

A Working Guide to the Landscape of Arts for Change

A collection of writings depicting the wide range of ways the arts make community, civic, and social change.



Nana Projects' *Great Halloween Lantern Parade* in Baltimore, MD. by Molly Ross in collaboration with Creative Alliance, Friends of Patterson Park, and Patterson Park Community Development Corporation. Photo: Mitro Hood

Community Arts at Work Across the U.S.

By Linda Frye Burnham

In this paper, long-time community arts chronicler Linda Frye Burnham offers snapshots of selected projects that help capture the range of community arts projects and programs today. They are led by veteran and up-and-coming artists and cultural organizations; new forms of interdisciplinary collectives; and collaborations between arts and community agencies. Examples demonstrate how single projects, repeated community events, and ongoing programmatic and organizational efforts can effect community, civic, or social change.

This paper may be read in tandem with [“Arts-Based Community Development: Mapping the Terrain”](#) by William Cleveland, refreshed and reprised from his time-tested characterization of community-based arts, published in 2002 by the Community Arts Network. Cleveland offers a “map” that defines four neighborhoods of intention—to build and improve, to educate and inform, to inspire and mobilize, to nurture and heal. Animating Democracy has included the map in this paper and located the community arts endeavors in Burnham’s paper on Cleveland’s diagram by their corresponding number to give a sense of the spectrum of community arts endeavors and the multiple ways in which such creative activity works to make change.

A Working Guide to the Landscape of Arts for Change is supported by the Surdna Foundation as part of the Arts & Social Change Mapping Initiative supported by the Nathan Cummings Foundation, Open Society Foundations, CrossCurrents Foundation, Lambent Foundation, and Surdna Foundation.

Artists have been working with and for communities for thousands of years, but in the last few decades, there has been enormous growth in the United States in a particular strain of this activity referred to as “community arts”: professional artists collaborating with communities to create artworks together.

The practitioners tend to agree that the arts are an integral part of a healthy culture, providing both intellectual nourishment and social benefit. Often their objective is to make positive change in communities in which they work, in a wide variety of ways and for many outcomes.

This work goes by many other names: community-based arts, community cultural development, arts-based community development, social practice, and more. It may employ the visual, performing, literary, or media arts, or an inter- or multi-disciplinary combination. Its primary creative method is human interaction and exchange—the sharing of stories, memories, expressions, needs, strategies, and beliefs.

When a community engages intimately and deeply in this way over time with artists skilled in community practice as well as their art forms, burning social issues can surface in the work they do together. A project may also be conceived from the outset to focus on a certain issue of concern within a community. Artists and their community partners actively promote the arts as part of educational goals, political life, health recovery, prisoner rehabilitation, environmental protection, community regeneration, electronic communication, and more. Such community arts endeavors often result in real change. There is now a wealth of data, documentation, and criticism about art that is doing important work like improving students’ test scores, reducing prison violence and recidivism, reaching across racial and class barriers, bringing generations together, and preserving history and culture that will otherwise be lost.

Initially, those driving community art were the artists themselves. The most visible proponents of this movement are companies of artists embedded for years in their communities of birth, residence, or choice. They see opportunities and seek out community partners, often working in their local schools, prisons, hospitals, shelters, community centers, and parks. Other artists tour the country working with a variety of different communities. They may be invited to a particular place to develop projects or do residencies, often under the aegis of a local arts presenter (a regional theater, a university, a performance or cultural center, a nonprofit arts organization) or an entity outside the arts (a union, social-service agency, national professional association, or public foundation).

VISION AND VALUES

The artists prominent in this work, and their community partners, tend to share a set of visions and values. Those doing effective work in community arts tend to value the process as well as the product. How they guide the collaboration is as vital as the artwork that results. They seek authenticity in their community work by insisting on access, authorship, ownership, and respect for everyone involved. They see themselves as accountable to each other and to the entire community in which they work, and the terms of that accountability are set forth at the beginning of their interaction, reviewed throughout the process, and assessed after its end.

Because this work often proves deeply interesting to observers, as well as to artists and cultural workers, community arts stories have been spread far and wide by critics, historians, and scholars.¹ Copious documentation and analysis have clarified how these values come into play on the ground in quality practice; they also articulate the challenges and the lessons learned, even those that are painful. As these stories circulate by word of mouth and in the media, communities are beginning to take the initiative to find and engage artists to help them achieve local creative, economic, and even political goals. In a 2007 survey, for example, artist Steven Durland and I found communities hiring artists to help them design a transportation corridor, produce a public-health campaign, mediate between students and teachers, critique a city's vision initiative, transform an abandoned public school, and tell community stories all across the country. (See [“Help Wanted! Communities Reach Out.”](#))

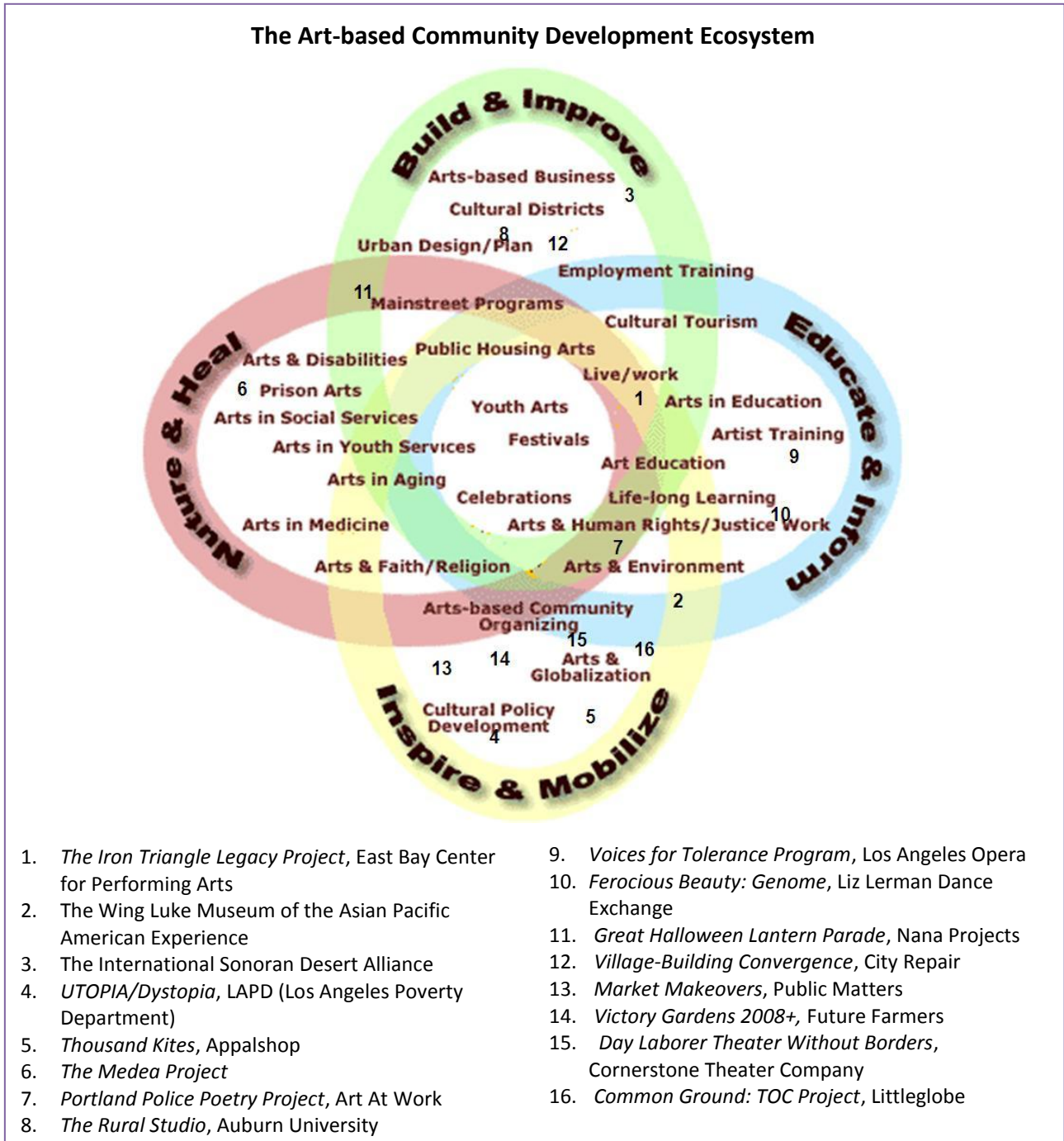
Because of this proliferation, the idea of artist/community collaborations has begun to influence many of the institutions that support the infrastructure of the arts. We now find these ideas in the policy statements of funding agencies, service organizations, arts councils, and higher education institutions.

A VARIETY OF APPROACHES AND OUTCOMES

Artists collaborate with communities for many different reasons. Sometimes it is to celebrate culture and history, sometimes to share and affirm identity. They might be building awareness or deepening understanding of issues by drawing out diverse and often unvoiced perspectives. Some are attempting to help shift attitudes regarding a particular issue or community problem. There are projects intended to motivate people to participate in their communities or engage them in action, and to help build their capacity to do so. Some aim to

go further, contributing to problem-solving or to change in policies or systems. And many community arts projects are literally making physical change by transforming community space.

The differences among approaches to these kinds of change become apparent when viewing recent projects in their settings and listening to the language community arts practitioners use when describing their work.



1. Discovering and Manifesting Community Identity: The Iron Triangle Legacy Project

Many U.S. communities consider themselves poorly understood, wrongly identified, or even invisible. A collaborative arts project in the San Francisco Bay Area is taking a comprehensive approach to such problems of community identity.

In The Iron Triangle Legacy Project, the artists at the East Bay Center for Performing Arts are working with more than 250 residents of the Iron Triangle neighborhood of Richmond, Calif., one of the most dangerous cities in the U.S. The East Bay Center's neighborhood suffers 42 percent of the city's violent crime and most of its murders. But the area also has a rich cultural life and a colorful historic past. Locals feel their neighborhood story has been told too many times by others. They want to define their own community values and identity, and shift perceptions of their community by telling



Break-dance statue in a park in the Iron Triangle, Richmond, CA. by Iron Triangle Legacy Project, East Bay Center for Performing Arts

their own story through the arts. With the participation of a diverse community-based advisory board, the project includes lots of community events, local mini-grants for mini-projects by residents, documentation of community issues, archiving of materials (including a Web site and digital archive), and a festival planned for 2011.

One activity among the many the group has created so far is a series of intergenerational family arts workshops with working artists and social-support service partners. The workshop “helps strengthen the ability of several generations within families to work closely together, sometimes reconciling members that

have been incarcerated or in rehabilitation programs and absent from the family,” says East Bay’s Jordan Simmons.

The ITLP is already changing the neighborhood’s perception of itself. “Just because you’re poor, it doesn’t mean you’re spiritually dead,” says Iron Triangle resident Anthony Allen. “Art comes from within—soul. Sometimes we lose touch of it in day-to-day struggle. We can help people come back to themselves. It is the easiest way to express that one is alive. When you create a piece, something that people can relate to or react to, it acknowledges that you are alive.”

Article: [“My Iron Tri-Angel: An Urban Neighborhood Seeks to Tell Its Own Story”](#) by Jordan Simmons

Website: www.eastbaycenter.org/ITLP/tabid/169/Default.aspx

2. A Community Curates Its Own History: The Wing Luke Museum

Museums are traditionally hierarchical, with programming decisions made by expert arts or history curators. The Wing Luke Museum has changed all that.

Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience in Seattle has become a national model for community-based exhibition processes and oral-history gathering projects. Under the direction of writer Ron Chew, the museum grew from a small, tranquil historical society in 1991 to today's award-winning museum honored for "its cutting-edge work in fostering broad-based participation in the development of exhibitions and programs." More than 100 regular volunteers and a lively community network, with the guidance of program staff, develop what have come to be called "community response" exhibitions that speak to issues "happening here and now."

Communities of color make up a majority of both the leadership and participants in the organization. Named in honor of Wing Luke, a Chinese-American immigrant leader who fought for open housing, historic preservation, and cultural pluralism, the museum intends "to educate the public about the contributions, history, and issues facing Asian-Pacific-American communities. Its first community-curated exhibition, "Executive Order 9066: 50 Years Before and 50 Years After," opened on February 19, 1992, on the 50-year anniversary of the federal order that forced 110,000 Japanese Americans into concentration camps. A recent exhibition, "A Refugee's Journey of Survival and Hope," presents life through the eyes of a refugee with personal stories, moving photographs, and multimedia; the museum has engaged 14 community organizations as partners in the project.

Museum website: wingluke.org

Video: wingluke.org/video.html

3. Making Visible a "Tri-Nation:" The International Sonoran Desert Alliance

When a community straddles tribal and national borders, how is it understood and empowered? The International Sonoran Desert Alliance (ISDA) is using community-based arts programs to make visible an unacknowledged "tri-nation" in southwestern Arizona and northern Sonora, Mexico—10,000 square miles of "the hottest, most fragile desert ecosystem in North America." The region is populated by three nations: the United States, Mexico, and the Tohono O'odham Nation (Papago). Life here in all its forms is fragile. The ISDA places arts participation high on its list of tools for preserving and enriching the environment, culture, and economy of the Sonoran Desert.

The ISDA is a nonprofit corporation founded in 1993 and governed by a board of directors representing the region's indigenous and non-indigenous populations. The board makes its decisions based on the belief that "inclusion of the diverse populations offers the most desirable way of solving the problems presented by the border's demarcation. ... We believe

the disarming power of the arts can bring people together across race, class, and generations.”

Among the organization’s “cultural preservation” strategies are Curley School Artisan Housing, an abandoned school rehabilitated into 30 affordable live/work rentals for low-income artists, artisans, and creative home businesses in Ajo, a former copper-mining town in southern Arizona. Curley’s Native American Arts program is based in the region’s Tohono and Hia C-ed O’odham art, culture, and traditions. Participatory programs include the Organpipe Cactus Fruit Harvest Tour led in July by a Hia C-ed O’odham elder, offering the traditional experience of harvesting cactus fruit in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. A Visiting Artists Program brings outside artists to the Ajo community, the community of Sonoyta, Mexico, and the western villages of the Tohono O’odham Nation. There are also an Afterschool Arts Initiative, tri-cultural festivals bringing the communities together, and a public art program with murals, planned for the Route 85 Ajo-to-Sonoyta corridor. ISDA won the 2009 MetLife Innovative Space Awards honoring art spaces “fundamental to well-planned communities.”

Project website: isdanet.org

Video: [“Puppet Art in Ajo”](#)

4. Building Capacity for Change: The Los Angeles Poverty Department

Every large American city has a neighborhood like Skid Row in Los Angeles, a place where the city’s poorest residents and homeless transients gather to access social services. Outsiders see it as a place without a history, without a community, and ripe for gentrification.

“UTOPIA/dystopia” is a project of The Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD), a 25-year-old performance company co-founded by artist John Malpede. LAPD has engaged homeless and formerly homeless people, along with professional artists, in a years-long arts-based campaign to “create and recreate” community on L.A.’s Skid Row. Currently LAPD is grappling with the fact that the downtown neighborhood is rapidly gentrifying and its real history and true identity may be lost. More than a community identity project or an effort toward cultural preservation, “UTOPIA/Dystopia” attempts to motivate Skid Row’s people to participate in their own community and to help them acquire the capacity to make the change they want to see.

In April 2007, LAPD initiated public discourse with Skid Row residents, the working poor, immigrants, and the area’s burgeoning loft-living population, asking them to envision the future of downtown “instead of being told what people want by newspapers, political leaders, and developers.” As a core goal of “UTOPIA/dystopia,” LAPD promotes residents’ engagement with issues of gentrification and asks them to consider “who benefits, who pays.” Strategies include public performances like “Is There History on Skid Row?” as well as installations like the Skid Row History Museum and arts-based civic-dialogue elements like “220 Glimpses of Utopia.” Participants learn to fully investigate relevant issues that have affect their lives,

becoming informed, animated, activated—even radicalized—politically.

LAPD website: lapovertydept.org

Video: [“200 Glimpses of Utopia”](#)

[“Making the Case for Skid Row Culture: Findings from a Collaborative Inquiry by the Los Angeles Poverty Department and the Urban Institute”](#)

5. Tackling the Criminal Justice System: Thousand Kites

According to the Sentencing Project, the U.S. has the highest incarceration rate in the world, and its criminal justice system appears to be rife with abuse, including overcrowding, racism, and even prisoner “renting.” Many community arts practitioners consider this to be the country’s most pressing civil rights issue. Thousand Kites, a national campaign based at Appalshop, an arts and education center in the Kentucky coalfields, offers unique arts/media products and strategies to help citizens find and advocate for effective solutions to over-incarceration in their communities.

Responding to the location of two new Super Max prisons in their region, Appalshop media artists Nick Szuberla and Amelia Kirby initiated Thousand Kites to communicate with the prisoners through independent community radio and began to organize annual broadcasts with prisoners’ families. (“Shoot a kite” is prison slang for sending a message.) Thousand Kites has gone on to produce free tools for informing and organizing a movement, including a documentary film about the Appalachian Super Max prisons and their abuses. Kites also offers a play developed in collaboration with Roadside Theater, featuring the testimony of prisoners and their families, ready for any group to present with its own cast. An interactive website maps U.S. prisons and immigration detention centers and features recorded poetry, essays, and visual artwork from incarcerated men and women. In 2010, Kites launched the Campaign Center, a communications platform for national organizing, and has formed working partnerships with over 50 new organizations.

In terms of making real-world change in the prison system, Thousand Kites and Appalshop are notable because of their sustained commitment to issues of prison reform. However, one story stands out: Kites discovered that states across the U.S. are renting their prisoners to other states, providing income for their departments of corrections. The Virgin Islands and Virginia have such a contract, separating families across an ocean and keeping men and women in segregation for years. As a result of the year-long Thousand Kites Virgin Island Prison Campaign, 150 Virgin Island men were returned home after five years of solitary confinement in Appalachian prisons. Virgin Islands activists have launched their own weekly radio program, using the Kites radio model.

Kites website: www.thousandkites.org

Video: [Thousand Kites introduction](#)

6. Going Deep to Bring What's on the Inside Outside: The Medea Project

For the millions of incarcerated humans in the U.S., perhaps the most painful aspect of their lives is dehumanization. Reaching deep for that humanity and bringing it creatively to the surface can help heal the soul and reduce the chance of going back to prison again and again. That's what performance artist Rhodessa Jones thinks. And many ex-convicts agree with her.

The Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women is an ensemble Jones created in 1989 with women inmates at San Francisco County jail, staging material derived from the prisoners' own stories. Doing research at the jail for her own performance work, Jones became aware of feelings of failure among female prisoners, resulting in crippling emotions such as guilt, depression, and self-loathing that directly contribute to repeat offenses and re-incarceration. In her jail workshops, Jones uses self-exploration and performance techniques to bring forth inmates' creativity and increase their self-awareness and self-esteem. Participants at a recent professional theater conference heard Medea Project company members testify that this experience has changed and "saved" their lives.

The ensemble—inmates and former inmates who have not succumbed to recidivism—performs in corrections facilities and the communities outside. Scholar Rena Fraden opens her book on the Medea Project with the image of a long line of stamping, kicking, dancing women moving down the aisles of San Francisco's Lorraine Hansberry Theater and up onto the stage. Their boisterous entrance heralds, she says, the key act of the Medea Project: "to make visible what has been kept repressed or oppressed ... in a way that is impossible to ignore."

Project website: culturalodyssey.org/medea

Project flyer: www.xroadsinstitute.org/wp-content/content/extras/jones/MedeaFlyer.pdf

Video: [Rhodessa Jones speaking at the 2006 San Francisco Safe Communities Reentry Council Summit. September 27, 2006, introducing a student's performance.](#)

7. A Different Sense of Who We Are: The Portland Police Poetry Calendar

Can a collaborative art experience change how a city feels about its police officers and how the police feel about themselves? The Police Poetry Calendar created by Maine's Portland Police Department (PPD) is part of Art at Work initiative led by artist Marty Pottenger in collaboration with the city of Portland. Art at Work is designed to improve local government by doing arts projects with municipal employees, elected officials, and local artists. The calendar project addresses two key problems for the PPD: their relationship with the public and low morale in the department. With Pottenger's help, police officers partnered with local poets and photographers to create artworks. Partner activities included ride-alongs, time at headquarters, coffee, swapping stories, rhymes, and editing suggestions. Poems and photographs by officers were published and sold as wall calendars in 2009 and 2010. Their work was also shown in a new City Hall gallery, in the mechanics' garage, landfill, healthcare facility, general assistance offices, and police roll-call room. In addition, several public readings by the police and local poets engaged community members in

dialogue about issues present in the poems. With exposure to the creative work of Portland's police, the community became familiar with officers as human beings. They have gained new understanding of the challenges and the toll taken by their day-to-day work.

"We had no idea the outcome would be this outstanding," says Police Chief Joseph Loughlin. "The photographs in the hallway, reading poems at roll call—it's brought us a different sense of who we are and what we do. It's changed a lot of minds about the police and about poetry." Portland Mayor Jill Dulan says, "This collaborative partnership has enhanced the city's sensitivity to issues of cultural bias and broadened the range of members of the municipal family." To address issues of inclusion and respect for all Work is currently meeting with other cities to replicate the project.

Project website: www.artatworkproject.us/
 Video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7-ToNulsn0&feature=Playlist&p=A4765B049992D9D7&playnext_from=PL&index=0
 Evaluation Plan: [Arts & Equity Initiative, Terra Moto and the City of Portland, ME](#)

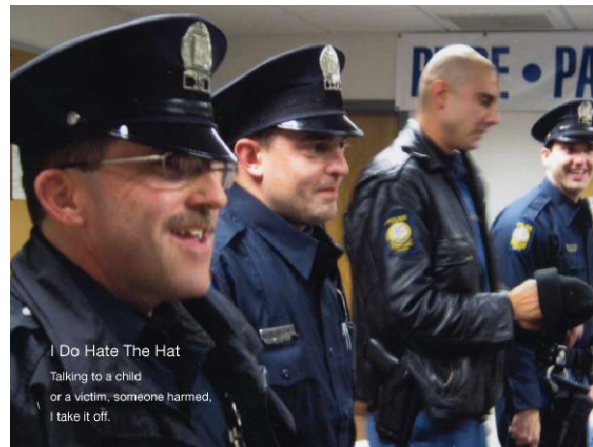
8. Subversive Architecture: Alabama's Rural Studio

One of the challenges for community-engaged

artists teaching design in universities is how to equip students with needed skills while passing along values such as concern for the problems of the working poor. An architecture program in Alabama has been working on this challenge for more than 15 years.

The Rural Studio is a design/build program within the School of Architecture at Auburn University, founded in 1993 by Auburn architecture professors Dennis K. Ruth and the late Samuel Mockbee. It gives architecture students hands-on experience and literally improves the living conditions in rural Alabama. Mockbee has said, "If architecture is going to nudge, cajole, and inspire a community to challenge the status quo into making responsible changes, it will take the subversive leadership of academics and practitioners who keep reminding students of the profession's responsibilities."

The studio is located off campus in Hale County, one of the poorest areas of the country. The students have learned innovative design/build skills while living in the community and collaborating with community members on more than 80 private residences and public buildings, using inexpensive available local materials. In the \$20K House Studio, students design home plans and prototypes that can be built by local contractors under the USDA's Rural Housing Service Section 502 Guaranteed Rural Housing Loan Program; the aim is to



Portland Police Poetry Calendar, a project of Art at Work
 Lead artist Marty Pottenger, of Terra Moto with the City
 of Portland, ME

design an approved model, bringing jobs and better housing to rural America.

One of the first student thesis projects was The Smoke House in Mason's Bend, built for fisherman Shepherd Bryant out of broken concrete, salvaged road signs, glass bottles, and beams from a local barn. A recent project is the renovation and expansion of the Safe House Museum in Greensboro, which documents the civil-rights history of Hale County. It is housed in a small yellow shotgun house where the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. once sought refuge from the Ku Klux Klan.

Rural Studio Web site: www.cadc.auburn.edu/rural-studio/

Safe House Museum web page: www.cadc.auburn.edu/rural-studio/Default.aspx?path=Gallery%2fProjects%2f2010%2fsafehouse%2f

Film: clip from ["The Rural Studio Film" by Chuck Schultz](#)

9. Music and Its Consequences: The L.A. Opera's Voices for Tolerance Program

Community art strategies, such as collaborations in which community members learn to create their own group pieces, are making their way into the mainstream. The Los Angeles Opera employs a staff of teaching artists with community skills in its "Voices for Tolerance" program, with the goal of instilling respect and tolerance for young students in Los Angeles schools.

This program aims to deepen understanding of both opera and social-justice issues in local public schools by working with teachers to integrate a particular kind of music into the curriculum. For example, at Vena Elementary School in the San Fernando Valley, Voices for Tolerance artists integrated "Follow the Drinking Gourd" into a multicultural fifth-grade American history curriculum. Students (mostly Latino) studied the song, learning how slaves used it to navigate the Underground Railroad through coded messages and directions. The children learned to sing and perform the song and work it into a program of other social-justice songs from different cultures, then performed the program before the student body. In the second half of the year, the fifth-graders wrote a play about tolerance and teachers reworked songs from actual operas to be included in the play and subsequent performance.

Voices for Tolerance is adapted to any institution the Opera's Education Department works with, including children in Juvenile Hall. In researching the project, they collaborated with Facing History and Ourselves, an organization that helps educators create programs about "the consequences of hatred."

L.A. Opera Education & Community Programs website:
www.laopera.com/educom/elementary.aspx#vft

10. Dancing Science: Liz Lerman Dance Exchange's "Ferocious Beauty: Genome"

Sometimes artists are inspired to create work with particular communities to help illuminate complicated concepts and issues that are changing the way we live.

A primary example is Liz Lerman Dance Exchange's 2006 project, "Ferocious Beauty: Genome," a touring performance created in collaboration with geneticists and educators exploring how knowledge of the genome "will change the way we think about aging, perfection, ancestry, and evolution." The performance integrates elements of dance media, including dialogue with scientists. Lerman calls this artwork an example of "nonfiction dancing" or "subject-matter choreography:" art exploring real-world issues, created through deep collaboration with communities and other fields. In this case, the Dance Exchange was involved for four years with the scientific and educational communities. "We have designed the piece," she writes, "to let the scientists speak for themselves, though subject to our editing. We chose the ideas to highlight through long conversations among ourselves, with the scientists and with the public."

"Ferocious Beauty" is also an example of a strong arts partnership between a company and a campus presenter and shows just how community-based practice is becoming embedded in institutions that have not been traditionally oriented toward working with community. This piece premiered in 2006 at Wesleyan University in Connecticut and Wesleyan's Center for the Arts initiated community-centered activities in concert with the premiere: an art exhibit of works exploring the impact of genetic research and a panel discussion titled "Lived Experience and the Human Genome Debate." The creation process also included other community-centered activities: a symposium about race, a master class partnering science and art, a town hall meeting on stem-cell research, a lecture on reproductive technologies, and more. These community events "brought people whose conditions may be helped by genetic research together with artists, ethicists, scientists, and religious thinkers," reports the company. "It represented a departure from many discussions that focus on stem-cell research by including the voices of people and families for which genetic research holds hope and promise."

Web site: danceexchange.org/projects/ferocious-beauty-genome/

Video: ["Translating ELSI: Ethical, Legal and Social Implications of Genomics," speech by Liz Lerman, Renaissance Hotel, Cleveland, Ohio, May 2, 2008.](#)

11. Lighting Up the Darkness with Community Spectacle: Nana Projects' Great Halloween Lantern Parade

In some cities, public places like parks are seen as sites of crime and violence, spaces to be avoided by nearby residents. Patterson Park in Southeast Baltimore, Md., was one such place. Artist Molly Ross decided to do something about that.

Nana Projects' Great Halloween Lantern Parade is an innovative artwork that draws people

together in public spaces, strengthening their sense of community identity through shared cultural experience. Now in its 11th year in the diverse neighborhood of Southeast Baltimore, this public spectacle is described by Nana's founder Molly Ross as existing "on an edge between a mob and a choreographed dance," bringing thousands of residents carrying thousands of painstakingly created lanterns together into Patterson Park at night.

"Once a symbol of fear," writes Ross, the park "becomes a place of magic, warmth and community ... helping foster a sense of ownership of our public spaces and building hope and excitement about the future of our community." Many populations take part, from the new immigrant to the committed urban dweller, by making lanterns, walking in the procession, and watching it. Ross has the help of the Creative Alliance, Friends of Patterson Park, and Patterson Park Community Development Corporation. "When we started, nobody ever thought about going into Patterson Park at night," says Megan Hamilton, program director of the Creative Alliance. But the parade "changes how people envision public space." Nana Projects also runs an annual Parade School to spread its skills around.

Project Web site: www.nanaprojects.com/thegreathalloweenlanternparade.html

Article: "[Community Spectacle: A Place of Magic](#)" by Molly Ross

Video:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXdUsdL1XdM&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fuser%2Fnanaprojects&feature=player_profilepage

12. Community Placemaking: City Repair's Village-Building Convergence

Artists and their neighbors in Portland, Oregon use public art, building, and planting to make the places where they live "more meaningful, beautiful, and ecological." The goal is to recreate the tight-knit closeness of a village community within the larger geography of a city. They call it "placemaking."

The intersection at Southeast Ninth Avenue and Sherrett Street became "Share-It Square" when artist/architect Mark Lakeman and a group of his neighbors illegally occupied it 10 years ago and creatively transformed it into a community centerpiece. Their placemaking was such a success that the city changed its policy about the residents' ownership over their own communal space.

The mostly volunteer group, now called City Repair, helps other residents design and build their own community amenities, including public squares, meeting houses, community kiosks, benches, and solar-powered and artistic innovations. City Repair has worked with communities to facilitate the collective creation of ceramic and glass mosaics, sculptural trellises, bike parking structures, creative cob benches, and the reclamation of neighborhood street intersections with massive street murals. They have produced a video showing how other cities can accomplish the same thing.

Once a year, City Repair hosts the Village Building Conference to teach placemaking skills and help residents design and build new projects. VBC10, the 10th annual convergence, May 28-June 6, 2010, took place all over Portland, producing the city's first-ever strawclay insulation retrofit to an existing building (The Public Repair Institute), finished with sculptural earthen forms applied to the surface; Portland's first elevated, spherical, solar-powered cob Chicken Palace (a chicken house built with cob, a material similar to adobe); and the adaptation of an existing cob fireplace into a serviceable pizza and bread-baking oven.

City Repair website: vbc.cityrepair.org/

Website with daily documentation of VBC10: sandbox.eco-munity.com/

Video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=wowFIOBpNKA&feature=player_embedded#!

Chicken Palace video: <http://www.beaverstatepermaculture.com/video/vbc10-planet-repair-institute>

13. Greening the Food Desert: Public Matters and Market Makeovers

Some artists team up with other professionals with the objective of making real change in the economic development, and even the public health, of underserved communities. Public Matters, a southern California collective of artists, educators, and media professionals, teams up with community initiatives, students leaders, city councils, and change agents like Healthy Eating Active Communities (HEAC) to design and implement energetic campaigns that yield long-term community benefits.

In South L.A., fresh, quality produce and other healthful foods are hard to find and junk food is easy to get. There are few supermarkets, no farmers' markets, and lots of small liquor and convenience stores that sell cheap, processed food. Residents suffer high rates of obesity and diabetes and many die young. A neighborhood like that is a "food desert." Market Makeovers is a grassroots, creative public nutrition initiative to "green" the food desert. Teens, learning to use video with the media artists of Public Matters, have worked with progressive institutions and local convenience-store owners in South L.A. to physically configure the layout and signage of five stores, leading consumers away from junk food and toward healthful food.

The Market Makeovers website uses these videos—written, shot and acted by local high-school students—to present a tool kit for doing this work in any neighborhood. In her lively video, "You Can't Put a Price on That," HEAC student Magali Bravo shows how she took the initiative, talked to her Padrino (godfather) who owns a local store, and worked with the HEAC Team to make it over, transforming it into a more health-friendly version of itself. "Making over a market like my Padrino's doesn't really cost much," Bravo testifies. "It's an investment in a local business with roots in its community. This neighborhood is my Padrino's home, not just his work. It provides greater access to healthy food options and

makes my neighborhood look better. This market makeover built a sense of community pride. You can't put a price on that."



Market Makeovers, Public Matters and Healthy Eating Active Communities

Project website:

www.marketmakeovers.org

Public Matters website:

www.publicmattersgroup.com

Video: ["You Can't Put a Price on That"](#)

14. Garden Design Grows New Public Policy: Victory Gardens 2008+

A number of artists are working with communities to bring nutrition awareness into the open. They are transforming public space by co-designing and planting

urban gardens and simultaneously changing public policy about land use.

The Victory Gardens 2008+ project was created by Futurefarmers, a San Francisco collective including artists, whose members have a common interest in creating work that "challenges current social, political, and economic systems." The Victory Gardens project was designed by Futurefarmers artist Amy Franchesini. She based her design for gardens planted both at private residences and on public land during World War I and World War II to reduce the pressure on the public food supply brought on by the war effort. In 1943, 20 million U.S. Victory Gardens were producing eight million tons of food, says Franchesini,

Franchesini's Victory Garden design has been adopted by the City of San Francisco's [Department for the Environment](#). It supports the transition of back yards, front yards, window boxes, rooftops, and unused land into food production areas. The project is engaging a citywide network of urban farmers by growing, distributing, and supporting "starter kits" for home gardeners; by educating residents through classes, exhibitions, and websites; and by starting and maintaining a city seed bank.

Existing projects include gardens on public lands at City Hall, city schools, and the Golden Gate Park. The city's policy statement reads:

The SF Victory Garden program builds on the successful Victory Garden programs of WWI and WWII but redefines "Victory" in the pressing context of urban sustainability. "Victory" is growing food at home for increased local food security and reducing the food miles associated with the average American meal.

Futurefarmers VG project website: futurefarmers.com/projects/victorygardens

Video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=3hUwLqr2U3c

15. A Show about Us: Day Laborer Theater Without Borders

Community-based artists often discuss the difference between “political art,” which is presentational, and “art that *is* political”—that is, art that works inside a situation, involving and engaging the people who are affected by it.

Day Laborer Theater Without Borders, *Teatro Jornalero Sin Fronteras*, is a Los Angeles theater of gardeners, painters, and housekeepers recruited by L.A.'s community-based Cornerstone Theater Company from gathering spots like the Home Depot parking lot. They take center stage at day-labor sites, churches, universities, and community centers across southern California, spreading messages about health, alcoholism, labor laws, and immigrant rights—issues that they identify as important in their own lives.

“We want to tell our own stories,” Juan Jose Magandi, a former day laborer and the artistic director and playwright for the Teatro, told a downtown crowd in Spanish as a recent performance was about to begin at the Carecen Job Center. “We want to use this theater as an educational tool for laborers, for them to feel more empowered.” The show was intended to provide information about worker and immigrant rights. An observer heard an audience member comment, “It’s a show about us.”

Teatro Jornalero was founded by Cornerstone with the National Day Labor Organizing Network. The idea for the company was inspired by the history of El Teatro Campesino, the artistic wing of the United Farm Workers union, which used the lives and stories of farm workers to ignite a movement in the 1960s. “This is doing similar things,” Cornerstone artist Ethan Sawyer says. “It’s theater by the people and for the people, and it comes from that tradition.” It is interesting to note that this is a community that most likely would not have been activated creatively but for the initiative of Cornerstone.

Project website and video:

www.cornerstonetheater.org/content/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=203:day-laborer-theater-without-borders&catid=23:now-playing-current-events&Itemid=111

16. Transforming the Struggle to Survive: Littlelobe’s Common Ground: TOC Project

In areas where resources are scarce, the struggle to survive can divide people and underscore their differences. Bringing diverse populations together to collaborate with professional artists can allow them to see their diversity as strength and can build their capacity to work together to solve community problems. Littlelobe’s Common Ground: TOC Project in New Mexico has done just that.

In 2007 and 2008, the Littlelobe artist ensemble and the South Western Organizing Project (SWOP) partnered on a large-scale, multi-year project based in Cuba, New Mexico, and the

two nearby Diné (Navajo) communities of Torreon and Ojo Encino. The TOC (Torreon, Ojo Encino, Cuba) initiative brought together 150 community members and provided them with creative tools to express issues of significance and meaning in their lives. They conducted weekly workshops in three schools over five months and also conducted weekly Saturday sessions with an intergenerational ensemble, ages six–87, sharing food and working with film, music, visual arts, and poetry. The ensemble comprised Diné, Anglo, African-American, Hispanic, and Chicano participants. For the artists, it required getting people to cross community borders. “Several people from Cuba feel Torreon [a reservation] is ‘unsafe for non-Natives,’” said Littlelobe’s Molly Sturges. “We purposely scheduled our weekly workshops in both communities.” They decided to offer people rides to the workshops. “Many people now cross these lines every weekend.” Says one participant in the TOC documentary film, “Color didn’t matter no more. It didn’t matter if we were Native Americans, there were whites among us, there were Spanish people around. It didn’t matter because it felt like we were all family and we got along and we worked as a team.”

Collectively, the ensemble decided to present the First Annual Common Ground Festival at the Sandoval County Fairgrounds in Cuba in June 2008. The festival of stories about place and people included their artworks about the daily lives, identities, and histories of community members. Following the festival a group of committed participants formed the TOC Regional Community Council and secured initial funding for training in collaborative leadership, conflict engagement, and community development. They are planning a touring version of the Common Grounds Festival and are in the process of planning future community development projects.

Littlelobe website: www.littlelobe.org/

Article: “A Bridge Conversation on Direct and Indirect Approaches to Community Change” by Valerie Martinez, Robby Rodriguez, Molly Sturges and Rosina Roibal

www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2008/06/a_bridge_conver_16.php

Video: vimeo.com/7294664

CONCLUSION

Let’s remember that none of this remarkable community activity would even be possible without the dedication of committed, innovative, skilled artists with a lot of courage. It’s hard work, requiring what public artist Richard Posner called “the eye of a journalist, the ear of a poet, the hide of an armadillo, the serenity of an airline pilot, and the ability to swim.”

And it takes even more than that. It takes a village.

Linda Frye Burnham is a writer who founded *High Performance* magazine in 1978 and, alternating with artist Steven Durland, served as its editor for its entire 20 years. She also co-founded the 18th St. Arts Center and Highways Performance Space in Santa Monica, Calif.; Art in the Public Interest in North Carolina; and The Community Arts Network on the World Wide Web.

The author would sincerely like to thank the Animating Democracy Initiative for its fundamental and groundbreaking efforts in making this work visible since 1999, and for producing so many indispensable gatherings for its practitioners.

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For more information, visit: www.artsusa.org/animatingdemocracy

Endnotes

The work has been documented in the wealth of writing in the field by thinkers like Arlene Goldbard, Jan Cohen-Cruz, John Kuo Wei Tchen, Suzanne Lacy, Maria-Rosario Jackson, William Cleveland, Marta Moreno Vega, Pam Korza, Barbara Schaffer Bacon, Amalia Mesa-Bains, Caron Atlas, Maribel Alvarez, Ken Krafchek, and others.