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COME2ART: Introducing a collaborative scheme between artists & community members fostering life skills development and resilience through creative placemaking

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*“A life skills curriculum through arts
in the context of creative placemaking”*



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Module 7

Promoting civic engagement through art-based community revitalization initiatives

Introduction

Before the engaged artists undertake an active and leading role as enablers of creative resilience at local level, firstly, they shall get trained and familiarized with the notion of community engagement, its importance and how it can be achieved through art and creative placemaking. When you are focusing on social challenges, transit opportunities, safety issues, public health crises, or other issues that impact how a place affects a resident's life, the arts should be one of the tools you consider using. The idea that artists, designers, or arts organizations have a role in shaping a community, is the main focus of this module.

This module aims to provide an introductory reference to artists and cultural workers on how to use art in social realm and more specifically, to describe the role that art-based initiatives can play in fostering civic engagement and empowering communities to face challenges and deal with difficult issues. This module is composed by two units

Unit 7.1: Definition of terms

The first unit tries to provide an introductory definition of the main terms that the module tries to elaborate with.

This units includes:

- Community engagement
- Community
- Art
- Importance of community engagement





Unit 7.2: Community engagement through art

This unit provides artists and cultural workers a brief understanding of the characteristics that art-based projects shall consider promoting community engagement and how this can be done.

This unit includes:

- Characteristics of socially engaged art
- How artists can empower communities using art-based initiatives

The learning objectives of this module are:

- Familiarization with terms
- Understanding of the importance of community engagement
- Understand and apply art-based initiatives to empower communities

Assessment

The level of achievement of the learning objectives will be assessed through:

- Questionnaire
- Group conversation
- Evaluation of creative outputs resulting from the learning process



Unit 7.1: Definition of terms

Introduction

Firstly, it has to be clarified that the empowerment of the community, the promotion of active citizenship that leads to social cohesion and builds human and social capital is the final aim of the so-called art-based initiatives. The role of art and creative placemaking has to be conceived as the tool to be used for the achievement of the above-mentioned community empowerment.

7.1.1 Community engagement

According to the Non-Governmental Organization *Americans for the Arts*, community engagement is defined as the active commitment by individuals to participate and contribute to the improvement of one's neighborhood, community, town or city and it is vital to healthy communities and a healthy democracy¹. In its simplest terms community engagement is the **process of actively involving and collaborating** with individuals, groups, institutions and other stakeholders in various activities, decisions, and initiatives that affect the lives, well-being, and the environment they live in. It is a **participatory approach** that seeks to build strong relationships, foster collaboration, and empower people to take ownership of issues that concern them and achieve long-term and sustainable outcomes.

7.1.2 Community

The word 'community' is a broad term used to define groups of people, whether they are stakeholders, interest groups, or citizen groups. A community may be a geographic location (community of place), a community of similar interest

¹ https://www.americansforthearts.org/sites/default/files/2008_NAPR_full_report.PDF.p.5





(community of practice), or a community of affiliation or identity such as industry or sporting club².

'Community engagement' is therefore a strategic process with the specific purpose of working with identified groups of people, whether they are connected by geographic location, special interest, or affiliation to identify and address issues affecting their well-being³.

7.1.3 Art

The term "art" is used to reflect the broad array of artistic disciplines and expressions which includes dance, music, theatre, visual and media arts, literary arts, traditional and folk arts, as well as our cultural resources and infrastructures, including individual artists, cultural institutions, local arts enabling organizations, arts presenters and providers⁴.

Arts can and do play a unique role in fostering citizen engagement by bringing forth new ways to view an increasingly complex world, and providing the creative space in which difficult issues can be addressed and solutions can take form.

7.1.4 Why is community engagement important?

For the complexity of issues in any given community – where traditional approaches have been ineffective if non-inclusive in the extreme – community engagement enables better understanding of communities' needs and aspirations. Constructive relationships between communities and the institutions of government make community engagement not only desirable, but necessary and

² <https://www.deeca.vic.gov.au/communities-and-regions/community-charter>

³ <https://aese.psu.edu/research/centers/cecd/engagement-toolbox/engagement/what-is-community-engagement>

⁴ https://www.americansforthearts.org/sites/default/files/2008_NAPR_full_report.PD.p.5



viable as it is likely to lead to more equitable, sustainable public decisions and improve the liveability of local communities.

As it is stated *“Community engagement is important as it takes action to influence stakeholders with government, political or funding power to implement public projects and policies that primarily benefit individual communities and drive social change”*.⁵

According to Allan Bassler⁶ a process that engage citizens:

- *Increase the likelihood that projects or solutions will be widely accepted.* Citizens who participate in these processes show significant commitment to help make the projects happen.
- *Create more effective solutions.* Drawing on local knowledge from a diverse group creates solutions that are practical and effective.
- *Improve citizens' knowledge and skills in problem solving.* Participants learn about the issues in-depth. Greater knowledge allows them to see multiple sides of the problem. Citizens can practice communication and decision-making skills.
- *Empower and integrate people from different backgrounds.* Groups that feel ignored can gain greater control over their lives and their community. When people from different areas of the community work together, they often find that they have much in common. By including diverse voices, usually marginalized or overlooked voices are actively empowered within their community to participate in decision making that affects their everyday lives.

⁵ <https://granicus.com/blog/why-is-community-engagement-important/>

⁶ Bassler, A. et al., "[Developing Effective Citizen Engagement: A How-to Guide for Community Leaders.](#)" *Center for Rural Pennsylvania*, 2008. p. 6



- Create local networks of community members. The more people who know what is going on and who are willing to work toward a goal, the more likely a community is to be successful in reaching its goals.
- Create several opportunities for discussing concerns. Regular, on-going discussions allow people to express concerns before problems become too big or out of control.
- Increase trust in community organizations and governance. Working together improves communication and understanding. Knowing what government, community citizens and leaders, and organizations can and cannot do may reduce future conflict.



Unit 7.2: Community engagement through art

Introduction

Promoting civic engagement through arts-based community revitalization initiatives is a powerful approach to foster community development, encourage active participation, and enhance social cohesion. By leveraging the arts, culture, and creativity, such initiatives can address various challenges faced by communities and contribute to their overall well-being. Artists and arts organizations are fostering citizen participation through the arts by bringing people together to understand and address complex issues, and by engaging audiences in more meaningful ways through the creative experience⁷.

What can better describe the interconnection between art-based initiatives and community empowerment is the term of **'Socially engaged art' (SEA)**. The term is rooted in the late 1960s and gathers knowledge from other disciplines such as ethnography, history, anthropology, sociology, pedagogy and education⁸. Artists who wish to work with communities can benefit from knowledge accumulated by other disciplines, learn some of their tools and employ them through art into meaningful initiatives and projects that can deal with challenges that a community faces.

Community is a word commonly associated with SEA. Not only does each SEA project depend on a community for its existence, but such projects are community-building mechanisms.

⁷ https://www.americansforthearts.org/sites/default/files/2008_NAPR_full_report.PDF p. 5

⁸ Helguera Pablo, *Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*, 2008 p.14



7.2.1 Characteristics of socially engaged art

According to Pablo Helguera⁹, socially engaged art shall have the following characteristics:

- **Social intercourse as a factor of its existence:** What differs socially engaged art from other forms of art, such as a painting that will be exhibited in a museum, is the social interaction that proclaims itself as art. While there is no complete agreement as to what constitutes a meaningful interaction or social engagement, what characterizes socially engaged art is its dependence on social interaction which can lead to a wider social motivation that can generate community engagement. The key to a successful project lies in understanding the **social context** in which it will take place and how it will be negotiated with the participants or audience in question. When an artist enters one of these contexts, he or she is suddenly faced with complex and unfamiliar social dynamics expressed in terms and cultural codes different from the ones he or she is accustomed to, otherwise it can lead to a bad experience for both artists and participants.
- **Building Social Capital:** Arts-based projects often involve collaboration and teamwork. By bringing community members together to work on a shared creative endeavor, relationships are strengthened, and social bonds are formed. This increased **social capital** facilitates greater cooperation and mutual support among residents.
- **Addressing Local Issues:** Community revitalization initiatives often aim to address specific local challenges, such as blighted areas, crime, or economic disparities. By involving artists and community members in the

⁹ Helguera Pablo, *Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*, 2008



process, these initiatives can generate innovative solutions and approaches to tackle these issues effectively.

- **Education and Skills Development:** Arts programs can serve as platforms for learning and skill development. Workshops, classes, and mentorship opportunities can equip community members with new abilities and boost their confidence, creating a more active and engaged citizenry.
- **Celebration of Cultural Identity:** Embracing and celebrating local cultural heritage through arts-based initiatives instills pride and a sense of identity among residents. Preserving cultural traditions and history strengthens the community's fabric and encourages active engagement in local affairs.
- **Enhancing Public Spaces:** Transforming public spaces through art can breathe new life into neglected areas, making them more inviting and inspiring. This, in turn, encourages community members to utilize and take care of these spaces, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility.
- **Long-term Sustainability:** By involving the community in the planning and execution of these initiatives, there is a higher chance of achieving long-term sustainability. Residents are more likely to take care of the changes brought about by the projects if they feel a sense of ownership and connection to them.
- **Focusing on process and site-specificity:** In the case of SEA it is the process itself—the fabrication of the work—that is social. We don't really care about the outcome; it is important to be aware of why we are acting and to learn how to act in an effective way. The materiality of the artwork is optional and most of times even ephemeral. Artists have to understand the complexities of the community they have to work with, how to bring people together in order to create those social bonds that can promise a long-term community impact and change. The aim of SEA projects is to become a



platform or a network for the participation of others, so that the effects of the project may outlast its ephemeral presentation.

- **Inclusivity and participation:** Arts-based initiatives can be designed in a way that encourages the participation of diverse community members, including people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities. This inclusivity fosters a sense of ownership and belonging among community members, making them more likely to engage in the project.

One factor of SEA that must be considered is its expansion to include participants from outside the regular circles of art and the art world. It is a participatory process where diverse groups of people are requested to participate either physically or via social networks and other online platforms. After that initial interaction, spaces enter a process of self-identification, ownership, and evolution based on group interests and ideas. What is important for the artists when it comes to work with diverse groups in SEA projects, is the awareness of how interpersonal scenarios emerge and how some of them can be negotiated by developing a better understanding of the needs and interests of the parties involved.

- **Promoting Dialogue and Understanding:** Art can serve as a medium for open discussions on various topics, including sensitive ones. Community members can engage in dialogues through art exhibitions, performances, or storytelling events, promoting empathy, understanding, and cooperation.

In conclusion, arts-based community revitalization initiatives have the potential to create lasting positive impacts by promoting civic engagement, fostering a sense of community, and addressing local challenges in innovative ways. These initiatives empower individuals to play an active role in shaping the future of their neighborhoods and cities.



7.2.2 How artists can empower communities using art-based initiatives

Art and culture are important assets in community planning and development. Working with artists can help improve stakeholder engagement in planning in a number of ways and contribute to plans and developments that represent and serve the people who live in a community.

According to the National Endowment for Arts¹⁰, artists can achieve the so-called community engagement because of the following reasons:

Artists bring people to the conversation: In community engagement and development there is a well-understood need and desire to get input from the people who live and work in the community itself. Community plans have a better chance of being useful, equitable, and healthy if the people who actually live in the community are represented in the planning process. Artists can help organizers and planners transform community input sessions from lightly attended meetings into vibrant, engaging celebrations that invite more diverse participation and input.

Artists can see beyond: Artists can help people visualize possible futures for a place, designing community planning processes to translate their hopes and dreams into policy and action. By partnering with community development and historic preservation leaders, local artists have been able to establish themselves as key partners and allies, using their creative skills to engage their neighbors in imagining possible futures for the building and community.

Artists highlight and support existing assets: Sometimes large development projects were implemented without regard to the potential displacement of people from the surroundings. For the most part, cities and planners recognize that this

¹⁰ Laura Zabel, How to do Creative Placemaking, National Endowment for the Arts, 2017, p.13





has been an inequitable approach and now look for ways to implement planning that encourages development without displacement. Artists can help planners develop projects that support and celebrate the unique and important strengths of a community that are already in place.

Artists can prototype and experiment: Beyond helping people see that things can be different or better in their community, artists are good at “getting to the doing”—trying small experiments that help test new ideas. Often community organizers and other stakeholders are understandably focused on trying to stop bad things from happening to a neighborhood that can lead to an atmosphere of distrust between city planners and residents. In addition to supporting this work to stop the implementation of inequitable or ill-conceived development, artists can also help organizers and neighborhood groups mark their place, express their voice, and make change in productive, creative ways.

Artists are part of the community: Artists are in every neighborhood, on every block. Artists are people who know place, love place, and will use their creativity to tap into its potential and opportunities. An invitation to artists to use their creative skills to support their own neighborhood can help develop and implement plans that are authentic, vibrant, reflecting the community’s shared vision for its own future.

