

lessons from the field

reflections on rural placemaking by
the Housing Assistance Council +
buildingcommunityWORKSHOP



acknowledgements

The Housing Assistance Council (HAC) and buildingcommunityWORKSHOP ([bc]) would like to thank the committed people and organizations that have generously contributed their time and resources to make this Rural Placemaking initiative and report possible.

In addition to the staff at [bc] and HAC that worked on this program and the underlying research for the past year, several individuals and organizations were instrumental in their efforts to investigate creative placemaking for rural communities, including:

Bill Menner, Bill Menner Group
Bob Reeder, Rural LISC
Courtney Spearman, National Endowment for the Arts
Dave Clark, Woodlands Development Group
Emily Wilson-Hauger, Woodlands Development Group
Jen Hughes, National Endowment for the Arts
Joseph Kunkel, Sustainable Native Communities Collaborative
Katherine Bray-Simons, National Endowment for the Arts
Marcia Perritt, smART Kinston Foundation
Nick Mitchell-Bennett, Community Development Corporation of Brownsville
Vernita Dore
Susan Duplessis, South Carolina Arts Commission
Suzanne Anarde, Rural LISC

This project is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts. To find out more about how the National Endowment for the Arts grants impact individuals and communities, visit www.arts.gov.



housing assistance council

With a broad reach and an unparalleled understanding of rural communities, the Housing Assistance Council (HAC) is a 46 year-old national nonprofit working to transform rural areas.

Through its data-driven investment strategy, HAC provides below-market financing for projects, technical assistance and training, and information and evaluation products which expand the scale and impact of rural organizations. HAC has made investments in all 50 states, Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands. HAC's work in rural communities, including the high need areas of the Appalachia, the Colonias along the U.S. and Mexico border, the lower Mississippi Delta, and Native American communities, has led to nearly 70,000 affordable housing units and more than 14,500 water and sewer connections in some of the poorest and most disconnected communities in America.

As is common when HAC takes on new initiatives, a local partner approached our leadership about partnering with buildingcommunityWORKSHOP to further creative placemaking and share the knowledge gained with HAC's broad national network. In doing so, we agreed to feature creative placemaking at the biennial national gathering of rural housing and community development practitioners and thought leaders. We also integrated creative placemaking into our portfolio of programming and multimedia outreach, eager to learn both from local partners engaged in placemaking and from nationally-known experts including the National Endowment for the Arts and buildingcommunityWORKSHOP.





buildingcommunityWORKSHOP

The buildingcommunityWORKSHOP ([bc]) is a Texas-based nonprofit community design center seeking to improve the livability and viability of communities through the practice of thoughtful design and making. We enrich the lives of citizens by bringing design thinking to areas of our cities where resources are most scarce. To do so, [bc] recognizes that it must first understand the social, economic, and environmental issues facing a community before beginning work.

While [bc]'s work is interdisciplinary and encompasses many areas of practice, we primarily work in architecture (building and landscape), urban design and planning, and storytelling through film and data analysis. [bc]'s creative placemaking and public interest design initiative positions residents to work alongside artists and designers to investigate, strengthen and share community's unique history, engage in the development of a physical and social framework for cultural activities, and plan for the future of their communities. The first iteration of this work began in Fall 2013 with the Tenth Street Historic District of Dallas and has continued with a variety of creative placemaking projects across the country—historic Downtown Brownsville to Washington, DC. This work has been funded in part through several generous awards from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

[bc]'s range of experience across geographies and artistic disciplines in creative placemaking, stakeholder-informed design strategies, and architectural practice was leveraged during this initiative to demonstrate how the arts can be used to enhance the value of housing and community development.

Dear Friends,

Over the past year, the Housing Assistance Council (HAC) and buildingcommunityWORKSHOP have had the opportunity to investigate how tools of arts and community building can be used in rural communities, funded in part by a generous Knowledge Building Grant through the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

This partnership has brought resources to existing local efforts and enabled our organizations to better understand both how 'creative placemaking' works in practice in rural communities and why it is a valuable tool for rural community development now. Through webinars, an internal working group, two pilot projects (in Kinston, North Carolina and Thomas, West Virginia) and a peer-to-peer exchange, we've seen the value of vivid local examples in understanding that 'creative placemaking' has been happening for a long time in rural communities across the country. Modest increases in resources - coupled with capacity building - hold vast potential for rural and tribal communities.

This initiative has affirmed and expanded upon nationally accepted understanding of the field. Creative placemaking is a conscientious effort by local nonprofit housing and community development agencies, public and private funders as well as community residents to shape both the social and physical appearance of a town or neighborhood by including not only sustainable and affordable housing, but also venues or places for gathering that define and foster a greater sense of community.

During a time of diminishing resources, unconventional partnerships to achieve affordable rural housing and stronger communities are both wise and necessary. Creative placemaking can bring new resources and new voices to projects and conversations, while complementing and expanding the scope of existing staff time or "brick and mortar capacity."

Ultimately, the best examples of creative placemaking engage all people, especially the most vulnerable, and enhance the triple bottom line of existing housing and community development efforts. These examples see housing as a key piece in community development, intimately linked with the arts to create vibrant rural places that attract and retain residents across age, race and culture.

Learning won't stop with the conclusion of this yearlong initiative. We look forward to continuing to learn from grassroots efforts to understand how creative placemaking can be incorporated housing and redevelopment portfolios to support inclusive, culturally relevant and economically equitable rural communities.



Stephen Sugg
Government Relations Manager, HAC



Thor Erickson, AICP
Managing Director, [bc]

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guiding principles

In the context of this yearlong initiative, **rural creative placemaking** is a conscientious effort by local nonprofit housing and community development agencies, public and private funders as well as community residents to shape both the social and physical appearance of a town or neighborhood by including not only developing sustainable and affordable housing but also venues or places for gathering (that might provide a combination of goods, services, entertainment and or employment or job training for residents) that define and foster a greater sense of community.

This partnership has revealed several essential ideas for those pursuing rural creative placemaking work. The below preliminary concepts for rural creative placemaking were revealed and supported by this work:

Engagement is inclusive - meaning all stakeholder groups, especially the most vulnerable are involved.

Creative placemaking can bring new resources and new voices to community development projects and conversations. Therefore, the opportunity to amplify local voices, narratives and expertise should include the most marginalized populations in a given community, with the goal of fostering socially, economically, and culturally equitable development.

This concept is not new.

Any effort must honor the work that communities have been doing for centuries to celebrate their existence through music, art and storytelling, which supports their unique cultural identity, even if it wasn't done using term creative placemaking.

One size doesn't fit all.

Local and regional context matters. Sharing frameworks and methodologies from [bc]'s Activating Vacancy program has been valuable for local communities that we've worked with to learn about case studies and generate ideas, but it is vital that local leaders and stakeholders rely on their knowledge and experience as drivers for creative placemaking efforts.

Experiencing and doing the work, rather than defining the work is more important.

Starting the conversation with definitions of creative placemaking has the potential to alienate prospective allies, especially those with traditional housing development skillsets. Providing the opportunity to see, do, live, and touch creative placemaking dispels notions that the field is a fading trend.

Credible leaders in the housing and community development field are instrumental to secure initial and ongoing support.

Credible, local examples and leaders are important in gaining buy-in for creative placemaking, locally and at a national scale. For example, HAC's 2017 Summer Edition of Rural Voices included pieces by the Delta Regional Authority, Sustainable Native Communities Collaborative, and Kentucky Highlands. These organizations are pillars in the rural housing field and their validation is essential to promoting creative placemaking moving forward.





rural placemaking initiative

Over the past year, buildingcommunityWORKSHOP ([bc]) and the Housing Assistance Council (HAC) have collaborated to promote creative placemaking as an important tool in comprehensive community development and build knowledge of the practice with in HAC's Rural Partner Network.

[bc] and HAC have been working to train an internal core group of HAC regionally-based housing specialists in creative placemaking and externally share creative placemaking information and best practices across multiple platforms.

These platforms include:

- an internal working group,
- technical training webinars and conference sessions,
- an issue of HAC's magazine Rural Voices dedicated to creative placemaking,
- support for creative actions in Thomas, WV and Kinston, NC,
- and an immersive peer-to-peer exchange in West Virginia.

Each of these multidimensional platforms are described in detail, along with key lessons learned on the following pages.

working group



“ Creative placemaking ought to make sure it creates places where [low-income] families can work, play and stay!”

- HAC working group member

Four working group meetings and two sessions at HAC's Rural Housing Conference were held with the goal of training an internal group of HAC regionally-based housing specialists in creative placemaking.

Working Group Meeting 1

The first working group meeting was held on Monday, March 6, 2017 at [bc]'s office in Washington, DC. This meeting introduced the Rural Placemaking program and creative placemaking to a broader group of HAC staff and developed key goals for the working group moving forward. Fourteen staff from HAC and [bc]'s offices across the country joined in person or remotely. This meeting established a goal for the working group to create a definition for creative placemaking that is specific to HAC's partners and role in rural housing. This definition could be supported through further resources on short, digestible examples of creative placemaking conducted by organization's familiar to HAC's network as well as information on funding and impact measures.

Working Group Meeting 2

The second working group meeting was held on Monday, April 10, 2017 at HAC's office in Washington, DC. Nine attendees discussed the recently selected pilot projects in Thomas, West Virginia and Kinston, North Carolina and worked through a case study of rural placemaking in Brownsville, Texas - where both [bc] and HAC have

prior experience. This revealed some consensus on the value of creative placemaking in its ability to coordinate different interest groups and sectors and engage them in conversation about visioning for the future. As [bc]'s prior experience has demonstrated, creative placemaking also builds a community's capacity to apply for grants, obtain additional funding, and pursue holistic community development.

Working Group Meeting 3

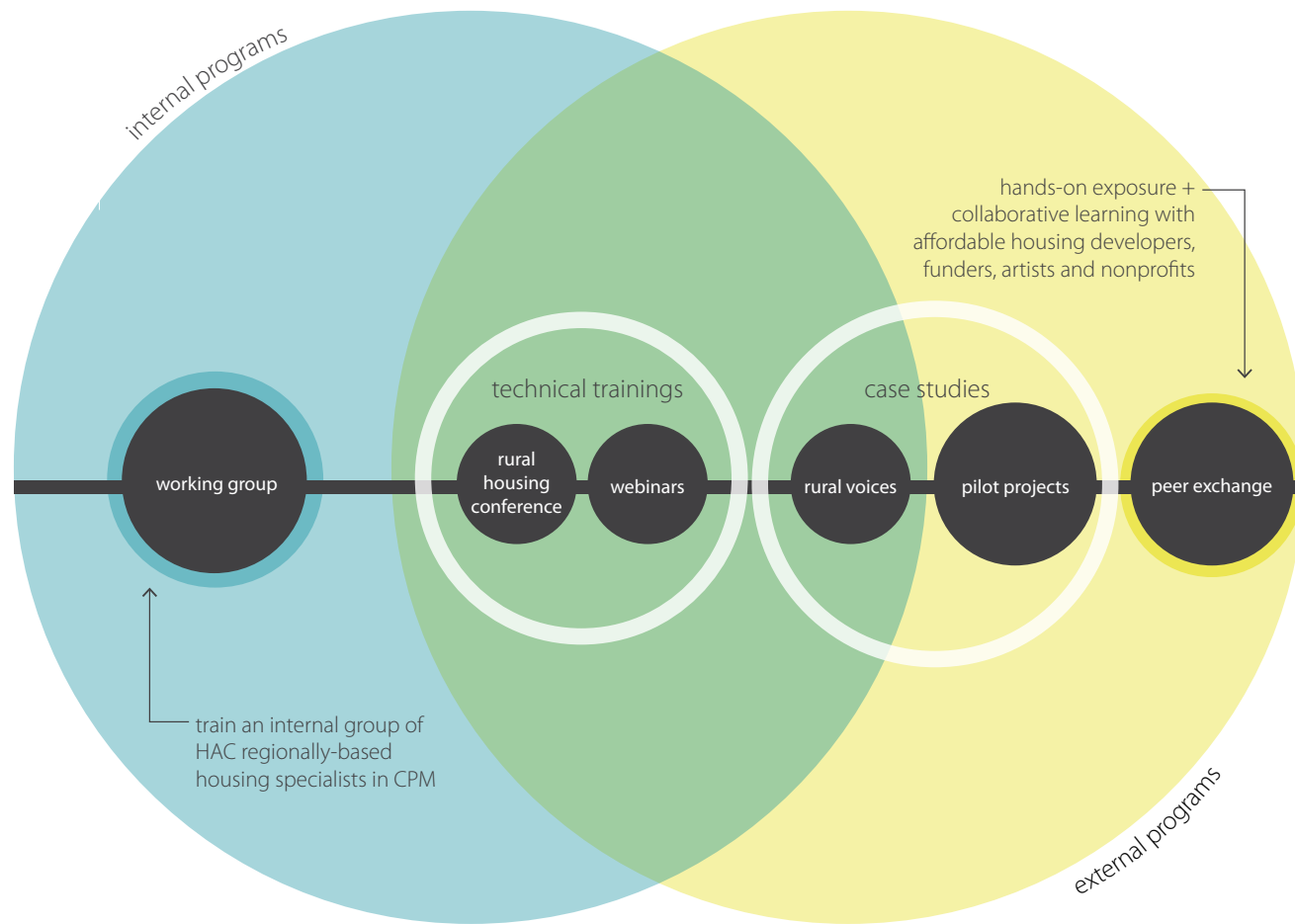
The third working group meeting was held on Monday, June 26, 2017 at HAC's office in Washington, DC. HAC's summer intern shared her research on indigenous placemaking with ten other [bc] and HAC staff, which helped foster an interest in tribal/indigenous creative placemaking at HAC. This presentation and subsequent discussion revealed that tribes are particularly well-situated to take on culturally-relevant creative placemaking as part of broader housing and community development strategies. In addition, HAC and [bc] staff collaboratively planned for the upcoming peer exchange by sharing ideas for content, workshop formats and site visits.

Working Group Meeting 4

The fourth and final working group meeting was held in conjunction with the peer-to-peer exchange in West Virginia on October 4th at Woodlands Development Group's offices. Eleven people from [bc], HAC, Woodlands Development Group and the peer exchange reflected on the knowledge and understanding gained through the peer exchange as well as next steps for creative placemaking in West Virginia.

key lessons

- Rural creative placemaking is best understood through experience (e.g. tours, conversations with local stakeholders, getting to know a place).
- Funding - especially for artist stipends - is one of the most significant obstacles faced by rural communities doing (or hoping to do) creative placemaking work.
- The arts can be a powerful tool to creatively envision or imagine a community's future.
- Rural communities often have an affordable building stock ripe for redevelopment that can open up space for artists and small business owners. However, long term affordability and equitable access to redeveloped space is a concern heard from local stakeholders.



“ Response to the CPM session at the 2016 HAC conference exceeded expectations. Participants gave the session top marks, and commented on the value of such. In HAC’s estimation, having an external validator with tremendous credibility with his peers (Nick Mitchell-Bennett) embracing CPM was key the session’s success.”

- HAC staff member

technical trainings

2016 Rural Housing Conference

This initiative’s first external technical trainings included two collaborative sessions and a white paper discussion at HAC’s Rural Housing Conference on December 1, 2016.

Equity in Housing

The session, ‘Equity in Housing’ was led by Omar Hakeem ([bc]) and Nick Mitchell-Bennett (Community Development Corporation of Brownsville). This session explored the sustainABLEhouse and MiCASiTA initiatives from CDCB and [bc] in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. sustainABLEhouse seeks to create sustainable processes for housers to integrate client-led design into their development model with little addition in cost and time. With limited financing and design options, many housing and community development organizations are forced to either turn away or maintain long waiting lists for would-be homeowners who do not qualify for traditional affordable housing delivery models. MiCASiTA seeks to change that by offering innovative financing, and design options, tailored to grow with the homeowners needs. MiCASiTA offers personalized design options that empower individuals through choice while also improving sustainability and overall quality of housing.

This session was an important bridge in linking innovative community engagement methodologies to the brick and mortar goals of affordable housing developers.

Creative Placemaking

The “Creative Placemaking” session, led by Michaela Accardi and Lizzie MacWillie ([bc]) provided an introductory training in Activating Vacancy methodologies, [bc]’s creative placemaking and public interest design initiative, alongside case study projects, with an emphasis on rural locations.

This session also introduced the Rural Placemaking collaboration with HAC and shared upcoming resources, technical training and grant opportunities with attendees.

Connecting Place-making and Place-based Opportunities to Rural Housing

Suzanne Anarde (Rural LISC), Thor Erickson, Lizzie MacWillie, Omar Hakeem and Lisa Neergaard [bc] collaboratively wrote a conference white paper on creative placemaking and its meaning and value for rural communities in the United States. This white paper was utilized to foster a lunch plenary discussion with conference attendees.

Several attendees shared their experiences with creative placemaking and importantly noted that much of this work is already happening in rural communities across the country and that creative placemaking funding may be leveraged to grow this work.



“ [Following this webinar] I plan on doing more research into creative placemaking and how this idea/model might benefit the communities we serve.”

- *Creative Placemaking 101* webinar participant

HAC Online Webinars

Two 60-minute webinars were created by [bc] and made available to the public, leveraging HAC’s existing technical training infrastructure and network of rural, affordable housing and community developers.

Creative Placemaking 101

The first webinar “Creative Placemaking 101 + Funding Opportunity” was hosted live on Tuesday, February 14, 2017 by Michaela Accardi and Christina Houle ([bc]). This webinar provided 56 attendees with an introduction to creative placemaking, its purpose, and [bc]’s creative placemaking framework and engagement methodology, Activating Vacancy. It also shared and provided interested parties information about submission for the Rural Placemaking call for participants.

Based on 11 surveys received following this webinar, the course learning objectives were achieved (4.3 out of 5), the course was found relevant to participating organization’s work (4.1 out of 5), the course was well organized (4.4 out of 5) and the course will moderately inform the day-to-day practices of participating individuals (3.5 out of 5).

This course may be viewed online at <http://bit.ly/2iCqYAO>.

Why Creative Placemaking? On the Ground Impacts

The second webinar “Why Creative Placemaking? On the Ground Impacts” was hosted live on Tuesday, June 20, 2017. This webinar tested out a new webinar format for HAC by bringing in several guest speakers for several mini-presentations and a discussion moderated by Lizzie MacWillie [bc]. Vernita Dore (former Deputy Undersecretary for USDA Rural Development), Susan Duplessis (Program Director at the South Carolina Arts Commission), Bill Menner (former Iowa State Director for USDA Rural Development), and Joseph Kunkel (Executive Director of Sustainable Native Communities Collaborative) were invited to share brief presentations of their work and discuss funding mechanisms used and outcomes observed.

24 individuals/organizations participated in this webinar. Based on 5 surveys received following this webinar, the course learning objectives were moderately achieved (4.3 out of 5), the course was found relevant to participating organization’s work (4 out of 5), the course was moderately well organized (3.6 out of 5) and the course will may inform the day-to-day practices of participating individuals (3.2 out of 5).

A wide range of experience levels participated in this webinar and indicated in the comments section the value of Joseph Kunkel’s and Susan Duplessis’s presentations in particular. Some attendees indicated a desire for more advanced learning objectives, while others indicated the need to start with more fundamental information.

This course may be viewed online at <http://bit.ly/2zRSNZQ>.

key lessons

- Sharing the same fundamental information about creative placemaking, in a variety of mediums, voices, and methodologies, is an important practice when introducing a new term, despite the arts longstanding practice in rural communities.
- Buy-in and industry support for creative placemaking is needed from respected practitioners in the housing field (e.g. Joseph Kunkel (SNCC), Nick Mitchell-Bennett (CDCB)).
- There are never too many examples. Participants in this series of external technical trainings highlighted the importance of hearing from those doing rural creative placemaking work about the specifics of their process, fundraising methods, and outcomes. A pragmatic lens is important for housers to understand this body of work and incorporate creative placemaking into their organizational endeavors.



rural voices

The Housing Assistance Council's Summer 2017 edition of Rural Voices "Rural Placemaking: Making the Most of Creativity in Your Community" examines creative placemaking as it is practiced in rural communities. The term "creative placemaking" is only about a decade old, but rural community organizations have long taken on community-building endeavors that have included the arts. Creative placemaking offers the explicit recognition that arts and artists, when fully engaged with local stakeholders, are often a gel or a catalyst toward sustained community betterment and economic growth.

The issue included a national perspective on funding and technical assistance from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) as well as a series of perspectives and examples from practitioners across the country, including Delta Regional Authority, Sustainable Native Communities Collaborative and Kentucky Highlands Investment Corporation (KHIC).

This edition of Rural Voices was distributed to all 50 states and U.S. territories, as well as a few international organizations. It was distributed to 1,174 email addresses and 902 mailing addresses, reaching 589 organizations. In addition, HAC shared the summer edition with 100 House and Senate offices, including offices representing the authors of the articles and key committees and caucuses within jurisdiction related to rural and arts issues.

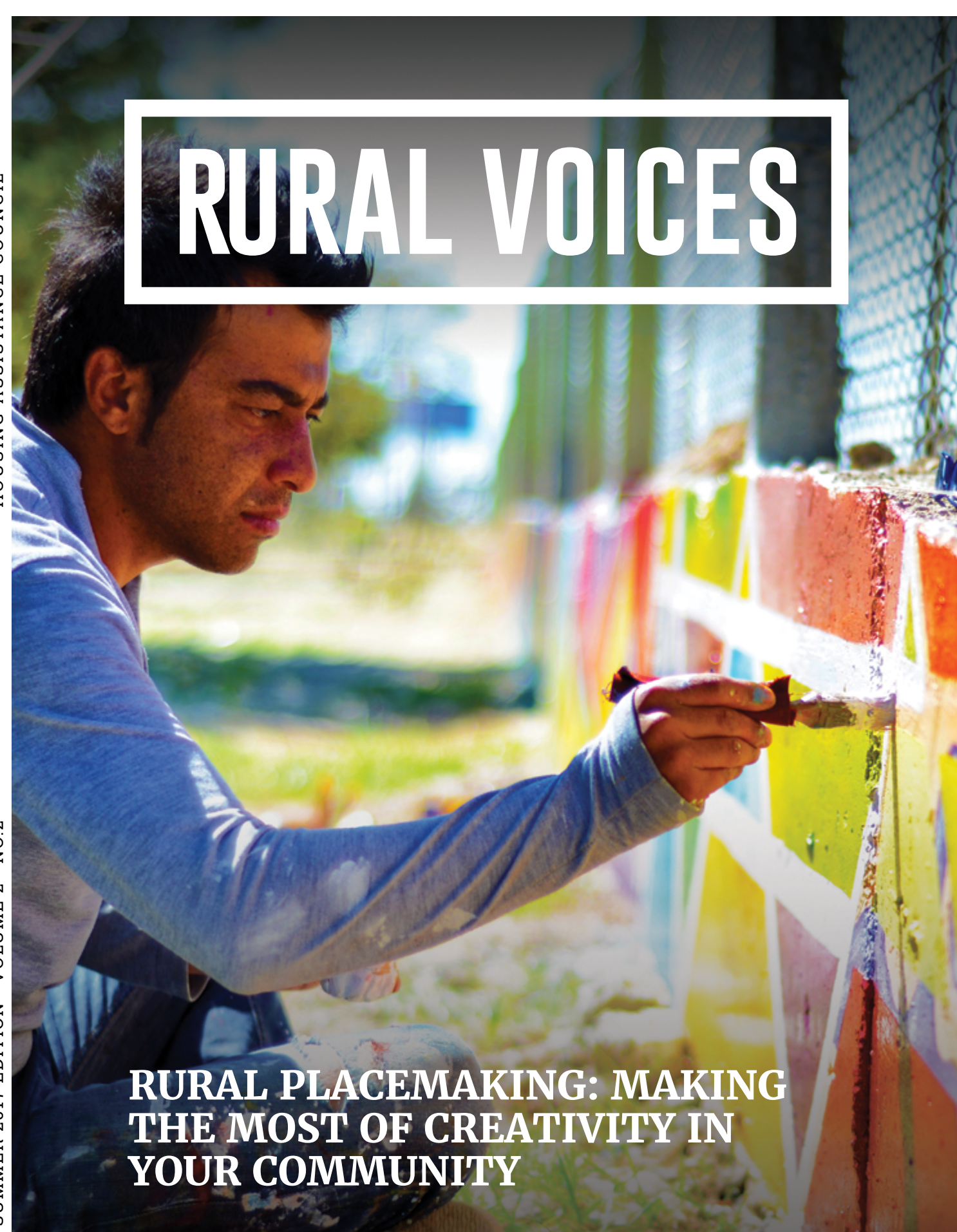
A PDF version of the summer 2017 edition of Rural Voices can be downloaded here: <http://bit.ly/2z3tjl1>

“ The “Rural Voices” edition devoted to CPM made things clear for me. Otherwise, discussions seemed vague— sort of like a mediocre college lecture.”

- HAC staff member

HOUSING ASSISTANCE COUNCIL

SUMMER 2017 EDITION · VOLUME 2 · NO.2



RURAL VOICES

RURAL PLACEMAKING: MAKING THE MOST OF CREATIVITY IN YOUR COMMUNITY



pilot projects

In February 2017, [bc] and HAC launched a call for participants for Rural Placemaking. This call invited housing or community development organizations partnered with an artist(s) or art organization to submit an application to implement a temporary creative placemaking initiative from May to September 2017.

This call required that initiatives must take place in rural communities (with populations less than 50,000) in the United States. Fifteen highly competitive applications were received by the call's close on March 10, 2017. Each applicant was reviewed based on evaluation criteria developed by [bc] and HAC, including: alignment of the proposal with the project's purpose and scope; organizational and artist capacity to complete the project; creativity and uniqueness of the proposal; potential for long term impact; community need; and strength of the artist-organization partnership.

After rigorous review, Woodlands Development Group (Thomas, West Virginia) and smART Kinston (Kinston, North Carolina). Woodlands Development Group and smART Kinston received \$7,500 to support the development of an arts and community building project in their community. They also received training and support from [bc] on the implementation of their project. [bc] and HAC provided individualized technical training video calls and resources, an on-site visit to assist in program implementation, and a peer-to-peer training session in October 2017.

Woodlands Development Group (WDG), based in Elkins, West Virginia, is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization and a certified Community Housing Development Organization (CHDO). Since 1995, Woodlands has helped build healthy, viable communities in the region by developing

sustainable, affordable housing and supporting economic initiatives. WDG builds homes for low and moderate income families, develops rental housing, purchases and renovates older buildings, and assists local communities with downtown redevelopment and public facilities. In 2011, WDG started a new organization, Woodlands Community Lenders, to provide accessible and affordable financing to small businesses and entrepreneurs in our region.

smART Kinston Foundation (smART Kinston) is a public non-profit dedicated to growing Kinston/Lenoir County, NC's creative economy and recruiting artists to Kinston's Arts & Cultural District. The goal of the Arts & Cultural District and the smART Kinston Foundation is not to create an artist enclave, but rather to create a place where artists can thrive side-by-side, as well as a place where people can visit the artists in their home studios/galleries. To help with this recruitment, smART Kinston created an Artist Relocation Package that focuses on helping artists financially with moving expenses and supplies, as well as on providing artists with a supportive framework to foster their creativity, help them grow as artists, and assist their efforts to turn their art into a sustainable business model. smART Kinston also partners with other community organizations and government agencies, as well as private businesses, to promote Kinston/Lenoir County's creative enterprises, to promote the arts within the community, and to promote Kinston/Lenoir County as an arts, culture and entertainment destination.

More information on the creative actions completed in summer 2017 can be found on the next pages.



mitchelltown history harvest

smART Kinston partnered with Kinston Teens, a local youth nonprofit, to conduct a "History Harvest" for the Mitchelltown neighborhood in Kinston, North Carolina, under the direction of the Harvest Advisory Committee, composed of local residents, leaders and artists. smART Kinston's History Harvest focused on the historic Mitchelltown area – the priority neighborhood for smART Kinston's core programming (housing redevelopment and Artist Relocation program) that has undergone a recent rebranding as the Kinston Arts & Cultural District.

The Mitchelltown area, adjacent to downtown, has played an important role in Kinston's history (and present), but there is little documentation of the history of the neighborhood beyond its architecture. The History Harvest was utilized as a pilot asset mapping tool that will contribute to Kinston's comprehensive mural program and may inform infill development opportunities that respond to the neighborhood's rich history.

At the "Harvest" held on Saturday, August 5, 2017, community members were invited to share their memories, stories, photographs, and other objects and participate in a conversation about the significance and meaning of their artifacts. These artifacts, from approximately 20 community members, were digitally captured and documented by volunteers ("Harvesters"). Recognizing that the local senior population may have mobility issues getting to the event, smART Kinston and Kinston Teens conducted person-to-person, in-home outreach in addition to the History Harvest event.



history harvest outcomes

smART Kinston has already observed increases in local understanding of place and cultural history, valuation of the Mitchelltown area, and residents' attachment to place. These increases can largely be attributed to Kinston Teens, who had never participated in an event like this one. Through planning, outreach, training, and the event itself, Kinston Teens gained new understanding of the history and importance of Mitchelltown in the City's history, and reflected on what other neighborhoods, perhaps even their own, may be significant to the City's history and development.

The event helped to involve and recognize the contributions of residents who aren't typically involved with arts or creative placemaking events, strengthening smART Kinston's connection with residents that aren't direct recipients of the organization's core housing services or programming. Neighborhood redevelopment efforts, particularly ones with an arts focus, can sometimes exclude long-term neighborhood residents and focus on bringing and building relationships among and with newcomers - the creative class - to the area. It is smART's hope that an event like the Harvest, and future iterations that it inspires, can help to bridge some of the divides between "old" and "new" and set the stage for future engagement. By sharing and uncovering untold stories, this initiative encouraged smART artists to incorporate these stories and local history into their artistic endeavors and strengthened ties between new and long-time Mitchelltown residents.

key lessons

- Partnering with a local, credible group that has already built trust with residents in the community can expand organizational capacity to do outreach and allow for new opportunities to build partnerships and capacity.
- Engaging youth in community building can help expand new ways of thinking, particularly as it related to marketing, technology and outreach.
- Work should be done to ensure that all residents feel like a community event is relevant to them - testing the marketing materials with our target population to understand perception of the event is wise. There is no "one size fits all" form of outreach and outreach should be tailored to the unique needs and circumstances of the target group.

wayfinding in thomas, wv

Tucker County is a recreational tourist-based economy with an abundance of public lands for hiking, mountain biking, and skiing. The completion of a major state highway project in 2016 has dramatically shortened travel time from Washington, DC to Tucker County, spurring a significant increase in out-of-state visitors and second home owners.

Thomas, a town of about 600 in the county of 7,000, is increasingly becoming known in its own right as a unique arts and music destination. However, many tourists visiting nearby Davis and Canaan Valley are not aware of the vibrant small businesses in historic downtown Thomas. Some of those businesses include five art galleries, antique and craft stores, a coffee shop, restaurants, and a renowned music venue called The Purple Fiddle.

Woodlands Development Group (WDG) partnered with Artspring in Thomas, West Virginia to create wayfinding materials, both physical and digital, that promote the dynamic creative culture of Thomas and its downtown historic business district to residents and tourists alike. Artspring - A Steward of Tucker County Arts - is a nonprofit organization that nurtures the arts community, engages the public, and promotes the county as an arts destination through year-round collaboration and by presenting an annual arts festival.

Through volunteer committees and community input, a digital and interactive illustrated business map and website was launched to guide the growing number of tourists during their time in Thomas. Likewise, the print version of the map is currently displayed on waste bins throughout downtown. Finally, a tri-fold print version of the illustrated map was also developed and distributed in strategic locations throughout the county and region to inform tourists of Thomas' businesses and amenities.



This is Thomas, WV



wayfinding outcomes

This multidimensional project encourages a stronger and more well-connected sense of place for further economic growth of the arts-based economy in Thomas. In addition, the project draws more attention to the historic commercial district of Thomas and begins to create a visual identity for the town, creating a brand for continued marketing.

“The committee thought a lot about what makes Thomas unique and what Thomas’ identity is. Through their processes of design, the committee volunteers grew in understanding of their ‘place.’ They also clearly grew in pride of the arts related businesses and the community that they were attempting to illustrate through the products,” said Emily Wilson-Hauger (WDG), project manager for this initiative.

Eight volunteers were engaged as committee members for over 100 hours of work, 39 businesses have been involved, and more than 400 brochures have already been distributed. Over \$12,000 in other funding for wayfinding and public art has been leveraged, in addition to AmeriCorps members’ time.

The demand for these maps is apparent, as WDG and its volunteers can barely keep them in brochure holders at various locations in Tucker County. Business owners have reported seeing tourists walking around and utilizing the maps. WDG has also observed an increase in local understanding of place/cultural history, valuation of project sites, and valuation of the arts and cultural amenities in the community.

key lessons

- Creative placemaking is a process for community engagement. Therefore, more time may be needed to complete a project, especially when it involves investigating and defining the cultural identity of a place for all residents.
- Keeping the scope of work for a community engagement project simple will allow for as much community engagement as possible. When a project gets too complex, it may be hard to include as many voices as desired.
- Creative placemaking projects require clear communication to get as much input as possible from diverse stakeholders. Yet, it also requires executive decisions to be made at times to keep projects moving in a timely manner.



peer learning exchange

On October 3 and 4, 2017 [bc] co-hosted a peer learning exchange with the Housing Assistance Council (HAC) and Woodlands Development Group (WDG) in Thomas, West Virginia to share knowledge and best practices for creative placemaking in rural communities. The peer learning exchange included a range of site visits, conversations with local stakeholders, and workshops.

[bc], HAC and Woodlands were joined by 19 rural affordable housing developers, artists, educators and local nonprofit organizations to discuss topics including funding, partnerships, program design, cultural equity and community engagement.

For example, WDG hosted a tour of Thomas, West Virginia focused on their financing of local businesses and the redevelopment of downtown to support an arts-based economy. Participants had the opportunity to meet with stakeholders, artists and business owners along the tour. In addition, [bc] led a training on designing engagement processes that bridge stakeholders, sharing examples from renowned rural creative placemaking projects across the country.

This peer exchange concluded with an productive discussion on challenges (or anticipated challenges) and successes of attendees' creative placemaking work. The group collaboratively discussed how WDG might integrate creative placemaking into their ongoing riverfront trail planning work and developed a workplan/budget for a local nonprofit to deliver small, creative placemaking microgrants to small towns across West Virginia.



Peer exchange attendees described rural creative placemaking as...

- “Using the arts to build community and engage with diverse groups.”
- “Using arts and humanities to bolster economic development and using economic development to bolster the arts.”
- “Using creative, inspiring approaches to visioning, planning and sometimes making together, while including awareness of how arts and culture generate a sense of place that has value in multiple ways.”
- “Using the arts and creative ways to develop a community.”





key lessons

- The highest capacity rural housing and community development groups have been the quickest to embrace creative placemaking. Organizations, like Woodlands Development Group, see creative placemaking as a complement to their broader mission, not just as a funding mechanism.
- In rural communities, small grants for artist stipends can go a long way. Local community foundations or private corporations may be important funders for this work. [bc]'s Activating Vacancy guide serves as a valuable resource for local organizations setting up a framework and to use in conversations with funders
- Seeing creative placemaking "on the ground" and engaging with diverse stakeholders involved in the work is vital for the affordable housing industry to embrace the concept.
- Locally-driven creative placemaking provides an opportunity to build new partnerships, incorporate new fundings streams, and embrace new methods of doing business.





reflections + lessons for the field

Each piece of this yearlong initiative has taught our organizations something new about creative placemaking for rural communities. While each technical training, pilot project, and facilitated discussion is of unique value, several key themes/lessons have emerged and are outlined on the following pages.

1 Housing developers (CDCs, CHDOs) are well positioned to do creative placemaking. These organizations can play a significant role in supporting a unique place-based cultural identity through the buildings they develop and financially support.

This thesis for our yearlong initiative was reaffirmed, especially by the two pilot projects completed over the summer 2017. For example, the redevelopment and financing work that Woodlands Development Group is doing in Tucker County supports local entrepreneurs, artists and small business owners in fostering a creative economy and unique place for existing and new residents, as well as tourists. Rather than short-term, temporary festival or events (which are an important element to thriving rural places), WDG has been a reliable and consistent supporters of redevelopment work with built trust amongst residents and stakeholders.

2 Starting with the terms and definitions for creative placemaking can be a barrier to securing stakeholder buy-in in the rural, affordable housing industry.

If possible, providing opportunities for housers to see, touch, experience creative placemaking and engage with stakeholders fosters understanding and support for the discipline. When hands-on, interactive experience isn't possible, a range of rural examples and dialogue with credible rural housing and community development leaders are essential.

3 Creative placemaking offers an exciting opportunity to bring high quality design of single and multi-family homes, as well as public spaces, to the most vulnerable, rural populations.

Architecture and community design are fields that may be unknown to rural affordable housing producers, working to create affordable homes on slim margins, especially in Appalachia, Indian Country, and colonias along the U.S.-Mexico border. Creative placemaking in a rural context may engage planners, architects and urban designers in creating more livable places. For example, creative placemaking has enabled [bc] and Woodlands Development Group to work together beyond this grant period.

4 There is significant overlap between community development challenges faced in rural and urban areas. However, no two rural communities are the same, and local context should strongly inform project approaches and methodologies.

Our work with smART Kinston and Woodlands Development Group supported national discussion about the wide spectrum of communities defined as rural. Kinston, NC (approximately 22,000 residents) and Thomas, WV (approximately 600 residents) are vastly different in scale, geography, and context. This reaffirms our current theories about creative placemaking: that all community engagement approaches and design methodologies should be respectful of and responsive to local expertise and culture.

5 The strength of an organization's relationship with stakeholders and a community's scale can play a significant role in the impact of a community-engaged design process.

[bc]'s technical assistance work with two different housing organizations in rural communities of vastly different scales revealed that a strong relationship with a small constituency may lead to higher impact outcomes. For example, WDG has been working in Tucker County for over 20 years and has earned the trust of nearly all local stakeholders. This small grant to support an illustrated wayfinding map relates to WDG's comprehensive community redevelopment, financing, and planning work that supports a naturally occurring artist community. Alternatively, smART Kinston was founded in 2013 by Stephen Hill who has built a brewery and several businesses in downtown Kinston and has advocated for the creation of an Arts & Cultural District in Mitchelltown (the focus of this project). smART Kinston has driven the creation of an Arts & Cultural District and is working to expand their community engagement efforts to be inclusive of artists moving to the district and long-time residents. The History Harvest event was the first of its kind with smART Kinston and hopes to inspire future iterations in neighborhoods across Kinston.

6 Modest funding can go far in rural communities.

HAC's mandate to serve the poorest rural regions can be a challenge to creative placemaking work (i.e. less funding and less capacity) but also invigorates this body of work. By bringing creative placemaking resources to those most left behind in the modern economy, HAC is amplifying what is possible. The preliminary results are encouraging, though such work at HAC is in its infancy. Moreover, as the Rural Voices edition noted, some of rural creative placemaking's best successes are emerging from challenged regions including Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, and tribal communities - a very encouraging sign.



perspectives

“ Too often housing, neighborhood revitalization, and community development focus solely on basic needs - providing quality, affordable housing, reducing blight and vacancy. Creative placemaking with a community development lens helps to elevate arts and culture - something that’s present and a given in so-called ‘vibrant’ communities - as another ‘basic need’ of an area that has experienced disinvestment.”

- *Marcia Perritt, smART Kinston Foundation*



“ I experienced striking similarities between the conditions in Kinston and the challenges they were hoping to tackle with our Activating Vacancy work and the context of 10th Street in Dallas. Even though there are meaningful differences between contexts, there are a lot of potential learning opportunities. This highlights the value and need for dialogue between rural and urban communities, like the Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange, a partnership between Art of the Rural and Appalshop.”

- *Lizzie MacWillie, buildingcommunityWORKSHOP*



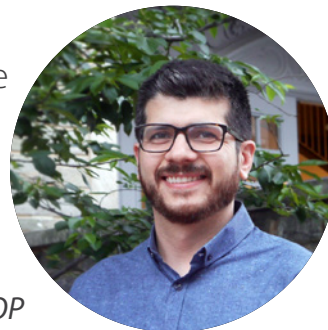
“ For Woodlands especially, [creative placemaking] means working across sectors and between partners to find creative solutions to the needs we find in the communities we serve. Incorporating the arts and artists into those solutions is key to our city planning efforts as well as our redevelopment work. Woodlands hopes to find more ways to use creative placemaking engagement and tools into our housing projects.”

- *Emily Wilson-Hauger, Woodlands Development Group*



“ Thomas is a great example of intentional investment in the arts. Artists are not just involved, but owning the economic development process. With the support of Woodlands, local artists have organized themselves, purchased buildings and are shaping Thomas as a thriving, cultural hub in rural West Virginia.”

- *Omar Hakeem, buildingcommunityWORKSHOP*



“ Housers and community developers that have built trust and credibility with the stakeholders they work for are well positioned to use arts and creativity as a bridge between a wide array of community goals, from affordable housing and redevelopment to environmental restoration. Rural communities need to be prioritized in allocation of funding and technical assistance resources. We’ve seen that relatively minor investments can go far with small, yet high capacity organizations.”

- *Michaela Accardi, buildingcommunityWORKSHOP*

“ It is important to me that creative placemaking include “art and artists” beyond murals, art galleries, etc. Oral traditions, for example, can be critical to creative placemaking--especially in struggling communities.”

- *anonymous, peer learning exchange survey*



“ I leave the grant cycle more convinced than ever that locally-driven CPM is a key trend in revitalizing rural. Especially in the hardest to reach areas. And the amount of public and private subsidy to bring CPM to rural communities is limited—especially in comparison to the cost of other rural needs such as housing and infrastructure. But to make CPM “stick”, funders must commit to several years of funding to “get the ball rolling” while embracing projects that don’t take off. In my own academic research of place-based education, a key finding (verified by others in field as well) is that failure is key to learning, embracing, and making something better. Especially in isolated (i.e. largely poor) rural areas. Thus, I urge rural CPM funders to keep such in mind when thinking about rural CPM. And finally, rural CPM must “unleash” rural people. This means that projects might take on directions and dimensions that are altogether different than what national thought leaders on CPM have in mind.”

- *Stephen Sugg, Housing Assistance Council*

“ Nothing is created overnight. For modest relative investment, NEA has inserted creative placemaking into much of HAC’s outreach and work, including publications and a peer exchange. Consider what has been accomplished. It is a lot!”

- *anonymous, Housing Assistance Council working group*

