

# Strengthening and Connecting to the Social Fabric of Communities

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# Introduction

When community developers and artists work with residents to transform a place, there is more change underway than simply creating, renovating, or energizing a park, street, storefront, historic house, or neighborhood meeting place. Physical improvements and creative expressions are the means by which a community can be strengthened, informed, and motivated. People can become more aware of and connected to each other, and motivated to collaboratively bring about needed change. Residents can contribute to the shared history of a place and its destiny and possibilities. This kind of growth and interaction can weave the social fabric of a community more tightly. The process of weaving together a stronger social fabric, and connecting that fabric to community development through arts and culture strategies, is the subject of this brief. Experiences in six diverse communities provide an opportunity to explore how the process takes place from the point of view of organizations leading the effort, and from the perspective of members of the broader community. Their experiences illustrate the potential for these strategies to have a positive and unique impact on significant social issues.

The Community Development Investments (CDI) program was launched in 2015 by ArtPlace America to assess and support place-based organizations to sustainably incorporate arts and culture into their core work. This one-time program provided \$3 million to each of six community planning and development organizations over three years. The CDI program also offered significant technical assistance on conceiving, executing, and financing creative placemaking projects aimed at achieving their missions more effectively, and bringing about positive outcomes for their communities.

The participating organizations and their partners took on and struggled with some of the most pressing and complex issues of our time, including gentrification and displacement, racial health inequities, the isolation of immigrant newcomers, and the historical trauma resulting from racism and oppression. They combined their expertise and standing with the tools, perspectives, imagining, and approaches of artists. As a result, they helped residents to own and express their communities' identities, and changed the terms of engagement and methods of neighborhood planning and placemaking. Communities are more resilient and capable of preserving and drawing from their cultural power, to adapt and respond to external forces on their terms. They have also become more "collectively effective"<sup>1</sup> at designing and advocating for the long-term change they wish to see.

There are preconditions that must be put in place for a community to become collectively effective when responding to deeply rooted social problems.<sup>2</sup> Five building blocks, as revealed by the CDI experience, were positively influenced by arts and culture strategies:

- social cohesion
- social agency
- civic and political leadership
- civic know-how
- narrative control

These are interrelated but distinct components of collective efficacy. In the course of outlining the change process and reviewing each case, we will define and examine how each feature emerges in a unique way.

For the purposes of this brief, social fabric is defined as the formally and informally recognized systems made up of **who** facilitates connections, and **where** and **how** people relate to each other:

- The **where** is the physical and virtual infrastructure that enables social and cultural connections to take place (e.g., backyards, barber shops, cultural centers, plazas, and social media sites)
- The **how** refers to the connections by which people relate to each other (e.g., traditions, stories, food, and music)
- The **who**—the connectors—are people or organizations that generate and maintain these connections (e.g., community organizers, religious leaders, culture bearers, and nonprofit organizations)

This is one in a series of six briefs that offer insights and lessons for a wide range of fields of practice, from affordable housing development to parks stewardship, from the social practice of art to youth development, from community organizing to public health. Learning from experience has been a Community Development Investments program goal, and PolicyLink conducted this research with program participants since 2015. Each brief takes on a different facet of our research framework. The overall documentation includes many publications, videos, and presentations from conferences, a collection that continues to grow throughout 2020.<sup>3</sup>

The following two pages provide capsule summaries of the six CDI organizations and the activities they undertook between 2015 and 2019. This is followed by a guide through the process by which arts and culture strategies can strengthen the local social fabric, starting with creating the preconditions for change and moving toward the ultimate outcomes. We then apply this conceptual model to three of the communities, while recognizing the uniqueness of each place and organization.

# CDI Participants and Activities

## Cook Inlet Housing Authority

**Anchorage, Alaska**

Guided by Alaska Native village values, this regional tribally designated housing authority creates housing opportunities to empower people and build community.

**Focus:** Solving problems in new ways and elevating resident voices.

**Key projects:** “Living Big, Living Small,” exploring small space living with set designer Sheila Wyne; “#MIMESPENARD,” mitigating business disruption during a road construction project with performance artists Enzina Marrari and Becky Kendall; the Church of Love, transforming a former church slated for demolition into a community center/art space/performance venue; and embedding story gathering and listening as an organizational practice with Ping Chong + Company.

## Fairmount Park Conservancy

**Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**

This is an urban parks conservancy that leads and supports efforts to improve Fairmount Park’s 2,000 acres and 200 other neighborhood parks citywide.

**Focus:** Working with artists to make city parks relevant for a more diverse population of Philadelphians, and to celebrate the history, culture, and identity of its neighborhoods.

**Key projects:** A community catalyst residency with the Amber Art & Design collective at the Hatfield House in the Strawberry Mansion neighborhood, including cultural asset mapping, social engagement, and community building; leading a master plan process for the Mander Recreation Center; co-hosting the West Park Arts Fest in East Parkside; and expanding the scope and reach of The Oval, a seasonal pop-up park in downtown Philadelphia.

## Jackson Medical Mall Foundation

**Jackson, Mississippi**

This organization manages a 900,000-square-foot medical and retail facility in central Mississippi with a mission to holistically eliminate health-care disparities through the promotion of creativity and innovation.

**Focus:** Enhancing their role as a neighborhood anchor by fusing arts and culture with health and economic development goals.

**Key projects:** Intergenerational programming and festivals linking artistic production and economic development with the delivery of health services; “Reimagining the Jackson Medical Mall” with Carlton Turner to introduce history and storytelling into the design of the space; a new community garden and kitchen; and internal and external creative engagement practices with significant developments, LLC.

## Little Tokyo Service Center

**Los Angeles, California**

This organization provides family services, affordable housing and tenant services, and community organizing and planning for the nation’s largest Japantown, in downtown Los Angeles.

**Focus:** Facing increasing pressures of displacement, homelessness, and high costs of living, they launched the +LAB (“Plus Lab”) Arts Integration project to test new ways to promote the equitable development of ethnic communities.

**Key projects:** “Takachizu” with Rosten Woo and Sustainable Little Tokyo, inviting residents to share treasures from the neighborhood; #MyFSN, which seeks to assert “moral site control” over the future of the contested First Street North site; 341 FSN, an experimental storefront space designed to explore community control and self-determination; and the +LAB artist residency program.

## Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership

### Southwest Region of Minnesota

This organization provides housing development, preservation, rehabilitation, and supportive housing and community development services for a rural 30-county region.

**Focus:** Partnership Art, which uses arts and cultural strategies to incorporate new voices, including Minnesota's growing immigrant communities, into local planning processes.

**Key projects:** Milan Listening House, exploring immigration stories and the concept of home to inform the revitalization of public spaces; Healthy Housing Initiative, an outreach and education toolkit reaching new Latinx communities; "Creative Community Design Build," where artists engage communities to reimagine underutilized downtown buildings; and hiring Ashley Hanson as an internal artist-in-residence to help sustain their arts and cultural approaches.

## Zuni Youth Enrichment Project

### Zuni, New Mexico

This effort is devoted to enhancing the health and resiliency of youth on the Zuni Pueblo in New Mexico.

**Focus:** Integrating Zuni arts and culture into planning, design, and construction of a new youth center and park.

**Key project:** Supporting an ongoing artists' committee and other local artists to co-design and contribute to long-term stewardship, activation, and programming of H'on A:wan ("of the people") Community Park.

## The Basic Elements of Connecting to Community Social Fabric

Every town, city, or region includes two broad systems of ongoing relationships which mediate power and influence, and determine how and whether a place can move toward greater self-determination, resilience, or equitable development outcomes:

1. The **organizational** ecosystem of governmental and private entities, and the decision-making processes, policies, and programs these entities employ to manage communities and guide their growth, and
2. The **interpersonal** connections which embody the social fabric of communities, consisting of **who** many people relate to, and **where** and **how** they relate to each other.

Community-based groups often occupy a middle ground, embodying elements of the institutional and the interpersonal system, and community development and arts groups are active in that in-between space as they seek to strengthen the local social fabric. Public policies, plans, and programs can either damage or support a community's social fabric, depending on how they are designed and implemented. When underlying support is strong, it is largely invisible and often taken for granted. Unfortunately, there is a history of policies that have torn apart the social fabric of communities, severing relationships and destroying networks of support and sources of power. This damage has most often been inflicted upon low-income communities and communities of color, where the networks of power and support, often invisible to outsiders, were critical to navigating systems of oppression. For example, when urban renewal programs demolished many neighborhoods, this not only uprooted and relocated their residents in the name of municipal progress, but also abruptly ended their historical and cultural continuity.<sup>4</sup>

A version of this negation of place and community is also evident in disinvested rural areas, when an extractive industry (typically mining, manufacturing, or large-scale agriculture) has pulled up stakes, forcing many people to migrate and where young people see no viable future at home. No matter the type of place, the policies guiding development have the potential to displace entire communities while also perpetuating a message that marginalized populations do not belong. Thus, people maintaining their local culture when powerful forces are pushing for their dispersal is the most basic form of what is now sometimes called “creative place-keeping”.



**Our research indicates that organizations that consciously and carefully embed their work in a community's social system, can shape more culturally relevant, responsive, and fully utilized spaces and programs. Residents can exercise their power to shape their future, thus increasing the likelihood of successive cycles of more responsive development and improved economic and social outcomes.**

Connecting to the social fabric of marginalized communities can be difficult for outside investors, planners, or policymakers, given the nuance and cultural knowledge required and the threat that outside interventions have historically brought. However, we have observed that arts and cultural strategies that are intentionally inclusive and socially and civically engaged can facilitate an almost sacred entry into community social fabric. This entry is made possible when these strategies embody specific values when interacting with community. These values include recognizing the interconnectedness of everyone, respecting and honoring the inherent power and wisdom of individuals as well as their ancestors, and making space to discover, uncover, and play. These values help reveal the seams that bind such communities that may be invisible, uncommon in dominant narratives, and mostly unknown to outsiders. This is why arts and cultural strategies—which often help “make the invisible, visible”—may be uniquely suited to uncover, strengthen, and weave a community's social fabric into future planning.<sup>5</sup>

After four years of closely interacting with, observing, and documenting the six community-based organizations, our findings indicate that working with artists, culture bearers, and designers can help organizations identify, build on, and connect community planning to a community's social ties and cultural roots. In the process, organizations can help center belonging, and strengthen residents' interconnectedness to each other and their heritage. Our research indicates that organizations that consciously and carefully embed their work in a community's social system can shape more culturally relevant, responsive, and fully utilized spaces and programs. Residents can exercise their power to shape their future, thus increasing the likelihood of successive cycles of more responsive development and improved economic and social outcomes.

## How to Create the Preconditions for Resilient Communities

Arts and culture-based community development strategies can enable the critical *preconditions* for long-term, effective change characterized by equity, resilience, and the authentic exercise of local democracy, a type of “bottom-up governance.”

The first set of preconditions is present when organizations have the capacity to support residents to exercise their voice and power. The second set is in place when residents can deploy the five building blocks of collective efficacy to create grassroots change. Examples will be described in three of the CDI communities’ accounts. Each community that was studied may have made progress on multiple building blocks, but for the sake of brevity, we highlight the two most illustrative examples in each case. The building blocks of efficacy are interrelated, but each one brings to the foreground a distinct quality and capacity.

- **social cohesion:** people becoming closer to one another, more connected to the place in which they live, and more likely to hold aspirations for improving the common good<sup>6</sup>
- **social agency:** neighbors building, through common experience, the shared capacity and readiness to act as a group on significant public issues
- **civic and political leadership:** taking up positions of influence, authority, and power in an authentic, accountable fashion
- **civic know-how:** knowing the practical techniques, rules of the game, and strategies for bringing about change at the local level, from the basics of organizing to the machinations of local government
- **narrative control:** reframing the values, terms, and public understanding and expectations of a policy debate or the decisions at stake for the future of a site or neighborhood

These community and organizational preconditions represent the social infrastructure necessary to make progress toward community-level outcomes, such as improved housing conditions or population-level health improvements, and long-term goals of building resilience and setting the stage for true bottom-up governance.

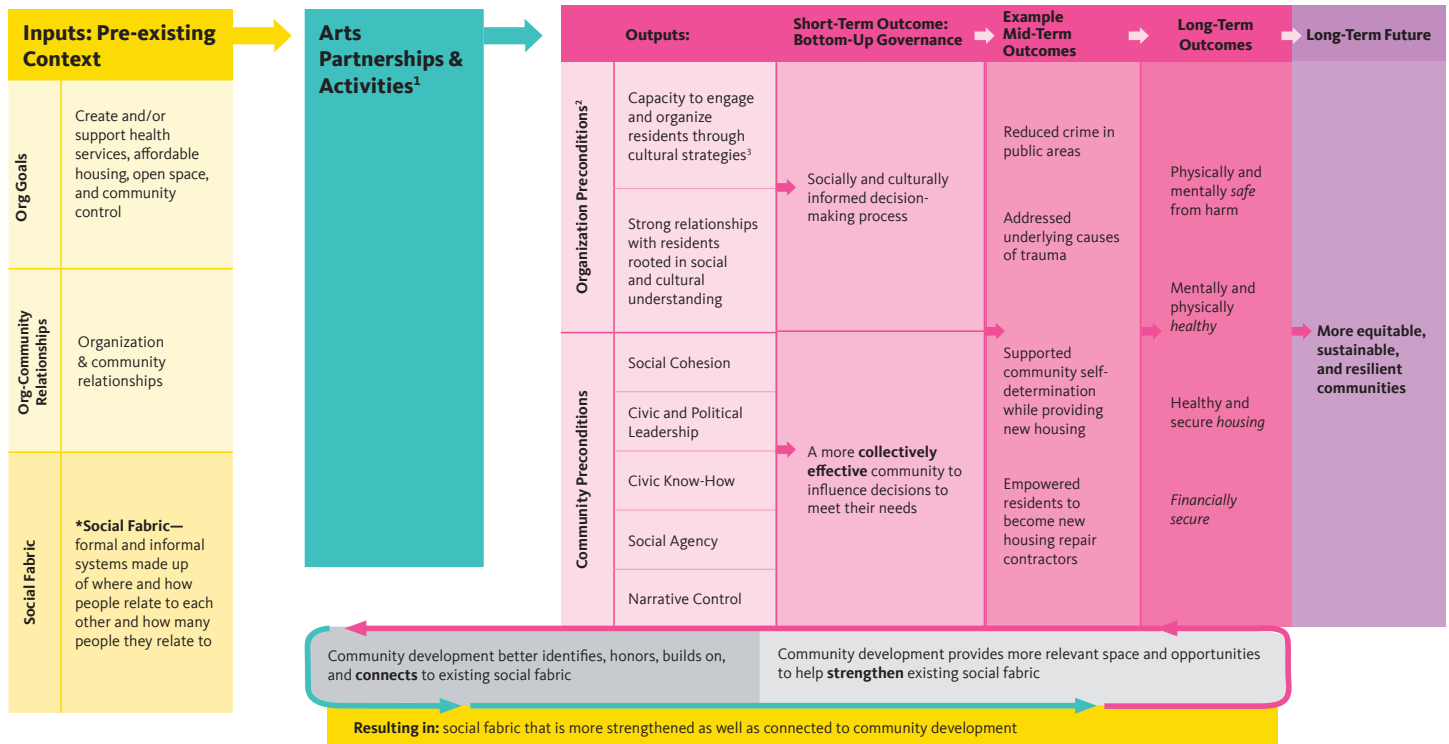
**Resilience** is defined by Enterprise Community Partners as, “the capacity of a system, be it an individual or a community, to deal with change positively and to use shocks and disturbances to spur renewal and innovative thinking,” or, the ability to not only, “bounce back but to bounce forward.”<sup>7</sup> Arts and culture-based community planning can help communities and those who serve them, to prepare and weather any change, be it demographic shifts, market pressures, or a pandemic.

**Bottom-up governance**, when rooted in vulnerable populations, prepares government and organizations to better listen to communities’ needs and ideas, and to make strategic decisions with limited resources and time that benefit all.<sup>8</sup> In essence, effective bottom-up governance helps communities to set their own agenda, and organizations to utilize their resources and networks to support their needs.

Creating the conditions for resilience, or the structures and commitments for bottom-up governance, takes significant time and dedicated attention. It is challenging, difficult work that must be rooted in the social fabric of neighborhoods. Therefore, it is not surprising that it has taken up to four years for most measures of tangible community-level outcomes, such as improved housing conditions or population-level health improvements, to emerge from the Community Development Investments strategies. However, important short-term outcomes emerged during the program period, milestones that indicated progress toward the long-term outcomes. Please see Figure 1 for a summary of the change process of arts and culturally based development.

Figure 1

# Arts and Culture-Based Community Development Theory of Change



1. See [Working with Artists to Deepen Impact](#). 2. See [How Organizations Evolve When They Embrace Arts and Culture](#). 3. See [Moving from Engaging to Organizing with Arts and Culture Strategies](#).

The pathways through which organizations and residents develop components of collective efficacy and the capacity to strengthen their social fabric are distinct in each sector, or broad issue area. While the CDI groups were all active in “community development” in the broadest sense, they were grounded in several sectors of nonprofit activity and service. The experience of an organization whose activities were centered on parks and health equity showed how the culturally driven building and repurposing of park spaces can become the entry point for a healthier, more resilient community, and more extensive social change. Two other lead organizations were accomplished housing developers and managers of services for the residents of their properties. They expanded their networks and capacities through engagement with arts and culture, which enabled them to form new alliances, draw new people into civic action, build bridges across ethnic divides, and more fully express the identities of their communities.

The organizations’ arts and culture journeys are portrayed in four parts:

- the challenge and opportunity which the organization sought to address
- generating community preconditions for long-term outcomes
- generating organizational preconditions for long-term outcomes
- how bottom-up governance is guiding progress toward long-term community outcomes

Community-based organizations in diverse environments can learn from these experiences and approach their work using new arts and cultural lenses in order to build greater equity and resilience.



# Case Studies: Three Diverse Paths Toward Strengthening and Connecting to a Community’s Social Fabric

Whether these organizations began the CDI program with limited or strong relationships with the communities they served, arts and culture strategies became a conduit to more meaningfully connect them to their residents. This connection helped build stronger bottom-up governance, allowing organizations, partners, and residents to collaborate on achieving a more resilient future. We have selected three cases that demonstrate how arts and culture strategies helped each entity to build more equitable planning and decision-making community development processes, rooted in the residents’ vision and agency.

Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership (SWMHP) began as a self-identified “top-down” organization with minimal community engagement that was unsure of how to work with rapidly changing demographics in their community

development processes. The pre-existing social fabric was minimal due to seismic shifts of the community’s demographics. Through the integration of arts and culture strategies, they honored and strengthened the social fabric of their communities, and moved the organization and the region more toward a bottom-up development process. In contrast, the Zuni Youth Enrichment Project (ZYEP) had pre-existing relationships with the Zuni community, and included arts and culture offerings in their programming. The pueblo already had a strong social fabric filled with cultural traditions that had been held intact over hundreds of years. However, by developing a deep partnership with an artist committee, ZYEP established Zuni culture as the foundation for their approach to health and the key component of a resilient Zuni Nation. Lastly, the Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC) was one of the most connected

Flier for art show created as part of Nik Nerburn’s Grand Terrace Photo League project with the Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership. (*Grand Terrace Photo League*)



Community Development Investments agency—a vital part of the rich existing social fabric of the neighborhood. However, by working more closely with their arts and culture partners, they more deeply aligned their vision and strategies, and built a larger, more cross-cultural base to advocate for Little Tokyo’s sustainability. Regardless of the prior state of each community’s social ecosystem, and the relationship between the organizations and residents, arts and cultural strategies helped strengthen the social fabric, while activating the networks, power, and traditions to shape decisions in each community.

Artist Nik Nerburn takes “family portraits” at Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership’s housing complex while learning about youth and their families’ stories and needs. *(Nik Nerburn)*



## Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership

Southwest Minnesota was primarily a rural and agricultural region that was relatively prosperous until the 1980s farm crisis. The crisis catalyzed the region to diversify its economy and grow industrial-scale food processing as a source of employment. Immigrants and refugees from Latin America, East Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands eventually filled the jobs in packing plants and other facilities, and in the process revived the economic life of many towns. The newcomers brought their traditions, values, and languages to places with longstanding cultures and norms primarily based on the descendants of Scandinavian immigrants dating back to the 1850s. Although there were some multicultural celebrations, this demographic change resulted in a social fabric that was loosely connected across the newcomers and the established populations. There were also few formally designated spaces for such social and cultural gatherings. Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership experimented with arts and culture strategies to address the “identity crisis” caused by demographic shifts, and increase new residents’ engagement in their towns’ civic life and development processes.

**Organizational Challenge/Opportunity:** SWMHP wanted to explore how arts and cultural strategies might help them to better serve the housing and community revitalization needs of the large population of newcomers—people of color from many cultures entering a previously overwhelmingly White and homogeneous region—who had not traditionally been involved in local community development processes.

### Community Preconditions: Shifting from Divided to United, Outside to Inside

Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership had one of the largest number of projects and partnerships with artists in the Community Development Investments program. Many of their artists had established social/civic practice backgrounds where their creative process began with understanding and building on the social fabric in the small towns where they worked. These practices ultimately helped SWMHP to unify diverse groups behind a more collective identity and purpose.<sup>9</sup> They connected residents of color, who had previously not been engaged, to civic resources and positioned them to become involved in local decision-making processes. In doing so, they helped enact the preconditions necessary for those communities to become more influential over their future. In this report we highlight two of the building blocks of those community preconditions: social cohesion and civic and political leadership.

## Social Cohesion

One of the first towns where SWMHP decided to test new ways of working with artists was Milan, a small town with a number of housing needs and two distinct, mostly divided populations. Working with artists proved to be key to helping address housing issues, and improve cross-cultural relationships. In a town of 350 residents, half of the population are of Scandinavian descent, and the other half are Micronesian (the Indigenous peoples of four islands in the Western Pacific). Many community members live in substandard housing. Instead of utilizing a business-as-usual strategy, such as providing a housing rehab workshop, SWMHP worked with artists Lucy Tokheim, Lauren Carlson, and Brendan Stermer to explore and understand the shared concept of home across cultures in *The Listening House*. The project was staged in a dilapidated house where both Scandinavians and Micronesian newcomers had lived. Artists and community members listened to, and reflected on, what home means through pictures, picnics, and video. The final report included community-building goals shared across the populations such as, “residents know they can work together across the many cultures, and solve problems,” and shared housing goals like, “homeownership has transferred [people] from rentals to residents.”<sup>10</sup> Residents reported that addressing cross-cultural relationship-building was not only necessary to create change together, but just as important as their housing needs.

*The Listening House* and other acts of creative community engagement revealed the community’s commitment to improving intergroup relationships. SWMHP partnered with a small theater organization, Placebase Productions, to produce *This Land is Milan*, a play that traveled throughout the town to “transform community into a stage to explore past stories, present conditions, and future possibilities.”<sup>11</sup> Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership and their artists explored common themes of Norwegian and Micronesian heritage, immigration stories, and hopes for the future. Over 40 community members and 2,000 volunteer hours later, this process of discovering and making together reduced barriers and forged a more cohesive, empowered community. Ann Thompson, a local leader, described the cultural exchange, “With these projects, the lines may have become a little less defined... This is the foundation. You gotta have people engaged and feel like they’re being heard. If you’re going to build community and physical things, like a new house, you have to have a firm foundation.”<sup>12</sup>

Thompson highlights social cohesion as a foundation or a precondition that is necessary before trying to make more tangible changes. Lisa Graphenteen, former SWMHP chief operating officer, further reinforced the need to address these barriers, “The most important changes? I think a lot of new relationships... so much bridges this ‘us versus them’ mentality. ... These communities that were 95-100 percent Caucasian and then all of a sudden, there’s all these demographic shifts, and they don’t understand the culture, don’t understand why they do what they do... So again, I think when you know someone, it changes a lot.”<sup>13</sup>

Even as seasoned community development practitioners, SWMHP upended their normal process to focus on a precursor to shape how they better address more specific housing problems—by tackling the root challenges of relationships.

Furthermore, Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership helped strengthen connections across groups by building cross-cultural public spaces. Through community asset mapping in St. James where one-third of the 4,400 residents are Latinx, the organization learned that residents wanted a more visible representation of their diverse community downtown. SWMHP worked with artist Sara Udvig and community and city leaders to build Plaza de Saint James. Over 100 community members collaboratively designed and constructed the Plaza. It features a metaphorical community compass on the ground that “encourages reflection on the paths of migration that our residents took to St. James,” with the footprints of community members in bronze converging on a north point.<sup>14</sup> The Plaza is “meant to drive continued energy towards cross-cultural connection among neighbors, and a better, more equitable experience for all in Saint James.”<sup>15</sup>

## Civic and Political Leadership

SWMHP’s partnerships with artists helped residents of color take leadership on improving housing conditions for themselves and their neighbors. SWMHP worked with Homeboat, an architecture and design collective, on the Healthy Housing Initiative to connect with the Latinx community in St. James, a group that has historically been hard to reach, to assess their home rehabilitation needs and connect them with repair resources. Like the artists in Milan, Homeboat did not just host a housing rehab workshop or undertake Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership’s other business-as-usual strategies. They began with “neighboring”—entering a new place like a neighbor who is intentional in creating reciprocal, compassionate relationships.<sup>16</sup> They dedicated time to getting to know

residents and asked them what organizations could do for the Latinx community. Each interaction led to another, “a church service, a potluck, or a game day in someone’s yard.”<sup>17</sup>

Homeboat was committed to understanding who made up the social fabric of the community. This eventually led them to partner with a local Latinx community group, La Convivencia Hispania, whose members went door-to-door with SWMHP staff, successfully gathering housing assessments in Spanish. Together, La Convivencia Hispania and Homeboat designed a healthy home toolkit that connected the Latinx community with resources to preserve, maintain, and improve housing.

Because the creative process often makes the invisible aspects of social fabric visible, ripple effects can come to light. Out of the artist-led Healthy Housing Initiative, St. James city government recognized Julieta Ochoa, from La Convivencia Hispania, as an emerging leader and she became the first Latinx person to serve on the city’s housing committee. Graphenteen reflected on artists’ ability to engage with city leaders in different ways to produce new outcomes, “I think if we would have gone and said [to the city government], ‘Oh, you should do this,’ they’d be offended. So, I think that change for them [was] to see where they could do better as a community on their own without being told. And even if maybe they were told by Jack, Mary, and Kelly, I’m sure they did it in such a nonchalant fun artist way, it became the city’s idea.”<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, this initiative inspired the city to dedicate funding for housing rehabilitation and translate municipal documents into Spanish. Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership’s arts-based approach to working within the city increased communities of color’s access to services and helped position Latinx leaders as champions of their own needs, while enabling others, including city officials, to understand how they could do the same.

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**This is the challenge of our work, and the job of us as housing policymakers, community-engaged artists, and as neighbors—how can we invest in people, and not only in the buildings that house them?**

— Nik Nerburn, Artist  
Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership

## Organizational Preconditions: Flipping from Top-Down to Bottom-Up

By transforming their normal development procedures through relationships with artists, this self-professed “top-down” organization has become more community-oriented and prioritizes residents’ needs and perspectives. For example, SWMHP engaged artist Nik Nerburn at the Grand Terrace, a large affordable housing complex in the city of Worthington and home to immigrants of color, to help reimagine ways to close the youth achievement gap and improve health. Like Homeboat’s neighboring approach, Nerburn’s artistic practice is centered on understanding and uncovering social ties, building trust, and curiosity. Through a photography project, Nerburn created a safe place for youth and their families to tell their stories and voice their needs through a process of taking “family portraits.” Nerburn learned residents lacked access to health care, jobs, and childcare, but the deeper challenge many residents faced was a “traumatic emotional loss, not a material one.”<sup>19</sup> He reflected that the building’s residents’ “common denominator” was that they were “on guard against hurt,” and they “craved respect and dignity.”<sup>20</sup> He added, “Photography is a powerful way to claim your dignity, which is why I was able to connect with so many of the residents in such a short time. How can an apartment complex give people dignity? This is the challenge of our work, and the job of us as housing policymakers, community-engaged artists, and as neighbors—how can we invest in people, and not only in the buildings that house them?”<sup>21</sup>

Nerburn proposed an indoor gathering space (critical given the cold winters) for socializing, physical activity, tutoring, computers, and a resident social worker. Property managers commented that residents, especially the kids, had “more energy” and they were “taking more ownership in the space than before.”<sup>22</sup> As a housing developer and manager of many housing complexes with marginalized communities, Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership staff were excited about Nerburn’s valuable insights and methods to inform the maintenance and development of other buildings and services in their portfolio. Using the arts to identify new ways to understand their constituents enables SWMHP to alter their housing practices to assess needs in a more nuanced manner, and collaboratively create solutions with the community.

After the successful collaboration with La Convivencia Hispania in the healthy housing assessment, Homeboat helped formalize the role of these Latinx leaders when conducting assessments by creating the Community Advocate Program. By authentically engaging and paying significant actors in the existing social fabric, providing leadership opportunities, and recognizing and growing successful practices, SWMHP became more deeply rooted in local, culturally relevant, people-based sources of power.

Now, when a city approaches SWMHP with a project idea, the organization responds with a new model that begins with arts-based community engagement.<sup>23</sup> Rick Goodemann, the former CEO of the Partnership, described a recent conversation with a city proposing a new housing project,

“Instead of talking about it from a top-down solution... our response was this is what we do, but here’s where we start. We’re going to engage probably an artist team to work to organize that community and give them a voice. How can we make them feel safe and also, how can they be promoting solutions? Nobody wants to live the way they are... How do we do this in a positive manner... And the city, said, that makes sense... They got it because they’re also being challenged as their community is diversifying how to engage with people in a meaningful way from different backgrounds, different cultures, different languages.”<sup>24</sup>

## From Bottom-Up Governance to Long-Term Outcomes: Engaging Arts for Healthy Homes and Financial Security

After experiencing four years of new arts-infused development processes, Southwest Minnesota has established preconditions for the region to be governed in a way that can more successfully create equitable, resilient communities. The region has a community development organization equipped with a method that begins by determining what is socially and culturally meaningful, and building the trust necessary to better identify and address needs and opportunities. Some communities in Southwest Minnesota are facing their identity crisis head-on, with residents becoming more unified and working together across differences. Furthermore, residents are better positioned as partners, and empowered as leaders, to work with government and other organizations to advocate for, access, and utilize the resources required for a healthy and resilient community. Overall, through arts and cultural strategies, in what is still a region of rapid demographic change, Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership has successfully recalibrated their governance to be more responsive and centered on the power and culture of its communities. Please see Figure 2 for a summary of the change process of SWMHP’s arts and culturally based development.

Community members perform “This Land is Milan,” a place-based play involving local community members that made the town a stage to explore past stories, present conditions, and future possibilities. (*Lisa Graphenteen*)

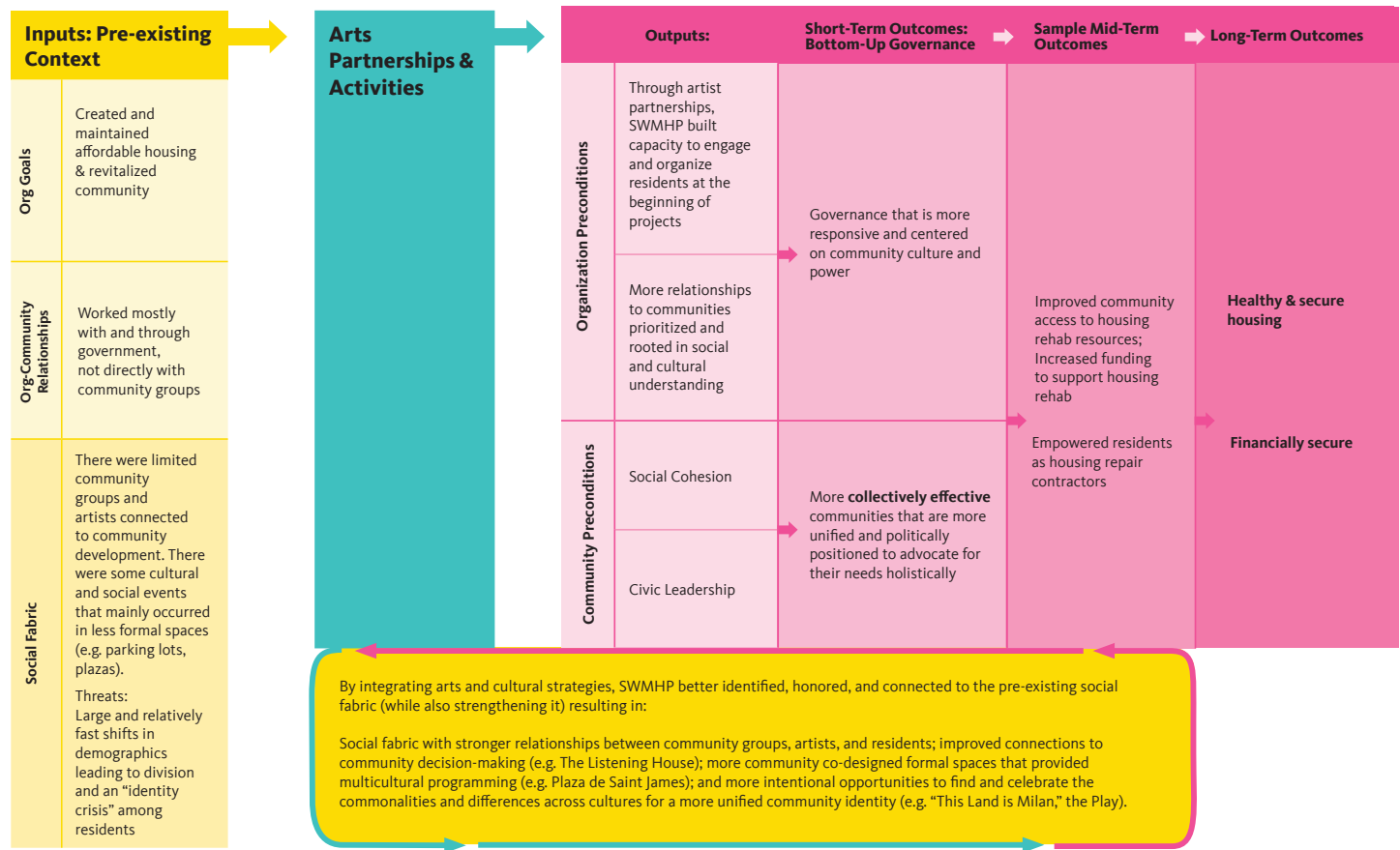


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**By adopting this new relational approach rooted in arts and culture, Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership is shifting community development to begin more collaboratively and inclusively, not only in towns that were part of the CDI program, but across the region.**

**Figure 2**

## Arts and Culture-Based Community Development Theory of Change about SWMHP



Because a bottom-up governance model that utilizes arts and cultural strategies can build deeper relationships and reveal the agency, power, and needs of a community, other outcomes and projects may naturally emerge. One example of an emerging mid-term program outcome developed from the healthy housing assessment. Not only were Latinx community members more connected to rehabilitation resources, but the assessment also led to the formation of Handyman Workshops to educate and empower residents as housing repair contractors themselves. Latinx residents not only improved their housing conditions but are also developing businesses and working toward a potentially more sustainable, financially secure future. Initiating a project with creative engagement tactics means starting a conversation that isn't exclusive to a single sector or goal. It highlights the interrelated nature of the qualities and long-term strategies a community needs to thrive.

A 2018 staff retreat facilitated by artist-in-residence Ashley Hanson to integrate arts and culturally based strategies organization-wide. (Lorrie Chang)



## Zuni Youth Enrichment Project, New Mexico

Zuni Pueblo, New Mexico, is a place whose strong cultural tradition and artistic excellence are appreciated worldwide. The Zuni Nation possesses more cultural and linguistic integrity than many other tribes have retained. More than 90 percent of the pueblo residents still practice the Zuni religion, and children grow up knowing which clan their family belongs to and hearing many stories, including the origin of Zuni people or why the seasons change. Their persistence in preserving their culture and land is no small feat—like many other Native communities, the Zuni Nation has endured hundreds of years of colonization and disempowerment. This historical trauma contributes to today's high rates of drug addiction, obesity, and suicide. Zuni Youth Enrichment Project was established to combat this health crisis by creating a range of programming for youth and their families, including sports leagues, summer camps, and art classes.

**Organizational Challenge/Opportunity:** ZYEP designed and created a large community center and park to advance health for marginalized youth and their families. They wanted to explore how working with local artists on the design and programming of the space could help improve health for the Zuni people.<sup>25</sup>

With 700 elementary school students and other community members, artist Noreen Simplicio designed pottery pieces that depict Zuni's emergence and migration story. (Lorrie Chang)



## Community Preconditions: Unlocking Cultural Resilience to Build Agency and Influence

Zuni Youth Enrichment Project worked in partnership with the artist committee to plan, design, and build their first capital development project, Ho'n A:Wan (For Everyone) Park. Tom Faber, former ZYEP co-director, explained that promoting resilience was about creating, "safe, stable, nurturing places."<sup>26</sup> The partnership with the artist committee helped cultivate a safe, nurturing space that supports the physical and mental well-being of Zuni youth and their families. In an area where people used to loiter, drink, and vandalize, police are reporting a significant drop in crime due to the park.<sup>27</sup> In a community where kids played on uneven ground littered with bottles, there is now a full-sized soccer field, commercial kitchen, classrooms, and amphitheater. In a pueblo with limited cultural markers and spaces celebrating Zuni traditions, Zuni art and culturally affirming designs permeate the park with murals, traditional coyote fencing, and traditional wooden beams (known as *vegas*). Daryl Shack, a member of the artist committee, proudly described children gazing up at the murals of Zuni's origin story and sharing what they know with each other. He explained, children who do not always have stable homes now have, "a place to call home," find mentors, and develop a commitment to themselves and their culture.<sup>28</sup>

By working in deep partnership with a committee of seasoned artists, ZYEP learned how to plan, design, and program themselves into the social fabric of Zuni.<sup>29</sup> Many of the artists set out to create community ownership over the park, motivating their networks to contribute to the park. For example, they had 700 elementary school students design pottery pieces depicting Zuni's emergency and migration story. As trusted religious leaders and artists grounded in the nation's traditions, they curated and created culturally affirming designs and art installations reinforcing Zuni identity and heritage, while also navigating religious sensitivities about building adjacent to the sacred Zuni riverbed.

Today, the park offers a countervailing force to diverse threats to social and cultural connections, such as changes to housing development patterns (from communal to single-family homes), the drying up of the Zuni River (the source of many Zuni practices), and increased access to technology (cited by elders as the cause of diminishing multigenerational cultural exchanges). In contrast, the park is an integral piece of Zuni

cultural infrastructure, and artists and community residents regularly present solicited and unsolicited ideas to ZYEP to reinforce cultural traditions across generations (e.g., storytelling plays and traditional social dance classes). Research shows that “artistic and cultural expressions... can reflect, magnify, clarify, or reimagine a community’s history and collective experience, including the traumas that have led to systemic inequities and health disparities.”<sup>30</sup> By rooting the capital project development process in Zuni’s cultural fabric, Zuni Youth Enrichment Project built the connections to address collective trauma. The artists’ work to engage the community has created a new invitation for the Zuni people to further develop a sense of ownership and agency over their future, which is a useful precondition to improving long-term health. We elaborate below on two contributing building blocks to those community preconditions: social agency and civic know-how.

### Social Agency

After being asked to co-create the park in a culturally affirming way, community members were empowered to bring and act upon their own ideas. The pueblo has sometimes been challenged when bringing projects to fruition. This time, however, the project asked Zuni community members to build from their cultural heritage and engage as co-creators, and witnessed tangible results in a relatively short period of time. After this experience and the grand opening, community members requested of ZYEP that they tell traditional oral stories containing moral lessons for their youth through theater. They stated that they needed the space “But we have the traditional knowledge. Can you help us with that?”<sup>31</sup> The Zuni people are no longer waiting for programs to be created for them, they are creating their own. Dr. Tom Faber, former

In conversation with Governor Val Panteah Sr, artist Daryl Shack creating a mural of the culturally and historically significant Dowa Yalanne Mountain during the grand opening of Ho’n A:Wan (For Everyone) Park. (Lorrie Chang)



co-director, described ZYEP’s past process, “We would identify a need in the community, and then we would maybe try to fix that problem by recruiting people to come in,”<sup>32</sup> and said it has evolved now to one where “we’re really seen as facilitators. People are coming to us with ideas.”<sup>33</sup>

### Civic Know-How

This community, which has not often been consulted on a wide scale in development of the pueblo, has had an opportunity to reimagine how they can contribute to the process of shaping their home. The lessons and processes from this project can serve as a model for changing the way new property development is designed in Zuni. During the early stages of park planning, a Catholic school was built in the middle of the pueblo without the engagement of the community. In contrast, for the park the Zuni people were engaged in the brainstorming, design, and creation of a capital project. Daryl Shack revealed that some of the artists are in dialogue to determine how to repeat this process for a new cultural arts center because, “this was one of the first calls for projects I think that actually went out into the community to involve the community. Now it’s set a precedent.”<sup>34</sup> Zuni artists and community members have experienced how to collaborate on and influence development, and they are ready to engage in future processes.

## Organizational Preconditions: Deepening Trust and More Effective Partnerships

Even before this opportunity to deepen their arts and cultural practice, Zuni Youth Enrichment Project had a strong relationship with the Zuni community and culture. ZYEP was known for providing activities for children, shaped in consultation with the tribal council, and had a majority of tribal members on its board of directors. By working in partnership with artists in the last few years, ZYEP deepened those relationships. It was only recently, 10 years after ZYEP was established by two Indian Health Service doctors, both of whom were White, that a Zuni Tribal Council asked Zuni Youth Enrichment Project to stay in the pueblo. Faber explained why the invitation was extended after such a long time, “A lot of people come to Zuni with their own ideas on how to fix things. I would like to think those words were coming from a recognition that we truly respect Zuni and believe what we need to do is like the PolicyLink motto, ‘build up what works,’ or whatever... I would like to think they see the arts and culture approach as a way we demonstrate that it is our approach. We’re not trying to change anything. We’re trying to use the existing strengths in Zuni to make things better.”<sup>35</sup>



Because ZYEP took their time to learn about, and be guided by, the social fabric of the community, they are honoring and holding up the wisdom of the Zuni people in their processes, thereby solidifying the trust of those who they are serving. These relationships enable ZYEP to deliver on its mission more effectively, with the community as their partners.

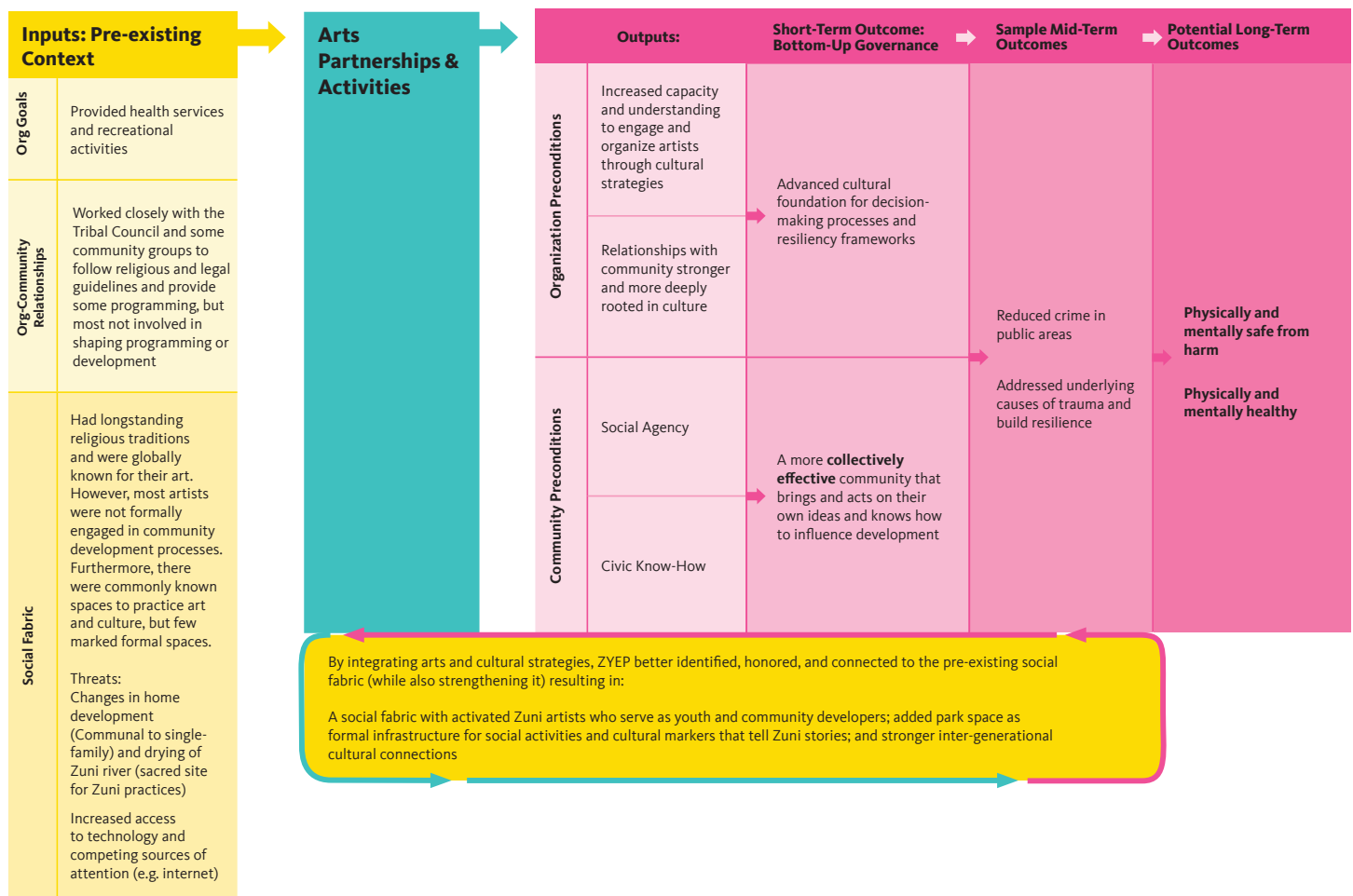
Zuni Youth Enrichment Project is learning how to repeat the artist partnership with equivalent activities while conducting traditional *waffle gardening* in their new agricultural space. ZYEP already had a community garden, but as Joe Claunch, ZYEP co-director said, “We were visibly successful, but we weren’t getting the engagement we wanted... people would stop tending them.”<sup>36</sup> Instead, by working with the agricultural committee, ZYEP is learning the process that, “Every prayer, every song in Zuni comes back to the seed in the ground and the water.”<sup>37</sup> By building from Zuni cultural principles, Claunch explained, “We could have real long-term impacts on health

“”  
**The artists’ work to engage the community has created a new invitation for the Zuni people to further develop a sense of ownership and agency over their future, which is a useful precondition to improving long-term health.**

and be more culturally responsive in doing that.”<sup>38</sup> Zuni Youth Enrichment Project now has a proven methodology for working that is more resonant, empowering, and effective.

**Figure 3**

### Arts and Culture-Based Community Development Theory of Change about ZYEP



## From Bottom-Up Governance to Long-Term Outcomes: Establishing Culture as a Foundation for Long-Term Health

Empowering Zuni residents as civic partners and rooting ZYEP more deeply within the community has created the preconditions necessary to generate long-term positive health outcomes. Zuni Youth Enrichment Project is now better at addressing the underlying causes of health issues by applying a cultural lens to its overall approach. In the last few years, ZYEP expanded their approach to be both trauma-informed (which recognizes and responds to trauma) and resilience-based (which enables people to prepare for, face, and overcome adversity, and to thrive). Integrating arts and culture into their practice can support both sides of this approach.

Intergenerational trauma, often cited as caused by the colonization and disempowerment of Native communities, can result in negative impacts such as child abuse and neglect. Dr. Faber described evidence that shows adverse childhood experiences can cause toxic stress that leads to negative biochemical and behavioral changes such as obesity, mental illness, and substance abuse, but, “the solution to that or the way to kind of address that is through resilience and healing from that underlying trauma.”<sup>39</sup> Colonization often involved cutting off Native people from their cultural roots and traditions—a source of power, pride, and consistency.<sup>40</sup> Faber described reinforcing the roots of culture in Zuni as the foundation of their health approach: “I think that that’s the piece that, at least in Zuni, that connecting kids to artists and art and their culture provides that sense of identity, that sense of belonging, that sense of purpose. And it really fosters that healing. So from the organizational mission standpoint, that’s the foundation that we want to build up from.”<sup>41</sup>

ZYEP is trying—in all of their programming—to heal children and youth from generations of trauma and adversity, connect to a great source of power, and contribute to empowering a resilient, healthy future Zuni nation. Please see Figure 3 for a summary of the change process of ZYEP’s arts and culturally based development.

## Little Tokyo Service Center, Los Angeles

The 130-year history of Little Tokyo in Los Angeles shows a community that has continually fought against outside forces for its right to self-determination. This history of advocacy in Little Tokyo, one of only three surviving Japantowns in the United States, preserved a strong social fabric where Japanese heritage is reflected and actively celebrated. However, Little Tokyo’s cultural traditions and those who hold them, including longstanding businesses, civic and cultural organizations, and residents, are continually threatened by one of the most expensive real estate markets in the country, given their central location in downtown Los Angeles. The Little Tokyo Service Center has been integral in the fight for self-determination since 1979. Their goal with the Community Development Investments initiative was to continue their campaign to end the cycle of displacement, and build power to set and enact the community’s vision. LTSC focused its creative strategies on First Street North (FSN), a parking lot at Little Tokyo’s core and one of the last remaining pieces of publicly owned land vulnerable to development.

**Organizational Challenge/Opportunity:** Little Tokyo is facing intense real estate market pressures, and advocates are fighting to gain community control over one of the last remaining pieces of publicly owned land in the neighborhood. LTSC wanted to explore how new arts and cultural approaches to their work could help advance the campaign for community ownership.

341 FSN is a collaborative and experimental space designed to explore community control and self-determination in Little Tokyo and at First Street North. (*Scott Oshima*)



## Community Preconditions: Redefining Cultural and Historical Value and Solidarity

LTSC established +LAB (pronounced “plus lab”), the umbrella initiative for the organization’s creative and cultural strategies. They partnered with other cultural organizations, and hosted an artist-in-residence program.<sup>42</sup> Through +LAB, LTSC helped residents share, understand, and build upon the full force of Little Tokyo’s social fabric and rich history to power their fight for a common vision. By helping residents and their allies better understand their past to shape their future, arts and cultural strategies further established the preconditions necessary for community self-determination. Although LTSC’s arts and cultural strategies advanced multiple building blocks that make up those community preconditions, we are highlighting two here: narrative control and social cohesion.

### Narrative Control

Visitors primarily observe Little Tokyo as a place to enjoy Japanese and other cuisines, and shop for Japanese cultural artifacts. LTSC found that their arts partners could reach further to better convey, “the fullness of our identity,” said Dominique Miller, LTSC’s former creative strategies producer.<sup>43</sup> In partnership with artist Rosten Woo and Sustainable Little Tokyo—a community-wide initiative to promote the neighborhood’s environmental, economic, and cultural sustainability—LTSC created Takachizu, a community archive of valuable and vulnerable assets. The archive became a way for LTSC to identify, amplify, and build upon the neighborhood’s power and cultural legacy. For example, the assets were the backbone of a dozen workshops, a “Self-Determination” zine, and a photography exhibit on the boards lining the site of the upcoming light rail station. Takachizu and other creative projects helped reframe what outsiders understood about Little Tokyo—from just a place to eat and shop to a historically significant land of activism (against three waves of displacement), cultural offerings, and a network of small businesses and organizations that carry cultural heritage and memories.



**With their arts and cultural partners, LTSC is disrupting the narrative of First Street North from being primarily focused on its potential market value to one that is reflective of its deep historical and cultural value, and the dreams of residents.**

The activation of this legacy also helped further shape a community vision for the future. Theresa Hwang, a community-engaged architect, utilized Takachizu to inform Sustainable Little Tokyo 2020, a community vision and projection plan (including First Street North).<sup>44</sup> Cumulatively, these arts and cultural activities supported LTSC and its partners to refine the concept of “moral site control,” whereby a developer cannot build in a neighborhood without the resident organization’s approval and operating in synch with their vision. Grant Sunoo, LTSC’s director of planning, explained, “We’ve seen a new kind of generation of artists that identify with that site and envision the potential.”<sup>45</sup> With their arts and cultural partners, LTSC is disrupting the narrative of First Street North from being primarily focused on its potential market value to one that is reflective of its deep historical and cultural value and the dreams of residents.

### Social Cohesion

Through arts and culture strategies, Little Tokyo Service Center has created opportunities for new connections between populations by making visible and building a shared understanding of history, and the issues they face. One example of these strategies is the artist-in-residency (AIR) program that expanded the definition of who is part of Little Tokyo’s community, and who is part of the fight for self-determination. LTSC acquired the Daimaru, a single-residence occupancy hotel—where traditionally low-income residents lived in single rooms and shared bathrooms and kitchens. Elsewhere in downtown Los Angeles, such hotels were often turned into condominiums as part of the gentrification process. LTSC not only preserved this much-needed affordable housing stock in its traditional form, but also designated rooms for an AIR cohort to cook with residents and embed themselves in and learn the fabric of the community. The selected artists dove into the creative process with the theme of “Community Control and Self-Determination.”

As part of her research for #MyFSN, a feature project of +LAB and a neighborhood campaign that raises awareness and promotes a community vision for FSN, artist Tina Takemoto created a film of the FSN area during “Bronzeville,” a period when African Americans settled in Little Tokyo. When the federal government forced Japanese Americans into internment camps, the neighborhood became one of the few places African Americans could settle due to housing discrimination elsewhere. Her research highlighted a lesser-known period after the war ended when both African Americans and Japanese Americans lived in Little Tokyo and explored its implications for multiracial alliance-building today.

Additionally, artists Tony Osumi and Kimi Maru hosted a quilt-making fundraiser, “Never Again is Now,” on Latinx communities’ struggles with family separation, while highlighting their shared history with Japanese Americans. These artists continue to lift up history as a way to broaden and reinforce messaging about people of color’s shared struggle for human rights and community control. Dominique Miller highlighted why solidarity is necessary for community control,

“We’re at a position where we understand the importance of needing to really pull in our residents, particularly our Latino and African American residents... People see what’s going on, but I don’t know if they understand it as gentrification. . . that’s what we are doing with this [creative strategies] work, to explain community development in a way where they understand or how they can combat those decisions... This has enabled that cohesion, so whatever it is we need to do to secure control, we have that base established and ready to go.”<sup>46</sup>

These artists are not only helping to extend the project’s reach to those who may not have considered themselves as tied to Little Tokyo’s future, but they are also helping to translate community development and the role that diverse community members can play together. Having the artists magnify these connections contributed to fostering a more collectively effective community that is cohesive, understands how change happens, and is ready to act when needed.

## Organization Preconditions: Creating a Nexus of Arts and Community Planning within Social Fabric

Despite the destructive impacts of policies ranging from the federal relocation of residents to internment camps, to municipal urban renewal schemes that demolished housing, temples, and businesses, Little Tokyo’s social fabric has not been dismantled. For over a century, advocates, community members, and community-based organizations (including LTSC) have fought hard to retain its strength. Little Tokyo Service Center’s new approach to partnership with the local arts and culture sector focused and reinforced the organization’s strength in response to recent threats. LTSC had a long history of investing in Little Tokyo’s cultural ecosystem, and its integration of arts and culture strategies with community development activated existing and new relationships to unite groups for the enclave’s self-determination. Before +LAB, LTSC had contributed to keeping the social fabric intact by acquiring the Union Center for the Arts, and providing a stable place for arts and culture partners such as East West Players (EWP), the Japanese American National Museum (JANM), and Visual Communications (VC).

Today, Little Tokyo Service Center is engaged in more strategic, intentional partnerships, working toward the shared goal of community control. JANM and VC are partners who help LTSC staff to program “341 FSN,” a collaborative and experimental space to explore community control and self-determination that occupies a commercial space in Daimaru. VC hosted “Centering the Masses” at 341 FSN, a nine-week series where artists, cultural workers, and civic personalities explored Little Tokyo’s racial, generational, and economic shifts and their causes through media. This space facilitates an in-depth exploration between arts and community planning. The process has transformed 341 FSN from just a space to a place of belonging. Concurrently, arts organizations are supporting self-determination goals in their spaces. East West Players hosted the “Residence Elsewhere” performance in their theater, a production that catalyzed discussions about home, belonging, and displacement. By partnering with important actors in Little Tokyo’s social fabric, the community development practitioners and arts and culture organizations are becoming a more intertwined and aligned force for local control. Arts and culture-based community development, 341 FSN, and other cultural spaces have become the nexus for the “where” in social fabric: where people relate, connect, and make meaning together, and advance community control. Today, the places where people congregate, and experience and create culture, are where they also discuss how to exert control over their future.

# Bottom-Up Governance and Long-Term Outcomes: Strengthening an Ecosystem of Community Control

LTSC is moving beyond investing in the social fabric to actively drawing on the unique talents, approaches, and methodologies of the arts and culture sector to contribute to community development conversations. This well-networked organization is strengthening Little Tokyo’s ability to better unify, fortify, and operate as an ecosystem in a shared fight to belong. Grant Sunoo reflected on understanding how arts and cultural strategies helped further connect and lift up the possible symbiotic roles of the many actors in Little Tokyo to work more strongly together,

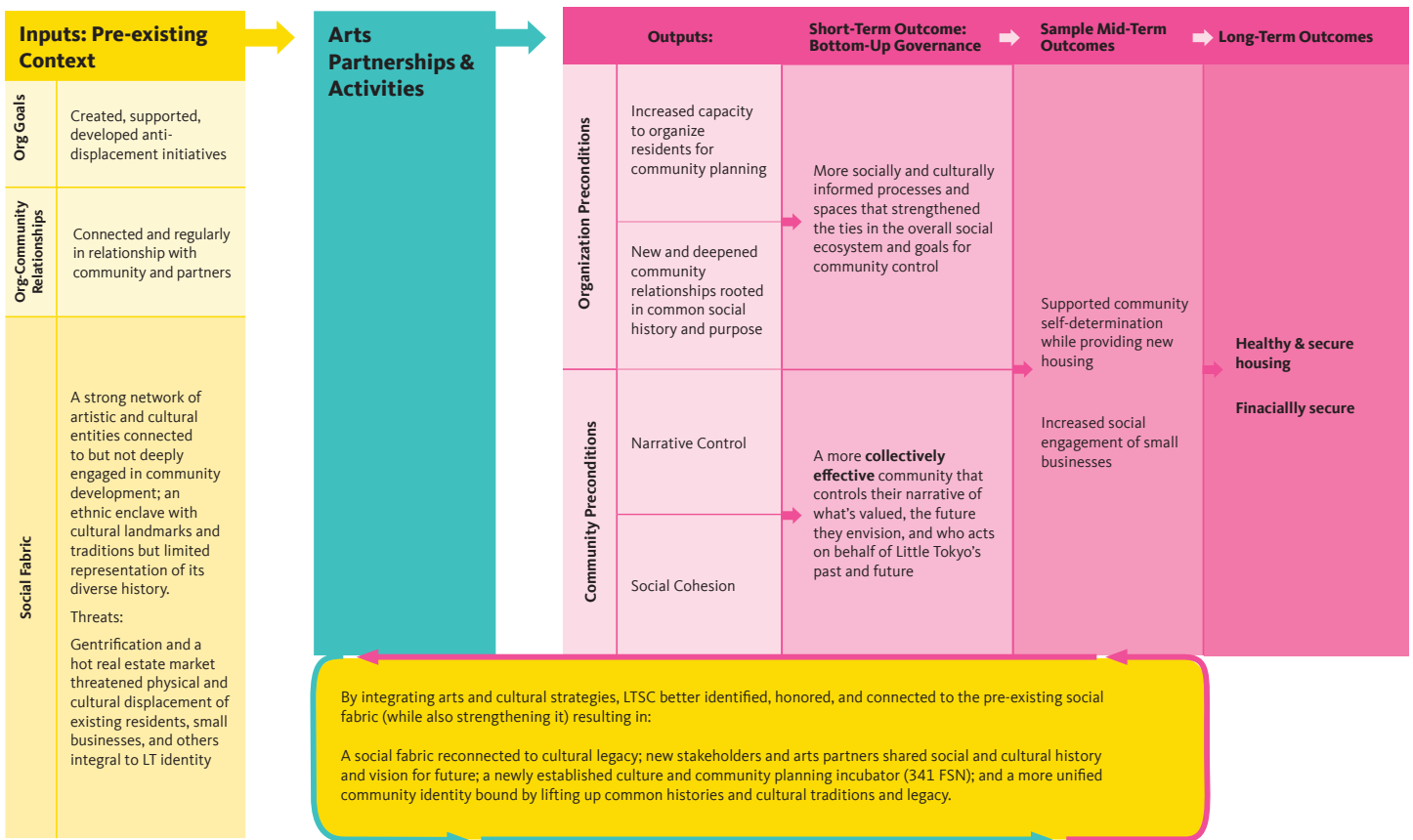
“At a certain point in the journey, I started thinking about creative place-keeping as an ecosystem... the need of having a community that’s receptive to approaching community development in this way... artists who are willing to integrate that as part of a practice... organizations that we work with that might not see this as part of their

mission... [or] not see their role as community developers in the way that I think they have evolved to. This experimental space in particular... people are starting to see artistic strategies as a really viable way to build community and an important way... there’s this ecosystem being strengthened.”<sup>47</sup>

Community development projects are no longer solely an opportunity to house vulnerable populations or support small businesses, they are also a way to serve the greater ecosystem. For example, Little Tokyo Service Center’s Small Business Assistance program hosts workshops at 341 FSN, including “Entrepreneurship in Little Tokyo: Past, Present, and Future,” through a partnership with the Little Tokyo Community Council, a coalition of businesses, residents, and cultural institutions. These conversations, Sunoo observed, helped give rise to “a new generation of entrepreneurs who see Little Tokyo as a viable place to do business, but also understand the importance of being a community-engaged business. As a community, how we are identifying what that site has also really been [is] an important outcome of the work.”<sup>48</sup> By applying this cultural lens, LTSC is helping anyone in Little Tokyo to ask, “What is my role in this community, and how can I continue the legacy?”

Figure 4

## Arts and Culture-Based Community Development Theory of Change about LTSC



Civically engaged artists and culture bearers often ask or facilitate responses to questions like, “How do we support belonging?” Community development practitioners such as those at LTSC ask, “How do we create community control and keep our vulnerable populations in place?” Combining these questions can result in a carefully crafted project that maximizes an investment to meet many purposes. By asking these questions through artistic practice, the Daimaru Hotel residencies accomplished many objectives. LTSC did not just provide much-needed housing to a vulnerable community, they built 341 First Street North to hold space that recognized threats and built knowledge about civic influence and advocacy. LTSC also embedded artists-in-residence in this historically significant building to learn about the community in-depth, and to then create projects that reinforced an identity of strong cultural heritage and community power. In this small but historically significant building, Little Tokyo Service Center declared that Little Tokyo is here to stay, they belong here, and they will build power to ensure these messages do not change. This is how resilient communities are built. Please see Figure 4 for a summary of the change process of LTSC’s arts and culturally based development.



**Civically engaged artists and culture bearers often ask or facilitate responses to questions like, “How do we support belonging?” Community development practitioners such as those at LTSC ask, “How do we create community control and keep our vulnerable populations in place?” Combining these questions can result in a carefully crafted project that maximizes an investment to meet many purposes.**

Residents weave together their quilt of dreams for a solidarity, community-based economy at 341 FSN. (Scott Oshima)



# Conclusion

The experiences of the three Community Development Investments organizations in this brief, and their partners, as well as the three other CDI organizations (Fairmount Park Conservancy of Philadelphia, Jackson Medical Mall Foundation in Mississippi, and the Cook Inlet Housing Authority in Anchorage), confirm that arts-, culture-, and design-based activities with immediate impacts and specific objectives can also generate trust, broaden intergroup cultural understanding, reframe narratives of community identity, and give residents the tools to act effectively in the public sphere. When small-town Minnesotans of Norwegian and Micronesian backgrounds found that their cherished myths had common themes (such as sea monsters), they formed a basis for deeper future collaboration with as-yet-unknown implications. That commonality was discovered through creating and performing a play. When residents of Strawberry Mansion in Philadelphia claimed the space of the previously “off-limits” historic Hatfield House, they built a foundation for community pride and collective action. They realized those greater capacities through the immediate acts of sharing music, storytelling, artwork, and from uncovering their local history. In these and many other experiences, arts and cultural activities became tangible building blocks for enhanced collective efficacy and other elements of a strengthened social fabric. The arts and cultural strategies combined creativity, the honoring of tradition, a spirit of experimentation, and just plain fun in ways that engaged residents as effectively as the best community organizers.

The organizations needed at least two changes from their normal order of business to become effective in this process of enhancing social fabric through arts and culture. First, they needed to genuinely, and with open minds, learn through their collaborations with artists, rather than think of the artists as contractors or instruments for a predetermined task. Second, they needed space, permission, and humility to rethink their relationships to residents. That modesty, openness to change, and willingness to take risks were necessary to successfully deploy innovative arts and cultural strategies. The groups were all experienced and well-established in their respective technical or specialized domains, making this venture into uncharted territory even more unusual. They ventured into areas where their expertise and standing could not guarantee

success, and put processes into motion that would empower residents, but not necessarily their own organizations. They chose to be vulnerable and to listen and, through those actions, did more to strengthen the social fabric and enhance residents’ power and efficacy than if they had been directive.<sup>49</sup>

The community developers did not weave entirely new social fabrics; a more apt metaphor might be that they tapped into a running stream. They unlocked the potential inherent in people and their relationships to generate new forms of civic decision-making. Artists of the Zuni Pueblo had always been a force in their community, but Zuni Youth Enrichment Project worked with, and learned from, them to craft a new kind of powerful, culturally centered placemaking. The Little Tokyo community had always been defined by its unique cultural heritage, but Little Tokyo Service Center and its partners found myriad new ways to mine that history and use what they found and created to strengthen alliances, helping make the collective case for “moral site control.” The social cohesion and resulting collective efficacy that has grown in each CDI site are enhancing these groups’ capacity to work with residents to meet their longer term goals for equitable community preservation, growth, and development. Their efforts in the future will likely be more comprehensive in their outlook and evocative of the joy that is an essential part of the human spirit.

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**Main cover photo:** Cook Inlet Housing Authority.

**Small cover photos top to bottom:** Lyz Crane, Jackson Medical Mall Foundation; Zuni Youth Enrichment Project; Ashley Hanson, Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership; Rudy Espinoza, Little Tokyo Service Center; Albert Yee, Fairmount Park Conservancy.

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