



## The Arts as Fundamental—and Fragile—in Community Life

Andrew Zitcer, Julie Hawkins and Neville Vakharia

*Arts funding in America mirrors the inequality found in society more broadly. Yet amid persistent poverty and other challenges, West Philadelphia residents assert that arts access and participation are central to their conception of a life well-lived. Andrew Zitcer, Julie Hawkins and Neville Vakharia discuss their research in West Philadelphia, noting the vibrant cultural production taking place there and maintaining that arts should be considered a fundamental right.*

Amid the existential concerns raised by the travesty of Donald Trump’s ascendance to the US presidency, it might seem inopportune or even gauche to ask what role arts and culture might play in America’s public life over the ensuing years. Nevertheless, in the days following the election, commentators wasted no time in rallying arts supporters<sup>1</sup> and asserting the continuing relevance of the arts to the contemporary moment.<sup>2</sup> These advocates appealed to the role of art as critique, art as protest, and art as a source of healing. The arts, they argued, give voice to the marginalized and provide meaning and emotional richness in otherwise desperate times.

Was this faith in the arts misplaced? Are the benefits of the arts broadly distributed throughout society? After all, the arts in the US has been called a “winner-takes-all” economy, where a few artists (and organizations) at the top reap most of the financial benefits (DiMaggio 2006). The lack of sufficient public funding mechanisms leaves many arts organizations, especially smaller, community-based arts groups, reliant on the whims of small grants and finicky private donors. Indeed, the majority of public and private arts funding goes to the 2% of arts organizations with budgets over \$5 million—and the trend is only getting worse (Horwitz 2016; Sidford 2011).

If inequality in arts funding mirrors wealth inequality in broader US society, are the arts effectively positioned to fulfill their social function, or to advance progressive civic objectives in the crucial years to come? Years before the 2016 election (and Trump’s saber-rattling about defunding the National Endowment for the Arts), arts advocates initiated a searching conversation about the importance of arts and culture in a functioning democracy; this conversation has been growing in urgency ever since. Advocates question the focus in US cultural policy on using the arts as a lever for economic development. Instead, they call for the arts funding superstructure to support art that fosters an expressive cultural life for all citizens (Ivey 2008; Juncker and Balling 2016; McCarthy *et al.* 2004).

In order to explore the way the arts support community life at the local level, we undertook a research project exploring arts and culture’s role in communities largely bypassed by institutional arts funders in three neighborhoods in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In our conversations, residents resoundingly asserted the need for, and value of, the arts in their neighborhoods. We found these neighborhoods had a complex but fragile arts ecosystem comprising informal and “under-the-radar” arts activities, and a high concentration of resident artists attracted by low rents and easy access to

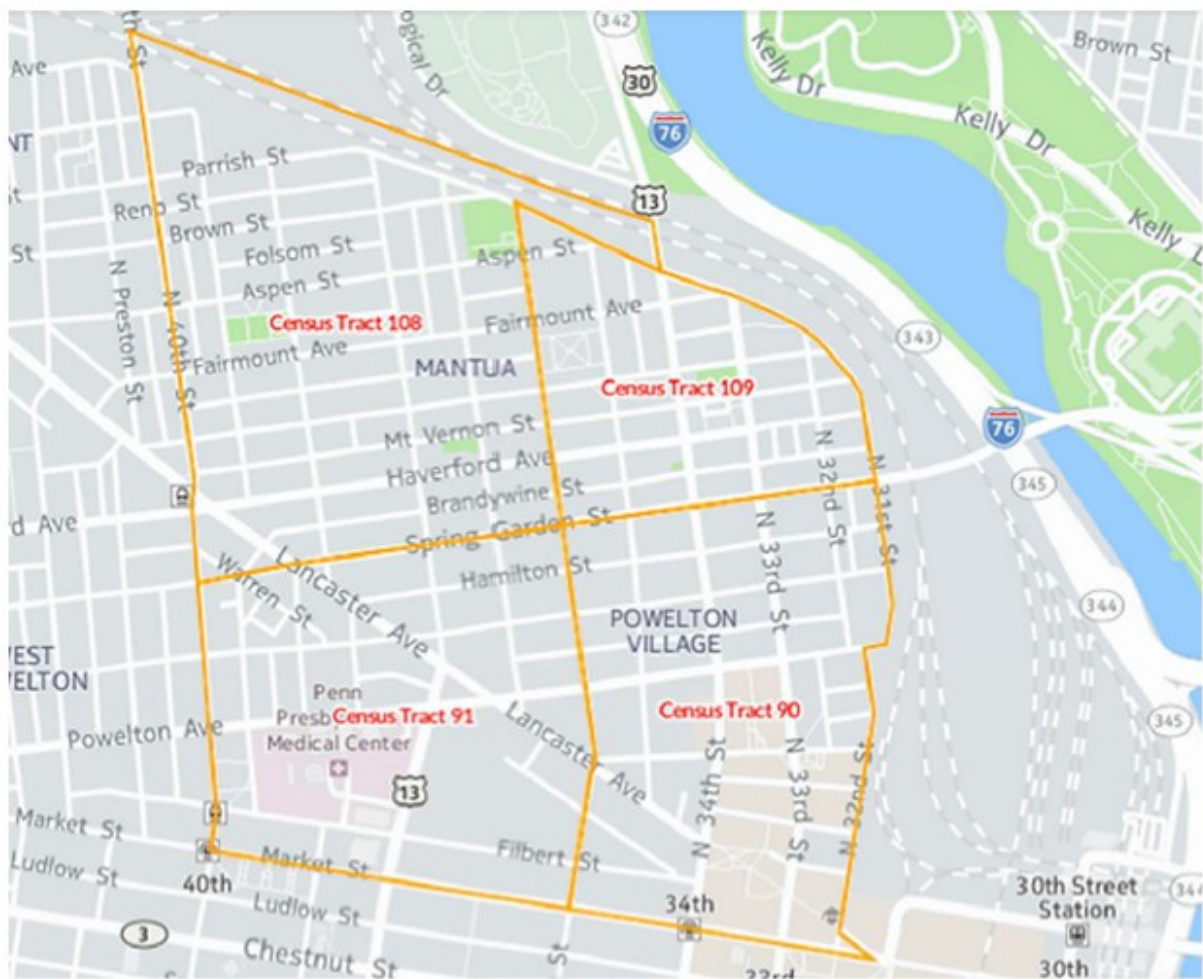
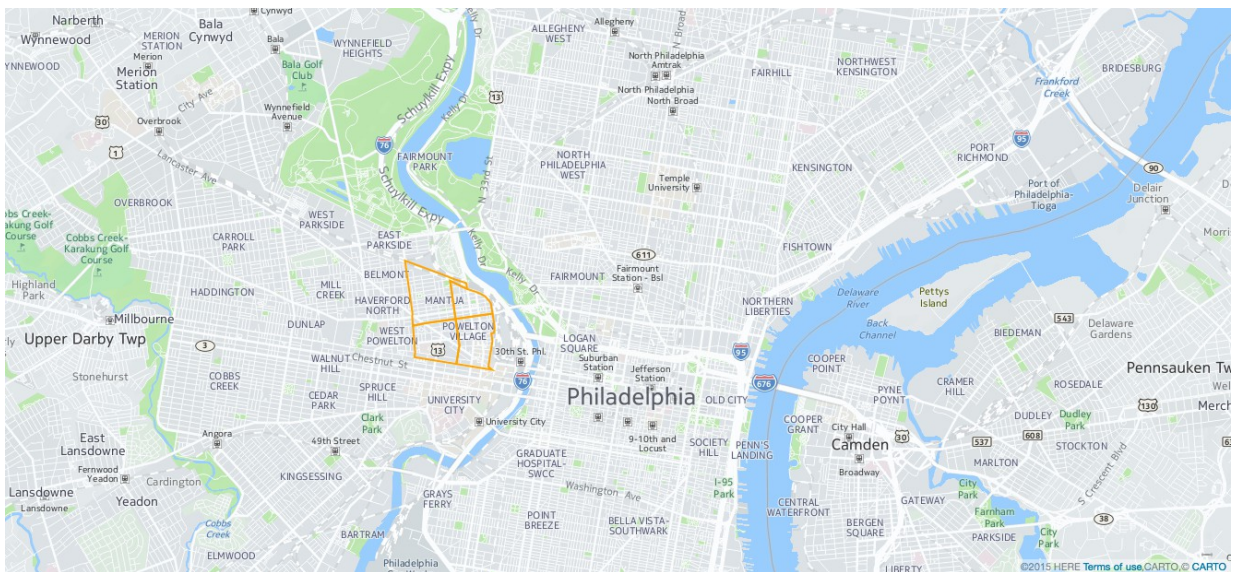
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<sup>1</sup> See: <http://mic.com/articles/159011/in-donald-trump-s-america-art-is-more-important-than-ever>.

<sup>2</sup> See: <http://theconversation.com/trumps-win-shows-how-vital-the-arts-and-humanities-are-68653>.

the city center. Yet we found that there are a number of interventions that need to be undertaken to strengthen this fragile ecosystem so that it may thrive for the people who depend on it.

**Figures 1 and 2. The research study area within Philadelphia, comprising three neighborhoods within four census tracts**



Source: maps generated by research team in CARTO.

## The case of West Philadelphia

Our interdisciplinary research team was comprised of faculty and students from the fields of urban planning and arts administration, working in three contiguous West Philadelphia neighborhoods: Mantua, Powelton, and West Powelton. These neighborhoods are adjacent to anchor institutions including Drexel University, the University of Pennsylvania's clinical medical facilities, and the University City Science Center (the first urban research park in the United States). After experiencing urban renewal and residential displacement<sup>3</sup> (partially at the behest of these anchor institutions) in the mid-1960s, these neighborhoods currently contend with a second wave of redevelopment, and the massive expansion of the aforementioned institutions.<sup>4</sup> Nearby, Mantua neighborhood residents (83% of whom identified as Black in 2010) labor amid conditions of extreme poverty, property vacancy, and struggling schools. Some households have annual incomes as low as \$15,000 (less than half the city's already low median household income), and the neighborhood's population has declined considerably and consistently since the 1950s. However, university expansion has led a formerly commuter-student population to begin to gentrify the neighborhoods, particularly Mantua.

**Figure 3. The Powelton neighborhood is a “pov-prof” neighborhood, with a high concentration of professionals and renovated homes alongside considerable poverty**



Photo: research team.

The neighborhoods of Powelton Village and West Powelton are “pov-prof” neighborhoods, with a longstanding concentration of university-affiliated White professionals living alongside many low-income renters (Stern and Seifert 2010). Race and class dynamics are fraught in these neighborhoods, as new and veteran, mostly Black, community leaders reckon with the mostly White-led anchor institutions. As the institutions expand, these leaders also encounter

<sup>3</sup> See: <http://theblackbottom.wordpress.com/communities/blackbottom/history>.

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://planphilly.com/articles/2016/03/08/with-new-schuylkill-yards-drexel-and-brandywine-promise-development-without-displacement>.

predominantly wealthy students arriving in the neighborhoods and, among other things, pushing up property values.

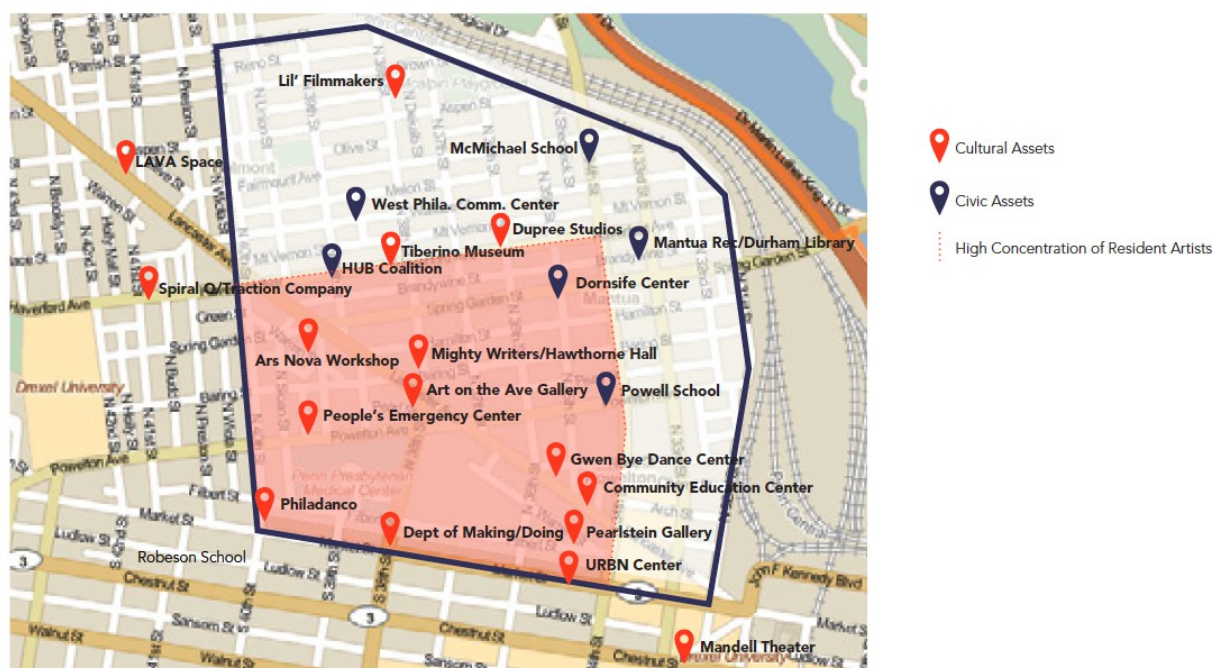
Our interviews and focus groups with more than 450 residents and community leaders uncovered a cross-section of resident attitudes towards the most pressing issues facing their neighborhood, the types of arts activities they participate in, and their barriers to participation. In contrast to prevailing wisdom that marginalizes the importance of arts as a “frill,”<sup>5</sup> residents strongly asserted that arts retain a place of paramount importance—especially in neighborhoods facing poverty, decades of disinvestment, and uncertain futures.

For focus group participants, arts were a crucial part of social mobility and a well-rounded life:

It’s not always ... living from paycheck to paycheck if you get arts and culture. I had one uniform for the rest of my grade school year and one uniform for high school—but in my house you had to learn how to play the piano, you had to learn how to do calligraphy. I went to Philadelphia art camp and I went to the art memorial. So I think it’s just a priority ... but if you want your child to be able to migrate into different societies as an adult you place [the arts] in there somewhere so that they have some kind of exposure — focus group participant, longtime resident.

Their affirmation of the importance of the arts was the inspiration for our investigation of arts as a fundamental right, and in thinking about the ramifications for justice in opportunities for meaningful arts engagement (Zitcer *et al.* 2015).

**Figure 4. Research study area showing key cultural and civic assets, as well as areas with high concentrations of resident artists**



Many neighborhood and cultural and civic assets are located near and along Market Street, Lancaster Avenue, and Haverford Avenue. Artists are concentrated in the southern and western sections of the study area. (Source: CultureBlocks.com.)

### The arts are worth fighting for

The findings of this effort provided valuable insights into the role of arts and culture in these neighborhoods, improving our understanding of the needs of residents as well as the role of civic

<sup>5</sup> See: <http://www2.ed.gov/news/speeches/2010/04/04092010.html>.

and cultural institutions. We found that arts programs and organizations within these neighborhoods received a disproportionately low share of available funding compared to the central business district, limiting their capacity to foster deeper connections with residents and collaborate with other providers of arts programs. Nevertheless, some artists persist, funding projects out of their own pockets:

My kids practice all winter in the cold because no one gave us a building. I don't get any funding. My house is literally falling down ... but we are still trying to save our youth ... if the money's not there, what do we do? — focus group participant, leader of a youth drill team and drumline.

**Figure 5. The Unique Miracles drill team practices on a Mantua sidewalk**



Photo: Unique Miracles.

This participant testifies to the importance of youth arts programming, yet her dedication to the drill team has not been matched with adequate material support. Her work in Mantua provides a needed community asset, but how can it be sustained over time?

In addition to the need to support neighborhood arts and culture with adequate funding, residents felt disconnected from the cultural offerings available from nearby institutions, such as the zoo and performing arts center. Many residents shared that their participation—whether in local community-based events, or institutional arts programming downtown—was hindered by a lack of established pathways of communication between residents and providers of arts and cultural programs.

You need to go out of your way to entice people to come in and see art, make them feel welcome. Need to make sure events are friendly to these communities if you want more than the normal art-going type of crowd — focus group participant.

From these findings, it is clear there are substantial issues holding back the potential for cultural participation and production in these neighborhoods, especially a lack of capital and meaningful, two-way relationships between local residents and flagship arts institutions.

## Surviving—arts intact—in the era of Trump and beyond

In order for the arts to retain their place as part of a functioning democracy, shifts in community development practice, arts funding and public policy must occur. Instead of focusing on economic development potential, project proposals should evaluate the access to opportunities currently present in a given neighborhood, and advance projects that redress lack of opportunity. In places like West Philadelphia, where neighborhood change threatens to re-inflict generations of racial and class-based wounds, it is only just that local projects be given the resources to thrive. Projects that are initially designed for, and by, residents may result in natural cultural clusters that nourish the cultural appetite of locals and visitors alike (Stern and Seifert 2007); the long history of community-based arts in Philadelphia attests to this, from South Philadelphia’s Fleisher Art Memorial<sup>6</sup> to Taller Puertorriqueño<sup>7</sup> in North Philadelphia.

**Figure 6. An urban garden and park at the Mantua Presbyterian Apartments, a senior housing community. The project was funded and led by faculty and students at Drexel University**



Photo: Halkin | Mason Photography.

Second, rather than advancing scattered-site projects that seek to spur investment, funders should try to strengthen the cultural ecology of neighborhoods. Supported by community development entities, the emphasis ought to move from potentially exclusionary conceptions of placemaking—making places attractive to the visitor class—to what Roberto Bedoya (2014) has called “placekeeping,” with planners seeking to strengthen existing local ties. Initiatives that point in compelling directions include West Philadelphia’s recent multi-partner artist residency program

<sup>6</sup> Website: <http://fleisher.org>.

<sup>7</sup> Website: [www.facebook.com/tallerpr.org](http://www.facebook.com/tallerpr.org).

Neighborhood Time Exchange,<sup>8</sup> and North Philadelphia's People's Paper Co-op,<sup>9</sup> which offers an artistic approach to criminal-record expungement, designed to reboot the lives of the formerly incarcerated.

It is important, however, that efforts to support artists enhance, rather than compete, with other neighborhood stabilization interventions in the areas of education, public health, and criminal-justice reform. Arts that are embedded in community practice can serve to catalyze new webs of relationships, and new horizons for problem-solving. Coming together around the arts table reframes established conventions of communication, making possible new pathways for trust. In West Philadelphia neighborhoods, it may be possible to create the conditions for rapport between longtime residents and new arrivals through the cultivation of awareness and respect for the cultural assets that have long existed in the neighborhood, and through the co-creation of new cultural activities. We see possibilities for such rapport in the Writers Room,<sup>10</sup> an NEA-funded project that brings together Drexel students and community residents to write and publish literary anthologies, host readings, and share meals. Initiatives like this one place art at the center of an expressive public life and help to guarantee that neighborhoods have the strength and spirit to resist and endure in the years to come.

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<sup>8</sup> Website: [www.neighborhoodtime.exchange](http://www.neighborhoodtime.exchange).

<sup>9</sup> Website: <http://peoplespaperco-op.weebly.com>.

<sup>10</sup> Website: [www.writersroom.online](http://www.writersroom.online).

**Andrew Zitcer** is Assistant Professor and Thesis Director of Drexel University's Arts Administration program. His research critically examines the use of arts as a tool for community and economic development, as well as the role of cooperation in transforming social and economic relations.

**Julie Hawkins** is Assistant Professor and Program Director of Drexel University's graduate Arts Administration program. Her research examines the strategies of individual artists, cultural organizations and communities, particularly the way they relate to arts advocacy, cultural policy, and community planning.

**Neville Vakharia** is Assistant Professor and Research Director of Drexel University's graduate Arts Administration program, teaching courses in management, strategic planning, innovation and entrepreneurship. His research portfolio is focused on the development of organizational knowledge systems and innovation-driven business models in arts and culture organizations and creative-sector enterprises.

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