

Stephenson, M. O., Jr., & Tate, A. S. (Eds.). (2015). *Arts and community change: Exploring cultural development policies, practices, and dilemmas*. New York, NY: Routledge. 242 pp.

Review by C. Kurt Dewhurst

In the last decade, there has been a remarkable revolutionary shift in the paradigm of the role of contemporary arts in American society. The emergence of the value of arts as a vital tool for community economic development has launched a lively new body of studies, publications, and civic dialogue on the role of expressive culture in community life, especially in the realm of urban redevelopment initiatives. The work of economists such as Richard Florida (2002, 2012) has contributed significantly to this shift as city planners, elected officials, and arts organizations have embraced this call and have become advocates for the use of arts and culture not as embellishment, but as central driving forces in their policies and practices related to what constitutes a livable and economically viable 21st-century community.

The higher education sector has embraced this new paradigm as well by fostering scholarship and dialogue across the arts, humanities, and social sciences in meaningful ways. As often occurs with new movements, the initial wave of interest galvanized scholars, civic leaders, and community organizations to examine case studies of “successes”: cultural investments that proved to be catalytic in creating magnets for attracting “young creatives” as well as business and housing investments.

This new collection of essays, *Arts and Community Change: Exploring Cultural Development Policies, Practices, and Dilemmas*, is a most welcome contribution, as it brings together the work of a number of scholars and practitioners in a critical framework to offer a deeper examination of the impact of these policies and practices on communities and the lessons that are being learned. Because many universities are now playing active roles in culturally-engaged work, this volume has particular value for those involved in university outreach and engagement.

The book presents an overview of the growing role of arts in community change initiatives and also raises important questions that need serious attention. Although there is no doubt that the role of the arts in the community is a timely and important topic, the contributors demonstrate that even as cultural development work in arts and cultural heritage has been successful, in some cases these

efforts have contributed to conflicts over neighborhood gentrification and ever-expanding inequality in community life. Adopting arts and culture-based development strategies can sometimes not only foster gentrification but deepen class divisions, increase racial and ethnic conflict, and even intensify neighborhood decay. The contributors also observe that some cultural development efforts divert resources and attention from grassroots endeavors and local cultural organizations.

The contributing authors properly note that various methods are being employed in this area, and explanations of this topic can easily oversimplify the work and its impact. The volume makes a strong case for understanding that cultural economic development involves arts and cultural work with communities that is varied, complex, multifaceted, and difficult.

Arts and Community Change raises an important question: What kind of cities and neighborhoods are being designed—and for whom—when they are created? The attention that Richard Florida has brought to the “creative class” has resulted in a body of scholarship that raises questions about the impact of the way arts and culture are commodified for community development and the resulting impact of this approach in fostering socioeconomic segregation and social distancing.

The authors in this volume collectively convey their concern that the very idea of “cultural development” is a form of cultural intervention in the life of a locale—whether it be a region, city, neighborhood, or block. The underlying argument is that simply “conceiving arts as an economic engine has its limits” (*Stephenson & Tate, 2015, p.*). Having noted the cautions that are apparent throughout this collection of essays about the necessary reconsideration of the way cultural economic development is fostered, the book makes a strong case for the potential for using arts as a tool for building citizen agency and generating greater individual and social capital. The authors present a number of inspiring examples that demonstrate how this potential has been realized—at least on some level.

In many respects, this volume is a call for rethinking how university outreach and engagement frame their community development work. It provides valuable insights into a more community-centered approach to cultural economic development policy and practice. In the past decade, engagement scholarship has embraced the idea of cocreation based on a commitment to values shared by university and community. These shared values include equity,

representation, transparency, and inclusive democratic citizenry. However, there is much room for the engagement field to add to the evaluation of the contributions of arts to community development. Engagement scholarship has much to offer in terms of assessing impacts of cultural economic development, as well as building enlightened social capital in communities. This includes higher education's participation in the placemaking movement, a multidisciplinary effort where the scholarship raises some similar cautions and proposes alternative "local citizen" empowerment approaches to cultural development.

In the introduction to the book, the editors convey their vision for the collected essays in this way:

The framework for the book draws on the concept of imaginaries... multiple and intersecting ideas, images, myths, and stories of place and community in various stages of development and coexistence.... [Focus is on] the difficulties and tensions in evidence among major groups contending to define or redefine their community's imagined geography. (*Stephenson, & Tate, 2015, p. 5*)

Authors include a number of notable scholars who have contributed to a growing, more thoughtful dialogue. This is shown in the contents: Arlene Goldbard, "Making Beauty, Making Meaning, Making Community"; Jon Catherwood-Ginn and Robert H. Leonard, "Rivers and Bridges: Theater in Regional Planning"; Jan Cohen-Cruz, "One New York Rising Together? Arts and Culture in Neighborhood Ecosystems"; Anjali Mishra, "Sustaining Emergent Culture in Montreal's Entertainment District"; Holly Lesko and Thenmozhi Soundararajan, "Digital Storytelling in Appalachia: Gathering and Sharing Community Voices and Values"; A. Scott Tate, "Shaping the Artful City: A Case Study of Urban Economic Reinvention"; Dudley Cocke, "Community Cultural Development as a Site of Joy, Struggle, and Transformation"; Liz Lerman and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, "A Dialogue on Dance and Community Practice"; Kate Preston Keeny and Pam Korza, "Assessing Arts-Based Social Change Endeavors: Controversies and Complexities"; and Lyusyena Kirakosyan and Max O Stephenson Jr., "Theatre as a Tool for Building Peace and Justice: DAH Teatar and Bond Street Theatre."

Readers will find the volume's focus on arts heavily weighted toward examples from the performing arts rather than from community cultural centers, museums (especially ethnically-specific

museums and those that are sites of conscience or eco-museums), and community arts projects. In addition, there is an absence of the creative community-engagement work that is being led by university-based museums, art centers, and performing arts centers, as well as innovative university-based academic colleges in the arts and humanities that are doing exemplary community-engaged work. However, this foundational volume sets the stage for additional scholarship of engagement by leaders of university-based cultural organizations, as there is real value in contributions to assessment of the cultural economic development and the evolution of community life by those who are both practitioners and scholars.

This volume speaks in many respects to the heart of outreach and engagement theory and practice. The rich potential of creating community vitality and ownership for our work begins with asking essential questions about our practice: Who is involved? How can we foster democratic community participation and realize the goals of shared authority? How do we honor the understanding of the community history and the related cultural assets? How can local values and existing patterns of convening/communicating be recognized? How can we help evolve a viable community identity and contribute to the ever-changing nature of cultural life of our communities? What is often overlooked is the involvement of scholars who can shed light on the ethnographic composition of communities and help “read” the living cultural assets that are often right in front of us. This perspective may help us avoid some of the failures to embrace community resources as powerful indicators of local culture and to recognize that they should be the starting place for community cultural development.

Finally, it is worth noting that this volume will serve as an effective text for those involved in teaching community outreach and civic engagement. The combination of voices represented in the volume—from remarkable dance activists such as Liz Lerman to Imagine America leader Jan Cohen-Cruz—makes this an especially timely contribution. The editors are to be congratulated for assembling and framing contributions from these diverse and thoughtful voices.

References

- Florida, R. (2002). *The rise of the creative class: And how it's transforming work, leisure, community and everyday life*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Florida, R. (2012). *The rise of the creative class revisited*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

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About the Reviewer

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