

A CONVERSATION WITH ANN MARKUSEN HER WORD ON CREATIVE PLACEMAKING

ANN MARKUSEN

Ann Markusen is Director of the Arts Economy Initiative and the Project on Regional and Industrial Economics at the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey School of Public Affairs, and Principal of Markusen Economic Research. In recent years, Markusen’s research and consulting work has focused on artists, arts organizations, and creative placemaking.

In November 2015, the Co-Editors of the Carolina Planning Journal sat down for a conversation with Professor Ann Markusen. Professor Markusen, who continues to be an active voice in the field of creative placemaking, shared experiences from her career and offered her thoughts on the future of placemaking. A condensed and edited transcript from that conversation follows:

CPJ: What do you think of the term creative placemaking?

AM: It’s a “fuzzy concept” (and so is planning). I’ve been thinking about why “placemaking” and “placekeeping” are problematic terms and why we need to get beyond them. I’m somebody who has spent a lot of time hanging around creative writers and thinking about the structure of language. For our National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) white paper, entitled Creative Placement, Anne Gadwa and I did not create the frame “creative placemaking”—it was coined by our clients at the National Endowment for the Arts, Chari Rocco Landesman and Deputy Chair Joan Shigekawa. Phrases like “placekeeping,” espoused by my colleague Roberto Bedoya, pose the same problem. Who is doing the placemaking and who is doing the placekeeping?

We need an actor-centered analysis (Markusen, 2004). Who are the placemakers and placekeepers? Developers? Merchants, big or small? Employers? Arts organizations? Local governments? Community organizations? Churches? Artists? Cultural groups? As an example in contrasts, think about the difference between a huge Filipino community organization in Los Angeles that combines social services with festivals full of music and dance. That’s “placemaking.” But so is a city-sanctioned makeover of a low-income community into condos that house young corporate financiers.

CPJ: What do you think of the larger conversation going on about creative placemaking?

AM: The research I did with Anne Gadwa and others on creative placemaking, and the NEA and ArtPlace funding programs that our work anticipated, has informed a broad movement in every kind of community, region, art form, and local economy. For one thing, it’s prompted conversations and projects that harness diverse artistic expressions to serve distinctive local cultures. There are tensions in this movement. Are efforts meant to attract tourism and boost economic impact? Or to do what Roberto calls “placekeeping,” affirming and sharing the distinctive cultural practices and features of the locale? I’ve learned through my research, public speaking, and consulting experience that what art and artists do to “placekeep”—to improve the quality of life for community members—and to help diverse people understand each other is more important than the economic impacts.

Leading thinkers in the contemporary arts and cultural research worlds are honing in on the idea and practice

of participatory art-making (Markusen and Brown, 2014). Thinking of community members as not only audiences, just listening or observing, but also as participating actively in art forms like making music, dancing, singing, drawing, painting, sculpting, acting, and writing. The established Euro-American arts organizations are in crisis—orchestras and many art museums. They are finding new ways to engage people and help them reconnect. But more artists are now working in smaller organizations that they build, often embedded in communities-of-color or communities around ethnicity or immigrant status.

CPJ: And what about your concept of the artistic dividend?

AM: I wrote *The Artistic Dividend* (2002) with my planning graduate student David King in the early 2000s. *The Artistic Dividend* documents the multiple ways that artists contribute to local economic activity – ways that most people aren’t conscious of. We talk about artists as a part of the export base. Many travel to perform. Most musicians make money through live gigs and not by selling CDs or writing songs. Most visual artists sell their work through galleries or participate in juried art fairs around the United States or sell things online. Writers earn income from readers all over the United States and the world.

We also show how artists support other industries and make them more productive. First of all, they help to anchor and attract cultural industries. For instance, in the Twin Cities, we have many publishers who draw heavily upon our organized writing community

“...placemaking does not have to lead to gentrification.”

(The Loft Literary Center) and provide jobs for writers. Writers and visual artists help design company materials like manuals for your products, work for the advertising industry, and do promotional work.

Because artists have high levels of self-employment, most of us think of them as starving in a garret as in *La Boheme*. But they are a key occupation in our communities and industries. Artists also infuse our communities with color, song, and movement, using their skills to address challenges and providing the tools for celebration.

CPJ: What would you say to creative placemaking critics who say that we should let go of the creative city planning agenda in order to focus more on inequality?

AM: I would not let go of the creative city agenda. People need arts and culture for so many reasons. There is no innate “either/or” about creative placemaking and equity. Many, many artists devote their work to preserving and innovating on their cultural practices—my Ojibwe writing partner and I demonstrate this in our study “Native Artists: Livelihoods, Resources, Space, Gifts” (2009). And many devote their work to addressing community issues. In slides I show during my speaking engagements, I demonstrate how, for instance, a Korean American traditional drum group uses their music in a pro-immigrant rights parade in Los Angeles. And how a big band African American jazz composer created an oratorio, *Port Chicago*, to commemorate the hundreds of African American sailors killed in a Bay Area ammunition explosion and their colleagues who survived it who were dishonorably discharged from the United States Navy because they refused to go back on the ships unless health and safety conditions were improved. Many decades later,

this oratorio and its performance in communities prompted the Navy to restore the status and benefits to those few still living. So, no – don’t abandon creative placemaking! Let it replace most of the sterile public art that fills our downtowns with artistic engagement!

Placemaking does not necessarily lead to gentrification or, more to the point, displacement. Many have made their communities safer, more expressive of their members, and more prosperous, too, in terms of jobs and small-scale retail, by beginning with arts and culture. Again, who are the actors in placemaking? It’s problematic when they are the agents of the built environment industry who simply want to profit from the turnover of land, and worse, who often welcome displacement of lower income people and land uses. Planners have been instrumental in establishing institutional mechanisms that prevent displacement such as rent control, land trusts, community benefit agreements, special forms of taxation, and nonprofit ownership and management. These tools can really make a difference.

CPJ: What is the most important challenge in the field of planning today?

AM: The displacement discussion is a welcome and important one and a challenging issue. The built environment industry is huge and it feeds off of David Harvey’s idea of the “spatial fix.” This, in turn, feeds off of displacement and our country has a tragic history of propagating that trend. It’s almost part of the American psyche; think of the great tragedies of the Native Americans, slavery, the Great Migration. We need to have a conversation about this massive built environment industry that feeds off of displacement.

Planning is very preoccupied with the issue of housing but not with the mechanisms behind displacement. It is important to figure out these mechanisms and how to further economic development in cities without furthering displacement.

CPJ: What advice would you give our audience to plan for artists in their communities?

AM: Well, there are two fronts: planning for artists and how can planning use the arts to solve challenges in communities. So, let’s look at planning for artists. Because artists have such high levels of self-employment and because of the nature of their work, artists have particular occupational needs. One of them is space.

Artists require more space than the rest of us. Forty-eight percent of artists work at home or are self-employed. They need space for canvases, or photographic chemicals, or space to store their paints. Musicians need rehearsal space. Theater artists and dancers need space to perform and practice. Studies show that it helps artists greatly to live near or with other artists—Artspace Projects’ nonprofit rehab and continued management of empty industrial space as artist live-work buildings is an outstanding example. However, these kinds of developments are often blocked by zoning codes that don’t permit people to live and work in the same space. Planners can change that. Across the country, artists have also created membership organizations by discipline or neighborhood and found reusable space for convenings, studios, shared equipment, classes, and other activities that substantially improve their ability to work as artists full-time (see our Artists’ Centers study, 2006).

Additionally, go read about creative placemaking. Then find out what’s going on in your community and who is already integrated into the community...who is creatively solving problems by channeling local talents. Then increase exposure to the creativity alive in your own communities!



FURTHER READINGS

To access these readings and more, go to annmarkusen.com.

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