Challenges and Feasibility of Rural Arts-Based Economic Development
A Case Study of Chatham County, North Carolina

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In recent years, economic development practitioners and planners have begun to recognize the role of the arts in regional economies and their use in downtown revitalization and other aspects of economic sustainability, particularly for rural areas and small towns. However, challenges in facilitating arts-based economic development strategies are not well documented or understood. This report examines Chatham County, North Carolina, and its residents’ attempts to create and envision arts-based economic development strategies. Challenges were identified, including unclear roles for arts support organizations, disagreements about government subsidies, difficulties in weighing the costs and benefits of an arts-based strategy versus other methods of economic or community development, obstacles (perceived and real) for local government and organizations in working with artists, and historic divisions based on race, class, and politics. Strategies to mediate these challenges are suggested.

The field of regional economic development in the US has generally focused on attracting industrial jobs and firms to certain areas. However, as the US economic base shifts from industrial production to service and information, and as the balance of power in choosing firm location shifts from the state to corporations, new and supplementary economic development strategies are needed. Although creativity and artistic production play fundamental roles in human development, interaction, and social life, economic development practitioners have only recently begun to widely recognize the role of the arts in the production and exchange processes that drive regional economies. Particularly in the past decade, the arts have been “rediscovered” as a viable element in regional economic development strategies.

Claims about the so-called “new economy” based on knowledge, ideas, and creativity have greatly influenced recent economic development discourse. Manuel Castells (2000) argues that the critical source of value in the new economy is talent, while Shalini Venturelli (2001) writes, “a nation without a vibrant creative force...does

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not possess the knowledge base to succeed in the Information Economy.” Creativity in the workplace is certainly encouraged by companies, who are increasingly seeing it as crucial to a competitive advantage. A recent article in Fast Company magazine begins: “Creativity. These days, there’s hardly a mission statement that doesn’t herald it, or a CEO who doesn’t laud it” (Breen 2004).

Others have focused on the impact of so-called “cultural industries” on regional economies, such as A.J. Scott’s (2000) analysis of the image-producing sector in Los Angeles or work in the cultural industries in the UK, from fashion design to painting to creating video games (O’Connor 2005). Finally, Richard Florida’s influential book, The Rise of the Creative Class (2002), makes the link between creative labor and regional economic development by arguing for amenity-based economic development strategies that attract the knowledge-based worker, or “creative class,” to a city or region and also capitalize on these workers as creative producers themselves.

The National Governor’s Association (2001) categorizes the potential contributions of the arts to economic development in a region as follows: the arts can encourage direct spending in an area, encourage downtown redevelopment, attract high-income residents, and stimulate overall creativity in local firms. Examples of arts-based economic development strategies could include an arts-based downtown revitalization plan, subsidized artist co-ops and live-work spaces, business assistance for arts-based small businesses, a tourism plan based on local arts, a networking forum for artists, or a formal matching program between local art and design school graduates and local firms.

In some cases, such as in Providence, Rhode Island, whole historic preservation and urban revitalization plans have been based around the arts. As Providence’s mayor David Cicilline writes on the City’s web site for the recently-formed Art, Culture and Tourism Department:

By providing centralized support for our arts economy and forging cultural connections across neighborhood boundaries, we will become even more than the sum of our parts… The Department will celebrate the social and economic power of art, as well as the tremendous potential of creative workers, as engines of growth and development in Providence (Cicilline 2003).

The strategy seems to be working; in 2003, New York Times reporter Julie Flaherty described Providence as “a tourist mecca with its rejuvenated downtown, trendy restaurants and vibrant cultural scene” (Flaherty 2003). Other municipalities from Austin to Seattle and rural regions, such as Mitchell and Yancey counties in Western North Carolina, have refocused downtown revitalization and economic development strategies around the arts.

It is clear that creativity is important in today’s economy, and that the arts can be leveraged to assist regional and local economies. However, it is not so clear how to go about using or encouraging these important resources. As cities and towns try to replicate successes, there is little reflection on the challenges of putting arts-based economic development strategies into practice. This case study focuses on Chatham County, North Carolina, and explores challenges and possible solutions to making arts-based strategies work, particularly in building effective partnerships between artists and planners.

Background

The Case for Arts-Based Economic Development

The International Economic Development Council (formerly the American Economic Development Council), an international membership organization of several
thousand economic development practitioners, defines economic development as “…a program, group of policies, or activity that seeks to improve the economic well-being and quality of life for a community, by creating and/or retaining jobs that facilitate growth and provide a stable tax base” (International Economic Development Council web site). This definition relates closely to the way many practitioners understand the concept, but the concept of “community economic development” is also important to keep in mind. While economic development, as outlined above, is generally concerned with increasing the overall wealth and number of jobs in a particular place, community development focuses more on social justice, wealth distribution, empowerment, and other elements of improving the quality of life in an area for existing residents. The concept of “community economic development” blends the two concepts into more of a long-term, holistic strategy. Graham Haughton (1999) defines community economic development as: “sustainable regeneration. . . requiring long term area regeneration processes that necessarily combine social, economic, and environmental actions.”

MDC Inc., a Chapel Hill based economic and workforce development nonprofit that focuses on capacity building in the US South (see profile on John Cooper, Coordinator of the Emergency Preparedness Demonstration for MDC, on pg. 53), brings the concepts together in their “building blocks” of community development (2002):

Economic development is not just about the creation of jobs. It is the process by which a community or region increases the standard of living of all of its residents. Viewed this way, economic development is part of a larger process of community development, through which a community provides for its citizens the institutions and amenities they need to live in comfort and security.

By describing their aims as not just creating jobs but also improving the quality of life for all community residents, MDC views economic development as part of a holistic community development strategy. Arts-based strategies may be particularly well-suited for this type of development work.

In the past 20 years, arts advocates, academics, and regional governments around the world have invested in studies that attempt to measure “instrumental” benefits of the arts, including individual benefits, social benefits, and economic benefits (for reviews of this literature, see Guetzkow 2002 and McCarthy et al. 2005). Also, the case has recently been made for a greater focus on the intrinsic benefits of art, which may not be quantifiable or measurable (McCarthy et al. 2005). Studies that identify and measure benefits to individuals from participation in artistic activities generally focus on benefits for cognitive function (especially academic performance and learning in children), health benefits from improved quality of life and stress reduction, and building interpersonal ties that improve social behavior and attitude (Guetzkow 2002; McCarthy et al. 2005). For example, the Ford Foundation has found that participation in an arts program has improved test scores and learning for school children in Texas (Reardon 2005).

Studies of the social impact of the arts in communities generally regard arts-related activity as contributing to social capital or to community organizing capacity in an area (Williams 1995). Stern and Seifert, in their study of community building and arts groups in Philadelphia, found that increased funding for arts groups led to increased cultural activity and participation, which enhanced vibrancy in urban communities, increased civic participation, and increased bridges across ethnic and class divides (Stern and Seifert 2002). François Matarasso (1997) identified 50 social impacts of participation in arts programs that benefit people and communities, including improving people’s employability, development of networks and capacity to organize, and improving health outcomes. He concludes that arts-based community development is publicly visible, feasible to plan and evaluate, flexible, and cost effective.
A recent report from the Rockefeller Foundation, *Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development*, outlines the theory and methods of “cultural community development,” which consist largely of artistic projects that help groups express identity and promote community collaboration between individuals and organizations (Adams and Goldbard 2001). Examples of these activities, which are drawn from case studies of Rockefeller’s PACT (Partnerships Affirming Community Transformation) grant recipients, include programs such as young dancers teaching dance to senior citizens, public mural painting, and public performances in protest of a city bus fare increase. Finally, Rhonda Phillips (2004) specifically identifies a typology of arts-based community development approaches that contribute to community economic development, including: arts business incubators, artist’s cooperatives, development of tourism venues, and comprehensive approaches.

Economic benefits are often estimated in studies that attempt to measure the economic impact of the arts (for example, see Barringer, et al. 2004; Department of Culture, Media, and Sport 1998; and Mount Auburn Associates 2000). These studies generally focus on the financial impact of the arts in terms of direct spending in a region, and measure sales of arts and crafts and performance tickets, arts-related tourism spending, tax revenue from arts organizations, and the payroll of arts-related jobs (for a review of methods see Radich 1987). For example, in their 2002 report *Arts and Economic Prosperity*, the advocacy group Americans for the Arts found that arts nonprofits in the US generate $134 billion annually in economic activity (seen in revenues for households and for state and local government) and provide 4.9 million full-time equivalent jobs (note that this study does not include for-profit industries) (Americans for the Arts 2002).

Arts advocates typically use economic impact studies to lobby government and business leaders for support, financial and otherwise, by showing that the arts have tangible economic value comparable to other industries. State, regional, and national studies, such as the Americans for the Arts study mentioned above, have been influential in lobbying policymakers. While critics of these studies have noted methodological inconsistencies, failure to prove significant economic impact, and a relatively myopic focus on instrumental benefits (see Madden 2001 and McCarthy, et al. 2005), a significant portion of the body of literature on the economic impact of the arts has made a convincing case for the value of arts to our society that is hard to ignore and extends to other types of benefits beyond the economic. These studies have also fostered collaboration and discussion with local governments, which have often led to the involvement of arts-advocacy groups in cooperative projects. Perhaps the value of these studies is not to show that the purpose of the arts is economic impact, but rather that economic benefits are just one of the impacts derived from creative production and that arts-specific benefits can be encouraged or enhanced through specific public or private support, policies, and interventions.
Examples of Arts-Based Economic Development and Factors for Success

Overall, given the potential of arts–based economic and community development, I would argue that measurement difficulties and implementation challenges are no reason to throw out the idea of arts-based economic development. The question is, how can planners get benefits to the community, and how can artists and arts advocates benefit as well? I now turn to two examples that briefly illustrate how such projects can take form.

First, the contemporary art museum MASS MoCA, in downtown North Adams, Massachusetts, is a clear example of a collaborative arts project that reused old industrial buildings to turn a small, declining downtown into a major destination. Stakeholders built political, private sector, and community support for the project, leveraging over $30 million to turn a historic factory into a center for the display and creation of contemporary art. The museum opened in 1999 and features:

- Space for art display (particularly for large installations).
- An experimental “laboratory” for artists.
- A theater that seats 850 and houses multiple performance spaces.
- An outdoor cinema.
- Office space for largely high tech and arts related retail and commercial uses.
- Many visitor amenities such as tours of the laboratory and programs for youth.

A year after its opening, MASS MoCA was financially viable, had a large number of annual visitors and members, had generated over 200 jobs in its commercial space, and had spurred impressive downtown revitalization (MASS MoCA web site—www.massmoca.org).

In a second example, Handmade in America (HIA) was founded over a decade ago in the mountains of Western North Carolina. The organization has focused on the existing resource of craft production instead of typical industry recruitment strategies to spur economic development in the rural region. HIA’s projects have been wide ranging, including:

- Conducting business training sessions at the nearby Penland School of Craft.
- Facilitating a revolving loan fund in conjunction with the Self-Help Credit Union (see article on Self-Help, pg. 55).
- Working with the Main Street USA program to revitalize small towns.
- Publishing a popular series of guidebooks that guide tourists along craft heritage and agri-tourism trails throughout the North Carolina mountains.
- Maintaining an online registry of artists, galleries, and crafts.
- Producing an economic impact study.

One innovative project is the EnergyXChange, an arts incubator project with a sustainable energy component; it provides live-work space for artists, along with a gallery, and is powered by gases released by a local landfill. HIA also facilitates many arts-in-education programs, runs training sessions and conferences, and has recently launched the Handmade Institute, which will provide consulting assistance to other organizations on arts-based community economic development strategies (HIA web site—www.handmadeinamerica.org).

From the above examples and relevant literature, we can draw some suggested factors for success. Phillips (2004) outlines several considerations, such as the need for local leaders and community citizens to recognize that general support for and participation in the arts is conducive to community economic development; the need for partnerships and sharing of resources; and the value of flexibility in terms of ways to offer arts support. A recent report from the Urban Institute and the
Fund for Folk Culture, Culture, and Commerce identify several challenges and provide valuable suggestions for arts-based economic development strategies. They suggest careful matching of assets with needs and geographical scope when matching partners, and that artists and arts organizations receive business skills training through partnerships. They also note that building partnerships between divergent organizations often had unexpected payoffs and resulted in unanticipated mutual benefit (Walker et al. 2003).

One of the key elements in the above examples and arts-based economic development literature is building effective partnerships. Robert Putnam (2000) describes social capital as “features of social life—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives.” Instead of advocating strengthening of all social bonds, Mark Granovetter and others (Granovetter 1983; Safoil 2004; Skocpol 1999) argue that weak ties are the crucial link between factions of closely knit groups, and are responsible for information relays, political mobilization, integration of the individual into modern society, and movement formation. They also note that participation by itself does not necessarily build trust in a community; in fact, as noted by Carol Stack and Lisette Lopez (2002), in divided communities with histories of prejudice, increased participation in group activity may do the opposite. In these situations, negotiating from a common ground, with mutual engagement, can lead to building trust and therefore constructive social capital. These different perspectives on valuing links between people and predicting action using these links will help to clarify considerations for arts-based economic development implementation.

Challenges in Using the Arts as Economic Development

In the updated preface to his classic text *Art and Economics*, Bruno Frey writes, “Without a sound economic base, art cannot exist, and without creativity the economy cannot flourish” (Frey 2000). In practice, the arts and economics are indeed intertwined; artists must become businesspeople in many practical ways in order to have a career, a strong economy leads to greater support for the arts through grants and private donations, and regions and modern companies are realizing that innovation and creativity are crucial to their competitiveness (Grant 1991). However, the relationship can be contentious; artists frequently resist becoming businesspeople or entrepreneurs, the arts are often given a short shrift in state and local budgets because they are seen as a “frill,” and companies or regions often do not recognize what the arts can offer because benefits are difficult to describe in concrete or empirically measurable ways (see Plattner 1996).

Arts-based economic development strategies are important because they recognize the value of art in our society, which goes well beyond economic benefits. In addition, this new focus recognizes that the arts can provide economic sustainability for people who are directly involved in or who support artistic creation. However, planners and arts-support organizations should reflect more on the challenges of implementing arts-based economic development in practice. For example, people involved with arts and those involved with economic development policy often disagree on goals, methods, or language. In fact, it may be the case that economic development practitioners and arts advocates or artists do not have the space or common ground to encourage interaction and collaboration. Many different types of problems can arise, and it is important to remember that even behind success stories is a long, complex process that brings many stakeholders together.

Chatham County Case Study

In this case study, I examined the interaction between economic development practitioners, artists, and intermediary organizations in their attempts to create arts-based economic development strategies in Chatham County.
County, North Carolina. I asked planners and people involved in economic development activities, arts support groups, and artists to comment regarding the following questions:

- Do arts have a role in economic development, and if so, how are the arts currently contributing to these strategies or how could they be used in these strategies?

- What are possible tensions barriers, or contextual issues that might be preventing these strategies from working or being initiated? What is currently working to address these tensions?

Background

Chatham County, located to the south and west of the Triangle area (Wake, Orange, and Durham Counties) in central North Carolina, had a population of nearly 55,000 people in 2004 and is growing fast, with a population increase of 27 percent between 1990 and 2000, about 5 percent higher than the state as a whole for this period (US Census 1990 and 2000).

The county’s two major towns, Pittsboro (population 2,200) in the east and Siler City (population 7,000) in the west, vary in terms of ethnic makeup and income (US Census 2000). Chatham’s population is about 17 percent African American, 75 percent white, and 10 percent Hispanic or Latino (US Census 2000). In the past decade, Chatham has seen a large increase in its Latino population, particularly in the western part of the county. In 2000, Siler City was 40 percent Hispanic or Latino, compared to only 9 percent in Pittsboro (US Census 2000).

In addition, as more middle and upper-income residents locate in the county, there is an increasing trend towards out-commuting and unevenness in income levels between the eastern and western sides of the county, as most of these high-earning residents are concentrated in the east nearest Research Triangle Park. The county is currently receiving a great deal of residential development pressure in its northeastern region adjacent to the City of Cary and the Town of Chapel Hill, a source of fierce controversy (Strom 2004, 2005).

Chatham is also located in a relatively “arts rich” region of North Carolina. The county lies east of the Seagrove area, famous internationally for its history and concentration of potters and other ceramic artists, and the adjacent Triangle and Piedmont Triad (Greensboro, Winston-Salem, High Point) areas possess vibrant art scenes and sizeable art markets. Chatham also shares in the strong artistic traditions that characterize North Carolina, and benefits from the relatively high awareness of and value placed on art statewide.

The vibrant, varied arts scene in Chatham County has grown appreciably in the past 20 years, through a combination of good fortune and deliberate action by local artists and community leaders. Artists have been drawn to Chatham in part by the beautiful countryside and affordable housing options in proximity to the opportunities and market of nearby urban areas, and by the...
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presence of other artists and established artist networks. Current arts-related activity includes:

- A small business incubator based on arts;
- A popular annual tour of local artist studios;
- A local arts council, many arts and music festivals, several galleries;
- Arts-related classes at the local community college;
- An active live music scene, numerous arts-related organizations;
- The presence of several hundred artists.

The local arts council’s directory lists nearly 200 artists, almost certainly an undercount, working in varied media, from pottery and other visual arts to literature and performing arts.

Study Methodology

Chatham County has a high concentration of artists and many different arts-based activities and groups that seemed to have economic development implications, but the official economic development policies did not center on the arts. Because of this, the county was ideal for exploring perceptions and conditions that could precede and eventually challenge arts-based economic development efforts. I based my research design on ethnographic fieldwork methods and on the “extended case study” method that combines qualitative research and quantitative contextual data (Burawoy 1998; Yin 2003). I collected relevant social, political, and economic statistics about Chatham County and outlined economic development challenges and current strategies from existing documents. I then interviewed a total of 35 people, including economic development actors, artists, and people from arts-support organizations. These interviews were confidential and my interviewees’ identities were protected. I also attended several arts events, sat in on arts council board meetings, and conducted site visits to businesses and artist studios.

Findings and Further Implications

Successful Examples of Arts-Based Economic Development in Chatham County

There are several cases that point to effective arts-based economic development in Chatham currently. These include live music gatherings that bring people together, galleries in downtown Pittsboro and elsewhere, businesses and industries that link to the arts in some way, and all working artists in the county who, by definition, combine art and economic development. Below are three organizations that specifically link art and economic development.

First, the North Carolina Arts Incubator is a small business incubator in downtown Siler City. Leon Tongret, the director of the small business program at Central Carolina Community College (CCCC), a former entrepreneur, was versed in the methods and language of economic development and also made connections with artists through programs at CCCC. He also researched how art-based incubators could be successful for downtown revitalization. He has built ties with local artists and has received several grants from the state and local government. The Incubator now includes a ceramics classroom, a gallery featuring incubator artwork, and workshops used to create guitars, jewelry, stained glass,
metal furniture, limited mass production sculpture, and more. Projects currently planned or under construction include a café with performance space, an art supply store, and a high-end restaurant.

Many attribute the Incubator’s success to Tongret’s personality and his ability to bring people together around the idea, recruiting talented volunteers and taking many public officials, press, and interested citizens on tours of the site. Tongret credits the unique nature of the project and the combination of factors that might not be the case elsewhere, including vacant downtown buildings that could be financed affordably, the concentration of talented artists, the community college’s art classes and small business center, and the willingness of public officials to try arts as economic development. According to public officials, they supported the project partly because Chatham is in need of creative economic development and because of Tongret’s business plan and consistent evidence of visible progress.

In a second example, there is an annual Studio Tour in Chatham. During the tour, local artists open their studios to visitors who drive around the county using an official tour map and purchase art directly from the artists. Visitors have a chance to see a working artist studio and can get to know the artist, an impossibility when buying art at a gallery or online. The tour has grown from 32 artists in 1992 to fifty-eight in the 2005 tour, working in a variety of media including: ceramics, fiber, drawing, glass, jewelry, metal, mixed media, collage, painting, photography, silk screening, stone, and wood. Despite the amount of volunteer effort and other challenges the tour demands, it continues to be one of the most successful events in Chatham, contributing to artists’ incomes, sales taxes, and significantly increased activity at local businesses. Many artists report that they sell most of their work for the year during these two weekends, and involvement in the tour has allowed many artists to become professional. It has encouraged networking and helped artists improve their business skills, create more sophisticated marketing strategies, and grow their clientele. Also, the tour has raised Chatham’s profile regionally and, among artists and others, has played a role in decisions to relocate to the county.

Third, Chatham’s local arts council has held various events that have linked local arts with the community. Chatham Arts is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to connect local artists to the community, which it accomplishes by holding charity fundraisers, organizing an annual arts and music festival, and running an artist-in-residence program for local schools. They have brought the community together through arts; for example, they invited gospel groups to perform at their festival, which successfully attracted many African American residents who had not previously attended. The council also serves artists by providing an online searchable directory of over 200 member artists; by the presence of their gallery in downtown Pittsboro that features member artists; and by partially funding local artists and performance events. Chatham Arts’ most direct form of artist assistance is a series of occasional workshops for artists, run in conjunction with nearby Orange County’s arts council, focusing on business skills such as how to improve the customer experience and increasing art sales during the studio tour, managing finances, and marketing.
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Challenges for Arts-Based Projects

Even in the context of this vibrant arts environment, I identified many barriers to creating and implementing arts-based projects. First, I found that there was a great deal of tension due to unclear roles for various organizations and entities. For example, the local arts council experienced tension between its role of helping artists and needing artists’ donations and volunteer time for charity events in the community. Partly as a result of this tension, the arts council and the studio tour group, which have worked together for many years, are now formally splitting. Also, I found disagreement about government subsidies for art and for traditional economic development projects. Some artists felt they provide a public good and should be supported by subsidies, while others felt they are businesspeople and should be treated as such. Regardless of the artists’ feelings many in local government were confused as to whom they should fund. In addition, the local Economic Development Council was under fire for spending public money attempting to recruit manufacturing businesses to the county with very little success. Many felt that the council should instead focus on encouraging existing industries, such as the arts, or protecting Chatham’s “rural” feel and other amenities.

My second major finding is that many of the groups mistrusted each other, largely due to false assumptions or a lack of information. For example, many local government officials were skeptical about the contribution of arts to the economy, in part due to a lack of economic data and difficulty in producing reliable estimates. In addition, many artists did not trust planners, thinking that they were aligned with developers (and the pro-development County Commissioners), even though the planners appeared to be more involved in the bureaucratic challenge of trying to manage growth in a controlled way. Finally, some government officials and people from local organizations thought that working with artists was difficult, or they thought it would be, because artists are not formally organized and there is no official spokesperson. While sometimes true, these perceptions were often not based on actual experience.

Finally, the groups used different languages, spaces, and activities. In terms of language, planners generally considered the purpose of “economic development” to be increasing the tax base and creating economic growth, while artists talked more about quality of life, careful development, and addressing inequality. In addition, there were no common places where the groups crossed paths, exacerbated by a lack of conference and performance spaces. The groups also experienced different daily activities. One planner observed that planning has a regulatory nature and takes a long time to produce something, while art is not regulated, does not need much infrastructure, and visible results can occur relatively quickly. The planner noted, “Art is transformative, while business is a transaction, and can the two ever meet?”

I also observed that the groups were still grappling with a past history of division. There are historic racial, social, economic, and geographical divides between groups of people in Chatham, with little (physical or metaphorical) space for meeting on common issues. In addition, divisions seem to be amplified by proposed development concerns, although this issue is also bringing some people together to organize for common causes. The arts are playing a divisive role in some ways, as seen in the current divisions between arts-related organizations and in the alienation of some local government officials through perceived unwillingness to work together or opposition to development. However, the arts are also bringing diverse people together, in projects such as fundraising events, local plays and music performances, street fairs, festivals, the studio tour, and the incubator project.
Conclusion

Based on my findings, the most successful projects seem to include “bridging intermediaries” that can work with many groups, embodied by particular people, organizations, and events. In the North Carolina Arts Incubator example, the director is a former entrepreneur, knows local officials, and also has connected well with artists. In the case of the annual studio tour, many dedicated volunteers and artists have pooled resources for mutual benefit. The arts council has brought business expertise to artists, and music festivals have brought different populations together. Other sites with emerging links between art and economic activity include organic farming, where local artists sell their work at farms during farm tours, and custom home construction using local artists.

Lessons from this case, often suggested by interviewees, that could be applied by communities in Chatham or elsewhere include:

- Holding a forum to find common ground and mutual interests.
- Increasing the role of intermediary organizations, such as the local community college or the local arts council, in bringing people to the table and involving them in a project.
- Clearly defining roles for arts-support organizations, performing more outreach by everyone involved in arts and economic development, making more attempts to transcend reactionary or hard-line positions, and increasing willingness for all the groups to brainstorm and let down their defenses.
- Engaging in projects that have tangible benefit for all stakeholders and incentives for continued involvement.
- Using economic data on the arts in Chatham County to begin a discussion of art’s contributions, and increasing public displays of mutual support among the involved organizations and integrating their boards of directors.

There are many challenges to overcome in attempting projects as complex and emotionally charged as those typical of arts-based economic development, including initial stakeholder skepticism, finding common ground for collaboration, and discovering appropriate roles for each actor, particularly for intermediary organizations or individuals. The same could be said of most planning projects, such as a downtown redevelopment project or a new transportation plan. Basing economic development or other projects on the arts, however, can be particularly challenging in certain ways, and also can be particularly rewarding for communities.

Involving art in a planned project can be intimidating for planners, government officials, and artists. Planners and public officials might be nervous about what the art may contain or how the general public will perceive it, while artists may be nervous about creating a personal work for public judgment or aligning themselves with government or development interests. As one interviewee said, these projects can be so contentious because “there is so much emotion involved.” However, the emotion is also the reason people are drawn into arts-based projects, such as a public mural project, public sculpture gardens, teaching art to troubled youth, building and participating in a local arts center, or participating in a project like an arts incubator. Creativity is part of being human, and creating various forms of art can be deeply emotional, pleasurable, informative, and challenging. Creative projects can also foster positive ties between groups in a community, whether they achieve arts-based economic development or are called upon in future times of crisis or opportunity.
This study raises many further questions:

• How are ideas about arts-based economic development seen in relation to other economic development strategies in Chatham?

• How have these actors negotiated other collaborative projects in the past?

• Can we trace a historical change in economic development strategies, and could we correlate that with changes in actor interactions?

• How can we more specifically characterize these relationships, through qualitative and quantitative methods, so that we may better understand the planning process and specifically arts-based planning?

• Are there other factors that might influence these kinds of strategies, or present challenges?

• If the goal of community economic development is to benefit everyone in a community, under what conditions can arts-based activities effectively accomplish this?

The case study presented here represents a unique contribution to the growing body of literature that addresses the implementation of arts-based economic development policy. The value of this study lies in its exploration of opinions and preferences for this type of planning policy without its being already integrated into an overall economic development strategy in this location. While “success stories” are important, we also need to reflect on possible challenges and obstacles to implementation when attempting innovative policy actions. It is my hope that this case study will provide valuable information for those interested in arts and economic development policy, stimulate further research into these challenges, and contribute to a growing inquiry into building effective partnerships for sustainable, asset-based community economic development.

References


