Cultural Research Network (CRN) Overview of CultureBlocks Mapping Tool and Interview With Susan Seifert (SIAP)

Kiley Arroyo

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Abstract
This document is the transcript of the Cultural Research Network inaugural interview featuring CultureBlocks posted by Kiley Arroyo (CRN) on May 17, 2013. The focus of Arroyo's interview with Susan Seifert was the SIAP perspective on development of the CultureBlocks tool and insights for other cultural researchers.

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration | Urban Studies and Planning

Comments
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Welcome to the Cultural Research Network (CRN)! My name is Kiley Arroyo. I’m delighted to serve as one of the CRN’s inaugural steering committee members. The purpose of this forum is to provide colleagues opportunities to explore project or professional connections, methodological challenges, technological innovations, standards and practices, and shared infrastructure. Put simply, it’s a new space where we can exchange ideas and accelerate learning on an individual and collective scale.

My passion for research was deeply shaped through my experience working with seasoned veterans John Holden and Samuel Jones at the think tank Demos. Over the course of that experience I saw how rigorous cultural research could play a powerful role in reshaping urban policy, planning strategies, organizational development and the broader fields of the arts, education and innovation. I came to appreciate how one could apply the same degree of creativity found throughout the arts to generate compelling research and new ways of understanding the value of culture. Multiple researchers had a formative effect on me, not least of which was and continues to be the exemplary research produced by Mark Stern and Susan Seifert and the Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP).

For those unaware, SIAP was founded back in 1994 and is a research group at the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Social Policy & Practice. In their own words:

“Our research focuses on the relationship of the arts to community change, with a particular interest in strategies for arts-based neighborhood revitalization, social inclusion, and community wellbeing. SIAP believes that if the arts and culture do, in fact, have
an important role in improving the lives of ordinary people, we should be able to measure it. We use the tools of social research to examine the intersections between cultural engagement, social structure, community development, and public policy.

In addition to producing an impressive catalogue of seminal research and field-building methodologies, SIAP has been involved in a long-running partnership with The Reinvestment Fund (TRF). TRF is a nonprofit community development financial institution that works across the Mid-Atlantic that provides financing for affordable housing, schools, businesses and other projects that build wealth and opportunity for the people and places in need. Just a few short weeks back, the City of Philadelphia announced the long-awaited launch of CultureBlocks, in partnership with the Office of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy, the Department of Commerce, SIAP, and TRF.

CultureBlocks is a free mapping tool that supports people making decisions about place and creativity in Philadelphia. CultureBlocks can be used for research, planning, exploration and investment on the neighborhood level. It visualizes powerful data about Philadelphia’s creative and cultural assets within the context of other important economic, demographic and geographic data for the purposes of understanding the relationship between culture and neighborhoods and driving future investment decisions. Many organizations can use CultureBlocks as a decision-making tool, whether it is for simple data gathering to inform a project, research into a specific neighborhood, or data gathering for a city-wide initiative. CultureBlocks is made possible through the generous support of the National Endowment of the Arts, Our Town Program and ArtPlace America, Inc.

Over the years Philadelphia has demonstrated a genuine interest in cultural research and open data initiatives, from participating in seminal studies such as the Urban Institute’s Cultural Vitality in Communities to being considered a national leader in open-government movements. CultureBlocks symbolizes another important contribution to that history. For these reasons and more, we hope to create discussion around CultureBlocks in these opening days of the CRN’s existence. We think the tool offers an entry point into a range of compelling topics, such as how the field can access data more
efficiently, the merits and limitations of specific data sets, how arts organizations and cultural activity are defined in a policy context, or looking at how cultural information can be leveraged to effect positive social change.

We look forward to presenting an interview with Susan Seifert later today and to the lively discussion we hope this stimulates.

Kind regards, Kiley

Source—CRN GoogleGroup email:
To: cultural-research@googlegroups.com
From: Kiley Arroyo kkarroyo2012@gmail.com
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Cultural Research Network  
CRN: Topic 1 – CultureBlocks  
Interview with Susan Seifert, Social Impact of the Arts Project  
Re: SIAP perspective on development of the CultureBlocks tool  
By Kiley Arroyo (CRN)  
May 17, 2013

1. Why was the platform developed, what objectives does it aim to achieve in the short and/or longer-term, and who are its target audiences?

The project was inspired by the NEA Our Town initiative (and launched by the Chairman’s planning grant). Development of the platform was an opportunity to build on an ongoing collaboration between SIAP and TRF, in service to the City of Philadelphia, through a new partnership with the Philadelphia Office of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy (OACCE). CultureBlocks and associated research (e.g., social wellbeing index) is also an opportunity to focus on neighborhood geography as the dimension of place that matters to people—the public sphere where people experience inclusion/exclusion and overall community wellbeing.

CultureBlocks is designed be a free simple online mapping tool that allows individuals and agencies access to a wide range of data on cultural and community assets in the context of a particular neighborhood. Researchers are certainly one target audience—such as community/cultural researchers or university students (in social policy or urban studies)—seeking neighborhood data as a context for qualitative or site specific studies.

Ideally the tool would bring attention and resources to isolated neighborhoods, leverage assets in struggling neighborhoods, as well as foster network building in asset-rich neighborhoods. We’d hope to encourage a cross-sector approach to community intervention and investment as well as integration of the arts, culture, and humanities into urban and social policy and research.
2. I understand quite a few partners were involved in its development. Can you give us some insights into what that was like? Who did what? Were there any challenges in this collaboration, and if so, how were they navigated?

The partners are The Reinvestment Fund (TRF) as lead partner, with its policy unit as well as PolicyMap; the City OACCE with the Commerce Dept; and Penn’s SIAP. Interestingly, while our missions and project rationales were different, it worked because each partner had a set of clear responsibilities and carried them out. PolicyMap was the lead in project management, developed the geospatial database, and worked closely with the City OACCE with respect to widget design and functionality. SIAP was lead in cultural database provider, cultural assets analysis, and implementation of the research agenda with TRF’s policy unit. TRF policy unit with SIAP worked with the City OACCE to identify and collect other neighborhood data from the City of Philadelphia and other public/private sources. OACCE took the lead in the user group sessions, beta testing, and outreach plan and strategy.

To me, CultureBlocks’ Terms of Use, drafted by the City of Philadelphia legal department, represents the spirit of the collaboration and its contribution. We all agreed to develop CultureBlocks as a free website and to protect the data (contributed from multiple sources) so that it would not get used for a purely profit making purpose (somewhat like Social Explorer). Originaly, we thought that the Philadelphia Open Data project would have developed language that we could draw on for CultureBlocks. In fact, it looks like CultureBlocks helped set the stage for Open Data Philly.

3. The data dictionary that accompanies the platform is quite helpful. Can you tell us why specific data sets were chosen? Were there specific dimensions of the cultural ecosystem you found it particularly difficult to find reliable data for?

The cultural asset data sets developed for CultureBlocks were based on SIAP’s experience since the mid-1990s with collection of data and development of methods to understand the relationship of the arts and culture to community vitality and social wellbeing. Given our
interest in a broad definition of cultural engagement, we’ve always had to construct the data sets needed before undertaking a particular research project. Developing the concept of the cultural ecosystem and identifying data both useful and feasible to collect was an outcome of the research process.

The single most important data source is the annual IRS listing of tax-exempt organizations 501c3 organizations, whereby we can identify nonprofit organizations with arts/culture as its primary mission as well as arts/culture programs embedded in other kinds of tax-exempt organizations, including colleges and universities. Drawing on experience with TRF, we’ve found the commercial database InfoUSA to be a useful source of data on cultural businesses. Again, this data set requires customization with respect to industry codes (primary, secondary, etc) and cleaning with respect to inaccuracies and overlap with IRS listings.

To supplement the IRS and InfoUSA, we used local sources (e.g., public and private grantmakers, including Philadelphia Cultural Fund and Philadelphia Activity Fund, as well as community and weekly newspaper listings) to identify “emerging” cultural resources—that is, arts/cultural groups and embedded programs that are nonprofit but not tax-exempt and cultural enterprises and artist cooperatives not listed on InfoUSA. This database is by definition incomplete but suggestive of location trends in emerging and entrepreneurial activity and incipient cultural clusters.

It is particularly difficult to document resident artists, who are an important dimension of the cultural ecosystem. The CultureBlocks data represent only a sample of Philadelphia-based artists (visual, performing, film/video) living in the city from 2005 to 2010 and their relative concentration in Philadelphia neighborhoods. Unfortunately, SIAP’s primary data source for a number of years—Pew Fellowships in the Arts—is no longer available. (Formerly artists of all disciplines could self-nominate for a fellowship. Since 2009 an artist must be nominated and formally invited to apply for a fellowship.) At the other end of the spectrum (of undocumented resources) are the folk and traditional artists residing throughout Philadelphia neighborhoods who generally are not members of artist service organizations.
Cultural participation too is an important dimension that is difficult to document. Thanks to the Philadelphia Cultural List Cooperative, a marketing program of the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, SIAP has figured out how to calculate a neighborhood cultural participation rate (per 1,000 households) representing a range of activities (program/event patrons, class registration, membership, etc) among a strong sample of nonprofit organizations. As a complement, the City’s cultural event permit data, identifying blocks closed for special events, can help paint a broader picture of participatory neighborhood activity. Generally, with respect to data on active participation, social networks and smart phones have increased the capacity of cultural programs to track participants but have decreased their associated geographic indicators (e.g., patrons sign-in with email address but with no street address or affiliation). One step forward, two steps backward.

4. What are the most important lessons learned over the course of this project that you’d like to share with other cultural researchers (whether behind the scenes and process related, data source challenges, or something else?)

The most important lesson, from SIAP’s point of view, is that developing a geospatial cultural asset database for the purpose of research is very different from developing the database as a public online mapping tool. As researchers, we are interested in neighborhood patterns (ideally, the fine-grained geography afforded by census block group data), relationships of cultural assets with other community attributes and socio-economic characteristics, and changes over time. For an online mapping tool, point-level data (vs. neighborhood layers) and current information are of central importance. While research can accommodate random error and benefit from data collected at different points in time, users who want to identify specific resources or make day-to-day location decisions could find these issues problematic. Thus, a big challenge will be the feasibility of refreshing multiple cultural and community asset data sets developed and assembled over a three-year period.

For over a decade, SIAP had the luxury of doing university-based cultural and community research with relatively little notoriety. These
days, with the creative placemaking vogue, cultural agents and funders are more eager than ever to use “research” to demonstrate that the arts are the magic bullet to cure economic woes. In other words, many arts advocates use the term “research” as a synonym for “casemaking”. We’d like to encourage cultural researchers to pursue a spirit of inquiry and to use expanded data and mapping opportunities to uncover and understand the elements of (what we call) the community cultural ecosystem as well as the local dimensions of a particular place. Over time the value of culture—as well as the credibility of its research—are likely to gain in recognition.

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