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Social Impact of the Arts Project

What do the arts & culture contribute to urban life?

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Panel discussion: Arts, Culture and Vibrant Cities: Innovative roles for arts and culture in growing inner cities

"Reimagining Cities: Building Resiliency"—A Full-Day Symposium on Challenges Facing American Cities

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What do the arts and culture contribute to urban life? Since the "culture wars" of the 1990s, this question has hovered over local and national policy debates. The core of that debate focused on the "elitism" of the cultural sector. The American Assembly's report, *Art and the Public Purpose*, appeared to answer this question unequivocally:

> The arts contribute to quality of life and economic growth—by making America's communities more livable and prosperous, and by increasing the nation's prosperity at home and abroad.[1]

For most of the past 15 years, urban policymakers have been more likely to emphasize "prosperity" and economic growth, rather than the quality of life and livability.

During the 1990s, the *economic impact* study was the dominant way of bringing culture into the urban policy mix. These studies sought to measure the aggregate value of all of a city's arts activities (staff, tickets) and then applied a multiplier to arrive at a really big number. Indeed, arts advocates continue to calculate this big number, over and over again.

Yet, the economic impact studies had a number of problems. First, inconveniently, economists noted that they generally didn't account for substitution effects, that is, if residents go to a museum, there is something else they don't do. Once these were taken into account, the big number was diminished.

More importantly, although the big number might impress arts advocates, what if gambling or scrap metal was able to generate an even bigger number? Reducing the cultural sector to just another industry, strips away much of the value that the arts generate.

As the economic impact strategy foundered, it was replaced by Richard Florida's "creative class" juggernaut. For Florida, the arts generated value by attracting "creative," which he argued, was the key to a city's economic dynamism. Certainly, Florida turned the heads of many civic and corporate leaders, but his argument raised its own difficulties. Were lawyers and corporate managers really part of the "creative class, and if they were, were their presence the cause, or simply the effect of economic growth. More seriously, could a city do much to make itself sufficiently cool? Could simply designating a "gay district," as one city did, attract the creative class? I had an opportunity to study a foundation-supported effort by Florida and his associates in three communities and came away impressed by the enthusiasm and, yes, the creativity of the local participants, but skeptical about its success in changing the communities creative class profile.

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[1] American Assembly (1997), *Art and the Public Purpose.* *http://www.scribd.com/doc/59799897/Arts-and-Public-Purpose-Report*

Perhaps most seriously, a creative class approach entails diverting resources from the broader community to investment that appeal to an already privileged segment. At a time when resources are tight, even if this effort were effective, it would tend to reinforce the image of the creative sector as elitist and insulated from the rest of society.

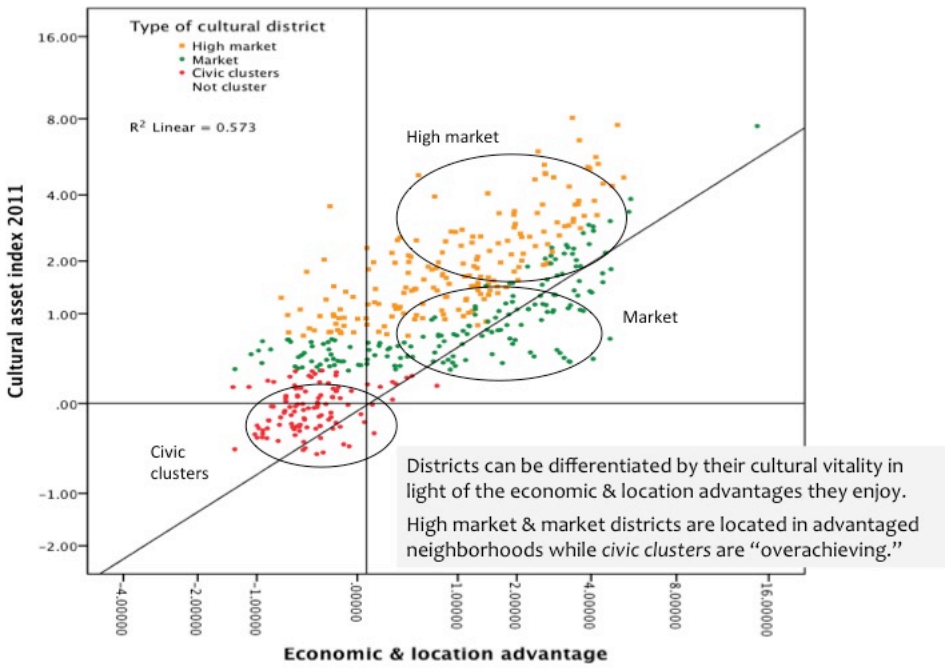
Yet, one of the contributions of the creative class approach was to move us back to an appreciation of both the economic and quality of life benefits of the arts. More recently, the "creative placemaking" movement, supported by a number of philanthropies and the National Endowment for the Arts, has continued this interest in the intrinsic and extrinsic roles of the arts.

The work that my research group, the Social Impact of the Arts Project, has done in Philadelphia provided some empirical foundation for creative placemaking. Through our work with The Reinvestment Fund, a community development financial institution, we developed a new way of conceptualizing the cultural sector, not simply as a collection of organizations and individuals, but as a set of neighborhood cultural ecosystems in which different elements—nonprofits, for-profits, artists, and cultural participants—benefited from their interactions with one another. Furthermore, we were able to demonstrate that when these resources reached a higher level of concentration—what we call "natural" cultural districts—they had a number of economic and non-economic spillover effects on their neighborhoods. For example, over the years we have demonstrated an association between these "natural" cultural districts and:

- poverty reduction without neighborhood displacement,
- better child welfare outcomes,
- fewer cases of ethnic or racial harassment, and
- lower morbidity.

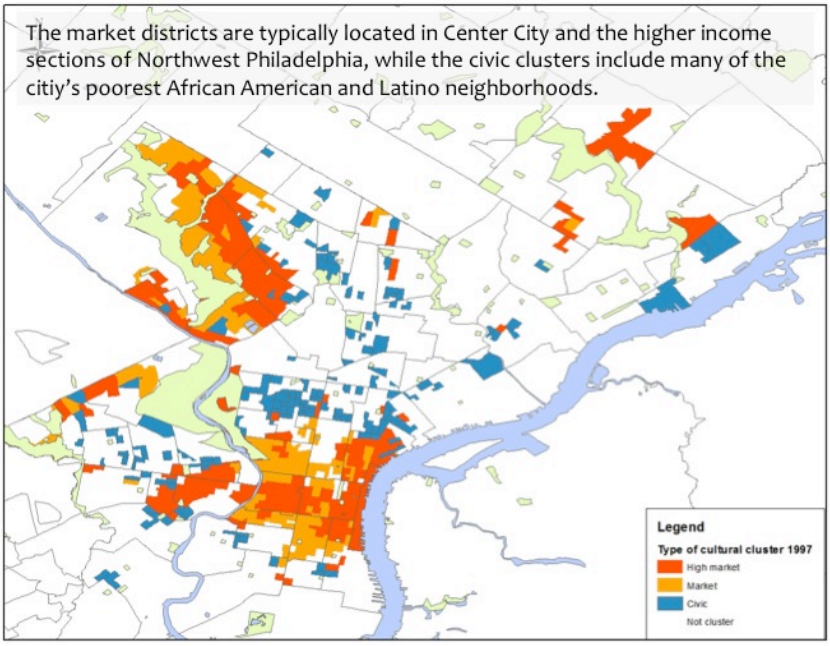
We are now involved in creating a multi-dimensional index of social wellbeing that incorporates these and other indicators to examine how social advantages and disadvantages are clustered across the city. We believe that a policy approach that build on existing cultural resources, rather than top-down efforts to create cultural districts or destinations from scratch, provides the best opportunity for harnessing the power of the arts for creating stronger communities and increasing social wellbeing.

We've learned that we can differentiate these cultural districts by their location. Some districts are located in neighborhoods with strong economic and location advantages (relatively wealthy residents, close to downtown), while other face many more challenges because of poverty or distance. For example, the figure below plots these advantages against the concentration of cultural assets in Philadelphia's census block groups.



As you can see, the two are strongly related. We can differentiate, then, market and high market districts in which large numbers of cultural assets are consistent with a neighborhood's advantages from what we call *civic clusters*, which in a sense are *exceeding the expectations* we would have based on their disadvantages.

When we map these clusters, we find that Center City, its surrounding neighborhoods, and affluent sections of Northwest Philadelphia are the focus of market districts, while low and moderate income neighbor-hoods are home to a number of civic clusters.

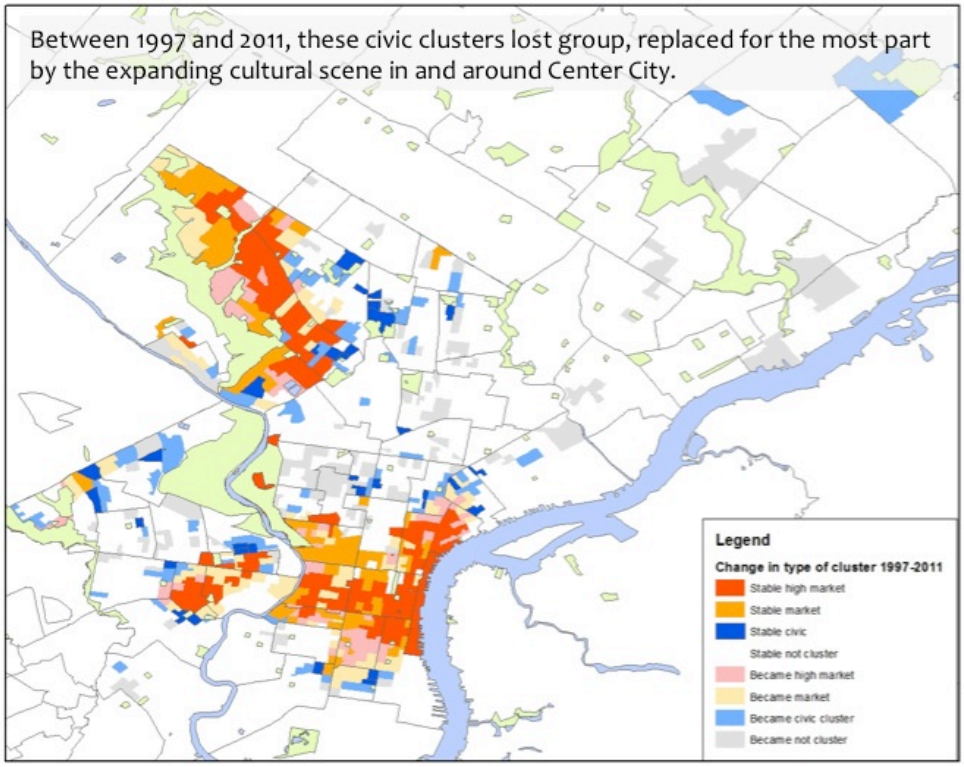


This differentiation of market and civic clusters has implications for social policy investments as well. Market clusters already enjoy a number of advantages. When we speak with artists and cultural

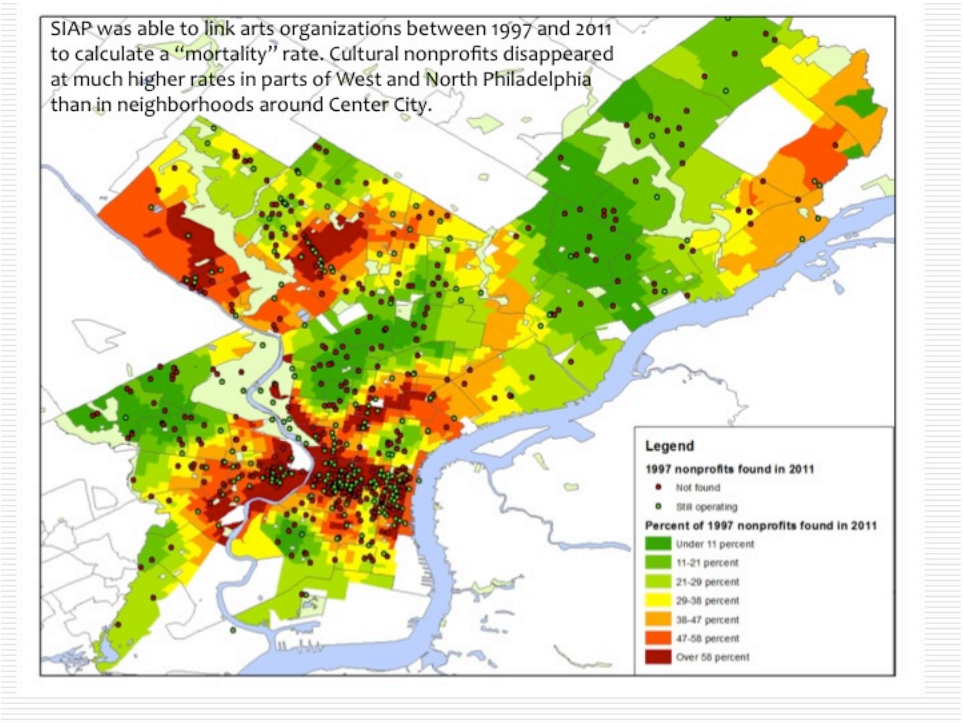
organization leaders in these areas, they emphasize the need for efficient city government—reduced red tape, better city services. In contrast, civic clusters need more help. The market by itself will not make these districts sustainable. They need social investments if they are to continue to produce the social benefits we've discovered.

Unfortunately, it seems that much of creative placemaking has focused on the low-hanging fruit associated with market districts. Taking a relatively privileged district and making it blossom is worthwhile and is much easier than the sustained effort necessary to grow a civic cluster.

Indeed, the evidence suggests that arts funding has tended to tilt more toward market districts. In Philadelphia, between 1997 and 2011, many of the civic clusters we identified disappeared. The new clusters that came into being were much more likely to emerge in relatively well-off neighborhoods near Center City.



When we calculated a "mortality" rate for nonprofit cultural providers, we found it was much higher in low and moderate-income neighborhoods. As a result, between 1997 and 2011, the strength of the correlation between economic status and cultural assets doubled. Increasingly, at least in Philadelphia, the arts are associated with economic privilege.



In my opinion, this pattern poses an existential threat to the cultural sector. If it is abandoning its role in providing cultural opportunities for people in all walks of life and becomes increasingly associated with a social elite, the arts will face increasing opposition at a local and national level.

What is more, if the arts withdraw from our cities' most challenged neighborhoods, their capacity for having social impact is reduced. We've demonstrated that investments in the arts and culture are associated with a variety of social benefits. If you want the arts to have a social impact, however, you must be willing to make the investment.

Thanks.