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"Natural" Cultural Districts and Neighborhood Revitalization

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Abstract
In this presentation, Stern argues for a policy approach that recognizes creativity as deeply embedded in urban social structure and the importance of diversity (economic, ethnic, and household) to the social production of the arts and culture. Only then can we come up with strategies that stimulate a creative society, not just a creative economy.

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Sociology | Urban Studies and Planning

Comments
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“Natural” cultural districts and neighborhood revitalization

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June 2009
Inequality is the defining feature of contemporary society

- Canada and the US have both experienced rapid increases in income inequality
- Many accusations of how creativity accelerates inequality:
  - Creative economy leads to gentrification and displacement
  - Attracting “creative class” leads to urban policy that disadvantages the “less creative”

Source: OECD
Misunderstanding creativity

- Not simply the work of a few geniuses: the truly creative
- Product of *social organization*:

“Works of art are not the products of individual makers, ‘artists’ who possess a rare and special gift. They are, rather, joint products of all the people who cooperate via an art world’s characteristic conventions to bring works like that into existence. Artists are a small subgroup of the world’s participants who, by common agreement, possess a special gift, therefore make a unique and indispensable contribution to the work, and thereby make it art. (Becker 1982).

We need a policy approach that understands how deeply creativity is embedded in urban social structure, especially the importance of *diversity* (*economic, ethnic, household*). Then we can come up with strategies that create a *creative society, not just a creative economy*. 

Major points

- Understand cultural sector as an ecosystem that is central to the “architecture of community”
- Cultural engagement has a strong association with neighborhood development.
- Social networks are the link between cultural engagement and neighborhood economic vitality.
The cultural ecosystem and the architecture of community

The creative sector makes critical contributions to the four dimensions of the “architecture of community”

- Social capital—ties between community members
- Public assets—investments in place-making
- Market relations—generating investment and business activity
- Flows of information, capital, and people between places—bridging divides that isolate distressed neighborhoods

Social Impact of the Arts Project

- Studying cultural sector and its impact on neighborhoods since 1994
- Collect systematic data on cultural assets of metropolitan Philadelphia, including:
  - Nonprofit and informal cultural groups: identified 1,200 nonprofit cultural providers in metropolitan area
  - Commercial cultural firms: ranging from galleries to neighborhood music stores and framing shops
  - Artists: identified over five thousand artists
  - Cultural participants: compiled from 75 regional cultural organizations and over 200,000 individuals
- Created single cultural asset index by combining the four sub-indexes
Public assets: Cultural assets are concentrated in neighborhoods across the region in what we call “natural” cultural districts.
From correlation to causation?

- Past research examined statistical correlation between cultural assets and changes in neighborhood well-being.
- Our time series is long enough now to examine how cultural assets at point A (actually 1997) are associated with later changes in neighborhood.
- Not yet causation (sorry!), but if there is a causal relationship, we know which way it flows.
Social capital: building community capacity

- The arts and culture are one way that neighbors build connections.
- Cultural participants are more likely to be involved in other community activities and to share a positive view of their neighborhood.
- Ultimately these connections become an asset that the community can use to address common challenges.
- “Collective efficacy”—this increased willingness of neighbors to address their problems—has been an effective force in addressing violence, truancy, delinquency, and other social problems.
Higher levels of collective efficacy may account for the strong relationship between a neighborhood’s cultural asset score in 1997 and trends in serious crime between 1998 and 2006.
Translating cultural assets into economic assets: “natural” cultural districts have driven improved housing markets.

According to The Reinvestment Fund’s Market Value Analysis, city neighborhoods with high levels of cultural assets were much more likely to experience significant improvements in their housing markets between 2001 and 2003.
Cultural assets predict improved real estate markets

Neighborhoods with high cultural asset index scores in 1997 saw their residential sale price increase nearly twice as fast between 2001 and 2006, even taking other possible influences into account.
Preserving communities: economic revival without widespread displacement

“Natural” cultural districts were no more likely to undergo ethnic transitions than other parts of the city.
Explaining culture’s impact

- Strengthen local civic engagement and “collective efficacy”
- Creates connection across barriers of geography, social class, and ethnicity

Eighty percent of community cultural participants cross neighborhood boundaries to attend events

The social network of artists and cultural organizations
What we don’t yet know: types of cultural clusters

- Consumer districts: attracting audiences and shoppers
  - Planned cultural districts
  - Neo-Bohemia
- Producer districts: integrating arts and design professionals and support services
- Civic clusters: maximizing civic and cultural engagement
“Natural” cultural districts must be cultivated

Two sets of strategies:

- Every neighborhood can be a cultural cluster: the spillover effects of cultural and other forms of civic engagement justify investment in civic infrastructure

- Neighborhoods with the right set of cultural and other assets can be encouraged through:
  - Improving quality and reliability of city services
  - Providing targeted investment funds for projects that show promise