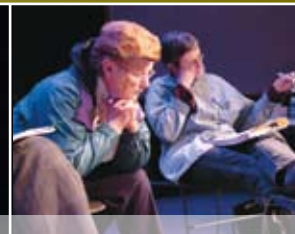




**Animating  
Democracy**

A Program of Americans for the Arts



ARTS & CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TOOL KIT

# Planning & Designing Arts-Based Civic Engagement Projects

# IMAGINE, DEFINE, DESIGN: Planning & Designing Arts-Based Civic Engagement Projects



This tool is designed to help both arts and community organizers and artists think and work through a plan for effective and meaningful arts-based civic engagement or dialogue projects. Referenced within are other tools and items in the workbook that offer further detail. Although this work doesn't always happen in a neat and linear way, arts-based civic engagement projects typically are developed in three phases:

## **1. IMAGINE WHAT IT COULD BE!**

Where are you starting from? What do you need to know? What difference do you think you can make?

## **2. DEFINE WHAT IT WILL BE!**

What have you determined are the artistic component(s) and the civic or social concern at the center of the project? What are the desired outcomes?

## **3. DESIGN FOR SUCCESS!**

How will art and engagement activities be linked or integrated? How will you tap the power of the art to foster engagement or dialogue? What settings will best support dialogue or engagement? How will you attract targeted participants to project activities? Who is best equipped to facilitate engagement or dialogue activities? How will you assess your impact?

# ☼ PHASE I: *IMAGINE* what the project could be!

## WHERE ARE YOU STARTING FROM?

Your impetus may be art or it may be a social concern. As you begin thinking about the possibilities with others in your organization, with artists, or perhaps a project steering committee, use the worksheets in this section to ask yourself:

- What do we know?
- What do we need to learn to move forward?
- What difference do we want to make?
- What might be the opportunities for linking arts and civic engagement?

Answering these questions will help you connect with potential constituents and partners to test ideas, ask good questions, and be open to creative engagement possibilities. To help you IMAGINE the possibilities, the [Spectrum of Arts-Based Engagement](#) diagram may spark some ideas!

### IDENTIFYING ISSUES

Here are some ways to be mindful of ripe opportunities or critical moments for civic engagement.

#### Start with the ART!

- What civic or social issue is inherent in or suggested by artwork you will be presenting?
- What issues are certain artists taking up through their work?

#### Consider the HEADLINES.

- Is there a pressing issue that is commanding people's attention and engagement?
- Is there an issue being deliberated that will result in policy or other decision-making?

#### Confer with COMMUNITY AGENCIES and ACTIVISTS.

- What issues are social service, justice, education, health, environment, or civic agencies in your community focusing on?
- Where might your artistic work align with action-oriented or activist efforts?
- Are there dialogue initiatives or ongoing dialogue groups whose efforts could be enhanced through art?
- Are there youth engagement initiatives that may be enhanced through art?

#### Listen to PEOPLE.

- Is there a nascent issue that people are talking about that would benefit from more focused attention?

- Is there a simmering issue that people are not yet willing or able to talk about or engage in that needs to be surfaced and awareness increased?
- What issues are neighborhood associations or other grassroots groups concerned about?

#### Link with CIVIC PLANNING PROCESSES.

- Is your community embarking on a planning process that will engage residents in visioning the future, articulating values, and identifying issues?
- Are there particular initiatives related to transportation, development, or land reclamation that will require public process?
- Are there plans for memorials, commemorative events, historic preservation, or heritage tourism that will seek public input?
- Is the community undergoing a cultural plan?

# Where are we starting from?

## If ART is the impetus for a project, ask:

## Thoughts/Ideas

What is the art, art/cultural event, program, or occasion that we have to work with?

To what civic or social concern does the creative work or content relate? Is this or a related issue present in our local community?

What opportunities for engagement does the art, art/cultural event, program, or occasion present? (See the tool, [Think PROJECT: Points & Opportunities for Engagement](#))

- **ART EVENT OR PRESENTATION.** For example: A touring art exhibition featuring artists' responses to global warming is an opportunity to partner with a local environmental organization. Public forums could be held in the museum that use the artistic work as a catalyst for dialogue about responsibility and actions the community can take.
- **PLANNING OR RESEARCH ACTIVITIES.** For example: A theater company's research about post-traumatic stress disorder for a new play about one veteran's journey home, might offer local veterans a way to contribute their insights and stories for the play.
- **THE CREATIVE PROCESS.** For example: Involving people in the conceptualizing and painting of a mural to raise awareness and commemorate the community's people of color past and present could provide a spark to systematically look at and redress untold stories related to the community's heritage sites.
- **FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES TO THE ART PRESENTATION.** For example: A city-wide poetry competition in the schools revealed issues of concern for youth in the community. A plan to inform youth of local agencies working on those issues would give avenues for young people to volunteer.

# Where are we starting from?

## If a CIVIC ISSUE / OPPORTUNITY is the impetus for a project, ask:

## Thoughts/Ideas

What is the civic or social issue, concern, or opportunity demanding greater civic engagement?

To what civic or social concern does the creative work or content relate? Is this or a related issue present in our local community?

How might art engage people in this issue? Here are some ideas and examples:

- **MAKE AN INVITATION.** For example: An oral history project could provide a welcoming invitation to elders to more readily engage in redevelopment plans for their neighborhood.
- **CREATE A SPACE.** For example: An artist residency at a social service agency could create a safe environment for new immigrants to express their concerns about immigration issues. The art created could be exhibited and used as a space for public conversation.
- **BE A SPARK!** For example: A community-wide read of the right book, might reinvigorate attention around issues of race that have been simmering below the surface in a community.
- **OFFER AN ALTERNATIVE FORM.** For example: A Photovoice project that gives students cameras to visually convey what they see as the implications of school system budget cuts can offer their perspectives into public forums.

# What do we need to learn to move forward?

| <b>Arts organizers ask:</b>   | <b>What we know</b> | <b>What we need to learn more about</b> | <b>How to learn more</b> |
|---|---------------------|---|--------------------------|
| <p><b>Who do we need to involve?</b> Who has a stake in the issue? Who is affected by it?</p> <p>Who believes they “own” the issue or has the right to represent it because of histories, experience, or long-term commitment to addressing the issue?</p>  |                     |   |                          |
| <p><b>What is the history of engagement around the issue in the community?</b> Who is already engaged? Whose voices are not being included or heard?</p> <p>Whose perspectives need to be represented in planning the project and the engagement activities and/or dialogue? How should they be involved?</p> |                     |   |                          |

# What do we need to learn to move forward?

| Arts organizers ask:  | What we know | What we need to learn more about | How to learn more |
|---|--------------|----------------------------------|-------------------|
| <p><b>What organizations may be important partners in order to be credible and effective?</b> (See the tools, <a href="#">Local Resources for Civic Engagement Projects</a>)</p>  |              |                                  |                   |
| <p><b>As an artist or an organization, what's my/our relationship to the issue?</b></p> <p>What, if any, direct experience or knowledge can I/we draw upon? What do I/we need to learn to be effective and credible?</p> <p>Do I/we have a position on the issue? How might this affect my/our capacity to organize or lead the project toward the desired goals?</p> <p>Is this an issue or concern in which I/we will want to stay engaged?</p> <p>What do responses to these questions suggest in terms of the contribution I/we can make? Am I or are we better positioned as a lead or supporting partner?</p> |              |                                  |                   |

# What do we need to learn to move forward?

| <b>Community organizers ask:</b>  | <b>What we know</b> | <b>What we need to learn more about</b> | <b>How to learn more</b> |
|---|---------------------|---|--------------------------|
| <p><b>What has been our experience with arts and culture that might inform this project?</b> For example: What art or cultural form(s) have desired participants previously responded to? (e.g., music, videomaking, or hip hop with youth; quilting, literature, or theater with elders; photography or traditional dance with a newcomer population)?</p> |                     |   |                          |
| <p><b>What do we want to know more about in order to incorporate the arts in our civic engagement efforts?</b></p>  |                     |   |                          |



# What do we need to learn to move forward?

| Community organizers ask:   | What we know | What we need to learn more about | How to learn more |
|---|--------------|----------------------------------|-------------------|
| <p><b>What specific artists or arts organizations do we know</b> that have relevant experience because their creative work:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• offers an upcoming opportunity?</li> <li>• addresses current issues?</li> <li>• involves community process?</li> <li>• has generated public response?</li> <li>• relates to our intended participants?</li> <li>• has intentionally been used for dialogue or engagement?</li> </ul> <p>What artists or arts organizations can we engage early on to help us explore and develop ideas? (See also <a href="#">Ways to Involve Artists</a>)</p> <p>(If you aren't familiar with artists or arts organizations, who can help identify artists or advise on how to develop arts dimensions to our efforts, see the workbook tool, <a href="#">Local Resources for Civic Engagement Projects</a>.)</p> |              |                                  |                   |

# *What difference* do we want to make?

(See examples of civic or social outcomes on the next page.)

## Arts and community organizers ask:

## Thoughts/Ideas

What would *we* see as meaningful outcomes of the arts-based civic engagement project?

What would *each stakeholder group* see as meaningful outcomes of the project?

## *What difference* do we want to make?

### Arts and community organizers ask:

**Draft what would be reasonable and meaningful *civic or social outcomes*** for this project considering stakeholders' as well as our own perspectives.

### Thoughts/Ideas

#### EXAMPLES OF CIVIC OR SOCIAL OUTCOMES

- Social bonding occurs within a targeted group.
- Social bridging occurs across groups.
- There is more diverse participation in a community planning process or public dialogue.
- People claim rights to public space who have felt unwelcome or unsafe.
- Contributions and value of a group are publicly celebrated and honored.
- Public awareness of an issue is heightened.
- People have a deeper understanding of the complex dimensions of an issue.
- There is greater respect among people who hold different beliefs or values.
- People recognize their own role in and responsibility for community norms and values.
- Civic leaders hear a broader range of citizen perspectives.
- People are moved to get involved.
- People challenge unjust systems.
- A conflict is resolved or averted.
- A solution is found to a community concern or problem.
- An increased number of people vote.
- A policy is enacted or changed.
- Others?

(See [Areas of Impact](#) and [Logic Models](#) for further help articulating outcomes.)

## ☼ PHASE 2: *DEFINE* what the project will be.

**After exploring the questions in the *IMAGINE* stage, you should have enough information to commit to certain basic things:**

- What is/are the art, cultural form, or activities at the core of the project?
- What is the social or civic concern or opportunity around which engagement will be focused?
- What are the desired outcomes?

Use the worksheet below to articulate these basics. This can serve as a basis for writing up your concept to share with others as you move ahead!

# What is the *core project*?

## Arts and community organizers determine:

## Thoughts/Ideas

What is the event, program, art, or cultural experience? Who are the artist(s) involved?

What is the civic/social concern, issue, or opportunity?

Who are the intended participants or publics?

What are the goals and outcomes agreed upon by arts and community partners?

What are compelling questions around this concern or issue that we will explore through the project?

What are the opportunities for civic engagement?

What role(s) will the art, art activities, artist, and/or art experience play?

## ☼ PHASE 3: *DESIGN* the project for success!

With a common grounding, partners and players can move on to design the specific elements of the project, event, or program. This section will help you design experiences that can meet their civic engagement intents through the unique capacity of art.

### **Use the worksheets to answer:**

- How will art and engagement activities be linked or integrated?
- How will you tap the power of the art to foster engagement or dialogue?
- What settings will best support dialogue or engagement?
- How will you attract desired participants or publics to engage in project activities?
- Who is best equipped to facilitate engagement or dialogue activities?

### **STRUCTURING ARTS-BASED ENGAGEMENT EXPERIENCES**

Here are some other factors to consider when designing arts-based civic engagement experiences or projects:

**Number of engagements:** Are you offering a one-time engagement, multiple engagements with the same group, or multiple opportunities for engagement for different groups or publics? Multiple opportunities with the same group allow you to go deeper and to build on previous engagements. To reach a range of publics or audiences, multiple opportunities over a period of time provide many occasions for people to participate. To make the most of one-time engagements such as a dialogue linked to a performance, see [Creating Meaningful Dialogue at Arts Events](#) for pointers.

**Sequence:** Consider how activities can be sequenced and designed to move participants from personal reflection to consideration of ideas and issues in a broader public context. For example to:

- **prompt personal reflection**, “Why do I think the way I do?”, a creative process like story circles can tap personal stories prompted by the art and related to the issue being explored.
- **explore a larger reality**, a full-group dialogue might be focused on the causes and effects related to the issue.
- **encourage people to get involved, take action**, information about local organizations working on the issue may be shared or visits made to these organizations.

**Length:** Consider the minimum or maximum length of a session or activity to foster meaningful engagement or dialogue.

**Size:** Consider how the size of the group will affect the quality of engagement. Small groups encourage participation and often enable a deeper engagement. Engaging with or as a larger group helps people experience a wider range of people, hear more perspectives in a dialogue, and can foster a sense of being part of a community. Some combination of small and large group engagement or dialogue, even within one event, can be very effective.

# How will *art* and *engagement* be linked or integrated?

## Thoughts/Ideas

**Art and engagement may be an *integrated* experience.** For example, people are engaged:

- **In making art:** By painting a mural featuring the community's historic Latino figures, led by a local Latino artist, members of that community come together, learn about their history, and publicly reclaim their cultural heritage.
- **Through the selection or development of art works:** Community members have a role in selecting artists and themes for public art projects that are part of a waterfront clean-up effort. The public art process is empowering, builds ownership of the artwork and the waterfront, and builds a volunteer corps for ongoing maintenance.
- **Within the actual art or humanities presentation or experience:** ESL students participate in the history museum's living history programs. Through interaction with living history players, they practice English and compare past immigration experiences with their own and learn about community resources.

# How will *art* and *engagement* be linked or integrated?

## Thoughts/Ideas

**Engagement activities may be linked to the art experience.** For example, people are engaged:

- **In dialogue through viewing art:** Gallery tours for the “Artists on Environment” exhibit are designed to be interactive and focused on environmental issues through docents’ use of a series of generative questions.

- **Through pre- and postperformance interaction:** In the lobby, audience members take a short survey about perceptions of immigration issues prior to a concert of music by immigrant composers. Responses are compiled during the performance and used to prompt a post-concert discussion facilitated by the symphony’s dialogue partner.

(See artist Laurie Brooks’ [“The After-Play Interactive Forum: A New Model for Talkbacks”](#) for creative strategies to creatively extend theater postperformance discussions into more meaningful audience dialogue.)

- **To become more informed through associated activities:** In conjunction with a student production of the play, *Dead Man Walking*, a university mounts a public symposium that brings together community and church leaders, justice workers, and community activists. In a facilitated dialogue, the public explores the death penalty in the context of upcoming state legislation.



# How will *art* and *engagement* be linked or integrated?

## Thoughts/Ideas

**Art may be linked to the engagement experience.** For example, people may be engaged in:

- **A creative process in an ongoing dialogue group:** Members of a veterans support group tell their stories of coming home in story circles led by our theater company. When the stories become part of our play, veterans feel recognized and validated as their hopes and fears are shared publicly.
- **Art that enhances public planning processes:** Community members and artists pair up to create works of art that reflect common ground or differences around development issues. These are then presented in public planning discussions to launch a values clarification process.
- **Art that helps to mobilize action:** Hip hop artists produce a show with our anti-violence coalition in order to get young people to focus on the issue and identify ways they can collectively help stop the violence.

# *How will we tap the power of the art* to foster engagement or dialogue?

## Thoughts/Ideas

Many elements of artistic work have a unique capacity to engage people in thinking and talking about civic or social concerns or simply with each other to build trust or find common ground. Consider how artistic elements in the creative work such as the following can foster engagement:

- **STORY** within the art can bring forward the human implications of issues, connect lived experience to issues, foster empathy, and build trust and bonds.
- **METAPHOR** can create fresh associations and expand the form and vocabulary of the dialogue.
- **HUMOR** in the art can break down barriers and establish common ground.
- **ABSTRACTION** can open space for multiple interpretations and perspectives.
- **PROVOCATION** can help challenge assumptions, unlock stuck conversations, reveal emotions underlying difficult issues.
- **AMBIGUITY** in the art can underscore the complexity of the issue and gives permission not to jump to answers.
- **EMOTION** evoked by the art can validate emotional dimensions of issues to be explored.
- **JUXTAPOSITION** within art forces new or unlikely relationships or connections that can open up thinking and dialogue.
- **HISTORY** embedded in art, objects, historic sites, anniversaries, etc. can offer touchstones for understanding and engaging in contemporary concerns.

# What settings will best support dialogue or engagement?

|  | Setting/location (fill in)<br>_____ | Setting/location (fill in)<br>_____ | Setting/location (fill in)<br>_____ |
|--|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Is the setting familiar and welcoming to desired participants?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are desired participants used to going there?</li> <li>• Do participants have equal access (geography, cost)?</li> <li>• Do participants perceive the setting to be neutral ground that welcomes all perspectives. Is it free of power associations that might discourage participation?</li> <li>• Do participants view the setting as safe?</li> <li>• Will participants have access to child care?</li> </ul> |                                     |                                     |                                     |
| <p><b>Is the space physically conducive to support interaction, dialogue, engagement?</b> For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• comfortable</li> <li>• hospitable; food can be served</li> <li>• space for creative activity</li> <li>• movable chairs for dialogue in circles</li> <li>• free of distractions</li> <li>• can be open at times when desired participants can attend (e.g., nights, weekends)</li> </ul>  |                                     |                                     |                                     |

# *How will we attract* desired participants or publics to engage in project activities?

| <b>Consider:</b>  | Participant group (fill in) | Participant group (fill in) | Participant group (fill in) |
|---|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| What are motivations and obstacles to participation?  |                             |                             |                             |
| How can we “name and frame” the civic concern or opportunity so that it will interest and be relevant?        |                             |                             |                             |
| What needs to be communicated about the intent and format of the activity to help people know what to expect? |                             |                             |                             |
| What recruitment approaches might help ensure participation?  |                             |                             |                             |

## *Who* is best suited to *facilitate the engagement or dialogue* activities?

What roles will artists, arts organization representatives, community partners, dialogue facilitators, or trained “nonexperts” play in facilitating the engagement activities?

### Consider:

### Thoughts/Ideas

- Skill, experience
  
- Experience with or knowledge of the issue
  
- Ability to tap the power of the art
  
- Trust and respect of the participants
  
- Perceived as and able to be neutral or multipartial in facilitating

For more on dialogue facilitation, see the [Basics of Arts-Based Civic Dialogue](#) section.

# How will we *assess our impact?*

**Based on the goals you set, what methods can you employ to observe and document the community/civic effects of your arts-based civic engagement project?**

## Thoughts/Ideas

- Change in participation (e.g., numbers, new voices, less likely participants engaged)
- Change in public awareness or understanding of a civic issue
- Changed relationships between people in a community
- Shifts in thinking and attitudes about an issue
- Movement toward action or change on the issue or policy
- Change among participants in a sense of self-efficacy or collective efficacy to take action
- Change in quality of or capacity for civic dialogue
- Change in the way civic leaders engaged with citizens and stakeholders
- Change in media coverage or representation of the issue

## Common Factors in Effective Arts-Based Civic Engagement

*Here are some of the most common factors that characterize successful arts and civic engagement activities. Keep them in mind as you **IMAGINE, DEFINE, and DESIGN!***

- **Understand context**—Understand the context for the social or civic concern, current other engagement efforts, who has taken leadership, etc. to ensure the integrity of goals, relationships, and the credibility of the project.
- **Tap the power of creativity**—Fully tap the unique qualities of the art, artistic process, and creativity for ways to encourage meaningful engagement. The quality of engagement often goes deeper faster when people are involved in making art together.
- **Facilitating with skill**—In dialogue experiences, those that are most substantive and transformative have deft guides who are able to create a sense of trust, respect, safety, and make perceptive connections between the art and the issue.
- **Providing a range of opportunities**—Think PROJECT! Look for multiple and varied opportunities for engagement in the trajectory of planning and implementing a whole project as well as what might happen after its conclusion. Frequent and varied sustained opportunities for engagement allow different stakeholders and publics to more readily participate, involve people in various ways to accommodate differences, and can provide important sustained attention to a social concern for greater impact.