

# Stone Soup

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## Artists as Assets for Community Building

by John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight

Every community has people who “produce” culture, who paint, write, sing, tell stories, and make jewelry and pottery and quilts. Some are “professionals,” but many more pursue their artistic activities as pure amateurs. As individual craftspeople, these residents represent invaluable contributors to community building. When these creative energies come together in local organizations, they belong squarely at the center of the community-development process.

Too often, though, traditional community builders — those who produce housing or develop small businesses or improve physical infrastructure — ignore what artists, musicians, craftspeople and poets have to offer. Sometimes this is because artists are looked upon as members of a professional elite whose services can only be brought into a community by well-intentioned sponsors. Though doing this may beautify or enhance a community, this approach ignores the possibility of a genuine artistic renaissance possible when the talents already existing within the community itself are fully harnessed.

What artists have to offer community builders is a greatly increased sense of social cohesion. Their voices and works can shatter the poisonous myths that still exist of inner-city voicelessness and apathy. They can help revive a community’s strength and vision, healing its sick, fragmented and internally divided neighborhoods by reconnecting them with their genuine roots and uncompromised futures.

The assets that artists bring to community building include:

- keeping alive community traditions and changing them in response to the community’s needs;
- weaving the various cultures of a community together, creating new patterns that can keep the community fabric intact;
- transferring skills, developed formally or informally, to others, giving them new outlets for self-expression and community expression;
- creating products that have commercial as well as aesthetic value, resulting in cottage industries that produce revenue for the community;
- opening access to facilities like theaters, auditoriums or rehearsal spaces that can be used for special events and informal and formal activities;

- making materials and equipment (especially from cultural organizations) accessible, like paints and brushes, costumes, instruments and sheet music; and
- contributing their skills and vision by reading, performing, directing, and teaching, often with an enthusiasm not to be found elsewhere in the community.

Local artists and cultural groups are eager to transfer what they know and love. They are eager to tell stories about a community’s history to younger people, to add music and poetry and dance to local meetings, to transform an ugly space into a beautiful one. They are the people who can contribute spirit and vision to a community-building project.

Neighborhood leaders can most effectively utilize the assets of artists and cultural institutions by creating partnerships among them and with nonprofit organizations, the private sector and the public sector. Artists can be found in citizens’ associations, through religious institutions and cultural organizations, through parks departments, in libraries, and at community colleges and in other schools.

Their work can be put to use benefitting young people, people with disabilities, welfare recipients, seniors, others with special interests, and the community at large. Their murals can replace graffiti-strewn walls with symbols of pride; their songs can proclaim a neighborhood’s determination to rid itself of drug dealers; their skills at weaving or quilting can transform the dull walls of meeting rooms and inspire action; and their performances can delight and educate audiences who might never otherwise have the chance to experience the magic of live theater and learn its lessons.

As NeighborWorks® organizations and others seek to transform their communities, they should look to artists and cultural institutions as worthy partners in this effort. Touching the hearts and minds of neighborhood residents is how real change happens in a society. While we’re doing the work, we might as well sing. ■

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*John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight are the authors of Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets, published by the Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, and distributed by ACTA Publications (1-800-397-2282).*