

**Arts and Culture & Economics:  
Partners in Revitalizing Rural America**

AAD 510 Community Cultural Development | Reflection Paper

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There exists an unlikely partnership, frowned upon by more traditional generations who said that “it will never work out.” Their pairing was a bit untraditional, some might say, and not everyone agreed it was the best idea. It turns out that sometimes the best results stem from unlikely couples and sometimes the best can be brought out by someone or something you may have never expected. Something similar can be said about the effectiveness of arts and culture as a catalyst for economic development in rural America. A pairing that doesn’t seem quite right at first thought actually has the potential for astounding results. Arts and culture cannot be overlooked as an important player in revitalizing rural economies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

A healthy community is dependent on the balance of all of its parts. The economic, social, physical and civic dimensions of community building are all inseparable and the weakness of one part may affect any of the others (Borup, 2011). Rural communities are no different than much more complex inner-city neighborhoods that may have many more moving parts and pieces, and in some ways, rural areas are economically lagging behind in a very similar way to older urban communities. They are still a fragile ecosystem that must be carefully cultivated in order to thrive, maybe even more so because they are often isolated, situated in hostile environments sometimes many miles from metropolis centers and valuable resources.

Every state in our nation has areas with rural characteristics. Rural America contains 75% of the nation’s land and is home to 17% of the U.S. population, which equates to 49 million people (Bayard, 2005). It is a huge segment of our land mass and a considerable portion of our population but unfortunately, it is an area that is often not on the forefront of development. When we think about progress and development it is rarely the rural that comes to mind, especially in an economic sense.

Rural America has many unique characteristics that make it very appealing for cultural economic development efforts. It may be difficult to believe that rural places might make fertile ground for vibrant arts and culture communities, an urbanized idea, but the complex aesthetics of rural places and people make excellent fodder for artists and creative thinkers. Rural America is a vast and complex landscape that provides inspiration for many artists working in rural spaces or who may have an interest in rural culture and its uniqueness (Frink, 2014). The “country” sits at the crossing of many contradicting complexities that are constantly pressing up and pushing against each other to create a very interesting cultural dynamic: the familiar and the strange, traditional and contemporary, material and immaterial, and permanent vs. transient. Organizations like the M12 Collective are contributing heavily to what is now a rapid art movement engaging the rural and agriculture as a “challenging new site for contemporary art practice and curatorship.” (Handwerker, Saxton, 2014)

Saxton tells us that “the innovation and originality associated with an avant-garde isn’t all that different from the pioneer spirit and rugged individualism” that we connect with rural people and places (Handwerker, Saxton, 2014). Rural people are sometimes forced to be innovative and creative due to lack of convenience of resources and services, and this do-it-yourself attitude

aligns very well with that of the creative individual and creative community. Arts ventures are highly entrepreneurial, which makes sense for a region founded on ideas of the “pioneer spirit.” And artists are generally readily available in many rural communities but must only be recognized and encouraged. According to Rosenfeld (2004), artists are just as prevalent in rural communities as they are in cities, just harder to find. The American heartland is a cradle for the handmade and for the artisan. In a way, rural communities may be more inheritantly creative than their urban counterparts. The intriguing complexity and deep cultural roots of rural areas are contributing to these places being recognized as fertile new grounds for art and culture to thrive. This is supplemented by an extremely deep connection to place and generational community which encourages a strong social fabric for these new cultural seeds to flourish (Fluharty, 2014).

Rural areas are often characterized by a deep connection to place and community. The social atmosphere of these areas usually connects the lives and experiences of many people within the community as well as the place in which they inhabit. These populations often greatly depend on communal activities to accomplish tasks and to generate a shared cultural identity. There is often distance between neighbors and cultural activities can bring people together who would otherwise not experience much interaction (Saxton, 2014). The isolation and small size of these close-knit communities often creates connections that are richer and deeper, providing great potential for collective action as well as cultural activity. Sometimes small can be an advantage when you know everyone in your community and you know how to work together (Vogel, 2013). Hard work and togetherness are the bedrock of rural communities. When a community has or seeks an identity together or can organize around a common interest, there are endless possibilities for development (Borup, 2011). Progress may not be so hard to reach with the creativity and ingenuity of a few deeply connected and passionate minds.

On one hand, rural communities are cherished for their deep heritage that is vital to national identity, but on the other, they are deemed as areas that one may only be interested in flying over or passing through, without little reason to stop, let alone stay (Saxton, 2014). Many rural areas across the nation are facing tough realities, especially deepening economic challenges, keeping them from becoming the flourishing cultural centers that they have the capacity to become. These regions may face many economic development challenges including geographic isolation, deficiencies in infrastructure, poor connections to broader markets and the continued flight of skilled human resources. Rural communities are older, smaller areas with limited resources and much slower growth than urban neighbors. Some are not only growing slowly but may even be losing population, such as the many small communities in central Montana that have been forced to combine once thriving extra-curricular programs in public schools in order to keep them available.

These communities are struggling to hold on to traditional economic sources in an increasingly globalized and knowledge-based economy. They experience not only a constant struggle with the elements to support agricultural industries but a struggle to maintain their population and social community (Art of the Rural, 2014). We have the opportunity to cultivate

arts and culture in these communities as a way of jumpstarting rural economies in a way that is sustainable in an age dominated by urbanization and globalization.

Economic changes and shifts in recent decades have dramatically affected how rural economies are situated within this larger scheme. Rural America has been pushed by powerful forces, the world market, to go forth in discovering its place within the 21<sup>st</sup> century, required to explore a new frontier of its own and to stake its own unique claim within this uncharted territory. Increased productivity and consolidation in traditionally rural industries, such as agriculture and manufacturing, are pulling these industries from the grips of rural regions that have relied on them for decades, requiring fewer and fewer people to be involved and greatly reducing the number of jobs in these industries (Drabenstott, 2004). This stripping of industry and increased globalization has resulted in a highly uneven rural economy. Too many rural regions are struggling to create jobs and therefore attract innovation and new populations to their communities. They are becoming stagnant without a powerful engine to drive their economies and to generate growth and sustainable vitality. Most importantly, these they are searching out viable options to revitalize their economies, which would then in turn help to revitalize all of the elements of their community ecosystems.

The potential in these areas for economic and cultural renewal is very high and this regeneration can lead to new revenue, new industries and new growth. Many elements already exist that make rural communities prime candidates for culturally based economic development, including existing cultural heritage, deep sense of community, growing interest in rural arts and a strong sense of need. The problems of rural communities are sometimes characterized similarly to those of older urban areas that have experienced positive change through cultural or arts-based development. These include “aging infrastructure, declining population and a loss of economic activity,” as outlined by Madeleine Bayard in an Issue Brief from the NGA Center for Best Practices (Bayard, 2005). The fact that revitalization has occurred in urban areas with similar problems to rural areas provides hope that similar strategies might be used outside of the city to achieve the same results.

These deficits characterize the beginnings of a “sweet spot” where arts and economic development collide; the grounds where cultural development can serve as a catalyst for economic growth (Vogel, 2013). Recent research and many successful case studies illustrate that arts and culture can and does play a major role in community economic development. This seems unusual, especially in the case of rural communities not traditionally associated with high cultural activity, but the United States arts and culture sector is a significant industry and according to Tom Borrup (2011), “a far more influential portion of most communities’ workforce than previously understood.” The arts play a significant role in the broader scope of the national economy, so it is viable to project that this can be carried over into rural economies as well that are being increasingly pushed away from their traditional industries into economic territory that is conquered by the innovative creative entrepreneur.

The cultivation of an arts based economy to supplement more traditional industries can provide many positives for bold rural communities that are willing to take on the challenge. The cultural developments can stimulate economic growth and create jobs, which provide a sustainable generator for a rural economy based in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The establishment of a creative industry will then attract other people who will create jobs, as these are individuals who want to live in places with diverse and vibrant culture and an innovative and educated workforce (Bayard, 2005). The future for many rural communities lies in their ability to encourage entrepreneurship, particularly of individuals who can start businesses that can create more jobs. Fortunately, rural areas can have a much easier time starting small business than in urban areas. The struggle lies in maintaining them or allowing them to grow (Drabenstott, 2004). The new global economy is based on skilled, knowledge-based activity and talented, creative workers and entrepreneurs are at the core of this economy. They are the fuel for the economic generators of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, even in rural America, which must adapt or fall behind.

The arts have proven to be a powerful economic engine within this economy, and even in Montana, a state that just reached 1 million people, more individuals are employed in the arts than in more traditional industries such as mining, wood products manufacturing or the building materials retail market. The number of full-time artists grew three times faster than the overall labor market of the state in the last three decades. Montana Governor Brian Schweitzer has even financially supported arts economic development programs and has made creative enterprise a goal of his administration (Bayard, 2005). This is immensely positive improvement for a state that has one of the lowest populations per capita in the country and which has never been on the radar for an arts economy.

An arts based economy also improves the quality of life in rural communities that may have previously been stagnant, sluggish or in some cases, even degenerative. The arts can generate benefits that attract other types of businesses, entrepreneurs and a greater wealth of people with a greater wealth of interests and ideas; in essence, a more diverse, tolerant and beautiful community. Businesses and people often select their location based on what it has to offer, and not just the capability to make a living. Quality of life is vital to attracting knowledge workers in the new economy as this is a part of where they choose to live that is high on their priority list, and those places that don't provide a high quality of living won't compete in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Richard Florida, in *The Flight of the Creative Class*, discusses quality of life as a vital economic factor in attracting knowledge workers, even just as important as traditional factors such as job opportunities. In a survey of job appeal for technology workers, quality of life ranked second just below salary (Bayard, 2005). These individuals are more mobile than any generation prior and are willing to relocate for a greater variety of factors than ever before, which may or may not be directly related to economic opportunity. It is vital to create jobs but there are many other elements that must be considered in order to draw in today's knowledge workers.

Many of today's workers were born into the knowledge-based economy which means that attracting these workers is highly important and retaining their presence is just as integral to

economic vitality (Bayard, 2005). So many rural communities lack the presence of young, innovative and creative minds and they equally lack the community culture to keep them there. Communities in central Montana focus energies on outlets for elementary and high school students and leave little for young adults to stay for once they graduate from the public schools. Students flock to more urbanized areas with greater opportunity, abandoning their local communities not necessarily out of want but because there is little reason for them to stay. One of the greatest issues for these communities today is the constant departure of their youth. They are left with an aging population and little incoming innovation or major change. Rural areas must make it a priority to develop vibrant communities in which the arts can thrive and where young people will want to make their homes.

Besides creating jobs and cultivating quality of life, an arts based economy can affect rural communities in other positive ways. It can enhance state efforts in many arenas, including diversification of rural economies, generating revenue, and attracting visitors and investment. It can stimulate employment and tax revenues, and most importantly, economies founded in arts and culture can bring together people and efforts in creative ways to reinvigorate communities and help them overcome their surmounting challenges (Borrupt, 2011). Unlike many other sectors, the arts and culture sector is unique in how it can encourage relationships and build community among people of different backgrounds, industries and interests. This helps to create a powerful force to create change and encourage development. Places that might have otherwise been deemed as “waste lands” can be transformed into the vibrant cultural hubs of our rural regions. The objective is to move away from stagnation; to develop rural economies that are as responsive and vibrant as the ever-changing landscape in which they are situated. The process in developing these cultural economies is just as diverse and unpredictable, and it requires a wide range of approaches.

Many of the arts and culture strategies for economic growth are not specific to any one type of community but most of them are flexible enough to be easily fitted to a rural situation. Momentum is vital. It is important to develop clusters of arts activity, artists or networks of local businesses that serve the community but also attract people from the outside in order to generate a diversified and sustainable creative economy (Borrupt, 2011). The foundation of this development rests in the cultivation of local assets, local artists, stories and traditions. Especially in cases of cultural tourism, a connection to the place, people and culture as well as a sense of integrity and authenticity is vital to sustainability. This also allows for deeper connection with the local people and greater community stewardship. There are many other important aspects that must be considered as well, including tolerance and support, careful language, cultivating a communal vision, and creating a momentum of energy within the community. In order to create a thriving arts community, the majority of locals need to be supportive of the efforts and invested in the idea in some manner (Vogel, 2013). An environment must be cultivated that supports the arts, creation of startups and continued growth.

Borrups' (2011) strategies for cultural economic development also center around nurturing entrepreneurs, creative workers and small businesses, encouraging creative clusters, and building off of local assets and characteristics. He also focuses heavily on the revitalization of downtrodden buildings and spaces, which are often prevalent in rural regions, sometimes too many to count. Reclaiming old or degraded spaces not only serves to beautify an area but it caters to artistic aesthetics as well as creates usable spaces in a very economical way. Old or historical buildings often appeal to artists and designers who are intrigued by the interesting architectural or design elements that may be present (Vogel, 2013). These types of buildings can offer very unique spaces that, with a little work, can provide an interesting aesthetic that define a strong identity for the organization or artist that works there. These spaces can also be very inexpensive and their revitalization can even serve as work opportunities for artists as well as possible live/work spaces.

The current aesthetics of rural America and increasing interest in the culture of these locations coupled with a need for economic revitalization in the new age of globalization provides a fertile foundation for cultural economic development strategies. The unusual synthesis of art and economic revitalization is proving to be an important step to sustaining the vibrancy of rural communities into the future.

## Resources

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