Undivided: New Paradigm Community Development

by Arlene Goldbard

If you listen to NPR or read book reviews, you’ve probably heard about Michael Pollan’s new book, *In Defense of Food*. Here’s a paragraph from the introduction:

As eaters we find ourselves increasingly in the grip of a Nutritional Industrial Complex—comprised of well-meaning, if error-prone, scientists and food marketers only too eager to exploit every shift in the nutritional consensus. Together, and with some crucial help from the government, they have constructed an ideology of nutritionism that, among other things, has convinced us of three pernicious myths: that what matters most is not the food but the “nutrient”; that because nutrients are invisible and incomprehensible to everyone but scientists, we need expert help in deciding what to eat; and that the purpose of eating is to promote a narrow concept of physical health. Because food in this view is foremost a matter of biology, it follows that we must try to eat “scientifically”—by the nutrient and the number and under the guidance of experts.

What does this have to do with “Arts, Neighborhoods and Social Practice”? Everything.

There’s a lot to worry about in this world, enough to fuel permanent panic. But I’m glad to be living at a time when some tired orthodoxies seem finally to be loosening their grip. In the spirit of modernism, or scientism, or nutritionism, we’ve been replacing the deep wisdom of our bodies and communities, amassed through eons of lived experience and cultural transmission, with a fractured view of reality. We’ve tried to divide the inseparable, interconnected aspects of human existence into component parts, like so many chemicals.

Michael Pollan learned some important lessons along these lines about food. We eat for reasons other than health, including pleasure, fellowship and appreciation. We can’t replace real food, embodying complex relationships among land, water, climate, human beings and other life-forms, with factory-engineered substitutes, unless we’re prepared to live with debilitating consequences—the “diseases of civilization.” Pollan asserts that humans already know how to eat for sustenance and pleasure; we have only to ignore those who are trying to convince us otherwise so as to enrich themselves at our expense.

In every realm of knowledge, in many different contexts, the same messages are emerging. In some fields, we see experts taking timid first steps beyond their orthodoxies, as in medicine, when doctors begin to speak again of treating “the whole person”; in psychology, where the power of stories to heal trauma is once again being recognized; in
sports, where athletes now commonly recognize the power of imagination, rehearsing in imagination the feats they will perform on the playing field; or in business, where old specializations are falling away: the people who start things like Google couldn’t have been trained to master what didn’t even exist when they were in school.

When we look at community development, we see similar openings and similar timidty. Experts are starting to think it’d be a good idea to understand culture as they try to revitalize neighborhoods, that this might add value to conventional means of planning and organizing. But the truth is much more startling, if only we can get past orthodox thinking: there can be no lasting, meaningful, deep community development unless culture is integrated with in every element. Culture shouldn’t be an afterthought or add-on, but the core and substance of community revitalization.

This is the chief insight of the field we’re discussing today: “community cultural development,” sometimes known by such other terms as “community arts,” “community-based arts,” or “socio-cultural community animation.”

Community cultural development can be compared to economic development: economic development aims to stimulate the flow of capital and goods within a community and between it and other sources of prosperity; community cultural development aims to stimulate the flow of cultural information and resources. Just as communities may lack adequate economic infrastructure, they may also lack cultural infrastructure: the spaces, networks, customs, institutions and opportunities that enable us to encounter each other in a context of pluralism, participation and equity, to learn from each other and to work and play together. Economic development may include initiatives like job training and job creation schemes, community loan and investment programs, tax and regulatory incentives to bring prosperity to a community.

In community cultural development, artists and organizers use their skills to help people express and develop their culture. Countless combinations and approaches are employed, using visual arts, architectural and landscape design, performing arts, storytelling, writing, video, film, audio and computer-based multimedia. “Community” can be defined by proximity (like a neighborhood or small town), interest (like shipyard workers or victims of environmental racism) or any other affinity (like Latino teenagers or the denizens of a senior center).

What these diverse initiatives have in common is their purpose. Community cultural development is predicated on the understanding that expression and communication through the arts powerfully encode cultural values, bringing out deeper meanings of experience so they can be explored and acted upon. Community cultural development embodies a critical relationship to culture, helping people become aware of their own power as culture makers, employing that power to build collective capacity, addressing issues of deep concern to themselves and their communities.

Today, because Karen Chapple asked me to focus on neighborhoods, I want to offer a few examples that address geographic communities rather than the other types. But
whichever sense of community is meant, in this practice, it is understood as a verb, always in the process of becoming, a project—like democracy—that is never complete.

Let me describe the Mendocino People’s Portrait, a set of interrelated projects that took place in Mendocino County, a couple of hours north of here, traditionally a timber and agricultural region.

“Mendocino in Black & White” was a community photographic self-portrait linking all parts of a county divided by mountains into a coastal strip, where tourism is big, and several hot inland valleys where wine grapes and marijuana have largely replaced timber and pears as cash crops. Point-and-shoot cameras loaded with 36-exposure rolls of black and white film were lent to residents for a week at a time. Each photographer collected images portraying local life, and through a highly participatory collective editorial process, their 5,000 images were culled into an exhibit that was mounted in community centers and libraries. The project brought people from ages 4 to 94 into an empowering process of self-representation remarkably different from being captured by outsiders. It came at a time when the county was facing the imminent departure of corporate timber, accompanied by a barrage of corporate blackmail as operators tried to take every last tree before moving on.

At the same time, the Ukiah Players Theatre, based in Mendocino’s county seat for over 30 years now, collected an incredibly diverse array of stories, then crafted a play, UpRooted!, exploring local people’s relationship with the forest. Performed and discussed throughout the county, the play underpinned a public planning process anchored by a Forest Advisory Commission appointed by the Board of Supervisors. Every year since, UPT has mounted a program called “Telling the Truth in a Small Town.” Any community member can participate in a series of workshops designed to help them craft a dramatic presentation of a story that needs telling. Some are highly personal and self-revealing, and some relate the community’s own history. For example, in 2000, a local Native American man told the story of “Bloody Island,” a massacre of Pomo people by soldiers 150 years ago. The teller’s great-grandmother described how she’d escaped by hiding underwater, breathing through a hollow reed; her spirit visited him, pleading that the story must be told for forgiveness and healing to begin. In a story about the project on the Community Arts Network Web site, one participant noted,

I’m a white woman married to a native man and know that the community needs to hear these stories because we need to understand why we don’t get along. Native and white live next door to each other and don’t even know these things—why we are still fighting. How can we deal with it if we refuse to know?

More recently, UPT’s PlaceMeant Project focused on the meanings particular places hold for community members. UPT offered writing and digital-storytelling workshops, helping participants tell vivid and compelling stories about a local place with special meaning for them. Together they produced a community presentation juxtaposing live performance with digital stories projected on two screens. The production coincided with an important event in the life of the community: an unprecedented development proposal
was being debated in city and county boardrooms, calling for a 700-unit housing
development and a super-sized “big box” retail park. The production was cited repeatedly
in community meetings for helping “focus public conversations on our collective
responsibility to not only protest unwise development, but, more importantly, to work
together as a community to imagine and manifest the kind of growth that allows for the
development of housing, industry and jobs, while preserving the agricultural nature and
beauty of the region.”

These are examples of cultural work integral to community development, where the
whole person and the whole community are engaged, with all our wounds, hopes, and
inherited wisdom. In contrast, the old orthodoxy often treats community as a fixed object:
people talk about “plugging into the community,” for instance, as if it were a wall-socket.
What is supposed to help often instead becomes what Erving Goffman called “cooling
out the mark”: the hollow shell of participation, designed—sometimes unconsciously—to
blunt people’s anger at being excluded from social power. There’s been a lot of bad
community development work, where everyone is invited to talk about what’s wrong on
the local scene and what should be done about it. Small groups with flip charts and magic
markers are deployed in nifty charrette processes, where a mayor or developer stands up
and promises to listen to every word; but when the meeting ends, people resume their
places in the pecking-order, just a little more cynical than before. Good community
cultural development work is grounded in the understanding that you have to go much
deeper if the work is going to matter.

Meaningful, democratic community cultural development always responds to social
conditions, embodying a social critique. In post-World War II Europe, a highly stratified
social order began to fray as veterans and others who had sacrificed for their countries
came to expect full citizenship as their entitlement and reward. A hugely misguided
rebuilding strategy—I once heard someone say that the typical postwar housing project in
a European city seemed to be cobbled together from leftover Mussolini-era
blueprints—the rapid rise of electronic media, the decline of traditional livelihoods—all
these things were perceived as encouraging an alarming passivity and alienation. In post-
colonial Africa, the issues were different: reclaiming and renewing cultural heritage,
taking on the enormous challenge of creating indigenous cultural industries, educational
institutions and social and economic opportunities in states that had been plundered by
colonial powers.

Bring it down to the local community level, and the critique becomes more specific.
We seldom think of prosperous neighborhoods as needing development, even though
their cultural infrastructure is often weak, with little interaction among neighbors. But
because residents have the freedom that comes with money, we don’t feel the same
concern: they have willing audiences for their worries and aspirations, and bulldozers
rarely threaten their homes or amenities. So we tacitly understand that community
“revitalization” is for poor people, for stressed neighborhoods. What is seldom said is
that such neighborhoods need it because many of the organic means that prosperous
people can use to create and nourish their sense of citizenship and creativity have been
removed from low-income neighborhoods.
I live nearby in Richmond, which holds the sad distinction of having the highest homicide rate in Northern California. What was once a thriving downtown is now a ruined arcade of boarded-up facades and empty windows. Richmond’s cultural vitality was drained by a public-private collaboration. When the boom created by importing workers to build World War II Liberty Ships slid into economic bust, no one did much to create jobs for the workers, many of them African Americans who’d migrated from the South. Retail establishments turned their backs and fled. Public programs offered training for non-existent jobs or other initiatives that petered out with each shift in the political winds. The epidemic of crack cocaine coincided with an influx of refugees from Southeast Asia and Central America. Local government is clogged with cronyism, and since Richmond is typically written off as a lost cause, few people pay attention to what it does and doesn’t do.

Great challenges abound for anyone who wants to help transform mere proximity into real community. One is mobility, both voluntary and forced. Over the last few decades, I’ve worked in parts of the rural south where over 80% of residents still live in the same county where they were born. When we talk about the meaning of place, there isn’t much ambiguity there: the landscape of the heart, the primary landscape that imprints us, is still the landscape of everyday living. But displacement is the much more common story, especially in cities. Half of Richmond’s people were born outside California, a third outside the U.S. Over 40 percent speak a language other than English at home. Even for the Richmond born-and-bred, there is the common story of “urban removal,” where their neighborhoods’ distinctive rhythms, familiar settings and relationships come to be seen as expendable and were bulldozed for freeways or parking lots, or simply emptied and abandoned.

Increasingly, people define community in many ways. Personally, I’m part of my neighborhood, and I also belong to a highly decentralized global network of people who focus on community cultural development. I’m active in the East Bay Jewish renewal community, and belong to a network of women artists and to a virtual community of writers. Some of these feel more real and immediate to me than the place where I live, and I’m not unique in this respect.

For many people, virtual community is more satisfying than the face-to-face kind: safer, more reliable, even more authentic. I’ve done several projects where teenagers talk online about social issues. Interviewing some of the most enthusiastic participants, I found they typically felt more accepted and free on the Internet. “I live online,” one gay kid from Nebraska told me. “I’d get killed at school if I showed myself the way I do here.”

What about you? Is your neighborhood your own primary identification? How do you feel when someone knocks on your door to recruit you for some neighborhood project? How many dedicated community development theorists and practitioners end their pressured, highly interactive, hard-working days by letting all their calls go to voice mail and zoning out with a book or video? It’s human to want a break.
We’re talking about a dialectic: all of us want some type of connection, closeness, being known and truly seen; but there is also truth in one of Marx’s favorite aphorisms, *Stadtsluft macht frei*. City air frees us, anonymity allows us to escape a too-narrow identity or too-watchful neighbors. Everyone wants to calibrate the perfect balance of being known and being free, and that balance is different for each person. These challenges, too, must be faced head-on if neighborhood-based community development is to be meaningful and lasting.

The community cultural development paradigm is based on facing all truths, even the hard ones. We can’t engage people deeply without paying attention to the things they voluntarily choose to do with their time: many kids make music or poetry or dance; many seniors tell stories about the past, sifting through and making sense of their experience; many mothers seek ways to save their children from the streets, looking to friends and churches for support; many young adults hang out in coffee shops, communicating online, alone together. There isn’t any way for people to fully share and act collectively on the complicated feelings they have about community, on their mingled hopes and fears, without using such cultural forms as storytelling, drama or music. Reports and plans, hearings and meetings will attract and hold only those who enjoy these activities—or who have a mad passion to get something done despite them. Indeed, after decades of observation, I feel certain that any approach to community development that fails to recognize and incorporate the power of culture is a total waste of time, like writing on sand.

If I had the power to bring the community development field into full realization of this integral wisdom, I would offer a yardstick for valid interventions:

- They engage the whole person, the whole community and the whole story, people’s feelings about the neighborhood as much as the bricks-and-mortar of the neighborhood itself.

- They use inherited cultural values to promote citizenship, cultivating the desire and means to have a say in what happens to one’s neighborhood, serving as a means of emancipation.

- They promote active participation in community life, understanding that activation in one personal or social arena will spill over into others.

- They help people to create a commons, a permeable social space with wide-open potential for interaction and cooperation, for a meaningful, lived equality.

- By supporting social imagination and creativity, they help to create new opportunity—economic, political, social, cultural—for everyone.

But I don’t have that power, and right now, we are still on cusp of change. Some shallow and fuzzy thinking generated by the old orthodoxies needs now to be corrected.
Much of the conventional community development we see tends to be sanitized for the protection of the powers-that-be. Too many funders are interested in short-term interventions that guarantee big results, but seldom deliver; then they move on to whatever appears to promise more bang for the buck. Yet current social conditions didn’t come into being overnight, and they won’t be resolved quickly, nor without major, ongoing public and private investment, no matter how many times people repeat incantations about “leveraging assets” and “sustainability benchmarks.”

Artists as a class have no magical power to bring about neighborhood revitalization. Many are market-obsessed and care nothing about community. There are clumsy and insensitive artists, caring and socially imaginative artists, just as in every line of work. Neither does the presence of artists either create or prevent displacement; artists are part of every community at every stage. While artists seeking affordable live-work space are often in the vanguard of gentrification, their identity as artists is almost irrelevant to the process: others, such as gay men (regardless of profession) often fulfill the same role. Artists are able to find live-work space because economic and social changes have already driven out manufacturing and commercial enterprises, creating adaptable vacancies. Without public policies to balance the market’s appetite, with an expanding population and a fixed territory, developers and entrepreneurs will always seek new venues; and adventurous, impecunious young people will always point the way. An influx of artists may be an indicator that a certain point in the process has been reached, but a correlation is not a cause. The idea that artists as a class are somehow culpable for the damage this does is absurd.

There is no supportable meaning to general statements such as “arts organizations lead to neighborhood stability” or “arts organizations destabilize neighborhoods.” Some do and some don’t. The real, integral, new-paradigm work of community development specifically requires community artists and organizations; social and cultural innovators who understand that art is sacred play; entrepreneurs of meaning, who know how to look deeply and connect deeply. Those who don’t share these values won’t be able to help.

Many relevant examples are discussed in my book, New Creative Community, and in the other books for sale here today. We have the knowledge, we have the energy and social imagination, to transform the work of community development. Our cultural inheritance teaches us everything we need to know about how people create community.

In every interview he did for his new book, Michael Pollan repeats the seven-word mantra that sums up his 256 pages: “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.” Let me close with my own mantra: Share stories fearlessly. The art of social transformation is unstoppable.

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