

how to do

creative placemaking

National
Endowment
for the Arts



how to do
**creative
placemaking**

**An Action-Oriented Guide to
Arts in Community Development**

**National
Endowment
for the Arts**

People-Centered Policing Through the Arts

BY MARTY POTTENGER



Police Chief Joe Loughlin in Portland, Maine, reviewing officers' poems and photographs.

PHOTO BY
MARTY POTTENGER

AS SOCIETY RE-ENGAGES IN ADDRESSING issues that have long stymied social progress, there is a different role for art, a type of creative placemaking that puts people at the center. The process of making art dramatically increases our ability to tap into a flexible intelligence, function collaboratively, analyze complex challenges, integrate contradictory perspectives, envision a positive outcome, and take the inspired risks that lead to innovative solutions.

For the last eight years, I have explored whether arts projects can deliver solutions to problems that have everything to do with relationships and nothing to do with the arts. As director of Art At Work, on the staff of the City of Portland, Maine, I have had the honor of working with hundreds of amazing local artists, municipal employees, elected officials, and residents. Together they have created more than 500 original works and engaged tens of thousands of Mainers.

THIN BLUE LINES: POLICE + HISTORIC LOW MORALE = POETRY

My arrival happened to coincide with a crisis in the police department. The city was about to appoint a new police chief and the officers were fiercely opposed. While I had not planned for Art At Work's first project to be so challenging, reality intervened. With little positive experience with police to build on, I spent the first six months getting to know their culture—asking officers and command and administrative staff what mattered, who did they “look to” and what art—if any—was already being made? Every officer I spoke with (over 40 percent of the department) said they—and the department as a whole—were experiencing “historically low morale,” a situation that any city leader or socially vulnerable resident would confirm is an expensive and potentially explosive problem to have.



Recognizing the tension between the value of collective knowledge and officers' "sealed lips" approach to their work, I strategized ideas. We needed a project where officers could explore their personal and work lives as deeply as they chose, but was also user-friendly enough to facilitate sharing with other officers as well as the public. As time went by, the connections between police work and poetry stood out to me even though the officers were quite opposed to the idea of writing poetry. Yet poetry requires a flexibility, discipline, intuition, observational capacity, edge, and muscle that uniquely reflects the work of policing. Making little headway, I made a chapbook using work from veteran soldier Brian Turner and other warrior poets, reading a few poems and handing out copies during roll call. I also looked for a companion artistic discipline that would give some officers an easier path to agreeing to join the project. Photography offered a less intense but still powerful experience so I designed a project that included both.

Working with real people and in real time offered challenges as deep as the rewards. A beloved officer, Rob Johnsey, died at home late one night, cleaning his gun, just as the poetry project was getting underway. At his memorial service, his wife asked his best friend, a lieutenant, to read one of Rob's poems. As the lieutenant began reading, he shared how shocked he was to learn that Rob wrote poetry. It was then I realized that the project, already intended to raise morale, should also raise money for Rob's widow and children. So Thin Blue Lines began—a two-year project where 40 officers, captains, lieutenants, and two police chiefs were partnered with 20 poets and 20 photographers to create two professional calendars that could be used by officers' families as well as residents to raise officers' morale on the job and at home and improve community relations by raising awareness and expectations all round.

IMPACT OF THIN BLUE LINES

Two years later, 25 percent of the city's police force had either written poems or taken photographs for two calendars that sold several thousand copies in bookstores and on Amazon.com. A W.K. Kellogg Foundation-funded evaluation showed that 83 percent of the participating officers reported that the project had significantly improved their morale. Officer Alisa Poisson's poem

below represents a small yet significant outcome to Portland's officers. Not long after it was published in the first police poetry calendar, a long-contested policy that officers had to wear their hats at all times, was changed. Officers spoke openly of this being a result of the poetry calendar.

*I Do Hate the Hat
Talking to a child
or a victim, someone harmed,
I take it off.*

After publication, the relationship between the residents who had heard of or purchased a calendar and the police was unlike anything anyone had seen before. Three months after publishing the calendar, we hosted a police poetry reading at our main library. There the police and poets read their poems to a standing-room-only crowd. The poets all remarked that they had never been listened to that closely before. One reflected whether the poet-officers' holstered guns might have made the difference. After the reading, the audience divided up into multiple civic dialogues groups to discuss police-community relationships, each group facilitated by a different poet/officer pair. To this day, eight years later, residents still mention what an impact Thin Blue Lines had on raising their understanding and expectations of real relationships with Portland police officers. The project continued to grow over time with even more unexpected results including performances after a fatal police shooting that built relationships between outraged youth and police officers.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THIN BLUE LINES

Building relationships, identifying and recruiting on-the-ground leaders, learning the culture(s)

Every municipal department has its own culture and way of doing things. Taking the time to learn the norms and practices of those cultures is invaluable to selecting art forms, project design, implementation, and evaluation. Leaders do not always hold official leadership positions—they include the people others go to when they need a hand. The support of both formal and informal leaders is critical for such an unusual idea—putting art to work to tackle non-arts—often “people-based”—issues.

Recognizing the police department's strong partner culture, Thin Blue Lines was designed as paired partnerships between each participating officer and a poet/photographer. It is also a culture where "showing up" is important, so participating artists were kept informed about police-related public events, whether it was Officer Johnsey's memorial, an annual awards ceremony, or the dedication of a plaque honoring those killed in the line of duty.

Listening as the primary tool in outreach, recruitment, assessment, and evaluation

Art At Work incorporates intentional listening into every activity. Incorporating "listening exchanges" establishes a welcoming and inclusive environment, decreases the number of distracting interpersonal dynamics, encourages greater diversity of participants and perspectives, and builds collaborative capacity.

Keeping the "art bar" high for the officers as well as their partner poets is a sign of respect, the kind of respect and expectation that turns historically low morale into durable pride.

Artists participating in Thin Blue Lines attended several "listening exchange" training workshops prior to meeting officers. Once the project was underway, we met regularly to share experiences, ask questions, and identify opportunities. City participants also exchanged listening to build relationships, sharpen leadership skills, and evaluate the project and process.

The surprising and critical value of enlisting stakeholders in the evaluation design process

An evaluation Field Lab organized by Animating Democracy, a program of Americans for the Arts, brought Chris Dwyer, a national evaluation expert, to the project. Her process for designing project-specific evaluations included meeting with all stakeholders to identify desirable goals and outcomes and creation of a list of indicators to ensure projects were on course.

With Chris as evaluation coach, I met early on with police command staff and with union leaders to identify desirable outcomes, along with indicators, that were most meaningful to them. This process identified the two highest priorities as raising internal morale and strengthening community relations. For Thin Blue Lines to have credibility and value, these outcomes would need to be at the center of the work and the focus of evaluation. But it was only after they had gone through that process—followed by my outlining how an art project might drive those outcomes—that they realized, "This just might work."

Working with artists working in municipal culture—selection, training, assisting, and appreciating

Three criteria helped me select the poets: excellence in their craft, a level of self-confidence that permitted them to focus on their partner (and not expect attention), and a willingness and ability to follow policies, procedures, and someone else's direction.

This last criterion was extremely important in light of the potential consequences in two very different cultures. People working in public service positions are working in hyper-vulnerable settings. Actions, opinions, decisions are constantly scrutinized by the media and the community. It is a culture with a myriad of things to remain mindful of—public perceptions, political considerations, unintended consequences, and a host of complex interpersonal dynamics.

A story and two examples: Before the poets ever met the police officers, they each agreed, upon my asking, that they would not quote their own poetry to their police partner. At our first meeting with the command staff, one of the poets broke his word and enthusiastically quoted a short poem. In seconds, the emotional tenor of the officers went from guarded interest to ice cold “save yourself” shutdown. It was quite dramatic. All the other poets took note. 1) A photographer is on a ride-along that suddenly becomes dangerous. Will he obey as commanded and stay in the cruiser? 2) A story exchange with supervisors and rank-and-file reveals a troubling labor issue. What is good policy when poems include information that might impact personnel career decisions?

Project goals and art: keep the bar high

Questions about quality in community arts projects are valuable and appropriate. After working decades in both professional theater and community arts, I have learned that insisting on excellence is essential to achieving valuable outcomes. I also know that “excellence” is a mutable concept that depends tremendously on context. Keeping the “art bar” high for the officers as well as their partner poets is a sign of respect, the kind of respect and expectation that turns historically low morale into durable pride. The same is true of project goals.

Much to my delight, the police chief agreed to write a poem for our second calendar. Scheduling kept him from attending the workshops held for officers and poets. He ended up writing his poem the night before our deadline. The next morning he confidently announced to his lieutenant that he was “done.” The lieutenant told me later that afternoon that he had laughed and said to the chief, “You have no idea.” Five rewrites later, the chief’s poem was accepted in the calendar.

CREATIVE PLACEMAKING WITH PEOPLE AT THE CENTER

As this project demonstrates, creative placemaking with people at the center recognizes that the most valuable asset any city has is its human capital. It recognizes that creativity is not only one of humanity’s most powerful, versatile gifts, it is a part of who we are. Art At Work projects in Portland, Maine, and Holyoke, Massachusetts, have helped change the way people behave, interact, and perceive possibilities. People touched by any of our Thin Blue Lines projects have higher expectations of the police now. They not only have a far more accurate understanding and appreciation of police work, they assume the possibility of a personal relationship that goes beyond enforcement and protection. It is a difference that affects the officers as well. They have shared their lives publicly, their experiences growing up, their struggles as parents, their fears as police officers. They have shown themselves to the community—including our immigrant and refugee youth—in ways other police departments never have. And that makes a decisive difference to everyone.

This is the kind of work that depends on our ability to step outside our comfort zones, work together, think outside the box, and keep the bar high.

Our brilliance, resilience, cooperative natures, and willingness to work hard as residents of neighborhoods and cities are all enhanced by figuring out new ways to integrate creative engagement into building a more equitable and sustainable future. This is the kind of work that depends on our ability to step outside our comfort zones, work together, think outside the box, and keep the bar high. What Art At Work and other projects around the country have helped make happen is only a modest start to what is possible.

Marty Pottenger has been a theater artist, animator, and social practitioner since 1975, and is the founding director of Art At Work (AAW), a national initiative that increases cities’ resilience through strategic art projects addressing social challenges. AAW partners with municipal/county governments, unions, community organizations, and artists.

Credits

November 2016

National Endowment for the Arts
400 7th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20506
202-682-5400
arts.gov

Published by the NEA Office of Public Affairs

Editors: Jason Schupbach and Don Ball
Co-editors: Katryna Carter, Jenna Moran, and Bryan McEntire

Design by Fuszion

ISBN 978-0-692-78289-7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Schupbach, Jason, 1975- editor. | Ball, Don, 1964- editor. | National Endowment for the Arts. Office of Public Affairs, publisher.

Title: How to do creative placemaking : an action-oriented guide to arts in community development.

Other titles: Action-oriented guide to arts in community development
Description: Washington, DC : NEA Office of Public Affairs, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016043772 | ISBN 9780692782897

Subjects: LCSH: Arts and society—United States. | Community development—United States. | Public spaces—United States—Planning—Citizen participation. | Community arts projects—United States.

Classification: LCC NX180.S6 H69 2016 | DDC 701/.03—dc23 | SUDOC NF 2.2:P 69/3

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016043772>



202-682-5496 Voice/TTY (a device for individuals who are deaf or hearing-impaired)



Individuals who do not use conventional print materials may contact the Arts Endowment's Accessibility Office at 202-682-5532 to obtain this publication in an alternate format.

This publication is available free of charge in print or PDF format at arts.gov, the website of the National Endowment for the Arts.

Cover: In July 2015, Lakota teenager Elizabeth Eagle demonstrated fancy shawl dancing during the Cheyenne River Youth Project's inaugural RedCan graffiti jam at the innovative Waniyetu Wowapi (Winter Count) Art Park on South Dakota's Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation.

PHOTO BY RICHARD STEINBERGER COURTESY OF THE CHEYENNE RIVER YOUTH PROJECT

About the NEA

THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS was established by Congress in 1965 as an independent federal agency whose funding and support gives Americans the opportunity to participate in the arts, exercise their imaginations, and develop their creative capacities. Through partnerships with state arts agencies, local leaders, other federal agencies, and the philanthropic sector, the NEA supports arts learning, affirms and celebrates America's rich and diverse cultural heritage, and extends its work to promote equal access to the arts in every community across America.

Case studies come from the Exploring Our Town microsite on the National Endowment for the Arts website:
[arts.gov/exploring-our-town](https://www.arts.gov/exploring-our-town)

How to Do Creative Placemaking is an action-oriented guide for making places better. This book includes instructional and thought-provoking case studies and essays from today's leading thinkers in creative placemaking. It describes the diverse ways that arts organizations and artists can play an essential role in the success of communities across America.

Featuring:

Amanda J. Ashley
Seth Beattie
Chris Beck
Tom Borrup
Julie S. Burros
Lyz Crane
Nicole Crutchfield
Ben Fink
Karin Goodfellow
Colin Hamilton
David Haney

Jennifer Hughes
Maria Rosario Jackson
Aviva Kapust
Mitchell Landrieu
Jeremy Liu
María López De León
Jenna Moran
Mimi Pickering
Marty Pottenger
Lori Pourier
Ilana Preuss

Judilee Reed
Esther Robinson
Jason Schupbach
Kira Strong
Tracy Taft
Erik Takeshita
Carlton Turner
Patricia Walsh
Joanna Woronkowicz
Laura Zabel



CELEBRATING **50** YEARS

National Endowment for the Arts
400 7th Street SW
Washington, DC 20506
Arts.gov

ISBN 978-0-692-78289-7
9 0000 >



9 780692 782897