CREATIVE COMMUNITY BUILDING: Institutional Collaboration, Local Results

Last June’s BostonAPP/Lab Workshop focused on “urban design as a catalyst for art in public places.” This month’s session will look at another set of catalysts – institutional collaboration from different perspectives and at different scales, but aimed at related outcomes.

Laura Jasinski, Director of Planning and Public Programs for the Rose Kennedy Greenway Conservancy (www.rosekennedygreenway.org), and David Bryant, Director of Advocacy for the Massachusetts Association of Community Development Corporations (www.macdc.org), represent distinct, but definitely complementary, strategic frameworks within which art, culture, and new attitudes towards place are playing significant roles in community-building at both local and the city-wide levels.

With Laura and David as guides, this month’s Workshop will look at how their respective organizations can provide new opportunities for collaboration that in turn will strengthen a creative environment for artists, for local communities, and for the city and region as a whole. Participants in the workshop will examine...

- how this collaboration can – and does – work, within individual communities or on a large-scale public space such as the greenway;
- where and how they it be applied in and on specific sites;
- which strategies, skill-sets, and types of support are needed for implementation.

The presentations by both Laura and David and the ensuing discussion made it clear that the “umbrella” under which all of us can discuss/conjecture/formulate strategies and opportunities around creative community development is pretty expansive. The principles that Laura set out regarding the installation of Janet Echelman’s “As if it were already here” over the Rose Kennedy Greenway apply at a variety of scales where collaboration – another word, perhaps, for building community – is essential. These included:

- Have the right people at the table
- Encourage creativity . . . everywhere
- Communicate early and often
- Leave room for obstacles
- Capitalize on successes

In many cases, the result is more than the sum of its parts: that is, collaboration begins, in a way, to expand and deepen demand for the arts; it enables a “big vision” – where “big” can also mean “resonant” to places, communities, contexts at any scale – to take root. Creativity, as was pointed out, can – and has to -- work at all levels, not only with and among artists.
David provided an overview of MACDC’s work, including its June 2015 report “Creative Community Development in Massachusetts.” Of MACDC’s 89 members, 29 responded to a survey designed, as the report puts it, to “understand the entire landscape of creative community building in Massachusetts...[and] to explore the breadth and variety of creative work that CDCs are undertaking across the state...[including] how CDCs in Massachusetts are weaving arts, culture, and creative placemaking into their work.”

Even in the face of both financial and human resource constraints, David – and the survey – identified any number of examples of successful initiatives among the CDCs, including: the South End’s Inquilinos Boricuas en Accion (IBA) and its arts and cultural programming and festivals; Asian Community Development Corporation’s engagement with local youth to help lead neighborhood tours; etc.

Implicit – as well as, at times, explicit – in Laura’s and David’s comments is the necessity for “lateral connections,” or cutting across the multiple, and sometimes invisible, silos whose existence at some level belie the word “community.” Overcoming that means having the big vision – “to be over the top, gung-ho, and then begin to execute.”