

Culture, Equity, and Cities

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Have you ever begun to just notice something and then suddenly you see it everywhere. Then you wonder, have I been out of it, or did this just become a thing?"

I felt that way around the time I started working on the cultural plan for the City of Oakland in early 2017. What I was seeing as I scanned the horizon for new developments in cultural planning and policy, racial equity, placemaking, and civic engagement was some very heartening work and language at the confluence of these areas. The resulting flows and churn from these activities seemed to be having an increasing

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impact on areas of urban and regional planning and development generally. And a lot of the action was happening at the local level, in a mix of public and private sector efforts.

When I cyber-stumbled onto the notion of "new localism," I understood what I was seeing was part of a nascent groundswell. (I wasn't completely out of it after all.) The double-edged dynamic of long-term devolution of governance and resource generation in the public sector has positioned cities and metropolitan areas for DIY problem solving — with power moving "horizontally from government to networks of public, private, and civic actors."¹ The growing efficacy of cities to collaboratively shape their futures was what I was seeing in the field. It also had resonance with how I was feeling about my own work, namely, that it needed to be more systems oriented, particularly in pushing a very stubborn equity needle forward.

Some Context

Last year, I was contracted by Roberto Bedoya to work with him to tackle a cultural planning process for the City of Oakland, after a hiatus of about thirty years since the adoption of its previous plan. Roberto had just been hired as Manager

of Cultural Affairs in fall 2016, after an extended period of interim leadership in the unit, a fair amount of reshuffling of its position within government over the years, and its being stressed by ongoing staff attrition. Just a few months into his tenure, the shock of thirty-six lives being tragically lost in the Ghost Ship artist warehouse fire sent heartache and shudders across the globe.² Before Roberto arrived, the precipitous rise in real estate costs in the Bay Area had already prompted Mayor Libby Schaaf to take a deeper look at the displacement of artists and the loss of artist spaces in the city,³ but the Ghost Ship disaster sharpened the edge and the urgency of this work. With Oakland still reeling from this blow, the planning process began. Given this and the slower-moving tragedy of mounting dislocation and disconnection experienced by Oakland communities — particularly within predominantly African American neighborhoods⁴ — the cultural planning inevitably began by stepping into an atmosphere of raw emotions.

This is just a small corner of the picture painted by the recent and historical past that stretched before us as we entered the different communities of Oakland. The planning process extended over a year and ended with the adoption of the plan by the city council in July of this year. The plan represents a significant reset for how local government sees and approaches the cultural life of the city. But it is a work in progress, as any plan grounded in reality must be, and offers a fresh plot in which to seed new collaborations between Cultural Affairs and other city departments, new dialogues between city government and Oakland's many communities, and new partnerships with allies who see the promise of supporting this grassroots-identified city to strengthen its challenged, yet resilient, ecosystem.

I think it is a safe bet to say that there aren't any surefire formulas for doing cultural planning in a way that does justice to its context and complexity. Data analysis and site visits will tell some important stories, but the veracity of how you capture the lived realities on the street is what the community will care about — and the community, in the end, is whom the plan is for.

In shifting through what I wanted to share about this planning process, I found it hard to pick what to highlight and what to leave aside since this was one of the most difficult and rewarding pieces of work I have ever undertaken. But I will offer at least a few lessons. As a wayfinding device through this article, I will point to some of the landmarks that stood out for me: both things I learned and

things I brought to the process that proved useful. From the circumstances I described above and many more too numerous to mention, it is worth noting,

Lesson 1: Context matters at every level.

Elected leadership, internal governmental structures, and statutory mandates; community cohesion and nonprofit capacity; business and entrepreneurial activity; and the hopes and concerns of organizers, dreamers, gadflies, and stalwarts. My belief in the importance of “thick description”⁵ was reinforced with each layer I uncovered about Oakland’s complex history and current dynamics.

A New Scope of Work

The question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire. The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.

— David Harvey, “The Right to the City”

Oakland’s new cultural plan seeks to bring this “most neglected of our human rights” into the light and offer a fresh civic narrative — one that emphasizes the importance of recognizing that a city’s cultural life comprises the full array of its people and their myriad ways of living and being. This new sense of what constitutes “cultural affairs” embraces the tangle of meaning-imbued activities that are agnostic in relation to sector and city department and are “woven into every neighborhood and commercial corridor, leaving no part of the city or its communities untouched”⁶ — the poetry slam at the library, the samba dancers rehearsing for *carnaval*, the orchestra collaborating with the gospel choir, the T-shirt designer on the street corner, the club-ensconced salsa band, the museum’s hip-hop retrospective, the qigong group in the park, the mural-lined parking lot, and the lowriders at the Art Murmur.

But what does this mean for a city office of cultural affairs? In the case of Oakland, it means the

purview of the office goes beyond professional artists, nonprofit arts and culture organizations, and arts learning to a larger domain of concern that is useful to think of in locative terms, that is, cultural spaces, neighborhood places, and the civic commons. This way of parsing not just the *who* and *what* of cultural pursuits, but the *where*, and by extension, the *how*, honors what we know about people and their expressive habits: they do them where and how they can regardless of falling into this or that category of taxation or property ownership. Culture making does not stop at the boundaries of 501(c)(3)s. This place-based framework also emerged out of the concerns we heard echoing throughout the community — those of loss of home or place of work, social disorientation due to high neighborhood in- and out-migration, and the changing culture in shared space, for example, what was once seen as “a joyful noise” turning into an issue for “nuisance abatement.”⁷

In this new schema, the term *cultural spaces* refers to spaces made or intentionally adapted for cultural production, distribution/presentation, skill building, administration, and expression and revelry — such as studios and artist live/work spaces, theaters, galleries and museums, music and dance

Radical belonging, the notion that we all belong to each other, not if we decide to but as a fact. We are all bound to each other by our interdependence. Of course, this is not a new idea; in fact, it is a very old one.

venues, and entertainment clubs. *Neighborhood places* refers to places not formally made for cultural activity, but serving communities as places to congregate, celebrate, commune, and generally create social connections, particularly in neighborhoods that lack formal cultural nonprofit infrastructure. This could include multifunctional social-service nonprofits, faith-based organizations, family associations, cafés, corner bodegas, nail salons, and other examples of culturally specific retail businesses and services. What is meant by the *civic commons* is the physical space that is part of the public domain where people gather and interact, such as parks, playgrounds, plazas, libraries, recreational centers, schoolyards and campuses, streets and sidewalks, and even

what can be shared visually as these spaces are navigated (e.g., the visual characteristics of neighborhoods created by architecture, murals/graffiti, tree canopy, setbacks, etc.). These new categories for Cultural Affairs align with its desire to do deeper mapping of what the community considers its assets and to combine that with an equity analysis informed by census data.⁸

This effort to make the city's Cultural Affairs align better with community-based affairs of culture opens up possibilities and imaginings for partnership and gives new reasons to "play well with others," such as city planners and policy analysts, public works and private developers, social service nonprofits and small businesses, parks and libraries, housing and transportation works, funders and investors, artists and activists, culturists and local historians, culture bearers and

iconoclasts. It is not that a magic wand has been waved and the budget of Cultural Affairs has suddenly blossomed a hundredfold (though now there are many more ways to make the argument

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that it should), but that opportunities have greatly expanded for engaging other sectors' resources for culture-related investments and infusing the value of expression and meaning making throughout city concerns. Which brings us to,

Lesson 2: Bust the boundaries. Broadening the nonprofit purview of offices of cultural affairs to a wider range of actors and entities across sectors will open the palette of possibilities for strengthening cultural expression, community cultural development, and cultural equity. (Hint: This is also an invitation to private funders to think more holistically about the dynamics of cultural production.) But there is a caveat: in opening these boundaries, thoughtful integration of diverse ways of being is the point — not their disappearance into generic community indicators.

A New Vision

The new scope of work for Cultural Affairs is deeply intertwined with the new vision for the work. The tagline for Oakland's cultural plan distills the vision as *Equity is the driving force. Culture is the frame. Belonging is the goal.*

Equity is the driving force. The City of Oakland, like a growing number of jurisdictions around the country,⁹ adopted the long-term goal and operating principle of achieving racial and social equity. In 2015, the city adopted a bold ordinance that expresses its will to integrate "the principle of 'fair and just' in all the City does in order to achieve equitable opportunities for all people and communities,"¹⁰ and it thereby established its Department of Race and Equity. The aspirations outlined in the ordinance through its list of "determinants of equity" provided a solid foundation for the new cultural plan's alignment with equity values. The ordinance also provided

DEFINITION OF CULTURAL EQUITY FROM THE OAKLAND PLAN:

Cultural equity in a democratic and diverse society recognizes:

- that all cultures have value,
- that a society is made more resilient by the collective knowledge of its diverse cultures, and
- that all cultures should have equal access to opportunities to achieve social esteem and civic parity.

This equity of opportunity entails:

- self-determined cultural expression, affirmation, and learning,
- appropriate spaces and resources for cultural production and participation,
- creating connections and cross-cultural understanding, empathy, and engagement,
- stewardship of the places one lives, works, and plays, and
- access to knowledge and skills to effectively advocate for cultural policy development and resource allocation that benefits the community.*

Achieving cultural equity requires fair and just distribution of resources and the identification and remedying of institutionalized norms that have systemically disadvantaged categories of people based on, e.g., race, ethnicity, customs, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, religion, disability, and socioeconomic or citizenship status.

* The definition of these opportunities was informed by the work of Maria Rosario Jackson and Roberto Bedoya for the PLACE Initiative of the Tucson Pima Arts Council. See Tucson Pima Arts Council, People, Land, Arts, Culture, and Engagement: Taking Stock of the PLACE Initiative, 8; <https://artsfoundtucson.org/advocacy/dashboard/>.

an opportunity for Cultural Affairs to begin discussions with colleagues about how all the determinants of equity are imbued with cultural elements, and opened the opportunity to outline what determinants of cultural equity could look like. (See the plan's definition of cultural equity and its determinants on page 24.)

Another conceptually key feature of the ordinance was its recognition that positive efforts and investments to establish equity can succeed only if accompanied by rooting out the systemic and persistent causes of inequities. Dismantling both the formal policies as well as the "habits of mind" that keep disparities in place is harder to get one's arms around and the much heavier lift.

This remediation point is missing from some definitions of cultural equity circulating in the field, so I believe it is worth putting forward as,

Lesson 3: Provide resources, but also remedy discriminatory policies and practices, to build equity. Investment without attention to systemic causes is not enough to eliminate inequities. These efforts ideally go hand in hand.¹¹ There are a growing number of valuable tools and guidelines in the field for embarking on this important journey.

Because equity is such a central driver to the work in Oakland, allow me one more point on this subject.

What hit me like a neuronal firestorm while listening to Angela Davis speak at the Oakland Book Festival last year was the realization that achieving equity is not a matter of the assimilation or inclusion of those left out of the advantages our society currently has to offer. It is not like finally inviting the people waiting outside to the party. Those advantages were built on systemic racism, sexism, and other forms of inequality and exploitation, and so do not reflect what societal goods would be if they had been constructed on principles that valued everyone's ability to realize their potential. To paraphrase Davis, *we do not know what true equity looks like*. It will take great insight, imagination, struggle, and tenacity to discover and create the ways to build that equitable new land that is beyond the horizon.¹²

Lesson 4: Achieving equity will require extraordinary and wide-ranging acts of imagination. Equity must be discovered together with those who are at the margins, not by drawing them into the center of something they didn't help to imagine and create, but by collective will, work, and creativity.

The Primacy of Culture in the Pursuit of Equity

So what does the pursuit of equity have to do with culture, and what does culture have to do with achieving equity?

Culture is the frame. I have been using the word *culture* a lot and the word *art* hardly at all. *Culture*, in the sense I have been using it, is not synonymous with the realm of arts but rather casts a much larger shadow that reaches well beyond the disciplines of music, dance, theater, literature, visual and media arts, and the places to experience them. By *culture*, I mean a system of knowledge, wisdom, values, and practices that a people have embodied and constructed over time through their lived experience of how to survive and thrive. The culture we grow up in makes us who we are: the language we speak, the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the shelters we live in, how we rear children and how we treat elders, how we celebrate and mourn, what we believe is good or bad, beautiful or ugly, that is, what gives our life shape and meaning.

As observed earlier, culture imbues everything and is woven in the fabric of life. So in defining the new purview for Cultural Affairs in Oakland, we are talking about this sense of culture. This does

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not mean the office will no longer be concerned with art makers and nonprofit arts and culture organizations, but it does mean that with equity as its engine, Cultural Affairs needs to support a fuller range of modes of expression, spaces in which they can be nurtured, and ways to build social cohesion. So, "culture is the frame" is shorthand for,

Lesson 5: Cultures as ways of being and systems of values imbue all aspects of human life. Understanding this frames the challenge of building equity in a democratic, culturally diverse society.

Each culture contains realms that condition different forms of human action and values (think ethics, education, economics, etc.). The aesthetic realm of culture influences our judgments of what is beautiful or ugly, attractive or repellent, delicious

or distasteful. It imbues objects, gestures, symbols, colors, sounds, and shapes with meaning. This is where the arts commonly take their place within a culture — though they can be valued variously for their different roles as a process or a product, to inspire, to interrogate, to reinforce social hierarchies, as a poignant reminder, or as a way to forget. In each case, however, *the value of the artistry must be assessed within its cultural context or risk being misunderstood, exoticized, or underestimated.*

What does it mean for a society to turn its back on people's sense of rootedness and home? How can a city own its role in building belonging?

Thinking of the arts as a single unified body — such as “the fine arts” — with a fixed set of criteria for determining quality stifles the attainment of cultural equity and can reinforce the status quo. Establishing equity in a diverse society requires acknowledging that *excellence, quality, innovation*, and other evaluative terms are only meaningful within each specific cultural system. Inequities will persist when positions of leadership and resource allocation are populated by like-minded people with a bias toward the dominant culture.¹³ Centering attention on culture and equity is long overdue, not to diminish the deep value of the arts but to greatly enlarge the understanding of their true breadth and range of meaning.

Lesson 6: Our society needs to recognize and engage with its full array of cultural knowledge to achieve equity. Inattention to this fact will keep inequitable policies and practices in place.

Diversity: A Cause for Celebration and Contention

Valuing equity in a multicultural society implies valuing diversity and the resilience and strength it brings. But not everything about diversity is without thorns. As people of different cultures increasingly inhabit shared space, their different ways of being can result in fascinating fusions as well as bitter contestations. In a democracy, different ways of living life need to be negotiated, and it is important to remember that what we judge to be fair and just or the right way or wrong way to do something is conditioned by our particular cultural background(s) and value system(s).

If the goal is to work together to create an equitable society, we cannot shrink from dealing with the tensions that inevitably arise. Not everything about each culture can be a matter for shared celebration. If eating animals in one culture is forbidden and in another is permitted, who decides what is allowed? If you think playing live music in your backyard is reasonable, but your neighbor doesn't, who is right? Is a painting that hangs in a museum worth more than one spray-painted on the side of a building — and more to whom?

The reality of cultural contention is underrecognized in city narratives and in arts and culture philanthropy generally. It should come out of the shadows so the need for negotiation and deliberation can be addressed and resolutions can be transparent. Celebrating a way of life with a festival, food, and a flag makes for an easy entry point to cultural difference, but it can gloss over the underlying meanings and intents of a worldview and sidestep real engagement with deeper issues. Cities on the moving edge of tectonic demographic shifts, like Oakland, are of necessity the first to respond to these dynamics and can be the early adopters of promising methods of “getting from the clenched fist, to arm-wrestling, to the handshake,” as Roberto likes to say.

Lesson 7: Contention is inevitable in a diverse society, so let's create equitable, respectful spaces for dialogue and deliberation.¹⁴

The Poetics of Belonging

Belonging is the goal. This is the last part of the cultural plan's tagline and reflects what Roberto would call an instance of poetic will at work,¹⁵ that is, harnessing the power of the imagination to make change. The notion of belonging has a deep, metaphorical resonance, but it can also go beyond the poetic.¹⁶ Belonging can be understood as the basic human need to feel the acceptance and support of other people. One's sense of belonging can also be influenced by the connection one has to the place one lives. We heard both the pleasure and pain of people's having or losing their sense of belonging in Oakland. What does it mean for a society to turn its back on people's sense of rootedness and home?¹⁷ How can a city own its role in building belonging?

The next phase of the plan will need to flesh out in concrete terms the significance of promoting belonging. How can strategies for belonging be operationalized? How will the city be accountable to them? Is supporting belonging different from

supporting cultural equity or policies of inclusive decision making? Can belonging be integrated into the work being done on well-being indicators or into urban planning methods? Asking these questions may sound like murdering the poetry of belonging to dissect it. But we know that both the political force and poetic spirit of belonging must be melded in order to combat “disbelonging.”

Lesson 8: Always make room for poetic will. Good policymaking requires openness, creativity, and diverse images and metaphors to connect with communities.

I want to add that there is a slightly different sense of belonging that we might also embrace, something I am calling *radical belonging*: the notion that we all belong to each other, not if we

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decide to but as a fact. We are all bound to each other by our interdependence. Of course, this is not a new idea; in fact, it is a very old one, but it is one we constantly need reminding of. So a meta-physical tweak to our goal of belonging makes it a goal to achieve awareness of our radical belonging, and that, together with our desire for cultural equity, will be our antidote to othering and our shared balm.

Vanessa Whang likes to be a thought partner with civic actors, organizations, and funders engaged with culture, equity, and social change. She has worked at local, state, and national levels in philanthropy. Whang believes a deeper understanding of culture is key to finding more sustainable paths to well-being for people and the planet.

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It was a profound privilege to have had a hand in reframing the value of cultural life in Oakland. First, I am grateful to have had the opportunity to work alongside Roberto. He is a serious and adventurous thinker, a poet and trickster in bureaucrat's clothing. He allowed me an extraordinary amount of conceptual latitude, and I thank him for his trust. Second, it is always a privilege to do work in the public sector on behalf of what we hold collectively as a people and to try to make the best of it for all our sakes (a fact that seems to go little noted these days but nonetheless is true). And given the “localism”

moment that we are in, it is exciting and heartening to be a part of this new wave along with a growing number of committed and adventurous colleagues in the public, private, nonprofit, and philanthropic sectors. And last, but certainly not least, Oakland is my home, and I understand more than ever that it is a privilege to be able to live here. It is an extraordinary place where you find deep camaraderie as well as contention. The community is fierce and beautiful, warm but steely-eyed. You feel its history at street level, and the future is now in the cranes in the air. Whether resident or visitor, being here makes you want to know what's going to happen next.

NOTES

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6. Alex Werth, “Oakland’s Arts and Cultural Economy,” appendix to “Belonging in Oakland: A Cultural Development Plan,” May 4, 2018.
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8. Alice Myatt, “Advancing Livability: A Tool to Help Funders Leverage Creative Placemaking,” *GIA Reader* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2018), <https://www.giarts.org/article/advancing-livability>.
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11. If you look at the widely circulated, undernanced “equality vs. equity” picture of three people of different heights trying to look over a fence at a baseball game, you will notice that the boxes they are standing on typically symbolize resources. What the picture should also show is that the ground they are standing on is not level, symbolizing systemic bias. And if you want to add a cultural nuance to it, they would be watching soccer!
12. I think the sky opened up and I heard the angels sing when I received that particular revelation. What it means for raising the roof on equity aspirations and how we conceive of the scaffolding needed to do that is still rattling around in my head.
13. Helicon Collaborative, *Not Just Money: Equity Issues in Cultural Philanthropy*, 2017, <http://www.notjustmoney.us/>.
14. Much more could be said about this, but it deserves its own article.
15. See “Creative Placemaking from the Community Up: A Conversation with Roberto Bedoya and Vanessa Whang,” forthcoming.
16. See the work on belonging of the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society at <https://haasinstitute.berkeley.edu/aboutb4b>; and of the US Department of Arts and Culture at <https://usdac.us/belonging/>.
17. See, for example, Mindy Thompson Fullilove, “Root Shock: The Consequences of African American Dispossession,” *Journal of Urban Health* 78, no. 1 (March 2001): 72–80, <https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=ZGVmYXVsdGRvbWVfbnxyb290c2hvY2tvcmd8Z3g6Y2Y2MjBhZTNiOWM1ZDlh>.