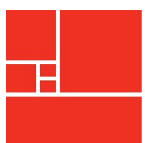




The **James Irvine**  
Foundation

# Building the Field of Arts Engagement: Prospects and Challenges

A report for The James Irvine Foundation  
Adrian Ellis, AEA Consulting



**AEA Consulting**

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## Foreword

*“The common challenge facing all cultural organizations, regardless of brand or size, can be boiled down to relevance to the changing world in which they operate” — Adrian Ellis*

The metamorphosis of the arts and culture nonprofit sector isn't letting up, and the pace of transformation is probably getting faster. In response to the speed of change, great organizations seek to produce what matters to their communities, providing arts experiences that entertain, teach, connect, and soothe. These organizations are constantly striving toward greater relevance both in what they offer and in how they operate from the inside out.

At The James Irvine Foundation, we've seen how powerful, relevant nonprofits provide deeply meaningful arts engagement for individuals and communities. Through our partnership with more than a dozen nonprofits in the New California Arts Fund we're witnessing just that. Immense passion and genius notwithstanding, even the strongest among the leaders we know express a need for the kind of support fellowship can bring. Like-minded leaders can mutually inspire one another to the kind of ongoing growth and adaptation that compels them to keep moving toward greater relevance. This begs the big question of how to build that spirit-, mind-, and energy-sustaining group of people?

The New California Arts Fund organizations possess an enormous amount of collective experience, intellect, and thirst for engagement and relevance. So, in beginning to explore the potential of these assets and the role they might play in the development of some form of support system, we asked Adrian Ellis of AEA Consulting to consider whether there are enough of these strengths — however undefined or undeveloped — in common to build on among organizations and leaders in the wider arts nonprofit field.

Adrian and his colleagues set about to gather information from arts leaders, researchers, funders, and others who have a vantage point on the topic. In this report, he shares the findings and analysis — providing critical context for this work, taking stock of the possibility for developing a nascent field through a five-part framework, and suggesting new courses of action that could accelerate the building of a strong network of practitioners whose purpose is increasing arts engagement for more and diverse kinds of people.

We hope you find that Adrian's work surfaces new possibilities for increasing and connecting arts organizations and leaders who are committed to the work of transforming themselves into relevant, public-facing institutions.



**Josephine Ramirez**

Portfolio Director

The James Irvine Foundation

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# Summary

The cultural sector in America is grappling with how to remain relevant to the rapidly changing society from which it draws its audiences and support. This is a demanding task — adapting to rapid demographic and technological change is no less challenging for the cultural sector than for journalism, the music industry, publishing, or the taxi cab business today. But if the cultural sector does not take on this task, it risks marginalization.

Cultural leaders therefore need to examine the mechanics of engagement in the arts in a concerted way, distill lessons from their successes and failures, and share those lessons — in short, to build the field of arts engagement. To explore this topic, in 2015 Irvine commissioned AEA Consulting to undertake panel discussions, surveys, and bilateral interviews across the arts sector. This report contains observations and reflections by Adrian Ellis, Elizabeth Ellis, and their colleagues.

## A NEEDED BUT NASCENT FIELD

While many have interest and incentive to build an arts engagement field, the field as it exists today is formative at best, based on assessment against the following criteria:<sup>1</sup>



**Shared Identity** — People self-identify as members of the field, share similar motivations and goals, and generally do not work in isolation or at cross-purposes.



**Standards of Practice** — Codified practices, demonstration models, professional development programs, and established processes and organizations ensure quality and fidelity of implementation.



**Knowledge Base** — A base of evidence and knowledge is well developed, with experts and researchers focused on the topic, and systems of knowledge documentation and dissemination in place.



**Leadership and Grassroots Support** — Influential leaders and organizations work overtly to advance the field, and there is a broad base of support from key constituencies.



**Funding and Policymaking Environment** — Dedicated funding and supportive policy foster ongoing progress.

## FUTURE FOCUS

Given the urgency and shared interest in engaging more people more deeply in arts, this study offers three potential paths forward:

- **Reform Agenda** that brings engagement nearer the center of concerns for established nonprofit arts organizations
- **Cultural Equity Agenda** that prioritizes arts participation as a means toward social objectives
- **Big Tent Agenda** that aims to advance the entire creative economy toward goals for both reform and cultural equity



*A companion arts engagement literature review was conducted through the process of developing this report. A summary of this review is available at [Irvine.org/AEAlitreview](http://Irvine.org/AEAlitreview).*

<sup>1</sup> Criteria established by The Bridgespan Group as part of a Strong Field Framework and described further in this report.

## Context

It is hardly a controversial or original assertion that the cultural sector in the United States is in a period of flux brought on by multiple and profound changes. These include changes in the tastes, expectations, and interests of audiences; the philanthropic priorities of funders; the demographic composition of the communities from which the sector has traditionally drawn its support; and income and wealth distribution, particularly the erosion of the American middle class. Changes affecting the cultural sector also include increased competition for leisure time and discretionary expenditure, new and transformational technologies available for the creation and distribution of creative content, and — not least — shifting modes of artistic practice themselves.

For some organizations, these changes are shaking the foundational assumptions for their artistic mission and institutional stability — sometimes to destruction. We read of closures and “near death” experiences regularly. For others, it is a time of opportunity, as new ways of interacting with audiences and co-curating content, and new sources of funding — for example, crowd sourcing or developer contributions — open up. Our era has been described as a golden age of cultural consumption; never has so much cultural product been available to so many so freely.

Some of these changes favor organizations with strong brands and a dominant market position, such as the National Theatre in London and the Metropolitan Opera in New York, key players in the event cinema market for theater and opera. Other changes favor nimble, often smaller organizations — for example, the bandwidth now available for online streaming, or the increased appetite of audiences and performers for informal, smaller performance spaces.

Many organizations are at neither extreme of crisis or crest, but clustered in the middle, facing neither existential challenges nor truly transformational opportunities. They are simply trying to navigate through a changing world to a viable business model that can continue to support the work that they see as their core mission.

In essence, the common challenge facing all cultural organizations, regardless of brand or size, can be boiled down to *relevance to the changing world in which they operate*.

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If there is one force driving the interest in engagement strategies and the growth of resources allocated to them, it is the legitimate desire and the need for cultural organizations to remain relevant — authentically meaningful and of interest — to enough people to sustain their underlying business models and to allow people to experience the work they produce or present. If that can no longer be done, then the business model needs to change or the organization needs to find new ways to engage people or both. And of course the deeper the impact of these wider environmental changes, then the more urgent is the need for organizations to find new ways to engage.

We are therefore witnessing a period of increased preoccupation with the mechanics of engagement in the arts. The techniques that were developed in the last 30 years to attract and retain audiences and financial support are losing traction in our changed circumstances and therefore what was once taken for granted — an engaged set of stakeholders — can no longer be taken for granted. This motive is a sort of “institutional imperative,” driven by the powerful desire for institutional survival. And because of this, there is a growing understanding that the legitimacy of an arts organization that is



dependent upon the benefits of Section 501(c)(3) of the federal tax code and on philanthropic support is rooted not only in the quality or originality of the work that it produces but on the public benefit that it generates.

A key implication arises — as society changes, arts organizations have to find new ways to engage with new audiences, and if they fail to do so, then they experience a crisis in their legitimacy, and one that might ultimately come to threaten their tax status. The arts engagement agenda is driven by both the need for a viable business model and a new need to demonstrate public benefit.

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Notwithstanding the fundamental importance of the goals of engagement, the *mechanics* of effective engagement are complex and still imperfectly understood by us all. Few cultural organizations would demur at the opportunity to have a broader constituency of support: greater ethnic and socio-economic diversity in their audiences; deeper, more intense relationships with their existing audiences; and a more plural funding base. Many devote considerable time, money, and emotional reserves to those goals. But equally, most would concede failure at developing consistent institutional strategies that are effective, understood, and replicable.

In 2014, AEA Consulting generated a literature review of articles written in English concerning audience development and audience engagement written between 2000 and 2014<sup>2</sup>. We found some 38 methodologically robust studies. The articles were all published in peer-reviewed journals, or by prominent and trusted foundations and think tanks. All involved primary research of some sort. The inescapable conclusion from the exercise was that there is a dearth of evidence of robust, replicable methodologies for extending the reach of cultural organizations into communities that have not traditionally attended or participated in their work. A very similar conclusion was reached in the extensive literature review published by the United Kingdom-based Arts and Humanities Research Council, *Understanding the Value of Arts and Culture*<sup>3</sup>, which also noted a gap between the conclusions of academic studies on the impact of the arts (on specific policy areas such as health and well-being, urban regeneration, building social capital, etc.) and the characterization of their impact in the advocacy documents that referenced them.

There *are* robust and replicable techniques for audience development, engagement, enduring outreach, etc. But they have not been codified and communicated in ways that facilitate knowledge transfer and the dissemination of good practice. Arts engagement is therefore something of a conundrum: It is critical to the future of an arts sector seeking a firmer footing in the social, cultural, economic, and inner life of a changing country; and at the same time, it is lacking anything approaching a commonly accepted framework or paradigm for its investigation, for knowledge transfer, or for practice.

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<sup>2</sup> This literature review was undertaken for WQXR, New York's classical music station.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/documents/publications/cultural-value-project-final-report/>.

## Defining key concepts

*Field-building* is the shorthand term commonly used for strengthening the capacity of a particular cohort or group to address effectively the common challenges facing its members — for example, disaster relief, climate change, or the prevention of terrorism. Example field-building activities:

- Training or leadership development
- Establishment and sustenance of peer-to-peer networks
- Strategically directed grantmaking by funders
- Creation of avenues for the dissemination of field-wide research
- Refining the explanatory paradigm for understanding the relationships between different groups of actors — for example, academics, practitioners, bloggers and other opinion formers, government, or funders

For at least a century, foundations, and occasionally governments, have found the idea of establishing and supporting self-identifying groups a useful focus for support: It offers the possibility of effecting, or at least supporting, systemic change by identifying and strengthening synergetic connections among otherwise isolated players.

The informing motive for field-building grew out of the understanding that large-scale change usually happens only when a critical mass of organizations and individuals in a sector work together toward a common set of goals. This, in turn, can happen only when the change agents within a field have a common understanding or “map” that constitutes a coherent picture of that field’s needs, connections, strengths, and weaknesses.

*Arts engagement* is a slightly more tangled knot to unravel.<sup>4</sup> In practice, the term “engagement,” as in “arts engagement” or “arts and social engagement” is generally used in two different ways in the cultural sector.

Engagement is a “triadic” concept — a engages b through c — and implicit or explicit in any use of the term is an understanding of who or what a, b, and c actually are. “Arts engagement” refers implicitly to an organization or individual (a) who engages a defined group or community (b) through some form of artistic activity (c) created by a or b or, importantly, sometimes co-created by a and b together.

Generally, when we discuss engagement strategies — for example, customer engagement strategies, employee engagement strategies, or audience engagement strategies — we are concerned with techniques for ensuring that the members of a group are more deeply involved in, and have a deeper emotional affinity for, whatever it is they are being asked to attend, participate in, consume, or otherwise interact with. “Employee engagement,” for example, refers to the relationship between an organization and its employees. An “engaged employee” is one who is absorbed by and enthusiastic about her work and so has a positive disposition toward, and a propensity to act in ways that promote, an organization’s reputation and interests.

<sup>4</sup>“Engagement” as a term has its critics. In a presentation by Jim Fishwick and Tilly Boleyn at the 2016 Museums Australasia conference, the term engagement was rated among the top ten most “vomit-worthy” pieces of jargon in the museum sector, alongside “activate,” “content,” “learnings,” and a selection of other tropes. See <https://medium.com/@FimJishwick/six-museum-words-to-make-you-vomit-340d3904603c#nf8o8c2dz>.

In the arts, engagement strategies can focus on deepening the relationship with existing audiences, improving the quality of their experience, expanding arts participation to new groups, or all of the above. In this first definition, arts participation is the *end*; engagement strategies are the *means*.

A second way that “arts engagement” is often used is to refer to fostering social or civic engagement *through* participation in the arts. Here engagement has as its object not the deeper involvement of a given group in the arts *per se* but achieving a social, economic, or political end through participation in the arts. It is not enough just that someone participates. Some sort of further change needs to be attributable to the participation for effective engagement in this second use of the term. Meaningful arts participation is therefore necessary for engagement but not sufficient, and participation in the arts is the means.

Goals of arts engagement in this second interpretation may be related to increasing social cohesion or order, improving collective well-being in the most general sense, or encouraging political activism and awareness. However, these ambitions are only realized through specific, operational, “second order” goals, such as the collective welfare of a specific demographic (e.g., youth at risk in Sacramento), or an increase in awareness of a specific issue (e.g., domestic violence or homophobia), or the development of a specific skill (e.g., advocacy or physical self-confidence) for a defined group.

Across both definitions, arts engagement comprises these key elements:

- **Activity** — doing something, such as participating as an audience member or as a creative agent
- **Interaction** — at least two people need to be involved in this activity, so teaching yourself to play an instrument from a book or an online course would not count
- **Social exchange** — the activity involves giving or receiving something from others
- **Lack of compulsion** — there is no outside force obliging an individual to engage in the activity

Therefore, “arts engagement” is the act of providing opportunities for people to access artistic experiences, whether those experiences are passive (*watching or listening*) or active (*doing*), and irrespective of the informing motive for the act. That last clause is important: Arts engagement is not defined by the motivation behind it. In reality, it is often the case that the motivation for pursuing engagement is some blend of motives not necessarily clearly articulated, and an ad hoc coalition of support often lines up behind a specific initiative without deep analysis of what exactly the intended outcomes are.

Indeed, sometimes there is an implicit understanding that a detailed investigation of motives might pull the coalition apart. For example, board members or marketing staff may expect that a community engagement project leads to increases in paying audiences — an outcome requiring a complex causal chain, which may be peripheral to project intentions and beyond the budget. This sort of ambiguity about goals can make evaluation difficult.

The informing motive for field-building grew out of the understanding that large-scale change usually happens only when a critical mass of organizations and individuals in a sector work together toward a common set of goals.

Arts engagement can be intended to create meaningful arts participation — or to achieve some other social, economic, or political result.



## Delineating the Field

Is there a sense of a common field of individuals responsible for the arts engagement agenda; and, if not, what are the merits of encouraging one? The attributes of a field can usefully be boiled down to five components:<sup>5</sup>



**Shared Identity** — People self-identify as members of the field, share similar motivations and goals, and generally do not work in isolation or at cross-purposes.



**Standards of Practice** — Codified practices, demonstration models, professional development programs, and established processes and organizations ensure quality and fidelity of implementation.



**Knowledge Base** — A base of evidence and knowledge is well developed, with experts and researchers focused on the topic, and systems of knowledge documentation and dissemination in place.



**Leadership and Grassroots Support** — Influential leaders and organizations work overtly to advance the field, and there is a broad base of support from key constituencies.



**Funding and Policy Framework** — Dedicated funding and supportive policy foster ongoing progress.

This is a fairly demanding list of attributes to be measured up against — but one can easily see the value of the approach. Apply these elements as criteria for a field in areas as diverse as palliative health care or carbon dioxide emissions control, and one can readily see how it is possible to map the strengths and fault lines, and to identify where resources might be invested most effectively. So how coherent a field is arts engagement? Let's take each component in turn.

<sup>5</sup> This typology is based on work by The Bridgespan Group, which has informed a number of initiatives by The James Irvine Foundation. See <https://irvine-dot-org.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/64/attachments/strongfieldframework.pdf?1412656138>.



## Shared Identity

“Shared identity” reflects the extent to which people working within a particular field self-identify as members of the field, whether there is clarity and consensus as to the broad goals of the field, and the extent of collaborations within the field.

The interviews and panels we undertook revealed pretty starkly that shared identity is sporadic and underdeveloped, with some strong fault lines. There are multiple and overlapping ways in which people in the arts define the field in which they work: Some define it broadly, such as “the arts,” “arts administration,” “artist,” or “arts philanthropy,” while some define it more specifically according to a particular art form or aspect of the arts, such as classical music, museums, art education, or arts leadership. Still others see themselves working in an adjacent field, such as community development, or in “art plus something,” such as art and social justice, or art and wellness. For the most part, people simply do not self-identify as working in the field of arts engagement. “Is there a field? There’s something out there, but it’s at least premature to describe it as a formal field,” observed one interviewee. “It’s more a facet of several fields.”

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– Arts practitioner

Many feel engagement is a *way of practicing* that reflects a set of values but that is not an area of practice in and of itself. Use of the term itself has almost an ideological connotation, suggesting implicitly an allegiance to community that is higher than the allegiance to institution or employer. Others underscore the difference between an emerging “engagement field” and the existing field of community-based, grassroots organizations for whom engaging the community has always been integral to mission. As suggested in the introduction to this report, engagement, as a concept, and a preoccupation, has risen in prominence as arts organizations have become *disengaged from* their communities and, as a result, from their audiences and supporters. Long-term workers in the wider field of community engagement tend to see an arts organization’s commitment to engagement as driven by institutional considerations and, on occasion, strategic positioning *vis a vis* funders and other stakeholders.

An even clearer and more enduring fissure, familiar to all who work in the context of larger arts organizations, can exist between those with a professional concern with audience development and those concerned with *community* development, partly because of the deep-seated sense that they represent different goals and require different strategies. Audience development, in its traditional incarnation, requires a single-minded focus on moving individuals along stages in a journey from indifference to curiosity to attendance and on to deeper loyalty to and affection for the work of an organization. It is a long term relational marketing strategy.

To the extent that many arts organizations are building-based, and that the art form is prescribed not just by location but by a particular physical configuration (e.g., a concert hall or a proscenium arch theater) and that the imperative is to attract audiences to that base and to experience the art form in a particular and tightly prescribed format, then a particular financial and social logic will, necessarily, inform the institutional agenda, even if not overtly.

That logic will be reinforced by the expectations of the current audience, accustomed to particular contexts for and conventions around their cultural experiences, whose support is critical and whom the institution currently serves. These expectations may inform both the trivial, e.g., performance times, dress standards, codes of behavior, pricing conventions, etc., and the profound, e.g., the location of institutional energy and focus. The tension felt by the leadership of many building-based arts institutions working in traditional art forms concerns *where the balance of institutional focus should be placed*, and the impact on the character, development, and integrity of the art form when its association with its traditional physical and social parameters are loosened. The Houston Grand Opera initiative, HGOCo, for example, has developed pioneering new work in collaboration with various communities in Houston including the acclaimed mariachi production “Cruzar la Cara de la Luna,” as well as “The Refuge,” “The Bricklayer,” “Pieces of 9/11: Memories From Houston,” and a series of chamber operas celebrating the city’s Asian communities. These new works have a performance life and social meaning independent of the traditional demographic or performance base of the company. Integrating such two apparently divergent worlds is often a challenge for institutional leaders looking to ensure their organizations remain relevant.

The arts engagement field is “evolving in an organic, mish-mashy way... Someone needs to sort it all out.”

– Arts practitioner

Currently, many involved with audience development tend not to identify with the term “engagement,” and if there is an arts engagement field, it is a loose, organic, informal community, a network of like-minded people and organizations, but one lacking strong linkages among them. According to one interviewee, the arts engagement field is “evolving in an organic, mish-mashy way... Someone needs to sort it all out.” Another explained, “We’re just on the verge of a critical mass.”

The difficulty in crisply articulating an overarching goal of the engagement field is also hindering the development of a stronger sense of shared identity. “There are so many different issues!” exclaimed one interviewee, while another observed, “There’s no consensus on the goal. It’s all ‘DIY,’ everyone’s on their own separate track.” This is obviously compounded by the lack of a uniform vocabulary and definition of terms.

So on the first criterion of field-building, arts engagement rates low. Those working in community engagement through the arts have a broad sense of affinity with others working in similar roles and a stronger sense of working with others in community development. And those working in the field of audience engagement in the context of institutional marketing and audience development tend not to identify their work as engagement *per se*.

This conclusion was strongly reinforced by a survey that the news and blog aggregator *ArtsJournal*,<sup>6</sup> a major media outlet in the arts professional community, conducted of its readership of 30,000 in early 2016 — to which some 3,000 readers responded. The 70 percent of respondents who declared that they “work in the arts” were asked to self-identify more specifically, and some 600 chose to do so. If one aggregates responses that include “arts engagement,” “arts community engagement,” and “community development” the total is fewer than 20, or about 3 percent. Only four respondents elected to spontaneously describe themselves as being in the field of arts engagement.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.artsjournal.com/>.



## Standards of Practice

Regardless of whether arts engagement is a “field” proper, a mode of practice, or an agenda within the wider arts field, uniformly understood standards of practice appear underdeveloped. This is true in terms of the codification of engagement models and practices, knowledge-sharing and networking infrastructure, training and professional development programs, and the relative absence of infrastructure to ensure quality of implementation. A literature review focusing exclusively on engagement — as opposed to engagement and audience development — strongly supported this conclusion, and interviewees were almost unanimous on this point. (Find a summary of this literature review at [Irvine.org/AEAlitreview](http://Irvine.org/AEAlitreview)). “There is no standardized terminology, much less standards of practice,” said one interviewee.

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– Arts practitioner

Some question the feasibility and even the value of attempting to codify engagement models, because for them “authentic” engagement practices are organic by design; they emanate from specific communities, people, and contexts, and therefore it may not be possible to transfer a model from one context to another. “It’s not something you can teach; it’s very experiential,” asserted one interviewee, while another suggested that “the whole notion of ‘best practice’ is not helpful, because it’s all going to be customized to a particular community.” For many, there is an objection of principle to the application of traditional metrics, key performance indicators, etc., because of a concern that the transformational impact of effective engagement, as in the field of cultural diplomacy, is often only discernable in the long-term and therefore ill-suited to the largely quantitative and shorter-term horizons of most evaluation work. This does not necessarily augur well for the development of a field that has credibility in academic, funding, or public sector circles.

Others, however, suggest it may indeed be possible to codify and teach the principles of engagement and to go beyond this to “reform” or evolve organizational culture within the arts to put engagement at the core. Some suggested that a “toolkit” that attempts to articulate these principles and approaches could be developed, along the lines, for example, of the creative place-making toolboxes developed by Artscape<sup>7</sup> and others.

Notwithstanding the challenges of codifying practice, there is an appetite for more infrastructure to support knowledge sharing, networking, and professional development. “My staff would absolutely benefit from learning practice,” said one interviewee. “It’s difficult to think of where they can go to hone their skills, especially implementation skills, which are critical.” There is however little available for people interested in learning whatever tools of the trade that may exist to do so. Many among those interviewed said that they “learn by doing” (and by failing initially and often).

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– Arts practitioner

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.artscapediy.org/Creative-Placemaking-Toolbox.aspx>.



## Knowledge Base

Alongside the lack of common standards of practice, arts engagement also lacks a formalized infrastructure for the development and dissemination of knowledge and other information. This has been true historically of cultural policy as a whole, but enormous strides have been made in the past decade, as academic and public policy interest in the cultural sector has increased. Arts policy, cultural planning, and the overall relationship between the arts and adjacent areas of urban, social, economic policy is considerably more sophisticated than a decade ago, with national and international networks such as the International Federation of Arts Councils and Cultural Agencies (IFACCA), the Cultural Research Network, an array of peer reviewed journals and standing conferences, and an active blogosphere.

However, a paradigmatic, largely agreed-upon framework for discussing and analyzing the success of different strategies in engagement is largely absent. Interviews and a literature review suggest that much activity is undocumented, and that where it is, metrics are often neglected, intentionally or by default. Where metrics are provided, they are rarely placed in a wider context of field experience for comparative purposes, making it difficult to create a cumulative body of replicable knowledge and understanding.

Key gaps in the knowledge base include the following:

- Academic research is not extensive, and often disconnected from practice
- There is little validation of the field through formalized programs leading to certification — with few formal degrees or other qualifications in the field
- Currently, no dedicated engagement forum for practitioners exists; there are few formal convening opportunities, and even fewer where knowledge and insights can be pooled between artistic disciplines
- There are no publications, academic or professional, that *regularly* focus on engagement issues

Interviewees favored investment in building this knowledge base. “Let’s fund research, experiment, and gather and document” was a typical comment.

Much activity in this regard is happening less formally. There are multiple and overlapping informal networks, and there are forums and publications that regularly touch on aspects of arts engagement. Philanthropic organizations including Irvine and The Wallace Foundation, and industry associations have generated some literature. There has been a concerted effort by bloggers, academics, practitioners, and consultants in recent years to build a codified knowledge base. There is strong insightful writing in the field, both analytical and descriptive. Obvious examples include Doug Borwick’s blog *Engaging Matters* and Diane Ragsdale’s *Jumper* at [artsjournal.com](http://artsjournal.com); publications and work with the Association of Arts Administration Educators; the community of practice that Nina Simon has created around *Museum 2.0* and her work on the *Participatory Museum* and *The Art of Relevance*; and also the efforts of [Createquity.com](http://Createquity.com) and other websites to consolidate thinking.





## Leadership and Grassroots Support

There is a broad swathe of constituencies, organizations, and individuals working in arts engagement. In no sort of hierarchy, these stakeholders include:

- Arts practitioners working in arts organizations — typically people working in education and programming departments
- Community-based organizations for whom engaging community members with and through art is part and parcel of their mission — for them, it’s “in their DNA”
- Artist-run organizations
- Individual “social practice” artists, also known as “community-based artists,” “artists,” “civic-practice artists,” or artist collectives
- Small, often unincorporated, volunteer-driven groups, or projects — that often coalesce around a single initiative or periodic initiatives and then dissipate
- Community groups, churches, and social clubs using the arts to engage community
- Academics and researchers
- Bloggers and other thought leaders
- Funders and policymakers

Leadership in arts engagement “has to come from all departments within an organization — curatorial, marketing, education. It has to be knit together. It has to be within the ethos of the organization.”

– Arts practitioner

Acknowledged leadership in the field currently lies disproportionately within small, grassroots organizations and individual social practice artists/collectives committed to engagement practices. Fewer leaders in this field are found within established arts organizations, except for those who have made a point of prioritizing education, outreach, and audience development. The reasons for this are not entirely clear, outside of a general, longstanding institutional culture and a sense that smaller organizations are better designed to engage communities, as working in this way demands flexibility, nimbleness, and a certain amount of “street cred.” “Large organizations are really hard to steer,” said one interviewee. “There’s something deep-rooted in their organizational cultures that resists thinking outside of the context of institutional advantage — maybe the financial challenges are simply too great.” Within large organizations, marketing and fundraising professionals can be skeptical about engagement outside the context of audience or donor development, as their professional performance is so often tied to bottom-line results within relatively, sometimes very, short timeframes.

Leadership has tended therefore to reside in individual practitioners and commentators who are actively working to restructure and re-engineer, or advocate for the re-engineering of, their organizational culture, programming, marketing, and management strategies so that they are underpinned by an ethos of engagement. In the words of one interviewee, leadership in arts engagement “has to come from all departments within an organization — curatorial, marketing, education. It has to be knit together. It has to be within the ethos of the organization.” Another said, “Leadership in this emerging field has to come from the directors and their boards.”



## Funding and Policy Framework

The funding and policy framework around arts engagement is evolving as the field itself evolves, partly in response to the increasing volume and types of arts activities that are designed to engage communities directly, and in some cases because national and local funders are prioritizing engagement, and thus encouraging arts organizations to do the same.

That said, the funding community is not currently widely represented in the debate. There is a strong sense that there remains an inequitable distribution of resources that favors traditional, “establishment” arts and “legacy” cultural organizations for whom engagement is a secondary or tertiary priority at best, and a distraction at worst. One interviewee put it this way: “I’ve sat in so many meetings...with all of the same people...and there’s never any ‘sausage’ at the end! Why? Because nobody who holds the purse strings is at that table!”

Some believe this discrepancy is partly a byproduct of the 501(c)(3) model and its relationship with an often fairly conservative philanthropic community. Relentless fundraising pressures on arts organizations — especially larger ones — can lead to the cultivation of a “power elite” capable of serving as board members and making major gifts. With escalating fundraising goals and competition for philanthropic dollars, engagement work may not be viewed as helpful to “the bottom line.”

It is difficult to generalize with respect to individual philanthropy. On the one hand, much of the engagement agenda does not carry with it the high profile that can be required to attract the attention of individual donors; on the other hand, the social and economic impact has an appeal that is sometimes absent in the funding of traditional cultural agendas.

Funding arts engagement can present a challenge because of organizational character of the players. Arts initiatives that succeed in engaging new audiences in new ways may be one-off projects undertaken by individuals and artist collectives, or unincorporated entities, or by small nonprofits with limited fundraising capacity. Often the projects are temporary, small-scale, intangible, or evolving; and evaluation is difficult.

Take *Fallen Fruit*, an art collaboration conceived by three artists who work with fruit and the economy of fruit picking and harvesting. Using a fiscal sponsor, the group has received grants to support its evolving, collaborative work: serialized public projects, site-specific installations, arts happenings, Public Fruit Jams, and nocturnal forages that “renegotiate our relationship to ourselves through guided visualizations and dynamic group participation.” This type of work can present difficulties to funders accustomed to making grants to a recognizable nonprofit with a specific project that can be described, repeated, and evaluated in a straightforward manner. “It’s really tough to fund it, measure it, replicate, scale it,” explained one interviewee. “There is an enormous amount of really valuable, vital, high-quality activity happening outside of institutions, and funders might be interested in it, but if it’s happening outside of 501(c)(3)s and outside of facilities it’s hard to capture it.”

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– Arts practitioner

## The Case for Concerted Field-Building

Arts engagement — the continued and effective search for relevance in a rapidly changing environment — is perhaps the most urgent facing the cultural sector in the United States.<sup>8</sup> The attempt to map the arts engagement field against the criteria for a strong field indicates that it is rather weak and under-articulated. This constitutes a rather stark contrast between need and response. In this section of the report, we further describe this need and discuss possible courses of action for meeting it.

In a recent set of interviews with 11 art museum directors, author and former Director of the High Museum of Art Michael Shapiro, asked Matthew Teitelbaum, the Director of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, his advice to a young person seeking to become a museum director. Teitelbaum's reply was telling: "[I'd] want to know if they understand that they'd have to work really hard and connect the 'why' to what they want to achieve in an ever-changing world. If they say it's because they love art, then my answer is, become a university professor. If you love art, great! ...If you want to work in a museum, then the 'why' is about that public space, meeting the public, creating civic value...are you prepared to engage some of those trends, like more user-generated content?"<sup>9</sup>

With few exceptions, these directors of the leading art museums across America spontaneously identify engagement with the communities in which they are situated and broadening the social base of the institutions as the most fundamental tasks they have.

This sentiment is iterated again and again in Shapiro's interviews. Kay Feldman of the Minneapolis Institute of Art reflects: "I guess my greatest wish is for people becoming a little more flexible when studying art history, so there is a greater focus on audience, and perhaps more on the impact of the art than completely on the art history." Julián Zugazagoita, director of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, shared these priorities: "[M]aking sure anyone coming to the museum feels welcome — that in a nutshell has been the real transformative work of the last five years." With few exceptions, and encouragingly, these directors of the leading art museums across America spontaneously identify engagement with the communities in which they are situated and broadening the social base of the institutions as the most fundamental tasks they have.

In the classical music field, the League of American Orchestras' recent strategic plan (2016-2022) identifies engagement as a priority of the sector enjoying equal status with artistic standards: "[O]rchestras are adding to their transactional role — i.e., the production of high-quality concerts — a relational role. In their relational roles, orchestras continue to strive for excellence in performance, but now bring equal attention to the nature of the orchestral experience itself: the interplay with different audiences; synergistic and authentic engagement with communities; expanding roles of musicians, composers, and conductors as ambassadors, advocates, and educators; and increasing activity in lifelong learning and civic participation." This may be an aspiration presented as a fact, but the aspiration is nevertheless clear.

<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the best statistical evidence for this relatively uncontroversial assertion is coming out of the work from the National Center for Arts Research at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. The Center's recent Edition 3 Report shows robust evidence for level or declining audiences for most of the 11 art forms it tracks and increased marketing costs per attendee. The art forms for which this is true include Art Museum, Opera, Performing Arts Center (PACs), Orchestra, Theater, and Other Museums such as Natural History and Science Museums.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Shapiro, *Eleven Museums, Eleven Directors: Conversations on Art and Leadership* High Museum of Art, 2016.

Meanwhile, philanthropic organizations such as Irvine, Ford Foundation, The Wallace Foundation, and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, as well as umbrella organizations like Grantmakers in the Arts, have sought to prioritize the territory of engagement, underscore their understanding of the changing context for their work, encourage thought leadership, and foster initiatives such as *Arts in A Changing America* by the California Institute of the Arts. The initiative's goal is to create "a vast network of relevant organizations, artists, scholars, idea producers, and resource people across sectors to reframe the national arts conversation at the intersection of arts and social justice...[and] serve as an urgently needed catalyst that brings unheard, leadership voices in the arts to the forefront of social discourse, arts production, and community change."

Related, place-making through the arts, perhaps the most pervasive recent agenda in arts philanthropy and public funding, has at its core a concept of artistic engagement that is very broadly based in both the concept of and context for cultural participation.

These trends put established building-based institutions on their metal in ways that challenge them on many dimensions. Key challenges include:

- Mechanics of location that can be a source of stress, with a shift of emphasis from building-based to community-based activity, and the attendant challenges of working simultaneously both in purpose-built spaces and in spaces that are much less highly specified
- Profound changes in work practices and relations implicit in co-curation and the generation of content that can and do challenge traditional notions of curatorial authority, and that by implication also challenge a cadre of workers whose sense of professional identity and *raison d'être* can be threatened
- Absence of developed business models that support engagement work on an ongoing basis; this can make effective work over time challenging, while reliance on project-based funding makes long-term relationship-building difficult and contingent
- Differences of perspective and preference between arts participants historically engaged by arts organizations and new communities of interest — creating expectations that can be and are often in conflict
- Absence of opportunities or contexts in which to compare the relative success of different practices

Leaders of established organizations are, in effect, aware that they are in a race against time in their re-engineering and reorientation and that they must reflect deeply on what is essential to their mission and what is peripheral. Alongside them has emerged a new cohort of organizations without the distinctions or burdens of legacy organizations, but that rarely have the assets to invest in organizational development. The issue is whether and how one might deepen the dialogue between these two cohorts. What emerges are two separate agendas — what one might characterize as a "reform" agenda and a "cultural equity" agenda, and the latent potential of a third "big tent" agenda that might yet take shape.

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## The “Reform” Agenda

This agenda focuses on established 501(c)(3) arts organizations, supporting them in their efforts to evolve their organizational culture, strategy, and operations to put engagement nearer to the center of their concerns and enable them to develop both the content and form of their work in ways that engage more meaningfully with the communities that they aspire to serve. This model is based on an approach to arts engagement in which arts participation is the end, and engagement strategies are the means. Engagement in this sense is less about drawing the audience to an organization than ensuring that an organization finds appropriate ways of being relevant and meaningful to the changing community in which it is located.

Those organizations whose leadership is succeeding in making these changes describe profound adjustments required in organizational culture and values, in the way that programming decisions are made, and in the funding models that support their businesses. Those responsible for transformational change within their organizations often underscore how isolating the process of leading such change and how intractable the cultures of established arts organizations can be. These leaders need support, and their successes need to be better understood, and the results more widely disseminated.

Engagement in this sense is less about drawing the audience to an organization than ensuring that an organization finds appropriate — and therefore often transformed — ways of being relevant and meaningful to the changing community in which it is located.

In this model, the focus for field-building is on leaders of nonprofit arts organizations for whom engagement has historically been a low priority but for whom it is now — or now needs to be — a higher one. The intention would be to encourage a cohort of arts engagement leaders sensitized to the changing nature of their environment, codifying good engagement practice, disseminating it, incentivizing it, and strengthening the hand of those arts leaders who have embraced it. The motive would be to ensure that the arts infrastructure that has been created is maintained and available in meaningful ways to future generations.

A program informed by this sort of framework could include the following elements (none of which currently exist):

- Opportunities for convenings focused exclusively on arts engagement to foster knowledge sharing and networking across artistic disciplines, and between the arts and adjacent sectors
- Codification of good practice
- Support for knowledge sharing and dissemination
- Tailored technical assistance to support organizational culture change
- An engagement mentoring program
- Engagement leadership training and development, which could focus not only on CEOs but also board members and senior managers in the arts — anybody who is or has potential to be a leader of the field



## The “Cultural Equity” Agenda

A second agenda focuses on the arts as a way of promoting social equity and social justice. Fostering social or civic engagement through the arts has as its object not the deeper involvement of a given group in the arts *per se* but achieving a social goal through participation in the arts. Here meaningful arts participation is necessary but not sufficient, and *arts participation is the means, not the end*. The end is related to participation in collective activities that reinforce social capital and social norms.

This model is concerned with the growing number of individuals, community-based organizations, and unincorporated entities — often quite small — that work in a variety of fields that sometimes overlap, including: art and community development, art and wellbeing, youth arts, art and the environment, creative place-making, arts and educational reform, and ethnically specific art forms. The agenda is concerned with reallocating cultural resources to better reflect communities, changing demographics, and changing patterns of artistic practice and cultural consumption.

There is a range of views as to whether the goals of this agenda are compatible with a commitment to artistic standards. Although pursuit of social goals can involve a compromise with respect to conventional artistic standards, many examples from practice show us otherwise. Boston Children’s Chorus has, for example, successfully managed to combine a social agenda around community building with the highest musical standards. El Sistema, the Venezuelan system of orchestral training that engages young people, is clearly premised on the compatibility of the two. Many arts activists believe, as an article of faith, that the two goals are entirely compatible.

Here meaningful arts participation is necessary but not sufficient, and arts participation is the means, not the end. The end is related to participation in collective activities that reinforce social capital and social norms.

This model differs from the “reform” agenda in that instead of supporting the better-established arts organizations to learn ways to engage community more intentionally, it would prioritize interventions where the community is already engaged. The agenda would be more oriented toward those organizations with an explicitly social agenda.

A program built on the cultural equity model might comprise:

- Strengthening the art and social change agenda through regular convenings, knowledge sharing, and dissemination
- Building the knowledge base, and generating case studies that explore the causal relationship between the arts and social change
- Developing a network of those working in art and social change — especially important since the territory spans many disparate areas and types of organizations and workers
- Funding a re-granting agency to extend support to individuals and grassroots programs that are unincorporated

## The “Big Tent” Agenda

These two agendas constitute parallel lines. But the potential impact of their effective integration is significantly greater, expanding the definition of both “arts” and “engagement” to reflect the totality of artistic and creative activity and acknowledging that we engage in the arts and creativity not only in terms of traditional cultural “consumption,” but, increasingly, in personal and community-based production and co-production.

A “big tent” approach would define the arts broadly to include not only traditional art forms, but the broader “creative industries” (design, architecture, fashion, commercial music, craft, film, etc.) and amateur or home-based arts and crafts as well. In essence, this model is concerned with supporting the entire creative economy: production, distribution, and consumption. Rather than focusing on one part of the overall creative ecology — 501(c)(3)s — it embraces for-profits, not-for-profits, individuals, and benefit corporations (or B corps).

The agenda addresses the reality of marginally economically viable entities that nevertheless have a major role in the generation and distribution of culture in today’s economy. It recognizes that there is something of value in a healthy creative ecology that the market does not spontaneously generate, and it responds to the collapse of the creative community that is attributed to changes in patterns of employment, the impact of technology on distribution, and the various horsemen of the late capitalist apocalypse.<sup>10</sup>

This model is concerned with supporting the entire creative economy: production, distribution, and consumption.

A program based upon the big tent model might embrace the reform and equity agendas and expand this to include:

- Consideration of alternative publishing houses, small presses, and other media outlets, and inclusion of independent music labels and their artists (alternatives to dominant outlets such as iTunes, Spotify, etc.)
- Exploration of nonprofit-for-profit collaborations and dissemination of case studies
- Exploration of the effective introduction of cultural components into policy agendas of adjacent fields, such as mental health, environment, and economic development

<sup>10</sup> The argument that culture and creativity have been adversely affected at considerable social cost has recently been put forward by Scott Timberg in *Culture Crash: The Killing of the Creative Class*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.

## Conclusion

This report seeks to make the case for a concerted effort by the arts community to ensure that the processes of producing and presenting culture take more fully into account the deep changes in society, taste, and technology of which most in this community are acutely aware. The emphasis is on the word concerted. It suggests that current efforts are fragmented and partial and that the lessons learned in one context are too rarely distilled into a form that can be applied in another context. Notwithstanding many advances in the self-knowledge and analytic understanding within the sector generally, we are struggling to keep pace with change. This case is implicitly addressed to the philanthropic community, the educational community, and to the broad swathe of cultural leaders who are deeply engaged with the issue of “relevance.” We are part of a broad field that cuts across art forms and scale to a deeper common cause: ensuring broader and deeper access to the transformational power of artistic endeavor.

## About The James Irvine Foundation

The James Irvine Foundation is a private, nonprofit grantmaking foundation dedicated to expanding opportunity for the people of California to participate in a vibrant, successful, and inclusive society. Since 1937 the Foundation has provided over \$1.5 billion in grants to more than 3,600 nonprofit organizations throughout California. With about \$2 billion in assets, the Foundation made grants of \$74 million in 2015 for the people of California.

## About AEA Consulting

AEA Consulting has worked with cultural organizations and their stakeholders internationally since 1991. Based in London and New York, the team works on cultural policy and on strategic and operational planning, and has contributed extensively to thought leadership in areas as diverse as audience development, capitalization, valuing the arts, and cultural district planning. AEA's previous work for The James Irvine Foundation includes *Why "Where"? Because "Who": Arts Venues, Spaces and Tradition* (2014) and *Critical Issues Facing the Arts in California* (2006).



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