

10/13/07 EAST AUSTIN ECONOMIC SUMMIT

BREAKOUT SESSION ONE:

Arts and Culture in East Austin: How Can Artists Network and Leverage Cultural Assets?

- Janet Seibert – Civic Arts Coordinator, “Create Austin”

“Create Austin” is currently drafting a cultural planning process to create strategies for long-term development for the next 10 years (with sights on 2017). Aiming for City Council adoption by February.

The planning process looks at possibilities for public/private collaboration (for instance, between the City and the community). It aims to define strategies for sustaining the culture of creativity, because creativity is a key component of a strong workforce and a strong community.

- Janet’s introductions:

Harold McMillan – Founder/director of Diverse Arts Culture Works, trying to provide access/exposure to Af-Am cultural traditions, art that is outside of the European tradition, appreciation for a “mosaic of cultures.”

Lisa Byrd – Executive Director of ProArts Collective—in charge of coordinating, managing, and planning media arts. “Inspired by the idea that arts provide people with an expanded view of our world.” Also the woman behind the “Black Arts Movement” festival. Former production manager of Ballet Austin.

Bonnie Cullum – Co-founder, Producing Artistic Director for Vortex Theatre on Manor since 1988. Built the foundation of Austin’s experimental theater/dance scene.

Sam Coronado – Came from Houston Independent Arts Council, has taught at ACC, Dougherty, Laguna Gloria, PeopleFund “poster child”

- Questions (posed by Janet to specific panel members):
 1. **Harold** – For artists, the affordability of space, finding partners/sponsors, and creating a sustainable career are major concerns. What are best practices? Obstacles? What support can we provide for our artists?

Best practices – I don’t know what they are, but there are models out there. I work in the non-profit sector, we produce a range of different types of programs. The way I would like it to be, is that I had an active Board of Directors that was

good at networking and raising funds, and that essentially acted as the “fingers” of the organization. They would get into the community, have conversations with people I don’t know, their friends would have convos with people they don’t know, and then those people would become part of my Advisory Board because they agree with the mission of the work we’re trying to do. Some of those people who are interested and advisory would have connections to tech firms, some would have connections to media, printing, pre-press offices, distribution firms for paper, recording studio (PSAs for broadcast), internet service providers that can give me free space in return for a banner ad on my website, etc.

Then, because I’ve got my fingers in my community, that becomes a subset—one of my board members says “we need to put together a support/membership organization” (a guild, friends of, producers circle, whatever you want to call it). With that, we could set up a structure that said “ok, if you’re really my friend and you want to be treated special, you’ll bring your friends to the table and write that check for X amount of dollars.” Then it becomes a cool thing to be on Harold’s good friend list, because every quarter we throw a good cocktail party, sit down dinner, whatever.

Within that larger group, there are people who don’t have money or access to goods and services, but might be college or high school students, poor people who are passionate about art, people with stage craft experience—they also want a structure to be my best friends, so maybe my Board of Directors puts together a recruitment structure for volunteers, because I need all of those people. Then my volunteers are there to help dispense tickets, clean up, bring friends to the show, etc.

Some of those volunteers are young, eager, enthusiastic—they’ve had marketing/advertising classes that have taught them that you can buy/sell advertising, PR, promotions, market research, press releases, whatever. So then I can put my fingers in the university community and on Craig’s List—Craig’s list is one of the secrets! Go to Craig’s list for any number of things, because that hits a lot of people. So that other group of people are who I can do a services trade with—they can come do a semester/year with me, because they need to learn how to do PR, and we provide an opportunity. On our end it’s time consuming, and the success rate is probably only about 60-70%. But I’ve worked with 500 volunteers/interns over the past 10 years. Many of my “kids” are doing better than I am. I’ve got a magazine journalist in London, I’ve got people all over. Non-profits provide great “get your feet wet and dirty” experience for young professionals who are just getting started.

That’s what I shoot at every year, but I don’t hit it. It’s much more complex than that, especially in central East Austin if part of what you’re up to is geographic and culture specific. Our stuff happens to be largely Af-Am based, so it’s less than 10% of us here in the city—and how many give to the arts or attend arts

events? How many people that *can* do those things deal with Af-Am art vs. the status of sitting on the Board of Directors for the symphony, the opera, etc? I understand the models. The challenge is getting the models to work in the situation where we are.

Q: (Follow-up) What can the community do to provide an infrastructure for support? How do we better connect with arts orgs to provide that mechanism for students to volunteer?

The reason that there is rapid growth and transition in the East Austin community right now is because it's funky and greasy and cool with its history—a history that's tied to poverty and segregation. There's much that we'd like to hang on to, but the tension is that many of the people who are coming into the community (especially the ones with assets, wealth, and power) are not particularly into that stuff. Their attitude is "hey, we're here now, the party can start." But I'm saying, "the party's been going on for the past 100 years, lets work together to make the community better for everyone."

There needs to be some level of arts education in the business community, to communicate to them that culture is important. Sometimes I think they don't believe that if they invest in culture, it will positively impact their bottom line. I can't tell them that—I have a vested interest, so they don't trust me. But PeopleFund, for example, has a cultural mission—they could set up a structure for cultural policy and economic development in Central East Austin, big Austin (Austin City Gov't) could do a similar thing, the ARA could do a similar thing, etc. There needs to be a certain amount of "officialdom" in a cultural education system. In preservation of our cultural history, there's a lot of work. Non-profits and individual artists don't have the time, energy, assets, or political clout to move these things.

Janet – It's all about people to people. Relationships.

2. **Lisa** – In the 2006 Bond elections, voters passed \$1.5 million toward an African-American Resource and Cultural Center. What does this mean to the Af-Am community In East Austin? In Austin in general?

2 years ago, a very innovative community Initiative was developed between the African American community and the City of Austin, called the Af-Am Quality of Life Initiative. Because of social and political considerations (police shootings, burning of black night club, other social issues) it came to a point when the community came together, facilitated by city, to have a convo within the Af-Am community, about what we as a community perceived as some of our own issues and how we thought the City Gov't might address them. So the initiative was born, covering 6 areas (education, police/safety, housing, employment, health, and arts/culture/entertainment) Harold and I served on the arts and culture committee—there were a series of forums and town hall meetings where we got

together and said, “these are the things we see as problems, these are recommendations that we have for the City and community to address those issues.

There were a total of 10 recommendations – 4 were about how Austin sells itself nationally and internationally, especially through the Austin Convention Visitors Bureau. Everybody of a certain age/race knows about Austin, knows what it’s about—live music, art, and so on. But when you ask African Americans around the country, the first response they have is, “I didn’t know there are Black people in Austin.” We went on their website, looked around, and there was not one Black person on that website. Not one brown person on that website. So the committee said, “No, in fact, you have to be more representational.” And we weren’t the only ones; businesses and corporations said that. They have a hard time recruiting Af-Ams to come to Austin because, who wants to go to a place that isn’t representative of your culture?

Other recommendations were about the public celebration of Af-Am culture in Austin. We know a lot about the general majority culture, the history of Austin, and usually there’s a little set-aside paragraph about Black people, how Texas used to be Mexico, etc. None of our culture has been celebrated, especially artistically. How can we help support art that represents the culture of our community? There are so many public events in Austin – SXSW, ACL, but there’s never been anything with a focus on Af-Am culture. One recommendation was to establish an Af-Am Cultural Heritage District in Central East Austin. Recognizing that there has to be a hub of information about Af-Am history. When a tourist or conference comes to town, the first place they go is the Visitors Bureau. In Austin, everything there is geared toward Anglo culture. So this would be where you would go to find out about Af-Am culture. The boundaries would be Manor, 7th Street, I-35, and Airport. Within that district, there are at least 75 existing Af-Am cultural historic sites. There’s Huston-Tillotson, The Carver Museum, Ebenezer Baptist, and historical private homes. The bond package would help to build a center for the district – the physical building itself is existing now, it’s on E. 11th Street, east of Bens BBQ. It looks like a little shack, but it has high historical significance—it was the 1st home bought by a free black man, in 1868, and has been in the same family since. So with that \$1.5 million, it will be renovated into a visitors center, a center for the Cultural Heritage District.

3. **Bonnie** – I’ve lived on Manor Road for many years, and there’s never been anything over there. Now there’s the salvaged Vanguard Theater, East Side Café, and your Vortex Theatre. What is going on on Manor, what are you doing to promote East Austin and what’s going on over there?

We moved to Manor in 1994—in that year we’d been in an old movie theater on Ben White. When I knew I wanted to move, I looked at every empty property in East Austin that I could find, so I had a pretty good scope of what was available. I

couldn't afford most of it, but I found this derelict warehouse that had been abandoned for 10 years. Part of my struggle has been the reality of turning an abandoned building into a theater. Like Harold, I also fantasize about ways that things could happen and don't. But all of the money that has gone into that building has been privately raised. We're very fortunate that in 1999, we had a group form a corporation and buy the building, and the lot in front for Vortex. There are lots of people dedicated to the arts, so I feel we're not in danger of slipping out. That's my biggest asset, in addition to people. That's what's happened with Manor. East Side and Mi Madre for many years were the only things on Manor Road. Nothing survived. What we see now is a huge boom in business there, now there are 8 restaurants that are packed all the time, there's a huge parking problem, people waiting in lines, there's been an incredible amount of growth. With the two theaters and 8 restaurants, a group was able to come together and work with the neighborhood association to lobby Cap Metro to bring a Dillo over at lunch time to serve those restaurants, in response to traffic/parking problems caused by the overflow of people driving to meet for lunch. The revised route started at the end of August, it goes from S. Congress through downtown, through UT, and now there's a Manor Road extension at lunchtime. I think there are long-term prospects for people being able to get on public transportation and have a meal at a nice restaurant, I think we can see some improvement if the Orange Dillo is successful. Inevitably we will have a better night route, high visibility through transportation, and it will bring tourists from downtown.

In May we started something called "East Austin Live"—the idea came about thru many conversations. As more arts orgs were moving into East Austin, it was not only those venues but dozens of companies working at those venues because they don't have their own. So there's been a cultivation of homes or hubs for the arts that can interconnect and educate not only tourists and people coming in, but also people living in Austin. They don't seem to understand that, there's more than just a couple of warehouse theaters in East Austin. The website, "EastAustinLive.com", has a list of all those companies and their links. There's even an East Austin studio tour – it's been successful, attracted sponsorship.

We've also done a lot to make theater affordable – we have a "pick your price" scale. So you can choose from a sliding scale, about \$10-\$30 for most shows, so you can get in for 10 bucks, but people who have more revenue can pay more. This has kept our box office revenue about the same, but it's increased the volume of people coming in. We're trying to get more people to come and find a cultural home, be part of that experience.

Janet – You can't do anything without the audience. By going and buying a ticket to see a play, fine art exhibit, dance, you make the picture complete.

4. **Sam** – has a screen print studio in East Austin, known as the "Latino artist hub" What does that mean? How did PeopleFund help you?

For many years I was sort of a loner, I was fortunate enough that I was able to buy a little piece of property on Montopolis a couple of years ago, just before property values went up in Austin. Before then I was located in East Austin where Café Munde was. It started off as a painting studio, and then became a print studio. I needed to have a little more control over lights and power—the landlords fall on hard times too, so sometimes that would affect you. I rented reasonably but needed to grow, so at one point we were looking for a space. Montopolis is so east it's almost in Bastrop, but it's probably the last barrio that hasn't been gentrified quiet yet, although you can see that things are changing. I had a tenant that was renting a little house that the property came with, but I needed more money for renovation. So I came to PeopleFund, and they were kind enough to let me borrow some money, that kept us going. Through my career as an artist, I didn't understand the significance of being an artist. It isn't just painting pretty pictures, it's being an entrepreneur. There's a business aspect – I had a lot of inventory that I needed to start moving.

We've got a Latino artist workshop, one of 2 or 3 in the country. We bring in artists from the US, Latin America, Mexico. Even though most people are not aware of what we do in East Austin and what happens in the Montopolis neighborhood. The artists we bring in, they're humbled by our existence because we're making whatever we can off of the materials and equipment that we have. I haven't gone into any more debt because I want to make sure that we start moving our product. I'm hoping that the money and consulting that PeopleFund has offered will help us with a marketing effort, trying to sell/promote prints. We've got into some major exhibits and museums, and collectors in the US, we're hoping to do more. In a sense I owe a deal of thanks to PeopleFund for making me aware of the business aspect of the arts.

- Audience Q&A

Q: I'm a resident in East Austin and I've never heard of your theaters. I'm thinking of my mother's generation, and most of the East Austin community, they don't have internet access, how do you make yourself available to those people in East Austin?

Lisa – Let me turn that around—if I can ask, what sources do you use to find out about things that are going on?

Resident: The Villager, neighborhood papers, the radio (KAZI), churches, handouts and leaflets. None of my neighbors know what's going on. Aside from a few places, you can't even get the Chronicle. There are politics involved as well as economics.

10 years ago while planning new Carver center, and choosing artists, didn't pick any people of color.

Lisa – A lot of this is also addressed in the Quality of Life Initiative – one of those things is, not just with Carver, an Arts In Public Places program of the City, they have a certain amount of \$ set aside from new city construction projects to go to create artwork. Public art is essential. In poor neighborhoods, even more essential. Maybe it needs to be funded in different way, because there are not a lot of buildings created by the city in East Austin. Does that art reflect the neighborhood? Do they have participation in what it is and who will create it? It's an issue, we need to work on pushing the City to redefine its program and also push the neighborhood, NPAs to come together and put in for a grant of money to do some public art in Central East Austin. There are a lot of studio artists, Af-Am, Latino, that live and work in Central East Austin and who have not participated in the public arts process, we need to help them do that as well.

Janet – It's a very narrow program. All it says is that for every City building, we will take 2% and create public art.

Lisa – City Council really listens to NPAs. If you can get them to speak to the issue, you have a voice.

Harold – It's also an issue of media exposure, distribution. Part of the problem is the perception that it's "over there", "we don't go over there." The Chronicle, for a lot of people, is a weekly source for what's happening, but a lot of those things are not going on in East Austin. Some are. Maybe we need to remind those people that you can expand your distribution, raise advertising rates. Put these out in the neighborhood. The flip side is, I do a pretty good job of getting press at the Chronicle. Sometimes even the Statesman. Because they can make a living, do trade, sometimes even offer free coverage. Smaller papers like NCOA, Equasi, and The Villager are struggling to go to press. So I'm less inclined to ask them to do me a favor because I know the Chronicle can afford it.

Q: One of the biggest issues is the idea of communication with the community and how most communities communicate through technology. Are there any programs working with you to help find answers to that communication gap by finding ways to get technology to members of the community?

Harold – The Division of Telecommunications has a program called "GTalk" that has an open call for proposals every year, where they give small grants, like \$20,000, set up to address the "digital divide." It has funded some computer access centers in Central East Austin, some content things, but they don't have a lot of money. They'll give their next grant in Jan/Feb.

Comment: If it's not at church or in the barber shop or at community centers, that's about it. There's really no venue for Blacks unless you're 18. There used to be clubs, but they're gone. When Black people come to Austin, there's nowhere for them to go.

Lisa – Af-Am artists are constantly fighting to get an Af-Am audience. Do a large number of Af-Ams read those newspapers to get entertainment information? I mean, the majority of Af-Ams live in Pflugerville and Round Rock. How do you communicate with those people? Church is very cultural, when you're talking about small orgs with limited resources, we have to hit the culture at large, and then those specific pockets. Do we have the resources/capacity to leaflet a church and do the digital thing as well? The digital thing is going to get out, and to a lot of people. Not that we shouldn't do that, but that becomes our internal process about what's going to be the best.