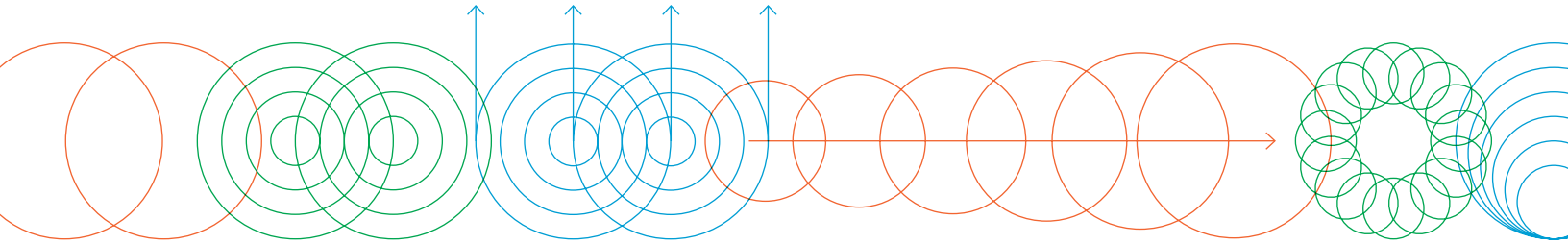

WE-Making

How Arts & Culture Unite People to Work Toward Community Well-Being

Theory of Change and Case Studies

metris arts consulting
planning | research | evaluation

PolicyLink

Center for ARTS IN MEDICINE
UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA / COLLEGE OF THE ARTS

Call it neighbor, friend, teacher, or just community,
Now, a needed part of our happy.
So, our life long collecting of others begins

—from the poem “WE-Making” by Carol Bebelle

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1

Preface

by the working group of funders of this project

This evidence-informed resource came about in far different circumstances from the ones in which we, as a nation, now find ourselves in the early months of 2021. At a time when "social cohesion" is challenged in new ways by "social distancing," and when "place-based" art has come to mean arts participation with neighbors whom we only see at a distance or virtually, one well might ask whether resources of this nature are hopelessly obsolete. Far from it. The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic fall-out and the protests related to racially motivated violence and discrimination have brought into national focus the persistent long-term threats to health equity. These crises have laid bare the ill effects of social isolation, social scarring, and social divides. These tools—and the lessons learned in their development—remain broadly applicable to those seeking to advances social cohesion, health equity, and community well-being.

In 2017, a group of funders with a mutual interest in supporting place-based arts and cultural practices to advance health equity and the well-being of communities began to ask: What can today's evidence tell us about the complex relationships between the arts, place, and social cohesion? How might this knowledge help funders and practitioners—in the arts, community development, and public health—set clearer goals and expectations for activities occurring at this nexus? How might these participants communicate more effectively with each other and with key decision-makers in their sectors about the relevance and utility of place-based arts practices to social cohesion, especially as one conduit to greater equity in health and well-being?

As with any large group enterprise, the parameters of this project changed as the partners got more deeply invested in it, questioning and even challenging the terms of discourse from their own fields of practice. From the beginning, the funders targeted the outcome "social cohesion" for particular study because previous

research had tagged it as a critical dynamic in population health and in solutions for responding to health inequities. Notably, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has identified this factor as part of its Culture of Health action framework (action area 1, "making health a shared value").

Similarly, in creative placemaking and the arts, the value of social cohesion has gained traction, though in practice and communications it often goes unexamined. The term, when mentioned at all, is largely indistinguishable from other perceived benefits of place-based arts participation, such as greater civic engagement, social capital, agency, and collective efficacy. The first order of business for a project of this scope was to define social cohesion, based on prior literature, and then to describe the state of evidence for a positive relationship between place-based arts practices and this outcome area.

The second of these tasks proved more difficult than expected. Although empirical evidence for the relationship is severely limited, the exercise showed how problematic it is to evaluate social cohesion as a general good without attending to structural inequalities or giving sufficient voice to the community members and artists affected by these inequalities. More qualitative research was needed, therefore, in the form of interviews, case studies, logic modeling, and—perhaps most catalytic—a two-day working group meeting in Lexington, Kentucky, with a range of artists, community organizers, researchers, and health practitioners to test the thinking.

The resulting tools include a conceptual framework document, a theory of change, and case study vignettes—all designed to help funders and practitioners in the arts, public health, and community development to articulate the shared benefits of their work. Throughout these materials, questions and issues of social justice and economic equity have come to the fore. As a recurring feature, the documents include guidance to amplify the voices of marginalized people in projects and policies seeking to leverage social cohesion through place-based arts practices. In addition to the tools represented by the components of this report, titled *WE-Making: How Arts & Culture Unite People to Work Toward Community Well-Being* and authored by the staff of Metris Arts Consulting, other documents resulting from this phase of the project were produced by PolicyLink and the Center for Arts in Medicine at the University of Florida. Our hope is that these resources can inform thinking and action to center community voices and to change community conditions—social, economic, and physical—so that all people can thrive.

This endeavor was supported and guided by a collaboration of funders whose portfolios and commitments cut across the arts and health sectors and who contributed substantially to its direction. The names and roles of all the project's contributors, advisors, and supporters are included in the Acknowledgments, and the funders would like to thank everyone for their insights and efforts in bringing together and presenting these valuable ideas, experiences, and lessons.

2

Theory of Change and Case Studies

Black girls proudly sing of communal healing while standing on an art installation made of magnolia-scented soap slabs. They sing at the site of a historically significant Black-owned farmhouse. Neighbors in a Pennsylvania coal town reflect on the past and future. Then they see their hopes and concerns for the community reflected back through painting, theater, and song. Long-time East Oakland residents face extreme displacement pressure. Organizations and residents work to develop a hub to celebrate, preserve, and amplify their community's culture and people.

Natchez (MS), Tamaqua (PA), and Oakland (CA) each face well-being inequities. A history of racism, economic disinvestment, and gentrification pressures have led to health, economic, and social disparities in these three places, as well as countless other American communities. What can help these communities reduce these disparities? One way is through "social cohesion." Social cohesion is when individuals feel and act as part of a group that is oriented toward working together.

Some communities have strong and potentially underrecognized social cohesion, such as communities of color with a shared cultural identity. In these communities, key aspects of social cohesion, such as a sense of belonging, help residents cope with economic challenges and promote health.[1] Other communities experiencing racism and oppression, specifically low-income and racially/ethnically heterogeneous communities, face particular challenges in their ability to amplify and leverage social cohesion, likely due to factors such as lower trust and withdrawal from community.[2]

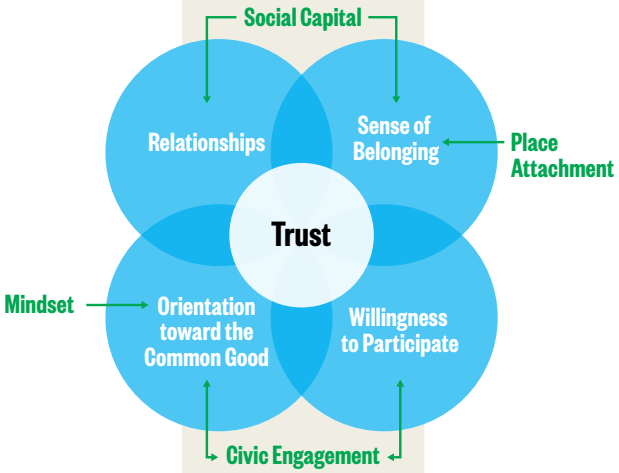
Place-based arts and cultural strategies are well equipped to drive social cohesion and build toward more equitable well-being in communities facing inequities. Below, we will explore how people in Natchez, Tamaqua, and Oakland have used arts and culture to pave this path. We tie their experiences to a theory of change that describes and visually communicates this path. The diagram on the following page introduces the theory of change. The case studies illustrate and reinforce language in the theory of change. This resource closes with key terms to provide readily accessible definitions. We invite readers to dive more deeply to explore the research underpinning our theory of change in the companion Conceptual Framework and Literature Review.

PLACE-BASED ARTS AND CULTURAL STRATEGIES

THAT BEGIN WITH COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE OF STRUCTURAL CONDITIONS AND BARRIERS TO WELL-BEING, INCLUDING RACISM AND OTHER OPPRESSIONS, AND THEN

- BUILD AND SHARE POWER THROUGH COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP
- CONNECT PEOPLE ACROSS DIFFERENCES
- INCLUDE ALL TYPES OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS
- HAVE A CONSISTENT PRESENCE IN THE COMMUNITY
- ALIGN WITH COMMUNITY CHANGE GOALS

AMPLIFY THE DRIVERS



OF SOCIAL COHESION

THAT NURTURE COORDINATED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AND ACTIVITY

- Self-determination of Shared Values
- Collective Efficacy
- Collective Action

AND LEAD TO INCREASED EQUITABLE COMMUNITY WELL-BEING.

- Mental and Physical Health
- Celebration and Preservation of Culture
- Creative Responses to Trauma and Racism
- Civic Capacity for Change

This process feeds back into, amplifies, and grows SOCIAL COHESION.

We Tell Our Story: HEAL Community Natchez

The room smells of magnolia, Mississippi's state flower and a symbol of dignity, joy, and nobility.[3] A group of Black girls (Girls'n Pearls) stand proudly and sing "We'll Rise Up." The words weave a narrative of communal Black healing. The girls perform on a 750-pound "Equity Platform," pieces of magnolia-scented soap stacked in such a way to equalize the singers' heights.

Girls'n Pearls is a group of girls ages eight to 18 mentored by the Southwest Mississippi Chapter of the National Coalition of 100 Black Women, the group that hosted the event. The singing group was just one part of a weekend-long art exhibit and performance series. The series strove to "lift up the often untold stories of African Americans throughout [Natchez's] 300-year history."[4] The events centered around St. Catherine Street, which leads into downtown Natchez. It's an area with deep historical meaning for the African American community. In the nineteenth century, it was the location of the second largest market of enslaved people in the South. And in the twentieth century, it was a hub of Civil Rights movement activity and the

HEAL Community Natchez launch and festival in September, 2017. Photo by Josh Miller, courtesy of IDEAS xLab.

"Black Wall Street" of Natchez. The "Equity Platform" exhibition was held in the Angeletty House, a historic house owned by a prominent Black American family.[5]

Historical tourism is and has been central to this rural community's cultural and economic life. In recent years, residents have tried to tell the history of the community in ways that do justice to the heritage, community, and experience of Black residents. Yet the question remains: Who benefits from the telling of these stories? In Natchez, over half the town's residents are Black. They face higher rates of infant mortality, smoking, obesity, and diabetes than their White neighbors. Plus, their median household income is only half that of White residents. Businesses and organizations that feature Black cultural heritage have not been at the forefront of downtown revitalization efforts.

Over the last 20 years, a small number of local stakeholders have worked to increase the focus on local Black history. These discussions came to a head around the town's 300-year anniversary in 2016. The community was imagining what kind of city they want to be for the next 300 years. Local stakeholders decided to address these challenges through arts and culture. The City of Natchez, local tourism businesses and organizations, and community members collaborated with Project HEAL (Health, Equity, Art, Learning). Project HEAL is a community-guided social-lab initiative by IDEAS xLab and partners.[6] It uses community arts and culture to build toward equitable economic development through a lens of health and well-being. HEAL Community Natchez seeks to grow cohesion in several areas at once—within the local Black community, within the tourism industry, between the community's residents of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, and between Natchez and other communities. What is the goal of building this cohesion? To advance and amplify equitable economic benefit and health and well-being outcomes for Natchez's Black community.

In September 2017, these partners collaborated to produce the festival. The festival employed and connected the talents and skills of many from Natchez. Jeremy Houston of Miss Lou Heritage Group & Tours, for example, performed "Narrative of a Slave." Jarita Frazier-King of Natchez Heritage Cooking School led a heritage food tasting, highlighting how traditional seasonings can support a low-sodium diet. Natchez-based blues legend YZ Ealey gave a performance. And Ann Heard, owner of local soap-making business called Scent From Natchez, provided the soap for the "Equity Platform" shown in the photograph. She collaborated with visiting Brazilian artist Cadu to complete the platform. Plus, young people who learned photography techniques exhibited their photos. Afterwards, local artisans created

buttons and inserted them into bars of soap repurposed from the "equity platform." They stamped each bar with the story of button artifacts from the slave market that are on display at the Natchez Museum of African American History and Culture. Also, the SW Mississippi Chapter of the National Coalition of 100 Black Women hosted free health screenings in the Angeletty House.

In 2018, the Mississippi State Department of Health decided to conduct a participatory research project to guide future cultural efforts. Many of the same people who worked together on HEAL Committee Natchez joined the steering committee, including Ann Heard. The committee decided to focus on a project to create a Civil Rights Trail and to apply to the National Register of Historic Places for designation. They assessed how this effort could contribute to community well-being and reducing inequality. The study found that the effort would have significant health impacts if they (1) focused on broader community and historical narratives, (2) highlighted the processes leading to inequality, (3) embedded the project in larger community development efforts, and (4) developed youth education initiatives. In December 2019, the group held a strategy workshop to decide how to move forward with the study findings. One promising idea was to develop a youth leadership initiative.[7] To connect youth across race and class, they would draw from both private and public school populations. They hope that bringing students together to work toward a common goal would reduce bias.

How arts and culture moved the dial in Natchez

How did these place-based arts and cultural strategies help Natchez realize community well-being? Natchez struggles with the complicated legacy of the past. The HEAL Community Natchez partners used a concentrated cultural event as a focus point to start to address the past and imagine a shared future. The event helped to develop a sense of belonging and ownership to place. It also invited people of many ages to celebrate community and history. And, it strengthened individual and organizational relationship bonds. These bonds enabled a group of community leaders to undertake a labor-intensive research process. They came together to plan efforts that will have long-term impacts on community well-being. Josh Miller of IDEAS xLab sees the health impact study as a clear sign of the success of the HEAL Community Natchez project in capacity building: "The fact that the Heath Impact Assessment was totally separate from our project, we saw that as the torch being carried forward by the community." The community also continued the

approach of joining cultural development with efforts to address inequality and health disparities.

Place-based arts and cultural strategies...

Local creative business owners, such as Jeremy Houston and Ann Heard, co-designed and co-created the event. The weekend's activities brought community members together across difference**.** Youth, for example, came together with artists and artisans with a variety of expertise in soap making, blues, and culinary arts. The event aligned topically to reinforce the desired impact of Black community members taking ownership over and reframing their cultural history. According to Houston and Heard, it gave the community an opportunity to celebrate future possibilities rather than focus on frustration and anger about the past.

...amplify the drivers of social cohesion...

The entire event presented multiple and varied opportunities for people to engage in activities oriented toward making a difference (civic engagement) in Natchez, both in its production and also for audience participants. However, interviewees, Houston and Heard, noted that lower participation from some White community members and young Black males reveals the difficulty of expanding cohesion across intersectional differences. Natchez had (and has) striking health disparities, untapped social cohesion among the Black community, and lower cohesion with the broader community. HEAL Community Natchez provided the opportunity and resources to leverage, amplify, and build relationships and a sense of belonging and ownership among Black residents. Community members, such as the young women performers and other student participants, and local businesses and artisans expanded their networks by forming new connections and trust with one another (social capital) through producing and participating in the event. Activating St. Catherine Street—a place with deep historical and emotional significance for the Black community (place attachment)—helped residents further deepen a sense of belonging.

...to increase equitable community well-being.

The weekend did not end the community's long-standing economic and social segregation challenges. Yet, the HEAL Community Natchez event powerfully amplified existing cohesion. These creative responses to racism offered opportunities to reflect on the history of slavery in Natchez. They lifted up Black historic sites and narratives along St. Catherine Street. In the process, they celebrated new and existing Black cultural heritage businesses. The project reimagined how preserving and celebrating Black cultural heritage could play a

role in downtown revitalization efforts. Finally, the project built civic capacity for comprehensive creative community development efforts. These efforts address the structural inequality that runs through the Natchez community. As a result, residents built collective efficacy for long-term equitable community well-being.

From Doom to Hope: Dear Tamaqua

You order a beer at the corner bar in Tamaqua, a rural town in northeastern Pennsylvania. The bartender places a coaster on the bar. You notice it's not just any coaster. The coaster is totally blank except for the prompt, "Dear Tamaqua...." You get out a pen.

Fast forward many months to September 27, 2015. You're in downtown Tamaqua surrounded by dozens of neighbors, the smell of food vendors, kids twirling in tutus, and teens wailing away on guitars. You remember what you wrote on the coaster and see similar sentiments reflected in a variety of creative ways. Volunteer actors perform "Dear Tamaqua" letters. An artist made large signs featuring messages from the community that range from "Renewed Determination" to "Burn It Down!" Musicians set community submissions to song. And a tunnel structure features illuminated submissions on its walls. "Dear Tamaqua...In a New Light" was "part festival, part public performance, part theater, part block party." It turned community input into artistic expression and led residents over a mile-long "physical and emotional journey" through the community.

"Dear Tamaqua... In a New Light." Photo courtesy of Tamaqua Community Arts Center.

What was the motivation for "Dear Tamaqua…In a New Light"? Just a few years before, residents of this northeastern Pennsylvania community couldn't have imagined such a celebration. A 2011 Penn State University survey showed that Tamaqua had the lowest levels of interpersonal and community trust out of all the Pennsylvania communities surveyed. Historically a coal-mining town, Tamaqua now struggles with opioid addiction problems. Residents reported that there is "'nothing worse' than life in Tamaqua and… that the community [was] 'doomed.'"[8]

Tamaqua Area Community Partnership is a nonprofit that has been working on initiatives to advance quality of life in Tamaqua since 1994. In 2004, having achieved some of their goals from their first 10-year visioning process, they resolved to add arts and culture to their work. They also had been noticing that, although residents appreciated the improvements, many still did not feel personally connected to those efforts. They established the Tamaqua Community Arts Center in 2011. With the support of Rural Local Initiatives Support Corporation, the center set out with a purposeful plan to use the arts as a "people-friendly" way to engage community members. They especially targeted "those who might not feel that their voices are heard or that their opinions matter," says Micah Gursky, Tamaqua Area Community Partnership and Arts Center leader. And so, "Dear Tamaqua" was born in 2013. With "Dear Tamaqua," Tamaqua Community Arts Center attempted to generate a conversation about who the community is, where they are coming from, and where they are going.

"Dear Tamaqua… In a New Light." Photo courtesy of Tamaqua Community Arts Center.

"Dear Tamaqua" was a prompt as if writing a letter to the town. It was a way to get feedback and input from community members in a variety of ways, through letters, songs, and drawings. The organizers intentionally did not censor these results for positive content. Instead, they encouraged community members to submit what they really felt about their town: "positive feelings, negative feelings, nostalgic feelings, memories, bad memories, hopes and aspirations for the future," says Gursky. The Tamaqua Community Arts Center tried to reach people in a variety of ways. They targeted schools and senior-living centers. They hosted writing events in libraries and on playgrounds. They opened a website for online submissions. They even delivered blank coasters with the "Dear Tamaqua" prompt to local bars. Patrons could write or draw on the coaster and then hand it over to the bartender. In total, the "Dear Tamaqua" project received 700 submissions out of approximately 7,000 total community members.

The Tamaqua Community Arts Center has built on the momentum and energy of that massively successful event by producing engagement-oriented arts programs each year. They began with "Tamaqua Has Heart," a project to create fiberglass hearts with engagement and sponsorship by the community. They exhibited the hearts throughout the town in 2017. They had noticed that very few, if any, of the "Dear Tamaqua" submissions talked about the future. So, the Arts Center curated a public art exhibition in 2018 called "Raw Aspirations." This exhibition intended to shift residents' thoughts into the future tense to imagine the future of Tamaqua.

The Arts Center has also engaged middle school and high school students in the development of art projects. Youth need connections and activities in the community to be able to imagine a future in which they belong and stay in Tamaqua, instead of leaving. The Arts Center paired youth with local community members to create two escape rooms, one featuring Tamaqua in the 1950s and one in a mining setting. The escape rooms were open for a month in February 2019. Later in 2019, the Arts Center created a mural with images collected from youth about what makes them happy. They titled the mural "Choose Happiness" to align with the Tamaqua Area Community Partnership's new campaign around well-being goals.

The Community Partnership noted that many of the "Dear Tamaqua" submissions highlighted substance use issues in the community. This confirmed information gathered for a 2010 Community Health Needs Assessment. Community leaders formed a group to address the substance abuse issues through grassroots efforts called STEP UP (Support, Treatment, Enforcement, and Prevention). The group recognized that Tamaqua is not a very recovery-friendly community. There isn't

much social activity that doesn't involve alcohol. Also, recovery is not well understood, because a lot of the stigma attached to substance use disorders is also connected to recovery. In response, the Community Partnership launched "Hope & Coffee," a coffee shop that would normalize and celebrate recovery in 2018. The successful coffee shop employs staff and contractors in recovery and provides meeting space for recovery organizations. For those not immediately affected by substance abuse, the shop offers an opportunity to engage in these issues. For everyone, the shop is a social gathering space that is not centered on drugs or alcohol and that stays open late.

How arts and culture moved the dial in Tamaqua

Many former coal and steel communities, like Tamaqua, have a deep-seated pessimism about the future. Rural communities face challenges due to unemployment, poverty, and lack of access to health care.[9] "Disconnect is our default in the coal region," says Gursky. After "Dear Tamaqua...In a New Light," Tamaqua requested that Penn State return and perform another survey. In 2016, the researchers found significant improvements in reported connectedness. Residents had expanded networks by forming new connections and trust with one another (social capital). Even more, community members felt like their voices mattered (mindset).[10] Buoyed by their success, the Tamaqua Area Community Partnership launched a new framework for their efforts in 2019 called "Choose Happiness." The framework describes a holistic approach to community well-being that includes five factors: financial health, health and wellness, social relationships, sense of purpose, and community engagement.

Place-based arts and cultural strategies...

"Dear Tamaqua" and the activities that have come since tie directly into the goal of community building and cohesion to bolster long-term efforts that foster community well-being. The Tamaqua Community Arts Center used fresh outreach strategies, such as coasters in barrooms and writing events in playgrounds. These resulted in participation from community members who might not otherwise participate, including programs targeting youth. Community members have ownership of the activities, since even the artist-focused activities use community input as the raw material of the work. Tamaqua Community Arts Center is able to provide crucial continued presence and opportunities for engagement.

...amplify the drivers of social cohesion...

Arts activities provided a low barrier for entry for participation. Gursky emphasizes how art is a way to invite people into community processes: "Genuinely participatory art processes put art between you and the issues. It's a safer way to express yourself." They also gave community members a clear, approachable way to visualize and interact with each other's thoughts. This willingness to participate and amplifying a focus on the common good has fed into subsequent efforts like "Hope and Coffee." The arts and culture activities have enhanced the community's existing strengths and broadened the number of people in Tamaqua working together to achieve a common goal (social cohesion).

...to increase equitable community well-being.

Although this example shows the power and impact of the arts, it also reveals how long this process can take. Five years in, these activities are beginning to come into deeper focus. Within the new "Choose Happiness" framework, Tamaqua Area Community Partnership has committed to developing relationships and civic engagement as part of community well-being. With arts and culture as an important part of their toolkit, the community has enhanced its civic capacity to make structural change that addresses challenges that stem from decades of economic disinvestment. The results of the second Penn State study suggest that with continued support and engagement, the gains in cohesion, hope, and trust that these activities have contributed to will be the bedrock of future community change.

Celebrating and Preserving Heritage: The East Oakland Black Cultural Zone

You show up to the Neighbor Night because your Latinx girlfriend invited you and told you the food was great the last time. While you are there, a Black woman who lives only a few blocks from you shares her story of growing up in East Oakland, where her family has been for several generations. Her story is so similar to yours, but your family came from Mexico and settled in East Oakland when you were young. Afterward, you go introduce yourself to her and she invites you to tell your story at the next Neighbor Night.

East Oakland's deep history of activism and movement work stretches back to the Civil Rights era and the Black Panther movement. The neighborhood has been a historical hub of Black residents. But it is also home to significant populations of Latinx, Asian, and White residents. The neighborhood is the "last frontier of gentrification" in Oakland, where many other districts have been changing rapidly and the overall Black population of the city has been declining precipitously. Central East Oakland now faces increasing displacement pressure that threatens long-time residents, especially residents of color. A new Bus Rapid Transit line is set to increase the neighborhood's connectivity to downtown and some of the city's wealthier areas. While it will improve service for current residents, the new transit line is also bringing concerns that real estate pressure on the neighborhood will bring a wave of more affluent newcomers at the expense of those who have long lived there. The area has also long sought to have a more viable, community-serving retail sector and more Black-owned businesses generally, so that local spending power can support community assets.

The Black Cultural Zone Collaborative is "a coalition of Black resident, leaders and organizers, whose mission is to innovate, incubate, inform, and elevate community driven projects that allow Black residents in East Oakland to 'THRIVE.'"[11] In addition to EastSide Arts Alliance, the cultural center that hosted the Neighbor Nights, there are currently 19 other organizational partners in the effort to fully realize the Black Cultural Zone vision. They collectively reflect the intersection of arts and culture with public health, resident organizing, entrepreneurship, property development, and transportation, and all have an overarching awareness that the community's culture provides the foundation for any successful revitalization strategy.

One of these partners invested in a long-term place-based strategy to address racial health disparities through empowerment of residents. East Oakland Building Healthy Communities (EOBHC) is one of 14 local places funded through a 10-year investment by The California Endowment, which will conclude in 2021. EOBHC's C.A.S.H. team—which stands for "culture, art, storytelling, and healing"—sees arts and cultural activity as critical for heritage preservation, helping to heal community and multigenerational trauma, and mending "distrust between groups, between communities, and between organizations." According to Sandra Davis, the East Oakland Building Healthy Communities program manager, the Black Cultural Zone effort is about "affirming who the community is, and who it has been." It is a joint effort among organizations and community members to claim and re-claim land, space, and ground for long-time residents. Davis notes the long history of expression and communication through arts and culture for justice and equity work in Oakland, and also as a way to bring people together, "through lifting community spirit, through visual art, through spoken word, through song."

The development of the Black Cultural Zone Collaborative builds upon earlier partnership work between EOBHC and the EastSide Arts Alliance. Together they organized Neighbor Nights, the community-building events planned for and by East Oaklanders to celebrate the arts, culture, and history of East Oakland. Neighbor Nights built and maintained relationships between residents of different cultures. Davis described the events as a space "for folks to connect over food, over stories." They also offered opportunities to strengthen inter-cultural and inter-generational networks and relationships. These celebrations built, maintained, and tended to community cohesion in East Oakland. This social cohesion has been critical to the larger step of establishing a Black Cultural Zone.

Davis explained the hope that a Black Cultural Zone Hub site will promote community health and lift up and celebrate the area's Black cultural heritage. It will provide space and educational opportunities for youth, and support Black-run businesses. And, it will also offer anti-displacement counseling and services for local community members. Under the leadership of Carolyn Johnson, who became the executive director of the Black Cultural Zone Collaborative and the Black Cultural Zone Community Development Corporation in 2019, the Black Cultural Zone is beginning to utilize real estate development as a strategy to achieve this goal. In 2020, it secured a lease on a prominent, publicly owned vacant lot adjacent to the Eastmont Town Center, a shopping center and social services hub in East Oakland. The Black Cultural Zone is creating a cultural activation space to include artmaking and

cultural programming, a farmers' market, and a community visioning process for a permanent development on the site.

The partners' persistence has recently paid off in another way. In June 2020, the Black Cultural Zone, in collaboration with 12 other organizations in East Oakland and the City of Oakland, secured the largest grant in 2020 from the State of California's Strategic Growth Council for their "Better Neighborhoods, Same Neighbors" initiative. Implementation of the $28 million grant will be "guided by the principles of community engagement, displacement avoidance, workforce development and climate resiliency" and the Black Cultural Zone's role will be to lead business and community engagement.[12]

How arts and culture moved the dial in East Oakland

The establishment of a Black Cultural Zone in East Oakland is still a work in progress. In the last several years, supporting Black-run businesses has been the most prominent component and the concerns about displacement the most powerful driver of the effort. The cultural events have been a way to sustain and grow people's interest as the campaign for more substantial permanent resources continues. As the Black Cultural Zone website puts it, place-based arts and cultural activities are part of "a strategy of building power, securing land, and directing more dollars to community driven projects."[13] The Black Cultural Zone Collaborative is working together to build the Hub site to reach three community goals: (1) place keeping through anti-displacement efforts, (2) a strong economy—including a focus on collective self-sufficiency, and (3) a high quality of life—mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and physically.[14]

Place-based arts and cultural strategies...

The making of the Black Cultural Zone is a truly collaborative effort by multiple organizations grounded in the community. It will eventually include a permanent physical hub, or anchor space, that will offer consistent space for programming. In East Oakland, arts and cultural strategies have been a way to organize people who may not otherwise take part in movement building, including youth. Davis sees the Black Cultural Zone as a place where young people can articulate and build their "true stories and legacies." Finally, the Black Cultural Zone aligns with community well-being goals. It's a "community and place-making effort rooted in equity and the goal of helping people stay in East Oakland," says Davis.

...amplify the drivers of social cohesion...

Sharing food, stories, and cultural tradition is an approachable way for neighbors to engage in the civic life (civic engagement) of East Oakland. These activities also allow space for diverse community members to strengthen intercultural and cross-cultural bonds, which cultivates relationships. Davis envisions that the Zone's hub building will promote "joy in the community" and give you an intangible feeling that "makes you feel good" (mindset). This, along with bolstering interpersonal relationships and highlighting community heritage, will strengthen a sense of belonging to place and people.

...to increase equitable community well-being.

As Davis says, "culture and arts offer a multi-medium way for people to learn and connect across difference, develop respect and to discover shared values. These are all critical factors in developing community and building the foundation for collective action." For East Oakland, community health means reducing displacement of long-time residents. It means the preservation of Black culture and heritage. East Oakland has a long history of using arts and culture to keep these traditions and expressions alive, and the Black Cultural Zone will be an opportunity to amplify

Eastside Flyers for Malcolm X Jazz Festival. Photo courtesy of the Eastside Arts Alliance.

and grow this social cohesion: "Our vision of freedom is grounded in our collective self-determination and the creation of political, social, cultural and economic liberation. These principles are informed by the ideals and platforms of our historic Black consciousness movements."[15]

The need for the Black Cultural Zone has never been greater, especially in the health, economic, and social devastation caused by Covid-19. As Carolyn Johnson writes in the *Capitol Weekly*: "Based on the experience of the East Oakland Black Cultural Zone Collaborative, our community-serving nonprofits in Oakland and the Bay Area, for example, have smaller quantities of medical grade [personal protection equipment] supplies, but are uniquely positioned to provide the only care that some of our community members will receive or trust."[16]

Whether during a pandemic or in times when people can interact more freely, that trust is the basis for everything else that is positive about a community. The efforts and collaboration among project partners and residents illuminate how arts and culture can be nested among broader community goals and effectively drive social cohesion and foster equitable health and well-being.

Rendering of a building in the future Black Cultural Zone. Photo courtesy of the EastSide Arts Alliance.

3

Pulling It All Together:
How Arts and Culture Unite People to Work Toward Community Well-Being

In these three communities, place-based arts and cultural strategies have generated and amplified social cohesion. We see that certain types of strategies help influence this process:

- **Build and share power through community ownership:** Strategies that center around community member co-design and co-creation, and that build community leadership
- **Connect people across difference:** Strategies that invite community members to collaborate and share experiences
- **Include all types of community members:** Strategies that encourage participation from parts of the community that might not otherwise participate
- **Have a consistent presence in the community:** Anchor spaces and organizations grounded in a community that can build on achievement over time
- **Align with community change goals to reinforce desired impacts:** Strategies that are reflective of community well-being goals

In the cases presented above, we see that these place-based arts and cultural strategies then influence people's:

- **mindset—**understanding each other's experiences and seeing fellow Tamaqua residents as part of a community that can move forward together;
- **attachment to place—**strengthening and lifting up Black residents' ownership of their historical connection to St. Catherine's Street in Natchez;
- **engagement in civic life—**penning a letter to your town in a bar; and
- **social capital—**sharing stories and food at Neighbor Nights in East Oakland.

From here, we build and nurture social cohesion. Like a barbershop quartet or R&B group, harmonizing together, we understand social cohesion as a group of dimensions: **relationships**, **sense of belonging**, **orientation toward the common good**, and **willingness to participate**. Each one a singer in the quartet, held together

by **trust**. Without orientation toward the common good, relationships and networks may exclude people. Without willingness to participate, sense of belonging may be individualistic and passive. Without relationships and a sense of belonging, orientation toward the common good can't be leveraged collectively. Social cohesion transforms individual feelings and orientations into collective feelings and orientations. The presence of social cohesion ensures that relationships and networks set us up for participation and action. This then will serve the common good of the group or community.

Strengthening **mindset**, **place attachment**, **civic engagement**, and **social capital** also grows the dimensions of social cohesion. And, all together, amplifies social cohesion. Social cohesion lays the groundwork for collective organizing and activity in communities. This plays out through enabling communities to develop **shared values** and **collective efficacy**, and thereby take **collective action**. Cohesive communities, through collective organizing and activity, can improve equitable well-being. We see this in action above: residents come together—through song, food, stories—to honor the past, envision the future, and act on that vision. Change will move at the speed of trust.

The examples from Natchez, Tamaqua, and East Oakland demonstrate that this work takes time. And that social cohesion must be nurtured. Small gains feed back into, amplify, and grow more cohesion, and can translate into even better outcomes. In Tamaqua, for instance, the community is now beginning to use the cohesion they have been building for collective visioning and action. And in East Oakland, community members and organizations have built off of earlier successes to mount a large-scale cultural preservation and economic self-determination effort.

Did you notice that girl who savored Jarita Frazier-King's collard greens during HEAL Community Natchez? In 10 years, you may find her making her own version for her family or in the kitchen of the restaurant she owns. What about those men you saw writing on coasters in a Tamaqua bar? Next year they may speak their minds at a community meeting. And the kids who helped imagine the Black Cultural Zone? In 20 years, they may be chatting with one another on the porches of their childhood homes, instead of being displaced. Through social cohesion, communities come together as a "WE," are able to act as a "WE," and share the benefits as a "WE." And arts and culture can help grow that "WE."

4

Key Terms

Here we provide short definitions of the key terms used above. For more robust discussions of these terms, as well as full citations, see the Conceptual Framework and Literature Review.

Anchor spaces: A long-standing physical space that offers consistent programming. This programming is community-based and builds the leadership capacity of a community.

Arts and culture: Not just the fine and performing arts, but also the design, aesthetics, traditions, values, and languages found in a given neighborhood, tribal land, town, city, or region.

Civic engagement: Identifying and undertaking activities with the goal of making a difference in public life. Connected to the "orientation toward the common good" and "willingness to participate" dimensions of social cohesion.

Collective efficacy: The capacity and capability of a group to achieve collective action.

Equitable community well-being: Mental and physical health, celebration and preservation of culture, creative responses to racism and trauma, and civic capacity for policy and structural change.

Equity: "The fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all people, while at the same time striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of some groups."[17]

Communities experiencing racism and oppression: Neighborhoods, towns, and tribal regions that have experienced a systemic lack of power over time. This results in health disparities, reduced access to economic resources, and increased risk of violence.

Mindset: "Thoughts, beliefs, and expectations."[18] Connected to the "orientation toward the common good" dimension of social cohesion.

Place attachment: The emotional bond people develop with a geographic place. Connected to the "sense of belonging" dimension of social cohesion.

Place-based arts and cultural strategies: When artists and arts organizations join their neighbors in shaping their community's future, working together to creatively address community challenges and opportunities.

Social capital: "Connections among individuals, social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them."[19] Connected to the "relationships" and "sense of belonging" dimensions of social cohesion.

Social cohesion: When individuals feel and act as part of a group that is oriented toward working together.

Stakeholder: A person or organization with an interest or stake in something.

5

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