

Creative Places: Public Perceptions of Arts, Culture, and Economic Development in Gateway Cities

BY JOHN SCHNEIDER AND STEVE KOCZELA

Cities have always been places for creativity. Dense urban form allows people to live and work in close proximity, fueling new ideas, partnerships, and projects. Creative energy helps the most successful cities stay ahead of the curve, transitioning quickly as industries come and go. For cities challenged by economic change, it is often creative types that initiate a renaissance by improving the quality

of life and writing a new narrative that alters how both residents and nonresidents see the community and its potential.¹

In recent years, cultural innovators have blazed urban revitalization pathways in cities that others have long overlooked. This is especially true in

Massachusetts Gateway Cities, urban communities that anchor regional economies beyond Greater Boston. Gateway Cities are using arts and cultural projects to grow their economies and to promote greater civic participation and sense of community. The result is citizens feeling a renewed sense of pride in their city and showing more support for activities that launch economic and civic innovation and improve the quality of life.

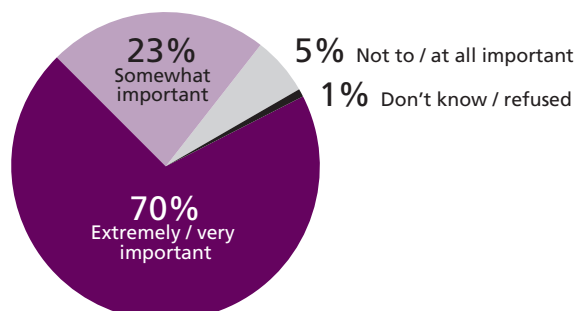
The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) calls this urban revitalization process creative placemaking. A successful effort “animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired.”² In recent years, creative placemaking has occurred in cities across the country in a very decentralized fashion, neighborhood by neighborhood, existing “cheek-by-

KEY FINDINGS

- Participation in the arts is widespread among Gateway City residents.
- Gateway City residents who take part in local cultural activities build stronger bonds to the community.
- Creative placemaking can improve quality of life and boost city image.
- Gateway City residents associate creative placemaking with educational and economic development benefits
- Support for public efforts to advance creative placemaking is strong in Gateway Cities

Figure 1

Importance of having quality arts and cultural events in the community



jowl with private sector export and retail businesses and mixed-income housing, often occupying buildings and lots that had been vacant and underutilized.”³

Creative placemaking is highly collaborative work requiring active public/private partnerships to marshal the resources, will, and energy to change a street, neighborhood, or city. State and local governments must engage with artists, entrepreneurs, and community and business leaders to advance successful projects. Creative placemaking requires broad community support, especially from voters, who determine the outcomes of elections and, by extension, the public agenda.

A more nuanced understanding of how voters view cultural programming can help us better define the opportunities and obstacles community leaders face in advancing creative placemaking projects. The perspective of voters on the impact of arts and culture on civic life and local economic development, as well as willingness to support public arts programs and the associated funding are particularly relevant. Voter opinion will shape what is politically feasible

Figure 2

Participation in each activity in previous 12 months

Visiting a museum or art gallery	48%
Attending a concert	47%
Attending a live theater or dance performance	39%
Painting, writing poetry, or playing an instrument	26%
Taking photographs	25%
Singing or acting	25%

at the local level, and could either spur leaders to take bold action in the creative placemaking arena or prevent them from doing so.

In order to accurately describe the political environment surrounding creative placemaking, MassINC surveyed 600 registered voters in 11 Massachusetts Gateway Cities on the following themes:

1. Personal participation in cultural events and activities
2. Views on how arts and culture affect local quality of life and community image
3. Views of government funding for cultural events, activities, and infrastructure

The results suggest Gateway City voters believe that both the image and

the social fabric of their cities can be improved with well-thought-out investments in arts and culture. Those who participate in the events that are occurring in the Gateway Cities see a better quality of life than those who do not. Many meet new friends at these events, or connect with others they already know. In addition, the poll reveals a public who sees the arts as a way to bring new businesses to their cities and provide educational opportunities for children. A majority of Gateway City voters believe the benefits of public funding for the arts accrue to all members of the community, not just an elite few. Perhaps as a result of these perceived benefits, support for public funding for arts and culture is high.

CREATIVE PLACEMAKING IN THE GATEWAY CITIES

The state’s 11 Gateway Cities are utilizing creative placemaking strategies to develop the local cultural economy and improve the quality of life. Consider the Western Massachusetts city of Pittsfield. With two award winning theaters, art galleries, restaurants, vibrant public art, museums, and cultural events and activities, Pittsfield markets itself as “Creative Pittsfield.” Lowell shares a similar story. A downtown arts district sparked a migration of artists and other creative types into the city, improving downtown and leading to other unique projects like the Western Avenue Studio, one of the largest buildings of its kind on the East Coast. New Bedford has revitalized its downtown through its AHA! program and a partnership with UMass that brought the school’s College of Visual and Performing Arts into the heart of downtown. Both Worcester and Springfield’s cultural districts attract world-class talent and events. Art and cultural projects are also taking root in Brockton, Fall River, Fitchburg, Holyoke, and Lawrence.

SURVEY FINDINGS

A. Participation in the arts is widespread among Gateway City residents.

Voters in the Gateway Cities report participating in a range of artistic pursuits. The most common activities are visiting a museum or art gallery (48 percent) and attending a concert (47 percent). Most others have participated in at least one of the activities we asked about, with only one in five reporting no artistic pursuits in the previous year.

Participation in the arts is tied to several demographic variables.⁴

- Young voters are more likely to participate in each of the arts and cultural activities in the survey (except singing or acting in a community group). Just 6 percent of those under 30 say they have not participated in the arts in the last year, compared with 30 percent of those over age 60.
- Higher levels of education and income are also tied to increased participation in arts activities. For example, 73 percent of those with advanced degrees say they have attended a concert in the last year, compared with 29 percent of those with a high school education or less. About half (53 percent) of those making over \$75,000 a year report attending a live theater or dance event, while just 16 percent of those making under \$25,000 say the same.

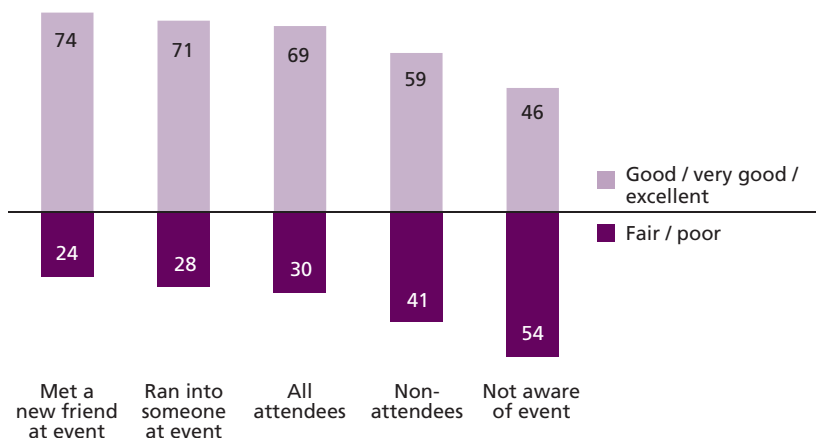
B. Gateway City residents who take part in local cultural activities build stronger bonds to the community.

Arts and culture has the power to serve as a social catalyst, bringing people together to either make new connections or reinforce existing friendships. As these survey results indicate, the Gateway Cities are already seeing positive social impact from the arts and culture events and activities they currently support.

Three-quarters (75 percent) of Gateway City voters report awareness of a regularly scheduled cultural event in their community that draws out-of-town visitors. A variety of such events are already regular occurrences around

Figure 3

Ratings of quality of life by event participation level



the Gateway cities. The Lowell Folk Festival, the Pittsfield City Jazz Festival and its 3rd Thursdays program, AHA! Nights in New Bedford, and Springfield’s Mattoon Street Arts Festival are just a few examples. Among those who are aware, 72 percent say they attend these events. Combining the two questions shows that about half of Gateway City voters (54 percent) are both aware and attend these events when they occur.

Attending cultural events is associated with a number of beneficial outcomes:

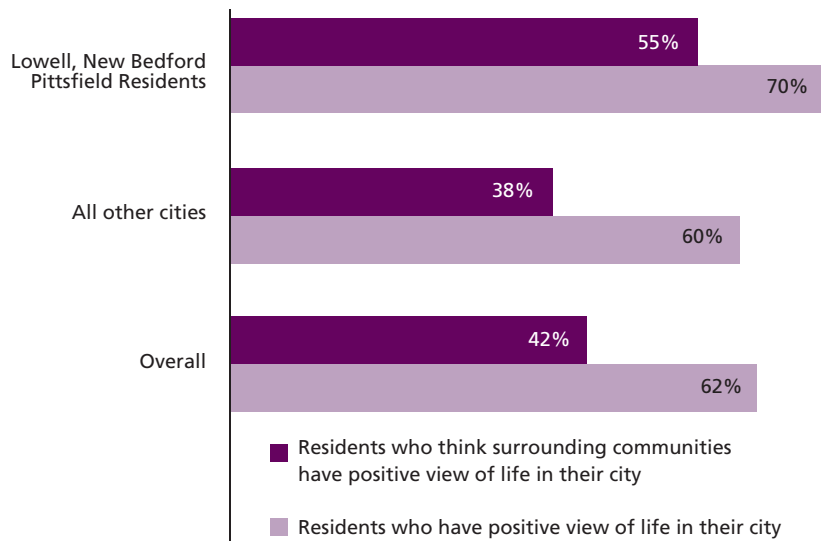
- **Events build community by reinforcing casual social connections.** About nine in ten (88 percent) attendees say they ran into someone they knew other than the people they came with at the most recent cultural event they attended.
- **Events also encourage new social contacts and friendships.** About one in three (32 percent) attendees report meeting someone at the most recent event with whom they later became friends.

- **Events improve quality of life.** More engagement with placemaking events has a clear relationship with positive quality of life perceptions. Three out of four (74 percent) residents who attended and met a new friend at a recent event offered a positive assessment of the local quality of life. Among those who were unaware of any such events, just 46 percent said the quality of life in their community was positive.

Attracting and retaining young residents is key to Gateway City growth and renewal. Poll results suggest cultural activities can play a keep role in keeping young people engaged in their cities. Young Gateway City voters (ages 18 to 29) are more likely to participate in all but one of the arts activities included in the survey. And providing additional outlets for participation appears likely to spur further participation because, while young residents who are aware of local cultural events are the most likely to attend, they are

Figure 4

Comparing quality of life perceptions



now the least likely of any age group to be aware of these activities. Better communication could be helpful in promoting greater participation among younger residents.

C. Creative placemaking can improve quality of life and boost city image.

Gateway Cities voters have a moderately positive view of their cities, with about 6 in 10 calling the local quality of life either good (39 percent), very good (19 percent), or excellent (5 percent). Despite general satisfaction with local quality of life, Gateway City voters believe their communities have an image problem. While 62 percent say quality of life in their city is good, very good, or excellent, just 42 percent think residents of surrounding communities view quality of life in their cities as good, very good, or excellent. We refer to this difference as an *image gap*.

Young Gateway City voters are especially negative in their assessment of

how residents of neighboring communities would rate their city. Among those under age 30, a full 42 percent say their city's quality of life is seen as poor in surrounding communities, while just 14 percent among this same age group actually believe quality of life is poor themselves.

Assuming these assessments are accurate, creative placemaking offers one potential way to close this image gap and boost perceptions of the Gateway Cities among residents of surrounding communities. Indeed, about six in ten (63 percent) voters believe holding cultural events in the community is a way to improve their city's image.

The faith Gateway City voters place in the power arts and culture to improve city image may be appropriate, judging by the significantly higher quality of life ratings offered by those who participate in their local arts and culture events.

For example, 75 percent of those who are unaware of any local cultural event

think residents of surrounding communities see their city's image as just fair or poor. Among those who attended a cultural event and met a friend, this figure drops to 40 percent.

The smaller image gap in three Gateway Cities with aggressive creative placemaking strategies (Lowell, New Bedford, and Pittsfield) provides additional evidence that this approach can help rebrand struggling cities. The image gap is 15 percentage points in these three communities versus 22 percentage points for the other Gateway Cities. Residents of these three advanced creative placemaking cities rate quality of life more highly, and are more likely to believe those in surrounding areas have a positive overall view of their cities.

D. Gateway City residents associate creative placemaking with educational and economic development benefits

Gateway City voters see a variety of potential benefits coming from arts and culture events in their communities. They are most likely to see educational benefits for children, but they also see the potential of new shops and restaurants, as well as an improved community image (Figure 5). Half or more strongly agreed with the potential for their communities to benefit in each of the five areas we explored.

Several demographic groups showed particularly strong agreement with the potential benefits of arts and culture events. Non-white voters are more likely than white voters to say they strongly agree with the benefits of arts and culture events, women more so than men, Democrats more so than Republicans,

Figure 5

Percent who “strongly agree” that arts and culture events/activities can have each benefit



and those under age 30 more so than those in other age groups.

Non-white voters are less likely to say they have attended a local art festival in the last year, but they reported stronger agreement than did white voters on each of the benefits of community arts events. For example, 63 percent of non-white voters “strongly agree” with the idea that “More jobs and businesses can be brought to cities and towns through community arts and culture events and activities,” compared with 44 percent of white voters.

E. Support for public efforts to advance creative placemaking is strong in Gateway Cities

Voters in Gateway Cities are especially likely to support government funding for arts and culture. About half (49 percent) feel public funding for the arts should increase, and another 36 percent say it should be kept at the same level. Just 6 percent think it should decrease.

In addition to inquiring about general funding for the arts, we explored

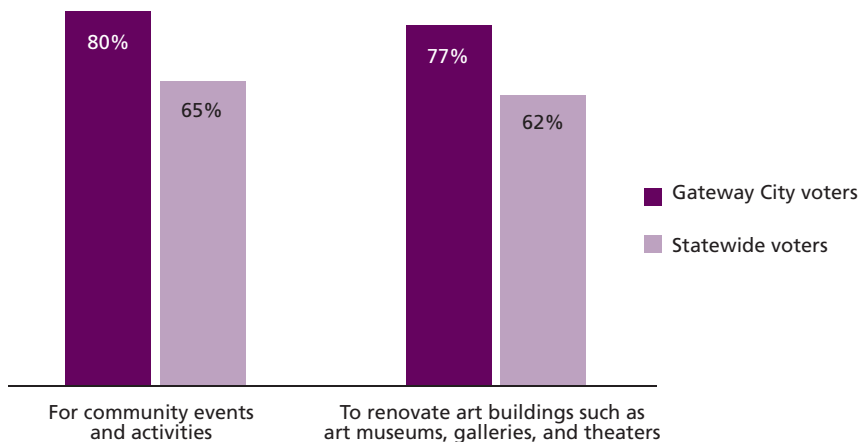
feelings about resources specifically for events as well as funding for renovations of arts-related buildings such as museums and galleries. Support for both uses of public dollars was strong in the Gateway Cities, even when compared with voters around the state. Eight in ten (80 percent) Gateway City voters support government funding for arts events and activities, and 77 percent support funding for renovating

museums, galleries, and theaters, in both cases 15 percentage points higher than support among registered voters statewide (Figure 6).⁵

Support for both uses of public funding is higher among young people, with 94 percent of those under age 30 supporting funds for events, and 88 percent supporting funds for building renovations. In each case, these levels are 10 to 20 points higher than support levels

Figure 6

Percent who would support public funding for the arts by use



among other age groups. Although support is highest among young voters, the three-quarters of those over age 60 who support funding events and activities is still an exceptionally high level of support. While income, education, and race/ethnicity are each related to arts participation levels, none showed a statistical relationship with support for funding.

One possible reason for supporting public funding for the arts is the widely held belief among voters that such funding benefits all residents of their communities rather than just the elite. While participation in the arts is tied to both income and education, voters do not believe that government support only benefits the wealthy and well-educated (just 10 percent say that government support for the arts benefits only the wealthy, while 80 percent said it benefits all people equally).

A total of 70 percent say quality arts and culture events and activities in their communities are either very important (44 percent) or extremely important (26 percent). Just 6 percent say they are either not too important (3 percent) or not at all important (3 percent). Residents of Lowell, New Bedford, and Pittsfield were slightly more likely (77 percent) than those in other cities (68

percent) to say such events are either extremely or very important.⁶ This is perhaps due to residents of these three cities seeing the benefits of the events that take place in their cities. Residents of these cities were also slightly more likely to have participated in the various artistic pursuits that were included in the survey.⁷

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Coordinating public and private investment in arts and culture can produce real benefit by spurring development and improving community image. Several of the Gateway Cities are already realizing the benefits of such investment. Substantial opportunity remains for other Gateway Cities to capture returns from investment in arts and culture.

Leaders seeking to lead such endeavors should be aware of the high levels of support among their constituents. Voters in the Gateway Cities approve of public funding for arts and culture, and see the potential benefits of such expenditures in their communities.

One of the keys to creative placemaking is the successful coordination of public and private resources. Leaders considering allocating public resources should take comfort knowing that

public support for arts funding is very high, even though voters' primary focus is on the economy. A variety of recent statewide polls by The MassINC Polling Group have repeatedly found the economy far outpacing other issues in terms of where voters' attention is focused. However, our polling has also shown simultaneous support for action in other policy arenas, despite their overall lower priority in voters' minds. For example, even while just 32 percent called global warming a high priority for State Leaders compared with 89 percent for the economy, residents expressed a desire for the legislature to take more action than they are now to address the issue. A similar dynamic is likely present here, with high levels of support for funding of the arts, despite prioritizing the economy over other issues.

Notes

1 For example, see Mark Stern and Susan Seifert, "Cultural Clusters: The Implications of Cultural Assets and Agglomeration for Neighborhood Revitalization," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 29(3) (2010).

2 Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa, "Creative Placemaking" (Washington, DC: Mayors' Institute on City Design, 2010)

3 Markusen and Gadwa (2010).

4 Complete survey results including demographic breakdowns are available at MassINC.org.

5 MassINC Polling Group statewide poll of 500 Massachusetts residents, October 2011.

6 As a part of this poll, we obtained an oversample of 100 additional interviews from Lowell, New Bedford, and Pittsfield, which brought the total to 229 responses from these cities. This was done to compare the views of residents of these cities, which have better established local arts events, with residents of the other 8 Gateway Cities.

7 While the differences were not, in all cases, statistically significant, the consistently higher numbers provides a measure of confidence that the differences found in the survey are an accurate reflection of a slightly higher level of participation.

TOPLINE RESULTS

1. Overall, how would you rate the quality of life in CITY? Would you say it is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?

Excellent	5%
Very good	19%
Good	39%
Fair	23%
Poor	13%

2. Among people who live in communities near CITY, would you say the image of CITY is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?

Excellent	3%
Very good	12%
Good	27%
Fair	26%
Poor	28%

4. Have you ever volunteered or served on the board for an arts or cultural organization in your community?

Yes	13%
No	87%

5. How important do you feel it is to have quality arts and culture events and activities available in your community? Would you say it is extremely important, very important, somewhat important, not too important, or not at all important?

Extremely important	26%
Very important	44%
Somewhat important	23%
Not too important	3%
Not at all important	3%

7. Do any annual or other regularly scheduled arts and culture events or activities take place in CITY that draw in visitors from out of town?

Yes	75%
No	13%

ASK IF Q7=YES

8. Do you personally attend any of these events or activities when they occur in your community?

Yes	72%
No	27%

ASK NEXT 2 IF Q8=YES

9. Thinking about the most recent arts and culture event you attended in CITY, did you meet any new people with whom you became friends?

Yes	32%
No	66%

10. When you attended this event, did you meet any people you already knew, other than those who came with you?

Yes	88%
No	12%

11. Do you feel that the funding which the State and local governments provide to support the arts in your areas should be increased, decreased, or kept about the same?

Increased	49%
Decreased	6%
Kept about the same	36%

12. and 13. Would you support or oppose government funding for the arts if it were used to _____?

	Support	Oppose
Support community events or activities	80%	16%
Renovate art buildings such as art museums, galleries, and theatres	77%	17%

14. Some people say government support for the arts only benefits wealthy people. Others say government support for the arts benefits all people, regardless of their economic status. Which is closer to your own point of view?

Benefits wealthy people	10%
Benefits all people equally	80%
Neither (not read)	3%

3. I will now read you a series of artistic and creative activities some people participate in. After I read each one, please tell me how many times you have participated in each activity within the last year. If you have not participated in the activity, please just say so.

	NON-PARTICIPANT	PARTICIPANT
Attend a concert, not including at a child's school	52%	47%
Attend a live theater or dance performance, not including at a child's school	60%	39%
Visit a museum or art gallery	52%	48%
Singing or acting in a church or community group	71%	25%
Creating art yourself such as painting, writing poetry, or playing an instrument	70%	26%
Attend a local festival such as a music, art, or cultural festival	37%	62%
Take photographs for artistic purposes	72%	25%

6. Please tell me if you agree or disagree with the following statements. And do you strongly (dis)agree or somewhat (dis)agree?

	STRONGLY AGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
More jobs and businesses can be brought to cities and towns through community arts and culture events and activities	50%	32%	8%	5%
Community arts and culture events and activities can improve cities and towns by attracting new shops and restaurants	63%	28%	4%	3%
Important educational opportunities for children can be provided through community arts and culture events	75%	19%	2%	2%
Community arts and culture events and activities can help to reduce crime	49%	29%	9%	7%
The image of a city or town can be improved through the help of community arts and culture events	63%	28%	4%	3%

Note: Screening questions and demographic questions not presented. Don't know/refused category excluded, results will not sum to 100.

ABOUT THE POLL

These results are based on a MassINC Polling Group poll of registered voters in the Massachusetts Gateway Cities, which include Brockton, Fall River, Fitchburg, Haverhill, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, New Bedford, Pittsfield, Springfield, and Worcester. The poll was conducted October 13-16, 2011 among a representative sample of 500 registered voters using conventional, registration based sampling procedures. In addition, an oversample of 100 voters from Lowell, New Bedford, and Pittsfield were called. Live telephone interviews were conducted via both landline and cell phone in both English and Spanish. Results were weighted to match estimated demographic parameters of registered voters in Gateway Cities. The margin of sampling error for the entire sample is +/- 4.4 percent with a 95 percent level of confidence.

ABOUT THE MASSINC — MASSINC POLLING GROUP PARTNERSHIP

This project was sponsored by MassINC. When MassINC and the MassINC Polling Group collaborate on research projects, the MassINC Polling Group is contracted to design the survey instrument, perform data collection, and provide results. Working together, MassINC and the MassINC Polling Group interpret findings and present them in a report. While this report is authored by both MassINC and the MassINC Polling Group, recommendations presented represent the views of MassINC exclusively.

About ArtPlace

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In addition to the NEA, federal partners are the departments of Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, Agriculture, Education and Transportation, along with leadership from the White House Office of Management and Budget and the Domestic Policy Council. Federal partners do not provide funding to ArtPlace but participate in the ArtPlace Presidents' Council and Operating Committee meetings, ensuring alignment between high-priority federal investments and policy development and ArtPlace grants.



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