

Art City

Community Participation & Decision Making at a Community Art Centre

Introduction

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A cherished tenet of planning, influenced heavily at the academic level, is public participation. The more the better, and ideally on a community-wide scale. However, this ideal situation is not always possible. This Case in Point will explore the different levels of citizen participation through a context-specific framework.

This Case in Point will explore Art City, an inner-city community art centre in Winnipeg's West Broadway neighbourhood and the models of participation and decision-making used at its scale. Art City contributes significantly to the social and cultural health of its neighbourhood and its programming and operation can serve as a model for future community art centres.

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The Art City Model of Community Participation and Decision Making

Background

Art City was founded in 1998 by local artist Wanda Koop in Winnipeg's West Broadway neighbourhood. She recognized a need in the community and created a space where local youth could express themselves creatively and positively.

Since its creation, Art City has expanded its programming and facilities by offering free, intergenerational art programming over 300 days per year. On average 20-25 participants visit Art City every day equalling participant visits of over 400 per month and 4800 per year.

Art City involves dozens of guest community and professional artists and collaborates with over 25 other organizations and agencies every year. The presence of Art City is highly felt in the area though its storefront location on Broadway to the annual parade and haunted house to the dozens of murals located throughout the neighbourhood to site specific installations and through the lives that are affected by the centre.

The centre is incorporated and has charitable status, with an annual budget exceeding \$300,000. The majority of funding comes from government grants and other foundations. The remainder come from corporate donations or in-kind contributions. Art City is home to a Board of Directors, four full time staff, nearly a dozen workshop facilitators, a bevy of volunteers and a countless number of participants – youth and adult alike.

Art City is open evenings Monday to Friday and during the day on Saturdays. It is open much longer when school is over for summer vacation.



Art City's Mandate:

To create a positive and expanding cultural impact on the unique needs of the community by:

- Fostering self-expression in participants, encouraging a sense of ownership, self-respect and pride in their work and community.
- Being a part of the neighbourhood, a place that is safe, comfortable, supportive.
- Being accessible by offering free-of-charge, quality programming with local, national and international professional artists.
- Being sustainable and available to the community day after day, year after year.
- Being a model for future community art centres.

Communities

It is essential to acknowledge that Art City is made up multiple communities that criss-cross into one another. The communities that constitute Art City can be arranged into three main groups: participants, assisters and animators. These are fluid groups whose definitions overlap into one another. These communities are also non-hierarchal; each with an equally important role in community participation and decision making processes at Art City.

Participants: This category ranges widely to include active and passive participants comprised of adult, youth and community organizations. Specifically, this includes daily participants, participants who attend special events, community members at large whose lives are affected by Art City, professional and community artists, volunteers, staff, community leaders and other community service organizations.

Assisters: The assisters are the enablers and engagers at Art City primarily responsible for program delivery. They consist primarily of Art City staff, volunteers and workshop artists, but easily extends to include members from the participants group such as youth leaders, parents or other community organizations. Decision making is primarily made at in this group.

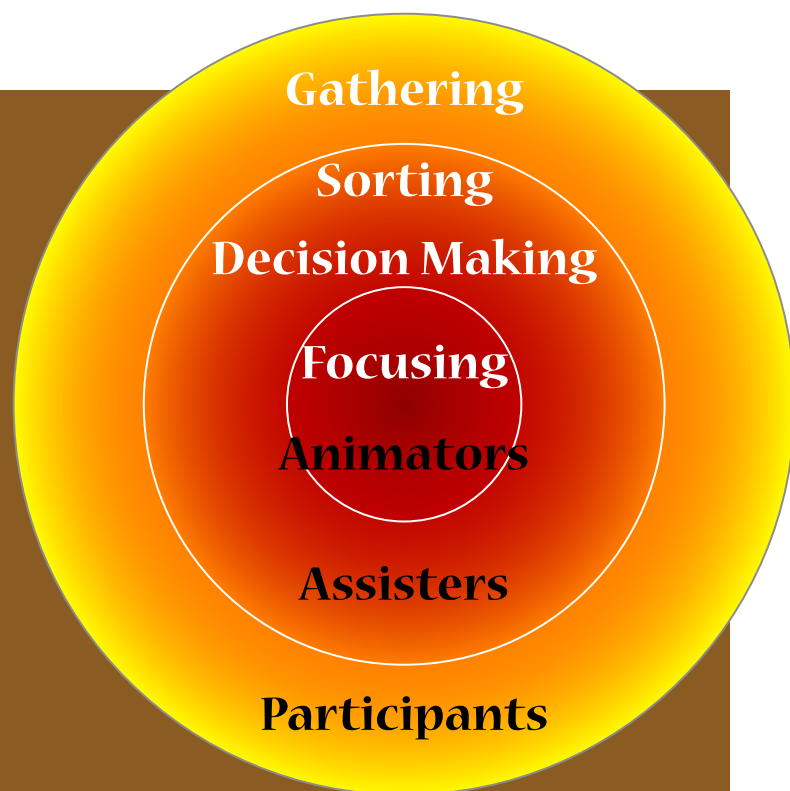
Animators: This is the group responsible for guiding the directions and decisions made at Art City. It consists of the Board of Directors and administration staff of Art City. This group is responsible for implementing policy rather than day-to-day decision making

The Art City Model

The community participation and decision making models at Art City are a non-hierarchal four-phase process of gathering, sorting, decision making and focusing. These phases correspond with the different community groups and just like the community groups, the distinctions between them are soft and blend into one another.

Participants	<i>Gathering & Sorting</i>
Assisters	<i>Sorting & Decision Making</i>
Animators	<i>Decision Making & Focusing</i>

Decision making at Art City is based on consensus and is primarily made at the staff level (assisters) with significant influence from the other two groups rather than at an administrative level typically found in hierarchies. The role of the administrative staff is to help focus the decisions made.



Strategies

The community of West Broadway has gone through tremendous change and challenges over the years. This is a community that has been studied extensively over the past number of years through repeated workshops, open houses, questionnaires and surveys. In contrast, Art City uses a wide variety of context-specific strategies to involve the community through information gathering and decision making. Each method looks to fulfill a specific pieces of information or to engage specific communities as there are no simple methods to engage a community as diverse as the one the Art City serves. When devising these strategies it is important to keep these key characteristics in mind:

- Who are the actors/participants?
- What is the nature of this activity?
- What is the desired outcome?
- Where does it take place?
- How often does it take place?
- Is this a formal or informal method of participation?

Looking at the following table you can see a small sample of these strategies and how they are used at Art City:

Actors	Nature	Outcome	Where	Frequency	Formal / Informal
Youth & Staff	Youth Council / Focus Group	Reflection on past activities / Inform future programming	Art City	Once a Month	Formal
Everyone	Project-Based. e.g. Parade, Haunted House	Community pride, celebration & awareness	Art City & Community	Multiple times a year	Informal
Board, Staff & Volunteers	Strategic Planning Session	Visioning / planning document	Art City or Off-Site	Last in 2004; Next in 2007	Formal
Floor Staff	Log Book Entries	Summary of daily activities	Art City	Daily	Formal / Informal
Community, Organizations & Staff	Public meetings run by other agencies	Information gathering, sharing and awareness	In Community	Multiple times a year	Formal
Community, Organizations & Staff	Private inter-agency meetings	Information gathering, sharing and awareness	Meeting Space	Monthly	Formal / Informal



Results

Results from Art City's community participation and decision making processes are difficult to classify in a traditional planning context. The goals and objectives are established by the various communities of Art City, but are not always visible as they are embedded in the fluid and organic programming model. One such typical activity that illustrates this is the Spirit Park Mosaic installation during the summer of 2005.

The Spirit Park project was designed to beautify the neighbourhood, introduce the community to a new medium and engage the community in a collaborative art project. This project was done in cooperation with Greening West Broadway, Spirit Park Residents Group, West Broadway BIZ, West Broadway Development Corporation, and the Winnipeg Foundation.

A community BBQ launched the project in which over 100 residents attended and generated ideas and visions for what this park meant to the community and what they would like to see the project become. The final mosaic was constructed and installed by Art City participants over a two week period at the end of the summer.

In this project the community was responsible for the content and creation of the mosaic. Community participation does not need to be limited to decision making processes, but can easily become part of project implementation.

A public community art project should not be underestimated for its linkages to pertinent planning issues. The park is a public space and to create art for the space one needs to be conscious of and navigate the multiple memories and multiple publics that Leonie Sandercock writes about in *Towards Cosmopolis*. The public and communal creation of the mosaic is akin to the social learning model that John Friedmann identifies. This may not be traditional land use planning, but the broad goals and results are similar: building communities, strengthening social capital, celebrating community pride and community participation.



Looking Ahead

Art City is a success story. It is a small community art centre in the West Broadway neighbourhood of Winnipeg with a city-wide and even international reach. Its continued success, however, relies on its ability to understand and meet the needs of its communities. The strategies used at Art City already apply the lessons learned over the years that the centre has been in operation.

Future community participation and decision making at Art City needs to find and address the gaps that the current strategies do not meet. It is important to realize that these strategies and gaps not only look to make Art City successful, but seek to strengthen the community as well.

One major gap in Art City's approach to broad participation is that to date it has not yet engaged the entire community in a formal strategic planning session. Considering the challenges of involving such a diverse community, this would not be an easy task. However, Art City is currently developing a strategic planning process for the Fall of 2007; the first Art City strategic planning process that will engage and involve the entire community to gather input and suggestions to create a future plan.

While an ideal, the highly involved traditional levels of community participation and decision making are not necessarily the most effective or efficient strategy for every situation. The Art City Model emphasizes much of the community participation and decision making at a highly involved level, but is flexible and contextual in how these strategies are implemented. Ideal participation strategies are the ones that are the most effective to their context, not always the most ideal in theory.

