



Year of Chicago Theatre

ASSET MAPPING REPORT

February 2022

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INTRODUCTION

The City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE) and the League of Chicago Theatres designated 2019 as the Year of Chicago Theatre. This initiative aimed to celebrate and build a stronger, more diverse, and inclusive performing arts sector. As a legacy of that year, the League and DCASE invested in a deeper understanding and engagement with theatre and performance assets in the South and West Sides of Chicago. These areas of Chicago have traditionally had less support and formal infrastructure for the performing arts.

In 2019, DCASE, the League, and Metris Arts Consulting selected three teams of artists:

- Free Street Theater
- Arts and Culture Unit of the Chicago Park District
- A team of independent theatre professionals working with Chicago Public Schools

The teams carried out extensive engagement with artists, community storykeepers, and other community members about cultural assets, barriers, and dreams about performing arts in a selection of South and West Side neighborhoods.

This report synthesizes the material collected in 2020 and 2021, through an engagement process adapted to and conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. It informs policy and programmatic recommendations to help strengthen the performing arts sector in underserved areas of Chicago. The recommendations align with opportunities within Mayor Lightfoot's INVEST South/West initiative, upgrades coming to Chicago Park District and Public Library facilities, the Arts77 recovery and reopening plan, and the We Will Chicago citywide planning process. We hope that the assets and insights gained through this process will catalyze the development of long-term support systems and infrastructure for the performing arts on the South and West Sides of Chicago.

SUMMARY OF KEY THEMES & RECOMMENDATIONS

Key Themes

Everything from neighborhood histories to dances of the African diaspora are cultural assets

- Neighborhood cultures are made of people, their relationships, their shared histories, and commitments
- Food is an important cultural medium and a key component of engaging cultural spaces
- Participants value spaces that center Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous arts and cultural traditions
- Performing arts practices range from the “usual” kinds to ritual and more, but all engage and welcome participants

Many neighborhood settings host & nurture cultural activities

- Community centers that are multidisciplinary and cross-sector are valuable cultural spaces
- Commercial corridors and cultural businesses are prized by residents, but also vulnerable
- Gardens and outdoor gathering spaces are growing more than food
- Participants valued parks for serving diverse groups and uses, especially for youth and families
- Religious organizations nurture some arts and cultural activities

Groups are connecting people to create, learn & work towards justice together

- Cultural spaces should be lively, accessible, welcoming, and community-driven
- Communities of peers support the development of working artists
- Intergenerational connections are critical for both youth and professional artists
- Working together towards social justice and community benefit is important to creatives and community members alike

Opportunities exist to support cultural production more equitably

- Funding and financial resources must target areas of historic disinvestment
- Chicago creatives are interested in easier access to information, training, and supportive networks
- New spaces on the South and West Sides could be tailored for performance requirements

Recommendations

1 - Counter disparities through targeted, innovative funding & investments in cross-sector uses

- Fund South Side, West Side, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Person of Color), and ALAANA (African, Latinx, Asian, Arab, Native American) artists and cultural organizations with unrestricted grants and low barriers to access
- Explore funding sources beyond government and traditional philanthropy
- Invest in cross-sector cultural programs and community building strategies

2 - Develop cultural space through strategic matchmaking, training & collaboration

- Provide cultural space development training for South and West Side creatives through cohort-based programs
- Support strategic re-use of city-owned vacant buildings by cultural businesses through matchmaking, training, and funding
- Streamline policies and reduce barriers for cultural uses in vacant lots and open spaces
- Develop pathways for accessing Park and Library facilities for creative production
- Identify opportunities to develop cultural spaces co-located with other city investments

3 - Invest in “people” infrastructure to increase accessibility & animate neighborhood cultural assets

- Create South and West Side DCASE field offices
- Employ staff to activate South and West Side Library and Park cultural assets
- Nurture the development of South and West Side neighborhood cultural councils

4 - Support networks to increase collaboration & access to resources

- Convene cultural workers to cultivate peer-to-peer networks
- Develop online databases to foster mutual aid and collaboration
- Connect K-12 performing arts teachers and students to non-school-based practitioners
- Encourage the cultural sector’s connections to broader economic-inclusion advocacy and activism

5 - Foster strategic training opportunities

- Coach small cultural organizations across organization “life stages”
- Develop paid youth internship and apprenticeship programs in performing arts and film

6 - Invest in systems to track & share progress

- Continue support for asset mapping data stewardship and accessibility
- Create neighborhood “cultural access” benchmarks
- Track progress on equitable funding and cultural access through annual analysis and reporting

HOW DID WE ENGAGE?

The Year of Chicago Theatre asset mapping project was envisioned before, but executed during, the COVID-19 pandemic. This resulted in dramatic changes to the artist teams' approaches to community engagement. Two of the teams, Free Street Theater and the Chicago Park District's Arts and Culture Unit, pivoted to the virtual environment and adapted to the challenges of public engagement. They collected stories and perspectives to identify cultural assets on the South and West Sides of Chicago—the people, organizations, facilities, businesses, and place-based histories that support and inform the development of the performing arts in these communities. The team focusing on Chicago Public Schools, however, created an engagement plan in spring 2020, before determining that it was not feasible (or responsible) to work in the school context during the COVID-19 crisis. The Metris team helped support the work of the artist teams by facilitating team convenings and reflection sessions. Metris also supported the teams' efforts by providing technical assistance on data collection design and mapping tool selection.

When cities undertake artist-led asset mapping projects, one goal is to humanize planning processes and create real opportunities for connection with the people behind them. Artists serve as intermediaries between seemingly abstract and remote decision-making and the day-to-day experience in neighborhoods shaped by those decisions. To do this, artists build relationships with individuals and get to know their day-to-day realities. But this approach was very difficult, if not impossible, to do in a socially distanced way. COVID took all of the ways that we build rapport through casual, in-person interactions, like sharing a meal, completely off the table.

All the teams encountered skepticism from artists and other community members about surveys or asset mapping processes. Participants were skeptical about how they would benefit from the process, given that they have seen many surveys come and go without resulting in community change. Artists were particularly skeptical about the transactional tendencies of information gathering efforts. They were concerned about having to distort their work to be legible for funding. The artist teams worked hard to build relationships and sensitively respond to mistrust; however, many people likely did not engage with this process. Therefore, there are still more cultural assets to uncover. This kind of engagement is an ongoing process, and the teams continue to steward the relationships that they have built.

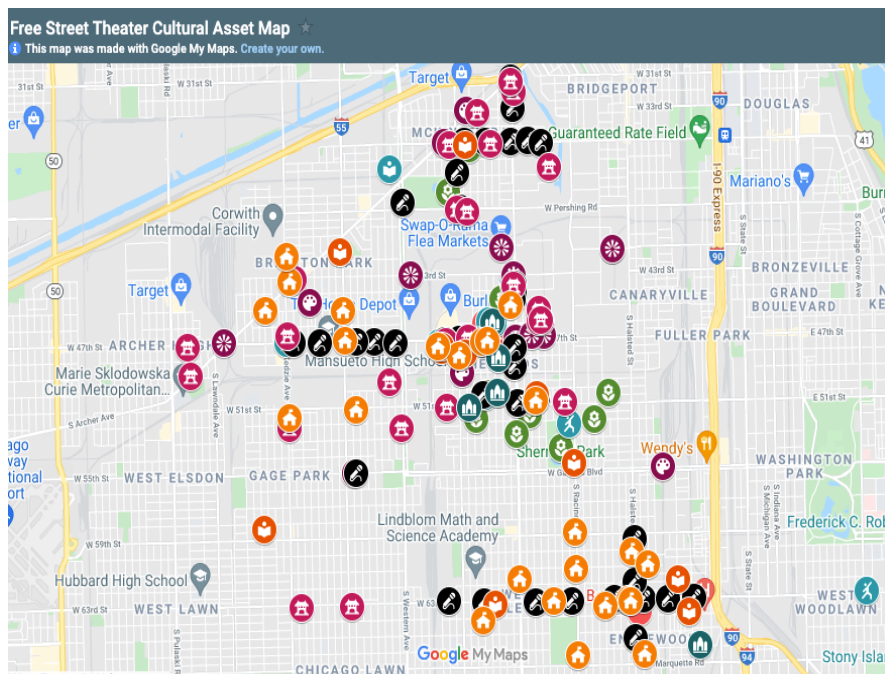
Free Street

Free Street Theater brought relevant contacts and relationships from earlier projects into this cultural asset mapping process. In 2019, Free Street Theater completed the “50x50 Project,” which featured performances in all fifty Chicago wards in one day to celebrate Free Street's fiftieth anniversary. In addition to their headquarters in Pulaski Park, Free Street Theater operates a “Storyfront” in a former refrigerator repair shop in Back of the Yards. The Free Street team decided to begin there, in Back of the Yards, with their relationships and spreadsheets of contacts. They selected four other adjacent neighborhoods—McKinley Park, Brighton Park, Gage Park, and Englewood—to focus on for engagement. The team conducted one-on-one phone interviews in English and in Spanish with their contacts, asking them a series of questions about the impact of COVID-19 on them and their community, the barriers to culture-making they see, and what they imagine their ideal cultural spaces to be like. Often, the interviewer typed the answers to these

“survey” questions directly into a Google spreadsheet. They also asked for recommendations of other people in their neighborhood to engage through interviews or virtual workshops, focusing on youth and parents who might be otherwise difficult to engage. To provide an immediate benefit for interviewees and workshop participants, Free Street developed a suite of thank you gifts. Having a box of produce delivered proved to be the most popular gift.

While continuing to conduct phone interviews, Free Street also conducted five virtual workshops in English and Spanish during the winter and spring of 2021. The workshops involved a mix of games and storytelling activities to capture the texture of the participants’ community, as well as existing assets and desires for their neighborhood. For instance, a game could involve listing a kind of asset, like a performance or space, trying to name as many as you can, as fast as you can. Storytelling activities included making a map drawing of how you imagine your neighborhood into a beautiful future. Then participants might be asked to describe the asset they shared or their future neighborhood using their five senses. Participants said that the conversations and workshops were fun, even though they did not expect them to be. Using their notes from these activities, the Free Street team added to their asset and response tracking spreadsheets. Free Street found these workshops to be good tools for surfacing neighborhood connections and resources, so they will continue to hold workshops and collect assets.

At last count, Free Street Theater identified 186 assets for our cultural asset mapping process. The team mapped these assets using a publicly accessible Google map. They shared that with participants early on, so they can visualize what they and other neighbors see as assets. Now, the Free Street team is developing their own website that includes an interactive map to showcase the assets and to act as an ongoing resource for their focus neighborhoods: fstculturemakersmap.com.



Free Street's mapped assets at www.fstculturemakersmap.com

The website will offer a way for individuals to continue to submit assets to the map. The Free Street team is also coordinating with the Chicago Park District team to make the Free Street dataset available through the Cultural Asset Mapping Project (CAMP) website that the Park District team has developed. Currently, Free Street Theater is developing a multimedia exhibition to share participants’ artwork and other materials representing the cultural assets they collected. The

final exhibition will be

available digitally and can “tour” to other public spaces in the neighborhoods.

Chicago Park District

For the Arts and Culture Unit of the Chicago Park District, this project also built on previous work. The Re:Center Initiative was a long-term visioning process for all fifteen cultural centers in the Chicago Park District, conducted from 2015 to 2020. While convening community stakeholders for Re:Center, the Arts and Culture Unit collected cultural assets in the neighborhoods around each cultural center. With the shift to virtual engagement, the Park District team saw an opportunity to develop a platform that synthesizes the Re:Center dataset with data from two new data collection tools. They created a cultural asset map and website hub using ArcGIS Online: camp-chiparks.hub.arcgis.com. The Park District team branded this next phase of their efforts the Cultural Asset Mapping Project (CAMP) and launched an associated Instagram account (@camp_chicago) to communicate about their activities. To collect information about people and assets, they created and launched two new tools—the Community Storyteller Survey and the Chicago Creatives Network Survey. The storyteller survey enables anyone to submit a story about a person, place, or program in Chicago that has made an impact on their lives and neighborhoods, with an emphasis on theatre, performance, and art. The creatives survey collects information from artists, designers, cultural producers, creative entrepreneurs, and organizations working in Chicago. It focuses on how respondents self-identify in terms of demographics and artistic discipline, where they work, what opportunities or kinds of collaboration they seek, what resources they could offer to other creatives, and other ways they would use an online database of Chicago creatives.

With these new CAMP tools in hand, the Park District team conducted a series of virtual, artist-led workshops in August and October 2020. The team selected nine of the communities they worked with in Re:Center, mostly on the South and West Sides, for continued engagement. They hired thirteen Chicago artists, many with pre-existing connections to these communities, to conduct the workshops. The artists and communities were:

- Eric Hotchkiss and Sydney Lynne, Austin
- Josue Esau and Miranda Gonzalez, Humboldt Park
- Rashada Dawan and Margaret M. Morris, South Shore and Woodlawn
- Sojourner Zenobia and Tamara Becerra Valdez, North Lawndale
- Epifanio Monarrez and Jen Delos Reyes, Little Village
- Chris Saint Martin, Roseland, Pullman, Chatham and Chesterfield
- Anders Zaniczkowsky, Edgewater and Rogers Park
- Yaritza Guillen, Chicago Lawn and West Lawn

The artists engaged participants from their assigned neighborhoods in a variety of ways to tell stories and experiences about what they valued about their communities. The Park District team then used the documentation and recorded stories from these workshops to populate the Cultural Asset Map, using the Community Storyteller Survey.

The artists then developed responses to what they heard in the workshops. Margaret Morris and Rashada Dawan produced “Pop Up & Smash” in November 2020 in the South Shore neighborhood. This event provided an outlet for community members’ anger and created an opportunity to produce something beautiful out of it. Participants wrapped a piece of pottery in cloth, smashed it with a hammer, and then placed the pieces on a board to create a mosaic. Chris Saint Martin and collaborator Stephanie Graham created “Roses for Roseland,” a four-minute video. The video features portraits of community members being gifted roses and footage of the neighborhood, set to a voice-over by Andrea Reed, executive director of the Greater Roseland Chamber of Commerce, describing the neighborhood.



*“Pop Up and Smash” event organized by Margaret Morris and Rashad Dawan.
Photo credit: Latham Zearfoss, 2020*

With additional funding from Enrich Chicago, the Park District team entered into a city-wide phase of their cultural asset mapping work. They opened the Chicago Creatives Network survey to wider input and conducted virtual workshops to promote the Cultural Asset Map and the Community Storyteller Survey. The virtual workshops included an info session, a two-part digital storytelling workshop, and six “Art + Stories” workshops led by art therapy students from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The Park District team also held virtual happy hours to promote networking among the numerous partners that they had become connected to throughout this process. Out of this continued engagement, the team designed a series of ten focus groups exploring Chicago’s cultural landscape and supports for ALAANA and BIPOC artists. These focus groups engaged forty-six artists and cultural workers in small groups organized by discipline and identity.

Through all these methods, the Park District team collected 147 stories set in Chicago neighborhoods, 115 of which we reviewed for this report. The team also collected survey responses from 241 Chicago creative individuals, organizations, and collectives. All of the stories and survey responses are all available on the CAMP website, along with the cultural assets collected during Re:Center. The Park District team hopes to make the website more accessible by adding more filtering functions to the database. With the help of data evaluation consultant Sara Sukhun, the team also developed a CAMP report that explores the survey responses and focus group themes in greater depth. See camp-chiparks.hub.arcgis.com/pages/resources.

The Park District team is continuing to engage those who participated in this process. To activate survey participants, the Park District team held an in-person Chicago Creatives Network social gathering in October 2021, where they explored the learnings from the process and facilitated connections among local artists. With funding from the Walder Foundation, the Park District team expanded their engagement at Palmer Park and Douglass Park, with artists Chris Saint Martin and Sojourner Zenobia, respectively. These took the form of funded, long-term residencies and are ongoing. The Park District team is also developing a cultural stewardship training series to empower artists and community organizers to offer relevant, vanguard cultural programming inside the parks while providing support, resources, and space to make it happen.

Chicago Public Schools Team

Performing artists Quenna Barrett, Tasia Jones, and Jacob Watson worked with Julia deBettencourt and Jeff Waraksa in the Department of Arts Education at Chicago Public Schools to focus their attention on opportunities in and around schools and working with youth on the South and West Sides of Chicago. This team selected three neighborhoods to work in, based on where the other two teams were not focusing and where there were gaps in existing knowledge. These neighborhoods were:

- Far west (Belmont-Cragin and Portage Park)
- Near south (Oakland, Douglas, and Bridgeport)
- Far south (Beverly and Morgan Park)

The COVID-19 pandemic scuttled the original plans of focusing on physical space opportunities within the school buildings and building a roving live performance on public transit to connect the communities. The Chicago Public Schools (CPS) team held a virtual focus group in July 2020 to which they invited educators from their target neighborhoods. In the focus group, participants explored their thoughts on performance and the use of spaces and places in their schools and communities, as well as what might be possible for this project during the pandemic. The team learned that teachers and students are focused on virtual and outdoor performance experiences. The conversation also surfaced a desire for more partnerships with arts organizations and establishing more consistent programs within the schools themselves. But they also learned that educators were overwhelmed with the demands of virtual learning and were too stretched to work on outside projects.

In further discussions with CPS central office administrators, the team learned that there is misalignment between theatre arts partners and the CPS arts education workforce. CPS staff reported that there are more theatre arts partners than there are staff and spaces within the schools to host them. A pipeline to recruit, support, and train theatre teachers could stabilize the theatre workforce in CPS. There is also no consistent way to track and support individual student journeys across schools and partner organizations. To address the needs that educators and CPS administrators identified, the CPS team designed an engagement process that would bring teaching artists and CPS teachers together for a cohort learning, asset mapping, and problem-solving experience. While the cohort process was designed specifically to address the challenges of the pandemic, ultimately the CPS team decided that during the pandemic was not the right time to embark on this learning journey. The team compiled the learnings and assets they identified during the planning phase of this project and shared them with DCASE, the League of Chicago Theatres, and Metris. Their insights have informed the themes we describe in the assets collected by the other teams and our final recommendations.

STORIES & CULTURAL ASSETS COLLECTED

The stories and cultural assets that the Free Street and Park District teams collected are wide-ranging and varied in their focus. The artist teams cast as wide a net as possible, defining “culture” in the broadest terms and being open to whatever stories and assets participants wanted to highlight. As part of the process of finding themes across these assets, we created a list of types of assets and stories submitted. Each asset and story collected contains many aspects and can fit into multiple categories, which makes it difficult to sort them. Nonetheless, we further grouped these categories to roughly fit under three of our four key themes (the fourth key theme being about opportunities to support these assets).

Everything from neighborhood histories to dances of the African diaspora are cultural assets

- Significant individuals
- Neighborhood cultures, connections, histories, and values
- Public art and landmarks
- Food as cultural medium
- Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous arts and cultural organizations
- Performance spaces and organizations
- Performance programs, events, and festivals
- Visual art events, spaces, and organizations
- Lost or former spaces

Many neighborhood settings host & nurture cultural activities

- Cross-sector spaces that meet arts and non-arts needs
- Civic or community organizations
- Commercial cultural venues, spaces, and businesses
- Gardens and outdoor gathering spaces
- Park memories and programs
- Library memories and programs
- Religious venues and organizations

Groups that connect people around cultural activities are assets

- Artist collectives, collaboration, and gathering spaces
- Arts and music education spaces
- Youth-oriented spaces and opportunities for youth
- Protests, community organizing, and mutual aid

The Free Street Theatre team collected 186 assets in their engagement process, as well as additional perspectives on ideal cultural spaces and barriers to cultural production. The Chicago Park District team collected 115 stories, alongside the self-nominated individuals in the Chicago Creatives Network, the answers to survey questions, and focus group discussions. Both teams are continuing to engage and gather input as part of their ongoing programs.

Throughout the report, we spotlight a few assets that exemplify some of the themes and cross-cutting categories in the assets collected. The full list of assets collected and reviewed as part of this effort can be found in the appendix. Also, feel free to browse the Free Street website (fstculturemakersmap.com) and Chicago Park District CAMP website (camp-chiparks.hub.arcgis.com), where they display fuller sets of assets.

KEY THEMES

Through this process, the artist teams documented assets, stories, visions of ideal spaces, and discussions of barriers. Some key themes cut across all these sources. Some themes emerged from the particular types of assets highlighted by participants. We distilled others from the perspectives and details that participants provided in stories and survey answers. The assets and ideas documented throughout this process paint a picture of the rich cultural fabric that weaves together South and West side communities. The themes across these assets—the types of cultural assets, the neighborhood locations and organizations that support them, cultural communities and networks, and the opportunities to invest in them—show us how to build up infrastructure that supports this cultural fabric. Perhaps every single entry in this process embodies the idea that cultural assets can connect community residents. Furthermore, in lifting up the cultural assets in their communities, participants demonstrated what they want more of. They seek a greater density of cultural assets and a more robust arts ecosystem that promotes connectivity between creative workers and culture bearers, and between these and their community. Through the themes, we can begin to understand *how* participants see cultural assets as integral to flourishing communities.

Everything from neighborhood histories to dances of the African diaspora are cultural assets

What is a cultural asset in Chicago? Participants' stories give us wide ranging answers to this question. In them, we see that neighborhood cultures are made of people, their relationships, their shared histories, and commitments to their community. Food also emerged as an important cultural medium and a key component of engaging cultural spaces. Furthermore, it's clear that participants value spaces that center Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous arts and cultural traditions. The stories also show us a range of performing arts practices, from the “usual” kinds to ritual and more. Though they vary in form, all of these performing arts practices are engaging and foster participation.

Neighborhood cultures are made of people, their relationships, their shared histories & commitments

Many stories highlighted neighborhood “legends,” people like Ms. Evangeline Fletcher, who acted as a second grandmother to a slew of neighborhood kids and took them to arts experiences throughout the city. Librarians and park-based dance and exercise teachers were called out as assets, particularly for their role in shaping youth. Often, these individuals are community storykeepers, themselves, like Back of the Yards librarian Bertha Flores Ramirez.

Many of the stories shared with the Park District team featured personal memories and connections to specific neighborhoods. For instance, storytellers described Roseland as a family-oriented place where extended families lived near one another, and people looked out for each other. Another described migrating to Humboldt Park, because of its concentration of other Guerrerense (people from Guerrero in Mexico).



Artist Epifanio Monarrez and children in front of a mural they painted to raise money for summer art and environmental justice programs. Photo credit: Vanessa Bly, 2016

Other storytellers told the stories behind works of art, the histories of the neighborhoods that those artworks depict, and who was involved in making them happen. One mural in La Villita Park elicits memories of the artist working with young people to complete the mural within 24 hours, as a fundraiser for the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization. The Martin Luther King Jr. monument in Marquette Park depicts the history of the fair housing marches in Chicago that Dr. King participated in, as well as the more recent participation of community members, young and old, who made tiles to surround the monument.

These stories display rootedness and commitment to community. An artist who led workshops through CAMP at Douglass Park highlighted how workshop participants had been fighting for their community in North Lawndale, since before 1968. Many people shared stories and concerns about rising housing costs, gentrification, and new development that does not serve their community. Some of the cultural assets that are no longer present in these communities were lost because of the natural changes in a neighborhood over generations, but others were lost because of not owning the land or building. The Elevated Garden, an outdoor gathering space used by elders and for food distribution in Englewood, and Ollin Papalotl, a cultural shop and Azteca danza venue in Brighton Park, were both lost because the properties were sold.

Food is an important cultural medium & a key component of engaging cultural spaces

Food plays a starring role in many of participants' stories, assets, and visions of ideal cultural spaces. Street vendors—past and present—were held up as community cultural assets, whether it was reminiscing about the Humboldt Park “coco man,” who sold fresh, Puerto Rican style coconut ice with a special sazón, or the street vendors that currently gather in Back of the Yards on 43rd, between Ashland and Damen. People's ideal cultural spaces included industrial kitchen space that could be used to support and incubate food businesses or performance spaces with on-site restaurants that served healthy food from local food vendors. Others still imagined that their ideal cultural space would be somewhere where they could gather and bring their own food to share.

Participants also shared how food can be a component of cultural storytelling and story-sharing. For instance, Chef Mel offers cooking demos at The Breathing Room Garden and Star Farms that serve as a vehicle for story sharing and community building. Chef and storyteller Roberto Pérez's initiative, “Urban Pilón,” honors and preserves cooking traditions from Puerto Rico, the Caribbean, and Latin America. Pérez's courses showcase the stories of his ancestors, while teaching recipes along with the history and traditions behind them.

Spotlight: Urban Pílon



Photo credit: Roberto Pérez

“Roberto Pérez is a chef, musician, and researcher of Afro-Caribbean traditions. He is one of the founding members of acclaimed Afro-Puerto Rican music group, Bomba con Buyá, and the co-founder of educational culinary initiative, “Urban Pílon.” “Urban Pílon” is a culinary movement with a mission: to honor and preserve cooking traditions from Puerto Rico, the Caribbean, and Latin America, while using completely natural, healthy ingredients. With this mission in

mind, Roberto serves not only as chef, but as storyteller, sharing the stories of our ancestors through his cooking, classes, and demonstrations. His popular Caribbean cooking courses showcase these stories by teaching both classic and original recipes along with the history behind them.”

—Roberto Pérez

Participants value spaces that center Black, Latinx, Asian & Indigenous arts & cultural traditions

Many of the assets and stories collected in this process feature Black experiences and cultural traditions and the people and organizations that keep them alive. One storyteller related how much she valued how Ms. Sherry Williams, president and founder of the Bronzeville Historical Society, used to “dress the part” in historical clothes and take kids on field trips to the Pullman State Historic Site. There she introduced kids to Black history through a variety of artifacts she collected. Stories feature organizations like Ayodele Drum and Dance and Red Clay Dance Company that teach and perform dances from the African diaspora. eta Creative Arts Foundation offers African American centered theatre experiences that are affordable, easy to get to, and accessible to young audiences. One storyteller painted a picture of the former Boulevard Art Center in Englewood by listing all the Black artists who used to teach, perform, and exhibit there. Another highlighted how skill-sharing workshops organized by the Black Abolitionist Network in 2020 had taken great care to center Black voices and Black radical thought in the conversations.

Other stories featured assets such as organizations that cultivate Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous cultural traditions. A few storytellers described the former Batey Urbano space. This venue lifted up Puerto Rican culture and connected young people by teaching about bomba and Puerto Rican history, as well as offered poetry and hip-hop nights. Other organizations provide intergenerational opportunities to practice and learn cultural forms. Jarochicanos is dedicated to the practice and preservation of traditional son jarocho music from Veracruz, Mexico. Xochitl-Quetzal Danza Azteca preserves traditional concheros music, song, and dance performance. Asian Improv aRts Midwest teaches and performs several traditional and contemporary Japanese music and dance forms. Some stories featured organizations that center particular ethnic groups, but that may not have an arts and culture programming focus. One example is the Federacion de Clubes Unidos

Zacatecanos en Illinois, which is a collective of Zacatecan, Mexican immigrants focusing on providing mutual aid and other support for their community.

Performing arts practices range from the “usual” kinds to ritual & more, all engage and welcome participants

Performing arts activities are laced throughout the stories and assets collected through this process. But when we take a moment to focus on performance assets, specifically, they are quite diverse and tell us a lot about what kinds of performance participants want to see more of. Many participants described their ideal cultural spaces as intimate venues where the audience becomes part of the show and people can come together and talk before or after a performance. The kinds of performances they envision happening in these spaces are interactive ones that break down barriers between producers and consumers, so that all are co-participants and co-producers.

Many of the performing arts groups and activities mentioned fit into the usual categories—theatre, music, and dance. Theatre organizations like eta Creative Arts Foundation, Urban Theater Company, and Chicago Dramatists loomed large in the stories. Teatro Tariakuri Ensemble in Gage Park performs teatro del pueblo, a slapstick style of storytelling that contains a lot of Spanish. Musical forms highlighted included blues, punk, noise, electronic music, bomba, Latin fusion, hip-hop, and marimba. Many of the music venues mentioned are commercial spaces, like bars. Others are dedicated to underground art and music like the Archer Ballroom and Rut-Corp. Some creatives and youth development organizations focus on audio engineering and recording aspects of music production.

Spotlight: Blues musicians and clubs



*Storyteller Larry Taylor performing at Blues venue, the Water Hole.
Photo credit: Bonni McKeown, 2019*

“I was in the second generation of Chicago blues performers whose parents brought the music here during the Great Migration from the South. We learned music from our elders, from school music classes, and R&B hits on the radio and club jukeboxes. We competed to get gigs in tiny Black-owned West and South Side clubs, also played on North Side in tourist clubs. Blues is the root of all American popular music—jazz, pop, soul, R&B, country, hip-hop—because it tells ordinary people’s real-life stories. It grew out of our parents’ hardships from slavery, Jim Crow, and the cotton fields, and took on the rhythms of the city. I want to recognize my fellow musicians and the places we played, before we leave this world.”
—Larry Taylor

Dance organizations and activities range from contemporary dance to more folk or diasporic forms of dance that are merged with culturally specific music traditions, particularly drumming.

Contemporary dance organizations mentioned include the Chicago Moving Company and the Chicago Dancemakers Forum. Open the Circle focuses on social dance with an emphasis on footworking on the South and West Side of Chicago. Folk or diasporic forms are championed by Ayodele Drum and Dance, Xochitl-Quetzal Danza Azteca, Red Clay Dance, Jarochicanos, Ballet Folklórico of Chicago, the Hana Center, and Asian Improv aRts Midwest.

Still, many of the performance activities highlighted in the stories and assets collected do not fit neatly into the “usual” categories of performance. The Defibrillator Gallery (a.k.a. DFBRL8R) was mentioned as a cultural space that nurtures performance art within the framework of visual art. Two works by Honey Pot Performance, “ways of knowing” and “Ladies Ring Shout” exemplify the collaborative’s approach that invites community members into the process of performance and centers Afro-feminist and Black diasporic performance traditions.

Other performances that appear in the stories highlight the use of ritual as an important community performance genre. Some of these are artist-led or directed, like the grass dance ceremony that Santiago X described at the site of his new earthwork, “Fololokha:cin Cinto” (The Coiled Serpent), in Horner Park. La Villita Park hosted artist Adela Goldberg who created life sized replicas of neighborhood landmarks involved in controversial real estate development projects. The papier-mâché pieces were incinerated with fireworks as a ritual for addressing power and coping with loss. Still other rituals are more intertwined with everyday life and yearly festivals, such as the annual “Blessing of the Rides,” Día de Los Muertos, and Christmas posadas processions. Artists also create and yearn for gatherings and happenings that center creative communal rites, such as a “Black New Year” gathering on the spring equinox, the “Full Moon Jam” sessions at The Breathing Room, and pop-up discos for Queer and Trans POC creatives.



“Grass Dance” at site of “Pokto Cinto” (Serpent Twin), earthwork by Santiago X in Schiller Park. Photo credit: Chicago Public Art Group, 2018

Some of the stories highlighted the importance of youth-oriented performances that open pathways for lifelong involvement in performance. One storyteller emphasized the importance of plays for young audiences in his own experience of deciding to go into the theatre after seeing a play written specifically for youth, “Song and Dance” by Runako Jahi. Other stories centered on how B.Fli Productions lifts up emerging talent on the South Side, through a performance competition and by giving others backstage production experience. Teatro Tariakuri offers dance and acting classes for young performers in everything from tap to ballet folklórico. Many other organizations use performing arts as part of comprehensive youth development programs, focusing on engaging youth in social emotional learning through self-expression and providing training in performing arts industries.

Many neighborhood settings host & nurture cultural activities

Participants told us that they value arts and cultural activities that are part of the fabric of their neighborhoods. Many people want cultural spaces that function as community centers, that are multidisciplinary and cross-sector in their orientation. Arts and cultural activities are embedded in many settings and organizations that may not seem like arts spaces or organizations. For instance, commercial corridors and cultural businesses came up frequently, sometimes because they were valued spaces that have been lost. Gardens and outdoor gathering spaces support all kinds of community and cultural activities. Participants valued parks for serving diverse groups and uses, especially for youth and families. Even religious organizations nurture some arts and cultural activities.

Community centers that are multidisciplinary & cross-sector are valuable cultural spaces

Through their stories and ideas, many participants described “one stop shops” or vibrant community centers where people can gather and access many different cultural and social services in one place. Several participants’ ideal cultural space visions included multidisciplinary community arts venues. These would feature enough space for multiple concurrent uses and programming for all ages and abilities. Some of these visions seemed to be describing the Boulevard Art Center, formerly in Englewood, that nurtured a range of visual and performing arts disciplines. Participants listed a wide range of cultural disciplines they would like to see in their community cultural spaces: visual art, printmaking, sewing, quilting, pottery, weaving, lacemaking, mosaic, carpentry, welding, 3D printing, music, dance, social dance, theatre, poetry, puppetry, cooking, and gardening. Notably, many of these activities are heavily participatory and craft oriented. In essence, participants’ ideal cultural space is one where everyone can come together to learn and create, on their own or in classes and workshops.

Cross-sector spaces offer another kind of multidisciplinary space with co-located cultural uses and other community services. Through their stories and assets, many participants highlighted organizations that offer both arts opportunities and social services. One that came up frequently was the Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN), which offers medical and behavioral health services at the same campus where they operate the Beloved Community Ceramic Studio. Port Ministries in Back of the Yards offers after school tutoring, a free health clinic, meal distribution, along with art studio space and workshops through The People’s School. Other neighborhood-focused support organizations also offer some arts and cultural programs alongside their social service and economic development programs. For instance, the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council hosts a folklórico dance troupe.

Participants also mentioned community-based and social service organizations as assets in their neighborhoods. Some of these organizations have cultural practices embedded in their work. For example, Mujeres Latinas en Accion serves Latina women who are domestic violence and sexual assault survivors through peer support programs. They operate a group for women entrepreneurs, many of whom have cultural businesses producing food or handmade items like jewelry. Participants highlighted other community organizations, like the Brighton Park Neighborhood Council, that do not offer arts and cultural programming, but serve as powerful intergenerational organizers and conveners. Many of their programs—youth leadership development, community schools,

immigration services, health and wellness support—could readily be paired with arts and cultural offerings.

Some community-based organizations, lacking their own spaces, bring people together virtually or only occasionally, yet operate as vibrant organizing and information hubs for their communities. Organizations like the Residential Association of Greater Englewood (R.A.G.E.) are examples of this kind of organization. This highlights the need for space for community and cultural uses in many South and West Side neighborhoods. In Englewood, participants noted that there is not enough meeting space for community and family events; those that are available (the Ogden fieldhouse and the local Whole Foods meeting room) are in high demand. In Back of the Yards, McDonalds and Dunkin Donuts were noted as some of the few gathering places where elders and youth can safely hang out.

Spotlight: Boulevard Art Center



Former Boulevard Art Center at 6011 S Justine Street. Photo credit: Marti Price, 1992

“The place that I want to map was a cultural institution in Englewood in the late 80s early 90s... You had all these artists either teaching or donating art to keep the Boulevard Art Center funded, doing programs or being a part of the art shows that they had there... They just really worked in all angles trying to figure out how to activate the community and then

bring things to the community that were needed but also, things that can empower the youth there. As I think back to it, man, when else could you get all those people in one space?... Just all that power, you know, in in one space is amazing, and for it to be in Englewood is a testament, you know, of community. If you know where the arts really lie, you know it's not necessarily in this glossy place. It's just in any space where people are pushing for culture. To be a part of that, to see that, it definitely changed me. It really made me see you could create what you want to see where you are.”

—Pugs Atomz

Commercial corridors & cultural businesses are prized by residents, but also vulnerable

Commercial corridors, themselves, are significant cultural spaces. Some participants mentioned that their ideal cultural space was a storefront on a lively commercial corridor with lots of pedestrian traffic. One storyteller painted a picture of a “shared street” where uncles sitting in chairs intermingle with kids holding bubble tea and storefronts across the street feel connected by a giant



Display at Kim's Corner Food. Photo Credit: Rafaella Las, 2020

sidewalk. In this vision, some stores have been there since your grandfather went there, while others rotate. Several participants cited Kim's Corner Food as an artistic asset. It's where Thomas Kong practices, displays, and sells his assemblage art made from packaging materials. Examples like this illustrate that retail spaces can have their own cultural value, especially because they are intertwined with and celebrate the cultural and artistic dimensions of everyday life.

Many of the highlighted cultural assets would fit into these visions of vibrant commercial corridors. Participants mentioned two bookstores no longer in operation. They valued Revolution Books as an artist gathering space. El Quijote sold Spanish-language materials for children and adults. Crafts By Claudia, a valued supply store in Brighton Park, closed in 2019 when the owner decided to retire. Back of the Yards Coffee still operates, but with limited cultural programming since the start of the pandemic. This Latinx and womyn-owned shop used to host open mics, storytelling events, children's book readings, and reading groups.

Several storytellers highlighted the importance of Black-owned neighborhood businesses. One storyteller reminisced about Black-owned businesses in Chatham, such as the Starlight Bowling Alley. They also explained how Seaway Bank formed in 1965 to extend credit to Black business owners. At its height, it was the largest Black-owned bank in the U.S. Another storyteller told a more intimate story of playing with dough as a child in her grandmother's bakery, where her grandmother practiced cake decorating. This place was significant, not only because it was a Black-owned business, but also because it allowed her grandmother to support her creative pursuits, like production design, in her free time. Participants highlighted pop-up markets and festivals, like the Cultural Connection African Marketplace and Bazaar in Chatham, as long standing and current ways to support BIPOC business owners and artisans.

Gardens & outdoor gathering spaces are growing more than food

Many of the cultural spaces highlighted through this process are community gardens and places that grow food. These spaces frequently focus their energies on local food economies and education on gardening, sustainability, and cooking. The D.I.G. garden program at Dixon Elementary School

encourages students to learn to grow their own food and to run a farmers market. The Plant Chicago is a nonprofit based in Back of the Yards that teaches workshops on growing food, composting, and cooking, and hosts a farmers market.

But these spaces also host a dizzying range of activities and programming that expand beyond gardening and education around growing food. These spaces operate as multi-disciplinary community spaces. Earl's Garden Mae's Kitchen, in Englewood, also hosts music, dance, and poetry events and activities. Star Farm Chicago, in Back of the Yards, hosts art workshops and storytelling events to support community building and healing practices. The Breathing Room, operated by the Let Us Breathe Collective, has hosted organizing and community programs of many kinds, but has also recently developed The Breathing Room Gardens where they grow food to distribute to the community and “use land stewardship as a path toward healing, sovereignty, and liberation.”

Spotlight: North Lawndale Peace Park

“During the year, youth groups come to the Peace Park to learn about Black history and contribute to park maintenance. An example of an activity here is the annual “Youth Art Fest” on the last Saturday of August. It includes a contest for teen artists to paint portraits of Black heroes, open mic stage performances, drumming, dancing, kids’ watercolor table, face painting, free art supplies for all children, refreshments, and more. This year, we are adding a food drive. Sometimes youth earn their service-learning hours here. Adults perform their community service hours here. University groups visit here to add art or get involved in gardening. The general population comes to enjoy the great outdoors and help with weeding and landscaping. Sometimes there are art workshops in the Peace Park. Everyone learns about Black history. The Peace Park offers an opportunity to discuss social justice issues. The Peace Park is open to the public. Individuals, families, and groups can utilize the park when they like.”



Butterfly garden at the North Lawndale Peace Park. Photo credit: Dianna C. Long

—Dianna C. Long

Participants nominated many other outdoor spaces as cultural assets, simply because they are places where people can gather. Some of these green spaces are informal gathering spaces, like the green space at 47th and Damen that is used for a Christmas tree lighting, food distribution, and as the starting point for marches. On Munoz Marin Drive in Humboldt Park, seniors hang out in the summer to play music and dance salsa, “car homies” gather with their low-riders, and everyone gathers before baseball games. The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the interest in outdoor event and performance space. One story tells of the 2020 dedication ceremony of an outdoor stage and community garden adjacent to the Stone Temple Church in North Lawndale and how important it was to be able to gather then. But even before the pandemic, community members cherished outdoor gathering spaces like the North Lawndale Peace Park or The Hammonds’ Promise Land in Englewood, made out of reclaimed vacant lots and programmed by community members.

Participated valued parks for serving diverse groups & uses, especially for youth and families

Many people shared stories of spending time in Chicago parks as children or with children in their life. One elder shared a story about swimming in Douglass Park as a kid, hiding their clothes in the bushes because all the lockers were taken, having their clothing stolen, and having to walk home in the rain. Other memories involved taking grandchildren to play miniature golf in Douglass Park and learning to play chess from an elder in Palmer Park. In this story, when the younger person finally beat the elder, the elder gave the storyteller the chess set and walked away. Along with these informal experiences, the after-school programs, summer camps, and sports programs for children and youth were also a regular focus of the stories shared with the Park District team. Park baseball programs, in particular, serve as a safe haven for young kids and prepare young people to continue in the sport. Overall, inside and outside of formal programs, the parks are valued as spaces for people of all ages and demographics to be active.

Participants also highlighted parks' importance as community gathering spaces. For instance, there is always a cookout, festival, party, or tour happening in Washington Park. One storyteller that participated in the Park District Day Camp in 2003 realized how intimately parks are connected to neighborhood activities and serve as central gathering places, similar to plazas in their native Mexico. In summer 2020 in McKinley Park, the McKinley Park Mutual Aid group distributed Black Lives Matter posters that they designed, which sparked opportunities for neighbors to have conversations about racial justice.

The ways that the parks operate as arts and cultural centers was another prominent theme across park stories. Halloween celebrations at the Tuley Park fieldhouse in the 60s included a talent show and bonfire. A Dia de los Muertos celebration held in Piotrowski Park in 2019 helped to restore a sense of community and celebration for a physical instructor there. The stories also celebrate the parks as outdoor venues for performances and events. One storyteller remembered performing as a DJ as part of "FEAST Festival" at Douglass Park as part of "Night Out in the Parks." The event was fresh, inviting, and cultivated connections because it was produced by local artists.

Another storyteller described "CYCLE," a performance by seven dancers and a seven-piece band that responded to the surrounding landscape at Big Marsh in 2019. Others noted pieces of public art or monuments in parks, such as the Martin Luther King, Jr. monument in Marquette Park and three murals in Ping Tom Memorial Park.



Dia de los Muertos celebration at Piotrowski Park. Photo credit: Patsy Diaz, 2019

Religious organizations nurture some arts & cultural activities

Since the Free Street team was able to concentrate their efforts in a few neighborhoods, they were able to have in-depth conversations with community members about a larger range of community

assets. In these neighborhoods, participants named religious organizations as places that nurture some kinds of cultural activity. Religious groups can often offer a gathering place for like-minded folks from similar cultural backgrounds, as well as rehearsal and performance space. Intergenerational performing arts groups like the Holy Cross Immaculate Heart of Mary Marimba Ensemble are fully housed in a religious community. Other religious communities, like Love, Faith, & Hope Evangelical Lutheran Church support activities for all ages, including dance, theatre, and comedy, powered by the passionate Pastor Felicia, who has a background in radio and television. St. Benedict the African Parish in Englewood was also noted as an organization that commissions visual, musical, and theatrical artworks.

Additionally, faith-based nonprofits appeared regularly in the stories and assets collected. Many of these organizations operate like other community-based nonprofits and often use arts and cultural strategies for social change and community development. IMAN operates a health center, programs for returning citizens, fosters organizing and advocacy, as well as housing a ceramics studio and sponsoring artworks. Art on 51st is a gallery and event space operated by Precious Blood Ministries, who's programming also has a restorative justice focus. Some religious organizations are suitable hosts for arts and activism work because of their own traditions of organization and direct action. The Su Casa Catholic Worker organization co-operates The Breathing Room Gathering Space and Garden with the Let Us Breathe Collective.

Still, the religious affiliation of cultural spaces was cited as a barrier to cultural production by some participants. They said it was difficult to find cultural space in their neighborhood that was not housed in a religious organization. This suggests that some of these religious spaces may feel unwelcoming for some. This is perhaps because some artists seek cultural spaces that center LGBTQIA creators, as not many traditional religious organizations do. Or it may be because these individuals practice an art form that has its own religious or spiritual component that may conflict with dominant religious traditions, such as Indigenous or African-derived traditions.

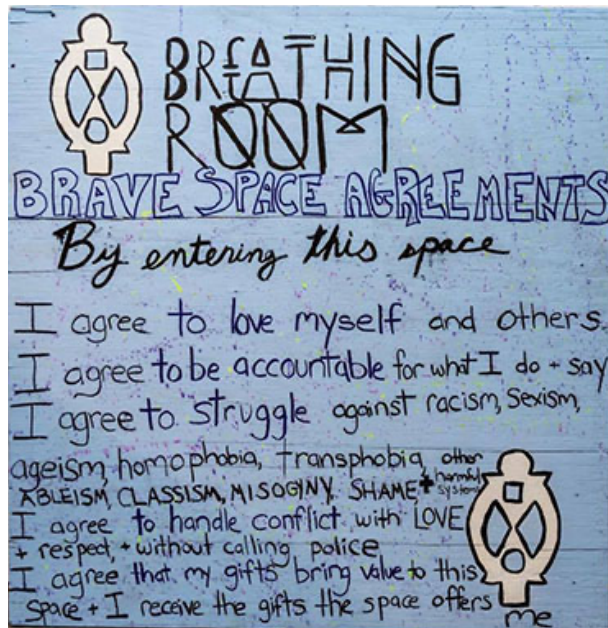
Groups are connecting people to create, learn & work towards justice together

Participants highlighted many cultural assets because they are places where they can gather with other people to create together. Above all, the ideal cultural space offers a sense of community that is lively, accessible, and welcoming. It's a place where people from that community make decisions about what happens there. Working artists particularly value peer communities and networks that nurture their artistic development. Learning an art form within an intergenerational community holds benefits for youth and professional artists. Finally, working together towards social justice and initiatives that benefit their communities is important to creatives and community members, alike.

Cultural spaces should be lively, accessible, welcoming & community-driven

Many participants' visions of ideal cultural spaces emphasized how welcoming and accessible a cultural space should be and feel. Above all, an ideal cultural space would be in the neighborhood, easily accessible by public transit, and have free parking. Some felt that it should be on a commercial corridor that is heavily trafficked by pedestrians. Others noted that it needs to be physically accessible to those with disabilities. The ideal space should also be open on nights and weekends when people are not working and to help commercial corridors feel lively and safe at night. The

cultural space and its activities should be free or affordable using a sliding scale. People need to be aware of what is happening in the space through multiple communication channels, so that if you do not have access to technology, you are not out of the loop.



The Breathing Room Brave Space Agreements. Photo credit: Kristiana Rae Colon, 2016

In these visions, a large component of what makes a cultural space feel fun and lively is who is there and made to feel welcome. Other participants described multi-generational spaces that would cater to people of all ages and families. No one would feel judged for looking too different, and in particular, queer and trans BIPOC people would feel like the space was for them. Language justice and access to communication in multiple languages is an extremely important way to make people feel welcome. Spanish, Polish, and Mandarin all came up as regularly spoken languages in the South and West Sides. A cultural space that is dedicated to and designed for youth to gather and feel safe was also a feature of an ideal space, since some participants cited youth concerns about crossing gang boundaries as a barrier to cultural participation.

Even more importantly than who is there, participants imagined how their ideal cultural spaces would be run. Many stories featured the individuals who run cultural spaces because of their passion, openness, commitment, and generosity. Ideal cultural spaces should be community-driven and inclusive in their decision-making processes. They would be open to anyone in the community for creative and organizing activities. Residents and community leaders that understand the culture of the community would drive the programming so that the programming reflects what people truly want. Decision-making processes would include or be led by BIPOC leaders, youth, and elders. This could be done through an advisory board that gives feedback and is meaningfully heard and part of the conversation.

Participants expressed concern about art-world elitism that drives decisions about what art is created or shown. They felt that when credentialed people or a funder are given priority in the decisions about what gets made, the art that gets made is not what people want to see. As a counter example, one storyteller narrated a visit to “First Friday” at the Zhou B Art Center where Defibrillator operates. The storyteller was surprised at how busy the event was, with multiple exhibits and performances, and how diverse the audience was. This event was a far cry from “the rarefied selections” of art school.

Communities of peers support the development of working artists

Many storytellers offered stories about communities and individuals who had a significant influence on their creative development. These people supported their practice by providing opportunities and introductions to others. A Chicago footwork soloist credited an invitation to perform for the first

time at Links Hall, as part of “Queer Art Festival,” as the opportunity that led to other opportunities and recognition in the dance community. Likewise, one participant cited the community of dance practice cultivated by the Chicago Moving Company at the Hamlin Park Fieldhouse Theatre as a “shelter for dance,” where the storyteller has rehearsed, offered workshops and dance concerts, and had an artist residency. One storyteller lifted up the Chicago Dramatists Tutterow Program, not only for the resources it provided them, but also for the community and mentors they found there.

Other stories highlight more casual and sometimes cross-disciplinary places for artists to gather that have nonetheless been instrumental in artists’ creative development. One such gathering featuring poetry performances was held at Revolution Books, a bookstore that no longer exists. The storyteller talks about how prominent artists “cut their teeth” here and how the gathering was a hub for artistry infused with political practice. Another more recent gathering is “Black New Year” celebrated on the Spring Equinox in a home in Bronzeville, where POC artists gather to play music, dance, and eat to recharge for the coming year.

In contrast to these pop-up gatherings, co-working spaces and collectives provide regular opportunities for peer support, collaboration, and resources. The Honeycomb Network, a co-working space for BIPOC creatives in Humboldt Park, has carved out a permanent space “curated to soothe the soul and allow our creative juices to flow.” Co-working spaces for artists and creatives where they have access to physical and digital workshops were also features of the ideal cultural spaces elicited by Free Street Theater. Artist collectives, such as Englewood Arts Collective, provide regular collaboration partners, but often lack the resources of a stable gathering place. Also, places where creatives can access affordable and sustainable materials for their work, like The WasteShed creative re-use center, were highlighted as assets and particular needs for creatives in South and West Side neighborhoods.

Intergenerational connections are critical for both youth & professional artists

Many storytellers highlighted arts education spaces that offer opportunities for growth for artists and creatives of all ages. In some traditional art forms, the cultural practice itself has always been intergenerational or followed an apprenticeship model. These communities provide opportunities for masters to practice the cultural forms at the same time as they are passing the tradition on to



“Follow Me Fandango” at La Casa del Fandango, August 2017. Photo credit: May Zazbil Fernández, 2017

new generations. One storyteller talked about learning to play blues music from elders who brought the music from the South during the Great Migration and this storyteller lifted up the Black-owned clubs on the South and West Sides where musicians play this music. These communal approaches to learning and practicing an art form shape the multi-generational learning opportunities offered by Jarochicanos at La Casa del Fandango and the traditional and contemporary arts offerings of Asian Improv aRts Midwest.

Other storytellers highlighted the important role of working artists in youth arts education spaces. These working artists contribute to young artists' development. In turn, arts education spaces provide employment opportunities for artists. The story about the former Boulevard Arts Center in Englewood contains a long list of the artists who taught and showed their work at the center. A participant lifted up the Musical Arts Institute in Roseland because of all the working artists who teach there. This storyteller noted how there are so many students in the Institute that there are still more opportunities for teaching artists.

The arts education resources with the Chicago Public School system were named as significant cultural assets, particularly in reference to music education. The Thomas Kelly College Prep and Back of the Yards Prep high schools were highlighted for their band and choir programs. One story featured a celebration of the work of Lena Mclin, who had been a music teacher at Kenwood Academy. Other performing arts programs associated with CPS are run through other organizations. Thomas Kelly College Prep's theatre program is offered through After School Matters, and the Frida Community Organization offers breakdance and Mexican folkloric dance in several elementary and high schools. School staff in the performing arts crave more resources for student development in the performing arts. They were particularly interested in places for students to perform in the neighborhood, outside of school buildings. Participants also highlighted many individual teaching artists and programs that work with youth that are not associated with CPS. So, there are opportunities for in-school arts education programs to connect to larger communities of practitioners in the performing arts.

Working together towards social justice & community benefit is important to creatives & community members alike

A strong theme cutting across stories and assets is that Chicagoans cherish cultural spaces that merge arts and culture with social justice. Participants mentioned spaces or activities working towards racial justice, prison and police abolition, land and environmental justice, health equity and healing, community safety, flourishing for queer and trans BIPOC, and food justice. Participants shared visions of ideal spaces with Free Street, in which cultural spaces "expand possibilities" and serve as gathering places for people working aggressively toward inclusion. These ideal spaces would strike a balance between holding on to tradition and fostering change, between openness to those newer to the fight and a critical edge that challenges the status quo. Individual artists, artworks, and cultural events were highlighted that inspired the participants to work towards social change in their communities, such as Maria Gaspar's "96 Acres" project that addresses the impact of the Cook County jail.

Spotlight: Let Us Breathe Collective and The Breathing Room

“The #LetUsBreathe Collective and the #BreathingRoom space have long been a place where I’ve been able to merge activism and artistry. I began organizing with them in 2015, coordinating #BlackBrunchChi in 2016 wherein we disrupted brunch spots in Lincoln Square. That summer we also organized #FreeDay wherein we gave out food, researched and developed a resource guide, and deployed a mobile clean-up and open mic. This set the stage for #FreedomSquare. What began there, a #FreeStore with clothes, books, food and other mutual aid, exists today at #BreathingRoom. There’s

something about the power of collective organizing that focuses on centering the needs of the people; and one that grew out of a need for folks to be together—through art, protest, rage. A lot of my personal practice, and the way I show up in the world, I garnered from this collective. Emerging artists need spaces such as these, and when artists imagine and support what people need, we create a more liberated society.”



Let Us Breathe Collective event. Photo credit: Sarah Ji-Lee

Several storytellers featured individual protest events, organizing activities, and meaningful places that nurture their activism. The Let Us Breathe Collective, and The Breathing Room space they operate, was mentioned several times as an asset for nurturing creatives in their activism and nurturing the community through mutual aid. The Let Us Breathe Collective is an alliance of artists and activists “organizing through a creative lens to imagine a world without prisons and police.” In addition to producing direct actions towards their goal, they have also produced cultural events, such as “Full Moon Jam,” a quarterly all-night jam session on the full moon. Other stories highlighted how much the storyteller valued artistic elements incorporated into protest events, such as an altar installation during a march on the hundredth day since Breonna Taylor’s murder and how the Hana Center adds their Korean drumming and banners to protests all over the city.

Many of the highlighted stories and assets focus on the power of cultural spaces to connect community members to build power and address community challenges. The respondents to the Chicago Creatives Network survey expressed a strong interest in using a network for creatives to engage in community building projects. A participant highlighted an anti-racist reading group at the Legler Regional Library, because of how the group was honest, vulnerable, and interested in contributing to the neighborhood. Other highlighted organizations, like the Gage Park Latinx Council, blend cultural programming and a focus on a specific neighborhood or cultural group. Gage Park Latinx Council has been focusing on mutual aid during the pandemic by running a free Community Mercado. They also have a cultural center and programming to engage youth artists in mural projects. Similarly, several participants mentioned IMAN as an organization that brings people together, facilitates healing, calls attention to community issues in an engaging way, and challenges participants to reimagine the world.

Opportunities exist to support cultural production more equitably

In addition to asking about existing assets, the Free Street and the Park District teams asked about barriers that participants experience in accessing cultural assets and creating cultural experiences in their communities. The themes across their answers show us the opportunities to invest in cultural assets and supportive infrastructure in Chicago's South and West Sides. Participants were keenly aware of the history of disinvestment in their communities and shared how they continue to struggle to access financial resources. Creative and cultural workers also shared that it could be easier to access information, training, and supportive networks. Participants also talked about their space needs, particularly for spaces tailored for performance.

Funding & financial resources must target areas of historic disinvestment

Finding adequate funding and receiving fair compensation was a major theme in all ten of the focus groups with ALAANA and BIPOC artists and cultural workers. Likewise, the lack of access to funding for their creative endeavors was mentioned frequently in discussions with Free Street about barriers to cultural production. Emerging artists, collectives, and small organizations all expressed frustration about not finding funding opportunities that are designed for them. Some felt that they needed grant-writing support and allies that would help them find funding. Others felt that they are in competition with larger organizations that siphon away funding for the same activities that smaller organizations have perfected. Conditional funding or support that comes with limitations and restrictions was also frequently mentioned as a barrier. Creatives felt that they have had to alter their work to fit into these constraints, sometimes because of the political orientations of funding institutions.

Participants described many of their concerns around funding as rooted in the historic and ongoing disinvestment of BIPOC communities. Gentrification that targets historic BIPOC communities was cited as a significant barrier, especially real estate investment that is only interested in profitable apartment buildings and not community or cultural space development. The social costs of neighborhood segregation, displacement, and turnover in neighborhood residents were cited as barriers to collaboration and community organizing. Lack of access to housing, healthcare, childcare, legal status, internet or digital resources, and wellness services were all mentioned as barriers to cultural production for creatives and community members. Participants in discussions with Free Street felt that it was difficult to find community members to engage with because of a lack of time and energy in the neighborhood, since everyone is in survival mode. Given the shift to virtual engagement during the pandemic, many participants cited difficulties in providing or accessing opportunities that were solely available on digital platforms.

Chicago creatives are interested in easier access to information, training & supportive networks

Participants in discussions with Free Street and the focus groups with the Park District team described feeling disconnected from non-financial support for cultural production. They highlighted how elitist structures in the arts can prevent access to support. In particular, creatives and cultural workers are not taken seriously unless they have gone through formal education processes or are associated with an elite organization. Participants described difficulty in navigating "the scene" to access resources and overcoming the bureaucratic hurdles to working in Park District facilities. The DCASE offices that might offer support are difficult to access for artists who are in neighborhoods

far from the Loop. There is no centralized information about what types of facilities are available or how to produce in Park District spaces.

In addition to accessing information, participants described wanting access to trainings, like how to run a cultural space, how to start a business, how to look for grants, and how to use digital platforms for cultural production. Participants also described challenges to sustaining cultural organizations, particularly when leaders move on because of burnout or because of financial pressures. This suggests that offering support for developing sustainable operational models and succession planning would be welcome.

Marketing and communications support was another resource that participants frequently mentioned as highly desirable. Artists and cultural organizations, alike, described challenges getting the word out to community members to let them know what kinds of cultural offerings are available. Participants also described a lack of publicity and promotion making it difficult for themselves, supposedly cultural insiders, to know what is happening in their neighborhood. Participants in the focus group on music highlighted the importance of marketing support for individual artists to help them succeed in reaching their audiences.

The Park District team conducted a focus group on networks and platforms, along with fielding survey questions to the Chicago Creatives Network about how they might use the CAMP database platform. This focus group explored models of non-monetary interaction and exchange including skill and knowledge sharing and time-banking networks. This topic echoes the financial and food mutual aid activities and materials exchange models that participants included in their cultural asset stories and in the other focus groups. Participants recognize that there is an abundance of assets in the Chicago cultural community that lives in individuals themselves, but that there needs to be more financial and social support for connecting Chicago creatives to each other to unlock and share those resources.

New spaces on the South & West Sides could be tailored for performance requirements

Very few of the assets documented in this project describe cultural spaces that are dedicated to performance. The Harold Washington Cultural Center in Bronzeville is one of the exceptions. Other performance spaces that participants mentioned are in public space, homes and repurposed residences, commercial venues, galleries, or underground venues. The array of these non-traditional spaces underscores the need for dedicated performance space on the South and West Sides. Participants frequently cited the lack of space appropriate for performance that is also affordable, consistent, and secure as a barrier to cultural production in discussions with Free Street. The need for space for creative production and gathering also came up in 8 of the 10 focus groups conducted by the Chicago Park District. Dance practitioners, in particular, highlighted the need to be able to create, rehearse, and perform their works in the same space. Currently, many of them have to rehearse elsewhere and only get access to the performance space right before a performance, increasing the risk of injury and other unforeseen difficulties.

In their imaginings of their ideal cultural spaces, many participants described formal performance spaces, with a stage large enough for fifteen performers, a sprung wood floor, marley flooring available, and “state of the art” lighting, sound, and projection equipment. Some described larger venues, with 300 or up to 1300 fixed or flexible audience seats. Others wanted more intimate spaces

with café style seating. The back of house space was also important, since participants described a green room, showers, locker rooms, and on-site rehearsal space that is at least 1500 square feet. The ideal facility would also have meeting rooms with technology for presentations and classrooms for artistic training.

Participants also described outdoor performance spaces, where they envision performances can be accessible to anyone who wishes to be included. But these kinds of performance spaces have different requirements. Having access to electricity and lighting for performances after dark and protection from the sun and rain is necessary. Participants called attention to the acoustics of outdoor space, imagining that it would need to be on a quiet street far from traffic noise. Some imagined that this outdoor performance space would be a grassy field surrounded by healing gardens or picnic benches that face a stage or platform. Some participants suggested that the parks and fieldhouses would be a good place to start in developing such a space. However it is arranged, an outdoor performance space must have access to restrooms.

Other participants noted that cultural spaces that support performance behind the scenes are also needed. Participants envisioned co-working spaces that include recording studios, computer labs for media development, equipment and materials for sewing and other textile work, and maker spaces that include carpentry and 3D printing. Participants in the focus group on technical theatre echoed the vision of a space that would support performance behind the scenes. They sketched a vision of a community maker space that would serve emerging and experienced designers through education, prototyping, and production (see the Park District's CAMP report for a fuller sketch of how such a space would operate). In this focus group and in discussions with Free Street, participants were interested in reusing and recycling materials and having a place to source materials sustainably in the South and West Sides.

Participants expressed interest in re-purposed cultural and performance space, consistent with concerns about gentrification, lost spaces, and the importance of land and building ownership. Some suggested that vacant storefronts and re-purposed churches could be their ideal cultural space. But others mentioned that they did not have the knowledge and skill to adapt and rehab buildings for cultural use. Adapted spaces on commercial corridors also pose a challenge for accessibility, as many involve stairs to a second floor.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given what we have learned and heard in this cultural asset mapping process, how can we support arts and culture, and specifically performance on Chicago's South and West Sides? This section offers recommendations for the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, the League of Chicago Theatres, and other Chicago partners to respond to what participants have shared about what they love about the cultural assets in their neighborhoods, what their ideal cultural assets would be, and the supports they are interested in. We developed these recommendations in conversation with the artist teams and with an eye on other City of Chicago initiatives that will impact the South and West Sides, the Chicago Park District, and the Chicago Public Library. Some of them echo the CAMP report's recommendations, but these recommendations incorporate insights from all the types of data collected by each artist team.

1 - Counter disparities through targeted, innovative funding & investments in cross-sector uses

It is crucial that we counter disinvestment by making funding more available and accessible to South Side, West Side, BIPOC, and ALAANA artists and cultural organizations. New kinds of funding approaches outside of those traditionally used to support arts and culture will also be necessary. Funding cross-sector initiatives can open opportunities for collaboration and community-wide benefits.

Fund South Side, West Side, BIPOC, and ALAANA artists and cultural organizations with unrestricted grants and low barriers to access. To correct the historic disinvestment in these neighborhoods and communities, funding opportunities must be made available that are easy to access. This means funding opportunities should not require grant writing skills or credentials to access. The funds should be unrestricted as to their use and be separate from funding opportunities with specific community impact goals.

Explore funding sources for cultural investment outside of philanthropy or government.

These funding sources could operate more like venture funds or pooled funds such as the Opportunity Zone Consortium housed in the Chicago Community Loan Fund. This could be a fit for independent ventures that are not eligible for foundation grants and don't meet guidelines for DCASE or other city grant sources, including grassroots organizing and independent artist collectives. These funding opportunities could also be a source of seed money for emerging artists and emergent ideas that need to provide more of a proof of concept before being eligible for traditional funding sources.

Invest in cross-sector cultural programs and community building strategies. Given the interest in assets that support cultural uses that are co-located with other community uses and social services, look for funding opportunities that bring artists and community-based organizations together. These funding opportunities could use an artist-in-residence model where the artist is embedded in an organization to help stimulate community engagement and access to social services. Other options include partnering with a program like Arts in Sacred Spaces (sacredplaces.org/our-work/arts-sacred-places) to help foster more formal partnerships between religious organizations that own property and artists in their communities.

2 - Develop cultural space through strategic matchmaking, training & collaboration

New cultural spaces should be supported through wrap-around support systems to ensure that they can thrive and be sustainable. These support systems should include cohort-based trainings and making vacant buildings and lots more accessible for cultural uses. City facilities, like parks and libraries, can be better leveraged for creative production.

Provide cultural space development training for South and West Side creatives through cohort-based programs. One example of this type of program is the Build Art Space Equitably (BASE) program that trains people of color in the Seattle area in support of community cultural spaces. (See seattle.gov/arts/programs/cultural-space/base-build-art-space-equitably-certification.) Another example is the Artspace Immersion program (artspace.org/ImmersionChicago), which trains teams from arts and cultural organizations who are in the planning stages of a space-related project and which just expanded to Chicago. Look for partners in developing this kind of training in Chicago's nonprofit real estate development sector, such as IFF and the Urban Land Institute. This training program should be linked with other programs that provide access to publicly owned vacant spaces/lots and capital support for real estate development.

Support strategic re-use of city-owned vacant buildings by cultural businesses through matchmaking, training, and funding. Start by identifying city-owned vacant buildings that are ideal for cultural use on key disinvested commercial corridors. Then, match them to cultural start-ups and business enterprises. These spaces should be sold for a dollar to the cultural entity and provided with wrap-around support to develop the spaces for new use. Along with a cohort-based training program that provides support for at least five years, this program must be funded with capital dollars for renovation and preservation. If spaces are identified as suitable performance spaces, the League of Chicago Theatres can be a key partner in providing support to performing arts entities. The Public Assembly Venue Grant program is a model for this kind of support.

Streamline policies and reduce barriers for cultural uses in vacant lots and open spaces. Lawyers for the Arts could work together with the city and other public land holders to create a legal toolkit that includes a standard simple agreement that requires no insurance and grants rights of entry. Additional partners in developing the program could be the Department of Planning, the Cook County Land Bank Authority, or the Chicago Community Land Trust. These uses could be for gatherings, performances, and productions of all sorts as either pop ups or ongoing or recurring on a seasonal basis. Invite neighborhood partners such as the neighborhood associations, youth-serving organizations, and local chambers of commerce to steward the lots and program them with events. City of Chicago "delegate agencies," who steward commercial corridors, could be considered as another programming partner. If a suitable partner can be identified, the partner can assume ownership of the land for one dollar, potentially with deed restrictions on its future use or sale.

Develop pathways for accessing Park District and Library facilities for creative production. The first steps should include creating and publishing an inventory of the capacities and facilities available throughout the Park and Library systems. Then a single application process or procedure should be developed for using a Park site for creative production and another for using a Library site (if necessary). Building on their Re:Center learnings, the Park District Arts and Culture Unit is concepting a cultural stewardship training series that would familiarize artists and community

members with all of the aspects of developing and running a program at a Park facility. A similar program could be developed for using Library and DCASE sites suitable for creative production.

Identify opportunities to develop cultural spaces co-located with other city investments. Use “cultural access” benchmarks to match neighborhoods with opportunities for cultural spaces within capital improvements and new facility development by Park District, Library, and other Chicago agencies. There could be a natural fit to co-locate cultural spaces within the Department of Family and Support Services, the Department of Public Health, and the Chicago Housing Authority facilities.

3 - Invest in “people” infrastructure to increase accessibility & animate neighborhood cultural assets

Cultural spaces need support and staffing to connect with creative workers and communities. DCASE can support greater accessibility of public resources by having a physical presence in the South Side and West Sides. Park District and Public Library cultural facilities could use more staff to connect with communities they already serve. All three agencies should coordinate their efforts to develop neighborhood cultural leaders.

Create South and West Side DCASE field offices. These offices should be on commercial corridors, libraries, and parks to serve as resource access points. These field offices could be staffed by local artists and community members that serve as cultural liaisons for the community. Their role could encompass information sharing about available citywide resources and information gathering about neighborhood activities and assets. These offices could also provide communication support for local cultural activities to boost awareness about cultural offerings and build local audiences, including maintaining outdoor message boards and producing flyers to help connect across the digital divide.

Employ staff to activate South and West Side Library and Park cultural assets. Currently and once renovated with any new cultural amenities, cultural centers within the Park District need staff to properly program these assets and work with community members to create programming relevant to their interests. Both parks and libraries need staff with communications and design capacity to create flyers and other media to let communities know what programming is available. Ensure that parks and libraries have staff with language abilities that are appropriate for their surrounding communities.

Nurture the development of South and West Side neighborhood cultural councils. Supporting a local group of advisors will amplify the impact of new investments and cultivate neighborhood cultural leadership. Consider paying council members to serve as cultural ambassadors for their neighborhood to increase communication and awareness of cultural assets and opportunities. These cultural councils could be sited in park cultural centers where cultural councils were developed as part of the Park District’s Re:Center initiative, but they could also be hosted by the Library or a new DCASE field office. Staff from the Park District, the Library, and DCASE should collaborate and coordinate their interactions with the cultural councils to combine outreach efforts.

4 - Support networks to increase collaboration & access to resources

Groups and networks of practitioners nurture a cultural ecosystem and promote connectivity to resources. Cultural workers, themselves, are some of the strongest assets we have. Creating opportunities for peers to connect and find each other through convenings and online tools will activate those assets. Connecting people that work in similar areas, such as teaching artists and in-school teachers working in performing arts, can help build a supportive community. Encouraging the cultural sector to connect with broader economic-inclusion efforts could create dividends for all.

Convene cultural workers to cultivate peer-to-peer networks. Consider reinstating or re-imagining the former DCASE-led “cultural network” gatherings which regularly convened junior staffers at cultural organizations for lunch, networking, info-sharing, and collaborative opportunities. The League can build on their successful job-category focused networking events, like Monday and Marketing, and extend this to other fields and categories aimed at connecting junior and entry-level aspiring creative professionals with mid-career and mature workers. Consider how these events could be re-invented for the current hybrid era, some virtual, some in-person, and focus on certain geographies with a groundswell of interest in certain disciplines like theatre, dance, film, poetry, etc.

Develop online databases to foster mutual aid and collaboration. Chicago Creatives Network survey respondents were interested in using an online database to provide mutual aid and stimulate creative collaboration in the cultural sector. Continue exploring how to create a platform for artists and cultural organizations to find each other using the data collected in this asset mapping process. Explore how to create this kind of resource alongside other cultural data-gathering efforts, such as the Chicago Artist Census. Initially, support the Park District and Free Street Theater as they continue to engage participants from this process and nurture connections between them. Eventually, explore how a consortium of partners and service organizations might continue to steward this resource in terms of digital development and programming, so that it can serve as a social connector.

Connect K-12 performing arts teachers and students to non-school practitioners. The Art Look Map data explored at the beginning of this project indicated there are relatively fewer credentialed theatre teachers in CPS, but theatre represents the largest number of external arts partners who are connected to CPS. Opportunities exist to convene these two groups of practitioners to encourage the development of a stronger connections that span in-school and professional performance contexts. One area of exploration could be creating opportunities for young performers to perform in professional settings, ideally in the South and West Sides.

Encourage the cultural sector’s connections to broader economic-inclusion advocacy and activism. Arts service organizations like the League can look for opportunities to connect to larger regional efforts for portable benefit programs for gig workers and broader access to social services. Explore options for ongoing support for creating connections between artists and activists, such as “activist-in-residence” programs in cultural organizations around particular economic-inclusion issues. Another option is to support trainings designed for both artists and activists, such as those offered by the Center for Artistic Activism (c4aa.org/what-we-do). Funded artist-organizers could also lead efforts to explore other mutual aid activities and structures of care, such as time-banking and co-operative business models.

5 - Foster strategic training opportunities

In addition to the programs focused on cultural space development, other targeted training opportunities can have a big impact on the Chicago cultural ecosystem. Small organizations need support that is tailored to their unique challenges and opportunities. Performing arts and film training opportunities should create pathways for youth into professional settings.

Coach small cultural organizations across organization “life stages.” A cohort-based program for both emerging and established groups could provide peer and external support to build sustainable cultural organizational models. Support would be tailored to small organizations at any stage of their life cycle, though professionals with experience in larger organizational models could serve as coaches, where appropriate. Some groups and individuals would need support navigating the professional field, securing a diversity of funding sources, or securing space. Others may require succession-planning, so that the organization can survive and evolve when their founder moves on. This training program could connect with the cultural space development cohort, where appropriate.

Develop paid youth internship and apprenticeship programs in performing arts and film.

DCASE and the League should work with unions and studios to build bridges from K-12 performing arts and theatre tech training to professional experiences that do not pass through college programs. Target local and BIPOC young adults, and pay special attention to professional roles in film, media, technical theatre, and directing, which do not have as many pathways for emerging artists outside of college programs.

6 - Invest in systems to track & share progress

This cultural asset mapping effort has been a step in the right direction, but there is much more to do. Investment in data systems is necessary to continue to build trust among the communities engaged in this process. Benchmarks and regular analysis and reporting will demonstrate accountability to supporting cultural assets on Chicago’s South and West Sides.

Continue support for asset mapping data stewardship and accessibility. The data collected in this mapping process require ongoing labor to make them useful and available to the public. They require cleaning, tagging, and organization for the data to be filterable, at minimum. In addition to funding for staff to steward these data, develop programming that invites the public to engage with these assets. The Free Street and Park District teams are continuing to engage with the data they collected and the participants they connected with. Other options include festival-styled events that focus on assets in specific neighborhoods, or “treasure map” festivals that highlight assets across neighborhoods. DCASE and the League might also consider hosting an Arts Datathon (lacountyarts.org/learning/arts-datathon) or Civic Tech event to help familiarize researchers and arts advocates with these data, and to encourage creative data visualizations.

Create neighborhood “cultural access” benchmarks. These benchmarks could be composite scores of indicators like number of seats in performance spaces and monthly average number of arts and cultural events in the previous year, the same way we measure walkability scores in communities. These kinds of benchmarks can then help to shape investment priority areas for public assets and support development of cultural spaces in commercial corridors. Developing a common measure

will encourage visibility for arts and culture investments inside other citywide initiatives, such as We Will Chicago and Invest South/West, and across city agencies. In addition, a common measure for “cultural access” could create alignment among arts funders, who could use the access score to direct support to areas with the highest need for access to cultural opportunity. Smaller organizations could also use readily available “cultural access” benchmarks to create stronger grant applications.

Track progress on equitable funding and cultural access through annual analysis and reporting. Regular assessment and visibility of the impact of arts and cultural investments is key for continuing to build trust in long disinvested communities. Annual checkpoints will also create a feedback loop to understand where course corrections may be necessary. This reporting mechanism should include tracking public (and private, as possible) investments to ensure that they are being distributed equitably. Responsibility for this analysis and reporting may need to be delegated to a partner outside of DCASE, such as the League, Arts Alliance Illinois, or Ingenuity, to increase capacity for reporting and ensure credibility. Further, DCASE, Chicago Park District, and Chicago Public Library websites could develop open API feeds to make their data available to support external analysis of their data



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Metris Arts Consulting's mission is to improve and measure cultural vitality. We believe in the power of culture to enrich people's lives, help communities thrive, empower communities, and cultivate belonging. Metris provides evaluation, research for field building, planning, and program development. Our clients span the country and globe.

This project is made possible by the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs & Special Events and the League of Chicago Theatres through grant funds provided by The Chicago Community Trust, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the Joyce Foundation for the Year of Chicago Theatre.

