

Journal of Arts, Music, Design & Creative Industries



Creative Placemaking and Neighborhood Revitalization in the United States: A Literature-Based Review of Economic, Social and Equity Outcomes

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How to cite this article: Carter E. & Bennet M. (2026). Creative Placemaking and Neighborhood Revitalization in the United States: A Literature-Based Review of Economic, Social and Equity Outcomes. *Journal of Arts, Music, Design, and Creative Industries*, Vol 1(1) pp. 19-29.

Abstract

Since 2010, creative placemaking has become the most visible arts-based development policy in the United States, promoted by the National Endowment for the Arts, private foundations and city governments as a way of renewing neighborhoods through arts, culture and design. This study reviewed the published literature to establish what is known about the economic, social and equity outcomes of creative placemaking in American neighborhoods. Although the arts and cultural sector contributed US\$1.17 trillion to the national economy in 2023, the neighborhood-level benefits claimed for arts-led development remain contested, and critics link it to gentrification and the displacement of long-term residents. The study adopted a desk-based integrative literature review of peer-reviewed articles, scholarly books and institutional reports on United States cases, analyzed thematically under four headings: economic outcomes, social outcomes, equity outcomes and measurement. The review found that cultural districts and arts clusters are consistently associated with higher property values, incomes and employment; that cultural assets are associated with stronger social connection and wellbeing, particularly in lower-income neighborhoods; and that the link between the arts and displacement is weaker and more conditional than commonly assumed, varying with the type of arts activity and the local housing market. It also found that outcome measurement is weak and that benefits are unevenly distributed. The study concludes that creative placemaking is a useful but not self-sufficient revitalization tool whose results depend on community control and housing policy. It recommends that funders and city governments pair arts investment with anti-displacement measures, support resident-led cultural organizations, and fund long-term, mixed-method evaluation.

Keywords: *Creative placemaking, neighborhood revitalization, cultural districts, gentrification, arts policy, United States*

1.0 Introduction

The idea that the arts can help to renew declining places is now firmly established in American urban policy. Over the past two decades, city governments, philanthropic foundations and federal agencies have invested in artist housing, cultural districts, public art, design improvements and festivals in the expectation that these activities will attract people and businesses, strengthen local identity and improve the quality of life of residents. The term most often used for this family of interventions is creative placemaking. In the white paper that gave the term its policy currency, Markusen and Gadwa (2010a) described it as a process in which partners from the public, private, non-profit and community sectors deliberately shape the physical and social character of a place around arts and cultural activities. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) adopted this definition and launched the Our Town grant program in 2011, and in the same year a consortium of foundations, federal agencies and financial institutions formed ArtPlace America to fund and promote the approach over a ten-year period (Frenette, 2017; Redaelli, 2016).

The policy interest rests on a substantial economic base. The Arts and Cultural Production Satellite Account, compiled by the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) with the NEA, estimated that arts and cultural economic activity accounted for 4.2 percent of the gross domestic product of the United States in 2023, equivalent to US\$1.17 trillion, and supported 5.4 million jobs (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2025). In the non-profit segment alone, the sixth Arts and Economic Prosperity study, which covered 373 regions in all fifty states and Puerto Rico, attributed US\$151.7 billion of economic activity and 2.6 million jobs to arts and culture organizations and their audiences in 2022 (Americans for the Arts, 2023). Figures of this size have encouraged local leaders to treat culture as an economic sector in its own right and not only as an amenity.

The intellectual roots of the approach are older than the term. Jacobs (1961) argued that lively streets, mixed uses and the informal contact of neighbors were the foundation of safe and prosperous city districts, and Whyte (1980) showed through direct observation how the design of small public spaces determined whether people used them. Zukin (1982) documented how artists converting industrial lofts in the SoHo district of New York changed both the image and the real-estate value of the area, a sequence that has since been repeated, and debated, in many American cities. Florida (2002) then popularized the argument that regions grow by attracting creative workers, who in turn are drawn to tolerant, amenity-rich places. Creative placemaking brought these strands together into a program that could be funded, but it also inherited their unresolved tensions, especially the question of who benefits when a neighborhood becomes more attractive (Zitcer, 2020).

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite more than a decade of public and philanthropic investment, the evidence on what creative placemaking achieves at the neighborhood level remains scattered and disputed. Advocates point to rising property values, new businesses and renewed civic pride, while critics argue that the same indicators signal gentrification and the displacement of the low-income residents and communities of color in whose name the projects were justified (Bedoya, 2013; Peck, 2005). The concept itself has been described as fuzzy, covering interventions as different as a mural, a performing arts center and an artist housing development, which makes outcomes difficult to compare (Markusen, 2013; Nicodemus, 2013). Empirical studies use different units of analysis, time periods and definitions of the arts, and they reach conclusions that appear to conflict: some find that cultural clusters reduce poverty without displacement (Stern & Seifert, 2010), others that cultural districts raise incomes while pushing out poorer households

(Noonan, 2013). Practitioners and policy makers are therefore left without a clear, consolidated account of the conditions under which arts-led strategies deliver broadly shared benefits. This study addresses that gap by bringing the United States literature together and assessing it against a common set of outcomes.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study was to review the literature on creative placemaking and neighborhood revitalization in the United States. The specific objectives were:

- i. To examine the evidence on the economic outcomes of creative placemaking in United States neighborhoods.
- ii. To assess the evidence on its social outcomes, including social cohesion and community wellbeing.
- iii. To evaluate the evidence on its equity outcomes, particularly gentrification and displacement.
- iv. To identify the limitations in how creative placemaking outcomes are measured and to draw implications for policy and practice.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Literature

2.1.1 Creative Class and Creative Capital Theory

Creative class theory holds that economic growth in advanced economies depends on the concentration of people who are paid to generate new ideas, technologies and content, and that these people choose where to live largely on the basis of quality of place (Florida, 2002). From this perspective, investment in cultural amenities, lively streets and a tolerant social climate is an economic development strategy, because it attracts the talent that firms then follow. The theory gave city leaders a persuasive rationale for arts spending and directly shaped the language of creative placemaking. It has, however, been strongly criticized. Peck (2005) argued that creativity strategies were inexpensive, easily copied and well suited to inter-urban competition, and that they redirected attention from redistribution toward place marketing. Markusen (2006) showed that the creative class grouped together occupations with little in common and that artists, as one such group, had distinctive work patterns, politics and location choices that the theory overlooked. Florida (2017) himself later acknowledged that the clustering of talent in successful cities had deepened inequality and segregation. A related but more modest formulation is the artistic dividend, which proposes that artists raise regional productivity by exporting their work, supplying skills to other industries and stimulating innovation among their neighbors (Markusen & Schrock, 2006). In this study the theory explains the expected economic pathway from arts activity to neighborhood change.

2.1.2 Social Capital and Collective Efficacy Theory

A second body of theory locates the value of the arts in relationships and not in markets. Putnam (2000) defined social capital as the networks, norms and trust that enable people to act together, and identified shared cultural participation as one of the ways in which such ties are formed and bridged across social groups. Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls (1997) introduced the related concept of collective efficacy, the combination of mutual trust and willingness to intervene for the common good, and demonstrated in a multilevel study of Chicago neighborhoods that it was associated with lower rates of violence. Applied to creative placemaking, these theories suggest that festivals, community arts programs and shared cultural

spaces matter because they bring residents into repeated contact, build a sense of ownership of place and strengthen the capacity of a neighborhood to solve its own problems. The theory underpins the expected social pathway and directs attention to informal and participatory arts activity as much as to formal institutions (Wali, Severson, & Longoni, 2002).

2.1.3 The Production of Space and the Right to the City

The third perspective is critical. Lefebvre (1991) argued that space is not a neutral container but is socially produced, and that the meanings attached to a place are bound up with the interests of those who control it. Harvey (2008) extended this argument into the right to the city, the claim that residents should have collective power over the processes that remake their surroundings. Read through this lens, placemaking is never only an aesthetic or economic act: it involves decisions about whose culture is made visible and whose is erased. Zukin (1995) showed how cultural symbols are used to frame urban space and to signal who belongs in it, and Bedoya (2013) applied the point directly to creative placemaking, warning that projects which ignore the histories of existing communities produce dis-belonging and not vitality. This theory informs the equity dimension of the study and explains why the same intervention can be experienced as revitalization by some residents and as dispossession by others.

2.2 Empirical Literature

2.2.1 Economic Outcomes

Empirical work on the economic effects of arts concentration in American cities is broadly positive. Markusen and Schrock (2006) compared the occupational structure of large metropolitan areas and found that artists were unevenly distributed across regions and contributed to the regional economic base through self-employment and through work for non-arts industries. Currid (2007) used the case of New York City to show that art, fashion and music operate as an interdependent economy that relies on dense social settings in which producers and gatekeepers meet. At the neighborhood scale, Noonan (2013) analyzed census data for 99 designated cultural districts and their surroundings between 1980 and 2000 and reported that districts were associated with gains in property values, incomes, employment and residential turnover. Stern and Seifert (2010) studied Philadelphia and found that neighborhoods with dense clusters of cultural organizations, artists and participants were more likely than comparable neighborhoods to experience falling poverty and population growth. Grodach (2011), in a study of art spaces in the Dallas–Fort Worth region, found that such spaces served as community hubs and incubators for local artists, although their contribution to wider economic development was limited by weak resources and by locations chosen for other reasons.

2.2.2 Social Outcomes

Research on social outcomes emphasizes participation and connection. Wali et al. (2002) conducted an ethnographic study of informal arts groups in the Chicago area and reported that amateur and voluntary arts activity brought together people of different ages, ethnicities and occupations and built skills that participants carried into civic life. Jackson, Kabwasa-Green and Herranz (2006) developed the concept of cultural vitality for the Urban Institute and argued that opportunities for participation and support for cultural activity are as important to a community as the presence of institutions. The most extensive quantitative evidence comes from the Social Impact of the Arts Project. In a study of New York City, Stern and Seifert (2017) found that, after controlling for economic status and ethnicity, the presence of cultural resources in lower-income neighborhoods was significantly associated with better outcomes in health, schooling and personal security, including lower rates of serious crime and of child abuse and neglect. The authors were careful to describe these relationships as associations

within a wider neighborhood ecology and not as proof that the arts cause the outcomes.

2.2.3 Gentrification and Displacement

The relationship between the arts and gentrification is the most contested part of the literature. The classic account is that of Zukin (1982), who showed how the residential conversion of manufacturing lofts by artists in SoHo opened the district to investors and wealthier households. Lloyd (2006) described a similar sequence in the Wicker Park neighborhood of Chicago, where the presence of artists supplied both the image and the flexible labor on which new entertainment and media businesses drew. More recent quantitative work qualifies this narrative. Grodach, Foster and Murdoch (2014) examined arts activity and neighborhood change across metropolitan areas and found that different kinds of arts activity were associated with different trajectories: commercial arts industries were most strongly associated with rapidly gentrifying areas, whereas fine arts organizations were associated with stable, slow-growth neighborhoods. In a later study of the thirty largest metropolitan areas between 2000 and 2013, the same authors found that arts establishments tended to grow in places that had already gentrified, that neither fine nor commercial arts were associated with displacement, and that the relationship differed between cities such as Chicago and Dallas on the one hand and Los Angeles and New York on the other (Grodach, Foster, & Murdoch, 2018). Case study evidence shows the distributional tension clearly. In the Station North Arts and Entertainment District of Baltimore, Rich and Tsitsos (2016) found, through participant observation and 39 interviews, that institutional partners succeeded in raising home values while declaring their opposition to displacement, yet residents regarded those institutions as holding too much power and the artists themselves faced the greatest risk of being priced out.

2.2.4 Governance and Measurement

A further group of studies examines how creative placemaking is governed and evaluated. Redaelli (2016) analyzed the NEA program as a form of multi-level governance in which a small federal agency used partnership requirements to draw local governments and other federal departments into cultural policy. Frenette (2017) traced the rise of the approach to a deliberate effort to build cross-sector alliances and to reposition the arts as a contributor to non-arts goals. This positioning raised expectations of measurable results that the field has struggled to meet. In their review of arts and culture in planning, Markusen and Gadwa (2010b) had already noted that claims for cultural strategies ran well ahead of evaluation evidence. Nicodemus (2013) observed that the looseness of the concept helped it to win broad support but made its goals hard to specify. Markusen (2013) criticized the indicator systems proposed by the NEA and ArtPlace America on the grounds that they relied on proxy data at unsuitable geographic scales and could not attribute change to arts interventions. The validation study commissioned by the NEA reached a compatible conclusion, reporting that local practitioners found many of the candidate indicators difficult to relate to their projects (Morley & Winkler, 2014). Webb (2014) argued that the dominant economic framing neglected social equity, and Zitcer (2020) concluded from interviews with practitioners that the term had been stretched to cover incompatible aims.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 summarizes the relationships examined in the review. Creative placemaking strategies form the independent variable and neighborhood revitalization, expressed as economic, social and equity outcomes, forms the dependent variable. The three theories reviewed above supply the mechanisms that connect them. The literature indicates that the direction and distribution of outcomes are moderated by local conditions, notably housing-market pressure, the degree of community control, the presence of

anti-displacement policy and the type of arts activity involved.

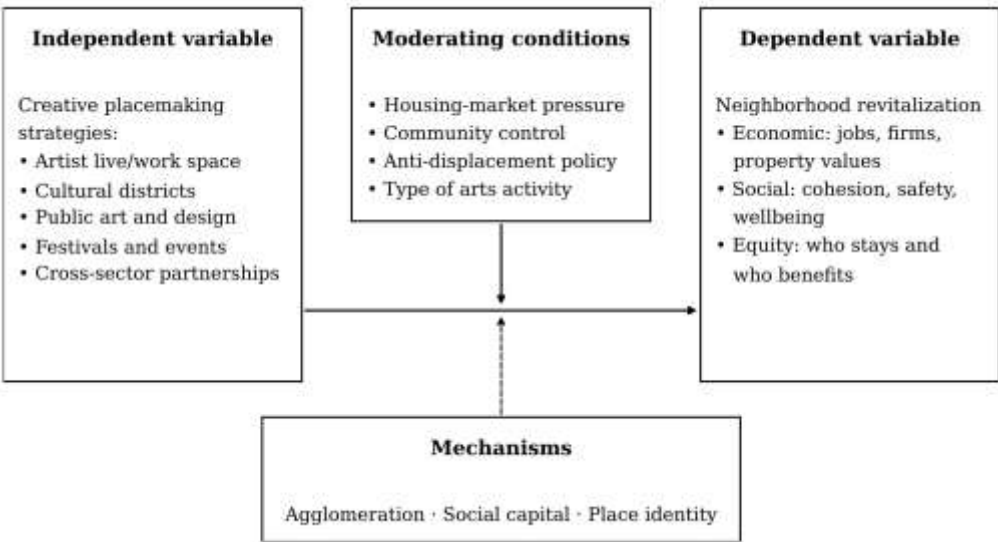


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

3.0 Methodology

The study adopted a desk-based research design in the form of an integrative literature review. This design was appropriate because the objectives required the consolidation of existing theoretical and empirical knowledge and not the collection of primary data, and because the relevant evidence is spread across urban planning, cultural policy, sociology and economics and uses both quantitative and qualitative methods. Sources were identified through searches of Google Scholar and the publisher platforms of the main journals in the field, using combinations of the terms creative placemaking, cultural district, arts and neighborhood change, arts and gentrification, and arts and community development, together with United States. Reference lists of key papers were also followed to locate earlier foundational works.

Sources were included if they addressed arts-based or culture-based place development in the United States, were published in English as peer-reviewed articles, scholarly books or reports by recognized public or research institutions, and reported either an explicit theoretical argument or empirical findings. Opinion pieces without an identifiable evidence base and studies concerned only with other countries were excluded. The final body of literature is the set of sources cited in this article and listed in the references, published between 1961 and 2025. Each source was read in full or in its published summary and coded for its setting, method and principal findings. The material was then analyzed thematically under the four headings derived from the objectives: economic outcomes, social outcomes, equity outcomes and measurement. Because the review is narrative and not a systematic review or meta-analysis, no pooled effect sizes were calculated, and the findings should be read as a reasoned synthesis of the direction and strength of the available evidence. No human participants were involved and ethical clearance was therefore not required.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

Table 1 summarizes the principal empirical studies on which the findings are based. The discussion that follows is organized by objective.

Table 1: Summary of Selected Empirical Studies on Arts-Led Neighborhood Change in the United States

Author(s) and year	Setting and method	Principal finding
Stern & Seifert (2010)	Philadelphia; neighborhood-level quantitative analysis of cultural assets	Dense cultural clusters associated with falling poverty and population growth
Grodach (2011)	Dallas–Fort Worth; case studies of art spaces	Art spaces act as community hubs and artist incubators; wider economic role constrained
Noonan (2013)	99 cultural districts; census data, 1980–2000	Districts associated with higher property values, incomes, employment and turnover
Grodach et al. (2014)	United States metropolitan neighborhoods; quantitative	Commercial arts linked to rapid gentrification; fine arts linked to stable, slow-growth areas
Rich & Tsitsos (2016)	Station North, Baltimore; ethnography and 39 interviews	Home values rose; residents perceived institutional dominance; artists most at risk of displacement
Stern & Seifert (2017)	New York City; neighborhood-level quantitative analysis	Cultural resources in lower-income areas associated with better health, schooling and security
Grodach et al. (2018)	30 largest metropolitan areas, 2000–2013; quantitative	Arts follow gentrification more than they lead it; no association with displacement
Zitcer (2020)	United States practitioners; qualitative interviews	Concept stretched across incompatible aims; equity concerns unresolved

Source: Compiled by the authors from the reviewed literature (2026)

4.1 Economic Outcomes

The first finding is that the concentration of arts activity in a neighborhood is consistently associated with measurable economic improvement. The studies of Noonan (2013) and Stern and Seifert (2010) use different cities, periods and definitions, yet both report gains in income and reductions in poverty in places with strong cultural presence. This agreement is consistent with creative capital theory and with the artistic dividend described by Markusen and Schrock (2006). Two qualifications are necessary. First, most of the evidence is correlational, and the later work of Grodach et al. (2018) indicates that the arts often expand in neighborhoods that are already improving, which means that part of the observed association reflects the arts following investment and not causing it. Second, the indicators most often reported, property values and median incomes, describe the place and not the people who lived there before the change. A rise in the median income of a census tract may reflect higher earnings among existing residents or their replacement by wealthier newcomers, and the two cannot be distinguished without tracking households over time. The economic case for creative placemaking is therefore well supported at the level of place but much less certain at the level of the original residents.

4.2 Social Outcomes

The second finding is that the social benefits of cultural activity are at least as well evidenced as the economic benefits, and are most visible where they are most needed. The New York City results of Stern and Seifert (2017) are notable because the associations between cultural

resources and health, education and safety were found in lower-income neighborhoods, which have the fewest cultural resources. The ethnographic evidence of Wali et al. (2002) explains how such effects may arise: informal arts practice creates regular contact across social boundaries and builds the trust and organizing skills that social capital and collective efficacy theory identify as the foundations of neighborhood wellbeing (Putnam, 2000; Sampson et al., 1997). An implication of this finding is that the forms of arts activity that generate social benefit are not necessarily those that generate property-value gains. Small, participatory, resident-led organizations appear central to social outcomes, whereas the economic studies focus on designated districts and flagship facilities. Grodach (2011) similarly found that art spaces were most effective in their community role. Policy that pursues only the economic pathway may consequently under-invest in the organizations that produce the most widely shared benefits.

4.3 Equity Outcomes

The third finding is that the common claim that artists and arts organizations cause gentrification and displacement is only partly supported. The case histories of SoHo and Wicker Park show that the sequence can occur (Lloyd, 2006; Zukin, 1982), but the multi-city analyses show that it is not general. The direction of influence frequently runs from gentrification to the arts, the effect depends on whether the activity is commercial or fine arts, and it varies between metropolitan areas with different housing markets (Grodach et al., 2014, 2018). This does not remove the equity concern; it relocates it. Noonan (2013) found that successful cultural districts were accompanied by higher residential turnover, and Rich and Tsitsos (2016) showed that in Baltimore even a strategy designed to avoid the SoHo effect left artists and residents with little control over the outcome. The critical literature adds that displacement is cultural as well as physical: residents may remain in place yet no longer recognize the neighborhood as theirs (Bedoya, 2013; Zukin, 1995). Taken together, the evidence supports the moderating role given to housing-market pressure and community control in the conceptual framework. Arts investment in a weak market with strong resident ownership is likely to be experienced as revitalization, whereas the same investment in a market already under pressure, led by outside institutions, is likely to accelerate exclusion.

4.4 Measurement and Governance

The fourth finding concerns the quality of the evidence itself. Creative placemaking was promoted on the promise of measurable outcomes, but the review shows that measurement has been the weakest part of the field. National indicator systems relied on secondary data that could not isolate the contribution of a single project and were of limited use to practitioners (Markusen, 2013; Morley & Winkler, 2014). The breadth of the concept, which helped to build a coalition across agencies and sectors (Frenette, 2017; Redaelli, 2016), also meant that projects with very different purposes were grouped under one label (Nicodemus, 2013; Zitcer, 2020). Few studies follow neighborhoods for long enough to observe lasting change, few track individual households, and equity outcomes are rarely specified in advance (Webb, 2014). The consequence is that funders have limited ability to distinguish effective from ineffective approaches, and communities have limited ability to hold projects to account.

5.0 Summary

The review set out to consolidate the literature on creative placemaking and neighborhood revitalization in the United States. It found, first, that cultural districts and arts clusters are associated with rising property values, incomes and employment, although part of this association reflects the tendency of arts establishments to locate in improving areas. Second, cultural resources and participatory arts activity are associated with stronger social ties and better wellbeing indicators, particularly in lower-income neighborhoods. Third, the

relationship between the arts and displacement is conditional: it depends on the type of arts activity, the state of the local housing market and the degree of control exercised by residents. Fourth, the measurement of outcomes is underdeveloped, and the breadth of the concept has made systematic evaluation difficult.

6.0 Conclusion

The study concludes that creative placemaking is a useful but not self-sufficient instrument of neighborhood revitalization. The literature gives reasonable grounds for believing that arts and cultural activity contributes to both the economic performance and the social fabric of American neighborhoods. It gives much weaker grounds for believing that these gains reach long-term, lower-income residents automatically. Whether an arts-led strategy produces shared revitalization or exclusion is determined less by the art than by the surrounding conditions: who initiates and governs the project, how exposed residents are to rising housing costs, and whose culture the project represents. The three theories reviewed are therefore complementary and not competing. Creative capital theory explains why places improve, social capital theory explains how residents benefit, and the right to the city perspective explains why benefits and burdens are unevenly shared. A creative placemaking policy that attends only to the first of these will continue to attract the criticism that has followed the approach since its introduction.

7.0 Recommendations

7.1 Recommendations for Policy

City governments, state arts agencies and federal funders should pair arts-based investment with explicit anti-displacement measures. Where cultural districts are designated or artist housing is developed in neighborhoods facing housing-market pressure, instruments such as long-term affordability covenants, community land trusts and support for the ownership of cultural space by resident organizations should form part of the same program. Funding criteria should require applicants to state in advance which residents are expected to benefit and how this will be verified.

7.2 Recommendations for Practice

Arts organizations, developers and community development practitioners should place residents in governing roles from the design stage and should build projects on the existing cultural assets and histories of the neighborhood. The evidence that small, participatory and informal arts activity generates the broadest social benefit suggests that a larger share of creative placemaking resources should be directed to resident-led organizations and not only to flagship facilities.

7.3 Areas for Further Research

Further research should use longitudinal designs that follow households as well as places, so that improvement among existing residents can be distinguished from their replacement. Comparative studies across metropolitan areas with strong and weak housing markets, and across small towns and rural communities, which are under-represented in the literature, would clarify the moderating conditions proposed in this study. Mixed-method evaluations that combine administrative data with resident accounts of belonging are needed to capture cultural as well as physical displacement.

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