

Outside-in >> Inside-out: Audience Engagement with the Core of a Creative City

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INTRODUCTION

Where are all the artists? This question has remained with me from the time when I began working on cultural economic development in New Bedford, Massachusetts. By the summer of 2003 a portion of visitors to New Bedford had read about the city's growing arts scene but could not always find it while walking the city's downtown cobblestone streets. Like many revitalizing post-industrial centers, New Bedford is an authentic and rapidly evolving *Creative City*. Still I observed during my years there how its core arts scene—organized around studio buildings, local artist enclaves, and grassroots organizations—can be several layers removed from the cultural city visitors encounter. What this scenario really highlights is the cultural tourism gap between the formal and informal experience of a creative city. Or expressed in terms of people, the gap between a city's outside audiences (visitors and some portion of its residents) and inside creative scene (local and regional individuals connected to the arts).

Is such separation the necessary status quo, or is this experiential gap between tourism and the creative city's core one that can be bridged? Furthermore, is it advantageous to do so? The answer is not an easy one but it involves continued innovation around how the arts are presented and what can be defined within the cultural tourism footprint.

A FRAMEWORK FOR CORE ARTS SCENE AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

The main article discusses in detail the following areas of opportunity with input and direct examples from interviews and online research regarding arts initiatives in Chicago, Denver, Indianapolis, Philadelphia, Providence, and Minneapolis.

- 1) **Open Studios & Gallery Nights** – Leveraging these event platforms to invite more off the beaten path exploration
- 2) **BUY ART!** – Emphasizing the local marketplace for original art and local collecting
- 3) **Serving Specific Audiences** – Piloting tailored efforts that cater to creatively inclined visitors seeking up-close engagement with a city's arts scene
- 4) **Creative City Immersion** – Inviting groups and individuals for creative exchange involving the city's most innovative spaces, models and dialogue
- 5) **Celebrating Local Creative Capital** – Valuing and generating awareness about a city's unique artistic assets and enclaves

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SUMMARY

To begin to look broadly at this topic of connecting outside audiences to a creative city's inside arts core is really about opening to possibilities and piloting initiatives that are tailored to a city's specific community and assets. There is much to be curious about when considering how tourism and the organic arts scene can positively engage to align the creative city profile and experience.

Goals for further innovation:

1. Invite artists to map out the extent of overlap that could be achieved between local and visitor experiences and then to develop initiatives jointly with cultural tourism stakeholders.
2. Make getting out into the neighborhoods part of the cultural city experience rather than a hurdle to finding these venues.
3. Think about when it makes sense to gather artists under one roof and when it's best to invite the public in to experience the studios and spaces first-hand.
4. Provide conduits (resources, events, programs, written content) to introduce and orient people to the core arts scene.
5. Continue to broaden and complement existing tourism thinking by valuing the less packaged, more independent experience.
6. Find ways to encourage openness, innovation and funding so that artist and creative scene collaborations can emerge in creative cities and across regions.

Margie Butler has a background in marketing and audience research. In 2002 she shifted to focus on her own painting and began her involvement in creative economy topics and cultural tourism. She worked as the Director of AHA! New Bedford from 2003-2007 and is now working on creative economy projects and living in Providence, RI. This article was written during a three-month research fellowship at Brown University's John Nicholas Brown Center for the Public Humanities.