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"Irrational" Organizations: Why Community-Based Organizations Are Really Social Movements

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This paper was prepared for the Planners Network Conference 2000 in Toronto. The focus of the paper is a re-conceptualization of community-based organizations from a model of a classic nonprofit institution to that of a social movement. Our observations are based on intensive evaluation of about 40 community-based arts organizations in Philadelphia involved in the Culture Builds Community initiative (1997-2001) of the William Penn Foundation. We argue that these small organizations have been colonized by business school consultants who want them to act and look like more established nonprofits. In our view, these organizations are better conceptualized as 'social movements' rather than—potentially—rational organizations. Changing the conceptual framework in this manner changes the definition of terms like 'capacity-building' and 'sustainability.' In addition, it shifts the 'unit of analysis' from individual organizations to the social networks in which they operate.

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Why Community-based Organizations are Really Social Movements

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This paper was prepared for the Planners Network conference on "Insurgent Planning, Globalization, and Local Democracy" held in Toronto, Ontario in June 2000. The focus of the paper is a re-conceptualization of community-based organizations from a model of a classic nonprofit institution to that of a social movement. Our observations are based on an intensive evaluation of about 40 community-based arts organizations in Philadelphia that are part of the *Culture Builds Community* initiative of the William Penn Foundation. We argue that these small organizations have been colonized by business school consultants who want them to act and look like more established nonprofits. In our view, these organizations are better conceptualized as 'social movements' rather than—potentially—rational organizations. Changing the conceptual framework in this manner changes the definition of terms like 'capacity-building' and 'sustainability.' In addition, it shifts the 'unit of analysis' from individual organizations to the social networks in which they operate.

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In recent years, social theorists have focused increased attention on community-based organizations. Politically, CBOs have been somewhat of a Rorschach; observers find what their ideological predilections would lead them to expect. For the New Right, CBOs are a reemergence of nineteenth-century voluntarism. They represent the superiority of citizen-based responses to social problems and the eclipse of 'statism.' For the Left, CBOs provide a reincarnation of the 'community action' of the 1960s; they provide hope that the 'community' can rise up to demand that the wider society guarantee greater equity and justice.

Yet, as is so often the case, the reality of CBOs is a great deal more complicated than either of these views would suggest. This paper offers preliminary results of a study of over 50 community-based arts and cultural providers in metropolitan Philadelphia. Our study population included 40 organizations that received grants as part of a philanthropic foundation's initiative to strengthen the role of small cultural organizations as a community resource and a small 'control' group of organizations that did not receive grants.

A major element of the foundation's initiative was an attempt to build capacity within these organizations as one means of increasing their sustainability. There is now a large and impressive literature, which forms the basis of technical assistance programs, on sustainability among nonprofit organizations. It generally focuses on a set of tasks that well-run organizations should undertake: board development, market analysis, and strategic planning. It calls for attention to the definition of staff roles and the acceptance of a management philosophy. It assesses the various fiscal strategies open to nonprofits and the ability to maximize earned income. Yet, as our research team observed and engaged in discussions with these groups, we became increasingly convinced that good business practices—which may suit large, established nonprofits—are the wrong yardstick with which to judge these relatively small organizations.

The implicit assumption of current practices is that community arts programs can be 'rational' organizations, that is, they can conform to the classic criteria of bureaucracy. As Max Weber pointed out a century ago, bureaucratic organizations are characterized by functional division of labor; hierarchy of authority vested in legal positions; written procedures, records, and files; thoroughly trained, expert employees; specific standards of work and output; and formal rules and policies binding equally on management and labor. These qualities provide bureaucracies with a host of technical advantages: "precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction, and of material and personal costs." [1] By systematically linking these bureaucratic means to the goal of organizational strength and survival, current policy makers have sought to make nonprofits more 'rational.'

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[1] From Max Weber: *Essays in Sociology*, translated, edited, with an introduction by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, page 214. The publisher is Oxford University Press, New York, 1958.

Clearly, for some organizations, the imposition of a technical or instrumental rationality on operations can produce positive results. Many of the organizations we have studied have learned to devise an orderly method of registering students or of determining the real cost of the services they provide. Certainly, in these specific technical ways, the use of 'rational' principles can advance the work of the organization. Mastering these ways of thinking systematically is particularly important for groups that wish to become organizationally mobile, to expand their programs, increase their budgets, and become well-known.

Yet, in a broader sense, the lure of 'rationality' may be misleading. Based on our research on the role of arts and cultural organizations in metropolitan Philadelphia, we have discovered that these groups have a critical social impact on the fabric of communities. Much of the impact of these organizations does not arise from their organizational strength and rationality, but from their intensive, passionate engagement in the life of their communities. Their effectiveness does not derive from the rationality of their organizations, but from the strength of their commitment to their vision. In this sense, they are 'irrational' organizations.

On the other hand, one reason why community-based organizations appear 'irrational' may derive from the application of the wrong model to their behavior. The use of a classic organizational paradigm emphasizing instrumental rationality focuses our attention on cultural groups' shortcomings, their 'need' for bureaucratic structures. An alternative model—that of the social movement—would provide a different yardstick by which to judge these organizations. Judging community arts groups as social movements would also change the way we balance internal stability and community engagement. As organizations, we should assess arts groups by their internal coherence—for example, do they have personnel procedures, can they pay their bills on time. As social movements, however, we should judge arts groups, first, by their ability to mobilize and change their constituents. Furthermore, if arts organizations are more like social movements than like formal organizations, the criteria we use to judge sustainability need to reflect the different standards by which they are to be evaluated.

This paper undertakes three tasks. First, it summarizes what we have learned about the character of community arts in Philadelphia during the past five years of our research. It then moves from this 'wide-angle' lens to zoom in on the ways in which small community arts organizations fit the model of social movements. Finally, it discusses how this different perspective on community arts organizations might influence the ways in which we evaluate and sustain their activities.

The Social Impact of the Arts

Over the past five years, we have begun to answer a number of questions about the contours of community arts and the role they play in the region. The picture confirms some of the conventional wisdom about the social contribution of arts and culture but adds surprising details. Most importantly, it shows that the many dimensions of the arts and cultural life of the region—although largely unappreciated—

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have made a critical difference in the process of building the social fabric of a community.

Quality of community life

The Philadelphia metropolitan area has a wealth of community arts and cultural resources. By our count, there are more than one thousand non-commercial arts and cultural providers in the five-county region. Over 80 percent of these organizations are located outside of Center City in all varieties of neighborhoods, regardless of their social, economic, or ethnic composition.

Arts and cultural activity are highly correlated with quality of community life. In particular, the arts flourish in diverse neighborhoods. Nearly one in three Philadelphians lives in a neighborhood that is either economically or ethnically diverse. Approximately one-fifth of all metropolitan area residents lives in a diverse neighborhood.

Diverse communities are the center of much of the arts and cultural activity in the region. These neighborhoods are home to more arts and cultural groups, as well as other types of social organizations, than more homogeneous communities. Diverse neighborhoods and high levels of cultural participation go hand in hand. These areas foster greater participation in both local and regional cultural activities than other parts of the region.

Building communities

Arts and cultural organizations build a reservoir of mutual trust and cooperation in the region's communities. Cultural participation is more than a commodity. Participation in arts and cultural activities is strongly related to other forms of civic engagement and "social capital."

The institutional infrastructure is stronger in neighborhoods with many cultural organizations. These communities tend to have more social and voluntary organizations of all kinds—neighborhood improvement, houses of worship, youth and social service, schools and child care, social and fraternal, recreational, business and labor, special interest—as well as arts and culture. Arts and culture are central to social change movements and play an increasing role in urban community organizing. AIDS activists, for example, use artistic productions to educate community members and cultural events to organize for change.

Frequent cultural participants tend to be involved in other community activities. According to a survey of residents in five Philadelphia neighborhoods, people who are frequently participate in the arts or cultural activity are three times more likely than other residents to be highly involved in other civic, religious, recreational, or service activities in their communities. Thus, although formal, institutional relationships are often weak, there is considerable cross-participation and informal relationship between neighborhood cultural activity and other forms of civic engagement. The links are, in fact, the participants themselves.

One neighborhood leader described what we call "participant networks" as the essence of community. As he explained: "What is a community? [Quoting a Philadelphia social activist], 'A community is a network of social relations marked by

mutuality and emotional bonds.' A neighborhood community is a network of persons that share involvement in mapped physical space. There are within this neighborhood many communities—a community of ethnicity, of worship, of activity …"

Quality of life and civic engagement is not simply a result of economic well-being. Cultural participants tend to take a relatively positive view of their neighborhood. The survey of community participation found that people who attended many cultural events were more than twice as likely as other residents to rate the quality of life in their neighborhood as "excellent."

Poor neighborhoods have levels of community engagement that are comparable to those in more affluent sections of the city. One cultural leader, talking about his neighborhood, observed that "despite a probable increase in poverty over the last decade, … attitudes are better… There are more block parties, cleaning projects, and a sort of rebound of small, very active churches…. " Generally, he said, people are feeling better about the community and its possibilities.

Bridging communities

The presence of community arts organizations stimulates participation in the arts across the region. One of the strongest predictors of cultural participation is the number of cultural organizations located in an individual's neighborhood. A person living in a community that supports many local arts groups is more likely to patronize the city's great regional institutions than is a person living in an area with few nonprofit providers. Indeed, the number of arts groups explains more variation in rate of participation than median family income or education.

One neighborhood leader, naming several local arts groups, commented that "through community arts, arts and culture have come to be important to the people living in this neighborhood." Later, talking broadly about participation, he noted: "A sign of opportunity … is access to things beyond your own neighborhood, not only [things] within the neighborhood."

The linkage of regional and neighborhood cultural participation is both an achievement of and a challenge to the cultural community. Although the largest audience for the city's regional cultural institutions is suburban and white, a substantial number of regional groups have developed an audience that is diverse both ethnically and economically.

However, residents of relatively homogeneous, poor neighborhoods are less likely than people living in diverse or affluent areas to participate in regional cultural institutions. Poor people are engaged in cultural activities in their neighborhoods at rates comparable to people living elsewhere in the region, but their involvement in regional cultural activities—with the exception of using the Free Library of Philadelphia--is much lower. Thus, in some of the city's poorest neighborhoods, the region's major cultural institutions are often invisible. High levels of neighborhood participation do not translate into high levels of regional participation.

Community arts organizations reduce the isolation of the city's poorer neighborhoods by drawing participants from the rest of the region. There is a large regional audience for community arts. Nearly two-thirds of all participants in community arts programs in the neighborhoods that we studied came from outside of the community. The "outside" community arts audience is from neighborhoods that have many cultural organizations

and high levels of regional participation. By drawing individuals from across the region to some of the city's poorer neighborhoods, arts and cultural organizations reduce the isolation and invisibility of these communities.

Revitalizing communities

Neighborhoods with a history of arts and cultural activity were more likely than the rest of the region to experience revitalization during the 1980s. Between 1980 and 1990, five percent of the city's block groups (a census unit that includes about six city blocks) retained their population and had poverty fall by over six percent. A block group that had many arts and cultural organizations in 1980 was twice as likely as the average block group to undergo revitalization.

The ability to bridge constituencies and neighborhoods appears to distinguish arts groups from many other community-based organizations. One new neighborhood association president described the challenge at a member meeting: "There is potential for conflict, division within the community, competition for scarce resources… how [do we] move beyond block mobilization, to expand self-interest from the block to the community… [so that the association is] not simply a group of volunteers who have to answer to 'what are you doing for me?'" Another local leader explained, "[Our group] is a civic association. A civic is primarily reactive and sometimes supportive. It does not take initiative in starting relationships."

By contrast, "a number of cultural organizations…," one neighborhood leader noted, "serve as bridging organizations"—that is, they cross rather than reinforce the traditional neighborhood boundaries. The bridging role of community arts takes many shapes. A task force of one neighborhood association started a mural painting project, culminating in what is now an annual arts festival, to engage a poorly served part of the community. In another neighborhood, a private, nonprofit playground supported by local institutions "bridges many grounds," according to a local civic leader. "It's the best place to meet kids from all the area neighborhoods … It's nobody's turf … That's where I got to know the local artist … while he was working on installations."

For many community arts organizations, their bridging roles serve strategic as well as community building goals. One director, after recounting an impressive array of recent activities and upcoming projects, summed up in this way: "We are broadening our opportunities, all through the relationships that we're building."

Arts and cultural enthusiasts are inspired by building rather than defending community. The founder of a community arts alliance recounts: "I was on the [neighborhood association] board for years and all we talked about was problems—crime, nuisance bars, traffic, drugs, … Finally, I started asking, 'What is it that we *like* about this neighborhood?' We began by identifying artists of all kinds who live and work in the area." Thus, a sub-committee of the civic dovetailed into a local arts alliance. A decade later, it is an independent artists' league housed at a new community cultural center.

In short, the social impact of arts and cultural activities is felt well beyond the stage or gallery and the handful of institutions that can afford a 'block buster' exhibit. Its value is anchored in the intrinsic value of arts and cultural production and the ways that smaller cultural groups link with their communities.

The 'Irrationality' of Community Cultural Organizations

Over the past several years, our research team has focused more intensively on a set of small community arts organizations and the role they play in their neighborhoods. Throughout this research, we have been impressed by the tension experienced by many community cultural groups in their attempt to sustain themselves organizationally while they pursue their community mission. Yet, for most community arts organizations, the attempt to become a 'rational' organization will almost always fail. The economics and social structure of the sector assure that this standard will never be achieved.

Staffing and personnel issues provide the most graphic example of the 'irrationality' of the community arts sector. Ideally, a community arts organization should have a staff with clear lines of authority and personnel procedures, adequate training and background, and sufficient longevity to provide regularity and continuity in the carrying out of the group's work. Yet, none of these goals are achieved by even a significant minority of the groups that we know.

The compensation and stability syndrome plagues almost all of the groups. Small cultural organizations are rarely in a position to pay for the expertise they need. As a result, the staffing of cultural organizations is typically of two kinds. Many of the staff have a commitment to the organization that leads them to work at lower than market wages. This commitment derives sometimes from a secondary motivation—for example, many cultural center staff are artists who want to be connected to the organization so they have a place to show their work or perform—and sometimes from an ideological or social commitment. The remainder of staff members are typically either looking for a part-time job or see the position as a short-term career move.

As a result, the staffing pattern at many cultural organizations is bifurcated. There is a small group of long-term employees who have a strong commitment to the mission and history of the organization and a group of 'floaters' who have high turnover and a limited commitment to the organization.

This staffing pattern creates, in turn, one of the great problems for community cultural organizations—succession. Many organizations have a strong 'founder,' an individual who has through the years come to embody the mission and vision of the organization. Typically, founders receive a heavy amount of nonpecuniary compensation: status, respect, awe. However, they also are typically poorly paid and overworked. As a result, many organizations find themselves headed by individuals who in one way or another feel trapped. The organization would 'never be the same' without them; the poor pay and long hours promote burnout; and the high turnover among the staff makes the grooming of a successor a tricky proposition.

When a 'founder' resigns, the 'irrationality' of the group's organizational structure often becomes clear. In one case we studied, the organization sought to replace the founder—who was an artist with strong political views—with a more 'professional' nonprofit manager. Yet, the new head quickly found herself engulfed in battles resulting from her efforts to make the organization more rational and less ideological. She soon found herself isolated within the organization from the staff and board. In several other cases, the attempt to find a successor foundered for the simplest

of reasons; no one who was qualified for the job was willing to take it for the amount the job paid.

Succession is only one of a number of organizational crises that community cultural organizations face. Over the course of a three-year period, nearly a third of the organizations we studied lost one of their senior staff persons, several faced shutdowns of one or more of their programs because of funding problems, as well as a host of other crises. Their success at recovery from these crises very often derived not from 'rational' organizational practices, but from the tenacity and passion of those who had an 'irrational' attachment to the institution.

In short, if the yardstick we use to judge these organizations is that of orthodox organizational practice, many seem to be failures. They have fuzzy, informal lines of authority; little strategic planning; and high rates of turnover. By these standards, community arts are irrational.

Cultural Organizations as Social Movements

Over the past decade, researchers and social theorists have paid greater attention to the increasingly important role of social movements in shaping everyday life. Although this literature is very diverse and nuanced, for this paper we shall use the perspective identified as the 'new social movements' paradigm as the basis for talking about arts and culture.

In their review of the new social movements literature[2], Johnston, Larana, and Gusfield point out that the literature on older social movements is inadequate for understanding modern movements. The traditional focus on the role of social class and other structural realities of advanced industrial societies does not provide a framework for analysis of many of the new social movements that have emerged in Western societies since the 1960s. They identify eight features that they see as differentiating these new social movements:

1. *no clear relationship to social class, economic function,*

2. *not connected to clear, overarching ideology,*

3. *highlights a "new or formerly weak dimension of identity,"*

4. *relationship of individual and collective is blurred,*

5. *connects to personal or intimate aspect of life,*

6. *uses radical mobilization tactics,*

7. *related to breakdown in legitimacy of established parties, and*

8. *segmented, diffuse, and decentralized organizations.*

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[2] From "Identities, Grievances and New Social Movements" by Johnston, Larana, and Gusfield in *New Social Movements* by H. Johnston, E. Larana, and J. R. Gusfield, pages 3-35, published by Temple University, Philadelphia, 1994.

Based on the above criteria, one can reasonably argue that many community cultural organizations conform more closely to the model of a new social movement than to that of a formal organization. Let's take each in turn.

No clear relationship to social class, economic function

One of the major findings of our initial work on the social impact of the arts was that cultural engagement did not fit neatly into the dominant social categories of industrial societies. Indeed, as researchers, we often found ourselves having to confront outright skepticism about whether the diverse neighborhoods that are so important to cultural organizations even exist. The relative invisibility of diverse neighborhoods and their centrality to culture are one of the defining features of this sector.

A unique feature of arts and cultural programs is that they foster the crossing of class, ethnic, and racial boundaries not only within the neighborhoods they serve but by functioning as destinations that attract people from across the city and region.

Not connected to clear, overarching ideology

The Left generally holds one of two views about the role of arts. Either—following the cultural capital theorists—they see arts and culture as one additional means through which social inequality is reinforced in society, or—following the new genre public arts writers—they see arts and culture as being a ready-made sphere for the advance of social change causes.

After five years of studying this sector, we can report back that neither of these views appears to be justified. The cultural sector is truly diverse, not only in its social composition, but in its ideological composition as well. Certainly, there are spokesmen (and we use 'men' advisedly) for a traditional view of the arts as an elitist enterprise, and there are others who use the arts to advance a variety of social causes. However, the ideological composition of most people engaged in community arts defies a simple categorization. Ideology, per se, is not a distinctive feature of this sector.

Highlights a "new or formerly weak dimension of identity"

What does distinguish cultural engagement is its focus on identity. As one travels from the mural painters of North Philadelphia to the clay studios of a suburban arts center to the hip (or hip-hop) artists in trendy Old City, what one finds is a preoccupation with identity. For many community cultural organizations, identity has a more overtly political content—for example, the role of Puerto Rican nationalism in Taller Puertorriqueno's mission. For other groups, the 'personal is political' comes out in different ways, as in the ways that many middle-class women use art classes as a means of gaining perspective and critique of their 'normal' identity. Still others look to the arts as a means of uncovering some part of their life that has been dormant for many years—here, the booming interest in art among senior citizens comes to mind.

The search for identity is the glue that holds together the motley mixture of community arts.

Relationship of individual and collective is blurred

Participants in community arts programs share a unique 'stakeholding' role. This blurring of organizational and personal identities often surfaces in struggles over

the composition of the board of trustees of community groups. As formal organizations, the board strategy of community cultural organizations is clear. They should have a few 'community' members to allow them to keep their pulse on their market, but they should seek out lawyers, accountants, and businessmen as well to assure their 'sustainability.' Yet, in many cases, the 'center's' perspective is hardly defined by the legal structure of the board. Teachers, participants, former board members, and community residents all see themselves as stakeholders with a right and responsibility to become involved in the organization.

These conflicts are double-edged. On the one hand, they cause serious internal difficulties for groups, as conflicts over governance and stakeholding become involved in all aspects of the institution's life. On the other hand, the source of these conflicts is the passion and commitment that so many people have for the arts. These 'irrational' commitments to the arts often lead to the fuzziness that characterizes many aspects of the organization's life.

Connected to personal or intimate aspect of life

Community cultural institutions live at the boundary between the two meanings of culture. First, they express 'culture as everyday life.' Community art centers often help define a neighborhood and its people. It is no accident that the most common form of community cultural participation we identified was attendance at street or community festivals.

Second, they embody the role of art as a unique creative impulse. Here the intellectual tradition of folklore is helpful with its focus on the role of creativity and performance in the structuring of everyday life. This focus on linking the social and personal is particularly important in the diverse neighborhoods within which so many of the arts group are located. We obviously have few rituals in the United States for articulating inter-racial or inter-class identities. Because these neighborhoods have few ready-made scripts to follow, the processes through which 'folk cultures' emerge in these neighborhoods relies heavily on the arts. For example, a recent exhibit on the "folk arts of social change" at the Fleisher Art Memorial in South Philadelphia focused on the ways that various political movements—ranging from peace movements to gay rights activism—developed a set of 'traditions' for expressing and advancing their causes.

Use radical mobilization tactics

Related to breakdown in legitimacy of established parties

OK. So the fit is not perfect.

Segmented, diffuse, and decentralized organizations

This final element of the new social movements is particularly relevant to community cultural engagement. The adherence to 'bad' organizational practices by social movements is not simply bad thinking. Rather it reflects the commitment of many of these movements to challenge traditional models of social power and to explore 'flatter' models of organization.

In *The Information Society*, Manuel Castells has explored this point in great detail. He discovered that many of the new social movements used the elaboration of social networks—often relying on new computer-based technologies—as their basis for

organization. Rather than representing a deficit model, networked "enterprise" organizations often express a new logic for how to pursue goals in a changing institutional environment.

Similar tendencies can be seen among community arts organizations. In contrast to traditional organizations that strive for a model of self-sufficiency, cultural organizations seek out social and institutional networks. The logic of networking, then, leads them to stress a different set of imperatives than those pursued by orthodox organizations.

Viewed as organizations, many community arts programs appear to be failures. They suffer from recurrent crises, frequent turnover, lack of planning, and budget deficits. However, if we use a different yardstick—that of a social movement—the strengths of community arts programs and the reasons that they are successful in spite of their 'irrationality' become apparent. In the concluding section, we reflect on the implications of this paradigm shift for urban and cultural planning.

Redefining 'Sustainability'

Sustainability has been one of the central concepts in planning and policy over the past several decades. Growing out of a heightened consciousness of the role of environmental forces in determining patterns of growth, sustainability has focused attention on the limits and costs of over-development.

In the world of nonprofits, the concept of sustainability has focused primarily on its limits. For organizations, the spectre of sustainability pushes along a conservative path of steady growth and realistic expectations. For orthodox organizations, sustainability focuses attention on organizational needs and maintenance.

This paper has suggested that for community-based arts programs, the orthodox view of organizations may be inappropriate. Rather than focusing on organizational maintenance and stability, we have attempted to demonstrate that these groups function more like social movements. If this model is convincing, then it should follow that the model of sustainability we use also should be different.

What would sustainability mean for a social movement? Social movements are a success to the extent that they are actively engaged with those 'outside' the movement— recruiting, proselytizing, and challenging. Typically, when a social movement takes the time to plot long-term strategy, to worry about organizational niceties like budgets, offices, and staff—it has already metamorphosed into something else. Either it has gained a foothold in the 'mainstream' or it is dying.

The same paths are present among community arts organizations. Certainly some community arts groups come to a point in their life-cycle when a concern with organizational coherence and strength become important. Typically, it is at a point when the organization's growth has put it into position to become a different type of organization, a 'socially mobile' organization that can now command the resources and influence that can take it to another level. For these socially mobile organizations, strategic planning, board development, marketing, and organizational charts are signs of success.

It is a mistake, however, to think that this is the only path to 'success.' For many community arts organizations we have studied, success derives from their ability to stay in touch with the community out of which they emerged. Sometimes these 'communities' are neighborhoods, other times they are 'communities of interest' that support the mission of the group. The price they pay for this 'success,' however, is a diminished prospect of social mobility. An organizations that succeeds in representing and engaging its constituency also runs the risk of chronically exhausting its resources. Although from an organizational perspective it might be viewed as a failure, this type of group serves a critical role in community ecology.

Successful community cultural organizations live off the land. While strategic planning is sometimes an important activity, these groups are often more successful taking advantage of opportunities as they emerge than outlining a long-term path. Indeed, in at least one case of which we were aware, a foundation-initiated strategic planning process actually created significant problems because it made more obvious the opportunistic qualities of the leadership.

What we need are standards of sustainability that give credit to organizations that succeed in engaging and mobilizing their communities, as much as we give credit to organizations for balancing their books and organizing their staff.

Yet, in practice, just the opposite has occurred. The logic of sustainability has focused many funders primarily on organizational coherence and maintenance. Funders who would look askance at a budget deficit or disqualify an organization without a strategic plan, ask for only the most rudimentary evidence of community engagement. In so doing, they may imperil the well-being and effectiveness of many community-based groups.

This paper has been written deliberately in overdrawn terms. Obviously, the groups with which we are concerned demonstrate the qualities of both bureaucratic organizations and social movements. To pigeonhole them into one mold is as mistaken as pushing them the other way. We do so, however, because so much of the attention on community arts groups—and other community-based organizations—has been preoccupied with organizational maintenance that the primacy of community engagement to their ultimate success has been ignored. By changing the lens through which we view these groups, we hope to bring certain elements of their existence and their strength into sharper focus.