



15 Questions to Ask about Creative Placemaking Proposals

ArtPlace America has recently launched the application process for its 2014 Innovation Grants. In its fourth round of funding, ArtPlace America will continue to support creative placemaking in communities across America.

ArtPlace America is a collaboration of 13 leading national and regional foundations and six of the nation's largest banks. ArtPlace America also seeks advice and counsel from close working relationships with various federal agencies, including the National Endowment for the Arts, the departments of Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, Agriculture, Education, and Transportation, along with leadership from the White House Office of Management and Budget and the Domestic Policy Council.

To date, ArtPlace America has awarded 134 grants to 124 organizations in more than 79 communities across the U.S. for a total of \$42.1 million. Past recipients of ArtPlace America grants have demonstrated creative placemaking as a means of investing in art and culture at the heart of a portfolio of integrated strategies that can drive vibrancy and diversity so powerful that it transforms communities.

Creative placemaking is a framework with a specific vision for driving community transformation. It is both process-driven and outcomes-driven. The relationship of place to arts in any given project can come in many forms- for example, in the content of the arts, in the means or location of artistic presentation, or in the involvement of the arts/artists in planning and decision-making related to a place.

ArtPlace America grantees come from the arts, community development, economic development, urban planning, government, higher education, and even business sectors. Accordingly, ArtPlace America has structured the grant application process to receive information from these various perspectives in a way that speaks directly to this framework.

At the end of the 2013 grantmaking cycle, ArtPlace America reviewed proposal notes to pull out the most common questions driving the recommendations of reviewers. ArtPlace America hopes to provide future prospective grantees with tools that bolster their ability to develop strong creative placemaking ideas and craft more robust proposals. To that end, we encourage all prospective grantees to consider the following questions when crafting their proposals:

1. Is it creative placemaking? Creative placemaking projects involve arts organizations, artists or designers working with national and local partners to drive increases in vibrancy and diversity in a place. While great arts programming is valuable in its own right, the intention to have an impact on the vibrancy and diversity of a place is central to the creative placemaking model. Successful proposals clearly demonstrate this intention or how this impact will happen. For example, capital projects on their own may not necessarily impact vibrancy, but programming, design, and long-term vision for the surrounding community can all help to elevate a bricks and mortar project into a creative placemaking project.

2. Is art central and is the art ambitious? Similarly, if art and artists are not central to the proposal, then the project cannot be successful creative placemaking according to the Principles of Creative Placemaking, *even if a project will have substantial impact on place*. The best proposals leverage the creative talent of artists and designers to drive a compelling vision for the project, with the arts as the driving power. Some factors that reviewers look at to understand this relationship include the percent of the budget that goes to artists or the arts portion of the proposal, the artistic vision or ambition, and the level of definition for the artistic vision or the process for arriving at the artistic vision. There are no set algorithms or a required combination of factors, but all of these things and more serve as signals that the arts are central to the project.

3. Is the theory of change clear - why this, why here, why now? These questions form the backbone of a creative placemaking strategy. Proposals should have clear arguments for how and why the strategy or set of activities being proposed can drive a particular vision of change. Moreover, reviewers frequently look in particular at “priorities and sequencing.” Creative placemaking projects can be valuable and meaningful in communities in a variety of stages of development and activity, but may function differently depending on the context of the place. Strong proposals have a clear reason why a particular neighborhood is the focus of a project, why this is the right time for an intervention, or why this strategy is the right one for this community.

4. Do the tactics involved add up to a coherent strategy? There is a growing body of tactics frequently employed by creative placemakers or in tactical urbanism projects. While ArtPlace America believes in the effectiveness of many of these tactics, the effectiveness relies on the context of the place and the overall vision for the transformation of a community. A tactic on its own does not address the “why this, why here, why now?” that is critical to a strong creative placemaking project. It is also valuable to consider how disparate tactics fit together to create a cohesive, mutually-reinforcing strategy.

5. Is it authentic to the place? Successful creative placemaking yields distinctive places. Strong proposals express clearly whether and how they are engaging with local assets, local history, and local values to augment distinctiveness and reflect a place. This clarity is particularly important for creative placemaking projects proposed by organizations not currently embedded in the community of focus.

6. Does it reflect and increase diversity? Working in diverse places or working to encourage and value diversity in a community is core to creative placemaking. ArtPlace America reviewers look for projects that encourage new interaction between diverse users in a place. They also seek proposals that demonstrate a strong understanding of the community and context in which a project is proposed and a methodology for connecting to the interests of diverse sets of current and potential community users and stakeholders.

7. Are the assumptions risky? ArtPlace America encourages innovation and appreciates requests featuring new ideas for this growing field. However, while it is not always necessary or possible to pilot a project, large requests for untested ideas should make sure to convey why the assumptions behind the theory of change are reasonable. For example, projects that rely on marketing, have an interactive technology component, or are remotely located benefit from having a strong basis for assuming certain levels of engagement/reach. Projects that no one sees or no one uses are unlikely to drive substantial vibrancy outcomes in place.

8. Are the right partnerships in place? Places are complicated. Creative placemaking often involves not only multiple sectors, but multiple levels of community and regional leadership involvement. Particular tactics and strategies require buy-in and involvement beyond the organization writing the proposal. Reviewers look closely for these types of partnerships and key players on board necessary to achieving the project's vision. Reviewers also look closely for synergy or consideration between a project's artistic vision and development vision for the place.

9. Is the implementation infrastructure in place? A great idea and project still needs a strong team to carry it out. Proposals that come in during leadership transitions, feature all-volunteer staffs, or have an over-reliance on star personalities may be scrutinized for sustainability. In these situations, proposals should detail how a leadership transition will be managed, why a volunteer infrastructure is sustainable, or how a strong management team will bolster and implement the vision of a star artist or leader.

10. Is the budget allocated for impact and sustainability? While ArtPlace America strongly believes that good projects require investment in staff time and expertise, budgets that cover a large percentage of organizational salaries and operating costs can raise red flags unless plans for long-term sustainability of impact or an explanation for the budget's relationship to impact are clearly laid out. Reviewers also look for intentionality around large consultant line items: Will the consultants support distinctiveness or bring a cookie cutter approach? Is there a rationale for using a particular set of consultants? Will the consultants bring specialized knowledge or are they a substitute for in-house capacity (and how will that affect long-term sustainability of the outcomes on place)?

11. Is the request size appropriate? The level of a request should reflect the scale of the project but also the level of risk and impact. Sometimes, a funder will bet a large amount on a risky idea and it pays off, and ArtPlace America believes in supporting innovative ideas. However, a proposal is more likely to receive a high level of funding if there is a strong sense that the proportion of funds reflects the proportion of impact. ArtPlace America has a capped level of funding in any given year and opportunity costs can be high.

12. Is there local buy-in? ArtPlace America does not require a funding match. However, reviewers frequently look at the percent of ArtPlace America funding and the other funding sources of a project. Buy-in at the local level (in a place where other resources are available) is a good way to demonstrate local commitment to project success. Intentionality and thoughtfulness around the role of ArtPlace America funding is also valuable. Even if the grants are small, having diverse local funding sources can be a good lever to gain ArtPlace America support. This can also work the other way around; some strong proposals make it clear that ArtPlace America funds will be a powerful national lever to gain more necessary local support.

13. If the request is for a capital project, is there adequate expertise and control of space? Given that many creative placemaking projects involve the built environment in a community, having a certain level of real estate/community development expertise expressed in the proposal helps mitigate the risk of investment. Moreover, already having control of the spaces in which a project is being proposed is also valuable. Arts organizations and those without a lot of experience with the built environment can sometimes underestimate the permitting challenges, property owner disputes, and level of work that is required in gaining access to and transforming space. Additionally, for projects that are not specified as temporary in nature, a lack of long-term control over a space can also potentially reduce the sustainability of impact of a project.

14. Is there an adequate business plan in place? The sustainability of impact as a function of the type of project is important. Long-term projects, projects with earned income elements, projects with significant future funding requirements, and capital projects all benefit from an extra level of strategy and planning for success. Capital projects in particular are recommended to have a business plan and set of pro formas for the operation of the space after it is built. This is especially true for multimillion-dollar projects. Clarity around the plan for the sustained operations of a capital project helps to convey how it will drive sustained vibrancy and diversity in place.

15. Is the vision sustainable? Different types of projects have different timelines for impact. Some may seek to redirect the trajectory of a community, while others may seek to make smaller progressive transformations over time. Temporary projects may be just the first step in a larger set of physical and psychological changes. In each case, reviewers think carefully about the potential sustainability of the impact as a result of the proposed project. Some projects with a short-term horizon still have a long-term impact. Other projects with a long-term horizon may suffer if not continuously refunded. These are all considerations in crafting the portfolio.

Final Thoughts

While not a direct part of the proposal process, reviewers also look at proposals in relation to the larger growing creative placemaking movement. Innovative projects with the potential to teach the field something new or those that include a documentation component to promote learning in the field offer unique and exciting opportunities to help expand the number of practitioners and partners doing this work. Projects that make clear connections to other movements related to place, such as food or biking, while still maintaining a solid core of arts-driven placemaking, are also valuable to help expand creative placemaking practice.

Overall, the field of creative placemaking is expanding rapidly, with some tested ideas spreading, but also with a large number of new ideas, new twists, and new players continuing to redefine what is possible. ArtPlace America and its partners are delighted to be a small part in supporting the innovative and difficult work happening in local communities around the country.

If you have additional questions about our grantmaking guidelines, visit:

<http://www.artplaceamerica.org/loi/>