AZ Creative Voices: Community collaborations create sustainable and inclusive local economies

By Ricky Araiza
AZ CCI senior coordinator
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Empowering communities and artists

Over the course of the past two years, I served as the senior coordinator of the Arizona Creative Communities Institute (AZ CCI), a collaboration between Arizona State University, the Arizona Commission on the Arts and the Southwest Folklife Alliance. This program provided opportunities for a cohort of teams made up of community members from all over the state of Arizona who had a deep interest and investment in learning and utilizing arts-based practice to create positive community change.

Collaborations such as the AZ CCI process empower communities and artists to take pride and understand the value of their lived experiences and creative labor, which often go unnoticed and therefore are overlooked as an economic resource.

As a native son of Arizona and an active theatre arts practitioner, I have witnessed the evolution of the Phoenix community as times and politics shifted dramatically. Throughout this I began to ask myself, “How can the artist respond to the needs of the community in a way that is healthy for both (community and artist)? And what resources are embedded in the biology of a community that may be overlooked but can serve as tools for its self reliant growth?”

One of the biggest surprises to me in this process, and in life in general, I suppose, is just how common it is for us to overlook the resources that are right in front of us. We are ultimately the experts that are needed in order to do the type of movement work that is necessary to create positive and equitable change.

Just prior to becoming the senior coordinator for the program, I was in my final year of graduate school and 45 had become president. In the time following that, I was so overcome with a sense of immediacy that I began to reexamine what it is I am trying to accomplish with my art as a theatre maker. It was abundantly clear that looking to the top was not going to be useful., As I became more invested in deeper community discussions, it became clear that true change would not be top-down, but rather from the grassroots movements that come from the ground up — not a concept that is new, by any means, but it was something that became evident to me.
in an undeniable way. It has become more vital than ever that communities begin to heal from the deep-seated colonizing practices that historically accompany social and economic growth, which is at the foundation of the discovering of this nation and touches many of our Arizona communities over the course of the last century with the rise and evolution of ever growing institutions.

**Healing our communities**

If we are to understand the importance of the redirection of local economic investment, we must understand the social and economic history in order to understand the appropriate ways to respond and begin the process of true healing.

Healing can look a number of different ways and is experienced through a number of different outlets.

When we talk about the healing of the body, as an example, we go to a doctor or take the necessary medicines. When we talk about the healing of nature, we water plants and provide them with sufficient sunlight.

But when we talk about the healing of communities, it begins with listening – deeply listening to the full spectrum of the story of the community and what it has accomplished and overcome.

We must understand the history of a community in order to understand its present. And if we understand the present state, we understand the importance of putting back into it in order for it to thrive and continue evolving. Not only must we understand a community’s history, but we must be in direct dialogue with it to understand what it needs. The concept is so straightforward, but we live in a “grass is always greener” type of culture. We often are told to believe that resources and knowledge should come from outside the community, that outside eyes will see something new or something that we have missed. But sometimes — often when an outsider is not truly listening — that can do more harm than good. It is true that a plethora of knowledge can be gained from outside sources, but if we are to strengthen ourselves as individual communities, we must have a sense of pride that is both connected to the self as well as the physical place.
“Grupo BombAZo” performing at Goodwin Park in Tempe for its Arts in the Parks event. Photo by Sealy Media.

**Listening to your community**

Throughout the two-year process, we engaged with teams in face-to-face convenings called learning sessions, which met in Phoenix six different times over the course of the process. In these sessions, teams were given opportunities to come together to work on the development of their community-based projects with the help of various experts from Arizona State University, the Arizona Commission on the Arts, the Southwest Folklife Alliance, as well as local experts in the fields of art and civic practice. Each of the learning sessions carried a different structure in terms of content to allow for flexibility as each community had its own set of questions and experiences and it was our intention to cater directly to their immediate needs.
Each of the sessions was structured in a way to serve the cohort, but it was also a perfect way for us, as the institutions, to practice what we preached by being mindful in our collaborations in our content building and program structuring, which led to how we engaged with local facilitators, experts and even vendors.

A major driving force in the program was the power of storytelling and its immediate connection to history and place. With the deep and complex history of Phoenix as a platform for the centralized convenings, it was important to find spaces that created opportunities for dialogue and reflection. In the variety of spaces we inhabited, we talked about the complexities of each of the structures and their existence in the current economic ecosystem of the city. Some spaces were historic and forgotten, others were fancier and hip. These often opened up discussions that praised prosperity and architectural development but feared gentrification and displacement. Discussions of inclusion and partnerships sometimes revealed blindspots and unintentional exclusions.

Place was only one part of the many discussions. Other topics included lived experiences and creative labor as some of the most overlooked resources, authentic engagement with community, basics of budgeting, and engagement with youth of the community. But nothing could prepare us or the communities themselves for the ever evolving needs of the community. The most important tool is flexibility in approach and planning. Not everything can be fully prepared for when doing this type of work, but every decision must be made in the service of the needs of the community.

These sets of knowledge can never be taught or learned by even the most well trained institutional partner. In my experience, when the entire community sees and feels that they are listened to and valued, especially communities of marginalized populations, a pride of place begins to develop. And when that develops, the passing of the torch begins.

For the two years of the program, I worked in direct dialogue with members of the Rural Policy Forum, a program supported by Local First Arizona and the Arizona Rural Development Council. Very similar to the learning sessions from AZ CCI, the Rural Policy Forum is an opportunity to gather members of municipality from the rural communities of Arizona to discuss ideas of economic growth and policy change.

One of the biggest questions that circulated was the concept of youth retention in rural communities. In a session directly addressing the concern, a youth on the panel, a student from the local high school, gave the most direct answer possible: “Listen to our answers when you ask the questions.”

After she said this, a silence rippled throughout the room, as if the concept was foreign. In a way, it was. We often talk about the future of communities both central and rural, but we leave that to “grown folks” to talk about and completely leave the future, the youth, out of the conversation. If
we are going to make change and make mindful decisions about the sustainability and economic health of our communities, youth must be at the table to lend a voice to the ever changing times.

Is the AZCCI process the answer to community change? No, not in its entirety. But it's definitely part of the answer. It is definitely a step in the right direction. I think the process was a valuable, informative, and inspiring first step in making deep rooted change in Arizona. Throughout my time, with all of its ups and downs, I witnessed both institutions and communities gain an understanding of what this program could become. It is my hope that this program, with the right leadership, can continue to dig deeper into the layers of complexity that exist in our Arizona communities in a truly thoughtful and equitable way. It is my hope that this program will have another opportunity to spotlight the work of thinkers, artists and businesses that are often not brought to the table to discuss the communities that they help build. And finally, even if the program never sees the light of day again, it is my hope that I was helpful in making some sort of positive difference in my Arizona community.

Cover image: With support from AZ CCI, the Barrio Stories Project celebrated Barrio Anita through a two-day heritage festival featuring large-scale video projections on historic buildings and screens of oral histories and archival images, a pop-up history museum, a 1950s style backyard fiesta and more. Photo by Kate Gross.