ARTISTS' CONTESTED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES

by

Devin Marquess

Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of

Peabody College of Vanderbilt University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

in

Community Development and Action

May 2026

Jyoti Gupta *Jyoti Gupta*	4-27-26
Major Professor	Date
David Carlone *David Carlone*	April 27, 2026
Second Reader	Date
Nicole E. Allen	April 27, 2026
Department Chair	Date
Camilla Benbow	4.27.26
Dean of Peabody College	Date

© 2025

Devin Patricia Marquess

All rights reserved

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank everyone who supported me through this work and made this thesis possible. I am forever grateful to all the mentors who cultivated me as a scholar. To my advisor, Dr. Jyoti Gupta, thank you for trusting me with your precious work and mentoring me through this process. I am honored to have worked with you. To my reader, Dr. David Carlone, thank you for your investment in me and for keeping me grounded during this journey; you sparked a love of community development that will sustain me for many years to come. To my Furman undergraduate mentors, thank you for encouraging my passions and helping me find my way to Vanderbilt. Thank you to those at the Curb Center for creating such a special place on campus to develop myself as a student and professional within the arts ecosystem, and for providing a welcoming space to nurture and explore the ideas in this project.

Finally, I especially want to acknowledge the care and support I received from my friends, partner, and family during my time in this program. Thank you to the lifelong friends I have made at Vanderbilt; you made my time in this program infinitely richer and more meaningful. A special shout out to the incredible, intelligent, and talented classmates I met who cultivated and deepened my academic engagement; thank you. I would not have been able to get through this process and achieve what I have without my community of care. No matter where my journey takes me, I know I can count on your love and kindness.

Go 'Dores and Anchor Down!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter Page

I. INTRODUCTION 1

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE 5

The Past and Present of Creative Placemaking 6
Creative Placemaking Pitfalls 9
Artists as Agents of Change 13
Present Study 18

III. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK 19

Critical Community Practice in Community Development 19

IV. METHODOLOGY 23

Study Setting 23
Data Collection 25
Interviews 25
Human Subjects Research 26
Analytic Approach 26

V. RESULTS 29

Professional Orientation 30
Artistic Orientation 33
Critical Practice as a Community Development Orientation 37

VI. DISCUSSION 40

The Future for Creative Placemaking 44
Limitations of the Study and Future Directions 46

VII. CONCLUSION 48

REFERENCES 53

APPENDIX 61

INTRODUCTION

Creative placemaking is under fire. Once heralded as a promising model for integrating arts and culture into community development, creative placemaking has faced many critiques since its initial articulation in the late 2010s. The term can be traced to a 2010 white paper commissioned for the National Endowment for the Arts by Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa. Emerging from the buzz around arts and culture as a tool for regional development, creative placemaking partners "public, private, nonprofit, and community sectors" to "strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood" (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010b, p. 3). It aims to mobilize a diverse network of actors for enhancing their local spaces and places by centering community participation, local identity, and promoting the social value of the arts.

Creative placemaking was first posited as a strategy for neighborhood stabilization and revitalization. Because arts and culture investments had proven to be an increasingly attractive strategy for stimulating the local economy, including creating jobs and "nurturing local businesses" (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010b, p. 3), creative placemaking sought to codify this approach in formalized projects. Creative placemaking, as articulated by Markusen and Gadwa, represents a concretized, project-based model approach to arts and culture investment as a tool for urban renewal. Since its coinage, creative placemaking marked the theoretical beginnings of other branching initiatives like Our Town and Art Place (Markusen & Gadwa Nicodemus, 2019).

Creative placemaking has been actualized in a number of investment projects such as Art Place America and the NEA's Our Town grant program. Art Place America was a $150 million, 10-year philanthropic collaboration established to invest in the idea of creative placemaking (ArtPlace America, 2020; Markusen & Gadwa Nicodemus, 2019). The National Endowment for

the Arts also has its Our Town grant program, which funds specific local projects that use arts and culture to shape communities. These grants require larger partner organizations like local government entities or nonprofit organizations. Our Town is the grant project that emerged from this concept of creative placemaking as a meaningful theory of change for "notable social, economic, and/or physical change" (NEA, 2021).

Since its conception, however, creative placemaking has been widely critiqued for reproducing many of the same dynamics it sought to avoid, including the instrumentalization of art for economic development, the privileging of top-down decision-making, and its entanglement with processes of gentrification and exclusion (Loh et al. 2024; Zitcer 2020). In addition, because funding structures have shifted, major initiatives such as ArtPlace have come to an end, and the NEA faces diminished administrative support, scholars more recently have gone so far as to declare creative placemaking, at least in its formalized and institutionalized forms, effectively "dead" (Zitcer & Taylor, 2026).

With this apparent decline in creative placemaking as a popular framework for urban cultural policy initiatives, important questions emerge about how to understand the ongoing possibilities of community-engaged arts practice and, crucially, the actors and individuals at the center of shaping it. While the discourse surrounding creative placemaking has largely focused on outcomes, metrics, and policy frameworks, less attention has been paid to how artists themselves interpret and navigate their roles within these processes. As funding priorities shift and institutional support wanes, the work and ambitions of artists engaged in community-based practice risk becoming obscured—alternately celebrated as symbols of civic innovation and then marginalized once they are no longer aligned with prevailing policy agendas.

Artists and creatives are at the heart of creative placemaking, and understanding how artists define and enact community-engaged practice in the wake of this changing landscape is, therefore, critical. At stake is not only the visibility of this work, but also the future of how arts and culture might contribute to more equitable and participatory forms of community development. Without sustained attention to artists' perspectives, there is a risk that the lessons, tensions, and possibilities embedded in these practices will be lost, limiting the potential for developing more critical and transformative approaches.

Ample literature has explored the discourse around arts and culture as a vehicle for city development, but there has been little published on artists' recognition or reflection of their roles as producers of these processes (Redaelli & Stevenson, 2022) and as agents of community change. This study seeks to explore both the artistic and community development practices artists are actually engaging in in hopes of understanding how they navigate the more formal, project-based collaborations rooted in creative placemaking. What follows is a review of the literature on creative placemaking, its critiques, its successes, its origins, and its future to better explain and articulate the tensions felt by artists working in a creative city.

Building on critiques of creative placemaking (Loh et al., 2024; Roberts & Lowe, 2024; Zitcer, 2020; Zitcer & Taylor, 2026), this study explores how artists envision their community practice in relation to a creative placemaking professional development program. I will draw from frameworks of community practice developed within community development and social service fields. In particular, the critical community practice (CCP) framework articulated by Evans and colleagues (2014) offers one approach as a social justice-based, critical praxis with "four interlocking concepts: critical consciousness, critical theorizing, critical action, and critical

reflection"(p. 3). It engages the community as active agents of change to allow for a grassroots, empowered process of development. This radical praxis affords artists greater autonomy to build sustainable livelihoods for themselves and their communities.

Drawing on qualitative research with artists engaged in community-based work in Nashville, this study examines how artists navigate the shifting terrain of creative placemaking and its legacy. It argues that artists do not occupy singular, fixed roles as community practitioners, but instead move between professional, artistic, and community-centric orientations to their community development practice, negotiating tensions between creative autonomy, institutional expectations, and social responsibility. By foregrounding these perspectives, the thesis offers a textured understanding of the role of artists in community development and points toward the conditions necessary for sustaining more critical and equitable forms of practice. This study responds to two guiding research questions. First, how do artists define their role in community development? Second, how do the roles artists define align with or extend critical community practice?

The present study builds on a larger study of artists' civic roles and positions in Nashville, Tennessee, conducted between 2016 and 2018 (Gupta, 2019). I analyze a subset of eight interviews with artists participating in the second of two cohorts of a program spearheaded by the Nashville Metro Arts Commission—the Learning Lab. The Learning Lab was an artist professional development program intended to build "capacity for artists and community/municipal partnerships" in Nashville, and was hosted by the city's public arts agency (Metro Arts) with the Nashville Arts and Business Council (ABC), and the national organization,

Center for Performance and Civic Practice (CPCP) (Center for Performance and Civic Practice, n.d.).

This study investigates how artists who were enrolled in the Learning Lab, a program grounded in creative placemaking, conceptualize their personal community development practices. The idea behind the creative placemaking framework is for artists to act as more empowered change agents in their communities, but this may be insufficient to train them in the type of community development practices they idealize. Using qualitative interviews, I analyze how these artists conceptualize their roles in community development and advance applied understandings of theories on what it means to be a change agent in contexts of rapid urban change. This thesis is a recentering of the artist in conversations of community development to understand their meaning-making around their civic roles.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Since it came onto the scene, creative placemaking has generated much interest as a promising community practice and even a possible corrective to extractive city policymaking. In what follows, I examine the extant literature on creative placemaking, its emergence, and its critiques. I situate creative placemaking as a complicated extension of creative city policymaking as an urban strategy. To understand how artists are viewed and utilized in these frameworks of urban development, I also examine the normalization of entrepreneurialism among artists seeking to support themselves within a precarious model of work. Finally, I investigate how these broader phenomena have contributed to artists being framed as agents of change and community developers.

The Past and Present of Creative Placemaking

Placemaking and arts and culture investment have a long history (Landy & Bianchini, 1995; Landry, 2000; Eisinger, 2000; Florida, 2002; Markusen & Gadwa, 2010b), and this relationship is well respected in the realm of arts and culture planning (Loh et al., 2024). Early justifications for creative placemaking hinged on their economic value proposition. As Markusen and Gadwa stated in a white paper commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts:

> This role of creative placemaking in hosting cultural industries is under-appreciated. Few economic sectors are as large, diverse, entrepreneurial, and export-generating as the American arts and cultural enterprise writ large. Whether approached as industries (what cultural firms make), occupations (what cultural workers do), or a set of organizations (producing firms, non-profit, public agencies and community groups), the arts and cultural sector is the nation's most under-rated economic engine, producing millions of well-paying jobs.

This white paper was the genesis of a longer initiative known as ArtPlace America (ArtPlace), spanning from 2010 to 2020. In a book published in 2020 by an ArtPlace partner, Forecast, the authors guide the reader through a 10-year initiative around creative placemaking. Running throughout the 2010s, ArtPlace had numerous investment wings for projects in community development, focusing on providing resources to local governments, community partners, and educational institutions for arts and culture investments. They also contributed to this new sector known as creative placemaking through "cross-sector research, knowledge, and network building" (ArtPlace, n.d.). For instance, in rural Appalachia, their funding helped expand a long-time arts organization into broader community development—supporting media training for youth, local businesses, cultural hubs, and storytelling-based organizing (ArtPlace, 2020, pp. 39-41). ArtPlace supported community and infrastructure projects, created national

creative placemaking grants, and convened summits and conferences around creative placemaking (ArtPlace, 2020).

Creative placemaking comes from a longer legacy of placemaking and arts-based economic development, some tracing it back to the turn of the 20th century (Ashley, 2015; Vasquez, 2012). The theoretical underpinnings of placemaking as defined by Markusen and Gadwa (2010b) cite research on the creative class by Richard Florida as evidence for the efficacy of arts and culture investment as a catalyst for economic and social growth (p. 6). The 2010 white paper emerges out of earlier work on placemaking, elaborating on the successes and pitfalls of creative placemaking (Markusen & Schrock, 2006). They define successful placemaking as initiatives that enhance "livability and sustainability as well as new jobs and economic activity, and do so in an equitable and participatory way" (p. 18). It also requires

> commitment to place and its distinctive qualities; a unique vision; successful partnering; buy-in from public, private, and arts and cultural non-profit sectors; and an ability to cross boundaries to leverage support and funds from other functional agencies (transportation, housing, environmental, parks and recreation, workforce development, small business) and various levels of government. All cases have demonstrated concrete outcomes (p. 18).

They enumerate the successful elements of creative placemaking, including: creative initiators, designing around distinctiveness, mobilizing public will, generating private sector support, securing arts community engagement, and building partnerships (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010b, p. 18-22).

Over time, advocates of creative placemaking articulated a clearer social value proposition, claiming to foster enjoyable, thriving places for people to live, while considering gentrification as a potential side effect of the cultural development of our spaces and places (Bajestani et al., 2024; Loh et al., 2024; Markusen & Gadwa, 2010a). Since its rapid rise in

popularity, however, creative placemaking has been deemed a "fuzzy" term with no clear definition, though some count this as a strength and asset (Markusen, 2014; Stern & Pray, 2014). Zitcer and Taylor (2026) synthesize it well, describing creative placemaking as the name attached to "a set of longstanding cultural practices that center community development as their primary objective," and a term with a number of different meanings to different practitioners and scholars (p. 1; Zitcer, 2020, p. 278). For the purposes of this study, it can best be thought of as "an emergent form of cultural policy and planning practice" dominating arts funding throughout the 2010s (Zitcer, 2020, p. 278).

Since its conception and adoption over the years, however, creative placemaking in practice has had to morph according to project and community needs. Authors Markusen and Bedoya developed research throughout the 2010s to interrogate how creative placemaking contributes to belonging and dis-belonging in one's community (Markusen & Bedoya, 2017; Markusen and Gadwa Nicodemus, 2018). In light of this, practitioners of creative placemaking had to evolve to consider how creative placemaking incorporates feelings of belonging to one's spaces and places (Markusen & Gadwa Nicodemus, 2018, p. 19).

Some scholars, like Furtado and Payne (2023), provide reformist approaches to creative placemaking in the wake of growing critiques. They highlight three key factors to make a project inclusive and successful: sustained, deep engagement by participants, a project design that is culturally specific to the members of the respective community, and an open-studio policy by the artist, encouraging community member involvement. Others, like Zitcer and Taylor (2026), take a more decisive stance in asserting that creative placemaking, as we knew it, is no longer the dominant approach to arts and culture in community development. In its wake, therefore, wholly

new models and approaches to creative community collaborations. In either case, creative placemaking, as it was originally defined, has undergone critical scrutiny in light of its perceived shortcomings.

Creative Placemaking Pitfalls

Creative placemaking has not been without significant critiques. Since Markusen and Gadwa's 2010 paper, it has undergone a reckoning by scholars and community members alike for its overreliance on economic indicators as a metric for the success of community development projects. The success of creative placemaking had a measurement problem in that is favored economic measures of success over evaluations of equity, justice, and belonging (Crisman, 2022; Zitcer & Taylor, 2026; Zitcer, 2020). During its reign, outcome metrics were a source of critique for ArtPlace and its creative placemaking project (Gadwa Nicodemus, 2013; Moss, 2012; Zitcer, 2026). These critiques steered creative placemaking away from further overemphasis on economic measures of success and provided the basis of its more belonging-focused identity (Bedoya, 2013).

Additionally, creative placemaking has been investigated for its likelihood of manifesting in top-down, non-representative projects alienated from the denizens they claim to prioritize, similar to the creative city (Loh et al., 2024). Further, a placemaking project needs only to be conceptualized by a single entity, whether it be an individual actor or a small team. This leads one to question how a plan for placemaking will prioritize participation throughout its lifecycle. However, Roberts and Lowe (2024) complicate this when they challenge the too-simplistic binary narratives of creative placemaking as either top-down or bottom-up. Instead, it should be seen as an investment in creative clusters in terms of an ecosystem of arts and culture.

A significant body of literature situates creative placemaking within broader processes of urban restructuring and gentrification. Scholars working across different geographic contexts demonstrate that arts-led development often operates as a mechanism for revalorizing urban space, frequently resulting in displacement and exclusion. For instance, Bedoya (2013) problematizes the tendency for placemaking to foster a sense of dis-belonging from one's neighborhood. Ruberto (2025) connects contemporary creative placemaking practices to a longer history of racially exclusionary urban redevelopment, demonstrating how Black participation is often limited to tokenistic forms of engagement within market-driven projects. Yang and Chang (2025) show how state-led creative placemaking projects in China mobilize cultural production to attract investment while displacing rural residents, while Schaller et al. (2024) illustrate how business improvement districts in Washington, DC, leverage creative placemaking to rebrand urban space in ways that erase Black cultural and economic presence. Some go so far as to deem creative placemaking as a covert, but compassionate revanchist tactic to mask poverty to "advance a capital project in revitalizing urban space" (Kudla, 2024).

Now, according to Zitcer and Taylor (2026), creative placemaking as we knew it as a formalized project is over. Given the increasing economic strain on artists, the lack of reliable arts funding, and the disorganization across sectors, creative placemaking as a formalized initiative was doomed to fail. The competing logics of creative placemaking created too many problems in creative placemaking for it to sustain itself (Stern & Pray, 2014).

There have been a number of investigations into the execution of creative placemaking, with some scholars feeling the need to abandon the framework altogether, while others would opt for a reformist approach to addressing its weaknesses. Furtado and Payne's (2023)

recommendations fall into the latter camp with their three recommendations for successful placemaking, leaning heavily into an intentional, robust, and reflexive community engagement practice. They recommend sustained, deep engagement by participants, a project design that is culturally specific to the members of the respective community, and an open-studio policy by the artist, encouraging community member involvement. Loh and colleagues are also hesitant to throw the baby out with the bathwater, recommending instead that placemaking regularly check in with how it is succeeding in the way of diversity, equity, and inclusion goals (2024).

Though the sun sets on creative placemaking in its more formalized iterations, like that of the ArtPlace project (ArtPlace America, 2020; Zitcer & Taylor, 2026), creative placemaking as a catalyst for localized economic development is not leaving the minds of urban planners anytime soon (Loh et al., 2024). What remains upon its death is the legacy ethos of creative placemaking—arts and culture for urban development. "Creative placemaking must die so the work can live on, informing a future integration of arts, community development, and urban planning" (Zitcer & Taylor, 2026, p. 2). The future of how arts and culture will be utilized in municipal development remains unclear. Zitcer & Taylor (2026) argue that the future that emerges from creative placemaking includes expanding the role of artists in cities, democratizing funding models for community development, collaboration across sectors, and healing fragmentation between practitioners. The future of creative placemaking, and placemaking more generally, will likely continue through the projects and plans of civic entities (Loh et al., 2024).

Much literature has been produced on evaluating the success of creative placemaking in specific project contexts. For some, success is evaluated through economic metrics, while others prioritize outcomes of inclusion and justice. Stern and Pray attribute this back to the "fuzziness"

of creative placemaking and the competing logics behind it (2014). Their report explicitly warns against artist-led development, perpetuating divestment and displacement rather than building community. This may be attributed to misaligned intellectual traditions of placemaking, creative economic development, and social capital.

This labor-centered perspective also complicates the framing of artists as beneficiaries of creative placemaking initiatives. While policy discourse often positions artists as key drivers of urban revitalization, scholars note that the freelance employment models underpinning creative industries frequently exclude those without access to financial resources or social capital. As Genders (2022) demonstrates, the ability to sustain a creative career is closely tied to structural factors such as housing affordability, access to training, and informal networks, all of which are unevenly distributed. In this sense, creative placemaking not only contributes to spatial inequalities but also reproduces inequalities within the creative workforce itself, privileging those who can afford to participate in precarious forms of labor.

Taken together, these debates highlight a central tension within creative placemaking: while it aspires to support community-centered development, it remains embedded within broader systems of urban policy and economic development that shape and constrain how artists are positioned and utilized. These dynamics are particularly significant for artists, who are positioned simultaneously as cultural producers, community intermediaries, and economic actors within these development frameworks. These critiques suggest that creative placemaking is less a discrete alternative to creative city policymaking and more a rearticulation of it, operating through similar logics of growth, governance, and spatial revalorization. Here, I elaborate on the

creative city development to demonstrate how creative placemaking is situated in this wider context.

Artists as Agents of Change

Artists' roles and perceptions of their roles as community developers in urban contexts are shaped by the broader political economy of the creative city. On the one hand, artists are seen as agents of urban revitalization as their presence and their practices are believed to build a city's creative identity. As advanced by Richard Florida's creative class theory, cities can capitalize on a nebulous concept of 'creativity' by leveraging technology, talent, and tolerance (2005, p. 6) to spur economic growth. Artists are seen as belonging to a "super creative class" that contributes to such growth by attracting tourism (Evans, 2009), innovation, and investment by other 'creative' industries (Florida, 2008). In this regard, cities' investment in culture may not be out of genuine creative pursuits but rather prompted by the pressure to expand other economic possibilities (Bishop, 2012, p. 15). Thus, the utility of the arts goes beyond their value as a means for expression. Creative class theory has prompted investments in large and small-scale projects such as neighborhood revitalization efforts that prioritize art galleries, cafes, music venues, and historic architecture, which are top-down processes enabled by artists' ability to add cultural significance to goods and services (Alsayel et al., 2022; Florida, 2002; Markusen & Gadwa, 2010b).

Florida's creative class theory has been widely debated, with critics framing creative urbanism as a technology of neoliberalism (Eisinger, 2000; Leslie & Catungal, 2009; Grodach et al., 2014; McLean, 2014; Loh et al., 2024). McGuigan (2009) and Mould (2015) similarly argue that the creative class functions as an instrument of neoliberal ideology. Neoliberalism, in broad

strokes, can be understood as the shift from welfare-state economics to free-market ideology, policy, and economic decisions (Brown, 2005; Harvey, 2005). As an ideology, neoliberalism prioritizes individual freedom and entrepreneurial initiative as the drivers of innovation and wealth creation (Harvey, 2005, p. 64), while also functioning as a broader political rationality that shapes behavior according to market logic (Brown, 2005). Individuals are expected to act as entrepreneurs of themselves, rendering inequality a normalized outcome of competition and framing failure as a lack of entrepreneurial effort.

This neoliberal logic makes people believe that human rational economic behavior and self-entrepreneurialism are an intrinsic norm rather than a fabricated habitus, an ideology. According to Brown, "the state produces subjects whose compass is set entirely by their rational assessment of cost and benefits of certain acts" (2005, p. 43). Therefore, the state can control the subject without being responsible for them, granting them "freedom" and responsibility for their well-being. Neoliberalism threatens liberal democracy by replacing ideals of equality, democracy, and freedom with economic values of efficiency, profitability, and competition.

In the neoliberal creative city, artists are positioned as human capital that cities can invest in to cultivate a creative identity. However, the policies and initiatives that mobilize creatives often place artists in precarious conditions that do not reflect their lived realities. While Florida includes artists in a celebrated creative class, Teresa and Zitcer (2022) note that they occupy a more unstable position than others in this category (e.g., knowledge workers like physicians, engineers, lawyers) due to irregular and poorly compensated work, earning the label of the "bohemian" (Florida, 2002). In the creative city, artists are expected to sustain themselves through flexible, self-directed work—often under precarious conditions. Bishop (2012) describes

artists as ideal neoliberal workers, accustomed to commission-based labor, low pay, and irregular hours. Similarly, McRobbie (2016) notes that young creatives are encouraged to bypass traditional employment in favor of self-employment, often without welfare protections or job security.

Indeed, the entrepreneurial logic maps closely onto artists. Scholarship on cultural labor highlights how precarious conditions—self-exploitation, unpaid work, and constant self-promotion—have become normalized (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Menger, 1999; McRobbie, 2016; Mould, 2018). From this perspective, entrepreneurialism is less a choice than a survival strategy. McRobbie (2016) describes this as the "creativity dispositive," where artists are expected to embrace risk, self-improvement, and instability while labor protections erode. Creative work increasingly blurs the boundaries between labor and life, reducing the need for stable employment structures while extending into personal time and emotional energy (Mould, 2018, p. 38). Within this regime, success is tied to the cultivation of the entrepreneurial self (Bröckling, 2016). Artists are expected to function as self-managing, self-branding individuals responsible for their own outcomes, raising concerns about artistic autonomy, equity, and the broader social role of art. Mould (2015) traces the rise of "creativity" alongside individual entrepreneurialism, arguing that the creative city paradigm co-opts the term, stripping it of its transgressive and activist roots. His later work calls for forms of creativity that resist this co-optation and the expansion of capitalist logics into "ever deeper recesses of socioeconomic life" (2018, p. 50).

While creative city discourse proposes artists as entrepreneurs and agents of economic transformation, the creative placemaking discourse focuses on artists as agents of social and community transformation. This perspective is grounded in the idea that artists possess unique

capacities to foster dialogue, reimagine public space, and engage communities in processes of collective meaning-making (Borrup & Zitcer, 2024; Duncombe, 2023). In this framing, artistic practice extends beyond aesthetic production to include forms of civic engagement, with artists positioned as facilitators of participation and, in some accounts, as practitioners of democracy itself. Borrup and Zitcer (2014), for example, advance the concept of "democracy as creative practice," arguing that artists play an important role in cultivating democratic capacities through collaboration, storytelling, and public engagement. Similarly, Duncombe (2024) highlights the performative and imaginative dimensions of political life, suggesting that artists contribute to shaping collective imaginaries and expanding possibilities for social change. This body of work positions artists as uniquely equipped to engage with complex social issues in ways that traditional policy or planning approaches may not.

However, the designation of artists as agents of community change is not without critique. Scholars have raised concerns about the assumptions embedded in this framing, particularly regarding the scope of artists' influence and the expectations placed upon them. Some argue that positioning artists as catalysts for change risks overstating the capacity of artistic practice to address structural inequalities, while simultaneously shifting responsibility for social outcomes onto individual practitioners (Bishop, 2012; McRobbie, 2016). This critique is especially salient in the context of some creative placemaking efforts where artists have been incorporated into development initiatives that prioritize metrics such as economic growth or neighborhood revitalization.

While much of the creative placemaking literature focuses on policy frameworks and spatial outcomes, a growing body of scholarship links the practice back to the consequences of

the creative city, examining the labor conditions underpinning these processes. Both Bishop (2012 and Genders (2022) argue that freelance cultural workers—who are often central to creative placemaking initiatives—operate within highly precarious labor conditions characterized by instability, informality, and reliance on personal networks. Genders says that, rather than existing as "placeless" creative entrepreneurs, these workers are deeply embedded in local creative economies, where access to work is shaped by place-based infrastructures, social networks, and the cost of living. This perspective reframes creative placemaking not only as a strategy for urban development but also as a labor regime that shifts economic risk onto individual artists while simultaneously valorizing their entrepreneurial capacity.

As another critique, artists' agency in community change is complicated by broader shifts toward project-based work within the cultural sector. As artists increasingly operate within grant-funded and partnership-driven environments, they are often required to articulate their work in terms of impact, outcomes, and community benefit. This can reinforce expectations that artists not only participate in community development efforts but actively drive it in the context of their funded projects, even when the structural conditions necessary for sustained change lie beyond their control (Bishop 2012; Mould 2015; Stern & Pray, 2014).

The creative city does not invent these dynamics but organizes and formalizes them into a model of development. Campbell (2015) notes the rise of programs that recruit artists, community leaders, and residents into structured approaches to community development. Yet many of these elements—artists in inexpensive housing, informal cultural spaces, and community gathering sites—long predate their formalization. What has changed is their incorporation into policy frameworks such as creative placemaking. Bishop (2012) traces a shift

from art as an object to participatory practices intended to repair social bonds fragmented by neoliberalism. This produces a model of the artist as a flexible, mobile, and adaptable worker (p. 12). However, participatory art does not necessarily produce transformative outcomes; it can instead mask structural inequalities rather than resolve them. Artistic responses to social problems risk becoming instruments that obscure, rather than challenge, systemic inequities. The idea behind creative placemaking is for artists to act as more empowered change agents in their communities. This identity of artists as community practitioners has been little explored, even as the refrains of artists as 'activists' and artists as 'entrepreneurs' have become common. Through this study, I parse out and distinguish how artists enrolled in creative placemaking efforts, including creative placemaking training programs, see themselves as serving community development agendas, versus how they think about bringing about community-centered change.

Present Study

As summarized here, much literature has explored the discourse around arts and culture as a vehicle for city development, but there has been little published on artists' recognition or reflection of their roles as producers of these processes (Redaelli & Stevenson, 2022) and as agents of community change. Additionally, creative placemaking has faced several critiques, largely due to its implementation in practice, which manifests as inauthentic, top-down, exclusionary policies (Loh et al., 2024; Zitcer, 2020). Through this review of the literature, creative placemaking was traced and situated as a current logic for arts and culture investment, charting its theoretical underpinnings, guiding ethos, and historical legacy as an ethos for community art initiatives.

This study builds on these discourses by examining how artists themselves understand and navigate their role within creative city and creative placemaking processes. Rather than evaluating placemaking outcomes, the following analysis focuses on how artists interpret their participation in community development, particularly as they move between artistic, professional, and community-oriented forms of practice.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study–the questions that are asked, the interpretations of the data–is informed by the understandings that I, as the researcher, have brought to the project. These understandings constitute the conceptual frameworks that are guiding the research. First among these, artists' definitions of and meaning-making around community practice must be considered in light of neoliberal pressures to adopt an ethos of individualism. These understandings were Second, while artists may be constrained in their positions, their participation in creative placemaking reflects a kind of community development practice. Several disciplines have informed a broad field of community development; here, I think with the critical community practice framework as synthesized by Evans and colleagues (2014).

Critical Community Practice in Community Development

I utilize this framework to explain how artists exercise agency to build sustainable livelihoods for themselves and their communities. I utilize this model in particular because of how it seeks to marry theory and practice and how it views community change not as an individual pursuit, but a communal, collective process. It expands on concepts of community organizing, providing more concrete recommendations for practitioners and making it more

practical to be implemented in one's work. Articulated by Evans and colleagues (2014), critical community practice (CCP) is a framework of theoretical underpinnings and practical applications that practitioners and organizations can draw upon to develop a radical, transformative community practice. It is a critical praxis with "four interlocking concepts: critical consciousness, critical theorizing, critical action, and critical reflection." CCP engages the community as active agents of change to allow for a grassroots, empowered process of development (p. 5). It emerges from social work and community development literature on how practitioners can foster a critical practice in response to the consequences of neoliberalism.

This study employs two facets of the CCP framework I thought most relevant to the current analysis—critical reflection and critical action—to understand artists' meaning-making around community practice. First, critical action is the practical steps people take to create systemic change through collective action (Evans et al., 2014, p. 5). It is the meaningful participation and partnerships undertaken to enable communities to "use their power to bring about significant change in the conditions of their lives through their own actions" (p. 5). It is about challenging oppressive power structures through actions such as "community organizing, collaborative strategies, grassroots leadership development, and increasing the active engagement, ownership, and power of those most affected by the social conditions under consideration" (p. 5). Critical action, as employed in this study, is the concrete behavior people engage in when bringing about community change.

Critical action also requires navigating the constraints and contradictions of working within existing systems. Artists engaged in community development often operate within institutional frameworks, such as grant agreements, nonprofits, or municipal programs, that may

both enable and limit transformative work. As such, critical action involves negotiating these tensions and working within systems while also seeking ways to challenge, reframe, or resist them.

Second, critical reflection is the continual questioning of why you do what you do with a focus on how power shapes systems and behavior. This involves actively questioning underlying assumptions, dominant professional discourses, and the socio-political conditions that shape both problems and interventions. Drawing on critical theory, Evans et al. (2014) emphasize that critical reflection is not a private or purely cognitive exercise but a collective and dialogical process, occurring through engagement with others and within organizational contexts (pg. 6). It involves stepping back and carefully considering one's beliefs and practices in the context of historical and sociopolitical realities, asking not only what is being done, but whose interests are being served and who may be excluded or marginalized in the process.

In the context of this study, critical reflection is particularly important for understanding how artists interpret their roles within community development and community placemaking projects. It requires practitioners to examine how their work may be shaped by institutional pressures such as funding structures and policy priorities. This reflexive process also invites artists to consider how their positionalities—such as race, class, training, and access to resources—influence their relationships with collaborators. Practitioners exhibit reflexivity in thinking of how their positionalities and their work are situated in a landscape of institutional and systemic pressures.

Further, it is an awareness of not only their work as individuals, but also their work as a broader group of professionals, which, in this case, is artists. It involves questioning how artists,

as a professional group, are framed within dominant narratives of development—whether as creatives, cultural producers, or tools for capital accumulation—and how these framings align with or conflict with their lived experiences and values. In this sense, critical reflection becomes a tool for identifying tensions between artistic autonomy and instrumentalization.

The CCP framework will allow me to investigate how artists have developed and acted upon their awareness of systemic inequities and power dynamics. Though people may not view themselves as influential agents in their communities, the CCP model frames people as active forces working to shape their communities. CCP draws from Freire's (2000) radical praxis "wherein action, research, and theory are complexly intertwined, and embedded in a deep understanding of the experiences of those who are marginalized, oppressed, and dispossessed" (p. 2). Artists vary in how they resonate with viewing themselves as a change agent in the context of their creative community development work.

While artists are frequently framed in the creative placemaking literature as "change agents" (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010b; Duncombe, 2023), this study distinguishes between that formulation and the conception of the artist within critical community practice. In creative placemaking discourse, artists are often positioned as instrumental actors who contribute to community development outcomes such as economic revitalization, social cohesion, or place branding. This framing, while emphasizing the social value of artistic work, often situates artists within externally defined agendas shaped by policy, funding structures, and development priorities. In contrast, the CCP framework conceptualizes practitioners—including artists—not as instruments of pre-defined change, but as agents who develop critical awareness of structural inequities and engage in collective action to challenge and transform those conditions.

Ultimately, critical action is inseparable from critical reflection. It is informed by an awareness of power, inequity, and positionality, and in turn, generates new insights that shape future reflection. Within this study, critical action provides a lens for understanding how artists translate their awareness of systemic conditions into tangible practices that aim to transform those conditions in collaboration with their communities. In this way, artists who engage in community work can be more reflexive change agents than creative placemaking necessarily asks them to be.

METHODOLOGY

Study Setting

This study utilizes interviews done with participants in the 2017-2018 cohort of the Learning Lab program in Nashville, TN. The Learning Lab is an initiative started by the Center for Performance and Civic Practice (CPCP), which was established in 2012 with the mission of "capacity-building support at the intersection of art and change" (CPCP, n.d.) In collaboration with Metro Nashville Arts Commission, or "Metro Arts," and the Arts and Business Council of Greater Nashville (ABC) (Gupta, 2019).

Learning Lab was a professional development and training program based in Nashville designed to support artists in engaging with community-based and civic practice work (CPCP, n.d.; Gupta, 2019). Drawing from a legacy of creative placemaking, the program aimed to equip artists with skills to collaborate with municipal agencies, nonprofit organizations, and other community partners. They used workshops, mentorships, and project-based learning to introduce participants to frameworks for community engagement, partnership-building, and navigating

institutional relationships (Maravalli, 2018). The Learning Lab, therefore, positioned artists as not only creative professionals but contributors to a community development process, encouraging them to integrate their artistic practice with civic and social objectives.

The Learning Lab was funded through the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Our Town Grant ($75K) and funding through the Mayor's Office ($50K). The Our Town grant project was created to support "creative placemaking projects that integrate arts, culture, and design in efforts to advance local economic, physical, and other community-desired outcomes" (NEA, n.d.). From 2015 to 2019, Our Town Grants focused on "knowledge building grants," awarded to "arts service or design service organizations, community development membership organizations, and/or other national or regional membership, policy, or university-based organizations" (NEA, n.d.)

In the first cohort of the Learning Lab, 25 artists participated in the professional development program through "lectures, individual assessment exercises, group activities, and one-on-one coaching sessions" (Maravalli, 2018). In the second cohort, 12 Nashville-based artists were selected, as well as 11 community partners. Community partners came from government agencies, nonprofits, and other arts agencies. Learning Lab artists were individuals who had self-selected into the program. Participants had a wide array of artistic disciplines, including, but not limited to, sculptors, muralists, art historians, photographers, creative re-use, theater and performance art, vocalists, and mixed media.

The Learning Lab had two goals: "provide local artists with the training and experience necessary to apply for larger projects and commissions, and directly invest in art-led creative interventions that stabilize and strengthen neighborhoods" (Maravalli, 2018). It is a professional

development program to train artists in how to navigate partnerships towards goals of community development.

In a city such as Nashville, which has had a tumultuous past with the city's arts investment, some of the clear avenues for artists to support themselves are through partnerships with nonprofit organizations and with city entities to develop a community-engaged art project. Though the Learning Lab ran its course, opportunities for artists to engage in creative placemaking continue. For instance, Metro Arts still invokes "creative placemaking" in their mission and as the basis for their Thrive Grants (Metro Arts, 2025). These grants go towards projects like community workshop series, public art installations, and arts and culture festivals (Metro Arts, 2026).

Data Collection

The present study stems from a larger study of artists' participation in creative placemaking initiatives and training programs in Nashville, TN, conducted between 2016 and 2018 (Gupta, 2019). The original study included multiple methods of data collection, including participant observation of the Learning Lab training program and public arts and cultural events, analysis of municipal arts and cultural planning materials, and interviews with artists, creative placemaking partners, and arts administrators. The analyses conducted in the present study are based on one-on-one interviews conducted by the primary investigator of the original study and artists in the second cohort of the Learning Lab artist training program.

Interviews

Interviews with Learning Lab artists were conducted to explore how they interpret, experience, enact, and navigate their civic roles and agency in the city (Gupta, 2019). The initial

study PI utilized a semi-structured interview guide to balance focused inquiry with a conversational, informal style. This was done with the goal to "engage participants in reflection on their work — their trajectories, desires, and struggles" (Gupta, 2019, p. 71) and to "engage these artists in reflection about the environments in which they are learning about and doing public-engaged work—the partnership/program, community, urban, national or global—and how they relate to these contexts" (Gupta, 2019, pp. 71-72). While there were 12 artists who began the second cohort of the Learning Lab, eight participated in interviews for the study. Interviewees represented a range of artistic backgrounds (e.g., painters, curators, poets, journalists, mixed media artists). Interviews were one-on-one, lasting 30 minutes to an hour and 30 minutes, and at a location of the participant's choosing (coffee shop, studios, or homes).

Human Subjects Research

This study was reviewed and approved by the Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board (IRB #160981).

Analytic Approach

This study employed an abductive coding approach, involving an iterative movement between empirical data and existing theoretical frameworks. Rather than strictly applying predefined codes or generating codes solely from the data, the analysis was guided by a continuous dialogue between emerging patterns and relevant theory. Coding was conducted using a combined approach of inductive and deductive coding (Tavory & Timmermans, 2019; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012; van Hulst & Visser, 2025; Vila-Henninger et al., 2024). I employed an abductive approach because it pays particular attention to and accommodates

unexpected and theoretically anomalous findings. Specifically, I followed the abductive approach outlined by Vila-Henninger and collegues (2024).

For example, in the first round of coding, I reviewed the transcripts using an open coding approach. Analytical memos were used throughout the coding process to document emerging patterns, reflections, and shifts in interpretation. These memos played a key role in identifying tensions in the data—such as conflicting views on artists' roles and responsibilities—which guided subsequent rounds of coding and conceptual refinement.

Guided by this abductive coding approach, data analysis began with open coding of the interview transcripts. Through open coding, I identified broad themes related to artists' community practices—for example, distinctions between artistic collaborations with fellow artists and projects entered into with metro or institutional partners. I then labeled chunks of the interviews with descriptions of what the interviewee was discussing, while simultaneously developing notes on themes emerging across conversations. A theme was identified when similar ideas, tensions, or experiences appeared across multiple interviews, particularly when participants used comparable language or described parallel situations. For instance, what initially appeared as a general category of "community collaborations" became a more specific theme when I noticed that several participants expressed differing affective responses to this work—some describing enthusiasm and alignment with their values, and others expressing hesitation or discomfort. These recurring patterns across interviews led to the development of more refined codes, such as "hesitancy" and "enthusiasm," as well as distinctions between types of collaborations.

I began by labeling chunks of the interviews with a description of what the interviewee was talking about, while simultaneously developing notes on patterns emerging throughout the conversations. This process allowed me to generate initial codes grounded in the language and descriptions used by participants. Throughout the interviews, I noticed different forms of work being discussed by artists and arts administrators, including their personal artistic practice, their professional practices, and their community engagement practices. These categories were developed inductively to capture how participants were describing their work and how they were conceptualizing themselves within the Nashville context.

The study utilized an abductive approach in that I simultaneously engaged the data through elements of the critical community practice framework adapted from Evans and colleagues (2014), as well as conducted inductive coding. The choice to code for critical reflection and critical action came through several coding iterations and conversations with my advisor. These elements of the CCP framework were most relevant to what artists were discussing in their interviews.

After an initial round of coding, I began identifying instances of critical action and critical reflection within the transcripts. Because the data were reviewed multiple times, these concepts became guiding lenses throughout the coding process, shaping how patterns were identified and interpreted. The codebook used in the analysis can be found in the Appendix at the end of this thesis. Coding for specifically critical reflection and critical action allowed me to differentiate the types of community practices interviewees were engaging in for analytical purposes.

RESULTS

This study is guided by an inquiry into how artists enrolled in social and civic practice artist development programs define a community practice, and how they wrestle with these definitions in relation to their own values and ambitions. While existing literature often frames artists one-dimensionally as creative placemaking practitioners (Furtado & Payne, 2023; Genders, 2023; Markusen & Gadwa, 2010; Loh et al., 2024), the data I will describe reveal the varied and complex set of orientations artists bring to their community-engaged work. For the purposes of this study, orientations refer to the ways artists position themselves in relation to their work, communities, and institutions.

Although all interviewees had some experience with community-oriented work, the forms this engagement took varied. For some, community practice in the form of civic and social art might be central to their working identity, while for others, it was situational, peripheral, or approached with hesitation. This variability suggests that "community orientation" is not a singular mode of practice, but rather a spectrum of engagements shaped by artists' experiences, values, and navigations of structural conditions. While artists' definitions and expressions of a community-engaged arts practice do not fit into discrete categories—that is, they are not, as artists, one or the other—their reflections and their actions demonstrate three orientations or perspectives on artists' practices.

Interviews with Learning Lab participants reveal that participants do not cast themselves as just artists or just community developers, but rather, they are constantly navigating and negotiating their role across these contexts and in response to project needs. Different artists at different times, they may lean one way or another. What follows is a breakdown of the

approaches to community development work by artists. The first orientation, labeled 'professional orientation,' embraces the professional marriage between art and community development, an approach cultivated by the Metro Arts Learning Lab program. The next two orientations are characterized by a separation and distinction between art and community engagement—these include the artistic orientation and the community orientation. The following results explore the challenges that emerged from a professional orientation towards community development. In addition to addressing the challenges and pitfalls of the professional orientation, I also break down how artists are incorporating elements of the critical community practice framework in their community development practices.

Professional Orientation

The first working orientation that emerged was focused on the unique intermediary or partner role artists play within community practice. Artists' professional practices capture the ways in which interviewees translate their artistic and community-based work into forms legible within institutional and economic frameworks. In this context, artists frequently described themselves not only as creators but as entrepreneurs, contractors, and collaborators operating within a broader ecosystem of organizations, funders, and public agencies.

One participant spoke about the recent increase in her professional social and civic practice art, as opposed to her usual private, studio writing practice. In one such project, she was asked by a local metro government agency to facilitate ongoing community conversations about an affordable housing redevelopment project. She believes the city thought her uniquely capable for this role. Her reflection is as follows:

> I think they very specifically wanted artists to come in…just be able to kind of fill in that gap some and create a space where people could talk about whatever their

> ideas, issues, concerns, questions are about the project, and where they could also be heard…they sort of wanted a conduit…anybody who translates languages knows that you're making constant decisions about nuance that impact meaning and that type of thing. And so, with a project like that as an artist...I have some type of social or cultural stock that the entity does not have…So, if a community partner has a specific goal in mind, they need to accomplish their goal. That's fine. What I know as an artist is that we're going to accomplish so much more. My role, I feel like, was to keep it open where I could maybe say things to [the organization], and to the residents, that the other couldn't say to one another.

In the eyes of this organizational collaborator, her artistic practice in wordcraft and language, as a professional poet, gave her a unique set of skills to facilitate community conversations about this housing redevelopment project. While this artist was effective in her role as community liaison, she maintains suspicion of artists acting as brokers of development conversations, saying, "There are all kinds of ways to start conversations. You don't need an artist just to do that."

Also central to this orientation is the need to frame artistic practice in terms of value—particularly economic and institutional value. Artists emphasized the importance of developing a professional language to communicate their skills, reliability, and impact to potential partners. As one participant explained in reference to the Learning Lab, "I'm hoping it taught me the necessary language to walk into an organization now and sell myself as an artist." Similarly, another described how they can position their work across any community context: "I'm making the same argument as I would be making to the planning department here, that I have a specific, unique set of skills. I can work with anyone. I have experience engaging diverse communities to solve problems." In both cases, artistic practices are framed as a set of transferable, marketable competencies useful in community development collaborations.

As this orientation emerged, the language used to identify this approach reflected that of the Learning Lab and its mission. One participant directly cited creative placemaking as the kind of work she preferred to conduct, saying:

> I always was wanting more engagement…My social work training taught me some fundamentals that later gets called creative placemaking… You meet people where you are, right? You don't meet them where you want them to come to. You go where they are and you engage them where they are with what they have, and you look for assets… This is my social working, which is exactly the same thing you do in creative placemaking.

When speaking about the skills they would like to cultivate as a practitioner, they mentioned a distinct set of professional skills—resource evaluation, project management, communication across sectors—that extend beyond traditional artistic training. Programs such as the Learning Lab that build understandings and skills in partner engagement play a key role in cultivating these competencies, equipping artists with the tools to position themselves as viable stakeholders within community development and planning processes.

This orientation is characterized by strategic partnerships and collaborations with a targeted community, like that of creative placemaking. Community engagement in these cases was the extension of their artistic practice, rather than a distinct pursuit. Their artistic outlets were through socially and civically engaged projects. This orientation works within structured collaborations, where artists enter communities as professionals equipped with tools, methods, and deliverables.

For one participant, they seek out civic partnerships as their creative outlet. This person views their work as an artist as entering a new partnership to address a social problem and developing a collaborative solution. She describes one project as follows:

> I have three upcoming things. That’s one of them. That is totally in the civic house in that I have no ideas, he has no ideas, we are coming together, he's telling

> me what his needs are, I am doing research around what his needs are, engaging that community, then depending on what we get back, then we will co-create a project. It's not me coming up with an idea.

This artist expressed relief in finding an avenue of work that married all their interests. They did not see themselves wholly as a practicing artist and sought out professional opportunities for civically engaged art. This is the person who is comfortable entering into any community and bringing their professional and artistic skills to address community problems. They view their artistic practice, based in creative placemaking, as similar to a sort of "social work."

This professional orientation introduces a set of tensions. The process of "selling" oneself as an artist can conflict with participants' commitments to authenticity and artistic integrity, particularly when their work must be framed in terms that align with funders' or institutions' priorities. Additionally, the emphasis on professionalization can blur the boundaries between artistic, community, and administrative roles, contributing to the broader ambiguity that characterizes artists' positions within community development. Importantly, artists working with this professional orientation describe various levels of comfort in conducting social and civic practice art depending on the expectations and requirements they had.

Artistic Orientation

The next orientation identified emerged from how participants discussed their role as artists, specifically, their artistic practice, in relation to their community development work. All participants engaged in some form of creative practice, including painting, mixed-media installations, curating, podcasting, and other visual, performance, or interdisciplinary forms. In this orientation, they approach their work through a lens that prioritizes their artistic endeavors and their creative voice. Participants often reflected on their journeys toward understanding

themselves as career professionals, and made special mention of why they engage in their particular practice. They spoke of the activities they engaged in to further their careers and circulate their work, such as exhibiting in galleries or publishing written pieces, and how, in their process, they maintained an authentic, distinct, artistic voice throughout community collaborations. With this orientation, artists noted the limits of their artistic practice as a mode for community change. As one participant put it, "I do take action on things I believe in, but not so much directly through my art. I don't think my art can carry that much weight…I don't think that's what my poetry can do."

This code also allowed me to track the types of creative work each interviewee was engaged in and how they framed their artistic practice. For instance, one Learning Lab participant described a trajectory from street graffiti into a professional visual art career. After receiving his MFA, he now teaches at a local university and maintains a robust studio practice while also engaging in community collaborations. He described one project at a neighborhood community center as follows:

> I create a piece with the kids, so I use their silhouettes. We, I projected their bodies onto paper…Their bodies. Their silhouettes. Trace it out, and then I did a workshop them for two weeks. What does community mean to you? And then what do you aspire to be? I gave them a bunch of magazines, papers, pencils, paint, and we duked it out for like a month. Just painting. In the end, there's a beautiful body of works. Literally bodies of work. I traced them out, documented them, and now I'm in the process of adding my work to it.

While this project involved collaboration with a community partner, the artist described it primarily as an artistic process. His focus remained on the creative methods, materials, and outcomes, rather than on broader community development goals. As he describes it, artists are needed to "take things that are immaterial and make them… you need us to articulate emotions."

Among those leading with an artistic orientation, they exhibited resistance to being asked to serve as spokespersons or representatives of a community. For instance, when this same artist spoke about another collaboration, he expressed discomfort with being positioned as a spokesperson for a community.

He shared another project with a South Carolina community and recalled his response when he was asked to speak about their progress to local media:

> When we painted the mural, [we] were out, and just dealing with the people…there's a responsibility of, and I was from out of town, so I didn't know, but I was protected by these two guys who were in town. So when the media came, I was like, "Talk to them. I don't know this place. I'm just helping them. So I feel that way about, okay, I thought about it. So when I'm doing murals in Nashville, or in Tennessee, I'm at home. That gives me more of a role and agency to speak, in a way.

The artist is grappling with his role as an artist and community collaborator in how he speaks for the community. His deferral to the two local men reflects an understanding of his position as an outsider. He showed hesitance to represent the project, suggesting that expectations placed on artists can exceed their perceived professional capacity.

In addition to apprehension about acting as a community representative, this orientation was often accompanied by concerns about artistic integrity and authenticity. Participants often reflected on how their work communicated meaning and whether it remained true to their intentions, particularly when working in collaborative or public contexts. Regardless of whether the work was produced individually or with others, artists emphasized the importance of maintaining honesty in their creative process. As one participant explained, "I can't control what people experience, but I know that, as long as I'm honest… I can't worry about other people." In

this sense, an artist-first orientation suggests that their primary concern, even when engaged in community-based work, is the integrity of their personal artistic endeavors.

One participant sees this compromise in artistic quality as a larger issue, saying of social and civic practice art, "you risk alienating a lot of artists, and the quality of art that comes out of the city…we are privileging a very certain type of art that often does not stand the test of time."

At the same time, this artistic orientation exists in a delicate balance with other forms of practice. While it provides a foundation for creative voice and meaning-making, it can come into tension with the demands of community engagement. This tension highlights the challenges artists face in maintaining artistic integrity while navigating roles that extend beyond the studio and contributes to the broader ambiguity surrounding their position within community development.

Building upon the tension of artists representing a community, another participant directly problematizes the positioning of artists as community developers with the rise of civic and social practice art:

> It does sometimes feel like there's a charge of making the artist the cultural worker in the city, and kind of the janitor in a way. That's risky. Actually, it's a problem. It's not just risky. It's a problem...not all artists are trained or even interested in having a major social or civic component to their work. I'm seeing a lot of trends where funding is being directed towards interactive, social, civic, and for a lot of artists, that's really not where their work resides. ... And so, it can make it harder to exist in a city where all of the funding is prioritized in that type of work.

They are speaking to the discomfort felt when artists are asked to do too much in their social or civic practice collaborations. Artists might not have the necessary skills, such as social work or community organizing, to serve as brokers for community art projects.

This quote is also exhibiting one of the elements of critical community practice—critical reflection. Critical reflection was operationalized as careful consideration of one's practices, acknowledgment of historical, social, and political aspects of experiences and projects, sharing and exploring one's experiences with others, and showing an understanding of power relationships and sociopolitical realities.

This artist considers how their personal practice, and artists' general positionalities, are situated in the current development ecosystem. He maintains a suspicion of institutional collaborators, saying "you have to use them as a tool, and to fight every tooth and nail," while you maintain a "good reputation," "keep a good name, and do business right." He describes it as "double" and "triple consciousness." He demonstrates critical reflection in that this awareness circles back to inform his actions as an arts practitioner in community development. This artist speaks to artists' hesitancy to do more than their particular artistic craft and demonstrates an understanding of artists' positionality as community developers and the limits of their skillset to bring about community change.

Critical Practice as a Community Development Orientation

The final orientation is one that is chiefly concerned with community development as a community member. Artists embed their practice more firmly within communities, describing their motivations and actions in relation to broader publics—as activists, civic agents, or neighbors. Within this orientation, participants provided instances of speaking with critical reflection and engaging in critical action. This included discussions of their involvement in community issues, advocacy efforts, and participation in projects aimed at social or neighborhood change. In contrast to professional orientation, community engagement was not

always framed as an extension of professional artistic practice, such as in creative placemaking or social or civic practice art, but instead emerged from lived experience, proximity, and a sense of responsibility to a specific place or group.

In leading with a community-oriented mindset, participants exhibited both critical reflection and critical action. Critical action was operationalized as actions by interviewees geared towards social movement building and collective action. This could include things like community organizing, collaborative strategies, and grassroots leadership development, focused on creating outlets for social change and reorienting power towards community members. By coding for critical action, not just critical reflection, I could further distinguish artists who have a community practice not intertwined with their artistic practice, like in the case of social or civic practice art.

One example of a robust community-oriented practice comes from an interviewee who described their engagement as beginning not from an artistic position but from their role as a concerned neighbor. In response to unaddressed gun violence in her neighborhood, this artist organized her neighbors to begin thinking of ways they can improve neighborhood safety, showcasing critical reflection and critical action:

> I've collected so many stories and experiences from living in my neighborhood…I don't think the average person in Nashville has ever had to crouch on the floor with their newborn because they're shooting outside your house…We've been trying to figure out 'what do we do as neighbors?' So we started gathering neighbors in September for another very serious incident. And we just continued to meet...It's just highlighting...one, what we see as a challenge, and two, what are we gonna do about it? And the answer for me is always something. I don't know what it looks like, but we're gonna do something... I've learned that it's the ability to have both disability that builds momentum…It's a very small thing to get a group of neighbors together and pick up trash but again, connected neighbors and at the end of the day, it's like oh my gosh, we filled up this four-ton truck with

> couches, toilets and the trash will probably be back next week. But we did something. That we had a lot of power.

Her community practice is not defined through her artistic identity, but through civic participation and accountability. Her actions—convening neighbors, brainstorming solutions, and creating actionable next-steps—reflect what can be understood, through the lens of critical community practice (Evans et al., 2014), as both critical reflection and critical action. Her articulation of injustice demonstrates an awareness of systemic power dynamics, while her persistence in engaging local actors represents a form of critical action aimed at addressing those conditions.

She goes on to share the positive outcomes of her community organizing, including increased visibility from the mayor's office and support from the police:

> We got a lot of attention from the mayor's office and brown people…we've been able to have a line to the mayor's office, which goes to the police precinct. And the police precinct commander has adopted [an] initiative where he wants his officers to meet to [with] community members each week. And in the past ten days, I've heard three positive reports of positive interaction.

Other participants also demonstrated community advocacy work that did not intersect with their artistic practice. Within their community orientation, they engaged in collective action through door-knocking campaigns, emailing representatives, organizing neighbors, and other grassroots tactics. One participant finds "angry emails and phones," as well as outward expressions of gratitude when "things are going really well," to be an effective method of getting attention from local representatives. Her community orientation, separable from her artistic identity, aligned with and extended the critical action outlined by Evans and colleagues (2014).

This orientation reflects a more embedded and relational approach to community engagement, grounded in personal connection and a sense of responsibility to a specific place or

group. In contrast to emphasis on collaborative projects in the 'professional orientation' outlined above, expressions of a community orientation did not always bridge community development practice with artistic practice. Instead, their engagement stemmed from lived experience, proximity, and a perceived obligation to contribute to their communities. For these participants, confidence as community agents was less about professional capability and more about commitment and accountability. If the problem called for it, participants could draw upon their work as artists to benefit their community, but they realized it was not always applicable to the needs presented. Their work was often driven by a desire to serve, advocate, or support, regardless of whether it aligned neatly with their artistic or career trajectories.

DISCUSSION

Results reveal artists operating with diverse orientations to community development practice rather than a coherent set of practices. The interviews revealed two strong orientations among artists: their creative practice (i.e., painter, poet, curator) and their work as community members, neighbors, activists, and organizers. Within their artistic practice, they desire to communicate authentically and truthfully. Some artists expressed less of a desire to lead with community practice, prioritizing their work as career artists and expanding their creative voice. They seek opportunities to show in galleries or publish more work and to cultivate environments that support their artistic careers. While these artists discussed some forms of activism, or may have even exhibited critical reflection, their primary concern remained living and working as full-time professional artists.

In contrast, other artists leaned more heavily into their community orientation. Although they maintained a creative practice, their concerns as citizens centered on the care and cultivation of their communities, with consideration for how their art could drive community development, being secondary to community needs. In addition to critical reflection, they also engaged in critical action through things such as neighbor organizing, door-knocking, or emailing representatives. These artists valued their artistic practice as an outlet for creative expression but also demonstrated an awareness of the boundaries of that work as a vehicle for material change. Art can be used to change hearts and minds, but it may not be the most effective route for structural transformation.

Across interviews, participants expressed reservations about marrying their artistic practices with community development. There was reluctance to treat art as a one-size-fits-all solution to community problems, with some feeling ushered into a kind of social work practice of addressing social issues through creative output and acting as the city's "cultural janitors." This tension is shaped by broader structural pressures from funding and project opportunities. Artists risk being asked to be community representatives or social workers as their work becomes increasingly funneled through social and civic expectations outlined in the creative placemaking framework (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010b). As artists enter municipal collaborations, funding mechanisms tied to creative placemaking and programs like the Learning Lab train and position them for community-engaged work. As a result, people seeking professional arts opportunities are often steered into institutional partnerships that privilege social and civic practice.

Within this context, the "artist as change agent" narrative becomes oversimplified. Artists frequently reported feeling unprepared or constrained in social and civic roles, expressing skepticism about what can realistically be accomplished by community arts collaborations. Some questioned or resisted the expectation that they are responsible for social change. As one artist put it, they cannot "write a poem to end poverty or gentrification." While they may feel comfortable engaging in collaborative creative work, such as murals or workshops, they expressed hesitation when asked to take on roles as spokespersons, leaders, or therapists for communities they may not feel equipped to represent, or to use methodologies they do not think will address the needs at hand.

This hesitation is meaningful and should not be understood as a weakness. Rather, it reflects an awareness of the limits of artistic practice and of the artist's role within broader systems of power. Artists are questioning power and grappling with how to navigate complex relationships with organizations and communities. Many participants demonstrated an awareness of historical and systemic injustice, though they varied in the degree to which they acted upon this awareness. In this sense, hesitation can be understood as a form of critical reflection.

Their orientations, which include critical reflection and critical action, therefore, undermine some of the concerns of the creative city. Scholars Bishop (2012), McRobbie (2016), and Mould (2018) all problematize creative city endeavors that pervert artists into neoliberal entrepreneurs (Florida, 2002; 2012). Participants discussed the various creative placemaking projects or gigs they took to maintain a steady workflow, with one artist saying the problem is:

> the way artists make money…I'm going to focus on civic work, and you try to do four or five of those a year, and they drain you…and I don't know that you can do a civic project very well if you don't have a strong personal foundation with your artwork.

Artists, in trying to follow the funding mechanisms of publicly engaged art, risk setting aside their personal artistic practice for civic or social practice projects that may not even produce high-quality results. What is produced instead, as Bishop (2012) points out, are projects aimed at both artistic creation and social change, failing to accomplish their goals on both fronts. This quote is also directly speaking to artists exhibiting the model for precarious labor, working "project to project", and maybe even for inadequate pay (Bishop, 2012, p. 16).

The critical community practice (CCP) framework provides a useful lens for interpreting these dynamics. The findings suggest that while participants demonstrated elements of critical reflection, particularly in recognizing structural inequalities, there were variations in sustained critical action. This aligns with Evans et al. (2014), who argue that human service practices often remain focused on ameliorative interventions rather than transformative change. At the same time, the presence of critical reflection among participants indicates potential for more participatory and empowering approaches. CCP offers a framework through which artists can better understand and navigate the tensions they experience in social and civic collaborations.

Therefore, these findings suggest that role ambiguity among artists is structural, not personal. It is produced by funding systems, institutional expectations, and the broader political economy of the creative city. Creative placemaking initiatives continue to position artists as community developers, shaping both the opportunities available to them and the expectations placed upon their work. As a result, artists are being asked to do too much, taking on roles as creative practitioners, social workers, and community leaders. This mismatch between expectations and capacity highlights the pressures placed on artists within contemporary cultural policy frameworks.

At the same time, the most promising practices emerge from artists who are able to navigate between orientations. By maintaining a distinction between their artistic practice and their community engagement, these people are able to preserve their creative integrity while contributing meaningfully to community life. Rather than fully merging these roles, they develop strategies to move between them, suggesting that a more critical community-engaged arts practice may lie not in integration, but in the ability to hold and navigate these tensions.

The Future for Creative Placemaking

In Nashville, some clear avenues for artists to earn a living through art-making include partnerships with nonprofit organizations and city entities to develop community-engaged art projects. Metro Nashville Arts Commission still includes creative placemaking in its mission, stating they "strive to ensure that all Nashvillians have access to a creative life through community investments, artist and organizational training, public art and creative placemaking coordination and direct programs that involve residents in all forms of arts and culture" (n.d.). In the Nashville case, it is unlikely that funding agencies and partner organizations will completely abandon creative placemaking and their approach to arts and culture development in the community within the next couple of years, contrary to what Zitcer and Taylor (2026) might suggest. Therefore, perhaps cities, artists, and scholars can instead prioritize the reformist approach posited by Furtado and Payne (2023), keeping in mind the implications of this study when trying to improve creative placemaking efforts.

Though creative placemaking as a formalized community development strategy has diminished, and the Learning Lab program ran its course, opportunities for artists to engage in creative placemaking continue. For instance, the Tennessee Arts Commission still runs grant

programs designed to support arts projects that "broaden access to arts experiences, address community quality of life issues through the arts, or enhance the sustainability of asset-based cultural enterprises," and just awarded nearly 70 grant awards to artists and organizations for projects like art festivals, public installations, and workshops (2026). The Nashville Office of Arts & Culture (Metro Arts) has gone through multiple iterations of its Thrive project grants aimed at deepening community engagement with the arts (2025). Finally, the Arts and Business Council of Greater Nashville (ABC) maintains both a grant program for community arts and an ongoing training program cultivating artist entrepreneurship (n.d.).

Beyond these funding structures, the legacy of creative placemaking also persists in the language, expectations, and logics that shape artistic practice. Across these programs, artists are positioned as facilitators of community engagement, contributors to quality of life, and drivers of economic and social impact. This reflects a broader shift toward the professionalization of artists, the normalization of cross-sector collaboration, and the expectation that artists articulate their work in terms of measurable outcomes and community benefit. In this way, creative placemaking continues to operate not only as a funding model, but as a governing framework that shapes how artists understand their roles, structure their work, and engage with communities—maintaining a legacy closely tied to Florida's (2002) creative class theory and its emphasis on creativity as a driver of urban development.

Though creative placemaking has undergone a reckoning with a number of critiques for its contribution to gentrification, the overreliance on economic indicators, and the burdens placed on artists (Crisman 2022; Loh et al., 2024; Zitcer & Taylor, 2026), it is still being pushed as a

meaningful catalyst for localized economic development. As a result, artists are still feeling tensions between their creative practice and their role as professionalized community developers.

This is where we can return to the critical community practice model (Evans et al., 2014). In their words, CCP is best understood as "an orientation" towards one's professional practice (p. 7). They go on to say that "the core principles of this orientation, which include a focus on social justice, empowerment, and transforming social systems, can be applied across multiple disciplines in countless ways" (p. 7). Therefore, perhaps a way to move forward in creative placemaking and social or civic practice art is through the integration of CCP approaches by artists, scholars, policymakers/implementers, and funders.

Limitations of the Study and Future Directions

An important quality to remember about this study is its small sample size (n = 8), which restricts the generalizability of the findings and constrains the breadth and diversity of perspectives. Results, therefore, should be understood as context-specific insights rather than broadly applicable conclusions. However, this study is part of a larger research project, and its findings can be read in conversation with the broader dataset (Gupta, 2019). The present analysis focuses on participants from the second cohort of the Learning Lab, offering an examination of emerging patterns that may also appear in the larger study. An important avenue for future research will be to examine the extent to which these findings converge with or diverge from patterns identified across the full dataset.

In 2019, Gupta analyzed the first cohort of the Learning Lab. In it, the author highlights the tensions of artistic civic practice, felt and navigated at the individual level, as they are shaped and informed by collective or community processes. In it, she concludes that while artists are

both enabled and constrained by institutional and systemic forces, they can still find opportunities to leverage positions of agency, saying of artists:

> Through the navigation of their political subjectivities, they are creating conditions wherein civic actors can be complex people and engage in complex relationships–relationships that bring about critical reflection and action on institutional and systemic forces that shape the architectures of inequity affecting not just them, as artists, but urban denizens with whom they share civic desires for self-determination and self-development (p. 226).

Building upon these ideas of artists as embodied civic agents, this thesis contributes to the discourse on artists' collective subjectivities and the ways in which they go about their community development practice in relation to organizational and community collaborators. This study joins with Gupta (2019), therefore, to offer an interpretive lens on artists' community-engaged practices. .

Additionally, my positionality as a researcher and an artist further shaped the vantage point from which this analysis was conducted. As an insider to the field of community-engaged arts practice, my familiarity with the language, norms, and tensions of this work informed how I engaged with and interpreted the data. This perspective may have brought greater sensitivity to certain themes—particularly around artistic identity, community engagement, and the expectations placed on artists—while also carrying the possibility of privileging particular interpretations. Although I was not involved in the data collection process and therefore did not influence participant responses, my role in analyzing and interpreting the data remains situated. Rather than framing this solely as a limitation, it is important to acknowledge how this standpoint shaped the analytic process and the kinds of insights that emerged, underscoring the importance of ongoing reflexivity in qualitative research, which I addressed through continual meetings with my advisor and my reader of this thesis.

A further limitation relates to the theoretical framework guiding this analysis. While the Critical Community Practice (CCP) framework provided a useful lens for identifying elements of critical reflection and critical action in participants' accounts, it also shaped how the data were interpreted and what patterns were foregrounded. By centering CCP, this study emphasized questions of power, social justice, and transformation, which may have directed attention toward moments of hesitation, critique, and structural awareness. Alternative frameworks may have illuminated different dimensions of participants' experiences. For instance, Dokecki's (1992) work on reflective community practice places greater emphasis on dialogical processes, relational meaning-making, and the co-construction of knowledge in community settings. Engaging this perspective may have allowed for a more detailed analysis of how artists navigate relationships and negotiate meaning within collaborative contexts, rather than primarily focusing on their alignment with critical or transformative action. Rather than suggesting that one framework is more appropriate than another, this limitation highlights how theoretical choices shape the analytic lens and, consequently, the kinds of insights that emerge. Future research could build on this study by applying alternative or complementary frameworks to further explore the relational, dialogical, and practice-based dimensions of community-engaged artistic work.

CONCLUSION

This research sought to understand how artists conceptualize their work as community practitioners, and the findings reveal that artists define their community practice not as a singular or fixed mode of work, but as a fluid and contested orientation shaped by relationships and

context. They are navigating complex, constrained roles shaped by a larger system. The artists in this study occupy a far more ambivalent position than merely embodying the flexible and instrumentalized agent imagined in creative placemaking frameworks. Artists are not always enthusiastic drivers of community development, but rather individuals navigating competing demands and aspirations between their artistic integrity, organizational expectations, and community responsibility. The hesitation they express around community practice, rather than signaling a lack of capacity, reflects a form of critical awareness and an understanding of the limits of their role within broader structural conditions. Their individual community orientations are motivated by a combination of personal values, aspirations, and the practical realities of funding and professional survival.

This study contributes to existing literature by challenging reductive narratives of artists as community change agents and by foregrounding the ways artists themselves interpret, negotiate, and sometimes resist these expectations. By bringing critical community practice into conversation with creative placemaking and creative city frameworks, this research highlights the gap between critical reflection and the structural conditions necessary for critical action. In doing so, it offers a more nuanced understanding of artists' roles within contemporary community development.

Returning to the central stakes of this study, in a moment when creative placemaking as a formalized framework is receding, the work artists engage in within community practice risks being obscured. In the wake of the decline of creative placemaking, new alternatives for artists and their community practice are emerging (Zitcer & Taylor, 2026). Without careful attention to

how artists themselves understand and navigate their roles, their contributions risk being misunderstood, simplified, essentialized, or erased.

These findings carry important implications for practitioners and policymakers alike. Rather than continuing to position artists as instruments of community development, there is a need to better align expectations with artists' capacities, training, and desired forms of engagement. Supporting artists in maintaining distinctions between artistic and community practice, rather than collapsing them into a single role, may enable more sustainable and critically engaged forms of work. More broadly, this study suggests that fostering meaningful community-engaged arts practice requires attention not only to outcomes, but to the conditions under which artists are able to work critically, reflectively, and in genuine partnership with communities.

Returning to the inclusion of the CCP model, what started as an interpretive framework to understand and code the dataset began to offer a hopeful avenue to address the tensions uncovered in this study. Throughout this process, I became increasingly encouraged by artists who exhibited critical reflection and action, and I would like to highlight it as a useful source of practical recommendations for those engaged in community work.

If creative placemaking projects are going to continue to be a strategy for urban development, perhaps integrating more lessons from CCP can aid in the reformist approach to creative placemaking's pitfalls. Future research could integrate the perspectives of institutions and organizations to see the extent to which they demonstrate critical community practice. Further, subsequent analyses could integrate the remaining elements of CCP that I was unable to fit into the limited scope of this project, i.e., critical consciousness and critical theorizing.

Critical consciousness in particular could help to explain why some people engage in critical action in light of institutional and systemic barriers to community change.

By way of conclusion, I will attempt to provide some recommendations to actors involved in creative placemaking efforts. For artists, understanding and articulating their boundaries and limits on the kinds of work they can bring to community collaborations can proactively address feelings of being asked to do too much. Investing in advocacy not only for oneself, but also for other working artists can shape the expectations that organizational and community collaborators have.

For scholars investigating and interrogating creative placemaking—and arts and culture's role in urban development more broadly—consider focusing on artists' experiences of community projects. Investigate this aspect of community development in light of the tensions raised by participants in this study. Further, consider formulating and imagining alternative ways forward in the industry of arts and culture in the community.

Finally, for cultural policymakers, implementors, and funders, reflect on and invest in ways for people to engage in their artistic craft outside of social or civic practice art. Artists felt compelled to do this kind of work for the monetary incentives. For instance, investing in affordable housing and affordable workspaces for professional artists can free up time and resources for them to prioritize their studio practice, ultimately contributing to a more robust, diverse, and healthy local arts ecosystem.

Additionally, in light of some artists feeling like social workers in these collaborations, consider bringing in actual social workers or experts in community engagement. Alternatively, before making the decision to hire an artist to do community development, think about whether

other professionals could be better suited to do the work necessary. To cite one participant, you don't necessarily need an artist to start a community conversation.

Ultimately, this study argues for a shift in how artists are understood within community development—not as seamless agents of change, but as practitioners navigating complex, constrained, and negotiated roles. Recognizing and supporting this complexity is essential for imagining more equitable and meaningful futures for community-engaged arts practice. By understanding and tackling the tensions raised in this study, perhaps we can present a route forward to a more healthy and thriving arts ecosystem for artists and community members alike.

REFERENCES

Alsayel, A., De Jong, M., & Fransen, J. (2022). Can creative cities be inclusive too? How do Dubai, Amsterdam and Toronto navigate the tensions between creativity and inclusiveness in their adoption of city brands and policy initiatives? *Cities*, *128*, 103786. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2022.103786

ArtPlace America. (2020). *Artplace: 10 years*. Forecast Public Art. https://forecastpublicart.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/artplace_10years_fin_spreads.pdf

Arts and Business Council of Greater Nashville. (n.d.). *Fiscal sponsorship*. ABC Nashville. https://abcnashville.org/fiscal-sponsorship/

Ashley, A. J. (2015). Beyond the aesthetic: The historical pursuit of local arts economic development. *Journal of Planning History*, *14*(1), 38–61. https://doi.org/10.1177/1538513214541616

Bajestani, S. A., Stupples, P., & Chanse, V. (2024). The changing dynamics of the creative city: Toward an inclusive, participatory, and place-based cultural policy in Wellington, New Zealand. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2024.2345651

Bedoya, R. (2013). Placemaking and the politics of belonging and dis-belonging. *GIA Reader*, *24*(1). https://www.giarts.org/article/placemaking-and-politics-belonging-and-dis-belonging

Bishop, C. (2012). The social turn: Collaboration and its discontents. In F. Halsall, J. Jansen, & T. O'Connor (Eds.), *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (11-410). Verso. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503627253-018

Borrup, T., & Zitcer, A. (Eds.). (2024). *Democracy as creative practice: weaving a culture of community life.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003475996

Bröckling, Ulrich. (2015). *The entrepreneurial self: Fabricating a new type of subject*. SAGE Publications.

Brown, W. (2005). Three: Neoliberalism and liberal democracy. In *Edgework: Critical essays on knowledge and politics*. Princeton University Press.

Campbell, D. (2015). Metis, craft, civic mindedness: essential attributes of democratic citizenship in communities. *Community Development, 46*(3), 198-211, DOI: 10.1080/15575330.2015.1023819

Center For Performance and Civic Practice. (n.d.). *About*. CPCP. https://www.thecpcp.org/about

Center For Performance and Civic Practice. (n.d.). *CPCP's Learning Lab*. The CPCP. https://www.thecpcp.org/learning-lab

Crisman, J. J. (2022). Evaluating values in creative placemaking: The arts as community development in the NEA's Our Town program. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, *44*(4–5), 708–726. https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2021.1890607

Dokecki, P. R. (1992). On knowing the community of caring persons: A methodological basis for the reflective-generative practice of community psychology. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *20*(1), 26–35. https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6629(199201)20:1%253C26::AID-JCOP2290200105%253E3.0.CO;2-2

Duncombe, S. (2023). A theory of change for artistic activism. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *81*(2), 260–268. https://doi.org/10.1093/jaac/kpad003

Eisinger, P. (2000). The politics of bread and circuses: Building the city for the visitor class. *Urban Affairs Review*, *35*(3), 316–333.

Evans, G. (2009). Creative cities, creative spaces and urban policy. *Urban Studies*, *46*(5–6), 1003–1040. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098009103853

Evans, S. D., Kivell, N., Haarlammert, M., Malhotra, K., & Rosen, A. (2014). Critical community practice: An introduction to the special section. *Journal for Social Action in Counseling & Psychology*, *6*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.33043/JSACP.6.1.1-15

Florida, R. (2002). *The rise of the creative class: And how it's transforming work, leisure, community and everyday life*. Basic Books.

Florida, R. L. (2005). *Cities and the creative class*. (1st ed.). Routledge.

Florida, R. L (2012). *The rise of the creative class: Revisted*. (2nd ed.) Basic Books.

Freire, P. (2000). Pedagogy of the oppressed (30th Anniversary Edition). Continuum.

Furtado, L. S., & Payne, J. M. (2023). Inclusive creative placemaking through participatory mural design in Springfield (MA). *Journal of the American Planning Association*, *89*(3), 310–323. https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2022.2083008

Genders, A. (2022). Precarious work and creative placemaking: Freelance labour in Bristol. *Cultural Trends*, *31*(5), 433–447. https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2021.2009735

Gill, R., & Pratt, A. (2008). In the social factory?: Immaterial labour, Precariousness and cultural work. *Theory, Culture & Society, 25*(7–8), 1–30. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276408097794

Grodach, C., Foster, N., & Murdoch, J., III. (2014). Gentrification and the artistic dividend: The role of the arts in neighborhood change. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, *80*(1), 21–35.

Gupta, J. (2019). *Toward political community: Navigating civic conditions and civic positions in the creative economy*. Vanderbilt University.

Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press.

Kudla, D. (2024). Masking visible poverty through 'activation': Creative placemaking as a compassionate revanchist policy. *Social & Cultural Geography*, *25*(4), 562–581. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2023.2177717

Landry, C. (2000). *The creative city:* A toolkit for urban innovators. *Earthscan Publications Ltd.*

Landry, C., & Bianchini, F. (1995). *The creative city*. Demos.

Leslie, D., & Catungal, J. P. (2012). Social justice and the creative city: Class, gender and racial inequalities. *Geography Compass*, *6*(3), 111–122. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2011.00472.x

Loh, C. G., Ashley, A. J., Kim, R., Durham, L., & Bubb, K. (2024). Placemaking in practice: Municipal arts and cultural plans' approaches to placemaking and creative placemaking. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, *44*(3), 1679–1690. https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X221100503

Markusen, A. (2014). Creative cities: A 10-year research agenda. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, *36*(S2), 567–589. https://doi.org/10.1111/juaf.12146

Markusen, A. & Bedoya, R. (2017). *Race, and placekeeping: A reframing of the gentrification debate*. Working paper, Project on Regional and Industrial Economics.

Markusen, A., & Gadwa, A. (2010a). Arts and culture in urban or regional planning: A review and research agenda. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, *29*(3), 379–391. https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X09354380

Markusen, A., & Gadwa, A. (2010b). *Creative placemaking*. National Endowment for the Arts. https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/CreativePlacemaking-Paper.pdf

Markusen, A., & Gadwa Nicodemus, A. (2018). Creative placemaking: Reflections on a 21st-century American arts policy initiative. In A. McKeown & C. Courage (Eds.), *Creative Placemaking* (1st ed., pp. 9–27). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315104607-2

Markusen, A., & Schrock, G. (2006). The artistic dividend: Urban artistic specialisation and economic development implications. *Urban Studies*, *43*(10), 1661–1686. https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980600888478

Maravalli, V. (2018, August 16). Learning to listen: The transformative power of collaboration and Nashville's Learning Lab artist training program [Americans for the Arts]. *Public Art Network 2018 Year in Review*. https://www.americansforthearts.org/2019/05/15/learning-to-listen-the-transformative-power-of-collaboration-and-nashville's-learning-lab-artist

McGuigan, J. (2009). Doing a Florida thing: The creative class thesis and cultural policy. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, *15*(3), 291–300. https://doi.org/10.1080/10286630902763281

McLean, H. (2014). Digging into the creative city: A feminist critique. *Antipode*, *46*(3), 669–690. https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12078

McRobbie, A. (2016). *Be creative*. Polity Press.

Menger, P. M. (1999). Artistic labor markets and careers. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *25*(1), 541–574. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.25.1.541

Metro Arts Nashville Office of Arts + Culture (Metro Arts). (n.d.). *FY27 grant announcements*. Metro Nashville Arts Commission. https://www.metroartsnashville.gov

Metro Arts Nashville Office of Arts + Culture (Metro Arts). (2025). *Thrive project grant criteria & guidelines*. Metro Nashville Arts Commission. https://www.metroartsnashville.gov/_files/ugd/cc4e3f_a1c875f684594bb09f68eff62405c100.pdf

Metro Arts Nashville Office of Arts + Culture. (2026). *Metro Arts FY26 Thrive grant awards*. https://www.metroartsnashville.gov/_files/ugd/cc4e3f_adcb7ca0d0d0464498b0d5ce8b1945fb.pdf

Miao, J. T., & Phelps, N. A. (2024). Art for art's sake? Artists as partners in urban regeneration. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2024.2390902

Moss, I. D. (2012). *Creative placemaking has an outcomes problem*. Createquity. https://createquity.com/2012/05/creative-placemaking-has-an-outcomes-problem/

Mould, O. (2015). *Urban subversion and the creative city*. (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315757469

Mould, O. (2018). *Against creativity*. Verso.

National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). (n.d.). *Creative Placemaking*. https://www.arts.gov/impact/creative-placemaking

National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). (2021). *Our Town: A framework for understanding and measuring the National Endowment for the Arts' creative placemaking grants*

program. National Endowment for the Arts. https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/NEA-Our-Town-Resource-Guide-2.5.2021.pdf

Redaelli, E. (2016). Creative placemaking and the NEA: Unpacking a multi-level governance. *Policy Studies*, *37*(4), 387–402. https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2016.1157857

Redaelli, E., & Stevenson, D. (2022). Arts in the city: Debates in the Journal of Urban Affairs. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, *44*(4–5), 456–470. https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2021.1919020

Roberts, L., & Lowe, J. (2024). The spatial imaginaries of creative clusters: Examining the role of R&D programmes in creative placemaking. *Geoforum*, *154*, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2024.104066

Ruberto, D. A. (2025). Black citizen participation in urban development policies and creative placemaking practices in Wilmington, Delaware. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, *47*(2), 586–606. https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2023.2184694

Schaller, S. F., Howe, A., McKinney, C., & Shoenfeld, S. (2024). Making power visible: Business improvement districts and creative placemaking in Washington, DC. *Urban Studies*, *61*(14), 2835–2853. https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980231174991

Stern, M. J., & Pray, K. L. M. (2014). *Measuring the outcomes of creative placemaking*. 84–97.

Tavory, I., & Timmermans, S. (2019). Abductive analysis and grounded theory. In K. Charmaz & A. Bryant (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Current Developments in Grounded Theory*. SAGE Publications Ltd. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526436061

Tennessee Arts Commission. (2026). *Arts build communities*. https://tnartscommission.org/grants/arts-build-communities-grant/

Teresa, B. F., & Zitcer, A. (2022). The specter of the “art-less city”: Locating artists in Philadelphia’s creative economy. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, *44*(7), 999–1018. https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2020.1779008

Timmermans, S., & Tavory, I. (2012). Theory construction in qualitative research: From grounded theory to abductive analysis. *Sociological Theory*, *30*(3), 167–186. https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275112457914

van Hulst, M., & Visser, E. L. (2025). Abductive analysis in qualitative research. *Public Administration Review*, *85*(2), 567–580. https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13856

Vila-Henninger, L., Dupuy, C., Van Ingelgom, V., Caprioli, M., Teuber, F., Pennetreau, D., Bussi, M., & Le Gall, C. (2024). Abductive coding: Theory building and qualitative (re)analysis. *Sociological Methods & Research*, *53*(2), 968–1001. https://doi.org/10.1177/00491241211067508

Vazquez, L. (2012). *Creative placemaking: Integrating community, cultural and economic development*. The National Consortium for Creative Placemaking.

Yang, X., & Chang, T. C. (2025). Rural idyll in a global creative city: Gentrification, cultural governance and creative placemaking. *Urban Geography*, *46*(3), 548–567. https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2024.2387935

Zitcer, A. (2020). Making up creative placemaking. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, *40*(3), 278–288. https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X18773424

Zitcer, A., & Taylor, J. K. (2026). A eulogy for creative placemaking. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2026.2615287

Zukin, S. (1995). *The culture of cities*. Wiley-Blackwell.

APPENDIX

Code Book

RQ	Applicable Codes	Code Definitions	Code Example
How do artists define their role in community development?	Artistic Identity (inductive)	Talking about and labeling themselves as artists; describing themselves as someone who is making/producing art	*"That's the first time I started calling myself a painter. A visual artist. If I would say painter, people thought I meant house painter. It's a different, and that's okay too, but it just ... Yeah, the language around what you do here, like, I also had to change like the way that I communicated what I did, that's less an exciting thing about all the new stuff now* *"I define myself as a working artist. I'm trained primarily in literary arts poetry, but I'm also practicing in visual art and some social practice and civic practice art"*

	Professional Identity (inductive)	Talking about career advancement, professionalization, entrepreneurship of their occupation	*"That to make new opportunities for yourself, you have to make more relationships and you can't just exchange a business card"*
	Community member identity (inductive)	Talking about themselves as activists, as civic agents, or as community members	*My job is to do justice, lord mercy and a lot of hope. So at the end of the day, I have to go to bed at night. I have to be able to sleep. I have to know that I did the right thing. If I don't have peace about something then it's not right. It's just not right… I have to stand up. I don't know how not to. I just have this internal unrest. If I'm not being tranquil so yeah.*
How do the roles artists define align with or extend critical community practice?	Artistic medium/practices (inductive)	Artist discusses their artistic practice (visual [sculpture, painting, collage, etc], audio storytelling [podcasts], journalism [art criticism], poetry, music, performance, curation, etc.)	*"I was just painting, and I was painting, I was painting a face, and just painting a person that has deceased"*
	Community work/practices (inductive)	Collaborations with Metro Arts, personal civic actions, commissioned projects, and	*"I'm gonna send you an angry email and I'm gonna send it to Oliver, who is the*

		facilitations/workshops, attending public meetings	*director of Libraries and he's like, yeah send it. Like he needs to know that people care. And so, that's been my tactic."* *"I have to go through so many committees, or critiques by groups of people. Those groups of people, they all think differently, great. But they also sometimes think they, they group think"*
	Critical reflection (CCP) (deductive)	Careful consideration of their practices, acknowledging historical, social, and political aspects of experiences and projects, sharing and exploring their experiences with others; showing an understanding of power relationships and sociopolitical realities	*"I'm not afraid of any medium, or any media. But I think now it's like intention and honesty because, yeah. I'm just in an honest stage, so I will do more research on things before I touch them. For example, the basketballs and all that, that I make. The history of the object tells me everything I need to do"* *"I think that that's really important in any social change,*

			is to be willing to assess ... admit that something's not working and throw it out and start something new, and also to take feedback from other people, which is ... I don't know this for sure, but I think that that's something that artists and writers, especially those of us who are overeducated, have to learn to do in MFA programs. It's all about critique
	Critical action (CCP) (deductive)	Actions by interviewees geared towards social movement building and collective action; community organizing, collaborative strategies, and grassroots leadership development; focused on creating outlets for social change and reorienting power towards community members	*"So what are we gonna do about it? And just kind of had a discussion on how we could pull our resources and get to be done and there was connection formed with [inaudible] Nashville and [inaudible], seems like they might be going to schools together to talk about bicycle safety"* *"the vice mayor. And the Office of Neighborhoods and I believe because -- my*

			arguments are this is what's happening, this isn't what's happening. What are you going to do about it? And I'm gonna write you back in two weeks. What're you gonna do about it? And I'm not going away. I'm not gonna get tired.

Signature: David Carlone
David Carlone (Apr 27, 2026 09:27:06 CDT)

Email: david.carlone@vanderbilt.edu

Signature: Jyoti Gupta
Jyoti Gupta (Apr 27, 2026 08:48:46 CDT)

Email: jyoti.gupta@vanderbilt.edu

Signature:

Email: nicole.allen@vanderbilt.edu