Repaving the Creative City: Interview with Jennifer Cole, Executive Director of Metro Nashville Arts Commission

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Nashville is a fast changing place. But the growth that this city has witnessed in the last five years looks much different than in previous decades. New Nashville has enjoyed much outside media attention recently, not just as a destination for music professionals and tourists, but as a place where musicians, artists, and makers of all kinds can rub elbows with fashion, design, tech, and academic professionals. This kind of change owes much to what city scholars identify as “Creative Class” planning and policy trends (Shaw, 2014). Indeed, Nashville has embraced creativity, but some policy leaders like Metro Arts Commission Director Jennifer Cole are paving new pathways to the creative city, which appear refreshingly more creative than classist.

Sammy Shaw: When did you come to Metro Arts?

Jennifer Cole: I came to Metro Arts in January of 2010. I think that what I bring to Metro Arts isn’t a fine arts background but a community engagement background.

SS: How has MNAC changed since you took the helm?

JC: I think the largest thing that has changed is quite simple-- it is a re-framing of what we do and why we do it. Rather than administering “grants” and “public art,” we [now] exist to help all citizens participate in a creative life -- thank you Bill Ivey. MNAC [now] sees the result of their work as catalytic versus administrative. That also means a different way of approaching the work as a collaborator and facilitator in the community versus a passive organization.

SS: You mentioned Bill Ivey. How influential has the former chair of the National Endowment for the Arts been in the process?

JC: Theoretically, very influential. Bill’s work, particularly around the “expressive life” concept has been a foundation for me and our arts commission. Arts commissions were formed around the country [1960’s-early 1980’s] to formalize and cement funding and resources for major cultural providers (museums, symphonies, operas, ballets), large institutions that focused on “subscribers” and mainly generating Western art. Bill’s idea that all human beings desire to create and will do so wherever they are, as artists and amateurs is incredibly different. From a public policy perspective it begs the entire “arts commission” system nationwide to reexamine why it exists and to what end? Is our raison d’etre creating conditions where individuals can be creative in their communities or facilitating the work of large institutions?

SS: What makes Nashville a creative city in your terms?

JC: Nashville has a high concentration of people who earn their living creating. You only need to look at the Tennessee Craft Fair or Porter Flea or any art crawl to understand that full-time creatives spawn a larger culture of participation in the arts. The other thing unique about our city...
is that songwriting is part of our DNA. That very process is one of the most collaborative in the arts. It requires artist, arranger, producer, singer; it forces inter-dependency. That bleeds over into how we view arts—you see many makers collaborating across genre, supporting the arts scene and each other’s careers. I don’t see this level of pure open source support happening at the same level in other communities.

SS: In the past we’ve talked about the idea of the Creative Class as a sort of narrow economic development model, which at best recognizes that current economic conditions award creativity, and at worst caters only to the amenity concerns of a very privileged type of citizen. But you suggested that creativity doesn’t have to lead only to economic development.

JC: I think we have to define the larger impact of creativity. Creative jobs will always be a smaller segment of the economic picture of Nashville than service or healthcare jobs. Framing the importance of creativity by only talking about one touch point does a disservice to the role of arts and artists. We create as human beings; it is part of what makes us tick. We must define how creativity and participation in it defines neighborhoods, creates livability and adds to our overall emotional intelligence as people. Art and arts policy leaders must stop framing their work in an economic only context; it simply doesn’t tell the story of why people create and why we should support that calling. There is a reason why every society in the world creates art. It isn’t just a commercial venture it is a human one.

SS: Creativity for you has a lot to do with artistic expression, and richness of social and cultural experience, which is probably the way most of us relate to the term. But I can imagine that “creative class” discourse still dominates in arts policy discussions. How do you relate to, or distance yourself from that discussion?

JC: This is a million dollar question for the policy wonk. At some level I feel compelled to play into the semantic world of “creative class” as it has become a term that most decision makers understand and want to tap into. Basically, using the language is unavoidable but I try hard to push those I work with away from some key pitfalls.

For example, we have to we have to stop talking about “creatives” as if they are some sort of alien population we are trying to resettle in our urban areas. This frame implies there are no indigenous creative people in the community and implies that what makes “creative” happy and productive is somehow strangely different from what makes others happy and productive.

Creative is simply an adjective that describes the good, product or service someone generates. Artists care about good schools and safe streets and job opportunities just like other people. We don’t have to seek some El Dorado of creative people—some hidden trove—we need to nurture those who are here and treat them as whole people. We need to invest in things that matter like housing and affordable production space and educational opportunities that support a person over the arc of their career. I also find the more you can create space for artists and makers to be part of policy conversations then they are more authentic. I would say we are very strategically trying to understand growth interests and create space for artists and other creators to be part of those decisions through policy and practice. Sometimes I say I’m an artist translator and I’ve learned to speak economic development, planning, and zoning. I can also speak gallery/theater and studio.
Unfortunately, modern cities don’t leave a lot of space to influence policy for those that don’t speak the language of city making. Sometimes the best I can do isn’t to run from “creative class” but to actually make sure the “creative class” is present when we make decisions about their future.

SS: Nashville is already “Music City.” Why does Nashville also need to be a “creative city”?

JC: Nashville already is a creative city. It has been since its founding. Music is the creative export that has the longest history and tradition and has become part of identity. Any time a city draws artists of one genre, it draws those of others. Paris after WWII, Harlem in the 1920’s. Nashville just is embracing that we can be diverse and excellent and internationally compelling in a variety of areas… I don’t often meet a musician who just does music. They write, they compose, they sing, they paint, sometimes they build furniture. Creativity is multi-dimensional and so are cities.

Reference