



public art resource center

Grassroots Growth of Creative Cultures: Programming Public Art for Rural Areas

by Erika Nelson



About the Americans for the Arts Public Art Resource Center

The Americans for the Arts Public Art Resource Center (PARC) was launched in June 2017 to serve the expanding field of public artists, administrators, advocates of public art, and field partners as they develop projects and programs in their communities. As an online portal, the Public Art Resource Center also allows individuals to find resources and tools that suit their work and interests.

As part of this project, Americans for the Arts is publishing a series of essays to explore ongoing and current trends that impact public art professionals, artists, field partners, and community members.

The essays in this series include topics like developing public art in rural, mid-sized, and urban communities, caring for public art collections in times of natural disaster, and the intersection of public art and arts education.

This essay series is just one resource available through the Americans for the Arts Public Resource Center. Visit www.AmericansForTheArts.org/PARC today to explore more.

About this Essay

Interest in having public art in communities has continued to grow throughout the country, specifically in rural areas. As growth continues, it is important for communities to have a basic understanding of planning for public art. As rural areas have their own unique needs, it is important to dive into these aspects as they relate to public art in rural communities. This essay was written as a means to provide an outlook of the current understandings of what make planning and implement public art in rural areas unique.

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A local family investigate Chris Lutter's *Boots* installation during the very first Farm/Art Dtour, a component of Wormfarm Institute's annual Fermentation Fest. Image courtesy Wormfarm Institute.



Grassroots Growth of Creative Cultures: Programming Public Art for Rural Areas

Introduction

Public art in rural areas takes many forms, but the best examples result from a natural, grassroots growth based on intrinsic qualities of that particular place and people. Rural areas are often regarded as an underserved population, and the artists and arts institutions and organizations who serve these areas are assumed to not have much impact on a national conversation about public art. As the country becomes increasingly interconnected, geographic 'place' is no longer a limiting factor in building a creative life. How is this increased attention to a decentralized life reflected in current art policy? How does the conversation need to change within policy-making institutions? While the conversations about rural arts, sustainability, and access aren't new, the impact of those conversations are becoming more evident and relevant—ushering in an age of interest and rural renewal.

In this essay, we illustrate three case studies of rural arts initiatives that enhance the assets native to their region, exploring cross-sector partnerships and innovative ways of thinking about and growing their own creative culture. The case studies were selected as starting points for investigation and examples of modes of thought, not as blanket models to be applied without regard to the local cultures' assets, needs, and individual makeup. As with agriculture, each creative culture thrives when it's planted in fertile soil, within a hospitable zone, and nourished and sustained through practices appropriate for the climate in which it grows.

Defining Rural

Where, exactly, is *rural*? Rural, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, “...encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area.” While other data-driven organizations, like The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and Federal Office of Rural Health Policy, break the definition down into population and density zones in an attempt to construct a hard number to define ‘rural,’ there’s still a tendency to look at rural as anything not urban—the outlying regions left over after defining urban zones. For example, OMB uses three designations: Metropolitan, Micropolitan, or Neither.¹

Is this how we think about rural—only in relation to urban—continually being defined not as something, but as something it is not? When case study participants were asked to define rural, nuances started to emerge. Some stick by official definitions, while others expand the definition to include a more philosophical exploration of self-determination. Savannah Barrett, Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange Coordinator, elaborates: “...people should decide for themselves what rural means to them. A lot of people who identify as ‘rural’ don’t live there. They may be a generation removed, but still feel most at home in rural settings. That diaspora is amplified when people feel marginalized by the demographic of definition. Rural identity [isn’t] compromised by living in the city.”

Why Rural Matters

When asking a group of people through social media, ‘Why does rural matter?’ the initial reaction from both urban and rural residents is often “Because that’s where the food comes from,” but in delving beyond the (erroneous) assumption that most rural communities are comprised of farmers and farmland, there emerged deeper, passionate insights, some idealized, and some bursting the bubble of that bucolic ideal:

- Without rural there would be no urban! –CVD
- It’s the beauty that lies between the urban. A place where life and the people in it are real. –JL
- People grow food everywhere... I have met just as many arrogant, ignorant, mean, unfriendly, snobbish, and untrustworthy people in rural places as I have suburban and urban. Same for lovely, connected, kind, giving people in all places. Rural is different because of a different awareness you have when you live in a rural place for a while—just as urban has another sort of awareness. It means not having a store on every corner. Being aware of sirens headed toward a neighbor’s place, how much feed, food, milk, and gas you have on hand. How to take care of a few things on your own—flat tires, no electricity, pump goes out. For some it means how to mend

¹ The U.S. Census Bureau defines urban areas as 50,000 or more people, and Urban Clusters as 2,500 to 50,000 people, regardless of county lines. The Office of Management and Budget labels counties as a whole, designating: Metropolitan (core area of 50,000 or more), Micropolitan (urban core of at least 10,000), or Neither, with Rural comprised of Micropolitan or Neither. The Federal Office of Rural Health Policy (FORHP) notes that the Census definition classifies quite a bit of suburban area as rural, while the OMB definition includes rural areas in Metropolitan counties, “...including, for example, the Grand Canyon which is located in a Metro county. Consequently, one could argue that the Census Bureau standard includes an overcount of the rural population whereas the OMB standard represents an undercount.” The FORHP has applied an additional set of designations to OMB labels, identifying rural tracts within Metropolitan counties, with Rural designations containing approximately 57 million people, about 18% of the population and 84% of the area of the United States.

Dave Loewenstein's bold, simple mural in downtown Lucas Kansas remains open to interpretation, encouraging people to add their own voice to the conversation. Image credit Erika Nelson.



a fence, catch a stray cow or horse, but for many in rural communities it doesn't mean those things anymore. It does mean space to see the world and the people in it in a unique way. Urban people can be aware of their world and the people in it too, but maybe in a different way and for different reasons. But the scarcity of some things in the rural world does give its people an opportunity to see their world in a unique way. – KVC

- Rural matters because people choose to live and love here. Rural matters because even if it's the middle of nowhere, it actually might be the middle of it all. – SE
- In the American psyche we still want there to be a place to explore, to have adventure, to demonstrate self-reliance, to test oneself. Wilderness and the great rural are what we have left for that need. – KVC

Why does rural matter? Because people live here.

Defining Public Art

For the purposes of this essay, we'll be using a very basic definition of public art as artwork of any kind that is free and accessible to the public. While some definitions indicate that public art needs to be planned and executed with the intention of being staged in the public realm, some of the case studies include work that exists in a gray area between public and private intention, but find themselves solidly existing within, having influence on, and being influenced by the community in which they exist. For example, communities that house artists often benefit from the spill-over of creativity or embellished environments that are in no way a part of a public art program or art-making institution. Studio spaces, built environments, and artist-driven exterior embellishments sometimes spur additional program-based public art initiatives, but the case studies illustrate the array of influential rural art, existing inside and outside of traditional definitions.

Also in this essay, the terms 'public art' and 'art' may be used interchangeably, and may often mean art that builds community, and reference both permanent and temporary projects. Anyone who has ever lived in a place with a population less than 2,500 people knows that almost everything rural is public. Are you working in your yard

priming canvases for Bonnaroo? You're process is now considered "public" by a rural definition because visual access to your work—and local chatter—makes it public.

Donna Neuwirth, co-founder of Wormfarm Institute, frames its work as creating art in public. "We are able to recognize opportunities as they arise, without definition. I think what we're doing is a gateway to thinking more broadly about what public art is. The label itself still seems urban, and up to one person or entity deciding, not growing from community. Rural public art circumvents the industry built around public art, and parallels getting out of the gallery and museum system." This sentiment reflects ever-increasing voices of those actively working to build and strengthen creative communities from within, where they are. Communities where creativity is embedded, not placed on top of a population, search for a balance between creative placemaking (a term in danger of becoming synonymous with commercial development and displacement) and creative placekeeping (honoring the populations that build creative communities).

Why Public Art in Rural Matters

Perhaps the question should be: "Why should we care about public art in rural areas?" Public art in rural places matters for exactly the same reasons public art in other places matters. We should care about public art in rural places because the life of people growing, making, innovating, caretaking, and living in rural places should be an enriched life, or at the very least, with access to cultural enrichment.

The Association for Public Art's definition of public art includes an important phrase: "Public art is a reflection of how we see the world—the artist's response to our time and place combined with our own sense of who we are." Public art in rural places gives a unique snapshot, a specific story, that can only grow in and be of that place, and can express feelings or desires not able to be articulated in any other way.

Public art in rural areas might not fit the mold in another way. Many resources (grants, information) focus on building a way to monetize the arts, or capitalize on a region because of its artiness (cultural tourism). While this is incredibly handy, and reflects current dialogue about commodification, gentrification, and the role of creative placemaking, it doesn't fully address the issue of rural and art. What about the rural artists who don't want to open a gallery, but want to build a working studio? Not a place to produce things for sale in that space, but a workshop, a place to think and explore and create, for commissioned work elsewhere? The town in which the artist resides isn't gaining an attraction, or a business to sell to tourists, but they are gaining a creative component that adds to the economy in the same way a manufacturer would. Does public art, does rural art have to be monetized to count? Or, can it exist, outside of a market or a value-added assessment? While case studies of organizations, people, and places can address that question, the studies exhibit not blanket answers, but ways of thinking that can lead to individualized, community-specific answers.



Exchange network members from Louisville and Hindman look out over Eastern Kentucky from Pine Mountain. Image credit Savannah Barrett.

RUX 2016 Design. Image courtesy Art of the Rural.



Case Study #1

KENTUCKY RURAL-URBAN EXCHANGE

Mission

Rural-Urban Exchange Mission Statement: Together, we are creating opportunities for Kentuckians to cultivate relationships across divides in order to build a more unified and equitable Commonwealth for all.

Rural-Urban Exchange Vision: We believe that by acknowledging our complex inheritance of historical divides and abundant assets, Kentuckians can work together to transform the present into an inclusive and equitable future.

History

Stemming from conversations between Savannah Barrett (Art of the Rural) and Josh May (Appalshop) during the Art of the Rural Year of the Rural Arts residency at Appalshop, the Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange grew from a shared recognition of the historic divide across Kentucky's physical and cultural landscapes. Grounded in the belief that people are more likely to do hard work together when they have meaningful experiences in one another's communities and are invested in their relationship to one another, the Exchange was launched in 2014 by partner organizations Art of the Rural and Appalshop to build a statewide network of community innovators integrating the arts, agriculture, and small business in partnership strategies that address a shared social and economic future.

Appalshop is a long-standing collector and disseminator of Appalachian culture, producing original films, video, theater, music and spoken-word recordings, radio,

photography, multimedia, and books. With its online archive, the culture specific to the region finds a national audience. Art of the Rural is a collaborative organization with a mission to help build the field of the rural arts and shape new narratives on rural culture and community through online resources informing real world actions, feeding back into an interconnected digital world of resource and connection building.

Identifying splits, real and perceived, geographic and economic, the idea for a facilitated set of collaborations emerges as a direct, relational-based way to start unifying the diverse populations that all call the Commonwealth of Kentucky home. “We believe ‘region’ is a relational term. So when we talk about Kentucky as a region, we’re talking about a shared cultural and historical experience based on relationship—to one another and to place—and the Exchange aims to highlight and expand those relationships.”

In the first two years, the Exchange connected leaders from the coalfields of Appalachia to the cities of Louisville, Lexington, and Covington to the river towns of southwestern Kentucky. In 2016, exchanges occurred in Paducah, Harlan County, and Lexington, with planning and programming evolving year to year as information gleaned from previous convenings accumulated and informed and shaped the process. As with most grassroots growth of creative communities, the road is built as you go, with a goal in mind, but not necessarily a set, specific path.

Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange is a partnership-rich movement, reflecting the non-centered nature of online collaboration made physical. By not limiting partnerships, Rural-Urban Exchange also sets no limits on the numbers of cohorts that can be involved, can be affected, and thereby infected by an ever-increasing network of people that are excited, involved, and are a part of a sharing economy.

The partnership between Art of the Rural and Appalshop illustrates a transition embracing inter-generational learning and honoring of the past (Appalshop was founded in 1969, while Art of the Rural began in 2012) while forging new methods of collaboration that mirrors a younger approach to placemaking. One of the core questions that led to the partnership, “Where are you from?,” became a concern, a split, that didn’t align with the current generation. This led Josh and Savanna to the vision that would become Rural-Urban Exchange (RUX)—that economics and policies catalyzed migration all over the state, opening opportunities for people to feel more aligned in a common vision, without regard to demographics. This shift in demographics was prominent as Josh and Savannah (28 and 30 at the time) were witnessing a generational transition from founders of a respected institution into a new model of working, with a core staff now under the age 35.

“This is a part of the reason the Exchange has worked really well, as it’s articulating a model that is deeply intergenerational, but led by the new. We’ve been looking at RUX as an extended model of creative placemaking, not defining regions by boundaries, but by connections. A network conjoined by arbitrary lines, not boundaries, and an examination of how culture flows through the boundaries.”



RUX Square Dance at Pine Mountain Settlement School. Image credit Sarah Schmitt.



RUX Showcase at Connect at Bernheim. Image credit Nathan Blake Lynn.

RUX at Americana in Louisville. Art making Mapping RuralUrban Connections. Image credit Aron Conaway.



Region of Focus

The Exchange based its work on a traditional split of the Commonwealth into five geographic regions, using that split designation as a tool to foster an increased view of Kentucky not as a collection of separate regions, but to unify them into one collective entity. The Commonwealth of Kentucky has tremendous human, natural, and cultural resources. We are rich in opportunity, but historically, real and imagined barriers between regions in the state have prevented these resources from being developed equitably. There are strong cultural associations with five regions throughout the state which rarely acknowledge their shared social and economic futures. The most significant of these historic cultural divides takes place along the borders between rural and urban Kentucky, which are essentially dependent on and decidedly ambivalent toward one another.

The first exchange (an in-person meeting) focused on rural Whitesburg and urban Louisville, with a second exchange expanding to include Paducah. Participants were selected based on their work, and were exemplars of individuals working to better the future of rural in their own chosen fields. With the success of the first exchange, the second year developed more partnerships, focusing on new regions, with partners outside of the original participants' spheres of influence.

“The success of the first exchanges necessitated a shift to regional partners instead of individual partners, and we found that having an institution as a partner is important. While individuals bring the passion, it’s a drain on their individual social capital, requiring them to pull all of the strings at their disposal to make an event, an exchange, come about. With institutions, we were able to expand our audiences, and now have an open application for participants; widening the field to people we were not personally familiar with, growing the network.”

Resources

Along the way, the expanding network also focused on defining the mission, establishing a core set of values that reinforce the overall conversations and modes of interaction. An emphasis on collaborative, not competitive practice, and equitable exchange of resources infuse the developing partnerships and now statewide conversation. This inclusive method of sharing enhances all, rather than depleting resources, again informing the sharing economy.

Making sure there's an equitable exchange of resources goes back to the founding principles of the partnering entities. In addition to physical resources (from traditionally extracted mineral, timber, and coal to capital, space, or population), the exchange is designed to identify the abundances of cultural resources (from traditional folkways to current thought innovation). "We have what we need already, in county, or in a network. There's a long Kentucky history of extraction of resources, but our relationships build on reciprocity, not extraction. Recognizing that they're both equal."

The partnerships are also developing new, cross-discipline resources, a collective community-built set of shared information. As of yet, there isn't a vehicle for dissemination of these developing resources, but RUX as a catalyst is looking for ways to not just facilitate the conversations leading up to resource development, but building a way for wider communities to access those resources.

To date, RUX has operated independent of the grantmaking system (aside from early support from the Kentucky Arts Council), relying on partnering organizations and stakeholders for capital investment. "They [Kentucky Arts Council] provided a large investment early on, enabling us to scale the model up, as well as tech support from one individual, who now serves on the RUX steering committee. They were essential at the early stage, and their continued knowledge-based resources have been incredible."

Barrett admits that the funding model needs to change. "We have become less stubborn in thinking about how RUX seeks funds. We may need to be more flexible in translating the work into more creative fundraising, but we need a few years of understanding the relationships that we've built and the results of those relationships to be able to translate the work into more traditional funding conversations."

Outcomes

In an Art of the Rural blog post introducing RUX, Savannah Barnett and Josh May outline their goals:

"At a time of significant regional economic transition, we have an unprecedented and critical opportunity to make the case for community-based arts as a driving force in local economic development. The idea behind the Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange was to bring together a diverse group of our state's most innovative young leaders to build shared knowledge and collaborative power. Together, we can provide a unified platform to actualize new models of community-driven development throughout the state."



Members of RUX gather in the shade at Castlewood Park in Lexington, KY to make plans for future collaboration across the state. Image credit Izzy Broomfield.

According to 2016 stats, RUX has: 75 participants representing 21 businesses, 18 nonprofits, and 5 universities all representing 16 counties across Kentucky, leveraging investments totaling \$157,040 from participants (49%), partners (32%), and private sources (19%).

Growing from an initial RUX in 2014 of 34 individuals exploring 17 partnerships, the Rural Urban Exchange has not only built its originally envisioned network, but it has built a model being emulated by economic development directors in multiple sectors. More traditional models for economic development are now looking for exchanges between regions based on the work of RUX, a beneficial byproduct of a grassroots model growing into a statewide constellation network.

But it's not just about the numbers and the investments. The underlying goal of all the entities involved is the creation of connections—real connections, between real people—creating an invested interest in community-built resources. For example: Paducah and Harlan County, two representative participants of RUX, are 10 hours apart by car. More than two-thirds of the participants had never been to the other part of the state, had never experienced what their exchange partners took for granted. The personal connections didn't just create potentially economically beneficial partnerships, but forged personal bonds that create investment in a partner's community. Bonds that are a gateway into experiencing a foreign place as an insider, a personal tour of favorite sites, favorite places, favorite foods—all leading to personal transformation from 'other' or 'visitor' to honored guest, friend, partner. The exchanges become access points for a broader experience.

Future

For its next step, RUX is looking at what it has built, and how to sustain it for the future health of the whole Commonwealth. With a now statewide steering committee, the scope of the organization has grown beyond the initial capacity. Lessons learned along the way point to a re-evaluation of funding partnerships and opportunities, as RUX continues to have a positive impact on the communities of Kentucky.

The Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange is the state's most promising model for self-investment in shared economic viability and cultural heritage. The model has been recognized by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Kentucky Arts Council, and RUX has been invited to present its work at a dozen conferences, including Grantmakers in the Arts. RUX has proven its concept: it can improve the economies, communities, and collective sense of self by connecting networks and sharing resources across the state. The Exchange has succeeded for three full program years without grant support.

One of the things that makes it difficult for fundraising, according to Savannah, is the non-outcomes-oriented nature of facilitating partnerships—of being a catalyst. “Some established institutions, when presented with the goals and work of RUX, just don't get it. They want to hear the concrete outcomes. That's not valued the most within RUX, so there has been a struggle in translating the value of transformation of individuals to something quantifiable.” That's one of the needs in a translation of arts policy in the new arena of community-based projects that are not based on economic numbers, but cultural health, preservation, and expansion. Developing a cultural quantification metric could be one solution, albeit more of a philosophical task, but building in an openness to growing the unquantifiable as a thing of value would better serve the initiatives and organizations operating outside of an institutional complex.

“At a time of significant regional economic transition, we have an unprecedented and critical opportunity to make the case for community-based arts as a driving force in local economic development. The idea behind the Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange was to bring together a diverse group of our state's most innovative young leaders to build shared knowledge and collaborative power. Together, we can provide a unified platform to actualize new models of community-driven development throughout the state.”

Savannah Bennett and Josh May, Rural Urban Exchange



Field Notes along the DTour route educate participants as to the specific regions, resources, and economies along the way. Image courtesy Wormfarm Institute.

Karl Unnasch transforms an agricultural implement for the Farm/Art Dtour with illuminated stained glass panels in *Ruminant (The Grand Masticator)*. Image credit Aaron Dysart.

Case Study #2

WORMFARM INSTITUTE, FERMENTATION FEST, AND FARM/ART DTour IN WISCONSIN

Mission Statement/Summary:

Just as the word culture is embedded in agriculture, so is cultural expression itself deeply embedded within our landscapes and our ways of deriving our livings from it. We believe the emotional power of the arts brings to the sustainability conversation the complexity and context the subject requires. For thousands of years, farmers in cultures around the world interwove dance, music, and art through rituals of planting and the harvest in celebration of the land and those who care for it. Through a contemporary approach and within this timeless context, we continue that tradition.

Dedicated to integrating culture and agriculture, the Wormfarm Institute is an evolving laboratory of the arts and ecology and fertile ground for creative work. Planting a seed, cultivating, reaping what you sow...both farmer and artist have these activities in common.

History

In 1998, Jay Salinas coined the term CULTURESHED: (kul'cher-shed) n. 1. A geographic region irrigated by streams of local talent and fed by deep pools of human and natural history. 2. An area nourished by what is cultivated locally. 3. The efforts of writers, performers, visual artists, scholars, farmers and chefs who contribute to a vital and diverse local culture.

From this recognition of place in terms of its resources, not limited to tangibles, a new dream sprouted in Wisconsin. An organization was formed, based in rural Wisconsin, celebrating the rich histories enhanced and celebrated through organically grown ini-

tatives. In 2000, Jay Salinas and Donna Neuwirth created the nonprofit Wormfarm, inspired by a quote from Charles Darwin’s book, *The Formation of Vegetable Mold through the Action of Worms*, “Every grain of soil has passed at least once through the gut of an earthworm.”

Envisioned as a laboratory based in the culture of place, they started with a residency program, utilizing traditionally agricultural architecture as artist and poet spaces, growing organic crops and exploring local foodways and growth cycles. The exploration led Donna and Jay into new ideas of where art could take place while exploring the links between urban and rural communities within and beyond the food chain. Interdisciplinary collaboration led to creative reinterpretations, integrating culture and agriculture.

Establishing a gallery space in downtown Reedsburg, the early years were experiments in introducing creative practice into the region. Experimentation and inclusion led to partnerships, but with a cautious participation from the community at large. What is expected of visitors to a gallery? How do you approach art—is it a business? A store? Just a place to look, or to participate? Fine art and curiosities as a label eased some neighbors into feeling welcomed in the space, with tweaking of the ideas and connections and programs sought to further shorten the distance between community interest and community involvement.

The turning point came in 2010, when Wormfarm Institute hosted *Key Ingredients: America by Food*, a Museum on Main Street / Smithsonian Institution traveling exhibit. Regional partners were invited to present their own traditions and foodways as supplemental exhibits, with a rash of locally sourced demonstrations, classes, and explorations of the culture of food bridging the gap between local and national. The resulting locally produced Fermentation Fest became the seed that turned the tide from an examination of a culture to an examination explored within, of, and celebrating the Sauk County cultureshed. Through the *Key Ingredients* exhibit, local citizens and partners embraced the creative reinterpretation and growth, leading to an annual celebration that engages the entire county.

Fermentation Fest – A Live Culture Convergence is an annual celebration of live culture in all its forms, from dance to yogurt, poetry to sauerkraut. Fermentation Fest brings together farmers, chefs, artists, poets and performers in the beautiful working lands of Sauk County, WI for nine days of tastings, demonstrations, cooking classes, art events, performances, food carts, and more.

Partnering with local landowners and businesses throughout Sauk County, the event selects a 50-mile route exploring the byways, highways, and backroads, and produces a nine-day event along the DTour. Set in advance, the route leads DTourists through small towns and open pastures, past family and corporate farms, with performances, site-specific installations, and food stops along the way.

In 2015, 20,000 people traveled the 50-mile self-guided DTour through working farm land punctuated by temporary art installations, pasture performances, educational Field Notes, local food vendors, and roadside poetry. “The DTour is a multi-sensory, leisurely,



Kominy-Tractor celebrates the art of stacking wood, while embracing and engulfing a symbol of Rural culture. Artist Heath Matysek-Snyder. Image credit Katrin Talbot.



Opera singer Diane Schoff engages in a Pasture Performance, where any place could be a stage, and any time could be show time. Image credit Celeste Nelms.

Monday is Wash Day is Brenda Baker's celebration of an undervalued part of rural life while drawing attention to its environmental beauty. Image credit Eric Bailie.



educational meander,” Neuwirth said. In past years, DTourists have come across giant straw animals leaping over fences, glowing corn cribs, crocheted leaves engulfing a farmhouse, and a mini circus wagon and sideshow encampment.

Participants include artists, artisans, performers, poets, food producers, and town boosters, showcasing the best of their culture to a (sometimes overwhelming) set of visitors, some exploring Sauk County and rural culture for the first time, some finding hidden gems in their own backyard.

Region of Focus

Sauk County, WI hosts the DTour, with the 50-mile route bringing visitors through a series of connected small towns and townships. To engage multiple communities, the route is shifted every three years to include new roads, new landowners, and new partnerships, but remains within the boundaries of Sauk County. While the focus of the route is local, the impact is much more global.

Landowners host installations, food stands, and pasture performances produced by artists from across the United States, brought in to develop site-specific reactions to the unique culture of their host place. These partnerships foster a global connection, facilitated by the local. Visiting artists establish relationships with landowners to develop their vision, and become a part of the fabric of the Festival, and by extension, part of the local community.

Fermentation Fest Components

In an effort to engage live culture in all its forms, the components of Fermentation Fest are as diverse as the possible definitions of live culture.

- **Classes** – From traditional sauerkraut recipes to hot sauces, from chocolate to coffee, beer and wine, from yogurt to sourdough bread, over one-third of what we

consume is fermented. Fermentation Fest features authors, chefs, bakers, scientists, chocolatiers, brew masters, and cheese makers, offering 40 classes and lectures that celebrate the abundance and transformation of fermentation.

- **Roadside Culture Stands** – Artist-built mobile farm stands vend fresh local produce, as well as the work of regional artists, while directing visitors to other cultural happenings. They come together at existing food-and-farming events in a caravan or “Food Chain,” creating a vibrant marketplace of food, art, and ideas.
- **Art Installations** – Site responsive installations in farm fields by artists from across the country explore the connection between land and people.
- **Pasture Performances** – Music in the company of cows, operas performed from a hay wagon, dancers activating trees and hayfields, special concerts in both traditional and repurposed spaces feature (D)compositions by composers, poets, and musicians throughout the route.
- **Field Notes and PassWords** – Signage detailing the agricultural history of the region on the DTour route, with roadside poetry in the format of Burma-shave signage which responds to the landscape.
- **Rogue Installations** – Art and exhibits produced by landowners, community groups, and townspeople pop up along the route during FermentationFest, as a direct response to the activation of the community.

The coordination of all of these activities is based on intensive collaboration and planning, tied together by a focus on the land, the people, and the embedded resources.

Resources

In addition to the massive staff and volunteer resources tapped during the production of the event, the Sauk County cultureshed provides a bounty of tangibles and intangibles. Landowners volunteer the use of their sites, work with invited commissioned artists to develop concepts, and sometimes space and equipment to actualize the often-laborious tasks of producing responsive large-scale artworks. The time resources, the land resources, the borrowing of equipment and last-minute panicked call for help is a natural resource common in tight-knit farming communities, traded and expended and as valued as any commodity.

Through sharing their resources, the farmer/artist partnerships lead to stories of the land, the hosts, the caretakers. Those providing space for the installations, farm forms, and performances each have unique stories of how they steward the land. Farm operations hosting the DTour feature: small and large dairy and beef, both organic and conventional, grain, woodlots, wetland conservation, diverse Amish farms, vegetable crops, and retired farmers focusing on wildlife habitat restoration.

A majority of the land mass in this country is rural—it contains all our natural resources on which urban centers depend. We are not served by seeing urban and rural as separate. Rather we all, to one extent or another, live along an interdependent rural/urban continuum. A healthier approach would be to consider watersheds, food sheds, and culturesheds as assets that comprise a rich region.



Brian Sobaski's *Too Much Pig* depicts the wild invasive swine species encroaching on rural Wisconsin. Image credit Katrin Talbot.

The Baraboo Range Preservation Association brings attention to invasive plant species through direct action and artistic intervention, as illustrated in *An Axe to Grind*. Image courtesy Wormfarm Institute.



Local residents whether farmers or not, find that visitors are in awe of the beauty of the land and value the work that farmers do to feed them. Contextualizing these transactions and putting a face on both producer and consumer benefits both. The Farm/Art DTour brings all these assets together.

In 2016, Wormfarm hosted its sixth year of the Fermentation Fest, and some frank evaluation of resource needs from Executive Director Donna Neuwirth. “Management resources for an event of this scale are lacking in rural communities. How do the catalysts, the innovators, continue the work? We patch together, we cope with the shortfalls, we spread ourselves out, necessitating a time to reflect and gather afterwards, evaluate how we can break the event down, parse it out, bring in a team to help with the details shouldered by staff and volunteers. We need to gauge our bandwidth.”

Outcomes

As the Fermentation Fest grew, partnerships never before realized have emerged and strengthened across sectors. In securing permissions from landowners along the route for potential art installation sites, organizers met and cultivated relationships not typically associated with an arts event. Artists touring the route and meeting farmers, dairy operators, and building owners continued expanding the conversation to inform their installations, projects designed to tell the story of the land, the building, the places being explored. The translation of the familiar for the local population facilitated a renewal of thought about what, exactly, their resources mean to themselves, to their region, and to outsiders.

Non-arts businesses discovered the economic impact possible through the exploration of art and culture. Not only do most of the commissioned DTour installation artists tend to source building materials locally, but events focused on local food producers and retailers, with roadside culture stands providing retail space for small and home-based producers along the route. Both the stakeholders and event participants fueled local economies while stimulating thought about the active cultures specific to the region.

Fermentation Fest helped bridge divides by bringing together partners that hadn't yet had an overlap or a reason to interact.

The proof of the action, once underway, spoke louder than the foretelling of outcomes, a quirk especially prevalent in Midwestern culture: translating the action of art into something universal, and especially valued in a work-oriented society enabled a response to the dedication of artists, pursuing a dedicated vision, ending in a transformative result. "Small towns move slowly, and initially they were unprepared for the number of people that came their way. I think they needed to see it rather than believe what we were predicting." While landowners and townspeople along each DTour route were initially skeptical of the interest outsiders would have in exploring Sauk County during the festival, organizers saw an annual visitation growth of 4,000 per year for the first four years, with 20,000 people traveling the route in 2015 and an estimated 25,000 in 2016.

On a national level, the work of Wormfarm has inspired other communities to address their own challenges through utilization of their own resources, cultivating their own culturesheds. A groundswell of organizations, think tanks, doers, and catalysts are sharing their voices, from Rural Culture Summits to online communities, sharing resources focused on rural vitality to changes in policy language. In repeating the stories that emerge from the interactions, policymakers are starting to listen and starting to incorporate culture as a key component to creating healthy communities.

Future

"In the seventh year, the land rests." After six intensive years, Fermentation Fest is continuing, but paring down and shifting the DTour component to a biennial event. Neuwirth explains the need to re-evaluate the scope of Fermentation Fest and its rapid growth beyond expectations: "We're taking a step back, to move forward." Wormfarm Institute employs a small dedicated staff, relying on a massive amount of personal capital from volunteers and stakeholders to make the event a success, with the DTour component demanding the most. Assessing the sustainability of Fermentation Fest before it becomes unwieldy seems the best way to ensure the event doesn't tax the resources of the community beyond their capacity.

Community meetings follow each festival, with input from community members, stakeholders, and organizers, illustrating the deep network that has grown from an intensive, integrated series of programs. "All of these relationships are evolving and now that there is a history and considerable interest and momentum, the event will need to further evolve with more shared leadership." With this pause, Wormfarm Institute takes a chance—examining what has worked, what needs attention, and how to grow the next batch of cultureshed-based celebrations.

"Wormfarm Institute has ever so gently—with a great deal of artistic vision, business acumen and perseverance—brought about long lasting changes in regional views about the role of the arts in stimulating our rural economy. I contribute annually because I've come to trust Wormfarm's ability to make arts and agriculture partnerships flourish."

—Judy Spring, Baraboo WI



Guest artist Fred Whitman carves a figure into local Post Rock limestone fencepost on the outskirts of Lucas. Image courtesy Grassroots Art Center.

Lucas' Welcome sign reflects the artistic traditions embedded in this town of 400. Image credit Erika Nelson.



Case Study #3

LUCAS, KANSAS

History

Lucas is a farming community of 400 people nestled in the Smoky Hills region of Kansas, just 11 miles south of the geodetic center of the contiguous United States. Established May 27, 1887, Lucas has a long track record of creative eccentricity. The town founders and early settlers held philosophical and political debates and enjoyed a 13-piece community band which boasted a violinist affiliated with the Boston Conservatory of Music. The most enduring piece of public expression is the internationally known folk art environment, S.P. Dinsmoor's *Garden of Eden*. Started in 1907, Dinsmoor created a series of concrete structures illustrating the story of the *Garden of Eden* and Populist Party politics in a sprawling dimensional illustration that still inspires tourists and scholars today. The three-story structures stand as a testament to a strength of character that runs through the people of Lucas.

After the *Garden of Eden*, in the late 1920s, Roy and Clara Miller started an outdoor roadside environment featuring replicas of national landmarks like Pikes Peak and the Royal Gorge, mixed in with models of local historic buildings. Created of concrete, stone, timber, and other everyday materials, it was open to the public and featured picnic facilities for tourists and townspeople alike. In the 1940s, Ed Root started embellishing his farmstead with glass-studded concrete ornaments, eventually creating hundreds of pieces. Science fiction writer Don Wilcox called Lucas home, reading the rough drafts of his stories to his daughter (the local librarian) before sending them off to be published in *Fantastic Adventures and Amazing Stories* throughout the '40s and '50s. From 1940 until the late '80s, local school teacher Florence Deeble started

a ‘rock garden’ in her backyard which grew into three-dimensional concrete postcard scenes of her favorite places, later evolving into tableaus illustrating the history of the town that eventually filled her modest yard.

Most of these makers would hesitate to call what they are doing ‘art,’ nor would they call themselves artists. Florence Deeble was fond of saying, “I’m not making art, that’s something you do in school...” while assembling yet another sculpted representation of something she held dear. That sentiment runs throughout town still—everyday people do creative things because they want to. Often put out in their yard, or screwed to the side of their building, or on display in their business window, most of Lucas feels free to creatively express themselves, but without a label.

Entities

Currently, there are the usual entities one finds in any small town—the City Council, Chamber of Commerce, Lions Club, Volunteer Fire and Ambulance. One major manufacturer employs much of the town and some of the outlying region, with the bulk of business being independently owned and intergenerational. A community theater serves as a cinema and community exhibition space, with programs ranging from weekly blockbuster movies to conference speakers. Completely volunteer-run, the theater expanded to include dressing rooms, a digital conference room, and support for live performances. The above-mentioned *Garden of Eden* recently transitioned from a for-profit tourist attraction to a nonprofit entity after a recent restoration to expand the cultural content the organization offers. The Lucas Arts and Humanities Council formed in part to create a museum focusing on self-taught art, called the Grassroots Art Center, which has expanded the appreciation of untrained art practitioners with exhibitions and workshops. The Lucas Arts and Humanities Council also spearheaded a recent building project, responding to a community poll about what Lucas needed next—a public restroom. As Lucas isn’t a typical town, the public restroom turned into an art environment as well, designed in the shape of a giant toilet, with mosaic elements throughout the interior and exterior Bowl Plaza.

Key people overlap, with any one person serving on two, sometimes three or more boards in addition to full or part-time work in the businesses that remain in town. As is the case in many small communities, few entities exist without an overlap. It also means that the few people who are constantly involved in multiple organizations, cultural or civic, end up making many of the decisions across sectors. Good or bad, it’s the reality of small communities that are adamantly active.

Russell County, multiple regional tourism coalitions, state grassroots tourism, and art networks are all Lucas partners, as that small, slowly changing core of Lucasites recognized early on that there is something unique, something intangible, that people want to see, to experience, something they don’t yet know they’ve been missing, and Lucas has it.

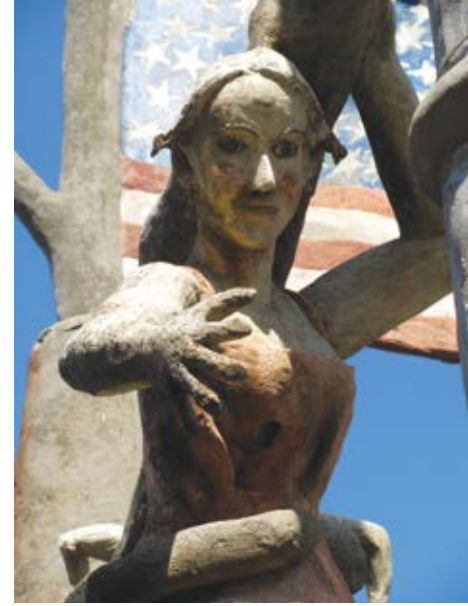
Art Sites

- **S.P. Dinsmoor's *Garden of Eden*** – Built between 1907 and 1928 and operated by S.P. as both a tourist attraction and a teaching tool, after his death in 1932 the site was run by Dinsmoor's second wife until the 1940s, was then used as a rental property, and then abandoned in the early 1950s. A local booster club decided to clean up the overgrown property for a city-wide celebration in the late 1970s, revealing the sculptures that had been left to recede into the foliage. With local interest re-growing, the site was purchased by a local hardware store owner. His wife insisted that they restore the environment, which was done with the tools and knowledge available. The couple ran it as a tourist attraction until the mid-1980s, when they decided to retire. A regional group purchased the property, and continued its maintenance for the next 22 years, writing articles and documenting art sites throughout the Midwest in an effort to promote examples of self-taught art. In 2010, Kohler Foundation acquired the property, invested the necessary funds to fully restore the environment, top to bottom, and then gifted the site to a new nonprofit entity, Friends of S.P. Dinsmoor's *Garden of Eden* (established 2009), now charged with its caretaking.



Roy and Clara Miller created their stone and concrete park environment for the enjoyment of locals and travelers alike. Image courtesy Friends of S.P. Dinsmoor's *Garden of Eden*.

- **Roy and Clara Miller's Park** – Built on their property at the edge of town, the sculptures were mainly completed between 1920 and the mid-1960s, and popular as a gathering site for townsmen throughout the Great Depression. In 1969, the site was sold at auction to settle the estate. As the townspeople didn't think the sculptures could be moved, no one bid to keep the site. The sculptures were sold to a developer in a neighboring town, and moved. From 1970 through 2011, the sculptures sat in the back lot of a reproduction frontier town, remaining after the attraction's eventual decline, closing, and abandonment. In 2012, local catalysts worked with the property owner, regional partners, and city to facilitate the donation of the sculptures back to Lucas, with the Kohler Foundation once again stepping in to provide the restoration and building of a new park site to house the sculptures. The site was then gifted to the Friends of the *Garden of Eden* for future care.
- **Florence Deeble's Rock Garden** – Built in the back yard of her home, Florence Deeble started constructing her site in the late 1930s, continuing to add elements through the late 1990s. Up until her death in 1999, she led groups of people through her yard, explaining the sculptures and the local history depicted. The property was gifted by her family to the Grassroots Art Center, charged with maintaining the site.
- **Grassroots Art Center** – Established in 1991, citizens of Lucas banded together to form the Lucas Arts and Humanities Council in an effort to save and house a collection of sculptures by regional artist and legend Inez Marshall, whose sculptures were sold to a collector after her death in 1984. A building was acquired and designated the Grassroots Art Center, collecting and displaying self-taught art. Through support from state and federal arts agencies, the GAC has initiated several large-scale art programs, including the creation of a limestone courtyard, a series of large-scale sculptural installations, and in 2012, Bowl Plaza, a mosaic-covered, toilet-shaped public restroom.



These sites and the initiatives to save them have been largely due to individual drive, supported by the community. Sometimes, community support lags behind the initial push, but with a collection of people who proceed with projects despite the lack of up-front support, Lucas has managed to build and retain a saturation of self-built worlds, sculpture parks, and public spaces.

The aforementioned art sites make up the core of Lucas' creative expression, with their histories reflecting the ebb and flow of interest and value placed on the arts. Rosslyn Schultz, director of the Grassroots Art Center, believes "...that 85% of the town thought we were crazy for starting an art center. Now 20-plus years later with tour buses rolling into town for arts-related tourism, I think the community realizes the importance of the arts and economic impact on the community."

The rise of interest in self-taught, visionary, and folk art parallels the interest renewed within Lucas' borders in the 1970s, while the recent tide of cultural tourism has added a new facet to the role these public works play in the town itself.

Resources

To keep going, Lucas has tapped various resources through the years. Often, individuals or volunteers lead building projects utilizing local labor, investment, and sustaining work, but grantwriting and foundation support has augmented the resources within the community. When the Grassroots Art Center was forming, the team assuming ownership of the *Garden of Eden* stepped in and taught the director some of the basics of grantwriting. This led to a partnership between the Grassroots Art Center and the Kansas Arts Commission for much of its early development, as well as the development of several additional nonprofits formed in the community.

Lucas' oldest art environment, S.P. Dinsmoor's *Garden of Eden*, was one of the first self-built artistic environments to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Image credit Rita Sharp.

Dinsmoor's sculptural figures combine in a political narrative, illustrating Farmer's Alliance politics at the turn of the last century. Image credit Erika Nelson.

Florence Deeble pauses in her backyard environment, with her dimensional postcard scene depicting Mount Rushmore in the background. Image credit Jon Blumb.



In 2011, the Kansas Arts Commission was officially abolished through an executive order from Governor Brownback, leaving many small rural arts organizations without access to the grants and support formerly offered. The Kansas Arts Commission had developed a set of granting options specific to rural places with easy application processes, smaller amounts, and faster turnaround than traditional grants. With this development, arts organizations across the state scrambled to find other sources, but few opportunities catered to the needs specific to small, volunteer-run arts organizations.

Another resource flowing through Lucas as a direct result of the saturation of art environments are the tourists, scholars, visiting artists, and wanderers drawn in by the sites. Half of the sites are run as revenue-generating tourist attractions, but visitors more importantly assure a continual flow of new ideas, new eyes, and new possibilities. Sometimes the visitors become residents, most often they become friends. This keeps Lucas on the wider map of places one must see, as well as an active participant in the expanded conversations involving site-specific art environments, self-built worlds, preservation, tourism, and economic development.

Peculiarities

With the aforementioned continuing timeline of creativity, compounded with the overt display of opinion woven into the very fabric of Lucas, it takes a lot to stand out as ‘different’ or ‘weird’ in town, but only in a fairly traditional way. Lucas is contrived of a homogenous and conservative population and can tend to exhibit some traditional small town behaviors. Local booster Nancy Jo Leachman summed up Lucas’ personality quirks with the phrase: “In Lucas, I’m normal.” The Chamber of Commerce promptly printed black tees with the words emblazoned across the back for the next trade show.

While there is openness to creative expression, there is still a closed attitude toward difference. Local resident Jeannie Stramel sums up the push/pull: “[I’m] still feeling my way through all these issues, but do feel some push-back from the traditional business community, that the ‘arts’ are trying to have more than their share of influence on my community. I don’t dwell on this but proceed to work in collaboration with others who share my interests and I figure there is room for us all, and hopefully someday the benefits will be seen. I try to keep an open mind and be respectful of those I may not feel in sync with.”

Even with this acceptance and reluctance, residents continue to initiate projects they feel would be good for the community, explaining the project along the way, but initiating on their own in hopes that support will gather. Local banker and booster Doug Hickman reminds us that this is nothing new: “Neighbors did not accept the artistic creations of S. P. Dinsmoor in the era of the hard times of the early 20th century. The passage of time and the attraction of ‘foreign’ visitors who have been in awe of the large sculptures on display has evolved into an identity associated with Lucas, Kansas and pride among local residents.”

Future

As with any small town, people assume that there will be someone to take over legacy businesses as original owners age, the school will manage to retain its student population even if the town population shrinks, the Post Office will continue to operate as it always has despite financial pressures to close and consolidate rural services, and the legislative decisions will be made with less populous areas in mind. Sadly, this isn’t so, and each one in its own way is crucial in keeping strong the very basic structure of a community.

A town is a living organism, with different functions required for life. Sometimes those shocks are just sprains (a hail storm damaging property throughout town) which are relatively easy to overcome with time, sometimes those shocks are mild strokes (a grocery store closing, creating a food desert) which are harder to recover from completely. Lucas has had a series of strains and strokes in just the past year, putting not only the body of Lucas at risk, but also affecting the cultural organizations. Communication breakdowns, old rifts reopened, loss of support from a strained economy, all are adding up to a new reality of a community operating under duress. While things may look ‘normal’ on the outside, on the inside of the town, things are strained. Lucas is living with just one kidney.

Small towns are also notorious for “old boy networks”—as are institutions. To get things done, it’s best to know people, or at the very least, know people who know people. But, what happens when the embedded institutions don’t speak for everyone? Who tells the stories, serves as the voice for the people who not only aren’t at the table, but don’t even know that the table exists? They are still citizens, still functioning parts of the whole, but maybe the systems haven’t crossed to inform each other.



Volunteers gather in a garage, creating mosaic panels for the Grassroots Art Center’s embellished Public Restroom project. Image courtesy Grassroots Art Center.



Volunteers install mosaic panels on the front of Bowl Plaza. Image courtesy Grassroots Art Center.

Bowl Plaza is now a downtown Lucas anchor art site, combining necessity with encompassing embellishment and whimsy. Image courtesy Grassroots Art Center.



Lucas recently hired an outside consultant to work through some of these issues, and provide some guidance in creating a direction for Lucas in the next 20 years. While the results are still being developed, it shows the willingness to self-examine, evaluate, and change course when in crisis. In addition to outside help, local individuals have initiated positive change—forming committees to address housing issues, more direct conversations regarding succession planning for multi-generational businesses, negotiations with a neighboring town for a grocery partner, and facilitating bulk food orders from an organic produce wholesaler. However, not all people feel like they have a voice.

One response to recent frustrations is Fencebook: The maker, faced with a manufacturer in his backyard, feels that his noise, health, and access concerns are being ignored by the people in charge even though he’s tried all of the obvious venues. So, he starts Fencebook. Like Facebook, it contains posts and dates, but made up of hand-lettered slats of wood, screwed to his fence, out in the yard, for everyone to see. The statements on it are short, to the point, and topical, such as one of his top posts which reads: “Is Tourism, Folk Art, and Junk Art more important than not having a grocery store?”

Lucas is a dichotomy of progressive and regressive, all at once. Navigating the waters is difficult, and there’s a fine line between being involved and embroiled, but for those of us who call it Home, and the visitors who find inspiration within its city limits, it is a truly grassroots-grown example of creative culture.

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