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The Contexts

This book is about the local arts agency, and how the local support group fits into the cultural picture.

Searching for ways to coordinate local arts activities and train new community leadership in the mid-1940s, the visionaries in part looked at the models from health and welfare — for example, the Community Chest — and adapted those elements that were applicable to the arts, creating the first coordinating arts agencies.

In 1965, the Rockefeller Report on the Performing Arts called upon the local community arts councils to look at the “common problems” of the dance group, the symphony, and the opera.¹ There were about 100 of these coordinating agencies then.

By the 1980s, they existed in cities, counties, and communities of all sizes, from the smallest to the largest; the total number is estimated to be more than 1,000. The job of coordinating had grown far beyond the job envisioned in the 1960s to the challenge of the 1980s. It had grown beyond supervising arts phone lines, directories, and calendars to the administration of laws and citywide programs. Some have remained private agencies; others have remained private but have functioned as public services overseeing the allocation of monies and the enactment of laws. Others are local government agencies. Some have emerged with primary programming functions, private and public fundraising functions, and facilities management. There is no one model even within categories. Community leader-

ship and timing have played important roles as one measures strengths and weaknesses — and images. This book details the history of these curious and interesting agencies.

One might even say that their survival and strength is critical to the survival of the arts community as a newly defined community extending and expanding the definitions traditionally given the arts. For the coordination of local support, financial and civic, becomes even more important in the face of pressures and community priorities. Properly understood, these agencies could have a substantial role in developing local advocacy not only to support the symphonies, dance companies, and operas, but the emerging smaller groups that serve artists, literature, jazz, crafts, or chamber music. Keeping the totality of the arts community visible and championing the smaller arts groups are important functions.

The evolution of any agency type occurs in a historical and sociological context. Arts councils have taken hold where citizens have seen the need and potential impact of the arts, where they have seen the proliferation of arts opportunity, and where they have had a desire to fill gaps in cultural programming offered local citizens. This was starting to happen before activities at the national level began, for the National Endowment for the Arts legislation of 1965 reflected these interests — it did not cause them. The local activity has been the backbone of the arts movement. The state councils, brought to full number, stature, and importance in the years following the federal legislation, have been important in the system of support for the arts and will have to find more ways to relate to the local agencies successfully. Given the attitudes of the administration in Washington at this writing, there is even greater incentive to do this.

The arts council movement has gained its momentum from several sources over more than 30 years. Most of all, there is a pragmatic tradition in American communities that has caused community leaders to seek cooperative solutions in the nonprofit fields (health, education, welfare, housing, the arts) to promote efficient administration and eliminate overlapping functions. The sociological ferment of the late 1960s and early 1970s brought to the surface the special needs of new arts constituencies and a broader concept of arts services, which the traditional arts agencies could not meet. As the state arts agencies matured, they felt the need to have local arts agencies to represent their interests on the local level and help administer state programs. In the middle and late 1970s, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) programs and more formal decentralization efforts by 12 states stimulated the growth of local agencies. Finally, toward the 1980s, there was the growing realization by city and county government officials that an organization that could deliver arts resources (institutions and artists) on demand could help revitalize neighborhoods and downtowns.²

America has seen "the grand ideas" of the 1960s and 1970s swell and diminish; expanding the arts was part of that visionary period. In the reordering of priorities through a range of crises such as the energy shortage, the problems of employment and unemployment, and economic woes, the new awareness of the arts emphasizes the new values and options for the use of time. The arts opportunities in the community (arts festivals, theater, music, dance, visual arts, and crafts exhibits) look like viable options for expensive travel. They also place those values in the forefront of action by creating a reevaluation of local cultural opportunities. The strength of independent spirits and the private nature of values lend substance to a feisty response to the 1981 federal mandate.

The growth of the local council reflects not only the organizational needs of the arts, but individual needs. There are those who have newly awakened interests in the arts and no place to focus, or are intimidated by the narrowly based institutions. The council is often the place where they have gained the confidence to explore other contexts.

The arts councils have identified most clearly the meaning of a broad base for the arts, taking the first risks of public exposure for many art forms in new places. They have given confidence to some institutions to try to interest new publics, sometimes in ways so subtle that the institutions themselves are not always aware of the genesis of the idea or source of support for the idea.

This is not a history of cases; rather, it is one of function, and of type of impact. It is about opening doors and filling gaps until the leadership of a community sees an arts council as integral to the local arts scene. Without that leadership, organizations remain special interest groups, not integral to the institutional base. In many communities, councils have come and gone; the larger cities, where conditions are the most complex and priorities are often set in a temporal and volatile context, have been especially difficult arenas within which to plan with ongoing commitment. The arts council or commission will be bright and shining for stretches of time; it will also often be dimmed quickly and politically. Private councils have existed in cities of all sizes. The private councils with contracts for services from local governments will be models to watch. In any case, the search for the art council's place in the local community structure has been part of the evolving organizational type. There are groups of community councils that are strong at this moment, and there will be others that are strong in the future. There have been some that have come and gone in recent years.

For the Endowment, the policy of formal recognition and support came after almost a decade of committee review and study on community arts agencies. It came in the closing minutes of the February 1981 meeting of the National Council on the Arts, the advisory body of the National Endowment for the Arts.

One of those who had worked hard behind the scenes was “thrilled because we had gotten this far” but expressed almost wonder at the incredibly slow, costly, and demanding process of achieving a simple policy statement. It had taken Clark Mitze’s work; the Mary Regan report; the James Backas report; Joseph Golden’s work; subcommittees and task forces created in 1969, 1972, 1974, 1976, 1977, and 1979; David Martin; Henry Putsch; NACAA; NASAA; the Congress; the National Council/NASAA Policy Committee; and Council’s Policy and Planning Committee many years and several hundreds of thousands of dollars to reach this point.

In the Harris poll of late 1980, 51 percent of the people surveyed were willing to be taxed more for the arts. They had become enthusiastic participants and had increased the audience numbers in recent years. They felt that arts education should be an inherent part of basic education of every young person. A miniscule number of school systems could attribute change to the result of such sentiment; the arts are still low-priority items in the educational system.

These supporters are natural advocates if newly focused and motivated. The arts councils are “naturals” to pull it together if they can gather the muscle and clout needed to lead communities through the process of defining priorities and possibilities. There are examples of where this has been done successfully, but nearly always each has some special components peculiar to that community—the numbers and sizes of institutions. Recent figures show that more than \$85 million has been generated in public dollars for the arts in the largest 50 cities and more in smaller ones. In over 50 cities, there have been united arts funds; other cities have active committees linking business people and the arts.

Volunteers, educated and oriented to new advocacy tasks, will help the public support the local arts and focus that effort. There need to be definitions among needs; the operating needs of an arts center differ from the needs of the individual arts groups housed there; projects and operating supports differ—and who supports the local artist?

The new coalitions—of public and private sectors, labor and business, large organizations and small—are necessary for the arts to survive. To this time, the local arts councils have concentrated on making the community aware of the arts and their needs. Now, as the focus of support transfers to the local and state level, the spirit of that refocusing needs to be absorbed.

Over the more than 30 years of its development, the local arts council has done a great deal to bring the public and the arts together. This has been achieved in the context of such developments as greater government support on all levels and changes in life styles that include more flexible work hours and greater leisure time. In the future, those leisure-time hours, in the wake of the development of home entertainment centers and narrowcasting on television for the arts consumer, will be an even more impor-

tant consideration. It will be important to watch as people and communities set priorities for the use of leisure time.

Arts councils are sometimes accused of being populists—supporting “amateur” as opposed to “professional” arts. In fact, they strive for balance: They provide funds and support for major cultural institutions, the professional artist, and improved standards for avocational or outreach arts programs. Most try to avoid the stereotyped attitudes held by “elitists” and “populists.” The arts council priorities will continue to be in community planning, in advocacy, and in working with all segments of the arts community and the public.

A large order. But it will be only then that understanding will allow greater implementation of the systems that have been found to be beneficial, and where the sentiments reflected in the polls can be put to useful and creative action.

The following chapters examine the evolution from the early years of arts council development to the concept of a fully recognized partnership: federal, state, and local.

NOTES

1. Rockefeller Panel report on the future of theater, dance, and music in America. *The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects*. New York Rockefeller Brothers Fund, 1965, p. 49.
2. Conclusions reached after many discussions on this subject with persons such as James Backus and Ralph Burgard from early 1980 to March 1982.