

## Part III

# CREATING A CLIMATE IN WHICH THE ARTS CAN THRIVE

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Part III is about what has been happening primarily in the 1970s and early 1980s, from the point of view of the arts councils — not as they are perceived by their communities, not as they are perceived by the arts discipline organizations. It is an attempt to focus their story as they tell it to their own clientele: the services, the programs, and the real and subtle ways they have been responsible for bringing the arts to a community's conscience and consciousness.

It is the story of the daily struggle to focus on the place of the arts in people's lives.

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# Services from A to Z

Reflecting upon the establishment of the Cultural Arts Council of Houston in 1978, John Blaine explains:

The city wanted a means of providing support to cultural organizations and activities within the city without having to go through the political machinations that were beginning to be too time-consuming. The city was also aware of the need to provide support to more than the highly visible cultural institutions. The city saw the importance of recognizing and assisting emerging cultural groups and to give some feeling of the possibility of survival and flourishing to people who only had an idea.<sup>1</sup>

The reasons given for the development of the Houston Council lie behind the development of many arts councils. Created by the Chamber of Commerce, the Council has emerged as a credible focal point for discussion on the parts of all the people who are concerned about the arts: "the Arts Council has rightfully earned a reputation for a place where people can meet and talk and be heard and where action will take place."<sup>2</sup>

While Houston and other cities deal with the influx of people moving in and ensuing housing, business, and service needs, some cities are dealing with the opposite syndrome, characterized by age and diminishing populations. All are going through the process of developing a partnership between the private and public sectors to build a strategy for preserving and promoting the greatest assets of their cities. One city leader has called the

arts the "enterprise zone." At the airports, the bus stations, and in the city magazines, travelers are told that the arts are why they're in the place they're in.

Whether it is the Ice Cream Festival in St. Louis, sponsored by the St. Louis Arts and Education Council, or the Bumbershoot of Seattle, one of the most successful fall festivals, the public enjoys and invades arts festivals. "The festival generates economic activity in the city, and assists in increased exposure for the arts groups,"<sup>3</sup> according to those in Atlanta who have sponsored festivals of jazz, dance, and film. John Blaine talks about the humanizing effect. "We need times when we can relax together and smile at each other and look at something with wonder, astonishment or even amusement."<sup>4</sup> Communities large and small would agree: They have been a priority of arts councils in places such as Buffalo, New York; Springfield, Ohio; and all across the nation.

Sponsoring festivals may not be everyone's cup of tea, but in New Orleans, for example, the festival sponsored by the Arts Council was the first multiarts festival the city had had. As the Council sought to increase public participation in as innovative a way as possible, it opened people's eyes by breaking new ground, such as being instrumental in commissioning New Orleans' first abstract piece of art. Such public artworks have in many places become city symbols—as the public and private sectors, more confident now, commission readily.

The Greater Louisville Fund for the Arts and the Fine Arts Fund of the Cincinnati Institute of Fine Arts are the country's oldest united arts funds. The Cincinnati organization had simply been a foundation for the first 20 years from its founding in 1927 to 1949, when it became a united fund, and has expanded the number of funded groups in recent years. In Louisville, just down the Ohio River, the mayor assisted in forming the fund. The fund has raised substantial monies for 13 arts groups since its inception, and recently was consultant to the state in the building of a new facility to house four of these groups. This fund has a subsidiary service division, the Community Arts Council, which serves as a community resource and information network and offers a wide range of programming, consulting, and technical assistance to artists and arts groups.

Thus some of the older organizations have tried to accommodate new needs as they have arisen. Newer councils also have found the need to change focus to accommodate the community being served. From 1973 to 1976, the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance (founded in 1972) produced a special series of "Philadelphia Festivals" that were, for the most part, large public celebrations that highlighted the city's cultural institutions and individual artists. Since 1977, the organization has functioned solely as a service organization for institutions in the cultural community.<sup>5</sup>

"When you've had an impact, the community starts to look to you for

all sorts of things,” say some of the directors of councils with budgets of less than \$75,000 and a high impact.<sup>6</sup>

And so the arts thrive. For whom? By whom? Where? “Everywhere,” explains the leadership. Let’s explore that in greater depth.

“The arts have been strong in these towns historically — a lot goes on, but it has lacked visibility and coordination. Thus it has been easy to enhance,” said the director of a regional council where neighborhoods are towns and the arts council is developing a base for greater citizen cooperation in the arts at all levels. “We represent the diverse cultural expression and needs of an area, and are in the unique position to serve the public while speaking for the arts as a whole.”<sup>7</sup>

In New Hampshire, a Bicentennial committee, designated to administer funds that were used in arts-related programs in 35 towns (85,000 people spread over 100 square miles), developed into the Grand Monadnock Arts Council. A study, proposed at the Bicentennial celebration’s conclusion, indicated that people living in that region considered the arts to be extremely important to their quality of life. Most felt that there were not enough arts performances or facilities for creative activities in their communities. The committee cosponsored a Business and Arts Conference with the Business Committee for the Arts, Inc., a national organization that encourages such meetings. Business leaders told their peers about the need for business support. A third program, attended by 100 arts organization board and management members, representatives from town and state government, the press, and educators, gave the regional council its encouragement for further development. From these activities, an independent regional arts council was evolved over a three-year period. The council spearheaded new state legislation to allow funding from the towns. In 1980, the city of Keene and eight of the 35 towns had given money to the Council, with some way still to go.

In Fredonia, Kansas (a community of 3,150 people), three local enthusiasts came back from a State Arts Commission meeting in 1965 and decided to try to start a council. They saw the needs then as starting a summer arts program for children and bringing in some high quality performing groups. In 1979, well ensconced in a 108-year-old house of hand-hewn stone, a state historical site, they felt as entrenched as the Chamber of Commerce. Funding comes from the private sector and the local school district, from the city and the county, as well as from state, national, and regional sources (individual and corporate). Local participation amounts to about two-thirds of their funding. By 1979, it was found that each person in the community had taken part in at least three events: “The people don’t just sit and listen — they do it.”<sup>8</sup>

In the same state, major dance and theater companies, such as the Martha Graham company and the Joffrey Ballet, have come to Manhattan

through its Arts Council. Kansas State University has provided a strong community base for arts programming. In Manhattan, the facilities for such performances allow the possibility of these types of touring companies. The people in Fredonia have to work around school schedules in school auditoriums; there is no community building with a performing stage. However, there have been community programs, including print-making, a poet-in-residence, a residency for a glassblower, and performances by the Wichita Brass Quintet.

In Riverhead, New York, the high number of older people with professional skills makes it possible to accomplish the goals of a local arts council. This Council, as in Fredonia, Kansas, is housed in an historic home. It is located in a town of 20,000 and serves a total population of 400,000, in an area where the arts were once thought to be a summer activity — meaning that it was for the wealthy who had the time and dollars to come to the shore and to participate in the arts. The Council has involved many people in the projects that they have done, and have, along the way, changed the image of the arts. The downtown center has not only brought the people to it, but has involved them in the development — laying out the garden and so forth. The arts center was a sign — the first — that something positive would happen. The arts have made history come alive, and they represent events around which people gather. The parlor of the old house, the home of the Arts Council, is used for monthly art exhibits, and now seven banks have monthly art shows and want more. There have been professional workshops for the visual artists. Among their activities, they have sponsored performances of the caliber of the American Ballet Theatre.

The banks in Dodge City, Kansas, have also become interested in the arts through the activities of the Arts Council. They ask what the Council would like them to sponsor, and these events have ranged from a visit by a muralist to a performance of the Oakland Ballet.

Arts councils begun in the 1970s emerged for reasons very similar, yet greatly extended beyond those reported in the 1950s — to coordinate and stimulate the arts activity, to deal with common problems, and to serve many publics. These roles have multiple ways of translating to service and function.

Arts councils can serve a lot of people or a specific clientele — the general community or the arts community, or both simultaneously. Their services can be as basic and ordinary as membership and mailing lists, duplicating and accounting services, or as complex as computer systems and the coordinated calendars. They can be as basic as fundraising and as complex as advocating and educating; they can be as basic as counseling artists and as complex as coordinating a private and public system around their support. The services can relate to facilities and to presenting the arts

and/or programming. The following chapters describe in greater detail some of these services, which are varied indeed.

## NOTES

1. Charles Ward, "A Positive Outlook for Cultural Arts Council" *Houston Chronicle*, April 13, 1980.
2. Ibid.
3. Discussions with Tom Cullen, City of Atlanta, Department of Cultural Affairs, 1980, 1981.
4. Ward, "A Positive Outlook."
5. Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, *Annual Report*, 1980–81.
6. Interviews with small arts council directors, 1980.
7. Interview with Sara Germain, Director, Grand Monadnock Arts Council, Keene, New Hampshire, 1980.
8. Interview with Joan Bayles, Fredonia, Kansas, 1980.