

Community and the Individual: the Fundamental Wellbeing Provided through the Arts

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“The creative impulse is fundamental to the experience of being human¹.”

Art fosters community. To begin, this statement isn't backed by a source or heavily researched. It is one made out of experience. It is a statement which can be made because of the obvious positive outcomes on a community followed by the integration of art. Art brings people together. It creates lasting relationships and a creative headspace in which people can learn and grow. And this is not something that should be taken lightly. Living in a city in which art plays such a pivotal role, it is essential to utilize art as a means to create community and foster the wellbeing of the people in that community.

To begin to look into how art affects a community, we must first break down the different pieces that create that statement. When talking about a community, there are two different definitions to the word, a physical definition and one that is emotional. Community can be defined as a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common. This is a physical sense of the word community—the actual people that populate that space. But there is a second part and this part is more important in the context of art. This definition of community is a feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals (“community”). So in addition to community being a physical group of people who live or exist in close proximity to each other, it also a feeling that grows with people who share interests, interests like art.

“Engagement in community-based arts activities can have a positive effect on social connectedness by facilitating interactions amongst people with shared interests...(Swindells).”

¹ In his book *The Singing Neanderthals*, Professor of Early Prehistory and Pro-Vice-Chancellor at the University of Reading, Steven Mithen, argues that the propensity to make music is encoded into our DNA, providing an evolutionary foundation for the emergence of language.

Another concept important to define before digging into the specifics of art fostering community is the wellbeing of a community and how that is defined. This is certainly a much more abstract concept and therefore does not have a dictionary definition. So when defining the wellbeing of a community, there are many different factors to take into account. These factors include things like economic performance, quality of life, the state of the environment, sustainability, and equality, but it can also go further, looking at intra-community relations, inter-generational connections and social capital. And those are just a few categories. “The World Health Organization defines the social determinants of health as the ‘conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life’ (The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing).” Though this obviously differs greatly depending on where one grows up, the financial situation in which they were raised, and the attitude that environment in which they lived had regarding arts integration.

Evidence proves that wellbeing is linked to health, so much so that the extent that “a high level of wellbeing is associated with positive functioning, which includes creative thinking, productivity, good interpersonal relationships and resilience in the face of adversity, as well as good physical health and life expectancy (The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing).”

Measuring the wellbeing of a community pre and post community arts involvement is difficult and complex because there is no exact science to it, but we can look at factors like these to decide the effectiveness of art in communities (Brownnett).

“During my 30 years at Americans for the Arts, I have had the great privilege to visit and learn about a different community nearly every week. While they differ vastly from one another, there is one common strength I have observed: the arts have made a profound impact on the health of each community,” says Robert L. Lynch the president of Americans for the Arts.

When talking about art, we are looking at both visual and performing. This includes crafts, dance, film, literature, music, and even things like culinary arts and gardening (The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing).

When integrating arts into a community, there are voluntary participatory activities like music festivals, art exhibits, and culinary events that members of a community not only willingly attend, but often pay for. There is also art in health and care environments. This could be like the program *Evolution* established for at risk youths. In addition to these two forms of art integration in communities, there is arts in an educational setting, integrating arts into lesson plans and the lives of students. And then there is medical arts which is integrating the arts into the daily life of someone that may be struggling with their mental health, art therapies, and the arts that aid in development.

In a study done in deprived communities in London, integrating participatory arts programs into young adults every day life had an incredibly positive effect on the livelihood of the people within that community. After engaging with the arts, 79% of people in these deprived communities in London ate more healthily, 77% of the people engaged in more physical activity, and 82% of the people enjoyed greater wellbeing. “Participatory arts activities help to alleviate anxiety, depression and stress both within and outside of work (The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing).”

Evolution is an artist-guided visual arts program in Australia. It was established for young people aged 15-22 who are not currently studying or employed. It became a safe space created for those struggling with mental health and social issues. *Evolution's* goal was to foster reintegration into education. The great success of this program stems from its commitment to building relationships through art practices. They explore diverse forms of visual art, design, film/video, animation, and photography.

Research from *Evolution* indicates that the arts programs they ran built confidence in young adults, promoted positive connections with others, fostered motivation, and encouraged creative thinking, self-discipline, and respect. "It [*Evolution*] re-ignited self-belief amongst these young people who were at risk of becoming deeply dislocated from education and society at large (Brown)."

From programs organized specifically to target at-risk youth and using art to guide them, to completely voluntary and expensive music festivals, many types of art integration in a community foster a sense of being and place. "Cultural engagement reduces work-related stress and leads to longer, happier lives (The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing)." Terri Brownett interviewed eight festival organizers in England and asked them about their events and how they create a community. This community developed at the very roots of the festival's organization, organizers agreeing that, "the act of community participation through the organizing, preparing, delivering or being at festivals forms and strengthens social bonds (Brownett)."

In addition to the sense of community created among the organizers in the event-planning process, there is also the sense of community amongst those in attendance to the music festival.

“[It] creates a great sense of community and when something like that [festival] happens in your town, you do feel proud to live there [...] like, attachment to place and loving their town, essentially [...] and in turn that helps with people respecting their town and acting more respectfully (Brownnett).”

Having a sense of community in this current social climate is growing increasingly important. The feeling of belonging that is so commonly linked to the arts, enjoying the same musicians, comics, movies, and books, brings people together and makes members of a community feel less alone in their interests. In a society in which people are attached to their technology, there is more of a need for community than ever.

It is simple to turn on a phone or a laptop and quickly log in to one of many “virtual communities”. But these communities are not tied to a physical place, just the virtual world. It is what individuals are now used to in terms of community, one that exists not in a physical space, but in one online, engaging with people all over the world. Because of this lack of the physical and emotional communities overlapping, there has been a growing unquenchable interest in people-place relationships and belonging (Mulligan).

Because of the switch to virtual communities, modernity stresses the purposeful creation of physical communities. People want to feel tied to a physical community now more than ever before. This is because in modern society we see less and less of physical communities and more of the digital. And while there are certainly pros to modern technology and the sense of community formed through common interests, creating connections with people from all over the world, these connections can only go so far.

Creating a physical community is currently to combat mental health, loneliness, and form strong emotional bonds. Bringing people together that share common interests in a physical space forms important and unwavering connections and relationships that prevail over that of the internet because of that overlap with the physical and emotional community. It creates strong bonds among individuals that can now spend time together, face to face, and not just through a screen.

“The arts can support healthy aging and counteract loneliness at all ages.” The benefits of arts participation include a sense of agency and empowerment, improved mental health and well-being, social inclusion and a perception of improved health and happiness (The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing).

Studies have proven over and over again that being exposed to art encourages the emotional, social and cognitive development of children. This is why parents play music to their children, it's why creativity is integrated into playtime, and it's why art classes begin at such a young age. When working with this research, it's easy to see how this social and cognitive development could aid adults as well. Music therapy reduces agitation and a need for medication in 67% of people with dementia. And people suffering from mental illnesses can especially benefit from art integration. The added benefit of building relationships and establishing that feeling of belonging within a community only aids in the numerous advantages that art programs create (The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing).

“Arts and culture make considerable and necessary contributions to the well-being of communities. Arts and culture are powerful tools with which to engage communities in various levels of change. They are a means to public dialogue, contribute to the development of a

community's creative learning, create healthy communities capable of action, provide a powerful tool for community mobilization and activism, and help build community capacity and leadership (Creative City Network of Canada).”

The evidence is here. And the initial statement of art fostering community is now backed by research, heavily. It is not purely visibly evident. Of course it is easy to see the types of strong relationships built upon the shared interests in the arts and the integration of the arts in a community. But there is also science, studies, and numerous papers written on how effective art can be on a community and the wellbeing of the people within that community.

More action needs to be taken. The research has been here. Now, it's up to individuals, cities, and governments to stress the importance of the arts. It's no secret that the arts can be looked down upon, that they are deemed not as important as science or business or math, but creativity is crucial. We are all creative, and not offering people, especially young people, an outlet for that creativity is much more hindering than helpful. It's also evident that the American government doesn't place an importance on the arts, with more and more art programs being defunded and many people in positions of power not believing that the arts are important to the cognitive development of young people and the forming of critical relationships and safe spaces. This needs to change.

More arts integration into the lives of young people, into the lives of people struggling with their mental health, into the lives of people struggling to find their place in the world, is not only important, it is necessary.

So the question now is how can we create a cultural shift to highlight the pivotal effects that art has on individuals and on communities.

“Art helps us access and express parts of ourselves that are often unavailable to other forms of human interaction. It flies below the radar, delivering nourishment for our soul and returning with stories from the unconscious. A world without art is an inhuman world. Making and consuming art lifts our spirits and keeps us sane. Art, like science and religion, helps us make meaning from our lives, and to make meaning is to make us feel better.” -Grayson Perry.

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