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Making the Case for Environmental Sustainability in the Arts

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Since the Ford Foundation's institutional stabilization programs of the 1960s, arts funders have explored and implemented initiatives intended to promote the sustainability of arts organizations. Funding approaches, programs, and special terminology have been developed in support of the arts' economic and social contributions to society. Artists and arts organizations are evaluated on the basis of their fiscal prudence and community contributions as well as artistic merit. However, the benefits and responsibilities of environmental sustainability have been given little attention as a part of what defines a sustainable arts organization.

This is not to say that meaningful work on environmental sustainability has not come from arts organizations or the grantmakers that invest in them. It does seem, however, that individual projects make up the bulk of this activity, and there does not appear to be a common vocabulary or understanding of these issues across the field. The arts have not cohesively addressed environmental sustainability and its benefits, responsibilities, and opportunities for their communities.

As in other sectors, the arts must consider environmental sustainability in an integrated way with other key success drivers. By understanding the arts as a component of a healthy cultural ecosystem, we can also begin to see how environmental practices contribute to a thriving whole. Our intention here is to introduce and explore the subject of environmental sustainability: its definition, the argument for environmental discourse and action, and implementation barriers that often exist for organizations and their funders. We discuss some first steps, as well as some directions for moving forward. By addressing environmental sustainability, funders have an opportunity to help arts organizations help themselves, as well as to become leaders in this growing field.

Defining Environmental Sustainability

One of the challenges in addressing environmental sustainability in the arts is definition. For most arts funders and practitioners, especially in recent years, sustainability has meant developing and maintaining organizational health. As the arts sector moves into a postrecession understanding of institutional and artistic sustainability, it is important to move beyond the notion of institutional health only.

In 1987, the UN created the Brundtland Commission (the World Commission on Environment

and Development) to address the emerging conflict between globalized economic growth, industrialization and development, and worldwide ecological consequences — in short, to reconcile economic prosperity with environmental impact. To accomplish this goal, the group had to define sustainable development; the Brundtland Commission's definition remains in use today:

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

This statement explicitly combines the environment — previously considered a concern unto itself — with human action, and addresses development as encompassing all human activities. It defines ecological sustainability in a cultural, social, and economic context and insists on intergenerational equity. The integration of humanity into the definition of ecological sustainability is what makes the Brundtland definition uniquely applicable across all sectors, including the arts.

In the past ten years, the topic has become ubiquitous in both public and private sectors. It has been gaining even more traction as businesses and consumers alike recognize the inherent opportunities for efficiency and cost savings in greener practices, in addition to the obvious, though less measurable, ethical benefits. The introduction of green building and operations protocols such as LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) and Energy Star has further driven the marketplace toward greener products and services. These and other protocols have emerged as industry standards that give us a common language and serve as a basis for comparing environmental performance.

When considering ecological sustainability or environmental impact, most people think immediately of energy use reduction. Comprehensively addressing environmental responsibility requires attention not only to energy and carbon emissions but also to a number of other critical factors. In the arts, these include such things as toxic materials, recycling and reuse, indoor air quality, and patron transportation, as well as artistic content.

A popular model known as the “Three Es” of Sustainability asserts that holistic sustainability addresses the environment, the economy, and social equity, rather than just one or two of those issues. The arts have deep experience addressing economic concerns, as well as important social issues. Ecological concerns have largely been a distant third. One interpretation of the three pillars of sustainability submits that since the economy exists within society, and society exists within the natural environment, action at the environmental level is the most critical for improving the likelihood of long-term societal and economic sustainability. A critical next step is to include the environment in the definition of sustainability in the arts. A sustainable arts organization advances its artistic and organizational mission while thriving economically, serving society, and preserving a healthy natural environment for future generations. These considerations are mutually reinforcing and deeply interdependent.

The Argument for Environmental Sustainability in the Arts

Green practices increase efficiency and can generate significant savings. The possibility of cost savings has been one of the driving reasons behind the adoption of green practices for businesses, municipalities, and nonprofits alike. One of the most cited examples is electric lighting upgrades to higher-efficiency sources such as compact fluorescents and light-emitting diodes. In addition to saving electric utility costs, these improvements also reduce air-conditioning load and extend lamp life. More and more utilities around the country are

subsidizing these energy-saving efforts through significant grants and rebates. Other efficient building systems reduce resource use and carbon dioxide emissions by lowering the demand for energy in buildings and operations. Although these systems may initially be more expensive than conventional versions, they often pay for themselves in short order as a result of reduced utility costs.

Operational efficiencies such as paper use reduction, waste stream separation (recycling), and power management strategies are often much less costly to implement and can begin delivering bottom-line savings immediately. These savings all allow more money to be directed toward program goals, staff support, and institutional capitalization.

Green practices and projects can also open up contributed income opportunities that were previously unavailable or unknown to many arts organizations. In addition to the proliferating availability of public-sector grants, green projects open doors for new and additional private and institutional support. Private donors who may not have considered themselves “arts patrons” can be energized by innovative green projects. Institutions that support conservation or sustainable development can be just as keen to support environmentally sustainable arts activities.

Ecological stewardship is a crucial component of community responsibility and offers an important opportunity for collaboration. Arts organizations are an integral part of any thriving community. Along with producing art, they have regularly responded to the educational, economic, and social concerns of the communities they serve. Today, as the need for environmental action has developed as a major community issue, arts organizations need to identify and address their role. Although many individuals involved in the arts have strong personal commitments to environmental action in their personal lives, this concern does not seem to have translated into institutional or industry-wide knowledge and action.

What’s Standing in the Way?

Taking action on environmental sustainability demands new ways of thinking and requires overcoming the inertia of the way things have always been done. Cultivating environmental literacy and implementing new or different activities are often seen as additional burdens, and as secondary to the support of existing organizational missions. Arts organizations, unlike zoos, aquariums, or nature centers, find environmental sustainability tougher to connect to their missions or to an existing set of guiding principles.

Additionally, many arts organizations are constrained by reduced staff capacity and find themselves hampered by the scarcity of resources and time. Those practitioners who want to take action find it difficult to effectively navigate the complexities of environmental sustainability, and to determine where to begin responsibly addressing these issues.

Arts organizations often suffer from information overload in trying to figure out how to begin implementing green improvements. How do arts groups identify appropriate projects and not get caught up in projects that are too expensive, or that don’t deliver sufficient return on investment?

Over many years, the arts community has created a robust advocacy infrastructure to support arts legislation and funding. Arts practitioners generally have relationships with elected officials who support the arts; successful environmental organizations have cultivated relationships with political figures as well. Without collaboration with environmental

organizations or direct familiarity with environmentally engaged policymakers, arts groups miss important opportunities. Additionally, lacking understanding of the environmental goals of arts supporters, advocates, and policymakers is a barrier to effective action, and a missed opportunity for collaboration and revenue.

Where Can Arts Organizations and Funders Start?

It helps to begin by cultivating a degree of environmental literacy for staff, boards, arts service organizations, and funders. Just as the arts community does, the world of ecological sustainability has its own organizations, certifications, funding sources, terminology, and success factors. A working command of environmental vocabulary is a critical step toward readiness to take effective action.

Next, arts organizations should develop the knowledge to assess existing behaviors and systems with environmental impact in mind. Analyze utility costs, understand the degree to which recycling occurs, and determine what kinds of lightbulbs are in use. Any improvements can be measured and reported from this starting point; without a baseline, achievements are difficult to quantify. Next, either in-house or with outside help, begin to identify ways to reduce environmental impact and what the results would be.

Cultivate relationships with experts and with peers who have undertaken similar changes. Arts organizations can capitalize on the sustainability efforts of institutions like children's museums, conservation centers, and zoos to avoid reinventing the wheel for their own purposes. Some projects will be very high cost but will also make big improvements environmentally; other steps will be virtually free to implement and will also save a lot of money every year. Still other undertakings will seem exciting and green and good for PR but actually have relatively little positive environmental impact. This analysis will help make low-hanging fruit relatively more obvious and harvestable.

Up to now, environmental discussions among grantmakers in the arts have been limited to individual projects and programs; an ongoing industry-wide conversation to reflect on successes and identify ways to move forward has been lacking. Each funding organization should examine its own institutional mission and assess how it relates to environmental action for all program areas. Talking with conservation or social services funders about environmental practices in the arts could open up new opportunities for collaboration both within and between funding institutions. Additionally, it's important to consider implementing green practices internally, just as grantees are asked to do. Funding organizations should be able to access the resources they need to make efficiency upgrades and update operational behaviors to greener standards.

Opportunities abound for new partners, funding streams, and program content outside the typical grantor-grantee system in the arts. Numerous foundations are already addressing environmental issues separately from the arts; the opportunity is ripe to establish collaboration among program areas. Ongoing communication among organizations, municipalities, donors, and grantmakers regarding sustainability efforts, whether they are successful or not, will encourage collaboration and effective action. Highlighting meaningful accomplishments will incentivize further innovation and improvements. As capital remains scarce in the arts sector, funders should encourage these collaborations as a way to drive new revenue streams toward the arts.

Next Steps

Arts grantmakers and arts grantees come in a variety of shapes and sizes, and their approach to this subject will differ enormously. There are, however, some specific actions that will move the entire field forward.

Provide Access to Knowledge

Encourage the introduction of environmental vocabulary and discussion of environmental sustainability in journal articles, conference content, grant guidelines, and web-based reports and other publications. Support the curation and development of arts-specific resources, including published materials, to begin gaining literacy in the field.

Encourage Environmental Analysis and Planning

Develop basic planning structures to guide arts organizations in creating environmental action plans, or integrating environmental action into existing strategic planning documents. Leverage existing protocols such as LEED checklists for capital projects or Energy Star for ongoing resource use analysis. It is important to note that business, government, and the nonprofit sector have developed many protocols, tools, and resources that are at least partially applicable to the arts. It is not necessary for the arts sector to reinvent the wheel.

Providing access to industry experts and the research of other industries will allow arts organizations to focus on those topics specifically relevant to their own work — for example, stage lighting energy use or visual arts materials toxicity.

Incentivize Collaboration among Foundations, Service Organizations, and Government Agencies

Grantmakers are uniquely positioned to encourage interdisciplinary collaboration and to bring different arts-interested parties together to develop a common understanding of relevant environmental issues. Arts service organizations can have a similar role. Sharing information, aspirations, and project-specific successes and failures will drive the understanding and appreciation of environmental issues in the arts forward.

Include Environmental Sustainability in Grant Guidelines

Review grant guidelines to allow and encourage environmental training, actions, and appropriate evaluation in existing funding categories, as appropriate. Including environmental projects as examples of fundable undertakings is an important start toward incentivizing action. Local arts agencies operating in individual communities are well positioned to take on the task of distributing region-specific information.

Develop Methodology to Evaluate Success or Failure

As the reduction of environmental impact becomes more integrated with the long-term viability of arts organizations, devising a way to understand outcomes and results will become an important task for arts funders. Metrics for evaluating environmental performance already exist, such as kilowatt hours of energy consumption, which can be easily used to understand the

relative efficacy of environmentally minded improvements. Developing an evaluation methodology for including environmental action along with the artistic, economic, and social elements that define a sustainable arts organization will be more complex. This will require a concerted effort on the parts of both arts funders and arts practitioners to explore and develop tangible evaluation metrics.

Seizing the Opportunity

Arts organizations and their funders have a responsibility to arts practitioners, to the people they serve, and to the global community to understand and address environmental sustainability as a key component of work in this field. The perfect storm of demographic and generational change, the current economic climate, our increased understanding of the importance of this issue, and developing public policy creates an imperative for the arts community to act now.

Ongoing discussion and engagement are needed for capitalization and institutional health, to protect the well-being of people in the arts, and for better stewardship of our cultural ecosystems. Arts grantmakers have the opportunity to capitalize on the momentum of a growing field that sees environmental sustainability as part and parcel of economic prosperity and community vitality. Arts organizations will have additional tools to successfully address their own sustainability as well as the sustainability of the communities around them. It's crucial that we all join the conversation.

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