

**It is precisely because artists recognize the vision that precedes the creation of a work that emerges from a place we cannot locate or name, a place of mystery, that we stand before creation in awe. And this awe is not the province of those we are schooled or learned, it is democratic. It is an experience available to anyone irrespective of race, gender, nationality, class; it can be present to anyone who makes art.**

— bell hooks (from *Belonging: A Culture of Place*)

## **BELONGING: A CORNERSTONE OF PLACEMAKING IN THE REGION** *by Roberto Bedoya, Executive Director, Tucson Pima Arts Council*

Much of the national discourse on creative placemaking is caged in an understanding of “place” as the built environment. Indeed physical places like artists’ live-work spaces and cultural districts benefit from creative placemaking. But to understand the term—and the practice—solely in terms of the built landscape is to miss the complete picture. Creative placemaking is much more than what manifests physically within the built environment. Before you have places of belonging you must feel you belong—to a community, a locale, or a place.

This idea of “belonging” is the poetic mark of how creative placemaking occurs in our Sonoran Desert context. Understanding it is paramount to understanding the 53 projects funded by TPAC’s PLACE Initiative.

The PLACE Initiative is about building the human capital of people as placemakers. Not only individuals, but also the collective “we.” And not simply the collegial “we” of “me and my friends,” but the neighborly “we,” which includes neighbors, passersby on the street, and fellow citizens of our mid-sized southwestern city in the desert. It is this democratic ideal of “We the people”—we who belong to a just and equal society—that animates the PLACE Initiative.

The PLACE Initiative privileges artists and their community partners undertaking projects as placemakers. Through art practice and activity, they engage with personal memories, cultural histories, imagination, and feeling to enliven a sense of “belonging” within the participants and audiences they reach.

To understand the civic impact of PLACE projects, we must view them through the frame of a social movement, one that weaves ethics and aesthetics into engagement projects. Through these projects, big gestures and little gestures collectively shape the identity of a place and allow us to feel a sense of belonging within it.

Let’s take the example of one PLACE Initiative grantee, the Barrio Sustainability Project, a project undertaken by local charter high school Toltecalli Academy, which focused on the issue of groundwater contamination in one predominantly Latino and Native American neighborhood. To address the issue, project leaders first identified the problem of the disposing of toxic waste in their neighborhood. Then they worked to educate school and community members about the principles of land stewardship. Then they created a community garden that reflected this principle with a focus on water harvesting. The garden included a community mural that illuminates the indigenous traditions and heritage of sustainability from a cultural and historical point of view.

This process of naming, examining, and creating artwork that addresses the problem is similar to the process undertaken by a social movement, which also names and examines problems then motivates actions. By exemplifying the active engagement of a civic “we,” the Barrio Sustainability Project offers a clear example of how PLACE projects can be seen as a social movement of belonging.

To acknowledge the importance of belonging, of course, is to also acknowledge the discomfort—and even violence—of dis-belonging. Dis-belonging occurs through acts of gentrification, racism, and speculation culture, which often occur under the name of “civic revitalization,” but in reality betray the democratic ideals of a just, civil society.

In our region, PLACE projects can also trouble the politics of dis-belonging. They do this by confronting the policies and realities that marginalize people or undervalue particular practices and places—or by offering a counter-frame, an antagonism, a perspective or action that is different than authorized norms and instead more authentically aligned with true democracy.

The way PLACE projects are linked to a sense of belonging is by developing and implementing arts experiences that shape the identity of a place, operate in the social spaces of dialogue and deliberation, present visions and manifestations of social cohesion, and activate democracy so as to build the commons.

Placemaking—and the aesthetics of belonging—happens on city blocks, in schoolyards and classrooms, and at neighborhood centers and is characterized by short- and long-term relationships among individuals. The PLACE Initiative creates opportunities for additional experiences, ones that are deliberate and grounded in arts practices designed to engage the expressive life of the civic “we.” Whether accidental or deliberate, this kind of placemaking is critical to creating a sense of belonging.

The expressive life of Southern Arizona is woven together through an interplay of people, land, arts, culture, and engagement. PLACE projects create opportunities to celebrate, explore, define, and redefine the relationships between these dynamic forces. PLACE projects illuminate a social movement of belonging that is alive and active. It is a movement that shapes the ethical and aesthetic experiences of belonging to a community where concern, care, and imagination animate and make more meaningful our lives together.