

The Creative Community: How Three Communities Used Art to Build a Future

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Yellow Springs, OH Community Pottery Studio

Richard Florida has written compellingly about the [value of the creative class](#) and the importance of attracting creative people to boost local economies. And many communities have embraced creative economic development or citizen engagement strategies, making arts part of the downtown landscape or highlighting arts-based non-profits.

But it's much less common for communities to take it to the next level, using art to inform planning processes and build a vision for the future. Here are three examples of communities that have – and that are still reaping the benefits.

Starksboro, VT Art & Soul

In tiny, rural Starksboro, Vermont, planning decisions have historically been made by a small group of elected officials, with limited citizen involvement. But the Starksboro Art & Soul project changed all that. After a robust community storytelling project, Starksboro hosted Artist-in-Residence Matthew Perry, who brought creative engagement projects to Town Meeting, mobile home parks, potluck dinners, and even made roadside stops in his colorful ArtBus. Perry helped citizens turn their stories into works of art, air community issues, and articulate the values and priorities that mattered most to citizens. Now Starksboro is working to take action to promote the vision that emerged from the art projects. From saving a historic school house to building a new community trail, the process has already unleashed more action than years of traditional planning.

Yellow Springs, OH's Why Here Why Now Project

Like many communities, Yellow Springs, OH was suffering from a host of issues: struggling employment base, rising housing costs, a polarized community, and few structured ways for citizens to come together and resolve these issues. Ethnographer Brooke Bryan saw an opportunity to use the arts to break down barriers and help residents identify common ground and common goals. The Why Here Why Now project combines photography, audio interviews, and music, exploring why people choose to live in the community and why it matters. By helping people to listen to each other and share their experiences, Bryan has helped to break down barriers, bring more voices into the conversation, and show Yellow Springs a common way forward.

The Placement Project in Mendocino County, CA

Many communities have conducted digital storytelling processes, capturing residents' voices and histories. But Mendocino County, CA turned its stories into a theater production in a unique collaboration between the Ukiah Players Theater and the Center for Digital Storytelling. After taking the show on the road, organizers took the production one step further, using residents' stories to launch a conversation about the importance of maintaining rural character and the environment while accommodating new jobs, housing and industry.