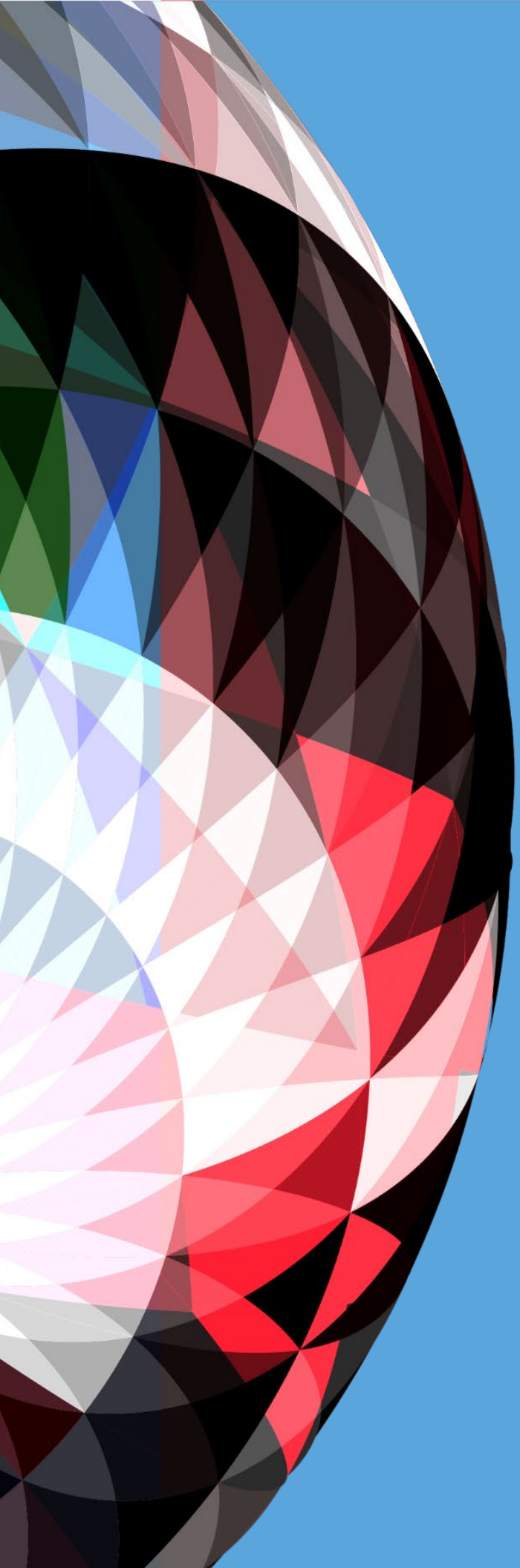


wolf brown

OLNEY CULTURE LAB

Reflections from The Olney Embrace Project

Catherine Reed Holochwost

January 2023

Olney Culture Lab:

Reflections from The Olney Embrace Project

Catherine Reed Holochwost

Olney Culture Lab:
Reflections from The Olney Embrace Project

January 2023

Produced by:

WolfBrown
8A Francis Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02138

Author:

Catherine Reed Holochwost

Citation:

Holochwost, Catherine Reed (January 2023). *Olney Culture Lab: Reflections from The Olney Embrace Project* [White paper]. WolfBrown.

At **WolfBrown** we believe that everyone has the capacity to imagine, create, and contribute. Far too often, the opportunity to realize those capacities is linked to income, zip code, and personal identity. For that reason, we work with communities, arts and cultural organizations, public agencies, schools, foundations, and artists to design programs, participatory evaluations, research, publications, and convenings that challenge and reverse that fundamental inequity, replacing it with innovative, inclusive, and sustainable possibilities.

At the **Olney Culture Lab**, we believe that culture can be a catalyst for community development and social change. Olney Culture Lab of CultureTrust Greater Philadelphia (OCL) was founded in January 2014, after the conclusion of ArtsRising, the initiative that served as an incubator for what would become Olney Culture Lab.

The William Penn Foundation was founded in 1945 by Otto and Phoebe Haas. Its mission is to help improve education for children from low-income families, ensure a sustainable environment, foster creative communities that enhance civic life and advance philanthropy in the Greater Philadelphia region.

To Note:

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the William Penn Foundation.

Acknowledgements:

First and foremost, we acknowledge the neighborhood and its residents whose resilience and cultural restlessness are the bedrock on which Olney Culture Lab is built. We also acknowledge that we work upon the traditional lands of the Lenape Peoples.

Gratitude goes to the staff (Ambrose Liu, Varissa McMickens Blair, Melissa Talley Palmer, Chamor Thomas, Wesley Brown, June Lopez) and advisory committee (Laurel Sweeney, Mark & Shannon Smith, Marquise Lindsey-Bradley, Wilhemina Gibson, Stephanie Michel, Seri Chao, Kyasha Tyson) at Olney Culture Lab whose passion and dedication to shine a light on the Olney neighborhood is boundless; the team at CultureTrust Greater Philadelphia for holding down the “back office” so the OCL creative team can manifest the dream; to the many partners and collaborators in Olney who believe in interdependence (North 5th Street Revitalization Project, Tookany/Tacony-Frankford Watershed Partnership, St. Paul’s Evangelical Lutheran Church, Gibson School of Music & Arts, Fisher Park Alliance, Roots Community Garden, the former 9th District’s Councilwoman Cherelle Parker, the Office of the 9th Councilmatic District, Alliance for Watershed Education, Free Library of Philadelphia Olney, Olney Recreation Center, New Life Church, Pastor Rod Kopp, Sanaz Hojreh, Paul Lazrow, Trust for Public Land, Public Health Management Corporation, all the schools in the neighborhood); and our dedicated core of funders and supporters (Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, Samuel Fels Fund, Independence Public Media Foundation, City of Philadelphia Office of Arts, Culture & the Creative Economy, Einstein Medical Network, Collins Shop Rite, Health Partners Plans, PECO, Julia Agnew, Webber Family Foundation, Harlem Lacrosse, Inc., Geraldine Wang)

Special Thanks go to The Olney Embrace Project Artists & Creative Contributors (Linda Fernandez and Keir Johnston of Amber Art & Design, Malcolm Burnley, Ernel Martinez, Professor Randy J. Gibson, Dr. Lela Aisha Jones, Mama Carla Wiley, Dr. Jamē McCray, Dr. Joy Friedlander, Malik Henry, Tania Y. Ramos Otón, Dave Kyu and Jamie Merwin) and to WolfBrown (Catherine & Steven Holochwost) for shepherding this report to fruition.

Finally, we acknowledge the William Penn Foundation without whose support The Olney Embrace Project would not have come to life.

Contents

Olney Youth Arts Festival performer. Photo Credit: Joe Ryan. Graphic Design: Ambrose Liu.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Olney Embrace Project (TOEP) was an ambitious project that commissioned twelve multidisciplinary artists and musicians to create work that would celebrate the rich, pluralistic identity of the Olney neighborhood of Philadelphia. In an era where identity seems to polarize more than it unites, the project offers valuable lessons for communities and nonprofit organizations on their journeys toward fostering more inclusive, generous, and resilient connections, namely:

Steward the "common wealth"

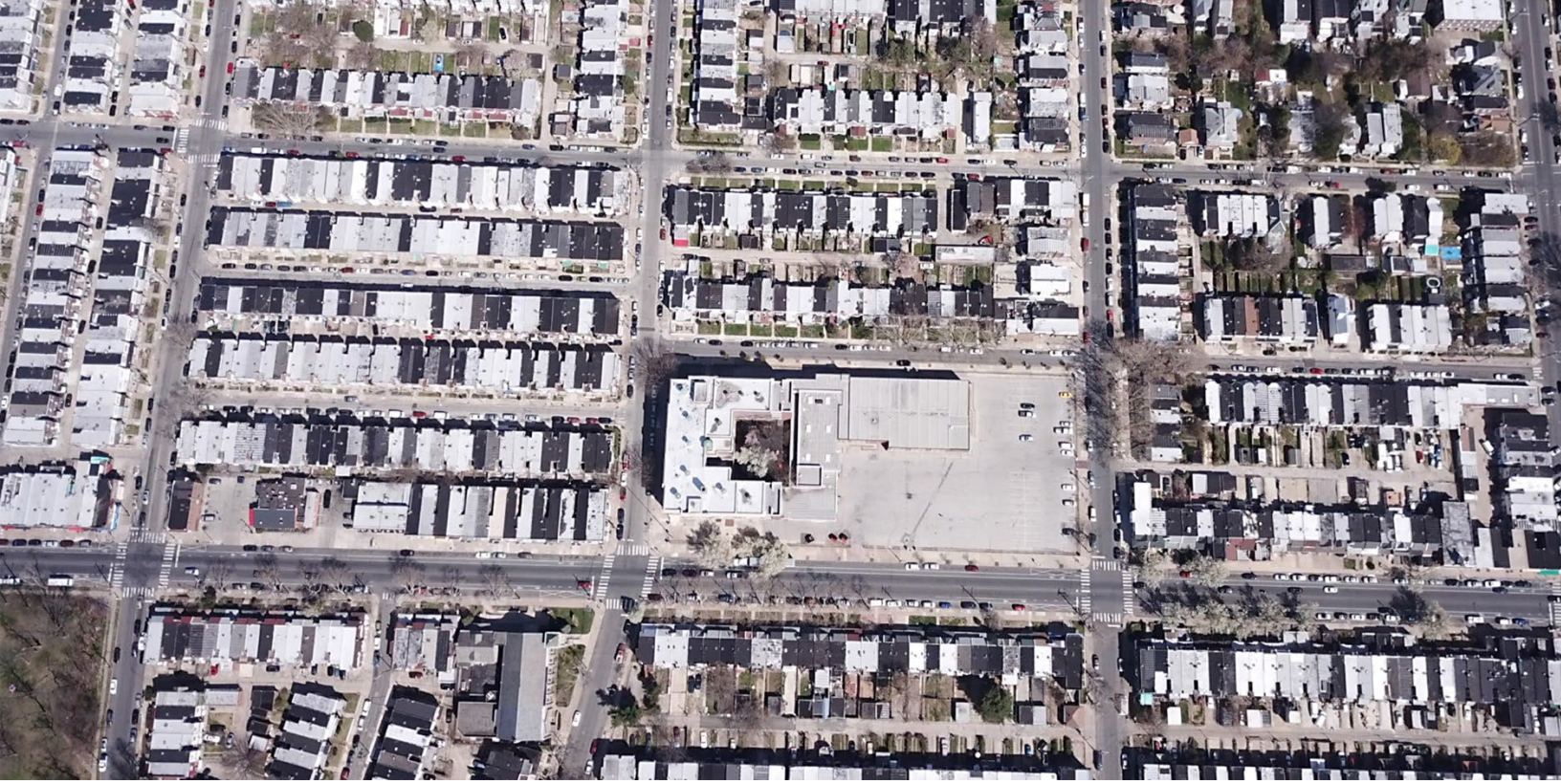
- Our indigenous and premodern ancestors would have found the idea of one individual hoarding wealth completely alien, not to mention unsustainable. Even the term "wealth" was once interchangeable with the archaic word "weal," which denoted a collective sense of well-being. Before the rise of modern capitalism, *gift economies* were the norm. In this model, abundance was periodically shared in order to strengthen a community's interdependence.
- With environmental and sociopolitical crises threatening collective well-being, redefining the "common wealth" more broadly and inclusively must be a priority. Potential indicators include the strength and rootedness of social networks, as well as gifts of culture, food, time, and mutual aid. Through TOEP, Olney Culture Lab (OCL) has embodied this spirit of generosity.

Share the space

- Placemaking has a history of drawing lessons about cooperation from the natural world, and one such ideal is the *symbiotic relationship*. Not all relationships are created equal, however, and only the relationships that evolve together slowly become mutually beneficial. If the process is rushed, symbiosis can be commensal (benefitting one member of the relationship while leaving the other unaffected) or worse, parasitic (benefitting one member of the relationship while harming the other).
- Space in the human world is always connected to politics and power. In Olney, land had been stolen from the Lenni Lenape in the 1600s and 1700s, exploited by developers in the 1800s and early 1900s, and threatened by racist policies of urban renewal leading to white flight in the second half of the 1900s. OCL was keenly aware of these colonialist histories, and worked hard to show that their commitment to the residents of Olney was mutually respectful.

Know your roots

- Olney is one of the most diverse neighborhoods in Philadelphia, so it is a place where sharing and connecting cultural traditions (“roots”) is key.
- Instead of seeing these cultures as being in competition, OCL leaders adopted a *decolonial* lens for their work. Decolonization can be complex, but at its core, it emphasizes “relation and interdependence in search of balance and harmony of life in the planet.”
- These ideas are inherent in many indigenous cultures across the world. Many TOEP artists drew inspiration from African diasporic practices, but they also noted that similar ideas could be found in native North American and Southeast Asian cultures, for example.
- Connecting with land through an indigenous and decolonial praxis offers spiritual and emotional connection to people from all walks of life. Animals and trees can be seen as ancestors or fellow beings, not just as resources to extract or specimens to analyze, as is common in western industrial and scientific practice.



Aerial view of the Olney Neighborhood, specifically North 5th Street and Lowell Elementary School. Photo Credit David Xiao.

INTRODUCTION

The Olney section of Philadelphia is a vibrant neighborhood that seems bigger than its 1.6 square miles. Located just east of Broad Street's northernmost reaches, Olney is known to many visitors for its main commercial corridor, North 5th Street, which is lined with over 360 businesses offering everything from a wedding dress to fresh papayas to a new TV. True to its slogan, "Where the global is local," visitors can also find Italian and Colombian bakeries, Jamaican jerk, and Korean barbecue.[1] For those who seek green spaces, there are playgrounds, parks, and tranquil walking trails that meander alongside Tacony Creek, a wide stream that wends its way south before emptying out into the Delaware River. Along Olney's northern and eastern edges (with East Oak Lane and Logan, respectively), there are also tree-lined residential areas dotted with stately homes, corner shops, and long rows of Philadelphia's iconic, brick "porch front" row houses. Finally, on Olney's southern border, the character of the neighborhood changes yet again as you reach the Roosevelt Expressway, a ten-lane highway that is one of the nation's oldest and busiest.

Olney is also remarkable for a degree of ethnic and linguistic diversity that is unmatched by any other neighborhood in Philadelphia or the state of Pennsylvania. Twenty-three percent of Olney's residents have emigrated to the U.S. from other countries, but, in contrast to some Philadelphia neighborhoods, no one ethnic group predominates over the others. In the most

1 North 5th Street Revitalization Project, https://shopnorth5th.com/shop/. Accessed August 21, 2022.

recent American Community Survey (ACS), the largest share of Olney's residents–49%–identified as Black or African American, but this category is not a monolith and includes within it both Wolof-speaking, recently-arrived Senegalese immigrants and English-speaking Black Americans who have called Olney home for decades. Nearly a third of Olney's residents identify as Hispanic or Latino, 60% of whom self-report Puerto Rican ancestry, with most of the remaining share split among Mexico and other Central American countries. Among Olneyites who have Asian ancestry, pegged at 15% in the most recent census, there is a vibrant community of Cambodian- and Vietnamese-Americans, many of whom came to the U.S. during the last thirty years, as well as a smaller group of residents with Korean ancestry (5% of the overall population), reflecting an earlier pattern of immigration to Olney in the 1980s.

Olney Culture Lab and The Olney Embrace Project

The Olney Embrace Project (TOEP) was conceived as a way to celebrate the neighborhood's pluralistic identity through place-based, cross-cultural dialogue. Project director and founder of Olney Culture Lab (OCL), Ambrose Liu, officially developed the project in 2018-19 with lead support provided by the William Penn Foundation. The intent was literally to "embrace" the neighborhood by activating its two bookends, North 5th Street and Tacony Creek. To date, OCL has commissioned twelve socially engaged artists and art collectives, musicians, composers, storytellers, and movement artists to produce a multi-disciplinary slate of artworks, performances, and events.

An ambitious capstone project, TOEP flowered out of seeds that had been planted some fifteen years before and were patiently nurtured over ten years of organizational growth. Liu worked with his longtime collaborator and advisor, Varissa McMickens Blair, first to map Olney's cultural resources and then to found and build OCL and launch TOEP, in which project they were joined by administrator and project manager Melissa Talley Palmer. All three are seasoned professionals with decades of experience working with large arts organizations with budgets to match, but they also made it a point to strike a balance between the managerial, assessment-oriented culture that has come to define the nonprofit sector and a more radical, grassroots approach. In this respect, TOEP honored the full humanity that OCL staff, their collaborators,

and neighbors brought to the project, and it was particularly significant that the community around TOEP was not defined in terms of easy binaries like artist/administrator or resident/visitor. Instead, participants in the project expressed themselves in terms of complex, lived identities, such as rock musician/administrator/first-generation immigrant, literacy teacher/quilter/activist, and much more.

As the world confronts intersecting economic, political, and environmental crises, experts contend that challenges like a sputtering global supply chain, the rising specter of fascism, and the rapidly accelerating effects of climate change cannot be addressed with business-as-usual thinking, and instead require the rapid deployment of sophisticated and innovative solutions. As critics point out, however, many of those “expert solutions” are what got us into this pickle in the first place, and they caution that top-down thinking without community buy-in is bound to be ineffective and wasteful, if not outright exploitative and harmful.

How can we break free from this limiting dynamic while bringing diverse communities together instead of driving them further apart? This white paper uses the lessons of The Olney Embrace Project to outline what it looks like when you use generosity and abundance to catalyze community development rather than the more conventional tools of money, expertise, and other forms of power. When authority is not only shared but is rooted in a sense of belonging, an ethic of humble curiosity emerges, unlocking the full range of a community’s material and intangible resources, its “common wealth.” This slow, yet wise process is familiar to close-knit communities the world over. "In the same way that discarded scraps of fabric can become brilliant, electric visual compositions in the hands of a talented quilter and storyteller like Olney resident Mama Carla Wiley (pictured below), powerful expressions of community and solidarity come from the methodical, deliberate work of enfranchising people and bringing them together." This wisdom is not esoteric or rare, although it is frequently forgotten in our myopic preoccupation with the bottom line. As Dr. Jamē McCray, a biologist, movement artist, and TOEP contributor put it, “You have to create reciprocity with the spaces, the people first. Once we have these connections, we can dream together, we can change narratives to ones we want. Sometimes you don’t know the water you’re swimming in until someone lifts you up.”

Olney resident, Mama Carla Wiley, and her community quilt. Photo Credit: Joe Ryan.

Methods and Frameworks

The Limitations of Economic Thinking

Methods are tools that shape our narratives and beliefs, and just as in less abstract realms like carpentry, whether you choose a lathe or a hammer has a big effect on the final product. The success of TOEP felt to us like it should be easy to articulate, but our research and discussions reflected a shared conviction that existing methods of evaluation could not account for the value of process and relationships. This is unsurprising given the fact that many of the things that make us most human, including our histories, art forms, and knack for creating community, have been progressively devalued in favor of financialized, free market thinking that demands profit and rewards individualism. The leaders of OCL have many years of experience in the arts and were therefore familiar with financialized metaphors like social capital and stakeholders but expressed reluctance about deploying those frameworks in this instance because they did not adequately capture their goals and intentions in TOEP.

An increasingly loud chorus of economists and business leaders, of all people, would agree with them. The economist W. Brian Arthur, for instance, who is credited with developing the modern economic study of positive feedbacks, has argued that his discipline must develop better ways of describing complexity and uncertainty. Building on his observation that modern economists often use obscure mathematics to make their conclusions seem more prestigious, he admitted, “I'd like to validate an older form of theorizing, where thoughtful discourse and reasoning in words are allowed. Historical reasoning has been pushed under by the extreme math emphasis, and I'd love to see that come back in full.”[2] Judging from a spate of recent, popular books in business publishing that apply lessons from storytelling, anthropology, art, and even French philosophy, many others agree.[3]

Decolonizing Arts Evaluation

This paper participates in these conversations, but it also inserts an important caveat. Long before White, western experts heralded the importance of understanding complex processes and patterns, indigenous leaders and communities fought to protect this wisdom and safeguard the rich bodies of knowledge that such holistic, rigorous thinking produced, even as they were dismissed by scientific experts and abused by colonial regimes for doing so. Therefore, while the pages below draw on ethnographic field study, history, and cultural studies, they also insist on doing so through a decolonizing lens. Decolonization means that communities can determine

---

2 W. Brian Arthur, “Economics in Nouns and Verbs,” Santa Fe Institute website, https://sites.santafe.edu/~wbarthur/econinnounsandverbs.htm, April 7, 2021. Accessed September 15, 2021. Preprint available at https://arxiv.org/abs/2104.01868.

3 See, for example, Seth Goldenberg, Radical Curiosity: Questioning Commonly Held Beliefs to Imagine Flourishing Futures (Crown, 2022); Gillian Tett, Anthro-Vision: A New Way to See In Business and Life (Simon & Schuster, 2021); Luke Burgis, Wanting: The Power of Mimetic Desire in Everyday Life (St. Martin’s Press, 2021); Frank Rose, The Sea We Swim In: How Stories Work in a Data-Driven World (W. W. Norton, 2021).

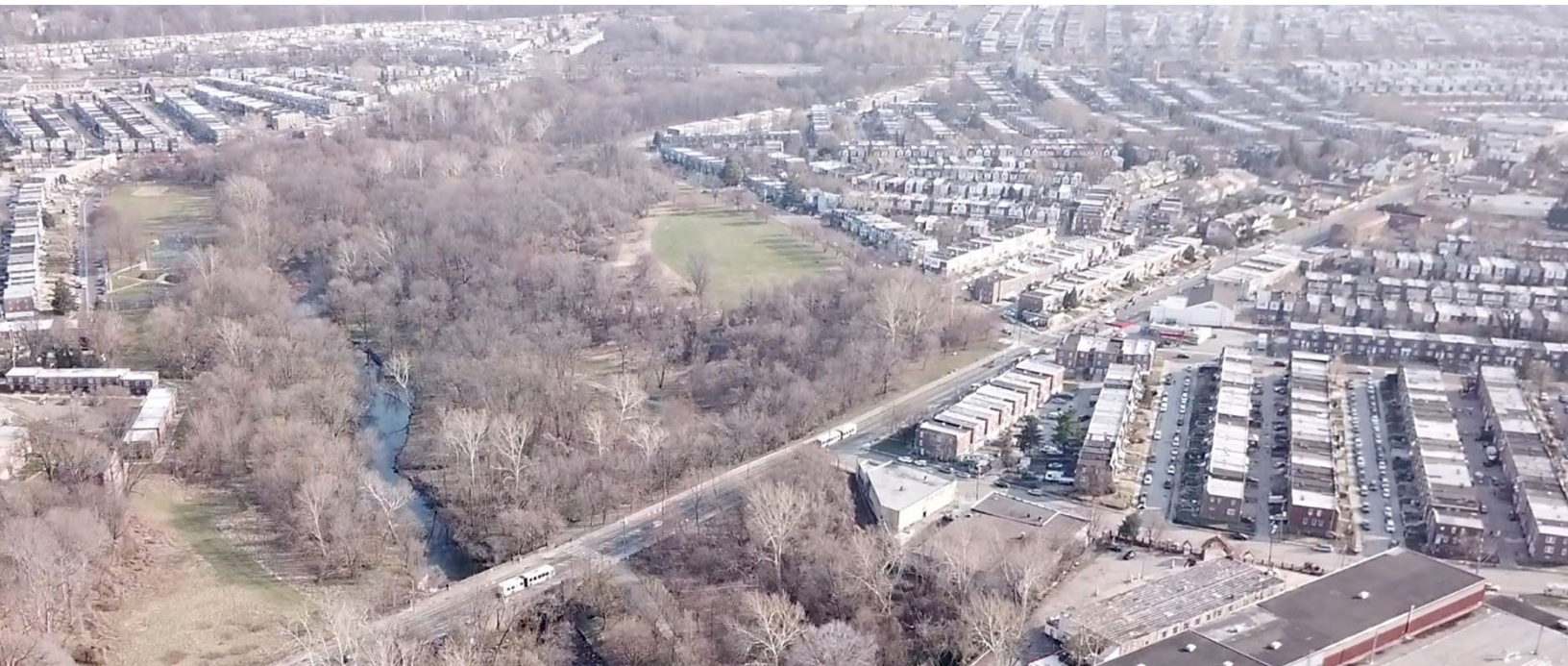
how to meet their own needs by providing mutual, grassroots aid rather than charity or expert advice from outside forces. Whether our knowledge is produced by the scientific method or corroborated by traditional knowledge, decolonial theory stresses that there is no single, universal truth that triumphs over everything else. It emphasizes equity and egalitarianism but insists that these freedoms also take place within an environment of interdependence. We are all responsible for one another, in other words, and no one, not even experts, rulers, or elected officials reign supreme.

A decolonial perspective is reflected in this paper and the work that went into it in multiple ways. For example, in collaboration with Liu and McMickens Blair, a conscious decision was made *not* to seek out thought leaders of national prominence since this had the potential to dilute or undermine the unique contributions of greater Olney's own thought leaders. Likewise, although OCL's work could be called "placemaking," participants rejected the colonialist mindset inherent in such a term. Olney was already a place with a unique and valuable culture before outside funding arrived. Furthermore, the idea that some communities are merely spaces to move *through* rather than distinctive places to move *to* echoes a long, harmful, and self-serving history of positioning lands governed by native, sovereign societies as unruly "wilderness" that requires cultivation and control.

Ecological Frameworks for Arts and Culture

The overarching idea of place and, by extension, its natural ecology was a guiding intention for TOEP, and the desire to understand the dynamics that "shape people's relationship to land and water" prompted OCL to think of Tacony Creek Park as one half of the embrace around Olney that the project's artworks would activate. For Liu, this way of thinking was prompted in part by the research of Mark J. Stern, a historian and social policy expert, and Susan C. Siefert, an urban planner who co-founded the Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP) at the University of Pennsylvania. The pair's research on "natural cultural districts" in 2007 and later signaled a break with the urban planners of the previous generation whose framework was more heroic and antagonistic.

Olney Neighborhood, specifically near Tacony Creek Park. Photo Credit: David Xiao.



While in the 1960s and 1970s, cities “died” or went through a “renaissance” thanks to large public works projects, Stern and Siefert showed how cultural districts were “self-organizing” and “interdependent,” and asserted that they could be “nurtured” with greater resources and investment.[4] Maintaining the vibrant culture of a city or neighborhood was more like keeping a garden in bloom than conducting an adversarial battle for the survival of the fittest.

The influence of Stern and Siefert’s work has been considerable, but its theories and assumptions still require refinement. In 2018, the placemaking scholar Anita McKeown described “an ethical imperative to expand creative placemaking’s understanding of an ecological approach.” As she further explained, “Although creative placemaking was informed by an ecological approach to revitalization (Stern and Seifert 2006), its next stage of evolution will need to show what an ecological approach truly means.” A crucial question for the field is whether an “ecological approach” can consider land through the lens of conservation and science without including the histories and people (indigenous and otherwise) who have helped maintain it.[5]

4 Mark J. Stern and Susan C. Siefert, "Cultivating “Natural” Cultural Districts" Culture and Community Revitalization: A SIAP/Reinvestment Fund Collaboration—2007-2009 v. 4 (2007), https://repository.upenn.edu/siap_revitalization/4.

5 For an example of an purely environmental analysis, see Jamie Hand, FARTHER, FASTER, TOGETHER How Arts and Culture Can Accelerate Environmental Progress, ArtPlace, Creative Placemaking Field Scan #4], 2018. In a more recent “state of the field” handbook, many others address placemaking and decoloniality. See Cara Courage, Tom Borrup, Maria Jackson,, Kylie Legge, Anita McKeown, Louise Platt, & Jason Schupbach, The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking (Routledge, 2020).

THREE REFLECTIONS FROM OLNEY

In keeping with these foundational frameworks, the pages below articulate three governing principles that have animated OCL's "embrace" of its community. These principles resonate with wisdom that has been protected and passed down across diverse groups of people and time periods, as well as the modern academic disciplines described above. We believe that every community has the capacity to undertake this work by examining their own complex ecologies and histories together, and it is in that spirit that we offer the following guideposts.

Steward the Common Wealth

If one word surfaced more than others when it came to referring to all that the Olney community had to offer, it was abundance. As mentioned above, the neighborhood has an uncommonly rich mixture of cultural traditions from all over the globe. Coupled with Olney's affordable rents for storefront properties along North 5th and elsewhere, these factors have made it an incubator for hundreds of successful small businesses, many of which offer food, services, or goods from their respective cultural traditions. Supporting small businesses and economic self-reliance is an important part of the Olney community, and so TOEP was not imagined as a rebuke of capitalism. Nevertheless, the artists, collaborators, and staff of OCL continually brought up how insufficient business-as-usual, economic thinking rooted in late-stage capitalism was to the present moment. The hunger for more, no matter the price, was seen as damaging to communities, of course, but also short-sighted. Why look outside the community for help or advice when there is so much here, informants asked?

What is the common wealth?

The traumatic events that have unfolded since the spring of 2020 have likewise prompted Americans of all backgrounds to weigh raw economic gain against other factors like well-being. In fact, as several commentators have pointed out during this period of reckoning, the word "wealth" derives from the Middle English word "weal" which was historically associated not with a definite amount representing one's net worth, but with a more collective sense of well-being.[6] Until the early modern period and the dawn of capitalism in the seventeenth century, it made little sense to think of wealth as something that one individual could hoard since wealth (or weal) was thought of as a common good. The anthropologists Theodoros Rakopoulos and Knut Rio admit that there was one Viking king in the eleventh century, aptly named Harald the Ruthless, who hoarded his riches, but he had to live in constant exile to do so. The much more common prescription for such excess across many societies was to give it away.

6 Danya Sherman with contributions by Jamie Hand and Chelsea Bruck, Building Community Wealth: The Role of Arts and Culture in Equitable Economic Development (Artplace America, 2020), 6.

Global Is Local Ethnic Food Tour in Olney. Kim's Korean BBQ Restaurant is a favorite stop. Photo Credit: Paola Nogueras.

For most of King Harald's Viking brethren, greed and stinginess were the most shameful qualities you could have next to cowardice. Diverse farming societies from many different historical eras would have agreed and held yearly feasts in which gifts were given and surplus food was eaten. This was the probable origin of the American tradition of Thanksgiving. Northwest Coast Native Americans like the Tlingit even held lavish "potlatches," communal feasts in which the more the host gave away, the more prestige he gained.[7]

OCL's commitment to place and community is consistent with an older definition of wealth, but it represents a sea change in the current conventional wisdom that more growth and speed are always better. As F. S. Michaels, author of *Monoculture: How One Story Is Changing Everything* has explained, "The master story [in early twenty-first century America] is economic. Economic beliefs, values, and assumptions are shaping how we think, feel, and act."[8] The specialized jargon of business has long since become utterly commonplace in areas like healthcare, education, religion, and even intimate, human relationships. Life coaches assert, for example, that friendships should not be formed on the basis of arbitrary factors like shared interests, but should instead be seen as an investment of time that will pay dividends in the future.[9] College

7 Theodoros Rakopoulos and Knut Rio," Introduction to an Anthropology of Wealth," History and Anthropology 29, no. 3 (2018): 275-291, DOI: 10.1080/02757206.2018.1460600. Richard Heinberg, "Capitalism, the Doomsday Machine (Or, How to Repurpose Growth Capital)," Common Dreams, February 25, 2021. https://www.commondreams.org/views/2021/02/25/capitalism-doomsday-machine-or-how-repurpose-growth-capital

8 F.S. Michaels, Monoculture: How One Story Is Changing Everything (Red Clover Press, 2011), 9.

9 Arlie Russel Hochschild, The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling. 1st ed. University of California Press, 2012.

presidents proclaim that education exists to turn out innovators in business, not to produce a well-informed citizenry.

Growth at all costs?

A central pillar of Olney Culture Lab's philosophy is that this kind of reductive, results-oriented thinking is insufficient for the kind of community development our moment of crisis requires. Becoming a trusted neighbor rather than a short-term colonizer requires a large investment of time to set down deep roots. Periodic cycles of outside economic investment can undoubtedly help further this growth, but the whole ecology is vulnerable if the continual growth of outcomes and deliverables is prioritized over relationships. Borrowing a concept from systems theory, the "reinforcing feedback loop," we find outside support for this idea in all kinds of disciplines. "With reinforcing feedback loops," the economist Kate Raworth explains, "the more you have, the more you get. They amplify what is happening, creating vicious or virtuous cycles that will, if unchecked, lead either to explosive growth or to collapse." More deer feeding on suburban gardens gets you more deer, or, for an example closer to the subject of this report, more points of contact between the staff of Olney Culture Lab and Olney residents leads to an even bigger and more robust local network.

Ecology and economics also tell us, sadly, that the reverse is also true. Destroying the habitats of the pangolin, an animal that looks something like a scaly anteater, has led to an even more precipitous decline in their numbers. Somewhat perversely, when pangolins became even more rare, the illegal market for their meat and scales expanded—simply because they were so scarce.[10] These cycles can be illogical, but that doesn't make them any less dangerous. Balancing loops, on the other hand, can work to restrain these increases. Unchecked economic growth might result in increased regulatory action or a financial recession, cooling an overheated market. Trafficking in pangolins might be reduced by concern over zoonotic transmission of viruses from wildlife to humans. The particular examples matter less than the fact that humans have the agency to affect these very large, often global cycles.

The potential dangers of unchecked positive feedback loops are apparent in the continual economic growth that the global financial system currently privileges. Unchecked growth, the late British economist David Fleming warned, could have grim, even catastrophic results. Observing the late-stage capitalist dynamics that have led many contemporary plutocrats to act like twenty-first century versions of Harald the Ruthless, the wealthy but dispossessed Viking raider, Fleming cautioned that, "Most of human history was bred, fed and watered by another sort of economy. But the market has replaced, as far as possible, the social capital of reciprocal obligation, loyalties, culture and traditions with exchange, price and the impersonal principles of economics." As a result, many of the usual societal checks and balances on runaway growth such as carnivals, feasts, or other traditions of gift-giving, including the construction of grand and expensive monuments like cathedrals and temples, have disappeared.

---

10 Alex Aisher, "Scarcity, Alterity and Value: Decline of the Pangolin, the World's Most Trafficked Mammal." Conservation and Society 14, no. 4 (2016): 317-29. Accessed September 2, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26393255.

Sharing the abundance

Against the gnawing anxiety that abundance will become scarce, practitioners and administrators in the arts have continued to preach the societal value of regular cycles of celebration, joy, and even excess. Liu echoed this idea, too, repeatedly citing generosity and gratitude as motivating factors in OCL's decision to partner with collaborators and funders to throw a multi-year celebration of Olney. "We exist in that space," Liu said in a recent interview, "where we just want to value the people that are around." In a historically anomalous, capitalist economy such as our own where the common wealth is all too often a static quantity that is hoarded by an elite, either in the form of currency or material goods, this kind of sentiment does not compute. In gift economies, however, which are far more common across historical and geographical areas, abundance is a tool that fosters social cohesion and mitigates against the darker outcomes that can result when social and ecological systems are thrown into disarray.

"We exist in that space," Liu said, "where we just want to value the people that are around."

Olney residents interviewed for this report echoed the idea that funding for community development is most successful when it is seen as a gift rather than an investment, or worse, a debt. Laurel Sweeney, a 30-year Olney resident who was instrumental in the founding and success of the Roots Community Garden in Fisher Park, alluded to this when she described the potential in Olney's children, saying that they merely need a place to express and develop. "They're already brilliant," she explained, adding that she only wished the city could open the usually locked pavilion opposite the garden within Fisher Park, perhaps offering some afternoon STEAM classes to help support them. Marquise Lindsey-Bradley, another longtime Olney resident and a talented young musician who currently attends the Cleveland Institute of Music, emphasized that "people [in Olney] are not necessarily unhappy with their lives," despite what outsiders might assume. They just needed a "channel" or "low pressure space" where they could explore their values and identities. And Dr. Jamē McCray, who paired with Flyground founder Lela Aisha Jones to help produce her "Revival Walks," participatory performances held in Tacony Creek Park, commented, "Olney really seems to be a resilient community already." Works like Jones' Revival Walks were "just highlighting and reminding people of a thing they already have."

Revival Walk at Tacony Creek Park. Photo Credit: Yeredith Cruz.

Curtain Call at an ArtsRising sponsored production. Photo Credit: Paola Nogueras.

Slowing down

Understanding wealth in broader terms like these helps illuminate a more expansive, yet inspiring common wealth, but that kind of deliberate and persistent pace can seem almost glacial in a culture that adores quick fixes, instant makeovers, and overnight success. Liu and McMickens Blair, however, spoke thoughtfully about how fallow periods in Olney Culture Lab's development let them take stock, plan, and build relationships that were instrumental in managing later seasons of abundance. This rhythm goes back to 2010 when the pair first met as colleagues at ArtsRising, an initiative designed to celebrate and promote the growth of "ArtsZones," Philadelphia neighborhoods where families and schools, as well as local business and community leaders, agreed to come together with arts organizations to benefit the wider community. Liu was assigned to Olney, among other neighborhoods, and in his role as ArtsZone Coordinator, he was tasked with learning what grassroots cultural resources existed. As ArtsRising's Executive Director, McMickens Blair was Liu's supervisor.

With its high profile and considerable resources, ArtsRising had several positive benefits for the communities it served. It set into motion a series of growth cycles for scores of community groups that had long operated under the radar of big foundations. Liu, McMickens Blair, and their colleagues had the luxury of time to get to know a wider range of the cultural producers in communities like Olney and to build trust with them. Many of the people who lived and worked in these neighborhoods also had the opportunity to pierce the veil of these powerful and well-established networks of funders and nonprofits that were operating in their backyard. As McMickens Blair remembers, "it was a very specific approach that we took to knock down walls . . . [and] silos," acknowledging that small, self-organized groups had probably existed for years, but often had no knowledge of major organizations which shared their values and were working right in their neighborhood. As a final benefit, ArtsRising affirmed the wisdom of a place-based

approach, using the specific conduit of leaders in local elementary and middle schools who were invested in promoting arts-integrated programming in their community. The fact that schools could serve as a nexus for bringing these rich resources together was an early proof of concept for OCL's intensely rooted approach.

When funding for ArtsRising's operations ceased at the end of 2013, Liu dedicated himself to voluntarily continuing the work, in collaboration with a determined group of stakeholders. They chose to focus on replicating the Olney Youth Arts Festival, a wildly successful community celebration that debuted that spring even as the larger initiative was sunsetting. The idea for the Festival had been circulating when Liu first started engaging the neighborhood in 2011. "I attended this community meeting, and I distinctly recall someone saying, 'We should have a festival and shut down North 5th Street.'" Rather than rushing to develop a marquee event, Liu decided instead to spend more time understanding the depth and breadth of the Olney community's cultural assets. Liu also offered the use of vital equipment such as his audio equipment which was used to support an open mic night held at St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church. Later, when attendance at the open mic night began dwindling, Liu used his knowledge of funding in the arts to help pay a local group to be the house band and "liven it up a little bit."

By 2012, a choir festival with local schools and church groups demonstrated the potential of intentionally gathering creative assets together, and Liu was able to share his birds-eye view of Olney's cultural providers to connect groups that had not known about each other previously. Still building an interdependent web of relationships, Liu sought out funding from local sources, including the office of 9th Councilman's District's Councilwoman Marian Tasco and then her successor,

Images from previous Olney Choir Festivals and Food Tours**. Photo Credits: Paola Nogueras* and Joe Ryan**.*

Cherelle Parker, as well as Collins ShopRite and Einstein Hospital, both of which maintain a significant presence in the greater Olney area. After the Choir Festival was established, further growth was achieved with the creation and execution of an outdoor event that is now Olney Youth Arts Festival. Co-productions with local partners around public space activations with live jazz music (Jazz on the Green at Fisher Park) and celebrations of performing talent and food (North 5th Street Food Tour) ensued. Yet in each case, these activities were allowed to evolve deliberately and organically, resisting the individualistic impulse to expand in size, scope, or area of geographic focus and instead building and then stewarding investments in the well-being of the community.

This was growth, but it was intentionally undertaken at a slow, measured pace, a point that OCL staff and associates repeatedly stressed. Dr. Jamē McCray, whose participation in TOEP initially came through her connection with Dr. Lela Aisha Jones, a Bryn Mawr professor and fellow movement artist, emphasized that, “Relationship building is a slow process. And that’s ok. It is definitely counter to the business narrative that we’re super-indoctrinated with now: time is money, outcomes need to happen yesterday. Focus on process, on relationships.”

In today’s outcome-focused world of bottom lines and tight deadlines, such a long-term investment might seem counterproductive, but even in a more constrained timeline, extending flexibility to the artists TOEP commissioned had a noticeable effect. Jones contrasted this sensitivity to other groups’ panicked demands for more content as the world “pivoted to digital”. As she recalled, “I just expressed that this hyper-productivity? I’m not able to do that. They listened. I know that it was heard. It influenced how we were able to negotiate the project and really have some time in between each event. To think about, what’s next, how does it need to be different.”

Images from past Olney Youth Arts Festivals. Photo Credit: Joe Ryan.

Truly hearing Jones' concerns was part intangible relationship-building, and part providing material support for things like the costs of childcare for her and some of her dance troupe members. Having more space and time during which these artists knew their children were safe and taken care of ultimately improved the quality of the work for TOEP, even though it involved a shift in plans. As Jones put it, "Interdependence is a dialogue and a conversation. The more people can get on board with it being a conversation and move away — a lot away — from the fear of being overcapacity the better." For his part, Liu said simply, "We were fortunate enough to have the money, so we were able to support the artists in a way that they needed."

As Jones put it, "Interdependence is a dialogue and a conversation. The more people can get on board with it being a conversation and move away — a lot away — from the fear of being overcapacity the better."

Decisions like these were not simply pivots made during the crisis of the pandemic, however, and several programmatic decisions reflected a longstanding commitment to the mental health and well-being of their collaborators. Melissa Talley Palmer, TOEP's project manager, took care to remind artists of the timeline and details associated with each event. Jones hoped that this practice would become more common because "individual artists just don't have the capacity to project manage. We do it, but it takes away from the work a lot of times." There is also implicit knowledge that an experienced administrator like Talley Palmer will have access to regarding history, community, and potential resources, bodies of knowledge that would require artists coming from outside substantial time to learn. Building flexible, interdependent relationships is not easy, but as economists and politicians debate whether the planet can survive another century of breakneck growth and remain habitable, these lessons from Olney should offer food for thought.

Share the Space

Sharing physical space together presented some unusual challenges since TOEP launched just as pandemic restrictions on social gatherings were being issued. Protecting the health and well-being of OCL's artistic collaborators and the public was of paramount importance, especially since Olney has a large population of seniors and people of color who were at risk of more severe outcomes from contracting Covid-19. With patience and creativity, however, the organization found many ways to bring people together safely, reflecting a core belief that bringing people together to experience music or art, or to share a meal, has a transformative effect on people's lives.

This commitment is a two-way street. OCL does not encourage others to "share the space" while cloistering themselves in offices that buffer them from the greater Olney community. In keeping with this ethos, many organizational and planning meetings take place in the community – whether that is local Olney businesses, churches, and restaurants, in Olney Free Public Library, in Fisher Park, or elsewhere. By not over-committing themselves to maintaining a

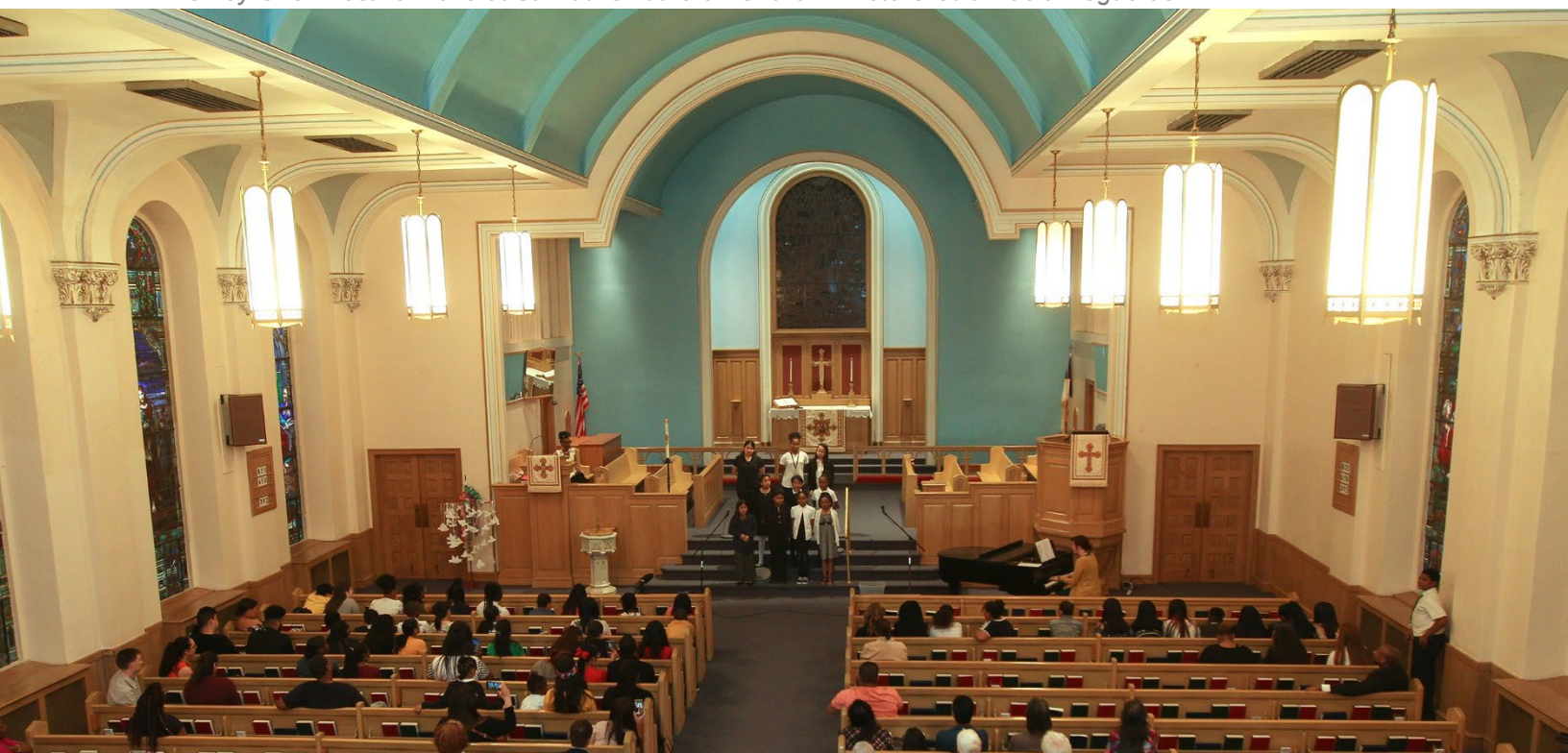
large, salaried staff or paying rent for a physical space within the community, OCL has made its commitment to centering people clear. They have become known to the community on the community's terms, giving mutual aid in ways that have strengthened ties with local organizations like the North Fifth Street Revitalization Project and the Cambodian Association of Philadelphia. Doing this required OCL to lend its support in ways that went beyond traditional placemaking activities, such as co-sponsoring a Covid vaccine clinic, but it also cemented those relationships.

"I think that that was our success," McMickens Blair reflected, recounting the considerable shoe leather it took to gain a comprehensive overview of the wide variety of Olney's cultural and artistic groups that operated under the radar. Getting to know these dancers, musicians, rappers, and griots was a formidable task, particularly since they were not listed in any directory or online search engine. But McMickens Blair, Liu, and the rest of the OCL staff made it a practice to show up regularly and consistently, whether it was "their" event or not. The network of contacts such an approach has garnered is a critical factor in what makes OCL unique.

Symbiotic relationships

Exhortations to share our space nicely start during the preschool years, and the benefits of doing so are not always clear in a cultural system that privileges the first, the biggest, or the best. Borrowing a lesson from ecology can offer an evidence-based way of understanding how a more complex, sustainable, and healthy system might operate. Rather than understanding all growth as good, ecological science takes a systems-based approach to understanding the flows, exchanges, and partnerships that develop in an ecosystem. Unlike the modern corporate system of mergers and takeovers, truly beneficial collaborations require investing a great deal of time to grow together if they are to be successful. In the natural world, symbiosis that develops quickly usually results in a parasitic relationship; only partnerships that have evolved together are mutually beneficial. Or, as Jones put it, "When you're talking about collaborations, the big question is, what kind of collaboration are you doing? It's not always a 50-50 draw."

Olney Choir Festival 2019 at St. Paul's Lutheran Church. Photo Credit: Paola Nogueras.



Interviews with Olney residents and TOEP artists highlighted the drawbacks of trying to run a program without coming from a shared social perspective. Marquise Lindsey-Bradley, the classical clarinetist raised in Olney cited in the previous section, provided a vivid example. Already a veteran of the Philadelphia arts scene, he spoke about the hypocrisy of programs run in urban communities like Olney by non-residents. “They don’t really walk around the streets. They don’t know what it’s like to be in the parking lot of the ShopRite at 11pm.” At the time of the interview, the ShopRite Lindsey-Bradley was referring to had been made tragically memorable within the community as the site where Khyrie Isaac, an Olney teenager and star football player, had been shot and killed in a random act of violence. “People have no idea,” 30-year resident Laurel Sweeney said, referring to the challenge of communicating Philadelphia’s gun violence epidemic to people who have not lived through it.

Placemaking, equity, and urban renewal

American society offers too few examples of how we might share space equitably in a way that benefits the common weal(th). Although a variety of public and private sector entities over the past twenty years have awoken to the value of place, it did not always result in equity and inclusivity. In the early decades of the twenty-first century, global and national funders and corporations, city mayors and civic groups, on down to community development networks and local interest groups put their support behind creative placemaking initiatives. In the U.S., this work was catalyzed by ArtPlace, a broad coalition of philanthropies, banks, and federal agencies that came together in 2010 to seed innovative, cross-sector projects that would have the power to truly transform communities. Thanks to this decade-plus of excitement and financial support, a variety of placemaking and community development projects were funded and carried out.

The financial and economic benefits of creative placemaking seemed to attract the most enthusiasm. Luis Ubiñas, then president of the Ford Foundation wrote hopefully in 2011 that, “Investing in arts and cultural institutions … can be the economic equivalent of bringing a manufacturing plant to a neighborhood and—from a cultural and quality-of-life standpoint—more than surpass it.” This was the vision of many placemaking projects: activating a deindustrialized, downtown core would supposedly kickstart a virtuous, self-reinforcing cycle that would improve a city’s cultural, social, and economic fortunes all at once. High-profile success stories like WaterFire Providence or Renew Australia seemed to confirm the hype, and media coverage centered on how these organizations turned “blighted”, post-industrial downtowns into vibrant, prosperous places.[11]

11 Rowland Atkinson and Hazel Easthope, “The Consequences of the Creative Class: The Pursuit of Creativity Strategies in Australia's Cities,” International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 33 (2009), 64-79. https://doi-org.10.1111/j.1468-2427.2009.00837. The most successful “creatives” are often white and very frequently male. Jamie Peck, “Struggling with the Creative Class,” International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 29: 4 (December 2005): 740–770; Bridget Conor, Rosalind Gill, and Stephanie Taylor, “Gender and creative labor,” Sociological Review Monograph Series, London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1–22.

Just who would ultimately benefit from these interventions was harder to say. How, exactly, would they "share the space"? In too many cases, they didn't, and necessary, frank discussions of power, money, and class failed to happen. The boundless enthusiasm for creative placemaking's potential in the early 2000s has therefore been tempered with merited criticism for the ways in which it worsened inequality in actual practice. Many times, its solutions were too shallow to effect real change, and the problems (such as crime, toxic waste dumping, and more) were too complex to be addressed with relatively weak tools like "increased awareness". As activists, community members in disenfranchised and marginalized areas, scholars, and others have worked to emphasize, practices like creative placemaking were also harmful because they reinforced colonialist practices that had (and have) negative economic, environmental, social, and political effects.

Today, a more robust dialogue about how placemaking has participated in these systems has started to take shape. Writing on behalf of ArtPlace, for example, Leila Tamari and Maura Cuffie, Senior Program Officers, acknowledged the power of the program which lay in "real people doing real work that is worthy of celebration," but also wrote to "reflect" and to "acknowledge" the harms that they had helped perpetuate. Many of these practices had been institutionalized through a workplace culture that prioritized attaining cooperation through conflict avoidance, feeling a "false sense of urgency" that sometimes resulted in overwork, and through other actions that amplified broader systems of oppression and injustice.[12]

Funding bodies have increasingly concluded that traditional economic measures may not be the best indicators of success in placemaking and have backed this up with real investment. A $40 million project called Reimagining the Civic Commons spearheaded by the William Penn Foundation, the JPB Foundation, the Knight Foundation, and the Kresge Foundation, for example, has recently provided practical tools and resources for measuring things like trust, engagement in public life, and stewardship. Other efforts include the Project for Public Places, supported by the Brookings Bass Center for Transformative Placemaking, a three-part series that examines holistic community impacts in three model projects.

Despite this progress, placemaking must continue to carefully reflect on its potential to reenact damaging histories, particularly the top-down policies of urban renewal in the 1960s and 1970s. Codified into law with the Urban Renewal Act of 1949, urban renewal helped metastasize decades of *dis*investment in places where Black/Brown people and immigrants lived. Supercharged by other federal investments and policies such as redlining and an interstate highway system that exacerbated white flight and destroyed healthy communities of color, these interlocking patterns worsened the health and well-being of American people of color for generations.

---

12 See also Alexandre Frenette, Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society 47:5 (October 2017): 333-345; and Robert Bedoya, "Creative Placemaking and the Politics of Belonging and Dis-Belonging," GIA Reader 24:1 (Winter 2013), https://www.giarts.org/article/placemaking-and-politics-belonging-and-dis-belonging.

An overpass on the Roosevelt Highway bisecting a community near Olney.

Olney was very nearly a casualty of these dynamics, as illustrated by its neighbor to the south. Nicetown was once a vibrant middle-class neighborhood where Black migrants and German or Eastern European immigrants were attracted by the same jobs in steel mills and factories that Olney's residents were. When planners used eminent domain to seize hundreds of homes for the construction of Roosevelt Highway, they justified the action by downplaying Nicetown's status as a place with its own history and distinctive culture.[13] The community of Olney, too, was threatened by this highway at one time, and even though their housing was preserved, the community was cut off from the larger city, its futures transformed by outsiders' visions of which places were worthy of protection and preservation.

These scars run deeper than appealing designs and good intentions can easily fix, as the distinguished urbanist and epidemiologist Dr. Mindy Fullilove showed in her 2001 article (and later book) called "Root Shock." Fullilove focused the reader's attention on these abstract dynamics through the story of one man, David Jenkins, whose family was driven out of their predominantly African American neighborhood of Elmwood in southwest Philadelphia when it was bulldozed for urban renewal. Although Fullilove met Mr. Jenkins in New York City through her work with unhoused people impacted by the twin epidemics of HIV and crack cocaine, she wanted to return with him to Elmwood to understand the depths of his loss. Overwhelmed by grief as he walked with Fullilove through an open field, Fullilove wrote, "David twirled and gestured with his arms. 'Here's where the church was. Patti LaBelle used to sing in the choir. Here.'" Fullilove notes that Mr. Jenkins was "very clear about the consequences of urban

13 Elizabeth Greenspan, "The Inequality Chronicles: Nicetown," Places Journal (June 2019), https://placesjournal.org/article/nicetown-inequality-in-philadelphia/?cn-reloaded=1

renewal on his life. He believes that it made it difficult for him to trust and feel settled. Relationships with places, as well as relationships with people, seem unreliable."[14]

Losing a sense of place is traumatic for anyone, but it is a disproportionately racialized experience. It matters therefore that the overwhelming majority of OCL staff and TOEP collaborators share these histories. Four of OCL staff identify as African American. Over 87% of the presenters for TOEP are Black or Indigenous, and over 90% of the program expenses for Olney Embrace have been dedicated to Philadelphia-based artists or groups who are BIPOC.

Everyone involved in the project was therefore mindful of how many organizations had come to Olney and communities like it "promising the moon," as McMickens Blair put it, only to leave once they had attained some short-term goal. By remaining steadfast in their dedication to the Olney neighborhood, OCL has demonstrated that they understand why space and place are so important and has gained valuable credibility in the community as a result.

Know Your Roots

"Roots" has two meanings in this section, referring to roots put down in the soil and to the metaphorical roots that connect people and families to different communities, places, and cultural traditions. TOEP is distinctive in that it connects people to roots in both the literal and metaphorical senses of the word. As discussed in the introduction to this report, Olney's cultural diversity is unmatched by any other area in the state, but it also boasts Fisher Park, a 23-acre area of woods, a community garden, and recreation facilities, as well as Tacony Creek Park, a watershed park that provides critical habitat for urban wildlife as well as several miles of paved walking trails. These green spaces have been under-used as public investment in them declined over the past few decades but understanding the stories they tell is a vital part of improving and sustaining the community's health and well-being.

Connecting cultures

As OCL and TOEP partners discovered, these stories can easily disappear if they are not collected, erasing radical stories of hope and partnership from our collective narratives. Oral histories revealed how the Roots Community Garden in Fisher Park, for example, became a site of community pride and cross-cultural understanding, connecting residents like Laurel Sweeney with newcomers who took turns maintaining the raised beds and sharing gardening tips, family recipes, and more. Sweeney recounted the exhilaration of being asked unexpectedly to represent Olney at the annual Philadelphia Flower Show in 2004, not long after the garden had broken ground. The garden also hosted potlucks using the bounty of the produce grown there, giving participants a chance to trade family recipes from West Africa, Cambodia, and Haiti. As community gardener Mark Smith from Olney reflected, "I've been able to meet incredible people, there's just so many people that are part of the garden from different places." Although they did not speak a common language, the shared community space allowed Smith to communicate \

14 Mindy Fullilove, "Root Shock: The Consequences of African American Dispossession," Journal of Urban Health: Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine 78, no. 1 (March 2001): 77.

Roots Community Garden at Fisher Park. Photo Credit: Wesley Brown.

with his Cambodian neighbor who introduced him to the herb lemongrass, straight from the garden. “It does unify us,” he remarked. “In a way, it is a language for the gardeners.”[15]

As with many histories not connected with the wealthy or powerful, however, these stories are vulnerable to being lost if they are not passed on, although they often speak directly to similar challenges communities are confronting now. Sweeney wrote after the wide-ranging interview, “Frankly, it felt so cathartic to reveal the depth of my experience working with that park with you.” Over the course of a few decades, we tend to forget our own stories, our own reasons for why and how the past happened, and how it shapes our present and future. Telling those stories can be therapeutic, if only on an individual level.

A reminder to know your roots is particularly appropriate in Olney, which has historically been a welcoming haven to immigrants. Through the twentieth century, the neighborhood was transformed as German immigrants were drawn to Olney for its wealth of manufacturing jobs, affordable housing, and green spaces, as well as its strong transportation infrastructure founded on the Broad Street line that made much of Philadelphia easily accessible. During the late nineteenth century, Olney was relatively rural and undeveloped, but by 1915, Olney had quickly become “one of the most German suburbs that Philadelphia has,” as one contemporary observer put it[16] German Americans living in Olney were keen to preserve their cultural traditions, and the area was famous for German food served at restaurants, bakeries, breweries, and butcher shops.

---

15 Interview conducted by Chamor Thomas with Mark and Shannon Smith, date.
16 Quoted in Russell Kazal, Becoming Old Stock: The Paradox of German-American Identity (Princeton University Press, 2004

Just like more recent histories, Olney's German history is vulnerable to erasure, although for different reasons than the stories of a self-organized, cross-cultural community garden might be lost. German immigrants in Olney and elsewhere worked carefully to identify with "old stock," meaning northern European immigrants who had come to America in the 19th century and earlier. "Stock" was a eugenicist term that referred to harmful and false notions of racial purity, but, for German Americans in the twentieth century, it meant that they could declare themselves superior to the immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe who arrived in large numbers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Many German Americans also took pains to separate themselves from Black Americans who had fled the Jim Crow south to find work in Philadelphia and other northern cities. By doing so, an ethnic group that had the potential to be treated as an inferior class managed to set themselves apart as if they were inherently superior. In other words, German Americans had the privilege of becoming White. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, this neighborhood of immigrants did not adapt well to new patterns of settlement in the later part of the twentieth century, first as large numbers of Korean families came to Olney, followed by a much more global mix of newcomers. According to the 1980 Census, 91.5% of Olney's residents were White, while 3.5% were Black. By 1990, the Olney population was only 59% White, and by 2020, that number had dwindled to 4%.

Indigenous roots

"Knowing your roots" also means acknowledging the fact that nearly all Olney residents since the 1680s have displaced its rightful inhabitants, the Lenape. Before William Penn's colonization of Philadelphia for the English crown in 1683, the Olney section was home to the Unami ("people down river") of the Lenni Lenape, sometimes called the Delaware Indians, a name the tribe prefers to use to this day. They would also have been part of the matrilineal clan of the Turtle Clan, the most important of the three clans of the Lenape and the one from which most sachems, or leaders, came. In the summer, the Lenape would live together in villages like Shackamaxon and fish, while they retreated to wooded areas to hunt in the winter. Olney was likely one of these hunting grounds. Tradition holds that all the Algonquin-speaking tribes (Nanticoke, Shawnee, Powhatan, and Lenape) were once unified, so many of these tribes would also regard Lenapehoking, including the area we now refer to as "Olney," as part of their cultural heritage and sovereign lands. Today, there are about 20,000 Lenape living in Oklahoma, as well as Ontario, Canada.[17]

Although the majority of Olney's residents have indigenous roots elsewhere, the opportunity to connect with the land as a source of spiritual and emotional reflection can be powerful. Professor Randy Gibson's monumental "Tacony Creek Suite," commissioned by TOEP and the Tookany-Tacony-Frankford Watershed Partnership, for example, premiered online in December 2020 with an accompanying concert film.

17 "Introduction to the Lenni Lenape, or Delaware Indians," Penn Treaty Museum, http://www.penntreatymuseum.org/americans.php.

Tacony Creek Suite Live Band. Photo Credit: Ambrose Liu.

Drawing inspiration from jazz, blues, classical chamber music, and more, the music sometimes alludes to the peace and stillness of nature as it mixes with the sounds of the city, but it also refers to contemporary political issues. The song “Live Streaming: 846,” for example, lasts for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, the precise length of time that former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin held his knee on George Floyd’s neck, an action that ultimately murdered him. “That is a duet of piano and saxophone, which represents the breath of the human body,” recalled Gibson. “It’s a very poignant song.”

Seeing a park as a site for personal and spiritual reflection is often different from how it is framed by primarily white fields like ecology and conservation. McCray, the biologist and movement artist who is also the Managing Director of the Alliance for Watershed Education of the Delaware River, spoke about the difficulties in well-intentioned efforts to incorporate Black audiences in environmentally focused programming, and the Black participants who may not recognize themselves in the language, the movements, or the rhythms used in those contexts. “Sometimes it’s a language disconnect. [White practitioners might be excited about] ‘arts and ecology!’ That is language I use, and love, and feel very comfortable in, but I am a trained scientist.”

In contrast, a western, scientific framework can alienate people who “don’t self-identify” with language having to do with conservation or environmentalism. Working from a praxis guided by African diasporic culture, however, McCray and Jones came together over a shared worldview derived from an indigenous framework that sees spiritual connotations with different African diasporic religions. The end goals for White conservationists and Black individuals connecting through African diasporic culture can have a lot in common, however, and Dr. McCray said that her hopes for TOEP’s interventions in Tacony Creek Park would result in “the place [becoming]

Revival Walk at Tacony Creek Park. Photo Credit: Paola Nogueras

a connection point between people and the land, the creatures (eagle, heron, beaver, fish, trees)."

Establishing a reciprocal relationship with the natural environment turns what has too often been an extractive, colonialist, and harmful pattern on its head. In her recitation for an October 20, 2020 Revival Walk, TOEP artist Lela Aisha Jones called on the participants to look around Tacony Creek Park and ask, "How can we serve this place?" Instead of, "How does this place serve us?" Instead of nature as a one-way provider of coal, lumber, or even intangible benefits like good mental health or reduced blood pressure, nature and humanity should be regarded as having a reciprocal relationship. As the late Chief Oren Lyons of the Iroquois Onondaga Nation explained:

> ***What you call resources, we call our relatives. If you can think in terms of relationships, you are going to treat them better, aren't you? . . . Get back to the relationship because that is your foundation for survival. It's not going to be human intellect, let me tell you. That's not big enough, not fast enough, not quick enough.***[18]

18 Chief Oren Lyons, Commencement Address, Fall 2005, College of Natural Resources, Berkeley University, https://nature.berkeley.edu/news/2005/05/fall-2005-commencement-address-chief-oren-lyons

CONCLUSION

The stories we tell about programs in the arts and community development can often be reduced to a set of numbers – whether of "butts in seats," dollars, performances, or new members. All these things *can* tell a more complex story of values, relationships, and history, of course, but they are ill-suited to the task. As a familiar axiom puts it, "When the only tool you have is a hammer, all the world looks like a nail." When we define success in terms of forward-moving values like growth, progress, speed, and innovation, it can come at the cost of slower virtues of contemplativeness, dependability, history, and memory. By zooming out to the scale of a city, region, or even a nation, organizations risk losing the intimacy that comes with mutuality and reciprocity.

It is hard to embrace "accomplishments" that, however poetic, can only seem like limitations or shortcomings in a financial system of winner-take-all. Boasting about being small or slow hardly seems like success when it is judged against a standard that values size and speed. For this white paper, a turning point in our thinking about appropriately valuing these countercultural achievements came in the form of an essay by the botanist and Potawatomi citizen Robin Wall Kimmerer, pondering the differences between a market economy and a gift economy. Kimmerer recounts an exchange with an anthropologist, who told her about trying to get one of his informants, an unnamed indigenous hunter, to tell him how his tribe usually stored the meat from a large kill. The hunter understood the question, but not its premise. As Kimmerer wrote,

> ***The hunter was puzzled. . . store the meat? Why would he do that? Instead, he sent out an invitation to a feast, and soon the neighboring families were gathered around his fire, until every last morsel was consumed. Asking again because the anthropologist was sure he had misunderstood, the hunter made his statement and underlying values crystal clear.***
>
> ***"Store my meat? I store my meat in the belly of my brother."***
>
> ***To name the world as gift is to feel one's membership in the web of reciprocity. It makes you happy—and it makes you accountable. Conceiving of something as a gift changes your relationship to it in a profound way, even though the physical makeup of the "thing" has not changed. A woolly knit hat that you purchase at the store will keep you warm regardless of its origin, but if it was hand knit by your favorite auntie, then you are in relationship to that "thing" in a very different way: you are responsible for it, and your gratitude has motive force in the world. You're likely to take much better care of***

Varissa McMickens Blair, Ambrose Liu, and Catherine Reed Holochwost. Photo Credit: Joe Ryan*.*

> ***the gift hat than the commodity hat, because it is knit of relationships. This is the power of gift thinking."***

When we (Ambrose Liu, Varissa McMickens Blair, and Catherine Reed Holochwost) read this language, it gave voice to the qualities of TOEP that had seemed so hard to justify given the structures of value and meaning that were available to us in contemporary discourses.[19] Naming the process of reflection and critical inquiry that shaped this paper (explained more fully in Appendix A) as a gift also reframed the challenges therein, especially for me, Catherine, the primary author of this paper. As I began to compile all the insights I had learned from the artists, leaders, and storytellers I interviewed for the project, I wondered how I could possibly fit these wide-ranging ideas into anything remotely readable, let alone useful. Convinced of how special TOEP was as a lesson and model, yet still not fully understanding the pandemic's lessons of how to weather radical deceleration and unprecedented change, I went through many messy drafts, trying to hang OCL's success on an authoritative concept that would not only explain to others why the program worked, but also justify its success.

The watershed years of 2020-22 also reframed my self-concept as "expert" and "professional" as the networks and supports of childcare, an office, and relatively unencumbered time that made that identity possible dissolved. It felt ironic but also appropriate that I was therefore drawn into a web of reciprocity and grace as I repeatedly received the gift of understanding, patience, and intellectual discussion that was simultaneously thoughtful and pragmatic. This living, imperfect process slowly shaped the conclusions presented here, and they shaped me, as well. Instead of concealing these backstage bits behind the curtain of the omniscient academic, as I have been trained to do, I acknowledge them here as an offering. In a time of great uncertainty but also great hope, may these reflections from Olney on sharing wealth, space, and history help us strengthen our communities and weather any coming crises together.

---

19 Robin Wall Kimmerer, "The Serviceberry: An Economy of Abundance," Emergence Magazine, December 10, 2020, https://emergencemagazine.org/essay/the-serviceberry/.

APPENDIX

The primary author of this paper, Catherine Reed Holochwost, conducted semi-structured interviews with eight key members of the Olney Culture Lab staff and their collaborators, and conversations were conducted virtually as well as in the Olney community. An event held in partnership with the Cambodian Association of Philadelphia in Tacony Creek Park also presented the opportunity to speak with additional collaborators in the field. The author also took part in bi-weekly staff meetings conducted via Zoom for three months in the fall of 2020, and held regular meetings with Liu and McMickens Blair during the summer of 2021 as lists of potential interviewees and a semi-structured protocol was developed. Additional conversations around shared drafts throughout the fall of 2021 through the summer of 2022 helped shape this paper's argument, language, and conclusions. Internal and external OCL resources were also reviewed, including completed grant applications, promotional videos and literature, and the six episodes of the first season of Audio Olney, a podcast commissioned for The Olney Embrace Project and developed by Linda Fernandez, Keir Johnston, and June Lopez of Amber Art & Design, with writing and research by Malcolm Burnley. Finally, these perspectives were also informed by a review of Olney's history ca. 1650-today that was based on archival and secondary research of visual and textual sources.

Methods

From the outset, our team acknowledged that collecting quantitative data around things like attendance or number of performances would not be especially revealing for this project, which left us to reflect upon the appropriateness of various qualitative methods. One early possibility we considered would have used measures of psychological resilience. This is an important theme for OCL's work, but TOEP practitioners and participants were clear on the fact that individuals, families, and communities in Olney were already resilient. In any case, this framing would not focus on joy and abundance, but trauma and other challenges, and we knew we wanted to avoid what the Unangax scholar of indigenous studies Eve Tuck has called damage-centered research which "looks to historical exploitation, domination, and colonization to explain contemporary brokenness, such as poverty, poor health, and low literacy."

The work of sampling and refining appropriate methods required a deeper process of reflection. In that way, the production of this report has followed a collaborative cycle of effort, communication, and growth that mirrors the organization's broader commitment to the process-based work of relationship-building. Across these cycles, several intellectual frameworks for how best to capture TOEP were adopted and then reworked as Liu and McMickens Blair held fast to a lived sense of the organization's "true north."

The complexities of the issues that TOEP collaborators brought up were not only cultural and social, but also economic and ecological, prompting a number of drafts that modeled OCL's path in terms of systems theory, a powerful model for the flows, exchanges, and partnerships

that develop in both cultural and natural ecosystems. Systems theory borrows concepts like equilibrium and entropy from biology and the physical sciences to explain a world that is dynamic and unpredictable, qualities that are highly relevant to any study of culture and community. What systems theory fails to acknowledge, however, is that a flexible and holistic way of seeing the world is inherent in indigenous philosophies across the world. This omission led us to discard systems thinking as an overarching framework.[20]

Perhaps the best fit between our approach and the available methods of qualitative analysis is with *critical systems heuristics* (CSH) which, as the name implies, considers systems and therefore complexity, but does not shrink from thinking about issues of power, ethics, and values. Although we discovered this literature too late to guide our process, CSH's frameworks for analysis across disciplinary borders and its emphasis on including both experts and non-experts make it an important reference point for future evaluations and reflections in creative placemaking.[21]

20 There is a well-developed literature in this area, but we found the following report to be particularly relevant for placemaking and community development. Leah Levac, Lisa McMurtry, Deborah Stienstra, Gail Baikie, Cindy Hanson and Devi Mucina, Learning Across Indigenous and Western Knowledge Systems and Intersectionality (Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 2018).
21 Werner Ulrich, "A Mini-Primer of Critical Systems Heuristics," Werner Ulrich homepage, https://wulrich.com/csh.html. Accessed September 7, 2022. A longer overview is available in Werner Ulrich and Reynolds, Martin, "Critical Systems Heuristics," Martin Reynolds and Sue Holwell, eds. Systems Approaches to Managing Change: A Practical Guide, London: Springer, 2010, 243–292.

CULTURE IS PLURAL.