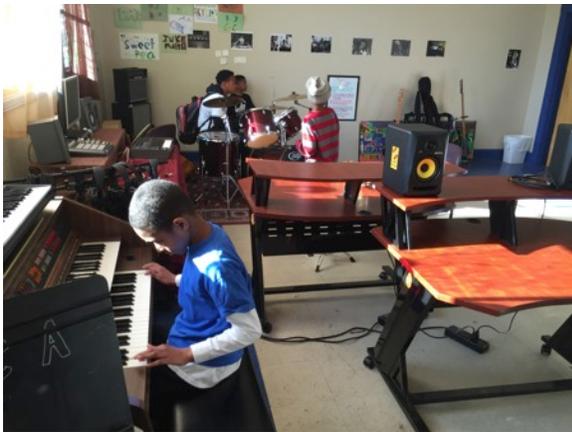


## **Open Studio Saturdays: A Community Pursuit into Public Space and Public Art**

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### **Abstract**

The Burton St. Community hosts a number of programs catering to all identities and peoples. Neighborhood residents and further traveling community members alike converge on the red brick building for festivities throughout the year. This semester, I have been adding to the pool of available programs with community partner and LEAF teaching artist, Nex Millen, to create a welcoming and supportive artistic development space. We have opened the studio to any and all artists on the third Saturday of each month in an effort to build social networks, share creative work

with others, and grow a stronger beloved community while providing public awareness for Burton St. Community Center. We have held four consecutive events so far and continue to provide community programming past the conclusion of this paper. Throughout this paper, I contemplate the efficacy of community arts programs based on previous research and observational material, concluding with a description of how these programs add value to the Burton St. Community and effectively turn ‘space’ into ‘place’.

## **Background and Origins of The Project**

Programs with a foundation in arts engagement have the capacity to create a network of civically engaged people in local communities through practices of cultural celebrations, engaging the youth, and creating spaces where a beloved community can flourish. Throughout this paper, I have presented evidence in categorized form describing the necessity of continuing arts education as well as the importance of extended commitment to the students and programs over a long period of time. The past three years has been a glorious time for me, due to my engagement with the Burton St. Community. I’ve worked with the after-school program, attended and helped create events in the community center, taken care of the OneMic Studio, and contributed to the community garden. Most importantly, I’ve made friends and allies devoted to creating spaces for communal artistic expression and youth development. These people all act in a support network, constantly refueling each other and revitalizing the spaces around us. I count myself incredibly lucky to be a part of this beloved community and web of connectedness.

The programs and people at Burton St. are constantly working to make voices heard. These are powerful people who are actively creating and changing the world around us. Too many people live lives of quiet desperation. As we grow into this world taking jobs and paying bills, we come to learn all the rules by which we must act, the boxes we must stand in, and the institutions in which we must take part. There is an underlying assumption that we are obligated to be part of systems that often do not represent our interests as individuals and community members. But why do we stand idly by, allowing ourselves to be disengaged and disconnected from those around us? What factors inhibit us from creating the neighborhoods we want to live in? As citizens, we often get caught up in our small circles of comfort and safety and put on blinders to the wealth of diversity and amazement found in the experience of others just arms reach away. I suggest that this individualization and compartmentalization of the self is indeed a learned practice. Through systems of control and authority as well as punishment for deviance, people become alienated from one another. Isolated individuals feel powerless over time to change the injustices they see and feel deeply. Thus, the question of a social activist becomes how to rise beyond and push back from the apathy of silent compliance and systems of oppression inhibiting thoughtful and active engagement. Can we reinvigorate Socratic energy into a properly functioning communicative democracy?

I believe arts activities and engagement lies at the center of this renewal in neighborhoods and across cultural differences through international borders. “Art is a stylized form of fantasy. A mental type of adventure, in which limits tend to lose their tight grip on our mind, fantasy, like humor, respects no boundary” (Zerubavel: 92) Art gives individuals the opportunity to engage with their truest selves and share it with others as a symbolic representation of identity, bringing people together to build community, share culture, and transcend language barriers.

As such, I have put time and effort into programs that attempted to create connections that foster collective civic action, an “essential ingredient in a democratic society” (Borup, 2011: 84) While

Burton St. Community Center affiliates run a number of programs I have chosen to focus on a monthly OpenMic and jam session in the OneMic studio. The program incorporates opportunities for people to share across a variety of artistic mediums.

### *Researcher's Position*

My motivation for this project lies in the continued effort of social transformation towards a more just and socially equitable society and planet. The youth represent the seeds that will grow to diverse, thoughtful, inclusive communities of young people who take their place as economically, politically, and socially engaged citizens. I'm highly interested in deconstructing barriers of race, class, gender, and age; recognizing these as primary identity markers which are often used as lines to divide and alienate individuals from peers. These divisions are highly important to youth culture as the social groups they create when they are young help shape their world view for years to come. In addition, the educational institutions of primary school and after-school programs are a couple of the places youth from all walks of life congregate before social stratification insulates us from people in other socioeconomic climates later in life. The time of primary education represents a critical period for individuals to understand social inequality before becoming its plaything.

The arts hold a special place for me because much of my identity as a youth was shaped through involvement in spoken word poetry and a community arts organization based in Chapel Hill called The Sacrificial Poets. This organization, the mentors who ran it, and the youth I came to call family taught me the value of self-expression and empowerment especially for young people who are so often disenfranchised and marginalized due to age discrimination. The arts education I received with The Sacrificial Poets put me in a position to bring insight to the arts programming involved in this project as I have been trained in workshop facilitation and safe space creation. I have lead high school after-school club meetings as well as provided programming for festivals and conferences. I recognize that much of the work I have done with youth arts programming has been with high school aged students. The work I have done for this project however was focused on elementary and middle school aged children from 5-13. The biases I have about differing age groups of children, particularly abilities to converse and understand complex social issues may inhibit my grasp on desired outcomes.

As part of a further investigation of community assets, I've recently taken up an internship at the OneMic Music Studio, a space designed by local audio engineers and funded by the WNC non-profit organization, Lake Eden Arts Festival and their Streets and Schools division. The founding members, Jonathan Santos, Nex Millen, and other LEAF teaching artists are working as a collective labeled Organic Synergy spreading "glocal" soul. This collective generated the OneMic studio curriculums and provided a case study and interview material. All of the individuals who run programming are thoughtful human beings, practiced in their respective artistic fields, they have access to an extensive knowledge base, and they are relationship and hustle oriented.

## **Methods and Work Undertaken**

Nex and I have been publicizing the event and opening up the studio on the third Saturday of every month to community members interested in sharing song, dance, poem, or otherwise. Here I offer my own reflections and field notes for further analysis.

On January 16<sup>th</sup>, we started assembling a mega-table out of six, eight-foot foldable tables in the multipurpose room. I had called a number of friends, poets, and community members, and we had

advertised sparsely around the neighborhood. As we gathered food, some youth who lived in the neighborhood walked in as well as a few who were around while their family members were engaged in other programs around the center. Seven of us sat at the end of the mega-table; four youth, two UNCA students, and I munched on a menagerie of items prepared by the Burton St. Staff. I suppose I was ambitious with the amount of table space and chairs I thought we would need.

I asked if anyone had any artistic skills, talents, or abilities they would like to share. Two young ladies who I suspected were in elementary school were ecstatic at the prospect of doing handstands and cartwheels for a live audience. They did not disappoint. Although they had to leave soon after their acrobatics, a number of UNCA students shared poems. We asked the remaining youth if they had anything to share. They exclaimed “we wrote poems for this poetry slam last year.” The young gentlemen tried the best he could but could not grasp the lines from his memory. Eventually, they ceased their mental efforts and left. The remaining college students packed up the tables and put away the food. On our way out of the building, we spotted the pair of boys sprinting back towards us, one, with a thick anthology raised above his head. The book was a published collection of young authors that they had both been featured in. We all walked back inside, sat back down and listened to two fantastic odes about the families of these young people and the amount of love that surrounded them. I was thankful to have been able to listen.

On February 20<sup>th</sup>, we had a small crowd of only UNCA students. A group of 5 young ladies came out who had heard of the event on Facebook. However, they all came to listen, none to share. So instead of moving all the food to the multi-purpose room, we stood around a table in the kitchen while I shared quotes from Audrey Lorde’s “*Poetry is not a Luxury*” I had prepared. After, I led them to the community peace garden where they met Dwayne Barton, the space’s owner and steward. He shared some of the history and efforts that have gone into various sculpture installations. One student shared, “my mind is so blown.” The students, while they did not get the performance art experience I had imagined, got to share in a piece of the community, which they enjoyed. In addition, I hear one of the students who attended has since talked with Dewayne about working on his land with UNC Asheville’s Black Students Association. In retrospect, the OpenMic facilitated circumstances so people could engage with the places around them, find community, and network future events to reinvest value into the neighborhood.

The OpenMic on March 19<sup>th</sup> was a bit of a hitch. We only had two attendees in the morning, who were there more for Nex’s expertise rather than our event. I did not advertise well enough, and everyone I contacted last-minute could not make it. So Nex and I sat in the studio watching old Muhammad Ali interviews and talking about white supremacy. Although we did not engage with that many people, we critically engaged with material and decided that the OpenMic could morph into a workshop space where we can have open forum discussions on community issues and arts, all the while helping each other grow.

April 16<sup>th</sup> went better than I expected. I walked into the studio at 1:00 PM to Nex laying out ideas for generational-transitioning-leadership. There was a break dancing instructor teaching “top rock” and “6 step” dance patterns. Many program participants and I helped string a bass guitar for the first time. A five-year-old boy and his father came in shortly. The young boy asked to play the drum set. I asked if I could play along on a hand drum. The youth did not disappoint. This kid flung himself into a 16<sup>th</sup> note riff of alternating snare and high hat strokes, and everyone in attendance was stunned. A friend of mine came out to witness, said she loved it, and has since gone to more community arts events in her area.

## Original Research and Outcomes

Over the last four months we have conducted four events with an approximately forty people total in attendance. In the future, it will be helpful to have an attendance sheet to solidify quantitative values. The research I conducted was aimed at facilitating a productive, thoughtful, and encouraging space for community growth. I spent hours mulling over bell hooks and Audre Lorde texts looking for what I felt were needed quotes. I learned how to string and tune a bass guitar so it could be used in a jam session. I have learned many different kinds of maintenance work, which help in the continued creation of art in the OneMic studio.



LEAF SCHOOLS & STREETS

**Burton St  
1Mic  
Studio**

Burton St Recreation Center  
134 Burton St Asheville NC  
Burtonst1micstudio@gmail.com

WORKSHOPS & SESSIONS

**TUESDAY 4PM - POETRY AND SONG WRITING**  
W. JONATHAN SANTOS

**WEDNESDAY 4PM - THE CULTURE OF HIP HOP**  
W. NEX MILLEN

**THURSDAY 4PM - PERFORMING ARTS**  
W. LYRIC JONES

•OPEN STUDIO TUESDAY 6PM-8PM & EVERY 3RD SATURDAY 12PM-3PM•

OPEN  
STUDIO

Burton St  
1Mic  
Studio

**Saturday**

**Burton St Community Center**  
134 Burton St Asheville NC 12pm-3pm

Calling all Producers, BeatMakers,  
Musicians, Poets, Rappers and Singers!  
Come show us what you got!

LEAF SCHOOLS & STREETS



## Challenges Faced and Responses to Those Challenges

The OpenMic Studio Events have encountered a number of obstacles and challenging realizations. First, as mentioned above, the limited time we have with participants makes building relationships difficult. Time spent together is the most important part of growing a web of connectedness as common experience breeds common interests.

Advertising and publicizing have also been difficult judged by low participation. We have seen between two and seven participants each month while my hope was to have an attendance of between twenty and thirty. In February, I created a Facebook event that Rocky The Mic (The UNCA spoken word poetry club) was meant to host and make available for the public. However, my own technological illiteracy caused a Facebook event created Hosted by myself and for Rocky The Mic.

Perhaps that is why only UNCA students attended. In the future, I will have to utilize targeted advertising and publicity to reach wider desired audiences.

Residents of Burton St. face more challenges as mechanisms of displacement and subjection, such as gentrification and urban renewal, roll through the neighborhood. Gentrification is a process, which involves members of the socioeconomic elite acquiring property at low cost, and then raising property values. Some people who have lived in a home for generations are now facing higher taxes for their 'higher value' property to the point they are not able to pay the taxes, having their homes foreclosed, and the occupants evicted. Nex put it this way, "we have all colors, creeds, and races come to Burton St. to enjoy the community activities, which is good in some ways. In some ways, it's not because it raises the value out of the reach of people who were born here for generations. So it's bittersweet."

Another major challenge has been the various sections of highway, strategically constructed over neighborhoods of marginalized populations. For Burton St., those highways have been 240, and I-26. Echo, who is a University of North Carolina Asheville student and volunteer at Burton St. said, "it displaces a bunch of people, forces them to move out and then also drug and crime rates increase after this so-called development takes place so it really puts a strain on those who build community." Various scholars have taken to researching the real costs of urban renewal in the wake of its disastrous effect on displaced people. Mindy Thompson Fullilove writes of the challenges urban development causes for collective efficacy in her book, *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, and What We Can Do About It*.

Kindness in urban ghettos had multiple sources... which had the history of being the kindly bulwark against oppression... Gardeners, who planted crops in small backyards, had produce to share. The men of many professions who managed the streets minded the wild children, to limit as much as possible their descent into harm. The musicians and dancers and athletes gave content to consciousness: ideas to think about and access to the tools of creation.... Kindness worked through the collective as both buffer and glue. It was a force for tolerance and respect: it was not a guard-all shield. Kindness did not stop child molesting, it did not stop wife beating, it did not prevent children from torturing each other, it did not prevent unemployment. It did ooze into the interstices to ease the pain of all these things.

Although the gentrification and my bias about the community in west Asheville has made me hesitant to call it a 'ghetto', the spaces and programs utilized at Burton St. exemplify the kind of kindness Fullilove talks about. However, despite continuing efforts, urban renewal disrupts this kindness in the diaspora of previously existing community members and such compassion is often not re-created in a similar or effective way.

Certainly, after urban renewal, individuals remained kind, and organizations continued to nurture rituals of concern. The field of

dispersion, however, appears to have altered substantially. In the compact space of the ghetto, a tight field of activity was created, through which acts and words might pass quickly.... The shattering of the field, which is a principal outcome of urban renewal, had an enormous effect on kindness because kindness was passed through the field. In the aftermath of urban renewal, individuals were preoccupied with making a new life, and perhaps they could not be as kind as they had been previously. At the same time, given the loss of the field, the kindness did not extend as far as it had before. The buffering effect of the kindness was lost, and the negative behaviors and attitudes that had always been present were given greater scope. Given the other difficulties that were to come, the decline in kindness, however small, triggered a downward trend in kindness over the ensuing decades.

Urban renewal continues to afflict the Burton St. community as a plan is working its way through city council this 2016 that proposes another extension of I-26 that will demolish thirteen homes in the Burton St. Community. Residents perceive the destructive highway expansion as highly likely. I have heard from neighborhood residents that the best options are to get homes appraised and pressure the city government to allocate money for community reinvestment as they have for highway expansion. However, there are those continually working to mitigate the effects of urban renewal and gentrification. Neighborhood Trusts offer one approach, as a Non-Profit focusing in them “believes wealth creation is generated from a combination of improved financial awareness and self-confidence, and access to financial tools which translate income into assets. Neighborhood Trust measures program success as the achievement of financial stability and financial mobility for low-income families via access to affordable financial services, credit establishment, and asset accumulation.” (Neighborhood Trust Financial Partners) Such programs have been effective. For example, the organization just quoted has had forty-three percent of their clients’ unbanked money become banked. In addition, forty-nine percent of clients have improved their credit score with the average increase being fifty points. Further research into the effectiveness of Neighborhood Trusts and Historic Site Declaration could prove useful.

## **Project Outcomes and Sustainability**

### *Cultural Celebrations*

The monthly and continuing programs that Nex and I manage “intentionally build connections and facilitate cooperation. Such events develop collaborative problem solving skills that can be used to address other issues, and they increase people’s comfort with group activity in the public or civic arena” (Borrup, 2011: 84) The OpenMic Studio utilizes intersectionality by providing a platform which caters to a variety of artistic mediums as well as “reduces isolations and builds connections across divides of ethnicity and social class.” (Stern, 2003) Artists come from surrounding communities to share in an intersubjective experience. (Stolorow, R. D. & Atwood, G. E.: 1979, 1993). Some bring instruments; some utilize the studio’s growing collection of guitars, percussive instruments, bass guitars, microphones, audio engineering software, and saxophone. Mark Stern and Tom Borrup found that “Eighty percent of participants in community cultural activities travel outside their own neighborhoods to attend these events.” The OpenMic Studio gives me an

opportunity to interact with the cultural education going on at Burton St. I have gained access to the community center without living in the community and actively gentrifying it.

### *Longevity and Continued engagement*

As research conducted by Roth and Brooks-Gunn illustrates, both meaningful relationships and sustained participation over a long period of time are integral to the success of programs and their ability to make an impact. The OpenMic Studio takes place over the course of a few hours once a month. One three-hour program cannot expect to alter participants' cognitive framework or behavioral and artistic development. Thus, our program must continue over a long period of time; years even, to see results. As I have been learning the meaning of community engagement, I have come to realize the necessity of sustained participation. The longer people continue to build relationships and space, participation only grows and creates value. Alas, the two gentlemen I originally volunteered for the after-school program with, no longer go, despite still being in Asheville and having sent them numerous invites.

UNCA students, by and large, seem to have a fleeting relationship with the Burton St. Community. While many students bridge their way into the community via service-learning for course credit, most are in one semester and out the next. I suppose it would be hard for youth to create meaningful relationships with volunteers who leave so often. Only a few UNCA students have stuck around past the end of their service-learning class or graduation for that matter. One staff member remarked, "I think if there were more people except the same ones over and over and over again. I think if they would actually show their face you would see some changes, but you can't keep bringing up the same issue from the same person all the time and think that something's gonna get done. It's just not gonna happen." It will take a variety of continuously engaged students motivated to work and grow with the Burton St. Community Center. Such strong relationships between program participants and students, staff, and alumni would solidify the community's connection with the university.

## **Ties To Academia**

Copious research in various artistic fields and locations demonstrates that creating and bringing activity into meaningful public spaces can "generate collective efficacy, trust, and social capital". (Borup, 2011: 76) Communities of people who come together in celebration, education, and management of public space can have profound impacts on individuals of all ages and larger group interests as well.

It has been well-documented that arts-based programming can have positive effects in the lives of youth. Results from the YouthARTS Development Project found that "arts programs really can have an impact on youth. Not only can such programs enhance young peoples' attitudes about themselves and their futures, but the programs also can increase academic achievement and decrease delinquent behavior... Youth who participated in YADP art-centered after school programs showed improved anger management, increased ability to stay on task, less delinquent activity, improved attitudes toward school, and increased self-esteem and self-efficacy." (Farnum & Schaffer, 1998)

Indeed most community organizations recognize the value of arts programming, as a Wallace Foundation study reported, 63 to 67 percent of "youth development, community development, education, and recreational organizations are involved with the arts" (Walker, 2004) In addition,

after-school arts activities allow youth who are disengaged from school to form a sense of identity through exploring their strengths and creativity.

The amount of time participants spend in these structured activities is an important mitigating force on the strength and outcomes of arts programs. “Programs that offer only limited contact with adolescents cannot expect to alter behaviors. A review of 15 methodologically sound evaluations of community-based programs for at-risk youth found that longer-term, more intensive programs that engage youth throughout adolescence appear to be the most effective (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Additional research conducted by Catalano et al. (2002) found that 80% of the most effective programs offered their services for nine months or more.” (Wright et al. 2006) However, a longitudinal study found that the quality of extra-curricular activities rather than the quantity of time was most influential in positive outcomes. (Peck et al. 2008)

Despite inconsistent methodologies across studies, the combination of recent, overwhelming results and my own research has led me to conclude that structured, arts-based activities have a positive effect on participants in terms of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral development. The longer a participant stays in a program, the more likely they are to cultivate meaningful relationships, develop confidence and self esteem, and hone new skills. While sustained participation and the quantity of time spent in a program is meaningful, research shows the quality of curriculum and staff has the most important consequences.

## **Conclusion**

This research has led me on a journey discovering the value of people, places, and programs in the Burton St. Community. It is the interaction between these three factors where I see the foundation for a productive community. Meanwhile, I’ve also been learning the meaning of participation and cultivation of local citizenship. I have found narrative shifts in my own life referencing events and objects of the center no longer as ‘the’ but now rather ‘our’. I have witnessed young people grow in terms of responsibility, respect, and empathy. None of this could be done without the places that frame communal action and efficacy at Burton St. The OneMic Studio provides grounds for process of turning ‘space’ into ‘place’. “The term ‘place’ in creative community building refers to a location within a community that has achieved deep and widespread meaning and value to locals and visitors alike. Taking mere ‘space’ and turning it into ‘place’, (what some observers call “place making”) means creating something collectively valued and used as a key building block to a vital community.” This is what engaged groups of people have done in the Burton St. Community, used “their creativity, their cultures, and their civic instincts to result in a stronger civic culture.” (Borrupt, 2011: 76)

Those who act as ‘stewards of place’ are especially to thank. Some research shows “that 80 percent of the success of a public space is the result of its ‘management’” (Kent, Mason: 75) (Borrupt: 75) The stewards who utilize the arts and arts education stand with a particular advantage as creating a work of art requires the artist to focus on an entire situation within a frame. So often we focus on figures in the foreground of our lived experience ignoring the environment around us. However, artistic frames offer a unique opportunity to practice stewardship as well as the notions of intent and impact.

An artist makes an “attempt to defy the conventional partitioning of realities into entities by blurring the very distinction between figure and ground.” (Zerubavel, 1991: 97) If youth artists can focus on

the entirety of a scene, there is a possibility to reduce the level of 'taken for granted' interactions they have with their environment. They may start to recognize the impact of figures on the background of experience as well as those in the spotlight. In addition, a deeper cognitive and emotional awareness of the artist to the environment around them has the potential to facilitate a more complex understanding of their impact in action. Finally, focus into the aesthetic of surrounding environments may encourage participants into spatial stewardship for the sake of maintaining the surrounding beauty they come to appreciate from artistic creation and replication.

All this is to say, there is value in arts spaces and arts programming. People keep coming back for events and classes. The community at Burton St. is always growing. I have argued through this research that arts and place-based programs have a positive effect on participants and the surrounding community. The effects can be seen in the interaction of place, people, and programs, specifically the OpenMic Studio and its participants. Programs draw people into a space, and then they generate enjoyment and growth from it. This positive feedback loop of increasing participation and enjoyment contribute to growing value in a place.

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