Roberto Bedoya - ArtPlace Reflection

In 2013, I wrote a piece entitled “Creative Placemaking and the Politics of Belonging and Dis-belonging” about this developing field and ArtPlace. I referred to the song “Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered” as a prompt to talk about the deficiencies I saw unfolding. Subsequently, I’ve been surprised by how my critique and the concept of belonging as central to placemaking practice has become a sticky word for many who are engaged with community cultural development.

I’m still “bewitched, bothered, and bewildered” by the many ways creative placemaking operates in theory and practice. As a policy maker, my North Star in this field has been an understanding that before you have places of belonging you must feel you belong. That the built environment of mixed-use structures or spatial design operates inside the policy frame of planning is OK, but that is not enough if creative placemaking ignores the justice and social cohesion that enliven place.

In the early days of this developing field, I was often asked, why aren’t more folks of color a part of this undertaking? — as if I, as a Latino, should know the answer. After some reflection and fatigue with this question, I stated that the problem with creative placemaking is its failure to articulate whether it’s a property rights or human rights movement. In America, we POCs are repeatedly seen and treated as property without human rights, and the field of creative placemaking has not examined toughly our nation’s racist legacy and its complicity with this line of thinking — especially in the actions of placemaking and the white spatial imaginary at play in policies and practices in this field.

In recent years, ArtPlace has moved beyond this cage of thought, especially through its investments in community cultural development. It needs to move down this path with more intention and lift up arts-based civic engagement practices as manifestation of creative placemaking. It also needs to reflect on the governance system embedded in the creative placemaking stakeholders’ community: the real estate developer, the city manager, the artists, the city planner, the elected officials, the foundation program officer, and the neighborhood spokesperson who have agency in these entanglements.

In my writings about spatial justice I’ve used the term creative placekeeping, which has much traction in Oakland, California, where I reside. In the face of displacement brought on by gentrification and creative placemaking as a property rights movement, a neighborhood, a locale asserts its humanism through keeping the stories of a place alive, by keeping a beloved landmark, or by keeping the renters in their home.

As ArtPlace comes to its end of a worthy undertaking, let us set aside its policies and turn to its poetics. Let’s think of creative placemaking/creative placekeeping in the context of affect, for example, how the New Orleans Blues, the Chicago Blues, or the Oakland Blues shape and identify a place, sculpting the aesthetic speech of a locale. And how Ella Fitzgerald singing “Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered” speaks to the allure of creative placemaking/placekeeping and its desire for connection to land, neighbors, home, and the mess of it all. — Roberto Bedoya

Roberto Bedoya is the Cultural Affairs Manager for the City of Oakland where he most recently shepherded the City’s Cultural Plan, “Belonging in Oakland: A Cultural Development Plan.” Throughout his career he has consistently supported artists-centered cultural practices and advocated for expanded definitions of inclusion and belonging in the cultural sector. His essays, such as “Creative Placemaking and the Politics of Belonging and Dis-belonging,” “Spatial Justice: Rasquachification, Race and the City,” and “Poetics and Praxis of a City in Relation,” have reframed the discussion on cultural policy to shed light on exclusionary practices in cultural policy decision-making.