



Arts & Culture Survival Guide: Perspectives from Ben Cameron

Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust's Thought Leader in Residence is a new program that brings internationally recognized thought leaders to the community. Through creative formats and dialogue, Piper Trust Thought Leaders share expertise on significant issues and spur idea generation to ultimately strengthen quality of life in Maricopa County. Ben Cameron, Program Director for the Arts at Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, is Piper Trust's inaugural Thought Leader in Residence. Following is a summary of messages from his residency titled, *The State of the ARTS—Ben Cameron on Why Arts and Culture Matter for Communities* (March 2013).



BY KATHLEEN INGLEY

Maricopa County's arts and cultural organizations aren't alone as they struggle with financial instability, eroding corporate support, and a shifting audience.

That's the good news. And that's the bad news.

This metro area is so new, so far-flung, so full of people with roots elsewhere that its cultural challenges often seem unique. But we're not a troubled island, it turns out. The basic issues are the same at the national level, said Ben Cameron, program director for the arts at Doris Duke Charitable Foundation in New York. He came to Phoenix in March 2013 as the inaugural Thought Leader in Residence for Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust.

Across the country, funding is plummeting, corporations have abandoned the field, technology is transforming the landscape, and audience behavior is a puzzle. "So don't you feel better?" Cameron jokingly asked the packed audience at a forum in Phoenix, *The Role of Arts & Culture in a Healthy Urban Environment*.

If it's reassuring to have company, it's unsettling to realize that we're confronting a systemic problem. The challenges aren't confined to our geographic corner. They aren't part of an economic downturn, to be solved when growth picks up.

**"The arts, whatever they do,
whenever they call us together,
invite us to look at our fellow human
being with generosity and curiosity."**

—Ben Cameron

The cultural institutions of today were built to thrive under the very conditions of post-World War II America, including the GI bill, rising affluence, and a scarcity of access to professional artists. "Those conditions no longer exist today," Cameron said.

To understand what we face, Cameron looks at parallels with the religious Reformation of the 16th century. New technology—the printing press—let average people own Bibles and draw their own conclusions about the text. Suddenly there was an easy way to communicate with large numbers of people. The Reformation obliterated the old business model, Cameron said, making it "a great time to be a land buyer and a rotten time to be a monastery."

The Reformation asked: Why do I need a priest to intercede for me? That's echoed today as more and more people ask: Why do I need the intervention of a professional artist to have a creative experience? While arts attendance is shrinking "at an alarming rate" in every field, Cameron said, arts participation is skyrocketing.

The old system that drew a bright line between professionals and amateurs is collapsing, as average folks are writing poetry, painting, composing and singing their own songs, making their own movies ... Cameron sees a spectrum

that includes the pro-ams, the avocational artists who do work at a professional level, with their creations showing up on YouTube, at film festivals, in dance competitions, and more.

Then there are the hybrid artists, who are professionally trained but working outside traditional settings, such as schools and neighborhood centers.

In this new landscape, Cameron says cultural organizations need to ask themselves some hard questions about their mission. Those include: What if our role is no longer to mount performances or exhibits but is instead cultural orchestration? What if our value isn't just to provide experiences to be consumed but to provide experiences as springboards to our own creativity? What are our core values? What real difference do we make in the community?

During his time as Thought Leader in Residence, Cameron suggested new possibilities for the local arts and cultural community to consider. He offered the strategies—some of them already under way here—as starting points for what is likely to be an endless series of adaptations.

Take art to the people.

Some groups are reaching out to the public in new ways, tapping into their concerns, and giving them new ways to participate. Shakespeare Festival St. Louis, for instance, has deliberately jettisoned the traditional model of stage productions and presents the Bard “in the schools, in the streets, and in the park.” Events like Shake38, an April marathon of all Shakespeare’s plays, let thousands of local residents create theater in their own neighborhoods.

The out-of-the-box ideas include “A Blind Shake,” where people simply show up and read a play. The group launched an anti-bullying crusade with plays on the issue.

Become embedded in the community.

No one would accuse the Trey McIntyre Project of flying under the radar in Boise. The dance company’s mission includes engaging and educating the community. One way is through SpUrbans, or Spontaneous Urban Performances: Dancers suddenly show up to do a brief performance at a market or a college campus, sporting T-shirts with the company’s name and handing out promotional materials.

Besides the more traditional connections with schools, the group also works with hospitals. It makes a point of forging face-to-face relationships with elected officials, youth, donors, patrons, and sponsors. A local bar has drinks named after each dancer. The Trey McIntyre Project got the city to create a new role of Economic Development Cultural Ambassador, which it has filled twice, traveling with business leaders to promote Boise.



Rethink time and place.

Technology has given people unprecedented freedom in how, when, and where they entertain themselves. They’re looking for the same flexibility with arts experiences.

Museums are well positioned, Cameron said, because visitors can already plot their own journey and decide how long to spend at each exhibit. Now there are opportunities to make the experience more interactive and to consider unconventional hours.

The challenge is tougher for the performing arts, where narratives are fixed and works have a particular length. But there’s room for experimentation. Why not look at different venues, rethink the length of a concert or try mash-ups with different formats?

Today’s shortened attention spans have to be taken into account. But people are still eager for epic experiences, in Cameron’s view. You’ve just got to earn their time.

Find new ways of getting support from businesses.

The old-style corporate funding, fueled by a commitment to be a good community citizen, is in free fall, Cameron said. These days, groups hoping for support need to figure out how they fit



Bottom (right to left): Ben Cameron, Kimber Lanning (Local First Arizona), Matt Lehrman (Audience Avenue), Tim Sprague (Habitat Metro), Greg Esser (Roosevelt Row) at the public forum "The Role of Arts & Culture in a Healthy Urban Environment." Top photos: Ben Cameron talks with business and legislative leaders about local and national arts and culture issues and trends. Photos by Suzanne Starr.

into a corporation's strategic plan and appeal to its enlightened self-interest.

When Cameron directed corporate giving at Target, the retailer knew its core customers—college-educated working women with two children—and made its contributions accordingly.

Look beyond cash, Cameron advised. Z Space in San Francisco, which calls itself a

"hub" for artists and audiences, turned to businesses not for donations but for practical help in getting skills in marketing and accounting. That can be a persuasive sell to smart executives, who recognize that helping artists can reenergize their own staff.

Tell your story more effectively.

Talking up the "arts," with its image of formality, may not resonate with everyone in this informal, diverse world. But frame the issue more concretely, and people start connecting: Do you believe in live performances? Should children have the experience of playing musical instruments? Should people see different forms of creative expression?

Make people feel welcome.

The hospitality industry, which relies on creating places and experiences that draw customers back again and again, has lessons for the arts. Everyone, from the director to the ticket taker, needs to be committed to making the visitor feel welcome, Cameron said. He pointed in particular to New York restaurateur Danny Meyer, who has built a dining and consulting empire on a philosophy that he calls "the Virtuous Cycle of Enlightened Hospitality." Meyer starts, interestingly, with fostering warm relations among staff.

Work together. When times are tight, groups naturally get turf conscious, worried about losing their share of the audience pie. But this isn't a zero-sum game. Organizations are starting to find creative ways to build demand for the arts.

At the Fall for Dance Festival in New York, for instance, several companies dance at every performance. For \$15, you get a sampling that could include tap or hula or ballet or flamenco. Before and after the show, plus at intermission, the theater's atrium is transformed into "Lounge FFD," where the audience, artists, and general public can mingle, dine, drink, and dance.

Find new ways of raising money.

Individuals are the growth area for funding, and the Internet and social media are opening new ways to reach them.

The Kickstarter website, created in April 2009, has raised pledges of more than a half billion dollars to fund creative projects. That's more than three times the annual budget of the National Endowment for the Arts.

More places are holding a Day of Giving, when there's a concentrated effort to raise money for nonprofits. (This state had its first Arizona Gives Day on March 20, 2013.)

Another innovative approach is Feast, a "crowd-sourced micro-funding event" in Boise. Guests pay for dinner and the chance to hear 10 artists make brief pitches for their projects. The winner, chosen by audience vote, gets all the money raised that evening. But every artist gets exposure and a list of potential customers.

Get out the economic message.

There's a compelling dollars-and-cents case for the arts that legislators, business leaders, and the public need to understand. They need to see that the direct and ripple effects go far beyond the actual artists and performers. A theater, for instance, buys fabric, paint, and printing from local stores. Surrounding bars and restaurants get extra customers. One theater in Vermont gave a hint of the impact by putting up pictures of the janitor, box office staff, and seamstress alongside the usual photos of actors and actresses.

The national Cultural Data Project has created a systematic way to document how arts and culture boost the economy and to track the data over time. Arizona has just done its first report, which shows an annual economic impact of \$581 million from arts and cultural organizations and their audiences. (The report also spotlights Arizona's rank as dead last in per capita state appropriations for arts and cultural, with zero money from the state General Fund.)

Arts and culture must also become part of the discussion about educating tomorrow's workers. It shouldn't be a secret that the arts can strengthen



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Ben Cameron is the Program Director for the Arts at Doris Duke Charitable Foundation in New York where he supervises not only an ongoing \$13 million grants program focusing on the performing arts but also a special additional \$50 million allocation designed primarily to benefit artists in jazz, theatre, and contemporary dance. Formerly he held executive positions with Dayton Hudson Foundation, Target Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Cameron, a globally renowned visionary and leading voice for the arts, is sought after for his expertise on revolutionary thinking about arts organizations. He is a TED Talks speaker and serves on the Tony Awards Nominating Committee. Cameron holds a master of fine arts degree from the Yale School of Drama. He has received honorary degrees from DePaul University in Chicago and American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco. Cameron came to his love of the arts through church choirs, Junior League drama shows, the Columbia Community Concert series, and "The Ed Sullivan Show."

children's academic performance and build their skills in communicating and creating.

Publicize your own economics.

Few people understand that the cost of a ticket only begins to cover the cost of a performance or an exhibit. One director dramatized the point during a pre-show curtain talk by suddenly dimming the lights to less than half their full power—that's how much light your ticket pays for, he pointed out.

It might seem dated in a digital age, but the traditional fundraising "thermometer" is an effective way to communicate financial needs and progress, Cameron said.

Respond to changing demographics. Staff and boards need to reflect the diversity of the community. Arts and cultural groups can become a public square for exploring and celebrating diversity. Theaters can be a forum for sharing ideas and opinions.

Engage with your audience.

It's not the same for everyone. Researcher Allen Brown has identified a spectrum of five levels of involvement, ranging from passive consumption to co-curating (where the audience has a say in the content of the events) to co-created performances, where the audience actually participates. There's enormous opportunity to tap into people's hunger to participate—and to participate with experts.

Some of the toughest tickets to get in New York and Minneapolis are for the annual Messiah sing-along. "They don't just want to sing," Cameron observed. "They want to sing with the best." So why does the opportunity come just one night a year? he wondered.

The Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's "Rusty Musicians" program has amateurs playing alongside professionals. As a bonus, the annual concerts are audience-development tools, connecting the orchestra with a new pool of potential audience members among the friends and families of the rusty musicians.

On an international scale, composer and conductor Eric Whitacre created a performance of his Lux Arumque using a Virtual Choir: combining recordings by 182 singers in 12 countries. The YouTube piece had more than 3.8 million hits in late April 2013.

Relentless change is the new norm.

If you're not trying to understand it and adapt, the world is going to be by you in a flash, Cameron said.

This is not easy stuff. If it were, we wouldn't have the national challenges we do. When organizations are struggling to survive from day to day, it's hard to look up and out. Yet that may be the most essential thing to do to survive.

Arts & Culture Survival Guide: Perspectives from Ben Cameron was written by Kathleen Ingley, freelance writer and award-winning journalist.

For more resources related to Ben Cameron's Piper Trust Thought Leader Residency, including a video of the public forum held in partnership with Local First Arizona and Phoenix Center for the Arts, visit: www.pipertrust.org/bencameron

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