



Beyond the Ladder of Participation:

A Trellis For Community Power

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A Trellis For Community Power

By: Laura Zabel, Executive Director of Springboard for the Arts

50 years later, Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Participation is still relevant. The language of the urban planning and community development fields has evolved but the topic of participation is still very present for practitioners, academics, researchers and others. We may be more apt to call it community engagement these days but questions about how the people most impacted and in need of policy change come to the table to influence that change are still common at



Laura Zabel; Photo by John Kaul.

conferences and convenings, and amongst planners, organizers, activists, public officials and artists across the country and the globe.

Though still relevant, Arnstein's model is flawed. Primarily because it characterizes all power as external to a community, as something people are invited into and which is given or taken from someone else rather than something that lives within a community or within individual people already. By positioning power externally, the "ladder" is easily placed and removed, doling out access to power individually, rather than building lasting structures and systems to

support community power. The field of urban planning and community development should aspire to durable and regenerative change that dismantles white supremacy and patriarchy.

To do this we must question practices, like the Ladder of Participation, that rely on the assumption that power lies exclusively in people's ability to influence the existing dominant systems and structures, rather than in their ability to envision wholly different ways of working.

As a field, community development and planning has invested a lot of work into building the ladders that invite people into the existing systems. Now it is time for this field to build structures that recognize and amplify wealth and culture already present in communities so people can use those assets to help make the change they desire, show us alternative ways of doing things, and imagine and build new futures.

Two Caveats: I am not a trained community development or urban planning expert. I am also not an academic. Rather, I am an artist whose ideas and opinions about community development have been formed through the process of trying, iterating and receiving feedback from trusted partners, mentors and leaders. I come from theater where work is made by doing, by finding the right collaborators and then standing up together and trying something, by receiving and incorporating feedback in real time. I come from the prairie, where the plants are scrabby and scratchy, and less obviously beautiful or cohesive than a cultivated garden, but what grows there is tough and hearty because it has deep roots. These perspectives inform my work at Springboard for the Arts.

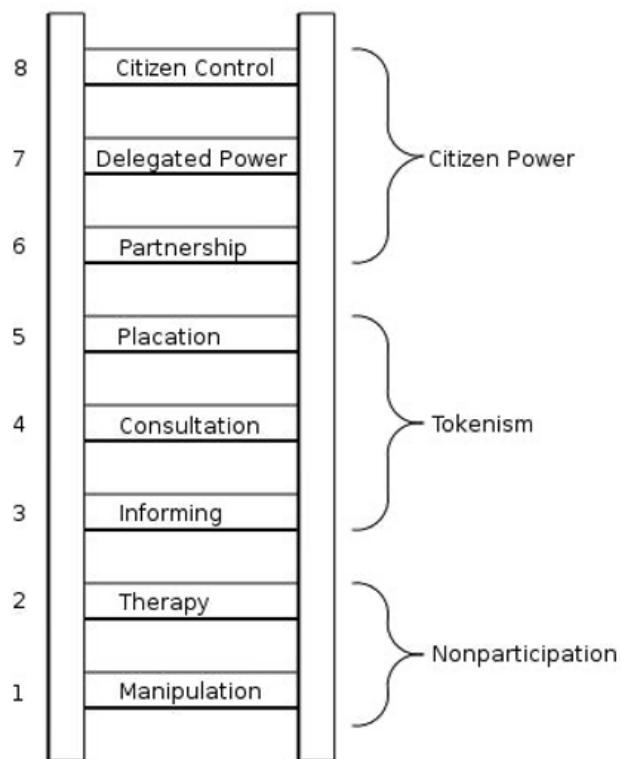
Springboard is an artist-led community development organization based in Minnesota. Our work roots equitable community development, community organizing and economic opportunity in creativity, culture and meaning-making. Springboard works from a framework we call “creative people power” which is the idea that in order to build real power or tap into a community’s expertise, we have to start with meaning making and belonging. We have to provide outlets for people to tell and write their own story and to imagine and build their own futures.

“To do this we must question practices, like the Ladder of Participation, that rely on the assumption that power lies exclusively in people’s ability to influence the existing dominant systems and structures, rather than in their ability to envision wholly different ways of working.”

One Acknowledgement: Arnstein’s work has strengthened the planning and community development field and set the groundwork for decades of good work. My critique is about what feels limiting about this framework: its language, its linearity, its narrowness—but not its intent. To make it plain: I’m uncomfortable as a non-expert critiquing a woman whose work is deeply researched and well used and whose whole career¹ was spent in pursuit of justice. Another way our culture replicates patriarchy is by rewarding takedowns, rants and un-nuanced criticism. This isn’t going to be that sort of critique. My work is possible because of Arnstein’s work. I can only hope that 50 years from now, something I’ve written merits the depth of examination and re-conceiving that Arnstein’s work deserves.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH A LADDER?

Arnstein presents us with a simple visualization and metaphor for a hierarchy of participation with therapy and manipulation at the bottom working up to delegated power and citizen control. Through the steps of the ladder, Arnstein provides a clear and legible articulation of the numerous ways that people are tokenized and further marginalized by the tactics used to claim their participation.



(Arnstein 1969)

However, the ladder framework still upholds and reinforces a western, capitalist perspective rooted in white supremacy and patriarchy in numerous ways. In particular, Arnstein's conflation of power with money is steeped in capitalist ideology. The ladder places the responsibility on the community to participate and influence existing systems and relies on those who benefit from those existing systems to invite people to climb the ladder they have created. What about the responsibility to look for ideas, models and efforts outside of existing systems? The ladder implies that only a single intervention is possible versus the systemic, interconnected and complex changes that any good organizer will tell you are necessary to enable full and relevant participation.

We are living in a moment that calls us to acknowledge the truth of our existing systems: money *is* tied to power; representation in existing power structures *does* matter; participation in our existing systems of policy making, community

development and urban planning *is* necessary and can make those systems more equitable. At the same time, this moment also demands that we imagine new ways of working, honor community knowledge, and build new systems that will support truly healthy, equitable, and just communities to flourish.

I propose a further iteration of Arnstein's work that looks beyond ladders and hierarchies to more eco-systemic approaches like permaculture, regenerative agriculture and gardening for inspiration and metaphor. My guess is that part of what has made the Ladder of Participation a touchstone for so long is that it is simple and linear. But communities are not simple or linear, communities are living organisms full of complexity and nuance and interdependence, and any approach to participation and power building must acknowledge the whole of this ecosystem. Moving one person higher on a ladder doesn't necessarily make the ladder easier to climb for anyone else. An ecosystem approach to participation, representation and power-building is by necessity both collective and asset-based, which, rather than focusing on a constant "fight", seeks to understand the unique assets that exist and build change based on the culture and wealth these communities and individuals already contain. An ecosystem approach demands that our systems of policy and power (and, eventually, even capitalism) recognize the many forms of wealth and power that reside in communities and culture.

In an ecosystem approach, the work of organizers, planners and community developers is to build the missing supports that allow power rooted in existing culture to grow, be more visible and durable. This approach seeks to build power that regenerates without ongoing intermediation. For example, in South Carolina, the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation² uses a holistic approach to ensuring that Black families in the rural south retain legal ownership of land inherited through generations and also create economic opportunities to build family and community wealth. Their programs in sustainable forestry "help families protect and keep their family land, build generational wealth and grow 'working' landscapes"³ by providing legal services to sort through complex land ownership issues and education and support services to put the land to work through sustainable forestry. For many people, issues of racial justice, land ownership, wills and estates, and sustainable forestry and land use may not seem connected. It is Heirs' Property's ecosystem based approach that allows them to see these issues addressed together build community wealth, compounding their impact for generations into the future. This approach grows real and lasting power for the participants from the assets that already exist in their community.

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**Rather than helping people climb the ladder, I believe the community development field should be building trellises** – support systems for growth and change that are both delicate and stable. Support and infrastructure that fades into the background. That provides structure and stability for what is meant to grow to flourish.



## WHY A TRELLIS?

At first, I resisted the metaphor of trellis – it seemed too slight, too diminutive, too feminine. My notes on this piece are full of gardens and sketches of trellises, yet when I sat down to write, I kept trying to use another metaphor – a scaffold or a machine or a platform – something sturdier, more serious. But the beauty of the trellis is in its slowness, that it is meant to

disappear, sometimes even to fall away, so that the plant can find the sun.

The process of tending plants is a process that is about deep connection to context, place and requires ongoing work and attention. Successful gardening is a combination of art and science and beautiful blooms are usually the result of both careful and strategic work and mysterious alchemy. That feels a lot like community organizing.

The trellis metaphor is useful to me, but, of course, it also has limitations. I offer it as an alternative to help create a different representation of how change happens.



*Illustration by Dustin Lopez*

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## THE SEEDS: WHAT ALREADY EXISTS.

Any framework intended to build durable system change that does not start from understanding and recognizing the unique assets and culture of a place or group is doomed to fail. What would change if community developers and planners started by believing that every community already has wealth? We are used to using the word “wealth” to mean money, economic privilege and connections. But wealth can and should be the knowledge and ways of working that exist in the community, which are not the same as money. Our definition of wealth should include the natural environment, existing natural beauty or resources like water, trees and soil. Wealth also includes the people in the place, their knowledge and ways of working and being, their creativity, their skills that may be combined in new ways to make new kinds of change.

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All communities already include culture: how do people make meaning in a community? Food, art and spirituality are core components of the culture of a place that are seeds for building power and participation. We must change our conception of wealth to recognize these multiple forms of resources. Without this change, we will always be stuck in a “haves and have nots” approach that prioritizes financial capital. Reimagining culture, relationships and environment as sacred and valuable helps us understand the existent wealth in every community. The problem is our systems are built to extract wealth (culture, land, water, etc.) and use it for someone else’s gain. **Our role should be to help the seeds take root and grow in place, rather than to extract the seeds to grow wealth for someone else.**

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**One Caution:** Sometimes asset-based approaches to community development can feel naïve or overly optimistic, as if simply telling marginalized folks, “you already have everything you need!” will solve the historic harms and traumas our dominant systems have inflicted. So I want to be explicit here: the approach I am advocating for is not about asking people to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. More so, it is about urgent and necessary system change. All communities do have richness, and these assets can be a form of wealth, but our existing economic and political systems do not currently value or even see these forms of wealth. It’s the systems that need to change, not the people.

Any project should start with questions like, “Who are our partners? How do things get done now? Where are the existing spaces and places for connection? Who are the culture bearers and informal leaders?” Sustainable community power grows from these seeds. The easiest way to know where to find the seeds of community knowledge, culture and vision is to be from the community in which you are working. For many professional urban planners, community developers and even organizers, this is not always possible. For an outsider, the process of knowing and understanding a community must start with deep listening, relationship building and learning – a process that is often overlooked or ignored. Unless you know what and where these seeds are you won’t be able to build the trellis in the right place.

The chef and activist José Andrés<sup>4</sup> tells the story of arriving in a community after a natural disaster to find that well-meaning nonprofits and government agencies were distributing uncooked rice and beans to people who had no power and no water and thus no way to cook the food.<sup>5</sup> Andrés’ approach to get on the ground, meet and connect with people (in his case especially chefs) led him to discover untapped infrastructure, for example, school cafeterias with working kitchens that he could partner with to create a network of community kitchens to feed thousands of people. Over time, Andrés’ organization, World Central Kitchen, has built on this model to include on-the-ground training and infrastructure so they aren’t only doing disaster relief but building opportunity and an ecosystem for the future. Even as the organization has grown, World Central Kitchen focuses on supporting local knowledge and community expertise. They are so dedicated to this model that they often send staff to a region *in anticipation* of a hurricane or other event, rather than the more typical relief model of sending staff post-disaster, so that they can learn and engage with the community to prepare—to know where the seeds are planted.



## THE SOIL: TRUST

Before we can build the trellis of participation, we have to start with trust. Trust is the fertile soil where community assets, ideas and power (the seeds) can take root. Trust is needed before anything healthy can grow. Trust is relational and multi-directional: trust between organizers and community members, inter-community trust and even trust and belief in ourselves all must be tended. Trust is a long-term endeavor and requires ongoing maintenance and attention. It is hard to build institutional trust, though over time, the reliability and dependability of individual relationships can begin to translate into organizational or institutional relationships. How do you build trust? First, by prioritizing the people who are most impacted. **Believe that people are the experts on their own lived experiences.** Question your own assumptions and resist the impulse to believe that “we all want the same things.” To put it bluntly: *it’s not about you*. A trust-building approach prioritizes flexibility and responsiveness over rigid process and planning, and recognizes that the specificity of people, place and context for the work should always lead its development.

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A simple way to start building trust is to show up at things that are already happening in the community. Rather than ask people to come to you, for community input sessions or meetings, focus on having actual experiences, especially ones that involve culture: eating, singing, dancing, art-making and other meaning-making, with the people in a community. Another entry point to trust-building is to seek out people who aren’t usually called on as leaders: elders, tradition-bearers, small business owners, artists, and chefs. If you are seeking place-based change — center the people who are from and of a place. If you’re seeking change based on race or class or gender — center the people who are from and of a particular identity. The work of trust building is ongoing: this is the soil tilling, watering, fertilizing and tending part of organizing — it is the precondition of healthy power building. It’s the part we tend to skip in favor of splashy projects and initiatives. This precondition is also missing from Arnstein’s Ladder and many other frameworks for participation.

At Springboard for the Arts, sharing is the value from which we build deep trust--starting first from what is possible before we add rules, systems or structures. We believe that trust is built through action and through thousands of small interactions, conversations, activities and relationships.

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For example, when Springboard bought a vacant used car dealership that we intended to repurpose into a community space in our neighborhood in St. Paul, MN, we challenged ourselves to reach beyond typical “community input sessions” and to really hand over the future of the space to our neighbors. Over the course of a year, we freely shared the unrenovated space with our neighbors, which consisted of a very large empty room and two functional bathrooms, asking them to use the space for pretty much whatever they wanted. The space was home to poetry readings, organizing meetings, rehearsals, art shows, birthday parties, board meetings, workshops, drum practice and many other things. The process of using the space was simple: reserve time on a shared calendar, receive a short user guide for the space (including the code to open the door), host your event and clean up after yourself. This trust-based approach engendered a deep sense of shared ownership and care for the space we never would have achieved through a design charrette. It also taught us exactly what people actually want from a community space which informed the eventual design for the renovation. Over 200 community groups and 6,000 people used the space.

Even as we seek to redefine wealth as broader than financial resources, committing monetary resources and support to community partners in tangible ways remains an important ingredient of trust. There is a long history of large institutions accessing money in the form of grants and contracts to work with marginalized and under-resourced communities and then relying on the unpaid labor and relationships of smaller grassroots groups and leaders to be effective. Recognizing the labor of community leadership, organizing and participation has value and resourcing people to do that work is fundamental. Put more simply, community partners in urban planning and community development work should be paid. Trust building is ongoing and the process of building trellises should continue to build and regenerate trust. As trust develops, new opportunities for pathways to participation will be illuminated.

## THE TRELLIS: SUPPORT FOR GROWING POWER

**I KNOW!** I have spent a long time on the seeds, and soil, and roots; we have only just now arrived at the actual trellis. In the end, that’s the point. If you don’t spend most of the time on understanding the conditions of the community, the unique needs and assets of the people and building trusting relationships, it will be hard to build any real participation no matter what metaphoric structure you use.

Most models for community participation are based on strategies for bringing people to the table to respond to or influence change that is already in progress or that originated outside the community. For example, a design charrette for a new community center invites input into an existing process and design. Even examples of community planning led by locally-rooted community development corporations or citizen organizations still define the outcome based on external policies and processes and often do little to build long-term power and agency of individuals and groups. **However, an ecosystem framework suggests we start with power building as a *pathway* to participation, rather than a result of it.**

The structures that organizers, planners and community developers create should support the process of building and seeing new forms of power, rather than simply creating invitations into historic centers of power. This is the difference between *inviting* participation and representation to adapt flawed systems and *supporting* people to imagine and build new systems. We need to be working on both of these fronts, but our current ways of working focus almost entirely on the former (strategies like voting, running for office, advocating for affordable housing, etc.) and very rarely support the meaning-making, creativity, and culture to build system change at the root. I am inspired by Eric Liu, founder of Citizen University's approach to power as infinite, "*In civic life, it is possible to generate power out of thin air where it did not exist before simply by organizing.*" <sup>6</sup>

Power building pathways are the garden trellis planted in a foundation of community assets and trust. These pathways create support and structure for individual and collective action to influence, change and reimagine systems, including public policy, economics and opportunity. How do we build this trellis? What are the structures that planners, community developers, artists, organizers and community leaders can make that support and tend activities that build power? I believe there are a wide variety of programs and projects that can build this trellis for community power. Here are three places to start to build a trellis in your community:

**What I can do.** (*community organizing through doing*) Many humans learn best by doing. Creating clear and legible mechanisms that help people try out new ideas in a low-risk way gives people the experience of participating and makes their participation visible. These structures value doing over talking. This type of program welcomes participation from many points of view and provides an onramp for community members to use their skills and creativity in service of addressing an issue or opportunity. By seeding and resourcing many small projects, new or under-recognized leaders in a community are seen and heard. Often, organizers want to skip this step and jump directly to trying out large-scale solutions before the community has the necessary relationships, trust and social capital in place to make them work. This is like trying to transplant a rosebush in a tallgrass prairie (likely to be ineffective and wasteful.) Starting with multiple small projects also means that not every project needs to be 100 percent successful or high profile. Keeping projects modest in scale and commitment invites more people to the table to try their hand at helping their neighborhood. If you expect people and organizations to collaborate, it's critical to provide support for trials so that people can learn how to work together and build relationships organically. Focus on making it easy for people to work together with simple and clear entry points and as few rules and restrictions as possible. Linking organizing training with project resources to allow people to try out the skills they're learning can be an effective combination.

**What we can do.** (*creating shared experiences*) Where organizing by doing is about providing the resources for individuals to go and make something happen, creating shared experiences is about the spaces for power-building to happen. To build power and agency we need spaces (both literal and virtual) that bring people together and foster relationship building. These kinds of spaces help build an infrastructure of relationships and social connection

necessary for long term power building. Projects that include making art together, using our hands, small collective actions like neighborhood trash pick-up or open mic nights help people realize their capacity to make collective change and build new relationships across power dynamics and social structures. Map and support the existing hubs and homes for creative ideas and creative thinking in places where people can get connected. Work on building open access, cross-sector spaces that serve as platforms for people to use for action, celebration and organizing. This may mean reimagining existing spaces to more actively support community activities, reusing existing infrastructure like parking lots and vacant spaces, or creating new plazas and parks that can be activated with community-led experiences. Here new relationships are built and a new sense of possibility about the future is established. Help people see how their small actions can combine with others and add up to something bigger in support of where they live. Simple identifiers like lawn signs or t-shirts make the cause visible and give people a sense of shared identity and investment.

**How we can be seen and heard.** (*visibility and representation*) Create mechanisms for people to tell their stories. Though this sounds simple, it is the most profound and important thing we can do to build power. People need outlets for their joy, pain, shame and history in order to be effective leaders of change. This deep human need to be seen and to know our story is held and known is where everything starts. The telling of the story of a historic trauma doesn't on its own create a solution, but solutions that don't start with deep hearing and acknowledging of those stories will never work. Creating these outlets also helps create multi-perspective narratives—narratives that don't ask one person, one leader, one artist, one storyteller, or one historian to speak for the whole of the community. Creating narratives based on multiple people's stories allows these stories to exist side-by-side as equal truths. Another important component of visibility and representation is the marking and taking of space. How do we support communities to be visible in the places in which they live or in the communities in which they are hoping to make change? Projects like murals, public performances, signage, oral histories and other public activities are ways for people to make and take space that makes their participation, culture and community wealth more visible.

To support the pathways to community power, the trellis is strengthened by the values of durability, regeneration and abundance.

**Durability:** Though a trellis is slight, it is strong and dependable. In communities that have dealt for generations with trauma, marginalization and extraction, there are well-founded reasons for folks to be skeptical of the commitment of planners and community developers. Far too often, support structures are dismantled or abandoned when a grant runs out, when attention shifts elsewhere or when a new political administration takes office. To use our metaphor, it is really hard to pull a trellis out of the ground and move it somewhere else without damaging the plants that are growing on it – therefore, it is meant to stay.

**Regeneration:** Rather than yanking a trellis out and damaging the plants, it is better to let the trellis slowly recede into the background and eventually fall away. The aim of any of these power-building approaches is to create structures that allow relationships and work to develop

and continue. In the nonprofit world especially, we are often asked to demonstrate how much a community “needs” our services. Regenerative work aims to create mechanisms and relationships that can continue without us, making our measure of success one in which we are no longer needed. At Springboard, we often create structures that support small community-led projects with few restrictions, except that we require each project to have a partner outside of the instigator. We do this to ensure the projects are an opportunity to build relationships between community members (artists and small business owners; artists and neighborhood organizations; community organizers and public agencies, etc.) that can continue to grow beyond the initial experience of working together. The continuation and flourishing of these relationships, **without our ongoing intermediation**, is one of our best measures of success.

**Abundance:** Working together is easier when we feel like we have what we need. And yet, capitalism rewards hierarchy, competition and winner-take-all processes and we often replicate these values in community development. Idea competitions, grants and even some fellowships reinforce the idea that leadership and power are only available to a special few, which is not useful to an approach that seeks to build broad power and collective agency. To create a trellis that supports more equitable participation, make the structures noncompetitive whenever possible. Seek ways to respond and change based on the desires of the participants. Use your perspective as organizer, planner or community developer to provide the framing to make these many small actions visible and relevant to other people and systems.

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Illustration by Dustin Lopez

## WHAT GROWS?

### LOOKING FOR THE SEEDLINGS AND THE EARLY BLOOMS

Part of the aim of the trellis is to support what is meant to grow, which challenges organizers to resist predetermined outcomes and push for longer term measurements of effectiveness. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't pay attention to whether the trellises we are building are effective. So, how do we know if anything is growing? Early signals of success might resemble narrative change, new relationships, and possibility.

**Narrative change:** What is the story we are telling about our place or our people? Years of systemic extraction and disinvestment create narratives both outside and inside a community that inhibit power. The media narrative about under-invested urban neighborhoods and rural places is full of stories about decline and fear. Creating new narratives that center the assets, creativity and wealth (remember how we redefined these concepts) of the community is essential to building power. Find ways to understand the story the community is telling about itself, so you can see it begin to shift. You might measure this by tracking media mentions, surveying neighbors, or eavesdropping in the neighborhood coffee shop.

**New relationships:** For sustainable power to grow, new relationships are necessary. Both inter-community and intra-community social connections need to be strengthened so people have practice working together, know how to find the resources they need to make change, and have a support network to sustain them. Try to understand how people are working together; and track if small projects create larger, or more sustained, opportunities for collaboration.

**Possibility:** A sense that not only is change possible, but that each of us has the tools and ability to make change. Personal and collective power grows from experience. Finding small wins with small projects helps build our ability and resolve to make deeper and bigger changes. Create opportunities to celebrate these early successes, which will also give you the opportunity to amplify the story of what is possible, connect more people to the work, and make community wealth and power more visible to others. The trellis should support and encourage the idea that change is possible, in a place worth time and investment from the people who live there.

In turn, these signals of success generate power, ownership, and opportunity that is simultaneously literal and metaphoric as well as individual and collective. This power, ownership and opportunity in service of community wealth and culture, creates a regenerative cycle in a community that can lead to long-term policy and system change.

In closing, we probably still need the Ladder of Participation for its clear and linear steps to help people participate and change existing systems. However, I hope the next generation of community planners, organizers and developers will also do the deep soil-tending, and trellis-building work that will help the seeds of a new, more just, creative, and equitable world take root and find the sun.





*Illustration by Dustin Lopez*

## Endnotes

1. Kyle Miller; “Building That Well-Known Ladder of Citizen Participation”; American Planning Association (2019):  
<https://www.planning.org/blog/9185753/building-that-well-known-ladder-of-citizen-participation/>
2. Center for Heirs Property website: <https://www.heirsproperty.org/>
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5. “Entrepreneurship and the Creative Economy: a conversation with José Andrés”; *Aspen Institute Artisan Alliance* (2018); 24:00-26:52:  
<http://www.artisanalliance.org/digital-learning-series-archive/2018/2/27/entrepreneurship-and-the-creative-economy-a-conversation-with-jos-andrs>
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## About the author

**Laura Zabel** is the Executive Director of Springboard for the Arts, an economic and community development organization run by and for artists. Based in Minnesota, Springboard's mission is to support artists with the tools to make a living and a life, and to build just and equitable communities full of meaning, joy, and connection. <https://springboardforthearts.org/> .

## Illustrations by

**Dustin Lopez** (Navajo/Laguna Pueblo) is an artist and graphic designer based in Phoenix, AZ. Currently, he works as an educator, designer, letterer, and collaborates with others in art, design, and education. Away from the office he's committed to mentoring native youth in identity reclaim, language + culture, and volunteers at a local Fire Department. As the creator of 'MixtBlood Streetwear', Dustin pushes to discover the creative solutions in being successful while being forced to live in different worlds. <https://www.dus10lopez.art/> and <https://www.dopez.design/>.

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## Studio for Creativity, Place and Equitable Communities

The mission of the Studio for Creativity, Place and Equitable Communities is to leverage the power and possibilities of Arizona State University as the New American University to integrate arts, culture and design in community development, planning and related fields in order to help redress historic inequities and create healthy, equitable, more just communities where all people can thrive. The Studio is a collaboration between the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts and the Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions. <https://creativeplacemaking.asu.edu/>

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