# Wealth and Citizen Power Structure in the Creative Placemaking:

## A Case of Columbus, Ohio

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## ABSTRACT

Creative placemaking, popularized during the 20th century in the United States, revitalizes neglected areas by fostering community ties and economic growth. It is a long-term, place-based project requiring diverse leadership adaptable to environmental changes. Arts districts exemplify this practice, utilizing local cultural assets to revive economic and community vitality. Effective creative placemaking mandates long-term resident engagement and respect for community characteristics. Despite the recognized importance of cross-sector partnerships in creative placemaking, scholarly evaluation of citizen participation in decision-making remains scarce. This study addresses this gap by investigating leadership structures and barriers to citizen involvement in arts districts in Columbus, highlighting the need for active participation and assessment in the communication process.

## Introduction

Creative placemaking reinvigorates neglected areas, bolstering community ties and economic growth. This approach gained popularity in many cities during the 20th century in the United States to overcome the fiscal challenge of the Great Recession (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010). It brings local government, residents, businesses, community leaders, and creative professionals together to achieve a shared mission of transforming the neighborhood's negative image and establishing a vibrant community. An arts district has been a popular form of implementing creative placemaking practices. Local arts and cultural assets, created and distributed by residents, are the fuel for operating and sustaining the arts district. In this sense, collaboration with residents has been emphasized throughout various development stages of creative placemaking.

The core competency of creative placemaking is demonstrating an explicit commitment to long-term engagement and involvement of all residents, while also respecting the

community's unique characteristics (American for the Arts, n.d.; The Kresge Foundation, n.d.). Given its intricate governance structure, effective placemaking cannot rely solely on a single entity or approach. As arts districts expand, governance must involve multiple entities tasked with various responsibilities. To illustrate, both Short North Arts District and Franklinton Arts District have multiple leading organizations, each catering to distinct purposes, target populations, and geographic areas. This underscores the importance of establishing a communication platform where all arts district entities can regularly exchange ongoing needs and goals to ensure the sustainability of their neighborhood.

While numerous studies emphasize the significance of cross-sector partnerships and resident collaboration in creative placemaking, a scarcity of scholarly work evaluating citizen participation in the decision-making process exists. To effectively implement creative placemaking partnerships, there is a need for a system that routinely assesses communication between stakeholders, thereby fostering participatory governance. Existing indicators of creative placemaking impact often focus heavily on quantifiable metrics, neglecting the values of equity, diversity, and inclusion (Moss, 2012). Addressing this gap, this study investigates the leadership structure within arts districts and identifies citizens' barriers to participating in the decision-making processes by exploring two cases of arts districts in Columbus.

## Creative Placemaking Leadership and Governance

Creative placemaking is a long-term, place-based initiative that necessitates diverse leadership capable of adapting to environmental changes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the estimated losses in America's creative industries were the losses of 2.7 million jobs and more than $150 billion in sales of goods and services. In Ohio, the number of creative industry employment in Ohio decreased by 41,000 while total creative industry economic contributions declined by over $8.6 billion from 2019 to 2020 (Ohio Citizens for the Arts, 2022). The forced closures brought the creative businesses to experience the hardest hit which required them to take longer to recover and resume their businesses than any other businesses (Ohio Citizens for the Arts, 2022).

Since arts organizations and creative businesses are key constituents of the arts district, the economic damage from the pandemic put arts district in danger of losing regional artistic characteristics. The number of arts spaces in the Short North Arts District has been dropped by approximately 17% from 2020 to 2023 (Short North Alliance, 2023).
Arts organizations and individual artists in the Franklinton Arts District have experienced significant rent increases, compelling many to relocate. Glass Axis, one of the district's initial organizations, decided to move in 2022 due to the escalating rents (Glass Axis, 2024). In March 2023, the rent at 400 West Rich, which houses over 200 art studios, also increased significantly. The property owner, Urban Smart Growth, cited a 50% rise in operating costs during the pandemic as the reason for the rent hike (Bornanacin, 2023). One artist at 400 West Rich reported that his rent increased from $338 to $900 per month when he tried to sign a new contract (Downing, 2023). If property owners and developers had clearly communicated the market conditions leading to the rent increases beforehand, artists and local businesses might have had time to devise plans to prevent their displacement. Since creative placemaking is

inherently tied to specific locations, support from landowners and the local government is essential to protect the district's original residents.

Given that each creative placemaking initiative encounters distinct conditions and local issues requiring attention, the governance model is chosen in accordance with the specific environmental context. Doeser and Kim (2018) identify six common governance models used in cultural districts: 1) Nonprofit, 2) Government-led, 3) Public-Private Partnership, 4) Real Estate Owners and Developers, and 5) Ad hoc. The nonprofit model is the most frequently used and typically involves an anchor organization that communicates with arts district entities and provides a blueprint for the district. The direction for managing the arts district generally depends on the interests of its leaders and its primary financial resources.

The Short North Arts District and Franklinton Arts District are also supported by anchor nonprofit organizations, Short North Alliance and Franklinton Arts Districts. They facilitate communication among local businesses and other constituents within the arts districts. Additionally, these districts have business membership associations, aiding local business owners in networking with other community entities and reinforcing the foundations of their enterprises. Moreover, special improvement districts, endorsed by the local government, foster collaboration between property owners and the arts district to enhance regional safety and aesthetics. These were formulated under the authority of the Ohio Revised Code 1710, which utilizes property taxes to enhance public services and implement plans aimed at benefiting the arts district (State of Ohio, 2023). With multiple organizations contributing a diverse range of skills, the arts district is equipped to operate effectively. As the creative placemaking region experiences shifts in demographics and environmental conditions, dynamic leadership becomes essential for promptly adapting and responding to new challenges and opportunities, thereby ensuring the continued vitality of the arts district.


**Citizen Power Hierarchy in Creative Placemaking**

The elite board has conventionally served as a traditional mechanism for the operations of arts and cultural sectors. In this study, 'elite' encompasses not only wealth but also occupation, education level, and other aspects of social status. Board member selection is contingent on organizational imperatives, particularly economic, political, and social resource considerations (Ostrower, 2002). Since the financial resource is directly related to the health of the arts district, funders' interest can substantially affect the ways of operating the arts district. Moreover, property owners or landowners wield significant influence over the creative placemaking region, which can affect local business tenants. To illustrate, a gallery owner in the Short North Arts District mentioned that her gallery is owned by the Wood family, allowing her to maintain her art business in the Short North with affordable rent for over three decades (Interviewee 24111023). Especially in the wake of the unexpected COVID-19 pandemic, many arts and cultural sectors suffered severe economic damage and were unable to afford their operating expenses. Therefore, the support of the landowner has been critical in creative placemaking, as landowners can retain the autonomy to adapt the primary function of buildings, especially under the absence of local government regulations.

Creative placemaking professionals need to secure stable income to enhance the sustainability of the arts district. Emphasizing the relationship between the arts and community development is crucial for garnering support from funders. When the public perceives artists as collaborators, problem-solvers, and civic leaders, this perception positively influences public funding for the arts and artists (Novak-Leonard & Skaggs, 2021). When the public has strong trust in the power of the arts in their community development, their support extends not only to finance but also to operations.

Social and human capital, cross-sector partnerships, funding, and policies are significant elements for maintaining a cultural district, regardless of its governance structure (Fonseca et al., 2019). A cultural district is not a standalone institution; rather, it requires collective efforts to manage it from a multidimensional perspective. Given the complexity of cultural district constituents, it is imperative to strive for horizontal participation from all creative placemaking stakeholders. Specifically, underrepresented populations require more attention to prevent unintended consequences of creative placemaking, such as gentrification. Creative placemaking was initially initiated to address issues of inequality, and it should not exacerbate them. Therefore, creative placemaking practitioners should understand the attributes of each constituent group and devise an inclusive decision-making process that reflects the opinions of all community members.

**Research Methodology**

The principal research methodology of this study is a case study, focusing on two arts districts: the Short North Arts District and the Franklinton Arts District in Columbus, Ohio. Columbus is characterized by its diverse demographic makeup, mirroring the nation's overall ethnicity. According to the U.S. Census (2020), the total population of Columbus is over 905,000, making it the 14th largest city in the United States. Even though Columbus is a mid-sized city, it has several arts and cultural districts, highlighting the importance of sustaining unique regional characteristics in each area. Likewise, the Short North Arts District and the Franklinton Arts District serve as the city's artistic hubs, situated approximately 10 minutes apart by car. To prevent cultural assimilation and the displacement of arts and cultural bearers in the region, document analysis and semi-structured interviews are employed to examine the process of citizen participation in these two arts districts. This study specifically explores the relationship between individual social status and the power structure of citizen involvement in creative placemaking, which can affect residents' ability to actively participate.

This study includes 30 interviews with residents and local business owners in the arts district neighborhoods. To gain a comprehensive understanding of citizen participation in these arts districts, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants categorized into three levels of citizen power as shown in Table 1: 1) Citizen Power, 2) Tokenism, and 3) Nonparticipation.

Table 1: Degree of Citizen Power in Creative Placemaking

| Degrees of Citizen Power | Description | Potential Positions |
|---|---|---|
| Citizen Power | Citizens both finalize and execute arts district decisions. | Board, executive director, developer, and policymaker |
| Tokenism | Citizens participate in arts district decision-making, but their influence may not be reflected in the final decisions. | Local business owners, and arts & cultural sectors |
| Nonparticipation | Citizens lack awareness and opportunity for involvement in decision-making. | Ordinary residents |

Note. Adopted from *A Ladder of Citizen Participation* by Arnstein, 1969, p.217, Copyright 1969 by Sherry R. Arnstein

Interviewees' degree of citizen power was determined by their current level of participation in the arts district. Document analysis was also utilized to understand the overall governance structures of the arts districts. This analysis encompassed a wide array of sources, including books, scholarly articles, reports, social media content, public committee meetings, and local news articles such as those from the Columbus Dispatch and Columbus Underground.
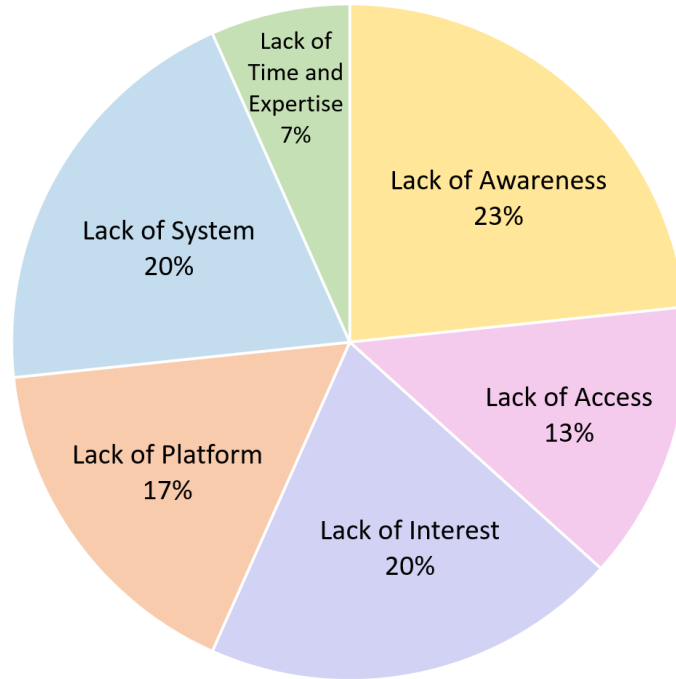
**Barriers to Citizen Participation in the Decision-Making Process of the Arts Districts**

Based on interviews conducted with residents in the arts districts of Columbus, six barriers have been identified, as illustrated in the chart: 1) Lack of Access, 2) Lack of Awareness, 3) Lack of Interest, 4) Lack of Platforms, 5) Lack of System, and 6) Lack of Time and Expertise. The most significant barrier appears to be Lack of Awareness, wherein residents are unaware of communication channels or opportunities to voice their opinions regarding arts district development. Following closely are Lack of Interest and Lack of System, which represent the second-largest barriers for citizens to participate in the decision-making process.

Chart 1. Barriers to Citizens' Participation in the Decision-Making Process of the Arts Districts in Columbus

- Lack of Awareness: Citizens are unaware of the existence of both online and offline decision-making platforms. They lack the knowledge of how to utilize these platforms and whom to approach for addressing specific issues.
- Lack of Interest: Citizens exhibit disinterest in both arts and regional development initiatives.
- Lack of Time and Expertise: Citizens prioritize other personal matters over engagement in arts district affairs.
- Lack of Access: Citizens face physical or psychological barriers that hinder their access to decision-making platforms.

- Lack of Platforms: There is a scarcity of platforms through which residents can communicate with the individuals responsible for managing the arts district.

- Lack of System: The lack of a democratic system disregards widespread citizen participation, thereby compromising the diversity and equity of the decision-making process within the arts district



The following charts categorize barriers based on residents' varying degrees of citizen power. In both the Citizen Power and Tokenism groups, a lack of system emerges as the primary barrier hindering citizens' participation in the decision-making process in the arts districts in Columbus.

Chart 2. Citizen Power: Barriers to Citizens' Participation in the Decision-Making Process of the Short North Arts District and the Franklinton Arts District
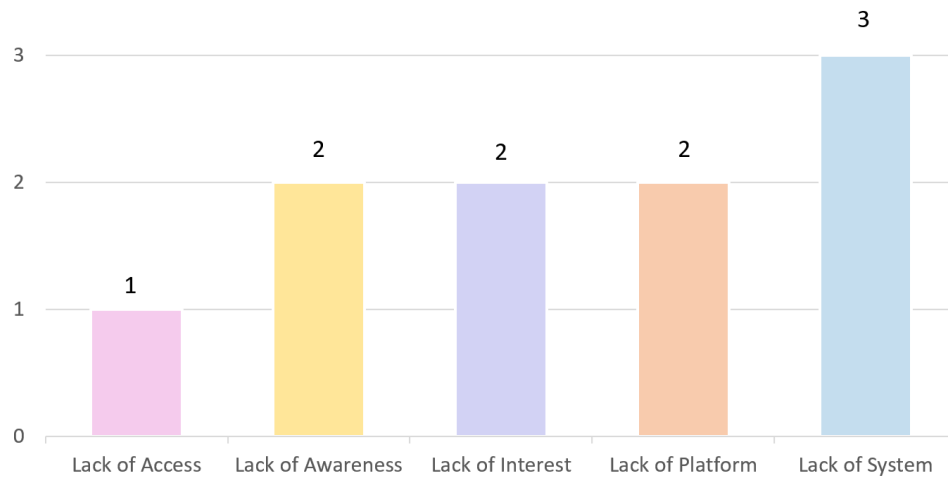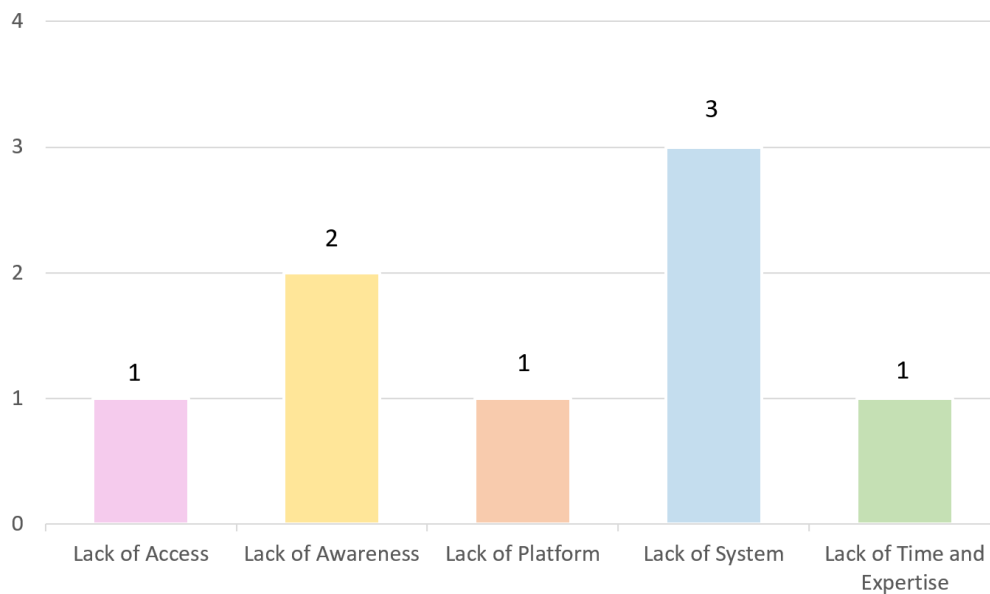


Chart 3. Tokenism: Barriers to Citizens' Participation in the Decision-Making Process of the Short North Arts District and the Franklinton Arts District



Furthermore, the absence of a system indicates that the arts districts should establish a democratic system that welcomes input from individuals outside the arts district's network to promote an inclusive decision-making process.

There has been some apprehension to bring anybody and everybody into the decision-making process and as maybe some of the more historic board members or community members are not as actively involved. New voices will arise. It's really just hopefully their understanding that those new voices bring new energy. Just putting it out there. Letting people know that they can be a part of the Scrawl, not just like the day of volunteering, but you can be a part of

the planning committee. You can be a part of Franklinton Fridays Planning Committee. Putting that information out there. Letting people know that those opportunities are available. (Interviewee 3082923)

In the category of Nonparticipation, a lack of interest stands out as the primary barrier preventing citizens from engaging in the decision-making process of the arts districts.

Char 4. Nonparticipation: Barriers to Citizens' Participation in the Decision-Making Process of the Short North Arts District and the Franklinton Arts District
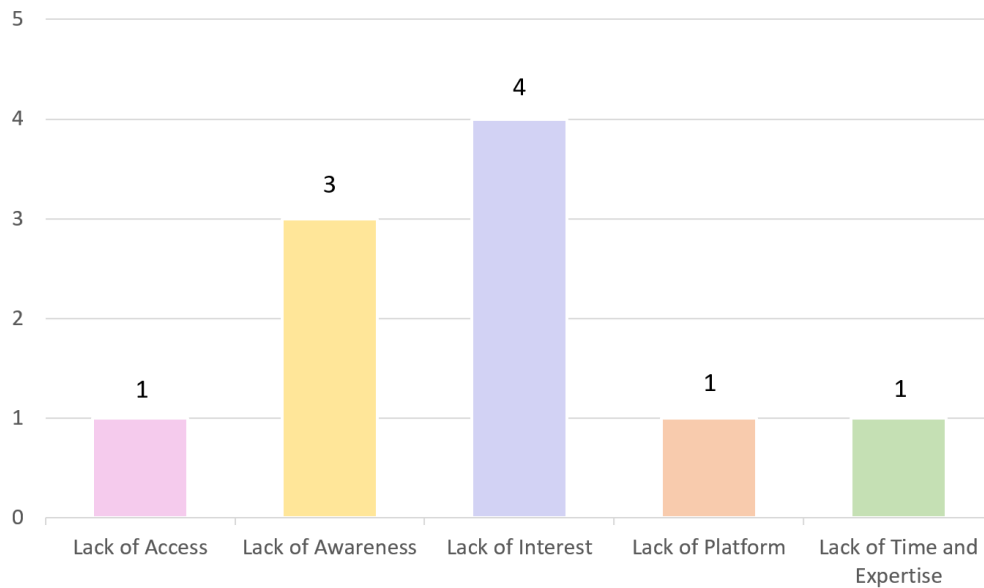


Residents must demonstrate an interest in the arts and regional development to effectively participate in the decision-making process. A genuine interest will serve as a catalyst, motivating them to engage in active citizenship practices for the advancement of the arts district. These interviewees emphasize the importance of individual relationships with the arts and a sense of belonging within the arts district community.

Residents lack their interest in regional development and embrace new cultures. Particularly, some West Franklinton residents have cultivated their own distinct culture, posing challenges for the arts district to integrate and share its artistic values with them. Additionally, local issues such as crime and drug-related concerns must be addressed first to garner individual interest in the arts and community development. We did not realize the cultural gap that existed between people like us, the artists and genuinely white people, although it has never really been about race. It's mostly white people from the suburbs, not from the extremely poor neighborhoods, you realize. In poor Franklinton, the median household income is up to $50,000 a year (Interviewee 2081823).

I would say lack of general education. Sometimes, the arts can be mysterious or seem inaccessible to people who didn't go to art school or don't have a background and viewing and appreciating art (Interviewee 21112723).

You can usually only influence things if you're really determined to influence what happens to the arts in the neighborhood. A lot of barriers to joining and becoming active in an organization like ours. Ultimately, the problem is how much influence do we have as an organization to be the same for any other organization someone has to belong (Interviewee 15092923).

**Conclusion**

As each region comprises community members from diverse backgrounds, creative placemaking necessitates cross-sector partnerships across different community members. In Columbus, arts districts were initiated by local community leaders with strong interests in the arts and social welfare. For instance, Chris Sherman, a key leader in establishing the Franklinton Arts District, drew inspiration from his artist parents, deeply involved in transformative creative placemaking projects. Similarly, Sandy Wood, the driving force behind the Short North Arts District, prioritized community engagement to bolster neighborhood sustainability. These leaders have personally witnessed the transformative power of the arts and community engagement, fueling their efforts to establish arts districts in Short North and Franklinton.

However, within the community, there are residents who are not interested in the arts and remain disengaged from the arts district. Despite their lack of direct involvement, their lives can be impacted by the arts district. Successful creative placemaking often leads to gentrification, resulting in significant rent increases and eventual displacement of initial residents. It is crucial for arts districts to maintain a diverse community to enrich their regional distinctiveness and unique atmosphere.

To achieve this, arts districts must implement strategies to ensure inclusivity and address the needs of all community members. This may involve outreach programs targeting underrepresented groups, affordable housing initiatives to mitigate the effects of gentrification, and cultural events that appeal to a wide range of interests and backgrounds. By fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion among residents, arts districts can thrive as vibrant hubs of creativity and community engagement.

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