

A STUDY OF THE SAN DIEGO GATHERING PLACE INITIATIVE  
SUBMITTED TO THE SAN DIEGO FOUNDATION

# GATHERING.



# A Study of the San Diego Gathering Place Initiative

Center for the Study  
of Art & Community

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## *EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*

**T**he San Diego Foundation has a long history of support for community cultural development. It has also actively supported the idea that investment in the purposeful growth of civic engagement can stimulate both social entrepreneurship and committed community leadership. Over the past two decades the Pomegranate Center, based in Issaquah, Washington, has become an established leader in the practice of what is now referred to as “creative placemaking,” working with “communities to imagine, plan and create shared public places.” It is not surprising then, when spurred by the interest of a major donor, that the Foundation enthusiastically joined with the Center in a partnership to stimulate civic engagement and leadership in San Diego neighborhoods using their “gathering place” methodology in the latter part of 2012.

Initiated in the summer of 2012 the San Diego Gathering Place Initiative had two core aims:

- “To implement a demonstration project in San Diego County to train and mentor a nonprofit arts organization and a cohort of fellows to implement community-build projects utilizing the Pomegranate Center’s methodology.”
- “To test Pomegranate’s community-build training and mentoring strategy as a new business model for the Center.”

## WHAT WE FOUND

### I. THE CONDUCT OF THE INITIATIVE

We estimate that 400<sup>1</sup> people participated in the various activities that comprised the Manzanita Canyon Gathering Place project. The project's support community was a diverse representation of both the surrounding Azalea Park neighborhood and the seven adjoining zip codes. Just over 50% of these participants took part in three or more community meetings and workshops, and 206 joined in during the final four-day building event.

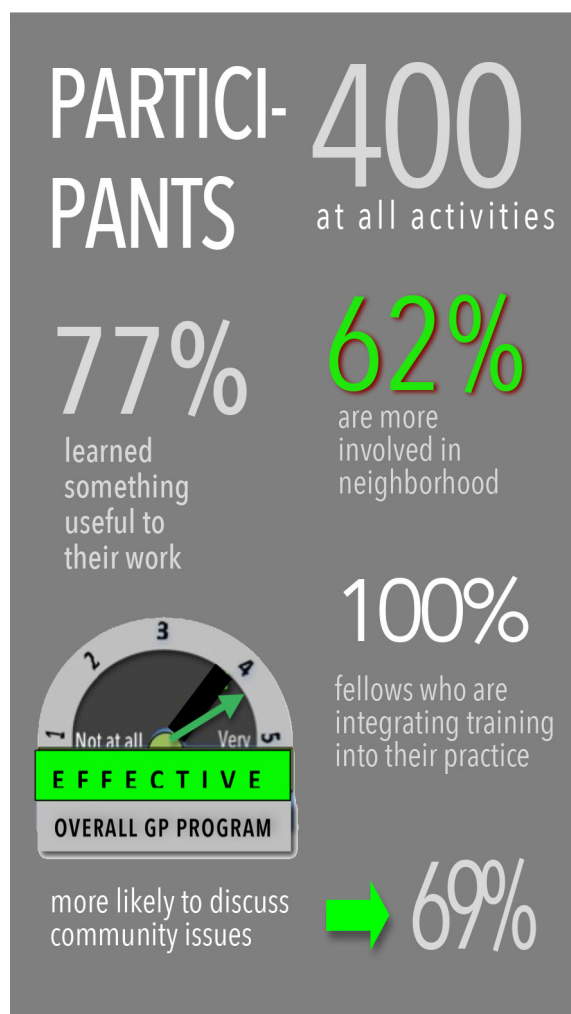
Needless to say, volunteer-intensive projects involving hundreds of people can be chaotic and confusing. Notwithstanding the first-time status of the project's leadership, and a severely compacted design and building schedule, the vast majority of the Manzanita participants said they had a clear understanding of everybody's roles and the project's goals. In the immediate aftermath of the project, many community members said they were less clear about what will happen with the site and the network of support that emerged during the project's short four-month life. As this report was nearing completion we learned that the Azalea Park Neighborhood Association was assuming responsibility for the continuing development of the project.



It is not surprising that the project's truncated schedule took a toll on its rookie leaders, who, nevertheless, persevered and saw the project through to its successful conclusion. For community members, though, the project's rapid pace was regarded as one of its most positive attributes. It is important to note that the active and enthusiastic participation of the leadership and members of the Azalea Park Neighborhood Association was a major impetus for the community's positive embrace of the project. The particularly strong leadership provided by the Pomegranate fellow who worked nearly full-time as the project's manager should also be noted as a valuable contributor to the project's success.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a rough estimate based on counts at community events and registrations during the 4-day building event.



## II. IMPACT ON PARTICIPANTS

*Community members:* Most of the community members responding to our survey felt the overall program was effective and reported that their participation had benefited them in some way. A significant majority said that they are communicating and collaborating more with their neighbors since the project's completion. They also indicated that things that they had learned through their involvement had been put to good use in other situations. As for the future, most respondents say that they see themselves becoming more actively involved in community-related activities, and joining in similar projects.

*Gathering Place fellows:* A significant majority of the 21 Gathering Place fellows were very positive about their training experience. Rating eight core curriculum elements in terms of their "relevance to your work," the cohort averaged 3.5 on a 4-point relevance scale (4 = *extremely*; 1 = *not at all*). Not surprisingly, the hands-on design and building experience at Butterfly Park was regarded as the most valuable aspect of the fellowship. As one fellow make sense." It is interesting to note that the fellows

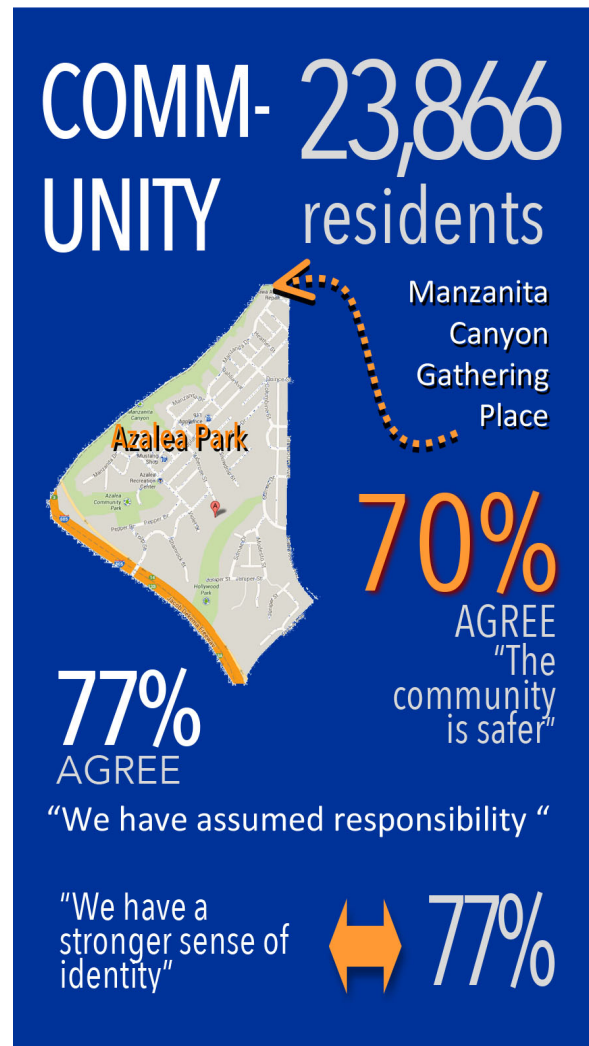
had a slightly more positive take on the building experience than the community members. This is not unexpected, given their significant investment in their learning experience. The one deviation from this pattern was in the area of role definitions, where it is clear that some fellows expected a more active involvement in the second "build" at Manzanita Canyon.

Probably the most significant outcome with regard to fellows is that nearly all report that they are integrating aspects of their training into their ongoing practice. And, notwithstanding the fact that nearly all were active community arts practitioners prior to their fellowship, 80% say that they have a greater appreciation of the effectiveness of arts-based approaches to community development. Another important indicator of the Initiative's simulative impact on the fellows is the volume and nature of their post-training activity. Fully 90% say they are more actively involved in community-oriented work and 75% say they have been involved with other fellows in the year following their graduation.

### III. IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY

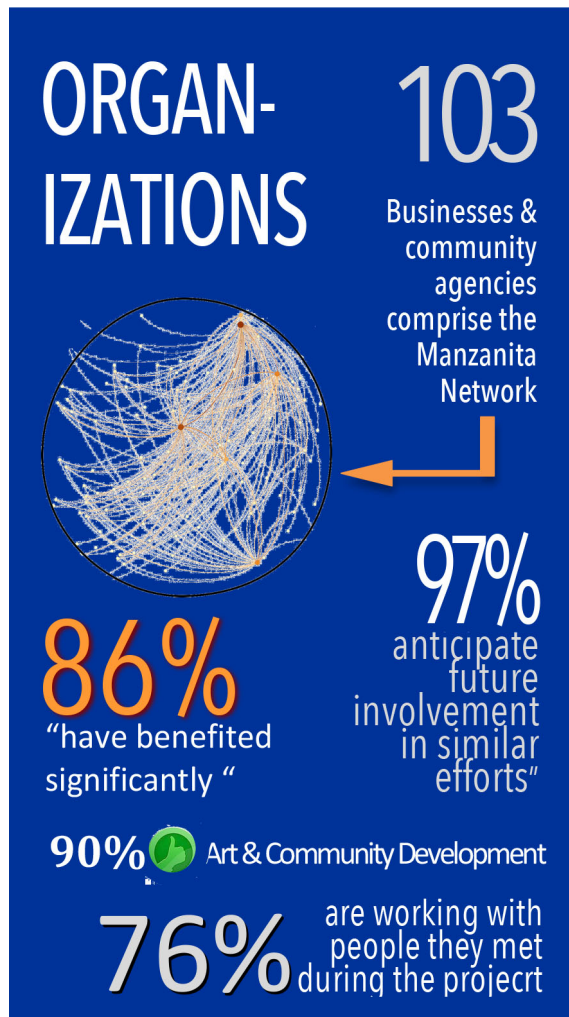
Study participants from the Azalea Park area surrounding the Manzanita site see their community as having benefited in a number of areas as a result of the Gathering Place project. Chief among these are a strengthened sense of *community identity* and a renewed belief in the neighborhood's *resourcefulness*. Another important reflection from community members is the increased feeling of security and safety that they report since the transformation of a derelict road end lot into what one respondent described as a "beautiful and welcoming community gathering place."

When participants weighed in on the community's commitment to the project, 80% agreed that the neighborhood had a "strong sense of ownership" of the Gathering Place collaboration. Just over 77% also agreed "the community has assumed full responsibility for its ongoing development and maintenance." The narrative responses from our interviews also show the strong sense of ownership and pride that the project has engendered among its active supporters. It also points to the importance of continuing to expand the Gathering Place community of support.



Given the complex mix of people, history, and communication that come into play, defining precisely what precipitates a community's embrace of one project or another is difficult. The Manzanita participants responding to our survey felt strongly that direct involvement was critical to the project's success. A majority (68%) indicated that the people who did not participate in some way had "very little understanding or awareness of the project."

The Manzanita Gathering Place project has also generated a high level of positive media about the Azalea Park neighborhood. This coverage has reflected positively on both the project, and the surrounding community. A Nexus search of coverage from the project's inception in September 2013, to March of 2014, shows that 3580 items about the project appeared in various print and digital publications. These ranged from reports on the project at various stages of development, explorations of how creative placemaking might impact cultural and community development policy, to pieces about innovative landscape design and water conversation.



## IV. IMPACT ON PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

In this section we focused on the feedback and stories from the Initiative's partner organizations. These included the key organizational players: the Pomegranate Center, ARTS: A Reason to Survive, the San Diego Foundation, and the Azalea Park Neighborhood Association as well as the many community organizations and businesses that participated in the project.

*Community organizations and businesses:* Local organizational leaders echo their neighbor's feelings of increased safety and sense of place since the project's completion. Interestingly, our data shows that most of the local organizations that contributed to the project also came away with strategies that they view as being useful to their own work. These included strategies for community engagement, civic discourse, volunteer coordination, and education. Fully 90% said they anticipate future involvement in projects that make use of the arts for community betterment.

Another less direct outcome is the small network of like-minded organizations that were introduced through the project that have continued to

communicate and work together. Nearly 35% of our organizational respondents report that they have partnered with agencies or businesses they worked with during the design or building of the Manzanita Gathering Place. A much larger 75% said they have continued to work with individuals they met as a result of their participation.

*Gathering Place partner organizations:* One of the core questions explored by the Initiative was whether ARTS could assimilate and lead the Pomegranate process after a relatively short period of training and the ensuing building experience at Butterfly Park. The Manzanita Canyon build was intended as an opportunity for ARTS to both practice and test its capacity to lead a full project. Based on our review of the survey and narrative data, we believe the ARTS-led Manzanita Canyon project shows that the Pomegranate model can be successfully learned and applied by a team of local organizations and creative leaders. The key contributors to this outcome include:

- ARTS' ability to *adapt effectively* to multiple unanticipated challenges.
- ARTS' ability to work effectively with *local cultural and community development assets*.
- *Flexible support* from both the San Diego Foundation, the project's principal investor.



- *A strong collaborative skill set* from both ARTS staff and the project manager.
- *A learning culture* at ARTS that is comfortable with simultaneous learning and leading.
- The considerable *depth of experience* the project partners brought to the project.

One area that posed a challenge to ARTS leadership was the dissimilarity of the organization's youth development mission and the typically adult-led neighborhood focus of the Pomegranate model. Although young people did play a role in the Manzanita effort, moving forward, ARTS has an opportunity to better integrate their core constituency more deeply into future projects, particularly in the areas of project design and leadership.

The San Diego Gathering Place Initiative cast the Pomegranate Center into a new role as an organizational mentor and community education resource. In the process the Center's staff had to learn how to step back and allow an untested team to find its way. Ironically, the project's success had as much to do with Pomegranate's forbearance in the heat of the battle as its decades of community building experience.



From its inception the San Diego Foundation made it clear that it had a strong interest in both supporting and learning from its Gathering Place investment. We would observe that the Initiative benefited from the Foundation's patient attentiveness and expertise. This flexibility and responsiveness will be a valuable asset for the Initiative as it moves forward.

Beyond the benefits to individual organizations we see a potentially powerful network of experienced community builders and community-invested organizations emerging from the Initiative. The Gathering Place Initiative has made a significant investment in stimulating these kinds of vital connections among people, places, and organizations in service to building a stronger sense of community in Azalea Park. This network is a powerful representation of how effective community organizing and creative leadership can stimulate neighbors and friends to work together for the common good. It is also evidence of the dynamic community-building potential that has been stimulated by the Gathering Place Initiative.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following recommendations are provided to inform and guide the San Diego Foundation's future efforts to advance creative placemaking and arts-based community development as viable community development strategies in the San Diego region. As such, our recommendations address two different yet interrelated constituencies; first, what we are calling the San Diego Gathering Place partnership, and second, the individual partner organizations.

## 1. Recommendations for the San Diego Gathering Place partnership

*1.1 Take the steps necessary to strengthen and sustain the collaboration that has supported the Gathering Place Initiative.* We strongly encourage the San Diego Foundation, ARTS, and the Pomegranate Center to continue and grow their collaboration. The successful first steps taken by this Initiative provide a promising foundation for advancing the Gathering Place approach. As such, we encourage relatively swift follow-up.

*1.2 Commit to long-haul learning.* To have demonstrable impact in San Diego, the techniques, skills, and strategies that constitute the Pomegranate model need to be practiced over and over. The aptitudes, awareness, and relationships required to sustain the model can only be developed through collaborative iterative learning. As the San Diego Gathering Place partnership considers its future, we encourage you to make continued hands-on learning and documentation a major priority.

*1.3 Convene the Gathering Place community to reflect on what has been learned and consider the next steps.* Bring stakeholders together to reflect on the Initiative's accomplishments and potential future. This could provide a forum that would allow the field to learn from itself, promote innovation and self-organizing, and give local practitioners and supporters a chance to weigh in on critical questions facing the field.

*1.4 Adopt a regimen of regular review, reflection, and revision for future projects.* Even when roles and responsibilities are clearly articulated early on, new initiatives like the SDGP almost always encounter role confusion. This is because of the significant gap between the articulated assumptions and the reality on the ground. Because this is almost unavoidable, regular opportunities for project review and recalibration need to be integrated into subsequent work plans and partnership agreements.



*1.5 Promote the use of arts-based community development and organizing approaches among Gathering Place neighborhoods and partnering organizations.* It would be unfortunate if this opportunity to insinuate arts-based engagement into the work of organizations like Azalea Park Neighborhood Association or Ocean Discovery Institute were not exploited. Their familiarity with the effectiveness of culturally based organizing makes them ripe for further development in this area.

*1.6 Invest in the long-term development of the Gathering Place creative placemaking practice and support in the San Diego region.* The training of the Gathering Place fellows has established a valuable cadre of potential creative placemaking facilitators and leaders. Given the myriad material, social, and cultural benefits derived from the Gathering Place projects, the return on investment is extremely high. That said, efforts like these still cost money, so we strongly encourage the project partners to place future financing at the head of their list of things to consider in moving forward.



## **2. Recommendations for individual partnering organizations**

*2.1 The San Diego Foundation should continue its leadership role promoting creative placemaking in the San Diego region.* Given its historic commitment to the development of effective community leaders and healthy communities, the Foundation is well positioned to establish itself as the prime advocate for this burgeoning field in the San Diego region.

*2.2 Use this report to stimulate system-wide thinking and action.* We recommend that the San Diego Foundation use this report to instigate new conversations in the public, nonprofit, and business sectors about the potential value and application of creative placemaking approaches. A potential goal might be to map and collaboratively invest in the long-term development of a sustainable creative placemaking development fund.

*2.3 Recognize and support the role of grassroots community development organizations and community organizers in effective placemaking.* One of the most critical elements leading to the success of the Manzanita project was the committed participation of the Azalea Park Neighborhood Association (APNA). Organizations like APNA should be included in discussions about how to best learn from and advance this work.



*2.4 Engage the Gathering Place fellows in the development of a Gathering Place learning network.* While the project laid the foundation for the development of a potentially robust post-training network, these kinds of enduring connections rarely happen on their own. This will require initial coordination and support to grow the self-organizing capacity that will be needed to sustain a network of Gathering Place practitioners and leaders.

*2.5 Take note that free labor can be expensive.* It is important to remember that free labor is not only labor-intensive, but for citizen design/build efforts, the quality of volunteer experience will often determine the success or failure of the project. For many successful community development organizations, volunteer coordination has become a full-time job. This is something for ARTS to keep in mind as it calculates the cost of future Gathering Place projects.

*2.6 Explore ways to align ARTS' new placemaking capacities with its core mission.* A threshold question to consider will be whether ARTS should expand its mission from personal change agent to community change agent. If so, how this happens will be critical. Other questions include:

- What does it mean to be the local translator and advocate for the advancement of the Pomegranate model?
- How can ARTS align its youth and local (National City) priorities with this effort?
- Where will the new resources needed to advance potential new Gathering Place Initiatives come from?

*2.7 Include bureaucratic path finding in future Gathering Place training efforts.* One aspect of the Gathering Place training encourages the development of a Steering Group that includes relevant municipal officials who can assist with bureaucratic logjams. We recommend that future training enhance this area by including strategies for the successful navigation of specific San Diego area public bureaucracies.

### **3. General recommendations for building the creative placemaking field in the San Diego region**

*3.1 Establish an ongoing cross-sector training program in support of creative placemaking practice.* Given the success of the Gathering Place Initiative, we would highly recommend the creation of a training and support program to advance the relevant knowledge and skills of the area's significant and growing creative placemaking sector.

*3.2 Emphasize the difference between creative placemaking and audience development.* Many arts organizations and funders have embraced community engagement as a way to expand audiences. For organizations like the Pomegranate Center, and ARTS, community relationships are intrinsic to both art production and presentation, and community members are seen more as a constituency than an audience. This implies a broad range of responsibilities and obligations that include expectations of openness, accountability, continuity, and respect.

*3.3 Educate funders about the complex ecology of community arts development.* We encourage the Gathering Place partners and others to explore ways to help increase funder awareness about the complexity, diversity, and effectiveness of the creative placemaking field. Increased awareness of this system among funders and policy makers could ultimately increase the effectiveness of arts-based community development efforts in the region.

*3.4 Promote the notion that collaboration is a learned skill.* Many of our respondents had a lot to say about partnerships, particularly the new and untested variety. Most comments reflected on the intensely collaborative nature of community art making. Over the years we have learned a lot from our clients about effective collaboration, taking special note of the lessons that seem to be in most need of repeating

## **DIGEST OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **FINDINGS**

#### **I. THE CONDUCT OF THE INITIATIVE**

- 1.1 Participation in the Manzanita project was broad, deep, and diverse.*
- 1.2 Manzanita's compacted schedule was a challenge for the project's first-time organizers.*
- 1.3 Most Gathering Place participants had a clear understanding of the project's organization and intentions.*
- 1.4 The post construction future is somewhat less clear to all participants.*
- 1.5 The fast-track design/build process was both effective and stress producing*
- 1.6 Fellow-led project management was critical to the success of the project.*

#### **II. IMPACT ON PARTICIPANTS**

##### **Impact on community members**

- 2.1 The majority of respondents say they are working more with their neighbors and colleagues.*
- 2.2 New learning has taken place and is being applied.*
- 2.3 Respondents express a greater willingness to participate in similar programs.*
- 2.4 Community members say they will be more actively involved in community-related activities and civic discourse.*

##### **Impact on Gathering Place fellows**

- 2.5 The fellowship training was well received by participants.*
- 2.6 Gathering Place fellows reflect very positively on their field experience.*
- 2.7 The fellows' opinions about the conduct of the build process differ somewhat from other program participants.*
- 2.8 Fellows say they are making good use of the things they learned during their training.*
- 2.9 Fellows say they have increased their involvement in community development activities.*
- 2.10 The Gathering Place experience has fostered a new network among the fellows.*
- 2.11 There was some lack of clarity about the role of the fellows for the second build.*

#### **III. IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY**

- 3.1 Respondents see their community as stronger as a result of the Gathering Place experience.*
- 3.2 The Manzanita Gathering Place project has generated a high level of positive media about the Azalea Park neighborhood.*
- 3.3 Local participants also say their community is safer in the wake of their placemaking effort.*
- 3.4 Community members report a very strong sense of ownership for their collaborative undertaking.*
- 3.5 Most respondents believe the community's commitment to the project will be sustained.*
- 3.6 Participants feel that direct involvement was critical to the project's success.*

#### **IV. IMPACT ON ORGANIZATIONS**

##### **Participating Local Organizations and Businesses**

- 4.1 Participating organizations report multiple benefits from their Gathering Place participation.*
- 4.2 Network building appears to be stronger among individual participants than organizations.*

### **Gathering Place Partner Organizations**

- 4.4 *The Manzanita Canyon project was a robust test of the Initiative's principal strategic objective.*
- 4.5 *ARTS stewardship of the project should be considered successful.*
- 4.6 *The high quality of the organizations and individuals involved was a key contributor to the project's success.*
- 4.7 *The ARTS mission and Gathering Place participation posed a challenge.*
- 4.8 *Pomegranate Center's initial undertaking as a systemic change agent took an important first step.*
- 4.9 *The San Diego Foundation's participation in the initiative has been beneficial on many levels.*
- 4.10 *A potentially powerful network of experienced community builders and community-invested organizations has emerged from the initiative.*

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **1. Recommendations for the San Diego Gathering Place Partnership**

- 1.1 *Take the steps necessary to strengthen and sustain the collaboration that has supported the Gathering Place Initiative.*
- 1.2 *Commit to long-haul learning.*
- 1.3 *Convene the Gathering Place community to reflect on what has been learned and consider the next steps*
- 1.4 *Adopt a regimen of regular review, reflection, and revision for future projects.*
- 1.5 *Promote the use of arts-based community development and organizing approaches among Gathering Place neighborhoods and partnering organizations.*
- 1.6 *Invest in the long-term development of the Gathering Place creative placemaking practice and support in the San Diego region.*

### **2. Recommendations for Individual Partnering Organizations**

- 2.1 *The San Diego Foundation should continue its leadership role promoting creative placemaking in the San Diego region.*
- 2.2 *Use this report to stimulate system-wide thinking and action.*
- 2.3 *Recognize and support the role of grassroots community development organizations and community organizers in effective placemaking.*
- 2.4 *Engage the Gathering Place fellows in the development of a Gathering Place learning network.*
- 2.5 *Take note that free labor can be expensive.*
- 2.6 *Explore ways to align ARTS' new placemaking capacities with its core mission.*
- 2.7 *Include bureaucratic path finding in future Gathering Place training efforts.*

### **3. General Recommendations for Building the Creative Placemaking Field in the San Diego Region**

- 3.1 *Establish an ongoing cross-sector training program in support of creative placemaking practice.*
- 3.2 *Emphasize the difference between creative placemaking and audience development.*
- 3.3 *Educate funders about the complex ecology of community arts development.*
- 3.4 *Promote the notion that collaboration is a learned skill.*