Arts and culture can...
Arts and culture can transform spaces.

Arts and culture are widely understood as tools to beautify, activate, and repurpose shared spaces, from sidewalks to parks to public infrastructure. Such physical changes introduce the risk of social, economic, or cultural displacement, however, so it is crucial to root them in the community’s stated needs and desires.
Arts and culture can reflect community identity.

The built environment sends powerful signals about who belongs in a community, and for whom public amenities are intended. Culturally-specific design elements and programming can honor and stabilize existing communities – particularly those who are marginalized or facing the threat of displacement – as well as include newcomers in the broader social fabric.

The Role of Arts and Culture in Equitable Community Development: A Visual Analysis

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Arts and culture can bridge differences.

Engaging in arts activities and shared cultural practices can create connections among disparate or diverse populations, fostering empathy and understanding of others and creating more welcoming communities.

IN AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SYSTEMS
Bridge and heal divides

IN HOUSING
Bridge disparate neighborhood residents

IN IMMIGRATION
Bridge newcomers and longer term populations

IN PUBLIC SAFETY
Promote empathy and understanding

IN WATER
Build bridges across different sectors and stakeholder groups

IN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT
Honor personal identity and build collective belonging

IN PUBLIC HEALTH
Address social exclusion and isolation

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Arts and culture can ensure cultural continuity.

Creative traditions and rituals are vital to honoring, sustaining, and evolving a community’s identity, sense of purpose and meaning, and inherited wisdom from one generation to the next – particularly for those who have been marginalized, oppressed, or displaced involuntarily.
Arts and culture can cultivate individual agency.

Creative practices provide important ways of building skills, gaining confidence, and navigating complex systems. Arts and culture programs can also be powerful tools for connecting youth and community members to business development and job opportunities.
Arts and culture can facilitate collaboration.

Traditional community planning processes focus on engaging stakeholders for input on decisions. Arts and cultural approaches can flip the paradigm, expanding beyond mere outreach and participation to truly collaborative decision-making and cooperation among a broader range of community members, partners, and allies.
Arts and culture can advance wellbeing.

As acknowledgement of the social determinants of health grows, so does the recognition that arts and cultural practitioners are key partners in the drive for health equity. Evidence shows that engaging in arts activities and traditional cultural practices promotes direct physical and mental health benefits at both the individual and community levels.
Arts and culture can heal community trauma.

Communities can experience intergenerational or collective trauma tied to disinvestment, environmental disaster, poverty, and more. Arts and culture can shine a light on a community’s history or collective experience, confront systemic inequities, and shift the narrative about a community through creative expression and action.

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Arts and culture can center people.

Many community development systems, institutions, and practices prioritize technical or financial bottom lines while addressing community needs. Arts and cultural strategies invite alternative ways of knowing, seeing, and relating to community residents, shifting the focus to more human-centered and holistic outcomes.
Arts and culture can build collective power.

Artists have long been activists, organizers, and allies to social change movements. Community organizers, too, rely on arts and cultural strategies to create a shared vision and build the collective capacity of residents and community leaders to advocate for, resist, or effect change.

The Role of Arts and Culture in Equitable Community Development: A Visual Analysis

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Arts and culture can make issues compelling.

Artists can surface what is hidden or overlooked in a community or institution – calling attention to complex challenges or intangible concepts, and making them personal, relevant, and understandable through performance, visualization, or other creative interpretation.
Arts and culture can imagine new approaches.

Artists are innovators and idea generators. They can bring bold and unconventional approaches to help communities and institutions envision new possibilities, imagine alternative futures, and experiment with entirely new ways of being.
Arts and culture can generate resources.

Arts and cultural strategies are powerful tools for communities working to sustain themselves or to build a more just and democratic economy. Cultural practices can expand our definition of community wealth (beyond financial) and ensure that those who create value are the ones who benefit from it.