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Imagination, Collaboration and Innovation: Using the Arts to Create Rural Cultural Capital and Address Community Challenges, Impacting Regional and National Policies

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This paper addresses cultural policies for smart growth, illustrating how small rural communities can overcome geographical and economic challenges through innovative placemaking initiatives that leverage the arts, collaborative relationships, and creativity. Both research and practice have demonstrated that innovation in both large and small communities—particularly if it is the result of consultation and collaboration—not only benefits a local area but affects policy at the regional, state and national levels as well. An outstanding benefit to the process of innovative placemaking in rural areas is the often dramatic change in the narrative surrounding those areas—from dismal prognostications about rural viability to positive, optimistic accounts of growth and evolution.² Even more important, perhaps, is the impact of rural placemaking success on national policies and practices of economic development.

Both the creative sector and cultural capital figure in the framework for rural economic development recently published by National Governors Association. The executive summary of their report, *Rural Prosperity Through the Arts and Creative Sector: A Rural Action Guide for Governors and States*, lists some key roles for governors and states:

- Provide leadership for the state’s creative sector to benefit rural communities.

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² See, for example, Ann Markusen and Amanda Johnson, *Artists’ Centers: Evolution and Impact on Careers, Neighborhoods and Economies* (Minneapolis: Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, 2006).

- Capitalize on existing regional cultural assets.
- Build state infrastructure for cultural and creative partnerships with other policy areas.
- Develop local talent and human capital with creative skills.
- Create an environment friendly to investment and innovation.³

These roles can function at the national level as well; I will outline their application on a larger scale in describing the functions of a proposed United States Department of Cultures.

In this difficult and challenging time of COVID-19, it is particularly important for the United States to consider the example of the European Union—not only in responding to the medical crisis but in forming international alliances for drawing upon cultural heritage for regional and national development. The work plan of Europa Nostra cites the “contribution of culture and heritage to social cohesion” and economic vitality.⁴

In this context, it is important to note that the creative economy produces cultural capital, promotes social solidarity, and generates tremendous value, both nationally and internationally. “With revenues of US \$2,250 trillion, cultural and creative industries account for 3 percent of world GDP and employ 29.5 million people, or about 1 percent of the world’s active population. . . . Cultural and creative industries (CCI) revenues exceed those of telecom services and employ more people than the car industry of Europe, Japan, and the U.S. *combined*. . . . This major contribution of CCI to the global economy is explained in a new study, jointly presented by the

³ Prepared by Sally Reed, ed., and Erika Fitzpatrick (Washington, DC: NGA, NEA, 2019).

⁴ <https://www.europanostra.org/work-plan-for-culture-2019-2022-eu-ministers-ofpculture-make-the-legacy-of-the-european-year-a-priority/> Retrieved 8/10/2020.

international Confederation of Societies of Authors and Composers (CISAC) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).”⁵

The role of cultural and creative industries in the United States is also reflected in the American economy. “The value of arts and cultural production in America in 2017 was \$877.8 billion, amounting to 4.5% of gross domestic product. The arts contribute more to the national economy than do the construction, transportation and warehousing, travel and tourism, mining, utilities and agriculture industries.”⁶ At its establishment, the mission of the National Endowment for the Arts was clear: to spread artistic prosperity throughout the land, from the dense neighborhoods of our largest cities to the vast rural spaces, so that every citizen might enjoy America’s great cultural legacy.⁷

Both research and practice have established that the arts generate cultural and financial capital and add to the fullness of community life and the collective American experience with the showcasing of many cultural identities and the celebration of the multiple cultural legacies that have shaped this country from its beginnings. While the COVID-29 crisis has raised intense economic, cultural, and societal questions, these converging forces suggest that this is a moment for bold, responsive new national policies. I believe that this is the moment to establish a United States Department of Cultures.

With this Department, the United States would join more than 50 other nations throughout the world which include a ministry of culture in their governments.⁸ This cabinet-level department, headed by a Secretary of Cultures, would honor and support voices from all of our

⁵ Paris: UNESCO, 2020. Published by EY (formerly Ernst & Young). Emphasis in the original.

⁶ National Endowment for the Arts, *The U.S. Arts Economy (1988-2017): A National Summary Report* (2020), and U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of Economic Analysis, *National Data for 1998-2017* (2020).

⁷ *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008*, ed. Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham. (Washington, DC: NEA, 2009.)

⁸ Megan Garber, “Should the U.S. Have a Secretary of Culture?”

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/07/should-the-us-have-a-secretary-of-culture/277409/>
Retrieved 7/9/2020.

diverse cultures, recognizing that the arts and humanities are at the core of human experience and must be accessible to everyone in this country. Investing in the nation's cultural organizations, scholars, and state and local arts agencies for the long term would enhance the intellectual, artistic and spiritual life of the country—restoring its soul, so to speak, and truly making good on access and equity for all. The policies of this department would encourage communication, cooperation and collaboration among arts organizations, civic leaders, and regional, state and national interests to achieve economic prosperity and promote community solidarity, honoring the multiple cultural legacies of our nation.

To bring this vision into national consciousness and to gain the broadest perspective on the creation of a national Department of Cultures, a logical next step would be to create a White House Blue Ribbon Panel to engage in a one-year process of connecting with the diverse cultures of our country, listening to the myriad spokespeople of the cultures and cultural legacies our nation encompasses, and building a framework for the department that is inclusive, responsive and creatively attuned to the wide range of heritage and experience across the nation.

The Blue Ribbon Panel and the eventual creation of a cabinet-level Department of Cultures would bring to the table some of the principles and techniques I describe in my case studies for negotiating change and imagining the future—only on a national scale. The outcome and opportunity would be a department capable of changing the national narrative from a monocultural perspective to a multicultural one, bringing people together in endeavors that create jobs as well as art, economic prosperity as well as social solidarity. This is a critical moment in the history of my country: it has never been more important, I believe, to bring people together. This is a golden opportunity to do just that, joining with our international neighbors to achieve economic success, artistic accomplishment, and access for all.

My two case studies illustrate the possibilities of this approach to the arts and the economy, building upon cultural legacies to promote and achieve regional development. These cases stress the importance of using “cultural capital,” the “stock of practices that reflect values and identities rooted in place, class, and/or ethnicity. Investments in cultural capital create or sustain the values, traditions, beliefs and/or languages that become the currency to leverage other types of capital.”⁹ The communities in both case studies have been cited as national models for rural arts and economic development work.

The concepts and principles of creative placemaking used in this paper are widely embraced by rural researchers and practitioners, including Charles W. Fluharty, co-founder of the Rural Policy Research Institute or RUPRI.¹⁰ RUPRI is home to the Rural Cultural Wealth Lab, which has coined the phrase “cultural capital,” defined as “[t]he stock of practices that reflect values and identities rooted in place, class, and/or ethnicity. Investments in cultural capital create or sustain the values, traditions, beliefs and/or languages that become the currency to leverage other types of capital.

Both the creative sector and cultural capital figure in the framework for rural economic development recently published by the National Governors Association of the United States, mentioned at the beginning of my paper. The roles of providing leadership, capitalizing on cultural assets, building infrastructure for cultural partnerships, developing human creative capital, and creating a friendly environment for investment and innovation can function at the national level as well.

⁹ “Rural Arts and Culture,” in Rural Cultural Wealth Lab, www.ripri.org/wp-content/uploads/RUPRI-nea-Lab-Conceptual-Design-September-22-2017-pdf, 3. Retrieved 1/10/20.

¹⁰ The Rural Policy Research Institute, University of Iowa, provides analysis and information on the challenges, needs and opportunities facing rural America. See, for example, the Small Cities Conference 2018 held at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana: “Vulnerable Communities: Research, Policies and Practices.”

The role of cultural and creative industries in the United State has been—at least until the present state of pandemic—reflected in the American economy. “The value of arts and cultural production in America in 1027 was \$877.8 billion, amounting to 4.5% of gross domestic product. The arts contribute more to the national economy than do the construction, transportation and warehousing, travel and tourism, mining, utilities, and agriculture industries.”¹¹

The changing narratives of two small American cities exemplify the engagement of cultural heritage and the investment of cultural capital to develop policies for smart and sustainable growth. Both towns undertook ambitious and arts-based projects for economic development. Both gained the support of the local citizenry. Recognizing and capitalizing on the cultural wealth of their communities, both towns engaged not only local, but regional, state and national interests to accomplish their goals. And both influenced policies and practices far beyond their city limits, progressing from local innovation to national influence in placemaking policy.

The first case study comes from New York Mills, Minnesota (population 1,199), twice named one of the 100 Best Small Art Towns in America and cited by the National Endowment for the Arts in its 2011 appropriations request to Congress Overview for the Our Town Program. The story begins in the late 1980s, when I moved to New York Mills to get away from the pace and the violence of city life.¹² For two years I painted barns to save enough money to renovate an abandoned farm outside the town, with the idea of turning the barn into an artists’ residence. During that time I got to know the people and my preconceptions about rural America changed. Many farmers and townspeople were college educated; some had advanced degrees. The local

¹¹ National Endowment for the Arts, *The U.S. Arts Economy (1988-2017): A National Summary Report* (2020), and U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of Economic Analysis, *National Data for 1998-2017* (2020).

¹² An account of the New York Mills experience appears in Carlo M. Cuesta, Dana M. Gillespie and Padraic Lillis, *Bright Stars: Charting the Impact of the Arts in Rural Minnesota* (Minneapolis: The McKnight Foundation, n.d.), 36-40.

culture was rich in memories of northern European cultures, primarily Finnish. There was clearly a thirst for the arts in this rural community, but no access to the arts. I did not think that was right, so I started a nonprofit organization with farmers and townspeople serving on the board. The logo for the organization? A tractor, to symbolize “cultivating the arts”. The New York Mills Arts Retreat began with a clear mission of “providing innovative access to the arts.” A residency program was created for artists who would bring their own cultural experiences to the town through collaborative community engagement, exhibitions and teaching in the local schools. Artists from as far away as France and Poland applied, and the program took off in my now-renovated barn and farmstead.

As the new Arts Retreat residency program was being well received in the community, I heard that the first brick building in town—dating back to 1885--could be available for use. I listened. Perhaps this abandoned building could be a spark, an inspiration to reimagine and revitalize a community through arts and culture. I heard what people said, the needs they articulated and the concerns they had. Using art as a response to those needs came from listening and learning from what people told me about who the community was and wanted to be. Talking with the Chamber of Commerce, bankers, and other local business leaders, I found that they were initially skeptical, but with the donation of that dilapidated 1885 building, fundraising could begin. To save money, I served as the general contractor; local service organizations pitched in, with community members donating more than 3,000 hours to the project. We raised \$35,000 from area residents and businesses, and the City Council matched this amount and invested \$35,000. (This was the fiscal equivalent of a city like Minneapolis giving 12 million to a project)

The building was renovated at half the projected cost, and in the final week, when I arrived at the center I found the mayor and school superintendent putting a last coat of varnish on

the floor. The financial investment of the small town of New York Mills had a significant impact on local and state policy on funding rural arts initiatives. The McKnight Foundation gave its first rural arts grant to the Cultural Center project in 1991, and Minnesota cities from Fergus Falls to St. Cloud, and Bloomington used the New York Mills precedent to invest in civic arts capital renovations with public funding.

The New York Mills Cultural Center opened with a parade down Main Street. Soon after, a sculpture park was inaugurated, featuring art made from farm machinery. Then came the First Continental Divide Music and Film Festival and the Great American Think-off, an annual philosophy-based contest in which participants answer a question such as “Is the nature of humankind good or evil?” The town took advantage of technology, partnering with Internet startup company Net Radio based in Eden Prairie, Minnesota. The first internet-only radio network, NetRadio, featured the 1996 Great American Think-Off competition in the world’s first interactive live webcast.

During its first quarter-century, the Cultural Center put on more than-100 art exhibits, hosted 50 visiting artists, and attracted more than \$500,000 in state and local funding. Between 1992 and 1998, 17 new businesses opened in New York Mills, increasing employment by 40 percent. The Center attracted attention from The New York Times, USA Today, and Corporate Report Magazine. In addition to C-Span, coverage has included the National Broadcasting Company’s Today Show, National Public Radio, and Canadian Public Radio, giving it international exposure. In 1993, the Northwest Area Foundation recognized the New York Mills Regional Cultural Center as a national model.¹³ New York Mills was twice designated one of the

¹³ Markusen and Johnson, 92.

100 Best Small Art Towns in America.¹⁴ Certainly it is a small town with a big idea, “. . . an example of how the arts can be embraced in a rural community and invigorate a local economy.”¹⁵ A case study of New York Mills¹⁶ was used by researchers in the National Endowment for the Arts to help create the Our Town program,¹⁷ which has supported creative placemaking for a decade.

New York Mills also helped to shift the narrative of rural American communities’ population decline. In 1990, the year the arts initiative began, the population of New York Mills was 940. In the 2010 census, the figure had climbed to 1,199, a 27 percent increase.

Perhaps the most eloquent testimony to the “powerful impact the arts can have in restoring hope to a small Minnesota town” comes from Neil Cuthbert of the McKnight Foundation. “At the grand opening of the Regional Cultural Center in New York Mills a few years ago, it was clear that many of the town’s residents were in attendance, including a good contingent of seniors. It was a celebration to end all celebrations, and the civic pride was

¹⁴ John Villani, *The 100 Best Small Art Towns in America* (Santa Fe, NM: John Muir Publications, 1994), 84-85. New York Mills was also featured in the 1998 edition.

¹⁵ Will Lambe, ed. and intro., *Small Towns, Big Ideas: Case Studies in Small Town Community Economic Development* (Chapel Hill, NC: School of Government at the University of North Carolina and the North Carolina Rural Economic Development, 2008), 130-133, here 132.

¹⁶ In its 2010 request for appropriations from the federal government, the National Endowment for the Arts stated, “In communities across the Nation, investments in the arts have had a profound impact. You don’t have to take our word for it—just look at the facts. New York Mills, Minnesota, is a rural community with a population of less than 1,000. In 1991, the City of New York Mills invested \$35,000 to renovate a downtown building into an arts and cultural center in order to reverse a trend of economic decline. Within five years after this investment, 17 new businesses opened in town creating 210 new jobs—representing a 40% increase in the number of jobs in this community.” *National Endowment for the Arts—Appropriations Request for FY 2011: Overview. Our Town: A Uniquely Arts-Based Initiative to Strengthen Communities Through the Arts. Our Town: An Overview.* Communication from NEA to the Executive Director of the New York Mills Regional Cultural Center, 2010.

¹⁷ “Our Town is the National Endowment for the Arts’ creative placemaking grants program. . . . Successful Our Town projects ultimately lay the groundwork for systemic changes that sustain the integration of arts, culture, and design into local strategies for strengthening communities. These projects require a partnership between a local government entity and nonprofit organization . . . and should engage in partnership with other sectors (such as agriculture and food, economic development, education and youth, environment and energy, health, housing, public safety, transportation, and workforce development). “The program provides matching grants of \$25,000 to \$200,000 for projects involving arts engagement, cultural planning, design, artist and creative industry support. <https://www.arts.gov/grants-organizations/our-town/grant-program-description>. Retrieved 1/11/2020.

palpable. An older woman standing next to me turned to me with tears in her eyes and said, ‘It’s like this town is being reborn.’”¹⁸

In an important article, Maurice Jones of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation discussed “the transformative power of arts and culture to drive new outcomes.” He described those outcomes as unleashing through the arts community power and innovative solutions that drive economic prosperity; building community identity, ownership, and agency through creative placemaking; and integrating social cohesion and cultural understanding into the process of community development.¹⁹

Lanesboro, Minnesota (population 754) is an example the principles described by Jones of creating, using and building cultural capital as a stimulus to economic development and sustenance. Despite its beautiful natural setting at the foot of imposing bluffs, with the Root River offering trout fishing as well as other recreational opportunities, Lanesboro was stagnating at the end of the twentieth century. As one writer described it, “In the mid-1970s, Lanesboro shared a fate similar to other small, rural towns: population decline, economic decay, struggling farms, abandoned storefronts and waning community life.”²⁰ I moved to Lanesboro in 2000 because the community was interested in building a new art center, and I accepted an offer to serve as executive director of the art center there. I soon realized, however, that what the center and the community had in mind was very traditional: all arts activities in one building—just the opposite of the more comprehensive arts presence I’d championed in New York Mills. When I first proposed the idea of the entire town as an arts campus, there was not only skepticism but

¹⁸ Neil Cuthbert, “Forward,” *Bright Stars*., 13.

¹⁹ Maurice Jones, “Integrating Arts and Culture into Community Development to Improve Outcomes,” *Community Development Innovation Review* (November 13, 2019).

²⁰ Nicole Nfonoyim-Hara, “Lanesboro Arts: Innovation Story No. 4,” *Notes on Innovation from Bush Prize*, Vol. 2 (Bush Foundation, n.d.), 49-59, here 53.

opposition. To convince the naysayers, I worked on developing collaborative relationships with the City, civic organizations, and community members.

Lanesboro lacked a Chamber of Commerce in 2000. I worked to establish one; in 2001 I was elected president of the new organization. One of the first objectives of the Chamber was to use the arts as a strategic tool to encourage tourism and economic development. We began outreach to both traditional and digital media outlets, targeting travel writers and tourism publications, promoting the Lanesboro cultural tourism narrative—including country fairs and tours of Old Order Amish²¹ communities—while directing visitors to the Lanesboro web site. The second objective was to weave the arts into the strategic plans of both the Chamber and the City in order to highlight the importance of the arts and embed arts and culture in local policy.

“Discover Sculpture Explore Lanesboro” began in 2001 as a partnership between Lanesboro Arts, the City of Lanesboro, Forecast Public Art, and metalwork sculptor Coral Lambert and her then-apprentice Karl Unnasch.²² Professional sculptors, they worked with community members in a public process to create cast iron medallions detailing the history and culture of Lanesboro.²³ Ten years later, with suggestions and contributions from the community, Unnasch directed another iron pour to create several new nine-inch marker medallions. Installed throughout the city, the medallions invite residents and visitors to hunt for the places and objects depicted as they walk about. Forecast Public Art now uses the “Discover Sculpture Explore Lanesboro” project nationwide as an example of creative placemaking.

²¹ Old Order Amish are a group of Germanic origin, conservative descendants of the sixteenth-century Radical Reformation that emphasizes simplicity and withdrawal from the “world.” The Amish are known for their distinctive dress and refusal to use modern machinery for farming or transportation.

²² Carol Lambert is a sculptor who works in poured iron. She is Professor of Sculpture and Director of the National Casting Center Foundry at Alfred University, New York. Originally from England, Professor Lambert first came to the United States in 1994 as an artist in residence at the New York Mills Arts Retreat. Karl Unnasch is a local sculptor.

²³ Medallions featured five aspects of Lanesboro and the surrounding area: history, culture, community, education, nature. One medallion, for example, depicted the local Amish culture; another, fish, etc.

From this beginning, it took seven years of working with the community for the idea of Lanesboro as an arts campus to be embraced as a shared vision. The City of Lanesboro formally promoted a civic arts partnership in its 2007 strategic plan by (1) recognizing “the growth of a strong arts community” as an asset vital to the town’s success, (2) “encouraging the vitality of existing arts programming and seeking to develop new artistic venues,” and (3) seeking to “implement the improvements of infrastructure, and build upon Lanesboro’s walkability and friendly community spirit.”

The arts campus project had seven goals: (1) engage the community and its visitors in the arts; (2) stimulate economic growth and improve quality of life; (3) attract and retain visitors, residents, businesses, and investment; (4) weave the arts into city infrastructure, create spaces for community interaction and construct artful, inviting venues for activities and events; (5) expand opportunities for artists to create, display, and market their work; (6) build on existing assets; and (7) keep Lanesboro authentic and unique.

Following the great recession and economic downturn of 2008, Lanesboro Arts began a series of conversations with community members about the Arts Campus vision; those conversations eventually led to a formal capital campaign for \$1 million, initiated in 2011. The capital campaign invited community members to donate—not only money, but—ideas for what the arts campus vision should include. We convened community meetings and started asset mapping, creating a vision plan with the support of regional funders, businesses and more than 100 community members in state and national funders.

The capital campaign for Lanesboro’s Arts Campus began in 2011. In 2014 the \$1 million campaign was completed, and the City of Lanesboro, with its population of 754, became the first small town in American to proclaim—by a resolution passed unanimously—the entire

community an Arts Campus. In the spring of 2015, the Lanesboro Chamber of Commerce conducted a ribbon-cutting ceremony for ten new businesses, noting that more than \$2.5 million had been invested in historic downtown revitalization efforts from 2011 to 2015 alone.

The Arts Campus design was published in a Lanesboro City-Wide Vision and Connectivity Plan. We envisioned a Rural Art Loop, or experience loops outside of town that passed by art places and natural views, connecting to other towns for biking or driving. Pedestrian connections through town were emphasized, with a Lanesboro Art and Poetry Loop; a Gateway Park; water power interpretive signage, poetry and art at Lanesboro's historic dam; and a Poems Around the Town loop. In effect, the Lanesboro Art Campus incorporated city infrastructure into a vehicle for creating high-quality art.

Over the years, collaboration and consultation produced arts-influenced solutions to community challenges. A dilapidated 1892 historic bridge was renovated for pedestrian traffic. The city put aside public land for developing a Gateway park. A dearth of signage led to the Artful Wayfinding System; the Poetry Parking Lot features haikus written by Lanesboro citizens, young and old, and an information booth directs visitors to town attractions. An education program, Surprise Sculpture, worked with young people and adults to create public art installations all over town. The Chamber of Commerce promoted Lanesboro's now-diverse cultural tourism economy which included a state Rhubarb Festival and an Art in the Park Festival. Lanesboro Arts continued to attract support from state and regional foundations, including the McKnight, Bush, Mardag and Jerome Foundations and the Minnesota Historical Society in addition to grants from the NEA Our Town program and ArtPlace America.

As community members and Lanesboro Arts worked to substantiate the Arts Campus vision, we received affirmation and support. In 2012, Americans for the Arts and Ovation TV

recognized the Arts Campus model with an Innovation Award; Lanesboro Arts was one of only five organizations in the United States to be so honored. The Lanesboro Arts Campus was featured at the 2013 Rural Arts and Culture Summit and the Americans for the Arts annual convention. In 2014, Lanesboro Arts was awarded the Bush Prize for Community Innovation. The City of Lanesboro itself passed a second resolution in 2017 for continuing support of the Arts Campus vision, demonstrating a community-wide dedication to the role of the arts and creativity in local government and public life.

Over the course of its transformation, Lanesboro changed its community narrative. In 2013, ArtPlace America chose the city as one of America's top 12 small-town art places. A national collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution in 2017 revived interest and raised funds for the town's deteriorating dam. Also in 2017, a Readers' Choice poll conducted by USA Today cited Lanesboro's arts scene, historic architecture and bed-and-breakfasts in addition to its plethora of outdoor activities. Like New York Mills before it, Lanesboro was twice listed in *The One Hundred Best Small Art Towns in America*. Lanesboro also received a citation in a national study of rural economic development. "Using this robust [collaborative] approach, the town addressed several issues related to . . . revitalization, such as vacant store fronts, historic preservation, pedestrian safety and parking. The endeavor incorporated history and design based on existing natural and cultural assets to stimulate the local economy and improve the quality of life . . . Added to these efforts are the artful handling of external communications, fundraising, and logistical and political aspects of all the projects."²⁴

A briefing for policymakers on Capitol Hill on May 2, 2019, on the Arts and Rural Prosperity, endorsed by the Congressional Arts Caucus, was designed to share new research and

²⁴ Sally Rood, *Rural Prosperity through the Arts and Creative Sector: A Rural Action Guide for Governors and States* (Washington, DC: National Governors' Association, in cooperation with the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, n.d.), 33.

examples of the power of creativity and culture to help rural communities thrive. At this briefing, Chuck Fluharty, founder and president emeritus of the Rural Policy Research Institute, discussed his organization's focus on the arts as a rural wealth driver and community bonding agent, citing the example of Lanesboro.

In both New York Mills and Lanesboro, publicity (branding, marketing and storytelling) played a key role in advancing our reputation as a national model while promoting local buy-in by citizens, civic organizations and government. In both cases, publicity advanced five key objectives: (1) shift existing detrimental narratives and stereotypes of rural decline by showcasing innovative arts success stories; (2) inspire community pride and buy-in to the arts as community development and strengthening tools; (3) promote tourism and economic development as well as inviting, welcoming and educating new residents; (4) leverage innovative rural arts economic success stories such as those in New York Mills and Lanesboro, Minnesota, to change and impact local, state and national policies on rural arts and sustainability from governmental, for-profit and non-profit perspectives.

The stories of both cities stress the importance and role of both traditional and digital media, storytelling, and publicity in developing and promoting innovative cultural tourism. Both cases also describe the vital civic and governmental roles in innovative cultural tourism and creative rural placemaking. These case studies emphasize the importance of negotiating change and reimagining the future—including strategies for attracting and retaining a new generation of rural leadership—and how small-town adversity can be transformed into success through innovation and the arts. They also illustrate the importance of developing new, positive community narratives which challenge the stereotypes of rural landscape and people, and how these new narratives can highlight the benefits of rural cultural capital.

The stories of these two small cities, and their influence on regional and national policy-making organizations, demonstrate that the arts generate cultural and financial capital and add to the fullness of community life and the collective American experience. While the COVID-19 crisis has raised intense economic, cultural and societal questions, these converging forces suggest that this is a moment for bold, responsive new national policies which will achieve economic prosperity and promote community solidarity, housed in the new Department of Cultures. The portfolio of this Department would quite naturally include outreach to and cooperation with international agencies and cultural ministries.

The opportunity and outcome of creating a Department of Cultures would be an entity capable of changing our national narrative from a monocultural perspective to a multicultural one, bringing people together in endeavors that create jobs as well as art, economic prosperity as well as social solidarity across national and international borders.