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by Joshua Elzy
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The Strains of Cultural Collaboration

Last year the City of San Antonio's Office of Cultural Affairs (OCA) organized a community effort focused on local arts and culture. With funds provided by a portion of the local hotel/motel tax, the City cannot play favorites, and it consequently has the nearly impossible task of actually making a higher tide float all cultural boats.

San Antonio first needed to decide in which direction it would take the arts. Some locals would rather the arts either look forward-to lead in progress and innovation-or look backward-to retrench and preserve the established artistic traditions of our historic city. Looking forward or backward is at root a political decision, and either choice will make a city's culture obsolete as years and trends go by.

A decade ago when Seattle's underground music scene grabbed national attention, that city's cultural authorities could have concentrated solely on encouraging the grunge sound. This focused approach would have brought wealth and notoriety to Seattle in the short term, but as changing tastes moved the musical spotlight elsewhere the city would find itself forgotten in the long run. What saved Seattle was its broader approach to developing the creative capacity of its economy in general. Seattle's arts managed to stay vital thanks to the city's industrial collaboration and technological innovation.

Creativity begets and is attracted to more creativity, as evidenced by Seattle's new Experience Music Project. Opened in 2000, this high-tech interactive museum was funded by a local kid, Microsoft innovator Paul Allen. Allen drew professional inspiration from Jimi Hendrix and other Seattle musicians, but channeled his own creativity into building the technology of the future and one of today's leading companies. Allen recruited leading contemporary architect Frank Gehry to design the EMP. Dedicated to the continuing exploration of musical creativity and how that creativity can spill over into other applications, the EMP now sits below Seattle's famous space needle. Since 2000 it has attracted millions of visitors each year and helped revitalized the downtown cultural scene. There is no better example nationwide of cultural collaboration and its beneficial result.

The leaders in any industry are those who value creative thinking, encourage the free exchange of ideas, and are not afraid to abandon the status quo. Innovative champions of industry like Paul Allen of Microsoft and Howard Schultz of Starbucks value human expression in general and realize that creativity leads to profit. Allen and Schultz may be focused on the unartistic pursuit of making money, but with higher profits they benefit the arts through large charitable support and a higher standard of living among their employees. Traditional arts institutions in the San Antonio

community must see local corporations as equal partners in cultural collaboration and value their input as such.

Back in San Antonio, OCA is looking for a way to make creative cooperation between the artistic and business sectors a permanent part of San Antonio's public life. To accomplish this, the traditional artistic community must reach the hard realization that the business community is a valid partner in cultural development.

Most museums, galleries, theatres, etc. see non-artistic businesses purely as a source of funding. HEB, Valero, and USAA may provide valuable services, but fundamentally lack creativity. San Antonio's art community is insulated, satisfied with at least attracting representatives other art institutions to an opening night reception. Sculptors attracting painters is reaching out far enough. This overlooks the employees of these corporations who attend First Friday, NIOSA, and other cultural events.

During America's last economic boom, some businesses at last attained acknowledgement as semi-artistic. Web designers, advertising agencies, architects, salons and other such companies were deemed hipper than mere trades, without taking into account the creativity and innovation that drives every industry.

Many participants in The Cultural Collaborative are still laboring under the mistaken assumption that San Antonio's "culture" must be defined and set in stone. They recognize our culture as this or that-Chicano or Old West, Tourism or Tradition-never broadening their definition beyond their own particular constituency. In their conception, San Antonio's culture is undilutable, unmixable, and unchangeable. This belief serves only to polarize residents. Culture is strongest when it is inclusive, inevitably containing contradictory elements and evolving as the city evolves. People can Tango and Two-Step in San Antonio just as they can speak both Spanish and English. A city's culture can be appreciated, but it cannot be delimited and defined.

As with any other civic activity, the issue of inclusion will challenge OCA's success. Although ideally every citizen and organization would have its say, this is of course impossible. Even including every art and cultural organization or patron, would be an unwieldy disaster. Although the Cultural Collaborative involves everyone, its administration must, by necessity, be limited to a representative few. OCA has created two planning groups: the eighty member, aptly named Steering Committee and the more selective twenty-four member Executive Committee. This bicameral system should couple a wealth of ideas with expeditious decision-making.

The "Finding Ways" kickoff conference that convened in November indicates OCA's goals and expectations for The Cultural Collaborative. At the root of this initiative is Richard Florida's treatise on cultural economy. Florida's 2002 book *The Rise of the Creative Class* argues that American cities with a healthy sense of creativity, characterized by arts organizations and cultural outlets, will succeed through increased renown, better quality of life for residents, and a stronger, more progressive business environment. Critics have accused Florida of poorly concealing a politically liberal

initiative when he points out that cities with a more progressive social scene are more likely to prosper economically. As example, Mr. Florida has often presented evidence that a strong homosexual population and that city's economic prosperity go hand-in-hand.

Accordingly, cities across the nation have embraced the idea that by enhancing their cultural efforts, they can attract the kind of energetic, creative people that drive business innovation and economic prosperity. Obviously part of this attraction lies in the fact that increased spending on the arts is easier for voters to swallow than corporate tax rebates or other such business directed initiatives. If someone with letters after their name claims that spending money on the people will help the people make more money civic leaders are usually willing to try the approach. Although Florida's theory has not been around long enough to compile evidence of cities benefiting from this policy, it has already filled his pockets and social calendar. We should all be so lucky to sell an attractive solution to those desperate for it.

The Cultural Collaborative also hopes to boost cultural tourism-another contemporary catchphrase that separates those visitors who come to soak in San Antonio's creative juices from those who only wish to purchase a rhinestone t-shirt and dine at Hooters. Cultural tourists visit galleries, museums, performances, festivals, and statistically spend more on the local economy than their less-refined counterparts. If cultural tourists like what they see of San Antonio's athmosphere, they are also more likely to return and spend more. In contrast, the un-cultured tourists may have a delightful time, but see this delight as a symptom of vacation and not as particular to San Antonio, so next year they are off to Disney World. The cultural tourist may come to San Antonio for a trade convention, like the city's atmosphere so much she returns the following year with her family, and then is impressed enough to move her company to San Antonio.

If you cannot already tell, both the creative economy and cultural tourism theories make value judgments based on a visitor's appreciation of "high" art and "authentic" culture over low-brow entertainment and kitsch. This inevitably reflects on the visitor's education level, politics, and economic status. However, taken at face value cultural tourists' increased spending on local arts boosts the visibility of those arts and fuels the effects of Richard Florida's theory, so these two concepts dovetail nicely.

The Cultural Collaborative in San Antonio faces an uncommon challenge: the more liberal elements of the local arts community tend to resent tourism and civic efforts toward it. In most American cities this complaint would be laughed out of City Hall, but in San Antonio it has taken root largely for economic reasons. Per acre, the touristy area of downtown gets more funding and attention than any other area of the city, resulting in the impression that the Riverwalk will be paved in gold before adequate drainage, sanitation, and transportation are available city-wide. Whatever truth this scenario might hold, it is obviously a problem of civic funding, not of tourists or tourism. Historically San Antonio was built and populated by visitors. Whether attracted here by natural resources or importance as a transportation hub these visitors fostered the culture that we now zealously protect.

As with many community initiatives, The Cultural Collaborative's process will be as important and as critiqued as the policies it sets. The success of this program will be difficult to measure, but the results should be evaluated through realistic expectations. There is little possibility that everyone in the greater San Antonio community or even within the Executive and Steering Committees will like the direction things take. In any organization, expecting perfection and complaining when it is not achieved only makes the best possible results more difficult. Although idealism is a quixotic notion traditional to those in the arts, participants in The Cultural Collaborative will get more out of it armed with realistic expectations.

The most important result of OCA's efforts might not even be a boost in cultural tourism or an increase in arts funding, patronage, and attendance citywide. The Finding Ways conference's first immediate benefit was introducing members of the San Antonio arts community to each other and to local business leaders. The second benefit of the conference was to get all attendees on the same page. Even if some do not agree with Richard Florida's theory of growing the creative economy or the concept of cultural tourism, establishing a common understanding of these theories and what they aim to achieve is a great accomplishment. Contacts and relationships established during The Cultural Collaborative will strengthen San Antonio's creative culture in the years ahead.