The Future of Urban Municipal Arts Agencies
Submitted by the United State Urban Arts Federation

The U.S. Urban Arts Federation is comprised of Local Arts Agency leaders from America’s top 60 cities. There is great variation among our group in operating models and functions – some of us are part of municipal government, some are non-profits, and some are hybrids. But we all share a common commitment to strengthening our cities by fostering an environment where arts and culture flourish. Our strength is that we are, ideally, operational reflections of the unique character of our communities. We generously share best practices, strategies and ideas. We also believe that cities are the centers of innovation in our field.

For years, we have shared a goal with the U.S. Conference of Mayors to see a cabinet-level position in the White House for arts, culture and tourism. With a renewed recognition of the vitality of American cities as centers of commerce and culture, we hope to see strong, visible national leadership from the West Wing, creating new opportunities to leverage our work at the city level.

Arts and culture are intertwined in the urban dynamic, and we need to involve our artists and cultural leaders in addressing our civic problems and challenges.

A broader concept of culture

In the first few decades of our movement, an USUAF agency might have focused primarily on major institutions. Many of us designed elaborate tier structures in order to be fair in distributing resources that for the most part have not kept up with demand. Our portfolios have broadened to include a more expansive range of arts and culture. Community-based groups, small theatre ensembles, choirs, organizations that preserve and interpret cultural traditions, artist collectives, ethnic festivals and informal arts have increased exponentially. As the National Arts Index data suggests, we will have to rethink our strategy to better correspond to the changing realities in our communities.

USUAF has been talking for years about the blurring of lines between the non-profit and for-profit cultural sectors. The proliferation of non-profit arts and cultural organizations demands that we seriously consider how this impacts the viability and sustainability of the non-profit cultural sector. Indeed, many young artists are eschewing the non-profit organizational model altogether in order to simply focus on creating the work. We need to ask ourselves what is ultimately more important: the organizational structure of an organization or the value of the work in our communities? Certainly, the non-profit structure is not going away, and indeed it works very well on many different levels – but it’s not well-suited for everything. We have the flexibility at the local level to encourage new models of organization that can add vitality to our cities.
Our cities and the people we represent are constantly evolving. Do our staff and board members mirror the changing demographics of our cities? That’s an important commitment and first step to make sure that our programs and services are relevant to diverse communities and constituencies. Only then can we develop inclusive, meaningful, community partnerships in ethnic and immigrant communities and capitalize on the strengths of arts and culture in building strong, healthy communities.

**Art, culture and the environment**

Environmentalism is the new urbanism, and a healthy and sustainable arts and culture sector is important to the quality of urban life, and the urban economy. And not just in our downtown neighborhoods.

Over the past few decades, the environmental movement has been successful in creating awareness, values, and practices that are now an integral part of our daily lives. This allows each of us as individuals, and collectively as a city, to contribute toward environmental sustainability. If we are to be effective stewards of our natural environment, we must also be good stewards of the urban environment.

Environmentalism is a core social value, and our arts and cultural core social values are very similar. We must figure out a better way to articulate the parallel daily connections and actions we have with arts and culture. Like environmentalists, we care deeply about our communities, and the health of our arts and cultural sector. Our role is to help make sure that our cities can sustain our cultural assets.

The successful revitalization of our neighborhoods depends upon on the presence of arts and culture to provide an authentic sense of place. Artists, of course, have always played a role in these efforts. We know all too well the familiar cycle: artists, as urban pioneers, transform a neglected neighborhood, only to eventually face eviction as property values rise. It is our responsibility to help develop policies and partnerships to ensure that space for artists and culture endures in all of our neighborhoods, and that we treasure this space as much as we value free public libraries, parks and open space.

**Flexing our political muscle**

For those of us working in and with municipal governments, the obstacles can be daunting as budgets shrink, priorities shift, and the mood of the electorate swings back and forth. We are often overworked and understaffed, and sometimes undervalued by our elected leaders. We struggle under the myth that the bureaucratic structure of government at any level simply does not permit innovation. As local arts agency leaders, we must be willing to exercise our political muscle in new ways that align with ever-shifting civic priorities. We also need to challenge established assumptions about what we can and cannot do – or what municipal government can or cannot do. It also means that we can’t do our work alone – we have to seek alliances with our peers in other agencies and jurisdictions, and to forge relationships with unlikely partners.
And for the non-profit or hybrid LAA’s who rely on partnerships with local governments, we hope to see elected officials more closely understand the value we bring to their work, manifest by a commensurate level of investment.

Americans for the Arts has done terrific work over the past several years to forge important alliances with the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the Conference Board and others. AFTA has also provided definitive national research studies and advocacy on our behalf. This work improves our credibility and provides an excellent foundation to spark conversations at the local level. It also strengthens our peer network. Most importantly, this work helps us spring into action. AFTA’s national affiliations have inspired many of us to forge similar alliances at the local level.

**Restoring the arts in education**

Educational reform is another daunting task that we must all engage in, but not simply to prepare the next generation of audiences. For years, many of us worked one classroom at a time, through direct grants and residencies. While these efforts are extremely valuable, it is not a sustainable model over the long haul. As USUAF members, we must ultimately hold our state and school districts accountable for a complete education for our children. A complete education includes a quality arts education for every child. We need to insist that teacher training includes the arts. And we need to form strategic alliances with local educational reform efforts to make sure that the arts are on par with math and science. Let’s hope we can accomplish this within two or decades, rather than five.

Our work over the next five decades is too big and too important for us to accomplish on our own.