

Culture Blocks

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Executive Summary

Before the launch of CultureBlocks this year, there was no effective way to access all cultural data in Philadelphia. Additionally, these data were not easily contextualized within the geography of Philadelphia. While some cultural data were technically available to the public, they were scattered in various databases housed at different agencies. Organizations wishing to make an informed decision were forced to hunt for datasets by calling around or, if they were unable to find the information, manually collecting the data on the ground (Maira Baylson, personal communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013).

The City of Philadelphia's Office of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy gathered a group of partners, including The Reinvestment Fund, the Social Impact of the Arts Project at the University of Pennsylvania (SIAP) and the City Commerce Department, and decided to tackle this problem by amassing information from over 50 datasets and mapping it on a free online tool that is open to everyone (Crimmins). This tool, known as CultureBlocks, is unique thanks to the extensive research of the SIAP. These data reveal cultural activity occurring outside of

traditional arts institutions such as artists' residences and cultural programming at places like libraries (Moira Baylson, personal communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013).

CultureBlocks allows city departments, foundations, arts organizations and community development corporations to make data-driven decisions (McCullough & Goldstein, personal communication, August 2, 2012). Better-informed decisions allow these organizations to be more effective in achieving their missions. Generally, these missions promote arts and culture in Philadelphia, which in turn can foster urban recovery and economic benefits. However, the tool can also be used in unexpected ways, such as informing strategies to reduce youth violence (Moira Baylson, personal communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013). The nature of the impact CultureBlocks will have on the city will depend on which organizations use the tool.

Philadelphia's tool sets itself apart thanks to its access to highly detailed cultural information. If another city were interested in replicating this tool at the level of detail CultureBlocks enjoys, it would need to have access to data, through comprehensive cultural data collection (similar to the work of the SIAP), as well as access to City data (Moira Baylson, personal communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013). Once data could be accessed, the CultureBlocks team could work in coordination with The Reinvestment Fund to adapt the mapping tool to the

needs of another city. This route to replication would save other cities a great deal of time and expense (McCullough & Goldstein, personal communication, August 2, 2012).

The team behind CultureBlocks consciously adapted the tool to ensure that it would be as useful to its users as possible. The research and development process lasted for a year. The team sought input from those who would be most likely to benefit from the tool's use. Additionally, the team held focus groups and brought in a number of testers. Now that the tool has launched, the team still is open to feedback. Suggestions are being compiled, and relevant ideas will be integrated into the next version of the tool (www.cultureblocks.com/wordpress/about/history).

CultureBlocks was implemented at relatively low cost. The CultureBlocks project received a \$250,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts Our Town Program, which was matched by a creative place-making grant from ArtPlace America. The only input necessitated by the city is staff time. While the initial funding was secured to develop and launch the tool, the team is actively seeking a sustainable funding model. This may include a fee for service (Moir Baylson, personal communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013).

The possible risk in pursuing a fee-for-service funding structure is that user costs could inhibit them from using the tool. Additionally, the team must ensure that users are

sufficiently pleased with the services provided by CultureBlocks that they are willing to pay. While the pay-for-service structure does pose some risks, the alternative, securing grant dollars, is also risky. Grant funding is not guaranteed, putting the project's future on unsure ground. It may be a particular challenge to prove outcomes to grant makers because the way the tool is used to inform decisions is largely obscured by the nature of the tool.

The Problem

Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter posed the question, "Do we have a map of all the cultural activity in the city?" According to Deputy Cultural Officer Moira Baylson, the answer to this question was a resounding no (Moira Baylson, personal communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013). There was no central location where all of Philadelphia's cultural information was stored. While many data are public, they are scattered in different databases. These databases often times are not readily available on the Internet. In these situations, a person would need to call an agency individually to access the required information. In other situations, an employee would need to physically go to a neighborhood and walk block by block to record where cultural activity is occurring (Moira Baylson, personal communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013). In cases where the activity takes place at an institution whose primary role is not cultural, someone

visiting the neighborhood would not realize cultural activity was occurring there, and the resulting data would be inaccurate (Jachimowicz). Furthermore, another organization interested in accessing such information might be unaware that these data had already been collected. Therefore, the second organization might employ another person to physically visit the same neighborhood for the same reason. This duplication is inefficient, time consuming and expensive.

For organizations with small budgets or those that are unwilling to allocate adequate resources for researching the cultural landscape, decisions about funding and programming would be made with an incomplete understanding of the area's cultural resources.

Furthermore, the understanding would be shallow because prior to CultureBlocks there was no readily accessible way to contextualize cultural information in the community. Being able to understand spatially where cultural assets exist is extremely helpful. Additionally, understanding these assets as they relate to demographic and civic data allows for an even deeper level of understanding (Maira Baylson, personal communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013). This level of understanding would better serve the needs of the Philadelphia community. However, building a map of an area that includes cultural and demographic data requires time and a particular skill set that every organization's employees may not have.

Solution

Moira Baylson reports that the Office of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy worked with The Reinvestment Fund to integrate existing demographic and civic data with data collected by UPenn's Social Impact of the Arts Program. These two types of data were uploaded onto the Reinvestment Fund's existing mapping platform, PolicyMap. Now cultural, civic and demographic data are all in one place and can be understood in a spatial context (Moira Baylson, personal communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013). Examples of available cultural datasets include cultural businesses, total cultural resources, murals, art galleries and art-related investments. Examples of demographic and civic information include education level, income, commercial corridors, open spaces and public transit. In total, CultureBlocks houses over 50 datasets (cultureblocks.com). This tool launched on April 30, 2013, and is available online and free to anyone (www.cultureblocks.com/wordpress/about/history). There is no registration required to use the tool.

According to the CultureBlocks website, the tool can be used in three different ways. The "explore" feature allows users to select datasets of their choice and pan and zoom around the map of Philadelphia. The "profile" feature prompts users to select a geographic region based on neighborhood, zip code, school catchment, planning district or council district. If these regions are not suitable,

users can customize an area by drawing a border or setting a radius from a particular point. CultureBlocks then creates a report for the selected area. The generated report lists cultural assets such as art galleries, cultural events, resident artists per 1,000 households and cultural participation per 1,000 households. It additionally provides pie charts and bar graphs depicting demographic information and compares some of these data with those of the general population of Philadelphia (www.cultureblocks.com). To date, the profile area of the website seems to be resonating with users—85% of all users have generated a report during their session (Moir Baylson, personal communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013). Finally, the "match" feature asks users to select the attributes of their ideal location within categories such as cultural resources, land use, race and ethnicity, zoning and education. CultureBlocks then provides users with the locations in the city that match their desired criteria (www.cultureblocks.com).

Outcomes

Baylson describes how users such as city departments, capacity builders, funders, foundations, arts organizations and community development corporations are able to make more informed decisions with CultureBlocks. For example, the University City District is using the tool to better understand cultural activity within University City. With this understanding, they can better promote arts as

part of their mission of urban recovery within their borders. CultureBlocks hopes the tool will be used by many users to assist in urban recovery, recognizing that arts and culture help strengthen communities (Moira Baylson, personal communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013). Mark Stern of the SIAP reports that arts are “associated with preserving ethnic and racial diversity in urban neighborhoods, lower rates of social distress, and reduced rates of ethnic and racial harassment” and contribute to “economic improvements, including declines in poverty” (Stern, 2012). Furthermore, arts and culture serve as tremendous economic engines for the city of Philadelphia. According to a 2012 report undertaken by the Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, this sector accounts for \$3.3 billion in direct and indirect spending each year and provides 44,000 jobs in the greater Philadelphia area. More-informed understanding of Philadelphia’s cultural assets can allow this sector to thrive for the sake of the local economy as well as for community well-being. Julie Hawkins, professor and director of the Arts Administration Program at Drexel University, is leading a preliminary research project that investigates cultural assets in the Mantua and Powelton Village neighborhoods of West Philadelphia. Students and faculty members from across departments at Drexel have begun broadly researching what assets, institutions and civic organizations exist in these neighborhoods. They also are investigating opportunities for cultural growth in these areas (Julie Hawkins, personal communication, August 1, 2013).

Hawkins reports that the team uses CultureBlocks every day. Without this tool, they would have to start from the ground up. Instead of quickly generating a map from CultureBlocks, they would have to walk the streets to build the map themselves and call organizations individually to find out what kinds of funding they receive. Instead, they only need to verify information listed on the map in person; for example, they found that one organization had moved its location since the dataset was uploaded onto CultureBlocks. The tool dramatically reduces the time and expense of this initiative. Thus, the Drexel team has been able to expand the scope of the project. Hawkins states that without CultureBlocks, her team would only have enough capacity to build their own maps. They would not have the time and funding to go beyond and assess what additional opportunities might exist in Mantua and Powelton Village (Julie Hawkins, personal communication, August 1, 2013).

Baylson reports how CultureBlocks has aided Apiary Magazine's work toward their goal of diversifying their audience and increasing their readership. The poetry magazine staff used the match feature of the tool to target areas that had an ideal population of potential readers. These features include a particular age, college education and economic diversity. Since the magazine wished to ensure ethnic diversity, they searched for areas where no more than 80% of one race dominated a particular area. Searching for these factors brought some

unexpected results for the magazine. Now Apiary is able to target neighborhoods it never would have expected would fit their ideal target audience. For a magazine with a very small budget and an all-volunteer staff, identifying these areas would not have been financially viable without the use of CultureBlocks. Apiary now is able to market its magazine to ideal areas by dropping off issues directly to coffee shops and neighborhood businesses.

CultureBlocks becomes even more useful when staffers can identify commercial corridors in these neighborhoods. Since these neighborhoods may be unfamiliar to staffers, this is key in cutting down time spent investigating where commercial activity exists (Julie Hawkins, personal communication, August 1, 2013). Maia Jachimowicz, the Deputy Policy Director at the Mayor's Office of Policy Planning and Coordination, is currently using CultureBlocks to inform the development of a strategic plan aimed at preventing youth violence in Philadelphia (Personal communication, August 1, 2013). This strategic plan to prevent youth violence is first focusing on the 22nd Police District, an area that has experienced the highest level of crime in Philadelphia for generations and continues to do so today. Part of developing this strategic plan involves identifying assets that already exist in the 22nd. Examples of these assets include community and recreation centers, libraries and businesses. The department also seeks to analyze where gaps in assets and services exist in this community. The department, along with other city partners, put a call out to all the

departments it works with on community matters, including the police department, the school district, the streets, water and parks and recreation departments and the housing authority to gain their individual understanding of the area's assets (Maia Jachimowicz, personal communication, August 1, 2013).

Soon after the Office of Policy Planning and Coordination started amassing a list of assets from these departments, CultureBlocks came online. Jachimowicz was impressed by the tool because it brought to her attention additional cultural and noncultural assets in the 22nd that had not been identified through the departmental search. Like Julie Hawkins at Drexel, Jachimowicz would have had to pay a staffer to walk through the neighborhood to manually catalogue additional resources if not for the services provided by CultureBlocks. The cultural data provided by CultureBlocks were particularly helpful for this project because they allowed the team to tackle youth violence outside of the traditional strategy of partnering with the police or the legal system. Instead, the City could focus on improving services for youth outside of school including recreational and arts and culture activities. While young people can travel throughout the city to participate in these activities, it is much easier to facilitate and promote involvement when they occur within the young person's neighborhood. Thanks to CultureBlocks, Jachimowicz and her team have quickly identified the available assets in the 22nd Police District (personal

communication, August 1, 2013).

This example of a use for CultureBlocks reveals how vast its outcomes can be. While its most obvious use is to inform strategies that support the arts and culture community in Philadelphia, it can also be used in unexpected ways. The success of this particular program can be measured by the decrease in youth violence in the 22nd. While CultureBlocks cannot take sole responsibility for the initiative's future successes, the data it provided will be indispensable. It would be fair to allot a portion of the program's outcome to CultureBlocks. This program is being piloted in the 22nd Police District but will evolve into a citywide strategy. The Office of Policy Planning and Coordination will continue to use CultureBlocks to identify community and cultural assets that will provide outlets to reduce youth violence. A widespread reduction in youth violence across the city in the future brought about by this program will, to a small extent, be thanks to CultureBlocks (Maia Jachimowicz, personal communication, August 1, 2013).

Measurement

Since CultureBlocks is still a new tool, measuring long-term outcomes is not yet possible. However, the CultureBlocks staff does have insight as to how the tool is being used. Google Analytics provides a basic measurement of how many visitors the website that hosts the tool receives each month (Maira Baylson, personal

communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013). Baylson reports that between April 30 and June 30, 2013, the site received 5,623 unique visitors and 8,326 total visits. However, this number does not reveal how the users are interacting with the tool. Are these users decision makers in an agency or organization who are serious about accessing the data to make an important decision about the future of arts and culture in a particular neighborhood? Are they simply curious visitors interested in trying out the tool? At this time, there is no way to answer these questions, and therefore, the exact impact of CultureBlocks is impossible to assess.

However, anecdotal evidence is being collected. The Office of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy hosts a help desk that allows users to have personal interaction with CultureBlocks staffers. Phone calls or emails to the help desk may develop into an ongoing relationship. In these circumstances, staffers have the opportunity to not only assist their users but also learn how the tool impacts an organization's decision-making process (Moir Baylson, personal communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013). Indeed, staff has already learned how the New Kensington Development Corporation, the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, Campus Philly and others are using the tool to inform their decision-making processes (www.cultureblocks.com).

Competition

CultureBlocks is a unique tool. While Baylson reports that there are cultural mapping tools being developed elsewhere in the United States, the depth of data available on CultureBlocks is unsurpassed. Other tools rely on how a nonprofit organization declares itself to the IRS. Only organizations that primarily consider themselves cultural organizations would be represented on maps based on these data. This broad-strokes strategy misses the cultural activity occurring in informal and unexpected settings, such as a church with a dance program, a police league that hosts cultural activities or simply a group that chooses not to file for 501(c)(3) status (Maira Baylson, personal communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013). These tools will only display activity at traditional locations such as an art museum or an orchestra. Most likely, these are places with which decision makers are already familiar. Furthermore, the less-visible activity may be what a funder is more interested in nurturing as a catalyst for urban renewal. According to Social Impact of the Arts Project's Mark Stern, 400 organizations in Philadelphia have designated themselves cultural nonprofits. However, CultureBlocks reports 1,200 cultural providers. This large expansion of data allows for far better understanding of the cultural landscape in Philadelphia.

Replicability

CultureBlocks's unique granularity of cultural data is thanks to the Social Impact of the Arts Project at the

University of Pennsylvania. Without this key partnership, CultureBlocks either would be a less-useful tool or would have been far more costly and time consuming to have developed and to maintain. The value of understanding cultural activities at the neighborhood level can certainly help other cities. However, the usefulness of this tool is limited without the rich data that are uniquely available in Philadelphia. In order to replicate CultureBlocks, adopters would also need to have a way to collect these data (Maira Baylson, personal communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013).

Additionally, the mapping platform itself is crucial to the value of CultureBlocks. Replicators who would want to recreate this software would be forced to spend millions of dollars on technological development (Maira Baylson, personal communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013). Luckily, the Reinvestment Fund, which houses the mapping software that CultureBlocks utilizes, is highly interested in spreading this model. The Reinvestment Fund is currently working on a business model to facilitate scaling the platform. Cities would work with the Reinvestment Fund to customize the mapping tool for the data they have. While the tool does not have the capacity of self-service, The Reinvestment Fund can work on the data to ensure that they will align with other cities' geographies and the specific needs of the datasets. For example, some processes require manual GIS to make the data useful. A dataset showing how many artists live

within a quarter-mile of a certain area would require additional work before being uploaded to the map (McCullough & Goldstein, personal communication, August 2, 2012).

Spreading this model would be highly desirable for funders who currently are providing grants to cities to build similar mapping tools individually. Instead, foundations could grant dollars to The Reinvestment Fund to develop an increasingly adaptable tool that can be adopted by cities across the country. This strategy would be far more cost and time effective (McCullough & Goldstein, personal communication, August 2, 2012).

Adaptability

Baylson notes that a year was spent in research and development to ensure that CultureBlocks was as useful to its users as possible. The team held focus groups to get feedback from a diverse set of stakeholders. These groups consisted of the following: arts and culture, real estate and economic development, tourism and marketing and funders and capacity builders (Moir Baylson, personal communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013). In February 2013, a beta version of the tool was released and tested by over 50 individuals who would be members of CultureBlocks' target audience (www.cultureblocks.com/wordpress/about/history). Only after integrating feedback from focus groups, testers, demonstrations and surveys did the team launch

CultureBlocks (Moirá Baylson, personal communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013).

Despite the improvements made to CultureBlocks since its inception, the team recognizes that the tool can become even more useful. Therefore, new ideas are catalogued in a spreadsheet. Leadership at CultureBlocks is open to new ideas and aware that users as well as staff who work in direct contact with users may have useful insight. This list of ideas for improvements is regularly considered, and ideas are integrated when appropriate (Moirá Baylson, personal communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013).

The data on CultureBlocks are updated annually to reflect changes in demographics and cultural resources. This process will be conducted by the CultureBlocks team each year. Additionally, if other datasets become available, The Reinvestment Fund can add these resources to the tool. The relative ease with which these sets can be added as well as the commitment staffers have to incorporating improvements make CultureBlocks a very adaptable tool (Moirá Baylson, personal communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013).

Financial Cost

While CultureBlocks would have been a multimillion dollar tool to produce from scratch, the partnerships that have formed around the development and maintenance of this tool have kept costs remarkably low (Moirá Baylson,

personal communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013). The National Endowment for the Arts gave the project a Chairman's Grant of \$25,000 to cover research and development costs before the project began. This initial interest allowed the team to develop a plan and attract additional grants of \$250,000 each from the NEA and ArtPlace (McCullough & Goldstein, personal communication, August 2, 2012).

The City of Philadelphia's only financial input is the time staff spend on the tool. The City is responsible for marketing and outreach that ensures that potential users are aware of how the tool can benefit them and that current users understand how to use the tool (Moir Baylson, personal communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013). The small team that facilitates this effort is based in the Office of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy and consists of a rotating cast of interns, one full-time staffer who also serves as the policy and research associate and Deputy Cultural Officer Moira Baylson. The City's Commerce Department also provides important support for CultureBlocks. The Commerce Department works to attract businesses to the city and support existing businesses. Since the launch of CultureBlocks, the Commerce Department has partnered with the Office of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy to help businesses use the tool for marketing purposes. While CultureBlocks receives support from a number of city employees, this financial input is modest because few

salaries are fully dedicated to CultureBlocks. Similarly, the work necessitated on the data collection and technology end does not require full-time staffers at the SIAP or The Reinvestment Fund (Moira Baylson, personal communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013).

Risks and Policy Implications

While the team is actively seeking funding opportunities, Baylson contends that they are also considering a sustainable business model. This could potentially include charging a fee for service (Moira Baylson, personal communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013). Currently, PolicyMap offers a free basic service as well as more advanced subscriptions that users pay for. These subscriptions range from \$200 a month to \$5,000 per year (www.policymap.com/subscribe). A similar pay-for-service setup may be ideal to implement for CultureBlocks. This strategy would eliminate the need to prove outcomes to funders and would allow for long-term financial viability rather than constant dependence on grant applications. Of course, the pay-for-service model is only effective if enough users feel the tool is worth spending money on. The decision to institute tiered pricing will have to be undertaken carefully to ensure that enough users will find the cost acceptable for the value they receive from the tool.

The impact CultureBlocks will have on policy in Philadelphia remains to be seen. Funding for arts and

culture may see a shift in focus as decisions are informed by detailed data (McCullough & Goldstein, personal communication, August 2, 2012). Additionally, arts and culture advocacy organizations will easily be able to identify areas that have not enjoyed arts investments and are lacking in cultural and arts activity and institutions. By using CultureBlocks reports, these advocacy organizations will be armed with data that are difficult to argue with or ignore. Funding for the arts across Philadelphia's many neighborhoods may become more equitable (Moira Baylson, personal communications, June 23 and July 29, 2013).

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