

Notes from Focus Group with Communities of Color for Minneapolis Plan for Arts and Cultures

August 18, 2004

Attending: Sarah Armwood-Moses, Rita Salone, Patrick Scully, Yolanda Johnson, Jayne Baccus-Khalifa, Deanna Cummings, Cha Lee, Sue Jahn, Laura Watterman-Wittstock, Kathy Welch, James Craven, Reggie Harris, Sandy Agustin, Lissa Jones, Roderic Southall, Titilayo Bediako, Kinshasha Kambui, Wendy Morris, and Erik Takeshita

Following dinner, Kinshasha welcomed folks and introduced Wendy Morris who was asked to help facilitate the discussion. Wendy went over the agenda and purpose of the meeting and asked people to introduce themselves. Erik Takeshita provided a bit of background on the planning process and where the materials are to-date. He presented the 6 goal areas as they were presented on June 30th to the Advisory Committee working groups and the seventh goal area regarding Public Art that has been added since. After his presentation there were small group (trio) discussions followed by a report out and large group discussion. What follows is a summary of the comments made both in small groups and in the large group discussion.

Themes: Here are a few of the themes that emerged from the conversation:

Fundamental lack of trust: For all kinds of historical reasons, communities of color don't trust white folks. This is only reinforced by the fact that people of color weren't asked for their input before now. While there is an appreciation that they were asked at all ("better late than never") it is not inclusive to invite people to the table two-thirds of the way through the planning process: "Why are you telling me the goals instead of asking me what I want?"

Appropriation: There is a concern about cultural appropriation. Don't support artists of color if you are only going to appropriate their work and make it yours for the mainstream. Don't use people of color for tourism. Don't just think about "audience development" when you think about communities of color (taking from); think about what you can bring to the community.

Accountability: If the City has spent all of this money on the arts in the past, where has it all gone, because it sure hasn't come to communities of color.

Access: We didn't even know the City *had* money, much less how to go about getting the funds. What's the process for getting money? It seems to be based on who I know and have access to; If so, City should not perpetuate this kind of a racist and classist system, but instead should dismantle it and create a new system that provides for equal access. For example, how do we get money out to individual artists and small organizations (who may not even be incorporated or have their 501(c)3 designation).

Difference between "art" and "culture": It was noted that in the Hmong and many other traditions, there is no word for "art" since it is infused into "culture." Do we only use "art" for Euro-centric work and "culture" whenever referring to people of color or

“ethnic” art? It was noted that “Arts and Culture” is used in the title of the document, but only “art” is referred to throughout the body of the document. If art=white and culture=people of color, then what does this say about the City’s commitment to support art in communities of color? The language we use matters; how we define our terms matters.

Ownership and leadership: Similarly, it is challenging to use “ownership” and “leadership” in the same sentence. “Ownership” implies investment and that this is mine; “leadership” implies that I am leading others based on my vision (versus what they want). They may not be incompatible for some, but for people of color who aren’t at the table, these are loaded terms and are not synonymous.

Tangible Recommendations: In addition to major themes a number of tangible recommendations were made that could be included or infused into the plan.

Make art relevant/Keep it real: For art to work it needs to be relevant to people’s lives: It needs to be transformative. Art happens in many places and in many forms. The City should support transformative art wherever it occurs and by whomever is creating it. The City should find ways to get real money to real folks. The City needs to be open to funding non-traditional organizations and projects if they want non-traditional results.

Invite people of color to the table, welcome and respect them: Invite people of color to the table to participate at the front end. BUT, it is more than just inviting people in; you need to make the table a welcoming and safe place for people of color to participate. Don’t tokenize people asking them to speak for all people of color or the entire _____ (Black, Asian, Indian, Latino, GLBT, ...) community. Once people are there, listen – you can invite people to the table, but if you don’t listen carefully to what they have to say what’s the point of them being there?

Safe places: In addition to being brought to and respected at the table, we need to continue to have safe places, like this meeting, for people of color to discuss their issues separate from the mainstream. The City should keep this in mind as it talks about leadership and convening.

Cultural center: We should create a cultural center for communities of color.

Language matters: Both written and spoken language matter; be careful in our use of language as noted above. Avoid using “coded” language that is exclusionary in nature. This is hard for the mainstream, but the very language they use, while still English, doesn’t seem to be so to people of color sometimes.

Respectful Collaborations, not Appropriations: It is fine to talk about and support “collaborations,” but there should be clear guidelines (almost a code of ethics) for how this is done. It shouldn’t just be about “audience development” for the bigger organization; there needs to be something in it for the smaller partner.

You all ready for this?: There is a lack suspicion and lack of trust of the City (and other mainstream organizations) by communities of color. The City needs to deal with the fact that it is fundamentally racist and classist. It needs to let and respect people telling their stories in their ways. When the mainstream reaches out to communities of color, if the mainstream fails to hear or honor what they have said, the mainstream further reinforces the pre-existing distrust people of color have of white-folks.

Commitments: The following commitments were made as a follow up to this meeting:

1. Erik committed to typing up and distributing these notes to those in attendance for feedback, additions, corrections, and deletions.
2. Erik committed to sharing these notes with the Advisory Committee of the Minneapolis Plan for Arts and Culture and the consultants working on the development of the plan so these comments can be reflected in the planning document.
3. Erik and Kathy committed to asking the Advisory Committee to invite the folks in attendance here tonight to participate in the planning process from here on out – to invite folks to the table.
4. Erik and Kathy committed to asking the Advisory Committee to have their next meeting here at African American Family Services instead of in City Hall.
5. Kathy asked that people consider applying to be on the Arts Commission. The Commission is currently seeking people for 3 positions and want more representation from communities of color (applications accepted through 10/15). Information is on the web at http://www.ci.minneapolis.mn.us/boards-and-commissions/open/Arts_Commission.asp.

Just before 9:00 people were thanked for their input and feedback and the meeting was adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,

Erik Takeshita
Senior Policy Aide to
Mayor R.T. Rybak