

Organizing Culture in Oregon, USA

Bill Flood, M.S. (bill@billflood.org)
Community Cultural Development Consultant (<http://www.billflood.org>)
Portland, Oregon, USA
Adjunct Instructor, Arts and Administration Program, University of Oregon
April 23, 2014

This essay speaks to organizing culture in Oregon, USA. I have specifically responded to the following questions: Who organizes culture? What effects do cultural projects have on the community? What challenges are posed for artists? What opportunities are offered to artists? I am somewhat familiar with German cultural management systems, and this essay is written with German readers in mind. I hope that something here informs or inspires you.

I write from my experience working in Oregon for over 25 years. From 1996-2005, I served as the Community Development Coordinator for the Oregon Arts Commission, and worked with arts, heritage, and humanities organizations in every county in our state. My particular specialty is supporting and utilizing local cultural resources toward community betterment and development. As a community cultural development consultant, I continue to support multiple projects across Oregon. I am again traveling the state, organizing a series of regional gatherings with local cultural coalitions (representatives of local arts, heritage, and humanities organizations). I also currently serve as evaluator for a foundation-funded grants program supporting excellence and innovation among a variety of arts and cultural organizations.

About Oregon

Oregon is bounded on the west by the Pacific Ocean, in the east by Idaho and Nevada, in the north by Washington, and in the south by California. Oregon is known for its diverse and majestic natural beauty – the Pacific Coast, Columbia River Gorge, the Cascade Mountain Range, including the iconic Mt. Hood, the eastern Oregon high desert, and more. Our culture, like any, is often shaped in response to the natural world and beauty around us. The recent surge in Portland's food culture, which has received national and international attention, to use just one example, is in direct relationship to chefs' ability to use locally sourced ingredients. (Thelin, 2013)¹

Until recently, Oregon's economy was deeply dependent on natural resources, most notably timber production. Now (as in much of the USA) the service and information sectors play an increasingly important role in local economies. Portland, the largest city in the state, enjoys a celebrated quality of life which plays a growing role in supporting the city's economy.

Oregon's estimated population in 2013 was 3,930,065 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014), with almost half of the people of the state living in Multnomah, Washington and Clackamas counties, which together make up the core of the Portland metropolitan area. Oregon (255,000 km²) is geographically slightly larger than the United Kingdom (243,000 km²).

Oregon is home to nine federally-recognized Native American (Indian) tribes. In Oregon, as elsewhere in the United States, tribal governments are legally considered separate sovereign nations, and members residing in Oregon are therefore citizens of their tribes, of Oregon, and of the USA. While small in numbers (2.8% of total 2010 Oregon population), tribal culture is immensely significant to the history and unique character of our state. (Oregon Secretary of State, 2014)

Both geographically and culturally, the state is sometimes seen as two parts: the Willamette Valley, on the west side of the Cascade Mountains, which includes the cities of Portland, Eugene, Salem (capitol), and Corvallis -- and the rest of the state, predominantly to the east of the Cascades, which has a range of geographic diversity and a more rural population. Residents of cities (especially Portland) tend to have a higher per capita income and support arts and cultural offerings more readily than the rural residents. For this reason, as well as the concentration of population, the majority of cultural institutions are based in these urban areas. However, there are very significant cultural organizations in the more rural parts of the state, including the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in southern Oregon (Ashland); the Sitka Center for Art and Ecology located on the Oregon Coast; and the Tamástlikt Cultural Institute and The Museum at Warm Springs, important Native museums in eastern and central Oregon.

Who is Organizing Culture?

I use “culture” in this essay to include activities in the arts (such as folk and fine arts, performing, visual, literary, and media arts), humanities (activities that help us reflect on our culture, including literature, philosophy, and scholarly pursuits), and history and heritage (our past and what is passed from one generation to the next). Culture is far more than just artistic activity and, in its totality, expresses what we feel most strongly.

The following three sectors are most engaged in organizing culture:

- public non-profit (federal, state, county, regional, city governments)
- private non-profit, tax-exempt organizations
- for-profit businesses, including individual presenters, artists, etc.

The Oregon Cultural Trust is a state agency dedicated to supporting local culture throughout Oregon. Its mission is to “lead in building an environment in which cultural organizations are sustained and valued as a core part of Oregon’s vibrant communities and economy.” The Trust encourages private contributions to more than 1,300 private non-profit arts, heritage, and humanities organizations throughout the state. These groups are the most active in organizing local culture; particularly in rural Oregon. They are the front-line workers (often volunteers) presenting performances, lectures, and visual arts exhibitions; organizing artists working in the schools; leading public art and public education programs; preserving local history and heritage assets; and facilitating public dialogue about sometimes difficult cultural issues.

Clear lines between non-profit and for-profit cultural sectors in the USA have been blurring for years, and this is certainly the case in Oregon. While non-profit cultural

organizations typically lead in organizing local culture, the for-profit cultural sector is equally important to a healthy arts ecology. The for-profit sector includes bookstores, galleries, cinemas, movie production companies, performance, event and media centers, as well as the many arts-related studios and businesses owned and managed by artists.

The public cultural sector includes the national, state, county, and local public agencies that support local culture. Often a grant from a public agency such as the Oregon Arts Commission, Oregon Cultural Trust, or National Endowment for the Arts validates the importance of local projects and increases visibility in the local community. Public agencies often have the mission of supporting arts and other projects for under-served populations such as those described in the following section. While public support for culture is comparatively small in the USA, it is not without significance. With perceived legitimacy, governmental support provides the opportunity to leverage additional financial support from other sources.

It's also important to note in a discussion about *who* is organizing local culture that cultural events in rural communities often occur in multi-use facilities, such as community centers, schools and libraries. Schools, in particular, are often the cultural hub of rural communities.

What effects do cultural projects have on the community?

My response to this question is based on a five-year (2010-2014) summary of projects funded through the Oregon Arts Commission's *Arts Build Communities* (ABC) grants program. This program supports arts in community development projects across Oregon. It seeks to stimulate partnerships between artists and local communities, and to build stronger communities. I reviewed summaries of 126 projects, with grant support totaling \$560,000. The average grant amount was approximately \$4,500. Here is what stood out from my review of this program's activities:

- About 25% of projects are focused on increased access, participation or recognition of ethnic artists and their cultures, especially within Oregon's growing Spanish-speaking communities;
- About 30% of projects have a strong focus on serving youth, often at-risk youth, through participation in the arts;
- About 30% of projects have strong educational components...either working in public schools or educating the public about key issues;
- Other projects address economic development, downtown development facility development, and public art. I was pleased to see the number and variety of temporary public art projects.

The projects show innovative and diverse partnerships between arts and non-arts organizations, involving a range of methodologies including artist residencies, storytelling and oral histories, film/photography/documentaries, performances, downtown development and facility development, educational workshops, lectures/discussions, writing workshops and poetry slams, festivals and events, temporary and permanent public art addressing issues from agriculture to ethnic pride, and technical assistance workshops. Issues and themes were equally diverse

including: healing, ethnic pride, empowerment across youth/women/disabled/ethnic minorities/faith/gay/lesbian communities, civic dialogue and tolerance, aging, and living sustainably.

Intended to provide a local arts solutions to a community-based need, *Arts Build Communities* is just one of the Oregon Arts Commission's grants programs, but certainly one with a wide impact across the state.

The Regional Arts and Culture Council (RACC) is the local arts service agency (non-profit organization) serving the City of Portland and Multnomah, Clackamas and Washington Counties (as mentioned above, these counties comprise a substantial part of the Greater Portland metropolitan area as defined by the US government). RACC's primary services are: advocacy (building support for arts and culture); grants (financial support to artists and arts organizations); public art (art in public places); community services (workshops, consulting, resources); and education (integrating arts and culture with school curriculum). The following from RACC's 2013 Annual Report illustrate its programmatic reach:

- 180,000 people were served by RACC in 2013 – including artists, arts administrators, teachers, students, and other residents.
- RACC awarded \$3.3 million in grants to artists, arts organizations, schools and other community groups.
- RACC's arts education program (The Right Brain Initiative) is now serving more than 14,000 youth in 49 schools in six districts across the region.
- RACC raised over \$444,000 in earned income and nearly \$700,000 in private sector contributions.

What challenges are posed for artists?

As a cultural planner I continually seek to build/support an environment in which culture can flourish and in which the arts are valued. Outside the metropolitan areas, Oregon is relatively conservative without tremendous state support for arts and culture. Current budgets for the Regional Arts and Culture Council (\$8 million) and the Oregon Arts Commission (\$3.4 million) reflect this gap in statewide support. Recognition of the value of arts and culture is growing, but it is not easy for most artists to earn a living through their artwork.

Approximately 300 artists work in Oregon's schools each year. However, support for arts in the schools has, unfortunately, dwindled in the past years, a notable exception being an income tax passed by Portland voters in 2012 to directly support arts in the schools. Many rural school districts have been forced to reduce to four day school weeks to save money. Under this intense financial pressure, some have all but eliminated arts in the schools. The Oregon Arts Commission has on its website information about the dwindling access to in-school programming: <http://www.oregonartscommission.org/resources/access-to-arts-education>.

In Oregon, as elsewhere in the United States, both artists and cultural organizations must be strong entrepreneurs and fundraisers to survive and thrive. Data from the 2009 *Act for Art* (Creative Action Plan for the Portland Metropolitan Area) show that Portland arts organizations receive only 4% of revenues from public sources. And,

indeed, this study indicates that entrepreneurship and direct fundraising appeals for contributed income are of approximately equal importance. The breakdown of specific sources of income was as follows:

- 46% earned income (ticket sales, admissions, etc.)
- 30% individuals
- 14% foundations
- 6% corporations
- 2% local government
- 1% state government
- 1% federal government

I recently surveyed the 36 county cultural coalitions in Oregon to determine their lead topics for training. How to engage new leadership (and especially youth) with local culture is clearly the top need. I see the challenge of engaging younger people in local culture echoed throughout our state. Portland is perhaps one of the exceptions to this statewide challenge, as young entrepreneurs here are actively engaged in a broad range of cultural enterprises.

What opportunities are offered to artists?

As I noted earlier, Oregon is a beautiful state with a mystique of being a place for dreamers who “do things differently”. If you can financially support yourself, Oregon is a wonderful place to live and work. Opportunities for collaborations and innovation are endless. An example of such innovation is Signal Fire, an organization that “provides opportunities for artists and activists to engage in the natural world”. See <http://www.signalfirearts.org/welcome>.

And there are other positive signs, too. Research commissioned by the Oregon Community Foundation in 2013 showed that private giving to Oregon non-profit organizations increased between the years of 2010 and 2011, during a time when giving nationally decreased. (Oregon Community Foundation, 2013) Another example, mentioned above, is Portland’s passage of an income tax in 2012 to support arts in the schools. In Bend (central Oregon) voters opted for a lodging tax to provide greater funding for cultural tourism in their area. These are all good signs for the support of non-profits and the arts.

I would not do justice to the subject of culture in Oregon without spotlighting Portland. Portland is bubbling with community-based cultural activity. It is continually ranked high as one of the most creative, sustainable cities in the USA. We now have an internationally-recognized food culture and probably the largest DIY (do it yourself) culture in the world. (The popular satirical comedy television series *Portlandia* speaks to the Portland DIY scene.) The word **artisan** is used appropriately to describe creative sector workers who are crafting the quality of life now prized by Portlanders, and those lucky enough to visit. A quick visit to the Travel Portland website illustrates current culture in Portland (<http://www.travelportland.com>).

Many thanks to the following people for their help with this essay:

- Jeff Hawthorne, Director of Community Affairs, Regional Arts and Culture Council

- Julie Keefe, photographer and Creative Laureate of Portland
- Cassandra Kelly, writer and editor
- Brian Wagner, Community Services Coordinator, Oregon Arts Commission

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Footnote

¹Mike Thelin is a national food consultant and co-founder of *Feast Portland.*