The Arts and Development: An Essential Tension

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PREFACE

There’s a long-standing complaint from some quarters in America, perhaps drawn from our Puritan tradition, that the arts don’t make good economic sense: If the arts can’t stand on their own two feet in the marketplace without subsidies, like any other “business,” it shows that the arts are something we can do without. For instance, in response to a poor economic climate, California is now taking decisive steps to essentially abolish its state arts council.

Meanwhile, new research shows that the arts are an economic and community-planning tool that municipal development specialists cannot afford to ignore. Not only do the arts make an immediate and measurable economic contribution to local economies, the research says, but also the long-term presence of the arts tends to generate a kind of creative culture that helps to attract and nurture industrial innovation and market leadership among cities. With this new research, arts advocates can presumably argue that the arts are, at last, demonstrably useful.

Although evidence—and common sense—suggests that the arts ought to be integral to development, there is an underlying tension in that premise, since economic development is usually pragmatic, goal-oriented, and quantitatively evaluated, while the arts are idealistic, expressive, and qualitative in nature. Because of that tension, positioning art in development may be more complex than simply demonstrating its contribution to economies.

This essay will describe a professional community-based theater project that ran up against such a tension in the context of local development, and found itself eyeball-deep in municipal complexities. How it attempted to navigate those complexities can demonstrate some of the opportunities and pitfalls of the relationship between professional community-based arts and local development.

A COMMON GOAL AND AN ESSENTIAL TENSION

Science historian Thomas Kuhn describes a necessary internal conflict that can be found in any truly important idea, which he calls an “essential tension.” The inherent conflict in the relationship between the arts and development embodies such a tension. The tension persists even at the point where the two fields seem the least contradictory, as in their common goal of community identity.

The idea of community identity is a way to comprehensively describe the aims of development—identity is the thing that development develops. Ideally, development tries to get inside of the economic and social forces continually acting on our communities, and guide and shape and augment them in ways that make a place into, well, more of a place. Similarly, one of the subjects of professional community-based art-making is community identity. Like development, community-based art operates from inside the forces that shape communities, framing them into local identity.

Yet, while development and the arts both seek to be on the inside of forces shaping a community, the arts must also stand outside, looking in, offering each audience member a chance to see his or her individual experience in a new or unusual way. While art involves its audience in a subjective experience, at its best it also liberates the individual’s singular vision into a big-picture vision of what life could be. In other words, economic development focuses on the collective, while art simultaneously focuses on the collective and the individual. At their best, both help us see what our communities can be, while art also helps me imagine what I can be.

Although this essay cannot go deeply into the matter, it should also be pointed out that the inherent conflict between art and development can in some cases provide the only available field of expression for communities struggling against institutions of power. For that reason alone (although there are many others) I hope that the case study presented below will suggest why the tension between art and development is indeed “essential.”
EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITY TENSIONS

In 2002, Dell’Arte, a rural community-based ensemble theater that has been in residence in its hometown for over 25 years, accepted a grant from the Americans for the Arts’ Animating Democracy Initiative (ADI) to create a theater project using an “arts-based approach to civic dialogue.” The project was to be about the controversy surrounding plans by native Americans to build a casino in the community, and perceived threats of subsequent development in Blue Lake, California (population 1,400), a small town in Humboldt County.

From a development perspective, three tensions pop up right away: 1) Although the town and the reservation are separate communities—actually, technically they’re separate countries—the town geographically surrounds the reservation on three sides. What happens in one inevitably impacts the other.

Although the need for cooperation between the town and the reservation is real, it is thwarted by the second tension: 2.) The cultural divide between the two communities is reinforced by the history of segregation and oppression of native communities by U.S. institutions nationwide. There is a further complication: 3.) Dell’Arte is a major player in the City of Blue Lake’s economy and culture, and is therefore a political stakeholder in the community that the Dentalium Project was meant to represent.

Throughout, the City of Blue Lake will be referred to as the “City,” and the reservation, known as the Blue Lake Rancheria, will be called the “Rancheria.” The combined City and Rancheria communities will be referred to as “Blue Lake.” Except where otherwise indicated, the story of the City, the Rancheria, and the Dentalium Project are drawn from interviews with the people involved. I am grateful to them all for their patience and willingness to share their stories.

STAKEHOLDER: CITY OF BLUE LAKE

Although it is an incorporated municipality, the City in many ways embodies the image of “American small town,” with its population of 1,400 and its bucolic rural setting. The City was a northern California lumbering hub in the boom days of the timber industry at the turn of the last century, with working sawmills, saloons with batwing doors, houses with picket fences, and thousands upon thousands of trees sold down river for enormous sums of money.

The City’s fortunes were tied almost exclusively to the lumber industry, so when that industry collapsed in the second half of the twentieth century, the fortunes of the City went with it. The City today is a quiet place along the untamed Mad River, home to a brewery, a bit of light industry, some truck farmers, and Dell’Arte, a professional theater and training conservatory of international reputation. Today, the number of saloons is reduced to one, the whitewash peels, and the City is mostly a bedroom community for its employed citizens, who tend to work in other parts of the county. With its dozen employees, Dell’Arte has been for years a major City employer.

In interviews, City residents told me that their principal concerns were for preserving the City’s small-town character, preventing an increase in crime, and protecting the lush surrounding countryside and the Mad River, which runs through town. The City Council understands that development is the best tool to shape the City’s future, but volunteers sustain much of the efforts, making it difficult for projects to gain momentum. There is as yet no infrastructure for tourism, and little ability to develop the local economy. Dell’Arte is one of three businesses on the main street.

The City has made a variety of attempts at development over the past few decades. One such attempt—the case of Ultrapower—illustrates the depth of the cultural divide between the City and Rancheria.

THE CASE OF ULTRAPOWER

In the early 1980s, the City was nearly bankrupt, its resources so depleted that police protection was reduced to 45 minutes per day. The City Council at the time managed to attract one industry to town—a power generator called Ultrapower. It turned out that the Ultrapower smokestacks dropped ash on the City, but the taxes levied from the plant enabled the City to beef up police protection.
Today, Ultrapower is no longer operating, and the ash is gone, but the City residents that I interviewed remember well the decision to welcome the plant to town, despite its ash by-product. For City residents, the ash was a trade-off. There was no such trade-off for the Rancheria, however.

**STAKEHOLDER: RANCHERIA**

The Rancheria is surrounded on three sides by the City. Walk across Chartin Street in one direction and you’re in the City, in the other direction, you’re on the Rancheria. Ultrapower’s ash fell on the tribe’s homes, but nobody on City Council asked Rancheria residents if the trade-off was acceptable to them. Nor did the tribe share in the benefits of the trade-off.

The Rancheria is small (less than 40 acres), with few residents. It is situated on traditional Wiyot land, although the Rancheria is composed of the descendents of many tribes. The Rancheria was originally founded in 1908, but ownership was subsequently disputed, and the land was taken from the Indians for a time. Rancheria residents worked in the lumber industry until the bottom fell out of that economy, and then, like the local non-natives, they worked wherever they could.

The current residency began in the late 1950s. Few native speakers live on the Rancheria. Even though the Rancheria and the City are geographically the same community, Rancheria has never been seen as an active stakeholder in City development, nor has City planning been considered in Rancheria development, until now. The most striking feature of the relationship between the City and the Rancheria is the invisible cultural divide between them, reflected in a historic lack of opportunity and political influence for the Rancheria, and in the City’s current strategic economic development plan.

**DEVELOPMENT PLANS**

Drawn up as recently as 1997, the City’s economic development plan mentions the Rancheria only in passing, as a potential magnet for cultural/heritage tourism. Truthfully, it would be hard to imagine the Rancheria as a cultural tourism site even today. The only tourist-oriented indigenous culture present is in the new casino’s gift shop. The lobby of the tribal office is decorated with Navajo art. It is also impossible to overlook the fact that the Rancheria is located next to the City’s sewage ponds.

The City has not included the Rancheria in its development plans, but then neither has the Rancheria included the City. Over the years, Rancheria residents tried lots of different ways to make a living, like chicken farming, raising horses, and other land-based enterprises.

According to tribal chairperson Arla Ramsey, the Rancheria’s attempts at economic development were always land-based, “That’s just in the tribe’s nature.” This is borne out by research showing that a sophisticated property-based economy—a real estate system—in which land was bought and sold in exchange for symbolic dentalium shell money, was in place in what is now Humboldt County long before the first Europeans arrived. So, what little development there has been over the past thirty years in Blue Lake has proceeded along two separate trajectories, which has contributed to the current cultural divide. Although the Rancheria did not seek legal recourse in the Ultrapower matter, back in the 1970s a new road was proposed, and without consulting the Rancheria, City officials aimed the road right through tribal lands. The plan was nixed at the last minute by a lawsuit brought by the Rancheria.

**INDIAN GAMING**

Like many native American tribes, the Indians of Humboldt County had an ancient tradition of sport gambling, playing for dentalium abalone shell money. But opening a casino on tribal lands was a project unlike anything the Rancheria residents had considered.

There were Indian gaming success stories in the state, though. Indian gaming had become an overnight economic success for many of California’s tribes. Today, the Indian gaming lobby is the most well-heeled in the State. With no other immediate option for making money, the Rancheria found some out-of-state investors and announced that Blue Lake was going into the casino business.
Tensions between the Rancheria and City residents began to escalate almost immediately. The Rancheria’s sovereignty meant that the City’s input into casino planning was minimal, which only exacerbated the situation. It was into this situation that Dell’Arte inserted itself with the Dentalium Project.

**ART AND TENSIONS**

The role of art in the clash of cultural identities is not a new idea. “Beauty today can have no other measure except the depth to which a work resolves contradictions,” wrote theorist Theodore Adorno in the twentieth century. Adorno and many writers after him argued that aesthetic considerations must be an essential part of the social landscape, because only art gives us the opportunity to stand apart from the contexts in which we are caught up, and recontextualize them in ways that are liberating. Recontextualizing can be understood as a resolution of tensions, or a productive use of them.

“Beauty is either the resultant of force vectors or it is nothing at all,” he continues. It is the responsibility of artists to allow their work to be shaped by the very same “force vectors” that shape the lives and cultures in which the work is made. Indeed, it’s interesting to note that in Adorno’s phrase above, the word “beauty” could be interchanged with “community identity” or “a sustainable economic development plan” and lose none of its rhetorical power.

I draw out this conclusion to illustrate the parallels between professional community-based art-making and local economic development. Given the force-vector premise, it stands to reason that in some cases development and community-based artworks ought to be working at resolving the same tensions. Since both are ultimately concerned with community identity, both must, as Adorno says of art, “... cut through the tensions and overcome them not by covering them up, but by pursuing them.”

While both community-based art and development are focused on affecting the processes and forces operating inside a community, artists must also simultaneously stand outside of the context of those operations. It is therefore easy to imagine that the more contradictory the context, the more difficult it could become for artists to establish and maintain an outside perspective while remaining civically engaged.

**STAKEHOLDER: DELL’ARTE**

Dell’Arte is a professional theater company and school of physical theater that has been in residence in a sprawling two-story former Oddfellows Hall in downtown Blue Lake for over a quarter century. Despite its touring and renown in places as far-flung as Uruguay and Denmark, a significant portion of Dell’Arte’s work has always been thematically linked to the stories of the local communities and cultures, including not only the white communities, but also the communities on the Yurok and Kurok (though not the Rancheria) reservations.

Each summer Dell’Arte brings theaters from all over the world to perform at its Mad River Festival, which takes place in conjunction with the Humboldt County Folklife Festival, all of which draws a large audience from communities around the county. Indian storytellers are always a feature of the festival. Over the years, Dell’Arte’s style has come to include all manner of theater traditions, including eighteenth-century American-style melodrama; text/movement deconstructions a la Robert Wilson; the Grand Guignol style, which was fin-de-siecle France’s shock-theater; circus, storytelling, and the spectacle of Brazilian-style street theater.

Through all of Dell’Arte’s work, though, runs humor. Dell’Arte’s specialty is physical theater, and comedy in particular. The company’s craft is based in the commedia dell’arte tradition of the Italian renaissance, which specialized in social critique through parody and rowdy physical comedy. Laughter is nearly always present, and this is never more true than in their locally oriented works, which are the pieces that return the company to its commedia dell’arte roots. Dell’Arte’s School of Physical Theater is accredited to offer undergraduate and graduate degrees.

Given the fast changes underway in Blue Lake as a result of casino development, and the theater’s history of artistic engagement with the community, the growing division between the City and the Rancheria seemed a good subject for a new Dell’Arte project. The playwright and director understood that history and tradition would be important to the project, and titled it with the ancient native word, “dentalium.”
The Dentalium Project would initiate civic dialogue amongst the Rancheria and City residents about the coming of the casino and what it meant to all of Blue Lake’s residents. From the dialogues taking place over the course of one year, playwright Michael Fields would draw material upon which to base an original play describing current attitudes and feelings about the coming of the casino.

NEED FOR CULTURAL RECONCILIATION
What contribution could an arts-based civic dialogue theater project hope to contribute to the situation in Blue Lake? It is easier to describe what should not be done:

- **Repackaging** the situation into a feel-good example of diversity. The past cannot be ignored, overlooked, or overwritten.
- **Simplifying** Blue Lake’s tensions by explaining them away with nostalgia. As theorist Michael Storper asserts in his paper, “Poverty of Radical Theory Today,” while a “celebration of cultures” might assuage guilt, it would ultimately contribute little to the resolution of tensions.
- **Advocating for the identity of one group over the other.** Even though the Rancheria is a historically silenced group, it has chosen to use the economics of Indian gaming to assert its identity. Although the economies of the Rancheria and the City are both very much in flux, both have the means to be heard by the County and by the State of California. What they probably need most is the means to hear each other.

The advocacy model might be useful if it could be adapted to advocate for a future Blue Lake in which the two distinct communities have a common, shared life. As Storper says, “It is not enough to document difference and advocate the interests of particular group. It is also necessary to think about how these groups can fit together.” Given Blue Lake’s growing divisions, cultural reconciliation is a goal that makes sense.

Although achieving a goal as large as reconciliation between native and non-native communities would require much more effort than any single civically engaged art project could possibly deliver, making a contribution to that goal would be a reasonable aim. At the very least, the arts could help imagine what such a reconciliation might look like.

MULTIPlicity
How does Storper’s idea, “the construction of a public sphere composed of individuals with equal dignity,” become realized in a small northern California town composed of conflicting cultures? Again, this sort of identity conflict is not new, nor is the idea of diversity. Imagining the necessary interrelating of multiple-yet-distinct cultural identities, early twentieth century philosopher Gianni Vattimo concluded that artists have a unique advantage in trying to imagine “multiplicities.”

Vattimo suggested that one way to seek out resolutions for the tensions brought on by the collision of multiple cultures, languages, and beliefs can be found by “the artist as one aware of the multiplicity of voices . . . ” The artist is the one who is able, he says, to stand outside the situation and recontextualize it in a way that those inside cannot. Artists then reflect that recontextualized vision back to the community in a work of the imagination.

The task for the artist, then, “is one of seeing how to bring a conscious multiplicity into effect within the construction of the work.” This requires artists not only to thoroughly understand the conflicting opinions, histories, and cultures in a situation but also to be able to imagine a unique and productive dynamic between them, with cultural identities interrelated yet distinct.

This is not to suggest that multiplicities are necessarily pretty. There will probably have to be a lot of water under the bridge before Blue Lake’s two communities can find themselves sharing a common identity. The first thing they need to do, though, is talk.
ARTS-BASED CIVIC DIALOGUE

The first phase of the Dentalium Project was a yearlong research process in which Dell’Arte hired the Cascadia Forum, a local leadership development organization, as consultant to guide eight “community dialogues” between Rancheria and City residents, regarding the coming of the casino. Dell’Arte artists participated in most of the dialogues, and everyone understood that the dialogues were source material for a play that the theater would later create and perform in Dell’Arte’s theater in Blue Lake.

My interviews with dialogue participants revealed that in the sessions, all the community residents, Indian and non-Indian, were quite willing to share their thoughts and feelings about the Rancheria’s development plans. In an interview, tribal chairperson Arla Ramsey indicated to me that the dialogues had given the Rancheria the opportunity to present its case and speak its piece in a spirit of goodwill and cooperation.

City residents were also vocal in the dialogues, especially about their fears of how the presence of a casino might impact the City. (As City planner Bob Brown described it to me, the very scale of the casino building was intimidating to City residents: “You could have more people in the casino at one time than there are in the entire town of Blue Lake,” he said.)

Meanwhile, at City Council meetings, Blue Lake residents blamed the Council and City Manager for not fighting hard enough, or for brokering deals that sold the community’s identity off cheap. But even those who were most incensed at the situation could see that the Rancheria was going to build its casino no matter what the City did, or didn’t, do.

The shoe of economic authority was for once on the other foot, and the Rancheria seemed to be making up for lost time.

Ramsey described in the dialogues how the profits from the casino would be used to finance a van service for the elderly, for the City and Rancheria alike. Also, a free breakfast program for children would be established, to be served at the tribal office each morning, available to all Blue Lake children. Finally, a retirement community would be built for the use of the City’s and Rancheria’s elderly. The Rancheria even pledged to any child who graduated from Blue Lake High School, regardless of heritage, a check for $500, no strings attached. The casino’s architects would be careful to shield the parking lot lighting from the City neighborhood across the street, and the casino would build its own entrance road with a roundabout to keep casino traffic steered away from the City.

Although neither the State of California nor Humboldt County nor the City of Blue Lake can impose upon tribal sovereignty, California tribes are expected to make “good faith efforts” to mitigate the effects of gaming, based on their compact with the State. These remarkable contributions—community and retirement centers, five-hundred-dollar checks for graduates, social services, lighting adjustments, and roundabout—may be meant to fulfill that requirement. No official mechanism is in place to measure the effectiveness of good-faith mitigations or their continuance, however. Nor has the binding nature of such compacts yet been tested in California. Even those City residents who felt assured that Ramsey was looking for an honest exchange of good will and cooperation could see that the Rancheria in no way needed the City’s permission, and hardly even needed its input, which was in time the most irksome thing to City residents.

OUTCOMES OF THE DENTALIUM PROJECT

At the end of the yearlong community dialogue process, some of the City participants who were originally most vociferous in their objections to the casino reported a sense of acceptance regarding it, even an understanding of why it was important to the Rancheria. This was the first change that could be attributed to the dialogue process.

Other evidence of the project’s impact would follow, including one City resident who was inspired to run for City Council (she won the seat), and another who was motivated to circulate a petition regarding traffic and parking. Clearly, the dialogues and play fulfilled some need for civic discourse lacking in Blue Lake.

With production of the play, Wild Card, the entire process reached its culmination. Despite the popularity that the play would have with audiences, its challenges were obvious, reflecting the complex relationship between community-based arts and development.
THERE WERE NO INDIANS IN THAT SHOW

Wild Card and the casino opened on the same weekend, and both had packed houses. The audience seemed engaged and entertained by the play. On the weekend I was there, I saw only two Rancheria representatives in the audience. Set ten years in the future, Wild Card is cast in the form of a variety show. The play speculates on the demise of Blue Lake's small-town identity and emergence as a megalopolis as a result of the coming of the casino.

Although the play is set in the future, it is clearly about the present moment in Blue Lake. Audiences are led to understand that the play's setting is an exaggeration of City residents' fears, rather than an actual prediction of the future. (The backdrop for the outdoor stage presents Blue Lake's skyline in the year 2013 as jagged with skyscrapers, for instance.)

The substance of the show is a wonderfully relentless lampooning of local personalities and politicians in skits, songs, dialogues, monologues, and clown routines. Much of the dialogue was taken directly from the community dialogues. The play also has quite serious moments, and the opinions of the City's naysayers and yea-sayers were represented side-by-side. The opinions of children were represented. Even the opinions of the dead were represented. Only the opinions of the native Americans went unrepresented.

I confess to being surprised that Wild Card was so focused on the present moment, and yet did not represent Indian voices. The script was self-conscious about the omission, going so far as to include a song, “Why There's No Indians in This Show.” The song explained the omission as being due to the history of oppression of the native community by non-natives. Unfortunately, even that explanation was presented from the non-Indian perspective.

In this version of Wild Card—it is currently being rewritten and restaged for a second production—Blue Lake's identity was incompletely represented. The play was unable to recontextualize the historical tension between City and Rancheria. Although the show did present the current multiplicity of diverse opinions among City residents, it did not consider any sort of multiplicity in a future relationship between the City and Rancheria. The play in no way attempted to repackage or gloss over the community's tensions, nor did it overtly advocate for one group over another, but the Rancheria, which had been so well-represented in the dialogues, was not represented in the play.

Wild Card's playwright, Dell'Arte cofounder Michael Fields, states that as the play got closer to opening, he realized that he could not find a way to adequately represent the Rancheria in the depth and complexity called for in the situation. Nor did Fields feel he could make the necessary adjustments within the limitations of the production schedule. He chose to split the difference, and leave the issue for the play's subsequent rewrite, putting the song in as a sort of bookmark.

Granted, “Why There's No Indians in This Show” is a kind of historical red herring. Asserting that the Rancheria is unrepresented because of oppression deep in U.S. history implies that the Rancheria had the means to participate today and chose not to.

Why There’s No Indians In This Show

Now I've been thinkin' about a long long time ago
In a galaxy not that far away
Before SUVs and pagers and keys
And playing cards down at the gamblin' hall
And those big bright lights and cigarettes and alcohol

Now for thousands of years they lived over here
Then the white people came along
Then we took all their land
And killed all their clan
Then we broke into a country song
So it gripes my butt
Every time some nut
Acts like he don't know
Why there's no Indians in this show

I'm tryin' to imagine what it must have been like for them
To have all these strangers movin' into their home
Now there's flight simulators and French fried potaters
And we all got cellular phones
And red or white
We all like barbequein' on the lawn

So after hundreds of years and millions of beers
We're all getting' kinda the same
We all stomp on the land
And drive minivans
We all love to play that bingo game
But in some ways we differ
Makin' us a bit stiffer
Every time that we wanna know
Why there's no Indians in this show
(lyrics by Tim Gray)
to, which is not the case. It is rather more likely that the problem was a case of missing identity.

IDENTITY AS A STUMBLING BLOCK

Every attempt that he made to adjust the script to include the Rancheria’s perspective was unsatisfactory to Fields. He was up against something that Dell’Arte had never encountered before, and Fields couldn’t find a way to make it right. He even found it difficult to describe the problem.

The script process was caught up in three tensions. Dell’Arte artists had long grown accustomed to standing objectively outside of the community in order to recontextualize it, but here they were intensely subject to the situation that the play was describing. Maintaining objectivity was wrenching. In addition, the task of imagining the divided communities as a multiplicity was made more difficult by rancor between the City and Rancheria, which had previously been suppressed in Blue Lake. Dell’Arte introduced the subject of history into the community dialogues from the beginning, but community animosity continually dragged the conversation back to current events. Therefore, Dell’Arte’s inability to use the dialogue process to unpack Blue Lake’s history made it difficult for the first version of Wild Card to contain a vision of multiplicity.

Finally, although Dell’Arte had done some ‘cultural bridge-building’ with other tribes in the past (see Julian Lang, below), in this situation they couldn’t find solid enough ground from which to represent the Indian perspective, and the Rancheria offered no help in that respect. The Rancheria had no reason to assume that Dell’Arte—an established City stakeholder—was trustworthy.

“APPROPRIATION”

Julian Lang is a member of the local Karuk tribe. (The Karuk are not affiliated with the Rancheria.) He is a cultural historian and storyteller who has annually participated in Dell’Arte’s Mad River Festival. Lang is also a theater artist, and in that capacity has collaborated on Dell’Arte projects drawn from Karuk mythology, and he has performed in a Dell’Arte production.

Lang’s perspective on Dell’Arte’s artistic process is an interesting one, because along with his obvious respect and enthusiasm for the theater’s work and commitment to the community, he also recognizes that its artistic process is contradictory with Karuk tradition. I do not suggest that this tension is something to be avoided, but rather that recognizing it is the first step in building the sort of multiplicity that can lead to cultural reconciliation.

In an interview conducted by the Community Arts Network for its “Performing Communities” research project, Lang described Dell’Arte’s relationship to the community this way: “I think that they are committed to this place. That is kind of what it is all about. They have these strange personal histories that have connected them here and there with different native peoples.”

At the same time, Lang acknowledged that Dell’Arte stands apart from the native American community: “They seem to be insulated within their own world and we just occasionally drop in.” Describing one aspect of a Dell’Arte collaboration, Lang said, “It seems to be a part of the nature of theater to appropriate and present views that may not necessarily be the views of the people doing . . . the acting.” This was subsequently the cause for much discussion between Lang’s tribe and Dell’Arte regarding the process for a particular project. “We talked a lot about that appropriation of our culture and our cultural ideas and our responsibility. We don’t just make a mistake by being over-generous with our stories . . . We are kind of leery of these relationships and collaborating and all of that.”

In the end, the collaboration was ironed out to the satisfaction of Lang, the Karuk, and Dell’Arte, and the show was made and presented. “We ended up with a nice understanding. They agreed that we would do what we do and hope for the best. It was fortunate, because it was a good play and it was really impressive.”

Various Karuk-Dell’Arte collaborations have been very successful over the years. Although Dell’Arte was “appropriating” stories from Karuk culture, they had the insights of the Karuk to help them fold those into an artistic process that was ultimately respectful and satisfying for all involved. Such a process would probably not be easy to transfer to a situation where there is a rapidly widening cultural divide and animosity, such as that sparked by the casino.
Collaboration can be quite difficult if only one party stands to gain from the process. Lang indicated in the interview that the Karuk were getting something out of the collaboration from which they could ultimately benefit—theater experience and development of an artistic culture—which perhaps helped to smooth their collaboration with Dell’Arte. The Rancheria, on the other hand, needed nothing from Dell’Arte.

The Dentalium Project was born in fast water, forcing Dell’Arte to frame a course between two entrenched communities while attempting to renegotiate its own political and artistic position between them. The difficulties of the Dentalium Project were not solely the result of Dell’Arte’s suddenly slippery position in the community, nor were they caused by the result of stonewalling from the Rancheria, or even by the fears of City residents. Rather, the Dentalium Project was shaped by a sudden collision of forces acting on Blue Lake’s identity.

The City will change, the Rancheria has changed, and Dell’Arte’s institutional and artistic evolution is inevitable, but the responsibility for bringing conscience and multiplicity to Blue Lake’s future identity falls to all three institutions. It seems clear that taking no action at all could mean simply watching as two cultural camps drift to either side of a widening divide.

The success of the Dentalium Project is in the fact that it engaged community members in dialogue about the changes underway in the community, and provided a forum for voicing a cultural rift that had divided the community for many years. The play not only held the attention of its audience but also inspired some to decisive civic action. The dialogues covered ground that would likely never have been discussed in any other sort of forum, and cracks appeared in cultural monoliths that would not have been there if the dialogues had not taken place. The play not only entertained its audience but also inspired some to action and challenged the artists who made it to consider their role in the community in a new way.

CONCLUSION: THE EVOLUTION OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The possibility of cultural reconciliation calls for risk, multiplicity, and a willingness to live with essential tensions. Storper calls for “a new procedure of self-questioning, of self-doubt” that involves three questions which could be seen as a check-list for civically engaged artists attempting to maintain objectivity in an intensely subjective situation: “Where do our categories come from? Of what and of whom are we speaking? In whose name?” Those questions could be useful in clarifying the character of a particular multiplicity.

The need for diversity/multiplicity must be continually rediscovered. In the same way that one cannot point to the division between two cultures and ask, “When can we put this issue behind us?” the job of asking these questions is never done. In the same sense that no city ever finishes developing its economy, it also never finishes developing its identity. Separate cultures that share geography will never cease to need new ways to interrelate.

Tensions must be boldly acknowledged. An example of this can be seen in the way that ancient myths relate to modern sensibilities. “I am not so much into entertaining,” says Julian Lang, “but just presenting a big fat myth and letting people think about it,” he says. “In order for you, a non-Indian, to understand my culture, you are going to have to walk away—not entertained, but I guess that helps. You are going to have to walk away thinking, ‘Jesus Christ, what was that?’ Not in a negative sense, but it is just like—there are too many things in there. You can understand it on the one hand, but on the other hand, it is too deep.”

It is increasingly understood that rational solutions to community problems are simply too narrow and exclusionary, and so there is a need for more complex, comprehensive visions of what a community can be. In response to this, there is a growing movement today for “sustainable” economic growth, which calls for development to be led by a more culturally proscribed perspective of economics and planning. Vattimo and Adorno might say that the sustainability movement is an attempt to apply the aesthetic, objective vision of the artist to development. The sustainability movement reorients economic development toward human development. Tensions are inescapable, and therefore multiplicities—of economy, ethnicity, culture, and politics—must be nurtured, because they refocus economic development toward human development.

It may very well be that the arts can play a definite and significant role in economic development, but communities might stand to gain more if the argument were reframed. Rather than attempting to identify art with economic
development, perhaps the stronger strategy for arts advocates would be to champion sustainable economic development for its potential contribution to human development. Now that would be a turnaround.

If community identity is a key factor in development, and if the arts make a real contribution to that identity, then it will behoove economic development to consider how the arts make communities viable, rather than merely prosperous. It is a more strenuous—though perhaps more attainable—challenge for artists and their advocates to reveal how economic development could make us all more human.

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