

**Through The Potholes:
The New Orleans Arts And Culture Community,
Metaphorically Speaking**

by

Philip M. Dobard

Occasional Paper Number Ten

Draft: not for citation without author's permission.

This paper is part of ongoing work at the Arts Policy and Administration Program at The Ohio State University as part of the National and Local Profiles of Cultural Support Project. The Profiles Project is a joint effort of the APA program and American for the Arts, along with academic and local arts agency partners in ten communities. We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Pew Charitable Trusts for the funding of the research.

Questions about the Profiles Project should be directed to:

Therese Filicko
Research Director
National and Local Profiles of Cultural Support Project
Arts Policy & Administration Program,
Dept. of Art Education
258 Hopkins Hall, 128 North Oval Mall
Columbus, Ohio 43210
Phone: 514-688-4346 fax: 614-292-8217
Email: filicko.1@osu.edu

Through the potholes: The New Orleans arts and culture community, metaphorically speaking

Philip M. Dobard, Director
Graduate Program in Arts Administration
University of New Orleans

May 2000

Introduction

Anyone who has ever traveled New Orleans by motorized conveyance knows too well that its streets can be characterized by potholes just as well as they can by street. And anyone who has lived in New Orleans for any length of time and thus is familiar with the city's political workings can be forgiven for suspecting that the relative repair of certain thoroughfares has more to do with the political capital of those who reside along them than does the water table or the deteriorated state

of the aging pipes running beneath them. The city's residents, by and large, many of whom remain despite superior career opportunities elsewhere, have come to accept this situation as the price associated with calling one of the more culturally colorful and politically entertaining cities on Earth home. New Orleanians are accustomed to a comparatively low—as conventionally measured—cost of living but must substitute certain unquantifiable variables in the market basket by which that economic indicator is measured. Again, many residents who remain by choice do so with full knowledge of the city's true cost of living.

As potentially horrifying as this situation may sound, the above is integral to the culture of New Orleans. The city reformed of its *laissez faire modus operandi* would be utterly unrecognizable to those who know and love it. While wags often quip that New Orleans is “The City that Forgot to Care,” many people who have chosen to make a life in this city do so because New Orleans is appropriately and lovingly termed “The City that Care Forgot.” The persistent and pervasive use of this term of affection, increasingly and, one might argue, abusively employed as an advertising slogan, is perhaps the best proof of an oft-repeated and now famous quote by New Orleans music educator and jazz pianist Ellis Marsalis, father of the Marsalis clan that counts Wynton and Branford among its number. He states that “In other places, culture comes down from on high. In New Orleans it bubbles up from the street.” I argue that Mr. Marsalis's metaphor, while apt, works just as well in reverse. While a well-ventilated viaduct may allow for a healthy release of creative energies by the greater citizenry, that same pothole-filled route to aesthetic enterprise may not provide sufficient support for artistic pursuits.

The metaphor, while equally applicable to the city's economic, social, and political culture, is intended as a descriptor of its artistic culture. And while I refrain from assessing the relative merits of the city's cultural production, I do discuss how this metaphor can be applied to the condition of the city's arts organizations. I argue that they could benefit from a measure of the top-down, a dose of hierarchy, a sounder organizational infrastructure, a sounder political infrastructure, a well-paved *via musica*, if you will. By way of illustration, I briefly examine three large organizations that have

made the painful shift from board- to staff-driven and attempt to essay the role of small organizations.

Background

U.S. cities, over the last half-century or more, have experienced a tremendous dispersal of human and financial capital from the urban core to the sub- and exurban periphery. Urban arts organizations, typically and necessarily centrally located in the urban core, are left trying to market to a public both physically and psychologically removed from these organizations' center of activities. Moreover, many of those remaining in the urban core suffer from economic depression and/or undereducation. Thus, urban arts organizations are faced with the challenge of marketing to urban core dwellers largely unprepared to appreciate, and with low involvement in, an essentially "complex" cultural product.

Over the last three to four decades, the city of New Orleans, like many other midsize to large American cities, has witnessed a tremendous demographic shift marked by urban sprawl, disinvestment in the urban core, blight of both private and public properties, and increasing racial tensions. New Orleans, however, significantly exceeds the national mean on two key indicators: urban sprawl, or the ratio of urbanization to population growth, and the ratio of new homes to new households. This is to say that the Greater New Orleans area has grown in physical size at a rate far disproportionate to its growth in population. One of six housing units is empty, the highest vacancy rate of any major U.S. city. In a city of 480,000, there are 37,000 vacant housing units. The numbers speak for themselves. City Department of Social Services officials state that roughly 25% of the City's total population receives some form of public assistance and 46% of its children live in poverty. Additionally, New Orleans is a majority-minority city in which identity politics plays an increasingly prominent role. Thus, the city's presenters and producers of traditional artistic fare are especially challenged as they seek to secure a meaningful future for themselves and their mission-mandated art forms in the life of New Orleans. The city's smaller, nontraditional arts organizations, meanwhile, many of them with ethnic foci, continue to proliferate if not prosper. Like

the Greater New Orleans region's political entities, they tend more toward duplication of services than cooperative pursuit of common ends.

New Orleans is a nearly three centuries-old city that still reflects its French and Spanish colonial past and the African and Caribbean communities present from the city's earliest days. Of course, New Orleans, like U.S. cities of any size, has experienced waves of European immigration, especially from England, Germany, Ireland, Italy, and, more recently, Vietnam and other Asian countries. Each successive wave, of course, has brought the immigrants' arts and crafts, music, food, politics, social structures, and values to New Orleans. The city is noted for the existence of these rich cultural traditions, as well as for the new forms born of their interaction.

While rich in culture, the city of New Orleans continues to struggle economically. In the 1840s, New Orleans was the country's third largest city. Before being surpassed by Houston in the 1950 census, New Orleans was the largest city in the South. Now New Orleans is the nation's 24th largest core city, and the Greater New Orleans area is the nation's 31st largest Metropolitan Statistical Area, with a population of just under 1.3 million, this despite the great Sunbelt migration of the last 30 years. Not unlike many other urban centers, the city's metropolitan area has continued to grow while its core population, which peaked at 660,000 in 1960, has steadily shrunk. During the 1980s, the city lost 11% of its population. The city's population of just under 500,000 is 62% black and 35% white. About 75%-80% of the under-20 (municipal, not metropolitan) population is African-American. The state of Louisiana recently released a ranking of the state's elementary schools on a scale from "academically unacceptable" to "of academic excellence." Of the 103 schools judged academically unacceptable, 50 were in Orleans Parish. Another 41 were deemed academically below average.

New Orleans has a long history of economic booms and busts. From the rise and fall of cotton as a major industry to the more recent extreme swings in the oil industry, the city has experienced sharp and persistent economic downturns. At long last New Orleans is working to diversify its economic base, but its chief growth industry is tourism, a field known for its long hours, seasonal employment, and substandard wages. New Orleans is a poor city with limited

revenue sources, including a small property tax base due in large part to a high homestead exemption. Under current Louisiana law, the first \$75,000 of a home's value is exempt from taxation. The city, in its efforts to finance basic services such as police protection, recreation facilities and activities, and greensward maintenance, has even begun to compete for funding with the nonprofit sector. At the same time, the nonprofit sector is changing, due in part to corporate shrinkage. The only Fortune 500 company headquartered in New Orleans, Freeport-McMoran, is contributing 60% less than in previous years, and the trend is for continual decline as the company focuses more on foreign giving. Local banks are merging, resulting in a decrease in the number of corporate donors, and national chains that maintain headquarters in other locations are rapidly buying out local corporations. Additionally, the oil industry continues to concentrate its offices in Houston as new technologies and "right-sizing" make maintaining a significant corporate presence in New Orleans, closer to Gulf of Mexico oil and gas deposits, less necessary.

New Orleans possesses a range of nonprofit arts and culture groups that have continued to function despite perennial subsistence on minimal finances and significant helpings of volunteer labor. There are few collaborative efforts that are able to achieve critical mass and take advantage of the benefits afforded by economies of scale. New Orleans arts organizations tend to behave as the region's political entities do. Each camp is suspicious of the next, and thus unwilling to cooperate in efforts to strengthen their respective organizations. Further, they traditionally have been governed as plutocracies, and then, once the money was gone, bankrupt aristocracies.

Discussion

In New Orleans, culture is broadly defined and is not limited to the traditional definition of the arts. Here culture is often perceived as an ethnic designation. Further, the terms "arts" and "culture" cover a wide range of creative expression from grand opera to Mardi Gras Indians, African-Americans males who masquerade as colorfully feathered and heavily sequined "Indians" on Shrove Tuesday and, as the arts are increasingly recognized and employed as an economic development tool, at other, less select and ritually less appropriate times of the year.

The three mainline, traditional organizations discussed here have experienced, to varying degrees of success, tremendous change over the last 20 or more years. They have all weathered financial and moral crisis and made the shift from board- to staff-driven.

LOUISIANA PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

The Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra, now in its ninth season, rose from the ashes of the New Orleans Symphony. In the 1980s, the Symphony rifled through its endowment as it toured both Europe and the East Coast and took on the financially and, ultimately, morally draining task of renovating and converting to concert use an acoustically superb but nonetheless dilapidated and ill-fitted vaudeville house.

What follows is a rather graphic illustration of the change in fortunes of the city's orchestral musicians. In 1976 New Orleans Symphony players struck over a base pay rate of \$24,000. The 1999-2000 season base pay rate of Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra musicians is \$20,000.¹ Furthermore, because the Louisiana Philharmonic functions as a cooperative, all players, save for the concertmaster, draw the same salary. Musicians are paid only after bills are paid. The situation, needless to say, is precarious. In recent years, however, the organization has professionalized its management and stepped up its education and outreach efforts in hopes of developing future audiences.

NEW ORLEANS BALLET ASSOCIATION

Of the three traditional arts organizations discussed here, the New Orleans Ballet Association has undergone the most fundamental transformation. By the early 1980s, at the height of the Louisiana oil boom, the New Orleans Ballet was producing programmatically balanced seasons of fully staged professional dance accompanied by full orchestra. But the Ballet, like many dance organizations the product of one choreographer's creative vision, resisted the company's pressing need to professionalize its management. Debt grew, the board bickered, the company folded. It returned as part of a two- and then three-city cooperative, first with the Cincinnati Ballet and then with both the Cincinnati and Knoxville companies. This arrangement, entered into to take

advantage of the economies of scale afforded by the sharing of artistic staff and corps de ballet, ultimately did not work. By the time this partnership was dissolved, the Ballet had accumulated a debt in excess of one million dollars. The company responded drastically. Closure was contemplated but rejected. Instead the organization fundamentally transformed itself from a producing to a presenting organization. It professionalized its management, gradually and successfully paid off its debt, and entered into several innovative education and outreach programs with local government agencies and community groups. The New Orleans Ballet Association has since engaged in meaningful education and outreach activities by working closely with the New Orleans Recreation Department and maintaining a training ensemble.

The biggest drawback to the Association's current configuration is that the city lacks the corps of professional, classically-trained dancers who once called New Orleans home. Additionally, the company suffers from an identity crisis occasioned by its very name. The New Orleans Ballet Association presents, on average, one classical dance production per season, yet its name connotes that classical, rather than modern, dance is central to its mission. Herein lies the disconnect. In response to the demographic environment in which it finds itself, the Association has chosen to offer programming that is culturally varied. Classical dance, in fact, brings the poorest return at the Ballet's box office. A change of name, however, to one that would more properly reflect the organization's programming thrust and educational focus, is not in the offing given the company's current board makeup. The Association's board of trustees has resisted every effort to change the organization's name despite the paucity of classical dance productions offered and the slow sales exhibited by the odd classical company on the schedule.

NEW ORLEANS OPERA ASSOCIATION

New Orleans is the cradle of opera in America. Opera was regularly produced in the city before New York had been favored with the art. Many late 18th - and early 19th-century European masterworks had their American premières in New Orleans rather than on the East Coast. Before the founding of the New Orleans Opera Association in the mid-1940s, however, the city could claim

¹ Dollar figures are not adjusted for inflation.

no permanent producing company. The Association, while never achieving more than a respectable regional status, flourished. By the 1960s the company was mounting eight productions of two performances each per season and producing a summer festival of contemporary and innovatively staged traditional works. By the mid-1980s, the company's production schedule had shrunk to four operas per season.

The company has struggled both financially and administratively. While teetering on the edge of bankruptcy in the early 1980s, the Association is now on relatively firm footing. The Association, however, has seen four general directors in the last three years. After the retirement of the chief executive who oversaw the company's shrinkage, the organization hired the retiring executive's anointed successor. At the same time, the company's board experienced a change in its presidency. Personalities clashed; rancor ensued; resignation followed. The new president hired someone of his own choosing, and the new hire's tenure lasted approximately three months, after it was determined that he could not work within the budget. The board's leadership changed hands again and a new general director was hired.

Things are now looking up at the New Orleans Opera Association. The new general director is to the board's liking and he is leading the company in sound artistic and fiduciary directions. Education is now a more central function of the organization and long-term audience development efforts have been embraced.

SMALLER ORGANIZATIONS

Without benefit of the data on the smaller arts and culture organizations of New Orleans that the National and Local Profiles of Cultural Support research study will provide, for now my discussion of these organizations must be largely impressionistic. I can say that the field is not characterized by cooperative efforts. Neither is it characterized by product differentiation. There are many small organizations lacking the resources necessary to hire professional staff who can market and develop the organization and educate its publics. They are often maintained by the efforts of one professional staff member, frequently a part-time executive director with little

management training, and boards who mean well but have neither the financial nor the administrative resources their organizations need to grow and prosper.

Conclusions

So what does the above suggest about the New Orleans arts and culture community? Larger arts organizations appeal to an urban core uninvolved with the products they offer, and smaller arts organization seek to differentiate themselves from one another without the benefit of marketing expertise and board members with deep pockets and mineable connections. This situation suggests several policy prescriptions, some organizational, some public. And I think the situation described can be improved to an appreciably greater degree if change is encouraged and effected in both the public and private arenas. My specific policy suggestions follow.

ORGANIZATIONAL POLICY SUGGESTIONS

Across all organizations there must be greater cooperation. While the scale of operations in which the larger traditional organizations are engaged disallows extensive sharing of managerial resources, there can still be significant cooperation in the area of education and outreach. Not one of the three large organizations I discuss employs a full-time education officer. The positions are either volunteer—the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra—or combined with others—the New Orleans Ballet Association and the New Orleans Opera Association. Given the state of general education and arts education in New Orleans, I suggest here that cooperation in this area is imperative and long overdue. The larger traditional organizations can be much more effective by partnering in their education efforts. Competition in this area can only be counterproductive and inefficient. Overtures have been made by several organizations, but no efforts have been sustained.

Smaller arts and culture organizations, on the other hand, could benefit from pooling their resources. This would enable further professionalization and expansion of staff without doing an injustice to the participating organizations' respective missions. Additionally, these organizations can work cooperatively with larger organizations to the partners' mutual benefit.

PUBLIC POLICY SUGGESTIONS

At the local level, arts funding has fallen precipitously from 1998. The city's Community Arts Grants, steady at \$225,000 per year from 1983, were zeroed out by the mayoral administration in 1999. A last minute and partial restoration of funding was effected when the city dedicated \$150,000 from its Economic Development Trust Fund. The economic situation has necessitated these cuts and there is little reason to believe the situation will improve. The Louisiana Department of Labor recently reported that the New Orleans area, while it will experience slow but steady economic growth over the next three years, will continue to lose white-collar workers, most arts organizations' natural market. The Arts Council of New Orleans, nevertheless, can encourage arts organizations to collaborate managerially and programmatically by encouraging joint grant applications.

The state of Louisiana, on the other hand, has a comparatively healthy per capita granting budget. The Louisiana Division of the Arts grants in the neighborhood of \$1.15 for every one of the state's four million residents. My suggestion here is the same as at the local level. The state arts agency can encourage joint grant applications, especially from intermunicipal partnerships.

Anyone who has ever driven to New Orleans from any direction or flown there with a window seat knows that one must cross a riparian barrier to get to the city. New Orleans is literally surrounded by water and waterlogged land. It is geographically isolated and often displays an island mentality, attributes manifested by a general lack of cooperation between the region's insular political entities. The city and region's arts organizations, if they are to prosper and operate at a level somewhere above subsistence, must overcome this culturally and naturally reinforced disinclination to cooperate. I repeat, "In other places culture comes down from on high. In New Orleans culture bubbles up from the streets." The metaphor, while apt, works just as well in reverse.