



KENOSHA RISING

A Community Conversation about Kenosha's Creative Economy



The KenoshaRising data presented here is a continuation of analysis from 2015 that began as an effort to set the “baseline” of economic impacts of the arts and culture in Kenosha County. Then throughout the Summer of 2016, a small team of researchers and arts advocates turned attention to analysis of the qualitative data presented in the original survey.

These data reveal in more detail the strengths and opportunities of the local creative economy and are used to set the course for the **Kenosha Creative Economy Strategic Plan** that will begin in the Fall of 2016.

Kenosha Is Rising.

Lost in Space by Judd Nelson
Harbor Park Sculpture Walk
Photography by Francisco Loyola

Background: In the August of 2015, an online survey was conducted by the City of Kenosha Commission on the Arts, Kenosha County University of Wisconsin-Extension, and Expose Kenosha, with support from the Kenosha Community Foundation, to assess the state of the arts in Kenosha County. A total of 142 local artists participated, sharing their perceptions of the area's strengths, challenges, and opportunities for continued growth. Then in 2016, a small team of arts advocates worked with researchers from UW-Extension to process the qualitative data presented in the survey results. Here are those findings including some recommendations for further study.

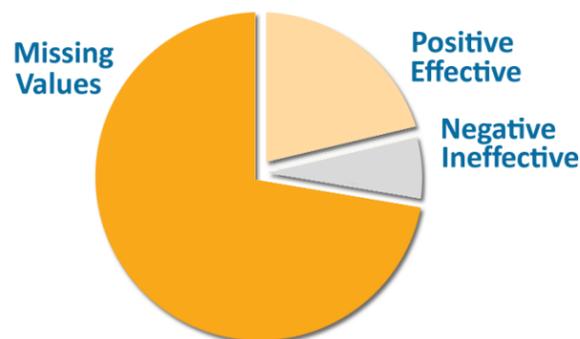
Research Questions: The following two questions were drawn from research article entitled “How Art and Culture Happen in New York: Implications for Urban Economic Development. *Currid, Elizabeth. American Planning Association, Journal of American Planning Association. Autumn 2007; 73,4:* Currid, an assistant professor of urban planning at University of Southern California’s School of Policy, Planning and Development—and prolific writer and researcher of arts and cultural development, indicates that places can strategically cultivate the “social milieus” and contexts that are most conducive to the production of art and culture. She, citing significant supporting academic literature, indicates the importance of gatekeepers in generating value for creative goods in the marketplace. Gatekeepers are identified as critical actors that establish cultural taste and value, advance artists’ careers and create art value. Furthermore, because of the social basis of arts and creativity, Currid’s research indicates that social scenes that provide opportunities for quality networking and access to gatekeepers is critical in advancing the creative economy.

Question: “In your opinion, how significant are local gatekeepers (editors, curators, gallery owners, nightlife proprietors) to advancing artists' careers and increasing the value of the arts?”

Insights from the Data:

1. 68 respondents answered this question, 55 of those replied yes—gatekeepers are significant. The range of responses reflecting many interpretations of the roles of gatekeepers (facilitator, curator, power broker, advocate, leader, promoter, etc) could be evidence that there is not much awareness or consensus about the role of gatekeepers. Additionally, many respondents used the opportunity to “unload” their hopes and expectations so it was difficult to find consistent themes in the data.
2. A number of respondents (30) also indicated that gatekeepers are **effective** in their role of advancing careers and have a positive overall impact. A smaller number (10) indicated that gatekeepers are ineffective and/or have a negative impact on careers.
3. There are high expectations of gatekeepers (despite the ambiguity about what they do). Some responses indicated an “avoidance” of gatekeepers by the artist/creative, presumably because of a bad experience in the past or general discomfort with the inherent power of the gatekeeper to affect careers. There are examples of dissatisfaction and some dismissive attitudes regarding interactions with gatekeepers that may be linked to unrealistic expectations of their abilities.

IMPACT OF GATEKEEPERS



A large portion of respondents did not answer the question regarding significance, we see this as evidence of a lack of understanding about what gatekeepers do.

Recommendations For Further Study:

1. It is recommended that the community host discussions with stakeholders (rather than pursuing additional surveying) to discover why gatekeepers are thought to be so significant and support these discussions with academic research from similarly-sized, thriving creative economies (e.g. Dubuque, Iowa) illustrating the central role gatekeepers play.
2. The community can work to develop a common, shared language that could define what makes a gatekeeper effective in his/her role and even collectively “prescribe” ways to make local gatekeepers more effective still. Again, it is recommended that the creative community come together to work out common concepts and definitions.
3. Finding ways to empower artists/creatives to be productive relationships with established gatekeepers may resolve the underlying discomfort some respondents feel toward these important fixtures in the creative economy.

Question: “What kinds of events/activities assist you in quality networking, advance your career and/or provide access to gatekeepers (editors, curators, gallery owners, nightlife proprietors etc.)

Insights from the Data:

1. The question aimed at **kinds** of events/activities that assist in networking, career advancement and access to gatekeepers- however, many survey participants answered the question by listing examples of existing community-wide touristic events or activities.
2. There were limited occasions where respondents provided descriptions of kinds of activities they desire to engage in—and why; collaborative projects, teaching, volunteering, tours, colleague critiques, friendships among artists.
3. Respondents generally listed events that are open to the public but not events/activities that bring artists together with other artists. At this point we think that a lot of the activities and events conceptualized under ‘networking’ revolve around exposure to audiences who are buyers. Perhaps the local arts scene’s “maturity” is hindered when many artists and creatives look at networking (and gatekeepers?) in the context of immediate sales rather than recognizing the layered process of “career making” as a valuable outcome in its own right.

Recommendations For Further Study:

1. Determine what events are most commonly listed and consider what—if any similarities exist between the various events. Are these events and activities truly used for networking and career advancement—or simply for sales?
2. Investigate further why and how these “deeper” kinds of experiences occur. Why are they valued? If these kinds of experiences do indeed assist artists/creatives in quality networking, career advancement and gatekeeper access, determine how the Kenosha community institutions can foster/incentivize more of these kinds of experiences to occur more often.
3. Explore how and why “exposure” and “networking” may serve different purposes and provide differentiated events for differentiated purposes. Perhaps more “exclusive events” can be more effective for networking and then later presenting opportunities for “exposure.” There can be separate aims that support the other. Consider hosting “invitation only” events with identified gatekeepers and artists that include discussions about how expertise can be used to advance the creative economy.

Conclusion: Based on KenoshaRising sample of qualitative survey data, there exists a general lack of consensus around the role and relative importance of gatekeepers. There is also a confused notion of the purpose of networking and vibrant social networks to advance careers in arts and creativity. Growth and development of the local creative economy depends on a broader and common understanding of these elements and structures. Community discourse would foster a shared language and advance the interests of artists, creatives and community-at-large.

Learn more and get connected at: www.kenosharising.com

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