

# Reflections on Creative Economic Development

## (or, What Social Artrepreneurs Need Now)



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LOS ANGELES -- Creative social entrepreneurs are an under-served community within the art world. The design of their commercially structured businesses makes them ineligible or non-competitive for many arts grants, and factors such as high debt-to-asset ratio, small operating budgets, and lack of formal business knowledge make them uncompetitive for traditional business loans and investment capital. And yet, strong, unique, and community-connected startups and micro-enterprises are the backbone of economic development and community vitality. They are sources for job creation, worktype innovations, as well as new products and services. They also contribute to fostering and anchoring neighborhoods and instilling community identity.

Creatives of all types—professional and non-professional artists; cultural producers conveying traditional and contemporary expressions rooted in ethnic, community-based, or immigrant backgrounds; and those working in commercial industries such as in independent design, media, or entertainment arts—are at the heart of any creative economy wherein arts and culture have an economic, and thereby social, impact. Enterprises operating with a creative triple-bottom line—pursuit of artistic or cultural expression, financial profit, and positive social impact—warrant tailored investment support.

We know this because we are now in the 4th year of the Creative Economic Development Fund (CEDF), an investment program that provides funding for projects that will help launch startup or expand micro-sized creative enterprises in Los Angeles. CEDF grants support entities (independent businesses, self-employed artists or cultural producers, artist collectives, or nonprofits) with significant earned income activities that use commercial strategies in pursuit of an arts or culture mission that have a social impact. CEDF is a program of the Center for Cultural Innovation (CCI) in partnership with the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, with support from the Roy and Patricia Disney Family Foundation, and prior year support from the Surdna

Foundation. CEDF grantees have included dance studios, barbers, designers of fashion, printed matter, merchandise, and media, retail business owners, food entrepreneurs, collectives, and organizations that support them.

**Kamajian, Natalie. Artists-in-Residence Adriana Rivera and Ana Guajardo in front of their Studio. 30 October 2015. Leadership for Urban Renewal Network (LURN), Los Angeles.**

(LURN received a 2015 CEDF grant to launch a monthly event series benefiting street vendors and in-residence local artist entrepreneurs.)



## Examples of CEDF-funded Creative Enterprises

**Project Q** (projectq.me) used CEDF funds to complete buildout of “Hairstream,” a mobile salon outfitted in an artist-designed Airstream trailer that provides a safe gathering space and hair styling to homeless queer and trans youth subsidized by paying clients. Founder Madin Lopez uses hair as their artistic medium and form of social justice work for LGBTQIA youth.

**Otherwild** (otherwild.com) is a graphic design studio, event space, and boutique retailer with locations in Los Angeles and New York. CEDF funding in 2015 enabled them to release an original t-shirt referencing an archival image from the 1970s feminist bookstore Labyris Books, which stated THE FUTURE IS FEMALE. The phenomenal success of this locally and ethically manufactured product line during a contentious presidential campaign season resulted in Otherwild’s ability to donate more than \$100,000 to Planned Parenthood through a percentage of t-shirt sales. They later released a spin-off EL FUTURO ES FEMININX line, benefitting Familia: Trans Queer Liberation Movement (Familia: TQLM).

**Piece by Piece** (piecebypiece.org) provides low-income and formerly homeless people free mosaic art workshops using recycled materials to develop marketable skills, self-confidence, earned income, and an improved quality of life. CEDF grants in 2015 and 2017 supported a bricks-and-mortar retail gallery at Mercado La Paloma selling mosaic wares designed and handmade by those living in poverty whose participation puts them on a path to earned income.

The CEDF grant was the catalyst for a really good year and a potential future. [...] Our surviving and thriving is a testament to our cultural vibrancy locally and beyond. We are a dance studio, we practice and promote non-commercial dance in a culture that is interested in the bottom line, not happy, healthy, creative bodies sharing resources. At our core we value each body, each human, human differences and interconnectedness. We value working within systems of reciprocal exchange.

- Jmy James Kidd, Pieter Performance Space  
(2016 CEDF grantee for investments to increase rental income)



## Developing the CEDF Training Series

In 2017, CCI experimented with presenting a series of workshops, in addition to CEDF grant funds, aimed at meeting creative entrepreneurs where they are by providing business training and facilitating networking and peer-to-peer knowledge sharing that took into account the intersectional identities and distinct (but often shared) challenges they face as an emerging economic community. The workshops would help them grow their business capacities while foregrounding their social and aesthetic values.

As CCI’s incoming Artists Knowledge Manager, I began designing this training series in early 2017 by sitting down with past CEDF grantees for one-on-one chats. I asked them what concerns were keeping them up at night, and where they hoped to be in

*Serrato, Rosa. Across Our Kitchen Tables Founders (L to R) Valerie Dueñas, Claudia Serrato, Jocelyn Ramirez. 9 June 2017. AOKT, Los Angeles. (2017 CEDF grantees to create networking and skill-share opportunities for Women of Color food entrepreneurs in East L.A.)*

6 and 12 months, with respect to their business. We talked about the kinds of mentors they wanted to meet, and the workshops they'd be most likely to attend. Like most professional artists I've encountered in CCI's professional development workshops, many wanted simply to strengthen basic business skills. They also suggested topics that reach beyond the standard small business toolkit, including popup retail strategies, collective ownership, and how to leverage their proximity to L.A.'s Entertainment Industry to reach expanded markets.

The workshops we offered in 2017–18, which were designed with CEDF grantees in mind, but open to the public, were:

- **ART>NET>WORK: A Networking Jam for Social Artrepreneurs**
- **Pop-ups 101: Retail with a Mission!**
- **Experiential and Event Marketing**
- **Strategic Action Planning**
- **Business Model Design & Branding**
- **Collective & Cooperative Business Models**



**Kastner, Lara. *The Rational Dress Society* - Abigail Glaum-Lathbury (left) and Maura Brewer (right) - presents *A History of Counter-Fashion*. 6 Dec 2016. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. (2016 CEDF grantee for an egalitarian JUMPSUIT that liberates wearers from signs of class and gender.)**

The creative entrepreneurs I met through the CEDF workshops often came to us at a critical growth moment in the lifecycle of their business, when they were hungry for knowledge and eager to take advantage of tools that would help them become more sustainable. By and large, they are eager to meet peers and draw upon peer knowledge, whether those peers are working in similar or wildly different ways. They tend to be folks who respond to workshop content that is delivered in a creative way, and to trainers who “get them” and the values

**For both Cha Cha Covers and Urban Xic, our community and culture work is intertwined with being entrepreneurs. This year [2016-17] was especially difficult politically and had a deep impact on the communities in which we produce our work and consider our clientele. In addition to funding our lines, studio space and creative endeavors, this grant allowed us to be activists in our communities through our respective culture work committed to social justice.**

**- Felicia Montes, Eastside Entrepreneurs Collaborative Studio (2016 CEDF grantee to establish a shop with walk-in retail and workshop space for other local artisans to develop their businesses)**

that underpin their enterprises. As a curriculum designer, I found it important to think about the urgent political and social concerns these entrepreneurs are responding to—for example, the need to create safe spaces for members of the LGBTQIA community and homeless teens. These creative entrepreneurs tend to be savvy around power structures, inclusive language, and group dynamics, and will critically sniff out an agenda that goes against their values. Content and messaging around workshops needs to be tailored with these political dynamics in mind.

At the same time, content should feel accessible and delivered with efficiency. One big barrier to participation is that these entrepreneurs may be too busy running their companies, advancing their art practices, raising their families, and serving their communities to make time in their week for a 3+ hour workshop. We found that offering modest stipends to the grantees allowed business owners with very tight budgets to participate, send their staff, pay for childcare, or turn down other gigs to attend a class.



## Seeding a Community of Peers

Besides knowledge and resource sharing, it was important to us that each workshop provide a socializing, networking space to nurture relationships and collaborations among the entrepreneurs. Many of these folks are working in isolation, dreaming up their own way of doing things based on years of experience managing their creative, artistic endeavors. Until CCI launched this CEDF program, there was no infrastructure that had brought these, or any other for that matter, creative, socially-minded entrepreneurs together. We found them to be generous with their time, eager to collaborate and share resources and cross-promote projects. It was encouraging that after each workshop, participants reported that they had more contacts they could reach out to for advice.

Whenever I run into past participants now, they inevitably tell me they miss seeing each other, and ask when we're getting together again. That feeling of community is incredibly important. We at CCI are grateful for what these promising visionaries have taught us about what it means to support the 21st century arts ecosystem where creative practice connects with social impact for a thriving and beneficial local economy.

Learn more about CEDF and past grantees at [www.cciarts.org/Los\\_Angeles\\_CEDF.html](http://www.cciarts.org/Los_Angeles_CEDF.html).



I don't have words to describe how appreciative I am for the opportunity to attend these workshops for the last several months. They've been a great launching pad for how to begin thinking about my organization as both a creative and business venture. And it's connected me to a creative network of like-minded socially conscience organizations I never knew existed.

- Elizabeth Bayne, Graybayne Film/Media  
(2017 CEDF grantee for equipment to expand business and subsidize cause-based digital storytelling projects)

I find, more than anything, how valuable it is to meet other creatives at these events and to learn how we can collaborate to support each other's initiatives. These connections are priceless.

- Teena Apeles, Narrated Objects  
(2017 CEDF grantee to produce books that raise awareness about urgent subjects in Los Angeles, with local contributors)

Endow, Jon. 2017 CEDF grantees (l to r) Jessica Hoffman, Teena Apeles, Daniel Villa, Jocelyn Ramirez, Eric Ibarra, Damien Robledo, Pei-Yen Chen, Christina Webb, Valerie Dueñas, and Elizabeth Bayne gather during Art>Net>Work event. 17 June 2017. Center for Cultural Innovation, Los Angeles.



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