



# Cultural Planning: A Work in Progress

**In every community's evolution, a seed sprouts in the hearts and minds of residents who seek out the arts to revitalize neighborhoods, provide personal enrichment and set their community apart from other places. Such people gather others to develop a collective vision and create what eventually becomes a cultural plan for their community's unique identity. In this process, individuals, businesses, community organizations, diverse ethnic groups and civic leaders create partnerships and share resources. Although the steps are similar, cultural planning enables each community to set its own goals and priorities.**

## Methodical Approaches Yield Remarkable Results

Merced and Tracy, cities of similar size in Central California, both identified the need for a cultural arts center. Their approaches and outcomes differed dramatically as they responded to the needs of their respective communities. Merced used cultural planning as a tool to revitalize its downtown while offering diverse cultural activities to engage the community. In Tracy, the return of art education programs to area schools was the springboard for a community needs assessment, which identified the need for a regional arts center.



*Bagpipers perform in front of a mural (also pictured above) at the Merced Multicultural Arts Center.*

“Artistic opportunities for our children will not be available in the future unless we do something to improve the quality of our infrastructure,” says Ann Langley, president of the Tracy Arts Leadership Alliance.

Tracy's challenge is to serve an increasing population while respecting both its rural landscape and position as a prime residential area for San Francisco Bay Area commuters. The city hired a consultant to develop the cultural arts development plan, after community members spent a year studying other cities' facilities to identify what ideas leaders wanted to emulate in Tracy. Another year was devoted to a needs assessment and community outreach. The city partnered with the Arts Leadership Alliance to implement the plan, officially adopted in April 1999.

“One of the best pieces of advice we got was to not hurry the process and do as much research as you possibly can do in advance, because it is necessary for the citizens to understand what is involved. ... The long-term health of the new



*Children enjoy a field trip to the Merced Multicultural Arts Center.*

facility was our primary concern,” recalls Langley. “We needed to bring people in and build bridges. Those activities are as important, if not more important, than the planning process — the partnerships must be formed *before* the brick and mortar.”

Merced's interest in the arts also began with arts education. Joan Sortini, executive director of the Merced County Arts Council, was one of many arts champions to see the planning process from its start as ideas in the 1980s to completion of the Merced Multicultural Arts Center three years ago. When diverse cultural performing arts groups visited schools, response was so enthusiastic that the community began planning a theater for public performances.

“We had a lot of people staying focused, a lot of partnerships and diversity of programming. Continuity, quality and diversity are the three things that made this work,” Sortini explains. The Merced Arts Council kept everyone — board members, volunteers, members and funders — engaged through public forums, fund raisers and festivals.

Sortini served on the county's redevelopment committee task force to study the proposed project area and develop the plans. A vacant Montgomery Wards store behind Merced City Hall was the perfect location. The redevelopment agency paid for initial work, while business partnerships, special events and a \$2 million trust, left by a member of the community, financed construction. Now open seven days a week, the arts center displays the slogan “All of the arts for all of the people.”

## A Renaissance in Little Tokyo

A similar type of rebirth is taking place in the Little Tokyo area of Los Angeles, which fell into disrepair during World War II, when many community members were forced into internment camps. During the 1960s, the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) took notice of Little Tokyo.

“This area is the traditional and cultural heart of Southern California. It needed to come back,” says Don Spivak, deputy administrator of the CRA.



*Musicians perform outside the Japanese American National Museum.*



*The former Union Church is now the Union Center for the Arts in Little Tokyo.*

Local businesses formed an advisory committee to support the community's redevelopment. The plan was to coalesce cultural events and religious organizations located there and create a tourist and residential/commercial destination.

Today, the Japanese Village Plaza is a thriving commercial center. Little Tokyo also includes affordable housing for seniors, a Japanese American cultural center, theaters, museums and restoration of one historic block from the turn of the century.

“We then asked ourselves, what are the opportunities for arts and culture to help complete the project?” Spivak recalls. Using interdisciplinary teams, monthly meetings and public input, the CRA conducted an extensive analysis. The agency funds individual elements of the completed plan, including a walkway along a historic block, with a timeline in the sidewalk listing owners of each building and its historical significance.

## Cultural Planning: The Catalyst

Cultural planning is always a work in progress. Whether it is giving birth to a new idea or rediscovering the past, cultural planning involves putting people first and engaging residents of all ages and backgrounds. Bringing people together to identify the unique assets and needs of their community is the first

step in successful cultural planning — the catalyst for building vibrant communities with strong ties to their histories and heritages.

*The League of California Cities selected Merced as grand prize winner of the Helen Putnam Award in the arts and quality of life category, for its development of the Multicultural Arts Center. The award will be presented at the League's annual conference, Sept. 7–9 in Anaheim. For more information, see page 62.*



*Japanese Village Plaza is a thriving commercial center that welcomes visitors.*

## For More Information

The California Arts Council offers program and funding information of interest to cities and counties at [www.cac.ca.gov](http://www.cac.ca.gov). A compendium of local arts projects and resources will be available in fall 2000 from the California Arts Council and the Institute for Local Self Government.

*This is the final article in a four-part series, which is a collaborative project of the California Arts Council, a state agency, and the Institute for Local Self Government. The California Arts Council is committed to making quality art available and accessible for all Californians. The Institute supports local communities through a variety of programs.*