




INTEGRATING CULTURE *into*
COMMUNITY POWER BUILDING

**Learning and Insights on
Culture and Community Power Building**

Evaluation Summary



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EXPANDING
DEFINITION of
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Summary of the Evaluation of the Culture & Community Power Fund

Introduction: A Laboratory for Culture-Centered Power Building

The Culture & Community Power Fund (C&CPF)'s purpose is to advance community power by positioning **culture as a central and fundamental force for change** in frontline communities. C&CPF is a \$13 million national funders' collaborative and action lab from the Barr, Kresge, and William Penn Foundations. Guided by trust and flexibility, C&CPF operates an innovative model that provides **unrestricted, multi-year support** to six "connector" organizations across the U.S. A key component of this model is the co-design of **ecosystem investments**, where connector organizations distribute resources throughout their local networks, shifting decision-making power to the community. This is complemented by a **trans-local community of practice** that fosters peer learning and collaboration among grantees.

The six connector grantees—Ashé Cultural Arts Center (New Orleans), Asian Arts Initiative (Philadelphia), Boston Ujima Project (Massachusetts), Center for Transforming Communities (Memphis), Northend Christian CDC (Detroit), and The Village of Arts & Humanities (Philadelphia)—reflect organizations deeply accountable to communities and a wide diversity of geographies, ethnicities, and approaches.

This evaluation of C&CPF was designed to retrospectively learn how grantee partners use culture to strengthen community power, document the outcomes of the C&CPF funding model, review the operational structure, and offer strategic considerations for the future. The findings are based on a review of several hundred documents and engagement with 51 participants through 20 interviews and focus groups, as well as participatory Ripple Effect Mapping sessions.

“Hope is what gets us to building trust because we actually are able to believe... It means that maybe we lean in against our own thresholds and when you hope you are willing to suspend your own belief or disbelief within that moment so that you can be transformed.”
– Center for Transforming Communities

Key Learnings: The Symbiotic Relationship Between Culture and Power

The evaluation surfaced deep insights into the integral role culture plays in building lasting community power. C&CPF defines community power as a community's

collective capacity to influence and control their community's own environment and future, disrupting hierarchical notions of power.

Based on the experiences of C&CPF grantee partners, community power should be built for **enduring, not episodic, engagement**. Moving away from transactional, issue-specific campaigns that cause fatigue and instead focusing on deep, long-term relationship building. This enduring power is cultivated through foundational activities like **healing, fostering interpersonal relationships, and creating safe spaces** where community members can identify shared issues and develop a collective, resident-led agenda. Once built, this power is used to **advocate for, resist, and defend a community's rights** to thrive and express its culture, serving as both a means to an end and a desired outcome in itself. Long-term power is sustained when communities gain the ability to **control their own narratives** by owning the means of cultural production and when they build lasting economic strength through the **collective ownership of land and resources**. Ultimately, the practice of **sharing power creates ripple effects** that benefit individuals, organizations, and the broader community by strengthening relationships, increasing agency, and making collaborative work more effective and sustainable.

This power is built with intentionality over time in distinct phases:

1. **Building Power:** Focusing on foundational relationship building, healing, and developing a shared story and identity.
2. **Leveraging Power:** Taking collective action through advocacy, defense, or proactive campaigns to make demands of existing power structures.
3. **Sustaining Power:** Establishing long-term institutions, collective ownership of assets (like land or cultural centers), and shared governance to consolidate and institutionalize power for the long haul.

Culture is the engine that drives this process. It is not an add-on but the very "water they're swimming in." Grantees demonstrated that culture is leveraged to build community power in several essential ways:

- **As an "ancestral technology for liberation,"** affirming shared identity and drawing on historical resilience.
- **As a vehicle for restoring relationships, heritage, and spirituality,** creating spaces for healing that are essential before power can be discussed or built.
- **As the bedrock for bold and innovative solutions,** allowing artists and culture bearers to act as visionaries who articulate possibilities beyond the current political realm.

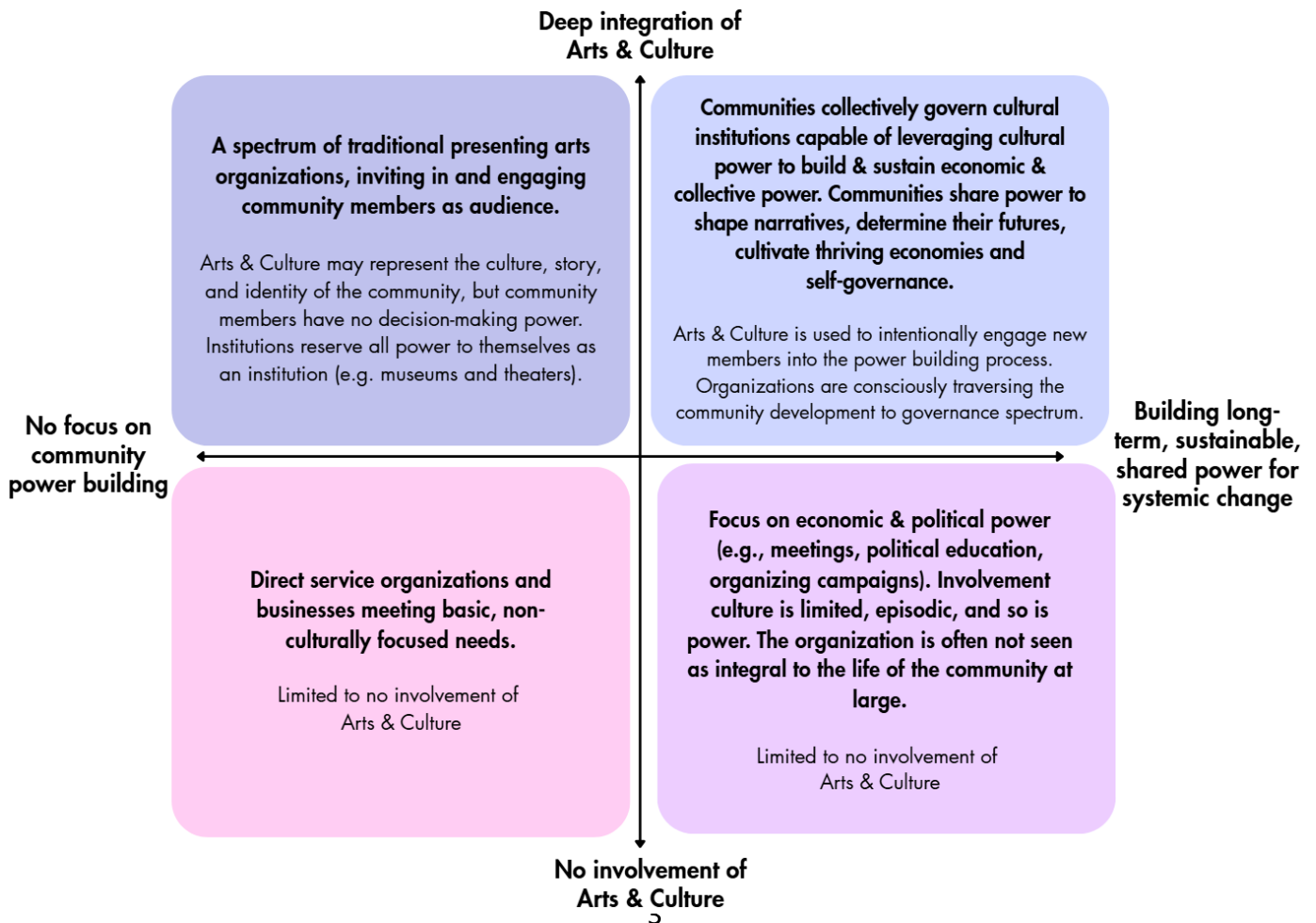
- **As a source of joy and longevity**, overcoming the fear rooted in the dangers and suppression historically associated with community organizing, particularly for Black communities in the American South, and sustaining engagement for the long term.

A key learning framework emerged from this work, captured in a matrix (see below) illustrating the symbiotic relationship between cultural integration and community power. The trajectory moves from surface-level engagement to a deep integration where communities govern their own cultural institutions to build sustainable economic and political power. Ashé Cultural Arts Center, which leverages cultural convening to build political power for policy wins like a housing trust fund, and Boston Ujima, for whom building a democratic, cooperative economic ecosystem is itself a profound cultural shift, illustrate this deep integration.

Major Findings: The Transformative Impact of the C&CPF Model

The C&CPF’s trust-based, relational model catalyzed significant shifts for grantees, their ecosystems, and the broader field. The evaluation identified five core areas of impact.

Relationship between culture and community power building



1. Deepened Understanding of Community Power: Grantees, especially those primarily focused on arts and culture, developed a more profound understanding of community power as essential for addressing systemic inequities. They began to more intentionally link arts programming with initiatives that enhance community ownership and decision-making: *“Community Power become a part of our regular organizational and programmatic vocabulary.”*

2. The Power of a Trans-local Community of Practice:

Grantees cited the peer cohort as the most significant programmatic element. It created a space for deep learning, solidarity, and collaborative problem-solving across geographies. This peer support system expanded grantees' *imagination*s about what was possible in their own communities.

“The tone for our gatherings was set so beautifully from the very beginning. I appreciated that and used the idea of communicating up front in our [community] meetings.”
– Connector Grantee

3. The Success of Co-Designed Ecosystem

Investments: By entrusting connector organizations to distribute funds, the model shifted decision-making power to the community, increased the grantees' credibility, and helped re-knit the local social fabric. This approach supported everything from restorative healing work and leadership development to tangible wins like a successful housing ballot initiative in New Orleans.

“The process of identifying and making the ecosystem grants was, in and of itself, building community power.”
– C&CPF Co-Director

4. The Critical Role of Unrestricted, Multi-Year

Support: Flexible funding was foundational in that it provided organizations with the stability to respond to evolving needs, advance pay equity, invest in infrastructure, and think creatively. This trust-based approach was empowering in itself and allowed organizations to focus on their mission rather than on short-term deliverables.

“What [the Fund] says is ‘I trust you... and I'm not going to question that.’ So that is empowering within itself.”
– Connector Grantee

5. Operational Challenges and Tensions: The Fund's identity as an "adaptive lab" created tension with traditional philanthropic needs for tangible, predictable outcomes. Funders sometimes felt disconnected from the ground-level work, making it difficult to advocate internally. At the same time, the co-design process, while valuable, required more time and capacity from grantees than initially anticipated.

Strategic Considerations for Future Investment

The C&CPF initiative offers a powerful model for philanthropy seeking to support community-led transformation. Based on the evaluation, the following considerations are recommended for any future iteration.

1. **Establish a Clear Framework for the integration of Culture from the Outset.** While maintaining flexibility, it is vital to articulate a clear vision and criteria from the start to ensure alignment around the goals of integrating culture and building power.
2. **Prioritize Flexible, Unrestricted, and Multi-Year Funding.** This trust-based approach is the bedrock of the model's success. A longer funding horizon (e.g., four years) is recommended to support the deep, unpredictable work of systemic change.
3. **Empower a Deeply Aligned Intermediary.** The intermediary role is crucial for straddling the worlds of philanthropy and community practice. This role should be empowered with autonomy, staffed by those with frontline experience, and adequately resourced from the beginning.
4. **Foster Deep Relational Capacity and Peer Learning (Including Funders).** Acknowledge that "**change moves at the speed of trust.**" Future initiatives must invest in relationship-building among grantees and ensure funders are active participants in the learning process, with increased direct interaction to gain a more nuanced understanding of the work.
5. **Design for Useful, Practice-Based Learning and Evaluation.** Embrace an "adaptive lab" approach with evaluation baked in from the start. Learning should be co-led by grantees, focus on capturing signals of power building rather than just outputs, and be equally useful to all partners.
6. **Strategize for Longevity and Succession.** To build "**enduring, not episodic**" power, the initiative must plan for sustainability beyond the funding cycle. This includes investing in the formation of permanent institutions, supporting collective ownership of assets, and nurturing ongoing communities of practice that outlast the grant dollars.