

Community Arts Framework: A Cultural Approach to Capacity Building for Asian Americans

NATIONAL CAPACD

Executive Summary



Think!Chinatown offered an all-levels open dance class with traditional Chinese props like fans and ribbons, led by Red Silk Dancers, as part of the 2025 Chinatown Arts Festival.

Credit: Felicity Zhang @felicityzhangphotography

National Coalition of Asian Pacific American Community Development's (National CAPACD)'s *Community Arts Initiatives and Community Capacity-Building in AA and PI Communities* research project examined how community arts initiatives (including placemaking and place-keeping projects) expand a community's capacity to address socioeconomic and cultural well-being and historical and structural disparities facing Asian American and Pacific Islander (AA and PI) communities. One strategy addressing community issues in AA and PI communities is through community engagement to build community capacity. A wide range of nonprofits—including those that focus on community development, arts and culture, and social services—leverage arts programming to engage and uplift local residents and advance the well-being of a community.

National CAPACD's Creative Placemaking program involves organizations throughout the United States that center arts, culture, and storytelling as tools for place-keeping and advancing equitable development. Staff from those organizations expressed a desire to acknowledge and document their projects, practices, and impacts. This research attempts to more fully explore how arts and culture build a community's capacity to sustain and protect their neighborhoods.

To understand how community-based organizations increase local capacity, the researchers developed a conceptual framework that looked at capacity through six dimensions:

- **Knowledge Capacity:** Gather, learn and pass on history, experiences, and traditions of people and places.
- **Creative Capacity:** Use arts and culture to self-define and express individual and shared identity and envision the future.
- **Relational Capacity**: Build a connected community through groups, organizations, networks, and coalitions.
- **Political Capacity:** Influence decision-makers and participate in planning and allocating resources for a neighborhood.
- **Economic Capacity:** Identify, mobilize, and expand community assets and resources.
- **Affective Capacity**: Foster a sense of belonging, shared identity, and shared future.

The researchers gathered data through a survey and in-depth case studies to examine both the challenges and opportunities when implementing community arts initiatives. The compiled findings highlight how organizations use the arts to build community in specific and impactful ways, while underscoring the importance of sustained investment, institutional support, and strategic design to maximize community benefits from arts-based development.

KEY FINDINGS

Community Arts Practices

- Since arts initiatives often amplify a community's cultural identities and experiences, they are deep-rooted not only in arts organizations but in all types of non-profit organizations.
- Community development organizations and their partners report impacts on future-oriented investment more than other organizations.
- More long-term investments in ongoing community arts initiatives can influence community capacity.
- Arts function not just as programming, but as a launchpad for sustaining a community's social, cultural, and economic fabric.
- Cultural identity is actively created, challenged, and worked out.

Community Capacities in Action

- Community arts initiatives are uniquely equipped to build affective and relational capacity.
- Political and economic impacts can be difficult to attribute to an arts activity and the data needed to assess is harder to gather.
- Intergenerational knowledge sustains community capacity.
- Collaboration across organizations and communities expands impact.
- Community arts initiatives function as sites of care and collective survival.
- Relational labor is central to community building but undervalued.

Investment Needs and Trends

- Economic and spatial pressures are reshaping community participation.
- Political, economic, and other structural conditions constrain community capacity.
- Community arts initiatives are not easy and require investments in staff time to achieve meaningful impact.
- Public funding correlates with all capacity domains but especially with the economic domain.

From these findings, local practitioners should consider integrating the arts (cultural preservation, storytelling, placemaking projects) into their community development work as it can underpin longer-term social and political change in powerful ways. This, in turn, can also help provide evidence for its significance and impact in the community development field at large. Practitioners should consider using this community capacity framework not only as an impact measurement tool but also as case-making language for fundraising their community arts initiatives.

The arts remain especially powerful in generating tangible as well as intangible, yet, deeply felt benefits—ones that often underpin longer-term social and political change. Thus the arts, when thoughtfully designed, implemented, and funded, can play a vital role in culturally-based community development to strengthen AA and PI communities as well as other communities across the country.

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Research Project Overview

Asian American and Pacific Islander (AA and PI) communities have long leveraged arts, culture, and storytelling strategies to create vibrant, healthy communities. People can thrive when they maintain their cultural practices—from preparing traditional foods sourced from local stores to gathering for music, dance, and theater that express identity and history. Community development, arts and culture, and social service nonprofits use these arts practices as distinctive ways to engage and uplift people and advance the well-being of a community. These community art practices can serve far beyond just "art-for-art's sake" or valuing art for intrinsic beauty or creative expression, as organizations also use them as powerful ways to cultivate social cohesion, build awareness of and organize around changing social policy, drive economic development, and solve place-based challenges.

This report, *Community Arts Framework: A Cultural Approach to Capacity Building for Asian Americans*, is the culmination of a research project by the National Coalition of Asian Pacific American Community Development (National CAPACD). National CAPACD is a coalition, intermediary, and the country's leading organization in advancing community development and advocating against gentrification and displacement of AA and PI communities. The research examines how community arts initiatives (including placemaking and place-keeping projects) expand the community's capacity to address socioeconomic and cultural well-being, as well as historical and structural disparities facing AA and PI communities.

The research team included: Dr. Jeffrey Hou (National University of Singapore, formerly University of Washington), Dr. Diane Wong (Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey), and Dr. Jonathan Jae-an Crisman (University of Arizona), along with Dr. Lexie Jackson and 'A'ali'i Alliance. The project components included: 1) framework of six dimensions—affective, creative, economic, knowledge, political, and relational—of how capacity can be built in a neighborhood; 2) analysis of survey results from 96 respondents from AA and PI-serving community-based organizations engaged in community arts initiatives across the country; and 3) analysis of in-depth case studies collected through ethnographic fieldwork and participatory action research that examine both challenges and opportunities faced by organizations. In 2025, a research symposium served as a working session to share preliminary results with community organizers and artists who then provided direction for shaping the analysis of the interviews and the other components of this community report.

In recognition that Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and Asian American communities have vastly different histories, cultures, languages, migration patterns, and relationships to colonization, militarization, displacement, and US policy, National CAPACD chose to conduct research and produce a separate report on community arts initiatives in Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities. This report's survey results grouped AA and PI arts communities because of the long-standing relationships and shared advocacy infrastructure that have emerged in part from the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's historical aggregation of Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities into a single racial category. The research team of 'A'ali'i Alliance with Dr. Lexie Jackson specifically disaggregated the NH and PI organizations in the survey data. Furthermore, they invited Pasifika-serving organizations to share through talanoa/talkstory sessions about their organizations and perspectives on how arts and culture show up and build their capacity within their communities grounded in their own histories, values, and definitions.

This research and set of reports build on the Vision, Values, and Practice document of National CAPACD's Asian American and Pacific Islander Creative Placemaking Learning Circle. Staff from diverse organizations conceived this document



Chinatown Community Development Center featured local seniors' portraits and their stories in the Chinatown Pretty exhibit.

in 2019 to share a vision for collective practices that elevate the particular cultural strategies and values that drive AA and PI creative placemaking in the community development field. At the time, staff from those organizations expressed a desire to acknowledge and document their practices and projects. This research attempts to do so by more fully understanding how their efforts use arts and culture to build capacity to positively impact their neighborhoods.

The arts remain especially powerful in generating tangible, intangible, and deeply felt benefits that often underpin longer-term social and political change. The six dimensions of capacity-building—affective, creative, economic, knowledge, political, and relational—can provide a lens for examining the impact of arts initiatives by community-based organizations. The findings highlight how organizations are using the arts to build community in specific ways, while underscoring the importance of sustained investment, institutional support, and strategically designed programming to maximize community benefits from arts-based development. Thus the arts, when thoughtfully designed, implemented, and funded, can play a vital role in culturally-based community development to strengthen AA and PI communities, as well as other communities across the country.

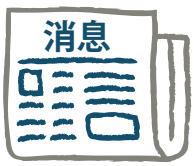
This research on how community art projects in AA and PI communities facilitate participation and engagement is important not only for these communities but also for the broader population and practitioners of community arts, community development, and creative placemaking as a whole. Using the six-capacities framework to understand how arts initiatives contribute to community development, AA and PI community-serving organizations reported that arts initiatives are uniquely suited to fostering social cohesion and cultural pride that can lead to increased participation in political engagement and advocacy. Through collective listening, storytelling, and imagination, artists can carefully curate and craft experiences that speak to particular identities and histories, empowering residents. Community members can then become powerful economic and political drivers shaping the future of their neighborhoods, which leads to paths of equitable development, dignity, and healing.

Six Dimensions of Community Capacity

Asian American (AA) neighborhoods have long played a vital role in helping their residents maintain their cultural ties and traditions, cultivate a sense of belonging, and contribute to the United States across generations. In the nineteenth century, Chinese arrivals were met with racist fearmongering, exclusionary laws, and the creation of a vast government bureaucracy to keep them out. In the subsequent decades, other Asian immigrant groups that followed were similarly subject to laws that explicitly barred their immigration, naturalization, and land ownership, as well as policies that denied basic rights and recognition. Despite these barriers, when Asian immigrants arrived in numbers, they lived in close proximity for safety, opened businesses that provided necessary employment, and established religious and cultural institutions to preserve their traditions and provide social support.

Community-serving organizations have been key in advocating and fighting for community issues and infrastructure in today's Koreatowns, Little Sài Gòns, Cambodia Towns, and others. AA-serving place-based organizations have adopted a resident-driven, culturally-aligned approach to address interconnected housing, economic, social, and physical needs.. Arts programs are part of these holistic strategies to address needs, cultivate community social cohesion, advocate for policy changes, drive economic development, and solve place-based challenges.

The researchers developed a framework to examine how community organizations build the capacity of a neighborhood to advocate for material changes. The categorization of capacities was helpful for organizing, creating consistency, and articulating how organizations talk about the impact of their work. The framework is based on existing literature primarily found in the community development, education, and community health fields. Organizations tend to be most successful when they build strong local capacity to secure funding to organize, implement, and sustain a range of community development strategies in local neighborhoods.



Knowledge Capacity

Knowledge capacity refers to a community's ability to generate, retain, and share information, histories, and expertise. In the context of arts-based initiatives, this includes documenting local histories, preserving cultural heritage, and developing new understandings of community identity. Knowledge capacity strengthens a community's self-awareness and equips members with the tools to engage in informed advocacy and decision-making.



Creative Capacity

Creative capacity encompasses the ability to imagine, design, produce, and maintain artistic and cultural expressions that reflect community identities, values, and aspirations. This dimension recognizes the arts as a resource for innovation, problem-solving, and envisioning alternative futures. A high level of creative capacity enables communities to respond adaptively to challenges and to articulate their narratives in compelling and resonant ways.



Relational Capacity

Relational capacity captures the strength and breadth of connections within and beyond the community. It includes building trust among residents, fostering collaborations among organizations, and forming partnerships with external stakeholders. Through arts activities, communities can create spaces where new relationships emerge, trust is built, and existing bonds deepen, enhancing overall social cohesion.

The framework proposes how community arts initiatives can lead to an organization's capacity-building outcomes. The framework identifies six dimensions of capacity-building—knowledge, creative, relational, political, affective, and economic capacity. This framework expands conventional understandings of capacity-building, which focus on organizational capacity or on methods an organization might create to run effectively or gain more resources. Centered on neighborhood outcomes, this set of capacities serve as the conceptual foundation for the survey design and analysis, allowing the researchers to assess the broader impacts of arts initiatives, particularly in relation to more expansive approaches to community capacity-building.

Together, these six capacities offer a multidimensional framework for understanding how arts initiatives contribute to community development. For example, a successful creative placemaking project might not only look at the dollars spent at local businesses (economic capacity) or if it spurred new neighborhood investments and infrastructure (economic and political capacity) but also how it might have built political advocacy (political capacity) from fostering shared values and culture, common narratives, and a sense of belonging (knowledge, relational, and affective capacity) that can motivate residents' long-term commitment to change. Collectively, they can provide a structure for measurement and analysis that captures both tangible and intangible outcomes, enabling organizations to build community capacity in distinct ways and generate a more comprehensive assessment of impact.

National CAPACD conducted an online survey on community arts initiatives by AA and PI-serving organizations. In preparation for the survey, the researchers conducted a literature review, developed criteria for assessing community capacity-building, and drafted survey questions. This allowed them to assess the perceived impacts of arts-based initiatives across multiple dimensions of community capacity.



Political Capacity

Political capacity refers to a community's ability to participate in, influence, and shape decision-making processes that affect its well-being. This includes mobilizing constituents, engaging in policy advocacy, and increasing visibility in public spaces. Arts-based initiatives often serve as platforms for community engagement and political expression, enabling communities to communicate their positions, assert their interests, and challenge systemic inequities.



Affective Capacity

Affective capacity relates to the emotional and psychological dimensions of community life. It encompasses shared feelings of belonging, pride, and hope for the future. Arts and cultural activities can inspire collective joy, heal from historical trauma, and foster resilience by reinforcing a positive sense of identity and possibility.



Economic Capacity

Economic capacity involves the resources, infrastructure, and financial stability necessary to sustain community initiatives. This includes direct economic benefits from arts-related activities—such as job creation or support for local business—as well as indirect effects such as attracting investment or enhancing a community's reputation. By integrating economic considerations into arts-based development, communities can ensure the long-term viability of their projects.

Survey Design and Analysis

The survey was designed for and distributed to individuals affiliated with an AA and PI-serving organization. Eligible respondents were staff or leaders from organizations that had engaged in at least one arts or cultural project in the previous three years. The survey was distributed to National CAPACD's Creative Placemaking program participants, all National CAPACD member organizations, and a national list of other AA and PI-serving organizations, with direct appeals to underrepresented geographies and groups. The survey was open from May 1, 2024 to August 14, 2024 and received 157 responses, 96 of which were fully completed.

Questions were carefully worded to consider impacts on clear, easily observable metrics without the need to understand or interpret the six capacities. The survey also provided an opportunity to elaborate on these impacts in an open-ended response, to add any additional metrics of community capacity the survey may have ignored, or to share anything else respondents wanted related to their arts initiatives.

The researchers conducted basic descriptive analysis of the survey results, followed by regression analysis (a statistical tool used to determine how one variable affects another), examining the relationship between the various survey responses and the ratings of impact. There were four key predictors of higher perceived impact: the number of initiatives started, receipt of public funding, initiative audience size, and affiliation with a community development corporation (CDC). Public funding and larger audiences were especially associated with organizations' reported gains in creative, affective, and economic capacities, while CDC affiliation strongly predicted future-oriented community visioning.

Overall, initiative characteristics—what organizations do and how they resource their initiatives—proved to be more consequential than organizational characteristics such as size or type. Notably, organizational budget was not a significant predictor of perceived impact. In contrast, there were associations to outcomes with audience size, the number of initiatives, and when an organization received public funding. These findings suggest that the design, reach, and resourcing of specific initiatives play a more critical role in shaping impact regardless of organization size, organizational form, or other factors that may be incorrectly assumed to hinder the pursuit of arts-based initiatives.

Respondents reported that arts-based initiatives had a significant impact across multiple forms of organizational and community capacity. Organizations most frequently reported affective and relational capacities — strengthening relationships, building trust, and fostering emotional connection — as areas of meaningful impact. These were followed by knowledge and creative capacities, where arts initiatives contributed to learning, skill-building, and imaginative problem-solving. Findings were more mixed for political and economic capacities; some organizations reported gains in advocacy, visibility, or resource generation, while others saw limited impacts in these domains.

These findings reinforce the value of using a multidimensional framework to show how the arts impact different dimensions of capacity. For practitioners, the findings suggest organizations can design more effective arts-based initiatives by focusing on specific capacity goals. If the goal is to increase political capacity, programs may need to incorporate explicit advocacy components and foster visibility in policy spaces. Conversely, if the aim is to build affective capacity, strategies that center collective storytelling, cultural pride, and shared emotional experiences may be more appropriate.

Case Studies

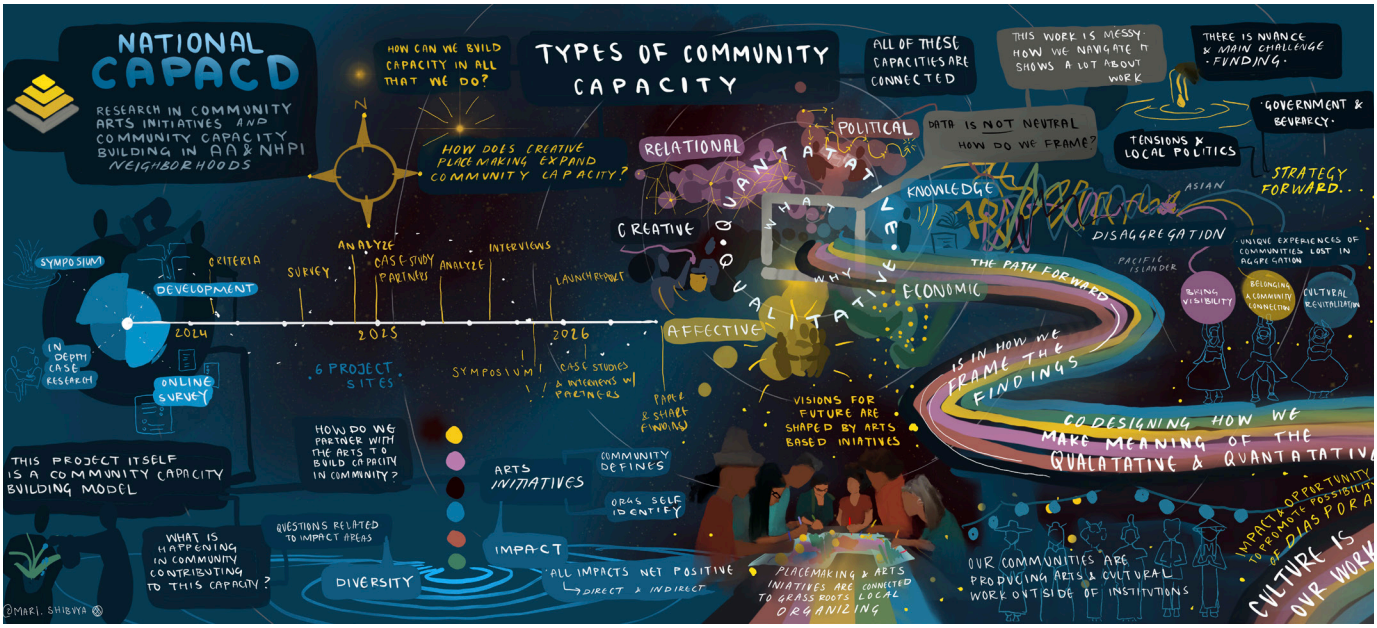


National CAPACD's Community Arts Symposium attendees learn about SCIDpda's work helping to design Hing Hay Park in Seattle.

Credit: Ronn Cunanan Meriales, Ronn's Photobooth

To better understand how organizations implement community arts initiatives and their impact in the community, National CAPACD invited six Asian American-serving place-based nonprofits to serve as case study research partners. Case study organizations were selected based on a track record of creative placekeeping efforts, readiness and capacity to conduct research, and representation of a range of organization type and focus, ethnic diversity, and geography. The partner organizations included Seattle Chinatown International Preservation and Development Authority (SCIDpda) and Friends of Little Sài Gòn in Seattle, WA; Think!Chinatown in New York, NY; Adhikaar for Human Rights and Social Justice in Jackson Heights, NY; United Cambodian Community (UCC) in Long Beach, CA; and Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC) in Los Angeles, CA.

These organizations conducted qualitative interviews between January and September 2025 in collaboration with the researchers. In total, 51 interviews were conducted with diverse community stakeholders, including former and current directors, artists, youth, business owners, organizers, urban planners, educators, musicians, archivists, storytellers, and residents. These interviews explored examples of community markets and festivals, parks and alleyway planning processes, and youth arts programs. Through the perspectives of artists, partners, staff, and participants, the interviews broadly revealed that community arts initiatives serve as spaces for building community power, strengthening local capacity, and fostering intergenerational connections, among other benefits.



Artist, muralist, and creative process designer Mari Shibuya captured the presentations and discussion at National CAPACD's Community Arts Symposium.

Credit: Mari Shibuya

For example, SCIDpda collaborated with researcher Jeff Hou, leveraging his expertise in landscape architecture and community engagement, to examine the impact of community capacity-building efforts related to the Nihonmachi Alley and two parks. These projects are tied to broader place-based community initiatives in the Chinatown International District. To look deeper into establishing and managing partnerships, SCIDpda and Friends of Little Sài Gòn explored their joint work on streetscape design improvements and the newly opened Hoa Mai Park (Lucky Flower Park) in Little Sài Gòn. Through efforts to create vibrant open spaces to meet the needs of residents, these organizations use knowledge capacity (knowing the history and experiences of residents) to build relational capacity (relationships with small businesses, other nonprofits, and city agencies), to then gain political and economic capacity (clout and resources for the neighborhood).

Think!Chinatown in New York City viewed its Chinatown Night Market not only as a commercial market but also as a community space for young and old alike, and as a way to advocate for the needs of neighborhood residents. The market built the creative capacity of artists, providing the support and platform that they rarely receive (lighting, sound, backdrop, publicity). The organization aimed to create an intentional and thoughtful creative showcase and connect artists across generations and mediums. The market allowed Think!Chinatown to reimagine its underused public space as a culturally relevant community space.

The night market also built their relational and political capacity to mobilize city agencies, elected officials, nonprofits, and social services ranging from assisting houseless neighbors who live on the plaza to aspiring vendors. The night market built its community's economic capacity by incubating businesses in an accessible pop-up model. The community capacities framework provided Think!Chinatown with a vocabulary to describe the impact of their work beyond the numbers of attendees and dollars generated in the neighborhood, instead, celebrating the sense of creativity, belonging, connectedness, and safety the space created.

During the research symposium held at the Wing Luke Museum in Seattle in November 2025, participants collectively contributed to community guidelines for analyzing and interpreting the interviews, centering pre-existing relationships and reciprocity throughout the process. Drawing on





Left photo: Attendees listen to research findings at National CAPACD's Community Arts Symposium.

Right photo: Friends of Little Saigon staff share about their public art, space activation, and development efforts in the neighborhood.

Credit: Ronn Cunanan Meriales, Ronn's Photobooth

feedback from partner organizations, the research team developed a rubric to guide interpretation of qualitative data, including the identification of key domains.

Some themes and findings emerged from the collective interviews. First, the interviews highlight a deep well of capacity within our communities, nurtured over decades and further strengthened through community arts initiatives, particularly those that bring together multiple generations of cultural artists. As Yin Kong, Executive Director of Think!Chinatown, reflected, "Those things that only happen here in Chinatown are a result of the layering and layering of generations of efforts to maintain and grow cultural practices. It's those things that cannot be manufactured, it's the layering that makes Chinatown so special."

Second, existing community assets and strengths are amplified through community arts initiatives, particularly those that bring together multiple generations of cultural artists. Little Tokyo Service Center co-produced the FandangObon Festival, bridging the communal dance forms of Japanese odori Obon dancers together with Mexican Spanish fandango, West African dance, and Sufi Hadra. As co-founder Quetzal Flores, shared, "The FandangObon practice [bringing the Japanese Obon dancers together with Spanish Flamenco dancers] itself has been a tremendous inspiration. It's been a lifeline. It's been a method of organizing for us. Every time you look at a FandangObon community, you see how they're connected to different things, whether it's a community land trust, or food justice work, or immigrant justice work." Arts programs can function as spaces for people to come together, build systems, and cultivate knowledge, relationships, political awareness, and economic opportunity.

Third, the relational and affective labor of staff and artists emerge as central yet under-recognized forms of community capacity, including trust-building, translation, and care work. As Don Pin, Program Manager at the United Cambodian Community, expressed, "Sometimes we try to get information out to local community members but they struggle with checking their emails, responding to our messages. You know, oftentimes we have to drive up to their business just to get their attention to kind of help them with what they need."

The qualitative interviews reveal the contradictions, challenges, and tensions that shape community arts initiatives, including limited financial support from the public sector and the power dynamics that structure this work. While these initiatives generate significant forms of community capacity, they are sustained under conditions of constraint. Interviewees consistently pointed to challenges such as burnout, limited and short-term funding, and the pressures of gentrification. These conditions place additional burdens on artists and organizers, who must navigate programmatic demands and the labor required to sustain wellbeing in the face of inequitable systems. Despite these challenges, nonprofits with diverse organizational missions pursue a range of arts-based initiatives that differ in scope, complexity, and scale, demonstrating the promise, value, and impact of implementing these programs in any setting.

Key Findings

Community Arts Practices

Since arts initiatives often amplify the community's cultural identities and experiences, they are deeply-rooted practices not only in arts organizations but in all types of non-profit organizations. Arts and culture organizations were the largest single category of survey respondents (35% of the sample). The survey also collected responses from organizations focused on direct services, community development, organizing, and policy or advocacy. Organizations with all sizes of annual operating budgets and access to resources offer arts programs.

Arts function not just as programming, but as a launchpad for sustaining a community's social, cultural, and economic fabric. Rather than discrete activities, arts initiatives operate as infrastructure, becoming the basis for social systems needed for a wide range of community engagement. They serve as platforms for gatherings that lead to social connection, economic development, cultural preservation, and political advocacy.

More long-term investments in ongoing community arts initiatives can influence community capacity. The number of initiatives implemented emerged as a statistically significant predictor of perceived impact. Most organizations in the survey implemented between two and five distinct arts-based initiatives, suggesting they invest in recurring programs rather than one-off experimentation. Traditional organizational indicators such as annual budget were not significantly associated with impact, reinforcing the finding that the approach to the arts—how they design, scale, and resource their arts initiatives over time—matters more than organizational budget size or form.

Community development organizations and their partners report impacts on future-oriented investment more than other organizations. Community development corporations (CDCs) or organizations partnering with a CDC were significantly associated with neighborhood impact, highlighting the distinctive role these organizations may play in shaping collective aspirations. CDCs have a practice of developing community visions and long-term plans and often have deep experience and relationships with local government. This recognizes the power of cross-sector partnerships between arts and non-arts organizations, such as CDCs and social service organizations and should encourage CDCs to consider art as essential to their community development work and to sustain it.

Cultural identity is actively created, challenged, and worked out through community arts initiatives. Participants described arts and cultural work as a means of defining, expressing, and reshaping collective identity. No community is a monolith, and this includes navigating intra-community differences (e.g., across ethnic groups, generations, class, and diasporas) and addressing tensions while building shared cultural narratives. Arts initiatives create space for discussions on continuity, difference, and transformation.

Community Capacities in Action

Community arts initiatives are uniquely equipped to build affective and relational capacity. Strengthening relationships, building trust, and fostering emotional connection were most frequently cited by organizations as the most meaningful impact. Knowledge and creative capacities, in which arts initiatives contributed to learning, skill-building, and imaginative problem-solving were also cited.

Political and economic impacts can be difficult to attribute to an arts activity, and the data needed to assess them is harder to gather. In contrast, organizations were less certain of the impact on political and economic capacities. While some organizations reported gains in advocacy,

visibility, or resource generation, others saw limited impact in these domains. Possible reasons include that some programs may not be designed to measure or specifically impact local economies or political participation, or that it might take a longer period of time to see those changes.

Intergenerational knowledge sustains community capacity. Across sites, participants emphasized that community knowledge is not newly created but built over generations. Cultural practices and place-based histories are continuously passed down and adapted. Arts initiatives are one of the few and often most fun spaces for intergenerational connection, sharing, and collaboration. Community arts initiatives play a critical role in bridging generational divides, creating spaces where elders, youth, and cultural workers can learn from each other and collectively shape the future.

Collaboration across organizations and communities expands impact. Partnerships are key to sustaining arts initiatives. Organizations don't need to be experts in everything but can partner with the people who do the work in communities and have these skills. Organizations frequently collaborate across sectors, neighborhoods, and cultural groups to share resources, expand reach, and build collective power. These networks also facilitate knowledge exchange and innovation.

Community arts initiatives function as sites of care and collective survival. Beyond their visible outputs, these initiatives provide emotional, social, and material



Kultivate Lab's UNDISCOVERED SF offers creative market activations to jump-start economic activity and public awareness of the Filipino cultural district, SOMA Pilipinas.

support. They create spaces of belonging, healing, and mutual aid, particularly in contexts shaped by displacement and marginalization. Community arts function as critical infrastructures of care that sustain communities over time.

Relational labor is central to community capacity building but undervalued. Trust-building, language translation, outreach, and sustained engagement are essential to the success of community arts initiatives. This labor is often time-intensive and under-recognized, yet it enables broader connection and participation, especially among immigrant, working-class, and non-English-speaking residents. Much of this work happens outside formal metrics of success. Funders should invest in general operating support and unrestricted funding to support this work, and organizations should invest in key people, retention, and succession planning to pass on these relationships and knowledge.

Investment Needs and Trends

Economic and spatial pressures are reshaping community participation. Rising rents, lack of affordable commercial space, and shifting neighborhood demographics are transforming how communities engage. Many participants noted a shift toward informal and flexible models, such as pop-ups, temporary activations, and shared spaces, as adaptive strategies in response to economic constraints.

Political, economic, and other structural conditions constrain community capacity. Despite their strengths, community arts initiatives operate within conditions of limited public investment, short-term funding cycles, and broader structural inequities. Gentrification and cultural erasure pose ongoing challenges, placing additional pressure on organizations and artists to sustain their work.

Community arts initiatives are not easy and require investments in staff time to achieve meaningful impact. Most programs



Informed by oral histories recorded from seniors and Chinatown residents, Think!Chinatown's "Everyday Chinatown: Objects and the Stories They Hold" exhibition highlighted seemingly mundane objects found in Chinatown homes that tie together collective identities and experiences. With artwork by Hui Ma, Xin Mei Liu, John Lee, Lilly Lam, and Nessa Nguyen bringing these everyday stories to life.

Credit: Chanel Matsunami Govreau @gidrastudios

were characterized by respondents as either "moderate" or "challenging" to execute, indicating that these efforts often require significant planning, coordination, and resource allocation. The median initiative engaged between 11 and 20 staff members and volunteers, reflecting that organizations are investing in at least a moderate operational footprint. Organizations reported a considerable range of program audience sizes, but the median attendance fell within the 251–500 range, suggesting that some initiatives are intentionally small, focused on specific groups, while others reach substantial audiences. The size of initiatives as measured by the number of attendees was especially associated with gains in creative, affective, and economic capacities.

Public funding correlates with all capacity domains but especially with the economic domain. Receiving public funding was one key factor consistently associated with greater overall perceived impact across multiple domains. Public funding was especially associated with economic capacities, as well as creative and affective capacities. This could be because organizations that built resources to acquire public funds may be better at articulating their intended aims, and the receipt of that funding may indicate that the government sector recognizes their work and impact. Currently, organizations are facing massive cuts and restrictions on federal funding and urgently need city, county, state, and private funders to prioritize this work and fill the gap.



SCIDpda, with the CID Small Business Relief team, created a multilingual comic in Cantonese, Mandarin, and Vietnamese to help local businesses understand fire safety and protocols.

Credit: David Lasky

Conclusion

This research illustrates the ways AA and PI-serving organizations center culture as an effective strategy to influence community capacity in multiple ways. With six distinct and interconnected capacity domains, this framework offers a more nuanced understanding of how programs and initiatives create impacts in neighborhoods. Community arts contribute to all sorts of outcomes, from creating learning opportunities and developing skills in the community, to facilitating new partnerships, linkages, and networks, to fostering a greater sense of shared purpose or stronger community identity. It is hoped that the framework will help organizations name the impacts of arts and cultural programs that are often difficult to quantify—such as fostering belonging, strengthening social connections, and reclaiming and sustaining cultural identity.

The framework is intended to serve as a useful lens to demonstrate how programs can be designed to address multiple goals and build interconnected capacities. For example, by exploring ancestors' stories, cultural practices and histories, communities can tap knowledge capacity. By honoring and remembering these experiences, communities can be inspired to generate new, living traditions expressing creative capacity. Artists can foster affective capacity by creating a place to explore shared identity. Organizations' physical spaces can build relational capacity, becoming cultural homes and the glue that keeps a community together.

In a climate where arts and culture are under attack, the primary impact of funding cuts is structural destabilization. When key organizations no longer exist and people are denied the opportunity to gather and create together, communities are threatened and under attack. In the face of adversity, programs can also inspire acts of political capacity-building, such as supporting vulnerable communities and advocating for resources at every level of government. Community-driven efforts toward self-determination can address the needs of those most affected by injustice while improving conditions for society as a whole. Community arts programs can be the catalyst for these changes, even in the small moments that invite people to find hope in shared stories of struggle, continuity, and resilience.



Oakland Bloom and Sticky Rice Club's Oakland Chinatown Lantern Festival supports local small businesses and emerging immigrant and BIPOC makers and chefs and reclaims an atmosphere of joy, safety and celebration.



K-pop and hip-hop dance competitions are part of AEDA's Little Mekong Night Market that brings hundreds of thousands to experience food, performances, cultural activities, and unique shops and vendors.

Credit: Thai Phan-Quang

These capacities help articulate broad impact and the importance of sustained efforts of creative community development practices within AA and PI communities, as well as communities across the country. Artists, culture bearers, and organizations should recognize that their community arts initiatives have a special power to build shared experiences, creativity, knowledge, and connection that can strengthen a neighborhood. And thus, these efforts and organizations should be acknowledged and funded for their invaluable ways of building flourishing, thriving, and equitable communities across the country.

Funding

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As part of the 2025 Chinatown Arts Festival, Think!Chinatown presented Puppets on Pell, a lively afternoon performance of hand and shadow puppetry by Chinese Theatre Works performed outdoors on Pell Street.

Credit: Wei-Ta Chen

Affective Capacity

Affective capacity refers to an organization's ability to cultivate emotional, cultural, and relational conditions that foster belonging, identity, connection, and agency—both internally among staff and externally with the communities it serves. It can look like people building trust over time, growing through consistency, authenticity, vulnerability, dependability, and commitment. Organizations can carefully create spaces to gather, bear witness from respective traditions, listen more openly, and care more deeply. If spaces are not designed carefully, times of crisis and chaos can surface tensions over the complexities of power, gender, race, class, immigration status, language ability, and religion. Through purposeful effort, people can learn to show up for each other with greater intention and re-establish collective places and their presence in the world.

In the context of organizational development, affective capacity can involve building the emotional and cultural infrastructure necessary to:

- Create inclusive, affirming environments where all individuals feel seen, valued, and respected (sense of belonging);
- Strengthen connections to place and cultural identity by embedding local histories, traditions, and community values into organizational practices (cultural and place attachment); and
- Shift power through storytelling by amplifying the voices and lived experiences of staff and communities, especially those historically marginalized (narrative power).

Affective capacity is critical for advancing equity, trust, and resilience within communities. It moves beyond technical competencies to focus on how people feel, relate, and find meaning—ultimately shaping how well an organization can serve, partner with, and be accountable to diverse communities.

How Think!Chinatown Builds Affective Capacity

Think!Chinatown is a creative placekeeping non-profit that creates intergenerational spaces of art, joy, belonging and connection in Manhattan's Chinatown. At the intersection of arts, storytelling, and neighborhood engagement, T!C works to grow community agency in their neighborhood's built environment, as well as the narrative of their own stories.

"We at Think!Chinatown feel that our community arts initiatives most contribute to a greater sense of community or stronger community identity. Our Lunar New Year festivities, Chinatown!Lit (literature event series), Chinatown Storytelling Festival, Chinatown Block Party, Chinatown Night Market, and Chinatown Arts Festival, are culturally relevant activations for our community to celebrate our cultural heritage, learn traditional crafts intergenerationally, weave our community history, and continue to create a place of belonging. Our target audience is local residents, Chinese Americans, Asian Americans and folks who share an affinity for Chinatown, Chinese culture, and Chinese diaspora culture. These are also the majority of the audience that we end up attracting to our events. These groups find a sense of groundedness to their identity in Chinatown, and through our events, they have an occasion to gather to experience and learn about this heritage together. Whether it's a local elder attending our Night Market for an after dinner stroll or a fourth generation Chinese American vibing to a song that sounds eerily familiar to them at our Block Party, we create a space where they belong and we bring our community a little closer."

For Think!Chinatown, their hallmark and biggest events give them the opportunity to engage elder community members on their own terms—which builds the trust necessary for true intergenerational learning and solidarity building. During Chinatown Block Parties, all attendees bond over music that elders love. The Chinatown Night Market benefits local Chinatown business owners and enlivens the cultural lives of Chinatown residents. The Storytelling Festival captures and shares the personal stories of elders who would not normally want to engage. Through all of this work, Think!Chinatown creates more understanding among the different facets in the neighborhood while maintaining an ecosystem that is culturally rich and vibrant for immigrants and the next generation of Asian Americans who call Chinatown their cultural home.

And for many non-English speaking residents, affective capacity goes beyond cultural relevance and representation. As immigrants, every aspect of their life away from their homeland and trying to navigate, learn, understand how things are done. Think!Chinatown aims to create a platform where immigrants' culture is centered and they are the subject experts. They "receive their flowers" and see the collective joy, curiosity, and interest from the English-speaking community. In these moments, residents are able to feel that their voices matter, feel activated, and have agency. Think!Chinatown is then able to engage non-English speaking community members into conversations about the community's future.

For example, for years Think!Chinatown visited seniors at Hamilton Madison House senior center to record English, Mandarin, Cantonese stories around everyday objects in Chinatown. These stories were compiled to make a multi-media exhibit called Everyday Chinatown: Objects and the Stories They Hold. Seniors were invited to the studio to see the exhibit and were delighted to re-hear their stories, re-see them interpreted into animation, graphic prints, and interactive stations. After seeing the exhibit and sharing more knowledge and stories around the everyday objects, they were very forthcoming when engaged in a small group workshop to talk about community gathering spaces, neighborhood preservation, and placekeeping in Chinatown. Some seniors had well formed opinions on the matter, but many also noted that they did not know how to plan for the community's future because they had never been engaged in neighborhood planning and asked to envision their community's future. These programs build affective capacity that then enables political capacity to be built. By engaging with the non-English speaking community members about their cultural practices and holding space for them to teach others, Think!Chinatown laid the groundwork for neighbors to feel more ownership and agency towards their community and eventually to feel more civically invested.



Takachizu, from the Japanese words takara (treasure) + chizu (map), is Little Tokyo's community archive that identifies and reflects on that which is most valuable, celebrated, and in need of protection in the neighborhood.

Credit: Rudy Espinoza



Creative Capacity

Creative capacity is an organization's ability to embed arts, culture, and creativity into its programs, operations, and strategies to drive community connection, economic opportunity, and systems change. It might be letting those culture bearers with the longest relationship to the land lead the way in how to think, behave, and create, in harmony. It is recognizing that art and body, mind, and spirit practice carry real healing power. A gathering of visual art, dance, music, and storytelling can explore how memory and experiences can be transformed into expression, connection, and meaning. It is recognizing the powerful ways food, traditions, and memory keep people connected to home. When people can assert their own identities, they can create, nurture life, and claim space on their own terms. Creative practice rooted in identity, memory, and freedom can be transformed into embodied expressions through movement or spoken word.

Creative capacity may include:

- Using creative expression to engage communities and support healing, organizing, and storytelling (arts integration);
- Investing in artists and cultural workers as key contributors to local economies (creative economic development); and
- Aligning organizational strategies with the cultural values and lived experiences of the communities served (cultural strategy alignment).

Building creative capacity means viewing art and culture as critical infrastructure—not just tools for beautification, but forces for social cohesion, narrative power, economic equity, and systems change. Community audience insights—harnessed by artists, culture bearers, and organizations—can help ensure these efforts are centered on residents' lived experience and honors local cultural knowledge and practices.



Artist Audrey Chan depicts Little Tokyo, the Arts District, Skid Row, and the former Bronzeville area residents in her public art commission "Will Power Allegory" displayed at the Little Tokyo/Arts District Station.

Credit: Audrey Chan

How Little Tokyo Service Center Builds Creative Capacity

Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC) provides a comprehensive array of social welfare and community development services to assist low-income individuals and other persons in need, also providing resources to neighboring Asian Pacific Islander and other low-income communities. Based in Los Angeles Little Tokyo, LTSC contributes to community revitalization and cultural preservation in the historic neighborhood and among the broader Japanese American community in Southern California. LTSC joins with Little Tokyo residents, businesses, activists, and other nonprofits that have been fighting to ensure the neighborhood's unique cultural and artistic strengths are preserved under community control. They view this effort as critical not only to honor the community's physical qualities, but to highlight its character, people, and multicultural history as a way of combating displacement and shifting neighborhood dynamics.

Designed to help local residents and small businesses leverage the arts to address displacement pressures, LTSC's +LAB Artists in Residence (+LAB AIR) program was one approach to preserve community assets under community control. In 2013, Little Tokyo advocates learned of several publicly owned plots of land slated for redevelopment that could threaten the neighborhood's character. The city's Metro also unveiled plans to remake the adjacent Little Tokyo stop into Los Angeles' second-busiest transit hub. This, along with changes to the historic First Street North block, raised major concerns about the disruption of local small businesses and the destruction of historic neighborhood assets, prompting advocates to organize for community control over the block.



UCC's Khmer Town Night Market provides a safe space for residents to connect with one another and enjoy food from local businesses.

Economic Capacity

Economic capacity is an organization's ability to mobilize, grow, and sustain financial and material resources in ways that advance equity, build community wealth, and support long-term impact. For community-focused organizations, economic capacity means not only securing funding but also doing so in ways that center shared ownership, economic justice, and sustainability.

These might include practices of stewardship, accountability, and financial leadership in non-traditional ways. These efforts might provide food, create jobs, build family wealth, and support new enterprises in ways that are distributive, circular, and rooted in care rather than consumption.

Economic capacity may include:

- Generating diverse, equitable funding and partnership streams that reflect community priorities and values (resource mobilization);
- Building and stewarding assets, such as land, capital, data, or infrastructure in ways that increase community control and benefit (asset expansion); and
- Designing long-term strategies that align finances with mission, center community voices, and ensure resilience across leadership, economic, and political changes (sustainability planning).

In short, economic capacity is about creating economic power with, not just resources for, the communities served.

How United Cambodian Community (UCC) Builds Economic Capacity

United Cambodian Community (UCC) provides culturally competent social services to the Cambodian community in Long Beach, CA. Located in Cambodia Town which has the largest Cambodian population in the United States, UCC's various business programs have built economic capacity by bringing visibility, attracting local visitors

who spend money in the neighborhood, and gaining the backing of the city, sponsors, and other funders. Their efforts include large-scale promotional activities such as Living Arts Long Beach and Cambodian Restaurant Week, as well as cultural holidays such as Sankranta with the Cambodian New Year Parade and Festival. Planned in partnership with other entities, UCC positioned itself as a leader taking on roles to foster networks, build relationships, organize youth groups, and raise funds through community grants.

Once rotating between different locations in neighborhood parks and plazas, the Khmer Town Night Market is now housed in a local bank's parking lot. The night market has been a safe space for families and community members to walk through Cambodia Town in the evening to celebrate, enjoy food, and connect with one another. The market draws in additional evening visitors to Long Beach Cambodia Town as many neighborhood businesses close at 6 pm, bringing in foot traffic for those that remain open. UCC fosters community placemaking by supporting existing small businesses as vendors and through marketing the market, as well as cultivating small entrepreneurial businesses as an incubator. UCC helps these new businesses build their social media presence, test their product with new customers, and decide whether to scale their business by opening a bricks-and- mortar location.

One business that UCC's business navigators have helped is Battambong BBQ, where Cambodian refugee Chad Phoung combines the flavors of traditional Cambodian cuisines with Southern-style Texas BBQ. Once a surgery center employee, business owner Phoung was a participant of UCC's SEED program and obtained capital assistance to purchase a new food trailer. His unique smoked meat is available at three pop-up locations, Kim Sun Kitchen, Ten Mile Brewing, and Khmer Town Night Market, and for private-event catering. Battambong BBQ has a nationwide following, with lines forming during setup and often selling out. Phoung's experience has made him a strong advocate for the Cambodian community and a big supporter of other small businesses and entrepreneurs in the City of Long Beach.

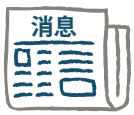


UCC helps new businesses at the Khmer Town Night Market build their social media presence, test their products, and decide whether to open a physical location.





SCIDpda led community design workshops to envision new improvements to Maynard Alley, located in Seattle on the south side of Jackson Street between Maynard Avenue and 7th Avenue, and Nihonmachi Alley, located on the north side of Jackson Street between 6th and Maynard Avenues



Knowledge Capacity

Knowledge capacity is an organization's ability to generate, share, and apply knowledge in ways that build collective understanding, leadership, and power—especially in partnership with the communities it serves. For community-focused organizations, knowledge capacity goes beyond formal education or expertise. It includes the ability to recognize lived experience as knowledge, create inclusive learning environments, and develop leadership grounded in cultural and community wisdom. Using specific spatial, textural, and cultural cues, organizers can affirm residents' memory and legacies. When residents see their stories reflected back, they may be more comfortable and more likely to participate in activities and leadership opportunities.

Knowledge capacity may include:

- Offering accessible, culturally responsive education and training that supports both staff and community learning (learning opportunities);
- Valuing and elevating knowledge generated by residents through storytelling, research, organizing, and lived experience (community knowledge production); and Creating pathways for community members—especially those from marginalized groups—to grow as leaders, decision-makers, and change agents (leadership development).

In short, knowledge capacity helps organizations shift from being providers of information to being facilitators of shared learning, reflection, and leadership.

How Seattle Chinatown International District Preservation and Development Authority (SCIDpda) Builds Knowledge Capacity

SCIDpda's mission is to preserve, promote, and develop the Seattle Chinatown International District as a vibrant community and unique ethnic neighborhood. For SCIDpda's community projects, it was clear that they should draw on local neighborhood knowledge, as community members were the real leaders and driving force behind the projects. On one project, the redevelopment of Donnie Chin International Children's Park, SCIDpda joined the project after it had already been started by community members who needed guidance on how to move it forward. On another project, Nihonmachi Alley, revitalization efforts were already ongoing before SCIDpda joined. Both serve

as examples of placekeeping where the community sought to maintain the space as an amenity and develop it for current and future residents to enjoy.

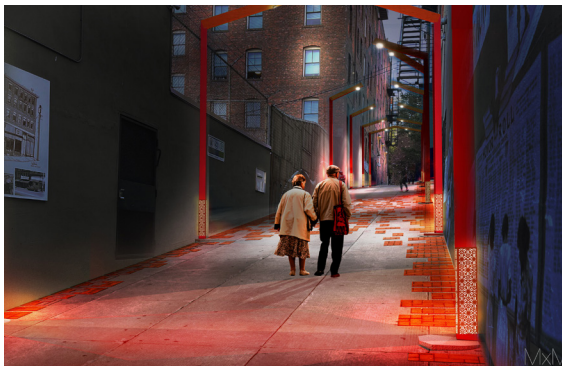
At their heart, these projects are community spaces that serve the multigenerational community of the Chinatown International District (CID). These projects leaned heavily on community support, as well as the collective knowledge and history of the CID. Community advisory boards were formed for each project to ensure that the visions of different parts of the community were always represented. The projects and their development processes affirm that these spaces are built by and for the community. Both spaces serve as sorely needed third spaces for the urban neighborhood and CID community.

Nihonmachi Alley is located in the center of Seattle's Japantown and serves as a community hub, multimodal thoroughfare, and utilitarian amenity for waste management. The alley features art installations in multiple mediums that represent the history of the community and neighborhood. This includes a wheat paste mural featuring imagery from Japanese incarceration by local artist Erin Shigaki, interpretive signage that shows historic landmark businesses in Japantown featuring art by the late Amy Nikitani, an artistic sculpture gate illustrating the population numbers of Japanese Americans in Seattle starting when the first Japanese immigrants arrived in 1896, and throughout years since. The Nihonmachi Alley Concept Plan proposes to add to these art installations to further reinforce the identity and sense of place in the alley. The plan also considers the current and future use of the alley as a thoroughfare and encourages repaving it as the first step toward greater accessibility and safety in the alley.

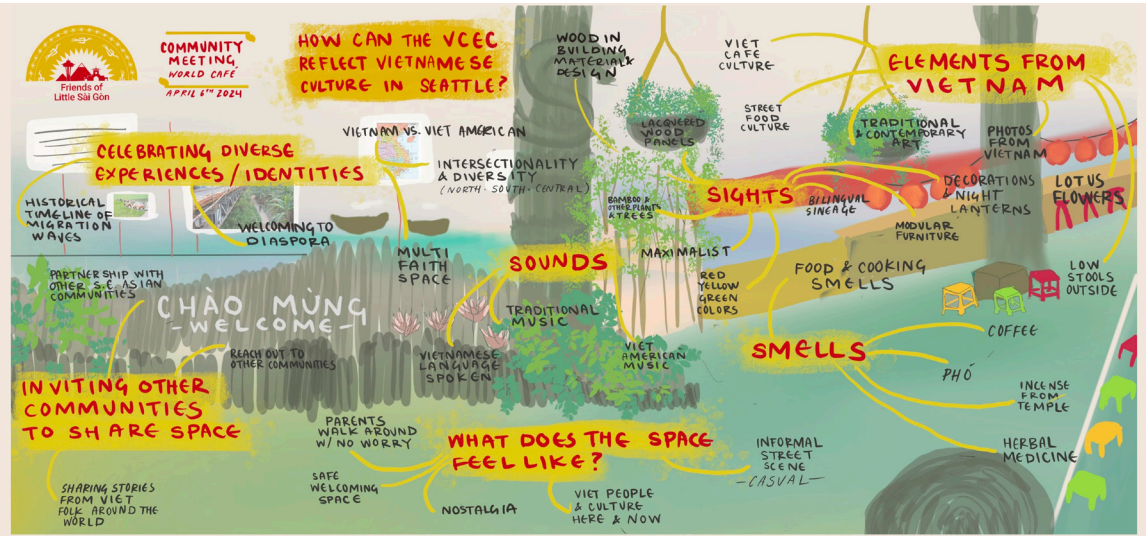
The Donnie Chin International Children's Park is one of four public parks in the CID. It is, at its core, a space for the neighborhood children, and the park was redesigned and eventually renovated in 2012 to "bring children back to the Children's Park." The redesign of the park was created to serve the multigenerational families in the CID, maintaining a single level that allows users to access all parts of the park regardless of mobility. The park has featured a bronze dragon sculpture by Gerry Tsutakawa since its original opening in 1981, earning it the nickname "Dragon Park." The park redesign added new bronze sculptures by local artist Stuart Nakamura, created to resemble toys from the Asian diaspora, reflecting the diverse community of the CID. SCIDpda regularly activates the park to bring the community together for Lunar New Year and the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival.

Another aspect of the knowledge capacity built through these projects is their connection to relational and political capacity as key relationships and community power were built through them. One of the biggest outcomes of these projects was the connections made, and staff still connect with city departments and community partners. For the Children's Park, SCIDpda built a relationship and rapport with the city agency, Seattle Parks, which facilitated collaboration on future park placemaking work. For Nihonmachi Alley, SCIDpda built relationships with the Seattle Department of Transportation and Seattle Public Utilities, and it still relies on those contacts to move the project forward. On both projects, SCIDpda received buy-in and investment from community partners, businesses, and residents, ensuring that community voices were heard and represented in the final designs. These projects also served as a professional development tool for many SCIDpda staff and project partners. By allowing these staff members to lead alongside the community, these projects brought the next generation of community leaders into the fold who continue to support and shape the neighborhood.





These renderings are part of the Nihonmachi Ally Concept Plan that considers the current and future use, which would provide the alley with greater accessibility and safety.



FLS conducted public engagement workshops to learn how their new Landmark Project building can reflect Vietnamese culture in Seattle.

Credit: Mari Shibuya



Relational Capacity

Relational capacity is an organization's ability to build and sustain meaningful, trust-based relationships across individuals, groups, and sectors to strengthen collective action and community resilience. For community-focused organizations, relational capacity means creating inclusive, reciprocal, and equitable connections—not only with partners, but across lines of identity, geography, and lived experience.

Relationships rooted in dignity helps counter the forces that seek to divide communities and help them thrive together, choosing curiosity over control, compassion over fear, and collaboration over isolation. In-person and virtual meetings, trainings and convenings, and peer relationships can seed and blossom into meaningful partnerships.

Relational capacity may include:

- Forming strategic, transparent, and mutually beneficial partnerships that center community needs and values (partnership and collaboration);
- Creating and nurturing cross-sector, cross-community networks that connect people, organizations, and ideas for shared impact (network building); and
- Facilitating dialogue, trust, and collaboration across lines of difference (e.g., race, culture, age, language), and embedding equity in all relationship-building efforts (intergroup engagement).

In short, relational capacity is about moving from transactional interactions to transformational relationships—grounded in trust, shared purpose, and community leadership.

How Friends of Little Sài Gòn (FLS) Builds Relational Capacity

"Working here has taught me a lot about the history of this neighborhood [...] It also taught me about advocacy, how to advocate for your neighborhood, the people, and what you care about."
—Ahn Nguyen, Arts & Culture Program Manager, Friends of Little Sài Gòn

Friends of Little Sài Gòn's mission is to preserve and enhance Seattle's Little Sài Gòn's cultural, economic, and historic vitality. FLS's efforts to create crosswalks and to host the Celebrate Little Sài Gòn demonstrates how the community has built relational capacity.

12th Ave and Jackson Street is known as the heart of Little Sài Gòn, where businesses first started to gather and establish themselves in the late 1970s. This intersection serves as the main arterial for traveling to, from, and between major downtown neighborhoods in Seattle. Designed by Duy Vo and inspired by the Hoàn Kiếm Legend, the crosswalks features flowing turtles and lotus flowers. The design and location of the crosswalks are a visible reminder of being in Little Saigon and signal to drivers and pedestrians alike to slow down and take in the scenery.

Former Executive Director Quynh Pham said,

"[Doing the crosswalks] was part of our effort to create a stronger identity for the neighborhood. It was our effort to increase the arts and culture in the neighborhood. [...] this was a visual representation of the Vietnamese identity in the neighborhood."

Painted crosswalks are also installed at the 12th & Jackson Streetcar stop. Designed by artist Minh Carrico, the artwork draws inspiration from the Vietnamese folktale of Âu Cơ and Lạc Long Quân, the fairy and dragon ancestors of Vietnam, symbolizing unity and lineage. Quynh Pham also talks about skills they developed while working with city partners, such as the Seattle Department of Transportation, on these projects. "I think the scale of the project too, as we get more experience in this, [...] we're being asked to do more challenging projects, or major projects that require additional expertise that we probably wouldn't have developed."

Celebrate Little Sài Gòn is an annual block party in Seattle's Historic Little Sài Gòn hosted by Friends of Little Sài Gòn. This all-ages free street festival celebrates Vietnamese cuisine and culture by highlighting local businesses and bringing together Vietnamese artists and performers. Visitors enjoy live music, games, raffles and prizes, and an eating competition for kids and adults.

One artist participant shares,

"I have no idea how much that opportunity would have changed my life, or the trajectory of my small art business [...] when I met with other community members, or when I met up with friends. [...] it kind of allowed for me to bridge connections with other creatives. ...You're bringing all these people together. Not only are you giving them an opportunity to support our small local vendors but inviting them to get involved and stay involved every year."

Hearing how artists have benefited from FLS's work demonstrated the true impact of the organization. One artist who helped design the branding for Celebrate Little Sài Gòn spoke of how working with FLS has allowed her to connect with her heritage and transformed her art to reflect her cultural identity. Reflecting with other staff members who worked on the projects demonstrated how much growth FLS has experienced, as an organization, as well as growth in personal capacity, experiences, and relationships with artists and city agencies.



Adhikaar organizes Nepali-speaking immigrants so that they can have a voice in determining policies that affect them.



Political Capacity

Political capacity is an organization's ability to build, support, and activate community power to shape decisions, influence policy, and participate meaningfully in civic life. For community-based organizations, political capacity means equipping staff and residents—especially those historically excluded from power—with the tools, access, and confidence to engage in democratic processes and accountable governance to shape systems that impact their lives.

Political capacity may include:

- Creating accessible, ongoing opportunities for communities to learn about, participate in, and influence civic processes (civic engagement);
- Sharing power internally and externally by supporting community members to lead within organizations and public systems (leadership in decision-making); and
- Organizing and advocating to advance policy changes driven by community priorities and grounded in lived experience (policy influence).

In short, political capacity is about moving from participation to power—ensuring that communities are not only heard, but are actively shaping the decisions that affect them.

How Adhikaar for Human Rights and Social Justice Builds Political Capacity

Based in Jackson Heights, New York, Adhikaar for Human Rights and Social Justice is a women-led community and workers' center that provides direct services to the Nepali-speaking community and organizes low-income workers and impacted community members to promote social justice and human rights. Adhikaar's programs provide Nepali-speaking immigrants with limited English proficiency opportunities to access information, connect with one another, build skills, and advocate for themselves. One program is the English language program that provides more than just language skills. These classes offer a path to confidence, independence, and better opportunities. Members are able to navigate daily life, access services, and pursue jobs more effectively, thereby enhancing their overall sense of belonging and self-reliance.

Another example is Adhikaar's workforce training programs, including those for nail salon workers and domestic workers. These programs not only equip individuals with practical job skills but also foster awareness of workers' rights and safe labor practices, contributing to long-term economic empowerment. Many of its members then also take on leadership roles in advocacy campaigns—demonstrating clear leadership development and community mobilization.

Additionally, Adhikaar plays a vital role in supporting youth who often feel culturally isolated in schools and other public spaces. By connecting young people with others who share their language and cultural background, Adhikaar fosters emotional well-being, identity development, and leadership potential. These programs demonstrate its investment in building the skills, confidence, and social connections that allow community members to thrive. A key factor that enhanced the success of all these initiatives is its culturally rooted, linguistically accessible approach.

By offering services in Nepali and creating a safe, welcoming environment, Adhikaar is able to remove significant barriers to participation and learning, particularly for those with limited English proficiency. For many members, Adhikaar feels like a second home, a place where they can trust others, learn, grow, and feel a sense of belonging. Its holistic and intergenerational model ensures that support is not limited to one demographic. Adults, workers, and youth alike find relevant programs that speak to their specific needs, which helps build capacity not only at the individual level but also across families and communities. Adhikaar programs are also focused on real-life needs, whether it's learning English, getting job training, or building community, each program helps members improve their everyday lives.

Appendix - Survey respondents

- 1871 Committee, Los Angeles, CA
- 1882 Foundation, Washington, DC
- AAPI Victory Fund, Washington, DC
- APANO, Portland, OR
- Arkansas Coalition of Marshallese, Springdale, AR
- ArtsFund, Seattle, WA
- Asakura Robinson Company, Austin, TX
- Asia Pacific Cultural Center (APCC), Tacoma, WA
- Asian American Center of Frederick, Frederick, MD
- Asian American Futures
- Asian Americans Advancing Justice | Chicago, Chicago, IL
- Asian Americans United (AAU), Philadelphia, PA
- Asian Arts Initiative (AAI), Philadelphia, PA
- Asian Chamber of Commerce Colorado, Denver, CO
- Asian Community Development Corporation (ACDC), Boston, MA
- Asian Culture and Media Alliance (ACMA), San Diego, CA
- Asian Economic Development Association (AEDA), St. Paul, MN
- Asian Girls Ignite (AGI), Denver, CO
- Asian Health Services (AHS), Oakland, CA
- Asian Pacific Islander Coalition of Yakima Valley, Yakima, WA
- Asian Services In Action (ASIA), Akron, OH
- AYPAL: Building API Community Power, Oakland, CA
- BCNC (Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center)/Pao Arts Center, Boston, MA
- Cal State LA, Los Angeles, CA
- Cambodia Town Inc., Long Beach, CA
- Cambodian-American Community of Oregon, Beaverton, OR
- CAPI, Brooklyn Center, MN
- Center for Asian American Media (CAAM), San Francisco, CA
- Center for Hmong Studies at Concordia University, Irvine, CA
- Center for Pan Asian Community Services (CPACS), Atlanta, GA
- Chinatown Art Brigade, New York, NY
- Chinatown Community Development Center (CCDC), San Francisco, CA
- Chinatown Media and Arts Collaborative (CMAC)/Edge on the Square, San Francisco, CA
- Chinese American Citizens Alliance (CACA), San Francisco, CA
- Chinese American Citizens Alliance (CACA) Portland, Portland, OR
- Chinese American Service League (CASL), Chicago, IL
- Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco (CCC), San Francisco, CA
- Chinese Historical Society of America (CHSA), San Francisco, CA
- Coalition for a Better Chinese American Community (CBCAC), Chicago, IL
- Colorado Asian Pacific United (CAPU), Denver, CO
- Culturingua, San Antonio, TX
- East San Gabriel Valley Japanese Community Center, West Covina, CA
- East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation (EBALDC), Oakland, CA
- Empowering Pacific Islander Communities (EPIC), Los Angeles, CA
- Filipino Bayanihan Center, Portland, CA
- Friends of Little Sài Gòn (FLS), Seattle, WA
- Friends of the Rail Park, Philadelphia, PA
- Good Medicine Picture Company, San Francisco, CA
- HAIBAYO Cares dba Argyle Street Collective, Chicago, IL
- HANA Center, Chicago, IL
- Hawai'i Alliance for Community-Based Economic Development (HACBED), Honolulu, HI
- Hawaiian Community Assets (HCA), Honolulu, HI
- Hawaiian Council, Honolulu, HI
- Hawaiian Lending & Investments (HLI), Honolulu, HI
- HIHumanities, Honolulu, HI
- Hmong Innovating Politics, Sacramento, CA
- Homestead Community Development Corporation, Honolulu, HI

- Hui Hawai'i o Tenesi Hawaiian Civic Club, Clarksville, TN
- Indigenous Roots Cultural Arts Center, St. Paul, MN
- Japan Center Malls, Los Angeles, CA
- Japanese American National Museum (JANM), Los Angeles, CA
- Karen Society of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE
- Khmer Girls in Action (KGA), Long Beach, CA
- Kizuna Little Tokyo, Los Angeles, CA
- KOHO, San Francisco, CA
- Kokua Kalihi Valley CFS (KKV), Honolulu, HI
- Korean Community Services of Metropolitan New York, Inc. (KCS), Queens, NY
- Korean Resource Center (KRC), Los Angeles, CA
- Kultivate Labs, San Francisco, CA
- Kundiman, New York, NY
- Lenora Lee Dance, San Francisco, CA
- Little Manila Rising, Stockton, CA
- Little Tokyo Historical Society (LTHS), Los Angeles, CA
- Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC), Los Angeles, CA
- Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC)
- MARU, San Leandro, CA
- Micronesian Islander Community (MIC), Salem, OR
- MidTown Cleveland, Inc. (MTC, Inc.), Cleveland, OH
- Mixed Asian Media, New York, NY
- National Asian Pacific American Families Against Substance Abuse (NAPAFASA), Los Angeles, CA
- NeighborWorks America
- New Mexico Asian Family Center (NMAFC)
- Nisei Week Foundation, Los Angeles, CA
- Nothing Without a Company, Chicago, IL
- Oakland Asian Cultural Center (OACC), Oakland, CA
- Oakland Chinatown Improvement Council (OCIC), Oakland, CA
- Pacific Gateway Center (PGG), Honolulu, HI
- Pacific Island Ethnic Art Museum (PIEAM), Long Beach, CA
- Pacific Island Knowledge 2 Action Resources (PIK2AR), Salt Lake City, UT
- Pacific Islander Health Partnership (PIHP), Honolulu, HI
- Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation (PCDC), Philadelphia, PA
- Pilele Projects, Los Angeles, CA
- Pu'uhonua Society, Honolulu, HI
- Ragamala Dance Company, Minneapolis, MN
- Raksha, Inc, Atlanta, GA
- Renaissance Economic Development Corporation (REDC), New York, NY
- Riyaaz Qawwali, Friendswood, TX
- South Asian Folk Arts Council, Pearlyn, TX
- SEAMAAC, Philadelphia, PA
- Seattle Chinatown International District Preservation and Development Authority (SCIDpda), Seattle, WA
- Silk Road Cultural Center, Chicago, IL
- SoCal Pacific Islander Community Response Team (SoCal PICRT), Carson, CA
- Song Community Development Corporation (Song CDC), New Orleans, LA
- South Asian Network (SAN), Artesia, CA
- Southeast Asian Freedom Network (SEAFN), Bronx, NY
- TeAda Productions, Santa Monica, CA
- The Asian Community Fund at the Boston Foundation, Boston, MA
- The W.O.W. Project, New York, NY
- The Young S.A.M.O.A., San Bernardino, CA
- Theater Mu, Minneapolis, MN
- Theatre Diaspora, Portland, OR
- United Cambodian Community (UCC), Long Beach, CA
- Utah Pacific Islander Civic Engagement Coalition (UPICEC), Salt Lake, City, UT
- Wing Luke Museum, Seattle, WA
- Xilin Association, Chicago, IL



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