



Belonging in Oakland: a cultural development plan *[draft]* executive summary

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with contributions from
Communities in Collaboration
and Alex Werth*

Heartfelt thanks go to the many community members and leadership and colleagues of the City and from the field who committed time, intelligence, and passion to this endeavor to advance the cause of cultural equity in Oakland and, hopefully, beyond.

Generous support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts made this cultural development planning process and plan possible

Photo Credit: Alice St. Mural, Community Rejuvenation Project, photo by Vanessa Whang

PREFACE FROM THE CULTURAL AFFAIRS MANAGER

In the spring of 2017, the Cultural Affairs Division embarked on the development of a cultural plan for the city. It has been a journey of celebration and reflection as we identified our assets and shortfalls. It has been an undertaking that has been both telescopic and microscopic in its process: we hosted community meetings; met with civic leaders; conducted research into the economic and social impact of the arts; surveyed the public, and met with our grantees. We listened, looked, and learned about the many ways Oaklanders express themselves.

The “we” I am referring to, in addition to Cultural Affairs’ staff, is Vanessa Whang, the lead consultant and researcher for the Cultural Plan; Susana Morales and Heather Imboden of Communities in Collaboration who facilitated the community meetings for the planning process; and Alex Werth, the research analyst who produced a new picture of the economic impact and assets of Oakland’s arts and culture sector. These individuals brought their passion, professional skills, and commitment to developing the plan with an equitable eye and intelligence that honors Oakland’s past and present. And most importantly their labors prompt a future for Oakland that strengthens how one can belong to a community of care, creativity, and can-do.

The tag-line for the plan “Equity is the Driving Force, Culture is the Frame, and Belonging is the Goal” operates as a guide to how we developed the plan. We focused on how Oaklanders realize their expressive life, a term coined by Bill Ivey the former Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, who states, “Expressive Life is composed of elements—relationship, memory, aspiration, belief”—which enliven community and creativity. Oakland’s expressive life is remarkable and vigorous. It is where aesthetic voices, community visions, and the social imaginary of how we live together inform the value and belief in our public good and a robust democracy.

The following plan provides an overview of today’s Oakland and the planning process, offers us a vision of culture for the City, and suggests pathways to lift up the role of culture in building a just and equitable city. It is not a document that operates as a typical strategic plan or SWOT analysis that cages itself in a technocratic assessment of the Cultural Affairs Division. It is a narrative that offers up a different lens and a different approach to understanding our city and how an alignment of culture and equity is required for Oaklanders to realize their potential.

We’ve listened to many stories of experience and looked at how Oaklanders communicate their knowledge, assess problems, offer remedies, and move through the messiness inherent in group processes. We’ve engaged in research and discovery into the conditions that shape Oakland’s expressive life—e.g., governmental leadership, philanthropy, financial investments, social capital, the space crisis, equity issues, cultural districts, organizational capacity, affordability, opportunity, and a desire for connections. These multiple concerns animate Oakland’s civic narrative that is best characterized by the lyric of Oakland’s Pointer Sisters’ “Yes, we can, can.”

I often think about how imagination and policy influence each other—whether it’s cultural or public policy; or the imagination of an individual or group. As the Cultural Affairs Manager, my work with artists, community leaders, and elected officials engages me with the entanglements of will at play in civil society—public will, political will, and poetic will, which function as a wind behind the actions of policymaking and imagination. Given that policy aims to *fix* via management guidelines and rules and culture is *fluid* as it develops new knowledge and brings to life our possibilities—how to do work with

these forces in the development of Oakland's Cultural Plan has kept us on our toes. We know that policy follows meaning, and what the plan has revealed is that Oaklanders find deep meaning in being able to live in an equitable society. Living in an ethically just and aesthetically diverse and rich city is the democratic charge we must address. To that end, the plan's orientation to equity and culture feeds an action agenda that entails a behavior shift: one that sees Cultural Affairs' embrace of connectedness and intersectionality as key to realizing belonging. The future work of Cultural Affairs, as presented in the following pages, is to serve the civic narrative of belonging in all its beauty, temperaments, and complexities.

Vanessa Whang was given the charge do this: to listen deeply to the stories of Oaklanders and to assert a strong analytic perspective, not an anemic exercise that avoids difficulties but instead offers up a voice that is about the social rigors and concerns that affect Oakland's daily life. She has written a plan that is a recalibration: less about a government agency and more about governance—and the ways Oaklanders enact meaning in their lives. I deeply appreciate Vanessa's stewardship, grace, and tenacity in writing this report—she has reflected the reciprocity, relationships, and learning we in Cultural Affairs experienced from Oaklanders, both during the planning process and each day as we do our work to support belonging and well-being in the city.

—Roberto Bedoya, Cultural Affairs Manager

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Oakland has an opportunity now to create a new civic narrative about the importance of recognizing and engaging its full array of people and cultures. Everything that happens in the city is infused with culture—in its broadest sense, that is, ways of being. The new vision takes this concept of culture as the frame through which diverse practices, expression, and creativity should be seen, respected, and supported throughout the city. This is the strength that Cultural Affairs can bring to the City's work to establish equity for all Oaklanders. Its goal is to ensure that the people of Oakland not only feel a sense of belonging in the city and to each other, but know that the city belongs to them—with the rights and responsibilities that entails. The guiding vision of this plan is:

Equity is the driving force. Cultural is the frame. Belonging is the goal.

Thirty years have passed since Oakland last had a cultural plan. The current plan is intended to serve as the first of two phases of a reset for Cultural Affairs that is relevant to today's Oakland. This reset needs to begin with adopting the new vision of culture for the City and establishing its role in advancing equity and belonging, with the ultimate outcome of community well-being. Adopting this vision will redefine the purpose of Cultural Affairs and its work. Once this step is taken, phase two can begin.

Phase two will entail prioritizing, developing, and revising the recommended strategies in the *Grounding the Vision* section of the plan. These implementation steps will require additional resources to be realized. The principal aim of this plan is to secure the acceptance of a cultural vision for Oakland that acknowledges the impacts of sustained public policies and institutional practices, both conscious and unconscious, that have resulted in unequal access to education and resources for people of color (i.e., Blacks, Latinos, Asians, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders) and other marginalized communities in Oakland. This systemic unequal access to opportunity has resulted in generations of unjust and inequitable outcomes for these communities and points to the new internal and external resources and position Cultural Affairs needs to be effective in achieving equity.

THE PLANNING PROCESS

The planning process began in April 2017 with a research and discovery phase that included individual interviews and small group meetings with over 60 people, and an extensive field literature and City document review. From late August through early November, fourteen community meetings were held throughout the city and in every council district. Seven meetings were targeted to the cultural community; seven were marketed to the general public. An online survey was offered as an additional vehicle for community input. Approximately 300 community members attended the meetings and about 450 surveys were received.

Members of the cultural community voiced concerns about **shrinking investments in the cultural sector**, both by the City and in the field generally; **retention of cultural spaces in an over-heated real estate market** and the **lack of adequate performance venues**; and the need for more **equitable funding for disinvested communities**. Other frequently mentioned concerns included bureaucratic barriers to accessing funding, support of cultural districts, and community benefits in new developments.

Members of the general public were asked about what they liked best about Oakland. Aspects mentioned most often were: **diversity**—cultural, ethnic, and racial; **good weather and the beautiful**

environment of Oakland; and **the character of the city's people**—one of unpretentious local pride, of resilience, and of being progressive/open/supportive. When asked about their ideas of how to strengthen community in Oakland, people's comments revealed a **desire for connection** to build unity and understanding; the importance of **orienting newcomers** to the history and culture of Oakland; equitable cultural **funding for communities of color** and other marginalized communities, **diverse cultural education for young people**; **gathering spaces and other resources** for all neighborhoods; and being able **to take greater ownership of their communities**.

A CULTURAL VISION FOR OAKLAND

Equity is the Driving Force: In 2015, the City of Oakland adopted a bold ordinance that states explicitly the government's will to integrate on a Citywide basis, "the principle of 'fair and just' in all the City does in order to achieve equitable opportunities for all people and communities." The goals of this ordinance form the foundation for this new cultural plan.

There are disparities among people, neighborhoods, and institutions that keep Oakland from being a fully fair and just city—particularly those underlain by race. To achieve equity, not only must disparities in access to and allocation of resources be addressed, but also the barriers built into both the physical and policy landscapes of Oakland. A new understanding of culture in the context of equity building can create powerful tools for surfacing the "habits of mind" and practices that keep disparities in place, and for finding creative strategies to remove them.

Culture is the Frame: Reaching well beyond the confines of the arts and artmaking, culture is the embodiment of forms of knowledge and wisdom people have gained through their different lived experiences of how to survive and thrive. The interwoven population of Oakland with its expansive range and mix of cultures and knowledge is the city's greatest gift and what makes it resilient, inventive, and irrepressible. The key to unlocking more of its potential is in the pursuit of cultural equity—creating a city where space and resources are allocated to allow diverse expression to flourish.

Because all aspects of civic life are infused with culture, having a shared understanding of it throughout the halls of the City is necessary for achieving equitable well-being. Cultural Affairs' new role will be to promote that shared understanding and to help inform departmental strategies with principles of cultural equity. This role goes hand-in-hand with its ongoing work to strengthen the ability of diverse communities to express themselves and build their sense of belonging.

Belonging is the Goal: People's sense of belonging tied to their ability to lead meaningful lives, to be connected to the place they live in and the people they live among, and to feel a part of something bigger than themselves. To cultivate belonging, there must be more equitable racial and socioeconomic conditions for self-expression, mutual respect, empathy, and acceptance. These conditions cannot be fulfilled without an understanding of the breadth of cultural diversity and how different forms of expression have different needs. Fostering belonging in a diverse civic realm is complicated and often contentious, but this is what needs to be done to make the city both equitable and whole.

The charge of working to ensure there are culturally equitable spaces—both physical and attitudinal—in which people can develop their sense of belonging is one that Cultural Affairs seeks to undertake in concert with its colleagues across the City.

GROUNDING THE VISION

To implement the vision for cultural equity, Cultural Affairs needs a change of orientation and scope. Below are the new and revised areas of emphasis for Cultural Affairs and initial steps to take as it works to prioritize strategies and build resources for phase two. It is important to note that Cultural Affairs' capacity is challenged to meet current needs, so any reorientation or new work will require support from internal and external sources.

Cultural Spaces, Neighborhood Places, and Culture in the Civic Commons

Cultural Affairs can reshape its work areas to be more responsive and focused on community issues. Given that the leading edge of change in Oakland concerns spaces and places, place-oriented programs and strategies should be identified as a main work area and organized into three general categories:

Cultural Spaces: These spaces tend to have been created or adapted specifically for the purpose of cultural production, presentation, and other uses by creatives and are generally concentrated in commercial areas. They include non-profit and for-profit spaces; some are formal and some informal; some are permitted for their uses, some not. For example, studios, galleries, theaters, live/work space, small scale commercial entertainment venues, etc.

- *Create a permanent position that continues to facilitate cross-departmental and City-community relations that are relevant to the creation and retention of robust cultural spaces in Oakland (FY 2018-19)*

Neighborhood Places: These are places in neighborhoods that generally have little in the way of formal cultural spaces or infrastructure, but where community-based non-arts organizations have filled cultural gaps and residents have created improvised cultural and gathering spaces, such as social service and faith-based organizations, small for-profit gathering space, etc.

- *Create grantmaking opportunities to support neighborhood voice, that is, ones that promote neighborhood empowerment, cultural self-determination, aesthetic accomplishment, and community health and well-being through neighborhood-based collaborations (FY 2017-18)*

Culture in the Civic Commons: The civic commons are the spaces that belong to the public and where people can gather and connect, and express, experience, or learn about their culture or those of others. These include libraries and recreational centers, open space, educational institutions, streets and sidewalks, other public spaces, etc.

- *Strengthen the Public Art Program's capacity to responsibly manage ongoing and new public arts projects and initiatives, and steward the City's collection of public art (FY 2018-19)*
- *Pilot a creative fellows program to embed arts and cultural practitioners into a variety of departments to nurture cultural equity across the work of the City (FY 2018-19)*

Strengthening Oakland's Cultural Ecosystem

Cultural Affairs has long supported a diverse range of non-profit cultural organizations and individual artists to enhance cultural vibrancy across the city. A focus on equity that is based on the particular conditions in Oakland and their underlying history is the impetus to recalibrate programs and policy to be more context-specific and driven by local circumstances and data. Taking an asset-based approach

will entail nurturing community-initiated efforts and on-the-ground realities that exist in Oakland's non-profit ecology and the independent artist/culture bearer/maker realm.

- *Strengthen the orientation of current grantmaking and technical assistance toward cultural equity and asset-based approaches (FY 2017-18)*

Building Infrastructure for Cultural Equity

Internal Infrastructure: The internal infrastructure of Cultural Affairs will need to be strengthened to align its work with the new vision to address historic injustices. The reorientation of Cultural Affairs' work towards racial and social equity framed by culture is a fundamental shift that requires building new "habits of mind" and organizational culture. Additional staffing, racial equity training, information technology and communication tools, and program-related funding will be required to operationalize the new vision in a meaningful way. Repositioning Cultural Affairs to facilitate communications and collaboration with department heads is advised.

- *Ensure new administrative hire has the skill sets to collect and analyze data, do community and field research, and to communicate effectively with stakeholders (FY 2017-18)*
- *Strengthen Cultural Affairs capacity to reorient to asset-based approaches (ongoing)*

External Relations: The reactivation of the Cultural Affairs Commission will require a clear charge, work plan, and membership that are aligned with the new vision and priorities in order to be effective. The duties of other citizen advisory bodies related to Cultural Affairs should also be aligned with the vision and reactivation of the Commission, with an eye toward efficiency and timeliness of decision-making. Keeping direct lines of communication open between the City and community is essential. The Cultural Affairs Manager's maintaining regular "office hours" in different neighborhoods is recommended.

- *Reanimate the Cultural Affairs Commission, ensuring it has a clear charge and scope of work aligned with the new vision (FY 2017-18, once new hire is in place)*
- *Align Funding and Public Arts Advisory Committees' membership and work plans with the new vision, implementation strategies, and Cultural Affairs Commission's charge and scope of work (FY 2017-18, in concert with Commission reanimation)*