

# PATHWAYS TO CHANGE

Building the Field of Civic Artist in Residence Programs

Caroline Hudson-Naef



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



## ABOUT

“Pathways for Change: Building the Field of Civic Artist in Residence Programs” is Caroline Hudson-Naef’s applied project for her Master of Arts in Creative Enterprise and Cultural Leadership from Arizona State University.

Caroline Hudson-Naef believes that creative expression is a platform from which we can build the world we want to inhabit. She is a civic and cultural strategist with nine years of experience working to forge more sustainable, impactful artistic communities. With a focus on creative placemaking, Caroline designs programs that address historical inequities through collaborative interdisciplinary practices. She hopes to build more systems that encourage artists to become community leaders that can usher in the social transformation we need for a just and equitable world. A native of Jackson, Mississippi, Caroline currently resides in Phoenix, Arizona.

### Committee Members

Steven Tepper, Chair  
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# BACKGROUND

## What are CAIRs?

Civic artists in residence programs, or CAIRs, embed artists into the non-arts context of governmental work to serve a community or internal need through arts processes, regardless of output. Known also as “artists in residence in government,” “public artists in residence,” “creative strategists,” and “artists in the public realm,” this framework is growing in popularity as cities and towns all over the United States are experimenting with artist-led systems change. These artists can work to accomplish outward-facing goals like increasing citizen participation and developing or communicating urban plans, typically with the goal of engaging communities for more equitable government operations. They can also work within government organizations to facilitate collaboration between departments, rethink practices, and encourage more creativity. Regardless, the overall goal of these programs is typically tied to desires for innovation, engagement, collaboration, and positive social change within the governmental sphere.

## Research Opportunity

In the emerging field of civic artists in residence programs, what avenues exist for field-building with government partners? This report studies the internal work of CAIR project-building and identifies a strategy for introducing new practitioners to the field at a time when resources available to support them are growing.

# RESEARCH

I began by analyzing 21 of the most relevant written resources on the topic of Civic Artist in Residence programs. While I had initially hypothesized that executive-level government staff with funding and decision-making power could be the most effective audience to target with field-building efforts, I came to the conclusion that information about these programs is less likely to reach mayors and city managers. Instead, resources about CAIR programs are more likely being shared among peers in the public art/creative placemaking field who could be better positioned to actually start CAIR programs.

I used the preliminary information gleaned from these resources to conduct two sets of interviews: one with 19 CAIR professionals and one with 7 high-level, non-arts government leaders. I asked the CAIR field leaders about their past experiences conducting projects and what they wanted government workers to know about arts collaborations. I asked

the government leaders general questions about their experience with innovation and creativity in local government and then got their first impressions of the CAIR framework.

## FINDINGS: CAIR FIELD LEADERS

CAIR field leaders are strategic thinkers and collaborative workers driven by making positive change in municipal governments. They believe that artists can help address the complicated issues that governments face through creative thinking and process-based methodologies. They are interested in projects that prompt transformative change in governments and reject limiting art to surface-level public beautification. They understand that these projects succeed by bringing people together, sparking new ideas through unlikely partnerships, and inspiring more flexibility with how governments operate.

My interviewees supported my hypothesis that getting approval from high-level staff in government was crucial to their success. However, they also made it clear that they needed to cultivate support all the way down the ladder for their projects to run successfully. Advocacy from internal champions can make a huge difference in getting a project off the ground. One interviewee made the point that when winning over a potential non-arts partner, unfortunately, it doesn't matter how convincing of an argument you make; the information will be much better received coming from someone that they trust, that they have a good relationship with, and that they will listen to non-defensively. CAIR programs are often the result of many, many conversations "wooing" municipal leaders; would-be practitioners need to cultivate partners who will help advocate on their behalf.

They also frequently found that attaching these projects to city policies, like a cultural plan, helped build legitimacy. Lastly, running a smaller-scale pilot phase was a helpful strategy for many of my interviewees.

CAIR practitioners were clear that when it comes to finding partners for government arts collaborations, cultivating trust is the most important strategy. Most of the CAIR field leaders I interviewed worked with partners they already had a relationship with, which made establishing this trust easier.

CAIR practitioners also stressed the importance of assessing whether their goals and values were aligned with their partner's. This is something many CAIR practitioners determined in their initial conversations with potential partners, and has been a learning experience for several after moving forward with partners who were less aligned.

<b>Conditions for Success:</b>
<b>Openness from partners</b>
<b>Onboarding</b>
<b>Agency</b>
<b>Time</b>
<b>Communication</b>

One of my interview questions was, “What’s the one thing you wish government workers understood about arts collaborations like civic artist residencies?” The answers were so rich and varied that they are presented individually in my full report, but I have included two of my favorites below:

**“That it actually makes your job easier...If you really let it be systems change, if you are ready for that, it can have outstanding results in terms of community engagement, transparency, accessibility and making your work more efficient. ”**

**Ash Hanson**

**“Their money is not going to widgets...They need to be okay with ambiguity...and that’s the actual value. And the whole point of doing these collaborations is that it’s not like, you tell me what you want and I give it to you. It’s [that] we’re working together, we’re not making a transaction, we’re hopefully making a transformative experience for all of us, you know?”**

**Shannon Daut**

## **FINDINGS: GOVERNMENT LEADERS**

The government workers I interviewed are working to counter stereotypes of being slow, ineffective, and part of a non-responsive bureaucracy; they are extremely interested in innovation, and are already participating in programs that allow them to approach their work in ways that are “out of the box.” They understand the value of collaboration and expressed a willingness to try new things in a low-risk way.

They are problem-solvers faced with complicated systemic problems that will require a range of solutions to address, like housing and the climate crisis. All of my interviewees are very interested in improving civic engagement, which is one of the most common goals of CAIR projects. Two of my interviewees specifically mentioned working on ways to improve trust of government with residents.

The government leaders I interviewed defined innovation as being responsive to community needs and serving residents in a more collaborative, effective and efficient way. They understand that to keep successfully addressing the needs of their communities, they have to keep evaluating what parts of their work need to change.

They are already used to starting new, experimental programs like participatory budgeting, innovative grantmaking policies, and cross-sector collaborations. They displayed entrepreneurial mindsets by expressing a willingness to experiment in order to find solutions. They even listed similar strategies as the CAIR field leaders did for starting new programs, including running pilot programs, making strategic use of funding, tying the program to city policy, and seeking support from higher leadership.

After I had asked them more general questions about innovation in local government, I explained that the specific innovation I was researching was CAIR programs. When asked whether this was something they had ever heard of, 3 said they had not, 2 said they had, and 2 said they were already doing this work. Despite being largely unfamiliar with this strategy, these interviewees understood the idea more than I expected. In the CAIR field, it is easy to think about this framework as something very new and different to how governments operate, but my interviewees felt otherwise. No interviewees responded negatively; many were able to consider it as a possibility for their work if they did not see it as work they were already doing.

Based on this, I would say that CAIR programs definitely fit into these government employees' current understanding of their work. Though many of them expressed that they would need to know more in order to make a decision on moving forward on a project, they were interested in learning and were open to considering it as a possibility. They recognized the benefits that working with artists and using arts processes could provide, like creative solutions and being a trusted liaison to underrepresented publics. Overall, it appears that these government leaders could be reached by CAIR practitioners interested in starting CAIR projects.



# REFLECTIONS

In comparing the interviews of CAIR field leaders and government workers, I see more similarities than differences. These two groups are incredibly aligned in their perspective on innovation in municipal government and what role the arts can play in it. After analyzing my research findings, I have identified several pathways for building the field of civic artist residencies.

## **Strategy: Build on the Ways it Fits into City Frameworks**

This research demonstrates that government workers can be entrepreneurial thinkers. In recognizing the ways that the creative process is already showing up in their work through design thinking methods, we can see that some government workers may be more comfortable with the artistic process than they realize.

I think it's useful to frame CAIR projects as a deeper dimension of work that government workers have experience with already. We can build a frame of understanding by relating it to the creativity and innovation needed in their own jobs. We can ease fears that they will be treated like change-phobic bureaucrats by inviting them to be active partners in the creative process of solving their most pressing problems. We can help them feel less intimidated by a process they don't trust by demonstrating that it is more familiar than it seems.

## **Strategy: Push for More Investment from Cities**

Because there is so much readiness for the CAIR framework in municipal government, we need to push for more investment from cities, financially and otherwise. While not having to answer to governments financially may offer more freedom for project administrators, I believe this lack of investment is a trade-off. It can introduce opportunities for surface-level partnerships since the city isn't putting its money on the line. It also opens the door for precarity as these projects rely on less stable funding through grants.

Additionally, it can affect the staying power of these projects. We should celebrate change at all scales, but low-investment projects like single year initiatives are hard-pressed to make transformative change unless they are designed very strategically. Change takes time, which can be at odds with how city governments are designed; if government partners are on board with this framework, we need to work together to support expansive timelines within a program's funding structure. And with so

much to be done, why limit our change-making potential to a one-time project?

We already know what full investment can look like. We know that high-level policies like municipal cultural plans can help us get there. Additionally, strategically aligned partners with funding power can start by replacing existing engagement line items with CAIR projects. If transformative change is the goal, we need to push for real investment from cities.

## **Strategy: Seek True Collaboration**

Investment also includes how partners work together. In many ways, CAIR partnerships have the same rules for success as any collaboration. However, these projects are not easy and will require closer ways of working together than government workers may be used to. Partners should establish mutually beneficial, values-based goals they can re-center with when things get messy.

The key for longevity and structural change through CAIR projects is dedicated alliance, not surface-level participation. Partners need to cultivate buy-in culturally in all participating agencies to create a foundation of support that can reach further than individual projects or individual people.

Government workers already have experience collaborating. CAIR practitioners can build on the ways that government workers already understand about working across difference in order to build deeper partnerships.

## **Strategy: Commit to Building Deeper Relationships**

Pushing for this kind of collaboration comes from developing deeper relationships than we are encouraged to do in transactional environments like municipal governments. What I learned in the course of this research is that convincing non-arts partners to participate in CAIR projects is not the point. CAIR work is strategic, but ultimately values-driven and relationship-based. This work is built on coalition-building among like-minded peers who then can invite others into the process, including those with more institutional power.

I believe a large focus of the CAIR framework is humanizing government work, both in what these projects can accomplish and how they can operate. Government workers don't often get to experience being seen as multidimensional human beings, and as the people who make choices about our daily lives, that is to everyone's detriment. If they are able to experience more empathetic treatment themselves in the process of coordinating a larger CAIR project, they can see firsthand the impact this framework can have on their work. By centering relationships wherever



we can, we can start to build the environment of care necessary to support this work.

## Audience for Field-Building

The audience I proposed to target with field-building efforts shifted over the course of my research. When developing my initial goals for this project, I had thought that I would need to build a strategy for pitching CAIR programs to executive-level municipal leaders. What I discovered was that while approval from these high-level employees is necessary for success, they are unlikely to initiate CAIR programs and will be more likely to be reached by their own colleagues who they know and trust. Instead, I propose that the most beneficial audience to target is mid-level municipal employees, arts-focused or not, who have the institutional power to start these programs but need help navigating how to build effective, sustained partnerships.

## Conclusion

As the field of Civic Artist Residencies develops, we can recognize the successes we have already achieved and look forward to those that are possible. This project adds to the growing body of evidence that professionals on both sides of these partnerships are invested in positive change in our local governments.

We know how to work together. We know the value of creativity. The complicated problems we face are not going to go away on their own. We can look to artists to help us bridge engagement gaps to help municipalities provide more equitable services. This research shows that government partners are ready, and that through dynamic local partnerships we can work holistically towards more livable communities.

