

Interview with Jamie L. Bennett
Executive Director, ArtPlace America

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MW: Introduction: This interview is between **Megan Wilson (MW)**, artist and writer, and **Jamie L. Bennett (JLB)**, Executive Director, ArtPlace America.

MW: Thank you for agreeing to talk with me this morning.

JLB: Absolutely, I'm thrilled to do it.

MW: My interest in this discussion on placemaking and ArtPlace really has to do with the impact that it's having on community revitalization and gentrification.

JLB: Can you just, because I would find it helpful, explain which definition of gentrification are you using?

MW: I'm using the definition in which communities end up displaced, where low and middle-income residents and communities of color end up being displaced from their homes.

JLB: Great and I can't remember if I had sent you this. Did you watch any of the sessions? We were out in LA for a summit with our grantees for three days and there was a really interesting session that we did with Manuel Pastor and Eui-Sung Yi talking about people and place. One of the things that I think is really important that happened there was Professor Pastor set aside the gentrification conversation for a moment to say I really think that what we need to talk about it is the displacement issue and physical displacement but also economic and cultural displacement because those are the aspects that I think can be taken off from a policy point of view as opposed to justification because we are not going to sort of tell people they can't move to a neighborhood but there are ways that you can deal with the displacement issues, maybe from a policy point of view. Anyway, I mean this is exactly the conversation that I'm really interested in.

MW: Yeah, great. So, what is ArtPlace currently focusing on, because I know that it has been three years now that you've been operating?

JLB: Yeah.

MW: What is the current approach to community revitalization for ArtPlace?

JLB: When we are talking about creative placemaking, the definition that we are using is essentially we are interested in funding projects where art and culture are playing an explicit role, an intentional role in shaping the social, physical, and economic future of a community and I have been talking with folks about the definition and I realize that we can actually take a step back and simplify it even a little further. A friend of mine pointed out that for the purposes of our conversation, creative is actually an adverb, not an adjective and it is the making that is creative. So, the intervention, the action, the activity are all artistic and the outcomes or success of a project are going to be measured in terms of community.

MW: What are some of the metrics that ArtPlace is using for the successes of your projects?

JLB: One of the things that we're actually doing is trying to demystify that for evaluation and assessment conversation and one of the other sessions that we did in LA and, again if you're interested I could send you a link to the video archives for background.

MW: I would love that, thank you.

JLB: So, one of the things we were asking still is rather than get sort of paralyzed by the evaluation analytic words, what we are asking folks to do is sort of say, what are you trying to do with your project and how are you going to know whether it is a success. So, I think that there are a lot of different ways to do that and there was a panel that my colleague Liz Crane led that was about the difference between doing and changing and then the art, we tend to attach a lot of that measurement to the

things that we are doing, right. What are the activities and not as much to the changing? What is the transformation that we are looking to affect and we had, I think it was five different projects. Each talked about their way of measuring their success. How they were setting out to define the goals for the projects, and they had five very different ways. So, Springboard for the Arts was running a program called Irrigate in Saint Paul where they were looking to change. There was a commercial quarter that was being disrupted by light rail construction for a period of two years or something like that and they didn't want that neighborhood to become only known for traffic jams and for being under construction and for being a place that you shouldn't go to. So, they wanted to change the ways that community was being talked about and so they tracked it using essentially Google alerts to see how often that community was being talked about in what terms.

There was a woman called Prema Katari Gupta from Philadelphia at The Porch at 30th Street Station who has done a series of light quick intervention in terms of the urban planning aspects for the areas right around Philadelphia train station and she has really created an interesting set of data that allows her to understand how people are using space. So, she is one of those folks who is practicing what is being called lean urbanism.

So, rather than waiting and doing a formal capital project, you just move a couple of benches, you move a couple of planters and see how that changes, how people are moving to a space. Is it better, is it worse? Did people seem to want other kinds of space? Then you need to make another change to make another change and after you have had to sit back a little and then figure out what you want to do permanently. Another project called Paradise Garden. I can get you the specifics from some of the other metrics and ways of measuring success that others hopefully can use for it.

MW: Yeah, that would be great, thank you. So, how is ArtPlace addressing – in your funding - this question of displacement and projects where you know it is not, of course, the intended outcome - the displacement of communities, but just by the nature of the arts attracting higher real estate expenses and cost of living, that unfortunately has been the outcome.

JLB: So, I think in some cases, I mean, the arts, I don't think it is necessarily and absolutely a true statement that the arts always attract higher income or higher property values. I think there are some places that's true and some places where it's not as true. I think the other thing is there is not necessarily a one size fits all solution because different communities have different circumstances. So, for instance, there is some work that is going on in Baltimore station north district and this is a neighborhood very close to the Baltimore train station. I was there when I was still working at the NEA with the mayor, with Stephanie Rawlings-Blake who talked about the fact that in that case you don't have the issue of physical displacement because there are a lot of vacant properties, there is a lot of burned out real estate. So, there's actually room to move in a significant population without physically displacing anyone.

Having said that, you still are left potentially in that circumstance with the potential for economic displacement or for cultural displacement where people cannot afford to stay there or people don't feel at home there or used to feel at home there. When Professor Pastor was talking in Los Angeles, he was talking, I think, about a new park in Echo Park that actually was done and all of the signs were only in English despite an incredibly high portion of the population of Echo Park that were Spanish speaking. So, I think that is an example of cultural displacement...

MW: Right.

JLB: So, I think it's really important, I mean, one of the things about place-based work and being very sensitive and very nuanced to place and sort of understanding what are the circumstances in a community and what does the community want to do about it. There is something in the language in placemaking that I haven't yet fully been able to sort of purse this out but there is something in the language of placemaking that puts people in the head space of doing to a community and not projects that are being done by a community.

MW: Uh-hmm.

JLB: And what we're really interested in are projects that are being done by a community. The projects should grow out of that community's overall interest in what it is setting to be its collective future and should grow out of that. There is something that sort of tiptoes into a little bit of colonial language, almost about like the discovery of a place or something like that by an outsider and I sort of haven't quite figured out why that's such a durable trope, but there is some interesting stuff. I think you're based in San Francisco. Yeah?

MW: That's correct which is why I think this has become such a hot topic, because those are the exact things are happening here.

JLB: Yeah and I don't know how well you have followed. There's a really interesting policy experiment that started in San Francisco with CAST, the Community Arts Stabilization Trust. Have you followed this at all?

MW: I have and I think it is a really great project and the benefit that it has had has been amazing, but at this point, one of the challenges is that real estate costs are so high that's it is becoming difficult for even the City or non-profit interests to buy into it.

JLB: Yeah, and what's so interesting to me about it is that my understanding, I'm coming out to San Francisco in a month or so because I want to sort of get to understand that project but also understand from the San Francisco issues more probably. What's interesting to me is that the Mayor and the city leadership seem to be trying to grapple with affordability broadly.

MW: Well, that's what they say publicly. That is correct publicly.

JLB: Okay, well you tell me. Sorry. You have more local knowledge.

MW: Yeah, we hear a lot of rhetoric around that – that they are all about affordability. However, we're not seeing much in the way of policy measures that are helping the folks who are being displaced. So, that's what our experience has been.

JLB: I don't have the local knowledge, but you do and the point of view. So, I absolutely defer to your opinion.

MW: Right, and it does all sound really good when you hear it but we just have not seen that in practice. We have not seen those policy changes happen that are actually having a significant impact for the folks that are being displaced.

JLB: It sounds like there is work for San Francisco to do.

MW: There is a lot of work for San Francisco to do and one of the questions I have that that does relate to ArtPlace and these larger public-private partnerships is what happens when the private partners bottom line is profit making. So, that you can go through all of these steps and conversations about what make a great community and what has value, but the ultimate value is making money for the shareholders and so that's going to be selling the real estate or selling these projects at the highest profit possible.

JLB: I mean that is a definition of what commercial developers do, absolutely.

MW: Right, and so in the case here of the 5M Project, being a publicly traded corporation, that is their bottom line. It is to make sure that that project is going to sell at the highest price possible and for the communities that it is happening in, a lot of folks don't realize that there are a lot of families who live there and a lot of low income families that live there.

JLB: I mean there may well be folks who don't realize that. I know it's something that has been talked about a lot and it is a very present issue for a lot of the folks.

MW: Right, and so it's a matter of then how does that get addressed when you're dealing with a large billion dollar publicly traded corporation whose is a part of this community revitalization project where ultimately their primary interest is about making money and really is not about the community. They are legally bound to make sure that they make the greatest profit for their shareholders.

JLB: Yeah. You got a definition of a corporation in a capitalist economy. Am I correct?

MW: Right. And that's an active definition and I don't think that anything has changed on that. So, how does that get addressed in these conversations or these projects where that is the partner on the project?

JLB: Sure, that's one of the partners on the project and I think even for someone who is and, again I don't speak for Forest City, they will need to speak for themselves, but one of the things that I have seen with a lot of developers and real estate companies that I have talked with and had a chance to speak with them around the country is that they are also very interested in understanding how to create a community where people will want to live and you'll need the things that gives the community its unique character, its unique identity, its quality of life. So what are those things that you need to have as anchor institutions, as amenities, as a nightlife in terms for place where people want to do things and want to be together and again I've seen lots of enlightened developers who, yes, they want to sell a condo or whatever the piece of property at a high price, but they also were interested in making sure that that community remains a place where people want to move in. So, there are examples similar to 5M where you see a commercial project that is giving over different kinds of community space. You have also seen non-profit developers come in the neighborhood and work alongside commercial developers. You also see lots of...as is true of any factor in any community, you want the partners who come in and work together and have sometimes complementary and sometimes divergent interests.

MW: Right, and I do think that the successes tend to be more with the non-profit developers because they don't have that same interests and so far that is what we have seen here is that initially of course the developers want the artists and want the community organizations on board because it looks really good as far as selling that project to the city and getting the permitting, getting through the review process to make sure that the project goes through, but then once that's done, that all sort of falls to the wayside and it does not necessarily end up being what was initially envisioned.

JLB: Yeah, and it's hard, I mean speaking in sort of broad generalities like that, it is a little hard.

MW: Right. And of course, I am speaking from what the experience here in San Francisco has been and also getting to know a few different communities like Portland whose has had similar experiences and New York whose has had similar experiences with Manhattan and Brooklyn. So, it's not that it's an isolated situation but...

JLB: Sure, and one of the things, I mean, you know better than I as a writer, one of the things that is hard about arguing by anecdote is yes, everything you said is true but there is also the commercial developer on 10th Avenue in Manhattan who is building a mixed use house, a commercial developer building a mixed use housing development and had to comply with the City's 80/20 and they actually gave space in that project, permanent space to the 52nd Street project and to other theaters that have been resident in that community for a long time. So, here you have a commercial developer that's overlapping with a city policy imperative in terms of doing the 80/20. That's also then giving over the community used space to an organization like the 52nd Street Project that has been an anchor in that community. So, whatever combination of sort of enlightened self-interest, extensive responsibility of the community and policy imperative, in some cases, I think that's an outcome that is not a really bad outcome in terms of having a building where people with different incomes are able to live, where people can come in for different purposes, come in for the theater purposes, come in for the arts and purposes that are happening there. So, yeah, I mean, and I don't have a sense, I don't know how you would sort of begin to look at the data or begin to look it in a holistic way.

MW: Right, and I think that those examples are great and of course we would love to see a lot more of that happening and one of the things that I have learned from speaking to different community-based organizations and arts organizations is that they really want to be a part of the policy-making process or be at the table for these policy discussions, but their greatest impediment is that they just don't have the capacity to do so. They are really struggling just to survive and I'm wondering if this is

something that ArtPlace would ever consider funding which would be to help support the capacity for these organizations to be a part of that policy process.

JLB: Potentially, I mean right now, the one funding stream that we have available goes for funding projects and not towards funding capacity building, but interestingly enough, I was at a community meeting yesterday in Brooklyn where this issue came up and there was a sort of interesting divide among the arts groups who were gathered and there were half of them who were sort of saying we live in Brooklyn, we are residents of Brooklyn, all of Brooklyn's government is responsible to us and we have to show up to all the meetings and not just to the arts meetings. Right, because housing policy impacts those transportation policies... community zoning. All of that impacts us and so those folks were sort of naturally building block coalitions so that they could split up all of various community meetings that needed to be gone to, so that the arts, there were always sort of two people representing the arts at every meeting so that we as a sector was sort of represented in the conversation and was present at the table.

The other half of the room sort of has that stance that you're articulating which is, I'm trying to do my art, I'm doing my day job, I'm exhausted, I'm running ragged, I don't know that I have the time or the energy to participate sort of actively as a citizen in terms of making sure that my interests are being represented in policies being developed and I think that's true. I also think it's true of a lot of other sectors. There are other low income sectors of the population who also have a hard time getting to community meetings. I assume that it is going to be an issue for a lot of folks who are working on an hourly wage, a lot of folks who are independent contractors, whether you're a home health aide or whatever it is. So, there was a beginning conversation there about how to build their alliances to make sure that we were sort of all representing broadly art community issues in all of the relevant tables. I think it is a really important area of work.

MW: Yeah, I agree and I think that that's why I'm seeing as somebody who is both a writer-artist and also works in the non-profit sector doing fundraising for small community-based organizations which are actually mostly social justice organizations and some arts.

JLB: Do you see those sort of divisions in community-based, social justice, and arts, do you see those as two distinct populations?

MW: Yes and no. I think that they are interrelated and I think that those lines are becoming more and more blurred in a good way, but I also think that there still are delineations and part of that is about this inability for capacity to have these larger coalitions that are made that could work together and so, I see this as a funding issue and something that I think would be great for foundations or coalitions of foundations like ArtPlace or something greater that would help to support and fund the capacity of all of these community-based organizations to have more of a say in the policy making and to be able to be at the table and have more direction in what ends up being created in municipalities.

JLB: And just because this was the sort of exact question that came up at the meeting that the Brooklyn Community Foundation was facilitating. What do you think that capacity looks like? I mean, what does that mean? What is this thing that needs to happen or what is this thing that needs to change to make that possible?

MW: I think it is a resource issue, right? So, it's really about those organizations having, say a dedicated position that is about being completely informed and having that ability to attend those meetings and to do the coalition building that addresses policy.

JLB: As this was another question that came up, do you think there needs to be one person at each organization or do you think there is a role for service organizations to play?

MW: I think it is both. I think that having a dedicated position is of course very needed, but I do think that it is also about the entire organization having that ability. So, it is having the resources to fully support that. It doesn't necessarily have to be that high of an investment for having a greater impact, if that makes sense.

JLB: Yeah, the interesting thing about if you want a full staff person that is just dedicated to that, do you want it to be part of someone's time but it is an explicit part of someone's time so that there is no issue about this is not really my job, or do you want to sort of take a service organization that works with. One of the people who was at the table yesterday was a service organization that works with 330 theaters in New York City. Is there a role for that service to play in representing the myriad interests of that sector of the community? So just what is the right level of investment? Because a lot of the smaller organizations were saying if I had to hire a next staff person, it would not necessarily be enough.

MW: Right. When you say service, do you really mean a larger advocacy organization?

JLB: I guess so. The one that I was mentioning was like the Alliance of Resident Theaters/New York. So, that's a membership organization that represents that 330 theaters and works with them on issues of mutual concern. There is a similar coalition called Dance/NYC that works with dance-making entities both individuals and organizations throughout New York City's five boroughs and there are some national ones as well. There is the American for the Arts or the League of Symphony Orchestras. So, that's sort of the professional associations or service organizations, that whole strata of stuff. It is interesting to note, I don't yet have a point of view on the right way to do it. And the other thing which is so interesting that was brought up as a conversation yesterday is that as we draw these divides between this is what a community-based organization is, this is what a social justice organization is, this is what an arts organization is that the folks just straddle those worlds. You know the work of Caron Atlas?

MW: No, actually I don't.

JLB: Caron Atlas. You would really, I mean, I think you guys would have a really great conversation. You will be really intrigued by what she is doing. I think you will really be inspired by her. She is doing some work with participatory budgeting. She is doing a project called Arts & Democracy. She is doing some really interesting stuff and she was saying the problem is that you can sometimes get into this you're not

artsy enough for the art community, you're not social justice enough for the social justice community, and you sort of end up being neither fish nor fowl.

MW: Right. I see that happening a lot and both changing more in each direction because folks are sharing their resources and information more and also their organizing, but then they are also competing for these very limited resources. So, it has actually become both.

JLB: So Our time is wrapping up.

MW: Okay, well, thank you so much Jamie for taking the time to talk with me.

JLB: Absolutely.

(END OF INTERVIEW)