

June 16, 2018

**CREATIVE PLACEMAKING FROM THE COMMUNITY UP:
A CONVERSATION WITH ROBERTO BEDOYA AND VANESSA WHANG**

Roberto Bedoya is Cultural Affairs Manager for the City of Oakland and Vanessa Whang is a culture/change consultant who recently worked with him to create the City of Oakland's first cultural plan in 30 years.

RB: I want to offer a little bit of history behind “Creative Placemaking from the Community Up.” It began a couple of years ago as a national collaborative project to explore community-centered placemaking. When it started, my voice was being linked to civic engagement work as well as policy work I was doing in Tucson [at the Tucson-Pima Arts Council]. Now I’ve moved that from out of the desert and into the fog of the Bay Area.

VW: *(laughs)* Both the literal and figurative.

RB: Exactly. And now also into an urban space. It’s interesting—it’s still about the grassroots, even in the Bay Area.

VW: There are always more grassroots than there are big guys, even in New York City—as Mark Stern and Susan Seifert have pointed out. Big institutions take up a lot of space—financially, socially, conceptually—but there are always more folks close to the ground. And as we learned through the cultural planning in Oakland, there isn’t a critical mass of big guys.

Community and Cultural Competence

RB: Maybe that’s a good prompt because many emerging artists, immigrant artists, culture bearers, etc. don’t even think about getting into this world—the world of non-profits and funders. And we don’t stress in our world the importance of constantly developing our cultural competencies to understand how to meet people where they’re at. There’s an assumption that we’re all liberal and good, but... I want to tell a story about a friend in Minneapolis who is African and I asked him, “What was the hardest thing about being a refugee in America?” And he said “the hardest thing for me to learn was to look at people in the eye because that’s disrespectful in my culture, if they are an elder or in a position of authority you don’t look at them in the eye. Americans are always up in your face!” That’s an issue of cultural competency. If you’re a grantmaker, he was not going to look at you. You have to respect that. This is how the culture operates, even if you think it’s stupid. It’s that kind of nuancing, I think, that philanthropy doesn’t pay attention to, we don’t pay enough attention to developing that skill set.

VW: That’s true. But then I have to ask—somewhat rhetorically—“why should philanthropy?” There is no push to develop that skill set in philanthropy, private philanthropy. And by the way, I don’t consider grantmaking in the public sector philanthropy because it’s the people’s money, it’s redistribution of public monies. Anyway, there’s often a tension between what philanthropy is supposed to be about and the way it behaves. It’s supposed to be about service, it’s supposed to be about “love of people”—literally. But often there is a very seductive hierarchical culture of power that seems like just the opposite.

RB: But related to our particular work— we're public funders—if you look at the context of what we've been doing, you have to have this skill set.

VW: Absolutely. Private philanthropy doesn't, but public funders do. This why people in this space—the space of cultural equity in the public sector—really can be and should be on the leading edge of that kind of competency and advocating for it because private philanthropy is not obligated, that is to say, it is not practically obligated, though I would say it is morally obligated. But no entity holds private philanthropy accountable for being of, by, and for the people.

Scaling Up v. Scaling Out and Sustainability

RB: One of the things I got to thinking about through the plan and the idea of creative placemaking from the community up is this whole language about scale and scaling, and how it has currency in the world of philanthropy and arts management. It's usually about scaling up and rarely about scaling out. But if you do creative placemaking from the community up, it's usually about scaling out. Let's look at two anchor institutions in Oakland—Peralta Hacienda and EastSide Arts Alliance—they are all about scaling out. They don't want another department of civic engagement or another department of arts education. If you are a big cultural institution you build departments. You know what I mean? And arts management kind of encourages that business model, a for-profit business model that we try to mirror. But nobody talks about the work of scaling out, which is in some ways community cultural development, community organizing—and the economics behind that are really different.

VW: It's not about consolidating power, it's about sharing it.

RB: Right. It's creating strong networks and knowing those networks have power.

VW: Put another way, it's not about creating departments, it's about creating relationships. I think scaling out is a really important point to make because in the end, I think that's the only thing that is sustainable.

RB: I want to pivot on that word "sustainability." It leads me to think about how the wind behind these groups is stewardship, to be good stewards of the neighborhood—like being a culture bearer is about being a good steward of your culture. That's different from sustainability.

VW: When I mentioned "sustainability," I didn't mean it in the way that it is often used in philanthropy—that organizations are sustainable if they have healthy operating revenues, a working capital reserve, etc. I meant it in more of an ecological sense. When you talk about scaling out, the image that comes to my mind is one of root systems under the ground. There's this ecologist, Suzanne Simard, who has shown that trees participate in these complex soil networks that communicate their conditions and can warn or help neighboring plants. That's what I mean by "sustainable"—it's a more organic form of being, to connect to others, and that others have a place in the system. It's not your role to consolidate power, and control everything, and dole out what you have as you will; it's about connecting with others who have a role in the ecology and you see that role. But I could tell when I said "sustainable," it raised your hackles. So tell me about that.

RB: It's the jargon of sustainability that I bristle at when I hear it. I did some work years ago for a funder talking with organizations of color, and I was supposed to be talking about the metrics of sustainability; and they were always failing, failing to meet the checklist. But there was nothing wrong with them!

What was wrong was how they were being evaluated. But there is a great desire—by funders, program officers—to evaluate impact. The language of evaluation privileges sustainability as a metric of success—but doesn't know how to deal with volunteers, doesn't know how to deal with scaling out. I said to the woman I was working for "I know these organizations. They've been around for 30, 40 years. They're alive. They're sustainable!" But they failed every sustainability metric. So what's wrong is not them, it's the language of evaluation.

VW: I completely agree. They are set up to fail because the metrics are often based on larger institutions, and community-based organizations don't behave that way, they're not set up that way, and their sustainability looks different, and their assets look different.

RB: I'll pivot to the [Oakland] plan here—and I thank you for this—what it tries to do is identify assets and figure out a validation system that is not the usual one, a validation system for the various assets that exist in a landscape like Oakland.

VW: Oakland doesn't look like cities we're used to looking at, with a lot of big institutions, like San Francisco. It's a different kind of animal. You can't use the measures relevant to an elephant when what you have is a zebra! But we like to have formulas.

But I want to circle back to the point that I think it's always important to look at nomenclature. For me, it's good to start by defining terms because we use these words and we think we are talking about the same thing, but we may end up having completely different ideas in our heads about what they mean.

I would get really angry when I heard funders say that a community-based organization was unsustainable, and I'm thinking: if you do your work in a community that has been historically under-resourced, and your constituents are folks who cannot pay tuition, or fees, or high ticket prices, and then you get blamed for not being sustainable, that's [rude word]. So I get the animosity around how "sustainability" has been weaponized—which is why I go to the more environmental sense of the word.

RB: In some ways, I'm still playing the game. So I would say: "OK, evaluate me on stewardship. What does that look like?" That implies value a lot more than "sustainability" in my mind.

But going back to my curiosities and when I started to feel bristly about "sustainability": I was wondering when did it become a sticky word? It moved out of the ecology field, but it went into the arts field and became a business management, an arts management term. It wasn't really about being a holistic term.

VW: It's ironic that in the for-profit sector the notion sustainability in terms of the triple bottom line of planet, people, and prosperity has taken hold in a way that it still has yet to in the non-profit sector. [I didn't say this, but I wish I had.]

RB: I think part of the storytelling of Oakland is that, for better or worse, our arts ecosystem never fell total victim to financial sustainability metrics because it was grounded so much in its sense of community from the grassroots up.

Creative Placemaking or Creative Placekeeping?

VW: I want to change directions for a moment and take us to one of the central subjects for this conversation: creative placemaking and, the perhaps more relevant in Oakland variation, creative placekeeping. What's the difference?

RB: I like to tell my story about placekeeping. People like to credit me with coming up with that term. I'll take credit for putting the term into play nationally, but I heard it from a colleague in Detroit, Jennie Lee. She's great. She's a student of Grace Lee Boggs. She said it to me in a casual conversation. People here in Oakland really like that term because it serves as a counter-narrative to creative placemaking and displacement. It creates agency and also speaks to what we talk about a little bit in the plan and what I've written a little bit about: that is, whether creative placemaking is a property rights movement or a human rights movement. If it's invested in human rights, then you keep places. I'll have to be honest, you need both, it's not either/or. But the creative placemaking world that caught fire with the establishment of ArtPlace America...

VW: ...and the NEA white paper...

RB: All that. City managers and urban planners loved it. It was in line with Richard Florida and the notion of the creative class and that we can revitalize our cities by engaging in creative placemaking. But that also meant development, and complicity with the powers that development asserted that resulted in displacement.

There high anxiety in Oakland because we are in this crisis—"I'm losing my identity. I'm losing my home. I'm losing my community." So the language of placekeeping is the counter-narrative of "I believe in place." But you can't throw the baby out with the bathwater. The downside of placekeeping is that it can be sentimental. "I want the old days when there was a barbershop at the end of my block. I don't want change to happen. I want my neighborhood to still be an all-Black neighborhood."

VW: It can be nostalgic—which is a pitfall of some kinds of cultural districts as well—if it's an attempt to freeze a place in time.

RB: The placemaking/placekeeping discourse is a reflection on land use policy, and this is what we learned from our planning process from the community up: I may have to work in other silos, other fields of practices, like planning. If planning is doing a downtown plan for Oakland and they want to think about culture, then it's a culture plan as well.

VW: Here's the point our cultural plan makes: any place the planning department does an area specific plan will entail cultural planning—and not just downtown, where there happens to be a concentration of cultural resources, but anywhere where people live.

RB: I think part of the storytelling about the Oakland cultural plan is how forthrightly it talked about culture as ways of community behaviors—not artists, arts organizations, and artifacts—which is not to damn those things. Those are the things close to me heart and give me great pleasures. However, I also want walkable streets, I want to know my neighbor, I want a business community that helps me identify the 'hood.

VW: ...and not just a row of homogenous, commercial margarine.

RB: I think one of the challenges of cities is that as people from the suburbs come back to the city, they want a Subway sandwich because they don't know the independent deli—because they never had one, right? So in some ways they try to bring the strip mall experience back to...International Boulevard!

VW: I think some of it is that, but I also think there are people who appreciate Oakland for what it is, for its diversity and uniqueness—but unwittingly change that culture and dynamic by entering it.

RB: One of the things I want to raise about creative placemaking and creative placekeeping is: What is the social imaginary behind the meaning of those words and the operation of those practices? In Oakland, thinking about the incident of somebody calling the police because somebody is barbequing at Lake Merritt without using a gas barbeque. So there is a spatial imaginary that operated out there that this particular White woman had about what was proper and not proper. An African American woman the other day told me a story about being confronted at a gas station because she was listening to her gospel music and opened her car door and someone confronted her saying that the music was too loud. an idea within the spatial imaginary about what's proper and not proper, and that's what's really highly contested. And I have no problem saying that it's within a White spatial imaginary that that can occur. So some of what's at issue with creative placemaking is about Whiteness. Hopefully what the plan does is validate that Chinatown is a place where you can cross the street at a diagonal and trucks are always double-parked and there is a high concentration of folk on the street—and that demands a different kind of transit pattern and policy.

VW: I think it's interesting to think about these terms—creative placemaking and creative placekeeping—and take them out of the context of the NEA white paper, because I've always been uncomfortable with the definition offered there. I think all placemaking is creative—though you may or may not like the aesthetic—and the idea that creative placemaking means centering placemaking around arts activities and arts organizations has always seemed very reductive and limiting to me. Its association with revitalization and, consequently, gentrification, makes it seem like placemaking is about property rights and placekeeping is about human rights. But there is a way in which both could be about property rights and both could be about human rights—it's about the context you put them in.

It's not a bad thing to think about placekeeping as a property right if you are talking about disenfranchised and displaced people's right to place. And it's not a mistake to think of placemaking as a human right, that is, the right of people to co-create social space.

RB: Totally. I know I set it up as a binary, but what I'm trying to assert as we start to implement the plan, we are going to introduce policies around placekeeping---not to confront placemaking, per se, but to say, "Wait a minute, here's another dimension."

VW: I just wanted to bring that up because I think the frame you put around it is important. Are you making places to flip or are you making places to be? What is your bottom line and how do you get to it?

Public Will, Political Will, and Poetic Will

RB: Right. Being in government, I've become mindful of energies and power and how they work. And I came to this thought about how people have an understanding of political will and public will. But when I found the term "poetic will" coming out of my mouth more often than not was right after the Ghost Ship fire. I went to the mayor's office and there was a journalist there, and we were talking about it. I said that we get political will—elected officials can move things along in terms of law and policy; and

public will is how community people organize themselves to impact policy and law. But it goes back to the language of the imaginary, and that I call “poetic will.”

Say somebody decides we can imagine this warehouse as a live/work space, and they start to make that happen. That’s poetic will. I think about AIDS activism and the development of the red ribbon—that was an act of imagination that came out of people who thought, “I’m going to bring visibility to this.” I think of plays like *Angels in America* or of Teatro Campesino—this work is about visibility for marginalized voices. That’s kind of a poetic will. I want to acknowledge the power of that imagination. And they’re all linked together. I think what happens in the world of technocrats and people who are constantly counting things—they don’t understand the power of imagination. I’m putting poetic will in alignment with these other wills. But who has energy, who has power? That’s another story.

VW: I’m thinking a couple of different things about poetic will. As you say, one is about seeing—making the invisible visible, raising something up that others aren’t seeing. I’m wondering if another kind of poetic will comes into play when you make policy—that is, policymaking is an act of imagination, or should be! If you don’t have imagination, you’ll probably make bad policy because you have to be able to imagine what you don’t know yet and what the future might be; you have to imagine what’s not immediately in front of you because policy will affect things that you can’t see and circumstances that you aren’t familiar with.

RB: Policy and imagination condition each other. As a cultural worker it’s my responsibility to prompt imagination and to prompt the community I’m a part of to feel like they have power. I’m in a position to validate the variety of different art forms and cultural practices, especially in the beauty of Oakland, that are engaged in community projects. Laotian women who want to have a community garden at Peralta Hacienda can suddenly become a part of the history of the hacienda—a different kind of hacienda, not like the old one! (*laughs*)

It makes me think back to the NEA four and my own history of organizing around the First Amendment rights of artists related to the culture wars and understanding the power of aesthetic speech and its multiple dimensions. At that moment it was about queer voices and feminist voices that were being attacked by conservatives, as well as the White avant-garde. So we were pushing back on that, knowing that there were many different marginalized voices. My frames about poetic will come from these experiences. If Karen Findley didn’t get naked and do a story about the debasement of women’s voices—her aesthetic vocabulary was nudity—if she didn’t create a controversy, people wouldn’t have gotten it. It was like ba-boom, I get it, I get it!

VW: It strikes me that the terms “being marginalized” and “being on the margins” indicate different things. If you feel like you are being marginalized, you want to be a part of what’s in the center, but you are being pushed out. But “being on the margins” might refer to being in the place where you want to be or where you somehow belong. Artists are often on the margins of society, on the periphery, and so are able to look in to the center, at what is considered the norm, from a different perspective. And that perspective from the edge is valuable. It’s a perspective that’s not only valuable to society, it’s critical because it helps us understand that the norm is not necessary, it’s contingent. There are other ways of being. Newcomers and immigrants are on the margins and can have this kind of sight—an outside insight. But it’s double-edged.

Othering and Intersectionality

RB: I think we are lucky to be in a place like Oakland where there is this growing language about “othering” and understanding how it works—in a way, not going into the position of margins and marginalization. In some way, our careers, I would say, are both inside and the outside. I understand that. Sometimes I’m inside because I have to bring the outside in, I have to bring the margins to the table. And sometimes, I am the margin. It’s an interesting thing to be mindful of: how the language of othering may rise up as when the margins become less distinctive in terms of changing demographics.

VW: I’ve been thinking a lot about why othering is a powerful concept and why intersectionality is important. Racial equity is critical, but I don’t want to separate racial equity from gender equity or from sexual orientation or from disability... We are all complex, intersectional beings—none of us has just one identity, we have many.

One of the things I didn’t quite understand about the current push for racial equity was I thought people were advocating for race first, that race should always be at the top of the priority list, that we needed to solve the race problem first. And I was uncomfortable with this because of how in the past, for example, gender issues could be sidelined in some struggles focused on race and class. But what I learned from the racial equity work that is happening in the City of Oakland is that it’s a matter of “and”—that if you are looking at gender disparities, don’t forget about race, look at gender and race; if you are looking at income disparities, look at them and race—because the data tell us that when you look through the lens of race, the disparities—whether they are about gender, class, disabilities, sexual orientation, citizenship—are more often than not even worse for people of color, for black and brown people. So it’s a reminder to add a racial analysis—look at “X and race”—not because race is more important than anything else, but because we know that race matters. So intersectionality with a racial analysis is, for me, a welcome reminder to embrace our wholeness as we see ourselves *and* as others see us.

What I find powerful about the notion of othering, as opposed to specific –isms, is that it acknowledges that people are infinitely capable of finding ways “to other” other human beings. We might have almost everything in common, but I can always find something that makes you different—you have big feet or your hair is wavy. We can always find ways of distinguishing ourselves from other people. We’re just wired to do that. So that is the thing we always have to be alive to, to be vigilant about when it entails judgment. We need to be aware that though we can make distinctions, it’s important to understand our state of what I’m now calling “radical belonging”—that we all belong to each other, not if we decide to, but as a fact—whether we like it or not! We are connected by our interdependence. What happens to you affects me. Like your quotation of Emmanuel Levinas in the plan: “We” is not the plural of “I.” We are not just a collection of individual egos, we are a collective whole.

The notion of “othering” captures the nuance of our very refined powers of differentiation—powers for good and for evil! Does that make sense?

Deliberative Democracy and Imagination

RB: Yeah, it makes a lot of sense. But what becomes complicated is that we’re in the business of looking at our cultural sector and we’re engaged in policy, and activism, and empowering talent in communities

and that “nuance”—and in doing that, how do we keep our ethics? I want to jump to the notion of the ethico-political and what it means to be a deliberative practitioner and about deliberative democracy.

Context: I don’t remember how I stumbled on this notion of deliberative democracy, maybe it was when I was fighting for First Amendment rights in the ’90s, but I came across this wonderful scholar, Chantal Mouffe, and her husband, Ernesto Laclau, who wrote these books on radical democracy and they came up with this version of deliberative democracy. What lingers in my mind is how it was differentiated from representative democracy. In the American context, representative democracy is always this sort of greater good that’s out there that we move towards. And nobody talks about how you negotiate to create democracy.

VW: This reminds me of Levinas. In a way, you can think of representative democracy as a bunch of “I”s and deliberative democracy is like Levinas’ “we.”

RB: Exactly. So what are the skill sets you need to negotiate? For me, when I’m at that table with public will and political will—which is the table of power in government—I’m going to say, hey, those artists have another kind of will called “poetic will”! I’m the weird dude at the table who is supposed to be speaking for all these different kinds of artists. That’s my position at the table, as some kind of poet-paladin with questions.

Chantal Mouffe uses this term: the ethico-political. And that took me to the question: how do you practice deliberative democracy? And that brought me to a bunch of scholars. And all these scholars I’m thinking of come out of the world of political theory and sociology, and also policy studies. And I realized that in the field of cultural policy, most of my peers don’t think this way. Now I’m going to get all old school—right after the culture wars, Pew [Charitable Trusts], Rockefeller [Foundation], and some others said “we’re in this jam because we don’t have a cultural policy.” So they invested in and created a field of cultural policy, with Princeton’s Center for Arts and Cultural Policy being the lead. But they didn’t look over here (*gestures*) to see that there already was a field of public policy and they’re already thinking about how to create policy and about the notion of the deliberative practitioner. So this is where I’m a poetic will-type. In my policymaking studies, one of the most important books to me was *Decolonizing Methodologies* and understanding how empiricism really dominates the field of policy and there’s no room in that logic for the dream. A bird comes to you in the middle of the night and tells you, “Vanessa, that Bedoya’s a fool” and you wake up and think, “What do I have to do now? The birdie told me!” I’m making a joke, but I know that people in the world have other ways of knowing. So how do you bring that knowledge to the table? And now I come back to poetic will. That imagination, those dreams, you’re taking a walk and suddenly you have a light bulb moment, it’s common. And the people who are all fact-driven don’t know how to handle that power.

VW: One of the reasons I think artists are important is that I think of artists as divers. Let me back up. I have an iceberg metaphor of the mind. The small part above the waterline is our conscious mind. I think they used to think that was about 10% of our brains, and now it’s probably even less—maybe because of climate change (*laughs*). The great majority of our brain function and what drives our behavior is not that readily accessible to us. I think of artists as people who have the ability to dive below the waterline to see what’s down there and bring what they’ve learned back up to share with us. We have some recognition of what they show us, it resonates somehow, even if we don’t always know why. I don’t think artists are the only ones who can do this, but this is an important societal function they serve. Because so much of what drives us is underwater, we need artists, we need ways to tap into those parts of ourselves that we have little awareness of, but condition what we do.

Chains of Equivalences

RB: So to connect this back to democracy, Chantal Mouffe refers to the notion of creating a chain of equivalences as being the work of democracy.

VW: What is a chain of equivalences?

RB: Let's say we're in alignment today, we may be in conflict tomorrow, but we may be aligned again the next day. We understand our positionality to create working relationships. Or at least that's how I define it. I bring that to my practice and the practice of creative placemaking. Say I'm a community activist and I say "Today you and I are in disagreement, Mr. Developer, but tomorrow you and I will be in agreement because we both want sidewalk activity, and we're going to figure out how these things work together. So we need each other." So maybe community benefits agreements are an example of this. They're a way of building social cohesion.

VW: Though sometimes those can be more extractive and adversarial than cooperative.

RB: Right. Two other terms Mouffe uses and differentiates between are "animosities" and "antagonisms"—basically, democracies always have antagonisms in them. "Animosities" are when you go to war—like "I hate you, I'm going to kill you." "Antagonisms" are: today, you're a jerk; tomorrow, you're my cousin. The point she makes is that the failure of democracies is that they don't teach people how to deal with antagonisms. And this goes back to the Oakland story of engagement: the clenched fist, arm-wrestling, and the handshake. As a colleague pointed out, the arm-wrestling doesn't always take place on a level table.

VW: There's always some kind of power imbalance at play.

RB: Yes, that goes to something we haven't talked about yet—that's resource and position—where you have your power. But negotiated equivalences took me down the path of figuring out "what does it mean to do this work and how do I develop my skill set?"

Being a Deliberative Practitioner

VW: You've talked about John Forester's notion of the deliberative practitioner. What does this mean to you?

RB: It means I have to learn how to build chains of equivalences; I need to listen, to look, and to learn, as Forester says; I need to learn how to move from positions of interests to positions of values. These are my professional homework assignments. Sometimes I'm really good at it, sometimes I'm not. And sometimes it's not just me, it's the collective we.

VW: One of the things Forester talks about is the difference between the reflective practitioner who researches and critically listens, and the deliberative practitioner who more actively engages "the we." I think of the Oakland plan as being a phase one that entailed more of a reflective practice because it had been so long since the city had looked at its cultural life. This phase one is teeing up an implementation

phase that is centered on cultural equity and can now be, must be, oriented towards a more deliberative, participatory practice.

RB: Part of doing creative placemaking from the community up is to create the arguments for a behavior shift.

VW: We start with a narrative and move to the arguments, and then to action. The next phase of the Oakland plan needs to be much more engaged with bringing the arguments to the ground together with the community. What does cultural equity look like in this neighborhood or that one? So this current phase of making the argument—that is, the plan as it now stands—creates a platform for the community to do its work from that gives it much more leverage. Or that’s the hope.

So launching deliberative practices with the community to create and build expressive capacity is what’s next. But what does that look like? Both of us have no doubt been in public sector community engagement meetings that addressed policy but weren’t what I would call deliberative practice. So what would a deliberative practitioner do?

RB: How do you answer your own question?

VW: For me, often what is missing is a two-way dialogue—it usually feels one way. The community is asked: what do you want? But how do you answer that question without a lot more context? That is a disempowering set up. Do I tell you that I want a grocery store or do I tell you that we need more open space? Without more information, I don’t know how to give a meaningful answer. I don’t know what you are asking or what’s possible. Often community members are being presented with a solution and they haven’t had the discussion of what exactly the problem is that this is a solution to, or if this is the best solution to that problem.

RB: I think in some ways this is linked to decision-making and how it works, and who has power and who doesn’t, and what you just said, the information and knowledge that is involved in decision-making.

In my Tucson experience, I was much closer to artists and funding artists’ projects that were much closer to the decision-making and involving the community and neighborhood folk in decision-making and making the work or making the argument. I don’t have that vessel in Oakland yet, but I’m working on it. But what we know from artists and arts organizations who do have robust community ties is that their success lies in how they make decisions and how power is distributed. We can tell that story through our grantees. But I need to study it more here to make sure I’m telling the story right.

VW: Part of it is about naming things we know, but we don’t say, we don’t talk about. One of things that is often missing from community engagement meetings is that the people who are direct stakeholders—who have skin in the game—aren’t there putting their cards on the table. How can we build this chain of equivalences unless the stakeholders are at the same table to say, “this is what I have, but this is what I need, and this is what I’d like to see happen.” I’m talking about the developers, and the elected officials, the city staff, the nonprofits, and the community all together. Are we talking about safety, are we talking about mobility, are we talking about access to retail, are we talking about retaining a sense of community cohesion? The questions need to be contextualized and pitched at the right level of analysis and decision-making to be meaningful and productive for the table they are being brought to.

RB: I don't know if community engagement is different from deliberative practice. I think community engagement could expand its frame to understand how to have a better deliberative practice—so they rub up against each other. I think in the field of deliberative practitioners and policies, I have yet to see those kinds of thinkers in the field of culture.

VW: Right!

RB: This is the point. What we say in the plan—and maybe it's odd because we sound like anarchists—we are more concerned with governance than with government. Where's my book? The Dutch are really better at this than we are: here's the cat that I go to—*Authoritative Governance* by Maarten A. Hajer.

VW: I need to add that to my syllabus, Professor! I really do appreciate all the intellectual resources you are bringing to this work.

But I want to get back to some Forester language: deliberative practice surfaces stories of experience and engages critical reflection. My question is: often we get stuck in the story part and we don't know how to take that into the critical reflection realm, so what's needed for us to get there?

RB: This is where Maribel Alvarez [Southwest Center, U of AZ] is a great thinker. How do we embrace the ethnographic research approach; how do we tell those stories; how do we raise up not just the witnessing, but the critical witnessing; how does this all lead to policymaking? We don't do that well enough.

VW: That has been a frustration for me in the cultural sector. Even with those of us who want to make change, who do cultural work in the old school sense—what I find has often been missing is that it doesn't get past story and into policymaking, story doesn't feed enough into a kind of critical policy analysis.

RB: This is where the practitioner on the ground level needs to know who their intermediary is—and maybe it's them, but often it isn't. They need to know who has the skill set to translate and go make the policy argument. I don't expect people on the ground to necessarily have that skill set...yet.

VW: People like Elena [EastSide Arts Alliance] who are working with Margareta [The Dellums Institute for Social Justice] on the Black culture zone.

RB: Let's take two more examples. We have Favianna Rodriguez [CultureStr/ke] and Jeff Chang [Institute for Diversity in the Arts, Stanford University]. Favi is fearless and is willing to do arm-wrestling. Jeff is really smart and he's making the argument. Jeff's whole narrative shift thing is important. There's the work and there's the argument, and sometimes the work *is* the argument. I think that is where you and I and many people... How do I say this?

I was speaking at this conference about new narrative—this creative practice of writing, mainly queers and feminists who were writing in the '70s and '80s who became affiliated with this school called "new narrative," which was blurring the lines between fiction and autobiography. Somehow I'm associated with it—I don't know why. I like to say that it's not that I'm a new narrative writer, I just dated guys who were in the school! (*laughs*) I was actually more involved in the support system for it. So I said at the conference, "I'm a new narrative policy wonk—meaning, I'm going to create the policy argument grounded in story and critical witnessing and a multiplicity of voices.

I guess what I'd love to do in phase two of the Oakland culture plan is answer "how do I create the skill set among the practitioners to be better at moving the train of policy without them abandoning their practice on the ground? This goes back to my current obsession with the dramaturgy of public policy. I am interested in what's in the dramaturgy toolbox (stage, script, actors, setting...) and how these frames could be of use for artists and policymakers who are working on arts-based civic engagement projects. I am motivated by encountering artists who are bewildered by policymaking as well as public policymakers who are beginning to engage with artists in their field of practice, e.g. planning, transportation, etc. and how to advance their abilities via this analysis.

VW: Here's an idea I had while reading *The Deliberative Practitioner*: the government is always going to be in the business of asking the community what they think about this or that policy or action. The problem is each department is responsible for doing their own engagement work, or at least that's how it is in Oakland, and they may or may not be good at it depending what expertise and resources they have in-house. Sometimes they might want to hire an outside consultant in order to get that expertise or be at arm's distance to make sure they get frank comments from the community, but usually that's not necessary because you want to be in the room to be accountable and responsive, and people in Oakland are not afraid to speak their minds! But wouldn't it be good to have a unit in the city government that had a developed and deep practice of deliberative engagement that could support all the departments on that kind of process work? Maybe it could live in the Race and Equity Department or somewhere else, but it shouldn't be the burden of each department to figure out how to do this each time something comes up and community input and dialogue is needed. People in government are hired because they know about zoning or codes or regulations or construction guidelines or financial analysis—not about deliberative practice. And until developing that skill set becomes a requirement of planning and public policy schools, that expertise is really needed in government and needs to be brought forward in a consistent way so the community isn't driven crazy by siloed approaches. I don't know if this is happening in any other cities.

RB: I would love to be able to say to my colleagues that I could help to create a portfolio of expertise to help you do your community engagement.

VW: One of the other things you've talked about it is doing a stakeholder analysis. I want to make sure I understand what you mean by that.

RB: In a way, I think the whole our planning process was stakeholder analysis. We could have done it better, we could have been better framers, etc., but we set it up so everybody could tell us what was working for them and not working for them about cultural life in the city. And what I heard that kept coming up was space and neighborhood identity. I think I can tell the story of the cultural plan being grounded in really listening to people and getting the stakeholder analysis from a variety of different people—from my colleagues in government to community needs—at least given the resources we had to work with.

VW: I think we have covered a lot of ground in this discussion. Of course, there is some much more to say about all of it and even more to do, but for now I want to say that it was a pleasure and a privilege to walk this path with you, and I know we will keep exploring this and getting our hands dirty! We should start a club for constant gardeners.