

AMERICAN ARTSCAPE®

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Bridges to Possibilities

Arts and the Built Environment



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This issue

The arts have the power to transcend boundaries and communicate across diverse landscapes, serving as bridges that connect individuals, communities, and cultures. Whether through visual art, music, or storytelling, the arts can forge connections, dissolve barriers, and contribute to the rich fabric of our collective human experience. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)—known for its role as convener, connector, and catalyst—is not just a funder, but a national resource for the arts. The NEA is committed to supporting artists, culture bearers, and arts organizations that are stepping outside of their traditional lanes and working alongside government officials, farmers, doctors, architects, and more. Against the backdrop of recent federal infrastructure investments, the arts and cultural sector is seizing the opportunity to forge connections in communities around the nation through the collaborative efforts of artists, community stakeholders, and designers.

On January 30, 2024, the White House Domestic Policy Council and the NEA co-hosted Healing, Bridging, Thriving: A Summit on Arts and Culture in our Communities. This landmark event convened government officials, policymakers, artists, advocates, academics, and leaders, all driven by a collective commitment to unlock the transformative potential of arts and culture. The summit also served as a hub for groundbreaking ideas, nurturing discussions that explored how arts organizations and artists can contribute to individual and community health, as well as breathe life into physical spaces and champion equitable outcomes. As NEA Chair Jackson noted in her remarks at the summit, “Last spring, when honoring recipients of the National Medal of Arts and the National Medal of Humanities, President Biden referred to artists as truth tellers, bridge builders, and change seekers. And I can’t think of an area of policy or practice that wouldn’t benefit from truth tellers, bridge builders, and change seekers.”

This edition of *American Artscape* will delve into the intersection of arts and physical infrastructure, exploring the pivotal role artists and designers play in shaping inclusive and vibrant spaces. From the planning phase to design and implementation, this issue will spotlight how artists and arts organizations contribute to the development of spaces that resonate with community vision. These stories illuminate the impact of the arts and physical infrastructure in cultivating not only robust and flourishing communities, but resilient and empowered individuals who are daring to dream big and, as Chair Jackson said at the summit, “stand in the space of possibility.”

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Cover: *Art on the Atlanta BeltLine* installation *Somos Borincanos*, a part of artist ARRRRADDICT’S Taino mural series, which documents an all-female Taino tribe in La Isla De Borikén and honors the artist’s Puerto Rican cultural roots. Photo by Erin Sintos, courtesy of Atlanta BeltLine

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Building the **Power** of Arts and Culture

BY MARIA ROSARIO JACKSON, PHD

At their most powerful, arts and culture do not exist in a silo, separate from all other dimensions of our society. We are able to unleash their power when we position the arts in all facets of our daily lives, communities, towns, and cities. This includes the development of our built environment. Integrating design, creativity, artistic sensibility, and imagination helps to create physical infrastructure that can impact and nourish our sense of belonging and social well-being, which are critical components of thriving and healthy communities. Trained as an urban planner, I recognize the importance of the built environment in shaping quality of life and outcomes in many ways. Elevating the arts in our built environment contributes to fostering social cohesion, making opportunity accessible to all, and bolstering our democracy and civic life.

In the same way that thoughtful infrastructure design has the potential to deliver on these benefits to communities in equitable ways, it can also create disparate impacts across and within communities. Historically, past large-scale federal infrastructure projects—our nation's highways, bridges, and railroads—served as conduits of connectivity and convenience for some communities. In other communities, particularly in communities of color, many of these projects sliced through neighborhoods and neglected community needs, resulting in social and cultural division, environmental injustice, health disparities, decreased economic opportunity, racial segregation, cultural erasure, and more.

◀ NEA Chair Jackson at Taller Comunidad La Goyco in Puerto Rico, where local nonprofit Estuario has held artist residencies. (left to right) Adriana García, a previous artist-in-residence at Estuario; Evelyn Huertas, M.S., U.S. EPA Region 2, Caribbean Environmental Protection Division; Chair Jackson; Brenda Torres Barreto, Executive Director of Estuario; and Mariana Reyes, Executive Director at Taller Comunidad La Goyco. Photo by Katherine Bray-Simons, National Endowment for the Arts



Today, with a surge of historic federal infrastructure investments made possible by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act, we have an opportunity to acknowledge these wrongdoings and help make things right. What I have seen and believe is that the arts are a precursor to what we say we aspire to as a nation of justice and opportunity. Integrating arts, culture, and the contributions of artists and arts workers in the development of our infrastructure will not only improve our physical infrastructure, but animate in positive ways the inextricable link between it and the state of our civic and social infrastructure, our social fabric, and the soul of our nation.

At the NEA, we are proud to have joined forces with our federal partners and provided grant support to organizations across the nation to adopt an arts-integrated approach to our infrastructure challenges. Throughout this issue of *American Artscape*, you will read about a number of projects and organizations that exemplify how this country's artists, creatives, and cultural institutions continue to break new ground to infuse the arts in physical infrastructure across the country.

Arts and culture belong at every point along the continuum of infrastructure development—in planning, design, execution, and use—because arts professionals and designers play a crucial role

in helping to build and animate inclusive spaces that align with a community's vision. When artists' contributions are elevated and valued, infrastructure projects can shift from being functional to being transformative. For example, this is evident when looking at the Atlanta BeltLine's redevelopment to enhance mobility and sustainability, Change Labs' design work to support Native and Indigenous entrepreneurship in Arizona and New Mexico, and so many of the other projects.

Against the backdrop of unprecedented federal investment, and inspired by the many examples in this issue of *American Artscape*, it is imperative that we continue to unlock new possibilities for our physical infrastructure through the arts. After decades of neglecting infrastructure at the federal level, this is a moment of immense potential. Imagine if we were able to learn from our past and develop physical infrastructure with the intention of unifying us, deepening our ties to one another, and honoring the stories and legacies of our communities.

We can make this vision a reality. All of the stories in this edition of *American Artscape* are testaments to this. The integration of arts, culture, and the talents of artists are critically important to address significant challenges and essential to building beautiful, just, inspiring, and thriving communities.



Maria Rosario Jackson, PhD is chair of the National Endowment for the Arts.

◀ NEA Chair Jackson toured the Eastside Trail of the Atlanta BeltLine in March 2023 to learn more about how they incorporated the arts in their efforts to connect neighborhoods, improve economic opportunity, and create equitable and safe spaces for healthy living. NEA File Photo



Resilient Entrepreneurs

Change Labs Brings Business Incubators to Tribal Lands

BY AUNYE BOONE

In the heart of the Navajo and Hopi Nations, where the vast expanse of rugged terrain meets the sky, Change Labs, a Native-led nonprofit, is reshaping the landscape of entrepreneurship on tribal land in Shiprock, New Mexico, and Tuba City, Arizona—providing free work spaces that support the advancement of artists, vendors, and entrepreneurs within Native communities. Heather Fleming (Diné/Navajo), co-founder and executive director of Change Labs, traces the organization’s genesis back to her own quest for connection between her academic pursuits and the needs of her Native community. “When I

went to college, like all good Navajo kids, the tribe gives us money and tells us, ‘Go educate yourself and come back and do good things,’ and I wanted to do that,” Fleming said. “My cousins had done that. But when I went to college, I wasn’t sure how to [bring back] the skills that I learned there.” With a bachelor’s degree in product design from Stanford University, Fleming went on to pursue a ten-year career in international development.

“That whole time I was looking for a way to bring the skills that I had, which probably can best be described at that point as creative problem-solving. I was running a design firm



▲ June 2023 grand opening of the Tuba City Entrepreneurship Hub. From left to right: Council Delegate Otto Tso (Diné/Navajo), Change Labs executive director Heather Fleming (Diné/Navajo), Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren (Diné/Navajo), Change Labs co-founder Jessica Stago (Diné/Navajo), Change Labs Board Chair Brett Isaac (Diné/Navajo). Photo by Jesse Wodin

in San Francisco called Catapult Design and we were working with social entrepreneurs around the world to design new systems, new products that were benefiting base-of-the-pyramid populations,” said Fleming. “I had a lot of experience at that point working with startups, and the startups I was working with were working on a lot of the same challenges that we have on the reservation, like access to clean water and rural electrification. I was really interested in the cross-pollination of those ideas.”

In 2013, Fleming joined forces with fellow Change Labs co-founders Jessica Stago (Diné/Navajo), and Natasha Hale (Diné/Navajo), and launched the inaugural Change Labs event, which celebrated Native entrepreneurship. Alvin Warren of the W.W. Kellogg Foundation attended the event and told Fleming, “I’m going to give you guys a half a million dollars, and you do more of these events.” Over the next three years, Fleming, Hale, and Stago went on to host three more events. Fleming said, “Between the three of us, we were creating these constellations of activities, business incubation, and new digital tools for entrepreneurs that were coupled to these events that were celebrating technology and entrepreneurship and innovation in various locations around the reservation, and each event got bigger and bigger.”

In 2017, one of the working group events in Tuba City brought to light that there was no hub on the reservation to get all of the working tools that a creative or entrepreneur might need. Fleming said, “Everything is paper-based. People have to drive for hours to get any type of information. There’s no Nolo [publisher of do-it-

yourself books] article for how to start a business on the reservation. The whole process was kind of cloaked in secrecy and money and myths, so I really gravitated toward this idea where you could come in [to an entrepreneurship hub] and be greeted with a friendly person who wanted to help you.” Fleming, Stago, and Hale decided that it was time to stop doing Change Labs events in their spare time, and, in 2019, Change Labs was established as the Navajo Nation’s first coworking and business incubation center. The organization’s Kinship Loaning programs require participants to be Navajo or Hopi, to fill out an application that shows a business’ profit and loss, and to have community member recommendations. Fleming said, “We don’t pull credit. We don’t ask for collateral. Collateral doesn’t really exist in Native communities.”

In 2023, the first Change Labs entrepreneurship hub (also known as E-ship hub) was created in Tuba City and serves as a “place where entrepreneurs are welcomed and celebrated, and where you’ll meet other entrepreneurs, where you can start tearing down some of the cultural barriers, the social barriers, the information-access barriers, maybe even financial barriers,” Fleming said. The 1,400-square-foot space provides a free work area that includes access to laptops, wi-fi, a print and scan center, business coaching sessions, and a meeting room. With support from the Arts Endowment for architectural designs, the next entrepreneurship hub will be built by 2025 in Shiprock, New Mexico.

Fleming explained the symbiotic relationship between design and entrepreneurship: “To me, design is all about creative problem-solving. What is entrepreneurship other than problem-solving?” One example of creative problem-solving is from Shiprock community roundtable discussions, where the importance of food came up as a way to bring people together. The design team listened to the community feedback, and a kitchen is set to be at the center of the hub. Fleming said, “I don’t know if it’s the golden rule, but you don’t design for yourself. Who is your customer? What are their needs? How do you root your solutions in those needs?”

Working with MASS Design Group, led by Joseph Kunkel (Northern Cheyenne Nation) and Nathaniel Corum, Fleming noted, “When they designed our Tuba City E-ship hub, they were very mindful of how the space reflected the brand that we were trying to build. Having them on board for the second E-ship hub, they can take the physical space aesthetic that they established for

us in Tuba City and translate that to Shiprock. It's a very different challenge, because in Tuba City we built a building from the ground up. Whereas in Shiprock, we are leasing a space within the Navajo Nation shopping centers, and it's a bigger space than our one in Tuba City."

Change Labs is fine-tuning their search for someone in the community to help lead the charge on carving out artistic spaces at the entrepreneurship hubs. Fleming said, "I worked with Stanford University to bring two of our Navajo artists out to teach a class last fall, and they got to go into the product realization lab there and visit the d.school [a program where people use design to develop their own creative potential and make positive change in the world]. I wasn't surprised. They came back and they were like, 'This is what we need on the reservation,' and I said, 'I know! One of you guys should do it or find somebody who could do that. Let's put a business plan together.'"

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Change Labs had a goal of building six entrepreneurship hubs around the reservation. "We didn't have anything online and now everything is online and everybody expects to join via Zoom. They prefer that versus coming in, despite the fact that the anecdotal data that we have suggests that the in-person peer learning is one of the most valuable things we have to offer. We're trying to reconcile that tension and also reconcile the fact that it is incredibly hard to build physical infrastructure within tribal lands," said Fleming. "Knowing all of those hurdles and knowing that the world has changed, one question I have for the board is about whether or not six entrepreneurship hubs is still correct, or if we need to think about how the world of work is going to be in the future. Maybe we don't need to rely as much on brick and mortar as we thought before, or maybe it is the opposite."

In terms of measuring success for Change Labs, Fleming explained, "If we look at what Indigenous entrepreneurship looked like before White people came, it didn't look like Silicon Valley at all and it was rooted in reciprocity. What that translates into is how we measure success of business activity. Of course, we talk about the importance of making money, but our goal isn't to get people set up to make the most

money possible, because we know that's not our traditional value. We do measure the things that are directly tied to our theory of change, and that is increasing human capital, increasing social capital, access to physical and financial capital, and increasing economic agency."

Over the past year, Change Labs has been developing a framework to define what economic well-being within an Indigenous community looks like. During their research, they discovered that a group in Hawai'i has developed a framework for community health, but no other tribes have done it for economics. "It's going to take a few years of data collection to start seeing patterns," said Fleming.

As data may fluctuate and the world evolves, what remains constant is the pivotal role that art, design, and entrepreneurship play in empowering Native communities and fostering economic resilience. Native artists are a critical piece in Native history, and if you travel to Navajo Nation and browse at a flea market or roadside vendor, you'll find many artists selling handmade jewelry, carvings, pottery, weavings, and rugs. Fleming said, "Many of our artisans don't necessarily see themselves as entrepreneurs. We [Change Labs] like to celebrate them as the resilient entrepreneurs who have basically kept our culture and our communities alive for decades and try to instill pride in that. I think there's a lot to be done in building pride and addressing lateral violence amongst our own people. I see entrepreneurship as one of many ways that we can do that."

Aunye Boone is the editor of American Artscape.

▼ Change Labs and MASS Design Group team members and community representatives gather under the portal of the Change Labs E-ship hub to envision the anticipated expansion of the Change Labs Entrepreneurship Hub at Tuba City, Arizona (Navajo Nation). Photo courtesy of MASS Design Group



Karyn Olivier's installation of *Sampling (need you)*, consisting of construction water barriers, audio amplifiers, and audio of construction zones in Philadelphia neighborhoods, at Tonya Bonakdar Gallery in 2023.



FROM TRASH TO TREASURE

RAIR Practices Resourcefulness through the
Artist-in-Residence Program

BY CAROLYN COONS
All photos courtesy of RAIR

On any given day at Revolution Recovery, a 3.5-acre commercial waste facility in northeast Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, an excavator might be used to move some of the more than 550 tons of material that come through the premises daily.

That same excavator could also serve as a makeshift boom crane to capture a tracking shot for a film project, with a camera ratchet-strapped to its arm. This unorthodox use of Revolution Recovery's equipment is facilitated by Recycled Artist in Residency (RAIR) Philly, an artist-in-residence program that has been working with the company for more than a decade. Before drone technology became available, one of RAIR's artists used the excavator in exactly that way, with the assistance of RAIR staff and consent from the facility.

"[The recycling facility,] both in material and equipment and site, is available to be co-opted creatively, as long as we can do it in a way that is safe for both the artist, RAIR staff, and for operations," said sculptor Billy Dufala, who is also RAIR's co-founder and creative director.

As an emerging artist in the 2000s, Dufala was constantly salvaging materials from abandoned buildings and dumpsters—motivated primarily by economics. He was also inspired by the Recology San Francisco Artist in Residence Program, located at the San Francisco Recycling and Transfer Center. Unfortunately for Dufala, the program was only open to artists in the greater Bay area, but he dreamed of forging that kind of partnership somewhere in Philadelphia, not only for himself but for other artists.

"I'm of the mind" he said, "that when you're pursuing something that is of interest or a potential resource, that you're doing it with paying forward to community in mind."

In 2009, Dufala met the owner of Revolution Recovery, who then introduced him to Fern Gookin, a graduate student in sustainable design at the time.

"[Fern] pitched her thesis as starting an artist resource at their facility," Dufala said. "And they're like 'Oh, we know this crazy guy, Billy. You should probably talk to him.'"

Between Gookin's thesis project and Revolution Recovery's facilities, Dufala's dream was realized.

RAIR was piloted for years before developing into the formalized program it is today, which consists of two residency types: the standard and the "biggie shortie." The standard residency is a more traditional studio-based program while the biggie shortie residency prompts artists to

complete a big project in a short amount of time. "By facilitating artists' direct engagement with the waste stream, RAIR encourages residents to consider their studio practice through the lens of sustainability and to thoughtfully reassess their processes of material sourcing and waste disposal," the RAIR website notes.

"In a lot of practices, it's making these things that you then bring back to your studio or you crate and ship and store and have to transport, or show in a museum or a gallery, or whatever," Dufala said. "[The biggie shortie] is really about that co-opting of site materials and equipment in a way that you're experimenting. For me, it's a model that allows a lot of latitude and experimentation for artists, room to fail.... At the end of the process, once you've captured and documented that project, it can go back into the waste stream if it needs to."

The residency is also not prescriptive to the type of art that has to come out of this engagement. Sculpture is a natural fit for a facility with hundreds of tons of interesting material to work with, but the residency has also attracted other kinds of visual artists, multidisciplinary artists creating theater or film, and two years ago, RAIR welcomed its first composer.

Both residencies, as RAIR's website states, are intended not only to stretch artists' imaginations of what is possible with the resources available at the waste facility, they are also intended to demystify an often-observed reality.

"People don't understand the back end of these systems because it's designed to mostly be invisible," Dufala said. "I don't think that you could spend even a day in a place like this and have it not drastically impact your urgency for

▼ Hsin Yu-Chen (2022 Open Call Resident) affixes a camera to an excavator claw.





▲ Eugenio Salas (2021 Resident) firing up the Fogone 2021, made of metal scraps and a 55-gallon drum.

change in behavior, because the systems will not change unless the consumers and the behavior ask it to.”

While RAIR staff try to have as little impact as possible on operations, Dufala said the entire facility is at the disposal of artists. During her residency, artist Karen Oliver wanted to film the sort line—a conveyor belt with stations that separates waste

by material type—without any of its workers. The sort line would never normally run without people on the ground, but through his relationship with operations and by compensating workers to come in on a Sunday, Dufala was able to realize Oliver’s vision without losing any material in the process.

“I think a lot of what we’ve done over the years in terms of building out our toolbox and our knowledge base is slowly aggregating all of these answers for artists’ questions and being able to solve for questions and problems and inquiries in a way that satisfies whatever it is the artist’s needs might be, but in a safe way being able to cultivate a bank of resources and potential opportunities,” Dufala said.

The workers who worked on that Sunday of Oliver’s filming were impressed by the effect of seeing a process they knew so intimately in a new light. While they try to stay out of workers’ ways as much as possible out of respect for their duties, Dufala said they do occasionally engage

with RAIR’s work, whether as a target audience or as a subject of work.

Another artist, Eugenio Salas, based his project on immigration and food—mapping cultural heritage through recipes. Using materials at the Revolution Recovery and with the help of the facility’s mechanic, Salas welded together steel to make a grill and then cooked for all of the operations staff. With the mechanic’s wife, he photographed their hands holding the food he cooked, documenting the occasion.

“People were like ‘When are you working with Eugenio again? When are you going to cook lunch again?’” Dufala said.

Due to the heavy machinery and processes taking place at Revolution Recovery, the risk and liability of bringing an artist in could be daunting, but Dufala said that “most things are possible” with mutual respect, trust, and maintenance of relationships between RAIR and operations staff.

“Not to be mistaken, we exist here because of their generosity,” Dufala said of staff at the facility. “And there’s something to be said about taking that and passing that on in this kind of form of radical generosity to those we serve. I think that that’s really important in this day and age as people’s resources seemingly are restricted, but there’s a lot more going on behind and around that challenge that perception.”

Carolyn Coons is a public affairs specialist in the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.

► Eugenio Salas prepares and serves lunch for workers at the recycling center.



Joyfully Together

How the Atlanta BeltLine Connects Neighbors to Their City and to Each Other

BY PAULETTE BEETE

All photos by the Sintoses, courtesy of Atlanta BeltLine



The 2017 Atlanta BeltLine Lantern Parade marches along the BeltLine's Eastside Trail. The parade first began in 2010 and has become an annual staple since its inception, with thousands participating in the family-friendly event annually.

Chantelle Rytter wasn't exactly thrilled when circumstances necessitated a move from New Orleans, Louisiana, where she'd lived for more than a decade, to Atlanta, Georgia. An artist who creates lantern parades using giant puppets, Rytter recalled, "When I first moved here, I called it a soulless parking lot." She couldn't help comparing how New Orleans' residents engaged their public space with the lack of similar engagement in Atlanta. In particular, it was New Orleans' first Mardi Gras post-Katrina, a potent measure of the shattered city's resilience and determination, that compellingly illustrated for Rytter that its traditional parade culture was comparable to a "civic wellness program doing this thing that so few things can do.... [New Orleanians] regularly occupy their public space so joyfully together."

This started Rytter thinking about how she could bring that same community-centered culture to her new home. "New Orleans krewes see the parades as a gift to their city. So I

thought that I should try to give that gift to our city. And that was rolling around in my head when the BeltLine gave a call for proposals in this brand new public space that didn't exist yet, that hopefully our city is going to love and be connected by. The BeltLine's connecting our in-town neighborhoods really rang a bell with me because that's what I want to do too," she explained.

Rytter's story exemplifies the central mission of the arts and culture program of the Atlanta BeltLine: to give the city's residents a way to connect in a deeper way with their community and with each other. The BeltLine itself, a series of pedestrian and bike-friendly trails built on the city's defunct rail lines, will eventually run roughly 22 miles, touching about 45 adjacent neighborhoods on the city's east, south, and west sides.

As Atlanta BeltLine Chief Equity and Inclusion Officer Nonet Sykes described, "The BeltLine is the largest, most comprehensive



redevelopment project in the nation right now.” The project includes not only art installations and participatory arts events on the site itself, but also economic development and inclusion strategies, such as affordable housing, a façade improvement program for adjacent businesses, job creation for artists, and a legacy retention program to make sure residents aren’t gentrified out of their homes. Sykes added that “the BeltLine project hinges on a vision where all Atlantans can benefit and prosper from all of the economic growth and activity associated with the BeltLine.”

The larger organization, Atlanta BeltLine, Inc., which operates as a quasi-governmental agency, also pays careful attention to the socioeconomic demographics of surrounding communities so it can, according to Sykes, “identify what we call equity priority areas, [neighborhoods that have] higher rates of unemployment, lower median household income, higher housing cost burdens, and greater dependency on transit. We use those four metrics to help us identify targeted areas where we would invest additional resources to ensure that those communities could benefit too from all of the development that was happening. We didn’t want them to be overlooked, to not have access to all of the resources they could have to help them thrive.”

Surprisingly, given their central role now, the arts were not an original part of the project proposal. But when planners considered how they could incentivize citizens to use the converted walking trails, a concept that was still relatively new to urban spaces in 2005, arts and culture offerings, were a natural fit. *Art on the Atlanta BeltLine*, an exhibition of temporary and permanent public art along the walking trails, was born.

Atlanta BeltLine Vice President of Planning, Engagement and Art Lynnette Reid explained,

“The idea that was the birthplace for *Art on the Atlanta BeltLine* was to create these cool public spaces for people to activate and engage with while they’re on the trail, and that was the sole purpose. We’ve got to get people on the trail period.... [Today] there’s an expectation that when you’re out there, you’re experiencing the culture of Atlanta in its many different forms.”

Speaking from an artist’s point of view, Rytter said, “The BeltLine itself is a developer. It’s a big giant development, and they have taken the time and the money to have an art program. I feel like you can bring any idea to *Art on the Atlanta BeltLine*. We’ve got famous people doing expensive things and we have local people who have never stepped out before. So I think it’s fantastic that there’s a solid art program around this giant development.”

The community is invited not only to participate in the arts while on the BeltLine’s trails, but also to be part of the arts and culture planning process. As Reid noted, “We’ve learned over time to also hear what the people want to see. Atlanta has had a large, rich history and culture before there was a BeltLine. So you come into that space, you have to acknowledge that and work with that. We have a lot of processes in place to allow the community to weigh in.” The programming process also includes Atlanta’s practicing artists, such as Rytter, so that the selected work is artistically at a high level as well as inclusive and representative of the larger community. The permanent collection alone contains art work by local, regional, and nationally known artists, including visual artist Mel Chin, illustrator and muralist Aziza Andre, and multidisciplinary artist EuGene Byrd III, currently the BeltLine’s curator-in-residence.

Sykes noted that by actively engaging with Atlanta’s residents, the BeltLine’s arts and culture program—which received NEA Our Town grants in 2014 and 2015 as well as subsequent NEA grants for public artworks and performances—has helped strengthen the civic health of the community. “We allow the community to hold us accountable, and that level of accountability is then transposed to other organizations throughout the city. They’re looking to hold other city agencies accountable, and then they show up expecting the same level of engagement, the same level of transparency, the same level of feedback and input,” she said. “I think we’ve helped to elevate community engagement and accountability and transparency through the way we approach our work at the BeltLine.”

◀ Fifth grade students and their teacher from Parkside Elementary in Atlanta’s Grant Park neighborhood worked with *Art on the Atlanta BeltLine* muralist Aysha Pennerman (not pictured) to create four temporary murals on the BeltLine’s Southside Trail near the school. The 2023 initiative marked the first art collaboration between Atlanta Public Schools and the BeltLine.



The BeltLine's deep engagement with arts and culture has also had economic benefits for the community, including its business owners and artists. Local businesses and developers are eager to work with artists, including offering them free or low-cost studio space and employing them to help beautify their sites.

Sykes said, "We are helping businesses that are located adjacent to the BeltLine refurbish or refresh the exterior of their business to make them more appealing, more inviting, increase foot traffic, and thereby increase revenue."

Reid added, "[For businesses,] it's not enough just for you to have the cool place to have coffee or what have you, but there has to be something visually interesting, something culturally significant as part of your development."

Though the BeltLine has only officially been open to the public since 2008, it has already changed the character of the city. "When you have a significant infrastructure project like this, there's definitely change that comes as a part of that.... We've seen amenities come to communities that historically have not seen those amenities. And so there's definitely a lot of success that way," said Reid.

"I believe the BeltLine is enhancing connectivity, enhancing mobility, enhancing

economic opportunity, and really just positively transforming Atlanta for the better, preparing it to enter into the next century," said Sykes. "When I came to the city, it just felt like the infrastructure didn't support all that Atlanta wanted to be, and so I think this is the first phase of really preparing the city to be [the] world-class global city that it ideally wants to become."

Rytter's BeltLine Lantern Parade has now become a signature event, which has led to additional parades in other Atlanta neighborhoods. Needless to say, thanks to the BeltLine and the opportunities it has presented, she's changed her mind about her new home. "I think that the cultural characteristics of a place is what connects people to it. When you love a place, you will behave differently and do things that you wouldn't do if you didn't love it. I think all of the visual, structural art on the BeltLine contributes to the sense of space and our collective character, like what we see ourselves as," she said. "I think when we lay down joyful shared memories together in a place, it's a blessing on that place. Beautiful things happen here."

Paulette Beete is the social media manager in the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.

▼ Atlanta BeltLine Lantern Parade Founder and Creative Director Chantelle Rytter.





A WELCOMING HUB OF MUSICAL ACTIVITY FOR ALL ARKANSANS

Christina Littlejohn of
Arkansas Symphony Orchestra



INTERVIEW BY ANN MEIER BAKER

Long before I came to the National Endowment for the Arts, I met Christina Littlejohn, the CEO of the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra (ASO), during an intensive professional development opportunity for arts organization leaders. It didn't take long for me to recognize her warmth and kindness, her passion for the arts, and her wicked-smart intellect. Since then, I've kept my eye on her work at the ASO, which is a frequent NEA grantee.

The 58-year-old orchestra has never had its own permanent home, but that will no longer be the case when they open the new Stella Boyle Smith Music Center this September. Named after a woman who helped start the orchestra in her home years ago, the center will also have specific spaces named for other individuals who made sure that the organization continued to thrive

over the last few decades. In this way, the new space will honor the past at the same time that it meets current community needs, with an eye toward future generations of Arkansans as well.

I recently spoke with Littlejohn to learn about this exciting \$11.75 million endeavor that will be located in the East Village of Little Rock, an area that has been historically overlooked and underutilized. What follows is the story of the project's evolution in her own words.

THE SPARK THAT IGNITED THE PROJECT

With just one rehearsal hall in a building over 100 years old, we struggled to accommodate our three youth ensembles and staff. We made it work by using the storage room and even

▲ (TOP) Architectural rendering of the new Stella Boyle Smith Music Center. Photo courtesy of WER Architects

(BOTTOM) Christina Littlejohn speaking at the Topping-Out ceremony for the new Stella Boyle Smith Music Center. Photo by Nelson Chenault

having rehearsals outdoors sometimes. One day, I'm looking out the window at a violin sectional rehearsing on the lawn when the sky suddenly opened up and the rain came pouring down. These poor kids, struggling to protect their instruments, came running inside. I knew we had to do better for these young musicians, especially since we had added a popular string academy to teach kids violin and cello. It was awesome to see the demand for the classes, but it was also clear we had to have more space. It was especially important to our music director, Geoffrey Robson, and the directors of our youth programs that we offer a professionally equipped space that shows them they are valued and that their musical creativity matters.

A SPACE REIMAGINED

The Arkansas Symphony Orchestra will continue to perform in the previously established Robinson Performance Hall [a rental hall], which can accommodate an audience of 2,200. The new music center is more of a community space with six practice rooms for private lessons; group lessons and rehearsals; as well as a 300-seat performance hall, Morgan Hall, which will accommodate concerts by small ensembles, such as a string quartet and piano and rehearsals of the youth ensembles and the ASO community orchestra, comprised primarily of amateur adults.

One player in the community orchestra was 104 years old when she had to quit because she couldn't carry her cello up the stairs to rehearsals anymore. The new space will be accessible to people of all ages and to those who need

accommodations, so maybe she will be able to rejoin the group. We'll also have a catering kitchen so we can do events there, such as lunchtime concerts, and will be able to experiment with more ways to reach our community.

The music center will include a broadcast recording studio, which we realized we needed during the pandemic when we started broadcasting the Bedtime with Bach series that reached over a million people from 30 different countries. The facility will also allow us to record programs that schools can use for their music programs. Students can even use the recording studio to make their college and music camp audition recordings.

As the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra, we are very excited about the endless possibilities of the broadcast/recording studio to serve the entire state. Members of the youth orchestra come from 33 different communities to play with us, and our professional musicians currently travel the four corners of the state to perform for schools. The broadcast studio will help us reach thousands of kids and adults in counties that can't easily get to Little Rock.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS

Our music director was previously our youth orchestra director, so he knows firsthand the impact of the youth orchestras and our programs for youth. To him, raising the funds and creating this building through the pandemic shows teamwork, discipline, and resilience, and those are the very same qualities that we help the members of our youth orchestras develop.

In addition to the music director, our orchestra musicians—many of whom are also teachers—have had a role in envisioning the new facility.

In 2023, we created a community task force with representatives from the Central Arkansas Library System, City of Little Rock, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, Blue Cross Blue Shield, [William J.] Clinton Presidential Library, and others, including the pastor of worship and arts at Saint Mark Baptist Church, Darius Nelson. The task force helped us be thoughtful about how to ensure this music center is truly the community's music center. It's easy for the musicians, Geoff, and me to think about how we're going to use the building, but that's not ultimately who it's for—it's really for the betterment and enrichment of our community.

▼ Student cellist Adrian Mayora, inside of the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra storage room, practicing in advance of his audition for the youth orchestra. Photo by Kelly Hicks



The community task force came up with an aspirational goal that has become a guiding principle for the Music Center: To be a radically welcoming hub of musical activity for all Arkansans. During one meeting of the task force, Pastor Nelson said, “I want to know that I belong there the minute I walk in. I want to see myself there.” That was really important for us to hear.

We plan to accomplish this in many ways. The center has lots of glass, so when you're outside you'll be able to see the musicmaking as it happens, and when you're inside you feel part of the community. The signage will be in Spanish, English, and Braille, and signage around the piano in the lobby will say, “Play Me.” Even the furniture will help convey a warm welcome,

with big beanbag chairs so the kids can feel comfortable and with a lot of spaces where they can plug in their computers.

We'll also have several digital signboards that can help us tell stories for and about our community. For example, we will share information about significant Arkansan composers Florence Price and William Grant Still, who both studied with the same music teacher here in Little Rock. There is a huge tradition of Ozark folk music in the area and others' stories that we want to share. And let's not forget Johnny Cash, whose statue is now in the U.S. Capitol.

UNVEILING THE NEW MUSIC CENTER

We want it to reflect our goal of being a radically welcoming musical hub for all Arkansans, and we mean to include all kinds of music. In addition to the official ribbon cutting along with fanfares by brass players, the opening will include a wide variety of music by our community, including performances by members of the youth and community orchestras, fiddlers from the Ozark folk tradition, the Saint Mark Baptist choir and jazz ensemble, and members of our professional orchestra. We're planning an on-site Beethoven Five play-along with alumni of the youth orchestra joining via Zoom. There will also be



a parade including drumlines from local high schools, circus artists on stilts, a dragon or two from our Chinese community, and we're hoping for puppetry from the Mexican community, as well as other offerings from all around the state.

THE POWER OF COMMUNITY VOICES

Looking back at our progress so far, the decision to put together a strong community task force seems key. Including the community and making sure you listen to their voices is essential if you want people to embrace the new facility and consider it home.

Pastor Nelson, who sadly just passed away quite unexpectedly, had many high-profile successes in his career and he did a number of amazing things. But [in a recent phone call], his wife told me that the thing he was most excited to talk about was working with the Arkansas Symphony on this project. When you invite the community to contribute their ideas and ask for their help, the result is an inclusive, welcoming space for everyone. The contributions of the task force have been an incredible gift to our institution.

Ann Meier Baker is the director of Music and Opera at the National Endowment for the Arts.

▲ Arkansas Symphony Orchestra conductor Gabriel Bruce (center) leads the youth orchestra rehearsal with artist-of-distinction violinist Ariana Kim (right) in the big room within the current orchestra building. Photo by Kelly Hicks



SETTING THE STAGE FOR *Community Transformation*

Mixed Blood Theatre Plans an Immersive Theater Experience

BY AUNYE BOONE

Located in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Mixed Blood Theatre was founded in 1976 by Jack Reuler, who approached the organization from a community organizer's perspective. Motivated by the quest for racial equity and universal civil rights, Reuler used theater to foster representation and empathy by showcasing diverse stories. Mixed Blood has remained committed to color-conscious casting and commissioning new works to represent people from all backgrounds. Alejandro Tey, Mixed Blood's associate artistic director, said, "The idea of Mixed Blood Theatre comes from this idea [that] we are all mixed blood. We gain something from sharing our perspectives. We gain something from seeing

people who are not like us on stage or on screen."

In recent years, amidst the global climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, Reuler and the board initiated a thoughtful leadership transition, bringing in Mark Valdez as the new artistic director. Valdez hired Tey and they are working to shift the organization's mission to focus on raising awareness and advancing community action and change.

"Folks who practice theater...have skills that translate really well toward community building. I mean, this is what we train to do. We figure out communication in different ways. We figure out collaboration. We figure out consensus building. We figure out how to navigate hierarchies...not

▲ From left to right: Playwrights Saymoukda Vongsay, Blossom Johnson, Johanna Keller Flores, and Ryan Hill after a long day at the writers' retreat working on the script for *UPSTREAM*. Photo by Alejandro Tey

around a product, but around a story, around a piece of art, around emotions, around people's varying needs and how to figure out how to prioritize those," said Tey.

Mixed Blood's current goal is to create immersive, participatory theater that connects audiences emotionally and provides concrete steps for making a difference, as exemplified by their upcoming NEA-supported play *UPSTREAM*—a cross-sector, youth-centered, and immersive performance that will showcase a small-scale model of comprehensive solutions that effectively address climate change. To do this, the production will activate the space at the Open World Learning Community school, a public middle and high school in the Latinx neighborhood of West Side in Saint Paul.

A community-involved production, students (grades 6-12), teachers, community members, scientists, farmers, artistic staff, and designers will work behind the scenes as designers and production staff to transform the school into an imaginative stage where audiences can engage in climate action. Jake Pinholster, founder of the Arizona State University's Media and Immersive eXperience Center in Mesa, Arizona, and one of the country's leading designers of and thought leaders on immersive experience, will serve as a consultant and the production's lead designer. Part of the production development process is for Mixed Blood's artistic staff to workshop with the students at each grade level within the school to come up with characters, scenarios, and narratives for the play. "Young people are going to inherit this climate crisis, they are going to inherit this planet, and it's going to be up to them to really deal with all of what's going on," explained Tey.

The production design's central location was originally planned to be the school library, which is beautiful but small. This caused the production team to think outside of the box and begin plans to turn the auditorium into the central location and transform the hallways and classrooms. Tey said, "I think the most important insight into this particular creative process is it's all emergent. It's all changing based on what we are discovering as we play with our collaborators, as we actually get into rooms with each other and explore. I think what we're looking at is how to balance the needs of the project with the needs of a functioning school, with the needs of audience members who are going to experience the [play]."

The school theater teacher Rebekah Rentzel shared with Mixed Blood Theatre that the design and technical students run all of the

school's tech, and, wanting the students to make a significant impact in *UPSTREAM*, asked Tey to let the students have a larger role in the production. Pinholster met with the students to see how they imagined the look of the show and ultimately let them have an active role in the design phases. Tey said, "He [Pinholster] comes with an expertise on immersive experience, but...guess what? [The students] come with an expertise on their school and on the spaces we're going to be moving through. Let's let those minds meet and come up with something phenomenal."

During the production, audience members will be able to participate and interact with actors and the environment that surrounds them. Tey said, "The goal is to provide a menu of invitations, and if you don't want to take them, that's fine. You can sit and watch, and you will watch a play take place. There will be characters. There will be scripts. There will be dialogue. There will be a story that unfolds, and you can experience it as an observer, if you choose. But there are going to be plenty of invitations for you to take action in a way that actually will change the outcome of the story and also of what goes back to these organizational partners. There will be a real-world impact." Describing some of the potential climate actions that the audience members could participate in, Tey said, "You as an audience member can change a light bulb, participate in



◀ Open World Learning Community students generate characters and scenes as starting seeds for *UPSTREAM*. Photo by Jake Pinholster



▲ Led by director Alejandro Tey (center), Open World Learning Community students improvise a scene where a world council deals with the climate crisis. Photo by Jake Pinholster

phone banking, help plant a community garden, and more. That would be amazing.”

The actors will play a crucial role in addressing climate change by using their creativity to raise awareness and inspire action in the stage environment about the climate solutions that are possible. Tey said, “As artists, we’re trying to create the bridge. How are we going to create [a] story that can help a lay audience member interact with those climate solutions?” Throughout the production, the actors will improvise and make adjustments to their dialogue and actions, as each interaction with an audience member could lead to a different conversation. “We’re going to start a conversation and we’re going to see where it goes. We have scripted the opening of that conversation, but the rest of it we’re having with you. We’re going to play with you. We’re here to play,” explained Tey. Fresh Energy [organizational partner and nonprofit focused on the advancement of Minnesota’s transition to a clean energy economy] suggested that the performers reframe the conversations with audience members to meet them where their personal interests are. “You

care about hunting. Okay, cool. Well, guess what? The hunting season is shortened and has changed because of the way that our planet is changing. Or maybe you don’t care about any of that. Maybe you like technology. Let’s talk about electric cars and electric vehicles. Let’s talk about electric buses and how that could completely change how our energy is used in urban space,” Tey explained.

The climate conversation is often dominated by dread and powerlessness, which can hinder progress. Tey said, “I was just in a meeting yesterday with the folks over at Fresh Energy and their big message is, ‘We need hope. We actually have solutions. The work that needs to be done is not actually around the technical solutions because those exist.’”

Tey discussed his hopes for the impact of this production and said, “If we can leverage this project to make any changes to the actual building, to the actual infrastructure or anything that leaves you all greener than when you came, I would love to do that. We’re still in more of a research phase than even a generative phase. We’re discovering...the possibilities of what we can do.” One of the climate actions that could take place during *UPSTREAM* is using youth testimony to advocate for electric school buses. “We’d leave the [school] doors, get on the electric bus, and learn. Then we can walk away with those students’ testimonies...that can go back to the organization and they can use that to actually get that grant. That’s the kind of real-world impact that we’re hoping to have with the project.”

Aunye Boone is the editor of American Artscape.

► Staff at Mixed Blood Theatre planning the Open World Learning Community school residency workshops. Photo by Katy Vernon





ENHANCING ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS



The EPA/NEA Artist-in-Residence Initiative

BY DON BALL

How can an artist-in-residence program work to support water restoration and climate resilience efforts? That's the question at the heart of a new program by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in partnership with the NEA. As announced by then-assistant EPA Office of Water administrator Radhika Fox at the January 2024 event Healing, Bridging, Thriving: A Summit on Arts and Culture in our Communities, co-hosted by the White House Domestic Policy Council and the NEA, EPA

is launching its first-ever artist-in-residence program. The initiative embeds artists within six national estuary or urban water locations with the goal of integrating arts and culture into key EPA program areas. Fox noted that this program will “unleash the power of arts and culture to support water restoration and climate resilience efforts around the country.”

EPA is allocating up to \$200,000 to each of the selected locations to support the artists' residencies for 18 months to increase community

▲ Condado community members work on *Mural con conciencia*, led by one of Estuario's artists-in-residence, Angelica Rivera. Photo courtesy of Estuario



▲ Radhika Fox, former assistant administrator, Office of Water, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, announcing the new EPA/NEA artist residency program at Healing, Bridging, Thriving: A Summit on Arts and Culture in our Communities held in January 2024 in Washington, DC. Photo courtesy of Shutterstock for NEA

engagement in addressing local environmental issues, building better understanding of water quality concerns and stronger connections between communities and natural resources. Participating locations are the Passaic River and Bronx and Harlem River in New York and New Jersey, Greater Philadelphia area/Delaware River Watershed in Pennsylvania, Green-Duwamish Watershed/Puget Sound in Washington, Middle Rio Grande/Albuquerque in New Mexico, Mystic River Watershed/Massachusetts Bay in Massachusetts, and San Juan Bay Estuary in Puerto Rico.

As a partner with EPA in the initiative, NEA is providing participating locations with guidance around practical aspects of the program, like crafting calls to artists and getting the word out, as well as inspiration around the role of artists in community-engaged work. Both agencies intend to document learnings and successes out of the pilot, with an intent to share insights and encourage wider adoption across federal government.

In Puerto Rico, the artist residency is focusing on the San Juan Bay Estuary, which extends through eight municipalities, from the mountains of San Juan to the coast between Toa Baja and Loíza. An estuary is a coastal area into which freshwater from a river flows and mixes with saltwater from the ocean in bays, lagoons, and canals, creating a unique ecosystem where a variety of wildlife species live. The San Juan Bay Estuary ecosystem supports 17 plants and eight animal species facing extinction, such as the Antillean manatee, as well as 19 species of reptiles and amphibians, 124 species of fish, 300 species of wetland plants, and is the habitat of at least 11 of the 17 native birds of Puerto Rico. Outside of the enormous ecological value, the estuary is also important economically to the territory. It is a major port for Puerto Rico, where 80 percent

of products arrive, including the majority of the island's food supply. It is also a source of tourist income for the island. Keeping the estuary both clean and sustainable is of the utmost importance to Puerto Rico.

The San Juan Bay Estuary Partnership, or Estuario, is a nonprofit in Puerto Rico whose mission is to improve water quality and ecosystems in the San Juan Bay Estuary, and they will work with the EPA and NEA on the artist-in-residence program there. Estuario has been running an artist-in-residence program since 2018 with funding from EPA's Office of Water as part of the National Estuary Program. The residency program started after the hurricanes Irma and Maria hit the island in 2017 as a way to reconnect communities with their ecosystems. "Resident artists immerse themselves into a particular community and produce a piece communicating how the community's interests and needs relate to a project," said Brenda Torres Barreto, executive director of Estuario. "These kinds of engagement enhance environmental consciousness and facilitate community engagement in developing a resilient watershed."

For this new EPA/NEA initiative, Estuario is looking for artists to work with the community around the Juan Méndez Creek, which begins near the state urban forest and flows through low-income communities in San Juan before finally draining into the San José Lagoon. The creek was channelized in the 1950s to accommodate San Juan's urban sprawl and control flooding in low-lying areas, but today it is impacted by sanitary discharges and structural deficiencies that pose a threat to surrounding communities during flooding episodes, affecting approximately 51,000 people.

The artist-in-residence project will, according to Torres Barreto, "not only generate awareness but also foster the creation of a community-based identity surrounding this important asset." She added, "The goal is to steward long-term support and engagement with the Juan Méndez Creek restoration project. Given that this project is in its initial stages, Estuario hopes an engagement strategy through arts and culture will help educate the community and make stakeholders aware of the importance of addressing environmental and social justice through resilient infrastructure."

The proposed residency project will be carried out in close collaboration with the Juan Méndez Creek communities as well as stakeholders responsible for managing the natural resources and water infrastructure of the region, such as

the Municipality of San Juan and the Puerto Rico Department of Transportation and Public Works. “The artist’s project should promote climate resiliency awareness, equity/cultural preservation, and water quality in the Juan Méndez Creek restoration project context,” Torres Barreto said.

Estuario has seen success in previous artist residencies that it has supported. “Each project offers different strategies and artistic products based on the artist, the communities, and the issues being addressed in the community/region by Estuario,” Torres Barreto noted. “Success is measured through community engagement, the number of residents and community institutions, presentations, workshops, and artist productions.”

Estuario has engaged with ten artists since it started the program, working with communities in five areas of the San Juan Bay Estuary watershed. In one project in the Machuchal community of Santurce, the artist Michelle Malley led sessions on how to artistically reuse glass that was discarded and discussed the importance of recycling glass materials for the community’s environment. Held in the Taller Comunidad La Goyco, a community cultural space, the workshops spotlighted the community’s habits regarding the consumption and disposal of glass. Another project in the Condado Lagoon area aimed to raise awareness about the protection of the lagoon habitat. The artist, Angelica Rivera, led the community in the conceptualization and creation of a mural located at the Rowing Federation building in Jaime Benítez Park. The artist also taught art and drawing workshops with community members.

Visual artists were not the only ones who participated in the program. Musician Armando Román investigated the sounds of San Juan Bay Estuary ecosystem and their relationship with the surrounding populations. Román interviewed community members to explore their sound memories and created field recordings inspired by those interviews, leading eventually to a final sound installation. The artist wanted to both bring attention to the noise pollution in the estuary ecosystem as well as emphasize the beauty of the natural sounds of the environment. To achieve this, Román carried out sound documentation tours in Monagas, Parque Central, and the Piñones State Forest with

assistance from community volunteers, as well as additional solo tours in other areas of the estuary. A selection of these recordings is available on Bandcamp for streaming and downloading.

Torres Barreto sees these artist residency projects as essential to Estuario’s engagement process, helping communities especially in the aftermath of calamities such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and the COVID-19 pandemic. “This strategy has proven to be a resilient and effective tool in times of crisis,” she stated.

A Request for Proposals for the EPA/NEA-supported artist residency at Juan Méndez Creek has been advertised with a deadline of August 31, 2024. Torres Barreto believes the project will bring communities and sectors together artistically. “With this hefty support,” she said, “we expect to obtain a firm proposal from a cadre of artists or an artist who brings out-of-the-box ideas and truly brings the community together about issues that are otherwise not understood by the general public.”

If the EPA/NEA artist-in-residence initiative shows success, there is consideration for expanding it beyond the six regions nationwide. At the very least, the imagination and innovation the artists bring to water restoration projects and their communities in these regions will be immense. As Fox noted at the summit, “I cannot wait to see what creativity, what new solutions, what new ways of thinking and being together will develop through these partnerships.”

Don Ball is the executive editor of American Artscape.

▼ A section of the Juan Méndez Creek in San Juan, Puerto Rico, the location for one of the EPA/NEA artist residencies. Photo courtesy of Estuario



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▲ 2023 Doors Open festival participants at the Amaranthine Museum viewing *Homage to the Age of Romance* by Les Harris. Photo by Mollye Miller Photography

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