

What's New with Creative Santa Fe?

Chairman of the board **Bill Miller**, creative director **Laura Carpenter**, and executive director **Cyndi Conn** discuss the organization's history, current initiatives, and its exciting plans for the future.

Ric Lum How did Creative Santa Fe get started, and what has Creative Santa Fe been up to lately?

Bill Miller Creative Santa Fe started with a conversation Laura and I had in late winter of 2011. We'd been asked to be on a panel at the Santa Fe Art Institute, and after the panel conversation we started talking. Laura, as you know, came back to Santa Fe in late 2010.

Laura Carpenter That's right, I did.

BM She made some observations that Santa Fe is great but couldn't we do something to help it be better and to really capture its potential? And I thought to myself, you know, that's a great question and we should pay some serious attention to it. Cyndi and Laura had been in contact and Cyndi quickly came into the conversation. The three of us spoke with a few people here in Santa Fe who might have an opinion as well, and all that led to the conclusion that, yes, this was an important subject and there wasn't really a nonprofit that could tackle some of the bigger problems in a collaborative way. Creative Santa Fe originally was set up as an organization funded by the city and the McCune Foundation to enhance our creative economy, and we adopted that mission. The change was in how we went about it. We've adopted a collaborative model based on finding those things in Santa Fe that can be done to enhance the economy and make life better for residents as well as tourists, and then bring together all the constituent parties that need to be together to make it happen.

Rather than starting our own 501(c)3 we approached Tom Aageson, who for many years was Executive Director of Museum of New Mexico Foundation and also on the board of Creative Santa Fe. We said that we'd like to work with him in a new, energetic way to do something about the creative economy. The board gave us the go ahead, so I became chair, Laura and Cyndi came in, and we began to put this together.

Cyndi Conn At the end of 2012, we started to put the organization together and recognized that we wanted to explore what other cities are doing to make a major collective impact for lasting change—who are the leaders, what does the language look like, and how would those projects and processes be relevant to Santa Fe? So we did a series of public lectures and private workshops to understand the national dialog and figure out some local projects that might make sense for our community. And then we worked to identify the key players in our community, what's already in process, and how can we become a catalyst to create an implementation strategy, get everybody around the table, and make an actual and lasting impact in our community.

We brought in Eddie Friel, an international expert in city transformation and cultural tourism. We brought in Artspace, the country's leading developer of affordable live/work art spaces. We brought in Walter Hood, an internationally known landscape architect who represented the United States for the Venice Biennale of architecture this past year. We brought in Jason Schupbach, the newly appointed director of design for the NEA to talk

about city design and communities working together to attract larger grants. We brought in Candy Chang, an artist and activist, to talk about crowdsourcing. We were invited to be one of the pilot cities for her Neighborland crowdsourcing platform website. We also brought in the editor of *Metropolis* magazine, Susan Szemany. *Metropolis* is deeply engaged in the discussion of how design can influence cities and the importance of design in everyday life and in larger projects.

So, through a series of talks and workshops we started to connect with a cross section of the community. Many groups that had never met, that didn't realize they were working on similar projects with shared goals, began to connect and share ideas. We began to create a network of shared knowledge, information, and resources within our community. Through that network, we pinpointed three major, on-going initiatives that we decided to launch, beginning in 2013. One is an affordable live/work space for artists and creatives that is also a place for incubation, of shared resources, small business development, potentially a marketplace, and a collaborative venue for creative people such as artists, architects, chefs, landscape designers, web designers.

BM It could even be entrepreneurs.

CC And it will be affordable, providing opportunities for people who otherwise would not be able to live and work in Santa Fe to stay here, which is one of our key goals: How do you get Santa Fe's youth not only to graduate from high school and college here but to be able to afford to stay here as young professionals?



From left: Ric Lum discusses the latest happenings at Creative Santa Fe with Cyndi Conn, Bill Miller, and Laura Carpenter.

BM We're doing the project in collaboration with Artspace, a nonprofit in Minneapolis. Artspace consults with folks like us who want to bring various parties together. It's a multi-year, multi-step project, and it's probably \$12 to \$18 million bottom line. The thing that's neat about it is that the community investment is very low relative to the total project. Artspace takes responsibility for the management and ownership in perpetuity of the space, so that it is much more than a consultant: it's the owner/operator of the facility, and it's done this 30-plus times in the United States, so it knows how to do it. The operation is headed by a local board that it sets up, but they have policies, procedures, and they know how to do artist surveys, which is our next step.

We're trying to survey at least 3000 creative types, and not just visual artists but chefs, entrepreneurs, circus performers, you name it. The goal is to have something like a *zocalo*, a place where people can come and visit these young artists who we can now keep in Santa Fe because the space is affordable—and the city doesn't have to do anything once it's done. They don't have to provide ongoing funding, they don't have to provide any kind of oversight. What the city does is reap the gross receipts and property tax benefits.

The bottom line is that teaming with pros like Artspace really makes this doable. We're willing to take the local lead by working with nine or ten other nonprofits in Santa Fe to make this happen. Wherever Artspace happens, wherever you create a meeting place where artists live and work and can show their wares, other businesses start to spring up. The economic development impact is much bigger, potentially, than just the work/live space itself.

RL Have you been able to identify spaces?

BM The next step is to survey artists to find out if they are interested in this kind of space. If so, would they live in it? How much could they afford to pay? Do they have special needs in the way of equipment, facilities? Where would they like to see it located? We've identified a couple of places. One would be on St. Michaels and another might be in the south Railyard district in the Baca Street area. There could be other sites, and we'll find out based on the survey what the people who are going to live and work there really want. And we're about ready to kick that off. By the time they do all the data gathering and the analysis, it's probably four to six months of work. We'll derive conclusions and then move on to the next stages of securing a location and preliminary design, etc.

RL Are you working with the local government, with Mayor Coss?

BM Yes. The mayor's aware of it. We've started

conversations with city councilors and, because we need city support and state tax credit financing, hopefully this will be a good project for them. But there will also be philanthropy and national grants. This is a project that's been on the books for Santa Fe for years. Now we're going to try to make it happen.

CC And we're working with a lot of the people that had initially come to Santa Fe with this idea. People originally from Beehive and other similar initiatives that began this discussion years ago, they're now a part of this conversation as well. It's a completely inclusive process.

RL Tell us about DesignLAB.

LC Last year, we co-sponsored the inaugural DesignLAB, which I think turned out very successfully. That event is something we will continue to work with. DesignLAB is a Santa Fe-based annual juried competition in which artists and designers from throughout the Southwest submit entries based on certain criteria, and then the winning designs are shown at local galleries. This year it is going to be at SITE Santa Fe and David Richards Gallery. We participated in Re:Mike and have become a fiscal sponsor for it. We've also worked with Meow Wolf and the Santa Fe Arts Commission. We've tried to identify a lot of different groups to get



to know what they're up to and how they might be interested in working with us.

RL Tell us about your second initiative related to walkability and connectivity.

LC There are two parts to bringing Santa Fe together. One is to create a more walkable city. We've focused a lot on biking, and that's been terrific, but it was brought up in one of our first presentations that our sidewalks are really terrible. So we've begun to think about how to get people to be conscious of that aspect of the city, and how the city could be improved by becoming more walkable. Linking different areas of the city physically also becomes a way to link different groups. So it's on two levels that we see the walkability and connectivity happen.

CC And there are examples throughout the country of backbone organizations—which is what we're really becoming in this community—that operate without a competitive agenda and who instead focus on convening and networking groups. The purpose of this networking is to promote our specific initiatives but also to create community connections that can spin off into their own new collaborative projects. So that's really one of our big goals—to get the community interacting and sharing information in ways that it otherwise might not.

For our first walkability initiative, we will look at connecting the downtown Plaza to the Railyard. Basically, locals get in their cars to drive from the Plaza to the Railyard, and tourists have absolutely no idea how to get from one place to the other.

We want to create a clearer path for locals and tourists alike to walk more. There is so much evidence that walkability boosts local economies, makes cities safer, greener, more beautiful, and draws tourism.

In our first initiative on June 15, we are helping reopen the downtown DeVargas Skate Park, and are partnering with the park's designer, Surrounding Landscape Architecture firm, as well as the City of Santa Fe, Santa Fe Skate School, local skating groups, New Mexico Arts, Santa Fe Botanical Garden, and Currents International New Media Festival, just to name a few, and this reopening is generating so much excitement and so much enthusiasm. We're working with skaters who actually created their own Facebook page to begin this dialogue. We'll have music, we'll have performances. The street will be closed on DeVargas for the reopening, so we'll ideally have some food trucks and it will be a very big festival.

But beyond celebrating a downtown park that is equidistant between the Railyard and the Plaza, we are going to introduce the idea of expanding this project along the river. So the entire river dialog is addressed, and we will present many solutions for better use of our water, irrigation, and water catchment systems, in addition to more walkable sidewalks and more shady areas. Laura, do you want to talk about some of the details that Surrounding Landscape will be doing in DeVargas Skate Park?

LC Right now the river is isolated between a couple of walls, so you can't really get to it. Surroundings wants to take down the wall on the DeVargas side and have it

slope down, creating a multimodal trail that runs below the underpasses so that bicycles and pedestrians can use it without having to cross the street. That's part of the long-term plan, along with a small amphitheater. We would like to show that by getting people excited about what's possible, we could build some public/private partnerships that allow the city to make things happen faster.

CC And there would also be a new *ramada* that will provide shade and some permanent furniture, all sorts of new seating. The skate park is an urban plaza design—the national group Gridline is doing it. So when skaters aren't there, the park functions as an urban plaza, where people can sit and eat and relax and it will be lit until 11 p.m. every night, which we're finding is a very big need for Santa Fe's youth—to have somewhere safe and well-lit to go and do things like skate and spend time together. So that is our second big initiative.

RL And your third?

CC Our third is an initiative that we're calling Explore Santa Fe, which is a community youth mapping project. We are working with Sherry Wagner, a consultant based in San Antonio, Texas. She has done these sorts of projects in the United States and was one of the main leaders spearheading and overseeing the entire San Antonio River Walk project. She's working with us to build a curriculum for 4th and 5th graders. We will start with one pilot project in a public elementary school in Santa Fe, an after school program that

Creative Santa Fe's collaborative model sparks economy-boosting initiatives that welcome the input of all interested parties—with the ultimate goal of making Santa Fe a better place for both residents and visitors.

teaches these kids how to map and survey their community, not in just a literal sense of mapping, but also how you video tape, interview, explore, and start to really look at your community and how you fit within your community. And once they learn these basic skills—we're using a STEM- and arts-based curriculum—and figure out what they want to do, we will actually work with the city to involve the kids in a project that is in progress in their neighborhood. And so they start to learn that they can have a voice in how their community is shaped. Not only do they learn that, but it also helps educate their families that they can get involved in that civic discourse as well.

One of our main objectives is to bring new voices to the table so the same people do not always dictate how the city operates. It's a whole new group of people speaking for the entire community, voices that otherwise would not be heard. For this partnership we're also working with the Educational Development Center in Boston. They have been doing these types of projects throughout the world, and so they've chosen the project in Santa Fe to be one of theirs. We're also partnering with the Jane Goodall Institute's Roots and Shoots program that has been doing community mapping throughout the world. They have pilot projects in New York, Denver, and Los Angeles, and now they're going to work with us on one for Santa Fe.

BM We really want to serve the entire community, not just the downtown/north side. And the south side is probably one of the most vibrant areas of Santa Fe

today. You go down there at night around the cinema complex and the restaurants, where the Plaza restaurant is—there's a lot of energy there, and we want to work with that. We're thinking that the community youth mapping project might be a good project for the south side, the far south side to reinforce the idea that we need to make our neighborhoods more user-friendly for our children. So this is not just about high-end arts and culture—it's much more than that. This is really trying to be grassroots and trying to make an impact that's felt in the local community.

CC Another main, ongoing part of Creative Santa Fe is what we're calling the Imagined Futures aspect of our organization, our "cauldron" of ideas. When we first started having public workshops and private talks, we started figuring out different opportunities that might ultimately become collaborative initiatives. We realized we had so many projects that could have a very deep and important impact in Santa Fe that we needed an incubation aspect. And so we work with those ideas, having private meetings with interested groups, and once we have the right collaborators, enough community buy-in, a very strong strategy for implementation, and possible funding streams, then that cauldron idea will come out as one of our next initiatives. And so there's a whole group of projects—the three we've chosen were the ones that seem the most appropriate and that the community was ready for right now. But Laura, do you want to talk about some of the big ideas we have for the cauldron?

LC Happy to. I have always thought Santa Fe was a place where time slows down, and I've thought it would be a great place for people to meet and have conferences in a way that isn't possible in larger cities where people are racing from one thing to another. Part of the idea is to do some sort of conference that makes it possible for people to have conversations that matter and talk about the things we're facing as a community, and how Santa Fe might be able to incubate some of those ideas.

And then also doing another kind of festival that brings an international audience here. We feel that we need to keep competing internationally, and getting our name out there. We've been unique in the United States because we *are* the City Different. I would like Santa Fe to continue to bring people here, because once they get here, a lot of them will come back.

We've also had an idea for an online magazine that would really show off all the great things that are happening here, and take on some of the topics that we're dealing with. Or perhaps some sort of graduate-level institute that operates like Black Mountain College [the experimental liberal arts college established in 1933 in North Carolina].

CC I want to emphasize that we invite collaboration. If anyone hears what we're doing or reads about what we're doing, and says "that's exactly something I've been wanting to do" or "I have that in the works," that's where we invite everybody to the table. Because one of our main objectives as an organization is to remain small, nimble, and lean. We want to activate projects, help strategize how they're going to be realized, work on collaborative impact and collective funding, and then let those projects go on their way with the appropriate leadership. We don't need ownership of any of the projects. We want them to come to the table and be a part of what we're doing and spearhead it. Lead it with us.

“Our main objective is to remain small, nimble, and lean. We want to activate projects and then let those projects go on their way with the appropriate leadership.” —Cyndi Conn

BM It's a challenge. And speaking of challenges, let me talk about the funding side of this, because I think people underestimate the difficulty of starting a nonprofit organization. One of our funding ideas is to try and bring in new money from outside of Santa Fe into Santa Fe, but that's not to say we can get by with no Santa Fe financing—of course that won't happen. However, I think the Artspace project is interesting in that the bulk of the financing won't be from local individuals in Santa Fe or from the city of Santa Fe, it'll be from a whole collaborative network of funders. So we're trying to do something that's collective, where we can have a broader impact through collaboration and partnership and philanthropy, where people come to us and say, “Okay, you've got a project, it's a big project, it's a multi-year project, and we'll support that.” And these are things that no nonprofit could do by themselves; they're not even thinking in these terms.

If we can improve the lot of Santa Fe, it benefits everybody—the hotels, the restaurants, the nonprofits, the city government. The challenge is for us to become better understood in Santa Fe. We're trying to do something on a larger scale with collaborative partners to make a real impact on the community.

LC We didn't dream this up completely, it's part of the zeitgeist. A lot of major foundations are looking to fund groups who collaborate. We think that Santa Fe has the ability to attract additional funding if we put those groups together.

RL Are there any particular challenges given the city's multicultural aspect?

BM How you engage the entire community is the trick. A lot of people have tried, and a lot of people haven't been very successful, honestly. But take the community youth mapping project, for

instance. It involves 4th and 5th graders, it requires teacher supervision, it's after hours, it involves parents, it empowers these kids to think differently about their neighborhood, and it convinces them that they can make a difference. My personal wish is that we do this on the south side. I'd love to work with city councilors who represent those areas.

CC What Bill is using as an example is really the overall strategy. If you get completely disparate groups to work together on a project, there's a place for mutual respect and for listening and learning what all these different groups represent, where the similarities lie, where the differences lie. Innovation really emerges at that cross section of diversity, not when all the same people in the same groups sit around the same table. We've determined that in these types of collaborative initiatives, people are not sitting around talking about what we could all do someday, they're talking about who's going to be in charge of each aspect, who's going to do each part. When you get people to engage with an end goal, it makes it easier to create deep and respectful cross sectional/cross cultural relationships. It's not tokenism, where we're going to include somebody from every part of our tri-cultural community—it's let's get everybody involved who has a voice in this so everybody comes to the table with an equal say. Our initiatives have the potential for great socioeconomic benefits to the community, but maybe even more so, it's getting the community to communicate and collaborate.

BM The other survey we're going to do for the Artspace project is going to extend to Española, the pueblos, the south side. If anybody knows groups that connect us with creative people—I don't care what they do—then we need that. And that's harder to get, frankly, on the south side and some other areas than it is in the north side and mainstream Santa Fe.

CC But an example is the skaters that we're working with. They are coming from different reservations, from the south side, from downtown, from all different schools. They're already so engaged in this project that they're a completely natural group to enlist in disseminating the survey. So each of our initiatives overlap in that community connection capacity.

BM We're evolving. We're going to get better at this. None of us has done this before. I think what we can do is have the energy to pull the collaboration together, sort through the ideas, find out where we've got good partners who really want to work hard, where there's a clear plan and a funding strategy. And we can help manage it.

All of us are willing to take on tough new projects—that's really fun. If they were easy it would already be done. And for us to make ourselves understood in the community is a big challenge. Because people say, “What do we need you for? What are you going to do?” They want a five-second elevator speech that answers those questions precisely. Well, it's not that easy, unfortunately. This is more complicated, and it's longer term.

RL Well, it mirrors Santa Fe—it's complex.

BM It's not a simple place, and everybody has an opinion. If this effort is just about ideas and conversation, that's not going to fly. It has to be about *doing* it, making something happen that has a real benefit to this community. If we can't pull that off, then I will consider it a failure. It has to be tangible. People have to say, “Yeah, that works and, boy, we like it.”

CC And people have to say, “I had a hand in making that happen.”

For more information, visit creativesantafe.org