

“The Concrete Megalopolis Needs Its Grass Spots, Too”: **NONPROFIT ARTS LEADERSHIP IN CHICAGO, 1971–2001**

Michael Wakeford

INTRODUCTION


In 1972, a *Chicago Tribune* reporter surveyed the city’s underfunded and disorganized nonprofit arts scene and urged, “The concrete megalopolis needs its grass spots, too.” For Chicago’s nonprofit arts community to flourish, the writer argued, it needed greater external support and better cooperation between organizations, and its leaders required more legal and technical knowledge. With Chicago’s own Council of Fine Arts still several years from its genesis, the writer insisted that the Illinois Arts Council (IAC), given its limited budget and statewide obligations, would be unable to serve the city’s growing needs. Months later, 70 representatives from Chicago’s arts groups—from the Organic Theater Company to the Lyric Opera of Chicago—met to protest proposed cuts in the IAC’s budget. For Chicago’s artists and arts managers, it marked an important moment in the creation of a collective identity. Musing that “Midwestern hardheadedness” had for too long impeded “unity among [Chicago’s] artists,” one observer saw great promise in the coming together of so many arts leaders in one room. Together, the meeting’s participants agreed on the need to mobilize politically and to articulate the arts’ vital place in the urban fabric.

Beyond issues of funding and organization, Chicago’s nonprofits faced public uncertainty about the artistic product offered by the city’s small and midsize organizations. In the early 1970s, cultural arts coverage in the *Tribune* or the *Chicago Reader* reflected a keen awareness that this was an era of fragile beginnings. Early editions of the *Reader* (which first hit the press in 1972), for example, carried headlines like “Raising the Level of Chicago Theater” and “Can Chicago Support a Ballet?” A reviewer remarked, with seeming surprise, that a Chicago theater “proved [itself] capable of presenting highly professional theater

[with] Chicago actors.” If forward-looking, even optimistic, much coverage suggested that Chicago’s artists had something to prove with regard to the quality and sustainability of their enterprise.

Three decades later, the grass has grown. Hundreds of visual and performing-arts organizations have emerged. Some have lived short but vibrant lives, while others have prospered enough to be counted among the city’s cultural fixtures. Many have garnered national and international acclaim. According to data gathered through the municipal CityArts grant program, Chicago currently boasts approximately 30 nonprofit dance organizations with post-1970 founding dates. For the visual arts, the number exceeds 30; for music, the number is 40, and for theater, the count approaches 90. Added to these are over 30 “multi-arts” programming centers. And these figures do not even account for the many organizations that have come and gone in that time. This all evidences a trajectory of growth across the visual and performing arts disciplines. Between 1971 and 2001, the total number of organizations funded through the IAC has risen from several dozen to 761. Further, there is now a much broader constellation of support. In Chicago, more than a dozen service institutions—such as the Chicago Artists’ Coalition, the League of Chicago Theatres, the Arts & Business Council of Chicago, and the Illinois Arts Alliance, complemented by the city’s Department of Cultural Affairs (and its antecedent Chicago Council of Fine Arts) and the Illinois Arts Council—have risen to the allied causes of arts advocacy, leadership training, board development, and the promotion of organizational collaboration.

While the nonprofit arts thrive in Chicago, the city’s current cultural landscape offers new questions, many of which IAAF’s leadership-succession research attempts to



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address. That we can now speak of a “generation” of nonprofit arts organizations is proof of progress, but also portends challenges ahead. The arts community finds itself on the front edge of a generational shift, confronted with the need to replace veteran leaders and, in turn, to shepherd organizations through uncharted paths of institutional transformation. Ostensibly, the pressing questions are future-oriented: How will organizations replace departing leaders, and with whom? How will leadership changes affect the character of organizations?

This essay, however, will look back. It draws on extended interviews with arts veterans who have participated in and witnessed the growth of Chicago’s nonprofits from a diversity of positions. Those interviewed include (in alphabetical order):

Richard Christiansen, *former chief critic and senior writer at the Chicago Tribune, and former arts and entertainment editor of the Chicago Daily News*

Fred Fine, *founder and former chair of Columbia College Chicago’s Arts, Entertainment and Media Management Department, and Chicago’s first commissioner of cultural affairs*

Joan Gunzberg, *executive director of the Arts & Business Council of Chicago*

Juana Guzman, *associate director of the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, and former director of community cultural development at the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs*

Ronne Hartfield, *former executive director of Urban Gateways: Center for Arts Education, and former executive director of Museum Education at the Art Institute of Chicago*

Nick Rabkin, *director of the Chicago Center for Arts Policy at Columbia College, former managing director of the Organic Theater Company, deputy commissioner at the Department of Cultural Affairs, and senior program officer for arts and culture at the MacArthur Foundation*

Arlene Rakoncaj, *founding member and executive director of the Chicago Artists’ Coalition*

Janet Carl Smith, *deputy commissioner for cultural programming at the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs*

Carlos Tortolero, *founder and executive director of the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum*

Dennis Zacek, *artistic director of the Victory Gardens Theater*

While the interviews collectively offer significant breadth of perspective, this essay is neither comprehensive in coverage—theater, for example, receives more attention than dance—nor does it claim to capture a universal “arts management experience.” Recognizing this, these pages shy away from declarative conclusions. Instead, the essay lets the experts’ words, in both convergence and contradiction, lead the way. By so doing, it makes two offerings: First, it begins to tell a history of Chicago’s nonprofit arts managers, which has yet to be chronicled in any thorough way. Second, it confirms the basic truth that as the field of arts leadership evolves, there is much to be learned from the past. As interviewees reflected on the past, they spoke beyond the realm of their specific organizations and institutions, and instinctively speculated about the future—how to learn from past organizational failures and to model past successes, the continuing and intertwined needs to pursue diversified leadership and audiences, and the challenge of energizing new leaders with a democratic orientation toward the arts.

THE GENESIS OF A GENERATION: GROWTH, ORGANIZATION, AND COLLABORATION

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a spirit of “newness” enveloped Chicago’s arts as a new cast of leaders founded theaters, music ensembles, art galleries, and dance troupes. It seems appropriate, therefore, to treat the issues of arts leadership—and particularly those relating to succession—in generational terms. Yet it is important not to cast the 1970s too simply as a point of origin. As the arts community took on new life, it did so in a city that, in both social and institutional terms, possessed a rich artistic foundation. The genesis of the post-1970 generation of leaders should be understood within this context.


It is not insignificant to note that many of the new generation of leaders were homegrown Chicagoans. Many, indeed, came into the arts as cultural evangelists of the countercultural politics of the 1960s. Most were middle class, many were children of relative privilege. But as Fred Fine implores the historian to understand, contained within Chicago’s working-class heritage was a deeply rooted artistic sensibility. Born into Chicago’s laboring class in 1914, Fine is the first to admit that he is of a different generation than most of the arts leaders with whom he has come to work in recent decades. His personal history, if anecdotal, is a useful reminder of the city’s artistic underpinnings. “I come from a working-class family. Like many European immigrant families, we were very conscious of the arts,” he recounts. “My father was the charter member of a big Yiddish chorus. They sang Handel and gave concerts in Orchestra Hall once a year. . . . From the Jewish immigrant’s point of view, I knew a lot about the arts. I came into contact with Lithuanian opera, Polish dance groups, and I was a member of a Ukrainian dance group.” From Fine’s perspective, this youthful romance with working-class culture is inseparable

from his later entrance into the world of arts management and his abiding commitment to cultural democracy.

Though it is difficult to say exactly how Chicago’s arts establishments—institutions such as the Art Institute of Chicago, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, or the relatively younger Lyric Opera—fostered the post-1970s artistic renaissance, they clearly offered both a real and symbolic counterpoint to newer arts initiatives. “I think about arts organizations in two large categories,” explains Nick Rabkin. “There’s a group of . . . arts organizations that have survived for a [long time], and there’s the second major wave of arts organizations that were created in the two or three decades beginning in the 1960s.” There is an important continuity here, Rabkin notes, but also a key separation. “The difference between the [two groups] was that the first [wave was] founded by civic leaders, most of whom were business leaders, and the second wave was founded by young artists. The first wave had to go find artists, and the second wave had to go find philanthropists.”

Out of these fundamental differences, moreover, came an important part of the new leadership’s very identity and mission. The *Tribune*’s Richard Christiansen notes, “Arts leadership in Chicago in the late ’60s and early ’70s could be divided into the establishment—those from families with . . . wealth and prestige, who sat on boards of the major institutions—and the antiestablishment—young artists, mostly in their early twenties, and ready to make their own marks in the city on ridiculously small budgets. There was this feeling at the time of ‘them’ and ‘us.’”

As individuals moved into leadership roles, many did so with a prevailing self-consciousness that they would lead in new ways with new goals, and were cognizant of the connection between the arts manager and new types of institutional missions.



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Ronne Hartfield joined Urban Gateways (UG) as a project director in 1969. “It was quite unusual to have a minority-run organization that also served a multiracial population,” Hartfield recalls. “From the very start its focus [was] providing arts experiences for underserved kids, and part of it was also to bring underserved kids into contact with better-served kids. It served a lot of poverty students but never primarily poverty students. And its artists were always multiracial.” Hartfield, who returned as UG’s executive director in 1981 after seven years as dean of students at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, adds that UG was always premised on a transformative philosophy of culture that she shared with her colleagues. “Culture [is] most frequently presented as ‘white,’ and the [conventional] thing to do was to introduce [students] to culture that was ‘white.’ . . . UG allowed minority kids to go to the CSO, and . . . white kids to have blues musicians in their schools. It valorized all of that. It valorized ‘black’ culture for both groups, and ‘white’ culture for both groups, too. I thought it was important to locate . . . high culture within a much broader spectrum.”

Dennis Zacek has been artistic director at Victory Gardens Theater (VG) since 1977. “Victory Gardens started [in 1974] with eight artistic directors, if you can believe it,” he says. “Some of th[em] were actors, some writers, some . . . directors, and they had very little in common in terms of stylistic similarity. . . . The one thing they had in common was [that] they wanted to do Chicago theater in such a way that the work of the Chicago writer was featured. I came along and knocked on the door and said I was interested, and they said, ‘We already have eight and can’t possibly consider nine.’ So I pursued work where I could and first came on board at VG as an actor in *Strangle Me*, playing a Bulgarian jewel thief.” Shortly after, Zacek

entered into the leadership circle of the theater and produced a play with Marcelle McVay—his wife and VG’s managing director. “Various of the directors came to be wary of the role of producer, so I took on the job of trying to convince the others to agree on anything, and did that for two years. It’s quite remarkable that anything got done and that we survived [despite] the classic problems of running an organization by committee.” In 1977, Zacek explains, “a key Chicago philanthropist told me he had looked around the country and couldn’t find any theater company run this way. He suggested that I take on the sole position of artistic director. If I’d do this, he’d develop and chair a board of directors—we didn’t have one.” Despite Zacek’s skepticism that the plan would go over with the other directors, the booster assured him that the theater was ready and waiting for a reorganized leadership. “He told me the others would welcome me and appreciate the change, . . . and he was right. Everyone just said ‘congratulations’ and ‘full speed ahead.’”

Carlos Tortolero began developing the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum in 1982 out of his own house, and then moved it into its own building in Pilsen in 1987. From Tortolero’s perspective, the primary obstacle the organization faced was the arts community itself. “The arts community told me from the word ‘go’ that you can’t put a museum in a working-class neighborhood. They said you can’t do it. Especially an art museum, they said. ‘An art museum? You are bananas! . . . And free? You can’t do a free art museum.’ They [asked] who would come. The community would come, I said. . . . Mexicans. Spanish is the number two language!” The museum center has grown into a major cultural institution with a budget of several million dollars, ongoing facility expansion, and international acclaim. Tortolero remains deeply critical of the arts leaders who


discouraged him, and sees their opposition as symptomatic of an enduring myopia that future leaders must overcome. “They were the artists, the [supposed] dreamers!” he says incredulously. Tortolero, in other words, does not see the primary opposition he confronted as generational. The doubters and critics, he argues, came from within the largely white, post–New Left community of arts leaders that shared power uneasily and hedged at embracing visions like his own.

These three examples bring out some of the broad goals that characterized the emergent generation of organizations and their leaders: a broadened, democratic definition of culture and the arts; a commitment to drawing on the city’s own artistic talent; and, relatedly, a desire to root organizations within the community. They also testify to important early lessons—whether regarding the fundamental connection between multiracial leadership and the effective service of a diverse audience, the merits of organizational self-evaluation and the reorganization of leadership structures, or the realities of power dynamics within the arts community itself.

Internal tensions notwithstanding, most share the view that Chicago’s arts community has distinguished itself with its cooperative character, both in the formation of umbrella organizations and in the pursuit of joint initiatives that have merged the creativity and resources of different groups. “About sixteen years ago I started the Chicago [Cultural] Network, through which we bring together arts organizations throughout the city,” remarks the Department of Cultural Affairs’ Janet Carl Smith. “What I’ve seen over that time is . . . the development of a real sense of character, which I think is remarkably collaborative compared to other cities.”

Efforts to draw artists and nonprofits together to pursue common goals have been a key part of arts leadership. In the inherently individualized world of visual artists, for example, cooperation was essential. Arlene Rakoncaj recounts the early days of the Chicago Artists’ Coalition. “We got started because some folks felt that the visual arts needed to be organized and finally in the winter of 1975 a bunch of us got together and [did it]. . . . We banged out bylaws, screaming and yelling at each other. We met in the basement of an old church. . . . We wanted to inform people about shows, have a slide registry of artists’ works so [that] we could promote [them] to galleries and art representatives. We wanted health insurance, we wanted newspapers to toot each other’s horns.” In its early years, the coalition also promoted the city’s larger arts infrastructure, Rakoncaj explains. “We had just got[ten] started and we [heard the city] was thinking about starting a council of fine arts. So we started writing letters . . . advocating for the council, and I think we put up enough pressure.” The successful campaign for the council, founded in 1976, still stands as a watershed moment for Chicago’s arts organizations.

Several years later, in 1982, the impulse to organize culminated with the development of the Illinois Arts Alliance (IAA). For Fred Fine, one of the charter members, such an organization seemed necessary to help think through arts policy and to forge an enduring partnership between institutions and the individual artist. He recalls, I decided one day to bring together a number of people in the arts—from the League of Chicago Theaters, the Chicago Artists’ Coalition, groups like that—and proposed that under the auspices of Columbia College we organize a conference on public policy in the arts. . . . We held the conference at the Congress Hotel. About 300 people were in attendance, and Congressman Sidney Yates came



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“But,” Fine recalls with delight, “the main speakers were artists, and the whole emphasis was that the whole grand structure of the temples of art really rested on the shoulders of the thousands of working artists—fiddle players, studio painters, and so on. That is what these institutions are [and were] about. The conference was so successful that we decided to form a permanent group for advocacy. So then on the coldest night in Chicago history, at the old library (now the Cultural Center), we held a statewide conference . . . and we formed the organizing committee for the IAA.” Consistent with the spirit of that evening, the IAA has worked for twenty years to convene artists and arts professionals around issues of public policy. The alliance has filled a service niche through both its advocacy training and its organization of regional and statewide meetings dedicated to further integration of the arts with community life.

Cooperation and collaboration, Hartfield argues, has been both a virtue and a necessity for Chicago’s nonprofits. The major cultural institutions were eager to enter into partnerships with Urban Gateways, she explains, because her organization was better equipped and staffed to organize their public outreach efforts. And when the situation was reversed, when Hartfield was director of museum education at the Art Institute, she eagerly sought out collaborators in order to fulfill the museum’s mission of broadening its audience and to take advantage of other organizations’ strengths. Ultimately, Hartfield reasons, increased collaboration is an index of improving leadership and the maturation of the arts community. She explains that through cooperative efforts, arts leaders achieve “a much richer presentation for the city and a strengthening of [their] organization. It satisfies the goals of long-term sustenance.”

ASSUMING A “SECOND” IDENTITY

In the early 1970s, Chicago’s “second city” moniker meant different things to the emergent generation of leaders. It deferred to New York as the symbolic epicenter of artistic production, but it also referred to real challenges for Chicago’s artists—artists who found themselves either pondering a stint in New York as a necessary rite of passage or closed out of the Chicago arts scene for having failed to do so. In various ways, however, arts leaders exploited the tag as a motivation to organize and develop their disciplines in Chicago.

Rakoncay explains that in the mid-1970s, “[visual] artists wanted to stay in Chicago, but they were very disgruntled. There was this ‘second city syndrome,’ where you almost had to be known in New York City before they’d look at you in Chicago. We had a handful of galleries, probably about 25. At the time I was working on my own [art], and my husband was a full-time artist, too. I thought, ‘Oh man, how am I ever gonna make it? Maybe we should move to NYC.’ But I thought that maybe if we could get organized here, we wouldn’t have to go to New York City, so I started going to the meetings and got hooked.” For Rakoncay, this spurred her interest in building the Chicago Artists’ Coalition.

In theater, Zacek saw much the same thing. “Victory Gardens began in 1974, at the beginning of the Chicago ‘theater movement.’ There were a lot of people who came on the scene at about the same time [with] basically the same idea. We’re not sure where it came from, but part of it had to do with a chauvinistic response to New York, and the feeling that if we were going to be the ‘second city,’ we were going to take pride in being the second city. So, the theater movement in 1974 was a movement that thought

we could present work featuring Chicago actors, designers, directors, and playwrights.”

The “second city” label, therefore, was ultimately embraced rather than dismantled. As Richard Christiansen observes, Chicago’s artists “wear it as a badge of honor now.” But he adds, “I think there’s still a vestige of the second city syndrome in the sense that people say, ‘we’re better than New York.’” Except in stylistic terms, perhaps, he sees the comparison as irrelevant. “The two are never going to be the same,” Christiansen explains. “Chicago is a great place for new theater because here there’s not so much at stake, and in New York it’s so much more all-or-nothing. . . . Here, the work ethic is stronger, the costs aren’t so prolific, and [theaters] continue despite the occasional failure. In the healthiest sense, we should realize that Chicago has special qualities and New York City has special qualities.”

BLESSINGS AND BURDENS: LEADERS’ REFLECTIONS ON FUNDERS


Arts leaders spoke broadly about the influential role that philanthropic foundations and public and individual support have played in the development of Chicago’s nonprofit arts. The relationship has been an inescapably complex one, which this generation of leaders has grown to understand through experience.

From her vantage point at the Department of Cultural Affairs, Janet Carl Smith has seen that all “funders have an agenda.” “It’s not necessarily a matter of [a funder saying] ‘This is what I want to do,’” Smith continues. “Just as often it’s, ‘Well, what if you did this or had a little more of that?’” Smith further notes that different types of funders bring different demands to the table, demands that require new skills among arts leaders. “With government funding, there’s this sense that in order to get the money, you really

do have to fit certain models,” she explains. “With the emergence of corporate sponsors, the concerns have become: How are you going to promote this? Who is your audience? and How much does your audience grow? This is a whole new set of questions.” The politics of grant getting and donor pleasing has been an animating force among nonprofits, at times pushing them to grow in new ways or to enhance their ability to understand the cultural marketplace in which they work.

Rabkin has worked on both sides of the funding paradigm. He wonders whether in some cases, the pressure of appealing to donors has helped lead nonprofits to their demise. Drawing on his own experience with the Organic Theater Company in the early 1980s, Rabkin points to the perils of “overlaying the characteristics of the premier institutions onto the character of this newer wave of institutions.” Donors sometimes look for a specific repertory model in a theater—having such features as facility ownership or a season-subscription series—and the pressure to conform to this model, Rabkin suggests, overburdens many organizations. “A combination of factors killed [a] generation of [theaters] off,” he says, “but one is the mismatch between artistic mission and the institutional forms they were compelled to take—if you want a grant, you have to look like what a foundation thinks a theater is ‘supposed’ to look like.”

Dennis Zacek agrees. “There was a period [when] we went through [a] development workshop, [and] I remember that one of the people who ran it . . . wanted us to buy into the corporate model—the regional theater model. And it took me a long time to get him to understand the phrase, ‘bigger is not necessarily better.’ After about a year, he got it, [but] it was a hard idea to communicate persuasively.” VG has, of course, grown tremendously. But Zacek sees the theater’s long-term success as contingent on the caution with which



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its leadership has consistently viewed growth. Today, for example, the theater is hovering just below a two-million-dollar annual budget—a symbolic mark on which Zacek reflects with some apprehension. “Getting to that figure is inevitable [at this point], but a certain amount of resistance has been good because we’ve never gotten ahead of ourselves. Water will rise to its own level. Salaries have gone up, costs have gone up, ticket prices have gone up, and we own most of this building.” Further, the theater is currently considering the purchase of a new, larger facility. But emblematic of the model of disciplined growth that VG has followed, the theater is “exploring it gingerly.” And, as Zacek explains, “it will be a judicious decision if we move in that direction because we don’t want to get to the point [where] we become so institutionalized that we become formulaic and the [art] gets lost.”

For Carlos Tortolero, the answer to these concerns is a combination of understanding one’s organizational mission, being true to that vision, and, in turn, being straightforward with funders. “I think we’re very honest with funders. We all know we’re two million strong in this community and nobody gives for nothing in return. When you give to a nonprofit, it’s ‘Can you do this for me?’ and ‘Can you do that for me?’ . . . [Potential donors] have come to us throughout our history. But in the last few years a lot of people and corporations come to us with, say, 10,000 dollars, and I have to say, ‘Who says [the museum’s] for sale?’ . . . Other community groups would die to have that, [but] that’s how we’re different. We’re more honest. We’ve always been big about trying to understand our mission and trying to raise more money.”

Looking back on the impact that funders have made on the Chicago arts community, few discount the aforementioned caveats. At the same time, they leave no doubt that

individual, public, foundation, and corporate financing is the invaluable partner of artistic vision in ensuring that the arts continue to prosper. Funders, moreover, can be far more than a source of money. Rather, they have been creative partners, helping to guide arts organizations in positive directions that they would not have otherwise gone. Hartfield, for example, suggests that any obstacles offered by funders are far outweighed “by their commitment to social change, broadening audiences, and outreach.” “Without philanthropy,” she says, “I couldn’t have accomplished all that I was able to at Urban Gateways [or at the Art Institute]. . . . Philanthropy has pushed for commitment to the city-at-large. You get some people who have that commitment naturally. But [for] other museum [or artistic] directors, it’s not their training.” Reflecting on her experience as director of museum education at the Art Institute of Chicago, for example, Hartfield explains that funders were key proponents of outreach. “They would say, ‘We will fund you if you form partnerships’ . . . [or] ‘We’d like to see you do something with the Chicago Public Schools.’ That’s how it works. I wouldn’t have done it, or thought it up, except that a funder said something about schools and then said ‘high school,’ and then said ‘social studies and history.’ I said, ‘Okay, we can do it.’”

Public funding from the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) was a major turning point in the history of the Chicago Artists’ Coalition. “We didn’t understand what [CETA] was,” laughs Rakoncay, “but [it allowed us to] get government funding for jobs and they would pay the organization to hire people to do all sorts of things. . . . It was a wonderful thing for our organization. We got someone to put out our newspaper; we got administrative staff. CETA granted us money, and we paid the artists to work!” This type of federal block grant, administered through state

and local agencies, filled a need that other forms of funding seldom satisfied. “Fundors don’t always want to fund people. They want to fund programs, not salaries. CETA was so wonderful because it allowed for us to bring in staff, and because we had the help, our organization grew.” Though CETA funds were cut in 1982, Rakoncaj sees an enduring legacy. CETA allowed for the coalition to build and strengthen such that it was more easily sustained even after the program vanished.

ON BOARDS AND BUSINESS


As Chicago’s nonprofits have grown, the development of boards—and the recruitment of board membership—has become an increasingly important task for arts leaders. Still today, the decision to develop a board is a major threshold for young organizations. If board development is an indicator of growth and a sign of even greater aspirations, the custodians of an organization’s artistic or creative vision may be wary of adding personnel to the organization’s leadership structure. Arts managers necessarily assume a diplomatic role vis-à-vis the board members—a responsibility that can sap artistic energy.

Successful arts managers, however, are quick to credit supportive and cohesive boards as key contributors to the execution of institutional goals. If boards and artistic directors are not necessarily always in lockstep, the ability to arrive at a common vision is essential, according to Zacek. “One thing that absolutely paid off for [Victory Gardens],” he says, was that “once I decided, and the board and staff decided, to be a playwright’s theater, we knew we were in for the long haul. There wasn’t any question [that] this was going to be a long-distance achievement requiring that we pace ourselves in order to achieve national or international recognition.” Juana Guzman fully concurs. The Mexican

Fine Arts Center Museum (MFACM) could not succeed to the degree it has, she says, “without having a solid board of individuals with a vision for the possibilities of this museum.” When successful, of course, the creative leadership of nonprofit boards beget institutional growth, which, in turn, attracts increasingly effective people to the board. Guzman reflects, “If something’s changed, it’s that as we’ve gotten larger—improved our façade, gained a more sophisticated building—people are looking at us differently because people do want to be associated with quality.” High-caliber board members join, in no small part, because they see a “successful organization that has always been in the black, has a solid foundation, staff, and management.” This is the ideal cycle—itself a model of one component of leadership succession.

The issue of boards, in the largest sense, fits squarely within the narrative of arts managers learning over time to find strength through collaboration and to utilize human resources where and when they are available. Board development is increasingly tied to the imperatives of fund-raising, audience development, and the business of marketing, areas in which many arts managers lack experience or training.

In recent years, the Arts & Business Council of Chicago has emerged as the primary advocate and conduit for bringing people with these allied skills into the service of arts organizations, either as pro bono volunteers or as formal participants on nonprofit boards. Discussing the council’s longest-running program, Business Volunteers for the Arts (BVA), Executive Director Joan Gunzberg recalls that initiating the program in Chicago in 1989 “was a very easy sell.” “We’ve got arts groups that want help. We’ve got business people who are dying to do something meaningful with their time, and a place to apply their skills,” Gunzberg explains. “It was our job to do a good job training, so [that]



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once they got into the arts organization, they would be [able] to adapt their skills from a gigantic Fortune 500 company [to] the arts community and [to respect] the realities of things like deadlines of getting a show opened.”

Acutely aware of the distrust that surrounds the entrance of business ideals into the arts world, the Arts & Business Council places intense emphasis on the training and orientation of its BVA volunteers, as well as the individuals it places on boards through its newer On BOARD program. In addition, the council has worked with organizations to “discover [their] fears” and to dispel the sense that business professionals will “threaten the artistic product.” That many small to midsize nonprofits lack advanced financial and marketing acumen is simple fact. “The key,” Gunzberg reasons, “is getting the arts organization to the point of recognizing there’s something to be learned and that a team approach can be forged.”

In the most direct of ways, the inclusion of business professionals in the nonprofit fold speaks to the issue of leadership succession. “To have new ideas and new energy is important,” Gunzberg insists, “and if you don’t have it in your staff, then . . . one way of doing it is through the board.” In historical perspective, Gunzberg sees the presence of business-oriented board members and volunteers as contributing to an important shift away from older leadership models that spawn burnout and discourage new entries into the arts field. “What came [out of] that glorious period was the idea of the ‘starving artist,’ Gunzberg recounts. “But what’s come with professionalization of the field is that it’s also OK not to be starving. . . . We encourage organizations to think about this.” In training board members and volunteers, the council urges them to move nonprofits to address issues of paying reasonable salaries, making profits, and understanding the audience in order to develop it.



RIFFS ON TOMORROW: THE FUTURE OF NONPROFIT LEADERSHIP AND THE ARTS IN CHICAGO

“There are lot of arts leaders today [who] were the arts leaders two decades ago,” Janet Carl Smith observes. “A lot of people have been around for a long time and are starting to think about moving on.” This reality, of course, goes to the core of the leadership succession issue. And attrition from the ranks is not only a function of age—pure fatigue is also responsible. As Christiansen notes, the arts leader’s “greatest problem . . . is burnout. It’s an awesome amount of commitment to do day after day. People eventually realize they can’t do this—working 18 or 19 hours a day. . . . [One has] to have the passion and desire to do all of this, and [many] come to the point where it’s not worth it.”

Asked to address the issue of leadership succession, veteran leaders cast their attention in myriad directions—from arts management programs, to racial and ethnic diversity, to wondering whether succession is really the most important question.

The arts management programs that have developed over the last two decades draw mixed opinions. Veteran leaders doubt whether formal programs will ever supply a pool of leaders driven by the type of artistic commitment with which they entered the field. At the same time, they all recognize the new demands of leadership and entertain the possibility that management programs might become an effective source of effective leaders.

“I’m not sure how successful a lot of those arts management programs really are in preparing people,” offers Smith, “[though] there are lots of [successful] people” coming out of Columbia College or the School of the Art Institute. Smith defers to one basic principle: “Getting the best person for the right job. [This] is something that we want to work to

help arts organizations do better,” she says, adding that organizations entering into leadership transition need to look critically at how leadership positions are defined. Too often, she explains, “the executive director job is defined as the job that the current person is doing, without really asking if there should be another configuration of duties.”


Guzman, too, is dubious about whether the solution to succession questions resides in the arts management degree. “I’ve always seen arts management as a big money maker,” she says frankly. “Have they really sat down with the generation that has come out of those programs in the past ten years and asked [them] if they felt they came out prepared?” asks Guzman. “I worked with a lot of them [as interns] at the Department of Cultural Affairs, and they would [tell me] how unprepared they felt.” Like Smith, she insists that professional programs offer no panacea and no substitute for self-reflection among current arts leadership.

Fred Fine, himself the founder of an arts management program, withholds judgment. Of greater significance than the debate over the virtue or nonvirtue of management programs, he argues, are the types of sympathies that young leaders develop through their training. Deeply critical of what he sees as major cultural institutions abandoning their commitment to the rank-and-file artist in Chicago, Fine insists that “the most important thing we should look for in promotions is advancing people who have [a] democratic orientation toward the arts. [With] the structure that exists today . . . it is difficult to maintain orientation for the individual artist on whose shoulders rests the whole structure, and who should be the main concern.”


To this notion of a democratically oriented leadership, Guzman adds the central importance of developing a

diverse generation of leaders. Arts management programs can be useful, she says, “only if they reflect the diversity and reality of our country and its artistic experience.” And for Guzman, this means looking at the demographics not only of the student populations but of the instructors as well. Guzman agrees wholeheartedly with Gunzberg and others on the need for an infusion of managerial skills and business savvy into nonprofit staffs. “I think students are coming out without business plan skills, but what worries me most about the arts management field is [that] it perpetuates the cycle of people of noncolor in the field,” she says. On this point, Hartfield sees positive, albeit limited, progress. “Growth is always positive. [Minority representation] is a lot better than it used to be,” she states. She goes on to say, however, that “the ‘arts mafia’ is still very white. If you were to go to any major organization, you won’t see many people of color controlling sizeable budgets, which is a very significant part of [making an] impact. . . . I don’t see people moving up.”

If the veteran leaders speculate that good can and should come out of the process of leadership transition, others ask an even blunter question: Is leadership succession always the right goal? While fully sympathetic to the concerns aired by Smith, Guzman, and Fine, Nick Rabkin believes that the arts community has to think critically about the fundamental premise of leadership succession. “The assumption, of course, is that institutions are supposed to be sustained—that there needs to be a transition. I would suggest that if the impulse for building these institutions is a particular vision embodied in a particular artist or group of artists, you have to ask, What are we saving by saving the institution? Are we throwing good money after bad when the soul of an institution is withdrawn?” Returning to the distinction between the first and second generation of Chicago’s



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arts institutions, Rabkin sees this question as more pertinent in reference to the artist-driven organizations of recent decades. At times, he reasons, “My suspicion is that [when making a leadership transition,] it’s probably a mistake to try . . . to hire somebody whose thinking is sort of similar, that the board is comfortable with. My sense is that often the board is disappointed because [new leaders] don’t seem as committed, talented, or experienced.”

From within a living organization such as Victory Gardens or the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, however, leaders hesitate to embrace this logic. They are quite candid that they think part of their success will be revealed through institutional longevity. While Zacek can agree in the abstract with Rabkin, he is committed to seeing the strong institutions survive. “When a theater goes out of business it is viewed, in retrospect, as something for the good of the cause. It had a life span, accomplished what needed to occur in that time . . . and made its contribution,” he says. But Zacek admits, “I’m not viewing Victory Gardens in retrospect and we have, knock on wood, never been stronger. . . . In my most honest desires, I very much want the institution to continue after I retire. . . . Someone can do the job. The organization would change a bit, [but] it’s my opinion that the city of Chicago should have at least one theater that is focused on the development of the writer. We’ve established that it is possible and made it work for 28 seasons. So it’s my desire to have it continue.”

So it is at the MFACM, where Guzman and Tortolero are confident that they are taking the right steps to ensure the long-term survival of the institution and its founding vision of empowering Mexican Americans to wield control over their own cultural self-presentation. “We’ve undergone a massive assessment of our institution on [transition] issues,” Guzman notes. “We are always talking about who to

empower [within the institution]. We watch them, and nurture them, and [in this way] hopefully build a staff with shared beliefs.” Tortolero adds, “I think Juana and I have enough ego to want the institution to miss us, but we also realize it will probably grow [in our absence].”

Important, too, are that some leaders identify a different type of opportunity at the point of intergenerational transition. The arts community must “prepare the moving-on generation . . . [and] think about keeping them useful,” suggests Smith. Fine agrees. “I’m a museum piece,” he jokes, “[but] Columbia College says I’m still usable, and I’m happy because I want to die in the saddle. Veterans need a way to serve without holding the key positions.”

Three decades into the boom era of Chicago’s nonprofit arts, one is struck by the confidence that its leaders express about the future. It is a confidence bred over time. “Chicago has blossomed,” exclaims Rakoncaj. “This city is so sophisticated, and it surely wasn’t [when we started]. I think it’s great.” Across the artistic disciplines, Christiansen concurs that Chicago’s nonprofits are positioned for an exciting future. “Chicago is now recognized as a hot and productive breeding ground, and reviewers come in from all around the country to see what’s going on here,” he explains. “As years have gone by, the talent pool has improved dramatically. A lot more people are getting a start here and staying, having a life, raising a family, and having a career in Chicago.”

Optimism springs, too, from the sense that today’s arts leaders are building their organizations more wisely, with the lessons of the past generation allowing them to work from a position of strength. As Gunzberg describes it, “The smaller organizations didn’t traditionally think in terms of relation to place in community, and they’ve gradually come

to realize that they better think about community and their audience. . . . I think it's only recently that this message has been embraced by the arts community." Rabkin adds that he sees great promise in new arts leaders exhibiting a refined understanding of the inseparability of artistic product, embeddedness in the community, and organizational growth. He points to new theater companies for whom civic engagement and educational work "is the artistic lifeblood." "This parts with the older model of institutional building," he suggests. "I guess my sense is that this seems like an exciting thing—that they feel a sense of freedom that the generation in which I worked didn't feel." Christiansen, too, is encouraged by today's organizations that know enough to proceed judiciously. Upstart performing groups, he explains, are "realistically looking at their future and trying to find a place for themselves in this huge population."

Indeed, finding a home in the city is both a task accomplished and a task that lies ahead for nonprofit arts groups in Chicago. **That a generation has successfully nurtured the arts to great heights provides the foundation for the future. All agree that artistic and managerial innovation can ensure even better things ahead.**
