

Arts & Culture Focus Group

September 15, 2025, 3:30 – 5:00 pm



Action Items/Takeaways

- Case study on cultural preservation: <https://www.phlpreservation.org/>
- 12 Steps to Town Making: https://www.neighborhoodrevolution.com/12-steps-to-town-making?fbclid=PAZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAafC_wetuWjpAcU07B1zbtU8dyI5UixRSKZoeF17iY0ReRMqV9Be2ZKTEq-xsg_aem_oBYyCtwkOnkYZFg-tlw_tA
- Case studies in Medellin, New York City – Co-benefits of cultural districts, community organization and intersectional body, business, residents: [Cultural Districts as a Tool for Community Self Determination](#)
- Survey LA helped to identify historic resources for the purpose of conserving culture in the public realm and built environment: [SurveyLA: The Los Angeles Historic Resources Survey - LA Conservancy](#)
- <https://projectrowhouses.org/>
- San Francisco's Community Stabilization plan includes a section for Arts and Culture Protection (page 110) which identifies the significance of general operating support, cultural facilities, inclusion of arts and culture space in new development and broad community-focused nonprofits support [cs_policy_program_inventory_draft01.pdf](#)
- Sharing a good example from San Francisco: [Love Our Neighborhoods - San Francisco Public Works](#)
- 2015 Task Force memorandum (Cultural Development Plan): [mahwtf-memorandum-12-23-15.pdf](#). We've made progress on the recommendations but there is much more to do
- Sharing San Francisco General Plan Arts Element, even if this Oakland plan does not include a stand alone arts element, this is a good resource for language to consider as part of this exercise: [Arts | San Francisco General Plan](#). I'm curious what others think about these recommendations, and how to capture Oakland's unique vision.

Attendees

Strategic Planning Staff: Khalilha Haynes (Presenter), Timothy Green (Presenter), Lakshmi Rajagopalan, Bebe LeGardeur, Daniel Findley, Michelle Matranga, Bill Gilchrist, Laura Kaminski

Interdepartmental Staff: Cristy Johnston Limon, Business Development, EWDD; Lex Leifheit, Cultural Affairs Division; Kristen Zaremba, Cultural Affairs, EWDD; Shawnee Keck

Community Members (link or copy sign-in sheet):

- Anne Huang (she/her), Executive Director of World Arts West; Fellow with the Greater Bay Area Arts & Culture Coalition (GBAC)
- Charlese Banks - The Town Experience
- Phil Green, Follow the Music
- Leslie Fay Marks, Senior Director of Philanthropy at Children's Fairyland

- Saly Lee, Oakland Asian Cultural Center
- Nina Woodruff, Black Cultural Zone CDC
- Naomi Schiff, Oakland Heritage Alliance, Measure DD Coalition, long time resident, 35-year business owner
- Naru Kwina, Alternative Minds Foundation, Eastside Arts Alliance, Black Cultural Zone, Hip Learning
- Indra Mungal, Oakland Asian Cultural Center
- Natalia Neira (she/her/ella) Co-Executive Director of Emerging Arts Professionals; Fellow with the Greater Bay Area Arts & Culture Coalition (GBAC); and Founder of Caracol Collective
- Anne Huang (she/her), Executive Director of World Arts West; Fellow with the Greater Bay Area Arts & Culture Coalition (GBAC)
- Vanessa Whang, Cultural Affairs Commission
- Sharmi Basu (they/them), Executive Director of Vital Arts, Alameda County Arts Commission for D5, BAGRC Board of Directors, Safer DIY Board of Directors
- Mandolyn Ludlum/Cultural Affairs Commissioner/Oakland
- Dr. Marc Weiss, Global Urban Development (GUD), and UC Berkeley
- Ronice Stratton, Oakland Art Murmur
- David De La Gran, Eastside Arts Alliance/ Malonga Arts Residents Association – Musician
- Elena Serrano, EastSide Arts Alliance
- Viviana Rodriguez Smith, E14 Gallery
- Patsy/Patricia Eagan - Writer, Editor, Creative Consultant, Oakland Art Murmur Board member
- Kev Choice, Artist, Cultural Affairs Commission, Oakland Symphony Board of Directors
- Michelle Lin, ARTogether
- Iz Plasencia, Senior Community Programs Manager, The Crucible
- Lyz Luke - Executive Director of Living Jazz and Secretary of the Board for CA Arts Advocates
- Natalia Neira (she/her/ella) Co-Executive Director of Emerging Arts Professionals; Fellow with the Greater Bay Area Arts & Culture Coalition (GBAC); and Founder of Caracol Collective
- Walter Wallace
- Rashida Chase
- Randolph Belle
- Phyllis Hall, Art Esteem
- J.K. Fowler

Total participants engaged: 30 community, 4 interdepartmental staff

Meeting Purpose and Goals

Solicit feedback on the Options for Stabilization and Growth. Participants grouped and invited to attend specific meetings based upon their role. This meeting gathers perspective on the Options from artists, culture keepers, creatives, and art institutions.

Summary of Engagement

Plan Options Presentation + Discussion:

Participants expressed strong support for a community-centered, culturally rich vision of Oakland that prioritizes maintenance of existing assets, equitable development, artist support, and deep neighborhood engagement. Option A was most favored for achieving these goals. There was a clear call for bold, strategic investments that empower local communities, preserve Oakland's cultural identity, and integrate arts into economic and urban development.

Summary of Feedback (Key Takeaways and Conversion)

Key Takeaways

1. Existing Infrastructure Must Be Prioritized

Strong consensus that existing parks, cultural spaces, and infrastructure (e.g. Malonga Casquelord Center, Dunsmuir, bus shelters) need urgent attention before investing in new projects.

Several speakers emphasized the need for ongoing maintenance, activation of current assets, and investment in community-run spaces.

2. Arts & Culture as Economic and Community Development

Arts & Culture should be central to economic strategies, placemaking, and community identity.

Suggestions include:

- Cultural Districts Program integrated into the General Plan.
- Mixed-use development with artist live/work housing.
- Use of public art, cultural hubs, and neighborhood events to boost the local economy.
- Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) paired with cultural planning.

3. Equity, Inclusion & Placekeeping

- Equity concerns were raised, especially regarding historically underserved neighborhoods and East Oakland.
- Warnings about gentrification, displacement, and the need to stabilize existing communities.
- Calls to support naturally occurring cultural hubs and small, community-rooted efforts.
- Emphasis on "placekeeping"—preserving community identity and culture, not just creating new development.

4. Strong Support for Option A: Neighborhood-Centered Planning

Option A (Oakland Neighborhoods) was the most favored for:

- Supporting localized culture.
- Dispersed centers accessible to all.
- Community-led programming.
- Lower environmental impact through walkability.
- Option C raised equity red flags but also was seen as most conducive to increasing artist space.

- Option B was seen as useful for Bay Area-wide connections but less rooted in community.

5. Public Amenities & Accessibility

- Many noted the lack of restrooms, ADA accessibility, and basic amenities in parks and plazas.
- Suggestions to create family-friendly, safe public spaces with Wi-Fi, lighting, and regular programming.

6. Artist Support & Recognition

Calls for:

- An Artist Union to address underpayment and lack of protections.
- Livable wages for artists.
- Prioritized investment in affordable artist housing.
- Inclusion of artists in design processes of new developments.
- Shift from token gestures (like utility boxes) to bold, meaningful public art.

7. Implementation & Long-Term Vision

Participants want clarity on:

- Timeline and rollout of General Plan options.
- Community benefit agreements, especially for developers.
- Data and metrics: which neighborhoods are prioritized and why?
- Funding strategy: public vs. private, sustainability of initiatives.

8. Key Projects, Spaces & Models Cited

- Trybe & Clinton Park in Eastlake/San Antonio as a successful community-led model.
- Desire for a signature Oakland Arts/Cultural District that represents the city on a broader scale.
- Referenced 980 Corridor, Coliseum, Oakland Arena, and others as major untapped opportunities.

9. Community Healing, Identity & Connection

- Many emphasized the need to rebuild a shared Oakland identity, especially post-displacement and after losing major sports teams.
- Interest in bridging divides between neighborhoods (e.g., hills vs. flats).
- Cultural programming (like Black Panther Skate Plaza, Chinatown Night Market) cited as powerful connectors across communities.

Conversation

Naomi: There are a lot of neglected historic buildings that need attention. We need to protect what we have. These can serve arts and cultural uses. Malonga, Dunsmuir. We need to maintain the infrastructure that we have. I'd say no more new parks or plazas until we fix the ones we have. Existing spaces require maintenance and support, then activate! Bus shelters have been abandoned! They are not maintained at all now.

Bill: Arts and Culture is a live manifestation, so we don't want to be overly prescriptive, but what we want to look at it as an important theme around development.

How can art be placemaking, especially around retail. Amazon does not provide an experience outside of a transaction of goods.

Project Row.

Liz: I want to see more of an emphasis on mixed uses, including live work. Cultural districts should be built into the long-term planning. We are lacking small to mid size venues. How do we work on multi use mid size spaces. We need to tell our story better, is there an opportunity through these streets plan i.e. an Oakland Hall of Fame. More family friendly spaces too would be incredibly helpful

More plazas and open spaces, we have great weather.

Safety and the night life economy, how do we work that into plan as thinking about general safety and transportation.

Natalia: Totally agree with Naomi's comments on the existing infrastructure needing to be a priority, i.e. Malonga Casquelord. Does the "City of Neighborhoods" option allow for that intention? I also want to uplift Lyz's comments on artist housing and incorporating the creation of a city Cultural Districts Program into the plan. What can be done to ensure Cultural Districts is incorporated into the plan?

Vanessa: To ask a more global question first, why are these organized as Option A, B, C. We need all of this. We have displaced so many multi generational residents. Not all homes are the same, Can we have data?

Arts are not the same as culture, don't conflate them. Culture is being held in a lot of place. How are Cultural Districts being lifted up to develop cultural retail, business development.

Malonga, we have missed the boat on, Oakland is an international center of African Music and Dance on the West Coast, we have a wealth of cultural and historical knowledge and it is so dreadfully neglected, and it could be a shining star.

Kristen: Building on what everyone else is saying, I understand this is high level but it would be helpful to connect how we are working on/acknowledging the work that has been done, what are the existing policies, what is the work that has been done, how are we connecting the dots. Artist Housing Whitepaper: Live/work, artist housing. Not all of these businesses fit into the definitions we have.

We want to be much more bold but strategic than small utility boxes as historical markers. We need to find other ways to fund public art and be strategic

Naru: I want to make sure we have maintenance for these spaces, for parks -- growing up in Oakland we had someone always maintaining a park and you never see that anymore. There are also no restrooms, it is not inclusive for everyone if there are no restrooms. As a big thing, I would love to see an artist union for all artists, producers, promoters- I had seeing artists not being paid enough and undervalued. It seems like artists are paying the same as it was 10 years ago.

Charlese: I'd like to explore how Arts & Culture can be leveraged in these plans as a strategy

for economic development, while also integrating CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) principles into cultural programming and development.

I had a couple questions. Is there a consensus or legal of urgency over the other? Are there are projected dates for roll out? How long term are we things versus short term? Do any of these general plans have community benefits/incentives programs for businesses and the residents?

Key: We brought up this question up – what is cultural, what is in the framework of culture? Options A neighborhood centers – gentrification has erased names and culture – going back to developing our neighborhoods could reinvigorate some of the cultures. Public safety, arts, entertainment, cultural hub.

Oakland needs a signature arts/cultural district – are city is lacking that- where is there a center space outside of all these individual spaces that could boost our city in totality.

Elena: There isn't a lot of art in the presentation, it is around transportation infrastructure. There just aren't things like cultural centers, we have robust community cultural centers but the language is not in that the same way as it is with parks. Stabilization in the details. Programed plazas not just plazas, having robust programming. Expansion along the estuary from JLS but there's not real rout for the neighborhoods to get to the water.

I have comments. Fresno just passed an arts and parks bond. SF had an initiative that failed but may be rewritten. There's an opportunity to include art every time something is developed Family reunions, black panther reunions, chocolate city, this can be a way to uplift culture.

Lex: I absolutely love the ideas coming out and the stickiest of them are the most specific. The whale tail, the idea that people would leave Oakland to SF to go to a contained park space. I would start with specifics and look at how much these cost; what can be done? Do you tune it to how many resources will come from city resources, then how many from development? What is the lens to look through for all the things we want?

Bill: When you look at specific projects, eligibility for funds, how can we leverage the most. How can we generate economic development and all the way up to being competitive in the Bay Area?

There is nothing wrong with putting down things that we don't have the funds for, but we should start to think about some. We want to improve in steps that look complete and can stand on there on – but measure our steps and we implement.

Mandolyn: Option A is the one that I currently gravitate to as a component of the general plan. Options C raises equity red flags for me in terms of how that would roll out. Regarding parks, plazas, open spaces... Merida, Mx has multiple plazas, wifi in those plazas, charging stations, weekly schedule of events, appropriate lighting, union setting up stages and sound, cultural creation and culture preservation. If we are working on the spaces we currently have and that should be kept; we can program these spaces in collaboration with the local communities, bringing in vendors, economic development, new spaces can add to greening and environmental aspects that are needed. If we are talking about a plan that is looking forward, these parts and plazas as engagement hubs can be really powerful. It is public safety when people come out and claim space, uplift community.

Charlese: Workforce development opportunities that would be created in plan; especially jobs that stay within the community.

I'd like to explore how Arts & Culture can be leveraged in these plans as a strategy for economic development, while also integrating CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) principles into cultural programming and development.

David: Stabilization needs to be highlighted when we are talking about this whole general plan. We don't need overdeveloped market rate. Arts and cultural groups need to be part of the design process, we want housing, but we don't want it to be a box, we want it to be nice. East Side East alliance was part of the design of Malonga. We need a staged plan for how to develop this new carless society, but for the next 20 years we need parking for the people to get to places. Arts and Culture needs to be deeply involved in the design of each new development regardless of any approach.

Phyllis: Center for artists around 35 years. We have school in east and every one of these areas, families and schools will protect and embrace if we bring this in around school. What does the messaging look like, the city has lost a lot of their identity, we lost our sports teams. If we are a city for the arts, is there a unified message, we want livable wage for arts. Are we needed to create that voice for all or just a selection of folks in the arts community or in this room. What is the brand and identity of Oakland?

Randolph: Many of the neighborhood merchant districts, Seminary/Foothill, E. 14th, Laurel, Dimond, Fairfax, are struggling and would benefit by an intense focus on attracting arts related businesses and other creative economy related businesses. They are mutually beneficial to other community serving businesses.

If we're talking about 2045, is the 980 Corridor included in the plan, as it is in the DOSP, as the terminus of the BAMBD, connector to 7th Street, and opportunity for large scale economic develop opportunities.

Nina: How can we prioritize an area that is home to the Oakland Coliseum and Oakland Arena. Investing in art and entertainment spaces? The Oakland International Airport is a major landmark in the area. Other significant institutions and landmarks in East Oakland include Dunsuir Estate, Mills College (which is now part of Northeastern University), the Oakland Zoo.

Vanessa: Thank you so much for offering this focus group to the cultural sector and for all the thoughtful work that has gone into this so far. Love the idea of activating open spaces, waterways, parks/parklets. They bring people together. Naturally occurring cultural hubs are important to support! It's important to design amenities with the proximate communities.

Sharmi: I think on the specificity point, my questions are around ADA accessibility, and to what Vanessa was saying, place "keeping" — what kind of plan will be in place to support small businesses that are arts & culture or community focused. I agree about the community benefit agreement. Unity Council is doing it with their new development already for the Ghost Ship site, 10% is artist specific housing.

Kristen: Agree uplifting Placekeeping is important and looking at strategies for funding cultural districts and community markers, neighborhood identification initiatives AND bold public art opportunities. We can also define pathways for community driven arts (and culture) initiatives including street naming, historical markers, etc that reside outside City funded programs, but

which would benefit from uplifting guidelines. Sharing a good example from San Francisco (credit goes to Lex Leifheit for pointing me to this): We can also define pathways for community driven arts (and culture) initiatives including street naming, historical markers, etc that reside outside City funded programs, but which would benefit from uplifting guidelines.

I agree about Option A- Oakland Neighborhoods being the most appealing, but I also appreciate the development of midtown / San Antonio neighborhood as a connective zone between the various neighborhoods, and for expanded R & D zones.

Lyz: I also love what Andrew Park has been doing with Trybe over in Eastlake/San Antonio. I think the big difference is that it's run by a local who's personally and deeply invested in making a direct impact in his neighborhood. He's made that park a vital community asset. I hope you can connect with him.

Cristy: Clinton Park is a public private partnership. EWD leased the space to Trybe and invested in a number of projects to assist with the community driven work. We will be having our community of practice convening at Clinton Park this Saturday with all of the ambassadors to continue to build this model.

They are currently supported to implement the ambassador program and convene the community of practice.

Viviana: I want to see the city support the great things that are already happening in Oakland. supporting cultural centers that are already doing this work we are talking about what are their needs and how can we support them. Take care of the spaces we already have and that might need that extra TLC.

Philip: I just want to make sure we prioritize the neighborhoods that need it the most. I live in Rockridge and we are good at mobilizing for ourselves because we have \$\$/resources...but I often feel like I live in a bubble, and I want to see deeper relationships BETWEEN neighborhoods. How can we deepen our sense of connection and get past this hills/flats, us/them narrative. I know that's not a practical recommendation, but it's what I hope for for Oakland.

Kristen: As others have already suggested, programming in those parks and neighborhoods helps to build that connective tissue. People visit different neighborhoods to attend festivals and other cultural events. For example, the Black Panther Skate Plaza activation at DeFremery each Thursday draws skaters from different parts of the City. Or the Chinatown Night Market, which draws people from across the Bay Area! So many examples.

Ronice: Adding my feedback: I am drawn to Option A, as it seems like the best option to build community--where neighbors meet, where culture can continue to be cultivated and new ones created. And the centers are dispersed across the town, so all Oaklanders can experience collective vibrancy. Centers are also accessible by foot, reducing carbon emissions (the benefit over Option B). I agree that Art & Culture is more than simple signage or painted utility boxes. When there is a heart of a place, I see experiences and activations happening in a genuine way (vs extractive tourism). Infrastructure with venues/art spaces along with affordable artist housing are needed. I'm curious about Option C, especially what was mentioned about the ways it would support the resources of East Oakland. I'm concerned about focusing on the

waterway with the climate crisis and rising sea waters.

Patricia: I worry about equity concerns as the Port of Oakland remains too dominant a stakeholder. I believe that Option B, and the transit-oriented development, is best for Arts and Culture as it multiplies opportunities for engagement Bay Area-wide.