Developing a Cultural Inventory: Tips!

Tips on Developing a Cultural Inventory For Cultural Coalition Planning Committees

What is cultural inventory?

A cultural inventory is a listing of a community's cultural assets or resources. A cultural inventory can be used as a resource for schools, cultural organizations, and others seeking to better understand a community or identify specific cultural resources within that community. A cultural inventory is often an important initial step to cultural planning.

What are you inventorying?

Specific to the programs of the Oregon Cultural Trust, culture includes the arts, heritage, history, and humanities. Within these areas, you are seeking to identify the people, places, organizations or other networks or bodies of information that are significant/special/unique to your communities. Your cultural inventory may include more than arts, heritage, and humanities, depending on its uses.

Why develop a cultural inventory?

- A cultural inventory is a starting point for cultural planning. This inventory process helps you better understand your communities and cultural resources and can provide a basis for setting performance measurements later in your planning process.
- Developing a cultural inventory can be a great community organizing tool – a way to get to know community members, to identify their special skills and talents, and to bring them into closer connection with programs, services, and the heart of the community.
- It's a great way to teach youth and others about their community and for them to acquire research and interviewing skills. For example, youth can identify their heroes in the community and interview them as part of this process. This process builds pride in community.
- It's an excellent resource for schools, neighborhood groups, planners, etc. For example, a school may turn to the inventory for help in identifying artists, craftspersons, historians, storytellers, and others who can support the work of classroom teachers.

How do we develop a cultural inventory?

- Attached to this document is Sensing Place: A Guide to Community Culture from the Maine Arts Commission. The Maine Arts Commission outlines one way of developing a cultural inventory. For more information on their process of discovery research, to go www.mainearts.com, then programs, then community arts development, then discovery research.
- There are many ways of developing cultural inventories, but they all involve community research and organizing data. They are all different, depending on the intended uses of the inventory.

Other notes to consider:

- Culture is where we feel most at home. It gives us identity and meaning. Culture is the societal glue that holds us together. It is what we are passionate about – our languages, our symbols and customs, our religions, how we shape our communities, our families.
- Culture is active, not passive. We all have culture. We inherit part of our culture and we create another part of our culture.
- Culture is personal. Let this be both a community process and a personal process and respect it as such.
- A cultural inventory is a listing of assets, not an assessment of needs. Operating solely from a "needs" model can base programs on deficits, not strengths.

Sensing Place
A Guide to Community Culture

We are all shaped by place. The places we grew up, the places we visit and the places we live influence who we are. Our relationship to place is close, complex and immediate. By paying attention to our associations with places, it becomes clear how individuals connect to larger communities. Becoming conscious of the things we sense - the sights, sounds and smells of a local spot, the everyday comings and goings - helps to define a place.

Alone or with a group, answer the following questions:

- What associations do you have with the place where you live?
- What are some of the important physical characteristics of that place?
- What smells and sounds are associated with the area?
- What places in the area hold special significance? Why?
- What local ways and values are connected with this place?
- Does your place have a name?
- Is there a story associated with that name?
- What are some of the other names for the area?
- What happened in the past in the area?
- What happened in the past among the group or groups of people who lived here?
- What is happening now?

Geographic boundaries.

Loosely define the area's geographic boundaries. This will help to focus the discovery and research. For example, you may decide that the boundaries of your community are defined by the limits of:

- your neighborhood
- a school district
- your city or town

- your county
- a set of cities and towns
- regional boundaries

Conceptual boundaries.

When thinking about the boundaries of a locale or community, remember that there may be many ways to describe a place, some of which may be geographically consistent, while others may overlap or conflict. All definitions are valid as they reflect the many and varying ways that people experience place.

How is the place defined? Consider some of these physical boundaries;

- voting precincts
- city or town limits
- county lines
- a council of governments
- reservation boundaries

Is your place defined by administrative districts? Some examples include:

- police precincts
- water authorities
- state or national forests
- school districts

Is it useful to define your place by statistical districts such as:

- a group of census tracts or
- a Metropolitan Statistical Area, as defined by the United States Census Bureau

Try to define your place by the market areas of local businesses or organizations such as:

- the market area of the neighborhood "Mom and Pop" store
- the market area of the new super-discount store
- the service area of the local women's shelter
- the service area of the local hospital
- the market area of a local theatre company
- the distribution area of the local newspapers
- radio and television broadcast areas

Is the place defined by major economic activities of the past or present? Name them. Consider areas such as:

- rail yards
- mining areas
- resort areas
- lumber camps
- factory districts

- retail districts
- colleges
- nightclub districts
- farmers' markets
- wharves
- town commons

Is your place defined by important natural features? Some examples include:
- waterfronts
- beaches
- a range of hills
- a river
- a valley
- bird flyways

Maps are also useful in defining a sense of place.

Maps may tell of political and legal boundaries and help you to understand the physical environment and how it has changed. Maps can also show population densities and land uses (agricultural, recreational, residential, industrial or commercial). Maps may remind us of historic places and events, they may advertise businesses, shopping malls or recreational opportunities. They may show us how to avoid obstacles and congestion.

Maps may also give hints as to who lives in a place - their ethnicity, education, income level or employment. Old maps may help to identify past events and land uses in an area. They may show how the area has grown, how roads have changed, where forests or wetlands stand or where culturally important buildings and sites once stood. They may help to identify the meanings of places that are still important to some residents, if not to the current mapmakers.

You can probably find variety of maps, both current and historic, of your community. The local library, city or county planning office, tourist bureau, historical society, chamber of commerce and state and federal agencies can provide area maps on a variety of themes and scales. All of these maps can help provide a more complete picture of your community. Maps will also help in describing a place, as well as discovering a community's resources.

Types of maps include:

- United States Geological Survey maps
- Department of Transportation maps
- soil and vegetation maps
- city, town or village street maps
- wildlife distribution maps
- nautical charts

- zoning maps
- deed maps
- insurance maps
- business maps
- maps of bus and train routes
- political ward maps
- tourist maps
- historic site maps
- cultural maps
- county road maps
- water resource maps

Mental maps.

Mental maps are personal expressions of an individual's understanding of the structure of his or her environment. They are drawings of how an individual views the spatial organization of the world: locally, nationally or globally. Mental maps can be used to learn how people perceive their environment.

Each of us carries an internal map on which we inscribe the details of our daily lives. As part of the Discovery Research process, community members can create maps showing their homes, neighborhoods, schools, downtowns and the places where they work, shop and play. Mental maps can enhance understanding and add to the list of cultural resources in your community. Comparing mental maps will help identify priority cultural resources. It may also help reveal and identify conflicts about the importance of certain places and cultural resources within a community.

Beyond geography.

One of the things you will discover while exploring your community is that communities are much more than lines drawn on maps. They are often rooted in common interests: occupational, intellectual or otherwise. A good example is the Deaf community, which exists within the larger community but has its own language for communicating, its own culture and its own traditions. Every community contains smaller groups embedded within the larger culture. A community is not so much a melting pot but an orchestra, with different groups contributing different sounds, sometimes in harmony and sometimes in dissonance.

Place has a very strong cultural impact. However, there are other forces that influence culture as well. People often belong to communities that are not easily defined by physical boundaries. For example, an occupational group, such as boat makers, is a community of people with similar interests and experiences. While exploring your community, think about the people you interact with frequently who have influenced you.

- Who has influenced you the most?
- What is their relationship to you?

- What have they taught you?
- Why is what they taught you important?
- How did that person learn what they taught you?
- Why is it valuable knowledge?

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s there a story about the history of your cultural, professional or community group? How do you identify other members of that group?

Creating a cultural inventory.

Inventories and descriptions of local practices help us discover what people consider important in their communities. A successful cultural inventory involves as many people as possible. When creating a local cultural inventory, consider these categories and involve local experts (even if they do not call themselves experts) in such areas as:

- community and family histories
- legends about places, people and events
- humorous stories and ghost stories
- stories about local occupations
- testimonies and sermons
- occupational skills
- creative writing
- vocal and instrumental music
- instrument making
- dance and theatre
- tatting, embroidery, quilting and other
- textile arts and crafts
- painting
- calligraphy
- basketmaking
- pottery
- jewelry making
- wood carving
- yard and garden design and decoration
- wall and fence making
- plant, animal and weather lore
- sail making, boat building and maritime knowledge
- guiding, trapping, fishing, hunting and fly-tying
- wreathmaking
- farming
- cooking, baking, canning and curing
- home remedy preparation

Local cultural expressions are also wayfinders.

Up north, where leaves do not appear on the trees until May, a common portent of spring is fiddlehead ferns being sold at roadside stands. Many people who have endured a long Maine winter appreciate the chance to cook this tangy vegetable. Day-to-day activities, whether they are cooking wild greens, mooring a boat, tilling a garden or sharpening skates, all tie people to place and are closely linked to a region's culture and values. The preservation of local skills depends upon participation in and appreciation of local knowledge. Where local culture is woven into a pattern of daily living, activities may not be thought of as "cultural." In turn, practitioners of these cultural traditions may not think of themselves as artists or experts. Although they may not know it, these people are the keepers of local culture. By virtue of their sharp memories or special talents, they have much to share.

The way people identify community members can indicate expertise. When working on a cultural assessment, Rangeley residents created an inventory of good storytellers and people knowledgeable about guiding, logging and local history. These lists helped indicate key cultural resources, as well as the types of activities of interest to community members.

Often a geographic community is made up of many smaller communities. A single community may contain cultural enclaves. In 1870, Swedish settlers colonized an agricultural settlement in Maine's Aroostook County. They left their cultural footprints on the area that is now New Sweden. Historically, Lewiston/Auburn included Franco- and Irish-American communities. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Quebec's farmers of French heritage began moving to Lewiston and Auburn to work in textile mills and shoe factories. The Franco-American millworkers settled in an area of Lewiston now known as "Little Canada." They followed the Irish laborers who built the canal in Lewiston. The canal made the mills possible, which in turn attracted the millworkers. Sometimes neighborhoods become home to succeeding layers of communities. While the textile mills in Lewiston once attracted Irish laborers and French millworkers, Somali immigrants have more recently settled in Lewiston and added a new layer to the neighborhood that was once called "Little Canada." Other cultural groups have also found homes in Maine, including Sudanese and Cambodian communities in Portland and a Latino community in Milbridge.

Local culture connects people with place.

Discovering the connections that create a community requires us to become aware of the relationships between art, culture, language, behavior and occupation. Cultural anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson calls this using "peripheral vision." It applies not only to perceptions of community life but also to perceptions of local culture.
In uncovering the cultural life of your community, you must consider the patterns and relationships that make individuals part of larger groups and events: teams, clubs, families, volunteer organizations and ethnic, tribal, religious or occupational groups. It is through these relationships that people develop a sense of continuing membership in their communities.

Everyone has several identities which may include religious, political and occupational affiliations, as well as cultural and geographic ties. Learning to recognize these multiple identities is one of the benefits of cultural assessment and development. As part of a cultural inventorying process, individuals can list all of their identities or roles within a community.

Discovery Research.

A Discovery Research project is one way of seeing the connection between people, place and local life. It is also a way of bringing local culture to light.

Discovery Research is a process by which community members are interviewed for information on local cultural expressions, including local events, history, performance, art, crafts, lore and work skills. The process collects information about cultural activities, explores connections within the community and organizes cultural events around those connections.

The most important step in a Discovery Research project is to include as many community members as possible: artists, art organizations, elected officials, civic and social service organizations, educators, students, members of occupational groups, senior citizens, religious leaders and others. It is useful to hold both one-on-one interviews with local experts on specific subjects and more general discussions with larger groups.

Learn about the key social and economic conditions of your community.

Research existing comprehensive plans and census reports at your town office or planning department. Identify key individuals who know the community well - people who are familiar with local conditions and history, and who can provide a wide range of perspectives on local issues. Include people who have varied or conflicting viewpoints. Below is a list of suggestions and questions to consider.

- What is the racial and ethnic composition of the community?
- What is the age distribution of your community?
- Are there large numbers of very young or elderly people?
- What is the educational profile of the community?
- What are the major occupations and economic activities of the community?
- How has the economic climate of the community changed over the past 10 to 20 years?
- Which industries are growing and which are not?
- What new industries are coming to the community, which are leaving and why?
- What are the key economic issues facing the community?
- What are some of the most important social issues in the community?
- What key social changes have occurred in the community over the past 10 to 20 years?
- How have these changes affected local culture?

- How might cultural resources address social problems and change in the community?

Read local history.

If you have lived in your community for a long time, you probably know more than you think. Look for reports on local cultural fieldwork at your local library, the Maine Folklife Center at the University of Maine in Orono or the Maine State Library in Augusta. Below are some initial questions to ask people about the local history.

- How much of the history of the area do you know?
- What arts and cultural organizations are in the area?
- What religious holidays are celebrated in the community?
- What does your community need in order to promote and preserve its cultural heritage?
- Attend local festivals, celebrations, church suppers and auctions. Hang out at parks, boat docks and coffee shops.
- Read local newspapers and listen to local radio stations.

Ask questions about your community.

There are a variety of approaches, including one-on-one interviewing by phone or in person, team interviewing, town meetings and open forums on specific topics. During the interviews and meetings, someone should take notes or minutes with the goal of summarizing key information. These interview sessions might also be a good time to do a mental mapping exercise.

Most likely, the end product will not be an exhaustive study of culture in the community. Rather, think of the work as a sampling of local activities that will uncover some of the more pressing needs and interests in your community. Hand out a signup sheet for names, addresses, phone numbers and areas of interest for future one-on-one interviews.

The following questions are useful for beginning each interview session.

- What comes to mind when you think of the cultural life of your community?
- What kind of reputation do you think your community's cultural offerings has locally? In neighboring towns? In the region? Among visitors?
- What do you consider to be the most pressing cultural issues facing your community?
- Depending on the expertise of the person being interviewed, consider these topics and sample questions:
- Local culture.
- What do you know about the history of the area?
- How do you see yourself fitting into that history?
- Who knows the most about local history?
- What types of things do they know?

- What is needed in your community to promote and preserve its cultural heritage?

Cultural organizations.

- What arts organizations exist locally?
- What types of programs do they offer?
- Whom do they serve?
- What are some of the organizations' most pressing needs?
- What facilities are available for cultural programming?
- Ethnic Heritage.
- What are some activities or organizations that are important in your ethnic community?
- Do you belong to any clubs or cultural organizations?
- Where do you meet?
- What religious holidays are most significant for your ethnic group? Why?
- How do you celebrate?
- Do you know any special stories for the holidays?
- What do you do for special observances like dances, birthdays, weddings, christenings, funerals, graduations and family reunions?
- What barriers have prevented you, your family or group from expressing yourselves culturally?
- How could those barriers be overcome or addressed?
- Occupations.
- Do you work in the same neighborhood that you live in?
- Describe some of the local businesses in your area.
- How do you earn a living?
- How long have you been engaged in that work?
- What are the future prospects for that work?
- How did you learn?
- Is your work part of a family business?
- How many generations of your family have been involved?
- Do you belong to any work-related clubs or associations?
- Do these groups have cultural or recreational activities?
- Do you participate in any recreational activities associated with work?
- Artists.
- Who are the artists living in your community?
- What kind of art do they make - musical, performing, visual, literary, crafts?
- How are they involved in the community or in cultural programming?
- What are their needs?
- Are there places where they can perform or display their work?
- Are they involved with local schools, the local library or seniors' centers?
- Arts in Education.
- What types of arts in education programs exist in your community?

- Which schools offer artist-in-residence programs? Who coordinates them?
- Are music, drama, dance and visual arts classes offered in your school? How often?
- Does your school offer advanced levels of study in artistic disciplines?
- How is the parent-teacher organization involved in the arts?
- Who in your community offers private lessons in the arts?
- Do artists in the community work in local schools? Who are they?
- What is needed to further arts education in your community?