

Design of the Community Innovation Labs ***A national initiative managed by EmcArts***

The *Community Innovation Labs* are a response to what we see in our nation today. Inequity is increasing across the board, traditional linear strategies for civic planning are failing us, views are increasingly polarized, and ingrained ways of working exclude most citizens from decision-making. The *Lab* framework helps local communities collaborate across silos, question old assumptions, develop deep understanding of local system dynamics, and rehearse many potential strategies for change. The *Labs* bring those who have been historically disempowered, as well as those with privilege and positional power, into new relationships in order to co-create responses to seemingly intractable social problems. Moreover, these *Labs* offer a rare opportunity for the cultural sector to play a vital role in system-level change in local communities, using artistic practices to build a shared vision, explore new possibilities, and advance innovative solutions.

We believe that the success in each community in developing strategies that effect system-level change will depend on:

- **An ability to build dense, cross-sector networks.** The scale and complexity of the challenges we face today are beyond any one organization's or sector's capacity to address. Networks help us eliminate fragmentation, reduce duplication, and forge unlikely collaborations. As Meg Wheatley, a leading researcher on networks, says: *"The world doesn't change one person at a time. It changes as networks of relationships form among people who discover they share a common cause and vision of what is possible – what matters is critical connections, not critical mass."*
- **A willingness to slow down in order to understand the system dynamics we wish to change.** Too often, we jump to action without giving time to see the system we're working in as a whole. But without this, our "solutions" can actually end up perpetuating the dynamics they mean to change. Zaid Hassan, author of *The Social Lab Revolution*, agrees: *"In our modern world, things are so complex and so fast-moving that it's difficult to get a picture of the whole. When we don't have a picture of the whole, we end up arguing strenuously from our position of 'truth.'"*
- **A willingness to let go of the strategic planning paradigm that's dominant today, in favor of a paradigm of experimentation and learning by doing.** In traditional strategic planning, we're used to relying on expert research and analysis, developing a plan, and asking stakeholders for input. The complex challenges we're taking on in the Labs demand a different approach, one that requires, as systems specialist Donella Meadows says, *"rigorously casting off your own paradigms and throwing yourself into the humility of Not Knowing."*
- **An ability to harvest the unique practices of artists and cultural workers to open up new ways of seeing and knowing.** Artists help us get to the right questions. They help us build empathy, connect deeply, and see things from perspectives other than our own. As teaching artist Eric Booth says, *"The arts are our essentially human way of telling our most important stories. Experiencing a deep connection to others through those stories activates the deepest sense of belonging, a full membership in a species that seeks to survive together."*

In 2015 and 2016, the pilot Labs are testing these principles in action in Winston-Salem, NC and Providence, RI. In each community we're gathering a cross-sector group of stakeholders to come together in a series of intensive workshops to co-create transformative new strategies in response to urgent local challenges.

The two pilot Community Innovation Labs A national initiative managed by EmcArts

About Providence

The Lab in Providence (pop. 178,042) is focused on the diverse Trinity Square neighborhood, a gateway neighborhood that connects downtown to the city's many diverse neighborhoods. The Square is anchored by a historic cemetery, an emerging arts center, numerous affordable housing investments, and small businesses. It hosts the most utilized bus stop in the state and is a nexus for social service providers.

In Providence, the *Lab* is exploring the core question: *“How can we together develop and test creative approaches to improving community safety and cultural life in Trinity Square?”*

The focus was identified through a stakeholder engagement process led by the Providence Dept of Arts, Culture, and Tourism, which engaged over 2,000 people over 2 years. Throughout this process, the most pressing issue consistently named by Trinity Square residents was *not feeling safe*. Safety is a complex and highly problematic issue with multiple contributing factors. Trinity Square has a large transient community because it includes the City's main homeless shelter and busiest bus stop. The neighborhood is also home to major social service providers, many of which are resource strapped. There is a historic cemetery that has become a symbol of decline and neglect. The focus of the Lab was further refined by a group of 13 stakeholders at a site visit in May '15.

About Winston-Salem

Located in central North Carolina, Winston-Salem is the state's 5th largest city (MSA 650,820). Residents are 51% White, 35% Black, and 14% Latino. The city is anchored by headquarters of BB&T, Hanes, Lowes, Wachovia (until '01) and the Wake Forest Medical Center. Traditionally associated with textiles and tobacco, Winston-Salem is becoming a tech leader, recently adopting the tagline “City of Arts and Innovation.”

The *Lab* team, which includes faith leaders, academics, artists, low-wage workers and city officials, will tackle this question: *How can we together generate and test transformative strategies that are community-focused and arts-integrated to address the structural, systemic and historical causes of inequities in employment, income, and wealth here in Winston-Salem?*

Winston-Salem is facing a watershed moment. As of the 2013 Census, almost 1 in 5 live in poverty, while 1 in 3 children wake up without enough food to eat. Poverty is on the rise here – an increase of nearly 80% since 2000. Moreover, a close look at the data reveals that the challenges of making a living and life in Winston-Salem are not the same for all. There is a growing body of evidence that the economic system today in Winston-Salem favors some and neglects others.

These challenges are incredibly complex and many-layered, often the result of old and injurious patterns, deeply rooted in decades and even centuries of policies, practices, power structures, and culture. There are no easy answers here. There is, however, is a tremendous will to do something different in order to realize a more just and equitable Winston-Salem.