

Somerville Arts Council (SAC)

Focus Group with Somerville's BIPOC Arts and Culture Community

September 8, 2021

Facilitated by TDC

On Wednesday, September 8, 2021, the nonprofit consulting firm TDC conducted a focus group with Somerville's BIPOC artist community as part of its engagement with the Somerville Arts Council (SAC) to explore interest and feasibility in launching a cultural planning project. The SAC recruited the eight participants, who met outside at Powderhouse Park at 6:30 pm.

The discussion began with a set of working norms to which everyone agreed, and was followed by a brief introduction to cultural planning. The group discussion was guided by the following questions.

- How do you think a cultural plan could help BIPOC artists in Somerville?
- What should SAC consider as it begins to design a cultural planning process to ensure that BIPOC artists feel welcome to participate and feel interested in participating?
- Outside of the usual suspects, what organizations, individuals, or other entities should SAC make sure to engage in planning and in plan implementation?
- What is your impression of how the arts and creativity manifest in the lives of BIPOC residents? Do you think they will have any interest in participating in cultural planning? Are there sub-groups that you believe should be proactively engaged?
- Through show of hands, who here is supportive of SAC initiating a cultural planning process? Who is against it? Who is not sure?

SUMMARY OBSERVATIONS:

Support for cultural planning

- By the end of the discussion, all participants expressed support for the SAC to begin a cultural planning process and that they would be interested in playing a role in the process.

Concern about the possibility of real change and inclusion

- Some concern was expressed in terms of how the cultural plan would genuinely integrate the BIPOC perspective and how BIPOC voices would be included; one participant shared that in the past, they have seen how it is often just three or four BIPOC individuals shouldering all of the work to represent the entirety of such a diverse community.
- Participants had mixed feelings upon hearing that many white respondents expressed a desire to center the voices, interests, and experiences of BIPOC artists in responding to the online Cultural Pre-Planning Survey sent by TDC in July:
 - On the one hand, they were appreciative and hopeful that real change might occur
 - On the other, history and past experience have shown them that they should remain skeptical until the actual resource are allocated and decision-making occurs that would indicate real change and create real opportunity for the greater BIPOC arts community

Lack of inclusion today for BIPOC communities

- There was broad consensus that the BIPOC arts community in Somerville does not feel welcomed in all spaces, that the city's culture does not always create a sense of belonging for

despite decades living in the city, and that the community histories from BIPOC individuals are not elevated so that they are known more broadly.

- “I’m working with an Asian community that is telling me, ‘I’ve been here but there is nothing in Somerville’s culture that is representative of us.’”
- “There are very few places where everyone feels welcome. It’s relationship building and needs a sense of belonging.”
- “New England plus the art world can be super exclusionary.”
- Participants reflected a certain degree of ambivalence when it comes to identity-specific arts. On the one hand, community members want to have an opportunity to celebrate their ethnic cultures. On the other hand, they also desire to be a part of citywide celebrations.
- It was noted by several participants that BIPOC residents often leave Somerville to find culturally relevant arts in Boston, Cambridge, or other towns.
- General agreement that Somerville can be a segregated community when it comes to where people live and where people congregate
 - In particular, one participant mentioned that there are certain parts of the city no longer feel safe for them to be at night (“like a sundown city”)
- Barriers to greater arts participation from the BIPOC community included:
 - Time – many individuals are working multiple jobs or evening jobs when community events are held
 - Childcare needs
 - Communication (language and channels)
 - Perception that local events are not culturally authentic: seen as a “white thing”
 - Individual bias or racism: sense that some venues would not rent to BIPOC artists principally because of their race or artform
 - Gentrification was mentioned as one challenge, but not the primary impediment, to Somerville’s BIPOC arts community.
 - “Place, history, and shared experience” was mentioned as frame to understand what is happening on the ground in term of gentrification. What culture has already been here, but is not seen?

Building on current opportunities

- Broad agreement on the power that SAC grants have had on BIPOC artists’ ability to realize their artistic potential; great appreciation was expressed to Greg and the SAC for these opportunities
- Strong desire for more information to be shared with BIPOC artists and the community at large in terms of what options are already available to establish and operate a cultural organization.
- Develop, incubate, and stage was a proposed model for how the SAC could think about how their work supports the BIPOC community.
 - Develop artists or events to help them grow
 - Incubate artists to help them learn the skills, tools to succeed (someone also called it ‘infrastructure’)
 - Stage artists’ work and events to uplift them and each community
- One participant noted that there is a broad swath of invisible work and skills an artist needs to succeed, and emphasized the development and incubation may have longer term effects than staging opportunities alone.

- One solution proposed was mediation between artists and those who control space – traditional arts venues but also other businesses such as restaurants. It was noted that BIPOC artists can sometimes be denied access due to biased views on their work, particularly relevant for hip hop artists.
- The group roundly agreed that visibility and marketing support for the BIPOC arts community is needed: how to reach specific racial/ethnic groups and how to attract a wider audience for their events/shows/programming
 - Interest in seeing data that shows who is in Somerville’s BIPOC arts community (and how to find these individuals and communities) with a belief that access to these data would support BIPOC artists being hired by local businesses.
- Several participants mentioned their own entrepreneurial efforts to create events in service of BIPOC artists and communities. A cultural plan could uplift these efforts.
 - A notable example is an artist group that has been meeting to plan a community-wide event for Juneteenth 2022, the first time that it will be celebrated as a federal holiday; by supporting this effort the city has the opportunity to cement a new tradition among its residents, an experience that can help shift the culture
 - There was also broad understanding for how much time and effort is required to launch a premier event, but also an appreciation for its benefits. For instance, planning for the Fluff Festival takes many months from many people and has been happening for decades; if this level of effort were directed in service of BIPOC artists it could transform Somerville’s culture.
- A goal for the cultural plan was expressed as: what do we want the identity of the arts in Somerville to be?

Participants:

1. Ben Echevarria, Executive Director of the Welcome Project
2. Aaron Emmanuel, Somerville musician
3. Emiliano Facundo Calvo, Somerville musician
4. Steven Flyth, Somerville artist and Board Member at The Center for Arts at the Armory
5. Jenny Ipuz-Cantalupa, Community Engagement Specialist at City of Somerville SomerViva
6. Denise Molina Capers, Director of Racial and Social Justice at City of Somerville
7. Alma Richeh, Executive Director of the Center for Arabic culture
8. Yvette Wilks, Independent Executive Producer and Board Member at Somerville Media Center

SAC Attendees:

- Gregory Jenkins, Executive Director
- Iaritz Menjivar, Event Manager

TDC Facilitators:

- Julie Koo, Vice President
- Adriane Musgrave, Consultant