

When Dr Tyler Denmead, fellow and director of studies in education, University of Cambridge, founded the youth arts organisation New Urban Arts in the late 1990s in Providence, Rhode Island, the area had struggled with deindustrialisation and an exodus of white city-dwellers. Today, as the area is threatened with gentrification, Denmead questions the role of the project in this latest development and asks how the arts can learn from such a contradictory effect

'Resisting gentrification is an important but complex task for me,' the social-media post read. 'I benefited from non-profit organisations as a teenager. But I think those same organisations can also be gentrifying forces. Is anyone else feeling this? Talk to me.'

This post had a major impact on my thinking about the arts and education. It was written around 2015 by a former participant in New Urban Arts, a youth arts organisation in Providence, Rhode Island (USA), that I had founded in 1997. In other words, this young person was likely suggesting that my own arts educational leadership was entangled in this contradictory effect. And I needed to consider this criticism carefully, particularly because I am white and this young person, racialised as Latino, grew up in a neighbourhood threatened by gentrification. How had New Urban Arts become both a positive influence and a gentrifying force in the lives of young people living in communities of colour? And, how might others in the arts learn from this contradiction as they work towards racial, economic and youth justice?

New Urban Arts is an arts studio that addresses the systematic denial of arts learning opportunities for low-income youth and those youth in communities of colour. Hundreds of teenagers walk from nearby secondary schools to participate in New Urban Arts' tuition-free programmes after school and during the summer. In the studio they partner with artist mentors as collaborators and peers



in developing their artistic practices and, together, they work towards exhibition and performance. The studio is a joyous place, full of laughter and swelling with energy. As one 'zine produced by young people and artist-mentors observed, New Urban Arts is a place where 'young people come together to make a lot, make together and celebrate what they make until what they make ends up on the floor.' The studio was recognised by First Lady Michelle Obama as one of the best youth arts programmes in the United States and notable youth alumni of the programme include Monty Oum.

Understanding how New Urban Arts could be interpreted as a gentrifying force requires contextual analysis. When I started New Urban Arts in the late 1990s, Providence had struggled for decades with deindustrialisation, as well as the exodus of white city-dwellers from racially diversifying neighbourhoods to more racially homogenous suburbs. A succession of mayors tried to stimulate investment in the city through a cultural strategy that emphasised arts and creativity — a strategy copied from countless mayors in the United States and beyond. Providence, with two elite tertiary education institutions — Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) — notorious for attracting young, affluent, artsy and politically liberal creative types to the city was ripe for this creativity-led urban renewal strategy. The city attempted to refashion itself as hip and edgy through the cultural production of graduates of these schools who stayed in Providence, and this image supported speculative real estate development projects that catered to more affluent, and often white, residents being summoned back to the city. These real estate development projects were largely taking place in low-income and non-white neighbourhoods.

It comes as no surprise, then, that young people of colour at New Urban Arts started to report losing a sense of control over how their neighbourhood communities developed, how their neighbourhoods were culturally expressed, and whether their neighbourhoods would remain affordable to them and their families. Indeed, my conversations with former youth participants suggested that the young person above was not alone in believing that New Urban Arts, under my leadership, was a gentrifying force. And they cited several examples. For example, youth participants interviewed and selected people to serve as artist mentors in the studio and many of those selected in the aughts were students and graduates of Brown University and the RISD. The studio thus operated as a gateway for the rising presence of these 'creatives' in historically low-income and non-white neighbourhoods. In another example, New Urban Arts made a public mural nearby the studio featuring portraits of various people of colour who lived in the neighbourhood where New Urban Arts is based. This mural was intended to combat racist stereotypes of neighbourhood residents. However, a photograph appeared in a newspaper article in the New York Times that intended to marshal an image of the neighbourhood as hip, edgy and racially diverse. This visual culture contributes to a contradictory rendering of creative neighbourhoods as both inclusive and exclusive, promoting racial diversity largely as a commodified spectacle for the benefit of white gentrifiers.

Of course, my own image as the founding leader of New Urban Arts contributed to this problem. During the decade I led New Urban Arts, several local news stories represented me as an unusual sort of inner-city hero who sacrificed a more traditional and lucrative career to empower youth of colour. I was being brought into being as a white saviour who transformed youth of colour through arts and creativity. Not only was I symbolic of a new urban imaginary that was ostensibly inclusive, I also provided an example of white people returning to the city to give it, as the local newspaper put it, an 'urban uplift'. By contrast, young people of colour at New Urban Arts were imagined in racist terms as troubled youth who were threats to urban redevelopment. Moreover, arts education was positioned as a mechanism that might transform troubled youth into creative youth. Public support for New Urban Arts not only stemmed from the fact that it was doing good work with young people but, troublingly, because it also fit this racist narrative that was being deployed to transform the city, largely for the benefit of white accumulation.

How might other arts educators who are committed to youth and race justice learn

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from this example? The first lesson is that if arts educators want to understand what is happening 'inside' a youth arts organisation, or any arts education setting, it requires taking into account social, economic, cultural and political factors 'outside' their borders. The second lesson is that arts educators must scrutinise how the arguments being made for the arts and education fit into cultural narratives that may, in fact, be working against the young people they intend to serve — and carefully consider how to avoid recapitulating those arguments and instead challenge them. The third lesson is to support young people as they deconstruct these cultural narratives through their social and artistic practices.

This moment, while not new, is one in which youth and artists of colour have redirected their criticisms towards institutions that tend to be thought of as good things. Community-based arts organisations, galleries and museums are being called to account for their ongoing entanglements in colonialisms and white supremacy. The arts and education institutions that will succeed are



Youth, race and the gentrifying city



those that can subject themselves to scrutiny, atone for past mistakes and do better moving forward by the communities they serve.

Policymakers and funders in arts and education can help by creating the conditions where critical forms of knowledge production and action generated within arts and education institutions can be debated and discussed, and even used to value how arts institutions measure themselves and their contributions to society. Otherwise, arts institutions will continue to reproduce a social and, indeed, spatial imaginary that is invested in whiteness. ■

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Top left Tyler Denmead, founder of New Urban Arts

Left Mural by participants at New Urban Arts. Private Collection

Top right Inside New Urban Arts © New Urban Arts

Right Embroidery by Sylvie Larmena, 2013, one of the New Urban Arts' participants © New Urban Arts