Being well is what we seek together as neighbors, and recalls one of the central guiding principles of the City of Santa Monica, the notion of ‘wellbeing’ as key to civic health. But in these current times, now that Santa Monica’s Office of Civic Wellbeing has succumbed to sweeping budget cuts in the face of the global pandemic and economic depression, our community of neighbors needs to take a more forward-thinking role. Reversing ‘well’ and ‘being’ shifts the concept from passive to active as an expression of our focus to co-produce our neighborhoods, as a basis for co-producing our city. What does justice look like in the face of an uncertain economic future? How do we rebuild better what has been lost? And what version of democracy can be possible now within the global port of Greater Santa Monica, within Tongva land, within the Southern California region, within the nation of the United States of America? Being well is both an inward and outward experience no matter where we begin, and so a neighborhood can be made of multiple kinds of people in multiple kinds of places as an approach to belonging.

What we know about our planetary unwellness shows that interconnectivity is real whether we like it, admit it, or not. As a civic facilitator effervescing with contemporary arts resources, 18th Street Arts Center as an organizational body seeks methods and strategies to critically engage flows running inside and outside its flexible borders, be they physical, discursive, or administrative. Our capacity to do this was tested as we underwent a series of dramatic shifts as an organization this past year, adding a new campus at the Santa Monica Airport with huge new gallery spaces, not to mention a community of 39 local artists who work out of the space (and some have for decades). Barely nine months into getting to know this new space and community, the pandemic shut everything down and the organization moved fully online. In knitting together our diverse artistic communities, maintaining connections over Zoom, engaging with a city reeling from a severe budget shortfall, and supporting our community partners through their own paradigm shifts, we have struggled at times to see the opportunities and connections for co-producing new futures, as a neighborhood, as a community of artists, as a city, and as a metropolitan region.

Enter the artist. We have long believed that the role of artists, and especially artists engaged creatively and civically in their communities, is to facilitate cultural shifts, to see openings and opportunities before anyone else, and to lay the groundwork for new ways of being (well) together. Los Angeles and Milwaukee-based artist Sara Daleiden has built her practice around these ways of working, and enacts these strategies through the critical lens of examining land use and real estate. To help us examine our own occupancy of two disparate neighborhoods in Santa Monica, interrogate and foster new community...
dynamics amongst our artist networks, and clarify how we might work with community partners and the City to advocate for justice (and indeed, greater democracy and liberation) in the wounded context we find ourselves in, we engaged with Daleiden for a two-year process to build artist networks and ultimately, a neighborhood co-development apparatus with art at its center.

Her project at 18th Street Arts Center grows out of the place-keeping work that 18th Street has been engaged in over the past six years through our cultural asset mapping project (culturemapping90404.org) and our Commons Lab, which involves community voices to define, center, and connect cultural practices within their own neighborhoods. Commons Lab was initiated and concepted by Anuradha Vikram in her capacity as 18th Street’s Artistic Director, and she initially connected Daleiden into this work. Daleiden’s practice investigates the influence of location, scale, market, values, and other regional factors on the production of the arts and cultural identity. Through methodologies involving partnership mapping, network building, and the facilitation of self-organizing and advocacy, Daleiden aims to enhance the advocacy power of artists in influencing neighborhood development in the city. Her durational engagement with 18th Street has and will continue to spin off land-based activations with opportunities for neighbors, artists, city staff, and the broader public to participate. Daleiden has been collaborating with arts workers Nicola Goode, Susannah Laramée Kidd, Dorit Cypis, and Kimberli Meyer, leveraging their expertise to craft and enhance aspects of the project.

Much of the project thus far has been a series of in-person and virtual conversations dubbed “Creative Roundtables,” which have involved 18th Street local and international artist communities, and a host of cultural practitioners from the wider LA region. These weekly virtual discussions, ranging from informal studio visits to brief presentations to facilitated critical engagement with creative practice and larger social conditions, have fostered emergent connections between culture workers in an ever widening circle. More recently, Daleiden has begun working with the City of Santa Monica as part of their “Art of Recovery” subcommittee, an effort to involve Santa Monica’s artists in its economic recovery and development. She sees her work on the subcommittee as representing the interests of artists and their markets at this time, but also to open conversation around a structural vision she has for the government to embrace arts strategies during the pandemic and in light of structural racism.

Ultimately, with artists’ voices and emergent government collaborations at its root, this project seeks to build a translatable model for sensitive development that strengthens differences among neighbors and transitions among neighborhoods to network a healthy city. This model begins with growing a core network of artist-neighbors versed in the arts, land, and real estate advocacy, and then grows to formulate inventive public and private alignments, all in the spirit of cultivating critical civic engagement. We recognize both the possibility and responsibility of creating environments that meet the needs and dreams of neighbors, to amplify the authentic local cultures in our neighborhoods and to respect the breadth of cultural groups in our city. So our city can feel whole, while also feeling permeable and responsive, as we navigate our health together, and prioritize being well.

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