

Tacoma's Identity Crisis:  
Collective Identity, Art, and Revitalization in Tacoma, Washington

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### **Abstract**

The art community in Tacoma, Washington plays an active role in many aspects of city life. My research questions included: How is the identity of Tacoma shaped by the art created within the city, and how does it help to shape that art? What is the role of art in fostering a sense of community? How is the conception of the purpose of art in the eyes of Tacoma artists a significant factor in shaping the artistic community in Tacoma? What is the Tacoma art community's role in the process of urban revitalization, and what are the implications of this in how Tacoma's identity is perceived? For my research, I conducted nine interviews with ten Tacomans who self-identify as artists. I found that for many artists in Tacoma, one major purpose of art is as a means of building community and creating a collective identity. Other artists feel that the conflation of art and community is problematic, and therefore criticism of art cannot be openly discussed. The identity of Tacoma is compromised by the cycle of urban revitalization and gentrification as these artists make areas desirable and are consequently displaced by the upper classes.

### **Introduction**

Tacoma, Washington is a mid-sized, historically trade oriented, blue-collar, working-class port city (Clarke and Gaile, 1998). "There's something intentional about Tacoma," Tom Llewellyn told me. He and Lance Kagey are the artists behind Beautiful Angle, a letterpress guerilla poster project in Tacoma.

It's not a trendy town like Seattle is or San Francisco is or Portland, where it's the place to move. I think people who end up committing to this community do so because they find something here that they intentionally like and they make an intentional choice to stay here.... Tacoma – one of the things that makes it loveable is that it needs love. It's not like a city that's already thriving – that you'd feel would get along fine without you. It's kind of like having a child that depends on you.... Which is actually a part of its great value. It asks for your love, and it makes you feel like you have something to offer, and that what you have to offer is valuable.

There is a sense of ownership that Tacomans feel toward their city, despite, and even because of the fact that Seattle and other cities in the region see Tacoma as a gritty, working-class city. This tends to give Tacoma an unappealing reputation around the Pacific Northwest and creates an identity crisis among the community.

Drawn in part by Tacoma's reputation, a sizeable and interconnected artistic community has formed in the city. The Tacoma art community has become a subsection of society that has woven itself into the general social fabric of the city. In describing Tacoma's signature style of art, Lance juxtaposed Jeff Koon's popular chrome balloon dog with a cardboard dog, created by Scott Fife, on display at the Tacoma Art Museum:

His [Koon's] chrome balloon dog doesn't fit the Tacoma aesthetic, where our [Fife's] cardboard dog does.... They're both great works of art, but one is more appropriate to our view of the world. Made of garbage, basically, or pulp. It's very blue-collar; it's very handcrafted.

This type of art echoes the "industrial heritage" of Tacoma's culture, and a representation of the identity of the city.

In my research on the Tacoma art community, I explored the process of solidifying a collective identity through artwork, as well as how art plays a part in fostering a sense of community, through both its subject matter and its public exhibition. I investigated tensions within the community about the purpose of art and how differences in opinion lead to strained relations among community members and reluctance of people to share their views. I also looked into the contribution of the artistic community in economic development, and the implications of this on the city's atmosphere and composition.

### **Review of the Literature**

Previous research on art's role in societies has shed light on some of the areas that pertain to my study. Scholars have addressed the significance of art as a force that drives the process of defining a collective identity, as communities attempt to understand who they are and how they present themselves. Research has been done on the nature of

artistic communities as important social and political actors through the creation of their art and the opposing views of art as purposeful and as self-contained aesthetic works. There is also information on the role of art in urban development and change, and the implications of artists being a part of neighborhood revitalization.

***Building Community and Creating Collective Identity through Art***

Local art fosters community as it creates bonds between people and promotes a sense of collective identity. Florida (2002; 2005), Putnam (2000), and Jacobs (1961) comment on the reciprocal roles played by artists and their cities. In Tacoma, the artistic community serves as a major resource in the lives of its members and pervades their experience of city life. Hillery defined community as a “social group inhabiting a common territory and having one or more additional common ties,” (cited in Lowe, 2000). Communities today are undergoing structural changes as city dwellers discover value in expanding the relational. They move beyond the small, tight-knit social groups of earlier decades into larger, more diverse, weakly linked social networks in which they can juggle numerous relationships (Putnam, 2000; Florida, 2005). Weaker ties expose people to new ideas and different worldviews, and thus are highly important in the mobilization of information and values (Florida, 2005; Jacobs, 1961). The social capital, or “social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them,” that people accumulate through their relationships builds a sense of community as each individual uses the resources at his or her disposal for the goodwill of others (Putnam, 2000). A city of this nature becomes fluid and organic, welcoming diverse expression and individuality and providing stimulation to creative individuals and artists (collectively, “creatives”) (Florida, 2002). Tacoma’s artistic community can be

considered members of Florida's (2002; 2005) "creative class," who embrace individuality, meritocracy, and openness and diversity.

The connections that individuals maintain in their social networks are developed and fostered in their daily interactions within the city. Artists in cities such as Tacoma value their social networks, which they can navigate with ease, relying on resources they acquire through their community interactions and social capital (Putnam, 2000). Everyday dealings stimulate creativity and cultivate an underlying sense of trust and comfort. Creatives feel free to demonstrate their individuality and inspire others to explore their own methods of expression and sense of self (Florida, 2002; Jacobs 1961). Encounters in the common spaces of a city provide ample new material for artists, as well as a forum for discussion and feedback, forming a continuous loop: the more open and diverse discussion, the more artistic stimulation; the more artistic stimulation, the more open and diverse discussion (Florida 2002).

In developing a sense of belonging, people in cities often form a collective identity that simultaneously influences and is influenced by their individual identities (Lowe, 2000). As a tool in forming this identity, art sheds light on commonalities among group members and creates a sense of unity (2000). Art is an important, accessible symbol for the collective identity of a group, and it brings diverse people together as one audience; it provides a common forum within which people may share their experiences and concerns, and thereby build relationships (Cable and Degutis, as cited in Lowe, 2000). Art forms relationships as it exposes people to multiple points of view and prompts them to expand their own perspectives (Greene, as cited in Lowe, 2000). By

considering multiple perspectives, people become aware of alternatives to their ways and assumptions (Lowe, 2000).

### *The Purpose of Art*

One current conflict within the Tacoma art community is the question of art's purpose. Artists disagree about the role of art in civic life and find themselves in the midst of the age-old debate: Which is more important, the work of art itself or the message it conveys? Some artists believe that their work ought to be able to stand alone as a piece of art in and of itself; the image ought to provoke thoughts and feelings simply through its composition and artistic integrity. Others, however, believe that a piece of art requires consideration of its presentation and physical, social, political, and historical context (Adorno, 1975; Benjamin, 1936; Hauser, 1979; Welty, 1984). It is a question of whether art should stand alone as a significant entity on its own, or if a piece of art should have a purpose that works toward some goal beyond itself (Hauser, 1979). This question divides the Tacoma artistic community and threatens its sense of community stability and the collective identity of the city itself.

Historically, the "art for art's sake" position is that art holds no agenda for the greater society, other than for people to experience it for what it is (Adorno, 1975; Benjamin, 1936; Hauser, 1979; Welty, 1984). On the other hand, some scholars asserted that a work of art is so thoroughly integrated into its context that the two cannot be separated. Hauser (1979) claimed that "art for art's sake" cannot exist in reality because art cannot be created in a vacuum; the artist cannot escape from being influenced by his or her context and background, and they cannot prevent the audiences from finding a greater meaning within the work, even if that meaning was unintended. Benjamin (1936)

explained that each work of art has a unique existence, or “aura,” which includes its physical condition and its history, which cannot be replicated and gives the piece its authenticity and renders each work irreproducible and immobile.

Ortega y Gasset (as cited in Hauser, 1979) stated that a piece of art is a window through which we can view certain aspects of the world. While this window is meant for us to look through, we can also, if we wish, look at the window itself, without seeing the things that appear through it. But the purpose of the window is not the window itself; it is the objects on the other side. Artists continually direct their audiences to concepts that stray off of the canvas, that appear “outside their own aesthetic range” (Hauser, 1979). Their art is entrenched in the world in which it was created and has meaning beyond the piece, into the real world. Every piece of art is an attempt at sensibly explaining the world, and by considering the art, the audience engages in dialogue with the artist. The audience is not bound to agree with the artist; on the contrary, dissent is appropriate (1979). Whether or not they agree with the message, a connection is made between the artist and the audience.

The strong focus on the message by proponents of purposeful art is not to say that the aesthetics of art are unimportant or overlooked by these scholars. The message is important, but, ultimately, art must satisfy its form (1979). Issues brought up in the subject matter must be aesthetically successful in order to be considered by the audience, and the method of conveying the message must be available to the artist (1979). The importance of the message does not free the artist of responsibility for aesthetics. No art is purely form or content (1979). There is a balance of both in every piece.

As art moves toward being created solely for art's sake, it becomes an experience embodied in the piece itself, making it mobile, and thereby either shrinking its aura to be isomorphic with the piece itself, or eliminating the aura all together (Adorno, 1975; Benjamin, 1936). The focus has fully shifted to place the lens on the piece of art in and of itself, rather than on its surroundings. This means that many different audiences may simultaneously experience the piece while being in separate locations. In this way, the very nature of art has changed from being context-based one to being exhibitionist (Benjamin, 1936). As art relies less and less on the context within which it is created and presented, pieces of art become more interchangeable and standardized so that certain parts of them may be substituted for each other (Adorno, 1975; Benjamin, 1936; Welty, 1984). This standardization sets up regulations for orientation and an "adjustment of the masses to reality," which actually causes art to be the same everywhere; there is no uniqueness to it (Adorno, 1975; quote from Benjamin, 1936). The audience becomes used to the standards, which causes "conventional art [to be] uncritically enjoyed, while new art is criticized with aversion," (Benjamin, 1936).

The connection between an artist and his or her audience is an important aspect of the lives of many Tacoma artists. Some contended that in theory, artists who create "art for art's sake" create for an unknown, generic audience with whom they do not interact (Adorno, 1975; Benjamin, 1936). With the standardization of art comes a disjuncture between the artist and the audience (Benjamin, 1936). Art that is created for a universal audience may be transported from one place to another without being changed. In this way, said Benjamin, the audience becomes as expert as a critic, and without having contact with the artist, they associate more with the physical piece of art than they do

with the artist or the message. The aura of the artist is tied to their presence and their relationships with their audience, as well as to the context in which the art is created and presented (1936). This question of the importance of context is key in current Tacoma artistic debates.

### ***The Role of Art in Urban Renewal and Gentrification***

In two ways, art plays a role as an economic commodity: it allows artists to provide for themselves financially, and it is a means of urban revitalization. Creativity fosters growth and innovation, which helps the city to progress (Florida, 2005). Artists, while often marginalized in discussions of economics, play a major role in the economic life of a city. Keating and Smith (1996) defined gentrification as “a pattern of change in the profile of a neighborhood’s population, accompanied by an increase in housing values, resulting from an influx of higher-income owners into previously lower-income urban neighborhoods.” While most artists view themselves in opposition to processes of gentrification, in fact, artists and their art often act as a source of economic and social value in a city, which can buttress urban revitalization and gentrification (Deutsche and Ryan, 1984; Florida, 2002; Florida, 2005).

Many artists do not make much money from their work, and therefore struggle with financial issues, so they are drawn to areas with low rent. Living in impoverished neighborhoods additionally bolsters an artist’s feelings of authenticity and pride as a true artist experiencing real city life (Deutsche and Ryan, 1984). By moving into areas that have been neglected by the city and are home to the poor, artists make those areas vibrant through their innovation and creativity. The economic prospects of artists’ involvement in their neighborhoods cause city officials to focus more on the area than when poor non-

artists were living there (Florida, 2002; 2005). This leads to artistic, economic, and infrastructural renewal of the city and raises housing prices as the area becomes more desirable to the upper classes (Deutsche and Ryan, 1984).

### **Research Questions**

For this project, I was interested in the role that artists in Tacoma play in determining Tacoma's identity. I was interested in how Tacoma artists view their city and what personal connections they feel with the city and the community in which they live and the people with whom they interact. I wanted to explore if and how artists portray Tacoma through their art, and why they do so. My investigation led me into an exploration of the art community and how it defines Tacoma and also is simultaneously defined by the city.

My research questions included: How is the identity of Tacoma shaped by the art created within the city, and how does it help to shape that art? What is the role of art in fostering a sense of community? How is the conception of the purpose of art in the eyes of Tacoma artists a significant factor in shaping the artistic community? What is an artist's role in the process of urban development, and what are the implications of this in artists' perceptions of Tacoma's identity? The answers to these questions offer us an understanding of the role that community plays in the Tacoma art community, the significance of the artistic community as an actor working in the process of distilling out an identity of the city, and the role of art in urban revitalization. They give us insight into the broader processes of social and economic transformation.

### **Research Methods**

In order to gain a sense of how art plays a significant role in identity formation, community reinforcement, and urban revitalization in Tacoma, I employed qualitative ethnographic research methods. I conducted nine tape-recorded semi-structured interviews with ten local artists varying in age from mid-twenties to middle age. The interviews took place between January and March of 2009, and lasted between thirty minutes and two hours each. The interviews were designed to gather information about the artists' work and their perceptions of Tacoma. I asked if Tacoma plays into their art, how it does, and why. I inquired about changes they have noticed in Tacoma's art scene. I also asked about their opinions on things like the process of gentrification and the effects that money has on their art and their lives. I analyzed my data through a process of coding.

My informants were strategically selected. I joined a Tacoma art listserv administrated by the Tacoma Arts Commission, on which postings about art events in Tacoma are regularly disseminated. I posted a request to speak to artists, and upon receipt of responses, I gathered a snowball sample, asking the artists I interviewed to refer me to others. I also contacted people in the city with whom I already had an established relationship, asking if they might put me in contact with any acquaintances. Included in my subject population were: artists who were born in Tacoma and those who moved to Tacoma from elsewhere; artists who rely on their artwork as their main source of income and those who hold other jobs as their primary source of income; and artists who create art about Tacoma and those who do not. Among my informants were painters, drawers, ink artists, a graphic illustrator, a graffiti artist, a clothing designer, a gallery owner,

letterpress poster artists, an abstract artist, and a political cartoonist. What united this diverse group is that each individual self-identified as an artist or as part of the artistic community.

I found the Internet to be a valuable resource in my study. I utilized various Tacoma-centered web communities, such as Exit133.com and feedtacoma.com to find information about artists and events in the art community. Daniel Blue, one of my informants, writes a blog for Exit133.com, and this was a source that I used to gain a deeper understanding of his relationship with Tacoma. Many of the artists I interviewed maintain websites, which I browsed to find more information on each artist.

The majority of the artists I talked with work, live, and show their art in the downtown Tacoma area. While I did not seek out artists specifically from downtown, my informants were especially active in this area. I am not able to therefore claim my pool of informants as representative of the entire population of artists in Tacoma, and this may have led to bias in my findings. Though there is bias in my sampling, I was able to gather substantial data from the informants I had. Using qualitative methods allowed me to gain a solid understanding of my informants' perceptions of the city, including the complexities that they deal with.

### **Findings and Discussion**

According to my research, the makeup of Tacoma's artistic community is very diverse. There is no single defining characteristic of Tacoma artists that holds the group together except that they are artists who live in Tacoma. Their beliefs about the identity of the city and about art vary greatly. This community is full of tensions and paradoxes

which cannot be easily solved and do not have a right and wrong answer. Growing relationships and expanding dialogue among Tacomans are the steps that these artists propose for advancing the community and progressing while remaining a strong web of individuals. By looking at the Tacoma art community, we can shed some light on the broader issues that play out in the city of Tacoma. These artists give us an understanding of greater processes of social and economic transformation, and the role of this specific community in these processes within the city.

In the following sections I will untangle some of the answers to the art community's role in Tacoma. I will discuss how artists both define and are defined by the identity of the city, followed by a discussion of the sense of community, which is deemed one of the most important factors in what makes Tacoma special to these artists. I will then describe tensions among artists about the role of art within the community, and how criticism of art gets entangled in discussion of community. I will conclude with the role of the art community in the economic sphere, as artists contribute to urban revitalization and gentrification.

### *Art's Role in Shaping Identity and Community*

According to the art community, Tacoma does not know who Tacoma is. In describing the city, my informants regularly used words such as “gritty,” “industrial,” and “blue-collar,” yet at the same time they describe Tacoma as “warm,” “friendly,” and “like a family.” The general consensus among the art community is that while it is difficult to pin down the city's identity, there is something unique about the city that they love – something that makes them stay here. Even people who are not originally from Tacoma feel a strong connection to the city despite, or even because of the city's identity crisis.

Tacoma has a force that draws artists to it – a dirtiness and supposed undesirability – around which a community has been formed. These artists take pride in the seedy reputation of their city, and they rally around what others might perceive as its negative aspects.

In Tacoma, art plays a significant role in both exploring and shaping the identity of the city. Consider Daniel Blue, a fashion designer, painter, poet, musician, and self-defined “creative” in his mid-twenties. Daniel is the creator of what is known as the “253 heart,” a graphic depicting Tacoma’s area code in the shape of a heart. This design can be found on tee shirts, car windows, and bumpers all over Tacoma. Daniel is unabashedly in love with Tacoma. R.R. Anderson, a political cartoonist, called Daniel the “poster boy of Tacoma hipster culture.” According to Daniel, Tacoma is in the middle of “an identity crisis.” He believes that Tacomans focus more on what they “want [the city] to be,” but “no one’s paying attention to what it is.” In dealing with the question of Tacoma’s identity:

Artists focus on Tacoma and express it [in their art]... to try to get people to look at what we [as Tacoma] really are. It’s like a mirror.... That’s what art’s supposed to do, right? Reflect life.... When people draw Tacoma or consider it and bring it into their artwork, they’re really trying to get the general idea of the place solidified.

Daniel invoked the idea that Hauser (1979) suggests of artists using art as an attempt to make sense of the world around us and as a reflection of reality. They use art as an attempt to distill out the essence of what it is that defines Tacoma and makes it unique.

Tacoma is often contrasted with bigger cities like Seattle and Portland, against which it is deemed the “ugly stepchild,” as R.R. put it, a juxtaposition that highlights the grittiness of the city. Calus, a graffiti artist in his mid-twenties, mentioned that there is a

“faulted image” of Tacoma in the eyes of residents of surrounding areas. “Everyone considers us to be a shadow of Seattle,” he claimed. Tom Llewellyn, of Beautiful Angle, mentioned that non-Tacomans tend to be surprised that anyone would choose to live here. My informants agreed, however, that Tacomans often relish the shabby reputation of the city: gritty, industrial, and blue-collar.

Tom mentioned that because of this Tacoma pride, “there’s a cohesive aspect to the people who live here, in the fact that they like... that part of their address.” Artists are especially fond of the toughness that they believe is an integral part of Tacoma’s identity. There is an underdog loyalty to which these artists cling and which bolsters their sense that in Tacoma they experience the world more authentically than they would elsewhere. They view Seattle as a glossy, planned, newly constructed, less organic environment, which fosters a less genuine lifestyle. The way these Tacoma artists view their city is reminiscent of the artistic community studied by Keating and Smith (1996) who found that the artists in the Lower East Side of Manhattan saw themselves as pioneers, constructing their own neighborhood, rather than moving into a pre-built area with a cookie-cutter, suburban aesthetic. Sean Alexander, an artist and co-owner of The Helm Gallery, equates the Tacoman pride of the grit to displaying “a swatch on your uniform,” believing that the rough identity of Tacoma is picked up by these artists and added into their own personal identity.

When Daniel moved to Tacoma six years ago, the story he heard about the city was that of:

A dusty jewel, discarded by the fancy merchant as common ore, found by the peasant with a special eye for that sort of thing and polished into the perfect jewel for the queen’s new crown. In that story every one [*sic*] praises the peasant for the

wisdom to look beneath the surface, and everyone regards the perfect jewel as even more special since it was almost lost to the heap. (Blue, 2009)

Daniel sees Tacomans as priding themselves on being the peasants who can see “beneath the surface and find the jewel parts of things,” but he also wondered if Tacoma clings so tightly to its dustiness that it refuses to allow its brilliance to be revealed (2009). The artistic community, especially, has burrowed its identity so deeply in the dirtiness that “we become fearful and unwilling to relinquish our status as dusty jewels,” (2009). R.R. added, “Everybody wants to be David; nobody wants to be Goliath.” They favor the underdog over the popular choice. Without the grit and grime, Tacoma would not be Tacoma; it would lose its uniqueness.

Dayton Knipher, an abstract artist whose medium is photography, sees Tacoma artists as expressing, “We’re a wonderful city” through their art. She said that in spite of its low reputation, Tacoma is a great place and deserves to be loved. In explaining their love for Tacoma, the men behind Beautiful Angle, Lance Kagey and Tom Llewellyn, cited a quote by G.K. Chesterton (1908): “Men did not love Rome because she was great. She was great because they had loved her.” They believe that in embracing Tacoma and all that it is, the city will grow into their love and become great. While Dayton, Tom, and Lance attempt to build a Tacoma identity that is not slick and glossy, they counter the general view of Tacoma as an undesirable place. The desire to establish an identity and to build pride based on the underdog characteristic of the city emerges from the reputation of the city in the eyes of others in the region. Tacoma artists want to pride themselves on the identity of the city because it is bullied by the words of the bigger, shinier cities in the area. “They have to do that,” said Sean, “because that’s their identity, and people protect

their identities. It's natural to do." Tacoma exists in the realm of double-consciousness, where its internal identity is based upon how it is seen from the outside.

Tacoma artists use art as a tool to grapple with questions about what the city is and what they want it to become. Artists attempt to define their collective identity through the art they create. While there may be no consensus among my informants as to what Tacoma's identity is, the single defining characteristic of the artists I spoke to is the value they place on community. "There's a pretty strong little community in this city," said R.R. Calus claimed that "everyone knows everyone in this place." Dayton added that Tacoma "is the biggest small town you will ever be in." My informants all mentioned that the size of the city allows for a lot of artistic opportunity. Unlike bigger cities like Seattle, which have "everything spoken for," according to Calus, Tacoma has room for artistic expansion. To R.R. this means that he can be, in his own words, "*the* political cartoonist guy." He explained that the situation for most Tacoma artists is the "big fish in the little pond" scenario. "You can find a niche," he said. Most of my informants told me how easy it is to be known and how this makes it easy for artists to get their work out and to connect with their audiences.

The nature of the community as an interweaving web of connections between people is significant in the social lives of these artists, and in the creation of their art. Reminiscent of Florida's (2002; 2005) description of the city as stimulation for artists' creativity, R.R. explained that by participating in the community, artists can bounce ideas off each other. He commonly incorporates into his cartoons ideas that he gets from interactions with other people. Because of the size and limited resources of the Tacoma art community, artists work together and collaborate. In Tacoma, Calus said, "people are

all coming together and making it one big art scene. It's not just a graffiti scene; it's not just an acrylic scene; it's not just a photography scene." In creating their posters, Beautiful Angle often collaborates with various local artists, writers, and poets. The groups of artists who create art in a certain media all weave in and out of each other to form an interconnected art community. R.R. told me that cooperation among Tacoma artists is common "because no one else is going to help, so they've kind of got to bind together."

Relationships within the art community provide not simply social interactions, but also as an economic means of survival. Maureen McHugh is the owner of the Mad Hat Tea Company downtown. Her tea shop is a hub for people to connect with each other, propelled in major part by her "habit of introducing strangers to each other." Her shop exhibits monthly rotations of art by local artists, and Maureen and her husband, Tobin Ropes, have forged relationships with most of the artists whose work they have displayed. Maureen told me that Daniel walked into the shop one day when they were first setting up. Daniel's art was the first they hung, and they "traded him a bunch of tea" for it. Trading is something that has been mentioned by many of my informants. Daniel tells me that if he were not integrated into the community, living here would not be financially viable for him. Artists often trade art for goods and services and use their relationships within the community as social capital.

Through these trade networks, artists navigate the tricky world of economics. My informants agreed that most artists are relatively poor and have to figure out inventive ways to get by. Trading springs from a combination of the needs of the individual artists

and the collective artistic community. Works of art are exchanged for goods and services as pieces of art are sometimes accepted as a valid substitute for actual money.

Local artists acknowledged the interdependence of everyone in Tacoma and the importance of relationships in the everyday life of an individual in the city. Daniel told me that his main purpose in creating art is to encourage others to engage in human relations. He said that one thing he likes about Tacoma is that individuals are forced to deal with other people. In bigger cities, he claimed, people need each other less. They may already have all of their needs met, so they do not need friends because they do not need anything from them; they can get by on their own. The focus on the “human mess” of relationships, as Daniel called it, places Tacoma on a higher relational pedestal in the eyes of these artists than bigger cities such as Seattle and Portland. They see that the necessity of living in community plays a significant role in the authenticity of Tacoma life. They described big cities as impersonal, and many mentioned the fact that in Seattle life is so saturated that there is no more opportunity for anything else – no need or time for many relationships. Artists compared their experiences in Tacoma to the way they imagine they would be integrated into a community in a small town – close personal relationships that permeate multiple boundaries and extend beyond simple formalities and business relations. They care about each other and value their interaction in daily life in common spaces like the Mad Hat Tea Company, coffee shops, art shows, and gallery events.

The Tacoma community is partially following the pattern that Putnam laid out (2000). An individual’s social network spans across a great spatial area, and its fingers reach to many different people of various types. The relationships formed in this art

community are not meant exclusively for social or business purposes; they span multiple facets of life in the city. My informants told me that this strong community is what has made them fall in love with Tacoma and what keeps them here. It is the relationships that they form with people, they said, that makes Tacoma special.

By creating art about Tacoma, artists support the sense of community they find so important. They hope that not only will they form a relationship with their audience, but that they will pave the way for relationships among audience members. Because community is so prized in the Tacoma art scene, local art is a bestseller. Sean, the co-owner of The Helm Gallery, told me that most of the art shown at The Helm comes from outside Tacoma, and the gallery is currently going out of business because local art sells; non-Tacoma art does not. He said that most galleries in town show only local artists because local buyers want contact with the artists from whom they are buying. They support community by purchasing art. A piece of local art on the wall makes possible a conversation about the artist and his or her work, and it encourages pride in the local art scene.

For many artists in Tacoma, part of the joy of creating art comes from getting to know their audience. Daniel sells most of his art directly to the buyer because he believes that the community is the basis of his creativity, and he wants to know the people who buy his work. He has sold his clothing in both Tacoma and Seattle, but he was disappointed in his relationships with Seattle customers. Everyone was so caught up in their own lives that they did not want or need to connect with the person who made their clothes. Daniel desires more than a business relationship. Similarly, Beautiful Angle

produces posters as a method of reaching into the community and stoking the fire of interaction, igniting dialogues. These artists' purposes are community-based.

Common knowledge of an artist serves as an initial basis for commonality and trust, enabling social networks to grow. Tom and Lance said that their art serves as a vehicle for sustaining conversations, and thereby fostering relationships. The focus on relationships as a reason to create art is a sign of these artists' beliefs in using art to bring people together. These artists echoed the theories of Hauser (1979), Benjamin (1936), and Adorno (1975) in that they place the purpose of their art outside of the aesthetics and image, and the meaning they assign to art bleeds into real life. The art is not just an end in itself; it is meant to introduce people and act as a magnet to pull people together and serves as the base from which relationships can be built. Not only is social context necessary for the audience to contemplate the art, but the audience *is* the social context and basis for its message and purpose. They hope their art can function as a symbol of the identity of the community and act as a base around which the community can gather and be strengthened (Lowe, 2000). The purpose of these artists is not only to foster community and build unity through subject matter, but also to form human relationships through the exhibition of the art in its context. It is the aura of the art that is important (Benjamin, 1936; Adorno, 1975). The purpose of the art extends beyond the canvas and into the lives of both the artist and the audience.

The artists I interviewed love Tacoma, and they hope to open their fellow citizens' eyes to both its positive aspects and to key issues that need to be addressed in order to make Tacoma better and more livable. Because the identity of Tacoma is so slippery and elusive, these artists hope to use art get a grasp of who and what Tacoma is.

As Hauser (1979) suggested, these artists are taking the great, complex entity that is Tacoma and trying to whittle down its essence to one canvas, sculpture, or photograph. They want their audience to follow suit and consider who Tacoma is and who it ought to be.

Beautiful Angle does this by bringing up issues that Tom and Lance believe are important to be discussed in the public forum. They identify problems that they see in society and prompt their audience to participate in a dialogue on those subjects. The topics of their posters range from an explicit call to love Tacoma, to a person's purpose in the city, to how people relate to each other, to religion. Tom said, "We tend to say things that piss off audience members.... And we're not afraid to do that on a regular basis." They want people to become passionate about what happens in the city, so "we say really critical things about Tacoma," even if they are not always accepted. R.R. hopes to prompt his audience to participate in civic life by creating cartoons that encourage people to actually cut them out of the newspaper and send them to their city council members in response to an issue that he feels ought to be addressed and discussed by the citizens of Tacoma. His cartoons are available under a Creative Commons license, and he welcomes people to rework them into something that fits their own views. "I want people to download them and put them on tee shirts... [or] put it on a picket sign if it's a cause they support.... I encourage people to remix, mash up the culture," he said.

Consistent with Florida's (2002; 2005) theory, creatives are drawn to Tacoma because it values openness and welcomes diversity. Daniel, in describing Florida's creative class theory, explained that members of the creative class "won't be attracted to places that don't nurture, request and value creative thinking and freedom to find new

ways of doing things,” (Blue, 2008). Within the Tacoma art community, differences of opinion are widespread and commonly embraced. Jacobs (1961) believed that a healthy city relies on dissent and diversity of opinion. Beautiful Angle welcomes dissent, invoking Hauser’s (1979) idea that appreciating a piece of art does not necessarily mean agreeing with it. They do not encourage blind acceptance of what they say; they want Tacomans to wrestle with the challenging issues they raise. Additionally, they want those who participate in the conversation to be exposed to new points of view that they may not have considered previously, consistent with Lowe (2000).

Ultimately, by discussing tough or controversial, relationships are formed and connections made, and this is the underlying principle upon which many Tacoma artists base their work. They focus more on the person than the opinions that the person has, and therefore they are able to respect and listen to a variety of dissenting views. Beautiful Angle reflects reality through their work and inspires dialogue on controversial and important issues that the community faces. In doing so, these artists, aligning with Hauser’s (1979) conception of the purpose of art, hope to reflect reality both in order to attempt to make sense of it and to shine it into the eyes of their audience in order to inspire them to participate in the life of their city.

As Lowe (2000) proposed, many artists in Tacoma attempt to symbolize a collective identity through their art. They are lifting up what they feel they have in common with other Tacomans, and they hope to make their audience reflect upon the place in which they live. They realize that everyone living here must share this space, so they attempt to make the chaos of humanity as peaceful as possible. They want to problematize the status quo and remind their audience of the other people in the

community. They hope to shake Tacoma out of its trance. As Hauser (1979) suggested, these artists hope to convey a message to the greater community. They hope that the purpose of their art is not simply to be art, but that it has a greater significance that requires a contemplation of the context of the city and which emanates well beyond the piece itself to reach well beyond the piece and which can be applied to life within the city. It is a means to achieve an end, that which the message sends.

### *Criticism of Tacoma Art*

There is a common critique, however, of art that self-consciously focuses of Tacoma or promotes the community in some way. While most artists in Tacoma are passionate about the community that is built through and around their artwork, some artists are critical of this focus on community and the fact that many Tacoma artists are unwilling to extract art from its context within the local community.

Sean is one such critic. He believes that the majority of the art being produced in this city would not hold up to the standards of quality set by the major art centers of the world. Frustrated with the insularity of the Tacoma art scene and what he saw as a deterioration of the quality of Tacoma art, he and Peter Lynn opened The Helm. They committed themselves to providing a gallery that would bring in art from the outside world that was, in their eyes, more complex and of a higher quality than most Tacoma art. Their focus was more on the art itself than on the context in which the art is shown. They thought this would open Tacoma's eyes to the higher level of skill that goes into art created elsewhere. Sean and Peter believe that by comparing art in Tacoma to art from elsewhere, Tacoma art would increase in quality because there would be more competition which would "breed survival of the fittest." They hoped they could challenge

Tacoma artists and spur them to focus on the skill of creating their art, rather than just on the message or community-centric aspect of their artwork.

The application of universal standards to artwork is exactly the approach that Benjamin (1936) and Adorno (1975) railed against. They adamantly argued that with the ability of art to be mobile and presentable in multiple contexts, art becomes so standardized that it is no longer unique. All artists tailor their work to fit these molds in order to be accepted as good artists, when really the regulations are set by the general society, who accepts the standards as natural. Because society buys into these measures of quality, judgments are made solely on the basis of these norms and creativity is no longer valued or expected (Benjamin, 1936; Adorno, 1975). There is no progress and art simply stagnates.

Sean, however, claimed that stagnation will occur if there is not a bar of high quality set to strive for. He believes that in order for art to be “good,” it must have an aesthetic quality that can be appreciated and respected everywhere. In this sense, art must be able to be removed from its aura, or at least have an aura that extends no further than the piece itself. It must be disassociated from the context in which it was created so that it can be uprooted, moved around, and reproduced. It must be able to be viewed by many different audiences in many different contexts in order to be considered good art. While Benjamin (1936) and Adorno (1975) saw applying standards as a negative action that makes art less unique, Sean sees the act as challenging art to improve to meet certain thresholds of quality. He believes that universal standards set the bar, and everything that does not meet those regulations falls short of good art.

When I asked Beautiful Angle what they thought of Sean's criticism, they recognized some validity in it. While their purpose and intent is embedded in the message of their posters, Lance acknowledged that Tacoma's art scene is:

A little self-absorbed.... We're like an awkward teenager. We want to do great things, but we don't quite know how to do them yet... [so] we end up looking at the way our art looks compared to the guy right next to us [and] not the guy in Paris.

Tom admitted that they only "occasionally reach the level of what I would consider art." Tom and Lance both believe that good art "requires mastery of the technique," consistent with Hauser (1979).

Maria Jost, an artist and an educator at the Tacoma School of the Arts (SOTA) downtown, agrees with Sean's criticism of Tacoma art. She bemoaned the fact that so much "energy is pumped into sustaining" pride in the city, which "[sacrifices] the product" itself. Too much focus is placed on getting the message across, but the vehicle for conveying that message atrophies when no energy "is pumped into honing your craft or becoming better at the art form you're doing." Maria's and Sean's thoughts echo Hauser's (1979) argument that artists must not forget about form. Without the vehicle of form, the message of the art would not be communicated effectively; the methods would not achieve the purpose.

One of the aspects of the Tacoma art community that is missing and whose lack is hindering the art community from developing, according to Sean, is a good critic. He claimed that "the art scene has always forever been pushed by criticism. Great critics are creating great artists." Thus, he acknowledges that Tacoma does not have a critic or force that prods along the art scene and spurs it forward. Sean believes that only good critics can see and understand the universal standards that define good art. It is these people who

are able to determine and express whether an artist has reached the threshold of good art. Unfortunately, discussion of the quality of art in Tacoma, said Sean, gets muffled by the proponents of community. Instead of focusing on the art as art, Tacoma artists focus on what the art says and how it builds and is inspired by the vibrant community of this city. Sean agreed that “[the community is] warm, but at the same time, it’s not serious.... It’s not people wrenching their guts to make artwork.” He believes that artists in Tacoma focus too much on relationships and not enough on the quality of their art.

This overshadowing of the quality art by a sharp focus on community leads to tension within the artistic world. Sean bemoaned the fact that even unofficial criticism between artists is often taboo in Tacoma. He certainly feels the warmth and the strong connections of the community that other artists praise, but he also senses a hesitation to accept criticism. He does not feel that he can be honest with the art community about the quality of art being produced in Tacoma.

The thing that sucks about living in Tacoma for me [is that] it’s almost taboo to talk about some of this stuff. I would just end up offending people by talking about a bunch of stuff. But if you’re going to offend people by being honest, that’s frustrating.

Sean is frustrated by the fact that Tacoma does not seem to notice that it is chasing its tail, and yet he feels he cannot voice his concern out of fear of offending someone. He thinks that the isolation of Tacoma from the larger art community hinders its progress. He believes that in order to progress artistically, Tacoma must plug into a place like Seattle, where artists can submit their work to official criticism and can compare their artwork to the universal artistic standards that are present in Seattle’s art. Without this, he said, Tacoma’s art will stagnate. He sees the quality of Tacoma’s art deteriorating, and he feels

helpless about the situation because people are so personally connected to the meaning of their work.

Sometimes I don't even want to talk to people about art because... [if] you start speaking your mind, especially in a small town like this, people just think you're out to get them. That you don't respect them. And I respect those people.

R.R. expressed a common sentiment, and explained that Tacoma's size is one factor that adds to the reluctance of people to voice their concerns about the quality of art. "If you want to criticize anyone [in Tacoma], you're going to run into them, and they're not going to be happy with you." Unfortunately, he added, this has potential to lead to some ruptures in the community. "If you do that [voice criticism], then all the people who think [what you think] will stand up and support you, but then all the people that support that person" will stand behind them, and a rift will form. But R.R. does not see this as an absolutely terrible thing. "It's good to shake things up a little once in a while."

This shying away from discussion of the quality of art in Tacoma results from, and may be explained by, a difference in opinion about the purpose of art. Those who consider the purpose to be emanating out of the art associate their art closely with the outside world, and a critique of the quality of Tacoma art would be taken as a slighting remark toward the community itself. They assume that the criticism follows the path of the message and extends beyond the canvas. Thus, there is a contradiction within the Tacoma art community between the proclaimed openness of the art community and the apparent reluctance to accept criticism. Being open to new ideas and ways of expression is highly valued, and artists tout their ideals of diversity and openness, yet when someone wishes to critique the art that is being produced in Tacoma, eyes widen and guards go up. Some artists see art and community as independent, separate entities, and can distinguish

art criticism from criticism of the community, but others conflate the two, leading to hurt feelings and both parties feeling antagonized. Sean, though, has no quarrel with the community itself, just the quality of some of the art it produces. Despite the fact that some people close to him are open to his criticisms, he feels hesitant to voice his concerns too loudly for fear of creating that rift that R.R. mentioned.

A common sentiment expressed by my informants is how much artists support each other, even if they feel criticism toward one another. In fact, Daniel is involved in the insular art scene that Sean criticizes, but at the same time, Daniel is one of the biggest mourners of the loss of The Helm. He is friends with Sean and told me that they constantly argue their viewpoints, so even though Sean feels like he is unable to voice his criticism widely, there are those with whom he is connected who will listen to him.

The community is trying to find a balance between being honest and progressive in order to create change, and supporting fellow artists in the community. This balance is hard to strike when the collective identity of the city is painted into the canvas, when artists have a personal investment in the message of their work, and when criticism of the art becomes entangled with criticism of the community and furthermore a criticism of individuals themselves.

### ***The Tacoma Art Community and Urban Revitalization***

The Helm is struggling, Sean said, because there is only a market for local art. Tom informed me that Sean and Peter have found that the “sweet spot in Tacoma is the 200 dollar range,” though the art they show is often priced in the thousand-dollar range. One of the biggest inconveniences that artists are forced to deal with is money. Some of the artists I interviewed make a living selling their artwork, while others have another job

which they rely on to pay the bills, as most of them would not be able to live off the income they receive from their art. Daniel claimed:

It's rare that you're going to find an artist that's doing it for art's sake without any money involved. I think that's kind of a fantasy. Really, really hard to live. If people are figuring out how to do that, I have to applaud them. Their life has become an art.

Tom told me, "Every artist I know is scrambling... to pay the bills." Tom and Lance both have stable careers outside of the Beautiful Angle project. Even with their substantial local following and the amount of money people are willing to pay for their posters, the project does not make enough money for even one of them to live off of.

A paradox exists in the fact that in order to survive, artists need people to buy their art; they need people with sufficient incomes to afford to purchase art. At the same time Tacoma artists do not want large numbers of high-income people moving to Tacoma and changing their city. Maria, the educator at SOTA, said that the connection between money and art is one of the hardest things for artists to accept. She explained that an artist will value creativity, beauty, and individual expression, but then will say, "I don't want condos, and I don't want gentrification, and I don't want corporate aesthetic," even though these are common consequences of having a local audience with enough money to buy the work. She asserted that "if you want to sell your art at the prices you need to make a living, you have to attract people who are coming with a certain lifestyle," which will change the atmosphere of the city. It is hard for the artists I spoke with to find a balance between expressing themselves creatively and making enough money to live off of while still keeping the city open to and livable for artists.

While many artists, especially those who rely on their work as a major source of income, fit into the category of being low-income earners, they also exacerbate the

processes of exclusion and gentrification as they draw attention to an area, raising the cost of living and pushing low-income residents, including themselves, out of the area. There is cycle of aesthetic revitalization that begins with artists moving into an area that is overlooked by many, especially city officials, because of the lower rent and large space for studios in those areas. In Tacoma a few years ago, when downtown was “a ghost town,” as many of my informants referred to it, there were many available studios downtown. Artists, drawn by the grittiness and authenticity of living in such an abandoned area, moved in and brought vibrancy to the city through their creativity. In so doing, they began a revitalization of the downtown area that was picked up by city officials and turned into an organized, official process (Clarke and Gaile, 1998). In creating a lively neighborhood, these artists attract attention, making their location desirable for those who have more money than they do because these people want to be a part of the “scene,” according to Lance. These people have their own sense of what aesthetic they want their neighborhood, which does not always fit into the atmosphere that artists wish for the area, so the artists feel that their creativity is stifled. Simultaneously, rent rises when an area becomes revitalized and desired, and as Tom put it, artists “get gentrified out.”

The reason artists do not necessarily want gentrification to take hold in their spaces, besides the fact that it raises rent and expels low-income residents, is because they fear that along with gentrification come certain strict suburban aesthetic standards, which they view as antithetical to creativity. They fear that the upper classes are less progressive than artists are, and that if upper classes move in, they will create rules that exclude the artists or limit their freedom. Adam Jackson, a commercial graphics and

fashion illustration artist, was careful to tell me that he is “very middle ground” about the concept of gentrification – he sees both the positive and negative aspects of it – but one thing he does not enjoy is the bland, suburban aesthetic that the upper classes bring when they move into an area. “They’re tearing out culture and creativity,” he said, “and they want everything to be painted the same color. That pisses me off.” He feels that the community’s creativity is stifled when regulations are placed on how an area should look. Daniel echoed this sentiment when he complained that the city “[sells] all of the land to people from out of town who build the same cheap-ass, Euro-box condo buildings over and over painted slightly different colors of lame,” (Blue, 2008). Calus, the graffiti artist, agreed: “The upper-class people are very single minded. They’re not going to accept things the way that us middle-class people or lower-class people accept.” These artists refuse to accept standardization as the path of city development. They value unique expression over applying set standards to be upheld in the areas where they live.

A point of interest about the cycle of gentrification is that no one takes a hard stance for or against it. Most of my informants are very strongly opposed to the fact that it raises housing prices in the area and, worse, displaces people with lower incomes who have nowhere else to go and cannot afford any other location. However, they are also honest about their support of certain effects of building condominiums. Safety is the most expressed benefit that comes with aesthetic and infrastructural standards. Daniel said that “gentrification... hasn’t all been for the worst.” He said he lives in an alley where sex and drugs were formerly rampant and shamelessly apparent. After a condo was built across the street, the alley was cleaned up to satisfy the standards of the new residents, so now

“it’s easier for me to live there, but my rent is more. So it’s kind of tit for tat. You have to think about infrastructure and what that means. Clean streets are awesome.”

There are concerns about the implications of cleaning up the city, however. Because the identity of the city is so intertwined with the industrial aesthetic, artists hesitate to support initiatives to make the city better. “You almost can’t fix things,” said Lance with a hint of frustration at the tension between the opposing forces. “You can’t have them get better because then it ruins the aesthetic.” Jacobs (1961) pointed out that no matter where people are, they will always care about the neighborhood in which they live. But, when you make a neighborhood a safer place and apply upper-class standards, you lose the grittiness and toughness that pervades the identity of Tacoma and of many of these artists. According to Sean, as the City begins to lift Tacoma out of its dilapidation in some places, “it’s losing its edge,” and “it will lose its appeal to young artists” if the aestheticization continues. “Artists want to be inspired, and I don’t think there’s anything inspiring about the way the suburbs affect the city,” he said. The “classically American” working-class atmosphere with its “industry architecture” that is “less tech-age and upper-class” is seen as more real to artists. The messiness adds an authenticity to their daily life, which inspires them to create.

Most artists agree that in order to battle the tensions created by this process of gentrification, two things are needed: communication and creativity. General creativity is important for the entire community, not just the arts. Sean believes that:

It’s possible that being progressive and young is also equally being poor or realistic in our economy. Like, a progressive thinker would say, ‘hey, we’re living outside of our means. I’m okay with having little.’ I think that that’s maybe part of the future of progressive ideals. To understand that not having a lot is realistic. I mean, if everybody is going to have enough, nobody would have a lot.

Artists have the potential to be progressive not only in their art, but also in their lifestyles, setting an example about how to live sustainably without a lot of income.

Daniel believes that the thing that is lacking is human relationships and communication, especially between categories of people like city officials and artists. These groups must bridge the communication gap in order to be understood by each other, he said; otherwise there will always be tension between them. If stronger relationships were forged, there might be a way to develop Tacoma and still allow artists and low-income people to stay. He encourages other artists to branch out of their “artists’ enclave” and forge connections within the city by interacting with other people. “I might say fifty percent of my needs are met with relationships, and the other fifty are with me earning money.” The creation of art, in bringing people together and opening pathways for communication and relationships, he says, is an important strategy for sorting through the conflicts between groups in this city, as well as a significant economic resource for artists’ survival.

Daniel’s words and lifestyle challenge the ideas that Deutsche and Ryan (1984) presented when they lumped artists together with the middle- and upper-classes. They claimed that the city builds condominiums for white, middle-class artists to live in, which is what forces low-income earners out. In Tacoma, not all artists are part of this group. Some of them, of course, make a comfortable living and can afford to live in higher-priced areas, but this is because they have alternate jobs that fund this lifestyle, and not because they make a comfortable income from their art. Many of these artists do not rely on their art as their only source of income. Those who do, like Daniel, are as subject to

and afraid of the pressures of rising rent as their neighbors are. It is his relationships with those around him that get him through each day and allow him to remain where he is.

In order to battle the problems caused by money, such as gentrification, most of these artists believe that there is need for more general creativity in our society. Creativity, they say, is what will move our world forward and what will create change. Maria believes Tacoma needs to start valuing creativity as something that is necessary for it to survive. She said that “in order for a community to be supportive of... diverse neighborhoods,” the value of creativity “has to be more infused across society in general.” If creativity continues to be undervalued, the harmful effects of gentrification will continue.

Daniel agreed that creativity is something that everyone needs to have, no matter what area of life they use it in. He said that “any city is dead in the water that cannot foster creativity and innovation,” (Blue, 2008). Creativity is necessary in the struggles of dealing with the identity of the city, in being open to different voices and opinions about art, and in the struggles associated with gentrification. Daniel believes that creativity is the best way to lead to change, and:

If things don't change, then they get stagnant. And if you're going to change, then how do you know how to change or what to change into unless you use your imagination? I mean, human life requires creativity.... Without someone looking at [a city] and imagining for it or hoping for better things for it, it just destroys... itself. And I think creatives are hopefully coming up with... [new and better] ways of living with what has been created. And I think that a city is like a mess of all that happening at once.

Artists attempt to define their collective identity through the art they create, but their creations have strong potential to actually change the identity of the city. This reluctance to give up the supposedly negative aspects that make Tacoma what it is and

act as a basis upon which the identity of the artistic community stands, comes into conflict when art creates vibrancy and is used as a method and a starting point of urban revitalization. The way to combat these tensions, according to my informants, is to expand communication so that no group's values are dismissed.

### **Conclusion**

The art community in Tacoma uses art as a method for working through the question of the city's identity. For many of these artists, the collective identity of the community is firmly rooted in the social networks of the city. Community is highly valued among Tacoma artists, and for many of them, strengthening the community is a main goal of their work and their purpose for creating. While doing so, these artists encounter challenges that arise out of differences in ideology and the purpose of art, and tensions between their goals and values and those of city officials and others in the areas where they live. Recent urban revitalization efforts in Tacoma have focused on the arts and have revolved around artists' participation in city-sponsored projects. By focusing on the arts in the process of revitalization, Tacoma artists hope to bolster a collective identity among the community. At the same time, art is lodged in a cycle of renaissance and gentrification that affects these artists both negatively and positively, and which has potential to change the identity of the city that has been defined by Tacoma artists.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In future research, I would suggest focusing more on the economic implications of the art community's creativity. It would also be interesting to compare Tacoma to other peripheral cities that are overshadowed by bigger cities like Seattle, whose artists might focus more on being held to a universal standard. A direct comparison to Seattle might also provide new insights. It would be interesting to find out if the Tacoma art community has a stronger community focus than do other cities like Seattle. This could be a strength for the area. Tacoma might benefit from a serious art critic, but the role of critic in Tacoma would be a difficult one given the strong sense of community among Tacoma artists. Pushing their art into universal molds might also raise the price of Tacoma's art, thereby causing more gentrification. The community focus of Tacoma's artists might be a factor in guarding the city from gentrification.

Most citizens of Tacoma struggle with issues of identity. There are perpetual tensions between values and priorities, and according to these artists, it is necessary to recognize the value of creativity and human relationship. The issues that are important within the artistic community are representative of those that Tacoma as a whole deals with – solidifying a collective identity and navigating Tacoma’s economic shifts. There are no easy solutions, and struggle is a part of the process of dealing with the tensions. Balance is necessary, and these artists are trying to shift their weight, to determine where the fulcrum is. There appear to be opportunities to involve the Tacoma art community and low-income communities in Tacoma’s renaissance planning to mutually benefit all Tacomans. According to my informants, communication and relationships are necessary steps to be taken toward building more understanding between groups.

The issues revealed in this study have shed light on the important role the artistic community plays in the life of Tacoma. The arts are a necessary component of the vitality of the city, but they also come with consequences that have significant impacts on people’s lifestyles. Every action has tradeoffs that the city must weigh in its decisions. Even if Tacoma’s artists do not agree on certain issues, they show that they care deeply about Tacoma, and they each express this in the way that they feel most drawn to. Their values and concerns show that they care about the city and how its sub-cultures interact, and they recognize their power and impact as artists who possess a deep reservoir of creativity.

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