

# The Connection Between Philadelphia's Demographics and its Cultural Sector

Gary Steuer 16 May 2012

When the 2010 Census numbers for Philadelphia were announced, we learned that the City managed to record a population increase (U.S. Census Bureau 2012), the first in 50 years. And while the increase was tiny—8,456 residents, which represents a 0.6 percent increase to 1,536,006—the reversal of the decades-long decline is huge. Many older industrial cities are shrinking in population (i.e., Chicago, Baltimore, Minneapolis, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, Detroit, Cincinnati and Cleveland) so this increase is especially notable. It is also notable because it confirms that Philadelphia has recaptured the "fifth largest American city" spot from Phoenix, which had passed Philly for a few years. There are two big phenomena that jump out, though, as you look at the detailed numbers by neighborhood and by ethnicity. Clearly, the City is becoming much more diverse, and immigration, especially among Latino and Asian populations, is a major contributor to Philadelphia's growth. The Caucasian population in 2000 was already below 50 percent, a trend that continued in 2010. The

Asian population increased almost 50 percent, from 4.4 percent to 6.3 percent. And the Hispanic population had a similar scale increase, from 8.5 percent to 12.3 percent. The Black population remained somewhat steady and the White population shrank from 42.5 percent to 36.9 percent.

In terms of neighborhoods, there are enormous differences from neighborhood to neighborhood. Center City East saw a 25 percent increase. Large double-digit increases were also recorded in Center City West, Fishtown/Northern Liberties and Bella Vista. The diversity make-up has also seen huge variations by neighborhood. In my neighborhood, Bella Vista, for example, the Hispanic population is up 170 percent.

Critically, virtually all the neighborhoods that have seen huge population increases during this ten-year period have also seen large increases in the number of arts organizations and artists calling those neighborhoods home. This is not an accident. Arts and culture are definitely part of the mix of elements fostering the population and economic resurgence of these neighborhoods, along with retail, restaurants and residential real estate development. Looked at by neighborhood, the population gain has largely been a Center City phenomenon, and there are many reasons for this: the great work by the Center City District and Paul Levy; the impact of the cultural investments made by the City over the past couple of decades; the support those

cultural investments have had from major foundations and individual philanthropists (Pew, William Penn, Lenfest, etc.); the growth of a vibrant Philly culinary scene; and the real estate tax abatement program that helped spur development of new residential condominiums. According to the Center City District, over the past ten years the number of arts organizations in Center City has grown from 314 to 415. Only New York City and Washington, DC have more downtown arts groups. The growth of cultural vibrancy in Center City has clearly been a factor in attracting more residents—and having more residents attracts more retail and more restaurants.

Many of the City's poorest neighborhoods, however, were population losers, some by as much as 10 percent. The challenge going forward is how to help make these "shrinking" neighborhoods, many of which are filled with empty lots, abandoned buildings and declining commercial corridors, into good places to live and work. What role can the arts, creative economy and design play in solving this problem? Is there something that can be done proactively, while recognizing that great things can also happen organically (bad things can also happen organically, though...)? The new Philly Rising Collaborative program, initiated in 2011 by the City, is an attempt to address some of these challenged neighborhoods in a holistic and strategic way. The arts have been one element of this program's approach. For example, initiatives for the first commercial area to be targeted,

Market Street between 7th and 12th Streets, included a program of free outdoor musical performances as a way to create a more welcoming streetscape. The North Philadelphia effort has involved a partnership with the Village of Arts and Humanities.

It is also important to note that, at its peak, the City's population was just over two million, so we have seen a cumulative decline of 25 percent over the past 60 years, even though that decline has finally been stemmed. The challenge this poses for the City is that we still are operating a city with an infrastructure built for the peak population in terms of police stations, libraries, fire stations, schools, roads, swimming pools, parks, etc. Attempting to "right size" our City's infrastructure has turned out to be a political third rail and has evoked strong "not in my backyard" sentiment when it comes to reducing or downsizing our municipal capacity. Every citizen can understand and support the need to make these adjustments, but not if it affects them personally. Great strides have been made in increased efficiency, but ultimately we must face the fact that some of the City's challenges are based on this disconnect. We may have a high residential vacancy rate and abandoned buildings and vacant lots in many neighborhoods because (in part) the population is not there to fill them.

To get a good picture of the current statistical story of our City, and to put the welcome and positive new Census data in some context, the best resource is *Philadelphia*

*2011: The State of the City*, a report by The Philadelphia Research Initiative of the Pew Charitable Trusts (The Pew Charitable Trusts 2011). We have a poverty rate of 25 percent, ranking Philadelphia sixth among the 50 largest cities (most of the Pew study compares Philadelphia to a group of nine cities deemed comparable, but some comparisons look at the 50 largest American cities). The percentage of adults not working and not even looking for work (different from the unemployment rate, which does not count those who have given up looking) is higher than any other city except Detroit and Cleveland. Our percentage of the population aged 25-34, a key indicator of vibrancy, is higher than only Detroit and Cleveland. This despite having an unusually large number of colleges and universities in our City and region (though the percent of graduates staying in the City has recently seen a significant increase, from 29 percent in 2004 to 48 percent in 2010, according to Campus Philly, so the Pew numbers may be trailing reality).

Our median household income is less than half that of the surrounding counties, and the gap has widened over the past ten years. We rank 45th out of the 50 largest cities, and again are higher than only Detroit and Cleveland among the 9-city group. This is a particular challenge for the City since an important source of revenue is our wage tax; lower wages results in lower tax revenue and less capacity to support services. A small bright spot is that values in the housing market have fallen much less than

many other areas of the country, some of which have seen drops of two to three times the 10 percent median drop from 2008 to 2010 in Philadelphia. But again, it is a "haves and have nots" story because values have sharply dropped in many of our poorest neighborhoods.

The connection between the changing demographics of the City and the arts should be obvious. Our "traditional" (i.e., not community-based, not culturally-specific) arts groups *must* find a way to connect with this growing component of the population if they are to survive and thrive. African American, Latino and Asian-American audiences (and donors!) must be engaged; this is 63 percent of the market in the City. Our audiences should be diverse not just when we do special "outreach" performances but for our day-to-day offerings and special events. Beyond the imperative to build audiences and supporters more representative of the larger community, the arts also have a role to play in efforts (like Philly Rising) that are seeking to revitalize neighborhoods.

Despite significant strides over the past few years in improving government integrity and efficiency, the education of our young people, the safety of our citizens, and our quality of life, this remains a city that clearly has a significant share of its population in deep trouble. Many of our citizens are grappling with grinding poverty, high unemployment, widespread physical decline of their neighborhoods, and high crime rates in their neighborhoods—a loss of hope for the future. This

situation should be a source of pain and concern for all of us, including artists, arts organizations, patrons and board members. Arts groups are not social service agencies, but what is the role we can play in addressing these challenges? What is it that we are doing to bring joy and wonder and the other qualities the arts can deliver into the lives of our most challenged citizens and neighborhoods? Are doing all that we can?

Many of our arts organizations live with these challenges as part of their core mission, are located in these neighborhoods, and/or serve these citizens as their primary activity. For others it is an "extra"—part of community development or audience outreach. How can we make thinking about, and acting on, these issues more central to more arts groups and artists? Maybe arts organizations can think about whether there are places within their organizations to hire the long-term unemployed, or ex-offenders, or youth. Corporations are asked to step up to the plate in this way, and arts groups should as well, asking: Do we have entry-level reception/administrative assistant jobs? Apprentice technical/production opportunities? As challenged as all arts groups are with their finances right now, might more of them partner with and devote a portion of the proceeds of their galas and special events to a human service cause/organization? How many arts groups have collection sites for toys, coats/clothing, or canned goods during the holiday season? Not many from what I have

seen. Can arts organizations and artists make better use of their imagination, tenacity and compassion to help make the City a better place for *all* its citizens? I believe if the arts and culture sector were more universally seen as truly living these ideals, then ultimately more resources and audience will result.

So these new Census population numbers are certainly cause for celebration, both because of the vote of confidence they represent for Philadelphia, and the demonstration of the role of creative vitality in how people choose where to live. It is easy to live in a "bubble" in this City and region, to get caught up in attending wonderful cultural events and black-tie galas, eating in amazing restaurants, shopping in great stores, and perhaps supporting worthy cultural organizations and even serving on their boards. All of this is really good for Philadelphia, and we should celebrate it. But most of these folks never see the other side of the City unless they take a wrong turn in their car. They don't see the abandoned buildings and vacant lots, they don't see the crime (unless it makes a "flash" appearance in Center City). They also don't see the extraordinary people holding these communities together and the central role the arts can play in creating community. Let's look at the Census numbers as another alert that we must redouble efforts to ensure that our arts groups better serve the full spectrum of our increasingly diverse City, and do all we can to celebrate and support those that do. And this is a charge, not just to arts

administrators, but to funders, board members, donors and artists, as well.

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