

# A Syllogism for 21st Century Center City Philadelphia

Evelyn Eskin 16 May 2012

Arts and culture are major drivers of Philadelphia's economy.

Senior citizens are major supporters of arts and culture.

Therefore, increasing the involvement of Philadelphia's senior citizens in arts and culture strengthens the city's economy and improves the health of arts and cultural organizations.

What are the ramifications of this synergy for arts and cultural organizations and for Philadelphia's economic and social policy leaders?

Philadelphia's older people have a frame of reference for arts and culture. They grew up in a world where the arts were part of all school curricula. As children, they heard classical music in stores, elevators and schools. They experienced the magic of jazz, musical comedy and the great American songbook. They were taught to respect the creativity and talents of artists, dancers and writers, and to savor the joy of sharing this creativity in real-time. Sitting quietly and watching a performance is natural to them both as a learned experience and as a function of their physical capacity and emotional needs. When they

think of experiencing arts and culture, they think of theatres and museums rather than YouTube. These characteristics speak to the importance and value of seniors to arts and cultural institutions.

Senior citizens contribute to the arts and culture environment in three specific ways. First, they are patrons of the arts and of cultural institutions. They represent a large percentage of the musical and theatrical audiences in Philadelphia. Second, they volunteer for causes and organizations in which they believe. They are docents at museums, ushers at theatres, and teachers in many cultural venues. Finally, they are financial contributors to institutions and groups that are part of their lives and that provide meaning to them. They recognize the importance of giving back to their communities and of cultural components of communities, and they do it.

Compared to other age cohorts, senior citizens have more disposable income, leisure time and sophisticated tastes. Senior citizens, like all people, want and need involvement, stimulation and recognition in a world in which it is sometimes hard to engage. For those whose primary means of contact is not thumb-tapping, the world often seems hard to access. Many people who have left the workforce are often hungry for personal meaning, social identification, purpose and sources of camaraderie. Arts and culture can fulfill many of those needs. The challenge is connecting the people who need the engagement, stimulation and enjoyment with the

organizations and institutions that need their skills, experience, resources and energy.

There are many things that arts and cultural organizations can do to welcome seniors to participate fully in their activities. Working together, these organizations can do more than they are able to do individually. Arts collaboratives have a long history of providing space and resources to individuals and small groups. An *arts outreach collaborative* to seniors could build on this history to make a significant impact on attendance, participation and contributions. A key to these efforts is the ability of organizations to go to the places where seniors are, whether that is a physical space or a website.

Collaboration on a special website in large font for seniors would send a message that these organizations value and want to reach older people. Such a site could list discounted performances, provide biographical and personal details of performers in their own words, summarize the plot of a play with a short video of a key scene, illustrate the highlights of a museum exhibit, and provide the context, the main ideas and the themes of a musical performance. Having this background would help to make seniors feel more comfortable attending events. Offering a package that combines a meal before or after a performance with a ticket to the performance would help to make the event more robust for the senior citizen who lives alone and/or who wants to expand his/her social horizons. It would also help restaurants that depend on

patrons attending arts events.

Working in conjunction with houses of worship, naturally occurring retirement communities, and other centers of senior life within the city would increase the impact of these efforts. Sending musicians, artists and actors to perform and interact with seniors and discuss their work would provide seniors with a direct connection to the people whose work they can see and hear. This direct connection is an important driver of decision-making and resource allocation for seniors.

Designing *volunteer opportunities specifically for senior citizens* would strengthen the connection between the audience and the organization. Many seniors are comfortable in customer service roles, and can be effective on the telephone or in person with other audience members to promote events and confirm last-minute changes in venue logistics as well as updating patrons' contact information and preferences. Arts and cultural organizations often participate with schools to bring their work to children, an important component of raising the next generation to support arts and culture. Senior citizens can help with this effort by reading relevant books to children or helping them to tell stories about what they have heard and seen.

Arts and cultural organizations might consider *special programs for seniors* that would help to form groups for social interaction as well as intellectual stimulation.

Perhaps a morning program that allows seniors to hear the music to be performed in the evening with historical and musical insights, a play reading that provides time and support for seniors to know the major themes before the performance, or a presentation of reproductions of works of art in an exhibit with comments about the artist and the historical period are examples of ideas that could increase paid attendance. Further incentives might include some of these programs being presented at large apartment buildings that are easily accessed, during daylight hours when people are comfortable traveling.

Finally, creating *opportunities for seniors who are or have been artists* would provide connections, opportunities and immense satisfaction to older people. Painting or drawing classes, musical performance venues, improvisation sessions, play-reading events, or poetry jams for seniors held in the social rooms of apartment houses or in houses of worship and led by members of Philadelphia's arts community would provide stimulation and connections for those seniors for whom the arts are an important part of personal meaning and life.

There are many groups in the City that provide some components of this kind of collaboration. One such group, Friends Center City, has a robust program of events for seniors, ranging from volunteer opportunities with cultural organizations to walking, book and play-reading groups. One ongoing event, monthly lunches with a Philadelphia celebrity, has consistently been a sell-out, leading us to

believe that connection with someone whose work is important to the life of a senior and the opportunity to share a meal with friends are powerful incentives for older people. Our “celebrities” have all been people who work in the nonprofit sector to improve lives and expand options for Philadelphians. We will introduce our first resident artist to the event this spring, and anticipate more to come.

*Collaboration among public organizations* such as the Mayor’s Commission on Aging, the Center City District, Philadelphia Corporation for the Aging, the Mayor’s Commission on Arts and Culture, and others could help immensely to expand the role of senior citizens in the arts and culture community and to create a climate of energy around arts and culture. One important component of senior citizens’ attendance at events is transportation. Philadelphia has a wonderful public transit system that seniors ride free. Running special buses from a variety of well-lit and weather-protected locations in Center City to key events and performances would make it easier and more comfortable for seniors to attend events, particularly in winter months. Seniors will pay for things they value, and transportation is a key value to seniors. If SEPTA buses are not available, sightseeing buses or vans could be used. Providing police presence at the bus stops would increase the comfort of seniors, especially at night. Group taxi rates could also be considered. *Guaranteed, affordable transportation*, particularly following evening

events, is key to getting seniors out.

Senior citizens are critical to the future of arts and cultural organizations. They are also important in assuring that the impact of arts and culture is transmitted to our children. Finding collaborative ways to assure the accessibility of performances and events for seniors, and for seniors to help transmit the energy and beauty of arts and culture to the next generation, is essential to the future of arts and culture in our city, country and world. I hope that some of these ideas will resonate with the people in Philadelphia who can make it happen. The future of arts and culture in Philadelphia might well depend on such synergy.

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