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OP-ED

OPINION

# Baltimore needs art

By **PETER BRUUN AND DEBRA RUBINO**

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What is one thing that kids from Harlem Park Recreation Center, residents of Remington and Belair-Edison, and refugees from around the globe now living in Baltimore have in common?

All have been touched by projects led by Art on Purpose. For the past six years, this Baltimore nonprofit has collaborated with communities across the city using art-making as a way to reveal, affirm and ignite thoughts about ideas and issues.

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We have witnessed children expressing their fears and their dreams through paint and papier mache. We have seen young people print photographs of their neighborhoods as postcards and send them to legislators to share their visions for their city. We have seen elderly community members, who had never stepped into established arts institutions, viewing and discussing their own art on the walls of these bastions of culture, next to works by revered master painters.

Building on the bedrock notion that cultural experience ought to be at the center of citizenship and civic engagement, rather than a peripheral sidebar, we proved the value by making that happen — and thousands of people and institutions benefited.

Unfortunately, Art on Purpose will cease operations in the next few weeks, unable to sustain itself in a challenging economy.

It's always sad when something important closes, but we're not writing to complain. We believe that Art on Purpose played a vital role in helping Baltimore rethink the value of art in the community. Art is not just pretty. Art is not just for the wealthy. Art allows people to discover their voices, independently and collectively. And art can connect us to the issues that confront us as a community — issues of identity, home, race, history and politics.

Through free art workshops, thousands of residents explored topics of common interest and used the city's cultural heritage as a catalyst for community art making. Through such exhibitions as "Maps on Purpose," which gave communities the chance to map their own worlds in their own ways, and "Baltimore: Inspired by Poe," which allowed city residents to create art that responded to the writer's still-relevant themes, community members who would never have considered themselves artists were able to have their works displayed at the [Baltimore Museum of Art](#) and the [Walters Art Museum](#), among others.

And we launched the Black Male Identity Project, a provocative, community-driven series of workshops, performances, celebrations and exhibitions, designed to combat the prevailing negative image of black men. But once again, this project was way

more than an art project — it allowed young and older men to rethink their own identity and create that identity in a way that was much more powerful than what is created day by day via stereotypes and exploitation.

We end our work brimming with ideas for other projects that would have engaged Baltimoreans who are often left out of conversations here in our city. There is a deep hunger in these communities to connect to art and to be able to create one's own art. We witnessed that in every project we mounted.

Our closing follows the recent suspension of operations at the [Contemporary Museum](#), another unfortunate loss. Yet exciting things are happening, with groups such as the Youthlight photography program, Wide Angle Youth Media, New Lens, 901 Arts in Better Waverly and Muse 360 Arts providing great programs in certain areas of the city. They need and deserve ongoing support from the community and from funders.

We urge the local arts community and civic leaders to appreciate the value of community-focused art and find a way to support it. Perhaps our city would benefit from having a strong, new umbrella organization that can help such groups survive, thrive and do what they do best: work with the community. This organization could provide bookkeeping and administrative support to small art nonprofits and help with coordinated marketing. And it could serve as a clearinghouse of sorts for people looking to donate to community-focused art initiatives, identifying best practices and working with funders to strategize on a sustainable plan to keep such programs going for the long term.

Art on Purpose wasn't able to keep its doors open. But the community still has a need for what we did. We need to keep pouring creativity into our communities through art and advocacy in a meaningful and purposeful way.

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