



Art: A Naturally Occurring Resource for Building Bridges to the NU JERUZ

Arts and art-making provide a milieu for creativity, exploration, and experimentation beyond the boundaries of immediate culture and its constructs. They provide a potentially formative and friendly environment where people can grow personally and in relationship to others. As such, they can be an effective vehicle for reaching across the chasms of difference created by both individuals and communities. Thus, the arts in service to others, versus in performance, create a social and physical opportunity to meet difference at the borders of our race, ethnic, religious, and class enclaves. Theologically speaking, the arts are an expression of the indwelling of God’s creative spirit in His creation, and they provide a divine invitation to all of His creation for reconciliation and redemption. The arts are therefore a naturally occurring resource for bridge building in just about every place where humans reside.

There is, however, a complementary potential for the arts to maintain the same barriers we would seek to reconcile. There is an old expression that says, “Music is a universal language.” While music and the arts are universal, they are not universally the same. Each art form of a culture represents the values, beliefs, and behaviors of that culture and can stand as symbols of exclusion. Penetrating cultural barriers requires an understanding, appreciation, and learning of the emotional and aesthetic expressions of people, and takes calling, motivation, desire, knowledge, and skill—in short, intentional action. God sent his Son into the world to redeem the world, including their cultures and artistic expressions. It is through human relationships—relationships that demonstrate the love and power of Jesus—that art and those who create it live

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and proclaim the gospel to and in a world of need. Simply put, art in service to God and His creation is not an end but a means to an end.

In this two-part lecture, I want to 1) discuss the importance of arts as a redemptive vehicle in reconciliation, 2) demonstrate through brief case studies how others are using the arts in mission and ministry, and 3) challenge us to use this valued but sometimes underutilized resource for building bridges of reconciliation in our churches.¹

The Arts in Redemptive Transformation

The Arts as a Redemptive Vehicle in Reconciliation

Natural bridges render the awe, power, and beauty of God and nature. They are, however, usually “wonders” in no position to be of practical use to everyday living. And so our more common first image is one in which the bridge represents the human creative effort to cross chasms, from one side to the other, in an effort to mutually benefit separated communities. The Ben Franklin Bridge in Philadelphia crosses the Delaware River, providing economic and social access to millions of people between the cities of Camden and Philadelphia.

A second more theological image of the bridge is represented in the love God demonstrated in the divine act of giving to the world His Son, the human form of Himself. Through his life, ministry, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection, Jesus provided a bridge of salvation and redemption—access to a renewed life and reconciliation with God. As well, God’s work in the world, the redemptive process, can be seen beautifully at work through the artistic process.

The introduction for the 2003 Princeton Forums on Youth Ministry likens ministry to constructing bridges of reconciliation, understanding, healing, and hope; bridges that span the gulf between youth and adults, youth and congregations, the church and the community, people of different races and cultures and faiths and social classes. I like this visual picture of ministry as a bridge. The arts when used for ministry outside the four walls of the church reach and bridge to those who might never come across the thresholds of the traditional church on their own.

We became intensely aware of this arts bridging potential in 1997 when the Angels of Harmony, Eastern University’s multiethnic gospel choir, received an invitation from the Baptist Convention (black Baptists) and the Baptist Union of South Africa (the white Baptists) to come to South Africa

and participate in their reconciliation ceremonies. The two denominations, which had been founded on the principle of apartheid, had not spoken in many years. But after much prayer and negotiation, they facilitated a “coming together.” The arrival of a Christian music group from race-torn America symbolized, in their appearance and task, exactly what the two groups were trying to accomplish. The Angels, with their example of living and singing in harmony, traveled to schools, joint services, radio and TV studios, and opening ceremonies for a new seminary. At a culminating joint black-and-white worship celebration, the heads of the two heretofore racially divided Baptist groups made additional commitments, as the Angels led everyone in singing and celebrating.

A year following the trip to South Africa and Kenya, the Angels were invited to Eastern Europe by Atlantic Bridge, a European-based international Christian organization that seeks to help youth from different cultures build bridges of friendship and faith while breaking down walls of misunderstanding, ignorance, unbelief, and indifference. This two-week summer mission project provided Eastern students an opportunity to experience being missionaries, as they learned to share their faith in cross-cultural settings by simply building relationships through the teaching and sharing of their music. They exchanged values, convictions, and lifestyles with young people from Holland, Germany, and the Czech Republic who hosted our students in their homes. While some of the host young people were Christian, most were not. Thus, the Angels, through music and testimony, had a unique opportunity to share the gospel, to help plant new and existing youth groups in Europe, and to develop an ongoing ministry with them through correspondence.

A highlight of the ministry trip was an International Youth Music Festival in Louny, Czech Republic, which featured the Angels. While they met hundreds of young people from several other countries, their principle role was to conduct a mass youth choir workshop, their vehicle for building relationships. As they began to teach a Negro spiritual, including the history of the spirituals and their connection to slavery in America, the rapport between the groups was unusually quick and strong. There were a few reasons for this. The people of the Czech Republic told stories of their recent emergence from an oppression that closed all of the church doors and banned all teachings of God. Western music and radio were also under heavy ban, but we were told that for some reason, the Negro spirituals were one of the only forms of music they were allowed to listen to. They were thus already familiar with the words

and melodies of these songs, which served as their inspirational freedom music. So there was, even before our arrival, identification with African Americans who were perceived by the young people of this part of Eastern Europe as having emerged successfully from oppression similar to theirs. The African American students from the United States, and adults too, had selfishly held to the view that African American gospel and spiritual music belonged to them exclusively. But halfway around the world were a people who too claimed it as their freedom music. The extension of sharing their music was a sharing of faith: some of the Czech youth wanted to know more about this God who we were singing about with such joy, given a painful past. And who was this Jesus that was a “Rock in a Weary Land.”

A major question for us is, “Has the church utilized the arts intentionally in building relational bridges?” Buildabridge International has interviewed and made site visits to three distinct groups in order to discover what indicators must be present for a faith-based community arts program to be redemptive, and how they can be replicated by Christians and churches who want to use the arts to transform people and communities outside the four walls of their buildings.

For the past year we have met artists of the Christian faith who are using their gifts in horizontal acts of love and redemptive callings to bridge all kinds of divisions and expressions of injustice related to youth: unequal access to education, prison stigma, poverty, low career aspirations and self-esteem, emotional issues, job creation, community identity, relationship issues (peers, parents, peers of other cultures, God), and more. We firmly conclude that the arts are naturally occurring bridge-construction materials in every community, existing as a natural resource in every situation, from the transitional homes (homeless shelters) of Philadelphia to the refugee camps of Lebanon. The Creator God, in whose image we are all made, is naturally present in all people, no matter where they are, although its expression may be suppressed and oppressed to the point where we are unaware of this part of our God-selves. We partake of this Creator quality when we create art of excellence—our “acts” of creation. The power of this natural resource is to connect past the moment, past oppression, and division, to usher in what we call in our book, *Taking It to the Streets*, the NU JERUZ.²

It is important to note that either side of the bridge is not the destination. Wherever the bridge travelers meet and then dwell, there is the destination. We call this place of our destination the NU JERUZ—the kingdom of God

on earth, the kingdom of God in the here and now, God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven. The examples we discuss will serve to illustrate the general bridge-building power of the arts and, more specifically, the cultural-symbolic, political, and spiritual powers of the arts. But first, let's more closely consider our goal of the NU JERUZ.

The Arts and the NU JERUZ

Well, how is it "done" in heaven? What should renewed communities look like? What is the vision for our cities? Both Scripture and our artist interviewees give us specific visions for this new community.

Isaiah 61:1–4 indicates a *reversal in the fortunes* of God's people when salvation comes. Cities and communities in ruin are rebuilt; joy, freedom, beauty, and praise replace mourning, bondage, ashes, and depression. Confusion gives way to satisfaction; the people, their relatives, and descendants enjoy places of respect and honor among their peers. The Isaiah passage assumes that true transformation and meaning in life are inseparable from, and found only in, a right relationship with God. Sin and social evil do not occur in isolation and are social in nature and impact. So too, then, is their eradication.

Nicodemus (John 3:3) reminds us that *new attitudes* are a necessary part of the NU JERUZ. "Kingdom" characteristics are also described in Romans 14:17–23. The emphasis is on an unselfish consideration of others, to build them up, to support them, to resolve conflict in pursuit of harmony.

From Galatians 5:19–21, we learn that *new behaviors* are important. We know that "fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these" will not be practices present in the kingdom of God. On the contrary, lifestyles of choice include those characterized by "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (vs. 22–23).

God's *provision* is for all. The prophet Joel (2:19–20, 28–29) extends God's spirit of provision, safety, healing, restoration, and personal fulfillment to all, regardless of race, gender, or social class.

This provision is a *message of hope*. A characteristic of all the Minor Prophets, and of any legitimate prophet, is the delivery of a message of hope. Amos 9:11–15 adds his vision of restoration—restoration through everlasting relationship and friendship and restoration with a redemptive purpose: hope for the future and a second chance.

Christians have a goal that points toward an eternal destination. Having such a view changes the way they behave in the present. The New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:1–21 summarizes the hope for the NU JERUZ. It was a great and holy city, lit with the glory of God and restored to splendor and beauty with the best and most precious of building materials. It was secure (great and high walls), dignified (angels as gatekeepers), and included the universal church (the inscribed names of the twelve tribes of Israel of the Old Testament and the names of the twelve apostles of the New Testament). It possessed trees that bore fruit continuously; an unpolluted, crystal clear, pure river of life-giving water; and the natural medicine of the trees' leaves for perpetual healing.

This NU JERUZ is for the “least of these.” We take the above-mentioned descriptions as evidence of God’s promise of a continuing restorative process on earth to lift up the downtrodden. The reversal mentioned in the scriptures, then, can also be anticipated in the renewal of God’s kingdom on earth. The urban homeless population is one of the most destitute of all the poor. But we can expect that in the NU JERUZ, they will be raised up with great visibility to positions of honor as testimony to the power of grace, mercy, and love: God’s and ours toward fellow humans. The first Isaiah passage also reveals the process by which transformation comes: through those of us who take up the call to a positive ministry of proclamation, healing, and love.

Throughout our discussions with artists and community arts workers, the term “a new heaven and a new earth” rang as a hopeful promise for a transformed community. It also served as a theological foundation to see the Kingdom of God realized in the present now. This vision for a world without pain and suffering, for structures and systems that are just and fair to the poor and marginalized motivates many Christian artists to accept meager incomes, live in “ghetto” and “barrio” communities, and risk their health and life to build loving relationships with the people living in the worst of communities. At the same time, these artists have found a NU JERUZ in many rich and loving relationships within these so-called “ghetto” communities.

These artists are people of faith. They believe that faith makes a difference because of their worldview—a view that believes in a world that was set in motion by God the Creator. The people of God’s creation are headed on a journey of faith toward an end, the New Jerusalem, that will be the perfect culmination of God’s interaction with the world he created, in spite of the personal shortcomings (sin) and social evil that separate humanity from a just

and right relationship with both the Creator and the created. In the present world, God is at work to bring about love, peace, reconciliation, justice, and redemption. Artists work as a part of God's plan for redemption. They act out of a strong calling and motivation to bring about the NU JERUZ, a foretaste of the New Jerusalem, by participating in what God is doing in the present.

The NU JERUZ is not so much a place, though we have used the term within the urban context, but a state of life where people, communities, and societies are being transformed into places where all people are empowered to live lives that are full, free, and pleasing to the Creator in all aspects—artistically, economically, culturally, politically, spiritually, environmentally, and socially until the journey of living faith is complete.

The NU JERUZ includes both those who profess allegiance to the Creator through Jesus Christ and those who do not—those who are participating in what God is doing in the world because they have been influenced by the values of the NU JERUZ. And, there are those who are on journeys and who are encountering the Creator but who still have yet to make such an open allegiance.

The NU JERUZ includes the institutional church, but also institutions outside the church. Though we believe in communities of the faithful, the church in some cases appears to have been passed over by the Spirit because of her failure to seek the NU JERUZ outside the four walls of her places and houses of worship, while the communities around them suffer at the hands of personal sin and social evil. Artists of the Christian faith work in these institutions, government offices, art organizations, human service organizations, and such, and seek to transform them in and through the integration of faith in their art and relationships.

In summary, the NU JERUZ *is what God is doing in the world through people who are invited into that world to create a place in which people, communities, and societies are transformed and empowered economically, socially, politically, and spiritually to live in harmony with God, themselves, one another, and their environments.*³ For the Christian this includes a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ, but it is much more than that. It includes communities of faith who nurture believers and provide a friendly space and sanctuary for the seeker. Even more, it includes the whole of God's world in a journey toward a redemptive end.

We at Buildabridge believe that all art—sacred and secular—is potentially redemptive in this transformational process. *Redemptive art*, from a Christian

worldview, will always point people in a direction that 1) brings an external expression of an inner reality, creating a critical awareness in which they may understand their place in the world, 2) raises one out of, or improves, a situation in which people find themselves a better way of thinking, believing, feeling, and ultimately living, 3) provides an opportunity to experience a new way of life as a rehearsal for change, 4) confronts both the evil in society and consequences of personal sin and social injustice, 5) instills a sense of awe and wonder of the Creator, and 6) ultimately leads to an understanding of God's ultimate redemptive plan in Jesus Christ through a personal relationship. Reaching this full redemptive nature depends not solely on the art itself but on the relationships established by the artists in the process of art making.

In his book, *Theology of Play*, Jürgen Moltmann suggested that the Western world had lost the gift of joy and was bound to a work ethic of doing good, when we are really called *to be*.⁴ This *being* demonstrates a joy of existence and awareness of God. "Only those who are capable of joy can feel pain at their own and other people's suffering."⁵ And, "without the free play of imagination and songs of praise, the new obedience deteriorates into legalism."⁶ In an active (and playful) faith of free works, we are called to be with others and be there for others.

The arts are a part of the kingdom of God and, as such, have a role to play in its transformation. In the words of John de Gruchy, "Good art, whatever its form, helps us both individually and corporately to perceive reality in a new way, and by so doing, it opens up possibilities of transformation."⁷

In the minds and words of our artists and the youth they work with, the indicators of a healthy physical community include safe and clean streets; the presence of incarnational leaders; job opportunities; affordable, decent housing; effective education for its children; cultural establishments; accessibility (transportation); functioning municipal and social services; access to preventive health care services; a pleasing environment in which to live. Much more difficult to quantify, but equally desired, are the absence of violence and abuse (peace); the presence of cooperation (harmony); the presence of forgiveness, patience, sharing, and politeness (love); integration of diversity of race and class (reconciliation); and a sense of awe and the presence of God (redemption). As articulated by one of the youth in a community art theater production of "Standing Out in a Drive-By World," "Heaven [is] a place where I can walk safely—[where] the name-calling, bigotry, and ignorance would end."⁸

Barriers to the NJ

Some bridges seem like impossible feats of engineering and balance. What keeps us from experiencing the NU JERUZ? Evangelicals see primarily personal sin as the barrier, while other Christians may see a broader evil in social structures. Robert Nolan, in *Jesus Before Christianity* defined four basic barriers that are both personal and social (institutional). They were at the core of Jesus' life and ministry to the poor. They are the pursuit of wealth, status, in-group solidarity, and power.⁹ Unless both individuals and the cultural institutions we create can cross these boundaries in both ideal and practice, we cannot experience the NU JERUZ. Our research shows that a significant barrier occurs when artists of God, who don't know quite what to do, act willfully on their call to bring about a world in which God is at the center—a world where the differences of race, power, status, and wealth are bridged (redistributed, reconciled, and redeemed).

The Agape Artist

Artists are to be involved in redemptive transformation building bridges of reconciliation with the arts—serving as loving artists. Agape Artists, as we call them, use their gifts of the expressive arts for mission and ministry (defined broadly) outside the four walls of the sanctuary—out in the community. They also work in arts programs and efforts that may take place within the physical location of the sanctuary, and they may also partake of the linguistic, artistic style, and theological foci associated with the sanctuary. The Agape artists' works are primarily relational in nature and their motivation springs from a compassion for “the least of these.”

They draw on the word meaning “to love one's neighbor” and have a primarily outward and horizontal theological orientation and practice. Their purpose is to love their neighbor through and with the arts. Agape artists are holistic and communal in that while there is an understanding of the spiritual nature of the arts and a concern for an excellence in artistic presentation, there is an equal or greater emphasis on caring for the multiple needs of people, including improving their quality of life and sense of worth as God's creation.

They seek a holistic *personal* transformation that has to do with behavioral change; spiritual development; physical well being; and personal, family, and social responsibility through healthy relationships in the community at large. They seek holistic *social* transformation through art produced in community for economic, political, social, and spiritual change, and the result may have

social and economic benefits, as in community development. While these foci may be present within the four walls of the church, the focus is on the broader concept of bringing *shalom* within the kingdom of God in the present through a compassionate and incarnational ministry.

In conclusion, the same risky love that motivated Jesus to cross the boundaries of race, ethnicity, culture, disability, and religion motivates our agape and prophetic artists. Like the street prophets of the Old Testament, Jesus loved mostly outside the formal boundaries of the temples, synagogues, structures, and systems. He loved in the streets, through conversation, dialogue, questioning, empowering, and encouragement of self-examination; and through physical touch of the forbidden, the castaways, the untouchables. It is a love that is uncomfortable, inconvenient, sticky, anxiety provoking, sometimes scary, and often risky.

Jesus forbade sectarianism when he reminded John that “whoever is not against you is for you” (Luke 9:50). Through his own barrier crossing, he modeled reconciliation across class, gender, ethnicity, religion, and disability. Upper-class noblemen, religious leaders, Samaritan women, gentiles, Greeks, wealthy women, and rich young rulers alike consulted and begged for time, wisdom, and healing from this blue-collar, Middle Eastern carpenter who also sought them out.

Like any redemptive, soul-winning, evangelical work that is respectful of people and their differing cultural contexts, the real power of the arts is its facilitative work through relationship. True celebration of the kingdom of God in the here and now means that we’ve not stopped at the point of meeting but have persisted over and through the barriers to an acceptance and treatment of the other as one of God’s children too.

Notes

1. Parts of this paper are excerpted from J. Nathan Corbitt and Vivian Nix-Early, *Taking It to the Streets: Using the Arts to Transform Your Community* (Baker Books, 2003/Used by permission).
2. The term “NU JERUZ” comes from the hip-hop world of rappers and gang bangers. The New Jerusalem is referred to by Lauryn Hill in “Every Ghetto, Every City,” [in *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 1999)] describing her childhood in New Jersey. In searching the Web, we came across several pages that used the term “NU Jeruz.” When talking to many about the term “NU JERUZ” most said the term meant New Jersey. We infer from Lauren Hill’s music that it is a nostalgic term of a wonderful childhood when things were safe and life was full for a child. To others, it was a “shout out” at parties, a term in raps, or a reference to the future world when African American brothers and sisters will live in a new world. While it has limitations from a particular ethnic enclave who may not see or believe in Dr. Martin Luther King’s the *beloved community* that reaches across class, race, and religion, the term, as we use it, offers at least an urban hope for a new heaven and a new earth, with new systems—the kingdom of God on earth.

3. This definition was influenced by conversations with Tony Campolo in a series of faculty discussions at the Campolo School for Social Change at Eastern University regarding evangelism in the pluralistic urban context and by Albert Nolan in *Jesus Before Christianity* (Mary Knoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).
4. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, translated by Reinhard Ulrich (Harper and Row Publishers, 1972).
5. *Ibid.*, 31.
6. *Ibid.*, 43.
7. John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 253.
8. Quoted in Howard County Study, “Standing Out in a Drive-by World” in *A Study of Model Community Arts Programs, Phase II Case Studies & Recommendations* (Arts Council of the Howard County Center for the Arts, <http://www.hocoarts.org/>), p. 16.
9. Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity* (Mary Knoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).