

Opinion: Jan Burton: Boulder can do more to support the vital connections art helps us make

By [JAN BURTON](#) | Jan.burton111@gmail.com | For the Camera. May 12, 2023 at 6:00 a.m.

This past weekend, I experienced a transformational dance event, thanks to a collaboration between Boulder multimedia artist Rebecca DiDomenico, the creative director of 3rd Law Dance/Theater Katie Elliott, musician/composer Paul Fowler, and filmmaker L. Ashlyn Collins. Rebecca DiDomenico's "Emanate," originally shown at a 2015 BMOCA exhibition, features maps with land removed, highlighting roads and rivers as networks with intricate interconnections, creating a three-dimension paper web.

According to choreographer Katie Elliott, "Up close, these maps, with the land removed, described an external network of connections, but when you zoom out, the maps were like networks inside the body: neuro pathways, veins, etc. These notions of internal and external became prompts that translated into choreography."

The several hundred people who experienced one of the four performances in the stunning Swoon Art House will not likely forget it. Intricately cut-out maps created the fringe of the dancers' costumes and the props, tumbling down stairs, piled around the stage. Film and original musical compositions created emotional connections, supporting the choreography. The close proximity of the audience to the stage and to the dancers gave the audience a feeling of human connection, especially with the deep "touches" by the dancers. And a "hang-out" with food and drinks before the event encouraged social connections with fellow audience members.

This is but one example of the amazing cultural experiences we enjoy in Boulder. Artistic endeavors like these educate us, inspire us, and fill us with surprise and joy. Research shows that the arts enhance the quality of our lives and have a positive impact on our mental health and well-being. Most of us understand this viscerally, having missed live performances and cultural events during the past few years of COVID shutdowns.

Last week, citing loneliness as a national health crisis, the Surgeon General announced a plan to rebuild social connection and community in America. It turns out, loneliness is more than just a bad feeling and leads to mental and physical health declines and ultimately premature death. Arts and cultural activities are part of critical community social infrastructure that encourages human connection and healthy relationships. Just like the 3rd Law dance performance.

Roughly 4,500 professional artists live in Boulder, comprising 3.5% of the city's workforce. Many of them barely make a living wage, and organizations have limited budgets to hire the staff they need to raise money, manage volunteers or create content. Very few artists and musicians can afford to live in the town where they create their work. Venue affordability and availability issues challenge all of our cultural organizations as we documented in the [final report](#) of the Arts Complex Visioning Workshop, commissioned by Create Boulder late in 2022.

Like any social infrastructure, there must be public support, but Boulder's support of the arts is at the low end of comparable cities. According to the 2015 Cultural Plan, Boulder's city government spends \$17 per person on cultural affairs as compared to an average of just over \$43 in comparable cities. The city has publicly acknowledged that "Boulder has work to do in public spending on the arts." To make matters worse, philanthropy for the arts is also on the low end for comparable cities.

But a positive change is in the works: a ballot measure that, *with no tax increase*, will dedicate funding for arts and culture. The ballot measure will ask that an existing sales tax, used today for general fund purposes, be repurposed and extended to enrich the lives of all Boulder residents by supporting arts and cultural activities and related spaces, arts education, the preservation of local history and the vibrancy of creative experiences available to the community.

We have a unique opportunity to do this now without increasing taxes and without necessitating cuts in general fund spending for other priorities including public safety, health and human services, and facilities maintenance.

A committee, formed by Create Boulder, for which I serve as a board member, is working to get 4,000 signatures by June 9, in order to place the measure on the ballot in November. Petitions can be signed on paper or online, and detailed information and ballot language are available at www.artsforboulder.com. Boulder voters have a unique opportunity to decide if arts, culture and our heritage should be a budget priority for our city.

Rebecca DiDomenico and Katie Elliott understood and communicated the critical nature of maps, leading to human connection in an immersive art experience. Maps can also connect our history with our future. Let's use this unique ballot measure as a map to develop the social infrastructure needed for an innovative, vibrant, and healthy city.

Jan Burton is a former member of the Boulder City Council. Email: Jan.burton111@gmail.com.