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Creativity: A New Pillar of Sustainability

By Anders Ferguson and Laura Callanan

Creativity. We hack it. We map it. We study it. We rate it. We take it places. We build industries around it. We invest in it. We recognize we need it, even when it hurts. We know our future depends on it.

This is the first in a series of blog posts which will explore the radical premise that creativity is a key driver of sustainability.

We will look at the role creativity plays in [strengthening communities](#) and driving change. We will appreciate entrepreneurs using the arts, design, and making to tackle topics like healthy food, [climate change](#), the criminal justice system, and immigration. We will remind ourselves how much research science, technology, and social entrepreneurship have in common.

We will imagine creativity as an investment theme and propose how it may be integrated into impact and mission-related investment portfolios. We will review creativity standards for [companies](#) and investment funds seeking to have a positive social and financial impact. We will start the conversation about how to measure creativity's contribution toward our sustainable future.

What Do We Mean By Creativity?

Creativity is the spark. When the spark catches, it catalyzes an expression, an experiment, a “creation.” If the spark turns into an invention, an entrepreneur can build an enterprise around it.

If the invention works and the company is profitable and grows, there can be a wide-spread change – that’s innovation. Innovation makes markets.

Business uses the word creativity, too. In fact, the Conference Board reports that creativity ranks among the top five skills that U.S. employers believe to be of increasing importance.

But the aesthetic, playful, social aspects of creativity are usually ignored by business. Business ignores creativity unless it’s easily measurable and quantifiable. Business ignores creativity unless it contributes to the financial bottom line.

Sound familiar?

If innovation drives the practical, monetizable, single bottom line, then creativity drives the social, impactful, sustainable bottom line. And just like the other drivers of social impact, since creativity is hard to measure, the value of creativity can easily be overlooked.

The Creativity Revolution

In the ongoing conversation about money and meaning, creativity is key to our next chapter. In the quest for a more sustainable capitalism, we must engage the potential for creativity to fuel change. It’s time we talk with the techies, the research scientists, and the artists.

Not because we are seeking a painting or symphony about climate change (though the Gates Foundation has recently engaged artists to help get the word out about the importance of vaccines). We need to talk to the “creative disruptors” because they have the power to transform systems, markets, and companies. They divine new solutions that most of us just can’t see.

Where “Design Thinking” focuses on needs, “Creative Thinking” focuses on possibilities, aspirations, meaning. And that is one reason why “creativity scares us,” as Bruce Nussbaum puts it in his terrific book *Creative Intelligence: Harnessing the Power to Create, Connect and Inspire*.

Why Creativity Is Sustainable

The fundamentals of creativity read like a playbook for sustainability. Stewards taking a long-term view will find a lot to like.

Creativity is a team sport. Creativity both relies on and builds social cohesion. Looking at places and moments of great creative output – Renaissance Florence, New York’s Soho in the 1970s, Silicon Valley over and over again – we see communities intermingling, competing, and collaborating.

Creativity blends tradition and innovation. Whether creativity takes an aesthetic or scientific form, the next “new new thing” builds off what has come before. There is a sense of history, perspective, and context – even when making radical change. This anchor in what has “gone before” wards off short-term thinking.

Creativity is a bulwark against a volatile, uncertain, and complex world. We cannot anticipate the problems and challenges to come, so we must be able to improvise and respond. During times of stability and plenty, incremental improvements are fine. But to answer daunting challenges, we need a bold reply.

Creativity. It’s not just for art class anymore.

This blog post first appeared on [PhilanTopic](#).

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