Building Community with Photography

*Untitled*, Sabinah Lopez, 2018

**Grade levels:** 9–12

**Duration:** One 45-minute classroom period
Learning Objectives

Can a photograph reveal a community’s strengths?

Message to Educators

The community asset-mapping process demands that we look at communities from the standpoint of their strengths, rather than their deficits. By shifting our point of view, we can shift people’s attitudes. When community members, rather than outside groups, map community assets, new resources get revealed. And photography is an ideal medium for flipping the audience’s perspective. Use it to identify and document strengths in your own community and see how residents, spaces, and community organizations become assets.

This lesson asks: How can photography highlight your community’s strengths?

Using photography to take action for social justice, your students will turn their attention to their community’s strengths for social change. Who in your community has knowledge and experience? What spaces exist for gathering safely? Are there organizations, groups, or informal networks that can contribute information or economic resources? This lesson plan includes photography examples to spark discussion, a list of materials, and cues to help you foster a safe space and lead confidently, as students represent their communities.

You do not need to be practiced at facilitating discussions using photography to effectively lead this lesson. Getty is committed to supporting meaningful dialogue through photography, and the lesson plan was created with educators to carefully walk you through the steps.

As you and your students unfold the elements of dominant culture and community, you may find yourself in deeper dialogue with each other around questions like: What are strengths in the context of a community? Can people be assets, and if so, how? Does physical space constitute an asset? In this conversation, you and your students will move from community awareness to highlighting community assets.
Lesson Plan Five: Building Community with Photography

In this lesson, students explore how photography can illustrate their community’s strengths and potential.

To start the exploration, the group considers the idea that photography can express community strengths, by analyzing photographs from the Getty collection. Students explore the definition of community assets (spaces, organizations, individuals, knowledge, economic capital, and informal networks). They begin to consider how these assets can be used to bring about change. Next, students create their own map of community assets. In the final reflection, they begin to internalize the idea that photography can bring about change by reframing conversations about communities, revealing their intrinsic strengths.

Associated Standards and Learning Objectives

- Getty SJA LO (Getty Social Justice and Advocacy Learning Objective): Understand methods of social change, such as culture jamming, media (art, video, music, stories), petitions, letter writing, lifestyle changes, strikes and walkouts, publicity, PR, journalism, public protests, boycotts, social media, and legal challenges.
- Getty SJA LO: Identify strengths in one’s community assets; practice asset mapping.
- CCSS (California Curriculum State Standard).ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.C: Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.5: Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence, and to add interest.
Materials

- Projector
- Photograph from Getty Unshuttered community
- Photographs from Getty Museum collection
- Community Asset-Mapping Organizer along with paper and pencil
- A digital camera or smartphone

Vocabulary

Community
A network or group of people, sometimes living in a particular place, who share interests, values, characteristics, responsibilities, or physical spaces.

Culture
A social system of meaning and custom, developed by a group of people to assure the group’s continuity. The system has unspoken rules that shape values, beliefs, habits, patterns of thinking, behaviors, symbols, and styles of communication. Consider using instead: Social identity group, social group

Discrimination
Actions stemming from conscious or unconscious prejudice, which favor and empower one group over others based on differences of race, gender, economic class, sexual orientation, physical ability, religion, language, age, national identity, and other categories.

Ethnicity
A social construct, used to group people based on shared cultural heritage and characteristics such as values, behaviors, language, political and economic interests, history, geographical base, and ancestry.

Intersectionality
An approach coined and theory developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, scholar of critical race theory, which holds that characteristics such as gender, race, class, and others must be examined in relation to each other, rather than in isolation from each other.

Justice, Injustice (see also: Restorative Justice)
In different contexts, “justice” refers to both moral correctness and fairness, and also the rule of law. By contrast, “injustice” usually describes unfairness.
Marginalize
Treatment of a person, group, or concept as insignificant or powerless; placing them outside of a group, society, or community; and enforcing prejudice through societal institutions.

Privilege
Unearned social power granted by societal institutions to members of a dominant group, based on the nature of their identities. Often invisible to those who have it.

Race
A term used to identify individuals as part of a distinct group, based on physical characteristics and heritage. Though, at one time, the term purportedly was based in biology, race is now understood as a social construct that is not scientifically based.

Religion
A system of beliefs, usually spiritual in nature. Often advanced in the context of a formal institution.

Restorative Justice (see also: Justice, Injustice)
A theory of justice that focuses on repairing or mitigating the harm caused by a crime. As a cooperative, in-person process with all willing stakeholders, its goals for offenders include taking responsibility, understanding the harm caused, redemption, and discouraging further harm.

Stereotype
Attitudes, beliefs, or assumptions about a person or group that are oversimplified and unsupported, but may also be widespread and socially sanctioned. Stereotypes can be positive or negative.

Unconscious Bias, Implicit Bias, Hidden Bias
Negative stereotypes regarding a person or group of people, which influence individuals' thoughts, attitudes, and actions without their conscious knowledge.
Instructional Plan

Introduction

As we look deeper at our communities, we begin to see strengths and assets that make our community a living, vibrant, dynamic culture.

The questions for inquiry at the center of the lesson include: What are strengths? What are assets? Can people be assets or strengths, and how? Does space constitute an asset? How do photographers use photography to illuminate, explain, or highlight community assets? And by extension, how do artists use photography to the same ends in a broader context?

- What do you feel are significant things to know about community assets?
  Consider the following:
  - Physical assets: buildings, tangible items
  - Organizations
  - People: stories, residents
  - Places to gather in safety
  - Networks of communication
  - Knowledge: experience, age, training
  - Economic assets
- What assets does your community have?
- What strengths have you not thought about before?
- Are strengths and assets static? Why?
- Is there need for change illustrated in the strengths here?
- Does the world see your community’s strengths? Why?
Set the Stage

Project the image shown below. Initially, do not include the caption. Discussion can begin by simply asking students what they notice about the photograph.

Questions for discussion:

- What do you notice first about this image? (It shows a woman standing on a stepladder in a garden, next to a life-size statue of a man gesturing with an outstretched arm; her face and expression are barely visible as she turns to use a brush on the statue’s face.)

- What do you notice about the setting, clothing, and other objects in the frame? (There is a thriving outdoor garden with flowering plants in the foreground, while the background is a multistory brick building with broken windows, which appears to be unoccupied; the female figure is wearing a long skirt, her arms and head are covered; she might be religiously observant, possibly a nun; the statue is wearing a gathered robe that suggests a historical or religious figure.)

- What compositional and photographic elements do you notice, and why?
  Include:
  - How is the photograph framed? What perspective is used? (It uses a traditional portrait frame and appears to be shot from the same level as the subjects.)
  - How is the photograph composed? What is the position of the subject? (The female figure and the statue are both shown full length; they are set at about the same level as each other; their gestures are the focus.)
  - How is the photograph lit? (Natural, outdoor light gives a realistic, unposed feel)

- Does anything change when you know the title and when it was taken? (Reveal the caption: Sister, Missionary of the Charity Painting a Statue of Christ, Sacred Heart Garden, South Bronx, 1989.)
  - Now that you know the title, what more can you infer about the background? (The South Bronx in 1989 was beginning a long recovery from decades of urban decay, brought about by a complex mix of government neglect and institutionalized racism.)
  - What role do you think the sister is playing in the photograph, and in the community?

- What do you think the photographer is trying to show, explain, or share? (Camilo José Vergara has spent more than thirty years documenting poor, urban, and minority neighborhoods across the United States. His projects emerge from what he sees as one big archive—thousands of images he has made since 1977, and continues to make, of urban neighborhoods where many residents live below the poverty level.)
• Is the photograph merely documentation, or is the photographer’s point of view evident?

Camilo José Vergara

Since 1977, Camilo José Vergara (born 1944) has documented poor, urban, and minority neighborhoods across the United States. Vergara himself experienced poverty as a teenager in his native Chile. In 1965 he attended college in the United States and was stunned by the contrasts in wealth and lifestyles he saw across the country. After completing a graduate degree in sociology, he developed a methodical approach to photographic documentation by researching his subjects and systematically documenting them over time.

View Camilo José Vergara photographs in the collection: https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/artists/21442/camilo-jose-vergara-american-born-chile-1944/

Discuss: Community and Cultural Dominance

Students are likely to have studied the US civil rights movement. Quickly activate prior knowledge with some questions about the period, such as:
• What are the origins of the US civil rights movement? (It began in the late 1940s and was notably at the forefront of our culture in the 1960s. One significant catalyst was the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which began in 1955.)
• What were the goals of the movement? (To guarantee equal treatment for African Americans, by ending legalized racial discrimination.)
• Who are some of the well-known leaders of the movement? (Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, Gloria Richardson, Claudette Colvin, Bayard Rustin, James Meredith, Medgar Evers, and Ruby Bridges, among others.)
• Who was Malcolm X? (Malcolm X was a prominent minister in the Nation of Islam, a proponent of Black empowerment and Black nationalism, and an opponent of the premise of nonviolence found in much of the civil rights movement. Later, he founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity, which aimed to increase voter registration, build community organizations, and assist Black enterprises.)

Project the image shown below. Share the caption to situate the photograph in time and place.
Now that we’ve looked at how a contemporary photographer has documented and commented on poor, urban, and minority neighborhoods across the United States, let’s look at another example from Getty’s collection. Are there other ways in which photographers use their work to demonstrate, or highlight, community assets and
strengths? Can you document community strengths without also spotlighting community problems?

Questions for discussion:

- What do you notice first about this image?
- Describe features and pose of the subject. (Malcolm X appears to be outside, in a relaxed stance, his mouth is open as if in conversation/speaking and his brow seemed slightly furrowed. His left arm, the one angled away from the viewer, seems to be at his side and out of sight, while his right hand holds a folded newspaper and against his face. He seems to be holding the newspaper between his index finger and thumb while his middle finger rests against his cheek. Is it there in an unconscious way, since he seems absorbed in thought and speaking, or is it a blatant message? The bold, partial headline of the paper is also evocative, “TO UNITE!”)
- Do you see any community assets here? (The subject of the photo could be considered a strength of the community, as a strong, inspiring and magnetic leader. The subject holds a newspaper; is this by accident? Or can you consider the press, the dissemination of ideas and news, as a community resource and strength?)
- Do you think the photographer is simply documenting a political figure or do you think the photographer is in some way commenting on his subject? Why?

Robert Adelman

Robert Adelman (1930-2016) often documented influential figures within Black communities, including musicians, athletes, and educators. A strong interest in social justice led him to volunteer as a photographer for the Congress of Racial Equality in the early 1960s. The position granted him access to key leaders of the civil rights movement, including Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and James Baldwin. He captured moments that reshaped modern American history, depicting not only the marchers, riots, and speeches, but also the fabric of everyday life in rural communities and at social gatherings.


Exercise: Communicating Community Strengths and Assets
Using the group’s list of community strengths and assets, let’s take some time to explore your own community strengths. Share the Community Asset-Mapping Organizer. [See Resources section]. Pass out the organizer, and have students choose to work individually or in a group. You may wish to assign the class groups, or allow students to self-select. Let students know that their map is going to be shared, so that they can determine what they want to illustrate about their community. Have students come back together as a class to share maps and discuss the assets and resources they revealed.

With the Community Asset-Mapping Organizers complete, students have the tools to begin to connect their understanding of community assets with photography.

**Practice: Using Community Asset Mapping**

In this practice, students use photography to show strengths and assets in their community. If time allows, this can be a good point to call out additional photo and narrative skills that may enhance students’ photography of community assets. In the earlier photography discussions, we focused on elements such as framing, composition, traditional portraiture, foreground and background, scale, proportion, and lighting. The related photography skills videos listed under Other Resources can serve as quick skills refreshers. Ask how they will apply these skills and understandings in their own practice.

Encourage students to continue their practice at their homes and in their neighborhoods. Assigning the community strengths and asset exercise as homework, if possible, affords students time to work on the assignment and the opportunity to use contexts from their daily lives.

**Reflect**

Reflection can take place in the group setting or individually. Ideally, have students share one to three photographs with their peers. They can each choose to speak about their intention with the photo(s), or not. Having the viewers provide positive feedback is key to the exercise. However, sharing can be a vulnerable moment for students. Use your best judgment about whether a group reflection is appropriate, and enlist the support of your students to create a safe space.

**Questions for discussion:**
What is the first thing you notice about the photograph?
What is the photographer explaining about their culture or community?
What did you discover about yourself, your community, and others, in the course of the project?
What was challenging, and why?
What part are you most proud of, and why?
What would you do differently next time?

Assessment

- Observe the group’s discussion of the lesson. Assess contributions to the discussion. Did students pose thoughtful questions? Did they respond to questions with reasons and evidence? Did they listen to different points of view? Did they clarify and challenge ideas and conclusions when appropriate? Did they synthesize evidence and ideas?
- Collect students’ maps in class to check for understanding and completeness, and to assess students’ understanding of how artists use mapping to prompt dialogue about community and cultural dominance.
- In the Reflection, assess student feedback for clarity and thoughtfulness.
- Encourage students to share community strengths and assets photography on the Unshuttered platform, and collect and display that work.

Thank You...

...for your commitment to using photography to inspire youth creating social change in their communities. Please adapt and improve upon this lesson plan to meet the needs and age range of your group. Now is the time! We are grateful for educators like you who listen, learn alongside their students, and inspire action.

Resources

Community Asset-Mapping Organizer [See pages 15 and 16]
Related photography skills videos:
Low Level Perspective: https://youtu.be/yTG2uGDDrtI
Composition: Leading Lines: https://youtu.be/DdtcxbCJiBo

Environmental Portrait: https://youtu.be/7G35Tl8Wjyl
Unshuttered: Community Asset Mapping
Where Does It All Live?

Using the idea of a map as a way to identify assets, think about what you want others to know about your community and its strengths and assets. Use the questions below to make notes for the map you will illustrate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Asset Prompts</th>
<th>Actual Strength or Asset</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the physical assets in your community?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Buildings</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tangible Items</td>
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<td>What organizations exist to help serve the community?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Churches</td>
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<tr>
<td>Libraries</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are there specific groups of people that serve as strengths for the community?</td>
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<td>Are there individuals who are an integral part of your community's strengths?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are the places to gather in safety?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community Asset Prompts</td>
<td>Actual Strength or Asset</td>
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<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are the networks of communication?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Who or what are the knowledge banks of experience, age, and training?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What economic assets exist?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are you an asset?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other thoughts? Ideas?</td>
<td></td>
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