

**Creative Community Development: A look at how community-based art organizations contribute to community development**

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## **Introduction**

When we think of equitable community development, several things are likely to come to mind, such as affordable housing, economics, issues for race and ethnicity, diversity, sustainability and neighborhood associations. However, if this list included “community art,” I suspect it would stick. The arts and local art organizations, such as theaters, music groups, and artist networks, are usually not considered an integral part of equitable community development, but there is plenty of research that suggests that it should be. Art is in fact a valuable tool for creating strong communities. It improves overall achievement for adults and children, creates strong social networks, brings together diverse groups of people, fosters a sense of community and builds relationships. These are just some of the benefits arts can bring to a community.

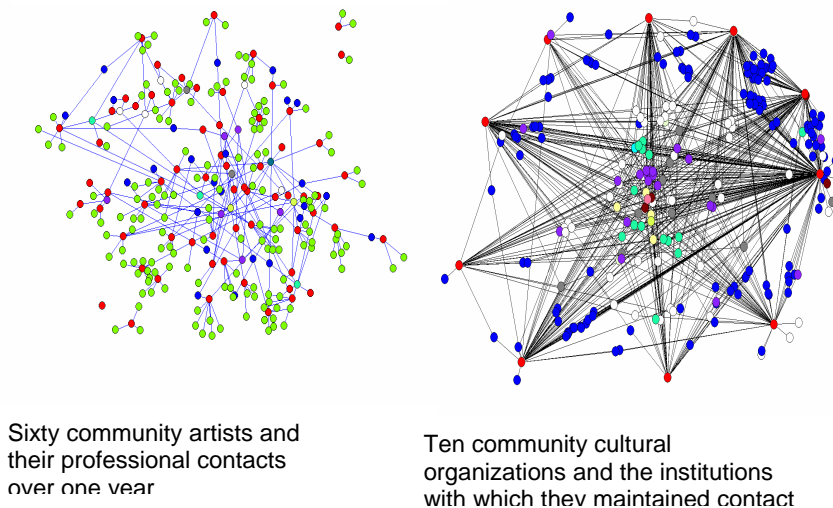
This paper looks at evidence that the arts provide these types of benefits to a community. Based on the cited studies, I focused on two Chicago neighborhoods, Uptown and Logan Square, and how the arts are impacting community development in these communities. The paper concludes with a brief explanation of how this information is valuable to advocates of equitable community development in Europe.

## **Evidence of Arts’ Impact on Communities**

There are numerous studies that provide us with evidence of arts’ power in communities. For example, art programs have correlated with improved self-confidence and overall achievement for both adults and children. The Social Impact of the Arts Project at the University of Pennsylvania, found that “Poor neighborhoods with high

cultural participation were much more likely to have very low delinquency and truancy than other poor neighborhoods” (Philadelphia Department of Human Services 1995-99; SIAP regional participation database 1997). In some cases, the arts have been connected to community regeneration, such as the “Small Towns Project,” founded in North Carolina, which has helped more than 12 towns in the region revitalize their main streets by “working together, sharing resources and creating an atmosphere of cooperation rather than competition between towns...building communities from within” (“Downside Up” 2003). Further evidence of how important the arts are to creating and sustaining communities is that locally-based art organizations help build strong social networks that break economic, racial and ethnic divides (see diagram 1). Cultural participation also sparks a communities overall civic engagement (Stern and Seifert, 2002). These are only some illustrations of art at work in communities. There are numerous other studies and resources that examine in more detail the possibilities associated with all types of cultural activities and art organizations (see Appendix I).

Diagram 1 (Source: Stern, 2004)



## **Local Examples**

These sound like great results, but are there examples of art building community in our own Chicago neighborhood? The answer is yes. In order to gain a better understanding of how the arts impact specific areas in the city of Chicago, I met with the organizers from four local art organizations as well as two representative from local neighborhood associations in two Chicago neighborhoods, Uptown and Logan Square, The individuals with whom I met are as follows:

- Mary Ellen McGary, Executive Director, The People’s Music School, Uptown
- Patricia Murphy, Executive Director, Beacon Street Gallery & Theater, Uptown
- Sarah Jane Knoy, Executive Director, Organization of the Northeast (ONE), Uptown
- Dawn Marie Galtieri, Executive Director, aurorArts alliance, Logan Square
- Joyce Fernandes, Executive Director, ArchiTreasures, Humbolt Park/Logan Square
- Rosita DeLaRosa, Staff Member, Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA), Logan Square

During these meetings, I discussed with these individuals the purpose of their group and what they perceived to be the impact of the arts on their communities. What I learned from these individuals was that grassroots art organizations are alive and well in both Uptown and Logan Square and that their contributions to the community are valuable in helping sustain these diverse neighborhoods. These examples also proved that arts can take many forms in a communities and involve a wide variety of people.

In addition to this portion of my research, I wanted to learn about what connections exist between neighborhood associations and local art organizations. Because a neighborhood advocacy group aims to facilitate community development by

building social networks and supporting actions that strengthen a neighborhood, I expected to find that these groups would be involved and working with local art organizations that seek to achieve the same goals but through different means. I met with the two representatives from communities' neighborhood associations to find out if my hypothesis was correct.

The following examples will provide examples of community-based art organizations and how they benefit their communities as well as how neighborhood associations can and do work with these groups to maximize their potential.

#### Mary Ellen McGary, The People's Music School

Uptown, a community on the northeast side of Chicago, is the site of 28 year-old community music school, The People's Music School. When Rita Simo' immigrated from Santo Domingo to the United States, she was appalled by the fact that Americans have to pay money to learn about music. She had been lucky enough to receive a life of music education and training and even attend the world-famous Julliard school in New York, however, she was not satisfied with her own good fortune. Rita recognized the need for a tuition-free community music school in Chicago and was determined to make this happen. It took her many and various attempts to achieve her goal, but in 1976, Rita finally saw the fruits of her efforts when The People's Music School was born. Because of its diversity, she chose Uptown as her home and the site of the new school. Since this time, the school has developed into a community music school and center that provides "high quality instruction and performance opportunities for personal and professional growth, and cultivates an informed and appreciative audience of classical music. Its programs are open to everyone, especially to those who have little opportunity for

musical instruction” (The People’s Music mission statement). The school empowers the students and their families by holding them responsible for the support of The People’s Music School. Those involved volunteer some of their time each month and taking part in the fundraising activities as a requirement for music education. The music curriculum includes both theory and private voice and instrument lessons. In addition to the classes, students put together performances which are open to the public. Not only is the music important, so are the collaborative efforts that maintain the organization, because this aspect of the school is essential to fostering a sense of family for those involved and facilitating an understanding of and accountability to the local community.

What makes The People’s Music School most valuable is that it brings together people from all over Chicago who represent a range of ages, classes, races, ethnicities and origins with one language: music. Mary Ellen McGary stated that this organization has been successful because it has built a community through this common language. Both she and those involved with the group agree that this is the most important factor to their solidarity. One example she offered to support this claim was the story of a homeless man who, while he was living on the streets, came in to The People’s Music School with the hopes of becoming involved. His participation in the program gave him a sense of normalcy and meaning in his life and essentially saved his life. In the months following his initial involvement, he slowly began to find ways of putting his life back together. He now lives in a single-room occupancy, affordable housing for individuals, in Uptown and is still heavily involved with the school. His musical talents include playing both oboe and clarinet, and he has even had the chance to play with the Chicago Symphony.

The People's Music School is a classic example of how a grassroots organization can bring together a diverse group of people, create social networks, build solidarity and therefore make great contributions to community development. Because the program involves the students and their families beyond just the music lessons by requiring that they take part in fundraising and upkeep of the facilities. This aspect is crucial in creating community because it provides various types of opportunities in which participants will interact and work together. Overall, The People's Music School provides evidence of what kind of potential the arts have in helping build strong communities.

Patricia Murphy, Beacon Street Gallery & Theater,

Not far from The People's Music School is the newest home of the Beacon Street Gallery & Theater, another example of an Uptown community-based art organization. This group works with the visual arts as well as music and performance arts and operates on a different model than the music school. However these two organizations are parallel in their belief that art is essential to a community. Beacon Street aims to create and maintain programs for both adults and children in the local community as well as the surrounding region which include theater, gallery exhibits, art education and workshops and the facilitation of artist networks. For the past 21 years, this gallery and theater company has served people from more than 100 different cultures and helped give them a voice through the arts. For example, Chicago is currently hosting several Native American art exhibits throughout the city, however, this month's exhibition at Beacon Street Gallery was a unique illustration of Native American art. Patricia Murphy, Executive Director, explained that "unlike the exhibits in the city that shed light on

Native American's Indigenous history from an outside perspective, our 'Dissipating Indians: Reflections on Native Iconoclasms' exhibit allows local Native Americans a chance to portray their current experiences." I attended the opening of this exhibit and was amazed not only by the art installation but by the variety of people that this event drew together. There were children, adults, young adults, Native Americans, African-Americans, Caucasians and Hispanics and people of various social status and people from all over Chicago present and interacting at this function. It was truly proof that Beacon Street thrives on and facilitates diversity.

In addition these types of art installations, which only represent approximately 25% of their work, the Beacon Street organization has a number of programs which employ art as a catalyst for change. For example, the "Master Artist" program for at-risk youth in and around the Uptown community provides kids between the ages of 8 and 18 a chance to learn literacy, leadership and performing art skills through art forms such as mosaics, dance, music and tutoring. Beacon Street also just began a new program, "21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers," which brings an arts-integrated, full service, after-school program to a local elementary school. The idea behind this project is that "arts improve academic achievement, develop social and scholastic skills, and enrich the lives of the students, their families and the Uptown community" (Beacon Street Web site). There are numerous other Beacon Street initiatives that use the arts to create community and bring about positive change.

Beacon Street Gallery & Theater makes great contributions to the Uptown community through their art exhibitions, theater opportunities and educational programs for young and old. Patricia Murphy describes well the vision of this group when she says

“that this ‘Beacon’ of light, which art brings to peoples lives and communities, knows no boundaries. We aim to make a difference for people in our local community and beyond.”

Sarah Jane Knoy, Organization of the Northeast

Uptown is not only the home of The People’s Music School and Beacon Street Gallery & Theater. It also the location of the Organization of the Northeast (ONE), which is a neighborhood association which seeks to build and sustain “a successful multi-ethnic, mixed-economic community on the northeast side of Chicago, in the neighborhoods of Uptown, Edgewater, Rogers Park and Ravenswood” (ONE Web site). I met with Sarah Jane Knoy, Executive Director, to inquire about any working relationships between ONE and any local art groups. I was surprised to find that while a few local art organizations, including Beacon Street Gallery & Theater, are members of the organization, ONE does not have any programs that employ the arts. Sarah Jane explained some of the reasons for the absence of such relationships.

One of the challenges that ONE faces in their community is that there is a common fear of arts as a sign or tool of gentrification, neighborhood revitalization that makes way for new development by forcing the original residents out of the area. Sarah Jane stated that many people in Uptown and the surrounding communities think of theaters and art galleries as the site of “high culture” and events that serve the middle to upper-class. Another difficulty that she cited was that ONE’s attempts to integrate the arts into their programs have been unsuccessful in the past. For example, six years ago, ONE initiated a contest that called for the participation of local schools as well as adult artists. They were offering a monetary award to one adult and one child who submitted a

piece of art that ONE would use as the logo on their organization's t-shirts. Only a few adults responded by submitting their work, and ONE never heard from any of the schools. This was one of the first times the organization had tried to build bridges with the arts, however, partly due to its lack of success, ONE has made no big attempts since then to integrate the arts into their community organizing.

Another challenge that came up in this discussion was that visual and performing arts often require a large amount of resources, especially space. Because these resources are expensive and the space difficult to come by, art programs are difficult for an Organization like ONE whose primary objective is not directly related to the arts to create or support these types of programs.

Although ONE is not directly involved with the work of local art programs, Sarah Jane was able to list a number of art organizations in Uptown. She talked about art orgs in the area, such as Neo-Futurists, a small theater company, Pegasus the theater at Harry Truman College, Black Ensemble Theater located at the Uptown Center Hull House, Jane Addams Cultural Center, which offers art classes, and Scrap Mettle/SOUL, a local theater company whose performances tell true stories from residents in the community. All of these groups serve Uptown, surrounding communities and beyond. It was clear from our conversation that this neighborhood is rich with cultural programs and opportunities that serve a variety of people.

Considering the number of successful community-based art organizations in the area, there is more opportunity for ONE to connect with art groups and use this as another approach to community development. Sarah Jane mentioned that ONE has received criticisms for not doing a better job of building these relationships, and she

acknowledged connecting with art programs in the future might be a valuable way to further ONE's efforts.

Dawn Marie Galtieri, aurorArts alliance

In Logan Square, a community northwest of downtown Chicago, I met with Dawn Marie Galtieri, the founder of a very young art alliance, aurorArts alliance. Because her neighborhood lacked visual and performance art organizations, she decided to establish an artists' group that would "foster artistic alliances that build and strengthen the spirit of the individual and the community" (aurorArts alliance Mission Statement) and connect community activists, artists, performers and educators with each other and the neighborhood. The programs at aurorArts alliance build bridges and strong creative relationships among residents in and around Logan Square. One of their most successful initiatives is their monthly variety show, "Vaudeville Underground," which consists of nine short performances programs and serves an economically, ethnically, racially diverse audience of all ages. They also started a free after-school program, Fine Arts for Kids of Logan Square (FAKLS), for children in the community. This program brings professional artists of all types to the community in order to teach them about the creative process. The local neighborhood association, LSNA, helps make this possible by donating space and resources for this program. This relationship also benefits the community organization because it brings these opportunities to its members and their children and therefore fosters a stronger sense of community for those involved in both the neighborhood association and the art programs.

aurorArts alliance is especially important to Logan Square's community because it is one of few resident artist groups or organizations. Dawn mentioned that while this

neighborhood is home to a large number of artists due to its affordable housing, however, there were few to no opportunities for their work to contribute to community development. Her organization has made that possible and continues to grow and be the resource for artists, children and families in the area who are interested in visual and performance arts. The programs that aurorArts offers serve a diverse group, but, the artist alliance and the board consist of a homogenous group of mostly Caucasian middle-class adults. Dawn offered this information and added that one of their goals for next year is to draw a wider-variety of members and board members. By fulfilling this goal, she hopes to see her organization begin to serve an even more diverse group in her community.

This art alliance is the only one of its kind that resides within the official Logan Square neighborhood, which is a drastic contrast to the plethora of organizations located on the northeast side. When Dawn and I discussed this issue, she named space and resources the biggest challenges for art organizations who want to establish themselves in Logan Square. She currently runs the organization out of her house, and as I mentioned above, her group relies on donated space in and around the community. However, groups such as arhi-treasures, which is discussed later in this paper, and Redmoon Theater group that need large spaces such as warehouses cannot afford to reside in Logan Square. This provides some explanation for why these two art organizations, along with several others, are located in the neighboring communities.

#### Joyce Fernandes, ArchiTreasures

Archi-treasures, which is actually located just west of Logan Square in Humbolt Park, is an organization that looks very different than the rest mentioned in this article.

This group was started only three years prior to aurorArts alliance, and serves communities all over metro Chicago. Joyce Fernandes, Executive Director, explained that their main goal is to raise community involvement in the urban landscape, redesign public spaces through participatory design and construction and engage local youth to achieve these goals. As a result, the program unites youth with their local community and allows them to improve their local environment through a creative process. archi-treasures works with Chicago communities who want to improve their neighborhood by cleaning up and redesigning public space. The organization facilitates the project trains local youths to take responsibility and leadership for the process and provides some of the materials. Through the training, the participants learn to identify their community's needs, plan and design the projects and finally initiate their design. Professional artists, carpenters and landscape designers are also involved with the training and building processes. This exposes the kids to these skills and occupations.

archi-treasures' initiatives not only help improve public space, the projects also “strengthen citizenship skills, catalyzes forums uniting youth and community and raise community involvement in the urban landscape” (archi-treasures Web site). It also helps foster relationships between the kids who participate and other community residents and organizing groups. Everyone who participates has a better understanding of how essential and valuable community organizing and creative processes can be to their neighborhood. Joyce has taken part in a number of archi-treasures projects and is witness to the benefits these programs offer. She believes that the lessons these children learn are crucial for their futures. The participants do not necessarily have other creative outlets or opportunities to see what kind of impact they can have on their neighborhood.

Rosita DeLaRosa, Logan Square Neighborhood Association

The Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) supports and hosts art programs that contribute to their community development goals. Rosita DeLaRosa, who is the key resource for LSNA's art and community initiatives, had plenty to say about the value of their neighborhood art programs. As I previously mentioned, they work with aurorArts alliance and their Fine Arts for Kids of Logan Square (FAKLS) by providing them space and other resources. Many families involved with LSNA take advantage of this program.

In addition to their relationship with aurorArts, LSNA is involved with three components of Redmoon Theater's Neighborhood Arts Program; "The Dramagirls Program," the "Winter Pageant," and the "Shrine Workshop Vehicle." Redmoon started these initiatives because the organization "believes passionately in the idea of fusing art-making and community-making" (Redmoon Web site). "The Dramagirls Program" pairs middle school girls in the Logan Square neighborhood with women artists, in an intensive exploration of creativity and leadership" (Redmoon Web site). This specific program offers girls from the neighborhood a safe environment in which to express themselves creatively, tell their stories by "creat[ing] original works of theater that express the truth of their lives" (Redmoon Web site). In addition to this initiative, for the past five years, LSNA has participated in a major Redmoon production, which this year is the "Winter Pageant." Senior citizens and children from the Logan Square community come together to create a performance piece for the pageant. LSNA organizes the workshops, meetings and rehearsals and finds a different community sponsor each year to donate the space.

Finally, Rosita described the “Shrine Workshop Vehicle” as an LSNA favorite. This program “provide[s] an opportunity for the public to participate in the art making workshops and celebrate the lives of those who have passed away” (Redmoon Web site).

All of these involvements bring Logan Square residents together in a positive and creative environment. Rosita talked about a long list of benefits. For example, she mentioned that “The Dramagirls Program” is especially good for girls who do not excel academically or athletically, because it helps them discover that they have value in other talents. The same is true for those who participate in the “Winter Pageant” performance. This program is unique because it brings together middle-school students and senior citizens from the community. These two groups would work together in few other circumstances. Rosita talked about the relationships that she has seen grow out of these programs. “When the children and seniors first come together, many of them do not know each other. By the time the work is done and the performance is over, everyone is giving hugs and saying goodbye.” These statements are testimony that the arts create community. Other benefits that Rosita mentioned were that the youth participated in any of these programs learn more about their potential and ability to achieve. Plus, the performances that grow out of these programs also serve the community.

LSNA employs the arts in ways other than those Rosita and I talked about in detail. What was evident from our brief but detailed discussion was that LSNA recognizes the benefits of art programs to their community. Although there are only a few organizations that are present in and around their neighborhood, these groups offer plenty of opportunities to get involved. The relationship between the LSNA and the local art groups helps strengthen and sustain this diverse community.

## **Conclusions**

From these discussions, I can conclude that these communities do recognize the value of the arts in community development. In both Uptown and Logan Square, the arts are creating social networks, drawing together diverse groups of people, helping foster achievement for adults and children and overall improving these communities. My hypothesis that the neighborhood associations and art organizations worked together was only partly true. Even though Uptown had more art organizations in its vicinity, there were few ties to ONE. Alternatively, Logan Square has a number of programs that involve the arts and local art organizations. However, in both neighborhoods that I explored, there are still many opportunities for arts to impact communities. There are also more ways in which community organizing groups and art organizations can join forces to improve their neighborhoods.

It is my hope that research such as this will make more people aware of arts' possibilities and benefits. Because the programs I examined in this project are proof that visual and performing arts can bring together people who might not otherwise share a mutual interest. Art comes in so many forms, providing infinite possibilities for collaboration. It is something in which we can all take part and share. Art is a common language that unites us and provides each individual with a voice. I can conclude that, yes, art has the potential to create community.

## **Implications for European Countries**

The United States is not the only country in which communities are using the arts to improve and build communities. Cities in Europe have also benefited from similar initiatives and are continuing to build on these experiences. There are plenty of more

examples in which European cities turned to the arts to help regenerate their communities. In Digbeth, United Kingdom, a developer decided to turn an old factory building into a major art center which houses exhibitions, a dance studio, classrooms for art education, commercial space and even rental units for artists. As a result of the conversion, the town began to attract new residents to the area, especially young artists, and the community once again began to flourish. Another example is another small community in the UK, Penzance, West Cornwall. This neighborhood re-established an age-old tradition of the town and once again began to host an annual, week-long festival. The preparation for the event brought the community together, and as the festival continues to grow, the residents' work together year-round to make it all happen. The festival also attracts more tourists to the area, which brings a positive economic impact. (Landry et al., 1996)

These are illustrations of how the arts can be a resource for urban regeneration. However, there are also community organizations that foster the arts, such as the following in Liverpool, England. (News from Nowhere)

- **“The Blackie”** - a community art venue that houses cultural events such as exhibitions, art workshops and programs, youth residencies and performances. Its main purpose is to offer a place for the community to come together and share in cultural events.
- **Liverpool Network Theater Group** – “They aim to produce the very best in community theatre, to encourage participation in community theatre at all levels, to develop new writing and new performance, and to use theatre to include, encourage and inform.”

Liverpool has an added interest in this topic since the European Union named their city the “Culture Capital” of 2008. The Cultural Capital project aims to highlight various European cities for their cultural strengths. As a part of the program, the city receives funding that helps improve the city's culture. However, after meeting some of

Liverpool's residents who are involved in the "Equitable Sustainable Community Development Project" at Loyola's Center For Urban Research and Learning (CURL), David and Irene Hall, I learned that this project is changing Liverpool in ways that negatively impact their community. For example, Irene Hall talked about how the city is taking money from other community development projects in order to fund construction and development that serves a small portion of the population. Another consequence is that the city plans to destroy one of the areas prime cultural spots for the site of new construction that is not intended to serve the save purpose. Plus, they have noticed that property values are already shooting up, and they fear that as Liverpool gets more caught up in dressing up the city for 2008, many of the city's residents will be forced to find a new home. These points show that while art has great potential to improve community, it is often the agent of change that benefits those of a higher social status. This makes the points in this paper even more pertinent to England and other European nations, because it illustrates the positive effects more grassroots art organizations and initiatives can have on a community.

### **Future Research**

This paper and the exploratory research that I began this semester only skims the surface of this topic. There are still more connections between community art organization and sustainable development that would be valuable for further study. Next semester, I will explore in greater detail the similarities and differences between the arts in the United States and those in Europe. I also plan to do in-depth qualitative research at The People's Music School, which should help me draw more conclusions on this topic. Overall, there are plenty more ways in which this research can develop.



## Appendix I

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### **Other On-line Sources**

*Art in the Public Interest* homepage. (<http://www.apionline.org/>)

*Community Arts Network: Readings in Arts and Community* homepage. <http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/rescomm-ulinks.php>

*Social Impact of the Arts Project* homepage. (<http://www.ssw.upenn.edu/SIAP/>)

### **Local Art Organizations**

ArchiTreasures. 2850 North Pulaski Road, 2nd floor, Chicago, IL 60641. Joyce Fernandes, Executive Director. [www.architreasures.org](http://www.architreasures.org)

auroArts alliance. 2515 N. Talman, Chicago, IL 60647. Dawn Marie Galtieri, Executive Director. [www.auroarts.org](http://www.auroarts.org)

Beacon Street Gallery and Performance Company. 4131 North Broadway, Chicago, IL 60613. Pat Murphy, Executive Director. [www.beaconst.org](http://www.beaconst.org)

The People's Music School. 931 W. Eastwood Ave. Chicago, IL 60640. Mary Ellen McGarry, Executive Director. [www.peoplesmusicsschool.org](http://www.peoplesmusicsschool.org)

Redmoon Theater. 1438 W. Kinzie Ave. Chicago, IL 60622. [www.redmoon.org](http://www.redmoon.org)

Scrap Mettle SOUL. 4707 N. Broadway, Suite 315. Chicago, IL 60640  
[www.scrapmettlesoul.org](http://www.scrapmettlesoul.org)

#### Local Chicago Community Organizations

Organization of the Northeast. 1329 W. Wilson Ave. Chicago, IL 60640. Sarah Jane Knoy, Executive Director. [www.onechicago.org](http://www.onechicago.org)

Logan Square Neighborhood Association. 3321 W. Wrightwood Ave. Chicago, IL 60647. Nancy Aardema, Executive Director. [www.lsna.net](http://www.lsna.net)