

Kansas City, UNESCO, and the United Nations

“A Common Instrument for a Common Purpose” – *reconsidering the legacy of President Truman, UNESCO, and the United Nations in the context of war and armed conflict today.*

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Several events globally and locally this week provide the opportunity to look at Kansas City’s connection with cities around the world – through the lens of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Created in the wake of World War II, UNESCO’s mission is to build peace in the hearts and minds of women and men. On October 31, 2017, the City of Kansas City, Missouri joined the [UNESCO Creative Cities Network](#) as a member city - and as the first, and only, UNESCO [City of Music](#) in the United States.ⁱ

The Faculty of Architecture, Urban Planning and Design (AUPD) at UMKC have had more than a little to do with the successful City of Music application, and the [Center for Neighborhoods](#) (CFN) has been a supporter of UNESCO Creative City KC from day one. Over the past five years, we have worked with Anita Dixon-Brown, founder of Creative City KC, to support and elevate the work of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network through research, outreach, conference presentations, and numerous events. You can see this work here.

The City of Kansas City’s return to the United Nations via UNESCO is not an isolated or unparalleled event. Set in the context of Kansas City’s long history and formative role within the United Nations, re-joining UNESCO as a member of the Creative City Network is quite significant. In fact – key leaders from both sides of our state line played an influential role in development of the post-war framework for social, cultural, economic, and political recovery and rebuilding.

President Harry S. Truman (born in Independence, Missouri and raised - politically speaking - in Kansas City) played a critical and persuasive role in the founding of the United Nations after WWII. President Dwight D. Eisenhower (raised in Abilene, Kansas) addressed the General Assembly multiple times during his time in office raising some memorable issues that still concern us today. It was General Eisenhower whose men worked to [preserve the monuments and cultural heritage](#) of European Cities during and after the war - in the face of Nazi destruction.

After the war, President Eisenhower partnered with Joyce Hall of Hallmark to encourage the establishment of [sister cities](#) around the world.ⁱⁱ It was Hall who went on to support the formation of People to People International with 100 leaders supporting the international initiative.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Founding of UNESCO and the UN Charter: A living, human reality

On July 2, 1945 – President Harry S. Truman addressed the United States Senate on the topic of the Charter for the United Nations.^{iv} Six days earlier, the Charter had been signed by 50 nations in San Francisco. In a written address to the *American Association for the United Nations, Inc.* - the

President saw the ratification of the UN Charter by the Senate as “*not so much an end as a beginning.*” He wrote:

“It remains now for the people of the United States to see to it that the Charter works in so far as it lies within their power to make it work. Only if they understand what the Charter is and what it can mean to the peace of the world will the document become a living human reality. We must all hope that the people of this country and the peoples of the rest of the United Nations will inform themselves of the possibilities which the Charter opens to them and will make the Organization of the United Nations their common instrument to achieve a common purpose.”^v

This quote rings true today for several reasons. President Truman recognizes that if *the people* don’t engage the UN and its charter – then the entire effort will be meaningless. Further, the “common instrument” language is a powerful metaphor for international cooperation through music - a reference that is both political and creative. To make peace a living, human reality - it is the everyday citizens of cities around the world who must stand up for peace and justice in the face of violence, repression, and armed conflicts.

Murder in Ukraine: Musicians on the Frontline

Sometime the past few weeks, the musical composer and director [Yuriy Kerpatenko](#) was murdered by Russian troops for refusing to cooperate in a concert organized by the occupying forces in the port city of Kherson, Ukraine. Kerpatenko was the principal conductor of the Kherson Regional Philharmonic, the Gileya chamber group, and head of the Mykola Kulish Music and Drama Theatre. According to the press reports, Mr. Kerpatenko was murdered after refusing to participate in a concert.^{vi}

Murders of civilians are a despicable act of desperation on the part of the violators. Kerpatenko’s refusal to cooperate with the Russian occupiers was an act of artistic freedom and freedom of expression. We must all condemn the murder of this conductor and call for the appropriate action in an international criminal tribunal to investigate and prosecute individuals responsible for this heinous act and war crime. #StoptheWar #SolidaritywithUkraine

UNESCO Creative City Network: “A Common Instrument for a Common Purpose”

In the shadows of World War II’s destruction – President Harry S. Truman saw the need for an international initiative to sustain peace globally. On July 30, 1946 – the President commended Congress on passing a Joint Resolution for the United States to join UNESCO. In the statement he noted the importance of the arts and creative technology to the efforts to build world peace:

UNESCO will summon to service in the cause of peace the forces of education, science, learning and the creative arts, and the agencies of the film, the radio and the printed word through which knowledge and ideas are diffused among mankind.^{vii}

Truman’s statement – at the very beginning of the founding of UNESCO and the United States membership in that organization – could easily explain in our time the purpose of the UNESCO

Creative Cities Network (which was not established until 2004). By identifying the “*the creative arts, and the agencies of the film, the radio, and the printed word*” – Truman named three of the seven creative fields of the UNESCO Creative City Network – also known as [sub-networks](#) or “clusters” – areas of creativity that the network focuses on to organize its work. These creative industries remain vital to cities around the world and economic development almost 75 years after Truman coined his phrase.

It is through the Truman legacy that Kansas City is directly connected with the mission of UNESCO and the UNESCO Creative Cities Network. Kansas City’s membership in UNESCO is much larger and more significant than any one cultural organization, arts association, or museum.

Kansas City: City of Music

There has been quite a lot of confusion about the “City of Music” designation and Kansas City’s membership in the UCCN since we developed the successful application in the spring of 2017 with Anita Dixon-Brown. The work of applying for membership in an international network of cities was not hatched overnight. In fact – it was several years in the making with the partnership with Ms. Dixon-Brown, former director of the Mutual Musicians Foundation – home of Local 627 – Kansas City’s AFM Black Musicians Union. Ms. Anita Dixon-Brown authored the application, received the approval of the US Commission to UNESCO, and worked to gain Mayor Sly James approval of the application as well. We sincerely honor and thank Ms. Anita Dixon-Brown for all of the hard work that she has put in for decades to elevate Kansas City’s African American cultural heritage to the level that it is now visible as cultural heritage of global significance.

It’s about Music as World Heritage...

One of the most erroneous myths – is the confusion around our membership in the UNESCO Creative City Network (UCCN). While the UNESCO World Heritage Convention and its management of the list of natural and cultural heritage sites around the world is well known, [Kansas City is not a World Heritage Site. That’s a different UNESCO program and convention.](#)

Musical Heritage – however – is central to the City’s membership in the UCCN as a City of Music. Creative City KC – the focal point organization – sought the City of Music designation in order to elevate Kansas City’s intangible and tangible heritage of music.

In particular – our members are deeply concerned about the loss of tangible heritage of African American neighborhoods in the City of Kansas City Missouri – and regionally in our metro area. We remain concerned about the under-resourced management of these fragile and often endangered sites of our musical and cultural heritage. For example – in the last ten years, Kansas City has continued to lose one of kind historic buildings, including the Chauncey Downs Building at 18th and Prospect, as well as the Kansas City home of William “Count” Basie at 1327 Brooklyn Avenue.

Recognizing that Kansas City’s efforts to save our sites of jazz heritage was failing – we sought global recognition of the City’s place in history – and our historic places. This is why [Creative City KC](#) hosted a global symposium on the topic of African Diaspora and historic sites in the Kansas City region this past month.

Music: “A Common Instrument for a Common Purpose”

Music has an emotional power that is different from the experience of the visual arts, architecture, or design. In some ways – music is more approachable – more accessible and requires less interpretation. The experience of the impact of music on the body, on the heart rate, on emotions – does not require translation. Music transcends many human boundaries and conflicts.

Notes

ⁱ <https://www.irckc.org/kansas-city-and-the-unesco-creative-city-network-music-and-culture-for-sustainable-urban-development/>

And: <https://www.startlandnews.com/2018/03/unesco-city-of-music/>

ⁱⁱ KC Sister Cities <https://www.kcsistercities.org/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.gkcptp.org/ptpi-history.htm>

^{iv} Thanks to the Truman Library for digitizing many of the records from President Truman’s collections. <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/charter-united-nations-address-president-united-states?documentid=NA&pagenumber=1>

^v <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/draft-statement-president-harry-s-truman-american-association-united-nations?documentid=NA&pagenumber=4>

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^{vi} <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2022/10/ukrainian-orchestra-conductor-murdered-by-russian-troops-after-refusing-to-perform>

^{vii} <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/184/statement-president-concerning-us-membership-unesco>