

POLICY BRIEF

Arts and Culture for a Just and Equitable City

Arts and culture can provide the inspiration, tools, and capacity needed to unify New York City into a more just and equitable city for all. We need to dream big, feel connected, propose bold new ideas, and engage the city in an inclusive transformation. Because cultural change precedes and embodies political change, arts and culture are an essential part of this progressive agenda.

Arts and culture engage our humanity in creating the city we deserve. Stories, images, and music speak to and clarify our deepest values, sustain and strengthen community identity, and support critical thinking and problem solving. Creation is inherently liberating, helping us see that something else is possible. It recognizes, affirms, and elevates the lived experiences of those often left out of civic engagement. Through imagination and creative action we can reconfigure our social and economic relationships, shift power, and make change.

While we support the full range of creative expression, this brief focuses on recommendations that maximize the role of arts and culture to advance a progressive agenda. A just and equitable New York City needs culture at the table.

1. CREATE CROSS SECTOR STRATEGIES

Integrate arts and culture across policymaking and practice including, but not limited to: safe streets and transportation, arts education, juvenile justice, childhood development and family reunification, education, immigration, sustainability, and community development.

Art builds community and that community creates change through collective impact—the engagement of multiple actors to a common agenda for solving complex social problems. Artistic process, properly utilized, plays a critical role in generating collective impact by connecting seemingly disparate stakeholders to work together to identify issues, envision solutions, build capacity, and transform people and communities.

Examples

Groundswell is a leading New York organization dedicated to the use of public art as a tool for social change. New Yorkers Against Gun Violence and American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) were challenged with how to engage multiple stakeholders in a multi-faceted campaign. By employing Groundswell's collaborative mural-making model they were able to change what people know about upcoming gun control legislation, increase capacity by developing teen spokespeople on the topic, change how people feel about Crown Height's Broward Park, and build community among various stakeholders. The youth met with anti-gun violence leaders, Crown Heights Mediation Center, police officers, elected officials, and families who had lost loved ones to gun violence. The youth acquired the leadership and art mastery skills to address the partners' multiple goals. After the mural was complete, a number of teens joined AFSC as interns on the gun legislation work. Elected officials used the mural dedication as a press conference and organizing opportunity. AFSC incorporates the mural images in their educational materials still used today. Community groups and public schools in East New York, Brownsville, and Washington Heights partnered with Groundswell to replicate the anti-gun violence efforts in their own neighborhoods.

The **Center for Urban Pedagogy's Making Policy Public** program uses graphic design to demystify complex policy issues. The partnership between CUP, a designer, and an advocate results in posters that

are used as resources around diverse issues ranging from domestic workers rights, to rules and regulations for street vendors, to redistricting.

Recommendations

- Identify a point person at each city agency who is responsible for moving forward arts and culture as an integrated part of their agency's agenda.
- Create an interagency working group to facilitate collaboration between agencies to use arts to address specific programmatic and policymaking goals.
- Designate a position within City Hall to convene, facilitate, and support arts-related interagency collaboration.
- Include artists and cultural organizations in strategy discussions about the future of the city and use art and design to better communicate and deepen understanding of complex policy issues.
- Identify and support opportunities for collective impact where arts and culture can play a generative role. Commit to demonstrating this impact through research and metrics.

2. INSPIRE PARTICIPATION

Build arts and culture into civic participation across the city to reach those who have been historically disenfranchised and to stimulate civic dialogue and action across difference.

In a city that is highly segregated there are few opportunities to actively come together across race and class to make change. Community members can also feel disconnected from decision-making, unable to have a say in the city's agenda or to participate in a meaningful way. Arts and culture are essential sources of empathy, respect, and connection, allowing us to see ourselves as part of a shared experience. We become the authors of our histories, unlocking civic energy. This is critically important during hard times when people can become isolated and disenfranchised.

Examples

In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, more than 100 artists volunteered at the Park Slope Armory "special needs" shelter, providing inspiring performances and workshops and organizing **the wellness center** infrastructure that made these programs possible. The wellness center engaged the residents in reclaiming their dignity, shifting them from victims to creators. **Dance Theater Etcetera** played a key role in Red Hook and the **Sandy Storyline** and **Groundswell** provided sustained opportunities for people to share their stories. Arts and culture also played an important role to heal and unify the city after 9/11. They are now being integrated into the process of participatory budgeting by the **Arts & Democracy Project**, to encourage creative and inclusive forms of participation.

El Puente's Green Light District is a ten-year effort to transform the Southside of Williamsburg "from a past as one of the most environmentally and economically challenged neighborhoods in New York City into a 2020 future as a healthy, safe, culturally rich, and civically engaged community." This happens through a holistic program that brings together arts and culture, community gardening, school reform, and environmental justice. Recently, youth at El Puente used the arts to amplify their own stories as part of their campaign against stop and frisk. Through this work El Puente provides opportunities to connect neighborhood newcomers to with longtime residents around shared goals of making the neighborhood one where they can all live and thrive.

Recommendations

- Include arts and culture as an integral part of the city's relief, recovery, and ongoing resiliency strategies.

- Include arts, culture and creative processes in city and neighborhood planning processes.
- Support creative civic participation strategies through sustained partnerships and ongoing mechanisms such as an artist corps and artist in residence programs.
- Increase community access and use of public spaces (such as libraries, parks, and streets).
- City Council members should identify cultural liaisons from the field and community boards should have cultural committees.

3. CULTIVATE COMMUNITY CAPACITY

Revitalize New York City from the neighborhood up by supporting community leadership, cultural hubs, and vital social networks.

Community-based organizations are responding to greater needs with fewer resources. They are the front line of local leadership and resiliency, but often lack the time and infrastructure to respond to the sometimes onerous requirements of a city bureaucracy. Community-based organizations have to navigate a complex labyrinth of agencies to organize community gatherings and performances in public space, lead local sustainability efforts, or improve underutilized facilities.

Arts and culture are an essential part of the cultural vitality and capacity of New York City neighborhoods. It's where we incubate the ideas of the future and strengthen the local infrastructure and leadership that supports us in good times and bad. Arts and culture enhance the ability of community members to take leadership in solving local problems, to mobilize, and to amplify their voice. Milly Hawk Daniel of Policy Link, a national economic and social justice institute, reminds us of the key role that arts and culture play during hard times: "The propensity to see art and cultural expression as ancillary to survival makes us forget how essential art and culture are to sustaining community, history, and livelihood."

Examples

THE POINT is dedicated to youth development and the cultural and economic revitalization of the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx. Their Village of Murals, the first stop on the South Bronx Greenway, enhances the community's access to the Bronx River while creating new opportunities for arts and the environment. With support from the Department of Transportation, **THE POINT** commissioned neighborhood artist and activist Sharon de la Cruz to paint a mural that bridges a community divided by an expressway. De La Cruz, who started at **THE POINT** as a teenager and returned after receiving a Fulbright, exemplifies the leadership development that is integral to **THE POINT**, El Puente, and Groundswell.

The **POINT** is a member of **Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts New York (NOCD-NY)**, a citywide alliance that connects neighborhoods across the five boroughs. These districts are geographically and structurally diverse, self-organized through community-generated action, and cultivated by a diverse range of participants. They join cultural centers, arts organizations, artists, community groups, small businesses, creative manufacturers, and schools to strengthen local economies and build the social networks that make communities resilient.

Recommendations

- Support the creative vitality of every neighborhood in New York City by providing equitable recognition, funding, and financing for diverse neighborhood cultural hubs, networks, and organizations.
- Create a City Council staff position to act as a resource to Council members in supporting small organiza-

tions and neighborhood-based culture in their districts to ensure that they have the same access to city resources and technical support that larger institutions enjoy.

- Make citywide programs easier to participate in for small organizations. Reduce bureaucratic barriers to working with the city (i.e. SAPO, DOT Public Plaza Program, DCLA Capital requirements).
- Support neighborhood cultural incubators and creative manufacturers.
- Support opportunities for neighborhood efforts and community networks to connect with one another, coordinate their efforts, and scale up through collective action.

4. FURTHER CULTURAL EQUITY:

Prioritize equitable distribution of opportunities and benefits related to arts and culture.

Arts and culture in New York City has also been a tale of two cities, reinforced by cultural hierarchies and an inequitable distribution of resources across boroughs, cultures, race, and class. The transition and the City Council's bill for a comprehensive cultural plan offer opportunities to take stock of how resources are distributed across the city and take proactive steps to further cultural equity and include those who have been historically excluded. A progressive cultural policy ascribes value, and increases access and equity, to diverse communities and cultures through its grant making, capital allocations, definitions of excellence, design aesthetics, composition of commissions and peer panels, and choice of where to site cultural resources and amenities.

Recommendations

- Develop funding criteria for excellence that recognize and reflect New York's diverse communities and cultures, and has a broad definition of culture.
- Increase transparency and access to information about City cultural funding and identify where equity issues need to be addressed.
- Develop a unified cultural plan for NYC that prioritizes cultural equity with increased funding support and a leadership role for community-based cultural groups.
- Increase accessibility of resources addressing equity such as the Communities of Color Nonprofit Stabilization Fund to small cultural organizations and include the cultural community in the development of such resources.
- Increase cultural funding to 1% of the city expense budget.
- Make the Internet fully accessible to all New York City communities.

CONCLUSION

What does New York City look like when it reflects the full diversity and vitality of its people and neighborhoods? We need to work together and harness every resource that we have at hand – data, policy, community knowledge, civic energy, and creativity – to achieve a fair, equitable, and sustainable city for all New Yorkers. We need to be able to imagine a city where we can live meaningful lives in thriving communities and build the relationships and public will to get us there. Arts and culture make a powerful contribution toward these goals.

Arts & Democracy Project, Groundswell, Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts New York

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