

## Innovative Cultural Uses of Urban Space

# PUBLIC OUTDOOR SPACE: LONG-TERM & SHORT-TERM



author: Joan T. Hocky  
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#### look for:

- adaptive reuse
- construction zones and vacant lots
- public outdoor space: short- and long-term
- publicly owned facilities
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**JOAN T. HOCKY** is a writer and consultant with a background in community development, the arts, and education, and expertise in relationship-building and problem solving with multiple stakeholders. She worked in low-income housing development at the NYC Department of Housing (HPD) and as arts advisor/grantmaker to Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger. She has worked with private foundations, public agencies, school districts and non-profits to address racial and economic equity issues and transform policy issues into engaging stories. Clients include Rockefeller, Nathan Cummings, and Andy Warhol Foundations, New York State Council on the Arts, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone, United Neighborhood Houses, Nonprofit Facilities Fund, National Center for Schools and Communities, and dozens of community-based groups throughout New York. Joan gets her hands dirty planting and cooking fresh from the Garden State, writing and blogging, as well as serving as Project Manager of New Jersey Recovery Fund.

cover photos, from left: **Riverside Campus for Arts and the Environment, Hunts Point, Bronx; Downtown Art, East Village** (photos: Joan T. Hocky, Ryan Gilliam)



## LONG-TERM USE OF PUBLIC OUTDOOR SPACE

Public outdoor space is at a premium in New York City, especially in its more densely populated boroughs. But through agreements between public and private landowners, nonprofit organizations, and artists, the city is home to a wide variety of public outdoor spaces reserved for the arts.

Whether such a space is located at a dumpsite or an underused plaza, what begins with an artistic and innovative vision ultimately requires those leading the charge to get their hands dirty. There is complicated and extensive work to be done, such as clearing out, renovating, or reconfiguring space; securing funding; transferring ownership; and formalizing relationships with public and private funders and stakeholders.

While their size, scope, and setting may vary, initiatives that succeed have in common certain features, including the following:

1. **A core belief that creative expression can help revitalize, improve, and add value to the urban environment**
2. **Programs that encourage interaction between artists, artwork, and the public**
3. **The flexibility to adapt to changes in the community or political landscape**
4. **The tenacity to devise creative solutions to challenges and constraints inherent in working in the public sphere**

Maintaining and producing art in outdoor public space requires that organizations take responsibility for capital improvements in and maintenance of the physical space, as well as for the operational and programmatic aspects involved in producing and presenting art, developing an audience, and being responsive to changing community needs. These multipronged responsibilities can be a challenge for nonprofits or arts collectives with limited organizational capacity and constrained financial resources. Developing and maintaining financial support is an ongoing challenge.

# EXAMPLES OF LONG-TERM USE OF PUBLIC OUTDOOR SPACE

## Riverside Campus for the Arts and Environment

*Hunts Point, Bronx, New York*

THE POINT Community Development Corporation is a nonprofit organization dedicated to youth development and the cultural and economic revitalization of the Hunts Point neighborhood, in the South Bronx. THE POINT's Riverside Campus for Arts and the Environment is an inspiring and instructive success story of how an organization and community allies worked together to literally make treasure out of trash. Situated on a former brownfield on the Bronx River waterfront—land that had been used for industrial purposes, polluted, and then abandoned—the Campus is an exuberantly colorful and active hub of creativity in an industrial section of Hunts Point.

### History

THE POINT was long familiar with the area surrounding what was to become the Campus because of the organization's participation in a coalition of local activist and advocacy groups interested in converting the adjacent area along the Bronx River from an illegal dumping ground into a useable park. Their successful effort culminated in city funding being granted to the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation to create a new park. The parks department and its designers and planners worked with community residents to create Hunts Point Riverside Park, which opened in 2007 and was the first new riverside park in the South Bronx in sixty years. Hunts Point Riverside Park is now home to kayakers, canoers, and paddlers from across the city, and it was the first step toward a greenway movement. (See Local Affiliations and Relationships, below.)

When THE POINT and its partners found out that a vacant lot adjacent to the park (the site of a former tannery) was going up for auction by the city, they decided to put a bid on the property. With leadership from New York State Congressman José Serrano, an ardent supporter of arts and environmental projects in his district, the property was purchased with funding allocated through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), as well as support from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Serrano also was able to allocate funds for cleanup and decontamination, which entailed knocking down the original building.



Riverside Campus for the Arts and the Environment photo: Joan Hocky

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In formulating their plan for converting the space, they collaborated with Rocking the Boat and other local groups, with whom they had relationships through coalition efforts, to create the Riverside Park.

### Owners, Tenants, and Structure

The Riverside Campus for the Arts and Environment is owned and managed by THE POINT. Among THE POINT's own projects housed at the Campus are the Urban Farming Home Garden and THE POINT Brick House Studio. Current tenants include Rocking the Boat (<http://www.rockingtheboat.org>), which teaches boatbuilding, boating skills, and environmental restoration. The Art Container, a gallery sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, will open soon. This past summer, the Campus hosted student workshops for a Groundswell mural project in collaboration with the Majora Carter Group. Although the space is relatively small, it is an incubator of creativity, involving gardening, designing, building, and painting—engaging youth and other residents from the surrounding neighborhood.



Rocking the Boat photo: Joan Hocky

### Local Affiliations and Relationships

THE POINT, with its Campus programming and partnering tenants, is part of several local advocacy initiatives formed to revitalize the South Bronx and its waterfront through environmentally sound means. Involvement in these coalitions and the sharing of common goals is vital to the project's success in these ways:

1. The Campus is part of THE POINT's Hunts Point Reinvisioning Project, a comprehensive planning, organizing, and revitalization initiative designed to improve economic health through environmentally sound development that maximizes open-space use.
2. It is an early stop on the South Bronx Greenway Plan, being implemented by the city's Economic Development Corporation (NYCEDC) as part of a master plan to improve access to the Bronx River waterfront and provide recreational opportunities on the South Bronx peninsula.
3. THE POINT and its tenants are part of the Bronx River Alliance (<http://bronxriver.org>). Working closely with the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation and headquartered in the department's facility on the Bronx River Parkway, the alliance works collaboratively with public and private partners to protect, improve, and restore the Bronx River corridor and greenway.

4. THE POINT is a key player in the New York State–designated South Bronx Waterfront Brownfield Opportunity Area (BOA), as part of a statewide program to support sustained redevelopment in distressed neighborhoods that have been adversely affected by multiple brownfield sites.

These coalitions combine to create a foundation and support system for the Campus and its organic, locally grown existence, providing a web of distinct but interconnected efforts to improve conditions in the perpetually underinvested South Bronx. They create a unified form of infrastructure for advocacy, information sharing, and problem solving to improve a region beset by an eroded physical and economic infrastructure.

While THE POINT's leadership is sometimes at odds with local elected officials on environmental policy issues, these political disagreements do not affect support for its arts initiatives. Leaders of arts programs at THE POINT and other local organizations have been able to cultivate the support of elected officials like Congressman Serrano and multiple Bronx borough presidents by focusing on the positive, nondivisive nature of cultural assets as tools to help revitalize the area.

## Challenges

Generally considered an example of a successful community-based reuse of land, the Campus faces several challenges. Lack of funds for an on-site manager prevents it from hosting a full roster of spring and fall programming. Even during summer months, community access to the space is limited to those times when class sessions or art events occur or when Rocking the Boat offers free boat rides on the river.

An even greater obstacle is finding ways to draw visitors from outside the neighborhood. Long-held public perceptions of the South Bronx as a dangerous destination, filled with crime and poverty, discourages some city residents and cultural tourists from making the trip. Although the site is relatively easy to reach—a subway ride from Midtown takes only about twenty minutes, with a fifteen-minute walk to the site—increased bus or trolley service from the subway could make potential visitors more comfortable making the trip.

Finally, an ongoing challenge is finding ways to replicate the project's success throughout the Hunts Point peninsula. Many in the community who appreciate the transformation are hopeful that other former industrial sites can also be converted to beneficial alternative use, creating parks and other sites for recreational or cultural purposes. Together, members of the alliance generating Hunts Point initiatives face geographic, logistical, political, and visibility challenges. Making the area's riverside parks work involves efforts to expand waterfront access, improve the environmental and cultural health of residents, and attract additional investment in existing and future conversions of space.

For more information on the interrelationship among various environmental and cultural groups in the Bronx, visit: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/22/arts/design/bronx-river-now-flows-by-parkshtml?pagewanted=all>

## Socrates Sculpture Park

*Long Island City, Queens, New York*

Although it maintains a larger space and boasts more resources, Socrates Sculpture Park has a history and landscape similar to those of the Bronx's Riverside Campus for the Arts and Environment. The Long Island City site was an abandoned East River landfill and illegal dumpsite until 1986, when a coalition of artists and community members—under the leadership of sculptor Mark di Suvero—transformed it into an open art studio and exhibition space and a neighborhood park for local residents.

The nonprofit sculpture park is the only outdoor site in the metropolitan area dedicated to providing opportunities for artists to create and exhibit large-scale sculpture and multimedia installations. It also doubles as a New York City park, offering a wide variety of free programs for the public.

### Elements of Success

Several factors contribute to Socrates Sculpture Park's success and serve as a model for other public spaces:



Socrates Sculpture Park photo: Joan Hocky

1. **The park's leaders serve on the local community board, giving the park a public presence and voice in the civic life of its neighborhood.** Attending meetings enables staff to keep abreast of local developments and to network with other community leaders and with area residents. They also elevate their visibility as representatives of a local resource for the public. For example, the installation of a farmers' market in the park was seen as a positive addition to the community. Participation on the board provides a sounding board for other community members so they may voice opinions on how potentially disruptive or inconvenient issues such as noise or crowds are handled.
2. **Socrates presents art and programs that attract a broad cross section of users and visitors, encouraging interaction between artists, artworks, and the public.** High-caliber art installations attract cultural tourists and visitors from all boroughs. Socrates's summertime Outdoor Cinema Series attracts thousands of younger visitors from Long Island City, Brooklyn, and Manhattan. Family programs and a weekly Greenmarket draw local residents, while education programs engage a diverse mix of young people, among them residents from nearby housing projects (Astoria, Queensbridge, and Ravenswood Houses) and middle-class students and campers from across the city.

3. **The park captures diverse funding streams, from public agencies to private foundations.** The park's public programs are supported in part by the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, in partnership with the New York City Council. Art exhibitions are made possible through funds from the New York State Council on the Arts and a roster of private foundations and individual donors.
4. **Socrates is highly accessible.** The park is open 365 days a year, allowing anyone to come and spend an hour or an entire day picnicking or gathering with friends in its beautifully landscaped setting (the park closes at sunset).

### Challenges

With its location in Queens, Socrates faces the same challenges as other outer-borough programs in attracting some city residents and cultural tourists who are less willing to travel to unknown locations. Although the subway trip from Midtown is short, the walk to Socrates entails an additional ten- to fifteen-minute walk (local buses run on an infrequent basis) along a busy thoroughfare. Socrates also faces challenges typical of nonprofit organizations in securing additional funds to increase programming. For example, there currently is not enough room for all the children who would like to participate in the summer education program. Additional funding would enable the park to expand its capacity.

## SHORT TERM USE OF PUBLIC OUTDOOR SPACE

New York has a long history of using public open space for a variety of temporary arts uses, from dance and musical performances to large-scale festivals, murals, and banners. New York also has a long and rich tradition of “taking it to the streets”—gathering in public space to show communal solidarity in either celebration or opposition. From the first Labor Day celebration of ten thousand workers held in Union Square Park in 1862 to Occupy Wall Street creative protest actions at Zucotti Park in 2010, New Yorkers have long embraced the public square, in planned and unpredictable ways, as a place to share ideas and spectacles.

Public outdoor space provides an accessible and egalitarian setting for art making and performing for diverse individuals and groups with wide-ranging objectives. Whether it is used by a collective involved in advocating for social change or by a gathering of new immigrants who want to

express and share their culture, public space allows artists to tell stories in ways that might more easily permit connections with new populations. Practice and exhibition can take multiple forms, requiring varied levels of capacity.

By claiming an imaginative and innovative stake in their communities, performing and visual artists can actually use public space as a mechanism to revitalize economically distressed or under-resourced communities. By placing a focus on the diversity of cultures within a community, practice and performance can reinstall a pride of place, build bridges between groups, and ignite cross-cultural interest among new residents and visitors alike. Art installations or performances can be costly and require a complicated set of resources. Alternatively, artists can create compelling work simply by manipulating their bodies, their imaginations, and the innate qualities of the space they inhabit.



## Corona Plaza

*Corona, Queens, New York*

The Heart of Corona Initiative of the Queens Museum of Art (QMA) is an arts-based community engagement project that has enabled the museum to be a major stakeholder in local neighborhood revitalization. The initiative is an outgrowth of QMA's commitment to adapt to the shifting cultural currents of its environs. Historically, in this borough of working- and middle-class black and white families, a "New Queens" has emerged over the past twenty years, encompassing immigrants from South and East Asia, including China, and Latinos who arrived from Ecuador, Columbia, and Mexico. The museum has gone through a thoughtful reexamination and thorough transformation in how it interacts and relates to its immediate community, leading to changes in leadership and the hiring of staff who are attuned to the New Queens and speak Spanish. QMA also hired a community organizer, a position not usually found in a major art museum.

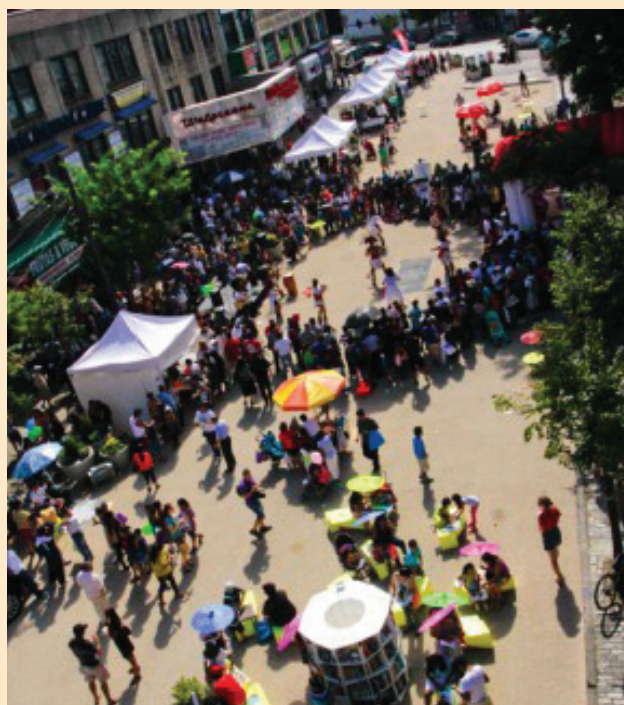
After boroughwide community engagement efforts, among them trolley tours, festivals, and a cookbook, to engage local residents in shared values like health, housing, families, youth, and leadership, QMA quickly realized that it needed to deepen its focus by concentrating on one distinct area. Corona Plaza was chosen because this community-identified hub had the greatest challenges of QMA's adjacent neighborhoods. These challenges included underdeveloped physical infrastructure and a lack of organizational structure or economic investment (e.g., lack of a local business improvement district).

What started as a cultural tourism initiative with local businesses and community leaders has grown into a series of public art projects, workshops, beautification efforts, and urban design ventures, using the arts as a means to achieve positive community change. And while its focus is community organizing rather than audience development, the Heart of Corona Initiative in fact has increased audiences significantly by making the museum more relevant and responsive to its surrounding community.

Components of the The Heart of Corona Initiative include:

### **Corona Plaza: The Center of Everywhere**

*Corona Plaza: The Center of Everywhere* commissioned a number of artists to make interactive, site-specific work to engage local residents in activities or performances that would be culturally



Corona Plaza Photo: Neshi Gallindo

relevant. QMA selected four artists to produce temporary, site-specific art in Corona Plaza, projects through which the artists would draw attention to the plaza's conditions. The community organizer played a key role in orienting the artists to the neighborhood, brokering partnerships and project locations, and facilitating public interaction.



*Pimp My Piruaga*, a commission of Corona Plaza: The Center of Everywhere  
Miguel Luciano, 2008

### **El Conquistador vs. the Invisible Man**

A good example of how the initiative was implemented is *El Conquistador vs. the Invisible Man*, a professional wrestling–inspired performance by Shaun “El C” Leonardo. Leonardo, born in Queens of Dominican and Guatemalan descent, was familiar with the area and its culture. In addition to creating the performance piece, he developed a community campaign in collaboration with QMA’s curator and community organizer. That campaign included approaching local business owners about setting up a promo video simulating a press conference in their storefronts to promote an upcoming local event. Many were open to the idea and excited to be involved, and the video played in storefronts, in area restaurants, and inside clothing and electronic stores. In addition, Leonardo held wrestling workshops with youth, appeared at local events in costume to sign autographs, and plastered posters throughout the neighborhood announcing the bout/performance. Leonardo felt his fearless attitude about approaching people was critical in generating interest and crucial to the project’s success. Also important was the cultural specificity of the project, since it ref-



*El Conquistador vs. the Invisible Man* photo: Queens Museum

erenced the Mexican wrestling *luchador*, something that they could relate to. While Leonardo and his team engaged the community, QMA staff worked out the logistics of securing permits, approvals, and insurance needed for the culminating event, in which a boxing ring was placed in the plaza in a location that provided great visibility and sight lines from the plaza as well as from the raised subway platform nearby. Over one thousand people packed the area to view the performance, an audience composed of both local residents and arts-aware and arts-savvy viewers.

### **Corona Studio**

In response to a need expressed by artists to have more time to develop projects and relationships, QMA initiated Corona Studio, which provided year-long artist residencies to enable selected artists to have time to develop their work. In one of these studio projects, Corona Studio artist

*Tania Bruguera, working in collaboration with Creative Time, set up an interactive, relational art project that is simultaneously a yearlong performance, a community center, and a consideration of the role and image of immigrants in the twenty-first century.*

### **Social Practice Queens**

*QMA has entered into a collaborative initiative with the arts department of Queens College (part of the City University of New York [CUNY]) to develop Social Practice Queens (SPQ), one of the first MFA programs on the East Coast to offer a social practice component. SPQ combines the expertise of artists, administrators, and educators to work on local issues specific to Queens. SPQ just completed its first interdisciplinary seminar, “Transforming Corona Plaza.”*

### **Corona Plaza**

*After years of community activism, a coalition comprised of QMA, elected officials, community-based organizations, and local residents is transforming Corona Plaza into a new public pedestrian plaza as part of the Department of Transportation’s NYC Plaza Program. The Queens Economic Development Corporation (QEDC) has a three-million-dollar budget for maintaining and running programming in the plaza. QMA has commissioned an architect and city planner to engage with local communities to develop programming and public installations in the space.*

## **A Community-Focused Model for Arts Organizations**

Questions remain about how best to share what was learned from QMA’s experience with other cultural institutions that have shown interest in following a similar interactive model. Although the community context may differ, other urban museums and their surrounding neighborhoods could benefit from what QMA has learned through this process.

QMA also integrates art and grassroots community engagement that is relevant for smaller and grassroots organizations wanting to create successful arts initiatives in public space, providing model elements:

1. *Creating work that is culturally relevant to the community.*
2. *Taking the time to build trusting relationships with local stakeholders. Enlisting their support while also finding out what their concerns and interests are, and then taking those into consideration in planning the work.*
3. *Meeting with area businesses; enlisting their support or involvement. Creating work that doesn’t interfere or take away from their daily commerce.*
4. *Making local organizations, leaders, police precincts, and others with a stake in the community aware of the proposed project, and working with them to minimize negative impact and risk factors.*
5. *Meeting with elected officials and other gatekeepers to get support and assistance in addressing*

*logistical issues, such as public assembly, permits, and space access.*

6. *Following up afterward, and getting feedback or suggestions for how to do it better the next time.*
7. *Considering approaching larger institutions to take advantage of their resources or knowledge. Asking them to serve as a fiscal conduit or partner in the work or being added to the bill of planned events.*

While size and scale may differ, arts organizations, regardless of resources, staff, or funding, can create work that advances good community relations and is both fun for the audience and creatively challenging and fulfilling for artists.

For more information, <http://www.queensmuseum.org/blog/>, <http://www.socialpracticequeens.org/2012/08/29/celebrating-the-new-corona-plaza/qma-art-worker/>

At its best, art in public outdoor places embodies the widely appreciated ideal of freedom of expression and spontaneity. However, such undertakings are often limited by the realities of government oversight and bureaucratic constraints, which either restrict its use or legislate public assembly. Artists and non-profits are often daunted or confused by the political and public landscapes they need to navigate to practice in public space, and many are unfamiliar with the agencies or entities under which purview for a given location or action falls. Other organizations discover challenges in figuring out how best to engage their work with local communities. Fortunately, artists and organizations have found innovative ways to address these challenges and even incorporate them into their work. A collaborative approach and inclusive spirit, along with persistence in overcoming setbacks, is key to their success.

Performances and events held in Corona Plaza benefited from the combined talents and expertise of artists; the community organizer, curators, and other museum staff; and community members. The artists and community organizer cultivated relationships and connections with local residents and businesses, while the museum had the institutional capacity and know-how to make things happen: it had liability insurance and relationships with the local police precinct, elected officials, the community board, and city agency staff.

## Downtown Art

### *Lower East Side, New York*

Having homesteaded and occupied an East 4th Street property for seventeen years, Downtown Art—a small arts organization in Manhattan’s Lower East Side—left their original home in 2006 as part of a cultural district plan. Occupying temporary spaces and managing a period of homelessness over the next six years, the organization recently acquired majority ownership of their future East 4th Street home. The building is being renovated with over four million dollars in public funding (from the City Council, the Manhattan borough president, and the city’s Department of Cultural Affairs). But renovations, under the direction of the New York City Department of Design and Construction, have been delayed several years beyond schedule, deferring Downtown Art’s permanent occupancy until late 2014 or early 2015.

Downtown Art’s artistic/executive director, Ryan Gilliam, is determined to keep her young company of teen artists fulfilling its mission of creating original theater, music, and performance events, so she set out to move her company’s theater productions to outdoor public space.

She first conducted research into city guidelines for events in outdoor public space—looking up rules for parades, street tours, performances, and other events. This information is available online, although it is time consuming to obtain, as it involves researching numerous city agencies and deciphering rules that vary based on the size and scope of the project. After discovering how much time and effort it took to obtain permits or get permission for space use, she decided to create work that would require as few approvals as possible.

Looking into examples from other fields, she decided to use small neighborhood tours as her model. She researched how they operated, which gave her guidelines on what she needed to know in order to implement her own work and also provided a template for how to present the project to others.

Gilliam’s years of working with artists have shown her repeatedly that “creativity can be spurred by limitation,” and she set out to be inventive within the restrictions of the company’s situation. She limited audience size to fewer than fifty per performance, thus avoiding adherence to rules for parades or other public assemblies. She and her troupe provided each audience member with an MP3 player so that the production would be silent and not bother merchants, neighbors, or passersby. They spent time



Downtown Art MP3 performance photo: Ryan Gilliam

getting to know each space and how to make good use of it, observing which spaces were crowded and which were underused, moving quickly through more congested areas and spending more time in places that were underused. When using public parks, they made sure not to interrupt or dislodge any ongoing activity. (This also meant planning backup locations in case there were unforeseen activities.) Although park rules might imply that a use permit is needed, they found that minimal time and lack of interruption made it possible to use space without a problem. Over the past four years, Downtown Art has staged fifty performances in the streets of the Lower East Side.

Downtown Art is a good example of how, regardless of size, scale, and capacity, it is possible to create exciting and creative work in outdoor public space. Even with limited resources, by being adaptable, inventive, and collaborative in their approach, artists and organizations can achieve wonderful results.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ART USES IN PUBLIC OUTDOOR SPACE

New York City abounds with opportunities for creating unique arts spaces and offering performances in public outdoor spaces. But it also presents many challenges, including a lack of transparency or easily accessible information from public agencies and no formula or overarching policy on how and by whom space can be used. What policies do exist tend to be universalized for a large scale rather than being tailored to a community-based model that would support small grassroots groups.

The large public agencies that oversee programs using public space or that manage access to public space have their own challenges. Limited staff have to respond to a high volume of inquiries and requests for using public space. They are held responsible for a variety of liability issues—from concerns of neighboring residents or business owners to potential damage to property, logistical inconvenience (such as in closed off streets and changed bus routes), and noise issues—which often makes government entities wary of involvement in risky projects. Finding ways to streamline public processes and provide helpful information in a centrally located,

easily accessible way could lessen the load of agencies that provide oversight while empowering and enabling a more diverse range of arts practitioners to contribute to the public square.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS

**Open a forum to discuss potential changes to city policies that would create more opportunities and access for arts in public spaces.**

- 1. Create a multiagency task force or working group** composed of representatives from agencies involved in overseeing use of outdoor space or funding art in public spaces (e.g., the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, the Department of Cultural Affairs [DCA], and the Metropolitan Transit Authority [MTA]) and elected officials who support the arts, along with artists or art organizations, to discuss current policies and possible policy changes. A university partner that could provide research and informational resources

would also be helpful. To be effective, the group needs to include members who have the power or expertise to actually institute specific changes or create new programs.

2. **Suggest and examine potential changes in current policies to make them more arts friendly.**
3. **Minimize or streamline processes** that apply unwieldy event guidelines and restrictions to small community gatherings or that prohibit or limit gatherings in public parks or other spaces.
4. **Review and examine the mechanisms for transferring property** (e.g., land banks); reusing space, such as former brownfields; or creating space-sharing agreements between private and public sector parties.
5. **Develop opportunities for more periodic, informal gatherings on selected topics and projects.** For example, in Seattle, Washington, a cross section of business leaders, developers, and nonprofit organizations in several sectors meet regularly for brown bag lunches to discuss area developments with a focus on green practices. While not centered on culture per se, these gatherings have led to support for and the development of some innovative programs promoting the arts, such as Garageband, a project to provide vacant garage space to musicians needing rehearsal space (<http://www.greatcity.org>).

**Provide more user-friendly, transparent, and easily accessible information about public agency roles, rules, and processes for using or gaining access to public outdoor space.**

1. **Create an online resource that provides basic guidelines, permits, and other stipulations for all agencies that oversee public outdoor space** (Department of Transportation, Parks and Recreation, DCA, MTA, etc.) Include up-front eligibility details for programs, so grassroots or small organizations

can easily find out if they have the budgets or resources necessary so they may participate.

2. **Include attachments of registration forms or applications and provide useful links.**
3. **Provide space in which practitioners or artists can post comments and suggestions.** To protect against backlash from negative comments, identified not by name but by a broad, general description (e.g., “performance group in Queens,” “dance company in the Bronx”).
4. **Have a channel of input from the arts field or from someone outside the hermetically contained world of policy makers** to ensure that information provided is user friendly, straightforward, and jargon free.

**Create and distribute inclusive guides to public art throughout the city.**

**Collaborate with MTA, DCA, or NYC & Co. to create and distribute such items as printed maps and online apps that provide information on programs, events, and travel to public art, and work with these agencies to make sure that guides that do exist include communities throughout all five boroughs.** Examples exist in cities such as Seattle ([http://www.seattle.gov/arts/publicart/walking\\_tours.asp](http://www.seattle.gov/arts/publicart/walking_tours.asp)), and Austin, Texas ([http://www.austintexas.gov/sites/default/files/files/Redevelopment/aipp\\_resourceguide\\_512.pdf](http://www.austintexas.gov/sites/default/files/files/Redevelopment/aipp_resourceguide_512.pdf)).

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ARTISTS/ PRACTITIONERS

**Provide more opportunities to share and learn from each other through online, print, and in-person learning communities.**

1. **Broaden the conversation to connect seasoned and emerging artists.** Artists and practitioners with experience in successfully designing and implementing programs or artworks in public spaces have an enormous

amount of information and experience that could benefit others. Some organizations or artists are already part of informal or local networks, but broadening the conversation to connect seasoned and emerging artists and organizations would be enormously useful for those seeking guidance, support, and a chance to brainstorm and problem solve on projects.

2. **Participate in Ning or other social media platform** where practitioners can post information and documents, weave networks, hold online forums and webinars, or arrange phone conference calls on areas of shared interest. This network could also provide an opportunity to post information about upcoming events, conferences, and publications.
3. **Hold periodic, in-person meetings or organize learning communities** for artists and organizations involved in or considering different types of initiatives.
4. **Generate user-oriented manuals** to maximize and help navigate existing resources, making information more user friendly and easily accessible. City Lore (<http://citylore.org/urban-culture/resources/street-performers>) and 596 Acres (<http://www.596acres.org>) offer examples.

### **Get written confirmation of rules or regulations.**

**While organizations can be good sources of information, often rules are different depending on the size and scope of a project or event.** It may be that smaller projects don't have to follow the same rules that larger ones do. It is therefore a good idea to double-check any advice by consulting written guidelines.

### **Be low impact and low maintenance.**

1. **Use good judgment to create work that engages but does not intrude on or inconvenience people in their daily lives.** Don't

dislodge or interrupt any ongoing activity. Get to know the space, and plan accordingly. Limit noise and general sound level. Clean up when you are done. The less that people can complain about and the less they feel intruded on, the better.

2. **Simplify or use models that minimize the oversight of public agencies.** If you are a small organization or group of artists with limited resources, consider creating something that requires as few approvals as possible to try to keep the project protected from unknown variables that can strain limited resources.
3. **Smaller entities should consider adding their work to an existing performance bill or collaborating with a larger organization** with more resources, familiarity with the location, and connections with the gatekeepers necessary to gain access to a given space.

### **Communicate well with the population that will be affected by your work.**

1. **Enlist allies, either in your local community or across sectors, to identify shared needs or concerns.** This is especially useful when addressing infrastructure needs such as increased transportation, improved lighting or signage, and other public safety or health issues.
2. **Whether designing a small-scale installation in one location or a community-wide project, communicate and provide information extensively in a way that enables the broadest level of involvement.**
3. **Meet people in local settings where they regularly congregate and live rather than just holding informational meetings or forums in one centralized location.**
4. **Acknowledge and address different issues and cultures that exist in different areas, and**



consider the needs, interests, and concerns of the community.

5. **Meet with local businesses and smooth over any potential problems.** Communicate with them regularly. Meet afterward to get feedback, and be responsive in future actions.

**Consider narrowing your focus to develop deeper connections and make a greater impact on one community.**

**For some groups, the aspiration for wide-reaching impact is met by the realities of how labor intensive and time consuming it can be to create and implement a program.** This is especially true for organizations with limited staff and financial resources. As staff at QMA learned, they worked more effectively, created better inroads, and saw greater results by concentrating efforts in Corona, Queens, rather than diffusing their energy to try to meet the needs of the entire borough. Community trust and neighborhood visibility also generated momentum for capital investment in the plaza.

**Be politically engaged and actively seek local support and cooperation.**

1. **Serve in public office, join community boards, or attend meetings** and cultivate relationships with community leaders.
2. **Meet with local elected officials** and convey how a project or initiative will have a positive impact on their constituents.
3. **Meet with agency representatives and highlight specific positive economic, creative, public health, and safety impacts.** Address and respond to any concerns or red flags that may be raised by your project (**such as potential liability issues, risks, and unforeseen expenses**). As evidenced by the experience of Socrates Sculpture Park, positive personal relationships with local civic leaders can build mutual trust and streamline the art delivery process.

4. **Through printed acknowledgments, publicly recognize help that you have received, and provide opportunities for supporters to make remarks before an event, participate in a ribbon-cutting ceremony, and otherwise be included in activities.**

## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: A CAUTIONARY TALE**

Years ago, a long-standing presenter of public art created a site-specific performance event as part of its summer series. Offered by a stellar group of Downtown Manhattan performers and musicians, the event was carefully choreographed for its setting, a large swimming pool in a city park in Queens.

On the day of the scheduled performance, during a major heat wave that saw the temperature soar into the upper nineties, artists and organizers arrived in the morning to find hundreds of local residents already in the pool. The surrounding neighborhoods are inhabited by largely working-class and lower-income residents, most of them people of color, and the local pool in a shaded park was their only means to escape the heat. Friction occurred as the predominately white group of Manhattan artists arrived and demanded that the swimmers leave the water in order to watch their performance. After some rushed negotiations, a compromise was reached in which half the pool remained accessible for swimming and half was used by the performers.

Although many present watched and enjoyed the performance, this event provides a powerful lesson about community engagement. Being sensitive to local residents, for whom open public space fulfills valuable community needs, will maximize productivity and fulfillment for all.



Corona Plaza, Queens photo: Neshi Gallindo

a NOCD-NY profile series



**look for:**

- adaptive reuse
- construction zones and vacant lots
- public outdoor space: short- and long-term
- publicly owned facilities
- religious spaces
- shared space