

**TESTIMONY**

**BY**

**ACTING CHIEF OF STAFF HARIS KHAN**

**NYC**

**DEPARTMENT OF SMALL BUSINESS SERVICES**

**BEFORE**

**THE COMMITTEES ON SMALL BUSINESS & CULTURAL AFFAIRS,**

**LIBRARIES, AND INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS**

**OF THE**

**NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL**

**WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 30, 2024**

Good morning **Chair Feliz, Chair Rivera**, and members of small business and cultural affairs committees. My name is Haris Khan and I am the **Acting Chief of Staff** at the **New York City Department of Small Business Services (“SBS”)**. I am joined today by **Deputy Commissioner Calvin Brown from our Neighborhood Development Division**. SBS’s mission is to create economic security for all New Yorkers by connecting them to good jobs, creating stronger businesses, and building thriving neighborhoods. Our teams work every day to make New York City the best place for an entrepreneur to start, operate, and grow their business. We are pleased to discuss the ways in which SBS supports public space activation and small businesses revitalization through our agency’s work.

During COVID-19, outdoor dining supported nearly 12K businesses, helping many survive the most severe impacts of the pandemic. Local businesses also benefited from patrons frequenting Open Streets, pedestrian plazas, public parks, and neighborhood shops. Under the leadership of First Deputy Mayor Torres-Springer and in collaboration with partner agencies, SBS delivered key initiatives in Mayor Adams’ Blueprint for Economic Recovery over the past three years.

We launched the **\$85M** NYC Small Business Opportunity Fund, marking the largest public-private partnership in city history aimed at supporting small businesses. The fund reached over **1K** businesses citywide, with **80%** identifying as minority- or women-owned, empowering diverse entrepreneurs across New York City. SBS also initiated the NYC Business Express Service Team which has saved businesses over **\$36M** in fines and fees. With support from the City Council, we implemented over 100 reforms to cut red-tape for small businesses by creating first-time warnings, cure periods, and removing outdated mandates, saving businesses over **\$8M** annually. SBS also introduced groundbreaking grant programs providing critical support to revitalize neighborhoods and business corridors in every borough.

Today, New York City has more jobs and small businesses than ever before, a record-breaking **4.7M** jobs and over **183K** businesses. Notably, one in every three

small business has opened within the past two years. Our city’s robust economic resurgence is supported by the Administration’s laser-focus on public realm improvements to unlock economic potential. Mayor Adams appointed Ya-Ting Liu as the city’s first-ever Chief Public Realm Officer, charged with implementing City Hall’s vision for accessible, clean, and vibrant public spaces that drives foot-traffic to small businesses.

In supporting these efforts, SBS works alongside her team and several city agencies including the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA), Department of Transportation (DOT), Department of Buildings (DOB), Department of City Planning (DCP), Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), and the Street Activity Permitting Office (SAPO). SBS also sits on an interagency capacity-building taskforce with Mayor’s Office of Nonprofit Services for city agencies that interact with non-profit organizations.

DCLA, led by Commissioner Laurie Cumbo, has an annual budget of **over \$250M** to support over **1K local organizations**. Many DCLA grantees leverage their funding to energize public spaces with vibrant events, such as the West Side Festival organized by the West Side Cultural Network in partnership with the Meatpacking BID. The Coney Island Mermaid Festival, another DCLA-funded event, attracts hundreds of visitors to the iconic boardwalk and supports businesses along Mermaid and Surf Avenues. SBS also plays a role in public space activation, not only as a funder for community-based development organizations but also as a connector, facilitator, and advocate for the needs of businesses across city government.

Our Neighborhood Development Division (“NDD”), led by Deputy Commissioner Calvin Brown, oversees NYC’s network of **76 BIDs** which themselves serve nearly **300 miles of commercial corridors** and invest approximately **\$200M** into our local economy. Over the past three years, SBS allocated **over \$35M in grants** to **over 100 community-based development organizations**, supporting over **88 public space activations** among other revitalization efforts. We are proud of this historic infusion, already resulting in the expansion of the Long Island City BID, the

creation of the Cypress Hills BID, with a future East Harlem 125<sup>th</sup> Street BID and a Coney Island BID approaching legislative review in the coming months.

Our grants also enabled community-based organizations to produce **39 Commercial District Needs Assessment** (or “CDNAs”) which study the existing business landscape of a particular neighborhood through merchant, consumer, and shopper surveys, as well as an in-depth inventory of streetscape conditions. Following the completion of these assessments, SBS deploys neighborhood-specific interventions through our grantees, our agency teams, and in coordination with city agencies. As an example, the Neighborhood Initiatives Development Corporation, an AvenueNYC grantee for FY25, will conduct a CDNA analyzing corridor conditions around the East Tremont section of the Bronx and providing recommendations based on community feedback.

This August, SBS Commissioner Gross also announced over **\$650K** in the first-ever **Public Realm** grants to ten community-based development organizations across all five boroughs. Our partner organizations will use this funding to develop place-based projects such as temporary lighting installations, public art, and wayfinding signage to direct visitors to important sights around the neighborhood. This work builds on last year’s lighting grants, which led to almost **\$1.7M** in funding for 17 organizations.

**In Murray Hill, Queens, Asian American Federation** launched their “Find Your Seoul” district marketing campaign with the activation of an underutilized public plaza on Barton Avenue. The Asian American Federation hosted cultural dance classes, a luncheon featuring local restaurants, and a public photo exhibition on their Open Streets and commissioned a mural reflecting the neighborhood’s Korean culture.

**In the North Shore of Staten Island, La Colmena**, one of the first Public Realm grant recipients, plans to paint three murals celebrating the strong Mexican and Italian heritage presence along Port Richmond Avenue from Ann Street to Hooker Place this year.



**In the Bronx, the 161<sup>st</sup> St BID and the Urban Design Forum** have transformed Lou Gehrig Plaza with seating, shade structures, and lighting. These additions allow local organizations to host free outdoor music performances and events, building a stronger sense of connection for residents and attracting more visitors to the neighborhood.

**In Brooklyn, Arts Gowanus and the Gowanus Canal Conservancy** will develop the “Gowanus Walkabout” program, a creative wayfinding program to promote and support local businesses and culture during a period of substantial neighborhood change. The project will utilize site-specific and digital signage designed by local artists to creatively educate and guide visitors around the neighborhood.

As you can tell from some of these examples, our FY25 allocation of **\$7.3M** in city funding provides critical support for cultural assets and revitalizes our commercial corridors. While most of our grant applications for this fiscal year have closed, our **Building Creative Capacity grant**, in partnership with the Van Alen Institute, has a deadline of **November 15th**. We encourage members of the committee to encourage non-profits in your district to apply.

Lastly, our programming goes beyond the public realm and supports community leaders themselves. SBS’s **Neighborhood Leadership program**, managed by Coro New York, teaches management strategies to emerging leaders. The program focuses on how neighborhood leaders can support small businesses and strengthen commercial districts through a cohort-model. Since 2011, SBS has trained 274 leaders and, in the past two years, expanded eligibility to include staff from cultural organizations.

SBS is committed to ensuring that small businesses thrive in every commercial corridor and is grateful for our partnership with sister agencies, local community-based organizations, and City Council in this work. We look forward to discussing ways to improve public space activation and strengthen our local economy.

Thank you and we are happy to answer any questions you may have for us.



**Asian American Federation**

**Testimony for New York City Council Hearing on  
Public Space Activation and Small Business Revitalization in  
Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts**

**Submitted to New York City Council Committee on Small Business  
October 30, 2024**

Thank you, Chair Feliz and Rivera, and members of the Small business and Cultural Affairs Committee for convening this hearing and providing the opportunity to offer testimony.

My name is Ahyoung Kim, and I serve as the Director of Economic Empowerment at the Asian American Federation (AAF). Our mission is to raise the influence and well-being of the pan-Asian American community through research, policy advocacy, public awareness, and nonprofit support. My Small Business Team's efforts have focused on empowering immigrant-owned businesses through merchant organizing and technical assistance, revitalizing commercial corridors, and fostering strategic partnerships to support the pan-Asian small business community in New York City.

Naturally occurring cultural corridors act as lifelines for immigrant communities, providing essential services, jobs, and cultural spaces. But they also contribute more than just economic value—they foster social cohesion and cultural exchange, enriching the fabric of our city. Investing in these districts not only drive foot traffic and revenue but also showcase the diversity that defines New York City.

**Murray Hill as a Model for Revitalization of Naturally Occurring Cultural Corridors**

Our work in Murray Hill, Queens, over the past three years exemplifies how targeted public space activation and commercial branding can drive both economic and cultural growth. With

the support of the Avenue NYC program, the Building Creative Capacity pilot, and DOT's Open Streets initiative, AAF launched efforts like the "Find Your Seoul" campaign to highlight Murray Hill as Queens' Koreatown.

A central element of this effort was our "Find Your Seoul" campaign, which highlighted Murray Hill as a cultural and culinary destination—branding it as the Koreatown of Queens. We created wayfinding tools, including maps of local restaurants and businesses, to help New Yorkers explore the neighborhood with a deeper appreciation for Korean cuisine. A professionally produced Shop Your City video further amplified these efforts, showcasing Murray Hill to a broader audience across New York City.

Our events<sup>1</sup> in the neighborhood such as the Murray Hill Food Tour and a variety of performances and public space activation brought over 2,000 visitors to the district, enabling them to learn about Korean culture, cuisine, and the evolution of the commercial district. These initiatives not only increased foot traffic but also diversified the clientele for many local businesses. Business owners reported seeing customers from different communities, reflecting the growing appeal of Murray Hill beyond the traditional Korean customer base.

Sophia Choi, owner of Jeunju Restaurant located in Murray Hill, said:

*"Since AAF started working in Murray Hill, my business has gained a lot of opportunities to be spotlighted in mainstream media. We also participated in 4 food tours AAF hosted in Murray Hill, as well as the Find Your Seoul Luncheon. AAF also helped me with technical assistance to update our online profiles on various platforms like Google Business Profile, as well as helping us maximize delivery revenue through consultation on how to set up our UberEats profile. AAF's efforts not only directly increased our business revenue, but I also see more diversity in the ethnic background of new customers. Before AAF's assistance my business mainly served the local Korean community. Now I have customers coming in from all parts of New York City and I am grateful for this tremendous support from AAF."*

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 1

Our work also had measurable economic outcomes. When AAF began these efforts in 2021, the vacancy rate in Murray Hill was 13.3%<sup>2</sup>. Thanks to our initiatives, along with merchant engagement and activation of public spaces, the vacancy rate dropped to 6.5% by 2024<sup>3</sup>.

Our success in Murray Hill demonstrates the importance of strategic, long-term investment in immigrant commercial districts that make up a big part of naturally occurring cultural corridors. Unfortunately, we were not able to continue similar work in Elmhurst, a community with enormous potential, and home to diverse communities. Our initial merchant organizing efforts in Elmhurst revealed promising opportunities, and many business owners we have built trusting relationships with in the past two years are still reaching out to our Small Business Team seeking for technical assistance and advice regarding business operations and quality of life concerns.

### **The Importance of Tailored Merchant Organizing in Immigrant Corridors**

Our merchant organizing efforts in Elmhurst during FY24 required a significant investment from AAF. While we were awarded \$75,000 in funding—below the \$100,000 maximum—we committed additional resources to maximize the impact of our work in this vibrant yet complex district. With the anticipation of building a long-term partnership with SBS to revitalize the Broadway commercial corridor, we invested heavily in staff time, outreach, and community engagement.

AAF went beyond the constraints of available funding to meet the unique needs of Elmhurst's small business community. For this project, we:

- Expanded outreach efforts in multiple languages to connect with diverse business owners across the district;
- Dedicated more staff time than the budget allowed, ensuring that businesses received the support they needed;
- Conducted one-on-one outreach to engage with business owners who could not afford to leave their stores to attend in-person merchant organizing sessions; and

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<sup>2</sup> Murray Hill Commercial District Needs Assessment:  
<https://www.nyc.gov/assets/sbs/downloads/pdf/neighborhoods/avenyc-cdna-murrayhill.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> According to LiveXYZ data, as of 10/28/2024

- Contributed prizes to the raffles for the Elmhurst Summer Fair to encourage more participation from local small businesses and community members.

While these efforts laid a strong foundation, it became clear that successful merchant organizing in immigrant communities requires time, flexibility, and sustained engagement with language access and a deep understanding of the local community. The cultural diversity and range of languages in Elmhurst made it essential to build trust through consistent, personalized outreach—something that cannot be achieved within a single fiscal year. Also, much of our additional work to build a meaningful relationship with local businesses and to raise awareness on the benefits of merchant organizing could not be reflected in the final assessment of the program because there was little room for qualitative analysis that highlights the value of trust and relationship built through this initiative.

### **Funding and Operational Challenges**

While SBS programs and city resources have provided valuable support, several operational challenges limit the effectiveness of public space activation and commercial corridor revitalization initiatives. Community-based organizations like AAF, which do not generate revenue from membership dues from small businesses or commercial property owners, rely heavily on city partnerships and available funding opportunities. AAF was not made aware of collaborative initiatives between SBS and other agencies, such as the Department of Cultural Affairs, nor related funding opportunities. Greater communication and cross-agency introductions are essential to help CBOs access the resources needed to sustain their work.

Additionally, bureaucratic hurdles presented significant barriers to activating public spaces:

- SAPO permits required for public space events often take too long to process, hindering the ability to plan and execute timely activations. This is especially burdensome for small nonprofit organizations and local artists who are not aware of the need to plan months in advance for bureaucratic processes and often mobilize their resources upon short-term community needs and interests.
- The insurance requirement for a SAPO permit can be financially burdensome for small organizations and local businesses, creating an additional layer of difficulty.
- To apply for Dining Out NYC, business owners must provide detailed architectural renderings for outdoor dining proposals, which are financially out of reach for many

mom-and-pop businesses. These requirements made outdoor dining structures inaccessible to the very businesses the Dining Out NYC initiative aims to support.

- AAF partners in Murray Hill expressed interest in hosting flea markets on Barton Avenue Open Street multiple times, but the concessions licensing process is overly complex and limited. To our knowledge, organizations cannot secure a permit for a single-day event and must compete for an annual permit, which is impractical given the limitations on committing to year-round programming for small local CBOs.

Further challenges arise from **spending eligibility restrictions**, which are often unclear during the contracting phase. This can result in misaligned expectations and missed opportunities. For example:

- Vendor/subcontractor registration requirements complicate the process of engaging and paying local partners, such as artists or microenterprises, limiting opportunities for community-driven collaboration.
- At the Elmhurst event, iPads intended for raffle prizes were deemed ineligible for spending under the grant, so AAF had to contribute prizes for this event from our own resources.
- For the Murray Hill wayfinding project, AAF wanted to purchase projectors for long-term use, but the funding allowed only for rentals—despite renting being more expensive and less sustainable.

Another challenge lies in media outreach restrictions. City grants such as the Avenue NYC grant program limits promotional spending to outreach within the local community. This restriction is counterproductive, as the success of commercial corridor revitalization efforts depends on attracting a broader audience and increasing foot traffic. Expanding the reach of promotional campaigns would maximize the impact of these initiatives and draw more visitors to local businesses.

### **Other Concerns: Limitations of BIDs and the new Building Creative Capacity Program**

While Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) contribute meaningfully to the development of commercial areas, there are inherent limitations in their ability to fully address the needs of small businesses, especially in immigrant neighborhoods. While many BIDs support the local economy, their reliance on funding and influence from commercial property owners often shapes

their priorities—sometimes against the best interest of local small businesses. As commercial districts grow, we frequently see a shift toward big-box stores and larger franchises where BIDs operate. This shift is, in part, a natural outcome of influence from property owners and success metrics for BIDs, which do not always align with the interests of small, family-owned businesses. As property owners benefit from attracting larger chains, smaller businesses face rising rents and find it challenging to sustain operations.

In addition, mainstream BIDs often lack the cultural understanding and language capacity needed to engage immigrant business owners effectively. Many small business owners who primarily speak languages other than English may not even be aware of BID activities in their area, as outreach is frequently conducted only in English. This language barrier leads to a disconnect from local communities. Without bilingual or culturally attuned engagement, many immigrant-owned businesses are left out of BID-supported programs and services. Consequently, these businesses and their community patrons often feel isolated and unsupported within their own commercial corridors.

The Building Creative Capacity (BCC) pilot AAF participated in during FY23 presented a promising model for overcoming these challenges by connecting AAF with local artists, cultural organizations, and smaller nonprofits. Through this program, AAF hosted community events celebrating Murray Hill's Korean identity, which not only attracted diverse visitors but also strengthened the sense of community pride. The pilot provided an opportunity for individual artists and small community-based organizations (CBOs) to navigate city processes—such as vendor registration—enabling them to access financial support and contribute to public space activation.

However, in this year's iteration, the BCC grant structure has shifted in ways that limit its effectiveness. While the original pilot empowered CBOs like AAF to play a central role in designing culturally resonant public programming, the current approach does not provide the same level of meaningful support. This restricts the ability to engage with the local creative community and impacts the long-term sustainability of these cultural initiatives for local CBOs.

To this end, we respectfully recommend the City:

- 1) sustain and expand investments in commercial corridor revitalization within naturally occurring cultural districts;

- 2) urge SBS to continue working closely with community-based organizations to ensure that these efforts reflect the needs and realities of immigrant businesses;
- 3) allow SBS to adopt flexible timelines and deliverables in their merchant organizing initiatives;
- 4) encourage different city agencies to work together to highlight immigrant cultural districts, and promote them as as destinations for New Yorkers to visit as part of a local tourism campaign.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. We look forward to continuing to work closely with SBS and other city agencies in support of naturally occurring cultural districts.

For more information, please contact:

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**Appendix 1: Public space activation activities in Murray Hill, Queens**



Open Street Open Mic Night - community karaoke event



*Find Your Seoul Luncheon*

Written testimony for Small Business Committee Hearing on  
Public Space Activation and Small Business Revitalization in Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts



Local district branding effort under *Find Your Seoul* campaign



Public photo exhibition, *Han in Town*, featuring local Korean business owners



Written testimony for Small Business Committee Hearing on  
Public Space Activation and Small Business Revitalization in Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts



Public movie screening of *Happy Cleaners*



Unveiling of public art installed in Murray Hill

*Written testimony for Small Business Committee Hearing on  
Public Space Activation and Small Business Revitalization in Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts*



Sidewalk Follies Circus at Barton Avenue Open Street



Small business online presence seminar





OATHAID technical assistance session



**Testimony of  
Michael Schnall  
Director of Government & Community Affairs  
Brooklyn Botanic Garden**

**New York City Council  
Joint hearing of the Committee on Small Business and  
Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup Relations**

**Oversight - Public Space Activation and Small Business  
Revitalization in Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts**

Good morning, my name is Michael Schnall and I am Director of Government & Community Affairs for Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify about the work Brooklyn Botanic Garden does to collaborative with our partners in Crown Heights and Prospect Park neighborhoods, and to bring and support arts and culture activities for the benefit of the surrounding communities and greater Brooklyn.

**HISTORY OF BBG**

Founded in 1910 on 52-acres of City-owned land, Brooklyn Botanic Garden is one of 34 New York City institutions operated in partnership with the City by independent nonprofit organizations on City property. In essence, the Garden is owned by the City of New York and belongs to the people of New York. With the City as a partner in capital and operating budgets, BBG has remained an affordable, state-of-the art resource. After the Coney Island Aquarium, operated by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), we are the most-visited cultural institution in the borough, welcoming nearly 900,000 visitors a year.

What's unique about the Garden, after its fine landscape and horticultural design, is its founding commitment, which put education, especially youth education on a par with horticulture and science. In its first two decades of operation, BBG evolved the property into a unique collection of "gardens within the Garden," including a number of gardens that were the first of their type in North America, such as the Fragrance Garden, designed for visitors with visual disabilities, or the Native Flora Garden, designed to feature plants from a 50-mile radius of Brooklyn in what was then rapidly urbanizing city. But BBG's historic commitment to putting education, especially education for children on a par with horticulture and science, is what truly differentiates it from every other botanic garden, and the first of its kind in a botanic garden in the world. That commitment can be seen today through its partnership with a high school in the neighborhood, and our pioneering work in [1000 Washington Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11225](https://www.bbg.org) | [bbg.org](https://www.bbg.org)

Community Greening. People, not just plants, put people and plants together, have always been what we do.

### **BBG'S COMMITMENT TO YOUTH AND COMMUNITY**

Children under 12 always enter BBG for free, something that's unique in the zoo, botanic garden, and aquarium world, and quite emblematic of BBG's founding commitment to youth environmental education. Each year, more than 150,000 young people come to the Garden, and many can engage with plants and environmental education year-round because of our indoor gardens and greenhouse classrooms.

Commitment to the community is visible in our ticketing approach: 20% of all daily tickets to the Garden are free to the public, no questions asked. Since we implemented the Community Ticketing program in July 2020, more than 300,000 guests have used Community Tickets to gain free admission to the Garden.

BBG is equally proud of its commitment to help green Brooklyn beyond the Garden walls: Through our Community Greening programs we teach urban gardeners, block associations, and civic groups, often supplying them with plant donations that are grown at BBG in our conservatory and nursery facilities.

### **WORKING WITH OUR NEIGHBOR INSTITUTIONS**

Together, BBG, the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn Public Library/Central Branch, Brooklyn Children's Museum, Brooklyn Academy of Music, and Prospect Park Alliance exemplify a naturally occurring cultural district. We are uniquely accessible from various forms of public transportation and walkable amongst all the properties. We collaborate on marketing and programmatic initiatives, like our summer Brooklyn Cultural Adventures Program (BCAP) and collaborative marketing between the Museum and the Garden, amongst the group, our staff and often coordinate our engagements with the community to ensure we're all on the same page with messaging.

Public events happen at all of these locations year-round, bringing in hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers to visit these jewels in the cultural crown of New York. We engage the surrounding community's small businesses by sharing information about our events and programming with community boards and local business improvement districts (BIDs), which in turn help increase our audience. And we're confident that these events provide "spill over" into the surrounding community, where our visitors are grabbing coffee, eating lunch and dinner, and perusing stores, before and after events.

As someone who has worked in the government, parks and cultural spaces of New York City for my entire career, I would be curious to learn more about what new Council-supported new initiatives could be developed, in coordination with Small Business Services and the Department of Cultural Affairs, both in the form of working groups and Council-funded initiatives, to bring cultural groups and New York's small businesses closer together.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any of your questions.



**Building for the Arts NY  
Testimony to the New York City Council**

**Public Space Activation and Small Business Revitalization in the  
Naturally Occurring Cultural District Known as Theatre Row**

October 30, 2024







# ORIGINS

**Building for the Arts** has been at the forefront of **creative placemaking** since its founding nearly fifty years ago. The organization was founded in 1976 as 42<sup>nd</sup> Street Development Corporation with a vision to **promote community renewal in Hell's Kitchen** by transforming the blocks west of Port Authority into a **vibrant and inclusive performing arts hub for the community**.

The organization's founding leadership included titans of New York City's preservation and civic development movement, such as **Fred Papert** and **Jackie Onassis**, who had just led the campaign to save Grand Central, **Dan Biederman**, who saved Bryant Park, and **Bill Ronan**, NYC's public transit visionary.

Building for the Arts became **the backbone of a transformational community movement**.



NYC Mayor Abraham Beame, Fred Papert, Jackie Onassis, and others, at the 1977 Groundbreaking Ceremony for Theatre Row.



# DEFINING A CULTURAL DISTRICT

**Working together** with Hell's Kitchen community leaders, the City of New York, and local arts organizations such as the Assoc. of Hispanic Artists, Black Theatre Alliance, and Playwrights Horizons, and with the support of civic-minded funders and patrons of the arts, we **anchored the transformation** of the neighborhood by developing the theaters, restaurants, and apartments known as **Theatre Row**, as well as advocating for other development, such as turning Manhattan Plaza into affordable housing for artists.



# THEATRE ROW'S FIRST OPENING NIGHT

In 1978, our efforts culminated in the opening of eight theatres, marked by a dedication attended by notable figures including board member Mrs. Onassis, Vice President Walter Mondale, and Mayor Ed Koch. Since that day, Theatre Row, as a place, has been Off-Broadway and independent theatre's **home on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street**. What's more, our audiences provide an **economic boost to neighborhood businesses** west of Port Authority.



*42d Street's New Theater Row Staging an Alfresco Celebration*



# AT THE INTERSECTION OF ART AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Building for the Arts sits at the intersection of art, small business, and real estate. Through our history as a community development organization, we maintain affordable housing and commercial units adjacent to our Theatre Row facility. This model supports our mission to expand access to the performing arts by providing creative space, learning opportunities, and hubs for artistic connection.

We pursue this mission through Theatre Row, which offers safe, professional, and accessible performing arts facilities as a service to artists and the community, through the Music and the Brain in-school music education program, and the activities of the American Playwriting Foundation, all of which are programs of Building for the Arts.



cir. 2002





## BUILDING FOR THE ART'S THEATRE ROW FACILITY

Our **Theatre Row** facility is a multi-theatre complex that serves as **an affordable home** for performing arts organizations and a **lively, accessible venue for diverse audiences.**

Theatre Row **supports actors, dancers, musicians, directors, playwrights, producers,** and other creators with five theatres, five low-cost rehearsal studios, office space, ticketing, box office, and production and tech support.

Among those who benefit most from our services are our **Companies-in-Residence**, currently including:

- Ma-Yi Theater Company
- Epic Theatre Ensemble
- Fault Line Theatre
- New York City Children's Theater
- New Light Theater Project
- United Solo Theater Festival
- Mint Theater Company
- Theater Breaking Through Barriers
- Pan Asian Repertory Theatre
- Keen Company



Company-In-Residence The Chase Brock Experience performs *Big Shot*.



Through Theatre Row, Building for the Arts can host and provide support for up to **fifteen or more performances per day.**

Each year we partner with and host:

- **300** performing arts groups
- **3,000** artists
- **70,000** audience members

This year we've offered **1700+ hours of subsidized studio rentals** to NYC performing artists and creators.





# THEATRE ROW TODAY

Today, Theatre Row refers to the five-theatre complex operated by Building for the Arts, but also **refers to the place**: especially 42<sup>nd</sup> Street from 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> Avenues, which includes our facility as well as Playwrights Horizons, Signature Theatre, the Laurie Beechman Theater, and Shubert's Stage 42, to name a few.

We are proud that our organization's **placemaking and community-building legacy** lives on as Off-Broadway companies continue **gather on Theatre Row**.

At our Theatre Row facility alone, we host 3,000 artists and **300 performing arts companies each year**.







# BRINGING THE COMMUNITY TOGETHER

We ask the Council to support Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts such as Theatre Row by helping us create

- Improved signage and wayfinding
- Bollards displaying the history of the neighborhood and the current cultural organizations and spaces
- Increased sanitation services







[www.bfany.org](http://www.bfany.org)

## THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

At **Building for the Arts**, we continue our decades-long commitment to **transforming communities through the performing arts**.

✦ **Music and the Brain** has expanded this mission nationwide, bringing the gift of musicianship to *every* student in over 650 under-resourced schools since 1997.

✦ Through the **American Playwriting Foundation**, we strengthen our support of new **imaginative, fearless, and relentlessly truthful voices in theater**.

✦ At **Theatre Row**, through subsidized space and residencies, we serve as an **incubator for emerging artists and companies working in NYC**.

We look forward to continuing the conversation on how our goals can align to **serve students, teachers, artists, and audiences** by providing creative space, learning opportunities, and hubs for artistic connection.

**Nicole Gardner, Director of Advancement**

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## **Testimony to City Council Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations and the Committee on Small Business**

*Submitted to the City Council Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations and the Committee on Small Business on November 1, 2024*

*Prepared by Melinda Wang, Research and Advocacy Manager of Dance/NYC*

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Thank you for your consideration of this testimony, submitted on behalf of Dance/NYC ([Dance.NYC](https://dance.nyc.org)), a service organization that reaches over 6,000 individual dance artists, 1,700 dance entities, and the many for-profit dance businesses based in the metropolitan New York City area. Its areas of service are of special benefit to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and Peoples of Color), immigrant, disabled, low-income, and small-budget dance workers. Through its action-oriented research and advocacy, Dance/NYC seeks to represent and advance the interests of the dance field. It embeds the values of justice, equity, and inclusion into all aspects of its operations and frames the following requests through the lens of those values.

In New York City, we know that **arts and culture are crucial to building flourishing and just local economies**. Small Business Services already recognizes this, supporting public art and community festivals as ways to bring vitality and economic activity to neighborhoods. Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts NY do excellent work to demonstrate how the organic, local creative assets in a community flourish when they are empowered with self-determination and cross-sector partnerships.<sup>1</sup> **As many of our colleagues shared during the hearing, arts and culture create the conditions for healthy economies by driving foot traffic and encouraging local spending.**<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts NY, Key Learnings Reimagining New York City: Cultivating Neighborhood Networks  
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56a13fbbbe7b9646c1decb1f/t/66f701341ba9ce103d722195/1727463732325/Longer+version+Lessons+Learned.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Center for an Urban Future, Big Ideas to Help NYC Thrive in a Post-Pandemic Economy  
<https://nycfuture.org/research/big-ideas-to-help-nyc-thrive>

**Dance, in particular, is a key part of thriving community life.** Dance/NYC's landmark report, *State of NYC Dance 2023: Findings from the Dance Industry Census*, envisions dance as a vibrant and diverse ecosystem that strengthens the local fabric of civic life. Dance workers are deeply embedded in their communities, with 28% of dance workers also working in education, 23% in healthcare and wellness, and 19% in leisure and hospitality. Supporting their livelihoods in dance allows them to continue to support our broader communities through their work in vital industries. Similarly, we found that dance programming takes place across a wide variety of settings, including theaters, community centers, educational sites, faith institutions, studios, and more.<sup>3</sup>

**Yet, the dance industry continues to struggle.** Dancers and choreographers, on average, earn just \$23,000 a year from dance, and \$39,500 total. Immigrant and transgender/gender-expansive (TGE) dance workers earn even less. 40% of dance organizations classify their financial health as weak or very weak, and 56% do not hold a reserve or savings.<sup>3</sup> **For these reasons, Dance/NYC urges the City to continue to support dance and culture as a way to support neighborhood culture and economies. In particular, we call for:**

- **Accessible, equitable, and affordable space for dance in local neighborhoods**
- **Support for public dance engagements**
- **Expansion of small business support for neighborhood-based cultural organizations**

### **Affordable, equitable, and accessible space for dance in local neighborhoods**

In our survey, **both organizations and individuals named space for dance as one of their top five needs.** For organizations, this was their number two need. Additionally, only 15% of entities own their place of business, while 45% rent, leaving dance entities vulnerable to rising rents and affordability concerns.<sup>3</sup> Dance organizations are struggling to find and continue to afford space. **Dance/NYC supports measures to**

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<sup>3</sup> State of NYC Dance 2023: Findings from the Dance Industry Census.  
[https://hub.dance.nyc/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/State-of-NYC-Dance-2023-Report-FINAL-23\\_12\\_11\\_ACC.pdf](https://hub.dance.nyc/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/State-of-NYC-Dance-2023-Report-FINAL-23_12_11_ACC.pdf)

**promote affordability, including commercial rent stabilization and the conversion of vacant or abandoned spaces into affordable cultural venues.** These affordability measures are key to preserving neighborhood culture and making sure the vital cultural assets in a community can stay there. Given that two-thirds of dance entities note that their headquarters are also a home, it is important to note that affordable space to dance and conduct business also means affordable space to live.<sup>3</sup>

**Support for cultural space should prioritize equity and accessibility. Working class, immigrant, and BIPOC neighborhoods across New York City deserve cultural spaces that reflect their own needs and values.** Cultural impact planning like that done by London's Culture at Risk Office can serve as a model of this. Our report found that 39% of dance workers commute 45 or more minutes to and from dance work. Dance workers should be supported in presenting vital programming in their own local communities. In addition, we found that 30% of dance entities do not provide accessibility accommodations.<sup>3</sup> **Dance/NYC supports capital funding for accessibility enhancements for dance spaces,** including minor changes like adding handrails or power doors, as well as major changes like adding elevators or making adjustments to landmarked buildings.

### **Support for public dance engagements**

Existing city programs for public art, like the City Canvas program, increase social vibrancy, community engagement, and economic returns. Dance and other movement- and performance-based arts also serve as important parts of public engagement. **53% of individuals and 65% of entities in dance conduct programming in public space.**<sup>3</sup> These public space activations keep people in their local communities and highlight diverse movement forms. They can serve to build and maintain the existing cultural fabric of local communities. Dance/NYC supports the work of programs like SBS's Open Streets Grant to support the activation of streets, parks, and plazas with cultural and community programming. It is also vital to build structures for public space activation in neighborhoods without Business Improvement Districts.

### **Expansion of small business support for neighborhood-based cultural organizations**

Small Business Services' Public Realm Grants have been instrumental in supporting cultural placemaking and economic revitalization. By funding community-based development organizations to conduct programming in their own neighborhoods, they emphasize the importance of neighborhood self-determination and community and business collaboration. It is important to note that dance and other cultural organizations serve as important community builders that can do this work. **Small Business Services should recruit and expand support for neighborhood-based cultural organizations to submit proposals. It should expand the Building Creative Capacity programs to encourage partnership between arts and non-arts organizations, using cultural organizing as a way to support broader community well-being.**

Lastly, it is important to recognize that dance and other cultural organizations are important small businesses and need greater access to small business resources. Conducting outreach to arts and cultural organizations and providing greater navigation support would facilitate their use of vital Small Business Services resources. Additionally, 57% of dance organizations are 50(1)c3 nonprofit organizations.<sup>3</sup> **Expanding the eligibility of Minority and Women-owned Business Enterprise (M/WBE) programs to nonprofits would provide vital support to the dance ecosystem.**

**Our city's diverse neighborhoods deserve the support and resources necessary to build local economies that work for the residents, businesses, and cultural workers rooted there.** Protecting arts and culture so that local cultural assets can stay in the neighborhood, bring vitality to public commercial and community spaces, and thrive through cross-sector partnerships and small business support is key. We thank you for your consideration of dance's cultural and economic impact as we move forward.

**New York City Council Committee on Small Business Services and Committee on  
Cultural Affairs**

**Wednesday, October 30th, 2024**

**Oversight Hearing: Public Space Activation and Small Business Revitalization in  
Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts**

**Elana Ehrenberg, Design Trust for Public Space**

My name is Elana Ehrenberg, and I'm the Director of Strategic Partnerships at Design Trust for Public Space, an almost 30 year old non-profit dedicated to enlivening New York City's shared civic spaces to create a vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable city. I would like to thank Chair Feliz and Chair Rivera and both the Committee on Small Business Services and the Committee Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations for holding this oversight hearing. I am grateful for the opportunity to submit testimony today.

As mentioned by Chair Rivera, in 2021 Design Trust for Public Space, supported by a grant from NYC Department of Small Business Services, launched *Neighborhood Commons: Plazas, Sidewalks & Beyond*, a project that explored opportunities to improve the current model of public space governance and programming in commercial corridors. With pandemic-era regulations and programs constantly evolving, this was an ideal time to think outside the box for assessing how our public spaces were managed. Our team of Fellows interviewed dozens of public space managers, BIDs, community organizations, and local businesses to gather insight on the challenges they faced with funding and navigating city regulatory processes. We journey mapped user experiences when applying for permits and researched what other cities were doing differently. We found that the public-private partnership model that has, for decades, been the default model for the management of public spaces in our commercial districts is fraught with challenges—particularly in outer-borough commercial districts with no existing place-based management organization or districts with limited organizational capacity.

We are encouraged to see SBS launch its Public Realm grants in FY25 as this was one of the recommendations that would unlock resources for community partners and allow for more creative and resilient spaces supporting our small businesses. In the future, we would love to see these types of grants expand so that coalitions of partners can apply for funding in areas where there is not one single entity managing public spaces. In many underserved communities, local organizations often have mixed levels of funding, resources, skill sets, or insurance coverage that need to be brought together to ensure

diverse and culturally responsive programming. This would allow for more artists and cultural organizations access to funding that they would not normally be eligible to apply for on their own and encourage coalition building of organizations strengthening neighborhood networks.

Cultural organizations and artists in historically marginalized and underinvested neighborhoods are critical anchors in the city's short and long-term health. Our Turnout NYC project activated public spaces with community partners in all five boroughs using a kit-of-parts, designed by our partners at SITU, for outdoor performances. Almost more valuable though was the fact that Turnout included soft infrastructure to support cultural community partners with the permitting, invoicing, marketing, and promotion necessary to activate public spaces in neighborhoods across the city. Cultural organizations and artists are in fact small businesses in their own right and deserve the same level of investment and resources that our for-profit business community receives through other SBS programs.

Insurance and indemnification is still by far the biggest hurdle for small organizations' ability to engage and activate the public realm. In May 2024, the administration and SBS announced a new "Trusted Partners" program to help small BIDs with rising costs of insurance. While this is a great first step, we think this program could be expanded further or become a grant opportunity for cultural and other place-based organizations to tap into as well. Removing the silos between agencies when promoting these opportunities is necessary to better serve both our cultural communities and our small businesses.

Design Trust is committed to continuing the work to cut bureaucratic red tape for a more open and inclusive public realm. With our latest project, Untaped, we're building off our earlier projects to unlock the potential of public spaces as vibrant venues for the arts and local culture. Thank you for your time and consideration today. We look forward to working with the members of these committees, SBS and DCLA, to ensure cultural programming in New York City streets, sidewalks, parks, and plazas is accessible to everyone.

# **DOWNTOWN BROOKLYN ARTS ALLIANCE**

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November 2, 2024

To: Committees on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations and  
Committee on Small Business

From: Beth Allen, Executive Director, Downtown Brooklyn Arts Alliance

Re: October 30, 2024 Hearing on Public Space Activation and Small Business Revitalization  
in Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify about Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts (NOCDs) as they relate to public space activation and small business revitalization. I write as the Executive Director of the Downtown Brooklyn Arts Alliance, a network of 60 non-profit arts and cultural organizations in greater Downtown Brooklyn. In my years of doing this work, I can think of no other City Council hearing that is more relevant to my organization's work, and at the same time highlights the issue that non-profit arts organizations are largely not benefiting from the programs as structured to foster public space activation and support small businesses in our NOCD.

Downtown Brooklyn is by and large a Naturally Occurring Cultural District (and I believe the largest NOCD in the outer Boroughs). While the artistic lineage of our community goes much further back and includes an especially rich history of civil-rights era cultural activity, there was a large influx of artists and arts organizations that gravitated to Downtown Brooklyn in the 1990s-2000s because of a combination of cheap space and favorable zoning. There has been some larger-scale civic investment, most recently the Bloomberg administration's capital investment in cultural space, but our community and the DBAA cohort continues to be dominated by smaller and artist founded organizations. The majority of our 62 organizations are artist-led; most are quite small and very notably serve a wide variety of community needs. DBAA organizations are especially defined by the quality and innovation in arts education on offer, using artistic knowledge to support and empower low income and underserved individuals and communities, and their demographic diversity.

As the subject of the hearing is the relationship between the arts and economic and community development initiatives and we're here with SBS, I want to talk about our work at DBAA. DBAA was formed initially as a volunteer-run coalition of 12 non-profit arts and cultural organizations when the rezoning of Downtown Brooklyn began in 2010. A key impetus for our founding was for the arts to have a voice in economic development and urban planning conversations that were happening at neighborhood BIDS and larger non-profit identities such as Universities (NYU, LIU, and others), hospitals, and parks at that time. The prompt for DBAA's founding was the

realization that it was only the larger (and at the time, White led) organizations that were being invited into these conversations, and that the needs of smaller organizations, many of them BIPOC led and serving, and/or serving underserved and special needs populations in Brooklyn, were not represented or considered in these conversations. On a really fundamental level the reason why Downtown Brooklyn Arts Alliance exists is because the community organizations that SBS mentioned in their testimony as being the conduits for cultural funding were not responsive to the existing cultural community and moreover, that the cultural community understood this as a very obvious equity issue.

This continues to be a pain point for our community, and it is a larger structural issue: for all the talk of being supportive of including the arts as part of economic and community development initiatives, what is largely being asked is for the arts to support economic development and community building. There is very little actual investment that supports the well-being of arts non-profits. What we have found in Downtown Brooklyn is that everyone is very interested in touting the neighborhood as culturally rich to prospective residents, businesses, and tourists, but less interested in initiatives that drive participation and support for local arts non-profits, and when there is, it is geared toward the largest and best resourced among us. So... we're trying to build the type of partnerships and programming initiatives that serve us ourselves but as a young grassroots entity that does not qualify for most sources of philanthropic or government funding we are vastly under resourced. I am the sole staff member at DBAA. Our work is not a great fit for DCLA funding because their guidelines largely exclude arts service organizations, and I have yet to identify any other NYC source that might support our work. Suffice it to say the priorities of our city council members and Borough President are generally not arts focused and the guidelines for discretionary funding are also not favorable to the type of work we do.

An example of this work is the pilot initiative we launched last spring, **Arts Month May**, designed to call attention to the diversity and vibrancy of the work our member organizations present each spring, and offer an annual platform for building relationships with community partners and reaching out to new arts audiences. For the pilot year of Arts Month May in 2024, we built a stand-alone website ([www.artsmoonth-dbaa.org](http://www.artsmoonth-dbaa.org)) that included a comprehensive programmatic listing of DBAA member events in May (over 150 unique listings; 300+ total events) that was searchable and sortable by multiple categories, from artistic discipline, to neighborhood, to descriptive tags, to cost. The complexity of assembling and publishing listings for organizations that are diverse in every way was the first challenge. Finding a way to make offerings that included everything from larger scale arts festivals (Dance Africa at BAM and Loud Weekend presented by Bang on a Can) to smaller productions and exhibitions, student recitals, galas, and public programs fit together on a website in a way that could be promoted was primary test for the initiative (it passed). We also secured a few partnerships to help promote the listings via local bids and other community partners (NYU, Art in Dumbo, etc.) that we hope to expand in 2025. In the coming year we are also focused on two key additional components: 1) producing promotional, editorial, and curatorial content that highlights broader themes that are present within the listings, i.e. provide context and entry points for those who



may not be regular arts goers or are interested in exploring a wider range of artwork but don't know where to start. For example: "here are five works to see this month that are focused on climate change (or racial justice, or reimagining classical works)" and 2) building out our "neighborhood guides" with the inclusion of small business listings focused on local restaurants and retail, and listings of projects by individual artists. We are also talking to Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce about sharing arts content with their new tourism portal.

Last year we spent \$3,500 on Arts Month May not including my salary – we paid someone to help with assembling the listings and for some modest design work and printed flyers – we are aiming to spend more this year, ideally \$10,000-25,000 (not including staff time). While the initiative has been met with great enthusiasm, there is not an obvious source of "start-up" capital. As the initiative is designed first and foremost in increasing arts participation, seeding longer-term community partnerships, and building local support for arts organizations, and not to attract tech companies to Downtown Brooklyn or drive traffic to small businesses, Arts Month May does not fit the purview of SBS or any economic development initiative that I have been able to identify. This is what I mean when I say that the arts are being asked to support economic and community development. There is no reciprocal investment in initiatives designed to attract corporate funding or private philanthropy to support equitable growth (or in fact, any growth at all) of the arts sector. While we built Arts Month May with the idea that it would eventually attract sponsorships, developing those relationships takes dedicated staff time that we do not have the funding to pay for while we are growing it. This too is an equity issue: we have seen it time and time again, where those who have independent wealth or connections are able to found initiatives like this, but for a diverse NOCD built without large-scale philanthropic, government, or corporate investment, it is very challenging to secure the scale of funding we need to grow this initiative. In the end, we are located in an economically thriving neighborhood – and this may be part of the hurdle – but unfortunately arts organizations are being mostly left behind in the explosive growth of Downtown Brooklyn.

While no doubt offering individual artists opportunities to show or create work in the public realm is one that we all support, especially knowing that there are few opportunities for artists to get paid fairly for their work and are an important source of income for many. But anyone who has ever worked with artists knows that a one-off commission is not going to feed a family and probably barely covers the cost of maintaining a studio. From my vantage point as someone who has worked in the field for 25 years, the lifeblood for artist careers in New York City comes largely from small and mid-sized non-profit arts organizations. These organizations nurture artists and give them space to create and present work. Our organizations also create the context necessary for that work to thrive. We nurture audiences for work that is not fully developed, is less commercial, serves niche and/or culturally specific audiences, and offers a source of community and connection for working artists.

I would be more than happy to talk more about the economics of running non-profit arts organizations and how the city can help ensure that our sector can scale and thrive. One clear and obvious way is to fund organizations like the Downtown Brooklyn Arts Alliance and the

others on my panel at the hearing, Fourth Arts Block, Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts, and Westside Cultural Alliance. Likewise, better funding our Borough Arts Councils would be a game-changer. While the idea of forming formal cultural districts (including through the NYS bill) that would allow for economic development funding to be allocated for the arts is attractive on the surface, we are deeply concerned that this money will be allocated to BIDS and similar entities. We have found in our community that the BIDS and Chamber of Commerce and other entities whose primary purpose is the growth of the commercial sector is very often not attuned to or aligned with the needs of arts organizations. Officially Downtown Brooklyn Partnership is the administrative home of the Brooklyn Cultural District, and there are numerous problems with the way this is structured. For starters, it includes only 8 arts organizations and excludes the 30 or so arts non-profits located within blocks of these organizations. Again, this was the core reason for DBAA's founding.

The idea in starting Arts Month May is part of a longer-term vision for building a community coalition comprised of the many from the civic, business, and educational communities in Downtown Brooklyn who recognize the contributions that the arts make to community well-being and understand the crucial importance of maintaining diversity and fostering equity in our sector as part of this. We have many potential partners and many ideas for how this can be achieved in the context of Downtown Brooklyn – there is no shortage of enthusiasm for our work by our growing list of community partners – but we need investment to realize our potential. Our residential population has grown by 22,000 residents (and counting) and numerous new businesses have been incentivized to move here over the past 20 years. We would love to see the same amount of consideration paid to growing the arts, but as it stands (I am fond of saying) **“everyone in our neighborhoods is talking about growth, but the arts are talking about survival.”** We are being dwarfed. We lost one organization this summer, New York Writers Coalition, who offered writing programs centered on elevating the voices of marginalized individuals including the formerly incarcerated and those affected by domestic violence, and nearly lost Brooklyn Music School that offers subsidized culturally-expansive music instruction for thousands of local residents annually. It sent a shiver through our cohort as many arts leaders are running organizations on very thin margins right now. Because of the combination of downturns in philanthropic funding for the arts and inflation many are fearing for their survival in the longer term.

The founding of DBAA was in no small part to ensure that the opportunities of being located in a growing neighborhood would not just be available to large and well-resourced organizations. This is not a given when the structures that incentivize real estate development, the development of retail corridors, and community enlivenment are not also designed to support non-profit arts businesses. We would love to see this change, and I look forward to working with whomever is interested in making this a reality.

Thank you again on behalf of the members of the Downtown Brooklyn Arts Alliance for the opportunity to testify!

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## **ABOUT DBAA**

Downtown Brooklyn Arts Alliance (DBAA) was founded in 2010 to connect local non-profit arts and cultural organizations to enable collaboration, facilitate joint advocacy, and address issues that affect the local arts community. Formed originally as a cohort of 12 arts organizations, DBAA has grown substantially to include 60+ member organizations.

DBAA brings together diverse organizations in the name of collaboration as well as equity. We often describe ourselves as part neighborhood association, part arts service organization, and part arts advocacy organization. Our work encompasses both nurturing peer relationships and connecting organizations to community resources and opportunities. We see ourselves as a “capacity amplifier” designed to bridge the gaps between small and large organizations and leverage our collective voice to encourage support for and participation in the arts locally.

For more information, please visit our website: [www.dbartsalliance.org](http://www.dbartsalliance.org)

## **CURRENT MEMBERS**

DBAA members include every non-profit cultural venue situated in the Brooklyn Cultural District, as well as many with administrative offices or that present programming primarily in our geographical area. Member organizations range from large and well-established performing, visual, and media arts venues, to smaller theaters and galleries, dance and theater companies, music ensembles, literary organizations, and arts service and arts education providers. DBAA Members include grassroots, community-based cultural organizations, immigrant arts groups, and groups led by people of color, and those that reach unique arts audiences.

Collectively, DBAA member organizations serve over 5 million people each year, employ nearly 4,000 workers, and generate over \$200 million in annual economic impact.

[651 Arts](#) • [A.I.R. Gallery](#) • [A.R.T./New York South Oxford Space](#) • [ActNow Foundation](#) • [The American Opera Project](#) • [BAM](#) • [Bang on a Can](#) • [BAX/Brooklyn Arts Exchange](#) • [Beth Morrison Projects](#) • [BRIC](#) • [Brooklyn Arts Council](#) • [Brooklyn Ballet](#) • [Brooklyn Conservatory of Music](#) • [Brooklyn Music School](#) • [Brooklyn Navy Yard/BLDG92](#) • [Brooklyn Youth Chorus](#) • [Caborca](#) • [CHIRON Performing Arts / The Phantastic Theater](#) • [Dancewave](#) • [Dieu Donn  Paper Mill, Inc.](#) • [DreamStreet Theatre Company](#) • [Emmanuel Baptist Church Jazz Vespers](#) • [Entertainment Community Fund/Mark O’Donnell Theater](#) • [Fiasco Theater](#) • [Girl Be Heard](#) • [Hedgepig Ensemble Theater](#) • [Hook and Eye Theater](#) • [International Contemporary Ensemble](#) • [Irondale Ensemble Project](#) • [ISSUE Project Room](#) • [Jack Arts, Inc.](#) • [Jamel Gaines Creative Outlet](#) • [Kumble Theater for the Performing Arts/LIU](#) • [Loading Dock Theatre](#) • [Mark](#)

[Morris Dance Group](#) • [MoCADA](#) • [Moving Mountains Inc.](#) • [New York Transit Museum](#) • [Open Source Gallery, Inc.](#) • [Poetry Society of America](#) • [Powerhouse Arts](#) • [Recess](#) • [Reel Works](#) • [Roulette Intermedium](#) • [Smack Mellon](#) • [StoryCorps](#) • [Tatter](#) • [the american vicarious](#) • [The Billie Holiday Theatre](#) • [The Center for Fiction](#) • [The Knights](#) • [The Laundromat Project](#) • [The Singing Winds](#) • [Theater 2020](#) • [Theater Mitu](#) • [Theatre for a New Audience](#) • [Urban Bush Women](#) • [UrbanGlass](#) • [ViBe Theater Experience](#) • [White Bird Productions](#)

# EL MUSEO DEL BARRIO NEW YORK

## Testimony to the New York City Council Public Space Activation and Small Business Revitalization in Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts October 30, 2024

Good Morning Council Members,

My name is Cynthia Carrion, and I am here representing El Museo del Barrio, an institution with over fifty years of experience in amplifying and celebrating Latino, Caribbean, and Latin American culture in New York City. We are dedicated to making cultural spaces accessible and vibrant for our community, from our location in El Barrio to larger NYC neighborhoods. El Museo has found public space activation to be a powerful tool for bringing our community together and for energizing local economies.

Our programs, including the annual Three Kings Day Parade, Dia de los Muertos, and our Uptown Bounce block parties, one of which this past summer was dedicated to the 60th-anniversary of Fania All Stars, have brought life and excitement to our neighborhoods. These events are not only cultural experiences but also economic drivers for local small businesses, drawing thousands of residents and visitors each year. Through open streets permits, these initiatives help connect residents and small businesses, creating a collaborative atmosphere that strengthens community ties.

While these events are impactful, they also come with unique challenges. For instance, programming in our courtyard—despite being a city-owned space—requires costly Department of Buildings (DOB) permits. These additional expenses, which can amount to several thousand dollars, limit our ability to activate the space fully and to direct more resources toward community programming.

To better support arts organizations like ours, I recommend the Council and relevant city agencies consider:

1. Reducing or subsidizing DOB permit costs for programming in city-owned spaces, especially for nonprofit cultural institutions.
2. Establishing a funding stream similar to the Small Business Services Storefront Improvement Program to help small arts organizations beautify and activate outdoor spaces such as courtyards and facades. This would allow us to improve the aesthetic appeal of our neighborhood and provide an even more welcoming environment for visitors and residents alike.

El Museo is committed to sustaining and expanding these community-centered initiatives, but enhanced city support would greatly amplify our impact. Thank you for considering these recommendations, and for your ongoing dedication to supporting New York City's cultural and small business ecosystems.

Thank you.



Cynthia Carrion  
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Arts  
Culture  
Community  
Lower East Side

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## TESTIMONY - City Council Hearing, Oct 30 2024

Good morning. I'm Ryan Gilliam, Co-Founder and Executive Director of Fourth Arts Block (FABnyc) - a team of artists and organizers working to preserve, strengthen, and grow the cultural vibrancy of the Lower East Side.

We were founded in 2001 by a dozen cultural organizations who ultimately succeeded in stopping our displacement from East 4th Street. Today FAB serves all of Community District 3, from 14th Street to Canal, Bowery to the East River. We have a membership of 45 cultural organizations. We organize community-wide events, produce public art projects, activate Open Streets, parks, and plazas. We work with neighborhood groups on local issues, document community histories, offer fellowships and affordable workspace for artists.

In New York City, in this ginormous metropolis, the cultural character of our neighborhoods is, I think, our saving grace. It fosters connection, allows us to live at a human scale. And yet the cultural character of our neighborhoods is also fragile – even consistently endangered. We all know what it is to lose what makes a place dear to us, what makes it special, what makes it specific. In the Lower East Side, sadly, we have some expertise in understanding that dynamic.

How do you prevent cultural erasure? And what does it mean to be a cultural organizer? FAB is still rare as an organization focused on the cultural well-being of a neighborhood.

So I deeply appreciate that SBS recognizes that culturally vibrant neighborhoods are where people want to be, live, shop, and do business.

I would like to see SBS

- Grow its Public Realm program with more funding and more cultural partners
- Rebuild its support for Open Streets and expand it to community parks and plazas.
- Support community incubators for cultural organizers with training, workspace, mentorship, and funding for pilot projects.

Thanks so much. I welcome you to visit us sometime and learn more about FAB's work in the Lower East Side.

Ryan Gilliam  
Executive Director | she/her | [ryan@fabnyc.org](mailto:ryan@fabnyc.org) | 917-587-6889 | [www.fabnyc.org](http://www.fabnyc.org)

Testimony for Small Business Committee and Cultural Affairs  
Committee join hearing on  
Public Activation and Revitalization of Small Businesses in  
Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts  
October 30, 2024  
10AM

Lucy Sexton  
New Yorkers for Culture & Arts

Thank you for hearing my testimony, and thank you in particular for this joint hearing of the Small Business and Cultural Affairs Committees. Cultural groups have long advocated for this inclusion of arts and culture groups AND small businesses as critical to our city's economy and to its quality of life. A thriving street landscape brings people together, it makes our communities safer, it improves mental health, civic engagement, and so much more. Data has proven that neighborhoods with strong cultural assets have improved outcomes in every measure of what defines a healthy happy productive educated connected community.\*

To state the obvious, when people are drawn out of their homes to see a show or take their kids to a dance class, they also visit local businesses, from diners to delis to retail shops. In the words of Andrew Rigie, head of the NYC Hospitality Alliance, “Our city's economy is an interdependent ecosystem, and there are few connections as strong as those between culture and hospitality. Invest in culture and we invest in vibrant neighborhoods and thriving restaurants.”\*\*

So how can we support this interdependent ecosystem? First by taking action to make sure that the rents for both commercial and nonprofit spaces do not skyrocket once they’ve created a great neighborhood. Commercial rent stabilization is long overdue; and tax incentives to allow cultural groups to rent and retain their spaces would be an enormous help. Increased funding for nonprofit culture is essential. In Rigie’s words, it is an INVESTMENT that will also help local businesses and economies.



You'll hear other suggestions in these testimonies, and I've included more in my written testimony.\*\*\* So I'll simply emphasize the fact that cultural organizations are also small businesses, whether they operate as a nonprofit or a for profit music venue or combination for profit and nonprofit dance studio like Art's House Schools in Coney Island. They should have easier access to support from the city's Small Business Services and participation in MWBE programs. Cultural organizations are suffering from disinvestment by philanthropy, and increased costs on every front.

The workforce's challenges also need to be addressed. Arts workers are also increasingly unable to afford to live here. The recent Comptroller report states that since 2017, the number of actors in the city is down 11%, dancers down 15%, designers down 17%. We need to address this immediately if we are to retain the culture and small business that power our city.

I'll end by again thanking these committees for raising up the critical issue of supporting both small businesses, cultural groups, and artists and culture workers that live in these

neighborhoods and make all of this possible. If we can support and strengthen this ecosystem, we can build a vibrant safe thriving city!

\*UPenn Study on Social Impact of the Arts

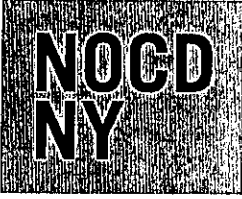
<https://repository.upenn.edu/exhibits/orgunit/siap>

\*\* QUOTES FROM NYC BUSINESS LEADERS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE AND ARTS

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1oFTXOsXvJikyeQPKUsZnNaGO9dbNCsHlkRku-oQZDIU/edit?usp=sharing>

\*\*\*suggestions for strengthening NOCDs from participants at Culture@3

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/159w1GwfbeIYfOXVkxscXCDfPp6jIIn1tC-vo3y-cQi0/edit?usp=sharing>



## **Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts NY**

Testimony for the Joint hearing of the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup Relations and the Committee on Small Business about Public Space Activation and Small Business Revitalization in Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts, October 30, 2024

I'm Caron Atlas and I direct the citywide alliance Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts NY (NOCD-NY).

NOCD-NY is a citywide alliance of cultural networks and community leaders that have joined together to revitalize New York City from the neighborhood up. We increase the visibility of community-based work, facilitate peer learning, and advocate for and carry out cross sector collaborations, including public housing, neighborhood planning, and public health.

Our asset-based approach recognizes the essential role of arts and culture in our communities and the importance of working across communities to make citywide change. Our shared values, including equity, racial justice, collaboration, self determination, and the importance of place, inform our programs and keep our network strong.

NOCD-NY came together in response to the vision, sustained needs, and creative resilience of NYC communities. It was initiated in the wake of the 2009 economic crisis, when a national group of artists, educators, activists, and policymakers came together to develop an affirmative framework and compelling vision for how arts and culture can be integrated in community recovery and transformation. In response, we refined the concept of naturally occurring cultural districts (NOCDs)—local clusters of creative assets that are organic, dynamic, and responsive to the unique contexts of their communities. We drew on Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP)'s research about natural cultural districts and civic clusters.

Naturally occurring cultural districts flourish with community self determination, strong cultural hubs and neighborhood networks, sustained cross sector partnerships, leadership development, opportunities for peer learning, access to affordable space, animated public space without barriers to participation, progressive policies that further equity, and long term flexible funding.

I would like to share with you two of our recent citywide programs: Cultivating Neighborhood Networks and Reimagining NYC.

For our **Cultivating Neighborhood Networks** project, we joined with neighborhood partners across NYC to learn about how networks and cultural hubs that make up naturally occurring cultural districts strengthen cultural ecosystems and further social impacts, especially in resilience to and recovery from the pandemic. This included participatory action research (PAR) in five neighborhoods Lower East Side, Manhattan; Kensington, Los Sures, and Fort Greene, Brooklyn; and Hunts Point South Bronx. Learnings are shared through reports, case studies, oral histories, essays, exhibitions, events, toolkits, and an annotated bibliography. You can find them on our project website here:

<https://www.nocdny.org/cultivating-neighborhood-networks>

We are also working with Greater than the Sum to develop a dynamic network map focused on community culture and cross sector collaboration in our city. Goals for the map include raising the visibility of community culture, facilitating relationships, sharing resources, and supporting organizing and advocacy.

Our **Reimagining New York City** initiative furthers NYC's ability to heal, recover, and transform by incorporating the wisdom, imagination, and creative practices of community cultural organizations, artists, and neighborhood residents in decision making and transformative change. We engaged New Yorkers in visioning sessions and learning exchanges on topics including storytelling in crisis, solidarity economies, climate justice, places of belonging and antidisplacement strategies, open space, public housing, undoing racism and more. Included with this testimony is a full list of Reimagining New York City recommendations shaped through this process, which are organized in areas including: Thriving Neighborhoods, Civic Participation and Transformative Partnerships, and Just and Equitable Support Systems. You can also find them here: <https://www.nocdny.org/reimagining-new-york-city-policy-recommendations>

**Recommendations relevant to this hearing include:**

- Support the cultural hubs and networks that strengthen our communities. This includes recognition and dedicated funding for naturally occurring cultural districts (NOCDs). A community cultural hub funding program with long-term public and private support could play a critical role in strengthening cultural hubs and their holistic and sustained commitments to their communities.
- Center community self-determination and decision making in the design, development, management, and programming of public spaces. Recognize the nuances and multiple perspectives of the diverse groups who make up a community, including both the people who currently use a space and those who have yet to feel welcome there.
- Proactively increase equity by resourcing groups who have historically had little access to public space, addressing barriers to participation. Recognize and support community based forms of cultural infrastructure in addition to BIDS.

*An example is the support NOCD-NY receives in support of the Kensington Cultural Council, which is made up of small cultural organizations serving immigrant communities in Kensington, Brooklyn. KCC serves as the programming partner for the Ave C Plaza. Support is made as a discretionary grant by Council Member Shahana Hanif through SBS's Neighborhood Development Fund. Another example is programming support for the plaza through DOT's Plaza Equity program. We are able to take on this role as a small group because of this support and because The Hort takes on plaza maintenance.*

- Reframe and promote affordability to show multiple forms of return, prioritizing community benefit over profit. Enact, protect, and expand rent stabilization for housing and commercial spaces alongside cost-reducing mechanisms to broaden access to long-term affordable cultural spaces.
- Reclaim/reuse vacant or abandoned spaces to create permanently affordable venues for cultural use. Facilitate the transfer of City-owned properties identified by communities for public use. Develop an easily accessible and regularly updated site directory of spaces owned by the City or designated for community use that can connect artists with neighborhood networks and hubs.
- Make it possible for nonprofits to register as Minority-and Women-Owned Business Enterprises (MWBES). They are often the best organizations to work as city vendors but without this status they are held back.

- Make City partnerships reciprocal, equitable, respectful, accountable, and use them to shift government culture. Respect and reward the leadership of community members and people working in the field. Support the work that is organic to communities rather than duplicating it through top-down programs. The people most impacted by policies—for example those that drive neighborhood displacement—must take the lead, drawing on their diverse experiences, deep knowledge, and nuanced experience.
- Include the cultural community and artists as part of a sustained and robust employment program, providing sustainable livelihoods, including benefits, to artists and cultural workers.
- Provide long-term, sustainable and flexible general support to the small-budget organizations and networks that are critical to thriving neighborhoods and a thriving city. Support groups in a manner consistent with their work. For example, allow organizations to pool their budgets in a single grant application to better represent their collaborative work and collective impact.
- Develop neighborhood-based, community-directed funding strategies that support collaborative programming across issue areas. The City should offer a singular application process that connects organizations with opportunities and agencies impacting arts and culture in a neighborhood.
- Increase access and transparency around City partnerships, listing all of the agencies that have cultural programs and providing clear guidance about how to apply. The City should prioritize supporting cross-sector collaborations through grants rather than contracts.
- Address the delayed decision making and funding that results in severe cash flow challenges and debt for organizations. This is a major threat to the field.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Caron Atlas,  
Director, Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts NY  
[caron@nocdny.org](mailto:caron@nocdny.org), 347-512-6612

**PAC ■ NYC**  
**PERELMAN PERFORMING**  
**ARTS CENTER**

Good morning. My name is Katie Hill, and I am the Assistant to the Executive Director of the Perelman Performing Arts Center, known as PAC NYC: New York City's newest performing arts center. Thank you to Chair Feliz, Chair Rivera, and the members of the Cultural Affairs and Small Business committees for this opportunity to share with you our mission to create community through the arts.

**Our Mission & Institutional Overview**

The Perelman Performing Arts Center (PAC NYC) is the last public piece of the rebuilding of the World Trade Center site. With our sister organizations, there is now a memorial to grieve the lives lost on 9/11, a museum to learn about what happened that day, and PAC NYC to celebrate humanity, contribute to civic healing, create connections, and look to the future. Even in a moment of great challenge and despair after those tragic events, leaders and the public knew the arts hold a unique power to bring people from various backgrounds and different walks of life together. Chaired by former NYC Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, PAC NYC realizes the vision of a multidisciplinary performing arts center in the master plan for rebuilding the World Trade Center that was released by The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation and the Port Authority of NY & NJ. Sitting on a natural hub, PAC NYC serves as a point of connection for 13 MTA lines, the PATH, and the NY Ferry. Lower Manhattan has always been a crossroads of the world and a cauldron of creativity. In fact, the first recorded performance of a play in New York City was just a few blocks from here on Nassau Street in 1732, but there has never been a major performing arts venue in historic Lower Manhattan. PAC NYC is proud to step into this role and be part of the rich downtown cultural community.

In September 2023, PAC NYC opened its doors to the public and has since welcomed over 200,000 visitors to our building. We create connections by cultivating bonds among extraordinary artists and communities, with exemplary performances, in active dialogue across the arts in our flexible intimate spaces, inviting conversation and new relationships.

Under the leadership of Executive Director Khady Kamara Nunez and Artistic Director Bill Rauch, PAC NYC champions daring works and diverse voices presenting a range of genres, including theater, music, opera, and dance. These projects focus on artistic excellence and speak to the pressing questions of our time while spotlighting diverse voices from all five boroughs of New York City and around the world, including those from BIPOC and immigrant backgrounds.

In its inaugural year, PAC NYC:

- Gave **discounted tickets to over 8,000 educators, first responders, and young people**, and
- Hosted **263 free shows on its Lobby Stage and outdoor Bloomberg Plaza, featuring 963 artists representing 38 countries.**

You do not need to buy a ticket to enter the building to experience the artistic events on our lobby stage or grab a meal at our restaurant, Metropolis by Marcus Samuelsson.

Our building has **three intimate, flexible theater spaces** which can be combined and configured **62** different ways to create **a range of unique experiences for audiences** and be **fully responsive to artists' creative visions**, and the Vartan and Clare Gregorian Lobby Stage. Our Lobby is a living room for Lower Manhattan where all are invited to relax, connect, and be inspired by what they see onstage. The Lobby Stage features a range of performances and events by local and international artists, Civic Alliance partners, and community-based organizations; family programming; cultural heritage programming curated in partnership with consulates from around the world; small to mid-size bands and ensemble concerts; and DJ + Dance Party nights.

Work on the Lobby Stage is designed to provide high quality art, while reducing the barrier to such art by making all programming free. Not only are these performances free to audiences, we create performance opportunities for established and emerging artists that allow them to in turn create opportunities for collaboration, multi-disciplinary learning, and thought partnership amongst their peers.

## **Community Partnership Through Civic Alliances**

In furtherance of our core mission, PAC NYC has launched a Civic Alliances program to deepen our relationships with area institutions, including the Borough of Manhattan Community College, the Lenape Center, the Center for Independence of the Disabled, the Interfaith Center of New York, and the New York Immigration Coalition. We have worked closely with these organizations to diversify the communities coming into our spaces as audience and as performers and shared the resources of the center to support our partners' missions. We have also worked with other neighborhood organizations including Trinity Church Wall Street, the Downtown Alliance, Chinatown Business Improvement District, Pace University, China Institute, UA3, and The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center to strengthen the cultural community downtown. We are committed to continuing this work and deepening our alliances with longtime downtown institutions.

One example of the success of these partnerships is that PAC NYC's production of *Between Two Knees* welcomed an audience that was 30% indigenous or Native American-identifying. Another example that hits close to home is that PAC NYC was honored to present an opera in May 2024 about the life and legacy of Manhattan Chinatown native Private Danny Chen. An example that is a favorite of our staff is the BMCC student public monthly showcases on our lobby stage. We provide students with professional performance experience, a stage run by union crew, and use of the same dressing rooms used by Oscar- and Tony-winning actors. The performances from the music and theater students are truly exceptional. They are the future of performing arts, and we are proud to be part of their present.

I invite all members of the Council to join us for our next free lobby stage performance. We at PAC NYC NYC look forward to continuing to build relationships with other downtown cultural organizations and retail businesses and contributing to the revitalization of the downtown area.



Hello, please see my testimony below for today's hearing:

Hello, thank you for the dedicated time to address this underrated topic. My name is Karesia Batan and I am the Founding Executive Director of the Queensboro Dance Festival. I also serve on our Queens Community Board 2 for land use and Chair the Arts and Culture committee. For the past 11 years, Queensboro Dance Festival activates outdoor public space throughout Queens. We provide free dance performances, classes, and parties presenting Queens-based professional dance companies of diverse cultures and styles. We also provide free career building tools and resources for Queens dancers.

Public space activation, small business, and NOCD's is an economic opportunity that needs more city attention and support, so neighborhoods across the city are empowered to utilize this model. We know that arts and culture programming not only generates income for the city, but it also improves quality of life, mental and physical health, and vibrancy of a community. When there is an NOCD, these benefits amplify and spread to nearby small business and public space.

An example of an NOCD in my district is 46th Ave in Long Island City, Queens. In a 5-block stretch, there is MoMA PS1, 46th Ave Plaza, local breweries and bars that feature live music, a bowling alley, CultureLab LIC that produces a wide range of free live performances and gallery shows across their indoor and outdoor public spaces; and the avenue ends at Gantry Plaza State Park at the waterfront. When an arts and cultural event happens in any of these locations, the entire area benefits because patrons also spend money at the surrounding businesses. Organizations like mine that activate all of these public spaces contribute to this local economic stimulation while attracting audiences that uplift our mission. It becomes naturally occurring economic stimulation.

We can lean more deliberately into this model at a city level in several fundamental ways: make it a standard recommendation by SBS for small businesses to collaborate with local arts organization, such as a public mural on their building facade or rolldown gate, displaying local artwork as decor, or a live activation inside their business to promote patronage. SBS and DCLA can pilot a joint grant that supports these types of partnerships, particularly in NOCD's. Local BIDS should also be supportive of this effort by providing for example logistical and marketing support. Council Members can commit to allocating a percentage of their discretionary budget to support partnership projects between small business and arts in their districts. This could also support activation in public spaces, from popup artisan markets to cultural celebrations.

It is also no surprise that especially in my district, we are in dire need of more open public space. Open public space doubles as arts and culture space, especially when thoughtfully designed, and serves as a gathering place that encourages spending in nearby businesses. Creating open space is one of the best bang-for-your-buck investments that our city council members can advocate for, and I push one step further and ask that there be legislation passed that any land development must require a public space component conducive to arts and culture activation, or an "art tax" be required especially near NOCD's, administered by the local BID or designated organization, earmarked for arts x small business collaborations. Thank you.

Karesia Batan



Karesia Batan | Founding Executive Director

[www.queensborodancefestival.org](http://www.queensborodancefestival.org)

[the physical plant productions](#)

Artist in District 26/Queens CB2? [List Event](#)

Zoom to a D26/CB2 Arts & Culture Meeting ([2nd Tues monthly](#))

### Dance/NYC and BLM

*The Physical Plant | Queensboro Dance Festival acknowledges that we are on stolen land, which was the traditional land of the indigenous Canarsie and Munsee Lenape People, who continue to live and work on this land to this day.*



P.O. BOX 150253  
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718-259-2772

PRESIDENT  
Francine Garber-Cohen

EXECUTIVE VICE-PRESIDENT/ SECRETARY  
Linda Cantoni

TREASURER  
Joseph Delfausse

OCTOBER 30, 2024 at 10AM:

Topic: Small Businesses and Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts

Dear Members of the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup Relations,

I am Francine Garber-Cohen, President and Producer of the Regina Opera Company, Inc. For 55 years, Regina Opera has offered year-round, fully-staged operas and ticketed and free concerts in Southwest Brooklyn.

Regina Opera performances are places where thousands of Brooklyn residents, many of them retirees, are able to meet friends - getting them out of their homes where many live alone. Regina Opera provides affordable entertainment for audiences who may not otherwise attend live opera performances. Some are on a fixed income and cannot afford the tickets to the Metropolitan Opera. But in order to provide these services, Regina Opera, like other arts organizations, needs increased support from New York City.

We at Regina Opera acknowledge that Small Business Services helps local Sunset Park and Bay Ridge businesses to survive and grow, and that the arts organizations in these and other neighborhood arts organizations are also small businesses. Regina Opera is just one of the small businesses that play a role in supporting local establishments.

The Company participates in many cultural events hosted by the Sunset Park Business Improvement District, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue Merchants Association in Bay Ridge, and Bay Ridge Arts and Cultural Alliance. These events bring new and existing customers to these neighborhoods and increase the visibility and income of the stores and restaurants. We now are requesting that the Small Business Services expand support for SBS Public Realm Grants and actively recruit more neighborhood-based cultural organizations like Regina Opera to submit proposals for funding.

Thank You.

## **Supporting Cultural and Economic Resilience in East Harlem NYC Council Hearing Testimony**

Goodmorning, Chair Feliz and Chair Rivera, and distinguished Council Members. My name is Michelle Cruz, and I serve as the Director of Economic Development and Government Affairs at Union Settlement. For nearly 130 years, Union Settlement has been at the forefront of providing opportunities in East Harlem. We offer comprehensive programming to help residents improve their skills and build better lives for themselves and their families. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today about the importance of supporting naturally occurring cultural districts and their impact on communities like East Harlem. Our neighborhoods are not just places on the map; they are living, breathing hubs of culture and creativity that have inspired, uplifted, and sustained generations.

East Harlem/El Barrio is an example of a naturally occurring cultural district, a place where culture and community are inseparable. This neighborhood, with its murals, festivals, and deep-rooted traditions, exemplifies the resilience and pride of its residents. However, what makes East Harlem unique is not just its rich history but its capacity to adapt and thrive, even in the face of economic challenges and gentrification threats.

Culture is not merely entertainment; it is a driving force behind our local economy. By investing in and recognizing cultural districts, we are creating opportunities to attract tourism, increase foot traffic, and elevate the profile of local businesses. The East Harlem Cultural/Theater District, a vision that Union Settlement has long championed, exemplifies how we can leverage cultural resources to drive sustainable economic growth. Cultural districts like East Harlem have long played a pivotal role in anchoring the local economy. Yet, these areas are also at risk as economic development pressures and increasing costs put their future in jeopardy.

As we move forward, we urge the Council to support the following measures:

- 1. Designate East Harlem as a Cultural District**

Legislation has been introduced on the state level by Senator Jose Serrano and Assemblymember Aileen Gunther to develop criteria and guidelines for state-designated cultural districts. We encourage the Council to adopt a resolution supporting this legislation. By doing so, the Council would empower agencies like the

NYC Department of Cultural Affairs to allocate critical resources, including grants and technical assistance, to local cultural organizations. This designation would provide much-needed funding to help institutions not only survive but thrive, reinforcing the neighborhood's unique character.

**2. Support Public Space Activation**

We need a continuation and expansion of programs like the Public Realm Grant. Public space activation can catalyze economic growth and foster community connections.

**3. Strengthen the Coordination between Cultural and Economic Development Agencies**

As outlined in the CreateNYC plan, collaboration between the Department of Cultural Affairs, the Department of Small Business Services, and other agencies is crucial. We need coordinated efforts to implement community-led economic development initiatives that prioritize cultural preservation and inclusivity.

In closing, with the Council's support, we can create a cultural district that is not just a collection of theaters and galleries, but a beacon of resilience, pride, and economic opportunity.

Together, we can ensure that communities like East Harlem, which have sustained and inspired so many for so long, are given the resources and recognition they deserve to continue thriving for generations to come. Thank you.

# WHITNEY

Whitney Museum  
of American Art

99 Gansevoort Street  
New York, NY 10014

whitney.org  
info@whitney.org

(212) 570-3600

**Testimony to the NYC Committees on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup Relations and Small Businesses regarding public space activation and small business revitalization in naturally occurring cultural districts.  
October 30, 2024**

Good morning and thank you Chair Rivera and Chair Feliz for the opportunity to speak about the Whitney's collaborations with its neighboring cultural institutions, nonprofits, and business community which have supported key institutional priorities including raising engagement with the Museum's free admissions initiatives.

The Whitney, a museum dedicated to the art of America, is located in the Meatpacking District on Manhattan's West Side. This neighborhood has always been a hub for culture. Artists have lived or had studios in the community for decades and continue to do so. Westbeth Artists Residence Housing, an affordable housing community for artists is located several blocks from the Museum. In recent years more cultural organizations have opened on the West Side, including the Shed and Little Island, cementing the neighborhood as one of New York City's great cultural communities.

The Whitney recognizes that being near other cultural institutions offers a unique opportunity to work together to advance member organization's missions and be of service to the community. The Museum has explored numerous strategies to do just that, and, in this testimony, I will touch on several initiatives.

In 2019 the Museum joined with its neighbors to establish the West Side Cultural Network, a network of 20 cultural nonprofits located between 34th Street to 6th Avenue to Canal. The Network meets monthly to explore opportunities to collaborate and produces the annual free arts celebration West Side Fest to attract new audience members to its institutions.

West Side Fest launched in 2023 to welcome New Yorkers into Network institutions for free or low cost with special programming, spotlighting the dynamic cultural community and encouraging engagement with local businesses. The inaugural event welcomed over 50,000 visitors to participating institutions. The 2024 event, which spanned 3 days, served over 130,000 visitors. West Side Fest was promoted by an integrated communications and marketing plan, which earned over 609 million media impressions in 2024 for the neighborhood. This event was made possible thanks to financial and in-kind support from the business community including Bloomberg Connects, Mercado Little Spain, Chelsea Market, Pier 57, Amazon, Wix Playground, and the Meatpacking Business Improvement District. The New York City Department of Cultural Affairs supported with event promotion, and the Network is grateful to its elected officials including Chair Rivera for joining the Network at a kickoff event to raise awareness about the event.

This January the Whitney launched two free admission programs to reach new audiences. The response from the public has been astounding. The programs include Free Friday Nights and Free Second Sundays and starting in December free admission anytime for visitors 25 and under. The Whitney is now free every Friday from 5-10 pm and all day every second Sunday of the month, complimented by special



# WHITNEY

A graphic element consisting of a thin black line that starts at the top left, goes right, then diagonally down to the right, then horizontally left, then diagonally up to the right, and finally horizontally right to the top right corner.

programming. The Museum has partnered with New York City businesses to celebrate these offerings and reach new audiences. This month the Whitney collaborated with Harlem Brewing Company for a special Friday night activation, and this summer the Whitney hosted a series of pop-up concerts inside the Museum with Brooklyn-based Public Records. Thanks to the free admission offerings enlivened through partnerships and special programming the Museum has seen a significant shift in its visitation. From January to June, the Museum's total audience grew, and is now younger, more diverse, and has a lower average household income. During the Museum's Free Friday Nights visitors are on average 60% BIPOC, an increase from 36% during usual attendance, and 10 years younger than typical visitors. The Whitney has welcomed nearly 200,000 free admission visitors since these programs launched.

The Whitney is located within the Meatpacking Business Improvement District and works closely with the BID. The Whitney is grateful to the BID for managing the Open Streets program for the neighborhood. Partnering with the BID has made it less time-consuming and significantly more affordable for the Museum to activate public space to offer special free programming. Most recently the BID supported the Whitney's request to close its street on Sunday, October 13th, to offer free public dance classes on Gansevoort Street with Ailey School faculty and Ailey Extension dancers as part of the programming for the October free Second Sunday. That day was the second highest attended Second Sunday event since the Museum's free admissions program launched, serving over 6,000 visitors, and shining a spotlight on the Whitney's current exhibition, *Edges of Ailey*.

The Whitney is fortunate to be located in a dynamic community that offers numerous opportunities for collaboration in service of the institution's mission and the City of New York. The Museum is thankful to its elected officials and NYC Department of Cultural Affairs Commissioner Cumbo and the agency staff for helping to raise awareness and engagement with Museum programs including the Whitney's free admission programs and West Side Fest.

The Whitney Museum is unwavering in its commitment to serve the citizens of New York and remains grateful for the ongoing support it receives from the City of New York and thanks Chair Council Member Carlina Rivera and Chair Council Member Oswald Feliz, Speaker Adrienne Adams and the New York City Council for holding a hearing on today's topic.

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For more information contact:  
Jane Carey, Director of Government + Community Affairs  
[Jane\\_carey@whitney.org](mailto:Jane_carey@whitney.org)  
301-775-9956 (mobile)

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

14

Appearance Card

[ ]

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Rosa Conway

Address: [Redacted]

I represent: Cottlin Park

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

13

Appearance Card

[ ]

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Beth Allen

Address: 41 Flatbush Ave Ste 1 Bk, NY 11217

I represent: Downtown Brooklyn Arts Alliance

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

[ ]

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 10/30/24

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Caron Atlas

Address: [Redacted]

I represent: Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts NY Brooklyn, NY 11215

Address: Same as above



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Appearance Card

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I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Katie Hill

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: Peperman Performing Arts Center

Address: 251 Fulton St.

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I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 10/30/24

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Nicole Gardner

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: Building for the Arts NY

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE COUNCIL  
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in favor  in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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Name: Lance Polivy

Address: 31 Chambers St

I represent: DCLA

Address: "



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THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

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I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: AH YOUNG KIM

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: Asian American Federation

Address: 120 Wall St New York, NY

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 10/30/24

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: CYNTHIA COLLIER

Address: 1230 Fifth Ave

I represent: EL MUSEO DEL BARRIO

Address: 1230 Fifth Ave, NY, NY, 10029

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THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. N/A Res. No. N/A

in favor  in opposition

Date: 10/30/24

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Calvin Brown

Address: 11 Liberty Plaza, N.Y., N.Y.

I represent: NYC Small Business Services

Address: "

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**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. N/A Res. No. N/A

in favor  in opposition

Date: 10/30/24

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Haris Khan

Address: 4 Liberty Plaza

I represent: NYC Small Business Services

Address: "

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 10/30

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Jane Cary

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: Whitney Museum

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 10/30/2024

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: RYAN GILLIAM / FOURTH ARTS BLOCK

Address: [REDACTED] // BKLYN NY 11218

I represent: FOURTH ARTS BLOCK (FABNYC)

Address: 70 EAST 4TH ST. NY NY 10003

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

*Appearance Card*

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 10/30/24

**(PLEASE PRINT)**

Name: MICHAEL SCHNALL

Address: DIR of GOVT & COMMUNITY AFFAIRS

I represent: BROOKLYN BOTANIC GARDEN

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

*Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms*

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

*Appearance Card*

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**(PLEASE PRINT)**

Name: Leslie Davol

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: Street Lab, Inc.

Address: 62 Degraw St Brooklyn

*Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms*