



**TOWARD A
21ST CENTURY
CITY FOR ALL**

**PROGRESSIVE POLICIES FOR
NEW YORK CITY IN 2013
AND BEYOND**

How Arts and Culture Can Advance A Neighborhood-Centered Progressive Agenda

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In his chapter on *Rediscovering City Planning and Community Development, Together*, Brad Lander calls for “a leap of imagination” to realize a vision for a city that cares about its neighborhoods, insists on equality, and embraces its civic energy. We clearly need such a vision and the imagination to get us there. Because cultural change precedes and embodies political change, arts and culture are an essential part of a progressive agenda. Drawing on the ingenuity in our neighborhoods and how their stories and relationships give meaning to our lives will help the city re-imagine itself from the neighborhood up. Change is about engaging hearts as well as minds. An agenda that doesn’t recognize this risks getting stalled before it starts.

Lander underscores the opportunity to reconnect neighborhood-centered community development with comprehensive planning that advances equity as well as growth. Here, we explore how to integrate arts and culture into the dialogue about neighborhood infrastructure, authentic engagement, and “organized compassion.” Three suggested programs bring this vision to life 1) Cultivating Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts, 2) Strengthening Cultural Citizenship, and 3) Animating Public Space.

1. Why Do Arts and Culture Matter?

Art is our human birthright, our most powerful means of access to our own and another's experience and imaginative life. In continually rediscovering and recovering the humanity of human beings, art is crucial to the democratic vision.

— Adrienne Rich

Arts and culture engage our humanity in creating the city we deserve. They are sources of empathy and connection, allowing us to see ourselves as part of a shared experience. Poetry, music, images, and stories speak to our deepest values, strengthen community identity, and support critical thinking and problem solving. We become the authors of our histories, unlocking civic energy. This is critically important during hard times when people can become isolated and disenfranchised.

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Creation is inherently liberating. It posits that something else is possible. For architect Teddy Cruz, “the future of cities is less about buildings and more about the reconfiguring of social and economic relationships. Artists can really contribute to that.” Milly Hawk Daniel of Policy Link, a national economic and social justice institute, recognizes the challenge of arguing for arts and culture when resources are limited. But it is precisely those times when they play a key role. “The propensity to see art and cultural expression as ancillary to survival makes us forget how essential art and culture are to sustaining community, history, and livelihood.” Arts and culture contribute to the vitality of our neighborhoods, “full of character, vitality, open to others and otherness, pulsating with poetry,” as photographer Jaime Permeth puts it. But they can also contribute to a city for the few, furthering a commercial culture of consumption, increasing inequality, reinforcing civic elites, and helping drive displacement. It is critical, therefore, that cultural policy be viewed with a social justice lens.

2. A Progressive Cultural Policy

Cultural policy is connected to such issues as economic stratification, racial segregation, immigration, education, and community development, to name a few. A progressive cultural policy should both be about protecting what is of value that is in danger of being lost (such as public ownership of airwaves or traditional cultures) and about engaging new opportunities (such as place-based cultural economies or rebuilding after Sandy). Changing demographics, gentrifying communities, and income inequality are just a few of the broader forces that inform cultural policy.

Like our country as a whole, New York City has a policy of not having a cultural policy. It is implicit rather than explicit, and frequently invisible. This disconnects culture from social change and prevents us from having a conversation about the value of arts and culture in our city and our communities. It prevents us from knowing, as cultural agency director Roberto Bedoya asks, “Who speaks, who’s heard, what is being asked for, what views are being presented, what cultural ‘we’ are we talking about?” A progressive agenda should articulate a clear, pluralistic, and equitable vision for cultural policymaking that puts neighborhoods at the center. This vision will be realized through long-term strategies to shift power, not short term tactics to manipulate it.

A progressive cultural policy:

- **Is grounded and self determined**, valuing neighborhood based cultural assets, traditions, and local leadership, recognizing diverse models of organizations and networks, and accountable to those in whose name it is carried out.
- **Reflects and engages the changing demographics of the city** – what the city is now and what it is becoming. As the Social Impact of the Arts Project concludes, “an ecological model of community culture may be a better guide to policymaking than an orthodox focus on organizations” (Social Impact of the Arts 2007).
- **Promotes cultural and racial equity and cultural rights**, supporting “the core cultural right of each person to participate fully in cultural life.” This policy ascribes value, and increases access and equity to, diverse communities and cultures through its grant making, capital allocations, definitions of excellence, design aesthetics, composition of commissions and peer panels, and choice of where to site cultural resources and amenities. This may include, for example, “fair share” responses to the

historical undercapitalization of community-based cultural centers in communities of color and low-income communities.

- ↘ **Protects public space for free speech and creative expression**, including access to the Internet, the airwaves, public streets, and plazas. It values and supports neighborhood libraries, community centers, and community radio as civic spaces where the public comes together.
- ↘ **Invests in artists, protects their rights as labor, and improves their working conditions**. This does not mean considering artists as a special group of individuals, but rather considering artists' issues as allied to those of other workers and individuals in our society. Many artists are freelance and independent workers, sharing with this growing workforce a need for a living wage, fair benefits, a social safety net, affordable work space, and protection against occupational hazards and unfair labor practices.
- ↘ **Is integrated into various policymaking contexts**, for example, engaging in community development, health, criminal justice, disaster planning, and education reform. It would consider cultural impacts to a neighborhood along with economic and environmental impacts. City Council members would have cultural liaisons, community boards would have cultural committees, and inter-agency working groups benefit from including the arts.
- ↘ **Invests 1 percent of the city's expense budget in arts and culture**, as recommended by the citywide One Percent for Culture campaign (current support is less than one-fourth of 1 percent).

3. Three Programs: Community Infrastructure, Civic Engagement, and Public Space

Three new programs could help us to strengthen the intersections between arts and culture, equitable development, civic engagement, and public space. The programs would be carried out through partnerships between government and nonprofits and small businesses, recognizing their expertise. The first program strengthens the community-based cultural hubs and networks of “naturally occurring cultural districts.” The second supports creative labor and cultural citizenship through sustained artist residencies, partnerships, and an artist corp. The third animates public space through neighborhood-based public art.

Program 1: Cultivating Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts

This program would strengthen the community-based cultural hubs and cross-sector networks that constitute naturally occurring cultural districts (NOCDs) across the city. While some cultural districts are planned and developed as part of institutional initiatives, NOCDs spring up more organically in their neighborhoods, tapping into and strengthening local clusters of creative assets. These districts are geographically and structurally diverse, self-organized through community-generated action, and cultivated by a diverse range of participants. They include cultural centers, arts organizations, artists, community groups, small businesses, creative manufacturers, and schools. NOCDs are clusters of creativity and entrepreneurship, and as illustrated after Hurricane Sandy, their hubs and social networks play a critical role in community resiliency and civic engagement.

For example, the Green Light District, is a ten-year effort to transform the Southside of Williamsburg (Los Sures) “from a past as one of the most environmentally and economically challenged neighborhoods in New York City into a 2020 future as a healthy, safe, culturally rich and civically engaged community.” The effort is led by El Puente community cultural center, working through committees of neighborhood residents and partnerships with small businesses, civic leaders, and community education and environmental justice activists. The Greenpoint Manufacturing and Design Center, a nonprofit industrial developer, offers another model by providing affordable space to over 100 small manufacturers with over 500 employees, many of whom are involved in creative economies. The Fourth Arts Block draws on the rich organizing and cultural history of the Lower East Side to bring together small theaters and businesses, housing, and civic organizations as part of the East 4th Street Cultural District. The network allows them to share strategies and create opportunities to maintain affordability, cultural vitality, and green infrastructure on the block and in the neighborhood.

The NOCD program would provide financial support, recognition, access to city-wide programs and public spaces, and reduction of bureaucratic barriers. The following recommendations, drawn from a series of roundtables and the citywide coalition, Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts – New York (NOCD-NY) provide some ways to support NOCDs in and across their neighborhoods.

Prioritize equitable distribution of opportunities and benefits:

- **Recognize NOCDs and cultural clusters** to ensure access and participation in existing city programs (like Business Improvement Districts, historic districts, and industrial districts).
- **Provide equitable funding, technical assistance, and peer mentorships for small neighborhood organizations** and networks and facilitate cross agency funding partnerships.
- **Support NOCD demonstration projects** and collect data about their impact in their communities. Share lessons learned with neighborhoods across the city.
- **Stabilize current manufacturing areas through zoning and land-use practices** and offer low-cost financing to mission-driven landlords, including nonprofits and creative industry leadership. Support cultural incubators for creative industry start-ups.
- **Create more opportunities to establish ongoing workspaces in city-owned property** through long-term leases, nonprofit partnerships, and RFPs.

Use Public Resources to Promote Neighborhood Based Culture:

- **Champion and promote neighborhood cultural vitality citywide** using existing promotional tools such as NYC & Company and Metropolitan Transit Authority neighborhood maps.
- **Launch a marketing campaign for the city’s creative manufacturing sector.**
- **Lift up promising grassroots practices;** using the convening power of the city, and when appropriate, helping increase its scale or scope.

Program 2: Supporting Cultural Citizenship and Community Partnerships

This program would support an initiative to place artists in residence at community organizations, unions, schools, and city agencies; and sustained partnerships between artists and community organizations.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, more than 100 artists volunteered at the Park Slope Armory special needs shelters, providing inspiring performances and workshops, and organizing the wellness center infrastructure that made these programs possible. Emergency workers were grateful that it kept the residents engaged, and a doctor credited it for helping prevent a riot. Above all, this helped return dignity to the residents, shifting them from victims to creators with stories and histories. Many artists returned several times, explaining how meaningful the experience was for them. When the shelter closed, artists continued to support the evacuees who could not yet return home. Casey Shae, a musician who performed and took leadership in the shelter and afterwards, said that the best way to support him as an artist would be to provide more opportunities where his music could make such a difference.

The arts played an important role in the aftermath of 9/11 as well. Embracing his “critical citizenship,” writer and theater artist Sekou Sundiata launched the Americas Project to inspire people to imagine what else could be possible. He wrote, “Living in the aftermath of 9/11, I feel an urgent and renewed engagement with what it means to be an American. But that engagement is a troubling one because of a longstanding estrangement between American civic ideals and American civic practice. This project is my response to this reality.” Poetry circles, community sings, “citizenship cabarets,” potluck dinners, and forums sparked ideas on critical citizenship, creativity and civic dialogue across the country and provided the basis for Sundiata’s theater work the “51st (dream) state.”

The value of cultural citizenship isn’t limited to disasters and economic crisis. The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) in the 1970s provided their first paid jobs to many low-income community artists and created an enduring infrastructure for neighborhood cultural programs. While the time seems to have passed for public jobs programs, we can still provide opportunities for artists to volunteer in meaningful ways and support socially beneficial work that pays artists a living wage.

An Arts & Wellness Recovery Corps could build on experiences like the wellness center and the Sandy Storyline project. A pilot project could provide an infrastructure for artists to bring their creativity and leadership skills to recovery and disaster planning. Members could become the core teams for wellness centers, which would be integrated into shelter design. The program would support artists to use cultural methodologies to engage residents in recovery and rebuilding, sharing and documenting their stories, and making sure that the human experience is not lost in all the talk of building repair and climate science.

An artist in residence program for community organizations, unions, schools, and city agencies would provide new perspectives and resources to their hosts and rewarding work for artists. Some such programs exist to provide greatly-appreciated cultural services to schools, senior centers, and hospitals, but these experiences are too few and limited. This program would strengthen and extend this work; however, it would not be intended as a replacement for core arts curriculum in the schools.

Sustained partnerships between cultural and community organizations and networks would build the civic capacities of artists and the cultural capacities of community groups. The Center for Urban Pedagogy’s Making Policy Public program, the Groundswell Community Mural Project’s collaboration with the Red Hook Community Justice Center, the Educational Video Center’s integration of young media producers into a citywide campaign for education equity, and the Arts & Democracy Project’s incorporation of

cultural methodologies into participatory budgeting are all good examples. This program would support, extend, and deepen such initiatives.

Program 3: Animating Public Space

This program would support interactive and community-based public art and cultural programs to stimulate participation in civic dialogue in a time of polarized debates and restricted public assembly. It would incorporate neighborhood priorities and diverse cultural practices, increase access to public space, and reduce the city barriers and bureaucracy that limits its use.

Arts and culture would animate streets, buildings, gardens, plazas, and parks to:

- ↘ Reinforce community identity in gentrifying neighborhoods through **street banners**.
- ↘ Build community and offer employment and alternatives to incarceration for youth through **mural projects**.
- ↘ Enliven public plazas with **interactive art installations**, such as Queens Museum of Art's commissions for Corona Plaza.
- ↘ Provide opportunities to **share grief through community based memorials** and participatory art making.
- ↘ Assert collective ownership of the street and celebrate cultural traditions through **community-based parades**.
- ↘ Express free speech with **street performances and creative demonstrations**.
- ↘ **Reclaim public space** and, as in the case of 596 Acres, **transform unused public land**.
- ↘ Reframe history and promote critical thinking through **street signs, projections on buildings, monuments and counter-monuments that identify absent narratives**, as was done by RepoHistory.

Cross-sector programs would provide support and technical assistance for multiple uses of space. New York City's Department of Transportation's Urban Arts Initiative offers an example of a city agency that supports temporary art and cultural programs in public plazas, fences, barriers, footbridges, and sidewalks, and has a dedicated staff member who can artists navigate city bureaucracy. Groundswell Community Mural and the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) in Los Angeles provide examples of extended arts-based community collaborations.

Public art gives a public face to neighborhood social networks, "providing an enduring visual reminder of the community relationships that made it possible," according to Anusha Venkataraman of El Puente. It can expose the systemic inequities that live below the surface in communities and the competing claims for neighborhood identity and narrative. A progressive arts and culture agenda would engage these tensions to create positive change. The National Trust for Historic Preservation has done this nationally in public sites of contested history, and the Coalition of Sites of Conscience offers an international resource.

4. Conclusion: Extraordinary Communities

We need to work together and harness every resource that we have at hand – data, policy, community knowledge, civic energy, and creativity – to achieve a fair, equitable, and sustainable city. We need to be able to imagine a city where we can live meaningful lives in thriving communities and build the relationships and public will to get us there. Arts and culture, strengthened by a progressive cultural policy and practice, can make a powerful contribution toward these goals. With collective compassion and civic energy, we can engage our creativity to create something bigger than ourselves – a 21st century city for all.

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