



Creative Transformation: Arts, Culture, and Public Housing Communities

**Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts New York Roundtable
July 27, 2015 at the Rockefeller Foundation**

Overview and Key Point Summary

(Full report will be available in September)

Overview

“The roundtable provides an opportunity to develop mutually beneficial creative partnerships.”

Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts New York (NOCD-NY) is a citywide alliance of cultural networks and community leaders who have joined together to revitalize New York City from the neighborhood up. Recognizing an opportunity to further integrate arts and culture into the transformation of public housing communities, NOCD-NY brought together a diverse range of tenant leaders, residents, elected officials and staff, city agencies, artists, cultural institutions, advocates, funders and community organizations. Drawing on interviews carried out in the field, the roundtable was designed to:

- Showcase exemplary partnerships that illustrated equitable, long-term approaches
- Identify barriers and challenges
- Develop recommendations and discuss how to move them into action
- Identify pilot project(s) that could be supported
- Build and strengthened relationships amongst participants.

El Puente, University Settlement, Park Hill Market, Casita Maria, Elizabeth Hamby, Betances Center, Groundswell, MoCADA, and Dance Theatre Etcetera presented nine examples representing diverse approaches. They included Cornerstone centers on public housing sites led by community cultural organizations; a resident organized marketplace; artist-led programs that engage public housing residents in training and creation; and an arts presenting program at NYCHA sites for the community at large. Public partners in these programs included NYC council member Ritchie Torres, NYC DYCD, NYCHA, and DOT, Choice Neighborhoods Initiative, and Empowerment Zone. Nonprofit partners included LISC, Red Hook Initiative, Good Shepherd Services, BRIC, Staten Island Arts, Rotary Club, and Dancing in the Streets.

Overarching Themes

“You’re dealing with a kind of trauma and it may extend decades and generations to new residents, well after it happened.”

- Look at communities as a whole, not just public housing developments. Communities were broken apart in the building of public housing, which resulted in the loss of a diverse range of cultural spaces that usually connect communities.
- Arts and culture have multiple functions including:
 - Creating space for healing to counter trauma.
 - Building community in transformative ways, breaking down isolation, humanizing residents and celebrating their cultures, connecting residents with other cultural communities, the community at large, and to services.
 - Spurring freedom of expression and creativity, and helping people see themselves as part of something larger.
 - Offering opportunities for education, training, and jobs.
 - Being a tool for social change, acting as a catalyst for individual, community, systemic, and institutional change.

- Community development should be resident led and driven. Residents are the experts. They should be leaders in determining change in their communities and in designing cultural programs.
- Cultural programs should reflect the diversity of people in public housing, which includes immigrants from many countries who speak many languages. They should also recognize the multiplicity of needs of public housing communities including language translation, isolation, security, basic repairs and lack of basic amenities.
- It is important to distinguish between providing services and community organizing. Both approaches were represented in the conversation, and arts and culture can be part of each of them.
- The cultural community and NYCHA residents should be engaged in larger neighborhood planning efforts.
- Opportunities exist to create policy and funding that supports sustainable opportunities for all people in the places where they live.

Characteristics of successful work

“Again, space. I can’t say it enough.”

- Programs bring people together in a safe, friendly, and culturally oriented space.
- World-class artists tap into and animate underutilized NYCHA spaces and draw audiences from across the neighborhood and city.
- Sustained, culturally appropriate work recognizes the talent, culture, expertise, and leadership within public housing communities. Artists are of the community, having participated in the cultural organization’s programs themselves as children. Cultural traditions are shared inter-generationally.
- Cultural groups draw on a history of facilitating collaborations.
- Robust cultural funding ensures the consistency and quality of the work.
- Organizing groups are able to dedicate a staff member for cultural work.
- A holistic approach connects arts and culture with other dimensions of people’s lives.
- Cultural hubs—inside and outside public housing developments—are connected across the community.
- There is a strong participatory process for cultural projects. Authentic community engagement is about people and place together, programming and community context.
- The cultural component of a cross agency partnership is there throughout the process.

Challenges and barriers

“The legacy of racism in building design and siting is heavy. When it expresses itself in such an unequal way, it brings about challenges. Arts and culture are powerful ways to interrogate the issues.”

- History of disinvestment, decline of federal funding, and physical neglect.
- Lack of appreciation for the role that public housing has played in keeping NYC diverse and affordable.
- Lack of street life and community. The loss of benches has a big impact, as they are the center point for socializing.
- Fear that art coming in means displacement for residents.
- Cultural displacement that determines who feels welcome in public spaces.
- Lack of access to space and facilities that are in poor condition.
- Inability to store supplies for sustained programs in shared spaces.
- Costliness of required insurance and distance from transportation.
- Difficulty in partnering with NYCHA and issues related to agency approval and logistics.
- Artist-led interventions where artists from outside the community parachute in and have not built trust.
- Conflicts within and between housing developments.
- Reluctance of general community to come onto public housing sites.
- Tenant associations sometimes do not represent tenants or lack the tools or resources to represent them effectively.
- Funding is project oriented and not sustained, resulting in limited time and capacity.

Recommendations

“Residents need to be in the forefront. Believe, respect, engage them and support their vision.”

- Make opportunities for residents to frame the questions and name their priorities for this work.
- Increase access to space, including city owned property and public/private partnerships. Develop written policies on how to use public spaces and joint use agreements.
- Provide technical support and networking sessions to facilitate partnerships and mechanisms to increase communication and remove structural barriers. Map resources, people, and partners.
- Cultural/community partners should be at the table for decision making related to physical space.
- Fund long-term, sustainable arts programs and provide quick, rapid support for small community projects.
- Allow groups to apply to DCLA funding through a fiscal sponsor.
- Utilize CASA and Immigrant Cultural Fund as resources.
- Develop funding partnerships across city agencies and across public and private funders. Look at models such as Cornerstone and community schools for cross sector funding of cultural hubs.
- Provide direct support and capacity building for artists working in community and dedicated funding streams to support naturally occurring cultural districts.
- Artists and cultural organizations should include/ be led by artists who are residents in the public housing community. Those who aren't should have a presence in the community and stay for the long-term. They should be involved at all phases of the work, have training to work in communities, and engage in neighborhood planning processes.

Opportunities

“We’re thinking of connectivity between (NYCHA) properties and the fabric of the neighborhood. The possibility for cultural corridors is huge and it is important to bring people together.”

- Several participants offered to partner with NOCD-NY on resident centered and led conversations.
- NYCHA invited participants to upcoming tables and said if the right table did not exist, they would create one.
- Participatory budgeting at NYCHA and across the city provides an opportunity for resident participation in planning and implementation of projects that could include arts and culture.
- Manhattan Borough President is holding town hall meetings on the NYCHA Plan; will send out updated list of meetings.
- Cultural planning process will provide opportunity to identify priorities with cultural equity focus.
- A DCLA-commissioned study on the social impact of the arts in NYC is underway; the researcher was at the roundtable.
- NOCD-NY and others can connect to a cultural policy agenda being developed by PolicyLink.
- Council Member Torres is interested in figuring out how to bring public art into public housing in a more systemic way and has partnered with Groundswell on a Public Housing Leadership Initiative.
- DCLA is looking at increasing the capacity of small organizations to engage with partners and the community.
- DYCD has a commitment to strengthening networks.
- Interagency partnerships bring new funding as in the case of the NEA Our Town grant supporting NYCHA and Casita Maria.

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