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The People's City Report Card 2015

BY STEVE ZEITLIN AND MOLLY GARFINKEL

Most New Yorkers recognize—and even tourists know—that the heart of New York City is not only found at the Met or Lincoln Center, but in the hustle and bustle, the cacophonous mix of ethnic groups, social classes, folk, pop, and high art. Increasingly, we are aware of the pressures forcing new immigrants, artists, and working people out of the City and making it more difficult for them to express their traditions, culture, and art. With passionate interest in what's distinctive and local about New York, we have issued, for the fifth year, the People's City Report Card 2015. Our first Report Card for Mayor de Blasio's administration shows that he is, in large part, seeking to fulfill his campaign promise to support New York's grassroots cultures.

COMMENDABLE

1. Jim Powers' Mosaic Poles

When the City made plans to completely renovate the public spaces at Astor Place, including new lighting fixtures, we assumed that Vietnam veteran and guerilla artist Jim Powers' mosaic-covered light poles were doomed. William Kelly and the Village Alliance, working with the Department of Transportation, City Lore, Clayton Patterson, Bob Holman—and Jim, himself—made plans, now underway, to take down the poles, store and repair them, and put them up again as art objects rather than light poles. It's a tribute the Lower East Side and its vibrant tradition of guerrilla art.

2. Artist Housing

In his first term, Mayor de Blasio promised to build 40,000 units of housing and to preserve 120,000. Within those numbers, he set the goal of creating 1,500 units designed for artists. This, of course, is a drop in the bucket, given that New York is home to 300,000 "creatives," as estimated by Adam Forman, Research Director of the Center for an Urban Future. Nevertheless, De Blasio's goal is on track, partly due to

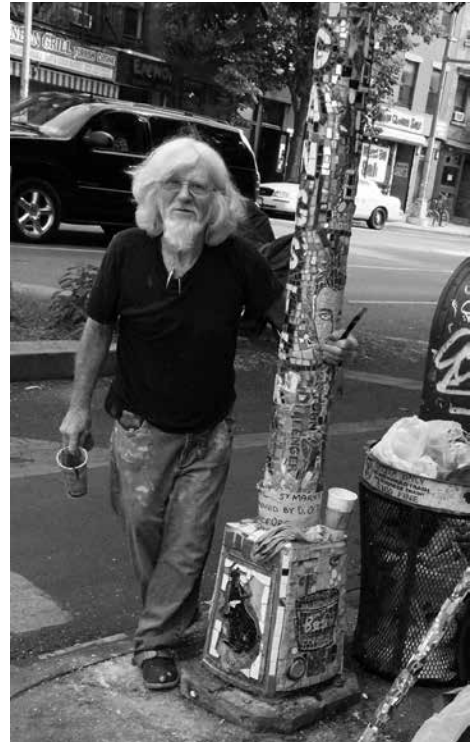
a building boom in New York that enables him to pressure developers to create these units. PS 109, created by Artspace in East Harlem, is a model that created 89 units in which artists can both live and work. In January, WHEDco (Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation) is breaking ground on a new low-cost housing complex that will include units for elderly musicians and house the Bronx Music Heritage Center, which City Lore's folklorist Elena Martínez is helping to create. Of course, many "artists," as opposed to "creatives" (including high-tech designers in start-ups and advertisers), are struggling to live in the City and have been considering other places. Mayor de Blasio's plans are a step in the right direction.

3. Neighborhood Plazas

The de Blasio administration is working to further New York City's Plaza Program. The City now has 70 plazas across the five boroughs. Mayor Bloomberg's plan was for all the plazas to be run on a public/private partnership basis, with the City providing the space but local businesses providing maintenance and programming. This, of course, works far better for the Manhattan sites with its upscale businesses than in the outer boroughs. Partly through the work of the Plaza Program, led by Laura Hansen, the City Council has allocated 5.4 million dollars over three years to help program and maintain plazas in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods.

4. Places that Matter: B & H

On the afternoon of March 26, 2015, a gas explosion toppled three buildings, claimed two lives, and destroyed four eateries, including B&H Dairy, the beloved East Village deli. Numerous neighborhood businesses recovered soon after, but the beloved lunch counter was shuttered for five consecutive months, with its gas turned off, its counter empty, and its extended family of



Guerilla artist Jim Powers, with one of his mosaic-covered light poles. Photo by Clayton Patterson.

staff and clientele struggling to understand why B&H was the exception. Thanks to persistent advocacy campaigns from neighbor Andy Reynolds, Jeremiah's Vanishing New York, Save NYC, the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, EV Grieve, and NY1, the city finally gave B&H the green light to reopen on August 14, and they haven't stopped serving and celebrating since.

5. Places that Matter: Stonewall

In June, the Stonewall Inn was unanimously deemed a New York City landmark for its association with LGBTQ history in the City and the nation. New York City in the 1960s had one of the largest gay populations in the country. However, few establishments catered to gay and lesbian clientele. Police regularly raided gay bars and clubs to enforce "morality" laws that prohibited cross-dressing, same-sex couples from dancing, and businesses from selling alcohol to the gay community. These raids

were physical manifestations of tolerated, city-sanctioned harassment. On June 28, 1969, police raided Stonewall Inn. The skirmish escalated into three days of rioting, demonstrations, and street battles. Known as the Stonewall Uprising, the Stonewall Riots, or simply Stonewall, the events created a media sensation, garnering international attention. They inspired LGBTQ communities around the world to rise up in protest of discrimination, spawning the modern gay rights movement and the international fight for equality.

6. Community Anchors

For too long, arts and cultural philanthropy paid scant attention to many grassroots sites that serve as generative incubators and as sites for vibrant cultural activity in local communities. City Lore is pleased to receive a Ford Foundation grant of \$105,000 for a Place Matters initiative to provide financial support to these exemplary cultural organizations, many of which are not 501(c)3s. In the Bronx, these include Casita Rincon Criollo, a long-standing Puerto Rican social club built on a vacant lot, and El Maestro Boxing Gym and Cultural Center; in Manhattan, Marjorie Eliot's Parlor Entertainment in Sugar Hill, which has hosted free concerts in Marjorie's living room for over 20 years; in Queens, the Hindu Temple Society of North America in Flushing and La Terazza 7 Latin music club; in Brooklyn, Sesame Flyers Trinidadian Social Club and Mas Camp and the Haitian Radio Station El Soleil; in Staten Island, the largely Liberian Christ Assembly Lutheran Church/African Immigrant Ministry and the Sri Lankan Vihara Buddhist Temple. To be able to offer this kind of support to these groups is a dream come true for City Lore, and we believe that the report and documentation that we are creating for the project will serve as a model that will generate increased support for grassroots sites in NYC and beyond.

7. Arts in Education

City Lore is committed to arts education for every NYC public school student, and our own education program brings

folk artists and artist residencies into more than 20 schools. We are delighted that the Mayor and his Education Commissioner, Carmen Fariña, have added several million dollars into the budget for arts in education. These new dollars are a welcome infusion of funding and support for arts education in city schools, but we would like to see a return to the Project Arts Program, put in place during the Giuliani administration, which distributed funds for the arts to all city schools based on the number of students in the school.

TROUBLING

8. Personal Losses

Sadly, we are missing several luminaries of the City's green space movement. In late July, José "Chema" Soto, founding father of the South Bronx's Casita Rincon Criollo, passed away at age 70. Casitas, small houses surrounded by garden lots, create the look and feel of the Puerto Rican countryside. Rincón Criollo, also known as La Casita de Chema, is one of the city's oldest and largest. Environmental activist and gardener Adam Purple passed away in September at the age of 84. Adam, whose real name was David Wilkie, is considered to be one of the original pioneers of the Lower East Side community garden movement. Adam built and fought a losing battle to save the spectacular 15,000 square-foot Garden of Eden, between Forsyth and Eldridge Streets, and visible to NASA from outer space.

9. Street Performers

This year, City Lore celebrated the 30th anniversary of subway musician Roger Manning's 1985 historic legal challenge, which helped establish First Amendment rights for musicians to play on the subway. These performers—who "instill a homesickness for freedom in the lives of ordinary men"—continue to be harassed as they exercise their constitutional right to perform on subway platforms and mezzanines. For example, at the close of 2014, Andrew Kalleen, 30, was ejected from the G subway platform at the Lorimer Street–Metropolitan Avenue stop, after calmly ex-

plaining that he was doing nothing illegal to the officer. A video of the incident captured by straphangers waiting for a train shows a police officer telling Kalleen he needed a permit to play there—which the musician disputed. Eventually, Kalleen was led off in handcuffs. The video went viral on the Internet. The street performer and activist Theo Eastwind notes this about the current situation: "I am hopeful for the future of busking. I see many more people coming out to busk, and that is great to see. My concern is the introduction of monitors on the platforms. I'm worried that in addition to iPhones, iPads, earphones, and the general trend of people being sucked into their devices, that there is a push by corporations to blast their message via monitors on subway platforms, drowning out buskers and creating an excuse for police to interfere."

10. The Trump Effect

Overall, the de Blasio administration is shifting resources to low-income and middle-class New Yorkers, smaller organizations, and groups in all five boroughs. Yet, forces of unbridled capitalism are much stronger than city government. With the new building boom, every block of Manhattan, and much of the City, is a construction site. Immigrant artists and workers in nonprofits are paying skyrocketing rents to live where they can still get to work each day. Small businesses are pushed out on a daily basis. As the working class is pushed away from Manhattan, the subways needed for them to get into town remain in disrepair, particularly on weekends. The wealthy are separated geographically from working people, and the opportunities for ethnic groups and communities to interact are diminished. Although New York City is becoming a high-tech center where "creatives" can live comfortably, the City's artists and working class are increasingly struggling and looking for other places to call home. ▼

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