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# Community Anchors:

*Sustaining Religious Institutions, Small Businesses, and Social Clubs that Serve as Arts Centers for their Communities* BY MOLLY GARFINKEL AND STEVE ZEITLIN

At this moment in the COVID-19 pandemic, when so much of the granular level of small shops and eateries, social clubs, spiritual centers, and folk traditions are threatened, when the world is increasingly virtual, New York City and the nation's Community Anchors warrant particular attention and support. Community Anchors are often the organizations that communities create in response to the conditions in which their members live. They are self-sustaining incubators for vibrant cultural activity in local neighborhoods and represent a layer of culture that is critical, not only to the work of folklorists but to the cultural ecology of American cities.

For the last several years, City Lore's Place Matters program has been engaged in a qualitative investigation of these community-based establishments. The initiative's ongoing research study explores the value, impact, and sustainability of cultural and artistic networks

that thrive in three organizational typologies: religious institutions, social clubs and mutual aid societies, and small businesses. Launched in 2015, with a grant from the Ford Foundation, City Lore investigated, honored, and provided financial assistance to 10 sites across all five boroughs of New York City, including the Christ Assembly Lutheran Church/African Immigrant Ministry in Staten Island, El Maestro Boxing and Cultural Center in the Bronx, the Sesame Flyers Trinidadian social club in Brooklyn, Terraza 7 Latin jazz club in Queens, and Marjorie Eliot's free Parlor Entertainment jazz concerts that she has hosted for over 30 years in her Manhattan apartment.

We were able to support their creative placemaking and arts initiatives, while also learning about and exploring the broader issues faced by similar organizations that galvanize community activity through the arts. In 2017, the National Endowment for the

Arts (NEA) Office of Research and Analysis (ORA) awarded City Lore a grant to expand the Community Anchors research initiative to a national level. Through this opportunity, we documented 12 additional community anchors—3 in each of 4 cities (Baltimore, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Chicago)—and submitted an extensive report on our findings to the NEA.

Our three key organizational typologies—(1) religious institutions, (2) social clubs and mutual aid societies, and (3) small businesses—represent the three main pillars of community life: spiritual, social, and economic. Community Anchors, which are often not on the radar of the philanthropic world, play a key role in community life and well-being and are what Tulane University Professor of Anthropology, Nick Spitzer calls “cultural first responders” (Nicholas Spitzer, personal communication with Molly Garfinkel, March 13, 2018). In times of crisis and change, these stalwart establishments have historically made every effort to keep their doors open, so that neighbors can come inside for solace, support, and something familiar. They provide location-specific and culturally competent goods, services, and programs that impact their audiences' daily lives, including on- and off-site guidance and connection to tradition, as well as community orientation, communications channels, educational opportunities, and even food, clothing, and emergency assistance.

One example of this essential work of responsiveness is the Arabber Preservation Society of Baltimore, one of our highlighted Community Anchors. Arabbing flourished in Baltimore well into the 20th century as a traditionally African American men's horse-cart trade, and its significant means of providing fresh fruits, vegetables, fish and poultry, ice, wood, and coal to city residents. Today, the Arabber Preservation Society works to maintain and preserve the city's last three Arabber stables. Baltimore residents, particularly in



Arabbers load their carts at the North Fremont Stable in Baltimore, Maryland. Photo by Molly Garfinkel.



The Terraza 7 Big Band performs for a packed house. The venue has just announced its reopening as of this writing. Photo by Molly Garfinkel.

struggling neighborhoods, still desperately need healthful food at near cost, without having to travel to other neighborhoods to pay prices hiked by middlemen. During the pandemic, Arabbers provided an ever more critical service to Baltimoreans in need. They hit the streets to hand out masks and disseminate information about the coronavirus. Arabbers partnered with the University of Maryland to distribute 2,000 pounds of chicken to homebound families in need of groceries (Frick 2020). They also teamed up with Food Rescue Baltimore to distribute produce meant for restaurants, which otherwise would have gone to waste (*Baltimore Sun* 2020). As a stalwart and trusted institution, Arabbers have leveraged their position to feed and protect the community.

Although COVID-19 poses the most present and immediate danger to Community Anchors, City Lore has spent years thinking of myriad ways to provide a solid legal basis for protecting local, long-standing landmark businesses. Twenty-five years ago, City Lore's founding Director, Dr. Steve Zeitlin, introduced legislation to protect endangered spaces to the New York City Council, albeit with little traction. One of the primary and consistent arguments offered in opposition to the idea of protecting small businesses is that it would constitute a form of commercial rent control. In fact, New York City had commercial rent control from 1945 to 1963, at which time it ended with the expiration of the state-

level law that authorized its implementation. After two and a half decades, several economic recessions, hyperbolic gentrification, and a global pandemic, City Lore is reinvigorating its advocacy around small businesses.

In November 2019, Council member Stephen Levin and the Committee on Small Business sponsored Int. No. 1796-2019, which proposes legislation to create a system of commercial rent registration and regulation applicable to some small retail stores, manufacturing establishments, and professional offices. A seven-member, mayor-appointed Commercial Rent Guidelines Board would be charged with developing and imposing yearly guidelines and the rate of rent adjustments for relevant commercial concerns (NYC Council 2019).

In January 2020, State Senator José M. Serrano introduced Senate Bill S7274B, which would establish an historic business preservation registry in the Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation “for the purpose of recognizing that historic community-serving businesses are valuable cultural assets that serve as examples of the rich history of the communities in the state.” (NYS Senate 2020). The proposed legislation suggests that, to be eligible, a business must be nominated by an assembly member, senator, the governor, or lieutenant governor, with no personal or professional ties to the entity. The business would have to have operated in the same municipality of New York State for 50 years,

with no more than a two-year break, and would be required to commit to maintaining the “physical features and traditions that define such business, including but not limited to craft, culinary or art form” (NYS Senate 2020). City Lore has also drafted a proposal for Community Anchors legislation that appears here in the box.

Community Anchors have weathered it all, from hurricanes to protests to gentrification, and they have withstood shifts in taste, demographics, and social consciousness. Their steadfastness has earned them the favor of community members, and their deep knowledge of local networks has also enabled them to lead cultural resilience efforts in their surrounding districts. In 2020, with global shelter-in-place orders, many communities across the United States have been unable to access sites of social and cultural cohesion, and in turn, these places are losing irreplaceable sources of income. Previously, they struggled to keep the lights on; now they hope only to be able to reopen their doors after the crisis.

Community Anchors also suggest an alternative definition of “essential” services. At this time, we are looking at how cultural communities across the nation understand and categorize “essential” businesses, workers, and programs before, during, and after the crisis. We are also thinking about how to sustain these essential services today and long after the pandemic is over. Despite the extreme experience of COVID-19, such collective environments and shared cultural experiences are critical to, and conserved through, Community Anchors. Particularly, at a time of extreme anxiety, economic upheaval, and isolation, when communities and individuals around the globe are separated from the people and gathering places they love and rely upon, the need to understand and protect these spaces takes on added importance and meaning. ▼

## References

- Baltimore Sun*. 2020. “Arabbers Distribute Food in Baltimore during Coronavirus Pandemic.” April 11. <https://www.baltimore-sun.com/coronavirus/bal-md-arabbers-distribute-food-in-baltimore-during-coronavirus-pandemic-20200411-nvuc5ml2ofa3lnyvsqpx7p5iu-photo-gallery.html>

## AN ACT to amend the administrative code of the City of New York, in relation to enacting the “Community Anchors Act”

The People of the State of New York, represented in the Senate and Assembly, do enact as follows:

**1. Section 1.** Short title. This act shall be known and may be cited as the “Community Anchors Act.”

**2. Legislative intent.** The legislature finds that Community Anchors, herein defined as small businesses, social clubs, and other long-standing neighborhood establishments that serve as arts and culture centers for their communities, are vulnerable at a time when gentrification and rapid displacement are taking place in all five boroughs of New York City. An unacceptable number of these Community Anchors, which often help communities stay in place, are being forced out of existence due to dramatically escalating rent renewal contracts, as well as shutdowns as a result of the COVID-19 virus pandemic. Landlords continue to exact such agreements from tenants under stress of prevailing market conditions and unequal bargaining power. City leases for Community Anchors on public land are subject to the same escalating renewal contracts that do not consider the value of establishments to their communities. The issue is exacerbated because philanthropy for arts and culture has paid scant attention to many of these grassroots sites, which serve as self-sustaining incubators for vibrant cultural activity in local neighborhoods.

The intent of this legislation is to promote cultural equity and improve the quality of life in neighborhoods and communities by providing rent stabilization rates of

increase, both for Community Anchors on private property and those with leases with New York City on public land. The program is limited to a select number Community Anchors that can demonstrate that they are providing invaluable services to their communities.

**3. Scope.** Some have argued that proposed solutions that address all small businesses in New York City have measurable and deleterious impact on the City’s overall economy. Whereas these proposed commercial rent control solutions may include some Community Anchor institutions, the legislation would most likely affect hundreds, if not thousands, of establishments in the City alone. The Community Anchors Act would limit the number of sites to be admitted into the program. Phase One would designate a certain number of Community Anchors sites in each of the five boroughs, based on borough population. These sites would not impact the overall economy of New York City. The Community Anchors Act is a neighborhood stabilization program, inspired by and complimentary to city and state historic preservation protocols, but aimed at local communities, and should not be considered commercial rent control.

**4. Criteria for Community Anchors.** To receive designation as a Community Anchor, an organization must:

- a. Nomination as a Community Anchor by one or more neighborhood residents.
- b. Demonstrably serve as an Arts and Culture Center for its community.
- c. Acquire 500 signatures signed by persons within their zip code.
- d. Rent or lease, rather than own, their space.

### 5. Selection of Community Anchors:

- a. Appoint a Community Anchors Commissioner in the Office of the Mayor.
- b. Assemble a Volunteer Committee associated with the Office of the Mayor, designated as the Community Anchors Selection Committee. It would function similarly to the Landmarks Commission, though its purview is education about, support to, and stabilization of neighborhoods and communities rather than architectural excellence.

### 6. Rights and rewards of Selected Community Anchors:

- a. Based on New York City rent stabilization policies, rent increases would be limited to the increases allowed by the New York City Rent Guidelines Board.
- b. Tenant shall lose the right of renewal or a landlord may refuse to renew a lease only if the tenant has persistently delayed rent payments without cause.

c. Leaders of designated Community Anchors would be appointed to the boards of the local Business Improvement Districts.

d. Community Anchors leasing public spaces from New York City would be awarded lease renewals in keeping with rent stabilization rates.

### 7. Limitation of designated Community Anchor Awards:

- a. No landlord or rental company would have their overall rental incomes reduced by more than 2 percent if they own a property housing a designated Community Anchor.
- b. Landlords can apply for a tax reduction if they host a Community Anchor.

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