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Art in the Contested City

Rachel Breen

Across the country, the tension between development and community is a frequent contributor to struggles over urban space. In an all too typical scenario, well-financed, politically connected developers seek to capitalize on the value of older neighborhoods, displacing residents, small businesses, and affordable housing to make way for luxury condos, trendy shops, and restaurants. Often, artists are perceived as the shock troops of such change. Moving to low-income areas in search of affordable studio space, they begin a process of transformation by which neighborhoods suddenly become desirable—“hip.” Soon, skyrocketing rents and property values force both the artists and longer-term residents to move.

Such gentrification scenarios have done much to drive a wedge between artists and community organizers. However, artists are equally capable of strengthening communities, providing positive new energy, keeping unwelcome development at bay, and helping enhance, preserve and beautify existing neighborhoods. Just as artist-led gentrification can forever alter a community’s fabric and “sense of place,” artists can also bring vitality, the capacity to think outside the box, and a playful sense of community empowerment.

Tensions over the role of artists in community transformation raise broader questions about the nature of public space. How we define and value communities—as a kind of “commons,” or as private space to be altered at will—will play a critical role

in determining the type of neighborhoods we will continue to build and thrive in.

Model Projects

These issues were the focus of a recent Pratt Institute Center for Urban Design conference entitled “Art in the Contested City.” Held at Pratt’s Brooklyn, New York, campus November 3, the event brought together some of New York City’s most dynamic artists and community organizers. On the one hand, the discussions explored the unintended role that artists play in development efforts that gentrify, displace and exclude; on the other, they examined innovative ways artists can bolster collective rights to space in a city where battles between developers and residents are decades old.

A key feature of the conference was its celebration of a number of recent efforts in New York to use the arts to nurture community, stability, and a sense of identity in relation to “place.”

The Point, a culture, arts, and community-development corporation in the Bronx uses its theater, ethnic dance programs, and gallery to highlight local folk artists. Focused on creating critical dialogue, it encourages artists to examine and express issues of identity and place within the community. The group recently sponsored a successful print-making project that explored police brutality.

El Puente has encouraged youth in predominantly Latino and Caribbean areas of Brooklyn to research the history of the international sugar trade, and the ways young people are lured into consuming unhealthy sugar-based foods. Participants created a traditional Caribbean folk dance performance documenting their research and their families’ experiences.

Not an Alternative is a group of young artists and public relations activists based in Brooklyn which has tried to redefine community symbols and provide new interpretations of important icons. Their hope is to tear down traditional political divisions and forge a “culturally focused” community organizing process. Recently, they participated in a fight to preserve public access to Brooklyn’s historic McCaren Pool. When the Clear Channel corporation sought exclusive rights to hold concerts there, Not an Alternative developed posters and other graphic tools to increase awareness of the public value of this important space, which had been closed for years.

Groundswell is a New York-based organization whose goal is to create murals that help stabilize neighborhoods and develop community pride. It attempts to play an intermediary and facilitative role between neighborhoods, artists and institutions. At the conference, the group provided beautiful examples of some of its projects, linking youth, art and community.

Learning from One Another

Artists, community organizers, planners, and activists who came to the daylong conference also were able to discuss challenges and share strategies. One of the more important themes was the need for artists to become more engaged in communities where they live and work—contributing their art and special perspective to development battles.

Rick Lowe, founder of Project Row Houses in Houston’s Third Ward, spoke to this theme, explaining the evolution of his organization, and how its goals of creating art and building community became intertwined. Project Row Houses preserves affordable housing for

Opposite: Billboard cutout by the Brooklyn-based art and public relations group Not an Alternative, who have campaigned against high-profile development projects and attempted to redefine community symbols. Photo by author.



long-time residents and studio space for local and visiting artists. *New York Times* columnist Michael Kimmelman recently wrote that as “The nation’s most impressive public art project, [it] is also a bold experiment in how to build communities.”¹

Brooklyn’s Laundromat Project provides another model of how artists can become economically involved in supporting existing community. The goal of this group was to buy and manage a laundromat in Bedford-Stuyvesant to support community art programs and make them more accessible to neighborhood residents. However, in the time it took to create a business plan, property values in the area doubled, indicating how severe the forces of gentrification may be.

Another important speaker was economist Ann Markuson, known for her research on the underreported role of artists to local economies. She addressed the challenges artists face in finding affordable space in the communities where they live and work. One model for support-

ing them is ArtsSpace, which creates such space through housing trusts and cooperatives. She pointed out that when artists have stable living and working conditions they are much more likely to participate in community preservation efforts.

Fostering Collaboration and Community

The conference made clear how much artists have to gain from and give to the development fights that community groups face in New York and around the country. Neighborhood preservation and revitalization efforts can benefit enormously by learning how to collaborate with artists in their midst. When artists and community groups come together, they can support each other and help protect and preserve communities that value creativity and celebrate a fabric of relationships.

Such a vital notion of community, as a type of “commons” grounded in physical space but also in social relations, can be elusive and hard to

defend. This is especially true when confronted with economic models that fail to value the phenomenon of neighborhood. It is therefore essential to establish the public nature of the terrain over which gentrification battles take place.

The forces of gentrification show no sign of ebbing. For this reason, the future of urban neighborhoods will have a lot to do with how we understand community, and who has the right to define and defend it. This may be a new way of thinking for many artists. But we all need to consider that the physical space of neighborhood rightfully belongs to those who live there, and that all residents have a responsibility to preserve and protect it.

Note

1. *New York Times*, December 17, 2006, Sec. 2, p. 1.