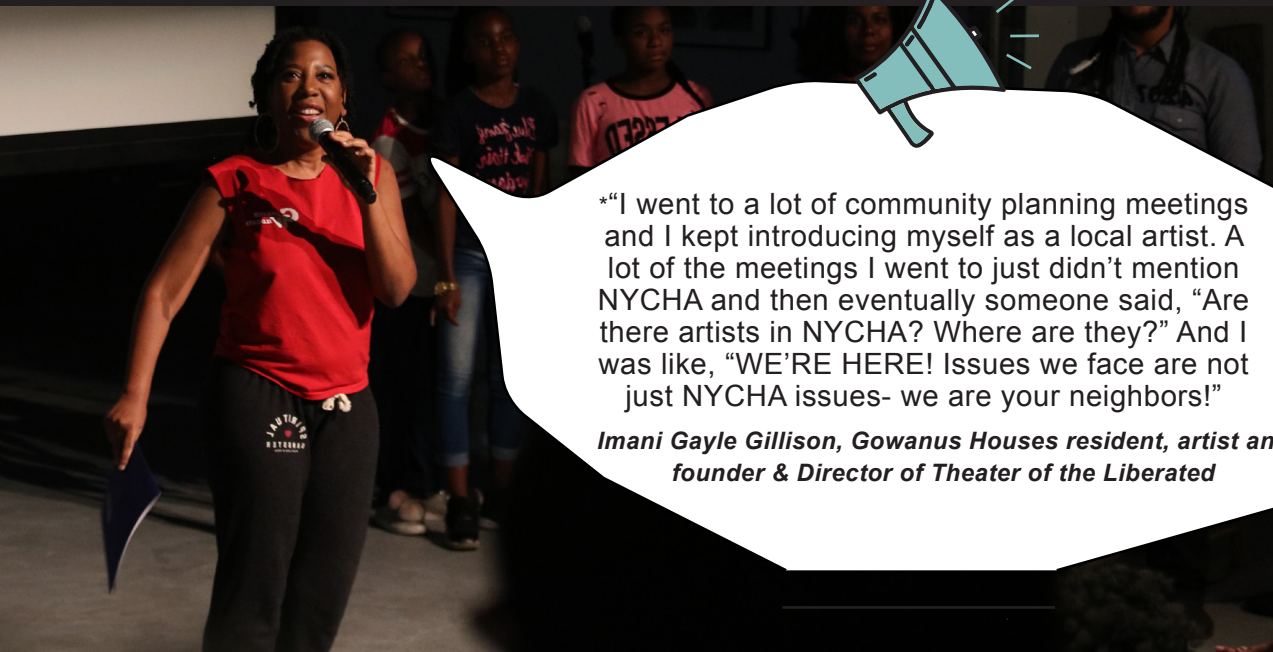


# “WE ARE YOUR NEIGHBORS!”\*

## KEY ISSUES & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TOWARDS CULTURAL EQUITY | GOWANUS, BROOKLYN

Can Gowanus provide a model for what neighborhoods undergoing rezoning can look like when they reflect the full diversity and vitality of their people and histories? How can decision makers meaningfully and creatively engage those who are not typically heard? How can planning processes in this rapidly gentrifying neighborhood be grounded in people’s voices and result in a culturally healthy community?



\*“I went to a lot of community planning meetings and I kept introducing myself as a local artist. A lot of the meetings I went to just didn’t mention NYCHA and then eventually someone said, “Are there artists in NYCHA? Where are they?” And I was like, “WE’RE HERE! Issues we face are not just NYCHA issues- we are your neighbors!”

*Imani Gayle Gillison, Gowanus Houses resident, artist and founder & Director of Theater of the Liberated*

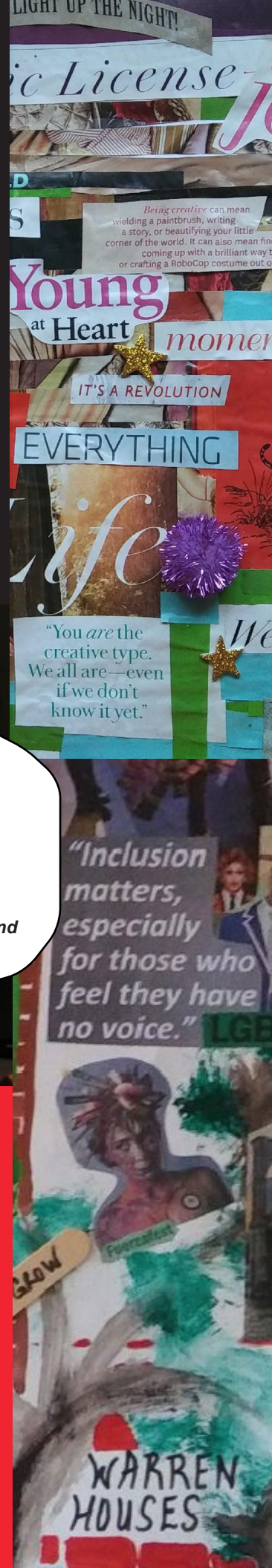
IN THE SUMMER AND FALL OF 2017, A DIVERSE GROUP OF RESIDENTS, ARTISTS, CULTURAL ORGANIZERS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS IN GOWANUS USED ARTS AND CULTURE AS AN ENGAGEMENT TOOL TO IDENTIFY KEY ISSUES AND ARRIVE AT SEVEN RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADOPT AS PART A NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING PROCESS THAT IS EQUITABLE AND SUSTAINABLE.



ARTS & DEMOCRACY



Report by  
Masoom Moitra



# SUMMARY



“What I want for my community?  
Is for it to shine. Not like rain or shine. But like a vibrant shine.  
Like some fresh kinda LED lights shine. And y’all, what’s a community if it ain’t mine? I gots lots of ideas and not enough time to implement, stories that don’t cost more than my rent. And community programs that are truly free, with no hidden fees and just, pictures of me. And no photo ops and pictures at election time, but photos of me when I’m on my grind.”

**Frantasia Fryer, Gowanus Houses Resident and Poet**  
(Excerpt from Making Gowanus & Theater of the Liberated: Soft)



To ensure that longstanding stakeholders can powerfully inform citywide neighborhood plans around rezoning, El Puente in partnership with Arts & Democracy, NOCD-NY and Hester Street, has co-developed a set of creative and tangible tools- the *Cultural Blueprint for Healthy Communities*.

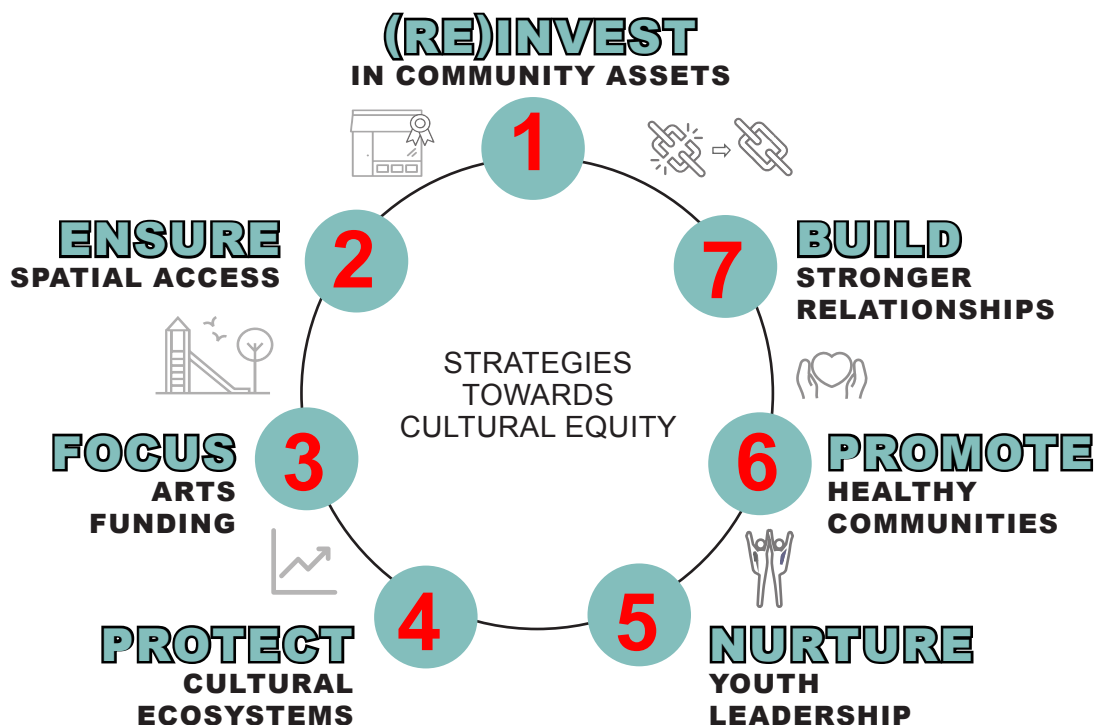
In Gowanus, Arts & Democracy used the *Cultural Blueprint* to give community members who are historically not at decision making tables, a starting place to organize around the NYC Department of City Planning’s PLACES Neighborhood Study.

This document is the outcome of a series of community-led conversations facilitated with the help of the *Cultural Blueprint*. Results have been collected from workshops with participants from the Making Gowanus Initiative, Gowanus Neighborhood Coalition for Justice and CHIPS (Park Slope Christian Help, Inc.). It builds on the work of Bridging Gowanus, GNCJ Survive & Thrive, CAAAV’s Public Housing Language Access, and NOCD-NY’s Creative Transformation:

Arts Culture and Public Housing Communities. Neighborhood residents reviewed and added to the draft.

The report identifies key issues and recommendations towards a planning process that inclusively connects arts and culture to other key policy areas such as economic development, education, health, security and housing. Additionally, the recommendations seek to actionably respond to CreateNYC, the City’s cultural plan that was informed by findings from the Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP). SIAP’s study linked the dramatic improvement of the lives of low and moderate income New Yorkers to adequate access to arts and culture.

“..across the board, cultural participation correlates with improved health, personal security, and school effectiveness, demonstrating the relationship between arts and culture and healthy community ecologies.” *Social Impact of the Arts Project, Culture & Social Wellbeing in NYC (2017)*

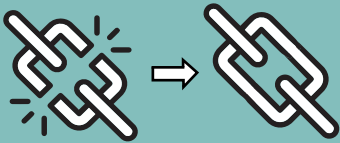


# ISSUE AREAS

Taking into account the rapid gentrification and real estate speculation that Gowanus has been subject to in the recent past, this section highlights the key issues faced by NYCHA residents, artists, organizers, immigrants, young people and seniors, small business owners, people with mental health issues and members of the Gowanus community who are insufficiently housed or homeless, filtered through the lens of art and culture.



## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & TRUST



- Fatigue from participation in community planning processes and creative partnerships without adequate representation, accountability, or compensation.
- Sentiments of alienation, objectification and helplessness owing to rapid changes over a short period of time and cultural insensitivity from newcomers.
- Miscommunication and distrust between community members and City agencies.

## RECOGNITION OF COMMUNITY ASSETS



- Lack of recognition and just investment in NYCHA as a valuable cultural asset.
- Unclear process in the reactivation of Gowanus Houses Community Center and free access to other cultural community spaces.
- Consistent erasure of historical and living cultural heritage like food, shops etc.
- Fear of pricing out of existing and informal neighborhood hubs.

## NEIGHBORHOOD HEALTH & LIVEABILITY



- Impact on mental health conditions due to dilapidated physical infrastructure and low quality building maintenance.
- Inadequate counselling, civic engagement and empowerment programs for youth.
- Unavailability of healthy, affordable, culturally sensitive food and produce.
- Lack of rehabilitative/ support services for homelessness, mental illness and drug addiction.

## AFFORDABILITY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT



- Lack of jobs, internships and training materializing from new developments and businesses.
- Pricing out of locally owned businesses, affordable pharmacies, and culturally relevant services.
- Disconnection from well resourced art spaces, nonprofits and organizations in the vicinity.
- Little or no access to affordable materials for arts and arts education.
- Fear of displacement stoked by land use speculation on NYCHA property.

## PUBLIC & GREEN SPACES



- Underrepresentation of low-income communities of color in the development of recreational and healthy spaces around canal.
- Inaccessible information about permitting processes needed to use available open and green spaces.
- Inadequate use of public places due to lack of intergenerational, culturally sensitive programming.
- Excessive police profiling in NYCHA open spaces and lack of alternative, community engaged models of policing that do not compromise on safety.

## YOUTH & ARTISTIC RESOURCES



- Disconnection from bigger cultural institutions, funding sources, professional training and creative networks.
- Unavailability of vital learning resources like libraries, computers, after-school programs or recreational centers.
- Shortage of unrestricted spaces for rehearsals, workshops, practice, presentation or artistic collaborations.
- Lack of leadership and mentorship opportunities towards career development.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Seven strategic recommendations towards art and cultural equity have been proposed in response to these issues. They are targeted towards multiple City agencies including the NYC Dept. of City Planning, Dept. of Cultural Affairs, Dept. of Youth & Community Development, NYCHA, Council Member Stephen Levin, Council Member Brad Lander, and others who have been engaged in the vision for equitable urban development and planning in Gowanus.

The values of **cultural equity, social cohesion, spatial justice and belonging** emerged consistently throughout our engagement process and are fundamental to consider in any rezoning process undertaken by the City.

Neighborhoods like Gowanus are especially vulnerable as public housing and rent stabilized tenants comprise 33% of the renter-occupied population.

“For decades these residents and the local organizations that serve them have remained invested in their community when others, including the City and developers, would not. Now these residents find their neighbors have been pushed out and their community centers and institutions are no longer able to stay.” *FAC Survive & Thrive Report*

## 1. (RE)INVEST IN COMMUNITY ASSETS

ALONGSIDE CREATING NEW CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE, INVEST IN MAPPING AND RESTORING EXISTING COMMUNITY CULTURAL ASSETS, NARRATIVES AND SITES.

- ✓ Follow up on the political commitment to re-open Gowanus Houses Community Center and make it truly accessible to *all* residents and neighbors.
  - Provide funding and permits for interim programming, operational costs and staffing until the Cornerstone starts operating.
  - Ensure transparency and input from the resident community in selecting a Cornerstone Group and demystify the process, timeframe and protocols that will be followed.
  - Set up a Community Arts Council that works in close partnership with the Cornerstone Group to determine programming, staffing and leadership. Keep in mind the community preference for a culturally sensitive, African American and/or Latinx American-led group.
- ✓ Formally recognize and give standing to NYCHA community centers as cultural assets for the entire neighborhood. Showcase their creative work through support for cross-sectoral collaborations like Making Gowanus, homegrown productions like ‘Soft’ from Theater of the Liberated, and protect historically significant artistic groups like the Gowanus Wildcats.
- ✓ Leverage the value of community centers as resilient, social arteries during environmental emergencies. The Gowanus Community Center served as a crucial post-Sandy resource to meet the basic needs of residents who lost heat, electricity and hot water.
- ✓ Support expanded language access at community centers to ensure these sites are accessible to



Photo: Making Gowanus Campaign  
Credit: Fifth Avenue Committee

### A LOCAL GEM

The Gowanus Wildcats Drill Team is a not for profit all female drill team that originated in 1970 in the Gowanus Houses Community Center. Renee Flowers (in the photo above), who volunteers her services, is an original member who took over leadership of the drill team in 1972. The intergenerational troupe held their practices in the community center for decades.

tenants with limited English proficiency and from different cultural backgrounds (*No Access Report, CAAAV & Urban Justice Center*)

- ✓ Support public art partnerships with resident artists and groups to amplify the history and cultural richness of local communities. Provide special access for artists to underutilized neighborhood spaces like construction sites, walls of new developments, scaffolding bridges and existing common areas like the Gowanus Canal Waterfront, local parks, and community centers.
- ✓ Design spaces and intergenerational programming to facilitate interaction between longtime residents and new arrivals to the neighborhood. Engage seniors in conducting local history tours, promote collaborative arts projects and performances, and introduce cultural sensitivity trainings.



Gowanus Canal Illustration by Simon Fraser/Eugene Lehnert

## 2. ENSURE SPATIAL ACCESS

ADDRESS SYSTEMIC EXCLUSION OF LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES IN ACCESSING OPEN, PUBLIC AND DEDICATED SPACES TO GATHER, REHEARSE, EXHIBIT, PERFORM AND CONNECT WITH THE WIDER COMMUNITY.

- ✓ Create space-sharing agreements between private and public sector parties that facilitate community uses, as part of the overall public vision/plan for the neighborhood. Leverage the resources of experienced organizations like Spaceworks that are based out of Gowanus.
- ✓ Make improvements to existing open spaces (including Thomas Green Park, St. Mary's Playground, Ennis Playground, and the Salt Lot) with better lighting, safety and accessible design features, when planning for existing needs and anticipated growth (*DCP Places Study*).
- ✓ Creatively program and design open spaces along the canal that are welcoming and publicly accessible to everyone, including low income residents and people of color.
- ✓ Revisit and clarify guidelines that are inequitably enforced or discriminate against certain cultural activities in these spaces, like drumming circles, dancing, skateboarding, barbecuing and music.
- ✓ Consolidate the system of permits and regulations on NYCHA property and hold free trainings to help residents navigate them and develop programming. Provide internal training for staff of City agencies and publicly owned buildings in effective partnering with the public to use these spaces.
- ✓ Make targeted efforts at involving a representative group of residents in an advisory role in planning for space and programs from the very beginning. Commit to involving them in decision making throughout the process.

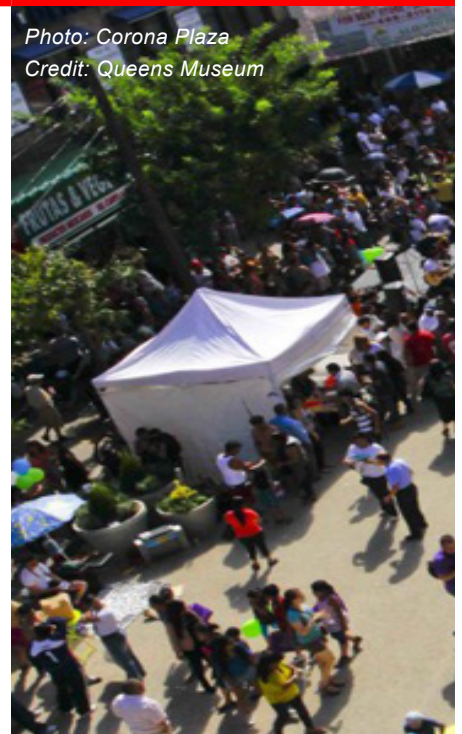
### HEART OF CORONA

An example of long-term, sustainable partnerships that can positively impact shared, open spaces can be found in Corona Plaza in Queens. By bringing together disparate segments of the community, the "Heart of Corona" initiative became an attempt to catalyze the transformation of Corona Plaza from simply a circulatory and commercial center into a site for neighborhood pride, cultural activity, and a space to access health and social services.

In 2006, Queens Museum hired a community organizer familiar with elected officials and community groups in the area, with a long history of immigrant rights advocacy, and ability to speak Spanish. She played a key role in building trust and facilitating communication toward the museum's goals of health and community well being, beautification, programming public spaces, and marketing ethnic eateries and businesses in the area.

- Being a Good Neighbor: Queens Museum of Art's Experiments in Community Engagement, Prerana Reddy, with Tom Finkelppearl and Naila Rosario

Photo: Corona Plaza  
Credit: Queens Museum



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 3. FOCUS ARTS FUNDING

CREATE FUNDING CRITERIA AND MECHANISMS THAT WORK FOR ARTISTS AND CULTURAL PRODUCERS FROM HISTORICALLY MARGINALIZED OR LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES.

- ✓ While making funding decisions or publicizing opportunities, broaden the definition of arts and culture to a diverse range of community cultural expressions and spaces that include immigrant groups, public housing, youth, and creative businesses. Include community leaders on panels.
- ✓ Make the process to apply for small grants less intimidating, cumbersome and confusing for individual artists, groups and smaller community events to gain funding. Allow more avenues for fiscal sponsorship for small collectives or organizations.
- ✓ To access larger grants, create cross-sector networks to facilitate collaborative fundraising between nonprofits, CBOs, artists, residents and City agencies.
- ✓ Use building notice boards, community center boards, windows of small businesses or resident association meetings to make information about space, materials, funding sources and trainings accessible to community members who do not have regular access to computers, the internet, libraries, or connections to conventional arts platforms.
- ✓ Expand participatory budgeting expense funding in order to support arts and cultural projects that do not qualify for capital funding.

“When it comes to getting my art out there into the world, I have no idea where to start. You tell me about all these resources, but I have no idea what you’re talking about - there is a big wall between my world and the art world out there” *Dover, Gowanus Houses Resident and Artist*

## 4. PROTECT CULTURAL ECOSYSTEMS

INTRODUCE MECHANISMS IN THE PLAN THAT PROMOTE CULTURALLY SENSITIVE AND EQUITABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES AND COMMERCE.

- ✓ Prioritize businesses, entrepreneurs, property developers and manufacturers that hire and train local youth, support local artists, small businesses, and provide spaces for local arts groups and organizations.
- ✓ Maintain the cultural heritage and diversity of the neighborhood by preserving naturally occurring cultural hubs that provide affordable goods and services. Retain laundromats, bodegas, 99 cent stores, pharmacies, restaurants, old churches, schools, monuments, parks and athletic spaces that are welcoming and culturally relevant.
- ✓ Provide training and financial support to community leaders and cultural organizers toward the creation of worker cooperatives, community land trusts and other ownership models that can ensure the long-term sustainability of locally-owned and community-run businesses.
- ✓ Incentivize community arts programs based in community centers, churches, soup kitchens and shelters by providing a direct connection to resources like Material for the Arts.



“A lot of cultural wealth has been flowing into Gowanus in the form of artists, funding, education and spaces that have emerged as a result of mindless development. These resources are great, but are inequitably distributed, unaffordable and inaccessible to a diverse population of renters and long-time residents who have a rich cultural history themselves.”  
*Making Gowanus Audience Member*

## 5. BUILD STRONGER RELATIONSHIPS

EMPLOY ARTISTS AND CULTURAL ORGANIZERS TO FACILITATE TRUST BUILDING INITIATIVES AND STREAMLINE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN POLITICAL REPRESENTATIVES, CITY AGENCIES, POLICE OFFICERS, COMMUNITY PARTNERS AND RESIDENTS.

- ✓ Recruit Cultural Ambassadors to act as liaisons between a diverse range of community stakeholders and initiate intergenerational programming to highlight common bonds, shared values, languages and experiences. They can also serve as intermediaries when new participatory processes or cultural projects are introduced to the neighborhood in order to ensure continuity, inclusivity and accountability.
- ✓ Include and engage residents more meaningfully over time, tapping local collaborations and partnerships, and not as a token gesture. Hire cultural organizers that have their finger on the pulse locally/are experts.
- ✓ Highlight and support art from the “inside” as a priority beyond only bringing in “outside artists” into public housing. Develop ethical agreements with artists and cultural organizations to ensure a long-term presence in the community, alongside appropriate training for them to engage democratically and equitably with the neighborhood.
- ✓ Employ the services of local artists to nurture healthier relationships and understanding between police officers and residents.
- ✓ Partner with Gowanus-based organizations like the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP) to conduct civic engagement workshops and use artistic tools to demystify confusing or contradictory information, complex policies, and regulations that tend to be a source of misunderstanding between various stakeholders.

## 6. NURTURE YOUTH LEADERSHIP

PROVIDE ACCESS TO CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS, ARTS EDUCATION, ARTISTIC MENTORSHIP AND LEADERSHIP TRAINING FOR YOUTH.

- ✓ Develop long-term partnerships with neighboring institutions like the YMCA, BRIC, Brooklyn Museum, and smaller organizations like Textile Arts Center, Gowanus Canal Conservancy etc. to provide arts education, internships, and local opportunities for skill building and mentorship.
- ✓ Locate an Arts Incubator within NYCHA premises as a permanent and intergenerational space for artist residencies, trainings, community-based arts projects, resources, community grant writing, as well as exhibitions, performances, workshops and talks.
- ✓ Organize Youth Councils to participate in decision making processes and leadership positions in community centers, associations and neighborhood partnerships to nurture a sense of ownership, keep youth creatively engaged and supplement resident associations, which tend to be older.

“Fostering leadership in public housing residents to curate programming through a stipended Arts Council has very positively transformed the way our own organizations function and think about curation, arts programming and meaningful collaboration with community members” *University Settlement and BRIC, NOCD-NY Creative Transformations: Art, Culture and Public Housing Peer Learning Exchange.*



### MAKING GOWANUS

*In 2017, a representative group of community and cultural leaders from within and outside NYCHA housing in Gowanus were brought together by Hester Street, NOCD-NY, Arts Gowanus, CM Brad Lander and CM Stephen Levin. Together, the team developed a resource-sharing model and combined their visions to support a series of community-led intergenerational workshops that led into a campaign for the re-opening of the Gowanus Community Center by the Gowanus Neighborhood Coalition for Justice. The initiative resulted in the birth of the Theater of the Liberated and temporarily revived the activities of the Gowanus Wildcats.*

*Photo: Youth from Gowanus, Warren and Wyckoff Houses perform at BRIC. “Soft” was a homegrown piece produced by the Theater of the Liberated.*

*Credit: Maulin Mehta/ Hester Street*



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 7. PROMOTE HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

ESTABLISH MULTIDISCIPLINARY PROGRAMS THAT RECOGNIZE THE LINK BETWEEN CULTURAL RESOURCES, NEIGHBORHOOD HEALTH, AND SOCIAL WELLBEING.

- ✓ Strengthen culturally sensitive mental health services for residents using services such as CHiPS and Baltic Street AEH, Inc., etc. Support counseling for teens, drug awareness and nutrition wellness programs that are rooted in the specific problems faced by low income residents in Gowanus (see pg.3).
- ✓ Acknowledge and leverage the creativity of homeless artists through wellness-oriented cultural programming and spaces for creative healing. Introduce higher standards for shelters, including clothing, ID and shower programs. Increase the quality-of-food standards at soup kitchens and shelters, and provide incentives for churches serving the homeless community.
- ✓ Focus programming at the Gowanus community center towards activities that encourage holistic wellness, including meditation, Tai Chi, yoga & art therapy.
- ✓ Develop evaluation frameworks that measure success taking into account a broader definition of arts, culture, health and resilience, and are responsive to the social context of low-income, multi-cultural communities. Also support evaluation that can be beyond the means of artists and community based organizations.

“Cultural engagement is a form of intentional social action- it represents an opportunity to develop counter-narratives to the structural forces that determine individual and community wellbeing.”

*Social Impact of the Arts Projects, Culture & Social Wellbeing in NYC (2017)*

**PRIMARY REFERENCES:** Cultural Blueprint for Healthy Communities engagements with Gowanus Neighborhood Coalition for Justice, Making Gowanus & Theater of the Liberated: Soft cast and audience, and CHiPS, Bridging Gowanus, Making Gowanus, PLACES Study, Survive & Thrive Report, Creative Transformations Report and meetings, CreateNYC, No Access Report

**Report Edited by** Caron Atlas & Tom Oesau

**Feedback from** Renee Flowers, Tracey Pinkard & Imani Gayle Gillison

**Collages by** residents from Gowanus, Wyckoff & Warren Houses during the Making Gowanus All-Arts Forum, Imani Gayle Gillison

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For more information and to download the Cultural Blueprint tool, log on to [www.culturalblueprint.org](http://www.culturalblueprint.org)

Photo: Imani Gayle Gillison facilitating conversations at CHiPS using the Blueprint tool (on the right)

