

Feb 27, 2017

New York City Council
Oversight Hearing on the Cultural Plan

Dear City Council members,

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to this question of the NYC Cultural Plan and the process to date. I attended several of the events held, namely the one in Brooklyn at Bric and one held in Harlem at Harlem Stage on 135 Street. I also attended a NY Community Trust event held at Museo del Barrio to which I wrote a response statement. It was a clear to me from that event what was being overlooked and that unfortunately, has continued.

A systems approach to fixing the structural patterns by which funds are allocated fails to zoom in and see how, under conditions of racial and cultural neglect, the arts are actually transmitted. The skills, devotion, gifts and remarkable achievements of individuals who persists under such conditions - their value are taken for granted by a 'fix the system' approach. Thus the accumulated body of knowledge, especially of people of color community organizations were referred to at the NYCT meeting as simply a natural life cycle in decline. I ask, how can this life cycle be considered natural when inequitable funding practices were in force? Is this not what "A Tale of Two Cities" referred to? Consider the body of knowledge cultural organizations in communities of color have evolved. Can the city really afford to disregard their value for the future of our city? I suggest such organizations need to be recognized for their importance to successfully transition to a more equitable New York City.

Although I feel it remarkable that this effort to create a comprehensive cultural plan is laudable even remarkable, I am disheartened that DCLA is entrusted with the task of creating it. The opportunity to reverse forty years of cultural neglect - this responsibility should not be given to the organization that perpetrated such policies. Racial and cultural neglect along with welfare for the rich has become a norm. so much so that it becomes extremely difficult even to imagine the changes a cultural plan needs to adapt. How then to begin.

A People's Cultural Plan as an alternative to the NYCInspires process is being written as we speak. I have the pleasure and the honor to introduce the first page introduction to this People's Plan as an attachment to my testimony. Other sections will be made public later. I'll mention a few. I've already spoken of cultural equity, but what about justice in housing? Land Use - real estate - the master and destroyers of our neighborhoods without which we would have no culture. Working-class people of color - the systematic exploitation of all low-wage workers including the unpaid labor of artists. These sections and others of a People's Cultural Plan are being prepared indicating how central the arts are to the key issues of our neighborhoods and communities.

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Last night on the Academy Awards we saw a near mistake corrected before our eyes. The reality that the film Moonlight had won Best Picture was accepted as real by the director, Barry Jenkins, following Warren Beatty's pre-remark that "truth is the aim of both art and politics". In the middle, before apologies were made for the error, we heard someone from La La Land accept the award and claim the importance of dreams.

Big institutions with big dreams and finances do not actually serve the people, do not empower them to create the truth of a real culture.

Don't make a mistake. Seize the moment. Its time to strike out on a path where culture, real culture, is at the heart and truth of neighborhoods and our city.

Thank You.
Robert Lee

The People's Cultural Plan for Working Artists and Communities in New York City

Inequity in arts and culture is a persistent problem in New York City. The worsening climate of fear, intolerance, and fascism, especially affecting people of color, must be countered with more than lip service in support of diversity: Only by implementing true equity in all city policies will the most vulnerable be protected from the multiple crises facing our communities. As a sanctuary city, any cultural plan must be supportive of the lives and contributions of communities of color and immigrants.

Displacement and gentrification are the greatest threats to culture in NYC, because culture is rooted in place, and skyrocketing rent threatens to displace working class black communities and communities of color, working artists, and underfunded arts organizations. The contracting of real estate development firms James Lima Planning + Development and BJH Advisors LLC as NYC Cultural Plan consultants indicates that yet again, arts and culture are being used as a Trojan Horse to usher in still more gentrification and displacement. **We demand a plan that calls for the elimination of these pro-developer policies and rezonings, for an immediate rent freeze, and for the development of more just rent control policies at the State and City levels.**

The exploitation of artists and other low-wage workers has always been a threat to culture in NYC, but in combination with the housing crisis, that threat places most artists, especially those who are working-class people of color, close to their breaking point. From low-wage workers servicing museums, to underpaid administrators of nonprofit organizations, to the unpaid labor of artists—workers across the supply chain contribute to making the arts a multi-billion dollar industry. **We demand a plan that insures equitable and adequate wages and employee benefits and protections to artists and workers in the field of culture, and additional supports to artists and workers of color**

Cultural funding is among the most inequitably distributed resources in NYC, and the policies of the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA) exacerbate that inequity by giving nearly 60% of its funding to Manhattan alone out of the five boroughs, and almost 80% of its funding to only 33 of the 1,000+ organizations funded. Inadequate funding to poor neighborhoods – and austerity in public services generally – operates in tandem with real estate development schemes to displace communities; inadequate funding to small and POC-run organizations makes it difficult to pay adequate wages and artist fees. **We demand a plan with generous and equitable public cultural funding that directs all increases in DCLA funding to the neighborhoods, organizations, and artists who need it the most, rather than to institutions that are already receiving generous allocations, many of which are not adequately serving the communities they purport to.**

We, the people, demand a cultural plan with concrete policies to: 1. End displacement and gentrification in NYC; 2. Insure equitable wages for artists and cultural workers; 3. Distribute public funding equitably; and 4. Provide additional supports to communities, organizations, and artists of color.

We further demand that changes in funding and housing policies be subject to community control – that the neighborhoods to be affected by policy changes determine the specifics. The most crucial component of equity is equity in power and in decision-making, and we will accept nothing less.