

# LOISAIDA CULTURAL PLAN

## Findings & Recommendations

Submitted to the New York City Cultural Agenda Fund in  
The New York Community Trust  
By Loisaída, Inc. for the City of New York

May 2017

*“Collective mural overlooking La Plaza Cultural addresses theme of gentrification in 1985 through negative, critical images of life all too real in Loisaída dominating the left side: a homeless family, an eviction, a wrecking ball destroying a building whose residents fled to the fire escape. Positive, affirming images fill the right side: a windmill, a solar panel rooftop, sweat equity workers undertaking building renovations, a community cultural center, and a local market. In the center, a large crystal ball holds hopeful images for the future: the promise of “housing now”, female construction workers, and young children playing in a lush community garden, which indeed La Plaza has become.”*

*-La Lucha Continúa The Struggle Continues 1985 & 2017, exhibition catalog.*



Artmakers Collective, *La Lucha Continúa / The Struggle Continues*, 1985, Eva Cockcroft, project leader, 30' x 40', oil on tar, La Plaza Cultural, Loisaída. (c) Artmakers Inc. Photo (c) Camille Perrottet.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge our Project Steering Committee comprised of leaders with diverse expertise who helped guide this project and made the process of engagement, research, discussion, and discovery, exciting and successful. **Libertad Guerra**, committee chair, Director of Loisaida Inc. Center, curator, anthropologist; **Ed Morales**, journalist, cultural critic, Nuyorican poet; **Elizabeth Colón**, one of the original founders of Loisaida, Inc., policymaker and local resident, and **Andrea Gordillo**, NYU graduate student, writer, filmmaker, and local resident.

Special thanks to **José Serrano-McClain** for his commitment, analytical mind, and for his studio of NYU students that so diligently and professionally assisted Loisaida, Inc. as it implemented the various focus groups, Town Halls, and Retreat events.

And special thanks to all our participants and collaborators who contributed to this project.

## TESTIMONY

*“I lived in Loisaida for 15 years in the 80s and 90s till the turn of the century and I witnessed the big changes in the neighborhood but one thing remained constant, the vitality and importance of the unique racial and cultural mosaic of the neighborhood that was essential to everyday life and the explosion of institutions like Loisaida, Inc. and Nuyorican Poets Café, the Agueybaná Bookstore, CHARAS, and so many other short-lived, and long term spaces of cultural creation. I saw how well-meaning community activists partnered with residents, formally and informally to create the aesthetic that today is recognized as Downtown. In spite of the considerable forces that conspired to take away our public and private spaces of art creation, the spirit of the neighborhood never died and lives on in places like the Loisaida Center, in public housing community centers, in the community gardens and even the walls that are reserved for memorial murals. While our numbers have been somewhat reduced by gentrification, we are still here in large numbers and we need to work with like-minded cultural creators and institutions that want to preserve the low-rise, DIY spirit of community arts by local groups and prevent the Lower East Side from becoming a museum of no-longer-with-us idealized ethnic and racial minorities, banished to forgotten memories of boarded-up tenements.”*

*Ed Morales*

*Journalist, Cultural critic, Nuyorican poet*

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# INTRODUCTION

*“The Downtown Latinx is more of a loose network, a series of bridges that ensure that the Latinx arts community thrives here. I think that physical spaces are important. To be 1,000 percent honest, Loisaida, this block right here [9th Street], is the only place in Lower Manhattan where I feel Latino.” - Anthony, 25.*

Anthony Rosado has lived most of his life right across the Williamsburg bridge in Brooklyn, and knows that Loisaida carries a cultural truth he’s always tried to get ahold of. Like other local residents, he had the desire to keep the spirit of his neighborhood alive—he just needed the space and vision to do it. Over a period of six months Loisaida, Inc. and project partners brought together hundreds of residents, community leaders of all ages, and cultural workers and artists like Anthony to express their opinions, observations, and fears regarding the future of Latinx and people of color on the Lower East Side.

On an early spring night this March, Anthony and peers were afforded the opportunity to respond, offer solutions and make recommendations about how to avoid a kind of invisibility that seemed almost inevitable. They were intent on formulating a way to see culture as a right, not a privilege; that every resident had a ‘right to the city.’ It was an attempt to establish a Cultural Citizen Bill of Rights that declares an inalienable right to cultural and artistic expression that would 1) ensure the protection and ownership of cultural sanctuaries and spaces, 2) demand cultural equity in accessing Fair Share funding across all City agencies and 3) strengthen and sustain Loisaida neighborhood based cultural organizations that advocate for Latinx and POC residents, artists and cultural workers.

This new energy, shared by community members of all stripes was carefully channeled to elicit a much needed local analysis and vision that would confront vital issues of bias, exclusion, and erosion of neighborhood cultural life-lines through a need-based infusion of resources and increased allocation of Culture-sustaining funds. This new approach is a necessary and timely initiative to protect the future of our Latinx and people of color, in this community and remove the the limiting and at times inappropriate use of Western European aesthetic standards that determine what kind of culture and art in is worth preserving. It’s becoming increasingly clear that neighborhood residents understand the necessity of asserting their interests in the battle over who gets the lion’s share of the public funding - both capital and expense allocations - determining who gets to increase their footprint, stature, and power.

This document offers a significant and perhaps crucial gathering of information and testimony that Loisaida, Inc. was able to garner in the process to seize the moment of opportunity afforded by the City’s visionary effort to address the problem of cultural equity. Community engagement provides residents with an open door to express their vision of an expanded, more inclusive definition of culture. We wish to alert the offices of the Commissioner of the Department of Cultural Affairs that the solutions to the evident *separate and not equal history* of decades of benign neglect, racism, and discrimination suffered by the Latinx and POC artistic and cultural community, and that the solution requires listening to the needs and concerns of those affected. While acknowledging the serious commitment of the Administration to include our voices in the Cultural Plan, it requires constant oversight to ensure compliance so that the Latinx and POC core communities are included.

## HISTORY & CONTEXT

*“I think the LES has a bigger burden to enforce a right to culture, which includes food, language, music, and arts. Culture is very broad. Loisaida has contributed to the Puerto Rican community, the Latino community, the Downtown Art Scene. The origins of Spanglish came from the Lower East Side--AmeRiCan. It informed the rest of the world.” – Jeremy Del Rio, Thrive Collective.*

In the early 1970’s, Bimbo Rivas coined the word Loisaida in a powerful poem, which carried a Spanglish reimagining of the immigrant crucible of the Lower East Side and launched a movement of pride and ownership of a cultural geography in Manhattan that had become the home to thousands of Puerto Ricans and later other Latinx after WWII. The great Puerto Rican Migration had finally imprinted their identity on its streets, in its schools and housing developments, on its walls and in the hearts and minds of Downtown Manhattan. Avenue C was later renamed Loisaida Avenue by an act of the NYC Council and in recognition of Loisaida Inc., established in 1979, and the many neighborhood artists and activists such as Bimbo, Tato Laviera and Dora Collazo Levy.

Like El Barrio/Spanish Harlem, Los Sures of Williamsburg, and the South Bronx, Loisaida is a “core community” for Latinx, not only because of its demographics but also as a result of a kind of “tropicalization” that creates a virtual homeland through the cultural generation of ‘place’ and the production of the spoken word, literature, music, visual art, and other urban Latinx forms of creativity.

A “core community” is a mixture of public spaces that fosters the creation of art, music, dance, poetry, and theater, as well as small Latinx businesses that sell Latin American products and advertise bilingually cultural events, creating a space for the casual conversations and street-level bonding that manifests the community’s “flavor” and character over the years. A “core community” revolves around the creation of a collective identity; a process of community development and determination that has been and continues to be confronted with the constant formidable challenges of discrimination, bias, and cultural inequity, and the threat of gentrification and displacement.

The neighborhood of Loisaida is defined by a living language of culture and commerce, a hybrid ecosystem imbued with Caribbean and Latin American spiritual and emotional energy; the neighborhood is the fusion of migrants’ ancestral homelands and the heavily layered and ethnic-based LES immigrant-built history and lore, which is struggling to persist along with the rest of the City’s endangered neighborhoods.

Culture and identity are processes rooted in self, struggle, and place; a weaving of experiences and histories, diverse contributions to the distinct imprints of a neighborhood over time, and the ongoing practice of respecting and enacting a kind of Cultural Citizenship. We envision our collective efforts as a crucial form of place-keeping: a strategy of preventing displacement, supporting and encouraging cultural equity, and of safeguarding the character and cultural citizenship of community residents.



## Towards a New York City Cultural Citizenship Bill of Rights

*“I believe there is a problem with perception. In my lifetime, Tato [Laviera], and others [artists], were seen as part of the community. Now, this dominant, commercial culture sees the artist as exceptional, not your neighbor. Our ability to access resources for our core neighborhood educators and artists is then jeopardized.” - Thea Martínez, Artist and Educator*

Latinx and people of color are part of this City. It is imperative to construct New York’s future without erasing our past or whitewashing our present. In the face of what we on the ground have seen and experienced, what is trending begs the question: Will this be the decade when historical Latinx core neighborhoods become casualties of unbridled and myopic development? Are we entering a time of larger Latinx numbers citywide yet given this potential displacement, a dispersed Latinx population in which the legacies of our Barrios, our living imprint in this city, are terminated, and ultimately extinguished?

In the 21st century, New York identity is expanding to include an urban identity of color, something shared by Latinxs, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Muslims, LGBTQ-identified, and mainstream Anglo city dwellers who share in its aesthetic practices. For Urban Latinx it is an opportunity to step into their well-earned space to create a new urban social practice that is as much in response to urban planning, as it is in taking a defensive position against exclusion and cultural anonymity. By combining traditions and culture from the homeland and creating new forms of urban artistic expression *Loisaidans* survived the period of blatant disinvestment of 1970s through the 1980s. Latinx in similar situations around the City used this imaginative process to take on a new urban identity.

These grassroots efforts to create, build, and thrive were formidable, historic, and empowering, but they were too often misunderstood, and later came under constant threat by outside real estate speculation that capitalized on their cultural value and artistic expression while in the process displacing them.

*“When you’re talking about a right to culture, it’s both historical and current. To me what resonates is that we always sit on this fine line in between. There’s always the matter of preserving and celebrating what has come before, and then there is a constant dynamic of change that we all create.” – Jamie Rogers, Chair of CB#3*

To borrow from French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, *Loisaidans* are realizing the need to demand a “right to the city” given the scars of historical disinvestment and current real estate hyper-speculation, rampant displacement and community/cultural alienation, we embrace this notion of *right to the city* as not just about preserving the neighborhood as cobbled-together properties of abstract real estate, but about the residents holding on to the spaces that came to be claimed and constructed by the them after decades of abandonment by public funding and support,

rejecting the opportunistic repossession of those spaces by private developers and speculators that accelerated gentrification.

By claiming the *right to the city* as living space for long-time residents, as working and commercial spaces at reasonable cost for our small businesses and cultural workers, as *fair share* funding for our community and its arts and cultural organizations and programs, as access to our local community schools and NYCHA community centers, and so much more, *we claim the right to remain in our core neighborhoods in the center of the city*. Our residents do not wish to be marginalized and dispersed to the periphery of this city, as they are entitled to the “full rights,” economic opportunities, cultural and artistic access to what is clearly underwritten by and/or facilitated with City funding and accorded equitably to the inhabitants of the core neighborhoods in the center of this Global City.

As stated in the recent University of Pennsylvania Social Impact of the Arts (SIAP) Research Project: *Culture and Social Wellbeing in New York City*, ‘Culture is a right, not a privilege,’ which is a point, they noted, that had been well established in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Latinx and communities of color need to embark upon the process of claiming our right to culture and right to the city to reverse our invisibility, and stop the displacement of our people, ‘places,’ cultural sanctuaries, histories, and the minimization of our contributions to culture and this city. By organizing to impact policy and resource allocation as it relates to our arts and culture, and community based organizations, which are the front-line in the battle against the erosion of our neighborhoods, we aim to protect against the displacement of our residents, the imposition of an elitist view of art creation, and the Eurocentric definition of culture and art.

*“I worked at one of the 33 CIGs. We need to have a common vocabulary and understanding. Diversity does not equal inclusion. Diversity=‘invited to the dance,’ Inclusion=‘asked to dance.’”*

*Anita Romero Warren, Clemente Center*

We seek to breach and expand the definition of what is legitimate art and culture as imposed by the dominant not-for-profit art institutions. This shortsighted appraisal of sanctioned art has quantified the worth and impact of arts and culture mostly in terms of what enhances their own organizational growth, balance sheet, and stature. Their widgets are headcounts of tourists and visitors. Many are devoid of community connection and rarely if ever collaborate, feature or support core neighborhood artists and organizations. They ignore the essential importance of neighborhood and community based art creation by POC, denying hundreds of thousand of City residents their right to culture, and their right to the City.

There are also other values that are essential for local community-based cultural organizations that large mainstream cultural institutions are ill-suited to generate and support: social cohesion and wellbeing, a sense of pride in the knowledge of one’s culture and heritage, civic-engagement and community building. These are all quantifiable assets created by the work that grassroots initiatives and smaller scale community-based organizations of color fulfill. These are the community anchors



that defend and protect a neighborhood's character as well as build youth self-esteem, bring joy to seniors, keep families together, and provide culturally and linguistically competent and innovative artistic expression that is culturally rooted.

## Building a Loisaida Cultural Network

*"[In the 70s & 80s] there was a gathering of artists that created an organization-Loisaida, but could not present their art and talents as a sanctioned element of the new community development group, so they had to cloak it with primarily programs they could get funding for. But in between, they would do Salsa at Zold's Plaza and dynamic community engagement through music, street organizing voter registration and poetry. It [the cultural heart] was hidden. People worked in these agencies, and they did their cultural and artistic work as part of everything, while they were helping people get housing and healthcare. They didn't see the separation, but conventional funding sources and traditional evaluators did."*

*Elizabeth Colón, Founding member Loisaida, Inc.*

In the decades after World War II, the Lower East Side went from being the City's gateway for poor immigrants from across the Atlantic, serving as first home to generations of future Americans, to a landing community for the thousands of Puerto Rican migrants, who were already American citizens, but nonetheless as poor as the immigrants that preceded them in generations past. Large numbers of Puerto Rican migrants also settled in Chelsea, Manhattan Valley, East Harlem, Williamsburg, and later the South Bronx. The Lower East Side and its diverse ethnic (Jewish, Italian, Polish, Irish) and political constituencies, however, made it renowned for its activism, political clout, retail businesses, theatres and entertainment. In the 1960s and 1970s, the alternative cultures of Hippies, Punks, downtown artists, and a vibrant Latinx culture (mostly Puerto Rican, but also Dominican) of social clubs, sidewalk domino games, storefront churches, botánicas and bodegas gave it an incredibly creative cultural landscape. These are the building blocks of what has come to be known as Loisaida.

The Lower East Side/Loisaida is a place that has become the iconic representation of the Anti-Suburb, the last stand against the mall-ification of sterile urban America; the ground zero of urban resistance movements; and perhaps fittingly given its "Downtown" edge, one of the first neighborhoods to come under siege by the gentrification wave of the late 1980s. But despite having struggled with and against gentrification for decades, but we are still here. The Clemente Soto Vélaz Cultural Center - with whom we partner - was founded in the early 90s, and is still a hub for global cultural production; it houses Teatro SEA, the premiere Latinx Children's Theatre in the United States and the only one remaining in Manhattan; regular theatrical productions and art exhibitions, despite becoming increasingly surrounded by chic restaurants and cafés for tourists and gentrifiers.

For now, embattled community arts centers in public housing still provide spaces, albeit dilapidated ones, for children and seniors; sanctioned murals spray-painted on walls mark our presence, and alternative galleries and small music spaces live sporadic existences. The Nuyorican Poets Café, the birthplace of a national movement of marginalized people performing spoken word poetry, is still maintains a vital pulse, ensconced deep in the heart of the neighborhood.

Although the new Loisaida Center builds on Loisaida Inc.'s history of activism and leadership in education, arts and culture, and community development, it is still in its formative stages of redevelopment. Loisaida, Inc. has survived an almost lethal blow that threatened to destroy a once formidable organization. In 2007 Loisaida Inc. faced eviction from its original base of operations at the 710 East 9th Street building, then a City-owned property. The building had been offered up for sale to developers in a neighborhood that was rapidly gentrifying. Loisaida Inc. had no alternative space options and would be losing its funding for want of space to provide any programming.

However, with strong organizing and local community and leadership support, Community Board #3 unanimously passed a resolution in support of Loisaida, Inc. that required that it the organization be made part of any development plan or use for the property and return to its original home in the property with the same amount of space that it had before the eviction - 10,000 square feet. Loisaida was fortuitous in this case, but many Latinx community-based organizations of note in the Lower East Side and around the City no longer exist.

Loisaida Inc. Center is currently the only Latinx-run cultural community center remaining from that era of grassroots activism in which poets and street theater artists, professionals and amateurs were vital community organizers and builders. It symbolizes a last stand of an era that tried to bring together art, politics, and an urban people of color aesthetic to maintain the spirit of the Loisaida space.

# PROJECT METHODOLOGY PROCESS & EVENTS

## Achieving Consensus: What Cultural Equity Must Look Like

The Roadside Theater defines cultural equity as the right all people have to inherit and develop their intellectual, emotional, material, and spiritual traditions.<sup>1</sup> For many decades, activists have worked to articulate this definition into the policy and planning vernacular. Over the past six months, Loisaida, Inc. and project team have been living this concept at the neighborhood-level.

The outreach and engagement methodology for Loisaida's Cultural Equity Planning project included four community participatory events (two town halls and three focus groups-targeting cultural workers and artists, residents and local leaders), as well as an end of project retreat involving the Loisaida project steering committee and partners and a studio of students working on various elements in support of the process. Two questionnaires were created and administered in order to survey neighborhood residents and art practitioners/cultural workers.

While no single methodology element results would have been enough, collectively they served to build a representative body of evidence from a Latinx and/or Lower East Side perspective on the link between culture, civil society, and well-being. They also revealed the many obstacles our residents and cultural workers face daily as they see themselves losing ground in their own neighborhood and mourning the loss of cultural sanctuaries, spaces, Latinx cultural and community based groups that are the frontline activists and advocates protecting the rights of residents.

The project team achieved consensus in defining terms relative to the central theme of Cultural Equity and the difficult reality as it relates to New York City.

To deal effectively with Cultural Equity in New York City we must:

- Come to grips with the overwhelming whiteness of most existing art and academic institutions.
- Hold these institutions accountable to their own public missions, and work to stop the public funding of exclusion.
- Agree and demand that artists should never be used as, or become tools of gentrification, displacement and dispossession.
- Understand that working artists, local longterm small businesses, and manufacturers face similar commercial rent increases, and should find ways of collaborating and realign as a sector.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://roadside.org/program/cultural-equity-defining-issue-21st-century>

- Support and protect locally-based arts and cultural organizations that are Latinx based and led that are vital to neighborhood fabric and civic engagement. As a category, these people of color (POC) controlled community arts and building organizations should receive funding in the manner that larger arts and culture organizations (i.e. museums) enjoy--operational and baselined funding rather than project based funding.
- Develop and implement ways of redirecting resources in solidarity with broader community anchors of neighborhood character.
- Include and enfranchise the cultural labor of 'non-artists' and diversity of expressions.
- Reduce and decentralize city bureaucracies and re-allocate support for neighborhood self-determined cultural and artistic initiatives conducted by local core neighborhood POC organizations..

More specifically and relevant to the history and character of the neighborhood, our participant group of stakeholders clearly established that:

- the Loisaida neighborhood's historical tradition of pragmatic and ecological undertakings through significant initiatives - such as the sweat equity and homesteading movement, in which residents restored properties to use as their own living spaces-and some with street-level commercial spaces, should continue to be affordable in perpetuity, and not become part of the gentrification economy;
- the Community Garden and Casitas movement -which preserved the imprint of local residents on the fabric of the neighborhood streets - must be preserved and supported;
- the Community Mural movement, which provided powerful cultural markers by homegrown muralists and others, should be protected and documented,
- Institutions such as Loisaida, Inc., The Clemente, and SEA receive special designation, funding and resources to be the living repositories of the Lower East Side Latinx core community arts and cultural legacy, working with a broader coalition of organizations and like-minded service providers to work together against displacement and to protect the rights of residents to culture and place in this city.
- these experiences should help to frame the context to flesh out our LES community recommendations and proposed solutions.

Some of the key topics in the initial discussion were centered on developing a more layered understanding of the intersection of art and social change for funding reform to strike a balance between the creative dynamism of unpredictable outcomes, and the rigor of measurable demands. The City needs to envision a new model of metrics criteria based on long term initiatives and preservation of the cultural integrity of neighborhood established by legacy residents in order to enable progress in how structural racism plays out in the non-profit arts and culture world.

- It was agreed that there must be a shift from the current practice of dissecting and fragmenting cultural work in communities of color into separate spaces/boxes, i.e. of education, healthcare, human rights, or arts.

- It was recognized that all of these issues above (culture, education, healthcare, human rights, the arts) are intrinsically connected and tied to one another.
- There was agreement on the need to validate action at every level, and a need to recognize that our work is interconnected in an ecosystem that embraces change.
- There was agreement about how the question of “social impact” is fundamentally inseparable from the act of creativity. Creativity and its effect on the world are bound together, therefore art and impact are interdependent rather than at odds.
- The group also concluded that there is a need for more responsive and accurate techniques to measure participation; and that these must look beyond the focus on benchmarked arts disciplines, passive audiences, and formal arts venues.

As a Community Arts Fund grantee, Loisaída Inc. set out to explore the issue of funding inequity from the perspective of a neighborhood ecosystem in which neighborhoods act as their own cultural developers, equip residents with the ability to express themselves and engage in the civic process that decides policy and budget to ensure that all city agencies are accountable to the legacies and values endemic to the neighborhoods they serve.

The core values as presented by participants were as follows:

immigrant friendly	LES DIY spirit	respect
reciprocity	open community spaces	community muralism
sweat equity	grassroots	community building/organizing
preservation	historical awareness	build on both old and new
reclaiming, urban ecology experimentation	proactivity	participation
consistency	collaborative spaces	sharing of resources

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following represents a synthesis of the various event discussions, comments, observations, as well as the overall recommendations that this significant community input process produced on behalf of the Loisaída/Lower East Side community.

We offer them confidently, in the spirit of collaboration, and with a commitment to continue to work with the Administration, DCLA, the City Council, as well as with the many residents, cultural workers and artists that we motivated to participate, and became engaged in this planning process.

## Metrics/Funding Reform:

**There must be a seismic shift in the way this City and DCLA values core community arts and cultural organizations** for the purposes of funding and resource allocation. The current conventional framework of metrics must be changed to support Latinx and POC organizations with longer funding time frames, and unrestricted general operating support to strengthen and ensure their sustainability based on a *neighborhood ecosystem approach* that revolves around growing and preserving local/grassroots culture.

**The allocation of dedicated base-lined funds will stabilize** a diverse and inclusive arts sector of community based organizations using cultural practices and emergent artists; this -in turn- will expand the narrow definition of sanctioned arts and approach “social impact” and well-being as fundamentally inseparable from the act of creativity.

**The value of culturally-specific arts organizations should be measured in ways that reflect the organization’s organic relationship with the communities they serve**, for example:

- Consider qualitative evidence of how the organization values the existing leadership in the community they serve.
- Consider how the organization promotes narratives that affirm the leadership and cultural legacies of that community.

Latinx, POC core community, and culturally competent organizations with demonstrated leadership and accountability records require investment in their human capital and administrative capacity over time. This is needed to support and sustain their development, and the cultivation of other funding strategies to supplement public funding.

## Neighborhood Ecosystem:

**The City must direct a fair portion of its tourism tax revenue, workforce development, small business services, community economic development, and the arts 1–2 percent** infrastructure/development fund to public arts funds and projects that invest in: arts and culture organizations, facilities capital and equipment needs, and programming in low income and working class communities and communities of color.

**The City Administration must decriminalize cultural expressions of otherness in public spaces** –such as improvised music/drumming sessions in public parks– for this limits the scope of established cultural festivals and street events. Instead, it should approach these as an extension of the neighborhood and the city’s social fabric. A permitting process that can support the performative nature of community culture expressed through art, music, dance, the spoken word, and other intergenerational performance elements in public spaces should be developed and formalized. At a time where ‘stop and frisk’ is history, cultural expression by POC must be emancipated. (See [Loisaida Festival](#))



**Tap into the energy of spontaneous local cultural expression** on weekends for example within a given time frame and place, creates opportunities for local celebratory manifestations that foster social cohesion and well being. Hosting events and other programming in parks provide the opportunity to tell the historical and cultural stories of underserved communities. (See Loisaida's [Theater Lab](#))

**The Administration, DCLA and other City agencies should fund cultural collaborations with social service and social justice sector**, i.e. (environmental, education - DOE and DYCD, health-DOHMH, and legal systems-DAs, Courts).

**The Administration and DCLA should institute a project to map under-recognized and non traditional Latinx and POC cultural assets**, resources, spaces, events, and cultural centers, with accurate histories and celebration of these communities to include in all City marketing and visitors propaganda. Each borough can follow suite in their efforts and DCLA can outline and layout cultural investment along with cultural preservation strategies along those lines.

### Media Justice/ Communications/ Visibility:

**We propose that the Administration support and fund public humanities projects that generate living archives, renewed historical interpretations of neglected legacies of Puerto Rican and Latinx cultural and civic contributions to neighborhood identities** in this City. These initiatives should be led by partnerships between culturally competent scholars, core community based cultural organizations with access to historical and vernacular archives and key individuals, as well as relevant institutions willing to provide the technical capacity for the formal archival process. (See collaboration between Loisaida and Artmakers' [La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues](#) archival exhibition)

**Neighborhood ecologies need resources for media production that today are granted almost exclusively to large institutions.** DCLA should fund equipment as it does for program grants to address a technology blockage and digital divide that exists in working class Latinx and POC communities to energize and democratize the creation, distribution and consumption of work from local creatives and emergent Latinx artists. (See Loisaida's [El Semillero](#)).

### Information Equity: Strategic Recommendations for City-Administered Data and Media:

#### **Coordinate a shared data platform for neighborhood-level cultural information**

It is proposed that City, with DCLA coordinating efforts, seek and allocate funding towards development and maintenance of a shared data platform, feeding into the City's Open Data portal, with real-time information on neighborhood-level arts activities, event pages, cultural journalism, artist resources and registries, and neighborhood-level cultural asset maps. This data platform should be powered by an open content management system, allowing independent practitioners and neighborhood-serving cultural organizations of a variety of scales to freely upload information. The information should be moderated by a combination of the efforts of platform volunteers, trusted community partners, and the support of dedicated DCLA staff (as well as automated platform functions that lead to high quality data).

**Coordinate distribution of neighborhood-level cultural info through a variety of new media platforms.** As the City increasingly invests in smart infrastructure and supports the growth of municipal digital services, it is proposed that DCLA develop a strategic plan and coordinate efforts to leverage those platforms to support the promotion and accessibility of marketing content for neighborhood-level cultural organizations.

On behalf of these organizations, It is proposed that DCLA leverage franchise agreements with municipal media companies and city-administered digital platforms, including:

- coordinating access to the City’s allotted screen time on the LinK NYC network;
- coordinating the dissemination of cultural content through new municipal wi-fi hotspots, including the sign-on page for access to those networks;
- coordinating the development and maintenance of information on the Open Data portal to power content for local platforms like [neighborhoods.nyc](https://neighborhoods.nyc.gov) and nycGo.

Additionally, it is proposed that the City promote opportunities for the civic tech startup community to develop new apps and services that build on the free availability of neighborhood-level cultural information in the City’s Open Data portal, in ways that generate revenues to support local curation of information.

**Coordinate media partnerships that contribute to neighborhood cultural ecology.**

It is proposed that DCLA coordinate media partnerships that sustain these new media platforms by re-thinking advertising in a way that supports local businesses and organizations, while simultaneously supporting local artists through commissioned digital artwork that promotes individual businesses and social organizations as well as overall neighborhood social and economic development.

Additionally, explore opportunities to leverage the marketing resources of larger cultural organizations to support these platforms.

**Organizing / Coalition-Building / Resource & Burden-Sharing:**

**Funding must be made available to increase access, capacity, and knowledge of technology in low-income communities and communities of color by:**

- Supporting [Artistic Residencies](#), Incubators and, [Idea-Activators](#) that accommodate and encourage artists to collaborate more among themselves combined with community participation.
- Offering funding and free tech support for artist certification programs with a focus outside the traditional benchmark arts.
- Increase technology & media access and training for low-income communities and communities of color to tell their own narratives. (See [Loisaida’s Community Screen Printing](#))
- Fund project proposals that are at the intersection of technology, art, and social justice.
- Employ youth of color to use media to create dialogue and productions around equity and community building, ecology and sustainability. (See Loisaida’s [Garbagia](#) Island Project)

**Develop and institute a community oversight council** with a diverse representative elected rather than appointed membership to insure that arts and culture allocations to neighborhoods reflect a balance of cultural groups and POC organizations serving the local neighborhood.

**Support and fund the use of arts and culture as an organizing mechanism** to deliver projects, programs and developments that reflects priorities of low-income communities and communities of color. Accept and incorporate arts and culture into community development design processes, and have artists of color, and cultural organizations leading community design processes.

## Cultural Education & Social Well being:

**Long term funding must be allocated and sustained for cultural education.** The DCLA must formalize a relationship with and between the Department of Education (DOE) and the Department of Youth and Community Renewal (DYCD) to facilitate cultural education that is outside of the museum education model and works intentionally with Latinx and POC cultural organization to establish curriculum and sustain efforts at the local public school and community center levels. Funding guidelines should be flexible enough to allow for innovation through cultural and artistic approaches. (See Loisaída's programs such as the [Young Lords Exhibit](#), which drew thousands, and locally more than 20 school visits in a four month time-frame as well as the exhibit's subsequent [Arts Paths to Leadership](#) workshop based on the NYS Common Core Curriculum pedagogy of object based learning, developed by artist/muralist, Maria Dominguez.)

**Engage youth in neighborhood planning and design** processes through relevant school curricula that build cultural capacity and entrepreneurial acumen to increase economic opportunities to underserved youth of color. Make transparent the budgeting of arts and culture within the DOE to equitably oversee partnerships with CBOs.

**Require sponsors and support their efforts particularly in NYCHA community centers such as DYCD Cornerstone Programs and DFTA Senior Centers,** where children and seniors can learn new and traditional arts anchored in community cultural pride and self-esteem program that would utilize local cultural and arts organizations as well as local artists and cultural workers to fulfill this requirement. (See Example of Loisaída's [Cultural Memory Project](#) recently funded by the DFTA-SU CASA Initiative for one senior center in the LES. DFTA should expand this Initiative. DYCD should fund and require a curriculum of arts and culture that connects to the core neighborhood within which each Cornerstone operates.

## CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

*“If institutions and networks are critical to capabilities, then it makes sense that community context provides an important link between capabilities. Many of the institutions and networks that distinguish neighborhoods are tied to particular capabilities. Health and social service organizations promote health and bodily integrity. Recreational and cultural institutions promote affiliation as well as imagination. Social justice institutions contribute to control over one’s environment. If these institutions are concentrated in particular places, one could hypothesize that the presence of institutions that promote one type of capability could contribute as well to the realization of others.”*  
-Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP)

The expectations are high and the time is right to continue to make our voices heard at all levels. This opportunity should not elude us and the community has responded.

This document as Loisaída’s *Community Manifesto* is organic and will evolve as we process the process, and continue to work shoulder to shoulder with our partners and the growing number of those that not only participated in creating the contents of this Paper, but who have committed themselves to the hard work of seeing that these most important recommendations become part of the City’s Cultural Plan, and even more critical that they are implemented at all the appropriate levels and spectrum of agencies and authorities, as well as across the board -- from changing metric methodology to cultural equity and fair share in funding, to opening the doors to public spaces and facilities for *Cultural Citizens* to enjoy their *Right to the City* and to freedom of cultural expression and social well being.

The following reflects a distillation or a three-part matrix of how we seek to advance policies and approaches for a more equitably cultural ecosystem into action in a way that is inclusive of Lower East Side residents, artists, and cultural workers.

### Towards A New, Equitable Narrative for Urban Arts and Culture: Democratizing Notions of “Artistic Excellence”

durational-collaborative-transparent approach:

- Engage local residents and community based organizations with an intention and structure of *transparency and accountability*.
- *Collaborate* with *locally*-informed organizations while evaluating social impact, and re-frame metrics of art/civic/community/social activity through a *human-centric lens*.
- Understand the historical and structural causes of long-existing challenges to address them in a way that reflects multiracial and multicultural awareness.
- Regard evaluative lessons of measuring social impact of cultural programs as a public good, and share the lessons widely.
- Invest in *sustained* and *durable* solutions as opposed to intermittent and short-term support or funding mechanisms.

neighborhood ecosystems approach:

- Value existing networks, connections and, communities of practice. Measure network densities and effects, rather than merely depend on numerical metrics for planning.
- Consider problems longitudinally (as they play out over time), and inter-sectionally (across issues); avoid isolating problems, challenges and issues because considering them in isolation can impede problem-solving.
- Consider the necessity of arts-based engagement as a community planning and organizing tool.
- Value diversity, local civic rituals as a means of community membership and social inclusion; minimize social isolation. Broaden the panorama of stakeholders, and share outcomes.
- Value physical, concrete, presence over virtual forms of interaction.

media access / visibility approach:

- Address the inequities and asymmetries that confront individual and institutional capacities for undertaking, driving, and owning “right to the city” narratives of representation.
- Recognize that the concept of “artistic excellence” is defined by who has access to media personnel and infrastructure. The heightened awareness of aesthetic experience is not reducible or quantified to amount of press contacts.

It was our general conclusion and recommendation that all concrete policies, programs, plans, initiatives, projects, and the like that try to address the challenges and issues itemized above (as well as all other related issues) should always have three overarching components:

durational-collaborative approach	Value: transparency, accountability, collaboration, historical awareness, consistency, sustained and durable investment.
neighborhood ecosystems approach	Value: connections, local networks, cultural organizing, social inclusion, broad palette of stakeholders, physical presence.
media access approach	Value: eliminating elite media-access asymmetries, sharing media resources and platforms.

Based on the core values/traditions of Loisaída stakeholders have to shift the double bind of being endlessly tied up in constant competition for scarce and unevenly distributed resources, to one of collaborative communities of practice for which our cultural claims do not become decorative accessories of gentrification and dispossession.

*“If there is one lasting way in which the “local” matters, it is the place where collective identities, cultural practices, and active policy engagement merge to give renewed life to the ongoing struggle for a just city.” (M. Martinez, 2010)*