

September 23, 2010

Las Casitas Revisited at art gallery

The Bronx Council on the Arts and The Hostos Center for the Arts and Culture present, *Las Casitas Revisited*, a reconstruction and update of the legendary exhibit, *Las Casitas: An Urban Cultural Alternative*, on Wednesday, October 6, 5 to 9 p.m. in the Longwood Art Gallery at Hostos Community College, 450 Grand Concourse at 149th Street. The opening will be in conjunction with the Bronx Culture Trolley and the BomPlenazo 2010 Festival, and will feature a Bomba dance workshop at the Hostos Memorial Garden from 5:30 to 7 p.m. In the event of inclement weather the workshop will take place in the Hostos Dance Studio.

BCA's original exhibition, *Las Casitas: An Urban Cultural Alternative*, opened at the Smithsonian Institution Washington, D.C. in 1991 and focused on the phenomenon of the proliferation of casitas -- a type of architecture introduced into Puerto Rican working class neighborhoods in the mid-20th century -- and found in empty lots throughout New York City, especially in the south Bronx, Lower East Side and East Harlem.

Still common throughout the city, casitas function, not as homes, but as infor-

mal community centers for people to gather, garden and most importantly dance, sing and play bomba and plena. These African-rooted music and dance traditions remain living, breathing and growing expressions of the island and in Diaspora communities.

Las Casitas Revisited brings together elements of the original exhibition, including photographs by the renowned photographer Martha Cooper. It includes photographs, found objects, video footage and musical instruments that reflect the history of one of the best known casitas, the beloved Casita de Chema (formerly called Rincon Criollo). This exemplary casita, which has been in operation for over 30 years, is an important catalyst and incubator of Puerto Rican culture in New York City. The centerpiece of the installation is a reproduction of a portion of Casita de Chema designed and installed by José "Chema" Soto, the casita's founder and Juan Fernando Morales, the exhibition's designer.

The exhibition is organized by William Aguado, president of the Bronx Council on the Arts, Wallace Edgecombe, director of the Hostos Center for the

Arts & Culture, and Juanita Lanzo, curator of the Longwood Art Gallery @ Hostos. It is an assemblage of works including video footage and still images of community jams and pig roasts held at the Casita (now at 157th Street and St. Ann's Avenue) since the original exhibition twenty years ago. Other elements of the show include a display of percussion instruments, found objects and memorabilia, including fences, masonry, historical posters and crafts.

The installation will be one of the principal components of the Hostos Center for the Arts and Culture's BomPlenazo 2010 Festival, a biennial celebration of Afro-Puerto Rican culture, which this year will focus on cultural traditions from the area of Mayagüez on the west coast of Puerto Rico.

In addition to serving as an important incubator of Puerto Rican culture, casitas are one of the most successful examples of the City's urban greening and continue to gain unparalleled notoriety among practitioners of the bomba and plena traditions. Perhaps a casita's greatest contribution to the cultural life of New York City, however, is its role as a center for new talent and cultural expressions.