



**Bronx Culture Trolley excerpt  
from full 22-page report**

## A Bumpy Ride

Cultural trolleys hold great promise in raising the profile of arts institutions outside of Manhattan—but infrequent service and limited marketing keeps most routes from boosting attendance at local venues

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The Center for an Urban Future is a New York City-based think tank dedicated to independent, fact-based research about critical issues affecting New York's future including economic development, workforce development, higher education and the arts. For more information or to sign up for our monthly e-mail bulletin, visit [www.nycfuture.org](http://www.nycfuture.org).

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# The Bronx is Booming

Trolleys in the Bronx are bringing visitors to well-known attractions like the Bronx Zoo and emerging galleries and museums alike—and are helping to change long-outdated perceptions of the borough

In the Bronx, seeing is believing. The borough has undergone an incredible transformation, but even most New Yorkers, let alone tourists, aren't aware of the emerging cultural hub that lies just minutes from Midtown Manhattan. To show visitors just how much is going on in the Bronx—and address deep-seated fears about safety and accessibility—borough leaders have developed three trolley routes. All three routes use the same vehicle (owned by the Bronx Tourism Council), but each shows visitors a side of the Bronx they may have never seen before.

The fires that ravaged the South Bronx died out decades ago, but their unfortunate legacy—the neighborhood's reputation as an unsafe area—remains. Though statistics indicate that the neighborhood is safer than it's ever been and the area has become home to a vibrant cultural community, it remains a challenge to get people to visit.

## BRONX CULTURE TROLLEY

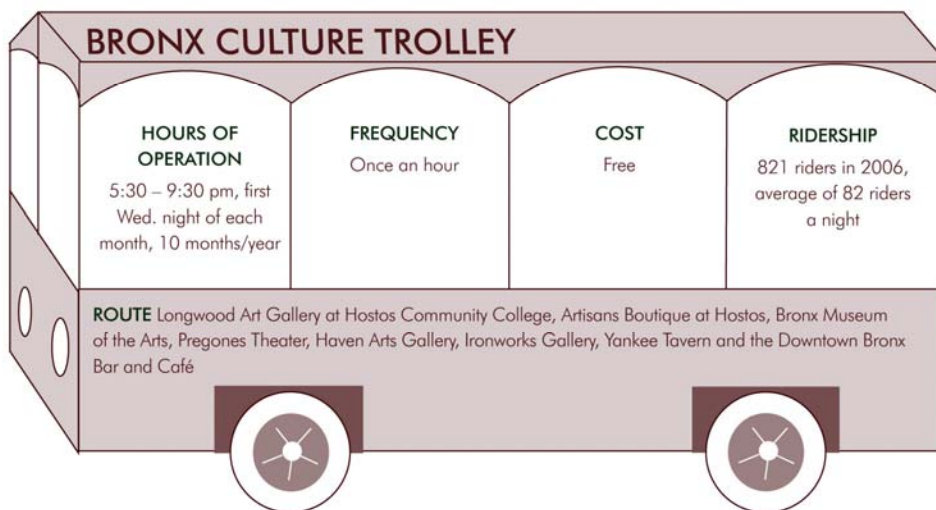
The Bronx Council on the Arts (BCA) is trying to change that with a red trolley that shows off the new South Bronx. Since 2002, BCA has run the trolley on the first Wednesday night of each month, bringing visitors to what it calls the South Bronx Cultural Corridor. This stretch of the Grand Concourse is home to a critical mass of cultural organizations in and around Longwood Gallery at Hostos Community College, including

Hostos Arts Center, just steps from the 2, 4 and 5 trains. The Bronx Museum of the Arts and Pregones Theater are within two blocks, as are a number of up-and-coming galleries and performance spaces.

Given the South Bronx's rebirth as a cultural cluster, organizers decided to use the trolley to help people connect to different institutions one night a month. "I believe in the South Bronx as an emergent force and cultural magnet," says Bill Aguado, executive director of the Bronx Council on the Arts. "The trolley is more of a metaphor for the revival of the Bronx than anything else. It's letting the world know: this is what's happening in the South Bronx, come and join us."

The trolley makes four loops each evening, starting its route at Longwood Gallery at Hostos Community College, which is also home to the bustling Artisans Boutique where local entrepreneurs sell a variety of arts and crafts. The trolley then makes a number of stops around the neighborhood, including the Bronx Museum of the Arts, Pregones Theater, Haven Arts Gallery, Ironworks Gallery, the Yankee Tavern and the Downtown Bronx Bar and Café. But it doesn't just drop visitors off at neighborhood hotspots, it offers an experience in its own right. Each month, the cultural institutions work closely with BCA to develop a rich itinerary of events for the evening and provide an engaging and entertaining experience for riders—a much easier task

for one orchestrated ride per month than for a trolley service that traverses the same loop ten times each weekend. Visitors are treated to something different each time; recent trolley riders have gone to gallery openings, listened to traditional Puerto Rican music and toured the studios of local artists. BCA has also featured



performances onboard the trolley itself.

The trolley's ridership ebbs and flows, but there are signs that a loyal audience is building despite limited capacity. Overall ridership continues to grow each year, from 630 riders in 2003 to 821 in 2006, and trolley-goers have shown up despite rain, snow and hundred-degree temperatures. BCA often has many more 'walk-ins' than actual reservations: in April 2006, 20 people made reservations in advance, but 103 people showed up to ride that night's trolley.

Riders range from international tourists to long-time Bronxites who live in other parts of the borough, sometimes stepping foot in the South Bronx for the first time in years. "People always say: 'I never knew the Bronx looked like this, I had no idea how close it is, how clean it is,'" says Ellen Pollan, director of BCA's South Bronx Cultural Corridor initiative.

BCA recently surveyed 232 riders over a seven-month period and found some compelling results. Two-thirds of riders said it was their first time on the trolley, but among the repeat riders, half indicated they had ridden it five or more times. 88 percent of all riders described the trolley experience as "extremely" or "very" engaging, 85 percent said it was convenient, and 84 percent said they would definitely ride the trolley again.

Three quarters of visitors said they take the trolley to visit multiple destinations. BCA's ridership data corroborates this: in November 2006, 106 people rode the trolley; virtually all of them went to the Longwood Gallery, 68 visited the Bronx Museum and 50 headed to Haven Gallery.

More than half the riders surveyed said they spend money the night the trolley runs, mainly at local restaurants and bars. In 2006, an average of 51 people visited the Downtown Bronx Bar and Café, which often features poetry readings on trolley nights.

The survey also gave BCA a glimpse into the demographics of their riders: 72 percent of riders were women, and 9 out of 10 riders lived in the U.S. Two-thirds were from the Bronx, with 25 percent from Manhattan and Brooklyn. Only a handful of people were from Queens or the larger metro area.

Planners are interested in expanding the trolley to shuttle people from other points, like El Barrio, and recently organized a trolley ride for Fordham University students. They've also piloted several daytime trolley trips with particular audiences—like a senior center in the South Bronx—that offered programming similar to the monthly rides. Twice a year, the trolley makes standing-room-only trips to Hunts Point, where riders can visit the Bronx Academy of Dance, Mud/Bone Studio 889, a working artists' studio, and The Point, a

community-based organization that works with dozens of artists and performers.

The trolley is a priority for the Bronx Council on the Arts, which expends a tremendous amount of staff time programming and managing the monthly event. BCA staff estimates it costs up to \$150,000 a year to run the trolley, primarily in staffing and advertising costs.

Successful marketing efforts have helped power the trolley's success: BCA aggressively promotes the trolley through their website and local media, and has developed promotional materials available at local cultural and civic institutions like libraries and courthouse jurors' rooms. BCA also entered into a sponsorship agreement as a cultural arts partner with WNYC, a local NPR affiliate, which entitled them to 25 public service announcements over 10 months. Their investment paid off: the target audience of young families and art lovers are riding the trolley in growing numbers.

"We have staff all over the place monitoring, coordinating, dropping by different sites, meeting with other sites," says Aguado. "We don't just show up once a month—this is a month-long planning process. There is a lot of time involved but it also increases the profile of BCA and increases the profile of the Bronx, so it is a win-win."

#### **BRONX TROLLEY**

Every weekend from April to October, the same vehicle that makes the monthly route through the emerging destination spots of the South Bronx Cultural Corridor is used to connect three of the borough's signature attractions: the Bronx Zoo, New York Botanical Garden and Arthur Avenue. But the Bronx Trolley doesn't just encourage people to see the Bronx, it helps bring them there.

The Bronx Tourism Council, which runs the trolley, hopes to tap into the market of out-of-towners on their second or third visit to New York—tourists who have explored the most famous sights in Manhattan and are now looking to venture into the boroughs. On weekend mornings, the trolley picks up riders at the NYC & Co. visitors center in Midtown Manhattan and brings them to the Bronx, stopping at the West Farms Square subway stop and Fordham Plaza Metro-North train station along the way. After making a series of loops between the institutions, the trolley does an evening dropoff back in Midtown. Some people ride the trolley for the whole day and use it to return to Manhattan; others take it to get to one destination and then return via Metro-North or the subway. In 2006, about 3,500 people rode the trolley, at a total cost of \$15,000 for the year, shared by the zoo, garden and Arthur Avenue merchants.

The trolley's itinerary has changed since it started running in 2001. Planners recognized that its original 90-minute-long loop, which included stops at Van Cortlandt Park and Jerome Avenue, made it untenable as a transportation system, and they tightened the loop in 2006 to include a smaller number of stops. This pared-down route nonetheless provides visitors with many options: they can go from watching tigers at the Bronx Zoo to sampling Italian delicacies on Arthur Avenue before finishing with a stroll through the 250 acres of the New York Botanical Garden. "Because it's a whole tourism product, it gives you a nice variety," says Margaret Price, assistant director of marketing operations for the Bronx Zoo. "If someone wants to do a quick taste test of what we have here, it gives you a quick flavor of these destinations."

The trolley has gone through several iterations—the Manhattan pickups and dropoffs only began last year—and awareness is still fairly low among tourists. Additionally, a large segment of riders are locals who use the trolley as free ground transportation. The institutions aren't certain how the trolley affects their attendance, though Arthur Avenue merchants see the impact most vividly. The Bronx Zoo is planning a study that will examine how visitors found out about the trolley, which should provide some insight into how much impact it has made.

Project officials think it's critical that the trolley visually stands out, for two key reasons. First, they believe that its role as a roving billboard is just as important as its capacity as a people mover. Every weekend, thousands of people see the large ads on the side of the vehicle advertising the institutions and their upcoming events. For example, the trolley recently featured ads to promote the reopening of the zoo's sea lion exhibit.

Second, when it comes to attracting tourists, the trolley's unique look sets it apart from the sea of vehicles that crowd city streets. "The trolley is really visual shorthand, and in a market as competitive as New York City for tourists' attention, we think it is important to be able to communicate that very quickly when it pulls up in front of the visitors center," says Doris Quinones, executive director of the Bronx Tourism Council.

All in all, the investment seems worthwhile. "It's a way of branding the borough as a legitimate tourism destination and doing a cross-promotion of sorts," says Quinones. "It may create a comfort level or plant an idea. It gives us something to talk to the hotel concierge about and validate their leap of faith to tell a somewhat skeptical hotel guest that, yes, the Bronx is a place you can visit."

### CITY ISLAND SEASIDE TROLLEY

Since 2005, on the first Friday of each month, the City Island Seaside Trolley has been bringing people to one of the most unique—and remote—neighborhoods in New York City. City Island is jam-packed in the summer, but in the cooler months, people are wary of making the trip, especially without a car. The trolley provides visitors an easy way to eat, shop and see the sights of the city's only state-designated maritime community.

Five times each night, the trolley picks up riders at Pelham Bay Park, the last station on the 6 train, and makes its first stop at the Bartow-Pell Mansion Museum, a 19th century historic house. It then takes riders to City Island, where they can explore by foot or hop on and off the trolley along the 1½-mile-long main drag to stop at galleries and shops, which stay open late when the trolley is running and frequently offer discounts.

The trolley is welcomed in City Island since it brings in new visitors without increasing car traffic or congestion. "We want to make City Island a unique destination. We need to make something of interest to attract people to City Island and this is a great advertising vehicle," says Paul Klein, vice president of the City Island Chamber of Commerce and a local business owner.

But many New Yorkers don't know about City Island, let alone the trolley service. The MTA's subway map didn't even include City Island until March 2006; an information box on the map had obscured the area. The trolley isn't widely known either. Often, riders get off the subway at Pelham Bay Park to be met by a trolley they didn't know existed. "It's a surprise to most of the people that see it. They don't see that it's available, they take the train or are driving here and see the trolley go by, and they all ask about it," says Gerard Giacco, owner of Lickety Split, an ice cream shop on the island.

Ridership has been erratic, with as many as twenty people and as few as one solitary rider. "Is it really working as a way of getting people here?" asks Giacco. "I don't know. But it's certainly working as an advertising tool. The people who see it think it's wonderful."

Despite low ridership, the project's organizers are optimistic, especially since the quaint-looking trolley fits in nicely with the neighborhood landscape. "It is certainly in its infancy," says Klein, "but I think it has potential. If we could do it every Friday or run it on the weekends as well, we could use it to supplement bus service and get people moving back and forth easier." And regardless of who rides the trolley, the economic impact on the island can be significant. "Whether they're tourists or Manhattanites, it's all spending dollars," he adds.