



The Bronx Council on the Arts: Economic Development through a Creative Economy

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I. Project Overview and Guiding Principles

The **Bronx Council on the Arts (BCA)** is working to create a community in the South Bronx where local artists and cultural events help spur sustainable economic development. To assist in its efforts to this end, the BCA retained the services of a team of graduate students at NYU Wagner's Graduate School of Public Service. Through desktop research, key informant interviews, and a survey of over 455 stakeholders in the development of a newly emerging South Bronx Cultural Corridor, the student team arrived at a set of recommendations for the BCA intended to guide its programmatic and strategic planning efforts in the years to come.

The recommendations present strategies for arts-based economic development, assess the feasibility of each in the context of the South Bronx and have the overarching goals of **bolstering small business activity, building the professional capacity of artists and artisans, engaging residents in the cultural life of the neighborhood and promoting the newly crafted "South Bronx Cultural Corridor" within the borough, the greater city and beyond.**

Recommendations adhere to an asset-based approach to community development, seeking to leverage existing strengths in the community to achieve important multiplier effects in economic development. A particular emphasis is given to program recommendations that serve to effectively prevent displacement through gentrification and to those that directly address expressed community priorities and demands as gauged through the South Bronx Cultural Corridor Survey. Finally, program recommendations are evaluated through the lens of existing BCA strengths, alignment with the organization's mission, and previous successes in creative economy endeavors.

II. The Creative Economy and the South Bronx

The creative economy, also referred to as the cultural economy, focuses on the unique role that the arts can play in promoting, "economic development initiatives with arts or cultural dimensions."¹ In addition to increasing commercial profits and job opportunities, a flourishing arts-based economy can revitalize communities by beautifying neighborhoods and promoting community pride.² The South Bronx's diversity, its richness of indigenous art and artists, its

¹ Ellis, Emily. "States and the Creative Economy." *National Assembly of State Arts Agencies* ns 1 (2005): 1. 20 Oct. 2006.

² "Strategies for Creative Spaces and Cities: Lessons Learned" *Cities Institute*, London Metropolitan University and Munk Centre for International Studies, University of Toronto 2006.

ripeness for economic development and its proximity to Manhattan give the South Bronx the potential for a thriving creative economy.

The South Bronx is currently undergoing massive revitalization—it is a community with a tumultuous past determined to remake its public image. **Through far-reaching economic development initiatives and a highly supportive political environment, the time is ripe for the development of a rich creative economy in the South Bronx.** The BCA is uniquely positioned to act as a leader in community development through arts-based initiatives. Through its extensive artist networks, its existing programs with far-reaching impacts, and its adherence to the vision of an indigenous creative economy based on the community’s inherent strengths, **the BCA has the potential to spearhead the creation of an economically vibrant area in which growth is truly shared among all members.**

VI. Options for Change

- 1) *Cultural Community-Building Initiatives* including public art campaigns, the creation of an art fair or market, and the development of a robust and widespread artist network;
- 2) *Enhance the Profile of Bronx Arts* using a branding and marketing campaign, aggressively promoting tourism, attracting cultural institutions for relocation to the South Bronx; and through Bronx-specific arts education;
- 3) *Expand Available Artist Housing* by subsidizing housing for artists, creating shared studio space between artists and non-artists, and by facilitating the development of artist cooperatives;
- 4) *Workforce Development of the Creative Economy* through expanding existing workforce development initiatives, modifying curricula to include an emphasis on transferable and business skills, developing an artist mentoring program, creating a new business incubator, and directly linking training initiatives to local employment opportunities;
- 5) *Expand Available Financial Resources for South Bronx Artists* through strategies such as microfinance, financial literacy training, and individual artist grants and loans, and
- 6) *Strategic Partnerships* with relevant private-sector, educational, cultural, nonprofit, civic, and public agency partners.

VII. Feasibility Assessment and Program Recommendations

Anchoring the Community:

To fight displacement, a package of strategies and programs will provide South Bronx residents with the human and financial resources required to be shared partners in the community’s economic growth.

Expand Job Training Programs & Augment Curricula

Expanding the BCA’s existing job programs is an excellent and cost-effective way of better preparing South Bronx residents to meet the needs of an evolving local economy. Through the expansion and enhancement of its existing job training programs, the BCA has the potential to reach new clients and to prepare South Bronx creative workers to participate more fully and profitably in the community’s economic revitalization.

- ✓ Scale up numbers served by using the BCA website to advertise job training programs.
- ✓ Reach out to more marginalized groups, such as immigrants.
- ✓ Enhance job training programs to include sessions on financial literacy and business skills.

Identify Nonprofit, Private, and Public Sector Partners

By engaging private, nonprofit, and public sector partners in its efforts to train the South Bronx creative workforce, the BCA will improve the quality of its programs in this area by using outside expertise and resources. It will also solidly anchor the community for shared economic growth by broadening the base of support for the local creative economy and its workers.

- ✓ Approach local community development financial institutions and local banks about leading financial literacy seminars.
- ✓ Establish relationships with local employers in the creative economy in order to get feedback on what skills and training make jobseekers most employable.

Directly Link Training to Local Employers and Economic Development Initiatives

By creating a job-ready pipeline of creative economy workers that feeds directly into local employment opportunities and economic growth, the BCA will heighten its impact in local economic development and play a valuable role in ensuring that growth is shared among all South Bronx residents.

- ✓ Approach cultural institutions with ongoing employment needs, preferably organizations that hire large numbers of entry-level or mid-level staff.
- ✓ Considers ways in which BCA job training programs can feed into local economic development projects and initiatives.

Channeling the Community:

To engage the community in development, programs will connect creative potential and weave a network of artists and merchants who can work together to create a prosperous and thriving local creative economy.

Establish an Online Creative Directory

Creating an online directory will help South Bronx creative industry members to connect with each other and match skills with needs.

- ✓ Identify and recruit artists and merchants in the South Bronx who are interested in participating in a creative economy network. Categorize the directory based on services, products, artistic mediums and other relevant themes.
- ✓ Create an online directory that will be easy to update and access.

Coordinate Creative Network

The BCA can create opportunities for creative industry members to meet each other as well as gain access to information that will help their creative businesses to succeed.

- ✓ Raise revenue for these events, possibly through a minimal annual membership fee;

- ✓ Host panel discussions and workshops, with themes including, but not limited to: artist funding, locating artist workspace and brainstorming sessions between artists.
- ✓ Host events at the Longwood Arts Gallery to enhance its presence in the South Bronx Cultural Corridor and identify other venues that would be willing to host events.
- ✓ Rotate event locations so that other spaces in the South Bronx Cultural Corridor such as galleries, performance spaces, restaurants, etc. are given exposure.
- ✓ Establish a volunteer committee of members interested in organizing/hosting networking events.

Establish a Creative Presence in the Neighborhood

Public art is an important community-building tool that gives artists public exposure, helps beautify the neighborhood and attracts consumers to stores.

- ✓ Identify stores with free wall space and available window displays in the South Bronx Cultural Corridor and invite these stores to display local artwork.
- ✓ Create a partnership with local high school art departments and host a mural contest.

Establish Strength in Numbers

Creating artist collectives and encouraging shared space and supplies will help reduce artists' expenses.

- ✓ Enhance purchasing power for South Bronx artists through the artist directory, allowing artists to buy bulk rate supplies and share resources.
- ✓ Assist with connecting people who have space available for rent with people who need space to rent through the online directory and network events.
- ✓ Assess the feasibility of the BCA acquiring studio space, which it would lease to artists and/or award to artists at a discounted rate via a studio space grant program.

Branding the Community:

To elevate the profile of the South Bronx Cultural Corridor, marketing and communication strategies will share the assets and cultural vibrancy of the community with both residents of and visitors to the South Bronx.

Resource Identification, Mobilization, and Unification

Without a concise image, the South Bronx will miss out on many of the opportunities, both financial and otherwise, that come with a creative economy. Branding both creates a comprehensive snapshot and communicates this snapshot. Though marketing is the most actionable portion of this strategy, emphasis should be placed on creating an image that will attract the attention of the media and visitors alike.

- ✓ Encourage resource identification through sticker participation. All sites and venues that wish to take part in the creative economy should identify themselves with a sticker.
- ✓ Unify resources through the creation of a creative economy map. The BCA should use this map to connect attractions and sites within the South Bronx. This map will both aid visitors to the South Bronx and advertise the breath of attractions.

- ✓ Piggyback on existing resources, specifically the notoriety and success of the trolley, to brand and advertise the creative economy. The BCA can create trolley runs with the objective of highlighting certain attractions.
- ✓ Expand on existing resources through enhancing the Bronx Cultural Card program to offer discounts at more locations within the creative economy.

Engage the Local Community in Branding the Cultural Corridor and Expand the Brand

Engaging the local community in the branding of the Cultural Corridor will help increase local ownership of the community economy, promote pride in the local cultural economy, and will ultimately play an important part in ensuring its success.

- ✓ Engage visitors by tying the creative economy to events. This will lure visitors and ensure that there is an influx of visitors at certain times (in addition to attract media attention).
- ✓ Consider a scavenger hunt. Institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of art have successfully used this strategy to engage children and families. A scavenger hunt would not only allow the BCA to highlight certain attractions but it would do so in a fun way that would attract visitors.
- ✓ Celebrate the success and expansion of the BCA's influence on the creative economy by hosting an art fair.
- ✓ Send out press releases, advertise on their website, and use word of mouth to advertise the South Bronx's creative economy.

VIII. Conclusion

The BCA is poised at the brink of an exciting opportunity: to act as an agent for change in the growth of the South Bronx's creative economy. The organization is already highly adept at connecting creative people, meeting the artistic community's needs, attracting media attention, and engaging the local community as well as strategic partners from the private, nonprofit, and public sectors alike. Through the pursuit of the strategies outlined above, the BCA will further strengthen its position at the forefront of a quickly-emerging cultural community - one that is vibrant, locally-crafted, and that results in shared growth for the benefit not only of residents of the South Bronx, but for the rest of the city and region as well.