

More than a Pretty Facade: Art as Community Revitalization Driver

BY ROBERT ROSENBERG

Over the past 15 years, many have begun to point to "the arts" as a new way in which to revitalize America's urban centers. The arts have entered into the development schemes of cities of all types and sizes. In Newark, Detroit and Los Angeles, we see new museums, new theaters and new performance venues—all designed to spark a renewed interest in our urban centers and to create a destination point or a reason to return to a city. Other cities are dusting off the cobwebs and restoring beautiful institutions—as when Baltimore did, reopening the Hippodrome Theater 2002, after more than 25 years of neglect. And yet others, like Philadelphia, have even created arts districts which showcase the role of arts in the development scheme.

Is this really a new phenomenon? Have we exhausted all other means for revitalizing our communities that we turn to the arts and cultural institutions whose funding was slashed in budget cuts decades ago? Or are we in the development and planning fields just now catching up to the ideas that have been growing in some corners of our country—and indeed the world—for decades?

I have been fortunate to have been a part of two truly spectacular

arts initiatives that have had far reaching impacts on their communities, the individuals who reside near them, and their ever-expanding base of patrons. These serve as good case studies to further open the dialogue about "the arts" in the development scheme.

West Side (Success) Story: Lincoln Center

The Lincoln Center on New York's West Side is a world-class institution and a prime example of art as an economic driver. It also marks the first time a city attempted to use the arts as a catalyst for economic and community development on such a vast scale.

In April 1955, the New York City Board of Estimate gave the mayor's slum clearance committee, headed by Robert Moses, the go-ahead to designate Lincoln Square for urban renewal. This was no small undertaking—the nearly 18-acre parcel was home to over 7,000 poor families who resided in what many would consider sub-standard tenements and boarding homes. The community was outraged. Racial and class tensions flared. Nevertheless, Moses—a controversial and well-known pioneer in the field of urban planning—persevered, and the project proceeded swiftly under his guidance.

In May 1959, President Dwight

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The Lincoln Center helped transform a rough, rundown neighborhood into some of the most in-demand real estate in Manhattan.

Eisenhower broke ground for the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. By the early 1960s, Moses had transformed a rundown neighborhood—the same rough streets Leonard Bernstein depicted in “West Side Story” merely a decade before—into a cultural hub. His steadfast, comprehensive approach led to the re-creation of the entire upper Upper West Side while the Lincoln Center grew to be one of the nation’s premier arts and cultural institutions and home to 12 resident art organizations.

The long term results are notable. Myriad studies reveal, not surprisingly, a significant drop in crime correlated to dramatic increase in activity and investment in the neighborhood. Taxable prop-

erty in the Lincoln Square area appreciated 1,724 percent between 1963 and 1999—a growth rate three times that of Manhattan as a whole for the same period, and representing an extra \$154 million in property tax each year.

To this day, nearly 50 years since its conception, the Lincoln Center continues to benefit from economic and social investment. New high-end retailers and mega-stores continue to open in the neighborhood, and residential high-rises continue to be developed. And, of course, real estate values continue to appreciate. This is in stark contrast to the housing market of the early 1970s, when I was housing and development commissioner with responsibilities

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for the West Side Urban Renewal area. In those early years, the struggle to sell brownstones in this same area for a mere \$7,000 was real. Today, those homes are going for \$1.25 million.

Bringing Them Back to Brooklyn: BAM

In 1976 I had the good fortune to be approached by board members of the Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra (BPO) who, upon seeing a young professional in charge of a large-scale building project in their neighborhood, asked me to join their board. To this day, I am thankful they did. It was one of the most worthwhile endeavors I have ever pursued.

The BPO is located in the Brooklyn Academy of Music—otherwise known as BAM. BAM is the longest running arts presenter in the nation. It was created in 1861—a fire destroyed the original building in 1903 and the current

2,000-seat space, which has just undergone an \$8 million rehabilitation, was built in 1906.

During the early years of the century, the Brooklyn Academy of Music was the place to be seen. It was located near the fashionable Fort Greene neighborhood and on the edge of the business district. Artists from across the country made their way to Brooklyn, where they were received by responsive audiences.

But, after World War II, Brooklyn shared the growing problems of other urban centers throughout America. As the area's demographics shifted, so too did the audience for the academy. In time, language classes and martial arts instruction were booked into performance spaces. The grand ballroom was partitioned and used as a school for boys. Crime on the streets kept even the most die-hard BAM supporters away.

By the time Harvey Lichenstein

was appointed executive director in 1967, the programming and facilities needed rethinking. And rethinking, reinvigorating and restoring to life the academy is just what Harvey and a very committed board of directors and staff did. During the 32 years that Lichenstein was BAM's leader, the academy experienced a renaissance, and is now recognized internationally as a preeminent, progressive cultural center.

The road to this renaissance was certainly a challenging one. Artistically, BAM and the BPO needed new life and the board of directors and the leadership of both entities realized this. They made some critical decisions that can and should serve as a case study for others.

At BAM, they gave Harvey Lichenstein, full license for artistic direction. He had a vision and they allowed, enabled and supported the growth of that vision. This vision

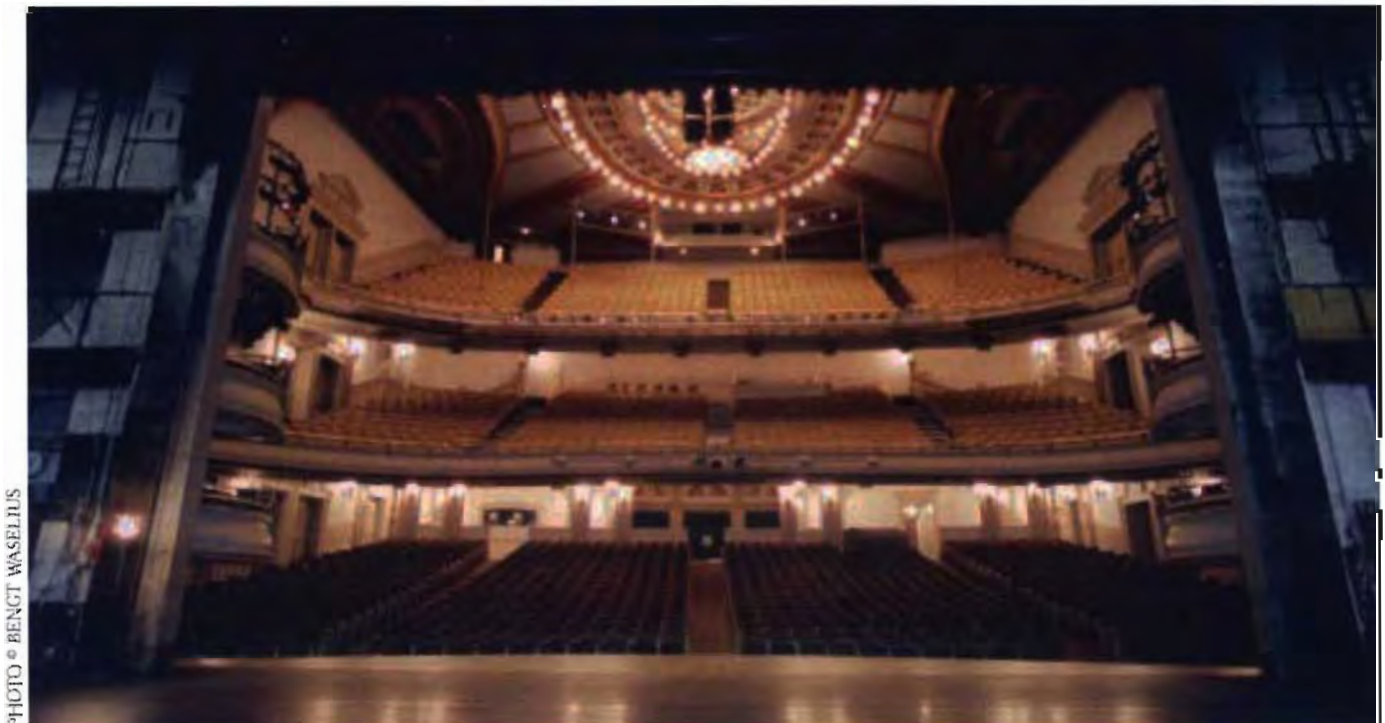


PHOTO © BENGT WASELIUS

The Brooklyn Academy of Music is the nation's longest-running arts presenter—and an important part of the Brooklyn community.

was focused on new artists, new ideas—a reason, if you will, to come to Brooklyn. Very early on, BAM and the BPO understood the importance of garnering a Manhattan audience—of bringing in artists and performances that would make people travel to Brooklyn to check it out and be a part. The board also hired Bob Spano as conductor and began recreating both the orchestra and its offerings. At the same time, financial considerations were not neglected—both the BPO and BAM pursued aggressive fundraising campaigns that began with strong commitments at the board level.

Over the years, the leadership succeeded in turning BAM and its offerings into the “in thing” or the “celeb thing” to do. Lichenstein accomplished this by seeking out and presenting a richly diverse menu—including classical, but with a strong mix of far-reaching and even outrageously cutting-edge performances. In 1980, Harvey created the New Wave Festival to celebrate and showcase these new talents. This is now one of the most sought out festivals in the country.

Lastly, the board and Lichenstein understood the need to infuse BAM with a broad array of funding sources to ensure its continuing ability to attract its audiences. Once you become an arts leader, you must maintain the position. The BAM and BPO staffs were truly talented at inspiring and motivating board members to bring resources and support to the organizations. This in turn increased foundation support. The long-term rewards are many—BAM just announced a \$30 million gift that will double its endowment.

Though it may sound simple on paper, the rebuilding of BAM was a long, continuous “work in process.”

It was enriching and rewarding and sometimes just plain difficult. I can vividly recall the early days, when the residents of the area and BAM were not so supportive of one another. One group of neighbors from a drug-infested hotel, in particular, took great pride in aiming rancid food and trash at BAM patrons as they entered the theater. On another occasion, we lost the support of a prospective board member when his introduction to the neighborhood included being robbed at gunpoint. Despite the challenges, BAM moved forward. On the way, I was able to petition the city to remove the hotel and end the assault on our patrons.

The lesson is clear: as BAM

grew, so did Brooklyn. And as Brooklyn changed and grew, so did BAM. The synergy that developed between the two entities has been powerful. Today there are restaurants, stores and vendors open to meet the needs of the BAM patrons. Astonishingly, half of all BAM patrons in 2003 were from Brooklyn. BAM has succeeded where others have not: it has built a first class performance venue which attracts the world while remaining welcoming to its neighbors.

As with any large-scale, community-based endeavor, the work at BAM is not over. In recent years, Lichenstein has moved from BAM to lead a CDC that will take the

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partnership between BAM and the community to a new level with affordable and market-rate housing, community space, and artists housing and studio and loft space.

Work in Progress: Chester, Pennsylvania

While both of the examples I've discussed have been large-scale urban institutions, art as a driving force for community revitalization is certainly scalable. My final example involves a much smaller arts center, which is currently under development in Chester, Pa. A city of 29,000 people, Chester exemplifies the most pressing issues of urban decay—it leads the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in crime, unemployment and teen pregnancy rates.

In this city I have served as federal court receiver for the Housing Authority for the past decade. In this time, we have secured over \$200 million in funds to rebuild Chester's four family housing sites—turning public housing communities into some of the best and most sought-out housing in the city. We are also embarking on a third HOPE VI project, which will create a dramatic and inviting gateway with both affordable and homeownership units, a retail corridor and a cutting-edge arts and cultural center. Strategically located on a parcel that connects Chester to Interstate 95, a local university and Chester's downtown, this art and cultural center will play a critical role in transforming this neighborhood—linking resources that currently exist in isolation as well as bringing

life to the streets and opportunity to the residents.

In 2003 we began conversations with the community, completed a needs assessment and began pulling our private and public sector partners to the table. While the scale of the project is small compared to my experiences in New York City, the task is no less arduous. The challenges we face are worth noting, as they can be seen in many such projects:

The first was finding common ground and support for the arts among community leaders—many of whom had spent years trying to make change with limited resources and serious political pressures.

The second is forging collaboration, not competition, among artists and art providers. We encountered



The Chester Children's Choir is just one of the arts-related community organizations in the area. The revitalization project has already received a \$20 million HOPE VI grant.

16 different groups from Chester and the surrounding region, each serving the same population but never talking, let alone coordinating with one another. In some cases, organizational heads had never met one another. To address this lack of communication, we formed an arts council and began meeting, sharing ideas and developing ways to work together for the common good. This alone took over 14 months, but the results are beginning to make themselves shown. This past December, the arts council created a 10-day collaborative arts festival, which reached over 1,000 residents.

The third and final challenge was garnering support for the arts from civic leaders who face staggering crime and unemployment rates. While these leaders have great compassion, they are often overwhelmed and understaffed when addressing daily issues and in many cases can not readily understand the potential of the arts. Initially the mayor and local development agency were more interested in building a recreational facility; but slowly started to share our vision of a cultural destination. Working in tandem with corporate and private sector leaders, we have been able to garner their support.

Fortunately, in Chester we are pushing forward. We have received a \$20 million HOPE VI grant to begin the overall \$100 million project, are using LIHTC to support the cost of the building the arts center, and have private sector funds committed for programming. While we realize that there are many challenges yet to come, we remain committed to opening a center with strong partnerships, diverse resources and a brilliant vision.

In all my years in this industry—in the private and public sectors—I have seen no greater lasting effect than a strategic and integrated arts program in a community. The

social and economic transformation can be unprecedented. I do warn you that this is time-consuming, all encompassing work—some may even call it a passion. To see this passion through takes a relentless commitment from all parties involved—but, as I hope I've demonstrated with these examples, the results are more than worth it.

As we all know from our personal experience, the arts have played and continue to play a critical role in the development of who we are as individuals; and in turn, how we define our communities, our cities and even our country. The benefits of integrating the arts into a community development plan are so immense that their impact is felt for generations. They aren't limited to tangible economic and physical change, either. To really understand the phenomena, beyond statistics and case studies, one must look to the artists, the dancers, musicians and performers, at and the audiences they reach, and perhaps, most importantly, the new generations they inspire. ■



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