



Written Testimony Submitted to the **New York City Council Committee on Small Business and the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations**
Joint Oversight Hearing on *New York City's Cultural Sector and Derivative Businesses*
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Submitted by Anusha Venkataraman
Green Light District Assistant Director at El Puente

I respectfully submit this testimony to Chairperson Reyna and Chairperson Van Bramer on the topic of *NYC's Cultural Sector and Derivative Businesses* on behalf of El Puente, an active member of the Naturally-Occurring Cultural District work group. El Puente is a thirty-old community human rights institution in North Brooklyn that promotes leadership for peace and justice through the engagement of youth and community members in the arts, education, scientific research, wellness and environmental action. I am the Assistant Director of the El Puente Green Light District, a ten-year initiative of the Williamsburg Southside ("Los Sures") community to exercise our right to self-determination, transforming Los Sures from one of the most economically and environmentally challenged neighborhoods in New York City into an equitable, sustainable, safe, healthy, and culturally engaged community. The Green Light District builds on El Puente's long history in the arts and leadership development to reach out and build a coalition of individuals and organizations committed to improving the Los Sures community from the ground up—in the image and vision of long-term residents committed to remaining in the community.

The community of Los Sures reflects a rich history of Latino arts and culture and today the Southside is home to a host of creative people, places and cultural organizations. El Puente is only one such organization, but the Green Light District is convening this network of cultural stakeholders—which include other nonprofits, informal networks of artists, and also institutions that are not always thought of as culturally-oriented but certainly are—such as churches, schools, and small businesses. For example, El Puente supports the Community Artists' Development and Resource Exchange (CADRE), a network of mostly Latino artists, artisans, and cultural workers. CADRE artists collectively advocate for equitable access to artistic and



cultural expression; create forums for creative exchange and collaboration; incubate individual and collective projects; and perform and exhibit works that honor and celebrate the cultural diversity and artistic richness of the Williamsburg and Bushwick communities.

This brings me to the policy recommendation I would like to impress upon you today: **prioritizing the equitable distribution of opportunities and benefits related to cultural economies.** CADRE artists are self-organizing and collectively supporting each other because they are drowning in the larger creative landscape of “hipster” and gentrifying Williamsburg. While many of those artists have lived and worked in the community for decades, their art forms and crafts are not as visible, recognized, and, at times, as well funded as the other art forms and modes of cultural expression that Williamsburg is now known around the world for. Criteria for excellence—as defined by city policies and funding sources—must recognize the wide diversity of artistic and cultural practices that must be supported, some of which are very informal and craft- or artisan-based. Venues supporting this diversity of cultural practices must also be supported and funded.

Second, artists, cultural workers, and neighborhood-based cultural organizations must be brought to the table early and meaningfully—and heard—on policy issues that stand to impact them, such as planning and development. Many artists we work with can no longer afford to live and/or work in the community they are dedicated to because of the Greenpoint-Williamsburg Waterfront Rezoning that has driven development in North Brooklyn—and displaced not only people, but the cultures, cultural practices, and businesses that they support, drive, and uphold. Uprooting people equals the disruption of culture and community, and reduces the ability of the small businesses of that community to survive and thrive. In terms of the drive for economic development, not all businesses are creative equal—some serve to support artists and local culture, while other forms of economic activity harm them.

The formal recognition of NOCDs and cultural hubs is integral to ensuring that NYC’s strong cultural communities are not further disrupted. For example, the El Puente Green Light District is a place-based initiative that is undergirded by a cluster of small and large institutions, some formal and some more informal, which are all stakeholders in the community. We must think about the idea of cultural institutions more broadly so that it includes these neighborhood-based networks, hubs, and clusters. Collectively within and among our



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communities, we have much to offer in the way of equitable, sustainable models for community development with artists and small businesses—and artists as small businesses—at their core.