

**TESTIMONY for City Council hearing on “New York City’s Cultural Sector and Derivative Businesses”
Held jointly by Committees on Small Business and Cultural Affairs
May 11, 2012**

Good morning. Thank you to the Council for holding this hearing – to Councilmembers Van Bramer and Reyna for bringing together Culture and Small Business, committees who in my humble opinion are natural allies, even members of the same family – and a special appreciation to Councilmember Rosie Mendez who has been stellar in her encouragement and support of grassroots cultural groups in our neighborhood.

My name is Ryan Gilliam. I’m a theater director and playwright. For the past 16 years, I’ve also been a community-based artist, working with youth ages 12 to 19 in the East Village and Lower East Side. My organization, Downtown Art, is a small nonprofit based on East 4th Street. I am one of the artists who founded FAB-NYC, a local service organization working with cultural groups in our neighborhood.

Before we created FAB-NYC, we were lucky enough to have a diverse cultural community on East 4th Street. Thirteen small and medium-sized arts groups had homesteaded several city-owned buildings on our block. As we watched the neighborhood change dramatically, we all expected to lose those homes. Our coalition – FAB-NYC- was formed in an attempt to preserve a diverse cultural presence in our neighborhood. That was ten years ago and our story, unlike many others, has had a happy outcome. Our small nonprofits now own permanent homes and the properties we secured from the city are designated for nonprofit cultural use in perpetuity.

FAB-NYC was formed in response to the threat of displacement. However, it has gone on to do much, much more than preserve space. It has become a potent force in building community, building bridges between cultural groups and local forprofit businesses, between residents and workers, between our community and communities across the city.

As a neighborhood based artist and someone who loves my community, I want to strongly recommend that the Council recognize, support, and fund the work that FAB-NYC and others with similar missions are doing to strengthen, preserve, and enhance the vitality – economic and otherwise – of the city’s ‘naturally occurring cultural districts.’

Two weeks ago, 25 teenagers and I opened ‘The Bowery Wars’, an original music-theater work which is performed outdoors in the streets, parks, and vacant lots of the Lower East Side. FAB-NYC has supported this project in so many ways – they reached out to the leaders of a new local park, making the connection so we could perform there, they blogged, posted photos and interviews about our project on their website, they quadrupled our outreach with eblasts, facebook posts, and ‘tweets’, and they contacted local media on our behalf (we are featured in the first print edition of The Lo-Down, a Lower Eastside magazine, because of FAB.) They brainstormed with me about how to overcome all kinds of difficulties – both large and small – and – I’m not sure if you can fully appreciate this, but believe me, I do – they have purchased full-price tickets to come see the show on their days off.

FAB's support doesn't end with these practical efforts. As part of FAB, we've gotten to know other local cultural groups in new and closer ways. This past fall, when we desperately needed rehearsal space, three other FAB groups came to our rescue, adjusting their programs and offering us free or very low cost space. When a studio opened up in one of the 4th Street cultural buildings a few months ago, we were offered space at a modest rent with the intention that we could be housed there until our permanent home is renovated. At the studio's opening last month, colleagues in FAB were there to celebrate with us – and I was pulled aside by the artistic director of Teatro Circulo. He told me that he had not come empty handed. Because his group had been able to secure new lighting equipment, they wanted to donate \$30,000 worth of used lighting equipment to our future home. We simply didn't have these kinds of mutually supportive relationships before FAB existed.

FAB-NYC, under the leadership of Tamara Greenfield, has built community. At the FAB Cafe, everyone crosses paths – residents, workers, visitors. Tenants in local buildings received white roofs and new more efficient refrigerators through FAB's sustainability program. In our current production, we are using two set pieces that came from another FAB theater and were recycled through FAB's Load-Out event. The off hours in our rehearsal studio are being used by young choreographers through FAB's Dance Block program. And yesterday I heard two FAB staff members talking about getting their hair cut at one of the small businesses nearby and I thought, "I need a haircut. I think I'll go there."

I'm an artist and emphatically not an economist. I can't provide numbers and verified measurements for FAB's impact. I'm not sure anyone can. But when I try to imagine FAB's absence – and imagination is my strong suit -- I am powerfully aware of the profound ways FAB-NYC has changed things for the better in our neighborhood.

You would probably agree with me that our local economies need creative efforts to help sustain them. The dividing line that separates small businesses and small cultural is mostly artificial. I urge the City Council to open a place at the table for entities like FAB/NYC from across the city –to work with them in strengthening local cultural assets and their integration with small businesses in ways that can build both economic power and community.

Submitted by
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