



Queens Museum of Art
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**Queens Museum of Art Testimony to the Joint Hearing of the
New York City Council Committees on Small Business and Cultural Affairs
May 11, 2012**

Good morning. My name is David Strauss and I am the Director of External Affairs at the Queens Museum of Art. I would like to begin by thanking Councilmembers Reyna and Van Bramer for chairing this important hearing examining the intersection of culture and small business, and furthermore, to thank the entire City Council for its steadfast support of culture throughout these past difficult budget cycles.

I know that my colleagues in the cultural sector have provided ample data and anecdotal testimony on the importance of culture in the small business sector, so I will concentrate on three items that exemplify this nexus in the course of the Queens Museum's everyday operations.

First, a little background - the Queens Museum is a mid-sized museum with a budget of just over \$3.4 million per year, 33 full-time staff and an additional 24 part-time educators, teaching artists and exhibition preparators. We are a member of the City's Cultural Institutions Group, meaning that we are on City-owned property and received a portion of our operating funding and energy support from the City, and also a member of NOCD, and true believers in the power of the cultural sector to revitalize neighborhoods and encourage the growth of businesses large and small. Our exhibitions and programs serve more than 200,000 people each year, primarily residents of Queens, but we also welcome tens of thousands of people from throughout the city, world and country.

The most common tactic used in measuring the impact of culture on small business is the direct and trickle down spending that we generate. By this I mean the Queens Museum events that are catered by local eateries like Tortilleria Nixtamal in Corona, Delhi Palace in Jackson Heights, and Spicy and Tasty in Flushing, the exhibition supplies purchased from Mensch Mills or Beplat Hardware, and the myriad other businesses we interact with during the course of the day. Close to one million dollars is spent by the Queens Museum on these purchases and we try to keep as much of that spending to locally owned businesses. As a whole, my CIG colleagues and I spend approximately \$600 million annually with local NYC vendors.

Add to that fact that thousands of visitors to the Queens Museum are coming from outside the immediate area to visit the museum and then heading out in the local neighborhoods to experience the finest food and wares that the worlds existing within Queens have to offer. Using the museum as an entry point, these cultural tourists bring their sense of adventure and spending power to the streets, helping local businesses to survive and grow, and in many cases throughout the city, encouraging new

businesses to open in the vicinity just to capture those visiting cultural institutions. It is no coincidence that the highest grossing street vendor in the city is the hot dog stand in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. On a citywide level, the record number of tourists the city is attracting with each successive year has kept our economy afloat, with hotels full, restaurants packed, and empty taxis hard to come by. There is no doubt that the museums, experimental theatres, small and large dance companies, zoos and other cultural outlets that we offer are driving visitors here in droves.

Speaking of tourism, in 2003, with City and foundation funding, the Queens Museum set out to develop a local cultural tourism initiative. Working with community businesses, leaders and cultural partners, we established the Queens Culture Trolley, a weekend service intended to remove some of the intimidating mystery of Queens that we found had prevented people from fully enjoying all that the borough has to offer. We hired the first of our two community organizers to pound the pavement, meet and create open dialogues with local business owners and collectively work to find ways to drive trolley passengers to their businesses – a free empanada at this restaurant and a free pastry at another. To make a long story short, as an art museum, we had a lot to learn about running a transportation system and after a few years, the Trolley project ended. However, the community and business relationships we made during that failed attempt have grown into a coalition of more than 100 entities looking to better the lives of those living and working in and around Corona Plaza. Responding to needs expressed by this coalition, we shifted our focus to making the once grand plaza at 102nd street and Roosevelt Avenue into the focal point of the community once again.

As this project grew, my colleague Jose Serrano, the second of our two community organizers, spearheaded efforts to better understand the needs of small businesses and local community groups, with the hopes that we could use our in-house talents and connections to help exact some positive change. After countless hours of discussions with business owners, Jose and his team of volunteers were able to ascertain what these people felt were the issues hindering their individual successes and the overall success of the plaza as a public space. From there we organized beautification efforts, held arts and health street fairs, presented public art projects and performances, created a free bilingual heart healthy cookbook in partnership with Elmhurst Hospital, and for the past three years, we have been leading the charge with the Queens Economic Development Corporation and Councilmember Julissa Ferreras to enroll Corona Plaza in the DOT's Plaza Program. If accepted into this program, a much-needed capital investment in the plaza would be made, thereby bringing people both from outside and inside the local community to Corona Plaza for performances, artmaking workshops, film screenings, street festivals, and some relaxation in the midst of the pressures of their 7-day work week. Of course this would benefit the 28 small businesses immediately surrounding the plaza as well as the hundreds on neighboring streets, and Jose is working diligently to include each of them in the process every step of the way.

The third example of the intersection of art and small business ties conveniently into a free vent we are hosting tomorrow in Councilmember Reyna's district. In recent years, the Queens Museum has noticed an increasing amount of artistic energy coming from Ridgewood, the "Old Queens" neighborhood that

has had new life breathed into it by an influx of new immigrants and the migration of artists and creative producers who have been priced out of Williamsburg, and now crossed the border into Queens. The art crawl event tomorrow, called “Actually, it’s Ridgewood” is a tongue in cheek reference to those who for one reason or another refuse to admit that this new creative enclave is in Ridgewood, Queens and not Bushwick, Brooklyn. Borough pride aside, the event, which starts at the historic Onderdonk House, will introduce more than 100 participants to nine of the galleries, studios and art spaces – all small businesses – that have already put Ridgewood, Queens on the hipster radar, and as we know from previous experience, will lead to more widespread attention. New restaurants, boutiques and grocery stores have sprung up in Ridgewood and waves of new residents are ushering a new era in the neighborhood’s history. Well-established businesses are enjoying this new uptick as well and if ever there was an example of how the creative class can help revive a community, this is it. If you want to experience this first hand, please feel free to join us at the Onderdonk House at 3pm tomorrow.

In closing, I would encourage the Chairs and members of both committees, and your colleagues throughout the Council to continue doing what you are doing. Keep fighting for more cultural funding so all three of the scenarios I described can continue to evolve and grow, and so that the cultural lifeblood of New York City will continue to flow out of the galleries, studios and theatres and into the local businesses that enjoy our crowds as much as we do.

I thank you for your time.