

**TESTIMONY BEFORE
THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL,
Committee on Small Business and the Committee on Cultural Affairs,
Libraries and International Intergroup Relations**

“New York City’s Cultural Sector and Derivative Small Businesses”

COUNCIL ON THE ARTS & HUMANITIES FOR STATEN ISLAND

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Good morning. I am Melanie Franklin Cohn, Executive Director of the Council on the Arts and Humanities for Staten Island and a member of the Naturally Occurring Cultural District Working Group (NOCD-NY). I appreciate the City Council’s interest in the arts and how they empower and enrich our local neighborhoods. I would like to thank Councilmember Diana Reyna and Councilmember Jimmy Van Bramer for inviting us here today.

Staten Island has been growing rapidly, by about 24% since 1990. The population growth has led to an influx of new faces who are creating a diverse cultural scene. Although these artists and heritage bearers (individuals that preserve, recreate, and transmit their cultural heritage to the next generation) come from diverse backgrounds—such as new immigrants from Mexico, Sri Lanka, Liberia, and transplants from across the U.S.—they have a common goal, to share their art forms and cultural expressions with their community. Unfortunately, Staten Island’s cultural infrastructure has not kept pace with its growth. There are few places to present their work.

One solution to that problem is bringing these artists and heritage bearers into public, city-owned spaces. This not only allows artists a space to present their work, but brings liveliness to public areas and can offer great accessibility to events so that even casual passersby become audiences.

We’ve had great success in this--from LUMEN, a one-night video and performance art festival that attracts over 2,000 people, which was held last year at the city-owned Former Third District Lighthouse Depot, to St. George Day, a community-organized festival that included a Dragon Parade, which was held last month at Tompkinsville Park.



When community artists create an extraordinary art experience, such as LUMEN or St. George Day, it attracts large numbers of people who patronize local coffee shops, bars, and restaurants and contributes to an idea of a “cool” neighborhood where other kinds of shops & small businesses begin to thrive. **These successes are why providing access to public spaces is so important.**

But for small art groups, individual artists, and heritage bearers (particularly artists who don’t speak English as their first language) the permissions, contracting, and permitting necessary to access these public, city-owned spaces can be formidable. Simply finding out what city agency needs to be contacted for permission and what paperwork is necessary can be very difficult for those who have never gone through the process before. These complexities can make the use of many public spaces out of reach for artists and immigrant groups. **This is why I support city efforts that help streamline and guide artists and heritage bearers through the process and provide financial support.**

A great example of how this can be accomplished on the city-level is the Department of Transportation’s Urban Art Program. This program allows artists a streamlined way to work with DOT to use public plazas, sidewalks and other DOT spaces as “canvases for temporary art in all five boroughs.” The DOT’s pARTners program even offers up to \$5000 for the installation and creation of the work. And they assist with press releases to announce the project.

We have worked with DOT on a temporary public art installation at the Ferry Terminal with artist Victoria Munro. This is a project that would have been impossible 10 years ago because at that time there would have been no system in place for beginning a conversation with the agency. But with the dedicated program at DOT, the art installation became a reality, and it enriched the local community. I encourage the City Council to consider the success of the DOT program as a model for ways to make other City-Owned property accessible to the community for arts programming.

Creating streamlined ways that artists and heritage bearers can bring these extraordinary art experiences to life in public space is vital to the synergy that exists between community artists and community businesses. This is why I am here today encouraging the City Council to help find ways to facilitate community-based cultural projects in public spaces **by reviewing city-owned properties for opportunities to use and share space creatively during non-primary use hours; to maximize opportunities for temporary public art through a unified program; and to facilitate community-based cultural projects with other city agencies in the way DOT’s program does so well.**