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TAKIN' IT TO THE STREET: ARTS INSTITUTIONS AS FORUMS FOR URBAN PROBLEMS IN NEW YORK'S LOWER EAST SIDE

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the ways in which arts institutions have expanded their community role to serve as forums for urban issues and potential generators of innovative design-based solutions. Using two case studies from New York City, we argue that arts institutions have increasingly used the philosophy of 'design thinking' to tackle public issues previously reserved for city governments and nonprofits. Through outdoor festivals, arts institutions sought to engage the public over issues such as housing, transportation, and environmentally conscious development. We ask what participatory arts-based processes bring to urban issues and how 'design thinking' can be compromised by frequent corporate partnerships. Finally, we consider how museums use design thinking as a new ideological rudder to expand their role into public policy and we assess the pitfalls of this process, including the often-uneasy relationships between traditional community groups and proponents of 'design solutions.

1. Introduction

Cultural institutions have always turned to face those who support them. Starting in the 1970s, Lower Manhattan reinvented itself as an epicenter for cultural production and dissemination (Zukin, 1989; Molotch and Treskon, 2009): for over a generation artists have moved increasingly farther south and east with galleries and other arts institutions following them. In just the past several years, southern Manhattan was chosen as the site for a revamped Whitney Museum and, possibly, a Guggenheim franchise. As these institutions move into new and significantly less affluent neighborhoods there is an ongoing discussion about the change they bring with them (Bishop, 2004; Rosler, 2012). Urban sociologists have long charted the links between artists and gentrification including: how artists market new areas (Lloyd, 2006; Zukin, 2011), help to mediate different understandings of how best to use public space (Madden, 2010), and how artists sometimes uniquely serve as community *stewards* (Brown-Saracino,

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2009). The role of artists in the redevelopment of urban neighborhoods has garnered widespread sociological interest and debate. A *placemaking* school lauds art as the asset that tips the balance of the community toward economic success (Florida, 2004), while some deride creative newcomers as the Sturmtruppen of real estate interests (Smith, 1996). We seek to extend this debate by examining arts institutions, rather than artists themselves, and to focus on how they are critically aware of their role in cities and seek new methods for involvement in urban politics. We also analyze the ways in which engagement with urban problems may be a mutually beneficial relationship in which museums attract new sources of funding and a larger variety of visitors while shifting their institutional model to fill the gap left by withdrawal of public and private support for more traditional community groups. New York provides an ideal terrain to examine these factors because of the large number of arts institutions, their variety of approaches, and the long, at times, contentious history of gentrification in the Lower East Side.

Arguments over arts-based gentrification have been intellectually fruitful but have generally overlooked three key elements: the linkages between artists and arts institutions, the symbolic systems deployed by these multifaceted organizations (Zolberg, 2000; Cameron and Coaffee, 2005; McQuarrie and Marwell, 2009) and the changing strategies of major contemporary arts institutions (Zolberg, 1994), which increasingly seek to engage with urban sociology, city planning, and architecture. We contend that these engagements serve a distinct set of purposes: to increase institutional capacity and prestige in a time of economic threat, to shift the discourse around urban problems towards a language that emphasizes design in order to solidify the expert role of artists, and to engage in re-brandings that emphasize community-commitment and raise the moral cachet of the institutions (and, sometimes by proxy, their corporate patrons).

This article uses two recent arts festivals in New York City to discuss the changing role of museums in debates over urban issues and the ways in which museums have deployed the philosophy of *design thinking* (Brown, 2009; Cross, 2011; Rodgers, 2012) to argue that artists must take a more important role in urban policy. We then analyze to what extent 'design thinking' is a truly innovative way of examining urban problems and how its invocation by museums, designers, and artists fits into a new professional landscape in which arts-based professions aspire to demarcate a new terrain of influence (Abbott, 1991). Finally, we look at how the use of design separates museums from other community advocacy groups and sets an ideological foundation for new types of arts-based interventions in urban politics.

2. Methodology

The data for this article was collected over a period of 18 months through participant observation of the two festivals as both attendees and as presenters. This allowed for insight into the planning process of each festival, informal conversations with other participants, and a very high familiarity with recent changes in the field. In the ethnographic fieldwork, the questions focused on were: what sets apart arts institutions as the proper setting to deal with urban issues such as poverty, climate change, transportation, and educational inequality and what skill set do artists and designers bring to these issues. We asked participants to directly explain their philosophy on how design can help solve contemporary urban problems and recorded how they advocated for their own expertise when presenting publicly at the festivals. Particularly, we tried

to gauge how they saw design-based solutions as beneficial to both the Lower East Side, a community with considerable poverty, people of color, and the highest density of public housing in Lower Manhattan, and a boon to the credibility and increased membership of arts institutions.

The authors also attended meetings of activists opposed to the two festivals, where group discussions were held and protest events were planned. Some of those present at these planning meetings where members of more traditional community groups who were opposed to the museums' neighborhood efforts and felt them to be self-serving incursions. We spoke with activists about what they believed the ideal role of the museums should be and how they differentiated their own approach to community problems from the more design- based philosophy of arts institutions. In general, traditional community groups wanted to work with arts institutions but in ways that privileged the historic role of non-profits that represented communities of color, tenants' rights associations, and anti-gentrification groups as original neighborhood voices that would have to be integrated into any new programs.

After each festival, organizers were interviewed for the purpose of clarifying the goals of the institutions involved. We used these interviews to determine how museums and non-profit institutions planned the events, how successful they thought them to be, and how they affected the institutions' future plans. We also sought to analyze how museums and community groups measured success using different rubrics and vocabularies. These interviews were semi-structured and lasted an average of one hour. In total, 12 interviews were conducted over eighteen months. Much of the article was also informed by five years of experience working in the fields of graphic design and the urban non-profit sector by one of the co-authors.

3. The Changing Museum

Museums easily fit in the narrative of arts-based gentrification but not in programmatically simple ways. Many arts institutions headline their capacity to serve as forums on urban problems, such as gentrification, and to increase the overall civic capacity of neighborhoods (Pollock and Sharp, 2012). While they also acknowledge their role in gentrification, they often do so in fine print, preferring to focus on how the visual arts can revive beleaguered economic prospects (Florida, 2004). Arts institutions increasingly present themselves as key sites to address urban issues. They have taken on new roles of organizing public forums, acting as institutional umbrellas for smaller community and activist groups, and creating pop-up learning centers that seek to extend the institutions' reach to new spaces and audiences. This is both a function of the changing role of arts institutions in general (Zolberg, 2010) and a shift in thinking regarding what groups of experts are best equipped to address urban problems (Logan and Molotch 2007). Of major note, is the way in which arts institutions seek to change the language in which urban issues are discussed and how the use of *design thinking* as a new philosophy has emboldened museums and given a new mandate to creative professionals (Evans, 2001).

Specifically, the insistence that design presents new and novel solutions previously untried by government and non-profits because of a lack of know-how and insufficient technology or creativity. We are keenly interested in how arts institutions attempt to frame classic problems of infrastructure, housing, economic disparity, transportation, and environmental protection in a

language that focuses on design rather than older solutions of community empowerment, better city governance, and infrastructural improvements.

In this article, we will examine two public events in New York's Lower East Side (LES), each of which lasted for over two weeks, sponsored by major arts institutions seeking to address urban issues through street level exhibitions with an eye towards incorporating a broader public. Unlike previous work on arts-based street festivals, we focus neither on the performative element (Wherry, 2011) nor the connection between arts festivals and neighborhood economic growth (Quinn, 2005), rather our focus is how arts institutions position artists as important voices in city management by using public demonstrations of how art and design can best solve urban problems. We examine projects sponsored by the New Museum and the Guggenheim Museum (in partnership with BMW) both of which took place in the LES in the summer and fall of 2011. Both sites are in an area that ten years ago would have appeared too peripheral for a major art event and potentially inhospitable to well-heeled museum-goers. We argue that arts institutions have taken on the role of urban forums to gain access to funding, attract younger patrons, and firm-up their mission of becoming 21st century institutions (Allen, 2012).

Secondly, we locate the changing role of these institutions as a bid to increase corporate, rather than public, funding by tackling media-ready concepts like *going green*, density, and bicycling instead of more politically contentious issues such as low-income housing, rent control, and racial environmental health disparities. Finally, we seek to offer a rejoinder to theories of gentrification that delegate the role of arts institutions as cultural bulldozers for the economic interests of real estate firms. Arts institutions serve a far more complex role: at times they cynically rally support to urban problems for the sake of institutional prestige but they also fill a very real gap left by the diminished standing of community groups with limited resources and de-funded municipal governments.

In the last two decades, cultural institutions have markedly shifted away from traditional haute culture in search of new revenue streams and more diverse audiences. Additionally, new theories from art history departments have generally privileged works that showcase interactions between people, and museums have responded in turn. These theories, labeled *relational aesthetics*, *social practice* and *dialogue art*, have expanded the role of institutions from guarded repositories for beautiful objects to open forums for novel interactions (Bishop, 2004; Zolberg, 2010). The *relational aesthetics* turn has shifted the terrain in the art world not so much to art that is explicitly politically-engaged but to spaces where art is meant to be experienced for the public good (Bishop, 2012). Relational aesthetics relies on art that is collectively experienced and therefore unique because of the contingency of each specific enactment (Bourdieu and Haacke, 1995), group of people and context, yet it is unclear whether interventions as banal as a community meetings, street stands, or workshops might actually fall into this category.

Many of these projects make use of *design thinking* as well (Brown, 2008): a concept with growing stock in the worlds of marketing and business, which dictates that intractable urban problems are not lacking in resources but rather in creative potentialities (Rodgers, 2012). Spatial reordering, aesthetic tweaking, and greening have been advocated as the solutions to a host of urban woes: implying that urban design is a serviceable master category by which to analyze and solve urban problems. Design thinking, by which we mean ideas that privilege

material interventions in the built environment and charette-style processes for idea generation, has slowly but surely moved from a relatively small circle of the *creative class* (architects, web developers, and graphic artists) into business schools (Brown, 2008; Cross, 2011). In the process, it has caught the eye of cultural programmers, major art institutions, and policy advocates. It has been championed as a more stimulating and effective way of engaging low-income and underrepresented communities; sometimes in tandem with, but often in-contrast to, traditional activist *door-knock* and *base-building* strategies. This paper takes up the conceptual gap between design thinking approaches and more traditional means of engagement and uses the two case studies to highlight some fundamental points of contention between the two schools of thought and how they relate to the communities they serve.

Design has been held up as a means in-and-of-itself to create a better functioning, greener, and more just city with the aid of like-minded institutions. For critics, this is often an *easy way out* of sticky problems like climate change and labor abuses because it suggests that we can effect change merely by switching product lines rather than re-evaluating our consumptive practices. While arts institutions are more canny and nuanced in the ways they use design, they often do so in partnership with businesses that conflate design as a means to sell products with design thinking as a way to better society. The shift to design thinking not only enhances the prestige of arts institutions but also draws in a new audience.

While design thinking is distinctly problem-oriented, relational aesthetics is highly attuned to process and seeks to transform activities that fit under the rubric of *community activism* into what can broadly be understood as art. Institutions, using relational aesthetics and design thinking, now market exhibits not as merely expressing political viewpoints but as actively contributing to a political dialogue that will help to remedy problems associated with urban life. On one hand, this signals the long history of convergence between art, architecture, and urban planning. On the other, it shows ways in which fine art and design have taken up fields not historically within their purview (Abbott, 1991). Art institutions often present urban problems as design riddles, shifting them from the domain of more traditional social justice-oriented groups toward a more limited *problematique* that emphasizes restructuring urban space alone rather than remaking urban power structures (Hackworth, 2006; Castells, 2012). As Claire Bishop notes, frequently new art endeavors that seek public engagement are deliberately project-oriented and limited in scope in order to critically respond to the grandiosity and utopianism of previous schools of socially-engaged art (Bishop, 2004). They also often seek a utilitarian appeal to a new generation of museum goers who are more familiar with interactive art, co-branding, and social change advertising campaigns.

The two museums examined in this article have, in a major way, moved away from showing aesthetically interesting objects -*art for art's sake*- to positioning themselves as umbrella institutions that span a variety of arts, cultural endeavors, and political positions. In the effort to re-brand themselves as the natural setting for debates on the future of the city, museums and other cultural institutions have sought out highly visual ways of connecting with new audiences. Many of these tactics, such as pop-up spaces, street festivals, guerrilla marketing, co-sponsorship, and social media blitzes, have been borrowed directly from the world of advertising. These new approaches are meant to engage a new type of patron: the urban passerby. The cultural victuals presented to this new crowd have been made deliberately bite-sized for those in motion. This type of endeavor reflects the ways in which corporate branding

Max Holleran and Sam Holleran

appeals to consumers through campaigns that address unifying world issues such as climate change, HIV, and hunger. It also shows a new self-consciousness on the part of arts institutions to make their cultural products more accessible to the average person on the street in order to diffuse the still prevalent charges of cultural elitism, often used to describe New York's major museums.

4. The New Museum's StreetFest

The New Museum's 2011 *Festival of Ideas for the New City* was billed as a two week long festival including a block party, a conference, and events at the Museum and local galleries. For two weekends in May a 150-meter-stretch of the Bowery, a wide street in the Lower East Side, was home to the block party composed of festive orange tents that held demonstrations with community groups shoulder-to-shoulder with artisanal pickle sellers and shrimp taco vendors in a telling mixture of art and commerce (Caves, 2000). The events were promoted as an intellectual and activist exchange of ideas facilitated through the conference, which featured out-of-the-box urbanists like Bogotá's former mayor Antanas Mockus, as well as a neighborhood events celebrating creative thinking about urban problems. The highly visible street festival, heavily subsidized by the carmaker Audi, featured artists and designers addressing New York's problems of infrastructure, transportation, and responsible growth with attractive models, multi-media presentations, and stylish flyers and booklets. One of the main tenets of the programming was that the festival would be an open discussion but would also seek out fresh thinking on urban problems that have plagued government and non-profits for years with, purportedly, dismal track records of effectively ameliorating these problems.

The New Museum, a downtown culture-maker since 1977, erected a sleek new structure on the Bowery in 2007. The building, which makes use of recent rezoning to rise ten stories above its low-slung neighbors (occupied, at the time of construction, by lighting stores, kitchen supply wholesalers, and the last Single-Room-Occupancy [SRO] residences for transients), was the subject of much local criticism and ultimately became a symbol of the continuing re-branding of the Bowery from seedy strip to up-and-coming arts hub (Greenberg, 2008). The new building did not represent an initial incursion for residents but, rather, the culmination of years of change. While the Museum showed a new alignment of economic forces in the Bowery it was greeted with less animosity than similar new condo buildings, part of the reason is possibly because the arts purpose retains the *social authority* of older gentrifiers who see the new construction as a legitimization of their foresight and an asset for their future endeavors (Ocejo, 2011). To many interviewed, the presence of the Museum confirms the neighborhood as a cultural destination rather than simply a zone for real estate investment although part of the allure of the neighborhood for galleries and museums is its perceived authenticity (Zukin, 2011) regardless of the demographic make-up of those engaged in street level events. One subject hailed museums as a positive force no matter what friction exists with residents because it added to the cumulative space taken up by non-profit organizations rather than expensive new housing.

With the *Festival of Ideas for the New City* the New Museum sought to demonstrate that it was a community-minded institution that could serve as an important resource for bringing together educational institutions, activists, and artists in a changing neighborhood. As many cultural spaces struggle to stay afloat they have looked for new audiences, new patrons, and new

pricing structures (Becker, 1984) as well as a re-articulation of their utility for their neighborhoods. The Festival of Ideas is a paradigm of a populist approach to increasing the audience of art museums and attempting to engage like-minded people through spontaneous interaction on the streets. Often, these exhibitions featured design as a tool to address urban ills, particularly through the use of new technological tools such as big data collection and cell phone apps.

The Festival was geared toward what Japonica Brown-Saracino calls "social homesteaders: those whose economic and ideological disposition do not align perfectly and who seek to become community leaders in their new neighborhoods in part to protect against the damages of gentrification" (Brown-Saracino, 2009: 11). Most who passed by, while the authors were attending, were what other presenters referred to as *our kind of people*, that is, already interested in art, design, and social innovation. Many were making a special trip to the festival, and not spontaneously drawn to the event to learn more about a subject they were wholly unfamiliar with. As several neighborhood group employees noted: *the programming was useful for attracting potential donors but we didn't see people from the communities we serve (Chinese, Latino) here*. Using an add campaign of street banners and artists commissioned to paint the rolling gates of Chinese restaurant supply stores, the festival attempted to attract neighborhood businesses and passersby using an aesthetic that drew on street art and word-of-mouth advertisement as explicit forms of nostalgia rather than conventional publicizing tactics.

The festival brings into focus the challenge of arts institutions stepping into the field of urban politics while also attempting to build institutional prestige and community trust. This entrance into urban politics, long the preserve of government and highly-placed NGOs, is rationalized by offering design and artistic skills as antidotes to what one interviewee called the *habitually stale thinking of city agencies*. After building a ten-story museum in a transitional neighborhood, the New Museum was a potential target of anti-gentrification groups and more cynical observers of the festival saw it as a maneuver to preempt criticism, one even dubbed it a *pacification mission*. Others asked how organizations can frankly talk about green city planning while their festivals are underwritten by luxury car companies.

Some artists and community groups expressed their basic ideological disagreement with the direction of the New Museum (and its reach into the cultural and political worlds of the LES), several of those interviewed also said they felt compelled to participate in the festival because the alternative was marginalization for their organization. Participants struggled with questions of best practices for museums seeking to address urban problems, not wishing to split hairs about corporate-institutional bedfellows, but to stress positive outcomes and institutional self-reflexivity. If moderately funded museums (as opposed to large endowment players like MoMA and the Metropolitan Museum) wish to grow, it is assumed that they will move to areas with lower rent. Many community groups interviewed, felt that when these cultural institutions, aimed at the highly educated, *show up in low or middle-income neighborhoods it is worth examining the ways in which they engage with long-time residents who are, most likely, not part of their constituent base*. Especially when these institutions move ambitious projects into their exterior spaces and attempt to reformulate street interactions (Loftland, 1998) many wanted institutional awareness as a baseline for involvement but were not opposed to new, and arts-based, approaches to solving neighborhood problems.

The New Museum worked hard to maintain its clout as an *alternative* and *downtown* institution despite its costly high-design building of stacked cubes, which when it went up was the tallest and most noticeable structure in the neighborhood. Monthly performances by young artists and independent hip-hop acts in the Museum's new galleries have helped to steer the institution away from young-MoMA status and into its own culture-making territory. The populism of the Museum's shows which often feature interactive art (such as Carsten Höller's sensory immersion bath, which viewers could literally climb into, and a piece by Chu Yun that used sleeping men and women on beds in the center of a gallery) solidified the Museum's reputation as an avant-garde space committed to shaking up the experiential norms of Museum Mile institutions. This framing presents the New Museum as a space not only more attuned to young artists but also as a place where younger patrons can come and not be confronted with the archetypically *stufffy* museum world of their grandparents. In terms of design thinking, this image was used as a credential to advance the idea that the Museum was willing to investigate new avenues and technological tools for urban problems that older, and perhaps more staid, institutions would not utilize.

The Festival of Ideas went a step further. It was promoted as an opportunity to engage directly with a burgeoning group of urban thinkers-and-doers focusing on design-based solutions that suggests a pragmatism not found within the museum's walls. Just as the New Museum's interactive exhibitions supplement blue chip arts institutions in uptown Manhattan, the Festival presented various ideas for a *new city* as supplements (or maybe anecdotes to) the official processes of policy and planning. This cheerful attitude overlooked the inherent difficulties of planning projects in public space and many interviewees admitted that they had been instructed to concentrate on work that would be *fun*. While requesting significant commitment in time and energy from participants, the Museum expressed little intention of reconnecting the Festival's *ideas* to the bricks and mortar world of the Lower East Side. Untethered from the official engines of policy and planning, the Festival's ideas were in grave danger of bleeding out immediately after the festival's last day.

The conference sponsored by the Festival of Ideas featured distinguished panelists like Rem Koolhaas, Elizabeth Diller, and David Byrne. The events, which cost $10 to attend, were held at NYU's Wagner School and the Cooper Union. A panel on the *Networked City* recommended crowd-sourcing techniques to deal with quotidian issues like traffic maintenance; while other panels aimed at more academic explanations of how better design can de-naturalize the familiar and help people feel a new sense of attachment and engagement with their neighborhoods. This notion of making design interventions in urban form as well as making activism more fun and appealing ran through many of the conversations. Antanas Mockus, former mayor of Bogota, showcased traffic clowns who chided dangerous drivers with mock sadness and were hailed as a critical success for non-traditional approaches to commonplace urban problems.

Web-based solutions (Castells, 2012) were spoken of with an appropriate sense of reverence as events in Tahrir Square unfolded in real time and some panelists discussed the idea of *Facebook revolutions*. The role of the artist and designer as a valued interpreter of urban issues was continually brought up and most of the panels observed that they were inadequately integrated into public and private institutions that dealt with city issues such as housing, public space, environmental issues, and food justice. What was tellingly absent from the discussions was a frank look at the role of the private museum as both a civic institution and a participant in

raising rent prices and forcing out low-income residents. Also, the role of artists as privileged commentators on neighborhood issues and as natural choices for identifying and representing community problems was dealt with as a given and not as a potentially problematic, question of gentrification, racial privilege, and cultural capital.

The conference also featured *World Café* workshops, which cost ten dollars to attend, and featured breakout sessions to *solicit and aggregate citizen views to identify downtown residents' issues and concerns* and then *group source* these issues by posting key conversation threads online. The threads elicited a paltry number of responses, showing the limits of digital conversations about community problems but, more disturbingly, highlighting the Museum's limited view of citizen constituents as those who could attend workshops that were not free of charge, based on internet registration, and held inside of a private university rather than in a more public space. These forums bespoke a type of gesturing toward community engagement as a popular practice rather than an actual attempt to hear a diverse set of voices or compile any sort of representative sample of community issues. Employees of more traditional neighborhood groups found the idea of crowd-sourcing to be both unnecessarily tech-centric and potentially a catalyst to further exclude low income residents who were not online, as one woman put it: *this tactic seems to be all about Silicon Valley solutions that involve concepts with trendy names. We call what they want to do a 'community meeting': we've been having them for years and they are working just fine*.

The Festival of Ideas marketed the Museum as a place that could successfully mediate the impact of its presence in a neighborhood that is quickly changing from soup kitchens and clinics to trendy clubs and restaurants with names like Mission, Peasant, and Barrio Chino that trade on the Bowery's down-at-the-heels history with little concern for the population served by former tenants. The high-mindedness of the Festival's program delineated it from workaday city street festivals that mainly feature handmade jewelry and kebabs. The Bowery incarnation of the street fest was meant for *100+ local grassroots organizations and small businesses (to) present model products and practices in a unique outdoor environment*. A new breed of *cultural* street festivals fills a void in a city where street *festivals* are rarely festive occasions (Hammett and Hammett, 2007) but rather bland carbon copies of each other replete with the same t-shirt vendors, sweet 'n hot Italian sausage grills, and fire-roasted corn-husk stations across the five boroughs.

By marketing itself as an event for socially conscious urbanites, the Festival delineated a very different cultural demographic than typical street fairs. A good point of contrast, is the annual San Genero festival, only two blocks away on Mulberry Street, which markets itself to suburban Italian-Americans looking for a carnivalesque atmosphere, heavy drinking, fried Oreos, and shooting games with stuffed-animal prizes. The Museum's notion of a culturally elevated street festival, which takes up important social issues, shows a reliance on a set audience whose taste culture (Bourdieu, 1984), political ethos, and consumption patterns are similar and attractive to both museums and to the companies that support their endeavors. Community groups that participated in the street festival were located in booths up and down the Bowery in a typical format for vendors at any New York street fair: in a similar sense organizations sought to *sell* passersby on their particular brand of community intervention using handouts, demonstrations, and interactive displays. Groups such as the Bowery Mission and the anti-gentrification activist group Good Old Lower East Side participated in the festival to raise awareness about their

institutions despite the fact that the Museum has a clear role in transforming the neighborhood and is, perhaps, making it more difficult for low-income residents to live and work in the area. This points to the tenuous nature of the Museum's relationship with on-the-ground activist groups who are eager for the exposure that the institution can provide but may, by and large, find themselves on the opposite sides of the fence when it comes to neighborhood change.

An employee of a Lower East Side-based community nonprofit said that his organization chose to participate for the positive publicity and because the event was close to their headquarters, but he maintained that the New Museum was the true center of attention and that the festival seemed to be something of a *devious PR stunt*. While organizations like his complained about the Museum's habit of *stepping on the toes of community groups* he felt compelled to participate because, no matter what objections he had, being left out was the worst possible scenario.

Organizers of the conference noted that the Bowery's connotation of urban grit, homelessness, and drug abuse was certainly alluring to a segment of the arts community who argued for non-institutional art practices and identified the neighborhood with the often romanticized 1970s art scene. Most of these organizers drew on Sharon Zukin's pioneering book Loft Living (Zukin, 1989) not to criticize arts-based gentrification but to show that the arts could put a neighborhood back on the map economically (à la Richard Florida). Local organizations complained about not having a shaping role in the festival, they did not discount the positive potential of having a powerful new neighbor who expressed interest in social justice issues. A representative of the Bowery Mission explained his belief that the Festival had helped publicize his organization's goals and he was happy to get support wherever he could without being hung up on the specifics of long-term neighborhood change. He also added that the neighboring clubs, who came to the Bowery years before had not been positive community-builders, even for self-promotion, but had simply wanted cheaper rent.

5. BMW Guggenheim Lab

The BMW Guggenheim Lab was both more anticipated and met with higher degree skepticism than the New Museum's event on the Bowery. This is partly because of the physical scale - which involved erecting a temporary structure designed by Japanese architects Atelier Bow-Wow on a City-owned sliver of land called First Park- and partly because of the theme, *confronting comfort*, which was announced with much fanfare, blogging, and press releases. Nor was it forgotten that a luxury automaker's name was attached to the carbon-fiber pavilion (although BMW's actual branding on the structure and printed materials was very subdued). The Lab featured talks, an urban design game called *Urbanology*, film screenings, and workshops during its ten-week run, at the end of which it was packed up and shipped to Berlin; the start of a six-year multi-city tour.

Just days before the Lab opened Mars Bar, a singularly grimy East Village hold-out, was shuttered to make way for a condominium development. At the opening itself, where illuminati from the fields of art, architecture, and design ate hors d'oeuvres, a homeless man passed out along the fence that separates First Park from Houston Street. An ambulance was eventually called for the man but not before a video of the incongruent scene was shot and distributed on YouTube. The incident, received some angry coverage on local left-leaning blogs, but was

quickly forgotten once the Lab's programming started in earnest. However, it proved a harbinger of things to come and made clear very different attitudes toward public space amongst new and old residents (Pattillo, 2008).

Despite a small protest against the Lab by veteran East Village activist groups , many on-the-ground groups choose to participate in the programming, albeit skeptically, rather than lose the opportunity presented by big walk-in audiences and a host of high-tech audio-visual components. The main structure of the Lab resembled a glowing shed when its multiple bays of flat-screen televisions were lighting up the summer nights. However, with the exception of the Lab's *Urbanology* game, the screens functioned to showcase artist's work, independent documentaries, and slideshows prepared by activist groups and not -as many had feared- high-octane BMW commercials.

During the short lifespan of the Lab an interesting and telling break appeared between resource-strapped groups working in low-income neighborhoods like the Lower East Side and more-ideologically driven groups like the (now defunct) anarchist collective Red Channels. The authors of this article were present at a Red Channels meeting held at ABC No Rio, one of the last-standing squatter spaces in the area that discussed the move by corporations like BMW and international museum franchises, like the Guggenheim, into the sphere of neighborhood organizing. The discussants were by-and-large white artists and writers with activist experience on several continents. The discussion focused on corporate co-sponsorship, the nature of public space, and the future of DIY and *radical* art projects when placed in competition with slickly-produced corporate culture. Towards the end of the discussion, a black woman joined the meeting, apologized for being late, stating that she had been at the Guggenheim Lab watching a really great documentary called *The Price of Sugar,* on the struggles of Haitian sugar cane cutters in the Dominican Republic.

At this point in the conversation a general consensus had been formed among the discussants that no one should set foot in the BMW-underwritten pavilion unless it was to disrupt the proceedings in protest. Members of the group confronted the new guest asserting that while the documentary itself may be worthy, the premises where she had viewed it was designed on a corporate idea of culture. They went on to state that this form of culture and urban-problem solving is spoon-fed to future consumers with no democratic engagement, no social justice 'teeth', and no mechanism for socialization without the help of a brand intermediary. In response, the new arrival stated that while the crowd at the Lab had been racially and ideologically diverse and what she saw at the meeting was a big group of white people essentially saying the same things as the Guggenheim project. She went on to point out that every public space organized as forum is a place to speak freely and a place to speak your mind. On the assertion that corporate-sponsored events tailor the opinions generated within them, she said: *wherever I go I can bring my skepticism, I can question*. The conversation that had occurred that night, she maintained, was not just some quick feel good chatter about urban problems but a real conversation and attempts to discredit the intervention of museums based on corporate sponsorship were unhelpful and even outmoded relics of a past generation of anti-corporate activism that essentially failed.

The contention that arts-backed activism only reaches out to like-minded individuals that opened up at the Red Channels meeting bled into the Occupy movement (launched the next

week by some of the members who had, earlier that summer, organized a break-in protest at the site of the BMW Guggenheim Lab). One of the main points put forward in the meeting by Frank, a graying member of ABC No Rio and long-time activist, is that radical arts groups have become too comfortable with a predator-prey relationship when it comes to mainstream cultural offerings: they write off their losses as inevitabilities in a system in which they are eternally positioned as the righteous loser. Many proponents of design-thinking take a different route: they seek to directly engage the slickness of corporate culture but on their own terms and often using equally slick tools inspired by marketing campaigns. In some sense, they see themselves as the insurgent architects who will move beyond the endless problematizing and never-ending conversations (Harvey, 2000: 245) and construct alternatives to the dominant spatial practice. For critics of design-thinking, the insurgent architect necessarily lives within a system of power and occasionally disrupts the system using conventional tools based in art, design, and architecture but these *artistic irregulars* are too often pacified and put back into their marching columns.

The Lab's game Urbanology was a perfect example of more traditional activists' objection to design thinking practices, and many were quick to point out how projects likes this one fostered a reductive understanding of urban problems and inadequate public engagement. The game laid-out on a checkerboard floor under television bays, prompts five players to slide artistic lecterns towards a finish. The questions they are asked -via bobbing motion graphics displays- were simplistic and rhetorical: after a 20-second lecture on soaring rates of asthma in children (their faces lining the display boards) contestants are asked if emissions standards should be toughened up. Similarly pat questions were posed on food justice and obesity, along with a variety of *green is good* questions with built-in answers. In this case, a focus on *ingenuity* and *social entrepreneurship* as solutions to urban problems creates a necessarily limiting framework in which the only actors who have large voices also have access to substantial policy knowledge, technical skill, and political pull on a neighborhood and city level.

In the end, the BMW Guggenheim Lab was successful in that it extended the resources of the museum to a far broader and more diverse group than its usual patron set. However, it did so on its own terms. Groups that participated were not forced to hew towards themes of greening or *ingenious urbanisms*, but many saw their social justice messages dim when placed on the Lab's website, on which their language took a backseat to *crowd-sourced* quotes proclaiming that urban comfort is *mature street trees*. Of those interviewed, many expressed a desire to both support large-scale projects, while also being perpetually disappointed with the end result of their collaboration and, what they viewed as a tendency to *mute* or *distort* their organization's original message. One non-profit employee said that arts-based interventions tend to present *what they call innovations but we see as pre-cooked solutions which do an end-run around the public input processes that our organization advocates for…they never bother to ask actual people what they want*.

As the urban experiment of the BMW Guggenheim Lab began to wind down in September of 2011 a far more ad-hoc group of urbanists were assembling in another City-owned space, a mile south at Zuccotti Park, to show that activating public spaces and engaging lively debates need not be done under the auspices of capital-'A' art or commerce. The Occupy movement serves as an interesting foil to the Lab because in a very basic way it achieved some of the goals set out by Guggenheim's curators at the project's onset: *part urban think tank, part*

community center and public gathering space, the Lab is conceived to inspire public discourse in cities around the world …The public is invited to attend and to participate in free programs and experiments at the Lab...

The Guggenheim Lab may have brought in a large and diverse group of participants (arguably more diverse than the initial days of Occupy during which *Liberty Square* was home to a largely-white, artist, and activist set similar to the participants at the Red Channels event) but this generated little in the way of ideas. For Occupy activists, it was the origins of design thinking processes in business management, not the ideas generated though these processes that proved unpalatable (Brown, 2008). Often questions like asthma rates in poor neighborhoods, food deserts, and the cost of mass transportation were met with answers of mature street trees, green markets, and bike share programs -all very serviceable solutions, but hardly the examinations of underlying problems, problems which Occupy activists were determined to investigate.

6. Conclusion

Arts organizations' initiatives to supplement their programming with public forums and spaces to tackle urban problems (Berwick, 2011) eschews previously accepted channels of working, going around city government and nonprofit groups. These new activities put museums directly in contact with the public as showrooms for new social and artistic interventions in urban space. However, many of these plans remain in the realm of *paper architecture* (Boym, 2008): hopelessly idealistic islands of floating parks, hectares of urban farming, and carbon-neutral transportation for millions of commuters. Design thinking -the process that informs many of these hypothetical interventions in the built environment- emphasizes that important urban problems have persisted because of flawed tactics, not strategy. Because activism focused on inequality and social justice has the potential to alienate *creative class* professionals, it instead focuses on activities based on high tech management and surgical interventions. For critics, museum-based events, design thinking, and its accompanying palette of *solutions* forecloses on other means of addressing problems like affordable housing and environmental justice in favor of limited aestheticized fixes.

It is worth asking if the *conversation* that these festivals aim to foster is simply a way for arts organizations to feel better about the neighborhood changes that are part-and-parcel of their expansion into low-income areas. Numerous Lower East Side community organizations have struggled for years to ensure that diverse voices are heard in discussions around the future of the neighborhood, and that these discussions yield real-life results. Some fear that cooperation with design thinking projects from comparably wealthy arts institutions will render their constituents' problems highly visible and creatively displayed but without a long-term commitment to those issues. One of the inherent dangers of using tools such as *flash* charrettes and *pop up* centers is sustaining long term community support and maintaining a committed group of volunteers and organizers willing to participate in unglamorous and time-consuming tasks. Design solutions work very well on the level of research and development but, in most cases, implementation is entirely unspecified.

Finally, it is telling that large arts organizations have moved to fill a gap in neighborhood services and organizing that, in a previous era, might have been attempted by local government, community groups, or religious institutions: all groups that have dwindled because of poor participation, budget cuts, or public mistrust. It is also important to ask whether this attempt has more to do with the professional insecurity of these organizations, seeking to continue their relatively elite position within New York's cultural structure, rather than with actual community needs. Design thinking advocates may laud temporary street sculptures and experiential walking tours as new ways to get involved with urban design but there is little evidence that these new approaches yield sustained improvements for the neighborhood's long-term low-income residents. Much more research needs to be completed on the specific ways in which new methods of community engagement through artistic practice are successful at shaping public opinion, mobilizing citizens, and concretely influencing public policy. Urban interventions in temporary public spaces set up by arts institutions demonstrate an interest in using art and design thinking to improve city life, but measuring the impact of these campaigns, and ensuring that they engage the full spectrum of community members (and not just young well-educated *creatives*), will be far more difficult.

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