Culture and Social Wellbeing in New York City

Highlights of a two-year research project

February 2017

Over the past several decades, much attention has been devoted to assessing the economic impact of the arts and cultural activity on cities. Most of these studies focus on the role of major venues—like museums and performing arts centers—in improving a city's attractiveness to out-of-towners and young, college-educated "creatives." By contrast, the role of the arts in enhancing the lives of ordinary urban residents, especially those who live in moderate- and low-income neighborhoods, has received relatively little attention.

Understanding the social value of the arts has been the goal of the Culture and Social Wellbeing in New York City project undertaken by the University of Pennsylvania's Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP), in collaboration with Reinvestment Fund, a community development financial institution.

Our starting point: cultural engagement, neighborhood ecology, and social wellbeing

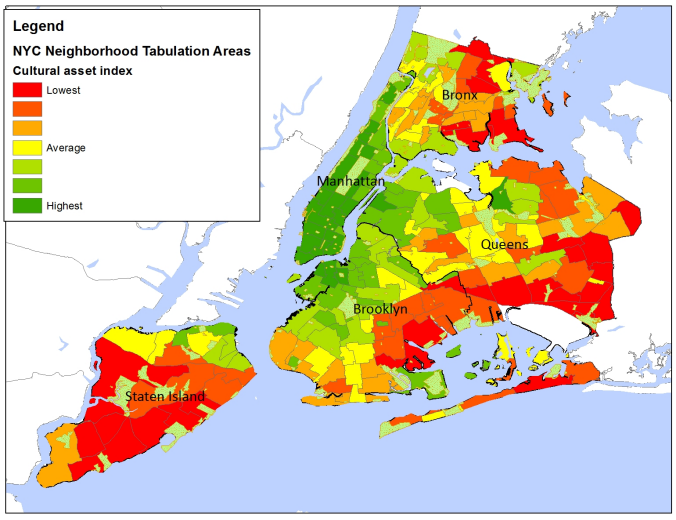
The project has been guided by the idea of a *neighborhood cultural ecosystem*. That is, rather than think about a discrete collection of artists, organizations, and participants scattered across a city, we believe that how these cultural assets come together in particular neighborhoods matters. It matters for practitioners active in the cultural sector, by encouraging collaboration and innovation. It particularly matters for residents, because cultural activities have spillover effects that improve people's lives, whether or not they are active in the local cultural scene.

To understand culture's impact on communities, however, we need a broad definition of *social wellbeing*, one that moves beyond a narrow economic standard. Here, the project was inspired by international scholars and policy-makers who have proposed *multidimensional* approaches to wellbeing that consider not just poverty and income but security, health, education, social connection and a variety of other dimensions. At its core, they argue, wellbeing describes the conditions under which people have what Amartya Sen describes as "the freedom to lead lives they have reason to value."

One of the great challenges of the project was to take this lofty ideal and translate it into something we could document and measure. In this brief, we describe what we did, what we found, and implications for how to tap the potential of culture to improve the lives of New Yorkers.

What we did

The project consisted of three phases: documenting the cultural ecosystems of New York City's neighborhoods; discovering and coordinating existing information on other dimensions of the City's social wellbeing; and undertaking neighborhood studies to understand what the culture/wellbeing connection looks like at the grassroots.



The project gathered data on four types of cultural resources—nonprofits, for-profits, employed artists, and cultural participants—and used them to construct a **cultural asset index** to identify neighborhoods with many and few resources.

Neighborhood cultural ecosystems. The project used a variety of sources, including tax and grants data, to identify more than four thousand nonprofit cultural providers across the five boroughs. This inventory was complemented by administrative data provided by over 50 organizations that identified the residence of cultural participants, data on employed resident artists, and the locations of for-profit cultural firms. All of these data were *geocoded* to place each resource in its respective neighborhood and then combined into a single *cultural asset index* that represents our best estimate of the relative concentration of cultural resources in every neighborhood of New York City.

Measuring social wellbeing. The project gathered existing data, primarily from federal and city government sources, along 10 dimensions of social wellbeing. Because residents' wellbeing is influenced by their immediate surroundings, our goal was to estimate each dimension at the neighborhood level. Our research differed from previous international work in three ways: we identified cultural resources as intrinsic to social wellbeing; we examined culture's potential to influence other aspects of wellbeing; and we focused on wellbeing at the neighborhood level rather than by region or nation-state.

Community case studies. To complement the quantitative data, the project conducted a series of interviews and fieldwork in two illustrative neighborhoods—Fort Greene (Brooklyn) and East Harlem (Manhattan). The interviews focused on how culture and other forms of social connection promote social wellbeing and the role of neighborhood change in the lives of residents and local organizations.

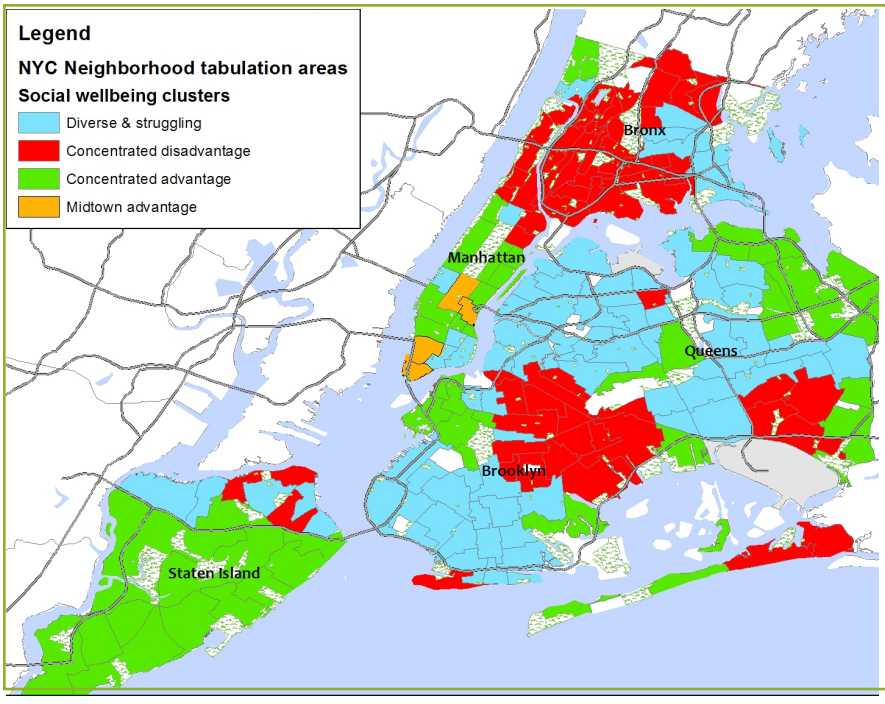
Dimension	Indicators
Economic wellbeing	Income, labor force, educational attainment
Housing burden	Percent of income for housing, overcrowding
Ethnic and economic diversity	Income and ethnic segregation & integration
Health access	Health insurance rates
Health	Birth outcomes, child abuse/neglect, morbidity
School effectiveness	Test scores, school environment
Security	Major crime rates
Environmental amenities	Parks, land use, summer heat
Social connection	Selected nonprofits
Cultural assets	Organizations, artists, cultural participants

What we found

Cultural resources, like other dimensions of wellbeing, are distributed unequally across the City's neighborhoods.

The most affluent neighborhoods in Manhattan and western Brooklyn have extremely high concentrations of nonprofits, for-profits, artists, and cultural participants, while vast areas of the other boroughs have very few cultural resources.

We recognize that all sections of the city house informal cultural resources that the project has been unable to document. Their inclusion would not likely change our conclusions about the inequality of cultural opportunities across the city.



By combining all 10 dimensions of social wellbeing, we can identify clusters of advantage and disadvantage as well as many neighborhoods that have both strengths and challenges.

Many dimensions of social wellbeing are tied to economic status.

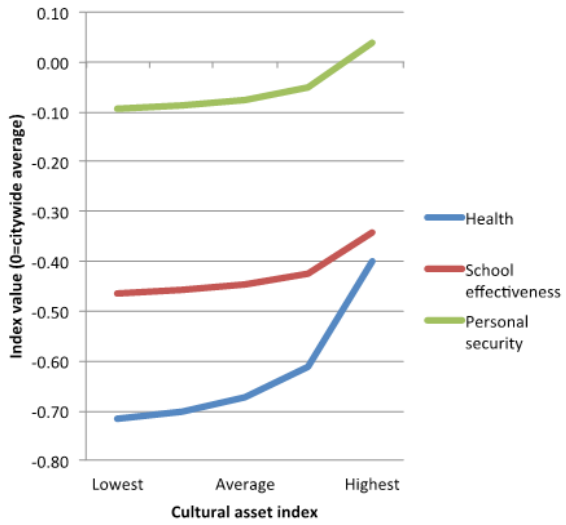
Where New Yorkers live influences their chances to enjoy a healthy and secure life. Wealthy neighborhoods enjoy better birth outcomes, less crime, and better school outcomes. Overall, social wellbeing advantages and disadvantages tend to concentrate in particular neighborhoods. At the same time, many parts of the city present a more varied picture, combining economic and ethnic diversity with a combination of other strengths and challenges.

Although low- and moderate-income neighborhoods have relatively few cultural resources, it's these neighborhoods where we find the strongest connection between culture and social wellbeing.

Economic standing, race, and ethnicity are the strongest influences on social wellbeing. However, if we control for these factors statistically, we find that the presence of cultural resources in a neighborhood has a significant positive impact on a neighborhood's health, the outcomes of its schools, and its crime rate. According to our analysis, among neighborhoods in the lowest 40 percent of the income distribution, (compared to those with few cultural assets) those with many cultural assets enjoy:

- 14 percent reduction in indicated investigations of child abuse and neglect,
- 5 percent reduction in obesity,
- 18 percent increase in kids scoring in the top stratum on English Language Arts and Math exams, and
- 18 percent reduction in the serious crime rate.

Neighborhoods in the lowest 40 percent of the income distribution

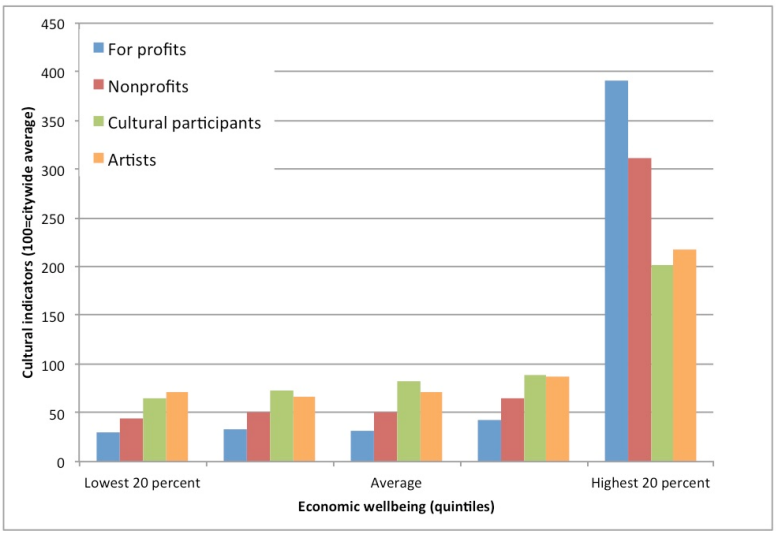


In lower-income neighborhoods, when we control statistically for economic wellbeing, race, and ethnicity, we find that the presence of cultural resources is significantly associated with positive social outcomes around health, schooling, and security.

In other words, among neighborhoods facing significant economic challenges, the presence of cultural resources is associated with positive outcomes on other aspect of social wellbeing.

Culture doesn't "cause" better health or less crime. Rather, cultural resources are integral to a neighborhood ecology that promotes social wellbeing.

Cultural assets, like many dimensions of social wellbeing, are unequally distributed across the city. The most affluent 20 percent of the city's neighborhoods have far more cultural opportunities and resources than the rest of the city.



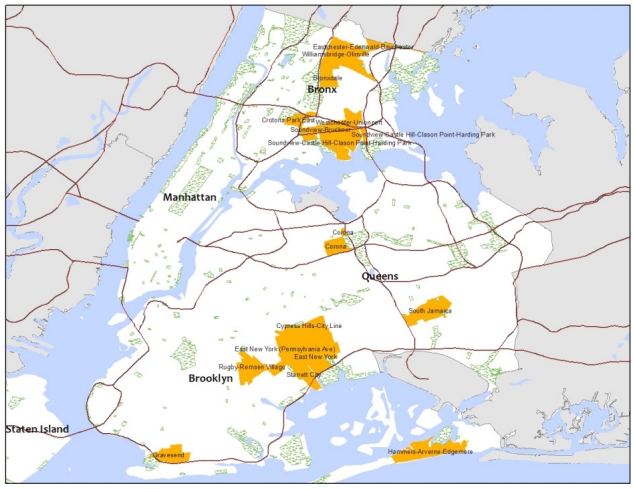
Tapping culture's potential for improving social wellbeing

Culture is not a magic wand that can take a challenged neighborhood and make it wealthier, healthier, and safer. Rather, we need to see a neighborhood's cultural life as part of an ecology of institutions, social networks, and resources that together improve the lives of residents. These elements cannot overcome the inequality caused by social class, race, and ethnicity but can make a measurable difference to communities. Most importantly, what we've learned about cultural engagement across the city will allow us to better match policy strategies to the existing conditions in particular neighborhoods.

Invest in low-income neighborhoods with few cultural resources.

Culture is a right, not a privilege, a point recognized in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. City government has a responsibility to translate this abstract right into practice by investing in those low-income neighborhoods with very few cultural resources. The City could use other public resources —like its more than two hundred public libraries—as a starting point for pursuing a more equal distribution of cultural opportunities across the city.

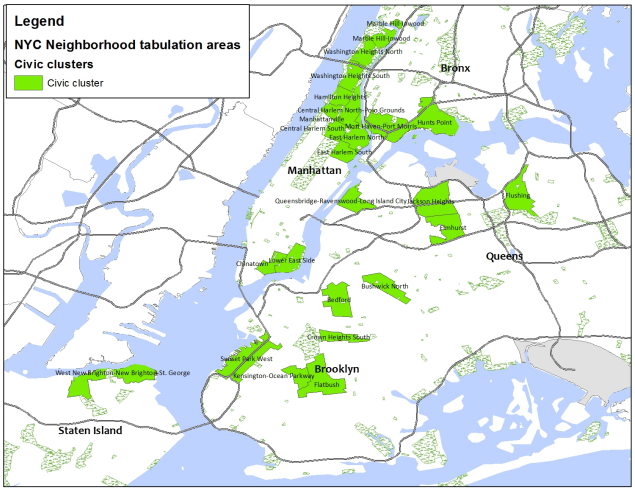
Neighborhoods with fewer cultural assets



Build from strength. Use civic clusters to leverage cultural opportunity and expand social wellbeing.

Many low- and moderate- income neighborhoods have more cultural assets than we'd predict based on their economic status. Clusters of community-based resources and grassroots groups —participatory and embedded programs, artists, and artisans—can provide a foothold for building programs that improve other dimensions of social wellbeing and spread those benefits to neighboring communities.

Civic clusters



Encourage cultural organizations to strengthen social networks within and between the City's neighborhoods and find their niche in the neighborhood ecology.

The cultural sector could take more initiative in generating social networks that link institutions and programs to other neighborhood resources. The project found many cultural organizations adept at building vertical networks that link them to resources in city government. Incentives for nonprofits to move out horizontally to connect with community-based resources—supported by closer collaboration among City departments—would increase the social contribution of the cultural sector.

Cultivating social wellbeing and livable communities across the city

For too long, urban policy and community development have reduced social wellbeing to a side-effect of economic development. Yet, in many neighborhoods, shiny condominium towers represent a threat of displacement more than a harbinger of shared prosperity. Linking cultural engagement to social wellbeing informs a set of strategies that can enhance the quality of community life for all New Yorkers.

Penn University of Pennsylvania
Social Impact of the Arts Project

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