Divergent Paths–Rapid Neighborhood Change and the Cultural Ecosystem

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This paper is a companion paper to Chapter 5, “Community Perspectives on Culture and Social Wellbeing in New York City,” of *The Social Wellbeing of New York City's Neighborhoods: The Contribution of Culture and the Arts* (Stern and Seifert, March 2017). Qualitative study for the NYC project included interviews during 2016 with 46 individuals from 32 organizations based in Brooklyn (Fort Greene), Manhattan (East Harlem), and Queens (Corona and Flushing). The Appendix lists all interviewees.

The Culture and Social Wellbeing in New York City project was undertaken by SIAP in collaboration with Reinvestment Fund, a community development financial institution, with support by the Surdna Foundation, the NYC Cultural Agenda Fund in the New York Community Trust, and the University of Pennsylvania. The research was conducted between 2014 and 2017.

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Abstract
This paper considers the impact of rapid neighborhood change on the cultural ecology of Fort Greene and surrounding Brooklyn neighborhoods based on qualitative study undertaken during 2016 for the NYC project. The paper argues that rapid neighborhood change causes an attenuation of the organic neighborhood connections among artists, creative businesses, cultural organizations, and cultural participants—that is, the neighborhood cultural ecology. Cumulatively these changes in cultural ecology further weaken the neighborhood ecosystem and introduce an additional source of inequality with respect to the wellbeing of the City's communities.

In response to rapid neighborhood change, different cultural agents find themselves on divergent paths as they respond to challenges and seize opportunities. The paper identifies and illustrates four trajectories: 1) the uprooted and replanted—organizations and individuals for whom rapid neighborhood change has made their existing modus operandi and/or location untenable; 2) flourishers—organizations and individuals that have been able to benefit from the economic and social effects of a neighborhood undergoing rapid change; 3) adaptors and transplants—organizations and individuals, both locals and outsiders, that have devised survival strategies in the face of increasing challenges; and 4) new growth—new cultural entities that have seen the emergent ecology as an opportunity. These trajectories, posed as more a set of hypotheses than a set of findings, are based on approximately 40 interviews conducted during 2016 and supplemented by references from those interviews.

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Social Welfare | Sociology | Urban Studies and Planning

Comments
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A SIAP Working Paper:
Divergent Paths—
Rapid Neighborhood Change and the Cultural Ecosystem

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Introduction

Over the past three years, the Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP) has investigated the relationship of the cultural sector of New York City to the social wellbeing of its neighborhoods. That study has been animated by two concepts: cultural ecology and neighborhood effects. The core of our work has focused on the ways that the unique cultural ecology of the city’s neighborhoods contributes to other aspects of neighborhood vitality, including health, personal security, educational achievement and school environment.¹

Yet, as we’ve conducted this study, we have been aware that the virtuous cycle of cultural engagement and social wellbeing is not the only factor influencing the city’s neighborhoods. Our analyses, observations, and discussions with practitioners make it clear that a number of forces—the city’s population and economic growth, the increasing diversity of its residents, and its dynamic real estate market—are promoting the acceleration of change in many parts of the city.

In this paper, we consider the impact of rapid neighborhood change on the cultural sector with particular reference to the cultural ecology of two neighborhoods in which we conducted interviews during the summer of 2016—Fort Greene (Brooklyn) and East Harlem (Manhattan).² The paper argues that rapid neighborhood change causes an attenuation of the organic neighborhood connections of artists, creative businesses, cultural organizations, and cultural participants—what we call the neighborhood cultural ecology. In response to these diminished connections and their own strategic decisions, different cultural agents find themselves on divergent paths as they respond to challenges and seize opportunities. Cumulatively these changes in cultural ecology lead to a set of trajectories that, in turn, further weaken the links within the neighborhood ecosystem. Thus, at the same time that cultural engagement and social wellbeing form a virtuous cycle, rapid neighborhood change and the weakening of the cultural ecosystem form a vicious cycle that undermines community wellbeing.

The overall effect of these divergent paths is to introduce an additional source of inequality into the city’s communities. In place of organic interaction among a diverse set of artists, organizations, and participants, the cultural life of communities becomes increasingly stratified by economic stability and institutional connections. In SIAP’s March 2017 report on culture and social wellbeing in New York City, we noted that one


² See Appendix for list of interviewees, summer-fall 2016. Our interviews involved 46 individuals from 32 organizations based in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens.
implication of the research was that many of the city’s cultural institutions seem to place greater emphasis on *vertical* connections to funders and government than on *horizontal* connections to other cultural and community agents in their neighborhoods. We suggest that this finding—based on our interviews—represents a manifestation of the divergent paths that different cultural agents pursue in response to rapid neighborhood change.

**Cultural ecology in the context of rapid neighborhood change—the divergent paths of community-based cultural agents**

In particular, we have identified four trajectories of neighborhood cultural agents in response to rapid neighborhood change:

- *the uprooted and replanted*—organizations and individuals for whom rapid neighborhood change has made their existing modus operandi and/or location untenable;
- *flourishers*—organizations and individuals that have been able to benefit from the economic and social effects of a neighborhood undergoing rapid change;
- *adaptors and transplants*—organizations and individuals, both locals and outsiders, that have devised survival strategies in the face of increasing challenges; and
- *new growth*—new cultural entities that have seen the emergent ecology as an opportunity.

These observations and the remainder of this paper should be taken as much as a set of hypotheses as a set of findings. They are based on a set of approximately 40 interviews conducted during 2016 and supplemented by references based on those interviews. Although we draw on material from both neighborhoods, this paper focuses on the Fort Greene experience. Because the findings imply change over time, they would need to be supplemented with a variety of other sources to fill in the case. Finally, although we discuss these four trajectories as distinct, we acknowledge that many organizations display characteristics of more than one type.

The evidence in this paper draws on qualitative study of two neighborhoods—Fort Greene and East Harlem. As it turns out, the research team’s quantitative study of geographic mobility and displacement risk in New York City identified these two neighborhoods as appropriate examples of rapid neighborhood change. In a companion paper, based on analysis of its Displacement Risk Ratio (DRR) across the city since 2000,³ Reinvestment Fund found that both Fort Greene and East Harlem have experienced high displacement risk and are among the high DRR neighborhoods experiencing a racial shift as well.

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A note on Fort Greene geography and demography

Fort Greene is located in northwest Brooklyn, east of Downtown Brooklyn and south of the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Neighborhood boundaries extend from Flatbush Ave/Flatbush Ave Extension on the west to Vanderbilt Ave on the east, from Nassau St and Flushing Ave on the north to Atlantic Ave on the south. Clinton Hill, the neighborhood to the east of Fort Greene, extends east to Classon Ave and Bedford Ave. Both neighborhoods are part of Brooklyn Community Board No. 2.

Fort Greene and Clinton Hill neighborhoods, Brooklyn, N.Y. Source: NYC Department of City Planning, Neighborhood Tabulation Areas (NTA), Census FactFinder: http://maps.nyc.gov/census/.
Between 1980 and 2016, Fort Greene experienced significant changes in its racial composition. In 1980, although its population was predominantly black, Fort Greene was not as segregated as the white neighborhoods to its west nor as homogeneous as the black neighborhoods to its east.

![Map showing racial composition in 1980](image)

Black or African American as percent of population, Brooklyn N.Y. census tracts, 1980. Range shown is from 0-1% (dark red) to 95%-100% (dark blue). Source: Social Explorer 2017.

By 2000, the composition of Fort Greene’s resident population had become somewhat less black. However, most of the neighborhood remained roughly half African American.

![Map showing racial composition in 2000](image)

Black or African American as percent of population, Brooklyn N.Y. census tracts, 2000. Range shown is from 0-1% (dark red) to 95%-100% (dark blue). Source: Social Explorer 2017.
In the most recent data (2012-16), the racial shift had become more notable. African Americans had become a distinct minority, for example, in the area just south of Fort Greene Park. Still, throughout most of the neighborhood, about a third of the population identified as African American.

Black or African American as percent of population, Brooklyn N.Y. census tracts, 2016. Range shown is from 0-1% (dark red) to 95%-100% (dark blue). Source: Social Explorer 2017.
Yet, racial composition hardly tells the full story of Fort Greene. In 1980, although a predominantly black neighborhood, many of the residents were college-educated.

Bachelor’s degree as percent of population (25 years old and over), Brooklyn N.Y. census tracts, 1980. Range shown is from 0-1% (dark red) to 90%-100% (dark blue). Source: Social Explorer 2017.

Over the next two decades, from 1980 to 2000, as the neighborhood became less African American, its profile changed very little in terms of educational attainment.

Bachelor’s degree as percent of population (25 years and over), Brooklyn N.Y. census tracts, 2000. Range shown is from 0-1% (dark red) to 90%-100% (dark blue). Source: Social Explorer 2017.
However, over the next fifteen years, from 2001 to 2016, the increasingly white neighborhood also became noticeably more highly educated.

![Map showing population distribution](image)

Bachelor's degree as percent of population (25 years and over), Brooklyn N.Y. census tracts, 2016. Range shown is from 0-1% (dark red) to 90%-100% (dark blue). Source: Social Explorer 2017.

In summary, during the period from 1980 to 2016, Fort Greene occupied a unique ecological niche within Brooklyn and New York City as a whole. At a time when the surrounding neighborhoods tended to be either white and highly educated or black and poorly educated, Fort Greene was home to an educated black and white integrated population that contributed to its emergence as a center of black cultural life in the last decades of the 20th century.
1—The Uprooted and Replanted

We use the terms “uprooted” and “replanted” to describe individuals and groups, organizations and enterprises that have been displaced (or died out) from a neighborhood undergoing rapid change. Resident artists and cultural workers, owner-operated businesses, informal and less established groups—and all entities subject to unfettered real estate markets—tend to be more dependent on neighborhood and community connections and vulnerable to rapid change. Here we describe a set of cultural agents once based in the Fort Greene/Clinton Hill neighborhoods of Brooklyn for whom the nature of change made their viability in this location untenable.

Artists, bohemians, migrants and other residents

Probably the group most vulnerable to the negative consequences of a neighborhood on the upswing are its existing residents—including artists and writers, cultural workers and practitioners, and other migrants and “bohèmes”—who were a position to appreciate the district’s affordability and accessibility as well as diversity. As recounted by a public art curator who did research on the neighborhood: “What’s distinctive about Fort Greene’s history? It’s been a haven for artists [during] the 1970s, the 1980s, and the 1990s.” Certainly it appears that by 1980, when the Paul Robeson Theatre opened, the African American arts community in Fort Greene was thriving.

Jazz musicians like Betty Taylor, Cecil Carter and Bill Lee, Spike Lee’s father, moved to Fort Greene and the surrounding neighborhoods for the housing and proximity to jazz clubs in the village. Spike Lee’s 1986 film, “She’s Gotta Have It,” which is shot and set in Fort Greene, helped to put the neighborhood on the map.  

Around 1990 a Brooklyn-born educator and DJ, who became co-founder of Soul Summit Music, relocated to Fort Greene expressly to be part of that milieu. At that time, he recalled, an aspiring musician or talented writer could rent an apartment in Fort Greene or Clinton Hill for about $400 a month. What he found was “a cultural renaissance and burgeoning of community … including artistic African Americans and progressive whites. …”

There were artists, live bands, and musicians—like Branford Marsalis, Chris Rock, Spike Lee, and Rosie Perez—four doors down on Clinton Avenue. … This was unknown to happen in Brooklyn. I wanted to be part of that.

Writer, historian, and filmmaker Nelson George, Fort Greene resident since 1985, reminisced in 2009 about the changing neighborhood.

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Though there had long been a black artistic presence in the area — mostly jazz people ... I was part of a wave of young writers, designers, cartoonists, dancers, actors and musicians who gave parties, walked the streets and worked hard at becoming good and famous. A few did both.

But in the last half-dozen years, many of my contemporaries have departed—some to Los Angeles to work in television and movies, others to Manhattan and New Jersey for bigger homes and gated communities. Black artists still live in Fort Greene, but they are only a piece of the neighborhood’s color palette.\(^5\)

In 2011 George produced a documentary to recount his firsthand experience with “the black arts movement that exploded in Fort Greene from the mid-1980s through the 90s” — before it’s forgotten. George entitled his evocative chronicle, co-directed with Diane Paragas, “Brooklyn Boheme.”

Around 2000 a Downtown Arts (Manhattan) migrant to Fort Greene found “a friendly neighborhood” and was surprised to meet residents who’d moved there with families during the late ‘60s and ‘70s. At that time, prospective homeowners could afford to buy a dwelling—suitable for two kids and with good transit—and slowly bring it up to code.\(^6\) In Fort Greene, over the past several decades, African American families had been solidly part of “this rising middle class.” A notable example was Herbert Scott-Gibson, professional opera singer and African American arts and civic leader, who moved in 1967 with his wife Evelyn, a modern dancer, to Washington Park (a brownstone-lined avenue facing Fort Greene Park). In 1973 Scott-Gibson founded the Fort Greene Landmarks Preservation Committee to advocate for protection of the neighborhood’s distinctive 19\(^{th}\) century architectural character. The group’s goal was historic district designation of Fort Greene by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Committee, which was accomplished—along with that of the Brooklyn Academy of Music—in 1978.

The evolution of this residents’ association reflects the changing neighborhood. In 1993 Fort Greene Landmarks Preservation Committee became the Fort Greene Association and began to focus on neighborhood improvement as well as historic preservation. During the early 2000s, the Fort Greene Association spun off a new organization called Fort Greene Park Conservancy. For about a decade, the Conservancy was an all-volunteer board with no staff and no office. Board members were mostly long-time residents—homeowners, a gardening group, and owner-activists who wanted to prevent demolition of landmark structures. “Members were owners who cared about quality of life for families. It was a broadly diverse group, including African Americans and gays, with a common goal. Decision-making — white and black — tended to be affluent.”

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\(^6\) A Brooklyn Historical Society neighborhood history helps fill out our interviewee narratives. The Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, established in 1967, got financing committed for one- to four-family dwellings within the area bounded by Eastern Parkway, Flatbush Avenue, Flushing Ave, and Broadway—which made mortgage and renovation money available to Fort Greene brownstone owners. Source: Fort Greene/Clinton Hill Neighborhood & Architectural History Guide, by Francis Morrone, Brooklyn Historical Society, 2010.
In the late 1990s artists were still discovering Fort Greene. In 1999 several muralists founded South of the Navy Yard Artists (SONYA)—a collective of visual artists living or working in Fort Greene, Clinton Hill, Wallabout, or Bedford Stuyvesant. By 2016 SONYA artists described the neighborhood as “drastically gentrified.” Resident artists observed more and more SONYA members (including the board) moving out of the area and many others ready to leave New York City in search of affordable home and studio space.

“Artists will stay if they own their home.” The owners of Greenlight Bookstore, a local business that benefits from the upswing in foot traffic, noted that few of their staff reside in Fort Greene. Several had moved to Prospect Lefferts Gardens or further east. “Before, all the authors and artists used to live in Brooklyn. Now they move out of state, seeking a better quality of life. If creators and makers can’t afford to live here, what is to be done about long-term sustainability?”

One interviewee—a mid-30s “general creative”—had reluctantly relocated out of New York during the summer of 2016 to take a position that taps their broad curatorial experience in public art and community engagement. “I know a lot of people who have left. They want to settle. I should be able to live alone—not have to have a roommate. It’s still a privilege to live here.” An African American migrant to New York, first to Manhattan then to Brooklyn for education and work, expressed the personal cost to artists of rapid neighborhood change regardless of their commitment to community.

I’m considered a gentrifier in the neighborhood. ... Before, living in Prospect Heights, there were cells of ethnic enclaves. I didn’t move to the neighborhood because it would change. People come, people go—there’s no longer the peace I like. I was attracted to the neighborhood. I wanted to give to the community.

Fort Greene Park’s director and local resident enjoys both a bird’s eye and a worm’s eye view of the neighborhood’s social geography. He sees Fort Greene Park as “the hinge” connecting a set of communities divided by economic disparity. To the north of Myrtle Avenue, the park’s northern boundary, reside tenant families of the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) Walt Whitman and Ingersoll Houses. Just south of Myrtle, and south and east of the park, reside brownstone, condominium and co-op owners and tenants. Although economic diversity has long characterized Fort Greene, interviewees tell us “the neighborhood is [now] very different—especially with respect to African Americans. Most households are wealthy except for the housing developments. Poor residents have been pushed out, and social institutions have [also] been pushed out.”

Longer-term residents concur that the porous housing market that fostered a bohemian community is lost. Nowadays in Fort Greene “the drive with real estate is unattainable for most regardless of race or gender.” The decline in affordable housing in Fort Greene has made it increasingly difficult to live there. Most renters have been able to stay only if they live in a rent-stabilized apartment, Section 8 housing, or public housing. Moreover, through illegal as well as legal mechanisms, a resident observed, “rent-stabilized apartments are leaving the market in droves.” With a decline in affordable housing also comes a loss of community associated with ethnic and economic diversity. In the late ’90s, Fort Greene seemed special in that “you could get The New York Times
and still be around a lot of black people and artists. Unfortunately the new people coming in are bound to their cell phones and the Internet community.”

The memories of the Fort Greene of the 1980s and 1990s exemplify a characteristic tension between the vitality of a cultural scene and the neighborhood’s ability to support the artists and organizations that create that vitality. With just a few exceptions, even at its height, “Brooklyn Bohème” was a marginal enterprise from the point of view of economic sustainability.

Percent of population living in poverty, Brooklyn NY census block groups, 2000. Range shown is from 0-1% (dark red) to 75%-100% (dark blue). Source: Social Explorer 2017.

Commercial culture

Several interviewees referred to Fort Greene’s “heyday” during the 1980s—notably, its profusion of black art and culture, poetry and music. “On Fulton Street, there were black-owned fashion stores, driven by black designers. But the area was unsafe. Kids had to run the gauntlet to get to school.” Historic district recognition in 1978 raised the social profile of Fort Greene but did not diminish its social problems associated with economic instability and citywide drug trafficking.

In the 1990s Fort Greene continued to nurture its creative community and cultivate its character as “New York’s black bohemia.” Venues like the Paul Robeson Theater and
Brooklyn Moon Café promoted homegrown musicians, poets, and artists. Fort Greene also got to be known as a destination for black-owned retail enterprises. In spring 1995 minority businesses along Fulton Street that catered to the African diaspora—American, African and Caribbean—established the Bogolan Merchants Association. (The African diaspora refers to people of African origin living outside the continent. Bogolan or bogolanfini is a reference to handmade, mud-dyed ceremonial cloth from Mali.) The group hung banners from street lamps along Fulton Street from Flatbush Ave to South Oxford St that read: “Welcome to Bogolan Brooklyn: The soul of the Brooklyn renaissance.”

In spring 2000 news of the BAM Local Development Corporation (LDC) plan to create a 24-hour mixed-use cultural district around BAM was “not unwelcome” to the Bogolan Merchants Association. In fact, executive director Errol Louis was optimistic. “What the BAM LDC is doing will almost certainly benefit our merchants. Anything that brings more cultural dollars and tourism and arts and entertainment has got to be a good thing.” Some Bogolan members, however, were concerned about BAM’s insularity. BAM had only recently, with the opening of the BAM Café, begun to showcase local performers. Until Bogolan gave them a tour, Harvey Lichtenstein and fellow Academy officials were unaware of the lively artistic businesses located within blocks of BAM theaters.

“The idea of making this a cultural district on the face of it is good,” says Selma Jackson, who owns 4W Circle of Art and Enterprise, a fashion and art boutique two blocks from BAM on Fulton Street. Yet the cultural institution hasn’t done what it could, she says, to put Fort Greene’s existing creative culture on the map.

“This is already a cultural district. Why are we reaching outside the community and not reaching to the people who are here?”

According to City Limits coverage on May 1, 2000: “The artists and retailers who have made Fort Greene a mecca for African- and African-American culture are ... discovering that they cannot take the character of their neighborhood for granted.”

By 2008 the planned redevelopment of Atlantic Yards, given the scale the 22-acre megaproject known as Pacific Park, had triggered a wave of displacement in Fort Greene. On January 27, 2008, in his watchdog blog Atlantic Yards/Pacific Park Report, journalist Norman Oder wrote about the demise of Bogolan and the closing of 4W, which Selma Jackson had founded in 1991.

“The closing of Fort Greene’s 4W, the demise of Bogolan, and the AY effect”

The story of the closing of 4W Circle of Arts and Enterprise at 704 Fulton Street, a unique incubator for artists and craftpersons from the African Diaspora, is an “end of an era” in Fort Greene, and I told a good piece of the story in an article a few weeks back in the Brooklyn Downtown Star.

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8 “Does it give a BAM?” by Robert Neuwirt, City Limits, May 1, 2000.
Today from 4-9 pm 4W is holding "The Circle is Unbroken Celebration, Celebrate 17 years of Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics), Pride, Ujimma (Collective Work and Responsibility) and the continuation of People Power."9

**Nonprofit, informal, and in-between culture**

Fort Greene had long been a place for the black creative class, though often unnoticed by mainstream press till the 1980s.10 When the Paul Robeson Theatre opened in 1980, as noted above, Fort Greene was already a burgeoning African American arts community.

The 1970s and ‘80s Fort Greene exploded with art and culture of all kinds, produced primarily by young black artists. The strength of the arts community brought on comparisons to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and led to the creation of Fort Greene theater groups and other arts establishments, including Spike Lee’s 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks. In 1977 the Brooklyn Academy of Music presented the first installment of Dance Africa, a showcase inspired by many styles of African dance.11

Over the next 25 years, Fort Greene evolved as a fruitful habitat for establishments as diverse as 40 Acres And A Mule and the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM). During the same years, however, smaller grassroots groups—such as the Paul Robeson Theatre, Brooklyn Young Filmmakers (now called People’s Hollywood Project), and Cumbe: Center for African and Diaspora Dance—had to close or restructure and relocate to other Brooklyn neighborhoods.

**Paul Robeson Theatre**

In 1979 Dr. Josephine English, the first African American woman to own a private ob-gyn clinic in New York state, bought the Adelphi Hospital at 50 Greene Ave and moved her practice from Harlem to Fort Greene. She then bought the 1864 Romanesque Revival church next door at 40 Greene Ave, the former St Casimir’s Roman Catholic Church, and transformed the upstairs stained glass space into the 300-seat Paul Robeson Theatre. The Paul Robeson became “a thriving community theater that hosted plays and events of all kinds” and was “positioned to enrich the African American theater world.” However, after opening the Adelphi Medical Center—which eventually included a senior center, day care and after school programs, housing for the mentally challenged, and other social services—Dr. English faced persistent financial difficulties maintaining and operating the church.

When English retired from medicine in the 1990s, the Paul Robeson began to fall into disrepair, but she kept it open and available till her death in 2011. Family members responsible for its management attribute the theater’s decline to the transition experienced by the neighborhood. “I guess possibly the black theater community as a whole ... kind of faded somewhat. I don’t know if everyone’s suffering ... but when you

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10 Morrone, Brooklyn Historical Society, 2010 (54-65).
do off-off-Broadway, there’s competition.”

In 2016 the former Paul Robeson Theatre in Fort Greene was available for lease. Post-1960s Fort Greene, though a “thriving” cultural scene, was also an economically diverse community sustaining an era of public disinvestment. Private investors in local arts and culture generated significant social return but often saw little financial payoff.

**Cumbe: Center for African and Diaspora Dance**

Five-year-old Cumbe: Center for African and Diaspora Dance represents the risk-taking and resilience of cultural agents trying to start-up and survive in the context of rapid neighborhood change. Cumbe Dance was founded in 2012 in Fort Greene by three women with extensive nonprofit and business experience in community justice and social service as well as culture, dance, and education. With the Great Recession and an uncertain funding environment, they decided to operate Cumbe as a for-profit dance studio. They believed that a for-profit enterprise with a public mission would be a versatile model. In 2016, however, following eviction from their downtown Fort Greene studio after considerable financial and sweat equity investment, the founders restructured Cumbe as a 501c3 nonprofit corporation.

From the beginning, Cumbe was established as “a home for African and Diaspora dance and music.” As a cultural education center, Cumbe’s mission is to bring together the diverse traditions and cultures rooted in Africa, the Americas, and the Caribbean—the geography of the slave trade—under one roof. While there are many African and Diaspora dance classes around the city, the co-founder/director explained, there was no one group with this focus as its primary mission. Cumbe is a platform for adults and youth to participate in traditional and contemporary dance forms and in so doing “create a community of people who love music and dance.” Other core values are to enable blacks (and everyone) to have affordable access to their own culture, to honor artists, and to pay teachers well. Cumbe’s vision is “preservation in a living way”—like a tree rooted in the ground but with living branches at the top—that can bring the power, spirit, and knowledge of these cultures (ashe) into our modern lives.

In 2012 Cumbe opened its Fort Greene studio at 558 Fulton St at Flatbush Ave, a rental above Fulton Street Bagels with a 10-year lease. The founders financed complete conversion of its “vanilla box” space, including sprung floor for dancers and soundproofing for drummers, to a dance studio. “In New York history, dance studios start frumpy and then go under. In contrast, Cumbe Dance had its own space and created a beautiful environment—a community environment.” Cumbe promotes community as integral to its program, both as a way to reflect African tradition and actually build a community among its dancers—adults and kids, whether local, cross-town, or new to the city. Cumbe also develops relationships and collaborates on programming with other Brooklyn-based organizations in the African/Diaspora dance family—including Urban Bush Women (in Fort Greene), Ifetayo Cultural Arts Academy (in Prospect Lefferts Gardens), and Purelements (in Bedford-Stuyvesant).

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In mid-2014 Cumbe got a 6-month notice of termination of its lease and the planned demolition of the building. The group had to move quickly into planning for its own “diaspora” and to begin the search for a new home. Beginning in 2015, children’s classes have been held at Brooklyn Ballet in downtown Brooklyn. Adult classes have been held at Brooklyn Friends, Long Island University, and since 2016 at Gibney Studio in Lower Manhattan. “Due to temporary relocation, community building has NOT been the same for our students.”

In October 2016 Cumbe announced news of its relaunch at Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, an established Brooklyn community development corporation (CDC) with a new Center for Arts & Culture, as arts organization-in-residence. Renovation of the commercial space (formerly occupied by Duane Reade) ran behind schedule with delays lasting over a year. In November 2017 Cumbe: Center for African and Diaspora Dance reopened its new home with RestorationART at 1368 Fulton St (about two miles east of its Fort Greene studio) in Bedford Stuyvesant.

Cumbe pursued the Bed-Stuy Restoration opportunity for three reasons: location—Bedford Stuyvesant is a great neighborhood; mission fit between the two organizations; and the attraction of a dedicated arts space within a CDC. Having borne the fallout from Atlantic Yards redevelopment, its founders did not see a place for Cumbe in the next wave of gentrification in Fort Greene.

New York City’s current real estate boom magnifies the distance between its winners and losers. Uprooted artists, creative businesses, and cultural groups don’t tell the whole story, but they do provide one perspective on the challenges to cultural equity and social inclusion faced by Brooklyn (and the City) as it moves forward. One interviewee framed the challenge in a web blog: “Does anyone have any new ideas? Can the City be more open to support big ideas from small grassroots nonprofits? Are there new ways to link to communities? How can we build new models based on how communities actually operate?”

2—Flourishers

What we call “flourishers” are those cultural agents that have been able to benefit from and thrive as a consequence of rapid neighborhood change. These tend to be established organizations, especially regional institutions with broader connections and income opportunities, which not only survive and adapt to change but actually flourish.

Institution-initiated cultural district driven by public-private development

The Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), located at 30 Lafayette Ave near Fulton St, is credited as both the engine of change in Fort Greene and its primary beneficiary. During the 1980s and ‘90s BAM president Harvey Lichtenstein decided it was important for the institution to become an international arts presenter and envisioned its making an even bigger mark as anchor of a BAM Cultural District. The “BAM model” thus evolved as a planned, institution-driven cultural district to be hub of the “struggling” community adjacent to downtown Brooklyn.

With the turn of the 21st century, several trajectories were percolating with the intent to transform Fort Greene into an arts and entertainment district. BAM continued to reinvent itself as “tabernacle of the avant-garde” and progenitor of “Brooklyn” as the urban myth brand. Lichtenstein was persistently recruiting Manhattan artists and cultural organizations to partner with BAM and take a chance on its emerging cultural district. In 2000 BAM completed a strategic plan, hired staff, and financed the BAM Local Development Corporation (LDC) to coordinate BAM cultural district planning and real estate development. At some point, the NYC Economic Development Corporation took over the BAM cultural district and incorporated it into the Downtown Brooklyn Rezoning plan, passed by City Council in 2004. In 2006 the City set up the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership as an umbrella organization to subsume the BAM LDC, the Downtown Brooklyn Council, the Fulton Mall Improvement Association, and the MetroTech Business Improvement District.

BAM’s plan was to identify and connect with likely partners to increase the area’s destination status, which in turn would enhance value to both the organization and the community. As described by Karen Brooks Hopkins, Harvey Lichtenstein’s successor and president from 1999 to 2015, the strategy was not to compete with Lincoln Center but to “double down on Brooklyn”—with respect to attitude and edginess—through coordinated branding and marketing, programming, and fund-raising. “All coordinated

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17 See Downtown Brooklyn Partnership website: downtownbrooklyn.com/about
with one voice—not the fragmented approach of institutions, which diminishes the
impact on the organization as well as the community.” In his search for potential
partners, however, Lichtenstein did not focus on Brooklyn artists or cultural producers
but rather on groups doing “visionary, cutting edge arts” in Manhattan.

It took much of the decade for the BAM Cultural District to get approval, funding, and
momentum. As an interviewee observed, “with Vision 2000 nothing happened till
recently.” Some groups never made it. Twyla Tharpe, an early plum recruit, agreed and
then later pulled out of her plan to open a dance studio at Lafayette Avenue
Presbyterian Church. Planned construction of a new Brooklyn Visual and Performing
Arts Library, a luminescent design by Mexican architect Enrique Norten, hit a snag.

So, who’s alive and well and flourishing in what’s now known as the Brooklyn Cultural
District?

**Cultural institutions with a permanent home**

The *Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM)*, founded in 1861 by the Philharmonic Society of
Brooklyn, relocated from Brooklyn Heights to Fort Greene in 1908 after its original
theater and concert hall burned down. Since the late 1960s, BAM has grown into an
urban cultural center with programming that includes theater, dance, music, opera,
visual art, literary events, cinema and film, and education. BAM manages facilities and
programs in three buildings: the Peter Jay Sharp Building (30 Lafayette Ave), the Harvey
Theater (651 Fulton St), and the Fisher Building (321 Ashland Place).

*BRICT*—*Brooklyn Information & Culture*—was founded in 1979 as the Fund for the
Borough of Brooklyn to develop a summer performing arts festival for the Bandshell (at
9th Street and Prospect Park West) in Prospect Park. Since that time, BRIC has worked to
become “the leading presenter of free cultural programming in Brooklyn” as well as to
incubate and present work by Brooklyn-bred artists and media-makers. In 2013 BRIC
Arts I Media House opened in the renovated historic Strand Theater at 647 Fulton
Street. Now its main venue, BRIC House offers a public media center, exhibition gallery,
two performance spaces, a glass-walled public access TV studio, artist workspace, and
an Internet café—all open and accessible to the public.

*Mark Morris Dance Group*, a Manhattan-based group founded in 1980 by
choreographer Mark Morris, was an early transplant to the BAM cultural district. In
2001 Mark Morris Dance Center opened at 3 Lafayette Avenue in Fort Greene as a home
for the international touring company and to provide dance studios, rehearsal space,
and dance classes for people of all ages and abilities. Community programs include
Dance for PD (people with Parkinson’s disease, care partners, and teachers); Special Kids
Dance; Visually Impaired classes; NYCHA Partnership (dance and music for youth and
senior residents of public housing); arts-in-education (K-12); and intergenerational
choreography and dance. “Mark Morris offers wonderful programs for kids and adults.
You don’t have to be a certain shape to dance. Everybody can move with the
choreographer.”
Theater for a New Audience (TFANA) was a Manhattan-based company founded in 1979 by actor Jeffrey Horowitz with a mission to vitalize the performance and study of Shakespeare and classic drama. “Jeff Horowitz had an original vision,” noted a local colleague in the dramatic arts. In October 2013 the troupe, which had worked out of 16 different venues in its 33-year history, opened its first permanent home—the Polonsky Shakespeare Center at 262 Ashland Place—in Fort Greene. As observed by the director who managed TFANA’s itinerant history: “In New York you are associated with place. It’s important to own your own space.”

**Dedicated nonprofit cultural clusters**

During the early 2000s, conversion of two underused properties south of Fulton Street to dedicated space for nonprofit arts organizations—South Oxford Space and 80 Hanson Place—has contributed to a flourishing Fort Greene cultural cluster that feeds local businesses and animates the neighborhood.


We would not classify most of the 20 groups housed at South Oxford individually as a “flourisher” but together they enjoy the security of subsidized rent, shared common spaces, and professional camaraderie. One flourishing group is Urban Bush Women (UBW), a dance company with an inspirational founder and strong institutional connections (including BRIC, NYU Tisch School of the Arts, and The New School). UBW’s creative approach to the use of dance and cultural expression as catalyst for social change has proved to be an effective business model that both engages communities (across the U.S.) and generates steady income.

The 80 Arts—James E. Davis Arts Building is a City-owned building managed by Downtown Brooklyn Partnership. Renovation of the former state office building at 80 Hanson Place was completed in 2004. The building houses 20 nonprofit performing and visual arts groups that, like South Oxford Space, benefit from below-market rents and shared amenities.

A flourishing group that occupies four floors at 80 Hanson is StoryCorps, a national project that instructs and inspires people to record each other’s stories in sound. Participants can interview friends, family, or anyone whose story they want to hear and preserve from a StoryBooth (located locally and across the U.S.). All recordings are archived at the Library of Congress and selected excerpts played on National Public Radio’s Morning Edition. “The Fort Greene location is a huge asset,” says StoryCorps’ director. Of 90 full-time staff, 80 work at 80 Hanson. Nearly all live in Brooklyn. They walk, take public transit, or bike to work. “Kids burn out with a commute to Manhattan. The location advantage is huge. [Brooklyn] is a comfortable place for us in light of our
social justice mission. The organization composition is diverse. Over 50 percent of our staff is a member of an under-represented group.”

The production of affordable office space for small arts groups, made possible by support of the City and State of New York with private funders, has been critical to sustainability of a diverse cultural cluster in Fort Greene. For the 40 groups housed at South Oxford Space and 80 Arts, dedicated workspace with a long-term lease at below-market rent— as provided by A.R.T./New York and Downtown Brooklyn Partnership— has been an essential element of their business models and enabled pursuit of their artistic and social missions.

**Dedicated cultural space in private development**

Several organizations have the good fortune to anticipate flourishing in that they are the planned beneficiaries of development currently underway. A 379-unit residential tower (20 percent affordable) under construction at 300 Ashland near Flatbush Ave will include 50,000 square feet of City-owned cultural space and an outdoor plaza. As the City’s designated tenants, two Brooklyn-based arts groups—651 ARTS and MoCADA—will be able to remain in Fort Greene indefinitely.

651 ARTS is a performing arts organization co-founded by BAM in 1988 and based at the Majestic Theater (now the Harvey) at 651 Fulton Street with a 25-year co-lease. BAM controlled the theater, and 651 ARTS occupied the offices on the second floor with six-weeks access a year to the theater for performances. As leadership changed at both organizations, so did their relationship. 651 became totally independent of the previous support provided by BAM during their early years. In 2015, in preparation for the move to 300 Ashland, 651 ARTS relocated its offices to the Studebaker Building at 1000 Dean Street in Crown Heights.

The *Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts (MoCADA)* is a visual arts organization founded in 1999 by Laurie Cumbo (now City Council Member) in a brownstone owned by Bridge Street AWME Church in Bedford-Stuyvesant. In 2006 MoCADA relocated to a larger space on the ground floor of the 80 Arts Building, which has enabled the group to expand its curatorial and exhibition programs. MoCADA’s off-site programming brings a range of cultural expression to Brooklyn residents and businesses in their neighborhoods.

In anticipation of their new home, which will have contiguous as well as shared space, 651 ARTS and MoCADA are working to deepen their relationship. The plan for both groups is to invest in emerging artists of African descent. For 651 ARTS the focus is on the performing arts of the African diaspora, while the focus for MoCADA is on the visual arts. In the meantime, says 651 ARTS director: “We must re-invent ourselves. In 1989 we were the only organization in the area with a mission to work with artists of African descent within a contemporary aesthetic. ... Now many organizations are doing it.”

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99 For a discussion of South Oxford Space and 80 Arts, see article in Architectural League of New York’s *Urban Omnibus*, “Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts: Fort Greene, Brooklyn,” by Mercedes Kraus, April 17, 2013.
A cultural district in Downtown Brooklyn

Downtown Brooklyn Partnership is responsible for master planning for the Brooklyn Cultural District. For the Partnership’s 2016 downtown plan *The Brooklyn Way*, the Downtown Brooklyn Arts Alliance, a coalition of more than 35 cultural groups, drafted “Culture Forward” as a blueprint for the future of downtown Brooklyn as a creative arts hub.21 The key question, as posed by Karen Brooks Hopkins, in her “Manifesto on the Future of the Cultural District in Brooklyn” is how to maintain the spirit of the past 40 years. “We want to maintain the authenticity and the Brooklyn edge of things. ... We don’t want it to feel like Anywhere U.S.A. We want it to be chaotic.” Hopkins’ guidelines include the “Rule of 3”—if there are already three of something, don’t do it. Another rule-of-thumb is to ensure that community benefits are negotiated as part of all new development. “If CVS comes in, make them do something for the community. ... It’s important to get every developer on the board of local cultural organizations, so the district would speak in one voice and that would be a voice of art.”

In January 2017 BRIC, Mark Morris Dance Group (MMDG), Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts (MoCADA), and Theatre for a New Audience (TFANA)—“the four leading Downtown Brooklyn arts organizations”—announced the launch of the Downtown Brooklyn Arts Management Fellowship. BRIC had invited its neighbor institutions to develop the Fellowship in response to a 2016 NYC Cultural Affairs study on workforce diversity in DCLA-funded cultural organizations.22 The program will invest in a new generation of arts administrators, beginning with seven fellows in its pilot year, with the goal of building long-term equity and diversity in the field of arts management. Notably, BAM is absent among the partner institutions leading this initiative.23

300 Ashland will also include a new space for the Brooklyn Public Library, three new screens for BAM Cinema (BAM Karen), and BAM’s archive. A 10-story building at 280 Ashland will include a new home for The Center for Fiction, founded in 1820 at the Mercantile Library (at 47th and Fifth Ave, another Manhattan transplant), and more studios for Mark Morris. The Ashland, at 250 Ashland, will have 8,000 square feet of cultural space, including rehearsal studios for TFANA, and a food hall. “The area’s public squares are to be populated by art and performances.”20

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21 *The Brooklyn Way: Putting Together the Pieces of a 21st Century Downtown*, compiled and edited by the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership, June 2016. For a list of Downtown Brooklyn Arts Alliance (DBAA) members, see DBAA website at dbartsalliance.org.
23 “Brooklyn cultural institutions launch Downtown Brooklyn Arts Management Fellowship,” BRIC website, January 27, 2017 [www.bricartsmedia.org].
3—Adaptors and Transplants

What we call “adaptors” are cultural entities that have devised survival strategies in the face of the increasing challenges generated by rapid neighborhood change. Many agents that we characterize as adaptors have their roots in Fort Greene but others could be called “transplants” in that they were founded or seeded in another part of the city but were then uprooted and transplanted to Fort Greene. Adaptors have been able to persist in their existing habitat—that is, they are survivors in place.

Artists, cultural workers, migrants, and other residents

An early insight from our practitioner interviews was that cultural workers and artists who are property owners experience neighborhood change quite differently from those who are not. As described by a Fort Greene transplant and homeowner:

Our [work] space is beautiful and full of light. ... What was then a shiny new development [South Oxford Space] is now an island of affordability. [We] live here—in Fort Greene—because I work here and decided against a reverse commute. ... We looked in Park Slope for a day and decided it wasn’t affordable [especially with children]. Fort Greene—OK—great! Within two years we couldn’t have afforded it. ...

We’ve got great transit access. The people are wonderful and racially mixed. Fort Greene Park is an Olmstead design. [In 2000] when [my family] first moved here, it was tough in that we could hear gunshots—like the East Village in the 1980s. I enjoy change. Now there are more cafes. ...

Homeowners, in particular, perceive Fort Greene as a long-standing integrated neighborhood, for many years the home of middle-class African American families.

On the one hand, a black-owned shop called Carol’s Daughter that was here around the corner in 2000 is gone. But to a meaningful degree, that character remains. Many families are black and are still here. Our block and neighborhood generally have maintained that connection, which is also reflected in local arts and culture. Some black families who had owned homes since the 1970s (or ’60s) have cashed out, moved, and retired.

Another cultural worker transplant to Fort Greene, resident since 2000 and condo owner since 2009 (a beneficiary of the housing finance crisis), also expressed calm about the changing neighborhood.

For me the neighborhood has become more and more friendly. In the new developments, the vast majority are renters, so there are more itinerant people moving through the neighborhoods. A new mix to add to the petri dish.

Fort Greene Park, the green oasis at the center of the neighborhood, has long reflected the tensions of a diverse community undergoing continual change. An early wave of homeowners, who “in 1978 could buy a brownstone for $60,000” on Washington Park
(the street overlooking east Fort Greene Park), presumably were attracted by the
diverse community. By the 2000s tolerance among Washington Park homeowners had
decayed to the point that one night a group destroyed all the benches along the park
with sledgehammers. Apparently they’d rather have no benches at all than share them
with the community.

Less surprising was the park director’s observation that “dogs get tied up with the
gentrification debate.” Many dog owners want restricted use areas to run their dogs. In
1999 residents formed an organization called PUPS—Park Users and Pets Society—to
advocate (successfully) for off-leash access to Fort Greene Park for their dogs from 9 PM
to 9 AM. A 2014 Pratt Institute event where Brooklyn-bred filmmaker Spike Lee decried
the changing character of the neighborhood suggests a generational culture clash.

Have you seen Fort Greene Park in the morning? It’s like the motherfuckin’
Westminster Dog Show. There’s 20,000 dogs running around.... I mean, they
just move in the neighborhood. You just can’t come in the neighborhood. I’m for
democracy and letting everybody live but you gotta have some respect. You
can’t just come in when people have a culture that’s been laid down for
generations and you come in and now shit gotta change because you’re here?
Get the fuck outta here. Can’t do that! 24

Lee’s rant, however “abrasive,” draws attention to a not uncommon set of tensions
among resident transplants and longer-term adaptors in urban neighborhoods. PUPS
also sponsors an annual Great PUPkin contest for Halloween in Fort Greene Park.
October 2017 was the 19th Annual Great PUPkin—“Brooklyn’s largest and most
outrageous dog costume contest.” Preregistration was recommended.

Commercial culture

Fort Greene’s most renowned commercial cultural establishment—40 Acres and a Mule
Filmworks, Spike Lee’s production company—was an integral part of Fort Greene’s
evolution as an African American arts community and continues to have a foothold in
the neighborhood. In 1978 Lee began to rent space in the vacant firehouse at 124
Dekalb Avenue, facing Fort Greene Park, and produced films in the building till 2008. Lee
has since moved 40 Acres’ headquarters into the building he owns at 75 S Elliott Place
(near Lafayette). 25

Several African American owned businesses on Fulton Street—including Moshood and
the Brooklyn Moon Cafe—date from the 1990s. Moshood, an African clothing store,
opened in 1994 by a Nigerian designer (of the same name) who’d moved to New York
City during the 1980s. Moshood Creations’ “Afrikan spirit” brand continues to draw
patrons into its Fort Greene boutique as well as online.

24 “Spike Lee’s Amazing Rant Against Gentrification: ‘We Been here!’” by Joe Coscarelli, New York
25 “Spike Lee’s former office building for sale,” by Candace Taylor, The Real Deal (NYC Real Estate News)
February 14, 2011.
In 1995 a local resident (with Bajan roots) opened Brooklyn Moon Café in a small storefront at 745 Fulton Street “to fill a void in the Fort Greene neighborhood.” The aspiring restaurateur could see the area had a “real sense of community” but lacked a good place to eat as well as a place for artists to show and perform and people interested in the arts to congregate. For many years, the café hung paintings and photographs by local artists and hosted open-mic nights, poetry readings, and one-man shows that became standing-room-only events. Although the neighborhood has changed, Brooklyn Moon, which features Southern and Caribbean cuisine, continues to occupy its niche within local eating and drinking establishments. As observed by Nelson George:

The Brooklyn Moon Cafe on Fulton, once the center of the New York spoken-word scene, continues on. ... But there seems to be surprisingly little interplay between the new white Fort Greene and the old-school black community. I asked my friend Mike Thompson, who opened the Brooklyn Moon 15 years ago, about this. He said that while he did have white customers, he noticed that the newcomers seemed more comfortable at recently opened spots like a French bistro farther down on Fulton Street.  

Brooklyn Moon Café is documented online by City Lore and the Municipal Art Society’s placeMATTERS as a “place that matters” to the local community.  

In January 2015, dnainfo.com ran a story about Brooklyn Moon with the title, “Poetry café turned comedy club celebrates 20 years in Fort Greene.” The sensibilities of the owner may be a key to its adaptability. “Brooklyn Moon is a casual, funky, unique, embracing place with great, affordable food, and I am Brooklyn Moon’s consummate glue.”  

Soul Summit Music, a DJ collective that produces “free soulful house music” events in Fort Greene Park on Sunday afternoons during summer, is a product of Fort Greene’s black bohemia of the 1980s and ’90s. In June 2001 a resident DJ (and two business partners) started the first “Solstice Sunday of the Summer” in Cuyler Gore Park at Fulton St. and Greene Ave. The roots of Solstice Sunday reached back to the 1970s, when there was “a tremendous outdoor music and dance scene (as experienced by the founding DJs) all throughout the parks in NYC.”

The initial musical movement scene—during the late 1970s and early 1980s—was mostly outdoors. This was before the club scene and required no money and no licensing. You had musical equipment and you dance. This was happening all over the city—there were pockets in the Bronx, pockets in Manhattan, and mostly in Brooklyn. Queens and Staten Island came later. On  

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26 Strangers on His Street,” by Nelson George, The New York Times, April 5, 2009. The authors were surprised to find that a white friend who lives in Fort Greene had never been to Brooklyn Moon until we mentioned a meal we’d enjoyed there.
27 Place Matters, a joint project of City Lore and the Municipal Art Society, at: [www.placematters.net/node/1063].
28 “Poetry café turned comedy club celebrates 20 years in Fort Greene,” by Janet Upadhye, dnainfo.com, January 16, 2015.
any given Friday and Saturday night, you could find the parties—dance, house music, Latin …

An offshoot of that culture, which was before hip hop, was hip hop.

The original plan was to hold the event on summer Sundays for a year or two at Cuyler Gore, a small triangular park in commercial Fort Greene, and then move to a larger site. However, by the second Sunday, the event had outgrown the site and was spilling down Fulton Street with the merchants. “We got calls from the Community Planning Board and City Council. We were tapping into a particular ‘interest group’—groups marginalized from Manhattan.”

Since 2002 Soul Summit Music festival has been held in Fort Greene Park. Necessary to survival has been the producers’ ability “to shape our relationship with the [NYC] Parks Department.” Initially, they held the event every week of the summer—nine Sundays. Over the years, due to evolving Parks Department regulations, the number of events per season dropped from 9 to 6 to 4 to 2. Soul Summit Music now hosts its free outdoor dance parties on two Sundays a summer in Fort Greene Park (from 3 pm to 8 pm) as well as on Restoration Plaza at Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation (CDC) in Bed-Stuy. The support of Fort Greene Park and Park Conservancy—in particular, the park director hired in December 2014—has also been critical. “There’s a lot to arrange … The [new park director] inherited everything. … He’s great—wonderful and flexible.”

The producers also credit support by the NYPD Community Affairs department. “During the last several years—with Parks and Police—their support has been outstanding. Formerly we’d have to remind them—by the way, this is programming that the City should provide. We’re feeding the ecosystem.”

House music as a genre and DJs as cultural producers represent the adaptability intrinsic to popular culture. While the origin of the term “house music” is subject to debate, it’s likely a reference to the “warehouse” (and garage) clubs in NYC and Chicago where DJs developed the sound and the feel.

“House is a feeling” … Its percussion-led rhythmic beats are firmly driven by its African roots; this music is best appreciated by people who love to dance. The 4/4 time drum percussion with low frequency, heavy basslines are the reason it’s not just music to listen to but to “feel”… it can touch your soul, make you dance and lift your spirit. “Oh yes, you can definitely feel it!!” …

Although House Music has heavily influenced and shaped pop music over the last few decades it remains non-mainstream and exists as a healthy network of underground scenes … and to many a whole culture.³⁰

Soul Summit Music festival was founded in response to “an artistic and musical vacuum” c. 2000, especially in Brooklyn, as perceived by local DJs. What began as a Brooklyn festival of spoken word, house music, classical and Latin music, now showcases guest artists and designers and attracts visitors from across the U.S. and abroad—but still

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³⁰ From Pressure Radio website re “What is House Music? House Music History and Explanation.”
http://pressureradio.com/house-music/
maintains a family ambiance as “the sweetest house party OUTSIDE you could ask for.” Over the past 16 years, Soul Summit Music has become “an institution” that continues to fill a cultural niche within the changing community—and beyond.

Many interviewees, even flourishers and adaptors, expressed a kind of fatalism about neighborhood change in Fort Greene. “Now—and looking forward—we see tall buildings, more fancy apartments, less affordable housing, and a stadium.” The Greenlight Bookstore owners track the pace of change along their commercial corridor. “It’s coming, it’s galloping down Fulton Street. The population density is different. Businesses have closed. Bartenders note that they have fewer, richer customers. Customers used to buy 10 drinks at $10 each and now they buy 5 drinks at $20 each.”

**Nonprofit cultural organizations**

Reflecting on the neighborhood cultural ecology, interviewees generally described Fort Greene as a nonprofit cultural district with BAM and BRIC as the key institutions. As a consequence, the area’s smaller nonprofits need to focus on the “sustainability” of their organizations, often at the expense of community network building. One interviewee was dramatic in characterization.

Regarding the cultural ecology of Fort Greene, the neighborhood has an incredible trove of dense resources—this is not a resource challenged neighborhood. BAM is the Death Star. We are all planets around BAM and the Cultural District, which sucks up a lot of resources (including boards and donors). BAM is like an imperialist country, and we are all colonies. When the City decided to make a cultural district, it was based on the vision of Harvey Lichtenstein and his Lincoln Center—turning [the area] into that. They put money into bricks and mortar but not operating expenses.

A number of interviewees were nonprofit “transplants” to the BAM cultural district from Manhattan, an intentional strategy by Harvey Lichtenstein. Lichtenstein sought to recruit innovative artists and experimental groups—many self-identified as “Downtown Arts”—to relocate from Lower Manhattan to Brooklyn. BAM’s lure—with a push by the 9/11 attacks (2001) as well as Manhattan developers—proved successful. “Now Brooklyn is the Downtown Arts scene.”

One Fort Greene adaptor—a Manhattan transplant—expressed a matter-of-fact view of neighborhood change and its impact on the arts in the context of the citywide cultural ecosystem.

The cultural centers of innovation have moved [as a result of] demolition, money, and real estate. In the 1960s it was Café Chino in the Village. In the 1970s it was La Mama and St Mark’s Church. In the 1980s, it was the East Village. Now the East Village is all gone, as is SoHo. … I’m not nostalgic for lost neighborhoods. Those centers of innovation have continued to migrate. They come and go. Kids now move to Bed Stuy and Bushwick (if they’re lucky), Prospect Lefferts Gardens, Crown Heights, and Queens. Long Island City—I love it there. Queens is exciting.
Franklin Furnace Archive, an artist-run organization founded in 1976 “to champion ephemeral forms neglected by mainstream arts institutions,” has proven remarkably adaptable to the changing landscape of New York City as well as the volatile world of art and cultural discourse. Over the years, on its “mission to make the world safe for avant-garde art,” Franklin Furnace has evolved an activists’ view of neighborhood.

In the arts world, it doesn’t matter where you are [or] where the artists live. You go to Manhattan to meet people. For presenting, resident artists drop in after work on their way walking home. The immediate neighborhood is not the issue. It’s the idea.

For twenty years from 1976 to 1996, Franklin Furnace occupied a loft and active performance space at 112 Franklin Street in TriBeCa, a working artist neighborhood in Lower Manhattan. In 1996 they sold the TriBeCa loft, matching an advancement grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and put the proceeds into cash reserve. In 1997 Franklin Furnace “went virtual” and launched its website [franklinfurnace.org] with a focus on the potential of new media to expand freedom of expression and audiences for emerging artists. Still based in Lower Manhattan, Franklin Furnace worked toward online publication of its event record archives and collaborated with Conceptual and Intermedia Arts Online (CIAO) national consortium to build a database of contemporary avant-garde work.

In 2004 Franklin Furnace relocated to Brooklyn at 80 Hanson Place (80 Arts) in Fort Greene. During its tenure in the Cultural District, the group was awarded two grants by the National Endowment for the Humanities to digitize two decades of event records. In 2006 they signed an agreement with Artstor, an online digital image library, and in 2009 published their event records online, which positioned Franklin Furnace Archive as a research resource on ephemeral art practice.

In 2014 Franklin Furnace negotiated an “Organization-in-Residence” agreement with Pratt Institute, retaining its 501c3 nonprofit status, and moved on campus at 200 Willoughby Ave in Clinton Hill. The agreement provides free rent and high-speed Internet service so Franklin Furnace can continue to build its value as a research resource for Pratt students and faculty, national and international scholars, and the community at large. Since its move to Pratt, Franklin Furnace has developed collaborative programs with Pratt Libraries and Performance + Performance Studies and begun to develop an artists' book preservation class for the School of Information. At forty years old, with a nested residency at Pratt, The Furnace has both a physical and virtual home in Brooklyn’s Fort Greene/Clinton Hill that advances its commitment to “the history of the future.”

Irondale Ensemble, an experimental theater company founded in 1983, has taken the path of both transplant and adaptor. Irondale decided to relocate from Manhattan to Fort Greene and also to make a home—for both the company and the community—at

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Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church. In 2008 they ran a modest capital campaign, renovated the church’s Sunday School auditorium (fallow since 1939), and opened Irondale Center at 85 South Oxford Street in the heart of the neighborhood. They kept the spacious 19th century auditorium intact as “a grand ruin,” which has turned out to be an unusually versatile theatre space. Seating capacity—with 103 theatrical seats on movable bleachers and up to an additional 150 folding chairs—is flexible from 50 to 250 depending on the design of the production.

Irondale was the first new facility to open in the Downtown Brooklyn Cultural District, before BRIC Arts Media House 32 and TFANA’s Polonsky Shakespeare Center. They opened quickly with a long-term lease and relatively modest rent but with the burden of debt from the capital campaign (construction loan) and operating costs to maintain the 7,300 square foot performance space (with its 28-foot ceilings, 1,900 sq. ft. balcony, and stained glass windows). Irondale Center had foundation funding for a Space Subsidy Program for two years, but that phased out. They continue to offer limited rent subsidies “on our own dime” for nonprofit projects that reach diverse or underserved audiences.

The Irondale theatre company—“essentially a performance think tank”—maintains its “glorious space” as Irondale Center for Theater, Education, and Outreach. The ensemble brings together artists who develop research and improvisation practices to explore the relationship between performance and education. “Our theatre can become a classroom and classrooms we enter can become theatres.” The company has adapted its creative learning and collaborative model to a variety of institutional and community settings—including in-school residencies, STEM programs, a teen ensemble and tech crew, and summer creative arts programs. In 2015 Irondale began to partner with the New York Police Department to develop a community program that uses improvisation to build communication and empathy between police and community.33 As explained by Irondale’s founder/director: “Relating to and understanding the people around us is the construct of our society—that is also at the base of what acting is. ...”34 Community member casting for Round 4 of “To Protect, Serve, and Understand” began in November 2017.

Since 1983, the company’s ideal has been to maintain an ensemble of 8 to 10 players for 40 weeks a year. However, since the opening of Irondale Center, their financial reality has been to maintain an ensemble of four actors and an administrative/facilities staff of six. The executive director doubles as an actor.

Target Margin Theater (TMT), an experimental theater group founded in 1991 in the East Village/SoHo, also fits the dual profile of transplant and adaptor. In Manhattan they had an office in a housing development on E 20th St—a gifted space, the janitor’s closet

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32 BRIC, a Brooklyn institution, had been based in Fort Greene and housed in the BAM Harvey building.

33 http://irondale.org/creative-learning/partnerships/to-protect-and-serve/

at no cost—due to the director’s relationship with the nonprofit developer. The company had a good relationship with the residents in the building, but its space was small and uncomfortable. In 1999 A.R.T./New York invited the TMT director to visit to its building under renovation at 138 South Oxford St. With the prospect of affordable office space and the appeal of the neighborhood, A.R.T. anticipated that the building would fill up quickly with a waiting list. In spring 2000 Target Margin Theater relocated to South Oxford Space and was among its first tenants. “The move to Brooklyn is a story of luck and timing.”

Target Margin is a small group with a clear vision and mission that influences all aspects of decision-making. “Difference is the generative principle of everything we do. ... We hope that everything we do creates a different answer to the question ‘what is a play?’” TMT is a nonprofit “with super-limited capacity.” They operate in other places. They raise funds and do shows. Their space needs—a small room or a big room or a different setting—depend on the project. They have a citywide network of sites—such as Abrons Arts Center at Henry Street Settlement and HERE Arts Center—in Lower Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens.

We have no interest in moving to new construction. Most companies have acquired a building or performance space. We’ve avoided that. I want to do the work, not service the building. When you get a building, you need to service the building or the company folds. What we have are people and ideas. We’ve never found a space that served us well.

That was the summer of 2016. During the summer of 2017, Target Margin Theater consummate adaptor moved to Sunset Park in Brooklyn. Their new office and performance space—THE DOXSEE at 232 52nd St—will be “home to new work, new artists, and new programs—all striving to change the culture at large.” Target Margin’s two Sunset Park studios are open for rent on weekdays and selected weekends and evenings.

Fort Greene Park

Fort Greene Park, Brooklyn’s first official park, has been a feature of community and cultural life in Fort Greene for 150 years. The 30-acre site designed by Olmstead and Vaux—extending from Myrtle Ave on the north to Dekalb Ave on the south, from St Edwards St/Brooklyn Hospital on the west to Washington Park on the east—serves the nearly 200,000 residents of surrounding neighborhoods. Planning for the Downtown Brooklyn Cultural District, however, did not anticipate the impact of neighborhood change on Fort Greene Park.

Only in the past ten years have resources begun to expand in response to the increased density and competing demands on the park by the community. In 2006 American Opera Projects’ executive director became chair of the Fort Greene Park Conservancy, which effectively donated staff time and office space to the young and all volunteer

35 Source: Target Margin website, accessed October 2017: http://www.targetmargin.org/space-rentals/
36 Source: Fort Greene Park Conservancy website at fortgreenepark.org
organization. At first it had been difficult to attract African Americans, and “there was no take-up with affluent hipsters, but we needed their money. ... Ten years later we are able to recruit strong African American leadership. Before we were underground, now we have more visibility.” In December 2014 the Parks Department hired a new director of Fort Greene Park, and in April 2015 the Conservancy got paid staff for the first time. “You can get this if you’ve got a strong Friends group.” The mission is “to keep the park clean, green, and safe.” In close partnership with the NYC Parks Department, the Conservancy runs free programming, trains volunteer gardeners, supports park maintenance, and raises funds for infrastructure improvements and restoration.

In May 2016 the Parks Department’s Parks Without Borders initiative, a new design approach to connect urban parks and public spaces to neighborhoods across the city, selected Fort Greene Park to receive $5 million in capital funds. The Conservancy has been working closely with Myrtle Avenue Brooklyn Partnership, “who has more experience than the Conservancy,” to do the extensive community outreach needed to...
inform the project. During the fall of 2016, the Parks Department began to hold public meetings at Fort Greene Park Visitor Center and, during the summer of 2017, extended Visitor Center hours to encourage broad public input on the design. Capital funding for the park—which now totals $10.5 million—will be used to upgrade its entrances, edges, and underused (or overused) spaces to make the park more open, welcoming, beautiful, and sustainable.  

One Map of Many Moments (below), a glass mosaic map of the park by local artist Amanda Patenaude, “celebrates volunteerism and stewardship in Fort Greene Park.” The mosaic is made of “upcycled glass” collected by volunteers. Open July 2017 – June 2018.

8th Annual Fort Greene Park Jazz Festival (above), in partnership with Eric Frazier, July and Sept 2017

Circadia (below), a concrete sculpture by Blythe Cain, provides seating on the Myrtle Ave plaza at Washington Park and a site for free yoga classes and Tai Chi workshops on weekends till October. Open June 2017-May 2018.

Photos: Fort Greene Park Conservancy

Spacebuster X Brooklyn Boheme. On Saturday, Oct 14, 2017, Spacebuster, a step van with an inflatable pavilion, parked in Fort Greene Park. The 12-10 pm program included a furniture-making workshop; short films by German indie filmmakers; and screening of Brooklyn Boheme (2011)—“a love letter to Fort Greene’s past as a vibrant cultural mecca of the late 80s and early 90s”—and Q&A with the filmmakers.

4—New Growth

Our last category—what we call “new growth”—describes new entities that have seen the changing neighborhood and its emergent cultural ecology as an opportunity. In some cases, these newcomers and startups have already taken root, begun to flourish, and become significant contributors to the neighborhood’s evolving cultural ecology.

Myrtle Avenue Brooklyn Partnership

Myrtle Avenue Revitalization Project (MARP) is a nonprofit local development corporation (LDC) formed in 1999 to revive the Myrtle Avenue commercial corridor and improve the quality of life of Fort Greene and Clinton Hill neighborhoods. At the time of MARP’s founding, commercial vacancy along Myrtle Avenue hovered around 28 percent. Local congregations, merchant and neighborhood associations were active but under-resourced, and there was a shortage of community revitalization programs. MARP community planners held visioning workshops across the 20-block district and attended neighborhood meetings. What they learned about the community continues to present a challenge. “There is brownstone Fort Greene and public housing Fort Greene with Myrtle Avenue the hard boundary between. We have limited transit on Myrtle Ave. Everyone walking south can live in a bubble without crossing Myrtle.”

In 2005 MARP’s community initiatives as well as its business services were greatly boosted with the incorporation of the Myrtle Avenue Business Improvement District (BID). Together MARP and the BID comprise the Myrtle Avenue Brooklyn Partnership. Like all the City’s BIDs, Myrtle Avenue programs are funded primarily from an assessment on property owners in the district, which extends from Flatbush Avenue extension in Fort Greene to Classon Avenue in Clinton Hill.

MARP community planners persistently pursue opportunities that afford “a counter-narrative to gentrification.” Their strategy has led to a versatile palette of programming. Celebrating neighborhood history and culture, for example, is an important counter-narrative. MARP’s summer historic walking tours, in collaboration with Fort Greene Park Conservancy, give old-timers and newcomers alike a window on Fort Greene history since the Revolution.38 For two centuries, the Myrtle Ave corridor attracted a mix of industry, commerce, transit, housing, and open space that shaped Fort Greene and linked Brooklyn with Manhattan and Queens. The Brooklyn Navy Yard, commissioned in 1801 and built on Wallabout Bay in the East River, stimulated early urban growth of Fort Greene and Clinton Hill. The abundance of skilled waterfront and shipbuilding jobs attracted workers, including many African Americans, who settled the district north of Myrtle Avenue. In 1847, urged by Brooklyn Daily Eagle editor Walt Whitman, the City of

38 The Walt Whitman Project and the American Opera Project provide information on Walt Whitman and recite selections of his work during the tours.
Source: [myrtleavenue.org/sign-up-for-a-historic-neighborhood-walking-tour/]
Brooklyn designated 30 acres south of Myrtle Avenue—now Fort Greene Park—as its first public park. In 1867 Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux prepared a design for the park that included a crypt for the remains of the Revolutionary War prison ship martyrs. In 1884 the City opened Wallabout Market, a wholesale produce market on a Navy Yard site, which flourished until its demolition in World War II. In 1888 the Myrtle Avenue El opened and eventually ran from Queens to Manhattan.

Since the early 19th century, African Americans have been integral to Fort Greene’s development. By 1870, according to the Brooklyn Historical Society, more than half of all black Brooklynites lived in the neighborhood. During World War II the Navy Yard doubled in size and employed over 71,000 naval and civilian workers. From 1941 to 1944, to house wartime workers, the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) built the Fort Greene Houses complex north of Fort Greene Park. Things changed considerably after the war. In 1964 the Brooklyn Queens Expressway (BQE) opened on a viaduct over Park Ave cutting through the neighborhoods north of Myrtle. In 1966 the Brooklyn Navy Yard was decommissioned. In 1969 the Myrtle Ave El was demolished. Still standing are Fort Greene Park, its landmark Prison Ship Martyrs Monument (and crypt) completed in 1908, and NYCHA’s Walt Whitman and Ingersoll Houses (formerly Fort Greene Houses).

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39 The State of New York did not free all slaves until July 4, 1827.
40 Morrone, Brooklyn Historical Society, 2010 (8-17). See also Myrtle Avenue website: http://myrtleavenue.org/about/history/ .
In the early 1970s the vitality of Myrtle Avenue began to decline. The corridor hit a low point during the 1990s with the rise of its moniker “Murder Avenue” drawn from local popular culture.

**South of the Navy Yard Artists (SONYA)**

Over the years, MARP has promoted community bridging and broadened support of local entrepreneurs by providing a platform for working artists to engage the community. In 1999, like MARP, the South of the Navy Yard Artists (SONYA) collective started up, and the two organizations evolved in support of each other. “They reach out, and we always say yes. It’s mutual support for homegrown business. The artists are part of that.” In spring 2000 the SONYA visual artists, with support by MARP and locally owned businesses, started an annual self-guided studio tour of Fort Greene, Clinton Hill, Wallabout, and Bedford-Stuyvesant. After 13 years, the SONYA Studio Stroll was renamed the SONYA ArtWalk.

In February 2013 MARP launched Black ArtStory Month to highlight the neighborhood’s legacy of African American artists. The idea was to spotlight artists and musicians of color with roots in the neighborhood—“a lot of production of culture in the USA happened in Fort Greene”—as well as the contributions of local contemporary artists. MARP recruited a freelance public art curator, who developed Black ArtStory (now in its fifth year) and later joined the SONYA board. MARP’s arts and cultural initiatives have expanded to bring public sculpture, street furniture, studio art, and performances to public spaces, sidewalks, and businesses along Myrtle Avenue. “These programs increase access to art for the entire community, create opportunities for emerging and established artists, and drive foot traffic to the commercial corridor.”

Unhappily for Myrtle Avenue—and Fort Greene/Clinton Hill—an indicator of rapid neighborhood change has been the recent closure of the SONYA artist collective. Within a scant two decades, SONYA sprouted up in Fort Greene, helped other enterprises to flourish, and unwittingly uprooted. During May and June 2017, Myrtle Avenue Brooklyn Partnership and the Fulton Area Business (FAB) Alliance presented the “Fort Greene & Clinton Hill Artwalk” as a tribute to the SONYA legacy.

If you’ve been in the neighborhood long, you should remember the beloved South of Navy Yard Artists (SONYA) ArtWalks. Myrtle Avenue Brooklyn Partnership and FAB Alliance recognize the cultural impact of this seminal arts collective’s decision to permanently cease its operations; MABP and FAB are hosting this new event to emphasize the importance of supporting the dynamic art community within the Fort Greene and Clinton Hill neighborhoods, and to honor the legacy of the SONYA Artwalks.41

The 2017 Artwalk featured works by more than 35 community artists on display in businesses, galleries and public spaces in Fort Greene and Clinton Hill. All locations hosted a one-time-only “Meet the Artist” event.

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41 See Myrtle Avenue Brooklyn Partnership website at myrtleavenue.org/ artwalk.
“We have space for everyone.”

Counter-narratives to gentrification—including an expansive interpretation of “aging in place”—weave through all MARP’s programs and services. That means maintaining Myrtle Avenue as a commercial corridor that can serve all residents as well as bridge their differences. “We have space for everyone.” Brownstone residents tend to be young and prosperous families, while NYCHA residents tend to be aging households on a fixed income. “We create opportunities to bring neighbors together. Anything we do is about getting people to come here and to shop here.” With limited transit access and modest foot traffic, commercial gentrification had been relatively slow. Most people who shop either live or work nearby. MARP reports great success as a neighborhood service corridor—maintaining everyday services like hair salons and barbers, dry cleaners and laundromats—but getting people to come together across boundaries like age and race remains a struggle.

MARP’s community initiatives focus on social inclusion as a counter-force to demographic divides. MARP’s Food Access Initiative makes affordable and healthy food and nutrition education programs available to residents. “Everyone wants food access. It brings people across divides. ... Food is always a great way to bring people together. It’s something in common and creates space for conversations.” MARP’s Age-Friendly Myrtle Avenue initiative is based on the Age-Friendly NYC model developed by the New York Academy of Medicine. Fort Greene’s older adults reside primarily in the five large housing developments on Myrtle Avenue: Ingersoll Houses, Whitman Houses (NYCHA), Kingsview Houses (co-ops), University Towers (co-ops), and Willoughby Walk (co-ops). In the summer of 2017, MARP’s started its Monthly Bike Ride program, a free group bike ride around Brooklyn starting in Fort Greene Park—open to all ages and abilities.

With ten new construction projects planned or underway, change has picked up pace on Myrtle Avenue. MARP anticipates that the 2,000 housing units in the pipeline, which include few affordable units, will change the profile of residents and their demand for goods and services. New businesses will pay high commercial rents at the expense of legacy businesses. “We need to maintain—not preserve—the retail mix.” MARP devotes considerable resources to business retention, but because the corridor has a low rate of property ownership, every sale means change. The private housing market has already felt the impact. A two-bedroom apartment on Myrtle Ave was $2,500/month in 2013 and $3,500/month in 2016. “But public housing is here to stay, and our community will always include residents on a very broad economic spectrum.”

A widely anticipated development, under design for ten years, is a major new public space and pedestrian amenity called Myrtle Avenue Plaza. The concept and site selection were the result of a series of community workshops conducted by MARP in partnership with Project for Public Spaces. The plaza is designed as a 25,000 square feet pedestrian mall—located on the south side of Myrtle Avenue between Hall Street and Emerson Place in Clinton Hill—with 42 trees and ornamental plants as well as a variety of seating and event space. Funding for the project has been provided by public capital
dollars and construction by the NYC Department of Design and Construction and NYC Department of Transportation. Once completed, MARP will maintain and program Myrtle Avenue Plaza “creating a beloved new public space in Clinton Hill.”

**Brooklyn Navy Yard**

From 2001 to 2011 the City of New York funded the Brooklyn Navy Yard industrial park to undertake significant upgrade of its basic infrastructure. Established by the young nation in 1801, the shipyard had not seen significant expansion since World War II. The City’s “millennial investment” enabled the Yard to seed a cluster of green manufacturers and creative enterprises that contribute to the evolving cultural ecology of Fort Greene.⁴²

In 2004, with support by the New York State Film Production Tax Credit Program, Steiner Studios opened five soundstages and state-of-the-art film and television production studios—“the largest and most sophisticated studio complex outside of Hollywood”—on a Navy Yard site. In 2010 Steiner began to expand its complex with new construction and adaptive reuse of former Navy structures. In 2015 Brooklyn College CUNY opened the Brooklyn Graduate School of Cinema at Steiner Studios, the first school of its kind located on a working film lot.⁴³

In 2011 BLDG 92 opened as the public gateway to the Brooklyn Navy Yard. BLDG 92 serves as a visitor, education, and employment center to showcase Navy Yard history; promote Yard tenants; and provide job placement services for the community. A new exhibit highlights contemporary makers and manufacturers: “Making it in NYC: The Era of New Manufacturing.” BLDG 92 runs an annual Visiting Artists program for local artists “inspired by or seeking to connect to the Yard through a variety of creative disciplines.” In partnership with Brooklyn Historical Society, BLDG 92 offers free education programs and field trips for K-12 classes in public schools. Brooklyn Historical Society’s curriculum kit—Brooklyn Navy Yard: Past, Present, and Future—is designed to guide middle and high school students to “learn to think like historians and engineers through hands-on investigation of Brooklyn’s material culture, art, and written documents.”

BLDG 92, on the north side of Flushing Avenue at Carlton, is Fort Greene’s doorway to the Navy Yard. During February 2016, Black ArtStory month, MARP’s public art curator opened that door. “There’s lots of stuff going on at the Navy Yard, like artists’ studios, but it’s too far away. We wanted to try to activate those spaces. They let us—the artists—use the space at BLDG 92 with no charge.” BLDG 92 bore the security and utility costs to stay open late for community programming. A year later, in the adjacent Building 27 at 63 Flushing Avenue, Brooklyn Roasting Company opened a new café.

During the summer of 2016, from May 7 to June 19, Creative Time and the Brooklyn Navy Yard presented a public artwork called “Fly By Night,” which got quite a buzz in the

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⁴² See Brooklyn Navy Yard website: brooklynnavyyard.org/the-navy-yard/history/. See also: bldg92.org
art world. Artist Duke Riley had trained a flock of 1,000 pigeons with LED lights to circle above the river at dusk. Creative Time outreach staff drew people from all over, including school groups and seniors on buses that drove directly to bleachers set up in the Yard. From a Fort Greene perspective, however, there had been little outreach to the local community; and oddly the stunning event was physically inaccessible on foot.

The folding of SONYA represents the loss of not only resident artists but of cultural workers with a commitment to community engagement and art in the public realm. Institutions like Brooklyn Navy Yard and Creative Time need those on-the-ground cultural organizers who build connections within neighborhood communities.

Commercial culture

Greenlight Bookstore, an independently owned retailer in Fort Greene, opened in the fall of 2009. A local theater director and resident family encouraged us to check out it out. “The bookstore is a big part of the culture of the neighborhood. They’ve become an anchor in the neighborhood in only six years.” Greenlight’s start-up and success are a direct consequence of neighborhood change in Fort Greene. In 2008 the Fort Greene Association (FGA was formerly the Landmarks Preservation Committee) did an online survey “with cross-demographic representation” to find out what retail options residents found lacking in the neighborhood. “The clear majority response was—a bookstore. There are other gaps in the neighborhood—a good grocery, a butcher, a fish shop—but people called for a bookstore.”

About the same time, two women with extensive experience in bookselling and publishing had formed a business partnership with the dream of opening an independent bookstore in Brooklyn. Fort Greene, with its literary history and support by the FGA, turned out to be a great fit. The partners found a space suitable for renovation, previously occupied by an insurance firm and Black Vets for Social Justice, at 686 Fulton Street at South Portland. “The site is a great location. It’s like being on Main Street in a town, where people talk with neighbors, and in a district with world-class cultural organizations.” The owners also note that, reflecting a national trend among independently owned bookstores, Greenlight functions locally as a “third space.” “The bookstore is not just about buying books. We think what we offer is community—a place for meeting neighbors, for meeting authors ... It’s a community cultural connection.”

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44 See Creative Time website: creativetime.org/ projects/ flybynight.
45 In The Great Good Place (1991), sociologist Ray Oldenburg argues that “third places”—where people can gather, put aside the concerns of work and home, and hang out simply for the pleasures of good company and lively conversation—are the heart of a community’s social vitality and the grassroots of democracy. Source: Wikipedia, The Great Good Place (Oldenburg).
Greenlight’s business strategy is to respond to the literary and literacy needs and interests of local households and to capture demand generated by downtown Brooklyn’s entertainment district and new residential development. In 2008 their first decision was how to finance the new business. They chose a Community Lenders model, where lenders are neighbors. “People have emotional investment in the neighborhood and [believe they] can take control of change and make livable change.” Response was greater than expected. A blog Call For Loans of at least $1,000, to be repaid with interest within five years after opening, generated $75,000—all repaid by 2015. Another decision was not to have a coffee shop in the bookstore. They decided instead to build partnerships with local businesses, such as Greene Grape Annex, a neighborhood grocer with an adjacent café and bar. Greene Grape employees get discounts at the bookstore, and Greenlight Bookstore holds book club meetings and book events across the street at the Annex.

Looking ahead, Greenlight owners use a “double bottom line” model for new investment: either they break even in the short-term or justify expenditure as an investment in the future. They seek partners, particularly for off-site programs, and track profit and loss accordingly. Off-site programs include schools, which have high labor costs and low return but in the long-term will be its own division. “We’re investing in the future of readers.” Nonprofit partnerships—such as Greenlight’s “special relationship” with BAM—are more about marketing than financial return. The bookstore has a vendor kiosk in the BAM theaters. “They came to us. It’s a challenge to keep stock in the theater—three inventories—and we need a kiosk manager.”

The challenge of a big nonprofit is to meet grant goals. BAM is also invested in keeping the fabric of the neighborhood. As a business, we need to make a profit. There are few venues available for literary events with high profile authors (92nd St Y, New York Public Library). We bundle tickets, some with a book copy, and co-branding. It’s good for the publisher, the bookstore, and BAM.

Greenlight pursues literary partnerships to explore and cultivate its role in the contemporary cultural scene. They work with Akashic Books, an independent Brooklyn-based publisher, to “reverse gentrification of the literary world” and expand literary space in Brooklyn. Every August Greenlight and Akashic Books with Fort Greene Park Conservancy are presenting partners for the Fort Greene Park Summer Literary Festival, begun in 2005 by the New York Writers Coalition. Festival events are held in the park and offsite at BRIC Media House. “We highlight kids writing in the park. We headline authors. We do the work. They do the space.” In September Greenlight joins local and international vendors at the Brooklyn Book Festival—“the largest free literary event in New York City”—held annually at Brooklyn Borough Hall and Plaza since 2006.

Greenlight is a Fort Greene startup that has taken root, survived, and flourished. “How do we know we’ve got community impact?” Word-of-mouth. The bookstore is “the place to see exciting new writers of color.” Economic growth. In the fall 2016 they opened a second Brooklyn location in Prospect Lefferts Gardens, southeast of Prospect Park. Like Fort Greene, the Community Lender plan tapped residents’ excitement about
a bookstore coming. People encourage Greenlight to open a third store. “Our business model is based on relationships with the community. ... But if we’re relationship-based, can we do that?” Meanwhile, the challenge for the independent bookstore—especially in neighborhoods like Fort Greene, where commercial real estate remains an uncertainty—is to stay profitable as well as vital.

**Nonprofit culture**

Among new growth in Fort Greene, we encountered few emerging nonprofits with a space of their own. Several interviewees suggested that we check out JACK in Clinton Hill. JACK is a 50-seat performance venue, an adaptive reuse of a lowbrow structure at 505 ½ Waverly Ave, between Fulton Street and Atlantic Avenue. Theater-maker Alec Duffy and co-founders wanted to create a community arts space with a mission to provide “radical access to the arts by presenting performance work that reflects the diversity of the city and by involving local residents in the creative process.” JACK presents about 250 performances a year—including theater, performance art, music and dance—and holds community forums on racial justice, gentrification, and police/community relations. Racial justice plays a large role in JACK’s work, which features a blend of arts and activism, as demonstrated by its series “Forward Ferguson.” Says Duffy: “My goal in founding JACK was to create a space for experimental performance that was threaded into the community.” A sign of JACK’s success is that Duffy has hired a co-director.\(^{46}\)

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\(^{46}\) Source: JACK website at jackny.org. The authors were unable to meet with Alec Duffy during the summer of 2016.
Conclusion

Much ink has been spilled describing artists as the harbinger of gentrification and telling the stories of individual artists and organizations harmed by rising property values. In this paper, in a preliminary way, we begin to make sense of how rapid change influences the entire cultural ecology of a neighborhood.

A starting point for this analysis is the inherent tension in a community between cultural vitality and economic sustainability. Even during its heyday in the 1980s and 1990s, the black arts scene in Fort Greene was tenuous. Its economic vulnerability set the stage for many of the dynamics discussed above.

Part of the folklore of Brooklyn cultural agents is the BAMbus. As told to us by several interviewees, the idea of coming to Brooklyn was so incomprehensible to Manhattan residents that BAM ran its own bus service to bring audience members to and from its theaters. This story, like much folklore, is equivocal. On the one hand, it’s a story of the “bad old days” when Brooklyn was too scary and (frankly) too black to attract a mostly white Manhattan audience. On the other hand, those fears served a protective function. Housing of lesser quality and only a few subways stops away in lower Manhattan was already unaffordable for middle-income families. The “bohemian” cultural scene in Brooklyn flourished precisely because the neighborhood’s perceived risks and racial composition made it affordable.

A variety of factors came together in the late 1990s and early 2000s to radically change that perception and reality. BAM’s success and its entry into community development certainly were critical. In addition, the City’s economic development plan for downtown Brooklyn, originally sold as a commercial real estate plan, triggered waves of new residential development that have steadily worked their way up Fulton Avenue.

Cultural ecologies, like biological ecologies, succeed because of the balance and interaction of complex elements. As real estate values increased, that balance was upended in Brooklyn, a shift with equally complex impacts. Certainly, part of the story is the many cultural organizations that have flourished thanks to a combination of philanthropic support, government aid, and the new audiences who either moved to the borough or no longer found it scary. At the same time, these market and demographic forces uprooted many resident groups and artists. Some found new homes as they moved east, while others simply went out of business. This attenuation of the linkages of the Brooklyn cultural ecosystem continues to play out in Fort Greene and other neighborhoods.

This paper, based on a set of interviews and archival sources, tells only part of that story. In July of 2017 the City of New York released its first cultural plan for the City’s five boroughs. At the center of that plan is the recognition that the forces of economic and social inequality pose a great challenge to the City’s cultural sector as well as its neighborhoods. Will the trends of the past generation—increasing marketization and
valuation of the arts simply as economic driver—continue to guide the sector looking forward? Can New York’s cultural sector coexist with an alternative vision that sees culture as a right for all New Yorkers? The future of New York City—and of Brooklyn—as centers of cultural production as well as consumption rests on how these issues are addressed.

Cern’s 2011 portrait of Comandante Biggie, facing west on Fulton Street in Fort Greene, reminds passersby that our cultural producers are both vital to community wellbeing and vulnerable to community struggles.


“Time Flies”—June 27, 2017. “Spread love, it’s the Brooklyn Way.”

It has been 6 years since the completion of the Notorious B.I.G mural. Habana, acting as the canvas, has given a unique opportunity for local artists and the community. Together, Biggie’s iconic image and his lyric from his song “Juicy” can be found appearing in front of the Brooklyn Love Building. While paying homage to Biggie’s influence in his native borough, the mural and lyrics promote a sense of community and compassion. As the neighborhood continues to grow and change, it also acts as a reminder towards ourselves, our neighbors and the place we can call our home.

Source: https://brooklynlovebuilding.wordpress.com/2017/06/27/time-flies/
Appendix
Interviewees, Summer-Fall 2016

Brooklyn

651 ARTS—Shay Wafer
American Opera Projects—Charles Jarden
BRIC (BRIC Arts I Media House)—Leslie Schultz, Anthony Riddle, Jessica Sucher
Brooklyn Historical Society—Deborah Schwartz
Brooklyn Young Filmmakers/People’s Hollywood—Trayce Gardner
Cumbe: Center for African and Diaspora Dance—Jimena Martinez
Fort Greene Park (NYC Department of Parks & Recreation)—David Barker
Fort Greene Park Conservancy—Charles Jarden
Franklin Furnace Archive—Martha Wilson
Greenlight Bookstore—Rebecca Fitting, Jessica Stockton Bagnulo, Alexis Akre
Groundswell—Claudie Mabry
Irondale Ensemble Project—Terry Greiss
Mark Morris Dance Group—Nancy Umanoff
Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts (MoCADA)—James Bartlett
Myrtle Ave Brooklyn Partnership (MARP & BID)—Meredith Phillips Almeida
NY Writers Coalition—Aaron Zimmerman
Soul Summit Music—Leonardo Bellamy affectionately known as DJ Sadiq
South of the Navy Yard Artists (SONYA)—Brittan Blasdel, Daonne Huff
StoryCorps—Robin Sparkman
Target Margin Theater—David Herskovits
Theatre for a New Audience—Dorothy Ryan
Urban Bush Women—Lai-Lin Robinson, Tahnia Belle
Manhattan

Centro at Hunter College/CUNY, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños
Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Library and Archives—
Alberto Hernández-Banuchi, Anibal Arocho

Harlem Needle Arts—Michelle Bishop

Hi-ARTS—Raymond Codrington

Los Pleneros de la 21 (LP21)—Juango Juan J. Gutiérrez, Julia L. Gutiérrez-Rivera

Musica de Camara—Eva de La O

National Black Theatre—Sade Lythcott, Nabii Faison

Placeful—Eileen Reyes Arias, Shawn McLearen

Taller Boricua—Nitza Tufino

Queens

Flushing Town Hall—Sami Abu Shumays, Ellen Kodadek, Gabrielle Hamilton,
Shawn Choi, Michael Liu

Queens Museum—Prerana Reddy, José Serrano-McClain