

Making Art Matter: A Plan to Redesign the Department of Cultural Affairs

by Norma Munn

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Over the last year, a number of arts professionals have met in small groups to discuss how the city might better use its resources to support the cultural community. One of the constant themes is the need to change the Department of Cultural Affairs. Final recommendations of this city-wide planning effort will not be complete until next spring. But here is one blueprint for a new cultural agency.

A new Department of Cultural Affairs should have a broad mission aimed at supporting, nurturing and developing the professional arts industry. It should:

1. support the creativity of the city's artists
2. provide resources for economic development within the arts industry
3. protect the diverse cultural heritage of the city
4. sustain both mid-sized and well established cultural groups
5. encourage and nurture new, emerging art forms and smaller arts groups
6. promote arts education and act as a partner in effort to expand arts education in the public school system
7. develop access to the arts throughout the city

There is an assumption that the city's current financial support is targeted to professional arts of high quality. Since Cultural Affairs does not utilize an evaluation system based on artistic excellence for most of its contracted funds, that belief is not justified.

Two things are clear in the current system. It serves neither the professional non-profit arts groups, nor professional artists well, and it places the emerging or gifted amateur in competition with the professionals. This has the effect of lowering the public relations value of city support to professional arts groups when they solicit private funding sources, while creating a paperwork burden for the emerging groups.

Agreeing that Cultural Affairs should focus on professional arts and artists would clarify its purpose, as well as limit its role. Emerging groups, preprofessional, and gifted amateurs, if supported by taxpayers, should be funded through a local, decentralized process. Some argue that these kinds of activities should not receive taxpayer funding; others feel that many of these individuals and groups offer important local resources.

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A new Cultural Affairs should use an evaluation system based on artistic merit to ensure that tax funds provide the very best to every citizen. The expectation of high quality art is as much the right of every New Yorker as safe streets. Mediocre art does not contribute to a civil society; quality art can and does.

Equally important, a new Cultural Affairs must distribute funds equitably across all five boroughs, within and among racial and ethnic groups, and between those organizations in city owned buildings and the rest of the arts groups. The factors complicating that effort are many, but the most difficult is simply that roughly 75 percent of the professional arts groups in the city are located in Manhattan. Even within Manhattan, arts groups are not widely distributed. The majority are located below 57th Street.

The low level political bickering that pits Manhattan against the other four boroughs is particularly detrimental to the arts. Many of those who work in Manhattan-based non-profit groups live elsewhere. They take their paychecks home to that other borough. In addition, substantial numbers of the arts groups in Manhattan clearly have citywide audiences and programs. However, it is also a legitimate concern of other boroughs that their much larger population be fairly treated.

One solution is to emulate a restriction placed on state funding for the arts, which requires a minimum per capita amount be spent in each county or borough. A per capita requirement provides a base line level of funding for everyone. Funding above that base line amount is common in many counties depending on the level of arts funding. A similar process could be devised for the five boroughs.

Access, equity, merit-based evaluations, support for arts education and protection of the diverse cultural heritage of the city are rational ideas that many can, and do, support. Suggesting that a new Cultural Affairs provide funding for individual artists would be widely welcomed in the arts, but elected officials can be expected to have a different reaction. Artists cannot be counted on to adhere to the status quo; they challenge, disturb and sometimes shock. One would hope that this city that calls itself the cultural capital of the world is adult enough to put all that in perspective and recognize the without artists, we would not be able to make that boast.

Almost as disconcerting to many, within the arts and elsewhere, is the notion that a new Cultural

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Affairs should promote economic development in the arts. The city's usual approach is to support culture because it attracts tourists, and claim that as economic development. Cultural tourism is important, but it requires a thriving cultural industry. To provide funds for marketing but not for general operating costs is like taking out an ad to sell a house, but neglecting to fix the leaky roof or replace the ancient furnace.

Yet every economic study about the cultural sector shows that it is a industry which employs tens of thousands of people and attracts creative talents useful in other industries. Public officials fret and worry about the real estate sector, Wall Street, the construction industry, Silicon Alley, biotech, etc, etc. Tax incentives to stay in the city, to relocate, upgrade, and expand are commonplace approaches in order to keep the jobs in those industries in the city. Not so in the arts. The Joffrey Ballet left town with no discernible concern from the city—'s elected officials. Only 80 jobs, but a telling example of a blind eye.

The estimated 1000 professional non-profit arts groups in the city are almost uniformly understaffed. Speaking hypothetically, the city could allocate funds for one job per group at an average of \$45,000 per person for \$45 million per year. That is a paltry sum compared to the tax breaks provided to a number of large corporations over the past few years. Since artists and arts groups create products that add to the economy, they also earn a substantial amount of their annual budgets. Enhancing their ability to increase their product results in greater overall wealth for the city -- just like new jobs do in other industries.

Economic development treats the arts groups as the entrepreneurial business they are, albeit with an unusual product. It is an investment approach; not a hand-out. It could also do much to overcome the thirty five year history of inadequate and meager public funding that has left this industry perpetually undercapitalized. The latter is a major factor in the fiscal instability plaguing most non-profit arts groups, and every level of government has contributed to that condition by its short sighted funding policies.

Giving a new Cultural Affairs economic development responsibilities could also mean paying serious attention to the commercial arts. Many in the non-profit arts fear this. The resources of the commercial arts, and their largely unfettered ability to contribute political dollars, are not insignificant. But the intertwining of commercial and non-profit arts is increasing, and in any case, the commercial arts also contribute to the well being of the city. As it stands now the city does deal with the commercial arts, but on an ad hoc basis. Priorities about the use of resources and expectations as to results might benefit everyone.

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A public policy debate is needed on these and other issues affecting the arts. Many within the arts are intent on seeing that the upcoming mayoral and City Council elections provide a long awaited opportunity for that debate.