After piles of research and hours of discussion, concrete steps are now being taken to lay the groundwork for a downtown cultural district. Arts advocates and city planners are hoping that Lower Manhattan's cultural resources will lure visitors and businesses to the area and help to catalyze the local economy -- and reshape the financial district into the mixed-use, 24-hour neighborhood that so many New Yorkers say they want.

Ambitious plans aside, however, many cultural groups need immediate help. They have experienced prolonged gaps in ticket sales and other earned income since 9/11, and now face precipitous drops in city, state, and philanthropic giving. The best hope for them in the short term may be the "take-it-to-the-streets" strategy put forth by DowntownNYC!, a grassroots coalition of arts groups and small businesses located below 14th Street.

This summer, DowntownNYC! will roll out the ArtsVan, a retrofitted film location vehicle that will circulate around Manhattan's parks and public squares, offering discounted tickets for cultural events and serving as a mobile hospitality unit for Lower Manhattan. The coalition hopes eventually to have several vans in action.

The idea came from the group's first meeting, in November 2001, when it was noted that Lower Manhattan lacked a visitor's center. One of the many ripple effects of the terrorist attacks was the loss of the TKTS booth that had been housed at 2 World Trade Center since 1983. While mainly focused on Broadway, the booth had also promoted downtown events, attracting the many tourists and workers that streamed through the tower's lobby. ArtsVan will be the first district-wide campaign to lure visitors to downtown's many theaters, dance performances, galleries, museums, and other cultural attractions. Notably, the van will also offer tickets for small and off-off-Broadway productions, which are not generally sold at Duffy Square or the new South Street Seaport TKTS.

According to project director Jonathan Slaff, the ArtsVan will serve as "a soft-core concierge service for downtown." A February 2002 DowntownNYC! survey revealed that only 10 percent of visitors to downtown cultural events were tourists. By contrast, well over half of Broadway audiences come from out of town, drawn by mass market advertising and the tourist-friendly infrastructure of Times Square. Taking a more targeted approach, the ArtsVan will promote

downtown culture as a form of experimentation -- one that, compared with Broadway, can be considerably easier on the wallet.

Rather than trying to market the sprawling area as a single destination, Ă la Times Square, the promotions will emphasize the unique assets of Lower Manhattan's neighborhoods, such as Chinatown's jewelry district or the East Village's Indian restaurants. It will offer package discounts between arts groups and nearby businesses, and provide maps, guides, and announcements about walking tours or special events.

ArtsVan's bootstrap operation may eventually get help from city planners, many of whom have embraced the notion of a downtown cultural district. City Councilmember Alan Gerson of District 1 (which includes parts of Greenwich Village and SoHo, as well as the Lower East Side, Chinatown, and the financial district) is advocating for a comprehensive municipal arts policy for Lower Manhattan, "with new and forward-thinking initiatives that will stabilize the entire sector citywide and create long-term sustainability for our institutions." Citing reports by arts advocacy groups, he calls for policies to preserve affordable space, build publicâ€"private partnerships, and foster civic involvement.

Such policies may be enabled by a bill currently in the state legislature that would allow local governments to designate "culture zones" in order to help local arts. The legislation cites Richard Florida's report, "The Creative Engine," which argues that strong arts communities attract creative thinkers in all industries. The bill would provide tax incentives to encourage the development of studios, galleries, and performance facilities, so that artists can work cheek by jowl with bankers. It would also provide tax incentives to landlords who offer below-market rents to arts tenants and organizations that make philanthropic donations to cultural groups.

Corporations are also playing a role in the emerging downtown arts district. American Express will be the headline sponsor of this summer's second-annual downtown arts festival . The company has also signed on to support a Museum of Freedom, planned as part of Daniel Libeskind's vision for the World Trade Center site. The museum would tell the story of the terrorist attacks and explore the notion of freedom from local, national, and international perspectives. The Museum of the City of New York and the New-York Historical Society, which have been discussing merger plans for some time, have expressed their interest in being part of the planned downtown museum.

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