FEBRUARY 2025

EAST HARLEM THEATER & CULTURAL DISTRICT FEASIBILITY STUDY

UNION SETTLEMENT



TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD 3

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 9

BACKGROUND & INTRODUCTION 20

ARTS & CULTURAL DISTRICTS 33

DOCUMENTATION & PROCESS 38

DESIGN VISION 81

STRATEGIC VISION & APPROACH 167

IMPLEMENTATION RECOMMENDATIONS 177

APPENDICES 207



ARTWORK BY
Yasmin Hernandez

REPORT PREPARED BY
OBRA Architects with Partners in Public Design

EDITED BY
Union Settlement
Michelle Cruz, Chief Community Engagement and Economic Affairs Officer & Joe Rogers, Senior Project Consultant

FOREWORD

The arts have been the backbone of East Harlem, carrying us through tough times and celebrating our successes. From the murals on our streets to the music that flows through our festivals, culture here has never been just for entertainment, it has been essential to our identity. It is the bond that unites us, sustains us, and lifts us.

—Michelle Cruz, Chief Community Engagement and Economic Affairs Officer, Union Settlement



INTRODUCTION

As we commemorate Union Settlement's 130th anniversary, we reflect on a legacy of unwavering dedication to the East Harlem community. Since 1895, our mission has been to empower and uplift this vibrant community through comprehensive services including education, wellness, and community-building.

The East Harlem Theater and Cultural District Feasibility Study is a pivotal step in ensuring our mission continues to evolve and meet the needs of our community. This study is more than just an assessment, it is a blueprint for strengthening the cultural and economic fabric of East Harlem. By identifying opportunities for revitalizing underutilized theaters and cultural spaces, we are creating new avenues for job creation, business development, and artistic expression. The study underscores the power of culture as a driver of community pride, economic stability, and social cohesion, ensuring that future generations can thrive in an East Harlem that remains rich in heritage and opportunity.

As we look to the future, we remain steadfast in our dedication to fostering a thriving community. Together, we will continue to build upon our past, ensuring that Union Settlement remains a beacon of hope and support for generations to come.

DBoone

Derrick A Boone, Psy D
Interim CEO and Chief Program Officer
Union Settlement



Courtesy of Union Settlement

Dear Community Partners,

For nearly 130 years, Union Settlement has expanded opportunities in East Harlem through comprehensive programs that help underserved residents improve their skills and build better lives for themselves and their families.

Building on those efforts, hand in hand with East Harlem's leading arts institutions and artists, the Feasibility Study for the East Harlem Theater and Cultural District assesses how we can create a thriving cultural hub that not only celebrates and extends our artistic legacy but also drives economic growth. It explores the demand for theaters and cultural spaces, evaluates financial sustainability, and provides a roadmap for revitalizing and repurposing existing spaces to benefit our community.

El Barrio is much more than a geographic location. It's a living, breathing hub of culture and creativity that has been a source of inspiration, identity, and strength for us, for our families, and for the generations who have called this community home. The arts have been the backbone of East Harlem, carrying us through tough times and celebrating our successes. From the murals on our streets to the music that flows through our festivals, culture here has never been just for entertainment; it has been essential to our identity. It is the bond that unites us, sustains us, and lifts us. The opportunity before us now is to elevate awareness of our rich culture to ensure sustainability and economic development for our people without contributing to the gentrification that threatens the very soul of our community.

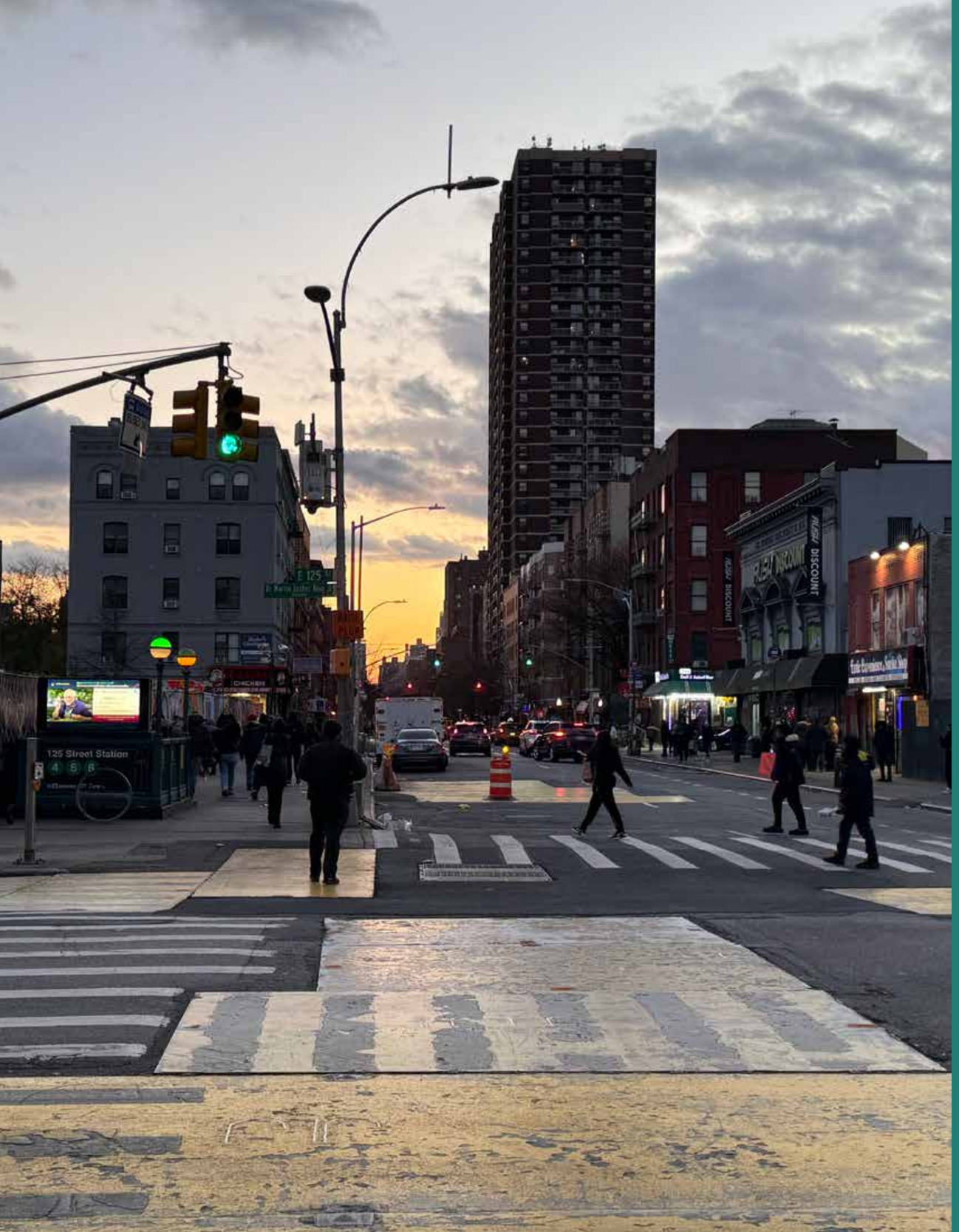
The theater and cultural district must align with the community's vision, serve our residents, and become a beacon for visitors. It must reflect the voices of East Harlem, the artists, the performers, the business owners, and the residents, so that it is a true celebration of our culture, not an import from outside forces. This approach to economic development—reflected in the inclusive, four-month stakeholder engagement process that identified the shared values and informed the recommendations presented herein—doesn't displace but rather elevates our community, creating opportunities that honor the contributions and aspirations of the people who have long made East Harlem their home.

This project is about creating a pathway to end generational poverty by growing a thriving local economy centered around arts and culture. A theater and cultural district attracts tourism, bringing in new revenue and jobs. It elevates the profile of local businesses, restaurants, shops, and galleries, all while providing platforms for local talent to shine on a larger stage.

With this study, with all of you, we have the chance to shape the future of East Harlem, not just as a cultural district, but as a model for economic development that lifts and sustains us and ensures that East Harlem will continue to thrive for generations to come.

Michelle Cruz

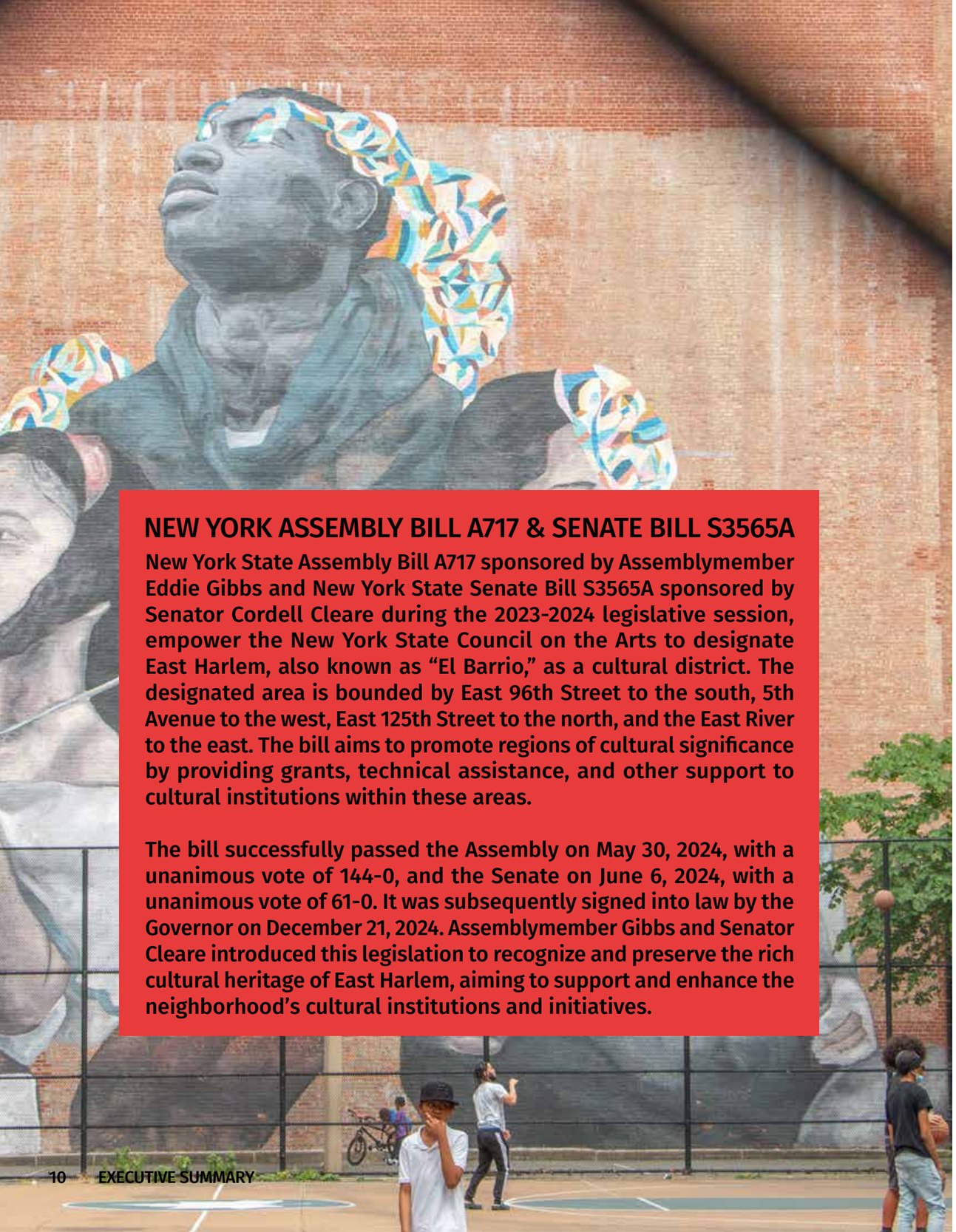
Michelle Cruz
Chief Community Engagement and Economic Affairs Officer
Union Settlement



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We set out to make change.

This is not a typical urban planning exercise in community engagement and feasibility. This is a design-forward effort—one that proposes pragmatic solutions alongside larger, connective strategies to prompt a networked cultural ecosystem for the future East Harlem Theater and Cultural District.



NEW YORK ASSEMBLY BILL A717 & SENATE BILL S3565A

New York State Assembly Bill A717 sponsored by Assemblymember Eddie Gibbs and New York State Senate Bill S3565A sponsored by Senator Cordell Cleare during the 2023-2024 legislative session, empower the New York State Council on the Arts to designate East Harlem, also known as "El Barrio," as a cultural district. The designated area is bounded by East 96th Street to the south, 5th Avenue to the west, East 125th Street to the north, and the East River to the east. The bill aims to promote regions of cultural significance by providing grants, technical assistance, and other support to cultural institutions within these areas.

The bill successfully passed the Assembly on May 30, 2024, with a unanimous vote of 144-0, and the Senate on June 6, 2024, with a unanimous vote of 61-0. It was subsequently signed into law by the Governor on December 21, 2024. Assemblymember Gibbs and Senator Cleare introduced this legislation to recognize and preserve the rich cultural heritage of East Harlem, aiming to support and enhance the neighborhood's cultural institutions and initiatives.

THE GOAL IS AMBITIOUS

East Harlem is home to a diverse wealth of cultural institutions, each contributing to the community's artistic and social identity. However, these institutions often operate in isolation, facing physical, digital, and operational challenges that limit their full potential and affect their growth and sustainability. This Feasibility Study, initiated by Union Settlement with support from the New York State Regional Economic Development Councils, seeks to bridge these gaps by strengthening connections and fostering synergies that contribute to a more cohesive cultural network.

Encouraged by Assemblymember Eddie Gibbs' and State Senator Cordell Cleare's success with the passing of New York State Assembly Bill A717 & Senate Bill S3565A and by ongoing efforts of Senator José M. Serrano to reintroduce his proposed New York Senate Bill S253A to support state-designated arts and cultural districts, providing them with technical assistance, marketing expertise, and access to additional resources, Union Settlement tasked OBRA Architects to conduct a feasibility study to assess and revitalize underutilized theaters and cultural institutions in the neighborhood by evaluating their physical conditions, programming potential, and revenue opportunities. The study seeks to understand the impact of a designated theater and cultural district, engage stakeholders, and develop a strategic plan and path forward for transforming these spaces into thriving cultural hubs that drive economic growth and community engagement. By addressing both practical renovations and broader cultural connectivity, the project envisions a sustainable framework for East Harlem's artistic and economic future.

INTRODUCTION

East Harlem is home to a rich network of cultural institutions that serve as vital anchors for both the local community and the broader city. Yet many of these institutions operate in relative isolation and, in some cases, within outdated infrastructure. This initiative not only addresses their operational needs but also positions them as key players in a larger urban development strategy. By leveraging East Harlem's cultural assets, we seek to ignite a renaissance that strengthens local identity and expands economic opportunity. Through targeted "acupunctural" design interventions, we are spearheading a neighborhood transformation that enhances public spaces, supports institutional growth, and fosters a renewed sense of cultural vibrancy. Our objectives are clear: to strengthen the presence and impact of East Harlem's cultural institutions and to develop micro-scale interventions capable of triggering macro-scale urban improvements. We aim to enhance public space and pedestrian experiences through green infrastructure and targeted signage, while also improving institutional facilities for better functionality and greater visitor engagement. In addition, we envision the establishment of a digital network that unifies and promotes the neighborhood's cultural assets.







DESIGN STRATEGY

Our design strategy is centered on what we call "acupunctural" design—targeted, small-scale architectural upgrades that have a ripple effect throughout the neighborhood. By focusing on key cultural hubs, we strive to create cascading impact that not only strengthens community ties but also enhances the surrounding urban environment. Recognizing that some cultural institutions operate in aging or underutilized spaces, our strategic but individually customized interventions include installing energy-efficient systems for sustainable year-round use, reconfiguring interior layouts to optimize space and enhance functionality, ensuring broad public accessibility, and improving acoustics and seating for performances and events. Additionally, we propose repurposing underutilized areas to unlock hidden potential. By addressing the concrete needs of each institution, we lay the foundation for longer-term success. This dual approach—combining pragmatic actions with an ambitious vision—aims to make East Harlem's cultural renaissance not just a possibility, but an inevitable reality.

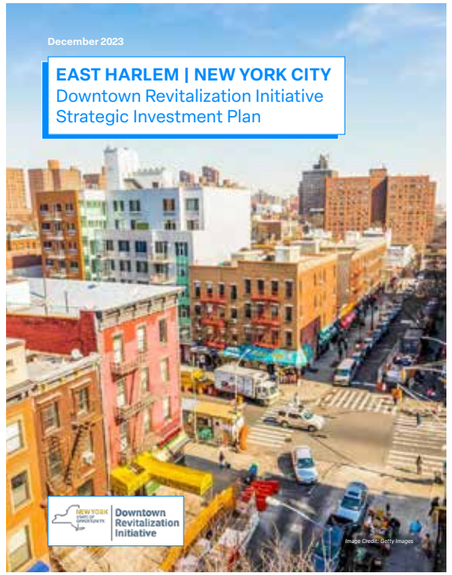
From the outset, our aim was to meet Union Settlement and the other stakeholders wherever they were along their individual trajectories, each at their particular stage development. We sought to allow room for each institution's active participation, rather than a prescribed or imposed engagement, in an effort to acknowledge and sensitively consider their challenges, successes, and unique narratives. Following outreach and dialogue with participating institutions and varying degrees of responsiveness, an introductory inventory was developed to assess needs, priorities and opportunities. This process informed a dual approach:

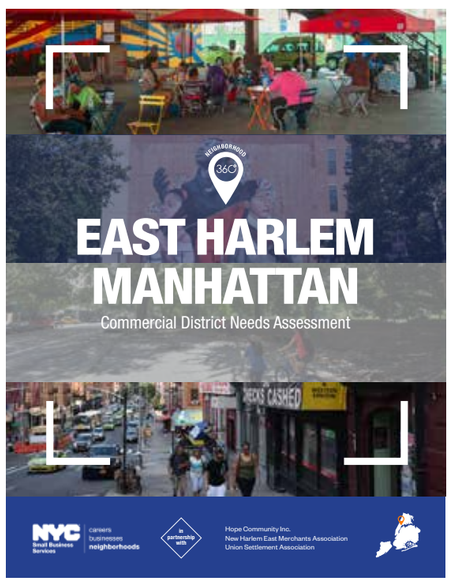
1. **Addressing immediate, pragmatic needs**—improving facilities, optimizing spaces, and enhancing accessibility to ensure each institution thrives

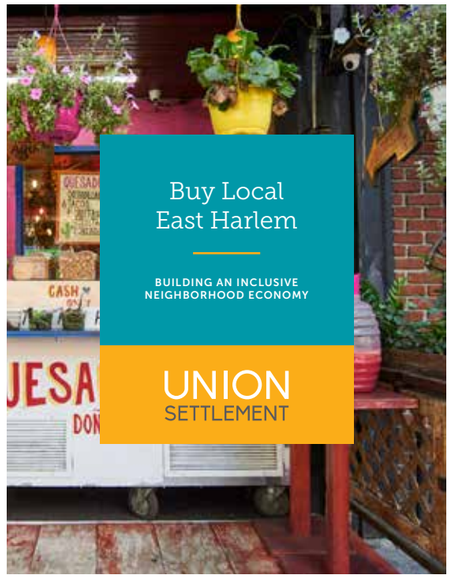
2. **Exploring ambitious, performative strategies**—proposing larger creative connections that **envision a theater and cultural district not just as a collection of venues, but as an interconnected corridor** that strengthens community ties and expands artistic opportunities

This study does not just respond to current conditions; it **imagines the future**. It examines how **strategic, small-scale interventions**—"acupunctural" design—can **create a ripple effect,** driving urban improvements that **enhance public spaces, expand economic opportunities, and reinforce East Harlem's cultural identity on a citywide scale**.









This Feasibility Study was initiated in the context of over two decades of community-led urban planning and cultural development in East Harlem, amid persistent gentrification and uneven economic developments that have increasingly marginalized local artists and residents while threatening the community's cultural legacy. Over the years, a series of initiatives have sought to address these challenges and shape the neighborhood's future. Significantly, the East Harlem Neighborhood Plan (2017), led by then-NYC Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito, Manhattan Community Board 11, Community Voices Heard, and then-Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer, was a comprehensive, community-driven effort focusing on affordable housing, economic development, and cultural preservation, with a strong emphasis on sustaining the arts and cultural resources that define East Harlem's identity.

That same year, the East Harlem Rezoning Plan, developed by the NYC Department of City Planning, aimed to promote mixed-use development and affordable housing while ensuring that cultural institutions were preserved amidst new growth. Alongside these efforts, the East 125th Street Community Visioning Action Plan, spearheaded by WE ACT for Environmental Justice, emphasized the centrality of arts and culture to equitable development, charting a course for the revitalization of the East 125th Street corridor.

Currently, the National Black Theatre Redevelopment is transforming the historic theater's space within a new facility that includes performance venues and residential units, reflecting ongoing efforts to integrate cultural programming into broader urban renewal projects. In addition, facility upgrades for the Afro Latin Jazz Alliance / Belongó, work underway at the Julia de Burgos Latino Cultural Center, and planned campus enhancements at Taino Towers further underscore the commitment to upgrading local cultural spaces.

Complementing these projects, the East Harlem Commercial District Needs Assessment—conducted by NYC SBS in partnership with local organizations—explored strategies to support small businesses while integrating cultural programming, and the East Harlem Downtown Revitalization Initiative Strategic Plan, developed by the New York State Department of State, focused on revitalizing the economic and cultural core of the neighborhood. The Manhattan Community District 11 Profile, published by the NYC Department of City Planning, offers valuable demographic and economic data to inform these efforts, while the Buy Local East Harlem initiative led by the East Harlem Alliance and Union Settlement, seeks to strengthen the local economy by supporting small, culturally significant businesses.

This report aims to build on these past efforts by outlining a path forward that will encourage a thriving arts and cultural scene, even as such a future remains uncertain amid the challenges posed by gentrification and economic disparity.



Courtesy of Union Settlement

What's Next?

The East Harlem Theater and Cultural District Feasibility Study lays the groundwork for transformation, and the journey is ongoing. As we move forward, we must continue to push for:

- **ACCESSIBILITY – Ensuring that all cultural spaces are welcoming and inclusive**
- **VISIBILITY – Amplifying East Harlem's cultural presence within the broader arts ecosystem**
- **CONNECTIONS – Strengthening ties between institutions, artists, and local businesses**
- **SUSTAINABILITY – Designing with resiliency, efficiency, and circularity in mind**
- **ECONOMIC VIABILITY – Fostering opportunities for both cultural participants and small businesses to thrive**

This is a pivotal moment for East Harlem. **The vision of a thriving Theater and Cultural District is within reach**—but it requires continued commitment, investment, and collaboration. The next step is to build on this momentum, taking cues from the starter steps envisioned, and transforming the findings of this effort into real, lasting change.



Courtesy of Union Settlement

From the beginning of this study, we saw this as an opportunity to create space for East Harlem to pose itself questions about its future, questions that in time the people of East Harlem would contemplate and give answers to.



Why This, Why Here, Why Now?

PURPOSE
Under the leadership of Union Settlement, this study represents an introductory inventory and assessment of underutilized theaters and cultural institutions in East Harlem and an evaluation of their physical condition, potential for renovation, and ideas for robust programming and revenue generation.

Its objectives are four-fold:

1

What are the benefits a theater and cultural district would have on both the local community and the broader arts and culture scene in New York?

2

How might a collective vision be articulated through engagement with community members and stakeholders in partnerships within the theater and cultural community?

- How should it serve communities and facility needs?
- How should the district look and feel?
- How might a district be governed and managed?
- For whom is the district? Who does it serve?

3

What are the efforts, advocacy, and costs involved in revitalizing underutilized theaters and cultural institutions in East Harlem and for establishing an Arts and Cultural District?

4

How might a strategic plan for the process of transforming these underutilized theaters and other arts centers into thriving cultural institutions drive the creation of economic opportunities for the East Harlem Community? What are the unique architectural opportunities for key anchor institutions / theaters and for the district as a whole?

Throughout a strategic engagement process in 2024-25, a core set of imperatives emerged which highlight the necessity of this process as demonstrated by its participants, leadership, and broader context of the neighborhood, including:

PRESERVE CULTURAL IDENTITY
Many businesses are dependent on arts and culture and vice versa. There is an opportunity to maintain the cultural identity of the neighborhood as a marketable identity.

MITIGATE THE RISK OF AN AGING POPULATION
Elders are key to the stories and culture of East Harlem. They are an aging generation of leaders in the arts and cultural space which could leave a vacuum of leadership if this is not addressed. Meanwhile, younger generations need support to build the ability to carry the torch.

WEALTH BUILDING POSSIBILITIES
The realities and stresses of real estate, local business, resident, and artist displacement make it hard to stay in the neighborhood. There is a need to use arts and culture not only as a driver for economic development but also as a tool for wealth creation for current and future generations.

POLICY AND ADVOCACY LANDSCAPE
Shifts in the legislative and policy landscapes, including New York State legislation that has designated East Harlem as an Arts and Cultural District and proposed legislation that would identify the eligibility criteria for NYSCA funding for arts districts.

The 2017 East Harlem Rezoning created a vision for the future development of the neighborhood, including making possible the creation and preservation of thousands of dwelling units, over 400,000 square feet of commercial space, as well as infrastructure improvements still under way. This all represents a great opportunity for alignment to strengthen the neighborhood's identity as an arts and culture destination.

CATALYZE A COALITION
This represents an opportunity to harness past efforts into a new beginning which formalizes the need and intentions of the community through seed funding.

CONCRETE POTENTIAL
We propose action through both pragmatic and aspirational steps forward. Revealing this concrete potential aims to spark interest, attract participants and contributors, and help secure funding.

BUILD ON EXISTING PLANS AND EFFORTS
Existing plans and studies, including a Downtown Revitalization Initiative Strategy Investments Plan, among others, offer an opportunity to build upon with complementary action.

IMPROVE STREET SPACES TO LIFT EVERYONE UP
Improvements to streets and public spaces can help drive commercial district and economic development activities with greater impact.

REVENUE RETENTION
Adjacent neighborhood residents can be as patrons to avoid displacement and capture leakage of revenues in the neighborhood.



Neighborhood Context: Assessing and Building on Existing Plans

BUILDING ON PREVIOUS AND EXISTING EFFORTS

Through review of existing plans, studies, policies, and data related to East Harlem, a number of key contextual documents underpin this process including:

- East Harlem Commercial District Needs Assessment
  Sponsored by: NYC SBS in partnership with Hope Community Inc., New Harlem East Merchants Association, and Union Settlement Association
- East Harlem Neighborhood Plan, 2017
  Sponsored by: NYC Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viveritoy, Community Board 11, Community Voices Heard, and Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer
- East Harlem Downtown Revitalization Initiative Strategic Plan
  Sponsored by: New York State Department of State
- Manhattan Community District 11 Community District Profile
  NYC Department of City Planning
- Buy Local East Harlem
  Sponsored by: Citi Community Development, NYC SBS, East Harlem Community Alliance & Union Settlement

A Strong Ecosystem of Economic Development Actors & Merchants Groups:

Hope Community Inc.
Uptown Grand Central (formerly New Harlem East Merchants Associate)
Union Settlement Associate
East Harlem Business Alliance
Greater Harlem Chamber of Commerce
Hispanic Chamber of Commerce



FUTURE GROWTH

"East Harlem's growth as a neighborhood is unmistakably tied to a unique set of characteristics that have been cultivated over time: a cosmopolitan history, transit connectivity, cultural and educational assets, and affordability. In recent years, residential and commercial development has brought new economic activity to the neighborhood, with more developments, such as NYCEDC's East 125th Street Development, coming online in the next several years. Meanwhile, the Second Avenue Subway promises to increase access to the eastern side of the neighborhood for workers, residents, and tourists. Through initiatives like the East Harlem Neighborhood Plan and the East Harlem Community Alliance, the community's many social service and grassroots organizations continue to collaborate with public and private partners to ensure these new investments translate into economic opportunity for all East Harlem residents and entrepreneurs."

East Harlem Manhattan Commercial Needs Assessment, NYC SBS





A Destination Already Rich in Arts & Cultural Institutions & Events

Union Settlement Annual Ethnic Festival
116th Street Festival
Dance of the Giglio Festival
Three Kings Day Parade
Mexican Independence Festival
Uptown Restaurant Week
Hope Fall Fest
Cinco de Mayo Fiesta Block Part
East Harlem for the Holidays
Experience East Harlem Spring Series
Salsa Nights at Amor Cubano
Salsa Socials at El Barrio's Artspace
Salsa Events at Lorenz Dance Studio
Zafire Dance Company Events
East Harlem Nights

and more...

East Harlem Community Alliance, 2025

A number of strengths and challenges were identified in the East Harlem Commercial Districts Needs Assessment (2017). To build on this work, and to overlay the intersections of economic development and the arts in East Harlem, a number of key considerations are addressed in this study. **Those priorities that are captured in the Commercial Needs Assessment and directly addressed by this feasibility study are marked in bold.**

OVERLAY ANALYSIS: STRENGTHS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

STRENGTHS

- Many longstanding small businesses in relatively affordable commercial spaces
- Affordable retail and dining options that represent East Harlem's rich ethnic, cultural, and culinary diversity
- **Popular cultural anchors – including museums, galleries, theaters, and public spaces – that bring residents, visitors, and workers to the neighborhood's commercial corridors**
- Excellent transportation accessibility via subway, bus, car, and commuter rail, with Phase 2 of the Second Avenue Subway set to bring additional transit options
- Large medical and educational institutions that employ local residents and bring thousands of commuters to the neighborhood
- New residential development bringing new potential customers to local businesses

CHALLENGES

- High number of vacant storefronts (14%) and properties reduce activity and lighting on commercial corridors, contributing to safety concerns
- Rapidly increasing commercial rents apply pressure to local businesses and their ability to offer affordable goods and services
- Real and perceived safety concerns on commercial corridors, especially at night
- **Changing demographics and tastes require long standing businesses to adapt in order to grow and better serve a diverse clientele**
- Lack of healthy food, sit-down restaurants, clothing options, supermarkets, and anchor retail on certain corridors, leading many residents to shop outside the neighborhood
- **Inconsistent coordination and communication between City government and multiple community organizations that serve varying stakeholder groups**
- **Large concentration of social services in and around the neighborhood contributes to the strain on public realm maintenance**

East Harlem Manhattan Commercial Needs Assessment, NYC SBS

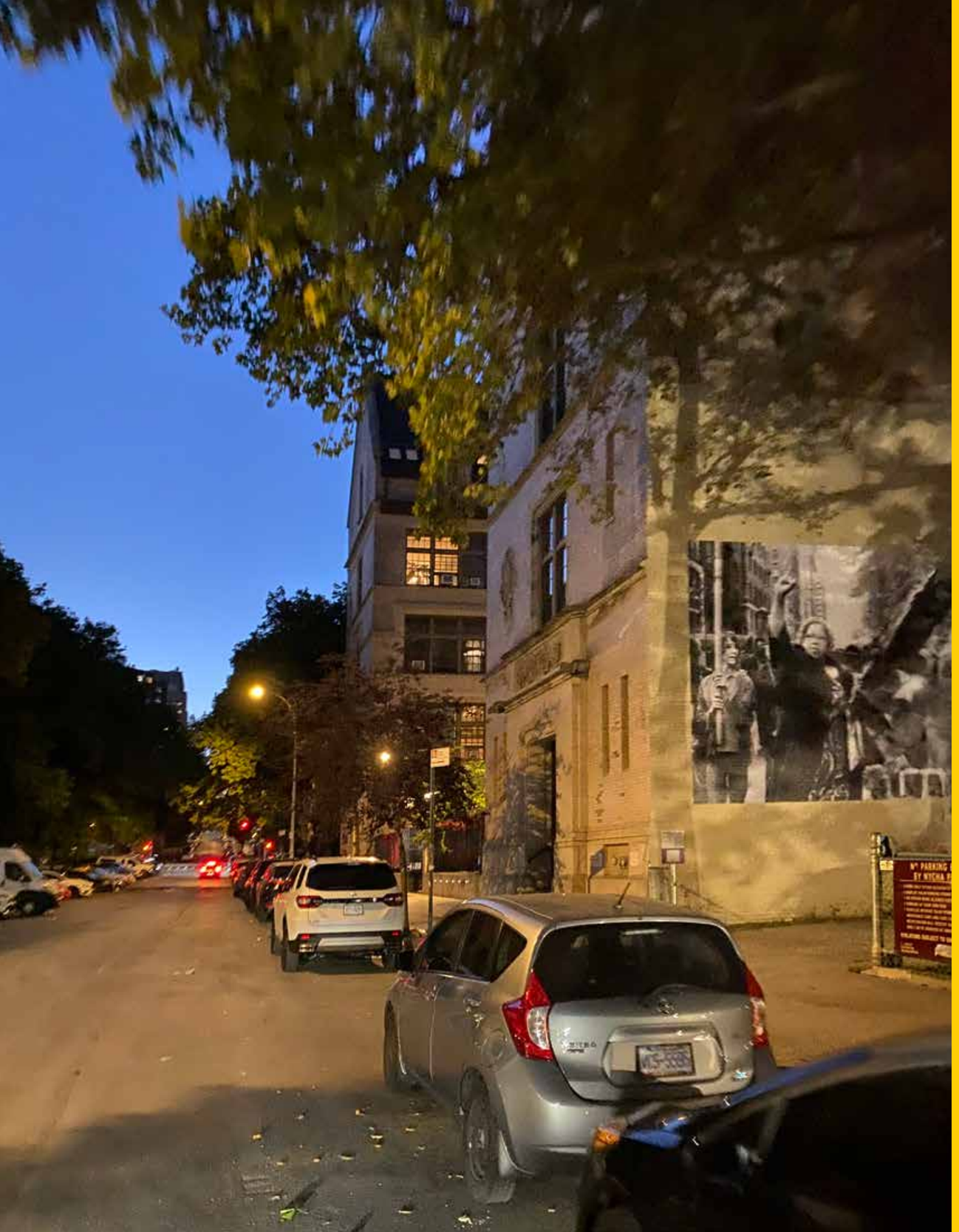


Courtesy of Union Settlement

OPPORTUNITIES

- Attract new businesses to vacant storefronts that meet the neighborhood's demand for healthy food, groceries, restaurant and clothing
- **Create and market a unified district identity for the East Harlem neighborhood, including neighborhood-wide events**
- **Develop wayfinding materials and guides to direct more workers, residents, and visitors to the full array of local retail and restaurant options and cultural events**
- Expand support services for business owners that plan on growing in place
- **Support existing coalitions and community groups to actively organize merchants, property owners, and other stakeholders around small business and streetscape needs**
- **Clean, beautify, and maintain streets and sidewalks across East Harlem's various commercial corridors**
- **Enhance lighting on key commercial streets to address safety concerns and encourage increased foot traffic**
- **Program existing open spaces and add new streetscape amenities and beautification elements**

East Harlem Manhattan Commercial Needs Assessment, NYC SBS



ARTS & CULTURAL DISTRICTS: A MODEL FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN EAST HARLEM

What is an Arts & Cultural District?

Arts and cultural districts can take a variety of shapes and forms, can range in the objectives and offerings, and exist within varied demographic, economic, and policy contexts. Typically they share a few key characteristics in that they are:

- Spatially bound
- Often, but not always, designated by legislation
- Usually benefitting from a set of policy / incentives
- Typically managed by a board
- Sustainably funded, even though the models may vary - from membership / subscription, developer-led, and ticketing based, to real estate, to BID-style

And while all arts and cultural districts necessarily define success differently and in relation to their unique context, they also tend to share a number of key features of "success," including:

- A unique and authentic identity
- Strategic partnerships
- Artist live/work spaces
- Anchor institutions
- Events
- Clear signage
- Marketing and promotion
- Strong amenities

A DISTRICT-WIDE APPROACH CAN:

- IMPROVE PUBLIC REALM: Enhanced cultural offerings will foster public engagement, improve quality of life, and revitalize streets and public spaces
- DEVELOP AND RETAIN ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY: A thriving cultural scene will attract both residents and visitors, boosting local businesses, creating jobs, and driving new development
- PRESERVE CULTURAL LEGACY AND IDENTITY: Supporting artists and institutions ensures East Harlem's artistic and architectural heritage remains a foundation for future creativity
- COUNTER DISPLACEMENT: The project seeks to enhance community life without fueling gentrification that could displace the very people central to its cultural revival
- BENEFIT FROM SYNERGIES AND EQUITABLE ACCESS: Collaboration among institutions and artists will strengthen cultural preservation, expand access to the arts, and ensure a vibrant, inclusive creative community

Source: Cultural Districs: The Arts As a Strategy for Revitalizing Our Cities

SNAPSHOT OF THE NYC CREATIVE COMMUNITY

- City's creative economy generates **$110B** in economic activity
- Employs **300,000** people and **$30B** in wages = pipeline of NY jobs
- **13%** of the city total economic output, number 1 driver of tourism in NYC
- Cultural organizations host **307M** attendees a year, **72%** of programming is free
- Culture improves mental health and safe neighborhoods
- **"A UNIFIER during difficult times"**
- **"An EQUALIZER in an often inequitable world"**

New Yorkers for Culture & Arts

How Might a Theater and Cultural District Benefit East Harlem?

An essential element in this process was identifying and defining the benefits of an arts and cultural district broadly, and in the specific context of East Harlem. This was done through research, case studies, and discussion.

GENERAL BENEFITS

- Create jobs: artists, performers, technicians, administrators, related professionals and adjacent businesses (caterers, photographers)
- Boost Tourism: Create demand for lodging, food, and services
- Increase Local spending: Arts and events encourage spending money on tickets, merchandise, and dining,
- Revitalize Community: Provide an attractive image and identity for businesses
- Innovation and creativity
- Talent development and retention
- Economic diversification - not relying on a single industry

EAST HARLEM-SPECIFIC

- Preservation of history and legacy
- Potential for intergenerational and elder inclusive models to create belonging
- Artist inclusivity as a means of fighting displacement
- Opportunity for creative businesses and efforts that are accessible to different body abilities and mobilities

Courtesy of Union Settlement

Timeline

SEPT

4 CCCADI INTRO
9 EL MUSEO DEL BARRIO INTRO
12 ARTSPACE INTRO
17 CCCADI SITE VISIT
18 ARTSPACE SITE VISIT
26 TAINO TOWERS INTRO

OCT

1 TAINO TOWERS SITE VISIT
1 NBT INTRO
22 COMMUNITY VISION SESSION

NOV

15 ARTSPACE CHECK-IN
22 CCCADI CHECK-IN

DEC

3 EL MUSEO DEL BARRIO SITE VISIT
17 COMMUNITY PRESENTATION 1
19 JULIA DE BURGOS INTRO

JAN

6 JULIA DE BURGOS SITE VISIT
8 COMMUNITY PRESENTATION 2

FEB

3 EL MUSEO DEL BARRIO CHECK-IN
7 TAINO TOWERS CHECK-IN
7 JULIA DE BURGOS CHECK-IN
28 FINAL REPORT DUE

2024

2025

INTERVIEWS

1 The interview with the Caribbean Cultural Center, African Diaspora Institute (CCCADI) focused on the challenges the organization faces in East Harlem.

- CCCADI highlighted the impact of Yorkville's expansion, affordable housing concerns, and its commitment to preserving cultural integrity while advocating for racial and social justice.
- Plans for a new 5,000-square-foot space were shared, designed to support artists of color and further cultural initiatives.
- The importance of integrating arts and culture into economic development was emphasized, with a goal to create a theater and cultural district.
- Concerns were raised about the motivations behind certain real estate projects and the trust in such initiatives, particularly in relation to CCCADI's mission.

2 The meeting with Taino Towers focused on the feasibility of creating an East Harlem Theater and Cultural District.

- The meeting with Taino Towers focused on the feasibility of creating an East Harlem Theater and Cultural District.
- Taino Towers, as a key participant in the community, discussed its role as a cultural and community hub, housing two important theaters serving local arts organizations, schools, and community events.
- The ongoing $170 million revitalization project was highlighted, which aims to improve residential and commercial spaces, benefiting local businesses and cultural activities.
- A state-funded feasibility study was introduced, which will assess the market demand, financial feasibility, and architectural needs for the proposed theater and cultural district.
- Taino Towers' involvement in the revitalization project and its connection to the larger cultural district development was central to the discussion.
- Challenges regarding funding, construction logistics, displacement concerns, and ensuring accessibility were addressed.

3 The meeting with El Museo del Barrio explored strengthening collaboration between cultural institutions in East Harlem.

- El Museo's role in fostering a cohesive cultural framework within the community was emphasized, particularly in relation to utilizing public spaces and experimental art venues, such as local schools, for future projects.
- The discussion underscored the importance of connecting institutions through urban design and public space improvements.
- The flexibility to address each institution's unique needs, including those of El Museo, was a central theme.
- Challenges such as resource limitations and time constraints were discussed, and adjustments were made to the project timeline to ensure meaningful participation from all involved.

4 The interview with Artspace focused on its role in the proposed East Harlem Theater and Cultural District and the challenges it faces in utilizing its space effectively.

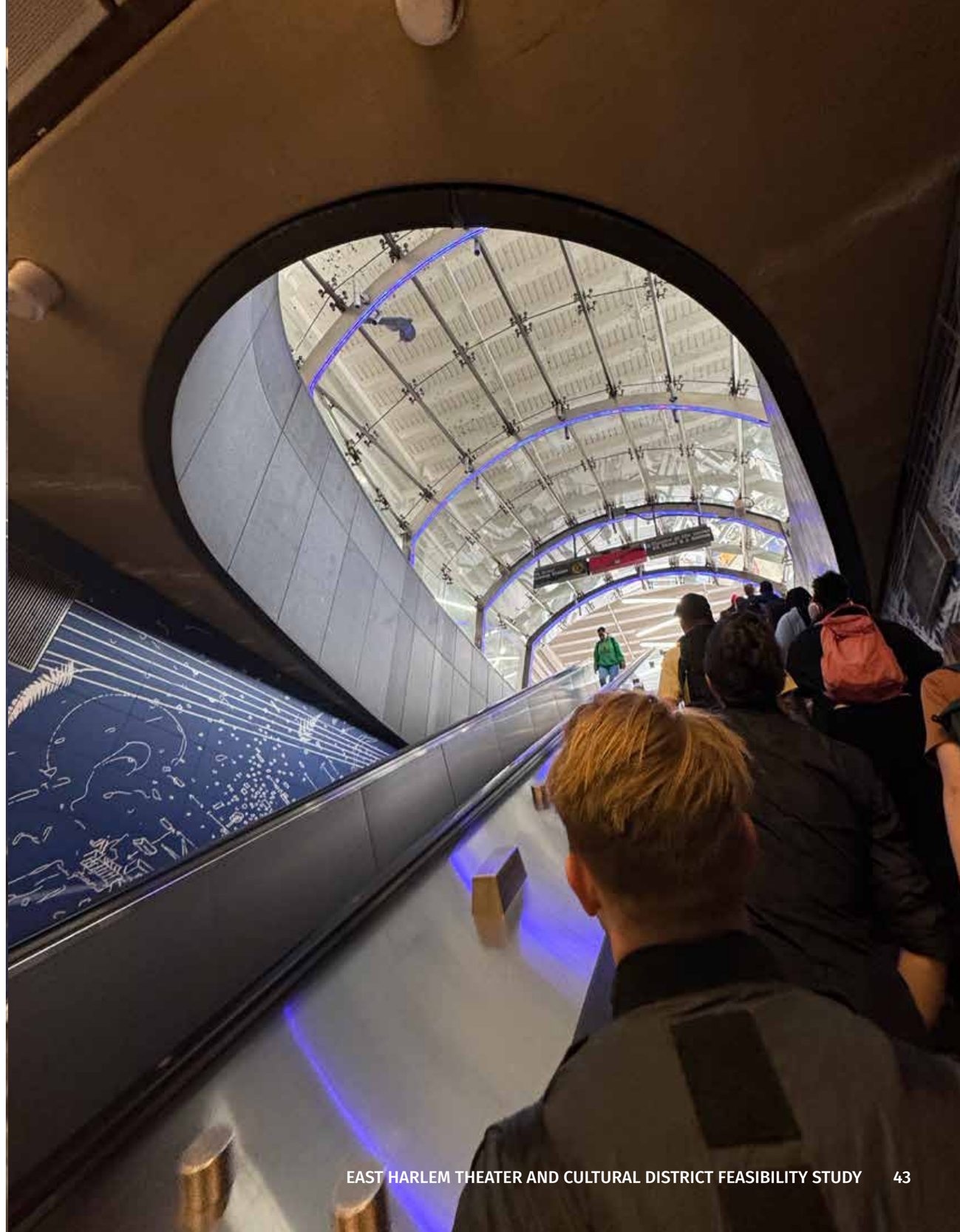
- Artspace has been a significant institution in East Harlem for the past 10 years, providing affordable housing for artists and hosting cultural partners.
- Despite its success, Artspace is struggling with funding issues, as it is not a 501(c)(3) organization and thus ineligible for certain grants.
- The organization faces overutilization of its spaces, lack of programming support, and limited resources.
- The feasibility study aims to assess the needs of local cultural institutions and offer recommendations for future upgrades.
- Artspace expressed a willingness to collaborate with other institutions to strengthen the arts network and address sustainability challenges.

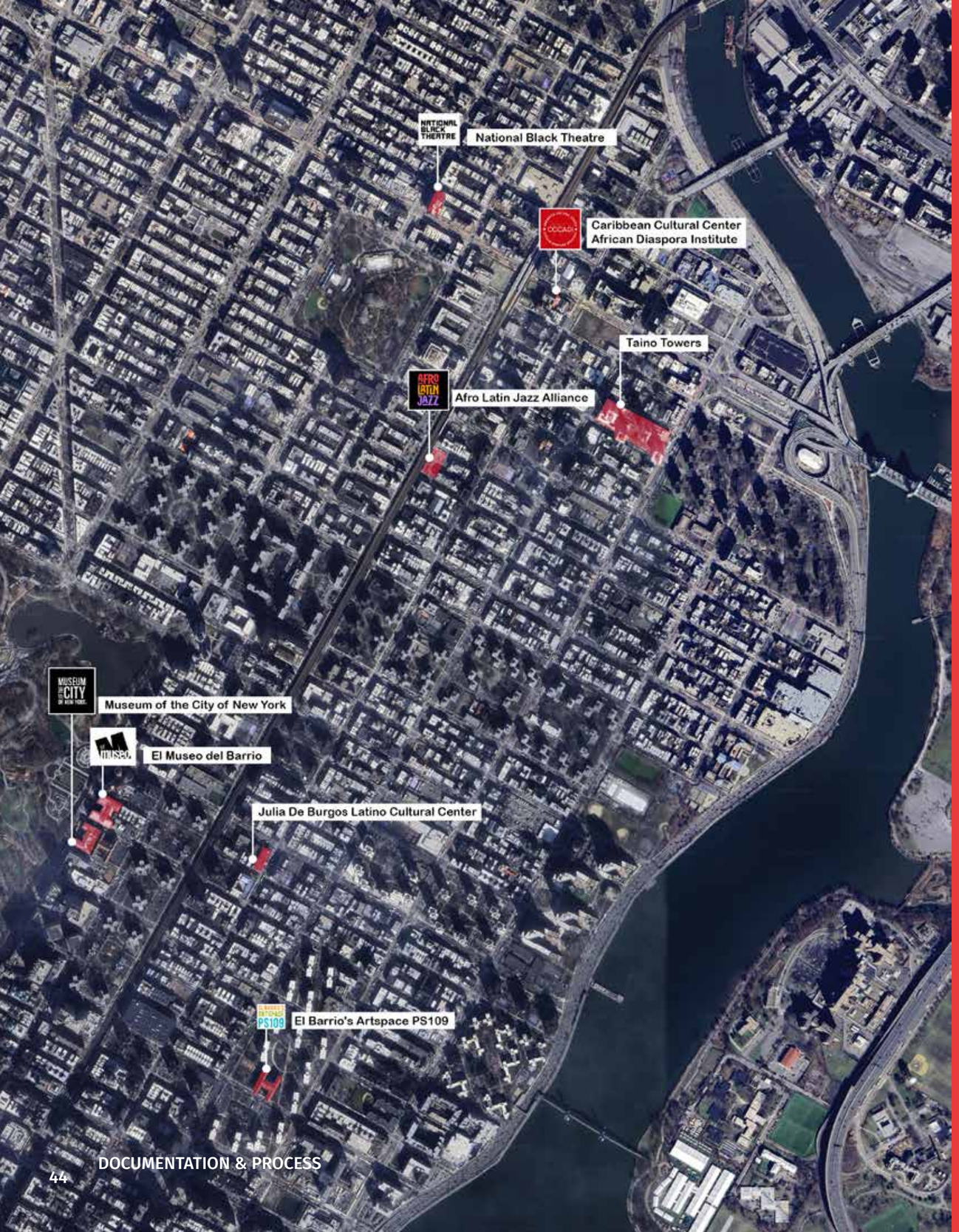
5 The interview with National Black Theater (NBT) focused on the organization's new development project and its impact on Harlem's cultural landscape.

- Founded by Dr. Barbara Ann Teer, NBT has been central to Harlem's community development.
- A key milestone for NBT was its purchase of a city block on 5th Ave, transitioning from renting to owning property.
- The organization is now leading a project for a 22-story mixed-use complex that will include nearly 30,000 square feet dedicated to performance spaces, rehearsal rooms, and offices.
- NBT aims to expand Harlem's theater district, increase foot traffic, and promote economic development while honoring the community's cultural heritage.
- The development also includes affordable housing initiatives for artists and subsidized spaces to prevent displacement.
- NBT is focused on ensuring the new space remains accessible and affordable. The organization emphasized the importance of public-private partnerships, especially with institutions like the Public Theater. Moving forward, NBT plans to host a stakeholder engagement session in October and continue working on a feasibility study to ensure the development meets community needs.

6 The interview with the Julia de Burgos Latino Cultural Center in East Harlem focused on a feasibility study for improving the center's space and its impact on the community.

- The discussion revolved around revitalizing East Harlem's cultural landscape, addressing the underutilized theater space, and exploring potential partnerships with local arts institutions.
- Key topics included streamlining access, enhancing marketing, and identifying potential operators or tenants for the center's vacant spaces.
- The aim is to create a more interconnected cultural environment that will benefit local businesses, artists, and the surrounding community.artists, and the surrounding community.





Site Visits & Initial Analysis



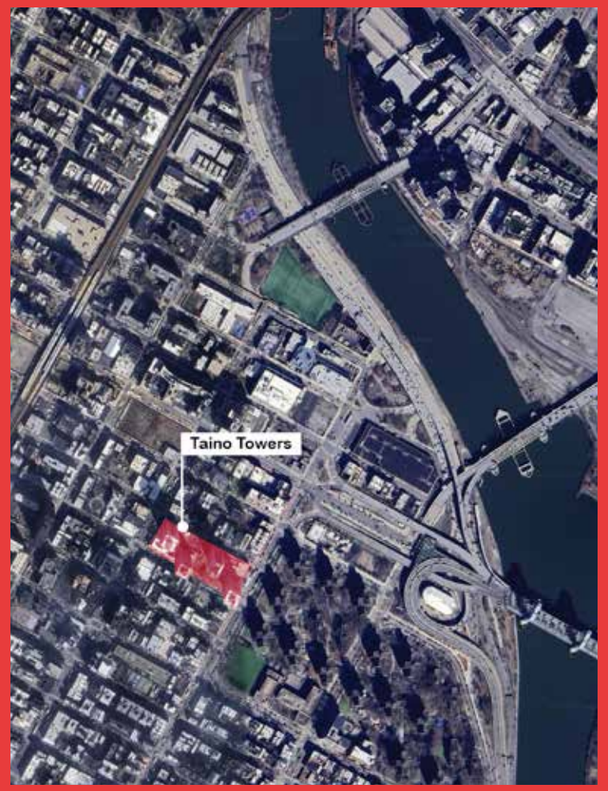

Caribbean Cultural Center
African Diaspora Institute




EXIT






Taino Towers



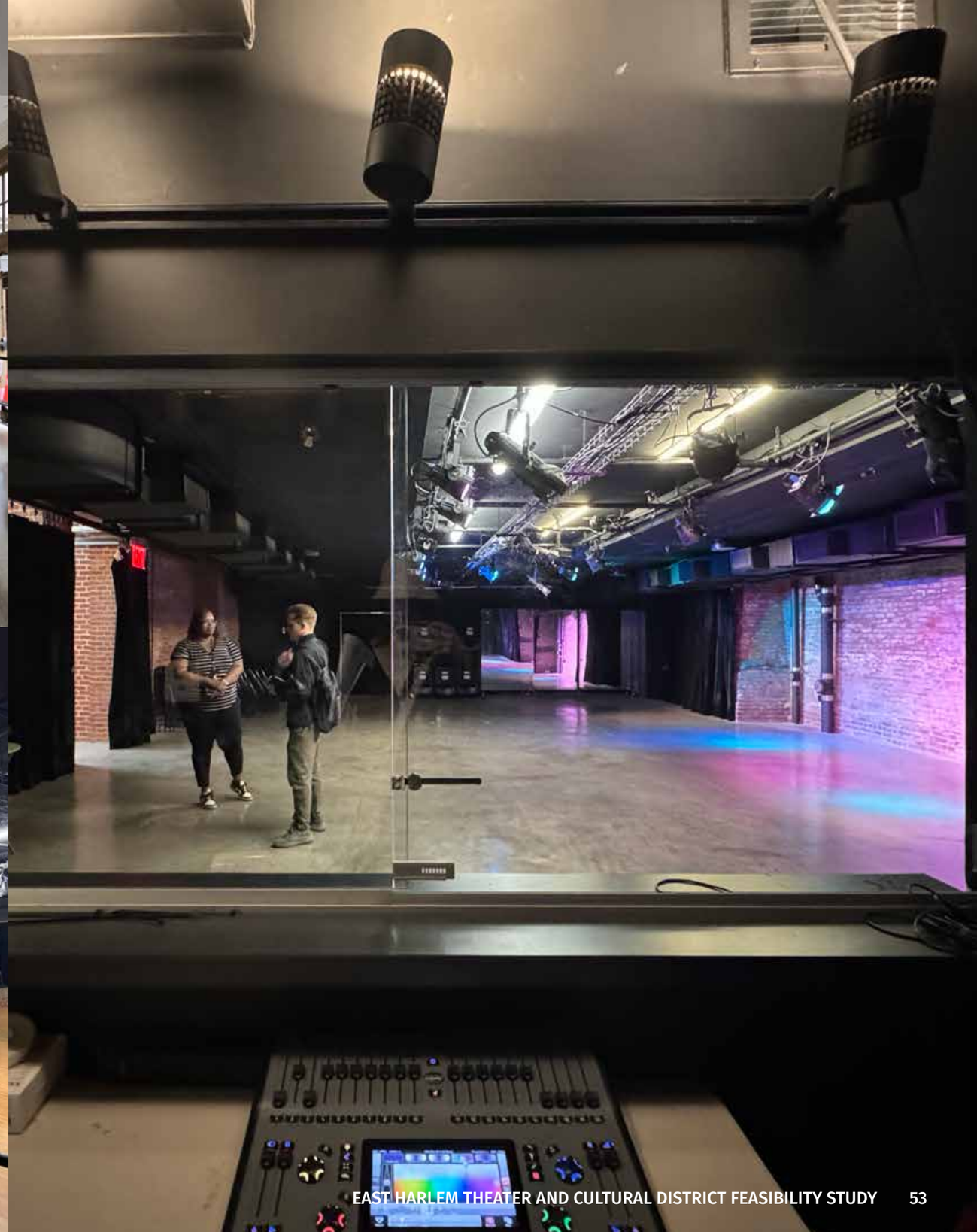


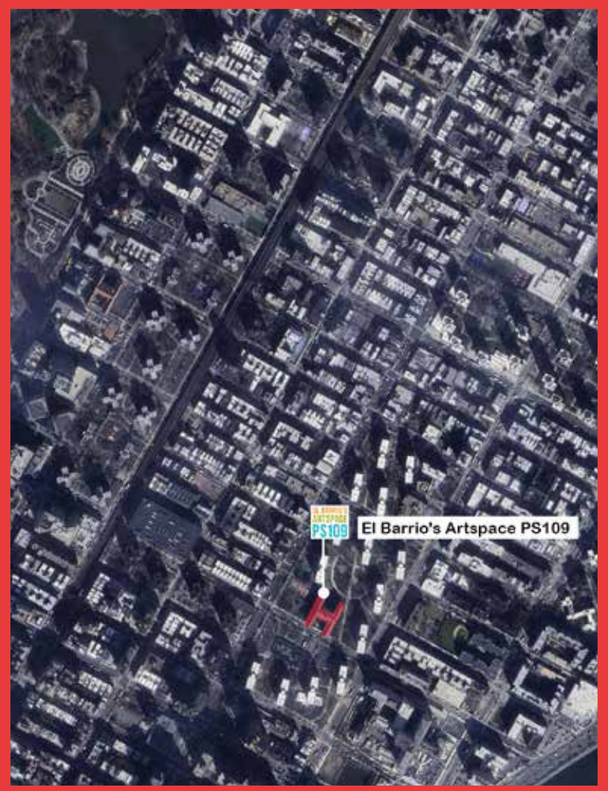



GUARIONEX
GUAMINA


EXIT





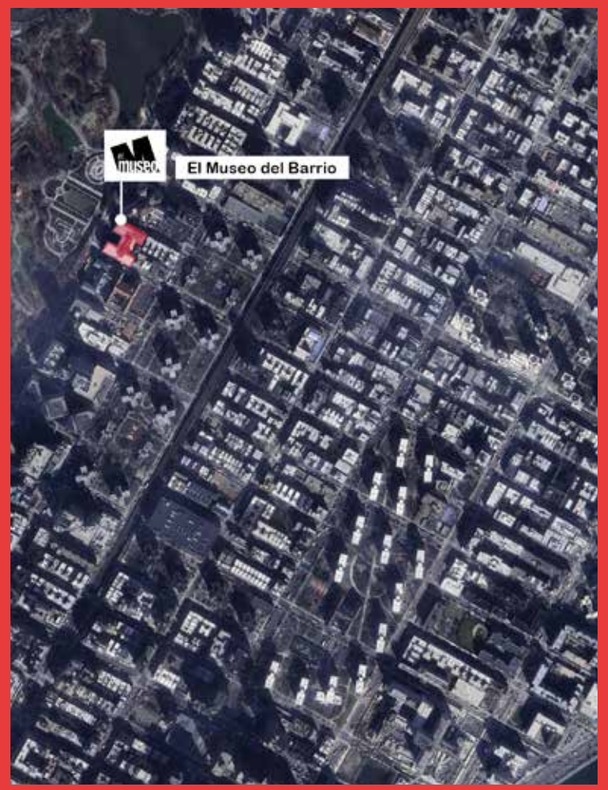

El Barrio's Artspace PS109






EL MUSEO DEL BARRIO




El Museo del Barrio




A MUSEUM IS A SCHOOL: THE ARTIST LEARNS TO COMMUNICATE.THE PUBLIC LEARNS TO MAKE CONNECTIONS.


EXIT






Julia De Burgos Latino Cultural Center





Courtesy of Union Settlement

Community Engagement

The process included (3) three meetings with a selected number of stakeholders to conduct focus group discussions. The invited stakeholders were representatives of the anchor institutions and artists they collaborate with along with elected officials.

MEETING 1 OCTOBER 2024

Meeting to present the initiative and project team to stakeholders, reflect on what we had heard from individual interviews and expand the common understanding of community assets, challenges and opportunities at multiple scales. Relevant case studies of similar initiatives were socialized, and served as a starting point for table discussions around a framework for a cultural district in East Harlem.





MEETING 1 OCTOBER 2024







MEETING 2 DECEMBER 2024







MEETING 2 DECEMBER 2024

Meeting to present the emerging vision for the theater and cultural district based on the October engagement and to generate a roadmap and timeline for the implementation of this feasibility study. This meeting included preliminary review of general urban strategies, design ideas, and virtual development strategies shared with the community participants.

MEETING 3 JANUARY 2025

Meeting to present the emerging vision for the theater and cultural district based on the October engagement; implications and updates on NY-SB 253 by Serrano's office; group discussion about essential decisions, considerations to move forward. This meeting also included an overview of general urban strategies, design ideas, and virtual development strategies.

Synthesis & Outcomes

Here's what we learned from the artists and arts institutions who participated in the stakeholder visioning sessions.

Facilities

STRENGTHS

ASSET OWNERSHIP:
- Some institutions own their buildings

ACCESSIBILITY:
- East Harlem is a very accessible location, and all institutions are well served by transit

RANGE AND DIVERSITY:
- Range of space types that include exhibitions, gathering, performance and multi-purpose spaces
- Some facilities include housing, including affordable units and housing for artists
- Some facilities have workforce development space
- Some facilities have successfully applied and received DRI funds to improve adjacent sidewalk(s) and storefront

STREET PRESENCE:
- Some facilities have strong street-side presence which helps with foot traffic and exposure

CHALLENGES

REGULATION:
- Landmark status of some buildings limit their capacity for expansion

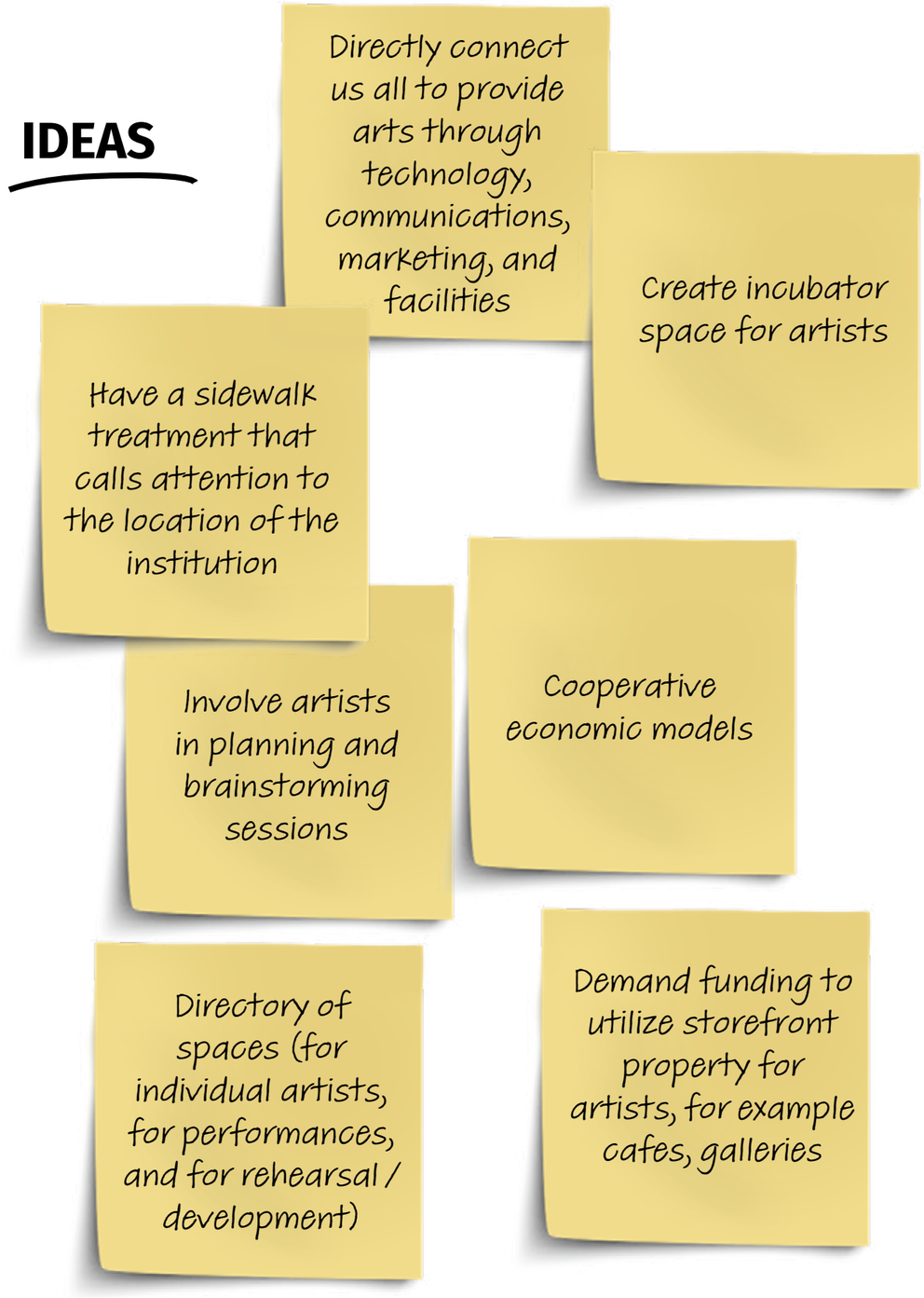
CAPACITY:
- Need for more facility space to keep up with demand of local artists and residents as well as human capacity for operations and programming

ACCESS TO CAPITAL:
- Access to funding for renovation /upkeep is limited and some institutions are not registered 501(c)(3), which limits funding opportunities

ACCESS TO FACILITIES:
- Significant elderly population with special needs, some facilities need renovations to facilitate access. It can be difficult to access East Harlem from the West Side, Queens, and Brooklyn

NEIGHBORHOOD:
- Crime, maintenance, debris removal, and lighting in entrances, exits and other public spaces are common issues

IDEAS



Programs

STRENGTHS

VARIETY:
- **Affordable incubators for artists of color (although not enough). Variety of cultural programs, including scholarly presentations, conference, concerts, theater, town hall meetings, high school children's programs, etc**

ACCESSIBILITY:
- **Access to research institutions, such as the Schomburg Center for Black Culture**

MESSAGE:
- **Art as a tool to have conversations about and celebrate Black and Brown culture**

SENSE OF COMMUNITY:
- **Institutions serve as a hub to the community. Institutions deeply rooted in serving the local community and unique identity of East Harlem**

PRESENCE:
- **Many cultural activities extend beyond physical buildings into public spaces, making streets a vital part of the community's cultural expression**

ECONOMIC DRIVER:
- **Local economic driver from local caterers, bakeries, and photographers is strong and can be stronger**

ADVOCACY MUSCLES:
- **Strong policy and advocacy muscles**

CHALLENGES

AFFORDABILITY:
- **Access to and equity of funding for programming. Less accessibility (post-covid) to diverse spaces/ institutions for people to pitch ideas or collaboration. Balancing affordable and inclusive access to art space while maintaining economic sustainability. Lack of affordable rehearsal space. Lack of programmatic funding - makes audience building difficult**

BANDWIDTH:
- **Capacities can be stretched thin for forward-thinking programming and sometimes pivot to immediate service offerings (e.g. food service)**

Emphasis on the importance of considering experimental art spaces and small theaters, such as local public schools and other community spaces, for future projects and collaborations

IDEAS

Blur the line between the institutions and public space with a program that spills out into the sidewalk

Imagine East Harlem as the Broadway of uptown

Integrate arts program with in-house or nearby public schools

Solve for over / under saturation (peak power plant)

Partnerships with downtown groups/ institutions to create mutual benefits

Highlight East Harlem in 36 hours places to visit - explore, stay, eat at

More Latino/a/x representation in Arts/ Theater for the youth

Include artists in all steps of the process

Offer cross-institution membership

Festivals for events that are open and invite community in!

More affordable incubator spaces for visual artists, such as residency programs and studio spaces

Explore a pooled fund for large-scale and well-resourced institutions to mutually support smaller cultural

District & Neighborhood

STRENGTHS

SENSE OF OWNERSHIP:
- Strong community activism

PLACE-BASED IMPROVEMENTS:
- African Burial Ground is underway, 125th Street BID

REGULATION:
- Cultural District designation by State Law

LEGACY AND IDENTITY:
- Long-standing institutions, Grand Central; Popular cultural anchors – including museums, galleries, theaters, and public spaces bring residents, visitors, and workers to the neighborhood's commercial corridors

ACCESSIBILITY AND ANCHORS:
- Excellent transportation, large medical and educational institutions

Create a "Hall of Fame" to honor those who contribute to the evolution of El Barrio for the future generations elicit enlightenment

CHALLENGES

TRUST AND COORDINATION:
- Institutions lack resources and time to be a part of this process. Inconsistent coordination and relationship with the City government

UNDERMINING FORCES:
- Gentrification pressure with new developments/neighborhood overwhelmed with social issues
- Methadone clinics
- Homelessness, drop-off area from Wards Island
- Drop-off area of formerly incarcerated people (Rikers)
- Institutional efforts are heavily undermined by the amount of social issues not addressed/ dropped in the neighborhood

TASTE CHANGES:
- Changing demographics and tastes and clientele

NEIGHBORHOOD FEEL:
- Safety concerns, high vacancy of storefronts, strained public realm maintenance - large concentration of social services

LEADERSHIP AND TRUST:
- Building trust across institutions and communities. Inadequate focus on, or support for, coalition building among East Harlem's racial and ethnic constituencies and leadership. Coalition of Latino and Afro-American Leadership is lacking support

IDEAS

Create a Theater and Cultural District focused on the arts

Restore murals and street art across the neighborhood and uplift as a destination through tours, walking, and programming

Ability to form a coalition is critical to create change at a neighborhood level

Potential to create a more unified cultural and social framework for the neighborhood (urban design)

Be a destination for people from all over the world

Tax increment on new development →fund for cultural district (including non 501(c)3 institutions)

Need of a program management role for an ongoing institutional network: network building, learning sharing, leadership

Potential to capture the revenues and sharing of economic development opportunities across food and beverage establishments

Build Tito Puente Statue to honor one of our greats

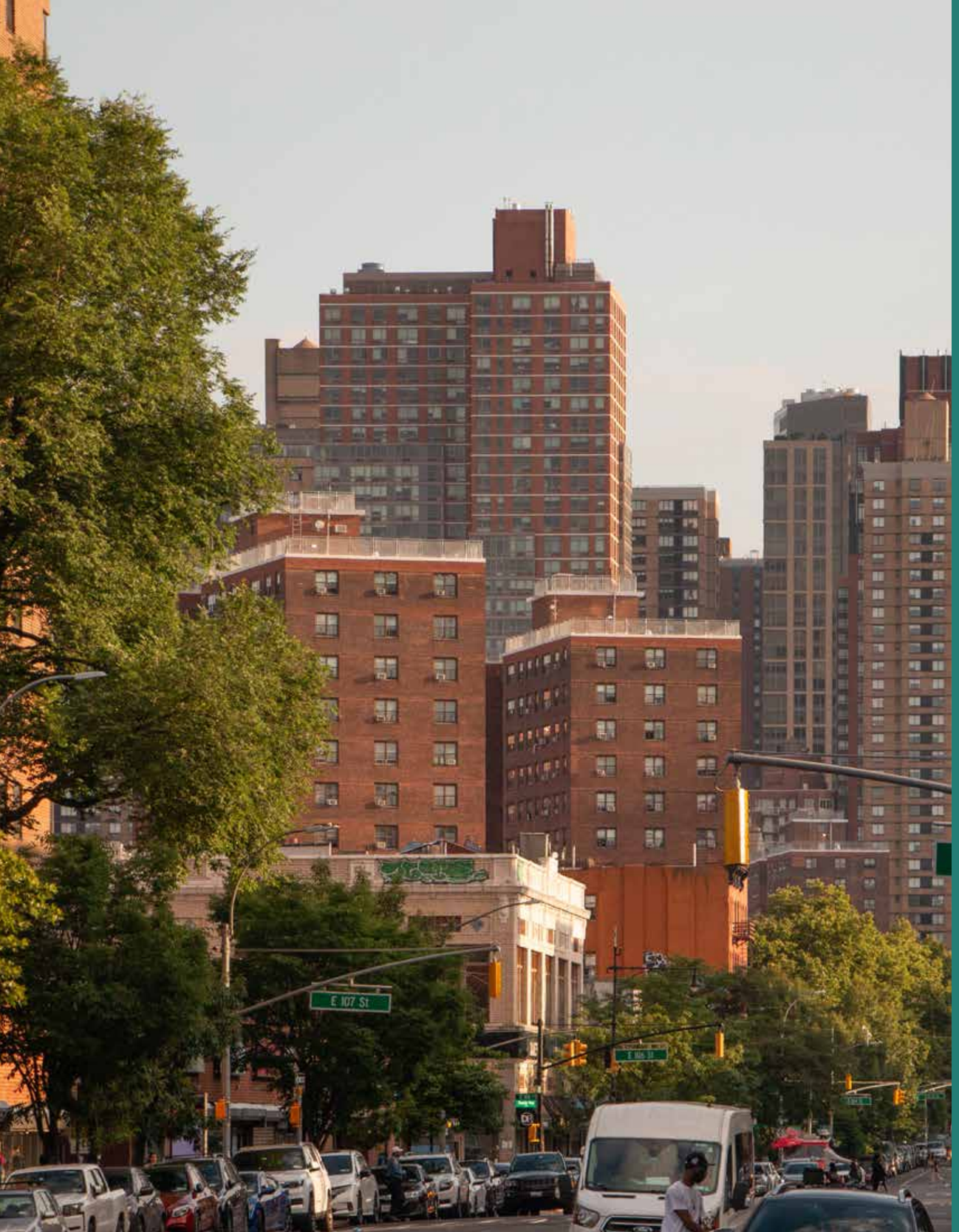
Develop a plan where coordination capacity is funded and supported

Build an Arch on 96th and 3rd titled "East Harlem/ El Barrio" to clearly identify the community

Landmark our community




ONE WAY
ONE WAY
E 104 St
E 104 St
ONE WAY



DESIGN VISION

Introduction

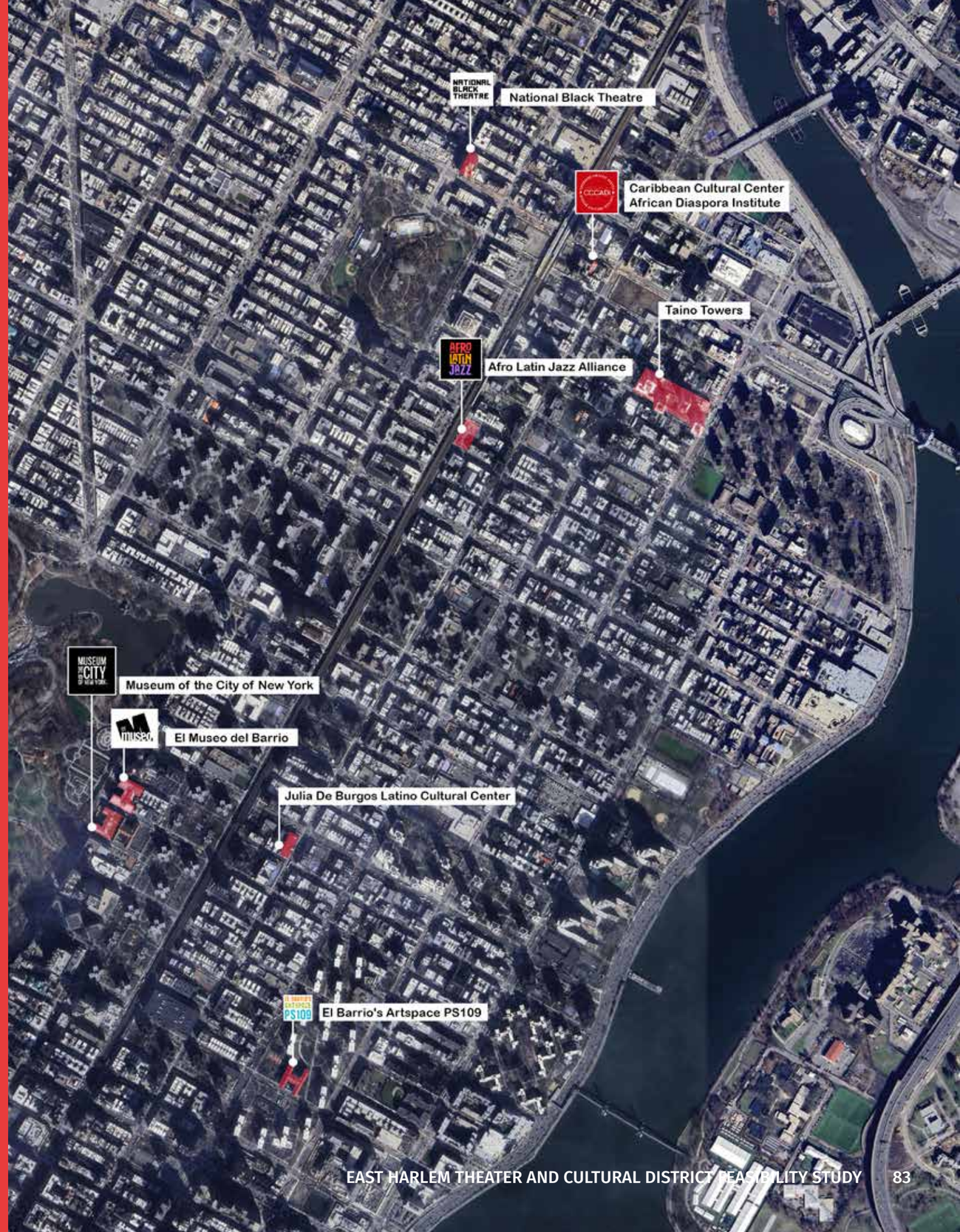
East Harlem is home to a rich network of cultural institutions that serve as vital anchors for the local community and the city in general. At the moment, many of these institutions are operating in relative isolation and, in some cases, with a physical and/or digital presence in need of upgrades. Our proposal aims to not only address each institution's operational needs in order to ensure they can realize their cultural and social potential within the community, but also to consider each discrete intervention as touchpoints of a potential larger urban development strategy. We believe that a coordinated leveraging of some of East Harlem's most prominent cultural nodes will serve as the catalysts for broader neighborhood improvement and development.

These goals are pursued through a series of targeted "acupuntural" design interventions, aiming to spearhead a gradual neighborhood transformation leading not only to better quality of life for the neighborhood residents but also to a possible new East Harlem "renaissance" within the brother cultural context of New York City.

Project Objectives

- Strengthen the presence and impact of cultural institutions in East Harlem
- Develop small scale interventions that might lead to large scale urban improvements
- Enhance public space and pedestrian experiences through green infrastructure and targeted signage
- Improve institutional facilities for better functionality and visitor engagement
- Establish a digital network to unify and promote East Harlem's cultural assets

“Acupunctural” Design: Targeted Institutional Interventions for Beneficial Urban Impact

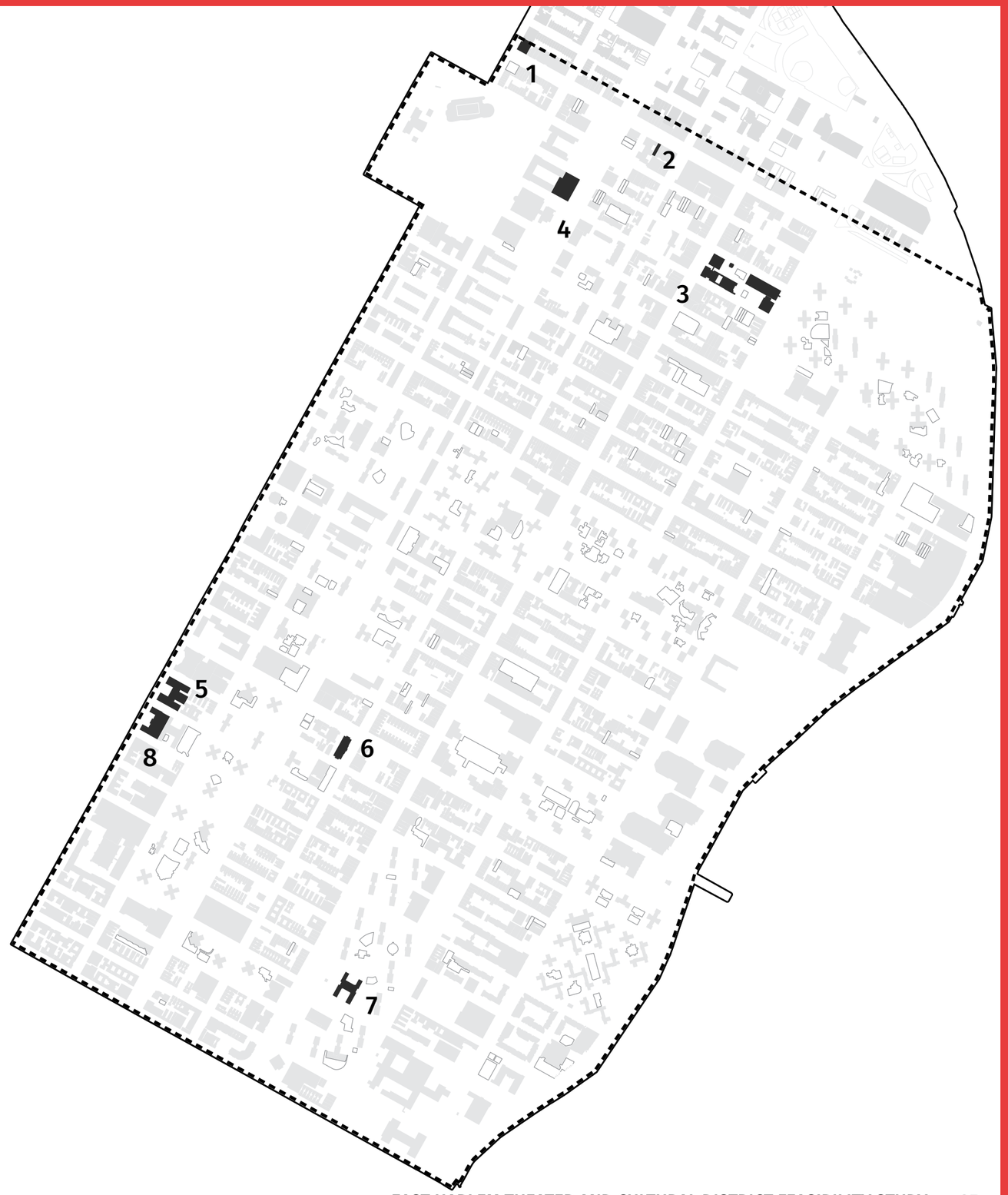


Our approach focuses on a network of precise, small-scale interventions that could produce a potential ripple effect across the neighborhood, addressing some of its complex urban problems with simpler architectural means. Each cultural institution is assessed to identify possible strategic improvements that, necessary in themselves, could enhance not only internal operations, but also the quality of the surrounding urban environment. Assuming an organic interdependence between the institutions considered and the city around them, we bank on the belief that, by raising the nodes of this network to a higher level of cultural and social importance for the community, we can also uplift the quality of life in the surrounding urban context to create a better East Harlem and a better New York.

SIMPLE, EFFECTIVE BUILDING UPGRADES

- **Many institutions in East Harlem operate in aging or underutilized buildings. We propose strategic architectural interventions such as:**
- **Installing central air conditioning and sustainable energy-efficient systems for year-round usability**
- **Reconfiguring interior layouts to maximize space potential and preserve the quality of the neighborhood's building infrastructure**
- **Ensuring broad public accessibility**
- **Improving acoustics and seating arrangements for performance and event spaces**
- **Introducing controlled reconfigurations of building interiors to better take advantage of dormant or underused resources in the institutions**

Tactically, opting to address the concrete functional needs of each institution might facilitate a smooth transition into action, directly addressing some of the more pressing needs some of these institutions face during their day-to-day operations. The neighborhood-wide cultural ferment that is sure to result from the physical improvements to these theaters and exhibition spaces will certainly propel the neighborhood into a realm of positive transformation that might be currently hard to envision.



1 National Black Theatre (NBT)
2 Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute (CCCADI)
3 Taino Towers
4 Afro Latin Jazz Alliance (ALJA) / Belongó
5 El Museo del Barrio
6 Julia de Burgos Latino Cultural Center
7 El Barrio's Artspace PS109
8 Museum of the City of New York



DESIGN VISION

Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute

CCCADI occupies a four-story former fire house constructed in 1889 on East 125th Street, between Lexington Avenue & Park Avenue. The building was renovated and opened in 2016. The space is currently utilized to host art exhibitions, performances, educational programs, and workshops, all aimed at honoring and documenting the rich cultural heritage of African-descendant communities.

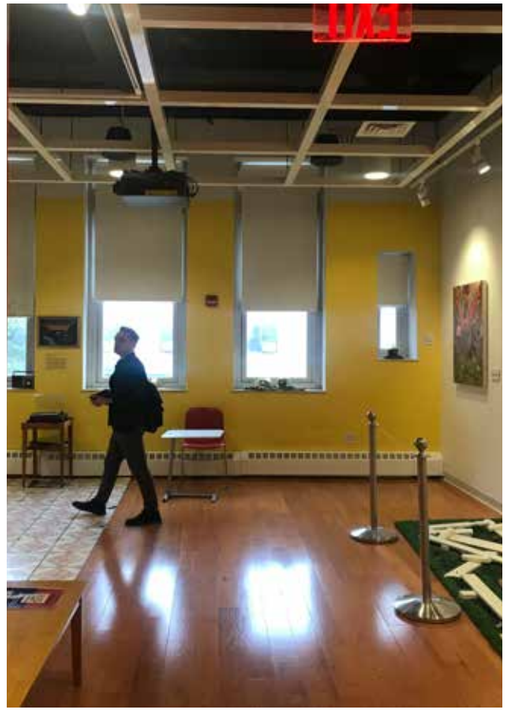
The facade of the existing building is landmarked. This may present limitations to future renovation and enlargement plans.

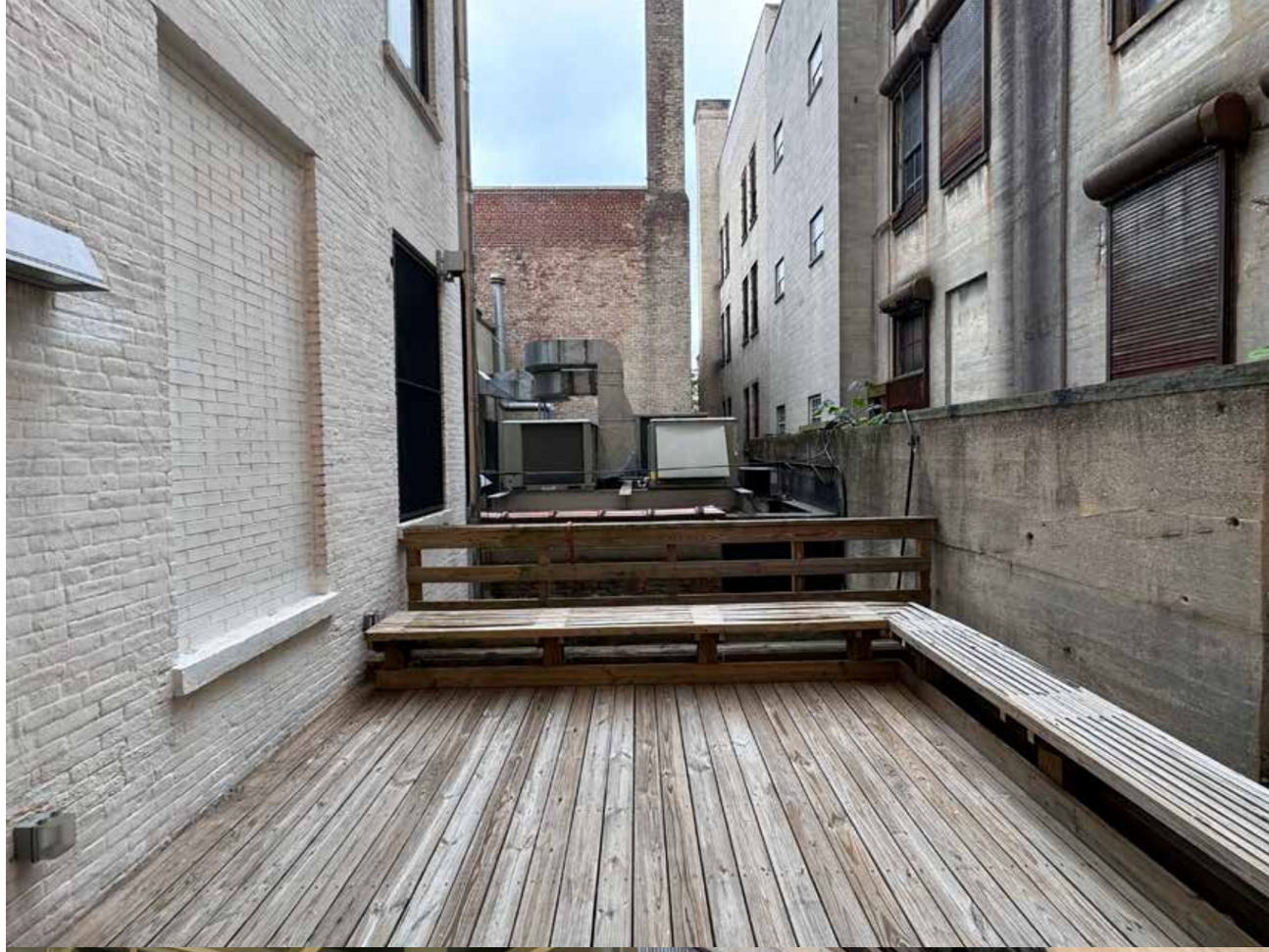
In addition, CCCADI has recently acquired an additional space on East 126th Street, between 2nd Avenue & 3rd Avenue for CCCADI's Institute for Racial and Social Justice in Arts and Culture, aimed at supporting artists of color and promoting racial and social justice.



NEEDS

- Additional exhibition space to accommodate larger exhibitions and attract more visitors
- More visibility from the street to increase public engagement and accessibility
- Renovation of the sidewalk, to improve drainage condition, prevent flooding, and enhance pedestrian experience
- More dedicated space for the store to support revenue generation and display a larger selection of cultural merchandise
- Additional flexible spaces for community programming, workshops, and artist residencies
- Enhanced infrastructure to support multimedia exhibitions and live performances
- Expanded administrative and storage areas to better support staff operations
- Enhanced digital infrastructure for virtual exhibitions and hybrid programming











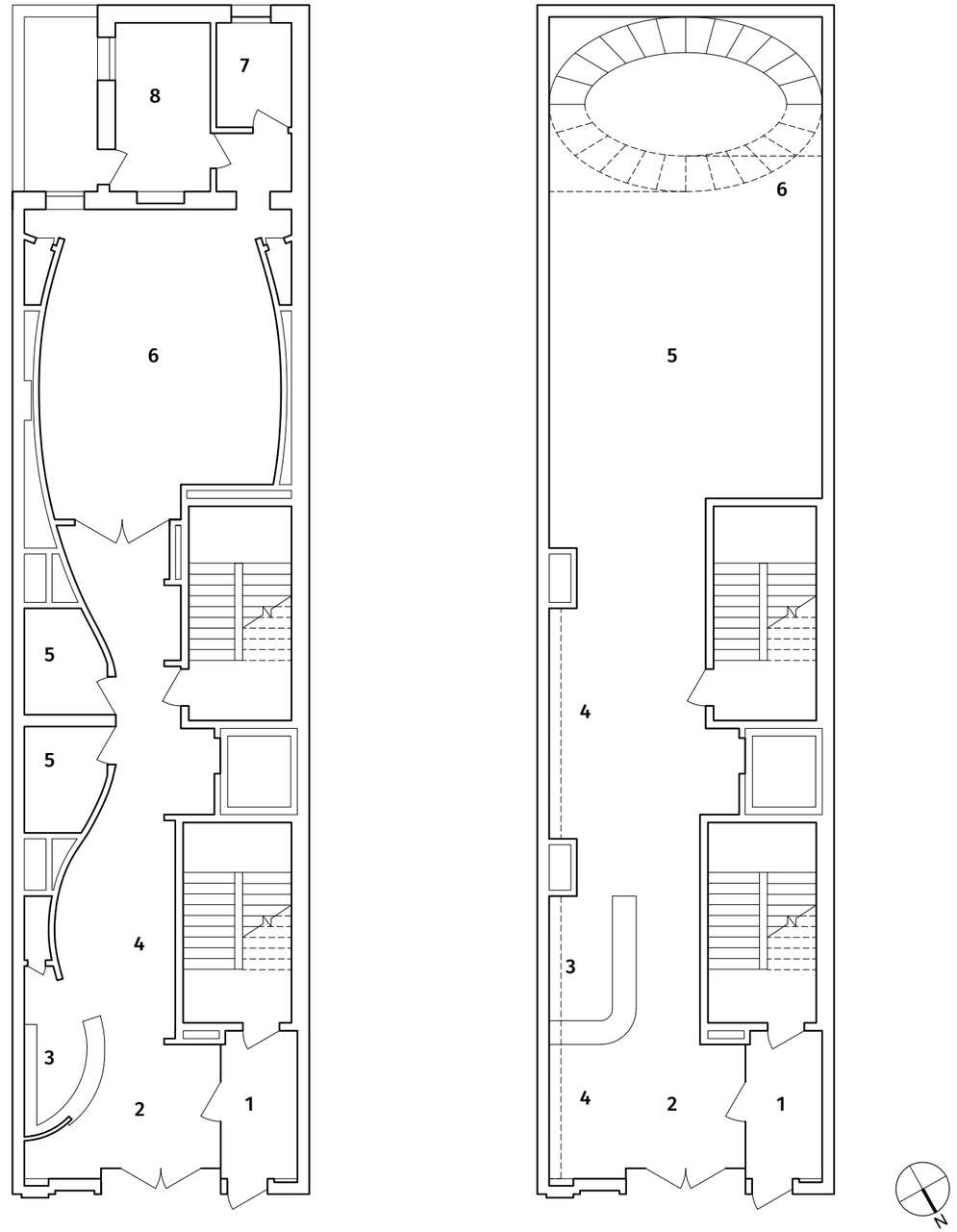
SUMMARY

In addition to new signage to improve the building's capacity to communicate its function to the public, we envision a rearrangement of its interior space to double the amount of exhibition space available. By introducing a new monumental public stair at the back of the ground floor gallery, the first and second floors—which can then in turn also be dedicated to gallery space—could be more visibly connected offering more and better exhibition potential. If simply but virtuously designed, the stair could become a memorable CCCADI icon enhancing the institution's presence in the public imagination.

GOALS

- Reconfigure floor plans to optimize space usage by removing unnecessary areas and consolidating offices, pantry, and accessory spaces to the 3rd and 4th floors
- Increase exhibition space on the 1st and 2nd floors with dedicated areas for the store and reception at the entry
- Add an open stair connection between the 1st and 2nd floors to improve exhibition flow and visibility
- Renovate the sidewalk with a restored linear drain to prevent flooding
- Install CCCADI signage on the existing flagpole and a mural on the side wall to enhance street visibility
- Create flexible multi-use spaces for community programs
- Enhance digital infrastructure for virtual programming, and expand storage and administrative facilities to support operations

GROUND FLOOR PLAN

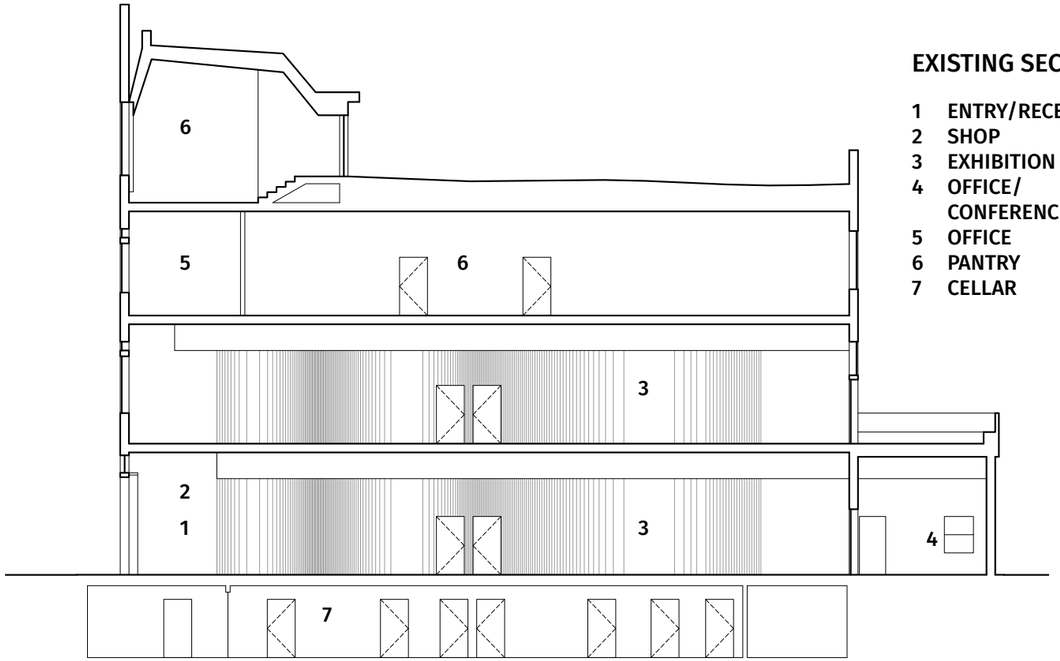


EXISTING PLAN

1 ENTRY (OFFICE)
2 ENTRY (EXHIBITION)
3 RECEPTION
4 SHOP
5 RESTROOM
6 EXHIBITION
7 STORAGE
8 PANTRY

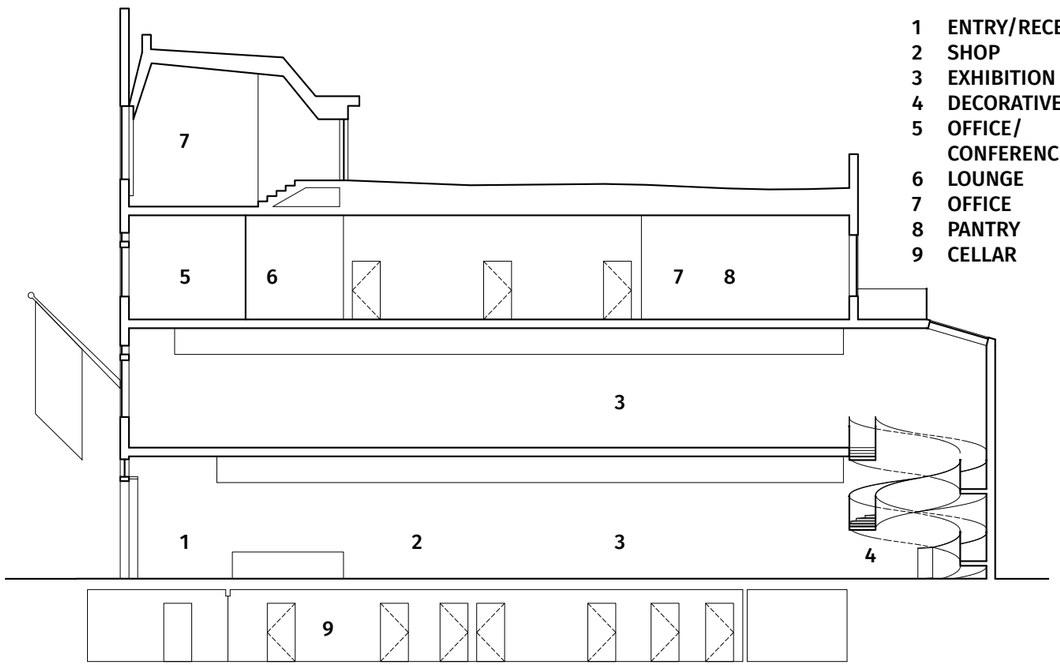
PROPOSED PLAN

1 ENTRY (OFFICE)
2 ENTRY (EXHIBITION)
3 RECEPTION
4 SHOP
5 EXHIBITION
6 STAIR TO FL2 (EXHIBITION)



EXISTING SECTION

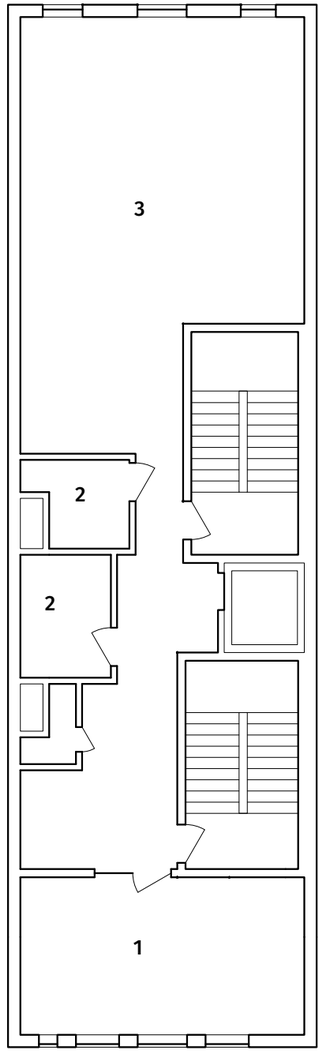
1 ENTRY/RECEPTION
2 SHOP
3 EXHIBITION SPACE
4 OFFICE/
CONFERENCE ROOM
5 OFFICE
6 PANTRY
7 CELLAR



PROPOSED SECTION

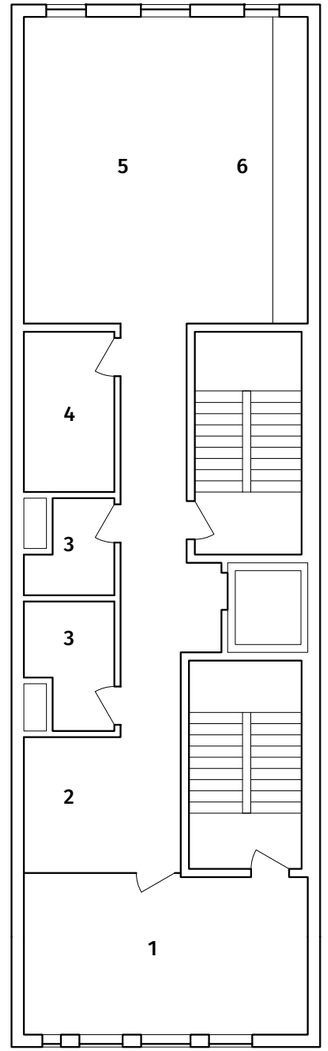
1 ENTRY/RECEPTION
2 SHOP
3 EXHIBITION SPACE
4 DECORATIVE STAIR
5 OFFICE/
CONFERENCE ROOM
6 LOUNGE
7 OFFICE
8 PANTRY
9 CELLAR

THIRD FLOOR PLAN



EXISTING PLAN

1 PRIVATE OFFICE
2 RESTROOM
3 OPEN OFFICE



PROPOSED PLAN

1 PRIVATE OFFICE
2 LOUNGE
3 RESTROOM
4 MAINTENANCE OFFICE
5 OPEN OFFICE
6 PANTRY





EXISTING



PROPOSED


POPEYES
LOUISIANA KITCHEN
5281
101 LIMITED
IGLESIA
PENTECOSTAL



DESIGN VISION

Taino Towers

Taino Towers, a residential complex covering a full city block between 2nd Avenue & 3rd Avenue and between East 122nd and East 121st streets, includes four 35-story towers and a total of 656 units of affordable housing. The towers include a four-story base with different amenities: schools, retail spaces, offices for nonprofits and spaces for performing arts. Amongst them are the Taino Towers Red Carpet Theater and Black Box Theater. There are also outdoor green spaces, a park, a playground and stages for outdoor performance.

The residential portion of the complex above the four-story base is currently under renovation/facade restoration. The Black Box Theater, Red Carpet Theater and grounds of the development are in need of improvement.







NEEDS

- Comprehensive renovation of the Red Carpet Theater, including new seating, windows, acoustics, durable materials, and state-of-the-art AV and lighting systems
- Comprehensive renovation of the Black Box Theater, including new seating, windows, acoustics, durable materials, and state-of-the-art audiovisual and lighting systems
- Enhanced accessibility, including upgraded entrances, elevators, and seating arrangements for all visitors
- Integration of modern digital infrastructure for multimedia productions and hybrid events.
- Creation of a flexible cafe space from the existing kitchen, serving as a community hub and offering street-level access
- Revitalization of outdoor spaces, including the playground, park, and performance stages, to create vibrant, multi-use community areas
- Enhanced landscaping with green spaces, seating, and shade structures to encourage community gatherings and outdoor performances
- Improved wayfinding and signage across the complex for better navigation
- Sustainable upgrades, including energy-efficient lighting, HVAC systems, and environmentally friendly materials



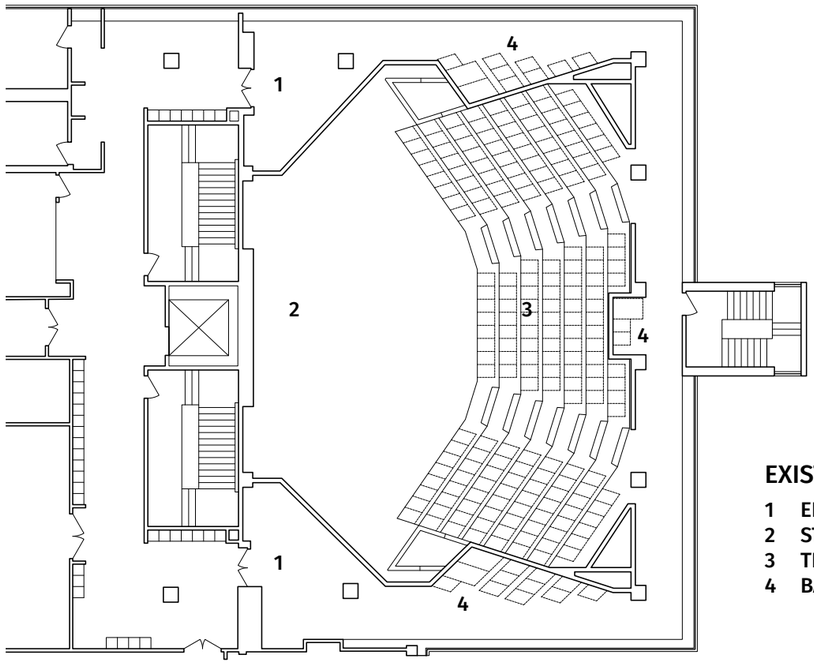


SUMMARY

The two theaters have the potential to operate in tandem to realize Taino Towers' cultural and social potential in the neighborhood. Both theaters were originally designed with considerable creativity and vision for the future. They offer flexible connections to the exterior, offering the possibility for controlled access to natural light, views of the greenery outside, and expanding their activities outdoors. The project contemplates the possibility for maximizing the potential of the theaters' original vision, banking on the unique qualities of their layout and capacity to accept or reject natural light. Besides improvements to control and regulate their relationship with the exterior common space, both theaters are in need of new seating, AV systems, acoustic conditioning, and lighting.

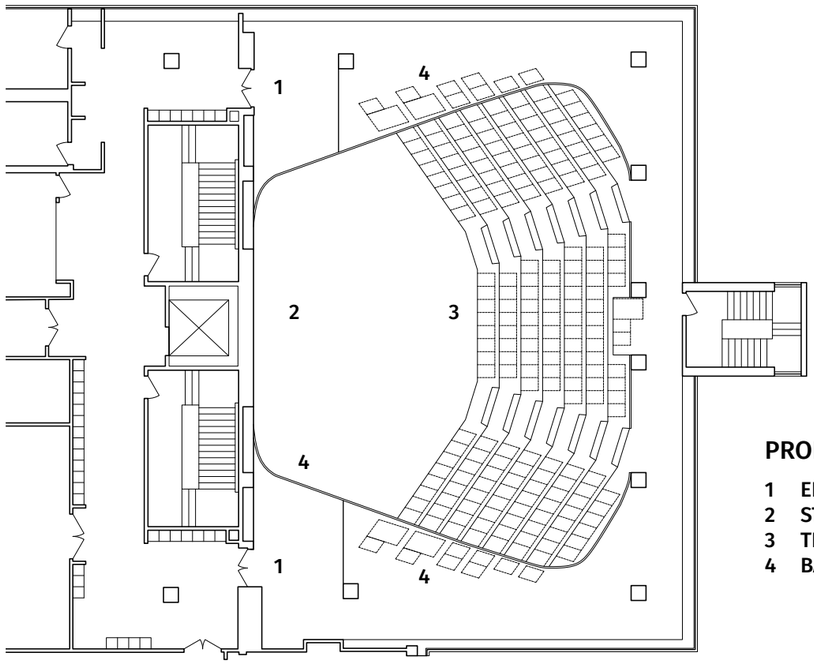


RED CARPET THEATER



EXISTING PLAN

1 ENTRY
2 STAGE
3 TERRACE SEATING
4 BALCONY SEATING



PROPOSED PLAN

1 ENTRY
2 STAGE
3 TERRACE SEATING
4 BALCONY SEATING

OBRA
ARCHITECTS

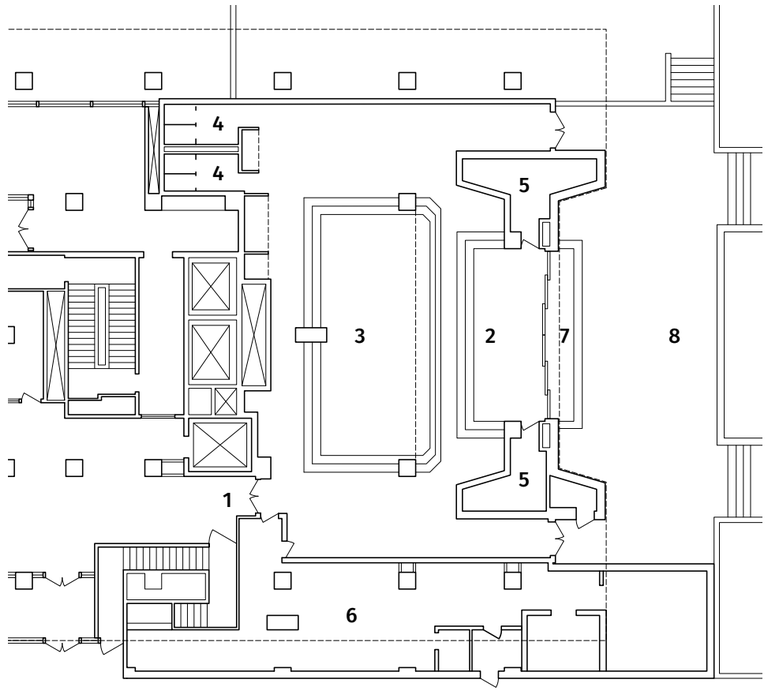




In the Black Box Theater, the proposal also focuses on a currently unused large industrial kitchen sandwiched in the plan between the space of the theater and the street. This space is ideally located to become a community cafe serving both the street and the theater itself and becoming a logical programmatic hinge ensuring flexible use and asset enjoyment.

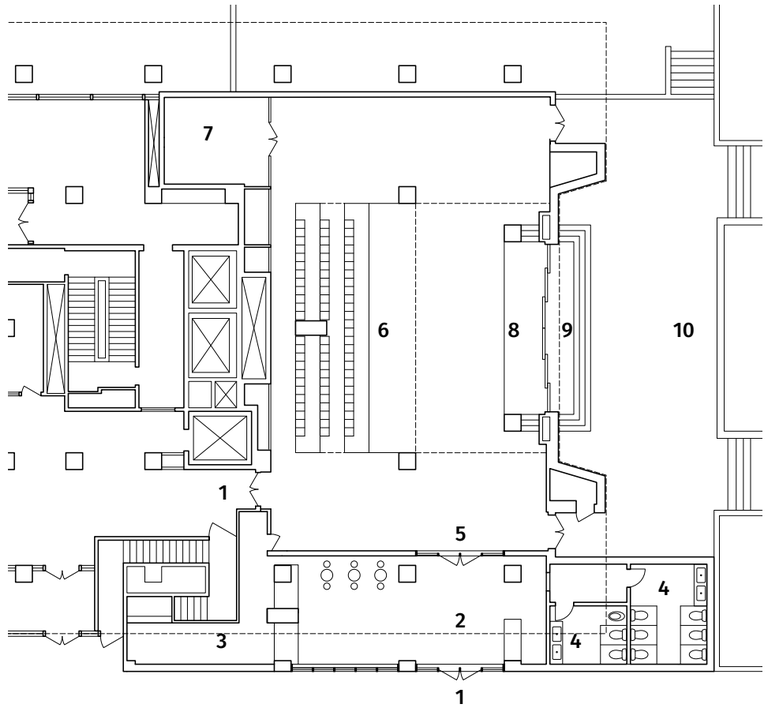


BLACK BOX THEATER



EXISTING PLAN

1 ENTRY
2 STAGE
3 SEATING
4 RESTROOM
5 STORAGE
6 KITCHEN
7 SLIDING DOOR
8 OUTDOOR SEATING



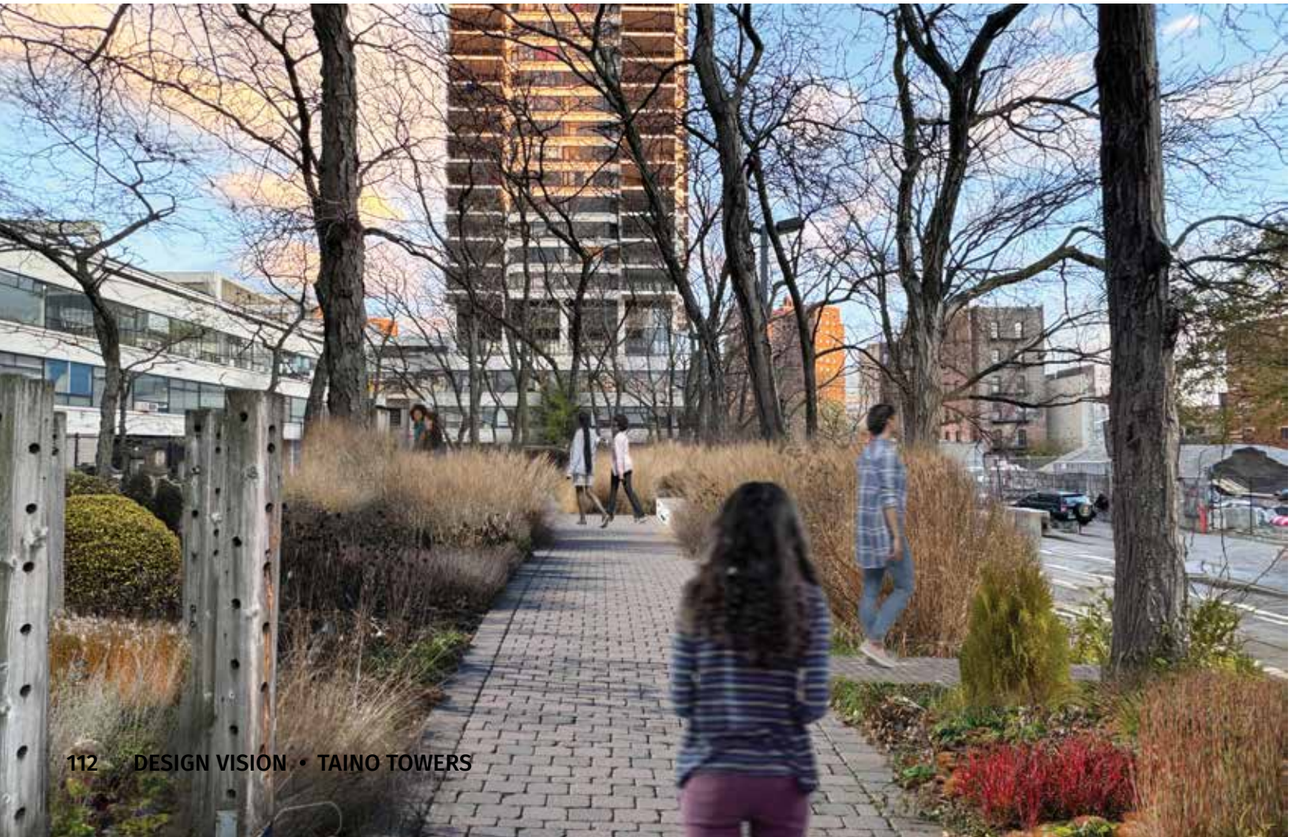
PROPOSED PLAN

1 ENTRY
2 CAFE
3 KITCHEN
4 RESTROOM
5 ENTRY FROM CAFE TO THEATER
6 SEATING
7 STORAGE
8 STAGE
9 SLIDING DOOR
10 OUTDOOR SEATING

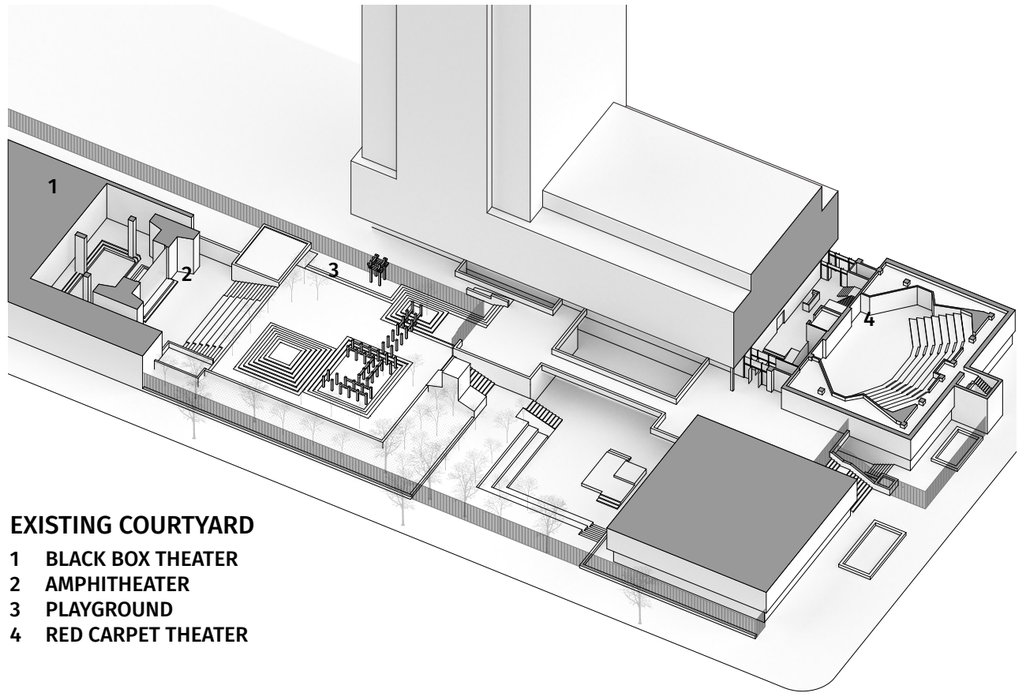


GOALS

- Renovate the Red Carpet Theater with upgraded seating designed for comfort and accessibility, new soundproof windows to enhance acoustics, advanced AV and lighting systems, and durable, high-quality finishes to ensure longevity and low maintenance
- Upgrade the Black Box Theater with modular seating for flexible configurations, state-of-the-art lighting and sound systems, durable finishes for high-traffic use, and blackout windows for improved light control
- Transform the existing kitchen adjacent to the Black Box Theater into a vibrant cafe with modern furnishings, flexible seating, and direct connection to both the street and the theater for seamless access during performances and community events
- Revitalize outdoor spaces along 122nd Street, including new landscaping with native plants, outdoor seating, shaded areas, and an amphitheater space for community gatherings, performances, and events
- Install advanced HVAC systems for energy efficiency, and upgraded wayfinding signage throughout
- Integrate digital infrastructure for live streaming, multimedia productions, and interactive exhibits, enhancing the theaters' technological capabilities
- Implement sustainability initiatives, such as energy-efficient lighting, and green building materials, to reduce environmental impact

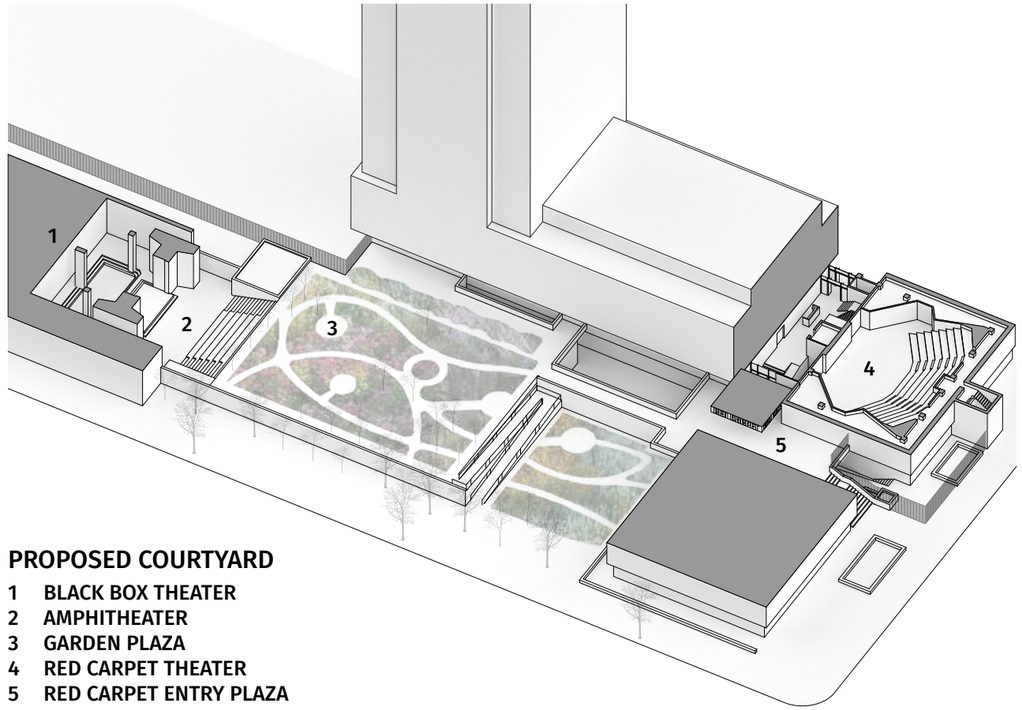


GARDEN PLAZA



EXISTING COURTYARD

1 BLACK BOX THEATER
2 AMPHITHEATER
3 PLAYGROUND
4 RED CARPET THEATER



PROPOSED COURTYARD

1 BLACK BOX THEATER
2 AMPHITHEATER
3 GARDEN PLAZA
4 RED CARPET THEATER
5 RED CARPET ENTRY PLAZA


E 116 St
Luis Munoz Marin Blvd
KEYS
OPEN 7 DAYS

DESIGN VISION

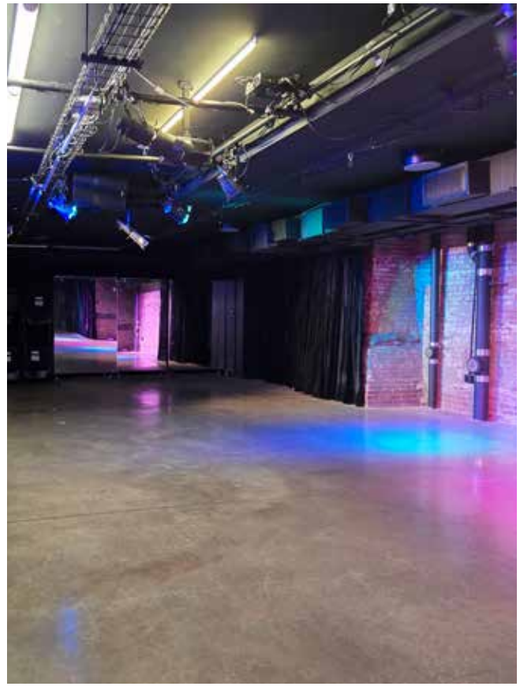
artspace

El Barrio's Artspace PS106

El Barrio's Artspace PS106, located on East 99th Street between 2nd and 3rd Avenue, is not only an arts center but also an affordable housing building for artists and their families. The building was originally constructed in 1901 as Public School 109 and is a New York City Landmark. In 2014 it was renovated by Artspace Projects, Inc & El Barrio's Operation Fightback into an affordable housing complex including 90 affordable live/work units for artists with additional community space for arts organizations. Notably, the building features a large exhibition space on the ground floor, as well as a dance studio, black box theater, and additional exhibition space in the lower level.

NEEDS

- Additional flexibility in the dance studio and black box theater, including easy use of lighting, speakers, seating, and curtain systems
- Improved acoustics and soundproofing in the performance spaces to enhance the audience experience
- Enhanced digital infrastructure to facilitate multimedia installations, virtual performances, and hybrid events
- Upgraded HVAC systems to improve energy efficiency, remove window units, and reduce maintenance costs
- Expanded exhibition spaces to accommodate larger installations and more frequent exhibitions
- Improved wayfinding and signage throughout the building for better visitor navigation
- Upgraded lighting, flooring, and finishes throughout the facility for a modernized aesthetic
- Outdoor courtyard activation with new landscaping, pop-up performance spaces, and banners to increase street visibility



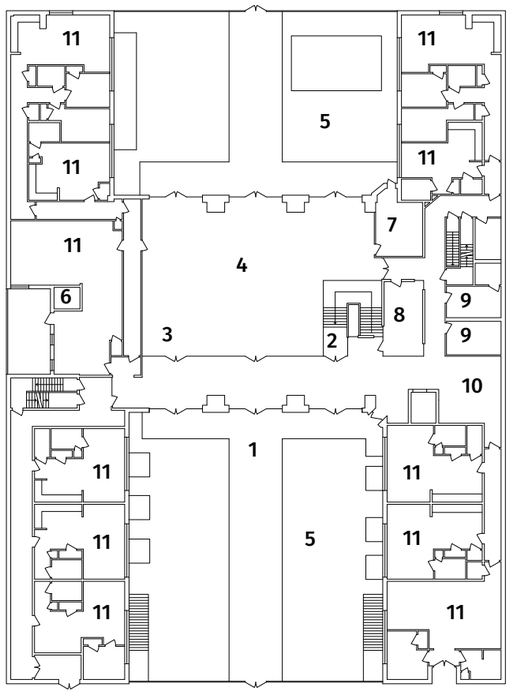


SUMMARY

The proposal for Artspace involves studies to improve physical and visual connections between the entry lobby and the facilities below-grade, in order to alert visitors of their presence and encourage wider use. Configured as an H-shaped plan, the building's ground floor is sandwiched between two beautifully-shaped courtyards that visually connect with each other across the main ground floor space currently used as a multiple purpose room. This key feature of the building is currently compromised by the existing stair layout, a fact that also compromises the flexibility and formal integrity of the multiple purpose room. The project contemplates the possibility that a reconfiguration of the stair might improve access to the basement public spaces, reclaim the multiple purpose room's integrity and restore the full width of the original connection between the ground floor and the two courtyards.

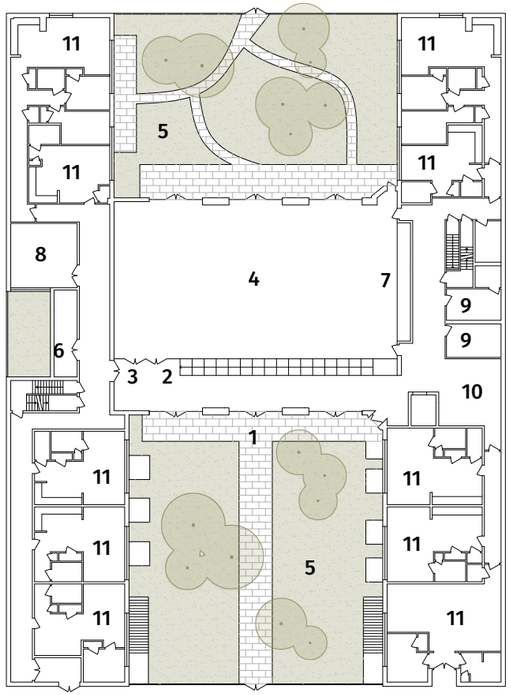


GROUND FLOOR PLAN



EXISTING PLAN

1 ENTRY
2 STAIR TO CELLAR LEVEL (PERFORMANCE SPACES)
3 ENTRY TO EXHIBITION SPACE
4 EXHIBITION SPACE
5 COURTYARD
6 MECHANICAL ROOM
7 STORAGE
8 OFFICE
9 RESTROOM
10 MAIL
11 UNIT



PROPOSED PLAN

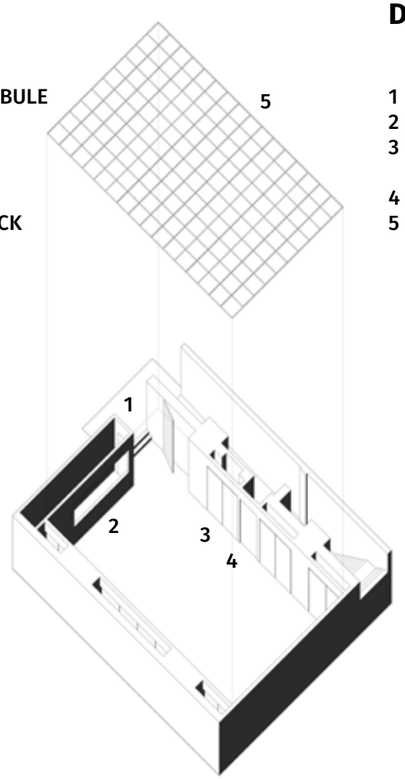
1 ENTRY
2 STAIR TO CELLAR LEVEL (PERFORMANCE SPACES)
3 ENTRY TO EXHIBITION SPACE
4 EXHIBITION SPACE
5 COURTYARD
6 MECHANICAL ROOM
7 STORAGE
8 OFFICE
9 RESTROOM
10 MAIL
11 UNIT

OBRA
ARCHITECTS



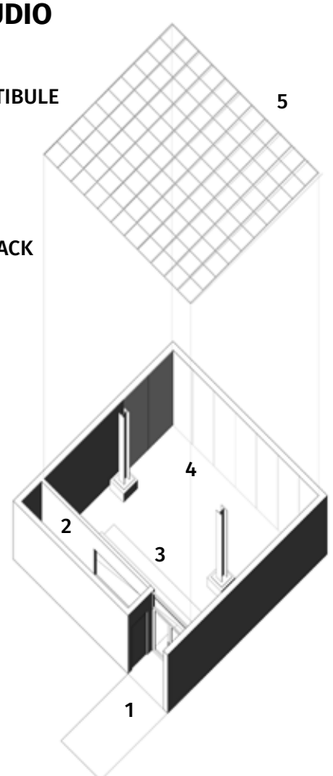
BLACK BOX THEATER

1 ENTRY VESTIBULE
2 AV BOOTH
3 STORAGE
4 EXIT DOOR
5 FLEXIBLE CEILING TRACK



DANCE STUDIO

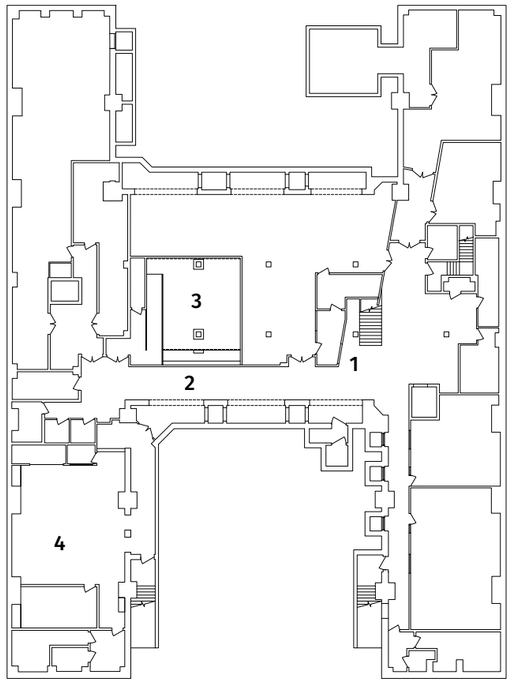
1 ENTRY VESTIBULE
2 AV BOOTH
3 TERRACE SEATING
4 MIRROR
5 FLEXIBLE CEILING TRACK



GOALS

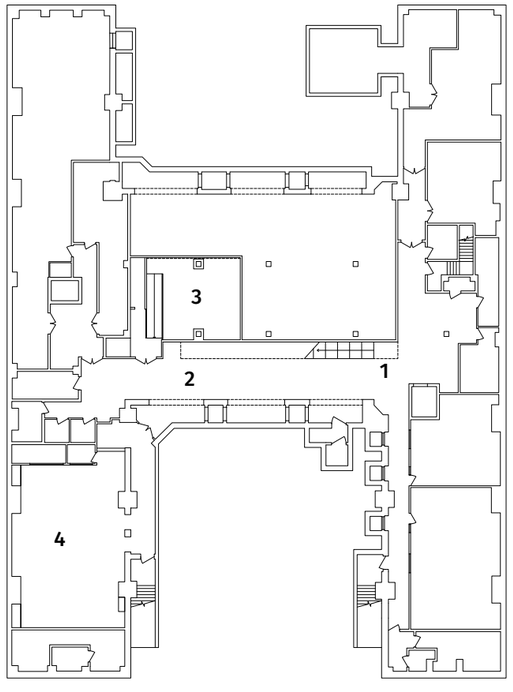
- Upgrade HVAC systems to energy-efficient models, removing window units for improved aesthetics, functionality and easier maintenance
- Reconfigure floor plans to clarify the boundaries of the ground floor exhibition space, increase its size, and improve circulation
- Redesign the stair to the lower level to increase visibility and accessibility to the performance spaces
- Relocate office and storage spaces to more discrete areas with clear visibility of the building entry for operational efficiency
- Renovate the dance studio with new audio, lighting systems, durable finishes, and flexible seating arrangements for various uses
- Modernize the black box theater with state-of-the-art audio, lighting systems, flexible seating configurations, and high-quality finishes
- Integrate advanced digital infrastructure for multimedia installations, virtual performances, and hybrid programming
- Enhance signage and wayfinding for seamless visitor navigation throughout the facility
- Upgrade lighting, flooring, and finishes across all public spaces for a contemporary and inviting atmosphere

CELLAR FLOOR PLAN



EXISTING PLAN

1 STAIR TO GROUND FLOOR
2 EXHIBITION HALL
3 DANCE STUDIO
4 BLACK BOX THEATER



PROPOSED PLAN

1 STAIR TO GROUND FLOOR
2 EXHIBITION HALL
3 DANCE STUDIO
4 BLACK BOX THEATER





DESIGN VISION

El Museo del Barrio

Located on 5th Avenue between East 105th & East 104th Streets, El Museo is a prominent museum specializing in Latin American and Caribbean art, with a particular emphasis on Puerto Rican works. Its permanent collection boasts over 8,000 pieces, including pre-Columbian artifacts, traditional crafts, modern and contemporary artworks and installations. The institution is also well-known for hosting educational programs, festivals, and community events.

El Museo occupies a building formerly known as the Heckscher Building. Constructed in 1923, it served as an orphanage and later accommodated various city offices, including the NYC Parks Department and Central Park Conservancy. El Museo del Barrio moved into the building in 1977, positioning it as a founding member of Museum Mile. The building is occupied by El Museo, NYC Parks, and Harlem Center for Education and is managed by East Harlem Arts and Education LDC. El Museo is prominently featured on the ground floor and occupies other floors within the building as well.

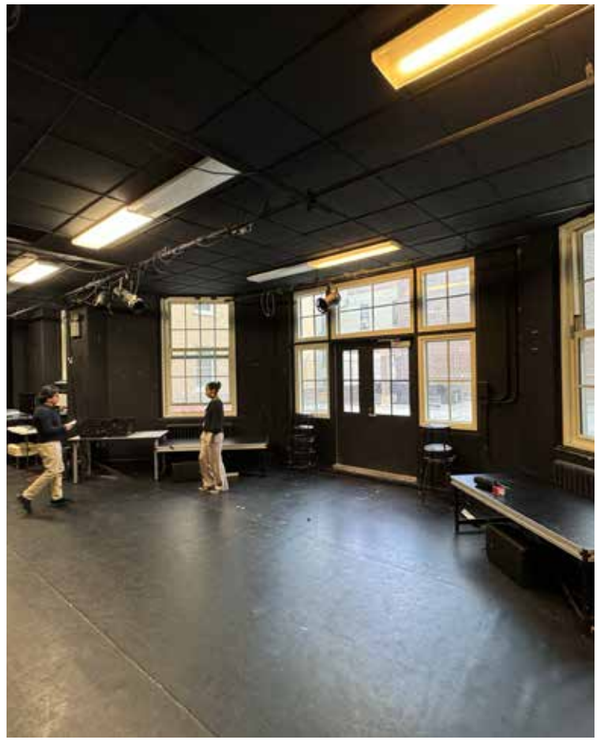
There are two performance art spaces in the building. Notably, El Teatro, a historic 572 seat theater currently serving the community with a wide variety of performances and cultural events. The theater was recently restored and features original murals and modern theater infrastructure: fly tower, AV, speakers, lighting systems, back of house changing rooms, practice rooms, etc. There is also a black box theater on the third floor of the building, used for smaller performances.

El Museo Strategic Plan includes expansion of the museum's exhibition spaces on the third floor, including 24,000sf of indoor gallery space - El Barrio Gallery, Taino Gallery, Modern and Contemporary Latino Gallery, and Print Gallery - 3,500sf of outdoor exhibition space, and an Art Laboratory and community hub for interactive experiences.



NEEDS

- Clarified lobby and entry sequence to the theater and gallery spaces to enhance visitor experience and reduce congestion
- Updated black box theater with improved lighting, sound system, seating, and flexible staging options
- Expanded gallery spaces to accommodate growing collections and temporary exhibitions, including expansion of 3rd floor galleries and Art Laboratory and community hub
- Enhanced wayfinding and signage throughout the building to guide visitors efficiently
- Enhanced visitor amenities including a larger cafe, expanded museum shop, and comfortable seating areas
- Creation of outdoor programming spaces in the courtyard and terrace to host community events and performances









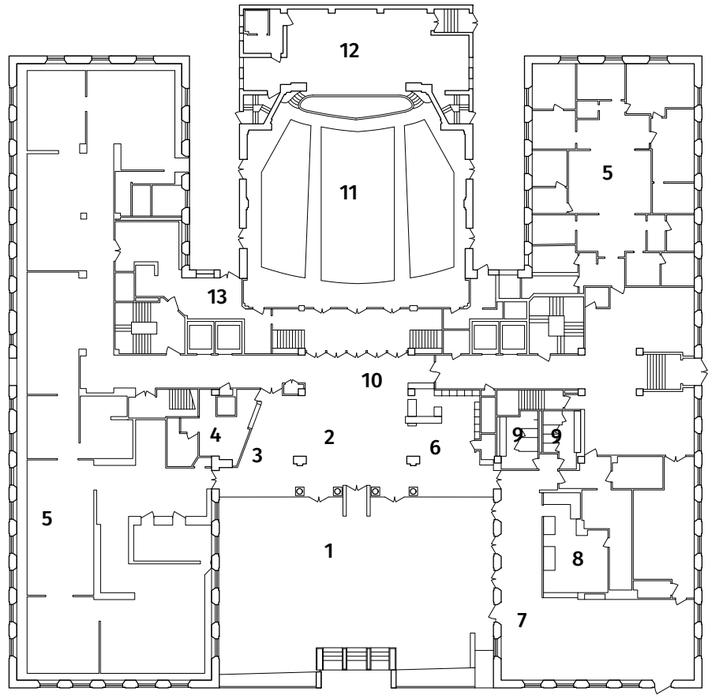
SUMMARY

The centerpiece of the building is the El Teatro which was splendidly renovated in 2019. Our proposal focuses on the possibility of rearranging the ground floor to more effectively orchestrate the spaces that surround and feed off into the theater: the entry lobby, the gift shop, the cafe, the box office, and the exhibition galleries.

A fluid connection between the Museo's Central-Park-facing entry courtyard and the spaces that surround it on the ground floor is also given prime consideration. On the third floor, much attention is given to expanded gallery space including a transparent connection to the new outdoor exhibition space - allowing a visual connection from inside to outside.

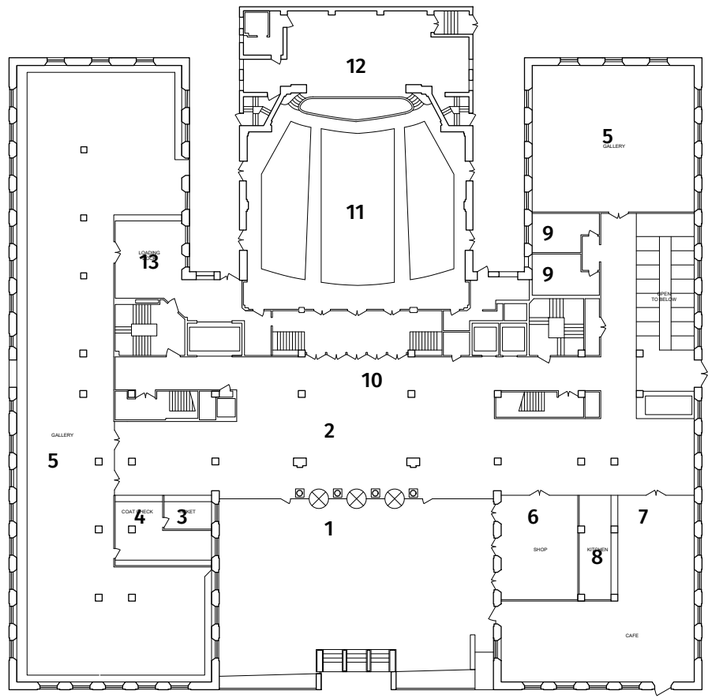


GROUND FLOOR PLAN



EXISTING PLAN

1 ENTRY
2 LOBBY
3 TICKETING
4 COAT CHECK
5 GALLERY
6 SHOP
7 KITCHEN
8 CAFE
9 RESTROOMS
10 ENTRY TO THEATER
11 THEATER
12 STAGE
13 LOADING DOCK



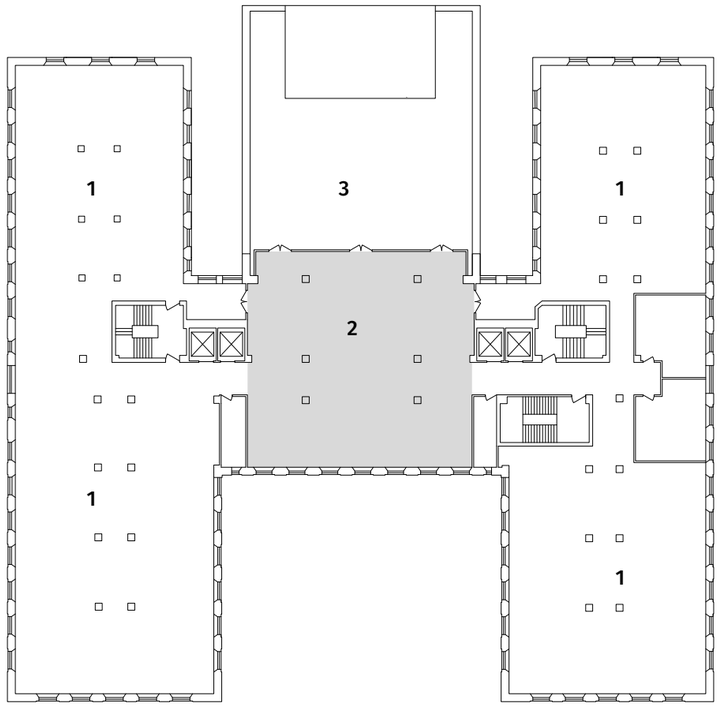
PROPOSED PLAN

1 ENTRY
2 LOBBY
3 TICKETING
4 COAT CHECK
5 GALLERY
6 SHOP
7 KITCHEN
8 CAFE
9 RESTROOMS
10 ENTRY TO THEATER
11 THEATER
12 STAGE
13 LOADING DOCK

OBRA
ARCHITECTS



3RD FLOOR OPTION 1



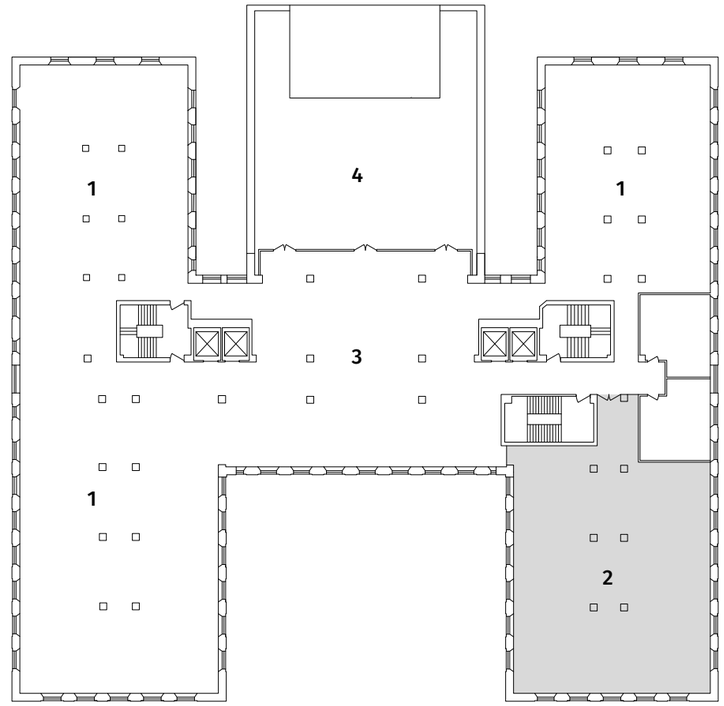
PROPOSED PLAN

1 GALLERY
2 LABORATORY & COMMUNITY EVENT HUB
3 OUTDOOR GALLERY & EVENT SPACE

GOALS

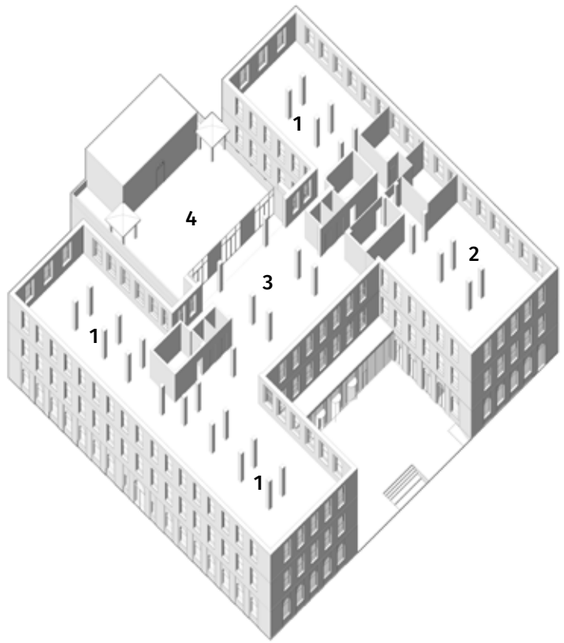
- Enlarge lobby to provide a welcoming and accessible entrance for all visitors
- Increase visibility to the gallery spaces with clear wayfinding and enhanced lighting
- Add prominence and reposition the cafe and museum shop for better visitor access and revenue generation
- Update theater entry & ticketing with modern technology and accessible counters
- Create outdoor programming spaces in the courtyard to host festivals, community events, and performances
- Increase the gallery space on the third floor, to include El Barrio Gallery, Taino Gallery, Modern and Contemporary Latino Gallery, and Print Gallery
- Increase the opening size and renovate the outdoor terrace for expanded uses in connection to the new gallery spaces
- Include a dedicated space for the Art Laboratory and community hub for interactive experiences

3RD FLOOR OPTION 2



PROPOSED PLAN

1 GALLERY
2 LABORATORY & COMMUNITY EVENT HUB
3 FLEXIBLY GALLERY ART
4 OUTDOOR GALLERY & EVENT SPACE



Julia de Burgos Latino Cultural Center

The Julia de Burgos Latino Cultural Center is located on Lexington Avenue between East 105th & 106th streets. The building was originally constructed in 1882 as Public School 72. In 1995, the building was transformed into a cultural center and named in honor of Julia Constanza Burgos García who was a Puerto Rican poet, journalist and a Nuyorican advocate of Puerto Rican independence. The institution now hosts a variety of cultural and educational programs, performances, and community events. The building includes two important facilities: the Performing Arts Center is located on the ground floor and used as a multi-purpose space with adjacent classrooms that serve as a venue for community meetings, rehearsals, and performances. The other facility is a black box theater, located on the second floor of the building.



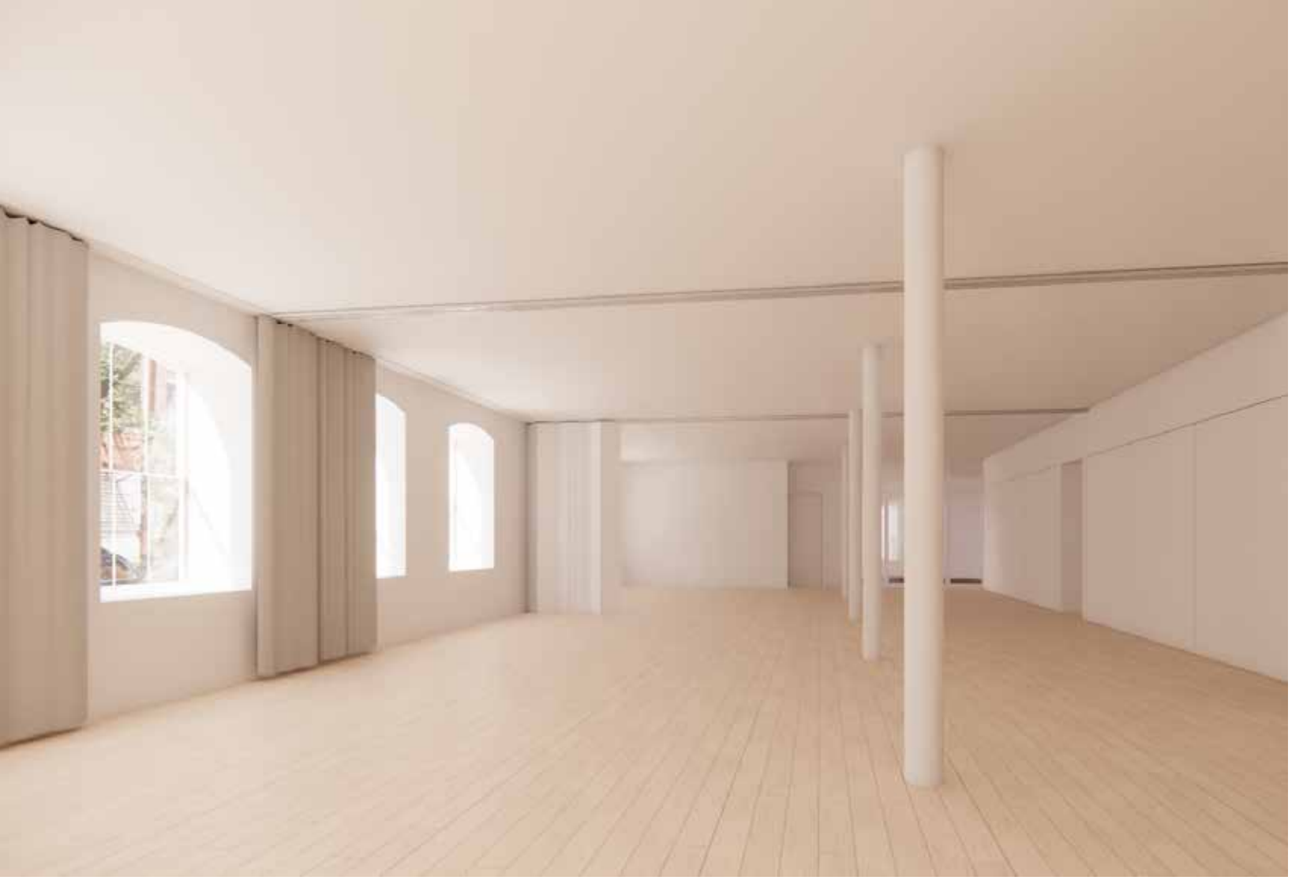


NEEDS

- Update of finishes and configuration for flexibility and ease of use
- Reconfiguration of classrooms for separate access (independent from the multi-use space)
- Optimized storage to eliminate unnecessary walls and increase light flow
- Improved accessibility to performing arts areas from the lobby
- Maximized flexibility for multi-use spaces and classrooms
- Improved seating arrangement and capacity of the black box theater
- Improved acoustics
- New AV, speaker, and lighting systems to upgrade performance quality
- Improve finishes to withstand wear and tear from events and performances



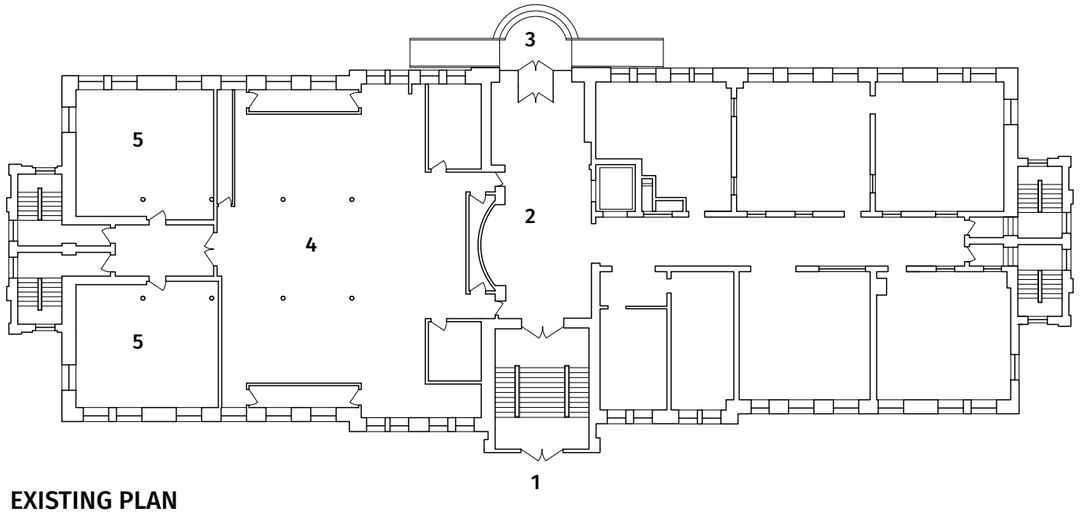




SUMMARY

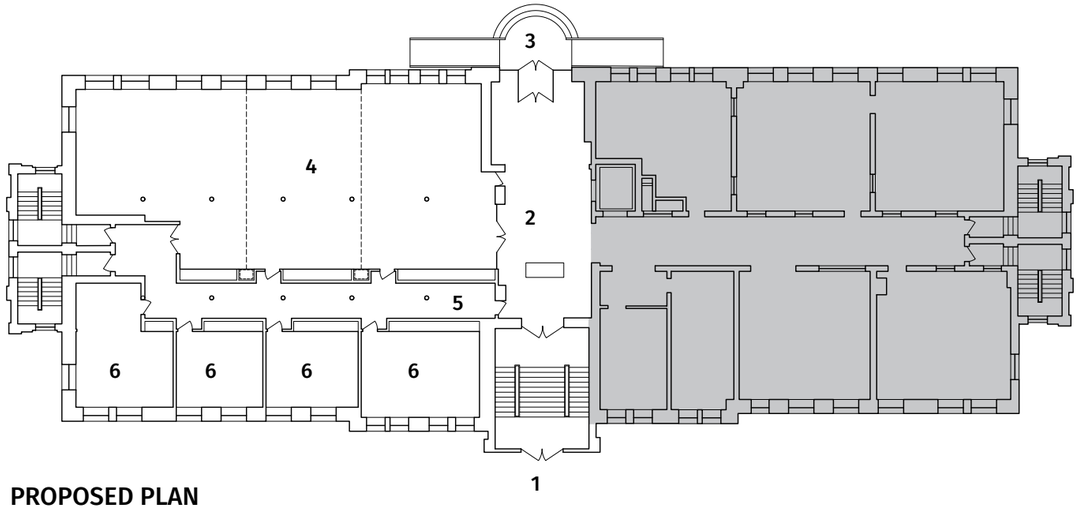
The project focuses on improving flexibility and accessibility for some of the great assets of the Cultural Center's building, particularly the multiple purpose room, classrooms on the ground floor, and black box theater on the second floor. The project contemplates improved access to classrooms from the lobby without having to walk through the multiple purpose room. On the second floor, a proposed rearrangement of the theater's backstage spaces would allow controlled access to natural light when desired, therefore improving flexibility of its use.

GROUND FLOOR PLAN



EXISTING PLAN

1 MAIN ENTRY
2 LOBBY
3 COURTYARD ENTRY
4 PERFORMING ARTS CENTER
5 CLASSROOMS / PRACTICE ROOMS



PROPOSED PLAN

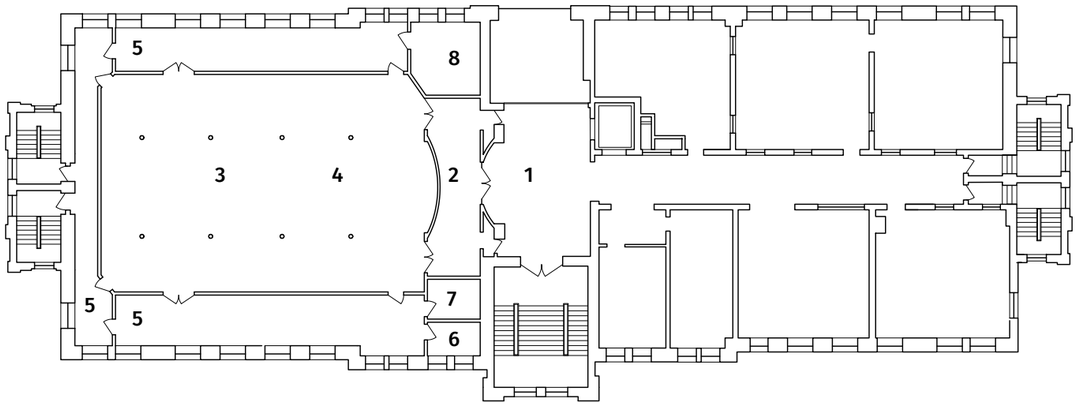
1 MAIN ENTRY
2 LOBBY
3 COURTYARD ENTRY
4 PERFORMING ARTS CENTER
5 HALLWAY
6 CLASSROOMS / PRACTICE ROOMS



GOALS

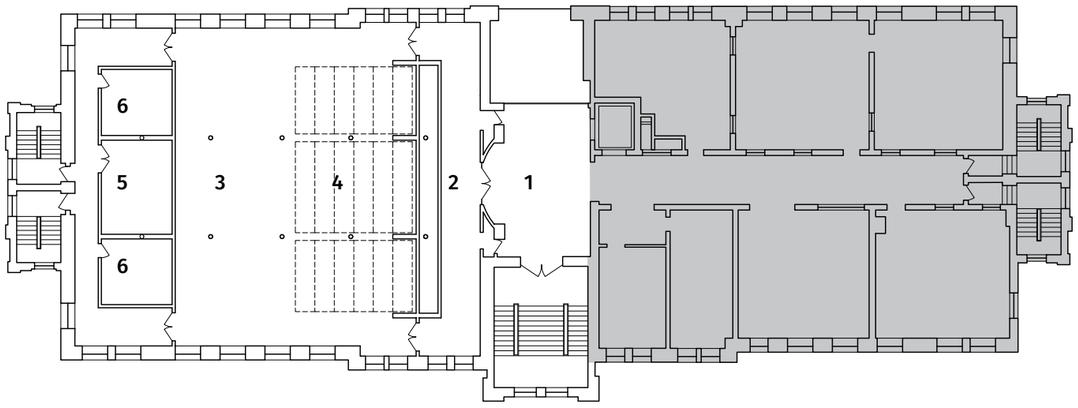
- Reconfiguration of lobby for better access and visibility to performing arts spaces
- Separate access to classrooms from the lobby to allow independent use
- Optimized storage solutions for more efficient space usage and increased natural light
- Improved flow of natural light through removal of unnecessary walls and partitions
- Back-of-house reconfiguration to increase the theater's size and improve circulation
- Retractable seating for greater flexibility in different performance setups
- Window openings on the east and west facades for natural light control
- Curtains for acoustic and lighting flexibility
- Stage curtain for larger productions
- Upgraded AV, speaker, and lighting systems for modern performance needs
- New drop ceiling and floor for improved acoustic separation from other spaces

THEATER



EXISTING PLAN

1 VESTIBULE
2 THEATER ENTRY
3 STAGE
4 SEATING
5 BACK OF HOUSE
6 RESTROOM
7 STORAGE
8 MECHANICAL



PROPOSED PLAN

1 VESTIBULE
2 THEATER ENTRY
3 STAGE
4 RETRACTABLE SEATING
5 STORAGE
6 DRESSING ROOMS

OBRA
ARCHITECTS




ONE WAY
E 104 St
ONE WAY
ONE WAY
E 104 St
ONE WAY
CORNER



DESIGN VISION

NATIONAL
BLACK
THEATRE

National Black Theatre

The National Black Theatre's new facility, located at the corner of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and 5th Avenue, is a 22-story building including over 200 apartments in addition to NBT's anchoring cultural programs. The new NBT facility will occupy 25,000+ square feet, across multiple floors and will house a 250-capacity flex space designed for immersive, experiential presentations and a 99-seat state-of-the-art studio theater.



NBT's new building at 2031 National Black Theatre Way is currently under construction and is expected to be complete in 2026 with its inaugural season planned for 2027. The facility will include high-caliber facilities, contributing greatly to the theater and cultural district. These facilities include:

1
Great Ancestral Hall
Exhibition Spaces

2
Multiple-Purpose Room

3
Studio Lobby &
Exhibition Space

4
Studio Theater
99 seats

5
Soul Den & Rehearsal Space

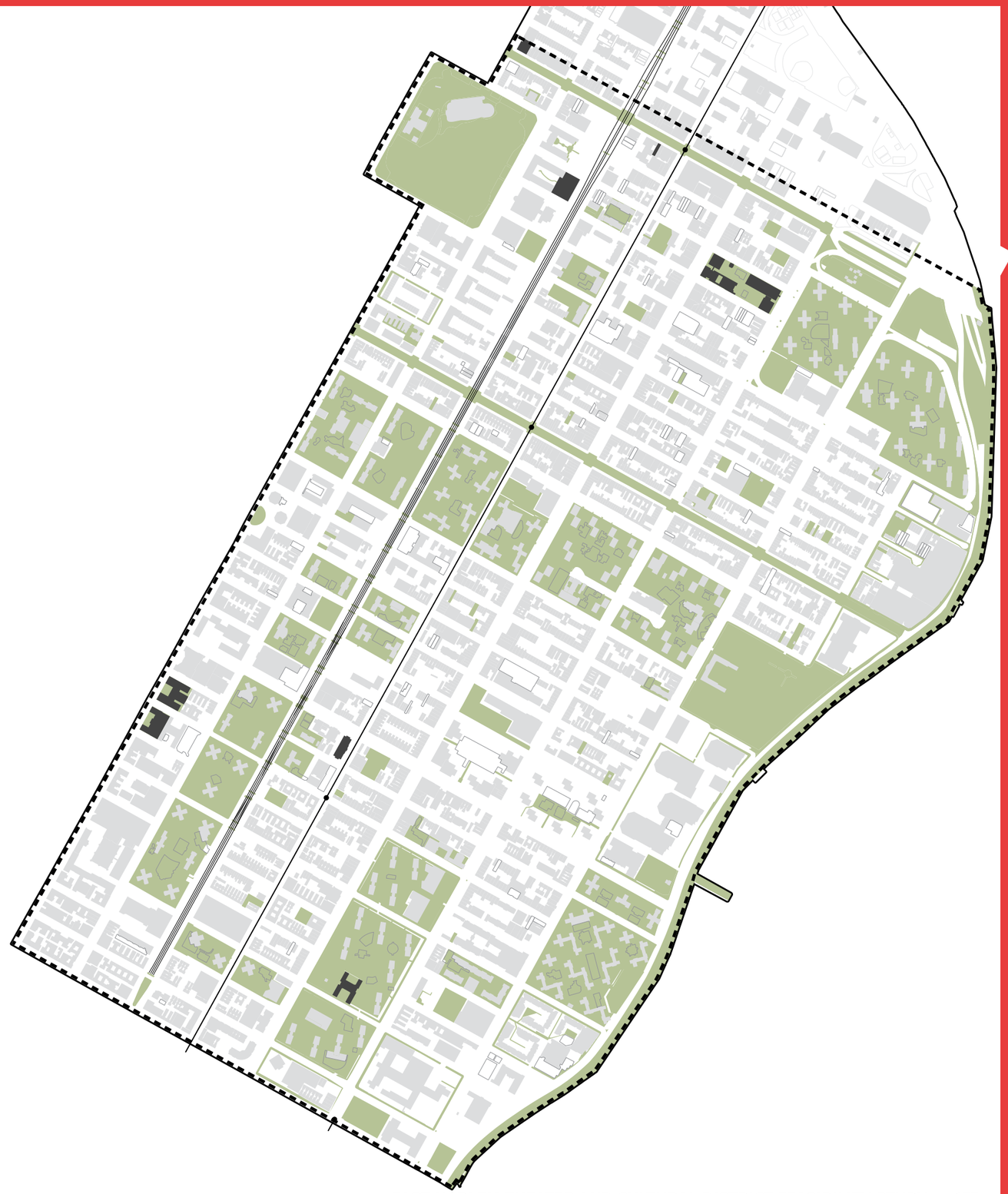
6
Flex Space for Immersive,
Experiential Presentations
250 seats

As part of this redevelopment, we propose that additional street trees be planted along Dr Martin Luther King Jr Boulevard and National Black Theatre Way, and that Dr Marin Luther King Jr Boulevard be redeveloped as a Green Corridor.

NYC PARKS AND GREENSPACE
HARLEM RIVER GREENWAY
INSTITUTIONS WITH GREENSPACE POTENTIAL
- TAINO TOWERS
- EL MUSEO DEL BARRIO
- EL BARRIO'S ARTSPACE PS109
- MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Existing Green Network



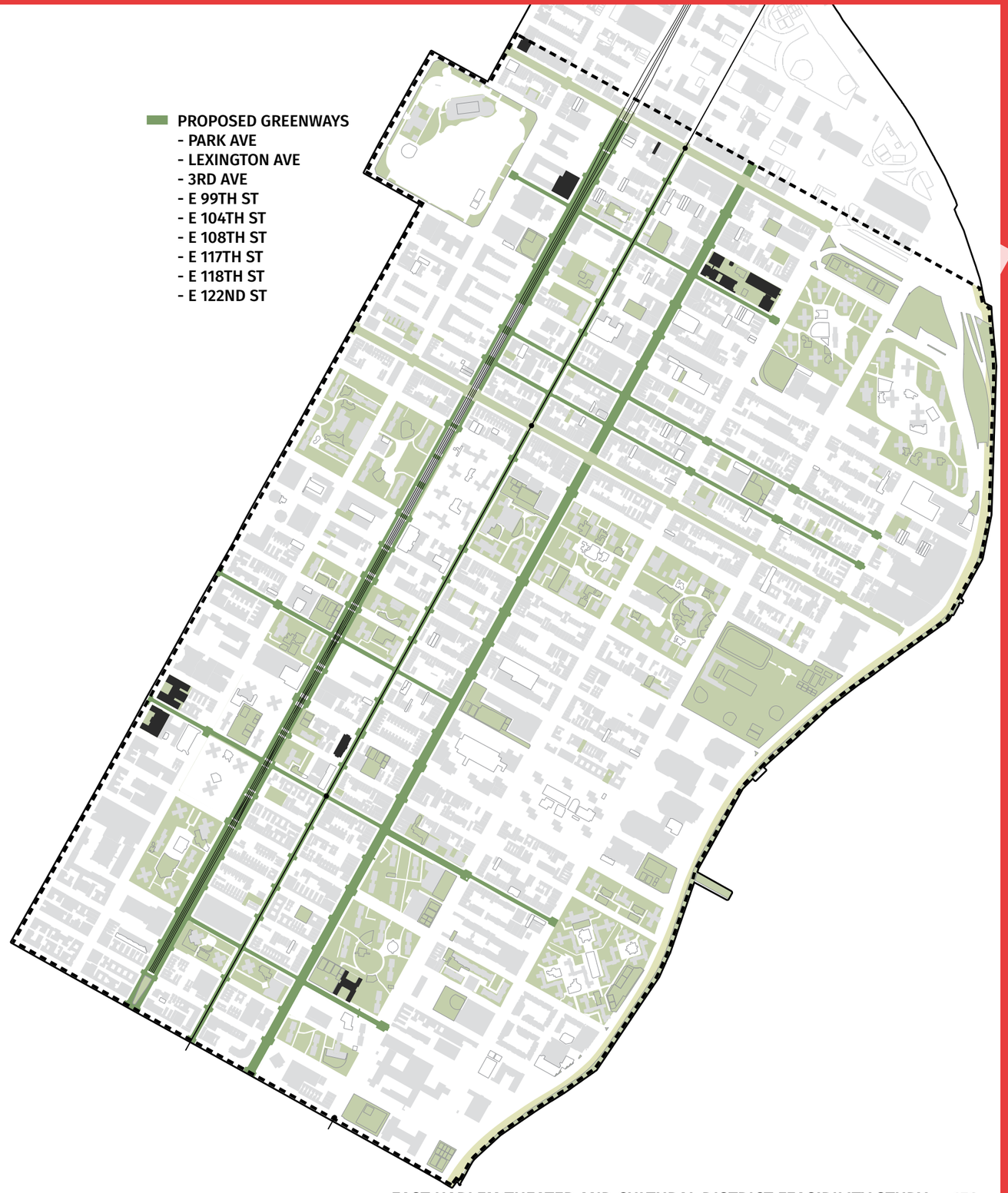


Green Infrastructure: A Network of Public Spaces

- Implement small-scale green spaces within and around cultural institutions to create a continuous, walkable network
- Incorporate street trees, planters, and permeable paving to improve sustainability and stormwater management
- Enhance courtyards and semi-public spaces for greater community use

STRENGTHEN URBAN PRESENCE

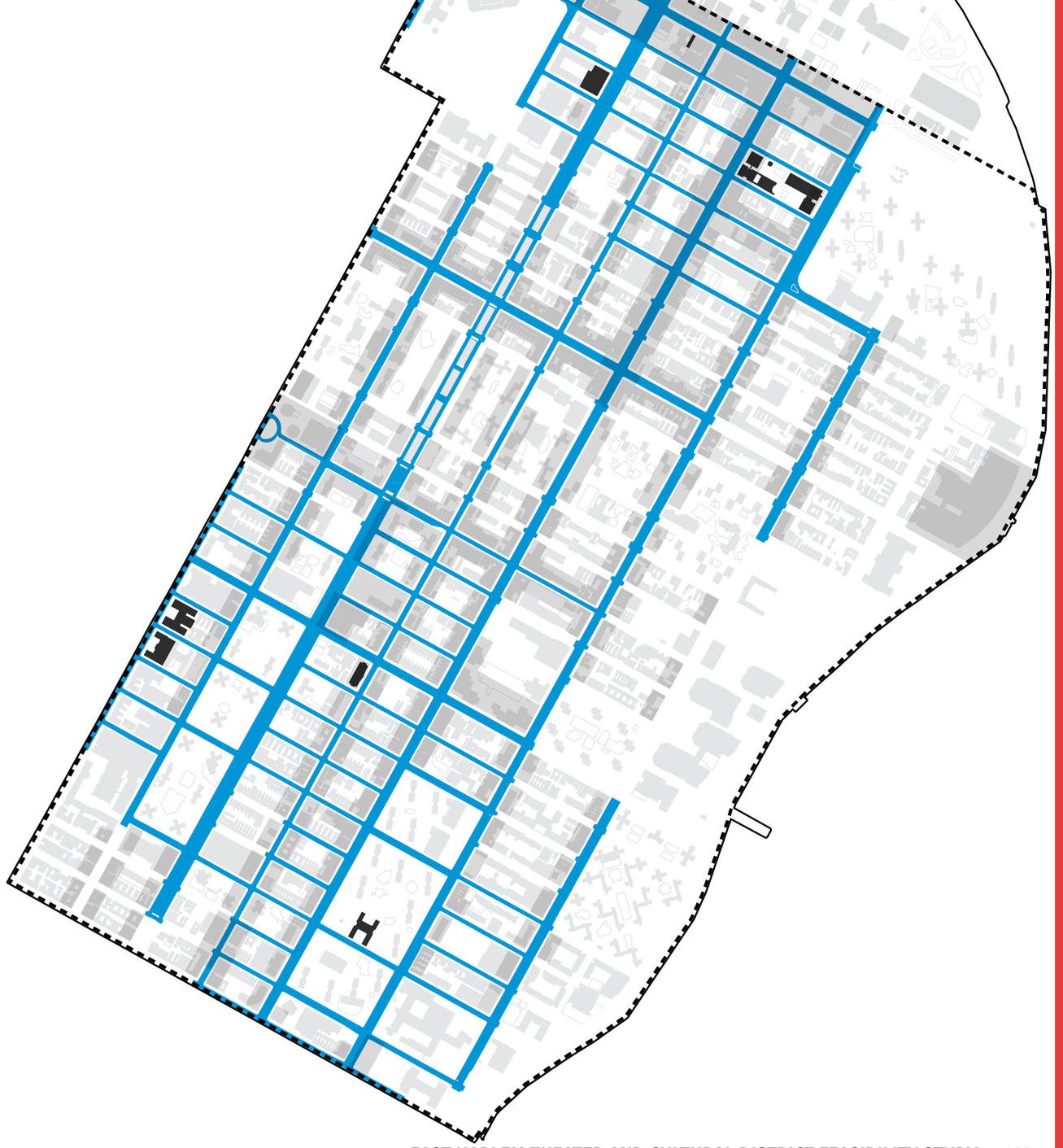
- Improve wayfinding and signage to make institutions more visible and welcoming
- Redesign entrances and facades to promote transparency and engagement with the street
- Utilize lighting and street furniture to create inviting spaces around key institutions





Digital Network & Collective Branding

- Develop an interactive online platform where institutions can share events, programs, and historical archives
- Create a unified cultural map of East Harlem to guide visitors and residents to cultural hotspots
- Implement digital kiosks and QR-coded wayfinding to seamlessly connect physical spaces with digital resources



Expected Outcomes

- Increased foot traffic and visitor engagement for cultural institutions
- Improved urban connectivity through enhanced public spaces and green infrastructure
- Greater visibility and accessibility for East Harlem's cultural landmarks
- Strengthened sense of identity and cohesion within the community
- A replicable model of micro-scale urban interventions that can be applied to other neighborhoods

Conclusion

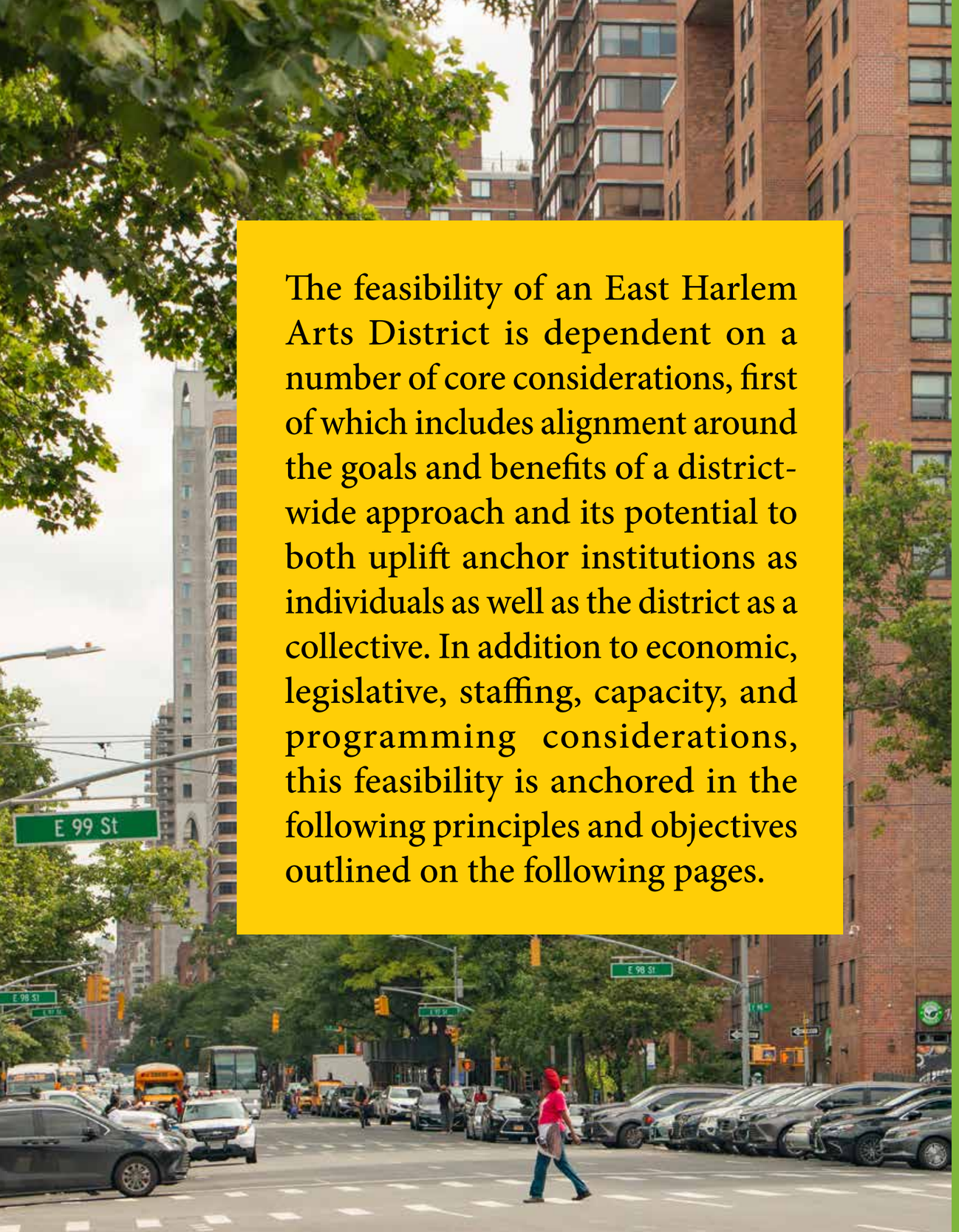
This proposal presents a strategic and holistic approach to revitalizing East Harlem's cultural landscape through thoughtful design and community-driven urban interventions. By leveraging small yet impactful changes, we can unlock the full potential of these institutions and create a more cohesive, vibrant, and resilient neighborhood.

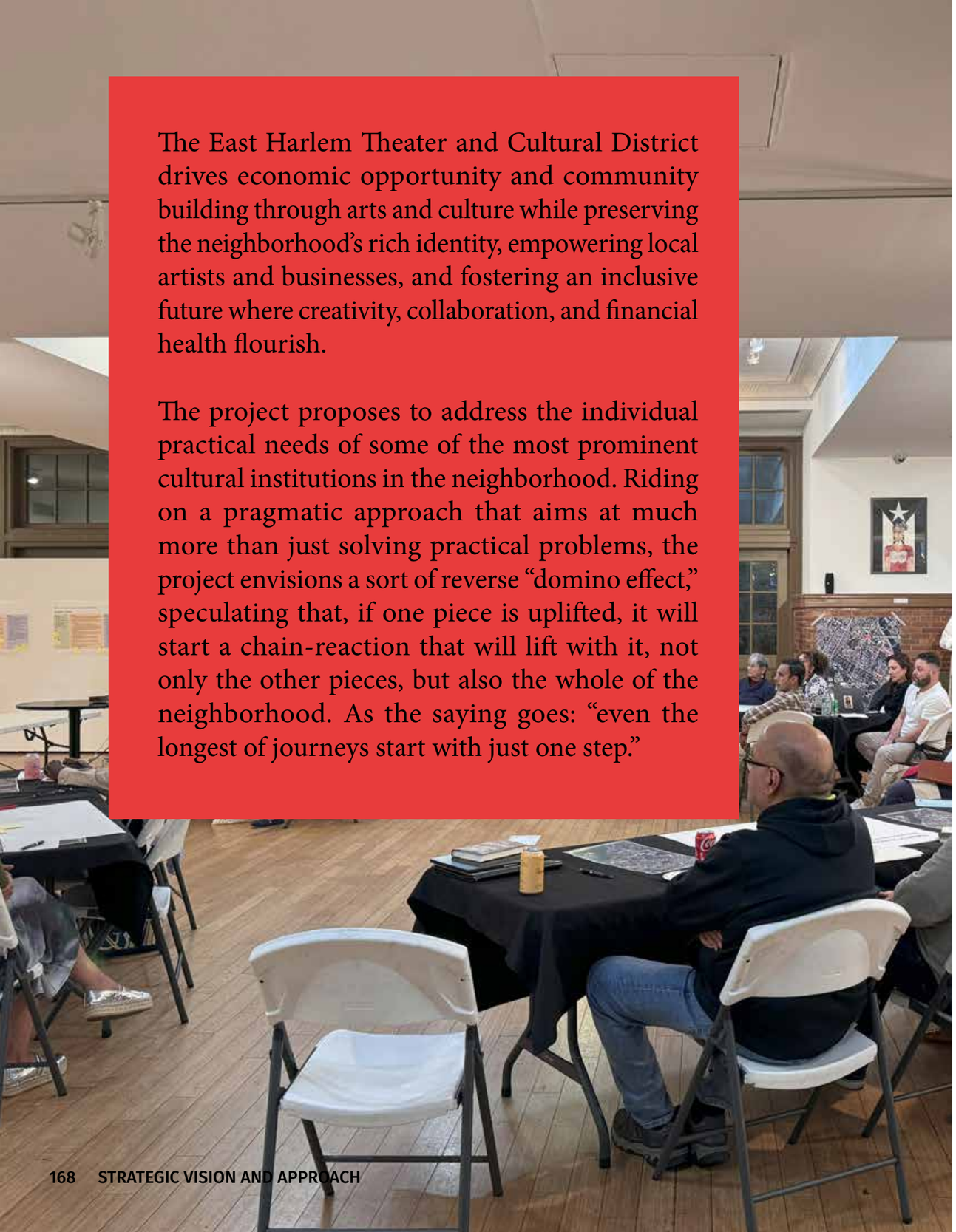
Vision Statement

The East Harlem Theater and Cultural District drives economic opportunity and community building through arts and culture while preserving the neighborhood's rich identity, empowering local artists and businesses, and fostering an inclusive community where creativity, collaboration, and financial health flourish.

- **IMPROVE THE PUBLIC REALM**
- **DEVELOP AND RETAIN ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**
- **PRESERVE CULTURAL LEGACY AND IDENTITY**
- **COUNTER DISPLACEMENT**
- **BENEFIT FROM SYNERGIES AND EQUITABLE ACCESS**

The feasibility of an East Harlem Arts District is dependent on a number of core considerations, first of which includes alignment around the goals and benefits of a district-wide approach and its potential to both uplift anchor institutions as individuals as well as the district as a collective. In addition to economic, legislative, staffing, capacity, and programming considerations, this feasibility is anchored in the following principles and objectives outlined on the following pages.





The East Harlem Theater and Cultural District drives economic opportunity and community building through arts and culture while preserving the neighborhood's rich identity, empowering local artists and businesses, and fostering an inclusive future where creativity, collaboration, and financial health flourish.

The project proposes to address the individual practical needs of some of the most prominent cultural institutions in the neighborhood. Riding on a pragmatic approach that aims at much more than just solving practical problems, the project envisions a sort of reverse "domino effect," speculating that, if one piece is uplifted, it will start a chain-reaction that will lift with it, not only the other pieces, but also the whole of the neighborhood. As the saying goes: "even the longest of journeys start with just one step."

The early "steps" proposed by the project are listed below as we address the needs of each individual institution—together, they aim to address broader challenges affecting East Harlem:

IMPROVE THE PUBLIC REALM

Enhanced cultural offerings will foster public engagement, improve quality of life, and revitalize streets and public spaces

DEVELOP AND RETAIN ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

A thriving cultural scene will attract both residents and visitors, boosting local businesses, creating jobs, and driving new development

PRESERVE CULTURAL LEGACY AND IDENTITY

Supporting artists and institutions ensures East Harlem's artistic and architectural heritage remains a foundation for future creativity

COUNTER DISPLACEMENT

The project seeks to enhance community life without fueling gentrification that could displace the very people central to its cultural revival

BENEFIT FROM SYNERGIES AND EQUITABLE ACCESS

Collaboration among institutions and artists will strengthen cultural preservation, expand access to the arts, and ensure a vibrant, inclusive creative community



EARLY AGREEMENT & PRINCIPLES

- Structure to support artists from threat of displacement
- Ensure that artists are a part of the process and decision-making early on, particularly as it related to resources
- Ensure that funding decisions are aligned with the mission for the district
- Think in a circle not a triangle
- Build opportunities for creativity
- Create tools and resources that make the history and identity of East Harlem accessible to different physical abilities, generations, and mobilities
- Center job creation for artists to preserve legacy

A DISTRICT IN SERVICE OF

- Kids and families
- Black and Brown people
- Cultural organizations, artists musicians, and creators
- Visual artists, actors looking for practice rooms, studios, venues to perform, galleries, visual art spaces
- Those who need a quantity of spaces, not just notable spaces
- An ecosystem of spaces to work and present in

"There's a sign at 125th that says Puerto Ricans used to live here. I don't want a monument, I want a community to live and thrive here."

EMERGING VALUES

NEIGHBORHOOD FEEL



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

ARTS DISTRICT PROGRAMMING

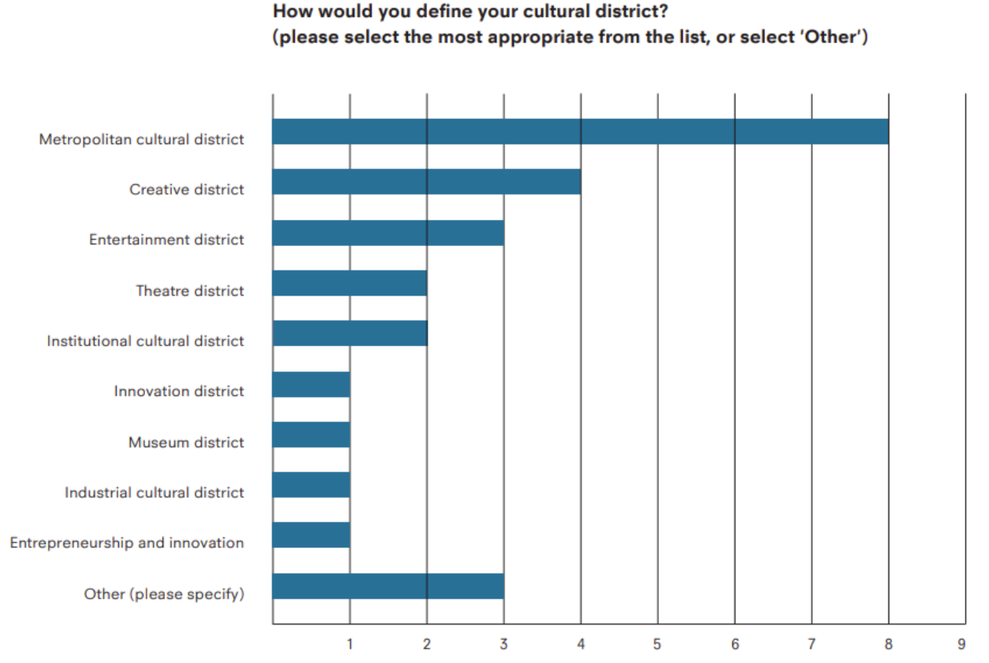


WHO BENEFITS AND HOW



ACROSS 26 MANAGERS OF CULTURAL DISTRICTS, MOST ARE LED BY NON-PROFIT ALLIANCES

- **A government-led structure** creates the possibility for "larger district planning with access to political, financial, and infrastructure support"
- **A Non-(or quasi) governmental structure** is managed by an organization as deemed by a government body (e.g., BID)
- **A for-profit model** is typically managed by a development company and involves entrepreneurs, real-estate interests and/or commercial arts businesses
- **A non-profit arts organization** is eligible for grant funding for non-profits and has the ability to pull together arts interests and communities in the area (e.g., Non-profit, non-Arts organizations, often Community Development Corporations (CDCs))
- **Artist-led,** which is often supported by members' fees and can prioritise creative placemaking and community development



Governance Models for Cultural Districts, Doser and Kim, Global Cultural District Network, 2018

FEASIBILITY CONSIDERATIONS AND ELEMENTS OF A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

CONSIDERATION	KEY OPTIONS AND TRADEOFFS
WHAT'S IN IT FOR EVERYONE? Benefits and drivers	• District formation/protagonists: Bottom-up, top-down, other? • Social, economic, benefits to residents, small businesses, property owners, non-profits, artists • Working with networks of creators, consumers, and collaborators that are community-generated
WHAT WILL IT COST AND HOW WILL WE PAY? Funding and financing	• Tradeoffs of district designations v. property manager and developer partnerships • Managing for who is 'in v. who is out' spatially • Stacking philanthropy, public grants, tax incentives and deferrals • Relationships between placemaking and arts • Shared governance and funding allocations
WITH WHAT CAPACITIES AND CAPABILITIES? Managing bandwidth and talents	• Running, operating and governing a district once developed • Management structures (e.g., Government, For profit, Non-profit / non-arts organizations such as community development corporations, or Artist-led • Advisory Boards • 5-year district plan development
MAINTAINING AUTHENTICITY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY Establishing cultural tourism	• Engagement of groups that are 'seeking' an experience or purpose • Maintaining "Place" by • Showcasing artists • Destination brands aligned with culture • Sense of community • Revitalizations • Consideration of 21st century trends, such as immersion, technology, and sustainability

East Harlem Feasibility Planning Participant Stakeholders,
AMERICANS FOR THE ARTS | NATIONAL CULTURAL DISTRICTS EXCHANGE TOOLKIT



Recommendations, Next Steps, and Resources

1. Formalize the Coalition into a Steering Committee

"Equalize the resources through shared fund"

CONSIDERATIONS

The formation of a steering committee can foster trust and commitment amongst the coalition, enabling the group to take the next steps of creating a new nonprofit entity capable of operating the District. While Union Settlement is committed to facilitating and convening this body, the new imagined entity is expected to function as an independent organization with its own staff and mandate. The steering committee may or may not evolve into an advisory body of the District.

The establishment of a steering committee can also establish a strong foundation for initial fundraising and activation efforts, that can (1) seed initial capital projects and (2) support programmatic pilots and the establishment of the new entity (e.g., communications materials, legal fees, and other startup costs).

The steering committee would oversee the creation and launch of the new entity, including tasks such as hiring an Executive Director, securing legal and administrative support, and engaging consultants and other facilitators.

Finally, a steering committee can coordinate a district-wide legislative and advocacy effort.

PEOPLE

Anchor institutions
Artists

RESOURCES

Choosing a Cultural District Consultant
Planning for Your Cultural District

"At the root of a successful foundation is private/public sector collaboration—between art and culture organizations and agencies and organizations responsible for economic development such as the Chamber of Commerce. When multiple teams join together to create a vision, a plan, and a strategy, seeking funding is shared work and will ultimately lead to success. After the foundation is built, an ongoing revenue stream will strengthen communities and inevitably attract and nurture the next generation of workers for the new creative economy."
Art And Culture Districts: Financing, Funding, And Sustaining Them, John M. Eger

"How do we piggy back and utilize that partnership as one that gives visibility for the rest of us? How to change that narrative?"

NEXT STEP AND DECISIONS

1. Identify and draft a Memorandum of Understanding between anchor institutions to secure their early participation and commitment to the district's establishment. Formalize partnership agreements with anchor institutions and others and establish steering committee mandates
2. Hire a staff person or consultant to continue facilitation of regular meetings, draft grant proposals, refine fundraising and development approach, draft legislative / advocacy materials
3. Establish a two-year work plan with key milestones and activities
4. Develop a strong pitch to secure early seed funding for capital projects and programming required to establish the district

2. Establish a New Entity and Governance Advisory Committee that Cultivates a Sense of Belonging

CONSIDERATIONS

In order to take a district-wide approach that both capitalizes the anchor institutions as well as creates a holistic platform for knowledge sharing and economic development, a new 501(c)(3), extending the work of the steering committee, may be instrumental in realizing the goals of the emerging coalition. The entity may conceptually operate similar to the Business Improvement District (BID), where participating organizations gain the benefit of participation in the activities and offer a platform for joint and holistic fundraising and planning. The entity can operate a general fund and develop a sustainable business model that can maintain its operations and district-wide programming.

During visioning sessions, early discussions identified a need to set up an advisory committee that would serve as a diverse board and platform of support and connection that is designed with equity and resource sharing at its heart. This would not only include anchor institutions, but also community representatives, elders, young people, elected officials, as well as technical experts such as finance, legal, and neighboring community advisors (e.g., Lower East Side Fourth Arts Block).

PEOPLE

Steering Committee

RESOURCES

Types of Partners for Cultural Districts

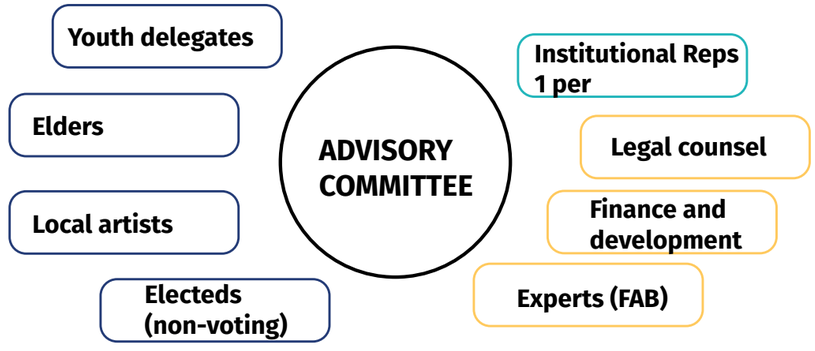
"How can we cultivate trust?"

"Arts district can be a beacon for the Latino community."

"An East Harlem Arts district needs to feel like it belongs to all these different people."

NEXT STEP AND DECISIONS

1. **Pursue Articles of Organization as an independent 501(c)(3) with the relevant legal, accounting, support. This may include by-laws. Or...**
2. **Pursue fiscal sponsorship to incubate the new entity**
3. **Determine the size, extent, facilitation, and participation of the Advisory Committee and draft initial by-laws and governance parameters including, for example:**
   - **Selection criteria for advisory committee members (e.g., merit, excellence, leadership)**
   - **Meeting cadence and calendar**
   - **Key roles**
   - **Voting vs. non-voting members**
   - **Term limits**
   - **Compensation structure for advisory committee members**
   - **Decisions and key activities of the Committee (e.g. fundraising at the scale of the district, grant making support, knowledge sharing, leadership)**



3. Catalyze Initial Investments in the District and Launch Demonstration Projects

CONSIDERATIONS

Initial seed funding investment in programming, media presence, and coalition building is essential to this process. These are roughly categorized into three types of efforts:

1. Community and public realm improvements: $30-$35M
   Banners, public realm signage, streetscape improvements
2. Facility upgrade to anchor institutions: $40-$45M
   Banners, exterior improvements, interior renovations
3. District Programming: $10M / 10yrs
   - $500K for coalition building and stand-up, including legal fees, early staffing, deepening architectural studies, consultants, marketing and communications, digital presence making, pop-up events, honorarium for advisory committee, meeting expenses, public events calendar creation, business planning
   - $2.5M Phase 2 (Years 2 - 4)
     Staffing of an executive director and programming staff. Establishment of long-term marketing and engagement planning, larger-scale fundraising, maintenance of legal fees and counsel, district-wide programming, stand-up of a pooled fund and local incentives, acquisition of property and space, artists grants, and capital improvements fund
   - $7M Phase 3: Programming and Operations (Years 3 - 10)
     Maintenance of staff and programming as in Phase 2

PEOPLE

Steering Committee

RESOURCES

Artist Spaces in Cultural Districts
Cultural Districts Signage
Cultural District Marketing Plans
Cultural District Events
Public Art Agreements for Cultural Districts

TIP: DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS, MARKETING AND SIGNAGE

- **Developing a successful marketing plan and its implementation is an important component to creating a sustainable, viable cultural district**
- **Signage can be an important marketing component of a cultural district - it lets visitors know that they are in the cultural district and helps them find their way around the area**

Americans for the Arts, Cultural Districts Basics

TIP: Identify specific designated spaces for individual artists who are interested in locating in a district, and being recruited. These spaces may include gallery spaces, exhibit spaces, and artist live/work spaces

Artist Spaces in Cultural Districts

TIP: EVENTS, PUBLIC ART, AND CALENDAR PLANNING TO BUILD SUPPORT

Festivals and events create opportunities to engage the community and the visitors of your cultural district. Events may include arts walks, studio tours/open Studios, outdoor performances, concerts, street performers, and film festivals

Americans for the Arts, Cultural Districts Basics

CAPITAL FACILITY IMPROVEMENT	
FACILITY 1	$$$$
FACILITY 2	$$$
FACILITY 3	$$$$
FACILITY 4	$$$
DISTRICT STAND UP	
Lawyers	$$$
Coordination and planning staff	$$$
Marketing plan and coordiantion	$$$
Fees and licenses 501c3	$$$
Advisory board honorarium	$$$
EARLY ACTIVATIONS	
Public realm improvements	$$$$
Pilot / Pop-up events	$$$$
Signage	$$$$
Digital	$$$$

NEXT STEP

1. **Create a draft artist agreement that represents participation in the "district" with partnership institutions**
2. **Prioritize projects and early activations**

4. Articulate Long-Term Business and Fundraising Model for Sustainability of the District and Tracking of Long-Term Tourism, Arts, and Economic Development Trends

CONSIDERATIONS

There are many ways cultural districts are supported through different types of funding structures. These structures may include special taxing districts, business improvement districts, state funding, and federal programs.

In this early concept, participants discussed a shared funding model that could serve as a platform for the district as a whole. In this way, it is imagined that it might support anti-displacement strategies as well as reduce and mitigate the competitive nature of resourcing amongst arts and cultural institutions and theaters, not only in East Harlem, but throughout NYC. This is especially important given the disparity of City budget that is allocated to smaller organizations, which compounds the competitive environment.

Furthermore, the establishment of a new entity can track and coordinate efforts in response to developments in tourism, economic, and arts over time. Whereas the status quo is that anchor institutions and artists are reacting to these shifting realities, an entity can respond and disseminate information and resources in a strategic and coordinated way. This may, for example, include tracking tourism trends, pursuing tourism development grants for East Harlem as a destination, and monitoring the revenue generation potential of tourism.

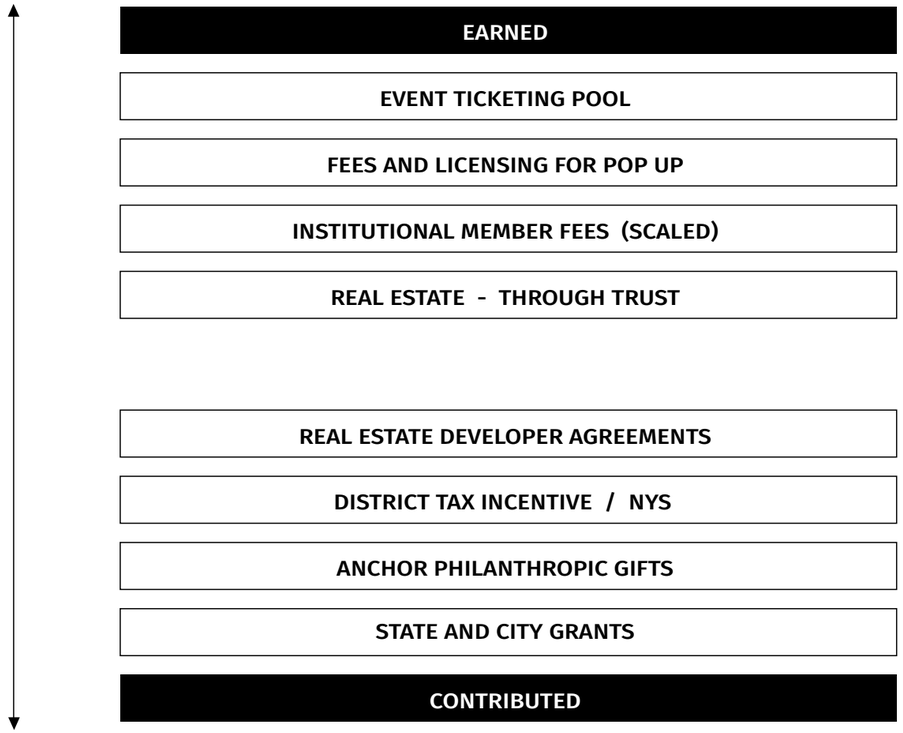
PEOPLE

New Entity

RESOURCES

Examples of these models are described in Appendix 2. Case Studies.

Cultural District Funding Structures



The entity will need to design and operationalize a sustainable funding model based on varied sources (see image above).

These might include, for examples:

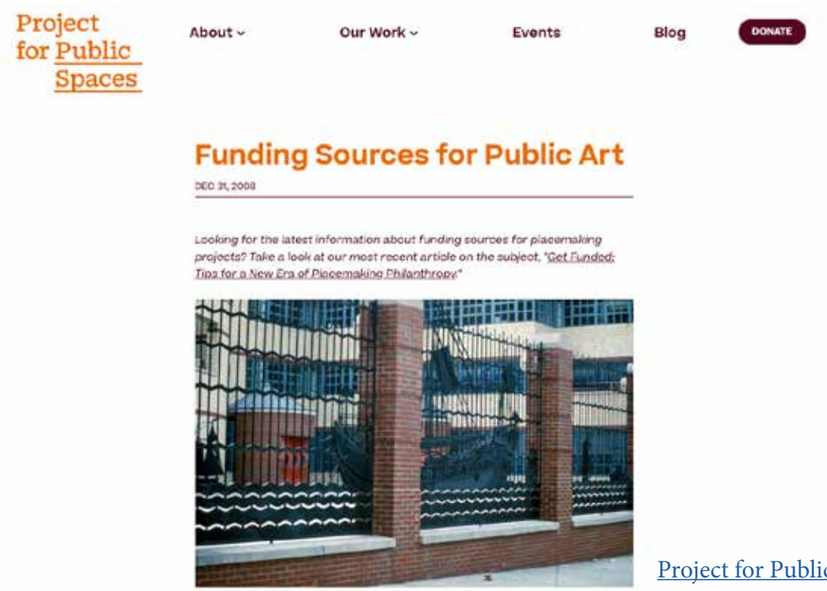
- Subscription / member based fees on a sliding scale based on organization capacity
- Ticketing structure and add-ons and pools
- Fees and licensing for pop up events
- Community land trusting of arts-based real estate and facilities
- State and City grants
- Public-private sector collaborations, such as business or government partners who can install or host art exhibits in vacant storefronts or buildings
- Developer / real estate partnerships, including advocacy for larger civic commitments and sponsorships
- Pursuit of tax-increment finance of vacant buildings for use by artists for housing and studios
- Philanthropic grants
- Special taxes on large-scale events or hotel/motel taxes for arts-based programming

"Tourism with dignity"

"Water flows from a well upward. This should be the same."

"We need to attract money and keep it here."

"How can we be capturing the revenues and sharing of economic development opportunities across food and beverage?"



Project for Public Spaces

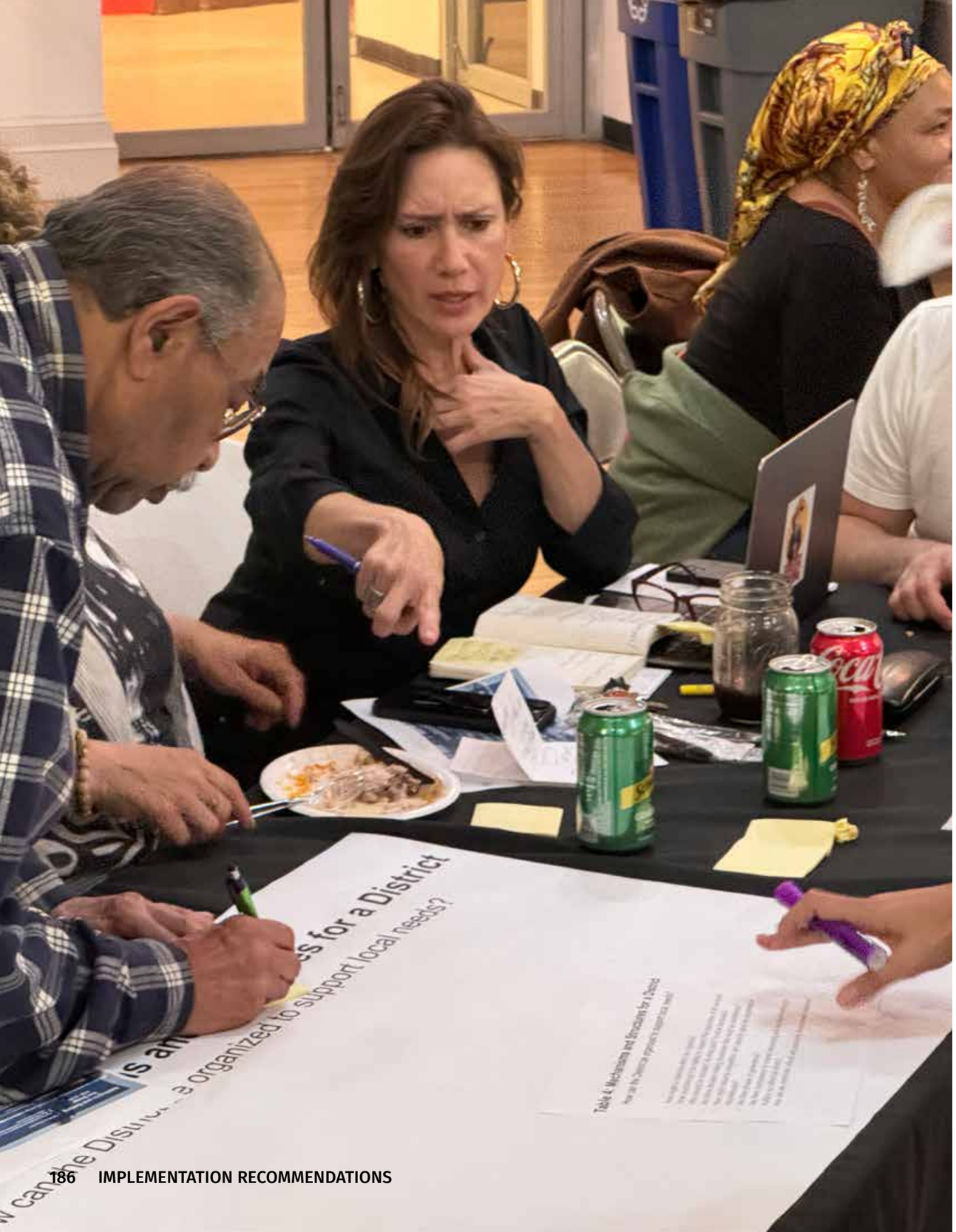
ADMINISTERING THE MONEY

A Public Art Trust Fund can be set up as a discreet fund of a Public Art Program. Public art program staff would deposit all funds earmarked for public art projects—be they from public or private sources, or donated or bequeathed to the city for works of art—into this Fund. Each project can be assigned to a separate account within the trust, or at least a specific project number used for tracking payments and disbursements. Additional funds can be deposited into the Public Art Trust Fund for a project's contingency or for use on other types of public art projects, both new and existing. The Public Art Program would contract with artists and pay them from this Public Art Trust Fund, which would follow standard accounting procedures and practices.

Funding Sources for Public Art

NEXT STEP

1. **Design an early business plan and prepare a market analysis**
2. **Decide if a Public Art Trust Fund is feasible and appropriate**



5. Design and Staff a New Entity to Manage the District

CONSIDERATIONS

The new entity may be responsible for a number of key activities. It is essential that it is managed and governed by a fully dedicated staff and operational team. It would be guided by the advisory body.

ACTIVITIES

Some of the activities for which the District entity could be responsible include, for example:

Administration
- Manages a common pool of funding
- Grants for community and artists from common pools
- Facilities support / capital
- Maintains strategy and coordinates advisory committee

Capacity Building, Knowledge Sharing and Leadership
- Hosting of knowledge network amongst institutions and others
- Grant writing support for artists
- Leadership curriculum, training, and credentialing

Placemaking and Programming
- Marketing and events, promotions
- Capital improvements
- Maintenance of public spaces
- Business development
- Artist incubation programming

Research and Advocacy
- Economic development trending
- Tourism development trending
- Fiscal impact analysis
- Housing and gentrification trending
- Advocacy and legislative engagement

PEOPLE

Executive Director
Small coordinating staff
Volunteers
Internship program

6. Align on Policy Agenda and Legislative Advocacy Strategy

CONSIDERATIONS

Many states and local jurisdictions have created legislation for the development of cultural districts. This is often necessary for the development of incentives and enhancements for cultural districts. In East Harlem, the District can play a role on two key fronts:

1. Consolidating a united advocacy agenda for East Harlem to mitigate the outsized NYC budgeting to large institutions, which is currently disproportionately funding 85% to well-funded large insitutions
2. Advocate for State grants for seed funding and capital improvements

At the State level, there are two key legislative items that impact East Harlem:

NY Senate Bill S253A

- Relates to developing criteria and guidelines for state designated arts and cultural districts.
- 2023-2024 Legislative Session
- Sponsor: State Senator José Serrano
- Status: In process of renegotiation in coordination with other NYS cultural centers and is expected to be reintroduced in 2025 Jan - Jun legislative session

NY Senate Bill S3565A

- Empowers the council on the arts to designate East Harlem as a cultural district
- Signed By Governor
- 2023-2024 Legislative Session
- Sponsor: State Senator Cordell Cleare and State Assemblymember Eddie Gibbs
- Status: No resources attached to the bill, but opens the door for potential capital campaigning

"We need unrestricted grants for operational costs"

ACTIVITIES

1. Hold regular meetings with elected officials
2. Establish a set of proposals for large-scale capital improvements aligned with legislative calendars
3. Develop and maintain a policy tracker of important legislative and policy changes and eligibility criteria
4. Develop an advocacy and policy agenda for the District that leverages, aligns, and amplifies the existing advocacy agendas of anchor institutions

PEOPLE

Steering Committee (New Entity)

RESOURCES

Cultural District Legislation
NY Senate Bill S253A
NY Senate Bill S3565A (Signed By Governor)

NEXT STEP

1. **Ensure that planning efforts align with current mapped area of NY Senate Bill S3565A**
2. **Convene an advocacy working group to gather language and collective advocacy leverage of a district for city capital budgeting**
3. **Contribute to draft language of the arts district bill designation and identify the specific economic implications and ensure that any re-negotiated language as it relates to S253A and eligibility criteria for New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) is applicable to East Harlem unique context and proposed activities**
4. **Pursue interagency collaboration with NYC DOT, NYC SBS, NYC DCLA, and NYC Parks to ensure permitting and resources opportunities and barriers are identified and coordinated. For example, overlay existing NYC Greenway Plan with desired public realm improvements and ensure that permitting conditions are understood for banners and landscaping.**

Project Costs

START-UP COSTS (soft costs):

Up to $500K Phase 1 (Year 1)

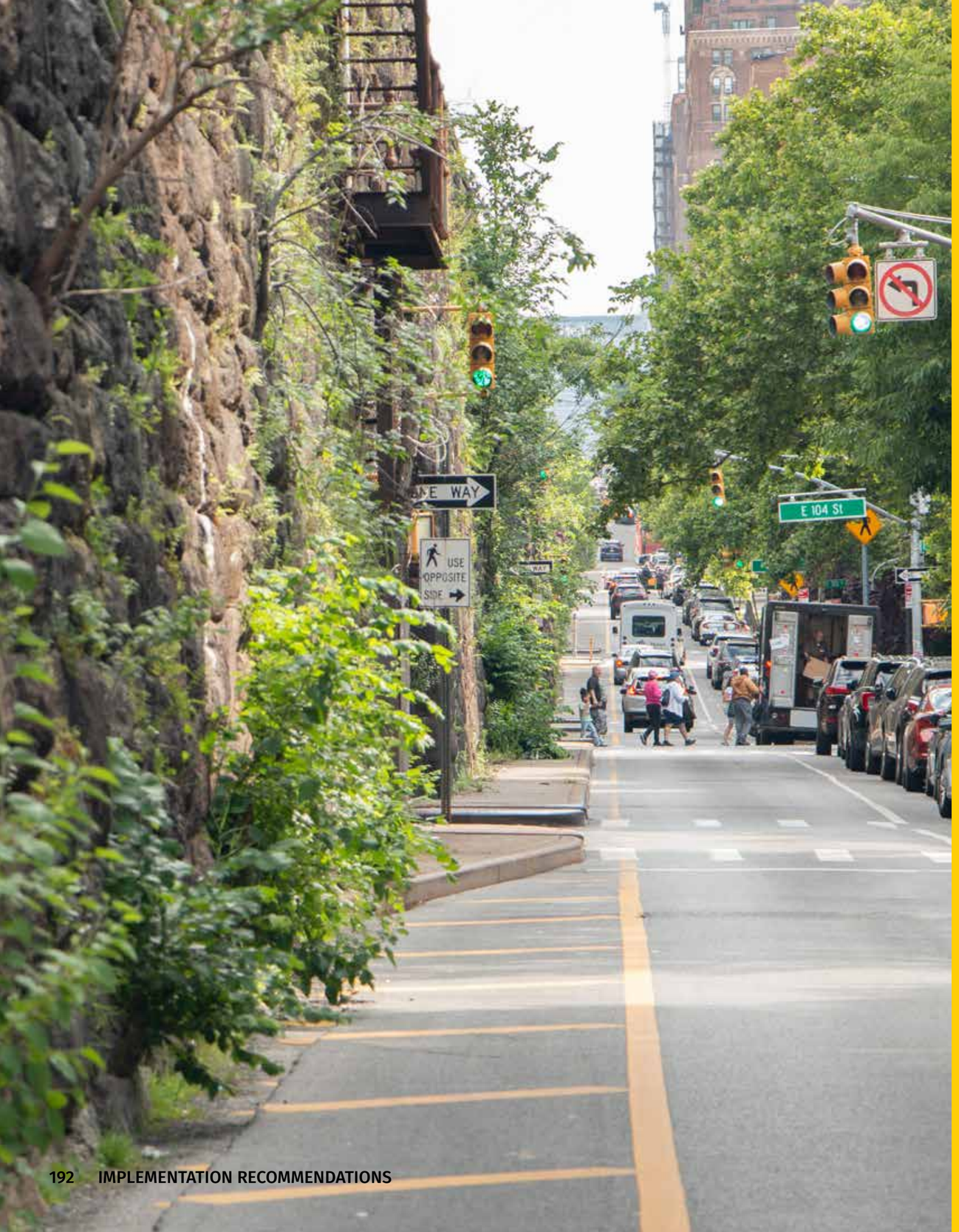
$500K for coalition building and programming, including legal fees, early staffing, deepening architectural studies, consultants, marketing and communications, digital presence making, pop-up events, honorarium for advisory committee, meeting expenses, public events calendar creation, business planning.

$2.5M Phase 2 (Years 2 - 4)

Hire an executive director and programming staff. Establishing a long-term marketing and community engagement plan.Launch larger-scale fundraising. Maintain legal counsel. Implement district-wide programming. Establish a pooled fund and local incentives to attract investment, acquire property and space. Provide artist grants.

$7M Phase 3 (Years 3 - 10)

Maintenance of staff and programming as in Phase 2.



COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENTS (hard costs):

$30-$35 M

Street Trees, Bioswales, Rain Gardens, Green Median Strips Wider Sidewalk, Protected Bike Lanes, High-Visibility Crosswalks, Raised Crosswalks
Benches, Seating & Lighting
Banners, Public Art & Wayfinding

INSTITUTIONAL UPGRADES (hard costs):

$40-$45 M

Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute: $3.1M
Taino Towers: $13.5M
El Barrio Artspace PS109: $6.75M
El Museo del Barrio: $12.5M
Julia De Burgos Cultural Arts Center: $6.75M
National Black Theater: $250k
Afro Latin Jazz Alliance / Belongó: $200k
Museum of the City of New York: $200k

Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute: $3.1M

EXTERIOR IMPROVEMENTS: $100K
- Renovate sidewalk to correct drainage issue
- Banners, flags & sidewalk beautification
- Mural

INTERIOR RENOVATION: $3M
- Relocate the administrative programming to 3rd floor
- Increase and clarify exhibition space, entry, and store on 1st and 2nd floor
- Construct a rear addition, including a monumental stair connecting the 1st and 2nd floors

Taino Towers: $13.5M

EXTERIOR IMPROVEMENTS: $5.75M
- Banners, flags & sidewalk beautification
- Improve entry to Red Carpet Theater from the south courtyard
- Renovate and program the south courtyard connecting Red Carpet Theater from the south courtyard

RED CARPET THEATER RENOVATION: $4M
- New material finishes throughout for added durability
- Replace perimeter glazing
- Add curtain
- New sound & lighting equipment

BLACK BOX THEATER RENOVATION: $3.75M
- New material finishes throughout
- Replacing sliding doors with sliding glass doors
- Add curtains
- Add seats
- New sound & lighting equipment
- New cafe and storefront along 122nd Street with connection to the theater

El Barrio Artspace PS109: $6.75M

EXTERIOR IMPROVEMENTS: $1.75M
- Banners, flags & sidewalk beautification
- Improve entry courtyard, new plantings, outfit with stage, banners, sound & lighting equipment for performance
- Improve back courtyard, new plantings, outfit with stage, sound & lighting equipment for performance

LOBBY & EXHIBITION SPACE RENOVATION: $2.5M
- Install new mechanical systems throughout building to free up facade of window units, increase ceiling height of central interior space on ground floor
- Reconfigure basement level to clarify entry to and presence of theater spaces
- Open hole in floor of ground level to make basement spaces more visible

BLACK BOX THEATER RENOVATION: $1M
- New finishes throughout
- New sound & lighting equipment for added flexibility and ease of use

DANCE THEATER RENOVATION: $1M
- New finishes throughout
- Add retractable seating
- New sound & lighting equipment for flexibility and ease of use

El Museo del Barrio: $14.25M

EXTERIOR IMPROVEMENTS: $2.0M
- Banners, flags & sidewalk beautification
- Replace exterior pavers to ensure proper loading for events
- Install projection & sound equipment
- Renovate the outdoor gallery on the 3rd floor, including new pavers

LOBBY RENOVATION: $8.75M
- Renovate lobby, ticketing, shop, cafe and galleries
- Minor interior renovation of back of house spaces adjacent to primary theater

LABORATORY & COMMUNITY EVENT HUB: $3.5M
- Renovate 3rd floor to include Laboratory & Community Event Hub
- Include installation of glass facade along outdoor gallery & event space

Julia De Burgos Cultural Arts Center: $6.75M

EXTERIOR IMPROVEMENTS: $200K
- Banners, flags & sidewalk beautification

PERFORMANCE CENTER & LOBBY RENOVATION: $2.75M
- Renovate lobby & add glass partition
- Renovate multipurpose room & classrooms to revised layout, new material finishes

THEATER RENOVATION: $3.75M
- Renovate theater space, accommodate new layout and provide new material finishes, new seating
- Renovate back of house space for street visibility
- New sound & lighting equipment, equip back of house space with sound booth

"This project isn't just about art. It's about creating a pathway to end generational poverty. By growing a thriving local economy centered around arts and culture, a theater and cultural district would attract tourism, bringing in new revenue and jobs. It would elevate the profile of our local businesses—restaurants, shops, and galleries—all while providing platforms for local talent to shine on a larger stage."
—Michelle Cruz, Visioning Session October 2024

National Black Theater: $250k

EXTERIOR IMPROVEMENTS: $250K
- Banners, flags & sidewalk beautification

Afro Latin Jazz Alliance / Belongó: $200k

EXTERIOR IMPROVEMENTS: $200K
- Banners, flags & sidewalk beautification

Museum of the City of New York: $200k

EXTERIOR IMPROVEMENTS: $200K
- Banners, flags & sidewalk beautification



Courtesy of Union Settlement

WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO:

Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute
Melody Capote, Sabine Blaizin, Nefertiti P. Arthur

El Barrio's Artspace PS109
Elliott Ortiz

NYC Economic Development Corporation
Aileen Gaztambide

Taino Towers - Multifamily Management Services
Tony Lantigua

National Black Theatre
Barrie Koegel, Belynda M'Baye, Sade Lythcott

El Barrio's Artspace PS109
Rolinda Ramos, Emmanuel Hernandez

El Museo del Barrio
Carlos Gálvez, Cynthia Carrion

Museum of the City of New York
Nick Martinez

Belongó
Zack O'Farrill

Office of New York City Council Deputy Speaker Diana Ayala
Elsie Encarnación

Office of New York State Senator Jose Serrano
George Damalas

La Fortaleza Community Development Corporation
Félix Leo Campos

La Reina Del Barrio, Inc
Rhina Valentin

Robleswrites Productions Inc.
Peggy Robles-Alvarado

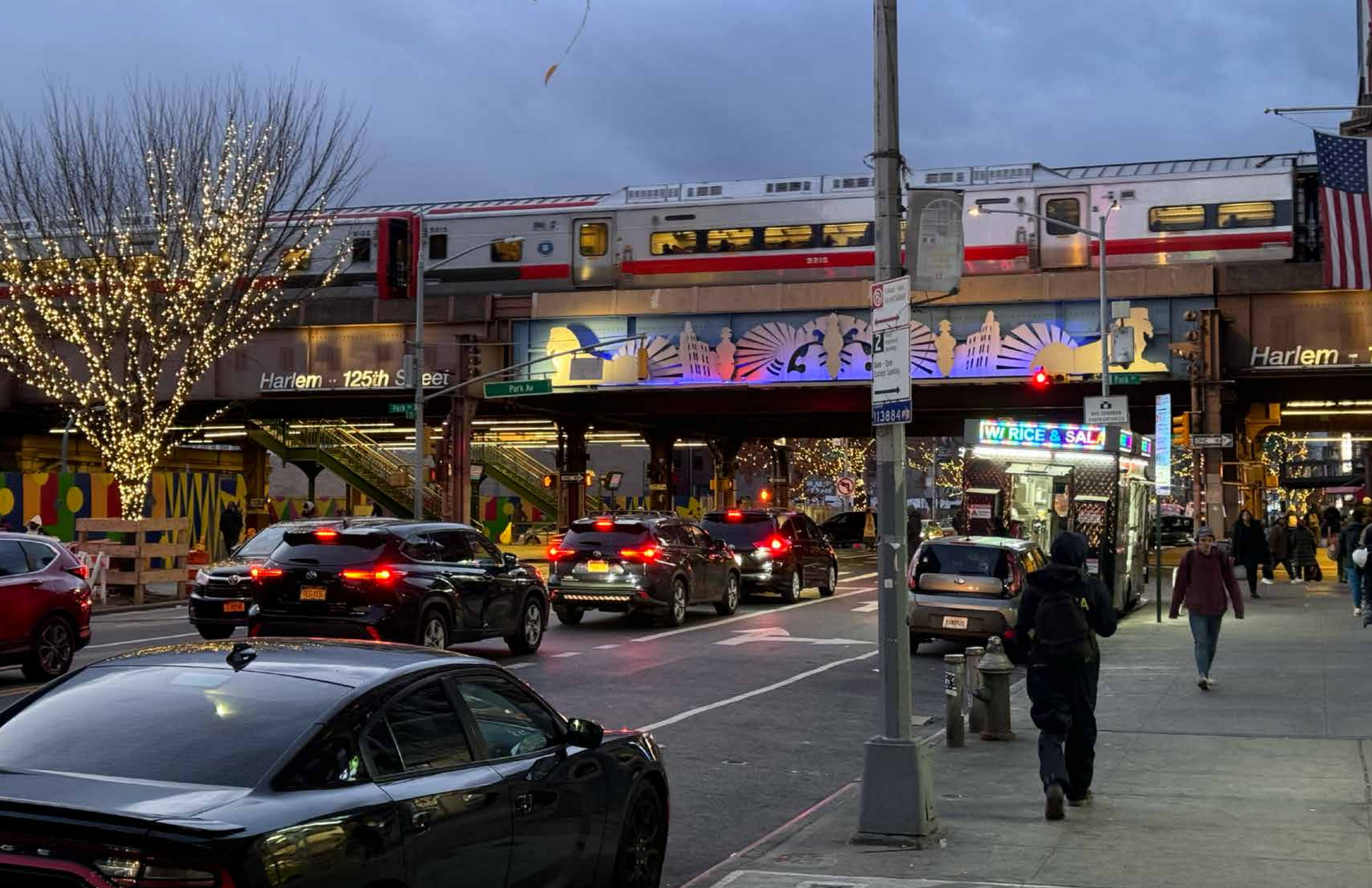
Taina's Touch Arts Enterprize
Taina Traverso

Playwright
Eugene Rodriguez

MirRam Group
Ana Chireno

JEROME HAFERD Studio
Jerome Haferd

Taller Boricua
Eliezer Berrios


Harlem - 125th Street
Park Av
Z
RICE & SALA



Courtesy of Union Settlement

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1:
Case Study Learnings

APPENDIX 2:
Landscape of Funding and Activation Sources

APPENDIX 3:
Introduction to October 2024 Visioning Session

APPENDIX 4:
OBRA Musings

APPENDICES TO BE MADE AVAILABLE ONLINE



Courtesy of Union Settlement

MADE POSSIBLE BY

OBRA ARCHITECTS

Partners in Public Design

UNION SETTLEMENT

WITH GENEROUS SUPPORT FROM

NEW YORK STATE OF OPPORTUNITY | Regional Economic Development Councils

New York City Council 1625 Deputy Speaker Diana Ayala

NYC Small Business Services | careers businesses neighborhoods