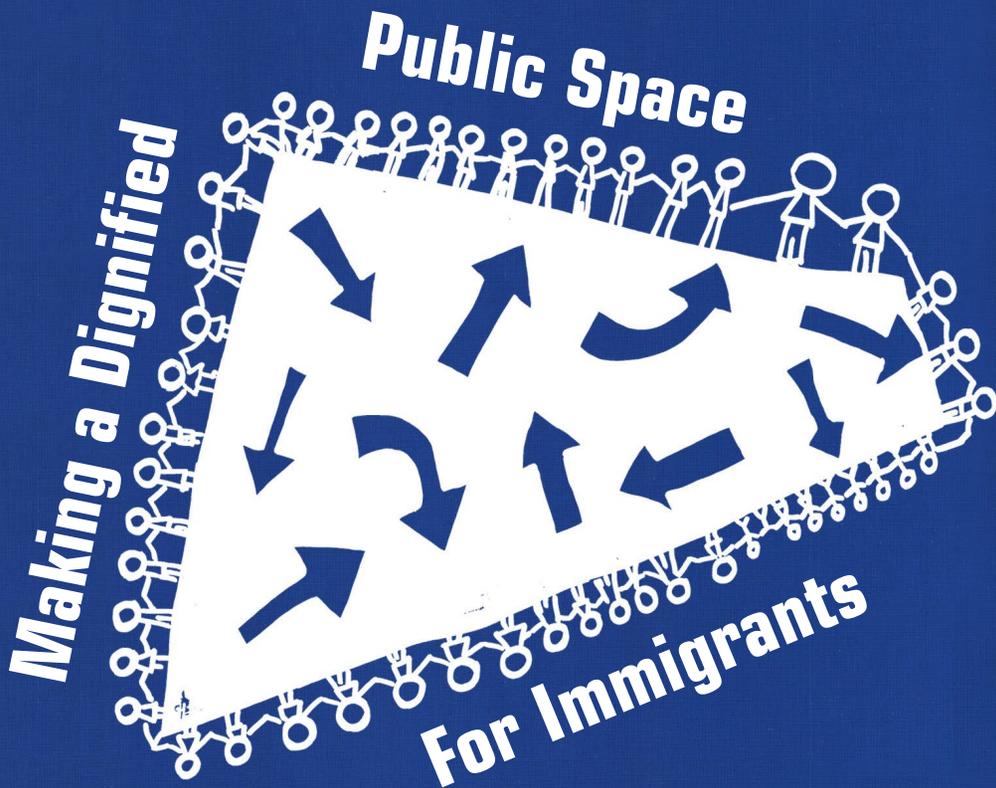


CORONA

PLAZA

ES

PARA



¡TODOS!

By Valeria Mogilevich, Mariana Mogilevich and Queens Museum staff
Prerana Reddy, Alexandra García, and José Serrano-McClain

Design by Clarisa Diaz

Translation by Adina Mazer and Mariana Mogilevich

Transcriptions by Adina Mazer and Valeria Mogilevich

Interviews by Alexandra García, Valeria Mogilevich, and José Serrano-McClain.

Interviews with Mónica Avilés, Verónica Ramírez, and Neshi Galindo were conducted in Spanish and appear here in translation. All interviews have been edited for clarity and length.

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OUR COLLABORATORS

Mónica Avilés

Mónica Avilés has lived in Corona for 15 years. She is the director of the dance group Ecuador Sumag Llacta, founder of the youth dance troupe Ñukanchik Llakta Wawakunas - Wawa Sumak, and serves on the Community Council of **IMI Corona**.

Alex Berryman

Alex Berryman is a Principal Landscape Architect at the RBA Group, and the lead designer for Corona Plaza.

Naila Caicedo-Rosario

Naila Caicedo-Rosario was hired as the **Queens Museum's** first Community Organizer in 2006. She is currently the Government Relations and Advocacy Manager at Brooklyn Public Library.

Ricardi Calixte

Ricardi Calixte is the Deputy Director of the **Queens Economic Development Corporation (QEDC)**.

Council Member Julissa Ferreras

Council Member Julissa Ferreras represents the 21st Council District in Queens, serving the neighborhoods of Corona, Elmhurst, East Elmhurst, LeFrak City, and parts of Jackson Heights.

Priscilla De Jesus

Priscilla De Jesus is the Program Manager for the Queens Navigator Program at **Public Health Solutions**.

Donovan Finn

Donovan Finn is a founder of the Jackson Heights Green Alliance. He has helped operate and manage the 78th Street Plaza in Jackson Heights, Queens, for several years.

Neshi Galindo

Neshi Galindo is a photographer, documentary filmmaker, writer, poet, activist, and mother of two young children. She founded Click Kids, a photography workshop, and has also been actively involved in creative education initiatives at **IMI Corona**.

Alexandra García

Alexandra García was hired as the **Queens Museum's** Community Organizer in 2008 and is currently the Corona Plaza Programs Coordinator.

Yoselin Genao

Yoselin Genao is the former Chief of Staff to Council Member Ferreras. She is currently Executive Director at Neighborhood Housing Services of Northern Queens.

Laura Hansen

Laura Hansen is the Managing Director of the **Neighborhood Plaza Partnership (NPP)**.

Immigrant Movement International Corona (IMI Corona)

Immigrant Movement International is a community space in Corona, Queens, taking a holistic approach to immigrant education. Many of the projects developed and incubated at IMI Corona have been presented publicly at Corona Plaza.

Phillip Kellogg

Phillip Kellogg is Executive Director of the Fulton Area Business Alliance (FAB Alliance), a Business Improvement District (BID) that is focused on activating public space along Fulton Street in the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Fort Greene and Clinton Hill and advocating for small businesses there.

Dorothy Lê

Dorothy Lê is the Director of Capacity Building for the **Neighborhood Plaza Partnership (NPP)**.

Silvia Juliana Mantilla Ortiz

Silvia Juliana Mantilla Ortiz is the **IMI Corona** Community Organizer and Artist Services Coordinator at the **Queens Museum**.

Juanita Martinez

Juanita Martinez is Senior Community Health Worker at **Public Health Solutions**.

Neighborhood Plaza Partnership (NPP)

NPP is an organization providing an array of services to assist plaza managers in high-need areas.

Public Health Solutions

Public Health Solutions is a nonprofit dedicated to improving the health of communities. Public Health Solutions has an office next to Corona Plaza and tables at Corona Plaza events.

Queens Economic Development Corporation (QEDC)

QEDC is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to create and protect jobs by assisting small businesses and promoting business development in Queens neighborhoods.

Queens Museum

The Queens Museum is dedicated to presenting the highest quality visual arts and educational programming for people in the New York metropolitan area, and particularly for the residents of Queens, a uniquely diverse, ethnic, cultural, and international community.

Verónica Ramírez

Verónica Ramírez has lived in Corona for 16 years. She teaches Bailoterapia as part of the Mujeres en Movimiento collective at **IMI Corona**. She is also IMI Corona's outreach coordinator a member of their Council.

Prerana Reddy

Prerana Reddy is the Director of Public Programs and Community Engagement at the **Queens Museum**.

Quilian Riano

Quilian Riano is the Principal of DSGN AGNC, a research and design studio experimenting with forms of political engagement. He was commissioned by the Queens Museum along with urban planner Aurash Khawarazad to help generate community input on Corona Plaza's design.

Patrick Rowe

Patrick Rowe is the founder of Mobile Print Power, a multigenerational artist collective based out of **IMI Corona** that uses silkscreen printmaking to engage communities and explore social and cultural situations.

José Serrano-McClain

José Serrano-McClain is the Community Organizer for the **Queens Museum** and the Manager of Corona Studio, the Museum's long-term social practice projects initiative.

Social Practice Queens

Social Practice Queens is a joint MFA program of the Queens Museum and the City University of New York. Students in Social Practice Queens conducted research about Corona Plaza and have also contributed programming to the plaza.

Roshani Thakore

Roshani Thakore is a Corona resident and leads the Masala Bhangra Workout dance classes at Corona Plaza events.

Larissa Vasquez

Larissa Vasquez is the Manager of Adult Programs at Planned Parenthood, a reproductive health nonprofit. Planned Parenthood tables regularly at Corona Plaza events.

Emily Weidenhof

Emily Weidenhof is the NYC Plaza Program Director for the Department of Transportation. She has been running the NYC Plaza Program since 2010.

On a sunny day at Corona Plaza,

you might see people eating lunch at tables, taking a break after grocery shopping, or relaxing and listening to music. Friends meet to chat, kids are studying, and families are eating ice cream. Come back for a weekend event and there might be, all at the same time, teens teaching each other how to screen print, children making art, an all female mariachi band playing, 30 people doing dance aerobics, people handing out flyers about an upcoming public meeting, and folks greeting one another with familiarity, like they've seen each other at the plaza before.

Corona Plaza has been a central site for learning through doing for the Queens Museum's community engagement efforts as a whole. When we hired our first community organizer in late 2006, the organizations that we initially convened all mentioned Corona Plaza as a site of interest, and saw its potential not just as a place for passive recreation or business improvement. They had the foresight to envision what it has now evolved into: a springboard for engaging residents in community development; a platform for developing and presenting local cultural producers and artists working in all mediums; a site for promoting the services of local community-based organizations; and a catalyst to promote health and wellness. We have gone on a long but incredibly educational and inspirational journey—moving from early cleanup and beautification efforts, block parties, and artist projects to becoming an official NYC Department of Transportation Plaza Program site with a full suite of regular programming, a friends group of local businesses, and a part-time plaza programming manager. The process has changed our institutional culture towards being more asset-based and accountable to the largely new-immigrant community we work with, as much as it has provided opportunities for a range of local leadership and stewardship to emerge.

The intent of this publication is to make public the firsthand accounts of the people who have participated through an in-depth case study, which can be shared and printed on demand. We hope people can learn from our experience when they collaboratively program their own plazas. Our intended audience includes museum professionals interested in engaging public spaces, neighborhood and business organizations that are either thinking about or already engaged in developing and improving public plazas, city officials developing public space initiatives, urban planners, local activists working on urban equity issues, students and professors in social practice art programs, and potential future partners in our own plaza.

The pages that follow include documentation of our long-standing relationship with this evolving public space. Alongside extensive visual documentation, we feature interviews with and reflections from the project's key collaborators and supporters: community members, city employees, resident artists, and museum staff. We've organized the workbook chronologically to chart the development of our own thinking, with each chapter ending in key questions we found useful along the way. We've also tried to be honest about the challenges we faced, and how, with our partners, we have tried to be both creative and critical in our responses. We hope that it honors the work of so many people who have contributed their time, labor, and ideas to the project, many of them volunteers. We also hope that it inspires readers to be creative in their approach to partnerships, to recognize their local assets, and to appreciate more fully the role of the creative community in neighborhood improvement.

Prerana Reddy
Director of Public Programming & Community Engagement
Queens Museum



Meet Corona Plaza

A photo essay by Neshi Galindo

We asked photographer Neshi Galindo to share and talk about some of her favorite images from Corona Plaza's transformation. Neshi is also a documentary filmmaker, writer, poet, activist, and mother of two young children. She is passionate about community programs that develop children's creativity. Her own children are part of the Corona Youth Music Project and Click Kids, a photography workshop that she founded. Neshi has also been actively involved in creative education initiatives at Immigrant Movement International Corona. Born in Oaxaca, Mexico, Neshi is reaching ten years as a New Yorker.



"That place used to be full of moving trucks, and you weren't able to go there or even see anything. And then all of a sudden there was a digging truck, people with shovels and there was yellow tape all around. That got my attention. I wondered what they were going to do here. I started taking pictures and the workers weren't shy at all. On the contrary, it seemed like they wanted to be photographed working, so I did it. And they changed the space super fast. One day I saw them digging and removing dirt and the next day there were chairs and people were sitting there drinking coffee. It was beautiful."

INSTALLATION OF TEMPORARY PLAZA



CORONA PLAZA FESTIVAL

"The plaza was divided in different spaces and you could be wherever you wanted. There was the library, there was a place with the musicians, dancing, and where the tents are—I think that's where the organizations were giving information about what they do. It was a way to coexist, to communicate and to come together."



"You go and read in a library, right? And some people read on the train and things like that. To see that in Corona Plaza, the kids flipping through the books, and not just the kids, their parents with the books too... The curiosity of what was happening in that moment and that it was a family thing, that was what got my attention."

THE UNI PROJECT, AN OPEN-AIR READING ROOM



MOBILE PRINT POWER SCREEN PRINTING WORKSHOP

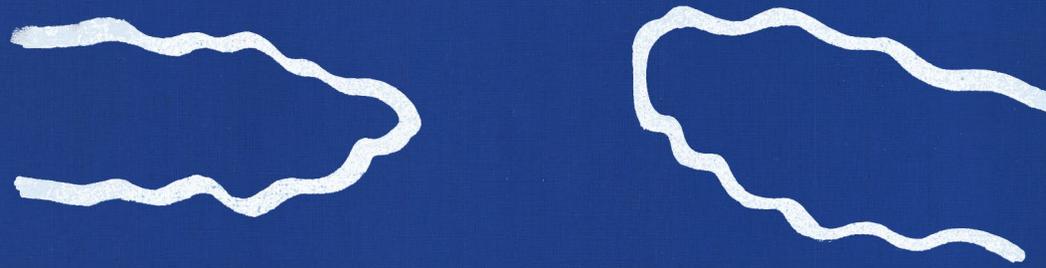
"I think that this space is the most beneficial for kids. Because kids always need open space and a place to flourish and develop their skills, and above all they need a place to breathe fresh air, to be social and to meet other children, to share something... And that's what I've seen in Corona Plaza.

In the screen printing workshop, the kids made their own designs. Seeing what they can do, at just five years old, that's an incredible sense of power and security that we give to the kids, and they need it a lot."



"There was a lot of intense emotion that day. My daughters were jamming on the buckets, and the sound was like the drums, like a heartbeat. Seeing so many children—maybe there were 200 kids, kids that weren't even in the orchestra—and they saw the cans there, they sat down and they started to play and all of the parents were there watching their children, like, 'Wow.' It was a very inspirational moment."

CORONA CHILDREN'S ORCHESTRA,
A PART OF CORONA YOUTH MUSIC PROJECT



SUEÑOS



1 Welcome to Corona!

Is there a different way of being a museum?

One in which the institution can be embedded in and responsive to the neighborhood where it lives? And use its resources and human capital to work with local communities to make a better place? At the Queens Museum, we wanted to learn how. What kind of issues did people in the neighborhood want to address, and what kind of work was happening on the ground?

In 2007, the museum started the Heart of Corona Initiative. Over the course of three years, we brought together a broad range of people from Corona to meet and talk about life in the neighborhood. Community leaders from local organizations representing immigrant communities, social service organizations, local public school parent associations, health providers, senior centers, community board representatives, local media, economic development institutions, elected officials, and a few local businesses all came together for a conversation every three months. Could we in Corona, as a neighborhood, take it upon ourselves to make a part of our neighborhood better?

One thing that came up in the Heart of Corona meetings was that community leaders felt that the city wasn't maintaining streets and public spaces well. Corona Plaza was a gateway to the neighborhood—next to the subway and bus stops and home to the post office and movie theater—and had historically been a centerpiece of the area. But Corona residents felt that the city was not meeting its sanitation obligations, and they felt blamed for the plaza's condition. Out of these conversations, we realized that Corona Plaza had potential as a highly visible place that could change the narrative about Corona from one of municipal neglect to a place where community members were shaping their neighborhood. In this chapter we'll introduce you to Corona and the issues we learned were important to residents there.



Corona Then and Now

How Corona Came to Be

Once the rural community of West Flushing, Corona grew up with the expansion of the railroad and connections to Brooklyn and Manhattan in the late nineteenth century. With the arrival of the Long Island Railroad in 1854, developers began to subdivide farmland and turn it into housing. The area boomed after 1872, when a developer renamed it Corona, the “crown” of the new villages on Long Island, and sold hundreds of lots for residential development. The elevated subway, which still runs over Roosevelt Avenue, sealed the deal in 1917. Corona became the densely populated home to a diverse set of working- and middle-class residents. First- and second-generation Jews, Italians, Germans, and Irish all called Corona home. Some worked in the factories that sprung up in the area, too. African Americans from the South settled in North Corona, where there was less housing discrimination than in other parts of the city and better housing than in Harlem and Brooklyn.

The biggest physical changes to Corona in the twentieth century came with the 1939 New York World’s Fair, when the neighborhood’s swamps and ash dumps were transformed into fairgrounds. Later, these became Flushing Meadows Corona Park, home of the Queens Museum. In the 1960s, LeFrak City, a massive residential complex, added its eighteen-story towers to Corona’s landscape of mostly one- and two-family homes.

Corona’s Activist Past

After World War II, Corona’s African American population grew and the neighborhood became more racially segregated. Residents of Black Corona actively fought for their rights and to improve their neighborhood. Malcolm X preached Black Power in Corona, and the Black Panthers ran community programs. Residents protested school segregation, and organized to develop a community-controlled library, the Langston Hughes Library and Cultural Center, in 1969. Edna Baskin and residents of LeFrak City organized to improve living conditions and political representation in that city-within-a-city.

Corona Has Always Been a Mecca for Migration

Newcomers from different parts of the United States and the world transformed Corona after World War II. The first Spanish-speakers to arrive came from Puerto Rico. They were followed in the 1960s by immigrants from the Dominican Republic. An immigration boom in the 1980s brought more Dominicans, but also people from China, Colombia, Korea, India, the Philippines, Ecuador, Pakistan, Mexico, Peru, and Guyana to Corona.

A Majority-Minority Neighborhood

Corona remains an immigrant neighborhood today. 64 percent of the population is foreign-born (2013 American Community Survey). Of the foreign-born population, almost three-quarters hails from Latin America and the Caribbean. A little over ten percent is Asian. Corona’s immigrant population is predominantly Mexican, Ecuadorian, Dominican, and Colombian. The neighborhood has more Mexican and Ecuadorian immigrants than any anywhere else in New York City, and the most Dominican immigrants in Queens. Corona’s migrants have brought with them a diverse and vibrant cultural heritage, which has transformed the neighborhood.

Corona Before Corona Plaza

Here are some of the things we learned about Corona through our community conversations starting in 2006. Many of these hold true today.

A lot of cultural and civic groups called Corona home

Traditional music and dance groups taught and performed Mexican, Colombian, Peruvian, and Ecuadorian folkloric dance. Small community-based organizations and civic organizations were active around issues of health, immigrant rights, and social services. But many of these area organizations were small and under-resourced, and were facing severe budget cuts at the height of the financial crisis in 2008.

Public space was very important to people in Corona

People in Corona brought a knowledge and culture of using public space with them from their hometowns. Plazas play a central role in public life in Latin America. They are free spaces where people can wind down, get together with friends and family, and attend and participate in cultural events. But there was no space like this in Corona.

“There was only Flushing Meadows Corona Park before. But now Corona Plaza is right in the center. It feels like in Izucar de Matamoros, where I’m from. You go to the *zócalo* (public square) and you buy a coffee and you sit and you drink it there. Or sometimes we just want to chat and get a bit of sun.” – Verónica Ramírez, IMI Corona Council Member & Outreach Coordinator, Co-founder Mujeres en Movimiento

Space was tight in Corona

Housing was expensive and many people lived in overcrowded homes. A lack of affordable housing and predatory renting practices meant that large families squeezed into small spaces, and day laborers bed-shared, trading off the use of a bed over the course of a single day.

Non-profit and cultural organizations also lacked access to space. When

planning for Corona Plaza began, area organizations didn’t have a place to hold meetings, workshops, and cultural performances. In general, there were not a lot of public spaces other than playgrounds.

Corona was economically stressed

Residents often worked long hours, juggled multiple jobs, and cared for family, so free time was a luxury. With economic priorities like sending home remittances, paying for entertainment or for travel to entertainments outside of the neighborhood was not affordable.

“We live so much in the daily grind that we forget to give ourselves a moment with our family, and our neighbors, and our community.” – Verónica Ramírez, IMI Corona/Mujeres en Movimiento

Corona cared about health issues

Heart disease is a concern for Latinos nationwide, and so are risk factors for cardiovascular disease, like physical inactivity, poor nutrition, and obesity. Corona had high rates of heart disease and diabetes. Corona residents were also concerned with health access. Foreign-born residents are less likely to be insured, and therefore often go without even basic medical care.

“Obesity is the biggest problem that affects our health. It creates many problems, among them diabetes. It’s not just that stress makes you overeat, it can also make you sleep poorly, and that makes you feel distressed.” – Verónica Ramírez, IMI Corona/Mujeres en Movimiento

Public space did not feel safe for residents

Corona residents didn’t have a safe place to wait for the subways. When they waited in the parking lot that is now Corona Plaza, the police gave out lots of tickets for loitering. Harassment of street vendors and youth was a common occurrence. Many Corona residents were undocumented, and worried about the consequences of interacting with the police. New York City’s stop and frisk

policy, implemented in 2005, disproportionately affected Black and Latino individuals. All this made residents wary of spending time in public space.

People had to work extra hard to be heard in Corona

City government is complex. Groups in the neighborhood had to work hard to make their needs and desires heard. Many Corona residents were not eligible to vote, so they had to organize and actively demand public amenities from their elected officials. While the neighborhood does have some attentive elected officials, Corona residents felt that municipal agencies were not interested in providing for the neighborhood. There was a sense that public amenities like parks, libraries, schools, senior centers, and after-school programs were not being created in Corona.

A Plaza for Corona

Corona had many great assets that the Queens Museum could help to bring together, but the neighborhood also faced significant challenges. In beginning our work on Corona Plaza, the Queens Museum knew that we had to respond to specific local needs. We mapped out a set of values as the foundation for all the work we would take up in collaboration with other groups. These values would change along the way as the learning process continued.

When we started to think about Corona Plaza, we knew we wanted to be a partner in the neighborhood's demand for more public space. We wanted to shift the space that would become Corona Plaza from a symbol of municipal disinterest to a space that is created by the neighborhood and reflects its vibrancy. First and foremost, we learned that it was important for the space to do two things:

- It should be culturally relevant, exhibiting local cultures and fostering cultural solidarity.
- It should address heart health problems, which disproportionately affects Latino populations, and health access in the neighborhood.

Outdoor cafés are a place to relax, to think, a time for yourself. These are the kinds of spaces you can find in Manhattan. But it's a place for rich people. They don't exist in places like Queens.

Neshi Galindo, photographer, editor,
former IMI Corona Coordinator

Community Conversations, 2006-2010

Who did we talk to in and about Corona?

Community-Based Organizations and Social Service Organizations

Alianza Ecuatoriana
Centro Civico Colombiano
Corona Lions
Corona National Community Center
Corona Self Help Center
La Defensoría del Pueblo
Dominico-American Society of Queens
Ecuadorian International
Ecuadorian Civic Committee
Florence E. Smith Community Center
Hanac Corona Beacon Center
Incarnación Baseball League
New Immigrant Community Empowerment
SCO Family of Services

Economic Development Institutions

Business Outreach Center of Queens
Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Queens
Latino Tourism Chamber of Commerce
Queens Economic Development Corporation

Media Outlets

Community Journal
EcuTimes
Hispanic Information and Telecommunications Network

Health Providers

American Diabetes Association
American Heart Association
Elmhurst Hospital
MetroPlus Health Program

Parent Associations

Junior High School 22 Parent Association
P.S. 16 Parent Association
P.S. 19 Parent Association
Somos Padres

Local Businesses

Antioqueña Bakery
Western Union

City Agencies/Elected Officials

City Council Member Office
New York City Department of Parks and Recreation
Partnerships for Parks
Queens Community Board 4
State Assembly Member Office
State Senator Office

Ask Yourself:

- ★ **What are the specific local needs your plaza project can respond to?**
- ★ **Who is interested in working together to improve your neighborhood?**



comunicar
communicate

2 The Art of Listening

The Queens Museum didn't know

how to do participatory design and programming when we started working in Corona. We had a lot to learn: about Corona Plaza, and about programming with and for the neighborhood. In order to think about what a public plaza could do, we needed to do research on the ground. In this chapter, you'll learn about our first steps in community engagement. Here's how we started to build relationships in Corona and learn about neighborhood needs, and how you can, too.

Hire a Community Organizer!

We hired Naila Caicedo-Rosario as our first community organizer in 2006. She had previously worked for local City Council Member Hiram Monserrate and as a canvasser for the Working Families Party.

Why Hire an Organizer?

We needed to earn the neighborhood's trust, so that Corona residents would feel that the Queens Museum wanted to be a long-term partner, that we weren't just there for self-promotion. This is the difference between outreach and community organizing. Instead of us bringing in already planned art projects, the community organizer was there to listen and learn.

The Queens Museum looked for someone who already knew the local organizations and had established networks in the neighborhood. An organizer would also have experience canvassing—talking to residents in their homes and on the street, and meeting with local elected officials and organizations.

It was important to have someone on staff who could speak in a language that community organizations, service providers, and elected officials could relate to. This was a different vocabulary than the one used in the museum world. It was also very important that the organizer spoke the languages that were most prevalent in the neighborhood. In Corona, that's Spanish.

We also wanted someone to be physically present in the community. The Queens Museum is not right next to Corona Plaza. The community organizer

could be a constant physical presence there, "pounding the pavement" to connect with organizations in the neighborhood and to bring arts and cultural programs to the table to foster more participatory interactions.

"It can be easy to send an email or a letter, but having that one-on-one meeting with someone is extremely valuable. I have found that when people see you in the community and get to know who you are and your intentions, it can really strengthen the relationship." – Naila Caicedo-Rosario, former Community Organizer, Queens Museum

Throw a Block Party!

We wanted to get to work quickly and informally. If people saw change happen quickly, it would shift their perceptions of Corona Plaza. They would feel proud of the changes, and feel ownership of the space. Public events and beautification projects were a fast way to involve the neighbors in starting a dialogue about the plaza site.

The Heart of Corona Coalition organized a series of daylong block parties in the summer of 2007 and 2008. We worked with organizations including Elmhurst Hospital, the American Heart Association, and the Queens Economic Development Corporation (QEDC), which had already helped build a coalition of local businesses interested in neighborhood improvement called Corona CAN.

Before each block party, we organized cleanups in Corona Plaza with the Parks Department. These events could involve local residents in the plaza and get the attention of elected officials. Changing the narrative that the community didn't care about cleanliness or beautification, the cleanups also showed elected officials that Corona residents were invested in the neighborhood. Small-scale plantings and cleanings made it clear for all to see that residents had the power to create space on their own. And it was a way to attract new partners, as they saw new possibilities in front of them.

For the block parties, we closed off the street and organized live music, art-making, and information tables. Headlining acts performed alongside local musicians, folkloric dance troupes, and spoken word artists. Local service and advocacy organizations set up tables. Local clinics and organizations like MetroPlus Health did nutritional workshops and free diabetes and blood pressure screenings. More than 600 previously uninsured residents signed up for low-cost health insurance.

The block parties were a great way to start having conversations with residents, local businesses, community organizations, and local artists of different stripes. We could bring together all these different groups with just a simple block party permit.

Commission Art Projects!

To learn more about Corona and identify community needs, the museum also commissioned socially engaged art projects. This way, we could channel our visual arts mission, arts budget, and our connections to foundations toward the crucial work of learning about the neighborhood.

For the Queens Museum, an art institution isn't just a gallery that collects and exhibits art objects. It can also be a vehicle of exchange between museum staff, artists, and community members. The goal of this project was never to get more people to come to the Queens Museum. We wanted to change people's idea of what art can be and what an art museum can be.

Art doesn't have to be an object on display like a painting or a sculpture. It can be an event, a form of interaction, or a social situation. It can blend into the neighborhood and bring to light the social dynamics around it. Through socially engaged art projects, a museum can work with local artists and residents to bring about change in its community.

As part of the program called "Corona Plaza—Center for Everywhere" (funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services), the Queens Museum commissioned site-specific and participatory artist projects in Corona Plaza. We hired outside curators with experience in public art. They formed a jury with museum staff, including the community organizer, to select projects from

an open call. Having the community organizer on the jury helped us imagine where a project could be sited and which themes might be most relevant to the community. In the second year, we realized that we needed to bring some Corona residents into the artist selection process to ensure greater transparency and buy-in.

Once artists were selected, the community organizer helped them get to know the neighborhood and negotiate project partners and venues. The artists were also present at each block party in the plaza to engage with a broader public and share how their project was developing.

The museum sees the community as not just potential audience members but as the real heart of the institution.

Naila Caicedo-Rosario,
former Community Organizer, Queens Museum

By embedding art in the places you use on an everyday basis, you can create casual conversations that are very different from what you'd get from formal canvassing. These projects were not engaging in social scientific research, but they helped the museum understand what made the community tick, and what spaces were most important to people in the neighborhood.

FOLLOWING ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF THE PROJECTS WE COMMISSIONED IN CORONA IN 2008:



Pimp My Piragua, Miguel Luciano

Miguel created a piragua (a term for flavored shaved ice in Puerto Rico) cart, and pimped it out low-rider style, incorporating a monitor and speakers to play salsa and merengue, as well as a hip-hop video he made with local rappers about his cart. Over the course of three months, he went out and made ices for the public in the neighborhood and at the block parties in Corona Plaza.

Miguel used the cart as a platform for conversations with residents and other vendors. He talked to residents about art and culture, and to vendors about their work and the regulations that affected it. This led us to think more about street vending issues—both the difficulties vendors face and the economic opportunity food vending presented to new immigrants—and it influenced the way we approached vending issues in the plaza in the future.



Adventures of La Coronita, Mike Estabrook

Mike surveyed a variety of Corona residents about the places that were important to them. He then created a mascot called La Coronita, and placed painted wood cut-outs of her in the spots residents called out. He also created a series of videos featuring an animated La Coronita shot at these same locations. One resident said the lake in Flushing Meadows Corona Park reminded her of her home in Ecuador, where she would boat around in the lake with her brother. Estabrook placed a canoe in the middle of the lake helmed by La Coronita and her brother.

"I wanted to use my mascot to get people more engaged in their neighborhood, to get people to start thinking about their locality and everyday life. People don't need to know she's an artwork or a representative of the Queens Museum. The fact is that there's this strange thing sitting there, so people will focus on that." – Mike Estabrook, artist



Unisex, Lin and Lam

Hair cutting and styling foster intimate relationships and conversations. Lin and Lam offered free haircuts at the street fairs we co-organized in the summer of 2008. The artists recorded their interactions with community clients, who shared their thoughts and feelings on issues such as beauty, aging, family, jobs, migration, work, and play. Later, they played the videos at local hair salons.

Tip:

It wasn't enough to just tell artists to do projects in Corona. It doesn't work if an artist unfamiliar with the local context helicopters in to do a project. What made these projects work was that the community organizer was already in place. Naila was already connected to neighborhood organizations, so she could introduce the artists to community partners, and the community partners (like the hair salon that played Lin and Lam's videos, for example) already knew and trusted the Queens Museum and were willing to collaborate.

Lessons Learned

After doing many of these kinds of art projects, we stepped back and collected feedback from the community, our partners, and the artists. We realized then that to have really meaningful community participation in the projects, they would have to last longer. This would inform how we set up residencies going forward. We also learned that residents responded most strongly to Spanish-speaking artists.

Ask Yourself:

- ★ **What are the different voices in your neighborhood? Don't just go with your usual suspects. Who are the community-based organizations who have been doing work in the neighborhood for a long time? What about small business owners? Or housing agencies?**
- ★ **These people are your biggest assets. How can you start listening to them now?**
- ★ **How can your organization be flexible, and learn to work with organizations and people who have different ways of doing things than you do?**

- ★ **Who will convene all of your stakeholders? They should play a big role in your programming and design process. Ideally, they will already be deeply embedded in the neighborhood and can connect to residents, local organizations, and local services.**
- ★ **What spaces and issues are already important to residents? How can you find out beyond traditional canvassing or surveys?**
- ★ **What kind of short-term program can you have in the space to begin working with local residents? How will it begin to address the desires of the neighborhood?**
- ★ **Even if you don't have the resources to hire a community organizer, you can use community organizing approaches. Who in your community could help get residents, elected officials, and businesses on board?**



3 Partnering Up

Momentum was building

in the space that would become Corona Plaza. In 2008, the New York City Department of Transportation (DOT) started a new program to build public plazas. This seemed like a good opportunity to get more funding to make Corona Plaza happen. How did the Queens Museum work with the DOT? What were some of the challenges of this partnership, and how did we deal with them? The information in this chapter will be especially useful to you if you are based in New York City, but there are lessons for groups in other cities that are taking on public-private partnerships.

What are public-private partnerships and where do they come from?

In the 1970s and 1980s, city budgets were cut dramatically. This had a big impact on the maintenance of city parks (among other things). People who lived around Central Park founded the Central Park Conservancy to raise funds to maintain the park, and neighbors of Prospect Park soon founded a conservancy, too. Businesses around Bryant Park created a Business Improvement District (BID) to maintain and improve that park. In these partnerships, a private group (the BID or the conservancy) teamed up with a government agency (the Parks Department) to take responsibility for the upkeep of a specific place. Over time, this public-private model has spread from wealthy neighborhoods to the entire city. Today, BIDs in low-income neighborhoods and friends groups for local parks also share the burden of improving and maintaining public space with city agencies.

“Over time, an expectation was created that a public-private partnership in a low-income area can perform just like one in an affluent neighborhood, but the reality is that local resources are not at all comparable.” - Laura Hansen, Managing Director, Neighborhood Plaza Partnership

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS:

What’s a Conservancy?

A conservancy is a private, non-profit organization that exists to raise money for the benefit of a park and spends it under a plan it agrees on with the government. The conservancy funds new construction and repairs. Some conservancies provide funds for park maintenance and programming, and some, like the Central Park Conservancy, actively manage the park. The city still owns the land and is ultimately in charge.

What’s a Friends of the Park Group?

Many smaller parks with less wealthy neighbors develop “friends of the park” groups. These groups are generally all-volunteer and focus on hands-on cleanup and grassroots advocacy. Their focus is usually on improving government services, not on private fundraising.

What’s a Business Improvement District (BID)?

BIDs are public-private partnerships organized to promote economic development. Property owners in a specific commercial area pay a fee to cover additional services and perks like neighborhood guides, street lighting, and additional street cleaning—things the city is not providing—to beautify the area and improve business within the boundaries of the district.

How the DOT Plaza Program Works

The goal of the Department of Transportation's [NYC Plaza Program](#), a public-private partnership, is to create vibrant public spaces with built-in community ownership, so that they won't become neglected. The program is application-based. When a community-based organization has a site in mind or wants a plaza, it applies to the DOT. This is what the process looks like:

- The community-based organization approaches the DOT, which either looks at the site group has in mind, or selects a site in the neighborhood.
- The DOT conducts an analysis of the space to study things like traffic, access to open space in the neighborhood, and the impact of a new plaza on parking, bus, and truck routes.
- The community group puts in an application to the DOT. They'll have to give proof of their capacity to take on plaza responsibilities (maintenance, programming, and liability insurance). They'll also need to gather ten letters of support to demonstrate that community members and elected officials support the plaza.
- If the application is approved, then the DOT funds the design and construction of the plaza. The plaza gets resurfaced, and the DOT provides boulders to define the space, along with planters and moveable furniture. This is a "temporary" plaza. Many temporary plazas are in line to get funds from the DOT to make the plaza permanent.

"The partnership is key. By being given responsibility for the maintenance, they really take on a sense of guardianship which we've seen lead to incredibly successful public spaces like Corona Plaza." – Emily Weidenhof, NYC Plaza Program Director, DOT

What About the Day-to-Day?

The community partner for the plaza is responsible for maintenance. What does that mean? What are the day-to-day things you'll be responsible for?

- Cleaning the plaza, removing trash
- Watering plants
- Replacing dead or stolen plants
- Snow removal
- Removing graffiti or stickers from street furniture
- Setting up furniture every morning and putting it away at the end of the day
- If you have a concession, supplying the structure and managing the contract with a vendor.
- Programming (see chapter 4: Activating Our Plaza)

All these things can take up all of someone's time, and can cost a lot of money. Maintenance for Corona Plaza (which is big—about 13,000 square feet) costs \$45,000 to \$55,000 a year. Insurance for the plaza costs an additional \$4,000 to \$5,000 per year. It takes a lot of capacity to raise the funds to pay for this.

One Size Fits All?

Even though the DOT has always wanted to prioritize plaza sites in low-income areas that lack access to open space, some of the assumptions built into the program make this especially difficult. This is because all the money that DOT has to invest in developing plazas has been for capital construction only. They have not provided any money to pay for the ongoing expenses of running the plaza. The NYC Plaza Program's framework has been the same regardless of the neighborhood, the non-profit partner, and the resources available for a given project.

Some neighborhoods have more access to resources than others.

Dorothy Lê, Director of Capacity Building, Neighborhood Plaza Partnership

Some aspects of how the DOT program works are hard to implement in low-income neighborhoods:

- A neighborhood must have a non-profit partner who can maintain the plaza. Usually, a BID will apply for a plaza. There's an assumption that a BID with a lot of resources—for instance, with a big anchor store—can take on the cost of the maintenance.

In Corona Plaza (as is the case in many other low-income neighborhoods) there was no BID in place. Corona Plaza doesn't have a big anchor store. It's a place with lots of small local businesses, many of which can't afford BID fees. Small non-profits don't have the fundraising resources or the connections to private funding sources to get enough money to cover the expenses associated with a plaza. And these non-profits may not be primarily set up to maintain public space, so taking on such a project could potentially strain the organization's capacity to perform its core functions.

- The only built-in way to generate money from the plaza is through concessions. The money you make off of your concession can go toward covering expenses.

Concessions do not work the same everywhere. There are assumptions about the income level of people in the plaza's neighborhood built into this partnership model that might not be true for your site. The price point of the goods sold at the concession that makes sense for your neighborhood might not be enough to offset the costs of having the concession in the first place.

Concessions may also compete with local businesses and street vendors. In Corona, we asked ourselves: What would happen to all of the taco trucks and street vendors nearby? We would want to give preference to a concession operated by an existing local business, perhaps with some unique menu items that were not available very close by. But in some locations, it might be difficult to find a business with enough capacity or experience to successfully get the contract. Finally, does introducing a preferred concession undermine the trust of other business owners who will play an important role in the plaza's success?

Small Non-Profits and Long-Term Stability

Issues of stability arise when a small non-profit is asked to take responsibility for a plaza. Finances can change drastically from year to year (this is less likely to be the case for BIDs or big anchor stores). What does that mean over time for public space? What if you lose the grant you got to maintain the plaza—does that mean the plaza no longer gets maintained?

Non-profit partners are asked to sign a three- to five-year maintenance contract with the DOT. That is not a very long time. What if leadership changes and the maintenance of the plaza is not a priority anymore? What happens to that public space? Does it fall into disrepair even if there is significant community support and stewardship? There are not a lot of guarantees that a small non-profit can take on this burden in the long term.

Public-private partnerships like the DOT's NYC Plaza Program have built-in challenges when they work in low-income communities. [The Neighborhood Plaza Partnership \(NPP\)](#) is trying to address these issues. "In collaboration with lots of plaza managers, we are demonstrating that with the right combination of resources, the public-private partnership can work," Managing Director Laura Hansen says, "and this is a great little laboratory to rethink the prevailing model. Because the DOT created a partnership-based program based in low-income areas, a first for that agency, everyone is learning how to problem-solve together." NPP assists community-based organizations in high-need areas that have taken on the role of plaza manager by providing them with services like subsidized maintenance services using a workforce development model, and organizational capacity building.

The City Is Aware of the Problems, Too

"After eight years we started to realize that our map of plaza sites didn't correlate with the map of needs. Especially in the de Blasio administration, we're really targeting the most needy neighborhoods and pumping in resources to help grow capacity where there aren't non-profits that have a mission for public realm enhancement. It's a mission of ours moving forward."
– Emily Weidenhof, DOT

A Partnership for Corona Plaza

“When we launched the program, we really saw one non-profit partner as the partner for the plaza. What Corona Plaza has done is shown how far community partnerships can take a relatively low-income neighborhood. So we’re actively rethinking and restructuring our relationships because of Corona Plaza. We are working with the Department of Cultural Affairs to try to connect cultural organizations with maintenance partners.”

– Emily Weidenhof, DOT

The DOT thought Corona Plaza was a good site for a plaza. It wanted to make sure that public funding was being spent fairly, and make sure that communities of color and working-class neighborhoods were involved in the NYC Plaza Program. They reached out to the Queens Museum, even though we weren’t a traditional non-profit plaza partner, since we were already doing activities on the site. The DOT felt the museum was an institution that had the capacity to be the maintenance partner.

We didn’t have a sense of how much it cost to run a plaza, or how to do things like manage snow removal. But we applied to the program anyway to keep the conversation with the DOT going. Ultimately, we decided that the long-term commitment and certain risks associated with being a maintenance partner were too great for us to take. We felt that cultural programming and design were more aligned with our mission than maintaining the plaza on regular basis.

So we suggested some reforms to the city. Could the city take on responsibility for the maintenance budget as well, perhaps creating a maintenance endowment that puts some of the maintenance costs back into the realm of public funding? That policy didn’t change in time for our plaza, though it is changing now.

Here is the team that we developed to address all the challenges we’ve discussed. We partnered together to make Corona Plaza a reality:

Queens Museum

We invented ourselves as a “programming partner.” We already had a community organizer on the ground and had been building relationships in Corona for several years. The Queens Museum would take on the locally-relevant programming for the plaza. No other plaza has this. We’re a quasi-official partner (there’s no contract), but it’s a way for us to take an active role to help ensure inclusive programming. We didn’t want to become a gatekeeper for programming, but to use our community organizing and administrative efforts to ensure that plaza programming and design reflected the priorities and visions of local residents.

Tip:

Even the main partner for the plaza has to get permits from the city for each event that it holds. Outside groups are charged an additional fee. That can get really expensive! So we actively encourage other organizations to participate in our regularly scheduled programs, or to apply together with the museum for the permit for their event.

Council Member

Julissa Ferreras, the New York City Council Member for Corona, was interested in seeing the plaza happen. We asked her to find an entity that could take on the maintenance role. Councilmember Ferreras connected us to the Queens Economic Development Corporation. Her office also provided discretionary funding for programming and helped to identify potential funders in the community.

“The conventional route is to involve the community boards, the local elected officials, and the city agencies. By having parallel conversations with all the different stakeholders, it made it so that when there was an opportunity to make this happen in a short amount of time, the community was ready. And not just ready to close the street, but having the programming ready, and having the volunteers ready to take care of the plaza.” – Yoselin Genao, former Chief of Staff to Council Member Ferreras; Executive Director, Neighborhood Housing Services of Northern Queens

The Queens Economic Development Corporation (QEDC)

QEDC is a non-profit organization whose mission is to create and protect jobs by assisting small businesses and promoting business development in Queens neighborhoods. The QEDC had already been doing work in Corona around business development and had connections to local merchants. They felt the plaza could improve the business climate for the area. They also had the ability to fundraise. With the encouragement and support of Council Member Ferreras’ office, QEDC raised three years of funding, so they felt they could afford to be part of the process.

“There is a bank about two or three blocks away from the plaza, the Queens Community Bank. We were able to reach out to them and make some connections with the president of the bank, and he recommended that we file for their foundation’s grants. We were able to get some commitments for three years.” – Ricardi Calixte, Deputy Director, QEDC

The Corona Plaza model of an aggregated group of community partners that all leverage the skillset that each of them has, collectively fundraise, and create one larger stronger management group: that’s been a successful model and we want to replicate that.

Emily Weidenhof, DOT

Things Are Changing

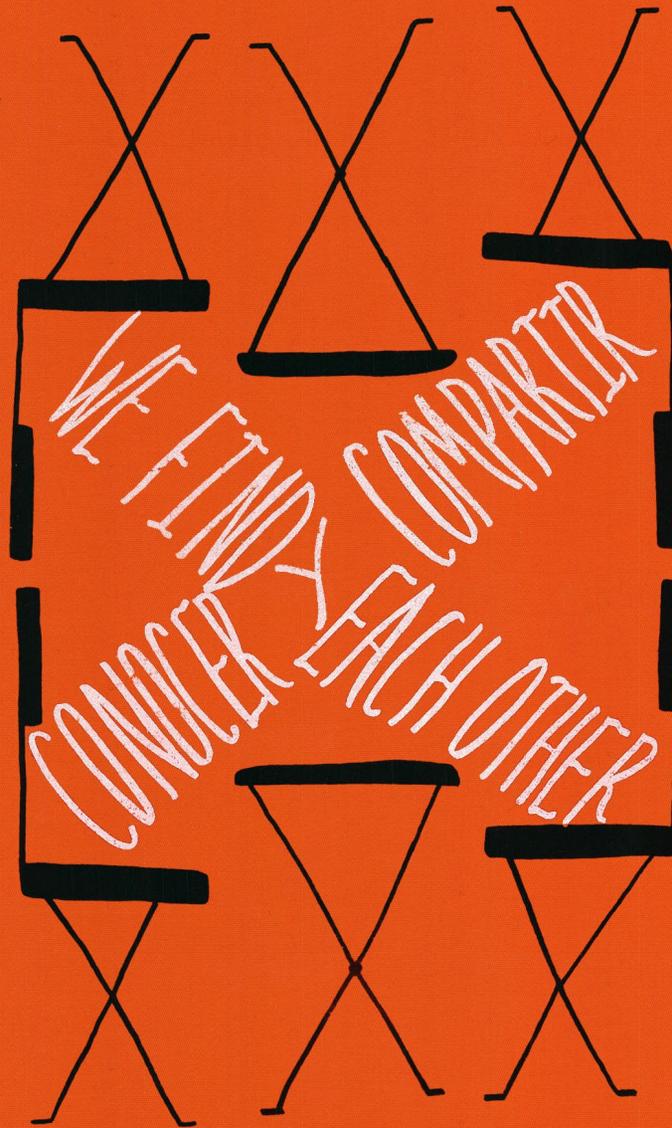
Today, as more plazas come into being in low-income areas, the de Blasio administration is changing its policy for funding plazas. It has set aside funding for plaza maintenance, and is making it easier to bring in temporary concessions so that plazas can test them out before committing to them. The administration is also providing more technical assistance to low-income plazas.

“All these low-capacity plaza managers are demonstrating to the city that they are more than willing to invest a lot of time, energy and resources, but they need public investment in operations, not just capital construction. Thanks to the plaza managers’ hard work and some strategic advocacy on the issue, Mayor de Blasio has allocated funding for plaza maintenance in his OneNYC Plan.” – Laura Hansen, Neighborhood Plaza Partnership

Ask Yourself:

- ★ **Can you talk to your city officials about using public funding to maintain the plaza? They may also be able to connect you to private funds or a group that can take on maintenance.**
- ★ **Are there other people and groups in the area who also want a plaza and can work with you to find funding?**
- ★ **Calculate your maintenance costs. Can you afford them? If not, who can you work with who has experience with fundraising and maintenance?**

- ★ **Are there any workforce development programs you can connect with in the area?**
- ★ **If you are considering concessions, will they really offset your maintenance costs? What's the price point people in your neighborhood can afford? Would it be competing with neighborhood vendors? Is there a neighborhood vendor who has the capacity to run the concessions?**
- ★ **How long will your funding last? What will happen after that timeframe?**



4 Activating Our Plaza

Corona Plaza became an official

DOT plaza in August 2012. The DOT repaved the street and brought in movable seats and planters. Queens Museum had hired organizer Alexandra García to coordinate block parties and public art projects in the plaza in 2008. Now that the plaza was “official,” Alexandra could manage collaborative programming and start to engage an even larger group of neighbors. Over the summer, she organized two events a month. Sometimes QEDC, Friends of Corona Plaza, or another local organization put on their own additional events, and we just provided the chairs, tables, and other technical and curatorial support.

This chapter focuses on the Queens Museum’s programming at Corona Plaza. We’ll share some participatory programming strategies you can use so that, when people come to your plaza, they are not just passing through. They can stop and interact. It’s not so hard! You just need to build relationships over time.

Getting Programming Ideas

How did we get ideas? What does it really mean to do culturally relevant programming—programming that reflects and connects the different cultures in the area? We wanted to make sure we were in conversation with local communities.

Alexandra went out to canvas in the neighborhood. She talked to people who came to our events, and she went to meetings of local community-based organizations. She stood in Corona Plaza and asked people what they wanted to see there. She’d ask people if they were willing to do a longer interview, and then talk with them at their homes. Sometimes she would knock on doors and do short interviews on the spot. Alexandra asked everyone she talked with to spread the word about the plaza and hand out flyers to their friends and neighbors.

This job is about keeping one’s eyes open to what is happening in the neighborhood.

Alexandra García, Community Organizer,
Queens Museum

Here are the things Alexandra asked people in her interviews:

- What do you do in your free time?
- Where are you from?
- What kind of work do you do?
- What kinds of things would you like to see at the plaza?
- Is there any cultural tradition you’re particularly interested in?
- Is there any particular performance you’d be interested in?
- What kinds of activities do you want to see for children?
- How do you feel about the neighborhood?

In addition to her canvassing work, Alexandra was always communicating with local organizations and local performers, people who are already creating culture on the ground. She would do this in person, by going to other festivals, and by following performers on social media. By building these relationships over time, we were able to recruit locally-sourced talent and work with performers who were relevant to the community.

“We have gone through a collective learning process as an institution and as individuals. We have learned that building community is a constant exercise, and that we need to create long-term relationships and open spaces where we can congregate. By having programs in public space we fight isolation, we change collectively with our neighbors, we reimagine ways to find spaces where we all can express ourselves. As immigrants, we are constantly bringing ideas from across borders, adjusting expectations, and creating new space and new community. We present free programs in the plaza because we love our neighbors, and it has been a dream come true to get together in Corona Plaza. We create solid ties with our neighbors in Corona that will help us to be more resilient to the struggles in this country and to know and feel what social sustainability looks like.” – Alexandra García, Queens Museum

Immigrant Movement International Corona (IMI Corona)

A lot of our relationships at the plaza were developed through IMI Corona. Initiated by the artist Tania Bruguera in 2011, this multiyear artist project was commissioned by the Queens Museum, with support from Creative Time. IMI Corona still occupies physical space in Corona, with a community space and an offsite immigrant education center. Local participants run free workshops there. Many of the dance and music groups that perform in the plaza hold regular rehearsals and workshops at IMI Corona. And many of the art projects that are developed and incubated at IMI Corona are then presented publicly at the plaza.

“Folks are imagining and creating within our communities all the time, but they’re not usually framed as art or creative cultural practices. I think opening up spaces where that creativity can be engaged and named and uplifted and made more public is a big part of what Corona Plaza is about. That’s the way folks build community, through culture. Corona Plaza acts as a platform where folks can connect and make visible the things that are already happening.”
– Silvia Juliana Mantilla Ortiz, IMI Corona Community Organizer and Queens Museum Artist Services Coordinator

Programming a Dignified Public Space for Immigrants

Originally, our programming at Corona Plaza was driven by the goals of Heart of Corona: improving public space, putting local programming in the plaza, and improving heart health and health access. The conversations we had through canvassing and as part of different art projects and events helped to shift our values for the plaza. We wanted to help create what we began to call a “Dignified Public Space for Immigrants,” with programming in which the local communities were not only reflected but actively involved.

“To me, a Dignified Public Space for Immigrants gives more than it takes and offers opportunities of engagement and entertainment that inspire people as creators and participants rather than recipients of services or consumers.”
– Alexandra García, Queens Museum

These were our new driving values:

Create a space for interaction and participation

Most of us aren't used to interacting with strangers in public space. The plaza can be a way to draw people out and connect them to other people and organizations. Bilingual programming is key.

"We can live in a community that is very diverse, however if we don't interact with one another, diversity means nothing. It is important to be able to celebrate that in a space that is welcoming and has a feeling that it belongs to everyone." – Yoselin Genao, Neighborhood Housing Services of Northern Queens

Have multigenerational activities and performances

We wanted to attract people of all ages and provide things for both children and adults to do. We wanted to give children the opportunity to rehearse and perform in public—and not just attend performances aimed at them.

Mix local and outside talent

We wanted to make Corona Plaza a place for performance and celebrating neighborhood pride. We would program groups that were culturally relevant, giving exposure to local groups and a platform for new performers.

"There are a lot of folks who are already doing amazing cultural work in communities. Of course it's really amazing to bring in a big name band to perform. That brings in a lot of joy. But it's just as amazing and important to open up space for a local group. To really understand those experiences as equally valuable and equally rich and equally contributing to what makes the plaza feel like a space that matters." – Silvia Juliana Mantilla Ortiz, Queens Museum/IMI Corona

Balance the new and the familiar

We would use familiar forms and events to draw people in and make them more comfortable engaging with new things—like exercise, poetry, dance, and art installations—and new ways of interacting with others in public space.

Reflect and connect cultures

We wanted to reflect the neighborhood and its cultures in the plaza. But we also heard from people that they didn't only want to see their cultures reflected; they wanted to learn about other cultures, too.

Be a platform for local services and advocates

We wanted to recognize the work that was already happening on the ground, and use the plaza to amplify it.

Tip:

Don't over-program the space. A Dignified Public Space for Immigrants is also a place where people can find quiet or get together informally.

A Scene from Corona Plaza One-year Anniversary Celebration

Saturday August 24, 2013

We celebrated Corona Plaza's first anniversary with a daylong event. It gives a good picture of the things that were happening in the plaza all summer long. We wanted to have lots of projects over the course of the day, with a bazaar-like feeling to the space. As with all of Queens Museum's programming, everything was free. And as at all Corona Plaza events, all presentations were in both Spanish and English. Since Corona Plaza is next to the train station, there are two hundred people exiting into the plaza every ten to fifteen minutes. We wanted to give folks a variety of things that might encourage them to linger in the plaza and to meet rather than just cross through in a hurry. At any one time, there'd be at least 100 people at the plaza.

COMMUNITY ADDRESS

As early as January 2013, we enlisted Council Member Julissa Ferreras' help in reaching out to organizations she worked with. They signed up to be *padrinos* and *madrinas* (godfathers and godmothers) for the plaza. One by one, organizations including Drogadictos Anónimos, Alianza Ecuatoriana, Mobile Print Power, and Mexicanos Unidos de Queens went up on stage to say what they did, or recite a poem.

HEALTH

We shifted our emphasis from just providing access to health services to programming "native health activities" that get people to do things that make them feel healthy, rather than just coming to get their blood pressure read.

Masala Bhangra Workout + Bailoterapia

One of the things we did was encourage physical activity and health through dance. Masala Bhangra Workout combines traditional Indian folk dance with

Bollywood steps, while Bailoterapia combines Latin social dance techniques with aerobics.

Roshani Thakore taught the Masala Bhangra Workout class, while Verónica Ramírez taught the Bailoterapia class. Alexandra knew Verónica from Mujeres en Movimiento, which is part of IMI Corona, and invited her to be a part of the monthly events at the plaza. We didn't want to hire a Zumba™ instructor, we wanted to make use of talent already in the neighborhood. Getting healthy shouldn't be something you need to pay for.

"I have been to many fairs. You kind of sit down and give out information, you wait for people to come to your table. At Corona Plaza, it was so great to see everyone interacting. I don't think I sat down once that day. It wasn't just tables, it was more of a cultural event. I remember seeing children dance, and that was amazing. It's representing the community in every aspect."

– Priscilla De Jesus, Program Manager for Queens Navigator Program, Public Health Solutions

Health Services

Planned Parenthood and Public Health Solutions set up tables. Public Health Solutions helps people access health insurance, nutritional guidance, programs for expectant and first-time mothers, and connects them to local clinics. Planned Parenthood offers reproductive health education and links to reproductive health services. We make sure to work with service providers who are attuned to the needs of migrant communities.

"Our promotoras are very diverse, they come from all types of Latin backgrounds. One of our *promotoras*, Blanca, other promotoras call her the Mayor of Queens because every time she's been to the plaza she knows everyone and everyone knows her." – Larissa Vasquez, Manager of Adult Education Programs, Planned Parenthood



IGLESIA
ALIENTO DE VIDA
DOMINGOS: 7:00am, 10:00am, 1:30pm, 6:00pm. MIERCOLES: 7:30pm

Domingos:
Tel: 718.205.1209
www.Alientodevida.org
Miercoles:

"Dance therapy exercise, or being in movement, is a way to free ourselves from stress. It's like we focus more when we are dancing or doing any exercise routine. I feel like I'm dedicating time for myself. I have seen that you re-connect with yourself."

- Verónica Ramírez, IMI Corona/Mujeres en Movimiento

MEMBERS OF MUJERES EN MOVIMIENTO/IMI CORONA

"My gradual shift from resident to neighbor to community member in Corona solidified through the work in Corona Plaza."
- Roshani Thakore, Masala Bhangra Workout instructor



MASALA BHANGRA WORKOUT

PERFORMANCE

We approached music groups and traditional dance groups from Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Mexico, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic. We found them by attending other parades, festivals, and street fairs. We got suggestions from neighbors, and groups contacted us directly. We chose groups that have a form of interactivity in their performances—they don't just have people be passive observers.

Traditional Dance

Groups such as the Bangladesh Institute of Performing Arts (BIPA) and Ecuador Sumag Llacta performed for the first time in the neighborhood at Corona Plaza.

"In this plaza you could see different dances from different countries. That's not something you see just anywhere. I think Corona Plaza was a multicultural place and it was showing that the word 'multicultural' really exists. Because Corona, Queens is a multicultural place, but where do you see that? Well, now you can see it in Corona Plaza." – Neshi Galindo, photographer

Live Music

Mixing a headliner and an emerging group is a strategy we use often. Inti & the Moon, an emerging world music band headed by an Ecuadorian immigrant, shared the stage with the headliner, Los Hacheros, a renowned salsa band.

"We look for groups that have a base in the communities that surround the plaza or beyond, but that have educational goals, that focus on immigrant identity, pride, exploring new ways of educating and congregating communities through the arts."

– Alexandra García, Queens Museum



DANZA AZTECA CHICHIMECA

ART

In all the art projects we have at the plaza, there's always an opportunity to answer a question, interact with something, talk to someone. We bring in projects that treat every participant as an artist.

Mobile Print Power

Mobile Print Power uses screen printing to address social issues. Patrick Rowe had been running printmaking workshops out of the IMI Corona space since 2010. We invited Patrick and IMI Corona collaborators to participate in Corona Plaza celebrations in the beginning of summer.

"There was already such a strong culture in place of respect and eager curiosity, working with the public in public space, collaborating. I didn't have to work to create that, it was already there." – Patrick Rowe, Founder, Mobile Print Power

Mobile Print Power went to the plaza with a screen printing cart and asked, What do you want Corona Plaza to become? They collected drawings and writings from residents. In exchange, collaborators would teach residents how to screen print. The group collaboratively created nine images—messages from Corona Plaza based on themes that emerged from conversations. They printed large images on fabric, and took the prints back to the plaza for the anniversary celebration. You can see these images on this publication's cover and at the beginning of each chapter.

"People in the plaza realized, 'I helped draw that thing.'" – Patrick Rowe

Vinyl Social

Sol Aramendi collects records that immigrants brought from their countries to here at street markets. She brought her vast record collection and let participants pick through it to choose a song to play. They could share why they chose their particular song before it came on. Sol's art project uses music to get people to interact, reviving the social spirit of listening to music

at a time when our listening experiences are increasingly digital and individual.

Workers' Pavilion

This physical structure and programming dedicated to workplace safety was an art project that dealt with concrete community issues, making a local campaign visible. The project brought together the Workers Art Coalition, initiated by Barrie Cline in collaboration with Jaime López, a Corona native and union electrician; students from Social Practice Queens; trade unionists from Empire State College's Van Arsdale Center for Labor Studies; and members of New Immigrant Community Empowerment (NICE). Together, over the course of the day, they created an exhibition structure from construction materials with light boxes illuminating writing about workplace safety and photographs of worker activists.

Globular Cluster Interactive Video Dome

This interactive music and light event within large inflatable domes invited people of all ages to participate by making drawings and manipulating sound and light projections on the domes while musicians provided an environment for musical interaction. The project was not something people were used to, but since it was part of a larger bazaar-like array that included more familiar elements, they were more willing to give it a try.

The Uni Project

"Since 2012, the Uni Project has created open-air reading rooms on Corona Plaza 13 times. I love Corona because it gives me hope for New York. I've watched fathers reading to children for hours on what is probably their only day off. I've seen a teenage girl lift up her younger brothers to look through a microscope. Corona is dedicated to learning and family." – Sam Davol, Co-Creator, The Uni Project

"For the youth it's a way to get an education. There are so many workshops that come through like Mobile Print Power, and the young people learn from it all. They get involved. They don't need to go to a university and pay thousands of dollars to learn something because in the plaza they teach things, free workshops, free information. So it's a way to educate yourself."

– Mónica Avilés, IMI Corona Council Member,
Ecuador Sumag Llacta Artistic Director, Ñukanchik
Llacta Wawakunas - Wawa Sumak Founder



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Verónica's Story

Verónica Ramírez has lived in Corona for sixteen years. She teaches Bailoterapia as part of the Mujeres en Movimiento collective at IMI Corona.



VERÓNICA RAMÍREZ LEADING A BAILOTERAPIA CLASS

Alexandra García: Tell us about your group, Mujeres en Movimiento.

Verónica Ramírez: The Mujeres en Movimiento dance therapy group is a collective; some of the other women also bring their ideas and we share them with each other. We also learn bike mechanics and ride together. I'm the one teaching the class, but I feel it's important that they don't see me as a teacher, but instead more as an equal. I'm from here, from the neighborhood, and they see it.

AG: When you teach in Corona Plaza, how do you and the other women get people to join you? When you started...

VR: It was just me!

AG: And now you are 200, 300 women. How did the plaza help?

VR: When I notice women watching our class in the plaza, I say to them, come dance! I invite them. Because I have been in their shoes. I always want to project this confidence, and that I am a mother, and that I am a housewife, and that I work, and that I share what I know, and that we are all equal. We are Latinos, we are all from the same land, sometimes we are even from the same country. So why not invite them? So that's what we do, we go directly to them, and we say, "Come and dance, the class is free."

AG: What are the benefits for Mujeres en Movimiento of being able to be present and active in the plaza?

VR: So many benefits. Four women have lost a lot of weight by following the dance therapy routine and the nutritional balance that we talk about. There are others who tell me that they feel more confident, that they feel like their body is more relaxed. Because in the beginning when they danced it was like their bodies were tight and tense, and now they feel like their body is more free. It's a way for them to express themselves through dance, to dance and to feel at ease.

Every time I go to the plaza I meet new people. They come to me and ask me, where do you do your classes? Then they start to come. So people start coming together. Some of them have become super good friends. The women have even become godmothers of one another's children.

AG: So you think Corona Plaza has impacted people's health?

VR: Definitely. And it's not only about physical health, it's also mental health. You might just go sit and make some phone calls if you don't have to work that day, or just go and chat with a friend or with your mother who is in Mexico, or with your wife or your husband. It's a way for you to relax your mind, or a way for you to connect, because when you are outside in the fresh air you could be almost anywhere in the world, just by looking at the sky. I think that transports you to another place, instead of being between four walls.

AG: What do you think is the Queens Museum's role in the neighborhood?

It was a great idea by the Queens Museum to bring "Oye Corona!" to Corona Plaza. It's a way to give support and also to work in the arts in a useful way because sometimes we don't all have a diploma that says, for example, you're an aerobics instructor. We can just come and share what we know and it's a way to have an income, which I think is really important for all of us.

AG: What's special about dancing outside?

VR: We want to draw in more of the community so that they'll be in motion and exercise, so that they feel better and more empowered. Because it's also a way for them to participate. We start with Bailoterapia, but this way we also find out about other workshops that are happening at Immigrant Movement International. And that's how we feel more confident to go out. So for example if they invite us to a march or a walk or a protest, to show our support, we'll go, and that's also how we are developing more confidence in ourselves.

So in that way they see that you don't need to have white skin or dress fancy or speak English perfectly or have the best cell phone. No, things don't work like that, they work by your desire to want to help, basically. To be present when it's time to speak up for our rights. That's what I want—if the women see me as a role model to follow, then right on. I'm here so that they can come and see that they can do it too.

AG: If you could sum up what makes Corona Plaza special, what would you say?

VR: For me and my group, Corona Plaza has given us a different vision of life, because we've learned, we've danced, maybe we've even cried, we've sweat there. We've felt that direct connection with ourselves. Every time that I am there I connect not only with my community but also with the beings, the spirits that are in the sky and they help me and give us energy. And I want them to keep giving us that light and that energy at "Oye Corona!" events and in our classes. And I hope they keep making this energetic circle and that at Corona Plaza, we keep moving towards what is good, and towards a new vision and new ideas too.

A Scene from Corona Plaza

Day of the Dead

Saturday November 2, 2013

The Day of the Dead is celebrated throughout Latin American, indigenous Latin American, U.S. migrant, and Native American communities. It's about celebrating the departed, not mourning them. People create altars in their homes to display loved ones' portraits, favorite food, or possessions. It's an opportunity to express indigenous cultures through art, food, and music. It's part of the cultural calendar for Corona.

Planning

We always pay attention to historic or cultural dates that can bring people together. But we were not about to impose our own vision for the holiday. The Aztec and indigenous dance groups in our neighborhood had been celebrating the Day of the Dead for years. More recently, IMI Corona had been creating and hosting altars as well.

Together with IMI Corona, we decided to connect immigrant rights activism to the plaza using the theme of loss of family from deportation and immigration policy. This way, we were connecting traditions to issues impacting many groups in the Corona community.

"Through ongoing conversations IMI Corona decided it wanted to honor not just those who had passed, but also the families that were absent from each other due to deportations and unjust immigration laws. We began by collecting stories from people in the neighborhood about being separated from families. From these stories we created a series of one-line poems and illustrations, which we embroidered onto cloth napkins. Those were the centerpiece of the altar. The altar was pretty traditional, it had traditional components. But it also had pieces that spoke to current realities in our neighborhood, to the experiences of folks living separated from families in different ways." – Silvia Juliana Mantilla Ortiz, Queens Museum/IMI Corona

We had to decide: With the variety of groups in Corona who celebrate the holiday differently, how would the neighborhood do it? We debated following Mexican Day of the Dead traditions versus other traditions, and decided the event would bring together the traditions of many different countries.

"The process was really interesting because it was about merging different traditions. Ecuadorian traditions are different from Mexican traditions. There's different food, different dances, different music. First it was really scary when things were proposed that didn't feel like ways folks are used to experiencing it. But there was a faith and trust that was built through that process. Sitting with discomfort, negotiating through it, and having a really positive experience together, that is something really valuable. In the end, it really worked to speak to the realities that folks are living. That opened up a space to honor our traditions but also make new ones." – Silvia Juliana Mantilla Ortiz

IMI Corona collaboratively built a community altar in Corona Plaza as a site for remembrance and discussion. In connection with local Ecuadorian civic group Alianza Ecuatoriana's advocacy work, they launched a letter-writing campaign urging local politicians and President Obama to end deportation and family separation.

At the Event

Mothers, grandmothers, and children brought *ofrendas* (offerings) to the altar throughout the day. Ecuador Sumag Lacta, a local music and dance organization directed by Mónica Avilés, developed a performance explaining how the Day of the Dead is celebrated in Ecuador. Children brought offerings to the altar as part of the performance. We hosted an open mic for organizations to speak about immigrant rights throughout the day. Flor de Toloache, the first and only all female mariachi band in New York, performed.

The Day of the Dead celebration has since become a Corona Plaza tradition.



DAY OF THE DEAD ALTAR



MEMBERS OF THE GROUP ECUADOR SUMAG LLACTA

Mónica's Story

Mónica Avilés has lived in Corona for 15 years. She is the director of the dance group Ecuador Sumag Llacta, founder of the youth dance troupe Ñukanchik Llakta Wawakunas - Wawa Sumak, and serves on the Community Council of IMI Corona.



MÓNICA AVILÉS WITH ECUADOR SUMAG LLACTA

Alexandra García: How did you get involved in Corona Plaza?

Mónica Avilés: I got involved when I saw that they were building something and for me that was like a sign. I said, "Wow! What are they doing?" And that's when Walter Sinche from Alianza Ecuatoriana also told me a little bit more about what was happening. And I also have a good relationship with the Museum. It was also at that time that Alex invited me to a meeting about what they were planning to do there. So I have been there since they started pouring the foundation of Corona Plaza.

AG: You've lived in the neighborhood for many years. Tell us how you've seen the neighborhood change and how your own life has changed since the Plaza got started.

MA: A lot has changed for the better, because I see more people getting involved. Before that it was a parking lot for moving trucks, it was like a street. And now it's a closed plaza, it even has a bathroom. It has little tables, chairs, umbrellas, it has changed. I think that people feel more at home there, more welcome. You can go and sit with your family. We didn't have that kind of space before. We had the park that's behind Walgreens but it's not the same. I see the Plaza as more of a family place, it's cozier. People come, they sit. I've noticed that people will sit down to eat, like for lunch, as if they were at home but now they're outside.

And children can also run around without being afraid that a car is going to come through. Because before there used to be traffic there, it was a normal street. I think it looks more beautiful, there are plants, I love the colorful chairs, the umbrellas. And I see people from the community getting involved. When it rains they are the ones who are concerned and put the chairs away. No one has stolen anything from there, nothing has been taken away. The people themselves take care of what is there. So I think that is something that's really beautiful about our neighborhood, you know?

AG: Tell us about your role in the community.

MA: I got involved because I have kids. When my father died, I started to

think that this is a community of my people, people from Ecuador, people from the Andes. So I think that my seeds are education, to give my children something that perhaps my father couldn't give me when I was young, which was to teach me about my culture, about my traditions, my roots.

For me it's very important that we know where we come from, in order to know where we are going. And since we live in such a multicultural country it's important that these young people know where they're from and where they're going. And furthermore that we know our rights as immigrants, as first-generation residents, as parents, and as children. As parents we are so busy working, but it is my role to pass on the information that I learn thanks to organizations that help me educate myself. So that is really important to me, to pass on that knowledge to future leaders, so that when they are older, they are prepared, and they can pass it on from generation to generation.

AG: Tell us a little about the dance classes you teach in the community. What kind of dance? What kind of music? From what regions?

MA: My father wasn't very proud to say that he was Ecuadorian. For him it was embarrassing to say *chompa*, *achachá*, *ararai* (sweater, it's cold, it's hot), all these words in Quechua. He had suffered so much discrimination that he didn't feel proud to say that. So I felt like, "Why?" It's not bad, I mean, it's part of my culture.

I decided to get more involved in the community, and to learn from my brother, who emigrated three years after me and brought these things from Ecuador. He taught me how to dance to the music from the Andes, more specifically to music from the Sierra, from Cayambe, Otavalo, Cuenca and Cañar, which are part of my roots.

AG: How has Corona Plaza contributed to the work you do as an educator in your community?

MA: Before, our group had a big problem. We had nowhere to rehearse our dances, or room for what young people wanted to do, to dance, to play their music. We never had space.

Now, I think Corona Plaza is a key piece in what we do because it's a public space, an open space. People pass through there all day long, so when we perform, they get to know what we do. And they get a positive message that what you do is ok, that no one has to judge you because you have indigenous features or because you speak some words in Quechua... So it's a kind of education. And this space has opened doors for us to continue carrying out our mission. And I think that Corona Plaza is the best thing that has happened in all the time that I have lived in this country.

Programming Costs

What does it cost to program a plaza? There's a big range. The Queens Museum spends approximately \$1000 per public program on performers, workshop supplies, and tech, and we employ a two-day a week plaza programming manager. The scale of your programming will depend on your resources and the experience you have in putting together events. Be honest about what resources you have access to. The most important thing is that your programming matches your resources, so you can do what you plan to do well. Whatever level you're working at, make sure you seek out and acknowledge local input and talents!

You'll need to cover these basics:

- **Initial startup costs**

A basic stage, PA system, microphones, tents, tables, and chairs

- **Bands/DJ/Talent**

If you have any budget at all, be sure to pay your performers!

- **Workshop supplies**

Art-making supplies, nutrition workshop supplies, fees for teaching artists, etc.

- **Personnel**

Plaza programming coordinator: This is one central person who is the go-to person for questions and problems in the plaza, manages the schedule, and makes sure you are applying your values in the programming. They also need to manage getting permits through the city permitting process. It could be a group instead of a person, but that group needs to meet regularly.

Tech: You'll need people who know how to manage tech for outdoor events.

Community engagement: You'll need some folks to get the word out, canvas, and distribute flyers (it's not enough to just pay flyer guys). Ideally, you can find local people who do that work already. Engage people with a stake in the plaza. Word of mouth has always been the most important for us.

- **Social service partners**

Health partners, social service partners (not necessarily based in the neighborhood). You could develop something that's part of their outreach budget, or apply for a grant together. You could also get a local health clinic that is willing to send out people as part of their ongoing community engagement efforts.

Three different budget and experience levels:

Small budget and new to putting on events

- Engage neighborhood cultural performers and student performers to demonstrate their talent and gain experience
- Use volunteers and skill-share
- Keep the venue small so you don't have to fill the space
- Buy a cheap battery-operated speaker that anyone can be trained to use

Medium budget and some event experience, like a cultural institution

- You probably have a part-time staffer to manage the whole thing. Hire only the folks that have skills that your staff can't cover.
- You probably already have some of the equipment necessary. If you're doing a lot of events, what should you rent and what should you buy so you can use it over and over?
- If you don't have the technical capacity for a full band and all the amplification equipment that goes with that, use smaller bands with acoustic instruments. Consider a percussion group, a good way to create a big sound without amplification. Or partner with a group that has this equipment already.
- Combine a headliner with local acts to stay within your budget.

Big budget

- Pay professionals to take care of the whole thing for you!
- Hire a DJ for the day
- Contract out to a company who sets up outdoor events
- Contract a sound technician (or other personnel) for the whole season

If other institutions or neighborhoods want a plaza like Corona they should do like the Queens Museum, which is trying to activate the space. Because it's all very fine if the city is going to spend money on a plaza, but if it's not being used for anything, then other people will make the decision for you how it will be used. But if you're already using it a certain way, then you have a lot of weight in persuading people, the design community, the city, that this is how it should be programmed.

Alex Berryman, lead designer for Corona Plaza, the RBA Group

Ask Yourself:

- ★ **What are your values, and how will your programming reflect those values? How have your values changed as a result of conversations with local communities?**
- ★ **How will you get people to suggest programming ideas and talk to you about their needs? Get as many people involved as possible.**
- ★ **What kind of resources does your group or institution have available? What level of programming matches those resources?**

- ★ **Who are your local performers? Listen closely to the capacity of the artist. What size is their performance? How long is it? Do you have the resources to support them?**
- ★ **Pay your performers. If you have any kind of budget at all, this should be your first priority. Cultural work is work.**
- ★ **What are the local organizations in your neighborhood and what are their needs? What advocacy campaigns are already in the works?**
- ★ **What can you say on the microphone over the course of the day that emphasizes your values? How can you involve local organizations in having a voice over the course of the day?**



5 Shaping Our Plaza

“I started to shift my thinking

from this notion of place-making, which is the hot new buzzword, to place-finding. We didn't really make this. This wasn't just made. There were lots of events and organizing and connections between organizations happening for years. And when the opportunity was right, we found a way to better share this place.” – José Serrano-McClain, Community Organizer, Queens Museum

For plazas slated to become permanent, the DOT plaza process has two stages. While the temporary plaza gets up and running, there is a parallel design process to envision what the permanent version of the plaza could be. The DOT pays for professional architects to design the permanent version of the plaza. New York City's Department of Design and Construction selected RBA as the designers for Corona Plaza. The plaza partners are expected to meet with the DOT and the designers to make sure the design is responding to the local context and is made of materials the partners can afford to maintain. The DOT requires two public input meetings, but we wanted to play an active role in making the design process more participatory.

How can cultural institutions like the Queens Museum play a role in bringing residents into the design process? This chapter explains how we worked with Corona residents to prepare them so they could participate more effectively in the official process.

Existing Conditions

The temporary plaza was already in use as we began the design process for a permanent plaza in 2012. What was the context for the permanent design?

“It's got the number 7 subway line running right beside it, so it's very noisy. It was easy to see that it was hot because it got a lot of sunlight, so shade was an important issue. And the other thing was that it was heavily used.” – Alex Berryman, lead designer for Corona Plaza, the RBA Group

We are not just talking about the physical context—all the stuff that was there—but the social context as well. The space already had users. Every neighborhood has a variety of constituents with conflicting needs. In Corona, there were lots of different types of people who would want to use the space of the plaza in different ways. Here are just a few of the different stakeholders and their needs:

Families with young children already used the temporary plaza and would want to keep using the space for family-centric activities. Parents wanted a quiet place to wait for their kids before they got out of school (there are two elementary schools a few blocks away).

“My kids love being there. I'm telling you, it's our living room. Sometimes we have gone just to sit for a bit, eat ice cream, talk. Sometimes when my cousins come from Brooklyn I say, 'Meet me in Corona Plaza.' And we sit there and talk. Why should we go to the house? We just go there.” – Mónica Avilés, IMI Corona/Ecuador Sumag Llacta

“The thing that seems to put people on the same page, on common ground, is what the kids need. This is why people came to this country. Most want to find a better way of life for their children.” – José Serrano-McClain

Mudanza (moving) trucks used the street as a place to park and wait for work. They didn't want to lose their parking spaces. But people also saw the trucks as dangerous.

“I was afraid to go because of the moving trucks. At any moment they could back up and they wouldn't see that there were pedestrians crossing behind. So it was somewhat dangerous.” – Verónica Ramírez, IMI Corona/Mujeres en Movimiento

Local businesses wanted to use the space to improve business. But the Queens Museum was wary of commercialization of the space.

“The plaza program was really development for more quality of life purposes. But being an economic development corporation, we tried to find a way to tie it into business. We understood that if you make the space lively and inviting, it was going to bring more shoppers to the area.” – Ricardi Calixte, QEDC

In Corona, there are a lot of immigrant workers who are **single men**. They felt uncomfortable using existing playground space in a nearby park as a social space.

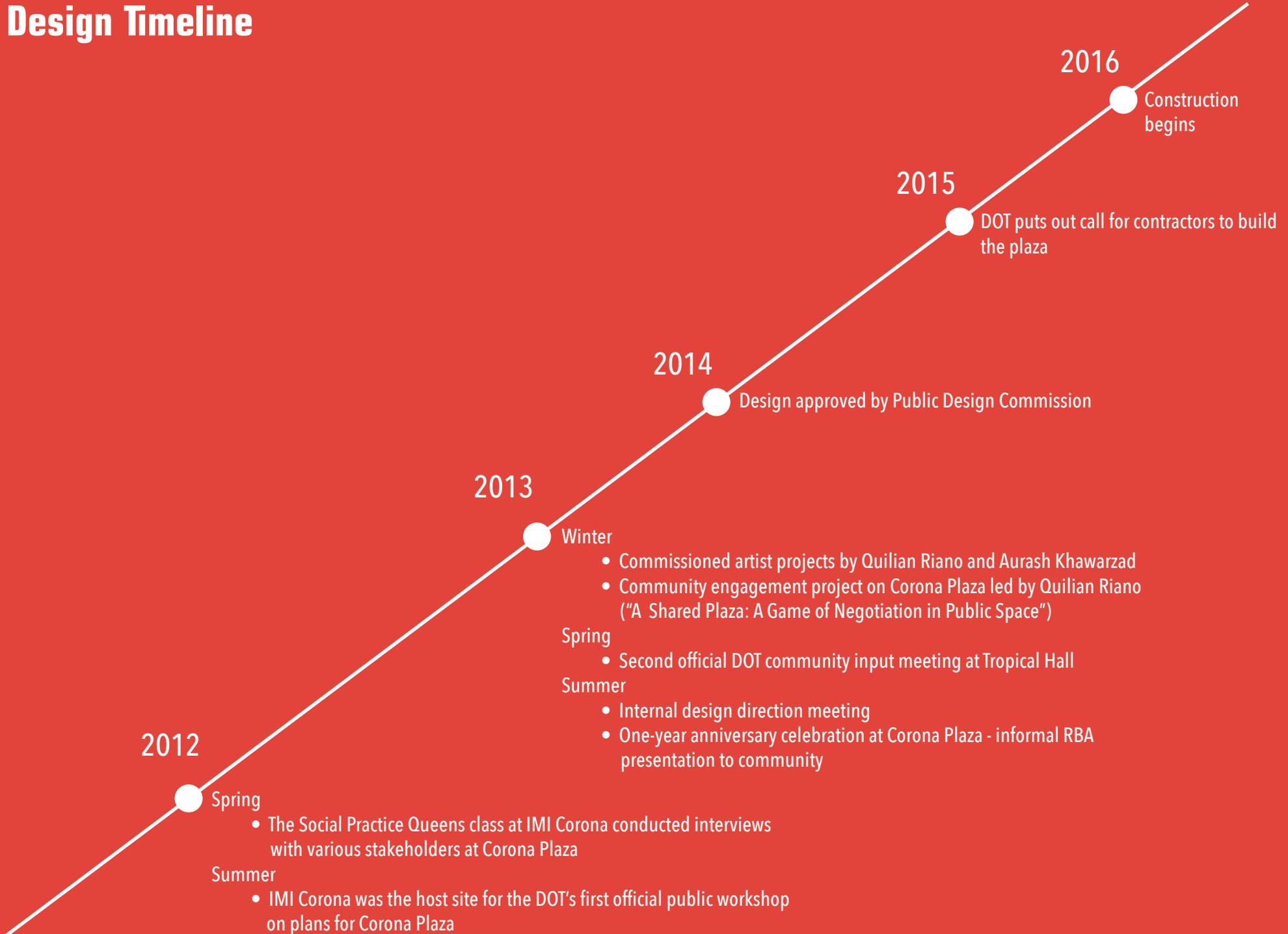
“We were talking with a gentleman who lives in North Corona. He shared with us that he lived there with five other guys. There’s a lot of men per unit. And it’s really tight. But when they go into public space they don’t feel welcome. So in some ways the plaza was one of the areas where men felt most comfortable because it had an ungroundedness. But a lot of people would say ‘just make sure you keep the drunks out.’ Many years ago, there was a club around there and everyone would just wake up drunk. The memory of this was huge. There was a distinct not wanting of a certain group of men to be there.”
– Quilian Riano, architect, DSGN AGNC

As you can see, not all these uses seemed compatible. How could we avoid saying to single men, “You’re not welcome here,” but still ensure it was a place where families felt at home?

Institutions should get out more, talk more, communicate more. Find out the community’s interests. Because we live here, and the higher-ups decide, but they never ask us about our needs or what we want to see in the neighborhood. They should ask us what we need. They should ask how we see the space.

Verónica Ramírez,
IMI Corona/Mujeres en Movimiento

Design Timeline



A Shared Plaza: A Game of Negotiation in Public Space

We commissioned architect Quilian Riano of DSGN AGNC and urban planner Aurash Khawarзад to develop a project to get input from residents on the design of the plaza, and as a way to prepare residents for participating effectively at the community input sessions. We selected Quilian and Aurash from other applicants because of Quilian's ability to speak Spanish and his experience creating games and physical tools for generating input, and Aurash's interest in simple prototyping and tactical urbanism. Their projects were part of "Corona Urban Studio," a series of art commissions in and around Corona Plaza.

Quilian worked with his collaborators at DSGN AGNC and a group invited by Queens Museum Community Organizer José Serrano-McClain, including QEDC, Drogadictos Anónimos, local business owners, and Corona residents. We asked DOT to schedule the public input meeting for the end of March, so that the artist project could do engagement work leading up to it. DOT agreed.

"The idea was to help people work out differences so that they could have a more productive conversation when the official meeting came around."
– José Serrano-McClain, Queens Museum

"My job was not to design the plaza, but to give people tools to go into a meeting and say, 'these are the concerns we have.'" – Quilian Riano, DSGN AGNC

One of the things that had to be done was to hold meetings where you actually got community input. If you're going to have a successful project, you have to have the local business and residents feel like they are a part of the planning process.

Ricardi Calixte, QEDC

Playing the Game

Quilian Riano constructed 15 physical pieces made of wooden pallets, crates, and greenery. Each piece had different shape (e.g. bleacher-style for the community programming). There were three pieces for each of five themes:

- Mobility
- Community Programming
- Green Spaces
- Social Services
- Local Economy

A “playing field” was marked out in tape. Players had to rearrange the pieces in the space of the plaza. There was only room for 12 pieces on the field, so they had to negotiate their priorities for the space and negotiate with each other. People would get prompts like, “What would you want to do in the plaza during rush hour?” Then they would have to make decisions, like removing a local economy piece and adding a public programming one.

“The local economies piece was one of the most intense ones. There are new businesses coming in that are mass chains and people are really afraid of that. Afraid of not having the places where you can have your first job if you don’t have all your papers. There was anxiety about the woman selling tamales in the corner, and whether she’d be able to continue there in the future.

I had nothing to present. I wanted people to talk and develop the knowledge together. I wanted a participatory process that was true, that was deep, to facilitate a way to talk about issues that we can’t talk about typically, and then try to translate that into ideas on the spot. Someone would say, ‘What if we put up a water feature?’ I’d look up on my phone three different examples of water features to show. And then we were able to do something with a little more knowledge.

The game was weird but fun. Just the fact that people stayed there for two hours playing this thing in the middle of a winter storm proved that if nothing else people seemed to like it. And it got people excited. They never expected that. They expected what many groups had done at the time, which is to look at a map of the plaza, how many benches, where are the trees? I was trying to create an opportunity to talk about something deeper. What is the kind of community we want? How can this plaza be a plus, and how can we create a process by which people could voice opinions?” – Quilian Riano, DSGN AGNC

“It was sort of like hands-on planning. And they could visualize it better with it being at the plaza. What better way to connect with the people that are going to be using this space than doing it right on their doorsteps?”

– Ricardi Calixte, QEDC

We sent RBA a list of community priorities that the architects could now take into account. Here are the big concepts that emerged from the game:

- Keep most spaces as open as possible.
- Minimize fixed furniture to allow for multiple uses, including larger performances when needed. Focus on movable elements that can cover the open spaces when not used for programming.
- Place green spaces to provide shade on the Roosevelt Avenue side of the plaza.
- Have a well-lit plaza to ensure safety of people at night and to discourage drinking.

"Figure out what assets the community has, what opportunities there are for the agency to see that something special can be done in terms of public engagement. No one is unwilling to make the process more creative, they're just not always going to have the capacity to take the initiative themselves."

—José Serrano-McClain, Queens Museum



Official Design Meeting

We billed the “A Shared Plaza” game as a two-part event. Come to the game, and then to the official public input meeting with DOT. There was a great turnout at the second meeting, more than 60 people. Some were people who had played the game, and others had been involved in the plaza planning.

Usually, in a design meeting, José points out, “it’s very reactive, you listen. You are not prepared unless you do the work of prepping yourself. It’s also not the same as developing mutual knowledge and a vision before walking into that conversation.”

We had given RBA the participants’ priority list from the “A Shared Plaza” game, as well as research that Social Practice Queens students conducted about Corona—transcripts of plaza interviews with residents and local organizations. We specifically did the work of preparing a group of invested community members for this meeting, and quickly synthesizing their ideas so that the design presentation was already responding to things the community was interested in.

“People recognized what they were seeing on the screen. We prepared people to go in there and share their values and important ideas, not a laundry list, because a laundry list is where you lose power.” – José Serrano McClain, Queens Museum

The pre-meeting activity was essential for the designers to get an understanding of the space, of resident priorities, and the consensus over ways to move forward. It would have been difficult to arrive at such a nuanced vision without the prep work of the game.

“We go in and we don’t have any design. We show other plazas or we try to get people to think about the space, but we purposefully don’t come up with designs. We had a basic outline of the plaza and we just got people to start drawing on it and writing down what they’d like to see. It’s really a listening meeting where you just hear what people have got to say, which I think is a very powerful thing to do.” – Alex Berryman, RBA

Design Directions Meeting

After the official meeting for public input, RBA presented three initial design directions to us, the QEDC, and the Parks Department. Ideally, there would have been another community dialogue at this point. Instead, the Queens Museum had to act as the community delegate and say which direction felt closer to the priorities expressed by community members. To address this, we suggested that RBA and DOT also present design directions at an upcoming festival in Corona Plaza.

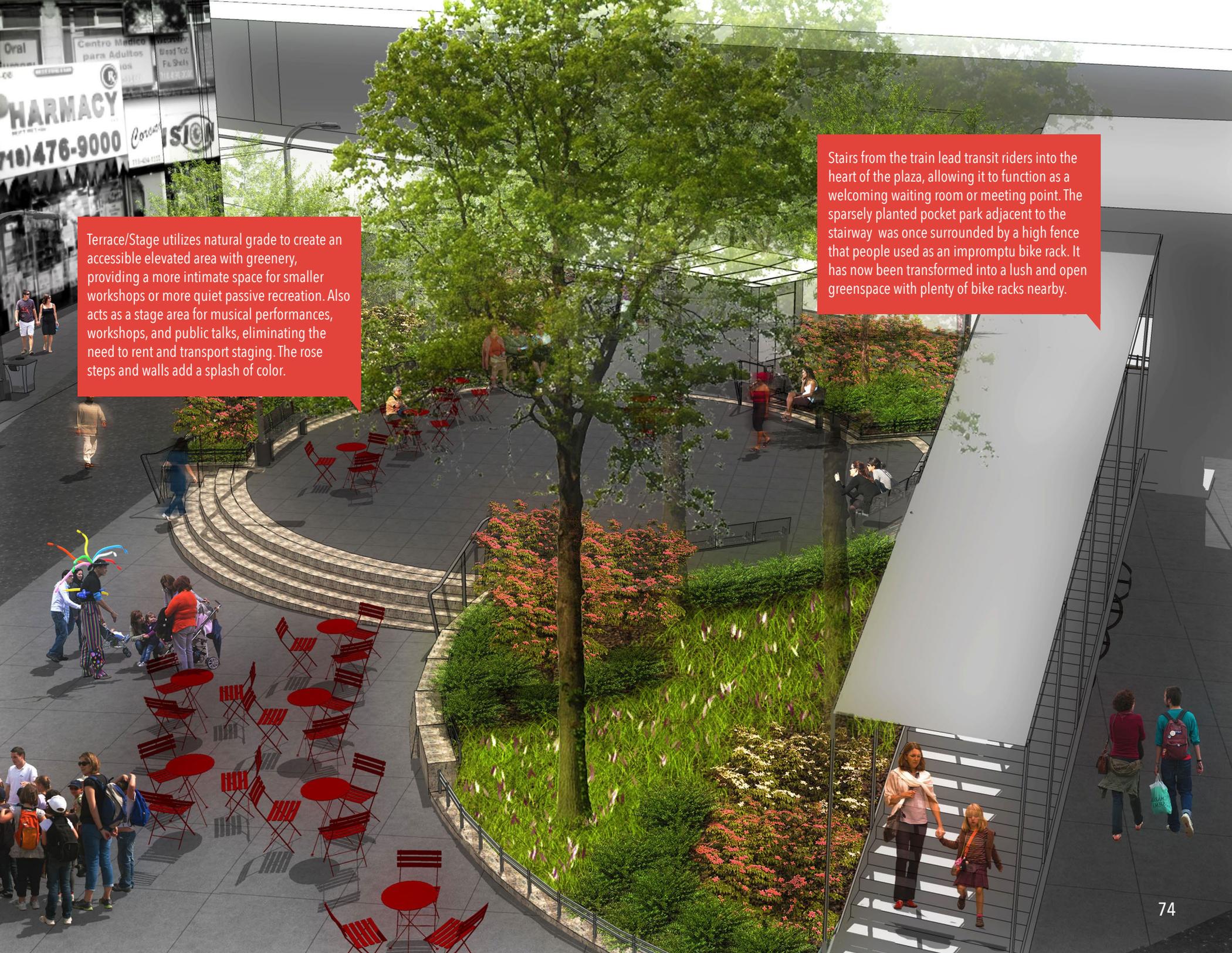
Plaza Design Tent

“We got translators in, we got our tent set up with really nice posters. It was a nice day and you have hundreds of people there for the festival. People wandered in and out and we took notes as much as we could. It was a clever way of reaching out to a community and helping them get involved.” – Alex Berryman

RBA and DOT stood next to their designs and explained how they arrived at them in informal conversation with residents. The designs showed suggestions from the public meeting, so that residents could see that their input was being taken into consideration.

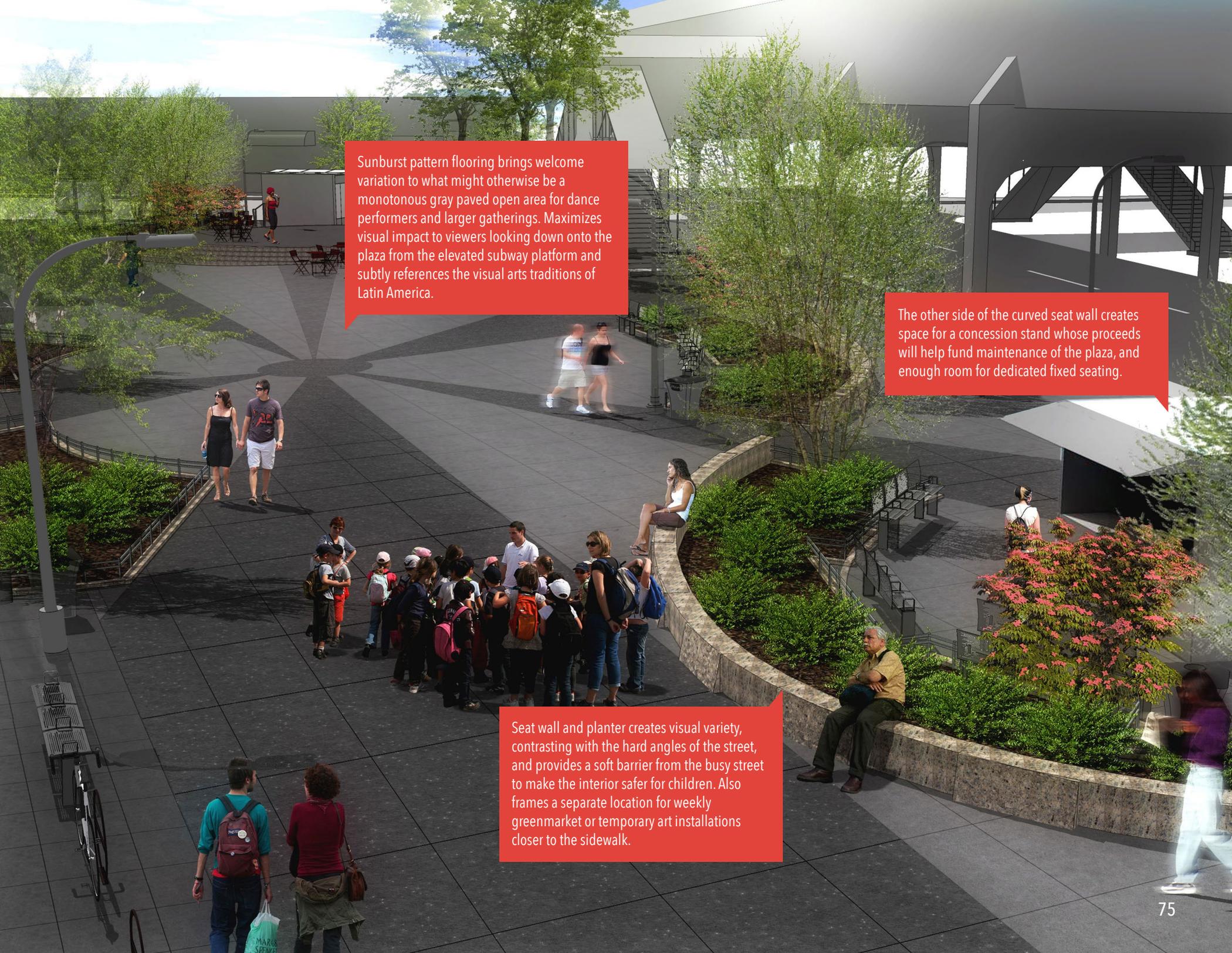
“We gave them two designs and what came out was that people liked the one that we are now going with. And they wanted more color.” – Alex Berryman

The Final Design



Terrace/Stage utilizes natural grade to create an accessible elevated area with greenery, providing a more intimate space for smaller workshops or more quiet passive recreation. Also acts as a stage area for musical performances, workshops, and public talks, eliminating the need to rent and transport staging. The rose steps and walls add a splash of color.

Stairs from the train lead transit riders into the heart of the plaza, allowing it to function as a welcoming waiting room or meeting point. The sparsely planted pocket park adjacent to the stairway was once surrounded by a high fence that people used as an impromptu bike rack. It has now been transformed into a lush and open greenspace with plenty of bike racks nearby.

An architectural rendering of a public plaza. The plaza features a sunburst pattern in the flooring, a curved stone seat wall, and a planter with greenery. People are shown walking, sitting, and gathering in the space. A red text box is overlaid on the upper left, and another red text box is overlaid on the right side. The scene is set against a modern building with a curved facade and a sky with light clouds.

Sunburst pattern flooring brings welcome variation to what might otherwise be a monotonous gray paved open area for dance performers and larger gatherings. Maximizes visual impact to viewers looking down onto the plaza from the elevated subway platform and subtly references the visual arts traditions of Latin America.

The other side of the curved seat wall creates space for a concession stand whose proceeds will help fund maintenance of the plaza, and enough room for dedicated fixed seating.

Seat wall and planter creates visual variety, contrasting with the hard angles of the street, and provides a soft barrier from the busy street to make the interior safer for children. Also frames a separate location for weekly greenmarket or temporary art installations closer to the sidewalk.

In the Meantime...

Construction of the permanent plaza will begin in 2016. Now the big question is, what do we do in the meantime? This is especially of concern to area businesses. What's going to happen when construction starts in front of their establishment? We have always circulated flyers to keep people in the loop about the next step for the plaza. [Hester Street Collaborative](#) has done some incredible work on [keeping an interim space in use](#) and maintaining stakeholder interest during a long design and construction process.

"I think this is a big creative question on our site now: How do we manage this transition in a way that keeps people excited about what's coming?"

- Alex Berryman, RBA

Ask Yourself:

- ★ **Can you find creative ways to engage a diverse group of residents in conversations about plaza design? Prepare residents for community input meetings so that they've already done some work of negotiating priorities. Artist-led community engagement processes can help with that.**
- ★ **Can you be open to unexpected outcomes in an artist-led community engagement process?**
- ★ **How can you use the space first as a temporary site to test out resident preferences and build stakeholders?**

- ★ **Suggest changes to how community input meetings work, or where they are held. Is there a public event you could plug into?**
- ★ **How can you keep residents informed about where you are in the process? We used flyers and events at the plaza.**
- ★ **How can you keep the space active during design and construction?**
- ★ **How will you program the plaza once it is permanent? Having a permanent plaza doesn't mean you can take a break from rallying the community.**



6 Looking Beyond Corona Plaza

How will you develop programming

when it comes time to start on your plaza? Corona Plaza benefited from having the Queens Museum as an anchor institution, but that's not the only model. By developing partnerships or cultivating the energy of volunteers, you can develop successful programming at the scale that works for your plaza. This chapter will share programming ideas from other NYC plazas that might be more like yours.

78th Street Plaza, Jackson Heights Green Alliance

78th Street Plaza is run by volunteers. In 2007, a group of eight neighborhood residents got together to expand open space in Jackson Heights, a perennially open-space starved neighborhood. Ultimately, together with other local organizations, the Jackson Heights Green Alliance succeeded in closing a one-block section of 78th Street in Jackson Heights—first as a “play street,” and eventually as a full-fledged plaza.

Donovan Finn is a founder of the Jackson Heights Green Alliance. He has helped to run the 78th Street Plaza for several years, co-programming with other volunteers. He is a professor of Environmental Planning at Stony Brook University and serves on the board of the Jackson Heights Green Alliance, which manages the 78th Street Plaza.

Valeria Mogilevich: What was there before the plaza?

Donovan Finn: Before, there was just a city street but it was unique because it was adjacent to a park on one side and the back of a private school on the other. So there's nothing with a front door on that street. It was underutilized.

I moved to Jackson Heights in 2007, and when you move here, you really feel how dense the space is and how little park space there is. I just instantly felt like something had to be done. I didn't know what that thing was. The initial idea was to close the street to increase public open space, even if just temporarily.

I think we really need to make more Corona Plazas in other places. And that's where we are heading. To start another new little piece of land where we can grow the community and keep planting these little seeds of communication, of hope, of empowerment. All I want to see is more Corona Plazas.

Verónica Ramírez,
IMI Corona/Mujeres en Movimiento

VM: Why was a play street a good first move?

DF: Because it was all that we could manage.

What we did was apply for the same kind of permit you get for a block party for a series of Sundays in the summer of 2008. And then we would borrow some barricades from the local police precinct and we would put them up at the end of block. We would go in at six in the morning, put the barricades in place. We would program the space for the day to get people using it. And then at six at night we would take down the barricades.

It was good that we started off with just a few Sundays because we didn't have the capacity to do much else. Because we didn't have any money, we didn't have any experience, and we just sort of built it up slowly.

Every summer we did a little more, we went from Sundays only to Saturdays and Sundays. The next year, we did the whole summer. And then eventually we worked with DOT to get into their NYC Plaza Program. We were the first volunteer-run neighborhood group to get into that program.

VM: How did the programming decisions actually happen? Was there one person in charge of reaching out to everyone?

DF: It was more haphazard. We just divided it up among the half dozen of us that were involved. If you had a contact or an interest in something, then you scheduled it and you put it on a Google™ calendar.

VM: Tell me about the benefits of being all-volunteer.

DF: The benefits of being all-volunteer were that we had a passion for it, and if we hadn't done it, no one would have. There was no improvement district for that area. For a lot of us it was a way to use our professional knowledge in a way that's harder during our day jobs. For me it's the ability to do something applied, I mostly teach.

VM: What about the challenges?

DF: Where do I start? Burnout certainly is one of them. We've lost a lot of people because their job or their home life gets too demanding. And it gets to be more work as things become more official. In the beginning we were flying under the radar. We had these block party permits, we would have events with live music, but we didn't apply for sound permits. But now that we're taking public money from City Council and have this 20-page contract with the DOT, we have to go through all of those hoops. When we were guerrilla-style in the beginning, we'd ask for forgiveness instead of permission. But we're not in a place where we can do that anymore.

VM: What's an example of programming that really benefited from this seat-of-your-pants approach?

DF: Jackson Heights typically hosts the third-largest Halloween parade in the city. Every kid in the neighborhood dresses in a costume and marches twenty blocks down 37th Avenue.

Hurricane Sandy happened on a Monday, and that Wednesday was Halloween. Police overtime was cancelled except for storm recovery, so they pulled the permit for the parade. The following morning, someone in our group emailed the rest saying, "Hey, we could have a Halloween party on 78th Street." By that afternoon we were sending out emails to the neighborhood listserv to say, "Bring your costume and bag of candy to the 78th Street Play Street at 5 p.m., and we'll have our own little Halloween party." Maybe we made a quick call to the precinct, and they sent over one car just to keep an eye on it. We definitely had well over 500 people show up. It was fantastic. I think there would have been nothing in the place of the parade had we not done it.

VM: What do you wish you'd known when you started out?

DF: I wish I would have realized early on how the attrition rate would turn our group of eight into a group of three or four or five a couple years later. I wish we had figured out a way to replace with new blood as we lost folks. We were strategic in that we had a goal and worked towards it, but not strategic in thinking about the long-term maintenance once we achieved that first goal.

VM: What's next?

DF: Starting hopefully next year, using city capital funds, the space will connect with a neighboring park and a new park across the street. So we'll have about double the amount of park space in the neighborhood.

Some events at 78th Street Plaza from 2008/2009:

- Theater workshops held regularly in Spanish and English
- African dance
- Soccer classes organized by Super Kickers
- The "Play Street Dance" performed by the DeFacto Dance Company
- 90th Street Choir
- Renaissance School Jazz Band performance
- Queens Community House "activity days"
- Friends of Travers Park "Summer Sundays" concert series
- Girl Scout activities
- Bike Exchange with Recycle-A-Bicycle
- Free children's book giveaway with Librería Barco de Papel
- FDNY "Operation Sidewalk"
- Rescued cats adoption with SaveKitty.org
- Back-to-school book and backpack giveaway with State Senator José R. Peralta
- Queens Library story time

Putnam Triangle Plaza, Fulton Area Business Alliance

Putnam Triangle Plaza in the Clinton Hill-Fort Greene area is managed by a Business Improvement District (BID). Fulton Area Business Alliance (FAB Alliance) is a BID that is focused on activating public space along Fulton Street in the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Fort Greene and Clinton Hill and advocating for small businesses there. FAB Alliance counts on 50 or 60 local partners to program the plaza.

Phillip Kellogg is Executive Director of the FAB Alliance.

Valeria Mogilevich: Tell me about your approach to programming Putnam Triangle Plaza once you became an official DOT plaza.

Phillip Kellogg: We started out with really simple concerts, one guy with a guitar out there for a couple hours. We started a concert series for young people.

But we also have other organizations do their activities in the plaza. And what's been really gratifying is that so many have. The senior citizen center across the street has used the plaza for their fundraising events with an all senior citizen steel drum band playing out there. The line dancing led by an eighty-year-old senior citizen was a wild success. And the only reason we aren't doing it this year is because she said, "I'm eighty-one and I can't do this outside anymore."

"This is a group of seniors known as 'Blenman Steel Sounds' performing in Putman Triangle. The performance was to bring awareness to the community at large of the many services Fort Greene Council, Inc. has available to the 60-plus population."

- Claudette Macey, Executive Director, Fort Greene Council, Inc.



VM: So 60 programming partners is a ton. Where did all those partnerships come from?

PK: We are a small organization. It's me and a part-time person or two. But I've got 29 board members who are all volunteer: merchants, property owners, and institutions. They are a big help with connections and partnerships. So the brainstorming was easy because there were so many opportunities and groups and institutions nearby. We leveraged our partnerships, we had them do some outreach to the people that they know. And that really started the ball rolling.

VM: What are the challenges of having so many programming partners and being the center of all of that activity?

PK: It is extraordinarily labor-intensive, there's no doubt about it. But again it's not like we woke up one morning and said we want to program plazas. This is part of our larger vision and mission for promoting Fulton Street. Because if we can make Fulton Street more walkable and more welcoming, more appealing to people in the residential community, they are going to come out to Fulton Street and they're going to come out more often, and then they're going to spend time inside the shops, bars, restaurants, and cafés.

The other advantage is it diversifies our offerings. If I was the one taking care of all the programming I don't know how many people would come. But when you tap into all these different people and do all this outreach you get much better programming ideas.

VM: Where does the funding for the programming come from?

PK: Part of it is out of the FAB Alliance budget from our BID assessment, because we see it as a marketing vehicle to help promote the district and our businesses. But we also have grants and awards. In the last three or four years we've gotten placemaking grants from our very generous partners of the New York City Department of Small Business Services. And we've also initiated a sponsorship program. In our first year we got a nice handful of sponsors: a couple of real estate companies, the school, a bank, a couple of others. And

then in-kind donations. I mean all of these events and activities, if you put a dollar on what these partners are putting out there, that's extraordinary.

VM: Any advice to other institutions or groups who are interested in embarking on this kind of work?

PK: I would say just community input, outreach, outreach, outreach. No matter how much outreach you do, it will never be enough, so just plan on doing ten times more outreach than you thought you were going to do and then do ten times more than that.

We are increasingly devoted to

the idea that an art museum can play an active role in the public realm. Corona Plaza continues to be a place where we learn how to do that. As you have seen throughout this book, we learn by doing.

As the plaza enters into re-construction in early 2016, the challenge for us will be how to care for a space in transition, one that cannot be physically used but whose ideals can still be celebrated. We are returning to our roots and programming a summer of street closures and block parties near the plaza, and perhaps in other places throughout Queens.

We are pursuing answers to what makes a Dignified Public Space for Immigrants in other ways as well. We are working in partnership with NYC Parks and Design Trust for Public Space to develop a community-driven planning framework for Flushing Meadows Corona Park, the largest park in Queens and the museum's home. We've supported the formation of a group of "community advisors" there to articulate the community's vision and planning priorities for the park. Based on the success of this initiative, the Parks Commissioner has committed to support the expansion of this community planning model to parks throughout the city.

We are also actively involved in the 111th Street Community Corridor campaign, a coalition that includes Make the Road NY and Transportation Alternatives, to identify 111th Street in Queens (a major boundary to Flushing Meadows Corona Park) for the elimination of traffic fatalities. The community plan, which has sparked a parallel campaign to introduce a new community garden on 111th Street, has the support of Council Member Julissa Ferreras as well as DOT planners, and will be voted on by the local community board in Fall 2015.

And at IMI Corona, the feeling is strong that community spaces can be platforms for community creativity in thinking about our place. The recent canvassing initiative and planning retreat by the IMI Community Council identified black/brown solidarity and community safety in public spaces as top priorities for this year's projects and programs.

We hope that our experiences might help you in your work supporting the growth of Dignified Public Spaces for Immigrants and community facilities in your own neighborhoods. We have an open door policy, which means that you can come visit us anytime to engage in discussion about our programs or yours. We look forward to learning from your experiences, too!

Saludos de la placita de Corona!

José Serrano-McClain
Community Organizer, Queens Museum

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Mobile Print Power: 1, 13, 20, 29, 37, 65, 79; Neshi Galindo: 7 - 12;
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Corona Plaza

Espacio donde se pierde los miedo humanos
y se es capaz de adivinar otro mundo posible

Un camino alternativo de senderos que se bifurcan
todo el tiempo
producto de la gran complejidad

quizás un barrio circunstancial
donde la vida ocurre
donde me desprendo del fuego
y vivo la danza, la música y el arte

El encuentro de los diversos caminos
dónde se desnuda la cicatriz sanguinea
y se conecta la locura de compartir
la paz, el agua, la esperanza.

- Neshi.

Corona Plaza

A space where you lose your human fears
and are able to glimpse another possible world

An alternative road of constantly forking paths,
the result of a great complexity

Maybe an accidental neighborhood
where life happens
where I disconnect from the fire
and I live dance, music and art

The meeting point of many paths
that reveals our common scar
Where we connect through the craziness of sharing
Peace, water, hope.

- Neshi.