



Cultural Innovation in Action

Case Studies from 2011 Grantees
of The Rockefeller Foundation's
NYC Cultural Innovation Fund

**Casita Maria & Dancing in the Streets
Dancing at Casita**

PREPARED BY:

EmcArts Inc.



Casita Maria and Dancing in the Streets are investigating the artistic legacy of the South Bronx.

Introduction

About Casita Maria & Dancing in the Streets

Casita Maria Center for Arts and Education has been serving young people in the South Bronx for 80 years through comprehensive arts and education programs for participants from kindergarten through college. Using project-based learning and entrepreneurial training, Casita Maria empowers young people to become creative problem solvers. The organization has an annual budget of approximately \$1.5 million.

For 30 years, Dancing in the Streets has been offering free public performances of dance, interdisciplinary, and site-specific works in New York City and around the country. In 2011, Dancing in the Streets became the first company in residence at Casita Maria.

About the Project

Working together, Casita Maria and Dancing in the Streets are developing a model for a sustainable partnership that will serve as a nucleus for artists and community leaders in the South Bronx. Through the partnership, the two organizations are investigating the artistic legacy of the South Bronx; creating public performances and installations that express the community's singular spirit; offering intergenerational programs that honor the

neighborhood's cultural legacy and lay the foundation for a future cultural renaissance; and building a physical and online South Bronx Culture Trail that will document these activities. The goal is to produce a community-led, sustainable culture trail that will build community pride, honor legendary Bronx artists, nurture the next generation of artists, document the factors that have contributed to the cultural richness and resiliency of the South Bronx, commission public art, and draw audiences to the Bronx.

Process

Starting Conditions

In the 1970s, the landscape of the South Bronx dramatically shifted due to swift economic collapse, rapid demographic transformation, and the literal destruction and abandonment of neighborhoods as impacted by questionable city housing policies. Despite this period of chaos, Dancing in the Streets Executive and Artistic Director Aviva Davidson says, “there is something in this community—a resilience and an energy lodged in the landscape that seems to inspire generations.” Choreographer Joanna Haigood, who worked on the South Bronx Culture Trail project, agrees. The hardship of South Bronx residents was felt “down to the bone,” says Haigood, “but from the ashes came hip hop” and many other cultural movements that emerged in response to the community’s struggle.

Casita Maria, which has been located in the South Bronx since 1961, stayed and served the community even during the area’s most difficult times. As an island of safety and a route out of poverty, the center was home to “Casita Kids” like the now-famous cultural icons Tina Ramirez, Tito Puente, and Rita Moreno. Today, Casita Maria remains a neighborhood anchor. Yet Sarah Calderon, Executive Director of Casita Maria, acknowledges a deep concern over the loss of cultural history in the South Bronx. “Young people were unaware of the talent that had emerged from their community,” she says, “and the loss of community memory was accelerating.” It prompted her to wonder how Casita Maria could celebrate the history of the South Bronx and build on it for the future.

In October 2009, Casita Maria opened its new Casita Maria Center for Arts and Education building—a \$62 million public-private partnership with the New York City Department of Education. As part of its agreement with the City, Casita Maria would incubate a city public school, and almost

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The South Bronx Culture Trail builds community pride, honors legendary artists, investigates the cultural legacy of the South Bronx, and initiates community-based performing and visual arts projects.



immediately, the organization added seven new programs, including summer arts internships, in-school partnerships, the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, a gallery, a theater, and other education programs. The number of youth receiving direct services from Casita Maria rose from 250 to 1500. The new facility gave Casita Maria a much bigger platform for arts and culture programs, but Calderon was concerned about her organization's limitations. With little arts experience, she and her staff decided to look to partnerships to help in program development and delivery. "At the same time, we were considering the opportunities offered by our new building and looking for ways to connect with our alumni," says Calderon, "Dancing in the Streets was asking important questions about its own future." Davidson agrees that it was a propitious intersection. "We are a small organization," she says, "and we wanted not just to survive, but also to strengthen our community connections and make a greater impact on the city's cultural life."

Through a shared board member, the two organizations made contact and decided to embark on a formal partnership. Clearly, they complemented each other in numerous ways. Dancing in the Streets brings site-specific art, programming skills, and production expertise; Casita Maria provides office, rehearsal, and performance space. Both Calderon and Davidson knew, however, that this synergy alone would not make an effective partnership. How, they wondered, could they translate a partnership between two organizations into programming, and how could they make that programming sustainable?

At the heart of their efforts was one big idea: The South Bronx Culture Trail. Combining the education capacity of Casita Maria and the performance/production experience of Dancing in the Streets, the two organizations began developing both a physical and online cultural trail. "It would be," leaders said, "an actual trail with a map and physical landmarks that were significant in our cultural history." The goals of the Trail were to build community pride, honor legendary artists and the venues that nurtured them, investigate contributing factors to the cultural legacy of the South Bronx, and initiate community-based performing and visual arts projects.

Prototyping

“Our project was really our partnership,” say Calderon and Davidson. “The Trail was our prototype for learning how to work together.” Inspired by *A South Bronx Latin Music Tale*, a paper on the confluence of place, community, and music in the South Bronx by Roberta Singer and Elena Martínez, the two organizations decided to build the first Trail around Latin music. Working with a community advisory committee and professional advisors, including outreach and history consultants, the organizations identified key sites on the physical Trail, as well as historical and contemporary cultural figures; commissioned the design of a Trail logo, map, and other material; launched an alumni outreach campaign; and held several public events, including two commissioned large-scale performances.

With the project ready to launch, they hired choreographer Joanna Haigood to create a large site-specific work to kick off the Trail. Haigood began by interviewing Casita Maria alumni. “It was a rich experience,” says Davidson. I was riding in a car with Grand Master Theodore (who invented Scratch techniques), and he took us to a derelict building that had been a boxing ring for kids. ‘We used to jam there,’ he told me. We never would have discovered this history on our own.” Interviews, adds Davidson, helped them uncover not just history, but also the personal idiosyncratic experiences that would shape the Trail.

Working with renowned Latin drummer Bobby Sanabria, Haigood began creating the work that would become *PASEO* and that would eventually win a Bessie Award for Dancing in the Streets—a first for the organization. During the project, Casita Maria and Dancing in the Streets put out a call to community members to participate in the piece, and Haigood created a segment that included 15 community members. It took shape as *PASEO*, a celebration of the contributions made by the Hunts Point and Longwood communities to Latin music, which was a traveling dance performance through the streets of the South Bronx. “It was very organic,” says Davidson, “with performances in the streets, on fire escapes, and on stoops.”

The Bronx Revolution and *The Birth of Hip Hop* programs followed *PASEO* in the second year of the grant. Building on learning from *PASEO*, the organizations expanded their vision and collaborated with other South Bronx cultural organizations to produce an entire festival around the Trail’s launch.

Changes in Assumptions

Originally, the partners imagined a collaboration that would include music performances, exhibitions, and other events, but they were concerned about how to sustain such a large undertaking. The Trail was the perfect answer, says Davidson, “because a baby born today could be added [to the trail] if he became the next Tito Puente.” At the same time, Davidson and Calderon knew they had to distinguish their efforts from the Bronx Hall of Fame and other local organizations, so they, in addition to renowned cultural sites like the Hunts Point Palace, they added the places where famous and less famous artists were born, and also the places that had nurtured their creativity. “This could be a church, a library, even a candy store where young musicians hung out,” says Davidson.

The way both organizations perceive themselves has changed as a result of the project. Casita Maria, Calderon says, is learning how to do more site specific work and is “moving from a model of provision to one of engagement.” Davidson points to an even more dramatic change. Going into the project, she remembers how she considered Dancing in the Streets a city-wide organization. “In the process of working on interviews and the Trail,” she says, “I was still trying to plan programming for Manhattan. But it became increasingly clear that our impact through the Trail so outweighed our impact through multiple locations, that we revised our mission statement to include the word ‘Bronx.’” *PASEO*, she recognized, was the organization’s passport to the Bronx, and she is “now planning how to strengthen [their] position there.”

Obstacles and Enablers

Calderon and Davidson agree that their challenges mostly arose from the different sizes of their organizations. As a large organization, Casita Maria had little experience in intimate collaboration, and Calderon says they had to learn how to be flexible with regard to “time, space, everything.” For *Dancing in the Streets*, it was the first time the organization was based in a single community. Both leaders wondered how they could actually “grow something while [they] were learning to collaborate.” There was always a tug, they say, between programming and sustainability. They asked themselves, “How do you create something large enough to attract public attention, but at the same time make it replicable?”

The key was a shared vision. As Davidson says, “We were different organizations with different missions, but we had shared vision and values. Calderon agrees. “You have to have the same ideals and vision for the collaboration, even if you have different ways of getting to it.” They admit to using an official checklist of criteria for evaluating the partnership, but in the end, they say, the checklist was secondary to the chemistry between them. “We never didn’t get along,” they say. “Intuitively, we just knew.”

The project’s success has generated one of the biggest challenges. Davidson and Calderon admit they had not expected to expose such a rich historical and cultural vein in the community, and the staff resources and financial support required to realize the project were greater than they had expected. “We are meeting all of our goals,” they say, “but it is placing considerable pressure on key staff.”

The success of the project was enabled in part by Casita Maria’s deep commitment to and history with the community. “We have deep confidence in the creativity of our community,” says Calderon, who also notes that the advisory committee was critical to making sure that what they did was what the community needed and desired. At the same time, *Dancing in the Streets* offered a proven methodology for capturing

the experiences and knowledge of a community and for producing large-scale performances in public spaces. Launching the project with Joanna Haigood was also positive, given Haigood’s tremendous respect for communities and her ability to cull important material from her interviews with artists and community members. To ensure that both projects had authenticity and integrity, Haigood developed and directed them in close collaboration with local artists.

Impact

By the Numbers

The collaboration has now produced two culture trails and created a model for working effectively together. Visitors may select a guided tour with Elena Martínez, ride The Bronx Culture Trolley, or take a self-guided walking tour. The organizations still must complete the Trail website and create formal markers for the trails. They are planning a design competition for the trail markers.

“The most important thing about the Trail,” says Calderon, “is that it has helped us engage in different ways with the community and our alumni. During the project, we realized that our students have a negative view of their community, and they don’t think anyone of actual talent or significance ever came from here. Through the Trail, we are helping them understand their history.” Davidson adds, “To our astonishment, *PASEO* moved people so much, especially the older community members who had lived in the neighborhood since the 1950s who told us they had never been represented or honored like this.”

New Pathways to Public Value

For both organizations, the partnership has changed behaviors. Instead of working through one-off partnerships, Dancing in the Streets is creating pathways into and with a specific community. Casita Maria is

focusing on delivering its arts programming through a single partner and as a result, is becoming not just an educational hub, but also a cultural hub. According to Calderon, “this new direction allows us to extend the overall reach of our programs and deepen our community connections. It’s also making us think more intentionally about how we interact with our community. We used to be much less deliberate, one year serving the homeless and the next serving immigrants. Now, we’re really focusing on how we want to be an arts organization embedded in the community.” Davidson says the project gave her a new personal direction that is changing her organization’s trajectory, as well. “I come from a small not-for-profit arts organization,” she says, “and if something needs to get done, I do it.” She describes a moment during *The Bronx Revolution* when she just couldn’t carry the load alone. “I vowed to get out of the ‘poor arts organization’ mentality. I was so inspired by this work that I am now committed to changing my role to being more conceptual and less hands-on.”

Both Calderon and Davidson believe that what they are doing is unique and that deep exploration into a community is fostered by close partnership. Although there have been recent explorations of cultural life in the South Bronx, such as efforts at the Bronx Museum and the Bronx Cultural Corridor, no one, they say, is attempting to present “a living, developing articulation of the area’s cultural history.” By shifting their focus away from presentations

alone, they are creating an ever expanding and richer documentation of that history.

Beyond all their initial expectations, the Trail has become the key driver of arts programming at Casita Maria, says Calderon, “impacting our work in ways we never imagined. It is providing the themes (and the talents) for almost all of our visual and performing arts presentations, and is bringing us into contact with a remarkable range of talented current and former community members, including alumni.” A continuing challenge is determining how much of Casita Maria’s arts programming is related to the Trail. “You can go both ways,” says Calderon, “and we’re still figuring out how expansive we want it to be.”

The fundamental new pathway, both leaders agree, is built on the sense of legitimacy that occurs when everyone in the community feels engaged, celebrated, and honored. “By becoming a vessel that gives the community an opportunity to tell its own story,” Davidson says, “we have learned a different definition of sustainability. It doesn’t have to be concrete, but it can be spiritual or psychological, empowering a community and building community pride.”

The South Bronx Culture Trail created an opportunity for a community to tell its own story.



Learn More

Visit ArtsFwd.org to watch a short documentary about this project and learn more about the 2011 Grantees of The Rockefeller Foundation's NYC Cultural Innovation Fund.

*Profile written by: Catherine Maciariello for EmcArts
All images: Meerkat Media*

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About The Rockefeller Foundation's NYC Cultural Innovation Fund

Through the NYC Cultural Innovation Fund, the Rockefeller Foundation invested \$16.3 million over six years to increase capacity for cultural innovation. The NYC Cultural Innovation Fund sought to reflect the creative aspirations of low-income and minority people, and to contribute to the development of theory and practice of integrating the arts into efforts to achieve cultural equity and community resilience.

The NYC Cultural Innovation Fund supported a diverse portfolio of experiments, explorations and innovations by 86 different cultural and community organizations in New York City. The Fund helped organizations experiment with new artistic programs and imaginative audience engagement strategies; involve community residents in creating work; present art in unconventional venues where it can be seen by a larger public; showcase work of minority artists and immigrant cultures; and pilot new revenue-generating approaches to sustain artists.

www.rockefellerfoundation.org

About EmcArts

EmcArts is a social enterprise for learning and innovation in the arts. We envision a time when participating in art is recognized as lying at the core of human potential. EmcArts is dedicated to advancing a resilient not-for-profit sector that can make this vision a daily reality. Our programs support individuals, organizations, and communities on their journey to becoming highly adaptive.

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