

# **‘Cultural Commerce’: Spaces and Places Beyond Bids**

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## **Introduction**

Our project posits the concept of ‘Cultural Commerce’ as the basis for an alternative model to the existing Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) paradigm, interrogating issues of advocacy, displacement, inclusion, and territory through policy initiatives and architectural intervention.

We define ‘Cultural Commerce’ in broad terms as any form of social exchange that expresses the traits of a local community and celebrates identity, diversity and cross-cultural relations; or more specifically, a subset of retail culture that supports small businesses and promotes local economic development and community sustainability.

Our proposed Cultural Commerce Program (CCP) responds to the limitations of the current BID model, highlighted by the recent failed expansion of the 82nd Street BID along Roosevelt Avenue in Jackson Heights and Corona, Queens. Criticisms of business improvement districts include citywide BID inequality, the imbalance of power between property owners and tenants, the displacement of small businesses in favor of national chain anchor tenants, and the subsequent displacement of local culture. The CCP also resonates with a number of recent policy proposals and initiatives, including the CreateNYC cultural plan and City Council’s Planning for Retail Diversity Report, which both demonstrate the need for a more intentional approach toward cultural commerce across New York City.

Two components make up the Cultural Commerce Program - a policy ‘mechanism’ advocating for small businesses, equitable development, diversity and in-place economic mobility, and a physical ‘language’ that creates spaces and places to support cultural commerce. Organizationally, the CCP receives administrative and financial support from the NYC Department of Small Business Services and is locally governed on a borough-specific basis. Each program, in our case Cultural Commerce-Queens (CC-Q), consists of a wide variety of members including advocacy groups, small business owners, social service organizations and cultural institutions. Members enjoy benefits such as funding, public advocacy, and marketing, and can also propose and sponsor Cultural Commerce Initiatives, which are place-based capital improvement projects implemented in partnership with local developers, city agencies, or even an existing BID.

The 'language' and potential for these initiatives is explored through a series of four vignettes located within the area of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Street BID and its failed expansion along Roosevelt Avenue. A symbol of protection and inclusion (and ubiquitously employed by local street vendors) the 'umbrella' becomes an identifying element for the CC-Q program, and is extrapolated into a scalable series of architectural components including street carts, open air market stalls, enclosed pavilions and public forums. The selected sites vary in scale and context, from a single storefront to an expansive cultural commerce plaza that includes retail, social service and cultural components. Each site investigation is paired with a series of potential cultural commerce tenants, drawing from a variety of organizations and businesses within the local community. Over time the CC-Q program will foster an expanding constellation of site-specific initiatives, defining a network of intervention that overlays the borough of Queens and creates a flexible territory of cultural commerce - a place for the marginalized that advocates for small business, equitable development and diversity.

## **Process Description**

### *Research*

Our project began with extensive research on business improvement districts (BIDs) in New York City. We researched the history of BIDs, how they are created and operated, and the criticisms that they face. We mapped and analyzed BID data and spoke to experts on BIDs in New York City, including Jill Gross from the CUNY Hunter Urban Policy & Planning Department and Laura Hansen from the Horticultural Society of New York.

From our research, we learned that BIDs emerged in the 1970s and '80s in New York City as a tool to address urban blight. BIDs supplement public services such as sanitation and security as a way to counter disinvestment and support local economic development. BID activities are funded by an assessment on property owners located within BID boundaries. The assessments are collected by the City Department of Finance and then immediately distributed back to the BID.

There are currently 75 BIDs in New York City and 13 in Queens, but not all of these BIDs are created equal: there are large disparities in the budgets, capacities, and political clout of BIDs. Large BIDs, such as the Bryant Park Corporation, the Downtown Alliance, and the Times Square Alliance in Manhattan, have annual budgets of more than \$18 million. Small BIDs, on the other hand, such as the 82nd Street Partnership, 165th Street Mall, and Bayside Village in Queens, have annual budgets of less than \$250,000. These differences in budget affect BIDs' capacities to provide certain services: while almost all BIDs provide sanitation and security services, BIDs with larger budgets can also fund marketing campaigns and capital improvement projects.

In Queens, we were particularly interested in the 82nd Street BID in Jackson Heights and the proposed (and failed) expansion along Roosevelt Avenue. This extended BID would have been the largest in the city, but the proposal did not receive the required number of signatures - at least 50% of property owners within the proposed boundaries—marking only the second time in city history that a BID has failed to form. Having identified our study area, we conducted site visits in which we

documented storefronts, street activity (including the many street vendors along Roosevelt Avenue), and potential sites for architectural intervention. We also identified key community and cultural organizations in the study area, including the Queens Museum, Make the Road NY, Immigrant Movement International, Grameen America, Terraza 7, and Queens Neighborhoods United.

To inform our project, it was important to understand the opposition to the Roosevelt Avenue BID extension. Opponents cited a number of concerns, including the displacement of small businesses in favor of national retail chains, the resultant loss of cultural and neighborhood identity, privatization of public services, the additional assessment typically passed on to business tenants, and the disproportionate power of property owners at the expense of the voice of business tenants and community members. The success of the opposition speaks to the history and reputation of advocacy and community organizing in Jackson Heights and Corona. These neighborhoods are some of the most diverse places in the city, and they support a vibrant commercial community and a wealth of cultural assets and anchor institutions.

### *Policy Proposal (The Mechanism)*

In light of the failed Roosevelt Avenue expansion, as well as the rich cultural and commercial environment of Jackson Heights, we focused our proposal for an alternative model on the issues of advocacy, displacement, inclusion, and territory.

‘Cultural Commerce’

1: any form of social exchange that expresses the traits of a local community; and celebrates identity, diversity and cross-cultural relations

2: a subset of retail culture that supports small businesses and promotes in-place economic development and community sustainability

We designed the **Cultural Commerce Program** and identified NYC Small Business Services (SBS) as the ideal City agency to administer the program. The citywide program comprises five borough programs that are locally governed by a combination of small business owners, community advocates, social service and cultural institutions, public officials, property owners, and developers and design professionals. (It is important to note here the balance of power, which we have intentionally shifted toward the small business and community side, and away from the property owner side, in response to a major criticism of the current BID model.) The benefits of membership include funding, advocacy, marketing, and access to City services. Members can also propose and sponsor cultural commerce initiatives, which are place-based interventions, and these can be implemented in partnership with local developers, city agencies, and existing business improvement districts.

The Cultural Commerce Program not only provides an alternative model to BIDs, but it also responds directly to existing public policy proposals and initiatives. The CreateNYC cultural plan was released in 2017 and highlights a number of different strategies that address issues of equity, social impact, neighborhoods, education, and public space, many of which are directly reflected in our proposal. For example, the plan calls for creating mechanisms for projects in public space with City government and brokering connections between cultural businesses and organizations and City business services. Similarly, on the business side, the recommendations laid out by City Council in their 2017 Planning for Retail Diversity report mirror the goals of our proposal, including empowering SBS and local non-profits, supporting public and pop-up markets, and creating programs for 'legacy' neighborhood businesses.

### *Architectural Proposals (The Language)*

In order to test the physicality of this policy mechanism, we developed a representative, scalable, and flexible kit-of-parts using Roosevelt Avenue's ubiquitous umbrellas as formal generators, embracing their symbolic value of inclusion and protection. From the single handheld deployable to the food cart shading device to the open and enclosed pavilion, this formal device generates a range of spaces that aggregate into Architecture.

We then applied this formal language to four case study vignettes within and near the 82nd St Partnership and failed BID expansion territory. These sites were chosen to represent a range of commercial conditions in the city and outer boroughs.

#### BID Storefront

Business Improvement Districts organize to prevent commercial vacancies within their territory. Yet empty storefronts can still be found along 82nd Street. As a small-scale CCP initiative, we imagine BIDs populating these underutilized spaces with social services agencies in need of affordable and accessible classroom space or walk-in clinics, or for arts organization programming, which could encourage more pedestrian traffic. These BID Storefront initiatives may operate on a temporary "pop-up" timeframe, or they may be more permanent, complimenting a commercial corridor's traditional business offerings with cultural commerce at all hours of the day.

#### Deployables: Incubator Triangle

Many commercial sites occur in isolation within residential neighborhoods. This site off Junction Boulevard could become a small CCP outpost, where existing storefront commercial spaces host sanctioned deployable carts. Through this mechanism, the CCP network expands and contracts on a daily basis as carts come and go, multiplying and decentralizing the spaces of cultural commerce throughout the borough.

#### Cultural Co-Op

Along Roosevelt Avenue under the elevated 7 Train, this site is currently home to the Queens Museum-supported Immigrant Movement International community organization. Nearby are a host of other grassroots initiatives like Voces Latinas and Queens Neighborhoods United, among others.

By consolidating and formalizing these organizations on this site, their presence, influence and collaboration could expand, serving the community and complimenting the adjacent local business strip.

#### Paraguas Plaza

Located along the southern extents of the 82nd St Partnership BID, this site provides a fraught case study in (non) public interest development. Previously containing a theater—and now vacant—the site was first proposed to be redeveloped into a 13-story mixed use tower, then a 9-story tower with a big-box Target anchor store, and finally a more understated 2 story commercial building, the so-called “Shoppes at 82nd St.” In contrast to these normative, colonial development narratives, we explored how a CCP initiative hub might be situated on the site. Cultural retail, social services, education and training, and cultural programming tenants such as Grameen America, Queens Library, Terraza 7, and the Street Vendor Project, among others, coexist and complement one another to foster a dynamic urban space and cultural commerce engine.

#### Urban Proposal (The Network)

With initiatives like these, the Cultural Commerce program would propagate across the borough and City, complementing and supplementing existing retail, cultural, and social service networks with a new overlay that serves and enriches life in these neighborhoods. In contrast to the current BID model—with its discrete territories and landlord-centric, formulaic commercial approach—the CC-P envisions a more flexible and equitable network that places marginalized voices at the center of conversations surrounding development.

Throughout our process, we consulted with representatives from a number of local organizations, including Queens Museum Director Debra Wimpfheimer, Dominique Hernandez from Immigrant Movement International, and Grameen America’s Director of Programs Rajitha Swaminathan.