

# CREATING CHANGE:

# THE ROLE OF ARTISTS IN ANTI-DISPLACEMENT

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# Table of Contents

Executive Summary ----- Page 3

Introduction ----- Page 4

*What Does Gentrification Look Like*----- Page 5

Background ----- Page 6

Review of the Literature ----- Page 8

*Do Artists Pave the Way for Gentrification?* ----- Page 8

*Can Gentrification Occur Without Displacement?* ----- Page 10

*What is the Role of Artists in Anti-Displacement?* ----- Page 12

Research Methodology----- Page 13

Research Findings----- Page 15

*Case Study: Laundromat Project* ----- Page 15

*Case Study: ArtSpace’s El Barrio P.S. 109* ----- Page 18

*Interviews* ----- Page 22

*Artist Survey* ----- Page 26

Strategies ----- Page 28

*Create Opportunities for Affordable Housing for Artists* ----- Page 29

*Provide Access to Affordable Workspace for Artists*----- Page 30

*Develop Opportunities for Artists to Work in Their Neighborhoods*----- Page 30

Obstacles and Precautions ----- Page 31

Policy Recommendations ----- Page 32

*Affordable Housing* ----- Page 32

*Workspace for Artists in Public Library Branches* ----- Page 33

*Combination People and Place Based Funding* ----- Page 34

Summary ----- Page 35

Citations ----- Page 36

Appendix A: Interview Questions ----- Page 41

Appendix B: Survey Questions----- Page 42

## Executive Summary

Cities across the United States are facing growth from an influx of new residents. Simultaneously they also face the challenge of addressing poverty and providing support for low-income residents. Neighborhoods such as Harlem in Upper Manhattan, are visibly experiencing rapid change as vacant properties are transformed, renovated and sold. Rents are on the rise and there is concern among residents and business owners for how this will impact the future of their neighborhoods. As Upper Manhattan gentrifies, the fear of displacement increases and the narrative of the arts as a catalyst to gentrification and subsequent displacement comes into play. My research questions this narrative and re frames the question to ask, what is the role of the arts in anti-displacement?

New York City is the optimal place to investigate this question as it is the prototype of gentrification juxtaposed by a history of community organizing, advocacy and activism for low-income residents. Jeremiah Moss' new book, "Vanishing New York", talks about the history of several cultural landmark neighborhoods that have been plagued by redlining, urban renewal and more recently, gentrification (Moss, 2017). Harlem and other parts of Upper Manhattan are experiencing rapid gentrification and displacement of lower income residents as property values continue to rise and cost of living increases. Upper Manhattan has a history of disinvestment that has changed in recent decades with the infusion of economic development, much of which has come from the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone (UMEZ). Their new grant, the UMEZ Arts Engagement grant, will provide artists up to \$10,000 to produce and exhibit their projects in Upper Manhattan to engage residents and attract new audiences. Moreover, this grant provides an unprecedented opportunity for Upper Manhattan artists to create and share their work in the communities where they live. There is a great potential for this grant to support artists in their ability to add to the cultural fabric of the community as well as provide an incentive to being more engaged in their community.

This research sheds light on the affordability crisis affecting low-income communities experiencing the impact of gentrification. It suggests that artists have the potential to play a unique role as cultural agents against physical and cultural displacement, not just for the benefit of artists but for the community at-large. The mechanisms for keeping low-income people, including artists, in place are important for maintaining healthy thriving communities.

## Introduction

Urban Renewal programs of the early to mid-20th century, often referred to as *slum clearance*, had a devastating effect on cities. Neighborhood redlining, which began in the 1930s, was a practice of denying services and setting extreme barriers for homeownership and businesses in neighborhoods based on racial demographics. What followed was decades of concentrated poverty in African American neighborhoods and communities of color which continues today.

In the 1990s under the Clinton administration, Empowerment Zones were designated across the United States to address issues of concentrated poverty in urban areas (Wilson, 2010). They were designed to provide support in the form of tax incentives and grants to businesses in high poverty neighborhoods (Wilson, 2010). The empowerment zones were backed with federal money that was distributed among nonprofit organizations to act as philanthropic partners in economic development. In 1994 UMEZ was created with the charge to enhance the economic revitalization of Upper Manhattan neighborhoods such as Harlem, East Harlem, Washington Heights and Inwood by investing in small businesses, supporting workforce development, and giving grants to the organizational capacity of arts and culture organizations. Economic development has created new opportunities for business, jobs and housing in neighborhoods such as Harlem, but it has also led to an increase in cost of living as housing costs rise.

In 2018 cities across the United States are experiencing growth as populations of new residents are moving in. The terms *gentrification* and *displacement* have become ubiquitous and carry a negative connotation. Arts and culture and artists in particular, are often a focal point in examining the leading causes of gentrification. The familiar narrative reads: Artists move into low-income neighborhoods where rent is affordable and make creative upgrades; drawing the attention of real estate developers. Eventually these neighborhoods become re-branded as arts districts which seek to replace the reputation of crime and poverty with an edgy hip urban allure. This phenomenon has been referred to as the “SoHo effect”.

The name SoHo refers to the neighborhood in New York City south of Houston Street. In the early 1960s it was an industrial area slated for highway construction by the city’s Park Commissioner, Robert Moses. At the same time, Chester Rapkin, an urban planner and member of the city’s planning commission had the idea of maintaining the neighborhood by renting space to artists to fill the vacancies in the industrial buildings (Truffleman, 2016). Marcos Dimas, a visual artist based in East Harlem and co-founder of Taller Boricua describes it like this, “During that time, SoHo was popular. That’s

where all the artists wanted to go, but if they didn't buy, they got priced out. Now it's all commercial, only people with a lot of money can afford to live there" (Dimas, 2018). SoHo today retains very little of its bohemian artist charm and is littered with upscale boutiques and restaurants catering to an upper middle-class clientele. The median household income in the SoHo zip code 10012 is \$100,859 which is 1.5 times more than the median household income in Manhattan (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

### ***What Does Gentrification Look Like?***

The process of gentrification is occurring in various neighborhoods and Harlem, where UMEZ is located, is often pointed to as the neighborhood in Upper Manhattan that has experienced rapid gentrification and community change in recent years. While gentrification may be difficult to define, it is often observed through socioeconomic indicators such as: increased percentage of the population with college degrees or higher education, increased percentage of the population that identifies as white, increase in income level of the population, and increase in rent and housing cost burden (Freeman & Braconi, 2004).

Since 2011, Harlem has seen an increase in overall population and household level of educational attainment. The percent of the population over 25 years old with only a high school degree has remained constant from 2011-2016. The zip code that experienced the greatest increase was 10039 where the rate increased two percentage points from 24% in 2011 to 26% in 2016. In contrast, the percentage of the population over 25 years old with graduate degrees increased in each of the six zip codes with the largest increase from 10.6% in 2011 to 14.8% in 2016 for zip code 10031 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007-2016).

From 2011 to 2016 neighborhood racial demographics have shifted with the population of White residents increasing in all six zip codes, while the predominant population of African American residents decreased in 10030 and 10031 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007-2016).

Housing Cost Burden (HCB) is defined by a rent to income ratio, where a person can be identified as housing cost burdened if they spend more than 30% of their income on monthly rent. HCB increased in some zip codes and decreased in others. In zip code 10027 HCB increased by 1.5 percentage points even though the overall population of renters decreased by approximately 130 households. Conversely, in zip code 10037 the HCB decreased by 35 percentage points and the total population of renters increased by approximately 1000 households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007-2016).

A 2017 report by the Center for an Urban Future noted that between 2010-2015 the number of artists<sup>1</sup> in Manhattan experienced an overall decrease. Interestingly, the number of artists in Harlem increased by 216 percent, accounting for 956 artists, and Harlem ranked #6 in the top ten neighborhoods with the largest increase in artists. Washington Heights and Inwood were counted among the top ten neighborhoods with the most artists, approaching almost 2000 artists in 2015 (Center for an Urban Future, 2017). According to scholarly research on the topic, the number of artists in a neighborhood is not a defining characteristic of gentrification. Additionally, the data does not provide details about why artists moved to these neighborhoods. One possibility is that they were seeking more affordable rents than those of downtown Manhattan.

The gentrification of Harlem and change in the market rate of rental units is likely to increase over time due to trends in the real estate market and increasing property values in Manhattan. This could lead to the negative side effect of displacement if efforts are not made to preserve housing for low-income residents.

## **Background**

Once the arts are discussed in the context of community development it is almost certain to bring up discussion of gentrification. Numerous books and articles relay a familiar narrative that describes artists moving into low-income communities of color and being the catalyst for neighborhood change and gentrification. The impact of which is the rising cost of living followed by the potential for displacement. However, there are artists all over the country whose work is deeply embedded in community engagement and advocacy for sustaining the cultural identity of their neighborhoods. By observing models of artists engaged with their community, can this narrative be reversed? Can artists play a role in anti-displacement?

Consider the work of Rick Lowe's Project Row Houses, which consists of 22 abandoned homes in Houston's Third Ward that Lowe purchased in the early 1990s. Several of the homes support young mothers who are working to finish school while the others house galleries and exhibition spaces for artists. The artists and young mothers work together to create a vision for their community, addressing social issues through art and creative expression. Similarly, Theaster Gates has transformed vacant buildings in Chicago's south side into cultural institutions such as the *Black Cinema House*, for his community. His work in the south side of Chicago has created numerous employment opportunities for local residents of this low-income neighborhood. In both artists' work

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<sup>1</sup> This data may account for art professionals and those who work administrative roles in the arts, therefore it may not be an accurate measure of artists who only earn income from their creative work.

there's a symbiotic relationship between arts and community where the integration of the arts has positive outcomes on the health and sustainability of the community.

A glimpse at development of three New York City neighborhoods demonstrates how gentrification has changed over the past 3 decades. In the Clinton neighborhood, gentrification by individual homeowners was staved off by neighborhood activism as well as city government assistance in the 1970s and 1980s. However corporate developers began to invest in and wait until properties appreciated. It is no longer a market for the average small investor due in large part to large investors. Long Island City, on the other hand, has experienced pockets of gentrification as a result of increased residential zoning and a mixed-use redevelopment called the *Queens West Project*. In DUMBO, Two Trees Development Corporation bought and refurbished industrial buildings, and evicted many of the artists and residents in efforts to increase property value. Although their project failed with minimal local government support in the 1980s, the 1990s brought about a shift in City Hall and zoning changes worked in favor of the developers (Hackworth, 2002).

This report will investigate models of artists working in community with a focus on anti-displacement by specifically focusing on two organizations based in Upper Manhattan: The Laundromat Project in Harlem and El Barrio's ArtSpace P.S. 109 in East Harlem. The Laundromat Project officially began in 2005 under the direction of Rise Wilson who thought of laundromats as a cross-sectional community gathering space with downtime to insert creative intervention. Their mission is to use arts and culture to strengthen networks within communities; addressing issues, and elevating residents' sense of ownership in their neighborhood. Within that, they believe artists are community assets that can work hand-in-hand with their neighbors to create a positive impact in their community and in the lives of residents. Much of their work addresses growing concerns about gentrification and displacement in communities with a high percentage of low-income long time residents (Laundromat Project, 2018). El Barrio's ArtSpace P.S. 109 was a former public school that was left vacant in 1995. In 2006, it was transformed into affordable live-work units for low-income artists by Minneapolis based real-estate developer, ArtSpace. ArtSpace was formed in 1979 by a partnership between the Minneapolis City Council and Minneapolis Arts Commission, as an advocacy organization with the goal of helping artists find workspace in the Minneapolis warehouse district. In 1986, they became a nonprofit real-estate organization with a mission to "create, foster, and preserve affordable space for artists and arts organizations" (ArtSpace, 2018). Their model of governance is tenant driven with a focus on engaging community in the building and within the community at-large. Both models present a unique vantage point through which to view the impact of artists on communities, particularly in Upper Manhattan.

In the early 1990s Upper Manhattan had some of the highest concentration of poverty in the country. Since 1994, UMEZ has funded about \$55 million in grants to support the capacity and stability of arts and culture organizations in Upper Manhattan.

In 2017, UMEZ launched the UMEZ Arts Engagement Grant (UMAE) which will provide grants of \$1000 to \$10,000 to artists that live uptown and are producing, exhibiting and performing their creative works uptown to engage local and citywide audiences. This is the first time in its history that UMEZ will be able to provide direct support to artists and the inaugural artists will receive grants in the summer of 2018. As UMEZ continues to support the economic development of Upper Manhattan, consideration must be placed on the issues of gentrification and displacement. In its new role as a funder for artists, UMEZ should consider the ways in which artists are engaging with their community to impact and create change from the bottom up, rather than the top down.

## **Review of the Literature**

There are varying viewpoints on this topic of arts and gentrification which I will divide into three schools of thought. The first points to the arts and artists as unwitting participants, seeking affordable live-work space, which then paves the way to gentrification and potential displacement (Rich and Tsitsos 2016, p. 736-756; Zukin and Braslow 2011, p. 131-140). Other scholars have argued that gentrification may have positive effects on communities and does not lead to displacement. As new residents with higher incomes move into a neighborhood, new businesses and services will emerge to serve this clientele and these additions may also serve the needs and interests of lower-income residents (Freeman and Braconi 2004, p. 39-51; Grodach, Foster and Murdoch 2014, 21-35; Grodach, Foster and Murdoch 2016, p. 807-825). However, opposing analysis of similar data tells a different story about Washington Heights in New York City and notes the gradual decline in the Dominican population (Hernandez, Marrara and Sezgin 2017, p. 1-35). The third school of thought addresses the role of the arts and artists in neighborhood revitalization and argues that this can happen without gentrification and displacement (Yu 2017, p. 173-178).

### ***Do Artists Pave the Way for Gentrification?***

Rich and Tsitsos delve into the complexities of creative placemaking and planning in neighborhood transformation. Working class neighborhoods cultivated by artists, such as SoHo in New York City, have the potential to be adopted by developers causing rents to rise and displacement of low-income residents to occur. The irony of

the situation is that the same artists that helped shape the unique culture and fabric of the neighborhood are often included among those that are most likely to be displaced (Rich and Tsitsos 2016, p. 754). They studied Station North, a recently branded arts and entertainment district in Baltimore, which consists of the Charles North and Greenmount West neighborhoods. Artists moved into these neighborhoods because of their affordability, cheap rents and warehouse spaces that could be transformed into lofted live-work spaces. In short, these neighborhoods were naturally occurring creative enclaves that local and state government sought to re brand as an arts and entertainment district in order to attract tourism and spur economic development (Rich and Tsitsos 2016, p. 742). Residents expressed conflicting feelings about the intentions behind this designation, with homeowners generally having a more positive disposition than renters. Overall residents and planners expressed concern for gentrification and displacement (Rich and Tsitsos 2016, p. 744). This is a case where a lot of effort was put forth to ensure that this was not a top-down approach towards development so that it did not fall prey to the “SoHo effect” of artists and longtime resident displacement. While the efforts were focused on ensuring community involvement, they note the challenge in defining community due to varying ages, races, classes and lifestyles (Rich and Tsitsos 2016, p. 749). Tensions existed between artists, stereotypically viewed as being educated, white and middle class, and the longtime residents of these communities that were majority African American. While many artists identify as low-income, they have access to social, cultural and political capital that their low-income neighbors often do not (Rich and Tsitsos 2016, p. 750). Rich and Tsitsos concluded that despite trying to avoid the “SoHo effect”, using creative placemaking and arts district branding to encourage upward socioeconomic movement into a neighborhood will likely lead to displacement (Rich and Tsitsos 2016, p. 754).

Zukin and Braslow draw similar conclusions in their analysis of the effects of gentrification and displacement in the absence of intentional cultural planning. They too talk about SoHo as a prime example of a naturally occurring arts district in the absence of being planned for creative industries. The example of SoHo demonstrates the power of government policies to shape and alter cultural districts. Municipalities subsidized artist housing and workspace which drew interest towards improving and upgrading artist occupied buildings and spaces, leading to gentrification with rising rents and displacement (Zukin and Braslow 2011, p. 132). They further recount the history of the artist migration in New York from SoHo to the East Village and then further along the L train into East Williamsburg and Bushwick. They identified the re-formation of creative communities by a three-step process of “socio-spatial” change, which is group migration, building reputation and creating visual representation or public art (Zukin and Braslow 2011, p. 134) There is a push and pull which influences artist mobility, whereas artists are drawn to cultural districts they are often pushed out by rezoning and high

rents and then pulled to more affordable low-income neighborhoods (Zukin and Braslow 2011, p. 135). New York City does not have policies to protect artists from rising rents and the lack of such leads to the destruction of the naturally occurring creative hubs (Zukin and Braslow 2011, p. 135). Artists' entrepreneurial work, networking, and organizing can lead to generating a neighborhood's creative reputation as can be observed in Bushwick, whose history of industrial grittiness created a trendy appeal (Zukin and Braslow 2011, p. 137). Public art is also identified as a push factor in that it creates a visual backdrop for cultural consumers that are drawn to murals and graffiti and can distinguish between street art created by trained artists and those created by youth (Zukin and Braslow 2011, p. 139). This builds a case for artists and policymakers to be cautious of creative districts, and particularly for artists to be responsible cultural agents within communities and act as a force against anti-displacement.

### ***Can Gentrification Occur Without Displacement?***

Freeman and Braconi have a different take on the issue of gentrification. Their analysis of data trends suggests that gentrification does not lead to displacement and that it may actually have positive effects on communities (2004, p. 41). Their longitudinal study of New York City in the 90s used data from the New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey (NYCHVS). They compared and contrasted rent-controlled housing, rent stabilized housing and uncontrolled housing in gentrifying and non-gentrifying areas and used household income and education level to identify disadvantaged households (Freeman and Braconi 2004, p. 43). What they found was that in gentrifying neighborhoods, as the cost of living increased, disadvantaged households were 19% less likely to move when compared to those in non-gentrifying neighborhoods and only a small percentage of moves are connected to displacement (Freeman and Braconi 2004, p. 45). This low rate of moves may be due to lack of other affordable housing options in the neighborhood and thus, low-income renters will find ways to adapt to rent increases (Freeman and Braconi 2004, p. 48). They make a case for gentrification as a solution towards resolving issues of segregation and socioeconomic disparities in cities. They add that a benefit of gentrification is its potential to integrate people of diverse backgrounds and this could have a positive impact on desegregating urban public schools (Freeman and Braconi 2004, p. 39).

In contrast, a policy brief produced by CUNY's Dominican Studies Institute used NYCHVS data from 1999-2014 to look into the decrease in Dominican households in Washington Heights and Inwood. Research shows that Washington Heights is one of the fastest gentrifying neighborhoods in New York City and Dominicans, who make up the largest population of ethnic groups in the neighborhood, are also the lowest income people and therefore most susceptible to forces of neighborhood change (Hernández,

Sezgin and Marrara 2016, p. 4). The data shows that as median housing costs increased by approximately 30.2%, median income increased by 21% (Hernandez, Sezgin and Marrara 2016, p. 5). In addition, this study states that the percentage of immigrant households has decreased by 26% and only half of the overall residents of Washington Heights and Inwood have lived in their current units since 2000 or earlier (Hernandez, Sezgin and Marrara 2016, p. 20). This study notes that the number of Dominican households has decreased from 2010-2015 and points to gentrification and rising rents as the culprit. (Hernandez, Sezgin and Marrara 2016, p. 23)

Grodach, Foster and Murdoch's research expressed interest in refuting the claim that the arts are a catalyst for gentrification (2014). They focus on the arts as an asset for neighborhoods and point out that neighborhood change is dependent on art form and not just the arts as a blanket term (Grodach, Foster and Murdoch 2014, p. 23). While they admit that artists indirectly "set the stage" for gentrification and have been instruments of urban planners and policymakers, they determine that the arts are not "inextricably" linked with gentrification (Grodach, Foster and Murdoch 2014, p. 22) They observe the varying effects of different types of art forms on neighborhood change, comparing fine arts and commercial arts. They found that commercial arts such as film, music, and design, were associated with gentrification. However, fine arts such as performing arts, museums, and art schools were associated with neighborhood revitalization and are generally found in non-gentrifying neighborhoods (Grodach, Foster and Murdoch 2014, p. 27) They call for more research to explain why these patterns occur.

Grodach, Foster and Murdoch later identified a gap in the research relating to the role of arts industries. Previous research focused on artists but there was less study of arts industries and the impact on gentrification and displacement. In their study of 4 metro areas, Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles and New York, they asked, "How is the presence of arts establishments associated with gentrification and displacement?" (Grodach, Foster and Murdoch 2016, p. 809). They observed data at the zip code level for variables such as income, education, new housing construction and housing value. They then classified neighborhoods as having the potential to gentrify, gentrifying, or gentrified (Grodach, Foster and Murdoch 2016, p. 812). Additionally, they questioned if the relationships differed by region? To some degree, their analysis of the data shows that they do. Gentrification may be driven by other factors in cities like Los Angeles and New York. but in New York the fine arts do have an effect on displacement, possibly due to economic development more so than the arts. In Dallas, however, gentrification did have an effect on displacement (Grodach, Foster and Murdoch 2016, p. 821). Their findings also showed that fine and commercial arts are more likely to locate in upscale neighborhoods however, commercial arts were shown to decline in wealthier areas.

According to their regression model, they conclude that the arts don't play a significant role in gentrification and displacement and despite evidence that commercial arts may drive gentrification, displacement isn't necessarily linked (Grodach, Foster and Murdoch 2016, p. 822). While they don't believe that areas that have plentiful growing arts industries lead to gentrification and displacement, they caution that it is actually areas without high concentrations of the arts that are more susceptible to gentrification (Grodach, Foster and Murdoch 2016, p. 823).

### ***What is the Role of Artists in Anti-Displacement?***

The third school of thought discusses ways that the arts and artists can play a role in revitalization without gentrification and displacement. Yu reports that after 9/11 developers invested billions of dollars in Chinatown and the Lower East Side neighborhoods of New York City for economic recovery (2017). According to 2013 Preserving Affordability & Authenticity report, the Asian population has declined by 30% and both Chinatown and the Lower East Side have lost 30,000 units of affordable housing since 2003 (Yu 2016, p. 174). The Chinatown Arts Brigade was founded in 2015 by three Asian American artists and activists with roots in the historic Chinatown community (Yu 2016, p. 173). Their model of community engagement includes workshops, storytelling circles, tours and mapping activities that are co-created with residents and community members. Their main project, "Here to Stay", projects messages of anti-gentrification created by community members, onto buildings for the public to see. Community members lead tours to places that no longer exist and visit buildings such as what used to be a factory and is now a luxury gym (Yu 2016, p. 175). In partnership with other artist collectives, they mobilize residents and community members to participate in social-change such as pressuring the mayor to approve the Chinatown Working Group community rezoning plan to manage neighborhood growth and sustain existing low-income residents (Yu 2016, p. 174).

While there is plenty of research that examines the impact that artists and arts industries have on drawing attention and consequently new development to an area, there is not enough evidence to conclude that a high concentration of artists and arts organizations are the drivers of gentrification. Though they may be a factor driving neighborhood change, they are likely not the sole factor. In addition, there is little research that investigates the ways in which artists engage in anti-displacement efforts in their neighborhoods and the impact this has on the community. My research seeks to fill this gap by investigating the role of artists in anti-displacement by observing models in New York City and through interviews with artists and arts professionals.

The majority of artists earn a low to modest income, often working as independent contractors with several part-time jobs to make ends meet. Consequently, they tend to be drawn to low-income neighborhoods where the rent is cheap and they can afford live-work space. Although artists may identify as low-income people, they have social capital with connections to institutions, museums, and foundations that their neighbors may not. As development creeps in and the process of gentrification expands into low-income neighborhoods, is there potential for arts and culture to act as an “antidote” to the negative impact of gentrification? What role can artists play in anti-displacement?

My primary hypothesis is that artists and arts and culture institutions that work and live in gentrifying communities can be a leading force against rapid community change involving re-zoning, gentrification and displacement. They can do this by leveraging their social capital and cultural assets for the benefit of their community. Additionally, I hypothesize that artists can form a bridge of communication between the residents of a community, urban planners and policymakers. In this way, artists act as cultural agents by getting involved with their community and advocating for policies that meet the needs of the community.

## **Research Methodology**

I began my research by collecting secondary quantitative data from the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey. I focused on collecting census data for the Harlem neighborhood which is where the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone is located, and also one of the neighborhoods in Upper Manhattan that has experienced rapid gentrification over the past few decades. The boundaries are defined by 110th Street to the south, 5th Avenue to the east, 155th Street to the north, and Morningside Avenue, Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, and Henry Hudson Parkway to the west. Harlem consists of 6 zip codes: 10026, 10027, 10030, 10031, 10037 and 10039. I conducted comparative analysis of historical and current data for the following data sets:

1. Rent increase or decrease per zip code over time
1. Household income as a percentage of gross rent (to determine housing cost burden)
2. Educational attainment
3. Increase or decrease in number of artists per neighborhood over time

My primary data consisted of interviews with key informants from nonprofit arts organizations, foundations, city officials and individual artists. I also conducted an

anonymous survey of artists to find out how civically engaged artists are and to ask what role do they see themselves and other artists playing in anti-displacement. I conducted this survey utilizing social media platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn to share my survey with my personal network, as well as friends' networks. The survey on Facebook was shared 11 times and was completed by 39 artists. I will note that because the survey was shared on Facebook with my network, this does not constitute a random sample.

I additionally conducted case studies on 2 different organizations in New York whose models are based on embedding artists within communities. The Laundromat Project has a focus on artists as advocates. I spoke with Ayesha Williams who is Director of Strategic Partnerships at Laundromat Project, and she shared the overall mission and vision of their work. Following that meeting I visited one of their program sites on Kelly Street in the Bronx to attend a free community program and speak with Alicia Grullón who is an artist and organizer for the space. My second case study was with El Barrio's ArtSpace P.S. 109, which provides affordable housing for artists in East Harlem. I attended an exhibition in their gallery space and got to meet artists who live in the building. Then I had the chance to speak with Rolinda Ramos, the building manager, about their model of artist housing and community engagement. I also spoke with Ariel Garcia who works for ArtSpace, a national real-estate developer for affordable housing for artists that is headquartered in Minneapolis.

During my research I was working as a National Urban Fellow and Special Assistant at the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone. Through this fellowship I was able to attend meetings with arts organizations, learn about the history of UMEZ and participate in the development and implementation of the new UMAE grant. I was given access to the data that UMEZ had collected from over 800 arts and culture groups of varying sizes all residing in Upper Manhattan.

## Research Findings

### Case Study: Laundromat Project *Artist as Activist*



*(Artwork by LP Artist in Residence, Walter Cruz)*

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On February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2018 I met Ayesha Williams for coffee in Harlem. Ayesha is the Director of Strategic Partnerships at Laundromat Project, a nonprofit arts organization that has been based in Harlem since 2006. Laundromat Project (LP) is housed at The Oberia D. Dempsey Multi-Service Center, a previously vacant public school that has been converted by the West Harlem Group, into offices for nonprofit and community organizations. Their mission is to use art to advance social change and Ayesha shared that LP believes that artists are instrumental catalysts to generate dialogue between neighbors and community members. They also believe that art is not a one off; it is integral to community life and well-being. Their model is a combination of art and civic engagement, connecting artists with opportunities to create art in their neighborhoods along with neighborhood residents. Since laundromats are places frequented by city apartment dwellers, they provide the perfect opportunity to interact and engage with neighbors and have discussion about issues relating to the neighborhood. In addition to providing opportunities for artists to facilitate workshops through their artist-in-residence program, LP has initiated a new fellowship program called, "Create Change Fellowship." The fellowship provides artists with an understanding of how to become involved in the public sector and offers workshops on community organizing and public policy. Artists learn what it means to be leaders in their community, become strong advocates and influence policy change. Over the past

decade they have worked with over 150 artists. Their newest program, the Kelly Street Collective, consists of a two-bedroom apartment in the Bronx where they run community programming. LP artist-in-residence, Alicia Grullón, oversees the programming and community engagement efforts at Kelly St.

On March 17th, a sunny Saturday morning, I met with Alicia at 920 Kelly St., the location of the Laundromat Project's Bronx project space. The building itself has a rich history with a turning point in 1978 when the building was saved after being slated for demolition. Through community organizing, neighborhood residents formed Banana Kelly Community Improvement Association which continues to serve the community by offering affordable housing, and rental assistance programs among other services (Banana Kelly CIA, 2018). I arrived at the building just minutes before 11am, when a community yoga class was scheduled to begin. After walking down through the open side gate and through a narrow courtyard hallway I was greeted by Alicia who introduced me to Alejandra, a community member and participant with LP. They welcomed me into the apartment, a modest two-bedroom that LP uses as an art gallery, workshop and community event space. We did yoga for an hour in what would have been the living room and afterwards everyone who participated stayed in the space to socialize. I was given a tour of the community garden that takes up the back-courtyard space behind four buildings. The garden is maintained by Bruce and his wife Carol who started community gardening in Brooklyn before being priced out of the neighborhood and finding the opportunity to work with Banana Kelly. They work to engage residents in gardening as well as provide vegetables grown in the garden to residents at no cost. They also host cooking demonstrations so that residents can learn how to prepare the offerings of the garden in a variety of ways. Following the tour, I sat down with Alicia and we began to speak about her work as an artist.

*Interview with Alicia Grullón, Community Artist and Activist*

**“When you're able to say something, you should say it.” — Alicia Grullón**

**LF:** The arts are often pointed to as something that spurs economic development and inadvertent gentrification and displacement. How do you think artists can reverse that narrative?

**AG:** We need to look at economic development in a different way. We need to stop focusing on the concept of capitalism and hyper trade where resources are taken and sold off. We (as a society) need to change our priorities. The system is broken, it's working for some people and not for others. In the Bronx there are these *casitas*, little traditional *jibaro* houses made by community members and artists in the 70s. The concept behind them was to build hope and see community come together.

**LF:** Do you think that artists taking on positions in local government may be a way to create change?

**AG:** No, I don't. You can't train people to be politicians because they will become corrupt themselves because your environment affects you, so the system is what has to change. Several years ago, I went rafting in Nepal and got swept up in the tide, it took a lot of effort to swim against the current to get to shore. I feel like a lot of the work that artists and activists are doing is swimming against the tide. It's hard to create a plan for the future, it's even harder to do it communally.

**LF:** What are some issues you address in your work?

**AG:** The main issues are based on gender, race, class and activism. I look into the structures that created classism and racism, I feel it's my purpose as an artist. One of my recent projects, Percent for Green, involved a community process for creating a bill to share with City Council and the Mayor of New York City. This bill asks for 1% of all new construction to include green space. It's similar to the percent for art which allocates 1% of new construction to public art. But I was thinking about climate change and specifically how this affects low-income urban neighborhoods of color. To me this is an issue on the front lines of environmental racism and injustice and this project relates to our lives and experiences. So, we drafted a bill and I handed it to Mayor De Blasio at a private event. I haven't heard anything about it since.

**LF:** How do you feel you can influence change through your art?

**AG:** For me it's about thinking how I can make a change using the skills I have and how I can talk to more people. In order to protest, we need to be caring for other people. We need to have love for community, our experiences, stories, resiliency and human spirit. My work is about swimming against the tide, I infuse elements of storytelling and life experiences.

**LF:** What artists do you think are doing important work?

**AG:** There are so many it's hard to think of just a few. One who comes to mind is Ayana Evans who does the *Catsuit Project* which addresses the presence of the black female body.<sup>2</sup> Shellyne Rodriguez whose hallway drawings present a hyper-real surrealism and show a deep connection to her neighborhood and community. *Decolonize This Place* is another project where activism is the artwork. We still live under colonized parameters; the idea is to dismantle the larger system through addressing things that are public facing such as the controversial statue in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

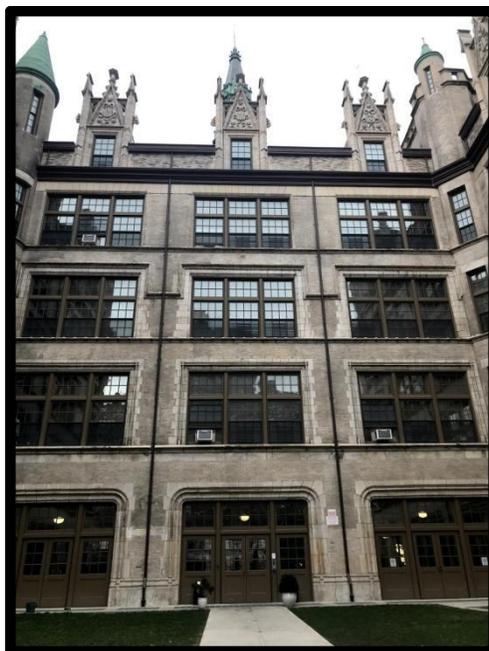
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<sup>2</sup>In July 2017, Ayana did a Catsuit performance at the Kelly St. garden. Information and images can be found here <http://laundromatproject.org/operation-catsuit-gardening/>

**LF:** How did you come to understand or be involved in the political process, advocacy and activism?

**AG:** I've always been aware and politically charged as a woman of color and child of immigrants. These are things I have no control over and my work is about trying to take back control. My parents were very socially conscious. They were anti-war Catholics of the 70s who were involved in local activism. Growing up I went with them to organizing meetings in church basements or in people's living rooms and this allowed me to see the world through a different lens. Overall, I believe when you're able to say something, you should say it.

**Case Study: El Barrio P.S. 109**  
***Potential for Community Impact***



*(Photo of the building facade at P.S. 109)*

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On February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2018 I met with Rolinda Ramos at El Barrio's P.S. 109, an affordable housing space for artists created by ArtSpace. ArtSpace is a property developer based in Minneapolis that focuses on creating affordable housing for artists in cities across the United States.

Rolinda has 20 years of experience as a building manager. Within that role she has also gained skills in social services as she has been exposed to working with different populations of people with varying needs. She describes her role as, "here to serve". She works for El Barrio Operation Fight Back (EBOFB), the organization that

oversees the management of ArtSpace's El Barrio P.S. 109 building for artist housing. The primary function of ArtSpace developments is to provide affordable housing for artists. The building contains 90 units of affordable housing for artists and houses individual artists as well as families which include 50 studios, 18 one-bedrooms, 21 two-bedrooms, and a one-bedroom artist-in-residence apartment.

**“There’s a sense of responsibility to fight displacement.” - Rolinda Ramos**

In order to secure their spaces, residents had to apply and go through an intensive interview process with ArtSpace projects for which they had to demonstrate their craft, but there is no qualification that they must be earning an income from their art, which allows for varying levels of artistic experience. P.S. 109 also provides space for cultural organizations such as *Hi Arts* and *El Taller Latino Americano* as well as a community run gallery space where residents co-curate monthly exhibitions and events. \$53 million dollars was invested into the renovation of P.S. 109.

In terms of demographics, 50% of the units were reserved for people from East Harlem. The other 50% went to artists from other parts of Manhattan and the boroughs. 40% of the residents are Latino, followed by a smaller percentage of White, Black and people who identify as “other”. Initially there was an income cap, but once an artist moves in they can stay indefinitely. For very low-income, the cap was \$24,000. Low-income was capped at \$35,000- \$40,000 for a single resident and \$42,000-\$44,000 for a family.<sup>3</sup> When P.S. 109 opened there were 53,000 applications from artists all over New York City for the 90 available units. The process for selecting residents was overseen by the Housing Preservation Department which has strict rules.

“In East Harlem there is a lot of energy towards fighting gentrification. It’s inevitable, it’s going to happen. Rather than fight a losing battle, why not focus more on placemaking? Create murals to tell the neighborhood’s story” (Ramos, 2018).

At P.S. 109, there is an events committee that programs cultural events in the gallery space. The ArtSpace model is a self-governing model in which the residents make decisions about how the buildings will be run and managed. At most ArtSpace sites, an agency has been hired to oversee rent collection and general building maintenance, however P.S.109 is the only site with on-site management, which is Rolinda’s job. This presents challenges for Rolinda by creating conflict between her and the residents as she works to create systems and instill a sense of organization among the residents in the building. She feels there is a power struggle between her and the

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<sup>3</sup> Based on data from 2012. The caps for 2018 are higher accounting for inflation.

residents and feels that she is viewed by residents as controlling; wielding authority and power over the building.

However, Rolinda has a vision for the building and the ways that the artists within the building can interact and engage with the East Harlem community. She believes that the residents of P.S.109 should be aware of what's going on in the neighborhood and that artists can be a voice for the needs of the community during these times of neighborhood change. Part of her job at EBOFB is to develop partnerships between local organizations and P.S. 109. One of the benefits for community organizations is the free use of P.S. 109's gallery space. Her vision is also for P.S. 109 to become a place that allows community to participate in the art making process, opening up spaces within the building and providing opportunities for people from the community to share their stories.

Rolinda works to strike a balance between allowing the artists at P.S. 109 to have autonomy and meeting the requirements of the ArtSpace model. She poses the question, what do we (P.S. 109) want to be known for? She suggests that P.S. 109 needs to develop a mission. She talks about the gallery/multipurpose space and says she would like to see artists in the building offer public programming however, notes that many of the artists don't have the capacity or ability to offer programming. She calls this the "what now" phase. There are a few current programs such as salsa dance socials once a month. She would like to develop a meet-up for teaching artists to stimulate community and help support individual artists.

### ***Challenges with the ArtSpace Model***

There are several challenges to achieving this vision of artist and community collaboration. According to Rolinda, there is a need for leadership at P.S. 109. Without a clear vision from the beginning, the tenant self-governing model is not going to work. Rolinda stresses that it's not about the tenants, it's about the community and there's a responsibility to fulfill the mission of artist housing. Without proper leadership, problems arise. When P.S. 109 first opened there was some racial tension among tenants and she felt the need to intervene so she hired Rich Rivera to facilitate a dialogue among the residents to address some of these issues. Rolinda is looking for strategic ways to shift the mindset and culture at P.S. 109. She is trying to develop a framework for ArtSpace based on the experience at P.S. 109. She feels that once a building is completed, as soon as artists move in there should be a meeting to facilitate dialogue and start building community within the building. Residents should work together to develop a vision and identify common goals.

Other challenges include communications about events. There is currently no website for P.S. 109 where people can get information about the building, its offerings and events. While the website is under construction, the residents have organized a Facebook page where they post information about events, but many happenings do not get posted publicly and this creates a somewhat insular experience.

### ***Potential for Community Impact***

P.S. 109 is in its early developmental stages, but its potential for community impact is high. For residents who live near P.S. 109 (around 99<sup>th</sup> Street and 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue) the closest city operated recreation center, North Meadow Recreation Center, is about one mile away in Central Park. The closest community center is Stanley M. Isaac's Neighborhood Center which is about half a mile away and the closest library is a quarter of a mile away. Although there are several public schools, parks and playgrounds, there is a lack of general community gathering space near P.S. 109. This presents an opportunity for P.S. 109 to fill that gap by offering the building's large multi-purpose space to be used for gallery exhibitions, performances, community meetings, workshops etc.

In 10029 the zip code where P.S. 109 is located, the median household income is approximately \$31,350, which is about half the amount of the median income in New York County and about 31% of the population lives below the poverty line which is double that of New York (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). In addition, 51% of the population over the age of 25 have either no degree or a high school diploma. This data suggests that there may be a need for additional resources and educational workshops in this community. In terms of housing there are approximately 32,559 housing units to meet the needs of the population which accounts for roughly 79,251 people. In this historically Puerto Rican neighborhood the population growth is increasing annually but the demographics of residents are changing. From 2000 to 2010 there has been a 54% increase in White residents, juxtaposed by a 12% decrease in Black/African American residents and a 9% decrease in Hispanic residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). This sharp increase in White residents is an indicative feature of gentrifying neighborhoods. In 2015, 10.9% of the population had moved to the neighborhood within the last year. This rate of geographic mobility is on par with the rest of New York County. A continuation of this trend in geographic mobility combined with the shifting neighborhood demographics has the potential to lead to displacement of low-income residents of color, barring the expansion of affordable housing units.

## Interviews

From January until April 2018 I conducted interviews with New York based artists, art administrators and arts funders to ask questions about the challenges facing artists in NYC, neighborhood change and the role of artists in anti-displacement. These interviews were loosely structured, consisting of a set of questions that were catered to the individual. By allowing for conversation to take a natural course, I gleaned insights that extended beyond my scope of questions and led to further inquiry.<sup>4</sup> Insights from select interviews have been divided into three themes which investigate challenges for artists in New York City, neighborhood change, and the role of artists in anti-displacement.

### ***Challenges for Artists in New York City***

My first interview was with Kaisha Johnson who is the Executive Director for Women of Color in the Arts (WoCA) which is based in Harlem. WoCA's mission is to create a network of arts administrators that focus on issues of racial equity and the arts; ensuring that women of color have seats at the table. Kaisha was recently involved in a study of immigrant dancers in New York City which was in partnership with DanceNYC. This study was being conducted in response to the recent New York City Cultural Plan, to amplify the role of immigrant dance artists and activate engagement around immigrant rights issues in New York. Our conversation focused mainly around the immigrant dancer survey and her interest in identifying new dance artists in Uptown Manhattan. She noted that one issue that has affected artists in New York is housing and affordability. Some artists have left Manhattan for the boroughs and some have moved away from New York completely. Those artists that choose to remain in New York City often must get other jobs to pay the bills and sometimes they give up their artistic practice in lieu of a full-time job with benefits (Johnson, 2018). This issue was echoed by Sita Frederick, a dancer and choreographer based in Washington Heights. Sita has identified as an artist from a young age. Her mother taught visual art and encouraged Sita to explore her creative side. In high school she got involved with community theater and had a flair for acting, singing and dancing. Her father grew up in Washington Heights neighborhood and she remembers there was a lot of dance and music on his side of the family but "they didn't see it as a professional endeavor, it was more a part of the culture" (Frederick, 2018). She moved to New York in 1997 to begin her career and in 2004 she started *Areytos Performance Works* in collaboration with visual artist, José Ortiz. She currently works as the Director of Community Engagement Programs at Lincoln Center Education. She described the challenges of being an artist in New York and the lack of opportunities. "I didn't have enough opportunities to create work or to make a livable wage. In addition to dancing and choreographing, I was also

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<sup>4</sup> A list of interview questions is listed in Appendix A.

working as an art educator but eventually the cost of living caught up with me and I was unable to support myself as an artist, particularly because my work is non-commercial, not for sale, it's community-based art. The economics are at the base, you have to figure out what you have to do to pay your rent and what you're willing to sacrifice for that. Healthcare is a major issue for dancers. Ballet dancers cannot dance on cement floors, for example, because they'll get hurt. Having a family really changed my situation. My husband is also an artist and New York is not a friendly city for independent artists with children, there's child care costs, so if you're not getting grants and you don't have space it's really hard to be an artist in New York City" (Frederick, 2018). Leanne Stella, Co-Founder of Art in Flux, has been living and working in Harlem for the last 7 years. Art in Flux is a pop-up gallery that features local artists and unlike traditional galleries it doesn't collect fees from sales. "I think public art is really important. I'm also a real-estate agent and I save a percent from commissions to put towards a fund for art exhibitions and public art" (Stella, 2018). Her goal is to provide opportunities for artists to create and exhibit in their neighborhood. She thinks one of the challenges facing artists is that there is still an overall lack of value for artists' work. Her vision is to be able to pay artists to exhibit and commission them for other work such as murals. Of course, the issue of affordability and creating a sustainable lifestyle is not distinctly unique to artists in New York. Jamie Bennett, the Executive Director of ArtPlace America said, "I'm not aware of anything that makes it difficult to be an artist in New York that doesn't make it difficult to be anyone else in New York City" (Bennett, 2018).

### ***Neighborhood Change***

Carlos Jesus Martinez Dominguez is an artist, educator and debater. His artwork draws on history to unveil divisive ideologies embedded within Latin American culture. He has lived in Washington Heights since 1984 and said that a lot has changed over the years. One of the biggest changes he observed was "infrastructure", as he described it. "I've been here decades and its changed in different ways. I remember when there was nothing but Dominican food and now there's still Dominican food but there's other choices, and I enjoy other choices. There's a *GAP* store, we would have never dreamt of a *GAP* being up here. It's affecting me socially, on a cultural level, and artistically in that its provided me with subject matter to make art about. It's cannon fodder because it irks me on a personal level. The rents are crazy, store fronts are ridiculously priced. Now there's three *Starbucks* in my neighborhood. Some people advocate for commercial gallery space, but I care about places to show my work on more of a community and social based level. I haven't tried to reach out to a lot of art groups in the neighborhood because they don't understand the issues and they're gentrifiers" (Martinez Dominguez, 2018). Sita Frederick remarked, "I've moved around a few times

but have lived at 181st and Broadway since 2000. Gentrification is probably the reason why my family still lives in a one-bedroom apartment. The stores have changed. There wasn't a *Modell's* or *Starbucks* or *Children's Place* when I moved into the neighborhood. Over the years I've seen disappearance of *mom-and-pop* shops on 181st street. There's still a lot but there's plenty of chains now. There didn't use to be any pet shops, now there's two. Gentrification is a national phenomenon. We (my family) would love to have a two-bedroom, my daughter is ten years old and we (my husband and I) sleep in the living room so that she can have her own room. We talk about moving to upstate, or Jersey or the Bronx. There are more people moving in from outside of New York and more white looking people. In the building where my husband grew up (also in Washington Heights) new comers moving in are paying upwards of \$5000 for an apartment. There's a lot more white people now on the east side of Washington Heights" (Frederick, 2018). Marcos Dimas is a visual artist and founder of Taller Boricua, an artist collective, printmaking workshop and gallery that is based out of the Julia de Burgos Performance and Arts Center in East Harlem. Along with members of his collective, he purchased property in East Harlem in the 1980s which has created a model of sustainability to support Taller Boricua throughout the past three decades. "Artists are vanguards in depressed communities, they set up studios and then the neighborhood changes and they can't afford spaces anymore. That happens because artists are not able to foresee the future and plant roots. They are caught up in the day-to-day living. It's bound to happen over and over if artist don't take initiative to buy property, gain wealth and maintain solid ground. A lot of artists have ceased to be artists because they just give up. We came into this community and became an advocacy organization with the model of a collective. We decided to come to East Harlem because it was a Puerto Rican neighborhood at that time, but now it's changed. It's like day and night. East Harlem now is partly gentrified. It was a depressed neighborhood with gangs and drugs, but most of that is gone now. There are new generations that have come over the last 20 years. There's been a big influx of Mexicans and others Latino Americans. Over the last ten years there's been more white people. It's a mixed neighborhood now" (Dimas, 2018).

### ***Artists' Role in Anti-Displacement***

José Ortiz is a native New Yorker from Washington Heights. He has worked as a visual artist and teaching artist and currently works as the Artist Program Manager at the Joan Mitchell Foundation. Recently the foundation opened a center in New Orleans to support residencies for emerging artists who embed community engagement within their creative practice. He remarked that the foundation has a focus to support diverse artists and artists of color. "Artists are a reflection of their communities. I think social justice is where artists are leaning, especially if you are a person of color" (Ortiz, 2018).

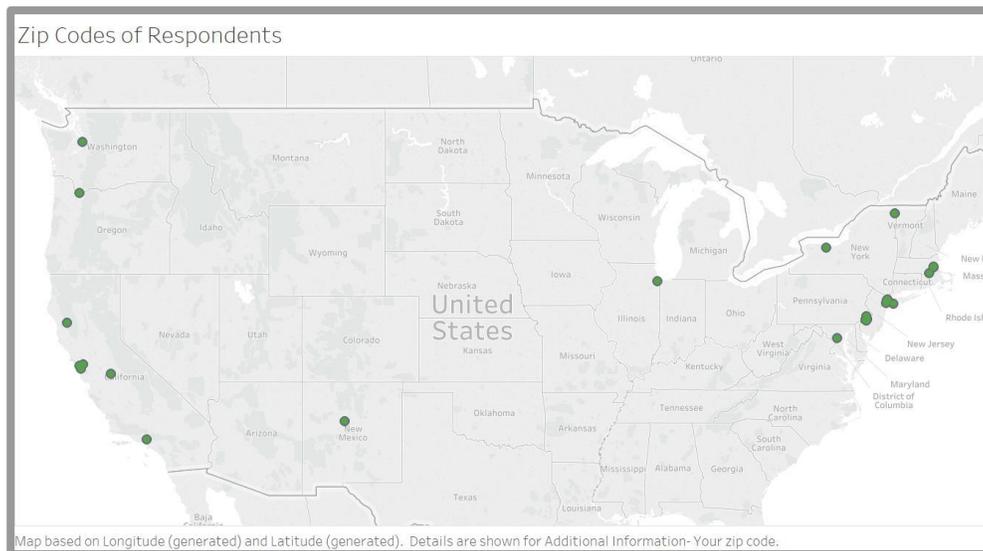
Last year the foundation hosted a community conversation to talk about gentrification. Leanne Stella pointed out that, “Artists open up the conversation, creating spaces for people to talk about issues” (Stella, 2018). Artists like Alicia Grullón, are using their art as a platform to connect community issues with advocacy for policy change. Alicia shared her belief that, “We need to look at economic development in a different way. We (as a society) need to change our priorities” (Grullón, 2018). Jessica Garz is a Program Officer for Surdna’s Thriving Communities program. Growing up in Philadelphia in the 1980s she noted how tangible the racial dynamics of the city were, “Some neighborhoods had street lights, some didn’t. I wanted to understand the history that influenced the built environment. My analysis was that the way cities were being maintained was racist. The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans really exposed these invisible policies of redlining and racial exclusion; cracking open a conversation about race in cities. I do think that artists and the arts and culture sector can play a role in anti-displacement. There is so much work with good intentions but it can be quickly co-opted by actors with financial interests and influence. Artists have to be value-driven and clear about their goals. Artists engaged in this kind of work need to be working in solidarity with advocacy groups or housing organizers to avoid becoming a tool of developers” (Garz, 2018). To echo these sentiments, Roberto Bedoya, Cultural Affairs Manager for the City of Oakland said, “Everyone has the right to have shelter, but if you get priced out where do you go? You have to move further away. Whether you're an artist in a live-work space, or an undocumented person, or a homeless person, you're all part of a housing market. It's about intersectionality; figuring out how to deal with these issues and do the coalition building that we need to do. Some artists say, *I'm not involved in politics, I paint and investigate color-* and fine that's important, that's what an artist does, but artists are also citizens of the world and neighbors and part of the public. I encourage everybody to think about civic engagement as part of being a citizen of a locale. There are many ways that people can be engaged. Whether they're on the park commission, friends of library or friends of a particular school; these are all ways artists can get involved with their neighborhood” (Bedoya, 2018). Tom Finkelpearl, the Commissioner of the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA) for the City of New York talked about an anti-displacement pilot program that emerged as a result of the city’s new cultural plan. “When we were doing the cultural plan, the issue of displacement was front and center. We developed a program called *Building Community Capacity*. Four neighborhoods were selected through an RFP process to create a community coalition. That coalition includes nonprofit and for-profit entities and DCLA provides funding for the coalition to hire an organizer. Eddie Pagan was hired to organize in the South Bronx to create the circumstances in which local arts and culture can continue to thrive. All in all, the focus is on artists thriving in place and understanding that artists are part of thriving community” (Finkelpearl, 2018). Marcos Dimas shared his thoughts on why it's important for artists to sustain their lives and

careers in New York. “Why is it so important for artists to be in New York? Better artist than politicians! The arts are an important component of life but sometimes it takes a backseat to other things that are more pressing. Look at schools, when there's a deficit the first thing they do is cut the arts and athletics. The value that society gives to arts is minimal because we live in a capitalist society. That's the way the system is, it doesn't want freethinkers. It wants people who will do the dirty jobs. They don't want people to get educated. Art is a freethinking activity and artists are freethinkers, so right away it's anti-establishment” (Dimas, 2018).

## Artist Survey

Artists were asked to anonymously respond to a series of questions to gauge their community engagement and civic engagement.<sup>5</sup> Since this survey was conducted on Facebook, it does not represent a random sample, however, my original post received eleven shares, meaning that the survey extended beyond my Facebook network into the networks of eleven of my Facebook friends from different parts of the United States. There were 39 respondents in total.

## Survey results



*(Map showing location of survey respondents by zip code)*

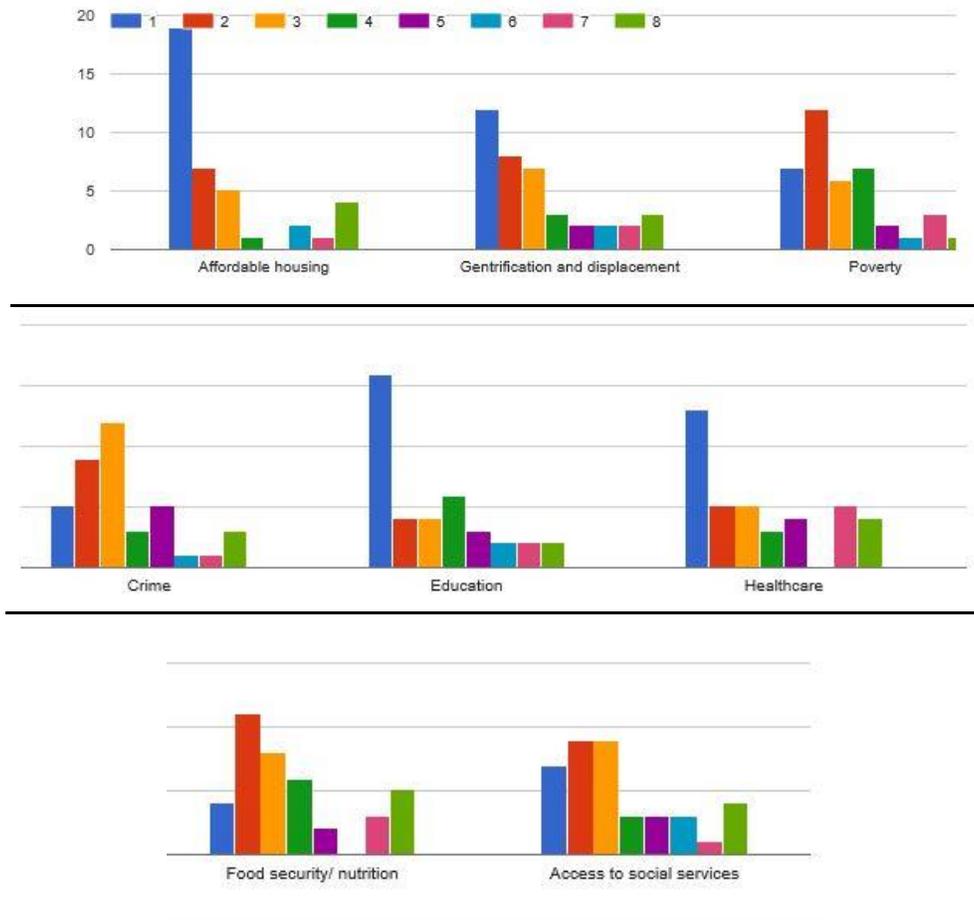
The majority of survey respondents were visual artists, representing 61.5% of the total responses. Most of the respondents have attended a community event or an arts workshop in their neighborhood but only 9 respondents have attended a zoning meeting

<sup>5</sup> A full list of the survey questions for artists can be found in Appendix B.

in the past. When asked about the issues most affecting their community, about half of the respondents listed affordable housing as the top issue, followed by education, healthcare and gentrification, as is shown in Table 1. Additionally, artists listed the following as other issues of importance to their communities: access to art as a tool to heal communities, police presence, funding for the arts, social justice, white supremacy, racism and discrimination, historical trauma, homelessness and drug addiction, and mental health awareness and treatment.

**Table 1**

Which of these issues most affects your community? (List in order of importance, 1 = most important)



Out of the 39 respondents only 7 reported having been involved with anti-displacement in their communities. They reported activities such as participating in panel discussions, actions, meetings about anti-displacement, and gathering petitions. One artist said, “I helped to do canvassing to a Vietnamese neighborhood about some public land that was being turned into a high rise. My job was to get community input.” Another artist

reported “I worked as a community organizer and ran workshops on art and gentrification for neighborhood youth.” There was a range of responses from artists when asked: Do you think artists play a role in anti-displacement? One artist said, “Yes they absolutely do. Artists have a huge role in anti-displacement because they are the ones developing creative ways to make these issues visible and begin a dialogue.” Another replied, “Depends on the artist. If the artist/art comes from the neighborhood then there's a lot less displacement or feeling of outsider-ism, in my experience.” While the majority of respondents felt that artists can play a role in anti-displacement, there were a few with opposing views such as this one: “I think they can, but not necessarily. I think artists can serve as a bridge bringing different parts of the community together, but I think some artists also end up being the first wave of neighborhood change leading to displacement.” Artists were given the option to leave additional comments and one person said, “I am very conflicted about displacement. I worked as a non-profit attorney for years. I've seen how it can ravage the community. At the same time I'm currently a landlord. It's very difficult to reconcile the needs of everyone in the community. On one hand, you have to understand that there are in fact, many first-generation and second-generation, hard working immigrants who have spent their entire lives trying to earn enough money to buy property. On the other hand, there are also many first and second-generation hard working immigrants who have not had the opportunity to buy property due to their own particular situations; the prison industrial complex, bad social policies, discrimination, etc... It is very complex and I think that you need to explore both sides of this. It's too easy to essentialize people who are party-and-party to displacement as being the "bad guys". Many of them may have come from the same communities. Many of them in the process of uplifting themselves and their families, become the same people demonized for being agents of displacement.”

## **Strategies**

***“Art washes away from the  
soul the dust of everyday life” — Pablo Picasso***

As evidenced by a report conducted through the University of Pennsylvania Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP), the presence of arts within a neighborhood is associated with positive outcomes for community health and wellness. This study found that in low-income neighborhoods with high levels of cultural assets there was an 18% decrease in crime compared to low-income neighborhoods with few cultural assets (Stern & Seifert, 2016). Although they do not conclude a causal relationship between the presence of culture and outcomes such as reduced crime rates, their research documents that a cultural ecology which fosters social connections can lead to social wellbeing (Stern & Seifert, 2016). Their study laid the groundwork for the City of New

York's Cultural Plan, Create NYC which seeks to support the arts in all neighborhoods across the city. In addition to support for arts and culture, the plan seeks to provide support to individual artists. In that regard, Commissioner Finkelpearl said, "What worries me is the thought of artists leaving New York City. Artists are still coming to New York City but there's a threat of affordability" (Finkelpearl, 2018).

In an effort to keep artists and low-income residents in place, I propose the following strategies. The first is to ensure that each neighborhood of the city has access to affordable housing for artists and low-income people. In addition, while space is at a premium in cities such as New York, there is a need for affordable workspace for artists. Finally, artists are cultural producers and as such they need opportunities to create work in their neighborhoods.

### **Strategy #1: Create Opportunities for Affordable Housing for Artists.**

While affordable housing should not be exclusive towards a specific profession, artists are also low-income people and require affordable housing in order to remain in their communities and sustain their creative work.

#### *The ArtSpace Model*

ArtSpace utilizes Low-Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC) to develop live and work spaces for artists in cities across the United States. This type of development keeps housing affordable and in the case of ArtSpace, their intention is for the affordability to last for the lifetime of the development, ideally "forever". Area Median Income (AMI), examines estimates of median family income and is used to determine eligibility for affordable housing. The AMI for a single person in New York City is \$73,100. The majority of ArtSpace housing units are affordable to low-income households earning at or below 60% of the AMI, which is \$43,860 for an individual in New York (StreetEasy, 2018).

According to Ariel Garcia, ArtSpace's Project Manager for Property Development, "ArtSpace was instrumental in including a preference for artists within the U.S. tax code. We were having issues with the city of New York and a human rights law in the city charter that says a developer cannot have a preference for *profession*. Our argument is that most of the artists that live in our buildings don't earn their sole income off their art. So while they are artists, they're also low-income people that have families and are working regular (9am-5pm) jobs and have kids to support. In providing affordable housing we hope to help transition artists from having a traditional (9am-5pm) job to be able to focus on their career as artists" (Garcia, 2018). Garcia added, "ArtSpace focuses on creating affordable housing for artists because the arts contribute

to the greater fabric of society. We've been fortunate to work in cities that see that as well. It has an effect on the health of community and we see it as revitalization of cities. We're helping to bridge the gap between everyday struggles of society and bring some positive light into people's lives" (Garcia, 2018).

### **Strategy #2: Provide Access to Affordable Workspace for Artists.**

Artists need access to affordable spaces to create, rehearse and exhibit their work. These spaces should not be confined to a specified arts district, but rather dispersed equitably throughout each neighborhood.

#### *The SpaceWorks Model*

SpaceWorks is a nonprofit organization that is working to expand access to affordable rehearsal and studio spaces for artists across New York City (Spaceworks, 2018). The program was developed in 2011 as an initiative of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs under the administration of Mayor Bloomberg. Since its inception, SpaceWorks has opened studio and rehearsal spaces in Brooklyn and Queens with plans to open new studios on Governors Island as well as Manhattan. Williamsburg Library is one of their sites in partnership with Brooklyn Public Library. This site features a multi-purpose rehearsal room, a music studio and four visual art studios. The ability to operate out of city owned buildings has allowed SpaceWorks to offer these spaces to artists for approximately 75 percent less than the market rate (The Bloomberg Legacy, 2015).

### **Strategy #3: Develop Opportunities for Artists to Work in Their Neighborhoods.**

The presence of the arts contributes to the assets of a community and artists help to create a unique cultural identity and ecosystem. In order to preserve the continuity of neighborhood arts and culture, I propose funding models that are a combination people and place based funding. The new UMEZ Arts Engagement grant (UMAЕ) is an example of this type of strategy.

The UMAЕ grant provides up to \$10,000 for individual artists and small arts groups who live in Upper Manhattan to perform and exhibit work that will engage the local community and draw audiences from across the city to experience arts and culture in Upper Manhattan. This will be the first time in the organization's history that UMEZ will give grants directly to artists in a continued approach to stimulate the local economy through the arts.<sup>6</sup> UMEZ's new strategy resulted from interviews and canvassing of

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<sup>6</sup> Artists must secure a fiscal sponsor in order to apply to UMAЕ.

several Upper Manhattan arts and culture organizations, to gather community input on how UMEZ can improve their ability to support arts and culture. This grant simultaneously allows UMEZ to expand their pool of grantees to include arts groups with budgets under \$250,000 and it provides a direct source of funding to artists that are creating, exhibiting and performing their art in the neighborhoods where they live. Artists can apply for the UMAE grant for three consecutive years before taking a year off to reapply. This helps to encourage a growing number of new grantees while also being able to provide a certain amount of continued support for previous successful grantees.

Grants like UMAE are essential to providing financial support to keep artists in place. If more opportunities like this existed to support artists' work, it might provide financial stability that would allow artists to focus their full-time energy on the production and presentation of their artworks, rather than work administrative or non-arts related full-time jobs to pay the bills.

## **Obstacles and Precautions**

In consideration of supporting artistic projects or bodies of work in neighborhoods that are undergoing change, there are some precautions to consider and obstacles to overcome. Urban planners should be mindful of the implications and negative outcomes of branding naturally occurring arts zones as arts districts. Branding a neighborhood that has naturally developed into an arts community as an "arts district" can lead to the negative side effects of gentrification and displacement (Stern & Seifert, 2016). When Fort Greene in Brooklyn was planned as a cultural district, it created a conundrum for cultural organizations that had to shift their programming to meet the needs of a changing community. The re-branding led to displacement of the majority of African American and Caribbean residents not living in public housing combined with a wave of wealthy in-movers (Stern & Seifert, 2016).

Creative Placemaking has become a popular approach for utilizing the arts as a way to cultivate community and civic engagement. According to neighborhood artists like Sita Frederick in Washington Heights, "There's a lot of focus on *placemaking* but I like to call it *placekeeping*; we want to keep what we have" (Frederick, 2018). Projects that seek to engage community in the redesign or reprogramming of the built environment should be led by artists in those neighborhoods where the change is taking place.

Further, there is the obstacle of designing projects that seek to engage people at the highest level of civic participation to allow for a "bottom up" rather than "top down" approach (Arnstein, 1969). Sherry Arnstein defined eight steps or "rungs" on the Ladder

of Citizen Participation ranging from manipulation, where community members are “educated” rather than consulted or engaged in a community development process, to citizen participation where community members have full power. Since every community has different needs and concerns, and within each community those needs and concerns will vary, the level of citizen participation will also vary. However, it’s important that neighborhood change comes from the needs and concerns of the neighborhood residents, typically those with the least amount of power, and that it doesn’t occur from the top down or outside in.

## **Policy Recommendations**

How can this research be used towards informing support for artists and equity in city planning to avoid displacement of people and culture? First, I recommend that urban planning shift away from market-rate housing to models of affordable housing that promote shared benefits and responsibilities. Second, I recommend that neighborhood libraries provide dedicated workspace for local artists and in this way act as hubs of neighborhood arts and culture. Finally, I recommend that arts funders consider equity within people and place based funding to ensure that funds are reaching artists with deep connections to community, place and culture.

### ***Affordable Housing: Community Land Trusts and Limited Equity Cooperatives***

In New York City, where rents are rising faster than incomes there is a demand for maintaining economically diverse housing. Mandatory Inclusionary Housing is a New York City policy that ensures new housing serves a range of incomes and retains a percentage of units that are affordable permanently (Mandatory Inclusionary Housing, 2015). This policy mainly applies to renters. Further, this type of mixed income housing doesn’t ensure that the people who live there will actually mix and build community together. Inclusionary housing seems like a mechanism to fight displacement but how will it combat other negative impacts of gentrification, such as cultural displacement? To address this, I propose policy that promotes the creation of shared equity housing in the form of Community Land Trusts and Limited Equity Coops.

Homeownership has long been one of the key sources of building wealth in the United States. However, few people are able to buy homes in cities like New York as market-rates continue to climb. For those who can still afford to purchase a home at market-rate, one challenge is being able to maintain that home. A study mentioned in a report by the National Housing Institute notes that only 47 percent of first time low-income buyers of market-rate homes were able to retain their homeownership within the first five years (Davis, 2006). Given that shocking statistic, Community Land Trusts

(CLT) provide an option for low-income people to become homeowners. In the CLT model, land is purchased and owned by a nonprofit entity such as a Community Development Corporation, and the CLT homeowners lease the land from the nonprofit. CLTs encourage community involvement as homeowners are part of neighborhood decision-making processes with the nonprofit that owns the land. This is a more sustainable model of ownership than the traditional real-estate market because it ensures that housing will be kept affordable for future generations (Davis, 2006). Within the CLT model, there are variations in housing structure from standalone houses to multi-unit condominiums or cooperatives (Davis, 2006).

Limited Equity Coops (LECs) are another type of shared equity housing in which there is fair allocation of equity related to improvements made on individual homes. In traditional market-rate housing, homeowners take on sole responsibility and benefit for their properties. In a coop model, owners share responsibilities and benefits which means that individual benefit has an impact on the greater community (Davis, 2006). This model retains and builds public wealth as opposed to individual wealth and can lead to long term improved conditions for the neighborhood. LECs provide stability as the burdens of homeownership are shared and stabilized property values offer a source of protection against displacement (Davis, 2006). Moving forward, cities need to develop policies to increase access to homeownership for low-income people, particularly low-income people of color and low-income artists; allowing them to build wealth and social status. Such policies could lead to the reduction of historic inequities caused by decades of racially biased policy making.

### ***Workspace for Artists in Public Library Branches***

During the development of the New York Cultural Plan, one of the top areas of concern was workspace for artists (CreateNYC, 2017). Space is at a premium in New York, and many artists cannot afford to pay for a studio or rehearsal space in addition to the cost of their living expenses. Without the space to create or rehearse many great art works and expressions would be lost or non-existent. Consider the cultural legacy of Harlem without the music of Duke Ellington due to lack of rehearsal space, or the absence of artwork by Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence due to lack of studio space. The arts contribute to the cultural fabric of a neighborhood, creating unique place-based identities. Therefore, it's important to ensure that artists in every neighborhood have access to space in their neighborhoods. Neighborhood libraries are uniquely positioned to address this need and serve as cultural community hubs that provide space for artists among a number of other resources. According to Commissioner Finkelpearl, "In New York there are 3 open democratic systems; the library system, the public schools and the City University of New York (CUNY). We're

looking to do a partnership with libraries to provide more access to the arts in neighborhoods across the city. We're interested to see if libraries can be a source of resources for artists" (Finkelpearl, 2018).

The image below demonstrates the ubiquitous presence of public libraries spread across each neighborhood of Upper Manhattan.



### **Combination People and Place Based Funding for Artists in Their Communities**

Funding for the arts should combine a people based and place based approach to support artists in their communities with a focus on removing barriers to entry and promoting equity in terms of how funding is distributed.

The UMEZ Arts Engagement grant provides a unique and exciting opportunity for artists living in Upper Manhattan to create work in their neighborhoods. This funding opportunity has the potential to provide financial support to help artists thrive and stay in place. The UMAE grant also allows UMEZ to address the negative impacts of economic development such as gentrification and displacement. The UMAE grant can do this by supporting artists whose work addresses issues facing low-income people such as displacement, and engages community to work together to address these issues and create change. In order to do this, the grant must be made accessible to a wider pool of artists, removing barriers to entry and reaching those who are engaged in their communities but lack grant writing experience. This can be done by simplifying the

application process while maintaining a rigorous grant review process. Additionally, the focus of the grant should not be on the output or final product, but rather on the process including short and long term outcomes. This will result in more equitable grant making and will be a great benefit to the communities where these artists live.

## **Summary**

Each year, more people are moving to cities like New York to study, work and try to make a living. This influx of in-movers has put pressure on the housing market, causing an increase in rents and cost of living and creating gradual neighborhood change. Artists have been singled out as the first wave of gentrification because of their tendency to move to areas with affordable rents, which often are low-income communities of color. However, there are numerous examples of artists whose work engages with their community to address issues of displacement and work together towards keeping people in place and creating positive change. Overall, this report determines that artists have the potential to play a role in anti-displacement by bridging the gap between urban planning and the needs and priorities of a particular neighborhood. However, more research must be done in order to prove this with data and evidence. A longitudinal study of artists' impact on displacement in gentrifying neighborhoods may provide the data needed to defend this hypothesis. If there is a correlation to be found between artists and displacement, one must consider there are several other factors that contribute to displacement and this correlation does not necessarily determine causality.

The SIAP study referenced in this report demonstrates how the arts contribute to public health and social wellbeing. Therefore, it's important for all neighborhoods to have a healthy arts community and for cities to ensure that artists are supported with housing that is affordable, workspace that is accessible and funding opportunities that help keep them in place.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. (For Artists): Why did you choose to be an artist? At what point did you come to identify yourself as an artist?
2. What changes have you observed in your neighborhood and how does it relate to your experience as an artist?
3. What are your thoughts on the NYC Cultural Plan?
4. What are the biggest challenges for artists living and working in NYC?
5. Can artists play a role in anti-displacement?
6. Do you think economic development hurts or helps low-income neighborhoods? How does the arts play into this equation?
7. (For Commissioner Finkelpearl): The cultural plan identified the affordability crisis and displacement as challenges. Do you think that artists can play a role in anti-displacement? What are some examples of this in NYC?
8. (For Commissioner Finkelpearl): A [recent study](#) by the Center for an Urban future notes that the number of artists in New York City is increasing, however the number of artists living in Manhattan is decreasing. Are you able to get data on where artists are going? Have there been any longitudinal studies to track this geographic mobility data?
9. (For Commissioner Finkelpearl): Community land trusts have been utilized as method for retaining affordable housing for low-income people. Do you think community land trusts are a viable model for sustaining artists in Upper Manhattan?

## Appendix B- Survey Questions for Artists

### Background

1. What is your artistic medium? (select and bold as many as apply)
  - Dance
  - Literary arts
  - Music
  - Performing arts
  - Visual arts
  - Multidisciplinary
  - Other (write in):
  
2. Do you currently/ have you ever worked as a teaching artist? (Yes/No)
  - If so what ages have you taught?

### Civic Engagement

3. Have you ever:
  - Attended a meeting about community issues affecting your neighborhood?
  - Attended a zoning meeting?
  - Attended a city council meeting?
  - Attended a community event in your neighborhood?
  - Offered an art based workshop in your neighborhood?
  
4. Which of these issues most affect your community? (In order from 1-8, 1= most important)
  - Affordable housing
  - Gentrification and displacement
  - Poverty
  - Crime
  - Education
  - Healthcare
  - Food security/ nutrition
  - Access to social services
  - Other (write in):
  
5. Do you think artists can play a role in anti-displacement?
  - If so, how?

### Community Engagement

6. Are you interested in offering programming or workshops in your community?

- If so what kinds of workshops would you offer?
- Who would the workshops be for? (age level, members of the community, open to the public, etc.)

7. Are you interested in getting involved with/working with organizations/ community members in your neighborhood?

- If yes, explain how you would like to get involved.
- If no, explain why not?

Additional Information (Optional):

Age:

Race / Ethnicity:

Zip code:

Additional comments (Optional):