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Places

Title

Hunts Point Comes Home [Roots]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/34z235qp>

Journal

Places, 11(1)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

1997-01-15

Peer reviewed

Hunts Point Comes Home Todd W. Bressi

Over the past decade, some of New York City's most devastated neighborhoods have seen a remarkable turnaround. City agencies, working with nonprofit and private developers, have created 50,000 new housing units in properties taken for non-payment of taxes. From Bedford-Stuyvesant to Harlem to Morrisania, nearly all of the burned and abandoned buildings, nearly all of the lots where buildings once stood, have been reclaimed with affordable housing.

But as hundreds of thousands of new residents reoccupy these neighborhoods, it is evident that the services they need lag far behind. Community groups have scrambled to provide social services, but cuts in parks and transit and sluggish school construction continue to marginalize these residents. Also missing from these re-emerging communities are "life spaces" — the shops and stoops, bars and clubs, gardens and playgrounds that pulse with the spirit of the people.

"The Point," a cultural center and market in the Hunts Point section of the Bronx, shows how life spaces can be created through a combination of entrepreneurial vision and architectural deftness. From the outside, the Point still looks like

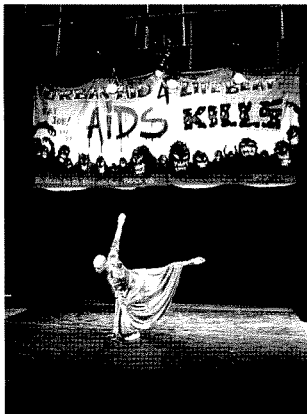
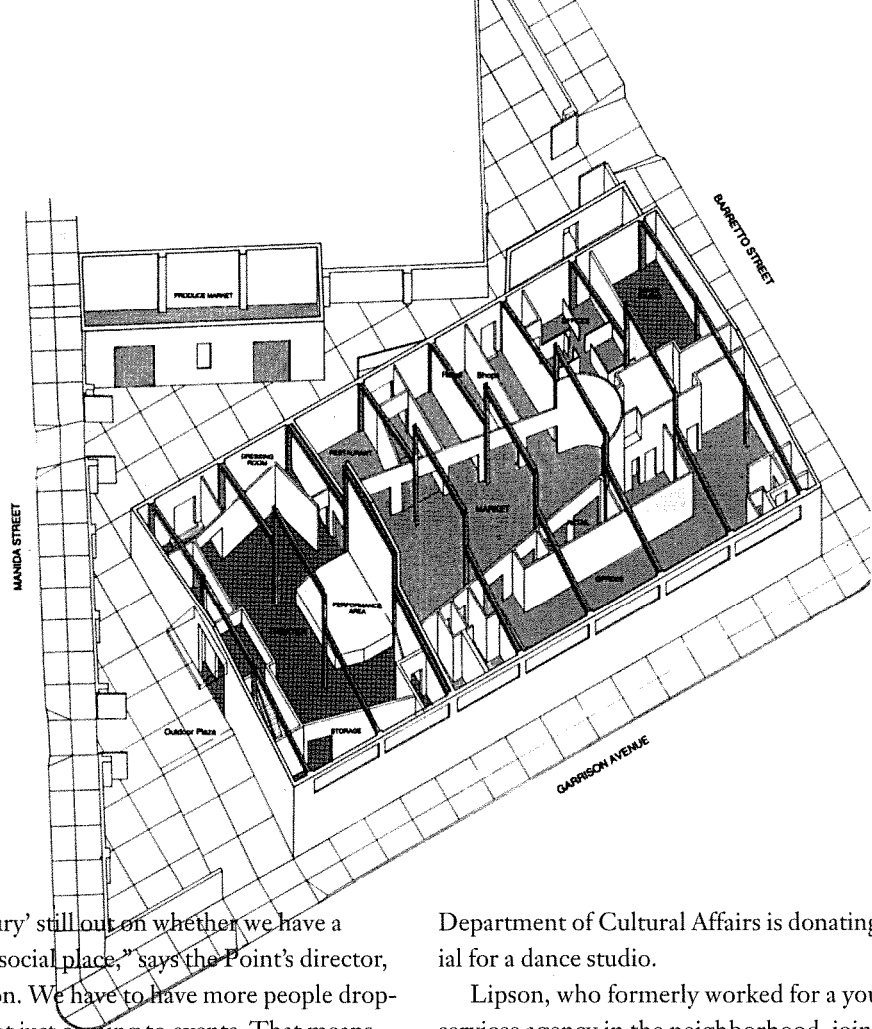
the former factory and warehouse. But inside, it is a hopeful, energetic crossroads for artists, aspiring businesspeople and residents.

The Point consists of two main spaces: a central gallery, which is lined by tiny spaces in which entrepreneurs have set up shop, and a black box theater. There is also an office suite, which is leased by a social service agency. The offices provide rental income that keeps the project going and constant foot traffic; the other spaces accommodate a range of activities, both planned and spontaneous. There are afterschool dance, music and art classes, and evening dance, music, comedy and theatrical events.

Consider that in the course of one summer day, the following things happened. A disk jockey came to check the stock of records in his shop and prepare for an upcoming event. A *New York Times* reporter brought by a group of interns, who were treated to a Southern-style lunch (by a caterer who hopes to open a restaurant at The Point). Arthur Aviles, once a member of the Bill T. Jones dance company, came by to offer an impromptu dance in honor of the youth class he would be teaching. A local theatre company rehearsed a play.

An impromptu lunch at the point: newspaper interns eat with local artists and residents. Photos by Todd W. Bressi.





Top right: Plan of The Point. The theater is at the lower left, the gallery is at the center and the proposed market and ice-cream shop is at the upper left. Above: Dancer Arthur Aviles practices in front of a banner painted by youths who are turning their graffiti-painting skills into a sign-making business.

“The jury’s still out on whether we have a successful social place,” says the Point’s director, Paul Lipson. We have to have more people dropping by, not just coming to events. That means making sure that whenever people drop by, there is something going on.”

Drawing casual visitors is in difficult, acknowledged Lipson and architect Robert Zagorelli, of the Pratt Institute Planning and Architectural Collaborative. They noted the difficulty of giving a former warehouse building a strong street presence — especially given the sparse pedestrian traffic on industrial arterial the Point fronts. And it is a relatively small building, 12,500 square feet, making it difficult to build the retail energy that will draw in shoppers. But there is room for small improvements. The Point expects to turn a garage on the other side of the courtyard into a farmers’ market and ice-cream stand.

The design work was funded by the New York State Council on the Arts and the Ferris Booth Fund. The project directors and community members donated some \$250,000 in materials and labor; construction was contracted to local businesses to help them get experience on renovation projects. The Corning Corp. donated the glass block that fills the clerestory windows; the city’s

Department of Cultural Affairs is donating material for a dance studio.

Lipson, who formerly worked for a youth services agency in the neighborhood, joined with two of his friends to create the non-profit organization that leased, rehabbed and operates The Point. Lipson’s father was born in the neighborhood and he still has some family members living in the area. “If I weren’t working here, I would be doing something else. I’m a professional Bronxite.”