Loisaida and the Nuyorican Arts and Activist Movement in the 1970s:

Abandoned Lots taken over by Inspiring Thoughts

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The Shaping of the Modern City

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The 1970s were difficult years for America's historic cities. Nearly every great pre-war American metropolis, from Chicago to Detroit to New York, was wracked by severe fiscal crises. Cities' tax bases were liquidated, as businesses and well-to-do residents moved to the suburbs and the rapidly growing cities of the Sunbelt. The old urban cores became concentrated centers of poverty, violence, and inequality, home to a segment of society that had been racially excluded from the great suburban home ownership boom and left behind by the economic restructuring of the post-industrial capitalist system. One of the neighborhoods that suffered severely from these changes was the Lower East Side of Manhattan. In particular, the area bounded by 14th Street on the north, Houston Street to the south, the East River to the east, and Avenue A on the west fell into extraordinary physical decay. This area was known as Loisaida (Low-ee-SIGH-da) to its predominately Puerto Rican population.

. By all accounts, in the 1970s Loisaida was a ghetto, inhabited by a marginalized and impoverished population, nearly all aspects of its physical, social, and economic environment deeply distressed. During these years, the streets of Loisaida were some of the most dangerous in the city. Nearly every block was marked with vacant lots strewn with trash, bloody syringes, and the stone, wood, and glass remains of fallen tenements. Of the buildings still standing, many had been completely vacated by their old residents and deserted by their landlords, to be invaded by a new class of tenants, an exploding population of drug addicts and dealers. Abandoned cars, stripped of all their valuable metal and parts, littered street after street. However, these were far from entirely dark days for the community of Loisaida.

In the 1970s Loisaida was home to the innovative and active Nuyorican community activism and arts movement that directly confronted and worked to repair the psychological and physical condition of the neighborhood. The ideology of the movement emphasized the

cultivation of cultural awareness and encouraged people to express their understanding of their environment and develop tangible, positive alternatives for themselves and their community. This ideology is most evident in the literature of the time, highlighted by the most important text in the movement, *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Feelings and Words*. The implementation of these ideals was successfully realized by Charas, a community arts and activism group. In particular, the history of La Plaza Cultural, a community garden and cultural center created in 1976, reveals the direct connection between Charas' works and the philosophical foundation of the movement found in Nuyorican literature. Although the Nuyorican arts and activist movement must be viewed and understood in its particular environmental and historical context, the ideals of the movement are universal. It is in this sense that the movement provides an inspiring model for pro-active, arts-based community development, relevant to both the most depressed ghettoes and the most affluent areas of the globe.

A Brief History of Puerto Ricans in New York

Puerto Rican migration to New York began as early as the turn of the nineteenth century. In 1898 the United States annexed Puerto Rican and in 1917, with the passing of the Jones Act, Puerto Ricans officially became American citizens. It was also during this time that there was collapse in the coffee and tobacco production on the Island. In turn, from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 1920s the first significant migration of Puerto Ricans to New York began. These groups settled primarily in East Harlem and in Williamsburg, near the Navy Yards. Very few moved to the Lower East Side which was still extremely crowded from the mass immigration at the turn of the century from Southern and Eastern Europe. Drawn

initially by the expanding industrial pre and post-war economy, the influx of Puerto Ricans reduced dramatically with the onset of the depression.[1]

After the Second World War, Puerto Ricans once again began migrating to New York City en masse, and this time, the Lower East Side absorbed many of the new residents. The population of the Lower East Side had steadily decreased since the 1920s. New immigration laws severely restricted the influx of more Southern and Eastern Europeans and many of the older residents had found success in the capitalist economy and followed the rest of the white middle-class to new suburban developments. As a result, the old tenements of the Lower East Side, with their comparatively low rents and high density, once again became available to a new wave of immigrants. Census figures show a fivefold increase in the Hispanic population of the area from 1950 to 1970. In 1975 the total Hispanic population of the Lower East Side was estimated at 29,971, a 19% increase from 1970, and almost all of these residents were Puerto Rican and lived in Loisaida.[2]

Puerto Ricans were drawn to New York following World War II because of the booming American industrial economy. Most immigrants worked in agriculture on the Island and saw manufacturing jobs in New York as a means to securing higher wages and an improved standard of living. The immigrants were also aided by the growth of commercial air travel. Whereas previous eras of migration had depended upon travel by sea, a mode of transport that required a major commitment and was not economically available to all, Puerto Ricans were able to move between the Island and New York quickly, without much commitment, for relatively cheap prices.[3]

Unfortunately, this rapid growth in the Puerto Rican population of the city coincided with dramatic changes in the labor market of New York. Expecting to find secure employment

in the manufacturing sector of the economy, Puerto Ricans instead encountered a rapidly shifting job market that increasingly favored positions in finance, service, and government. While the old immigrants of the Lower East Side were often able to find constant work in the thriving industrial economy at the turn of the century, this new wave of immigrants would not be so fortunate. New York City lost 55% of its manufacturing jobs between 1960 and 1975.[4] The effect of deindustrialization on the Puerto Rican population of the Lower East Side was devastating. Without many skills, mired in an inadequate public education system, and still fighting heavy discrimination, Puerto Ricans found it nearly impossible to take advantage of the shifts in the New York economy. The result was extreme poverty and unemployment. The average per capita income in Loisaida for 1974 was $1,852, equivalent to $6, 410 in 2000, based on analysis of federal income tax returns, public Assistance/Supplemental Security Income payments, and Social Security Payments. In 1970, unemployment in Loisaida was estimated at 20% for adults and as high as 40% for youth.[5] This devastating economic condition in the 1970s was coupled with dramatic changes in the housing market that left the streets of Loisaida in terrible decay.

A Brief History of Housing in Loisaida

The housing market of the Lower East Side has always depended on a constant influx of a foreign, working-class population. The tenement structure itself, prominent on nearly every block throughout the area, is the ultimate symbol of this history. It is designed specifically to hold a high-density of low-income residents, thus making housing of the poor a profitable endeavor. And housing the poor in the Lower East Side was a profitable arena for real estate developers and landlords. With the constant flow of thousands of immigrants from Europe,

there was a great deal of demand for low-income housing. However, with the change in immigration laws in the 1920s and as families began to move out of the neighborhood into more middle-class areas, the Lower East Side began to decline in population and the demand for low-income housing shrunk accordingly.[6] At this time and until the 1950s, city officials and real estate developers envisioned recapturing profitability by redeveloping the Lower East Side to compete with the suburbs for middle-class homeowners. Geographically, they saw the Lower East Side as ideal for white-collar workers on nearby Wall Street and Lower Manhattan. However, this plan failed, as federal subsidy of suburban development and lack of funds for inner-city development proved too large an obstacles to overcome.[7]

The massive influx of Puerto Ricans at the beginning of the 1950s would once again make the housing of the poor profitable, and in the first half of the 1950s speculation and investment in the neighborhood picked up. This reinvestment was short-lived, though. The Puerto Rican community never gained a strong foothold in the city's economy, and in turn, their socioeconomic status imposed a ceiling on profits for real estate speculators. Furthermore, in the 1960s there was a sharp decrease in immigration from the Island, some return migration, and a continual dispersal of the Puerto Rican population to other parts of the city, thus decreasing demand for housing on the Lower East Side.[8]

Loisaida property owners' responded to this shift with disinvestment. The process was quite uniform and simple throughout the neighborhood. In order to maximize any opportunity for profit, landlords would invest the least amount of money possible in their properties and would neglect property tax payments. In turn, the already old housing stock of the area decayed rapidly, as services and repairs were often entirely neglected.[9] In his 1984 study *Displacement Pressures on the Lower East Side*, Frank DeGiovanni found that more than 50% of the

properties in Loisaida were substandard condition, and around 40% had been in substandard condition for more than 24 years.[10] And that is just of the structures that were still standing. Frequently, just before the city would foreclose properties after three years of unpaid taxes, suspicious fires would erupt in buildings. Much of this is attributed to landlords conspiring to burn the buildings down, seeing their last prospect of profit as insurance payments. As a result, the city inherited hundreds of burned-out abandoned buildings or completely decimated, vacant lots, and the urban landscape of Loisaida came to resemble post-war Berlin or Dresden.[11] It is within this historical context — social, environmental, and economic — that the Nuyorican artist and community activist movement developed.

The Nuyorican Philosophy

One of the primary elements of the Nuyorican ideology is the cultivation and expression of a "Nuyorican" culture. The artists sought to understand "Nuyoricaness," coming to terms with the colliding worlds of the traditional values and culture of Puerto Ricans on the Island and their new urban lifestyles in the inner-city ghettoes of New York. The initial work that ignited this movement was Pedro Pietri's *Puerto Rican Obituary*. Pietri was from Spanish Harlem, but he would frequently work and meet with artists and activists from the Lower East Side and his writings played a significant role in the artistic and political movements of Loisaida. *Puerto Rican Obituary* was published in 1973, a compilation of thirty-two poems that with raw emotion and anger criticize the American government, portray the everyday life of the ghetto, and call for Puerto Ricans in New York to embrace their Latino roots. The most riveting and influential piece is the title poem, "Puerto Rican Obituary," an eleven page epic tale which tells

the story of five Puerto Ricans — Juan, Miguel, Milagros, Olga, and Manuel — who symbolize the plight of all Puerto Ricans in New York city's ghettoes. Pietri writes:

> Dead Puerto Ricans
> Who never knew they were Puerto Ricans
> Who never took a coffee break
> from the ten commandments
> to KILL KILL KILL
> the landlords of their cracked skulls
> and communicate with their latino souls …
> Here lies Juan
> Here lies Miguel
> Here lies Milagros
> Here lies Olga
> Here lies Manuel
> Who died yesterday today
> And will die again tomorrow
> Always broke
> Always owing
> Never knowing
> That they are beautiful people
> Never knowing the geography of their complexion
> PUERTO RICO IS A BEAUTIFUL PLACE
> PUERTORRIQUENOS ARE A BEAUTIFUL RACE …
> If only they
> had turned off the television
> And tune into their own imaginations
> If only they
> had used the white supremacy bibles
> for toilet paper purpose
> and make their latino souls
> the only religion of their race …
> If only they
> had kept their eyes open
> at the funeral of their fellow employees
> who came to this country to make a fortune
> and were buried without underwears …
> Juan
> Miguel
> Milagros
> Olga
> Manuel
> will right now be doing their own thing
> where beautiful people sing
> And dance and work together …

> Aqui Se Habla Espanol all the time
> Aqui you salute your flag first…
> Aqui Que Pasa Power is what's happening
> Aqui to be called negrito
> means to be called LOVE[12]

Pietri's obituary is a chilling description of the lives of Puerto Ricans in New York. Throughout the story of the five main characters, Pietri calls for his fellow Puerto Ricans to reject the mass culture of white America and to embrace their Latino heritage. In his heaven, Spanish is spoken all the time, the Puerto Rican flag is respected before the American, and racism has been replaced by love. The cultural awareness that Pietri envisioned was soon fully realized in the Nuyorican movement that arose in Loisaida.

Two of the most significant Puerto Rican writers from the Lower East Side are Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero. In 1975, the two combined to edit and publish the most important work in the Nuyorican cultural movement: *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings*. Recognizing and contributing to the changing cultural sensibility in the Puerto Rican community, Algarín and Piñero worked together to produce a text that vividly captures the aspirations and spirit of the Nuyorican movement of which they were at the head. In his poignant introduction, Algarín describes the fundamental choices that face New York Puerto Ricans and the essential role that the poet, and more broadly, the artist and activist, plays in the community. Algarín's first paragraph is:

> For the poor New York Puerto Rican there are three survival possibilities. The first is to labor for money and exist in eternal debt. The second is to refuse to trade hours for dollars and to live by your will and "hustle." The third possibility is to create alternative behavioral habits. It is here that the responsibilities of the poet start, for there are no "alternatives" without a vocabulary in which to express them. The poet is responsible for inventing the newness. The newness needs words, words never heard before or used before. The poet has to invent a new language, a new tradition of communication.[13]

This new language for Algarín was Nuyorican, a form of communication that he saw as still in its infant form of development, a growing combination of Spanish and English that captured his

people's perception of the everyday spirit of the street. More important than the language itself, though, is the emphasis upon innovation and the creation of alternatives to the traditional means of communication and existence. Most of all, the Nuyoricans were concerned with promoting cultural awareness and encouraging people to creatively examine their environment and take action to create real, positive alternatives for themselves and their community.

The Nuyorican ideology is deeply rooted in a sense of place. Nuyoricans find their inspiration and voice in their community, on their streets — in Loisaida. Algarín writes,

> The poet blazes a path of fire for the self. He juggles with words. He lives risking each moment. Whatever he does, in every way he moves, he is a prince of the inner city jungle. He is the philosopher of the sugar cane that grows between the cracks of concrete sidewalks…. He carries the tension of the streets in his mind and he knows how to execute his mind in action….The poet juggles with every street corner east of First Avenue and south of Fourteenth Street ending at the Brooklyn Bridge. Poetry is the full act of naming. Naming states of mind. The rebellious, the contentious, the questioning personality wins out. And poetry is on the street burning it up with its visions of the times to be:
>
> Now only our tomorrows
> Will tell if that arrow
> Of love with a head
> Of art penetrates into
> Higher dimensions.
>
> The poet sees his function as a troubadour. He tells the tale of the streets to the streets. The people listen. They cry, they laugh, they dance as the troubadour opens up and tunes his voice and moves his pitch and rhythm to the high tension of "*bomba*" truth. Proclamations of hurt, of anger and hatred. Whirls of high-pitched singing. The voice of the street poet must amplify itself. The poet pierces the crowd with cataracts of clear, clean, precise, concrete words about the liquid, shifting latino reality around him.[14]

In the afterword Algarín further elaborates on the importance of place to the Nuyorican poets:

> A poem describes the neighborhood of the writer for the reader. There are poems, or rather, there are poets who describe conditions that are either in the past or in the future. The poems in this anthology are in the dance of the moment. The Nuyorican poets have worked to establish the commonplace because they have wanted to locate their position on earth, the ground, the neighborhood, the environment. These are the places that the poet names for his readers. To cut into the immediate moment and deliver an image of what is going on and then move

> on so that the next image is fresh and alert to the ever-changing present is the business of the poet.[15]

The Nuyorican poets absorb what they see and feel around them, constantly sensitive and aware of their environment, working to express their own personal understanding of their everyday lives. Nuyoricans believe that one's physical surroundings dramatically effect one's psychological state. Nuyorican poetry, art, and activism directly confronts the creator's physical surroundings and seeks to evaluate, give meaning to, and change those surroundings.

Another important aspect of the Nuyorican ideology is the relationship between the self and the community. On one hand, the Nuyorican movement sees the creation of self-aware and thoughtful individuals as one of its primary goals. It is a movement for collective action, but at the foundation of collective action, the Nuyoricans envision confident and empowered individuals. The importance of the self can already be seen in Algarín's introduction when he writes, "The poet blazes a path of fire for the self."[16] He further expands this idea in his poem "San Juan / an arrest / Maguayo / a vision of Malo dancing." He writes,

> how clear it was
> that el policía's eyes
> couldn't x-ray the poems,
> he couldn't
> defeat the POEMS
> he couldn't discover
> our innocent smoke secret
> smooth,
> cunning,
> fast,
> deliberate,
> inside the self
> that's what the street
> Nuyorican has to learn
> for survival and that's
> what Lucky knows —
> he knows salvation is from inside
> the self.[17]

On the other hand, the movement works to establish unity in the community. It advocates a heightened cultural and racial awareness among its listeners and readers, seeking to create common bonds and solidarity amidst a population whose traditions it sees as dangerously threatened by the forces of mass American culture. It is the hope of the Nuyorican that once individual members of the community become self-motivated and aware, that positive spirit will overcome apathy, initiate cultural innovation, and allow for broad-based community action to be possible. The Nuyorican philosophy is that of bottom-up, grassroots activism that works to take control of their neighborhood and lives through organized, collective mobilization. These ideals are apparent in Louis Guzman's poem "Doñita Loisaida's Destiny":

> A destiny has been born en el pueblo de Doñita Loisaida
> A pueblo that people have come to live and leave
> Only to be followed by generations.
> El pueblo de Doñita Loisaida has been tortured.
> El pueblo de Doñita Loisaida has been wounded.
> She has been plagued by pot holes,
> Ailing buildings,
> Abandoned cars.
> She's been choked by pollution,
> And she's been raped by greedy landlords
> Who have been tearing her to shreds.
> She has been beaten by flunky lookin cops.
> El pueblo de Doñita Loisaida
> Has been through life's ups and downs a million times,
>
> Pero she has survived
> And now she has a destiny.
> A destiny to save what needs to be saved
> And to rebuild tomorrow's future today.
>
> We the people of Loisaida are going to stitch up the wounds
> With out love.
> Porque el pueblo de Doñita Loisaida must live and live it will.
> Because she has fed us from her breast,
> And she has given us the love which can't be found elsewhere.
> The love of survival.
> And so it is up to us
> Her children,

To rebuild and show the world what Doñita Loisaida's destiny is
And always will be
The love of a people
The love of a pueblo
The love of Loisaida
A symbolic destiny.[18]

Guzman recognizes the physical and social troubles of his community, but his poem radiates with optimism and a plan for communal action. The poem bears his name, but at its soul, it is clearly the declaration of "We the people of Loisaida."

Lastly, one of the most important aspects of the Nuyorican ideology is an emphasis upon positive action and thought. The Nuyorican attempts to actively alter the present for the sake of the future. Nuyorican ideology does not simply call for the expression and critique of one's perception of his or her environment: it demands change and seeks to discover means for solving the problems of the community. However, the Nuyorican does not dwell in fantasy. The Nuyorican "gives hope without deceptive illusions."[19] Miguel Piñero sums up this aspect of Nuyorican philosophy perfectly in this compact but powerful line in his play *Short Eyes*: "Try is a failure. Do."[20]

A Brief History of Charas

The community activist group Charas has worked since its founding in 1965 to promote arts and grassroots organization in order to improve the social and physical conditions of Loisaida. One of the most significant figures in the development of Charas has been Chino Garcia, an initial founder and the current director. Garcia was born in Rio Piedras Puerto Rico in 1946, but moved to the Lower East Side when he was five. At the time, gangs dominated the youth culture of the Lower East Side and the other ghettos of New York City. These gangs served as a means of protection and solidarity among the youth of the community. Garcia had

already become entrenched in the gangs of the Lower East Side by the age of 12. By 17, he was head of the infamous Assassin Lords. It was at this time that Garcia's criminal lifestyle caught up with him: in 1963, convicted of various gang-related crimes, Garcia was given the choice by the New York Police Department to either return to Puerto Rico or spend time in the city's jail system. Garcia chose to return to the Island. It was during this period of exile that Garcia reconsidered his personal lifestyle and came to recognize the immense power that gangs held with the youth of his community. He had seen first hand the strength of organized groups, and he started to imagine channeling the force of the various gangs into positive community action. He believed strongly that most members of gangs were not criminals by nature, but had been given limited alternatives and joined gangs mainly for protection. Given an alternative organization with which to unite themselves, Garcia believed the youth of the community would be willing to leave behind the dangers of gangs and work to improve themselves and the social and physical conditions of their neighborhood. [21]

In 1965 Garcia returned to the Lower East Side, committed to implementing his new-found approach to community development. He ran into a couple of old acquaintances who had recently spent time in jail and had also begun to consider means for taking positive action in the community. At this time, Garcia and other former gang members started the Real Great Society (R.G.S.), the name a mockery of President Lyndon Johnson's federal program to combat poverty, the "Great Society." Garcia and other members of the community were frustrated by Johnson's program, seeing no improvement in their everyday lives, instead witnessing millions of dollars being spent by the federal government on the salaries and projects of uneffective social workers, unfamiliar with the specific needs of the community. Garcia described the initial motivation for founding the group:

> In the 60s, the Poverty Program came into the neighborhood with millions of dollars, and the government had all these programs that were going to help us out and save the Lower East Side. Those programs were supposed to be controlled by the people, but they never really were, so those millions of dollars were spent and nothing really changed. In fact, things got worse. Some people got the idea that the government would provide for them. But some us came to understand that we had to make changes ourselves if we really wanted to control what happens in our neighborhood…. We decided to take the role of organizers, developing and teaching ourselves and others how to be more self-sufficient, working to improve our lives as people.[22]

As Garcia had envisioned, the strong organizational structures of the gangs would serve to benefit the cause for changing the direction of the community. "The grapevine that had once been used to announce bloody gang rumbles now spread the word that a bunch of guys were getting together to see what they could do about the community — constructively."[23]

Because of its origin in the youth gangs of the city, the Real Great Society paid a great deal of attention to working with the youth of the community. One of the most significant early projects of the Real Great Society was the University of the Streets. In this program, R.G.S. provided free, alternative education to members of the community. Offering hands-on courses in cultural and social studies, arts, crafts, and dramatics, the University of Streets was located throughout various venues in Loisaida. The basic learning unit was a self-organized group of students who worked in an open and participatory way with a teacher, who served as a resource and facilitator, not an authority figure. The students decided what they were going to study and how they were going to study it. The University of the Streets sought to promote education and motivate youth to take the initiative to construct means for realizing their personal interests and ambitions, and to work closely with others, gaining an education in the potential power in group organization and community activism. In its first summer, the program served over 1,600 students.[24]

At the end of Johnson's presidency and the end of the "Great Society" programs, the group decided to reconsider its name, and the Real Great Society became Charas, an acronym of the groups six initial founders. The group would, however, retain its commitment to pursuing grassroots activism to improve the quality of life and provide positive alternatives for the Loisaida community.

Charas, La Plaza Cultural, and the Implementation of the Nuyorican Philosophy

One of the most significant projects that Charas has been involved with is the creation, maintenance, and programming of the La Plaza Cultural. It is in the history of this project that one can most vividly see Charas' role in realizing the various aspects of the Nuyorican ideology. La Plaza Cultural was started as a community garden and cultural center in 1976 by Charas and Liz Christy. Christy, a neighborhood artist, had spearheaded the creation of the first community garden on the Lower East Side, reworking an abandoned lot at East Houston and the Bowery.[25] La Plaza Cultural was built on a series of abandoned lots at the corner of Avenue C and E. 9th Street.

One of the functions that La Plaza Cultural served was as a test-ground for alternative technology, an interest of Charas' since the 1960s and the Real Great Society. With the same attention that they had shown in innovating alternative solutions to the community's problems through the University of the Streets, the Real Great Society became involved in the implementation of alternative technology. In 1967, the Real Great Society met with Buckminster Fuller and began pursuing the construction of geodesic domes. A geodesic dome is a light-weight, low-cost structure that Fuller invented. Domes can be built in virtually any size, through a series of established mathematical calculations for the length and angle of the various

struts. The geodesic dome is built using a triangular framework that gives it incredible structural strength. Most importantly, the materials for the domes are inexpensive and the construction rapid and relatively easy. The Real Great Society saw these new architectural forms as a means for developing temporary housing, low cost housing, greenhouses, cultural facilities, and climbing structures for playgrounds.[26]

After meeting with Fuller, the construction of geodesic domes and the exploration of alternative technology and sustainable living became one of the Real Great Society's, and later Charas', primary projects. One of the main spaces where Charas would experiment with these ideas was La Plaza Cultural. In La Plaza, Charas would frequently hold community gatherings to provide guidance for various dome projects and work on different domes in La Plaza itself. The group took part in building domes in other vacant lots and on rooftops in the area, and also coordinated with other community groups in Harlem and the South Bronx to promote the construction of domes. The domes were far more than just structures that would beneficial services in the community: they were symbolic representations of the community's efforts and accomplishments.[27] They were alternatives to the traditional means of construction and reflected the Nuyorican ideology of creation, innovation, and empowerment. They proved to everyone inside and outside of the community that self-motivated individuals could come together as a collective force and produce tangible products that would improve both the lives of the individuals and the community as a whole. Garcia said, "We were building something real, not just protesting."[28] They are concrete examples of the implementation of the pro-active approach supported by Nuyorican philosophy.

Closely related to the experimentation with geodesic domes in La Plaza Cultural, was Charas' work in gardening, alternative energy production, and recycling. Their work in these

three environmental fields is a direct reflection of the Nuyorican ideology of working towards self-sufficiency and empowerment. Two of the smaller plots that made up the La Plaza Cultural were set aside and constructed as gardens. Charas hoped that the gardens would provide a substantial quantity of organic produce for the community, and that they would learn enough from their experience with the gardens at the La Plaza to implement similar practices on other abandoned lots throughout Loisaida. Charas saw urban gardening as a means for working towards community self-sufficiency and creating a low-cost alternative to the capitalist market. They applied this same philosophy to experiments with alternative energy production. Once again using La Plaza as a laboratory, Charas explored the possibilities of constructing windmills and using solar panels to provide low-cost, low-pollution energy for the community. From their field work in La Plaza, Charas would eventually successfully attach a functioning set of windmills and solar panels to a tenement they renovated at 519 E. 11th Street. Charas also redeveloped an abandoned garage next to La Plaza and turned it into a community recycling center. Envisioning the transformation of all of the trash-covered abandoned lots in the neighborhood, Charas encouraged people to help in the clean-up and earn money by turning in recyclable waste.[29]

La Plaza Cultural also has served as a great natural resource for the community. On the large section of land that was not being used as a garden, Charas created a beautiful park that provided a much needed place for natural escape and serenity, a healthy complement to the comparatively oppressive environment of crowded tenements and nearly endless violence, drugs, and rubble. For the park, grass and two large willow trees were planted. The creation of the park clearly reflected Charas' desire to physically improve the environment of Loisaida. The group believed that cleaning and beautifying the community's streets was a feasible and

meaningful way to improve the psychological and social quality of the neighborhood. Concerning the importance of the environmental movement, Garcia explained,

> The environment is related to every issue that you can think of: from jobs, to drug addiction…The environment is where one gets the feeling for mobilization, to move forward, and to relax. A crowded, ugly, uncomfortable environment creates a paranoid person who feels inferior to others. A clean, healthy environment creates a person who feels secure and sees further than just himself.[30]

For Garcia and Charas, like the Nuyorican authors, there was a direct connection between the improvement of the community's physical environment and the everyday, psychological state of Loisaida's residents.

La Plaza Cultural was not only an important natural resource for the community, but it also functioned as an extremely active cultural venue. From the beginning, La Plaza was created to provide a space for cultural activity, innovation, and expression. It is in this context, that Charas realized the artistic and cultural elements of the Nuyorican movement. One of the most important spaces in La Plaza Cultural is a small, rock, open-air amphitheater. Included in the original plan of the space, the amphitheater in the summer was the setting for the exhibition of plays and performances by local artists, directed to a local audience. Works ranged from works by the more prominent Nuyorican authors like Piñero, to local bard Bimbo Rivas, to performances of Shakespeare in Spanish. The amphitheater also has played host to many dance and music performances, highlighting the multimedia character of the Nuyorican arts movement. In particular, many "*bomba*" dances, a Puerto Rican tradition, have brought life to La Plaza Cultural and the Loisaida community in the audience.[31] Clearly, La Plaza Cultural has helped neighborhood residents reconnect with their Latino souls as Pietri envisioned and provided a venue for contemporary artistic innovation. The amphitheater must be seen as an outgrowth and reflection of the cultural and artistic ambitions of the Nuyoricans.

La Plaza Cultural was also one of the focal points of the muralist movement in Loisaida. The decrepit walls of the buildings that surround La Plaza have served as surfaces for many artists. The muralist movement in particular embodies the various ideals of the Nuyorican philosophy. The creation of a mural is often both intensely individual, but also fundamentally collective by nature. Like traditional painting, an artist will have a personal vision and a unique, individual approach to the project. However, the actual creation of the murals in the La Plaza and throughout Loisaida was almost always done in groups. On one level, this was simply for practical reasons because the murals were so large.[32]

The muralists, though, also conceived of their work as deeply rooted in the community and wanted to have as many people involved as possible. The muralist movement in Loisaida in the 1970s, like the other aspects of the Nuyorican art movement at the time, was not a professional art movement, but one of and for the people of the community. The themes and subjects of the murals, and the other works in La Plaza and Loisaida, are readily accessible to everyone that will see them. Far from high-brow art, the muralists worked to incorporate all of the members of the community, both in the actual process and in the content, most of whom were not directly involved in the arts. “Most of the early CityArts murals were concerned with process, with the participation of the non-artist community. What I remember most about painting these murals was the energy and thinking that we’re really changing the neighborhood,” said muralist Tomie Arai.[33]

Charas worked closely with the city funded program, CityArts, to initiate projects that would expose all members of the community to both the individual and collective process involved with art. Beyond simply working to improve the aesthetic environment of the neighborhood, the murals were seen as a vehicle for introducing the community, particularly the

youth, to the artistic process, hopefully inspiring them to explore the arts themselves. Kathleen Zabrowski Gupta, an administrator at CityArts outlined the groups mission:

> The philosophical basis of CityArts, from the very beginning is a strong a belief that average people have a great deal of creative impulse built up which can be released with a little bit of technical assistance; that the result should be a work that is relevant to their lives, and should make a statement about their past, their present and their aspirations for the future. What we do is unique because anyone on the street is given a chance to design, to participate in the painting, and finally, to feel a sense of ownership.[34]

Art Guerra, a muralist from Los Angeles who worked in Loisaida with a program sponsored by Charas and CityArts, further explained this aspect of the muralist movement:

> We are dealing with kids with the barest social skills and no education. All they know is fighting and robbing. When they come face to face with someone who is doing something different, it makes them stop and think. Public art of this sort is often the first introduction to art; the first awareness of what the artist is and how he works. They see the tools of the trade and how they are used. In fact, they see enough to go out and do it themselves if they want. And some of them do.[35]

Clearly, the muralists felt their work had an important and direct relationship with the community in which they worked.

Because of their locations in open, public spaces, the content of the murals themselves, whether conceived individually or in a group, had to reflect and address the broader community. Thus, the subjects of the eight initial murals in La Plaza and many others throughout the neighborhood highlighted traditional Puerto Rican culture, promoted cultural awareness and understanding, and often portrayed scenes that attempted to incite community activism and social change.[36] Local muralist Freddy captured the essence of the muralists' mission:

> I say do things realistically. That abstract shit has always gotten to me because it doesn't say anything. I paint about us, my people, myself, the way we live. I'm recording history, the same way the Mexicans did it. I'm dealing with reality, the things that happen in a life. I'm not going to come up to a wall and paint a whole lot of lines across and maybe a circle here and a triangle there. I'm not looking for that. I'm looking far away from that. I am going to be a painter about me. I draw about things that happen in the street. I draw about fellows playing dice, the old men playing dominoes. I know that. I grew up with that. I'm a messenger, and I'm going to produce as many positive things as possible. If something

> doesn't seem right to me, I am going to say something about it. I am an artist and I have this voice and I'm going to say something. If it's a negative situation, I'll just try to find a way to look at the positive side. I'll with the negative, but I'll do it in such a way that when people see it they'll take it in a positive way.[37]

Mirroring the message of Algarín, Pietri, Piñero, Guzman, and the other Nuyorican writers, Freddy approaches his art as means for understanding his environment and effecting positive change in the community. He draws inspiration from the Mexican muralist movement, led most notably by Diego Rivera, which pursued on a grand scale the expression of the Mexican cultural heritage, the contemporary issues of that nation, and often attempted to incite political and social revolution. Freddy's combination of reality and positive change directly echoes the Nuyorican philosophy to "give hope without deceptive illusions."[38]

The Nuyorican Philosophy: A Universal Model for Community Development

The Nuyorican arts and activism movement of the 1970s can serve as a great urban model for community development, not only for ghettoes but for all people who desire to live in inspiring spaces and feel connected to their neighbors. At its soul, the movement is the story of people deeply aware of their physical and cultural environment, who took action to make it the way they wanted it. The Nuyoricans placed great faith in the power of one's surroundings to alter one's psychological condition. Understanding their surroundings as both physical and cultural, the movement crated identity and meaning for both the individuals of Loisaida and the community as a whole. Everyday the cultures of the world are slowly becoming more homogenized. With continuing suburban sprawl, our urban landscape is rapidly losing any regional authenticity. The individualism and uniqueness that defines the human race is being lost as we assimilate into a global, capitalist culture. Loisaida should not be looked at as simply a model for its specific projects — its gardens, its murals, etc. — but more so, for the ideology

that inspired these works. The Nuyoricans embraced their unique qualities, both as a community as a whole and as individuals, and sought to continuously express and understand themselves and their environment. They were possessed with a passion for keeping things fresh and new, embracing the moment, seeking to be masters of their own everyday lives. The Nuyoricans believed that they had the power to control their environment and their feelings, and effectively shaped their world to realize their visions. It is the powerful spirit of perpetual innovation and the creation of alternatives to the traditional structure of life that defined this community. These ideas are not only important and effective in the ghetto, but should be held as universal, human values. Let us hope that the example of the Nuyoricans and the Loisaida community may inspire individuals and communities around the globe.

Notes

1. Virginia Korrol Sánchez, From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 11-50.

2. Christopher Mele, "Neigbhborhood 'Burn-out': Puerto Ricans at the End of the Queue," in From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side, ed. Janet Abu-Lughod (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), 128-131.

3. Ibid., 132-135.

4. Malve von Hassell, Homesteading in New York City, 1978-1993: The Divided Heart of Loisaida (Westport: Bergin and Garvey, 1996), 47.

5. Daniel Chodorkoff, "Un Milagro de Loisaida: Alternative Technology and Grassroots Efforts for Neighborhood Reconstruction on New York's Lower East Side" (Ph.D. diss., New School for Social Research, 1980), 65-71.

6. Richard Plunz and Janet Abu-Lughod, "The Tenement as a Built Form," in From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side, ed. Janet Abu-Lughod (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), 63-77.

7. Harry Schwartz, Planning for the Lower East Side (New York: Praeger, 1973), 1-5.

8. Mele, 135-138.

9. Ibid.

10. Frank DeGiovanni, Displacement Pressures on the Lower East Side (New York: Community Service Society, 1987), 21.

11. Mele, 135-138.

12. Pedro Pietri, Puerto Rican Obituary (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 2-11.

13. Miguel Algarín, “Introduction: Nuyorican Language,” in Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings, eds. Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1975), 9.

14. Ibid., 10-11.

15. Miguel Algarín, “Afterword,” in Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings, eds. Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1975), 181.

16. Algarín, “Introduction: Nuyorican Language,” 9.

17. Miguel Algarín, “San Juan / an arrest / Maguayo / a vision of Malo dancing,” in Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings, eds. Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1975), 141-142.

18. Luis Guzman, “Doñita Loisaida’s Destiny,” quoted in Chodorkoff, 39-40.

19. Miguel Algarín, “Dusmic Poetry,” in Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings, eds. Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1975), 130.

20. Miguel Piñero, Short Eyes (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 14.

21. Chino Garcia, interview with author, 14 November 2000.

22. Chino Garcia, quoted in Chodorkoff, 126-127.

23. Roger Vaughan, “The Real Great Society,” Life, 15 September 1967, 27.

24. Garcia, interview with author

25. Lawrie Mifflin, “Garden on the Bowery is a Real Tonic,” New York Daily News, 22 September 1974, M1 and M4.

26. Chodorkoff, 147.

27. “CHARAS: ‘Doing more with less’ in Spaceship Earth, 1975-1976,” poster on display 2 December at Charas/ El Bohio, 605 E. 9th Street.

28. Garcia, interview with author.

29. Chodorkoff, 159.

30. Garcia, quoted in Chodorkoff, 149-150.

31. Garcia, interview with author.

32. Eva Sperling Cockcroft, Toward A People’s Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977), 113.

33. Philip Pocock and Gergory Battcock, The Obvious Illusion: Murals from the Lower East Side (New York: George Barziller, 1980), 18.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid., 16.

36. Garcia, interview with author.

37. Pocock and Battcock, 19.

38. Algarín, “Dusmic Poetry,” 130.

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