



Cultural Innovation in Action

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

Groundswell
StreetWise: Hunts Point

PREPARED BY:

EmcArts Inc.



Groundswell's projects beautify neighborhoods and engage youth in personal and societal transformation.

Introduction

About Groundswell

Founded in Brooklyn in 1996, Groundswell brings together artists, youth, and community organizations to use art as a tool for social change. Groundswell is one of New York City's leading organizations for the practice of public art, having created over 450 murals and worked with more than 1,000 young people. Its projects beautify neighborhoods, engage youth in societal and personal transformation, and give expression to ideas and perspectives that are generally overlooked in public dialogue. Groundswell's annual budget is approximately \$1.2 million.

About the Project

In StreetWise: Hunts Point, Groundswell worked with two partners—the Department of Transportation's Safety Education Division (DOT) and a local economic consulting and planning firm—to engage local youth, artists, and community members in a series of community mural-making projects to identify local traffic and safety issues, implement short-term streetscape solutions, and secure a commitment to solving longer-term transportation issues in Hunts Point, Bronx.

Process

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We increasingly wanted to undertake multi-year initiatives targeting entire communities, particularly those most economically challenged.

- Amy Sananman
Executive Director

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Starting Conditions

In 2010, Groundswell was in an enviable position. Following a period of sustained growth, the organization had moved into a new, larger studio that could better accommodate after-school projects, as well as serve as staging space for projects around the city. At the same time, Groundswell had just been awarded a two-year contract by the Planning and Urban Development Division of the City of Newark to mentor local arts organizations in its mural development process.

Over 15 years, Groundswell had developed a creative and workable method of creating issue-based public murals. Executive Director Amy Sananman believed, however, that Groundswell should be working in a larger and more strategic way. Not willing to settle into the comfort of simply replicating proven practice, she wanted more. Building on a multi-year partnership with DOT's safety and education division, Groundswell staff shifted their focus to neighborhoods. "Our work historically had been completed on a per project basis," says Sananman, "but we increasingly wanted to undertake multi-year initiatives targeting entire communities, particularly those most economically challenged."

At the same time, DOT had a mandate to increase citizen participation in neighborhood infrastructure decisions. The NYC Cultural Innovation Fund came at just the right time, igniting a conversation with DOT about ways the existing partnership could further both their objectives by addressing wider transportation-related concerns in specific parts of the city.

Hunts Point in the South Bronx was a good place to start. The community is part of the poorest congressional district in the borough, and over half its population live below the poverty line. Hunts Point also has one of the city's highest rates of

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asthma and one of the lowest ratios of parks to residents. It is also dangerous to pedestrians. Highly industrialized, Hunts Point has an unusual amount of truck traffic, prompting one young participant in the project to note, “We have a lot of faded crosswalks, and there is a high pedestrian hit rate in this neighborhood. Pedestrians get hit more than cars or bicycles.”

With a strong institutional commitment, a productive and long-standing partnership, and a neighborhood in need of attention, Groundswell was poised to move. Groundswell received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation’s NYC Cultural Innovation Fund in 2011. “We wanted to see,” says Sananman, “whether we could take a series of murals and build a case for a better transportation infrastructure in the Hunts Point community. We saw the grant as an opportunity to do a number of projects together in a more sequential and intentional way and toward a greater goal.”

Prototyping

StreetWise: Hunts Point was itself a prototype for what Groundswell staff envisioned as a new direction for the organization. Historically, Groundswell had selected its partners based on their ability to contribute or assist in raising funds to support each project. This meant, Sananman explains, that “the acquisition of new projects was often more opportunistic than strategic.” Groundswell staff, however, wanted to focus on developing relationships with partners who more closely shared the organization’s vision and values, and they wanted to concentrate attention on a defined set of issues or a particular neighborhood in the city.

StreetWise: Hunts Point was not just a campaign for safer streets. As Sananman explains, “We wanted it to be a call to action to DOT. We wanted to say, ‘See our proposed actions in the mural... now make them happen on our streets.’” Groundswell’s inaugural effort in Hunts Point began by engaging students from Hyde Leadership Charter School to research the history of community activism in Hunts Point. Working

with artists Crystal Bruno and Joel Bergner, they created portraits of local heroes on plywood that could be installed on small walls with a lower standard of structural integrity than would be required for a larger mural. They then approached local business owners to request that the portraits be installed in their locations. The goal, says Sananman, was not only to reach a broader group of stakeholders, but also to deepen the young people's understanding of project management and organizing strategies.

Soon afterward, Groundswell was ready to begin work on the large-scale mural project. Working with a Bronx-based youth services provider, Groundswell recruited a mural team of 17 from throughout the South Bronx. Together, the team convened a series of public meetings with community organizations and neighborhood groups to explore urgent transportation concerns that might be addressed through changes to the streetscape or through public art. They also conducted their own field work, walking the neighborhood to gain first-hand information about transportation issues and hazards. Armed with this information, the team worked with participating artists to design and create *A Better Bronx*, a mural on a huge wall overlooking Hunts Point Riverside Park.

The final mural in the project—*Bronx Rising*—was finished in 2012 by 15 young people. “This was their full-time job for eight or nine weeks,” Sananman explains, “but it was sometimes a struggle for them. There were fights and shootings right on Hunts Point Avenue, and it was impossible for the kids to tell the story about what makes streets safe without thinking about this.” The young artists, however, were not deterred. “We started from the negative and moved to the positive,” says one participant. “First there was the pollution and the trucks and then the greenway. The phoenix [in our mural] represents rebirth—Hunts Point was in ashes but it will get built up.” Enthusiastic about the work they did on the project, the young people are convinced that the mural will make local residents “feel positive about their community.”

But that's just part of the story, say Groundswell staff. Bruno says, “Creativity isn't limited to painting

and drawing. It's also how to creatively problem-solve the issues of your neighborhood, how to navigate streets and find green spaces. It's moving beyond beautification into actual infrastructural and structural urban planning changes.” She adds that having a hand in this process is “really empowering” for the young people.

Changes in Assumptions

Groundswell staff point to two fundamental shifts in institutional assumptions. First, StreetWise: Hunts Point itself represents an entirely new project model. Rather than creating an isolated mural aimed at fulfilling a commissioner's vision, the mural team began by asking a series of questions and conducting research around specific community needs. What direct action, for example, did the team want to result from the project? How could they use art to tell a story that would resonate as true but also make a pointed request for action? As Sananman says, “It pushes us to take the next step of being a community organizer.”

Early on, Groundswell staff also recognized the need to increase the visibility of the project and decided to allocate some project funds to creating youth-driven documentation of the work. Documenting the project was critical, say staff, in order for Groundswell to share the outcome with a broader audience outside the South Bronx. In particular, they wanted to heighten national awareness of the potential of art as a tool for social change, contribute to an ongoing conversation among youth leaders, and share work with peer organizations.

Obstacles and Enablers

“Coordinating all the moving pieces can be a real challenge,” say Groundswell staff, citing the logistical issues of bringing together community partners, a team of youth, one or more wall owners, funders, and artists. This is especially complicated when attempting to work in a new community that is unfamiliar with the organization's work and process. Sananman notes in particular the need to educate teaching artists about what community organizing is and to

provide adequate coaching and problem-solving to make them comfortable in their role.

Groundswell relies heavily on its community partners. “It is so important to work with agencies or organizations based in the community,” Sananman adds, “so that they can serve as a proxy for the community.” Halfway through the project, Groundswell and one of its community partners, a local consulting firm active in urban revitalization, parted ways. Sananman cautions others about the critical importance of selecting partners that not only share common objectives, but also common values and practices. “We realized,” says Sananman, “that while we did have mutual objectives, our values and practices were just too different.”

The rapidly changing political landscape in the South Bronx was also a challenge. During the grant period, the NYC Economic Development Corporation completed the first phase of its plans for the South Bronx Greenway, and DOT also launched key projects in the area unrelated to the StreetWise initiative. In this context, it was critical to maintain a cohesive vision for the initiative despite the fact that individual mural projects were being directed by different artists. Groundswell also had to work especially hard to leverage the talents and vision of youth participants and raise visibility of the project within the local community.

To address these challenges, Groundswell made several changes in the second year of the project, including the decision to commit one artist to lead all projects. Groundswell also engaged youth leaders in intensive research to identify the shared values of the neighborhood’s multiple transportation and environmental justice stakeholders. The young people created a map of existing Hunts Point transportation-related needs, identified the government agencies that could affect desired changes, and showed the points at which shared values and opportunities existed. To gather feedback, they presented their findings to the community in 2013 prior to beginning the final mural.

Groundswell’s grassroots methodology and its

artistic and youth empowerment experience were huge drivers of the project’s success. Already managing six to seven large mural projects each summer, producing the Hunts Point mural was nothing new for the organization artistically. In addition, Groundswell built off of its experience with running regular after-school programs in which young people make art for community organizations, including through its Teen Empowerment Mural Apprenticeship program. So, while StreetWise: Hunts Point was ambitious in new ways, it built directly on a strong existing foundation. Groundswell’s history of successful collaboration with DOT was also critical. Staying aware of DOT’s capacity and being able to communicate easily with DOT staff helped Groundswell anticipate and avoid problems, manage community expectations, and create leverage through public input during the process.

Impact

By the Numbers

During the grant period, Groundswell completed five art-making projects. Each project served as a building block for the next, with the final collaboration offering an opportunity for all stakeholder groups to come together and share lessons learned, celebrate achievements, and identify future goals. The initial Hunts Point Heroes project engaged seven high school students. Seventeen young people from ages 14-21 participated in a second project to create a mural overlooking the entrance to Hunts Point Riverside Park. Two subsequent projects involved eight middle school students and 16 elderly residents of the Pio Mendez Senior Center in designing original street signs. The final mural project—*Bronx Rising*—was created by 14 young people. It presents a community-inspired vision for Hunts Point and highlights suggested policy changes for DOT.

While it is yet too early to know exactly what street level recommendations DOT will implement, Groundswell reports a positive reception both within the borough and at DOT.

New Pathways to Public Value

Groundswell staff are excited about the organization's new direction and the potential to increase the impact of its work through more purposeful and strategic partnerships.

Leveraging the success of StreetWise: Hunts Point, Groundswell secured funding to support other multi-year initiatives, as well as cross-city projects that focus on specific issues. Working with the artist Swoon and young people from the neighborhoods most affected by Hurricane Sandy, Groundswell created *Recovery Diaspora*, a collaborative city-wide public art installation based on stories of healing and recovery. In *Transform/Restore: Brownsville*, Groundswell is working with the NYC Department of Probation and the Pitkin Avenue Business Improvement District to transform vacant and vandalized walls into seven works of public art.

Groundswell staff credit the NYC Cultural Innovation Fund with helping the organization reach a new level of institutional maturity. “We were able to pilot a new programmatic model in a real world context and gain critical data that would inform our long-range planning,” they say. The result is a more intentional way of using its collaborative art-making process to empower young people to improve their lives, their communities and their physical surroundings—all on a much larger scale than the ad hoc projects that had characterized Groundswell’s previous work.

In the end, empowering young people is what animates Groundswell’s vision. As Sananman says, “What we find at Groundswell is that you can learn about an issue intellectually, but if you use the creative process, kids can connect to it at a very deep level. They’re connected to issues in a way they’ll take with them for the rest of their lives.”

Learn More

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

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

About The Rockefeller Foundation's NYC Cultural Innovation Fund

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

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

www.rockefellerfoundation.org

About EmcArts

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

www.emcart.org

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