

## Culture City: The Arts in Postwar New York

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Work-in-progress



In January 1960, *Look* magazine offered a new attribution for New York. With the rise of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, it would become "Culture City." The accompanying photograph alluded to what that meant beyond the travertine marbled theaters. Artists and impresarios sat atop a tenement soon to be torn down; the rooftop perch was the stage set for the promotion of the dramatic transformation of the neighborhood known as San Juan Hill by some, Lincoln Square by others, on the west side of Manhattan from 60th to 65th Streets. This neighborhood of two to five-story brownstone buildings, small shops, and local businesses would soon become home to a grand performing arts complex that was the centerpiece of the largest federal urban renewal project ever granted. The prima ballerina Alicia Markova and actress Julie Harris bookended the less dramatically dressed but perhaps more powerful gathering of impresarios in the middle, including Rudolf Bing of the Metropolitan Opera, George Judd of the

Philharmonic Orchestra, and Reginald Allen, the executive director of Lincoln Center. The feature suggested that whatever social costs the urban renewal project might accrue would be more than compensated for by the crowning artistic achievements of the country's most renown artists, directors, and producers. Lincoln Center would be the new capital for the performing arts in the U.S. and showcase "America's cultural maturity."<sup>1</sup>

One year earlier, the picture was neither so symbolic nor staged. Instead, backroom politics prevailed. Days after Nelson Rockefeller was inaugurated governor of New York on January 1, 1959, he held a Friday night meeting in his apartment on 5th Avenue. Some of the most powerful men in the city came together to discuss the fate of the proposed Lincoln Center. Parks Commissioner Robert Moses and Mayor Robert Wagner represented city interests; Arthur Houghton, President of Steuben Glass and board member of the New York Philharmonic, spoke for the arts; and John D. Rockefeller, 3rd, Nelson's older brother, was the leading philanthropist in charge of the effort to create the performing arts center, at it for four years already. Groundbreaking had yet to occur, even though the plans were gathering interest around the world. The complex faced an uphill battle in fundraising and needed a commitment from the city not just for land, but for money. The governor demanded that Moses cut back the park space in the complex to give more room for the Metropolitan Opera building and, most important, the mayor committed to supplying funding.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Culture City," *Look* (19 January 1960): 40-42.

<sup>2</sup> John D. Rockefeller, 3<sup>rd</sup> (hereafter JDR3), Diary Entry, 9 January 1959, b.59 f.532; JDR3 to Nelson Rockefeller (13 January 1959), b.57 f.522; Record Group 5, JDR3, series 1, subseries 4, Rockefeller Archive Center. These thoughts are based on research in the following archives: Brooklyn Academy of Music; Brooklyn Public Library (on BAM); LaGuardia-Wagner Archives (including the mayoral papers of Fiorella LaGuardia, Robert Wagner, and John Lindsay); Library of Congress (including the papers of August Heckscher and Robert Whitehead); Lincoln Center,

Such a meeting confirmed the power and relationships that mattered in getting such a complex project done—the governor overrode the mayor and the parks commissioner to help his brother. But what was unusual about this meeting, and two others like it during the years of construction that followed, was that government officials played key mediating roles in and contributed substantial public monies to arts enterprises that had, in general, been the purview of the wealthy. The year 1959—and the enormous undertaking of Lincoln Center—proved to be a critical one in New York City’s commitment to cultural activities. In 1962, Mayor Wagner inaugurated the first municipal office of cultural affairs in the country, a recognition of the government’s influential role in the centrality and importance of the arts in Culture City.

The nascent formation of cultural policy occasioned by the rise of Lincoln Center was bound to the grandeur and devastation of urban renewal. The Lincoln Square Urban Renewal Project implanted a large performing arts institution in the middle of the dense island of Manhattan during a time of enormous demographic shifts, remaking a neighborhood as more white and wealthy just as the city was becoming more brown, black, and poor and soon to face bankruptcy. The story of Lincoln Center—its limitations perhaps more than its successes—exposes the complex social dynamics that underpinned the ragged and incomplete

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Inc.; Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts (including the papers of Morton Baum, Joseph Papp, and Shakespeare in the Park); New York Public Library (including the papers of Martin Segal, Century Foundation, and Alliance for the Arts); and the Rockefeller Archives Center (including the papers of John D. Rockefeller, 3<sup>rd</sup>, Edgar B. Young, Lincoln Center, Nelson A. Rockefeller, and the Rockefeller Foundation).

transformation of the mid-century American city from a segregated to a more cosmopolitan place. And it illuminates the role of the arts in enacting these changes.

Lincoln Center accrued many names in its years of development: Athens on the Subway, Colossus on Broadway, Monumental Vampire, Monument to Culture, Tomb of the Future, Lincoln Square Folly, and, from President Dwight Eisenhower, A Mighty Influence. The enormity of the project – five buildings covering three super blocks housing opera, symphony, ballet, theater, a museum/library, and a school, costing \$185 million dollars at its completion in 1969 (approximately 1.2 billion in today's dollars) – could be expected to inspire a range of opinions about its worth. The epithets point to the social and political issues entangled in the development of Lincoln Center, including the middling of highbrow culture, the controversies aroused by urban renewal plans, the changing demographics of cities, and the pervasiveness of Cold War tensions. It also signaled the embedding of the arts into the structure—physical, financial, political, and aspirational—of the city.

New York had long been at the forefront in the U.S. of incorporating the arts into urban life. Beginning in the 19th century, buildings were the first commitment of government—and public monies—to cultural activities. The American Museum of Natural History followed by the Metropolitan Museum of Art led the trend for the city to provide land and, eventually, construction and renovation monies for large cultural institutions. Across the five boroughs of the city, botanic gardens, zoos, and museums constituted a cultural institutions group whereby private monies and employees managed and produced cultural activities in city-owned

buildings. The city's Art Commission governed the display of public artworks and design of functional objects such as street lamps and signs. In the 1930s, however, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia began a campaign to change the paradigm by advocating for a city-owned and run civic arts center. Rhetorical support was plentiful but practical possibilities few in the midst of the Great Depression. In 1942, LaGuardia saw an opportunity to achieve his goals in the foreclosure of the Mecca Temple on 55th Street. A year later, the building opened as the City Center for Music and Drama with a performance of the New York Philharmonic at a \$1 top ticket price.

City Center was a new kind of involvement of the city in cultural affairs. Not just a benevolent landlord, the city worked to become a supporting producer. LaGuardia and others realized that direct use of tax funds for the arts might spark a revolt so they set up a private non-profit corporation that would have fiduciary responsibility but whose head would be appointed by the mayor. The institution was given a favorable lease by the city, which, eventually, became \$1/year nominal fee (starting in 1953). Most important was the emphasis on audiences. In the federally-sponsored Works Progress Administration in the 1930s, the goal was to put artists to work and, secondarily, to create artworks and performances for all Americans. In City Center, the goal was to offer opera, dance, music, and theater at an affordable price for all New Yorkers. While the institution provided opportunities for artists, the focus was on audiences. The arts should be for everyone, regardless of ability to pay.

When ideas for a grander performing arts complex started up again in the early 1950s, City Center was inevitably part of the discussion. It was a kind of model for what many wanted – a house that offered opera, drama, dance, and music, and one that drew a varied audience of mixed income levels. But City Center was rife with inadequacies: barely a backstage, poor sightlines, no air conditioning. It was neither big enough nor flexible enough for the grand ideas. What it did have was a mission to make the arts accessible to more people, or, as City Center branded itself, “the best in entertainment at the lowest possible prices.”<sup>3</sup> Lincoln Center embraced but subtly shifted that goal by claiming the mantle of art rather than entertainment. Its goal was to make the highest quality arts available to all—but without a clear commitment to low ticket prices. The Metropolitan Opera, Philharmonic Society, Robert Moses, and others maintained an allegiance to quality—a value that eschewed a more commercial, market-based approach and required funding far beyond government subsidy. Lincoln Center would be neither Broadway nor City Center. The grandiosity of the Lincoln Square Urban Renewal project answered aspirations of a Culture City that was not only a place of the arts but a transformation of a neighborhood and a mark of global prominence. This was a cosmopolitan ideal, connecting New York to other cities around the world both past and present. Rockefeller noted that famous cities in history – Rome, Athens, Paris, Kyoto – were known for their arts, not their political, economic, or business successes. Rockefeller was also concerned with the international dimensions of the United States’ power and recognized that most countries did not think highly of America’s culture. In his view, Lincoln Center would feature the best of the

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Dalrymple, one of the original administrators of City Center, says this was the original slogan; Dalrymple, *From the Last Row* (NJ: James T. White, 1975): 2.

performing arts from the U.S. and provide a place to present the best of the performing arts from countries around the world to U.S. audiences.

City Center, however, was necessary to realize these grand aspirations and tethered Lincoln Center to local realities. It housed the New York City Ballet, the most prominent company of a fledgling art form and an obvious choice as the resident dance company at the new complex, and the New York City Opera company, a more adventurous opera company than the Metropolitan. (Both companies received their name from their affiliation at City Center, labeling themselves as of, by, and for New York City.) After ten years of bitter negotiations, City Center became a constituent in Lincoln Center, on par with the Metropolitan Opera and the New York Philharmonic, with the transfer of the New York City Ballet and the New York City Opera to the New York State Theater (while also maintaining the theater on 55<sup>th</sup> St.). City Center made different demands, though: maintenance of its low-price ticket policy and a direct connection to city government. The opera and symphony had protracted debates over competition for rich donors. City Center, instead, understood its sustenance as based on municipal support. A direct lease of the New York State Theater to City Center, not Lincoln Center, made the city “directly responsible for us as its tenant”—a way to ensure that some operating costs would be covered by public monies.<sup>4</sup>

This contrived marriage was based on contradictions and Lincoln Center’s aspirations toward cosmopolitanism and grandiosity quickly overrode the more local concerns of City Center.

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<sup>4</sup> From Baum papers?

These contradictions burrowed in the city more generally during the 1960s, particularly in the mayoralty of John Lindsay, a gracious Republican leading an increasingly diverse city at a time of explosive politics. Lindsay believed that the arts and culture could be an important part of the raucous times and he extended cultural policy. He moved the office of Cultural Affairs into the Parks department and thereby opened up the parks as sites of art installations and happenings; created a new office to encourage and facilitate the use of the city in films; stemmed the demolition of Broadway theaters and promoted zoning changes that allowed new office buildings in Times Square to house theaters; increased the budget for cultural affairs overall; and supported the rise of borough cultural councils. (Harlem Cultural Council began in 1964, followed by the Bronx Cultural Council in 1966, an indication of the parts of the city left out by the arts activities crystallized in the development of Lincoln Center.) In rhetoric and action, Lindsay recognized the cultural sector as a means by which to activate democracy through inclusion and participation.<sup>5</sup>

Even Lincoln Center got the message. Arts education grew in the 1960s and became a focused goal in its own educational arm, the Lincoln Center Institute. The arts also moved into mass media, continuing on radio but expanding to television, again with Lincoln Center leading the way with its own series of performances “Live from Lincoln Center.” Perhaps even more enduring, the arts moved outdoors, onto the plazas of Lincoln Center in 1971 and institutionalized as the Out-of-Doors Festival in 1974. The Metropolitan Opera and New York

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<sup>5</sup> See *Summer in the City: John Lindsay, New York, and the American Dream*, ed. Joseph P. Viteritti (Hopkins, 2014), esp. the articles by Goldberger, Cohen and Goldstein, and Mogilevich.

Philharmonic had staged occasional performances in the park before but, by the mid-1960s, parks, plazas, and neighborhoods became common sites of performances and art installations.

Joseph Papp's Shakespeare in the Park productions crystallized this new attention to changing where the arts live at the same time as the plans for Lincoln Center were unfolding. Papp started a Shakespeare workshop in the basement of a church in the East Village in the early 1950s. "Always free, always live" was his idea of what it meant for the arts to be for everybody. Papp recognized that creating centers, of any kind, reinforced barriers; buildings demanded that people come there to receive their arts benediction. He believed that the arts needed to go to people—in parks and neighborhoods. He built a wooden folding stage from a truck that traveled to New York neighborhoods from 1957-59 and also began performing in Central Park. In March 1959, Robert Moses insisted that admission be charged for these performances to cover the costs of the extra traffic on the park, perhaps a retaliation for Papp's unfriendly testimony in front of the House on Un-American Activities the year before. Papp sued the city and won the case on appeal in June. He immediately put on *Julius Caesar* in the park that summer. Moses did an about-face, giving his support to Shakespeare in the Park and constructing the Delacorte Theater for its permanent home.

Throughout the 1960s, the city gave unprecedented programming support to Papp, from \$60,000 in 1961 to \$373,000 by 1967, funds which covered performances at the Delacorte but

also in twenty-five parks and playgrounds across the city and in public schools.<sup>6</sup> Papp put forth so many productions, varying in style, form, and success, that when the building for theater at Lincoln Center became vacant after yet another company's failure, he took his franchise there as well. In a 1973 editorial announcing his arrival at Lincoln Center, Papp named the problem: "the wall that separates vast numbers of people from the arts."<sup>7</sup> He planned to bring the openness and accessibility of Shakespeare in the Park to Lincoln Center. Four years later, it was he who left Lincoln Center.

Much else was in disarray by the mid-1970s. The larger structural economic changes already underway in the 1960s led the city to a fiscal crisis in the 1970s. In a 1971 article, Roger Starr linked the rise of economic distress and the loss of "cosmopolitan citizenship" as the causes behind the "decline and decline of New York." Similar to John D. Rockefeller's evocation of past culture cities, Starr noted that "world cities" stimulate the "creative imagination." The consolidation of artistic institutions in Manhattan was a strength, where the elite—"whether selected by birth, by wealth or by cultural attainment"—built up taste and aspiration that attracted so many to New York. The push to distribute the arts throughout the boroughs worked against the rise and stature of quality. Culture would no longer be the compensation for putting up with the increasingly difficult mundane problems of daily life in the city, Starr predicted.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See the appendices of a partial manuscript by Morton Baum, "NYC Center of Music and Drama" [1967?], Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts Library.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Papp, "To Break Down 'The Wall,'" *New York Times* (22 July 1973).

<sup>8</sup> Roger Starr, "The Decline and Decline of New York," *New York Times* (21 November 1971).

Starr's article turned on elitist and gendered views of cosmopolitanism and economies—wives would not follow husbands getting offered corporate jobs in New York because of the decline in culture—but it also presaged the financial downturn and its defining impact. (And he would worsen it as the architect of “planned shrinkage,” which targeted poor areas of the city for obsolescence and deliberate neglect.) But he did not accurately predict the course of cosmopolitanism or the arts.

Most overtly, the dramatic crisis prompted a robust defense of the economic value of the arts. The businessman Martin Segal, appointed to head Mayor Abraham Beame's Committee on Cultural Policy in 1974, became one of the most prominent people to articulate and advocate this view. Segal first popularized the idea in an article in the *Sunday News* in April 1976, in which he outlined the current state of the culture industry of the city in a series of numbers: expenditures of culture-related industry were 3 billion dollars per year; the value of non-profit institutions were estimated 5 billion; the industry employed 50,000 people; the city contributed 25 million dollars after 1974; and—the key number—for about one-fifth of 1% of city monies, the cultural industry generated four times that in tourist dollars and taxes. Segal concluded: “Culture Pays.”<sup>9</sup> Culture City had become Culture Pays the City.

The economic argument for arts and culture would only deepen in the coming years. Tracing the emergence of this dominant paradigm begins, though, by recognizing the beginnings of

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<sup>9</sup> Martin Segal, “Culture Pays [4 to 1]; Don't Strangle It,” *Sunday News* (11 April 1976).

formalized cultural policy as the acquisition and maintenance of buildings, not programming, direct support of artists, or education. Continuing from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the city's primary role of support has gone to museums. Smaller policy changes in the 1960s extended the interest in buildings beyond museums with the percent-for-art legislation that devoted a small portion (typically 1% or less) to art in publicly subsidized construction. Historic preservation laws in the 1960s offered another avenue of legislative support. Joseph Papp utilized this new law to persuade the developer who owned the Astor Library to sell it to Shakespeare in the Park in 1965; when his organization needed money a few years later the city bought back the building and offered it to the Public Theater at its typical \$1/year lease. The attention to buildings cemented the dominance of Manhattan in the city's cultural policy, and gave force to centralization – or, odes to centers: Rockefeller, City, Lincoln. Consolidation in centers may have had rhetorical and economic force but it worked against inclusion. There were occasional exceptions to the predominantly white, affluent, educated audiences attending the performances at these centers, such as the public-school children attending matinees through Lincoln Center Institute, the lower-priced offerings that continued at City Center itself, and the ethnic and racial diversity of performances in the outdoor plazas. But centers reinforced inherited exclusions by consolidating wealth, talent, and attention in the most white and wealthy borough.

Buildings, however, do not fully encompass institutions: the politics, debates, and contradictions that habitually occur in running large and small organizations. The rise and volatility of dance and theater during this period exposes the contentiousness and battles

around diversity and legitimacy beyond the solidity and containment of buildings and centers. If music and opera were older, established inheritances from Europe, dance and theater were in the process of legitimation in the U.S. in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century; they were shaped by questions of inclusion and accessibility. At Lincoln Center, dance advocates fought for modern dance to be recognized alongside ballet; theater devotees argued over the relatively young canon of American plays versus support of contemporary American playwrights. These were traditions-information accorded legitimacy by the prominence of and affiliations at Lincoln Center. Their volatility may also have been about the nature of performance as well, a new emphasis on audiences, in a more active role. Visual art and museums dominated discussion of the arts in the early 20th century; the performing arts of music, dance, opera, and theater gathered interest, money, and acclaim in the postwar world. Value shifted to the experiential, transient nature of performance and participation, even if passive: does the artwork exist without an audience? Cultural policy followed this emphasis in the development of the Theater Development Fund voucher program for off-off Broadway in 1972 and the first TKTS trailer in Duffy Square in 1973. It was some recognition of the importance of the work of the audience: to spend money, yes, but also to bear witness.

In 1977, 90% of the budget of the Department of Cultural Affairs went to 25 institutions; in 2016, the department gave 77% of its funding to 33 institutions. Currently-funded institutions go beyond Manhattan (to museums such as the Bronx Museum of Art) and include attention to people marginalized in traditional institutions (such as El Museo del Barrio). There is more money for smaller organizations, programming, education, and supplies. Increasingly, New York

City government moved from a passive landlord of buildings to an instigator of activities and performances in parks, schools, and plazas. These small but notable changes were driven by the spread of the arts in the postwar period from a barometer of social status to an expression of individual and social imagination, a cosmopolitanism that shifted from upholding elite tastes to recognizing and reaching to encompass differences.

The ascendancy of Joseph Papp and Martin Segal to the high echelons of Culture City by the 1970s illustrate the opening, and its continuing restrictions. Both were from Russian Jewish heritage, Papp born in New York, Segal an émigré at the age of two; both never finished high school. They built empires as producers, organizing, managing, and promoting others on stage. They bridged popular and high arts, Papp in his excursions from Shakespeare to Broadway and Segal in his co-founding of the Film Society at Lincoln Center. Segal's trajectory, in particular, maps the increasing prominence of cultural policy from a post on the board of City Center in the early 1970s to the chair of the mayoral Committee for Cultural Affairs in the mid-1970s and then chair of Lincoln Center, Inc., in the early 1980s. More important than the limited move from the control of the arts by largely white, Anglo-Saxon men to Jewish men is what and who Papp and Segal sponsored. Papp's Public Theater gave rise to mixed casting, supporting African American and Latino playwrights, and plays of social relevance. Segal oversaw the hiring of the first woman to head an opera company; Beverly Sills would go on to assume his role as the chair of Lincoln Center.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> A contemporary incisive analysis of Papp charted his limitations; Stanley Kauffman, "The Stages of Joseph Papp," *American Scholar* 44 (Winter 1974-75): 110-23. For an account of theater that discusses both Papp and, briefly, Segal, see Hillary Miller, *Drop Dead: Performance in Crisis, 1970s New York* (Northwestern UP 2016).

The broadening rhetoric of the period—the arts are for everyone—demanded government action to realize. The arts became a way to prove inclusion and reach in governmental action and support: they moved from a good reserved for the deserving to a good for all. Success in doing this has been both modest and uneven in practice but perhaps most effective rhetorically. The “culture wars” of the 1990s hinged on questions of public support for and identity politics in the arts, which could be targeted because of tax dollar support (however small) and openness to diversity and expression (however incomplete). In Culture City, the arts became embedded in structure, policy, economy, streets, habits, schools, subways—and what it means to be a New Yorker.