

# BT-00

## Borrowed Time

Curated by:  
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One of the most recognizable forms of contemporary insidiousness is the relentless extraction of profit from various forms of human agency that seem to be outside of capitalism. Creativity is especially subject to this kind of commodification in New York City, where financial capital is often warehoused in the culture industry in times of recession.<sup>1</sup>

The speculative mechanisms of real estate have crashed painfully into creative communities in New York City. We all know histories of neighborhoods transformed after artists unwittingly make them safe for financial speculation: from SoHo's change from a manufacturing district to a paradise of artist's lofts and independent activities in the 1970s, to a shopping mall for luxury items in the 90s, or even Clinton Hill's upscaling in the naughts. With these histories in mind, theorists such as Richard Florida have seized on the figure of the creative professional (whether artist, architect, or software designer) as the representative of gentrification par excellence, and real estate agents and condominium developers have made and marketed buildings for this sociological type during boom years.<sup>2</sup>

Scholarship on artists' role in gentrification, particularly that by Sharon Zukin and Neil Smith, paints a slightly different picture, by showing that cultural producers in "creative cities" often are rewarded for taking advantage of forced disinvestment and lax regulation of real estate markets, conditions which are ideal for the re-territorialization of

<sup>1</sup> Many thinkers have theorized different roles for artists during this recession. The questionnaire and discussion about "Recessional Aesthetics" in the latest issues of October is particularly illuminating on the relationship between recessions and cultural spaces in New York, especially the response by Jakob Schillinger, who has adapted the theories of David Harvey to explain how cultural capital provides shelter for finance capital when it cannot be invested elsewhere. See "Recessional Aesthetics: An Exchange" October 135, Winter 2011: 93-116. See also David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*. New York: Harper, 2005.

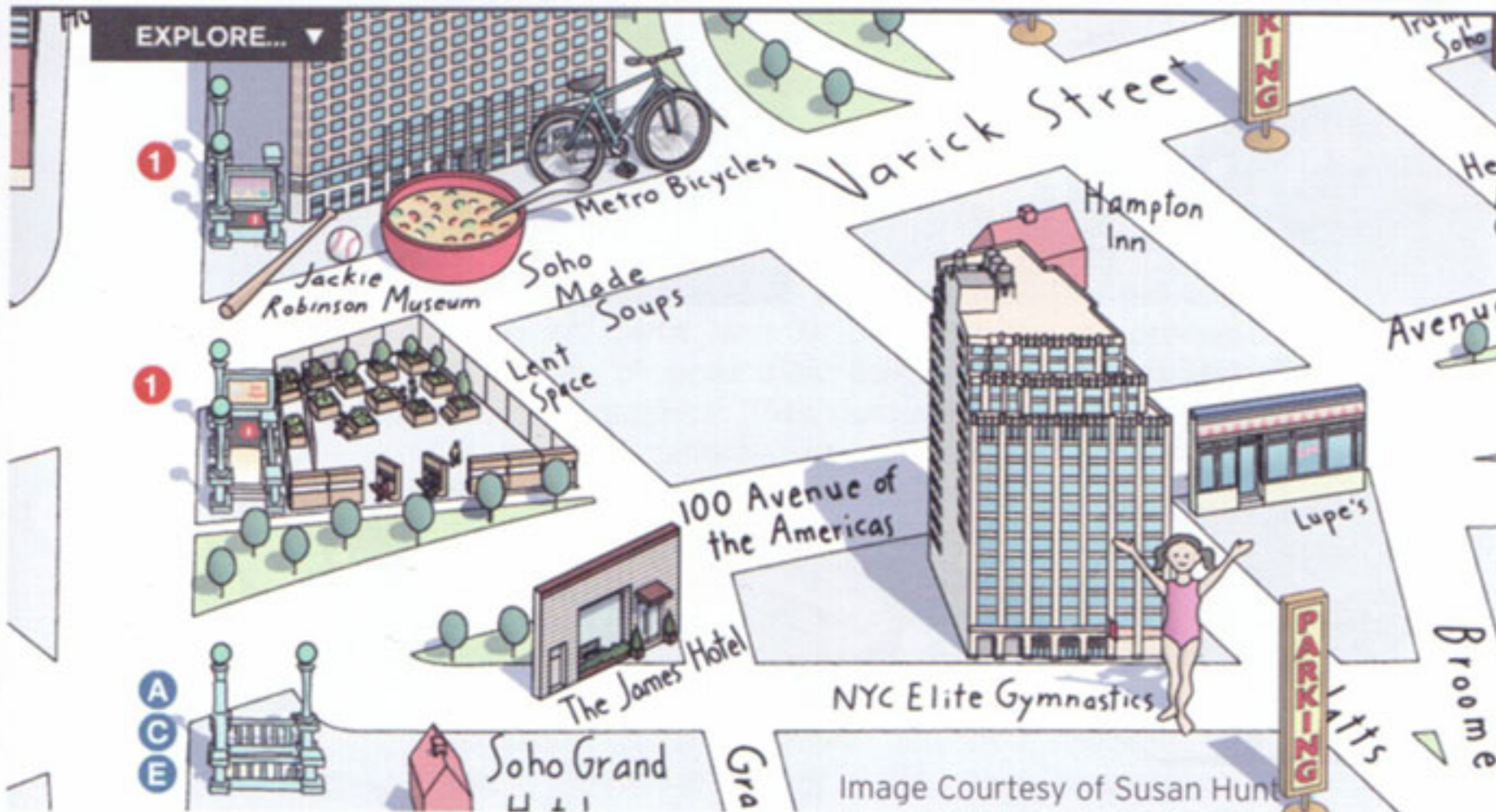
# BORROWED TIME



Image Courtesy of Michael Falco/ The New York Times



Everyone thinks more creatively here.

[PHOTO GALLERY](#)


land and property.<sup>3</sup> This scholarship understands that cultural producers are only part of a larger economy of insidious speculation, and makes clear that such a climate places them in positions of permanent precariousness: they are only able to operate in aporias in the real estate market, but everywhere they go, they help to create the conditions that lead to their own displacement.

We thus have two stories about the possible agency of the cultural producer in the city: one, Florida's, which privileges their activities while reducing them to the profit that they might generate for municipalities and business, and another, that of Zukin and Smith, which cautions that their political agency is not nearly as strong as it seems. It must be possible to move beyond these dichotomies, and indeed, a number of artists, architects and performers have recently attempted to do so. During the present recession, unused real estate has again appeared in desirable districts, and curators and business improvement districts have offered cultural producers temporary use of these spaces as a hedge to keep property values high. Projects such as No Longer Empty, the X Initiative and Exhibition have all taken advantage of this offer. Using artists to assist with landbanking can have its advantages, making activities possible that might not have otherwise occurred in central districts such as Manhattan, but artists' lending of cultural value to real estate can be fraught with

compromises, especially for cultural producers unaware of the role they play in the city's real estate economy.

Architects working to design cultural spaces often turn a blind eye to these histories of urban change. But two architectural practices, Interboro Partners and common room, have constructed temporary cultural spaces which intervene intelligently in the machinations of real estate in New York.<sup>4</sup> Interboro Partners' LentSpace project, curated by Adam Kleinman, seeks to make the process of landbanking palpable to the public, and to question the value of it even while using it to provide a service to the community. common room's exhibition space, common room II and the free education initiative they co-initiated in New York, The Public School (for Architecture), interrogate the ethics of "open source", clientless design, given freely by its originators. While the temporary cultural spaces created by these architects in New York operate in spaces left behind by other activities, they do not ignore the charged contexts in which they operate. Through the new roles that they envision for architects, the ways that they share the resources of open space, and their practice of rethinking the spatial definitions of community, they have managed to cope creatively with the insidiousness of cultural gentrification in New York.

Meredith TenHoor has collaborated with both common room and Interboro Partners, and this text is written with the benefit of those experiences. While the interpretations of their work are our own, we are very grateful to Dan D'Oca, Lars Fischer, Adam Kleinman and Todd Rouhe for sharing their ideas and images with tarp.

3 See Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*. New York: Routledge, 1996 and Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.





## Interboro Partners

LentSpace  
New YorkTobias Armbrorst, Dan D'Oca,  
Georgeen Theodore

Created on land licensed by Trinity Real Estate, organized by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, curated by Adam Kleinman

LentSpace is a 37,000 square foot sculpture park constructed on a trapezoidal parcel of land licensed by Trinity Real Estate, the real estate holding company of Trinity Church.

One of the largest landowners in Manhattan, Trinity has been trying to create luxury commercial properties in the neighborhood of Hudson Square, formerly the home of much of New York's printing industry. On the site that became LentSpace, Trinity planned to demolish existing buildings in order to redevelop the site more profitably. Knowing that they would have to wait a year or more for permission to rebuild, they decided that it would be advantageous to use the soon-to-be empty lot to generate good will towards their company and its development strategies. An early hope was to turn the lot into a temporary park or a tree farm. But Trinity realized that it would not be possible to do so on a temporary basis: once a park becomes part of a neighborhood, it can be culturally quite challenging, if not impossible, to turn it back into a private building.

Enter Maggie Boepple, then president of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC), a group that has a long history of offering temporary studio spaces to artists



and programming cultural events in un-leased downtown buildings. LMCC partnered with Trinity to come up with a plan for making the lot provisionally public: it could become a "sculpture garden." Such a program would technically be a cultural space, and would avoid the pitfalls of being called a park, yet it would offer many of the same public benefits. As Trinity cleared the lot, covered it with gravel, and erected a chain link fence around it, LMCC curator Adam Kleinman commissioned work from a group of young sculptors, designers, and performance artists whose work would reflect critically on the program of the sculpture garden. Why was it there? What could it become? (As part of this program, Kleinman invited common

room to distribute one of their publications there.) Kleinman also felt there was a need for architecture at LentSpace. He argued that simply putting sculptures onto a gravelly empty lot was likely to anger residents, and asked for a budget to hire landscape architects to improve it. After securing a budget of \$250,000 (which eventually grew almost fourfold), he hired Interboro Partners to design the site.

Interboro has a long history of working on projects which explore the potentials of landbanking, as well as the dynamics of exclusion in much contemporary architecture and planning. In the Dead Malls competition (2002), they proposed a series of interventions that could be made to adaptively



# INTERBORO

reuse unprofitable suburban shopping centers abandoned by their anchor tenants. For the Rotterdam Biennale (2009), they created a lexicon of simple design interventions that could either open spaces to the public or serve to further privatize them. And in their winning proposal for PS1's Young Architect's Program (2011), "Holding Pattern", they proposed that any design intervention that they spent PS1's construction budget on be something that was both needed by and capable of being returned to the surrounding community.

At LentSpace, Interboro tried to add more tangible community benefits to the project, enhancing the prior program of "culture" and greenscaping. They did a site analysis of traffic and circulation patterns, produced chronotypes of pedestrian activity, and analyzed the area's demographics. They conducted precedent studies of temporary cultural spaces, and catalogued their successes and failures. And they brought in teams of experts, including horticulturalists and consultants from the Parks Department, to further define an agenda for the space. While they wanted to support the program of the sculpture park, they also hoped to create opportunities for other types of use. To serve the office and retail workers, small-scale vendors, tourists, and local residents who primarily used the area, they tried to make the space more indeterminate and welcoming to spontaneous, unforeseen uses. At the same time, practicing a form of Brechtian architecture, they wanted their design to highlight how temporary LentSpace was, so that anyone using it might be led to question how it became that way, and what role they were playing in holding, creating or destroying value in the space. By doing so, they hypothesized that the park's

visitors might comment just as critically on the idea of the sculpture park as the artists commissioned to make installations there.

Several key design elements help to realize these goals:

**Fence:** Trinity required that the site's perimeter be secured, so that it could be closed at night. Interboro installed a chain link fence, evoking the aesthetic of the construction site. The fence served as a reminder that the space was in transition, and that access to it is regulated and controlled, and became a screen and a temporary support structure for a number of performances and events.

**Planters:** After consultation with a team of horticulturalists, Interboro designed tree planters capable of being moved easily by forklifts, so that LentSpace could be used as a kind of neighborhood nursery: once the park closed, trees grown on site would be distributed throughout the surrounding district.

**Pathways:** Observing the site, Interboro realized that street vendors would often come down Varick street laden with suitcases, so they designed pathways through LentSpace which would make it easier for these vendors, and others they observed in the neighborhood, to traverse it. Designing smart pathways might also make people who might not linger in LentSpace nonetheless miss it when it was gone or closed.

At LentSpace, Interboro conducted an experiment to see what kind of constituency the sculpture park's users might generate: would anyone become attached enough to the site to launch a campaign to save it? Could a temporary space be used to galvanize a public against the privatization of open space, perhaps generating a movement to stop it?

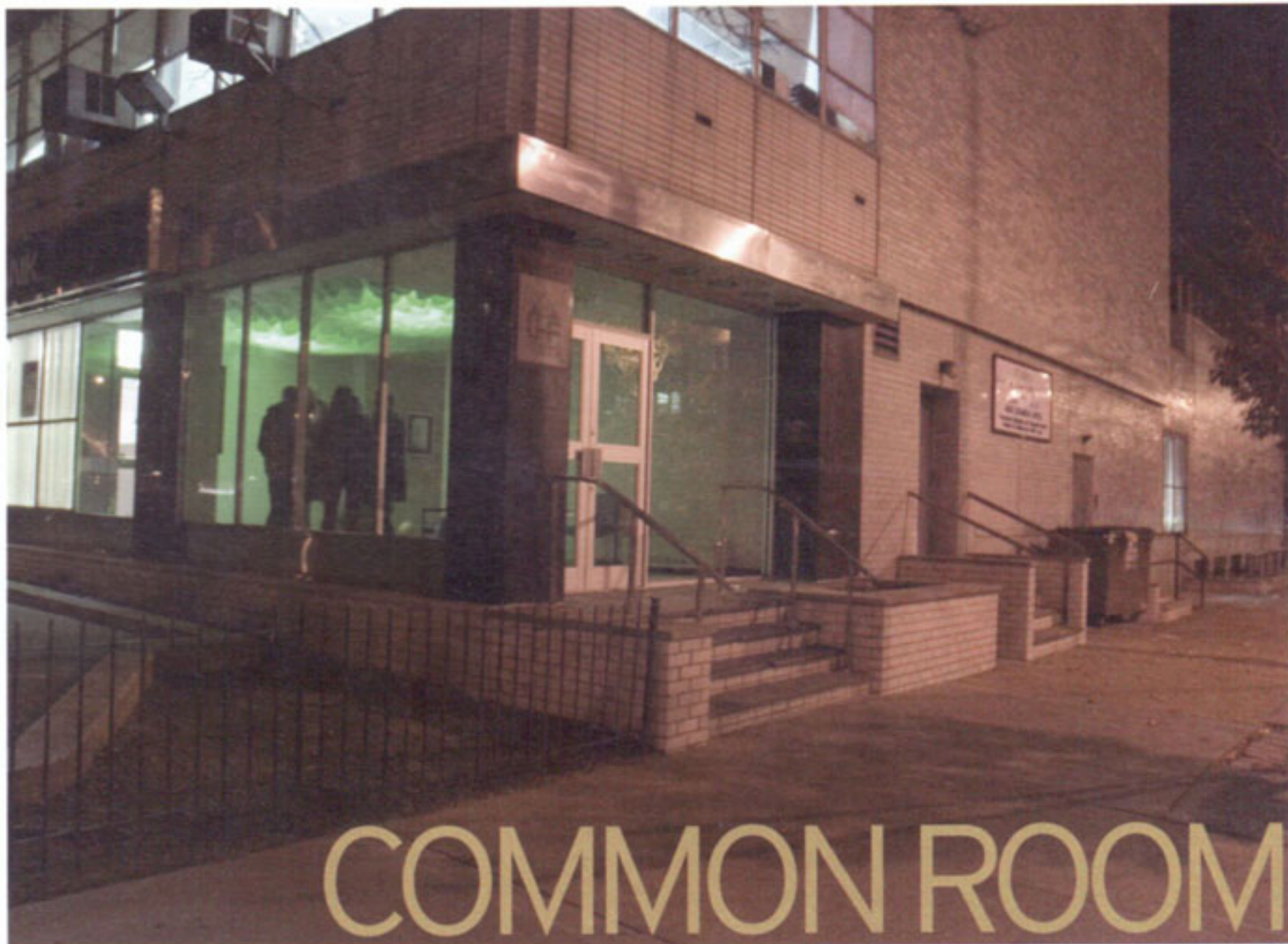




## common room

common room 2

The Public School (for Architecture)

Lars Fischer, Maria Ibañez, Todd Rouhe,  
with Geoff Han

## COMMON ROOM



common room has invented an architectural approach to activating and curating unused spaces. This work began in their own offices: their design practice is on the fourth floor of a building that also houses a day care center, an Emigrant savings bank, and a senior center, placed on an oasis of grass and parking lot in the otherwise densely developed Lower East Side of Manhattan. The strangely suburban excess of space they enjoy led the practice to try to find ways to open some of it to productive uses, and in 2006, they started to use the building's lobby for exhibitions and events, calling the space "common room 2". In the tight real estate market of the boom years, the city sorely lacked conversation and exhibition spaces for young practices, and common room 2 served as an important gathering place for a group of architects and thinkers interested in exploring the social dimensions of design.

Initially, shows at common room 2 were actively curated by the practice's partners as a kind of extracurricular activity, which amounted to an exquisitely generous gift to the city's architecture world. Exhibitions featured the work of designers such as Berlin's institut für angewandte urbanistik (IFAU), Ava Bromberg and Brett Bloom, Lize Mogel, Dexter Sinister and even Interboro Partners. Chairs, digital projectors, paper banners, and other inexpensive and easily moved and reconfigured materials were used to mount the exhibitions and events, and common room had newsprint pamphlets printed for most.

But after several years, it became clear that the space had both an established architecture and an established audience. Fischer, Rouhe and Ibañez were approached by artists and architects who wanted to activate the space themselves, which would expand the group of participants who used it more widely. Having acquired a set of techniques for making the lobby into a think-tank/clubhouse/exhibition space, common room generated an architecture for curation through the establishment of material and programmatic conditions and constraints. Shows by Rey Akdogan and Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani's students at the New School called attention to common room 2's architecture and context.

In 2008, common room was selected as one of six practices featured in the New Practices New York competition at the American Institute of Architecture's Center for Architecture (CFA), and they were given space in the CFA's galleries to use to exhibit their work. Through a carefully conceived series of programming gestures similar to those used in the common room 2 project, the group tried to make that space usable to a group of people outside of the orbit of the AIA. They invited experts on context, publication, institutions to speak at the space, designed conversation-generating furniture, and printed a newsprint publication, the common circular, using the exhibition as a "point of distribution" for architectural ideas not typically found or generated in that particular place.





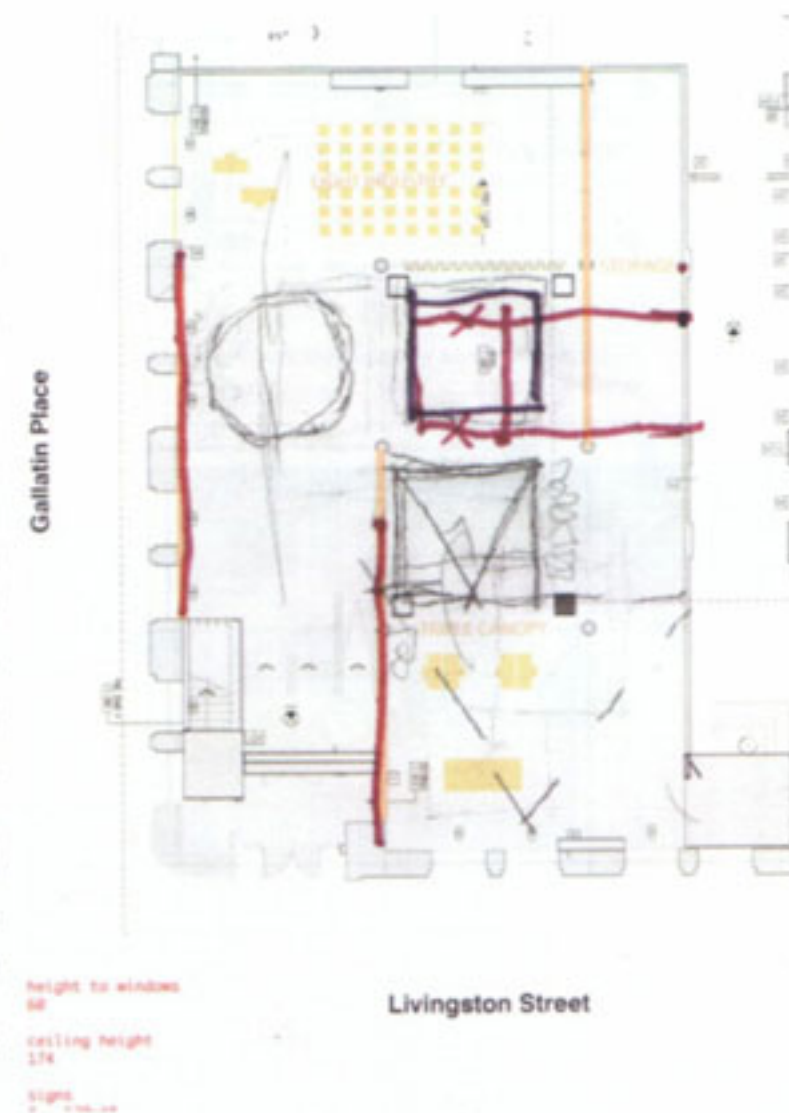
After winning the New York Prize Fellowship at the Van Alen Institute in 2009, common room furthered this project of opening spaces for the dissemination of architectural ideas. In collaboration with Sean Dockray of Telic Arts Exchange in Los Angeles, they brought the Public School, a program for a series of free classes convened and taught by anyone initiated by Telic, to the Van Alen Institute. Calling this incarnation of the project The Public School (for Architecture), they focused the curriculum on an expanded definition of architecture and urbanism. common room offered what they call "stewardship" to the project by providing it with an infrastructure for its operation: they invited people to participate as teachers and students, and customized Telic's web platform for organizing classes with a new graphic identity.

Classes could be held in borrowed spaces -- anywhere that was conducive to discussion. This could be at Brownies café at Columbia University, in common room's lobby, or in the Teacher's Lounge, a studio space reappropriated by common room, at the Van Allen Institute. But given the public-ness and variety of these spaces, common room felt that it was necessary to provide some spatial and graphic continuity to the experience of the Public School, and so they invented a portable and flexible "architecture" for the school out of furniture and signage. -- A neon sign helped to demarcate the school wherever it was installed. Special "open source" furniture provided storage and seating, plans for which were made available to the public, and used in other projects. Classes were held in subjects such as propaganda, infographics, and even simple Rhino tricks, some taught by uncompensated professors from local universities, others taught by architects, enthusiasts, and activists. The labor of transporting and storing the furniture and sign

between classes became an important part of the project, and kept common room involved in each one.

It was not immediately clear to common room that a project which relied entirely on desire and generosity would survive in a city with as much time and financial pressure as New York. But the Public School thrived in New York, and began to depend less and less on the stewardship of common room to continue. Groups of teachers and students used the web platform to meet more or less independently, and when the Van Alen run of the project ended, the Public School became largely independent; supervised by a committee, only one of whose members, Todd Rouhe, was from common room. At this point, the committee elected to drop the "for architecture" from the school's official title as a way of symbolizing its openness to any type of educational activity.

In its incarnation as a self-organizing school independent of common room, the Public School was able to temporarily enjoy a fixed location. In 2010, along with the magazine Triple Canopy and the film series Light Industry, it moved to the ground floor of 177 Livingston Street in Downtown Brooklyn. The Downtown Brooklyn Partnership, a public-private organization that promotes development and retailing and coordinates business improvement districts in the area, arranged for the three groups to temporarily occupy a commercial unit in the building while its owners tried to rent it out. Architects Gabriel Fries-Briggs and Rachel Himmelfarb designed a space which could accommodate all three groups. The Public School's existence in this borrowed space took on a different valence than it did when housed in Brownie's café or at common room 2; the politics of 177 Livingston were more complicated. Although the shopping streets surrounding 177





## THE PUBLIC SCHOOL (FOR ARCHITECTURE) NEW YORK

The PUBLIC SCHOOL (FOR ARCHITECTURE) NEW YORK intends to reactivate dismantled professional networks of the New York architectural community into a productive force that can collectively begin to make sense of current cultural, economic and technological conditions through open-ended discourse and alternative approaches to education. The PUBLIC SCHOOL (FOR ARCHITECTURE) does not have a permanent location.

Courses will be held in a series of three itinerant classroom installations, located in transitional public spaces – lobbies, thresholds, large corridors – within established architectural institutions in the city. The third session (December 1–12) will be located at BROWNIE'S CAFE.

### Session 3

BROWNIE'S CAFE  
Avery Hall, Basement  
Columbia University

Tuesday Dec 01 06:00pm Free Schools as Artistic Practice – At What or Who's Cost? Facilitated by Adam Kleinman

Looks at the exhibition of a lecture and events forum positioned as a "school" as a form of cultural production today.

Sunday Dec 06 03:00pm Representing the Social Center Movement (Part 2) Moderated by Alan Moore

Considers the question of how the Social Center Movement can best be represented, and what the resonances in other kinds of practice are.

Tuesday Dec 08 12:30pm OM Ungers and the Question of Utopia Led by Reinhold Martin

Focuses on the question of Utopia as it appears (or disappears) in selected works by O.M. Ungers from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s.

Friday Dec 11 03:00pm Infographics – Research and Agenda Administered by Jesse LeCavalier

Examines a range of approaches to presenting complex situations through static graphic means.

Livingston have some of the highest retail ground rents in the city and are culturally significant and commercially successful destinations for hip hop music and fashion, the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership felt that the area needed improvements in order to attract further hotels, luxury condominiums and retailers to the area. Having "artists" use the area would make property in the district seem more desirable to the retail location consultants who searched for homes for future chain stores. Whether they wanted to be or not, The Public School, Triple Canopy, and Light Industry became entangled in this process as they occupied 177 Livingston. The Public School took on this conundrum directly by making gentrification and the operation of small cultural spaces the subject of some of its classes. Yet there was also little connection between their students and the shoppers who frequented the surrounding streets. The appropriation of space by the proximate public that occurred in common room 2's lobby wasn't possible in the context of 177 Livingston; it would have required "stewardship" and planning, an activity provided at one time by common room, but one not necessarily part of the self-organizing operation of the later incarnation of the Public School.

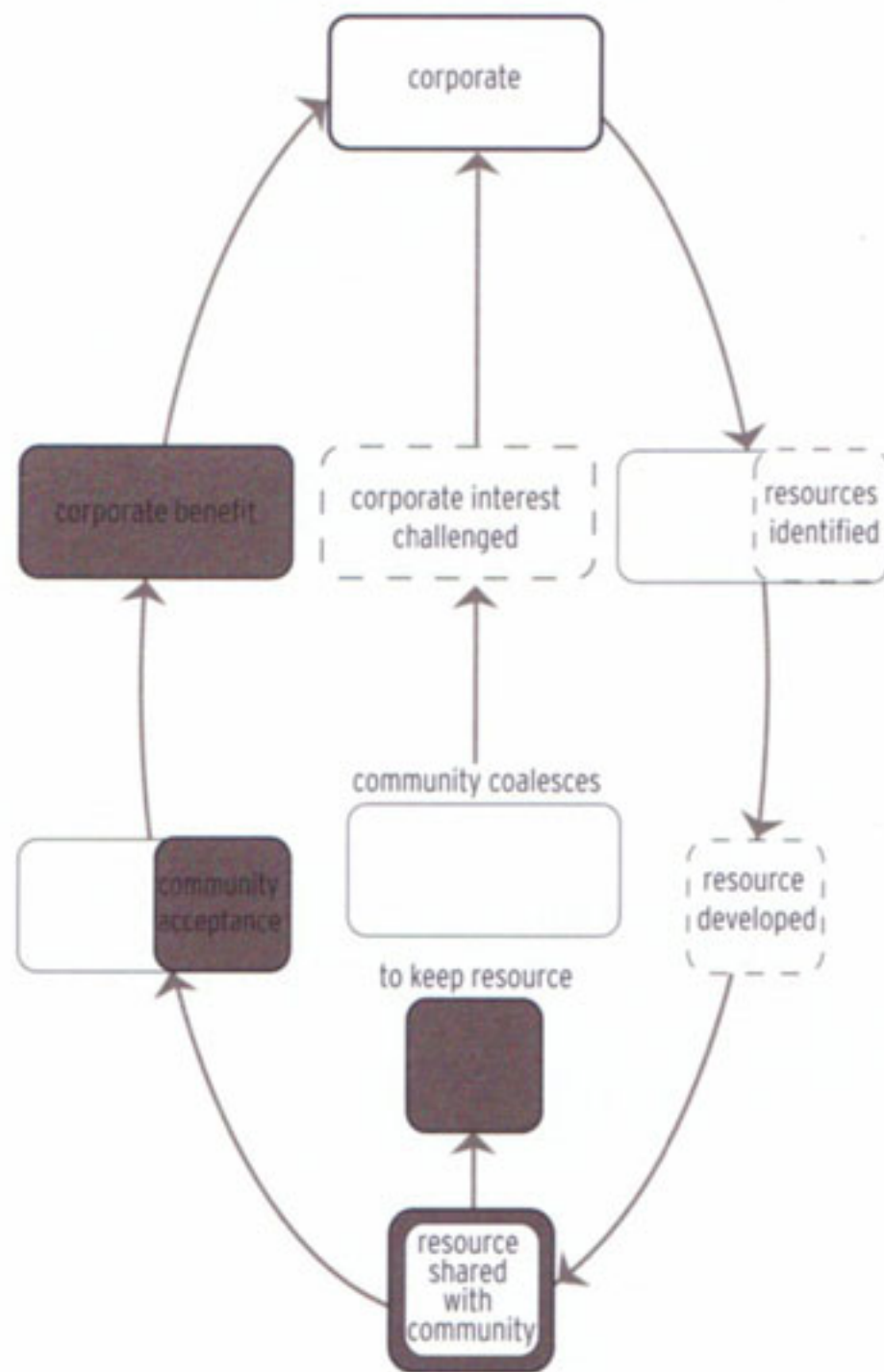
Releasing its lobby, the common circulars, and the Public School to semi-public control, common room's practice of the architecture of programming and curating is a means of coping with the constant reterritorialization of cultural space in New York. How much architecture is necessary to generate and sustain a community? To what extent can the spaces that have permitted common room's interventions be transformed by their occupation by such counter-communities?

1 See "Interview with Joseph Chan" in Rosten Woo and Meredith TenHoor, *Street Value: Shopping, Planning and Politics at Fulton Street*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010.





### INTERBORO'S MODEL FOR INSIDIOUSNESS



### COMMON ROOM'S MODEL FOR INSIDIOUSNESS

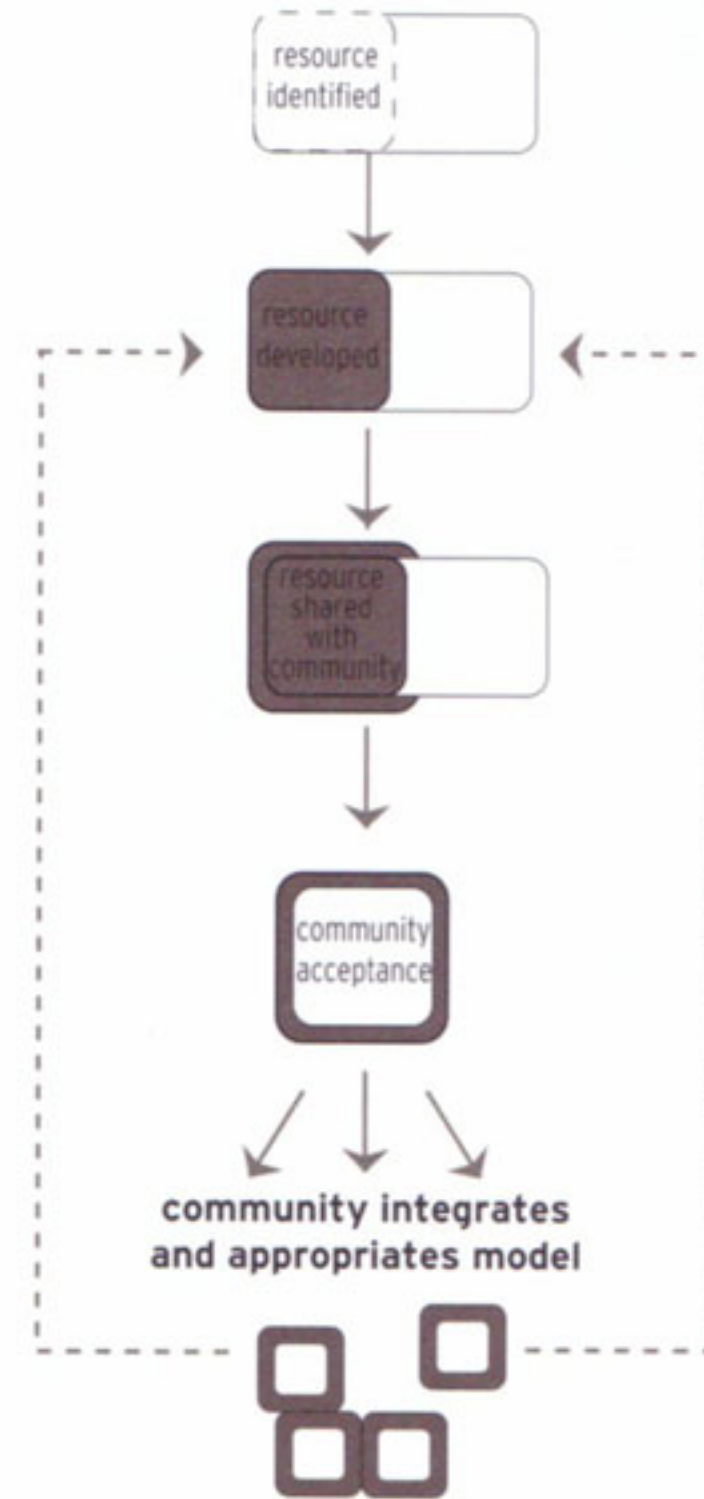


Diagram by Sarah Ruel Bergeron

### CONCLUSIONS

Both Interboro's and common room's projects use architectural design to generate forms of community. Though they differ in how they consider communities and resources to operate, their thoughtful research about how unused urban resources might become integrated into communities is an essential part of their practice.

Interboro understands that architects can be resource diverters: they draw out assets from the cultural institutions that commission their work, and give them over to physically proximate communities who may not necessarily consume what the commissioners produce. This is simultaneously a critical gesture, one that performs an (often invited, as was the case at LentSpace) institutional critique of the cultural commissioners' role in their communities, and a functional gesture, one that repairs the gulf between commissioners and communities by building

unexpected ties between physically proximate community partners.

In contrast, common room understands that architects can be resource generators: the projects featured here require finding time, spaces, and energy outside of traditional structures of commissioning and payment. In this realm of work, architects only have to design for their own concept of a community, rather than rethinking and redirecting that of a commissioning agent, but their work requires invented, uncompensated time. Like Interboro, common room establishes ties to communities through potlatch, but they make it possible for communities to then take over this process themselves, and re-appropriate resources made valuable and usable by the architects.

Both practices are deeply committed to de-privatizing resources, spaces, and knowledge,

yet, fascinatingly, neither group chooses to do so in a directly democratic manner: instead, design or designers mediate redistribution, deciding which publics to privilege. For Interboro, this is not problematic because it generates the possibility of creating a contest over these resources to generate conflict which can in turn lead to political engagement. For common room, the closeness of the communities generated by their projects is something to both be enjoyed and eventually overcome, as they become appropriable by larger and more distant publics.