

Art and Urban Regeneration in New York City. Doris C. Freedman's Public Project

Arte y Regeneración Urbana en Nueva York. El Proyecto Público de Doris C. Freedman

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Abstract: *Given its positive economic, social and urban impact, even with low-cost or low-tech materialization, the urban creativity encouraged by the arts is of great interest today. This narrative reviews one of the most prolific careers in this regard addressing the pioneering work by Doris C. Freedman. The late 1960s and the 1970s, in the context of two financial crises, saw a groundbreaking effort to formalize innovative artistic programs that recycled the obsolete city and integrated local communities in the processes. Doris C. Freedman was the first director of NYC Department of Cultural Affairs, the Public Arts Council, and leader of the organization City Walls. These institutions promoted an unprecedented improvement of the public urban life through the cultural action. Such experiences led Freedman to the conception of her last project, the relevant and, still, ongoing Public Art Fund of New York City. This article focuses on her early professional years, when she began and consolidated herself in the task of legitimizing art as an urban instrument for shaping the city. This research provides a contextualized critical analysis on Freedman's less-known experimental projects before the foundation of the Public Art Fund, enabling an extraordinary source of inspiration for a current creative city-making.*

Keywords: *Public art; public space; urban art; urban regeneration; New York City.*

Resumen: Debido a su positiva repercusión económica, social y urbana, incluso con una materialización de bajo coste y escaso desarrollo tecnológico, la creatividad urbana fomentada por las artes es de gran interés en la actualidad. Este texto revisa una de las trayectorias más prolíficas en este sentido, abordando el trabajo pionero de Doris C. Freedman. A finales de la década de 1960 y en la de 1970, en el contexto de dos crisis financieras, se produjo un notable esfuerzo por formalizar programas artísticos innovadores que reciclaran la ciudad obsoleta e integraran a las comunidades locales en sus procesos. Doris C. Freedman fue la primera directora del NYC Department of Cultural Affairs, Public Arts Council, y una de las líderes de la organización City Walls. Estas instituciones promovieron una mejora sin precedentes de la vida pública urbana a través de la acción cultural. Tales experiencias llevaron a Freedman a la concepción de su último proyecto, el relevante y todavía vigente Public Art Fund en la Ciudad de Nueva York. Este artículo se centra en sus primeros años profesionales, en los que se inició y consolidó en la tarea de legitimar el arte como instrumento urbano para conformar la ciudad. La investigación proporciona un análisis crítico contextualizado sobre los proyectos experimentales menos conocidos de Freedman antes de la fundación del Public Art Fund, facilitando una singular fuente de referencias para una regeneración creativa de la ciudad actual.

Palabras clave: *Arte público; espacio público; arte urbano; regeneración urbana; Nueva York.*

INTRODUCTION. CITY AND ART

The widespread events of May 1968 in Paris that reached the US, the fight for civil rights, the social rejection and condemnation of the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal and the Arab oil embargo, all gave way to the controversial decade of the 1970s, when artists, creators and certain socially committed people saw in their common urban space the right place to work and express their ideas. In New York City, this decade was particularly a period of openness regarding the city, which led to a revision for the concept of public, public space and public art.¹ Several cultural organizations, balancing urban and artistic resources, fostered advanced relationships between the new creative forms and the cityscape. The work by Doris C. Freedman from the Department of Cultural Affairs, City Walls Inc., the Public Arts Council (PAC), and the Public Art Fund (PAF) provided a major boost to New York public project by expanding the artists' access to the city in a context of crisis and urban obsolescence. How and when did this originate? What were the social and urban conditions for this stage of intense public creation to occur?

This fact would be driven by the confluence of crucial dynamics: the urban expansion of the art field, the destruction of a vast number of urban symbols in the city, and an extensive production of low-quality public space. In this period, the art debate was moving beyond its traditional boundaries. Many art groups and individuals clearly expressed a need for visibility in their environments, awaking a postmodern consciousness, more diverse and inclusive. The Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (1968), Guerrilla Art Action Group (GAAG, 1969), Women Artists in Revolution (WAR, 1969) or Ad Hoc Women Artists' Committee (1970) were some of the alternative groups created at the beginning of the decade. Art historian Julie Ault elaborated a

chronology on the creation of 69 alternative groups and places over a twenty-year period (1965-1985) in New York City.² Artists fought against the exclusionary and rigid procedures of cultural institutions and founded another connection between their work and the real city, also by challenging the traditional "monumentality" of public spaces.

Along with this, due to the intense renewal processes affecting New York from the 1950s onwards, there was a profound symbolic crisis, a distortion in the perception of urban identities caused by the destruction of extensive genuine urban and social fabrics. After the Great Depression, this city would mainly focus on developing its transport system and renewing its housing stock, something that was to result in the disappearance of meaningful buildings and urban areas, causing significant urban and social fractures within less wealthy neighborhoods and communities.³ Throughout the 1960s, the priority was to expand office space in response to the financial market upturn, creating large vertical business complexes that represented the new economic character of the city, which in turn also involved the destruction of the memories and identities of the pre-existing situation. Only, the figure of Jane Jacobs would challenge that prevailing logic and, although addressing her work would exceed the capacity of this article and divert its objective, her exceptional critique of these processes of destruction-creation and the modern city and her defense of the local identity should be highlighted.⁴

Furthermore, there was another dynamic that was to affect the progression of public art in the city, the promotion of public spaces with little social significance. From the mid 1960s, New York multiplied the creation of public urban sites. The 1961 Zoning Law led to a prolific production of privately owned public spaces. It specified that developers had to be granted with extra floor space for use in

their buildings if their projects included new open private spaces that were physically accessible to the general public. In a decade, over 500 such public sites emerged rapidly among buildings and streets, although they were spaces with few amenities or any architectural or symbolic attribute.⁵ Many of these plazas had not been used since their creation, acquiring a state of premature obsolescence. In fact, speaking of the urban renewal of the Bronx, Marshall Berman stated that "when the construction was done, the real ruin had just begun."⁶ As these organizations about public space would note, these mute and dehumanized sites were also "modern ruins" that could easily become spaces of opportunity, platforms for artistic use.

In sum, the public panorama would thereby be determined by interconnected facts: the intensive destruction of New York landmarks which diminished the evocative power of the public space and the speedy production of new and dehumanizing public spaces from the second half of the 1960s (Figure 1). These would set the stage for these art organizations. In the 1970s, however, the arrival of two fiscal crises, in 1973 and 1979, would stop these dynamics that caused devastation in the name of progress. The interruption of construction processes resulted in an urban recession that provoked the emergence of numerous vacant spaces and the deterioration of the existing public matrix.

This obsolescent cityscape, and the public space in particular, became the desired field of action for many artists. Indeed, the expansion of the field of art, as noted by art historian Rosalyn Krauss, had strong impact on the shared environments.⁷ A diverse and experimental new public production was boosted by the urban art of the 1970s, which celebrated a postmodern society that mistrusted of great heroes, grave dangers, and purposes represented in traditional monuments. The new



Figure 1. Aerial view of Manhattan Island after 1973.

monuments were not references to the past but the future, creating identity among the extended ruins of New York. These artworks were very diverse. In many cases, they became conceptual, social, political, as they were site-based, involved with their surroundings. They would emerge from the old ruins of devastation of great urban areas, as well as from the contemporary ruins in the forms of unfortunate new privately owned public spaces that dotted the city.⁸ Some artworks would use these sites as pedestals while others would reshape them, but, in both cases, they introduced alterations that contributed to enlarge "the forest of symbols of New York City," quoting Marshall Berman.⁹ They could be sculptures, environments or murals, installations of many sorts that enhanced the inherent narrative capacity of public space.¹⁰

While the art scene of the 1970s, including the SoHo phenomenon, has been largely studied by relevant art historians and critics, such as Lucy R. Lippard, Rosalind Krauss, Lawrence Alloway or Julie Ault, as much as the 1970s' urban scene by architecture

experts, such as Robert A. M. Stern, Thomas Mellins and David Fishman or Rem Koolhaas, this article builds on a lesser-known part of New York City history that worked on both, the artistic and urban reality of this period.¹¹ The codification of art in New York public environments boosted by Doris C. Freedman was a big step forward in the acknowledgement of a contemporary challenge: the regeneration of western cities. In the dramatic economic recession after the oil crises, from the organizations that she directed and founded, Cultural Affairs, PAC, City Walls, and PAF, artists were able to go beyond the traditional confines of cultural experience and recycle valuable yet neglected urban contexts. They anticipated the favorable connection between creative experimentation and obsolete space, which urban planners and city theorists were unaware of until the second half of the 1980s – with Bernardo Secchi, and later Ignasi de Solà-Morales –, even then, not much attention was paid.¹² From the 1970s, PAF headed this innovative process of revitalizing the public space using art, just as its earlier incarnations, PAC and City Walls, had done from the 1960s. While PAF is still an ongoing widespread project, PAC and City Walls are less known, as is the interesting professional path that Freedman followed to pioneer this field.

This article aims to fill this gap and addresses the early stage of Doris C. Freedman's career. This research is motivated from the idea that her work provides a wealth of knowledge for the regeneration of the city of today, which seems even more pertinent after the effects of the Pandemic. In contrast of the dynamics of decay, displacement, and hyper-development that have constantly affected urban contexts in this millennium, the post-Covid era is expected to focus on a more sustainable and resilient way of managing the existing urban life. As the city of the future is mostly already built for the European and North American world, further

exploration on innovative forms of urban regeneration should become increasingly necessary. This manuscript, ultimately, contributes to the construction of a more inclusive history of the contemporary city when this exceptional woman is featured as a pioneer in introducing art as urban instrument, by acknowledging her authorship in this early creative regeneration of New York City public space and by, also, giving her a place of relevance in the field of Urban History and Theory.

DORIS C. FREEDMAN'S PUBLIC PROJECT

The use of art as an urban tool was first attempted by American public organizations in 1933 with the setting-up of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), conceived to combat the high rates of unemployment with community services and civic improvements during the Great Depression. Other programs and agencies also contemplated the participation of artists. This was the case of the Resettlement Administration, a division of the Department of Agriculture, which aimed to revitalize existing farms and houses. Early on, brilliant photographers recorded the dramatic urban and social context of several cities at this time.¹³ The 1960s saw the appearance of a second wave of institutional support for public art in reaction to difficult circumstances. In addition to the Art in Architecture program of the US General Services Administration, the National Endowment for the Arts (1965) was created as an independent US Government funding agency, while Doris C. Freedman founded and led a cultural city agency in the New York City administration, in many ways a forerunner of the Public Art Fund.¹⁴

New-York-born Freedman (1928-1981) was the daughter of noted architect and builder Irwin S. Chanin. After attending Albright College in

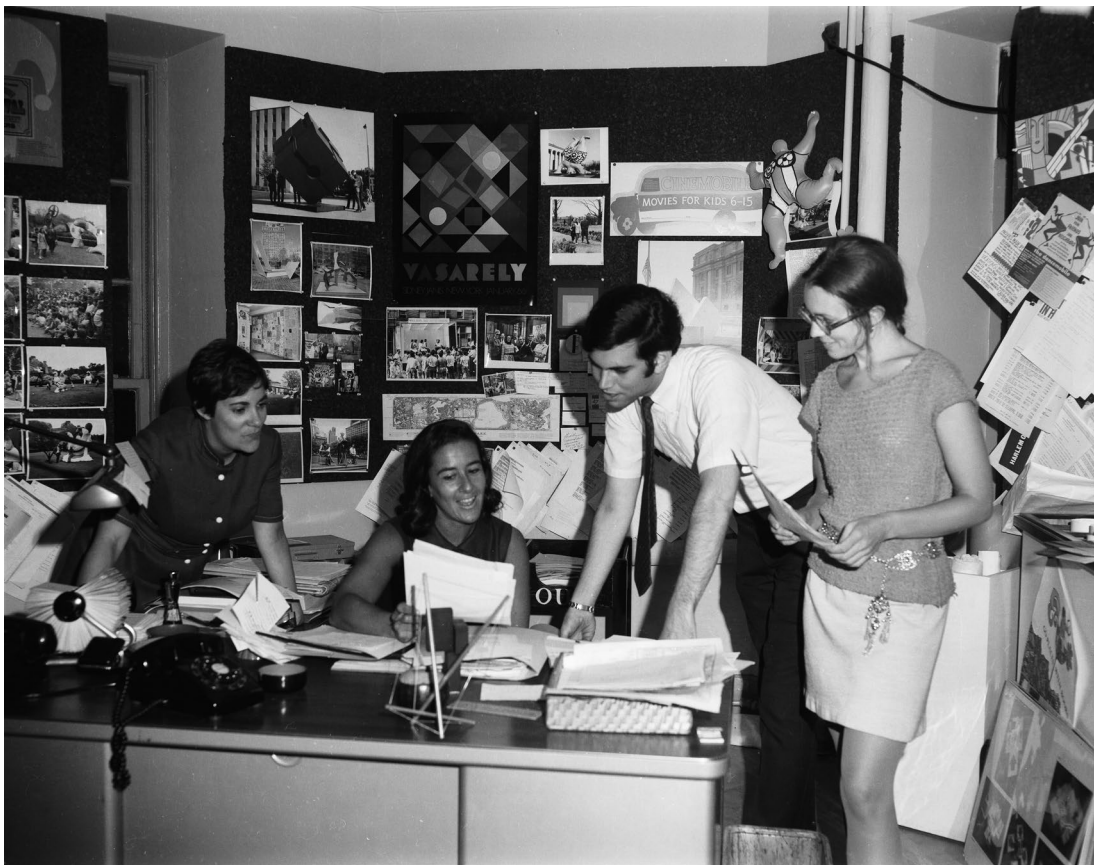


Figure 2. Doris C. Freedman (center) and NYC Parks Employee at Central Park office, 1968.

Pennsylvania, she graduated from Columbia University with a Master's degree in Social Work. This education would be extremely useful to her future career, as she was active in public affairs most of her life. She worked toward securing the legislation, which allowed artists to reside in SoHo loft buildings, and was involved in the Municipal Art Society's fight to save Grand Central Terminal. However, her relationship with public art did not officially begin until 1967 when she was appointed

the first director of New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, a position she held from 1967 to 1970 (Figure 2). She was also a founding member of City Walls Inc. in 1968, and within the Municipal Art Society she created the Public Arts Council (PAC) in 1972. These two agencies later merged in 1977 to become the Public Art Fund (PAF), an influential institution active to this day, although its study is beyond the scope of this article.¹⁵

Each stage of Doris Chanin Freedman's professional career prioritized a specific type of procedure that relates space and art practice. The following chronology of selected projects reviews the period between 1968 and 1977 when Doris C. Freedman was at the helm of Cultural Affairs, City Walls and PAC, on her way to becoming one of the great advocates of public art in New York City.

Department of Cultural Affairs (1968-1972)

In 1968, Doris C. Freedman was appointed director of the recently established Department of Cultural Affairs at the New York City Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs Administration when John Lindsay was Mayor of this city. In this year, with curator Sam Green, she produced Sculpture in Environment as the City's contribution to a Cultural Showcase Festival (Figure 3). This was the first major program on public art in the city. Twenty-four artists, including Claes Oldenburg, Barnett Newman and Louise Nevelson, placed twenty-nine sculptural works in nine city parks and fifteen public and corporate buildings and plazas.¹⁶ From the public administration, exceptional spaces owned by the city were used as a temporary and sometimes permanent alternative artistic arena. "Sculpture that confronts us on our way to work, or on our daily errands, is no longer the remote object belonging to the world of galleries and museums, but a special component of our daily lives," Freedman revealed her particular perception of art in urban spaces in the New York Times.¹⁷

Numerous artworks were produced. In cases where these were created with no specific location, it was up to Freedman to bring the artwork to life by selecting the right setting. Alexander Calder's Little Fountain went to a Harlem apartment building, Barnett Newman's Broken Obelisk was placed before the Seagram Building, David Smith's Zig

IV went to Lincoln Center, Alexander Liberman's Offering and Alpha were placed in Battery Park. All over the city the work of major artists went on temporary exhibition and Tony Rosenthal's Cube in Astor Place was given to the City as a permanent work.¹⁸

However, special attention was also paid to site-specific projects. Although initially the approach to public art productions was similar to that of traditional curatorship in galleries – considering public space a neutral platform unrelated to the artwork – it was not long before this changed. Freedman developed a special "inverse" sensibility for selecting and placing the artists in the urban environment (Figure 4). Her team had to either find the right art worker for a place or the right context for an artist, but both, the creator and the city, benefited always from such alliances. Art critic Irving Sandler pointed out how these shows were "focused on the fact that the artists' desire for the kind of spaces that the urban environment can provide coincid(ed) with the city's need for art. The resultant (was) a new birth of public art."¹⁹ Two projects especially illustrated this symbiosis: Street Art and Neighborhood Street Festival.

With the help of a NEA grant, from the Department of Cultural Affairs, Doris C. Freedman organized the creative program Street Art in the summer of 1968 (Figure 5). This program set up workshops in dance, music, theater, visual arts, film-TV, creative writing and poetry in churches, community centers, social clubs and storefronts in inner city-areas of New York City. Directed by local artists and based on popular traditions, the aim of these works was to involve the neighborhood in the artistic experience and expand their culture.²⁰ In 1969, still as part of this initiative, Cultural Affairs produced Neighborhood Street Festival, a portable event that used a truck to access city neighborhoods in summer (Figure 5).



Figure 3. Selection of artworks from *Sculptures in the Environment* (1967), from left to right: *Little Fountain and Triangle with Ears* by Alexander Calder, *Lenox Terrace Apartment Building*, 40 W 135th St; *The Broken Obelisk* by Barnett Newman, *Seagram Building*; *Offering and Alpha* by Alexander Liberman, *Battery Park*; *Peristyle II* by George Rickey, *Public Library Bryant Park*; *All Star Cast* by Les Levine, *Time-Life Building*; *Alamo* by Tony Rosenthal Sculpture, *Astor Place*.



Figure 4. Van Cortlandt Park, putting together truck racks for festival at Al Smith Playground, Doris C. Freedman, 1969.

The technical equipment used for the street celebrations was stored in the Festival Truck. According to Freedman, “the design of the equipment had to help make the streets a meaningful frame of reference, had to take into consideration the normal items of street life, which include fire escapes, stoops and empty lots. The essence of the problem was to design a gigantic thinker toy that also functioned in useful ways.”²¹ While the festival was still in the planning stages, the Department commissioned Michael Lax and Associates to design the truck to answer to the specific street situations.

In this period, another independent project led by Freedman was crucial to the city-art relationship: City Walls. This proposal for the symbolic restoration and cultural diversification of the city context was supervised by a parallel organization supported by the Department of Cultural Affairs.

City Walls, 1968-1977

CITYarts formed in 1968, contributing to a social shift in art production. This group gathered artists and children with the aim of their creating public artwork, mainly community murals. Slightly more complex was the use that non-profit organization City Walls made of street walls, which became great blank canvases for site-based paintings of high quality. The first president of this organization was the Vice President of the J.M. Kaplan Fund, Joan K. Davidson – whose post Freedman took over afterwards. The Kaplan Fund, which initially boosted artist George Maciunas’s Fluxhouses in SoHo – and would later fund the Westbeth Art Complex – was an influential institution in the art scene of 1970s New York. The extremely committed Municipal Art Society of New York City (MAS) also supported the City Walls project, as did the Department of Cultural Affairs.

Both women were fascinated by the idea of operating the city as a collective drawing board. Davidson and Freedman had witnessed the beginning of the wall painting movement in the city. Freedman explained: “In the mid 1960’s, landscape architect M. Paul Friedberg brought artists in to the urban design process for the first time. Friedberg had been commissioned by the New York City Parks Department to convert ten debris-laden vacant lots into vest pocket parks. As his intention was for these lots to provide an environment for the social, physical, psychological and educational needs of human beings, Friedberg requested the collaboration of a number of artists, including Tania [Tatiana Lewin]. Tania’s first commission at 10 Evergreen Avenue, Brooklyn, was completed in April 1967, and was the first professional non-commercial, outdoor wall painting in New York City.”²² After that, a young engineer and city planner, David Bromberg, encouraged artists to change the atmosphere in the city’s depressed communities. With the landlord’s permission, he asked the artist Allen D’Arcangelo to paint a four-story wall adjacent to a rubble-strewn vacant lot

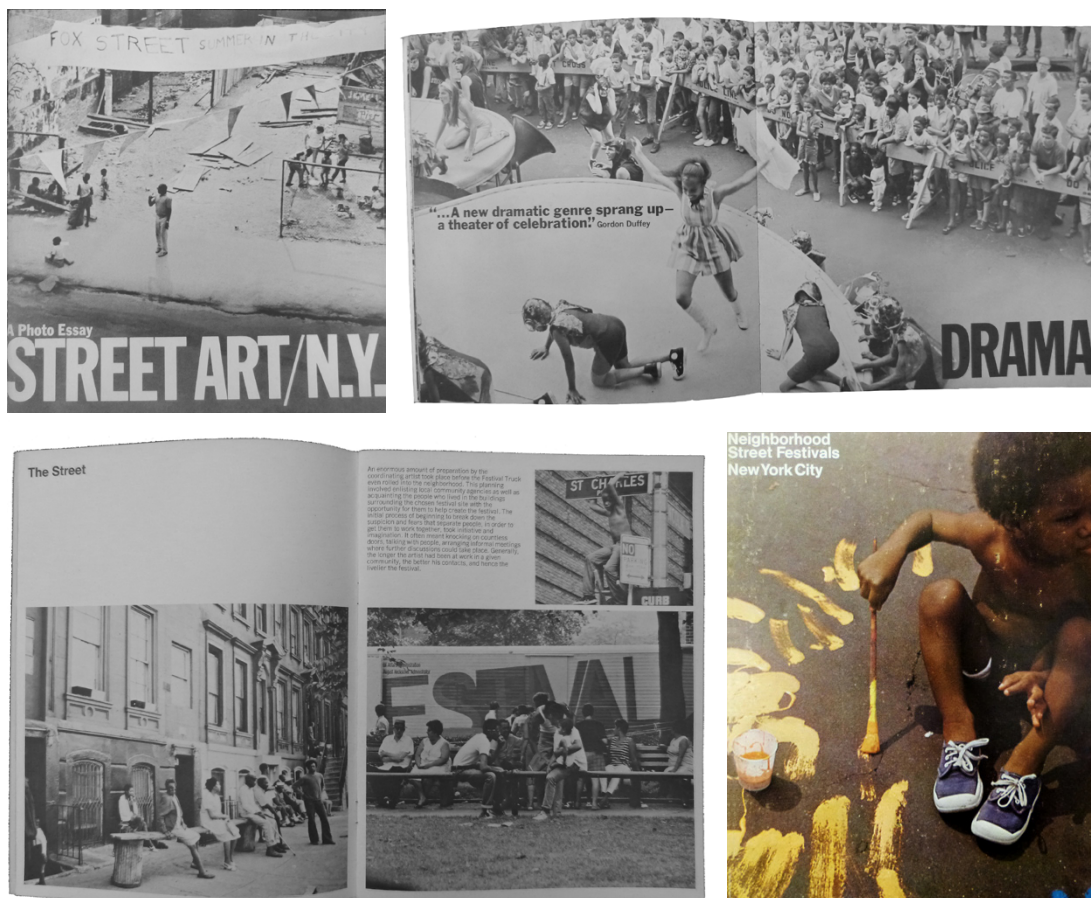


Figure 5. Street Art/N.Y. A Photo Essay, 1968. / Neighborhood Street Festival, 1969. New York City Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs Administration's Department of Cultural Affairs.

at 340 East 9th Street in Manhattan.²³ The illusionary landscape created had an extremely positive effect on the community and the city, and its success rapidly prompted new city wall projects.

City Walls Inc. was founded in 1969 as a public service. It was a non-profit organization aimed at managing wall art projects with any necessary funding secured

from the State, the Federal Art Council or private foundations. Joan K. Davidson observed, "the monumental painted walls of New York are banners in the battle to make the city habitable for People... Paintings on the walls of the City endow daily life with a bit of gaiety and delight, represent an important movement in contemporary art, and serve as a kind of city planning as well."²⁴ Davidson articulated a plan for integrating



Figure 6. From left to right: Mural by Jason Crum and Allan D'Arcangelo. New York City. 1967. City Walls 1974. Environmental Communications. 324, 340, East 9th Street between 2nd and 1st Avenues. / Mural by artist 'Tania' (Tatiana Lewin). New York City. 1970. Mercer and West 3rd Streets. / Mural by Richard Anuszkiewicz. New York City. 1972. City Walls 1974. Environmental Communications. YWCA building. / Mural by Mel Pekarshy. New York City. 1971. City Walls 1974. Environmental Communications.

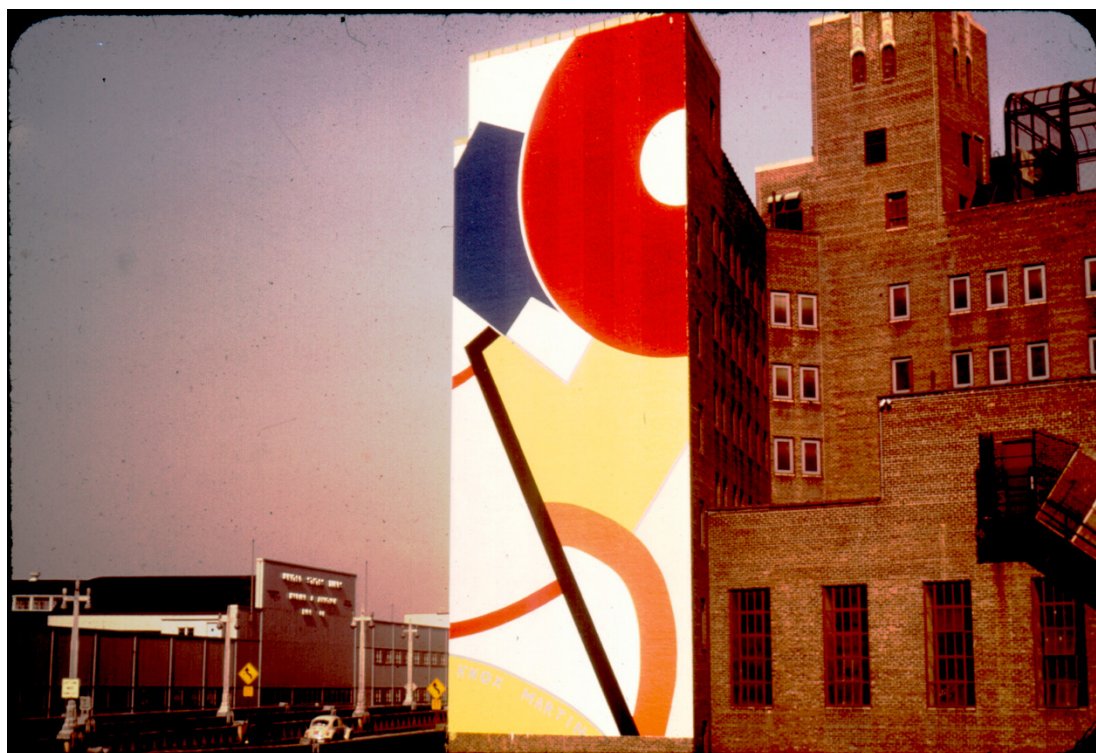


Figure 7. Mural by Richard Anuszkiewicz. Jersey City, New Jersey. 1972. City Walls 1974. Environmental Communications. / Mural Venus by Knox Martin. New York City. 1971. City Walls 1974. Environmental Communications.

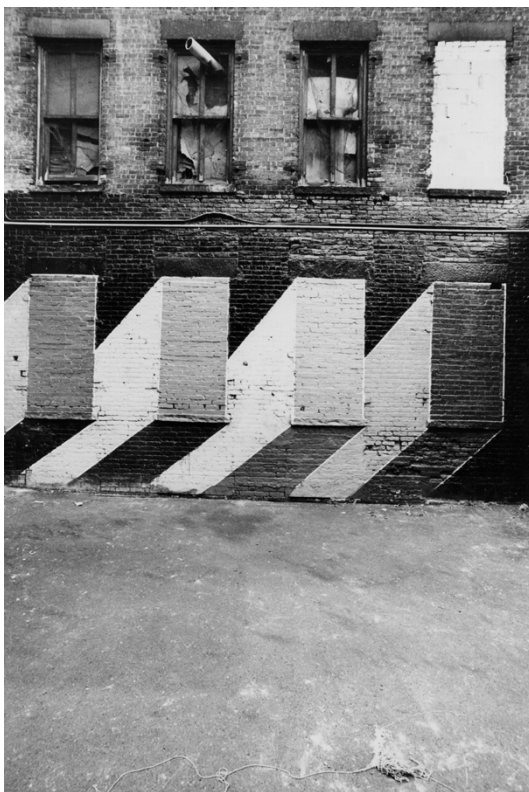


Figure 8. Artwork created by Smokehouse Associates William T. Williams, Melvin Edwards, Guy Ciarcia and Billy Rose, c.1968-70, used for the cover of the catalog *Using Walls, The Jewish Museum, 1970*.

art in the city and contributing to its improvement. A wall painting could enhance the symbolic value of the architecture where it was created. It could also benefit any corporations occupying the building by making them stand out and promoting their public image, while also improving the physical conditions of the façade. In 1970, in collaboration with Lever Brothers Company and under the guidance of the Museum of Modern Art, City Walls organized a major competition to design one of the walls of the Lever building, which had been one of the cases of reference in the 1961 Zoning Resolution. The artistic customization of such an important privately owned public space was an immense boost to these productions. From then on, there were many collaborations between wall artists and

private corporations interested in setting their locations apart and improving their urban environments (Figures 6 and 7).

This activity did not go unnoticed in the city. In 1969, the Museum of Modern Art set up the exhibition *Painting for City Walls* and, a year later, the Jewish Museum presented *Using Walls*, where City Walls Inc. and its brother organization Smokehouse Associates showed the potential of these works to transform urban space and beneficiate local communities (Figure 8). Artists Tania, Nassos Daphnis and Jason Crum painted a long horizontal panel for the museum's façade.²⁵ Exhibitions were tangible proof of how, in the hands of artists, the brushes were naturally moving out of

the gallery and onto the exterior brick. The customization of buildings created completely different new urban environments that broke the monotony of neighborhoods and had an impact on its residents. Bright colors covered decadent gray façades with new plastic designs that decomposed their geometry and challenged the natural order of construction, causing surprise and awaking the senses. Such actions gave visibility to the forgotten. As new contemporary symbols, these walls contributed to a change in perception that reactivated the social links to those sites.

New York City was suddenly becoming known for art produced on the streets, feeding the paradigm of artistic capital with an art of the cityscape. This successful program would have great impact, extending to different worldwide settings including American cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Jersey City, Philadelphia, Syracuse, Boston, Cincinnati, Atlanta, and San Francisco, and also to other cities outside the country, such as Hannover, London, Paris, Tel Aviv, Tokyo or Toronto.²⁶

The Public Arts Council (1972-1977)

Between 1970 and 1972, 27% of the metropolitan areas in the US were in decline. Toward the end of Mayor John Lindsay's Administration, the country was about to collapse. The 1973 Arab Oil embargos would prompt the deactivation of NYC industry; causing high rates of unemployment and starting a critical period of social and urban decadence that the charming image of the Big Apple projected by Lindsay could not hide.²⁷ With four years of experience at this administration, Doris C. Freedman joined the Municipal Art Society (MAS), ready to share its commitment to the city's history. This unique organization, with more than a century of history, assumed the central task of designating and preserving historical and culturally significant spaces in the city, as well as advocating for New York genuine communities

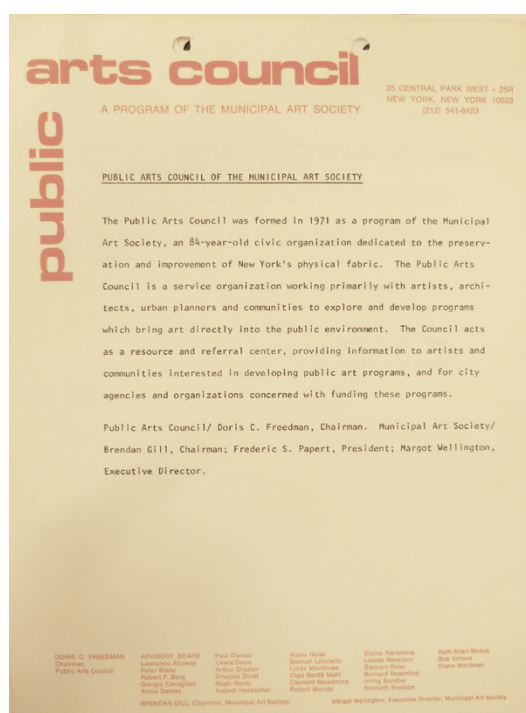


Figure 9. Public Arts Council's document, 1972.

and its diverse urban identities. It promoted the first Landmark Preservation Law of New York City in 1965, and boosted countless studies, programs and events to create awareness and act on the most significant urban, social, and artistic scenarios of this city.²⁸ MAS was highly sensitive to the influence of art in the enhancement of such landmarks, as well as to the need for a new symbolic production in public spaces that reflected the current society. Under the auspices of this organization, Freedman founded the Public Arts Council (Figure 9). MAS planned to offer the same opportunities in the public realm to sculptors that City Walls was providing to painters. Freedman had set up the Neighborhood Action Program (NAP) with the City to place artworks in northern Manhattan parks

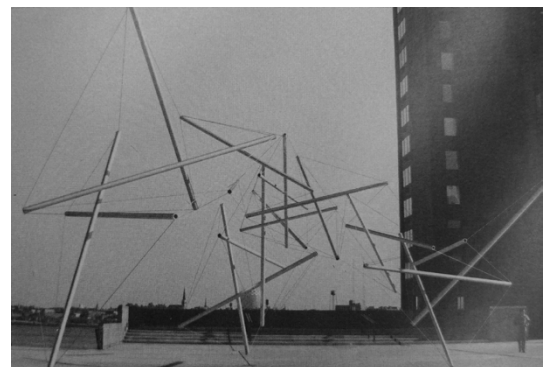


Figure 10. One of the towers of Waterside Plaza, 2012. Unknown photographer / Free Ride Home, Kenneth Snelson, 1975. Aluminum and stainless steel. Waterside Plaza.

hoping to extend similar programs to other sites and boroughs. The interventions took place in social platforms of all sorts: privately owned public plazas, sidewalks, galleries, subway stations and parks. For the first time in New York City, this organization instituted comprehensive plans for the incorporation of contemporary works of art into the public realm. Freedman made use of her expertise on legal regulations and procedures and the experience from years of MAS' activity to facilitate a more extensive artistic action in urban contexts in later years. These are paradigmatic examples of projects in public plazas in the city, both above and below ground:

-Waterside Plaza. 23rd Street intersection with F.D.R. Drive, 1974-75. 1977-78.

In 1974, the recently built Waterside Plaza became the location for Kenneth Snelson's dynamic sculpture

installation, Free Ride Home (Figure 10). The plaza was a privately owned public space for an apartment complex completed in 1973 by architectural firm Davis, Brody & Associates on an artificial landfill over the East River.²⁹ Although the Waterside Complex was slightly different to the cold housing compounds squeezed into the New York grid, it was also equally affected by social disconnection.³⁰ With its four brick towers between 31 and 37 stories high and row of duplex townhouses, built on a platform sunk into the East River with over 2,000 concrete piles, the Waterside had distinctive environmental and symbolic standards.

Instead of being erected over an existing neighborhood, as was the norm in this city, the complex had been built on a new platform over the river. In itself, this platform was also made up of another ruin of sorts: rubble from the bombed city of Bristol, in the United Kingdom, during World War II, that were



Figure 11. *Shadows and Flags*, Louise Nevelson, 1978. Seven pieces, cor-ten steel. Louise Nevelson Plaza, William St and Liberty St with Maiden Ln.

transported to New York to conform the site. Aware of the power of its foundations, of its social significance, Freedman saw Waterside Plaza, flanked by buildings in a theatrical composition, as the ideal location for an art program focused on performance and dynamic art that was to last several years. The next artist to use the space after Snelson was Dennis Valinsky, the creator of *Skylaunch*, a fabric and wire sculpture floating over the plaza. In the years that followed, the Public Arts Council organized a temporary piece of art every season.

Freedman brought this location to the attention of the City and the Waterside Plaza is now included in the Municipal Art Society's Watch List of Future

Landmarks. Continuing the Public Arts Council's cultural mission, the plaza hosts several free year-round events open to the public, including open air summer concerts and music festivals.

-Louise Nevelson Plaza. 73 Maiden Ln, 1978.

By the mid 1970s, the parks system had deteriorated to the point that dedication to public art was seen as frivolous, and priority was given to cleaning the outdoor space for sole use for recreation and contemplation. New York City was in a critical point. The arrival of a second Oil Crisis in 1979 consolidated a context of obsolescence and precariousness. The number of deprived people in New York City increased

by 20%, while the city's population declined by 10% between 1970 and 1980.³¹ Nevertheless, special circumstances allowed a few projects to be executed. In 1978, the Louise Nevelson Plaza was created thanks to a collaboration between the Chase Manhattan Bank's Building Department and MAS. This was a controversial triangle of land at the intersection of William Street, Liberty Street and Maiden Lane in Lower Manhattan. In 1974, the city's plans to begin work on the site were dashed by the start of the financial crisis. With the intention of reactivating these types of projects, the Mayor's Office of Development published a booklet entitled *To preserve a Heritage* in which they identified urban missions which could be adopted by the private sector.³² Although the City could not provide major funding, it did offer assistance, while private corporations developed and executed the proposals. This was for them an opportunity for representation and dissemination beyond their own private domains in the city.

It was this booklet, in fact, that prompted Chase Bank's decision to collaborate in the construction of this bowtie plaza. Doris C. Freedman recommended artist Louise Nevelson for the project. Nevelson created an integral work of art with seven of her *Shadows and Flags* pieces, placing steel conical forms on the plaza interspersed with trees and benches (Figure 11). Nevelson was an important figure in the burgeoning public art revival of the 1960s, and created more than 22 public commissions in her lifetime. Around the time of this work, Nevelson had produced public works such as *Night Presence IV* (1972) on Park Avenue at 92nd Street, *Sky Gate* (1978) at the World Trade Center, *Celebration* (1976-77) at Pepsico World Headquarters, and *Chapel of the Good Shepherd* (1977) at St. Peter's Lutheran Church. The plaza, named after the author, was one of the first honoring a female artist in New York.³³

-Platforms for design. *Subway stations of Pelham Parkway (Bronx), Borough Hall/Court Street (Brooklyn), 81st Street and 53rd Street, 1975.*

Platforms for design was a project organized jointly by the Urban Mass Transportation Administration (UMTA), the Art and Business Council and PAC to improve the underground life of the city. Despite its limited archive the project brought about substantial change in this unique urban context. In a team with Kent Barwick – later appointed director of MAS – Freedman advocated a more stimulating and educational role for public space, enhancing its potential for communication.

Ever since the construction of the first line from City Hall to 42nd Street in 1902, the New York City Subway System had been an exemplary model of technological progress. By the 1970s, however, the system remained intact yet had not been updated since its foundation. It was very deteriorated and few stations had been properly renovated.³⁴ The tunnels had become dark humid holes of dust and dirt, at times intimidating and even dangerous.³⁵

PAC planned a revitalization project for the subway using art for environmental improvement. This was supported by the Exxon Corporation, which provided \$25,000 funding, as well as other private institutions. Freedman approached several experienced graphic designers and architects and selected four firms: Peter Bradford and associates, Samuel Lebowitz Design and Planning, Mayers and Shiff Architects Planners, and Propper-Elman Design-Planning. Each group had a limited \$5,000 budget to cover design fees as well as material, fabrication and installation costs. This arrangement also included several months of poster space rental and the designers were allowed to use the station billboards. In order to manage a project on this scale, MTA architects Isaacs & Katz had to provide



Figure 12. *Projects for Platforms for Design. Propper/ Elman Design/ Planning, 1975. Subway station at East 53rd Street and Fifth Avenue.*

support to the artists. The firms were free to use any station in the city but it was requested that they relate their proposals to an aboveground cultural institution or community.³⁶

The firm working at West 81st Street, at the Manhattan IND Station, chose to link the art installation to the Museum of Natural History, located near this stop. They produced murals of extraordinary imaginary animals and used lively messages such as "Create-a-Creature" to stimulate passengers' imagination. Other interventions played with the subway indications, using colors and environmental drawings that reached ceilings, walls and

floors. At 52nd Street IND Station on Fifth Avenue, Propper-Elman Design-Planning picked a closely supervised place with almost clear walls to be used as part of the proposal. Super-graphics, like enormous rainbows guiding the passengers, were created to cover large surfaces along the tunnels (Figure 12). Work on the project went on for fifteen nights with the help of 5 students from the Pratt Institute.³⁷

Other firms used light, conceptual maps and new signage to foster an original underground imagery of the city. At the end of the process, which lasted several months, a "how-to handbook" was published. More than a mere exemplary storefront of

environmental works, Platforms for design served as a pilot project showing the process of coordination between city agencies and creators for the symbolic regeneration of the infrastructural space of New York.

Towards the Public Art Fund

In 1977, the Public Arts Council and City Walls merged to establish the Public Art Fund, which was a funding organization for programs administered by the Borough Councils. It became the leading non-profit organization in charge of programming temporary public art in New York City. This organization emerged to support art projects in plazas, parks, subways, and landfills. Freedman argued that it was possible to “enhance the quality of life by re-involving the artists in the planning process of our cities.”³⁸ She put artists, architects, city planners, and art professionals to work together with city agencies and community groups. With her countless projects, Freedman was a major contributor to the reformulation of the concept of “public art” in New York, being particularly known for her effort to codify the art-city relationship into new urban regulations, most notably, the One Percent for Art Law.³⁹ In 1980, Freedman was appointed honorary member of the American Institute of Architects, which stated that she had “rendered distinguished services to the architectural profession.”⁴⁰

Doris C. Freedman was a tireless defender of the healing properties of art for unsuccessful public spaces in New York. Her career shows her determining commitment to instituting art as a key instrument in the improvement of urban life. She challenged the official statements, transforming the authorized channels and creating public institutions in order to formally accomplish her goals. It is shown how, as director of the Cultural Affairs Department of New York, City Walls and the Public

Arts Council, she created innovative programs, which literally transported art to the most forgotten areas of New York, nurturing the long-lasting project of the Public Art Fund, which obtained the Public Art Network Award by Americans for the Arts in 2005.

All her institutions acted as mediators between the City and the artists' interests, between urban and symbolic concerns, offering an innovative model for urban regeneration through art. Her career shows how the success of her interventions did not rely on the condition or quality of the works of art but on the strategy used: the choice of site and period, the identification of the social and urban problems in this context and the conformation of a suitable team of creators (artists, architects, etc.) to work there. This mediation was as creative as it was functional for the city. Therefore, this research shows how important it is today to focus on the institutions or agencies acting in this position. Building also on the theory that – using the words of Matjaz Ursic – “leaving the field of public art to spontaneous development also opens doors to its exploitation and make it vulnerable to economic pressures,” this article calls for the importance of the “planner” as an expert on the urban and artistic context of the city.⁴¹

From an urban perspective, these institutions had an advanced vision: anticipating which spatial resources could be potentially incorporated into the symbolic network of the city, while also deciding when this should be done and how long for – taking into account the life cycle of those spaces. These organizations' activity demonstrated that the management of public space was as important as the artistic creation itself. In its early years, the public resources used in Freedman's projects – walls, infrastructures above and below ground, privately owned public spaces, parks and landfills – showed

its broad and innovative interpretation of this concept. Indeed, from the evaluation of her projects, it can be concluded that these organizations contributed to a creative city making: reshaping the collective space of the city, aiding its social reactivation and, in some instances, its physical renewal.

Notes and References

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- ⁷ See Rosalyn Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," October 8 (Spring 1979): 31-44, and Hal Foster et al., *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames Hudson, 2005).
- ⁸ See Michele H. Bogart, *Sculpture in Gotham. Art and urban renewal in New York City* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018). This book contextualizes the public art project from the 1950s in New York City, referring some of these projects and giving a wider view in time on the subject.
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- ¹⁰ María F. Carrascal Pérez, "City and Art: Cross-dialogue on Space. New York in the 1970s" (PhD diss., idUS, Depósito de Investigación de la Universidad de Sevilla (handle/11441/39112), 2015). <https://idus.us.es/handle/11441/39112>
- ¹¹ This article does not focus particularly on the artistic counterculture, nor on the SoHo phenomenon, however, they actively contributed to that expansion of access to the city and to the critique of its urban logic. This is precisely documented in "The Share Use of the Cityscape. The extraordinary case of SoHo," *Revista Telón de Fondo*, no. 24 (2016): 227-255. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras (UBA) Argentina. Monographic for the Research Project of the National Plan of I+D, Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad, "Las prácticas escénicas como forma social del conocimiento: Una revisión crítica de la idea de participación en el contexto de las democracias" (HAR 2014-57383). Director: Óscar Cornago (CSIC).
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- ¹³ In 1936, a group of American photographers, including Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, were commissioned by the Resettlement Administration to document the rural landscape affected by the Great Depression and the development of the initiatives held by such programs. The work of this group was the first official artistic commission relating to declining human environments. Hal Foster et al., *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 300.
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- ²² Doris C. Freedman and Kyle Morris (with the participation of Joan K. Davidson), *City Walls a New Kind of Public Art* (New York City: unpublished), 2. *Public Art Fund Archive*. Tania is the artistic name of Tatiana Lewin, as member of City Walls, together with artists Jason Crum, Nassos Daphnis, Allan D'Arcangelo and Robert Wiegand.
- ²³ *Freedman and Morris, City Walls*, 3.
- ²⁴ *Davidson, City Walls*, 5.
- ²⁵ Julie H. Reiss, *From Margin to Center. The spaces of Installation Art* (New York: MIT Press, 2001), 85.
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