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ARTS & INSTITUTIONS

April 26, 2021

The Arts & Institutions Committee of Community Board #2, Manhattan, held a monthly meeting on Monday, April 26, 2021 at 6:30 P.M. via Zoom.

The meeting covered two topics:

1. The Executive Director of Tectonic Theater Project presented an overview of a theatrical event entitled *Seven Deadly Sins* that the company is planning for several storefronts in the Meatpacking District this summer.
2. The City Firm, an independent council of experts creatively solving community and cultural infrastructure issues from the ground up, most notably filling empty retail spaces with arts programming under Wallplay from 2013-2020, presented an overview of their organization and the work they are supporting in our district.

There were no resolutions created from this meeting

Arts & Institutions Committee:

Board Members Present: Robin Rothstein, Chair; Amy Brenna; Coral Dawson; Susan Gammie; Rocio Sanz; Scott Sartiano; Georgia Silvera Seamans

Board Members Absent with Notification:

Board Members Absent without Notification: Wayne Kawadler

Public Members Present: Kristin Marting; Jonathan Slaff

Other Board members Present: Donna Raftery

Minutes:

1. Presentation by Tectonic Theater Project

Matt Joslyn, Executive Director of Tectonic Theater Project, a New York City Theatre company founded in 1991 by Moisés Kaufman and Jeffrey LaHoste, presented on an upcoming project called *Seven Deadly Sins*, which will take place in the Meatpacking District this summer. Tectonic Theatre Project has had a prolific history, but is probably best known for *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*, which was a downtown hit in the late 90s, and then in the early 2000s *The Laramie Project*, which was about the 1998 hate crime murder of Matthew Shepard.

Joslyn described *Seven Deadly Sins* as whimsical, fun, naughty, and hopefully “very New York.” This project was first born in Miami via Tectonic’s sister company in Miami Beach, Miami New Drama that was founded by Moisés Kaufman and Michel Hausmann. The New York Times called the Miami production the largest, most expensive, theatrical production of this pandemic time. *Seven Deadly Sins* in New York City will – similar to the Miami version – be seven world premiere 10-minute plays presented to an outdoor, masked, socially distanced audience in a promenade experience.

The basic concept of *Seven Deadly Sins* is putting seven short plays in fully realized sets inside vacant storefronts with actors behind glass, and the audience outdoors, outside of the glass, watching the performance, listening to through ear buds, and experiencing all seven plays in the course of one evening.

Tectonic started working on the New York City version as soon as Miami closed because Miami was an enormous hit and had fantastic coverage in the New York Times and on PBS, and has been nominated for a lot of awards. These are all new commissions, with the exception of one play written by Kaufman, but the remainder will be new works by New York playwrights. The main impetus for this project and everyone who has come on board to fund it is to help re-animate our devastated theatre industry, to put theatre artists and restaurant workers, and anyone displaced by the pandemic back to work, to do it safely, and to also be on the leading edge of helping audiences come back. Safety is Tectonic’s number one priority and they will be following every protocol as they move through this process. Joslyn anticipates this project will put 90 theater artists, technicians, and other arts workers back to work.

The project will not be about simply putting a couple of actors in a storefront and have them read plays. These plays will be produced using fully realized designs created by Broadway set-building shops. Each performance will have an audience of about 20 people, possibly more, depending on the governor’s guidelines for social distance and gathering outside, as well as sightlines for each of the spaces. The plan is to have all seating on the sidewalk, with possibly some seating in the roadbed. The first performance for an audience will be on June 23, 2021 at 8p.m. The run will perform in 29 days because the Department of Transportation is granting Tectonic a 29-day concession, meaning that they can execute this performance plan 29 times this summer. The current plan is to perform 29 times over seven weeks with the possibility they make it over six weeks and add some performance days as our as their schedule slightly shifts. The footprint on the public space will be set up and torn down for each performance. So, when the show is not performing in the morning, and on days when there is no show, there is no footprint on the street. However, passersby will be able to view the fully-realized stage sets, so that will be a kind of exhibit during the entire time on performance days.

Partners on this project include the Meatpacking BID and the BID’s Executive Director Jeffrey LeFrancois, as well as the Department of Transportation. Tectonic’s real estate partner, Aurora Capital,

and Gottlieb Real Estate are also supporting the project by donating their spaces to the project. The High Line has been a thought partner and connecting Tectonic with individuals looking for part-time summer work. Danny Meyer and his team at Union Square are partnering with Tectonic as well.

Joslyn showed slides that gave a sense of the footprint for the shows, which will take place in storefronts on Gansevoort Street and 13th Street, and how audiences would flow from one storefront to the next, while maintaining an eight foot sidewalk space for pedestrians at all times. They will distance their audiences in groups of two, with some people standing. In the course of an evening Tectonic will rotate three groups through. So the first group starts at 8 p.m., then they begin their journey and see the shows, then another group starts at 8:45 p.m., and then a final group starts at 9:30 p.m., and each one is 90 minutes. So the final group completes its journey done at about 11:30 p.m. Each night, there will be staff on hand that will include audience staff, a front of house manager, usher guides, box office and stage management who are going to be on the street, working with Tectonic.

Tectonic plans on doing the show, rain or shine. One of the things that they're lucky to have going for the project is that all of the artists inside storefronts and protected. However, if there were a weather event deemed dangerous, Tectonic would cancel the show based on advice from officials.

The Arts and Institutions committee was very enthusiastic about this project. The one area where the committee hopes Tectonic will be more accessible is with ticket pricing. Joslyn said that they are struggling to keep the ticket price low across the board, but because this is an expensive Off-Broadway level union show with a limited audience, their goal is to average a \$65 ticket across the run, and make standing tickets somewhere in the range of \$25 to \$35. Joslyn said they have raised about a half a million dollars to produce this project through founding supporters and individual donors. The most they expect and hope to be able to get from ticket sales will be just a little bit more than their operating costs. They are not looking to recoup the half a million dollar investment that organizations like the Ford Foundation and NEA have donated, but they do hope to cover their operating costs.

Joslyn does not anticipate this project will evolve into a Broadway production, but, if this is a hit, he thinks Tectonic would like to reproduce it in other cities such as Austin, Santa Monica, Palm Springs, and wherever else has unused real estate in need of activation, and where this kind of project can be produced.

Tickets for *Seven Deadly Sins* are on sale as of Mid-May.

For more information about Tectonic Theatre Project and *Seven Deadly Sins*, visit:
<https://www.tectonictheaterproject.org/>

2. Presentation by The City Firm

Laura O'Reilly, Founder of The City Firm, which founded Wallplay, a company that programmed and operated a number of retail spaces in Manhattan for eight years, and Regina Harsanyi of Arts Impact, a City Firm partner, presented an overview of the work they do and are supporting in our district.

O'Reilly opened with some background on Wallplay, which, unfortunately, did not survive the pandemic. Wallplay had been in a big growth moment right before the pandemic hit, operating over 30 vacant spaces for full-time programming 24/7. They lost all of their revenue, as their business model had been dependent on renting out spaces to brands at market rate, and then giving the spaces to arts organizations and artists for sliding scale, or for free in the in-between slots. That business model is no longer sustainable. Due to the complete decimation of revenue from the pandemic, they were only able to create a toolkit for how to repurpose vacant space. They have open-sourced their learnings, compiled over eight years. The information lives on Wallplay's website: <https://www.wallplay.com>. It explains the value that culture brings to the storefronts, provides guidelines on how landlords can understand the benefit of providing free space to arts and culture partners, and goes over a lot of different kinds of guidelines on how to ensure that relationship goes as positively as possible. This toolkit is a free and open resource the public can download.

The "On Canal" project, which is still going and was featured this year in [a New York Times article](#), was launched in 2018. In the summer, you might have walked by on Canal Street and seen consecutive storefronts taken over, with different art programming – that was "On Canal." Locals could apply to program these vacant storefronts that Wallplay was operating under the "On Canal" brand ID. This branding created a kind of arts district. Overall, 400 exhibitions have been hosted there and there are some exciting shows that are still up there now.

O'Reilly has been able to transition current public tenants into a direct relationship with the landlords using the toolkit, which is creating an opportunity for different small businesses and arts organizations to continue to fill the spaces for programming. As far as what is next, O'Reilly and Harsanyi moved back into the holding company The City Firm and closed Wallplay's operations. The City Firm is also currently partnering with [ChaShaMa](#) (who presented to our committee last month) and created a new platform called "Night Vision," which CB2's Arts & Institutions committee got the first look at, as The City Firm had not formally announced the project at the time of the meeting. "Night Vision" is an initiative specifically programming vacant storefront windows with digital art, and is a result of all of O'Reilly and Harsanyi's learnings of taking over vacant spaces.

O'Reilly described the format as "very plug and play." They are working through with a screen partner through whom they will have access to a large monitor that they can remote program and change out the content in a number of the different vacant locations around the city. The program launches in August 2021, and in partnership with ChaShaMa, the project will include a space on 14th Street and one in Greenwich Village, to start. They will then expand the window program out, essentially using "Night Vision" to expand upon the Wallplay mission. They decided to zero in on nighttime programming since the digital art in the storefronts will look better after dark, and these activated storefront windows will consequently bring energy, life, and excitement back to the streets at night. Their vision also includes hosting live performances in these windows. So, at times, there could be a dance performer for example, or a slot where people can submit an idea to program the windows. It will not be a closed curatorial loop. There will be the opportunity for local artists to apply to have their art looping in the windows as well. So it will be a mix of curation that will include hyper-local programming featuring artists that live in the same neighborhoods that the screens will be in. The motto for "Night Vision" is "Art not Ads," as O'Reilly sees Manhattan as the most "marketed to" capital of the world and sees "Night Vision's" digital art as a reminder that we need a release from this.

They noted that they are looking for space partners if anyone in the CB2 community has big windows and would like to get in the queue. They will just need the window frontage; there could still be other things happening in the back of the space.

The City Firm was instrumental in programming the Canal Street Research Association into their space. They also got the group a two-month extension due to the popularity of their “living archive” on Canal Street. Canal Street Research Association is the main group the New York Times highlighted in the aforementioned article. The City Firm is still supporting them by helping them find a new location, and have an ongoing relationship with the curators behind that project.

Overall, our committee was very enthusiastic about The City Firm further activating our local storefronts with art.

Several members did raise concerns related to the light emanating from the storefronts’ digital art 24/7, and asked if they had taken that impact into consideration. O’Reilly stated that ambient light will not be a factor during the day, but that the windows will definitely “pop” at night. However, O’Reilly noted that they experimented with light coming from screens on Canal Street and determined that the light is localized enough not to cause a disturbance to residents. She also pointed out that they are not doing full-screen takeovers of the windows, or “Times Square-style” screens. The dimensions of the screens will be small enough that the lighting should not be an issue. Another lighting concern raised by a committee-member was if the digital art beaming into public space would have an adverse impact on people with visual disabilities and those on the autism spectrum. O’Reilly stated that the light from the art would not be any more invasive than the kind of digital ads you already see in public spaces throughout areas of the city. In addition, she said that they expect to curate works that are meant to be more soothing, rather than disruptive.

One other lighting concern raised was related to potential impacts on wildlife, such as insects and migrating birds. O’Reilly responded that she had not thought about the wildlife piece but would investigate it.

A committee member also asked O’Reilly if they had considered how they plan to curate the art in relation to the location of the spaces. Will they be taking land use context into consideration when programming the art? O’Reilly noted that they are taking locations and residents into consideration, but that some of their programming decisions will also be influenced by certain variables, such as scale, i.e., the size of the windows, the number of windows available at the locations, if the night art is tied to a related interior exhibition at the same site, etc. She is also hoping they may be able to give grants to artists to create site-specific works for certain spaces.

O’Reilly reaffirmed her belief in storefront programming serving both the landlords and artists and is excited about what she sees as a growing future for this model, and how ground floor spaces are utilized and transformed.

For the Wallplay vacant space repurposing toolkit, visit <https://www.wallplay.com/>
For more information on “Night Vision,” visit <https://www.nightvision.art/>

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The Arts & Institutions May meeting that was scheduled for May 24th (due to Memorial Day landing on the 31st) has been cancelled.

Respectfully submitted,

Robin Rothstein
Chair, Arts & Institution Committee
Community Board 2, Manhattan