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Place Matters

## Brownsville Community's Placemaking Efforts a Factor in Reducing Crime



*The Belmont Project*

For its final public program of the Fall/Winter 2017 season, the Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS) is partnering with the Center for Court Innovation and its Brownsville Community Justice Center to host a conversation, *Unlocking Public Space: Placemaking in Brownsville*. The talk, moderated by New York Times writer Ginia Bellafante, will center on placemaking – the nexus of public space and public safety – in Brownsville. The event takes place this Monday, December 18, 6:30 pm at the Brooklyn Historical Society, 128 Pierrepont Street, Brooklyn, NY 11201. Limited seating for the event which is ticketed at \$5 for nonmembers.



*Marcus Garvey Project*

Erica Mateo and Deron Johnston from the Brownsville Community Justice Center, and David Burney, Mayor Bloomberg’s Commissioner of the Department of Design & Development and the current Director of Pratt’s Urban Placemaking and Management Program, will explore the successes and challenges of placemaking in Brownsville – which may become New York City’s gold standard in community-involved placemaking efforts. According to the society, starting with Jane Jacobs’ first campaign against Robert Moses, urbanists have argued that public space is a critical component of a healthy, vibrant city. But what if people fear for their safety on their own street?

In Brownsville, through the work of the Brownsville Community Justice Center, residents have leveraged urban planning tools to transform neglected spaces into safe, vibrant public hubs. For further elaboration, Our Time Press reached out via e-mail to Adam Mansky of the Center for Court Innovation’s Brownsville Community Justice Center. Below, Mansky outlines the center’s work in the area to reduce crime and incarceration in Brownsville.

“The Center for Court Innovation’s Brownsville Community Justice Center is dedicated to reducing crime and incarceration in Brownsville. “As part of its youth-focused social service work, the Justice Center has undertaken placemaking initiatives that seek to reactivate public spaces through youth leadership and community partnerships.

The Justice Center’s placemaking efforts have focused on identifying local hot spots for violence and crime by engaging youth and the community in planning projects to improve the area and committing to longterm investments in sustained change. To date, 1,500 community members have participated in placemaking events and projects which create ripple effects through multiple corners of the community by transforming the visual environment, promoting economic activity

and building the community's faith in public agencies. Since the Justice Center's place-based initiatives began, Brownsville has seen extremely encouraging signs of improvement. Shootings have fallen to their lowest rate in years." Three examples of the Justice Center's neighborhood initiatives:

**Marcus Garvey Project:** Working within Marcus Garvey Village (also known as "Marcus Garvey Village")—a housing complex with high rates of gun violence and police activity—the initiative has leveraged local resources to support community members in affecting change from within the development. The initiative seeks to address community needs, provide programming and engage young people by activating strategically identified spaces. Through the project, the Justice Center was able to reclaim an empty lot in Marcus Garvey Village and build a youth clubhouse space, designed and developed by local young people. The clubhouse holds regular community events for youth and other residents.

**Belmont Revitalization Project:** The Belmont Project has worked to restore a crime-ridden retail corridor into a thriving business district that promotes positive activity and strong community. Since its launch in 2014, the Belmont Revitalization Project has coordinated several large street murals and other youth-designed art installations, organized the maintenance of a community garden and established a permanent public plaza with locally designed public art, event space, pedestrian seating and greenery. As part of its "Be on Belmont" initiative, the Belmont Revitalization Project has held block parties, markets and other public festivals that activate the corridor. Additionally, the Justice Center continues to host weekly community service that brings consistent improvement and care to the visual environment. Since the Justice Center began its work there, several promising new business ventures have been launched on the Belmont corridor, chosen in large part because of the successes of the Belmont Revitalization Project. The Dream Big Foundation has backed a combination business incubator-café called 3 Black Cats, run by three sisters who grew up in Brownsville. A nonprofit called the Melting Pot Foundation—created by world-renowned chef Claus Meyer—has opened a restaurant and free culinary school on Belmont Avenue. And a local marketplace called MGB Pops—converted from an abandoned lot—now brings pop-up stores, food trucks and other small merchants onto Mother Gaston Boulevard seven months out of the year. The Justice Center received an award from the Center for Active Design for its work on Belmont.

**Livonia Avenue Project:** The Livonia Avenue Project focuses on an area underneath the train tracks that is a hot spot for crime and violence in Brownsville. In an effort to reactive the space—which is poorly maintained, badly lit and generally unattractive—youth interns designed kiosks that aim to improve lighting and safety, while showcasing artwork from Brownsville residents. The project culminated in the installation of three kiosks along the corridor. The Brownsville Community Justice Center is a multifaceted initiative that seeks to prevent crime by investing in local youth and improving the physical landscape of the neighborhood. Their innovative work in Brownsville serves as a model for neighborhoods across the city and around the country on effectively fostering organic community change, youth engagement and crime prevention.

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