

Crown Jewel of the Bronx or Nail in the Coffin? Assessing the City's Public Visioning Process for the Kingsbridge Armory's Redevelopment and Buy-in for Community Ownership in the Northwest Bronx

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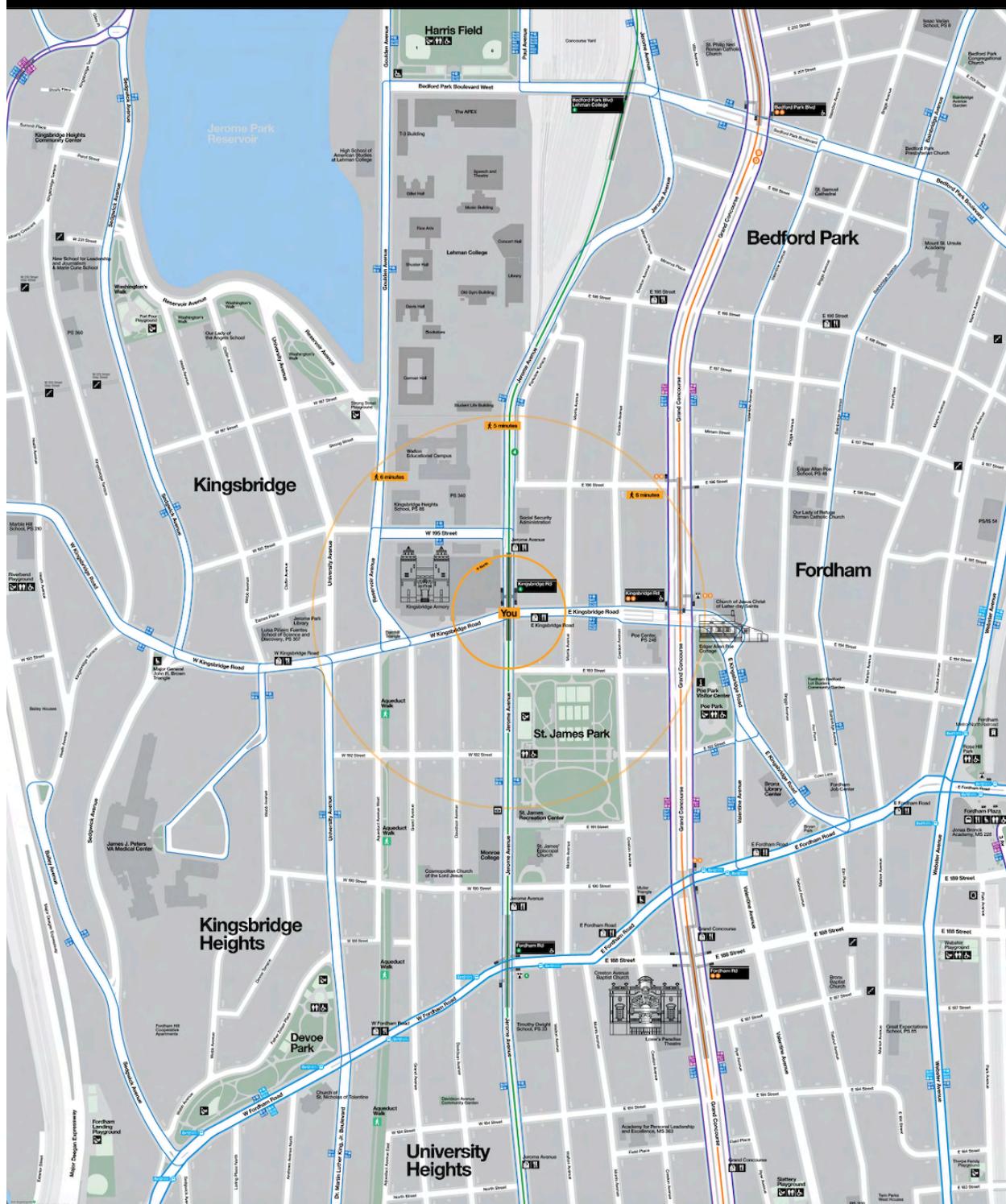
Reader: Arif Ullah, Executive Director, South Bronx Unite



W. Kingsbridge Road & Grand Ave facing East (Personal Photo)

Neighborhood Map

WalkNYC



(Source: MTA)¹

¹ MTA. (n.d.-f). Kingsbridge Rd (4) - Neighborhood Map. <https://new.mta.info/document/1851>

Abstract

This ethnographic research seeks to better understand whether certain vulnerable community members in the Kingsbridge Heights neighborhood of the Bronx, BIPOC small businesses and street vendors specifically, were included and valued during NYC EDC's Together for Kingsbridge public visioning process, the first-ever City-led public visioning process for the redevelopment of the Kingsbridge Armory, the world's largest armory. The research also seeks to understand whether community ownership of the Kingsbridge Armory, the Northwest Bronx Community & Clergy Coalition's (NWBCCC) top priority for the property, is a goal shared by local and citywide elected officials as well as community members and stakeholders besides the grassroots, community-based advocacy organization itself. The embedded research follows the journey of various community members in the Northwest Bronx from June 2022, months before the public visioning process, to just after what was supposed to be the last public workshop for public input on March 18, 2023, concluding with organizing work in April 2023, prioritizing the expertise of a working-class community of color that I, the researcher, happen to come from.

Amongst a list of takeaways from a complex place and moment in time, the findings show that NYC EDC has insufficiently engaged with BIPOC small business owners and street vendors both prior to the public visioning process and during it. The findings also show that while community ownership of the Kingsbridge Armory is supported by most facets of the Together for Kingsbridge Community Working Group, by the end of the public visioning process, there was no support from elected officials in Kingsbridge Heights, the Bronx, and city at large.

This labor of love, co-produced by my neighbors in the struggle, is for people in the community ownership movement, especially those organizing for community land trusts (CLTs), shared wealth and governance, and community stewardship of underutilized neighborhood assets in communities of color in the US, and it's for people concerned with the qualitative side of the issues at hand with BIPOC small business and street vendor displacement. Organizers in New York who will have to deal with EDC in the future or who want to reflect on their engagements in the past, will also find this research to be useful. This is also for those who believe in the power of embedded planning and anyone concerned with community development in the Bronx. Additionally, it's for people interested in urban ethnographic analysis in planning, particularly those interested in understanding the intimate ways by which communities organize and respond to transformative economic development plans and those concerned with the political complexities at play - before and throughout - such planning projects. Lastly, this will, hopefully, serve to inspire other low-income and working-class BIPOC leaders from disadvantaged communities of color that aspire to become planners themselves one day, a necessary departure from a field - academic and in practice - that is generally occupied, managed, and envisioned by the affluent.

Acknowledgments

As Jamaican-American rapper KRS-One once said on the groundbreaking track *The Bridge is Over*: "Bronx keeps creating it.." This whole body of work is dedicated to the people of The Bronx, my ever so thorough borough, a people who keep creating pioneering movements of resistance and building power against all systematic forms of racism, oppression and neglect. This work, more so a message, was a labor of love that would be absolutely nothing if it were not for all the voices of my neighbors in the struggle throughout the Northwest Bronx. The Our Armory campaign would be nothing without all the organizers and people that paved the way throughout the last 25+ years and without all the leaders who stayed and rebuilt the Bronx when it was burning. My work and dedication to you won't conclude after this thesis or the curtains close on graduate school. Our conversations won't die in Columbia Academic Commons. This is not for the elitist and academic status quo in planning. This is your work, this is your pain, this is your glory.

And to all my loved ones from the Caribbean to New York and beyond, you know who you are. All the times you were there for me, watching me struggle to go to a program that is designed for the rich and stacked against the poor. All the times you listened and tended to my pain. All the times you never stopped believing in me. All the times you prayed for me. I repeat: all the times you prayed for me. My angels, may God eternally bless and protect you.

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Prologue – A Black Boy from the Northwest Bronx

The Northwest Bronx means a lot to my family. It's where my mother, searching for better opportunities for her immediate and future family like countless others, moved in the 1980s with little to nothing in her wallet when she immigrated from the small Caribbean dual-island nation of Saint Kitts and Nevis, settling into a majority Kittitian and West Indian-occupied apartment building in Norwood on East 213th street, steps away from the elevated Woodlawn station on Jerome Avenue, the last stop on the 4 train line. It's where I was born in 1994 at Our Lady of Mercy Medical Center in Wakefield, before moving into an apartment building on Creston Avenue at East 197th St in Bedford Park. Life wasn't easy, just as it wasn't for our neighbors. My mother, whose dream was to become a nurse, had to work endless back-aching night shifts downtown as a nurse aide downtown at Memorial Sloan Kettering and carry me up and down the elevator-less train station stairs to her daytime nursing classes at Bronx Community College. It's where my dad taught me how to shoot hoops at St. James Park and where I learned how to hit a baseball at Harris Park. It's where I saw my first wedding, a glamorous Ghanaian wedding at the Mitchell Llama-created Tracey Towers, also known as Little Ghana, for a family friend. It's where I first experienced tragedy after learning the news that a friend had died while trying to jump from the roof of one apartment building to another. And it's where I got haircuts on Kingsbridge Road and spent endless hours following my window-shopping mom around Fordham Road.

Whenever we would walk down Kingsbridge Road, whether it was to walk my mother to the James J Peters VA Hospital where she would eventually end up working or to pick up some Dominican food, we never knew what to make of the Kingsbridge Armory, which occupies an entire city block. Like many of our neighbors, curiosity and amazement would sweep us as we looked up at this majestic, giant structure that, according to my family, supposedly housed military soldiers. However, it was also disappointing on many levels. At the time, Mayor Giuliani was in office, and a lot of Black and Brown communities across the City, like Kingsbridge Heights in the Northwest Bronx, were being targeted by what scholars would call a revanchist state, a state of unjust "zero-tolerance" policing that purposely, and with great precision, targeted, among others, Black and Brown people, the homeless, squatters and "reckless bicyclists," all of which were blamed by an administration for degrading the City, a city that would go on to violently eradicate their supposed disorder and unruliness (Smith, 1998). In reality, young people in our neighborhood did not have many outlets to turn to or yearlong resources like community centers, local public schools were overcrowded, and the Bronx, as it continues to be today, was often unfairly associated with bad press on the nightly news -crime alert this, crime alert that.

After my family moved upstate years later because we could never afford to buy a home in the Bronx, I missed the friends and family I left behind in Kingsbridge Heights and Bedford Park and relished in the memories. When I moved back to the Bronx in 2012 for my freshman year of college, I would get sick of being around spoiled rich, suburban kids at Manhattan College in the more affluent Riverdale neighborhood of the Northwest Bronx and occasionally head to the

other side of Van Cortlandt Park to visit family in Bedford Park and walk around Kingsbridge Heights. Nothing changed. The immigrant hustle, the working-class spirit, and the nicest but toughest people - who you never wanted to get on the wrong side of - remained.

This was around the time that I first started to receive news about activism surrounding the Kingsbridge Armory. Little did I know it, but by that time, a lot had happened regarding the Armory. I never in a million years would've thought that years later, at the age of 28, I'd be so immersed in a grassroots struggle, years in the making, waged by countless low-income and working-class BIPOC Bronxites, for this immense castle-like building. Similarly, seeing and experiencing what other Black men go through in this nation, I never thought I'd have an opportunity to write a Master's thesis.

Introduction

Underutilized, empty, in a state of disrepair, and fenced off from the public for the past few decades, the Kingsbridge Armory, a former military armory building, the largest of its kind in the world located in the Kingsbridge Heights neighborhood of the Bronx in New York City, is soon set to wrap up a public visioning process in April 2023, a process that was launched in November 2022 by its manager, the New York City Economic Development Corporation (NYC EDC), to envision what its future redevelopment should entail. This public visioning process, otherwise known as *“Together for Kingsbridge,”* marks the first time the City of New York, the Armory’s owner since 1996, has ever attempted to implement a standalone community planning process to solicit input from community members on redeveloping the 750,000 square feet of space inside the Armory (NYC EDC, n.d.; Tishman, 2014). However, it is far from the first time that NYC EDC has attempted to redevelop the massive structure. Amidst decades of mobilization and organizing from community advocates fighting for an Armory that would fulfill the needs of the surrounding area and borough at large, various Mayoral administrations championed proposals through NYC EDC, backed by political allies, that ultimately failed to one extent or another.

First, there was Mayor Giuliani’s proposal in 2000 to create a retail and sports complex that failed due to not being able to secure financing from the State during a time in which the City was in fiscal debt (Tishman, 2014).

Then there was Mayor Bloomberg’s “Shops at the Armory” proposal in 2008 that would have created an indoor shopping mall, but that fell flat due to community-led opposition that garnered support from Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz and the City Council during the ULURP process, stemming from the fact that the mall’s developer, Related Companies, would: 1) pay workers a minimum wage of \$7.25/hour instead of a living wage of \$10/hour indexed to inflation, 2) lead to more traffic in the area, and 3) put local small businesses out of work and be inappropriate for a neighborhood where Fordham Road, the largest shopping district in the Bronx and third largest in the City, was already within walking distance from the Armory (Tishman, 2014).

After the Shops at the Armory proposal failed, there was the Kingsbridge National Ice Center (KNIC) proposal that was greenlighted in 2013 to construct the nation’s largest indoor ice skating facility in the Kingsbridge Armory together with a landmark Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) in 2013, the first binding CBA of its kind in the City’s history, but that ULURP-approved plan, met with muted support from community groups involved with the negotiation, failed to come up with the funds necessary to develop the project, prompting the EDC to open the Armory up for redevelopment once again (Tishman, 2014).

Community organizers, most notably from the Northwest Bronx Community & Clergy Coalition (NWBCCC), a longstanding community-based advocacy organization formed in 1974 that fights for economic democracy and racial justice, are, once again, organizing to hold the City

accountable to the needs of the communities that exist around the Armory's shadow in the Northwestern area of the Bronx, particularly for the working-class communities of color in the neighborhoods that roughly include Kingsbridge Heights, Bedford Park, Fordham, Norwood, University Heights, Kingsbridge and Belmont. NWBCCC, a nonprofit organization that has long brought diverse peoples and neighborhood institutions into its membership base, a base it revolves its decisions around, has been at the forefront of advocating for a community-centered Kingsbridge Armory for more than two decades mobilizing community members months before the EDC formally announced the current public visioning process in November 2022 (Northwest Bronx Community & Clergy Coalition, n.d.-j). This urgency to organize early enabled NWBCCC to establish a new list of community-driven values and principles for what the vision, construction and operation of the Kingsbridge Armory should entail. NWBCCC's values and principles for the redevelopment of the Kingsbridge Armory are as follows:

- **Local Hiring, Training and Living Wages:** The project should provide good wages, benefits and training to local Bronx residents from the pre-construction phase to ongoing building maintenance, supporting the unionization of workers and worker-owners.
- **Local Procurement:** Local small businesses should benefit from prioritizing cooperatively owned and minority and women-owned businesses
- **Environmental Sustainability:** The project's construction, management and operations should promote environmental sustainability and promote community resilience.
- **Community Health and Wealth:** The project should promote resiliency, health and wellness and support the development of building collective ownership and shared wealth.
- **Collective Governance with Accountability Structures:** The project should include accountability structures that ensures communication and transparency and shared governance with the Bronx community.
- **Cooperative Ownership:** The project should prioritize community and cooperative ownership of the overall development process and ultimate development project.
- **Collective Land Ownership:** The land underneath the Armory should be owned by the Bronx Community Land Trust, in a way that acknowledges indigenous people's collective stewardship of the Lenape land.
- **Shared revenue + Additional Contributions:** The project should be building shared wealth for local Bronx residents through cooperative ownership, revenue-sharing components and providing additional resources to the community (Northwest Bronx Community & Clergy Coalition, n.d.).

In an effort to center the community in its first public visioning process for the Armory, NYC EDC formed a Community Working Group, co-chaired by local City Councilmember Pierina Sanchez and NWBCCC's Executive Director, Sandra Lobo, who collectively brought in community stakeholders that they believed were best suited to work to ensure that the unique challenges and opportunities facing the Kingsbridge Armory area were accurately reflected in the creation of a vision document. Said vision document, set to launch around June 2023, will establish a guiding plan for the future redevelopment of the Armory and be appended to EDC's

Request for Proposals for developers. It should be noted that the Co-Chairs met with NYC EDC weekly, and the Community Working Group, as a whole, met monthly. (Fernando interview)

Who is on the Community Working Group?

- Co-Chairs:
 - Council Member Pierina Sanchez
 - Sandra Lobo, Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition (NWBCCC)
- Elected Official Offices:
 - Borough President Vanessa Gibson
 - Congress Member Adriano Espaillat
 - Senator Robert Jackson
 - Senator Gustavo Rivera
 - Assembly Member George Alvarez
- Community Stakeholders:
 - Community Groups: Community Board 7, Kingsbridge Heights Community Center, Gardiner Foundation, Mekong, Dominicanos USA
 - Labor: Central Labor Council, Local Union 79
 - Small Businesses: Kingsbridge Merchants Association, Burnside-Tremont-Jerome Merchant Association, Street Vendor Project
 - Faith Based: Our Lady of Angels
 - Health: Morris Height Health Center
 - Academic: Lehman College, Monroe College, School District 10
 - Economic Development: Bronx Overall Economic Development Corp, Bronx Cooperative Development Initiative- BCDI



3

(NYC EDC, n.d.-o)

This ethnographic research situates you, the reader, on the ground of a neighborhood and borough living through this period of time by following the majority of the duration of this public visioning process, wrapping up shortly after NYC EDC's third and final public workshop for public input for the Kingsbridge Armory on March 18, 2023. From November 2022 to March 2023, NYC EDC used various forms of community engagement, including: public workshops facilitated by Hester Street and engagement worksheets, an online survey, focus group meetings, a Town Hall event, virtual information sessions, Armory tours, and presentations at Community Board meetings. The scope of this research examines the dynamics surrounding all of the aforementioned engagements, except for the Community Board presentations.

As I would later learn from the NYC EDC via an interview, the Armory is viewed, by the City, as a massive property, in a city that has so few of it, with a "strategic location" that is close to mass transit, Manhattan, Westchester and New Jersey. The City also views the Armory as having the potential to be an economic engine for Kingsbridge Heights and the Bronx that will create hundreds and thousands of jobs. The City also sees a Kingsbridge Heights community that has a large immigrant and Dominican and Hispanic population, along with some of the City's highest rates of evictions and public health disparities. (Fernando interview)

However, how does my community view it? How has it affected them? What, if any, implications did this public visioning process create locally and for the Bronx?

This research seeks to better understand whether certain vulnerable community members, BIPOC small businesses and street vendors specifically, were included and valued during EDC's public visioning process for the Kingsbridge Armory and whether community ownership, NWBCCC's top priority for the Kingsbridge Armory, is a goal shared politically and by community members and stakeholders unaffiliated with NWBCCC. Many of the attendees at the aforementioned first public workshop were members of NWBCCC, which begs the question: is community ownership and management of the Kingsbridge Armory a goal supported by other Community Working Group members and by vulnerable community members, such as BIPOC small businesses and street vendors? Moreover, are such community stakeholders aware of what community ownership entails?

Therefore, this thesis, with the expertise of many fellow Bronx neighbors in the struggle, seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) By April 2023, towards the end of NYC EDC's community engagement process for the redevelopment of the Kingsbridge Armory, to what extent did NYC EDC work to ensure BIPOC small businesses & street vendors were included in the community planning process for the Kingsbridge Armory's redevelopment?
- 2) By April 2023, towards the end of NYC EDC's community engagement process for the redevelopment of the Kingsbridge Armory, to what extent was there community and elected official buy-in for a Kingsbridge Armory that is cooperatively owned and managed by community members to build community ownership and shared wealth?

Background

Living in the poorest county in New York State per capita (Comptroller, 2022) and the poorest urban county in the US (CoLab, n.d.) residents of the Bronx lack ownership of assets. This is certainly the case of the Northwest Bronx, where the Kingsbridge Armory is situated in Bronx Community District Seven (CD7) and surrounded by the neighborhoods of Kingsbridge Heights, Bedford Park, and Fordham. In Bronx CD7, according to the 2020 US Census, only 6% of residents own their properties (GCPE, 2022). On the flip side, 63.9% are rent-burdened, 29.7% are without a high school diploma, household median income was \$38,397, and 28% are below the poverty line (ANHD, 2022). Additionally, 73% of the population is Hispanic and 14% is Black (GCPE, 2022).

To combat these circumstances in the Bronx, circumstances of top-down racist city planning (Berman, 1982) disinvestment, negligence (ANHD, 2022) and capitalistic greed, and poverty, among other things, there's been a growing movement, driven by community-based organizations and allies, that is fighting for community ownership over neighborhood assets, often times reconfigured via adaptive reuse, to build shared collective wealth and power, motives that are often aligned with the solidarity economy movement (Utting, 2015). This movement, one that has precedent in the Bronx with the Young Lords Organization's community control endeavors in the 1970s, Co-Op City (the world's largest housing cooperative), Cooperative Home Care Associates - one of the US' largest worker cooperatives - and through labor union organizing, can be seen in various coalitions across New York City today, including the New York City Community Land Initiative's growing network of grassroots community land trusts, the Cooperative Economics Alliance of New York City and with the advent of Bronx-based groups, such as the Bronx Cooperative Development Initiative and Green Worker Cooperatives (Mironova, 2019).

As seen from the first public workshop's post-workshop synthesis report from Hester Street, there's a lot to be gained or lost from what the Kingsbridge Armory will become. There are concerns from the community about gentrification, displacement, community members being excluded from the public visioning process, corruption, developers that prioritize profits over community interests, outsourced jobs, and not enough funding to see the project through, among other concerns. However, community ownership was listed as the most mentioned idea to mitigate community concerns over the redevelopment of the Armory, along with a redevelopment that prioritizes local small businesses and street vendors, vocational and educational training opportunities, and spaces to preserve the culture and history of the neighborhood and Bronx (NYC EDC & Hester Street, 2022).

A look at history tells us the results of market speculation from major economic development plans can be devastating for communities of color. Developers and landlords have not always had the same interests as community members, and local BIPOC small businesses were jeopardized as a result of previous plans for the Kingsbridge Armory (Cruz, 2014; Tishman, 2014).

In Kingsbridge Heights in the Bronx alone, many businesses on Kingsbridge Road, the bustling, largely small mom-and-pop commercial corridor adjacent to the Kingsbridge Armory, are rent burdened, and several experienced doubled rents after the proposal for the Kingsbridge National Ice Center was approved for the Armory, forcing some businesses into eviction or to close down shop because they simply could not afford such rents (ANHD, 2019).

It's also important to note that the Kingsbridge Armory joins a list of former armories that communities and stakeholders in the City have advocated to be turned into community centers of education, recreation, arts, entrepreneurship, youth development, or cultural programming.

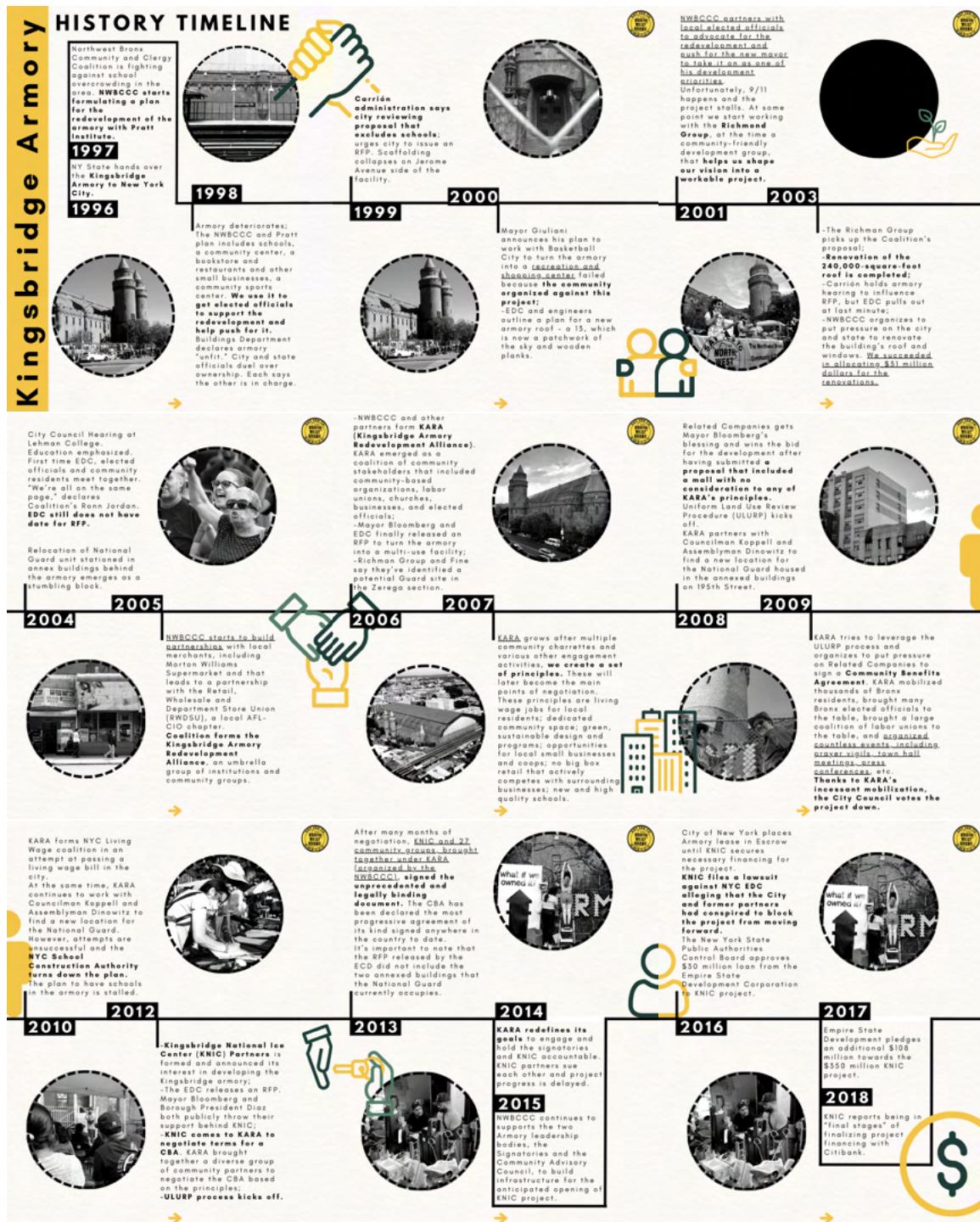
In Washington Heights, the Fort Washington Avenue Armory, once the 22nd Regiment Armory, was turned into the New Balance Track and Field Center. In the Upper East Side, the 7th Regiment Armory became the Park Avenue Armory, which now houses, alongside the 53rd Digital Liaison Detachment and the Veterans of the 7th Regiment, the Park Avenue Armory Conservancy, a nonprofit dedicated to using the large spaces of the building for alternative arts.

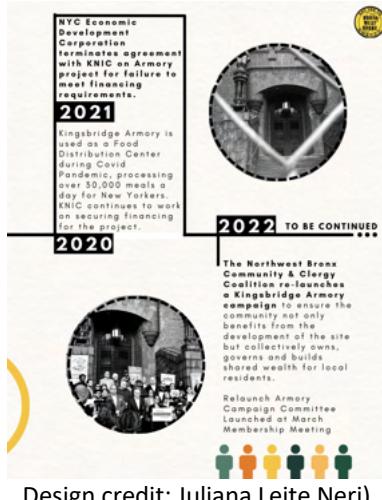
Over in Brooklyn, the Bedford Union Armory became the Major R. Owens Health and Wellness Community Center, offering basketball courts, a soccer field, an indoor swimming pool and some cultural and youth development spaces (Major R. Owens Health and Wellness Community Center, 2022), and, there's the Marcus Garvey Armory Project, that was awarded \$125,000 to conduct a feasibility study and administer survey outreach to the community, led by a team that includes NYS Assemblymember Zinerman and professionals and researchers from real estate, finance, public policy and architecture (Marcus Garvey Armory Project, 2022).

Although its fate is not sealed yet, the Kingsbridge Armory, however, represents a significant departure from the fate that was bestowed upon other armories.

For over two decades, we've seen community-based organizations, such as the Northwest Bronx Community & Clergy Coalition (NWBCCC), advocate for an armory that would offer a combination of spaces and services that would benefit and uplift the marginalized and disadvantaged communities near the Kingsbridge Armory and across the Bronx. Whether it was additional educational spaces due to overcrowded local public schools, or community spaces for local community organizations to expand their capacity and offering to the communities they serve or through a community benefits agreement to ensure living wage, local jobs hiring for Bronx residents and procurement and technical assistance for local businesses, NWBCCC and others have centered the large spaces provided by the Kingsbridge Armory as a symbol of equity and means to racial justice and economic development opportunities for community members (Casper-Futterman, 2019).

Here is a compacted timeline produced by NWBCCC that sheds light on said organizing history:





Design credit: Juliana Leite Neri)

Today, NWBCCC's advocacy for the Kingsbridge Armory has shifted beyond economic development to economic democracy, "one where local people share ownership over the borough's resources and infrastructure, with a direct say over how they are used, and reap the benefits of their use, and where people of color and women — who have been marginalized by traditional economic development structures — lead the charge." (Mironova, 2019)



(Northwest Bronx Community & Clergy Coalition, n.d.)

There are three different types of community ownership possibilities for the Kingsbridge Armory: 1) ownership of the Armory, 2) ownership in the Armory, and, 3) and ownership of the Armory's land through CLTs.

Regarding ownership of the Armory, since the Armory is a big building, usually for large real estate deals there's a property owner and manager. Sometimes they're different, sometimes the same. Shared ownership of the Armory would mean that there would be some kind of entity – company, ownership structure, LLC, cooperative, etc. - that would own the building and they would have a lot of responsibility for fixing the building, addressing repairs and taking on all costs of redeveloping the structure. Later, the advantage of that would be you benefitting from charging people rent and making money, just like any landlord would as you are now a property owner – you own land and building and you get to charge rent. Shared ownership of the Armory would need community ownership, organizational ownership, individual ownership through various means of direct public offering, where people could take ownership shares of the building itself. (Evan Casper-Futterman interview)

Then there's community ownership *in* the Armory. This could mean cooperative enterprises, cooperative incubators, etc. The conversation would also revolve around how space inside the Armory would be owned by different types of community institutions and organizations and to create shared wealth in the Northwest Bronx. (Evan Casper-Futterman interview)

However, it's important to note that the former, where you own the Armory, would give you a say in what happens to things over time. This is where power and agency can be actualized on a larger scale.

Regarding commercial CLTs, a 2022 commercial ownership report from LISC states:

"The two most common structures for commercial CLTs are the nonprofit CLT and master lessor models. The nonprofit CLT model is most similar to a traditional CLT, with separate ownership of land and buildings, and a renewable ground lease issued to the owners or operators of commercial buildings on CLT-owned land. This approach can offer affordable rents or an opportunity for small businesses to purchase an affordable commercial space and build equity, subject to resale restrictions in the ground lease. By contrast, in the master lessor model, the CLT owns both the land and buildings together, and rents out spaces to small businesses or community organizations under conventional commercial leases rather than a 99-year ground lease. This model is more similar to nonprofit-owned commercial real estate, as the CLT maintains ownership over the entire property, and is typically focused on preserving affordable commercial rents and stabilizing commercial spaces over the long term. All things considered, EDC has yet to make any indication that it will give up control of the Armory or its land."²

In the long term, it's likely that, by 2040, the Armory would be stabilized with revenues and tenancy and finances would get clearer and debts start to get paid down. By then, you would

² Duranti-Martínez, J. (2022, November). Commercial Community Ownership as a Strategy for Just Development. https://www.lisc.org/media/filer_public/32/89/3289dc22-c6fa-4ca4-8815-5a642bf340fa/pub22_commercial_community_ownership_fin.pdf

start to see actual community ownership dividends and voices being exercised so that whenever there are issues that arise, the community would address them and provide the most appropriate solutions, forming an empowering infrastructure where the community is solving problems as they arrive, and reaping benefits with increased success. (Evan Casper-Futterman interview)

Methodology

This research is primarily comprised of qualitative methods in the form of **twenty-one semi-structured interviews** and **ethnographic observational analysis**.

Since this research examined dynamics surrounding a public visioning process that happened in real-time, it was important to be intentional.

It would have been inappropriate to interview anyone about their perspectives until around the end of a public visioning process that started on November 5th because any time earlier would have been premature for people to speak with authority on matters. So, to that end, all interviews took place from February 28-March 24, 2023, wrapping up days after the City's last public workshop on Saturday, March 18th. Fortunately, interviews felt more like **long, impassioned conversations with neighbors and friends**, often lasting up to two or three hours and requiring part-two chats in some cases. They also occurred whenever and wherever was most convenient for interviewees, including: at their businesses, in one case at Columbia's campus, at local restaurants, in one case at someone's home, and in many cases via video and phone calls.

Since the research aimed to utilize embedded planning, it was important to center and understand the lived experiences, past and present, of the people living and working in or near the Kingsbridge Heights neighborhood of the Bronx.

To that end, I interviewed five small business owners **unaffiliated** with the Community Working Group on Kingsbridge Road and one street vendor, keeping them anonymous for privacy. Small businesses east and west of the Kingsbridge Armory on Kingsbridge Road were interviewed, including a nail salon, a bodega, a tax prep office, a liquor store, and a discount store -all businesses that are not monopolies on Kingsbridge Road.

To obtain more comprehensive information specifically regarding the state of **small businesses and street vendors** on Kingsbridge Road, I interviewed several Bronxites: Christian Ramos - Vice President of the Kingsbridge Road Merchants Association, Evy Viruet - former Small Business Organizer at NWBCCC, and Jennifer Salgado - Lead Organizer at Street Vendor Project.

To understand small businesses in the Bronx and the City **more broadly**, I interviewed an anonymous vendor at the Flatbush Central Caribbean Market in Brooklyn, Abigail Ellman - Director of Planning & Development at Cooper Square Committee, and Trey Jenkins - Executive Director of the East 161st Street Business Improvement District.

Eddie Cuesta, Executive Director of Dominicanos USA, was also able to provide me with insightful information on local small businesses in Kingsbridge, along with providing me with feedback regarding community ownership.

On the topic of **community ownership**, several other Bronxites shared their thoughts: Dr. Evan Casper-Futterman - Senior Director for Planning & Education at Bronx Cooperative Development Initiative (BCDI), Caesar Tobar-Acosta - Food Pantry Manager at Kingsbridge Heights Community Center and member of NWBCCC, Khamarin Nhann - Campaign Director at Mekong, Deacon Wilson of Our Lady of Angels Parish, and Tafadar Sourov - Organizer at Local 79. These individuals were joined by Jennifer, Khamarin and Christian in helping me to understand the degree to which community ownership, a priority of NWBCCC's campaign for the Kingsbridge Armory, was supported or not amongst the public visioning process' Community Working Group.

And then there were those who were able to provide insight on **everything**, namely: Juan Nuñez - Lead Armory Organizer at NWBCCC and Jonathan Espinoza (Jay Espy) - former organizer for People Power Movement & North Bronx Collective and current Tenant Organizer for South Bronx Tenants Movement.

Additionally, I interviewed Fernando Ortiz from **NYC EDC** to ensure that I was able to get as comprehensive an understanding of EDC's public visioning process as possible.

Lastly, since the research's observational analysis follows my experiences being in the streets of Kingsbridge Heights organizing for NWBCCC, and attending important public meetings and events where I listened to elected officials' statements, I utilized **ethnographic storytelling** to link people, statements, places and events together, both before and during the public visioning process, subsequently illustrating their perfectly imperfect complexities and providing you, the reader, with a strong pulse of a high stakes moment in time for a community, borough, city, and movement.

Kingsbridge Armory Visioning Process



(Source: NYC EDC)³

³ <https://kingsbridgetogether.com/sites/default/files/2022-11/Together-for-Kingsbridge-Visioning-Process.pdf>

Literature Review

1. Grassroots Activism for Underutilized Neighborhood Assets in New York

Community-driven movements to seize ownership over neglected neighborhood assets, such as vacant public and private properties, are not new. Here in New York City, a Puerto Rican collective, CHARAS, in the Lower East Side, co-led by local activist, Chino Garcia, acquired former Public School 64 in the late 1970s after it was closed down due to reduced public services from the City and a drop in enrollment caused by a population shift in the neighborhood. This led CHARAS and housing advocacy group Interfaith Adopt-a-Building to transform the former school building into the El Bohio Community Center, a space that was intended to serve the low-income residents of the neighborhood, celebrate the Latin culture of the neighborhood, and provide educational, art and cultural programming that was missing for the area's people of color (Bagchee, 2018; Lindner & Sandoval, 2021).

And, as of recently, we're seeing the South Bronx Unite's grassroots community-led efforts to acquire and redevelop the former NYC Lincoln Detox Center in Mott Haven in the South Bronx, currently owned by NYC Health & Hospitals Corporation, by turning it into the HEArts Community Center, a space that would promote health and wellness, sustainability, arts and cultural development, community organizing and be owned and managed by the Mott Haven-Port Morris Community Land Stewards Community Land Trust, a community land trust formed in 2016 that's located in the poorest Congressional district in the nation (Bagchee, 2017).

We also see buildings currently used by the city government be deemed by local activists and community groups as inadequate to community needs in the case of the Western Queens Community Land Trust, an effort, after Amazon HQ2's campus expansion efforts to relocate to Queens failed after community and political opposition, to negotiate with the City of New York to transform a warehouse storage building used by the NYC Department of Education in Long Island City into a community center that would provide a new food coop, arts and cultural spaces and jobs training, among other things (Western Queens Community Land Trust, 2021).

This research would both contribute to and stand in contrast to a growing set of literature that examines contemporary community ownership movements in communities of color in New York and the United States by utilizing urban ethnography to detail the real-time implications that communities face when it comes to the redevelopment of large neighborhood assets that may or may not amount to some form of shared ownership.

2. Flipping the Script on Oppressive, Former Military Spaces for the Few

The transformation of properties into publicly beneficial spaces also extends to former military armories, buildings that, according to literature, were often used to quell dissent from working-class factions and exhibit superiority and classism from upper-class military personnel (Shepard, 2017). Armories' architectural styles, often reminiscent of castles from the Middle Ages, were

often manifestations of the fears of the upper class in American cities in the early twentieth century (Nelson, 1985).

This study, akin to the local community organizers' desires to utilize the Kingsbridge Armory as a way to flip the script of economic development into economic democracy in the Bronx, will add to what is, ultimately, a lack of literature on activism aimed at transforming formerly oppressive military spaces into neighborhood-envisioned and managed centers of community wealth building for working-class communities of color in the United States.

3. Raising the Voices of Vulnerable Community Stakeholders on Kingsbridge Road

On the community level, the Kingsbridge Armory has been an arena of struggle, contestation, and advocacy planning akin to Paul Davidoff's framing in *Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning* (Davidoff, 1965). Central to Davidoff's case is that advocacy planning serves to represent and support those that are not typically represented in city planning and decision-making. An example of this in practice can be seen with the work of the Pratt Center for Community Development, which was formed in 1963 and was largely responsible for building a national model for community development in the 1960s that would influence community-based development organizations ever since. To this day, Pratt continues to redistribute its planning and architecture resources to low-income communities in New York and train advocacy planning professionals who desire to bring about social change (Alligood, E. N., 2015). This research seeks to embed such principles by uplifting the voices of BIPOC and immigrant-owned small businesses and street vendors in my community, two community stakeholders that have been neglected to various extents by local policymakers and government agencies, unwelcomed by certain community members, and targeted by markets forces and predatory landlords. The research also examines Pratt in practice working to support an advocacy campaign that is fighting for the BIPOC working-class people of the Bronx.

4. Planners' Complex Complicities in Furthering Capitalism over Communities' Needs

In contrast, there are planners, nice people that you may know, who are complicit in furthering the inequities in our cities by furthering the profits of the wealthy few at the expense of the poor, neglecting community needs, and strengthening private real estate portfolios and profits. This is certainly the case in New York where planners may not entirely realize that they're contributing to a pro-real estate engine that is eroding the working-class by fueling gentrification and displacement (Stein, S., 2019). This research directly engages with a Latinx planner working for the NYC EDC who is involved in a dynamic similar to the one just described in Samuel Stein's *Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State*. Moreover, it seeks to understand this planner's positionality and lived experience, a necessary and holistic approach.

5. Anti-Displacement Organizing for BIPOC and Immigrant-Owned Small Businesses

But what is the cost of economic development, in this case, a redeveloped armory, on communities of color? Time and time again, we've seen how working-class and low-income

residents of color and BIPOC-owned small businesses in cities have been displaced by market speculation and gentrification (Angotti & Morse, 2017). BIPOC small businesses, often owned by people, especially immigrants, who reside in their community and think, speak and look like the communities they serve, are seen as the face of communities of color, the lifeblood for food access in communities that are food deserts, community hubs of information sharing, and a source of cultural vibrancy and neighborhood character (Meltzer, R., & Capperis, S., 2017). These essential, albeit vulnerable community members, are often excluded or left out from planning decision-making, neglected politically, and faced with tenuous landlord dynamics (Hill, J., 2021)

As seen in Themis Chronopoulos' *African Americans, Gentrification, and Neoliberal Urbanization: the Case of Fort Greene, Brooklyn*, in the first decade of the 21st century, 75% of Fort Greene's Black-owned stores in Brooklyn closed down. The reasons were multifaceted: gentrification and Black businesses facing higher rents to renew leases, Black businesses' lack of access to capital, decrease in Black customers living in the area due to rising costs, strict inspections and ticketing during Mayor Bloomberg's administration, and lack of black spatial imaginary, which is another way of saying community control by low-income Blacks as a way to advance neighborhood interests. As Chronopoulos would write: "*As middle class blacks gentrified Fort Greene, the radical version of the black spatial imaginary was moderated and replaced by a more mainstream vision of urban affairs* (Chronopoulos, 2016)."

With that context, how have such beloved community members been able to survive and fight back against the odds of major developments and the forces of gentrification? As Kathryn Wilson's *Ethnic Renewal in Philadelphia's Chinatown* explains, Philadelphia's Chinatown, located next to Center City, has a storied history of East Asian-owned small businesses and residents organizing together to fight back against various forms of what they deemed to be oppressive forms of major developments that failed to consult or put their community's needs first. To that end, they successfully fought against a Foxwoods Casino being built in a community that suffered from gambling addiction and for a baseball stadium to be built in their neighborhood by organizing hundreds of people to speak out against the development proposal's lack of consideration for language accessibility and actual needs in the residential neighborhood, such as daycare centers, public schools, libraries and community centers. Philadelphia Chinatown businesses had learned from the city's mistakes of the past when businesses were sold a false dream that the Convention Center would benefit their businesses. Instead, it has not generated the foot traffic they had hoped for due to the intermittent scheduling of events. These businesses have been frustrated by planners' insistence that their neighborhood be treated as a commercial neighborhood when they would prefer it to be treated as a residential neighborhood (Wilson K., 2015)

This research is exciting because it adds to the literature about how major developments and gentrification impact BIPOC commercial tenants in predominantly Latinx and Black communities in New York, especially those in the Bronx. Additionally, it also aims to add to a growing body of literature that touches on anti-displacement organizing for BIPOC and immigrant commercial tenants located in working-class communities of color.

6. Embedded Planning in the Northwest Bronx

Examining existing literature on the Kingsbridge Armory, an on-the-ground neighborhood context appears to be missing from various analyses and conclusions, many of which were derived from reports and public-facing staffers and organizers working for various nonprofit, public or private entities that were heavily invested in the Kingsbridge Armory proposals of past. The foundation of this literature centers on my lived experience as a Black native of the Kingsbridge Armory area of the Bronx and the street knowledge and trust from community members that inherently comes from that, along with an on-the-ground approach that prioritizes the people of the Kingsbridge Armory area, my neighbors, putting their experiences and perspectives at the forefront of this research, emphasizing their roles as experts on neighborhood and community planning matters, and, ultimately, seeking to achieve an honest, intimate and comprehensive in-depth analysis of the public visioning process for the Kingsbridge Armory and who was truly involved or not. This approach, free from the often desk-oriented confines of spatial analysis and data analytics-related planning research, is intentionally aligned with the embedded planning movement, championed by Jonathan Pacheco Bell, which states that we cannot plan from our desks for marginalized communities (Pacheco Bell, 2018), but rather we, as planners, must be boots on the ground, prioritizing in-person, street-level engagement in such communities and understanding such places by building genuine relationships with community members rooted in trust that's only built over time, and by humanizing technical tools used by planners, critically assessing how planning decisions affect everyday people, including our neighbors (Diaz, 2019). Planning education, like the field itself, lacks students of color that come from disadvantaged communities of color, such as mine, and often time gaslights working-class BIPOC planning students, such as myself (García et al., 2021) This research is a small step towards a future where, hopefully, more planning students of color from communities of color in New York or other cities in the United States will be able to confidently and unabashedly write on the issues affecting their lives and communities, a refreshing and necessary departure from contemporary planning academia that has largely been envisioned, managed and informed by the affluent.

Story | Intro – “Our Armory!” (June 2022 – September 2022)

Every story starts somewhere. It was the summer of 2022 in a New York trying its best to recover socially and economically from the deep wounds of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Puerto Rican Day parade had returned to the streets of the city with the sounds of bomba and salsa, the Yankees were on the top of the league, and as I was sweating profusely on the crowded AC-less subway running back and forth between part-time jobs in different corners of the city, some parts of the world were experiencing their hottest summers ever.⁴⁵⁶⁷ My two roommates had just moved out, and with one month left on the lease for the apartment I was subletting, I was on the brink of losing my apartment. Like many BIPOC working-class and low-income New Yorkers living in communities of color, I was dealing with a non-communicative, no-face private landlord who seldom answered phone calls, who decreased the rent-stabilized apartments in my rent-stabilized building in recent years, who failed to make repairs in the building, who let the building become infested by roaches, and who failed to adequately turn on the heat in the winter.⁸ Refusing to undergo the hassle and costliness of finding a new place to live, I attempted to negotiate a new lease, to which the landlord required that I prove that I made 40 times the new rent of \$3500/month (\$140,000) in order to get a new lease or have a guarantor that makes 80 times said rent, among other requirements that were impossible for me to afford. These requirements were impossible for myself, a young Black man with meager savings trying to make it on his own while in graduate school. I had no rich family to turn to, but can you imagine what others, especially those with children, disabilities, victims of domestic and sexual violence, or seniors must go through in New York?

On the other hand, this was during a time when I was feeling unfulfilled by a graduate urban planning program at Columbia that, like much of the university itself, is profoundly disconnected from the issues communities of color, such as Harlem and Washington Heights, are facing on a daily basis with affordable housing, homelessness, public health and climate-related issues. Unless students brought up issues happening in New York in classroom discussions, you would seldom learn anything contemporary about things occurring in our city's disadvantaged communities because most of the time we were stuck in abstract, theoretical, inaccessible, rigid academic scholarly texts that were taught by academics and practitioners

⁴ Shachnow, L. (2022, August 17). “Mixed Signals”: New York City’s Precarious Economic Recovery.

<https://www.gothamgazette.com/city/11523-nyc-economic-recovery-august-2022-jobs>

⁵ Snyder, M. (2022, June 20). MLB Power Rankings: Yankees are still the clear number one, and the best mid-June team seen in a decade. CBSSports.com. <https://www.cbssports.com/mlb/news/mlb-power-rankings-yankees-are-still-the-clear-number-one-and-the-best-mid-june-team-seen-in-a-decade/>

⁶ CBS News. (2022b, June 12). After 2-year hiatus, National Puerto Rican Day Parade returns to Fifth Avenue. <https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/national-puerto-rican-day-parade-returns-nyc/>

⁷ Henson, B., & Masters, J. (2022, September 14). Hottest summer on record for Europe and China during Northern Hemisphere’s 2nd-hottest summer. Yale Climate Connections.

<https://yaleclimateconnections.org/2022/09/hottest-summer-on-record-for-europe-and-china-during-northern-hemispheres-2nd-hottest-summer/>

⁸ Rabiyah, S., & Bhat, S. (2023, February 15). New data shows where rent-stabilized apartments might be disappearing. <https://www.thecity.nyc/2023/2/15/23600261/rent-stabilized-apartments-disappearing>

that mostly do not come from communities of color and have little connection to them and their movements. This weak connection inevitably extends to the program's output with its studios, currently, the best way for students to utilize their skills and the plentiful resources of the institution to deliver a real product for a real client. However, assessing my program's 31 studios in the last 5-6 years, only one had a client that was a grassroots community-based organization or group, only one was based next door in Harlem -albeit for the Regional Plan Association, which is not a Harlem-based organization, less than a third of studios conducted extensive community engagement, and zero studios in New York enjoyed multiple studios annually on the same project for a client as was the case for studios overseas in Italy or Puerto Rico. Nearly every day I dreaded going to classes at GSAPP because I did not feel comfortable talking about issues affecting communities of color that I have a deeply personal connection to like Kingsbridge in The Bronx with affluent classmates that are mostly rich or upper-middle-class international and American students with no lived experience in communities of color. To make matters worse, I did not sit around idly and let these things happen. I joined the Urban Planning Program Council, the program's student representative body, and constantly pushed the faculty and school to do better by increasing socioeconomic diversity at the school, showing up to community meetings, building genuine relationships with grassroots community groups organizing on the frontlines of change in their communities, but only a few indicated any willingness to be leaders and do something beyond their self-centered research goals, while others would quite literally gaslight and mock me for bringing up these important matters. Seeing my lonely struggle to address these matters at Columbia GSAPP, some rich, affluent classmates of mine admitted to me that they didn't share my urgency and frustration because they lived in bubbles of privilege their whole lives and could not understand. Some others did not have the patience or drive to deal with a faculty they had long given up on.

These predicaments, combined with a formative experience working for a coalition of grassroots community-based organizations in Brooklyn during my first year of graduate school, sparked a fire in my soul last summer to search for more opportunities to organize on the frontlines of grassroots anti-displacement, community wealth-building and economic democracy movements in my city. The perfect opportunity to dive further into the work came when NWBCCC, whose office, a five-minute walk from the Kingsbridge Armory in the Bedford Park/Kingsbridge Heights/Fordham area of the Bronx and around the corner from my childhood apartment on Creston Ave. where my godparents live to this day, announced that it was going to host a community land trust workshop on June 27th. I had, especially in recent years, read about NWBCCC's work from afar and knew, to a certain extent, that they organize tenant associations, advocate for health justice initiatives, and are a part of the city's growing community land trust movement. I was also slightly aware that they played a key role in advocating for the Kingsbridge Armory in the past. However, I never had the opportunity - until June 27th - to attend any of their events, learn more about their history, meet their dedicated members and staffers, and understand their current campaigns.



(Personal photos)

The CLT workshop, held in the backyard of the NWBCCC office, felt like a turning point in my life.⁹ I had found people, neighbors, most of whom are of color and from similar backgrounds socioeconomically, who were just as pissed off about systemic racism, disinvestment, top-down planning and self-serving local politicians in the Bronx, often elected by a political establishment that doesn't always have the community's interest at heart. It was there that I saw some familiar faces from other advocacy organizations in The Bronx that I had seen at other community events in the borough, but for the most part, it was great to befriend many new brothers and sisters of various generations. After blessings from a local artist, East Harlem/El Barrio CLT was there to present on the successes and challenges of their new CLT. CLT organizers from NWBCCC also talked about their newly incorporated CLT, otherwise known as The Bronx CLT, and how they were inching closer to the acquisition of several properties in the Belmont neighborhood for their CLT. From El Barrio to the Northwest Bronx, the urgency in that close, intimate outdoor space was palpable and the realization was clear: we, the working people of communities of color have to throw everything we've got to fight against the forces of capitalism that are destroying the social and cultural fabric of our working class communities apart, gentrifying and violently displacing our people at ruthless pace, and extracting power and agency from our people into the hands of the wealthy and few. If we weren't going to band together to fight for neighborhood assets in the form of residential buildings, vacant lots and abandoned properties that could empower our people and provide permanently affordable and decommodified housing, equitable wealth-building community centers and sustainable open spaces, nobody else would.

Later that summer, walking through the streets of Fordham and Bedford Park on a hot summer day on August 12th, fire hydrants on nearly every block were converted into fountains to keep people cool during the sweltering heat, a common sight in many communities of color in the

⁹ BronxNet. (2022a, July 18). NWBCCC hosts Community Land Trust Workshop. <https://www.bronxnet.org/watch/videos/15456/?topicId=10>

city that is at risk of disappearing as more neighborhoods become gentrified.¹⁰ After buying a mango and cherry flavored icy (helado in Spanish) from a flavored ice vendor, I returned to NWBCCC's backyard where they were having a membership barbecue to bring members and supporters together to discuss important upcoming campaigns, including a rally for the Right to Counsel Coalition and actions to pass the New York Health Act. It was there that I met more organizers and change agents across the Bronx, including Juan Nuñez, the new Lead Armory Organizer for NWBCCC who was going to spearhead NWBCCC's new Our Armory advocacy campaign for the Kingsbridge Armory, with community ownership, collective governance, shared wealth and a community land trust as one of the most important priorities of the campaign.



(Personal photos)

Juan immigrated from the Dominican Republic with his family to the City, settling into a largely Dominican community on Dyckman Street in Washington Heights/Inwood in the 90s. Then his family, like many other Dominicans in Upper Manhattan, was displaced, moving to Kingsbridge Heights in 2005 because it was the only place that would accept their Section 8 voucher and because it would allow them to stay close to loved ones just across the river in Manhattan. It wasn't an easy move as it took his mother six years to receive a Section 8 voucher after applying. Juan first learned about organizing from his mother who organized a tenant association in their building uptown around 1999/2000 after the tenants in their building spent a year and a half without heat or hot water. His mother, with the help of the Northern Manhattan Improvement Corporation (NMIC), successfully won her case in court against their landlord, securing up to seven months of monies that were owed to them for services not

¹⁰ Hackman, R. (2016, July 28). "It's always been there for us": a love letter to New York's fire hydrants. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jul/28/new-york-city-fire-hydrants-love-letter>

provided by their landlord. However, when his mother tried to move his family to other buildings in Washington Heights, she was blacklisted due to her organizing work. After moving to Kingsbridge Heights, their apartment building experienced a fire around 2008 and they've had to deal with a lack of repairs from a largely no-show landlord. His family would then find about NWBCCC from a tenant organizer that visited their church, Our Land of Angels, which has had a close relationship with NWBCCC throughout the years. From there, they would help organize a tenant association in his building and "*the rest is history.*" (Juan interview)

Speaking on what NWBCCC means to him:

"I mean.. it means the world to me. Honestly, at that time, we were dealing with a lot in our building, and I had no idea that you could actually organize. I mean, I knew because my mother did something when I was young, but I didn't understand what community organizing was. And that was around the time that Obama got elected and there was all this talk about change. I was really influenced by the Occupy Wall Street movement because I used to work at Wall Street as a security guard. So I was around that whole time when the banks collapsed and, you know, they were bailed out. I was looking for something to be a part of, honestly. And then I found the Northwest Bronx..apparently, there was a bank that owned our building and nine other buildings. So they were like, 'You want to fight to get control of these buildings?' And I was like: let's freaking do it, let's go. And that made me fall in love with the community... And I got to know so many people in the community through organizing their buildings. I became sort of like a volunteer organizer with the Coalition, starting with the 10 buildings that we helped organize for that big campaign. After that, I was a tenant leader. I was part of the 2019 rent law campaign with Housing Justice for All, but I mean, for me, Kingsbridge, it's just home. And, you know, seeing a lot of what people go through in the community really affected me- deeply."

Speaking on becoming the Lead Armory Organizer for NWBCCC, Juan mentioned:

*"I'm tired of fighting landlords for basic repairs, I want to start owning these buildings. And just the connection between that and the Armory really speaks volumes, because it's not just residential buildings, it's all of these buildings that are in our neighborhoods that are being controlled by folks that don't live there. And that's what I don't want with the Armory, I don't want the Armory to be controlled by another freaking private developer, similar to what happened to the buildings, because that landlord is owning more buildings in the community, pushing more Black and Brown people out. Right? And I don't want to do that again, not with the Armory. So that's the biggest reason why I decided to take on this role full-time, why I decided to leave my job at POTS (Part of the Solution). And so, instead of being a volunteer, I'm like, nah, I cannot let this happen again, like, I cannot allow for another private developer to come in and take over this building and do the same sh*t."*

Speaking on being a Case Manager for POTS, Juan said:

"Seeing all of our people having to go there on a daily basis and having to apply for public benefits and like having to make the line for food. And I'm just looking at this like, it just feels like a constant loop where I'm like: Am I really helping my people right now? Am I really, really helping my people by trying to get as many people to apply for SNAP benefits? Not that I wasn't doing a lot of good work. You know, people survive on these things. But I'm like: No, this can't just be it. You know what I mean? And I just felt like, after everything that was happening with the pandemic, I think it was like a sign like, oh, this building is just up for grabs? This giant castle? This is it! This could be the thing that could change not just Kingsbridge, but the whole borough, and I just went ahead and said let's do this."

Juan then informed me of upcoming plans for the campaign, including an upcoming art installation rally on August 25th and how to get involved. Meanwhile, the city's districting commission had proposed new city council districts that would have placed the Kingsbridge Armory into the council district next door that includes the wealthier, white neighborhoods of Riverdale and Fieldston, removing the Armory from the working class BIPOC and predominantly Hispanic communities of Kingsbridge Heights and Bedford Park whose community-based organizations had long advocated for the Kingsbridge Armory. The outrage was immediately voiced by community members, such as Juan and countless other members of NWBCCC, who testified at a public hearing at CUNY Lehman College hosted by the districting commission against the proposed changes, and Council Member Pierina Sanchez, who acknowledged that community-based organizations around the Kingsbridge Armory had long advocated for the armory and deserved to have it remain under her district, the district that the armory has long remained in.¹¹ Additionally, Pierina fought against a district splitting of the commercial corridor of Kingsbridge Road, filled with many brick-and-mortar mom-and-pop small businesses, predominantly owned by Hispanics, arguing that they needed to be collectively represented by one member.¹²

With built-up momentum from the poorly-received redistricting news, the August 25th art installation's goals were multifold: to inform the community that the Armory was up for redevelopment again because there was a feeling at the time that the City wasn't going to go out of its way to adequately inform Kingsbridge Heights, to send a strong message to the people of the community and the City that the building belongs to the community that had long organized for it to be something that benefits their people and that they should own it and govern what goes inside of it, not anyone else, that the money invested into the building belongs to the community, and that this community, a community well-informed about the City's history of performative and top-down planning, was going to hold the City accountable for such demands and had the power to organize and shut down the City's plans if did not live up to the community's vision for the Armory and wasn't transparent. (Juan interview)

"The biggest armory in the world, and you're leaving it there abandoned for years." - Juan

And so NWBCCC and supporters from the community and the Bronx at large, including local faith leaders, grassroots groups like Nos Quedamos from Melrose and the politically powerful Local 79 labor union, gathered in front of the Kingsbridge Armory, situated on the busy Kingsbridge Road on August 25th and got to work. Everything they did during that art installation intervention and rally was intentional. Firstly, the City let an unsafe sinkhole grow for years and collect trash near the front of the Kingsbridge Armory by Kingsbridge Road and Reservoir Ave, just one of the many ways the City let the Armory and its surrounding property decay, emblematic of its longstanding disinvestment in The Bronx. So, NWBCCC held its rally in

¹¹ McClendon, S. (2022, August 26). 'Keep Kingsbridge Armory where it is.'

https://www.riverdalepress.com/stories/keep-kingsbridge-armory-where-it-is_79880

¹² NYC Council Member Pierina Sanchez, District 14. (2022c, August 17). TESTIMONY OF CITY COUNCIL MEMBER PIERINA SANCHEZ AT THE NEW YORK CITY INDEPENDENT REDISTRICTING COMMISSION.

<https://www.nyc.gov/assets/districting/downloads/pdf/20220830-Council-Member-Pierina-Sanchez.pdf>

front of the sinkhole to draw awareness for this clear neglect. Secondly, the front, west and northern sides of the Kingsbridge Armory are fenced off from access. So, NWBCCC took advantage of that chainlink fence, a symbol of separation from the community, to insert bright yellow and black tiles, the same colors of NWBCCC's logo, in its holes that read "Our Armory!" The NWBCCC also attached big signs to the fence that read: 1) "What if we owned it?" and "Y si fuera nuestro?" (Spanish translation) and 2) "Our bronx, our lives, our solutions" and "nuestro Bronx, nuestras vidas, nuestras soluciones" (Spanish translation). (Juan interview)



(Photo by Miriam Quiñones)¹³

Thirdly, the NWBCCC attached QR codes to said big signs with links to surveys that were a way for them to receive feedback from local residents and local youth on what the Armory should be. Fourthly, several media outlets showed up to broadcast coverage of the event.

¹³ Giralt, J. A. (2022, October 7). NWBCCC Pushes for Local Input on Kingsbridge Armory's Next Phase. <https://www.norwoodnews.org/nwbccc-pushes-for-local-input-on-kingsbridge-armorys-next-phase/>



(Photos by Miriam Quiñones)¹⁴

Additionally, all speakers at the rally were reflective of the community around them. Street vendors, local residents, teenagers, community organizers from the neighborhood, longtime Kingsbridge Armory organizers, and other community persons all got a chance to speak into the microphone and talk about the importance of the Armory, seen as a neighborhood asset. And lastly, yellow roses were handed out to all rally attendees, a way of showing each community member present, that no matter what they did or where they came from, all were powerful, appreciated and deserving of being a part of the Armory's future.

¹⁴ Giralt, J. A. (2022, October 7). NWBCCC Pushes for Local Input on Kingsbridge Armory's Next Phase. <https://www.norwoodnews.org/nwbccc-pushes-for-local-input-on-kingsbridge-armorys-next-phase/>

And what exactly does community ownership entail and what are its benefits? As I would learn from Dr. Evan Casper-Futterman, or Evan as he prefers to be known, a Bronxite whom I met around that time and who's the Senior Director for Planning and Education at the Bronx Cooperative Development Initiative:

"We're not actually advocating that literally people in Kingsbridge will be the sole owners of the Armory, we're actually advocating for shared ownership of the Armory, which means that the kind of traditional players or actors that you see in development, like property managers, commercial real estate developers, will still be involved in the process, owning the facility and deciding what happens there. The thing about economic democracy and the thing that's being advocated for in the artwork specifically is shared ownership, not, you know, we expect to raise all the money and have all the expertise and govern and control it together. We ask is that for what community has fought for and the work that people in the community have put into developing and preparing this armory to be successful, that people in the neighborhood and community at an individual household level, as well as the organizational level, should have rights of ownership and decision making that are equal to, or on par with, those who have all of the money to develop the building itself. And so that's really what the argument for shared ownership is about.."

"..There's nothing of a similar scope or scale that reflects this level of shared ownership in the United States, anyway. And so that's one of the key things of what's possible -yes, it's possible, even if it's unprecedented.."

"Shared ownership is a de-risking strategy, right? So sharing ownership and governance is a way of building in, you know, more shared responsibility, shared reward, but also sharing the risk. So it's about spreading the really big challenge of running an apartment building, or running a business or developing commercial property by saying, you know, there's a role for multiple actors and interests and groups to play in the governance of a space. And that in addition to having a say over how things go, that part of ownership is also benefiting from the surpluses or the profits that are generated. And, you know, that is something that works for a lot of different companies in a lot of different contexts. And what we're trying to argue is that, particularly in the Bronx, a place where most people are poor -results in and causes are really deeply correlated with poverty and lack of opportunities - that having shared ownership over a large community, revenue-generating profit-generating asset is something that stabilizes the neighborhood, but also could create better outcomes for the people who live in the area and the Bronx overall."

"There's plenty of statistics around what shared ownership does, it make people's lives better. People who work in an employee business.. you have more retirement savings, you're happier, you're more productive, reduced turnover - there are many statistics that back up why working in a shared ownership environment or workplace or housing: reduces evictions, reduces turnover and builds wealth and ownership and fosters stability. There are a lot of cross-cutting things around why cooperatives offer advantages that are both economic and social, and we're trying to make that case and apply those advantages to the shared ownership which is exceptionally uncommon in large, commercial real estate property." - Evan

Following the high of what was a beautifully received rally in the community, the City came and took down the art installation the next morning. The installation wasn't even up for 24 hours, but, thanks to NWBCCC's good relationship with the maintenance worker at the Armory who saved their work from being thrown away, they were able to salvage the installation's materials and strategize next steps.

The NWBCCC refused to give up. Almost a month later, on a bright clear-skied afternoon on Friday, September 23rd, I, alongside many commuters and school kids from the local PS 340 and Celia Cruz High School, walked past a line of street vendors situated in front of the Armory selling clothes that they hung to the fence, hardware items and secondhand electronics - referred to the vendors as a flea market - who had grown in number in recent years since right before the pandemic (Jennifer Salgado interview). Most of the vendors on Kingsbridge Road, especially in front of the Armory are what the City would consider as general vendors, vendors that entirely sell non-food items.¹⁵ However, there are street vendors on Kingsbridge Road that sell food, but most don't sell in front of the Armory, opting to sell closer to the busy intersection at Kingsbridge Road and Jerome Ave. where you have people constantly entering and leaving the 4 train subway station there.



(Personal photo)

I eventually arrived where NWBCCC, with the help of their members and some children, students from Fordham University, and passersby, were reinstalling the art installation, this time directly at the front entrance of the Kingsbridge Armory to send a more defiant message to the City. There was no rally this time, but a crowd of people started to form, curious about what was going on. Organizers and staff members from NWBCCC explained in English and Spanish what they were doing with the art installation, asked them to fill out their ideas for the Armory survey in English or Spanish, and invited them to their monthly community meeting the next day at The Bronx Library Center near Fordham Road where they could learn more about NWBCCC's campaign for the Armory.

¹⁵ Devlin, R. T. (2010). *Informal Urbanism: Legal Ambiguity, Uncertainty, and the Management of Street Vending in New York City*. (dissertation).



(Personal photos)

Invigorated, ready to give back to a community that has provided for my family over the years, and eager to use my skills and experience for what seemed like a potentially transformative grassroots, community-driven campaign, I took a chance and chatted up Juan and Sandra Lobo, NWBCCC's Executive Director, to learn more about the work that they're doing and to follow up and see if they needed support. I had mentioned to them in very brief engagements previously that I would be happy to help their organization's causes, but like anything, people working in community development spaces are busy and it takes time to build relationships rooted in trust. Fortunately, they didn't see me as a clueless, hyper-privileged Ivy League grad student seeking to take advantage of them for my own resume or for the sake of a class assignment. Rather, they saw that I too was a kid from Bronx whose heart never left the borough when I

moved away twice from the Northwest Bronx and that their fight genuinely mattered to me and my family who remained in the area as well.



(Personal photo)

Part 2: Organizing for Public Workshop #1 - “Together for Kingsbridge” (Sep. 2022 - Nov. 2022)

The following morning, excited for the monthly community meeting that NWBCCC was inviting people to, I got onto the Bx9 bus that always rides up Kingsbridge Road past the front of the Armory and saw that the installation had not been taken down. In fact, since the Our Armory installation went up that early autumn day in late September, it has remained ever since and the City had long fixed the sinkhole due to NWBCCC’s pressure.

I got off the bus at Poe Park, where Edgar Allen Poe’s cottage still stands and where I have many memories as a kid running around playing tag with other neighborhood kids in the park. Like the cottage, not much has changed in the park and Black and Brown kids were still running around being kids. As I walked past the park, I glanced over and saw the Cambodian-owned Battambang Market at the corner of East Kingsbridge Road and East 194th St. This area used to be referred to as Little Cambodia due to the tens of thousands of Cambodians who fled there as refugees from Cambodia in the 1970s and set up shops. Many other Southeast Asians moved to the area from the likes of Vietnam as well, establishing small businesses and beloved food markets and restaurants, such as the popular Vietnamese restaurant named “*Cơm Tấm Ninh Kiều*” on Jerome Ave near Kingsbridge Road.



(Personal photo)

As Khamarin, the Campaign Director of Mekong, a community-based advocacy organization located near University Heights that organizes for Southeast Asians living in the Bronx, would later tell me, much of this population, a population that escaped genocidal war and was hostily relocated *“to the Bronx when the Bronx was burning,”* has largely shrunk and relocated to neighboring boroughs or state in recent decades, but their largest presence is still in The Bronx, and they continue to contribute to the cultural fabric and economy and dealing with unique challenges of their own. Some of the challenges facing the Southeast Asian community today, especially exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, are: housing and food insecurity, issues navigating healthcare, language barriers across the board, and rates of mental illness, including post-traumatic stress disorder, due to war. Today, through intergenerational community building and healing, racial justice organizing and youth development, Mekong is pushing for the Clemency Justice Act, the Nail Salon Minimum Standards Council Act, the New York Health Act, and nationally, they’re a part of the anti-deportation campaign, called Southeast Asian Relief and Responsibility (SEARR)¹⁶ (Khamarin interview)

From there, my curious mind wandered and I took a brief detour onto Bainbridge Ave a block away from where the community meeting was about to take place. And there it was: steps away from Fordham Road, the old Bronx Library Center, a beautiful 19,000-square-foot Georgian-style brick building with arched windows built in 1931, and also where my mother taught me how to read when she wasn’t busy working.¹⁷ To get to the library, we would often have to walk down the side street known as Coles Lane, which used to be filled with broken glass bottles and litter. The library, owned today by the New York City Department of Citywide Administrative Services (DCAS), is no longer and has been sitting largely vacant for years since it was closed in 2005. This is important to note because Sistas and Brothas United, the youth organizing arm of NWBCCC and other members of the community have advocated over the years for this building to be something, anything, that benefits the community.¹⁸ However, despite a plan or two from the city, including a proposed computer-based testing and application center to apply for city government jobs, nothing has happened, and the building, with all its potential and splendor, sits empty.¹⁹

¹⁶ Mekong. (n.d.-f). Organizing & Campaigns. <https://mekongnyc.org/organizing>

¹⁷ NYC Department of City Planning. (n.d.-p). 2556 BAINBRIDGE AVENUE, 10458. shorturl.at/FNRW6

¹⁸ Clancy, D. (2021, February 18). City proposes new Computer Center at old fordham library.

<https://www.norwoodnews.org/city-proposes-new-computer-center-at-old-fordham-library/>

¹⁹ Greene, D. (2022, November 4). Inquiring Photographer: Thoughts on How to Spend “The People’s Money.” <https://www.norwoodnews.org/inquiring-photographer-thoughts-on-how-to-spend-the-peoples-money/>



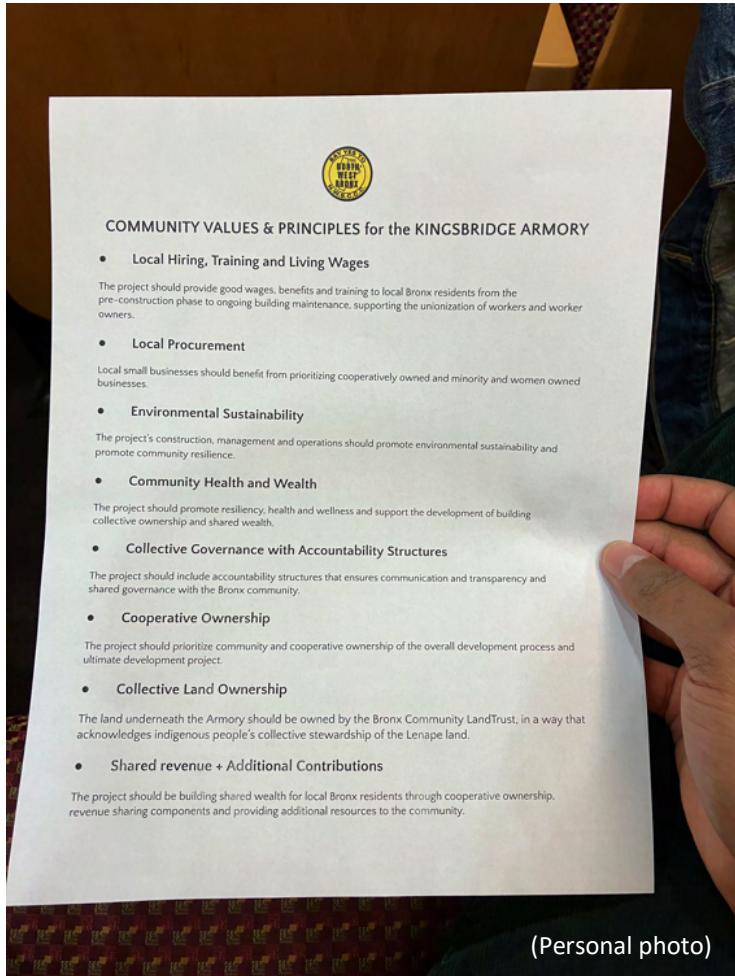
(Source: Norwood News)²⁰

Walking up the largely litter-less Coles Lane to the new and larger Bronx Library Center, I arrived at NWBCCC's community meeting, this time as a new member of NWBCCC.



(Design credits: Juliana Leite Neri)

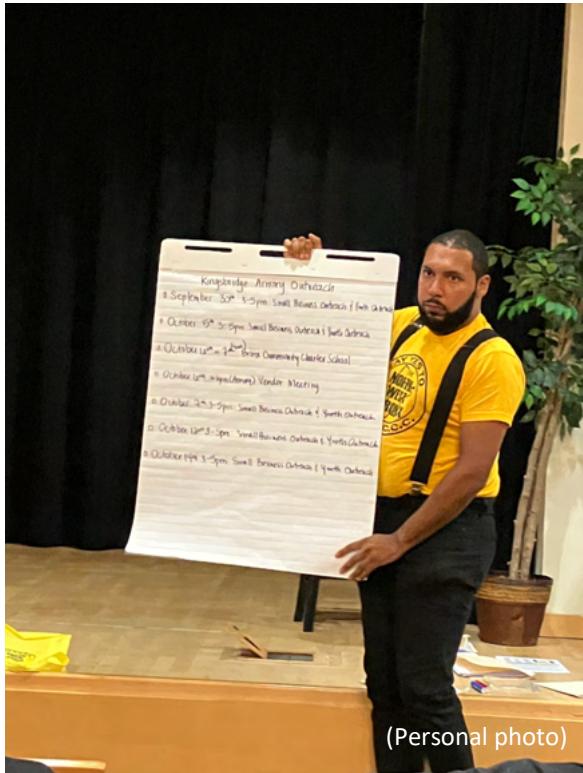
²⁰ Clancy, D. (2021, February 18). City proposes new Computer Center at old fordham library. <https://www.norwoodnews.org/city-proposes-new-computer-center-at-old-fordham-library/>



(Personal photo)

The meeting, with Spanish translators to boot, got started, and members of NWBCCC split into different smaller committee meetings; there was a health committee meeting, a voter power committee meeting, a housing committee meeting, and then there was the Armory committee meeting. Joining the Armory committee meeting, I learned how NWBCCC brought hundreds of its members, mostly residents and workers in the greater Kingsbridge Heights/Bedford Park/Norwood/Fordham area, together in February 2022 at its annual meeting to form a new set of values and principles for the future of the Kingsbridge Armory, up for redevelopment yet again. Since that annual meeting, the NWBCCC held several meetings, to continue to solicit input on the values and principles drafted at the well-attended annual meeting. By the time of this September community meeting, the values and principles were finalized and ready to be advanced.

After the Armory committee meeting ended, all the committees then rejoined and meeting attendees got the chance to ask questions and make comments on the values and principles. It was then that we learned that Hester Street won EDC's request for proposal (RFP) for facilitating community engagement at the upcoming public visioning process' public workshops over NWBCCC, who had also applied. At the time, it felt like a slap in the face for NWBCCC, but, at that same meeting, there was a realization that it was a blessing in disguise because NWBCCC's status as a community-based advocacy organization that has long succeeded in community organizing and political agitation would then be able to be leveraged in a way that would have been limited if they were EDC's public workshop facilitator.



This meeting was crucial because it was when the Our Armory campaign started to mobilize. Juan started asking members for support with outreach to apartment buildings, small businesses and street vendors, schools and places of worship in the next months. It was also when we found out that the Armory was going to stay in Council Member Pierina's district in Kingsbridge Heights, the working class, predominantly Hispanic and Black district that had long fought for it.

As I signed myself up to support outreach efforts during times that worked for my packed school and work schedule, I noticed that an architect had joined the meeting, asking strategic questions and immediately attempting to sell himself. The Armory was getting people's attention, even before the EDC's public visioning process began. Nonetheless, I left the meeting with my friend Juliana Leite Neri, NWBCCC's talented urban and digital media designer (responsible for designing the art installation and all of NWBCCC's reports, social media content, and other external communications), excited, ready for whatever lay ahead, and satisfied with the free Dominican arroz con pollo y maduros (rice with chicken and sweet plantains in Spanish) that we were given on our way out the meeting.





(Personal photo)

The following week, it was straight to work. It was Thursday, September 30th and Juliana had texted me asking me to rush to NWBCCC's office to help manage a group of Fordham undergraduate student interns who volunteered to help NWBCCC with outreach over the next couple of months. The goal of that day was three-fold: hand flyers out to street vendors inviting them to an upcoming street vendor meeting on October 6th in front of the art installation sign that NWBCCC was planning to host; post said flyers in visible places for the vendors to see; and, start passing out NWBCCC's small business surveys to small businesses on and around the Kingsbridge Road commercial corridor.

It was the first of many times that I would go on to speak to more small businesses around Kingsbridge Road. The surveys were a way for

NWBCCC, who's organized small businesses in the past on Kingsbridge Road, to get a snapshot of what small businesses were dealing with in 2022 in order to begin to understand how to best protect the small businesses moving forward. It was then that I learned that many small businesses on Kingsbridge Road, not a few, have no leases and are on month-to-month rent and concerned about their future. Little did I know how much Kingsbridge Road, the place where I got my first haircuts, walked my mother to work at the hospital, got takeout food, and zipped through countless times to get to Saint James Park as a kid, would become such a focal point for most of the organizing work that I would go on to support Juan with.



(Personal photos)

This was right around the time that I started the ANHD Community Development Graduate Fellowship program, working 20 hours a week for Cooper Square Committee (CSC) in the Lower East Side. Cooper Square Committee, one of the nation's oldest anti-displacement community-based organizations in the country, has long specialized in housing justice movements, succeeding in creating the oldest community land trust in the City with over 300 units of permanently affordable and decommunified housing, organizing countless tenant associations, and delivering vital services to neighborhood seniors, along with working in coalition with other community organizations across the city.²¹ With its radical and results-driven organizers, old and young, I knew I was in the right space to learn and grow plenty. What I did not know was that Cooper Square Committee had a small business organizing arm and that this was where I would be supporting my supervisor, Abigail Ellman, CSC's Director of Planning and Development, who specializes in small business organizing. With Abigail, I started immediately going around what's somewhat controversially now referred to as the East Village area of the Lower East Side, Cooper Square Committee's catchment area, getting to know countless small businesses that knew Abigail already and others that didn't, understanding their issues, receiving their ideas and concerns and learning more about the diverse landscape of small businesses in the East Village, a gentrifying, mixed-income neighborhood filled with small businesses, a contrast to the Northwest Bronx which is defined by several commercial corridors spaced apart.

It was here that I started to learn just how difficult small business organizing is due to the lack of commercial protections in law, despite organizing victories that Cooper Square Committee and other anti-displacement small business organizers fought for, such as the Commercial Tenant Anti-Harassment Law and the commercial vacancy registry law, as Abigail would tell me (Abigail interview). It was there that I also learned that it takes a lot of time to build trust with small businesses that have so little of it, and you have to constantly follow up with small businesses and often do something tangible for them before you could convince them of the importance of organizing and being a part of bigger picture causes such as the ANHD Citywide Merchant Organizing Project, an initiative that builds on the other small business organizing and research projects that ANHD conducted by bringing together community-based organizations in communities of color across the City with the goal of each organization conducting comprehensive surveys in our organizations' respective neighborhoods.²² The goal of the survey was to gain enough community-driven data as possible to create a report that would hopefully go on to inform city policymakers of the necessary changes in commercial tenant laws that would need to take place. It was also here that I learned more organizational skills and about the different, albeit few, resources available for small businesses in New York, including the Commercial Lease Assistance Program, Renaissance, and Pace SBDC, some of the main services we often referred businesses to. With this knowledge, I was eager to help my community back in Kingsbridge.

²¹ Cooper Square Committee. *Here Today, Here To Stay*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://coopersquare.org/>

²² ANHD. (2022a, November 21). ANHD and Six Neighborhood Partners Launch Citywide Merchant Organizing Project. <https://anhd.org/blog/anhd-and-six-neighborhood-partners-launch-citywide-merchant-organizing-project>

In early October, Juan started to really mold me into a leader of the Our Armory campaign by giving me responsibilities ranging from helping him manage various technical assistance projects, such as neighborhood analysis projects, and helping out with research tasks. To that end, I helped consult a graduate planning studio from Pratt Institute and a group of designers and architects from Val Alen Institute's Neighborhood Now initiative with community-driven feedback necessary for them to deliver analyses and recommendations that were useful to NWBCCC. Both Pratt and Neighborhoods Now were conducting different neighborhood analyses. Pratt was focused on mapping out socioeconomic data, environmental data and the built environment of the area, and later providing recommendations for us to consider. And Neighborhoods Now was focused on the socioeconomics, environment and built environment of the all areas within a 1-mile radius of the Armory. We were also meeting with Albany Law School's Community Development Clinic and receiving education on the structure and legality of various things: community benefits agreements, cooperatives, community investment trusts and community land trusts.

As I became more immersed in the niche world of small business organizing in early October, sitting in a local coffee spot on Kingsbridge Road known as Mocha Cafe, a large and relatively new cafe that popped up in recent years after its space had been occupied by two smaller stores adjacent to each other, I came across a YouTube video posted eight years ago titled "*#Kingsbridge Armory #Gentrification*" featuring a local resident and tenant organizer from Kingsbridge Heights named Jay Espy.²³ The video was alarming for several reasons. Jay, a young, scrawny twenty-something-year-old with a small afro, and his red shirt-wearing, grassroots tenant organizing group, known as the People Power Movement (Movimiento de Poder Popular), had predicted that the recently-approved proposal to turn the Kingsbridge Armory into the Kingsbridge National Ice Center, the nation's largest indoor ice skating center, would only serve to disadvantage the people already living in the neighborhood.

²³ The Youth Channel. (2015, February 7). *#KingsbridgeArmory #Gentrification*.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wP5mQR1deWY>



Join us on Sunday, May 1st, 3-7 p.m. at the Kingsbridge Armory.

29 W Kingsbridge Road, Bronx NY 10468.

We will be speaking out in front of the Kingsbridge Armory against the injustices facing the working-class here in Kingsbridge and around the world.

Let's move the people's struggle away from downtown and into our hood where we live, where we work, where we go to school, where we buy groceries. This way we can begin to really develop the bases of grassroots worker-led leadership that will help lead us into a truly sustainable people's movement towards Popular Control of our communities and Fundamental Social Change!

Workers of the world unite!!! #MayDayInTheHood

(Source: People Power Movement ft. Jay Espy holding megaphone)²⁴

He was right. As the video showed, Jay walked up and down the staircase knocking on doors of this apartment building close to the Kingsbridge Armory to organize a tenant association. The residents of this building were facing rent increases from what they argued was a negligent landlord who allowed the building to crumble, despite their complaints about the conditions that included extensive mold, deteriorating walls, uncollected trash, vermin, electrical malfunctions, broken ceiling and floors, etc. The landlord of their building was also charging them for what residents believed were unjust rent increases in the form of major capitol improvements, costs the residents felt should be incurred by the landlord who owned the building and allowed it to fall into such a state. Similar to Juan's family, the video showed residents who suspected that they were being pushed out by their landlord to make room for wealthier residents that would be able to pay higher rents. Jay went on to highlight a small business on the Kingsbridge Road Commercial that was forcibly closed down by city marshals because they couldn't afford a tripled rent, and included the voices of several BIPOC business owners, including Christian Ramos, Vice President of the Kingsbridge Road Merchant Association, who were explaining how they've seen or experienced sudden doubled rents shortly after the KNIC approval. With Christian's leadership and the support of local community organizers, several small businesses without leases on the corner of Kingsbridge Road and Jerome Ave by the New Capitol Diner with the same landlord, organized an emergency meeting at Community Board 7 to negotiate with the landlord. Jay went on to say: *"Whenever there's redevelopment in the city, particularly in communities of color, poor communities of color, the neighborhood changes, so that those people are no longer there, and White middle class, upper-class people start moving in, along with corporate stores, big chain stores."* The People Power Movement, in the video, would go on to host a speak-out rally with community allies in front of the Kingsbridge Armory denouncing gentrification and landlord harassment.

²⁴ People Power Movement - Movimiento Poder Popular. (n.d.-aa). People Power Movement - Movimiento Poder popular. <https://peoplepowermovement.tumblr.com/page/2>

As the video ended, horror overcame me, and my mind raced as I contemplated the possibility of history repeating itself with this new chapter of the Kingsbridge Armory redevelopment. It became clear that I needed to start pestering Juan and Sandra with possible solutions, if any, that would protect small businesses from displacement. Like any planning student, I've learned how developments have displaced Black and Brown people in communities of color, such as Central Harlem and Southside Williamsburg, in recent years. As I left the cafe to return home, I also hoped deep down to meet Christian and Jay in the neighborhood sooner or later.

October 6, the day of the street vendor meeting had finally arrived, and I was rushing from school to get there on time. The sunsets were starting to go down earlier. When I arrived at the Our Armory sign, I was pleased to know that Street Vendor Project was there to support NWBCCC with organizing the street vendors. I had, in the prior school year, gained a newfound understanding for the advocacy work that Street Vendor Project does for street vendors citywide because I worked with them during a half-semester-long practicum course, one of the few classes I enjoyed at GSAPP, to create a map of the street vending activity on Fordham Road that they had requested.²⁵ As we waited for the street vendors to come, I glanced over at the meeting agenda signs that Juan had prepared for the meeting. The goals of the conversation were to build a relationship with the vendors to ensure their involvement and leadership in the Our Armory campaign, to

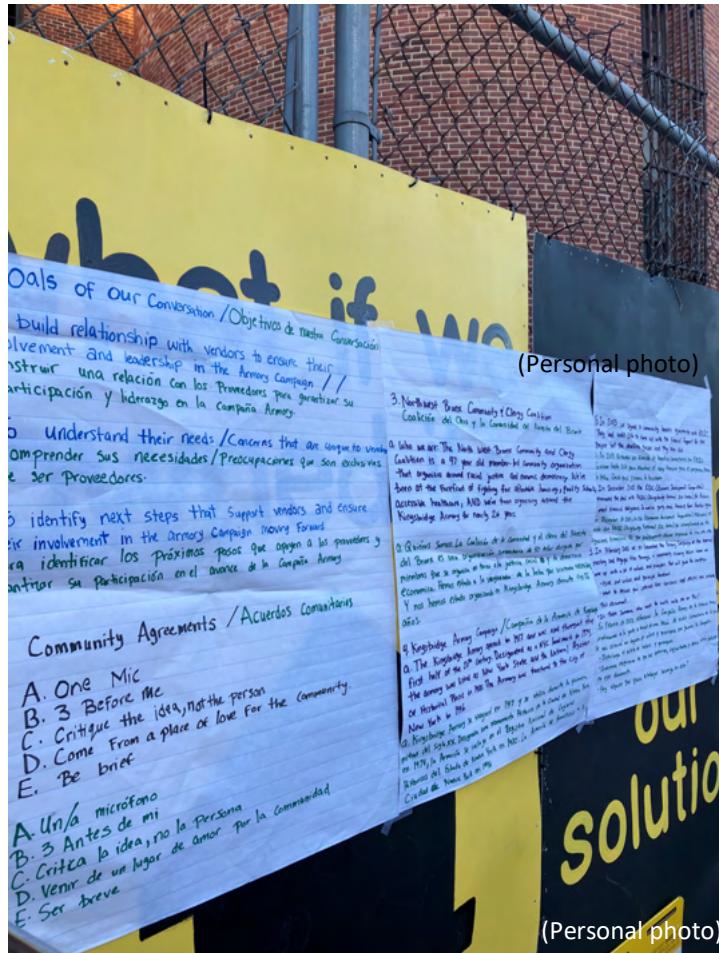


(Personal photo)

²⁵ Street Vendor Project. (n.d.-ae). <http://streetvendor.org/>

understand the vendor's needs, and to identify next steps that would support the vendors and ensure their involvement in the campaign moving forward.

As I read through the meeting agenda and chatted with Caesar and other NWBCCC members, a young lady walking by with what appeared to be her mother, aggressively remarked that the street vendors were degrading the community and that we were facilitating the degradation by encouraging vendors to be a part of the Armory's future. She then questioned if we were from the Bronx and asked us what hospital we were born in, before storming off. After two seconds



of silent bewilderment, the group proceeded to bust into laughter, brushing off the encounter with the understanding that there are always going to be those in any neighborhood who are against street vendors and other forms of urban informality.

It was there that I met Jessica Salgado, Street Vendor Project's Lead Organizer. For Jessica, born and raised right there in the Kingsbridge Heights neighborhood, street vending advocacy was personal to her because growing up her family members street-vended around Kingsbridge to put food on the table. In fact, she still has some relatives that are vendors.

"I'm a Bronx native, born and raised here, my whole life, actually on Kingsbridge. And the way that I got involved in the Street Vendor Project is because my mother used to be a street vendor when she first left my dad, and it was her way of surviving and keeping us afloat. And then when I was in high school, she was arrested on Valentine's Day, and that was really traumatizing for all of us in my family. So, since then, I've had a strong passion for organizing and standing up for things that aren't right." – Jennifer Salgado

Speaking on the value of street vendors in the outerboroughs and in Kingsbridge Heights, Jennifer said the following:

"And then in the outer boroughs, street vendors are super important in being able to provide affordable fruits and vegetables, affordable general merchandise that you may have to get at higher prices in other areas. And they also are a way to keep this community safe for the community that they vend in because they're the eyes and ears of the community..."

In a lot of areas, you're going to see a lot of makeshift markets, sort of being set up along sidewalks, and a lot of the vendors are going to be thrifting items that you would normally see at a thrift store, secondhand items. And a lot of these markets came out of a need that was coming from that particular community. I think it really signals the poverty that a lot of folks are facing in their homes that they have to sell personal and home items to be able to get by, and Kingsbridge is a perfect example of that. Like right before the pandemic is when we started to see a lot of these vendors starting to set up there. And Street Vendor Project got involved with these folks out here.. when we started hearing about the redevelopment project that was gonna happen with the Kingsbridge Armory. And also thanks to the Northwest Bronx for reaching out to us and sharing that the Kingsbridge vendors were going to be a priority for them as well. So since then, we've sort of been collaborating with them to ensure that the vendor perspective is heard and included in this redevelopment process. And that meant that it didn't only include the vendors right outside of the Kingsbridge Armory, but the vendors in the vicinity, because everyone in the vicinity should have a stake in what goes on in their neighborhoods that we work in and live in, and that includes street vendors. And the folks who are selling out there, you know, they're gonna be directly impacted in what's going on inside, so why not have a say in it? - Jennifer

Speaking on neighborhood dynamics between street vendors and small businesses sometimes, Jennifer said:

“..the BIDs and the business associations aren't always in favor of vendors because there's this false narrative that vendors take away business from the brick and mortars, but we know that that's not true, and it's just a lot of false narratives and general like sentiments that some folks feel, but it's due to a lack of real education and information on what's actually going on in the ground.”

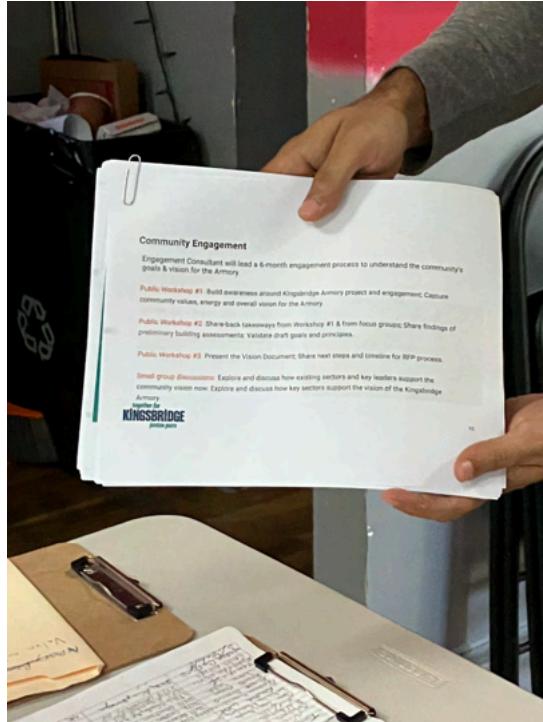
With limited availability of general street vendor licenses from the City's Department of Consumer and Worker Protection (DCWP), limited availability of food cart permits from the City's Department of essential to operating a legal food vending business, and an increasingly hostile Mayoral administration that shifted street vendor compliance enforcement from DCWP to the City's Department of Sanitation, the city agency responsible for removing the City's trash, our city government has sent a message that vendors are less than thou, dehumanized from their right to dignified employment conditions and adequate service delivery. (Jennifer interview)

As 7 pm inched closer and we waited, wondering if the street vendors would come, we received confirmation from one of the respected street vendor leaders on the block that the vendors were tired from a long day of working and would appreciate it if we postponed our meeting. Instead of sulking, the group completely understood, knowing fully well how hard street vendors work. Juan, already thinking about the next steps, mentioned that we should return the following day, Friday evening, and directly speak with the vendors and see if they'd be interested in filling out our small business survey.



(Personal photos ft. NWBCCC and Street Vendor Project)

The following day, after work, I met with Juan at the NWBCCC office and he shared news that the EDC had begun to release details to a select number of community stakeholders who would later go on to form the Community Working Group about the proposed timeline for the upcoming public visioning process for the Kingsbridge Armory. The EDC's idea was that two public workshops were enough for public input. NWBCCC was outraged about this and planned to push the EDC to increase the number of workshops to ensure more opportunities for the community and Bronx to have a say. It was around this time that we also found out the Armory had an extensive asbestos problem and would have to be likely closed for months to be remediated, preventing any tours at the Armory for the unforeseeable future.



(Personal photo)

We then walked over to the front of the Armory to begin talking with vendors, dropped off surveys, and collected contact info to stay in touch. As we slowly made our way down the street talking to vendors, we came across a vendor who informed us that the opportunity to sell inside the Armory would make her feel safer because she had experienced robberies at a store she used to own and that other vendors had been robbed in broad daylight in front of the Armory. As we said goodbye to the lady and later called it a week after speaking to the last set of vendors on the street, we contemplated the magnitude and complexities of what was at stake.

"This Armory could be that asset...this could be the thing that could keep us here for generations to come. We don't own our buildings, we don't own our businesses, but if we get to own this giant. Right? This is something that we can pass down to our kids. This is something that could be the thing that you point at: 'hey, I was part of this campaign when we first started'...and then having a whole display inside of the armory of all the stuff that we've been doing from the get and seeing folks say: 'Hey that's my mom right there, she went to this meeting on November 5! We were a part of this rally on March 18!' This could be the thing that could literally change the City, the borough, and spark more movements around the City and the country. Right. That's what I envisioned for this. This is gonna be our baby, this is gonna be the poster child for every future development now. This is going to be the view when you redevelop buildings like that. Or, it could be the Barclays Center or the Fordham.. that could be the thing that could literally just puts the nail in the coffin as far as affordability and gentrification in the Bronx. It could be the thing that literally is gonna push us out, Black and Brown folks. But really, it could be the nail in the coffin as far as 'the Bronx for the people.' And then the coalition was started back in the 1970s after the Bronx was burning, and there's no way in hell that we can let this Armory fall back into the hands of the people that allowed the Bronx to burn in the first place. So, we can't let that happen. That's my viewpoint. We can't. There's no other choice, there's no other choice. So, this is it." – Juan



(Personal photo ft. Juan Nuñez)

The very next day, I met up behind the Kingsbridge Armory with a classmate who owned a small drone with a camera. According to her drone, the Armory was in a safe flying zone. As we flew the drone up, I couldn't believe what my eyes were seeing. The Armory, already a massive castle-looking structure from street level, looked huger from above. Soaring above Kingsbridge Heights was akin to a dream I had dreamt as a child, a dream I wished others could see as we neared the beginning of the public visioning process. The following week, my friend sent me the drone's photos and videos of the Armory, and my heart nearly skipped. I instantly sent the pictures to Juan and Juliana, and they loved it. It was then decided that we would use this footage for our social media materials for the first workshop and as a presentation tool for Juan's outreach to local high schools.



(Photo credit: Mollye Z. Liu)



(Photo credit: Mollye Z. Liu)

In the next weeks that followed, it was all hands on deck to get ready for the soon-to-be-announced public visioning process. We were continuing survey outreach with small businesses and street vendors, and phonebanking NWBCCC members to invite them to a community meeting on Saturday, October 29th to prep for the upcoming public visioning process and to

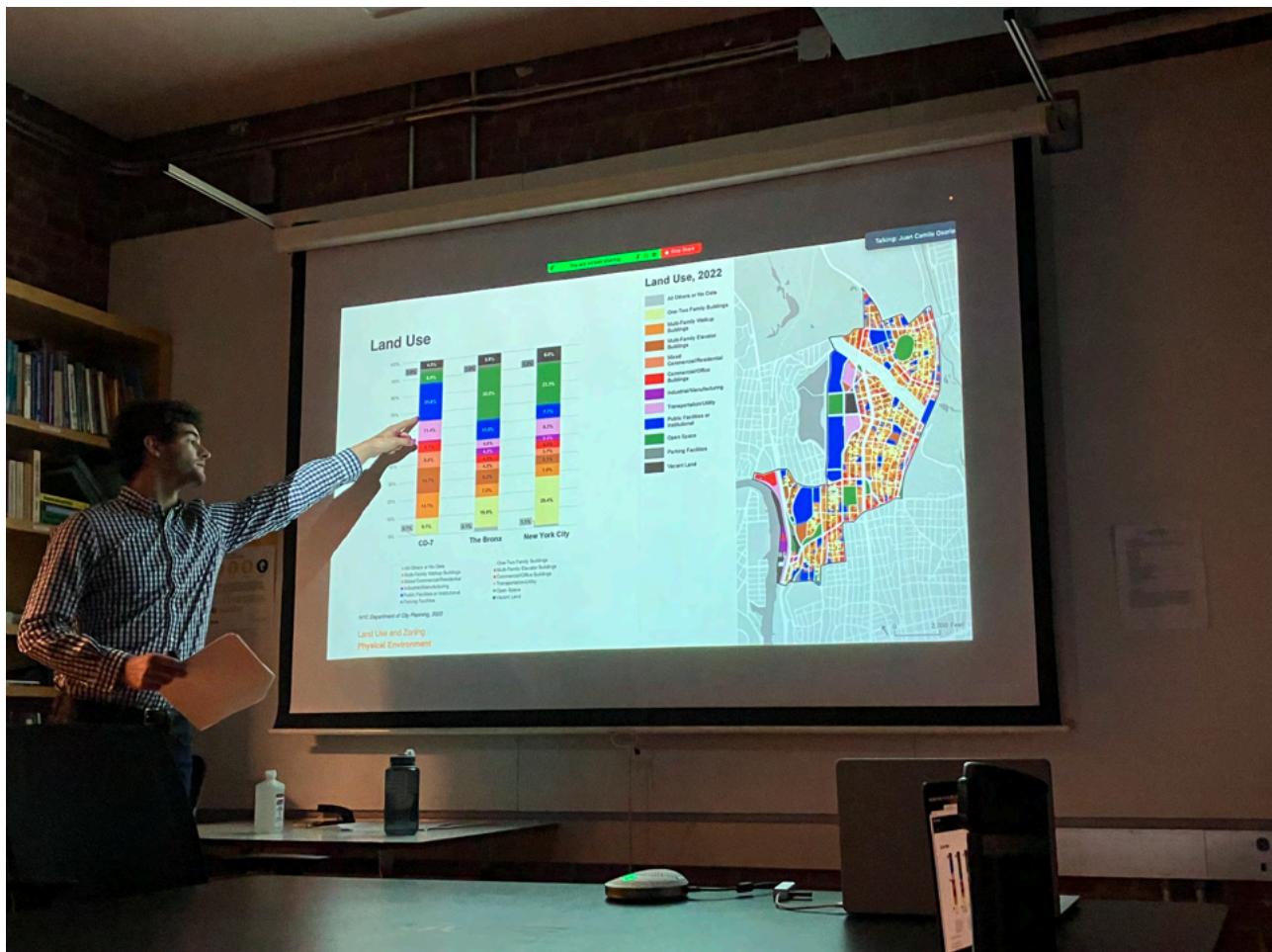
ensure that members understood the eight different components of NWBCCC's values and principles for the Kingsbridge Armory redevelopment, including community ownership. For the street vendors, we realized that it would be better to do the surveys with them on the spot if they had time. It was around this time that I found out about the first-ever conference that the Small Business Anti-Displacement Network was hosting virtually from November 9-10 titled: *"Keeping BIPOC and Immigrant-Owned Businesses in Place."*²⁶ Deciding to commit to being an anti-displacement pest for Juan and Sandra, I told them about the event and registered for the event, paying the discounted student fee.



On October 24th, Juan, myself and a group of NWBCCC members then finally got the chance to meet with the Pratt studio in Brooklyn, where a group of first-semester planning students, led by Juan Camilo Osorio, a member of the City Planning Commission, and Mercedes Soto, showed us some existing conditions in Bronx Community District 7. The students did a great job explaining different trends they were seeing and gave NWBCCC hope and a stronger conviction that it was fighting the good fight. It was exciting to be on the other side of the table for a studio, and I provided the students with many considerations for their final presentation in December, which would provide us with a list of planning recommendations to consider for the Our Armory campaign. Some of my key suggestions to the students were that they look into special purpose districts as a mechanism of anti-displacement and affordable housing

²⁶ Small Business Anti-Displacement Network. (n.d.-u). SBAN Conference 2022. <https://antidisplacement.org/conference/>

preservation, climate planning opportunities from New York State's Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA), which will invest clean energy investment monies into working-class communities of colors like Kingsbridge, and I also encouraged them to consider what's lost when they solely focus on Community District 7, recognizing that NWBCCC's network and history extends to parts of the Northwest Bronx, such as Fordham and Kingsbridge Heights that are not included in Community District 7. After chatting it up with the Pratt team, it was a long subway commute back uptown for the Armory team.



(Personal photo – Pratt mid-semester studio presentation)

Later that week, on Saturday, October 29th, I took the Bx12 bus from Inwood over the University Heights bridge into the University Heights neighborhood of the Bronx, glancing over at where Fordham Landing is slated to go up as the bus rode over the Harlem River. I instantly had a flashback to how the Pratt studio presentation earlier that week had told us that this development was going to certainly gentrify the area. Adding insult to injury, old buildings close

to Fordham Landing that didn't look like much had banners posted on their exteriors advertising luxury apartments.



(Personal photos)

As Evan would later tell me:

"the one-two punch to me that is actually maybe more indicative of the direction -or at least that has more punch for the neighborhood itself is Fordham Landing. That's a multi-billion dollar, mixed-use residential development, that'll be probably three-quarters market-rate housing or something around that. And I think that that is, because it's residential and commercial, and likely to get built probably earlier, just because the amount of construction and everything for the Armory is going to take much longer and it's got a ton of remediation work before anything can really happen there and it has a sort of less direct impact on the immediate neighborhood composition. Those two things together, I think, are a really powerful punch. So yeah, the stakes are high for that part of the West Bronx, with those two things in tandem."

Evan's relevant point on the Fordham Landing was a view that was also shared by the Pratt studio. As we progressed toward the Kingsbridge Armory's public visioning process, I hoped that the City and community organizers would remember to keep these wider neighborhood developments in mind as we discussed how to protect our people in tandem with potentially uplifting them through whatever projects end up being selected for the Armory. It wasn't enough to think about the Armory's impacts on the neighborhood, speculation knows no manmade geographic boundary.

The community meeting this month was in a gymnasium held at the old, gothic St. Nicholas of Tolentine Church, a Roman Catholic church that is always stunning to look at when you're heading southbound down University Ave or westbound down Fordham Road.



Similar to the September community meeting, we split up into committees, and Juan got the meeting underway for the Armory team, a team of around 15 people that day. Looking to my right, I saw that the same architect from the last meeting was there again. Copies of NWBCCC's values and principles were passed around the table and Juan posted up eight white poster boards on the walls next to us with each of NWBCCC's eight values and principles for the Armory. We were then handed three different colored sticky notes. Pink sticky notes were for our questions, yellow stick notes were for examples we could compare each principle to, and blue sticky notes were opportunities to explain why each value and principle was important to us. One by one, we wrote our thoughts down onto the sticky notes and had a fruitful conversation that gradually prepared us to push for the values and principles at the first public workshop, which we recently found out would be the next exact Saturday.





(Left photo credit: Juliana Leiti Neri | Right Photo: Personal credit)

After wrapping up the Armory team meeting, everyone reunited and we got into our last activity of the day, which was to rank vote different proposals from the Bronx-Wide Coalition, a coalition of Bronx-based community-based organizations, labor and faith groups that are aiming to create a boroughwide plan, called the Bronx-Wide Plan, that is aimed at collectively addressing longstanding systemic injustices in the Bronx on a grassroots level. Since the Coalition spent two years creating community-envisioned proposals, the goal of this activity was for us, people of the Bronx, to vote on what the coalition should prioritize.



(Personal photo)

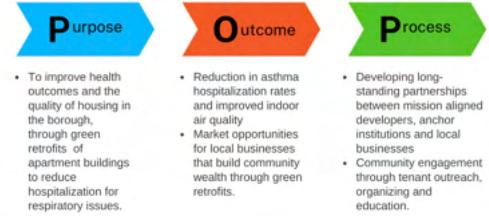
Our voting was just one of a number of voting opportunities for Bronxites to rank the different proposals for the borough. Former Voter Power Organizer of NWBCCC, Marshall Strawbridge, together with Sandra, handed us flashcards and tape, and explained that we should go around to each Coalition project poster posted on the walls of the gymnasium and vote on the ones we thought were top priority. As of March 2023, the top five most unifying proposals for the Bronx-Wide Coalitions are:²⁷

Healthy Buildings Program



Healthy Buildings Program

The Bronx Healthy Buildings Program aims to address the social determinants of poor health outcomes by addressing poor living conditions in buildings that see high rates of hospitalization. It also prioritizes creating a high road workforce in retrofitting buildings, creating good local jobs. This proposal would build on a pilot previously enacted in the Northwest Bronx in partnership with Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition.



Bronx Community Purchasing Cooperative



The Purchasing Cooperative will support Bronx community organizations such as faith institutions, affordable housing developers, community groups, and nonprofits and local businesses in saving money by purchasing together through a buying club. It will create market opportunities for local businesses by organizing demand for local goods and services from these institutions.



Kingsbridge Armory Cooperative Hub

The purpose of this proposal is to ensure that the redevelopment of the Kingsbridge Armory includes shared ownership and governance of the armory site and its activities, as well as a larger neighborhood stabilization plan related to commercial corridors and housing stability and affordability.



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South Bronx Land and Community Resource Trust (SBxLCRT)

The SBxLCRT is an integrated long-term strategy for the preservation and sustainable growth of affordable housing, open space, community resources, community institutions and landmarks, as well as community cultural preservation; while supporting resident participation and decision-making in community planning and land use development through the creation of a non-profit community land trust.



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Bronx Peoples Credit Union



This proposal calls for the expansion of the Peoples' Credit Union initiative in the Bronx to create an inaugural branch and to expand on that branch in future years. This proposal would also reduce operating costs for these sites by partnering with community and labor organizations to share office and co-working space with the credit union.



28

²⁷ The Bronx-Wide Plan. (n.d.-x). Let's Shape the Future of the Bronx. Together.

<https://bronx.consider.it/>

²⁸ The Bronx-Wide Plan. (n.d.-x). Let's Shape the Future of the Bronx. Together.

<https://bronx.consider.it/>

As Evan would later inform me:

"We are mapping out what the current development horizon in the Bronx is, and you know, the Armory, as big as it is, is actually just one piece on the whole board. And that picture, as a whole, I think paints -all of those pieces together paint a picture of what the future of the Bronx can look like over the next 10 to 20 years. And so that's really what we're trying to draw attention to with our Bronx-Wide vision and plan is something else."

Tuesday, November 1st. After wrapping up work for the day in the Lower East Side, I rushed uptown on the D express train to Kingsbridge Road to take in history in the form of a press conference at the steps of the Kingsbridge Armory launching the Armory public visioning process.²⁹ Upon arrival, the gate with the Our Armory sign was open and newly elected local Council Member Pierina Sanchez, with her signature ponytail and charisma, was there in her bright pink jacket, ready to deliver remarks, and several media cameras were ready to roll.

As stated in her City Council profile and on numerous websites, Pierina is an Afro-Dominicana born and raised in the Northwest Bronx, and educated at local public schools, before she went on to attend the local private institution, Academy of Mount St. Ursula, and the Ivy League institutions of Harvard University for undergrad on a full scholarship, and Princeton University, where she got a Masters in Public Administration.³⁰ Pierina later interned at the Obama White House, worked at the Regional Plan Association, what some consider to be a centrist, business-friendly regional planning firm, as a planner, and served on Bronx Community Board Five, the board of the Bronx Young Democrats and as Senior Advisor for Housing, Economic Development and Labor for former Mayor Bill de Blasio.³¹ Despite a relatively humble working-class background, she, in many ways, was seen as the big-money candidate, groomed by elite institutions, that had the backing of the political establishment in the form of the powerful political machine of US Congressman Adriano Espaillat who endorsed her and countless other Dominican-Americans who've won a slew of recent elections in Upper Manhattan and The Bronx, places with increasingly large Dominican communities.³²³³ Pierina, endorsed by more elected officials generally and with the largest amount of political fundraising money of any candidate in her Democratic Primary race, usually what you need to win office in a borough heavily represented by registered Democratic Party voters, also had the backing of some of the city's largest unions, including SEIU1199. DC 37 and UFT.³⁴

²⁹ NYC EDC. (n.d.-t). NYCEDC, Elected Officials, and Community Members Announce Visioning Process for the Redevelopment of the Kingsbridge Armory. <https://edc.nyc/press-release/nycedc-elected-officials-community-members-announce-visioning-process-kingsbridge-armory>

³⁰ New York City Council. (n.d.-g). District 14 - Pierina Sanchez. <https://council.nyc.gov/district-14/>

³¹ Oder, N. (2020, November 11). ATLANTIC YARDS/PACIFIC PARK REPORT.

<https://atlanticyardsreport.blogspot.com/2014/08/rpas-yaro-retires-was-ready-to-back.html>

³² Coltin, J. (2022a, September 12). How Rep. Adriano Espaillat built the Squadriano.

<https://www.cityandstateny.com/politics/2022/09/how-rep-adriano-espaillat-built-squadriano/376969/>

³³ Parra, D. (2021, May 12). 14th City Council race has attracted big bucks and dueling endorsements.

<https://citylimits.org/2021/05/12/14th-city-council-race-has-attracted-big-bucks-and-dueling-endorsements/>

³⁴ Tarleton, J. (2021, June 11). *City Council Races to Watch*. The Indypendent.

<https://indypendent.org/2021/06/city-council-races-to-watch/>

It's important to note that Pierina won her Democratic Primary election over Adolfo Abreu, also Dominican-American, and an NWBCCC protege who took a markedly different career path than Pierina throughout his years. Adolfo, 28 years old at the time of running for office, received his political education from NWBCCC, joining the organization's Sistahs and Brothas United youth organizing arm around the age of 12 where he went on to organize for years for many different campaigns, including turning the old Bronx Library Center in Fordham into a community center with youth programs, pushing the City to return free MetroCards to public school students after they were stripped away, successfully advocating for the passage of the Student Safety Act, organizing tenant associations and winning the passage of what is widely considered to be a landmark tenant protection law, otherwise known as the Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act of 2019, which strengthened tenant protections by: making the rent regulation system permanent, extending rent stabilization statewide in New York, keeping rent-stabilized apartments regulated after they've reached the rent of \$2775/month, and providing tenants with more protections against evictions and high security deposit and administrative fees to relocate.³⁵³⁶ Where Adolfo's experience was more embedded into grassroots activism and organizing movements, his endorsements were also more progressive, garnering the support of anti-Democratic Party establishment elected officials, including US Senator Bernie Sanders and Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the Democratic Socialists of America party, and more leftwing unions, such as the New York State Nurses Association, PSC-CUNY and Local 79.³⁷

The Kingsbridge Armory was also featured in Pierina and Adolfo's campaigns for office. For Pierina, it was featured in the background of her campaign portrait photo, and for Adolfo, it's where he launched his campaign near its front entrance on Kingsbridge Road in front of a crowd of supporters socially distancing and wearing masks for protection from COVID-19.³⁸

³⁵ Bleyer, J. (2008, July 27). A Library With a Past Ponders Its Future.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/27/nyregion/thecity/27anim.html>

³⁶ Northwest Bronx Community & Clergy Coalition. (n.d.-i). Northwest Bronx Community & Clergy Coalition - 2019 Annual Report.

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a2021c5e5dd5b3a4dda00d4/t/5e5d306d83e7f96f9d4e0f2a/1583165620479/NWBCCC+REPORT_ENGLISH_PRINT_SINGLE_NO+MARKS.pdf

³⁷ Tarleton, J. (2021, June 11). *City Council Races to Watch*. The Indypendent.

<https://indypendent.org/2021/06/city-council-races-to-watch/>

³⁸ The People for Adolfo. (2021b, May 14). From the Ground Up: Adolfo Abreu for City Council District 14.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1GKSZpeoNsw&t=45s>



(Personal photo)

Flanked by NYC EDC President Andrew Kimball, State Senator Gustavo Rivera who endorsed Adolfo's campaign, Bronx Deputy Borough President Janet Piguero, Co-chair Sandra and several members of NWBCCC who endorsed Adolfo's campaign as private individuals outside of their work for the 501c3, and members of the Community Working Group, Pierina and the group of diverse stakeholders were there to unite and put any political differences aside for the sake of their community by launching the Together for Kingsbridge public visioning process. A diplomatic Pierina made the following remarks at the presser:

"As an urban planner, I'm all too familiar with how all over the City communities complain when these kinds of redevelopment processes come around. 'You don't care about what we have to say, the project is already baked, no one is ever going to listen to us, the short timeline is not going to allow for community input.' Now you've all heard about the calm before the storm, but in urban planning what we should be doing is embracing the storm before the calm. Planning is the storm before the calm. This community process will invite all perspectives and feel unwieldy at times, yet it will be the foundation for what is to come."

Then, tense and serious, Sandra Lobo, got the chance to speak. Donning a black jacket and a yellow NWBCCC t-shirt that has become ubiquitous to NWBCCC's image and fight for justice throughout the years, she made the following remarks:



(Personal photo)

"Good afternoon! So as Andrew mentioned, my name is Sandra Lobo, Executive Director of the Northwest Bronx Community Clergy Coalition. We are a community-based organization committed to racial justice and economic democracy. In other words, we're building shared ownership and wealth and collective governance for our people over the assets in our community. The Bronx is too often described in terms of our worst statistics. You all have heard them before: poorest health outcomes in the state, highest unemployment rates, poor graduation rates, high rates of eviction, it goes on and on, and we know that during the pandemic all of these got exacerbated, but we understand that these poor statistics are a reflection of the generations of systematic disinvestment and marginalization of our people and not a reflection of our people. We know full well that the Bronx is full of assets, of leaders, of innovators, creators, entrepreneurs, organizations, and institutions who have been instrumental in responding to redlining and disinvestment in the 70s, rebuilding in the 80s and 90s, and fighting off displacement and gentrification, gentrification until today. The Bronx has been organizing to address the root causes of poor health, education, housing and more. I share this history and framework at today's event because we are here to share the relaunching of a development process around the world's largest Armory, an incredible Bronx asset that can be used to invest in our people and help build shared wealth and ownership for our community here or it can be used to further expedite displacement pressures and undermine our local economy even further. The Northwest Bronx Community Clergy Coalition, along with our labor, faith and community Partners have been organizing around the Kingsbridge Armory for over 26 years, fighting to ensure this asset is our community's asset, the asset to build the future of the next generation, the asset that can be a catalyst to transform our economy to one that builds cooperative ownership, community governance, local hiring, good wages and more. We're committed to working with the city, our elected representatives and community stakeholders in developing a project that invests in our people and builds our Bronx. Whose Bronx?!"

Crowd response: *“Our Bronx!”*

Sandra: *“Whose Bronx?!”*

Crowd response: *“Our Bronx!”*

As the press conference finished, media cameras turned off, and people slowly started to leave the giant steps and twin towers of the Kingsbridge Armory behind, I reflected on the speeches provided that day and the varying degrees of political support and neglect community activists in the Northwest Bronx have dealt with over their many years of organizing for the Kingsbridge Armory, and wondered if NWBCCC’s prioritization of community ownership, collective governance, shared wealth, and a community land trust, the more radical goals of their values and principles for its Our Armory campaign, would be supported politically in The Bronx. Things were moving fast, and a thought crossed my mind: Why did EDC decide to have this press conference to publicly announce the public visioning process to the world only four days before the first public workshop? I also started to sense a disconnect between the attitudes of those in the community who’ve been long fighting for the Kingsbridge Armory and those, mostly the newly elected officials, who’ve just arrived. I recall one community member stating that it felt that the elected officials had just swooped in out of nowhere ready to take pictures in front of the Armory, not honoring years of organizing for the Armory as well as they should have. Standing on the elevated 4-train platform next to the Armory waiting for a train back downtown, the late 90s Jay-Z rap song *“Politics as Usual”* played in my headphone as I looked into the distance at the Manhattan skyline, contemplating the situation.

As Evan would later mention to me: *“And the other is the political will or component to it, which is, you know, is it possible? The people decide*



whether it's possible or not. There are power dynamics in which, at one point or another, either what the organizing work the Northwest Bronx is doing to build community vision and alignment and momentum for it will come up against whoever else, you know, has a role in shaping and making that decision, deciding whether it's feasible or desirable or not."

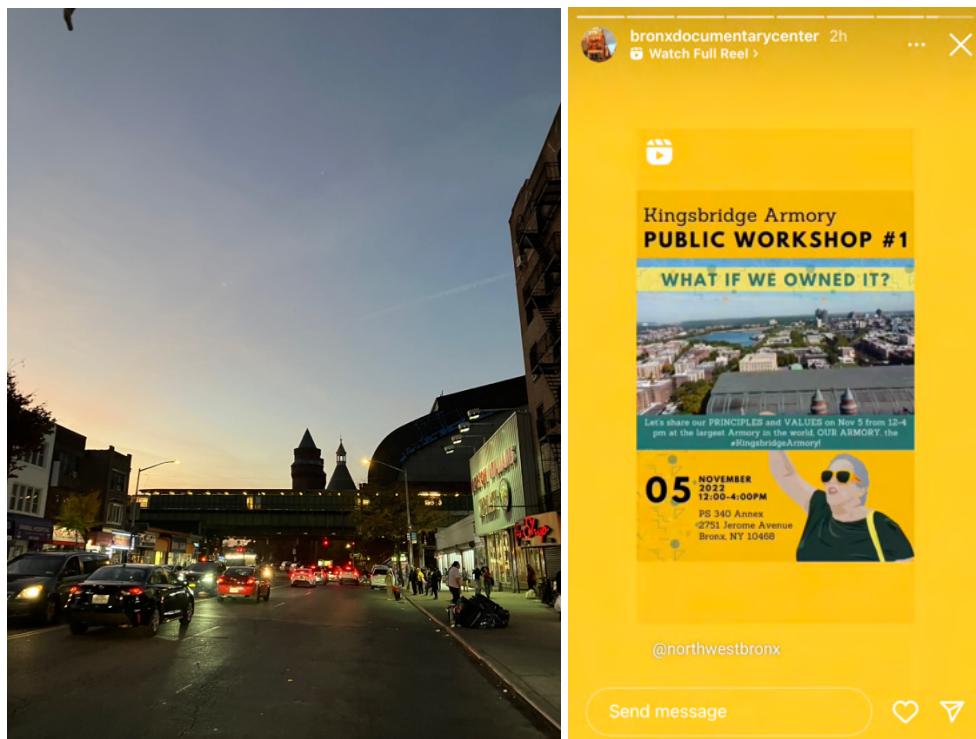
And just as fast as a New York minute, Juan and I were back at it later that week, with an army of volunteers and interns, trying our best to get the word out that the Kingsbridge Armory was undergoing a new public visioning process that scheduled its first workshop in a few days. As the interns were posting flyers on visible telephone poles around the Kingsbridge Armory area and asking some storefronts for permission to post the flyer by their entrance, I was going door to door into many small businesses, directly letting their owners and workers know about the workshop. Most of the reactions I received were unfortunate: many people did not realize the Armory was being replanned again, others were understandably frustrated and fatigued by many years of failed Armory proposals, and others wish I gave earlier notice, explaining to me that it's very difficult for them to attend these public meetings, especially on Saturdays when their businesses receive a lot of customers (Christian Ramos interview). When people asked for more information about the public visioning process people, I began to show them information from NYC EDC's social media, to which several people scratched their heads and suggested that we advertise these important public meetings on television for the next workshop. This was the same week the NYC EDC posted their sign about public workshop #1 at the front entrance of the Armory above the Our Armory sign! This was the only physical sign that NYC EDC put up in the neighborhood to promote the public workshop.



(Personal photos)

After speaking to over 30-40 businesses, I had to soon wrap up for the day and reconvene with Juan and the interns. I still had a stack of flyers and, in an anxious rush, I started taping them to any pole in sight when another thought came to me: why don't I just start passing out all these flyers to people walking down the street? Similar to before, although many pedestrians appreciated that I gave them the heads up and some said they'd try to make it to Saturday's workshop, many did not know what the Armory was to begin with, and many others did not realize that the Armory was being replanned. As the night sky painted the sky dark and the public workshop visioning process for the world's largest armory was about to start, I had many questions: What was EDC doing to get the word out for their public visioning process? How was EDC planning to include small businesses and street vendors, two stakeholders that often have to work long hours onsite most days, in the public visioning process? Was the community going to be well represented on Saturday? And, lastly, was EDC expecting community-based nonprofits organizations, such as NWBCCC, with limited resources and capacity challenges of its own, to be able to inform the Northwest Bronx area on their own?

As I headed home, I hurriedly sent direct messages to the Instagram accounts of several Bronx organizations with large followings, hoping that they would share the news about the public workshops. Fortunately, Bronx Documentary Center, with over 34,000 followers on their account, publicly reposted NWBCCC's post about the first workshop on their story.



(Personal photos)

On what was a surreal day, I woke up that Saturday morning on November 5th ready for the start of what would be the Kingsbridge Armory's first-ever standalone public visioning process. After arriving at Jerome Avenue and Kingsbridge Road, I decided to use the same approach I used in the days prior to the workshop: stop anyone who wasn't in a rush to tell them about Public Workshop #1 for the Kingsbridge Armory's public visioning process. Zigzagging up and down the front of the Armory, I asked people if they knew about the public workshop. Everyone said "no." I then proceeded to show them NWBCCC's post on Instagram about the public workshop and told them that the workshop was being held at PS 340 Annex, a school located a block away from the Armory on Jerome Ave. Most people responded with interest and mentioned that they would try to "swing by" before the public workshop ended. After speaking to nearly eight people, I pressed on to the workshop, saying hello to some of the street vendors, including one I had befriended, named T. (for the purposes of privacy). After telling T. where I was off to, he said he would try to go, but no guarantee because Saturdays are his best business days.

Arriving at PS 340 Annex, you wouldn't have known a public workshop was underway. The only signs in the front were a big Pierina Sanchez banner with her picture and a generic sign from the EDC that read: Together for Kingsbridge.



(Personal photo)

Stepping into the gymnasium of the school building where the workshop was being held, lots of people were there listening to one elected official after another give their statements. Amanda Septimo, a State Assemblymember from the South Bronx, was even there to give a speech.



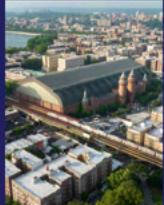
(Source: NYC EDC)³⁹

Around the time the speeches wrapped up, the EDC gave their presentation introducing Pierina and Sandra as the Co-Chairs of the public visioning process, introducing Hester Street as the community engagement facilitator, and explaining the day's course of events. They also confirmed that the public visioning process would have three public workshops for people to provide input, which is due to NWBCCC's insistence that there be more workshops for people to provide input. At the time, no online survey had yet been released.

The goal of this public workshop was to understand the strengths and values of “*the Kingsbridge and Bronx community*.” To that end, we were asked to walk around the room and post sticky notes and dots to community survey boards posted on the walls around the room that asked us questions like: “*What are your favorite things about the community?*” and, “*What does this community need?*” The room was filled with other interactive components, including a small space for kids to play, an interactive Kingsbridge Armory mural that you could write or draw on and EDC’s timeline of the Kingsbridge Armory’s history, which offered a generic history of events for the Armory, not including any information on the reasons why the Shops at the Armory proposal failed or why NWBCCC has been organizing for the Armory for years.

³⁹ NYC EDC & Hester Street. (2022). *Public Workshop #1 Synthesis*. Together for Kingsbridge. Retrieved from <https://kingsbridgetogether.com/sites/default/files/2022-11/Together-for-Kingsbridge-Public-Workshop-1-Synthesis.pdf>

Birth OF THE ARMORY



The Kingsbridge Armory is one of the largest armories in the world.



It housed the New York National Guard's Eighth Coast Defense Command, a regimental unit, relocated from Manhattan in 1912.

World War 2 & BEYOND



During World War 2, the Armory was used as an induction site for immigrants from nations at war with the U.S. and the Allies.



In 1942, Governor Herbert Lehman, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, and U.S. Senators ceremonially received 10,000 troops.



After World War 2, the City offered it to the United Nations as temporary meeting place until the main UN building was finished.

1910s
1940s

ARMORY in transition



In 1974, the exterior of the armory was designated a City historic landmark. For years, the armory remained vacant.



For a period in the 1980s, the armory was used as a homeless shelter. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

A SPACE FOR art + community support



In 1994, the regiment departed the Armory and after its military use ended, the City took control of the building in 1995.



In 2006, Warner Bros. rented the Armory for six months to make the Will Smith film *Legend*.



In 2010, the music video for the song "Just Tonight" by rock band The Pretty Reckless was filmed.

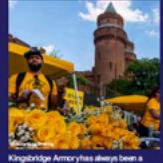
1974
1999
2000s

Past redevelopment PLANS



In 2007, New York City Economic Development Corporation (NYCEDC) issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) for the redevelopment of the Armory. In 2008, Related Retail Armory, Inc. proposed to redevelop the building into approximately 600,000 square feet of commercial and community facility uses and approximately 400 parking spaces. This project was not approved by the City Council in 2009.

COMMUNITY advocacy + engagement



In 2012, EDC again issued an RFP for the redevelopment of the Armory. INN Partners, LLC proposed to redevelop the building as a national ice center and was selected as the developer in 2013. The proposed development included 100,000 square feet of retail space, and parking. The City Council approved the project in December 2013. The developer was not able to obtain the required financing for the project.

2007
2013
2013
2022

(Source: NYC EDC)⁴⁰

In complete contrast, the NWBCCC had its own timeline at the workshop (same one posted in this report's background section), which went into detail about its organizing history over the years for the Armory and various political contexts associated with the Armory.

⁴⁰ NYC EDC & Hester Street. (2022g, November). Public Workshop #1 Exhibit Boards.

<https://kingsbridgetogether.com/sites/default/files/2022-11/Together-for-Kingsbridge-Public-Workshop-%231-Exhibit-Boards.pdf>

Engagement Goals

- Acknowledge past redevelopment attempts
- Communicate this is a new, exciting yet different moment
- Seek to understand the values of Kingsbridge residents and of the Bronx



Engagement Activities



Engagement Worksheets



Exhibit Boards



Facilitated Discussions



Community Survey Boards



Interactive Mural

(Sources: NYC EDC)⁴¹

The most important thing, however, was the four-page engagement worksheets that we were handed. These engagement worksheets, primarily available in English and Spanish, would serve as the most important basis for informing the EDC's vision doc for the Kingsbridge Armory.

⁴¹ NYC EDC & Hester Street. (2022). *Public Workshop #1 Synthesis*. Together for Kingsbridge. Retrieved from <https://kingsbridgetogether.com/sites/default/files/2022-11/Together-for-Kingsbridge-Public-Workshop-1-Synthesis.pdf>

Demographics survey (Optional)

What is your zip code? _____

Which category best describes you?

- Indigenous American or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Middle Eastern or North African
- Native Hawaiian or other
- Pacific Islander
- White
- Other: _____

What is your age?

- Under 18
- 19-24
- 25-30
- 31-45
- 46-65
- Above 65

Do you have children or dependents?

If yes, how many?

- Yes
- No

What best describes you? I am:

- A student
- A worker
- A parent
- Retired
- Other: _____

NYC/EDC

Thank you for your participation.
Your input is of great value to us. Please leave this worksheet behind for us to collect.

Thinking about the redevelopment of the Armory

I wish that...
For example, I wish the community is more involved in the decision-making process

I wonder if...
For example, I wonder if the armory can include an indoor basketball court for my children to play on

All participants who fill out this information will automatically be signed up for our newsletter. Please check this box if you would NOT like to be informed about future public engagements, summaries of public workshop engagements,

**together for
KINGSBRIDGE
juntos para**

Name	Phone	Email
------	-------	-------

**Activity 1:
Community Values**

In your opinion, how has the Bronx changed or grown in the last 30 years?
The Bronx used to be... Now the Bronx is...

What inspires you about this neighborhood and community?

What values define this neighborhood and community?

How can new development support this community's values?

**Activity 2:
Concerns and Support**

What are your top concerns about this redevelopment project? What would be an ideal alternative or solution to your concerns? What are ways we can reach the ideal situations?

Your concern:	→	Ideal situation:
Steps we can take to mitigate this concern		

Your concern:	→	Ideal situation:
Steps we can take to mitigate this concern		

What is the best way for a future Armory to support the community?

Community Support Idea #1

.....

Community Support Idea #2

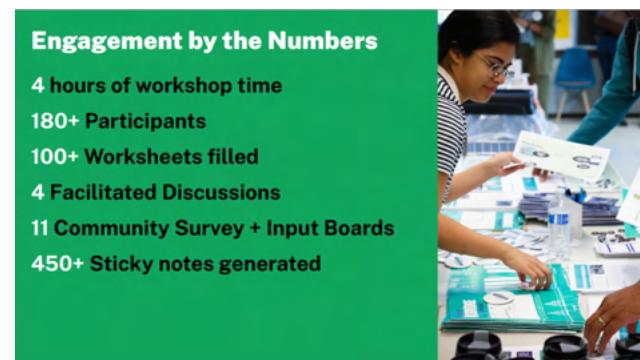
.....

Community Support Idea #3

(Source: NYC EDC)⁴²

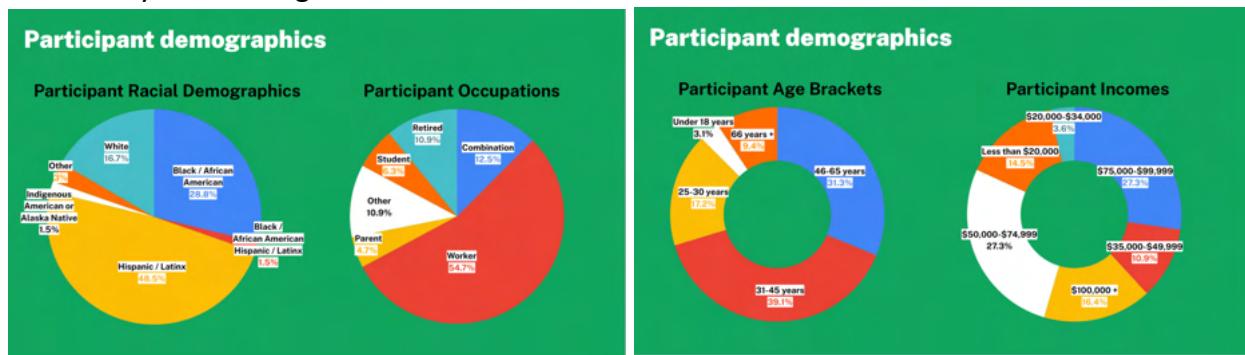
As the workshop event reached its second half, we were then split up into groups for facilitated discussions where two people from Hester Street would ask us the same questions in the worksheet in an attempt to forge a discussion and understand the group's feedback. Looking around the room, I was pleased to see two people I had stopped in the street and some of the Pratt studio students that were taking in what community members were saying. Another thing I noticed while looking around the room was the many people there wearing either yellow NWBCCC shirts or representing other Community Working Group organizations. It almost seemed as if the room had been entirely filled with members or affiliates of Community Working Group organizations and people in the know.

⁴² NYC EDC & Hester Street. (n.d.-q). Together for Kingsbridge Public Workshop #1 Worksheet. <https://kingsbridgetogether.com/sites/default/files/2022-11/Together-for-Kingsbridge-Public-Workshop-231-Worksheet.pdf>



(Source: NYC EDC)⁴³

As we would come to find out later through Hester Street's synthesis report of public workshop #1, 43.7% of people in the room make over \$75,000/year and 71% of people in the room make over \$50,000/year. How could that be the case when the average annual income in the community district is \$38000? Something wasn't adding up. There've been extensive studies that have shown the limits of public participation processes over the years, including unique difficulties for poor and working-class families to participate due to, for example, having to work multiple jobs, along with inaccessible times and mechanisms that municipal planners often use.⁴⁴ While it was good that community members felt valued by Hester Street's engagement strategies at the public workshop, EDC did not do enough to ensure that working-class people, the overwhelming majority of people in Kingsbridge Heights and the Bronx, could participate in the planning process for a potentially transformative development for our own community and borough.



(Source: NYC EDC)⁴⁵

⁴³ NYC EDC & Hester Street. (2022). *Public Workshop #1 Synthesis*. Together for Kingsbridge. Retrieved from <https://kingsbridgetogether.com/sites/default/files/2022-11/Together-for-Kingsbridge-Public-Workshop-1-Synthesis.pdf>

⁴⁴ King, C. S., Feltey, K. M., & Susel, B. O. N. (1998). The question of participation: Toward authentic public participation in public administration. *Public Administration Review*, 58(4), 317. <https://doi.org/10.2307/977561>

⁴⁵ NYC EDC & Hester Street. (2022). *Public Workshop #1 Synthesis*. Together for Kingsbridge. Retrieved from <https://kingsbridgetogether.com/sites/default/files/2022-11/Together-for-Kingsbridge-Public-Workshop-1-Synthesis.pdf>

Nonetheless, there were other interesting takeaways from Hester Street's report, the most mentioned community values were mutual support, collective economy, working-class values, diversity, resilience, family, kindness and educational progress.

Emergent themes across activities



(Sources: NYC EDC)⁴⁶

The top concerns about the Armory's redevelopment were the redevelopment failing, high cost of development, community being excluded from the process, a developer being chosen without collective decision making, a developer that chooses profit over people, gentrification and displacement, lack of shared wealth, and construction damage and unsafe conditions.

Community Concerns	Community Concerns	Community Concerns
Redevelopment process failing. High cost of development.	Community excluded from process. Developer chosen without collective decision making.	Lack of transparency Lack of valuable youth input City selects private developer that doesn't hear community input No community ownership Project becomes politicized
Community Concerns	Community Concerns	
Developer prioritizes profits over people. Displacement. Gentrification.	Profits not being reinvested into the community. Ultimately, the Bronx does not benefit.	Outsourced jobs Draining of community + culture of the Bronx It will take small businesses out of business Revenue not flowing into the Bronx No reinvestment
Community Concerns		
Damage to the landmark during construction. Unsafe. Unsustainable.	Lack of safety of buildings + building Wage theft Too much traffic + noise during construction Unsustainable + exploitative practices	

⁴⁶ NYC EDC & Hester Street. (2022). *Public Workshop #1 Synthesis*. Together for Kingsbridge. Retrieved from <https://kingsbridgetogether.com/sites/default/files/2022-11/Together-for-Kingsbridge-Public-Workshop-1-Synthesis.pdf>

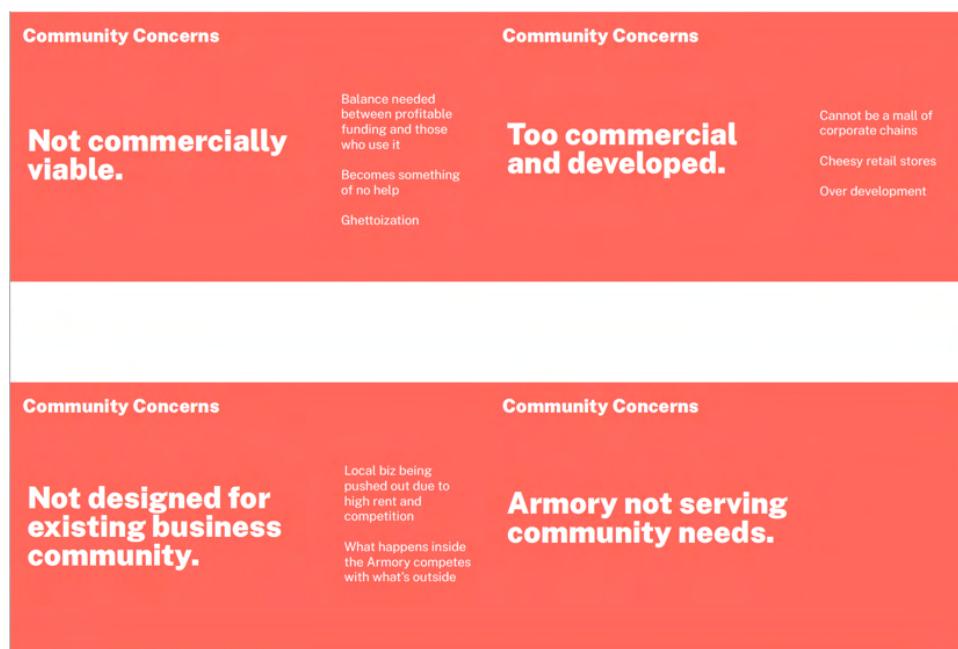
(Source: NYC EDC)⁴⁷

In response, however, the most mentioned ideas to mitigate concerns were 1) community ownership, 2) more community involvement and outreach 3) an anti-displacement stance and 4) thoughtful and intentional development.



(Source: NYC EDC)⁴⁸

In regards to the Armory's programming, the top community concerns listed were:

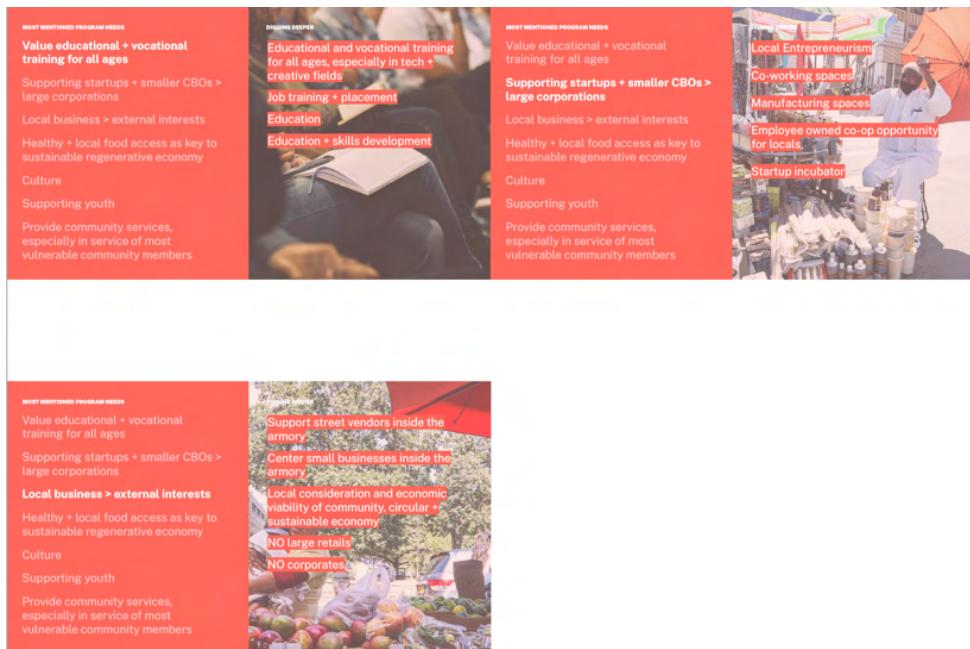


⁴⁷ NYC EDC & Hester Street. (2022). *Public Workshop #1 Synthesis*. Together for Kingsbridge. Retrieved from <https://kingsbridgetogether.com/sites/default/files/2022-11/Together-for-Kingsbridge-Public-Workshop-1-Synthesis.pdf>

⁴⁸ NYC EDC & Hester Street. (2022). *Public Workshop #1 Synthesis*. Together for Kingsbridge. Retrieved from <https://kingsbridgetogether.com/sites/default/files/2022-11/Together-for-Kingsbridge-Public-Workshop-1-Synthesis.pdf>

(Source: NYC EDC)⁴⁹

And the most mentioned programming needs were:



(Source: NYC EDC)⁵⁰

As I said goodbye to people and started to leave the workshop, one of the organizers from NWBCCC shouted out: “*Whose Armory?!*” Crowd response: “*Our Armory!*” Organizer: “*Whose Bronx?!*” Crowd response: “*Our Bronx!*”

Upon leaving, I mentioned to Fernando Ortiz from NYC EDC in detail how many people did not know about the workshop, hoping that he would get a hint and aim to better publicize the public visioning process moving forward.

After I left the public workshop, I spoke to many of the businesses and street vendors on and around Kingsbridge Road that I spoke to prior to the workshop, and, no surprise, many could not make it because it was a busy work day for them. One gentleman that I spoke to the day before the workshop said he attempted to find the workshop, but couldn’t find it and was confused because he saw no signs. I then shot this feedback to Juan and Juliana, who mentioned that we’d discuss it at our next community meeting.

⁴⁹ NYC EDC & Hester Street. (2022). *Public Workshop #1 Synthesis*. Together for Kingsbridge. Retrieved from <https://kingsbridgetogether.com/sites/default/files/2022-11/Together-for-Kingsbridge-Public-Workshop-1-Synthesis.pdf>

⁵⁰ NYC EDC & Hester Street. (2022). *Public Workshop #1 Synthesis*. Together for Kingsbridge. Retrieved from <https://kingsbridgetogether.com/sites/default/files/2022-11/Together-for-Kingsbridge-Public-Workshop-1-Synthesis.pdf>

Tired and hungry, I later met up with my supportive partner, Kat, at Cơm Tấm Ninh Kiều on Jerome Ave., where we had delicious beef pho and I told her about the day's events, and sat eager for the next public workshop to be an improvement from this one and curious as to whether community ownership was something supported by other members of the Community Working Group and elected officials whose prioritization of the Kingsbridge Armory redevelopment seemed to be a significant part of their political agendas.



(Personal photo)

Part 3: Organizing for Public Workshop #2 – “We Want the Keys to the Castle!” (Nov. 2022-Jan. 2023)

In the weeks that followed, Election Day and Veterans Day passed and NWBCCC focused on other priorities besides the Armory.

I would eventually attend the Small Business Anti-Displacement Network’s inaugural conference where I listened to practitioners from Montreal to San Francisco talk about different strategies they experimented with, including: cultural heritage districts, zoning and height restrictions, place-based initiatives, and strengthening local business associations.

It was then soon time to prepare for NWBCCC’s November community meeting on November 19th. Juan and Sandra decided that it would be good to invite the Pratt studio students to share the mid-semester presentation they had given to us at their campus in Brooklyn on October 24th. Instead of having the Pratt students present their entire neighborhood analysis findings, which included an exhaustive list of info, the Pratt students were asked to split 20 slides of information on Bronx Community District 7 into two presentations for the community meeting, which would each be followed by a facilitated discussion.

When we later did a prep run on Zoom with the Pratt students for NWBCCC’s Armory Committee, I realized that the students, despite their best intentions, were only reading off numbers and technical spatial analyst jargon that would go over most people’s heads. For example, one map that was difficult for NWBCCC and I to understand was a map that showed how Bronx Community District 7 had 82 million square feet of developable space and how 25% of its lots are overdeveloped, including Harris Park, which is just a public park. Additionally, the students were not offering any historical or contextual information about the neighborhoods in the community district as they explained the spatial patterns in the maps they were seeing. I realized this was because the students in the class were not from the area and were thus unable to comfortably speak on such topics. As a fellow graduate planning student myself who had completed a studio the academic year prior, I offered to co-present with the Pratt students to essentially translate what they were saying both in a way that community members would understand and visualize beyond what a 2D map says. Juan Camilo was warmly receptive to this idea as were the students and Armory Committee.

And so the day came, and as we assembled in the same gymnasium of the first public workshop, the Pratt students were a bit nervous. I told them, don’t worry, we’re a team, and that I would be able to contextualize their presentation since I come from the area. NWBCCC then debriefed the first workshop and we collectively agreed that the second workshop has to be better. And then the presentation got underway.



(Left photo: personal; Center and Right photo credit: Juliana Leiti Neri)

As we presented, Council Member Pierina briefly walked into the room to watch and say “hello” to NWBCCC members.



(Source: Councilwoman Pierina Sanchez)⁵¹

After we presented, it was clear that there were two maps that really stuck out to most people in the room: 1) a map showing how only 6% of people in Bronx Community District 7 own their

⁵¹ Council Member Pierina Sanchez. (2022e, November 21). Post about NWBCCC's November Membership Meeting. <https://www.instagram.com/p/ClOjAhBMPa2/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y3D>

homes, compared to 20% Bronx-wide and 33% citywide and 2) a map called Displacement Threats that showed a strong correlation between areas that are rent burdened and buildings that have the most Class C housing violations in the community district. Moreover, the highest concentration of rent burden and building violations was just to the southeast of the Kingsbridge Armory in an area surrounding Saint James Park. Some members, however, were frustrated that Pratt was only focusing on Bronx Community District 7, and leaving out parts of Kingsbridge Heights, places where people had long been organizing for the Kingsbridge Armory throughout the years. I anticipated such comments on the map boundaries and took the mic from the Pratt students and explained that we had considered those issues too and would continue discussing them. Leaving the meeting that day, people came up and shared encouraging words about the presentation. One of the Pratt students said that he was moved by my co-presenting with him, an outsider. To this day, NWBCCC members sometimes come up to me and say how much they enjoyed that presentation and how it still resonates with them because while they organize weekly against the injustices that we presented, it's not often that they are presented - with clear, digestible language and local context - on visualizations of the scale and distribution of the injustices at hand. Additionally, it sent a signal to community members that NWBCCC's Our Armory campaign meant business and was enlisting the intellectual capital and technical skillsets of various experienced entities to advance its goals.

As the next week started, so did the FIFA World Cup and many throughout Kingsbridge and the City were glued to tv screens in restaurants and cafes, cheering for their countries and favorite soccer players. As an avid soccer fan, I remember thinking to myself: wow, I don't think there's one indoor soccer field in the Bronx. Despite all the kids that play soccer in Saint James Park, there was nowhere for them to play indoors during the wintertime when it's cold outside.



(Personal photo)

During this time, Juan and I were having talks about speaking with Christian Ramos, a local small business owner himself, about reviving the Kingsbridge Road Merchants Association, which had gone on hiatus since before the COVID-19 pandemic. We saw reviving the merchant association as a way to: connect small businesses to resources that could support them, organize the small business community against displacement threats that could potentially occur as a result of the Kingsbridge Armory and gentrification, and strengthen their collective voice, a voice that had been missing up to that point in the public visioning process.

Back at the bubble of Columbia University, things were getting busier as finals neared, but there was one event that I looked forward to: the last guest lecture event of the urban planning department that semester on November 29th, which invited Jonathan Pacheco Bell, champion of the Embedded Planning movement, to speak with us.⁵² It was an unforgettable moment because Jonathan, a Latino planner and planning professor from California, explained to us what we don't often hear in planning school at Columbia: the importance of constantly planning, not from our desks, but from the streets with community members, the hugely positive impact of planners with lived experience from communities of color, building real relationships rooted in trust, using street knowledge, being intentional about embedded planning at the places we work for, and taking care of ourselves throughout the midst of it all because embedded planning, while intimate and powerful, could be burdensome once you start to accumulate internalizations of the deep injustices that people in communities of color face daily. Jonathan also shared stories of planning employers that attempted to oust him for his role in campaigning embedded planning, seeing him as a disruption to the order and as a troublesome employee that wasn't showing up to work.⁵³



(Personal photo)

⁵² c1typlann3r.blog. (n.d.-d). Embedded Planning. <https://c1typlann3r.blog/embeddedplanning/EmbeddedPlanning>

⁵³ Cal Poly Pomona. (n.d.). Jonathan P. Bell. Jonathan Pacheco Bell. <https://www.cpp.edu/faculty/jpbell/index.shtml>

After his presentation, I couldn't wait to sit and chat with Jonathan since he decided to have lunch with a few students afterward. I asked Jonathan several questions, including a question aiming to get his thoughts on co-presenting with planners that do not come from communities of color, and he mentioned that he never thought much about that, but loved the practice in principle. Since then, we've been in touch. I found a planning mentor I had been missing, a courageous BIPOC leader and change agent from a working-class background who had also dealt with the experience of being in an elitist architecture program and in organizations that gaslighted and rejected him. Through it all, Jonathan was determined that "*embedded planning is worth the struggle*," as the title of his presentation that day proclaimed.

On December 10th, EDC hosted a small business focus group meeting at the popular Dominican restaurant named Caridad on Kingsbridge Road, which was sponsored by the Office of Congressman Adriano Espaillat, Chairman of the Small Business Committee at the House of Representatives, who represents Washington Heights and Kingsbridge Heights.⁵⁴ Approximately five small businesses show up, and some weren't from Kingsbridge Road. The meeting was also announced at the last minute and Congressman Espaillat himself didn't show up (Juan interview). This would turn out to be the only small business focus group that EDC would host.

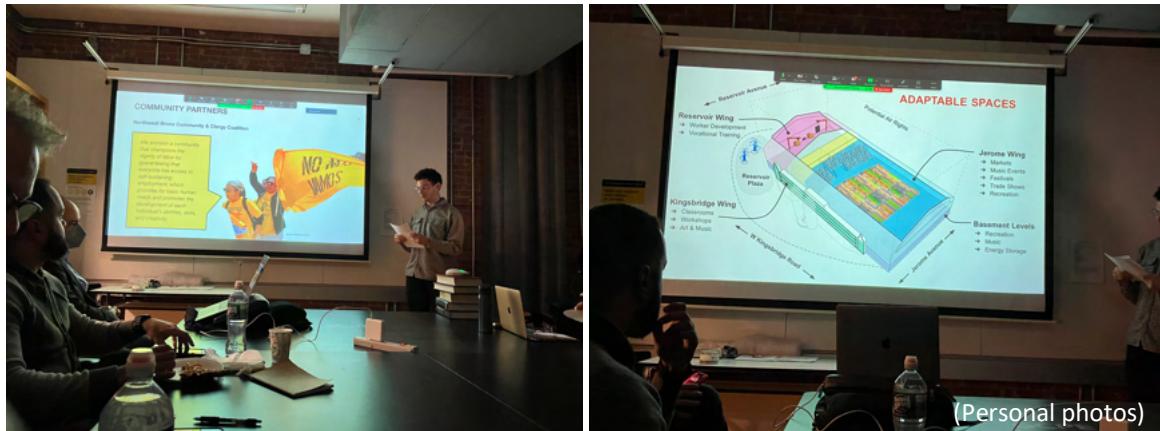


(Personal photo)

Two days later, Juan and I met again with the Pratt studio for their final presentation at their campus in Brooklyn where their agenda was to present us with final recommendations, many of which incorporated the feedback we had provided them with. Upon arrival, they gave us pizza

⁵⁴ Council Member Pierina Sanchez. (2022f, December 10). Post about Together for Kingsbridge Small Business Focus Group Meeting . <https://twitter.com/CMPISanchez/status/1601696282946732033?s=20>

and cookies before we watched their presentation. Sandra, Wanda and other NWBCCC members watched live from Zoom. Before they mentioned a word, I was already proud of the Pratt students, especially the few from the class that continually showed up to the Northwest Bronx to attend NWBCCC meetings and learn more from the residents. Some of the recommendations included: using modulars inside the Kingsbridge Armory to lower costs and increase flexibility for different uses in the Armory, a community solar grid, a performing arts space, a community equity endowment fund, a special purpose district to mitigate displacement, an air rights bank, a greenway, a street vendor market bazaar, and workforce development training, among other ideas.



(Personal photos)

Pratt provided the Our Armory campaign with great insights and Juan had begun to ask students if any would be interested in helping NWBCCC with creating its own Vision Doc report that would utilize much of the research that Pratt had conducted. It was a formative experience consulting the Pratt studio after I had been in their position as a graduate student the year prior stressed about meeting deadlines for studio reports and presentations, and I wished deep down for Columbia's urban planning program, so disconnected from grassroots community-based advocacy organizations in BIPOC communities like NWBCCC, could see how much capacity and insight a planning program could provide to activists on the frontlines of change in communities of color, just like Pratt's program.



(Personal photos)

Four days later, on the eve of the World Cup Final between France and Argentina, NWBCCC visited the Flatbush Central Caribbean Marketplace on December 17th in the largely Afro-Caribbean/West Indian neighborhood of Flatbush in Brooklyn. Since the public visioning process started, NWBCCC, in an attempt to learn from different mixed-use developments about their uses and how they're managed and financed, joined several site visits and meetings during this time: a visit to the former Bedford Union Armory in Brooklyn, a meeting with Downtown Crenshaw Rising, and a meeting with Manufacturing Renaissance from Chicago. Flatbush Central Caribbean Marketplace, commonly referred to as Flatbush Central, is a new Caribbean-themed market opened in May 2022 that, similar to another EDC development called Essex Market in the Lower East Side, is situated on the ground floor of a 14-story, mixed-use building called Caton Flats, a development that has over 220,000 square feet of residential space with affordable housing units, 16,000 square feet of space for the Flatbush Central Market and its adjacent small business incubators and offices, 5,000 square feet of supplemental community space on the second floor owned and operated by the Caribbean American Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CACCI), and 10,000 square feet dedicated to local retail.⁵⁵

It's important to note that 25 vendors in the new Flatbush Central Caribbean Marketplace, a development managed by Urbane, a Black-owned development company, were a part of the 40 vendors at the old Flatbush Caton Market, which once stood on the site of the new market. The new marketplace is also cross-subsidized with new vendors paying market-rate rents. The old Flatbush Caton Market, Caribbean-like and brightly colorful and visible in appearance, was originally established in 2000 as an open-air market before getting funding and political backing by former City Councilwoman Una Clarke, New York's first Caribbean-born woman elected to City Council, that resulted in the construction of its original building in 2002.⁵⁶ We learned that vendors Urbane deemed as legacy vendors from the old Flatbush Caton Market had their rents frozen at 2009 prices (\$440/month). This dual rent system is used today in Essex Market today, with legacy vendors from the old Essex Market paying subsidized, lowered rents and new commercial tenants paying market rents. Several of legacy vendors at Essex Market also cater to low-income and working-class local residents in the Lower East Side, selling items at affordable prices and accepting EBT.

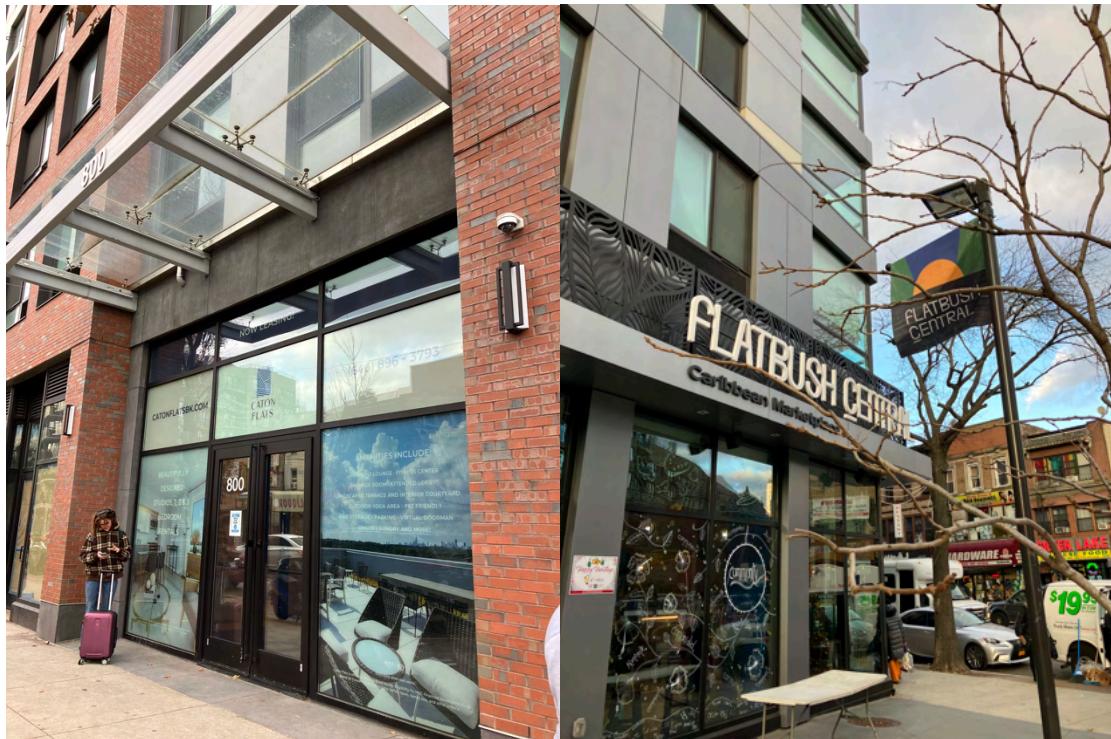
After releasing a RFP for the redevelopment of the site in 2013, NYC EDC selected BRP Companies in 2015 to redevelop the city-owned Flatbush Caton Market into a mixed-use building that includes affordable housing as well as the market. When Flatbush Caton Market was demolished, BRP Companies was able to offer a temporary market location on Claredon Road for the Flatbush Caton Market to operate during the construction period.

As a West Indian myself, I relish any opportunity to go to Flatbush and enjoy the delicious Caribbean food and music, and was excited to learn more about this marketplace that I heard

⁵⁵ City Officials, Local Elected Officials and Community Stakeholders Break Ground on Caton Flats in Flatbush, Brooklyn. NYCHDC. (2019, May 16). <https://www.nychdc.com/newsroom/city-officials-local-elected-officials-and-community-stakeholders-break-ground-caton-flats>

⁵⁶ Flatbush Central. (n.d.-e). MARKETS. <https://flatbushcentral.com/markets/>

of before, but never visited. Upon arriving, the building did not look like a Caribbean marketplace, it looked like an office building or upscale hotel.



(Personal photos)

As generic American pop music played in the background laced with the occasional dancehall song, Urbane showed us around the facility and painted a pretty picture of the place. They introduced us to the vendors, many of whom had no customers, and then showed us an empty bar and event space that looked barely used, before taking us to the back where a kitchen incubator was waiting to serve us food.



(Personal photo)

On our way to the back, Urbane showed us some spaces of Mangrove, “*an open workspace, learning annex, and cultural development center that supports local Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) creative producers, makers, workers, and entrepreneurs, including a large kitchen and design lab for textile design and printing, that they are using as business incubator spaces for budding entrepreneurs in food or design.*”⁵⁷



(Personal photos)

After eating food and asking Urbane questions about the development, financing and barriers for the project, we parted ways with Urbane, and NWBCCC headed home. I decided to linger around and speak to a vendor I saw during the tour. I would later learn from her that most of the vendors are not making as much as they used to at the old market, are less visible to people in the community than before, are restricted from selling outside and in other areas of the market as they had done in the past, are displeased with the lack of authentic Caribbean music being played in the market, had no say in how the new marketplace was designed, were unhappy about their stands they've been provided with since they lack the autonomy and space they used to have, and are uncertain about their future due to vague language in their lease contracts. Adding insult to injury, the West Indian Day Parade, the largest parade in the City held annually in Brooklyn each Labor Day that brings many Caribbean nations and cultures together, saw little to no business for most of the vendors at the market, a huge letdown because they had planned for what they hoped would be their busiest day of the year. To collectively address some of the aforementioned issues, the vendor mentioned how a number of the vendors at Flatbush Central were planning to organize a vendors association. (FCCM vendor interview)

This feedback alarmed me because it was similar to the feedback I had received from some vendors at Essex Market, another EDC development that relocated vendors from one market to a new market. This feedback also alarmed me because I would later find out in an article from Amsterdam News that at the grand opening of the new marketplace, none of the politicians

⁵⁷ Mangrove: From Seed to Stone. (n.d.). <https://flatbushcentral.com/mangrove-2/>

that showed up to celebrate the market's opening bought anything from the vendors.⁵⁸ Stomach growling, I bought a couple of items from the vendor for Christmas presents, her first sale of the day, took the vendor's business card and wished her happy holidays before leaving to find some Trinidadian doubles, currant rolls and ginger beer. Overall, NWBCCC was thankful for the hospitality shown to us and appreciated learning more about one of EDC's recent mixed-use developments. NWBCCC was there to simply learn and they took the holistic feedback I received from the vendor to heart, including it in our Armory Committee debrief conversations later about the visit.

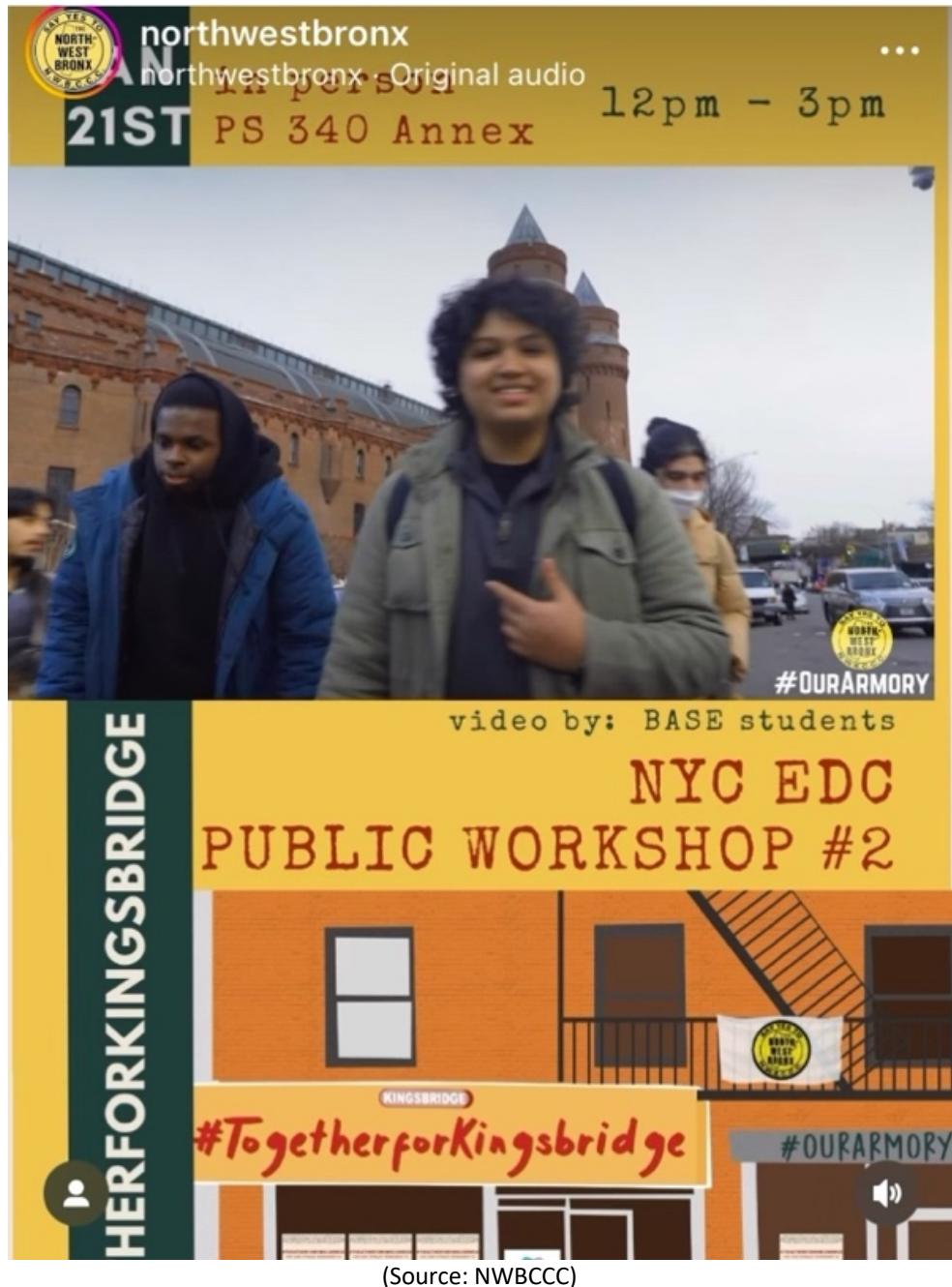
Shortly after the holidays, a cold, snowless wintertime was in full effect in New York and NWBCCC was ready for the new year, planning, learning and organizing once again. Like the first workshop, the second workshop was scheduled for the early Saturday afternoon of January 21st at PS 340 Annex and we had a couple of weeks to prepare. The goal was to try our best, despite the weather, to get more people to show up to the upcoming workshop. NWBCCC ramped up its communications strategy during this time for the Our Armory campaign and posted a video featuring BIPOC teenagers from the community who mentioned:

"Bronx youth need to pull up to tell the City what we want. It's our Armory! For over two decades, young people have been leading the fight to redevelop the Armory for our people, not big corporations run by billionaires who aren't from The Bronx. We don't just want to give input, we want the keys to the castle. What if we owned it?"

The youth then proceeded to state that the Armory could be used in a variety of ways, including recreational spaces, farming, a place for street vendors, etc., but only so long as the community has shared ownership of the Armory. This video was well-received on social media, garnering over 250 likes. It was moving to see BIPOC youth from the Bronx speak so eloquently on how the Armory could better enable the borough to fight for self-determination and economic democracy. Moreover, the youth's involvement is an important part of the organizing work that NWBCCC and BCDI have been doing. This video felt like a step in the right direction to bringing the youth voice forward, sharpening NWBCCC's advocacy and messaging around its priorities for the Armory, and centering who should stand to benefit from the benefits the redevelopment of the nation's largest armory.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ LONG, A. C. (2022, August 4). *Flatbush Central vendors ask for help*. New York Amsterdam News. <https://amsterdamnews.com/news/2022/08/04/flatbush-central-vendors-ask-for-help/>

⁵⁹ Northwest Bronx Community & Clergy Coalition. (2023b, January 17). It's Our Armory! What if WE owned it? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyVyN_OzlbA



(Source: NWBCCC)

Juan, Juliana and I were also in communication with some of the Pratt studio students and Neighborhoods Now staffers to begin the process of creating NWBCCC's own Vision Doc that would utilize maps and diagrams from both parties, accompanied by writing from Sandra, with the hopes of further mobilizing the community and ensuring political support for NWBCCC's values and principles, including community ownership of the Armory. Our brainstorming was fun but arduous as we reassessed the boundaries of the neighborhood analysis maps that would best reflect NWBCCC's geographic scope, as we discussed what the outline of our report would be, and as we discussed the format of the report, pondering whether it should be a storytelling approach, more technical or something else. While taking a break, I asked Juan:

“Hey, when am I going to get one of those cool black and yellow NWBCCC hoodies?”

He then retrieved one for me from their storage and handed it to me. As I held the hoodie, which had NWBCCC’s logo on the front and “Whose Bronx? Our Bronx!” on the back, I couldn’t contain my excitement.

It was a proud moment, and I told Juan and Juliana: *“Years from now, we’re going to look back at these moments of collaboration and organizing. No matter what happens, let’s cherish every second.”*

Starving, we then got food at the popular New Capitol Diner on the corner of Kingsbridge Road and Jerome Ave. before discussing next steps for the Vision Doc.

The next week, on Saturday, January 14th, I ended up in Kingsbridge Heights after spending some time at Oval Park in Norwood. Graffiti had appeared on the eastern side of the Kingsbridge Armory on Jerome Ave. and the lines of street vendors in front of the Armory, which had become a fixture of the area, had disappeared, seeking warm shelter from the cold.



(Personal photo)

Only two vendors were around, including my friend T., whom I caught up with.



(Personal photo)

As I looked at the Kingsbridge Armory, thinking of the possibility of it being a source of shared ownership and shared wealth for a community that severely lacks assets, I remembered the high projected cost just to repair the Armory and found myself in need of some inspiration. I then remembered that in the prior semester of school, I met and spoke with Arif Ullah, Executive Director of South Bronx Unite, for an interview for an elective course's class assignment. As a Bronxite who was familiar with the work of South Bronx Unite, I was excited to ask probing questions going into the interview about the status of South Bronx Unite's current projects and campaigns. South Bronx Unite is a grassroots community-based advocacy coalition of residents and community groups who were heavily involved in protesting in 2013 against the

plans of FreshDirect, a growing online grocer that was offered \$127.8 million in tax breaks to move their operations from Queens to a vacant site on the waterfront of Port Morris in the South Bronx after officials deemed a 1993 environmental review of the site to be sufficient enough grounds to allow the company to move into the neighborhood. Thus, South Bronx Unite filed a lawsuit outraged that there was no use of any updated environmental standard that would think more holistically about how the area has become more residential over the years and how FreshDirect's business practices would add more traffic to an area, otherwise known as asthma alley due to its historically high rates of asthma and cardiovascular disease, directly linked to the community's close proximity to polluting infrastructure.⁶⁰ However, much to South Bronx Unite's dismay, their lawsuit and appeal were dismissed and FreshDirect was allowed to move into the South Bronx, opening its facility in 2018 and increasing truck traffic and air pollution in the area, according to a study conducted between 2017 and 2020.⁶¹

This news prompted South Bronx Unite to think of other ways to secure neighborhood assets that would be stewarded by community members to promote environmental sustainability and improved health outcomes in an area that is considered to be the poorest US Congressional district. To that end, they developed the Mott Haven-Port Morris Waterfront Plan to advocate for improved access to a waterfront rapidly being developed by luxury real estate developments and polluting industries and they established a community land trust, otherwise referred to as the Mott Haven-Port Morris Community Land Stewards. Among other places, this CLT seeks to transform the abandoned and decaying NYC Health and Hospital Corporation-owned former Lincoln Detox Center in Mott Haven into the H.E.Arts (Health, Education & The Arts) Center, a community center designed by community members after extensive grassroots community visioning sessions.⁶²

When I got the chance to ask Arif about the status of the community center, he said that the City issued an RFP for the redevelopment of the Lincoln Detox Center in October 2022 and that South Bronx Unite was confident that they would win the RFP because they had political backing and assembled a strong team that consisted of an architect, a mission-oriented developer, a historic preservation consultant and Hester Street. This team, led by South Bronx Unite, agreed to file a strong application for development that was almost an exact copy-and-paste job of the community visioning work that community members in Mott Haven produced with South Bronx Unite. Excited by this news, I asked Arif if it would be ok if NWBCCC's Armory team could meet with him to learn more about how they went about their RFP application, to which he warmly agreed. South Bronx and Northwest Bronx coming together.

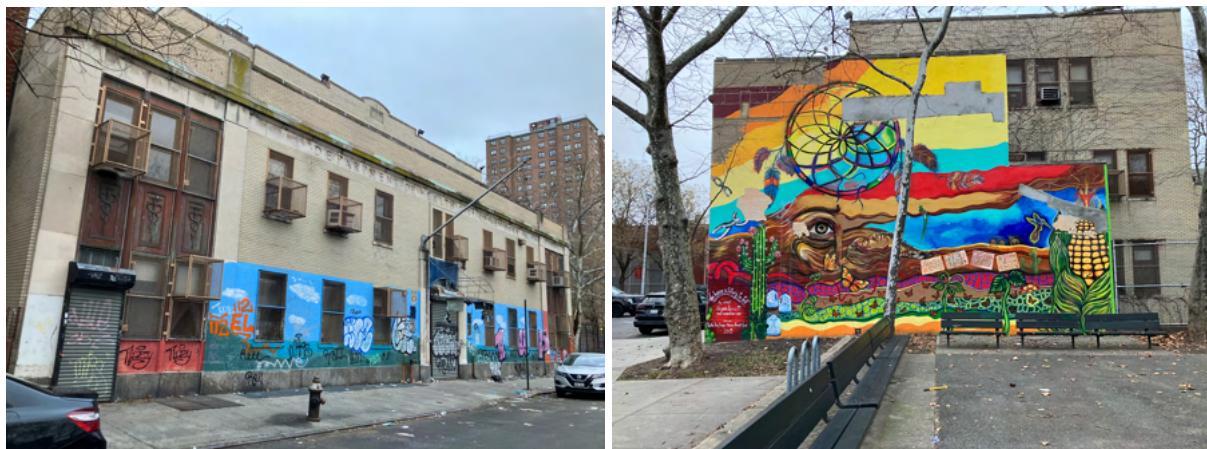
⁶⁰ Hu, W. (2013, March 4). Residents Sue FreshDirect Over Move to the Bronx.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/05/nyregion/residents-sue-freshdirect-over-move-to-the-bronx.html>

⁶¹ Columbia Mailman School of Public Health. (2020b, May 12). Grocery Depot Brings Increased Traffic to the South Bronx. <https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/news/grocery-depot-brings-increased-traffic-south-bronx>

⁶² Bagchee, N. (2017, May 3). *Design and Advocacy in the South Bronx*. Urban Omnibus. Retrieved from <https://urbanomnibus.net/2017/05/hearts-studio/>

As I snapped out of my daydream about the HEArts Community Center, I decided to take the 4 train from Kingsbridge Road down to Mott Haven to check out the city-owned building in question. It had been some time since I was last in the area, and I was eager to take in a building that could potentially be a new pioneer in the movement for community control and shared stewardship over neighborhood assets in The Bronx and other communities of color in the City. When I got to the building's block, I bumped into Mychal Johnson, the founder of South Bronx Unite, who lives nearby. I had met Mychal before at a community event and explained to him that I was busy working with NWBCCC for their Kingsbridge Armory campaign and had recently received updates from Arif about the HEArts Community Center plans. Mychal smiled and confirmed that South Bronx Unite had just submitted their RFP on Thursday. After saying "bye" to Mychal, I feasted my eyes on the building and particularly the murals on the side of the building, titled "*We have a story to tell*," by the artist, Virginia Ayress, which includes various indigenous imagery and aims to express the experience of immigrant children and their broken dreams.⁶³



(Personal photos)

Shortly after leaving the building and walking through the adjacent Willis Playground, which is situated next to NYCHA's Mott Haven Houses, I found out there was going to be a panel event on community ownership the following day at "The Clemente," a Puerto Rican and Latinx multicultural arts institution in the Lower East Side. The event, titled "Cultural Workers and the Community Land Trust movement in NYC," would feature my coworker at Cooper Square Committee, SaMi Chester, Artistic Director of Studio One, along with Arif from South Bronx Unite, Western Queen Community Land Trust, and Nandini Bagchee, an architect and professor at CUNY City College's architecture school who has worked for South Bronx Unite and Western Queens CLT.⁶⁴

⁶³ The Loisaida Center. (n.d.-y). LIFTING H.E.ARTS: THE PRESENT, THE FUTURE AND THE FOUNDATION. <https://loisaida.org/event/lifting-hearts/>

⁶⁴ The Clemente. (n.d.-ai). The Art of land: Cultural Workers and The Community Land Trust Movement. <https://www.theclementecenter.org/calendar/cultural-workers-and-the-community-land-trust-movement>

I was particularly interested in learning more about Western Queens Community Land Trust because they've been organizing in Long Island City, since Amazon's HQ2 plans were shut down, for shared ownership of what they deem to be an underutilized 561,000+ square feet NYC Department of Education-owned building, a building similar in size to the Kingsbridge Armory. In a packed room of audience members, Co-Chair of Western Queens CLT, Jenny Dubnau presented on the land use conflicts that had occurred in Long Island City in recent years, how Western Queens CLT was opposed to waterfront zonings that they believed would only serve to gentrify the neighborhood, along with the community envisioned uses of the city-owned property such as: maker spaces, studios, workshops, kitchens, classrooms, libraries, daycares, event spaces and farming spaces. It's important to note that Western Queens CLT is not proposing to kick out NYC DOE, they believe that NYC DOE could use significantly less space in a building where at least two-thirds could be reserved for community uses.⁶⁵

Jenny would later state the following at a Queens-focused CLT event called, *"Queens Community Land Act Town Hall,"* an event they co-hosted with organizations, such as Chhaya, New Economy Project, Ravenswood CLT and 89th Street Tenant Unidos:

"As we know, the City has a history of giving land away to for-profit developers that actually belongs to us... Why should that property and that giant building not belong to the community that surrounds it? Queensbridge Houses are ten blocks away. With all the high rises and luxury going up around Queens Plaza and in Long Island City, there's never anything that really directly benefits the people who live in Queensbridge. There's never anything that benefits street cart vendors, that benefits manufacturers who are displaced from the industrial areas that are being given over to luxury towers, hotels and self-storage facilities. And there's even commercial use that's very, very luxury and high-end that no one can afford. And that's another problem with a lot of these city-owned plots that are often industrial areas, the EDC... you can boo now... The EDC, which is a city quasi-public, quasi-private agency that stewards a lot of these industrial and city-owned sites, never gives the land to the community. They never use it for equitable purposes. Like the Brooklyn Navy Yard, they're putting up luxury, light manufacturing.

*Who can afford the rents there? Not the small businesses that used to be there, not the manufacturers who give good jobs to the community. Certainly not working artists -musicians and dancers who often have space in these buildings. They go to higher-end, high-rent payers...architecture firms, tech firms, fancy food courts, which only offer minimum wage jobs to the surrounding community. This has to be reversed. We need equitable economic development and that's what we're looking to do in the DOE building, which we have called the Queensboro People's Space...All of these city-owned properties should go to benefit the public and right now, they do not."*⁶⁶

Jenny's comments at this community land trust forum in Queens made me reflect on the trajectory of the EDC up to this point. Her comments highlighted how the EDC often works against community interests and needs, neglecting radically transformative and community-empowering methods of development for the sake of large-scale job creation. This is evidenced in the case of the siting of the FreshDirect warehouse in Port Morris Bronx when the EDC

⁶⁵ Western Queens Community Land Trust. (2021). *Queensboro People's Space, Long Island City*. Retrieved from <https://wqclt.org/current-projects>

⁶⁶ Western Queens Community Land Trust. (2023h, March 16). Queens Community Land Act Town Hall. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QxLXHBBldrE>

provided \$81 million to help FreshDirect move to the South Bronx in 2012, against community desires. This led to South Bronx advocates suing a number of public agencies, including the EDC. In response to the lawsuit, an EDC representative condescendingly remarked: *“A small group of critics continues to ignore the facts, including the enormous economic impact this project will have on an area that desperately needs jobs..”*⁶⁷⁶⁸

The energy in the room, where Chino Garcia, co-founder of CHARAS/El Bohio Community Center in the Lower East Side was present, was positive, and the outlook was hopeful. I caught up with Arif, and later got the chance to meet Jenny and other organizers from Western Queens CLT who told me that a graduate planning studio from Rutgers University, taught by Dr. James DeFelippis, was planning to support them in the upcoming months.



After leaving The Clemente that evening, I felt energized instead of tired. Although it was dark out, my ever-so-curious mind had to see this huge building in Long Island City that Western Queens CLT was fighting for. After taking two trains to get to Long Island City, I stepped out of the Court Square station and braved the cold winds whipping my face from the East River. After surprisingly bumping into a classmate walking past, I arrived at the Queensboro People's Space, awestruck at how huge the building was, heartened to know that it was in better shape than the Kingsbridge Armory, and quickly ready to leave because the cold instantly became unbearable. Hopping on the Q69 bus to Astoria, I bumped Nas' song *“The World is Yours”* as the bus rolled past the Queensbridge Houses, the nation's largest public housing complex where the rapper famously grew up and where Western Queens CLT has been forging connections with local residents.

⁶⁷ Wall, P. (2012, June 13). South Bronx Groups File Lawsuit to Block FreshDirect. <https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20120613/port-morris/south-bronx-groups-file-lawsuit-block-freshdirect/>

⁶⁸ Garellick, A., & Schustek, A. (2021, June 28). New York's Economic Development Corporation Is a Tool for the Rich. <https://jacobin.com/2021/06/new-york-city-economic-development-corporation-edc-public-money-democratic-control>



(Personal photo)

The following week, it was all hands on deck back in the Northwest Bronx to get people to show up to public workshop #2 at the end of the week. NWBCCC was phone banking hundreds of its members, flyering a neighborhood that wasn't being flyered by anyone else, and spreading the word online. Thanks to my fellowship at Cooper Square Committee, I learned that you could post neighborhood events for free on up to two LinkNYC kiosks. After a few days of waiting for confirmation, LinkNYC confirmed that they'd accepted our event post for a LinkNYC kiosk on Fordham Road and one on Kingsbridge Road across the street from the Armory.



(Personal photos)

This was also the week that EDC decided to host an online panel on the topic of Adaptive Reuse on Tuesday evening, January 17th. This panel was one of three online events that the NYC EDC did, including a general virtual information session in January on what's happening with the public visioning process and a real estate development finance event on March 16th presented by Kevin Dunlevy, NYC EDC's Assistant Vice President of Real Estate Transactions and Columbia GSAPP alum. After openers from Pierina and Sandra, the agenda of this panel event was to discuss various case studies of adaptive reuse, including: the Bedford Union Armory, the redevelopment of the infamous former Spofford Juvenile Detention Center into a mixed-use site that includes, among other things, affordable housing and a supermarket, the Brooklyn Army Terminal in Sunset Park, and various design models from WXY.⁶⁹

Agenda

- 6:00 – 6:10: Greetings from NYCEDC and Community Working Group Co-Chairs
- 6:10 – 7:00: Case Study Presentations
 - Bedford Union Armory
 - Spofford, The Peninsula
 - Community ownership models
 - Brooklyn Army Terminal
 - WXY design models
- 7:00 – 7:30: Discussion
- 6:00 - 6:10: Saludos de NYCEDC y de los co-presidentes del Grupo de Trabajo Comunitario
- 6:10 - 7:00: Presentaciones de casos prácticos
 - Armería Bedford Union
 - Spofford, La Península
 - Modelos de propiedad comunitaria
 - Terminal del Ejército de Brooklyn
 - Modelos de diseño WXY
- 7:00 - 7:30: Discusión



2

(Source: NYC EDC)⁷⁰

When speaking on its participation in the planning process for the redevelopment of the Spofford Juvenile Detention Center, Maria Torres, Executive Director of The Point Community Development Corporation said the following:

“Throughout the process, one of the things that we always, at least The Point always stressed..this is our first time doing anything in terms of development of housing, and one of the things that was really important to us was just to be proactive and not reactive to the community. Always keep contact, keep in touch with the people in the community. And part of that was The Point’s job and Urban Health Plan’s job,

⁶⁹ NYC EDC. (2023d, January 17). Adaptive Reuse & Redevelopment Panel Discussion.

<https://kingsbridgetogether.com/sites/default/files/2023-02/Kingsbridge-Adaptive-Reuse-Panel-01-17-2023.pdf>

⁷⁰ NYC EDC. (2023d, January 17). Adaptive Reuse & Redevelopment Panel Discussion.

<https://kingsbridgetogether.com/sites/default/files/2023-02/Kingsbridge-Adaptive-Reuse-Panel-01-17-2023.pdf>

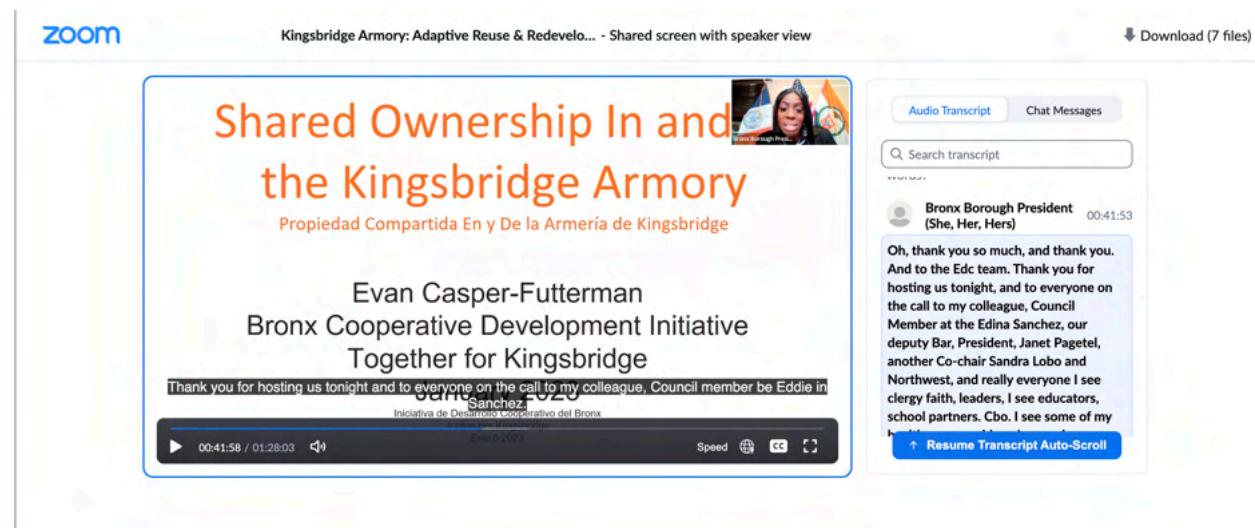
you know, to be responsive. But you know, having community meetings..we didn't have zoom then, but we probably would have if we did. But really just keeping that open communication for what the community asks for. And I know this project, the Kingsbridge Armory, is so much bigger than what we did, right? But you know, this was a big deal for the Hunts Point Peninsula.

The Kingsbridge Armory is a kind of a horse of a different color in that this is something that will affect the entire Bronx. And so, you know, doing things, such as tonight's event is really important, and you know, hats off to Sandra and EDC, and the Councilperson, for, you know, being a part of this and trying to get as much input as possible to make this project happen.⁷¹

It was heartening to hear that The Point had a positive working relationship with the EDC for the Spofford development, but it's easy to say that when you're on camera in front of the EDC and other electeds. Deep down, I wondered if The Point had any critical analysis of the way the planning process and development transpired for the community.

Interestingly enough, the topic of community ownership models was also scheduled into the agenda of this adaptive reuse panel, which I would learn was due to the insistence of NWBCCC and the BCDI who were displeased that the EDC was not facilitating more discussions on how the Armory could be owned, governed and managed, and who felt that community ownership was being looked at as an afterthought.

After the presentation on the redevelopment of the former Spofford Juvenile Detention Center was discussed, it was Evan from BCDI's turn to present. On the virtual call with 70+ people watching, the title page of his presentation read: "*Shared Ownership In and Of the Kingsbridge Armory*." As soon as he was about to speak, Bronx Borough President Vanessa Gibson was given the mic from NYC EDC to make opening remarks. What she would proceed to say was much more than that.



The screenshot shows a Zoom video call interface. The title of the call is "Kingsbridge Armory: Adaptive Reuse & Redevelo... - Shared screen with speaker view". The video frame shows a presentation slide with the title "Shared Ownership In and Of the Kingsbridge Armory" and the subtitle "Propiedad Compartida En y De la Armería de Kingsbridge". The speaker is identified as "Evan Casper-Futterman" from the "Bronx Cooperative Development Initiative" and "Together for Kingsbridge". The transcript on the right shows a message from "Bronx Borough President (She, Her, Hers)" at 00:41:53: "Oh, thank you so much, and thank you. And to the EDC team. Thank you for hosting us tonight, and to everyone on the call to my colleague, Council Member at the Edina Sanchez, our deputy Bar, President, Janet Paget, another Co-chair Sandra Lobo and Northwest, and really everyone I see clergy faith, leaders, I see educators, school partners. Cbo, I see some of my". The transcript also includes a "Resume Transcript Auto-Scroll" button.

(Source: NYC EDC)

⁷¹NYC EDC. (n.d.). Kingsbridge Armory. Together for Kingsbridge. <https://kingsbridgetogether.com/>

These were her remarks:

"Oh, thank you so much, Jana. Thank you. And to the EDC team, thank you for hosting us tonight, and to everyone on the call: to my colleague, Council Member Pierina Sanchez, our Deputy Borough President, Janet Peguero, another Co-chair, Sandra Lobo and Northwest, and really everyone... I see clergy, faith leaders, I see educators, school partners, CBOs.. I see some of my healthcare providers. I see unions, friends in labor has joined us tonight, as well as our Congressman. And I really wanted to say as a former Councilmember, and being a part, not an intimate part, but certainly as a member of the body. When the Bedford Union Armory was underway, and seeing how my colleague, Laurie Cumbo, really navigated that project, and seeing it come to fruition with the Carey Gabay Center, and the Major Owens (Center), who were pillars in Brooklyn, really just resonates with me, because health care is so important, and the intersection of health care and youth development and recreation coming together in one space is exactly what we envision for our own armory in the Bronx -although it's much smaller in scale. The Bronx armory, in our borough, just allows us a real opportunity to come up with a lot of ideas that can really work together.

And then, knowing the work that The Point and so many others, led by EDC did at, you know, La Peninsula. I'm really grateful to see the transformation in the Hunts Point community. And I do want to say last year, as I began this position as Borough President, and we held our first-ever Bronx week, we decided to use the Peninsula to host our Bronx ball because we knew the history of Spofford, and we wanted to transform something that held such a painful part of an era in the borough and turn it into a real purpose, and that's what that project at La Peninsula is going to do. It's going to take something that was such a dark period in the borough, and really transform it into new ideas of housing, of recreation, of open space, of access to healthy food, of health care. And so all of that to me is on the table.

And while I'm looking at the chat -and I know there are a number of questions around the financing, the community engagement- the public-private partnership is so critical to the work we're doing to reimagine the Armory, and the reality is, government is not going to be able to do everything, no matter how much we raise and get from every level of government. We absolutely need the private sector to join us, and we really have to make the Armory as attractive as possible.

So, I came up with a couple of buckets that I've been thinking about for all these weeks and months, as we've, you know, been working together with the working group and our co-chairs, and I definitely think anything that we envision in the Armory has to produce good-paying, solid union jobs that create a pathway to the middle class. To me, that's number one.

Number 2, the recreational space for youth and families is absolutely critical. Whether it's a mini soccer field, it's basketball, it's track and field, it's lacrosse, it's chess.. so many opportunities that we have when you talk about recreation, because, if you think about it, recreation also creates jobs as well, and I envision summer youth, I envision interns and volunteers, our explorers, and so many young people in the recreational space.

Um, also the small business aspect and supporting entrepreneurs and MWBEs is also a critical part of this, and I think when you look at the Kingsbridge corridor, the merchants, the business improvement district, so many businesses that have been in the neighborhood for many years, they really need support. And then also the street vendors that have done tremendous work as well. They also need a home, too.

My next bucket is envisioning this site to provide training for the future jobs of tomorrow. Like the tech industry, like the gaming industry, and making sure that we are creating the engineers, the designers, the

architects, because we realize that people have a pathway to college, but they also have to have a pathway to careers. So I envision having some sort of workforce development training that can train young people, those returning home from prison because they have been exploited, and we need to make sure that people that reenter our community are able to get access to those good paying jobs as well.

And then we are a borough of diversity, and I feel that the Armory has to incorporate something dedicated to culture, whether it's salsa, merengue, bachata, it's hip, hop, jazz.. Whatever it is, we have to encapsulate the culture and what we represent in the Bronx from an artistic perspective, because the intersection of art, education, economic development and jobs is a critical one, and I feel that whether it's the Zoo, Botanical Gardens, Wave Hill, Pregones theater, Ghetto film School, the Bronx River Art Center, all the different institutions, big and small, in our borough that really are generating and training the next leaders and the next artists are out there, and I can imagine, like poetry night, or spoken word, and so many different spaces for our artists from a cultural perspective.

Tourism is huge for us in the city of New York, and certainly in the Bronx. We now have a new executive director at the Tourism Council, and we want to make sure that whatever we're doing, obviously for the Bronx, for the local residents, but also it can be a tourist destination for visitors to travel to when they're coming to the Bronx.

My next bucket is tech. Tech is huge, as you know, connecting families and making sure we address the digital divide is something that should be on our list as a priority as well. And then my final bucket, which is Number 8, um someone mentioned food equity and healthcare. So important to address food deserts, healthy food, access to healthy produce, and making sure that we can create that space for the next urban farmers, for the next boost of agriculture and what Hunts Point does today for the City of New York, or really creating that space.. gardening, and so many things that we can envision from the perspective of addressing food equity, food justice, and health care altogether

So just some ideas I wanted to put out to all of you, because I think everything should be on the table, but I think at the end of the day, the ideas we come up with should kind of guide us with these guidelines we've outlined from jobs and tourism and workforce development and health care and food and youth and recreation. I think all of these ideas coming together will really allow us to really reimagine what the Kingsbridge Armory can look like. So thank you so much for your time, and thank you everyone for your ongoing commitment and to our Co-chairs. We're going to get this done because we are the Bronx, and that's what we do. Thank you so much! ⁷²

When the Borough President finished her remarks, I was shocked. Not only did she prematurely insert her own comprehensive vision for the Armory in the middle of a public visioning process, but she asserted that her vision should be *the* vision for the Armory. Again, this was done while the screen read: "Shared Ownership In and Of the Kingsbridge Armory;" which is the biggest priority for NWBCCC, the main community-based organization that has been bringing many community stakeholders together for more than twenty-five years. After this speech from the Borough President was over, Evan from BCDI would go on to deliver a powerful presentation that honored the organizing history in the Northwest Bronx against proposals for the Armory that didn't have the community's best interest at heart, and then he proclaimed that "community ownership is not a metaphor," it's been done for large building spaces in other

⁷² NYC EDC. (n.d.). Kingsbridge Armory. Together for Kingsbridge. <https://kingsbridgetogether.com/>

places, such as Market Creek Plaza in San Diego, California and the Portland Community Investment Trust in East Portland, Oregon.

Evan would then go on to say:

"We have tremendous value and wealth in our community in the Bronx, and the traditional development process asks us too often to give up some amount of that in exchange for jobs. And they may be good jobs, but ownership over land and ownership over an economic engine for the Bronx and the entire region is significantly more wealth and lasts a much longer time for many more people than just a job....Community ownership is a real and tangible process of owning economic assets that build wealth for our families, our households, and our community and the Bronx and the City overall..

Whether you are a neighborhood resident, whether you are a labor union, whether you're an elected official, whether you have lived here a long time, or have only lived here in the last few years, people like us have organized to take ownership over their community. And this is not a metaphor. This is not about ownership over a process. This is actual economic ownership, owning a piece of paper, owning a share in something. It generates wealth for your family and your community, so that when you're walking down the street you can point to the Armory and tell your children and your grandchildren. We own a piece of that. It is us. It belongs to us..

The Armory, of course, is significantly larger than these commercial properties than these shopping malls, but we also have many more people to draw on. We live in New York City, the biggest city in the country. The Bronx is a 1 million and a half people, not a small city like Portland or San Diego. And so I want to push. Consider folks from unions and community residents to think about the idea that we can posit and say we want the request for proposals to include a component of community ownership in this process, which means your union, your church, you, yourself, as an individual -all of those different actors and institutions have the opportunity to take a meaningful ownership stake..

The last point I want to say is just to reimagine the concept of risk, which is to say that we often, including myself, who have been have been researching these ideas for years, still think that the safest thing to do is to go to a big commercial bank and a big developer, and say the safest thing is to get a big anchor tenant or a mall, a big commercial, traditional economic development project. And I want to posit that not only should we be thinking outside the box for the Armory, but that we should also be thinking that, in fact, relying on ourselves, on building community and local assets is actually the least risky thing we can do for the long-term vision of the Armory, because we are the ones who are going to be living here in this neighborhood long after this development process concludes, and we have more at stake over the future of the Armory and its success."⁷³

The presentation was interesting and strange to watch. Finally, someone was talking about community ownership at an official EDC Together for Kingsbridge event, and talking about the power of organizing, the power of the community, and the opportunities there are to ensure shared ownership of the Armory through the RFP process, all while educating those on the call who weren't familiar with what shared ownership entails.

But, before I could fully process Evan's speech, another elected official came to give their speech: Congressman Adriano Espaillat. His remarks were as follows:

⁷³ NYC EDC. (n.d.). Kingsbridge Armory. Together for Kingsbridge. <https://kingsbridgetogether.com/>

"Thank you. Thank you to EDC. And to, of course, to the Councilwoman Pierina Sanchez, Sandra Lobo who head of the task force, and all the advocates that are part of this call for this very exciting project that I believe in many ways will shape, help shape, the future of the Bronx and the City of New York. As you know, the West Bronx, particularly the North West Bronx part of our city was hammered by the pandemic, and unfortunately, some of them most severe numbers were registered there in that area, and those zip codes in and around the Kingsbridge Armory. And so in many ways, this is a project that I believe will tell the rest of the nation, if not the world, that we're back, and that the Bronx is back in a bigger and better way.

And as you know the Armory is the largest armory in the country, hundreds of thousands of square feet. You can fit 3 football fields in it and it has with it also tremendous challenges, structurally and otherwise.

And the community, of course has been pushing for its development, but it has sat there for decades. And we're excited about the new prospects of a new project in the Armory that will provide jobs and opportunities for local residents that will boost the local economy, particularly small businesses in the neighborhood that have been struggling financially for many years, and there's no doubt that a project of this magnitude could very well lift the local economy as well. It is a very expensive project. The building is huge, and as such, presents tremendous financial challenges, but I'm sure that by listening to the testimony of the participants we'll be able to come up with the best proposal out there to make it successful.

All the partners must be at the table. Labor must be at the table, they must be full participants of this effort. Of course, the clergy and local not-for-profits must be at the table. Community must be at the table. The local institutions that are there already, that could be so helpful, must be at the table, and we must listen to each other's ideas to ensure that we come up with the best plan possible to lift the Kingsbridge neighborhood and the surrounding areas -lift them from the conditions that they find themselves today. I look forward to working with all of you, but most importantly, to listen to folks. I, I want to make sure that the Federal Government plays a vital role in this particular project I've engaged with the Secretary of Labor and also with the White House Finance team, Business team, and they're excited about the project. They want to come visit the project.

*As you know, the site is currently under some repair, some construction, so that it, it could be accessible once again, and we can bring all levels of government to it, and see how we can come up with the best proposal possible. So thank you so much, all of you, for your desires and efforts in making this, I believe, a national signature project for the Bronx and New York City."*⁷⁴

Hearing this speech was my first time listening to Congressman Espaillat publicly speak in real time about the Armory. Having worked for the New York State Assembly after college and prepared politicians' speeches, this was a classic, scripted politician's speech. Espaillat acknowledged the local elected official that he has a close relationship with and community partners, along with recent issues in the community and the Armory, and was claiming to care that the community's vision matters, before mentioning how he plans to use his power to help this potentially transformative project. Nothing memorable, but at least he didn't insert his own vision for the Armory as another elected official had done. It was also good to know that the Congressman was speaking with the White House about the Armory, but at the same time, I was left wishing that he would speak more about the power of bottom-up planning and the

⁷⁴ NYC EDC. (n.d.). Kingsbridge Armory. Together for Kingsbridge. <https://kingsbridgetogether.com/>

need to include the community in those conversations he's having. There seemed to be another disconnect. After the Congressman spoke, the conversation shifted back to adaptive reuse, and I called it a night.

And then the day came! January 21, 2023. Public workshop #2.⁷⁵ It was important that I invite my relatives in the neighborhood to the workshop, and, fortunately, my cousin came and filled out a worksheet, leaving soon after to do errands before the facilitated discussions started. She was heartened to have provided her voice and ideas for what she believes will be a major source of upliftment for the Kingsbridge Armory area, where she grew up, and for the Bronx, but she would not have known about the new Kingsbridge Armory redevelopment era and public workshop had I not told her.

As I did for the first workshop, I stopped people walking down Kingsbridge Road and Jerome Ave. and asked if they knew about the second public workshop and what was going on with the Kingsbridge Armory. No one knew. This time around, I was able to point them to an online survey that's only available in English, which was problematic because Kingsbridge Heights, like much of The Bronx, is predominantly Latinx. Walking up Jerome Ave. to PS 340 Annex, I spoke with a middle-aged lady who had lived in the neighborhood for forty years. She had seen it all with the Armory and was worried that it would become an events space like the Javits Center and gentrify the neighborhood, and she preferred that the Armory be a museum that talks about its military uses in the past. Appreciating her stories of the neighborhood and its history, I suggested that she share her thoughts at the public workshop, to which she said that would go after picking up some items from the local Morton Williams Supermarket down the block.

⁷⁵ NYC EDC. (2023, January 21). Public Workshop #2 Presentation Slides.

<https://kingsbridgetogether.com/sites/default/files/2023-02/Kingsbridge-Presentation-Public-Workshop-2.pdf>



(Personal photos)

Upon arrival, the gymnasium was absolutely packed, and there was a line, which I later discovered was for a one-person bathroom, the only one available for any of the approximately 250 workshop attendees to use. When I went to the front table to sign in and pick up the ever-important engagement worksheet, the EDC staffer at the table informed me that there were no English worksheets left, only Spanish. Soon after that, they ran out of the Spanish worksheets.



(Source: NYC EDC)⁷⁶

⁷⁶ NYC EDC. (n.d.-l). Emerging Themes from Workshop #2. <https://kingsbridgetogether.com/sites/default/files/2023->

Unlike last time when I failed to entirely fill out my worksheet, I was hell-bent on getting the worksheet done. The questions asked this time around were different, and mostly focused on uses for different generations and stakeholders at the Armory, potential tourism attractions for visitors, and a section to ask questions about the existing uses of the Armory. I was surprised that the workshop did not attempt to build on feedback from the first public workshop, which overwhelmingly supported community ownership and the collective economy as important solutions for the Armory. I found a quiet staircase in the school building and jotted down my answers. It took quite some time to fill out the worksheet. After finishing, I went into the gymnasium.

Demographics Survey
Optional

What is your zip code? _____

Which category best describes you?

- Indigenous American
- Alaskan
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latinx
- Middle Eastern or North African
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- White
- Other: _____

What is your age?

- Under 18
- 19-24
- 25
- 31-45
- 46-65
- Above 65

Do you have children or dependents? If yes, how many?

- Yes
- No

What best describes you? I am:

- A student
- A worker
- A parent
- Retired
- Other: _____

What categories best describe you?

- Female
- Male
- Non-Binary
- Transgender
- Other

What is your household income?

- Less than \$20,000
- \$20,000 - \$34,999
- \$35,000 - \$49,999
- \$50,000 - \$74,999
- \$75,000 - \$99,999
- \$100,000 or more

What is your primary language spoken?

- English
- Spanish
- Spanish Creole
- Chinese (Cantonese, Mandarin)
- Korean
- Russian
- Bengali
- French Creole
- Hindi, Urdu,
- Gujarati
- French
- Italian
- Greek
- Arabic
- Yiddish
- Hebrew
- Polish
- Other: _____

Thank you for your participation
Your input is of great value to us. Please leave this worksheet behind for us to collect.

PUBLIC WORKSHOP 2

12:00 pm: Workshop starts
12:30 pm: Presentation
2:00 pm: Facilitated Group Discussion

Throughout the day:
Armory Space Lab
Public Workshop 1 Recap Gallery

Name _____	Email _____
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Thinking about the re-development of the armory

I wish that...
For example, I wish the community is more involved in the decision-making process

I wonder if...
For example, I wonder if the armory can include an indoor basketball court for my children to play in

I would like to be informed about future public engagements, summaries of public workshop engagements, and general project updates.

Kingsbridge Armory for the Bronx community
Accompanied by a facilitated discussion at 2pm

How can the Armory be a space for work for the following?

Youth	Older Adults	Local Entrepreneurs and Workers
-------	--------------	---------------------------------

How can the Armory be a space for learning for the following?

Youth	Older Adults	Local Entrepreneurs and Workers
-------	--------------	---------------------------------

How can the Armory be a space for play for the following?

Youth	Older Adults	Local Entrepreneurs and Workers
-------	--------------	---------------------------------

Kingsbridge Armory as a New York City destination
Accompanied by a facilitated discussion at 2pm

What kinds of attractions should the Armory have for visitors, tourists and others?

Questions + concerns about the existing conditions of the Armory

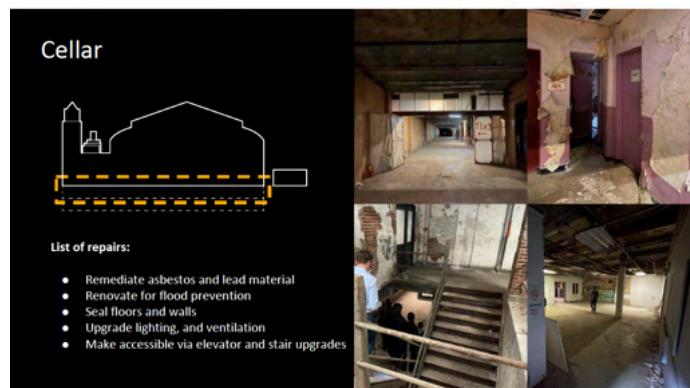
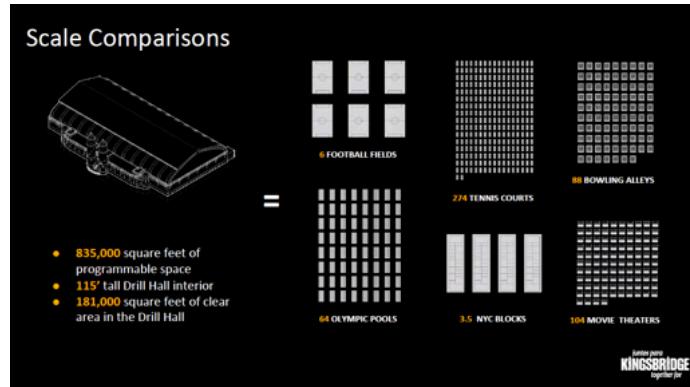
(Source: NYC EDC)⁷⁷

03/Kingsbridge%20Emerging%20Themes%20From%20Workshop%202.pdf

⁷⁷ NYC EDC & Hester Street. (n.d.-p). Public Workshop #2 Worksheet.

<https://kingsbridgetogether.com/sites/default/files/2023-02/Kingsbridge-Worksheet-2-English.pdf>

There was no childcare as there was last time, and I noticed many union representatives and overheard some displeased community members who were concerned about the union members not being from the Bronx. One interesting feature of this workshop was a 3D model of the Kingsbridge Armory. The EDC also presented on the many repairs that would need to be made at the Kingsbridge Armory that they own.





(Source: NYC EDC)⁷⁸

Inside of the Armory model, they placed a public bus model to show the sheer size of the building's drill hall, and it was breathtaking to see. After impassioned facilitated group discussions led by Hester Street, who talked us through our worksheets, the workshop wrapped up. Two interesting takeaways from the discussions were: 1) people's reaction to the worksheet questions and 2) how much people were coming around to the idea of community ownership for the Armory. People, in my group at least, very forcefully said that we are the attractions and that our community's needs should be prioritized before thinking about attracting visitors. Additionally, a few members of my group, who I would come to find out were unaffiliated with NWBCCC, supported community ownership for the Armory. After saying "bye" to my fellow NWBCCC brothers and sisters, I decided to at least leave the workshop pleased about the increased turnout.

In a report that wasn't publicly available till March 20, nearly nine weeks after the workshop and after public workshop #3, the priority uses for the spaces in the Armory were as follows:

Priority Uses for the Armory



79

⁷⁸ NYC EDC. (2023, January 21). Public Workshop #2 Presentation Slides.

<https://kingsbridgetogether.com/sites/default/files/2023-02/Kingsbridge-Presentation-Public-Workshop-2.pdf>

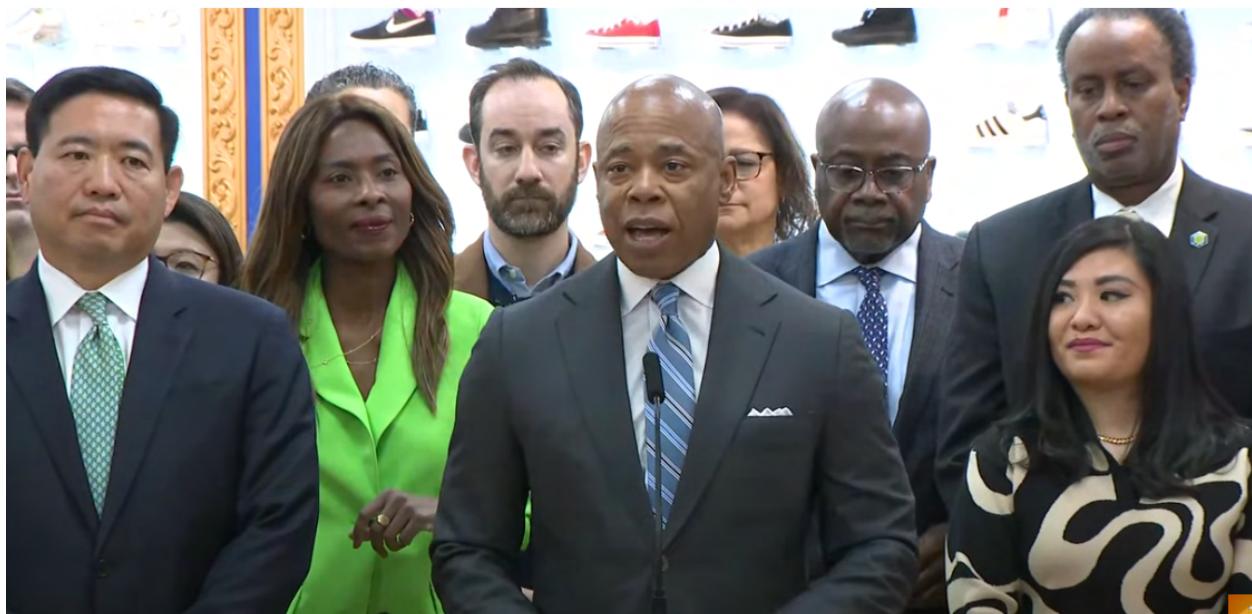
⁷⁹ NYC EDC. (n.d.-l). Emerging Themes from Workshop #2.

<https://kingsbridgetogether.com/sites/default/files/2023->

Part 4: Kingsbridge Armory Rally & March + Public Workshop

#3 – “What if We Owned It?” (Jan. 2023 – Mar. 2023)

A couple of days later, I found out that Mayor Adams himself came to a streetwear fashion chain store with multiple locations in NYC and New Jersey named Nohble at Kingsbridge Road and Jerome Ave. to announce a new program for small businesses in the City.⁸⁰ Flanked by Pierina, City Council Small Business Chairwoman, Julie Menin, Janet Peguero, and the likes of Goldman Sachs, Mastercard, NYC SBS, and various CDFIs, such as Renaissance Economic Development Corporation, the Mayor announced that NYC SBS would have a new low-interest loan to offer to small businesses from a fund named the *“Small Business Opportunity Fund,”* which would provide small businesses with loans of \$2,000-\$250,000, at a fixed interest rate of 4%, no minimum credit score required, and with no application fee to boot, among other features of the fund.⁸¹ The Mayor’s Office also mentioned that approximately 1500 local small businesses would be served by the fund.



(Source: Philippine Daily Mirror)⁸²

03/Kingsbridge%20Emerging%20Themes%20From%20Workshop%202.pdf

⁸⁰ Mayor Adams, SBS Commissioner Kim Announce Opening of Applications for Historic \$75M “Opportunity Fund” to Help Small Businesses Lead Pandemic Recovery. Office of the Mayor. (2023, January 23).

<https://www.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/054-23/mayor-adams-sbs-commissioner-kim-opening-applications-historic-75m-opportunity#/0>

⁸¹ NYC SBS. (n.d.-r). NYC Small Business Opportunity Fund. <https://sbsopportunityfund.nyc/>

⁸² Philippine Daily Mirror. (2023g, February 14). Mayor Adams and SBS commissioner Kim Laud Small business opportunity fund rollout. <https://www.philippinedailymirror.com/mayor-adams-and-sbs-commissioner-kim-laud-small-business-opportunity-fund-rollout/>

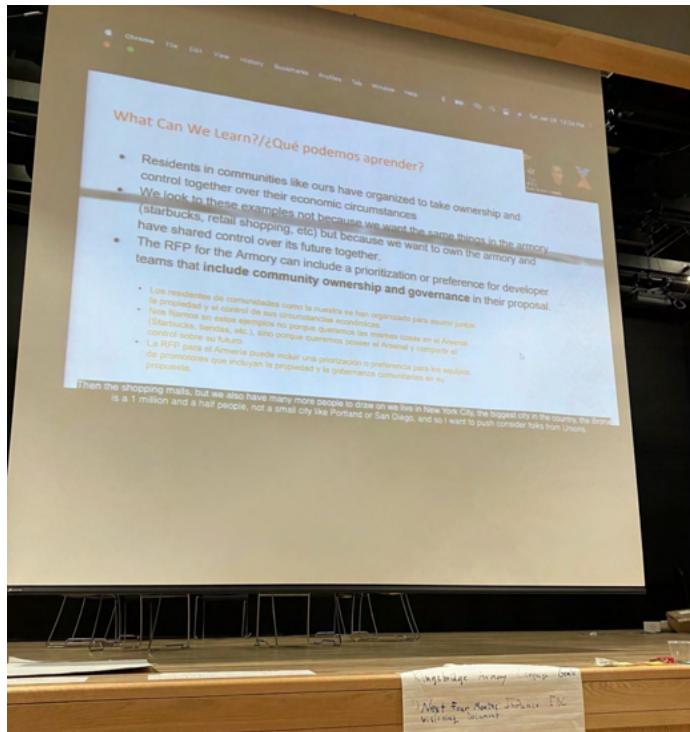
Hearing the announcement, I thought: *“More loans?”* Of course, that’s important, and accessing capital is always a barrier for BIPOC businesses, as mentioned at the press conference, who often need assistance right now, but that doesn’t address the deep-rooted issues that small businesses, especially around the Kingsbridge Armory, are facing. I also wondered if many struggling small businesses around Kingsbridge Road knew that the Mayor came to the neighborhood and if NYC SBS would come and inform them about the new program. As Abigail would later tell me, NYC SBS is short-staffed and not able to serve small businesses as well as what is needed in communities, and they’re not focused on the anti-displacement of small businesses, as a number of community-based organizations across the City are. Abigail would also inform me that NYC SBS’s scope is largely focused on new businesses, rather than on helping to preserve existing small businesses. Approximately 80% of the small businesses that SBS interacts with are new businesses trying to open, Abigail told me.

Sadly, as I would later find out from Juan and Christian Ramos, the Small Business Opportunity Fund was not able to support the many businesses that applied for it seeking relief. After over 10,000 struggling small businesses applied, the program was placed on hold.⁸³

The following week was spent trying to get people to show up to NWBCCC’s monthly meeting on Saturday, January 28th, another effort that requires lots of phone banking and work. At the meeting, held in PS 340 Annex, we debriefed the prior workshop. Some people mentioned that they were disappointed that their feedback at the workshop was not written down the way they expressed it. When then talked about NWBCCC’s strategy for the next few months. The goals were simple: influence EDC’s visioning document and win EDC’s RFP for development. If NWBCCC’s RFP was not to be selected, it had another Plan B up its sleeves.

During this meeting, Juan found it imperative that we watch Evan’s presentation on shared ownership, especially for those unable to make it to the virtual adaptive reuse panel in January.

⁸³ Ghani, A. (2023). NYC Mayor Pauses The \$75 Million Opportunity Fund For Small Businesses. <https://original.newsbreak.com/@abdul-ghani-1588677/2937054860350-nyc-mayor-pauses-the-75-million-opportunity-fund-for-small-businesses>



(Personal photo)

People were moved by Evan's words and had lots of questions about what shared ownership entails. My question to Sandra and Juan was: *"What amount of shared ownership of the Kingsbridge Armory would you consider to be a victory for the community? 25%, 50% or more?"* They generally appreciated my question and it gave them more to think about. From there, we began to prep for NWBCCC's annual meeting in February. NWBCCC's annual meetings, usually with approximately 150-200 people in attendance, are often an opportunity for the organization to mobilize community members affiliated and unaffiliated with NWBCCC for various campaigns. They're also an opportunity to produce community-driven feedback aimed at guiding NWBCCC's priority campaigns for the year.

Later that day, I met up with my partner, Kat, at La Marqueta in East Harlem. I had not been to that area of El Barrio in a long time and was eager to learn more about this famous market, currently owned by NYC EDC. Coming into the market under the elevated Metro North tracks on Park Ave., I was shocked at how few vendors there were and how there was only one Puerto Rican and Hispanic food vendor in the whole market. Speaking to a security guard there, he told me that the number of vendors in the market had dramatically decreased over the years. Besides the single Puerto Rican food vendor there, the only other remnants of Boricua heritage in the space were the Carmen Ayala Art Studio which was closed when I was there, and an empty event space across the street from the food market named La Placita, after San Juan's famous live music and dancing area.⁸⁴⁸⁵ The guard would tell me that the event space is mostly used in the summer. At the time, as seen with NWBCCC's video with local teenagers advocating

⁸⁴ Cocotazo Catering LLC. (n.d.). <https://cocotazocateringllc.com/>

⁸⁵ NYC EDC. (n.d.-m). La Marqueta. <https://publicmarkets.nyc/la-marqueta>

for a community owned Armory, there were lots of talks by community members about having market spaces for local street vendors and small businesses in the Armory, so La Marqueta was a concerning and sad sight to see because it did not strongly reflect the predominantly Latinx community surrounding it as it once used to when it had over 500 vendors. I would later learn that La Marqueta faces other challenges, including tensions between legacy vendors and new vendors selling high priced artisanal products that cater to the gentrifiers in East Harlem and vendors opening up stores outside the market to stay afloat, decreasing their investment in La Marqueta, and, the nondescript appearance of any market existing, causing slow foot traffic.⁸⁶



(Personal photo)

The following day as I was walking down Broadway from campus, I noticed a banner with the photo of a familiar face outside the Forum building at the controversial Manhattanville Columbia Expansion building.⁸⁷ As I got closer, I realized it was a picture of US Congressman Adriano Espaillat, with his signature slicked-back hair and poised demeanor. When I looked over, I saw former Congressman Charles Rangel get escorted into the building. *"This has to be an important event,"* I thought. I was right because it was Espaillat's annual State of the District speech.⁸⁸ Hundreds of people were filing into the building, and I even saw some NWBCCC people, who told me that others were on the way. After dropping off my stuff at coat check, it was up to the auditorium, which only had a few seats left in the back row. As soon as I got seated, Espaillat protege, Council Member Oswald Feliz, and Former Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields kickstarted the event into action and the national anthem was sung, followed by several prayers from clergy. This would then be followed by acknowledging the many elected officials who were sitting in the audience. And then, some of the City and State's most powerful politicians came in to give their remarks: NYC Mayor Eric Adams, Governor

⁸⁶ Scattergood, A. L. (2013). *La Marqueta: Examining the Retail Landscape of East Harlem* (thesis).

⁸⁷ Manhattanville Controversy. (n.d.-g). https://www.wikicu.com/Manhattanville_controversy

⁸⁸ Rep. Adriano Espaillat. (2023e, January 29). Welcome to the 2023 State of the District, hosted by Rep. Adriano Espaillat. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xauBSx11-RA&t=2437s>

Kathy Hochul, US Senator Chuck Schumer, and US Senator Kirsten Gillibrand. Mayor Eric Adams was heckled but laughed it off, saying:

"It feels so good to be in New York, you know what I'm saying? It feels so good to be in New York, you know? In other cities, when you are heckled, they crumble. In New York, we just love the energy of all the people. You could heckle, yell at me, call me names, and all I do is throw on that smile, welcome to New York! 3.5 million people, 30 million opinions, you know that?"



(Personal photo)

And then later, to much fanfare and applause, Espaillat himself walked onto the stage. From left to right on a projector screen, the centerpieces of his speech were three “transformational regional projects” that he’s focused on: the 2nd Avenue Subway, the Kingsbridge Armory and the Uptown Cultural Center. After starting with the 2nd Avenue Subway, he said the following of the Kingsbridge Armory:

“The Bronx has a similar transformative project, and that’s the Kingsbridge Armory!”

(Crowd applause)

“Which is the largest armory in the nation, Congressman. It has over 180,000 square feet and seven stories going down. You could fit three football fields inside the Armory. And that Kingsbridge Armory project is a revolutionary one, and would potentially bring thousands of good-paying jobs to the families of the Northwest Bronx. It also has the potential, it has the great potential, to strengthen the commercial strips, such as Kingsbridge Road, Fordham Road and Bedford Park, that need a lot of help right now. The project has already gotten \$5 million for redevelopment thanks to the great work of Councilwoman Pierina Sanchez who’s here with us today. (Crowd applause) And it has the undivided, and I mean it, the undivided and full support of The Bronx Borough President, Vanessa Gibson. Now, Governor Hochul has already committed \$100 million to the project, not simply as a loan, but as a potential grant for the development of that great project. Last year, I was excited to bring the US Department of Labor Secretary Marty Walsh to visit the location. This was an area that was the hardest hit during the COVID-19 pandemic, and this

project, once completed, will send a clear message to the world that we are back and that we will rebuild The Bronx.” (Crowd applause)

As I looked at the large projector screen on stage behind the Congressman that featured a picture of Espaillat with the Secretary of Labor on the roof of the Kingsbridge Armory's head house and that read: “Working For You in Congress, Working With You in the Community;” I perplexed. On one hand, you had a US Congressman who, as he mentioned at the adaptive reuse panel, is prioritizing the Kingsbridge Armory and speaking with other levels of government to pool resources and monies together to get the redevelopment done. And on the other hand, you had a Congressman who was publicly disconnected from the vision of community activists in Kingsbridge Heights who have long been organizing for the Armory, a vision that has shifted from development as usual to economic democracy. The Congressman acknowledged many people and organizations that day as elected officials often tend to do, but made no mention of NWBCCC or its priority demands for the Armory. Similarly, as the Chairman of the Small Business Committee, it was heartening to hear him acknowledge that small businesses on Kingsbridge Road are struggling and need help. On the other hand, however, it was concerning to not hear him mention the potential negative impacts that the Kingsbridge Armory would have on small businesses or any real plan to protect them. Moreover, he did not mention the merchants association or the need for local small businesses to be involved in the City's conservations surrounding the Armory's redevelopment. These things made me wonder how much time Espaillat, himself, spends on the ground in Kingsbridge Heights talking with community organizers, talking with small businesses, Community Working Group Members and getting educated on the Armory's organizing history in the Northwest Bronx.

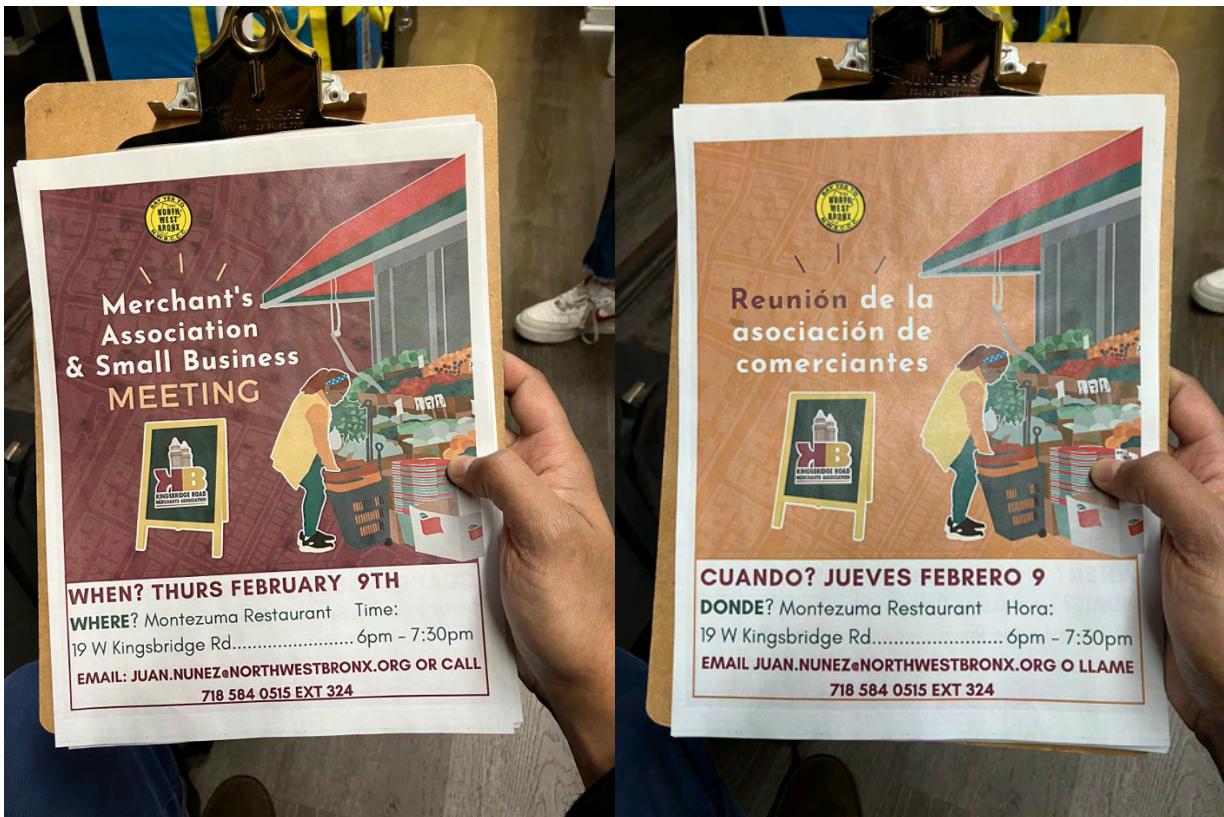


(Personal photo)

As Espaillat's speech winded down to an end and other hecklers were escorted out of the auditorium, I told Juan, who was unable to get into the building because it had reached capacity, what I heard and rested my thoughts with my school work that needed to be completed before the week started.

The following week, Juan and I's efforts to revive the Kingsbridge Road Merchants Association were starting to come to fruition. After several meetings the weeks prior brainstorming ideas via video call with the association's Vice President, Christian Ramos, Eddie Cuesta, Executive Director of Dominicanos USA, and Evy Viruet, former Small Business Organizer at NWBCCC, it was decided that we need to organize a preliminary NWBCCC and merchant association-sponsored meeting with businesses to get a pulse on what issues they're dealing with in their businesses and in the community, to see if there was any interest in reviving the defunct merchants association, to update small businesses on what was going on with the Kingsbridge Armory, and to establish a date/time for a next meeting, potentially with EDC and elected officials on hand. Juan and I had a solid team that consulted us: Christian, the Vice President of the merchant association at the time, has been a small business owner on Kingsbridge Road for over 20 years, planned annual summer festivals and holiday events on Kingsbridge Road, and helped organize small businesses in the neighborhood when their landlords threatened to double and triple their rents following the approval of KNIC. Evy, born and raised in The Bronx, is a tenant organizer who used to work as a small business organizer with NWBCCC for several years, supporting businesses in various commercial corridors in the Northwest Bronx, and successfully fighting, together anti-displacement small business community organizing coalitions, such as United for Small Business NYC, for the passage of legislation in City Council that established the City's first-ever Storefront Tracker, a public and searchable database that requires landlords to report the median rents, lease terms, and vacancies of all first and second-floor commercial spaces, and, legislation that requires a comprehensive analysis of neighborhood commercial corridors every five years. Eddie, who has family in Kingsbridge Heights, is the head of an organization that is heavily active on the ground in getting Dominicans in New York to vote, which has, through the obtainment of extensive community data, provided him with a strong understanding the issues small businesses in Kingsbridge Heights, a community that is almost 40% Dominican, are facing.

After talking with the owners of the popular Montezuma Restaurant on Kingsbridge Road, we were able to secure a meeting space in the large restaurant for the merchants association on Thursday, February 9th from 6-7:30 pm. The next steps were to reach out to other small businesses that had previously been members of the merchant association or engaged with its affairs to one extent or another. To that end, Christian gave us what looked like an old hand-written list of thirty businesses, and Juan, myself and a few NWBCCC members and volunteer interns set off to distribute the flyers. To keep us organized, I created a spreadsheet and inserted all the storefront addresses Christian provided, later transferring them to a shareable Google Maps that we could use to create an efficient walking route for outreach. We also brought flyers of NWBCCC's annual meeting scheduled for February 24th to post around the neighborhood.



(Personal photos)

On a late Tuesday evening on January 31st, after showing the volunteers, including one who was fortunately from Kingsbridge Heights and spoke Spanish, by example how to engage with the businesses and invite them to the merchant association meeting, I, for the purpose of dividing and conquering with the little time that we had, left the volunteers behind at the eastern end of the Kingsbridge Road commercial corridor near Grand Concourse to start speaking with businesses by the western end of the corridor near Sedgwick Ave, just a couple of miles north from where hip hop was birthed by DJ Kool Herc at 1520 Sedgwick. Equipped with tape, my half-charged phone, a blank contact sign-up sheet, and a stack of flyers for the two aforementioned NWBCCC events, one by one I made my way down Kingsbridge Road, hitting up the businesses on my map, and posting annual meeting flyers to storefronts that granted permission and street poles. Seeing me post flyers of the annual meeting onto poles, some people came up to me and asked: *"Is this for the Armory?"* After telling them "yes," I smiled, relieved that at least some people knew about what was going on with the Kingsbridge Armory.

The next day, on February 1st, I jumped on a zoom call with Juan, Evy, Christian and Eddie, where Juan and I updated the others on our progress and where we planned an agenda for the February 9th meeting. After a thoughtful discussion, I told them about a rally that was scheduled for the following morning at City Hall for Commercial Rent Stabilization. I explained to them that community organizations such as Cooper Square Committee and Chhaya from Queens, along with mission-aligned artists, were planning to rally for Intro 93, a bill in City

Council that would, similar to rent stabilization laws for residential tenants in NYC, stabilize the rents of commercial tenants.⁸⁹

Sponsored by Council Member Diana Ayala of East Harlem, the legislation would:

“..establish a system of commercial rent registration and regulation applicable to retail stores of 10,000 square feet or less, manufacturing establishments of 25,000 square feet or less, and professional, services or other offices of 10,000 square feet or less. The Mayor would appoint a nine-member Commercial Rent Guidelines Board responsible for annually establishing guidelines and the rate of rent adjustments for covered commercial spaces.”⁹⁰

The NYC Artist Coalition believes that commercial rent stabilization:

“..provides an important tool to protect New York City small businesses and nonprofits from predatory rent hikes. Currently, there is no system in place to prohibit a landlord from raising the rent by 500%, or harassing one commercial tenant to end their lease to rent to a higher-paying tenant. Commercial tenants make up our neighborhoods: they are the restaurants, bodegas, laundromats, bookstores, after-schools, venues and all local shops that make each neighborhood distinct and uniquely New York; yet, our current commercial rental market is based on individual profit incentives, not on what is in the best interest of the neighborhood or needed for businesses and residents to thrive.”

Their website also states that

“Today, businesses have no idea how much their current space will cost once their lease ends; many are operating in spaces where they are month-to-month because renegotiating the rent after a lease expires comes with a huge risk of a rent hike. Many others have closed or moved because landlords demanded high rents when leases ended. Setting guidelines on the rent ensures that small businesses can responsibly plan for the future, knowing how much they’ll need to pay for use of the location their business needs to operate.”⁹¹

Reading the NYC Artist Coalition’s statement felt like they were once NWBCCC organizers in a past life who had seen what many small businesses in Kingsbridge Heights went through and continue to go through. Unfortunately, the issues and uncertainty faced in Kingsbridge Heights are faced by many BIPOC and immigrant-owned small businesses citywide that don’t have nearly enough protections as residential tenants, especially rent stabilization. Critically reflecting on the legislation, I wondered what, if anything, needs to be amended in the language of the stalled legislation to deliver results for the small businesses that need it the most.

⁸⁹ NYC Artist Coalition. (n.d.-j). Fair Rent NYC. <https://fairrentnyc.nycartc.com/>

⁹⁰ Int 0093-2022. New York City Council . (n.d.).

<https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=5534186&GUID=0FA34310-33D2-4090-9A39-2396910C9EB5&Options=ID%7CText%7C&Search=int+93>

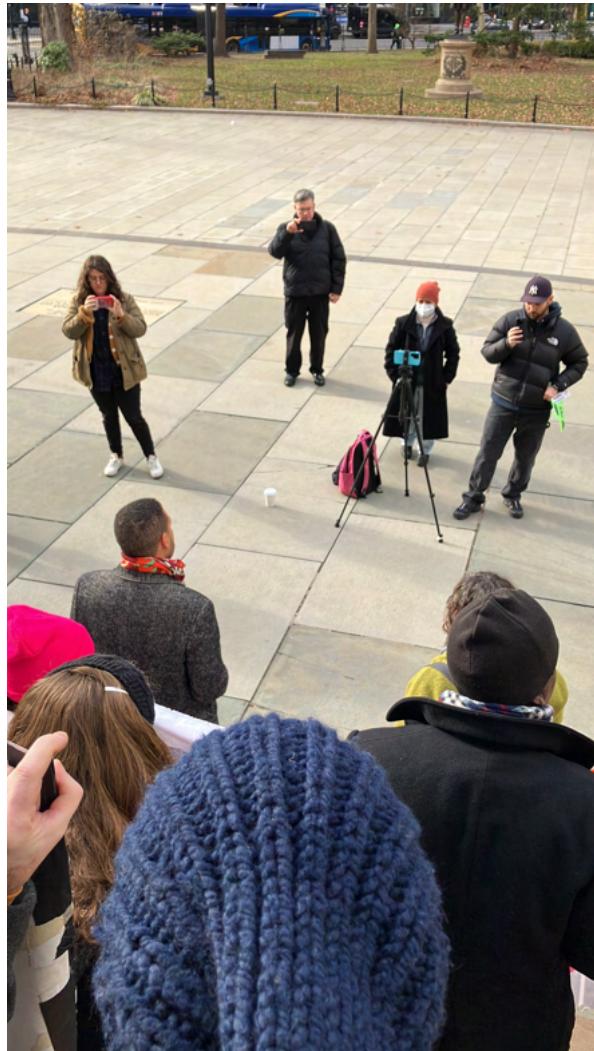
⁹¹ Fair Rent NYC. (n.d.-d). What is commercial rent stabilization as proposed by Intro 93?

<https://fairrentnyc.nycartc.com/what-is-commercial-rent-stabilization/>

The next morning on Tuesday, February 2nd, I woke up and packed my bags for work, school, NWBCCC and this 9 am rally that I was headed to at City Hall for commercial rent stabilization. I had been to City Hall before for different rallies large and small. When I arrived, there was a medium-sized group of people ready to get the rally started. Chhaya was there with about three business owners from Jackson Heights, Queens who provided testimony; my supervisor from Cooper Square, Abigail, was there with a business owner she invited from the Lower East Side who had been struggling recently; Street Vendor Project was there; the Yemeni American Merchants Association was there; many members of the NYC Artist Coalition were there; and, Jenny Dubnau from Western Queens CLT was there too. Looking around to see if any city council members would speak at the rally, as they usually do, I only saw Council Member Christopher Marte, whose district encompasses the southernmost neighborhoods of Manhattan, including the Financial District, Chinatown, Battery Park City and portions of the Lower East Side.

As we began to assemble on the front steps of City Hall to start the rally, I looked to the bottom of the steps and saw no news cameras and no other elected official. There was only a small group of acquaintances taking pictures and Nicholas Heller, otherwise known as New York Nico, a New York City-born-and-raised social media influencer with over a million Instagram followers, who posts content of quirky characters in the streets of the city, and, who has famously started successful crowdfunding campaigns for struggling businesses throughout the City in recent years.⁹²

⁹² Carmel, J. (2021, February 12). The Work Diary of the Unofficial Talent Scout of New York City. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/12/business/nico-heller-new-york-city.html>



(Personal photo)

The Council Member only had so much time due to a meeting he had to soon attend, and stated the following at the beginning of the rally:

“Every year, there’s a new story about a small business that we love closing. Timbuktu, Ming’s Caffe recently in Chinatown. All throughout my district, whether it’s in Little Italy, the Seaport, or on Bleeker Street, it’s always news article after news article that a generational business is closing. And why? Because greed. Because of profit over people. Because of private equity having portfolios of buildings and not caring about the mom and shop that has been doing the work every single day. During the pandemic, who was open? Our small business owner.

(Crowd applause)

Who’s the one that lined up the street to keep us safe? The small business owner. Who’s the one that says ‘don’t worry this time, you could get me next time’ to help a struggling family? The small business owner. It’s time that the City Council and this administration steps up for them and says that this time is your time. Let’s protect our small businesses.”

It was interesting that Christopher mentioned Timbuktu, a former Moroccan goods store on 2nd Ave, because I had visited their store for the holiday season in 2022, just days before they closed. It was a sad sight to see this beloved store close at the complete whim of its new landlord after being in business for more than 20 years. I can recall many customers walking in just to bid farewell and well wishes to the store owners. Despite the sad news, the owners were as charming and pleasant as ever, giving their customers, myself included, great customer service, something that you lose when in neighborhoods when small businesses are displaced in exchange for chain stores.⁹³ (Christian interview)

After Christopher left, the aforementioned community organizations and small business owners present shared their testimony. As we listened to the troubling testimonies of the business owners, many elected officials walked past us on their way into City Hall, where they meet and pass laws.



(Personal photo)

⁹³ Joy, S. (2022, December 20). *Moroccan specialty shop Timbuktu being forced out after 20 years on 2nd Avenue.* EV Grieve. <https://evgrieve.com/2022/12/moroccan-specialty-shop-timbuktu-being.html>



As a handout from the NYC Artist Coalition indicated that day, only 25 of the City Council's 51 council members supported the Intro 93 legislation for commercial stabilization. So, Olympia Kazi, a founding member of the coalition, seized the opportunity to run down elected officials who had not supported yet, passing the handout with information on the legislation and its co-sponsors and urging them to support the cause. Council Member Oswald Feliz was among the council members that Olympia ran down.

As the rally went on, the sponsor of the legislation herself, Diana Ayala, walked by, as did the Chair of the City Council's Small Business Committee, Julie Menin, who represents huge portions of the Upper East Side and Roosevelt Island. Both briefly waved to us as they walked by, not even taking a minute to make a quick comment in

support or learn about the rally. Moreover, Chair Menin is not a co-sponsor of the bill.

These political dynamics were tough to swallow, especially since I had become so immersed in the issues of small businesses, especially BIPOC and immigrant-owned small businesses.

As Abigail would later tell me, there's little political willpower in New York to meaningfully protect small businesses, which are often seen as small constituencies for elected officials. As Evy and Christian would later tell me, the lack of commercial tenant protections is directly felt by communities of color like Kingsbridge Heights in the Bronx where many small businesses lack leases and are on month-to-month rental arrangements, have poor relationships with their landlords, are struggling to afford property taxes and higher costs associated with inflation, and have not been able to successfully make use of different resources available to support small businesses with their leases, finances and business strategy, including NYC Department of Small Business Services' (NYC SBS) Commercial Lease Assistance Program, grants, and low-interest loans from the likes of community-focused nonprofits, such as the Renaissance Economic Development Corporation. (Abigail interview)

Additionally, as a 2022 City Comptroller report would indicate, out of the five boroughs, the Bronx received the fewest NYC SBS loans and grants for COVID-19-related financial assistance. Despite accounting for about 8% of the City's small businesses with fewer than 100 employees, the Bronx only received 2% of available loan funding. On the other hand, for small businesses

with fewer than 100 employees, Manhattan businesses received 60% of loan funding, Brooklyn received 22%, Queens received 13% and Staten Island got 3%. Breaking down the numbers for small businesses with fewer than 100 employees: Manhattan accounts for 41%, Brooklyn is 26%, Queens is 21% and Staten Island is 4%.⁹⁴

For grant funding provided to small businesses with fewer than 5 employees, the numbers are similar. Manhattan received 63% of grant funding, Brooklyn received 20%, Queens received 13%, Staten Island received 2.1% and The Bronx received 2%. Meanwhile, Manhattan accounts for 38% of such businesses, Brooklyn is 28%, Queens is 23%, The Bronx is 8% and Staten Island is 4%.⁹⁵

Compounded by the fact that, according to a State Comptroller report, with 90% of The Bronx being minority residents, the Bronx has the highest share of minorities of any borough. Yet, The Bronx had the highest hospitalization and death rates for COVID-19 and an unemployment rate of 25% in May 2020, a peak time of the pandemic, and the highest unemployment rate of any borough.⁹⁶

As I left the rally to head to class, I looked up the Ming's Caffe that Councilmember Marte mentioned. An online article with a list of business closures read:

"Ming's Caffe, a restaurant along Canal Street that fell somewhere between a Hong Kong-style cafe and New York bodegas, is done. The restaurant was a gathering place for senior citizens, construction workers, taxi drivers, and younger artists types who shared an appreciation for the large and affordable menu. Yelp and Google now list Ming's as permanently closed; calls to the business on Friday morning revealed that the phone line has been disconnected."

Listed right below Ming's Caffe was a small restaurant name Cafe Cortadito in the Lower East Side that Abigail and I spoke to as they were closing down. The article read:

"Cuban restaurant Cafe Cortadito is done after 18 years on East Third Street. Owners Ricardo Arias and Patricia Valencia attributed the closure to a rent hike — from \$8,000 to \$15,000 a month.."⁹⁷

However, the situation was more nuanced in that the restaurant was tired of dealing with a hostile landlord that harassed them. Fortunately, after some relocation support from Cooper

⁹⁴ New York City Comptroller. (2022h, December 9). Department of Small Business Services' COVID-19 Loans and Grants Underserved the Bronx. <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/newsroom/department-of-small-business-services-covid-19-loans-and-grants-underserved-the-bronx/>

⁹⁵ New York City Comptroller. (2022h, December 9). Department of Small Business Services' COVID-19 Loans and Grants Underserved the Bronx. <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/newsroom/department-of-small-business-services-covid-19-loans-and-grants-underserved-the-bronx/>

⁹⁶ Office of the New York State Comptroller. (2021a, June). Recent Trends and Impact of COVID-19 in the Bronx. https://www.osc.state.ny.us/reports/osdc/recent-trends-and-impact-covid-19-bronx?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery

⁹⁷ Fortney, L., & McCart, M. (2023, February 24). A Restaurant That Ushered in a 'New Era' of Vietnamese Fine Dining Is Done — And More Closings. <https://ny.eater.com/2023/2/3/23580317/nyc-restaurant-closings-february-2023>

Square Committee, the restaurant has found a new location in the neighborhood that it is relocating to. Reading these articles made me fear the prospect of soon seeing similar articles and stories from local Bronx-based news outlets covering the displacement of beloved BIPOC small businesses in the Kingsbridge Heights area as a result of landlord greed and speculation stemming from the future redevelopment of the Kingsbridge Armory.



A few days after the Commercial Stabilization Rent rally at City Hall, Juan and I, after more days of phone banking and talking to small businesses on Kingsbridge Road, were ready for our preliminary meeting on February 9th for the Kingsbridge Road Merchants Association at Montezuma Restaurant. When I arrived just before the meeting started was to start at 6 pm, Juan was there and Christian was the only business there. As others, including Evy, Sandra and representatives from Dominicanos USA arrived shortly after, still no businesses. Finally, around 6:30 pm, 2-3 more businesses, including the restaurant owner arrived and we got started. By the time we got closer to 7 pm, 6 businesses had gathered. Prior to the meeting, I created a packet, translated into Spanish by Juan, that we could hand out to the businesses at the restaurant. This packet had information on the merchant association's history, and most importantly, a list of resources available for small businesses, including their websites, certain contacts at different small business assistance program that spoke Spanish and English, and a basic summary of what each resource entailed.

Juan took to the stage next to our tables and conducted the meeting in Spanish, since all of the business owners present were Hispanic. The top issues and concerns received from small businesses at the meeting were: security and not feeling safe in an area they noticed had experienced an increase in crime, the increase of smoke shops in the area and the legalization of marijuana, the need for business loans, dirty streets, competing business with street vendors, needing help with taxes, lost revenues since the pandemic, needing help with their leases, and high rents and a need for financial assistance to pay rent. It's important to note that many of the businesses, which, among others, included a pharmacy, a hair salon, and a tax

services office, were not new businesses. They had been around the neighborhood for some time.



This got me thinking: were older businesses in less need of support than newer ones? As Evy, who often worked with merchant leaders like Christian, would confirm later: it was usually the newer businesses that needed the most help on Kingsbridge Road, not that the older ones weren't struggling either. (Evy interview)

All in all, the small businesses seemed to appreciate the meeting and the packet we prepared, and confirmed a second date later in the month for another merchant association meeting with EDC. I thanked Montezuma's owner for hosting us, said goodbye to my NWBCCC team, ate up my last pieces of calamari, and walked out of the busy restaurant pleased to be working with people in the community that were serious about helping the local small businesses during this important time.

Through mid-February 2023, NWBCCC conducted significant outreach in the form of text banking, phone banking, flying, social media and email blasts, and more to get the word out to its members, the community at large, and supporters about its upcoming annual meeting on the 24th at Monroe College. I was helping throughout this time scouring through excel sheets of contact info, and calling as many people from NWBCCC's office and my apartment as I could during my spare time.

This was also when several longtime organizers and members of NWBCCC wrote op-eds in local newspapers, such as the Norwood News. Elisabeth Ortega-Bailey, a 34-year-old mother and



NWBCC member who has been organizing for the Kingsbridge Armory since she was 16, stated the following in an op-ed titled *Op-Ed: Bronxites Will Create New Kingsbridge Armory*:

*"We do not want another failure. This time, the Coalition demands that there is a significant amount of community ownership of the facility. This is not a fantasy. Market Creek Plaza in San Diego, CA and the Portland Community Investment Trust in Portland, OR, are both examples of organized communities developing leadership and sharing the benefits, and risks and responsibilities of community real estate ownership with values-aligned developers. This can and will benefit all."*⁹⁸

She then went on to say:

"We do agree strongly that the Armory needs to earn significant revenue to maintain the property, but that can and should lead to well-paying jobs for community members and not compete with local businesses..."

A re-developed Armory that vitally serves the community will not solve every challenge my neighbors and I face, but it can provide a wide range of opportunities: jobs, education, exercise, entertainment, community collaboration, and more.”

As the NWBCCC annual meeting approached, some colleagues of mine from Cooper Square Committee told me about a rally that they were going to attend on February 23rd at City Hall in support of the New York Community Land Act, a package of pro-CLT and tenants' rights bills championed by the New York City Community Land Initiative (NYCCLI), a coalition of nonprofit community land trusts across the City, including NWBCCC's Bronx CLT, Cooper Square CLT, East New York CLT in Brooklyn, Western Queens CLT, Mott Haven-Port Morris Community Land Stewards, East Harlem CLT and more. According to New Economy Project, the nonprofit group that facilitates NYCCLI, the rally's purpose was to organize strong support from CLTs and elected officials across the City right before a City Council hearing, hosted by Council Member Pierina Sanchez from Kingsbridge Heights, Chairwoman of the City Council's Committee on Housing and Buildings.⁹⁹¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Ortega-Bailey, E. (2023, February 25). Op-Ed: Bronxites Will Create New Kingsbridge Armory.

<https://www.norwoodnews.org/op-ed-bronxites-will-create-new-kingsbridge-armory/#comments>

⁹⁹ New York City Comptroller. (2023b, February 23). NYC Comptroller, Public Advocate, Council Members, Advocates Rally for New Vision for Housing. <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/newsroom/nyc-comptroller-public-advocate-council-members-advocates-rally-for-new-vision-for-housing/>

¹⁰⁰ NYC Community Land Initiative. (n.d.-q). Take Action to Support the Community Land Act!

<https://nyccli.org/cla/>

The bills included in the New York Community Land Act are as follows:

- **Community Opportunity to Purchase Act (Intro 196):** COPA gives CLTs and other mission-driven nonprofits a first right to purchase multifamily buildings when landlords sell. Modeled on successful legislation implemented in Washington, D.C., and San Francisco, COPA would curb speculation and level the playing field for nonprofits to expand the supply of permanently-affordable, community- and tenant-controlled housing.
- **Public Land for Public Good (Intro 637):** Most City-owned land currently goes to for-profit developers, contributing to market-rate development and displacement in low-income Black and Brown communities. Intro 637 would require NYC to prioritize CLTs and nonprofit developers when disposing of City-owned land, to ensure public land is used for permanently-affordable housing and other public benefit.
- **Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Resolution (Res 38):** Resolution 38 calls on the New York State legislature and Governor Hochul to enact legislation giving tenants a first right to collectively purchase their buildings when a landlord sells.
- **Abolish and Replace the NYC Lien Sale:** The City Council must pass legislation prohibiting NYC from resuming the tax lien sale — a Giuliani-era policy that has destabilized and extracted wealth from Black and brown communities — and replace it with an equitable system that engages CLTs to keep New Yorkers in their homes and convert financially distressed buildings into permanently-affordable housing.¹⁰¹

Happening right before my work day hours for the day, I figured I'd go and check out the rally.

What I saw was a large and amped-up crowd, filled with many CLTs and housing justice groups: Chinatown CLT, This Land is Ours CLT, MET Council on Housing, etc. and accompanied by many local elected officials: City Comptroller Brad Lander, a former Council Member himself; NYC Public Advocate Jumaane Williams, Council Members Tiffany Caban from Queens, Sandy Nurse from Brooklyn, Lincoln Restler from Brooklyn, Charles Barron from Brooklyn, and Pierina herself. NWBCCC, however, was not present at the rally. In overlapping fashion, after an elected official would speak, a community organization would take the mic and speak to the crowd.

¹⁰¹ NYC Community Land Initiative. (n.d.-q). Take Action to Support the Community Land Act!
<https://nyccli.org/cla/>



(Personal photo)

It was an unprecedented moment in the history of the community ownership movement in New York because it was the first time the City Council's Housing Committee ever had a public hearing on any package of bills put forward by NYCLC and CLT coalitions of the past.

As the hearing wrapped up and East New York CLT delivered final remarks, a charismatic Pierina hyped up the crowd, singing: *"When I say COPA, you say TOPA..COPA!"* Crowd response: *"TOPA!"* Pierina: *"COPA!"* Crowd response: *"TOPA!"* Pierina: *"Housing is a?"* Crowd response: *"Human Right!"* Pierina: *"COPA!"* Crowd response: *"TOPA!"* Pierina: *"COPA!"* Crowd response: *"TOPA!"*

Pierina: *"Alright I should go into music. Let's go inside!"* The crowd responded in genuine laughter.

As people were starting to trickle inside, I saw a few people I recognized who are members of the NYC Chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America. After catching up, I learned that they were pleased about the event, but mentioned that they were surprised to see some of the elected officials who were present. When I asked which ones they were referring to, they mentioned that they were mainly surprised about Pierina given the campaign she ran and the

political endorsements she received. The more I learned about Pierina, the more I began to identify complex contradictions in her politics and actions.

Although I had to go to work and was unable to stay for the duration of the hearing, I was able to catch the opening testimony from the City's affordable housing development agency, the Department of Housing Preservation & Development (HPD). HPD expressed several concerns about COPA. Kim Darga, Deputy Commissioner of Development of HPD, stated that: 1) COPA, as currently drafted, is "very broad" and risks "undermining the goal of supporting more affordable mission-driven housing." 2) that "the breath of the legislation risks significantly disrupting the housing market potentially causing the most significant harm to small property owners." 3) that HPD had concerns that COPA would "slow the market" for residential sales of buildings 4) HPD welcomed discussions with the bill's sponsors to "narrow the scope of the legislation."¹⁰²

As I left City Hall, contemplating HPD's testimony, I wondered what the real estate industry's response would be.

Well, the real estate industry was in immediate opposition. Alvin Schein, a Partner at Seiden & Schein, P.C., "a boutique law firm with a recognized reputation for skillfully representing New York City's most sophisticated developers;"¹⁰³ mentioned the following:

"Do counsel for City Council Members ever tell them that their proposed laws don't even pass the smell test in terms of legality? Now, City Counsel member Carlina Rivera (with the support of Comptroller Brad Lander) is proposing a package of proposed laws that are intentionally designed to impair for-profit private ownership of real estate in NYC (and without a doubt, would disrupt the real estate market, drive down values and reduce tax collections). The most egregious of these proposals is a law (Intro 196) that would give not-for-profits a 120 day right of first refusal to buy any residential property having 3 units or more! HPD would be charged with administering the right of first refusal process. Considering that HPD is understaffed and is backlogged with work and also considering that very few not-for-profits have the resources or capability to buy existing occupied multi-family properties, sales would be delayed for a long period of time and the values of the entire privately owned multi-family market would likely go into free-fall. This would severely erode the City's tax base and reduce real estate tax revenues (which Brad Lander should surely understand!). What these elected officials do not seem to understand (or do not want to understand) is that a right of first refusal is a property right. The City does NOT have the legal right to grant any party a right of first refusal to buy someone else's property without paying for it. This would be unconstitutional under the 'taking without just compensation' clause of the Fifth Amendment to the US Constitution and Section 7 of Article 1 of the NYS Constitution.

Also, last year's attempts by some municipalities in NY to enact 'good cause eviction' laws were struck down as being in direct conflict with State law and thereby preempted. The proposed law in this

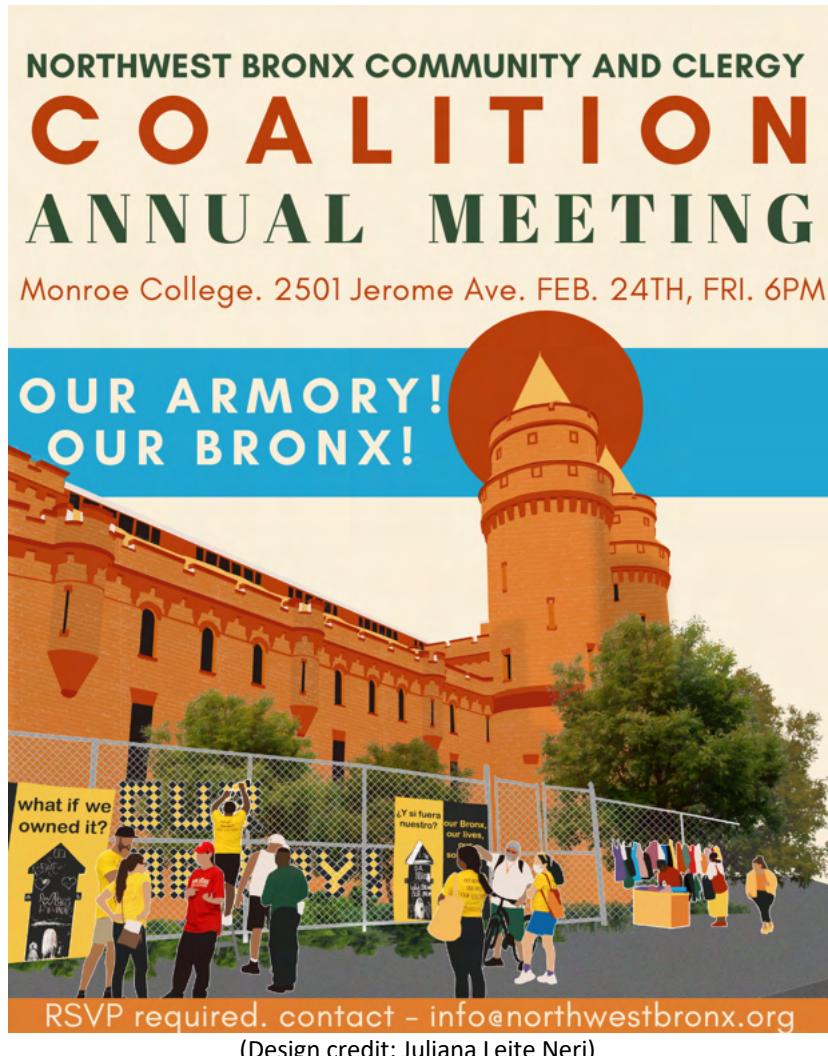
¹⁰² Stein, J., Koffler, P., & Schneider, E. C. (n.d.). The New York City Council Sets its Sights on Non-Profit Housing Ownership. Lexology. <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=7d148de7-e3aa-47c6-bb30-ce3e0f32ea6>

¹⁰³ Seiden & Schein, P.C. (2023f, March 27). About. https://seidenschein.com/#front_about

case (Intro 196) would also likely meet the same fate, before even getting into a constitutional question.”¹⁰⁴

Nonetheless, Pierina’s support for the Community Land Act and positive engagement with CLTs at the rally made me wonder if she would also support community ownership for the Kingsbridge Armory.

The very next day was NWBCCC’s annual meeting.



Getting off the D train that Friday evening, I had to rush to Monroe College because I was asked to be one of the facilitators for the community visioning exercises at the annual meeting, but also because we all had to do rapid COVID-19 tests upon entering the building at Monroe

¹⁰⁴ Schein, A. (2023, February 25). Alvin Schein on linkedin: City Council bill would nonprofits right of first refusal: 17 comments. Alvin Schein on LinkedIn: City Council Bill Would Nonprofits Right of First Refusal. <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7035244900233150465/>

College on Jerome Ave. Walking down a bustling Kingsbridge Road as the sunset was occurring, I noticed Christian's store was shut down with a sign outside that read "*temporarily closed*." "Oh no," I thought, "*this can't be real.*" I feared that Christian was facing financial difficulties.

Upon arrival, the gymnasium inside Monroe College was packed for the annual meeting.



(Personal photos)

After people trickled in, had some dinner that was offered and settled down, the event began with opening remarks from Wanda Salaman, Board President of NWBCCC and longtime community organizer in the Bronx, before Sandra gave the mic to Pierina, who said the following:

"When I was growing up in the neighborhood, I didn't know about Sistahs and Brothas United. I didn't know, even though I grew up right there on 196th and Bainbridge, I didn't know that you guys were two blocks away. And so when I was able to meet the Northwest Bronx and see the organizing and see the power that is in a space, I just, it just gave me so much energy and so much hope for what we can accomplish in the community, so thank you all for being here and doing what you do."

Sandra, thank you for inviting me into this space. Thank you for your partnership on the Kingsbridge Armory -take three!"

She then proceeded to acknowledge NWBCCC's Board Present, Wanda Salaman, and all the work she's done in The Bronx.

Pierina then followed by saying:

"I feel special as the lone elected official that is here today, but I take this with a lot of weight. I take this with a lot of seriousness, because we're here in this space in Monroe College, you have the Armory once again up on the screen, up on the stage, because you all have been fighting to redevelop the Armory since I was I little, little girl."

Crowd response: "That's right!"

Pierina:

"And the work that you have done has made it so that... yes, there have been challenges. Yes, there was a failed attempt in the beginning because we didn't want a mall. Yes, there was a second attempt because although a lot was gained in the community benefits agreement that was historic and that set the stage for so many other community benefits agreements. In 2013, that community benefits agreement couldn't come to fruition because the KNIC the Kingsbridge National Art Center wasn't able to get the financing. The City of New York had to sue and wrestle back control of the Armory. And right when I took office was right when this decision was being made by the courts, that the Armory was going to go back into the hands of the City. But we're here and I'm here in partnership and so happy to be working with Sandra and the Northwest Bronx and with all of the members of the working group, because it's not about control to 'the City,' it's about control to the community. It's about empowering the community. And so I wanna, I wanna just surface some of the tensions that that means."

She then proceeded to pause and give shout-outs to members of the Community Working Group, before continuing the following:

"And we're surfacing again, right, the third go around at least, the hopes and dreams of the community: community ownership, wealth building, wealth building, wealth building... did I mention wealth building?"



(Personal photo)

Pierina then proceeded to talk about what she believes has been historic and intentional disinvestment in The Bronx and the lives of Black and Brown people in communities like Kingsbridge.

She then got tense and gripped the microphone saying the following:

"And so that's a lot of power to stand on... that we are owed this, that you better. We have power that is not all the power. It's a lot of power, but it's not all the power. And so I want to bring that into this space that there are going to be tensions in what we want to see."

"But then we have a deficit of a billion or \$2 billion or however many dollars it's going to take to redevelop that Armory that's going to serve as an obstacle to say 'you can do it, and you can't.' Right? And so I want to welcome that partnership of how do we make sure that the communities and the residents of this district, but the

residents of the Bronx stay at the forefront of the decision making for what's gonna happen at the Armory. Right? We have a working group, we have community input sessions, we have town halls, we have all of this, but how do we remain empowered to make happen what the community wants to happen, and that is in unity...

I feel, you know, we're in the honeymoon stage in the sense that we're planning and we're dreaming big, but we're about to get to the rocky stages. And that's where it's really going to matter to stay strong and to believe that we have and that we are what the Bronx needs to be to have a better future.

So I'm gonna stay, and I'm gonna listen, and I'm reading...Ultimately, you know, you have my commitment. There's going to be these tensions, but you have my commitment to transparency. You have my commitment to openness. That when those hard trade-offs get presented, and they're like: 'Pierina, well, if you don't do this, then you're not gonna get a project' When that happens, I bring that here to this space. I bring that to the community, and I say: 'This is what I'm being told. I'm being told that they're going to shut it down if I don't do it like this. What do we do? What are we going to do with that?'

Crowd response: "Ok, we'll hold you to that!" "We'll hold you to that!"

Pierina:

"Right? Because that's the point at which many people - and I've seen it happen, we've all seen it happen - many people shut down, and they're like oh man, that threat is real, and I gotta go. But that's the point at which we need to come together. We need to stick together and we need to say: okay, alright, how much of this is bluffing, how much of this is real, and what do we do with this information? So thank you, thank you, thank you. My commitment is to do that with you. Staying and listen, listening, continuing to listen, and you know? Getting this thing.. getting this done. Y'all deserve it. We all deserve it."

When Pierina wrapped up her comments, I thought: "So, you supported CLTs the day before at City Hall in front of media cameras, several influential elected officials, and a slew of grassroots community groups from across the City, and the next day you come back to your own community, where the support for a community owned Kingsbridge Armory is growing, and this is what you tell us?" It was a measured speech, and she made it clear that she's a result-driven leader that won't work against us, but she refrained from supporting community ownership – the headline of the highly promoted event – for the Armory. Her transparency and honesty were great to receive, especially about the high-stakes moments that await our community in the months and years to come as a result of the Kingsbridge Armory, but the speech was not reassuring and we didn't receive Pierina's solidarity.

After the crowd clapped, Sandra honored all of the NWBCCC's staff members, and then, before we got into the community visioning activity, we handed out yellow roses, just as was done at the first art installation, to honor everyone else in the room.

For the community visioning activity, NWBCCC had identified five potential anchor revenue-generating projects that aligned with its values and principles and were consistent with feedback obtained from community members in recent months. The five anchor projects were: a STEM Workforce Development Hub, an Urban Farming Hub, an Advanced Manufacturing Hub, a Multi-Use Event Hub, and a Hemp Manufacturing Hub. With people seated at each of the approximately 15-16 round tables in the room, the facilitators got things rolling. My responsibility as a facilitator was to ensure everyone at my table felt welcomed and respected, to explain what each of the anchor project ideas entailed, to have my group rank their favorite ideas, and to obtain written feedback and questions from group members on sticky notes. It was a fun activity that sparked lots of questions and that got people excited and talking away. The only idea that didn't receive noticeable support in my group was the hemp manufacturing idea. On the other hand, many group members loved the urban agricultural idea, stating how underserved the Bronx is by Hunts Point, the nation's largest food distribution site.



(Personal photo)



(Personal photos)

As the event wrapped up, Michael Jackson played on the stereo in the room, and NWBCCC started cleaning the room up. I then realized that Jay Espy, himself, was at the annual meeting. With the afro gone, Jay was more grown than the younger version of himself that I had seen on YouTube. After mentioning how much I learned from his video, he mentioned that I was the second person at the annual meeting to tell him that. We then exchanged contact info and vowed to stay in touch.

After leaving the annual meeting, I walked with my friend Caesar down Kingsbridge Road, where we later got coffee at Mocha Café. After saying farewell, I proceeded down the hill of Kingsbridge Heights into Marble Hill, the northernmost tip of Manhattan physically next to the Bronx, with a sore throat. Craving a ginger beer soda to alleviate the discomfort, I walked inside a bodega near the Major Deegan Expressway. It was cold out, the next 1 train downtown to my destination wasn't coming for another while, and I decided to hang out in the bodega and enjoy the soda. The bodega owner didn't mind and things seemed fine. That was all until a frustrated guy with a North Face puffer jacket and fitted cap, accompanied by his partner wearing a Black ski mask, came into the store and asked me what I was doing there and where I was from. I instantly knew what that meant: I was on their territory and had to go. Not wanting any

problems, I just nodded, kept silent and walked out into the night as the bodega owner looked at me with indifference.



The following afternoon on Saturday, February 25th, New Economy Project hosted a Bronx Town Hall on the Community Land Act at the Pregones Theater, a theater in the South Bronx whose mission is to

"champion a Puerto Rican/Latinx cultural legacy of universal value through creation and performance of original plays and musicals, exchange and partnership with other artists of"

*merit, and engagement of diverse audiences.*¹⁰⁵¹⁰⁶ The event was a good opportunity to catch up with Mychal and Arif from South Bronx Unite and others I had gotten to know, and it was a good opportunity to meet people. Edward Garcia, NWBCCC's CLT Organizer, was also there and connected me with a student journalist that interviewed me on the spot about the Kingsbridge Armory. Leaving the event, I wondered how large these sorts of events could become in the Bronx in the coming years, especially if more people learn and become interested in the community control of neighborhood assets, such as the former Lincoln Detox Center that South Bronx Unite has reimagined with community members.

The next day, Sunday, February 26th was huge. For a week or so, it was rumored that Congressman Espaillat was going to invite Mayor Adams and other local elected officials to the Our Lady of Angels Roman Catholic Church for a Town Hall event about the Kingsbridge Armory.¹⁰⁷ Climbing up the West 229th Street step street, one of the many step streets ubiquitous to the Bronx, I arrived at Sedgwick Ave across the street from the brick building that is the Our Lady of Angels Roman Catholic Church (OLA), a church that is well-attended by the Hispanic community and that has close ties to NWBCCC, historically and presently.



(Personal photo)

¹⁰⁵ New Economy Project. (2023b, February 24). Bronx Community Land Act Town Hall.

<https://twitter.com/NewEconomyNYC/status/1629204767426727937?s=20>

¹⁰⁶ Pregones/PRTT. (n.d.-ae). About. <https://pregonesprtt.org/about/>

¹⁰⁷ Council Member Pierina Sanchez. (2023b, February 24). Post about the Kingsbridge Armory Town Hall.

<https://twitter.com/CMPiSanchez/status/1629229170877251584?s=20>

Similar to the first and second public workshops, you wouldn't have known the event was a Town Hall on the Kingsbridge Armory because there was no sign advertising it as such. The only signs visible were banners from Espaillat's office and Pierina's office. This stretch of Sedgwick Ave is particularly tranquil with the green Jerome Park Reservoir Loop nearby and there's not much pedestrian traffic as in other parts of the neighborhood. Nevertheless, it was odd to see no event sign, not even EDC's generic Together for Kingsbridge sign, posted outside, which made me think that the only attendees at the Town Hall were people in the know, people affiliated with one of the CWG organizations, or people who attend OLA.



(Personal photos)

Upon entering, the atrium of the church was well-occupied by staffers from EDC and Pierina's team who had their table filled with materials about the Armory. I was handed a flyer for public workshop #3 that had a confirmed date for the workshop, but no location or time. *"Location TBD"* it said. After signing in, I entered the nave of the church and took a seat close to the middle row of pews. The first half of pews in front of me were filled while the pews behind me slowly started to fill up as the event went on. Standing before the church in front of the chancel were from left to right: Espaillat, Pierina, Assemblyman George Alvarez, who unseated a longtime incumbent, Assemblyman Jose Rivera, after being endorsed by Espaillat, and Assemblywoman Yudelka Tapia, who else lost against Pierina in the Democratic Primary for Council District 14. Standing to the right of Tapia was Jennifer Sun, Executive Vice President of NYC EDC's Planning Division and Columbia GSAPP alum, and Juan, whose family goes to the church, like many other NWBCCC members, and cares deeply about it.



(Personal photo)

After opening remarks from Espaillat and other elected officials, such as State Senator Robert Jackson, whom Congressman Espaillat tried to unseat with one of his political protegees, in walked the Mayor to respectful applause from the audience.

Congressman Espaillat, a close friend of the Mayor: said the following: *"The mayor is very busy, but he took time from his busy schedule to be here with us. That shows the level of interest that this administration has in the Kingsbridge Armory."*

After, in Spanish, encouraging the crowd to applaud and welcome the Mayor, Espaillat handed the mic to the Mayor, who said the following:

"Thank you, Congressman. And you have amazing electeds here. This is a great opportunity for the Kingsbridge Armory to be developed and become an anchor for the entire community. The Bronx has been waiting a long time for a project of this size and magnitude, and it's going to take City Hall, our federal leadership, our City Council, our State lawmakers all coming together and hearing from you on what YOU want this crown jewel to look like. That is why the Congressman has hosted this, and I want to be here to hear directly from you. This is a partnership. This is a Dream Team of producing what you want this armory to look like. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. They're going to be those outside your community that's going to attempt to dictate and we're saying no to that. It must come from community-

based conversation. How do we find the RIGHT fit for the Armory that we can bring about jobs, economic development, opportunities for young people? ..And when you look at the magnitude of this project, this is a multi-billion dollar initiative that is going to need the type of combination of lawmakers to come together to make it happen. So I'm excited to be here, I'm excited about this opportunity. This is a legacy project, and all the electeds that are here clearly understand that this is a project that's going to define our ability to move these issues forward. So, thank you for allowing me to come up here and spend some time with you."



(Personal photo)

It was good to see the Mayor come to Kingsbridge Heights and sit for the duration of the Town Hall, making remarks that he was here to listen to us for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and that he was committed to partnering with all levels of government -until I remembered that his administration, just three days earlier, was expressing many concerns with the New York Community Land Act that were being pushed by the CLT and community ownership movement in NYC. The Mayor's comments were also predictable. Any politician would say let's bring jobs. What this Mayor did not do was make any indication the Armory was an opportunity to think outside of the box and go beyond traditional economic development. Time will tell how the administration will ultimately respond to legislation, such as the New York Community Land Act and shared ownership for the Kingsbridge Armory, but this impression was not reassuring that the Mayor, who didn't acknowledge a single community-based organization in his speech, would put community organizers' goals first.

After the Mayor's comments, Jennifer from EDC was handed the mic while the elected officials and Juan were up on stage and was ready to start the Q&A, saying: *"I will start. You should take your seat first. Ok, thank you. And I'm going to ask.."*

As she was talking, Juan, also at the front of the stage of his family's church as the electeds began to take a set, became visibly upset that NWBCCC was not given the opportunity to make opening comments as all the electeds were able to. He then turned over to Nate Gray, Vice President of Development at NYC EDC, who was standing next to him and muttered a few words.

Jennifer Sun: *"Um, good afternoon, everyone. Buenas tardes. I'm Jennifer Sun from New York City Economic Development Corporation..."*

Before she went on, Nate and Juan then motioned to her that Juan needs to make opening comments as well. She then looked over at Juan and Nate, saying the following:

Jennifer Sun: *"But I before I get started, I will introduce a community partner, Juan from Northwest Bronx Clergy Coalition."*

Juan then smiled through the frustration of multiple occurrences of EDC not giving NWBCCC the chance to make opening comments at Together for Kingsbridge events, and proceeded to make a speech in Spanish talking the importance of OLA to his family, the importance of the Armory and what's at stake for the community and small businesses, for example.



(Personal photo)

After Juan finished speaking, Jennifer then handed the mic over to a Pierina who rushed over to the chancel with her baby and said:

"Thank you so much to Northwest Bronx. So, I was asked to make sure there was a balance in the guest speaking, and so, if you don't mind Juan, I'll just say that Northwest, they're pushing because they're hearing from the community for ownership for the Armory. They're saying that this asset is too important and there needs to be ownership. I grew up, you know, in the shadow of the Armory. So did Juan. And now I'm going to have this little one growing up in the shadow of the Armory, and it's just too important. So Juan, thank you for your partnership, and just wanted to say that as well."

Yet another moment of Pierina just acknowledging how the NWBCCC and people in the community want community ownership.

And then the Q&A began and people who wanted to ask a question were handed with a single flashcard to write one question down. Now, when I found out about this Town Hall event, I was under the impression that elected officials, such as Pierina and Espaillat, were going to answer questions from the audience, akin to most town halls where electeds field questions from their constituents, but what transpired was anything but. After those with questions had their flashcards collected by EDC staffers and such, the cards were all handed to Espaillat who started to meticulously sort through the cards. As he did that, I wondered if would go through all of the questions. To their credit, they went through each flash card, eliminating any question that was previously asked. Many people had questions about the Armory's implications on parking and traffic. However, Espaillat and Pierina didn't answer most questions, delegating them mostly to Jennifer Sun who stood next to Nate Gray.

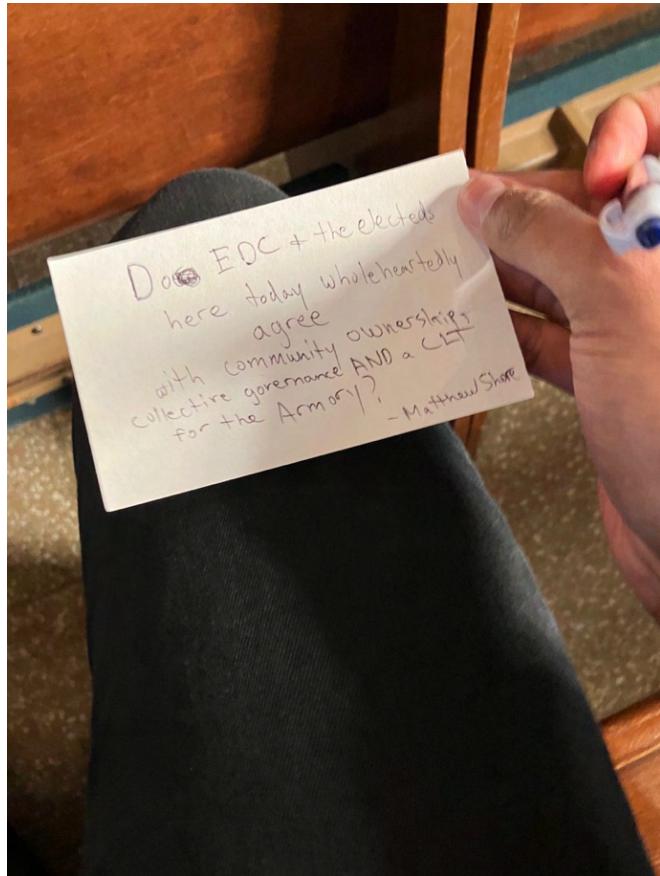
As Espaillat and EDC teamed up and weaved through the questions, a question about street vendors came up:

"Why do you have people illegally selling their belongings in front of the Armory every day? Will the development do something to bring people other than Bronx residents to the neighborhood?"

Jennifer Sun:

"So with the case of vendors playing an important part of the community and the economy, right? We see that people are trying to make a living. They're selling goods and services to try to be a positive part of the community too. The City can do its part by trying to connect Small Business Services (SBS) to vendors to support them and be able to have access to the resources and the permits to be able to do vending legally. And then if they want to be in a storefront, we could help them plan for that transition for them to be successful enough for them to grow into a physical space, whether that's in the Armory or nearby in a storefront of the neighborhood. So that is the way that the City could support the street vendors while supporting business too."

And then it happened. Espaillat read my card out loud, which asked: *"Do EDC + the electeds here today wholeheartedly agree with community ownership, collective governance AND a CLT for the Armory? – Matthew Shore"*



(Personal photo)

After he read the question, Espaillat then placed the card down on the stack of flashcards he had previously read out, glanced over at Pierina, and then Pierina and Espaillat both looked over at Jennifer Sun, nodding and giving her the green light to answer the question for them.

A few supporters of the question in the crowd approvingly went: "Woo!" "Yerr!"

Jennifer Sun's response was then as follows:

"Yeah, so we recognize that community ownership and community land trust is a way of achieving that goal of delivering as many community benefits from this project as possible. And so the RFP will be open for a community land trust to respond and be a part of developing the Armory and making sure that it really supports residents, workers and businesses for generations to come long-term."

After that calculated answer from Jennifer, a number of people in the crowd applauded in support of the question. And, as you guessed, my mind was filled with thoughts.

Firstly, as Espaillat read the card out, it almost seemed as though some of the terms, such as CLT, were unfamiliar to him. Secondly, why didn't Pierina say anything? Instead, she looked down at her phone while Jennifer answer for her and all the other electeds present. That was an opportunity for any elected official to say: *"Ok, we know the community wants this and we'll*

support it, but we should have a Plan B in case it doesn't work out." However, that never happened.



(Personal photo)

I would later tell Evan about this moment, to which he shared his own opinion:

"My perspective on this is like they want to diffuse these questions as much as possible and not piss anybody off, but never in their wildest dreams would they transfer control of the Armory to a CLT without extraordinary pressure to do so."

On organizing for CLTs on land that the EDC owns, Evans said:

"So, in order to win that demand, you would have to fight a related, but distinct, campaign around arguing for that control and ownership to be transferred from the EDC. And so, you know, that's been included as a demand, but so much of the focus has been around what goes in the armory, that much less of the energy has been directed at whether or not the plan itself would ever be transferred to a community land trust. I think it's reasonable to say as a long-term demand that we would want to think about certain large-scale real estate assets in New York City being transferred over the long-term into community land trusts from the EDC, but right now the EDC is the only game in town when it comes to, you know, city or semi-public, ownership over large-scale assets.."

Evan was right. A community land trust is one of NWBCCC's demands for the Kingsbridge Armory, but shared ownership of the building and the industries, spatial usage and programming inside the building has been a bigger part of the conversation. If NWBCCC wants a community land trust for the Armory, not only would it have to rigorously organize for it, but it would have to educate the public on the benefits of an Armory for a building that won't contain housing.

Commercial community land trusts, what NWBCCC is interested in for the Kingsbridge Armory, are not unheard of, they exist across the United States, and some examples are:

- the Anchorage CLT in Anchorage, Alaska, which boasts nine commercial spaces consisting of 24 commercial tenants and 11 new businesses in a formerly disinvested corridor, including the Mountain View Service Center, which is occupied by seven community-serving nonprofits; and,
- the Rondo Community Land Trust in St. Paul, Minnesota, which created the Selby Miton Victoria Project, a two mixed-use building development that provides 9,300 square feet of affordable commercial space and affordable senior housing to the community. Rondo CLT owns the commercial space and leases it to local and BIPOC small businesses, including six Black-owned businesses, at below-market rates that revolve around \$7 per square foot.

According to the Small Business Anti-Displacement Network, commercial community land trusts have multiple benefits:

- secures land for long-term affordable small business space by constructing or rehabilitating commercial buildings;
- stimulates economic development by creating local jobs, supporting BIPOC- and immigrant-owned businesses, and retaining neighborhood-serving small businesses that reflect the culture and character of a community;
- attracts public and private investment and directs it toward local needs;
- promotes comprehensive community development, including the revitalization of disinvested commercial corridors;
- serves as stewards for both property and tenants by maintaining community-controlled property and providing community-based resources;
- supports commercial tenants with business assistance and connects them with community-based organizations; and,
- supports businesses' marketing and development efforts.¹⁰⁸

They are also not without challenges, namely:

- requires significant capital to acquire, build and maintain properties;
- often have higher property values than residential properties;
- requires staff capacity, real estate knowledge and speed for the acquisition of commercial land in cities with strong markets; and,
- few dedicated funds available for affordable commercial land acquisition and development, although some organizations have been able to tap funding options, such

¹⁰⁸ Small Business Anti-Displacement Network (SBAN). (n.d.-v). Commercial Community Land Trust.

<https://antidisplacement.org/tool/community-land-trust/#:~:text=CLTs%20acquire%20land%20and%20maintain,used%20to%20support%20small%20businesses>

as the federal New Markets Tax Credit program and other public and philanthropic grants.¹⁰⁹

Meanwhile, back at the Town Hall, other questions were fired out, but they were mostly all answered by Jennifer Sun.

And then, the Chairman of the Small Business Committee himself, read the following question before deferring to EDC: *“And how will you foresee small established businesses will be protected from big business coming into the Armory?”*

Jennifer Sun:

“So, that’s one of the things we heard is very important to the community is: If there are businesses in the Armory, how do we make sure their rents are affordable? When we’re receiving proposals from developers, one of the things we’ll look is: How are they thinking about the entire program the ability, for example, the ability of nonprofits and/or small businesses to have affordable rents. So we have seen in other projects that will use market rents for some types of activities to help subsidize and pay for lower rents, to help keep lower rents for other types of uses. So one of the things we’ll look for is: Can a developer bring enough money to repair the building, and on top of that, also support lower rents for uses that are important to the community?”

My thoughts:

“Ok? So, they want another Essex Market model in the Armory? Also, are they assuming that small businesses on Kingsbridge Road, for example, are going to want to leave their storefronts where they have desirable visibility and access to foot traffic, as confirmed to me by several small businesses, and relocate to inside of a building where there’ll potentially lose that?”

As the questions wended down, what looked to be one of the same hecklers from Espaillat’s State of the District speech made an appearance and started heckling Espaillat again. I couldn’t make out what he was saying, but the crowd, just like the one at the State of the District speech, were not pleased to see this person. He was eventually escorted out.

Before I knew it, the Town Hall was over and Espaillat thanked the Mayor and other elected officials for staying for the duration of the Town to listen to the discussion. However, this was not a discussion in the slightest. The elected officials posted their pictures on the flyer for this event and only showed up to give opening remarks. This was more of an EDC Q&A session if anything. As the event ended, many people went up to the elected officials, including the Mayor, to introduce themselves and chat. I stuck around chatting with NWBCCC friends and other neighbors I recognized. When they found out that I asked the question about community ownership, they were delighted because it was the only question on the topic that was asked at this Town Hall.

¹⁰⁹ Small Business Anti-Displacement Network (SBAN). (n.d.-v). Commercial Community Land Trust.

<https://antidisplacement.org/tool/community-land-trust/#:~:text=CLTs%20acquire%20land%20and%20maintain,used%20to%20support%20small%20businesses>.

On Espaillat's appearance at OLA, Caesar, who grew up in the church, would go on to tell me:

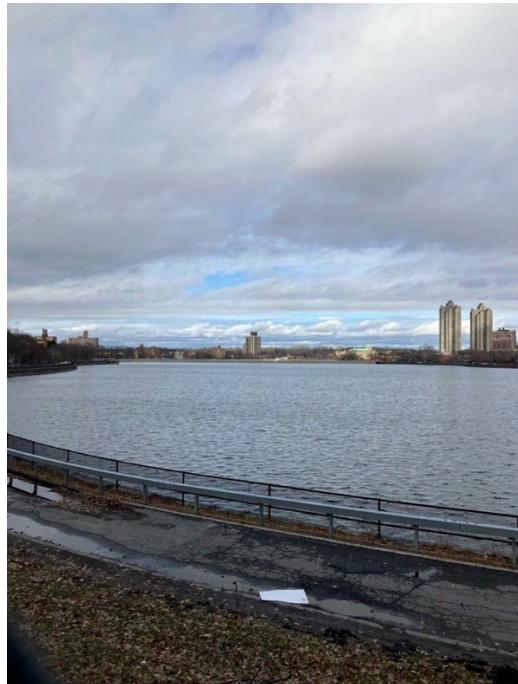
"I'm from the Bronx, I am from Kingsbridge Heights, and one of the things that I just known for a long time is that whenever he says ---like, Our Lady of Angels is located in his district. People were surprised that he was there. It is very much a thing where it's like this part of the Bronx is surprised. Your constituents are surprised that you are there. That is a disconnect for me. And while yes, he does have more connections to this area now given Councilmember Pierina Sanchez, given Oswald Feliz, and given Assemblymember George Alvarez, as a Congressperson, I do not necessarily know how actually connected to this area, as opposed to his other areas where they've been his constituents for a much longer time, because of his time at State. And the other person, as I mentioned earlier, Mayor Adams, only because it was kind of confusing about why he was even at the Our Lady of Angels Town Hall to begin with. Granted, he has shown no other vested interest in the Armory, nor any of the work that's been going on since September with the Community Working Group."

Hearing Caesar's reflection on the Town Hall was insightful and unsettling. It made me hope that Espaillat wasn't another opportunistic politician showing up for his own political gain at the expense of the community he was elected to serve.

According to EDC's website, 200 people ended up showing up to the Town Hall and over 65 people filled out surveys, but the question remains, how were they notified about the meeting and who was unintentionally excluded from this important event?¹¹⁰

Eventually, I left the church hungry and speechless. To relax, I walked along the Jerome Park Reservoir loop, looking across the water at the iconic Tracey Towers. Eventually, I passed by Fort Independence Park, known by locals as Pigeon Park, and went over through Mosholu Parkway, ending up at Halal Bros Grill Bronx on Jerome Ave near Gun Hill Rd, one of my favorite halal spots in the city. Eating chicken over rice, I tried to make sense of the political dynamics at play. Was Pierina aware that NWBCCC was disappointed by the lack of clear political support from Bronx elected officials for community ownership over the Armory? Was she waiting for the public visioning process to run its course and the vision doc to be released before deciding to champion something, anything? Was she aware that the community was concerned that their vision may not show up in the vision doc because of the rollercoaster job that EDC has done in managing the public visioning process? Why did no elected official answer questions at what was advertised as a Town Hall event? Snapping out of my thoughts, I decided to just enjoy my food and the vibrant commercial corridor Jerome underneath the elevated 4 train line.

¹¹⁰ NYC EDC. (n.d.-w). Public Workshop #3. <https://kingsbridgetogether.com/sites/default/files/2023-03/Workshop%203%20handout%20ENGLISH.pdf>



(Personal photo)

March 2023. The last month for public input during the Together for Kingsbridge public visioning process had arrived.

Eager to learn more from Jay Espy about his organizing history in the neighborhood and his thoughts on the community and Armory generally, I asked if he wanted to meet at the New Capitol Diner, to which he basically said *“hell no, the place doesn’t pay their migrant workers.”* We then agreed to meet at Bedford Cafe on Jerome Ave. and Bedford Park Boulevard about a block away from Lehman College and Harris Park.



(Personal photos)

I arrived at the homey, classic-styled narrow diner early, anxious about getting a seat in the quiet back corner to speak with Jay due to the fairly loud pop music playing on the diner's radio, and excited for what I hoped would be an insightful conversation. Jay's train was skipping stops, so he was delayed. When he arrived, he arrived. Jay walked into the diner wearing a green cap with a red star in the middle of the front. On the side of the hat was the flag of Cuba.

After catching up, we got into it. I would learn that Jay, born in 1991, was born and raised in Kingsbridge Heights - two blocks away from the Armory - and lived in the neighborhood his whole life till 2022, when he personally moved down to the South Bronx, although his family remains in the same apartment. He was educated at public schools in the neighborhood, including P.S. 86 across the street from the Armory and DeWitt Clinton High School next to Tracey Towers, before graduating from SUNY New Paltz in 2013 for his undergraduate studies where majored in Black Studies and minored in sociology. Despite moving out of the neighborhood the year prior, Jay said:

"Everything I know and love is in the Bronx, predominantly Kingsbridge Heights. Everything that happens in this community, I think it's very personal to me. A lot of my friends, you know, either grew up there with me or live there now... I notice everything. I notice every change. I know what businesses were there, and what businesses were not there. I know what buildings have been up for how many years and which ones were built when and I know everything about Kingsbridge Heights. There's not an area of Kingsbridge Heights I don't know, which I'm very proud of that, you know, because I think that like everyone should be proud of where they're from.."

In many ways, NWBCCC had a strong impact on Jay's political education and working trajectory because it was the place, around the years 2008 and 2009, that gave him his first-ever job as a tutor, and it was the place that took him under their wing during Mayor Bloomberg's administration, educating him on the issues happening in the city at that time and exposing him to various organizing campaigns that they were a part of, including the campaign to turn the old Fordham Library/Bronx Library Center into a community center and efforts to organize students at his high school. Jay joked that he didn't even go to NWBCCC looking for a job, he went because his friend told him they often had free food available after school, but fate had other plans.

Today, Jay is politically a Marxist, and in practice, he's an organizer focused on organizing the working-class.

"I don't organize capitalists. They're in my community too, but I don't organize them.

I organize working-class people. I organize tenants, I organize students, workers, small businesses. Those are the people that I care about. Small businesses not so much, but small businesses because they relate to the working class, in terms of they're in the community, right? They offer and procure resources to working-class people, and they employ working-class people, so that's why they matter in the grand scheme of things."

To that end, since 2015, he's been mostly organizing tenants in Kingsbridge Heights, Hunts Point and Mott Haven, the neighborhood where he's currently actively involved with the South Bronx Tenants Movement.

Prior to the South Bronx Tenants Movement, as I had already known from watching the video that introduced me to him, he was part of a grassroots organizing group called the People Power Movement, which formed in 2011 and dissolved in 2018. He then later helped to create the North Bronx Collective group during the pandemic in March 2020 but only stayed for a few months, leaving in the summer. Speaking on his work organizing in Mott Haven, he mentioned that he was shocked and disappointed to learn that the community lacked a tenant organizing presence and there was no nonprofit organization, to his knowledge, organizing Mott Haven's tenants, especially at a time when the neighborhood is experiencing gentrification in the form of luxury rental apartments and hotels being built around existing public housing in the area. Jay later mentioned that the South Bronx Tenants Movement (SBTM), which organizes on an anti-capitalist stance, helped organize five tenant associations in Mott Haven, and more so:

"We don't believe that there should be such a thing as landlords. We don't believe that there should be this dichotomy between landlords and tenants. We don't believe that that relationship is reconcilable. We believe that that relationship is inherently in contradiction, and that contradiction is not reconcilable. You cannot reconcile a relationship in which one person exists because of the other. In other words, a landlord exists because of the tenant. If there was no tenant, there would be no landlord. If there was no landlord, that would be no tenant. So, the landlord is the one that depends on the tenant. When you talk about a relationship like that, this is where me and Northwest Bronx don't see eye to eye in one way because Northwest Bronx has certain positions, maybe not officially as an organization, but among the

membership, where you can reconcile relationships with landlords, you can compromise between a landlord and a tenant. And I've been in conversations with members of that organization where they have argued those things, and I say no, you cannot reconcile that relationship. It is not a compromise."

Adding on to SBTM's stance, Jay would go on to say:

“..our goal is basically to make landlords obsolete. To abolish landlords. You know, we hear people talking about abolition, right? Abolishing police departments, defunding police. Well, why don't we abolish landlords? What is the concept of a landlord? I mean, that is a remnant of feudalism, right?”

“South Bronx Tenant Movement believes that the working class, specifically tenants, are the vanguard in New York City that will abolish and dismantle capitalism in New York City and beyond because tenants are in a special position in the economic forces in that place where we hold a lot of leverage. The biggest industry in New York City is real estate, next to the financial industry. Wall Street and real estate, but they go side to side....Wall Street, literally over a span of five to 10 years, since 2008, shifted their whole financial policy and investment portfolio strategy into rentals. That's why you see companies like Blackstone start to come out and invest heavily in rentals. Why? Because as a capitalist you're trying to make as much profit as possible in the fastest amount of time. What is the most profitable and lucrative opportunity in real estate? Apartment rentals. Why? Because leases go up like that in a year, you can kick out people every year, every year, raise the rent, raise the rent, raise the rent. A house? You have to wait a whole lifetime sometimes for the house to go up for sale..”

When I got the chance to ask Jay about his thoughts on community land trusts, he was largely keen on them, saying that they are:

“..a concrete mechanism to dismantle capitalism because capitalism thrives off of privatization... you take a land that is otherwise privatized, and say we're gonna make this public for public domain. Capitalists cannot stand that and then they say, 'well, I can't, I can't, I can't speculate on that, I can't make money off of that.' And that's the point.”

However, Jay is concerned about 501c3s owning CLTs because then they would be less accountable to the public.

“I don't have necessarily a say what the coalition does at Northwest Bronx because I'm not a member, but if it was a public organization, let's say an agency of the government, I have equal say, but Northwest Bronx has no legal rights to really disclose anything they do in their operations. It's a private organization. Right? Here, they get the public funds, and in that way, I guess they have to disclose something; but at the end of the day, they don't have to take our money in terms of the taxpayer. They get money from the City Council, right? So, in a way, they are obligated to disclose, but they don't have to in order to exist as an organization. So that's where I have concerns. Right? Because at the end of the day, it's a 501c3 that manages that CLT, right?”

Critically assessing the popularity of CLTs in contrast to other forms of social housing, Jay remarked:

“Another thing I'm concerned about, and this is a question: is CLT just another way to not say public? Right? Is that just another thing that they can put on their end-of-year funding report to get more money into the nonprofit? Is that just the language to just kind of fight for what you should be fighting for, which is public domain, public land, right? Instead of affordable housing, why can't we just fight for public housing? What's wrong with public housing?.. So that's where I have concerns about CLTs, and I would like to learn more about that..”

Continuing his concerns about 501c3's ability to address capitalism, he mentioned:

"But I can only speak from my own theories about the limitations of 501c3s within the context of capitalism, and how nonprofits and capitalist society are just one way to neutralize the more radical elements of resistance under capitalism, and understanding that as a reality. That is my starting point of understanding organizations like Housing Justice for All, like Northwest Bronx Coalition, and then working from that starting point, right? Like, I'm not naive to think that the North Bronx Community Clergy Coalition is going to bring about the dismantling of capitalism. When I go into these meetings, I am not assuming that that's their role. Yes, they can help towards that in ways and there are individuals that might be involved who are anti-capitalist and just happens to be part of that, but as an organization, I'm not going to go to them and say: 'Let's go dismantle capitalism, let's go abolish landlords.' No, I'm not going to. They have their position, whatever it is, I respect it, and move on. We're not gonna get caught up in that disease. Like I used to, right, like before.. I was younger, I was a hothead. You know, I would bump heads with people, you know, but I also wasn't trying to just make it about that, you know, it's not about that at the end of the day."

It was then that I started to realize that Jay and NWBCCC's history is more complex than I perhaps would ever come to learn in a day or two. In milestone moments in Jay's life, NWBCCC was there. In milestone struggles that NWBCCC was a part of, Jay was there. When Jay organized tenants in buildings in Kingsbridge Heights, NWBCCC helped print out flyers for him. Despite differences in views, Jay came to NWBCCC's annual meeting. It's also when I started to realize that Jay and NWBCCC's ways of addressing things have many similarities and differences.

And then we started talking about the Kingsbridge Armory:

"Looking around my community, seeing the needs and those needs not being met for 30 years, I feel disappointed. It means a lot to me because, you know, I pay my taxes towards it. My tax dollars go to the maintenance of that armory. It takes up an entire city block. It could fit how many planes, how many football fields?...I want it to be a space that is recreational that is economically supporting the community that is prioritizing the community. And that is giving people in the community, you know, opportunities to thrive. You know? And yeah, it's just, it's, it's sad to see it just sitting there doing nothing."

And then I got the chance to ask Jay about his history with the small businesses on Kingsbridge Road. After a period of organizing CUNY students, Jay informed me that he used to do cold outreach in 2014 with the People Power Movement around Kingsbridge Heights, asking people what they think about the Armory, what should be done with the Armory and what they think of the ice-skating rink. During that time, that's when he found out that thirteen small businesses under one landlord at the corner of Kingsbridge Road and Jerome Ave, the same building that New Capitol Diner is a part of, were facing the possibility of doubled rents and doubled taxes. In order to continue to stay, these businesses had to agree to doubled rents and doubled taxes. This news alarmed Jay and the People Power Movement who worried that their neighborhood would be losing vital and affordable products to commercial gentrification and displacement, so they started a soft campaign to highlight the issues the small businesses were going through and they often met with the Kingsbridge Road Merchants Association, who

would later go on to host an emergency meeting at Bronx Community Board 7 where, with the leadership of Christian Ramos, they came up with an agreement with the landlord's attorney.

However, there were several businesses that simply could no longer survive due to the new market pressures in the neighborhood. Jay mentioned:

"And unfortunately, though, we lost two or three businesses, one of them being Forever Young, which is a natural food store that my mother had frequented for years -still does to this day- but they moved to Grand Concourse and 187th Street. So they are sort of far away. So, someone like my mother was affected directly by that because she's trying to find alternative, natural, organic, healthy food options that the Bronx, as we know, is notorious for not having. And, you know, we know that malnutrition and diabetes and food-related diseases are very high and disproportionately concentrated in the Bronx. She's a vegan, my mother, and so she's trying to find ways to not get diabetes, not die from high blood pressure or stroke and then now she has to deal with this displacement of a natural food store, due to the rent hike, and due to the instability of the market and the real estate in the area. We had discount stores get displaced that I would always go to. On University Avenue and Kingsbridge Road, there was a discount store there that - their rent went up crazy, like more than twice. They, unfortunately, had to move. A Chinese restaurant that I always bought from when I was a kid, on Kingsbridge, between University and Reservoir Avenue -also displaced. Numerous businesses that I had always gone to as a kid started to be displaced because of this. And if you go there now on Kingsbridge Road and University Avenue, you will see businesses still vacant - spaces there still vacant. Tenants had told me that live on that corner - I think it's like 2690 University Avenue - those landlords were messing with the tenants in the building. On the corner of University Avenue and Kingsbridge Road is predominately Asian, a predominantly Asian tenant community there, and I heard people talking about how the landlord was really messing with them around that time period because of, in our opinion, the Armory."

Expanding on the other concerning developments in the area at this time, Jay said the following about the Jerome Ave. rezoning and various other personal takes:

"They were going to call it something like Cromwell Jerome, like this new neighborhood. There was a neighborhood study of the area, this is something that DCP does -you probably know about that as a planning student. And so they did walking tours, and we participated in both tours. And the second tour, at the end of the tour, when it was kind of wrapping up, we made our noise, started to call it out for what it was, which was basically, in our opinion, a gentrification pipeline... You know they take all these into consideration, all the variables, right? -as urban planners. At Jerome Avenue, you look at what is running on Jerome Avenue, the 4 train. Where does the 4 train go? Kingsbridge Road. What's happening in Kingsbridge? The Armory. Who's gonna take the 4 train to Kingsbridge? People from Manhattan, people from Long Island. What if they want to live in this area? You got to build the housing for that. All these things! I make it sound like this like peachy and creamy like, you know, sitcom episode, but these are conversations that they're having behind closed doors, right? 'Oh, let's look at the map.' Hey, they map these things out, right? 'Oh Kingsbridge is here, there's an armory for development there, ice rink is gonna be there - world's biggest ice skating rink center, right? That's important, we need to rezone that!' I mean, we saw Jerome Avenue being the pipeline. What runs through the 4 train line? Mott Haven! These things all are connected."

Going futher, he said:

"They started looking up Kingsbridge, New York Times gets a hold of that 'Oh, let's do an article on Kingsbridge. What's the hottest neighborhood in New York City?' They come up with a list every year. You know one year Kingsbridge was on that list? Right after the Armory redevelopment. These things all are

*connected. You don't have to be a college graduate to be aware of how these forces interplay -just using enough time of the day to put two and two together. Why do you think they were panicking when we were unemployed during the pandemic? Because we had enough time to think about sh*t. We're smart, working-class people are smart. We know how to survive -that alone.*

But they don't have a mechanism to measure that intelligence, right? Because if they do, we would be the smartest people on the planet. Whoever is surviving capitalism every single day, in this world, in my opinion, are the smartest people on this planet. Why? Because we have to figure out creative ways to make ends meet with what little we have."

In what would be an emotional moment that I'll never forget in my life, Jay said the following:

*"So how do we do that when we have to work 50-70 hours a week? How can we ever think about connecting the dots? When you give us two weeks, three weeks, four weeks to think about sh*t, we can figure sh*t out real quick. And once we figure sh*t out real quick, we're gonna hit the streets because we're not gonna take that. Not only are we smart, we have dignity. We're not working to make just money. We're working to feed our kids. We're working to feed our parents that are aging. We're working to pay the bills so that they have a roof over their head.*

I work 70 hours a week. Why? Because I want to buy my mother a house. Why? Because I don't want my mother to grow up in an apartment that faces the garbage. I grew up in an apartment that faces the garbage of my building, the garbage disposal. Do you know three of my windows in my mom's apartment face the garbage? So, for 31 years, we had to be mindful of the garbage smell. We had to close our windows when they were throwing the garbage out. You can't open the windows in my mom's bedroom because of the garbage. There's a screen that's broken.. My mom doesn't want to open the window because there's rats all the time. What if they come into the room? I'm working 70 hours a week to buy my mother a house in upstate New York so that she doesn't have to grow old in an apartment where she doesn't feel at peace. This is what it means to be a working-class person under this society..

*I have to work 70 hours a week just to be able to save enough money in two years. By the way, I can't just make that money right away. I have to work at least two years to get the down payment, to get the pre-qualified loan, to pay the fees I have to pay, to pay the lawyer to sign the paperwork, to.. To just get my mother out of the apartment that faces the garbage disposal of our building. We're just two blocks away from the Armory. I mean, these are the things that we don't learn in school. These are the things that you don't read in books. These are the things you don't see on TV, or you don't see on Netflix necessarily, the realities of a working-class person day to day, the sh*t that we have to do to be able to survive this system. Right? And then they gaslight us. Even if we do something, right? They still find a way to make us feel like we're less than, working-class people, black people, women, trans people, disabled people.."*

Jay then went on to say that he appreciates the fact that NWBCCC is considering a CLT for the Armory because that will help curb speculation, but when it comes to urban planning, he said there has to be a no-eviction zone, around the Kingsbridge Armory. He then went on to criticize the NWBCCC for not being more proactive with the KNIC CBA and working to utilize planning and zoning as a mechanism to prevent displacement. Hearing this feedback from Jay made me perk up more than I already was during the conversation because we shared the exact same thoughts and urgency to be proactive and use planning as a tool to protect our people before the Armory is redeveloped. I mentioned to him that I had, in fact, mentioned these concerns to Juan and Sandra, along with the Pratt studio that worked with NWBCCC, and that it ended up being one of Pratt's final recommendations for us to consider and that Juan and Sandra did seem to consider it to an extent.

Before I knew it, Jay then had to catch a bus and leave, but we agreed to meet again and talk more about these issues, whenever he had a moment from his packed schedule. I did, after all, need to still talk with him about community ownership of the Armory and other topics. After he left the diner, I sat there blown away by the passion, leadership, courageousness, and strength of this man. There wasn't one minute of my journey back home that night or a day in the following days that his words didn't shake me to the core.

It was around this time, the beginning of March, that Juan had received a worrying call from Evy that she received word from some business owners in the 13-business, one landlord-owned building at the corner of Kingsbridge Road and Jerome Ave. that they had been notified that they had 6 months left to stay in the storefronts and that they would be offered money to leave. After meeting with Juan at the NWBCCC office, we went over to speak to a few of the businesses that were notified, handing them the list of resources that I made for small businesses, telling them about the City's Commercial Lease Assistance Program and how they can get a free attorney from Brooklyn Legal Services that can support them regardless if they had leases or not, which many of them don't. They then confirmed to us our worst fears, and we proceeded to pass out more merchant association resource packets to other commercial tenants in the building, who, oddly enough, had not been notified about this news. However, one business had informed me that, right around the time that the other business received the news, they had seen some suspicious people snooping around and taking pictures of their business. Juan and I were alarmed. Nothing like this has happened since KNIC was approved at the Armory. Once again, the market was capitalizing on the attention the Armory was getting, and placing longtime, beloved businesses, all of which are BIPOC and important to the community they serve, at risk. This is when Juan realized that we have to inform the City right away of the news in an intentional way and have Brooklyn Legal Services come and speak with the commercial tenants to figure out a plan.



(Personal photo)

The day we were talking to the businesses that received the news was also the day the Bronx Borough President Vanessa Gibson was scheduled to have her State of the Borough speech, her first ever as Borough President.¹¹¹ I asked some NWBCCC friends if they were going, and they weren't. Then I thought to myself: *"Is Vanessa Gibson really going to say anything that she hasn't already said about the Kingsbridge Armory? Would I be wasting my time by going to this event?"* Reluctantly, I decided to take the Bx9 from Kingsbridge Road up Broadway to my alma mater, Manhattan College, the same college I had to transfer out of to go to SUNY Albany because the school is expensive and often inaccessible to working-class people from places like the Bronx. Tucked away into the hills of Riverdale and Fieldston, I walked up Manhattan College Parkway, just as I had done so many times as a first and second-year undergraduate student, eventually arriving at the Kelly Student Commons, a state-of-the-art campus center completed after I transferred in 2014. As you would expect for any large public event like this with many

¹¹¹ Office of the Bronx Borough President. (n.d.-t). BOROUGH PRESIDENT GIBSON DELIVERS FIRST STATE OF THE BOROUGH ADDRESS. <https://bronxboropres.nyc.gov/2023/03/07/borough-president-gibson-delivers-first-state-of-the-borough-address/>

elected officials present, there were many police cars out front. Upon walking in, I was asked if I had RSVPed in advance for the event with the theme: *“Borough of Opportunities.”* When I responded and said no, I was asked to stand by because the room was already at capacity. Luckily, after waiting about eight minutes and watching throngs of people pass through, I was given the green light to go up the elevator to the giant conference room on the top floor of a building overlooking the rest of the likes of Van Cortlandt Park.



(Personal photos)

The room was packed and I started to see some familiar faces from Street Vendor Project, NWCCC, Bronx River Alliance and other organizations across the borough. After lots of opening remarks and music performances, in came the Borough President dressed in a beautiful sparkling, silver dress akin to a disco ball. Many people were in attendance: Mayor Adams, Attorney General Leticia James, State Comptroller Tom DiNapoli, City Comptroller Brad Lander, the other borough presidents in the city, and many State and Local legislators, including Pierina.

The Borough President would go on to deliver a speech that touched on multiple themes: economic development, health and wellness initiatives, digitized community board applications, fire safety legislation, tourism, support for youth, combatting maternal mortality, a diabetes task force, and support for small businesses. In regard to small businesses, she acknowledged their contributions to the borough during the pandemic and their struggles, and announced that the Bronx Overall Economic Development Corporation (Bronx OECD) would be seeking to take advantage of a nearly *“finalized U.S. Small Business Administration’s Community Advantage Loan Program will allow the Bronx Business Initiative Corporation of New York to approve loans from \$25,000 to \$350,000 for small businesses to receive access to capital.”*¹¹²

¹¹² Office of the Bronx Borough President. (n.d.-t). BOROUGH PRESIDENT GIBSON DELIVERS FIRST STATE OF THE BOROUGH ADDRESS. <https://bronxboropres.nyc.gov/2023/03/07/borough-president-gibson-delivers-first-state-of-the-borough-address/>

There's no denying that it was good to see the Borough President leverage her position to bring more financial resources to small businesses in the borough. However, she made no mention of the issue of many small businesses not being able to access these resources for various reasons.

She then stated the following in regard to the Kingsbridge Armory:

"Now, we can't talk about economic development and tourism without talking about the Kingsbridge Armory! Last year, I said we were going to reimagine the Armory, and we are still committed to doing just that. Working in partnership with Councilmember Pierina Sanchez, New York City EDC, the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition, Hester Street and all of the members of the Kingsbridge Together Task Force, we are hearing from all of you and collecting your ideas on how we can transform that Kingsbridge Armory. Why can't the Kingsbridge Armory be the next small business market with mom-and-pop stores? Why can't it be a sustainable food industry center or even the next film studio? There is so much promise and potential in the armory to be a space for our residents to recreate and serve the Kingsbridge community and the entire borough in such a meaningful way. We are truly committed to this goal. And I want to thank all of our partners on the Task Force and our Deputy Borough President, Janet Peguero, who has taken this on as an important initiative for our office. We will get this done, and we will have a focus on culture, food equity, health care, workforce development and jobs, youth development, recreational space, support for our small businesses and our street vendors, and we will reimagine the Kingsbridge Armory!"

"Ok, this bit wasn't as disruptive as her remarks at January's 'Adaptive Reuse Panel,'" I thought. However, she once again asserted that she will prioritize certain things for the redevelopment of the Armory after claiming to care about community input. What's more, is that tourism has consistently been tied to her statements on the Armory, which implies that she is serious about it becoming an economic engine that brings money into the area. However, not once did she mention the issues or visions of Kingsbridge Heights residents. The speech then ended, I said hi to a few people I recognized and saw Fernando Ortiz from NYC EDC on my way out, who agreed to later meet with me to chat about the public visioning process.

The next day, March 2nd, I found out on social media about an activist and filmmaker originally from Queensbridge Houses in Queens, Lashawn Jamell Marston, more commonly referred to as Suga Ray, who had started a 14-day hunger strike in the middle of the cold winter outside of the NYC DOE building next to the East River in Long Island City that Western Queens CLT has been fighting for.¹¹³ Speaking on his goal, Suga Ray said the following:

"Ultimately, this building is underutilized. This is the building ... I don't know if y'all remember from a few years ago, they were going to sell it to Amazon for \$1. Amazon was going to destroy the building and then build the whole hub. The activists, we got them out of here. So now we're like yo, let us use the building for public good. They're like: 'oh, we're using it.' So I'm like: 'yo, you was going to move the stuff that's in it!' Right? Anyway, we need to have a conversation with the Mayor. Alright? The Mayor has sole authority to grant our organization, Western Queens Community Land Trust, to use the space that's empty in this building. And all we want to is provide art space, low-cost and free manufacturing space, storage space; we have a plan for a daycare, we have a plan for a rooftop farm, we have a plan for a community room,

¹¹³ bdavidofficial. (2023a, March 2). Post about SugaRay's Hunger Strike for Western Queens CLT. https://www.instagram.com/reel/CpS9V6Oje-2/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

*where people can gather and meet and talk about all of the things. Right? It's been a runaround so far, so I said' let me take this next action and hopefully we could push the needle forward, you know, and get people to listen a little closer.' It's cold, I don't want to be cold, alright? I love food, I don't want to not eat, but when it comes to justice, when it comes to fighting for the people... there are people that are sitting right now who are cold, who don't have a tent, who don't have a scarf, who don't have friends bringing them supplies. So I'm fortunate and I'm privileged in this space, but I'm f**king pissed off... because how much do we really care about the people?"*



(Source: Hell Gate)¹¹⁴

The stakes, the urgency, the conviction of this Black brother really stood out to me. After reposting his video to my story and mentioning the similarities between the Kingsbridge Armory and the Queensboro Peoples Space building, Suga Ray personally thanked me for spreading the word. I would later learn that his strike would go on to garner the attention of several elected officials, including Council Member Julie Won, who visited Suga Ray at his tent, and City Comptroller Bran Lander who honored Suga Ray for his activism during Black History Month.

In the days that followed, Juan organized an Armory team meeting and we later ended up meeting with ANHD to strategize how to go about our upcoming merchant association on the 21st of the month.

Around this time, I was heartened to learn that Christian had reopened his store and was getting himself back on his feet. Christian was someone I had been getting to know over the

¹¹⁴ Rivlin-Nadler, M. (2023, March 10). *Why Is Suga Ray on Hunger Strike?*. Hell Gate. <https://hellgatenyc.com/why-is-suga-ray-on-hunger-strike>

months through various merchant association planning meetings with Juan and brief chats in his store while doing outreach to the small businesses around Kingsbridge Road. As I was walking down Kingsbridge Road one day, I saw him walking out of his store. He looked in good spirits, and I asked how he was doing, to which he said a lot better after he said he was harassed by his landlord. Seeking to finally have the chance to speak with him after all these months of brief interactions, he agreed for me to come by the store on March 8th during his lunchtime.

At this point, I had gotten used to speaking with small businesses in the Lower East Side and the Bronx while they're busy doing their jobs and serving their customers, and told Christian that we could always pause chatting for him to help his customers. We sat down in the store, a store that Christian, I would learn, has had to change over the years to adapt and survive, going from a primarily shoe and shoe repair store to a store offering shoe repair, watch repair and selling electronics. His story reminded me of a business I had seen in the Lower East Side that evolved from a car service business to a business that also sells clothes. As we talked over the sounds of a banging hammer in the background repairing an old pair of dress shoes, customers, many whom know Christian, would frequently come in to pick up stuff, drop off stuff, or just to say hello and banter with Christian. Like many storefronts in the Bronx, hanging out at Christian's felt like you were at a neighborhood hub watching the rich multicultural vibrancy of the community unfold before your eyes. Christian would go on to explain to me how the store was once owned by an old Argentine man who took Christian under his wing when he moved from Ecuador. Christian then got the chance in the aughts to take over the business, and helped create the merchant association in 2014, which is a nonprofit, after the group informally began meeting in 2010.

"We are in the middle of two big streets, Fordham Road and Bedford Park. This community needed businesses, different restaurants, beauty salons, nail salons, and multiservice because this community is about a lot of immigrants from different counties." Many businesses are Latinx, but there are African businesses, Southeast Asian, East Asian, etc. Christian told me that Kingsbridge is different than Fordham Road in that is mostly mom-and-pop shops, while Fordham Road, the largest commercial district in the borough, is characterized by a lot of chain stores. Christian would go on to tell me that the businesses on Kingsbridge Road compete with the businesses on Fordham Road in offering better prices and customer service. In Fordham Road, "you see the product, pay the price and go." In Kingsbridge, "we care because we talk to each other, we send them messages." On his location, he loves it because he's between two subway lines, the 4 train and the D train and a lot of customers from west of the Armory near Sedgwick and east of the Armory near Grand Concourse frequent his business."

Christian was inspired by other merchant associations elsewhere and how they organized to get better support from elected officials and to host great events like festivals, block parties, holiday events, etc. He was also inspired from learning that Kingsbridge Road used to have a merchants association thirty years ago that used to unite and fight for their rights. He realized that Kingsbridge Road never had any kind of Christmas lighting event, so he helped organize one.

As a nonprofit, every two years they are supposed to renew and with their President gone, they need new leadership due to the changing times and Christian's limited capacity. When asked

how many businesses in the merchant association there were, Christian said there were 6-7 in the beginning, but they later grew to around 30 businesses. Now, he's interested in starting a new chapter for the merchant association and selecting new leaders that he could serve alongside in a steering committee so that they could collectively and successfully advocate for improvements from the many new elected officials in office in the Bronx and city. The merchant association used to collect a yearly fee of \$160 for small businesses and \$300 for big ones, and they opened an account at Chase Bank, the only bank on Kingsbridge Road. The merchant association also used to get funding from elected officials to host events in the community, such as the Unity in the Community Festival, which was a popular street block party in front of the Kingsbridge Armory that happened every summer for a few years straight, up until 2018. The festival often saw the support of former Councilmember Cabrera, an elected official Christian enjoyed a positive working relationship with, which was in contrast to what a number of organizers said was an elected official who did not do enough for small businesses in Kingsbridge Heights.

I would later learn that for all his good faith deeds for the community, Christian himself was not entirely immune from criticism either. One of the challenges of reviving the merchants association was that people had lost faith in Christian's leadership due to the fact that no events, including the Christmas tree lighting, had happened in the community over five years. Additionally, they would not see or receive updates from Christian, who became less concerned with going door to door and speaking with businesses and more concerned with building relationships with elected officials. This frustration is compounded by what many businesses characterize as a rise in crime and litter on Kingsbridge Road in recent years since the start of the pandemic, and what they feel has been a glaring neglect from all sides of government.

As we would learn from Evy, another challenge in organizing businesses on Kingsbridge is that there is a tendency for non-Hispanic businesses to unintentionally get excluded in meetings that are being conducted in Spanish. As mentioned, Kingsbridge is home to West African businesses, Vietnamese businesses, a number of Korean businesses, and others.

Speaking to Christian, I also wanted to learn about why the Kingsbridge Road Merchants Association never decided to become a business improvement district (BID), which often employs people to keep a defined area cleaner. Christian said that what separates Kingsbridge Road from the other BIDs in the Northwest Bronx area, such as the Kingsbridge BID near Broadway and West 231st St, the Jerome Gun Hill Road BID, and the Fordham Road BID, is the commercial tenants' relationship with their landlord. Many small businesses in Kingsbridge Road have poor relationships with their landlords, including a nail salon and bodega I interviewed, and including Christian himself. The businesses also don't make as much money as they do on Fordham Road to be able to afford the extra fees that are commonly associated with BIDs. The downside of this is that many initiatives have to come out of pocket for the merchant association as many businesses are struggling to survive.

Christian hopes that the Armory will be a source of revenue growth for local businesses. If it turns out to be so, it's then that Christian would consider the possibility of a BID on Kingsbridge

Road. However, he said that certain matters, such as possibly hiring security or street maintenance personnel, need to be handled with urgency.

Christian would then tell me that he was actively going to Bronx Community Board 7 meetings when the Shops at the Mall and KNIC proposals were floated. For the Shops at the Mall proposal, he was vocally critical of the project, standing up at meetings and stating that the proposal would spell chaos for small businesses in the area, who did not want to become like small mom-and-pop businesses on 161st Street in the South Bronx around the Yankees stadium's shadow that disappeared, a fear also expressed to me by the bodega owner I interviewed who said that his friend's business was displaced from that area of the borough.

"Everybody likes to see each other on Kingsbridge Road. When you build a mall in there, it's like you're gonna break this small business area." Then speaking on the vulnerabilities of commercial tenants, Christian said: *"Commercial law is very weak in New York City."*

Christian would later tell me about landlords who called him from California asking what's happening with the Armory. *"That's what we're living with, simply speculation."*

Speaking on the KNIC proposal, Christian mentioned that nobody would walk down the streets and let the businesses know what was happening. When it was even time for Christian to sign the Community Benefits Agreement, he felt rushed by NWBCCC and other signees involved and other parties involved because no one sat down and talked with him about what the agreement would entail.

Christian:

"You working for BOEDC and EDC, you gotta walk and pass by, not only in the campaign time when you're supporting the mayor, or the councilman, or the Senator. No, you need to do your homework. In the summertime, put a little tent in the corner, with a nice tent and tables and chairs -'listen we're gonna do this, we're gonna do that.' In Kingsbridge Road, you cannot wait for people to go to your meetings...It's very clear, if you do something on Kingsbridge, walk out, speak out, and let them know."

Christian added that he's fine with passing out flyers here and there, but he expects the EDC to do its part and take to the streets to inform people about what's going on with the Armory.

During COVID, Christian's store was able to stay afloat thanks, in part, to his electronic repair services, which experienced good revenue as more people stayed and studied and worked from home on electronic devices. However, he noticed that many businesses struggled and were robbed on Kingsbridge Road.

Speaking on the lack of businesses in the Bronx that received COVID-19 financial assistance, he noticed that the application's requirements were impossible and too strenuous for many small businesses to meet.

Eventually, Christian, like many other businesses on Kingsbridge Road, got a month-to-month rental arrangement instead of the security of a long-term lease because the landlord wanted to raise the rent, and Christian pleaded with the landlord not to do it. He attributes this to a combination of factors, including a history of speculation in the neighborhood largely connected to the Armory and COVID.

Speaking on the landlords' residences, Christian said that many moved away years ago. Prior to 2010, it was common to see different commercial landlords at the supermarket, but not anymore. The closest landlords now live in Riverdale in the Bronx, Yonkers, New Jersey and others are living in California.

On the issue of a language barrier between commercial tenants and landlords, Christian noticed that when Hispanic commercial tenants have a building super who's Hispanic, it's often easier for them to communicate with their landlord. However, when commercial tenants have no super, it's more difficult communicating.

Christian appreciates how NWBCCC has been able to connect small businesses to lawyers and legal support, and he appreciates the power of organizing, which he says has enabled small businesses, particularly the ones on the corner of Kingsbridge Road and Jerome Ave., to fight back against the landlord's plan to build a hotel at that site, which was a plan that came about only after KNIC was approved. Speaking on the negotiation that Christian and the merchants agreed upon with this landlord, they:

- Agreed to a lowered rent increase. For example, New Capitol Diner's rent increase plan went from \$9,000 to \$12,000, instead of going to around \$17,000 as planned.
- All businesses would be on a month-to-month rent with no lease. However, if the landlord wants to sell their location, the landlord would have to provide at least six months' notice.
- They tried to negotiate to allow tenants to make money from the landlord's selling of the property by having the landlord agree to pay the commercial tenant an undisclosed amount of money to vacate their storefront. However, Christian is not certain this process is legal because it usually only works when commercial tenants have long-term leases.

Christian used to be a part of the USB coalition of small businesses with NWBCCC and learned a lot from other businesses. Christian would like to see laws like commercial rent stabilization passed and more security for businesses on month-to-month. Speaking on the challenges that businesses on month-to-month with no leases deal with, Christian mentioned that they struggle to qualify for loans from banks, struggle to get a line of credit and you have to pay a security deposit for utility bills, such as Con Edison, when businesses with leases don't have to.

The KNIC CBA also included a technical assistance fund, which would have saved a portion of the revenue for the Armory for small businesses. Christian said he would like something like this to return for the new development at the Armory.

Christian is also interested in community ownership as a concept, but said that we have to sit down with community members to really discuss and strategize what that would entail.

On EDC's proposal to have subsidized rental spots inside of the Armory for local small businesses, Christian said it's risky to have businesses leave their street-level storefronts to go inside an Armory. Instead, Christian said it would be more attractive for businesses to have a second spot in the Armory. *"But again, it's the history. Your place have a history. This is not about how much money I make every day. This is not about that. Businesses in Kingsbridge are small mom and pop store, and it's not about your income, it's the quality of your life and history that you have on the neighborhood."*

Christian said he would like the "Together for Kingsbridge" public visioning process to take its time with putting together the Vision Document, saying a few weeks is not enough and that having the public visioning process during the winter was not ideal for small businesses since many have to sell more during that season to stay afloat. For these reasons, Christian could not attend various EDC-organized Armory events. He also said that the expectation that businesses show up to focus group meetings was not realistic and feasible for businesses. Christian also said that, from the beginning, the City should have been meeting with small business owners. He also said that because of these reasons small businesses have not been represented enough.

On the topic of small business focus group meetings hosted by electeds, Christian said it's fine to do that, but you have those meeting months after month, not just once. Additionally, Christian was a proponent of advertising these events on local news.

And businesses are tired and fatigued from years of the Armory not amounting to anything. So, he hopes that the Mayor and City will be on board with community activists vision this time of community ownership so that the project is not stalled and so that merchants don't get further fatigued.

On the diversity of business' issues and concerns, Christian said that, yes, every business needs their own solution, but working together delivers stronger results than working individually.

Since the merchant association is in transition, Christian said that it's important for the City to meet with all businesses, not just the merchants association. *"It's not about only me as the umbrella association, it's about all of the merchants. We are over 250 businesses right now. So imagine the impact you can share."*

Speaking with Christian taught me a lot. Here was a member of the Community Working Group who was seen as a representative of small businesses in Kingsbridge Road, that, ultimately, was a small business owner at the end of the day that experienced many of the same hardships, if not more, that small businesses on Kingsbridge Road, in the Armory's shadow, face. Even more importantly, he's a resident of the community who, despite his flaws and shortcomings in recent years, has sacrificed his time to advocate for businesses. He had the perspective of what businesses have been dealing with, how they've been affected by the Armory over the years,

how they've been included in the EDC's Together for Kingsbridge Armory public visioning process, and what it takes to effectively organize the community.

Before leaving Christian to later meet up with Juan to outreach for the small businesses, I was able to take a few pictures of the framed newspaper articles that Christian has been featured in over the years.



(Personal photos)

Only a few blocks away from Christian's store, I met up with Juan at NWBCCC's office who was able to get a couple of staff members from Brooklyn Legal Services to join us for our outreach to small businesses that evening which was intended to inform small businesses about the upcoming Kingsbridge Road Merchants Association on the 21st and to connect businesses to Brooklyn Legal Services who offers free attorneys to businesses. Deciding to divide and conquer, Juan and Brooklyn Legal Services went to the businesses on Kingsbridge and Jerome that recently received the concerning news and I aimed to flyer as many businesses as possible on Kingsbridge Road between Grand Concourse and Sedgwick Ave. What followed was an exhilarating ride. It was about 3:30 PM, so most businesses were still open and one by one I went to each business, listening to people, sharing resources, inviting them to the merchant meeting, and putting my Spanish-speaking abilities to test. At this point, a good number of businesses had recognized me from multiple prior engagements and expected that I was going to drop off a flyer with a QR code for our merchant association meeting, so it was nice to catch up with them. On the other hand, there were many businesses, especially on the second and third floors of some buildings of the Kingsbridge Road Commercial Corridor that I never visited due to limited time. One of the businesses, owned by a Dominican, was struggling with slow customer traffic and had no idea about the small business resources I shared with him. At some point, I eventually ran into Juan and the team from Brooklyn Legal Services who, fortunately, had productive conversations with some business owners. After a brief chat, I proceeded up Kingsbridge Road to more businesses, taking in the scenes of people hanging out in chairs in front of storefronts and building entrances, playing dominos, listening to the sounds of Willie

Colon and Rubén Blades' Pedro Navaja song: "*ocho millones de historias, tiene la ciudad de Nueva York*" / Eight million stories in New York City. At the end of the outreach for that time, I had spoken to over 70 small businesses and gained lots of new business cards. Sharing the news with Juan, he was overjoyed. We had high hopes for our virtual merchant association meeting on the 21st.



(Personal photo)

The weeks that followed were characterized by an urgency to mobilize as many people as possible to come out to the public workshop #3 on Saturday, March 18th because it was, according to EDC and Community Working Group members such as NWBCCC, the last in-person opportunity to provide the City with public input about what the Armory should be. The organizing strategy to accomplish this had scaled up from the strategy used for public workshop #2. Yes, NWBCCC was phone and text banking its network of members and supporters, and doing its usual social media communications, but something else had to be done to cap off the public visioning process akin to the way the campaign had sent a powerful message with the art installations in August and September 2022. With Juliana's suggestion, NWBCCC decided to host a rally at the Kingsbridge Armory on the morning of public workshop #3 to: unite community together with labor and show that we're not divided as some developers have tried to do in the past with Innovation QNS, to once again show that we want the community to own the Armory and have union jobs, and to show that NWBCCC has the power to bring 400+

people into the space and that it has the power to shut anything down. I was excited by this news, but still wondered if there was any degree of reactivity to this decision.

As days wended down to March 18, EDC had still not sent a flyer indicating where exactly the meeting would be held. What they did, however, was advertise were tours of the Armory!¹¹⁵ Finally, many people from the Northwest Bronx that never stepped foot inside the Armory, including myself, could fulfill their dreams. I, like many, things found out about the tours through NWBCCC. It was not advertised extensively on social media, and I wondered if it had been advertised on tv or in flyers around the neighborhood at all. Then the day came. Another day I'll never forget. It was Friday, March 10th and I scheduled a tour right before my Community Land Trust class, of which I'm the only person of color in a room of three real estate development students and a professor. Upon arrival, I was lost and didn't know where the Armory tour was going to happen. I went to the front entrance, no signs, nothing. Finally, I found the tour at the Armory's entrance on Reservoir Ave., where were also no signs, and the tour before me was just wrapping up and I saw that Jay, Caesar and Evan were a part of the tour. As we would find out from Evan later, a group of developers was at this tour, including John Wang, who's affiliated with the Queens Night Market.

About that instance, Evan said the following:

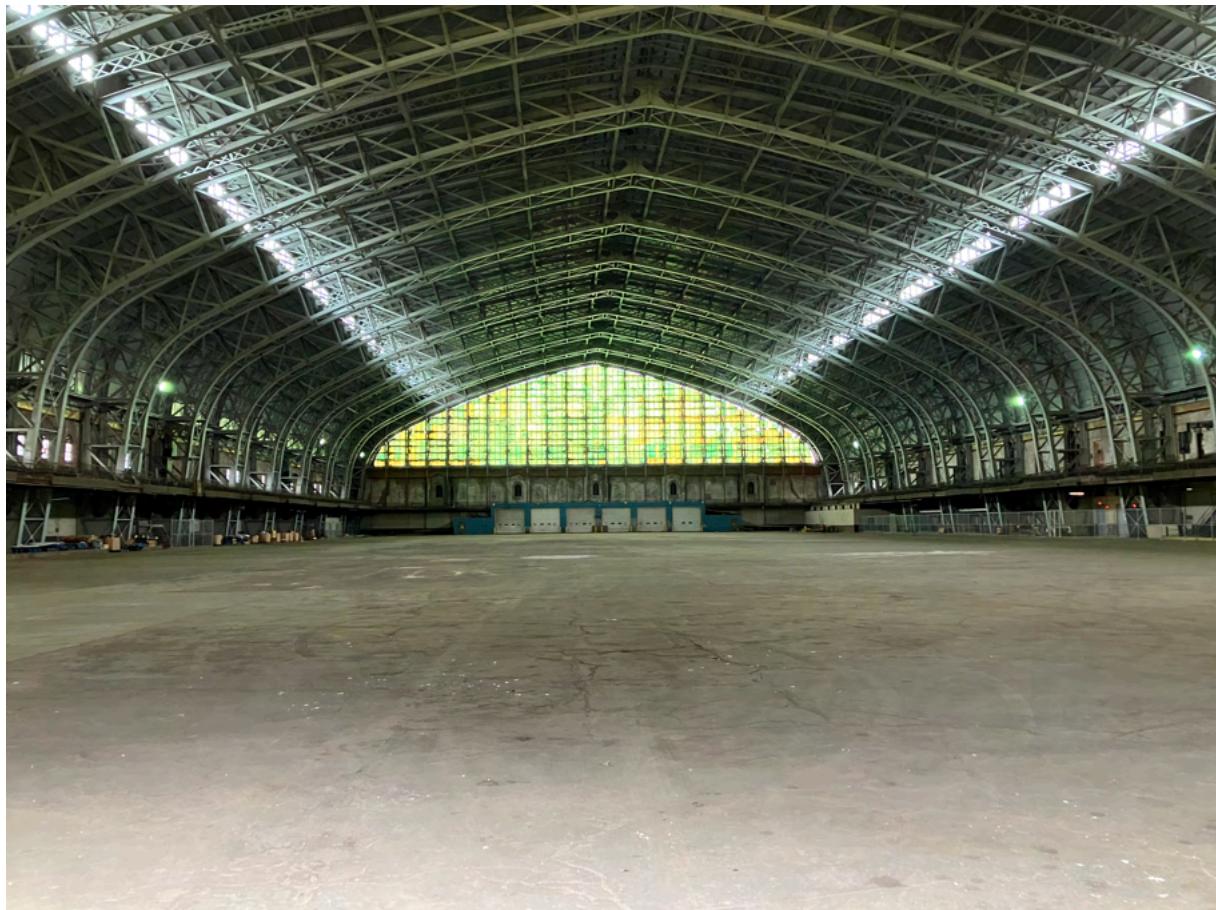
"And that's how most development works. It's not inherently bad. It was just, it was just, like a weird experience to be in the same space as people like there were people from the neighborhood on one hand, and there are people who have like, literally zero connection to the Armory, and its history and anything about it. And I think that was just a jarring experience because it sort of opened my eyes to the reality of like, what's coming, which is that there are people, particularly developers who will submit RFPs, who just skip over the entire part where you have to, you know, engage with community or like: Do you know any of the things that have happened over the last year? -And not only just the Northwest Bronx, I mean, you know, showing up at the public meetings that the EDC holds, just anything. And they just sort of skip that entire process and just wait until EDC releases the RFP, and then they release it. And then they submit one. It's just a really wild sort of disjuncture between like what the on the ground experiences versus what the developer experiences."

And then my tour got underway. I was one of two people that signed up for this time slot, which made me slightly upset and which gave me the urge to want to run down the street and bring people over. The tour was done by three NYC EDC staff members, including Fernando Ortiz. Being inside the Drill Hall of the Armory felt like being in the middle of a giant canyon. On both sides, you had walls, but to your front and back were what felt like an endless amount of space. And the kicker? Water deep below because the Armory's bottom floors are supposedly flooded from the Jerome Park Reservoir nearby. The crew from EDC proceeded to walk us to the middle of the drill hall where they would then provide a basic history of the space. We couldn't visit the other parts of the Armory, such as the beautiful headhouse where the twin towers are and the cellar, because they were unsafe to access due to their extensive need for

¹¹⁵ Nehring, A. (2023, March 17). Armory opens grand doors to new future.

<https://www.riverdalepress.com/stories/armory-opens-grand-doors-to-new-future,102457>

remediation and repair. Regardless, I was satisfied and taking what must have hundreds of photos and videos. My only regret was not running a lap around the huge indoor space because I couldn't tell if we were supposed to just follow the EDC in a straight line or not. *"Well, maybe when the Armory is redeveloped to the community's vision I could do it,"* I thought to myself with glee.



(Personal photo)

After saying bye to Fernando and the EDC staffers, I noticed Jay and Caesar were waiting outside for me, along with a young man, whom I would come to find out is a CUNY City College student who's doing a studio for NYC EDC on vertical farming possibilities at the Kingsbridge Armory. Instead of splitting up and heading our separate ways, we decided to get pizza at Emilio's Pizza across the traffic-jammed street, buzzing about the space we had just seen.

Jay would later tell me:

"Yeah, it was, for me, the first time I ever was inside the Armory. You know, I've lived in the community for more than 30 years, and I never had stepped foot inside, even past the fence. So, you know, to be inside was a big deal for me. And, you know, to see it empty for as long as I've been alive, basically, is also, you know, there's like an overwhelming feeling, but it was also a good feeling. Because I think, you know, yeah, just like just a lot of feelings, you know, just because I never been inside, so it just kind of gives me motivation to see where this goes. I'm glad that they were able to open it up to the public in that way. And

that's very important because it also helps to build morale in the community around the Armory. And you know, at the end, I forget his name (Fernando!) but he works at the New York City Economic Development Corporation. He was facilitating the tour, he was our tour guide, and he said he wants more people from the community in the tours. And so, because after a tour, I mean, everyone spoke English. Right? That's red flag number one. Red flag number two, a lot of people probably weren't from Kingsbridge, right? A lot of people coming in from all over the city. I mean, that was just the first tour. I don't know how the other tours were or have been. I think that it's important that we also promote the fact that there's a tour to people in the community. I promoted it to my neighbors in my building -and because we had a group chat from the tenant association days, which is no longer active, but the group chat is still active. So, there's like about 10 tenants on that group chat, and I shared with them the website, I shared with them the information about the tour. I didn't share with them the photos, I should."

As we chatted away, I looked out the window at what has to be the best view in Kingsbridge Heights, a view of the Armory next to a mural that says: "KINGSBRIDGE. Whose Bronx? Our Bronx! Our Bronx, Our Lives, Our Solutions." The mural also has an image of the Armory, a father and his daughter, and a girl proudly wearing a yellow NWBCCC shirt. After departing I rushed down to Broadway to catch the 1 train to my CLT class.



The following Monday, I would meet up with Jay at his place in the South Bronx to continue our conversation. On my way there on what was cold, gray day with light flurries flying about, I passed by Yankee Stadium.



(Personal photo)

If you're from the Bronx, it's hard not to be a Yankees fan, especially after you watch them win the World Series multiple times in your life, as I have. Although in recent years it's been difficult to support the team after learning from a number of people working in community development spaces that the team has done little to nothing transformative for the community in the South Bronx that surrounds it. We're talking about the richest baseball team in the nation and the fourth richest sports franchise of any sports team in the world sitting in the poorest US Congressional district in the nation. What gives? As I would come to find out from Susan Fainstein's the Just City:

"In terms of equity, the community loses a valued park, and few of its members are likely ever to be able to afford a ticket to a game. The community benefits agreement, which has now become the standard way through which communities receive compensation for developments they do not want, offers little. The jobs reserved for local residents will be low-paid and seasonal and will not really represent an increment to what already existed. On the other hand, the richest team in baseball attains enormous benefits from the city, state, and federal governments and keeps all the revenues from the lucrative skyboxes and ancillary commercial establishments. None of the huge sums from media coverage of the team go to the city, even though the population of the New York metro area provides the largest media market in the country. The well-paid players and wealthy owners largely live outside the city, so even their personal taxes go elsewhere. The New York Times, which generally supports Mayor Bloomberg's economic development initiatives, commented in an editorial:

'The Yankees have the richest franchise in the league, and they have played the better part of a century in a depressed area of the South Bronx without adding much to the neighborhood.. - Economic development is a good thing, when the target is right. Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration has delivered some worthy investments....But major professional sports teams just don't need the assistance. Government officials should be negotiating from positions of power, instead of standing ready to give away the store when professional teams bat an eye in New York's direction.' (New York Times, March 27, 2005)"¹¹⁶

Additionally, I would learn that an audit of the Yankees' charitable fund, aka the New Yankee Stadium Community Benefits Fund, intended to distribute almost \$40 million in cash grants and sports equipment, along with 600,000 baseball tickets, to community organizations in the borough over four decades, showed that only provided 30% of its monies went to charities occupying the same ZIP code as Yankee Stadium or four adjacent zip codes.¹¹⁷

What's more, while businesses across the South Bronx were struggling in 2020 during the peaks of the COVID-19 pandemic, Cary Goodman, former Executive Director of the East 161st Street BID, had to plead with former Mayor de Blasio's Office to "renegotiate the lease with the Yankees, requiring them to pay fair market rent. He said that money can go to help the shops and community here. The Yankees' current lease is for \$1 a year."¹¹⁸

I would actually go on to reach out to the East 161st Street BID, hoping to learn more from Cary about the franchise's implications on local small businesses in the neighborhood, but ended up speaking with the new and younger Executive Director, Trey Jenkins, who wants to distance himself from the Cary era of the BID, saying that the era left him in bad shape coming in. Trey, had nothing critical to say about the Yankees, and is seeking to forge a more positive relationship with the baseball team. However, like anything, time will tell if that is sustainable and produces anything for the neighborhood.

Eventually, I got to Jay's place, and we caught up a bit. It was a cold day, but it was warm in the apartment, and he joked that his slum lord had been surprisingly doing a decent job with heating lately, in his unit at least. Jay would go on to show me the flyer for a petition the North Bronx Collective started when Councilmember Fernando Cabrera announced, during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, that the Kingsbridge Armory would be used as an emergency food distribution center with the GET Food NYC Program, which delivered food boxes to those in need. The petition's demands were to establish community control of the Kingsbridge Armory by: creating an emergency community-controlled hospital with universal healthcare, community-controlled housing for the homeless, community-controlled mental health center with universal healthcare, a community-controlled food garden, and, and immediate hiring,

¹¹⁶ Fainstein, S. S. (2010). *The Just City*. Cornell University Press.

¹¹⁷ Hauser, M. (2017, June 27). Yankees Charity Neglects Stadium's Neighbors.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/27/sports/baseball/yankee-stadium-charity.html>

¹¹⁸ NY1. (2020b, June 27). The Yankees May be Playing Ball Soon, But Local Bronx Businesses Say Their Economic Outlook Is Grim. <https://www.ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/news/2020/06/27/the-yankees-may-be-playing-ball-soon--but-local-bronx-businesses-say-their-economic-outlook-is-grim>

living wage paying jobs, universal healthcare, and personal protective equipment (PPE) to workers. This push from North Bronx Collective, who was also providing mutual aid services and food to the community, came at a time when the KNIC plan was still in motion. Noticing the attention that this petition received, Sonyi Lopez, former community journalist at BronxNet, interviewed Jay about the petition. Although the petition did not accomplish its goals, it was a piece of a large multi-faceted campaign that the North Bronx Collective had waged where it was organizing tenants on a cancel rent campaign.¹¹⁹



(Flyer provided by Jay Espy)

Speaking on recent political representation, Jay said the following:

"Cabrera was a homophobic Christian, elitist, classist elected official. Didn't really prioritize the Armory in my mind, but people voted for him because he's Dominican. And he's a Christian and he speaks Spanish, so he's.. and because he's homophobic, that's also a reason why a lot of people voted for him. You know?"

"I know Espaillat blessed Pierina, and that's really why she won. Not to say that she doesn't have the skills to be in office, but whoever Espaillat is going to bless, you know, they're going to take it because he has that power in Congress... they invited me to be part of Adolfo's campaign, and I declined respectfully. You know, I have nothing against Adolfo. Known since I was 17. He's one of the first people I met at Northwest Bronx when I was going there, so I admire his commitment, I do. And that's not to be condescending, I genuinely, genuinely admire his commitment, and others that have been there for a very long time, who

¹¹⁹ BronxNet. (2020a, April 15). North Bronx Collective #OpenPeoplesArmory Petition for COVID Relief | OPEN BXRx. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRutKnViNbw>

are still there. It's not easy to continue the work like that for so long and still be motivated like, it's hard. You know, I give them credit for that. And, I would love to see a third party. I mean, I'm tired of picking between Democrats and Republicans, can we break the cycle? I mean, if Adolfo ran as an independent, or like a third party, I would have voted, I would have ran, I would have campaigned with him. Because to me, just to say you're not going to run Democrat or Republicans- who say you're going to run a third party, and in my mind, I would say it's a progressive party if he was to do that, to me, that is like, that is for me a big endorsement of an anti-capitalist, radical stance."

"So I think that, you know, something as simple as just the Democratic Party's machine in the Bronx.. They have a machine in the Bronx that they have they have gatekeepers in the Bronx, Salamanca is one of them. Ruben Diaz is another one. These are gatekeepers, and if they say something, their words weigh heavier than anyone else's in the Bronx. So that's a machine we have to break. It's hard because New York State is a Democratic state. Most people in New York City vote Democrat."

Speaking once again on the limitations of the nonprofit industrial complex, Jay acknowledged:

"That's a hypocritical thing to do, right? Critique nonprofits, but then don't do any work outside of that, just sit back and just look down and say: 'Oh, well, that's not good enough.' No, we can't flow, we can't move like that. We have to try something else. And, you know, I respect anyone that tries whatever the theory. You test it out on the ground, you have my respect. And then we can debate because you have an experience in the material realm to refer to when you debate me. And I respect that. I don't respect people sitting in their armchair and telling me how things are supposed to be. I can't have that. I don't debate academics, I debate people doing the work on the ground.

And I can't even be in a position to debate if I don't, myself, do that work, or am doing that work. I mean, even the fact that I've been removed from, you know, politics or political work in Kingsbridge in the last two years, makes me feel a little. What is it? What's the word I'm looking for? It makes me feel insecure, even about my opinions right now as I stand, because in two years, things have changed a lot...You know, so these are things that we have to consider if we're on the left, if we're left of the nonprofits, and we're anti-capitalist, and we're radical and revolutionary, like we have to develop these alternatives, and these things are happening around the world and in other places."

Speaking on the public visioning process, Jay mentioned:

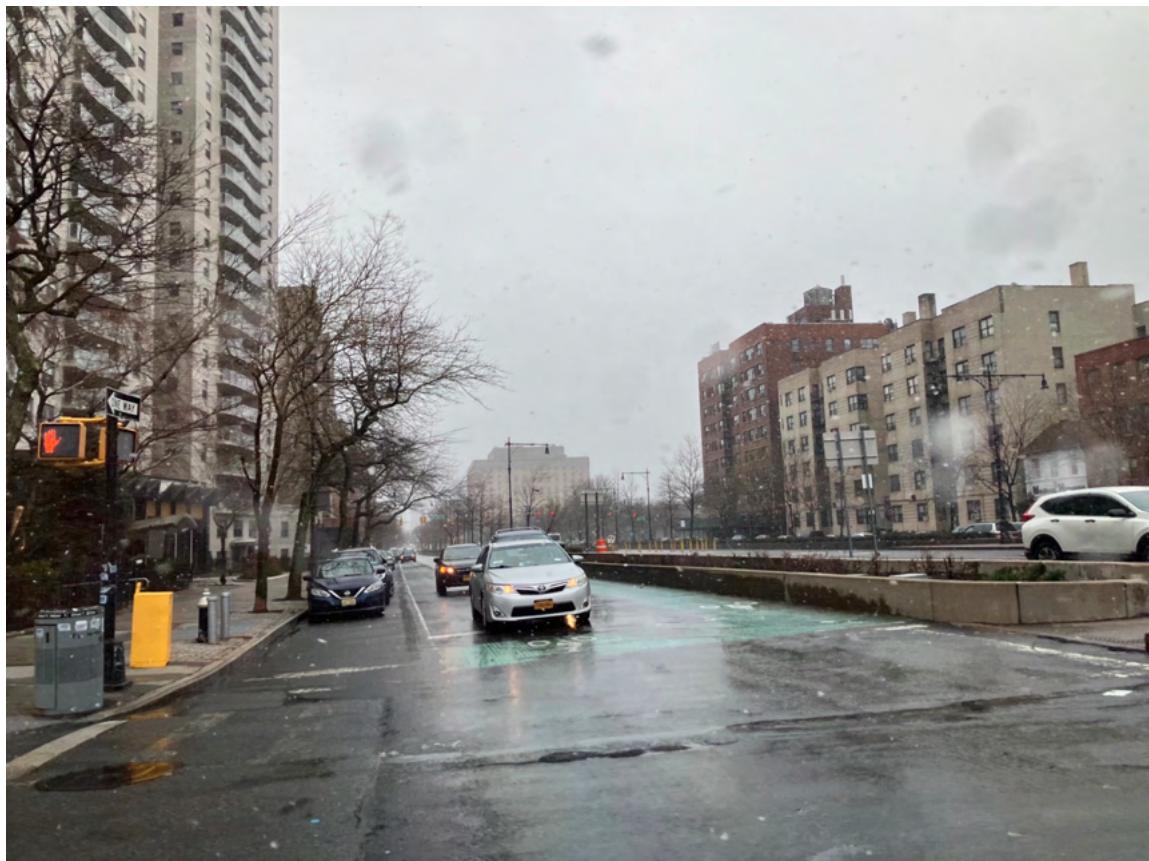
"Because I wonder how much, or how known it is that this is happening in the community? Like, what is the poll of who knows? And who doesn't know? What is the ratio? Just because the room is at capacity doesn't mean everyone knows. So I'm wondering that, right? Like, it's on social media, I only found out through social media, actually, that the annual meeting was happening. I didn't get an email. I didn't get a letter in the mail. And no one knocked on my mom's door. So, I'm wondering, how accessible is this visioning process? Are they doing just enough to say, we did that? I'm not questioning the people in there who want to do this. I'm sure that they want to tell everybody, but in practice, what is happening? What are the decisions that are being made in these meetings in North Bronx around promoting these meetings? I don't know. My mom has never opened the door for anyone for that, you know? So, I know that there's money for when people run for office and they send a bunch of letters telling me to vote for them, but I don't know about stuff like this. I think this is more important, but I'm not seeing that in the mail. And I get my mom's mail every week. Haven't seen one thing about it. My mother does not use social media. My mother does not go on the internet like that. How are you reaching people like my mom? Because if my mom doesn't know, it's a problem. And don't count on me to tell her! Because I barely found out. And I know people that know me that know that I should be there. That know that I put work in. And I found out by chance, because through social media, and through a friend of mine who just happened to see the flyer, that's how I found out. So that's not a good look, in my opinion, and they can say whatever they want to

say about well, we don't have enough resources. Well, every two to four years, you seem to have a lot of resources. So, what is the issue here?"

"I mean Pierina should do more to let her constituents know that this is happening. It's on her. Sure, Northwest Bronx can say they don't have the resources, but Pierina does. Right? So why isn't she mailing out to every constituent about this? And I can say for a fact, that's not happening. For 100% fact that's not happening, but she wants to send out flyers when she's running for office. So there's money for that, but you see where the will is, right? These are decisions being made, that no one was really calling out, but I'm paying attention to that, and I'm remembering that. It's the same critique I had back when the KNIC thing came into play. Didn't get no letters, didn't get no knock."

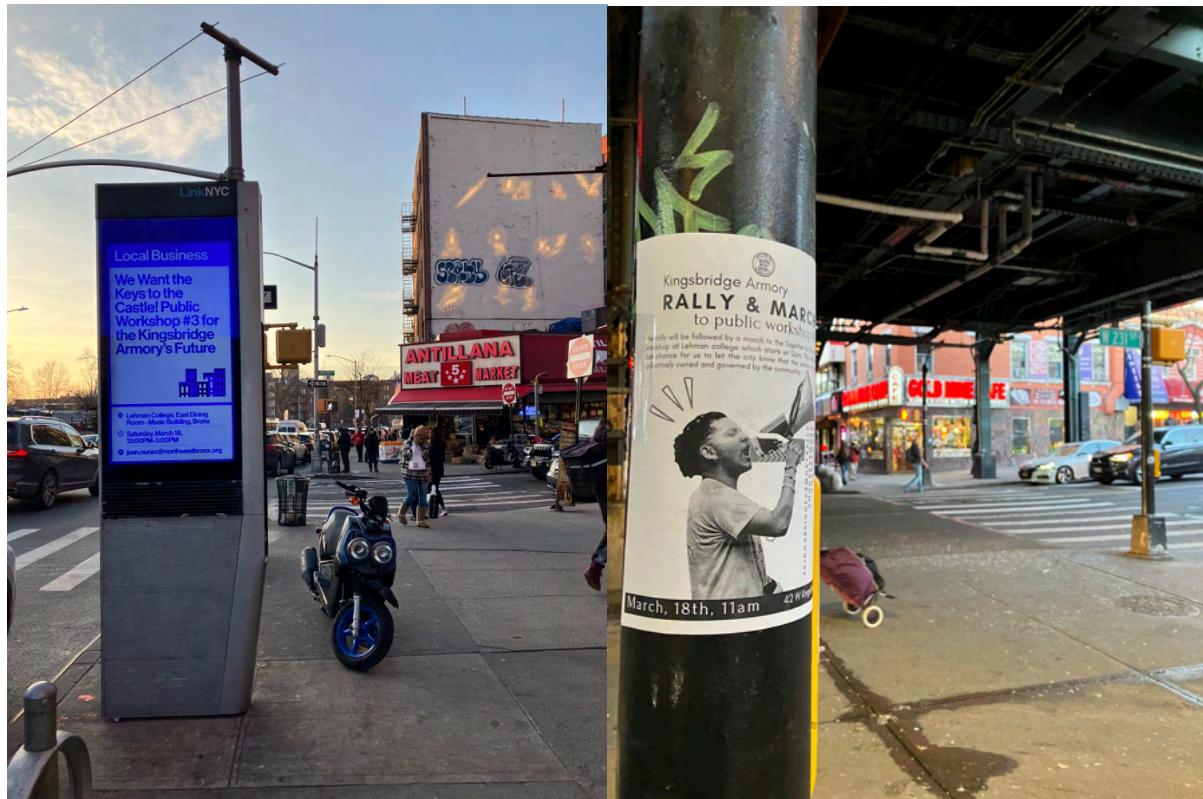
Then we got into a conversation about community control, to which Jay envisioned a more decentralized system of decision-making with a reformed community board system that is electable by community residents instead of borough presidents, has more autonomy to vote and make decisions affecting the lives of their neighborhood, and that has more power to veto city council decisions. This shift would spell a departure from the advisory role community boards traditionally play and be modeled off of things like participatory budgeting.

We then ended the conversation by talking about the upcoming rally at March 18th, which Jay said he would attend with the hopes that NWBCCC do its best to pass flyers out to those rallying and passing by. I then left Jay's apartment and headed downtown to the Lower East Side for work, wondering how I get the energy to do all this work while in school.



(Personal photo)

In the week of March 13th in the last days leading up to the rally, I traveled up Broadway in Kingsbridge on a crowded Bx9 bus and saw flyers at each bus stop from NWBCCC advertising the March 18th rally. This made me so proud, especially because the design from Juliana, featuring a Sistahs and Brothas youth member of NWBCCC, felt relatable and felt like it was a personal invitation to anyone walking down the street to be a part of the cause. We also had our free LinkNYC ad up and were making lots of phone calls and texts, posting engaging social media content, and flyering visible areas in the neighborhoods surrounding the Kingsbridge Armory. I had also invited fellow allies in the struggle, including South Bronx Unite and Western Queens CLT, who both confirmed that they would come.



(Personal photos)

I remember seeing T. during this time and I told him about the rally. He was pleased to hear the news and then asked if there would be a predetermined list of speakers at the rally, to which I was honest and told him yes, NWBCCC has a tight schedule and wants to make sure that each of their speakers was a longtime member of the community or the long fight for the Armory or a member of labor. Needless to say, it personally did not sit well saying that, and T. was right to ask that question because he was trying to understand how welcome his voice would be. It was the one time that I felt confused and conflicted as a proud NWBCCC member. On one hand, yes, NWBCCC gave itself just one hour to do a huge rally and march to Lehman College for the public workshop and had to stick to an organized schedule and send a strong message of community and labor uniting that needed to be carefully crafted internally in the days leading

up to the event. You can't please everyone in these time-crunched circumstances, and NWBCCC had, in fact, given street vendors a chance to speak at its first rally for its Our Armory campaign and been very much involved in prioritizing vendors with the Street Vendor Project. Thankfully, T. did not take it personally and remained optimistic about the event.

And then, after much anticipation and weeks of preparing, the day came. It was time to make history for our people and our borough. It was time to make the City remember that this has long been our armory, not anyone else's. It was time to unite community and labor and show that, together, our movement is unstoppable. It was time to bring that raw and incomparable Bronx energy and realness, the same spirit that birthed hip hop, birthed salsa legends, and the same spirit that continues to innovate and lead pioneering movements for working-class people of color today.



Getting to Kingsbridge Road and Sedgwick Ave. on the bus on what was a sunny Saturday morning, I got out and walked down a street filled with the sounds of dembow and rap. *“There is nothing like this neighborhood, this time, this energy, this borough,”* I thought. As I walked past the *“Whose Bronx? Our Bronx!”* Kingsbridge mural, I saw that a large crowd had started to form in front of the Our Armory sign. When I got there, the whole NWBCCC staff was there as well as many friends from the Armory team.



(Personal photo)

My friend Juliana had helped designed black t-shirts that everyone at the rally received, which had a yellow silhouette of the Armory's towers, and said on the front: “what if we owned it?” On the back, it said: “whose Armory? our armory!” I was then immediately assigned to pass out flyers to everyone at the rally with information about the advocacy campaign that NWBCCC was doing for the Armory, general information about the current public visioning process, and a bit about NWBCCC’s organizing history for the Armory. As more and more people came, largely from labor unions such as Local 79, it was determined that we would not have enough space in front of the Armory to do the rally. Juan, at one point, told me that the unions were expecting 200-300 of their people to show up that day in solidarity. Interestingly enough, as I was passing out flyers, newly arrived labor union members were coming up to me asking where they could

check in for the event. It soon became apparent that there was some kind of incentive points system that labor union members accrued whenever they showed up to rallies and other community-centered causes that Local 79 was a part of. As the clock neared 11 am and there were too many people taking up space in and around the sidewalk, the rally moved to West 195th St. behind the Armory. This entailed us taking up all of our tables, shirts, the food we brought, and bringing the mass of people to the street behind the Armory that's the beginning of what's otherwise known as Education Mile due to the fact that the entire area north of the Kingsbridge Armory contains various schools of all levels, including PS 86, DeWitt Clinton High School, Bronx High School of Science, and CUNY Lehman College itself. It was almost a blessing in disguise that the rally was relocated to the back of the Armory because we were able use a labor union member's pickup truck parked on that street as a platform for the rally's speakers to use.



(Personal photo)



(Personal photo)

After the DC9 union hung up their *Whose Armory? Our Amory* banner, the rally began with Juan and a union leader leading on the crowd with call-and-response chants of “*Whose Armory?*” Crowd response: “*Our Armory!*” “*Whose Armory?*” Crowd response: “*Our Armory!*” “*Whose Armory?*” Crowd response: “*Our Armory!*” You had a crowd of DC9 union members holding up picket signs with solidarity fists, a crowd of Local 79 union members holding up their 79 signs, NWBCCC members holding up signs that read: “*We Fought for the Kingsbridge Armory. Now, Let’s Own It*” and “*Community Ownership is Not a Metaphor.*”



(Personal photos, left and right)

After delivering opening remarks and shouting out the many community organizations and places of worship that had joined, including the Gambian Youth Organization, Mekong, South Bronx Unite, Street Vendor Project, Our Lady of Angels Church, Fordham Manor Church, etc.

Juan: "That Armory belongs to us, and we're going to decide what happens inside that Armory! Let y'all know, today is the third and final workshop, today's the last workshop, that we're going to be able to let the City know that that Armory belongs to us, that we want living union wage jobs from the construction period throughout, that we want workers coops, ownership of the Armory. Regular paying jobs are not enough to keep us in our neighborhoods!"

Crowd response: "That's right, we're hungry!"

Juan: "The rents keep going up, food prices keep going up, they keep building affordable housing, but affordable to who?!"

Crowd response: "Not to us!"

Juan: "Not to us!"

Juan, who always makes an effort to ensure that Spanish and English are both communicated with anything that NWBCCC does, then repeated his entire speech in Spanish.

Juan: "So the Northwest Bronx has been organizing for more than 26 years in that Armory. We helped stopped that mall from being built in 2008 because that developer didn't even want to negotiate a living wage and union jobs! So we said no and we won!"

Juan: "Now we're going to have folks from the Northwest Bronx, the community, from labor, from the neighborhood to talk about what this day means for us today!"

Board President, Wanda Salaman:

"I've been a member of the Northwest Bronx since my teenage years, and I'm proud to be a member of NWBCCC. The Armory is very important, it's always been a part of the agenda of the NWBCCC. But we never had said it the way we're saying it now: WE WANT OWNERSHIP! We have always worked in coalition. That's why it's called Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition. We could 150 meetings,



(Personal photo)



response: "Local hire!" Taf: "Whose Armory?" Crowd response: "Our Armory!" Taf: "Whose Armory?" Crowd response: "Our Armory!" Taf: "Whose Armory?" Crowd response: "Our Armory!"

Tafadar: "Together, we're going to uplift our communities, we're going to defeat poverty, we're going to defeat criminalization, and put all of our people onto a path of success. Make some noise!"

*but we have to stick together. The union and the community have to make decisions, but we have to make all of the decisions together. And if we don't own that, nobody's gonna f**king own it!"*

Tafadar (Organizer, Local 79):

"All too often, when it comes to developments in our neighborhoods, the people with the power and the money try to pit us against each other. They try to pit our unions against our neighbors, and that's wrong because they know if we stand together we can win what we want for the people that matter, for our families, for our neighbors, our mothers, our fathers, our children, our grandparents... all the people that matter!"

The people that have to work for a living, the people that have to live here to deal with the community, and put money back into our communities, so when we're fighting for good jobs, and we're fighting for local hire and responsible development, we are fighting to put money into our communities and build generational wealth and lift our people up! So I want to close off with a chant for what it is that we're fighting for. When I say union jobs, you say local hire.

Taf: "Union jobs!" Crowd response: "Local hire!" Taf: "Union jobs!" Crowd response: "Local hire!"

The speeches from Walanda and Tafadar were energizing and the crowd was really into them. However, the one thing missing from Taf's speech was outright support for community ownership of the Armory.

Taf, who also received a political education from NWBCCC while he was in high school in Fordham, would later confirm to me in a zoom call while he drove around The Bronx ensuring that his workers were doing ok at different sites, that Local 79 supports community ownership in addition to union jobs and were there to unite with community no matter what any developer throws at them. (Tafadar interview) Labor was really uniting with NWBCCC after all.

After a few more remarks from labor representatives and NWBCCC members, it was time for the march. It was time to visibly show our might.

Walking up alongside the eastern side of the Jerome Park reservoir next to Education Mile, NWBCCC led a line of people, as far as the eye could see, to Lehman College. Along the way, we chanted: *"Tell me what community looks like! This is what community looks like!"* *"Tell me what community looks like! This is what community looks like!"* *"Whose Bronx? Our Bronx!"* *"Whose Bronx? Our Bronx!"* *"If we don't get it, shut it down!"* *"If we don't get it, shut it down!"* *"Whose Bronx? Our Bronx!"* *"Whose Bronx? Our Bronx!"* *"Whose Bronx? Our Bronx!"* *"Whose Bronx? Our Bronx!"* *"Whose Bronx? Our Bronx!"*

¹²⁰



(Source: BronxTimes)

¹²⁰ Blease, M. (2023, March 21). *Kingsbridge Armory rally, public workshop sets the stage for upcoming proposal.* BronxTimes. <https://www.bxtimes.com/kingsbridge-armory-rally/>



As we approached the Music Building on Lehman College's campus, the location of public workshop #3, the chants changed to: "Whose Armory!" Crowd response: "Our Armory!" "Whose Armory!" Crowd response: "Our Armory!" "Who decides?" Crowd response: "We decide!" "Who decides?" Crowd response: "We decide!" "If we don't get it, shut it down!" "If we don't get it, shut it down!" "!" "If-we-don't-get it, SHUT IT DOWN!"

That was the moment. It was that hair-raising and collective moment when we arrived at the Music Building, with nearly 500 people in tow, the capacity of the workshop, that we sent the message, directly to the City and elected officials about who has the power, the vision, the workforce, and who will have shared ownership of the Kingsbridge Armory.

As Juan would recall later: *"If it wasn't for us, there wouldn't be anybody at the workshop. So it was to show the city to EDC, elected officials, everyone, this is our powerful community. This is what our community looks like. And this is what happens when you sign a solidarity with labor."*

As the rally and march came to an end, I bumped into Jenny from Western Queens CLT, who was blown away and inspired by the day's events, especially the unifying force from labor. She then caught me up to speed on some exciting plans that Western Queens CLT has in store, and mentioned that the Queens Community Land Act Town Hall had gone well. I was curious to know her thoughts about Suga Ray who had done the hunger strike, and she was thrilled with it and mentioned how helpful it was for the cause. She then had to go, and I made my way inside.

Upon entering the Music Building at Lehman College, I learned that two large open-space dining hall rooms would be used for the public workshop to fit everyone that had come. One room in the building was already packed with 250 people and closed off, and I and many others had to go to the overflow room, which would soon see nearly the same amount of people as



(Personal photo)

the other one.¹²¹ We were told that after Pierina, Sandra and NYC EDC gave their opening remarks in the first room, they were going to go to the overflow room and deliver remarks again.

Pictures of the first room:



(Source: Bronx Times)¹²²

As I entered the overflow room, I noticed that it was mostly filled with different union members. It seemed as though most NWBCCC and community members were in the first room.

¹²¹ Press, R. (2023, March 31). Kingsbridge Armory Public Workshop #3. The Bronx Chronicle.

<https://thebronxchronicle.com/2023/03/31/kingsbridge-armory-workshop/>

¹²² Blease, M. (2023, March 21). *Kingsbridge Armory rally, public workshop sets the stage for upcoming proposal.*

BronxTimes. <https://www.bxtimes.com/kingsbridge-armory-rally/>

Picture of the food and exhibition room aka the overflow room:



(Source: Bronx Borough President Vanessa Gibson)¹²³

Shortly after, as an NYC EDC staffer was handing out materials for the workshop, she mentioned to me that NYC EDC was flustered because they did not expect so many people to come. *“Oh boy,”* I thought. Yet again, the EDC was underprepared for the community to show up. In each workshop, NWBCCC and labor kept increasing the turnout, but NYC EDC could never keep up.

After several more minutes spent waiting, Pierina, dressed in white, walked in, Nate from NYC EDC walked in, the Bronx Deputy Brough President walked in, and a visibly angry Sandra, wearing a Black jacket and Black “What if we owned it?” shirt, entered the room, followed by labor leaders. Per usual, I whipped out my phone and started to video record as Pierina began her speech, saying the following:

“Is the Bronx in the house? I need energy guys! Is labor in the house? Is the carpenters in the house? I love it! Who built this city?” Crowd response: *“We did!”* Pierina: *“Who built this city? Who’s gonna build the Armory?”* Crowd response: *“We are!”*

¹²³ Borough President Vanessa L. Gibson. (2023b, March 22). Post about Public Workshop #3. <https://twitter.com/bronxbp/status/1637976119474266112?s=20>

Pierina:

"Alright, so, listen up! So my name is Pierina Sanchez, and I'm so happy that y'all are here today. This is a critical moment. This is workshop 3 of 4. There's gonna be a fourth. Alright? And in workshop 3, up until this moment, y'all have been coming out. The community has been coming out, and everybody's talking about what we want to see in the Armory, and we're closing our eyes and we're dreaming big. Right? So, this workshop today is talking about the difficult decisions that we're going to have to make. We need upwards of a billion dollars for this redevelopment. How much of that do we have right now? We have a \$100 million loan from the State. Shoutout to Senator Gustavo River and Robert Jackson, who have secured this loan. But we have 100 million of upwards of a billion dollars."

"So whoever comes to propose to do the work here in this Armory, they have to show that they have the money. But this here? You all, the carpenters, labor, this community, we gotta together and demand that the government put money in. Alright? The City has to put in money. The State has to put in grant money as well. And the federal also has to put in grant money. Because, why did this fail last time? Why did the National Ice Center fail? They never had the money. They sold us a dream. They said they had it, but they never had the money. They had to borrow, and CitiBank and the banks and institutions they went to, said nah, we're not going to invest in that. We can't have that happen again. We don't have thirty more years for this to be redeveloped for what the community needs. So, I'm asking you – y'all came out here today, and I thank you. And I'm going to ask you to keep coming out, and to keep showing up because we need government to put their money in our community because they stole from us in the 70s and 80s, let's be real. They took that from us, they disinvested, they closed down firehouses as Sandra so well said, and now we need to them to come in and undo the harm that they did to this community. So do I have your community that you're going to keep showing up?"

Some people in the crowd: "yeah!"

Sandra:

"Good afternoon! I know y'all have been hanging out for a while. We're gonna get started now. But before we get started, I had a couple of things I wanted to share with you. Back in the 70s, did we decide to disinvest and abandon our community?"

Crowd response: "No! "

Sandra:

"Did we decide to redline our community? Come on, I know you know the answers! Did we decide to redline and disinvest in our own communities?!"

Many voices in the crowd: "NO!"

Sandra:

"No, we did not. What we did decide was to organize and to rebuild the City. That's what we decided to do together. Did we decide to close our firehouses that turned our community into arson and abandonment?"

Crowd response: "NO!"

Sandra:

"No we didn't. We didn't do that. Did we decide to put all those chain fast food restaurants all over the Bronx making us super unhealthy? Did we decide that?!"

Crowd: "NO!"

Sandra: *"This side of the room, did we decide that?"*

Crowd response: "NO!"

Sandra: *"I'm not hearing this side of the room!"*

Crowd response: "NO!"

Sandra:

"No, what we did do is we decided to organize community gardens where people are growing fresh fruits and vegetables. We decided to create a network of farmers markets where we have access to fresh fruits and vegetables, so we do not continue to be SICKEST COUNTY IN THE STATE! The Bronx right now is the sickest county in the State! And it's not just because of fast food restaurants and all that, it's because we don't have good jobs, we don't have jobs that bring us dignity and we're not able to take care of our families. So when we talk about the Armory, I'm going to ask you: Who decides?"

Crowd: "We decide!"

Sandra: *"I'm sorry, say that again?"*

Crowd: "We decide!"

Sandra: *"Who decides what goes in the Armory?!"*

Crowd: "We decide!"

Sandra:

"And so that's why we're here today. We are here to talk about what we want in the Armory, and it's not just the idea of the projects that can go inside. It's also the structure. We hear a lot about how we need money. Right? Big money to come out from the outside to come in to pay for this. I think that's curious because the City owned this building for decades and let it rot! And let it decay, and let it fall apart. So now community can't own it, workers can't benefit from it, because the City was a negligent landlord?!"

And at that moment there was complete silence. Nate Gray from NYC EDC grabbed his cup and took a gulp of water. And Pierina was there clenching her hands and standing on her tippy toes.

Sandra: *"Who decides?"*

Crowd response: "WE DECIDE!"

Sandra: "We will decide. So the conversations today, my brothers and sisters from faith organizations, from community organizations, from labor, we are here to say we want union jobs."

Crowd response: "YES!"

Sandra: "I need to hear you say it...We want union jobs!"

Crowd response: "YES!" *cheers*

Sandra: "We want community ownership!"

Crowd response: "Yes!" *cheers*

Sandra:

"And we want shared wealth. It's not enough to have jobs that end and then you don't continue to get benefit. We want jobs that after the job is over we continue to benefit from it. And the way that we're going to do that? Is because labor and community stand together! In other development projects across the City, we often are divided. We are told that you have to decide. Which one you want? Are we divided?"

Crowd response: "No!"

Sandra: "Are we united? Community and labor are we united?"

Crowd response: "Yeah!"

Sandra: "Who decides?"

Crowd response: "We do!"

Sandra: "Thank you!"

And it was at that moment that I wanted to run a marathon. The sheer energy emitted from Sandra was cathartic. I was wondering if it was ever going to get to the point where NWBCCC would have to take its gloves off and go full Bronx, and it happened. She did not hold back from calling EDC out, she did not hold back from pushing back on Pierina's narrative about the Armory needing big-money developers, and she did all this while deeply engaging with labor and community stakeholders in the room as she spoke, emphasizing the unity and power in the space. Some things are better than movies, better than books, better than television. This was

it, right in the Northwest Bronx. With the weight of years of organizing on her shoulders, Sandra took the moment head-on.

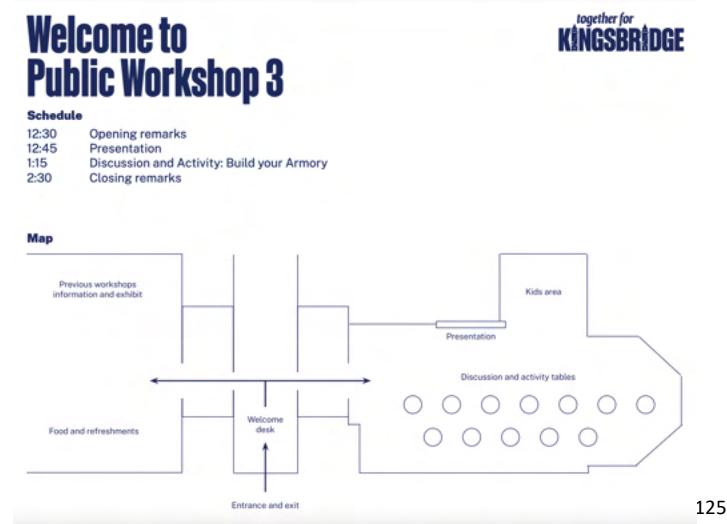
Juan would later confirm that: NWBCCC was very upset and felt disrespected because there were no translation services offered, there wasn't enough space for everybody, they divided the workshop into two rooms, they didn't have enough sign-in sheets, they had people signing in with a QR code, half of the people that came eventually left and they simply were not ready. What's more is that NWBCCC also spoke with EDC about cutting down on the elected officials' speeches in the beginning of the workshops, preferring to just have Pierina speak since she's Co-Chair.

"And then you let each elected official speak one by one, when we agreed we do not need elected officials to take up that much space and talk. No, this is not their time. This is not a campaign!" – Juan

Being there, I also noticed that NYC EDC ran out of water and food.

"You don't have enough tables for 500 people. Why? Because you thought we couldn't bring 500 people!" – Juan

As seen from this map, the large room on the right was where the actual workshop took place.¹²⁴ However, the room could only fit 250 people. So, myself and many others, were placed into the food and exhibition room on the left. After the Co-Chairs and elected officials gave their speeches in what would become the overflow room, many people, especially union members, in said room left the building altogether because there was no activity for them.



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(Source: NYC EDC)

¹²⁴ NYC EDC. (n.d.-n). Public Workshop #3.

<https://kingsbridgetogether.com/sites/default/files/2023-03/Workshop%203%20handout%20ENGLISH.pdf>

¹²⁵ NYC EDC. (n.d.-n). Public Workshop #3.

<https://kingsbridgetogether.com/sites/default/files/2023-03/Workshop%203%20handout%20ENGLISH.pdf>

What's more odd is that Pierina said we would be talking about difficult decisions that will have to be made for the Armory in the workshop, but that did not seem to be a major focus. What we did end up doing was a design charrette with Hester Street, the first time that's ever happened in the public visioning process. And supposedly the last, since it was the last workshop that EDC wanted to get feedback from the community.

Now, let's build our ideal Armory!

Facilitated group activity



The conversation that my group had, which was joined by Deacon Wilson of Our Lady of Angels Church, was exciting nonetheless.



(Source: Councilwoman Pierina Sanchez)¹²⁸

¹²⁶ NYC EDC. (n.d.-n). Public Workshop #3. <https://kingsbridgetogether.com/sites/default/files/2023-03/Workshop%203%20handout%20ENGLISH.pdf>

¹²⁷ Council Member Pierina Sanchez. (2023e, March 20). Post about Workshop #3.

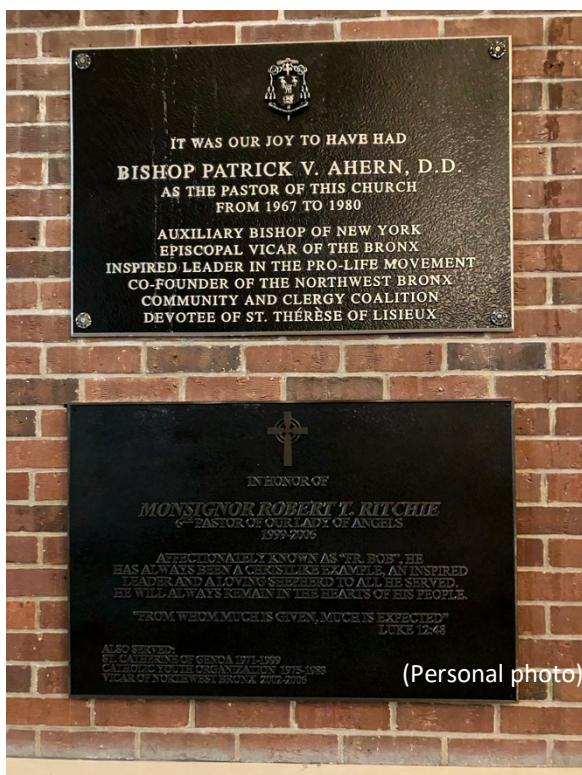
https://twitter.com/pisancheznyc/status/1637992313573060609?s=46&t=Lp_sqZTrDwdLgkzDkpxHPA

¹²⁸ Council Member Pierina Sanchez. (2023d, March 20). Post after Workshop #3.

<https://twitter.com/PiSanchezNYC/status/1637992313573060609?s=20>

The Hester Street community engagement facilitator at our table implored us to remember that the Armory needs to make revenue that will sustain its operations. To that end, she placed entrepreneurship and jobs hubs as our top-ranked priority use for the Armory, and asked if my table agreed, to which we did, along with placing job training and development as tied for number one. We then after some friendly back and forth, community organizing and gathering as our second top use, cultural attractions as our third top use, recreation and fitness as our fourth top use, and retail and entertainment as our lowest priority. We then discussed giving half of the drill hall to an anchor tenant that works in urban agriculture or in light manufacturing and the other half would be used a flexible space that could be used variably for performing arts, recreation, and health and wellness services. Our proposal for the headhouse was, since it's the front of the building and facing Kingsbridge Road, to be the community center of the Armory with spaces for street vendors, smaller performance, community organizing spaces and meetings, business incubators, art spaces, etc. And the cellar, for us, was to have 35-50% of it be saved for the anchor tenant and then reserving the remaining space for a STEM training center, studios, and tutoring. Bringing retail into the Armory was something that my group was concerned about because they would compete with local small business that are already struggling. After each group collectively agreed on how the Armory should be designed, we presented our designs. My group pressured me to present for them, so I did just that. Before I knew it, the last public workshop for public input for the Kingsbridge Armory was

over and the future seemed bright because of our organizing power, but uncertain because, given EDC's poor record of managing the public visioning process, there was concern that the EDC's Vision Document would not take the community's vision into consideration. (Juan interview)



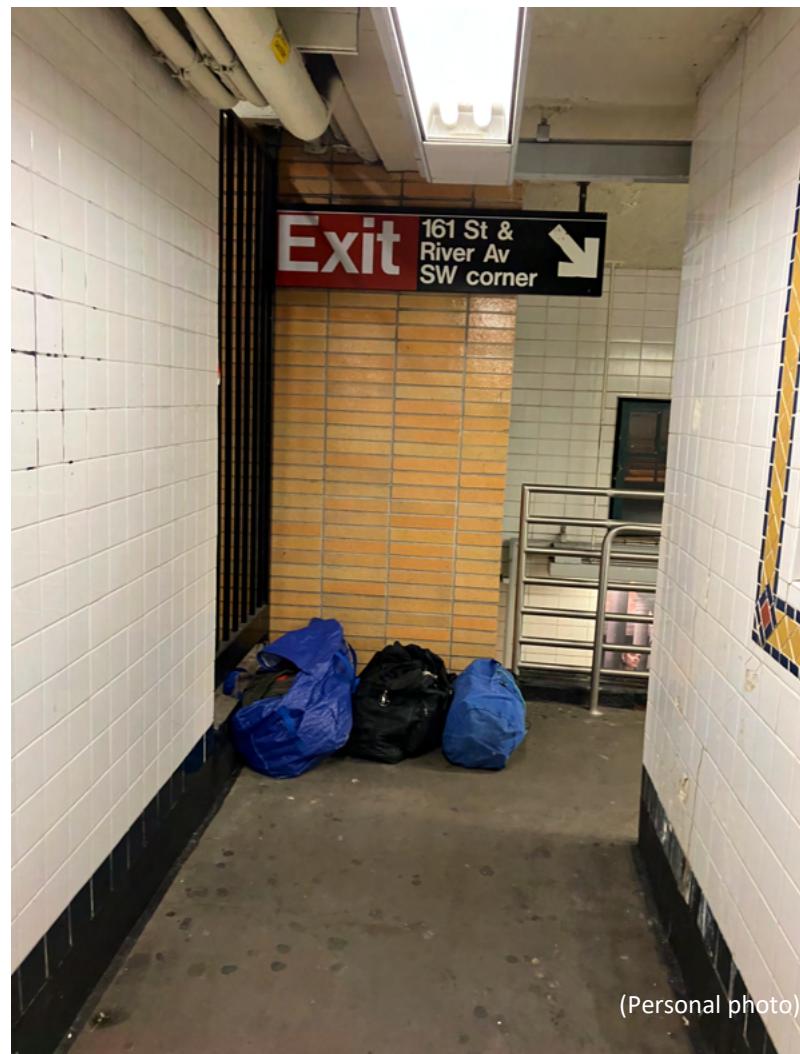
After the workshop, I walked with a large group of NWBCCC friends out of Lehman College to Jerome Ave. I noticed Jay and Sandra were talking and it seemed like there was some kind of effort being made to reconcile past differences. Labor wasn't the only one uniting that day!

I then had to jet off from the group because I scheduled a time to meet with Deacon Wilson at Our Lady of Angels (OLA) Roman Catholic Church. Deacon Wilson, who used to be an organizer in the South Bronx, was fascinating to

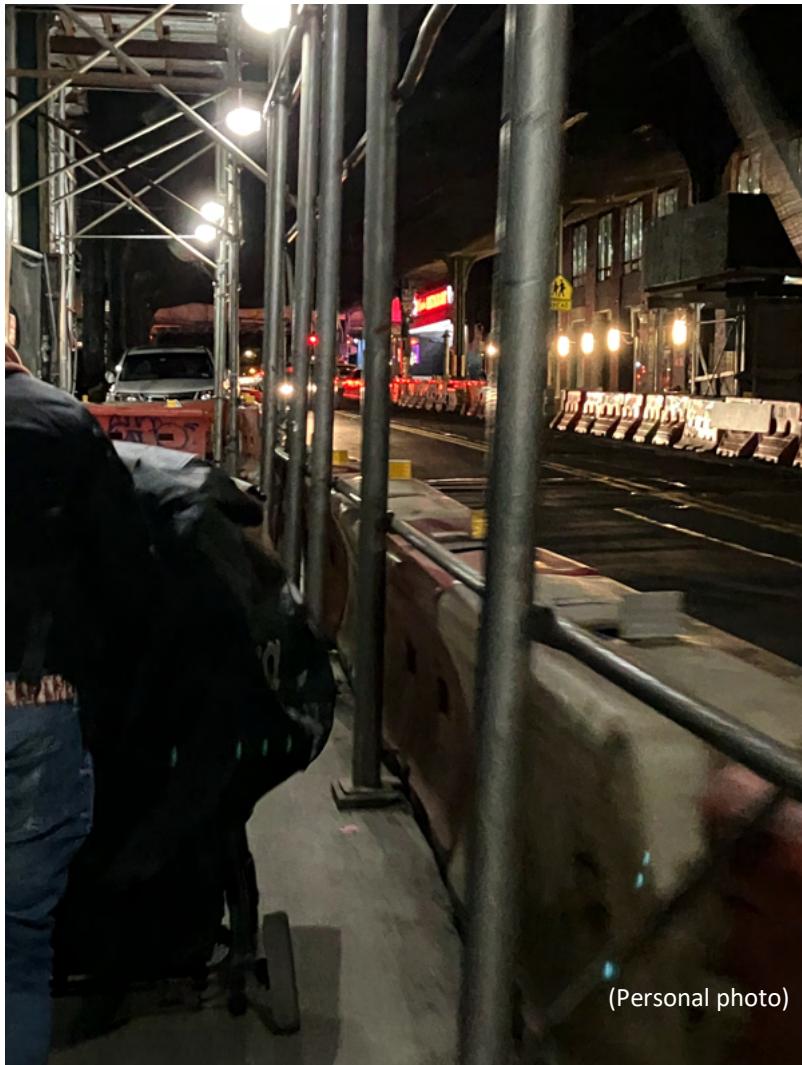
learn from because he was able to share stories about the history of NWBCCC, OLA and other

churches coming together to organize and fight back against neglect and disinvestment in their communities. He then told me that he supports community ownership and had enjoyed learning about it since NWBCCC has been educating people since starting the Our Armory campaign. Another interesting thing mentioned by Deacon Wilson was the difficulties of his attempts at organizing places of worship in the area because a lot of places had no leadership.

After meeting with Deacon Wilson, the plan was to meet up with T. the street vendor in the evening because we had planned to get dinner and chat it up. I arrived at his spot at the right time as he was packing up for the day. After catching up, I then asked if he wanted to get food nearby, but he said he preferred to go home first so that he didn't have to leave his cart outside while we ate, which he feared would get stolen. He countered with another plan: Getting food near his place all the way down in the Mt Eden neighborhood of the West Bronx. Being the adventurer that I am, I agreed, and we left Kingsbridge Road and walked down Jerome Ave to the Fordham Road 4 train station because the Kingsbridge Rd station isn't ADA compliant and has no elevator. After we went up the elevator at Fordham Road we then found out that all downtown trains were skipping the station due to maintenance so we had to go all the way up to Woodlawn station, the last stop on the 4 train, because it's the only one that would allow us to go back downtown without leaving the train and paying more. On our way to Woodlawn, T. was telling me about his high school days running track where he was the underdog that proudly beat the favorites in his mid and long-distance races. After I told him that I ran track too, he asked me what my times were. Once I told him, he responded by saying that I was slow, to which we both laughed. After getting to Woodlawn, we were able to go back downtown. Our destination was Yankee Stadium station at 161st street. Even though T lives closer to the station at 167th, the 167 station does not have ADA accessibility and an elevator. However, once we got to Yankee Stadium station, the elevator to the street was broken! So we had to disassemble T.'s items one by



(Personal photo)



(Personal photo)

Mexican spot, after our ears nearly dropped off from opening the door of a restaurant next door that was actually a club playing music from the loudest speakers I've ever heard. Over tamales, tacos, huaraches, and Mexican sodas, I experienced a conversation that humbled me and altered my outlook on life. After playfully ribbing me and NWBCCC for not playing music at our rally, T. mentioned that the Kingsbridge Armory wasn't about himself or the vendors, it was for the youth of the Bronx. I also learned about T.'s journey as a business owner, a journey that took him from vending, to owning his own store, and then back to vending. After seeing his partner pass away a year ago, he sought spiritual guidance. He could've sold anywhere in the City, including Harlem where he used to make a lot of money years ago, but he ended up on Kingsbridge Road because it meant the world to him to provide affordable items to people in Kingsbridge Heights that often have very little and do not have the means to buy clothes from chain stores.

"Doing what I'm doing merchandising on Kingsbridge, people will come to me almost like I was their therapist. And you'd be surprised at the amount of people, including Spanish people, some don't even understand that much English, but it's like I'm doing a service, not just selling stuff cheap. Because that is

one from his cart, including a table and carry them down to the street just to reassemble them once we got everything down the stairs, including the cart itself.

5-8 blocks up the street past Yankee stadium seems like nothing when you're walking with a backpack or purse, but as I took turns helping this vendor push his cart back to his building, I couldn't believe that he does this twice nearly every single day. Seeing me strain to push his cart, T. gleefully joked that he never has to go to the gym due to the physical demands of his commute.

After arriving at his building, which fortunately has an elevator, I waited downstairs as he dropped off his items at home. We then decided to find a spot nearby to eat food, eventually settling on a no-frills

the name of the game, that's the order of the day on Kingsbridge when you sell items, you got to go below costs, and that tells you something about the community. It tells you that people are living similar to third world country incomes, if at all. Some people walk up and down Kingsbridge and they look like they're normal with cloths and everything and speaking to you, you know, like sociably like social etiquette. But then you find out they have nothing like they don't even live in the United States. So this merchandise thing goes a long way, man. People look at it one way, one dimension away. It's a lot of facets to this man. You make people's day when you say good morning. That changes a lot of outlooks and attitudes some mornings. And you change people's day when a woman comes in and got three kids, no husband, no boyfriend, and she needed a pair of boots from you. And you tell her \$5 And she says she got three and some change. You take it, and she hug you and remember you every time she see you... That's the kind of stuff that I started to evolve to."

"When I first walked by and see Our Armory. I said: wait a minute, there's some conscientious people around here? Because I thought it was just you know, those guys and us, and it's 60-40, and we're gonna keep losing. But when I seen that, I was like wow, I gotta get with these people. Maybe God, the Creator, whatever you want to call them, or they will call him, whatever whoever wanna call him, maybe He put me here for a reason. Because along your journey of thing called life, we keep questioning yourself. What is my purpose?"

And then T. started to tell my about his daily routine. Every morning he collects recyclables around his building to supplement his income from vending. Every single morning.

Then about his vision for the Armory:

"I would never think I'm too small to make an impact to get with the people that's going to make a difference and change the Armory. And I really think it should be a strong standing from all the adults, all the ethnicities, all the people, all the colors, all the different races, economic levels should be backing us up. Whether your child was born and raised up here or not, these children are all our children. It's the village concept wherever you go, whether there's only negative feedback or positive, it takes a village to raise a child, and we should look at it like that. How many times you turn on the TV and see another teen shot in the Bronx? It was weekly, now it's every three days. We can prove that factually. Aren't you tired of that? That next person shot could be, God forbid, a friend of yours, nephews, son, brother or a stray bullet could be somebody close to you that you know..."

Expanding on how the Armory could serve the youth:

"Let's save some lives first. You can always fill a position at Wendy's, but how many youth can we save by making an impact in that armory?"

On community ownership, he was supportive and said the following:

"And then let's let them know what they should make available instead of lining their pockets. Because that's what's gonna happen, devil's advocate, that's what's gonna happen the Starbucks, and the Lowe's and the Target could move in, you can do that. But the shootings will go on. When can one those elected officials say I was a part of that little tiny group that got together and say they owned it as their motto? When can one of them stand up for the righteousness instead of talking that BS man? You already know."

After wrapping up our meal, I paid the bill, and then we both called it a night. Him, the same old person. Me, forever changed.

Story Ending - Base Building amidst Displacement Pressures (Mar. 2022-May 2023)

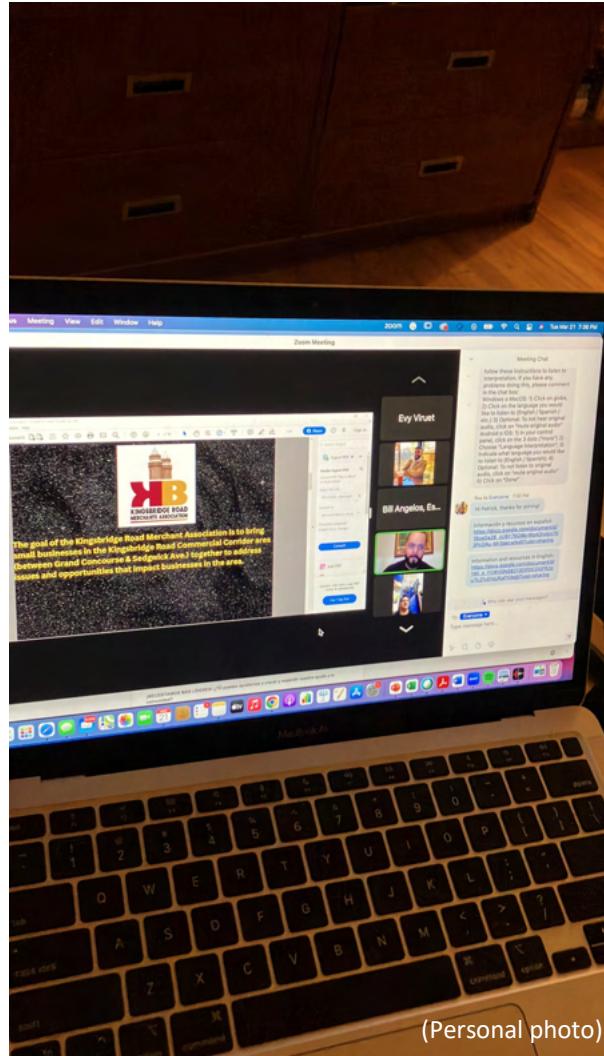
The following Monday? You guessed it, Juan and I were back to work organizing and phonebanking small businesses to remind them about the virtual Kingsbridge Road Merchants Association meeting the next day on March 21, 2023. One by one, I called businesses, flipping between English and a script I prepared in Spanish. In many cases, either businesses didn't pick up, or I had to leave a voicemail, or the business manager wasn't there. After calling about 88 businesses on a spreadsheet that Juan and I had populated with the contact info of businesses we had engaged with in the last several months, I received 12 confirmations from businesses that were highly likely to attend the virtual meeting and 8 responses from businesses that were possibilities, but not entirely sure.

By this point in our engagement with businesses over the months, Juan and I started to spot businesses with owners that were enthusiastic about the work that we were doing and that might be interested in being a part of the new Steering Committee that we were hoping to advance for the merchant association to bring new energy and more diverse leadership to the association, to reduce hierarchy in the association, and to, hopefully, better sustain the merchant association. Thanks to consultation from ANHD, we decided the steering committee would have 6-8 members and have the following responsibilities: meet monthly (in addition to any general merchant association meeting), represent the merchant association in meetings, bring updates and decisions to general membership for input, and serve as Rapid Response Team for urgent responses and decisions needed for the merchant's association.

Some people that I spoke to the day before the March 21st merchant association meeting asked me to email them the zoom link for the meeting.

On the day of the meeting, we did more last-minute follow-ups via email and phone to get the word out. Once the meeting started, Brooklyn Legal Services gave a presentation as did Fernando Ortiz from NYC EDC who we almost didn't invite because we weren't sure if the EDC's presentation on the Armory would be appropriate for the many businesses that just needed support, resources and connections before anything. With a Spanish translator on hand, we got started. Initially, at the beginning of the meeting, only about two or three independent small businesses were on hand. With my zoom camera turned off on my computer, I started calling the businesses that seemed interested in the event. Some had last-minute things come up that prevented them from attending and others simply forgot and asked me to send them the link again. With that kind of persistent communication, the meeting then swelled to around six businesses. After some time, the call grew to about 10-11 businesses, which would be the peak amount of businesses the call had that night.

The meeting ended up being a success because of the five businesses, including Christian, that expressed interest in being a steering committee: three were women, two weren't Hispanic, and at least 1-2 of the businesses were newer compared to the others that had been around for a long time. The meeting was also good in the sense that we were able to provide the list of resources that I made – in English and Spanish – to businesses. The other good thing about the meeting was that Evy showed up and was able to ask good questions to Brooklyn Legal Services for the benefit of the businesses on hand and was a welcome presence in a room where many of the businesses recognized and respected her due to the years of small business organizing she had done to support them. Lastly, the meeting was good in the sense that small businesses didn't have to leave their storefront and be inconvenienced from their lives. While some business owners were visibly tuned into the call from their homes or from their commute back home, many others were still at their storefronts working away and taking care of their customers while the meeting transpired.



(Personal photo)

When the call wrapped up, I was proud of the work that Juan and I had done to revive the merchants association and start a new chapter for it. It was tough work to pull that off, but we are heading in the right direction. It's unlikely that there have been any small business meetings of that albeit moderate size in Kingsbridge in a while, probably since the pandemic, and we look forward to keeping the momentum rolling.

The beginning of April marked a time of brief rest for NWBCCC and a reevaluation of its strategy for the Our Armory campaign. During this time, I was consumed with balancing school and final class projects, preparing for thesis jury week, working to pay the bills, and dealing with the stresses of everyday life as a working-class Black man, an alienating experience all around from most of my wealthy classmates that did not have to worry about such obstacles and who have the means to obtain their own apartments in New York without working and who have a more adequate amount of time to complete course assignments. With the passing of each day, I was getting severely fatigued and quickly losing motivation to go to school, but, deep down, what always kept me going was the work I was doing for NWBCCC and work-class people in the

Northwest Bronx. It was real, it was personal, it was extraordinarily insightful, it was immensely exciting, and it was difficult, but it was just and worth fighting for.

On Thursday, April 6th, Juan organized an Armory Committee meeting. One of the biggest goals of this meeting was to discuss a new outreach plan for the month of April that would focus on base building and leadership development. NWBCCC had spent a significant portion of its energy and capacity on getting people to come out to EDC's Together for Kingsbridge events, but it needed to spend more time sharing the Our Armory campaign's values and principles throughout the Northwest Bronx, especially the goal of community ownership for the Armory. This shifting of gears in organizing strategy was also intended to mobilize communities around the Armory and build more grassroots people power that would only serve to strengthen the campaign as NWBCCC was preparing for its next steps of releasing its own Vision Plan for the Armory and eventually submitting its own application once the EDC releases an RFP for redevelopment. To that end, there was discussion of more tabling, outreach to apartment buildings, cold outreach in other areas, such as Fordham Road and Broadway, and engaging with people at local food pantries, among other places.

Around April 10th, Juan and I were following up with several small businesses that expressed interest in being a part of the Kingsbridge Road Merchants Association Steering Committee for a follow-up virtual meeting that we scheduled with them for Thursday, April 14th to further discuss how NWBCCC could support small businesses and the Our Armory campaign, to inform small businesses of resources, to discuss possible expectations of steering committee members and to talk about the need to create bylaws.

On April 12th, after a long day working at Cooper Square Committee and doing outreach work to small businesses below Houston Street in the Lower East Side to assess interest in forming a merchant association there, I made some final follow-up phone calls, texts and emails to small businesses and briefly spoke with Juan about the upcoming merchant association meeting agenda, the idea for having subcommittees in the merchant association that would be divided into certain areas of the Kingsbridge Road Commercial Corridor (such as a Jerome Ave. subcommittee -great for small businesses with month-to-month leases there, an East Kingsbridge Road subcommittee, and a West Kingsbridge Road subcommittee), a new \$10K grant for small businesses in New York from Citizens Committee, and other matters affecting local businesses. We were excited about the grant and looked forward to the meeting the next day.

Thursday evening on April 13th, a day before my thesis defense presentation, the merchant association meeting got started. Predictably, the small businesses, busy as ever, were slow to join the call and I had to make some additional last-minute texts and calls to see who could join. A bodega owner I had befriended was about to do evening prayer and break his fast for Ramadan, but he gracefully decided to attend the meeting and learn more about the steering committee, resources and the merchant association generally. In total, seven businesses, including Christian, ended up showing up. A representative from Citizens Committee was also there to inform us about the new grant opportunity and how to apply, and several merchants

were happy to hear about the opportunity. Businesses had various questions, including the process of having to incorporate the merchant association. This meeting was interesting because small businesses on the call were dealing with different concerns. Some, especially the ones that are more established and doing well, had more concerns about cleanliness and safety in the area. Others, especially the ones on month-to-month leases and that have poor relationships with their landlords, are worried about staying in business and financial stability, which solidified the importance of having the steering committee united on common causes, but organized into subcommittees for businesses that are dealing with different issues. Whether the subcommittees are organized by location or issue remains to be seen. The meeting ended with the suggestion from one business owner that we have our next evening meeting in person, and most businesses agreed, seeking to better know the businesses they'd be working on the steering committee with. Seeing the merchant association build its foundation made my day and gave me the energy to tackle my final thesis defense presentation.

The following week, Juan informed me that NYC SBS was going to be tabling in front of the Armory on Kingsbridge Road on the morning of Wednesday, April 19, and that he was planning to visit many small businesses with them and Brooklyn Legal Services. That morning, I met up with Juan at NWBCCC's office and we walked over to meet up with SBS and Brooklyn Legal Services. Upon arrival, not only did SBS have a table with flyers and brochures, but they also had a big RV, or what SBS refers to as its "*mobile unit*," which is its attempt to bring SBS' services directly to communities and "meet people where they are."¹²⁹



(Personal photo)

¹²⁹ NYC SBS. (2022, May 3). Mobile Unit. <https://m.facebook.com/NYCBusiness/videos/this-mobile-unit-is-a-prime-example-of-how-we-bring-various-new-york-city-agenci/397747948867211/>

We were invited into the RV, which was large, modern, and had many of the office amenities that one would need for an office: a printer, desks, WIFI, etc. However, with the RV parked in one location, was SBS really expecting small businesses lined down the street to just magically stick theirs heads out their storefront, see the RV and come over? I was skeptical of the purpose of the RV and their method of tabling small businesses, but glad that SBS staffers and Brooklyn Legal Services were there to go door to door with Juan and I.

After SBS decided to snap pictures of the group in front of the RV, we agreed that it would be time efficient if Juan went with Brooklyn Legal Services and SBS to businesses on West Kingsbridge Road, and if I went with the other representatives from Brooklyn Legal Services and SBS to businesses on the other side of Jerome Ave on East Kingsbridge Road. It was important that Juan and I, with our connection to small businesses, be present to help provide Brooklyn Legal Services and SBS with the necessary context of what businesses are struggling with and to make interactions more comfortable and less intimidating for the businesses.

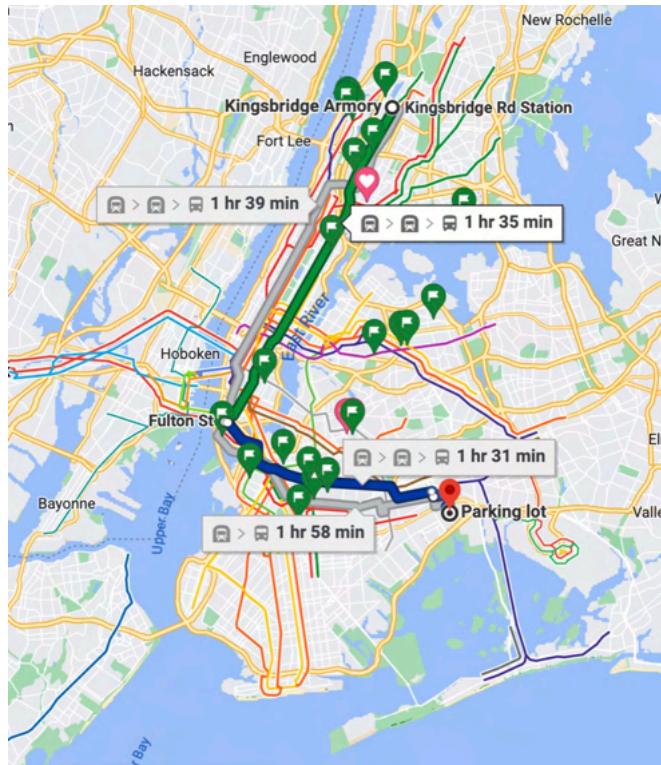
As my team prepared to do outreach, I noticed that SBS and the Business Express Service Team (BEST) decided to do outreach on their own, mentioning that it would be too intimidating if we all went to businesses together. I understood where SBS was coming from, but at the same time was worried that such a decision would just confuse and potentially overwhelm business owners. Nonetheless, we carried on with our outreach and were able to inform a lot of businesses about the Commercial Lease Assistance Program and the EDC's Kingsbridge Armory survey, which, as Juan informed me that day, had been extended, due to pressure from NWBCCC and Council Member Pierina, to the end of April and was finally available in multiple languages besides English. Yes, EDC waited until the last month of the public input period of its public visioning process to translate its online services. This would have been good news if that was done when the public visioning process started, but I was supremely disappointed because EDC, once again, was depriving this diverse community of its ability to participate in such an important planning process until the last minute.

After visiting approximately 25 storefronts, Brooklyn Legal Services had to wrap up for the day. However, we decided to visit a few more storefronts on the way back to SBS' RV. As we popped into businesses, store owners and workers informed us that they had already spoken with someone from our team. We then realized that staffers from SBS' BEST team had visited the storefronts already to inform them about the services that BEST provides and had to clarify that we were there to talk about other services and opportunities. Understandably, we were met with confused and annoyed reactions from many of these business owners. *"We have to be better coordinated if we do this with SBS again,"* I thought.

After wrapping up outreach, one of the staffers from Brooklyn Legal Services received a phone call from her team that the police came and raided the street vendors in front of the Armory and that Juan was trying to protect the vendors and explain their rights to them. Once I heard the news, I was shocked to the core. *"There's no way,"* I thought. As we arrived at Kingsbridge

Road and Jerome Ave. by the eastern corner of the Armory, I saw several vendors frantically leaving the vicinity with their carts. After asking them what happened while passing by, they shook their heads and just muttered that the police kicked them out. They were convinced that somebody maliciously called the police on them.

Juan had to run off to an event, but he explained that Street Vendor Project taught him how to explain the vendors' rights to people, including the importance of vendors showing the police their identification if they wanted to retrieve their items back, recording everything that's happening – if they have camera phones, and making sure they received their summons. Understandably, a lot of vendors are apprehensive about this and keen on their right to privacy. It's important to note that in order for vendors on Kingsbridge Road to retrieve their items, like other vendors in the outer boroughs, they'd first have to go all the way downtown to a City-owned office at 59 Maiden Lane in the Financial District neighborhood of Lower Manhattan, present their identification and the summons fine and itemized receipt, and then pay an undisclosed summons fine. After that ordeal, they'd then have to trek to 803 Forbell Street, which is all the way on the easternmost side of Brooklyn, not too far away from John F. Kennedy International Airport. There is also no subway station within a 20-minute walking distance from 803 Forball Street. So, if you're a vendor from Kingsbridge Heights, you'd have to take the 4 train all the way to the last stop at Utica Ave in Crown Heights and then transfer to a bus, or, take the 4 train and transfer to the A train before getting on a bus. Either way, the journey there would take you approximately 1.5-2 hours, and don't forget your return trip.



(Source: Google Maps)¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Google. (n.d.). [Google Maps directions to subway from Kingsbridge Armory, Bronx, NY to 803

The scenes that I then witnessed were disturbing, to say the least. One by one, police officers known as the “*Sanitation Police*,” the law enforcement arm of the City’s Department of Sanitation (DSNY) that carries firearms and has uniforms and vehicles that resemble that of the New York City Police Department’s (NYPD), whisked away items from several of the vendors, tossing them into large bags, and loading the bags onto trucks owned by DSNY, the same city agency responsible for handling the City’s trash. As you can imagine, this caused quite the scene, and many passersby were snapping pictures with their phones, shocked at the sight of the literal evaporation of what had become a staple of the neighborhood, the street vendor area in front of the Kingsbridge Armory, also known as the “flea market.”



(Personal photo)

Fortunately, most vendors, including my friend, T., were able to secure their stuff and flee across the street from the scene before the Sanitation Police could seize their items. As I crossed the street to meet with T., my phone buzzed with a call from my friend who owns a bodega nearby. The bodega owner was shocked at the scene and was asking me if I knew what was happening. I was only able to relay the preliminary information I had received at the time, and then I met up with T.

In all his years vending in different parts of New York, T. had never seen a street vendor raid of this magnitude, nor had he ever seen a sweep on Kingsbridge Road. My heart then sank when

Forbell St.]. <https://rb.gy/jcbqs>

he began to process that he was not going to be able to make the money he needed to make by the end of the day to put food on his table and get by. I couldn't stand to let him suffer that way and offered to at least buy him lunch at the halal food truck down the block, and he accepted the offer. While waiting for food, T. was pacing up and down recounting the recent events to someone on the phone, and I received a text from Jennifer Salgado from Street Vendor Project giving me her contact info in case the vendors needed help retrieving their items back.

After we picked up the food, we went back to T.'s cart. A kind small business owner was watching over it while we were gone. As T. ate his lunch, Sanitation Police were continuing to load the large DSNY truck with lots of bags containing the vendors' items. When I asked T. what he thought had caused this, he surmised that a few vendors were recently having disagreements and fights with each other over space, creating a scene, causing perhaps an anti-vendor person nearby to call the police to address the situation.

As T. was wrapping up lunch, I had to leave and do some errands. As I walked south down Jerome Ave., I was devastated to see several street vendors standing at a standstill next to New Capitol Diner looking distraught and doubtful about their future. It wasn't too long when Jay Espy called and reported that he had heard from a friend that the vendors in front of the Kingsbridge Armory were kicked out. I explained what I knew and the assumption that T. had about the causes at play. For Jay, the issue at hand was much larger than that and he reminded me that Mayor Adam's administration has been known to be anti-vendor. I agreed with Jay. As I would later learn from Juan, the Sanitation Police had conducted a sweep of the street vendors on Fordham Road the week prior. Moreover, since Mayor Adams assumed office and moved the responsibility of enforcement of street vendors from DCWP to DSNY, street vendor sweeps have gone up in communities of color across the city at scales vendors have never seen before, just like T.¹³¹ The Mayor's administration often criminalizes vendors who don't have vendor licenses, but it's not for vendors' lack of effort to obtain such licenses. According to Street Vendor Project, there are approximately 20,000 street vendors in the City. However, due to the City's unjust, outdated laws, dating back to when Mayor Koch instated a permanent cap of 3,000 licenses for food vending permits total, the demand for food vending permits from the City's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (NYC DOHMH), the city agency that administers the permits, far outweighs the inhumanely abysmal supply. This places street vendors, the majority of whom are unlicensed and many of whom are BIPOC immigrants and low-income, into a precarious situation of risking steeper fines from the City due to their unlicensed status as they work one of the few jobs available to support their need to feed their families. And that's not the only cap that food vendors had to deal with because there was also a cap on the number of street vendors that can be on the waitlist for food permits. That cap was set for 2,500, but then later closed in 2007.

¹³¹ Gonon, Y., & Chu, H. (2023, March 28). Street Vendor Oversight Shift to Department of Sanitation Gets Trash Talk From Council. <https://www.thecity.nyc/2023/3/28/23659371/council-street-vendor-oversight-sanitation>

So what does this mean for Kingsbridge Road in the Bronx, where the majority of street vendors are general vendors instead of food vendors? Well, the City capped general street vendor licenses to 853 total in 1979. Meanwhile, according to Street Vendor Project, nearly 12,000 people are on the waitlist for general street vendor licenses. However, this waitlist has been closed for nearly a decade, making it impossible for the great majority of people to vend legally.

While advocates, such as Street Vendor Project, were successful in advocating for the eventual passage of Intro 1116-B in City Council in January 2021, which, by 2031, is supposed to increase the amount of food vending permits by 4,000 with 400 being released each year in the interim, the rollout of new permits has been criticized for being slow, and, unfortunately, the 1979 cap on general vendor licenses was not lifted, worsening inequities among vendors that are collectively suffering from a government that continues to fail them.

The Sanitation Police's sweep of street vendors on that bright, sunny early afternoon of April 19th, was anything but sunny. It was an attack on the community, an attack on immigrant and racial justice, and an attack on everyday people's fundamental right to self-determination. With the Kingsbridge Armory in the backdrop there and a lack of political willpower to support vendors right in front, the future of our community's smallest of small business owners - and some of its most vulnerable – looked grim. I wondered: *"Would displacement be the vendors' fate once a project is selected and construction begins at the Armory? How about after the redevelopment? Would vendors' unlicensed status also jeopardize their ability to sell and store items inside the Armory's premises? Would the Armory cause vendors to become a target of the state after vendors made it their home for years?"*

On my way home later that afternoon, I wondered if Street Vendor Project or NWBCCC would release a statement denouncing what had transpired. Since there wasn't any media coverage of the sweep, I decided to post some videos on social media that I recorded while the sweep was occurring, tagging Street Vendor Project, Council Member Pierina Sanchez, DCWP, and State Senator Jessica Ramos, a state legislator from Jackson Heights, Queens, who has been known to be a strong advocate for vendor rights, sponsoring a bill in the State Legislature that would decriminalize street vending across the State of New York and prohibit municipalities from having a cap on any street vending licenses. Street Vendor Project immediately reposted my story post and NWBCCC shared it the next day. Council Member Pierina and State Senator Jessica Ramos both saw my posts with them tagged, but did not respond. As an intensely sad day came to an end, people were shocked and disturbed to see my videos, reposting and sharing with their own networks.

Ironically, the next day was supposed to be when EDC was to give a scheduled tour of the Armory to vendors that were available. To my surprise, Juan reported that a good amount of vendors showed up to the tour, which ended up incorporating a larger discussion on the events that transpired the day before. Juan, together with Street Vendor Project leading the way, hosted a know-your-rights training for the vendors present and there was talk of organizing an Armory Vender Coalition for the vendors on Kingsbridge Road. Even more surprisingly, there

was also talk of EDC releasing a statement about the events that transpired, but, at the time of this writing in early May 2023, that has yet to materialize.

Sadly, however, Juan informed me that only a few vendors returned to Kingsbridge Road the day after the sweep. In the days that followed, it was hard to get a hold of T. on the phone. I hoped deep down that he was doing ok.

The following week on April 26, Juan and I agreed that I should meet with a few small businesses that expressed interest in being on the Kingsbridge Road Merchants Association's Steering Committee to assess their capacity in fulfilling the responsibilities of that role. On my way to meet with the businesses, I remembered to check in with this nail salon that reportedly had issues with landlord harassment and negligence. This nail salon had a broken ceiling with multiple holes -large and small – from leaks and a lack of repairs from the landlord. It had gotten so bad that the ceiling had fallen down onto the owner's customers multiple times. She was worried that she was any minute away from facing endangering her staff, customers and getting sued by customers for disrepairs that were never her fault. After asking the owner if she ever called the City's 311 complaint hotline, she said that the landlord threatened retaliation if they called 311. I took it upon myself to connect this business with Mekong who would be able to speak in her Southeast Asian language about the issues at hand, and the next step was to connect her with our contacts at Brooklyn Legal Services who could fully inform her of her rights as a commercial tenant when it comes to landlord harassment issues.

Thanks to the advocacy of community organizations and small business owners across the City, including the United for Small Business NYC (USBNYC) coalition that organizers like Abigail from Cooper Square Committee and Evy from NWBCCC are/were a part of, the City Council, in September 2016 passed eventually enacted legislation that established the "Non-Residential Tenant Harassment" Law, more commonly referred to as the Commercial Tenant Anti-Harassment Law. According to the NYC Bar Association, this law protects all commercial tenants, small and large, from landlord harassment if you prove that: "1) the commercial landlord, or someone acting on the landlord's behalf, is doing something that is intended to make you to vacate the commercial property or surrender your rights under the commercial lease; and 2) that the landlord engaged in one of the following wrongful acts:

- Using force against you or threatening to use force against you or your clients/customers;
- Causing repeated interruptions or discontinuances of your essential services;
- Starting court proceedings against you when you are not in default under your lease;
- Removing your personal property from the commercial property;
- Removing the entrance door, causing the lock to the entrance door to not work, or changing the lock without giving you the key;
- Preventing you from entering your commercial space;
- Interfering with your business by doing unnecessary construction or repairs; or
- Engaging in any other repeated conduct that substantially interferes with the operation of your business.

If the court finds that your commercial landlord has harassed you, it shall impose a mandatory civil penalty of between \$1,000 and \$10,000. The court may also issue a restraining order against the commercial landlord to prevent further harassment. The court may also make the landlord pay your attorney's fees if you are successful in court.”¹³²

Moreover, in 2019, following further advocacy from the likes of USBNYC, the City Council strengthened 2016’s Commercial Tenant Anti-Harassment Law by raising the civil penalty for unlawful acts to a maximum of \$50,000 per property, enabling the court to deny a harassing landlord’s construction plans at the building until harassment has ceased, and expanding prohibited landlord actions to include making discriminatory threats (e.g. age, race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.), requesting citizenship status, and interfering with a commercial tenant’s construction or repairs.¹³³

Nonetheless, this nail salon’s unawareness of her rights as a commercial tenant was not surprising because of how disconnected many small businesses in the Bronx are from opportunities, decision making, etc. in the City. However, it amplified a sense of urgency in me to really build the Kingsbridge Road Merchants Association up to where we are able to educate, with partners like Brooklyn Legal Services, many small businesses around Kingsbridge Road to the point where the community is better protected by virtue of having a stronger understanding of existing laws, laws we could continue to improve through organizing.

After leaving the nail salon, I went on to meet with a couple of small businesses on Kingsbridge Road, including my new friend who’s a bodega owner. By this time, there were more street vendors back selling in front of the Armory, but nearly half were still missing. After catching up, it was heartwarming to know that he was really interested in serving his community and taking on the important role of being a Steering Committee member despite being incredibly busy. We then got to talking about a new grant from Citizens Committee, which was intentionally created to award up to \$10K to small businesses that are giving back to their community, as defined by metric they had created. My friend then smiled and showed me a picture of a community fridge he opened in front of his store during the peak days of the COVID-19 pandemic in New York circa 2020-2021. Not too long after, unfortunately, some unknown people complained to the City about the community fridge and my friend decided to shut it down. Despite the sad ending to a positive story, I assured my friend that he had an even greater chance of winning the grant from Citizens Committee because of his direct and active involvement supporting community members in greatest need beyond his store. This sense of community is what inspires me so much about Kingsbridge and many communities in the Bronx. Despite racist and systemic oppression and against all odds of poverty and neglect, working-class people support their own in the Bronx, especially in a crisis, when it’s needed most. This same business owner watched over street vendors items as they fled the scene of the recent police sweep. Per an earlier

¹³² Vernon, D. M. (Ed.). (2018, June). Commercial Tenant Harassment. New York City Bar - Legal Referral Service. <https://www.nycbar.org/get-legal-help/article/landlord-tenant/commercial-tenant-harassment-lawyer/>

¹³³ ANHD. (2019b, September 25). Commercial Tenants Have New Protection Against Landlord Harassment. <https://anhd.org/press-release/commercial-tenants-have-new-protection-against-landlord-harassment>

interview in March, this small business owner was worried the Armory would displace him. I certainly hoped not because this store is a prime example of the lengths BIPOC small business owners, oftentimes residents of Kingsbridge and the Bronx, go to selflessly help our communities. Leaving the bodega, I hoped deep down to be able to help the owner win the Citizens Committee grant to support his business and keep him in our community, where he's loved and greatly appreciated.

A few days later on Saturday, April 29th on a rainy day, NWBCCC hosted its monthly membership meeting at St. Nicholas of Tolentine Church. The main goals of the Kingsbridge Armory breakout group meeting were to continue to mobilize the base-building efforts of the Our Armory campaign, update community members on recent happenings and upcoming events with the Together for Kingsbridge Community Working Group, and to critically assess the Community Benefits Agreement from 2013 for KNIC to get people prepared for the next phase of the Kingsbridge Armory after the public visioning process wraps up later in the year.



(Personal photo)

One thing that I appreciated about this meeting and other NWBCCC meetings, was that Juan allowed Armory Committee members, including its youth members, to lead the agenda of the discussion, a form of youth and leadership development that NWBCCC has long strived for. One of the biggest takeaways from the conversation on base building was that we want to say that each of us can bring five people out to the next big public Armory event. This scaling up in people power NWBCCC argued was crucial in ensuring that we solidify the goal of having shared community ownership for the Kingsbridge Armory. As the meeting concluded, I mentioned to

Juan that I'd try to connect with a family friend in Tracey Towers for upcoming possible outreach, an idea he had in mind before.

When the first week of May came around, the classic rainy April season in New York started to subside and the warm, beautiful spring weather blossomed into full effect. It was a busy time balancing work and finals, but as always, I needed to remain close to what was happening in the Northwest Bronx. During this time, Juan informed the Armory Committee that the EDC was going to host another public workshop in mid-May for only residents of the Bronx. It would be one additional public workshop for public input with participatory design charettes akin to those from what was supposed to be the last public workshop for public input on March 18th. As usual, the EDC had yet to create a flyer, publicize the event anywhere, give members of the Together for Kingsbridge Community Working Group additional information about the logistics of the event, and, most importantly, provide the public with adequate notice.

On May 3rd the Bronx-Wide Coalition hosted its monthly meeting on the Bronx-Wide Plan at La Central YMCA in the South Bronx. Entering this meeting, the coalition was experiencing an exciting time. More and more Bronxites across the borough were voting and providing feedback on the grassroots Bronx-Wide proposals that they believe should be prioritized by the coalition moving forward, some proposals, such as the Kingsbridge Armory and capping the Cross Bronx Expressway, were unfolding and progressing along, and the movement was gaining political support.¹³⁴ In the coalition's monthly meeting the month prior in April at La Central, US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) came and passionately threw her support behind the coalition, a move that was warmly welcomed by coalition organizations that I spoke with.¹³⁵ I thought: *"If AOC, a self-identified progressive, could support the Bronx-Wide Plan, which includes various projects that champion economic democracy through proposals, such as community land trusts and a Kingsbridge Armory that has shared ownership and governance, why haven't Council Member Pierina, another self-identified progressive, and many other Bronx elected officials done so yet?"*

The May 3rd meeting ended up being great. It was nice to many familiar faces from the likes of The Point CDC, BCDI, Local 79 and NWBCCC collectively in one uplifting and supportive space. We used up much of the meeting time training on how to base build for the Bronx-Wide Coalition by practicing a skit on how to do cold approach community outreach. This practice was useful for many people in the room who hadn't done community organizing work before and for the individuals that have.

¹³⁴ Abello, O. P. (2023, April 6). *Organizers Behind Bronx Wide Plan Now Building a Movement Behind It*. Next City. <https://nextcity.org/urbanist-news/grassroots-organizers-launch-campaign-to-support-bronx-wide-plan>

¹³⁵ Abello, O. P. (2023, April 6). *Organizers Behind Bronx Wide Plan Now Building a Movement Behind It*. Next City. <https://nextcity.org/urbanist-news/grassroots-organizers-launch-campaign-to-support-bronx-wide-plan>



(Personal photo)

I left the meeting more confident in my abilities to engage with people on the Bronx-Wide Plan and more excited about the direction the coalition was headed. Once the meeting ended and I wished my brother and sisters in the movement a good night, I walked into the night down Melrose Ave. with Juliana, just as I had done after NWBCCC's September 2022 membership meeting, curious and eager to know how the next year will pan out for the Our Armory campaign and all the powerfully inspiring grassroots proposals across the Bronx. It wasn't enough to work in silos anymore in a Bronx where we are collectively being disinvested and oppressed. Now that the Bronx-Wide Plan is set, this is a crucial time to build and organize grassroots power across the Bronx.¹³⁶

After eight months of organizing, embedded into my community and citywide movements at large, supporting my neighbors, learning from my neighbors, my people, I arrive at the conclusion of this story tired, but energized. Anxious, but determined.

I had learned from the brightest of the brightest and the toughest of the toughest individuals from the Bronx.

Remarks from Jennifer Salgado - Street Vendor Project:

*"It's really the vendors themselves that keep me going because a lot of the times the City continues to throw s**t left and right, but it's the vendors who have really like shown the determination in wanting to make this system work for them. And then on top of that, it's also the fact that I still have a lot of family*

¹³⁶ The Bronx-Wide Plan. (n.d.). THE BRONX NEEDS A BRONX-WIDE PLAN. <https://www.bronxwideplan.nyc/>

members who are vendors in the Bronx. I have an aunt who sells like tamales on the weekend here, sometimes along Kingsbridge, and so it's, you know, it's, it's that it's just knowing that we are creating change, slowly but surely. And then, it's the fact that I'm able to work with folks who are from my community who I grew up seeing. Yeah, because there are some hard days, there's some hard days, but it's really like the relationships that I've built with the members on the ground.

If the city really wants to support vendors, they need to create meaningful reform and create real laws that can work for everyone. Yeah, because right now, the way that it is, the system is broken, and vendors are left with very little options to be able to work with dignity. And a lot of them, that's just what they want: They just want to be able to get by and work with dignity."

Remarks from a discount store owner:

"A slump in sales, and cost of everything going up from power, to rents, to.. everything, the cost of goods, and then you don't wanna.. it's similar to the beginning of COVID, when getting merchandise was incredibly hard, and the resellers were charging exorbitant prices for things. And you don't want to pass that on to the people in the community because, again, the community is your lifeblood. You grew up there, you see people growing up around you, you don't want to jeopardize that. So, the small businesses take a good amount of the hit when it comes to price increases, even in the merchandise, that we couldn't put to a consumer. So that doesn't help. And the cost of everything went up. When shipping became super expensive, that really raised the prices for us, and we couldn't reflect that in the price of the merchandise. It's a discount store specifically, and your prices have to reflect that."

Remarks from Dr. Evan Casper-Futterman - Bronx Cooperative Development Initiative:

"It definitely goes up and down, it's a roller coaster. I think there's moments where it feels kind of impossible. You know, is this really worth it, does it have any purpose? You know, there's all those kinds of questions. When you see it in, in certain flashes, where it emerges, where the clarity emerges of what's possible, and when people sort of come together in those certain spaces to build that kind of power. It's clear what's at stake. It definitely can happen when you're doing local organizing be like: Oh, this is all just very parochial, all we're doing is the Bronx, and the Bronx is just one part of a huge, you know, city, state, country, etc. But when you start to see those things click into place when you build the right partnership, or you, you know, run the successful campaign, or you build the base and create real people power and energy, you start to see their transformative power and how it can move from place to place and go beyond just one moment in time or one place. So I think that that's like, how I do it is you just kind of keep your eyes out for those moments because they're not, they're not frequent. Really, I would say in my experience, anyway."

Remarks from Christian Ramos – Kingsbridge Road Merchants Association:

"I want to see Kingsbridge be successful, not for this guy, it's for a new generation, for the future. The future need to be progress with our generation. You know it's harder to see on Kingsbridge or Fordham that they say they decide to go to work all the way downtown or go to college all the way in Albany. When you have a talent, have a skill -we need more skills on Kingsbridge Road. We have a good Lehman College right there. We need a good Fordham University -gotta be more flexible for the students, offer scholarships around here in this area, you know? So, that's my future, the future I would like to see is the future for the new generation that it's coming in because definitely the new generation get in the neighborhood and they need to see progress. I don't want to see the generation get killed for drugs on the corner, that's what I see right now, that's my present. It's a horrible present that we live in, but at the same time, we need solutions for the future, for the new generation, you know, because right now I follow

my reality right now to repair shoes with something simple, but next day I want to see in the future I don't want to see generations repairing shoes. The new generation, they need more technology, better location for technology. When I say technology, we don't need a generation who buy parts outside in the foreign countries away when we could build the parts here, we could do chips in here with the students mind, you know? You don't need to go far away and get parts..From my past, I came from the place that -small place, no money..I would like to see a future, good salary, good generations, good families."

Remarks from Evy Vruet – Current Housing Organizer / Former Small Business Organizer with NWBCCC:

"It's hard not to shake a lot of stuff that's happening because it sticks with me, especially if you hear I mentioned (store owner) a lot because (store owner) has shared so much stuff with me, personal stuff. Okay, it's really crazy when you hear someone that doesn't have a flushing toilet, and you're an organizer, you know, and stuff like that sticks with you. You know, I try to shake it off when I get home because I don't want to bring work home. Now it's a different issue because now I'm working from home. But at that time, you know, it really gets difficult to try and shake everyone's issues away that way when you come into your home you have a clean slate with your family. So, it is hard to shake stuff off. Okay, for me, I think probably music, having conversations with my friends from Northwest Bronx, and just try to tune it out. Okay, because it is hard. You know, you're only human."

Remarks from Juan Nuñez - NWBCCC:

*"I don't know what the best job in the world is, but this is the right job. This is the only job right now. I could have done anything else. I could have gone back to travel, I could have stayed at POTS as a case manager, but I knew that nah man, if they do something with that castle that's just gonna f**k us over, then it's a wrap, it's not going to be my Bronx anymore. And I love this borough, you know, I really do. I love this neighborhood, man. This is the role of a lifetime for me. I felt like it was meant to be. This is the way, and as overwhelming as it could be, you know, it's a lot to be a community organizer, but man, it's worth it though.*

And I know that the Bronx is, once again, going to make history. We're always the ones that make history and doing something that's never been done. And once again, it's gonna be the Bronx that shows the whole country how to do this. There's no other place in the world where you say 'I'm from the Bronx' and it resonates and people automatically know...I'm from the Bronx, I'm from this borough. Yeah this is where I'm from, what's up? I wear it as a shield. You're not going to use that against me. Now, I wear that. I wear it as a shield. When you say where you're from, it doesn't do anything for them, when I say where I'm from, that moves the ground that they're standing under."

And here the story ends, compounded with thoughts and stressed about this looming thesis deadline, but calmed by conviction and elated for an embedded future that I'll continue to learn endlessly from and build others up with.

Fernando Ortiz from NYC EDC's Take

One of the first stakeholders that I wanted to interview for this research was Fernando Ortiz from NYC EDC in order to have his perspective in mind prior to speaking to everyone else in the community and beyond. After some persistence and patience, I finally got the chance, on March 10th, to chat it up with Fernando who has been the face of his team, a team managing the Kingsbridge Armory's redevelopment, public visioning process and external communications with community stakeholders, including the Community Working Group. In his role, Fernando oversees the EDC's Upper Manhattan and Bronx borough portfolio.

Fernando, born and raised in the Bronx, is a product of environmental activism at local grassroots organizations, such as The Point, and has worked at the likes of the Department of City Planning's Bronx Office as a City Planner and is currently working at Columbia as a Lecturer in the university's graduate sustainable management program. According to a number of people I've spoken to, he has been a warm and refreshing presence that has been welcomed and appreciated by many in the Community Working Group, including NWBCCC.

Fernando, who's Dominican-American himself, has, on several occasions, been able to communicate the many happenings of the public visioning process and the Kingsbridge Armory in a digestible way and bilingual way in both Spanish and English. Talking with Fernando for this research was surprisingly like talking with anyone else from The Bronx because he seemed to understand the various ways the people of The Bronx have been disinvested in, exploited and neglected.

His words about growing up near Yankee Stadium:

“..that really was what marked my interest in development and planning. Growing up, I saw the Courthouse being built, I saw the old stadium being torn down, and the new stadium being constructed, and I think that really just kind of marked for me an interest in development that's especially grounded in community. My parents also at the time had small businesses in Harlem. So, I used to go across the bridge all the time, to Harlem, and really seeing the change that the neighborhood of Harlem had throughout the 90s and early 2000s. And kind of hoping that that didn't happen in Bronx, or that any changes that would happen in the Bronx were led by community.”

Fernando, also a Community Fellow at my school, Columbia GSAPP, at this time of writing, had full disclosure about the purpose of my independent thesis research and was aware of my work with NWBCCC.

Our nearly two-hour-long conversation was insightful and he shed light on many things. The main takeaways were:

1. **His team advanced the Community Working Group model partly because they wanted to respect the network of longstanding community-based organizations in the area that knows the community better than his team, and they did not want to impose**

upon the community by getting in the way of that. Therefore, his team's intention was for the responsibility of informing the public about the public visioning process to be shared equally among members of the Community Working Group.

"We don't have the relationships. We don't have the context. We don't have the platforms that the community organizations or stakeholders do. So, it was super important that we leverage those. And we didn't want to -again, we wanted to be respectful of previous organizing and engagement that has happened throughout the years. So, you know, again, like an organization like Northwest Bronx, or an organization like Mekong, right? They've been involved, they organize people around the same topic, so we wanted to make sure that it wasn't just us, and we wanted to have a big team, so that's why we formulated the Community Working Group, so that they could help us with the outreach, so that they could be the familiar faces, so that they could share it in their platforms, and with their stakeholders who know and recognize them.." – Fernando

2. His team did not want to fatigue the Kingsbridge community further by having a prolonged public visioning process.

"We thought that six to eight months is sufficient time to do an engagement process, especially for the Armory and this neighborhood. Right? As I mentioned, this is not the first time that people have engaged or, you know, been doing advocacy around the Armory. Organizations like Northwest Bronx have been doing work for 30 years, like, we don't need to be repetitive, we don't need to be like, you know, 'what do you want to see in the Armory?' Like, you know, there's already a groundwork that is already there, so we wanted to build on that, and that's why we brought in those folks to be part of a Community Working Group. And we didn't want to create burnout, right? Like, we didn't want to lead a two-year Vision Plan process that people by 10 months or the first year are exhausted of us. We wanted it to be respectful of the existing advocacy and organizing that has happened, but also kind of, you know, presenting the new information, giving a, you know, that this is the new chance, we have a clean slate, but we wanted to ensure that that happened within a certain timeframe so that people aren't burned out." – Fernando

3. The Community Working Group model for the Together for Kingsbridge public visioning process builds off of NYC EDC's Hunts Point Forward Plan.

"EDC, we do a lot of planning work, and the most recent one that we can point to is in Hunts Point. We did a vision plan called Hunts Point Forward. And for that Vision Plan process, we had a community working group that was made up of five organizations. One was the Councilmember Rafael Salamanca, we had Community Board 2, we had The Point CDC, Urban Health Plan, and Casita Maria. So, you know, Casita Maria was like the arts and culture, The Point was both arts and culture, youth, community development, and Urban Health Plan was like health. Those were the five main community working group members, but then we had a sub-working group, which was a much larger list of about 20, 25 other organizations in Hunts Point. So we would meet with the working group members on a, I think, bi-weekly basis, and then we would meet with the subcommittee group on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. And this was a two-year planning process... So, we kind of took that model and said, okay, well, let's expand it to more than five, let's do, you know, 20, and then 25 with the local electeds, to get more, you know, different sectors represented." – Fernando

4. The public visioning process's engagement worksheets distributed at in-person Together for Kingsbridge events and the Together for Kingsbridge online survey are the sole ways that the EDC is obtaining information to inform its Vision Doc.

"For the most part, it is the worksheet and the online survey. And we have a worksheet that we use for the focus group, but it's the same questions -just not in that pamphlet format that we use for the workshop. The workshop one's a little more fancy, right, like a cute little pamphlet. The one that we use for the focus group is just a document that we, you know, the same questions that we've jotted, but it's the same questions for the most part. Yes." - Fernando

5. His team acknowledges that the Armory could have detrimental effects on local small businesses, as seen in the past, and is promoting NYC SBS' Commercial Lease Assistance program as a way to provide small businesses with resources to mitigate potential impacts.

"So, one of the first things that we identified was the impact of the redevelopment, any kind of development, on the local community. When the ice skating rink proposal was announced, when it became public, one of the things that we saw was, you know, small businesses and landlords kind of fighting about, you know, the rents going up and just and fears of displacement. So, we wanted to ensure that that doesn't happen this time around as best as we could, right? So, for example, I want to say two or three weeks ago, the Borough President's Office and the Council Member's office (Pierina) hosted a event with SBS, which is the New York City Small Business Services Agency. And they had an event around commercial lease assistance, making small businesses aware of, you know, of commercial leases, what resources and services are out there, providing them with legal representation, providing them with legal advice, you know, helping them if they don't have a lease, helping them to get a lease. If they do have a lease, helping them, offering to review it -so, ensuring that small businesses are aware of what services and resources are out there for them now, and not when, you know, and not when the water gets hot... as this process evolves, before, you know, anybody is selected, we want to make sure the community is equipped with resources and services that could avoid things like displacement and gentrification and rents going up for small businesses." – Fernando

6. On the flip side, his team sees the Armory as providing local small businesses with multiple benefits, namely increased foot traffic and revenues.

"We see the redevelopment of the Armory benefit the community per se in bringing good jobs, bringing community amenities, community programs, services to the neighborhood, but for the small businesses along Kingsbridge and Jerome? You know, it can be.. if there's 200 jobs, 300 jobs, 500 jobs happening inside the Armory, all those people need to eat lunch, right? All those people probably get their nails done, all those people probably get their hair done, all those people probably, you know, get snacks at the bodega -it brings an influx of people that ideally will be supporting the small businesses in the community, just because of the increased foot traffic. So, and hopefully, you know, it's not any person. Hopefully, the people working in the Armory are the son of the bodega right, who now is able to get a job or has got a job at the Armory and can go support, you know, the restaurant that he eats that all the time, right? The idea is that we want to have as much of a local involvement and local impact as possible, so that the people who are working and, you know, going through the programs and services that the Armory has to offer are the same people who live in the neighborhood and will circulate in the neighborhood." - Fernando

7. His team's goal is to reach as many small businesses as possible with this public visioning process.

"I think, you know, I think we would love to reach everybody, but our goal is to reach as many people as we can. We want to conclude this process and say, you know, we were able to reach X amount of people in X amount of time, right? And I think, you know, we're not limiting ourselves to a number and we're not -I think we're just like, as many people as we can hear from, from all different sectors, the better, right? Would we love to speak to everyone? Absolutely; but what is everyone? Right? You know, that gets to a different question. But as many people as we can." - Fernando

8. His team believes that they've sufficiently engaged with small businesses and street vendors in the Kingsbridge Armory area thus far.

"So we have two merchant associations on our Community Working Group, as well as the Street Vendor Project.. and we brought them in to help us with engagement with the street vendors. So having representation of those two stakeholders in the community working group, it was important to us. And then also, you know, like, we've gotten flyers, and I've spoken with small businesses, as I said, we had an event two or three weeks ago around commercial lease assistance, inviting them to the public workshops. With street vendors, particularly like, I myself, I've walked, you know, the strip, two, three times speaking with the street vendors kind of developed relationships with them. We had a focus group with small business, we had two focus groups or small businesses, we have a third one on the 21st of this month (March), which is being organized by Northwest Bronx, and we had a focus group with street vendors that was hosted by the Councilmember (Pierina) at the Councilmember's office, and we had about 40 street vendors attend, and that was the first time that many of them got together, right? Like some of them knew each other because they like friends. We had vendors from Kingsbridge from Jerome from Fordham Road. And that was the first time that they were all in the room, right, and hearing their concerns and their visions and their ideas. You know, that was a great event, we had about 40 street vendors come out and attend, and we constantly go out and flyer. And, you know, part of what I want to do, like.. I was trying to get over the street vendors to come into the Armory today, right? But they couldn't leave their tables and stuff. So, even things like that, like making sure that we had a focus group with the street vendors, making sure that they're able to go inside the Armory see it, making sure that they're aware of the public workshop, right? I think we had a good handful of the street vendors that were at the focus group came out to the workshop, right? And they recognize us: 'Hey, how are you, remember me? You know, so, building those relationships is important because the public engagement stops at some point, but that doesn't mean that the... process stops, right? So, we want to make sure that people are, you know, aware of who we are, what the process is, what the timelines are of opportunities for them to voice their concerns throughout this whole process." - Fernando

9. Where NWBCCC and Street Vendor Project have organized street vendors to come to the street vendor focus group meeting, EDC has mainly chatted and provided flyers to street vendors with the hopes that they could make it to the Together for Kingsbridge events.

"Northwest Bronx has engaged with them before. They partnered with Street Vendor Project, they went out and, you know, brought the folks out to a meeting. And then it's also been EDC, right? I've gone out twice to speak with the street vendors, like I spent afternoons just walking going to each of them, asking them questions, right? Talking to them, introducing myself,

introducing the project, letting them know about events that we have coming up. We flyer with them all the time to any events that we have..” - Fernando

10. His team knows that the community is home to people that speak languages other than Spanish and English, their Together for Kingsbridge website is viewable in different languages, and they made materials and translators available for Spanish-speakers.

“So we try to have all of our materials both in English and Spanish, and we recognize that those aren't the only two languages, especially in the Bronx and in this community, but, you know, Spanish and English being the top majority. So like you can, you could have your website in a different language. So we try to make sure that like, there's the option whether it's on the website for translation, and at our workshop events, we try to make sure that we have Spanish translators. I myself, for example, I'm bilingual, so at the next workshop, I'll be presenting the workshop both in English and Spanish. And we'll have handouts, both in English and Spanish, that people can follow along with the presentation and all of the materials. So just making sure that we as best as we can have, you know, language accessibility.” - Fernando

11. His team confirmed that Essex Market is a model they're considering for small businesses.

“So, we are looking at those different models, and we've done it in other places, like Essex Market. Right. So we think that's important. To make sure that, yes, we're bringing in a good anchor tenant who can pay market rate rent, you know, and, and bring in the revenue and profits, but also who can leverage that for the organizations who may not be able to, you know, pay market rent and who are legacy businesses or tenants. So, we are looking at those kinds of models.

I don't think that we're pushing for businesses to come in so the Armory per se. What we're looking more at the Armory is, when we say bring in tenants, we want something that can create good jobs, not retail jobs. Right? We don't want a Target that's paying people 15 minimum wage, you know, salaries. We want people who can make good salaries in working in the Armory, right, good-paying career jobs. But that being said, the Armory is huge. Right? There's space for everything, there is a space for potential market space, there's potential for all kinds of different uses. And that's what we want to help identify in this process. What is most important for the community? Is it having food retail space in the market? Or is it just is the number one priority that there's youth programming, right? Or is the number one priority that there's jobs? Or is the number one priority that there's just public access? Right? Like, what are those top priorities?” - Fernando

12. His team doesn't believe that most street vendors don't want to be inside the Armory for the majority of time.

“You know, for example, with the street vendors. A majority of the street vendors do not want to be in the Armory. Because they don't want to pay rent, right? That's, that's part of their profitability, they don't pay rent, they're on the street, they, you know, they sold something for \$20, they take those dollars home. So for them, the priority is, what we've been hearing is something that attracts people to the Armory, because they want the foot traffic, they want something like a museum, or something like a theater, that people are constantly coming in and out of the Armory, because that is more business for them. Some of them have vocalized like oh,

yeah, it would be great to maybe like have a market every Sunday that we can, you know, maybe rent out for the day a space and vend in there, but there's not a huge desire from most of the street vendors, at least that we've spoken to, to be inside the Armory." - Fernando

13. His team doesn't have capacity issues, especially because they've partnered with the Community Working Group.

"No, I don't think we have... we have a pretty big team. And when I say team, you know, again, that's why we, we thought it important to formulate the Community Working Group because we cannot do this by ourselves, even if we wanted to, and not just because of capacity, right?" - Fernando

14. His team took a very hands-off approach to the outreach strategy of the public visioning process.

"So we didn't want to give everyone like..instructions on how to do outreach, right? The goal is like.. spread the word, get people to show up, get people to fill out the survey, in whatever method that works best for you. And let us know what you need.. You need a flyer? Here you go. You need language? Here you go. You need, you know, a social media thing? Here you go.. Like, equipping the Community Working Group to do the outreach based on their best practices, and not like, you know, giving them like instructions on like..this is how you should do it. Because they know their communities better than we do, right?" - Fernando

15. His team has asked the Community Working Group who could help with outreach and what materials they need.

"When we have our Community Working Group meetings, we definitely talk about... okay, you know, what do you need for outreach? Who can do outreach this week? You know, do you need flyers? And you know, even the Borough President's Office through BOECD, which is the Bronx Overall Economic Development Corporation, they have volunteers and people they've mobilized to do outreach, so everyone has put in their own, you know, grain of salt in the process." - Fernando

16. After winning the EDC's RFP for community engagement for the Together for Kingsbridge public visioning process, Hester Street was assigned to primarily work on public workshops because NYC EDC has a planning team of their own and wanted to be a visible face of the public visioning process, a process that he acknowledges is EDC's.

"It was mostly just capacity. EDC, we have a planning team, and so we just, we just had more capacity to do these conversations. And also because we want to, you know, kind of divide and conquer, but, you know, we also wanted as EDC as kind of lead behind this engagement process, we wanted to make sure that people weren't just seeing Hester Street, right? That they were also hearing and seeing EDC. So that's why we've been very closely working with Hester Street. So, for the small groups, we, just because of the capacity, were like, okay, EDC, can manage these and we'll have these so that people, you know, can see our face and our role in this process, and Hester Street will do more of the backend coordinating for the public workshops. So, I wasn't at workshop two, but if you attended workshop one, you know, it was basically me and Cinthia from Hester Street, we were the hosts. For the third workshop, I will be the host. So, EDC kind of

owning that this is our event and this is our process, but Hester Street kind of, on the backend, helping us with all of that engagement facilitation.” - Fernando

17. Additionally, his team, at the time of our interview, established March 31, 2023 as the deadline for all public input. However, this was later changed to the end of April 2023, just days after our conversation. Later, it was changed to the end of May 2023 due to NWBCCC and Pierina’s insistence that there be at least one more public workshop for public input in May 2023.

18. Lastly, Fernando Ortiz from NYC EDC solely foresees impacts to small businesses happening after a project is announced for the Kingsbridge Armory.

“The Vision Document doesn’t signal anything. I think, you know, what we saw in the previous two developments is when a project becomes official, when it is announced, when there’s like the KNIC proposal -when that passed into the land use review process, and it was official that that was the plan that is when things start to get in motion, right? Because right now, you know, as the word implies, it’s a vision document, and it’s not the first time that documents or reports around the Armory, whether it’s been the City or community organizations, have been released. We really don’t anticipate any kind of motion around the community in terms of rents going up until further in the process when there’s a project selected, right? When people hear oh, an ice skating rink is going to be put into the army, that’s when developers and landlords and everyone starts, you know, tooting horns and stuff, whatever you want to call it, but when it’s just a vision plan that’s community-based, we don’t tend to ever really see that kind of side effect.”

Community-based Findings

In contrast, here's what neighbors in Kingsbridge Heights in the Northwest Bronx had to say. These findings are informed by the expertise of street vendors, small business owners, community organizers, planner scholars, etc. It is clear that community members' views and experiences were comprehensive and largely different from that of Fernando Ortiz from NYC EDC. In addition to interview data, these findings are also informed by the observational analysis provided through the extensive ethnographic storytelling of this research. The findings are telling and offer a number of areas of opportunities for community and government to consider for the Kingsbridge Armory moving forward and for future organizing efforts elsewhere that concern some combination of community ownership, anti-displacement, and municipal economic development plans.

1. EDC's views that the responsibility for informing the public about the public visioning process was shared among the CWG members was not a view shared by CWG members.

"The EDC does bear most of the work when it comes to informing members of the public about these meetings, and that comes into a very precarious situation as far as the EDC does not represent this area, but yet EDC and Hester Street are the ones that have most of the information. So, as I'm reading earlier, the Kingsbridge Armory survey response is 302 people -this entire document was provided to us by EDC, and we were told that the Community Working Group does not get the rest of the information up until the survey process is done, so we don't even have an accurate sense of what we have... What the Community Working Group can do is talk to members of the community and be like: 'Hey, this is what's happening. Here's our opinion. Can you fill out a survey,' but the EDC is the one that facilitates the focus groups. We can message about it, we can facilitate our own focus groups, but unless they give us the surveys, or unless we make sure that we have technology and other requirements that people can fill out surveys, that becomes a little more difficult.

When we're talking about resource as people power..Every nonprofit can tell you almost the exact same thing of we always need more people power to run the current programs that we are doing, so when it comes to like, hey, here's an additional thing, that always becomes more difficult doing.. one of the things that we at Kingsbridge Heights Community Center do is that I run a food distribution that runs on Tuesdays and Thursdays. One of the things that's very valuable about the one that's on Thursday, is that the public workshop is in two days, usually on a Saturday, actually all of them on a Saturday. So on that Thursday, we're using it as a time to make sure that people have a flyer to understand that 'Hey, this is literally in two days, it's about the armory..'- had multiple conversations with participants about that. Does that actually translate into retention or people showing up? Not really, but unfortunately, that is the long game with a lot of these events. We do, unfortunately, have to play this fallen game of the Law of Big numbers, is that you just need to get the word out to as many people as possible and hope that a small amount of those people show up.." – Caesar Tobar-Acosta (Kingsbridge Heights Community Center staff representative in CWG/NWBCCC member)

2. Most small businesses were not informed about the public workshops by EDC at all, nor did they know that the Armory was being redeveloped to begin with till NWBCCC, specifically Juan and I, informed them.

"I didn't even know that was going on. EDC, I never even heard of that. What does that stand for?" – Liquor store owner

"No, nobody did. I heard from the community.." – Bodega owner

"Yeah, because of you. You bring the paper, then I got to know about it.." – Nail salon owner

"Didn't know until you came in couple days ago, let me know about the information.." – Tax prep office

"Most of what I heard about it was through Juan and through a couple of articles in Norwood News and things like that. I had actually volunteered there during Hurricane Sandy, so I became more interested in what was going on in it after that, and I did a little bit of online research and what not.." – Discount store owner

"A lot of the businesses around the area don't even know, they don't know what's going on. Like, and if it wasn't for me and you going out there and talking to them, they wouldn't know still what's going on." - Juan

3. Small businesses were not aware of the small business focus group meetings hosted by EDC.

"Nah, only the posters you bring here..that's the only one I know about. I never visited one of them" – Bodega owner

"I did not know that, no" – Discount store owner

"No, not at all." – Liquor store owner

"No, being honest, and I've been here.." – Tax pep office

"Yeah, the EDC held a focus group meeting with Adriano Espaillat at Caridad Restaurant around January. And, you know, a lot of the merchants didn't really know what was going on or weren't aware. He didn't even show up by the way, Espaillat...There's a lot more businesses here in this corridor. You only have about six here, and there is at least, what, 200 something -Don't you dare assume that this is your focus group meeting with the merchants. Doesn't make sense." - Juan

4. EDC announced many things last minute.

"We're doing a lot of work, a lot of the groundwork doing outreach. They need to do more to tell more people what's going on, like, go door to door. How dare you send us a flyer for a workshop two days before the workshop? Like, how are we supposed to take that now and spread the word?" – Juan Nuñez (NWBCCC)

5. Small businesses prefer an embedded planning approach when you directly go to them in person all the time. It's more convenient for them, accessible for them, and

it's the most effective organizing and outreach approach in Kingsbridge Road as shown by the work of Juan and I, and others who paved the way, such as Christian and Evy.

"The first thing is, you need to build that trust before anything. Start having one on ones, start to get to know people and to know what they like. Okay, maybe I don't know, maybe they like.. maybe like strawberry milkshakes instead of chocolate. You know, get to know them on a personal, get to know them on a business. It's not going to happen just with one on one, it needs to be constant conversation. Okay, that is my first.

My second is making sure that you are there having that communication. Okay, if you have just one on one, and you don't show off them for a month or two, they're gonna forget who you are. And they're gonna probably say, oh, man, you just you know, I just saw you last month. No, be consistent.

Okay, number three, share a story about yourself, and how you got started as a small business organizer. For me? Honestly though, okay, I was bored at home, needed a job. Okay, loved organizing. Okay? But not with small businesses. So, for me, I've always shared that story. How I started, okay, because for me, it was a whole hell of a ride. And also, expect a hell of a ride. Because you're gonna get rejection from some, okay, and you're gonna get a lot of calls from others for help. Get to know their managements, get to know who owns that piece of land, and do your research. I can go on with you. Yeah, those are some basics." – Evy (Former Small Business Organizer – NWBCCC)

"In Kingsbridge Road, you cannot wait for people to go to your meetings.. It's very clear, if you do something on Kingsbridge, walk out, speak out, and let them know." – Christian Ramos (Vice President – Kingsbridge Road Merchants Association)

"You think people go online, are doing interviews online? No, you have to go door to door!" – Juan Nuñez (NWBCCC)

- 6. As seen from the ethnographic analysis, EDC was performative. From announcing a public visioning process at a press conference and then publicly announcing the first workshop that would occur a few days later, to showing off slides that celebrate their falsified community engagement milestones, to utilizing planning methods that were exclusivist and not well-strategized with community, to taking pictures of Together for Kingsbridge events that did not do a strong enough job of obtaining genuine community feedback, the EDC seemed more concerned with its image than genuinely concerned with getting as much robust community feedback as possible.**
- 7. EDC rushed the public visioning process through during the coldest time of the year and members of the community want more time to provide input.**

"Together for Kingsbridge, you guys are doing meetings, but you have to figure it out in a year to do a vision document, not in a few weeks like they doing it, especially in the winter. November December, January, those are the times the merchants need to sell more. So it's harder for the merchants to attend any type of merchant business meeting or armory meeting..I believe it's more residential than commercial people that go there. You know why? The time is not the right time for the business owner" – Christian Ramos (Vice President – Kingsbridge Road Merchants Association)

“But I think there was always a case being made from Northwest Bronx, in particular, from the beginning, that the number of sessions that they planned and designed, was not reflective of an actual desire to develop community leadership or have sort of community leadership over the process.” – Dr. Evan Casper-Futterman (Bronx Cooperative Development Initiative)

8. EDC excluded non-Spanish and non-English speakers from the public visioning process.

“When we have a conversation regarding Mekong, it becomes very important that the documents that we are providing to people are also in the language that they can best understand. These are one of the things that consistently we see that EDC has not been providing us. We understand that we have large communities that do not primarily speak English or Spanish. Or, if they do speak English and/or Spanish, that is not the language that they are the most comfortable speaking. Therefore, if we want to have surveys about what the community needs, we do have to make sure that the language that we are using is accessible to them, and even looking at a document which was handed to us by the EDC and Hester Street, it is Kingsbridge armory survey responses. This was a compilation and the aggregate data from the online surveys on the Together for Kingsbridge website only is completed by 302 people, both for the online ones, but even looking at this, we are looking at the fact that there are three languages on this list, we have English, we have Spanish/Spanish Creole, and then we have Hindi and Urdu, because we’re looking at spoken languages. And between English, which is at 48.34%, and Spanish which was that 51.32%, we are seeing over 99%, so this is 99.66% of people that are speaking English and Spanish that are filling out the surveys, which makes sense when the survey is only in English and Spanish, that those are the people who are filling it out...

..Literally across the street from the Armory, we understand that are a bunch of Vietnamese spots, we understand Alex's market, which is a Thai spot, right around there, Mekong. And we do understand there's also like Arabic community, we do have a Muslim population, we have Arabic speakers, we have a lot of people that speak all these different languages, but when we are only saying English and Spanish, after months of telling people we need these in more languages, that's when we start seeing problems of how can we best engage people who will be directly impacted by the Armory.” – Caesar Tobar-Acosta (Kingsbridge Heights Community Center staff representative in CWG/NWBCCC member)

“The EDC was just talking about vendors and showing them this presentation that was only in English. The presentation was only in English. Most of the conversation was happening in Spanish and was leaving out a lot of the folks who were in the room who were non-Spanish speakers. And so, I don't think that EDC has created enough mechanisms to make public comments accessible.” – Jennifer Salgado (Street Vendor Project)

9. As seen from the ethnographic analysis, EDC did not plan for many people in the community to participate in the Together for Kingsbridge public visioning process.

10. As seen from the ethnographic analysis, small businesses on Kingsbridge Road are more vulnerable than they've ever been and impacts are already being felt by the Kingsbridge Armory in the form of rumors and speculation. Additionally, Christian has received at least a call or two from local landlords inquiring about the Armory.

“Yeah, I mean, just the fact that they're already looking to sell some of these properties and how a lot of these tenants - these business owners - are just waiting to see what's gonna happen. And

*that's so f**ed up ... as soon as they know that something's happening with the Armory, they're looking for ways to profit off that land, and they're ready to sell. That's what we're hearing. And to do that and try to push these folks out, that's what we're trying to fight against. Right? You know, these landlords are going to continue to do these things. They've already done it: doubling their rents, not providing monthly leases. So, we hope to bring those resources back to these people and help them stay afloat because these landlords, you know, similar to residential landlords, they're just trying to make a profit and they don't care there. If they can see that they can rent that space out to another tenant that can make them more money, they don't give a damn that Lucy's been there since 85. You know? They don't care that these folks are people that have been a pillar in that community, and they're doing it again, and hopefully, we'll be able to protect these businesses and help them stay there." – Juan Nuñez (NWBCCC)*

11. As learned from the small businesses I interviewed, most small businesses are not aware of resources out there to help them, including the City's Commercial Lease Assistance Program, despite Congressman Espaillat being the Chair of the Small Business Committee, despite Mayor Adams coming to Kingsbridge to announce the Small Business Opportunity Fund, despite politicians acknowledging that small businesses in the Bronx received the least assistance during COVID, and despite Fernando's claims that Pierina's Office went out to businesses with Brooklyn Legal Services.

Responses from businesses when asked if they know about resources, including the Commercial Lease Assistance Program:

"No." – Nail salon owner

"No." – Bodega owner

"That program (Commercial Lease Assistance program) I'm not aware of only because maybe I haven't even been like, search for a program like that. I do have occasionally, really rarely though, like, what is it called this Small Business Association or whatever, they come around with flyers and stuff.." – Liquor store owner

12. As learned from the ethnographic analysis and small business organizers that I interviewed in the Bronx and city at large, small businesses' lack of commercial tenant protections is quite literally killing the businesses in communities of color such as Kingsbridge. This is directly connected to elected officials' lack of political support for commercial tenant protections.

13. While Street Vendor Project and NWBCCC did a lot of work to organize street vendors on Kingsbridge Road for a Together for Kingsbridge focus group meeting for street vendors and many vendors showed up and provided feedback, the EDC did not report the feedback down or give the vendors surveys to fill out.

"As the Street Vendor Project, we believe, strongly, that the vendors should be the ones speaking up and taking up space. And we did collaborate with the Northwest Bronx on putting together the focus group. And I want to say that if the turnout was successful, it was because of the work that Juan and I put in, and that the vendors put in themselves. The focus groups are structured in a

way that don't allow for a lot of public comments, and meaningful public comments. And so, there haven't been too many opportunities to voice that. And it is a little upsetting because this is supposed to be the time where EDC is conducting community input sessions, but at that focus group, I can tell you that the only people who were taking notes were the Councilwoman's Office (Pierina), but it wasn't as super engaging..” – Jennifer Salgado (Street Vendor Project)

“They showed up, the vendors. They took time out of their night and went to her (Pierina’s) office. I’m glad I showed up. I was disappointed because the vendors didn’t really fill out surveys. So I was curious to see how they were going to take all their information and ideas and incorporate it into the document. So again, it was a great meeting because of the work that we and Street Vendor Project did to get people to come out, but when we were there, it felt a little bit like they shortchanged the vendors.. And, you know, credit to Fernando from EDC, we’re gonna work and he wants to set up another meeting with the vendors to have them fill out the surveys and take them inside of the armory.” – Juan Nuñez (NWBCCC)

14. A lot of street vendors don’t have emails, but yet EDC’s public online survey requires one to list their email address, excluding many street vendors from doing an online survey, an online survey was only in English from circa November 2022-early April 2023.

“And I think one thing that we saw was a survey that was released for the public to leave comments. It was only in English. And then it asked for emails. A lot of our community members don’t have that. And also, like, why isn’t a paper-like option being distributed? No, there are more meaningful ways to actually get folks to be engaged.” – Jennifer Salgado (Street Vendor Project)

15. There are street vendors that strongly want to be inside the Armory most of the time.

“Listen to me. I’m gonna give you an example.. if you’re building a house, and the plumber and the electrician, they go a little hand in hand because the plumber knows a little bit about the electrical wiring because he comes in contact with it a little bit, and the electrician also comes in contact with the plumbing. But if you want to know about the plumbing, talk to the plumber, don’t talk to the electrician about the plumbing work. Talk to the plumber. So, if you want to know about if we want to go inside, come talk directly to each vendor, not what you hear. There’s a saying that go like this: If my enemy shot arrows at me and he missed me, why pick them up and throw them? Come directly to me, man. Everybody wants to go in...

It’s gonna solve a host of problems. The greediness, the ‘I was here before you,’ the amount of space you’re taking up, the elements, the rain, the noise, too hot, too cold, raining today.

We don’t have to be outside ever because that place is so big and airy it’s almost like being outside! It gives us more financial stability to be out there when it’s raining out. It got skylight sky windows, sun comes in there -I seen it.

That’s another thing! You know how many incidents I’ve seen out there? People stealing or people have a disagreement and pull out at a knife. Both parties pulled out a knife. The police came three times last year, seriously! People bleeding, people got beat up. Yes, safety is a another issue that will be solved..” – T., Street Vendor on Kingsbridge Rd.

16. There is a disconnect between the permits that street vendors actually need and the permits that NYC EDC is exploring from NYC SBS as ways to support street vendors.

“Licensing and permits don’t exist for vendors right now and haven’t existed for over 30 years because the city capped them back in the 70s, and since then, hasn’t created a legal pathway to be able to secure any more licenses and permits. And it’s not even SBS who provides these licenses and permits, it’s the Department of Consumer Worker Protection and DOH.” – Jennifer Salgado (Street Vendor Project)

17. Street vendors in the area that don’t vend in front of the Kingsbridge Armory have not been reached out to.

“Another thing is that there’s been a strong emphasis and focus on the Kingsbridge vendors, and that has been amazing, but then there are other vendors in the surrounding areas that have not really been engaged, and all of that is kind of being left on North Bronx and the Street Vendor Project. Juan and I are only two people. So, it’s been a little sad to see that EDC has only had Fernando work on this.. The Kingsbridge Armory has been an iconic part of the Bronx as a whole. And so we have vendors on Bedford, we have vendors in the surrounding areas. The Street Vendor Project does work on Fordham, but then there are folks on 180th you know, all of these surrounding areas are also worth being able to collect public comment from, and it just feels like we were focusing on just Kingsbridge when a lot of these other folks can also be involved.” – Jennifer Salgado (Street Vendor Project)

18. This raises the next point: Hester Street’s increasingly limited role in the public visioning process was one that was noticeable.

“I was a bit surprised that they had to take a step back, that EDC took more control of planning the focus group meetings and all these things. Hester Street, they haven’t been bad... All the folks in Hester Street have been trying their best. In my honest opinion, I was surprised that they (EDC) took some of their responsibilities away as far as organizing the focus groups. I think they’ve (Hester Street) done the best that they could. I mean, some of these workshops to be honest with you haven’t been greatly designed, but I mean, I don’t know, man. It’s hard for me to even, I don’t want to critique them in the sense because they’ve done the best that they can. Right? Like they’ve done the best they can. And they’ve taken a lot of advice here and there as much as they could, as much as the EDC would allow. Yeah, I don’t know why the EDC decided to lessen their responsibilities.” – Juan Nuñez (NWBCCC)

19. As seen from the ethnographic analysis, EDC-led developments such as Flatbush Market, have pros and cons that are not being holistically discussed by EDC in its communication with small business owners, most of which, based on my interviews, would prefer to stay in place and not relocate into the Kingsbridge Armory.

20. From the jump, community ownership was listed by public visioning process participants as the top way to address concerns. Despite this fact, structures of management and ownership and community ownership were an afterthought ... Never taken seriously. In turn, the community was insulted and asked how should the armory be a tourist attraction in public workshop 2. In public workshop 3 we were limited to one-time design charrettes... this also applies to information sessions that the EDC held, such as the adaptive reuse panel:

"The fact that I was asked by EDC to share that, as part of the adaptive reuse panel showed that they were sort of deciding that they needed to accommodate this, this demand, this request, this insistence, that there be space made in the official community engagement process for models that are about shared ownership, rather than just design, or redesign, you know, adaptive reuse of the building of, an armory space itself. I feel like that's an example of what I'm talking about, which is like, you know, the very fact that they called it an adaptive reuse panel, and then just sort of shoved this other thing, which is not really adaptive reuse, into that panel showed that they were sort of making adjustments on the fly, and had sort of no original intention of there being any space for this kind of conversation. It's not like there was ever a plan for a separate webinar about, you know, community ownership or shared ownership over commercial property.... And so I feel like that's, that's kind of what I'm saying, which is like, you know, the fact that they have case studies of these models up at the last public meeting and stuff -all of that was them having to adjust to something that they were not planning to do in the original." – Dr. Evan Casper-Futterman (Bronx Cooperative Development Initiative)

21. Despite claiming to care about a Kingsbridge Armory envisioned by the community, not a single elected official has supported community activists' vision for an Armory that has shared ownership.

"They haven't really mentioned it when they talk. Whenever they get a chance to speak on it, they mainly talk about wanting to bring jobs and good living wage jobs. Right? Like they always focus on the jobs. So, have electeds named it? No, it's been mainly coming from us. They've been very, very careful to even mention community ownership. And when they speak, for them, you know, they don't want to cross that line and make that commitment. And it's disappointing. You know what I'm saying? Like, it's really disappointing that they haven't gone all out and said: Yeah, community ownership, they're kind of playing the game, you know, of saying the right things, but not really crossing that line of saying: 'Yeah, this belongs to you, to the community.' It's more like: 'we want to hear from you, the community,' not it belongs to you. – Juan

"Yeah, I think it's getting built. I think that it has been something that has been said numerous times. And I think in my personal perception, has often been sort of not sneered at, but looked over like, 'okay, that's what you're saying, and I got it,' like, 'whatever, we'll look into it' that kind of, you know, a little bit of the brush off. But that as the process has gone on, Northwest Bronx, in particular, has really advocated strongly and expanded its case and strengthened that. Rather than kind of backing off coming on strong at the beginning and kind of losing momentum over time, I think that the argument in the case for community ownership, coming from Northwest Bronx has actually gotten stronger over time, more insistent, or persistent, or both, I guess. And I think, you know, some, some things have shifted, but in my perception, again, I have no idea how it'll actually all play out. But in my perception, I think, it's gone from being something that was sort of being like, you know, placated to something that is like actually being where, where people who have power, elected officials, EDC, are being forced to reckon with the idea. It doesn't mean they agree with it or they support it, or they think it'll happen, or they think it could work, I'm sure there's all kinds of skepticism and blah, blah, blah, but they're at least being sort of pushed uncomfortably or unexpectedly, perhaps for them, you know, to contend with it as a real idea, not just like, 'oh, you know, community says they want all these things. You know, they say all this stuff all the time. They don't know what they want' and all that." - Dr. Evan Casper-Futterman (Bronx Cooperative Development Initiative)

22. Councilmember Pierina Sanchez was the only one to even acknowledge the NWBCCC's goal for community ownership, but never wholeheartedly said that she would support. Despite being the big-money, establishment politician backed by an Espaillat

political machine that helped her win against an NWBCCC protege for the Council Member seat, Pierina is appreciated by many in the community, including a number of NWBCCC members, for being more approachable, engaged and progressive than her predecessors. However, one has to wonder how things would be had she positioned herself differently. Only time will tell. Not only does Pierina have a strong influence on the ULURP process that will eventually occur, but she has also assumed a level of political influence that is playing a role in lobbying Albany and Washington DC for public funding needed to see the Armory redevelopment through.

"And, you know, I think it remains to be seen. Pierina at the annual meeting... she was really emphasizing community wealth more than community ownership, which isn't bad, saying community wealth is better than saying nothing; but like, I think she was in her statement already trying to prepare people for the fact that we're not going to get what we want. And her position, I think ultimately is that we can't allow this effort to get shut down. Whereas I don't think that people in leadership in Northwest Bronx have the same desire to avoid conflict at all costs or to avoid stopping the process at all costs. And so I think that's ultimately the conflict that I see emerging, which is like, Pierina is like, you know, I think she's gonna push, I think she is going to advocate for the things that she achieves agrees with and believes in with, you know, community ownership and those things, but she's not the most powerful elected official that we're dealing with and she's up against a very stacked deck, and she's vulnerable. And if she pushes too hard, Espaillat's gonna get pissed and the Mayor's gonna get pissed, and she, you know, she has other concerns she has to worry about politically, if that stuff happens.

So, you know, I think there's the other strategy, ultimately, which is how Northwest Bronx defeated the mall proposal under the Bloomberg administration is you have to go citywide, you have to bring in other elected officials from across the Bronx, and across the city, and the borough president, to hold the line that you want them to hold to create the pressure that is needed to force these other electeds into considering that they need to move the conversation differently. So, that's a bigger project, but eventually, it's gonna go beyond Pierina, and it's gonna involve the entire City Council. So those are all like, longer down the road concerns when it comes to who was ultimately selected, because once they select the developer, I think that's when it goes through ULURP, so ULURP is a whole other process where people have to say whether they oppose it or support it, and there's all these advisory opinions. And then if the council person supports it, and the borough president supports it, and the community board -you know, there's all these different layers of stuff that has to happen after the developer's chosen. So there's a sort of all of this shadowboxing stuff before the developer is chosen and then after developers chosen." - Dr. Evan Casper-Futterman (Bronx Cooperative Development Initiative)

- 23. It was a bumpy road between community, elected officials and EDC during the public visioning process -from not getting acknowledged enough at Together for Kingsbridge events, to EDC allowing elected officials to make too many speeches, to not having enough seats to accommodate community members at public workshops, running out of worksheets at the workshops, inconsistently having child care, inconsistently having food and water for the public, etc.**
- 24. Despite the lack of political support, community ownership was something that gained the support of most CWG members, except for Dominicanos USA, a nonprofit organization tapped by Council Member Pierina to join the CWG. Nonetheless, Eddie,**

their Executive Director, wanted to learn more about what it entailed and who had concerns about the feasibility given the large repairs needed at the Armory.

"Yeah, I think the biggest thing is, is what grounds us in the Bronx. Again, the Bronx is so diverse. I think oftentimes, we hear about like the City, like New York City is such a diverse melting pot for so many communities and cultures. But if you dive deeper into the boroughs, it's very much the same too. The Bronx has been growing and expanding with a lot of new communities coming in, like the Southeast Asian folks is only 40 plus years here in the Bronx and New York City. And now you have like new African communities coming in, new Muslim community coming in, right? We even still this day are getting new Vietnamese and Cambodian immigrants that are coming into the Bronx. And so one of the biggest things is: what are some of the things that ground us in the work that we do, right? When we talk about social justice, when we talk about racial justice, like these are just words in terms, but if we're not actually practicing what those means, I think is very important.

And so for us that alignment is important. When we say community ownership, when we talk about building shared wealth, when we talk about cooperative giving the power and money to the community, to the people that are led by community, is so important. And so I think those are the things that we need to continue to uplift and also reimagine when we talk about economic democracy, because even some of those words, like you can't even translate them into different languages, right? And so it's like a theory and an idea, but how do you talk about it in a practical way that community members can understand like: okay, you're talking about building money and resources, being able to develop capacity, being able to have ownership. And so these are the things that I think are very important when we talk about solidarity and what it looks and means with other committees of color. Like I think this is one of those powerful steps moving as part of this work." – Khamarin Nhann (Mekong)

"I support the shared profits, I support the land trust, and I support the shared ownership. And I grew in conviction when I saw the examples of the LA market, and when I saw the two in New York (armories that were chains that are being used purposefully), and when I saw the light manufacturing people from Chicago at Manhattan College, they were all things that had been done with a track record that clearly had created, not just on paper, but real, good paying jobs and real skills building for young folks and for families. If the first two didn't work, and they didn't, a mall that wasn't approved under Bloomberg and the ice skating rink that couldn't get financing, then what the heck, let's be bold and innovative, and try what people think is crazy, or maybe not attainable, but let's reach for the stars so that we can finally clinch something purposeful in this property.

I believe that if you set goals, and you strive for them, and you reach them, it's empowering. It's enabling, it's life-giving. And even when we stretch for the stars, and we don't land, all the way at the top, the stretch and the striving gets us from nothing to something better. So even if what will happen is a negotiated agreement between whoever the developer and the community agreement, it's more than we don't have right now. And I think it's going in the right direction for something tangible, that can impact a real life or real family or real zipcode a real community. And for me, from where I grew up South Bronx to Northwest... it resonates and in my later life, certainly that we should dare to dream. And we should strive for those that feed us and nurture us and enrich our families, enrich our personal careers, maybe or maybe not, but at least enrich the people that we care for, or the people that we should care for." – Deacon Wilson, Our Lady of Angels Roman Catholic Church

"So, whoever invests have to get the return on their investment as I mentioned earlier...but the community has to be the one that have a say in it. So, there is not a position that I've taken,

because I haven't seen, I will have to see exactly how would it be managed, numbers...and I think for anybody else that would want to come in, you know, the, the economic support from the state and the city and the federal government will be a key role for it, you know, to really have the community ownership push for that, you know, which is important. I'm sure, there's a lot of developers that are going around and asking, you know, I mean, I got a call from a while back... not even at that stage, you know, we'll have to see who's going to own the building, what would be the turnaround, what support from the Office of Economic Development, I saw some finance, I attended the meeting to see how the finance will be in place. So, you got to advocate for whatever is best that they've been, you know, working for many years. I'm new, I didn't participate, you know, the past struggles, you know, so. So it's a serious group that is making, you know, a great contribution to getting an eyesore in our community development.

More information for me... maybe I haven't made sufficient efforts, you know, to really get more of it, try to hear, listen, learn more, and then being able to say: Okay, this makes a lot of sense, it's doable. We want to make sure that we get something that's doable, that's community, and is not abusive in terms of the cause for the space. I mean, it sounds good, but how you put the finance together? You know, that's my big question. Right? When you talk about community ownership. It's got to be community ownership that you get title of the building and then you outsource with a developer, you know, those are the important information as you alluded to that many people perhaps don't understand very much..” – Eddie Cuesta (Dominicanos USA)

- 25. As seen from the ethnographic analysis, from a radical, anti-capitalist organizing perspective, you had people in the community, such as Jay, that support shared ownership, but questioned how that would pan out, preferring for the governance of that ownership to be managed by a reformed and decentralized community board system that's elected by the community and is more reflective of their communities than the current community board system.**
- 26. Community ownership is also something that interests businesses and street vendors, but more education and resources need to be provided as the understanding is generally low.**
- 27. The stakes are high for shared ownership of the Kingsbridge Armory in relation to a larger movement.**

“I think the stakes in terms of like, if it's not shared ownership, I think it's just reflective of the trajectory of where the movement and the work has come, which is that, you know, in the last 10 years, we've in the Bronx, in New York, and generally, across the country, there have been, you know, some local work that has definitely taken root and road, but there isn't enough national coordination, or capital, or expertise and infrastructure to execute on the sort of largest scale development. That intuitively makes sense. To me where we are, if the armory is community-only controlled it will be, you know, sort of a miraculous confluence of events that is extraordinarily improbable. And itself, will both hopefully, ideally, put under enormous strain the entire very, very small national movement for community wealth building, and potentially set it forward as well. I mean, I think that that's the the risk and reward of. That if it works, it will immediately bear the weight of the world, and its success or failure will be indicative of an entire generation of work. And also, if it doesn't, it's sort of relatively run-of-the-mill indication that in the last 10 years, we just haven't built the sophistication to execute on a project of, you know, one of the most probably expensive and complex urban construction projects of the century so far.” - Dr. Evan Casper-Futterman (Bronx Cooperative Development Initiative)

- 28. As seen from the ethnographic analysis, NWBCCC, despite its limited resources, was the main actor on the ground organizing the small businesses, co-organizing the street vendors, understanding their needs, working to revive the Kingsbridge Road Merchants Association.**
- 29. As seen from the ethnographic analysis, NWBCCC ramped up the pressure on its values and principles, including community ownership, by consistently increasing turnout, often with the help of unions, in each public workshop throughout the cold winter.**
- 30. As seen from the ethnographic analysis, there were clearly tensions between NWBCCC and the City that boiled over in public workshop 3. NWBCCC used direct and public confrontation to address such matters while scaling up and uniting with labor and continuing to hold the City and electeds accountable to its values and principles for the Kingsbridge Armory, with community ownership being a top priority.**
- 31. NWBCCC never would've had to talk about creating its own Vision Doc report months before the EDC's Vision Doc if it had the support of elected officials for a Kingsbridge Armory that has shared ownership. Despite the rally, march and record turnout at public workshop 3, the work of convincing elected officials, somehow, still persists and the EDC's Vision Doc will not be released till at least July 2023.**

“But that's something that it's gonna be on us to let them know, to convince them. Right? And, you know, a lot of the things that we're doing now is prepping for that report that we hope to finalize and release in the next month or two (April or May) and using that to show them like community ownership and shared wealth is the only way that this is the only way something like this could work for the betterment of the community. So whether they agree with it now or not, they're gonna have to eventually, because you know, the community is going to share what we want. And if we have the shut this down, we'll do it again. But, once the visioning document is released, we'll see how that looks, number one. But number two, like, we'll see how they really feel. We don't know yet. They haven't really mentioned it that much at all. Still to find out.” – Juan Nuñez (NWBCCC)

- 32. Lastly, the Northwest Bronx has spoken in a profound way. 85% of my interviewees are people, mostly Bronxites, who either grew up in, live in, work in and/or have family in the Northwest Bronx.**

The only ones that weren't were the vendor from Flatbush Caribbean Central Marketplace, Trey Jenkins from the East 161st St BID and Abigail from Cooper Square Committee.

Conclusion + Opportunities for Additional Research

What does it say that EDC has done a mightily poor job of including small businesses in Kingsbridge Heights in the Bronx, vulnerable as ever in a borough that has experienced more neglect than others for small businesses, in its public visioning process for a building that has historically disadvantaged them?

What does it say that EDC has not comprehensively accounted street vendors' visions for the armory, despite their location in front of the structure, and engaged with them enough throughout the area?

What does it say that EDC lacks an understanding of the core displacement pressures currently affecting local small businesses and street vendors, most of whom are BIPOC and immigrants, and has not thought of bottom-up solutions that are relevant, informed and that comprehensively address the core systemic issues at play for such vital community members?

What does it say the EDC has consistently excluded Spanish speakers and people who do not speak languages other than English and Spanish?

What does it say that EDC waited till the last minute to do important things it should have done from day 1 of the public visioning process?

What does it say that EDC was performative about much of its community engagement efforts for the Together for Kingsbridge public visioning process and that most Community Working Group members had a different understanding of the responsibilities and real capacity issues at hand?

What does it say that, despite large community-based support for community ownership, Bronx and citywide politicians, representatives to the many advocating for these visions, have not supported something that would take a step further than traditional economic development by giving people more assets in an area that severely lacks it and strengthen communities' right to self-determination in a borough and county that is continuously rated as the poorest, unhealthiest, most neglected, and most disinvested?

Inevitably, time will tell.

As noted by several interviewees, although its public visioning process is wrapping up at this time of writing, the Kingsbridge Armory's redevelopment process will continue to unfold and a lot is up in the air. The vision doc won't be released till June. The RFP process for redevelopment is unlikely start till the fall or winter of 2023, and then there'll be a ULURP process that follows the eventual project selection.

Speaking of the RFP, it remains to be seen whether the Vision Doc will be this performative appendix attached to the RFP for development or whether community demands listed in the Vision Doc are non-negotiable, legally binding criteria that developers have to adhere to. If community ownership ends up being a top priority, let alone a priority, the NYC EDC should consult with stakeholders, such as NWBCCC and the Bronx Cooperative Development Initiative (BCDI), to ensure that the RFP includes a non-negotiable binding requirement that developers agree with community stakeholders on what the best model for shared ownership, shared wealth, and collective governance looks like.

In a city that continues to be shaped by major developments from the EDC, these findings should alarm: anyone concerned with the anti-displacement of small businesses, especially those concerned with the root causes of their vulnerabilities; anyone interested in street vending organizing and “urban informalities;” and, anyone on the frontlines of the growing community ownership and economic democracy movements worldwide, a movement that must have political support in order to be successful.

It also serves to inform communities who, sooner or later, will have to deal with an EDC that will sell illusionary language that they are putting communities first through various mechanisms such as community working groups and public visioning processes.

Moreover, it should ring an alarm that we need more low-income and working-class students of color from the outer boroughs and disadvantaged communities of color of New York who can see and tell things for what they really are. This research is something that personally affected, and will continue to affect, the majority of Bronxites interviewed, including myself. We've all been exploited and neglected, and continue to experience such injustices. This was a labor of love co-produced by my neighbors. It begs the question: What would planning and literature be if there were led by more people of color from East Harlem/El Barrio, Brownsville, Southside Williamsburg/Los Sures, or places such as Queensbridge Houses? I'd argue that it'd be more real, more embedded, more compassionate, more restorative, less exclusivist, less affluent, and thus, more transformative.

This research, like many things, was limited by time. It would be great for other Bronxites who are embedded into community struggles to examine the impacts of city planning in the Jerome Ave. rezoning and to examine how EDC, elected officials, developers and community stakeholders respond to further major developments in the Northwest Bronx, including the eventual Kingsbridge Armory project selection and Fordham Landing.

This research, hopefully, leads by example. Student or academic research means little if you're not on the ground committed to communities well before anything. Communities, such as mine in the Northwest Bronx, are more than a dot density map, more than a data coding exercise, more than a design charrette, more than an abstraction, more than a scholarly literature review to show how well-read you are, more than another academic framework, more than a thesis. Not to say those things aren't important, but they're meaningless if you're not on the ground and have a personal connection to the issues at stake and the people affected by them.

Lastly, ethnography is a fascinating method of research that is one of the best ways to get at the good, bad and the ugly of real people, places, events near and far, processes and issues at hand. This can be done by outsiders, but it's often done best by those with lived experience.

Lessons Learned & Policy Implications

With its massive size, the largest of its kind in the nation and world, the landmarked Kingsbridge Armory is iconic in the Bronx and represents the hopes and dreams of many in the grassroots movement for economic democracy, a movement that is fighting to redistribute power, governance and wealth for working-class and low-income Bronxites, especially BIPOC and immigrants, people who have long been disadvantaged by systemic racism, oppression, top-down planning and corporate greed. Seeing the inside of the Armory's drill hall, standing near its massive castle-like towers at the front entrance on Kingsbridge Road, or seeing the building's gigantic scale from a distance, it becomes clear how the building's multitude of spaces could be used to address many issues in the Bronx, such as food insecurity despite having the nation's largest food distribution center in Hunts Point, lack of access to STEM jobs and training opportunities to address the world's emerging issues and develop the next generation of leaders in such fields, and poor environmental and health outcomes.

Despite this pivotal movement, however, where the vested interest from elected officials in the City and State is high for this project and where the EDC has conducted the City's first-ever public visioning process for the Armory, the City and the political establishment, at this moment, have produced concerning statements and actions that suggest the Armory could very well be more of a nail in the coffin than a crown jewel that radically transforms the lives of people in the Bronx. The two-dimensional focus from elected officials and the EDC on jobs, tourism, and spatial uses for the Armory has been profoundly disconnected from the conversations that grassroots organizations and groups, many of whom saved the Bronx when it was burning and abandoned by profiteers and the government, are having in the Northwest Bronx and borough at large. This movement's conversations have intentionally been more concerned with the root causes of the issues people in Bronx face today, such as a profound lack of assets, agency, non-extractive wealth and power to govern decisions affecting their own communities and the future for their families. This disconnect says a lot about the motives and design of the EDC, as well as the lack of embeddedness between working-class communities of colors' activism struggles and the political establishment in the Bronx and city. For AOC to support the Bronx-Wide Plan before many elected officials in the Bronx says a lot. Organizers in the community ownership movement have to anticipate these challenging political dynamics during election cycles and think about their short and long-term consequences for the movement's progress. Many of the elected officials highlighted throughout this research – Council Member Pierina Sanchez, Borough President Vanessa Gibson, Mayor Adams, and Congressman Espaillat – will play big role in the ULURP process for the Armory and the securing of public monies needed to offset the high cost of repairing the building.

Speaking of the EDC, it's clear that its structure and purpose fundamentally stand at odds with the values and aspirations of the fight for racial justice and economic democracy in many communities of color in New York. Concerns that the EDC serves the rich are indeed valid when the quasi-public agency, an agency that manages all of the City's revenue-generating land, continually gives away public land to private developers in the name of job

creation that often stands in opposition to community demands, gives away tax subsidies to corporations that don't pay living wage jobs, extracts wealth from the City and communities and stimulates gentrification by often helping to facilitate neighborhood rezonings that fuel rising land values and inequality.¹³⁷ As noted by Tom Angotti, the EDC is not mentioned anywhere in New York's City Charter, but often performs many planning functions that the Charter applies to the Department of City Planning. Additionally, despite often issuing RFPs and selecting consultants to make long-term plans that may have a significant impact on the City, the EDC is not required by law to conduct this work in the public forum as with other City agencies. EDC's land use acquisitions and dispositions are not always subject to ULURP either, preventing the public from being able to hold it accountable to the same standards of other city agencies.¹³⁸ With these fundamental issues at play, there need to be more conversations on how EDC, which largely serves as a real estate development and economic development could be reformed or abolished, so that the City could achieve a more socially just model of economic development, particularly one that is aligned with the principles and practices of economic democracy.¹³⁹

On the topic of reforms at EDC, its reliance on outdated and exclusionary planning practices, such as public visioning processes and surveys, and its performative usage of Community Working Groups, must be thoroughly reevaluated. The lack of understanding of Community Working Group members' outreach capacity during the Together for Kingsbridge public visioning process was disappointing to witness, especially given the fact that street vendors and small businesses, the eyes and ears that serve as the face of our community, are in such close proximity to the Armory and have so much to gain or lose from its redevelopment. It's also clear that the EDC is poorly suited to be doing the work of community planning and is out of touch with the need for communities to have adequate time for public comment and accessibility, which is better done by meeting people where they are, building relationships rooted in trust and centering peoples' lived experiences, the hallmarks of embedded planning. As seen from this research, Kingsbridge Heights is a place where people want to get to know you as a person, and this can't be done in a few transactional visits, it takes time and it takes genuine compassion and commitment to small businesses' needs. Doing something, expecting nothing in return.

Additionally, EDC's insistence on focusing on design uses for the Armory, instead of facilitating meaningful conversations on how the building could be governed and financed in a way that centers community, was also inappropriate for the crucial moment that the Bronx

¹³⁷ Garelick, A., & Schustek, A. (2021, June 28). New York's Economic Development Corporation Is a Tool for the Rich. <https://jacobin.com/2021/06/new-york-city-economic-development-corporation-edc-public-money-democratic-control>

¹³⁸ Angotti, T. (2010, August 10). *LAND USE AND THE NEW YORK CITY CHARTER*. Hunter College. <https://www.hunter.cuny.edu/ccpd/repository/files/charterreport-angotti-2.pdf>

¹³⁹ New York City Comptroller. (2018, September). A New Charter to Confront New Challenges. https://comptroller.nyc.gov/reports/a-new-charter-to-confront-new-challenges/creating-a-fairer-more-equitable-ny/#_ftn20

is currently in and neglected the feedback it received from the community dating back to the first public workshop where community ownership was listed as a top solution to addressing community concerns. As the city reforms the methods it uses to achieve community planning work, such as the Department of City Planning's new Community Planning and Engagement division, as long as the EDC continues to be around without reform, it's time to rethink the comprehensiveness of the methods it's using.¹⁴⁰

There are also several items of legislation that would drastically improve the ability of working-class communities of color like Kingsbridge Heights in the Bronx to protect themselves against gentrification displacement pressures in the face of major developments like the Kingsbridge Armory, while advancing community ownership and governance of neighborhood assets, building shared wealth and furthering right to self-determination. They are as follows:

- Decriminalizing Street Vending and Lifting the Cap on Vendor Licenses – State Legislature (S.1739/A.3575)¹⁴¹
 - This legislation would be particularly beneficial for the many general vendors on Kingsbridge Road that don't sell food and that can't obtain a vending license. It would also vacate and expunge street vendors' records from past citations and misdemeanors related to sidewalk vending, along with lowering fines and limiting street vending violations to citations;
- Establishing Commercial Rent Stabilization – City Council (Intro 93);
- The New York City Community Land Act (NYC CLA) – City Council and State Legislature, which includes the following:
 - Community Opportunity to Purchase Act (Intro 196): COPA gives CLTs and other mission-driven nonprofits a first right to purchase multifamily buildings when landlords sell;
 - Public Land for Public Good (Intro 637): Would require NYC to prioritize CLTs and nonprofit developers when disposing of City-owned land, to ensure public land is used for permanently-affordable housing and other public benefit;
 - Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Resolution (Res 38): Resolution 38 calls on the New York State legislature and Governor Hochul to enact legislation giving tenants a first right to collectively purchase their buildings when a landlord sells; and,

¹⁴⁰ Hamby, E., Mérida, L., & Tepale, J. (2023, April 5). Getting to Yes. <https://urbanomnibus.net/2023/04/getting-to-yes/>

¹⁴¹ NY State Senate. (n.d.-j). NY State Senate Bill S1739. <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2023/S1739>

- Abolish and Replace the NYC Lien Sale: The City Council must pass legislation prohibiting NYC from resuming the tax lien sale — a Giuliani-era policy that has destabilized and extracted wealth from Black and brown communities — and replace it with an equitable system that engages CLTs to keep New Yorkers in their homes and convert financially distressed buildings into permanently-affordable housing.¹⁴²

None of the aforementioned legislative items have passed yet. While there have been some signs of progress with NYC CLA, as seen with the rally and hearing that City Council hosted in February 2023, it remains to be seen how City Council and the Mayor's administration will respond to HPD's concerns about the legislation as drafted. **Each day that the legislative items stall and sit on the back burner is a day that my neighbors become increasingly at risk of displacement.**

Non-residential CLTs, including commercial CLTs, in New York face significant policy and financial barriers that are legislatively amendable. It's important to note that the way CLTs are defined by the City's Administrative Code is too narrow because they are just defined as a mechanism to provide affordable housing. As mentioned by the Pratt Center for Community Development's April 2023 report titled "*CLTs Gaining Ground in NYC*," land commodification is a root cause of the City's current housing crisis, but also the loss of small businesses and the jobs they provide, as well a lack of free and accessible community spaces and diminished open spaces for recreational and agricultural community uses. According to the report, CLTs could serve to protect small businesses and could work well for storefronts with similar values, such as worker cooperatives, credit unions and food cooperatives. It's also important to note the balancing act that CLTs face between providing affordable commercial space that serves their residents with the need to use commercial space as a revenue stream to help subsidize residential tenant rents, which is why the report recommends the City provide more funding and subsidies to CLTs to offset that issue.¹⁴³

Another policy gray area to mention is protections for small businesses on month-to-month leases. Along with street vendors, these are arguably among the most vulnerable small businesses in New York, largely at the mercy of their landlords, landlords that, as seen from this research alone, that can get rid of them quite easily.¹⁴⁴ According to Brooklyn Legal Services, a landlord must give a 60-day notice to vacate to month-to-month tenants who have been in a leased space for 1-2 years, and a 90-day notice to vacate to tenants who have been in a leased space for 2+ years. However, policymakers must examine the other barriers that small businesses, especially BIPOC and immigrant-owned small businesses, face when they're on month-to-month. Landlords can raise the rent on small businesses with month-to-month

¹⁴² NYC Community Land Initiative. (n.d.-k). Take Action to Support the Community Land Act! <https://nyccli.org/cla/>

¹⁴³ Morse, S. (2023, April). CLTs Gaining Ground in NYC. https://prattcenter.net/uploads/0423/1682705700812033/Pratt_Center_Gaining_Ground-042823.pdf

¹⁴⁴ Brooklyn Legal Services Corporation A. (n.d.-c). COMMERCIAL TENANT FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS. <https://jarcbx.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/CLA-6-pager-ENGLISH.pdf>

overnight if they want to, which is often the case when they want to make more money from having a new commercial tenant in their space that's typically not from the same neighborhood.¹⁴⁵ As I learned from Christian Ramos, businesses on month-to-month struggle to qualify for loans from banks due to their lack of a lease, struggle to get a line of credit and have to pay additional fees to basic expenses, such as utility bills. Can legislation help these vital yet vulnerable community members?

It's also important for community organizers, planners, and policymakers to look beyond policy by considering land use mechanisms that could strengthen the anti-displacement of small businesses in communities of color. Special purpose districts, such as the Special Clinton District (SCD) on the West Side of Manhattan, can mandate that all future development within a designated area maintain a certain level of permanently deeply affordable housing in new buildings, a mechanism was intentionally created to preserve neighborhood character. The zoning tool could also protect commercial tenants against landlord harassment through its policies.

As noted by CUNY Law Review:

“..the SCD zoning regulation deters harassment by forcing building owners found to have harassed tenants to surrender nearly a third of the property for low-income housing in perpetuity. Here, harassment includes any conduct by the owner that ‘causes or is intended to cause’ occupants to vacate or ‘to surrender or waive any rights in relation to such occupancy.’ Harassment includes any ‘use or threatened use of force,’ interruption of ‘essential services,’ or failing to maintain the building such that it is ‘unfit for human habitation’ under section 27-2140 of the City Administrative Code.

The New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (‘HPD’) is charged with enforcement of the SCD harassment prohibitions. Enforcement is triggered when an owner wishes to make a ‘material alteration’ to the property that requires an Alteration Type 1 permit from the Department of Buildings (‘DOB’). Then, an owner must first apply for and obtain a ‘Certificate of No Harassment’ (‘CONH’) from HPD. Upon receiving an application for a CONH, HPD will initiate an investigation to determine whether there has been any harassment in the building during the preceding 15 years, or longer, should HPD have ‘reasonable cause’ to believe there was harassment prior to the 15-year inquiry period. The investigation consists of sending notices to the building’s current and former tenants, local housing groups, and placing a public notice in the City Record. Investigators also make site visits and attempt to personally contact current and prior tenants.”

¹⁴⁵ Duranti-Martínez, J. (2022, November). Commercial Community Ownership as a Strategy for Just Development. https://www.lisc.org/media/filer_public/32/89/3289dc22-c6fa-4ca4-8815-5a642bf340fa/pub22_commercial_community_ownership_fin.pdf

As seen on Kingsbridge Road in the Bronx with the Kingsbridge Road Merchants Association, another important aspect of the anti-displacement of small businesses in New York is merchant organizing, especially in regard to organizing merchant associations in areas that are characterized by more local independent small businesses/mom and pop shops. While some merchant associations typically may have the ability to fight back against predatory landlords, connect small businesses to financial grants and other financial support opportunities to stay in place, and plan community events, merchant associations generally are not without their limitations. **As I learned from interviewing Abigail from Cooper Square Committee, merchant associations aren't financially sustainable. They're also largely marginalized by a city that has prioritized business improvement districts (BIDs) as many property owners have prioritized cleaner streets and higher property values over the needs of longstanding small businesses that serve low-income people.** The fact that the Kingsbridge Road Merchants Association is trying to revive itself, reincorporate, bring new leaders in, and secure new financing, is essential and timely, but in a dynamic neighborhood where the implications of the Armory and other developments in the area, such as Fordham Landing, stand to affect many small businesses, it will be important to comprehensively consider solutions that will prevent the merchant association from another hiatus. One of the biggest things business owners were frustrated by was the lack of results from the old merchants association. It will take time to build up their trust again and to ensure them that this new era of small business organizing is worth their time.

Another area of opportunity for small businesses in Kingsbridge Heights that should be explored is commercial community ownership. Disadvantaged communities of color often require comprehensive community development strategies beyond affordable housing for meaningful change to occur, and thus, across the US, community ownership is increasingly revitalizing distressed commercial corridors by fighting speculation and commercial displacement, providing space for community-serving businesses, and promoting community wealth building in BIPOC, immigrant, and refugee communities.¹⁴⁶¹⁴⁷ A few promising areas for BIPOC small businesses and anti-displacement organizers to consider are commercial CLTs and commercial ownership on CLT land. One case study to consider is the Partnership in Property Commercial Land Trust (PIP CLT) in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Compared to CLTs with commercial rental units, PIP CLT supports BIPOC small business owners with purchasing commercial buildings on land stewarded by the CLT. PIP CLT provides 20%-40% of the building purchase price to small business owners, who obtain a mortgage for the remainder. Due to systemic racism in lending and inequities in capital access, it is challenging for BIPOC-owned small businesses to secure loans, so in cases where small business owners do not yet qualify for a loan, PIP CLT intervenes by offering a lease-with-option-to-purchase agreement, allowing a

¹⁴⁶ Rosenberg, G., & Yuen, J. (2012). Beyond Housing: Urban Agriculture and Commercial Development by Community Land Trusts.

https://www.lincolnist.edu/sites/default/files/pubfiles/2227_1559_rosenberg_wp13gr1.pdf

¹⁴⁷ Duranti-Martínez, J. (2022, November). Commercial Community Ownership as a Strategy for Just Development.

https://www.lisc.org/media/filer_public/32/89/3289dc22-c6fa-4ca4-8815-5a642bf340fa/pub22_commercial_community_ownership_fin.pdf

portion of the commercial tenant's monthly rent payments to go toward the eventual purchase even as the tenant continues to operate in a below-market rate commercial space.¹⁴⁸

Regarding street vendors, organizing an Armory Vender Coalition is essential. It won't prevent all problems, but it would improve cohesion, generate more information sharing through routine meetings, increase compliance with vending laws, and strengthen the vendors' voices, a voice that has not been adequately obtained during the Kingsbridge Armory's public visioning process. One has to wonder how a coalition would've responded to the sweep that took place in April 2023. Perhaps there would have been a more vocal and powerful response to that injustice.

Another injustice that street vendors face in the Bronx face is the inhumane trek they must make to Lower Manhattan and Southeast Brooklyn in the event their items are seized by Sanitation Police. Not only is this costly to vendors, but it's emotionally and physically draining. This City should be ashamed of this process and should have more localized structures in place to enable vendors to not have to leave the borough they work in to regain their livelihood.

Harking back to the power of embedded planning, lived experience, particularly from inner city communities of color in the US, is so important yet greatly lacking in the field of city planning and in the academic world of urban planning studies. It was a dream to write this paper on a huge matter affecting the neighborhood and borough that I'm from. It meant the world to write about a movement that I'm actively a part of. At the end of the day, the stories, places and people in this paper are all aspects of my life that I deeply care for. Similarly, it's simply a miracle that you are reading this paper. The obstacles that I, as a Black man from the Bronx, had to overcome to get to this point are great. On top of that, it was incredibly exhausting having to juggle this undertaking with working to get by and running to classes scheduled throughout the day and completing multiple school projects in an elitist institution that is not fundamentally designed for BIPOC working-class and low-income students and our lives, struggles, visions, and voices. Through it all, what kept me going was the organizing work that I do in the Bronx and the people, neighbors, that I do it for. If you are an aspiring BIPOC planner from the hood, I want you to know that you can do this too. Speak your truth everywhere you go -stuffy classrooms, predominantly White work spaces, and even your barrio, love yourself and remain true to yourself no matter what gets thrown at you, never forget your roots and who you do this for, and remember that you have a purpose that is so great, bright and powerful. You went through the school of hard knocks to get this far, and you know the issues facing your community better than anyone else. Yes, anyone else. You're the promise of a better tomorrow. Nobody can take away your light. Shine.

Last, but not least, it's once again important to center the roots of the struggle for a Kingsbridge Armory that's been decades in the making going back to the time I was born in

¹⁴⁸ Duranti-Martínez, J. (2022, November). Commercial Community Ownership as a Strategy for Just Development. https://www.lisc.org/media/filer_public/32/89/3289dc22-c6fa-4ca4-8815-5a642bf340fa/pub22_commercial_community_ownership_fin.pdf

the mid-1990s: the Black and Brown youth of the Bronx. Back then, the fight was for additional school spaces. Today, there is not a week that goes by when I don't hear someone talking about the importance of the Armory being something that uplifts a youth that continues to get neglected by systemic racism and oppression. A community-owned Kingsbridge Armory, for all its benefits to the Bronx, would send the strongest message that our youth no longer have to dream of being rich and privileged to acquire property, own stakes, and govern the fate of their own communities, they, the local working-class, have the power to organize and do it themselves.

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