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I ❤️ New York (1977) et WE ❤️ NYC (2023) : comment fédérer des communautés dans la ville sensible et la ville transmédiatique ?

I ❤️ New York (1977) and WE ❤️ NYC (2023): How to Build Communities in the Physical City and in the Digital Version of the City?

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mots clés

New York City, politiques publiques, community building, usagers, *Le droit à la ville*, Henri Lefebvre, phénoménologie, marketing territorial, images sociales, labyrinthe urbain transmédiatique

key words

New York City, public policies, community building, city users, *The Right To The City*, Henri Lefebvre, phenomenology, city branding, social images, transmedia urban maze

résumé

Dans le contexte américain, je propose d'envisager la communauté urbaine en tant que production complexe qui inclut l'espace urbain physique articulé à la production d'espaces urbains numériques, dans lesquels les " usagers " font l'expérience du *Droit à la ville* tel qu'il a été théorisé par Henri Lefebvre (Lefebvre 1968) et que j'étudie dans une perspective phénoménologique (Dewey 1934; Husserl 1985; Merleau-Ponty 1945). Cette double approche me permet d'observer le rapport à la ville de New York dans ses multiples dimensions sensorielles, émotionnelles, narratives, visuelles, mémorielles et dans ses complexes strates numériques sédimentées. Cette double perspective de recherche révèle des pratiques numériques qui ont transformé la ville en un écosystème que j'appelle un labyrinthe urbain transmédiatique. J'envisage cet écosystème urbain transmédiatique sous l'angle des deux campagnes de communication, I ❤️ NY en 1977 et We ❤️ NY en 2023. Elles ont pour objet de créer une nouvelle dynamique dans la ville physique et dans la ville numérique pour le bénéfice des touristes et des new yorkais.es, dans un contexte plus large de gentrification, de déplacement de populations et de politiques publiques néo-libérales. Ces campagnes à forte dimension transmédiatique révèlent deux axes d'actions complémentaires : des initiatives de développement émanant d'institutions ou de groupes alliant des acteurs publics et privés; et des initiatives citoyennes d'organisation de communautés urbaines.

My premise is that in an American context, any urban community is a complex, multi-layered production which combines the city's physical space with the on-going production of digital urban spaces where "users" experience *The Right To The City* as defined by Henri Lefebvre (Lefebvre 1968). Considering this experience from a phenomenological perspective (Dewey 1934; Husserl 1985; Merleau-Ponty 1945) allows me to observe how city producers interact with "users" in the complex process of settling down of digital contents, multimodal users' narratives, images, emotions and memories. This dual research perspective highlights what I consider to be a transmedia ecosystem resulting from digital practices that have refashioned New York city into what I call a transmedia urban maze. I further address this transmedia urban maze through the 1977 I ❤️ NY campaign and the 2023 We ❤️ NYC campaign. These city branding tools aim to re-dynamize New York City for the benefit of tourists and New Yorkers alike, both physically and online in a context of gentrification, displacement and neoliberal governance. Those campaigns have strong transmedia roots and have paved the way for mutually shaping initiatives - *i.e.* community development initiatives from public administrations and private alliances as well as civic community organizing initiatives in New York City.

5 novembre 2024

The OED defines community as "what several people have in common." It stresses a "semantic link" between inwardness and movement towards others, between self-centered belongingness and out-centered movement towards outlanders (Mayol 2007). My take on the concept of community is based on the twin perspective of the ecosystem built by city "users," those urban residents called *usagers* by Henri Lefebvre (Lefebvre 1968; Lefebvre 1974) together with city producers -- namely NYC City Hall, Department of Commerce, New York State Department of Economic Development (Rapport NCRC - Jason Richardson et al., 2019), real estate developers, architects, banks and investors, business companies, the tourism industry and the creative industries.

My premise is that in an American context, any urban community is a multi-layered production in which physical urban space is combined with the on-going production of digital urban spaces where users experience *The Right To The City* as defined by Henri Lefebvre (Lefebvre 1968). My doctoral work is devoted to this transmedia urban space resulting from those digital practices which have refashioned NY city into a transmedia urban ecosystem, which I call a transmedia urban maze. I further address this transmedia urban maze through the 1977 I ♥ NY campaign and the 2023 We ♥ NYC campaign. These city branding tools both aim to re-dynamize New York City for the benefit of tourists and New Yorkers alike, both physically and online. They raise my two research questions: (i) How do city producers and local users intersect in the post-crisis urban contexts of city communication campaigns? How do they impact the policies of community building? (ii) What do we learn from the unscripted revitalization efforts of such grassroots communities as Gotham Park and Welcome to Chinatown? How do transmedia communities contribute to empowering local New Yorkers? The process of empowerment underpins the civic engagement of the individual activists I will mention (Rosa Chang, Steve Rodriguez, Victoria Lee). Empowerment stems from a sense of personal responsibility that leads them to actively engage in their community for the benefit of marginalized and non-marginalized groups, in the face of gentrification, displacement and neoliberal governance.

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FROM 1977 I ❤️ NY TO 2023 WE ❤️ NYC

COMMON POINTS

These two communication campaigns have backed the city policies of community building. Although launched years apart, these campaigns have many common points. They both emerged in a similar post-crisis context when the city feared bankruptcy, financial disaster and a negative perception of the city that led New Yorkers to leave. City producers were similarly challenged and turned to communication campaigns to address the situation. They included nonprofit organizations which grouped actors from the private sector, the public sector and citizens. Today, those types of nonprofits are still relevant to the City of New York and are truly active at a local level. In 1977, under Democrat Mayor Beame and then under Democrat Mayor Koch, city producers allied with economic development agencies at state level and with a nonprofit organization called ABNY (Association for a Better NY). They worked to attract tourists and businesses back by restoring the city image. The tourism budget was \$4.3 million (from \$400 000). Similarly, Partnership for New York City initiated and fully funded the We ❤️ NYC campaign in 2023.

Interestingly, Partnership for New York City mobilizes private sector resources and expertise to advance New York City standing as a global center of economic opportunity, upward mobility and innovation. It is a nonprofit organization whose 330 members are prominent business leaders and companies that employ more than 1 million New Yorkers. Partnership for New York City claims to serve as an "honest broker between business, government and the civic sector to achieve a more inclusive and vibrant economy" (Partnership for New York City <https://pfnyc.org/>, access February 2024). City producers in 1977 and in 2023 shared the same objective. They wished to revitalize and change how NYC was perceived. They aimed to wake up the "urban imaginary circulating in potential consumers, investors and creditors." (Greenberg 2008: 192). Myriam Greenberg underlines that this change in narrative had already taken place in 1977 in the media thanks to the 1968 creation of a magazine called *New York*. It had triggered a process of displaying New York City as a hyped destination through entertainment, landmarks and lifestyle. The magazine founders commissioned market research studies by firm Yankelovich, Skelly and White to structure the magazine. Remarkably, they hired Milton Glaser as the magazine designer who later created the iconic 1977 logo I ❤️ NY. In 2023, I ❤️ NY morphed into We ❤️ NYC (see *Fig. 1*).



Figure 1 @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ), We Love NYC logo and Love NY logo in Times Square, NYC, NY. June 27, 2023, 12.36 am.

The shift from 'I' to 'We' fits the new attempt by city producers to mobilize civic engagement through a change in narrative. They now promote the city as a city of doers. Seen in this twofold perspective, those campaigns include different tools designed by two advertising agencies, Wells, Rich and Green in 1977 and Founders in 2023 which claims to be "a minority owned, multicultural agency that creates ideas." A noteworthy point is that both campaigns have a transmedia dimension and the design of their logo was instrumental to the success of the campaigns. It has evolved over time but followed technological evolutions. For example, a summer 1991 TV ad currently available at Duke University David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library featured a beating heart and a dynamic logo. This logo was adapted after 9/11 by Milton Glaser himself into a bruised heart and had this additional line, "I ♥ NY More Than Ever."

In 2023, the animated logo was envisioned as an ever-lasting icon which could be complemented by such derived objects as the blue Anthora cup (the disposable paper cup that has come to symbolize New York City daily life and the Greek community heritage) or the Yankee cap. These visual objects snugly fit into digital media (blogs, social networks, instant messages platforms) and I suggest they should be linked to two theoretical approaches of American cultural practices. First, Marc Chenetier's concept of *Americônes* underlines the foundational *image relation* (in painting, photography and cinema) between American culture and their historical, ideological and aesthetic contexts (Chénétier 1997). André Gunther's concept of *images sociales* (Gunthert 2014; Gunthert 2017; La Rocca 2007; Leveneur 2023) should further be mobilized in that these objects together with their widespread digital images visually encapsulate and promote the quintessence of the city life which local and world users instantly recognize.¹ Whenever displayed, such derived objects nurture a sense of togetherness and a feeling of common understanding - albeit superficial. Recognizing them as iconic signs of the city implies common experiences of New York City which bind city users and tourists alike, regardless of their location and whether online or on site.

DIFFERENCES

I now wish to turn to the way 1977 I ♥ NY and 2023 We ♥ NYC campaigns featured major differences in their budget and targets. In 1977, a \$ 4.3 million tourism budget was dedicated to communication campaigns which the municipality and the State contributed to while in 2023 zero taxpayers' money was involved. I mentioned Partnership for New York City earlier which

also pitched in. In terms of consumer targets, both campaigns stand in sharp contrast. I found it striking to watch the 1978 Valentine's Day ad which is the first TV ad produced for the campaign. It concentrated on Broadway show tours. It plainly wiped-out working-class communities and urban diversity. This commercial is available on the You Tube channel of the New York State Archives Department NYSA, (currently available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VbSG4gdm55A>, accessed January 2, 2024). As a Hackman Residency Scholar at the New York State Archives (July 2024) in Albany, I accessed the February 1978 diagnostic pre-test report created by Myra Somer, from creative research services, mandated by the New York State Department of Commerce. The campaign is first seen as "a tribute to New York" (SOMER 1978: 1), "the first exposure respondents found it an unusually attractive and appealing commercial." (SOMER 1978: 4) Then, Broadway show tour becomes clear. The campaign proved to be successful as it reached city producers' objectives to turn people's attention to attractive selected features of New York City.

In contrast, by 2023 New Yorkers from all backgrounds and genders were included. Their biographies and life stories are gloriously featured on the We ❤️ NYC website (currently available on <https://welovenyc.pfnyc.org/#do-ers>, accessed September 13, 2024).

This takes me to an additional striking difference between the two campaigns. While event organization has been a common feature, by 2023 the emphasis was on bottom-up initiatives from underprivileged groups that challenge the duality of center and periphery and foster a community locally. This point is visually made by such a mural as the one painted in the Bronx as part of the 2023 We ❤️ NYC community building initiative. This recently painted mural (*Fig. 2*) showcases a local collaboration with Bronx Artists Andre Trenier and Marthalicia along with Morrisania Air Rights Houses Residents. This is a public housing residence located on 161st and Park in the Bronx.



Figure 2 screencapture-website-the_genequality.org -2024-03-12-09_54_00. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)

The project is led by a nonprofit called genEquality founded in 2017. Strikingly, genEquality claims to be "a social enterprise that is on a mission to creatively activate gender-equal and inclusive beliefs and behaviors." Those were not part of the 1977 I ❤️ NYC mission statement.

We are a small but mighty team of designers, artists, strategists, applied behavioral scientists, educators, organizers, policy advocates, and more. While our team brings a

wide range of skills to our interdisciplinary work, we all envision a world in which everyone lives with equality, regardless of their gender.
(<https://www.genequality.org/aboutus>, accessed June 18, 2024)

What might be less expected is that genEquality partnered with city producers and We ❤️ NYC which they view as a "civic action campaign." Below, Fig. 3 shows "the Morrisania Air Rights Houses x We ❤️ NYC Nudge Art Mural," together with a short list of prominent contributors (including We ❤️ NYC, Partnership for New York City) "companies, nonprofits, thinktanks, government agencies, educational institutions, and global multilateral institutions".



Figure 3 screencapture-website-the_genequality.org -2024-03-12-09_55_00. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)

Their online statement of intent is illuminating in that it binds the official city campaign and a local community bent on reshaping the perception and life of a Bronx underprivileged area:

Since it is a part of the We ❤️ NYC civic action campaign, community is the driving force behind the MAR Houses Nudge Art Mural. Residents came together for a series of design sessions which elicited the issues, values, and elements that they wanted to visualize in

this 76-foot-long, 2-story-high mural. The final design is an iteration of both dozens of ideas and hours shaped by the community in which the mural resides.

In the community design sessions, the values of “Inclusion” and “Respect” came up repeatedly, as did the values of family, safety, intergenerational connection, love, and unity. The residents wanted the mural to be a source of both peace and inspiration for the viewer; it is designed to almost be an oasis amidst the bustle of the Bronx. "(<https://www.genequality.org/mar-mural>, accessed June 18, 2024)

The mural showcases the way city producers invest in communities of users who then act on their love for the city and their community. Their motivations surface when one reads that the mural not only promotes specific values but also the cultural roots of their community which have universal reach beyond multi-faceted ethnic, gender or generational differences. The mural visually literalizes the concept of rainbow coalition that seeks to bring together disadvantaged people whatever their backgrounds with a view to mobilizing them politically and socially.

The mural is rooted around the concept of the “tree of life.” The tree depicted is the Kigali tree, which is native to the African continent, where life began. The tree provides coverage, safety, and a nurturing environment for the silhouettes that represent the community at-large, including playing children, loving families, intergenerational duos, and differently-abled individuals. Carved into the tree are more of the values that the community wanted to encapsulate: “family,” “love”, “our village,” “unity,” “safety,” and “pride.” All elements of the mural represent the MAR Houses community and the Bronx as a whole, set against a calming blue-sky and green-grass background. The rainbow which shines through the leaves signifies unity and equality – two other components that MAR residents wanted to be clearly represented. The skyline background of the mural is the Bronx itself, with the five buildings of the MAR Houses community being portrayed on the left. (<https://www.genequality.org/mar-mural>, accessed June 18, 2024)

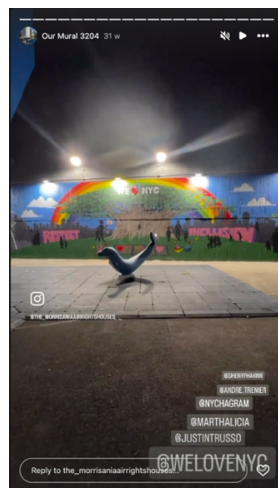


Figure 4 screenshot-instagram-the_morrisaniaairrightshouses-2024-02-10-16_22_00. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)

In other words, city producers invest in communities of users who then act individually and collectively on their love for the city. Fostering communities of users has proved financially successful. In 1977, a Consumer Behavior Inc’ report underlines that in a year after the campaign launch in 77, there was an 11.8 % increase in travel receipts in NYC. A total of \$14.3 million in tax revenues were collected (Consumer Behavior, Inc., Study of Effectiveness of the

New York State Department of Commerce "I Love New York Theater Weekends" Campaign. Prepared for the New York State Department of Commerce, May 1978). This means that 1 US \$ spent generated 4 US \$ in tax revenues (Consumer Behavior May 1978; Greenberg 2008: 211). all in all, 16.7 million visitors injected \$1.6 billion into the local economy.

What is strikingly different today is that in 2023, media buzz and increased virality massively contributed to the success of We ❤️ NYC. In the words of Marketing lead, Maryam Banikarim speaking to journalist Jenny Rooney, "after just two weeks into the campaign, \$ 21 million ad value equivalency were generated by the conversation and the virality of the campaign" (Learnings From the We3NYC Campaign w/ Maryam Banikarim, MaryamB & NYCNext, Jenny Rooney, <https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/learnings-from-the-we3nyc-campaign/> April 18, 2023, accessed September 13, 2024, 14: 45 pm). This campaign reached 123 million people in its first 48 hours, *i.e.* 16 times the size of the city -- the equivalent of two Super Bowls without a cent of paid media.

Another significant difference stems from an improved understanding of what happened with the 1977 I ❤️ NY logo. It became a world icon pointing both to mass tourism and to individual users. However, once users joined in the digital ecosystem, the scope of the 1977 campaign reached another level through such hashtags as #IloveNY. Figures speak volume here: on Instagram only, the #iloveny had generated a total of 3 433 770 posts on February 19, 2024 (Fig. 5).

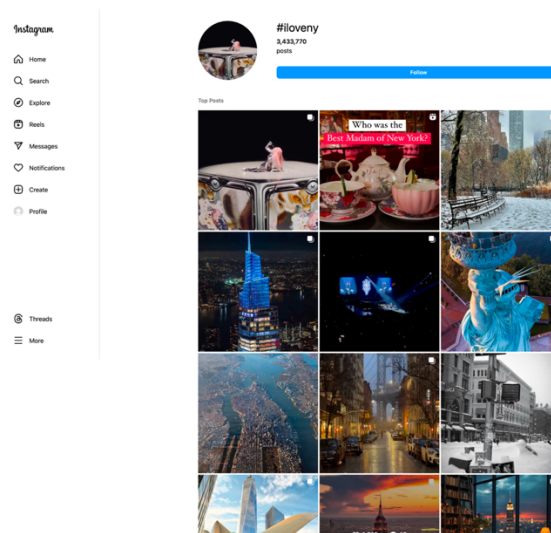


Figure 5 screencapture-instagram-explore-tags-iloveny-2024-02-19-09_59_49. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)

Over a year from September 2021 to September 2022, I checked the #iloveny which had 16 117 posts which generated 9 222 025 total interactions and 9 021 047 likes (data collected through Crowd tangle). In addition to their massive presence online, communities of online users have designed new logos. Their impact works incrementally as new visuals combine with all the pictures taken of the logo and of the city. They keep nurturing the "urban imaginary" of NYC (Greenberg 2008). Indeed, taking online data into account has led me to view the 1977 and 2023 city branding campaigns differently. As community development initiatives, they have generated the growth of online communities and the creation of brands both in the digital urban maze and the brick-and-mortar city. Those new brands have been created by New Yorkers, who call themselves "neighborhood makers" and feature merchandise as *Americônes* connected to New York City. I have specifically in mind such brands as New York or Nowhere, WhatIsNewYork, Bronx Native, 5Boros, PicolliNY, Rat Tok.

These neighborhood maker brands have distinctive features in contrast to mainstream luxury brands that use the I ❤️ NY logo (Coach 2025 Ready-to-wear Collection on <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2025-ready-to-wear/coach>, accessed September 13, 2024, 15:14). New York of Nowhere, WhatIsNewYork, Bronx Native, 5Boros are new brands featuring the name of the city or a borough. They merchandise streetwear, framed pictures, original designs in office furniture, caps and mugs. In contrast, PicolliNY and Rat Tok do not include the name of the city or of a borough because the icons used quintessentially spell New York City. They operate as *Americônes* embodying the essence of New York City. PicolliNY sells a "\$9 Cannoli Rainbow Cookie New York Enamel Pin" claiming this is "A pin with an I heart NY motif, " to " Make sure the world knows just how much you love this big city!" (<https://piccolinyshop.com/collections/sale/products/cannoli-rainbow-cookie-new-york-enamel-pin>, accessed June 18, 2024). They refashioned but did not repurpose the I ❤️ NY logo when drawing "inspiration from famous foods such as hot dog pretzel NY tees and lox bagel baby teethers." (<https://piccolinyshop.com/pages/about-us>, accessed June 18, 2024). What these new brands have in common is that they all capitalize on well-known features of the city which in turn circularly nurture NYC narrative and imaginary perception. They confirm the belief that consumers' perceptions and purchasing decisions will be positively monitored by what marketers name "the country-of-origin effect."

Bronx Native is another case in point because this fashion brand has created a strong link between the digital urban maze and the brick-and-mortar city. They initially duplicated their I ❤️ BX logo from the I ❤️ NY logo, thus positioning their brand in the wake of the 1977 campaign. Then the store owners aggregated a community of users around the store claiming to "change the narrative about the Bronx." Their brick-and-mortar flagship location is on 127 Lincoln Ave, Bronx (NY 10454) but their transmedia locations are almost limitless -- at least 96 websites devoted to Bronx Native are referenced on google. A peek at one such website shows their community building efforts (<https://www.nyctourism.com/shopping/bronx-native/>). They have an online store and they created accounts on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter/X and LinkedIn. Their multi-modal strategy is presented as a community building initiative: "Opened in 2016 to uplift, support and represent the spirit of those born in the borough, this Bronx shop has become a hub of the community." Because they felt the Bronx had a troubling reputation while [lacking] representation and apparel that signified the pride of the borough," co-owner Amaurys Grullon together with sibling Roselyn committed themselves to making social change possible:

We wanted to wear clothing that identified us, we wanted to wear clothing that empowered us, showcased our history, our culture, and we could not find any Bronx-based merchandise. (<https://abcnews.go.com/US/local-fashion-brand-bronx-native-fights-survive-hard/story?id=70349078>, accessed June 18, 2024)

They design Bronx-themed clothing sold alongside other items created by neighborhood makers. As the Bronx is also the birthplace of hip-hop, the brand offers "their own music platform, Bronx Native Records, to support up-and-coming local recording artists."

In a March 14, 2023 article, Amaurys Grullon forcefully argued:

It's not about putting out a shirt with a cool design. It's about telling a story through the shirt. It's about empowering and making a call to action— having substance," Grullon says. "I design with a cause, with a mission. (<https://epicenter-nyc.com/bronx-native-changes-the-narrative-of-the-bronx/>, accessed June 18, 2024)

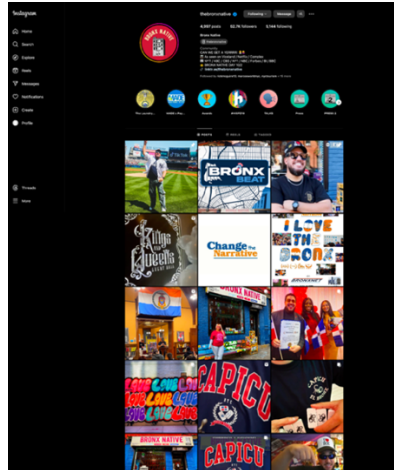


Figure 6 screencapture-instagram-thebronxnative-2024-03-02-22_09_00. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)

In 2021, they produced a documentary called *Change The Narrative Today* and launched a website (<https://www.ctntoday.org/>) dedicated to civic actions in the Bronx.

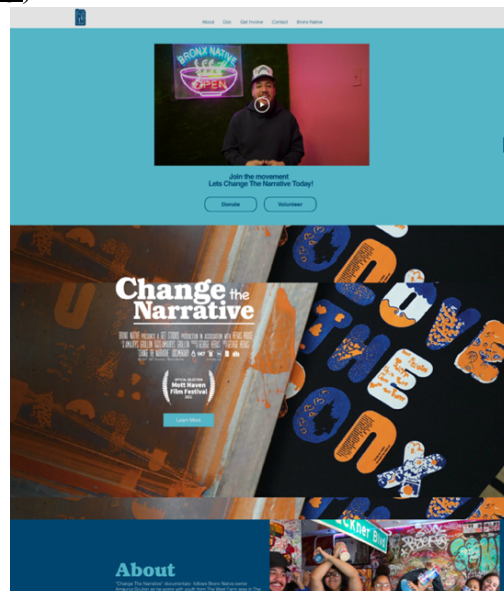


Figure 7 screencapture-ctntoday-org-2024-03-02-22_05_26. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)

Analyzing and comparing the two 1977 I ❤️ NY and 2023 We ❤️ NYC campaigns leads me to argue that city producers and users intersect in the transmedia ecosystem through neighborhood branding, consumption and the narrative contents generated online about the city and city dwellers. I believe branding the city as a community development initiative has uniquely contributed to the development of users' communities in a digital urban maze. Since the 2020 pandemic, New York has been a place where local civic engagement has risen and where community organizing has fostered initiatives rooted in the digital urban maze and in the physical brick-and mortar city. I now wish to show how small local communities showcase bottom-up initiatives that have emerged from the combined efforts of city producers and city users.

LOVING THE BRONX, GOTHAM PARK, WELCOME TO CHINATOWN: GRASSROOT NONPROFITS ON A MISSION TO HELP THEIR COMMUNITIES

I now wish to turn to small local communities in Lower Manhattan and in the Bronx that showcase bottom-up initiatives that have emerged from combined efforts between city producers and city users.

LOVING THE BRONX CIVIC COMMUNITY INITIATIVE

My first example is led by a native Bronx woman, Nilka Martell. She wishes to help her community and to empower people:

As an individual you have power,” Nilka says. “But so many people don’t realize that. They don’t even know that community boards exist, or they don’t realize what elected officials can do. There’s not a lot of education on the power of being an individual. Nilka Martell April 10, 2017, <https://www.ny4p.org/news/meet-a-new-yorker-for-parks-nilka-martell> (https://www.ny4p.org/news/meet-a-new-yorker-for-parks-nilka-martell accessed June 1, 2024)

The Bronx is the only borough connected by land to Manhattan. It is shaped and divided in two parts by the 11 miles long I95, known as the Cross Bronx Expressway. Today, “It moves 300 diesel trucks per hour, tens of thousands of cars per day. More than 200,000 people live within one-half mile of the expressway.” (<https://urbanomnibus.net/2024/02/living-legend/> accessed June 21, 2024) It was constructed in the fifties when building roads was a major public policy focus. The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 signed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower authorized the construction of 41,000 miles of interstate highways and established an interstate highway system in the United States (<https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/national-interstate-and-defense-highways-act#:~:text=This%20act%20authorized%20the%20building,system%20in%20the%20United%20States.> Accessed June 6, 2024 / https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/Federal_Highway_Act.htm. Accessed June 24, 2024). The City of New York received \$ 250 million (Brennan 2022: 834; Caro 1974) and the Cross Bronx Expressway was implemented under the supervision of Robert Moses, an urban planner who held multiple roles in New York City, *i.e.* Chairman of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority from 1934 to 1968. The creation of I95 displaced local New Yorkers and Bronx natives. Today, recent studies underline the multiple negative impacts I95 has on health, on the economy and on social related matters (See American Public Health Association: Kim, Sooyoung et al. "Cost-Effectiveness of Capping Freeways for Use as Parks: The New York Cross-Bronx Expressway Case Study.").

Nilka Martell created the non-profit Loving The Bronx in 2016 to tangibly help her community after witnessing and experiencing struggles on the ground on a day to day basis:

Years ago, I brought my cat to the animal clinic and asked, “Why is she hacking like this?” And the vet said, she’s asthmatic. And I was like, “So it’s not just kids!” Sometimes you have to know your audience. To parents, chances are your kid’s up for some kind of respiratory issue. But there are a lot of people that are not parents. “You have pets? Well, guess what, be on the lookout for that, too.” You have to engage folks and meet them where they’re at. (<https://urbanomnibus.net/2024/04/road-warrior/> accessed June 6, 2024)

Her actions underline the grassroots connections between the physical city and the digital urban maze. The hashtag #capthecrossbronx illustrates the process which I take to be an illustration of a uniquely sustainable, virtuous cycle in a local urban ecosystem. The movement is meant to cover up 40 % of the Cross Bronx Expressway to create public green spaces, recreation areas and reconnect a territory cut in half by the Expressway. For example, Nilka Martell organizes visits on the ground along I95 to explain the objectives of the project to the locals who are impacted by the Expressway. She explains the issues at stake and the kind of engagements that can be considered to help improve local residents health (*Fig 8*).

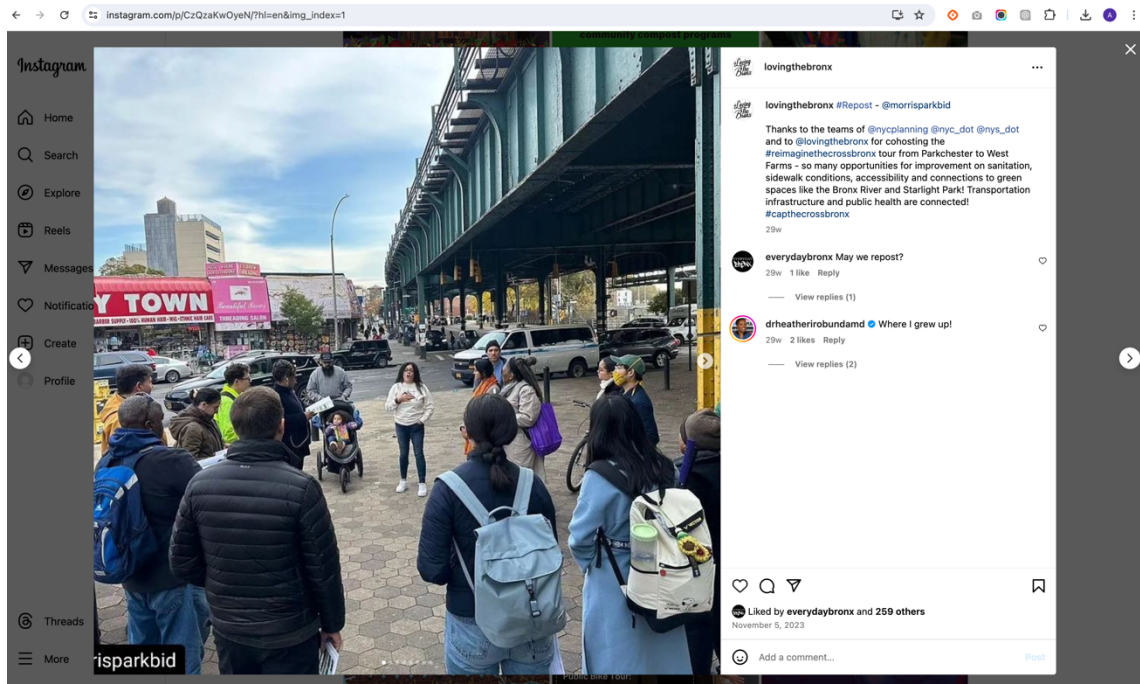


Figure 8 screencapture-instagram-Loving-the-Bronx- 2024-05-28_09.36.06 Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)

Nilka Martell also produces many events to help promote the Bronx with a different narrative. The events are not only focused on #captheexpressbronx. Nevertheless, they serve the cause because they foster a sense of community. Nilka Martell's actions reconnect the Bronx, city users and the audience reached online to an original Bronx. The Bronx is indeed a borough with the third highest population density (New York State Department of Health, Population, Land Area, and Population Density by County, New York State – 2010. Accessed June, 24 2024), yet Nilka Martell highlights that it is also a borough rooted in a tangible environment. She particularly stresses its natural setting (rivers, parks beaches), which is often overlooked in the narrative on The Bronx. For example, Loving The Bronx annually supports The Annual Flotilla fundraiser which is supported by the Bronx River Alliance, a non-profit where public and private entities meet. Their point is to develop and fund affordable summer activities on the Bronx River. The fundraiser includes a paddle tour on the Bronx River and Nilka Martell streamed it live and posted four videos on the Loving The Bronx Instagram account (Fig. 9). It shows a disruptive image, from the borough through nature and recreational activities opened to all.

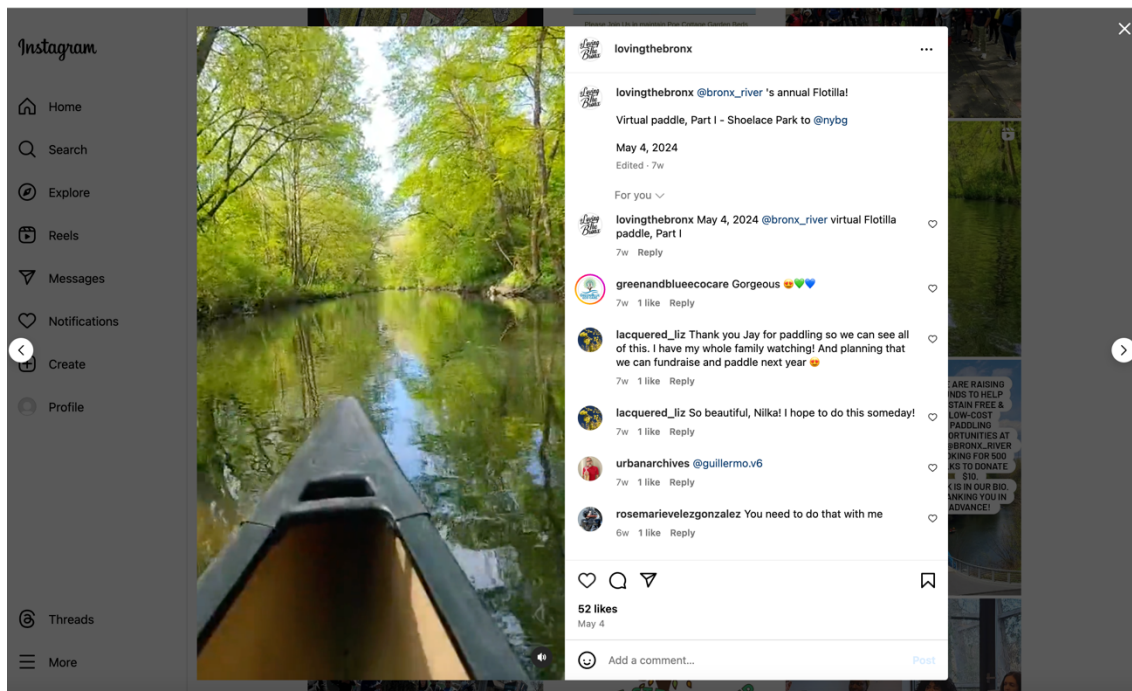


Figure 9 screencapture-instagram-lovingthebronx-2024-06-24-16_10_43. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)

Throughout the years, Nilka Martell's initiatives have reached local representatives such as Alexandria Ocasio Cortez (District 14) and Ritchie Torres (District 15). The synergy thus created led to local public policy programs. Congresswoman Alexandra Octavio Cortez (District 14) who is a strong advocate for this project included it in the Green New Deal program (Fig. 10).

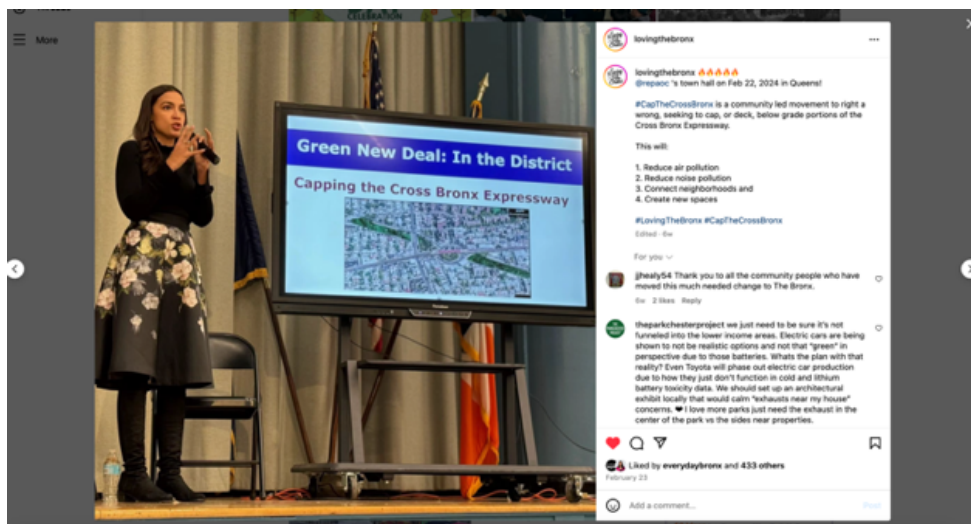


Figure 10 screencapture-instagram-lovingthebronx-2024-04-11_10_28_35. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)

The #capthecrossbronx project received federal fundings in 2021 and is now on the political agendas of the City of New York and the State of New York. Time will tell how the project evolves and is implemented as it is a major financial initiative with technical challenges. Nevertheless, Nilka Martell's relentless activism revitalized a community both at grassroots level and at an institutional level both in the physical city and in the digital urban maze. What I find noteworthy is that she dynamically merged a community of users through online and offline actions and contents centered on a local borough.

GOTHAM PARK COMMUNITY INITIATIVE

The second civic community initiative is Gotham Park located under Brooklyn Bridge on the East side. It is part of Brooklyn Banks which was formerly known as a skateboarding spot in the 90's until it was closed right after 9/11 for security reasons. It was partially reopened and then closed again in 2010. As described by Steve Rodriguez (one of the co-founders of Gotham Park), "it is made for skateboarding." Location is key as Gotham Park is at the corner of Rose Street and Avenue of the Finest, in other words it is hedged in between a major hub and two Manhattan landmarks, *i.e.* the Brooklyn Bridge and Chinatown. I took the following pictures in 2023 and researched the way three local activists changed Gotham Park "[into] a new type of urban park BY OUR COMMUNITIES, FOR OUR COMMUNITIES." (<https://gothampark.org/>, accessed June 10, 2024)



Figure 11 @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ). Gotham Park, NYC, NY, August 4th, 2023, 15h32.



Figure 12 @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ). Gotham Park, NYC, NY, August 4th, 2023, 15h33.



Figure 13 @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ). Gotham Park, NYC,NY, August 4th, 2023, 15h33.



Figure 14 @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ). Gotham Park, NYC,NY, August 4th, 2023, 15h33.

As a nonprofit, Gotham Park was created by Steve Rodriguez, Rosa Chang and Rob Magliaro in 2020. Steve Rodriguez is a well-known self-described "[f]irst generation skateboarder at the Brooklyn Banks advocating for free public open spaces in New York City since the 1990's." He is a NYC native and claims that "[his] hope is to bring the Brooklyn Banks back to its former glory within a reimagined and expanded park with inclusive and flexible areas that serve our diverse local community and beyond." (<https://gothampark.org/steve-r-bio>, accessed June 10, 2024)

As three co-founders, Steve Rodriguez, Rosa Chang and Rob Magliaro joined forces to resurrect and revitalize Gotham Park based on this observation (*Fig. 12*):

[illegible]

Figure 15 screencapture-ctntoday-org-2024-03-02-22 05 26. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)

In the face of similar threats faced by Gotham Park Community spaces, they launched a website, then an Instagram page on January 17, 2021.

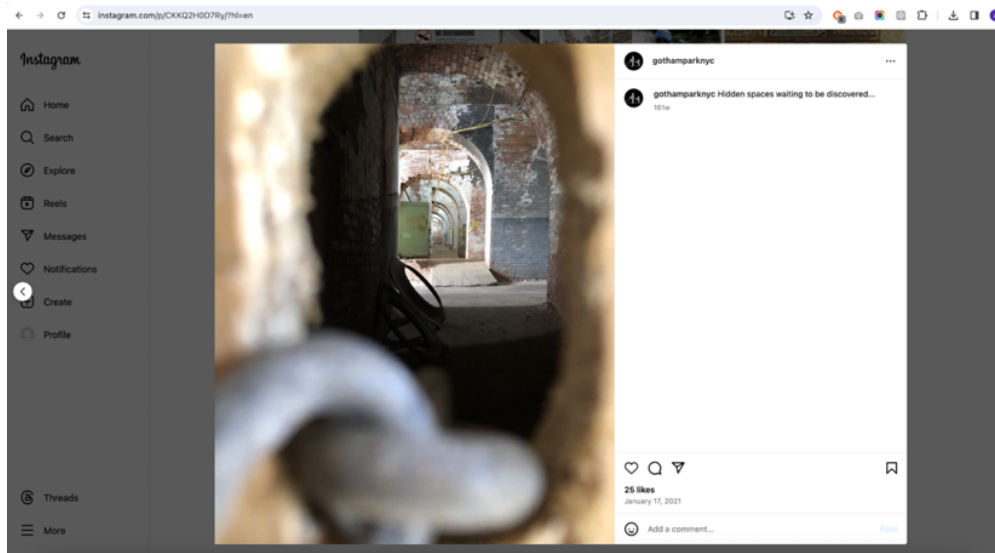


Figure 16 screencapture-instagram-gothampark- 2024-02-20_10_43_37. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)

Then, an online January 23, 2023 New York Times article by Winnie Hu had a lasting impact on their project by raising public awareness beyond the confines of the Park.

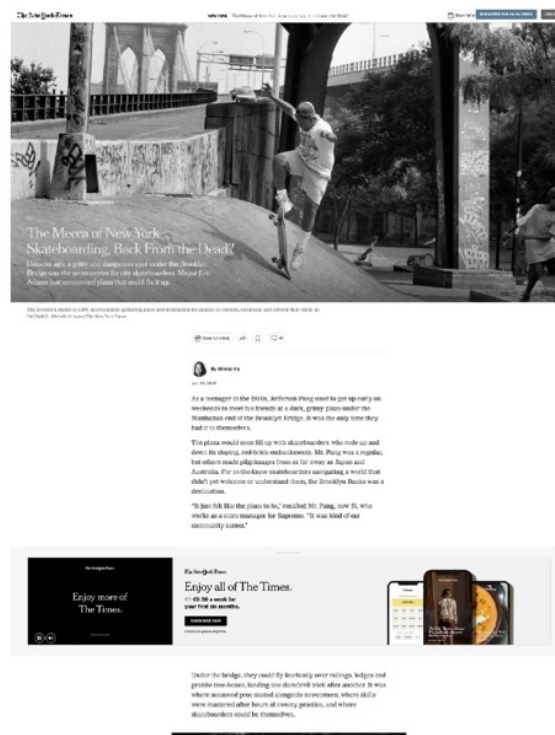


Figure 17 HU, Winni. "The Mecca of New York Skateboarding, Back From the Dead?" *The New York Times*, *The New York Times*. Published on January 26th, 2023, accessed on February 12th, 2023.

From its inception, the revitalization of the park envisioned an inclusive space for all users in the community seen as one neighborhood. They then nurtured the project online through different strategies to connect the transmedia urban maze and the physical brick-and-mortar neighborhood. They used posts, stories or reels to update on current progress or to call for action and event.

They organized several community block parties like the first community block party held on November 4, 2023.



Figure 18 Screenshot- -instagram-gothampark-2023-11-04_10_28. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)



Figure 19 Screenshot-instagram-gothampark-2023-11-04_10_29. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)



Figure 20 Screenshot-instagram-gothampark-2023-11 04 _2 _10 _29. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)



11-04 _19 _21. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)



11-04_19_22. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)

They posted videos to show vintage segments from the 90s with the history of Gotham Park to connect to connect past and present skateboarders and to nurture the sense of a grounded community that existed in the past. As a memorial, their action also links to their online content. The video below was posted on May 24, 2023. It features a compilation of vintage segments or clips of skateboarders at Gotham Park back in the 90s. Today, as a community organizing initiative, Gotham Park uniquely stands as a "legacy project," recognized "for its ability to unlock the potential of the forgotten spaces" for the benefit of local residents in a local community neighborhood:

After 13+ years of disuse, Gotham Park is creating a new, community-driven 9-acre public space at the crossroads of five great Manhattan neighborhoods - Chinatown, the South Street Seaport, Two Bridges, Little Italy and the Financial District. We are transforming this space into a neighborhood nexus connecting and strengthening our residents, businesses and communities with healthy and safe open space and environmentally resilient design. (<https://gothampark.org/the-plan>, Accessed June 10, 2024)

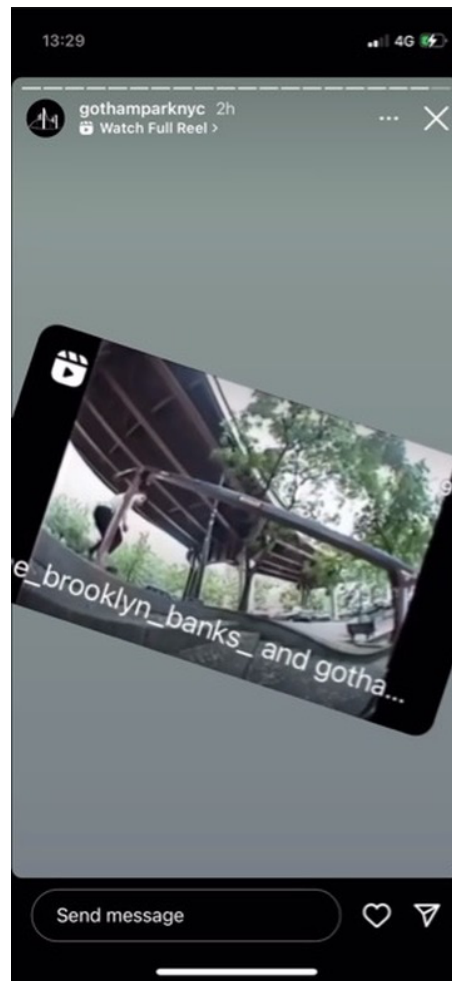
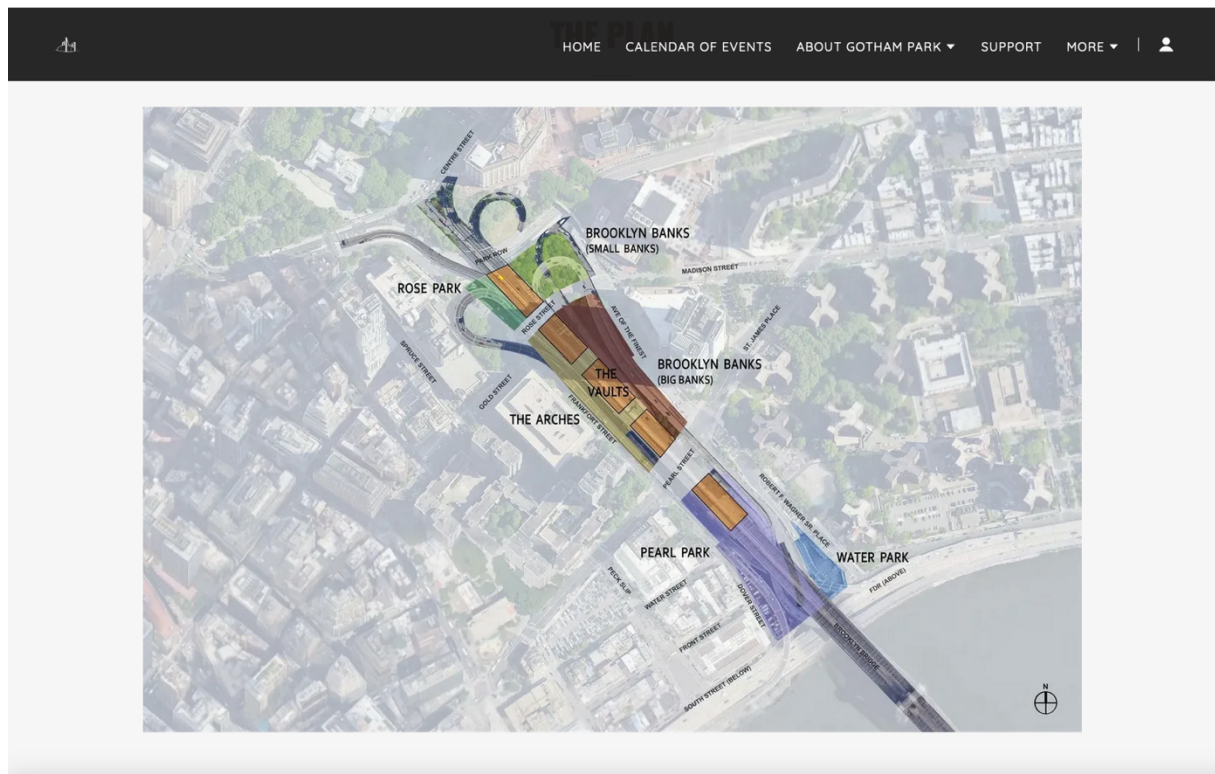


Figure 21 creencapture-instagram-gothampark / the Brooklyn banks -2023-11-05_13_42. Screenshot @Agathe MikaeloffJanssen (AMJ)



<https://gothampark.org/the-plan>

Most interestingly, Gotham Park claims to be a "neighborhood nexus" meant to "[help] our neighborhood businesses have more customers, help our tourists navigate safely from landmark to landmark, and create a safer and enjoyable street experience for all." (<https://gothampark.org/activating-the-bridge>, Accessed June 10, 2024). Connecting businesses, city users, neighborhood residents, customers and tourists in a common life experience typifies local people power harnessed by a civic community organizing initiative.

WELCOME TO CHINATOWN COMMUNITY INITIATIVE

The third community organizing initiative unsurprisingly links Gotham Park to Chinatown. Because Gotham Park is located right next to Chinatown, their two nonprofit organizations met, *i.e.* Welcome To Chinatown joined forces with Gotham Park. Their actions converged because they share the same values and purposes. They fight for the creation of an inclusive space for their community. The Gotham Park community and the Chinese community came together on a redevelopment territory project to facilitate access to Chinatown, Manhattan from Brooklyn Bridge. Their specific actions within their community participate in the regeneration of the city. As a project created by users and for users ("by New Yorkers for New Yorkers"), it has people meeting in the physical city but with digital roots grounded in online contents and online interactions.

Welcome To Chinatown is a nonprofit organization co-founded by Victoria Lee and Jennifer Tam. They are Chinatown residents and Victoria Lee claims she has had her family in Chinatown for generations. They started their nonprofit during the pandemic in 2020 when Chinatown, its residents and small businesses were impacted. They helped weather the crisis. They set up a GoFundMe page and distributed food in Chinatown. The group has since worked on developing the Chinese community in a post-Covid era by supporting local Chinese retailers and small businesses. An additional point comes to the fore when watching their website homepage:

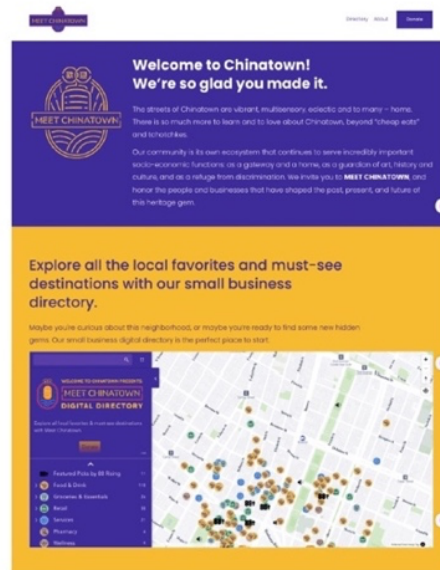


Figure 22 screenshot-meetchinatown-2023-10-11-22_23_34. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)

Their mission statement echoes that of Gotham Park:

The streets of Chinatown are vibrant, multisensory, eclectic and to many – home. There is so much more to learn and to love about Chinatown, beyond “cheap eats” and tchotchkes.

Our community is its own ecosystem that continues to serve incredibly important socio-economic functions: as a gateway and a home, as a guardian of art, history and culture, and as a refuge from discrimination. We invite you to MEET CHINATOWN and honor the people and businesses that have shaped the past, present, and future of this heritage gem.

Welcome To Chinatown self-describes as an ecosystem that encompasses family life, business activities, cultural practices and politically oriented values. It stands firm as a safe haven against rising anti-Asian violence. They claim the status of "heritage gem" very much in the way Gotham Park claimed to be "a legacy project."

Next, online activities also shape Welcome To Chinatown just as it did Gotham Park. They launched a website (<https://welcometochinatown.com/>) which includes an eshop (<https://madeinchinatownnny.com/>) meant to support local businesses:

"Made in Chinatown is a merchandise program we offer to help small businesses bring in extra income during these uncertain times.

The Made in Chinatown moniker is deliberate — it's our way of subverting traditionally negative connotations of 'Made in China' products and redefining what 'Made in Chinatown' means to us: high-quality goods filled with cultural vibrancy designed by hardworking people."(<https://madeinchinatownnny.com/> June 19, 2024)

Their other website (<https://meetchinatown.com/>) displays a digital directory titled *Meet Chinatown Digital Directory Guide* (<https://meetchinatown.com/>, accessed June 10, 2024). It has an interactive map where shops and restaurants may be localized in Chinatown.

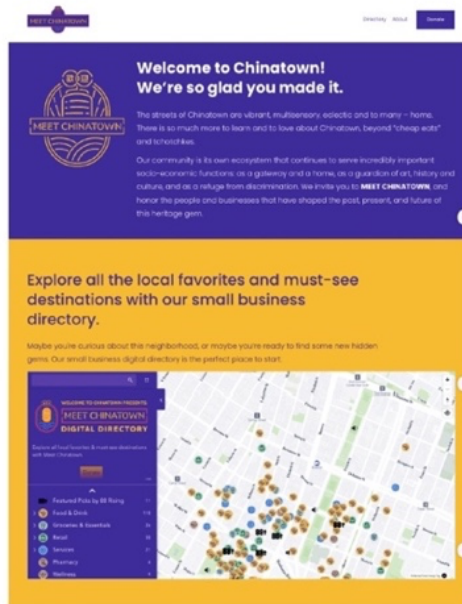


Figure 23 screencapture-meetchinatown-2023-10-11-22_23_34. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)

Their digital platforms combine social networks, various websites and applications. They are tools meant to bring people together. They shed light on specific New York City cultural events and wish to promote Chinese culture and diversity. As a nonprofit, Welcome To Chinatown contributes tools or spaces to foster residents' actions to keep them grounded in their community. A point in case is the way they fundraised online and opened co-working spaces to host events under the name The Hub. The founders call it a "gathering space for the community."

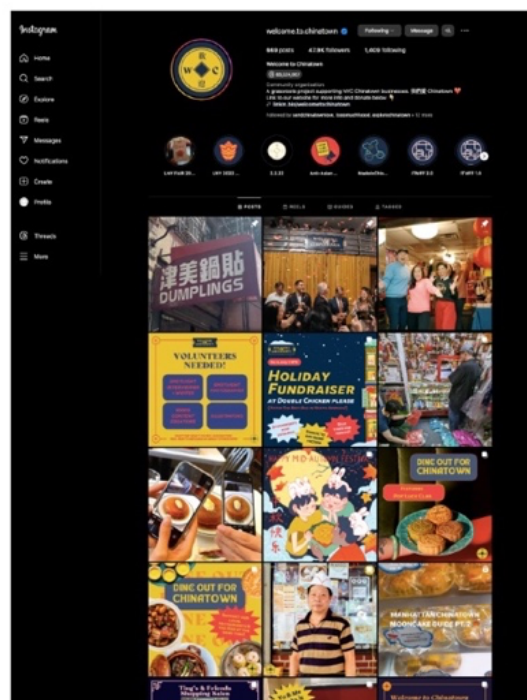


Figure 24 screencapture-instagram-wecolmetochinatown-2023-10-11-22_12_53. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)

As a civic community organizing initiative, Welcome to Chinatown has a physical and digital interface with structured Instagram pages and editorialized web contents. They may inform locals and/or call for actions. Their main target is to defend their community, strengthen and support activities both online and offline. Very much like Gotham Park claimed to fight off territorial dispossession, Welcome to Chinatown took a firm stand against Mayor Adams' administration, organizing community meetings and visits to fight a tower jail project with required online registration to inform residents about the tower jail project in Chinatown initiated under former Mayor de Blasio in 2019.



Figure 25 screencapture-instagram-welcometochinatown-2024-02-21_12_57_30. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)

While doing field work in the area in July 2024, I realized the mega-jail located behind New York City Criminal Court and Manhattan District Attorney's Office is currently under construction. The demolition phase of the current Manhattan Detention Complex, also called The Tomb, has begun (pictures taken on July 8, 2024). Local activists argue that "[c]onstructing the tallest jail in the world will change the fabric of the community, diminish quality of life for residents, and cause harm for an already marginalized community." (<https://welcometochinatown.com/news/stop-the-jail>, accessed September 13, 2024). One may notice the I ❤️ NY logo on the store front in the back of figure 28 which stands perennial in the face of massive changes in the neighborhood.



Figure 26 Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ). Chinatown at Bayard St and Mulberry St, NYC, NY, July 8th, 2024, 17h14



Figure 27 @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ). Chinatown at Bayard St and Mulberry St, NYC, NY, July 8th, 2024, 17h00.



Figure 28 @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ). Chinatown at Baxter St and White St, NYC, NY, July 8th, 2024, 17h03.



Figure 29 @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ). Chinatown at Baxter St and White St, NYC, NY, July 8th, 2024, 17h04.

On the upside, the nonprofit also produces activities on American and Chinese celebrations. Last October 2023, it had a scavenger hunt combining online and offline activities (posts on October 27, 2023).



Figure 30 screencapture-instagram-welcometochinatown_2024-02-21_13_11_10. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)



Figure 31 screencapture-instagram-welcometochinatown_2024-02-21_13_11_10. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)



Figure 32 screencapture-instagram-welcometochinatown_2024-02-21_13_11_10. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)



Figure 33 screencapture-instagram-welcometochinatown_2024-02-21_13_11_10. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)

An additional feature is the way Welcome to Chinatown highlights individual resident users in the community through posts, stories and live feeds. On September 1, 2023, the nonprofit drew people's attention to Mei's last workday and encouraged them to enjoy her food one last time. The story ran through different accounts in the Chinese community. The story ran on food dedicated account such as WhatNewYorkEats with 121 000 followers.

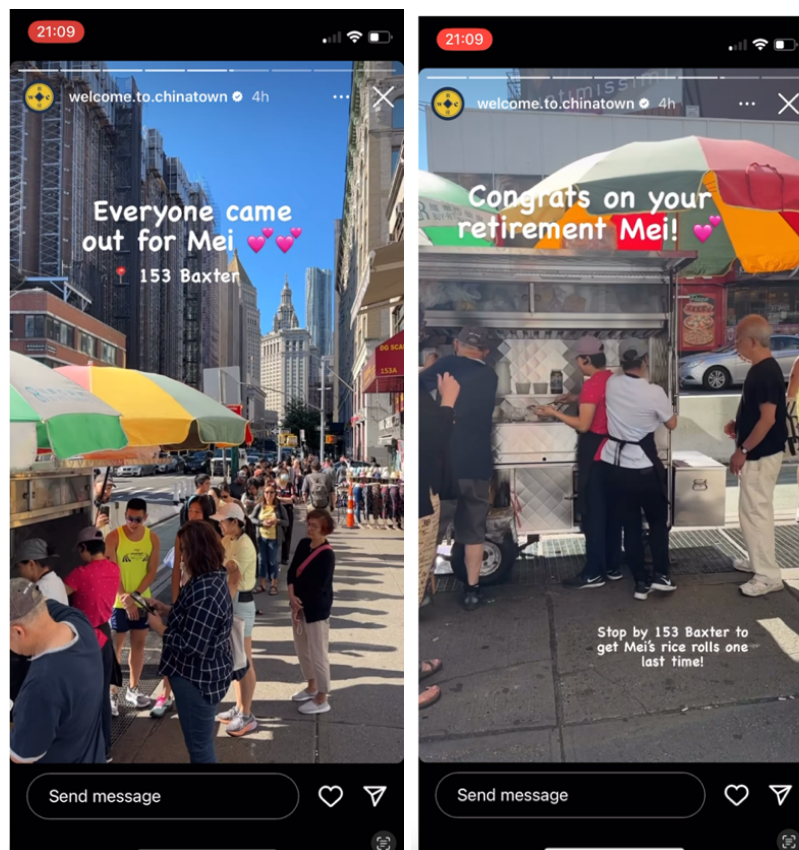


Figure 34 screenrecording -instagram-welcometochinatown_2024-09-01_21_12_19. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)

It supports restaurants' owners and food specialties by featuring them in specific posts. On January 13, 2024, the nonprofit posted a video dedicated to restaurants featuring Chinese soup specialties.

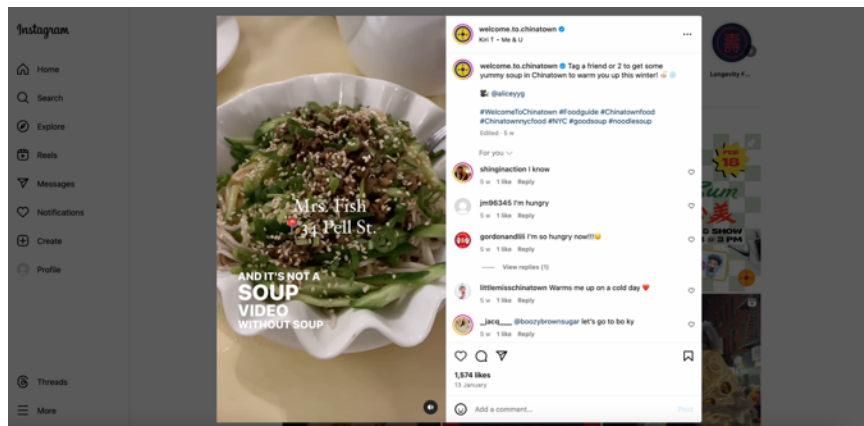


Figure 35 screenrecording-instagram-welcometochinatown_2024-02-21_13_16_07. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)

A last noteworthy point is that Welcome To Chinatown generates content to feature work achieved in collaboration with Gotham Park and meant to emphasize future developments. The video below was produced in collaboration with Lunaraccel, a nonprofit dedicated to accelerating the careers of young Asian-Americans.



Figure 36 screencapture-instagram-welcometochinatown/lunarcel_2023-06-01_15_59. Screenshot @Agathe Mikaeloff Janssen (AMJ)

All of the above are tools meant to nurture and revive a sense of community in Chinese residents and beyond and to create a positive momentum within the community. It could lead to two types of actions, first online and offline volunteering work, next consumers' support. They urge residents, New Yorkers and tourists to buy in Chinatown, eat locally and visit the neighborhood. Those actions contribute to the transmedia urban maze as every individual experience and selfie that gets to be posted will trigger the endless production of contents by users themselves.

As two nonprofits, Welcome To Chinatown and Gotham Park have recently developed such a strong relationship, so that Victoria Lee is now the secretary of Gotham Park. The two communities have come together and got city producers involved. Considering the active work done in the two communities, locally elected representatives Senator Brian Kavanagh, Manhattan Borough President Mark Levine, Congressman Dan Goldman, Assembly member Grace Lee, Robert Rodriguez - NY Secretary of State and Ydanis Rodriguez - NYC DOT Commissioner have taken a keen interest in the projects which have recently reached a whole new level. City producers, the mayor's office (through the Chinatown Connection Plan) and the Governor's office (through The NYS Chinatown Downtown Revitalization Initiative) have joined forces to launch the Chinatown Connections plan on February 9, 2024. The Plan involves Kimlau Square and Park Row both directly connected to Chinatown and Gotham Park. The budget breakdown has " \$44.3 million in city capital funding with \$11.5 million from New York state's Downtown Revitalization Initiative awards for a total project budget of \$56 million." (NYC.GOV 9.02.2024). Time will tell how the project develops. Yet these are bottom-up initiatives that may come full circle with the top-down initiatives I mentioned earlier in this paper. Bottom-up civic initiative combine with top-down institutional initiatives for the benefit of city producers, city users, residents and tourists. In the face of all the difficulties and crises, one may wonder if they will prove to be a sustainable, virtuous cycle in a local urban ecosystem.

In my research so far, I have come to closely watch the way city producers and resident users intersect in the physical and digital spaces which I term the transmedia urban maze. My research hypothesis is that top-down community development initiatives by city producers such as 1977 I ❤️ New York and 2023 WE ❤️ NYC campaigns together with bottom-up community organizing initiatives such as Loving The Bronx, Gotham Park and Welcome To Chinatown have implicitly been theorized in terms of oppositional politics or confrontational processes infused with the glamour of urban exploration (urbex). However, my research so far tends to disclose partnership models operating locally in New York City. Joint projects and actions have led to the humble yet growing empowerment of communities of users or residents. They ultimately unveil a connection between city producers and users through # hashtag-based digital practices in the transmedia urban maze.

They further highlight the *users' Right To The City* as described by Henri Lefebvre (Lefebvre 1968). City users and local residents do not only participate in polls or collaborative actions but also create projects, gather in communities both on and offline to weigh in on the well anticipated production of the city by city producers. One of the key findings of my research so far is that understanding civic and institutional initiatives in New York City should factor in the current media and digital culture "embedded in society and everyday life," (Bakardjieva 2005; Lievrouw 2004) in (Boomen et al. 2012: 9). They operate as " an intricate web of mutually shaping relations" (Boomen et al. 2012: 9).

It next means recognizing digital physicality in its impact on political practices, as new forms of communication intersect with business practices. Digital materials and day-to-day experiences are "in mutually shaping relations." This goes well beyond the process of digitization. Even though the general assumption is that digital matters are "in the realm of the non-physical, the virtual, the immaterial or ephemeral," (Boomen et al. 2012: 9) my point is to show that digital practices are changing the lives of New York City communities and institutions on the ground. They configure digital public spaces which now operate on a par with physical public spaces and impact public policies. Naturally, self-help as a concept has always been at the heart of American activism ever since Ralph Waldo Emerson. However, theorizing social activism today means watching how transmedia digital practices have led to a different multi-faceted ecosystem in which local users and city producers both contribute to New York city public space. What needs to be researched is how transmedia digital practices

and institutional policies both configure New York public space and communities in "mutually shaping relations" (Boomen et al. 2012: 9).

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TABLES OF PICTURES, SCREENCAPTURES AND SCREENSHOTS

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ⁱ [original in French] "*L'intégration des images dans les outils numériques conversationnels (forums, messageries, réseaux sociaux...) a pu être analysée comme une " iconisation du texte " (Marie-Anne Paveau). Mais elle fait aussi assister à une lexicalisation des icônes. Celle-ci se manifeste par des pratiques de réinterprétation qui isolent un schéma situationnel au sein d'une image, permettant son usage dans des contextes variés. Caractéristiques du recours aux gifs animés, qui proposent des signifiants brefs adaptables à des situations diverses, ces pratiques se diffusent également par l'intermédiaire du légendage de photographies (mèmes). En déliant le rapport de l'image à l'événement pour lui donner une valeur plus générale de signe, cet exercice de réinterprétation s'éloigne de la lecture référentielle traditionnellement associée aux formes visuelles, tout en conservant leur valeur d'incarnation.*" (<https://doi.org/10.58079/n21d> Laurence Leveneur (accessed March 14, 2023). *Quand l'image fait signe. Usages visuels dans la conversation en ligne.* André Gunthert. COMUII. Accessed June 6, 2024.