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Creative City: New York Meatpacking District's Cool: Creativity at the Waters' Edge

Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to be here with you today.

This is a wonderful conference, being held in a beautiful City and region. In America, we look to Bilbao as an example of how a community can harness the energy of the creative economy – if it is willing to be inventive, to go against conventional wisdom, and to take a chance.

My goal this morning is to share some thoughts about my home, New York City, and how creativity has long resided in our communities, and also where it is now bursting out in new forms and activities which improve the lives of our citizens, workers and visitors.

First, I will provide some background, both in terms of planning history in New York, and also about what Creative Cities mean to us as concept and strategy.

Then I will talk about a specific neighborhood that embodies these trends and talk about the way Creative Industries are re-making this neighborhood.

In a metropolitan region as large as New York – over 21 million people, 8.5 million jobs, 13,000 square miles – there is never just one Creative Community, and I'm sure other speakers would have argued with my choice. But I hope that by the end of this talk, you'll agree with my thinking on this subject.

And finally, I'd like to touch on some of the lessons that we have learned about this phenomenon, and where we think it may take us in the future.

From our perspective, as planners in America, with its history of zoning, urban renewal, suburban sprawl and fealty to the all-powerful automobile, Creative Communities are not communities in the traditional, pre-1950s sense of the term. They are not places where people of similar backgrounds, incomes or ethnicities come together and build boundaries – economic, social, regulatory, or physical – to distinguish themselves from other communities. At the end of the 20th Century, planners rediscovered density and community, as “new urbanism” and “true urbanism” sought to undo the mistakes of previous generations. This thinking has now focused on creative spaces as the building blocks for 21st century communities.

These ideas about urban form have profound impacts on society. In contemporary culture, communities are places that bring together people who are not alike; contemporary communities are best described as “the being together of strangers.” If we are to conceptualize a new ideal city life, it is one in which “persons and groups interact within spaces they all experience themselves as belonging to, but without those interactions dissolving into unity or

commonness.”¹ Contemporary communities thrive in their inherent difference; not their sameness. Christine Boyer describes urbanism as “contested terrain.” Richard Sennett argues that successful cities have narratives – that is to say they have a past, present and future – which provide consciousness in both material objects and in people “as an unfolding experience.”² This makes differences today more of an advantage for places: it helps them identify their inner strength and character, which both ties them to, and distinguishes them from, the ever-expanding global community.

Sociologist Steven Tepper argues that creative cities are an attempt to assert local identity in a global world. He writes about communities being similar to a child’s toy ball inside a ball, which rolls or bounces in a slightly unpredictable way, and he asks how communities can find the “inner ball” that wobbles, that throws a community off its stride and provides a funkiness that will engage and interest people. Efforts to find and cultivate this inner ball must build on the history and character of a community. Once again, identity comes to the fore as multiple groups and interests intersect in a specific place and live side by side with other groups even more different than themselves.

Authenticity matters a great deal to Richard Florida’s creative class, too. Efforts to mimic other communities always fail. As an alternative, Creative Communities must look to their intrinsic advantages – their overlooked assets and neighborhoods – to find the ingredients of their new and exciting creative communities. Florida argues that creativity – in communities, cities and the economy – can be measured by taking stock of three complementary attributes, his three T’s: Technology, Talent and Tolerance.³

New York City brings some serious advantages to this new kind of community. New York’s assets – as the world’s polyglot cultural center, arguably the greatest generator of prosperity in human history – provide a unique base with all its multicultural, diverse and rich experience. Richard Florida’s seminal “Rise of the Creative Class” identified these advantages across a spectrum of indices.

In Florida’s updated version of the “Overall Ranking of US Regions in the Creative Index,” New York is the 20th most creative one out of 300 cities. Its ranking in Tolerance is the 39th; on the Talent Index it is the 25th; and on the Technology Index the 65th. In the newly added “Wage Inequality Rank” New York is positioned high at place number 12th, which indicates a relatively fair distribution of salaries.⁴

Despite all these advantages, New York still faces considerable obstacles to nurturing its creative economy. These challenges rise from being a high-cost, high-amenity global city, with high barriers to entry. Economists tell us that self-employment and temporary work – both indicators of the knowledge economy, and yet causes for concern – are growing faster in New York than the rest of the country.

Perhaps more than anything else, the cost of living in New York continues to escalate literally through the roof. In 2005, small 1 bedroom and studio apartments in established neighborhoods routinely sell for close to \$1 million. The average cost of housing in New York for similar units is

¹ Gerald E. Frug, *Citymaking: Building Communities without Building Walls*. Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 11.

² Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities*, W.W. Norton & Company, 1990, p. 213.

³ Richard Florida. *Cities and the Creative Class*. Routledge, 2005, p. 6.

⁴ Richard Florida. *The Rise of the Creative Class*. Basic Books, 2002, p. 355.

now between \$1,000 and \$1,500 dollars a month. And talk of a housing bubble, ready to burst at any moment, does nothing to reduce costs. Investors have noticed that even as people recognize a bubble, the final months before it bursts can be the most profitable of all – if you're in the market. Just two weeks ago, The New York Times front page warned that the market may be cooling off. And yet real estate speculation continues unabated.

The only solution to this pressure is constant renewal – to find older, overlooked neighborhoods and re-make and revitalize them into new kinds of communities. New York City – which added 685,000 new residents from 1990 to 2000, more than any other city in the United States – has a voracious appetite for growth. And nowhere is this happening more in New York City than in the city's waterfronts. Mayor Bloomberg has responded by promoting vibrant waterfronts and the reuse of derelict industrial areas by the water to facilitate housing production as one of the guiding principles for its strategic development plan.

The Postindustrial Return to the Waterfronts

In returning to the water's edge, New York is certainly returning to its roots. The natural harbor of New York, and the city's focus on commerce and tolerance, established New York in the 17th and 18th centuries. Herman Melville recognized the city's unique reliance and relationship to the waterfront, and sent his protagonist Ishmael walking through the streets of the "commerce-ringed Isle of Manhattoes" before launching him to sea, highlighting the relationship between the city and the sea.⁵

Back then, Melville was referring to the water's edge as the place of commerce. New York's natural harbor, and the man-made connections by canal into the continent, positioned New York as an entrepreneurial capital. But as middle-sized American cities were hollowing out after the riots and urban renewal of the 1960s, New York City lost its commerce to the ports of New Jersey on the other side of the Hudson River. The waterfront fell into decay and neglect. For decades, nothing happened on the water's edge. The one Big Vision idea, to tunnel a highway called Westway underneath the waters edge, and pay for it by allowing developers to build enormous towers, fell victim to a new generation of community activists armed with environmental impact assessments. (Remember, lawyers can be creative, too.)

If you want to find the most exciting things happening in New York today, take a walking tour of the city's waterfronts. New York City's five boroughs are located along the Hudson River, East River, Harlem River, New York Harbor, Long Island Sound and the Atlantic Ocean⁶. Yet, the 578 miles of shoreline have little public access. The next generation of planning and development will certainly transform it into a new asset and amenity. After fighting over large-scale development on the waterfront for decades, and finally rejecting the "bigger-is-better" approach, New York is returning to the waterfront.

In Brooklyn, an emerging greenway is beginning to link staid Brooklyn Heights to DUMBO to the north and gritty Red Hook to the south. The recent rezoning of Greenpoint-Williamsburg in northern Brooklyn allows lots along its waterfront to have up to 10,000 units of new housing, of which one-third will be affordable.

⁵ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick, or, The Whale*, Harper & Bros., 1851.

⁶ Regional Plan Association. *A Region at Risk. The Third Regional Plan for the NY-NJ-CT Metropolitan Area*. Island Press, 1996, p. 107

In Queens, Long Island City is emerging with parks and landscapes that maintain the urban archaeology, rather than wiping clean the slate of the industrial past. Sir Richard Rogers has designed a bold proposal, SilverCup Studios, which combines three tall towers with a mixed use development project, including a large film studio to support a burgeoning east coast film industry. The design of the towers, with exposed steel trusses, evokes the neighboring Queensboro Bridge.

In the center of the harbor sits majestic Governors Island, recently vacated by the United States Coast Guard. Under the supervision of a joint city/state planning entity and a civic coalition, the island is now identifying new uses compatible with the public vision of becoming a Central Park for the harbor.

Even Staten Island and New Jersey are getting into the act. Fresh Kills landfill, the largest man-made structure on the eastern seaboard, has been closed to new garbage. Soon, the landfill will begin regenerating itself through innovative and exciting plans to create a major new park system designed by Field Operations. The Department of City Planning selected the winning design through an open competition, which rewarded innovation and collaboration. And across the Hudson River, in Jersey City's Liberty State Park and Hoboken's Pier A, new open spaces and residential communities are replacing derelict industrial land.

Let's take a closer look at one of these neighborhoods, and see how the creative class is thriving on the waterfront. New York, of course, boasts more than a single Creative Community. After more than a decade of prosperity, driven by escalating Wall Street bonuses, but also matched by dramatic drops in crime, neighborhoods across the city have gentrified and improved.⁷ But perhaps no neighborhood more closely captures the essence of creative cities than the Meatpacking District in Manhattan, on the western edge of Greenwich Village.

The Meatpacking District: A Creative Hub

As a global capital for finance, entertainment, and culture, it is no surprise that Manhattan is leading the way in developing a new geography for the creative class. Lower Manhattan, in particular, continues to change and reinvent itself with each generation. For over a century, Lower Manhattan was a center of finance, one of the world's largest Central Business Districts, with the emphasis on Finance, Insurance and Real Estate that the name implies.

But over the past fifteen years, activity in Lower Manhattan has shifted. Significantly, during the economic boom years of the 1990s, not a single square foot of new Class A commercial office space was built in Lower Manhattan. Instead, development of Battery Park City created thousands of new residential units – even as older, Class B office space, was being converted to residential use. Eventually, this waterfront development to the south started moving up the shoreline. At the same time, the West Village and Chelsea kept expanding, pushing their boundaries further west, towards the water. And by the late 1990s, these forces exploded in the Meatpacking District, one of the last great undiscovered neighborhoods on Manhattan's western shore.

In 2003, the Landmarks Preservation Commission declared the area a historic district - the last market neighborhood in New York City. The new Gansevoort Market Historic District honors the city's vibrant commercial past. The buildings and streetscapes define a low-rise urbanism, with

⁷ City of New York. *2003 Report on Social Indicators*. Department of City Planning, 2003

streets of Belgian pavers, distinctive canopies, and open views of the river and sky that combine to make the area distinctive and memorable.⁸

First, let's look at the demographics of the community. The Meatpacking District lies within Census Tract number 79 in the County of Manhattan in New York State.⁹ The data shows us that the area grew at a modest 4.3% from 1990 to 2000, and now has about 5,000 residents. This is in sharp contrast to the surrounding area, which actually lost residents during that period. The area is predominately white, with a mix of Hispanic and Asian residents thrown in. But about one in sixth residents are foreign-born, pointing to the cosmopolitan nature of the neighborhood. There are relatively few residents over 65 years in age, so the area is younger than most places. And median household income and educational attainments are higher than the City as a whole. In sum, the Meatpacking District appears to be strong by its young adult population and somewhat diverse ethnically, containing the roots for great talent and tolerance characteristics of creative communities and cities.

Land use in the area is half residential, with the rest of the area a mix of industrial and commercial. The neighborhood is unique in having such a strong mix of residential and industrial uses side-by-side. The current trend for land development in the area is precisely to do "loft conversions"; industrial space recycling and transformation into residential high-end products that attract wealthy and young urban professionals.

The mean market value of the lots in the area was \$2.4 million in 2001 still substantially lower than the mean market value of the whole of Manhattan at \$3.7 million. This makes the Meatpacking district an attractive area for investment, given its comparatively lower acquisition costs but highly desired location and amenities.

Considering the historical character and postindustrial nature of the area and its young and diverse urban population we can clearly attest that it functions as a creative hub, and has become an avant-garde location in the city. Nevertheless it is in the making. Future changes are going to enhance its attractiveness and quality of life and attract and retain more of the emerging high-end retail boutiques and restaurants to the area.

The Meatpacking Cool: Selected Projects around the District

To give you a better sense of what is happening on the ground in this neighborhood, I wanted to talk about three projects, spanning 40 years, that demonstrate the steady evolution of the neighborhood.

WestBeth

The first project is Westbeth, a conversion of a set of factory and office buildings into the first subsidized artists housing in New York. Built in 1894 as the headquarters for the Western Electric Company of Chicago, the site had become in the early 20th century the location of the American telephone and Telegraph company, or AT&T, one of the largest monopolies in the world. The building had an illustrious history as manufacturing and experimental site – in fact, first movie with sound. Al Joelson's "The Jazz Singer," was made in these buildings. The building was also built along the High Line, an elevated freight railroad running along the length

⁸ NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission. *Gansevoort Market Historic District*, September 2003

⁹ US Census Summary File 3

of Manhattan, which was meant to take trucks off 10th Avenue – then known as “Death Avenue” for the number of accidents – and move them up into the sky.

By the 1960’s, however, AT&T was looking to move their operations to less expensive land in New Jersey. As the site was on the edge of Greenwich Village – long a haven for artists and bohemian culture – it got the attention of the J.M. Kaplan Fund, a private philanthropy which supported the arts in New York.

The foundation brought in a young, unknown architect named Richard Meier, and gave him his first major commission. Meier pieced together a single entity out of the patchwork buildings on the site, using innovative designs to create large spaces that artists would find desirable for working and living in.

What is important about Westbeth is not only that it set a mark in the neighborhood extending Greenwich Village to the waterfront. Westbeth also represented an innovative process in planning, design and even financing, which would have profound effects on New York real estate. The same group working on Westbeth had recently re-written the City’s zoning codes – producing the famous “Lindsay Plan” that allowed modern office towers to run up Park Avenue and the concept of incentive zoning, which allowed developers to add extra floors on the top of their towers if they would produce public amenities and space at the ground level.

Many of the innovations of Westbeth – such as Richard Meier’s innovative design, which had corridors only on every third floor – were, strictly speaking illegal. But the individuals and groups involved saw the potential for transformation in this building, and figured out a way to make it work. Indeed, some have said that the most successful public policy of this era was in fact “lax enforcement.” Most of the great things that happened in New York were, at first, against the law, but fortunately no one took the effort to shut them down, and eventually the laws were changed to make them legal.

Industria SuperStudio

Now we’ll fast-forward about 20 years, to the late 1980s, to visit an important tenant in the Creative Meatpacking District, fashion photographer Fabrizio Ferri and Industria SuperStudio.

A native of Milan, Ferri came to the realization in the 1980s that he wasn’t the only photographer constantly searching for quality studio space, with skylights and flexible spaces, for his photo shoots. He opened the first Industria in Milan to create a one-stop opportunity for the fashion industry – a place with lights, cameras, flexible spaces, and all the other variables that creative marketers could want. During the day, the studios are rented for photo shoots. At night, they may transform to host gala events.¹⁰

Along with the studio, Ferri opened a school to teach creativity – he calls it “synaesthetics,” which is the process of relating perception across the senses, to recognize the smell of an image or the sound of a flavor. More than running a business, Ferri is expanding the concept of the creative process, which he defines as inputs become something else through a process that bridges from one sense to another: sound to sight, taste to touch, sight to taste.

The success of the project pushed him to New York, where he was looking for an opportunity to replicate the success of Milan. He was drawn to the Meatpacking district for the usual reasons –

¹⁰ www.industrianyc.com

excellent access, large and flexible space, and affordable rents. The studio is housed in a former parking garage, re-designed by architect Deborah Berke in a manner that preserved the structure's rough, industrial qualities while creating new crispness and clean lines. (One advantage of the former use is that entire cars can be driven right up to the second story studios – to deliver equipment, or become props in the shoots!)

Located on Washington Street, just a block off the West Side highway (ironically, the neighborhood which perhaps would have been most transformed by the Big Project Westway), Industria SuperStudio became an anchor to the neighborhood. Models and photographers need to eat – or at least drink coffee! – and myriad cafes, bars and restaurants sprung up around the studio. These became the “liminal” spaces, in-between places, neither public nor private, outside typical thresholds of ownership, which are so important to creative activities. On the ground floor, the restaurant Barbuto, run by celebrity-chef Jonathan Waxman, is now one of the city's hottest destination restaurants, having recently been declared the best new Italian restaurant of 2004 by New York Magazine and featured in the most recent edition of Gourmet Magazine. Waxman serves Mediterranean-style food by way of California – fresh, simple food that appeals to the young and hip. The old garage doors of the building, preserved in the re-design, open up on two sides, to literally vanish the separation between the private restaurant and the public sidewalk. Clientele include neighborhood families, and the occasional model or actress. And the food is excellent.

The High Line

The evolution from Westbeth to Industria is almost a straight line. Just as suburban America grew in the decades after World War II, with housing coming first, followed by retail and then office space, so too has Creative America's growth seen areas grow first with housing – often for artists, gays or other marginal communities – and then other activities follow.

So perhaps it's not surprising that after the establishment of housing and shopping, even more exciting things would start to happen in the Meatpacking neighborhood. In New York, the single most exciting planning, design and development project today is the High Line – the reclamation of that elevated freight railroad that I mentioned earlier.

Robert Hammond, one of the founders of the non-profit organization “Friends of the High Line,” says that he got the idea for preserving the urban artifact of the elevated railroad at a meeting sponsored by my organization – the Regional Plan Association. We had been hired by freight interests to tell them what possible uses the derelict line could have. After assessing the options for connecting the railroad to the existing passenger and freight systems, his conclusion was that it no longer served any transportation purpose, but should be considered as a public amenity. Robert met Josh David at the meeting, and a radical idea was hatched to preserve a beautiful asset in their neighborhood.

With help from residents, the Community Board and a broad base of “non-planner supporters” this grassroots initiative started to take shape in 1999. At the outset the timing was of the essence in the last months of the 20th Century, when the owner of the line was advocating demolition of the structure.

The High Line's relation to the Meatpacking District embodies the simultaneous transformation which was occurring in the neighborhood. As the area transformed from an industrial to a recreational place, both elements coexist and thrive in mutual feedback. At the base of the project's success -scheduled to begin construction in early 2006- is the community of artistically

mindful people, designers and architects that have been involved from the outset with the project. According to Peter Mullan, Planning Director of Friends of the High Line this “design nexus” has proven fruitful both for the innovative character of the project and to muster broad-based support for the project.

Friends of the High Line itself has its offices just a few blocks east of the future entrance of the park. They have located there to identify with their project, and when talking about the District, Mullan talks about the “shifts that take place around here.” Early in the morning -from 3am to 6am- the meatpackers can be seen working hard at their produce, to give way by midday to a host of “fashionistas,” – the artists, designers and creative workers that have recently moved their studios and offices there.

By evening time the restaurant and bar scene is hectic with local New Yorkers stopping for drinks at the new Gansevoort Hotel or the plethora of trendy restaurants available. But this corner of “the city that never sleeps” epitomizes precisely that: by midnight the club scene thrives with hipsters and yuppies across the river from New Jersey, Upstate and elsewhere. What is very telling is the recognition of the diversity of the place in its time “shifts” recognized by many in the area, such as painter Ruth Ro with a studio located just off Little West.

The strength of this mix of schedules is confirmed by a field survey of the area: This urban environment is composed of high end boutique stores, lower end design retail, restaurants, bars, hairstylist and some galleries -such as the new location of the Dia Center for the Arts at the footsteps of the High Line main entrance- or the popular Chelsea Market ex-industrial building rehabilitated as a strip interior food market. This is truly the “wild west” of the city, reinforces Mullan, with old sidewalks, streets built in cobble stone, a low built form of old warehouses, and a skyline of horizontal character -all with vistas to the Hudson River.

At the southern terminus of the High Line lies the main entrance seen in the previous image. The relation to the waterfront is to allow for slow movements through the elevated trail whereas to the west and on the waterfront Hudson River Park allows for faster bicyclists and joggers. The project first phase starts by no coincidence at the Meatpacking District anchoring the development, providing a great public space through its entrance and reinforcing the green gesture that the whole project is about. At street level the High Line will provide retail and restaurants but high above a greenway will connect twenty two blocks of waterfront.

Conclusion: Creative Communities at the Water’s Edge

In New York City the waterfront is “where it’s at” – not only where innovative and exciting things have been happening but where the next generation of development is going to take place. The current and official policy of the City of New York is to respond to the housing crisis and land scarcity that constrains its development by opening up what urban theorists called in the 1990s the “hollowing of the waterfront.” Now with a more proactive stance, New York has embarked in a recycling and repositioning of these areas for the future.

But walking down the streets of these waterfronts shows how new development is already taking place. Real estate development is moving in even before planning comes, taking advantage of lower land prices but a strong demand for products, mostly residential or mixed ones with retail or restaurants in the first stories. The Meatpacking District is a case in point. Walking around the western part of the area you see demolitions, and construction staging areas of a landscape to be.



While change is the only constant in New York, almost as ubiquitous is the presence of old-timers lamenting for the past. “There goes the neighborhood,” they argue, especially as cultural activities –artists, designers, entrepreneurs- that moved in early on begin to be pushed out by their own success. A cycle that has been seen in SoHo, TriBeCA, DUMBO and other neighborhoods will likely repeat itself here.

Fortunately, after the Meatpacking cools, there are other places and flavors to look for, particularly in Brooklyn and Queens. New York won’t run out of waterfront communities for new creativity any time soon. And many of the galleries and other businesses will thrive and are root themselves in these new frontiers. One might even expect to see a good portion of the people and start-ups that opened up the Meatpacking District to hang on and flourish with the new wave of interest in the area.

Creative Communities succeed at the water’s edge in New York precisely for the combination of tolerance, talent and technology that Richard Florida anticipates. As industrial wasteland from a not-so-distant past, these areas have attracted young people looking for larger rental and studio space, opening up the door for retailers and small businesses to flourish. This population is diverse, young and very tolerant. That has brought talent. It stands almost as a truism that the influx of artists and young professionals breeds nightlife, gathering places and innovative retail.

The Meatpacking District is the current “it” neighborhood, riding the wave of change and reuse. It will most likely follow the pattern of earlier neighborhoods, cresting and breaking on the rocks of real estate speculation and appreciation. But this trend, of movement back to the waterfronts, certainly holds promise for the future of New York. And for its creative citizens.