

## ARTS VIEW

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# Art, Money and Impotence in New York



A distinguished group of New Yorkers concerned with the arts, called the Mayor's Committee on Cultural Policy, has spent 20 months trying to find out how well, or badly, New York City handles its cultural affairs. The Committee's report, issued this fall, is a model of clarity and conviction. The conclusion it reaches is that the city could not be doing a much less effective job, and that without major administrative changes the situation endangers both the city's economy and its cultural institutions.

That is not the way the script is supposed to read. According to timeless New York legend, youth and talent, forever replenished, are making continuous cultural history, and striking it rich, in countless sophisticated settings. Art and the future are being served in theaters on and off and off-off Broadway, in the galleries of Madison Avenue and the lofts of SoHo, in the studios of the Village and West Village, in East Side penthouses and West Side apartments. The hum of creativity and the buzz of success are almost audible.

It is a popular mythology compounded of art and money. And at least part of it is true. Creativity endures brilliantly in New York in spite of high rents and Con Ed and crime and dirt and potholes in the street. There are

more than 1,500 cultural institutions and organizations, worth about \$5 billion in irreplaceable assets, fed by a Niagara of hope and ability. The richness and ease of New York cultural life is so overwhelming and irrefutable that New Yorkers don't even bother to make a case for it—an attitude that to outsiders is a more unpardonable sin than chauvinism or pride.

It is also true that art and money are inseparable in New York; the business of the arts is a way of life. New York's life and livelihood depend in large part on the arts, from direct revenues and taxes to the spin off of related service industries and the effect on real estate values. (Lincoln Center is one example of a cultural land boom.) This adds up to \$3 billion annually in terms of the city's economy, with about \$102 million in tax revenues. The arts are an enormous fringe benefit for businesses and a magnet for tourism. Attendance at cultural events is estimated at about 65 million people a year. Not only is there massive economic interdependence between business and the arts—the relationship is almost like a death grip. Any threat to that relationship is a threat to the city as well.

It is not, however, all profit and glory; anyone who reads knows that the arts are in trouble. Institutional and performing arts deficits are huge. Salaries, often low to begin with, are not keeping pace with inflation. All production and maintenance costs are skyrocketing. Keeping culture healthy in order to keep New York prosperous has become a problem addressed by amateurs, professionals, the intelligentsia and the body politic. The Mayor's Committee on Cultural Policy is addressing this problem with a certain urgency. Its head, Martin E. Siegal, an investment banker, points out that it is not dealing with an academic question. The city is officially and deeply involved with the arts both administratively and financially. Therefore the productivity and quality of the city's involvement is critical. New York provides \$50 million annually to arts institutions and programs (up from \$6.7 million in 1960) through its budgets and agencies. Not surprisingly, the money is accompanied by labyrinthine bureaucratic procedures.

Anyone who reads also knows that New York City itself is in trouble. A monster deficit is projected and stringent economies are in the air. City-assisted cultural

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institutions are being asked, like all city agencies, for an eight per cent cutback over the next six months. And so the recommendations of the Policy Committee, as well as any actions on them, will have a lot to do with the future of New York both as a cultural capital and a solvent city.

The first conclusion reached by the Committee on Cultural Policy is that the city has no cultural policy at all. The second conclusion is that the city isn't remotely getting its money's worth for what it spends. And the third conclusion is that only a radical change in the city's administrative set up for cultural affairs can improve the situation.

What the Committee proposes is a new Cultural Affairs Commission that would have parity with top city agencies. At present, cultural responsibility rests in the Department of Cultural Affairs, a subagency of the Parks Administration. This puts the matter somewhere, after tennis permits and bike-ins. It was shunted here during the ambitious superagency reorganizations of the Lindsay administration, when what appeared to be leftover ragtags of city business that did not fit neatly anywhere else were put under the Parks umbrella. The casualties were cultural affairs and landmarks. Parks then became the Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs Administration.

The Committee has found, not surprisingly, that disposing of cultural affairs in this manner was a dreadful mistake. This disembodied subagency has neither the personnel nor the power to define the job or do it properly. It cannot create or coordinate total city policy or expenditures or the work of all of the agencies involved. It cannot innovate, improve procedures or productivity, or establish priorities. Nor is it able to explore ways or means available to get arts support from other sources, from the federal level to the private sector.

Because it can do none of these things, it operates primarily as a restricted programming and servicing unit. It promotes summer activities and special events although culture is properly a year-round phenomenon, and it does routine jobs, such as publicity, printing and mailing for other organizations. Even for these purposes its seven staff members, reinforced by "borrowed" personnel from Recreation, are inadequate, and temporary summer help is insufficiently trained.

The Department does not even control its own administrative and overhead budgets. Its limited "special program" funds (\$161,000 in 1974-75) do reasonably well in reaching some small and emerging groups. But the Department has so little muscle and so much red tape that its funds and supplies are frequently delivered late, often too late for fledgling organizations on tight budgets. Equipment and services also come late, or not at all, since the heavy-use summer months are a particular strain on Parks Department resources. Some performances and

programs are then also scheduled late, so that publicity and attendance are poor.

These program funds often go to borough arts councils which advance them to community arts groups, resulting in a double delay. Last year, for example, summer programming money was received in November, long after performances were over. The hardship to low-budget arts groups is obvious. The addition of slow-motion bureaucracy in such things as contract approval and payment vouchers compounds the cruelty and inefficiency.

Priorities are generally established by degrees of clout or who shouts loudest. More often than not, funding by this ad hoc method becomes a stopgap emergency procedure. Some incredible incidents result. At one point, the Brooklyn Museum actually threatened to sue the city to protect its collection from serious damage because broken windows were not replaced by midwinter.

If the matter involved is a building or a capital improvement, there are 71 municipal steps leading to construction. Budgeting is an end run around the department to the Bureau of the Budget. And once budgeted, the work takes twice as long to complete and costs twice as much as if it were done privately. There is the tale of the comfort station built for the New York Botanical Garden that soared to \$180,000 and an incredible \$312 a square foot. And there is the instructive story of two Metropolitan Museum projects. The more complex one, which the Museum financed and built itself, took 13 months; the simpler, city-financed and constructed project took 25 months, with costs rising all the time.

The city's emphasis was originally on help for the maintenance of institutions, such as museums, rather than for the performing arts, and that inequity remains. Moreover, the right and left hands, Cultural Affairs and the Landmarks Preservation Commission, both within the Parks Administration, rarely operate together. The matching of cultural resources, such as threatened landmark buildings, with cultural needs, such as places to perform, is singularly erratic or ignored.

All this does not mean that the city does not do some things well. It has some fine, but fragmented cultural programs. Through innovative zoning the City Planning Commission has created a special Broadway theater district and encouraged the building of new theaters. The advisory New York Cultural Council and its Foundation services 52 organizations, mostly with administrative help. But where it counts most, in terms of long-range objectives and overall money and management, New York flunks out.

Under the proposed reorganization, the new Cultural Affairs Commission would have policy-making, supervisory and coordinating authority over all city-aided cultural activities. It could establish appropriate balances at the top administrative level. There would be a Cultural Affairs Agency to staff the Commission and absorb the powers now given to Parks. A Cultural Affairs Foundation, formed at the same time, would function to raise private funds to supplement public expenditures.

By creating what would be virtually a Cultural Affairs Administration, the city's consciousness of its cultural role would be significantly raised, and its commitment to the arts would be profoundly strengthened. The report has been accepted in principle and endorsed by Mayor Beame, and the legal and technical aspects of the changes are now being investigated. There could be action within six months.

Until then, according to the Policy Committee, the city is virtually impotent. The irony of such impotence in the face of such astounding resources creates a kind of cultural Catch-22. While the avant-garde struggles somewhere out there, the rear guard holes up in City Hall. The alternative to corrective action, the report states succinctly, is a deterioration of New York's cultural life that can cause a decline in the city itself. That is something nobody can afford.