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Art as Industry

By Robert Montgomery Jr.
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Imagine New York City without the arts: no new plays, no concerts in the parks, no independent exhibition spaces for modern painting and sculpture. What would the city be without the excitement of the "Next Wave" festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music or the rich diversity provided by hundreds of lively community-based arts groups?

Everyone knows it would be bleak. Yet few appreciate that, without the arts, New York City would lose up to \$6 billion in business.

The arts community is not a "frill" in New York: it is one of the city's major industries. Through both its direct activities and its impact on related industries — such as design, advertising, publishing, fashion and education — it is an industry that generates more than 117,000 jobs. The arts attract more than 13 million

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artists to the city each year. They are one of the main reasons that corporations and their highly-skilled, tax-paying employees move to and remain in the metropolitan area.

But despite the support of millions who enjoy the arts in New York, the arts industry is now at risk. Performance and rehearsal space is becoming scarce; Government and corporate funding is not keeping pace with inflation. As an indication of how difficult things have become, a professor of drama at Yale University no longer suggests to his graduates that they base their careers in New York. Instead, he recommends they move to Los Angeles, where they can earn a decent living in film and television while working in that city's burgeoning theater community.

A recent survey conducted by Alliance of Resident Theaters, the service organization for the city's non-profit theaters, reports that nearly

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half of its 80 member theaters face the expiration of their leases within three years; many will be forced to find new spaces or go out of business due to real estate pressures. A third of Broadway's theaters are dark.

In the last two years, 17 dance schools and four dance rehearsal halls have been displaced or destroyed. More than half the dance companies and schools in New York have reported rent increases of more than 100 percent in the last two years.

Despite the fact that New York has more arts activities than any other state in the country, it now ranks fifth in per capita state support of the arts.

While appropriations for New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs have increased in recent years, more than 80 percent of the agency's budget goes to 32 institutions. That leaves \$13 million to be shared by hundreds of organizations and projects vital to the city and to the future of the arts themselves.

Money, of course, is crucial, but the first order of business is to make clear the link between arts organizations with the economic future of New York. Government and industry must finally realize how essential the arts are to the life of the entire city.

Ways must be found to provide rehearsal, performance and exhibition space for arts groups and artists in all five boroughs. Other cities and states have achieved these goals through rent subsidies, bond issues or by mixing private and public investment to build "arts districts." New York could do the same and do it better.

Arts groups should serve all New Yorkers and we should encourage artistic work that reflects the city's changing ethnic population, enabling all to better understand the city we share. And art institutions can be more effectively used by the schools to introduce children to world's beyond themselves and their own neighborhoods.

We must recognize that new work by younger artists needs exposure and time to build an audience, for it is these new artists who are the hope for the future. We should give priority to helping young artists support themselves and provide space for them to work.

There is no one path to these goals, but they can be reached if the public and private sectors recognize that the arts are as important to the city as Wall Street, the New York Yankees and the city's precious parks.

With so much at stake, New York City needs to take action now to solve the problems currently facing the arts industry, before they become irreversible. We must insure that this vital resource remains healthy and thriving — and in New York. □

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