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## Harlem: Parable of Promise or Peril

Mary Schmidt Campbell  
*Tisch School of the Arts*

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"Long before I came to Harlem—as early as 1968, the summer of some of the worst riots uptown—a quiet but fervent revolution had already begun to take place. A band of guerrilla culture-warriors—a small army of remarkable men and women, often unbeknownst to one another—decided to take fate into their own hands and bring their talents and skills uptown and plant the seeds of the future. They came uptown as early as the late 60's—after the riots had left Harlem and other inner cities across the country—Detroit included—with a ruined physical infrastructure; after a predatory drug culture had assaulted these neighborhoods with the ferocity of terrorist attacks; and after banks, funding agencies and most of the rest of the city had written off the neighborhood. Nonetheless, come these talented people did."

How was Harlem transformed from an urban wasteland to a center for African-American culture? What still needs to happen there? Campbell draws on history and her own experience as a cultural worker in Harlem to discuss the second Harlem Renaissance and provide a model for the transformative power of democratic culture making.

Harlem: Parable of Promise or Peril was the keynote address for Imagining America's second national conference. Mary Schmidt Campbell is Dean of the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. She was executive director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, and Commissioner of Cultural Affairs for New York City in the Edward I. Koch and David Dinkins administrations.

Also available:

*Democratic Vistas in the Humanities*, by Richard J. Franke, founder of the Chicago Humanities Festival (Foreseeable Futures #1).

As with all our publications, these reports can be ordered for distribution at conferences and meetings. Let us know how many you need by contacting Heather Dornoff at [hdornoff@umich.edu](mailto:hdornoff@umich.edu) or (734) 615-8370.

Imagining  
America

# Harlem: Parable of Promise or Peril

Imagining America National Conference  
University of Michigan  
Ann Arbor, Michigan  
November 4, 2002

Mary Schmidt Campbell  
Dean, Tisch School of the Arts,  
New York University

Foreseeable  
Futures #2

Position Papers from Imagining America

## From IA: Artists & Scholars in Public Life

*Dear Reader,*

Welcome to the second publication in *Imagining America's* series of position papers, *Foreseeable Futures*.

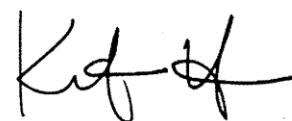
The first essay in this series, Richard J. Franke's *Democratic Vistas for the Humanities*, is a clarion call for expanding our vision of what the humanities and arts should be. Franke begins with the simple question "How do we get scholars and artists to a larger audience?" Arguing that U.S. history is not so much a history of democracy as a history of the painful processes of democratization, he writes that "for a truly healthy democracy, we need a well-informed citizenry capable of making complex political, social, and moral decisions." (Certainly, we are in a moment in history in which we feel this all too palpably.) Franke goes on to argue that the humanities and the arts provide the best testing ground for this kind of critical thinking. His essay is sweeping and ambitious and makes explicit (and therefore more potent) the tacit assumptions about the public importance of the arts and humanities that drive the work of so many artists and humanists. He gives us a sharp articulation of why the art and the humanities are so crucial to the well-being of the culture at large.

Mary Schmidt Campbell's essay, *Harlem: Parable of Promise or Peril*, is also sweeping and ambitious. It is the story of one institution's successful struggle to make the impossible merely difficult – to build a museum in a mythic urban ruin and to make that museum a force in both economic development and community empowerment. It is also a case study in democratic culture making. As the essay moves through Campbell's tireless

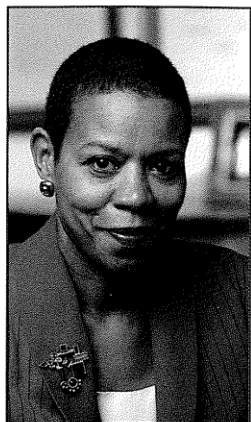
campaigns and myriad strategies to push her museum forward, she adds to our collective tool-kit for the public arts and humanities and she feeds our ambitions. She stresses the importance of constructing a critical history of public cultural institutions in a way that generates expanded partnerships between universities and such institutions. And in doing so she changes the future that we can foresee.

This is the work of *Imagining America*. *Imagining America* is a consortium of highly diverse colleges and universities from across the United States that share a commitment by the president or chancellor to public scholarship and community service in the arts and humanities. Together we are naming a national movement saying clearly (and in public) that campus-community collaborations in the arts and humanities are significant civic acts that are vital to universities and to communities. We want to change our shared expectations about what is possible and who is responsible in the arenas of public cultural work.

To join the consortium or to share your visions or suggestions contact us at [www.ia.umich.ed](http://www.ia.umich.ed).



Kristin Hass  
Associate Director



**Mary Schmidt Campbell**  
Dean, Tisch School of the Arts

Twenty-five years ago Harlem was a ruin. Row after row of once-elegant brownstones were boarded up. Vacant lots, strewn with debris, gave the wide boulevards the look of a garbage dump, while the scent of decay hung on your clothes like stale cigarette smoke. Commerce uptown, such that it was, consisted of street vendors, fast food joints, record shops and second hand furniture stores. Even Central Park at the North end seemed to honor the invisible Berlin wall that cut off life north of 96th Street from the rest of the city. The beautiful Central Park, as you proceeded north, gradually turned tawdry and chaotic. So grim was the Harlem of the late 70's, a well-known novelist, who lived on 125th Street, decided to make a satire of the neighborhood's decline by filming himself on a walking tour that went from W. 125th Street to 145th and Edgecomb Avenue. His role in the tour was that of an archaeologist who had landed on earth from another planet and had just stumbled onto the fragments and debris of a lost civilization. He was narrating this tour as if he were unearthing the last remains of some ancient Aztec village. Sadly, his film was quite convincing.

This was the Harlem I came to in 1977, when I became the executive director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, a Harlem that looked like the Cuba of today; cut off from the world of trade and capital. Once a magical destination, still full of great architecture, the place was haunted by memories of a once grand but now lost past.

As everyone knows by now, the story has a happy ending, sort of. Once-dead residential streets have come back to life. Trees have been planted; boarded-up houses have been reclaimed and renovated. Business returned to 125th Street. Where once there were fried-fish joints, now there is Starbucks. H&M department store, Blockbuster Video, Disney and Old Navy have replaced the second-hand furniture shops. Former President Bill Clinton is a neighbor; Magic Johnson has a multiplex; and the Studio Museum in Harlem, having converted one of those grungy vacant lots into a glass enclosed sculpture garden, now occupies a modernist 60,000 square-foot space in the heart of 125th Street, one block from a revitalized Apollo Theater. The theater is now playing *Harlem Song*, a Broadway-quality show. *Harlem Song*, the creation of one of the city's most renowned directors, George C. Wolfe, is itself an epic musical of the rise and fall and rise again of Harlem. And not a

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month goes by without the New York Times publishing an article that heralds the turnaround. The story is always the same: "Harlem, a parable of urban promise."

This afternoon, I will share with you the role I played in this transformation as executive director of the Studio Museum in Harlem from 1977 to 1987. In 1987, when I became Mayor Ed Koch's Cultural Affairs Commissioner, I moved to one of those stately townhouses uptown. My experience of this community, then, comes as creative worker, government official and as civic consumer of its services.

I want to focus today, however, on my role as creative worker. My pride is the grassroots effort that made such a profound transformation possible. My concern is the fragility of that transformation, the perils that cling to it still. Even now as I walk by Alexander Hamilton's lovely 18th century yellow frame house, once his country home, jammed incongruously between an ugly brick apartment building and a beautiful but anachronistic Romanesque stone Episcopal church, I am reminded of the layers of history piled one on top of the other in Harlem. I am reminded of the haunting presence of another era in Harlem, the Harlem Renaissance that held even more promise only to be betrayed by many of the false hopes that promise held out. Today, the Harlem Renaissance will be a point of reference in my talk but not my focus; rather I want to home in on my experience of Harlem's struggle to pull itself out of decline to become a re-born urban community.

At the end of my narrative, I will suggest some ways in which NYC's colleges and universities might contribute to sustain this historic sector of urban life.

My story begins with a community, which, seemingly to many, bore no hope within it at all. Twenty-six years ago, I was a 29-year-old armed with an M.A. in art history, some experience as a curator, and none as an administrator. I was a bit like the archaeologist in the novelist's film who landed in this crumbling environment and tried to make sense of it. I had dreams, though, dreams of one day finishing my dissertation on the African American collage artist, Romare Bearden, and dreams that I could "learn on the job" to be the executive director of a museum. To many who greeted me in those early days, that particular ambition seemed like a ridiculous notion; I mean, I didn't know a 990 from a 401(k). But I did know something about the art, the mission of the struggling institution. I knew of the depths of undiscovered artistic and cultural treasures waiting to be discovered, the real promise of a place like the Studio Museum in Harlem.



These undisclosed depths, however, in no way disclosed themselves in the museum's exterior. Situated over a liquor store and a Kentucky Fried Chicken, the museum looked like just one more woe-begotten storefront. Inside, however, the place was a hot-bed of activities: studios for working artists, serious first-rate exhibitions, catalogues, and programs on sparsely documented African and African American artists and forgotten aspects of American cultural history. On my very first day of work was an example of the seminal work the museum had been doing since its founding in 1968. Some of those undiscovered treasures had arrived in crates for an exhibition—organized long before I arrived—of works by Black artists who were part of the WPA. The show was curated by Ruth Ann Stewart, then a curator at the Schomburg Center for Black Culture and Research, now at Rutgers University. The Works Project Administration's Federal Arts Project had been vital to Black artists in major American cities like Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia and New York during the 1930's and 1940's. The WPA center on W. 125th street trained many Black NYC artists, the easel project employed others, and still others found work on some of the mural projects. The Studio Museum exhibition, entitled, "Black Artists and the WPA," which featured a range of masterworks from WPA projects all over the country, was scheduled to go up at the same time as other shows on the subject around New York. Art critics from major newspapers and fine arts publications covered the exhibition. As a result, information on the works of Black artists not normally part of the discourse on the period was included. The exhibition, with its slender little catalogue, was groundbreaking.

As exciting as I found the work of the museum, I found, too, much to my surprise, the financial prospects of the museum miserable, a not uncommon situation at emerging institutions in those days. In 1977, out of an annual budget of \$300,000, the museum was funded 90% by state and local funding agencies—the New York State Council on the Arts and New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs—and bore a deficit that was coming perilously close to 25% of its total budget. By almost all not-for-profit standards, a deficit of 25% of the total budget was almost impossible for any institution to overcome. Private support was less than 10% and earned income negligible. Dreams of turning the Museum into a proper museum with a dignified building, permanent collection, accreditation and a financial arrangement that could sustain it into the future seemed foolhardy.

These were the days when the urban life of our country in general was under siege and New York, the largest city in the United States, and the city most linked

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with the health of the country's cultural life, was probably one of the most distressed. New York City, after all, at this time, was on the verge of bankruptcy. Ed Koch, who beat out Mario Cuomo to become the Mayor of the New York during this period, faced the prospect of the city not being able to meet its debt payments or its bloated municipal payroll. On top of that there were labor strikes, subways that barely ran, libraries that were closed more than they were open, disintegrating schools and a federal administration under President Gerald Ford whose response to New York City's fiscal crisis, as reported by the Daily News was, "Washington to New York-Drop Dead."

Again, as we all know, this story too has a happy ending—so far, that is. An urban miracle took place. In an act of extraordinary civic cooperation involving financiers, union leaders, philanthropists and private citizens, New York City not only climbed out of insolvency but re-invented itself. Forty-Second Street transformed from porn city to Disney world; a rotting waterfront, once filled with derelict broken-down piers, has become a landscape out of a painting by Seurat. Whole neighborhoods are re-born: the South Bronx, downtown Brooklyn, Tribeca, Soho, Chelsea and, of course, Harlem.

Long before I came to Harlem—as early as 1968, the summer of some of the worst riots uptown—a quiet but fervent revolution had already begun to take place. A band of guerrilla culture-warriors—a small army of remarkable men and women, often unbeknownst to one another—decided to take fate into their own hands and bring their talents and skills uptown and plant the seeds of the future. They came uptown as early as the late 60's—after the riots had left Harlem and other inner cities across the country—Detroit included—with a ruined physical infrastructure; after a predatory drug culture had assaulted these neighborhoods with the ferocity of terrorist attacks; and after banks, funding agencies and most of the rest of the city had written off the neighborhood.

Nonetheless, come these talented people did. Men and women like Arthur Mitchell. Mitchell, once a principal dancer with New York City Ballet, was boarding a plane to Brazil when he heard about the death of Dr. King. King's death was the impetus for him to come to Harlem and start Dance Theater of Harlem in a rented garage. Dorothy Maynor, an acclaimed opera star who had performed at the Metropolitan Opera, taught music in the basement of St. James Presbyterian Church at the corner of W.141st Street and St. Nicholas Avenue. She decided that an institution that embraced music with the same high standards she held for herself had a place uptown, and she started Harlem School of the Arts. 7

Walter Turnbull, a young musician and composer with a promising career ahead of him, decided to commit himself to teaching young boys, and later young girls, choral singing on the level of the great world-renowned choirs; and so Boys Choir of Harlem was born. Barbara Ann Teer started the National Black Theater; Betty Blayton Taylor inaugurated the Children's Art Carnival in a townhouse uptown; and David Bailey and famed jazz pianist Billy Taylor got Jazzmobile underway. Of course, 1968 was the year the Junior Council of the MOMA and some local Harlem residents opened the doors of the SMH as well. Often unbeknownst to each other, they came at the absolute nadir of the community, but most importantly they came—often with the help of larger organizations, but always as an act of individual imagination and willfulness.

This individual willfulness extended not just to the executive leadership. From the late 1960's to the present, institutions such as Dance Theater of Harlem, Harlem School of the Arts, National Black Theater, Boys Choir of Harlem, Schomburg Center, and later Aaron Davis Hall at City College and the Apollo Theater—along with the Studio Museum in Harlem—all attracted staffs with high levels of expertise in the disciplines represented at the institutions. Even as they needed to expand staff to include new additions who may not have had those same skills initially, the standards had been set and these institutions became training grounds for employees new to these professional skills, a living example of the each-one-teach-one philosophy. In addition to the expertise and commitment at the staff levels, they assembled civic minded, committed individuals at the board levels. Those citizens who often did not live or work uptown but who, nonetheless, recognized the need to rebuild the city at the grass roots level, could have a role at the trustee or volunteer level.

The coming together of all of these individuals reminds me of what Walter Pater, the great 19th century art historian, wrote of the Italian Renaissance in the preface to his landmark study of that period. Pater noted of artists, philosophers and intellectuals who work in the same era: As products of the same generation they partake indeed of a common character, and unconsciously illustrate each other; but of the producers themselves, each group is solitary, gaining what advantage or disadvantage there may be in intellectual isolation.

*He goes on to write:*

"There come, however, from time to time, eras of more favourable conditions, in which the thoughts of men draw nearer together than is their wont, and the many interests of the intellectual world combine in one

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complete type of general culture... Here, artists and philosophers and those whom the action of the world has elevated and made keen, do not live in isolation, but breathe a common air, and catch light and heat from each other's thoughts. There is a spirit of general elevation and enlightenment in which all alike communicate."

To my mind, there were three conditions which made possible the catching of each other's light and heat in Harlem: 1) The presence, as I mentioned, of individuals who brought with them high standards, excellence, competence and expertise as well as the commitment of volunteer boards who provided financial support and often access to political and philanthropic leaders. 2) The productive interface between public policy and private enterprise. 3) The establishment of permanent institutional life.

The question which might be asked with City College and Columbia University so close is where were the universities? For now, they are not central to the story.

In any case, 26 years ago, I could see and feel neither heat nor light. What I saw and felt were my dreams about to collide with reality. Meeting payroll kept looming up in front of me, getting in the way of my capacity to see anything other than how are we going to make this month's rent or electric bill. To save money, we turned the heat off until we could see our breath in front of us and it was necessary to wear gloves to answer the black rotary phones. We negotiated with the phone company to keep our phones working. Periodically I would visit our local banks in search of a kindly loan officer who was willing to make a bridge loan against our slender state or city grants. We were desperate. Nonetheless, we believed, as did everyone else working in their institutions in Harlem, in the integrity of the artistic mission. All of us were convinced that we just needed to convince other people, especially other people who could help us.

Virtually everyday, sometimes several times a day, I was out on the streets of New York asking for help with the museum: corporate leaders, government officials, grant makers, foundation program officers, kindly individuals, and government agencies that dealt with the arts and those that did not. To help tell our story, I had some black and white photos blown up (very low tech) to give some visual meaning which I put into a very large architect's portfolio that was almost as big as I was. The same novelist who made the film said he would look out of his window and see my determined little figure, face set, marching out of the museum day after day, dragging my oversized portfolio behind me. He told me that as a writer, he admired my persistence.



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Speaking of writers, stories are important; people need to hear stories and see where they can fit into the narrative, before they can help you. The story I told was as follows: invest in the Studio Museum and you will not only be growing what had already been identified as the principle center for the study of Black art in America, but you would be investing in the economic revival of Harlem and, hence, a piece of the re-invention of New York City. And you will be reviving the memory of a once-great past.

My story was a classic economic development argument and suggested that if, in fact, there were viable points of destination uptown, people would once again return. My argument drew on Harlem's rich past, the memory that still haunted Harlem and which not a few of the older members of my audience once knew and still remembered warmly.

The Harlem of the past was a mythic place, a place some remembered and many had read about, a site in the American cultural imagination of the great Harlem Renaissance of the 20's and 30's, the Black cultural capital of the world. This was the Harlem that emerged after the troops returned from World War I. Thousands of African American migrants from the south began to pour into the cities of the north: Harlem, Philadelphia, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and Chicago. All of these cities—but New York, in particular—attracted an intellectual, political and artistic elite. The philosopher Alain Locke gave definition to this period in his publication, *The New Negro*, describing the metamorphosis of the Negro, when he migrated north, as "shedding the old chrysalis of the Negro problem" and "achieving something like a spiritual emancipation." Poets and writers like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, and Jean Toomer published works that would in time become part of the American canon. The nightclubs, cabarets and rent parties of Harlem attracted the finest jazz musicians from St. Louis, New Orleans, and Chicago; and they attracted the rest of New York who, during the era of prohibition, went uptown, "slumming," to participate in the often illicit honky tonks or to partake of the cultural entertainment at Harlem famous night spots. Harlem, by day, was left to its own struggles.

The truth of the mythic Harlem is that for all of its cultural superiority, Harlem was a poor community. Gilbert Osofsky's study of Harlem, *Harlem: the Making of a Ghetto*, meticulously details the statistics of appallingly high death rates from infectious disease, inadequate health facilities, overcrowded living conditions, poor wages, and high housing costs. Two ruinous civil insurrections, one in 1935 and another in

1943, foretold the declining fortunes of the neighborhood. When prohibition ended and there was no compelling need to go uptown; when the public support of the WPA ended in 1943; when after World War II residents had the option of moving to other areas of the city; and when the virulent drug trade abetted by corrupt law enforcement was introduced into inner cities, Harlem and communities like it declined precipitously.

Part of my story was the resurrection of one of those symbols of decline, a decaying vacant building on which the New York Bank for Savings had foreclosed. We were trying to get the bank to make a donation of the building to us and take a tax write-off. My story, appealing to people's memory of the way 125th Street used to be, said that if we got the money to renovate this building, we would be salvaging one of the many decaying buildings on 125th Street and transforming it into an attractive destination to once again lure visitors. What came next was finding the right public policy to match our narrative. What I discovered is that my story nicely converged with two prevailing public policy concepts: historic preservation and economic development, both of which have been instrumental in re-imagining America in the past 30 years.

In New York City historic preservation built on memories of a by-gone past and the need to salvage at least some part of it as part of our cultural legacy. Two of preservation's most visible successes—Carnegie Hall and Grand Central Station—would bring broad public support for preservation policies in NYC; but back in the late 70's preservation was a budding idea. Nonetheless, it helped focus public attention and, hence, public support in a neglected region of the city. In Harlem, where the economic decline of the neighborhood truly threatened the works of several turn of the century architects like Stanford White and William Mowbray, the landmarks policy had the effect of creating not only spheres of awareness around the architectural richness of Harlem but also a sphere of protection for private citizens who were motivated to make capital investments in historic housing and designated districts.

Landmarking made more likely public infrastructure projects like the re-paving of sidewalks and reconstruction of streets along with cosmetic improvements like tree planting and the installation of street light fixtures, slowing physical decay at least in designated neighborhoods.

Preservation also put a premium on recycling buildings rather than tearing them down. The façade of the old Schomburg was landmarked, as was the exterior of the Apollo. The buildings of the Studio Museum, Dance



Theater of Harlem and the National Black Theater—though not landmarked—were all recycled for a new use. In the context of preservation, major architects were attracted to work uptown. World renowned architects such as Hugh Hardy, architect for Dance Theater, and Max Bond, who was the architect for the Studio Museum and the Schomburg Center, left their creative and restorative mark on the physical landscape of Harlem by establishing with their buildings beachheads of physical clarity, coherence and beauty. In addition to the private and institutional value of preservation, the policy of preservation focused public opinion on Harlem's affirmative qualities and not just its pathologies of poverty and decline. If the community contains something of public value, the argument for public support is easier. This brings me to the second public policy concept critical to the re-vitalization of Harlem: economic development.

As we were taking our story around town, someone at a major foundation—wanting to divert us, no doubt, from their doorstep—suggested that I take my story to Washington D.C. to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). You may ask why we did not go to visit the NEA—after all that is the federal agency in charge of the arts. Let me digress a moment.

I had had no luck with the NEA, which in those days was focused on artistic excellence exclusively. Moreover, the NEA had a hierarchy of funding that put major institutions on top and venues like the Studio Museum in an entirely different category that only gave out modest grants. Expansion Arts was the title of this category. On several occasions I visited the offices at the NEA to explain to them how utterly circular their reasoning was. I explained to whoever would listen that if an institution like the Studio Museum was forever relegated to modest grants, we could never grow. Isn't it possible that the curators at the Studio Museum might be smart enough to come up with a really great exhibition idea that could compete with MOMA or the Brooklyn Museum of Art? Besides, most of us who were receiving these piddling amounts were cultural institutions representing traditionally underrepresented cultural groups—Asian, Latino and African American back then. Isn't that discriminatory? The program officers at the NEA weren't buying any of my arguments.

Exasperated by their intransigence, six of my trustees went to Washington, where one of them had enough clout to arrange a meeting with Livingston Biddle who, to his credit, promised to do something. He did. Shortly after that visit, he started something called Advancement grants. Except for the area of education, NEA, however, has never fully grasped the powerful way

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in which art intersects with so many other public spheres. This solipsistic approach is what doomed the NEA by isolating art and artists so that by the time the culture wars erupted in the late 80's, the public was hard pressed to know what public purpose the arts served beyond their own self gain.

HUD, on the other hand, proved to be more flexible. Nixon, of all presidents, had developed something at HUD called Urban Development Action Grants (UDAG). Their purpose was to use public funding as an incentive to bring private investment to distressed areas. These grants required private investment three times what the government would grant. The only problem is that most UDAG grants had been for light manufacturing and commercial development in these distressed economic communities. Only the Joyce Theater in Chelsea had made use of the grant for a cultural purpose. Our goal was to persuade the people at HUD that yet another a cultural institution could be a lightening rod for economic growth.

We told the people at HUD that granting us a UDAG would encourage the bank to give us the 60,000 square foot building on 125th Street. We told the people at the bank that if they gave us the building, we would have a much better chance of getting the HUD grant. In the meantime the large private foundation who told us about the UDAG grant in the first place, which you may have guessed by now was Ford, said if you get the building and the grant, we'll award you a loan so that you can get started with construction, something called a Program Related Investment, which helped organizations develop their self-sufficiency—that came to \$1.3 million dollars. These were dollars advanced against the UDAG that would pay them back.

So here I was in 1979, an art historian and curator, in between curating exhibitions and writing catalogues for artists like Bettye Saar, Mel Edwards and Sam Gilliam, juggling these three major financial investment tools: a loan from Ford, a grant from HUD which turned into a long range mortgage, and the gift of the building from a private bank. Talk about dangerous on-the-job-training! On top of needing to master these financial tools, the Studio Museum had made a pretty ambitious promise to all of these funding entities. We had assumed the responsibility of developing a 60,000 square foot building that had been given to us into a fully accredited, collecting museum which could support itself by renting half of its space to not-for-profit tenants and thereby, over time, becoming an economically self-sufficient organization. We promised them that according to our forecast, the increased visitation to the museum, the capacity of the

museum to offer viable lease space to not-for-profits like the College of New Rochelle and the Red Cross, whose services were vital to the community, and the museum's role as an educational and civic arena, would contribute to the long term development of 125th Street. All we had to do was fulfill the terms of this proposal.

To say the least, this was a complex set of negotiations and management challenges. In the midst of submitting all of the analyses and budgets, things were not going well. My little staff was far from sufficient to do all of the legwork required for this grant. My accountant was clearly over his head and had no idea how to handle any of this. Moreover, members of my own board were beginning to doubt that I had the necessary skills to run the big new operation the Studio Museum in Harlem was to become. Splits in the board often tugged the institution in conflicting directions.

One day a program officer from Ford called to ask how things were going. I was candid: not well. Her counsel was sobering. She informed me in a firm and unequivocal way that if I wanted this to happen I would have to get my organization into shape to do this. If we couldn't handle the grant applications or manage the board now, how were we going to handle the increased responsibility of being landlords, with more space and a larger staff? How could we manage the increased responsibility of a permanent collection? I had to look closely at my organization and make some hard decisions. My board had to go through a similar process of self-examination. The changes we made at board and staff level were painful but necessary in order for us to move away from rented space over the Kentucky Fried Chicken and into our new identity. I believe that this moment of self-scrutiny and self-evaluation, painful though it was, also had to be honest, and the organization had to make the necessary changes if it was to undergo the kind of transformation it believed necessary to do the work it set out to do.

One challenge we faced was the need to expand staff. And this brings me to a third public policy: labor and job training.

One of the arguments New York City made in support of their continued funding of the arts during the city's darkest fiscal days was that cultural institutions in the aggregate employed thousands of people. The city, as administrator for an important public funding program from the Department of Labor, used this argument to subsidize professional labor at the city's cultural institutions. The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, or CETA, as we all fondly referred to it, was a remnant of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. CETA was

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not specifically designed for the arts, but someone in city government discerned that because arts institutions require skilled labor—curators, preparators, ballet mistresses, costume, set and lighting designers, registrars, archivists, librarians, etc.—CETA could be used by cultural groups as a valuable job training tool. CETA, through the city administrators, assigned artists to institutions, imposed a high degree of oversight and regulation to assure that carefully agreed-to tasks were complete, and provided subsidies to the institutions' resources. Museums at that time were notoriously segregated places—except for the guards and cafeteria workers. At the Studio Museum CETA became a way of training significant numbers of people of color as curators, registrars, preparators, many of whom later went on to important jobs at major museums. From then on, the museum's role as a training ground was firmly established.

In the fall of 1982, five years after I first climbed the narrow steps of the old Studio Museum, we triumphantly opened the new Studio Museum with 30,000 of the 60,000 square feet of the recycled building renovated into premiere gallery, office, and studio and storage space. Once again, there were groundbreaking exhibitions: a retrospective of Charles White; a retrospective of the works of James Vander Zee that were to form the core of our permanent collection; and a survey of contemporary work by African artists of the Diaspora entitled, "Memory and Myth." I celebrated personally, too, since I finally defended my dissertation that year. In the years following the opening, the museum would build its permanent collection and become the first Black fine arts museum to win accreditation from the Association of American Museums.

Lest you think everything was now hunky-dory, in the years between 1979, when the building was given to us and 1982 when we officially opened, we had, of course, undergone another set of the Perils of Pauline with the building the bank had donated. The roof leaked; the windows allowed us to enjoy winter's snowfalls from the inside as well as out; an unpaved basement grew muddy when the river that ran beneath the building twisted its way below us; and next door a vacant city-owned lot, filled with the rotting debris, from time to time caught fire. The tenants who were going to pay us a lot of rent so that we could run the building had not yet been signed up. In fact, the building was half empty and the tenants with whom we did have leases regularly withheld the rent because the air-conditioner did not work. I am happy to report that most of those problems were resolved by the time the museum opened—except for the city-owned lot.

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This time the interface between private will and public policy is probably what got me my next job. I am convinced to this day that my harassment of the mayor's office about the lot is what, in part, motivated Mayor Koch to appoint me the cultural affairs commissioner. To be serious, though, to his credit, he visited the museum, cleaned up the lot and committed city support to help the museum build, long after I left what is now an exquisite glass enclosed sculpture garden.

In one of the most moving gestures and public displays of the power of "we the people", the museum enlisted the imagination of the artist, Houston Conwill, who conceived of a monumental community event to consecrate the meaning of converting this vacant lot into a sculpture garden. Before the garden was built, he invited major figures—among them Toni Morrison, Lerone Bennett, Vernon Jordan—to place a message to the future in time capsules. That day when we buried the time capsules with the messages from the wise elders we enlisted several young people, among them my 12 year old son, now a 32-year-old math professor at Swarthmore College, to actually lay them in the ground while the Boys Choir sang. That day was one of those glorious blue-sky days when everyone looked radiant with hope. I have always felt that that ritual event was our symbolic gesture of the faith we placed in an institution like the Studio Museum.

This function of the museum would be underscored over and over and continues to this day. Healthy communities need forums for public discourse. Over the years the museum would become a place where scholars, poets, musicians and young people gathered for discourse, dialogue and debate.

Not long after I left the museum, the commercial establishments started to arrive and today Harlem along 125th Street is no longer a ruin; rather it is a bustling crowded thoroughfare populated by major national franchises. Place like Dance Theater of Harlem, Harlem School of the Arts and the Harlem Boys Choir separately have become household names and are firmly rooted in the American cultural consciousness, contributing to Harlem's vitality in much the same way as the Studio Museum.

With all that the museum and other institutions uptown have accomplished, why do I still have this nagging sense of the peril, a peril that I feel still clings to Harlem, still hangs in the air? To be sure there are signs everywhere of regeneration but there are just as many signs of problems. Unemployment is still higher uptown than in the rest of NY; rates of AIDS infections are higher; my guess, though I have not looked at the figures,

is that the rate of those on welfare and food stamps is also high compared to the rest of the city; and public school performance still falls behind in many schools, though ironically Harlem also has one of the best school scores as well. Low-income housing is still insufficient and there are still pockets of desolation, though certainly not nearly as many as 25 years ago. Harlem Song, the much-acclaimed musical, had to post closing notices. In spite of its critical success and lines around the block, the show was not breaking even. Under capitalized, the production was rescued at the 11th hour so that it will play its entire run until the end of the year. Its near closing, nonetheless, is a cautionary tale.

Still, there is encouragement. We all remember those spirited Harlem Little Leaguers who captivated America's imagination with their audacious style of playing ball and the ferocious commitment of the adults to those young people. Figure Skating in Harlem, started by a Tisch School Graduate Film alumna, is thriving as are chess and fencing. And last Monday morning's New York Times once again had a story about the re-birth of Harlem, this time in all of the theater groups that are working uptown—all good signs. Coupled with the red flags, they tell us that although we still have work to do, we have come a long way. Our job, however, is far from over and perhaps never will be.

In all of these shifts and permutations in the urban environment what has been the role of colleges and universities? Where were they in all this? Columbia University has been, up to now, notoriously missing in action. Their new president, however, whom you know well, in one bold and imaginative move, has ended Columbia's isolation from its community. The word is that the role of the arts will expand on the part of Columbia into some of the cultural institutions uptown. A very good move. City College, with considerably fewer resources, has made Aaron Davis Hall eminently available to its community, and the hall itself has become part of the constellation of Harlem institutions.

There are other roles for colleges and universities. Internships have long been a staple of the cultural institutions uptown. The growing complexity and sophistication of these cultural laboratories suggests an opportunity to craft more formal collaborations that might yield substantive contributions for students, faculty and cultural institutions alike. Some examples are as follows:

1) *Enlist students from the city's colleges and universities to create strategies for membership or subscription programs.*

2) *Research local legislative offices—congressional, senatorial and at the state level—for new sources of funding.*

**Colleges and universities who take as their mission a pro-active involvement with urban communities have a responsibility to articulate and promulgate those ideas and concepts that affirm productive urban strategies. Policies begin with ideas and affirmative ideas are necessary for affirmative policies not only in the area of historic preservation, economic development and labor and training but cultural development and the arts. Bold partnerships stemming from these ideas are possible and can provide publicly visible models of collaboration and mutual dependence.**

3) *Establish a viable legislative strategy and become liaison to the appropriate office to submit a viable proposal.*

4) *Conduct discipline-based research, e.g. bibliographies, chronologies, permanent collection research, educational materials, background for Playbills etc.*

As Ernest Boyer's Commission on undergraduate education reports, fieldwork, research and discovery are the hallmarks of a good learning environment at research universities.

There is another role, however, for colleges and universities to play, and that is an intellectual and conceptual one. One of the most insidious ideas to emerge in the midst of Harlem's development was the myth of a permanent underclass. More than a description of economic status, underclass was a psychic label that was meant to convey a person caught and trapped in a vicious cycle of welfare, no job, no job skills, little educational opportunity and no plans for a way out. "Permanent," attached to any class status, cuts at the core of what we consider a fundamental attribute of American life: the capacity to change status through hard work, education and public will as manifest in public policy. Colleges and universities who take as their mission a pro-active involvement with urban communities have a responsibility to articulate and promulgate those ideas and concepts that affirm productive urban strategies. Policies begin with ideas and affirmative ideas are necessary for affirmative policies not only in the area of historic preservation, economic development and labor and training but cultural development and the arts. Bold partnerships stemming from these ideas are possible and can provide publicly visible models of collaboration and mutual dependence.

For me, though I now live in the East Village, Harlem will always be my home. I grew up in an inner-city neighborhood in Philadelphia just like Harlem. I have always believed that the great gift of this country is that we have always been able to re-envision, re-imagine ourselves, from the Revolutionary War to the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement. We have invented and re-invented our cities and our very identities as citizens. It is the great challenge of living here. For me, I will always believe in the promise of places like Harlem and will always do whatever it takes, long after the closing notices have been posted, to overcome the perils.

For more information about Imagining America, visit our website at: [www.ia.umich.edu](http://www.ia.umich.edu).

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