

# The State of the Arts in Newark

Jack Tamburri  
63 Parker Avenue  
Maplewood, NJ 07040

The Rutgers Institute on Ethnicity, Culture, and the Modern Experience  
Rutgers University, Newark Campus  
Newark, NJ

September 2001

## *State of the Arts*

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Historically, a creatively-flourishing artistic community supported by participation from the general public has been a clear sign of a healthy city. Ancient precedents for this phenomenon such as BCE Athens and 15<sup>th</sup>-century Florence, as well as modern cities like Pittsburgh and Cleveland, have undergone significant revitalization periods following economic downturns. Revitalizations such as these often revolve around the creation or advancement of artistic initiatives, either publicly- or privately-funded (alongside other municipal-improvement programs). Art of any kind brings with it a certain cachet, a gleam of the modern that endows its owner with respectability and a reputation for being sought after that every city can appreciate. Public art is a major function of every beautification project. Museums and theaters are listed before restaurants and sporting events in guidebooks. The presence of artists' studio spaces causes property values in an area to rise (often beyond the means of the artists who caused the trend in the first place). Art makes a place attractive to everyone. Therefore, art becomes a valuable commodity to a city that wants to change its image.

Newark, New Jersey, is a city in the process of making itself over. In 1847, Newark's first concert hall, aptly named the Newark Concert Hall, opened at Market and Harrison streets. The facility, a state-of-the-art hall designed to accommodate the grandeur and passion of contemporary compositions, was soon given over to a theater company. On October 18, 1997, the New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC), a comprehensive structure containing a majestic, acoustically-advanced concert hall as well as an intimate 514-seat theater, hosted its inaugural performance to a packed house and glowing reviews. In the meantime, Newark had experienced an economic boom, a depression, depopulation, a tercentennial, decimating riots, and numerous subsequent attempts at rehabilitation. The 1967 uprisings, which followed a fifteen-year period of white flight to the suburbs, cemented the city's image as the worst place in America. By 1993, Newark was the car-theft capital of the country, and boasted the highest number of AIDS cases per capita of any city in America. One-third of the residents were on some form of financial aid (Jardim, 1993, p. 66).

According to the city's governmental and artistic bureaucracies, Newark today is experiencing a "Renaissance"—a cultural, social, and hopefully economic resurgence that will restore prestige to the once-glamorous metropolis. City fathers and the developers they employ have been taking a serious look at Newark's arts community as a way to make the city an attractive destination

to upper- and middle-class suburbanites, as well as to improve the quality of life of Newark's indigenous population through artistic expression. Linwood Oglesby, Executive Director of the Newark Arts Council, an organization started in 1981 to provide services to the arts community in Newark, claims that the arts are the "centerpiece" of Renaissance Newark—"I think the current attraction of Newark is because of our arts and cultural institutions." Using the attraction of the arts to restore a city's image is an approach that has been successful elsewhere prior to Newark's current attempt. The most notable of these recent examples has been Pittsburgh, once the leaden heart of the Rust Belt. In 1984, a group of benevolent Pittsburgh industrialists, led by Jack Heinz, chairman of the Heinz Corporation, formed the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust, an arts advocacy group and real estate developer. Over the next fifteen years, the Trust implemented its plan for development, which was "a holistic approach that included streetscaping programs, facade restorations, new cultural facilities, and public open spaces and art projects" (History of the Trust, Online). The Pittsburgh reinvigoration has been mentioned as a model by a number of active parties in the Newark Renaissance community.

The ostensible two-pronged approach to improvement through art has become a source of conflict in Renaissance Newark, as proponents of one technique or the other (bringing in outsiders with money to burn or stabilizing the present community) have clashed over policies and strategies. Victor Davson, the director of Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art (which works with artists and galleries to create opportunities for exhibition) notes, "I think one has to be aware of the context in which one's physical plant is located, because by extension your local communities and neighborhoods become your immediate audience. This issue is complex, and one in which you have a number of constituencies which you must program for. I would hate to think that we were so parochial that our only audience would be our local constituents." Everyone agrees that bringing art to the people is an activity central to the success of the current rehabilitative attempt. The question is, which people?

"Since I've been here, a number of people have made attempts to revitalize Newark. Nothing worked until the PAC." Lawrence Tamburri, Executive Director of the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, came to the area in 1991. At the time the orchestra toured a network of venues around the state, which it still does, without a home base to speak of. When NJPAC opened in 1997, it became the ensemble's new artistic home, mirroring the organization's Newark-located business offices. According to Tamburri, whose sentiments are echoed by Phil Thomas, NJPAC's Vice President of Arts Education, the hall has become the heart of Newark's burgeoning fine arts

community. The Symphony and the PAC have each made an effort to bring hands-on arts education and experience to Newark's maligned public schools. Thomas explains that the arts center has formed a partnership with the school system, and has no intention of ignoring its responsibility as the city's bastion of high culture. "It's very important that Newark experience a strong quality of life for all of the residents of the city. The NJPAC is contributing to that by providing meaningful opportunities for exposure to live theater, live dance, live music, and other forms of cultural expression." Thomas also recognizes the cultural dichotomy that exists in Newark. "[T]hings that are going on in the neighborhoods which have been going on for years within the social and cultural fabric are too often overlooked because they are not part of the 'traditional' cultural community... And then you have the 'traditional' cultural organizations that have the formal programs that they operate, like museums, arts centers, art galleries, cultural centers. So you have two parallel fields of activity that don't often cross or meet with one another." Despite this, Thomas has endeavored to bring art into the communities and the communities into the arts center. However, some think the success of such programs from the viewpoint of the neighborhoods of Newark is dubious.

Dina Levy, a Coordinator for the Newark Community Development Network emphasizes a sense of outright removal from all "downtown" development activities felt by the people of Newark's surrounding areas, that she has noticed while working in the city's West Side Park region. Levy states, "The only thing worth doing is to make sure the folks living [in Newark] have access to the improvements being made." According to her, many of Newark's citizens view developments such as NJPAC and the proposed Nets/Devils arena (to be built in Newark in the next four years) with distrust, seeing them as methods of displacing the city's lowest-income residents and "forcing gentrification." Levy herself has seen a "critical investment going into land, but a minimal investment in the people" being made by the city. Property values increase as developers hired by the city destroy unsightly old buildings and create newer, more expensive ones. As the city builds more housing to attract families and residents of higher means, it demolishes existing structures which, though they were often below standards of safety and health, housed far more people (and people of lower incomes at that) than the new buildings ever could. Levy sees the attraction of a Newark full of mixed-income residents, but is concerned about the current populace being displaced and forgotten in the struggle to draw newer prospects from outside the city.

If NJPAC is the "official" face of Newark's arts community, capable of beckoning moneyed suburban Jerseyites, Elizabeth Ssenjovu's consulting firm Mouse and Elephant, Inc., is working the

other half of the crowd. Ssenjovu is responsible, in a partnership with NJPAC, for Sounds of the City, a weekly free outdoor concert held in the PAC's spacious courtyard. The event hosts an eclectic variety of performance artists, many of whom are from the area, attracts an equally-diverse crowd, and has been hugely successful. Mouse and Elephant also organized the Outdoor Urban Theater Project, a performance-art presentation that was first staged in the Felix Fuld Court, a courtyard within a notorious drug-trafficking area. Initially intended to be an NJPAC presentation, the arts center pulled its support from the project weeks before the first performance. The same thing happened to Newark After Dark, an initiative to bring the Sounds of the City audience into venues within Newark at the end of the Thursday night show. Ssenjovu says that the PAC revoked its funding after two local clubs had already invested in expensive sound equipment in preparation for the event. Mouse and Elephant, Inc., fronted the expenses that NJPAC was initially going to pay. According to Ssenjovu, parties within the corporation were concerned about PAC involvement in events that did not take place at the arts center. This is a legitimate viewpoint for a corporation to take, but Ssenjovu wonders about the level of the organization's stated commitment to the people within Newark that is being displayed when highly popular events like the ones she is involved in are not supported.

Mouse and Elephant also sponsored a public art installation in Military Park created by local artist roycrosse called *no seat in the Park*. To emphasize the dearth of benches and seating areas in the park, roycrosse hung fifteen miniature, brightly-colored chairs from cables suspended between trees. The opening of the exhibit was a significant day for Newark's cultural momentum, according to the attendees. Many, including roycrosse, expressed a hope that such public art would become a fixture of Newark's parks and public spaces. Soon after the opening ceremony, a family of five was caught removing chairs from the trees. This event seemed only to further illustrate the point being made by the installation, but, as Ssenjovu said, "The papers were just thrilled to get the words 'theft' and 'Newark' in the same headline." The installation has been on view since late July, but it has received practically no publicity since the attempted thefts.

The Newark Museum, which has been a fixture of the city since 1909 and underwent its own reinvigoration in the mid 1980s, continues to be one of the most culturally-relevant venues for fine art in the area. By making an effort to host a diverse range of artistic exhibits alongside its collections of colonial-era artwork, scientific materials, a planetarium and the Ballantine House Museum (a restored 1885 mansion), the Newark Museum has tried to avoid becoming a dinosaur. In addition to these initiatives, the museum can claim vigorous art and science education programs

that invite schools from all over the state to participate (or bring the museum to the schools). Add to this the fact that admission is free to the public, and one is faced with an institution that is working to scrub the face and strengthen the heart of Newark.

In terms of its attraction to suburban patrons of the arts, the biggest problem facing Newark today is to the east, across the Hudson River. While Pittsburgh was able to establish itself as the sole cultural Mecca of Western Pennsylvania, Newark must do battle for the interest of its intended audience with the most significant cultural entertainment center on the east coast. Linwood Oglesby admits that it would be “foolish to see [Newark] in a competitive role [with New York City].” He adds, “But I think we’re beginning to see more people looking at New Jersey and looking at Newark who have more respect for the cultural institutions here. When you look at Newark International Airport, one of the busiest in the country, we have visitors here every day. I think we just want to carve out a niche for ourselves.” Victor Davson concurs. “There’s not enough activity in Newark for it to have that kind of separate and discreet identity, and I do think that we need to be part of what goes on in New York City, but on another level, we don’t want to be New York City. I think that artistic activity has to be relevant to the community, so to some extent it has to be localized, it has to honor the context in which it’s originating.”

For a city that is only now climbing out of a social and economic ruin as well as a national reputation as a wasteland, Newark has birthed a number of influential artists. On the national scale, dancer Savion Glover, rappers Redman and Ice-T, poet and activist Amiri Baraka, singer Whitney Houston, and jazz legend Sarah Vaughan all hail from Newark. The city also has a flourishing, lesser-known artistic community. Architect and artist Troy West has worked to cultivate a socially-conscious arts scene, providing low-cost studio space in Newark’s Ironbound district. The city, through the Newark Arts Council, has realized that the presence of artists does more for an area’s visibility and popularity than any beautification program. To this end, the NAC has worked with ArtSpace, a corporation from Minneapolis, to look into providing working and living spaces for artists in Newark. Linwood Oglesby of the NAC says, “We have been very interested in possibly creating some artist space in Newark. Our focus is not just on residential space but on live-work space, live-only space, live-work-exhibition space, exhibition-sell space, all of those as components of the artist’s need. At this point we are looking to have a consultant do a needs assessment to determine what the market is.” It would seem that a potential geographic and city-endorsed Newark arts community is embryonic at this stage. Meanwhile, Elizabeth Ssenjovu culled from the existing arts community to put together the Outdoor Urban Theater project, which as a result became a

vivid and diverse performance including, among other things, a *capoeira* (a Brazilian martial art) demonstration, a poetry slam, and an improvisational, multi-lingual percussion jam. She has nothing but praise for Newark's grassroots cultural community, and wishes that it could receive greater exposure. "That's how you bring art to the people, you do something that involves them, that interests them, that doesn't take them for granted. This is as important, if not more than, attracting an audience outside Newark."

Newark's situation has advanced significantly in recent years. The Performing Arts Center is an unmitigated success, drawing its audience even from New York for the consciously-eclectic programming offered by the New Jersey Symphony and the PAC's own programming department. According to Tamburri, the Symphony has made a point of playing rarely-performed music, premiering pieces by modern composers, and expanding its repertoire to include more culturally-diverse works along with its base of traditional classical music in order to increase its current audience and stimulate the one it already has with the new material. In fact, the New Jersey Symphony, NJPAC, and the Newark Museum have been nationally recognized as leaders in bringing multiculturalism to venues that had previously been considered the strongholds of old white men—classical music and the visual arts. However, a complaint leveled against the PAC has been that it is not doing enough to foster Newark's own cultural growth and artistic communities, despite its visibility. The sense of social displacement felt in Newark's neighborhoods can be compared to the physical displacement caused by the construction of newer, attractive facilities and housing.

Of course, it is unfair to burden NJPAC with a responsibility to support everyone involved in Newark's potential resurgence. Its pockets simply aren't deep enough to please everybody all of the time. The corporate sponsors who back organizations like the PAC, the museum, and the symphony should perhaps take a look at their goals for Newark and how those could be met by community-based organizations. Admittedly, the goal of a corporation in supporting such endeavors is not necessarily to be altruistic, but to increase awareness of a brand, whether it be Johnson & Johnson medical supplies or Prudential insurance, and foster consumer appreciation for the company's good works. So there is the city, which also funds the "major" arts organizations more significantly than it does the grassroots ones, which currently get their local government funding in small grants funneled through Byzantine bureaucracies. Perhaps the city of Newark should take better advantage of its formidable publicity machine when it comes to touting events like *no seat in the Park*, which, as a pioneer of Newark public visual art, deserves at least an examination as a possible precedent for future programs.

For its artistic rebirth to be complete, Newark must cultivate its unique opportunities for expression, such as the Outdoor Urban Theater project and *no seat in the Park*, along with its more widely-known venues and organizations such as NJPAC, the New Jersey Symphony, and the Newark Museum. Public art and performances geared towards people living in Newark are vital pieces of the revitalization strategy that must not be ignored. Art can revive a city, and has done so in the past. For Newark's "Renaissance" to succeed now, it must take advantage of every opportunity for expression that is available. Only by diversifying and increasing the number of artistic voices in the city will Newark have a chance of being heard by the rest of the nation.

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## *Newark on the Web*

### ARTS

[www.njpac.org](http://www.njpac.org) NJPAC  
[www.njsymphony.org](http://www.njsymphony.org) New Jersey Symphony Orchestra  
[www.newarkmuseum.org](http://www.newarkmuseum.org) Newark Museum  
[www-ec.njit.edu/~newrev](http://www-ec.njit.edu/~newrev) Newark Review  
[www.wbgo.org](http://www.wbgo.org) WBGO jazz radio  
[www.njartscouncil.org](http://www.njartscouncil.org) New Jersey State Council on the Arts  
[www.artpridenj.com](http://www.artpridenj.com) ArtPride New Jersey

### BUSINESS

[www.newarkedc.org](http://www.newarkedc.org) Newark Economic Development Corporation  
[www.newark-jobs.com](http://www.newark-jobs.com) Local job directory

### EDUCATION

[www.nps.k12.nj.us/default.htm](http://www.nps.k12.nj.us/default.htm) Newark Public Schools  
[www.graduatecenter-newark.org/inst.html](http://www.graduatecenter-newark.org/inst.html) University Heights  
[rutgers-newark.rutgers.edu](http://rutgers-newark.rutgers.edu) Rutgers Newark  
[www.njit.edu](http://www.njit.edu) New Jersey Institute of Technology  
[www.essex.edu](http://www.essex.edu) Essex County College  
[www.umdnj.edu](http://www.umdnj.edu) University of Medicine and Dentistry

### GUIDEBOOK SITES

[www.guide2newark.com](http://www.guide2newark.com)  
[www.newarknewjersey.com](http://www.newarknewjersey.com)  
[www.gonewark.com](http://www.gonewark.com)  
[www.downtown-newark.com](http://www.downtown-newark.com)  
[www.in-newark.com](http://www.in-newark.com)

### HISTORY

[www.rootsweb.com/~njessex/towns/newark/njhsgc.htm](http://www.rootsweb.com/~njessex/towns/newark/njhsgc.htm) NJ Historical Society  
[www.virtualnewarknj](http://www.virtualnewarknj) Newark history virtual tour  
[www.rootsweb.com/~genepool/nj.htm](http://www.rootsweb.com/~genepool/nj.htm) Founding of Newark  
[www.rootsweb.com/~genepool/newark.htm](http://www.rootsweb.com/~genepool/newark.htm) Outline of Newark history

### MUNICIPAL

[www.newarknj.org](http://www.newarknj.org) City of Newark official site  
[www.newarkpd.org](http://www.newarkpd.org) Newark Police Department

### RELIGION

[www.rcan.org](http://www.rcan.org) Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Newark  
[www.dioceseofnewark.org](http://www.dioceseofnewark.org) Episcopal Diocese of Newark  
[www.newarkabbey.org](http://www.newarkabbey.org) Benedictine abbey  
[www.dioceseofnewark.org/theoasis](http://www.dioceseofnewark.org/theoasis) GLBTS alliance ministry

### SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

[www.spiritofnewark.org](http://www.spiritofnewark.org) Drum and bugle corp. for inner city youth  
[www.citybloom.com](http://www.citybloom.com) Greater Newark Conservancy  
[www.habitatnewark.org](http://www.habitatnewark.org) Habitat for Humanity  
[www.bgcn.org](http://www.bgcn.org) Boys and Girls Club  
[www.newcommunity.org](http://www.newcommunity.org) New Community Corporation

### MISCELLANY

[www.npl.org](http://www.npl.org) Newark Public Library  
[www.newarkbears.com](http://www.newarkbears.com) Newark Bears  
[www.newarkymca.org](http://www.newarkymca.org) Broad Street Y  
[www.sbhcs.com/hospitals/newark\\_beth\\_israel](http://www.sbhcs.com/hospitals/newark_beth_israel) Beth Israel Hospital  
[www.nyctsubway.org/us/newark/](http://www.nyctsubway.org/us/newark/) Newark city subway  
[www.starledger.com](http://www.starledger.com) Star-Ledger