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How the Bronx was Branded

Art moguls, real-estate developers, city institutions, and local elites unite in the name of development for the few, displacement for the many

By [SHELLYNE RODRIGUEZ](#) DECEMBER 12, 2018



Lisa Kahane, Falsas Promesas, The Bronx, NY, 1980

IN July 2015, a slick, minimalist billboard appeared above the Bruckner Expressway in the South Bronx, proclaiming: “South Bronx—Piano District. Luxury Waterfront Living. World-Class Dining, Fashion, Art, + Architecture. Coming Soon.” The billboard featured the logo of Somerset Partners and their business associate the Chetrit Group and was funded by developer Keith Rubenstein. Earlier that year they had purchased land along the formerly industrial Bronx waterfront for \$58 million, a process facilitated by Bronx Borough President Rubén Díaz Jr. As with the renaming of other places in New York City like “SoHo” and “East Williamsburg” in previous decades, the billboard signaled with colonial arrogance that two working-class neighborhoods of color—currently known as Port Morris and Mott Haven—were now destined to be carved into new territories of luxury real-estate development. Two 25-story towers were to be constructed, with market-rate apartments starting at \$3,500 per month. Angry Bronx residents revolted against the proposed name change, and it culminated with the “Piano District” billboard being defaced.

The billboard announced Rubenstein's desire to purchase the South Bronx and build a luxury colony in one of the poorest regions of New York City, which for decades had been associated in mainstream media with stereotypical images of dereliction, crime, and violence. As suggested by the slogan of the billboard, an appeal to "art" would be crucial in transforming the image of the South Bronx from marginal working-class zone to among the most hyped-up frontiers of property speculation in the city—a process led by developers that would unfold with the full support of local and city government. Each of these entities—developers, local elected officials, and the city administration—weaponized the arts to move this initiative further along. It reveals an unnerving intersection of power that positions real-estate developers, the art world, and city government in an alliance to advance gentrification, as a process of systematic repopulation, further into poor and working-class communities.

Rather than simply erasing the cultural history of the Bronx, contemporary neoliberalism has worked to appropriate it in the service of rebranding. Though this process is spearheaded by figures like Rubenstein, Bronx-born elites have themselves been complicit in it, including homegrown celebrities like rapper-producer Swizz Beatz. In turn, the apparently more benign discourse of "social-practice art" is poised to play a role in this process as well, especially through the cultural initiatives of New York City Director of Cultural Affairs Tom Finklepearl, whose work will inevitably be integrated with the pro-developer policies of New York Mayor Bill de Blasio, even as Finklepearl makes appeals to community engagement and local cultural heritage.

During the 1970s, in the wake of the Vietnam War and large-scale deindustrialization, which led to massive unemployment, the Bronx was largely abandoned by city and state agencies. New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan espoused a philosophy of "benign neglect," also known as planned shrinkage, in the borough, which essentially withdrew city services such as sanitation, street repair, and firehouses. What followed was the murderous mass torching of buildings and homes in the Bronx by racist, greedy landlords

looking to collect fire-insurance money from these properties. By 1977, “the Bronx is Burning” would be a catchphrase heard all across the world as it became a symbol of urban decay, sending Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan into the bombed-out borough to pander for votes.

In the midst of this wave of plagues, young people in the Bronx formed a new culture, a radical avant-garde art movement that would shape culture globally: hip-hop. The South Bronx continues to be a beacon of art and culture. Young people there reinvent language, fashion, music, and dance at lightning speed. By the time this genius is “discovered” by some corporate exec, it is already stale, and these young people have moved on to new iterations of joy and survival expressed through this cultural practice.

Despite this genius, honorable cultural distinction reserved for the Bronx has not affected its political economy; marked as the poorest U.S. congressional district in 2010, the Bronx continues to rank among the areas highest in poverty, unemployment, asthma, obesity, and malnutrition in the country. In New York, the importance of the Bronx as the birthplace of hip-hop has only recently been embraced and acknowledged—but as a marketing tool. The hip-hop origin story has become a selling point for luxury developers in the South Bronx.

While the aesthetics of Keith Rubenstein’s first “Piano District” billboard in July 2015 were minimalist and matter-of-fact, the kickoff promotional event for his campaign to rebrand the South Bronx was an extravagant spectacle of the borough’s traumatic history. The event, entitled “Macabre Suite,” was held on Halloween 2015 in one of Rubenstein’s newly purchased warehouses slated for development on the waterfront. It was orchestrated by Salon 94 gallerist Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, who commissioned artist Lucien Smith to create installations in the former piano factory where the party took place. The installations entailed a clichéd reimagining of the South Bronx in the 1970s. Bullet-ridden cars were installed in the space along with hobo-style bonfires in metal barrels. Rubenstein then chartered buses for A-list celebrities and art-world impresarios making their way from Manhattan. The social-media

accounts of attendees swarmed with the hashtag of the night, #thebronxisburning, creating a mockery of the arson committed by slumlords decades earlier.

Backlash ensued in protests and in the press and Rubenstein receded from the media spotlight to let the controversy die down quietly, launching an offshoot of Somerset Partners under the name Somerset Hospitality Group. This entity began systematically opening local businesses in the vicinity of the Piano District project as a way to expedite the gentrification process. La Grata Pizzeria and Filtered Coffee were the first to open in the neighborhood. Locally, he invested in young Bronx designer Jerome LaMaar's boutique 9J, the boxing gym South Box, and the nonprofit art gallery BronxArtSpace. Under the guise of "trying to do right by the community," Rubenstein hired locals to work in his pizzeria and coffee shop. As he told NPR, "People who live in the public housing down the street work at the new pizza place. The boxing gym will offer scholarships to local kids. And residents who've been clamoring for access to the waterfront will finally get it." Rubenstein uses the deceptive rhetoric of "job creation," forming a human shield to ward off criticism, but the relatively few people who are employed by the local businesses Rubenstein floats do not outweigh the massive number of people who will be forced to move because they can no longer afford their apartments. Rubenstein will shamelessly parade around the recipients of his benevolence, but the wages they earn will not be enough to save them from displacement.

The Rubenstein strategy is simple: build a planned community by planting "Trojan horse" businesses in the area to hold space. Artists in search of cheaper rents will inevitably flock to the South Bronx, where the rent is quickly becoming unaffordable for long-time residents but is considered affordable to newcomers who have been priced out of Brooklyn. Struggling artists will inevitably respond, and through no fault of their own set in motion the displacement of the people who live there, before they are eventually displaced too. Rubenstein's shallow investment in local businesses and talent takes advantage of a people who have historically been locked out of pursuing

creative business endeavors. While this is the case, protests and boycotts of those local Bronx residents who crossed the hypothetical picket line and accepted Rubenstein's patronage are obligatory. Rubenstein knows all too well that artists and the poor and working-class people of the Bronx are starved of funding and opportunity and seeks to exploit these circumstances for his own profit. Developer tactics range from "lending" spaces to artists and curators for pop-up shows in new developments built in the middle of poor and working-class neighborhoods to draw in potential renters, to funding start-ups and small-business ventures to create ambiance and selling points for neighborhoods still considered too "edgy," to donating free studio space to up-and-coming artists as a way of generating interest in their new investments.

Positioning himself as a benevolent and pragmatic capitalist with a conscience, Rubenstein insistently suggests that support for local upstarts and artists today might absolve him from travesties committed tomorrow, that charity will exonerate him when he eventually bulldozes and displaces a whole neighborhood. Rubenstein mimes the philosophies touted by progressive liberals who believe that working within the system can produce some kind of "conscious capitalism," but his philanthropy is a smoke screen. With a significant amount of local support Rubenstein was ready to re-announce his venture in the South Bronx. Rather than throw another party himself, he brought in a famous Bronx native armed with his own philanthropic project: rapper-producer Swizz Beatz.

Kasseem Dean, who goes by his stage name Swizz Beatz and is a well-known art collector, joined the board of trustees of the Brooklyn Museum in 2015. In August 2016, Dean was hired as "Global Chief of Creative Culture" for Bacardi and launched the project No Commission, an art fair that showcased the work of emerging artists of color alongside prominent African-American artists. Dean's motto, "If you free the artist, you free the world," was widely applauded. The No Commission model allowed artists to sell their work directly to buyers without paying the high commissions charged by galleries. This commission-free selling took place in the context of a four-day music festival that was free and open to the public, as long as attendees RSVPed on

the Bacardi website. The audience was privy to performances by DMX, Q-Tip, Grandmaster Flash and Melle Mel, Dean's wife Alicia Keys, A\$AP Rocky, Young Thug, Fabolous, and many more. There was a Ferris wheel on-site for partygoers to enjoy, and the outer walls of the venue were covered in a mural by TATS CRU, the legendary graffiti collective. The Bacardi was free.

“I think without the Bronx in the world, a big hole would be missing,” declared Dean nostalgically as he bicycled through his old neighborhood with A\$AP Rocky in a promotional video for No Commission. But this nostalgia did not stop Dean from partying at the Macabre Suite event the year before, reveling in the mockery of the same people who were now the object of his sentimentality. In fact, the No Commission event served as a vehicle for reintroducing the Keith Rubenstein project to the Bronx, helping Rubenstein reframe the site where the Macabre Suite party had occurred. Dean's street cred and social capital served as the ultimate buffer for Rubenstein's project, though his musings about making the arts accessible to Bronx residents weren't reflected in the event. The RSVP on the Bacardi website didn't work for many, and the barricades surrounding the venue with manned NYPD officers certainly made it unwelcome to the people in the neighborhood. As a result of Dean's collaboration with Rubenstein, No Commission was heavily [protested by groups such as](#) Take Back the Bronx, Why Accountability, and a wide variety of folks from the community, among their numbers many outraged New York-based artists of color. When Dean was forced to respond, he applauded the “landlord” (Rubenstein) for pushing back his development project for two months so that Dean could hold the festival (the delay cost Rubenstein only \$2 million). Ultimately, Dean treated the gentrification of the South Bronx as inevitable, and his indifference to how it would affect the borough that raised him was made plain in [an interview](#) he did with *Vibe* magazine about working with Rubenstein: “The plan is already done . . . so let's go out with a blast.” The minute the No Commission event was over, Dean jet-setted out of the Bronx, leaving local artists and activists deeply divided. Some initiated conversations in the community about the implications of a famous hip-hop star from the Bronx lending his street cred to a developer. Others—missing the bigger picture entirely—focused on the fact that Dean

didn't include local Bronx artists in the show. Other artists who did participate resented the activists for protesting what they saw as their big break, since opportunities of this caliber for artists of color are rare. Meanwhile, Rubenstein made a clean getaway, as the debates around these complex issues turned the focus away from his development project.

The potential for social and economic advancement for a few puts countless long-time residents in danger of displacement. Hip-hop culture and its icons, from the oldest pioneers to the youngest up-and-coming emcees, are co-opted by developers who operate in the Bronx with strong government support thanks to Bronx Borough President Rubén Díaz Jr. In 2016 Rubenstein hosted a \$2,500-a-plate fundraiser at his home for Díaz's reelection campaign. Díaz in turn champions gentrification as revitalization and is a long-standing ally of developers. He points to Rubenstein's shiny new Potemkin village as an example of urban progress, and manipulates the desires of the people of the Bronx, who have endured decades of benign neglect. In his cozy relationship with real-estate interests, Díaz is not unusual among New York City politicians. Many of these politicians cower before the Rent Stabilization Association (RSA) and the Real Estate Board of New York (REBNY), two powerful groups that lobby on behalf of landlords and fill the coffers of every politician from the Bronx to the state capital in Albany.

With a Bronx borough president in the pocket, Rubenstein is guaranteed to receive the proper governmental infrastructure necessary to accompany the lifestyle needs and aesthetic markers that define a neighborhood as "up and coming." This appears as the revitalization of public spaces. The city plants new trees, replaces street signs, repairs and repaints roadways, and creates bike lanes. After years of neglect, public services beneficial to everyone are expedited solely because it serves a developer's needs. In 2016, St. Mary's Park, located a 20-minute walk from the Rubenstein property, received \$30 million as part of the NYC "Anchor Parks" initiative. For Mott Haven, this upgrade of St. Mary's Park is being accompanied by a new \$50 million state-of-the-art architecturally avant-garde police station. The new 40th-precinct police station, whose completion is scheduled to coincide with the completion of the

nearby Rubenstein project in 2019, will have a green roof, a courtyard, and a training area. It will also have the first-ever “community meeting room” located within the station itself. Inside the community room, a work of community-engaged art will be installed, commissioned by Percent for Art, a division of the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs, which requires that a percentage of the construction budget of new buildings be used for public art. This art project could be viewed as a step in building a bridge between the community and the police, but what it actually accomplishes is placing art in the service of an abusive and authoritative apparatus of state power that in turn maintains the institutional frameworks upholding the conditions for profitable capital accumulation.

Borinquen Gallo, one of the artists selected to create the installation, contributed a project informed by interviews she conducted with NYPD officers at the 40th precinct and neighboring Bronx residents. Her research culminated in the production of a pair of neon signs. An interior sign, facing the space where officers will hold briefings, will read “Black Lives Matter,” and an exterior neon sign, facing the community room, will read “Blue Lives Matters.” The work is intended to be an equalizer, an effort to bring the police and the community together, but Gallo’s effort collapses under her false assumption that the many generations of people who have lived under the authority of the NYPD, and who are routinely harassed, beaten, and arrested by police, can access equal power in a space located inside a police station. She assumes that the NYPD will not exercise its authority and just unplug the interior sign, leaving the Blue Lives Matter sign blazing and asserting the truth about the power dynamic Gallo glosses over.

The project at the 40th precinct is within the purview of the Department of Cultural Affairs, which is spearheaded by art-world darling and social-practice champion Tom Finkelpearl, who joined the de Blasio administration in 2014 and is charged with overseeing city funding of the arts. In his role as director of cultural affairs, Finkelpearl’s goal is to promote cultural diversity in arts programs citywide; he sees artists and cultural organizations as vital not only for the economic benefits they bring to the city but also for the integral roles

they play in their communities. For this reason, Finkelpearl has championed social-practice art, which he understands as art that is not just isolated on the wall of a museum for judgement by an individual viewer but a form of collective participatory interaction engaging with public matters in an urban context.

To his credit, Finkelpearl understands clearly the dilemma faced by artists trying to pursue their practice while living in New York City. As [he told *Artnet News* in 2014](#),

There are problems for artists related to housing, but the problem in general is that housing is too expensive, and actually I would combine that with the crisis related to student debt . . . But debt is also a big problem for low-income individuals in general. So how do you create coalitions to have artists and folks in the art world understand the coalitions that they should be building with other low-income folks? That's fundamental to the vision of the administration.

However, as director of cultural affairs, Finkelpearl is beholden to the de Blasio administration. While his personal vision may not be aligned with the goal of assisting developers in hyper-development, his ideological underpinnings allow the city to co-opt his ideas and to bastardize them in the service of private development. This co-optation hinges on Finkelpearl's idea of what praxis should be—an idea he derives from the famous community organizer and progressive liberal icon Saul Alinsky. Alinsky espoused “realistic pragmatism,” believing that one should focus on single issues and work within the system to achieve winnable goals. But in this approach, concessions won through struggle will always remain within the power structures that grant them. Finkelpearl could preside over the greatest overhaul in cultural equity this city has ever seen, but instead he risks inadvertently providing the channels for the city to utilize the arts as a path-clearing tool for predatory

development.

In his book *Rules for Radicals*, Alinsky attempts to persuade future community organizers to follow his “pragmatic” approach, which he says must begin from the premise that we must “accept the world as it is.” In order to change it, one must work within the system. He is only interested in concessions that can be gained from the powerful elite, leaving undisturbed the structures that constrict freedom and hold time and space captive.

Writing extensively about the organizing he stewarded with his Back of the Yards organization, Alinsky propels the role of the organizer to the forefront as “the architect and engineer” of campaigns. This hierarchical positioning of the organizer over the community is also found within most union organizing, where bureaucratic negotiations are managed by a weak leadership that is uncomfortably cozy with the bosses. This absence of antagonism renders the unions largely powerless vis-à-vis their employers. Nonprofit organizations have also adopted Alinsky’s model of “single-issue,” service-oriented community work administered by a paid staff who, in order to keep their jobs, must prioritize the desires of the foundations that fund them over the needs of the community. At their core, philanthropic foundations aim to determine the priorities and limits of community organizing. Foundations requiring grant recipients to focus on a single issue is a tactic, and the Alinsky model of organizing follows suit.

In his classic 1969 text *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*, Robert L. Allen details the strategic interests of these powerful foundations, such as the Ford Foundation, the Urban Coalition, and the National Alliance of Businessmen, in the fight for civil rights and black liberation. The nonprofit foundation, he writes,

was designed to counter the potentially revolutionary thrust of the recent black rebellions in major cities across the country. This program was formulated by America’s corporate elite—the major owners,

managers, and directors of the giant corporations, banks, and foundations which increasingly dominate the economy and society as a whole—because they believe that the urban revolts pose a serious threat to economic and social stability.

This mixture of counterinsurgency on the one hand and accommodation and integration on the other haunts what we now know as the “nonprofit industrial complex,” defined by Dylan Rodríguez as “set of symbiotic relationships that link together political and financial technologies of state and owning-class proctorship and surveillance over public political intercourse, including and especially emergent progressive and leftist social movements.” This helps explain why Finkelpearl’s Department of Cultural Affairs has commissioned artists to decorate a new NYPD station house in the Bronx: Both departments are arms of the same apparatus.

The Rubenstein development in the South Bronx is well underway and has [been sold](#) to Brookfield Properties for \$165 million. Rubenstein remains in the South Bronx, as he has opened offices for Somerset along the Bruckner and now owns other properties in the area. The coffee shops are open and the real estate is booming. Ultimately, the wave was too strong to escape, and the people in the Bronx scramble now to get ahead of any city planning sessions for rezonings to try to stop these developer giveaways in their tracks. What developers, city officials, and politicians have ultimately taken from us is space.

In New York City, artists experience this crisis of the disappearance of space alongside other New Yorkers in many ways. Less space on the subway, which is constantly delayed and in disrepair. There is less space for work, as opportunities to sustain our lives continue to disappear and our hours and budgets are trimmed while the rent on our studios and our apartments increases.

Like many other major cities, New York has been reorganized into roommate-

driven living systems where we barely restore our bodies, in order to repeat the process of sustaining our lives so we might continue to prop up the structures that continue to allot less time to actively pursue leisure or, more importantly, to organize and agitate for our freedom. How would an artistic practice that aims to disrupt alienation appear in our hallways, elevators, and all the spaces we share in our communities? What if these considerations were practiced outside of the art world, without foundation grants or institutional support as just an act toward freedom? Rather than only thinking about the aesthetic qualities of space, artists can aim to topple the neoliberal scaffold that holds capitalism steady above us, like a firmament.



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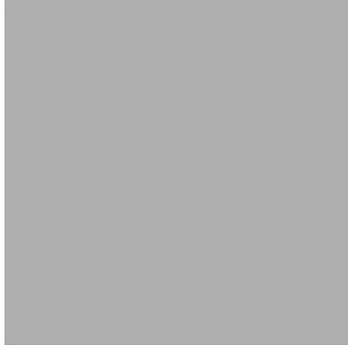


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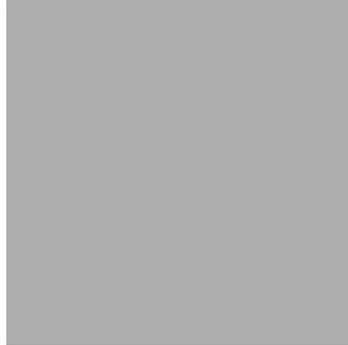


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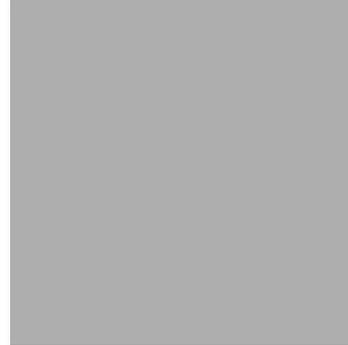


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