



# NEW VISIONS FOR NEW YORK STREET FAIRS

New York's street fairs need a makeover. They are bland, repetitive and don't reflect what's unique about New York. In order to kick off a discussion about how these staples of summer could better serve New Yorkers, the Center for an Urban Future asked two dozen innovators from a variety of fields for their visions for improving the city's street fairs.

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The Center for an Urban Future is New York City's home for independent research and innovative thinking about key issues affecting the five boroughs. For more information or to sign up for our monthly e-mail bulletin, visit [www.nycfuture.org](http://www.nycfuture.org).

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New York's street fairs certainly tap into a deep-seated desire on behalf of many residents and visitors to be outside during the hot days of summer, to stroll along city streets that would normally be closed to pedestrians, to people watch and maybe even indulge on a massively over-buttered cob of corn. But for far too many New Yorkers, summer would be even more enjoyable without them.

The city's street fairs get under the skin of countless New Yorkers for a variety of reasons: there are so many of them that they quickly blend together; a majority of the vendors sell the same bland merchandise, such as tube socks, sunglasses and gyros; a handful of neighborhoods are inundated by the fairs, with a new one popping up almost every week; and with nearly a dozen street fairs on some weekends, the multiple street closures make driving or taking a cab through the city a nightmare.

Even New Yorkers that have a soft spot for street fairs generally agree: they could be so much more.

Last summer, the city's Street Activity Permit Office approved 321 applications for street fairs, and as in years past most of those events were completely indistinguishable from one another. Professional production companies like Mardi Gras Festival Productions or Mort and Ray Productions roll out events like microwaves in an assembly plant. They obtain the necessary permits, sign up vendors and secure corporate sponsorships. This can be a valuable service for the community groups and non-profits that sponsor the fairs, but it too often results in events that have little or nothing to do with the neighborhood they're in.

In a 2006 report, the Center for an Urban Future concluded that street fairs reflect little of what's unique about New York, finding that only 20 vendors held nearly 50 percent of the permits to sell food at city street fairs, and that a quarter of all vendors who sell merchandise are not even based in the five boroughs. Since then, the Bloomberg administration has made some welcome changes, such as cutting back on the total number of street fairs, consolidating the different bureaucracies overseeing event permits in one department—the Office of Citywide Event Coordination and Management—and enabling online applications for neighborhood groups and non-profits seeking permits for street fairs (though individual vendors still have to apply to the different city departments on their own). Although those modifications could no doubt help city officials improve both the quality and placement of many street fairs, there is still a lot of work to do. For one, the blanket moratorium on all multi-block and multi-day street fairs, while well-intentioned, virtually guarantees that no new sponsoring organizations or innovative ideas and themes can enter the fray.

Street fairs should be a great opportunity for neighborhood groups and qualifying non-profits to showcase distinctive neighborhoods and communities in the city. They could provide a platform for any number of local businesses, artists, entrepreneurs and cooks—and perhaps even serve as a testing ground for talented amateurs interested in one day starting a business. But to realize the promise of street fairs—and turn around the negative perception that so many New Yorkers have about these events—the Bloomberg administration needs to re-evaluate the entire structure of street fairs and take steps to ensure that the sponsoring organizations have the incentives and tools they need to put on more interesting and meaningful events.

As a way of kicking off that discussion and generating ideas, the Center for an Urban Future asked two dozen innovators and thinkers from a variety of fields to share their vision for remaking New York City street fairs. We interviewed everyone from the founders of successful public markets like the New York City Greenmarket, Union Square Holiday Market and Brooklyn Flea to the creator of Chowhound.com, the organizer of Red Hook Food Vendors and musician David Byrne, who has done some art installations involving New York City streets.

The pages that follow include excerpts from our interviews with these and other urbanists, open space experts, real estate developers, food critics and artists. The interviews include a wealth of creative ideas for improving street fairs, from suggestions for specific festivals to systemic fixes in the permitting process. But though it wasn't necessarily our intent one theme popped up again and again in all of our interviews, and that was the need for street fairs to tap into what is already there and unique in New York City neighborhoods, whether it's the local merchants, industry groups, cultural organizations, artisans, home chefs, gardeners or kids. With the right rules and incentives, street fairs could be a great opportunity for city neighborhoods to show off.

**Eldon Scott** is the director of Urban Space Management, a London-based firm that established the popular holiday markets in Union Square, Grand Central Terminal and Columbus Circle.

**What do you think about New York's street fairs?**

People do seem to like to get out and walk down a street that's been closed off and be with other people. But sometimes the experience is less than the promise. Some are better than others. A good example is the Atlantic Antic [on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn]. It functions very well as a gathering of local businesses and residents, as well as outside vendors and visitors.

**What's good and bad about street fairs in general?**

Some of them feel hollow. One major problem is the current common perception of street fairs, in terms of the ubiquity of certain types of merchandise and food that are offered in most of them. Successful street fairs should bring a mix of customers and this really depends upon the organizers. Local residents can enjoy products and food not usually found in their neighborhoods, as well as discover local merchants because, for whatever reason, they have not made the choice to step inside someone's store or restaurant. People from other areas, as well as tourists, can have the opportunity to experience the ambience particular to each neighborhood in the city. The people-watching and camaraderie is great and it's really hard to recreate this on the Internet.

**What's good about the Atlantic Antic?**

The mix is good because there's something for everyone. A lot of local businesses get involved, which you don't always find in street fairs. And you seem to get a lot of the local cultural and community groups involved. That's one of the better things about street markets, the way they can truly hone in on a neighborhood. Then it becomes an event that celebrates that area.

**What would you do to improve street fairs?**

I would make an effort to tie them more closely to the communities they're in. Even if it ends up being a mix, there'd be some more connection to local businesses and cultural groups that are there.

**The holiday markets you run work, in part, because you don't just allow any vendor to participate; you look for unique merchants and strive for an interesting mix. Could we do this with street fairs?**

The organizers could be more careful and selective in curating the street fairs. But it's a real balancing act of curating and serving as broad an audience as possible. You are providing merchandise that should appeal to a whole cross section. It doesn't mean getting rid of ev-

erything, but I don't think they should be full of all up-scale items. Not everyone wants to buy that stuff. It is a public street. I don't think it's terrible that they have a real range of products.

**You've done a lot of research about the history of markets in New York. Is there any lessons we can draw from that history to improve street fairs?**

There's a really interesting history of street markets that go back to the founding of city. The first markets in New York were actually on the streets. For instance, they used to trade in front of the Dutch West India Company's storehouses. The very first municipally authorized markets were on storehouses on the Battery. American Indians and farmers would trade along the shoreline, which is why Fulton Market and others sprung up along the edges. The markets in the 17th century worked very differently from today. They really were where goods were traded and they were a major part of the supply chain. People really did go buy their dinner or staples at these markets. People don't do that today to the same degree, if at all. Even in the 19th Century, you had pushcarts selling items that were more vital to people's everyday lives than we see today. But companies like Woolworth were saying that's not good for our business. It resulted in the Municipal market system, which includes the Essex Street Market. For the most part, the city pushed those uses to markets or private leased space. The modern street market is a completely different animal. It is more of a festival and gathering place. Street markets no longer serve as a place to buy staples or necessities.

**So then, are street fairs and public markets expendable today?**

Actually, in the age of the Internet, I think markets have an increasingly important place in the city. People still want to get out and be with other people. That may change in another generation, but it is still an important function of cities. Markets are a big part of that. People can sit all day long in apartments and write articles, but a lot of them end up at Starbucks. It's not because they need coffee, but because they want to be around other people. It's important for cities that those gathering places aren't just in private sector, but in public spaces. New York is primarily made up of public streets and parks and plaza. Along with the subway system, the streets are really the dominant public interface in the city. They really are the arteries that bind the city together. As imperfect as they are, street fairs really are a great way to get a big cross section of people to hang out.

**Suketu Mehta** is a New York-based journalist who chronicled the life of India's largest city in his nonfiction book *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*, which was a finalist for the 2005 Pulitzer Prize.

**What's your impression of New York City street fairs?**

They are not good. I've lived in Paris, Bombay, Calcutta and the bazaar is an incredibly vibrant place. But here, most of the vendors tend to be the same, whether on Washington Place in the Village or Cobble Hill in Brooklyn. There aren't enough local vendors. And much of it here is just about buying and selling.

**What's missing?**

We have this incredible ethnic diversity in this city. This city probably has more kinds of diverse food than any place on the planet, but this is not represented in the street fairs. The street fairs should tap into the traditions of immigrant groups in neighborhoods where they live. For instance, there are public festivals in South Asian communities that could be linked to street fairs. I would like to see a Holi festival in Jackson Heights. That's a celebration which generally takes place in March or April where people throw colors at one another. The same could be done to tie in local themes in communities where there are a lot of Haitians, Colombians and other groups. And it shouldn't just be food and merchants. Many of these cultures have traditions of carnival entertainment. For instance, among South Asians, there is a tradition of henna painting. You could have a street fair in Jackson Heights where women could have their palms painted with henna. There could be a Latin American street fair where you learn how to dance the tango. This would be something that really gets people into the street. We have the most heterogeneous city, certainly in the U.S. But the street fairs here that I see go nowhere in taking advantage of this heterogeneity.

**How should street fair organizers take advantage of this diversity?**

It can't just be a generic street fair, which is what we see now. They've got to be linked to neighborhoods and the people living around it. If fairs were tied to immigrant groups, it could be just a matter of getting local restaurant owners, vendors and community elders to have a mix of selling food and entertainment and music and some kind of education about the community. One of the amazing things about New York City is that you can see the world for the price of a Metrocard. I often take people to Jackson Heights or Brighton Beach because they're curious. But the only way to begin to know these cultures is to go into ten different stores and try to glean what you can. That's great, but a street fair in these neighborhoods could be an easy way for the rest of the city to participate in—and learn about—different cultures. The fairs are open, on the street and welcoming. People from the community wouldn't mind it if you just stroll through there without buying anything.

**Don't some street fairs incorporate elements of this now?**

The India Independence Day Parade basically ends up in a street fair. People set up booths selling everything from samosas and saris to phone cards and insurance. It's wildly successful. There's a huge crowd that ends up there. So, we do have really successful street fairs in New York; they're just not called street fairs. The West Indian Day Parade has all elements of a successful street fair.

**You've written extensively about Bombay and that city's vibrant street culture. How are things there different from New York's street fairs?**

The most fascinating part of Bombay—or Marseille, for that matter—is the bazaars, made up of very small stores selling all kinds of things. What makes bazaars work is that there's not one dominant commercial enterprise. It's all incredibly local. The street fair could be a bazaar or souk set up for only one day, where you have this cheerful energy of small-scale transactions.

In Bombay, and a lot of other cities, there's hyper-local involvement in the fairs. As a child growing up in Bombay, we had building level street fairs. They were called fun fairs. They were the highlight of the year. All the people in the building would come down and set up tables. Some of the adults and kids would sell things we made in our homes. My friends and I opened a betel leaf concession. We mostly sold to residents of our own building. It was the equivalent of kids having a lemonade stand here. Another thing in the fun fair, we had games and little amusements, like throwing darts at balloons. We donated the proceeds to charity. I realize that this model is not entirely practical in New York, but what I'm arguing for is combination of a street fair and a block party.

**Do you have any specific suggestions for city officials?**

I'm not really familiar with the licensing of street fairs, but it needs to be much more open to local vendors. The greenmarkets somehow manage to bring in farmers from New York State and New Jersey. Everyone loves the greenmarkets, but very few people love street fairs the way they're set up in New York today. We have to be more relaxed about them. Americans love control. Paris seems to be much more democratic about the kinds of vendors they have in street fairs. They somehow have managed to bring in much more heterogeneity. Maybe we shouldn't be so afraid of the bazaar or souk.

## Are there any other interesting street fair concepts that you've seen in other cities?

In Paris, one day last summer, we stepped out of our hotel and the entire city was singing and dancing. It was part of the La Fête de la Musique street festival that happens there every June. Street musicians operate

without a permit throughout the city. Stages were set up all over the city. There are hundreds of local bands, not just French musicians, but Arab and Indian ones. It was really magical. For one evening, the noise ordinances were put in abeyance and there was this amazing festival of music. This would be great for New York.

**Eric Demby** is a co-founder of the Brooklyn Flea, an acclaimed market that features hundreds of vendors of antique and repurposed furniture, handmade crafts, art, and fresh food.

## What's missing from summer street fairs in New York?

I would want there to be more of an experiential aspect to them rather than just a purely commercial one, so that when you went to a street fair you got some sense of where you were, meaning the neighborhood and the character of that neighborhood and the kinds of people that are there. The opportunity for people who live in the same neighborhood to interact and to have some sort of platform for interacting, whether its food or dancing, is a good thing that I want there to be more of. A lot of street fairs pose as that, but they're not really that, at least the ones that I've seen. They take advantage of existing foot traffic in the summer for blatantly commercial purposes. They call it a street fair, but really it's a commercial activity that has the benefit of some long standing permit. That's my sense of them.

## Since local non-profits and neighborhood groups use these events to raise money, the city will sometimes defend them by saying they bring money back to the community.

Benefiting a neighborhood group or nearby non-profit, I'm sure, is an easy political out for the operator, but I'm not sure that's enough to say they directly affect the community or improve the community.

## Should the city or community have a bigger role in determining the specific character of street fairs, who is allowed to sell, what the purpose of the fair is, and so on?

From a business perspective, getting consecutive blocks on the street in New York City is an incredibly valuable opportunity. They're not even a store. People don't have to go into your store; they're automatically inside your business by just walking down the street. That's a really valuable commodity that should come with some strings attached. So the community, I think, has the right to place certain requirements on what

these events look like and feel like. And for a city and an administration that has made innovative street use such a high priority, revisiting how street fairs operate seems like a golden opportunity to solidify a legacy of taking back the streets for pedestrians and non-vehicle activity.

## What do you think should be done to improve street fairs?

Street fairs could have much more positive impact if the operators cared more about the details of the event and how it's run, to create a community spirit inside a public space. But to do that I think you have to find a way to open them up to other operators, to more competition. Finding space to do public markets in New York is very challenging. And honestly doing them in the same place every week like we do with the Brooklyn Flea is also challenging. It would be great to be able to move around, and I think a lot of our vendors would cherish the opportunity to sell in a different part of the city every weekend. So I think opening them up to more competition is really the best way to improve them, because there are so many markets of all different kinds opening up all the time right now. There was just another article in the Times food section about the Greenpoint food market and the local artisanal food producers there. There is a market over here and a market over there; some of them really take off and get a reputation and some of them stay small and local. But the drive right now is definitely there, all over the city, to have these public space gatherings. And I think street fairs would be a really easy way to capture and build on that spirit, because ultimately, I think, it's a really positive spirit—it's entrepreneurial. If you do street fairs in a way closer to how the Brooklyn Flea operates, where it's viewed as a business opportunity rather than just a moneymaker, they could start to make a really positive impact on the city and city neighborhoods. You could get a bunch of innovative vendors and give them one weekend to sell their stuff; then maybe two of them really catch on and get noticed.

**Jim Leff** is a co-founder of the popular website Chowhound.com, now run by CBS. He has written extensively about under the radar restaurants and street vendors all over New York City, including the now well-known Arepa Lady in Jackson Heights.

**Why do you think so many New York City street fairs are so boring and generic?**

It's not just New York City street fairs, it's street fairs all over the country and continent. In 2006, I did a report where I drove 11,000 miles for two months eating all over North America and I found amazing treasures in all these little places nobody has ever heard of. About once a week I'd find myself at a street fair and I'd be all excited— I found one in Nova Scotia, upstate New York and Georgia—and every single fair that I found was exactly the same as the last one. There's the fried bread guy and the tubes socks guy. It's like a caricature of a shopping mall.

**Why is it so hard to put on a street fair, do you think? Why can't people just cook cupcakes and bring them out to the fair to raise money for the community?**

If you want someone to come to your fair and sell home cooked cupcakes, there are a few things you have to do: You have to find someone who makes really good cupcakes, which isn't a trivial matter. There are a lot of people who can make cupcakes, but who makes the good ones? And once you find them: How sure are you that they're going to show up on time at your fair, and that they're going to have enough cupcakes, and that they're not going to get huffy, because they don't like the cigarette smoke coming from the carnies in the booth to their right? Or that they're going to be harsh to the customers, or that they're going to give you a hard time on the split of the money, or that they're going to get confused or anxious? All these things are very very high maintenance with an unproven quantity. So what people do is, they opt for the sucky stuff that's proven. There are a few companies that bring fairs to towns all over the country. They're extremely professional. They will show up, and they will have their usual stable of vendors. Fried dough will be eaten—it's a proven economic model. These are people with lots of experience, so if you want to have a street fair you can absolutely kill yourself trying to handhold everybody through the process or you can call Vito at the carnie operation and have it all done for you.

**You probably know more than anybody about the diversity of food options in New York, the street vendors in particular. Why are they not getting involved?**

Because of all the factors I just discussed. Look at it this way: why do we stay in Holiday Inns when we go to a strange city, rather than find some charming little place? Because if you find some charming little place you might find a hair on your pillow. Things could go wrong. In a Holiday Inn nothing goes that wrong—it doesn't go that right, but it doesn't go that wrong. It's the same thing with food. Why do people eat at McDon-

ald's rather than some charming little place? Because you can't always count on the charming little place. You can't predict how the encounter is going to go. The food could be terrible, you could get food poisoning, whatever. So the average person settles; they take the easy way out and go to McDonald's. In terms of street fairs, it's the same thing. I could tell you about a hundred wonderful charming vendors in New York, but they're not necessarily equipped to sell at street fairs. A certain amount of handholding is required. Would you like me to describe actual bits of food that come off grills and stuff? I could do that.

**Sure. That'd be great.**

The best vendor I know is the Arepa Lady, who is a saintly Colombian woman who grills Colombian corn cakes called arepas. Now, this is slightly dicey territory, because arepas are actually one of the generic stupid commodities you get at street fairs. But the street fair arepas that we all know and loathe are lousy commercial products filled with sugar and margarine. The Arepa Lady cooks the real thing and she cooks for her paisanos on the street in Jackson Heights, the Colombian neighborhood in Queens. And she imbues them with butter and cheese and love. It's pretty much the best food I know in New York. However, she's an exception because she actually does sometimes show up at organized events. She has a little bit more experience in it, so she's more trustworthy than some.

**Are there good street fairs or markets that we can highlight and maybe learn something from?**

There's a summer street food fair in Toronto called the World Café at Harbourfront Centre. It has lots of different ethnicities and lots of different food and the quality is really good. But, you know what, as I've eaten around it, I notice the hallmark of one overarching intelligence, someone who did the legwork to find the really good stuff. It's hard to find good stuff, and it's even harder to find someone who can find it. That's the ideal. Another example is the soccer fields in Red Hook Brooklyn. Now there's a heartfelt attempt to gather really good authentic food and the city has done everything it can to murder the operation; it's been an absolute nightmare.

**What would your ideal street fair look like? Take your own neighborhood in New York or one you like and tell me more about what you think would work there.**

First, don't assume that street vendors are the best people to provide food for street fairs. Anybody can bake a pie. And, indeed, how about pies? When was the last time you saw a really good pie at a street fair? That would be great. Second, you have to make it specific.

One of the cool things about New York is, we have tons of ethnicities and tons of people who are pretty savvy about it. So take Sunset Park. Sunset Park is mostly southern Mexican stuff, it's Oaxacan and Chiapan food. So I would have a southern Mexican street fair, and that level of specificity makes it a lot more tasty and interesting. Or you could have a Turkish street fair on Coney Island Avenue, on the southern part of it, or do like the guys in Toronto do and just have people come eat the world in one place. Or you could do pan South American and spotlight Colombian, Ecuadorean, and Peruvian vendors in Jackson Heights. In general, though, I think it's best to be as specific as you can in New York, because it's such a savvy city and such a rich full city that the more narrow you make it the more catchy it becomes—and also the more hooky it is for journalists. If you're having a southern states of Mexico street fair in Sunset Park that is about one hundred billion times more likely to get press than a Mexican street fair. We certainly see that on Chowhound. If you go on Chowhound and ask 'Where is the best Italian food in Manhattan' nobody will answer you. But if you ask 'Where's the best place that makes Tuscan food from the 1950s,' you'll get a hundred replies. The opposite extreme are the sort of caricatured ethnic festivals from a previous era, like the San Gennaro festival in Little Italy. I wouldn't go to such a festival now. I'd want to go to a hipper, more authentic and specific festival, like with food from Abruzzo or Palermo, or maybe ethnic Korean food from China. To figure out which groups have a critical mass in which neighborhood, it's easy to find Census data, or if you want something more up to date just come ask me, because people who eat out a lot in New York recognize immigration patterns before the Census people do.

**I understand you're skeptical about any role the city could play to encourage these events. But couldn't it at the very least get out of the way a little bit and streamline the permitting process?**

No. It's deliberately that way. The city makes people run through things, permits and all that, just so that someone who makes a really wonderful blueberry pancake doesn't have a chance, and so that the guy who is an absolute octopus of business does, because we're set up for the octopuses of business. Let me tell you a story. For years the Arepa Lady was being harassed by the police. She didn't have the right permits or something. I went to my local councilperson in Jackson Heights, and I gave her a dossier on this woman. I said here is a woman who is maybe the best chef in New York, a cultural treasure like one of those samurai sword makers in Japan. For her community she is a symbol and rallying point; the Colombians love her. And for everyone else it's one reason they come to Jackson Heights to eat. Furthermore, she's getting us press in Queens, because everybody is writing about the Arepa Lady, how great she is, and that sort of thing has transformed Queens into sounding like a foodie vacation destination. So I told the councilwoman this, and told her that bureaucratic issues were making it impossible for her to do what she does. She was extremely sympathetic, and fully captivated by this homegrown local story, but the best she was able to do was to provide a little nametag or badge. And it's helping a little bit; the cops are laying off a little. But she's still being harassed, and it's still a touchy situation. So if someone this famous, loved, acclaimed, and feted in the press—a bona fide neighborhood landmark—can hardly sell her damned corncakes undisturbed, even with such a powerful political ally, obviously we need something more revolutionary than just some streamlining in the process.

**David Byrne** is the co-founder of the Talking Heads and a member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. As a long-time bicycling enthusiast and activist, he wrote *Bicycle Diaries* in 2009 and designed several bike racks for New York City streets.

**What do you think of a majority of New York street fairs?**

Right now when I think of street fairs I think of tube socks and generic Italian sausages in neighborhoods that aren't Italian in any way, shape or form. The street fairs have become, in many people's view, a movable business, a scam, where the same stands simply relocate but never change. They seem to embody the corruption in our city. In Manhattan, we miss the 25th Street flea market — even though in later years one

had to pay to get in! Can you imagine paying to enter a store? But other than block events that are put on by local residents and businesses, I wouldn't miss these typical street fairs if they went away completely.

**Do you have any suggestions for street fairs?**

Maybe more flea markets and block events is the way to go, provided the items relate to said block. How about a flea market on Governor's Island?

**Karen Seiger** is a blogger and the author of *Markets of New York City: A Guide to the Best Artisan, Farmer, Food and Flea Markets*.

**As someone who has traveled around touring markets and writing about them, what do you think of the majority of street fairs in New York?**

One of the keys to the success of a market is that it must be relevant to its local community. I don't know what the economics of the street fairs are. I don't know how much money a non-profit or neighborhood organization makes at the end of the day after working with one of these larger organizing groups. But I do know that a lot of these events are not attracting local people. And because of that, I have to think they're leaving a lot of sales potential on the table. If I see the street fair on Bleecker Street or Greenwich Avenue, I just avoid it. I also know that the local shop owners along Bleecker Street have told me that they actually lose business, because their regular customers on a Saturday can't be bothered with the crowds and the trash and the obstructions on the sidewalks caused by a street fair. That is bad for the community, and it's bad for the local businesses. It would seem logical for these organizers to reach out to artisans to bring a bit more authenticity and relevance to their events. There are a bunch of organized local artisans who are incredibly talented and dynamic, and they're hungry and dedicated to local markets. To coordinate through an organized group of artisans would be a reasonable, easy first step in improving these fairs. A lot of them have a huge following, so they could attract people from all over the city.

**Do you have any particular groups in mind?**

Well, I have one. They're very impressive. They're called the {NewNew} and they all started by selling their work on Etsy, the online marketplace for handmade crafts. Now they have become an organized group. They get a good amount of support from Etsy, the company, but they are all locally based in and around New York, and they organize their members and set up tents at many fairs and markets in the city. It can be expensive to rent a market booth, and if you're just starting out with jewelry or soap or handmade skirts, the {NewNew} enables you to share a tent. That saves you money obviously but it also gives you an opportunity to sell your items and get exposure and learn about selling at the markets. The Hester Street Fair that just opened has a designated space for the {NewNew}, and the {NewNew} manages all the vendors in that space. In that case, the market benefits from having a group of rotating artisans selling their wares every weekend, the artisans win because they get a really good space at an exciting market at a reduced rate. And the {NewNew} wins because that's their mission and purpose—to support their members. It is a group that is growing organically, and the quality of handmade crafts they offer is really outstanding.

**The city has placed a moratorium on all multi-block and multi-day street fairs, which means if your organization didn't put on a fair last year you can't put on one this year either. But when I hear about dynamic organizations like the {NewNew}, it makes me think they should be giving other organizations a chance.**

Yes, the {NewNew} also puts on their own events. They just did the Handmade Cavalcade, which had about 1600 visitors in one day. And it was in a lonely corner of Williamsburg and wasn't right off the subway. You had to make an effort to get there. But all the artisans who showed—there were about 25—had their own following. They call each other and communicate with me and I pass on the word about their events. So it's social networking at its finest, and a great use of the Internet. They have a lot of experience putting on smaller events, so the leap into something a little bigger wouldn't be that daunting. The people who put on the Hester Street Fair too—they had no experience with a fair before they started, but boy they put on a great market. They had 11,000 visitors on opening day in April and had to hold people outside for a little while because they're only allowed to have 500 people at a time in that space.

**We have been talking to some of the people about the exceptions out there, the street fairs that are really doing the neighborhood a service. They're local and they're quirky and they're valuable. The Atlantic Antic is always mentioned as one. There's one in Ditmas Park and there's one on the Lower East Side all about pickles.**

Oh Pickle Day, yes, by the New York Food Museum. There's also one called the BBC—which stands for Bedford-Barrow-Commerce Block Association—right here in the West Village. People rave about that, and local stores do indeed participate, opening their doors and selling their products on the sidewalk. I've been to the Jane Street Sale. The Jane Street Sale is like a swap meet, or a yard sale, kind of like the London Terrace yard sale, which is impressive. But the Atlantic Antic really blew me away. It was like a street fair, but one where you actually recognized the vendors and the shops. And, yes, you could get your curly fries and funnel cakes and Italian sausages, but at the same time the garden store has an incredible display in front of their shop. There are shops that sell crafts handmade in Brooklyn that opened up their store to the sidewalk. They get the space right in front of their store. There are artisans from all the other markets represented, the skirt-maker from the Brooklyn Indie market (Fofolle) and the soap-maker from Artists and Fleas. So people really get excited about it and they feel like they're a part of the event and the community. The Atlantic Antic had this feeling of a Manhattan street fair, and yet 60

percent of the people participating are from the neighborhood. They seem to have cracked that nut quite well.

**It seems like the city could step in somewhere along the way in this process and at the very least require whoever's putting on the street fair to consult with the local businesses.**

New York is a city made up of small neighborhoods. The Village really is a village. I know everybody in the street. And friends on the Upper East Side have their stores and their neighbors and they know every dog in their neighborhood. And so when something like a big street

fair just plops right in the middle, it disrupts the neighborhood so much. I think there has to be some kind of benefit to the community to justify all that disruption. The sponsoring organizations really need to look at it a little differently and instead of saying 'Alright get off Eighth Avenue, we're shutting it down for the day,' how about they say: 'Hey everybody, we have this big opportunity, we're going to give you a discounted space in front of your store, and we're going to work with this wonderful co-op of local artisans, so if you want to join let us know and come on out.' It would take more effort, but I have to think it would earn more money in the end for everyone and build goodwill in the neighborhood.

**Cesar Fuentes** is the executive director of the Red Hook Food Vendors and the founder of the new Red Hook Mercado, an innovative market that brings together local merchants and a rotating cast of critically acclaimed ethnic food vendors.

**What do you think of the majority of street fairs in New York?**

I like to think that right now there's a whole movement going on in terms of street fairs and markets. One of the largest fairs in the country, the New Jersey State Fair, contacted us in January and said they were looking for vendors. This is a very traditional fair that has been going on for decades, but by asking us to participate they acknowledge the need for something fresh and something different.

**From my perspective, it would be nice if the operators in New York City would do a better job of reaching out like that. What do you think?**

Well, you know, I think the ball is starting to roll. Amazing events like the Vendy Awards, organized by the Street Vendors Project, have helped a lot and brought an awareness that there is a lot more to street vending and street fairs than just your average hotdog vendor. But you have to look at this in several ways. When you go to a street fair and you see the same Italian sausage vendor—at some point in time those vendors too were a part of this immigrant wave that brought something new. Slowly but surely this food was incorporated into the mainstream and has become part of the food culture that makes America the way it is—it's beautiful. Now you see pupusas from Central America, tacos in different variants from Mexico, South American ceviches or Colombian arepas, and in a way those goodies are like the Italian sausages and pizzas you see everywhere. The problem we have with a large number of street fairs is the lack of diversity. The managers know hotdogs are going to sell and pizza is going to sell, so they stick with it. We would love to see more variety. We would love to see the actual food that represents the melting pot that is New York City.

**How did you do it in Red Hook? How have the vendors provided such high quality food for so long?**

To be honest, I came into what was already great. I actually started in 1998. I knew of the vendors in the 90s as many Latinos did in the city. The vendors themselves actually started in the mid 1970s. They were the family members and friends of the soccer players, and because Red Hook was such an isolated, industrial spot with very few food vendors or stores, they started to set up their own grills and cook for the fans and players who played at the fields there each weekend. Many of the vendors who work there now have been there for many years. My family has operated there for 12 years. The oldest vendor has been there for 36 years. So at this point it's not just a place to sell, it's like their home. In terms of the food, everything is fresh and made on the spot, and of course one of the secrets here is family recipes. It's very important to emphasize how many people there are in New York with wonderful, delicious recipes. These people are not academically trained chefs; they just have amazing recipes that come down from generations. Grandma's cooking. And it's that home-cooking feeling that actually creates this amazing environment.

**Do you think street fairs are an appropriate venue for talented street vendors like the Red Hook vendors?**

The Red Hook vendors are a part of a very large network of great food purveyors who work under the radar and oftentimes live in certain areas that are not very accessible. I think street fairs would be an excellent opportunity for many of these vendors, if not the only opportunity, because there really is very little opportunity out there. They don't have the means to open a restaurant. They don't have the money to say 'Hey I'm going to lay out \$15,000 to \$20,000 for some new equipment.' They just need a chance.

**There's been a lot written about the Red Hook vendors and other really talented street vendors in Jackson Heights and other neighborhoods. Do you think as a result of all this attention that the city is slowly changing its posture towards you and street vendors like you?**

I think they are. First and foremost, there's a unity. We're working very closely with Sean Basinski and the Street Vendors Project; most of our vendors are members of this organization. In addition to working with other food vendors, I'm working with other groups such as Sunset Park Vendors in Brooklyn and also with different events like Summer Stage at Lincoln Center—some of the Red Hook vendors will be there this year selling pupusas. There's a brotherhood and in order to be heard we need to stick together and listen because the idea was—and it's not even an idea, it's a reality—to get people talking about this great food. People demand this food, they love it! And it's silly that we're not even coming close to tapping into what it could be. When Fernando Martinez of the Red Hook vendors won at the Vendy Awards last fall, Mayor Bloomberg went to visit him and had a huarache. We hope it was a changing experience for him, because there are some very strict regulations on food vending in the city. There is a very low cap on permits, and many vendors are paying very high fees and tickets.

**It seems like we're experiencing a real movement toward more street food and more open-air markets in New York. As someone who is branching out into public markets, what do you think?**

We're going through a kind of paradigm shift right now, a post-supermarket era, where many people want to go back to a more purist alternative. It's funny because I was born in a very small city in El Salvador and saw a similar shift in the other direction. After the wars in my country, we went from a little open air market in the central square to a big enclosed supermarket, and everybody went crazy over the supermarket because everything was neat and packaged and what we would call generic. But now in New York people want choices. They want to care for the environment and create community and have these amazing things that are very unique.

**Irwin Cohen** is a real estate developer who turned a former Nabisco factory on the edge of the Meatpacking District into Chelsea Market, an eclectic complex of small food manufacturers, restaurants, and fishmongers.

#### **What's your impression of New York City street fairs?**

They're terrible now. You see the same hustling people at every single fair. It's really become a controlled event, with the same dealers and the same odor coming out of the cooking oil wherever you go in the city. You walk through blocks and blocks of these street fairs, but the very essence of New York is not there. I'm in New York but these fairs could be anyplace in the United States.

#### **What should be done to improve them?**

The street fairs need something else besides what they've been doing. They lack the vitality of New York City. I think they should incorporate one of the great strengths of New York: the theater. People come here because of cultural diversity. One of the great markets of New York is the theater. We should get people performing on Broadway and Off Broadway to perform at these fairs. Just think about the depth of performers that we have in New York City. There is no other place like this in the world. This has to be brought out. The street fairs can become the best way of introducing people who don't go to theater about what's it really like, with young performers doing what they do. Theater and music have to be incorporated into street fairs.

#### **How would this work?**

When I started Chelsea Market, right across the street was the Atlantic Theater Company's main office. I became familiar with Neil Pepe, the artistic director. I said 'Neil, you have all of these young students; where do they rehearse?' He said their space was pretty crowded.

I said 'why don't you let them rehearse at the market in middle of the aisles while people are walking by?' He brought over these young people and they started to do soliloquies from Shakespeare right in the middle of the market. I'm sure that most people in the market had not heard Shakespeare, but they were stopping and listening. It was fantastic. That's what has to be done with street fairs. I think that this can transform the street fairs into a true New York City cultural event. It wouldn't take away from merchants. The performers will be attracting other young people.

#### **Could you really do this?**

I think you can. I think there are more performers in New York City than any other place in the world. Why shouldn't we take advantage of this? I just saw a performance of Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. It's being performed for children at some Jewish organization on the West Side. There, they'll have 200 people come, which is great. But why not put it in the street? And don't have just one little performance. If you want to create a market, you should have two or three small performance areas per block, where the music from one cuts into the music of another so that as people walk from one end of the street to the other they hear this synchronized stream of music and voice. Let them hear Shakespeare. The performances can be in different languages—Korean, Spanish, German, Italian, Swahili, anything. Suddenly, people will say 'let's go down there.' Street fairs will ultimately have much less food and more culture. You could start small with this and build it up.

**Ivo Araujo** is the co-founder of Manhattan Samba, a Brazilian drum ensemble that has been performing in New York for roughly two decades at local clubs and street events including the annual Brazilian Independence Day celebration on West 46th Street.

#### What's missing from New York's street fairs?

You go to any street fair, and nothing happens. You don't see anything other than people selling food and other products. New York is this incredible mixture with people from all over the world; it would be more interesting to go to street fairs to see the way people from other countries live, the way people express themselves, not only eating and stuffing themselves with greasy food. They should showcase the culture, the music...

#### What would you suggest to jazz up street fairs?

More street fairs should have a band or some kind of entertainment, like we play at the Brazilian Independence Day celebration on 46th Street. The street fairs now don't have much entertainment—not only samba, but different kinds of music. Adding culture and entertainment would make it a lot more fun, like in Brazil where we do street parties. It would be like a big show on the street.

**I've seen the Manhattan Samba perform at the Brazilian Day festival and it's one of my favorite experiences at any New York street festival.**

I have been participating in this festival since my arrival in New York City in 1980. It's great, but the organizers have a lot of problems putting this event together. Too many of the vendors play really loud canned music over sound systems, which make the event uninteresting, uncomfortable and noisy. At the same time, they're less interested in having live music. Because of this, Manhattan Samba—the oldest and biggest authentic samba group in the city—ends up having to move from spot to spot like a samba guerilla. This year, Manhattan Samba's 20th Anniversary, we would love to have a nice spot where we could show a little bit of the real deal of the Rio de Janeiro's samba schools, a good street samba show. That way we would not get kicked out from spot to spot.

**Sean Basinski** is the founder of the Street Vendor Project, a non-profit that advocates on behalf of the city's more than 10,000 street vendors and hosts the annual Vendy Awards, New York's annual competition for the title of Best Street Food Vendor.

#### What's wrong with street fairs?

Right now, street fairs are designed to maximize profit for a small group. A few promoters have figured out how to make a lot of money. They know the political levers, they have connections with the vendors. And a few vendors have figured out business models that make money at street fairs. Like the mozzarella guys and the Thai food vendors and the Italian sausage vendors. You can't blame them. If you have the equipment and the recipes and the system to turn out 1,000 arepas one weekend, you might as well do the same thing every weekend all summer. But to really change things, you really have to take the big companies out of the business. The goal should not be to maximize profit for a few individuals. It should be to create community involvement and opportunity.

#### What about your own experience at the Street Vendor Project?

Our vendors suffer from some of the same weaknesses. Only a few models have proven to work on the street—hot dogs, roasted nuts, coffee and bagels, fresh fruit—so those are what our vendors sell every day. But street

fairs can be something totally different. They are a one-day event. So that is the day for people to try something new. One of the things about food vendors at street fairs is that the health code is relaxed. The assumption is that it is just a one-day community event. But that is great for experimentation. We have a lot of Bangladeshi vendors who sell hot dogs. And they never eat hot dogs themselves. Their wives make great curry that they bring from home every day. And if you ask them why they don't sell Bangladeshi food, it's because they would need to buy a \$20,000 cart and find a place to cook the food in a commercial kitchen, and that's out of their reach. I imagine that street fairs could be a petri dish for experimentation. How many people are there in New York who have nine-to-five jobs, but they have some great brownie recipe out or their empanada recipe that all their friends rave about? These folks are not just going to quit their jobs and borrow a million dollars and open a restaurant. But if they know the street fair is coming in a month, they could put some tables and grills out on the street in front of their house and try their recipes on the public. And some of these people would go on to open stores and restaurants. So in this way, street fairs would not only be more interesting, but they would be engines for economic growth.

### And your own street fair?

Yes, we applied for the first ever Street Vendor Project street fair. Our board members got this idea as a way for our members to make money for one day and promote the organization. It took place in early June on Park Place between Church and Broadway. The Community Board almost refused us because they said there was a moratorium. But we argued that ours was going to be totally different. Many of our vendors brought their carts and tables and sold like they usually do, except they were able to move off the sidewalk and into the street. There was so much space that it was like a vendor paradise. But we also had some space for non-vending. I wanted to get a basketball hoop and entice some people to shoot hoops. We didn't have that this time, but we did have a ping-pong table. You never see that kind of spontaneous thing at street fairs.

### How do you fix what is wrong with street fairs?

One thing you could do is make sure they are being sponsored by legitimate non-profits. There is nothing wrong with a neighborhood association putting on a street fair, so long as they are involving and promoting the neighborhood. Some of the non-profit sponsors just take the money and outsource the running of the event. There are lots of non-profits that would love to have spaces to promote their work and build community. Another thing you could do is make sure that each street fair has space for people from the area, either to do recreation or just to put a table out and sell their junk when they do their spring cleaning each year. In the suburbs, one way you meet your neighbors is through garage sales or yard sales. In the nice neighborhoods of Brooklyn, they have stoop sales, if you are lucky enough to have a stoop. But most people, certainly in Manhattan, just throw their old stuff away.

**Hoong Yee Lee Krakauer** is the executive director of the Queens Council on the Arts, which puts on the Queens Art Express festival, a four-day spring art festival taking place at different venues along the Number 7 train.

### How do you feel about New York City street fairs?

I love street festivals. I'm a Jane Jacobs person. Street energy is the pulse of a community. Street festivals are a way to celebrate what that community spirit is about. However, I do think there is proliferation of the mass market street fairs that have very little creative value. There's too many of them. If I'm going to put my effort into something, it's got to be niche. It's got to be unique. I will not do a street fair with tube socks.

### How could the city create more of the unique street fairs and less of the tube sock fairs?

I don't mean to be disparaging about that type of street fair. But there's so much of that. I think we could make those street fairs more interesting if cultural voices were at the table during the planning phase. Whether it's a Chamber [of Commerce], a BID [Business Improvement District] or an activist group putting together a street fair, the voice of the cultural community should be part of it. Then maybe you'd still see the tube socks, but they'd be tube socks that rock because there would be an artistic perspective involved. When you have more creative energy in the room, you have a better product.

### Any other ideas?

To me, street festivals should be a very powerful tool for bringing people back to Queens. They're a great way to bring people right down into the belly of the beast, where New Yorkers can experience the borough's neighborhoods. But it won't be zeppoli or tube socks that bring people and get them to keep coming back.

It'll be vegetable samosas at a literary event in Jackson Heights and watercress dumplings at a gallery opening in Flushing. The uniqueness of the pairings is what we're looking for.

### Are there particular street fairs and festivals that you like?

The Fourth Arts Block Festival and Block Party is an awesome event. The East Fourth Street Cultural District is the only official cultural district in Manhattan. When you attend that festival, you feel like you're in East Fourth Street's world. The uniqueness of that experience is what sets that apart. The Howl Festival is another really good one. It's a literary festival that takes place in Tompkins Square Park every September. They use the literary experience as a way to be unique, with poetry readings at different sites. And all the products they sell there are very artistic. We were involved in the Jackson Heights Food and Film Festival, which was great. Local food vendors came out and set up their stands in part of a yard of a local church, and the organizers took over Eagle Theater and showed Indy films with themes that were relevant to Jackson Heights and the people living in the community. From June 10-13 this year we will be presenting the Queens Art Express, a subway/station/street fair where there will be different cultural events at every stop along the seven mile route of the Number 7 train, from Main Street Flushing to Times Square. It's a partnership of 20 art venues and about 80 businesses along the 7 train. By linking commerce and culture, it becomes a reason for you to spend a couple hours in Jackson Heights or Corona or Long Island City. In some cases, you are going inside a venue; in others, the art is right on the street.

**Omar Freilla** is the founder of Green Worker Cooperatives, a south Bronx-based organization that incubates worker-owned and environmentally friendly cooperatives. In 2007, he won the Rockefeller Foundation's Jane Jacobs medal.

**What type of street fairs would you like to see in the Bronx?**

What I would like to see in a street fair in the Bronx are local artisans selling their crafts. Artisans don't generally have retail stores so they don't really have a lot of places to sell their stuff. If you have a street fair it's a great venue for people to show their wares and sell their crafts. I like looking at art. People like looking at art. For both those reasons I think street fairs can be a venue for art. It's not just art but functional art. There should be different types of local businesses that are setting up shop on the street. There should be games and fun activities for people to do. It should be family oriented. Adults like to do cart wheels too. The food in the street fairs in Manhattan is pretty uniform. It's either the Italian mega sausages, or the arepas with the mozzarella in the middle, or some corn. It's usually those three. I wouldn't want to see the same thing. If there are opportunities for a diverse group of local vendors to sell food, you're going to get a better reflection of food in that area.

**Why don't you think there are more street fairs in the Bronx?**

I think what's keeping street fairs out of the Bronx, within the current business structure, is that the Bronx is the poorest part of the city. If you were just setting up street fairs anywhere as a place to make money, you're going to do it in a place where people have a lot of disposable money; it wouldn't be in the Bronx. That doesn't mean people here don't spend money, we

just wind up getting the short end of the stick. I'd like more of them happening in the Bronx, places outside of the East and West Village and the Upper East and West Side of Manhattan. It's an issue about who is involved in setting it up. There needs to be opportunities for different street fair promoters. Maybe the business improvement districts should have their own street fairs and do local initiatives.

**Do you think street fairs can help with economic development?**

The place, wherever it is, becomes a destination. You go there once, you see a street fair happening, and you come back again. You decide to come back because there is stuff happening. You deviate from the street fair and go shopping in another local store and the other businesses get benefits too because there is more money circulating.

**Do you think there should be greater involvement of community groups?**

Certainly, to the extent that a company that puts on a street fair is in partnership with local groups then the local groups should have a significant say in how it's being put together. There should be a push to have the local vendors and businesses from the community where the street fairs are happening to be a part of it. If the business improvement districts were involved, it would be in their interest that local businesses would be in the street fair.

**Karen Brooks Hopkins** is president of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, former chair of the Cultural Institutions Group, and author of the book *Successful Fundraising for Arts and Cultural Organizations*.

**What do you think of the summer street fairs in the city?**

They have become more homogenized, less interesting, totally predictable and generic. They don't reflect the diversity of the neighborhoods or communities or artists.

**The primary purpose of street fairs is to raise money for qualifying non-profits and neighborhood groups, and as a result the fairs have become less about the neighborhood and more about how the sponsoring organization can raise money most efficiently. Should the mission or purpose of street fairs be expanded to include a requirement that it showcase the neighbor-**

**hood or be about the neighborhood in some demonstrable way?**

Yes, absolutely. Why should people be so lazy? If people want to raise money then they have to raise money with a focused strategic plan. I raise money here and we have to do it using BAM's programs. It seems to me that, out of any street fair, X number of spaces should be reserved for local artisans and vendors from the local community who are doing something a little bit different. This would not be that hard to do. The sponsoring organizations would still be able to rely on corporations to cover X number of spaces, but it would give them more flavor. Our Dance Africa Bazaar has 250 vendors, and it's the best street fair in the world, because it's all

local craftspeople. It has some outside stuff, but most of it is local vendors. If the weather's good then there'll be thousands of people here. The vendors sleep here the night before to get a space. And that's because it's not like one of these generic fairs with tube socks and sunglasses and almost nothing else. I'm not saying everyone is going to do it like we do, but there is a middle ground that would make more sense.

**When the city hears complaints about how generic street fairs have become, they'll sometimes say they're not in the business of making judgments about quality or deciding which fairs are good and which are bad...**

But they are in the business of community building and empowering neighborhoods and making sure that New York has a distinctive character. On the one hand, they force people through these byzantine landmarks procedures where every inch of your building has to be regulated in order to meet historic preservation standards and neighborhood standards. And, then, on the other hand, they allow this ugly garbage to be built on every street in New York. You can't have it both ways. If you care about community and you care about reflecting the quality of the city's neighborhoods and you care about economic development and you care about

tourism and you care about the persona of New York City, then yes you can create some rules that impact the quality.

**What kinds of themes do you think should be emphasized?**

I think they should be artisan based, like Dance Africa—it's Africa based. I think they should relate to the things that make a neighborhood great. This is where I think community boards and block associations could come together and decide on themes that resonate with their neighborhood. Brooklyn now is filled with artists and creative people, so fairs that reflect those artists and creative people are a natural. People need to spend five minutes thinking about it and then relegate a certain number of spaces and the look of the thing and the décor of the thing to represent what they want their neighborhood to represent. Allowing it to become a corporate footprint does a disservice to the neighborhood and city, and after a few years people will just stop going altogether because it's a bore. Maybe there is a historical event that happened in that neighborhood or a monument that people can key off of. Maybe they want to involve students and let the students in the neighborhood pick the theme.

**D.J. Kool Herc** is considered by many to be the founder of Hip Hop for a turntable innovation that created the 'breakbeat.' In the 1970s, he hooked up his turntables to street lamps and turned parks, schoolyards, and streets into vibrant open-air parties.

**As one of the founders of Hip Hop...**

I'm not one of them. There really ain't a bunch of us. There's one. Mr. Ford was the one who created the cars. Then come the rest. The man who created electricity—there wasn't a bunch of them. There was one. It's Kool Herc. Nobody else.

**What is your experience with summer street fairs?**

I've seen a bunch of them, from different countries, different boroughs. I find a lot of stuff I wouldn't find in stores. I like the different nationalities. It brings the community together. People from far and wide come together at the street fair.

**What is something that you might come across there that you wouldn't get in a store?**

Cut out clothes. Clothes that were once out, and they don't make them no more, like a big department store will buy up a whole clothing line and put them in a Burlington Coat Factory. You have some people that don't make it to a Burlington. They have their own stuff. They never make it to a department store, and they are still an item that people are looking for. That's what I mean about having unique stuff. Everything that you might

want to find you will run into. If not, the atmosphere is lovely.

**How important is the role of music in these fairs? You used to throw outdoor parties and hook up to the street lamps. What's the role of music in street life?**

It brings out the community, young, old, different nationalities. You play some of their music, it brings them out. Not just r'n'b, soul, funk. You play other stuff. You play some Spanish, some reggae, some r'n'b, some classic old stuff from back in the day, '50s, '60s. You keep it like that. You don't just play one set of music. It's a good way of communicating, to get to know your neighbor, when it comes to summertime and the street fair.

**Can a big organization or big company put on a good street fair or does it have to come from the community?**

If they do their research and contact the people in the neighborhood, the block association. They do have block associations and all of the different grassroots people in the community. They got to be onboard to let them know who lives there. To have a sense of what is going on.

**Robert LaValva** is the founder and executive director of the New Amsterdam Market on South Street. Named best outdoor market by New York Magazine, it features locally sourced produce, meats and artisanal food purveyors.

**Are street fairs still relevant? Is there still a need among local businesses and neighbors to get together for a one-day or two-day event on their street?**

Yes, I think there is. Even in New York which can be such an anonymous place—and you can certainly live an anonymous life in New York—people know their little shops and local restaurants. So I feel there is always an opportunity for people to create community. But on the other hand these things have real life-cycles. For years I lived in a house of some architects in Brooklyn Heights, in a part of Brooklyn Heights that was known as Willow Town back in the 1960s and 70s, where it was pretty run-down and people were just starting to fix up buildings. And long before my time they used to have a big block party every summer, where everyone on the block would prepare something and they would bring in a few amusements for the kids. These people I lived with were older and retired and they would reminisce about this, because the kids had all grown up and a lot of the families moved away and it was no longer done. In one way that was sad but it also made sense. It showed how there are times for everything. An event like that made sense when there were a lot of young families and kids around, but as things changed the festival faded away because it was no longer relevant.

**Do you know of any businesses or communities for whom a street fair would be relevant now?**

It's interesting that you bring it up, because we're actually in the process of formulating a street fair right here, for the businesses along Front Street in lower Manhattan. Front Street is kind of unique. There's been a real effort here over the last few years to create a neighborhood. Much of this block (between Beekman Street and Peck Slip) was recently developed by a partnership between the Durst Organization and Zuberry Associates. This team was really cognizant about respecting the heights of the neighborhood and designing buildings that weren't jarringly out of place. And in terms of commerce they didn't want to bring in chain stores. Now many of the businesses have gotten to know each other and they approached us to see if we were interested in helping them organize a block party for a day. The New Amsterdam Market is held just a block away on South Street, so we'd like to relate the street fair to the market. The local restaurants want to create a Seaport version of "Taste of Tribeca," to support the new schools in Lower Manhattan. This area has always been about markets and food purveyors, whether it was the Fulton Fish Market or a flour mill or wine importer, so we feel any street fair here should relate to that history. The New Amsterdam Market vendors will bring in great local produce, meats and fish, then in the afternoon you can have a block party featuring food from all these local restaurants that is cooked with these ingredients, relating to the season and the harvest.

**If you were in charge of street fairs for the city of New York, what kinds of initiatives or strategies would you employ to encourage these more authentic, neighborhood fairs?**

There are a handful of these companies, for profit operators in existence already, so obviously they're generating income; the formula is already there. Suppose the city wanted to make a concrete effort to introduce better quality street fairs and they issued an RFP and said: 'Look: we get 1,000 applications for street fairs every year and usually we narrow it down to 367. But because we want to foster more creativity, instead of 367, we're going to allow another 25 in the year 2011. But these new fairs are going to be assigned to a company that we pick.' And you know there are so many, think Creative Time, or a similar group. The city could say, 'here is an RFP, submit your ideas, submit your team, what is your expertise. If we select you, you're going to be awarded 25 street fairs and your job is going to be to go in and help these 25 groups create their own street fair.' Through an experiment like this, we could generate some great new ideas.

**And what specifically might that company do that a more traditional operator probably wouldn't?**

Obviously, they could help with all the codes and permits, but they could also go in and talk to these groups, help them decide on a theme and purpose. For example, is it a church that is doing this to raise money? Well, then, what is this church? What is its history? Were there any traditions or old fairs they used to put on? You know, when you dig down to the roots of a lot of religious and cultural traditions, you'll find they tend to have something to do with the changing of the seasons and the harvest, so you could relate the fair to the time of year, as a celebration of the spring or the fall, a particular fruit or vegetable. Then, let's talk about the design. You're going to need some tables, some stalls and some banners. But what if you went beyond that? What if there is a senior center in your neighborhood where there are plenty of older people with skills or people just dying for something to do, or maybe a church ladies' group or a nearby tailor? Maybe they could make a banner out of cloth that is handmade—it could be a patchwork quilt that everybody contributes to. In many small ways like that you can weave in some things that are really related to the neighborhood and to the people who live there, and you can also begin to foster a tradition that grows over time. You know that's a lot of effort to make a quilt, but maybe it becomes a tradition that every year the block association creates something—one year it's a quilt, and another year it's something else, a poster or banner or float. The actual ideas will come from the people putting on the fair, but what the non-profit can do is organize them and help them generate ideas and do all the things you have to do to make the fair a reality.

**Deborah Marton** is the executive director of the Design Trust for Public Space, a non-profit that brings together design professionals, city agencies and New York neighborhoods to strengthen creative industries and propose strategies for public spaces.

#### What do you think of street fairs in New York?

I think New York street fair culture is, to a great extent, divorced from the culture of the city. I don't think they are an expression or extension of the neighborhoods they are in. They would be a lot more interesting and probably better for the city if they reflected the world of people who make things in our city, and I never see any evidence of that in these fairs. Mostly what you see are cell phones, yucky food that is not healthy or locally sourced, and garments and jewelry that's mostly from China or worse Latin America. There is a renaissance in the city about things being made here. I think there should be incentives for local vendors, so that street fairs are more of an expression of the identity of New York City right now.

#### How do you think local businesses can be encouraged to participate?

I live in the Flatiron District and very frequently the stretch of Broadway between 17th Street and 23rd Street is closed for street fairs, and there's never a single vendor from my neighborhood. I know there are local restaurants, for example, Spoon, which could be staffing a booth and selling food that is sourced regionally and locally. I'd give priority through a tiered pricing system to neighborhood vendors, and then branching out to borough vendors, and then New York City-wide vendors, and then New York State vendors, and the highest price being for out-of-state vendors. I also

would do an aggressive marketing campaign with New York City media to reach out to the pockets in the city where people are making things and give them a priority to sell in the New York City markets, like all of those craft studios in Brooklyn. I would give them a lower price at the booths so it would be a way of subsidizing New York City businesses.

#### What role should street fairs play?

I don't know what role they play now. If you're going to bother to close a street down, which to my mind is a huge public space imposition, it should be for a worthwhile reason. It should first improve the quality of life, which means it's actually interesting and worthwhile, and second the city should make some money from it. The city needs to think about what it wants to get from these events. Are they just about the bottom line? Or are they about promoting quality of life or local businesses like New York City manufacturing? It seems that the local movement that's growing and already firmly rooted in food is expanding to all sorts of other goods and services. At a time when energy costs are rising and rising, and shipping costs are rising and rising, why not promote local manufacturing businesses through street fairs? Of course if I were a local business I wouldn't want to take part in a lot of these street fairs, because I wouldn't want to be associated with that kind of junky food and crappy merchandise. But if it had character and the pricing was right, businesses would definitely participate.

**Fred Kent** is the founder and president of Project for Public Spaces, a non-profit that consults on public space projects all over the world. In 1970, he was the chairman and coordinator for New York City's first Earth Day celebration.

#### What is your experience with New York City street fairs?

I have been truly disappointed in them and have seen an evolution of them. When I organized Earth Day in 1970 we closed the street and all kinds of people came out. We did it again ten years later, and ten years after that. We had these big environmental fairs and anyone who worked on environmental issues could come out and talk about what their issues were. We had performers too. We drew on local talent and it was a good opportunity for a lot of these groups to reach out to large numbers of people. I always liked that way of doing it. But I've been watching the evolution of these fairs, and they've really ceased to be of value to the neighborhoods that they're going into; they're commercial fairs with all kinds of goods that you can buy in stores and

off-price places. I think there needs to be a dramatic change in how they're constituted and how they relate to local communities.

#### We have so much local talent here in New York City too. The vendors who sell at most street fairs are all the same, and a tiny group secures most of the permits. How do we tap into the diversity of vendors out there?

Well, it's not just vendors. Again, I think the trick is to make them more local. For instance, the farmers markets are an amazing opportunity; I'm a big fan of farmer's markets. But I think they could become more local like in East New York. My daughter-in-law started the East New York market and she got a few farmers but also local people who grow their own produce and

make value-added products like pies. It's become a kind of community marketplace. I think farmer's markets and street fairs both should evolve so that people from the community who do value-added can come in. I have a little bit of a problem with the farmer's markets that sell bread products, because there are a whole lot of bakeries around. If they came into my neighborhood on Court Street in Brooklyn, that would not be very good, because we already have great bakeries. Farmers markets should be expanded to draw on local entrepreneurs and also people who might just have an ability to bake apple pies. You start building a local economy that way and then enhancing it, so that eventually the person who makes apple pies can maybe one day open a business. So there's a whole agenda here that's much broader than just street fairs.

#### **What role should the city play in encouraging or facilitating these more community-based fairs?**

I think there ought to be a team of community organizers who are set up to encourage these fairs and help communities get permits and find out what kinds of skills people have. One of my favorite markets that I've seen in the world is in the Netherlands where they have a kids market on the birthday of the Queen. All the kids come out and sell their old toys or perform; nobody else can do it. So I think we need to get a whole lot more creative. We're doing this big event in Granville Island in Vancouver and it's all about creating what we call a multi-use public destination. Typically these are big deals, but you can also think of the street in a neighbor-

hood as a kind of multi-use public destination. And if it's defined by the community for the community, where the community comes out and shows off what it's all about—the existing stores and skills of the residents—it can be an amazing event. It brings people together so they can get to know each other. New York has become a city of neighborhoods so why not let the neighborhoods become even more evident by setting up these systems or groups that would help them put on events like this? I don't think it has as much to do with permits as with community organizing.

#### **I love the kids' market idea. Do any other themes stick out in your mind?**

The other theme I love is a repair market, so a market full of people who can repair things like computers or blenders. People could come to have their appliances repaired so that they don't have to keep buying new stuff. Or a recycling market. Or what about a bartering market? You could have a forum where you list your skills, and you could barter or sell. We've opened our backyard where we live in Brooklyn, and we've started to share plants with neighbors. So we grow plants and if we have a plant that gets too big, then we'll share it with someone else and they'll plant it. We're building this community around sharing things. So, again, I think there is a bigger purpose to this, and we're losing sight of that purpose by slipping into the lowest form of street fair that you can have. What we need to do is to elevate it and bring it back into the community.

**Suzanne Wasserman** is the director of the Gotham Center for New York City History at City University of New York. She has written extensively on street fairs, pushcart peddling and the history of the Lower East Side.

#### **How have street fairs changed over the years? How did they originally come about?**

Street fairs in New York City originated as a sort of reaction to the fiscal crisis of the 1970s. They were a way for blocks in city neighborhoods to unify and build community spirit. They came about very organically, but originally they all were very connected to a particular place and that has disappeared almost completely from the majority of today's fairs.

#### **What happened?**

Well, I think what happened in the 1980s and 90s is, it became profitable. These production companies figured out there was money to be made, and the bureaucracy got more and more complicated so they could step in as middle-men and simplify the process for the neighborhood groups and non-profits who sponsor the events. But now even though each fair is supposed to be sponsored by a non-profit, oftentimes they're not

even present at their own fair and you don't know what the impetus or point of the fair is.

**It's really an interesting conundrum in some ways, because all the individual parts seem to make sense. But the result is still something no one really likes.**

I think that's really true. People love being outdoors and they love being able to walk down the middle of the street and not have to deal with traffic. And when you see street fairs that work, you remember why people love them. For example, on East Seventh Street there's the Ukrainian Festival and that's a really local event that's been going on for, I don't know, 50 years. Another good example is the New York Food Museum's International Pickle Day. I'm on the board of that event. We're celebrating our tenth anniversary this year, and we used to close down two blocks on Orchard Street between Delancey and Broome. It was unbelievable how many people would come. The director had to move it to the municipal lot on the next block in order to ac-

commodate all the people and a lot them wanted it to be back on the street. It's an amazing event. It's about pickles in all their incarnations, smoked pickles, Haitian pickles, kimchi. It's really about something, and it's connected to the neighborhood. That's so different than just walking down Third Avenue or Sixth Avenue and running into one of these generic events. You choose to go there as opposed to just running into it by accident. There's something very soulless—and not only soulless but maddening and aggravating—about the generic street fairs. They'll close down nine blocks, from 14th Street to 23rd Street, and then generate such ill will in terms of congestion and the amount of garbage they leave behind. I know they have to pay extra to have the garbage removed, but I've been on the street when these fairs are closing up and the amount of garbage they leave behind is just depressing.

**What can the city do to cut down on the generic events and perhaps promote the unique, community-driven events?**

First of all, it would be interesting to see a real break-

down about whether these street fairs are financially helpful to the city. That seems to be a piece of the puzzle that's missing. Does the city actually make money even though they have to provide sanitation and cops and all of that? It just seems hard to believe. I think if someone like Bloomberg saw that the city was losing money on street fairs, it would be motivation for him to try to change how they work. They could try to reduce street fairs across the board, but I'm not sure giving out fewer permits addresses the real issue, which is quality. I don't think the city can legislate that, and I certainly don't think they should ban the production companies or anything, but they could create rules to encourage fairs to have more of a connection to the neighborhood they're in. For instance, there could be some priority given to local vendors. Or what about the non-profits that sponsor the fairs? They should be held more accountable. Sponsoring organizations aren't only neighborhood associations, they can be non-profits like the American Cancer Society or the Midtown Democratic Club. Instead of just collecting the money, these groups should have to have much more of a presence at the fairs they sponsor.

**Kent Barwick** is president emeritus of the Municipal Art Society, the former Chair of the New York City Landmarks Commission, former Director of the New York State Council on the Arts and former President of the New York State Historical Association.

**Are there any street fairs you like?**

The best thing I've seen is an international food fair at Snug Harbor Cultural Center. There were one or two food tents from many sections of the globe and kids danced distinctive ethnic dances on the steps of one of Snug Harbor's beautiful Greek-revival style buildings. It was enjoyable in and of itself but also gave a great sense of how diverse and really interesting Staten Island is as a place to live.

**What would you do to improve the city's street fairs?**

A potential virtue is that street fairs can reinforce the distinctive character of neighborhoods, and New York has very distinctive neighborhoods. So it seems to me that we should encourage elements of street fairs that are distinctive, even if their scale shrinks a little. My views are framed by living in Little Italy where the Feast of San Gennaro is held each year. There are only a couple of things that are Italian about that festival. It is unrelated to the feast. And how many sausage stands do you need in a five block area? I would like it to have more character and maybe reduce its scale. In addition, we could certainly use someone to screen or jury street fair participants. Granville Island, which is connected to downtown Vancouver, was an industrial area in World War II. After the war, instead of just leasing all the factory buildings to whoever would pay the most rent, they took a group of them and created a crafts center. And because it is juried, those crafts are

wonderful compared to what you see at New York City street fairs. Someone paid attention to quality. In New York, standards are high to get hired in a good restaurant or act in a show. Standards should also be high for crafts sold at street fairs. New York is city of extraordinary and ambitious talent. Just go into the subway or to the steps of the Metropolitan Museum or to Washington Square. None of the street talent you see in these places finds its way into our street fairs. Why not? En Garde Arts used to stage outdoor performances—serious plays—using the backdrop of the city, such as an abandoned pier. You could tie groups like that into a street fair.

**What kinds of street fairs would bring out the distinctive character of city neighborhoods?**

Wouldn't it be great fun if you could pull off a street fair in Brighton Beach that had something to do with the Russian community there? And wouldn't it be interesting as a prelude to the St. Patrick's Day parade to have part of the parade begin in Battery Park City near the Irish Hunger Memorial which commemorates the Great Irish Famine of the 19th century? It could then proceed to St. Peter's Church, the city's oldest Catholic parish, the Mott Street corner where the Ancient Order of Hibernians was formed, the wall of old St. Patrick's that was erected to protect Catholics from assault by the Know-Nothings. It could work this way for almost any ethnic group.

**Jonathan Marvel** is a principal at Rogers Marvel Architects, a practice that focuses on the design of public space at many scales, from parks to buildings to street furniture.

**Are there any street fairs you like? Any favorite item sold at a street fair?**

I have a soft spot for when the street fair is being put on by a neighborhood school or church. That's where you really get the local flavor and local participants. There aren't the cookie cutter vendors you always see, like the ones who sell corn on the cob and badly framed posters. I live and work in Lower Manhattan where there is substantially less traffic and a boon of street fairs occur. Many of the schools in this area sponsor street fairs with cupcakes, book sales, funky clothing as well as people recycling their household stuff, like a stoop sale. It's nice when there's a not-for-profit that is benefiting from these commercial enterprises.

**Any thoughts on how to improve street fairs? Is there anything the city could do?**

It is important that the community board be involved.

We work on many public projects around the city of New York—street closures, plazas, parks—and therefore work with the community boards frequently. The community board broadly addresses the public impact, so if there's real opposition in the community, the community board will take note before the next round of applications. In Lower Manhattan, certain street fairs happen every year at the same locations. It would be nice to know if these fairs are being supported by the community or whether they are forced on the community. Perhaps the community board should be a control valve and act as a filter on the frequency of street fairs. Maybe there should be some spots in the fairs reserved for local vendors. Perhaps for every ten vendors there should be a table reserved for a local community group, whether a church or school or not-for-profit group that supports the elderly. As for the City government, leave it out of it. You do have to get a permit, but beyond that street fairs monitor themselves.

**Leslie Koch** is the president of the Governors Island Preservation and Education Corporation, an organization that oversees all public programming and redevelopment plans for Governors Island in New York Harbor.

**What is your experience with New York street fairs?**

I think that the Atlantic Antic is the most wonderful event of the year and I plan my entire year around it. Seriously. I basically go as far away as possible from most street fairs, and I'm old enough to have vague memories of the Ninth Avenue food festival, back when street fairs were real fairs. But now, with the exception of the Atlantic Antic, I plan my route to avoid them.

**The Atlantic Antic is a good counterpoint to the majority of street fairs because it explicitly taps into the neighborhood's businesses. Why doesn't that happen more?**

The city has changed so much that I don't think the Atlantic Antic is really a viable model for most of Manhattan. Most of the merchants in Manhattan come from somewhere else. There are very few strips of Manhattan where a majority of the merchants are locally owned stores. So even if you wanted to have an Atlantic Antic model in Manhattan it would be almost impossible, because a store that is part of a national chain doesn't have the ability to do those kinds of things; that's not how the stores work. You can see that even on Atlantic Avenue during the fair. Barney's and Urban Outfitters didn't purchase space in the Antic last year.

Those stores don't have that kind of discretion to participate in local marketing events. So as much as I like the Antic, I don't think it's a viable model for most of Manhattan.

**What kind of model do you think would be more appropriate?**

Well, to answer that, I think you have to consider why these things are still so popular? Whatever we think of them, obviously thousands and thousands of people still respond to them. So what do street fairs offer that is not available elsewhere? The virtue of them is that they close off the streets. People in New York City like to walk, they like to look at other people, and they like to gather. I don't say that trivially either, because that's something unique and important about being in the city. Also, this is a shopping town. It doesn't matter how much money you have, people want to shop. And I think that the transaction in the street, which is different than shopping at Duane Reade, is an important experience to people. If you go to Downtown Brooklyn, on a weekday even, you'll see these guys who set up tables with jewelry or shea butter. There's something about that. You can buy that same stuff in a traditional store. But it's some combination of the transaction price and the spontaneity that's still appealing to people.

**You have really encouraged an eclectic mix of organizations and artists to put on events at Governors Island during the summer. Have you learned any lessons that can be applied to street fairs?**

The activities that take place on Governor's Island are more about art and participation and bike riding. People still eat, but we don't have very much shopping, which is not appropriate to an island; people are not going to buy old furniture and carry it back on the ferry. Our strategy, which we announced back in 2006, a time when we had just 26,000 visitors, was to expand visitorship with what we call early signature uses, things like artist-designed miniature golf. Those are singular things that you can't do elsewhere, and we knew that we had to offer experiences that were not interchangeable with the experiences you could have easily in Cen-

tral Park or in a street fair, which are spaces that are just, quite frankly, easier to get to. I'm not sure how applicable that is to street fairs. If you're an arts organization, and you're talking about staging an event, that's a different kind of thing. Artists are motivated because there's an opportunity for them to present work and have an audience that they don't readily have in other public spaces. And that's wonderful and we make that easy for them. But that's different than a street fair and what a street fair is about. A street fair is about commerce, it's about eating and buying things. It's not about art. So in order for Governors Island to figure in the discussion, I think you would have to broaden your inquiry to say what kinds of events can and should be taking place in the streets of New York City.

**Stacy Sutton** is an expert on community planning and a professor at Columbia University's School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation.

**What do you think of the city's street fairs?**

Some are better than others, but overall they're redundant. I like when they're attached to cultural festivals because they tend to be more coherent. The ones that come to mind are the San Gennaro Festival in Little Italy and the Harlem Week Festival. They both attract an array of vendors and patrons from outside of the immediate neighborhood, which leads me to believe that they're well promoted and orchestrated. Unfortunately, too many street fairs in New York lack distinctiveness, which contributes to community resident apathy, declining patronage and weak sales especially for smaller vendors. It seems that neighborhood organizations, community boards and city agencies should play a more active role in using street fairs as a mechanism for crafting community experiences and showcasing neighborhoods to visitors.

**What could those organizations do to create more meaningful community experiences?**

Perhaps, if community organizations developed street fairs using a thematic approach, they'd be more vibrant and interesting community events. For instance, I can imagine developing a street fair that highlights neighborhood history, culture, industry sectors, health, etc. A thematic approach to street fairs requires the private production companies that actually develop and manage the fairs to have a more diversified pool of vendors from which to choose. Hence, the city has to disseminate information and grant permits to a wider array of vendors. A thematic approach to fairs in neighborhoods across the city would also require greater coordination and planning among not-for-profit organizations, community boards and city agencies, and it would mean

less autonomy for production companies. But ultimately, I think it could enliven banal and redundant fairs into destinations and summer excursions. At the very least they'd become more exciting for community residents and they could become an important venue for the city's small and emerging businesses.

**How can the city encourage better fairs?**

The city controls vendor licenses and allocates street fair permits. One thing they could do is to only grant permits to production companies that meet community specified criteria. The question goes back to what should communities envision and demand from production companies? Again, what I like about the festivals are the ways they transform public spaces into street-level scenes. People come from far and wide to the San Gennaro and Harlem festivals because they offer a cultural experience, and the vendors play a critical role in that experience. Diversifying the vendor pool is something the city could do, especially if city agencies, like the Department of Small Business Services (SBS), worked with borough-wide economic development agencies that have access to the small business community through the business improvement districts (BIDs), local development corporations (LDCs) and merchant associations. With a more robust pool of vendors, the city could then make street fair permitting contingent on vendor diversity, rotation across locations, and thematic approaches. Unfortunately, the city's moratorium on new permits and new fair locations only exacerbates the status quo. Production companies will undoubtedly use the same old templates in which they receive 40 percent of revenue from booth sales, regardless of retail composition.

### What role, if any, should the city's economic development agencies be playing?

One thing I think is important to emphasize is getting the Department of Small Business Services involved. I'm kind of shocked that they aren't more involved. SBS has a commitment to small businesses, and they offer neighborhood-level resources for commercial revitalization. It seems like a logical match. SBS also provides resources to various borough-wide EDCs. The EDCs are well positioned to disseminate information to members and various neighborhood-based small businesses. With ample information and time, small and emerging enterprises might find it beneficial to collab-

orate as street fair vendors. The local EDCs could play an instrumental role in helping to diversify the city's pool of street vendors and expand the vendor typology. For a community organization to plan a thematic fair around 'global textiles,' 'healthy food,' 'made in NYC' or whatever, there needs to be a dynamic and robust list of vendors from which to draw. I see borough-wide EDCs as helping to create such a directory. The current production company-driven process of street fair development and management is clearly not sustainable. If they have to work a little harder to put together a list and be creative, people would come out and support them.

**Holly Hotchner** is the director of the Museum of Arts and Design, formerly the American Craft Museum.

### What do you think of the city's street fairs?

I don't know who the audience is for street fairs. Maybe tourists go to them? The immediate community? Certainly not in my neighborhood. Do they really provide a community service? I doubt it. From my experience I don't think that the surrounding neighborhoods make much use of street fairs. There's nothing educational about them, either.

### What sorts of street fairs do you think would work in New York?

There's a lot of creativity in New York. It would be nice to have one that is devoted to food, maybe one that is about plants. I think it would be great to have more flea markets. In general we don't have places to put flea markets, but when you think about flea markets in Europe they're really just closed streets; they close streets down and let people set booths up. To me that would be a lot more interesting. You never know what you might discover. You could have some food, too. I think you

would get New Yorkers to turn out for something like that. There is an absence in this city of something between the Park Avenue Armory art shows and a street fair. Also, I know there are people who want to do more up-market craft shows. With craft shows at least there's some character, and people go to them to buy gifts.

### Could the city's cultural institutions become more involved and perhaps sponsor a fair?

The cultural groups could get involved, but we're all not-for-profits and would have to get some of the money to make that happen. I think the city should ask the 31 members of the Cultural Institutions Group to do this as part of their contract with the city. The CIG is comprised of all city-funded cultural organizations. I'm sure they would all balk and say no, but it would not be a bad idea to make it a condition to be in the CIG that they do a city project such as a street fair. If the Museum of Arts and Design got money from the city, I would make it my business to participate.

**Barry Benepe** is a co-founder of Union Square's Greenmarket and the bicycling and mass transit advocacy group Transportation Alternatives. Now in retirement he helps run a farmer's market in the Hudson Valley town of Saugerties, New York.

### What is your overall impression of street fairs in New York?

On the positive side I think it's great to get traffic off the streets and bring people out to celebrate. But I also think they could be a lot better. The street fair near us on 14th Street in Manhattan is abysmal; it's full of bad, unhealthy food and bad smells. But I guess they're profitable and that's why you see them everywhere.

### What do you think is going wrong?

The block associations and neighborhood groups that put them on can't manage all the work by themselves, so they go to an operator. It costs money to buy insurance and to comply with all the Health Department regulations. Professional operators are prepared to deal with all of that. Up here in Saugerties, we've tried to bring prepared food to our farmer's market and the

state won't let us, unless we have professional kitchens nearby and bathrooms. We have an event we call "the Men's Cook-off" where men come in and serve their favorite dish; there's a competition and the winner wins a prize. But in order to comply with state regulations no money can change hands.

**That's the kind of thing I think a lot of people would like to see more of at these fairs, quirky events, home cooked food. But what can the health department or other city agencies do to encourage that?**

Quality of course is an issue that no regulatory agency wants to get involved with, because they'll argue that it's too subjective. If you're going to get into a quality issue then you have to define what you're looking for so that everybody is on an even playing field in terms

of competing for spots in the market. But I know what a lot of us would like to see more of and that's more home chefs. People should be able to prepare good food at home and bring it out to the fair to sell. These are supposed to be community oriented events and what better way is there to get people in the community more involved? But the problem is that most Health Department regulations require them to have licensed kitchens and most people don't have a licensed kitchen at home. So then you have to go find a commercial kitchen that abides by all the local and state regulations and that can be a costly investment for a block association. There are shared kitchens around that would pass muster, in churches or schools, for example. Maybe the New York City Health Department or Department of Consumer Affairs could help connect people to nearby institutional kitchens.

**Jeff Risom** is a project manager and architectural engineer for Jan Gehl Architects, an influential Danish urban planning and design firm.

**How could street fairs be organized a bit differently? Is it enough to close off a street and allow vendors to set up tables?**

You need to clearly demarcate what part of the fair is open to traffic and what parts are not. I wouldn't want to do much more. You could clear a wide path down the middle of the street, so it doesn't become too crowded or claustrophobic, and maybe create some side paths. A lot of times you can duck behind some of the stands, between the stands and the buildings. You need to make sure there are several different routes, and that transition zones are thought about and made clear. That's the biggest thing. I wouldn't try to organize it too much more than that.

**Is there one street fair in your travels, in your work in the European context, that really sticks out?**

It depends on what you call a street fair or market. I spent a year in London while I did my master's. There are two markets there that are recurring. One is Broadway Market; that sticks out as just being a fantastic place, a fantastic Sunday market. It's fantastic because it starts at a canal and ends at a park. There are a lot of different restaurants and cafes along the street. And to be able to make a day of it, to be able to say: 'We're going to walk along the canal to Broadway, then we'll

end in the park. We'll meet some friends, barbecue, exercise, or swim.' It makes for a pretty memorable place that you want to go back to. The other market is called Borough Market; that's the place where Jaime Oliver used to buy all of his raw ingredients. Since then, it's become quite a gourmet destination. It's in a really interesting part of the city, close to old rail yards, a really nice church, and the Thames. Looking at those two, the key is being able to put these markets in interesting places and combine them with other forms of urban recreation.

**What is the role of street fairs in the broader urban context?**

The great part about these, whether it's a street fair or street market or any temporary alternative use of a street, is that it really gives people a chance to re-imagine what a city can do, what that street can be, what street life in the public realm can offer to a city. The more you can experiment, test different things out, the more you inspire other people. I hope there could be more opportunities to use streets in alternative ways, at different scales, whether it be a small half block section or something more elaborate and semi-permanent, something like Broadway Market that happens most Saturdays throughout the year. There's room and a need for a big diversity of activities like that.

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