

Corona Plaza Final Report

Team Members: Pablo, Emma, Chris, Carina and Kristie



I. Proposal Description

Corona Plaza is a space located in an extremely busy neighborhood with subway tracks above. It is a loud and boisterous place in a lively community that lacks open space for the community to interact or relax. It is a tremendous opportunity to be able to open up some green space in this over populated section in Queens. Our proposal plans a minimal disruption and minimal cost to the existing plaza. By making use of preexisting Department of Transportation equipment from its web site, and re-purposing some materials already in the plaza we hope to provide an oasis of calm along a busy section of Roosevelt Avenue.

The fence surrounding the already present garden area could be opened by the western staircase to the subway to provide access, or completely taken down. Benches could be added and the planting of hardy plants that will provide beauty throughout the seasons added. The eastern fence could be dismantled and the green space extended along Roosevelt Avenue towards 104th street. Swatches of ornamental grass would add a beach like effect and a soothing sound as the wind blows through it. Winter Cabbage would add color during the colder seasons. Up lighting could be installed among the garden to create a warm and inviting mood yet allow the garden to retain some intimacy from the ornamental grasses. A few dwarf trees could be planted such as Japanese Maples that create wonderful areas of shade something much needed in an urban environment. The reason for dwarf trees being they will not grow very tall and interfere with the subway above or over emphasize any of the new sight lines of the plaza allowing it to retain its open airy feel. The planting of trees would help lower pollution due to a CO2 exchange and also give shade to people sitting in the plaza.

We also plan to re-use or re-purpose the existing billboard mounted atop National Street on the subway station wall, as an interactive sign. It is currently unused and has a Van Wagner sign company label. The Van Wagner companies website states:

“Above all, we genuinely respect people, our community, our industry and our environment. We have a long history of corporate and social responsibility. These streets are our streets, and our streets are your streets. And we take great care of our streets. Our vision is one of inclusion, collaboration and the alignment of common interests. We are deeply involved and interested participants who sincerely believe in giving back. We contribute millions of dollars, pro-bono and in-kind support to many worthy causes. Below are just some of our community partners and projects.”

It may be possible to use this as an interactive neighborhood information sign, by either projecting on it or installing a neighborhood map on it. This would partially fulfill the information kiosk many stakeholders requested and also retain the open space feeling by not cluttering the already heavy foot trafficked area. An alternate take on this could be to replace the billboard with a screen that has a hinged mechanism that would allow the screen to move at a 90 degree angle so it could be seen from the green space/ park section of the plaza or contact the MTA and move the billboards further east along the subway wall to the middle of the plaza. This would allow for movie screenings and interactive events to take place in the plaza and be seen by all persons in the plaza. There is a current pilot project happening right now with NYC phone booths being turned into info booths. This is something that can be explored for Corona Plaza. Maybe City Council member Julissa Ferrarras can pursue this installment.

Another form of information concerning the community and what can be found there will be at street level in the plaza. An information chart which is a series of circular mounted boards around a light post will contain a detailed map of the area along with a list of attractions, local businesses and services in the area. This could be an easy installment that wouldn't have to wait since access to information is important in this community.

There is a concrete triangle at the eastern intersection of Roosevelt Avenue and 104th Street, that is across from the plaza proper, this property is maintained by DOT and has the capacity to be included. We propose this also be used as green space and although it is not physically continuous, it will be a visual continuation of the expanded park section of the plaza. Thus creating a larger expanse to the project. The cobblestones can be removed with benches and a fountain added. The use of a fountain will add a feeling of tranquility in a space that has none. An art project using the removed cobblestones can focus on the nationalities within the Corona community. Children can paint the cobblestones in the national colors of countries that have immigrated here and now live in the community.

In order to address the concerns of a performance stage we have designed a raised 20' x 20' platform with storage underneath and a pergola mounted atop for shade. This platform continues with our design to have a space that is open, It would be an easy installment and something that is architecturally very pleasing to eye. This would be a low cost solution to having a performance

space at the plaza that our stakeholders had addressed in their interviews with our group members.

II. Research Methodology Section:

The population of interest for this study is more of an area than a specific group of people. However, the people within the area consist of a heavily populated Latino immigration community. This class project is the collaboration of two academic departments within Queens College, more specifically the Urban Studies department and The Art Department.

Appropriately, named Social Practice Queens (SPQ) designed to implement the social research it gives the project a basis for which it will begin and end.

An introduction to this research shared with the class; after many years of being a topic of community conversation, Corona Plaza, location in Queens NY at 103 Street and Roosevelt Avenue is undergoing a transformation beginning this summer 2012. Stated in the class syllabus, this transformation of a public space is located in one of the country most culturally diverse neighborhoods. This is factual, as a class we visited the community and discovered a neighborhood though dominated by a heavily immigrant community it is also a community rich in culture and history. The Louis Armstrong house is located in the neighborhood, also shared in one of many class lectures that Malcolm X once lived in the community. Given in a very detailed manner the research for this project/class and the scope of the project was listed in a class syllabus, which detailed all projects, lecture, events, readings books, and other research as needed.

Stakeholder interviews

The Stakeholder interviews were an assignment given to all students in the SPQ class. In a detailed slide presented by the Queens Museum of Art, students were able to see a list of all the participating stakeholders. This slide explained who the stakeholders were, how long they had been in the community, what their roles in the community were, and how the plaza would benefit from their involvement in this project.

Asked to choose at least two stakeholders Paired students choose the stakeholders they would interview. A mock interview was prepared using question that had been prepared beforehand. Many of the stakeholder organizations (and there were many) are community based and most were interest base. Each student group were to set up interviews, with time and location, we were to facilitate the interviews with our own choice of stakeholder and then proceed to prepare a written summary and reflection as well as a presentation to the class.

Our assignment was to learn as much as we could about each stakeholder. Focused questions from stakeholder who included their organization's mission statements, were asked, what was their sense of a possible relationship with Corona Plaza, and how the plaza would benefit their organization.

Resources methods for this research included websites, newspaper articles, and one on one interviews and in class visits from other non-stakeholders. Modifications of these questions are allowed depending on the organization to be interviewed. Before the interview, each team had to choose a lead interviewer. This person would facilitate the conversation and the other person would take detailed notes. Based on the groups' notes, an "*interview summary analysis*" would be produced for an overall class presentation. Below is one example of such an interview initiated and completed by members of the class.

Stakeholder Interview Corona Plaza Project Interview with Jacqueline Donato March 12, 2012 National Book Expo- Hispanic Heritage

Mrs. Donato, runs programs in conjunction with the Queens Museum. She participates in the Heart of Corona Festival at the Plaza. A major problem is that no one can sell during the festival, which creates a lack of participation on behalf of many possible vendors because permits are needed. More authors and artists would be willing to participate if they could also sell their work and not just do workshops, classes or readings. Book Fair occurs only one weekend per year and it is not enough as of present. This event takes place during the summer. It would be helpful to coordinate with a local school centering on an immigrant book that could lead to a creative performance by the students and take place in the plaza. She stated she could always use volunteers; she is currently working with a college fraternity from St. Johns.

Mrs. Donato also mentioned a stage or band shell in the Plaza would be helpful in order to hold performances or presentations more often, although tents can be brought for extra support or shelter during public outings. The Plaza is a great location to display the neighborhood, a prime real estate location that needs constant maintenance. There is also a need for community programming on how to behave in a community space. Maybe in the form of performances to teach people how they belong and interact within the community. During the week, the area is busy with students and might be better to hold events after school. Intersection can be dangerous for students and sound from train is very loud. Below please find some interesting point made doing the interview:

- v Easier use for Public events concerning permits*
- v Some kind of permanent structure for performances and storage*
- v Community based programs*

Jacqueline is also the Strategic Program Coordinator for the Queens Chamber of Commerce.

The following is how the Plaza pertains to the QCC.

Queens Chamber of Commerce works with the Corona branch of the NY Public Library located on the plaza. They conduct business seminars for Spanish speaking people, and immigrant groups on how to do various things; i.e., open a checking account, immigrant id number, pre-paid credit cards. They also assist local merchants in establishing credit.

She would like a kiosk similar to the one in Jamaica, but states Queens Chamber of Commerce cannot be responsible for running the kiosk. They can assist in the collecting of materials from the whole borough, coupons, event listings, hotels, and maps. Would like to see small trade shows with local merchants and more festivals but train may be distracting in terms of noise. Queens Chamber Commerce can invite people to meet and come together and participate in initiatives for neighborhood, the Plaza needs programs and Queens Chamber Commerce has the means to make the connections. Use our Corona Plaza program as the initiative to find a partnership for the plaza, possibilities are The Mets, Walgreens, Mc Donald's (around the corner), and local banks. Other suggestions were movie viewing and The Queens Orchestra, which is always looking for venues. The chamber can provide things for the plaza grand opening such as souvenirs.

Queens Chamber Commerce would like to promote the communities of Jackson Heights, Corona and Flushing with US Open, perhaps even a presentation or appearance in Plaza by tennis players, or one of The Mets players on to read to the children. On the downside, they have concerns with the need for long term funding of projects in the plaza and its upkeep. The

lack of a unified aesthetic in the Plaza, perhaps reclaim the original facade of the former theater and change some of the signage so that it is more unified on plaza. Queens Chamber Commerce's experience with other parks in the neighborhood or in other areas is that benches will create an unsafe environment for children and cause the homeless more problems. In regards to the concrete triangle that exists west of 103rd on Roosevelt Avenue and is currently not connected in any sense beyond its geography, benches would be good but it is loud and has the possibility of danger perhaps from the subway.

- v Community based info kiosk*
- v Partnership with sponsor for the Plaza*
- v More use for local merchants and the community*

Luz A. Pereira Program Director of Pachamama Peruvian Arts

Luz A. Pereira is a retired school teacher and is the Project Director at Pachamama Peruvian Arts. She volunteers her time to educate young people about the traditional dances of Peru. Pachamama leases space at PS 212 every Friday from 4-9pm. They recently have opened workshops for adults who wait for their children at the free after school program. Everyone who is interested in this program must register at a first come, first served basis. The program relies on public and private entities for funding this after-school program, which serves over 4,000 students each year. Luz said she has never been to Corona Plaza, but is interested in finding a space that she can bring her organization into the community and highlight the performances of the students that participate in the program.

Waiting to meet someone you don't know is a bit nerve racking, Luz Pereira was the someone my classmate and I were to meet. Mrs. Pereira is the Project Director at the Pachamama Peruvian Arts Center. I chose to meet stakeholders who are part of the performing arts and culture centers in the community. Carina set up our meeting time with Mrs. Pereira for 1:30, at the Starbucks in the city. This is where Mrs. Pereira's center is located. Arriving early, I found a nice table in the back. There were people already there, so I walk over to a few people to see if any of them were our contact. She had not arrived as of yet. As more people arrived, I noticed the time was getting on to 2pm. I asked a few more people and was about to give up when I noticed I had not asked a small unassuming woman if she were waiting for students from Queens College. Eureka! Imagine, she was sitting in the same Starbucks for at least twenty minutes before I walked over and asked if she was waiting to meet with Queens College students. We laughed, as I walked back to the table to get my things, to join her. Carina arrived about this time and we began our interview. We shared with her who we were, what the project consisted of, what other stakeholders were involved, we asked her question about her center and how would she like to see the space evolve. Mrs. Pereira shared with us that she had never really visited the Corona site but she would as Carina pointed out would like a space to teach her dance classes, and possibly do performances and workshops. We found Mrs. Pereira to be a very informed and delightful person, she may be a good contact to keep as far as having a performer and someone to teach workshops, however, her lack of interest in the Corona project was clear; however, her conversation was witty, and upbeat. She would be someone I think we should keep informed by sending newsletters and updates as they occur.

Corona Plaza

Interview group: Kristie Hirten and Pablo Alvarez

Asociacion Benefica Cultural – Father Billini

Interview Schedule: On Monday, March 5, 2012 at 11 am.

Representative: Leibniz A. Scottborgh – Executive Director, MSW,

Children: Kaylalisa Fernandez (12 years old), Jon Rodriguez (11 years old), Jorge Cerevino (11 years old)

1.) What is your role in the organization? Coordinate, supervise and support after school programs through homework assistance, tutoring, computer training, arts, dance, job readiness, sports and extra curricula activities. Most activities are guided to fund-raise money for the program. Main goal is to provide a safe and healthy space and environment for children during after school hours. Parents of the children involve in the program work all day and therefore this space is of significant support. I make sure I can integrate our students into a more mature and responsible civil responsibility and community based learning. My kids help out a lot during trips, and fund raising activities, they feel empowered and feel good about contributing to the cause of promoting the program.

Fact: Mr. Leibniz A. Scottborgh was a student at this school. He runs the program often investing 60+ hours a week due to the lack of funding and adult support.

2.) Who do you serve and in what capacity? This program serves young students and children from the area. Currently has 2 adult volunteers and is hoping to get students from colleges to internship with his program. Mr. Leibniz also has “young organizers”, kids in the school who help him organize the after school program. After school program has an attendance of 70 – 80

kids between the ages of 7 – 13 years of age. Approximately 120 kids per week. The program provides a better and healthy alternative to: gangs, teen-pregnancy, school drop-out, drugs and even hopelessness. We promote a sense of belonging and a chance to connect with others and be part of a healthy cause. We sponsor a lot of peer counseling – learn to negotiate and mediate.

3.) What is your general opinion of Corona? *Corona is today more safe than it was 10 to 20 years ago. Parents feel very comfortable leaving their children in our program. The population long ago was predominantly Dominican and Colombian, there is not more of a Ecuadorian and central American integration.*

4.) How long have you lived or worked in Corona? *I was raised in Corona; I attended this school and graduated.*

5.) What are some of the issues for you? *The lack of funding and of assistance, I would love to have more adult volunteers or college students willing to do an internship – and run programs.*

6.) What do you like about Corona Plaza? *Is a central location, everyone is exposed to great little food shops.*

7.) What do you not like of Corona Plaza? *Too many birds, is out of control, bird droppings happen everywhere in the surrounding train station. Cannot stand still in one area because you may get hit with bird droppings. People are too busy or in a rush and walk very fast to pass through this area, I think that if we had this area cleaner and neater with benches, people will get to sit down and relax a bit.*

8.) Physical Improvements – what would you like to see in the space? *We would like a water fountain, more green space, better lighting, benches and chess tables for the elderly and a*

surveillance camera. With a Water Fountain, people can relax because the noise of the water falling is very pleasant. It would also be a good idea to have umbrellas for the benches and or tables to prevent bird droppings to fall on people or food if they decide to sit and eat. We would like to plant flowers or plants, we can volunteer to go every week or other week to maintain the space clean and vibrant – water the plants. There should be more garbage cans.

9.) Do you find yourself using this space for your organization? Specify what type of activity or use? *We would like to run a Farmer’s market or flea market and run a fund raiser. Many families pass by this area and having lots of benches or “Domino” tables will be nice as well.*

10.) How often do you use or visit the Plaza? *Every week, at least twice a week.*

11.) What is your relationship to the Plaza? *My parents use the train station and family friends to go to or back from work.*

Other Community Engagement Activities

Corona Studio is a cross-disciplinary class; it combines the history and theory of social practice art with aspects of urban research and design. With that said, within the structural of the class there were many other proposed community activities, which were part of the transformation of the Plaza. These methods shared, were presentations of other public spaces in many place around the world. This gave the students an excellent example and idea of what the Corona Plaza could look like.

The SPQ methods used within the class allowed for sharing new ideas. One such collaboration included Corona City Council Member Julissa Ferreras; Mrs. Ferreras visited the class on her day off to speak about her vision for the transformation of the plaza. She spoke about the kinds of actives she sees as a gateway for a much-improved area and a better more beautiful community. Professors from Queens College Art Department Mr. Gregory Sholette, and Mrs.

Maureen Connor gave lectures, which centered on the way art was used in Public spaces. For e.g. the use of slides titled a Civil Disturbances and Challenging the Limits, one of the many presentations given by the pair. Websites, from, *WhoOwnSpace* and live on site presentations gave us a clear understanding of how public spaces can work and what kinds of activities have been completed using public space. Quilian Riano from DSGN and AGNC shared his use of design as a tool to observe and diagram urban open spaces. Aurash Khawarзад from Project for Public Spaces and *DoTank Brooklyn* lectured on how to use tactical interventions to reach strategic community goals.

Professor Tarry Hum from the Urban Studies Department led a discussion on the PPS reading and gave us our assignment and other useful handouts. A walk to Corona Plaza with the Director of Public Event, Prerana Reddy allowed the students to view firsthand the plaza area and take pictures of the space.

Research on Best practices, Policy Immigrants and public spaces

Shared in the Social Practice Queen syllabus, Queens College links studies in art with urbane studies, sociology, history, philosophy creative writing, and other fields of studies. These collaborations create individualized learning plans that address specific aesthetic and intellectual interests and make use of different research methodologies. Transforming Corona Plaza is an experimental team taught course led by Professors Gregory Shoette and Maureen Connor from the Art Department and Professor Tarry Hum from the Urban Studies Department.

In a recent article published in: *Queens Latino.com* dated April 2012, it is states that because of the current stage of globalization and the rapid rate of social change long standing demographic, institutional, and political forms of behavior are being transformed in fundamental ways. The iconic immigrant neighborhoods of Corona East Elmhurst, and Jackson Heights, which

constitute community Board 3, provide a window into this dynamic process in Queens County. (*QueensLatino.com*, April 2012, No. 19, p.9.)

The demographic of this area has changed, “whites and African- American have lost population and Hispanics and Asians have gain population.” The 2010 U.S. Census found it difficult to count the population in the community Board 3 area. However, the numbers between 1999 and 2000 has not remained consistence. Blacks went from a population of 19,000 to 10,000, while the number whites dropped from 36,000 to 20, 000. The paper asked the important questions “how would this process of coalescing support the civic, political and social incorporation of immigrants,” while in the process of transforming the community from one thing to another. Other question asked were how does a project like Transforming Corona Plaza keep the lines of communication open among the many key people who are current advocates in the neighborhoods, and how will partnerships be established and what new policies will be implemented as part of this partnership within the community. This project is part of the New York Department of Transportation, described as “an innovative community based program that is creating new neighborhood plazas throughout New York City by transforming underused streets into compelling, accessible public spaces and walkable destinations.” (NYCDot Website) As part of the class lecture series, described as a key player in the Corona Plaza redesign project, Vaidila Kungys , the Plaza Program Coordinator of the NYC DOT gave a presentation in class.

III. Proposal addresses

The are many challenges to re-creating Corona Plaza from a transit island into an open space with new greenery,programming and information screen or information kiosk. Currently, the space is desolate with no space for sitting. Down the block there is a NYC Park that has no

seating and has many rules to follow. NYC passed a law a few years ago that makes it illegal for adults without no children with them to be present in NYC parks. If so you would get a fine and be removed from the park. Putting seating in the plaza will allow those who can't be in the park to have a place to sit after a long days work or after they are shopping in the area. This would also assist businesses surrounding Corona Plaza by giving their customers who want to sit outdoors a place to sit.

Many stake holders want something in the Plaza that allows for information to be broad casted and have asked for an information kiosk. Our design will utilize the blank billboard and make it a projector screen. This will broadcast any upcoming events that will happen in the area with ads from local businesses or organizations. We are also proposing to have a information kiosk or bulletin with a detailed map of the area and a list of attractions in Corona. A portion of this bulletin is removable so it can list upcoming events and activities at Corona Plaza and in the neighborhood and local area institutions and local business deals.

The concerns of the businesses in Corona Plaza is important for us to address. If we don't outreach to them they are the ones who will be most affected by this street closure. Our class hasn't been in contact with any of the businesses in the area. City Councilwomen Julissa Ferraras addressed in our class that they will have a community board meeting to address to the businesses this plaza. The representative from DOT said that they will be installing street signs in both English and Spanish in a month or two saying that a new plaza will be coming here. The signs will only stay up for a few months in the plaza to inform the community about the changes to the plaza.

IV. Implementation

The proposal for the greening of the plaza would enlist the help from the NYC Parks Department to remove the current black fence around the greenery. Replanting new smaller trees and plants that are low maintenance and bloom year round will be used in the main plaza. In the extended triangle across the street from the plaza which is managed by the DOT sea grass can be planted by taking out a few cobble stones in the area which are low maintenance and allow for water to be able soaked up by the sea grass since the area surrounding the triangle is concrete. Thus, preventing more run off from heavy rain to run into the sewer system. This has been a problem in our city and by making small changes to the city landscape we can assist with re-routing runoff water from going into the Flushing Bay and the surrounding creek that is in the area. It is important to note that future changes to the plaza in terms of changing the green space will have to go through the Parks Department. Unfortunately, they haven't been involved with this process, but will possibly come on-board when the plaza design is finalized.

DOT is the one who will make the decisions on the temporary plaza that will be done this Summer 2012. They will be working with the City Council representative and local businesses on the design of this plaza which has been allocated \$3 million dollars. Starting in the summer they will create a temporary plaza by closing off the street, possibly painting the street green and setting up tables and chairs. Using the DOT Street Design Manuel we selected a few additional things that can be easily installed in the plaza. We would like to include ten light posts around the vicinity of the plaza to make it brighter. It will deter anyone from committing any crimes. Another item that we want the DOT to install is 24 bike racks around the perimeter of the main

plaza. Before we add these bike racks we must make sure that we have enough room for them, as there is clearance guidelines that must be followed. We will be adding six tables around the main plaza.

City Council member Julissa Ferrerras will be taking a lead role in this process of creating the plaza and representing her constituents. She said that she will be having meetings with the business owners in the area around the plaza to inform them of the changes coming in a few months that will begin this summer. The local Community Board will be enforcing the local codes and be key for outreach to the local community to let them know about this plaza. They have been discussing at their meetings about the plaza and were informed about our class being able to create designs for the future look of Corona Plaza. In addition City Council member Julissa Ferrerras should make a proposal bill that addresses empty ad space around the city. When we called Van Wager they said that the ad space next to Corona Plaza has been empty for a year or so. This isn't the only ad space that is not currently being used. You can see empty ad spaces when heading to the Midtown Tunnel. Not only is this unattractive, it is a blight to a community to see these empty bill boards. Julissa should also reach out to Van Wagner who rents the billboard space and let them know about the changes to the plaza coming this summer.