The Theater of the People: A look into Queens Street Vending Culture

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The Theater of the People project recognizes street vendors in Queens, Corona Plaza as merely the visible performance of a network of distributed and transient actors and social infrastructure. Simultaneously, an actual theater sits between a public plaza and a public park, offering a potential political, economic and social connection between the two public arenas. What can a building built for performance teach us when it becomes a scaffold for an entirely different play? How might we imagine a Theater for the People? Within the practice of everyday life, street vendors produce an inherently social space that's embodied, processual, rhetorical, and political. What happens when a theater, a space of leisure that gives pleasure from the art of fiction, becomes the backdrop for the script of the street vendor? What would a space for the stateless look like? What role would the politics of aesthetics have in such a place? By portraying these relations and connections of everyday life interactions within public spaces, we can think of ways to invent new, inclusive futures.

"Urban form should not be seen as an immutable constant to be rigidly controlled, but rather it should be responsive to changing conditions and relations"

—Mukhija and Sideris, *The Informal American City*

THE PUBLIC PLAZA AS A CONTESTED SPACE

Corona is a neighborhood in the borough of Queens in New York City. It is bordered by Flushing Meadows Corona Park to the east and Jackson Heights and Elmhurst to the west. Corona has a multicultural population made up of 72% Hispanics and Latinos, 11.5% Asian, 11.2% Black, 4.4% White, and .5% Mixed (according to the 2010 United States Census), and was one of the neighborhoods named as the epicenter of New York's covid 19 outbreak.[1] The infection, had exposed the city's stubborn inequalities, ravaging working-class immigrant neighborhoods.

At the 103rd St Corona Plaza Station, the crisis had transformed the vital commercial plaza that was normally packed with taquerías, arepas, tamales and fresh water stands, with sellers of masks and their Tyvek suits. The disappearance of the food vendors was due to the increased persecution of the city as part of the security measures against street vendors without permits. The street vendors did not have government help since, their job was categorized as "informal" and therefore they did not qualify for aid during the pandemic.

In the midst of the Covid 19 epidemic, the economic strain led the vendors to come out to the streets again. As soon as you went down the elevated platform of the 7 train, you would start to hear the mixture of Latin music and recognized the booming food smells, from the grilled meat, burnt corn and steamy stew, presented to you on sticks, plates, casseroles, and plastic containers. The need during the pandemic was so great that the infractions on vendors peaked, regardless of ticket violations, confiscation of goods and the possible infection of the virus.

In a first attempt to understand the Corona Plaza site, I recognized how the street vendors became the predominant figure of embodied culture on the streets and public spaces. What at first presented to me, the outsider, was a multiethnic celebration of food and diversity, soon revealed itself as a constant movement of bodies behind each cart. Producing this environment takes a toll on many of the vendors. The use of power plants provide electricity, which require gasoline, and a couple of fuel trips during the day if you don't have reserves. Gallons of freshwater and merchandise demand would also need to be brought back and forth. The use of canopy or umbrellas helps modify their environmental conditions when the weather isn't in their favor. These also help identify from afar a street vendor and work as a cover from the pigeon droppings.

In most cases, easily movable DIY shopping carts are the main structural body that permits storage, cooking, and food serving. Heavy concrete blocks or Home Depot buckets filled with cement serve as foundations to define territory. Certain urban services perform as anchors to these vendors. Banks, ATMs, Groceries Stores, and Public Bathrooms are the main attractors.

Most of these vendors are undocumented and therefore have a tough time looking for a job. This is the main reason why many appeal to street vending. Street vending is not illegal in New York, however, certain restrictions make it hard to make street vending profitable. New York City has had a cap on how many permits they can approve since the 1980s. This number is currently around 5,100 permits. According to the Street Vendor Project, "There are as many as 20,000 street vendors in New York City" which means there are around 15,000 street vendors operating illegally.[2] This permit issue became even more critical with

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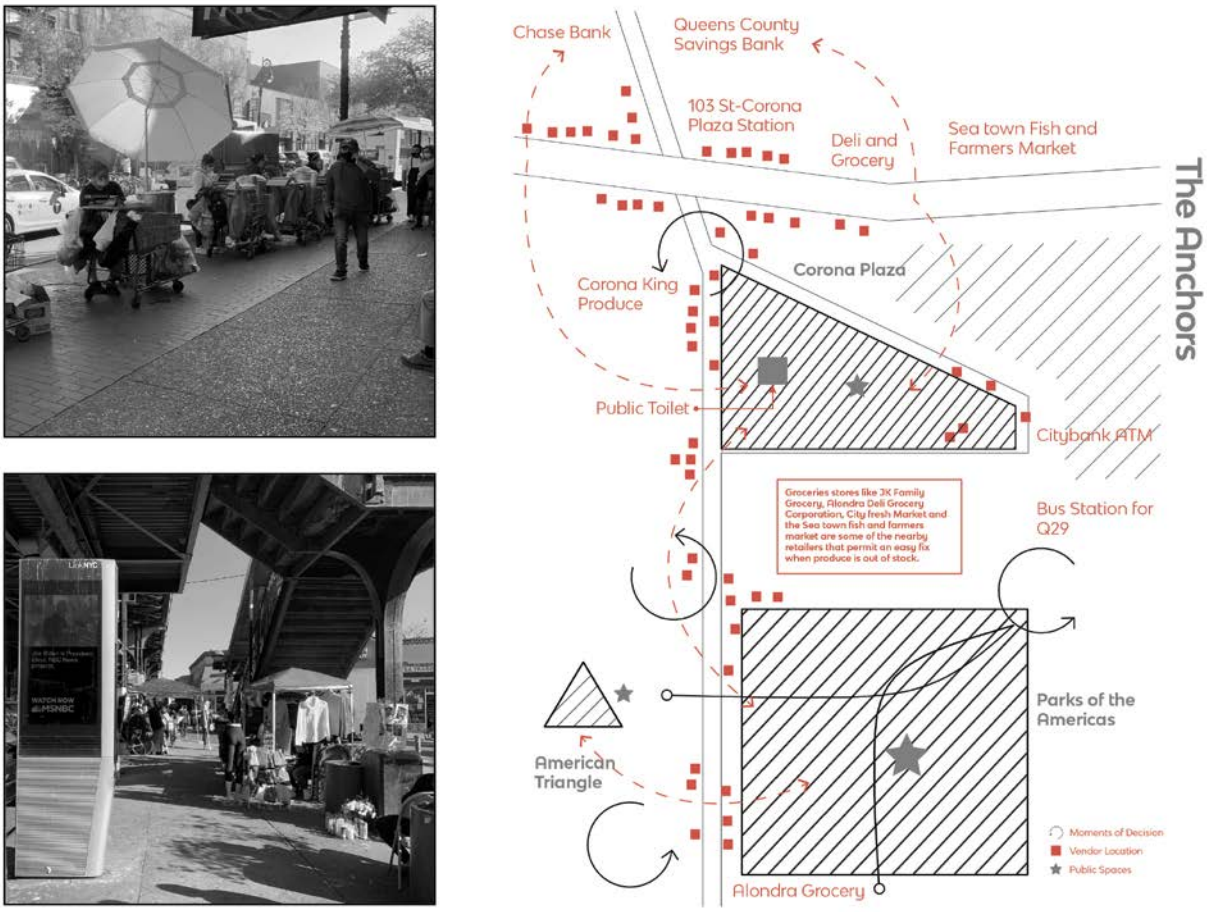

Figure 1. Street Vendors at Corona. Photo and Drawing by Pedro Cruz.

the pandemic since many new vendors are taking the streets in search of economic relief. This is only one of the struggles that many of these vendors face. Others include sidewalk restrictions, regulations on proximity to entrances or certain buildings, cart storage and restock, and now even more than ever, contested space between brick and mortar establishments with outdoor dining and bikers that look to escape the confinements of their small New York apartment during Covid. These are all constant brawls street vendors have to deal with daily.

Until June of 2020, the police were handing vendors fines and threatening with arrest and property confiscation. That is until Mayor Bill de Blasio prohibited this act due to the struggles that came with the pandemic.[3] This hold on fines opened the door to many street vendors since a lot of people were left without jobs because of layoffs due to the virus. Street vending became a source of income for many, not only in Queens but around the world. The necessity has made street vendors appear again in areas that were previously banned from, like Diversity Plaza or Downtown Flushing.[4]

Even now, during this pandemic, these workers have worked non-stop out of pure necessity. An increase of vendors has given rise to contested space between the vendors themselves. Before the pandemic, profitable spots were contested by those who had permits and those who didn't care much for fines. When De Blasio held enforcers from handing out tickets and confiscating property, the streets got filled with vendors.

This disregard of the vendors can be traced back to even when the Plaza was being redesigned. In 2012 the city transformed a redundant Roosevelt Avenue service road into a vibrant pedestrian space called Corona Plaza.[5] Although the Corona neighborhood has been listed as home to one of the largest street vending scenes in Queens in the Commercial District Needs Assessment (CDNA), this new design did not take into account electrical outlets, sinks, access to drinking water, transportation or the necessary storage to cater to the community of vendors in the area.[6] In addition, street vendor regulations have created numerous scenes of conflict due to a shortage of available space to vend. The tables, carts and chairs are now strongly chained to the urban infrastructure to secure their spaces.

Figure 2. Mariela Vivar a Fruit Vendor in Corona. Photo by Pedro Cruz.

Figure 3. Loew's Plaza Theater. Photo by Pedro Cruz.

THE PLACE MAKERS OF QUEENS

Despite the complications that come with being a vendor, every day street vendors like Mariela, José, Froilán, and Rosa prepare to serve the public of Queens. As the day passes, the vendors take their place and help convert the merely physical space of the plaza into a place that contains an emotional dimension, with a link between people, their nationality, memory and the desire for progress. The act of selling in public spaces provokes an exchange of sensory, technical and expressive interactions that produce an embodied, procedural, rhetorical and political space. Vendors provide an aesthetic experience that contrasts the dominant views and normative beliefs of order in cities like New York.

So, what would happen if instead of preventing street vending sales we enforce the right to public space with the placemaking tactics of street vendors? What new type of social apparatus would suggest relationships between the public space and the migrant seller?

After conducting interviews with street vendors at Corona Plaza and non-profit organizations like The Street Vendor Project and the New Immigrant Community Empowerment (NICE), the idea for a garage and commissary came up. The current commissaries in New York are run as lucrative businesses that provide storage and restocking of the carts for a fixed monthly fee and require their own transportation. Currently, the closest commissary to Corona Plaza is 4 miles away in Long Island City. The proposal for this new project speculates on a type of "informal" commissary of mutual aid in Corona Plaza. A place that is financed and worked by the vendors themselves and the networks of job opportunities that they provide. At the same time, aid organizations could provide financial and legal support by establishing their offices within this new space and providing a safe haven for the harassed and marginalized.

The concept of the mutually aided commissary comes from the House of the People concept that actually existed and were mutually benefited cooperatives rather than a predatory or extractive counterpart like the common commissaries we see in New York. These houses were all about indoor public spheres, with recreational and social spaces and were financed by mutually aided societies as well. Margaret Kohn in her book Radical Space talks about the means to Build a House of the People by using the concepts of Dominated and Appropriated spaces that Henry Lefebvre defines in The Production of Space. He argues, that Appropriated spaces are the constant practices of adaptation, experimentation and revision and are somewhat temporal. While Dominated spaces are the ones created from standardization, uniformity and tradition.[7]

A great example of this, is the Vooruit Cooperative in Brussels, Belgium, which was founded in the late nineteenth century by Victor Horta, and it introduced a space for political and cultural organizations to come in and create the sense of a public sphere. The expansion of this method was generated by a secondary cooperative completely owned by the workers while the Vooruit Cooperative provided logistical and financial support. [7]

To tie this to the vendor commissary, the Vooruit Cooperative was Designed around two central spaces, the restaurant/bar for social life and the auditorium on the top floor for political life. In the case of the commissary the social part is the communal kitchen in the flyspace of the theater while the church auditorium turns into the political one.

THE NETWORKS OF SELF-RELIANCE

To make up for what others have ignored, street vendors have built up their networks of mutual aid. This network is made visible by everyday characters like the vendor him/her self, the

distributor, the affiliate, the place holder, the police lookout and the masses. In contrast, others transcend space and become an invisible social infrastructure that caters to things like storage, wholesale, transnationalism, and informal loan investments.

Networks of self-reliance allow for the cultivation of trust within their social ties, themselves, and even law enforcers. As a street vendor, this cultivation of trust with people will determine when and where you will be able to vend. A social tie with a restaurant nearby would grant these vendors a place to use a bathroom, for example. An alliance with other vendors could get them a ride to their vending corner every day, a truck to pull your cart, a lookout, or as a financial resource in desperate times. A connection to a wholesale market could get you a monthly tab to manage your product expenses. Vendors become the steady presence on the street corners an embody the beloved jane Jacobs phrase of "eyes on the street".

The abundance of Latino street vendors in Queens is due to the quantity of Latinos in the area itself. Since they offer a sense of security and a relationship with the mass provides for better chances of alliances. Here in Queens, we see how a transcending form of living culture becomes a safeguard for these vendors. The Latino population is then a character within this network and a reason for mobility in the case that it's needed. The question is, where would such a space be located? What kind of building could support the cultural aspirations of Queens and its networks of self-reliance?

THE THEATER AS A COMMUNAL SPACE CONNECTOR

On the same block where the Plaza is located, lies an old building theater called Loew's Plaza Theater. This theater first opened in November 1927 and was renowned for showing the latest Hollywood movies with Spanish subtitles but later closed due to a decline in the neighborhood in 2005. [8] It is currently occupied by the Walgreens pharmacy and a Christian church called Aliento de Vida. The block where the Loew's theater is located is right in front of the plaza and at the same time has its back to the Park of the Americas. This park constitutes of a playground, a baseball field, basketball courts, and a sports and recreational park that is constantly used for numerous activities of leisure and family gatherings. The spatial value of the theater could potentially serve as a mediator over the rights to public space in the plaza. The theatrical and scenic configuration of the theater invites us to imagine how Corona Plaza and the Park of the Americas come together through public appropriation, thus giving a some means of reparations for the years of persecution of immigrant vendors.

How could we imagine Loew's theater as an apparatus that enables cultural relations of solidarity and self-sufficiency through social, aesthetic and spatial resources? What happens when a theater, a leisure space that delights in the art of fiction, becomes the scene of the street vendor's script? How could we imagine a Theater for the People?

The intervention seeks to attack these questions with two phases that discuss the temporary appropriation of public spaces. The first phase seeks to create a connecting bridge between the working environment of the Plaza and the sense of leisure in the Park, using the theater as a connector. The border wall of the façade is perforated to reveal the day to day manifesting itself as a framing of the mundane. The dismantling of the façade creates a transitory space where the public of Queens can visualize the effort behind the curtain, the machinery of human energy, that in many cases without any rest, continues to supply the micro-economies of many informal businesses in the area. The closure of Street 41 proposes to imitate the history of Corona Plaza, where a disused road was transformed for the benefit of the public. A level resurfacing would suggest an open-air market that would activate the street as a transitory space between the theater and the Park of the Americas. This would entail proposed consequences of multicultural activities in the park, thus activating an entire block highlighting the largest street vendor center in Queens as mentioned by the CDNA.

The second phase seeks to transform the space of the theater inside into a collective "informal" commissary worked by street vendors. Those less sophisticated carts that turn to outside kitchens to prepare their meals due to sanitation regulations would now have a communal kitchen on top of the theater. This area serves not only as a communal kitchen for vendors, but also as a central food pantry in case of emergencies like we saw with the pandemic. The church bleachers are transformed on weekdays to bring together organizations like The Street Vendor Project and the New Immigrant Community Empowerment. As NICE continues to provide employment to immigrant day laborers, their families can come to obtain hot meals provided by the Street Vendor Project. The old theater infrastructure would help provide the resources that the plaza lacks. The water in the tanks could be used for cooking and cleaning while the electrical power outlets could provide a place to recharge batteries and power plants. The delivery and inventory area is in charge of organizing a whole network of international products that many vendors depend on for their craft and authentic food of their nationality. The shopping cart warehouse provides an alternative for those vendors who come from other parts of the city in search of a Latino and Hispanic audience. Tasked with storing their own carts, vendors could restock, clean and prepare everything for the next day. The disused part of the theater walkway is elevated to create a platform over the corn, tomato and chile crops. This platform also serves as a connecting element of transition between the plaza, the theater and the Park of the Americas.

Lowe's Collective Theater proposal produces a space where economic and social relationships flourish from human collectivity and mutual aid. Empowerment and collective work take over the theater to show the performative act of making place, of making a home, of sharing the multicultural identity of Queens.

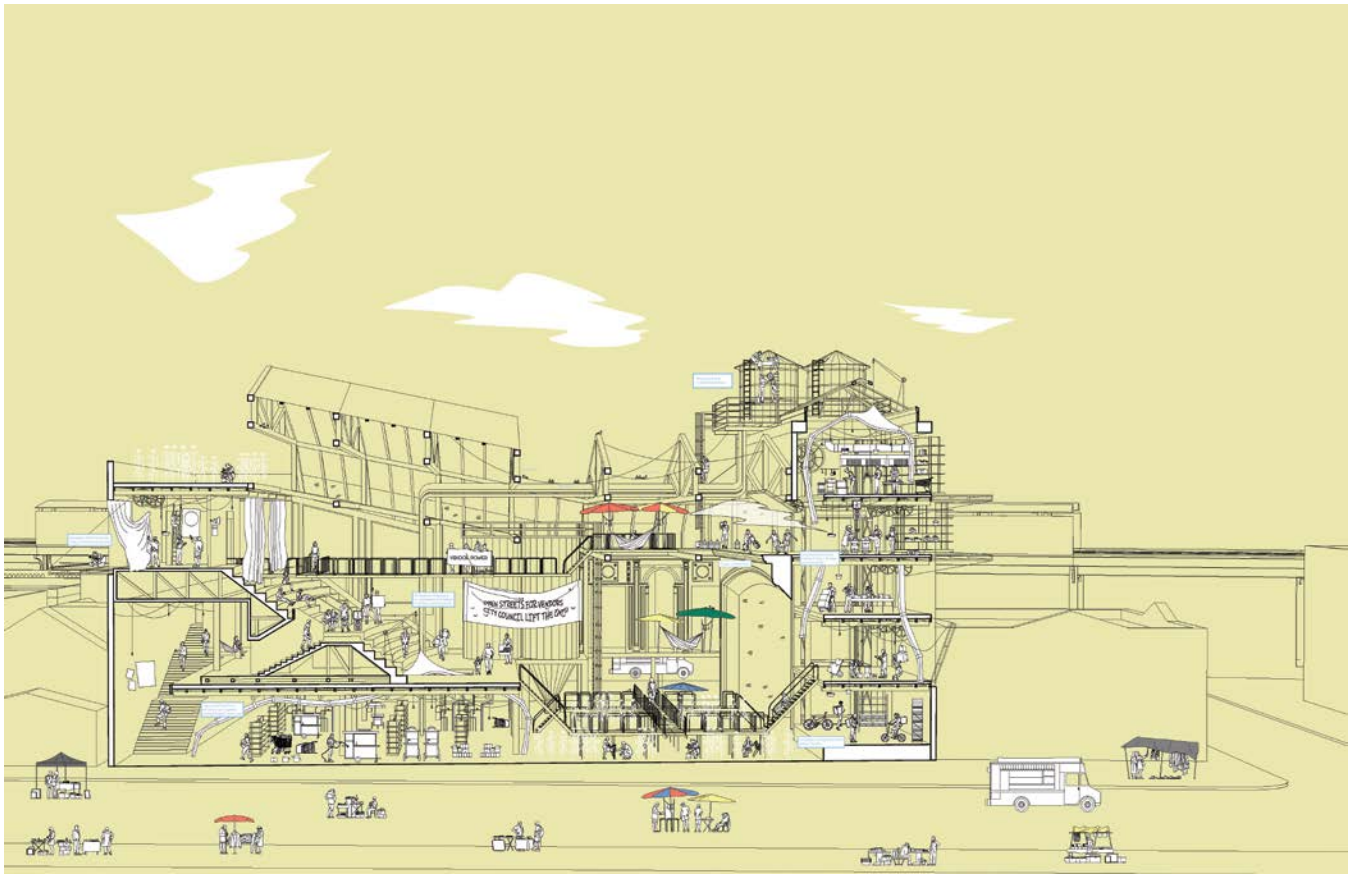

Figure 4. Section Drawing of Commisary. Drawing by Pedro Cruz.

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