



EcCoWell Community Recovery Program

Harlem New York Report

Walls-Ortiz Gallery and Center

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Led by the City Seminary of New York, the Harlem neighbourhood of New York has been innovative in applying EcCoWell principles in a local community. The present report shows the cross-sectoral approach integrating faith, the arts, learning, and eco-justice implemented through the role of the Walls-Ortiz Gallery and Center. The Justice Seedbed Project described extended the innovation to a wider audience, and illustrated an approach to building community understanding of environmental issues affecting the neighbourhood.

The Harlem experience shows how an effective free-standing learning neighbourhood can be developed outside the framework set by a learning city initiative. This model, with leadership provided by a cultural institution or community college could be more widely applied in big cities.

This report for the EcCoWell2 Community Recovery Program highlights the integrated, cross-sectoral work of the Walls-Ortiz Gallery and Center (WOGC) and neighborhood partners in Harlem, New York, over the past year. Building on the July 2020 Pascal Policy Brief 4 (Liu Wong and Watson), which examined the opportunities and challenges involved in formulating an expanded understanding of EcCoWell with practical implications for community recovery and renewal, this report describes the *Justice Seedbed Project*, an eco-justice, faith, and arts initiative at the WOGC, seed-funded by the Luce Foundation through Drew University's Social Justice Leadership program. This work began in the summer of 2019 and has evolved during COVID-19 pandemic times until the present moment, to fulfill its purpose of *strengthening community bonds and social cohesion; raising civic awareness around eco-justice issues, the arts, and faith; and providing opportunities for lifelong learning for all ages*, engaging with cultural institutions such as our public library, the gallery, and community gardens. These endeavors are all important elements of implementing and sustaining a community recovery process, especially as the pandemic continues to impact our ability to gather in-person and hold larger gatherings.

As such, this report attends to possibilities raised and policy practice recommendations from the paper introduced earlier (Liu Wong and Watson, 2020). Some questions raised include: *What are the implications for policy and practice for an EcCoWell 2 Community Recovery process and program that recognizes a moment of reckoning and possibility - as we negotiate a pandemic, racial protest, and increasing climate change? How do we iterate this approach wisely in supporting the resilience of communities in a time of extraordinary challenge and opportunity? How can the potential for transformative learning for individuals and groups be fostered by integrating the arts, faith / spirituality, embodied knowing, and groundedness in place?*

While we may not be able to comprehensively answer all of these questions in this report, they are highlighted here to frame the lens through which we interpret and analyze this work. Due to the ongoing pandemic, we recognize what we were able to do until February 2020 is not possible now - at least, not in the same way. As such, we have had, in the past several months, an opportunity to explore and evolve iterations of this approach - in ways that are virtual yet connected, and on occasion, in-person following social distancing guidelines. In this report, we explore possibilities for linkages between faith / spirituality, the arts, the environment, and community resilience. We witness transformative learning - in small, incremental ways - at work in the midst of new and old relationships, where family, friends, and neighbors expand what it means to know themselves, each other, and the environment, and build a stronger, more resilient community.

Context

As an introduction to this work, the mission of the Walls-Ortiz Gallery and Center is to create a community space for interaction with art, for conversation, for telling stories, for visualizing and engaging faith, and for new questions and unexpected appreciations. It is the public engagement arm of City Seminary of New York, an intercultural Christian learning community.

The *Justice Seedbed Project* extended our Christian practice of hospitality at the WOGC in Central Harlem to a wider audience, emphasizing lifelong learning for all ages by cultivating community dialogue; deepening relationships with neighbors and organizational partners; and identifying and understanding the environmental issues affecting our neighborhood. The project began with an exhibition in June and July of 2019 called *Planting for Peace*. As an exhibition of Harlem- and NYC-based artists working with ecology themes, the aim was to create the space and dialogical pivot points for community conversations around our local environmental concerns and the guiding questions for this project.

In the fall of 2019, the site of the Walls-Ortiz Gallery and Center was closed for future construction, and, without a physical home, we operated a “gallery on the move.” During this time, we partnered with local organizations, especially our neighbor Fresh Oils Ministry, the local public library, the local police precinct, nearby community gardens and environmental advocacy groups, and a day center for adults with special needs, to continue pursuing the flourishing of the environment in our neighborhood. We hosted workshops with seniors, youth, police and families, adults with disabilities, and local crafters that involved planting, art-making, sound-

mapping, and crocheting around topics that might help us attend more closely to the natural world in our urban environment.

We also attended events held by local organizations committed to environmental justice and invited those organizations to educate our staff and learning communities. We had hoped to convene a working group from these various communities—artists, activist organizations, seminary and gallery staff, and neighboring residents of the community—on environmental justice, but were unable to due to schedule coordination, and, later, the physical distancing constraints of the pandemic. However, through a three-pronged approach of a physical exhibition in the gallery space, workshop series with community partners, and intentional connections to environmental justice organizations, we explored and developed a grounded response to our questions:

- *How do we hear and respond to the environment's call for care?*
- *How does the practice of being a good neighbor in Central Harlem extend to engaging with local ecological issues?*

Our core gallery team of six (three of whom live in the local community) became a form of a working group that we hope to expand.

What follows is a reflection on how our efforts responded to those questions and worked toward our goals of 1) cultivating community dialogue; 2) deepening relationships with neighbors and organizational partners; and 3) identifying and understanding the environmental issues affecting our neighborhood. We gathered data from visitor feedback forms at gallery events; staff reflections conducted at two intervals over the course of the grant period; and photographs from workshops, conversations, and events. The report concludes with reflections on the implications of this work for community resiliency and recovery going forward.

1. Cultivate community dialogue

The *Planting for Peace* exhibition featuring local artists lasted for five weeks in June - July 2019, and involved events geared toward cultivating community dialogue, including an opening artist panel and three community conversations. We engaged approximately 150 participants in these various events, and during our public visitor hours, we logged a total of 639 visitors. 132 were first-timers and 507 were returning visitors, indicating a consistent base of community participants who value the work and approach of the gallery.

Community conversations gathered local residents, passersby, visitors, artists, and families for discussions sparked by the artwork on view. One participant reflected on a sculpture made from tree branches, thinking about the creative potential of raw materials. Another reflection came from work made with discarded materials, leaves, and sticks strewn across sidewalks—where does this garbage that we scatter end up? How might we be more responsible?

In one community conversation, a food justice educator and activist from a neighboring university led participants on a sound walk of a nearby park. As we walked, we took photos with

disposable cameras, training ourselves to see the natural world bursting at the seams. As we got to the park, we engaged in mapping sounds around us, and when we returned, we mapped these onto a shared diagram of the park and blocks that we had walked.



Planting for Peace exhibition and community conversations (Summer 2019)

Other community conversations involved planting flowers and painting planter pots. One staff member shared the following reflection on how these small acts led to sense of agency, which could lead to an accumulation of justice:

One day as I was watering the recently planted flowers in the tree pits, an older gentleman walking by stopped to talk to me.

Neighbor: "Do you know the names of all of those plants and flowers?"

Me: "No, actually... I don't."

Neighbor: "I bet a lot of people in this neighborhood don't know either. If you can find out and then label them, people walking by will learn their names too. Then they also become a part of the community."

So we labeled them. My hope is that one day our neighbor walked by again and saw the labels, realizing that he had made a difference. And that passersby every day are able to benefit from the care given to the trees.

A simple observation and exchange on the street led to reflection and transformation, not only on the part of the staff member, but potentially for the neighbor who returned to find that he was heard and responded to. Community relationships are strengthened when we see and hear

each other, and when we realize how learning can happen and slowly negotiate change, building stronger relationships and community resilience.

2. Deepen relationships with neighbours and organizational partnerships

In addition to the community conversations, we had two events geared toward intentionally deepening relationships with neighbors and organizational partners during the *Planting for Peace* exhibition in 2019: Senior and Youth Paint Day (in partnership with the local police precinct) and Tree Pit Planting Day. As the gallery went “on the move,” while our physical space prepared for construction, we used the opportunity to reach out to more neighbors and organizations.

The following image and staff reflection point to the ongoing partnerships we cultivate to build resiliency, knowing that even while we are not able to meet in person, there is a desire to continue to work together to rebuild, restore, and re-imagine the future of our neighbourhood.

The image, featuring a senior paint day co-organized with our local police precinct, epitomizes a glimpse of what we hoped this initiative would catalyse - building a shared connection in our neighbourhood amongst a diversity of peoples - seniors, youth, visitors, police, and our gallery as a third space for gathering. It was through art and the imagination that we could bring life to this project and this conversation about the flourishing of our Harlem community - not only its people but the place itself, the earth, the concrete, the trees, and animal/insect life.



In the winter and spring of 2020, we began more sustained projects with community partners, while navigating our situation as a gallery without a physical location and then as a gallery during a pandemic. From November 2019 to February 2020, we offered monthly art workshops to adult day-residents of the Fisher Center at a branch of the New York Public Library (NYPL) in East Harlem. These workshops created a new organizational partnership with the NYPL and deepened our existing partnership with the Fisher Center. Seminary staff, Fisher Center participants, and library staff shared feelings of joy, meditation, and connection as they created art on the themes of air, wind, sun, land, and sky. While the pandemic brought our workshops to a pause, we have

collected artwork that we hope to display either at the East 125th Street New York Public Library as previously planned or at another site.

In the spring of 2020, we began a participatory craft project to beautify the backyard space of Fresh Oils Ministry, a space used for church programs, ESL classes, NA meetings, and other community functions. Working with a local yarn installation artist, we met weekly over Zoom to crochet clematis flowers for the installation from April through June 2020. The crocheted clematis vine was installed in early September 2020, and we celebrated on September 24, 2020, after cleaning up the backyard, purchasing outdoor benches and planters, and establishing the Fresh Oils Community Garden. During the installation, we encountered numerous neighbours who were interested in the vine project.

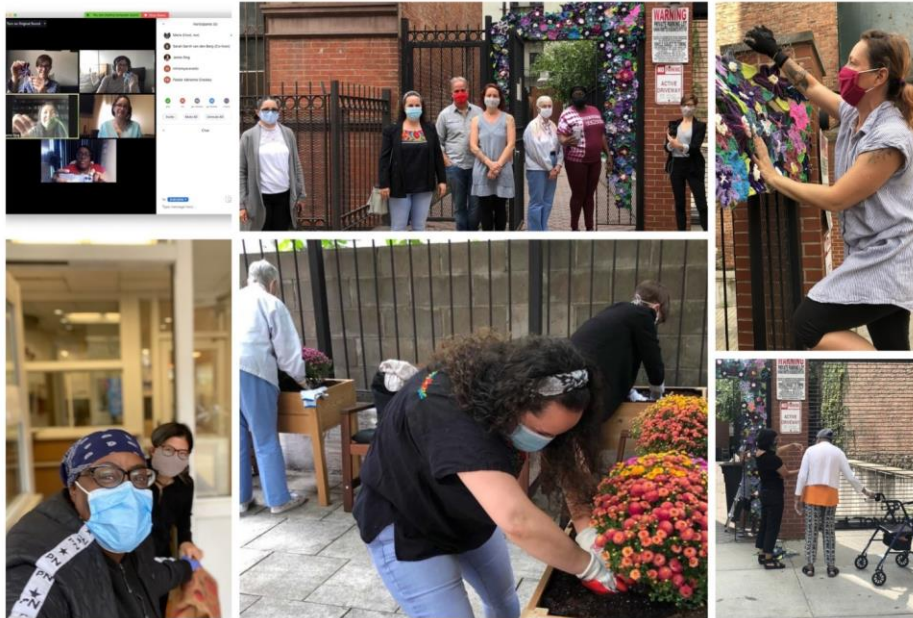
The community yarn project was an example of a creative iteration of the EcCoWell approach - bringing family, friends, and visitors from as far as India (via an Instagram invitation) together for virtual community conversations, learning not only technical skills (following a new crochet pattern) but sharing in life and listening to each other. News of other community projects—crocheted ear savers for healthcare workers and knit / crocheted THANK YOU banners—were shared, and there seemed to always be something new and unexpected to learn in those weekly sessions.



Fisher Day Center Art Workshops at East 125th St New York Public Library (Fall 2019 / Winter 2020)

Community connections multiplied as a local Harlem “crafty ladies” group joined for the virtual sessions and neighbors of the garden stepped up to help unload plants, soil, and bulbs from a

staff member's car to the backyard area. During installation of the crocheted clematis vine, an impromptu crochet lesson happened on the sidewalk with a staff member and an appreciative neighbor, a member of a seminary alumna's church.



Virtual yarn circles and in-person planting, Fresh Oils Community Garden (Spring - Fall 2020)

3. Identify and understand the environmental issues affecting our neighbourhood

We sought to learn from local organizations who have been working toward ecojustice for decades. Our summer intern Zoe created a map of dozens of community gardens and green spaces in Harlem, making us aware of a whole network of ecologically active and concerned citizens. A team member attended a panel held at a community garden, Harlem Grown, in conjunction with the Harlem Emergency Network in fall 2019. Months later, we invited WeACT to lead an environmental justice tour as part of our Faith and the City conference. Participants learned about a fifty-year history of activism and policy change led by residents of Harlem in response to toxic waste plants and bus depots.

These connections helped to transform our own seminary practices as we hosted events pre-COVID, moving away from disposables and starting to collect vegetable and fruit scraps to compost. They also raised more explicit awareness of ecological practices in the planning and design of the building which will house our renovated gallery. These conversations were not limited to staff, but extended out in community conversations and activities and built resiliency into our everyday practices.



Community Gardens	Community Gardens	Community Gardens
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carver Community 212 East 124th Street Floral Garden 1805 Madison Avenue Frank White Memorial 614 West 145th Street Friendship Center 499 West 125th Street Riverside Valley 699 West 139th Street Carver Memorial Plaza 145 St Avenue Avenue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elizabeth Langley 121 West 127th Street William B. Robinson 324 West 128th Street Dr. Little Green House 217 West 129th Street #210 127 Garden 147 West 115 Street Manufacturers 105 West 135th Street Villa Santitas 71 East 117th Street 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nelson Mandela 743 West 127th Street 120th Street Garden 120th Street Garden Lyle's Magic Garden 100 East 115th Street El Garden 1571 Lexington Avenue Christopher Clapp 1401 Madison Avenue Langston Williams Garden 405 West 124th Street William B. Robinson 145 East 117th Street
<h3>Recycling Centers</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tinker Center 100 East 110 Street New York Recycling 4415 Broadway Avenue Priority Recycling Center 874 St. Ann Ave, Bronx 		

Getting to know and naming ecojustice efforts in Harlem (Summer / Fall 2019)

Simple acts like planting flowers and recognizing the importance of community interaction together in these activities were a part of making connections between faith / spirituality, the arts, ecojustice and our city. The following photo and staff reflection provide evidence of this:



Tree Pit Planting / Community Heroes Day (Summer 2019)

In Tree Pit Planting Day, done in partnership with a local teacher, students from the community and staff discussed how to be better caretakers of our environment and planet. Artmaking, planting, and reading combined to make students aware of how our environment is impacted by garbage, pollutants, asthma, gas, and oxygen. At the same time, participants reported a sense of wonder. Children participated alongside adults who also pitched in to help beautify the neighborhood. Children felt pride as “community heroes.”

Conclusion

As we consider the connections between faith / spirituality, the arts, eco-justice and transformative learning, we return to some questions raised earlier:

What are the implications for policy and practice for an EcCoWell 2 Community Recovery process and program that recognizes a moment of reckoning and possibility - as we negotiate a pandemic, racial protest and increasingly tenuous climate change? We must continue to build on and deepen existing relationships and move toward different ways of engagement (when limited to virtual or socially distant in-person interaction). It is harder to feel connected in a COVID-19 world. However, it is through ongoing conversations that see and hear the issues and concerns of our neighbors - particularly those who are black and brown in our Harlem community - that we can move towards recovery and resilience together.

How do we iterate this approach wisely in supporting the resilience of communities in a time of extraordinary challenge and opportunity? It is with creativity and an openness to try new things that we continue to adapt how we answer and articulate the EcCoWell approach in Harlem. The evolution of the project moved us from an in-person gallery exhibition and walks around the city to gathering for a season as a virtual community. Recovery and renewal in Harlem will emerge in time as the gallery activities are able to find their place again, not only in hosting events at the Fresh Oils Community Garden, but on the street and other unexpected places of connection.

How can the potential for transformative learning for individuals and groups be fostered by integrating the arts, faith / spirituality, embodied knowing, and groundedness in place? Since the opening of the Fresh Oils Community Garden, we have moved into the next phase of our work - offering virtual art-making workshops twice a month for local neighbors, family, and friends, and are in the process of developing a call for socially-engaged artwork from Christian artists and educators in response to the pandemic. We anticipate the call will engage a group of New York City-based artists and others from around the US, and will form a community of practice, meeting monthly over Zoom to connect and stimulate creative practices that are grounded in community, faith, art, and the city - with the potential again for transformative learning at the individual and collective levels.

To conclude, ***how can community resilience be built by lifting the human spirit - defining purpose, making meaning, and generating connections while addressing emotive, embodied, spiritual and transformative aspects of what it means to be human in a more-than-human***

context? Making art, building community relationships, learning from those doing the work, sensing the city—this didn't lead to "justice rolling down." We feel it though, welling up from below and around us. It formed us as a team and institution. We've built community partnerships, both with environmental activists and environmental artists, and have become conscious of and changed sustainability practices as an institution to be a better neighbor. We became most of all aware of the work yet to be done and how this complements our mission and calls us to contribute as a center for theological learning to an integrated, holistic, community-based EcCoWell2 learning approach that promotes resilience during and after pandemic times, moving us all forward to a future of hope and justice.