Las Casitas Archive Comes to Hostos

Home is where the heart is, and that love was on full display at Hostos Community College through a special collaborative exhibition honoring the casitas of Puerto Rico and showcasing the materials from Las Casitas: An Urban Cultural Alternative, created in 1991 by the Bronx Council on the Arts (BCA) Longwood Arts Project.

The November 4, 2015 reception and exhibit highlighted the generous donation of the Las Casitas collection and exhibition resource materials to the Hostos Archives. New York’s casitas are reproductions of working class homes and remain a vital expression of Afro-Puerto Rican culture in the diaspora. Casitas have transformed abandoned urban spaces into sites of cultural and historical memory in the Bronx and beyond for decades.

This archival collection epitomizes the creative ingenuity of a community recreating its surroundings into spaces of cultural continuity, survival and hope in the midst of hostile living conditions. The Library and academic departments will encourage ongoing research and deeper study of the value to Bronx arts and culture, and the many neighborhoods in which casitas presently exist in the Bronx, East Harlem and the Lower East Side.

As part of a month-long salute to Puerto Rican Heritage Month last November, Hostos inaugurated original materials from the 1991 exhibit curated and produced by Betti Sue Hertz and Bill Aguado, both formerly of the BCA. Deirdre Scott, Executive Director of the Bronx Council on the Arts, facilitated the smooth transition of the materials from BCA’s main office to Hostos.

About the Collection

The exhibition opened at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. and went on to be exhibited at the Bronx Museum of the Arts and Syracuse University, among other venues. Later, in 2010, elements from the original exhibition were reconstructed and updated by BCA’s Longwood with further research and programming throughout the community.
Las Casitas Revisited opened at Longwood Art Gallery@ Hostos and included photographs by the renowned photographer Martha Cooper. Due to the artistic and cultural value of this collection, along with the historic role of Hostos as an institution which serves the community, the Hostos Archives will serve as the permanent repository for these materials.

The collection’s worth lies in its value to various constituencies from students and faculty at Hostos, to researchers in anthropology and history, as well as to community-based arts organizations. The Humanities Department hosted a Tertulia (a social gathering with literary or artistic overtones) entitled “Teaching and Learning with Las Casitas Archive” which featured presentations by Bill Aguado, William Casari, Wallace Edgecombe and Jorge Matos. The presentation was organized by Prof. Inmaculada Lara-Bonilla, of the Latin American and Caribbean Unit of Humanities.

Columbia University doctoral student Alicia Grullon has already consulted the collection which she is using in her research. Please see related “Researcher Spotlight” article on last page of this newsletter.

### Incorporating Hostos Archives into the Classroom

The Hostos Archives doesn’t just represent the past, but provides a context for today’s current events. Incorporating archives into your curriculum offers students a chance to take a look at the past and see how the present and future are informed. Here are a few ideas based on the Hostos collection that might work in your class.

#### Group Exhibit

Over the course of a semester, students will curate an exhibition of items from the Hostos Archives and Special Collections on the course topic. Students will work collaboratively to decide on an exhibition narrative, select items for display, conduct research, and write interpretive texts.

#### Book Arts / Comic Art

After looking at examples in Special Collections for inspiration, students can produce their own graphic novels / comic books / propaganda posters, etc. The possibilities for this one are endless, and in fact, we have examples of past student work in the collections.

#### My Birth Date in History

Locate primary sources about on the date of your birth. You may use one type of material only once, i.e., one newspaper headline of a major event, one quotation, one biography, one census figure, one top musical number, one campus event, etc. Use a minimum of six different sources. Write a short annotation of each source and include the complete bibliographic citation.

#### Walk the Grand

The Grand Concourse offers a varied history from the Walk of Fame to the interior and exterior of buildings along the Concourse. Have students select an individual from the walk of fame using a variety of sources for a presentation or paper. Students may select an architectural site to create a visitor’s guide. Combing through the archives may result in learning that the individual performed or visited the college or that there are several images that display the architectural site.

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“The principle of absolute equality before the law, for all races and nationalities, founded on the equality of natural rights.”

-Eugenio María De Hostos
America: The Struggle for Freedom (Anthology)

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Madeline Ford
Chief Librarian
Culture in Transit’s Caroline Catchpole recently visited Hostos and digitized 101 promotional cards from the Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture Collection. The cards are now available online at the Digital Culture site and will be made available through the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA). At the suggestion of Chief Librarian Madeline Ford, College Archivist William Casari wrote a successful proposal for the digitization program last year. Ms. Catchpole, the Culture in Transit Digitization Specialist, spent two weeks digitizing materials and then added descriptive information (metadata) into a database. The project is based at the Metropolitan New York Library Council (METRO).

The cards feature original artwork documenting musical and theatrical performances, gallery exhibitions, and art installations that have taken place at the college. Since its inaugural season in 1982/83, the Hostos Center has presented renowned visual and performing artists as well as local professional artists. Numerous festivals and concert series showcasing the cultural traditions of the communities served have been a featured tradition of the Hostos Center. In addition, every season includes annual observances of Kwanzaa, Puerto Rican Heritage Month, Dominican History Month, Black History Month, and Women’s History Month.

While aesthetically pleasing, the collection also reflects the Center’s place in the community as an entertainment venue and the importance Hostos Community College places on education through arts and culture. There is a strong African and Latin American theme running through the Center’s programming, reflecting not only the College’s roots but also the diversity and roots of the local community. There is also a strong appreciation and celebration of local artists represented in the collection. These promotional cards have become collector’s items in the local community, posters based on the cards are featured on the walls of Hostos Community College. Others grace the homes of countless Hostos family members, community residents and Bronx institutions. They immortalize the amazing history, breadth, and scope of the Hostos Center for the Arts and Culture. These materials will now reach far wider communities through Digital Culture and Digital Public Library of America.

More information and original blog post here:


Caroline Catchpole
Culture In Transit Digitization Specialist
I am an interdisciplinary artist drawn to situations and locations where power relations and cultural pluralism are in flux. Whether through socially engaged projects, performance, works on paper, video or photography, I take into account the use of space as a site of construction where issues of race, class, gender, and activism open. My involvement comes from wanting to re-write history interrupting traditional dialogues in order to show a perspective closer to that lived by people. I have exhibited at El Museo del Barrio, BRIC Gallery, Bronx Museum of the Arts, and presented for Creative Time, Open Engagement, Performa 11, and Art in Odd Places among other places in the U.S. and abroad. For my research, I am looking at the ways the “Las Casitas: An Urban Cultural Alternative” exhibition created by the Bronx Council on the Arts (BCA) in 1991 underscored the political nature of casitas and how they can serve as a resource for developing critical multi-cultural pedagogy.

This is part of a paper I am currently working on focusing on the history of art education in the Art and Art Education department of Teacher's College, Columbia University. Through conversations with former BCA director William Aguado and current Longwood Art Gallery at Hostos director Juanita Lanzo, I was introduced to William Casari and told about Las Casitas Archives. It was truly exciting to be one of the first people to look through these archives and begin to map the importance of the work done by curator Betti-Sue Hertz and the Casita founders.

My interests in critical multi-cultural education brought me again to Hostos specifically with regards to Las Casitas Archives. Casitas, or little houses, were built by Puerto Rican migrants on empty lots that dotted the South Bronx, El Barrio, and the Lower East Side. In the midst of the culture wars, in an increasingly conservative New York City, Casitas are a beacon for diversity and understanding. Since exhibiting at the BCA’s Longwood Gallery in 2014 with my socially engaged art project Percent for Green, which focused on addressing climate change in urban environmental justice communities, I have become keenly interested in just how closely activism, culture, and education connect in the Bronx.