

# A Breath Of Art In Jamaica

POST AUG 24 1974

By ROBERTA BRANDES GRATZ

IT STARTED as an experiment and now it's the prototype of community arts programs all over the state. And when the Jamaica Arts Center in the heart of the Jamaica business district announces such daily afternoon programs as a string quartet concert or a vegetable jewelry demonstration or an African drum and dance performance, there is no telling how large the audience will be.

Invariably though, it's a diversified and attentive audience—people who live outside the area but work in the local businesses, vacationing children from nearby communities, housewives with toddlers looking for a break from the shopping or playground routine.

A recent quilting demonstration and workshop brought 70 participants; a Chinese calligraphy demonstration brought 40 on-lookers and a Saturday puppet show attracted 250 people — "all ages, sexes and color" notes Ward Mintz, director of the center.

The program has been building gradually in little more than a two-year period but it really began to mushroom this year when it moved into its own building at 161-04 Jamaica Av. — an 1860 Italianate edifice that has been proposed as a city landmark. The three-story, high-ceiling structure formerly housed the City Register's Office and retains many features of the spacious building that is considered one of Jamaica's most attractive.

Now there are afterschool workshops planned for the fall, a second wall mural being created and executed by 25 local youngsters, and a current exhibition of



Mural depicting brotherhood at 105th Av. and Waltham St., in Jamaica.

Post Photos by Jerry Engel

children's art from the Queens Federation of Youth Organizations. And, of course there are constant special events usually scheduled during lunchtime hours to attract local employees.

In 1972 there was a budget of \$10,000. Today with public and foundation money it is \$225,000, which includes funds for maintenance of the building. The program has enlisted the cooperation of private businesses, the expertise of the Queens Council on the Arts and the support of Queens professional artists.

Just getting a building of its own was an accomplishment for the Arts Center. "But we got it from the city," says Mintz, "on the basis of an unusual concept. It is to be turned into a multi-use building with office and retail space being rented to cover maintenance costs and subsidize the art space."

That is still in the working stages but for now there is a large exhibition space on the ground floor that was designed by Bernie Wolff, former chief designer at the Brooklyn Museum. And the entire second floor is an open space for workshops and performances.

The concept of the Jamaica Arts Center is one that had been developing in recent years as an alternative to the isolated four-wall museum. In a center such as this, there is involvement in all the arts. And

more than just exhibitions or performances, there is instruction and workshop programs.

The Jamaica Arts Center Project started as an unusual effort to incorporate the arts into the major urban redevelopment of Jamaica Center. The idea for it was first presented in a 1968 report by the Regional Plan Assn. on why Jamaica should become a regional center and the focus of a concerted development effort that involved local, state and federal programs alongside private ones.

Out of that grew the Greater Jamaica Development Corp., a kind of umbrella for the varied plans that called for the building of the new York College, office development and programs for upgrading the skills of area residents.

As an integral part of the over-all program, cultural activities were to be incorporated during the planning stages.

"That's what makes this program unique," says Mintz, 26, who until June, 1972, was assistant to the director of the Brooklyn Museum. "Starting an over-all program for the arts during the development stages of something was unheard of."

In many efforts to revitalize business areas, the question is usually posed, "How can we attract new businesses?" Here the question was, "What do people need to live here and enjoy themselves?" notes Lucy Kostelanetz, visual arts program director for the New York State Council on the Arts, one of the many sources of public and private funds for the project.

"It's a good example of the new trend," adds Miss Kostelanetz, "to aim for the complete environment, to integrate the arts into the fabric of the community."

City Walls, the non-profit organization that has succeeded in bringing wall paintings by professional artists to neighbor-

Emily Genauer is on vacation.

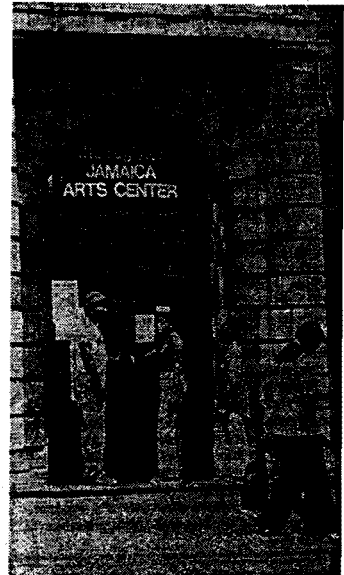
hoods all over the city, has already completed one by Robert Wiegand at the Center's Jamaica Av. corner and is working with the center to place six more in major spots of the downtown area.

Doris Freeman, City Walls president, says of the Jamaica project: "By giving the people something visibly exciting, it shows that the area is not dying or dead. It's a new and important element in basic planning. We know arts attract people and if a downtown area shows signs of life people won't desert it. Physical development takes time but creative development can happen immediately."

In many public art programs, the pattern has been to "give" the community an already planned series of cultural activities, bringing in performers from big name institutions or exhibitions from museum collections.

In Jamaica, Ward Mintz points out, "We go to the community to find out what they want and they get involved in developing it. People walk in off the street and offer their talents and we use them."

Mintz cites the involvement of the Jamaica Art Mobilization (JAM), a group of some 80 working Queens artists who have sought to get more involved in their



A gift from the city... with strings

own community and often work on Center projects.

Janet Henry, vice-president of JAM, typifies this involvement. She is a young black painter who got her first exposure to the arts when she lived in East Harlem and took part in a cultural program at HARYOU-ACT and later attended city art schools. Now she lives in Jamaica and one day approached Mintz with the idea of doing a wall painting near her Jamaica home.

With the help of neighborhood youngsters, a colorful mural depicting brotherhood now graces the wall of the city health station at 105th Av. and Waltham St. Janet Henry, who now runs a mural workshop at the center, currently has 25 youngsters starting a painting that they have designed under her direction on the wall of the Mayor's Office of Jamaica Planning and Development at 162-04 South Rd. and Union Hall St.

Miss Henry sees the entire project and specific programs as a "rare opportunity for whites from north Jamaica and blacks from south Jamaica to get together, not to change cultures or for one to take over the other but to do something together. I'm tired of blacks only talking to blacks and women only talking to women. That gets dull."

Plans are also underway, says Mintz, to develop programs relating to the history of Jamaica. They have already completed an architectural survey of Queens, "discovering more than 1000 buildings of significant architectural value," mounted a photo exhibit of "Lost Architecture of Queens" and are looking to develop some bicentennial projects relating to the area.