Creating shared public spaces for culture and play:

Lessons learned from Governors Island, New York City
Governors Island **basic facts**

- 172 acre island in the middle of New York Harbor
- Sits 800 yards from Manhattan’s Financial District and 300 yards from Brooklyn
- Former military base, closed to public its entire history
- Accessible only by boat
- First opened to the public in 2005
• In 2003, 150 acres of Governors Island transferred to New York, now managed by The Trust for Governors Island

• Remaining 22 acres of Island declared a National Monument, managed by the National Park Service, Federal agency
Northern half of the Island

• 92 acre Historic District, protected by national and local landmark laws

• More than 52 vacant landmark buildings, totaling 1.4 million square feet
Southern half of the Island

- 80 acres of flat, featureless landfill
- New park required, new buildings and uses allowed
- Derelict buildings and obsolete infrastructure
- Closed to public until 2009
The Island (in 2006)

- Residential housing and casino development banned by deed
- Little to no credible interest from property developers
- Little to no public visitation or constituency
- Limited available public investment for infrastructure or required park
Start with **public use**, with **culture** as the magnet

- Activate the island
- Create desirable place for public, developers and political leaders
- Stimulate activity instead of drafting conventional master plan

*Put Governors Island on the City’s map*
What is the traditional definition of “culture”?
Culture is in a **Box.**

Lincoln Center, New York
Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, Miami, FL
Culture is for spectators.
Culture needs an appointment.
Or at least a ticket.
And what is the role of parks?
Parks are for passive recreation.
Or active recreation.
Parks may allow “programming.”
But how does the public on Governors Island define and experience culture?
Culture is everything.
Jazz.
Electronic dance music.
Art installations.
African drum festivals.
Dance performances.
Theater.
Sculpture.
Culture includes food.
People like approachable culture.
Which is easier outdoors.
Children want to play.
And express themselves.
So do adults.
Culture can be created by anyone.
Including the audience.
Culture is social.
With friends.
Or strangers.
Even better together.
Public spaces should let you relax,
And alleviate stress of urban life.
So should opera houses.
Created by and for New Yorkers,
Governors Island is
New York City’s

shared space for art and play.