



Art Aside, Still the United Nations of Queens

By Abby Russell

WHAT YOU'LL FIND: *If you haven't already visited the Queens Museum of Art (QMA) in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, you are missing one of the greatest cultural institutions in Queens.*

Park-goers may not realize that the giant steel and limestone edifice behind the Unisphere is known as the borough's premier fine arts institution.

The building itself, designed by American residential architect Aymar Embury II, is large and somewhat daunting, looking like an East Bloc relic. It is, however, a building of great distinction and home to some unique cultural exhibits.

QMA's home is the New York City Building, which was built for use in the 1939 World's Fair in order to promote New York City culture. The building is the only structure that still

exists from that Fair, and even more astounding, was the original site of the United Nations between 1946 and 1950. The General Assembly met in the room that is now an ice skating rink to vote on the important issues of the day, which included dividing up Korea and creating the state of Israel.

Currently, QMA houses the renowned permanent collection of Tiffany art glass as well as the awe-inspiring Panorama of the City of New York. Created by Robert Moses for the 1964 World's Fair and for use as a model for future development in New York, the Panorama is a full-scale architectural model of all five boroughs.

At almost 10,000 (9,335 to be exact) square feet, QMA Chief Curator Valerie Smith calls it "one of the seven wonders of New York City."

The Queens Museum of Art (QMA) is not merely a place where works of art are displayed – it's a thriving cultural mecca where Queens residents and non-residents alike can participate in making and learning about art.

If you're a student of history, you may know that the building where QMA is today once served as the home of the actual United Nations. But since 1972, when the space became an art museum, the goal has been to reflect the cultural communities of Queens.

It has been said that there are up to 172 languages spoken in Queens and at least that many immigrant communities. Just to name a few, the Korean, Chinese and Taiwanese communities are vibrant in Flushing and the Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi, and Pakistan communities populate Jackson Heights.

Corona, which used to be a thriving Italian neighborhood is becoming more and more a home to Mexican residents.

And Peruvian, Colombian, Ecuadoran and other people of South American descent would likely be found on a stroll along Roosevelt Avenue. There is no denying that the

Queens Museum of Art sits in the middle of an unparalleled cultural oasis.

"What's really unique to Queens and this museum is that you have in one borough this incredible cultural diversity," said Valerie Smith, QMA Chief Curator. "It's so rich," she continued, "and we can do amazing programming with that."

As in any museum dependent on grants for funding, Smith must plan exhibits at least three years in advance.

To mirror QMA's cultural diversity that sits in its "backyard," Smith is planning a Caribbean exhibit in conjunction with El Museo de Barrio on Manhattan's Fifth Avenue and a Middle East exhibit that will include works from five different countries in that region.

As in everything QMA does, both exhibits will give opportunities to artists from around the world to show their work as well as explore the idea of modernism and contemporary art in different countries.

Chiefly, QMA wants to appeal to its different cultural constituencies in Queens and make people in Queens feel that

the museum belongs to them. In order for Queens residents to think of QMA as their museum and for non-Queens residents to really identify with QMA as a true representation of Queens in all its cultural varieties, QMA takes a local and international approach to planning events, programs and exhibitions.

QMA Director Tom Finkelppearl said, "To be local is to be international in Queens."

QMA's "specialties," or things the museum "can do better than anyone else," Finkelppearl said, are to "recognize the history of our site" as home to the World's Fairs of 1939 and 1964 and the United Nations between 1946 and 1950, and to truly be the peoples' "Queens Museum of Art" that mirrors and fosters "contemporary multicultural" art.

"The big challenge of the museum is to really make it part of the public life of Queens," said Finkelppearl.

Besides exhibits like the upcoming one about United Nations official and Nobel Peace Prize winner Ralph Bunche, QMA creates that public life through a variety of educational programs for children, adults and seniors, community events and special programs like film festivals related to an exhibition.

QMA attracts many community residents through its educational programs, which painter and QMA Coordinator of Adult Programs Miriam Brumer calls "one of the very best in the city if not in the country."

The list of outreach and educational opportunities is seemingly endless. Each year, tens of thousands of young people on school trips visit the museum, where they tour

exhibits and get treated to a hands-on workshop in creating art related to an exhibit.

Every Sunday, children can participate in workshops in the studio, experimenting with mixed media assemblage, collage, painting or printmaking. Teens can get into the action too, as well as get trained to be museum docents. Last summer, area children participated in the museum's first "Art Camp," which will continue in the summers to come.

And for adults who "may not always want to go into the city for a lecture," Miriam Brumer invites them to come to QMA, where she gives slide talks on different art themes every Thursday between 2 and 4 p.m.

Her "Looking Series" has been ongoing since 1989 and has attracted many since then. Marion Kesten of Douglaston is a devotee of Brumer's lecture series and the museum itself. After visiting an exhibit or attending a lecture, Kesten always comes away with "something to think about... feeling I've learned something."

QMA's push to attract new visitors includes dovetailing event programming like musical or dance acts, related films or ethnic food to a particular exhibit. And this seems right in line with QMA's illustrious past and international pedigree.

"I went to both World's Fairs," said Kesten. "I came every Saturday with my father for two years. Every nation was represented, plus food, dancing and music," Kesten continued. "The world of tomorrow – that was the theme."

With the always-changing face of Queens, QMA is always looking to tomorrow, and adapting to meet the needs of an ever-changing community.