At a time when everyone speaks of the crisis facing the arts, when money is tight and culture “irrelevant,” it’s heartening to note the emergence of several vigorous new community museums in New York City. Within the past year, El Museo del Barrio, the Bronx Museum of the Arts, and the Storefront Museum have opened their doors as grass-roots institutions, bridging the gap between “culture” and everyday life.

Their success is an important confirmation of the Metropolitan’s position that the impetus for a community museum must come from the people themselves. It would be arrogant, we feel, for any large cultural power to set up its own branch museums, carbon copies of itself, regardless of the needs of the commu-
nity. Instead of invading an area with preconceived ideas and projects, the Metropolitan helped the founders of each of these new neighborhood centers to give substance to their own aims; we offered suggestions and advice, not cut-and-dried formulas. And we shared not only works of art but, more important, the know-how of our staff. Whether helping to draft joint fund-raising proposals, lending cases and other exhibition materials, or providing exhibit insurance, the Metropolitan put its experience and expertise on the line in behalf of these younger cultural institutions.

There is much more to be done, however. Many stumbling blocks have to be cleared away. For example, among professional museum organizations there is a restrictive legal definition of a museum as an institution possessing and utilizing a collection: this contradicts the purpose of these community centers, which place most emphasis on the flexibility of presenting changing exhibitions, not acquiring permanent collections. And, before allocating funds, many federal agencies demand that an applicant have a staff, a concrete program, and strong financial support – exactly the things that these museums need money for! Then, before objects of any value can be borrowed, the museum must be insured, but it’s very difficult to obtain insurance policies in so-called high-risk areas.

It is the responsibility of established museums to help their younger colleagues overcome such obstacles. These centers continue to need tremendous support if they are to survive. But this support must not be dogmatic or restrictive: the museum must be created by its community and shaped by its interests. They need our help in showing them how to accomplish the goals they choose for themselves.

El Museo del Barrio

In a renovated brownstone at 206 East 116 Street in Manhattan, El Museo del Barrio is the city’s first museum of Puerto Rican history and culture. The child of Community School Board District 4, under the State Urban Education Fund, El Museo’s program will encompass a traveling collection of slides, photographs, and original works by Puerto Rican artists, a series of artist-in-residence workshops, as well as changing special exhibitions. Energetically directed by Martha Vega, a former public school teacher, El Museo has set about making Puerto Rican children aware of their own cultural heritage, and thereby open to the cross-fertilization of cultural experience. Since opening at its permanent home in July 1971, El Museo has presented several special exhibitions, including Homenaje a Nuestros Pintores ("Homage to Our Painters") and Taino (a cultural study of the Taino Indian, native of Puerto Rico). The Metropolitan Museum has been able to help Mrs. Vega in obtaining insurance for her exhibitions, while providing continued technical assistance from the Design Department, and the Department of Community Programs and the other education departments. The Museum will continue to work closely with Mrs. Vega and the staff of El Museo as they develop programs, educational kits, and exhibitions related to the Puerto Rican experience.
The Bronx Museum of the Arts

The Bronx Museum of the Arts was inaugurated on May 12, 1971, with an exhibition of paintings from the Metropolitan in the Rotunda of the Bronx County Courthouse, at 161 Street and The Grand Concourse. This crystallized more than four years of hard work on the part of Irma Fleck, Executive Director of the Bronx Council on the Arts (BCA) and countless others. The show had been selected by the Bronx Council on the Arts and installed by the Metropolitan; it was open to the public free of charge, seven days a week. Museum-trained volunteer guides supplemented the Spanish-English catalogue for the more than 15,000 people who visited the exhibit during the month. A grant from the New York State Council on the Arts enabled the BCA to hire William Miller, a Cooper Union graduate and Metropolitan Museum trainee, to direct the new museum’s program. The panels and light fixtures designed by the Museum’s Design Department are adaptable to a great variety of exhibition situations, and have already been rearranged to accommodate shows from HUD, the South Bronx Community Action Theater, the Bronx Historical Society, and most recently the exhibition Games! ! ! ¡Juegos!, with objects selected from the Metropolitan’s collection.

Thinking in terms of a multifaceted, multicenter approach to the arts in the Bronx, the BCA views the Rotunda and its schedule of changing exhibitions as only Phase One of their program. Plans describe a chain of many museums – workshops in the performing and applied arts as well as exhibition space – throughout the borough, connected by a van circulating materials, exhibits, and personnel.
An oasis in South Jamaica in Queens, Tom Lloyd’s Storefront Museum, at 162-02 Liberty Avenue, was established this past summer in response to the results of a community cultural survey. Believing that the arts can be a means of “instilling pride and identity,” Mr. Lloyd has secured a five-dollar-a-year lease on a former tire-dealer’s garage, and encouraged community participation in this museum devoted to black history and culture. Through such ethnically relevant exhibitions as African Images and Geographic Scene Africa – costumes, jewelry, and artifacts from the Tribal Arts Gallery – Storefront has sought to develop a cultural orientation in the people of its neighborhood. An artist himself, Mr. Lloyd is aware of the importance of gallery space for community artists and schedules programs accordingly. The Storefront is open every day, without charge. Special tours are arranged for school groups, youth organizations, and senior citizens. In a very short time, the Storefront has become the cultural center of the community, serving as a forum for the exchange of ideas and experiences – from the drug scene to the finer points of photographic technique, and from African ceremonial costumes to the expression of Black Solidarity Day.

Photographs: Cheryl Rossum