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At the Laundromat Project, Artists Are Ambassadors of Joy and Activism

A nonprofit that has been supporting community-based artistic ventures inaugurates its new home in Brooklyn.



Laundromat Project staff members, led by the executive director, Kemi Ilesanmi, interacting with neighbors at the organization's new storefront in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. Credit... Douglas Segars for The New York Times

By Hilarie M. Sheets
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The Laundromat Project was founded two decades ago at a kitchen table on MacDonough Street in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, when Risë Wilson received her first grant money to make art experiences accessible to her neighbors — miles away and

a world apart from gatekeeper institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art.

Wilson, having left her corporate job and marrying her degree in African American studies with a love of art, wanted to own and operate a laundromat where she could invite artists to initiate workshops and conversations with people waiting for their laundry to dry.

“In trying to figure out a way to bring art to where we already were, I realized the laundromat is this incredibly democratic, de facto community space,” said Wilson, who in 2005 incorporated her nonprofit organization to support artist projects in underserved areas — “not just for delight and play but as this political tool. Art has always been part of movements for Black liberation.”

When Wilson’s original vision to actually buy a laundromat proved financially out of reach, the Laundromat Project, or the LP as it’s known, shifted to a decentralized approach — supporting artists in communities of color across New York’s five boroughs on projects rolled out in laundromats, parks, plazas, city streets and local cultural venues.

Hollis King received a grant from the LP in 2012 after leaving his corporate job at Universal Music. He engaged with a laundromat on 135th Street in Harlem, “getting up the nerve to explain to them this wacky idea of creating art there,” and invited people to bring in their cellphones or cameras so he could teach them to make better pictures. It was also a time to hear their stories.

“How you enter a community, you can come really high or you can come low and listen and build from there,” said King, who now programs exhibitions at Restoration, a multifaceted cultural center in Bedford-Stuyvesant. “That’s one of the most valuable lessons I learned from the Laundromat Project.”

Under the leadership of Kemi Ilesanmi, to whom Wilson passed the baton in 2012, the organization has directly invested in more than 80 public art projects and 200-plus multidisciplinary artists including Shinique Smith, Kameelah Janan Rasheed and Lizania Cruz. They identify neighborhood partners to work with and are not required to produce an exhibition, but more often stage events or actions. Early in the pandemic, for instance, the arts administrator Xenia Diente and the artist Jaclyn Reyes teamed up with Filipino restaurants and bodegas in their Queens neighborhood, Woodside, to provide food to local caregivers, and led art-making classes at these same businesses.

Now, after working from temporary offices on the Lower East Side and then Harlem and the South Bronx, the organization has returned to its roots in Bedford-Stuyvesant, opening its first public space, a storefront, with a 10-year lease, on the busy central

corridor of Fulton Street. An open house planned for Aug. 6 will officially inaugurate that community hub.

Passers-by are greeted by a window mural of a celestial landscape by the Bed-Stuy-based artist Destiny Belgrave — the first artist selected through the LP’s open call for the new annual commission. Inside, the airy floor-through space has public gathering and exhibition areas, with the architect Nandini Bagchee’s versatile benches-cum-cubby-spaces that can be rolled to the street for art-making pop-ups and sidewalk conversations. The communal administrative office for the dozen or so staff members, visible through a glass wall, is ringed with limited-edition prints designed and donated by artists including Mickalene Thomas, Nina Chanel Abney, Xavier Simmons and Derrick Adams to raise money for the organization.



Cievel Xicohtencatl, left, and Andrea Gil-Garcia, two Laundromat Project staff members. Before the organization returned to its roots in Bedford-Stuyvesant, it had been working from temporary offices. Credit... Douglas Segars for The New York Times

“People recognize the LP’s contribution as something very counter-institutional and groundbreaking in opening up how artists could navigate in spaces that are not traditional art spaces,” said Adams, who lives in Bed-Stuy. “Having this physical space in the area is definitely going to influence more people doing this type of work to think of themselves as ambassadors in the community.”

Last year, in a gift that came out of the blue, the philanthropist MacKenzie Scott gave the organization \$2 million, equal to its annual operating budget, which is largely

supported by foundation grants and government funding. Ilesanmi and the LP's deputy director, Ayesha Williams, decided to pay the love forward by giving away \$200,000 off the top — making \$10,000 awards to five former partner organizations around the city: Kelly Street Garden, the Literary Freedom Project, the W.O.W. Project, BlackSpace and STooPS; and \$500 grants to every current and former LP artist and staff member.

“If we win, how can we make sure our community wins as well,” said Ilesanmi, who, with Williams, has created an investment policy for the remaining money with financial institutions like Brooklyn Cooperative, a credit union serving local Black-owned small businesses and homeowners. According to 2020 census figures, Bed-Stuy lost more than 22,000 Black residents over the previous decade and gained more than 30,000 white residents.

“One of the things that happens with gentrification is that POC organizations get displaced along with the people,” Ilesanmi said. “So being part of the community, having a 10-year horizon on this space and a gift that builds intergenerational wealth for the organization just moves your head up in a different way.”

In the 1970s, Bed-Stuy was an epicenter of the Black Power movement, fostered by the Pan-African organization called The East that created dozens of self-sufficient businesses including a school, food co-op, cultural center and jazz hub and is explored in the new documentary “The Sun Rises in The East.”

“The East was inspirational to many people in part because of the way it held physical space in Central Brooklyn,” said Tayo Giwa, who, with his wife, Cynthia Gordy Giwa, produced the film and runs the digital publication Black-Owned Brooklyn.

“The Laundromat Project is, in its own way, also holding space here and investing in the potential in our community,” he said.

The film acknowledges The East's legacy, panning at the end to images of the LP, along with other neighborhood anchors including Restoration, the cultural center which opened in 1967 with the help of Robert F. Kennedy, and Weeksville Heritage Center, honoring one of the largest free Black communities before the Civil War.

The Laundromat Project has shown up to help distribute resources with Councilman Chi Ossé on Wellness Wednesdays outside his office just down Fulton Street. “We have the largest shift in losing the Black community out of every single neighborhood in New York City,” said Ossé, who has allocated support for the LP through discretionary funding in the City Council's new budget. “There's so much left here and I'm hoping throughout my tenure as councilman and through my work with the LP we can preserve the culture that is so rich.”

Kendra J. Ross, a current LP artist-in-residence, received \$20,000 to support her intergenerational storytelling project called the Sankofa Residency. “The word ‘sankofa’ is a Ghanaian term that essentially means in order to move forward, we have to take a look back at where we came from,” said the Bed-Stuy-based artist and founder of STooPS, which hosts artist performances on stoops, sidewalks and community gardens

throughout the neighborhood. The LP has helped Ross collect oral histories from residents, whom she's also invited during her interviews to imagine the future of Bed-Stuy together. She will present her work-in-progress in an open studio at the LP in September and the project will culminate in an immersive dance-based performance in November.



A Laundromat Project staff member prepares signage for a popup event. Credit: Douglas Segars for The New York Times

After a decade of leadership, Ilesanmi is stepping down at the end of this year and handing the reins to Williams, her deputy. "I'm leaving when there's money in the bank and a beautiful new space to be dreaming about," Ilesanmi said.

Joking that "you can't throw something softer than a stone in a group full of Black folks in the arts and not hit five people who went through the Studio Museum at some point," she similarly believes in the power of the Project's alumni network that's moving out into the world. All 200-plus artists, most of them women, are invited to convene for the first time in September at an LP event hosted at Weeksville.

"That seed planting is really key to the way we're thinking," she said. "We work with individuals but we really work at the collective level. We're very keyed into showing the field what can be done."

