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GREATER NEW YORK

Ideas on the Bowery

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Big Night For Barbra

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CITY NEWS

URBAN GARDNER | By Ralph Gardner Jr.

Big Ideas, Big Appetite

I was stoked—I don't think I've ever used the word before, in print or in person—when Lisa Phillips, the director of the New Museum, told me about the Ideas City street festival her institution is holding on the Bowery on May 4.

I've always loved street fairs. Actually, that's a slight exaggeration. I'm usually grateful to be out of town for them and the traffic congestion they create. But the larger disappointment is that they rarely live up to their potential. The food is frequently grotesquely unhealthy and there's nothing you'd want to buy, even though there are dozens of stalls selling things.

For some reason, a ceramic frog planter comes to mind. I have no idea why. I doubt I've ever seen one at a street fair. Nonetheless, that epitomizes the mindless bric-a-brac usually on sale at these expos. Think also wind chimes. Or stained-glass birds that you can suction to your window so that pretty light pours through them.

To show you how thoughtful and inventive the New Museum's effort is going to be by comparison, they commissioned a new tent for it. And not just a new tent, but an entirely new tent concept. "It's a break with that standard white tent," Ms. Phillips explained. "Why not have artists and architects reinvent that, or refresh it?"

Why not, indeed. The result is a 70-foot mirrored shed that will stand in front of the museum and reflect the surrounding cityscape and sky. "You typically don't look up in the city," Ms. Phillips mused. "Once, when I had a bad back, I was lying down in the cab looking up at the sky. It was a completely different orientation."

She has a point. Sometimes, I stop dead in my tracks and struggle to see the city through the eyes of a tourist. Taking the time to find the sky amid the skyscrapers is sort of like that. The reason I don't do so more often is because I'm too busy and distracted (or at least making believe I'm too busy and distracted), and because if you stop to ponder anything in this city for more than a second or two you're marked as strange and fellow pedestrians start to feel uncomfortable.

So I certainly appreciate the museum's effort in bringing the sky down to Earth. But what about comestibles? What about stuff to buy and eat? I'm all for ideas, but aren't corn dogs and shopping what street fairs are supposed to be about?

"The Bowery Mission started a prototype roof garden," Ms. Phillips stated. She was referring to a project that was part of the previous street fest, in 2011. (It's a biennial event, with Ideas Cities export-



Clockwise from above, a rendering of Davidson Rafalidis's 'MirrorMirror' tent that will be part of the New Museum's Ideas City street festival on the Bowery; a view of the 2011 festival, with the museum at left; Lisa Phillips, the director of the New Museum; and Georg Rafalidis photographs himself with 'MirrorMirror.'



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I'm thrilled for them, but is their produce for sale? Fresh radicchio, perhaps, in ornamental planters spun by cutting-edge downtown artists? "We had another group that started bekeeping," Ms. Phillips went on. "They just produced Bowery honey. It's fabulous."

"There will be things for sale," she promised. "Innovative products and projects." To name but a few: • Seedbombs: "Participants," the festival guide reports, "will combine mushroom teas, locally composted soil, and the seeds of native plants into seedbombs for distribution to bike groups who will ride with these powerful packages and disperse them along coastlines."

• Bomb-related materials: "Peacebomb collaborates with artisans in Laos who make jewelry from the remnants of American bombs dropped in their country between 1964 and 1973."

• And from something called "The Canary Project," which I assume refers to that beleaguered canary in a coal mine: "Design and make your

own solar-powered radio using only recycled materials. Learn about urban survival and resiliency. Free handbooks on site."

You've got to appreciate a street fair that celebrates creativity and the human spirit while planning for the Apocalypse. But, I repeat: What about food? It'll be a lot easier to focus on bootmaking or constructing contemporary furniture using the lumber from demolished NYC structures—a couple of other workshops—if I'm chomping on a hot dog slathered with mustard.

I didn't spot any hot-dog stands, sustainable or otherwise, on the calendar for Ideas City, which runs May 1-4 and includes panel discussions, workshops and interactive projects tapping the talents of



the downtown community. "Living culture is critical to the vitality of urban places," Ms. Phillips told me. "We have to advocate for culture. It's not a thrill—it's a necessity; to make museums welcoming places, to afford access to people who can't afford the admission price, to talk about things relevant to people's lives. They want to connect with their own creative impulses."

But back to my stomach problems: in other words, the need to top it off. There's a kimchi-making workshop, and who wouldn't be better boyfriend material for knowing how to pickle cabbage? Also, there's one devoted to making "multi-ethnic breads." And a chocolate-making workshop using "conscious ingredients." (I trust they don't feel pain.)

I spoke over the phone with Georg Rafalidis, half of Davidson Rafalidis, the husband-and-wife architecture team that won a spirited competition with "MirrorMirror," the new tent design. As it turns out, the structure—made from

stretched Mylar for the fair, but from aluminum panels when it goes into mass production, if all goes according to plan—is mirrored not only on the outside but also on the inside, creating a sort of fun-house effect. At least that's my take on it.

But isn't the problem with street fairs the crowds—to be precise, people you probably wouldn't socialize with normally? And won't mirrors only multiply the effect? I suppose it's different if the critical mass is composed of hipsters. But sometimes even hipsters can be too much of a good thing.

"Overwhelming?" Mr. Rafalidis, who lives and works in Buffalo but is originally from Germany, said in response to my characterization. "It's pretty intense," he acknowledged. "You get a different perspective of the whole event."

And what of the outside of the shed? Don't get me wrong. I'm excited about it. Who doesn't love mirrors? Actually, probably people into whose windows they shine. If it turns out to be a sunny day—and let's hope it does—a mirror the size of the one at Keck Observatory on the summit of Mauna Kea shining into your apartment may require you to don sunglasses and draw the shades. But I suppose that point you'd have joined the rest of the cognoscent below admiring the Tower of Babel made from a representation of just one hour's worth of Styrofoam waste produced in Manhattan, or attending the LGBT Center's "queer artists and performers rough it on the streets without mics or lights—just plenty of camp and lots of laughs."

I intend to be there with an all-natural, made-to-order ice-cream sandwich by Coolhaus, another of the food offerings. My flavor choices include Tahitian Vanilla Bean and Brown Butter Candied Bacon. It's as close to junk food as I'm likely to get.

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