



Testimony prepared by
Gregory Wessner
for the
New York City Council
Committee on Parks and Recreation
on
An Examination of Parks Department Properties
Currently Inaccessible to the Public

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Good afternoon. I am Gregory Wessner, the executive director of Open House New York.

It is an honor to be here today to provide testimony on an issue that is especially meaningful to an organization like Open House New York, and particularly when it is in regards to the Department of Parks & Recreation. Open House New York has had a close and special partnership with the Parks Department for many years and it has been a privilege to work with them to provide limited public access to many of their sites, including the base of the Prison Ship Martyrs Monument in Fort Greene Park; the Little Red Lighthouse in Fort Washington Park; the Highbridge Park Water Tower; and Parks Department headquarters at the Arsenal in Central Park, among others.

Open House New York is a non-profit cultural and civic organization that was founded nearly fifteen years ago. We are best known for the annual Open House New York Weekend, a citywide festival held every October since 2003, in which hundreds of buildings across all five boroughs open their doors for one weekend of public tours and talks. Open House Weekend is a celebration of the extraordinary inventory of buildings that makes this the greatest city in the world, but it is also a reminder to all New Yorkers that our greatest shared resource is the city itself. In opening these sites—whether they are public buildings like City Hall or infrastructure like the Newtown Creek Wastewater Treatment Center or educational campuses like the Bronx Community College—Open House is helping to both inform and enrich the conversation about how we design, build, and preserve New York. We do this because we believe that direct experience is the most powerful form of education and engagement. Giving New Yorkers the opportunity to experience a place for themselves—especially ones that are not normally accessible to them—can be transformative. It can be empowering. It seems like such a small thing to do, but opening a door is a profoundly meaningful act of trust and sharing, and we all benefit, as individuals and as a community, as a result.

That there is interest among the public in increased access, you need only look at the overwhelming engagement we see each year during Open House New York Weekend. This past October, we estimate that more than 81,000 visitors toured 275 sites over the course of two days. Nearly 11,000 people made reservations for sites that needed them in the first hour that they were available. Last year, 8,000 people made the trek to JFK, not because they had to catch a flight, but because they wanted to visit the TWA Flight Center, simply for the joy of experiencing a great work of architecture. To me, this says that New Yorkers care deeply about quality of their environment, which is a step towards building consensus around the kind of future we want to shape together.

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I should add that when we talk about access, we are not talking about unlimited or unregulated access. For a lot of reasons—safety and security among them—not all sites are meant to function as public spaces. But speaking from experience, there are ways to work with sites that take into consideration existing site conditions while still accommodating visitors, even if only on a limited basis.

The question, then, is what benefit does this access serve? Limiting access would certainly be an easier option, so I applaud the Council for even holding a hearing on this question. We talk a lot about the importance of civic engagement, but we have to consider what form that engagement takes for most people, most of the time. Sadly for too many of us, scrolling Facebook's news feed or watching a YouTube video stands in as engagement. We get information about our civic life second and third hand and I think we are beginning to realize how that lack of direct experience—with one another and with the places where we live—can lead to an eroding of the public sphere. I am not so naïve to think that simply letting people climb the Washington Square Arch or visiting Hart Island will reinvigorate citizenship, but I do think that the degree to which the city makes itself open and accessible to its citizens communicates a great deal about this city's values. And there is no more tangible expression of a welcoming city than the simple act of opening a door.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today.