

An elderly man with white hair and glasses is smiling as he paints a small, light-colored ceramic pot. He is wearing a green apron over a white t-shirt. He holds a paintbrush in his right hand, applying a blue stripe to the pot. The pot already has a purple top and the numbers '107' in yellow and orange. On the table in front of him is a white paint palette with various colors and a glass bowl containing paintbrushes. The background is a bright, out-of-focus indoor space.

Age-Inclusive NYC Arts & Culture

Best Practices for Creative Aging

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Message from the NYC Cabinet for Older New Yorkers	3
The Impact of Creative Aging — John-Morgan Bush, Dean of Juilliard Extension	4
The Cabinet for Older New Yorkers	6
The Importance of Creative Aging	8
Executive Summary	11
Best Practices for Creative Aging Programming	14
Addressing an Age-Inclusive Community Need	15
Developing a Responsive Age-Inclusive Programmatic Structure	16
Ensuring Accessibility and Adapting to the Evolving Needs of the Community	21
Specializing Age-Inclusive Arts Programming	24
Demonstrating Outcomes and Promoting the Impact of Creative Aging	27
Supporting Sustainability	29
Index of Cultural Organizations	34



The NYC Cabinet for Older New Yorkers (Cabinet) is delighted to introduce the Age-Inclusive NYC Arts & Culture best practices guidebook. Whether you're an artist, an arts administrator, an older New Yorker, a younger New Yorker, or even someone from another city interested in this work: thank you for your time and attention. By reading this guide, you're taking a small but meaningful step toward fostering a more welcoming, inclusive society for us all.

Under the umbrella of the Cabinet, the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA) and the NYC Department for the Aging (NYC Aging) partnered to create this best practices guidebook to reinvigorate the conversation about creative aging and provide practical guidance for cultural organizations to develop or expand their arts programming for older adults. From tangible solutions like offering affordable and convenient transportation options, to big picture thinking about developing cultural programming that speaks to diverse audiences: the case studies in this guidebook examine ways that age-inclusivity can be integrated into program design and implementation at every level.

This guidebook also seeks to challenge ageist assumptions by recognizing that older adults have as much to contribute to our city as we have to offer them. For older adults, creative aging programming has meant improved cognitive function and emotional well-being, while also reducing social isolation. As older New Yorkers represent the vast diversity of our city and already surpass the number of school age children living in our communities, it is imperative that cultural institutions have age-inclusive programs reflective of those who live here.

By highlighting cultural organizations, teaching artists, and older residents who are working every day to break down barriers to cultural participation at every age, it is our hope that this guide will contribute to our mission to build an age-inclusive city.

This guide serves as a call to action for cultural institutions to advance age-inclusive programming and ensure the centrality of older adults to their missions. While the work represented here is only a small fraction of the incredible creative aging programs happening across our city, it showcases diverse approaches across disciplines and communities. We hope it serves as a starting point for thinking more about how we can build a more age-inclusive New York City together.

THE IMPACT OF CREATIVE AGING

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Photo credit: Claudio Papapietro

John-Morgan Bush, Dean of Juilliard Extension, shares his insights on creative aging in New York City

"Through initiatives that center older adults, I believe New York City can demonstrate that creativity is not bound by age but fueled by experience."

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE TO CONSIDER OLDER ADULTS IN CULTURAL PROGRAMS?

It means designing from the outset with older adults in mind. It is human connection along with artistic growth. Older adults bring a richness of emotional depth to the arts, offering perspectives that can deepen collective understanding and appreciation. By centering these contributions and convening older adults, we create stronger, more inclusive programs that reflect the full spectrum of human experience.

FROM JUILLIARD'S EXPERIENCE AND EXPERTISE, WHY IS CREATIVE AGING IMPORTANT?

Creative aging is a natural extension of what the arts have always done best: fostering growth, connection and resilience. Creativity often deepens with age, offering new pathways for expression and meaning. Through our Lifelong Learning programs at Juilliard Extension, we aim to nurture curiosity and empower older adults to continue learning, creating and contributing.

"Programs for older adults are often positioned as recreational when they could be transformational."

"Leadership in creative aging begins by listening closely to older adults, learning from their lived experiences, and shaping programs that respond thoughtfully to their needs and aspirations."

WHAT IS THE EXISTING CREATIVE AGING LANDSCAPE IN NEW YORK CITY?

New York City is rich with cultural resources and artistic excellence. As the city's population ages, it presents a major opportunity to rethink how we serve generations of communities. Juilliard Extension is helping to shape this future by building programs that welcome older adults into vibrant, meaningful cultural participation, inspired by both demographic trends and a commitment to lifelong learning.

In the movement for creative aging, the city has a chance to lead once again by championing cultural participation across the full lifespan and across all boroughs. Through initiatives that center older adults, I believe New York City can demonstrate that creativity is not bound by age but fueled by experience.

WHAT ARE THE CURRENT GAPS IN PROGRAMMING AND HOW CAN WE RETHINK THEM?

Programs for older adults are often positioned as recreational when they could be transformational. We have seen firsthand in our Lifelong Learning programs that older adults seek the same high standards of artistry, education and community that we offer all learners. By designing programs that are rigorous, joyful and inclusive, we honor the creative spirit at every stage of life.

WHAT IS NEEDED TO EXPAND CREATIVE AGING?

Expanding creative aging is within reach when we approach it with commitment and creativity. Institutions can build on what they already know by offering thoughtful, well-resourced programs and celebrating the contributions of older adults. Leadership in creative aging calls for curiosity, empathy and action. It begins by listening closely to older adults, learning from their lived experiences, and shaping programs that respond thoughtfully to their needs and aspirations. Through collaboration, investment of resources and imagination, we can create a more vibrant and inclusive cultural landscape for all.

THE CABINET FOR OLDER NEW YORKERS – NYC DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS & NYC DEPARTMENT FOR THE AGING PARTNERSHIP



The Cabinet for Older New Yorkers is an interagency collaborative established to realize and institutionalize an age-inclusive New York City through structural, legislative and systemic solutions.

Launched in September 2022, the Cabinet for Older New Yorkers (Cabinet) is an interagency collaborative established to realize and institutionalize an age-inclusive New York City through structural, legislative and systemic solutions. As a founding member, the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA), along with nearly 30 city government agencies, plays an integral role in advancing this collective mission, together with the NYC Department for the Aging (NYC Aging), which chairs the Cabinet.

Aligned with the expansive vision of the Cabinet for the future of aging, this guidebook explores multiple ways to increase the age inclusiveness of cultural programming in New York City. In previous years, DCLA and NYC Aging have partnered on SU-CASA, a community arts engagement program funded by the New York City Council. Through SU-CASA, artists and organizations in residence have placements at NYC Aging sponsored older adult centers to provide rich arts programming in those spaces. SU-CASA continues the success of an earlier Age-friendly NYC initiative, Seniors Partnering with Artists Citywide or SPARC, which matched artists with older adult centers. While SU-CASA is a major vehicle for promoting creative aging, in light of the large and growing number of older New Yorkers, more cultural programming built in response to the needs of this population is necessary. This guidebook aims to reach various cultural organizations and share strategies that would support them in the creation or expansion of their programming for older adults.

Through interviews with 13 DCLA-funded cultural organizations that have robust and extensive programming for older adults, distinct connective threads across their creative aging programs emerged. Leaders of these organizations, and some of their external partners, provided insight into the purposeful and impactful creative aging programming across New York City boroughs and artistic modalities. The objective of this guidebook is to encourage all cultural institutions to join the growing network of organizations bringing creative aging practices and programming to communities throughout New York City.

CABINET FOR OLDER NEW YORKERS MEMBER AGENCIES

NYC Department for the Aging

Bklyn Public Library

NYC Children

NYC Civic Engagement Commission

NYC Commission On Human Rights

NYC Mayor's Office of Community Mental Health

NYC Consumer and Worker Protection

NYC Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice

NYC Cultural Affairs

NEW YORK CITY
DOT

NYC Mayor's Office of Equity & Racial Justice

NYC Food Policy

NYC Health

NYC HEALTH+HOSPITALS

NEW YORK CITY
HOUSING AUTHORITY

NYC Department of Housing Preservation & Development

NYC Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs

NYC Office of the Mayor

NYC OTI



NYC Parks

NYC Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities



NYC Mayor's Public Engagement Unit



New York Public Library

NYC Public Schools



QUEENS PUBLIC LIBRARY

NYC Service

NYC Small Business Services

NYC Department of Social Services

NYC Mayor's Office of Talent and Workforce Development

NYC Urban Agriculture

NYC Department of Veterans' Services

NYC Department of Youth & Community Development

THE IMPORTANCE OF CREATIVE AGING

As older adults have surpassed school-age children as a percentage of the New York City population – with the percentage continuing to grow¹ – it is more essential than ever to develop healthy aging initiatives that best serve them. With all baby boomers reaching the age of 60 by January 2025,² this significant demographic shift underscores the compelling need for age-inclusive strategies.

In 2020, Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging (Brookdale) published a report, *Creative Aging in NYC*, studying the city's pioneering SU-CASA program. Starting as a pilot in 2009, the program was then expanded through a National Endowment for the Arts grant into the Seniors Partnering with Artists Citywide initiative or SPARC, which was an earlier Age-friendly NYC initiative. Now known as SU-CASA and operated as a collaboration among the New York City Council, DCLA, NYC Aging, and the city's borough arts councils, the initiative provides community arts programs that place artists and organizations in residence at older adult centers across New York City. By 2010, with funding from the New York City Council, SU-CASA had become the largest public participatory arts program for older adults in the United States.

As a result of participating in SU-CASA programming, Brookdale found that older adults reported “feeling rejuvenated, reclaiming long-buried artistic dreams, or reinventing themselves.”³ Participants felt a renewed sense of purpose and valued the social connections they gained.⁴ SU-CASA's success highlights the importance of arts programming in supporting healthy aging and illustrates the need to expand these efforts as demand continues to increase.



Vocal Ease — Photo credit: Michael DelNagro

In addition, an Americans for the Arts report states that a critical gap exists between arts programming and aging services for a growing older adult audience.⁵ According to the report, “Arts participation is proven to increase the health and well-being of older adults, however few organizations offer quality professional arts programs for them.”⁶ The report further emphasizes, “Arts organizations are poised to benefit from this tremendous need for high-quality, cost-effective creative activities...[T]he arts provide lifelong learning, meaningful community building, and respite to caregivers—all while uplifting individual creative expression.”⁷

Studies indicate the positive impact of professionally conducted cultural programs on the physical health, mental health and social activity of older adults.⁸ Older adults who joined participatory art programs reported a higher overall rating of physical health, fewer doctor visits, less medication use, fewer instances of falls, and fewer other health problems in comparison to older adults who did not participate.⁹ Additionally, older adult participants in art programs evidenced better morale, less loneliness and increased activity.¹⁰ These findings reflect important health promotion and prevention effects of creative aging, as well as an associated reduction of risk factors driving the need for long-term care.¹¹



Photo courtesy Queens Museum

Executive Summary

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"Considering older adults in cultural programs means designing from the outset with them in mind. It is human connection along with artistic growth. Older adults bring a richness of emotional depth to the arts, offering perspectives that can deepen collective understanding and appreciation. By centering these contributions and convening older adults, we create stronger, more inclusive programs that reflect the full spectrum of human experience."

— John-Morgan Bush,
Dean of Juilliard
Extension

New York City is undergoing a profound transformation. Currently, 1.8 million New Yorkers are age 60 and older, which is approximately 1 in 5 residents. On its own, this many residents would constitute the fifth most populous city in the United States. As older adults continue to be a defining demographic of New Yorkers, it is imperative that we advance an age-inclusive approach in meaningful, tangible ways across all aspects of city life.

In a city as rich with cultural assets as New York, one powerful way to cultivate a more age-inclusive city is through the arts. Studies indicate the benefits of the arts as a path to improving the health, independence and well-being of older adults,¹² which has led to the concept of “creative aging.” Creative aging has been embraced by various cultural practitioners across New York – often with significant support from the city. However, a broader understanding and promotion of creative aging has the great potential to notably benefit older New Yorkers, but also universally strengthen the communities and culture of New York City as a whole.

The positive impact of professionally conducted community-based cultural programs on the physical health, mental health and social activity of older adults is well-documented.¹³ Older adults who joined participatory art programs reported a higher overall rating of physical health, fewer doctor visits, less medication use, fewer instances of falls, and fewer other health problems in comparison to older adults who did not participate.¹⁴ In addition, older adult participants in art programs evidenced better morale, less loneliness and increased activity.¹⁵ These findings reflect important health promotion and prevention effects of creative aging, as well as an associated reduction of risk factors driving the need for long-term care.¹⁶

To advance an age-inclusive New York City and provide a roadmap for people and organizations to join this movement, the Cabinet for Older New Yorkers, with leadership from the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs and the NYC Department for the Aging, has developed the *Age-Inclusive NYC Arts & Culture: Best Practices for Creative Aging* guidebook. Featured in this guidebook is a cross section of best practices from across the city’s diverse cultural sector to implement creative aging arts programming.

This guidebook highlights lessons learned from in-depth dialogues with 13 New York City cultural organizations that demonstrate robust examples of creative aging programming and offer guidance for other cultural organizations interested in joining and expanding the city’s network of creative aging practitioners.

Located across all five boroughs, these cultural organizations have purposefully developed older adult arts programming and represent a variety of arts disciplines (e.g., dance performance, visual art, creative writing, vocal music, etc.). Informed by the collective knowledge and

experiences of the participating cultural organizations, this guidebook is intended to raise awareness, support, and inspiration to further an age-inclusive New York City through arts and culture.

Several best practices for developing substantive and meaningful older adult programming in the arts emerged. The best practices include:

- **Addressing an age-inclusive community need;**
- **Developing a responsive age-inclusive programmatic structure;**
- **Ensuring accessibility and adapting to the evolving needs of the community;**
- **Specializing age-inclusive arts programming;**
- **Demonstrating outcomes and promoting the impact of creative aging; and**
- **Supporting sustainability.**

As the arts present a significant avenue for age-inclusive engagement and enrichment, this guidebook underscores how creative aging can cultivate a cultural landscape for all generations in New York City. Cultural organizations are encouraged to consider how creative aging may expand and complement their current programming, provide a blueprint for designing and developing sustainable age-inclusive programs, and examine how community networks and resources can be accessed to provide mutual benefit for both the organization and the older adult population – and New Yorkers overall.



Photo courtesy ¡Oye! Group!

Best Practices for Creative Aging Programming

BEST PRACTICES FOR CREATIVE AGING PROGRAMMING

Based on interviews with cultural organizational leaders, gerontological research and additional sources, this report highlights six best practices identified for the development of robust arts programs for older adults. The best practices for impactful creative aging programming explored in this report include:

- **Addressing an age-inclusive community need**
- **Developing a responsive age-inclusive programmatic structure**
- **Ensuring accessibility and adapting to the evolving needs of the community**
- **Specializing age-inclusive arts programming**
- **Demonstrating outcomes and promoting the impact of creative aging**
- **Supporting sustainability**



Photo credit: Concerts in Motion

ADDRESSING AN AGE-INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY NEED

Partner Spotlight:

Mark Morris Dance Group in Brooklyn provides education in dance to people of all ages and abilities. They offer Dance for Parkinson's Disease, as well as classes specifically designed for healthy aging.

The motivation to prioritize creative aging often emerges as a pilot program or an exploratory initiative with a limited scope, revealing a much broader community need with a deeper resonance among audiences and older adult populations. For example, Mark Morris Dance Group (MMDG) initially launched Dance for Parkinson's Disease (Dance for PD®) specifically for adults living with this condition, as well as their families, friends, and caregivers, helping them maintain or regain confidence, self-efficacy, and motor skills through dance movements. The success of Dance for PD® resulted in a high community demand for similar classes designed for older adults in general who do not have Parkinson's disease, which led to the establishment of the Movement for Healthy Aging program at MMDG.

Community based partners also proactively outreach to cultural organizations to promote age-inclusive arts opportunities to engage older adult participants in their programs. For instance, Brooklyn Art Song Society (BASS) initially connected with Heights and Hills Senior Services (Heights and Hills) home care personnel. In addition to home care services, Heights and Hills oversees the Park Slope Center for Successful Aging (Park Slope Center). The Heights and Hills team raised that mobility issues among older adults they serve may limit access to BASS performances. Heights and Hills recommended for BASS to conduct performances at the Park Slope Center to address accessibility concerns. This began a long-standing partnership between BASS and Heights and Hills, resulting in a monthly concert series for older adult members of the Park Slope Center. The performances serve a dual benefit: BASS artists have the opportunity to rehearse with an enthusiastic, live audience, and older adult center members have access to cultural experiences right in their center.

Partner Spotlight:

Brooklyn Art Song Society is dedicated to the vast repertoire of poetry set to music, and holds monthly outreach concerts at the Park Slope Center for Successful Aging.

Personal experience is an impetus as well to cultivate arts programs for older adults. For IlluminArt Productions (IlluminArt), their President and CEO Arlene Sorkin was inspired by close family members who are older adults, exemplifying that creativity and talent are timeless. Similarly, the Founder of Vocal Ease, Eva Swan, sought to employ her musical talent to engage older adults after recognizing the lack of attention paid to this demographic. ¡Oye! Group's Founder/Artistic Director Modesto 'Flako' Jimenez served as the primary caregiver for his grandmother as she battled dementia, an experience that inspired him to develop Healing Rooms where older adults could access therapeutic art workshops led by community artists and health professionals. Many of the team members who helped launch the AileyDance for Active Aging program had older family members whose own experiences deeply influenced their interest in creating a program specifically for the older adult population.

DEVELOPING A RESPONSIVE AGE-INCLUSIVE PROGRAMMATIC STRUCTURE

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Partner Spotlight:

Vocal Ease is a volunteer singing organization that provides live entertainment across NYC for older adults in older adult centers and residences.

Cultural organizations that developed successful creative aging programs did so by cultivating a strong, sustainable programmatic infrastructure. This infrastructure entails recruiting artists with age-inclusive competency to serve the older adult population; building strategic institutional partnerships to advance creative aging; and conducting dynamic community engagement.

RECRUITING ARTISTS WITH AGE-INCLUSIVE COMPETENCY

Vocal Ease recruits volunteer performers through a variety of ways, including posting advertisements and promoting via word of mouth within the performance industry. To reach new artists, Vocal Ease often advertises on Backstage and Playbill websites, specifying recruitment criteria such as singers whose repertoire includes Spanish, Mandarin, or pop/soul songs from earlier eras, which ensures that they engage artists whose work can strongly resonate with the diverse older adult audiences they serve. In addition to sourcing singers through advertisements, the performance reputation of Vocal Ease has established a robust artist network that assists in finding performers through word of mouth—demonstrating how a dedicated focus on serving older New Yorkers can have a multiplier effect that makes it easier for groups to sustain such programming.

Partner Spotlight:

Sundog Theatre is a Staten Island-based performing arts company that offers arts programs for older adults, including residencies in dance, visual arts and music.

Prior to initiating new programs, the Sundog Theatre team meets with the director of each older adult center they are working with so activities can be tailored according to the needs and interests of participants. When selecting teaching artists to work with older adults, Sundog Theatre prioritizes those with patience, adaptability, and experience in community or intergenerational settings. They seek out artists who can communicate clearly, foster empathy, and encourage storytelling and creative expression. Their training emphasizes using multiple modes of instruction, and creating a supportive, judgment-free environment. Sundog Theatre also encourages their artists to account for hearing, vision, mobility, and cognitive needs through repetition, clear instructions, adaptable activities, and large-print or visual aids.

BUILDING STRATEGIC INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS TO ADVANCE CREATIVE AGING

¡Oye! Group's strategy to build external partnerships focuses on direct engagement with aligned professionals and leveraging existing networks. For example, ¡Oye! Group currently partners with Dementia Spring, Citymeals on Wheels, and Mount Sinai. To facilitate these partnerships, the Founder/Artistic Director Modesto 'Flako' Jimenez often simply calls contacts from the organizations that align with the mission of ¡Oye! Group and their programs. Following initial contact, Jimenez then works to

Partner Spotlight:

Teatro Círculo is a community-based theatre company that serves Latinx neighborhoods throughout NYC. Their multigenerational program, *Abuelito, dime tú*, shares older adult experiences through storytelling and performance.



Vocal Ease — Photo credit: Michael DelNagro

Partner Spotlight:

Teatro Círculo is a community-based theatre company that serves Latinx neighborhoods throughout NYC. Their multigenerational program, *Abuelito, dime tú*, shares older adult experiences through storytelling and performance.

foster concrete relationships by listening to the partner organizations and considering how ¡Oye! Group can collaborate. He focuses on the needs of the older populations and designs a plan that fits the vision of partner organizations. The willingness of ¡Oye! Group's Jimenez to be responsive and flexible at the highest level of the organization is fundamental to their success.

Teatro Círculo presently works with partners in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens. To cultivate their partnerships, the organization utilizes a few key strategies, such as showcasing their work at older adult centers across the city free of charge. In an effort to engage new older adult centers, Teatro Círculo extensively networks and relies on current partners to connect to numerous untapped organizations. Programmatically, Teatro Círculo develops various workshops based on participant feedback specifically to suit the diverse interests of older adult center members. By engaging in this reciprocal relationship with older adult audiences, they have developed a catalog of 23 different workshop options, including computers, film, and sewing, allowing for adaptability to serve different populations.

Partner Spotlight:

Ailey Arts In Education & Community Programs offers specialized dance residencies for older adults in the NYC metropolitan area, focusing on movement, creativity and storytelling through the AileyDance for Active Aging program.

Vocal Ease partners with venues across the city, attributing these relationships as crucial pillars for their success. Originally, Eva Swan, the Founder of Vocal Ease, started with the phone book to cold-call venue directors. She was persistent in marketing Vocal Ease performances and establishing relationships with the venue operators. To ensure wide reach, Vocal Ease consistently organizes shows at no cost to venues with budget constraints. Since the founding of the organization, the mission of Vocal Ease has been to provide outstanding entertainment for older New Yorkers in order to spread joy and enhance the quality of their lives. Their commitment to this mission allows for strong and lasting relationships with partnering venues and the audiences they serve. Many of the venues where Vocal Ease performs are recommendations by older adults who have seen them perform at other sites.

AileyDance for Active Aging is more than a fitness program, serving as an outlet for artistic expression where participants generate choreography and explore their imaginations—building a greater sense of community and social engagement. The program began with four pilot sites and grew through word of mouth and direct outreach to older adult centers. After demonstrating the benefits of AileyDance for Active Aging, AARP funded a promotional video about the program that provides another tool for partner outreach and engagement.



Vocal Ease — Photo credit: Mara Tucker

CONDUCTING DYNAMIC COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Mark Morris Dance Group formed unique external partnerships to engage new populations. Through their Dance for Parkinson's Disease program, MMDG has outreached to physical therapists, support groups and clinicians to promote Dance for PD® and its benefits. By utilizing this approach, MMDG can connect to key target populations while also meeting the needs of participants at their current level of mobility. Approximately 70 percent of Dance for PD® participants learn about the program through physician referrals—showing the power of community engagement through unexpected, creative channels to tap into target audiences. MMDG also relies on extensive partnerships with community centers and residential facilities to serve older adults through Move & Flow and Restorative Movement classes.

Partner Spotlight:

IlluminArt Productions on Staten Island uses theatre to serve underrepresented populations. Their "Senior Boomers Ensemble" allows older adults to participate in all theatrical aspects, from playwriting to final production.

Building upon their deep theater experience and community recognition, IlluminArt started ACTive Adults, their first older adult program, with education on the fundamentals of storytelling and performing arts. Initially, IlluminArt began collecting stories and leading drama exercises, while also providing an introduction to theater and discussing the interests of participants. This approach built a strong foundation in the community and grew excitement for their organization. By the second year of the program, IlluminArt gained even more participants and realized the potential and interest in expanding the program to other locations. ACTive Adults created several small-scale original shows in the early years of the program. Following this success, the program is now known as the Senior Boomers Ensemble, which has produced 14 scripted and original full-length plays and musicals.



Photo courtesy Teatro Círculo

Partner Spotlight:

The Queens Museum is dedicated to high quality arts and educational programming, including art workshops for adults aged 55 and older, designed to foster creativity, community and lifelong learning.

The Queens Museum has committed to dedicating a specific space for older adults as an investment in the future of the organization. The organization is in the process of expanding within their existing footprint by building a children's museum space, which will incorporate intergenerational and multilingual programming. Museum planners solicited community input and conducted focus groups, including with older adults, to co-design the new space. Additionally, Queens Museum leaders emphasize flexibility in their programming and plan based on iterative participant and community input.

Teatro Círculo employs a personal approach to engage the older adult community. With a background in theater, the Program Manager for *Abuelito, dime tú (Grandpa, Grandma, tell me a story)*, Rubén Darío Cruz II, works with participants to help them perform their stories. He focuses on connecting with older adults, emphasizing how the program supports health and wellness, especially in relation to physical and cognitive abilities.

Before the theater residency begins, Cruz visits the older adult center to promote and announce the upcoming schedule to members. When serving bilingual populations, he identifies center members who can be liaisons for communication and language access. Additionally, Cruz underscores the importance of observing, listening to, and understanding the community to maximize their experience during the residency. His primary strategy is to rely on the growing community of program participants to expand reach, as other older adults will be compelled to join after observing the positive impact on others.



Photo courtesy ¡Oye! Group!

ENSURING ACCESSIBILITY AND ADAPTING TO THE EVOLVING NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY

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Partner Spotlight:

The Bronx Documentary Center uses community-based documentary practice and education to drive social change. They have a Senior Photo League program offering a free photography workshop series.

Through the various stages of aging, different needs emerge. It is essential for creative aging programming to adapt and ensure accessibility to address evolving needs among the older adult population. To support accessibility, cultural organizations raised the following priorities: reliable transportation to and from programs, virtual options for audiences and participants, and artists experienced with serving older adults with disabilities.

RELIABLE TRANSPORTATION TO AND FROM PROGRAMS

The success of a program can often depend on hyperspecific, practical concerns such as reliable transportation. In response to requests from older adults in the community, the Bronx Documentary Center (BDC) worked with an aging services provider to offer subsidized taxi and car service, which enabled more participants to attend on-site photography classes. At the Queens Museum, museum personnel coordinate with nearby older adult centers to provide regularly scheduled group transportation so that center members can join the Vitality Arts workshop series on location. By listening to and addressing these logistical needs, both institutions have formed strong, reciprocal relationships and demonstrated to older New Yorkers that their participation is a priority.

VIRTUAL OPTIONS FOR AUDIENCES AND PARTICIPANTS

The Dance for Parkinson's Disease program by the Mark Morris Dance Group was made available virtually as a one-way digital stream, as well as through instructional DVDs, prior to the pandemic to accommodate participants who were unable to attend in person. During the pandemic, however, the class format shifted to Zoom to prioritize interactivity that mimics the shared group experience as closely as possible. Currently, both Dance for PD® and Move & Flow classes are offered in a hybrid format, pointing to how pandemic-era innovations can be adapted to expand access to programming even during post-pandemic times.

Partner Spotlight:

Concerts in Motion brings personalized live music by talented musicians to create the most healing music experience for people experiencing loneliness or isolation.

Concerts in Motion (CiM) launched a Virtual Visiting Series as a result of the pandemic, continuing their mission to reach homebound populations despite physical distancing constraints. Since then, CiM still hosts free weekly virtual music performances, which can be accessed from home or in the common areas of older adult centers, naturally occurring retirement communities and caregiver programs. To meet the diverse needs and interests of all older New Yorkers, some of the virtual concerts have special themes, such as dementia-friendly, Chinese language and an open mic series. While created to adapt to the circumstances of the pandemic, programs developed to reach people during quarantine continue to be useful models for expanding access to older adults and other populations who cannot readily participate in live events.

Partner Spotlight:

Dances for a Variable Population is a multigenerational dance company with programs in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens, dedicated to promoting strong, creative movement for older adults of all abilities.

ARTISTS EXPERIENCED WITH SERVING OLDER ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES

For every class, Dances for a Variable Population (DVP) designates two teachers to meet the needs of older adults of all abilities. DVP trains teachers twice per year on topics ranging from combating loneliness to strengthening community relationships. Teachers come from all types of backgrounds, which allows for various education methods through different styles of dance based on the interests of older adult students. The autonomy of older adults is at the forefront of the program. Teachers and facilitators play supporting roles in sculpting the vision of older adults as dancers and designing a successful, collaborative process. In addition to teachers, DVP also incorporates social workers and dance specialists, depending on the programming. Through this approach, DVP creates a safe, judgement-free space that prioritizes the experience of older adult dancers.

In line with their mission to serve marginalized communities, IlluminArt has programming specifically for older adults with developmental disabilities. To foster a supportive and inclusive environment, IlluminArt engages teaching artists with experience in disability education. These artists prioritize ensuring participants feel safe, heard, and respected.

Mark Morris Dance Group offers Dance for Parkinson's Disease and Move & Flow classes in English, Spanish, and Mandarin, working in inclusive ways through movement, language, and culture as part of their Movement for Healthy Aging program. Regarding Dance for PD®, every class includes two teaching artists to support physical inclusivity and accommodation for all ranges of motion. MMDG provides a modified, seated version for any standing activities. Teachers are shared across all MMDG programs,



Photo courtesy Teatro Círculo

allowing for training methodologies to be deployed across the organization. Virtual options are available for those whose distance from the studios is a challenge.

AileyDance for Active Aging teachers undergo rigorous training using a research-based curriculum developed specifically for the program. Two teachers are assigned to each class, one who demonstrates movement while standing and another while sitting, to address varying mobility needs of the participants. The teachers also take part in peer-to-peer mentorship, which pairs veteran artists who have experience working with older adults to train teaching artists who have not worked with the population. This approach ensures a standardized educational experience across all residency sites.



Photo courtesy Queens Museum

SPECIALIZING AGE-INCLUSIVE ARTS PROGRAMMING

Partner Spotlight:

Teachers & Writers Collaborative provides transformative writing and arts education for lifelong learners and youth, as well as Creative Aging programs.

Specializing creative aging programs, tailored to meet the distinct needs of historically underserved older adult communities, is another effective approach for cultural organizations to engage this population. Recommendations for specialized age-inclusive arts programming include developing intergenerational programs, ensuring cultural competency and language access, and promoting innovations to serve underrepresented older adult populations, such as LGBTQ+ and homebound individuals.

DEVELOPING INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMS

Seeing an opportunity to serve communities at older adult centers and after-school programs alike, Teachers & Writers Collaborative (T&W) offers programs that bridge generational divides through shared storytelling. Currently, T&W works with Jewish Association Serving the Aging (JASA) in Brooklyn and Grand Street Settlement in Manhattan on an intergenerational poetry and visual arts program. Youth participants are elementary, middle and high school students from an after-school program at Grand Street Settlement, while the older adults are from JASA Bushwick Hylan Naturally Occurring Retirement Community. Through a 10-week residency, participants engaged in creative workshops and community building, culminating in a final presentation. Recent intergenerational programs included designing a mural and developing a podcast sharing stories about the history, identity and community of Bushwick.

Partner Spotlight:

¡Oye! Group in Brooklyn is a creative incubator for all ages. Their Healing Room program for older adults entails therapeutic art workshops led by artists and health professionals.

¡Oye! Group piloted a program at the RiseBoro Diana H. Jones Older Adult Center, which connected youth, older adults and local playwrights. Intergenerational participants partnered with the playwrights on dramatizing their scripts or conducting readings of their work. For their involvement in the pilot, the older adults and youth participants received monetary compensation, demonstrating respect for their work and contributions to the program while expanding opportunities for local artists and intergenerational engagement.

These intergenerational initiatives demonstrate how engaging with older New Yorkers can be integrated with other programs to provide a net positive for all of an organization's audiences, rather than being seen as something which might draw resources away from existing programs.

ENSURING CULTURAL COMPETENCY AND LANGUAGE ACCESS

During their first theater festival, Teatro Círculo noticed that they drew older adults from diverse linguistic backgrounds, including English, Spanish and Chinese. In response, Teatro Círculo redesigned their production, *Abuelito, dime tú*, to represent the multicultural history of their community, creating a play about the immigrant experience and what it is like to blend the mosaic of cultures that call New York City home—an example of cultivating programming that directly speaks to and invites in the target audience.



Dances for a Variable Population — Photo credit: Meg Goldman

After working with many Spanish speaking older adults, Dances for a Variable Population started a bilingual initiative in the Bronx. To build up the program, DVP tapped the local community to find teaching artists to lead the dance classes. DVP currently has four artists in training recruited from the communities they are serving, who will learn the techniques of DVP and assist in translation.

For their Healing Rooms, ¡Oye! Group works to ensure that the materials they provide to older adults are both culturally and linguistically competent. Communication barriers are often what disconnects people, so it

is imperative to meet language access needs. ¡Oye! Group also outsources translation services to assist in the Healing Rooms if the population does not speak English as a primary language. The languages they have previously offered are Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, and Russian.

Concerts in Motion employs a community-based approach to cultural competency and language access, recruiting many of their artists from the neighborhoods where their programming takes place. Using this method, they have recruited 150 performers that speak a total of 17 languages. This model enables CiM to respond to cultural and language access needs for all audiences.

The Queens Museum is acutely aware of the need for language access because it is located in the most culturally diverse county in the United States. To address the needs of older adults with limited English proficiency, the Queens Museum leverages expertise from its New New Yorkers program, which focuses on the experience of new immigrants through artmaking and educational workshops held in different languages.

PROMOTING INNOVATIONS TO SERVE UNDERREPRESENTED OLDER ADULT POPULATIONS

In partnership with GRIOT Circle, Teachers & Writers Collaborative developed a visual arts program for LGBTQ+ older adults of color in Brooklyn. Through this initiative, participants use still life painting to explore their identities, personal stories, and the legacy of joy and resilience within their communities. The eight-week program also featured visits to Brooklyn art galleries, helping participants to see themselves as part of a broader creative community. This collaboration shows how a nuanced understanding of diversity within the older adult community can lead organizations to innovative, impactful partnerships and programs.

Teachers & Writers Collaborative also works with VISIONS, a nonprofit organization that serves the blind and visually impaired. Their eight-to-ten-week workshops encourage participants to explore their own cultural backgrounds and personal histories through projects that combine the literary arts with tactile arts. Past programs included poetry writing, fiction writing, song writing, docudrama, collage, papier-mâché, sculpture, and Lego art. When possible, workshop cycles include a museum visit during which participants can engage with art tactilely through “touch tours.”

Concerts in Motion centers their work on bringing performances to people who love music but may not be able to leave their homes. They have a variety of programs designed specifically for the homebound population, including older adults, such as their Virtual Visiting Series and Music for the Homebound.

DEMONSTRATING OUTCOMES AND PROMOTING THE IMPACT OF CREATIVE AGING

An instrumental best practice identified by cultural organizations is the ongoing effort to demonstrate and publicize the positive impact of creative aging. By reinforcing the evidence-based benefits of creative aging programs, many cultural organizations have increased community participation, advanced age-inclusivity in the arts, and raised additional funding. Strategic approaches engaged by cultural organizations include promoting creative aging efforts through media, ensuring the visibility of the artistic work of older adults, and issuing publications from age-inclusive arts programs.

PROMOTING CREATIVE AGING EFFORTS THROUGH MEDIA

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Bronx Documentary Center—along with many other cultural institutions—pivoted to remote alternatives. The BDC began offering virtual classes and provided each student with a camera by mail, which they used to document their lives during this time. Recognizing their efforts, *The New York Times* covered the BDC in a profile, featuring photography from both the Senior and Youth Photo League programs.



Photo courtesy ¡Oye! Group!

ENSURING THE VISIBILITY OF THE ARTISTIC WORK OF OLDER ADULTS

Dances for a Variable Population holds classes and an annual performance outdoors around the city to display the creativity and artistry of older adult dancers. Sites include Washington Square Park and Grant's Tomb. The outdoor dance classes promote creative aging and increase the visibility of older adult talent in high profile public spaces.

The Bronx Documentary Center hosts a two-week gallery exhibit showcasing the photography of older adults at the end of the Senior Photo League sessions, with each participant exiting the program as an exhibiting photographer. To celebrate and promote their work, a ceremony is held for family, friends and the public. The showcase provides older adults a community platform to display their work, giving a sense of pride and accomplishment, as well as engaging and educating the public about creative aging. BDC also created a video to share testimonials and experiences of older adults and teaching artists participating in the Senior Photo League Program. In both English and Spanish, the video features the photographs of the Bronx by older adults and shares their insights into the importance of photography. Their photographs not only show the archive of their personal narrative, but also the history of their Bronx communities and pride in their neighborhoods.



Dances for a Variable Population — Photo credit: Meg Goldman

ISSUING PUBLICATIONS FROM AGE-INCLUSIVE ARTS PROGRAM

Teachers & Writers Collaborative provides professional development and resources for teaching creative writing to older adults. With detailed lesson plans, T&W publishes a magazine that explores innovative approaches to skill-building in later life. For example, an article co-written by two T&W teaching artists offers a step-by-step guide to introducing older adults to the fundamentals of songwriting, complete with suggested activities and teaching strategies. The publication also contains excerpts from the work of older adult participants, which can all be found on their website.

SUPPORTING SUSTAINABILITY

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As with any movement, developing ways to sustain programming is central to the success of creative aging. Once the ideation, planning and implementation of the older adult arts programming are underway, sustainability is at the forefront for cultural organizational leadership. From strategic planning to community input to innovative marketing strategies, these cultural organizations have focused on ensuring the future of older adult programming. Methods to support sustainability include broad community engagement, building connections beyond the classroom, long-term development planning, and a feedback mechanism for program improvement.

BROAD COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Teatro Círculo builds and adapts their plays to share neighborhood stories, an approach that fosters strong local support, longevity and commitment to their programs. They developed one such story with older adults in the Bronx, where a participant shared a life experience of caring for family members and finding herself alone at 63. This anecdote reminded the older adult participants of Cinderella, which inspired them to create a similar story set in the Bronx: Bronxerella. To put on this production, Teatro Círculo involved the entire older adult center: sewing class participants helped create the costumes, and computer class participants assisted in creating the play credits. For the final production, Teatro Círculo invited community residents from around the neighborhood to attend, including everyone – local elected officials, bodega owners, and others.

BUILDING CONNECTIONS BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Beyond the classroom, the teachers at Dances for a Variable Population build strong relationships with the older adults in their programs. The teachers are aware of health issues, as well as certain personal issues among students—they even check in if the students miss class—creating a deep sense of community and connection with the participants. DVP also

expanded their programming based on where the teachers are located, allowing for their creativity and instruction to grow organically, rooted in a strong existing community-based network.

LONG-TERM DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

Like many arts groups, Vocal Ease hosts an annual gala to both celebrate its impact and raise funds for future programming. Featuring performances by Vocal Ease artists and special celebrity guests, the event helps attract donors and broaden the reach of the organization. The event also serves as a vital opportunity for cultivating relationships with funders and rallying local support. Testimonials from older adults who have benefited from the programming are spotlighted during the event, reinforcing how Vocal Ease serves and impacts older New Yorkers. Vocal Ease makes its work with older New Yorkers a central part of their story and mission at their gala, opening new possibilities for performances and support.

FEEDBACK MECHANISM FOR PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

To improve their programming, Sundog Theatre pursues several evaluation strategies: they conduct regular surveys—both formal and informal—to ensure that the interests of older adults are central to their activities; they consistently evaluate programming and residencies to ensure that participants benefit from the program, while also recognizing which activities have the greatest participation; they input from team members who interact daily with participants, giving them a deeper insight into the viewpoints of older adult participants, and using these to inform decision making for the organization. Based on this feedback, Sundog Theatre learned that many older adults prefer interactive programs, such as theater and storytelling, over more passive programs. Additionally, this information helps formulate new and inspiring programs that meet community needs. An ongoing dialogue between Sundog Theatre team members, program participants, and organization leadership ensures that programs remain responsive to the community.

With the creation of the Healing Room programs, the artistic director of ¡Oye! Group worked with dementia specialists and certified art therapists to ensure the validity and effectiveness of the program. This led to the collaborative development of dementia programming and modifications to the Healing Rooms according to the expert feedback. Looking to the future, ¡Oye! Group stays updated on current and projected community needs of the older adult population, keeping the bigger picture in mind and planning programming for the future.

CALL TO ACTION

With these best practices, the Cabinet for Older New Yorkers, through a partnership between DCLA and NYC Aging, has shared the insights and experience of 13 cultural organizations and their partners that have created exemplary models for older adult programming. This is just a starting point: we encourage readers to learn more about the creative aging programs discussed in this guidebook, share examples of other great work happening in this arena, and reach out to your fellow cultural practitioners, as you consider new ways in which current networks and resources could be evolved to include older adults in existing programs.

Older adults represent a large and growing share of our city's population. Ageism can often present in subtle forms that result in this population lacking visibility—and resulting resources—despite its size. Creative aging is a powerful way of thinking about, seeing, and engaging with older New Yorkers. It is also a means of combating the ways that ageism can erode public awareness of and support for older adults. Studies have consistently revealed the many benefits of engaging in the arts as a path to improving the well-being of older adults, indicating that creative aging should be at the forefront of our age-inclusive priorities in every community. We invite all groups to examine their work through an anti-ageism lens—and to partner with us on fostering a healthier, happier, and more vibrant age-inclusive New York City.



Photo courtesy NYC Aging

ENDNOTES

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- ¹⁶ Cohen. The Impact of Professionally Conducted Cultural Programs on the Physical Health, Mental Health, and Social Functioning of Older Adults.

Index of Cultural Organizations

INDEX OF CULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS

1. Founded in 1980, Mark Morris Dance Group (MMDG) provides educational opportunities in dance and music to people of all ages and abilities. MMDG's older adult program began through Dance for Parkinson's Disease (Dance for PD®) and has expanded to engage the general older adult population. They currently offer two classes specifically designed for healthy aging: Move & Flow and Restorative Movement, both of which are offered in person at their studios in Brooklyn, in community centers in Brooklyn and Manhattan, and online.
2. Dances for a Variable Population (DVP) is a multi-generational dance company and educational organization dedicated to promoting strong, creative movement for older adults of all abilities. DVP's Movement Speaks® program offers free and accessible dance classes for older adults, fostering community engagement while creating vibrant, theatrical dance experiences. DVP serves over 2,500 older adults across various sites in New York City and is widely recognized for its vibrant performances.
3. Teatro Círculo is a dynamic, community-based theatre company that serves Latinx neighborhoods throughout New York City and the surrounding tri-state area. Their audience also includes avid lovers of Spanish and Contemporary Latinx theater. Teatro Círculo's multi-generational program *Abuelito, dime tú* recognizes older adults as natural artists, tapping into their experiences and sharing them through performance. Their programs create a space for older adults and their families to grow and learn about their culture and histories using intergenerational dialogue with artists, art, and storytelling.
4. Teachers and Writers Collaborative (T&W) celebrates the imagination through transformative writing and arts education for youth and lifelong learners. T&W partners with Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs), which is non-age restricted housing where older adults have aged in place over time, and older adult centers throughout the city to offer innovative programs to the older adult population. Led by experienced teaching artists, T&W residencies are based on Dr. Gene Cohen's "Creativity and Aging" study which revealed powerful positive effects on the health and well-being of older adults participating in community-based art programs. T&W's diverse programs include storytelling, poetry, songwriting, pottery, jewelry making, memoir, painting, sculpture, and intergenerational programs with youth.
5. Founded in 2010, Brooklyn Art Song Society (BASS) is dedicated to presenting programs of the highest artistic caliber to large and diverse audiences while committing to affordable ticket prices and free ticket initiatives for underserved populations. Partnering with aging services provider Heights and Hills, BASS presents monthly outreach programs at the Park Slope Center for Successful Aging. These concerts are accessible to older adults and feature an opportunity to socialize with the artists after each concert.
6. Based in Brooklyn, ¡Oye! Group is a creative incubator for artists, students, and community members of all ages, with an emphasis on the Bushwick neighborhood and immigrant communities in New York City. With wellness in mind, ¡Oye! Group's Healing Room program aims to spread awareness on how one can heal through different forms of art. Through therapeutic workshops, older adults experience a myriad of benefits, including cognitive stimulation, socialization, reduction in stress and anxiety, as well as self-expression.
7. With a mission to serve underrepresented populations, IlluminArt Productions utilizes theater and the arts to illuminate critical social issues and create conversations for positive social change. Their "Senior Boomers Ensemble" allows older adults to participate in all aspects of theater, from playwriting to final production. Currently, the program is on its 14th show, featuring 19 cast members.

8. The Bronx Documentary Center (BDC) is an accessible, community-oriented gallery and educational space located in the Melrose neighborhood. The BDC empowers Bronx older adults to tell their stories through photography, by offering a free, eight-week Senior Photo League program in the winter and fall. Through a supportive and creative environment, older adults develop artistic visions by documenting their neighborhoods and connecting with fellow participants. Photo League alumni have showcased their work in exhibitions, celebrating the vibrant history and culture of the Bronx.
9. Founded in 2002, Sundog Theatre is a Staten Island-based performing arts organization with a mission to create positive change through arts education and live theatre with the goal of expanding the way people see themselves and the world. For more than ten years, Sundog has provided programming for older adults, with 85 residencies completed. Sundog works with older adult center directors to understand population needs and tailors their programs, offering visual arts, jewelry making, theater, chair yoga, and more.
10. Vocal Ease is a volunteer singing organization that provides live entertainment across New York City for older adults in nursing homes, older adult centers, and older adult residences. In 2024, Vocal Ease put on 131 shows across 69 older adult venues, reaching about 6,000 older adults in the community. Their performances bring back memories for many older adults, which allow them to relive joyful moments and feel a renewed sense of connection to their past.
11. Concerts in Motion addresses the growing epidemic of social isolation and loneliness, connecting talented musicians to isolated people throughout New York City. Since 2009, they've brought personalized live music and engagement to older adults, caregivers, veterans, Holocaust Survivors, individuals with disabilities and mental illness, individuals experiencing housing and food insecurity, and hospitalized patients of all ages. Concerts in Motion trains a diverse community of talented professionals and volunteer student musicians in trauma-informed care to provide uplifting performances that celebrate the dignity of every concert participant.
12. Founded in 1972, the Queens Museum is housed in the nation's most culturally diverse county. The building stands on the grounds of the 1939-40 and 1964-65 New York World's Fairs, and the United Nations was located there from 1946 to 1950. Dedicated to presenting high quality arts and educational programming for the people of New York, with a particular focus on the residents of Queens—a uniquely diverse ethnic, cultural, and international community—the Queens Museum strives to be a cultural institution that is open, responsive, inclusive, and empathetic. The Museum's work honors the history of its site and the diversity of its communities through wide ranging and integrated programming of exhibitions, educational initiatives, and public events. Through its Vitality Arts Workshop Series, the Queens Museum has prioritized creative aging and life-long learning in their programming.
13. The Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation, Inc. is the home of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, one of the world's most acclaimed modern dance companies. The Foundation furthers the pioneering vision of choreographer and cultural leader Alvin Ailey by building a vibrant cultural community that provides performances, training, arts education, and community engagement programs for all. Rooted in the African American cultural experience and inclusive of diverse traditions, the Ailey organization brings people of all ages and backgrounds together through the transformative power of dance. AileyDance for Active Aging (ADAA) brings Mr. Ailey's enduring belief that "dance is for everybody" to life by offering inspiring dance classes for older adults in community centers, residential homes, and beginning in Spring 2026 at Ailey's New York City headquarters, The Joan Weill Center for Dance.

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**Juilliard Extension
Mark Morris Dance Group
Dances for a Variable Population
Teatro Círculo
Teachers and Writers Collaborative
Brooklyn Art Song Society
¡Oye! Group
IlluminArt
Bronx Documentary Center
Sundog Theatre
Vocal Ease
Concerts in Motion
The Queens Museum
The Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation**

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