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Summer Art Space a Big Hit at Forest Houses

Maybe you want to dip your feet into a small wading pool. Or read a philosophy book while enjoying a gentle breeze. Or perhaps listen to a poetry reading on a couch in the shade. You can do all of this, and more, at the Gramsci Monument at Forest Houses. The large interactive art exhibit – built out of wood in a public space just for the summer – is drawing people not just from the Bronx development, but all over the world.

The workers and volunteers at the construct are Forest Houses residents. This includes Harry Drake, the Resident Association Secretary, whose stage name is DJ Baby Dee – he serves as the emcee for performances, works in the radio station and reads daily announcements. "The project brought the community together; we've never seen anything like this before in NYCHA," Mr. Drake said. "It's like a burst of energy, 'Wow, it's art coming here!'"



Children receiving art instruction at Gramsci Monument at Forest Houses. [Click image for more.](#) (LETICIA BARBOZA/NYCHA)

The Gramsci Monument is the brainchild of Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn, and is paid for entirely by the Dia Art Foundation. Its name comes from the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci. An exhibit at the art space includes many of Antonio Gramsci's personal artifacts, including the utensils he used when he was in prison. And his books are included in the library, which is managed by resident Marcella Paradise. "This has brought a lot of enlightenment to me," said Ms. Paradise, who also was convinced to do a poetry reading one day. "I was nervous at first because I never had experienced that, but (Mr. Hirschhorn) brought a lot out of me."

In the computer room, the most popular spot in the exhibit, residents can use the internet and play video games. "It's a lot of fun," said seven-year-old Shamah Jeffrey. "I like playing basketball on the computer."





To make sure everything is kept safe, several residents work as security, including cousins Kareen and Ernestine Bethea, who also know CPR and first aid. "We're always out here, so why not help out?" said Kareen Bethea.

"The kids need something to look forward to every day, something positive, especially the ones who are not in day camp," said Ernestine Bethea.

People have come to the Gramsci Monument from as far away as Germany, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. And neighborhood day camps even schedule regular visits as part of their day, according to Resident Association President Eric Farmer. "The kids love this thing. We have to actually make them leave at night," he said.

The Gramsci Monument will be dismantled on Sept. 15, by the same Forest Houses residents who built it earlier this year. "I am going to feel so sad when it closes," said Myrna Alvarez, who provides snacks at the art space. "I wish we could keep it forever; the community would get closer. It will stay in my heart and in my mind."

Mr. Hirschhorn updates the Gramsci Monument's website every day at www.gramsci-monument.com

By [Eric Deutsch](#)
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