

# Innovative Cultural Uses of Urban Space

## PUBLICLY OWNED FACILITIES

bringing the arts to publicly owned facilities: challenges and opportunities



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**look for:**

- adaptive reuse
- construction zones and vacant lots
- public outdoor space: short- and long-term
- publicly owned facilities
- religious spaces
- shared space

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

**LYZ CRANE** has served in a variety of roles at the intersection of arts and community development, including working at ArtHome, an organization that helps artists and their communities build assets and equity through financial literacy and homeownership, and Partners for Livable Communities, a national nonprofit leadership organization focused on quality of life, economic development, and social equity. In 2009, Crane was named a 'Next American Vanguard' by urban affairs magazine Next American City. She received her MPA in policy analysis from the Robert F. Wagner School of Public Service at New York University. Crane is currently serving as the Director of Partnerships and Special Projects at ArtPlace, a collaboration of leading national and regional foundations, federal agencies, and banks to accelerate creative placemaking.

cover photos, clockwise from left: Jacksonville Public Library ; Katarina Weslien's exhibition in Portland, ME Art at Work program; Brooklyn Army Terminal, a prospective site for NYC's Spaceworks program.

photos: Walter Coker, Katarina Weslien, New York City Economic Development Corporation (Spaceworks),



## INTRODUCTION

According to the New York City Department of City Planning, almost 7 percent of usable land in the city is occupied by public facilities and institutions. Such structures—libraries, schools, senior centers, and other types of municipal buildings—can be found on every block in every neighborhood of every city. Similar to local arts communities, these centers of civic life serve the public as outlets for culture, activity, and learning. However, public facilities often have a bounty of underused space, while arts stakeholders are often in a constant search for a place to produce their work. Sadly, despite their apparent synergy, the arts sector and public facilities have not always partnered effectively together.

Fortunately, as the planning field embraces creativity and innovation, an increasing number of city departments are finding that it is not simply an option but part of their mandate to find new ways to partner with outside groups in the innovative use of space. Similarly, as information sharing grows in the grassroots arts movement, more artists and organizations are willing to tackle the challenge of partnering with complicated city bureaucracies.

This paper explores some of the common challenges that arise in bringing the arts to underused publicly owned buildings, along with recommendations and opportunities to overcome these challenges. To inform the discussion, ten projects have offered up their experiences and expertise in navigating the relationships, constraints, and interests that come along with these spaces. The four major areas of exploration include the following:

- **Politics**
- **Partnerships**
- **Physical space**
- **Producers**

*Ten projects contributing their experience and expertise to the topic of publicly owned facilities.*

| <b>Non-Profit/Individual-Driven Projects</b>   | <b>City-Driven Projects</b>  |
|--|--|
| <p><b>Casita Maria Center for Arts and Education</b><br/> <i>Bronx, New York</i><br/>           An arts organization that shares space with a New York City public school</p>  | <p><b>Kensington Library Resources and Community Space</b><br/> <i>Brooklyn, New York</i><br/>           A library with a room designed for use by community arts groups</p>   |
| <p><b>New York Chinatown History Project (Museum of Chinese in America)</b><br/> <i>Manhattan, New York</i><br/>           A museum that began with exhibits in senior centers, libraries, and a school building</p> | <p><b>Jacksonville Public Library</b><br/> <i>Jacksonville, Florida</i><br/>           A library hosting local popular bands</p>   |
| <p><b>Staten Island Arts</b><br/> <i>Staten Island, New York</i><br/>           A local arts council creating a cultural space and gallery in a ferry terminal</p>   | <p><b>City of Philadelphia Office of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy, City Hall Presents</b><br/> <i>Philadelphia, Pennsylvania</i><br/>           A city agency programming performing arts in spaces inside and outside City Hall</p> |
| <p><b>Art at Work</b><br/> <i>Portland, Maine</i><br/>           A local activist working with city agencies and their staff to produce and display art in city office buildings and City Hall</p>                   | <p><b>New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, Seniors Partnering with Artists Citywide</b><br/> <i>New York City, New York</i><br/>           A city arts agency placing artists in residencies in senior centers</p>                    |
| <p><b>Dancenow/NYC</b><br/> <i>New York City, New York</i><br/>           A dance company that has produced performances in empty pools and other nontraditional spaces across the city</p>                          | <p><b>Spaceworks</b><br/> <i>New York City, New York</i><br/>           A nonprofit started by the city to identify under-used spaces to turn into artist work space</p>   |



## PUBLIC FACILITIES IN THE COMMUNITY

The history of art in public places is long and complex, but recent history presents some interesting intersections of art and the laws governing public space, particularly in regard to the right to use the space, content, and funding.

Many famous public buildings have included art for centuries, and this practice was further advanced by the Public Buildings Cooperative Use Act of 1976, which determined that publicly owned space is indeed “public.” The act encouraged more integration of government-owned space into the public sphere, including for commercial, cultural, educational, and recreational purposes. This proclamation opened doors wide for community groups to initiate partnerships with the government for use of publicly owned space.

While the act encouraged certain types of activities, there remained a delineation between different types of public space. In public forums (parks, plazas, sidewalks, and public property intentionally designated for public expression), the government cannot unreasonably restrict the use of space, and any restrictions must be content neutral, as long as the content does not break any laws or endanger public safety. In a nonpublic forum, the government is allowed to ban or restrict any expression that is “not compatible with the forum’s purpose.” This caveat means that arts stakeholders may occasionally run into concerns about whether arts uses are suitable and whether certain types of artistic content are appropriate. As concerns over censorship exploded in the later part of the twentieth century, this distinction became a main point of contention for artists.

Another point of contention in the larger public sphere was, and remains, public funding for the arts. In 1959, the City of Philadelphia pioneered the first Percent for Art program, which required developers to commission art as a part of the

development process. Percent for Art programs are common across the country and include a number of variations. Most often, they help to pay for outdoor public art installations. Another frequent variation includes funding for the installation of art in municipal buildings, which has resulted in many buildings around the country, from city halls to libraries to schools, being able to install visual art either purchased or commissioned by these funds.

*Public buildings are indeed a “public” resource, and this intention is carried out by opening our buildings for the breadth of activities they can support. These activities bring new visitors and additional investment to communities, sustain the vitality of Federal buildings through diverse uses, and promote their civic importance, as the spirit of the act intends.*

[http://www.gsa.gov/graphics/pbs/Urban\\_Policy\\_Update\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.gsa.gov/graphics/pbs/Urban_Policy_Update_FINAL.pdf)

Recently, the National Endowment for the Arts has been actively encouraging partnerships between arts stakeholders and government entities for projects that encourage “quality of life, increased creative activity, distinct identities, a sense of place, and vibrant local economies that capitalize on existing local assets.”<sup>1</sup> Many communities have thus increased the number of partnerships around creative uses of space, which could easily encompass underused public space. Unfortunately, these funds cannot be used for the construction or renovation of facilities, which severely limits the potential for these partnerships to move forward without other funding options. Public capital funds in general can be difficult to come by for smaller arts-related projects, even when the project involves the city as a partner.

1. <http://www.nea.gov/grants/apply/OurTown/Grant-program-description.html>

In general, policies around space, content, and funding of the arts provide a starting point for arts stakeholders to explore relationships with government actors for the use of space. However, they also begin to introduce some of the challenges. While government entities are mandated to consider how to better encourage community use of publicly owned space and often have programs to support art installations, they retain a fair amount of discretion within facilities to determine what can and should be done.

However, there are signs in many sectors that public entities are thinking more creatively about space. In the education sector, joint and extended use of public school facilities, which serve the

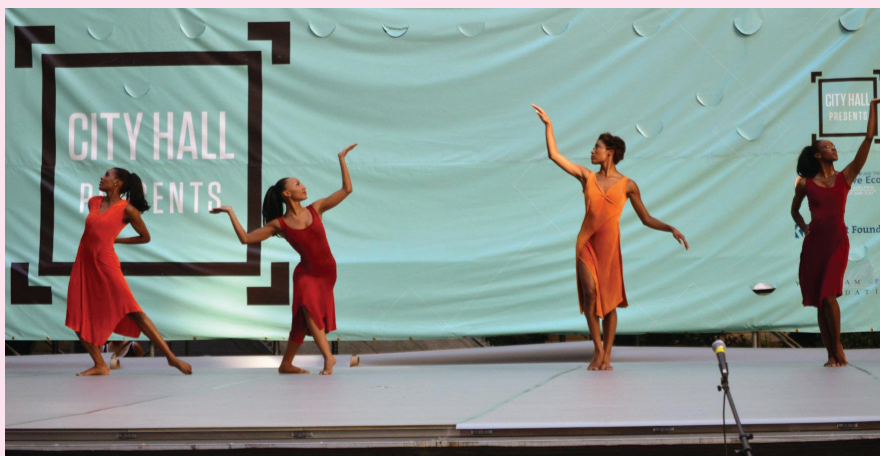
community and expand services and activities for students, have become hot topics. Traditional community institutions such as libraries and senior centers have also been recently evolving beyond their original missions to become stronger and more vibrant hubs of all kinds of community activities. They are not alone. Less obvious facilities such as pools, firehouses, and municipal warehouses have also found themselves occupied by artists and creative activity.

And yet, despite an increase in innovative projects, many community institutions have space that is not being fully used or is used for only part of a day. This space has the potential to serve as a major asset for local community and arts groups.

## City of Philadelphia Office of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy, City Hall Presents

*Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

After a long period of renovations at Philadelphia's City Hall, Mayor Michael Nutter wanted to see the main courtyard become more animated. With outside funding from the Knight Foundation, the City of Philadelphia Office of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy (CreativePHL) has instituted City Hall Presents, an initiative to host performing arts groups in a public room inside City Hall in the spring and fall and outside in the courtyard during the summer. With a lot of trial and error, CreativePHL has learned how to work with the many agencies to get the space set up and to make sure that artists are clear on what is possible and that safety regulations are being followed. Because the idea initially came from the mayor, getting agencies on board has been less of a problem than with some other projects. A rolling application process and stipends for the performing groups has ensured that CreativePHL is



**Philadanco dancers performing at the outdoor stage at Philadelphia's City Hall.**

Photo credit: Amanda Brandt for the City of Philadelphia

able to host groups both large and small from all across the community. Representatives believe that the series has changed the public's perception of City Hall while also conveying to city employees the power of the arts. They hope that this pilot program will serve as the basis for either additional private funding or direct city funding to continue the series.

<http://cityhallpresents.creativephl.org>

# CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES: PUBLICLY OWNED BUILDINGS

## Politics

City governments are vast and complicated. They get things done through two primary forces: directives from above and elbow grease from below. Leaders at the top want to make things happen, while workers below have the task of complying with requirements and making sure they are covering all bases. Arts stakeholders have to learn to incorporate these different types of agendas into their own goals to get things done.

Problems of oversight and accountability are further compounded by the highly specialized, constantly changing nature of city government. Outside groups, and indeed many insiders, have a hard time navigating both the requirements for using a space and those for which staff members must be involved. While city-developed event-planning guides can help for individual special events, sustained relationships are often more complicated. Arts stakeholders must consider any number of building owners, users, and property managers along with permitting departments such as the Department of Building Services, Fire, Police, and Sanitation. Each of these has a narrow, but sometimes overlapping, set of interests in the space. This same patchwork can also make estimating costs for a project exceedingly difficult, as quotes may be very different from what can be obtained in the private sector and may take significant time to get from participating agencies.

*Entering into negotiations with city agencies is always “at your own risk”—there is no guarantee that things won’t change at the drop of a hat and all of your time and energy will be for naught.*

— Participant at NOCD’s Space forum on August 15, 2012

Finally, arts stakeholders have little control over the process or outcomes of partnering with the city, which can be problematic. For example, the Museum of Chinese in America engaged in a long battle with then New York City mayor Ed Koch over the museum’s building at 70 Mulberry Street when the Koch administration attempted to raise the rents exorbitantly on the cultural and community groups using what had been an abandoned school. Other cultural groups have entered into negotiations with cities and invested significant resources into an opportunity only to see city staff or priorities change and the groups’ ending up with nothing to show for their work.

Some of the strategies for dealing with this political labyrinth seem basic, but they cannot be overstated and indeed were emphasized repeatedly by profile projects. Building relationships at both top and bottom is critical and time consuming.

Some people, especially those with an established history in the city, consistently went straight to the

## Political Challenges

### Stakeholders

- Oversight
- Coordination
- Accountability

### Bureaucracy and permitting

- Learning curve
- Lack of centralized resources
- Overlapping responsibilities
- Cost estimation

### Reliability

- Timeliness
- Evolving terms of agreement
- Political climate shifts

top when they had problems. Others saw better results by cultivating strong and close relationships with staffers. Groups have devised other strategies, such as the following:

- Maintaining a list of everyone carbon-copied on emails and including them in every communication about the project
- Keeping track of titles in addition to names, as staff can easily turn over but responsibilities for each position stay roughly the same
- Talking to organizations that are already familiar with working with the city, such as business improvement districts, community development corporations, and neighborhood associations

*If you only have one dollar to spend or an hour to use, spend it on relationships with the department, not the city councilors, mayors, or elected officials. When push comes to shove, they are going to be the ones to fight for you, which turned out to be true for me.*

— Marty Pottenger, activist and artist

## New York Chinatown History Project (Museum of Chinese in America)

*Manhattan, New York*

The Museum of Chinese in America began with an exhibit in the early 1980s in a local Chinatown senior center. The exhibit, titled 8 Pound Livelihood, drew on and highlighted the history of Chinese laundry workers in the city. This exhibit and similar community history projects helped the group become a trusted community voice, which allowed it to forge many strong partnerships. Over the following years, the group moved on to hold exhibits in libraries around the city. Its strategy for these partnerships was to come prepared to do work, share resources, and reinforce its shared public mission with the libraries. While it had many successes with partnerships, it faced a number of space challenges along the way. In 1984, the group moved to 70 Mulberry Street, an abandoned school where a number of other cultural and community groups were located. The city became interested in trying to sell the building or charge commercial rent, resulting in a long battle with the Koch administration. Ultimately, the battle led to new requirements and covenants for city-owned buildings to allow them to maintain their status as community assets. Recently, the organization has moved to its own new space but retains offices and archives at the old school building. When the building has presented challenges, such as a ceiling collapse, the group has been able to work with the Department of Cultural Affairs to get emergency grants to fix problems.

<http://www.mocanyc.org/about/>



Directory for 70 Mulberry Street, an abandoned school occupied by the Museum of Chinese in America and other cultural groups in Chinatown.



## Partnerships

In addition to concerns about the larger political climate around using public spaces, common issues related to partnerships can easily arise. The first is the existence, or lack, of reciprocity. Many arts stakeholders may approach city spaces or agencies with the notion that they have unlimited pools of resources. However, city budgets are often constrained by strict allocations and designation of funds. Individual city staff also may not have the time or motivation to work outside their normal parameters to accommodate new partnerships.

For partnerships to work, projects should benefit both partners. For arts stakeholders, the benefits may be a low-cost space to produce art. For city stakeholders, they may include advancing a mission by having the arts stakeholders provide, in exchange for the space, public services to constituents that the agency could not have provided on its own. Through such arrangements, both stakeholders have increased their resources by partnering, rather than having one partner

tax the other. Another option is to find a way to help get or provide other services and resources that are needed by the public facilities. In negotiating the development of a new community space at the Kensington Library in Brooklyn, funds for the space were bundled along with other upgrades to get library leadership on board with the idea.

There are also cases where mission alignment involves more than providing a service to the public facility. While city agencies may support the idea of involving or including arts activity in their spaces, they may also have certain mandates that cannot be superseded by the special conditions that arts require or create. For example, in working with the New York City Department of Transportation (DOT) on designs for the Culture

*Never go into a relationship empty handed or expecting the other organization to do the work.*

— *Charlie Lai, city activist and former head of the Museum of Chinese in America*

### Kensington Library Resources and Community Space

*Brooklyn, New York*

The Kensington Library Resources and Community Space project was born out of a participatory budgeting process managed by the councilmember for Brooklyn's Thirty-Ninth District, Brad Lander, and by committees of community delegates in the fall of 2011. The community was interested in enhancing the community room planned for the new library so it could function as "a site for rehearsals, story times, and small performances" as well as a meeting room. With the Brooklyn Public Library midconstruction on a new Kensington branch facility, the delegates bundled the funds for sound, lighting, and a dance floor for this flexible cultural space with other upgrades to the library's collection and equipment. One of the main challenges the delegates faced was coordinating with the city to get appropriate cost estimates, which was ultimately facilitated through Lander's office. Brooklyn Public Library outfitted the space in consultation with the participatory budgeting delegates and community cultural groups. The library opened in November of 2012 and the cultural outfitting is expected to be completed in the summer of 2013. The short time line is the result of this having been part of a preexisting project that was nearing completion. There are still some questions to resolve around management of the space, but the group is confident that the space will be a valuable new resource for multicultural community activity.

<http://bradlander.com/sites/default/files/images/Culture%20-%20Kensington%20Library%20final%20online.pdf>

Lounge in the Saint George terminal for the Staten Island Ferry, the Staten Island Arts (SIA) learned that one of DOT's primary objectives is to move people as efficiently as possible through the main corridor of the terminal. In contrast, SIA wanted to develop a space in which people would stop and view a performance or exhibit. SIA agreed to orient the space so that there was limited commuter distraction in the primary transit corridor but a wide and open entrance in the area where it was safer for people to slow down and look more closely.

Experience with partnering can exert a strong enabling or disabling force. Some city stakeholders, such as libraries, may be used to hosting a wide variety of programming in their spaces. The New York City Department of Cultural Affairs' Seniors Partnering with Artists Citywide (SPARC)

program, which places artists in residence in senior centers, found that some centers were adept at bringing in outside groups and addressing their needs, while others rarely did and thus were less willing to be flexible when negotiating with requests from participating artists. Over time, one of the main ways that organizations have solved this problem is by creating very clear memoranda of understanding that outline the expectations of both parties. In the case of SPARC, the Depart-

## Partnership Challenges

- **Reciprocity**
- **Mission alignment**
- **Experience with partnering**

## Staten Island Arts Culture Lounge

*Staten Island, New York*

After the Staten Island Arts (SIA) spent significant time searching the borough for a new space that could accommodate offices and space available for use by artists, the Staten Island borough president approached SIA with an exciting idea: move into an unused space inside the Staten Island Ferry Terminal. Planning the space has involved coordinating the interests of the New York City Department of Transportation, which owns the space; the city's Economic Development Corporation, which runs it; the federal Department of Homeland Security; the city's Department of Buildings; the borough president; and the organization's own board. By communicating constantly and working to align its goals with those of the other agencies (security, moving people, profit, etc.), the group is set to open the space in early 2014. With the opening, it anticipates a number of new challenges in dealing with all the competing populations—commuters, tourists, kids, homeless people, and more. To help with this challenge, it will be training all staff members in customer satisfaction.

<http://www.statenislandarts.org/culture-lounge.html>



Models of the new Culture Lounge at the Staten Island Ferry Terminal, designed by architect Vincent Appel. The windows to the office are situated along the main transit corridor.

image: Vincent Appel

ment of Cultural Affairs (DCA) has been able to act as a central hub to help senior centers replicate good practices seen in other centers. DCA has also consulted with nationwide organizations such as the National Center for Creative Aging to learn what has worked in other programs and places.

## Physical Space

After wading through all the political challenges and relationship brokering of putting a partnership in place, the next step is interacting with the space. This involves being able to gain access to the space, setting it up to meet the needs of arts producers, following various rules that are in place around use of space, and interacting with the public.

### Access

The ability to use public space is not always as straightforward as it is for private space, particularly when entering into a partnership with a building that has a preexisting fixed primary

use. Libraries, senior centers, and schools all have specific hours of operation and often do not have the capacity to open doors, add security, and provide custodial services for after-hours activities. Contracted custodial staff must follow union rules and have complicated fees associated with after-hours work. Casita Maria Center for Arts and Education, which shares the building it owns with a public school, has had to enter into frequent, challenging negotiations with the school custodians, who do not have provisions in place for Casita Maria's unique relationship to the building and the organization's need for after-hours

*One group that is helping to centralize useful information for public facilities is the National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities. Their website (<http://www.ncef.org/rl/auditoriums.cfm>) lists a number of resources for building auditoriums in schools*

## New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, Seniors Partnering with Artists Citywide (SPARC)

*New York City, New York*

In 2009, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA) in concert with local arts councils piloted a program that placed artists in residencies in senior centers. As the program has evolved over the years, DCA has learned a number of lessons about managing expectations. In the beginning, artists had trouble with the short hours available for using the space, the lack of storage and private space, language barriers, and the difficulty of programming against seniors' popular activities such as lunch and bingo. This led to frustration from the artists, who felt that they were not able to get work done. However, by clarifying the parameters of each available space, recommending that artists' projects incorporate the seniors, and providing a stipend and materials budget, DCA has helped to create a viable program that can provide affordable space to artists while increasing the vitality of local senior centers.

<http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcla/html/sparc/sparc.shtml>\*



Artist in residence Meghan Keys with a senior at Fort Greene Grant Square Senior Center showing off the piñatas Keys taught the seniors to make.

Photo credit: Eric Harvey Brown

\* Clarified guidelines that include descriptions of each space are available at [http://www.statenislandarts.org/resource-flyers/SPARC\\_Call%20to%20Artists\\_Staten%20Island-1.pdf](http://www.statenislandarts.org/resource-flyers/SPARC_Call%20to%20Artists_Staten%20Island-1.pdf).



## Casita Maria Center for Arts and Education

*Bronx, New York*

Casita Maria's new Center for Arts and Education is much more than an arts facility; it is a unique partnership with the New York City Department of Education. While Casita Maria owns the building, the first five floors house a public school, the Bronx Studio School for Artists and Writers, with the top floor reserved for Casita Maria.

Constructed by the city's School Construction Authority, the building has brought up a number of interesting issues around management and the needs of arts organizations. Casita Maria must plan its programming around the school's opening hours. Because of this unique relationship, the organization is troubleshooting a variety of unexpected problems, such as coordinating with the contracted custodians to provide adequate hours of services or trying to get the School Construction Authority to approve special dance floors and theater equipment. However, overall, the group believes that this new type of partnership has been successful and is thinking of ways to share its story to encourage similar partnerships between nonprofits and small schools.

<http://www.casita.us/>



Illstyle & Peace Productions dance company teaches kids hip-hop moves in the gym at the Casita Maria Center for Arts and Education.

## Spaceworks

*New York City, New York*

Still in its infancy, Spaceworks began as a partnership between the Charles H. Revson Foundation, the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City, and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA). The goal of the initiative is to identify underused space and repurpose it as artist studios and rehearsal space. To help support its mission, DCA has allocated capital funds, and Spaceworks is actively looking at numerous potential demonstration projects, including in publicly owned space on Governors Island and in libraries around the city. Because each project is unique, the organization must build new sets of relationships and new plans for every space that take into account the differing needs of performance and visual artists. To help facilitate this complexity, the partners hired an executive director with significant previous experience working with the city on real estate development and the arts. While the project is fully endorsed by the current administration, Spaceworks stakeholders are aware that a new administration could change their plans. In the meantime, having the support of the Mayor's Office has allowed them valuable access to underused publicly owned spaces around the city that an outside organization might not have.

<http://www.nyc.gov/html/fund/downloads/pdf/2011%20SPACEWORKS%20release.pdf>



Spaceworks will carve 300 studios out of 85,000 sq. ft. of City-owned vacant space, including the Brooklyn Army Terminal photo credit: NYC EDC



custodial services. For projects such as Spaceworks and SPARC that are offering studios and artist residencies in underused space, the lack of flexibility for artists to use the space after hours can be a big detractor. This can also be a particular problem for rehearsal spaces, which often are most heavily used in after-work hours. In some of the library projects, Spaceworks is specifically looking to outfit buildings with a separate entrance to the converted arts spaces to make sure that the spaces meet the needs of artists' schedules.

Conversely, sometimes being unable to gain access to space at any desired point in time during normal business hours is the problem. When Dancenow/NYC was working frequently in empty public pools, one big challenge was the inability to clear out the public from the park area surrounding the pool to do tech runs of dance

performances. Similarly, Casita Maria must have very strict load-in and load-out rules for its performing arts spaces because during the day, the school uses that space as a gym. As a result, Casita Maria cannot easily accommodate multiple-run performances because sets and props cannot be left in place overnight.

**New York City's "one-stop resource" for information and guidance related to event permitting in New York City: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/cecm/html/home/home.shtml>**

### Setup

Similar to problems of access, arts stakeholders must work around a variety of challenges in set-

## Dancenow/NYC *New York City, New York*

Dancenow/NYC has been operating for over a decade and a half, running dance festivals in New York City. In its early years, it was known for putting on performances in unexpected spaces—pools, firehouses, parks, and more. In the process, it learned a lot about the amount of energy and coordination it takes to set up and use a nontraditional space. For example, the group's pool projects entailed solving multiple challenges. First, it was difficult to allow groups to rehearse in the spaces, as people could not be cleared out of the park surrounding the pool. Second, the group had to completely outfit the spaces for performances, which meant renting and hauling gear and chairs, finding appropriate electrical outlets, and trying out multiple configurations. Third, it often had to construct or go without dressing rooms, bathrooms, and off-stage areas for performers. Finally, it was unable to charge any ticket fees for the performances because of city rules, which meant having to heavily subsidize performances. To help ease the difficulties of this process, Dancenow/NYC made sure that the dance groups who applied to its festival had an active interest in the pool space and a willingness to deal with the challenges of the space for the trade-off of its uniqueness. The group also combined funds from both public and private sources. It has since found a more permanent space arrangement where it is able to gain more earned revenue from its performances.

<http://dancenownyc.org>



**Julia Gleich Dancers, performed in a New York City public pool.**  
photo credit: Michael Dames

## Jacksonville Public Library *Jacksonville, Florida*

By combining his love and knowledge of the local music scene with a passion for his library, an entrepreneurial librarian at the Jacksonville Public Library now regularly hosts local popular bands in library spaces. While the library has often presented classical music performances in its auditorium, the band performances are staged around the library itself. Because these performances occur during the library's regular hours, the library has chosen to keep the performances short, no more than an hour or two.

It also takes care to warn patrons when a show is about to start. One of the biggest challenges is the amount of personal time and energy it takes the librarian to make these events happen: promoting shows requires different channels from those of normal library events, such as local zines and music journals; setting up a show requires an understanding of and access to complex sound equipment; and selecting and managing the bands requires an understanding of the music scene in general. However, in the end the program both provides the bands with validation and a new performance venue and invigorates the library as a central community resource.

<http://www.jaxpubliclibrary.org>



Experimental electronic band Yip-Yip playing at the Jacksonville Public Library

Photo credit: Max Michaels

ting up the space for arts use. Some challenges are common to the use of any nontraditional space for arts purposes. For example, the Jacksonville Public Library, which occasionally hosts popular local bands to play in its space, has made it very clear to all involved that the acoustics of the available spaces are not ideal. These spaces either are designed to stifle sound or are cavernous, which means that sound quality will never reach that of a real music venue. Dancenow/NYC accepted that doing performances in public pools entailed a host of challenges around equipment load-in and -out, dressing rooms, bathrooms, and even access to electricity. Moreover, most nontraditional spaces do not facilitate having local locked storage of materials and equipment.

Publicly owned spaces can also present their own unique challenges. For example, directions to SIA's new Culture Lounge cannot be included on wayfaring signs around the ferry terminal because of DOT regulations. In designing the new school building for Casita Maria, the School

Construction Authority failed to implement sprung floors for the dance studios, despite having a conversation about it with the Department of Education. Having learned from that mistake, Casita Maria recommends working with experts to review plans in the construction phase so specifications like that are not missed.

In another case, artist-activist Marty Pottenger, based in Portland, Maine, had installed special lighting using her own budget in the gallery of the Portland City Hall to help highlight the artwork in her Art at Work project. However, the city had also hired a sustainability officer to reduce energy use, which resulted in the lighting being removed without discussion. Ultimately, after the mistake had been pointed out to the city, it installed its own track lighting, but the removal indicated poor communication between relevant agencies and lack of understanding of what is needed for arts spaces.

## Rules and Regulations

Of course, there are also a number of rules and regulations that limit how public spaces can be set up and used. One that was most frequently cited was the lack of ability for money to exchange hands on some types of property. For Dancenow/ NYC, this was a major factor in ultimately pushing the group to find a more permanent location for its dance performances. Since it could not collect money for tickets at places like the empty pools because they were open to the public, it had to heavily subsidize all of its work with grants and alternate revenue sources. Casita Maria has also has to work around restrictions on the ability to sell tickets in its school space, and many libraries present similar restrictions.

Other rules and regulations are laid out on websites dealing with permitting and in event guides

posted by local governments; these concern, for example, alcohol permitting, cleaning requirements, fire and safety rules, and the need for groups to have proof of insurance. Each one of these requires advanced planning, coordination, and fees and expenses, which can be prohibitive for small groups.

## The Public

Another consideration that is somewhat unique to publicly owned spaces is that their use is often public in nature, meaning that they have regular populations and constituencies that rely on them for services or activity. These might be seniors, library patrons, children (both during the school day and after school), tourists, commuters, and homeless people. While an arts stakeholder may look at a publicly owned space and see it only for the space, there can also be huge benefits and challenges of inbuilt audiences.

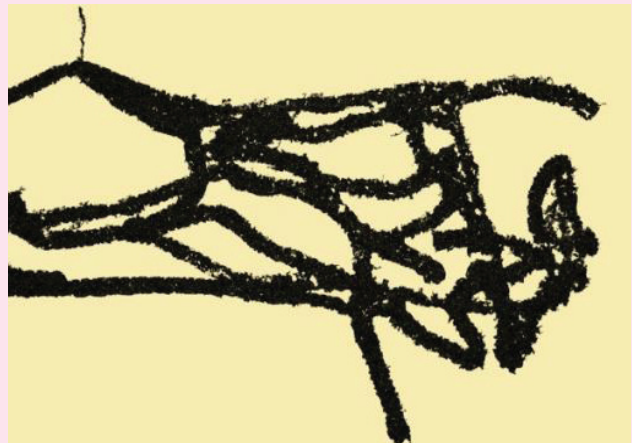
## Art at Work

### *Portland, Maine*

Artist activist Marty Pottenger, based in Portland, Maine, works in partnership with the city government both to integrate arts and creative thinking into the work of municipal staff and to promote the arts around the city. She has worked with numerous city agencies to have staff produce and install original art in city spaces. One of the main outlets for this is a gallery at City Hall, which displays artwork and poetry by public service employees, members of the police force, and others. In developing these projects, Pottenger has specifically chosen to work from the bottom up rather than the top down, establishing relationships with the people who manage the space directly rather than trying to start by

getting permission from above. By gaining the support of people she needs to work with on a regular basis, she has been able to move many projects along smoothly and efficiently. She has also taken an incremental approach. Since she began, she has held about seven or eight shows a year. Each time, she has made small changes to the space to make it better for use as a gallery, such as nailing in shelves or installing new lighting. In this way, she has shown what is possible with the space and avoided facing a backlash against radical change in what is seen as a sacrosanct space.

<http://www.artatworkproject.us>



Katarina Weslien print from *LINES Portland: the visible/invisible lines and labor that connects us*, an exhibit interpreting road repair lines made by Public Services crews in Portland, Maine.

*It's a great chance to give citizens a chance to experience City Hall in a way they never have before.*

*Usually they are here for jury duty, to get a file, pay a fee, et cetera. This is a chance to form an entirely new association with what City Hall stands for, what goes on here, and the business we take care of here.*

— Josh Dubin, City of Philadelphia Office of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy

Some programs explicitly include these populations or place them at the core of carrying out their mission. Examples of groups that practice this are SPARC, which requires artists in residence to provide programming for the seniors at their center; the Museum of Chinese in America, which directed its first set of exhibitions at seniors in the local senior center; and Casita Marita, which provides some arts programming for the school with which it shares space and includes many of the school's students in its own programming. Working with populations such as these requires some training. The Department of Cultural Affairs trains artists it is placing in residence in senior centers on how to work with seniors so that the

artists do not treat them inappropriately or plan activities that will require intricate motor skills.

Other programs expect or hope that the public will encounter the arts unexpectedly. This is the case for library patrons at the Jacksonville Public Library during its concerts, CreativePHL's programming in the City Hall courtyard, and SIA's Culture Lounge exhibits and performances in the ferry terminal. In these unexpected encounters, arts stakeholders and artists must be prepared to address the needs of constituents with a wide range of ages and backgrounds.

SIA plans to train its staff in customer satisfaction and also have regular conversations about how to engage populations such as schoolchildren and the homeless in a friendly, meaningful way.

## Producers

The last set of challenges for publicly owned buildings revolves around the artists themselves. Because of the complexity of working in these public spaces, most projects come from either the city or some other type of intermediary group that has the time and resources to navigate the bureaucracy. This means that the artists using the space are often one step removed from the partnership

## Physical Space Challenges

### Access

- Timing/Hours
- Custodians

### Setup

- Technology and specifications for arts uses
- Storage and long-term accommodation
- Wayfaring
- Shared space

### Rules

- Money changing hands
- Alcohol
- Insurance
- Cleaning
- Security

### Public/constituency needs

- Built in
- Passing through



building and other processes that have gone into setting up the spaces.

As a result, leaders of all the projects cited spoke strongly of the need to clearly communicate how the space may be used. Some artists are interested in and respond well to the site-specific requirements that many of these spaces have. Other artists have a particular way of doing things and may be hesitant to operate without more standard specifications. If there is an application process in which it is very clear ahead of time what artists can do in a space and what is available, stakeholders can avoid problems later on. Moreover, arts advocacy groups such as SIA believe that an added bonus of having artists go through an application process and then work within strict parameters is that such an arrangement trains artists on protocol for working with various types of venues, which strengthens the sector as a whole.

One final concern is the appropriateness of content for the public. Surprisingly, while this issue has probably received the most media attention over the years, many intermediaries have found ways to ensure that it does not become a problem. For example, SIA has asked that all art that goes into its Culture Lounge be focused on the environment of the ferry terminal, the waterfront, Staten Island, or a combination of these. In matching artists to senior centers for residencies, SPARC specifically looks for artists who want to work with the senior population. While content could still be a problem as partnerships evolve, having the intermediaries curating the artists using the spaces seems to allow for enough control and discretion to ensure

that public partners do not become upset. Artists wishing to push the boundaries of content can present their case to public officials, but the laws governing control over content in publicly owned buildings do allow for an element of discretion on behalf of managers, as most of these spaces are not technically public forums.

## MOVING FORWARD

### The Field

With all these potential hurdles, it is not surprising that many publicly owned buildings and spaces remain underused for arts purposes. Organizational capacity plays a big role in this. Larger organizations may have the time, resources, staff power, and project management experience to form relationships and address challenges as they arise. However, these organizations are also often less likely to be in need of the types of spaces that public buildings offer. More often, smaller nonprofits or individuals have to drive a project forward. While this can be effective with the right people or organizations, it is not a sustainable model for the field as a whole.

For the field to move forward, the entire process needs to be demystified. From a practitioner standpoint, this means the following:

1. **Documenting strategies.** Given that staff members both in the city administration and in arts organizations can turn over quickly, all organizations and individuals should try to document how they have made these types of partnerships work. Lists of what you need, whom you need to talk to, and what works and doesn't work are invaluable both internally and for the wider field.
2. **Sharing information.** Practitioners who have figured out how to effectively partner to use publicly owned spaces should open their doors for other organizations and individuals to learn how they did what they did. Finding available space can be a competitive game in some places, but holding back information means the

### Producer Challenges

- **Managing Expectations**
- **Content**

whole sector suffers. Furthermore, organizations wishing to begin a new program should do due diligence to find out what similar programs may already exist to avoid reinventing the wheel.

- 3. Finding experienced partners.** The arts is not the only sector that frequently partners with the city on events and activities in public spaces. Groups such as business improvement districts, community development corporations, and neighborhood associations may be more accessible than city departments and have contacts and structures already in place that help make partnerships happen. They also all share goals of enlivening spaces and putting underused spaces to work.
- 4. Creating demonstration projects.** Sometimes the problem with nontraditional spaces is that the stakeholders involved cannot see the vision that arts stakeholders see. In such a case, it may help to start small. By beginning with a small project, groups can form relationships and become comfortable with processes when there is less at stake. Once partners see how exciting a project can be, they may be more likely to prioritize making it happen on a larger level.
- 5. Developing and sharing guides to inform public partners.** While individuals in the arts sector may have detailed knowledge about theater construction, acoustics, or dance floor specifications, public construction partners may have less experience. Using and outfitting space in most public buildings involves working with public construction and facilities maintenance personnel. Guides that explain how to develop space for the arts should be shared with public partners at the beginning of a project to ensure that specifications are incorporated into plans.

## Policy

There are many changes that could be made at the government level to ease the ability of arts and other sectors to employ underused spaces.

- 1. Designate point people.** One of the things that SIA found most valuable during its process of creating Culture Lounge was that the New York City Department of Transportation had someone on staff whose

job focused on public art. If the city wants to promote innovation and vibrancy at the local level, there must be accessible people in departments whose responsibility it is to facilitate the development of unique partnerships and events. In particular, local cultural departments or agencies should consider providing some staff capacity to help arts and community organizations navigate other parts of the city bureaucracy.

- 2. Create and update event planning guides for public spaces and buildings.** Many event planning guides for the use of public spaces or buildings address a very narrow set event types, are not updated regularly, or cannot be found easily on complicated websites. These guides should be simple, substantial, central, and written so that the average person can use them without any specialized knowledge. For example, participants at an NOCD forum that helped to inform this profile report suggested that there should be a simple guide explaining how arts and community groups can partner with schools on the use of their space for rehearsals and other activities.
- 3. Provide training to the public.** Given the significant barrier that permits and bureaucracy cause for holding events and using public space, cities should consider holding free training that is open to the public for individuals or any size group to learn how to navigate the system.
- 4. Provide internal training.** Buildings and agencies that offer public services should be trained in partnering with the public to use their spaces and developing effective memoranda of understanding that can help add to their mission and resources instead of draining funds and energy.
- 5. Publish list of available spaces.** Even before problems of process arise there is the problem that community groups do not know that space is available. Right now, there is no way for any organizations, large or small, official or unofficial, to know what publicly owned buildings could be used by the community. Some publicly owned spaces are geared toward making a profit for the city, while others have very explicit community-minded missions. The latter have great potential to accommodate arts uses.

Other, more specific ideas include the following:

- Review maintenance and custodial policies and contracts to allow for more flexible hours.
- Provide small grants to cover certain fees for permits and insurance that small community groups and individuals cannot afford.
- Encourage public facilities to review spaces to identify capacity for use by community groups.
- Consider developing services for small community groups in the same way that services have been developed for small businesses.
- Model guidelines and services for libraries, senior centers, and other community service buildings on extended-use guidelines and services for public school facilities.
- Reconsider rules that prevent arts stakeholders from collecting entry fees for performances on public property.

## CONCLUSION

Ultimately, both cities and the arts communities need to learn from these trailblazers to enhance the efficiency and efficacy of future partnerships. Better programming of public facilities helps to achieve both city and arts missions and can help increase access to more resources for diverse community cultural activity.



Dancenow/NYC, Julia Gleich Dancers photo credit: Michael Dames

a NOCD-NY profile series



#### look for:

- adaptive reuse
- construction zones and vacant lots
- public outdoor space: short- and long-term
- publicly owned facilities
- religious spaces
- shared space