

A grassroots movement in Charlotte builds arts events by the artists, for the people

By Alicia W. Roberts
PUBLISHED IN: ARTS ALIVE

Don't talk to Manoj Kesavan about Charlotte's arts scene, arts venues and event sponsorship – unless you want to enter into a deep discussion about who art is for, how it should be funded and, most importantly, who should control it.

By Kesavan's reckoning, the creating, presenting and even the funding of art is less gallery and glamour, and more community and crowdsourcing.

"It's the Wikipedia model," he says, a slight smile starting to stretch across his face.

[Pecha Kucha Night](#) makes the perfect example. Kesavan's organization, que-OS, has announced that Vol. 10 of one of the city's most well-attended – and most informal – arts events will open Aug. 29 at [NoDa's Chop Shop](#).

Kesavan, who's 41, and a dedicated group of volunteers from Charlotte's creative community have planned and executed the nine previous editions of Pecha Kucha Night since 2008. Performers submit applications weeks in advance, and plan short (six minutes, 40 seconds) but powerful presentations. Only 10 are chosen to perform.

The most recent Pecha Kucha Night, which you could describe as a sort of TEDx event without the rules or the stiffness, drew more than 400 people to the Mint Museum Uptown on a Thursday night in March.

They had to turn people away.

"These kind of informal, almost alternative events, I think they all really click in Charlotte because it's a big enough city but without too many such outlets, too many stages for artists to share and for audiences to experience,"

- **Pecha Kucha Night, Vol. 10**

An evening of short cultural presentations.

When: 7:30 p.m. Aug. 29.

Where: Chop Shop, 339 E. 35th St., Charlotte.

How to apply: Point 8 website for details, deadlines: www.point8.org/pechakucha

How to attend: Admission at the door; arrive early – these events sell out.

Watch: Video from Pecha Kucha Night: <http://bit.ly/12SRS6k>.

- **Manoj Kesavan**

Charlotte resident since: end of 2002; came here for a job.

Occupation: Architect, cultural events coordinator.

Organization: que-OS, which organizes arts events.

Cultural chops: Founder of Point8 Forum discussion group; TEDx steering committee; McColl Center for Visual Art resident; founder, Pecha Kucha Night Charlotte; coordinator, The Quasimodo project.

Kesavan said.

Kesavan might smile when he calls the recent evolution in Charlotte's arts scene the Wikipedia model of sharing arts performances and exhibits.

But he's not joking.

Working through a succession of grass-roots organizations – from the Point 8 Forum, to Pecha Kucha, to The Quasimodo Project and, now, a firm he calls que-OS (pronounced chaos) – Kesavan and a group of dedicated artists and arts supporters have created experiences that are informal, experimental and very well attended.

Suggest to Kesavan that he is the drive behind some of the more off-the-wall arts events in Charlotte in the past few years, that he is in some way the godfather of a new grass-roots arts movement, and he disagrees. Vigorously.

The Voice

With Point 8, and now through que-OS, Kesavan strives to provide the space for professional artists to communicate to the public.

So we'll call him an arts instigator. We'll label him a voice for the arts.

Because, after all, grass-roots happens through the efforts of the group. He stresses that he is one of many.

And the forum and the artists are the focus of this group, not the glory.

Artist Felicia van Bork explained it this way during her Pecha Kucha Night Vol. 9 presentation: "Artists are people who have a compulsive need to communicate, but they do so in totally (messed) up ways."

Kesavan came to Charlotte in 2002 to follow his primary vocation – architecture. But he quickly branched out to become a mainstay of the city's cultural community. Through his connections, he started gathering a diverse group of Charlotte residents to talk about issues affecting the city's arts scene.

That built into what the participants officially dubbed the Point 8 Forum, a collection of artists, architects, designers and thinkers affiliated with arts institutions, galleries, universities and colleges.

They created a venue for academic-level discussions without the college campus, aiming to facilitate a culture of creativity in Charlotte, paired with an atmosphere of open and objective criticism. They launched a website and an online magazine that featured essays and criticisms.

They started Pecha Kucha Night.

Kesavan says Point 8 Forum is the foundation and catalyst for all that has followed. The connections he and the others made created something almost tangible, he says, "mentally and intellectually and almost spiritually an institution for this group of people."

Related Stories

Related Images



Point 8 alumni include architect Faron Franks, who with Kesavan was an affiliate artist at the McColl Center for Visual Art in 2012; artist Barbara Schreiber; and photographer Mitchell Kearney. They all still participate in Charlotte's cultural scene.

This group pushed the concepts of Point 8 even further with The Quasimodo Project, a series of "pop-up" arts events during the Democratic National Convention in September 2012.

"It was a strange reflection on Charlotte that there was no cultural plan," Kesavan says.

So this group of artists stepped in to fill the void.

"Artists came together and decided what it would look like," he says.

It looked like this: roving bands of artists performing throughout uptown during the convention; a "Yard Art Day" exhibit at homes across Charlotte; and the Projection Wall, broadcasting artworks on the 12-story wall of UNC Charlotte's Center City Building.

What's next?

Kesavan wonders if The Quasimodo Project has a life after the DNC, as a fringe festival or some other alternative arts event.

Following his McColl Center residency, Kesavan's primary livelihood now depends on que-OS.

"And I really relate to the starving artist now," he says.

He works seven days a week on que-OS, combining his background in architecture with his new love of cultural arts planning, which leaves little time for television (he doesn't own one) or Facebook (which he uses very little, and then only for work). He even uses an ad blocker when he surfs the Internet, to cut down on the distractions.

Instead, he spends a lot of time in the field, meeting with groups to try to elevate and execute new ideas. He occupies an office, sparse as it is, in Packard Place on South Church Street – where creative collaborations, meetings and presentations are a way of life.

Desiree Kane, a stalwart of Charlotte's cultural scene who has worked with Kesavan on Pecha Kucha Night, TEDx and The Quasimodo Project, says he can make the massive, complicated projects happen because of his own passion for and dedication to the arts. It gives him a little touch of the Pied Piper.

"People don't buy what you do, they buy why you do it," she says. "When you talk with Manoj and you're able to see into him and why he does things, it's easy to get on board with him. Because you can tell his heart and his head are in the right place. He's very selfless."

Art in the public square

What Kesavan would really like to see is a way for artists and traditional arts institutions – museums, venues and funding organizations – to find a way to create these informal, heartfelt and wildly popular arts event together.

That would be the next step in the cultural shift that took hold in Charlotte about five years ago. That's when Charlotteans began to see things like Pecha Kucha Night, BarCamp, TEDx and Quasimodo – large-scale cultural happenings presented by individuals with hardly any corporate or institutional sponsorship.

Kane wonders if projects like Kesavan's can alleviate some of the burden the arts community is feeling as it faces budget issues – that maybe his money-conscious, high-impact model for dissemination can keep the importance and appeal of the arts always at the forefront of the community.

“When communities are struggling, the arts tend to struggle,” she says. “The everyday happiness of the community begins to suffer. That's when people like Manoj become a beacon of light. ... He cares a great deal about Charlotte. Otherwise, he wouldn't do it.”

His dream is to upend the traditional arts patronage model to support these grass-roots arts experiences.

He wants to see arts supporters “given a choice between putting your name on a gallery or supporting something that's popular in the public square.”

That, he says, is something artists could get behind.



[Subscribe to The Charlotte Observer.](#)