



ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE:

Venues and Settings, and the Role they Play in Shaping Patterns of Arts Participation

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PERSPECTIVES ON NONPROFIT STRATEGIES FROM WOLFBROWN

ABSTRACT

Among the subtlest but most important shifts in patterns of cultural participation is the increased importance and meaning that consumers attach to the settings in which they engage in creative activities. The implications for arts presenters and the venues, spaces and facilities they use are significant. Future generations will not ascribe the same importance to permanent venues with fixed seating and fixed staging. In order to remain relevant, arts presenters and producers must radically re-conceptualize the relationships between their programs and their spaces in order to reach younger and more diverse audiences. Moreover, entirely new types of facilities are needed to breathe new life into the art forms. Arts presenters who learn how to carefully match setting with artistic content, both live and digital, including the use of unusual or dispersed performance locations, will earn the patronage of a new audience.

Why will some people engage with art in one setting, but not another? For example, why will someone watch great drama on television at home, but never darken the door of a theater? Why will someone listen to classical music in a place of worship, but not a concert hall?

The term “setting” refers to the many spaces, venues, and locations where arts experiences take place, and is used intentionally to broaden the discussion beyond conventional arts facilities. Settings may be formal or informal, temporary or permanent, public or private, and physical or virtual. In the broadest sense, “setting” is a sort of meeting ground between artist and audience – a place both parties occupy for a finite period of time to exchange ideas and create meaning.

Two underlying hypotheses compel this paper. First is that setting plays an increasingly important role as a decision factor amongst cultural consumers, and therefore is a subtle, if not profound, driver of arts participation. The second is based on a wealth of anecdotal evidence: artists and arts organizations are choosing to create and present art in a wider range of settings that both animate the art and capture the imagination of audiences in new ways.

“Theatres are the best way to keep people from the arts.”

SIMON DOVE
Utrecht Festival, Dance/USA Forum
January 2011

The need to more fully understand the inter-relationships between setting and art is long overdue. In 2008, a group of Australian researchers set out to answer a similar set of questions, “based on a strong impression that the relationship between place and performance is shifting substantially” (Lancaster et al, 2010). With this notable exception and several others, the arts sector lacks a strong body of critical thinking about the changing nature of venues and settings for contemporary arts experiences, and, specifically, how different settings amplify, or detract from, participation.

Outside the arts, a wealth of related literature delves into placemaking, the psychology of architecture, and the role of public art in civic identity (see, for example, Green 2011). Much of this work suggests that setting plays a much larger and more significant role than that of an empty vessel for art. On the contrary, setting influences both the art itself, and the audience response. As a determinant of impact, it is thereby worthy of much more attention than has been accorded. *Continued on the next page*

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Theaters, concert halls, and museums are conducive to certain kinds of exchanges between art and people. These are, and will always be, critically important spaces for public participation in the arts. But meaningful exchange occurs with greater frequency in many other settings, from old breweries to planetariums, abandoned subway platforms, barges, cinemas, and community bookstores. With the proliferation of virtual spaces for arts programs, it seems now that all the world's a stage.

The new emphasis on setting is evident in the rise of site-specific festivals, growing experimentation with temporary or "pop-up" spaces, a new pattern of use of cinemas for high quality digital arts programs, and increased use of outdoor urban spaces for video presentation. It is also evident in the work of young artists who choose to curate the settings for their work as an integral part of the work itself.

Inviting audiences to spaces they do not want to visit is a losing proposition, especially when they do show up and feel out of place. Without a clearer perspective on the dynamics between audience, artist and setting, the arts sector will not develop the capacity it needs to engage the next generation of art lovers.

The Problem with Fixed Arts Facilities

Historically, venues and the art that appears in them have enjoyed a close relationship: sacred music composed specifically for reverberant cathedrals, Viennese opera houses, Parisian cabarets, and the American jazz clubs of the 1930s all had unique and idiosyncratic connections to their respective art forms. The proliferation of multipurpose theatres, high school auditoriums, and performing arts centers in the second half of the 20th century began to deconstruct important historical relationships. Over the years, audiences in many cities and towns have grown accustomed to using the same venue for a wide array of live events, from poetry slams to chamber music concerts. While multipurpose venues can expand access to the arts, important connections between art and setting have been lost.

For all the billions of dollars invested in arts facilities over the past decades, little critical analysis can be found except for architecture criticism and news accounts of the trials and tribulations of planning and development¹. In his 2010 TED talk, *The True Power of the Performing Arts*, Ben Cameron, program director for the arts at the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, acknowledged that many purpose-built arts venues "...were designed to ossify the ideal relationship between artist and audience most appropriate to the 19th century" (Cameron 2010). Facility planning consultant Duncan Webb echoes this sentiment in his forthcoming paper,

Theaters for Audiences, arguing that arts facilities have not evolved or adapted to the changing expectations and needs of contemporary audiences and local communities, nor to the needs of artists whose work demands alternative settings. Even as new performing arts centers open in places like Kansas City and Las Vegas, industry leaders are talking about the need to adapt and repurpose these types of facilities to accommodate programs and activities that serve a larger public (Brunner Loeb forum 2010).

First-class, purpose-built arts venues tend to be found in larger cities and towns with a strong philanthropic base. As the American population continues to diversify both ethnically and geographically, an inevitable shift in policy towards "democratizing culture" will almost certainly result in a re-allocation of resources to organizations, programs, and venues outside of the major cultural centers.²

A 2008 study of patterns of arts participation in California's inland regions (Brown, Novak, and Kitchener 2008) found that people of color use purpose-built arts facilities at a fraction of the rate that white people use them. For example, the study found that whites are seventy-six percent more likely than African Americans to engage in music activities at "theaters or concert facilities". In contrast, African Americans reported using places of worship for music, dance, and theatre at two to three times the rate of whites. A significant difference was observed between English-speakers and Spanish-speakers in their use of theaters: thirty-eight percent of English-speakers reported using theatres, compared to just six percent of Spanish-speakers. Again, it is difficult to know the extent to which negative attitudes and perceptions are a barrier as opposed to other factors such as location or lack of culturally relevant programming.

The larger problem with the infrastructure of arts facilities is that it is fixed and slow to change, while culture is changing more and more rapidly.

With an average age of roughly 50 years, purpose-built theatres lag behind current day cultural norms by many years. The problem is exacerbated when new facilities are modeled on old ones, perpetuating a long line of derivative thinking by architects, theatre consultants, and their clients who seldom take the time to consider what future generations of artists and audiences will require. Once built, arts groups grow comfortable and efficient in their spaces, which can be a boon to artists and audiences alike. When keeping the lights on as often as possible becomes a financial imperative, however, there is little incentive to think about moving the art to alternative settings.

Monuments to culture are important symbolic vessels of community pride, much as sports arenas and stadiums have taken on the symbolic weight of urban vitality. But since culture is always changing, so, too, should its monuments.

Facilities built to preserve the divide between artists and audiences are not going away any time soon, and many people will continue to idealize the experience they offer. But as consumers grow to appreciate unusual, quirky, and more comfortable settings for art, they will become less tolerant of uninteresting and restrictive spaces.

A sea change is underway in the relationship between the public and the settings where it engages with culture, both live and digital. To say that the professionalized arts sector has been caught off-guard would be an understatement. “It almost makes you think the arts have been in hiding all these years, playing it safe in their own cultural caves instead of venturing out to where life is really going on,” says Peter Linett of Slover Linett Strategies, a leading research firm (Linett 2011).

Symbolic Identification and Behavior Change

Just as certain sounds and scents evoke memories, setting plays a key role in stimulating and reinforcing human behavior. People associate settings with specific behaviors, such as eating, learning, worshiping, and creating. Much like a young dog learns to associate her crate with safety and contentment, so too can humans be conditioned to associate certain settings with desirable behaviors. Behavioral psychologists identify setting as a trigger for both constructive and destructive behaviors. Removing someone from a setting associated with an undesirable behavior is a form of stimulus control, the first stage in a process of change to modify a “problem behavior” or acquire a “positive behavior” (Prochaska & DiClemente 1986).

Moving someone into a new setting re-contextualizes the behavior in question and resets the relationship between space and behavior. Old sights, smells, and symbolic cues are no longer present, thus removing a barrier to the desired behavior. This is as true of smoking cessation as it is of arts attendance.

The 2009 Sacrum Profanum Festival in Krakow, Poland included performances in the Museum of Urban Engineering, located in an old tram terminus and depot station. Photo: Pawel Suder



While the physical attributes of a space can trigger conditioned behaviors, memories associated with past experiences in certain settings also play a role in framing expectations. In other words, the totality of one's past experience in a certain theater or museum, as well as its historical significance and meaning to the community, shapes one's expectations for what is appropriate and possible in that space.

A museum assumes the character of its art much as an old pair of shoes assumes the personality of its wearer.

The architecture and design of arts venues influence the behaviors that occur within them. Winifred Gallagher asserts that “people feel best in settings that, like parks and cars, foster a sense of control, impose few constraints, and offer multiple choices” (1999, p. 74). Studies in the fields of architecture and environmental psychology point to the profound role that environment plays in driving behavior. Speaking at the American Institute of Architects annual convention, Fred Gage, the Salk Institute neuroscientist, explained:

As neuroscientists, we believe that the brain is the organ that controls behavior, that genes control the blueprint, the design, and the structure of the brain, but the environment can modulate the function of genes, and our behavior. Architectural design changes our brain and our behavior (as quoted in Zeisel 2006).

Re-contextualizing art in a different setting, therefore, is a form of stimulus control that can trigger new behavior (that is, attendance) and free the art from negative associations and other barriers. Evidence abounds. The phenomenal success of la Folle Journée, France's largest classical music festival, may be ascribed in large part to creative uses of setting and alternative formats (for instance, no concert lasts more than 45 minutes)³. When the Boston Lyric Opera offered two free outdoor performances of *Carmen* in the Boston Common in the summer of 2002, roughly 120,000 people showed up, according to official estimates. Nearly two-thirds were under age 35, and 30% were at their very first opera⁴. More recently, the San Francisco Opera attracted over 30,000 people to its September 2011 live digital broadcast of Puccini's *Turandot* at AT&T Park.

Audiences and visitors have deeply-seated emotional feelings about arts spaces, often characterizing them as “friendly”, “welcoming”, “cold”, or “intimidating” – attributes often ascribed to people. Why will some people attend an arts event in one venue but not another? The reasons are complex, often relating to cost, mobility, accessibility, convenience, cultural relevance, and expected social norms. It is difficult to isolate the degree to which the setting itself is the problem.

Venues also take on symbolic meanings, either based on actual experience or transmitted through social networks. Some young people reject theaters and concert halls as settings for their parents' and grandparents' generations. Others feel that formal arts venues impose stifling social norms or elicit what Bourdieu described in his research on museum visitors as “a profound feeling of unworthiness and incompetence” (Bourdieu 1991). In a recent focus group discussion, one young man put it this way: “Sitting in a dark room for two hours and not being able to talk to my girlfriend is not my idea of an enjoyable evening.”

Arts groups' efforts to attract younger audiences, even when successful, are sometimes thwarted by the actual experience that young people have when they show up and do not see their peer group in attendance. When the setting is changed, however, the positive experience can be reinforced, such as when the London Sinfonietta performed Steve Reich's music in the Oskar Schindler factory in Krakow, Poland (Bujic 2009). Other variables, such as curtain time, can also be adjusted to attract different audiences, such as Paul Winter's popular solstice celebrations at New York City's Cathedral of St. John the Divine, which begin at 4:30 a.m.

It seems that younger adults attach greater importance to both setting and format than their older counterparts, although this assertion is based on anecdotal evidence and bits of quantitative findings from audience segmentation studies. Or, it may be that younger adults simply enjoy different kinds of settings than their older counterparts. The New World Symphony's late-night Pulse concerts in Miami Beach attract hundreds of fashionably dressed young adults. These events feature a live DJ playing electronic dance music in alternating sets with the orchestra. The concert hall itself is barely recognizable, transformed dramatically into a domed club-like setting with high-definition video projections and ambient lighting. In altering the setting, artists and curators can invoke cultural norms not typically associated with arts attendance and begin to address some of the underlying barriers.

Audience Sovereignty

Consumers increasingly expect, and more often than not are given, a high degree of interactivity and engagement in their leisure pursuits, from gaming to reality TV and theme parks. Everywhere one looks, consumers are being offered choices to make that were not previously available. Instead of buying a doll, a young girl can go online and design her own. The crowdsourcing ethos is a manifestation of this shift, along with the pervasive assumption that consumers are entitled to provide feedback on every product, service or webpage they use.

There is much talk in the arts sector about allowing audiences and visitors to “co-author” meaning, but still a good deal of skepticism about what this really means, and how to do it. Lynne Conner uses



American Repertory Theatre, 2011 production of *The Donkey Show* at the Oberon. Photo: Marcus Stern

the term “sovereignty” to characterize the authority that audiences want over their arts experiences (2008, p. 6). Of course, many people profoundly enjoy sitting quietly and taking in a live performance, or viewing art that is not interactive at all, without feeling under-engaged or disempowered.

Nonetheless, static experiences of all sorts will grow increasingly problematic, especially those that do not offer audience members any choices to make, such as when to get up, when to get a drink, when to talk – all of which are available in the theater of the home.

At a focus group discussion several years ago, young adults were asked to narrate an “imaginary tour” of a hypothetical jazz venue. With the aid of a glass of wine, they designed the next generation of concert facilities defined largely around choice-making. During

the day, the venue would be open as a coffee house/music lounge, where anyone can come to hear, share, and acquire music. At night, it would transition to a venue for live concerts where patrons can move fluidly between different spaces designed for intensive listening, “partial-attention” listening, and socializing while watching the concert on a large screen.

The need to offer consumers more opportunities to personalize their experiences has implications for both the art itself, in terms of a diminishing audience for what some consider “passive” experiences, and most likely foreshadows waning interest in the more restrictive settings in which professionalized art is offered. In the realm of participatory arts, recent studies have uncovered a rich tapestry of activity in a wide range of informal and non-traditional community settings such as coffee houses, neighborhood art centers, commercial stores and parks (see Alvarez 2005; and Wali, Severson, & Longoni 2002). Perhaps this high level of accessibility is one reason why participation in arts creation has not declined as much as attendance-based participation (Novak-Leonard & Brown 2008).

Settings and Socialization

In his seminal text *Art as Experience*, John Dewey wrote that music, dance, drama, painting, and sculpture and the buildings that housed them served an inherently social purpose over the centuries (Dewey 1934). Eating, drinking, socializing, flirting, and more serious discourse were always central to arts experiences. Only in the last few hundred years have the arts been restricted to “sacred place[s] where there is no touching and no talking” (Conner, 2008).

Settings for arts programs are distinguished by the types of social interactions that they permit both inside and outside of the audience chamber or gallery spaces. What does it signal to arriving audience members, for example, when they see other patrons sitting in intimate seating areas socializing before a concert – or lingering afterwards?

Settings are important because, for a finite period of time, they create “community”.

But, what kind of “community” do they really create, and for whom? Sociologist Elijah Anderson suggests that public spaces can serve as “cosmopolitan canopies” where people from different walks of life converge (Anderson 2004). Under these “canopies”, race, class, and other conventions of social hierarchy matter less. Everyone has an opportunity to “belong”. Not everyone, of course, wants to be under Anderson’s umbrella. But I find the concept useful. Arts facilities can serve not only as meeting places for like-minded art lovers, but as canopies for our increasingly diverse communities.

Creating “community” is not dependent on interpersonal contact alone, since most people who visit arts facilities speak directly with only a few other people. The larger meaning of “community” relates more to what French sociologist Émile Durkheim described as the “collective effervescence” – when the “act of congregating” becomes a “powerful stimulant” – and the outcome cannot be predicted by individual responses alone (Durkheim 1912).

Subtle design features can have a profound impact. What is the effect on theatregoers, for example, when they can see the faces of other audience members during a performance, as opposed to when they can only see the backs of heads? As humans, we instinctually mimic one another, thereby negotiating meaning and constructing bonds that sustain and protect us (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson 1994).

It is difficult to absorb the emotional reactions of other audience members in a totally darkened auditorium, except by hearing them. Seating configurations that allow for more visual interaction amongst audience members, aided by sufficient lighting, can positively affect the audience experience.

The need to offer more sociable, intimate, informal, and comfortable environments for arts programs has become an urgent priority.⁵ Diane Paulus, the visionary artistic director of American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, refers to herself as “a crusader for expanding the ways and the places where people can come to the theatre”. Speaking to a group of opera administrators at the 2011 Opera America conference in Boston, Paulus described Oberon, ART’s club-like second space, as “a way of thinking about art and theatre and nightlife in an intertwined relationship”. The higher premium attached to the social aspect of arts attendance can be seen in facility projects ranging from Arena Stage’s \$130 million transformation (devoted to improving the audience experience *outside* of its theatres, in large part) to New York’s *Le Poisson Rouge*, a hybrid social/performance space “serving art and alcohol” – undoubtedly one of the most talked-about facilities in recent memory.

As audiences become more assertive about shaping their own cultural experiences, it’s little wonder they are turning to a broader array of venues and settings.

It’s a natural progression in the evolution of taste. Consumers who reject one setting in favor of another are merely enacting a form of sovereignty they are regularly given, and have come to expect, from other entertainment experiences.

Settings for Digitized Art

The proliferation of settings extends to virtual spaces and physical spaces designed for the enjoyment of digital content. Once digitized, art can be experienced anywhere – on a computer screen at work, on a mobile device at the gym, or on a large screen in a movie theatre. Digitized art is also largely a sunk cost; the incremental expense of showing it again is a fraction of the cost of its original production. This is a momentous paradigm shift, but one that has yet to impress the arts sector, with a few notable exceptions.

In 2011, over 2 million people worldwide attended the Metropolitan Opera’s high-definition broadcasts in local movie theaters. The Met’s cinema patrons enjoy a good social dynamic – they applaud together and mingle – and often comment about the excellent visual

experience: “The close-ups were so tight you could see a tear slowly trickling down the tenor’s face – and that the soprano’s fingernail polish didn’t match the color on her toes, though she did nail the high C” (Associated Press 2010). Other arts groups such as the National Theatre of Great Britain and the Los Angeles Philharmonic have also entered the digital marketplace with high quality programs.

Amid the clamor about live versus digital arts experiences, no one seems to have taken notice that the omnipresent movie theater is quickly becoming a valued setting for arts programs. With their reclining seats, cup holders, and individual arm rests, movie theaters set the standard by which other venues are judged. Have you been to a luxury cinema lately?

Digital experiences, as they gain in quality and selection, will be seen as an inexpensive and attractive alternative to live performance, especially when the setting affords more social benefits and creature comforts than are available in theaters and concert halls. In 20 or 30 years, it is quite possible that millions of people around the globe will be going to movie theaters to watch high quality digital broadcasts of the best opera, dance, classical music, stage plays, and musicals in the world, for a fraction of the price of a ticket to a live performance. While this would be a fantastic outcome in terms of increasing public participation in the arts, it could also divert demand away from live programs. The opposite may also be true – broadcasting arts programs into cinemas may, in fact, fuel demand for live programs. Regardless, arts groups have a limited window of time to integrate digital content into their programs and facilities, or risk foregoing significant opportunities to develop new audiences and regenerate interest in their art forms.

The Role of Arts Facilities in Placemaking

A new focus on the arts’ role in urban revitalization, neighborhood development, and civic dialogue speaks to a shift in priority from art as a disembodied commodity for those who can afford it, to art as a fully integrated element of community life (Markusen & Gadwa 2011). Two well-funded examples are the ArtPlace grant initiative,⁶ supported by a consortium of foundations, and the National Endowment for the Arts’ Our Town Initiative⁷, both designed to support a variety of projects that integrate art with civic priorities such as livability and neighborhood renewal.

This signals a new chapter in the central narrative of the public value of the arts. More often, investments in art must generate not only “excellent” art but also art that connects people with their

communities in tangible, practical ways – a ratcheting-up of desired outcomes born out of a desire to gain a more central role for the arts in civic life. A growing body of research linking arts and cultural assets with neighborhood vitality (See Nowak 2007; and Stern & Seifert 2008) supports this important shift in cultural policy.

As a consequence, cultural facilities will be expected to play a more integral and intentional role in civic life.

The decades-old value system underlying centrally located stand-alone cultural facilities that are disconnected from the urban fabric is giving way to an ethos that supports more decentralized networks of smaller, re-purposed and re-used facilities that have more intimate and immediate relationships with their surroundings.

In large metropolitan areas like Atlanta and Detroit, this is largely a function of suburban sprawl and the fact that the center of gravity of arts-inclined households is moving farther and farther away from the urban core. Many suburban municipalities have built their own cultural facilities. It is also a function of the decreased willingness of time-starved arts lovers to fight traffic or drive more than 20 or 30 minutes when attractive alternatives are closer to home – or at home.

What do communities need from their cultural facilities? Cultural policy in the United States has not addressed this question with much clarity, although recent cultural planning efforts, such as the one completed by the City of San Jose in 2010, tend to prioritize smaller-scale venues scattered throughout a community, “both downtown and in neighborhood business districts” (Plettner & Saunders 2011). A new breed of spaces for arts-based creative exchange has emerged, such as the Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago and Taller Puertorriqueño in Philadelphia, often combining libraries, exhibition spaces, performance spaces, classrooms, media labs, retail spaces, cafés, and technology-rich meeting spaces. These spaces are distinguished not only by the mix of functionalities they accommodate, but in the blending of participation modalities they foster – both in terms of producing vs. consuming, as well as valuing the work of both amateur and professional artists in a holistic experience of creativity.

Between 2005 and 2008, a consortium of public agencies in Canada sought to better understand the existing cultural infrastructure in order to anticipate future needs. Scholars articulated a need for four types of arts, cultural, and creative spaces:

1. Multi-use hubs that bring together arts, culture, heritage, and library facilities;
2. Incubator spaces that support creative exchange between and amongst artists, entrepreneurs, and the public;
3. Multi-sector “convergence spaces” that foster networking and “random collision” between creative workers; and
4. Long-term artist live/work spaces (Duxbury 2008).

When the siting and design of arts facilities reflect their communities and mesh with their surroundings in novel ways, the results can foster community engagement in the arts and add immeasurably to a community’s sense of place. Consider, for example, the Mart Theatre in Skipton, a small agricultural town in the Yorkshire region of the U.K. where city planners identified an underutilized livestock market as a site for live performing arts programs. The Mart Theatre opened in 2005 with an “artistic programme designed to address local cultural and economic needs”, including weekend art fairs (“Art in the Pen”) and theatrical productions on weekend nights exploring, among other things, intersections between art and agriculture. Arlene Goldbard, an influential writer and champion of community arts, goes so far as to suggest that local governments should impose a “cultural impact assessment” permitting requirement on all new public construction (including cultural facilities), identifying negative impacts on cultural and social infrastructure, and denying permits to projects that will destroy valued cultural fabric (Goldbard 2006).

Arts and cultural facilities must play a far more central role in the intellectual, creative, social, and entrepreneurial lives of their communities than they do now, and must be guided by a far more nuanced understanding of the types of settings that artists, audiences, and community members will need over the next 50 years.

It is also clear that community needs will be increasingly satisfied by temporary, movable, and low-cost “semi-permanent” venues that can respond more flexibly to a community’s unique and changing needs. This can be seen in the growing number of “pop-up” arts programs

and facilities around the world, such as Chicago’s Pop-Up Art Loop™ project¹⁰ and the CHANEL Mobile Art Pavilion,¹¹ to the expanding realm of “urban ephemera” – parades, festivals, and other short-lived or spontaneous events that transform urban areas and inject an element of surprise into life’s routines (Shuster 2001).¹²

Artists as Curators of Setting

While some artists prefer to perform and exhibit in prestigious venues with first-class technical capacities, good acoustics, and comfortable dressing rooms, other artists, such as choreographers Elizabeth Streb and Emily Johnson, are decidedly moving beyond conventional spaces and asserting a license to design the settings in which their art is experienced, as well as the art itself. Streb’s Lab for Action Mechanics (or SLAM) in Brooklyn’s Williamsburg neighborhood was designed specifically to allow and encourage audience members to play an active role in their experiences, and embodies Streb’s desire to embed her work in a community context. Minneapolis-based Emily Johnson’s work blurs many lines, including the lines between artist, audience, and setting. Her pieces often take the form of installations that engage audiences in architectural spaces and environments – such as vacant office spaces and IMAX theatres – that are part and parcel of her artistic impulse.

Sometimes artists draw inspiration from the setting itself, either making thematic connections or incorporating physical elements of the space into their artistic concepts. One of the more imaginative examples in recent memory was Gotham Chamber Opera’s 2010 production of *Il mondo della luna* (The World on the Moon), an obscure Haydn opera staged in the Hayden Planetarium of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, under the direction of Diane Paulus.¹³ Another notable example of the blending of setting and art is *Sleep No More*, a roving theatrical production by Punchdrunk, the British immersive theatre troupe, in which “Lines between space, performer, and spectator are constantly shifting”.¹⁴ Billed as an “indoor promenade performance” at a converted warehouse space in New York City, audience members wander around the venue charting their own course and encountering scenes along the way.

Several arts groups have built an identity around the unique settings in which their work is experienced. Woodshed Collective, a New York-based group of theatre artists, creates installation theater presented free of charge to the public. By setting its work in unusual locations, the group rejects the traditional performer/spectator



A Classical Revolution concert at the Revolution Café in San Francisco
Photo: Henry Story (bblfish.net)

relationship and encourages its audiences “to activate their senses and become participants in the world of the play”.¹⁵ Similarly, the Da Camera Society in Los Angeles has built a distinct identity by carefully matching chamber music artists with historic sites, including architecturally significant homes, ornate ballrooms, cathedrals, and even the RMS *Queen Mary*.¹⁶

Site-specific work is nothing new. What seems to be changing, though, is an increased desire among artists (whatever their medium) to control the settings in which their work is experienced, and to afford audiences greater purview over their experiences. Artists’ motivations to work in settings of their own design can be understood both in economic terms, as a means of accessing more affordable spaces, and on artistic terms, as a means of bypassing cultural gatekeepers and gaining more creative control over the entirety of the arts experience, if only to relinquish it back to the audience.

This presents a challenge to curators and artistic planners who must think anew about existing and alternative spaces that will accommodate the work of ambitious, untethered artists whose work aims to explore the combustion of art and setting.

Creating more intimate, interactive, and direct connections with audiences is an overriding need for talented but discontented young artists like violist Charith Premawardhana, founder of Classical Revolution,¹⁷ who are frustrated with the system of agents, unions, venues, and institutions that stand between art and people. “It’s our experience to enjoy the way we want to,” explained Premawardhana in an interview. “I think younger musicians have a different attitude. We need to make our own work happen on our own terms.”

Working with artists to find a broader array of settings that enrich the art and capture the imagination of the public is necessary for securing the future of the art forms themselves. As Howard Becker noted in his 2004 essay “Jazz Places,” artists’ work is shaped by the many settings in which they work (Becker 2004). It is essential, therefore, to think of setting not only as a variable in the audience experience but also as a critical aspect of the aesthetic development of artists. “To free the art,” Diane Ragsdale reflects, “...we need spaces, both live and virtual, that support artists, support socializing, and that enable a more dynamic interaction between patrons and artists” (Ragsdale 2010).



Gotham Chamber Opera, 2010 production of *Il Mondo Della Luna* at the Hayden Planetarium. Photo: Judith Levitt/The New York Times/Redux

Conclusion

Demographic and technological shifts, along with shifts in patterns of cultural engagement, are slowly cracking the conceptual foundation of the cultural facility infrastructure, calling into question underlying assumptions about the role that permanent cultural facilities play in society, and what types of cultural facilities are needed to animate a community and accommodate artists.

Settings are imbued with meaning, much as art has different meanings to different people. In the economy of meaning, setting is a currency, just as art is a currency (Sharpe 2011). As consumers grow increasingly facile with editing, organizing, and remixing the art in their lives, so too are they increasingly comfortable curating the settings where they interact with art. In doing so, they form likes and dislikes for certain settings, which, in turn, reshapes patterns of arts participation.

All of this suggests a need for modern-day curators and artistic directors to canvass their communities for indigenous settings for art, much like an archaeologist scours the earth for clues to human history. Where, amongst the architectural detritus of a once-bustling Midwestern town, might jazz take on a new life? Where along the streetscape can visual art find a new audience? Where are the unexpected stages in your community, waiting to be animated? Effective artistic leaders will need to know their communities as well as their art forms, and will need to take artistic cues not only from art and artists, but from settings as well. An orchestra, for example, might identify a space of historic significance to its community, and then curate a musical program particularly suited for that space, and for the audience that will be drawn to it.

Many artists and arts groups prefer not to perform or exhibit in unconventional settings. There are financial obstacles, artistic limitations, technical barriers, and a host of other legitimate reasons for keeping art in purpose-built venues. Nonetheless, the fact remains that setting is an under-leveraged variable in the stubborn calculus of audience development.

Arts groups with fixed spaces have tough choices to make. How to balance the need for operating efficiencies with the longer-term need to replenish audiences through programming in new or different spaces? Much can be done to transform existing spaces. Lobbies can be made more conducive to social exchange and informal, spontaneous programming. Seating plans can be adjusted to increase the comfort level of patrons and offer them more choices to make. Black boxes, lobbies, rehearsal halls, and donor lounges can be converted into cabarets, jazz lounges, and digital venues. Stages can

be made into intimate performance spaces where audience members surround the artist. Exterior walls can be converted into giant screens for video art¹⁸ and outdoor plazas can be redesigned to accommodate public dances, drumming circles, and spoken word competitions, as the Music Center of Los Angeles County has done with its Active Arts® program.

Adapting old spaces and using found spaces are two approaches to re-contextualizing art, but a third approach is necessary. Fresh thinking is needed to design an entirely new breed of arts venues that blend together social, artistic, and creative possibilities, both live and digital. The New World Center in Miami Beach is a laboratory for exploring new presentation formats and represents a significant step forward in the re-thinking of arts venues. But a great deal more experimentation is needed. Until the chain of derivative thinking about settings for art can be broken, the infrastructure will grow obsolete on an ever-shortening timeline.

The public has already asserted sovereignty over where it engages with art. Now the arts sector must apply its creative energies to discovering the settings where art will resonate with different communities, especially those without museums and theaters. In order to gain the higher levels of public support and funding that they seek, arts groups will need to become more facile in locating their work in settings that re-contextualize art and make their programs relevant to a broader public.

Setting is a critical backdrop to arts participation. In a marketplace haunted by uncertainty, setting is one of the few variables that artists and curators can, and must, use imaginatively. The time has come to reconsider the trade-offs of presenting art in a broader range of settings that engage communities in new and exciting ways. As our forbears discovered centuries ago, the marriage of art and setting can be divine.

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Endnotes:

- ¹ The Cultural Policy Center of the University of Chicago plans to release a major study of the U.S. cultural infrastructure in 2012. For information, see <http://culturalpolicy.uchicago.edu/index.shtml>
- ² Achieving more equitable access to culture was a theme of the Future of the City symposium in June 2011, organized by the University of Chicago. See <http://futureofthecity.uchicago.edu/arts/>
- ³ La Folle Journée is a French annual classical music festival held in Nantes. According to the organization's website, "la Folle Journée offers a new perspective on concerts that attracts and instructs new audiences of all ages by doing away with the unchanging and rather predictable rituals of conventional concerts." For more information, see http://www.follejournnee.fr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=47&Itemid=85&lang=en. Other cities have developed their own festivals based on the format of La Folle Journée, including Madrid, Bilbao, Tokyo, Rio de Janeiro and Warsaw.
- ⁴ These figures derive from a survey of 762 *Carmen on the Common* attendees; research conducted for the Boston Lyric Opera by Audience Insight LLC of Fairfield, Connecticut, 2002
- ⁵ The creation of inviting social environments to attract younger audiences was a recurrent theme at a 2010 symposium on the 21st century arts center, hosted by Dartmouth College. The entire proceedings were videotaped and are posted in time-marked segments at <http://hop.dartmouth.edu/uncategorized/arts-of-the-21st-century>.

⁶“ArtPlace believes that art, culture and creativity expressed powerfully through place can create vibrant communities, thus increasing the desire and the economic opportunity for people to thrive in place. It is all about the local.” – from www.artplaceamerica.org.

⁷ See <http://www.nea.gov/national/ourtown/index.php>.

⁸ The Centre of Expertise on Culture and Communities (CECC), administered at Simon Fraser University from 2005 to 2008, was an extensive research project into cultural infrastructure in Canada. For a list of publications, see http://www.cultureandcommunities.ca/resources_infrastructure.html.

⁹ See <http://www.themarttheatre.org.uk/>.

¹⁰ See <http://www.popupartloop.com/index.php>

¹¹ The Chanel Mobile Art Pavilion was a traveling exhibit created by Karl Lagerfeld and Zaha Hadid. For a video tour of the inflatable venue, see <http://www.chanel-mobileart.com/>. The architecture field has long been fascinated with temporary, inflatable and mobile structures: <http://weburbanist.com/2011/09/09/blow-up-buildings-17-inflatable-works-of-mobile-architecture/>.

¹² Examples of urban ephemera include The Big Dance, a large scale event planned in conjunction with the 2012 Olympics in London (see <http://www.bigdance2012.com/>), and The Sultan's Elephant, a show created by the Royal de Luxe theatre company and performed in London in 2006, involving a huge moving mechanical elephant, a giant marionette of a girl and other associated public art installations (see <http://www.thesultanselephant.com/about/royaldeluxe.php>).

¹³ For an accounting of the conception of the production in this unusual space, read Matthew Gurewitsch's January 14, 2010 New York Times story on the production at www.nytimes.com/2010/01/17/arts/music/17mondo.html?pagewanted=all.

¹⁴ See <http://sleepnomorenc.com/>, accessed November 26, 2011. Also see Ben Brantley's New York Times review at <http://theater.nytimes.com/2011/04/14/theater/reviews/sleep-no-more-is-a-macbeth-in-a-hotel-review.html?ref=theater>

¹⁵ Woodshed Collective describes its work as “full-scale installation productions designed to allow our audiences to explore a tactile theatrical landscape through language, story, image, sound, light, dance, and visual art, all within a densely rich surrounding environment.” For more information, see <http://www.woodshedcollective.com/mission/>.

¹⁶ For more information, see http://dacamera.org/about_us.php.

¹⁷ Classical Revolution is a musician-driven, zero-budget, multi-city movement to bring chamber music to a wider audience by “...offering performances in highly accessible venues such as bars and cafes, and collaborating with local musicians and artists from various styles and backgrounds.” As of early 2012, there were 20 chapters in communities ranging from Portland to Ann Arbor. Marketing is done almost exclusively through Facebook. For more information see <http://www.classicalrevolution.org/>.

¹⁸ The New World Symphony's new facility in Miami Beach includes a large wall on which video content is projected (i.e., Wallcasts™), with a high quality audio experience. Live orchestra concerts and other programs occurring inside of the hall can be enjoyed simultaneously by a different audience outside of the hall. For information about the New World Center, see <http://www.newworldcenter.com/>.



About the Author

Alan Brown, principal of WolfBrown, is a leading researcher and management consultant in the arts and culture sector worldwide. His work focuses on understanding consumer demand for cultural experiences and on helping cultural institutions, foundations and agencies to see new opportunities, make informed decisions and respond to changing conditions. His studies have introduced new vocabulary to the lexicon of cultural participation and propelled the field towards a clearer view of the rapidly changing cultural landscape. He speaks frequently at national and international conferences about audience behaviors, trends in cultural participation, and the value system surrounding arts programs.

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