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## **Designing a Twenty-First Century Cultural Hub to Build Community**

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## Designing a Twenty-First Century Cultural Hub to Build Community

Nancy Fushan

*There is a lot of conversation these days about the need for those of us in the cultural sector (artists and funders alike) to move beyond our own silos in order to deepen the impact of our work. This article explores how the leaders of an arts organization that is part of a larger multiservice community center have seized an extraordinary opportunity to break down silos and, together with their human services colleagues, are redefining their work for the benefit of their culturally diverse and economically struggling Minneapolis neighborhood.*

Outside, it is a bone-chilling winter evening, and the corner of Thirty-Fifth Street and Chicago Avenue in Minneapolis is deserted. Inside, the Pillsbury House Neighborhood Center is warm and bustling with activity. Pillsbury House Theatre actors and crew are in the first-floor auditorium rehearsing the latest production. Teenagers are working on a service-learning project in the lobby. Upstairs it is standing room only for the free Integrated Health Clinic operated by one of the center's many community partners. As people arrive for their clinic appointments, center staff move among them inviting them, while they wait, to attend a play reading organized with the assistance of the Minneapolis-based Playwrights' Center. This is an experiment and part of a new initiative to infuse arts strategically into the everyday operation of a multiservices community center. Several patients join about twenty other theatergoers gathered in an adjacent dance studio. The performance begins. One by one, each patient quietly exits for his or her appointment. Then, one by one, three of them return to see the end of the play.

Back in 2008, Faye Price and Noël Raymond, who share the artistic leadership of Pillsbury House Theatre, knew the theater was at a crossroads. Artistically, it had captured critical acclaim for main-stage productions of provocative, socially conscious work, and showcases of emerging performers. There was local and national recognition for authentic and highly successful youth and community engagement programs. Organizationally, however, the theater had hit a plateau of human and financial resources. With an annual budget of less than \$700,000, it was operating as one of the Twin Cities' smaller midsized theaters and drawing an audience of about five thousand people each year. The Pillsbury House Theatre existed as a semi-independent programming entity of Pillsbury House Neighborhood Center, a human services agency operated by Pillsbury United Communities, the largest social services provider in the Twin Cities.

"The seed of what we could be ... the path of our institutional development seemed to be about getting more structure, more capacity, and the resources necessary to build much more infrastructure," recalls Raymond. About

that same time, she and Price also became aware of the research by Mark Stern and Susan Seifert at the University of Pennsylvania's Social Impact of the Arts Project. Raymond was particularly intrigued by the notion of "creative clusters" and their impact on community development and neighborhood revitalization. She and Price believed that Pillsbury House Theatre fit Stern and Seifert's description of a "highly networked cultural asset" that could be a force to improve the struggling neighborhood surrounding the theater.<sup>1</sup> Remaining a smaller performing arts organization, but focusing on an increased role within a dynamic and growing "natural" cultural district along Chicago Avenue, seemed more appealing artistically and more relevant to the theater's values and philosophy. "We both came to the conclusion," says Raymond, "that in our case, bigger was not going to be better."

What began as strategic thinking about the theater's future took another surprising turn later that year as the economic downturn worsened. Pillsbury United Communities announced a major restructuring of its various facilities to minimize duplication of staffing and services, and to create "hubs" focused on the particular strengths of each center. The parent organization recognized Pillsbury House Neighborhood Center's strong and intrinsic link between community health and community cultural development.

As Pillsbury United Communities looked at developing a merged management structure for the center and the theater, Price and Raymond sensed a unique opportunity. They submitted a proposal to create a "Community Cultural Hub," a new model for nonprofit human services work that recognizes the power of arts and culture to stimulate community participation, investment, and ownership. Pillsbury United Communities found the idea compelling and went even further. In April 2009, then-CEO Anthony Wagner placed the entire operation of the newly merged center and theater under the leadership of Price and Raymond. "It was a hugely courageous move," observes McKnight Foundation Program Officer Laura Zimmermann. "But Faye and Noël were exactly the right leaders ... a combination of humility and good instincts." They also happened to have academic training and professional experience in human services in addition to their considerable artistic credentials.

"The Pillsbury United Communities board felt that what the theater was doing in the community was the way they wanted to take the whole center," says Price. "The decision to make this the 'Cultural Hub' would deepen and strengthen the arts and community that had always been part of this building."

That focus certainly is evidenced by the history of Pillsbury House Theatre, which has a mission "to create challenging theater to inspire choice, change, and connection." As noted in a report by William Cleveland, director of the Center for the Study of Art & Community and the Pillsbury House Neighborhood Center's planning consultant, the theater "has been a unique, boundary-crossing, creative enterprise

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... [Its] focus on artistic excellence and sustainable community development places it in the forefront of the new and growing field of arts-based community development."<sup>2</sup> Yet the larger thinking about this arts and human services hybrid model was significantly informed by the center's legacy as part of the Settlement House movement.

### **Settlement House Roots and the New Settlement Way**

First established in England, the settlement house movement was a response to the harsh societal transformations that occurred during the Industrial Revolution, spawning massive dislocation of workers, slum conditions, and class divisiveness. The movement's origins grew from a belief that the causes of poverty were economic and class based rather than a reflection of personal weakness or character flaws intrinsic to the poor. The movement advocated for social justice (as opposed to charity) and a commitment by those with advantages to living or "settling" among the poor and working collaboratively to improve the quality of life for the entire community. In London's original settlement house, university students lived on-site, learned about the neighborhood, and provided community members a variety of services based on the community's expressed needs.

The Settlement House movement swiftly spread to America as the country grappled with the needs of a swelling population of newcomers. By 1910, there were more than four hundred settlement houses in the United States. Many of them had robust and participatory cultural programming that included social clubs, ethnic festivals, art exhibitions, theater groups, and music ensembles. In what would presage aspects of today's community cultural development, settlement houses were seen as a means "to dispel fear and the sense of 'stranger-ness'," according to Cleveland, and to build the capacity for civic engagement by enhancing self-expression and creativity.

Pillsbury United Communities began in 1879 as the Minneapolis Bethel Settlement. In 1905, flour-milling magnates John and Charles Pillsbury built Pillsbury House to provide a health clinic, women's employment center, youth clubs, and art classes to hundreds of neighborhood residents in a safe, clean, and inviting space. By the 1920s, the professional field of social work had emerged and would go on to supplant much of the work of settlement houses. Those that survived evolved into modern social services agencies such as Pillsbury United Communities, today a multimillion-dollar organization composed of five neighborhood-based facilities that collectively serve more than thirty-five thousand Twin Cities residents annually.

Pillsbury House Neighborhood Center moved to its current location in 1980 and this year will serve more than sixteen thousand people (not including the theater's audience of nearly six thousand), most of whom are residents of the Powderhorn and Central neighborhoods of south Minneapolis. Stretching along two miles of Chicago Avenue, both

neighborhoods have a mixed economic base and are racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse. More than half the residents are from communities of color, and the poverty rate for both neighborhoods is 25–30 percent. Local residents face a litany of challenges, including low educational attainment, high unemployment, racial discrimination, language barriers, dislocation, isolation, violence, gang activity, and street drugs. There also, however, are nascent signs of a turnaround. It appears that foreclosures may have created new affordable housing opportunities for young families; small businesses are emerging; there's a history of artists living in the two neighborhoods; and the city of Minneapolis has actively recruited arts-related nonprofit and commercial entities to make Chicago Avenue their home.

The center's somewhat ungainly, largely unadorned concrete building is a physical and metaphorical anchor on Chicago Avenue. In recent years, it has provided a broad array of human services with a particularly strong reputation in the areas of parenting programs, early childhood education, youth and teen programming, street survival programs for homeless youth, and health-related assistance. Many of the programs involve longtime and opportunistic collaborations with other area community health and social service partners.

As for artistic programming, in addition to the 106-seat Pillsbury House Theatre, the center rents space to Obsidian Arts, an African American visual arts group, and Upstream Arts, which serves youth and adults with disabilities. Yet the artistic endeavors existed largely in their own silos, at best considered a complement to the center's human services work. That is changing fundamentally now, says Cleveland, as the new leadership and staff are pursuing a "truly distinctive model ... one that rediscovers the powerful impulses of the Settlement House in a new way and a new time."

### **The Community Cultural Hub: From Design to Reality**

With funding from the Bush Foundation in 2009, the center embarked on a thoughtful and extensive planning process to develop the Community Cultural Hub. The plan reflects research, community input, and a framework of assumptions, benefits, and impacts based on "arts as the defining characteristic of the Center's human/social and health services, informing their delivery and enhancing their effectiveness."<sup>3</sup> Price and Raymond reviewed the center's thirteen program areas, many of which had their own logic models and outcomes. They then developed a consolidated logic model for all program areas that tied to the Hub's assumptions and the impacts. Cleveland describes the tool as "a comprehensive web where you can see how everything adds up."

Once the initial planning phase was completed, three major goals were identified for the Hub's operations: (1) the intentional and authentic integration of arts in the center's work with individuals, families and children; (2) building and supporting community cultural development for the benefit

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of the Powderhorn/Central neighborhood; and (3) the use of creative and artistic processes for the center's ongoing nonprofit management and innovation.

Price and Raymond knew the successful implementation of the Hub would rest on changing the organizational culture and bringing together two somewhat disparate staffs that had come through a major organizational transition. The thirty-seven current full- and part-time employees represent a mix of veteran center and theater staff, and newer personnel. More than 40 percent of them are working artists or have had arts experience. Additionally, five new resident teaching artists, funded by a Minnesota State Arts Board Legacy Fund grant, have been hired in the past year to serve specifically as resources for the arts integration work.

Cleveland and his team suggested a series of "Institutes" using Open Space Technology as a technique not only to identify and focus on group-defined priorities but also to build camaraderie and trust. As Raymond recalls, "Bill came at it like building an ensemble. As much as we may have wanted someone who had a particular answer, having the answer surface through a creative process was really the way to go."

Meeting in three half-day Institutes on the theater's stage, more than 80 percent of the center's staff discussed the Hub concept, expressed their concerns and interests about collaborations, and began to suggest new programming and processes that fit the goals. Mike Hoyt, an installation artist with youth development expertise, manages the center's Out-of-School-Time programs. He acknowledges that, at first, "there was some trepidation. What existed was siloed work, and given funding streams and outcomes-based reporting ... making all this more malleable was met with questions." Hoyt adds, however, that the sessions had significant value: "[They] put a container around healing the culture ... making sure everyone's voice was heard, shining a light on the mission and allowing us to celebrate and champion this thing we could move towards."

The group hatched more than twenty ideas ranging from small-scale projects to operational processes to longer-term initiatives involving the center's programming or community-based work. Those were then narrowed and consolidated based on the staff's interests, and subgroups began to energetically move ideas forward. Among those in progress:

- In response to widespread concern about the need to make the building a more welcoming space, the center will collaborate with Franconia Sculpture Park to create mosaic benches in front of the building, and there are plans to have artists design eye-catching new internal signage and exterior wall murals in coming months.
- As a means of integrating landscape, culinary, and design arts into youth and community programming, "Project Grow and Eat It" is a newly funded collaboration involving a local community garden enterprise, a neighborhood association, the center's Full Cycle bike shop for homeless

teens, and the center's early education program. Garden beds are being designed for the daycare's playground area. Food will be grown throughout the summer and teens will prepare meals for center events. Full Cycle will create artistic bike carriers to cart surplus produce to the other community organizations serving neighborhood residents in need.

- Youth involved in the theater's Chicago Avenue Project now work on props for their productions in the lobby, soliciting the creative help of center clients.
- Early childhood education staff and resident teaching artists are now cocreating new, developmentally appropriate arts-based curriculum for creative activities that take place daily in the child-care area as well as in the building's arts-specific areas.
- Northwestern Health Sciences University, which operates the center's Integrated Health Clinic, has initiated a new on-site art therapy program.
- The theater collaborated with the center's early education program to provide free child care as part of Pay-What-You-Can performances, resulting in first-time theater attendees who subsequently enrolled their children in the center's day-care facility.

As Cleveland observes, "Faye and Noël hired people with one foot in the creative process ... and the assertive ownership necessary for this Hub has erupted." Price agrees, noting, "Staff are reporting much more of a collaborative feeling in the building and cohesion that there wasn't before." As the new collaborations are burgeoning, the existing work of the theater and the center continues. At times, that has posed management and communications challenges. For Price, it is critical to get systems in place for sharing knowledge among the staff. She envisions developing ways for the entire staff to "share a common language about our work" and to be able to easily access ideas across programs. "We've talked about an Internet database system where we put concrete information of who's doing what and when. But people are also getting together to work collaboratively as part of staff meetings now and that's producing results." There also are plans for the Institutes to continue on a periodic basis as a way to nurture creativity and keep the staff focused on goals and outcomes.

In addition to the program-related work, there are early indications that the Hub is changing the nature of the staff's interpersonal interactions. "There's been a huge shift in the way we're doing business with each other," says Theatre Programs Manager James Williams. "I had a conversation the other day with my colleague Kevin Moore, who's working on a music video for his HIV/AIDS prevention program, and he asked if I had any kids who might be great for it ... Turns out I have a kid whose parents have allowed him to turn part of the basement into a studio. So now he has a chance to work on a production. Having that conversation wouldn't have happened before the Institutes."

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For Virginia Lucio, who directs early education programming, it's about "knowing boundaries, but working collaboratively and freely ... Before I'd just stand back and think I'm not an artist so I'll just let them tell me what to do. Now I'm not afraid to say 'I've got this idea' ... for example, I have this song that little kids sing, and the dance artist says, 'Well, give it to me and let me see what I can do with it.' There's no longer this big boundary and we're really having fun."

There also have been intentional moves on the part of some artistic staff to reach out to center clients for the first time. The Dance Studio door is left open during some theater rehearsals and people are encouraged to watch. Obsidian Arts Director Suzanne Roberts regularly makes time to talk with center visitors drawn to her organization's lobby exhibitions.

James Williams remembers a man who would come into the center repeatedly asking for bus tokens. He was described as "cantankerous," and many of the staff had avoided dealing with him. Recently, Williams decided to sit and talk with the man. "He said he was interested in theater. I took him up on that and hooked him up with our set designer and he helped build a set. The guy actually lived in north Minneapolis and recruited audiences from there and they came. Well, after the run, he helped tear down the set and asked about what's next? Since I was acting in the next show I invited him to sit in on those rehearsals. The show has references to West African culture and music. One day he says to me, 'You know, I'm a percussionist' and so he's going to perform some of the music for the production. He's feeling an ownership in the building now and he's mellowed out."

## Next Steps

The Hub is, and will continue to be, a work in progress. Cleveland observes it will require something different from "Old World planning where there's a long train track with predictable stops along the way. The Hub's planning will be synergistic more than linear or sequential." Raymond adds, "It isn't about creating an organization chart or matrix and moving towards it; we have to be constantly evolving. It's the notion of building the plane while flying it."

She and Price are now focusing on three major next steps. First, there is the need to take the initial logic model and build out the Hub's formal evaluation. Price believes it may be a year before the tools and processes are in place and data can start being assessed. One challenge already being addressed is to deepen the artistic staff's knowledge and capacity to evaluate their work, "to move them from descriptions of what they're doing to reflections on what they're seeing." Another challenge will be finding appropriate measures to assess the impact of the Hub on community cultural development in the neighborhood.

In October, the center plans to formally introduce the Hub concept to the neighborhood by promoting the new programming and institutional goals as part of a large celebratory event. Cleveland sees this as more than a publicity tactic. It is a first step in inviting people to participate in

the new life of the center, "to move residents from the idea that this is the place I go to solve my problems to this is a place with opportunities to come and collaborate on solutions to improve the neighborhood. It's a think tank rather than a triage center."

A third priority is building the center's financial capacity and sustainability. The economy and the neighborhood's growing needs continue to provide pressures to increase the center's \$2.4 million operating budget. While some local human services funders are curious about the changes at the center, they expressed their need to better understand the Hub concept and see concrete outcomes.

On the other hand, Price and Raymond say the Hub concept has helped to retain existing and attract new funding from public- and private-sector community cultural development and arts donors. For instance, the Bush Foundation recently approved multiyear support. The center also participates in the Kresge Foundation's Arts and Community Building Program. Kresge's Senior Program Officer Sandy M. Ambrozy says that the center is a strong fit with the foundation's interest in supporting exemplary cultural organizations that serve as catalysts "for community-building, creative place-making, and neighborhood vitality." Ambrozy adds, "We were impressed by their leaders pushing the envelope ... they are authentically working in the community and giving voice to those in the community. We see a potential win for Pillsbury to strengthen its programming and effectiveness; for the neighborhood to strengthen its civic identity; and for Kresge to identify a successful multiservices, multi-arts center model for building community."

The McKnight Foundation's Laura Zimmermann believes that given the center's neighborhood and demographics, and the quality of its arts programming, the Hub has the potential to transcend class, "being one of the few places where poor people, middle-class and rich people can feel at home." Yet Zimmermann expresses some reservations about promoting the Hub as *the* new national model: "There are temptations to document this and preach that and, as funders, we can get it wrong! You can't write a playbook for this. Ultimately it's about the outcomes, about the work, about getting the right measures and accountability at all levels."

The staff at Pillsbury House Neighborhood Center would agree heartily.

*Nancy Fushan is a philanthropy consultant and former Bush Foundation senior program officer.*

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## NOTES

1. Mark J. Stern and Susan J. Seifert, *Cultivating "Natural" Cultural Districts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, School of Social Policy and Practice, October 2007). [knightfoundation.org/research\\_publications/detail.dot?id=233561](http://knightfoundation.org/research_publications/detail.dot?id=233561)
2. William Cleveland, "Developing Plan for the Pillsbury House Cultural Community Hub" (draft report). (Bainbridge Island, WA: Center for the Study of Art & Community, 2010), 1.
3. *Ibid.*, 15.