The Arts Center of the 21st Century: A Symposium Summary
Where is our field headed, and what does that mean for our future buildings?
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The Dartmouth Symposium
On June 23, 24 2010, 64 participants gathered at Dartmouth’s Hopkins Center for the Arts for a symposium on “The Arts Center of the 21st Century”\(^1\). The goal of the symposium was to learn from artists and practitioners where their work and interests are leading them, and how that might affect the physical manifestations of future campus-based arts centers. The symposium was organized by a committee drawn from members of Major University Presenters (MUPS)\(^1\). Attenders of the conference included multiple representatives from 16 MUPS members campuses (arts center directors, faculty, architect/planners, museum directors, and others), as well as leading artists, national arts leaders and funders, innovators in the field, and a substantial cross-section of Dartmouth faculty, students, administrators and community members.\(^1\) The symposium had been largely funded by members of the Hopkins Center Board of Overseers and other Dartmouth alumni\(^2\), and five current and recent Overseers were among the participants.

The symposium was organized around two kinds of learning experiences: (1) an infusion of information and opinions by artists, practitioners and architect/planners, and (2) an interactive charrette process, wherein five teams of participants addressed planning issues particular to arts center facilities by examining challenges and opportunities present in the Hopkins Center; these charrettes were intended to develop solutions specific to the Hopkins Center as well as applicable to campus-based arts centers anywhere. As part of a pre-symposium research process, several leading artists who could not attend had been interviewed prior to the symposium, and their thoughts were distributed to participants ahead of time.\(^3\) The entire proceedings of the symposium were videotaped and are now posted in time-marked segments at https://hop.dartmouth.edu/Online/arts_center.

The Hopkins Center Context
Dartmouth and the Hopkins Center for the Arts served as the host and principal organizer of the convening as part of a series of activities leading up the Center’s 50\(^{th}\) Anniversary in 2012/13. When it opened in 1962, the Hop (as it was soon nicknamed) was a precursor to a decade of cultural building across the country, and a breakthrough for campus-based arts centers in its “all the arts under one roof” concept and the unprecedented scale of its multi-theater, multi-discipline vision. As it nears its 50\(^{th}\) year, the Hop building is itself in need of updating and expansion, and so its leadership was motivated to convene this national conversation to inform its planning as well as the thinking of several campuses involved in capital planning in the arts.

\(^1\)A list of participants, MUPs members, and extensive symposium documentation is at https://hop.dartmouth.edu/Online/arts_center
\(^2\) Funders included the Howard Gilman Foundation, Robert Manegold, Beth Stephenson, and William Neukom
\(^3\) See Artist Interviews at https://hop.dartmouth.edu/Online/arts_center_interviews
Frequently over the two-day symposium, the spirit, energy and meaning represented by the Hop’s building was remarked upon, even as participants in the charrettes suggested ways its physical plant might become more contemporary and future-oriented. As one well-known architect of cultural buildings remarked, “the Hop led the way.”

**An inspiring keynote message**
The second day’s proceedings opened with remarks from Dartmouth President Jim Yong Kim, a doctor, scientist, anthropologist and international leader in public health activism. His inspiring message was a call to increase arts participation, especially among college students whose lives campus-based arts centers can help shape. Citing both well-known earlier social science research, in addition to more recent research in neuroscience and other medical fields, President Kim argued that the formation of productive “habits of the mind” is measurably and importantly improved by arts participation. While noting that the arts should not and do not need defending as an important part of societies, the compelling evidence that they are also “good for the brain” makes them vital to educational settings. (for President Kim video, see https://hop.dartmouth.edu/Online/arts_center)

**What we learned**
The symposium discussions were less about discovering new information, and more about crystallizing broad areas of thematic consensus which can inform future facility planning discussions. Diverse perspectives among participants helped assure that the sometimes aligned and sometimes competing constituencies that inhabit arts centers were all heard – the visiting artist, the presenter/programmer, the artist/teacher, the student, the community member, the administrator. What follows is a summary distillation of the most recurrent and collectively accepted directions that these various constituents articulated.

**Hybridity is rife; how to accommodate it?**
While large parts of the artistic landscape may still be divisible into long accepted genres, a dominant direction for a coming artist generation is hybridity. Many do not want to be typecast as visual artists or performing artists, they want the freedom to spill over into territories that combine and alter past definitions of genre. It is a time of “hyphenists,” who cross over not only genres but disciplines and entire professions (e.g. the farmer-artist). While initially articulated by a key funding voice for experimental artists, this idea was echoed by non-academic artists, teacher/artists and students. For all, there is not only the idea of self-perception, i.e. I want to be a theater-dance-visual artist. There is also the motive to collaborate with disciplines that might have seemed disparate in the past, e.g. theater+computer science+engineering+dance+ music, with an outcome not easily categorized in our current artistic vocabulary.

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4 William Rawn, a symposium audience member  
5 Per Ruby Lerner, Executive Director, Creative Capital  
6 Examples included both recent student work (“Viscera” at Dartmouth), as well as work by Ralph Lemon, Michael Gordon, and multiple artists under the Creative Capital umbrella
Related to the facilities orientation of the symposium, this hybridity phenomenon presents a quandary for architectural vocabulary as well. For instance, what kind of space is needed when an artist produces a work “White on White” where a computer is making a film and audience members watching it describe it as a kind of dance?7

**We want laboratories.**

Certainly one direction arising from the hybridity discussion was the desire for space analogous to what scientists have: laboratories. The argument is that science cannot be advanced without significant time spent in the lab. Equally, art cannot be advanced without time spent in the lab, and we need to provide more and better laboratories, just as we do in order to facilitate the advancement of science. Black box theaters are forerunners of this kind of space, but in the coming era they need to morph into something that allows the wider range needed by hybridity and multi-disciplinary collaborations. They need to be both creation spaces - where multiple artists can work and be housed together - as well as performance spaces where the audience’s location, participation level and size are all malleable. These are laboratories where the experiment may be as much about how the space is configured for project-specific adaptation, as it is about the other elements of the work’s content. It is also a situation where not only is the right space needed, but also equipment and a flexible decently financed programming context. A prime example noted was “Decasia,”8 originally created and performed in a large empty space in Basel where the artists could create the “hall” and situate the audience in the middle of sound and projections. Its eventual touring to other kinds of more traditional venues,9 meant adapting a 21st century piece to 19th century conceptions of the concert hall as museum. It worked, but not with the same immediacy.

Some of the newer elements of these laboratory spaces include: nearby locations for artist offices/studios, where collaborators can have a working home for a project’s duration; fully interactive digital connectivity for artists and audience; video capabilities, both for projections as well as for recording and broadcast; larger scale than the typical black box exemplar; proximity to community life, and ways to integrate community/audience into lab processes (e.g. windows for observing, flexible set-up so work-in-progress experiences can be arranged; social spaces nearby). A key attribute for the workability of these spaces (and one that has doomed some past efforts in the black-box era), is affordable adaptability, i.e. changeovers of space need to be easy, low-staff, and fast.10

**We also need to protect our museum function.**

While the proscenium stage and the horseshoe concert hall may be outdated sites for much of tomorrow’s art-making, campuses still felt a need to protect the curatorial role represented by these spaces. In addition to being homes for contemporary work, we still need to be places where the great works of the past can be experienced in optimal settings – “full spectrumness,” as one participant summarized.11 Not only do our missions dictate

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7 Cited by Ruby Lerner  
8 Michael Gordon – Bill Morrison collaboration  
9 E.g. Walt Disney Hall, Los Angeles  
10 See examples in Tom Kamm presentation: Wyly Theatre, REDCAT, Woolly Mammoth Theater  
11 Mike Ross, Krannert Center
this range of programming, but traditionalists in our audiences demand it. The range of these kinds of spaces can and should co-exist with the new laboratory spaces noted above.

Since most of the artist voices the symposium represented Western traditions, it was illuminating also to hear about the physical needs arising from presenting artists from other cultures, and to understand this different breadth needed in spatial planning. Intimate spaces, flexible enough to adjust to various performing traditions and high-tech enough to accommodate simultaneous translation and use of projections, were among the needs expressed for this different sort of museum function our arts centers serve.

**What happens offstage is as important as what happens onstage.** Nearly all speakers and panelists referenced the verity that the arts experience is more than watching and hearing the performance. What this means for our current and future buildings was a matter for wide-ranging speculation. Seemingly there will always be a need for inviting and comfortable pre and post-performance gathering spaces – for educational programs, for social interaction, for cabaret-style environments that can offer social and performing experiences. But the configuration and location of these kinds of spaces is evolving in new ways. One architectural plan showed a bar in the midst of the audience area of a proscenium performance space, an attempt to blur the lines of the show and the pre/post show experience. One scenario posited an entirely transparent (walls of windows) addition to an older performing arts center that could at times be an audience-surround dance performance space and at others a wide-open social space.

For many existing arts centers, this discussion was as much about shifting usage of spaces as it was about building new ones. Programmers referred to the challenges of providing strong educational contexts and frequent spontaneous experiences of the arts, and this led to the idea of more intentional programming of non-performance spaces. One charrette team posed the idea of a curator of public spaces, so that there could frequently and, ideally, always be a sense of artistic excitement and content. As one artist said, the arts center should be a place of “total sensory revival.”

Another key facet of this discussion, particular to some arts centers in academic settings, is the definition and usage of arts teaching and learning spaces. While certain characteristics are requirements for these kinds of spaces (good acoustics, lighting, tech infrastructure), there are also new challenges that yesterday’s spaces do not necessarily address. Key among these was encouragement of interdisciplinary teaching and learning, and new levels of technical needs (multiple projections, on-demand tech delivery, broadband video sharing). As noted below, there is also an interest among some teachers and students to have greater transparency about arts learning spaces, so that both the casual visitor and the intensive arts center user can see arts teaching/learning in action.

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12 Theodore Levin presentation
13 Paul Westlake presentation – Penn State and one other example
14 Charrette on “Re-Animating Existing Public Spaces”
15 Peter Sellars interview
Solving the social equation is crucial.
From an artist’s exhortation to have great organic food\(^\text{16}\) to a charrette team’s definition of a social “heart” of the arts center, the creation of a vibrant, inviting and inspiring social environment was expressed as a recurrent holy grail in arts centers. Some key elements of this kind of environment were articulated:
- Transparency (though see some qualms below);
- Flexibility; different configurations for different settings;
- Visual arts as a real presence (not just decorative);
- Spaces large enough to “breathe,” small enough to be intimate when needed;
- Multiple constituencies may need multiple spaces (students, general audience, special patrons, artists);
- Digital information delivery;
- Curating the public spaces (as noted above).

Entering into the discussion of the “social equation” was the particularly intriguing recent example of a bar/club in New York – a quintessentially social space.\(^\text{17}\) Presenting an unprecedented range of musical performers for a club (classical, jazz, rock, contemporary, world music), this downtown New York destination reaches a wide-ranging and young audience, all in an informal setting very unlike most campus-based performing arts centers. The messages were multiple: (1) one can get audiences to experiment beyond their comfort zones if attracted to one’s programming reliability and an alluring atmosphere; (2) even if we keep our formal presenting spaces, for some audiences we also need to find space for the informal social interaction with performance; and (3) widely eclectic programming can be a magnet if one chooses to make it so.

Participatory audiences: how to adapt and encourage?
Virtually all commentaries on current arts practice reference the proliferation of self-created or self-curated arts experiences, and how this trend potentially undermines traditional modes of arts presentation. At its most extreme, observers of this phenomenon wonder about the viability of current audience assumptions and the buildings which house them, i.e. in a future full of iTunes, YouTube and instant messaging, will anyone come to buildings that expect large groups to listen and watch quietly for long periods of time? There were questions raised along these lines at the symposium.

The predominant tone of responses to the challenge of this environment was one emphasizing maximal adaptability in our programs and buildings. We need to have modes of programming that offer participatory experiences while not abandoning the unique opportunities of seeing/hearing virtuosos at work. Clearly, for capital planners, it is another message that questions the proscenium/concert hall and points more in the direction of flexible laboratory spaces where participation can more easily be a part of the experience. Alternatively, for the many arts centers who already have traditional performing spaces, it probably means that there need to be proximal spaces for

\(^{16}\) Peter Sellars interview
\(^{17}\) (Le) Poisson Rouge, represented by co-programmer Ronen Givony
participatory activities and/or, according to one cultural planner, we need to give audiences back some of the control over the program.\textsuperscript{18}

**Transparency: Love or hate proposition.**
Multiple examples of glass-encased new arts buildings illustrated a trend toward facilities whose external transparency intends to reveal their purpose in inspiring ways while also giving occupants expansive views. It is not a new trend, having been a recurrent design approach more than once in recent decades, including the sixties when the Hopkins Center itself was built. While most comments from symposium participants welcomed the external transparency (nearly all of the charrettes championed it), there was a good deal more discussion and disparity of opinion about the use of transparency inside our buildings.

The inherent tension between the privacy of teaching and other creative activities versus the desire to show off such activities to visitors was evident the several times this subject arose. The increasing interest among audiences to experience the creative process was underlined by institutional and individual donors who were present. That motive, and the desire of programmers to show such process as a form of contextual background, amplified the “more transparency” side of the equation. It seems nearly everyone who visits the arts center wants to be able to see and hear the art being made – it is part of what makes it an arts center. A senior student affairs administrator also posited that students would be more responsive to arts participation if they “saw themselves” in that role more often and transparency of arts activities would increase those opportunities.\textsuperscript{19}

Visual artists and teachers, though, evidenced the most reluctance to have their process observed, and even among performing artists and teachers there was a desire to limit the potential transparency to rehearsal rather than teaching moments. The interior design solution would seem to be blinds and other forms of flexible blockage, so that sometimes you see the process going on, and sometimes you do not.

**Voices from the coming generation: don’t make assumptions about us.**
Since, to a great extent, the arts center of the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century will be devoted to the art-making and audience-going of coming generations, there had been an effort to have representation from the current student population at Dartmouth in each of the discussions and each of the charrette teams. As college students already involved in the arts, these students were hardly typical of general audiences, though because each had played roles in trying to elicit arts participation from other students, they did have a sense of the challenges of reaching and involving their generation in the arts.

In multiple inter-generational exchanges, the students questioned assumptions made about them and their peers. In response to a comment about their limited attention spans, a student countered that they should more accurately be seen as information omnivorous, and perfectly capable to paying attention when they desire. Laments about their generation’s unwillingness to explore new arts experiences brought an assurance that,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{18} Duncan Webb  \\
\textsuperscript{19} Dartmouth Acting Dean of the College Sylvia Spears
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like other generations, they were likely to mature in their arts interests and participation (and already show some likelihood of that). For their part, they encouraged future arts centers to accept and capitalize on their growing interest in interactivity and multi-tasking, by offering spaces and programs that play to these contemporary interests.

**Buildings do need to change with today’s needs.**
When one prominent cultural planner wondered out loud about the wisdom of cities continuing down paths leading toward cultural palaces (admittedly a large part of his clientele), he was crystallizing a sentiment that had arisen more than once during the symposium. On the one hand, there is a frustration among artists with the constraints one must deal with in existing buildings; we want buildings that are about today’s art-making and today’s audiences. It turns out, though, that many buildings get built without much consideration being given to the changing arts world into which they are coming. The conservatism of some donors or other project underwriters was cited as an obstacle in some projects, wherein new design approaches like laboratory spaces had been developed only to be rejected in favor of traditional spaces like proscenium theaters. In too many cases, it was said, a generic space was being developed for an imagined tourist or other external audience rather than tailoring spaces to actual local artistic and audience interests.

In addition, references to successful arts projects occurring in existing and sometimes repurposed spaces suggested that, in times of economic constraint, adaptive re-use may work in some instances. Examples of repurposed warehouses as creative hives, and site-specific projects in unexpected kinds of spaces were mentioned admiringly. More than one person remarked on these kinds of performances being especially memorable.

**Tension between artist and audience needs; how best to advance art forms and also serve communities?**
The kinds of spaces contemporary artists are needing, and the kinds of spaces communities want are sometimes at odds with each other, as noted in the above example of lab spaces vs. prosceniums. Some notable exceptions, though, indicate possible directions. A highly artist-driven Washington-based theater company recently built a new home, calling it a “transparent laboratory for creating new theater.” Its success arises in great measure from its balance of addressing community interests (as cultivated and developed over 25-plus years of programming) and taking the risk of creating new work. The building itself attempts to make the artistic process more understandable through transparency of rehearsal and practice spaces, and the central courtyard theater is a model of flexibility and spare industrialism. It is a building that its artists love and is also a magnet for audiences – so the wedding of these interests is certainly possible.

That theater’s success is emblematic of a theme that arose multiple times during the symposium: that strong programmatic imperatives drive successful buildings, not the

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20 E.g. Michael Gordon’s “Decasia” reference above, and his Asphalt Orchestra, performing in unexpected street settings.
21 E.g. Taylor Mac’s “Lily’s Revenge”
22 Wooly Mammoth Theater
other way around. One participant posited that “architecture is a declaration of intent,” and so it was not surprising that much of the discussion in charrettes and elsewhere dealt with program goals and strategies first, and then attempted to articulate spatial solutions for achieving those goals.

**Technology: many opportunities, many worries.**

Nearly every discussion and presentation at some point turned to the technology and how best to harness it to today’s art-making, arts teaching and arts presenting. While the symposium was not the setting to try to develop technology protocols for new buildings, there were certainly some principles that emerged in the different discussions, among them:

- Given the speed of technology change, we can never hope to design spaces that are truly cutting edge in their technology. The best we can do is try to build in flexibility, aiming for maximal adaptability.
- In most environments for arts teaching and participation, we do not necessarily want (and cannot, in any case afford) the most advanced technology resources. As one participant said, we don’t want “all the bells and whistles” because students will rarely find them in real-world art-making situations.
- Technology needs to serve the flexible lab concept that is the workplace for many of today’s artists. For instance, we should use technology to solve a longtime bane of multi-use black boxes – making their project-by-project re-configuration cost effective. One new theater in Dallas was shown as an example of space that, without crews or substantial other cost factors, could convert from thrust stage to large empty space. Advance spatial planning that takes into account the ubiquitous use of cameras and projections was another example cited.
- Remember the hybridity of today’s artists. A high-tech performing arts center also should have visual arts exhibition options, and the forward-thinking museum needs to take into account spatial needs of multi-media and performance arts. On campuses, the need for collaboration between entities that, in the past, have been defined by discipline boundaries is paramount – both for programming and for spatial planning.

**Buildings as art.**

Beyond the question of arts centers and their artistic impact as architectural statements, one noted trend was the increasing role of arts centers as a canvas for site-specific video and projection artists. In a kind of reverse transparency, these buildings and their art projects take opaque facades and fill them with artistic content that communicates, in sometimes monumental ways, their artistic mission. Ars Electronica in Linz, Austria was cited as one example where this was a central architectural and programmatic concept.

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23 Ben Cameron
24 The Wyly Theatre
25 Presentation by Tom Kamm
The campus as arts center.

Many participants, in multiple contexts, articulated a vision of university-based arts centers that should go beyond the boundaries of defined arts facilities and encompass the campus – the idea of “arts everywhere.” This was viewed not only as a programmatic imperative, but as yet another way to reach and audiences who don’t naturally make their way to traditional theaters and concert halls. Central to this concept is the time-tested and still evolving modus operandi of campus-based artist residencies, where guest artists make their way into classrooms, dormitories, student unions, eateries, fraternities/sororities – as well as into multiple venues in the wider community. There was a hope expressed, though, of a broader and more intentional strategy by campuses, whereby capital planning for arts spaces is not confined to arts-specific facilities, but becomes a part of the program/design process for other kinds of spaces on campuses. Similar to the “% for art” concept in some public infrastructure projects, campuses should capitalize on the opportunity that an arts presence in any building enlivens it and encourages arts participation by a wider population.

Addressing administrative structures is as daunting – and needed - as addressing facilities needs.

One charrette, referencing the Hopkins Center’s breakthrough role in arts center planning fifty years ago, posited that one of today’s greatest leadership needs is a management imperative as much as an architectural one. An administrative exemplar is needed which encourages and rewards the kind of art-making and art teaching that was at the symposium’s core: interdisciplinary, experimental, and lab-oriented. It was remarked that, at most campuses, departmental boundaries, course-load formulae, tenure review mechanisms, and administrative hierarchies militate against rather than encourage this kind of work. The example of a recent Dartmouth project involving faculty and students from multiple departments was noted, in which an immensely productive collaboration developed, but virtually no involved faculty received compensation for this work.

At the heart of this issue was the question: if we do manage to create the kinds of lab spaces we imagine, how should we be administering them to maximize interchange and productivity? Answering this question likely leads to potentially difficult discussions: Can we give up departmental control of some spaces for some kind of shared governance? Can we devote scarce space to offices/labs for visitors from non-arts departments? Who gets to decide what projects happen?

It was also noted that physical planning processes are also not always structured to recognize the modes of today’s art-making and teaching. The more such planning processes can encourage interdisciplinary interchange, the more likely the resultant spaces will also accommodate and encourage such interchanges.

Sustainability: two kinds of green.

The term sustainable arose often in the discussions, in two different meanings: (1) that new buildings need to have a financial structure that gives them programming

26 “Viscera”, involving Theater (performance, design, direction, sound), Dance Ensemble, Computer Science, Digital Humanities
permanence, ideally endowments, and providing for these financial structures needs to be a part of the planning process, and (2) we must construct new buildings, and retrofit old ones, with maximal usage of energy-saving, recycling and other environmentally friendly techniques. In both cases, the desirability of these kinds of sustainability was not really a matter of discussion but rather an assumed goal in any capital planning process.

Diversity: an assumed component.
While there were no panels specifically devoted to diversity issues, the opportunities associated with diversity in programming arose in charrettes and other presentations. Discussions about the welcoming affects of transparency also noted that a building that communicates its openness and excitement is a better beacon for attracting diverse audiences.

Conclusion
One presenter, in describing the nearly impossible degree of difficulty facing planners of cultural facilities, remarked that “trying to design the perfect arts center is like trying to raise the perfect child”.

Certainly the cross-currents of needs among the multiple constituents of campus-based arts centers bring this verity into sharp focus. Faculty, students, visiting artists, staff, changing audiences – young and old, donors, alumni – these diverse groups do not share a universal vision of a “perfect arts center”, and probably never have. The symposium heard from all of these groups, though, and the areas of consensus (many noted in this paper) leave plenty of room for creative progress in the design and programming of future campus arts centers. The areas of conflicting needs are also instructive to illuminate, and will help to assure that choices are made with an awareness of their likely upsides and downsides for different constituencies.

The larger lesson of the symposium was an appropriate one for the college/university setting: (1) that when it comes to planning and building optimal future arts facilities, there is much to be learned and understood in the fast-changing world of art-making, audience behavior and educational practice, and (2) that a convening of this sort - artists, educators and those who support them - can help demarcate guideposts for informed capital planning, so that we can seize opportunities and avoid pitfalls in that fast-changing world.

May 2011

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27 Emil Kang