

MARKETING SPACE

Lessons on artistic intervention

in uncommon places

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► Here's an easy way to tell before diving in.



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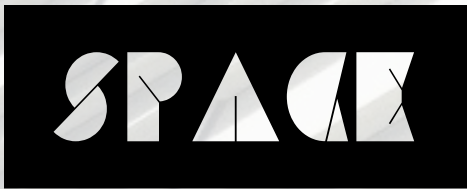
CONTENTS

1 ► INTRODUCTION

3 ► DASHBOARD CO-OP

13 ► DETROIT SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA


21 ► THE CIVILIANS INVESTIGATIVE THEATER



doesn't have to be the final frontier. In fact, it might just be the beginning — that is, the beginning of working with architectural spaces to create new artistic experiences and engage audiences on a new dimension.

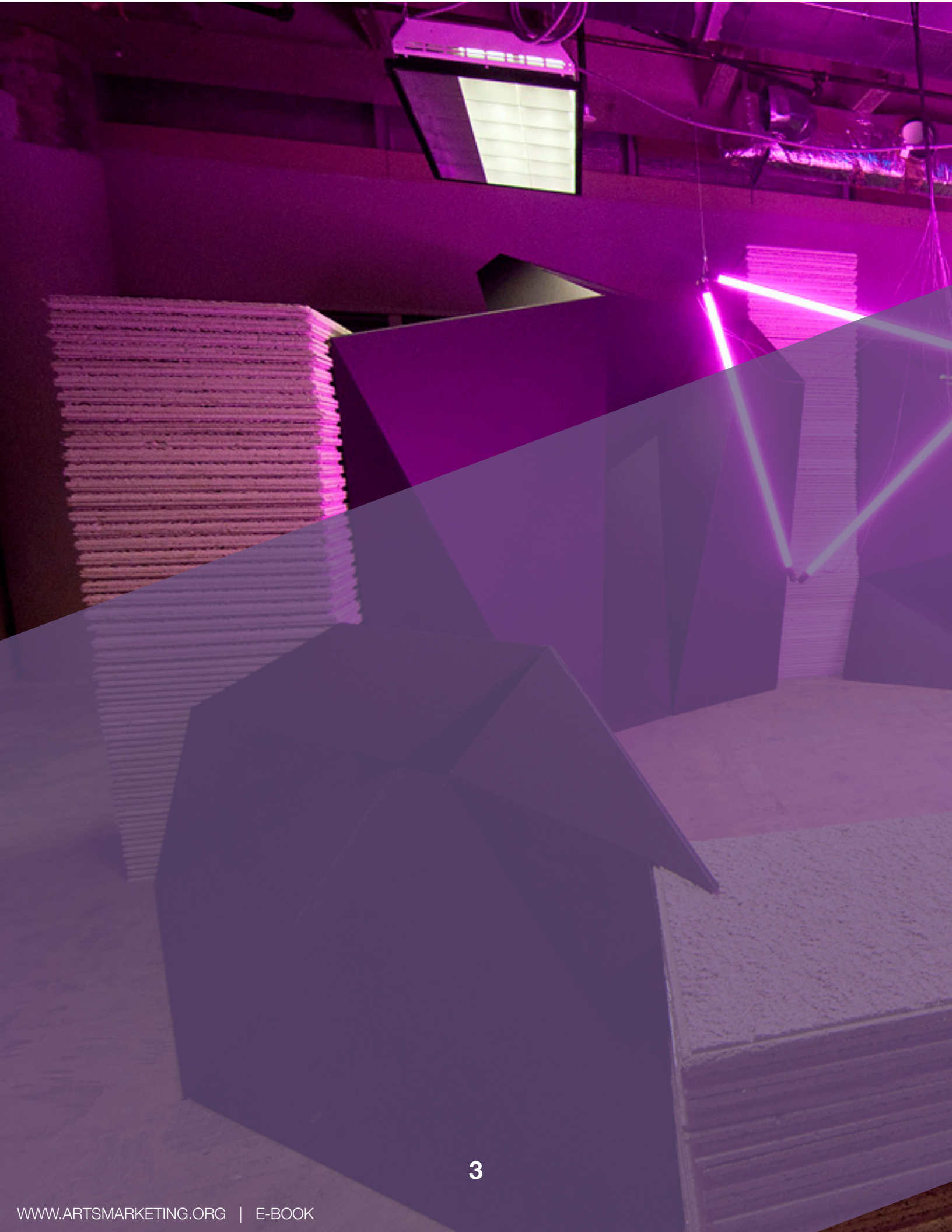
In the art world, which simultaneously has an obligation to be loyal to established traditions yet relevant to contemporary audiences, perhaps the answer to staying innovative and pushing our creative boundaries is to work within our spatial boundaries. The implications that space has on human perceptions are so innate that people often don't even think about them — but art makes people think. So naturally, when art is injected into uncommon spaces in harmony with existing architecture, viewers and audience members are offered transformative ideas and perceptions on their relationships to the walls, hallways, entrances, and barriers that enclose us. Little else is truly as effective in engaging an audience as inviting them into new spaces and allowing them to rethink their physical presence.

So what constitutes an uncommon space exactly? When it comes to an artistic experience, this means anywhere we wouldn't expect to see a certain kind of art form. For example, you might not expect to attend a multimedia art show in a run-down, abandoned nightclub — like the



one **Dashboard Co-op** curated in downtown Atlanta, Georgia — but you would definitely leave having explored and experienced a site that may have otherwise been dauntingly off-limits. Or maybe you wouldn't expect to experience a yoga class in an orchestra hall like you can at the **Detroit Symphony Orchestra** — but it most certainly would make you rethink the dynamism and functionality of the symphonic space when you're viewing it upside-down in downward dog. Or perhaps you might not expect to watch a full-length play about death and the afterlife in the auditorium of a historic converted church — like the one performed by the **Civilians Investigative Theater** in Brooklyn, New York — but it would surely be a spiritual opportunity for some existential ruminations on the nature of life.

As arts marketers who are constantly hard-pressed to find innovative ways to engage audiences, inviting patrons to encounter uncommon architectural spaces might be our key to pioneering future arts experiences. The stories in this e-book are all real examples of real organizations who have done just that — their artistic interventions in existing architecture have provided the public with opportunities to experience space in new ways, fostering new and engaged audiences as a result. Read on to find out how. ▶





DASHBOARD

CO-OP

**Breathing life into Atlanta's forgotten spaces
with contemporary art**

The “pop-up” gallery craze is here: it’s trendy, it’s contemporary, and it speaks to the art world’s creative itch that sees every empty space as an opportunity for expression. This fad of injecting unused places — such as storefronts, public parks, and other public spaces — with visual art objects is a relatively recent happening, but it is quickly evolving throughout the world.

Dashboard Co-op (fondly referred to as “Dash”) is an organization that has been striving to take the pop-up phenomenon even further in the city of Atlanta, Georgia. Rather than simply imposing art into available spaces, the staff at Dash carefully curates installations and performances that are site-specific and interact intimately with abandoned spaces in and around the city.

Started in 2010 by two Atlanta residents, Dash has since been consistently connecting artists with opportunities in vacant properties.

“ WE ASK [VIEWERS] TO BE VULNERABLE AND EXPERIENCE THE ARTWORK IN THESE SPACES WITH OPEN MINDS AND CURIOSITY ”

ASK FOR MORE

Beth Malone, co-founder and co-director of Dashboard Co-op, explains: “We use immersive art to transform and redefine the way people experience neglected environments. “Essentially, we produce exhibitions of object-based and performance art in vacant, dynamic properties. Our mission challenges an artist’s conceptual practice by inviting them to respond to structural elements of a space with their work, while also considering audience and how viewers will interact with their work.”

Central to the programming and identity of Dash is its element of collaboration. Given the nature of what the organization does, its scope extends far beyond the conventional curatorial marketing model of engaging an audience with an artist and vice versa; instead, Dash essentially serves and connects artists, viewers, neighborhoods, property owners, city planners and chambers. Not only is their network of collaborators vast, but these collaborators tender greater and more active participation than individuals in the traditional gallery setting.

The Dash audience is included in this list of participants who are asked for more than you might expect from the usual constituency. “Our exhibitions engage the public to



reexamine the way they move through the world and engage with space and structure and art,” says Malone. “We require viewers to be bold and adventurous — to trust us when we invite them to new parts of town or buildings that have sat vacant for years. And just as quickly as we require their gumption, we ask them to be vulnerable and experience the artwork in these spaces with open minds and curiosity.”

For a public that can be stubbornly resistant and skeptical to the idea of offering this kind of vulnerability to an art experience, it takes a special kind of voice to articulate a convincing argument on why it’s worth it — and Dashboard Co-op’s voice has been ringing that message loud and clear.

NO VACANCY

Throughout their oeuvre, Dash has been committed to the mission of combining artistic practice with existing architecture. This marriage has ultimately proven to be the organization’s defining factor and competitive advantage: the staff quickly discovered that their most significant and successful exhibitions to date were those that were “conceptually sound, aesthetically innovative, well-attended and

received and, ultimately, exhibitions that brought new life to blighted buildings and streets,” says Malone.

Among their most successful exhibitions was their summer 2013 show called “No Vacancy.” For this show, Dash invited two multidisciplinary artists — Henry Detweiler and Ben Coleman — who had previously never met and were unfamiliar with each other’s work to live in a “sleazy vacant nightclub in downtown Atlanta” for three weeks without being able to leave the space. As their sole prompt, the artists were asked simply to “make art.”

“As intended, they were perfectly matched to explore similar themes and points of tension in their performance, 3D and 2D work,” Malone remarks. “The artists were given no real creative parameters; however, they weren’t allowed to leave the space, and could only request materials and food via a crappy, prepaid phone programmed with Dash staff numbers only.” Following the three-week unconventional residency, doors to the space were opened to the public to witness and engage in the work that was created out of the artists’ spatial isolation.

“Utilizing objects found in the space — two pool tables, a jukebox, and a Galaga arcade game — the two created a massive interactive installation: a conceptual representation of time, a ‘time machine,’” describes Malone. “The time machine was controlled by viewers and the jukebox, which the artists programmed with thirty original sound pieces. When selected, each track incited a different performance by the artists within their created environment. The project was exhausting, challenging, weird, beautiful, trippy, and immensely well done.”

In being forced to pay special attention to the originally dilapidated architecture of the former nightclub, Detweiler and Coleman effectively “collaborated,” both physically and conceptually, with the space they were proffered in order to create the show. Moreover, the effect that this intervention created in the space was completely revitalizing for the property — it proved the space’s potential as an artistic venue and thus created a lasting change.

“Following ‘No Vacancy’ — two weeks after the show — the space was leased by Mammal Gallery, which continues to

“ THE PROJECT WAS EXHAUSTING, CHALLENGING, WEIRD, BEAUTIFUL, TRIPPY, AND IMMENSELY WELL DONE ”

present provocative art exhibitions and music shows,” Malone reports proudly. “There is a very big buzz around the gallery and they bring a constant stream of people and attention to a street and property that have been notoriously neglected in Atlanta.”

ART-CHITECTURE

learly, Dashboard Co-op’s artistic interventions can have a profound impact on the future of both the place and the space. However, it takes a relatively deliberate and meticulous review of the properties to make sure they align with Dash’s mission, have the potential for future growth and development, and maintain the public’s fascination.

“We choose dynamic properties that are strategically placed within a city,” says Malone of their site selection process. “We are looking for space that turns the one we formerly used on its head a bit; this challenges our own curatorial practice as well as our viewers’ expectations. We never want to be predictable.”

Not only are the properties dynamic in their potential and functionality, but Dash must stay dynamic in their production capacities as well. This dynamism is a key requirement to Dash’s curatorial practice of letting the

structure of the site guide the process and ultimate fruition of the art. In this way, Dash’s projects are experiments in reinterpreting the architectural “eyesores” of Atlanta as artistic prospects. Courtney Hammond, Dash’s Creative Director and Co-Founder, coordinates the realization of that place-making. “We have proven we can exhibit a show in a white box just as well as in a multi floor 1800’s feed store with an open elevator shaft,” Hammond explains. “For us, it’s all about accepting a space, and what others may see as a flaw, we turn into an opportunity.”

WHAT OTHERS MAY SEE AS A FLAW, WE TURN INTO AN OPPORTUNITY

Then, with the help of hosted artists, these opportunities turn into reality. “The artists we exhibit have a way of twisting a space on its head and seeing outside as in and vice versa,” remarks Hammond. “Dash removes walls, carpet, and even an oddly placed shower or two — brings in an artist that can make waves — tells them to get as big and bad as they want — then we use light and atmosphere to make it even more magical. Our marketing, design and color palette change with each project and mirror the direction the artist or Dash is



moving in for that project, but still keeping the details close to our chest.”

Ultimately, the final artistic interventions that Dash’s projects achieve aren’t entirely complete without the audience’s interaction with the space Dash and their artists create.

In “No Vacancy,” for example, Malone observed that “people kept going into off-limits areas where we were hiding old gross carpets, discarded supplies, rat traps. They



were literally walking up dark stairwells, ignoring ‘DO NOT ENTER, FOR REAL. THIS IS NOT PART OF THE SHOW’ signs, pulling heavy curtains aside and venturing forth into a great unknown.”

As amusing as this anecdote may be, it is also telling of a much broader effect that Dash’s projects have been having on the audience’s attitudes towards interacting with space. “[Hammond] and I realized that we did this to ourselves,” muses Malone. “Dash has cultivated such a bold audience that they’ll go anywhere and try anything even when all signs point to it being a bad idea. There are instances like this at every show we have. Audiences activate exhibitions and space in ways that we could never imagine until the

AUDIENCES ACTIVATE EXHIBITIONS AND SPACE IN WAYS THAT WE COULD NEVER IMAGINE UNTIL THE MOMENT ARISES

moment arises. It's spectacular and keeps us on our toes with band-aids on hand. We love bold people."

But who exactly is the Dashboard Co-op audience? "Because there is so much energy surrounding our openings and possibly to do with the fact that we ourselves are young administrators, we often get pigeon-holed as having a young audience," explains Malone, "but in the past two years we have seen notable shifts in our audience as well as the artists we work with. All of this takes experience, right?"

Although Dash is still trying to figure out who their market is, their sights are set on an audience that is both diverse and engaged, and they're getting there. "We've needed a moment to get our footing and find diverse audiences," Malone continues. "We have a much broader reach now, and are working with and for people of varying ages, ethnicities, and backgrounds. We can

cultural make-up, we'd like for the people we serve and support to be a reflection of that."

When it comes to reaching these diverse audiences, Dashboard Co-op's promotional techniques have been consistently creative and unexpected. For the "No Vacancy" project, for example, much of the hype they generated was engendered from a strategy of maintaining the mystery of it all. "We did market to create a buzz around the idea of 'secret urban residency' by keeping the location under wraps," says Malone. "We would promote the project in newsletters with abstract images of the work the two were doing, hint at the location by showing shots of their living quarters, make a big stink about the art magic and synergy that was happening. We finally released details about the location the morning of the opening."

While promotion through secrecy might sound counterintuitive, the secret to this technique is maintaining intrigue — and having an intriguing spectacle to back it up. "We like being secretive about projects and garnering attention out of curiosity," explains

SPREAD THE WORD



always improve and are always aware of the city we live in and its multi-

Hammond. “We never share images of site-specific works in our exhibitions before an opening. The first peak is never meant for a preview article but for the viewer that shows up to truly experience it. As long as we don’t disappoint the audience when they arrive, I think we’re safe in continuing this kind of promotion.” Malone adds, “We keep secrets, then make sure to let everyone in on them.”

Sound non-traditional? That’s the Dashboard Co-op way. Since the beginning of their operations, Dash’s marketing efforts have been barely traditional. “Print costs money, so we started out purely digital,” explains Hammond. “Except... at one point

“ **PROFESSIONAL DOESN’T ALWAYS MEAN PROPER** ”

we would screen print or paint bedsheets

from thrift stores and guerilla tie them up over underpasses and busy intersections before rush hour. I can’t remember who stood on whose shoulders to get them up there.”

Dash currently has been continuing to push their digital marketing strategies to promote their shows and brand their organization. “Naturally, we’ve used social media as an outlet,” Hammond says. “If you’re not doing that, you just don’t exist. If John Deere

has a Twitter, by god, we should too.”

Through these digital platforms, Dash has made sure to constantly maintain a voice that aligns with their brand identity. “Since the beginning we’ve been staunchly consistent in keeping the same tone in order to establish a personality for Dashboard,” Hammond remarks. “Dash speaks like its shareholders (artists/audience) speak. I feel we’re pretty successful in this regard.”

Maintaining this voice, however casual or conversational it may seem, is central to the

FUTURE THINKING

B organization’s methods of engaging their constituency. Hammond insists, “No matter what our Board says, professional doesn’t always mean proper. It’s all about audience and artist engagement.”

esides diversifying and expanding new audiences, what’s on the docket for Dashboard Co-op’s future?

Geographic expansion beyond the South is certainly a prospect to look forward to. “Historically we’ve been intimately engaged with Atlanta but have always had eyes in other cities,” says Malone. “Since our inception in 2010, we’ve always worked with artists from

WE'RE READY FOR A LONG-TERM COMMITMENT

New York as well as New Orleans. These two cities are accessible from Atlanta. We knew it was important to look out and bring artists into this city early on. As we move forward, we have built some very strong relationships with these cities, and others like Detroit and Los Angeles, and plan to host exhibitions in them in the coming years.”

Malone also reports that Dashboard Co-op’s mission of pushing the limits of artistic curation through experimentation will be sustained through further local projects that will maintain a permanence that has been unprecedented in Dash projects thus far.

“Up to this point, the exhibitions Dashboard Co-op has produced briefly ignite a property with art, inspiring necessary boost not only to artist’ careers, but to the actual space and neighborhood around it,” Malone describes. “Having been known for this fleeting, explosive quality, Dash is ready for something new — we’re ready for a long-term commitment...for a little bit anyway.”

Three abandoned buildings at the busy yet blighted corner of North Avenue and Spring Street in Atlanta have been obtained by the organization and will serve as the site for these upcoming experiments

in longevity.

“Dash will curate a series of exhibitions in these three spaces with works by Dash artists as well as artists living in and outside of Atlanta,” describes Malone. “Concepts we’ll explore: how can our conceptual practice as exhibition-makers improve when the difficulties of moving from place to place are removed? How can we maintain the excitement our viewers feel when ‘discovering’ a new space for each exhibition? How can we revitalize a property or street when given more time to infuse it with art? This is an experiment. This is a curatorial endurance piece.”

However far the scope of Dashboard Co-op’s projects and influence goes in the future, they plan to remain steadfast in their original mission of reviving space. As Malone envisages: “We have our sights set to be a true commissioning agency, working nationally and eventually internationally, to breathe life into artistic practices and neglected space.”

Learn more about Dashboard Co-op’s spaces and exhibitions at [htwww.dashboard-coop.org](http://www.dashboard-coop.org).





DETROIT

SYMPHONY

ORCHESTRA

Transforming a historic symphony hall into a meditative yoga studio



When it comes to rethinking the functionality of different spaces, we might think of a symphony hall as a rather classical example. As an art form rich in history and tradition, the symphony is one of the ultimate examples of timeless beauty — but it can also be a tough nut to crack in terms of novelty and diversification.

That's where the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO) has been changing the game. In an active endeavor to change the landscape of symphonic programming, the DSO has identified a distinctive mission of reaching diverse audiences. They've specified innovative programming as their primary way of achieving this goal, rather than containing themselves within the expectations of a traditional orchestra's classical and symphonic programming. The DSO has expanded its catalog of events in both performance genres and interactive programs. Perhaps the catchiest (and certainly one of the most successful) of these events is the groundbreaking Om @ the Max series.

Lindsey Evert, Patron Engagement and Strategy Manager at the DSO, has been actively working to maintain the Om @ The Max's longevity as the program's primary coordinator. "The Om @ The Max series offers a yoga class set to live chamber music," she explains. "A string quartet is

set in the middle of The Music Box, our black box theater, and a yoga instructor (who also happens to be one of our orchestra's librarians) conducts a class of 200 yogis whose mats are set up around the musicians."

Wondering how a historic symphony orchestra thought of this unique programming (and pulled it off) to make a huge splash in their community? We were too.

SONIC SPACES

To start, the DSO stepped back and took a look at what they already had: space. The DSO's Max M. Fisher Music Center (fondly referred to as "the Max") possesses a unique architecture and history, presenting itself to the company as a blank canvas for major opportunities.

Opened in October of 2003, the physical architecture of the Max is a temporal and spatial collage that creates a space for innovative, collaborative and restorative reflection. The larger space in the musical complex of the Max encompasses the hundred-year-old restored Orchestra Hall, which has welcomed performances from some of the world's most renowned jazz musicians including Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington, and Ella Fitzgerald.



The restoration was joined with several other structural components: a more intimate 450-seat, modularly configured performance hall called The Music Box; the company's primary educational facility, the Jacob Bernard Pincus Music Education Center; and the broadcasting station for Detroit's local classical and jazz music station, WRCJ 90.9 FM. Evidently, the Max has made concerted efforts to keep its space multifunctional and relevant to its contemporary community, while maintaining their updated efforts as harmonious and even collaborative considering the space's historical weight.

Apart from asserting the dynamic functionality of its space, the 2003 opening of the Max


created reverberations throughout the community. A local development in and around the Midtown neighborhood of Detroit was sparked in response to the restoration, and currently it continues to gain momentum.

AMPLIFIED AUDIENCES

The Max's distinctively multifaceted architecture is echoed in its pioneering, diversified programming, which strives to achieve a similar level of versatility

as the compound it inhabits. Its Civic and Education Initiative, for example, has been instrumental in positioning the symphonic orchestra within the community as leaders, not just in performance, but in the realm of learning and education, allowing the orchestra to reach younger, non-traditional audiences.

PARTNER UP

 Although these programs might sound like one-hit wonder solutions to the issue of audience outreach, breaking the mold of traditional symphony programming is no walk in the park — it takes some help. Evert explains that the secret sauce to the orchestra's success has been its community relationships. "Our obstacles are the areas where the content is not presenting orchestral music," she divulges. "We've been able to overcome some of these by teaming up with community partners and asking leaders in the community to help advise us on these projects. This is a crucial part of the expansion of programs."

So naturally, when staff were coming up with programming for Om @ The Max, they were already well-versed in the practice of visualizing novel programming tactics through local partnerships. Logically,

they started with their strengths: "The DSO started looking at what we have to offer: beautifully talented musicians," Evert explains, "and then what community partners could bring in terms of new programming. To us, classical music and yoga practice share meditative qualities, and we thought they'd make great companions."

The DSO then turned to their local neighbor, the Yoga Shelter Midtown Detroit — a partnership that would prove to be vital to the symphony's role in the local yoga world.

While an unprecedented collaboration, the infusion of yoga practice into the DSO's classical music performance was a perfect complement to the institution's mission of diversity. As Evert comments, "Yoga specifically allows us to provide an inspirational experience that reflects the diversity in our art and business practices" — that is, the experience of blending two unconventional art forms.

Moreover, the organizational partnership offered both institutions access to a new

CLASSICAL MUSIC AND YOGA PRACTICE SHARE MEDITATIVE QUALITIES

audience community where they previously did not have an established presence — not to mention a whole other voice to speak out about the DSO.

“We are definitely trying to broaden our audience base with this project,” Evert asserts. “We achieved much of the success with the outreach through our community partner in the Yoga Shelter Midtown Detroit. They discuss the events with the classes and spread the word throughout their community and we follow suit with ours.”

What’s more, the breakthrough partnership has allowed the DSO to save considerable amounts of time, energy, and money on actual promotional efforts and expenditures. “Most of the marketing for this programming is done through digital media outlets and word of mouth,” says Evert. “The yoga studio that we partner with holds the key to much of the audience and then once they’re in our building, we make sure they have information about some of the other programs that we offer here as an orchestra and as a music center. Since these events

have traditionally sold out weeks in advance, print and other traditional media haven’t been necessary or practical.”

TRANSFORM + ENGAGE



As it turned out, the DSO staff’s expectations for the Om @ The Max program were exceeded on multiple levels. The transformational effect that the yoga series has had within space offered by the historic Max, for instance, has been undeniable.

“This programming truly transforms [the Max] by making it alive with activity,” Evert describes. This liveliness can be attributed to DSO staff’s deliberate efforts to carefully program the event such that attendees have a chance to socialize and connect both inside and outside of the actual yoga practice. “Typically, we don’t offer concerts on Sunday morning so we’ve chosen to use this time to present the yoga classes. People arrive as early as an hour prior to shop for yoga gear, grab a fresh juice and chat with friends in our Atrium,” explains Evert. “It’s really an intimate and emotional experience for all involved.”

From the very first event, it seemed as though the Om @ The Max series had

“THIS PROGRAMMING TRULY TRANSFORMS [THE MAX] BY MAKING IT ALIVE WITH ACTIVITY”



Image courtesy of Lyn Tally via Flickr

**WE ARE
LOOKING
TO INSPIRE
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CONTENT AND
GENRES**

responded to a demand the community didn't even know it had. "Tickets have sold out for the past three events," Evert reports. A sold out event in the Max's Music Box means a crowd of 200 attendees — truly a feat of a turnout.

This turnout is met with an across-the-board positive participant experience: not only has the series offered a way for attendees and musicians to rethink the physical space of the Max, but has also allowed for renewed meditation on the music itself. Evert observes, "We've heard anecdotally that although some attendees have heard the pieces played in many other settings, they see them in a new light as they're working through their Om @ The Max yoga practice."

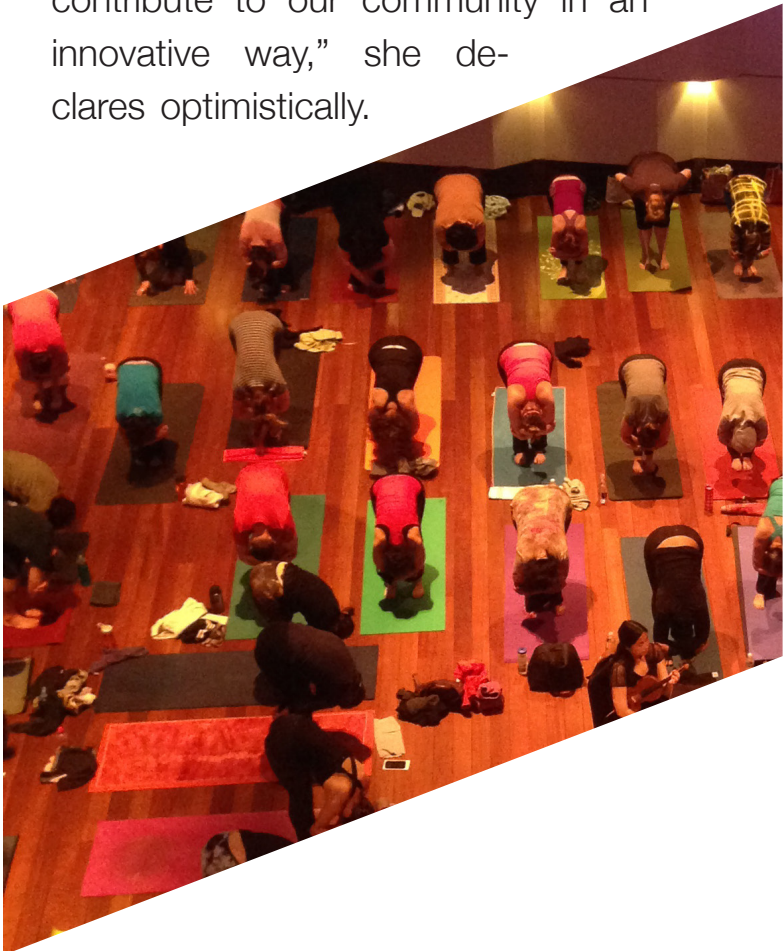
With the feedback that the DSO have received in the early stages of the series programming, Evert and the rest of the staff are already looking forward to opportunities for improvement. "The community has responded with requests for an increase in the

number of classes and varying the skill level,” Evert explains. “We’ve taken this feedback and will implement it throughout the 2014-2015 season.”

The DSO staff sees their current trajectory of innovative programming steadily continuing on in future endeavors. “Looking forward, we are imagining everything from presentations of documentaries to an opportunity to paint to music,” says Evert. “We are looking to inspire through cross-disciplinary content and genres.” In the long term, Evert hopes this expansive programming can pave the way for the DSO’s relevance and dominance in the contemporary music world. “I see the Max M. Fisher Music Center becoming the great American music center with programs that contribute to our community in an innovative way,” she declares optimistically.

“Programming like the pairing of yoga and chamber music allows us to offer Detroiters various experiences that will keep them guessing what we’ll be up to next.”

Learn more about the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and their Om @ The Max program by visiting www.dso.org.





THE CIVILIANS

INVESTIGATIVE

THEATER

Reviving a historic church auditorium with an interactive performance



Death can be a sensitive topic to talk about — but The Civilians Investigative Theater isn't exactly shy when it comes to touchy subjects. Based in Brooklyn, New York, The Civilians is a theater company that maintains a distinctive mission of “boldly exploring the intersections of theater and society.” In furthering this mission, The Civilians has had a history of unapologetically addressing controversial social and philosophical issues such as divorce, the Evangelical movement, the Occupy Wall Street movement — and now death — using inventive and experimental methods.

The Civilians, explains: “Investigative theater is a methodology with an ‘outward’ focused process in pursuit of a question. Artists typically engage with individuals and communities in order to listen, make discoveries, and challenge habitual ways of knowing. The ethos of investigative theater extends into production, inviting audiences to be active participants in the inquiry before, during, and after the performance.”

Continuing with these investigations, The Civilians took the winter and spring of 2013 to begin working on *Be the Death of Me* — described as “an installation

“ **ARTISTS TYPICALLY ENGAGE WITH INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES IN ORDER TO LISTEN, MAKE DISCOVERIES, AND CHALLENGE HABITUAL WAYS OF KNOWING** ”

performance piece that offers the audience intimate encounters with matters of life and death in New York City.” One of the most distinguishing aspects of this project in particular was

So what exactly is “investigative theater”? While the axiom in itself might sound daunting, investigative theater is exactly what it sounds like: an investigation. What distinguishes the idea of investigative theater in The Civilians’ terms is the dimension of artistic intervention that is extracted by artists on a community level.

Sarah Benvenuti, Interim Managing Director and Director of Development for

its venue — set in the auditorium of a historic converted church and performance space, the piece was an unabashed intervention that fully utilized the space it inhabited to create an eerily supernatural environment for its visitors.

Following their methodology of investigation, the theater began with their morbid research for this project by listening to the stories, anecdotes, and philosophies of members

of their community. “Our team of interviewers spoke with a wide cross-section of New Yorkers who had stories about these themes, including ER nurses, priests, funeral directors, shamans, vampires, crime-scene cleaners, and more,” Benvenuti describes. “These interviews were then edited and presented in a myriad of formats by actors throughout the Irondale Center space for two nights.” The result was an acclaimed interactive performance, described by the *Mildly Bitter* blog as “epic in scope but grounded in the documentary-style intimacy that makes their investigative theater approach powerful and effective.”

The Irondale Center was previously a neglected Sunday school auditorium in the Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church in the Fort Greene area of Brooklyn. It was restored in 2008 by the Irondale Ensemble Project, who found the 7,300 square foot space begging to be reworked into a dynamic theater space. The massive, vaulting church has since been utilized by several different performance artists and continues to be transformed by performing arts projects.

“The vastness of the space allowed us to create very unique encounters between the audience and the performers,” Benvenuti explains of the performance. “Sometimes a few audience members were gathered in small groups around different performers, and sometimes we drew the entire audiences’ attention to a single performer.”

While the performance was carefully “curated,” it was done in such a way that visitors were given options in order to craft their own unique audience experience — made possible by the enormity of the space that the Irondale Center provided.

Benvenuti describes the independent component of the performance: “For the beginning of the show, we created a ‘choose your own adventure’ atmosphere: audience members were allowed

RESURRECTING SPACE

Considering both the functionality and the symbolism of the space it offers, the Irondale Center was the perfect venue for The Civilians’ project. Given that the project was focused on stories of life

and death, it seemed more than fitting that the historic space was brought to life through the piece.

“**THE VASTNESS OF THE SPACE ALLOWED US TO CREATE VERY UNIQUE ENCOUNTERS**”



THE DEATH OF

to choose where they wanted to go and whose story they wanted to listen to. It also gave them the autonomy to decide how much time they wanted to spend listening to each story. We gave them a map of locations, but did not specify what they would see in each location. We also created a listening station with headsets for this portion, giving audiences yet another way to experience the material.”

“We then guided the audience during the second half of the show a bit more,

focusing their attention on one short story at a time, then breaking them up into multiple stories at once,” she continues. “This became a bit of a dance, as actors mingled through the crowds while the audience focused on one actor, and then spotlighting those actors at once when they all began to tell their own stories.”

The creative use of the performance curation ultimately allowed for adjustable levels of intimacy tailored to the individual experience. “At various ‘stations’ throughout the space, audiences could get up close to the actors as they became these characters, listen to recordings of content, or observe video of actors telling these stories,” explains Benvenuti. “The space was choreographed,

guiding audiences to have individual experiences as well as coming together as a group for certain monologues.”

The immense space evidently achieved the intended effect of proliferating the audience’s interpretations of the work. Kristen Van Nest of Edge, New York describes the experience of watching *Be the Death of Me* at the Irondale Center: “Map in hand, everyone scurries into a large, open room. A balcony surrounds the edges, providing an upstairs with a large open center... The constant need to move breaks up the monotony and allows moments for reflection between intense personal stories.”

VIVIFYING VIEWERS

These highly unique components of the performance and use of space were so provocative in themselves that marketing efforts were supplementary and cost-effective. Promotion for the performance — which was sold out to their maximum 180-person capacity on both nights — involved mostly digital marketing. An online crowdfunding Indiegogo campaign helped raise funds for the production, and social media efforts and blog entries focused on particular interviews were crucial in building hype around the event.

“We were thrilled to have such support from our community: through social media, e-blasts, and other online outreach we were able to fill both nights very quickly,” Benvenuti remarks.

Not only was the audience vast, but it was diverse as well. “We definitely wanted to draw in a broad demographic,” Benvenuti asserts. “Much of our audience for our interview-based work is often comprised of the family and friends of our interviewees, and for this show we interviewed a large cross section of individuals from a variety of cultural economic, and socio-political backgrounds — that definitely helped bring in a more diverse audience.”

Plus, *Be the Death of Me* seemed to have cracked the elusive code to the outreach problem that has increasingly been permeating throughout the performing arts: how do you engage younger audiences? Benvenuti explains: “Much of our audience tends to skew younger than many of the performing arts disciplines. Having a more ‘experimental’ setting for the piece, as well as a low ticket price, attracted a younger demographic than a sit-down production with higher ticket prices might have.”

These expanding audiences are not just event-based, either — they are institutional, and therefore enduring. For *The Civilians*,

their method of investigative theater in itself allows for a sustainable model of audience outreach. “Much of our work is created from interviews, often involving individuals in theatrical creation who may not have any connection to theater in the past,” describes Benvenuti. “We then provide supplemental opportunities to many of our shows — be it talkbacks, pre-show discussions, workshops, online content, or more — that allows audiences to interact more directly with the material and provide feedback that, many times, will then be used by the artists involved.”

THE GREAT BEYOND

Nonetheless, as much as the investigative theater methodology allows for unique opportunities for experiments in audience engagement, it simultaneously presents unique challenges. “Since often our work is ‘presented’ by other theaters, audiences don’t have a clear sense of the company and our assortment of programming,” Benvenuti elucidates. “Also, as an investigative company we have a great deal of ‘collateral’ in terms of material we gather and develop over the course of an investigation. This information is disseminated across a variety of media platforms, and I think it’s hard for

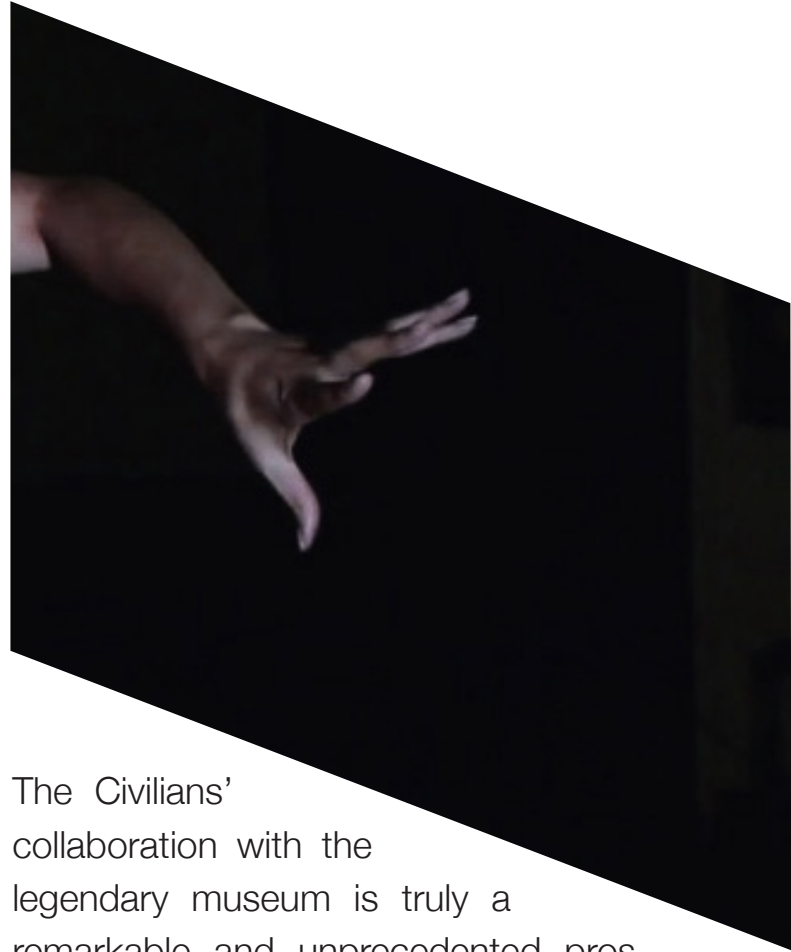
our audiences to know how to navigate through our plethora of materials.”

To these challenges, The Civilians is responding in kind. Institutional changes are being made in the realm of their process, as the company plans to begin increasing their producing capacity in order to self or co-produce more of the work they develop, rather than focusing only on supporting the artists in their various stages of creation.

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“Producing our own work will help audiences identify The Civilians as a company and a brand in itself,” Benvenuti explains, “allowing us to raise more funds that can then be directly invested in the artists and work that we support.” The company has thus identified an ambitious yet committed goal of self-producing at least one show a year in addition to their continuing annual investigations, like the one that brought *Be the Death of Me* to fruition.

Furthermore, with plans to condense and disseminate their valuable ideas and in-



formation in the form of concise digital content, The Civilians hopes to rebuild and enhance their brand identity.

AFTERLIFE OF DEATH

Today, the life of The Civilians’ death investigations has a bright future. Responses to the *Be the Death of Me* project were so overwhelmingly positive that the production is currently in the process of developing into a second iteration. “We are thrilled to be continuing the development of the show (now titled *THE END AND THE BEGINNING*) as part of our Performing Artists Residency at the Metropolitan Museum of Art this year,” Benvenuti remarks.

The Civilians’ collaboration with the legendary museum is truly a remarkable and unprecedented prospect. “This marks the first time the Met will host a theater group as their performing artist-in-residence,” Benvenuti notes of the residency program, which has in the past hosted multimedia artist DJ Spooky and the performance-composer group “Alarm Will Sound.”

As a continuation of its wildly successful *Be the Death of Me* project, The Civilians will enhance its previous project by conducting



more interviews and adapting the piece for the Temple of Dendur — an Egyptian monument in the Sackler Wing of the museum, and one of the Met’s most celebrated pieces. Laden with ancient Egyptian cultish symbols of life and death,

the Temple of Dendur is sure to be a powerful and effective new venue for the piece.

However, The Civilians envisions the project extending even further beyond its endeavors at the Met. “We see DEATH/END as a production that can adapt to each community that produces it,” Benvenuti explains. “We are going to explore this plan while at the Met, including interviews with

“ WE SEE DEATH/END AS A PRODUCTION THAT CAN ADAPT TO EACH COMMUNITY THAT PRODUCES IT ”

curators of the Egyptian Wing (where the Temple resides) in the production, and conducting further interviews with individuals that tie into any new themes we discover. “We hope to do this with END in various communities

in the future, creating a truly unique, immersive, theatrical experience each time it is performed.”

Learn more about *The Civilians'* past and future projects at www.thecivilians.org.





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