

Jonah Bokaer interviewed by Alejandra Martorell* (*questions by Sarah Maxfield)

Alejandra Martorell: How does the Center for Performance Research relate to your personal artistic work, and the work you have done with Chez Bushwick? In what ways is it an outgrowth of those projects and in what ways does it diverge from your other work?

Jonah Bokaer: I try to think of CPR as a community space, through and through, and I try to think of the many ways the word 'community' can perform. We collaborated with the developer to zone this ground-floor as a community space. Its mission is community-driven, in terms of serving a population of performers, dancers, choreographers, practitioners and also serving related art forms to continue sustaining what they do, short and long-term. John Jasperse and I were interested in creating a permanent piece of real estate so that the arts can have a foothold in New York City for the long haul. We wanted a space that is not just "handed" to the arts community by professionals who know little about the art, but a space that is actually conceived of by artists. We wanted to create very simple yet effective architecture that's relevant not only to performance practice today, but to what the needs of the community might be today. There's an aspect of community that is local to Williamsburg, which is an artistic community, but there's also a Hasidic, Latino, Polish, Ukrainian, and multi-ethnic community. CPR sits along a lot of different fault lines, so the question is: what does a performance center look like today in this area?

In terms of how this relates to my own work, my parents were artists and activists. I've always been involved in volunteering. I used to volunteer at the East Harlem Tutorial Program, but I also volunteered for the Gay and Lesbian Community Center in NYC, and numerous HIV advocacy groups. I teach weekly when I'm in New York, in the public schools in Bushwick, which is also done on a volunteer basis. Community isn't necessarily tangential to what I do; it's really embedded in the way that I think as an artist. The desire to partner with John and the architect, as well as the developer, was motivated from serving the community of Brooklyn in that way too.

CPR is also related to my personal work because my choreography involves media. John and I both had the feeling that choreographers and performers in New York City have a need (which is often unarticulated) for stronger production values: where does an artist create, store, and develop their work, lock out a space, build video, and build production elements? And how does that translate onto stage, in an integral way, and have a larger life? We hope that CPR can be positioned as a laboratory where that can happen.

Alejandra: What about the trajectory of Chez Bushwick? Do you see yourself continuing to be a part of that?

Jonah: It's important to differentiate between the two: Chez Bushwick is an artist-run space in the community of Bushwick. It's a very low-tech facility. It's a non-profit that has an active and diverse Board of Directors. Its main programs involve affordable rehearsal space. CPR is a capital project: it has partnered with the Department of Cultural Affairs for city capital, and is a partnership among companies. There is also an ecological component to CPR, which is an organization that will require staffing and infrastructure of a different kind, and the organization is more multi-disciplinary in scope. The organizations have very clear differences, and they are separate non-profits.

Alejandra: On your website, you describe CPR as "a dynamic new model for sustainable arts infrastructure." Does that refer specifically to your relationship with the Greenbelt Building developers or does it include other aspects of your operating model?

Jonah: I think that the word sustainability is generally overused: it is used freely by corporations, arts organizations, panels, etc. I think CPR has a responsibility to define what it means when it uses the word sustainability. The reason that CPR is envisioned as sustainable is it will eventually

own its facility, in a very short timeline. CPR is a partnership between organizations, so that two organizations make the financial burden less strenuous. It doesn't waste energy in electrical resources in a number of ways: it is a green building – L.E.E.D.-certified - which stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, and is a nationally-accepted benchmark for design, construction and performance of green buildings. What that translates into is: all materials in this facility have little to no VOC (volatile organic compound) content, there are solar and wind panels on the roof of the building, the HVAC (heating, ventilation and cooling system) is Energy Star compliant, appliances like elevators, toilets, and eventually washer and dryer, are also Energy Star compliant; even the wood and the foam sleepers of the dance floor are VOC-free. We're looking into a biometric lock and eventually, through a grant from the Department of Cultural Affairs, we plan to outfit the facility with LED (light emitting diode) lighting instruments, which may use up to seventh-eighths less power than a normal theatrical lighting package. And this would be the only facility in the country completely equipped with a full LED, from a lighting company called Selador.

But I must say, what's not sustainable about CPR is that John and myself work more than 90 hours per week at present. It's a very all-consuming project. I think that we knew, but we didn't know.....

Alejandra: What existing models did you explore when developing your plan for CPR?

Jonah: Good question: operationally CPR begins tomorrow! The way that we've outlined it is there are up to twelve different kinds of activity or rental based on: individual artists rate, class work, non-profit rental, commercial rate, performance-week rental, dialogue, exchange, summer camp, education programs... different things that we're just starting to set sail on. Rehearsals that involve John's work or my own work are just one limb of the project. Anyone who needs space will be able to have equal access to it. We're in discussion with Trisha Brown Company about having subsidized space, yoga teachers and practitioners have reached out to have affordable teaching space. In July we will be working on something called CAMP – a summer camp for local children. We've been in discussion with a number of galleries who would like to rent the space for installation-based work for some of their artists. So, we are trying to think of diversity, not only of activities, but also of income streams. And all of that, hopefully, will relate back to research – how does performance evolve today?

Alejandra: I guess that in order to make all of that happen in a sustainable manner, you are looking for someone to work here.

Jonah: We're hoping to make two hires in the coming year. We're talking about a Director of Operations, which would involve programming, and a Development/Finance Director.

Alejandra: And you have a Board.

Jonah: That's another part of the infrastructure, which I hope will be sustainable. The two Co-Founders sit on the Board, as well as two members of their respective companies' Boards. And from there, we will build an odd number of CPR Board members (probably nine).

Alejandra: Relative to CPR's performance and rehearsal/development programs, what is your curatorial focus in terms of the artists you select to participate? Are these programs fully curated, or are they supplemented by partially-curated or non-curated rentals of rehearsal and performance space?

Jonah: Presently, CPR has done three public programs. "Displacement," which had a soft opening, consisted of a visual arts exhibition and installation-based work, as well as a performance program that included six choreographers from New York and abroad. That was in March 2008. We hosted the United States premiere of French artist Christian Rizzo, a visual and performance artist, who presented performance work, an installation, and a video in the spaces.

CPR also hosted Daria Faïn, a Brooklyn-based choreographer, who is working in built environments as well as a deeply somatic approach. Those three initial programs, I think, are an adequate reflection of how the organization aspires to program - a true overlap of visual and performance programs - being global in reach, but local in implementation. And those programs are not at odds or compartmentalized from one another: the way that I see it, is the landscape of the arts is starting to overlap in a new kind of way, and I hope that CPR can curate along that trajectory—with artists who work in expanded practices that might include performance, choreography, architecture, as well as wanting to host a public event, discussion, or screening.

CPR just completed the closing process and its mortgage financing, successfully obtained in the midst of the international financial crisis. The mortgage is structured in the form of a 10-year loan. Basically: CPR raised \$600,000 and borrowed \$600,000. The loan was made at a very competitive fixed rate, which is good news, but we are currently pursuing a rental model that I think is also competitively priced. And rental activity is seen as a main income stream to pay off the debt, unless funding for specific programs are in place, as they were for Christian Rizzo (where funding was received from FUSED, as well as Cultural Services at the French Embassy).

Alejandra: How would you describe your experience as an artist and arts administrator working with developers, architects, and others in the construction field? How involved were you in the planning and design for Greenbelt and CPR?

Jonah: The developer of CPR is named Derek Denckla. The architect is Gregory Merryweather. Both are deeply visionary members of their field who are working across sectors to advance relevant projects and causes. Partnering with an architect and a developer was deeply informative, it was challenging, it was time consuming, and it was painful. It was rewarding and rare in that John and myself had the opportunity to collaborate on the design and build-out of this facility, as well as the initial outfitting. John and I were able to bid on all of the equipment and systems that will eventually be in place here: it allowed for a level of collaboration that I had never considered, and I'm thankful for that. Any development project, and you can quote me here, is precarious, difficult and delayed. And painful. And it also costs more than you think.

Alejandra: Is the pain component that you mentioned a result of compromises you were forced to make along the way?

Jonah: There were certain compromises made, yes, but more than that, about \$180,000 of pain was incurred, due to constructing a green facility and building changing orders, some of which we requested.....and some of which were dominoed on to us by the contractor.

Alejandra: On your website, you also mention "educational and pedagogical engagement with the communities of New York City and abroad." Can you talk a little more about this aspect of your mission? What types of programs will this include?

Jonah: It was a goal of CPR to consider education engagement as well as community activity, really from the onset, instead of as an afterthought. And so we applied to the first round of the ARC program from Pentacle (Advancement, Reinvention, Creativity) to study and implement an effective community outreach plan. Beginning in January 2008 there has been an 18-month planning phase, and we plan to begin community work in June/July of this year, starting with the Summer Camp, which engages young kids in artistic practices.

Alejandra: How much do you feel this as home?

Jonah: I've had one rehearsal here, and I love this space. It's quiet. It's open. It's very vast. There's natural light. It feels comfortable. It feels like the architecture is appropriate. While it doesn't feel like home yet, it feels like the best option for one. I see it as being home for a lot of different things, not just my own. And I can't think of a better physical space to build work right now.