

Doing Things Differently

Stories from innovation initiatives in the arts.



The Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

The Innovators

San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA) was founded in 1993 as an accessible, high-profile venue devoted to the creation and presentation of contemporary art representing diverse cultural and artistic perspectives. YBCA presents national and international artists, as well as local Bay Area artists. In actively commissioning new works in visual, performing and media arts, YBCA has launched the careers of hundreds of emerging artists and serves as a catalyst for local and regional artistic activity. The organization has an annual budget of \$9.2 million, and presents nearly 30 exhibitions, performances, films and community projects annually.



The Innovation

YBCA redesigned its cultural engagement practices to change the experience visitors have when coming into its space. The new approach – called the *Immersive Visitor Experience* – includes strategies for creating more substantive person-to-person relationships among staff and visitors, more visible internal branding, new technology applications, improved interpretive materials, and changes to the physical lobby to stimulate conversation among attendees.

A crowd attends TASTE!, a site-specific, collaborative installation using food, art, and conversation to respond to the exhibition.



Starting Conditions

As it looked around the country at other performing arts centers, YBCA saw a pattern emerging: architecturally significant buildings housing programs that were increasingly irrelevant to the world outside, in part because programs had been developed to fit the buildings rather than to engage the public in creative ways. YBCA itself had long struggled with the dynamic tension between the experimental art it presented and the conventional limitations of space and practice. Although it saw itself as “the people’s art center,” YBCA admitted that it had not always pursued this vision with creativity or discipline, often relying on conventional practices that were more piecemeal than focused, and saying to visitors, “Come, look, leave.” YBCA asked itself an ambitious question: how could the organization overturn the traditional assumptions of how art is presented in order to create a more dynamic visitor experience that both reflected its own reputation for artistic risk-taking and recognized well-documented changes in consumer behavior? The Center called its emerging vision *Yerba Buena INSIDE/OUT* and began to think about the work in three parts: physical space, cultural practices and programs. With the specific goal of developing new cultural practices, YBCA applied to and was accepted into the Innovation Lab March 2009.

The Lab

Transformative Moments

For several years, YBCA had been organizing its program year around three or four big ideas that connected programs to each other and to contemporary issues and ideas. In Phase 1 of the Lab, facilitator John McCann met with a group of YBCA staff, Board, artists and external constituents to consider ways to implement the season’s big ideas – *Encounter: Engaging the Social Context; Soar: The Search for Meaning; Reflect: Considering the Personal; and Dare: Art, Action, Audience* – through new cultural practices. Armed with the raw material from this discussion, YBCA’s Innovation Team went to the Lab Intensive.

Its first breakthrough came when the Team realized it would have to narrow its ambition – from considering a broad and unwieldy reimagining of YBCA’s cultural practices to addressing a specific area of interest. The Team began to think from the viewpoint of the visitor, taking a close look at ways the organization was failing to serve visitors effectively. The Team emerged from this facilitated discussion with

a new focus that went beyond merely engaging its visitors. The key to “moving its big ideas” and to creating a powerful visitor experience, YBCA’s Team believed, was a seamless and multi-faceted immersion of visitors into the YBCA experience. “What would they have to change,” the group asked itself, “to make YBCA more user-focused? What could the organization do to create multiple simultaneous conditions that would define and reinforce the immersive experience?” The Intensive was critical in enabling YBCA to identify the five key elements of the *Immersive Visitor Experience*.

McCann describes YBCA’s transformation as a subtle, rather than a dramatic shift, saying that there were “no identifiable moments when the organization turned a corner.” Instead, YBCA’s awareness of how to proceed with its project emerged organically throughout the Lab. The organization is just now developing a vocabulary to talk about what it calls its “new boundary-less reality where there are no longer art forms, just art.”

Shifts in Assumptions

YBCA already had a well articulated point of view about its role in putting contemporary art at the center of community life. What changed as it traveled through the Lab and prototyped its innovation was the assumption that the best way to achieve this mission was to offer high quality compelling programs and exhibitions. As a result of its experience in the Lab, YBCA discovered that thinking from a visitor’s perspective gave the organization new insight into how best to animate its programs in the eyes of the public.

New Pathways to Mission

Through its participation in the Intensive, YBCA discussed multiple new pathways to achieving its mission and branding itself as the “people’s art center.” Without changing its programmatic focus or artistic imperatives, YBCA identified creative ways to connect its visitors to its core activities. The Center involved its entire staff in contemplating the implications of its new focus on the visitor, and the process opened new communications pathways within the organization as staff members worked on project-based teams and examined their ideas through the lens of audience immersion.

The Prototype

At the Intensive, YBCA's Innovation Team identified five areas in which to focus its prototyping efforts: 1. The Staff/Visitor Experience; 2. Internal Branding; 3. New Technologies; 4. Interpretive Materials; and 5. Re-purposing the Building. Upon returning from the retreat, YBCA immediately set up individual Task Forces to begin quick testing in each of the five areas.

The Staff/Visitor Experience Task Force set out to strengthen the connection between the staff and YBCA's audience. In *Project: Greet* staff served as roving information kiosks during strategic high-traffic periods, welcoming guests to the facility, pointing them in the right direction, and suggesting must-see points of interest in the building. More than 40 staff participated in the program. A successful prototype, *Project: Greet* has become part of YBCA's new Gallery Guide program in which paid docents interact with guests throughout the gallery spaces.

To reinforce messaging among visitors who were already in the space, the Internal Branding Task Force gave away buttons that recipients could later exchange for free admission to certain events at the Center. In a follow-up proto-

type, the Task Force established a design competition, inviting the public to submit designs for another button that would reinterpret one of the Center's thematic areas. The staff selected the winner and distributed these buttons at later performances. This prototyping led to a new software program that allows visitors to design their own buttons in the theme of the evening's program and use these buttons for discounts on performances, films, exhibitions and membership.

YBCA's New Technologies Task Force investigated a number of applications and tools that had been identified as potential enhancements to the visitor experience, including mobile ticketing, scanning systems and kiosks. While it is likely to recommend a scanning system, the Task Force has decided that kiosks are too costly and unreliable to warrant purchase. To help develop a comprehensive digital media strategy that was adaptable, flexible and not tied to a specific platform, YBCA used funds from the Lab to work with Hot Studio, a San Francisco design firm.

The primary goal of the Interpretive Materials Task Force was to deepen audience experience using docent services and smart phone technology. YBCA tested a prototype in conjunction with its Kamau Patton exhibit in early 2010, using docents and smart phones along with the Center's printed guides. The Center added a personal touch, giving visitors access to additional content, technical assistance in using the smart phone features, and individual concierge services. In Spring 2010, the Task Force met again with McCann to discuss



A YBCA staffer wears buttons to communicate a new internal branding message.

ongoing efforts and to brainstorm new ideas that would continue the momentum already established. Based on these discussions, the Task Force expects to identify new ideas for prototyping over the next year. YBCA's final prototype involved testing the limits of the building lobby. How could the Center create a more hospitable, fluid feeling for visitors without rebuilding the entire space? How could YBCA ensure that the changes it made would not interfere with the needs of rental clients? For help in answering these questions, the Re-purposing the Building Task Force worked with architect and interior designer Suzanne Greischel, who donated her services to help revamp the Center's main lobby. Working with the Task Force, Greischel created sketches for specific areas of the lobby that aim to change the way people interact with the space. The task force is currently considering three options – a new information kiosk, a new permanent café/bar, and a ceiling structure that will allow the Center to change the atmosphere easily. YBCA said it intends to use funds from the Lab to complete the work once it makes a final decision.



Artist Niki Korh greets visitors to the TASTE! event at YBCA.

Obstacles and Enablers

Throughout the process, YBCA encountered a number of obstacles. The organization and its staff struggled against ingrained field-wide practices, such as “look, don’t touch,” and had to work hard to engage curators who had been trained to perpetuate these practices. YBCA also had to re-educate audiences who had become familiar and comfortable with what they believed was appropriate behavior when viewing art and listening to performances. Overall, the organization had to work consciously to break down the silos that impeded cross-functional collaboration. Within the organization, there was some resistance to YBCA’s shift in philosophy among those who saw the *Immersive Visitor Experience* as secondary to the Center’s mission. Because the new projects required considerable maintenance, YBCA’s Team had to be vigilant in getting other staff to see that these projects were integral to its mission and not “extras that take people away from their real work.”

Coordinating the various task forces, managing the constant flow of information, and maintaining adequate communication – particularly during the prototyping phase – also proved difficult. YBCA had to work carefully to ensure that the prototypes reinforced each other, did not become redundant with other services the Center offered, and remained focused on the overarching goal – creating an immersive experience for visitors.

YBCA knew that rapidly building awareness, knowledge, acceptance and good will in a large organization of 25 Board members

and 50 staff would be difficult. Its strategy for reporting the results of the Lab proved extremely effective. Instead of going to the Board to present a formal report on the Intensive, the Innovation Team adopted a one-on-one approach – a speed-dating encounter in which five two-member teams took one aspect of the *Immersive Visitor Experience* and made themselves available to individuals or groups of staff and Board to learn about what had happened during the Lab Intensive, how the ideas

had emerged, and how the Team believed the new work would serve YBCA’s mission.

The funds provided by the Lab during the prototype phase were critical in enabling YBCA to move quickly, test multiple ideas, evaluate impact, adjust and develop enhanced prototypes. They were also important in allowing the organization to hire experts to help develop and refine technology strategies.

The Impact

YBCA’s practices changed as it used the frame of visitor engagement to break down traditional silos. What YBCA learned in the Lab has widespread implication for multi-disciplinary presenters. The leverage that came from thinking like a visitor didn’t change the content of YBCA’s programs, but rather illuminated and re-positioned them in the eyes of both visitors and staff. Today, projects at YBCA are not dance projects or film projects or visual art projects. They are YBCA projects. The organization has re-organized its work into cross-departmental teams charged with bringing projects to life and using them to produce an *Immersive Visitor Experience*. This has created greater synergy within the organization, improved project coordination, and prompted colleagues from other organizations to call saying, “Hey, we hear you are doing something really new. Can you tell us about it?”

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The Innovation Team

Kathy Budas
Director of Marketing
and Communication

Wren Coe
Executive Assistant

Nick Colin
Receptionist/
Accounting Clerk

Kenneth Foster
Executive Director

James Kass
Executive Director
Youth Speaks

Kevin King
Artist/
Board Member

Emily Lakin
Membership
Manager

Julio Caesar Morales
Adjunct Curator

Crystal am Nelson
Marketing Assistant

Joël Tan
Director of
Community
Engagement

Facilitator:
John McCann
EmcArts