



# Cultural Innovation in Action

Case Studies from 2011 Grantees  
of The Rockefeller Foundation's  
NYC Cultural Innovation Fund

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**Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM)  
The BAM Fisher Building**

PREPARED BY:

EmcArts Inc.



The BAM Fisher Building helped shift BAM's local role in Brooklyn's creative community.

# Introduction

## About The Brooklyn Academy of Music

The Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) is the oldest continuously operating performing arts center in the country. BAM presented its first performance in 1861 and began operations in its current location in 1908. BAM currently operates the Peter J. Sharp Building (which houses the Howard Gilman Opera House, BAMcafé, and the BAM Rose Cinemas) as well as the BAM Harvey Theater. BAM is widely recognized for its commitment to innovative national and international programming, including the prestigious Next Wave Festival. BAM has an annual budget of \$50 million, and 750,000 people attend performances in its theaters each year.

250-seat performance venue, a rehearsal studio, an education classroom, and a roof terrace. Among the programs piloted during the grant period were expanded Next Wave Festival performances, the BAM Professional Development Program, and new education and humanities programs.

## About the Project

With support from the NYC Cultural Innovation Fund, BAM planned and piloted programs for the new BAM Richard B. Fisher Building adjacent to the Peter J. Sharp Building. Designed by Hugh Hardy, The BAM Fisher serves as an intimate venue for emerging voices in dance, theater, and music, as well as a home for expanded education and community programs. It is the first new space constructed on the BAM campus since 1987. The space includes a lobby, a flexible

# Process



A home for creative exchange between international artists and Brooklyn's cultural community, for Brooklyn artists, and for Brooklyn youth and their families.

- **Stephanie Hughley**  
Vice President for Education and Humanities



## Starting Conditions

BAM is widely known for its adventuresome programming, artistic risk-taking, and international reach. As early as 2004, BAM leaders were beginning to long for a space that would allow smaller, more intimate performances, and by the time the institution reached its 150th anniversary in 2012, they were asking themselves important questions about what that historic moment might mean for BAM's local role.

How could a large, global institution have a greater and more profound local impact and inspire greater ownership by the Brooklyn community? How could BAM overcome the limitations of its existing large-scale theaters with proscenium stages and offer more versatile and less costly space to smaller organizations? How could the organization create more customized space for artists to help them meet their creative objectives? And how could BAM respond to the increasing demand for its education programs by bringing more diverse education and humanities programming onsite?

Acting on a 2006 Community Engagement Study, a 2011 assessment of its education programs, and information gained through a series of focus groups with community leaders, BAM was already moving ahead with construction of a new building adjacent to its main facility when the opportunity to apply for a NYC Cultural Innovation Fund grant arose. When word arrived that BAM had been awarded a grant, staff began putting their programming plans and ideas into motion.

The BAM Fisher Building was originally meant to expand BAM's mission by providing the physical capacity and programmatic framework to nurture new artistic work, encourage local youth and families to engage with the arts, and create opportunities for Brooklyn cultural organizations

*Programming at the BAM Fisher connects international artists and Brooklyn's cultural community.*



to build organizational capacity through a professional development program tied directly to their work at BAM. Yet BAM staff envisioned the new building as more than simply a facility or an arts center. It would be, they imagined, “a home for creative exchange between international artists and Brooklyn’s cultural community, for Brooklyn artists, and for Brooklyn youth and their families.”

## Prototyping

BAM staff were not timid in their approach to programming the BAM Fisher, initiating a series of ambitious projects during the initial prototyping phase.

Carrying on a tradition of innovative artistic programming, BAM staff curated a full roster of 15 programs in the new space during the Next Wave Festival in 2012, increasing overall Festival programming by 82 percent and making the 30th Next Wave Festival the largest in BAM’s history. The inaugural season in the Fisher included new works by Michael Gordon and David Lang, as well as performances by Ireland’s Pan Am Theatre and Iceland’s Vesturport Theatre, among others. In 2013, the Fisher hosted 13 Next Wave presentations, including the Polish avant-garde group Karbido, a new play by Ain Gordon, a residency with Doug Varone and Argentina’s Brenda Angiel Aerial Dance Company, and a world premiere from Tere O’Connor Dance Company. BAM also presented 30 curated rentals, including performances from organizations participating in the professional development program.

The BAM Professional Development Program—offered in collaboration with the Kennedy Center’s DeVos Institute of Arts Management—also got off to a good start. Thanks to a grant from the Brooklyn Community Foundation, BAM offered significantly reduced rental rates to local organizations selected to participate in the program. Not only were these organizations able to present their work in the BAM Fisher in 2013, they also participated in a 14-month hands-on instruction program in management, fundraising, production and marketing. Taught by DeVos

Institute faculty and key BAM staff, the program was structured as nine three-hour workshops. During the pilot year, the Professional Development Program supported 14 dance companies: six Brooklyn-based organizations selected by BAM and eight New York City-based companies selected by the DeVos Institute. In addition, eleven dancers looking to make the transition to arts management (and who were currently participating in the DeVos Institute's Performers in Transition Arts Management Fellowship program) also attended the workshops and interned with the six core Brooklyn organizations.

During the program's second year, the focus shifted to multidisciplinary organizations, serving 10 organizations: five Brooklyn-based organizations selected by BAM and five New York City organizations selected by the DeVos Institute. Based on the previous year's experience, BAM changed the program structure, offering six six-hour workshops timed to coincide more closely with the work being done in preparation for the BAM Fisher's production schedule.

Finally, BAM turned attention to education and humanities programming—a cornerstone of its vision for the BAM Fisher. The 2011 education assessment had identified three specific needs: more family presentations; year-round offerings, including programs during summer and school breaks; and new collaborations with community groups. BAM staff attacked these priorities as aggressively and enthusiastically as they approached artistic and training initiatives. During the pilot year, BAM tested a series of weekend and family programs, featuring film screenings and music performances paired with hands-on workshops that enabled children to participate actively. *Books to Films* (with guest author Doreen Cronin) and *Puppets on Film* kicked off the series. In addition, BAM offered special post-show workshops for selected schools that attended a production of Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*; a free three-hour workshop for 36 high school students (*Richard's Rampage*) in conjunction with *Richard III*; a poetry slam for teens; and dance and shadow workshops for children ages 8-11 during spring break.

A second year of programming launched in January 2013 with an afternoon of storytelling and poetry. Other family programs in 2013 included master storyteller Charlotte Blake Alston, the Italian theatre company Kindur, a children's music festival in collaboration with Kindiefest, and theatre groups from Canada, Belgium, and Spain, among others. BAM also offered three new teen initiatives, in-school calligraphy workshops, a series of professional development workshops for teachers, four-day school break initiative with Pilobolus Dance Theatre, five BAMYouth summer workshops, and two distance learning poetry workshops with student groups in two different countries led by spoken-word artist Baba Israel.

Humanities activities during the pilot year featured artist talks with iconic artists who have played a special role at BAM, including director Robert Wilson; choreographers William Forsythe, Bill T. Jones, Chuck Davis, and Lin Hwai-min; Merce Cunningham Dance Company; multidisciplinary artist Meredith Monk; and composer Steve Reich. A backstage seminar for theater professionals and students enrolled in theater degree programs provided in-depth, hands-on instruction in how a play is mounted—from set building and lighting to sound design and touring. Held in conjunction with *Richard III*, the program included five 90-minute sessions. BAM also offered a master class with Batsheva Dance Company member Ia'Ara Moses as well as a new series of discussions entitled *On Truth (and Lies)* hosted by Simon Critchley, professor of philosophy at The New School. The pilot event—*The Faith of the Faithless*—was a sold-out discussion between Critchley and Princeton University professor Cornel West.

## Changes in Assumptions

Executive Producer Joseph Melillo and Stephanie Hughley, Vice President for Education and Humanities, credit the experience of the BAM team with enabling them to move the project forward as planned. One thing, however, surprised them. "This was supposed to be a place for Joe's programming," Hughley says, "but because the community has taken such ownership of the building, we have to

pay a lot more attention to scheduling and the movement of bodies. For example, where do we park all those strollers?”

Melillo says they had many assumptions during the first year in the BAM Fisher of what would work and be achievable, adding that they simply had to work their way through much of it. A big question, he says, was around seating for the Next Wave Festival, which typically had been reserved. After some consideration, staff decided to abandon past practice even though they anticipated some backlash from the public. “We didn’t know what to expect,” says Melillo, “but now we are comfortable with open seating, and when people come to the BAM Fisher, they know it’s different, and they accept it, too.”

## Obstacles and Enablers

“My vision was a completely flexible theater,” says Melillo. “But there are many challenges to the concept, the practicality of ‘completely flexible.’ You go from a wedding to a luncheon to a choreographer, then to a theater company to musicians and filmmaker. You also go from having the audience straight on, to having the audience on four sides or three sides or no seats at all.” Having as many as 15 different configurations from which to choose means that BAM staff are changing things every week. Maintaining flexibility and being able to turn events quickly was a big challenge, but an inspiring one, says Melillo, because it requires a creative, interactive environment in which everyone cooperates throughout the process. Hughley agrees, saying, “I was surprised by the speed with which we turned show after show around. The intensity was amazing.”

The rapid increase in programming meant that staff was challenged to create a management system that could respond effectively to different types and sizes of audiences. The new structure required a high degree of collective thinking and creative problem solving. “Luckily,” Melillo says, “this is BAM’s strength.” Hughley cites the huge emerging demand for use of the Fisher. “This is a good thing,” she says, but there is a challenge of how to balance that [strength] and serve as many needs as we can.”

Raising additional funds to support new initiatives was also challenging. In response, BAM launched *Ignite*, a three-year education fundraising campaign supported by a \$1 million matching grant from the SHS Foundation.

BAM’s own inherent strengths as an organization dedicated to presenting experimental and innovative artists and programs provided a firm foundation on which to build when programming the BAM Fisher. In addition, the experience of staff, strong partnerships with funders who supported new initiatives, collaborations with other organizations, and the assistance of outside consultants who helped with assessment and planning were also critically important to BAM’s success. Among the most important enablers of success, however, was BAM’s enthusiastic and well-organized communication with the local community—and its willingness to listen to community needs and expectations of how the new theater should function.

# Impact

## By the Numbers

BAM reports good attendance at events during the pilot year at the BAM Fisher. When the building opened in Fall 2012, BAM hosted a block party for the community. “We have a capacity of 450 in the building,” says Hughley, “but we had 1,000 people come over the course of an eight-hour day.” Family and community programs attracted a total audience of 2,863; attendance at post-show education workshops was nearly 1,000; and 904 people attended the poetry slam. Humanities programs attracted a total audience of 1,550. Nearly 12,500 people attended Next Wave Festival performances in the BAM Fisher. Attendance continued to grow in the second year, with 1,400 people attending the opening free workshop, and more than 3,200 attending six paid performances. New teen initiatives served 175 young people, and 65 teachers benefited from professional development workshops.

## New Pathways to Public Value

Stephanie Hughley describes the impact of the Fisher on BAM’s ability to connect with the local community in new ways. “What we’ve done is create a whole new arm of the BAM body,” she says, adding, “There is ownership taken of the building from a community of artists, students, parents and residents. We

knew there was a great demand, but to have lines of people standing out in the cold with strollers to get in to see a performance was a tremendous testimony to the need. What a great opportunity it is to fulfill and satisfy that need.” Hughley says that while they have “only begun to sense the impact of new family programming,” she hears from parents that their participation is affecting their families both at home and at school.

Joseph Melillo believes the Fisher is opening a whole new avenue for creating artistic value as well. “For the first time,” he says, “we are able to invite a group of artists who make intimate work to come and make that work in an architecturally appropriate environment. That’s huge.” And audiences are responding robustly and enthusiastically, with many Next Wave Festival performances sold-out far in advance. The ability to stream content nationally and internationally is also opening up artistic and education opportunities.

Looking back, staff are proud of the way BAM, as an internationally prominent organization, has found meaningful ways to operate just as effectively in its local neighborhood. Unlike most of its programming, which focuses on bringing nationally and internationally prominent artists and companies to a wide audience in New York, BAM Fisher programs are grounded in the needs of the Brooklyn community—providing just one more pathway to fulfilling a multi-faceted mission and purpose.



# Learn More

Visit [ArtsFwd.org](http://ArtsFwd.org) to watch a short documentary about this project and learn more about the 2011 Grantees of The Rockefeller Foundation's NYC Cultural Innovation Fund.

*Profile written by: Catherine Maciariello for EmcArts*

*All images: Meerkat Media*

## About The Rockefeller Foundation's NYC Cultural Innovation Fund

Through the NYC Cultural Innovation Fund, the Rockefeller Foundation invested \$16.3 million over six years to increase capacity for cultural innovation. The NYC Cultural Innovation Fund sought to reflect the creative aspirations of low-income and minority people, and to contribute to the development of theory and practice of integrating the arts into efforts to achieve cultural equity and community resilience.

The NYC Cultural Innovation Fund supported a diverse portfolio of experiments, explorations and innovations by 86 different cultural and community organizations in New York City. The Fund helped organizations experiment with new artistic programs and imaginative audience engagement strategies; involve community residents in creating work; present art in unconventional venues where it can be seen by a larger public; showcase work of minority artists and immigrant cultures; and pilot new revenue-generating approaches to sustain artists.

[www.rockefellerfoundation.org](http://www.rockefellerfoundation.org)

## About EmcArts

EmcArts is a social enterprise for learning and innovation in the arts. We envision a time when participating in art is recognized as lying at the core of human potential. EmcArts is dedicated to advancing a resilient not-for-profit sector that can make this vision a daily reality. Our programs support individuals, organizations, and communities on their journey to becoming highly adaptive.

[www.emcart.org](http://www.emcart.org)

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