Innovations in Space:

Sunder Ganglani (Co-Producer/Community Outreach, The Foundry Theatre), Charles Frasier (Director of Development, Portland Center Stage) and Michael Ross (Managing Director, CENTERSTAGE) discuss various innovations in the use of space.

Michael Ross:
Good morning folks. Are you ready to talk about innovations in space? It sounds like a sci-fi topic—innovations in space. (Laughter.) I hope that we’ll be able to share some information about innovations in space and that you’ll also share with us. But, obviously, space is very important to all that we do—how we use spaces that we have and how we think about the environments that we have and the new environments as our markets change, as our institutions change, as our people change in the way they interact with each other. So we’re going to talk about three different models about use of space—by Charlie Frasier from Portland Center Stage, Sunder Ganglani from the Foundry and me, Michael Ross from CENTERSTAGE. I’m going to turn to Charlie to start us off and talk about the new Portland Center Stage building.

Charles Frasier:
Thank you, Michael. We’re in our 20th season at Portland Center Stage and in October of 2006, we moved into our new building—our first and only building—as we’ve been in rental spaces before that in the Portland Center for the Performing Arts. What we did was to take a building that was a former military installation—an armory—that was built in 1891, so it’s 116 years old, and we basically built a building within a building. We couldn’t structurally do anything to the building itself—and when I say the building, it was the outer walls and the old growth Douglas fir timbers that made up the ceiling for the old roof. It was a 20,000-square-foot facility when we went there—basically two floors. It was a shell and had been empty for about five or six years and had been used for 30 years prior to that as a storage facility for the Blitz-Weinhard Brewery, who would drive trucks in there and store kegs of beer. For 85 years before that, it was a drilling place for the military, but it was also, for a number of years, the largest gathering place for the population of Portland under one roof—6,000 people could fit in there in chairs and balcony seating. It was never a theatre per se, but it was used as a theatre, in a sense, for a lot of different community events—whether it was basketball, or Portland wrestling was filmed in there, the New York Philharmonic performed in there, presidents spoke there, but, again, it was primarily a military installation.

When Gerding Edlen Development bought and began to develop these five blocks in the neighborhood called the Pearl District, they got this building as part of the purchase of the five blocks, and they wanted this building to become some type of community performing space. It almost became an REI (a sporting goods store), a 24-Hour Fitness center, a parking garage, and it was almost torn down. Fortunately for us, Bob Gerding, who is the principal for Gerding Edlen Development and had been on our board for a long time—it was his vision and the vision of our artistic director, Chris Coleman, that allowed this to happen. Now it’s called the Gerding Theater at the Armory. And, as I said, it was originally 20,000 square feet and we took it to 58,000 square feet. What is most significant about the building is that we’re a LEED certified, Platinum level building.
LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design and Platinum status is the highest level that you can achieve. We’re the only performing arts venue in a renovated historic building that has ever achieved Platinum status. We’re pretty proud of that fact, and it allows us to do what we call the four pillars of the organization. We’re certainly about the art form. Secondly, we’re about community, so now we have this huge gathering space where people can come. Third, we’re about sustainability—the greenness of the building. And finally, we’re about historic preservation.

For me as a fundraiser, if I can’t find one of these things that will attract someone to donate to Portland Center Stage, then they’re just not going to donate. This makes my challenge to raise money a little less challenging—although it’s certainly always challenging to raise money! Some of the aspects that make it a green building are: We collect rainwater up on our roof, and that’s called grey water. It rains on the roof and is collected in pipes that go down into a 15,000-gallon cistern that we installed under the street, and that grey water goes back into the building and flushes our toilets. It’s not drinkable water, and we have signs that say, “Please don’t drink the toilet water,” because you have to do that. (Laughter.) Another thing that that water does is that we have these structures that are held up on the third floor (we have five levels, but two are underground). On the third floor we have these machines that are called chill beams and water flows through these and it helps heat and cool the spaces, but it also helps with the lighting. One of the things that we found (and we estimate this since we don’t have hard numbers) is that the designers felt that we would use 40 percent less energy in this building than a like building that didn’t have all of these special modifications. So that’s a cool thing for us. And one of the things that one of our donors recently said is, “This building is just so Portland that it’s cool.” We wanted to achieve that, but we’ve gone beyond what we thought we’d achieve.

Another one of things that is part of the efficient design is that you walk into any office or space that isn’t a public area and the lights go on and go off after 30 seconds that you’ve been in the space. They work on motion, so if you’re not moving they go off. You can now tell when someone’s asleep at their desk because the lights go out! (Laughter.) All of the spaces in the administrative area and the less public spaces are on heat and cool self-monitoring systems. So if I come in on a Saturday and I’m the only person there, I don’t have to heat or cool the entire space, just my area. Another aspect is in the theatre itself. To cool the space, rather than have the air come down from the ceiling, the air comes up from the floor so it only has to cool eight feet and not the entire theatre.

Another thing with the building is that we went in and went from 20,000 square feet to 58,000 square feet. We actually dug 27 feet below street level and then went another 67 feet below street level to put in the two elevator shafts because none of those things had been in the building. If you can imagine this block-long building and all of that dirt and everything that came out of there. All of that had to go out through these two major double doors since we couldn’t do anything to the structure itself to take things out or bring in steel beams, etc. Since the walls of the building only went six feet underground, that fact that the building stood for 116 years before we went in and started to renovate it, is amazing in and of itself. And one of the reasons that it did stand is due to these old growth timbers that held the roof together—there’s 17 that go across and those are connected to the wall. To keep it safe and sound, we went beneath the ground and shot steel rods down these 30 foot holes and added cement in, so the building within the building is secure. And people say that if the old building should ever fall the one inside
will stay put. And when I say the main building, when you look at it, you really can’t tell the difference per se, but the architects liken it to building a ship in a bottle.

A few other things that make us green: Our seats in the main theatre—we have a 599-seat main theatre and a 200-seat studio black box—the seats are made of recyclable materials; the carpets are recyclable materials; our paneling is recycled Douglas Fir. Also, within the green realm, a percentage of our staff is encouraged to take public transportation to work or to bike to work. We’re very involved in Flexcar—we have Flexcar spots in front of the theatre. We do a lot of recycling within the building. We have seven caterers that we use in the building and they all have to be green. The entire staff goes through training to understand what green means, and we host forums for the community about what being green means. So we’re not just trying to practice but to live it in everything that we do. With that I think I’m going to stop and let Sunder go.

Sunder Ganglani:
Thank you. You and I are at polar ends of the spectrum here. The Foundry doesn’t have a space, so we have nothing to be green for exactly. What I was originally approached to talk about was a commission that we call Open House, which is taking place in 30 different apartments—private spaces—across the five boroughs in the city. I’ll start by following the trajectory of an idea that is beginning with Open House, which is what the Foundry does. We follow the trajectory of an artist or commissioned idea to wherever or whatever it takes us. Open House started from a town hall, a public forum, that we did for our local community in the East Village but was open to anyone who showed up. And, over the four sessions, 500 people had shown up. It was curated around the issues of food, water and shelter in New York City—how an artistic community negotiates their lives through the necessities and the traumas of acquiring those necessities in New York City, especially shelter, which by far were the most popular ones.

Aaron Landsman, who is a collaborative artist with Elevator Repair Service and an emerging playwright, was really excited about the shelter ones. He approached us about the possibility of doing something. He wanted to do something in a public space, but we ended up doing something in the most private space that you could possibly imagine. He wrote us a piece that has three characters and deals with the concerns of living in New York City—a couple dealing with their relationship and negotiating that relationship and all of the weird transgressions that can happen as they’re moving throughout the five boroughs of New York, depending on their economics. What this has done for us, which is really interesting, it’s made our email lists more personable. Because we had no idea who was on it until we sent out a blast asking if they wanted to have our show in their house. So we're meeting strangers constantly. Last night, for example, I was in an apartment across the street from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, drinking dry sherry with somebody who had never heard of our work but got our email. So now she’s doing our show!

So the space of the Foundry is kind of a transgressive public space that is continuing to articulate itself around the concerns of a particular artist’s idea. Aaron’s piece performs in February and March across the five boroughs, and we have no idea what’s going to happen. We’ve also started to think about each of the hosts’ apartments as kind of co-producers because they all have a different set of concerns. For example, you should see the list of questions to ask—it’s pretty ridiculous—shoes on or off, is the dog nice or is the dog mean, can you hear the water in the bathroom if someone uses it? And then we ask some interesting questions about their neighborhood proper, which has been
enlightening because people in the city love to talk about where they live and how they got there. Aaron is taking great pains to write that material into each of the scripts, so it’s different for each of the apartments.

One of the most challenging parts of this is making people understand that this is a piece of, almost, high art, and it’s not just a party for their friends. But that said, it’s also kind of a party for their friends. So calibrating all of these different intentions has been really problematic—establishing our organizational idea has been problematic each time. But what has been enlightening has been meeting strangers who we would have never met before and tapping into their communities.

I’m here to talk about Open House but I also want to mention another piece that we’re doing because all of our season is about transgressions in public spaces. It’s a piece called Etiquette that’s going on at Veselka at 2nd Avenue and 9th Street, 24 hours a day, at half hour blocks of time. It’s for two people, and they sit across from each other at a table with earphones on, and the audience and performer are the same thing. The audio recorder is a dual-layered DVD. Both partners are given a completely different set of directives to speak to each other, to perform to each other. We will have it set up right close to the window and will place a fake proscenium on the actual glass, so when you walk by you’ll see two people—strangers to each other and to you—performing for each other. Again, what’s problematic about what the Foundry does is to establish your organization over and over and over again around the concerns of each commission. But why we do that and why we like it is because the art itself takes priority over our kind of brand. And it’s ended up that we actually don’t and couldn’t have a brand. So I think I’ll end there as well.

Ross:
Fantastic, thank you. As a managing director and someone who worries about bills and such, I’m envious about not having a utility bill! (Laughter.) At CENTERSTAGE, we embarked on something a few years ago—like a number of you have in terms of trying to develop a younger audience—something that we call our Gen Next Program. And in developing our Gen Next Program, we hired a full-time coordinator, someone who is a senior staff member, who all day and all night thinks about how to engage a younger audience in CENTERSTAGE in whatever way that may mean. That may mean volunteer ushering, that may mean joining our board, that may mean through the audience, that may mean through artistry, or that may mean through programming. We looked at this in a very holistic way and said that this has got to be holistic or it’s just not going to work. It can’t be just about audience but it also has to be about programming and it certainly has to be about environment. So I’m going to talk mostly about the environmental piece rather than the others. I’m going to talk about our space and our constant look at our space.

We have a six-floor building—150,000 square feet—a building originally built in the 1850s. It was a Jesuit Boys High School—and if the walls could talk…I’m sure it would be very interesting. (Laughter.) It’s a funky great space in midtown Baltimore—a huge space with lots of nooks and crannies with two theatres and a lot of weird spaces that we could use for a variety of different things. Our Gen Next coordinator decided that, not only are we going to do all of the other things to attract young audiences, but also we were also going to use the space. And, in this specific instance, use the space in such a way, à la like what many of you have done, in terms of happy hours and parties where you can eat and drink, and à la what museums do—like the story in the New York Times
about what the Brooklyn Museum did. But take that a little bit further because our concern was that we didn’t want to just make it a cocktail party, though that was a big part of it, but also make it somewhat more interactive with who we are and what we do and that may be the slight innovation in this project and what we’ve taken from this.

We created this program called Project One, and we call it a unifying arts event. And frankly, for the longest time, I had no idea what the hell this was or what it would look like, but we gave it over to her and, in fact, she took the whole building—all six floors. She took the building, took the floors, took the staff’s talents as well, and is using all of that as part of this. All of the production staff got involved and anybody on staff under 35 got on board as well. It was lights, sound, the props department and the costume department. And we said, let’s show off your talents. They’ve got talents that they’ve obviously been using on stage for the six productions we do in the season, but they do know how to use this talent, this equipment, for something else. And she designed this evening in the entire building that had performance pieces in different spaces, bands in different spaces, lots of drinking and food, and a hookah lounge that was created by our prop and scene shops.

Ultimately, what excited me most was she created a fashion show using our costume shop and costume stock, as well as our lighting and sound people, and made this incredible fashion show. They took what was in our stock and kind of contemporized pieces from it and engaged young models from the Baltimore area to be in it. The other key to this was the creation of partnerships and sponsorships like crazy. I understand sponsorships as going to a corporation and getting a bunch of money and putting their logo on something. But in this younger world, sponsorships and partnerships are not necessarily about money but about avenues and people and connections and maybe some products or supplies of some sort.

So she created this evening and we charged $25 or something and there were a lot of free tickets for sponsors and partners to populate this thing with a lot of hip young people as well. There wasn’t a single ad for this but there was a lot of printed material for distribution in clubs and restaurants and other venues. There was a website created for it where people could go and find out about this and connect with each other in that social networking way that’s going on today. Everything else was viral and through email and just connections and people talking. Well, two days before the event we had sold maybe 150 to 200 tickets to this thing. Our building is big and can take a lot of people in there, and I thought is this really worth it? Ultimately, I arrived about a half hour before this thing was to start and, when I got there, there was a line at our box office out our lobby, down the street and around the corner—800 people showed up for this first event. I went in and looked around and there were these performances going on, and I thought this was fantastic. People were excited! After all the performances were done, I was standing around thinking I don’t get this? What is this? I don’t go to clubs, but what we created was this sort of “Club CENTERSTAGE.” People had an incredible time and stayed until 2 a.m. doing whatever they do in a club until those hours.

We’ve done this a couple of more times and we hope to create a different image about CENTERSTAGE, a different audience, and hope that they will eventually buy tickets to our programming. But we do have issues about whether this programming is relevant. We have issues about accessibility to tickets and making this exciting for them to do. Making them a new audience but appropriately converting them—as we’re very protective of these young people that have come in and not thinking the next thing we
have to do is send them our season brochure. That’s just going to bore the bejesus out of them! We need to figure out what it is to really connect them to what we’re doing.

From this, we’ve created what I call “Club CENTERSTAGE.” We’ve just done a refresh of our lobby space and we’re working with architects on a complete overhaul of our space, designed primarily around thinking about a younger audience and use of the space. Even in what we currently redesigned, we’ve created lounge space and a much more funky, younger look to the place. Now on Friday night, in our regular programming, we’ve created this ongoing atmosphere that is sort of our Club CENTERSTAGE and is called Live CENTERSTAGE. It’s a happy hour of sorts, where you can come to it and not go see a show but you can come to this and see our show as well. It’s from 6 to 8 p.m. and young professionals gather and the whole look and feel is completely different than the usual CENTERSTAGE—the lights are down, the music is up, there’s live entertainment. We actually have a deejay spinning music as you come into the lobby. The ushers are young and hip and hopefully pierced in someway. (Laughter.) It’s a whole other look and feel, and we’re hoping that this look and feel will get others who understand that look and feel to be part of what we’re doing.

I want to leave CENTERSTAGE at that and go to a different aspect. I’d like to go back to Portland for a minute before opening this up and ask, why are you even doing this—going green? What is it in terms of image or brand that you’re trying to create in terms of audience?

Frasier:
We really wanted to redefine what this movement would mean to us in terms of our relationship with the community. And, fortunately, the building is in the hippest part of the city right now, called the Pearl. It’s where the best restaurants are; there are a ton of galleries there. However, there wasn’t a community hub spot under one roof there beyond a great outdoor park. We wanted to see how we could connect to the community, and our goal in changing our mission is that PCS desires to inspire our community by bringing unexpected stories to life. We wanted those stories to be more than what was going on stage. When we were designing the theatre, we brought out a guy named Ed Schlossberg, who’s married to Caroline Kennedy. Ed is one of the leading designers of spaces and Mr. Gerding underwrote him to come out for a few days. Ed said what you want to do is bring the proscenium out into the lobby and out into the street and out into the community.

In doing that, the lobby and the outside, we’ve got a sliver park on one side where there isn’t parking and that water that’s collected on the roof goes into a water feature down there. There will be benches and sculptures and it will be a place where the community can gather and sit outside and be part of the theatre. Also, we’re not a theatre that opens at 6:30–7:00 p.m. for people to come in. Our building is open 13 hours a day starting at 10 a.m. We have a café that operates from 10 a.m. until an hour after the show. You can get breakfast, lunch, cocktails and pretty simple fare. We have free Wi-Fi in the lobby, so you have people in there working on their laptops hanging out in the Todd Oldham Lazy-Boy chairs. Todd Oldham and Lazy-Boys never made much sense to me but Lazy-Boy donated all of the lobby furniture from the Todd Oldham line and it’s cool and hip just like what we’re trying to be. And it’s a comfortable place to come and hang out.

Another reason people seem to like to do that is we had four things created for the building by a company called Second Story. Second Story is a multimedia interactive
company that happens to be based in Portland but had never done a project in Portland. They had done a lot of stuff for the Smithsonian. They came in and created four pieces for us and we hope that will attract people in and, once they’re in the building, we hope that they’ll be attracted to Portland Center Stage and attracted to the things that they’re seeing. One of the projects they did was to create two play boards that you touch on the screen and can pull up any show that we’re doing in the season and you can choose an interview with any of the actors that are in a show. We have an in-house videographer that does an interview with every one of the actors—about 30 seconds each. The director is interviewed; the costume designer is interviewed; Chris Coleman is interviewed about why he chose these shows. And you can get a better understanding of what we do. Our goal for the second one (they now both play the same thing) is to include things about the community at large in the arts. It can be a great place to come and find out information about what’s going on in the arts in Portland.

The second piece that they did for us is what they called a historiscope or an auricabinet. And the outer part of this cabinet is a replica of the building and inside the cabinet, we have two computers and two viewing parts that you can view from two sides that people can view different things at the same time. It’s all computer generated and it’s the 116-year history of the building and all of the different aspects of what has occurred in the building. It’s done in a very Monty Pythonesque way with images from the Portland Historical Society. The third piece that they did for us was this huge touchscreen TV that talked all about sustainability and there are about 28 different interviews on there. You hear from the architects, the theatre designers or Mr. Gerding.

And the fourth one that we have—and I as a fundraiser am really pleased with—on our donor wall (and our donor wall is in a small donor room, and the donor room is sponsored by Key Bank). On both sides of the room we project all of the donors’ names from all of our campaigns. We can add special notices on the wall if we want to, quotes from donors about why they support Portland Center Stage. These names float in and out and then all of a sudden a quote floats in. What’s great about that with this technology is when we get a new donor in or they go to the next level, their name gets keyed into our Tessitura system and it automatically links to the computer on the donor wall and it updates their information with just one touch. So the good thing is if a donor doesn’t honor their pledge, we can take them off the wall, but if they increase we can move them up. We like to believe that this is a moving piece of art that people are really engaged in.

We did some similar things with the space, like Michael was talking about, trying to bring in younger people. Being in the Pearl with all of these art galleries in the area, we’re now part of what is called First Thursday when new shows open. With the gallery spaces in our building, we have artists coming into the building and rotating that art in and out. We have entertainment there to bring people in and, of course, we have bars, so that brings people in. We rent out the facility and any space in the facility that we possibly can. We actually turn away more rentals than we can accommodate sometimes because we’re only dark one night a week, since we do nine productions a year. But that doesn’t mean we can’t have something going on in the mezzanine while we have something going on in the mainstage. One of my favorite things that happened last year was we had opening night on the mainstage; we had a show playing in the studio; we had a show rehearsing in the rehearsal hall; we had a reception in the mezzanine; and, following the shows that night, we had a late-night jazz party that went until 2 a.m.
One of our board members (our treasurer, who’s always looking for ways to make money) said, “What I care about is the time between late night and 8 a.m. when the building isn’t being used. There’s a funding opportunity there!” So now we have a lot of independent filmmakers who come there between midnight and 8 a.m. because it’s inexpensive and they use some of our technology and just enjoy the coolness of being in that space. We have people using the space in the daytime like tai chi classes, yoga classes, a ton of fundraisers in there for other organizations. One of the things I love is that it’s become a place in Portland that you can host a fundraiser. You can fit 360 people on two levels for a dinner. What I love is that you have all of these organizations that are doing black tie events and these are the people that we want to get, if they are not supporters of Portland Center Stage. They’re in there, and they’re interacting with these different pieces of equipment, seeing everything in there, learning that the building is green. I used to be one of those fundraisers that said that I didn’t want to give deals to groups that may hurt us—raising money on our turf. But it’s been one of the greatest opportunities for us because, again, they’re seeing us when they might not otherwise see us.

Oh, there’s so much that goes on. We have a grand staircase that’s very popular for weddings—we’ve had a ton of weddings in there; we’ve had dog shows in there, wine tastings, anything you can imagine that’s outside of the realm of theatre. We give nonprofits a huge discount to use the space since we are really committed to being a community space and giving people the opportunity to utilize the building.

**Ross:**
We’re doing much of the same things. As I said, we have six floors and in our elevator we have signs about all of the things that are happening on the six floors. And I’m so proud of the times when we have something on every floor. It’s a big resource that we all have—our buildings—and it’s definitely a way of developing new audiences. But it also goes back to the fact that we need a different relationship with our audiences, whether old or young. People expect to be more interactive with you. And I think being the place where they’re going to have their coffee or share information with you is definitely a plus. I think the days of picking up a Styrofoam cup, as Diane Ragsdale said, and putting a $1 in a tin can and going in and watching a show and sitting there being quiet—those days are over. People expect some more from every experience they’re having. And your work [Sunder] is obviously about the relationship with them.

**Ganglani:**
Yes, that’s correct. I actually have a question for both of you. How do you imagine all of the ways that your space is enacting itself and attracting different kinds of people for different things other than theatre? How do you imagine these new people to take part in a performance, and how do you imagine and conceive of how this is affecting your programming for your stages?

**Ross:**
I think that some of this is about developing a relationship with our audience and how they are spending more time and building a different relationship with us. We’ve created a sort of “book club” around the work that we do on our stages—particularly when our plays are social or current issues plays. Every night after the performance in our lounge area, we facilitate this “book club” conversation. So basically it’s about them seeing the play and then talking about it. And it’s as much about interacting with each other and drinking coffee as it is about the play. We think this builds a deeper relationship with
them. Some of the other stuff is about generating income, whether through rentals or
other events. They may or may not buy a ticket but it definitely builds income that
supports our mission. And I think about the way that Susan Booth at the Alliance in
Atlanta is interacting with her community by inviting theatre groups into the Alliance to
actually perform in the space. And this goes to what you were saying earlier. We used to
be so territorial about who we were and the work that we did. I think it’s about breaking
this down and saying that there is other programming that’s pretty exciting and
interesting, and how do you interact with these groups?

Ganglani:
Also, I’m sure that a lot of people who are coming to your yoga classes fancy
themselves to be emerging artists.

Frasier:
I agree. It does expose them in a different way. Our expectations keep getting exceeded
with the building and the opportunities that we find. We have a lot of corporations that
have receptions in there, and we were surprised in the beginning when some of them
asked for a tour of the building before the reception for the whole group. But this gave us
a great opportunity to show 50 attorneys around to see the building and explain why it’s
relevant and important and why we needed it in Portland.

Talking about programming and bringing in different audiences, we just closed Cabaret,
which was the highest grossing show in our history. We’re probably going to top out at
$850,000. Chris had an incredible idea about how to program that show. He went after
and “stalked,” for quite some time, the woman who was our lead, Sally Bowles. Her
name is Stormy Large and she was on Rock Star: Supernova last year and a was
runner-up. She’s a Portland person, but she’s never acted before. She’s taken acting
classes before but never acted—and she’s totally Sally Bowles. That bit of programming
and casting has brought in all of these twentysomethings and other people who knew
her but didn’t know about her acting and certainly didn’t know about Portland Center
Stage, and it has brought in a whole new audience to the theatre. So, yes, I think our
programming has changed somewhat in Chris’s thinking about engaging different people
in the community that might not otherwise think about Portland Center Stage.

Ross:
Questions?

Deeksha Gaur:
(inaudible)...If you could speak to the tradeoffs of creating this multiuse space and
programming—are you using your talent in different ways?

Frasier:
Well, certainly in our move we had to add more staff than we had before. We were a
renter before, now we’re a landlord. We have a full-time community outreach person
who tries to program all of these events and rentals coordinators. We had to recruit 600
volunteers to be ushers. Before, all the ushers were provided by the Center for the
Performing Arts. So we certainly had to upgrade all of those things. Our budget definitely
went up, so that was a tradeoff. Another thing that we’re struggling with is the amount of
time that we spend on groups that come in and want to learn about the building and
sustainability. It’s really a model, the building, and we’re becoming a leader in this. That
was not an original part of our mission and we’re struggling with it. Now do we have to
find some funding to bring on somebody to be the “green” person and help bring together the people in the city who are also into sustainability? Portland is a green city. It’s not part of our mission, but it has become one of the components, and you have to be able to not have other things take away from that person’s responsibility to operate the building. That’s been a tradeoff and a thing that we’re learning.

Another tradeoff is dealing with actors because actors don’t smoke, right? (Laughter.) Well, actors need to have their smoke breaks and being a green building, you can’t smoke within 25 feet of the building. So an actor on a short break who wants to pop out the door and grab a cigarette—they’ve got to go down a block in the rain (which happens a lot in Portland). So that’s a challenge and a tradeoff—keeping them happy. But I think for the few minor setbacks, it’s been worth it. We went from an office of 1,800 square feet that we’d been in for 19 years, creating costumes in the hallway, to a 58,000-square-foot facility that is state of the art, that people love, that is cool to go to. I know for me and the staff, we feel better about the jobs that we do because we’re doing more than just theatre. We’re doing more educational programs because we don’t have to fight with someone over scheduling space. We don’t have to pay more money for the space. We can extend shows. We don’t have to know a year in advance that we want to extend a show that we haven’t even opened yet. So it effects our bottom line in so many ways. So, the tradeoffs don’t seem to be too challenging. It’s been about being better stewards for the environment, and we’re getting good at it.

Ross:
I think that we’ve spent more time than money when we’re inviting all of these people into our building—and I think that’s what all of us need to be doing—which means we’re spending more time with each other—and maybe it’s not the time that we spend creating that ad to get people in, but that one-on-one time and talking to people, inviting them in. For me, it’s less about hardcore dollars that we spend (although our parties are making us money now) and rather the time that we spend with people. And in most cases it actually excites our staff as well. Maybe that’s the flipside of this interaction—we all, as human beings, like that interaction as well. I have to tell you that our production people love showing off their talent and what they do and talking about it. What’s been interesting is that it’s difficult for me to do these post-show conversations—à la book club—that we’re doing in our lobby, and saying, let’s get a staff person there every night, just to facilitate, not to dictate the conversation, and ask for volunteers. And I wonder if there will be a day where I think should we do that, can we do that, as I don’t want to overwork our people, but we actually do get them in all levels of staff. It’s about being part of a conversation about the work that we do. But I do worry about that, though, about burning our staff out.

Ganglani:
I have a question for you, in your comment about bringing the proscenium all the way out: We’re actually building a proscenium in people’s apartments. What if you extract the performance and bring it to the public? And, also, are you using the alternative nooks and crannies in your amazing buildings for programming? Is the yoga studio used for like a small theatre company around the corner that may need a space? Is that something that you’re thinking about in the future to make these alternative spaces available as performing spaces?

Frasier:
Our midlevel between the first floor and the lower level is public and is where the majority of the restrooms are. In the ladies’ restroom there are 14 stalls, and we’ve had performance art in the ladies’ restroom. (Laughter.) We’ve had all types of things go on. Portland Institute for Contemporary Art does a festival every year called TBA (Time Based Art), and they used our building and actually used every nook and cranny doing this art, whether it was in the restroom or the rehearsal hall or in the hallway in the Canteen. They used everything. We’re also dog-friendly. Staff can bring their dogs to work, so that’s always cool. I just had to throw that in!

Audience: (inaudible)

Frasier:
Well, certainly at the most basic level we track attendance. We have a concierge and there’s only one way into the building and we track every single person who walks in the door. Last year, we had 117,000 people see performances and we had another 24,000 that were in the building for some reason or another. So at that very basic level, we do track that. As far as getting information from people, we do offer the ability to sign up for information about Portland Center Stage. We don’t want to be intrusive to those who are renting the space, so we don’t capture information about every person who is in there. We encourage them to share the information with us, but it’s not a requirement when they rent from us. When we do have the ability to capture information, we put them in our system and send them our email blasts and our email newsletters. With Tessitura, we are able to track whether they’re buying tickets or making donations. So we’re tracking it. Can we do better at it? Yes. If you can think of better ways to do that, I’d love to hear them.

Ross:
I think I said this earlier, but we’re trying to capture as many emails as possible and, at our rental events, we encourage them to use our box office for reservations so that lets us capture their name, address, email, etc. But we’re also very particular about what then we would follow up with. I think it’s important because all of us just want to jump to getting them to buy a subscription, and I don’t know if they’re going to. So why waste your time on sending that print brochure?

Audience:
(inaudible)...What’s the next step with these teens wrapped around the building?

Ross:
Well, we’ve started doing the discount ticket program on Friday nights. We actually had two different image campaigns about our shows. There was one that was very much a young-geared image campaign with funky postcards and emails—it didn’t tell you a whole lot about what was going on but was more about the image—and a more traditional campaign. And now the two are converging in a way—the new and old. As we’ve talked about already, it’s important to attract young people and part of the innovations in space are about that, but I have to say that even we, as babyboomers, like to think that we are young and interesting and still hip. We like to chase after that great new restaurant that has the really cool feel and look to it, as we also like to think that the places that we go are kind of cool and interesting. So they do converge, and we’ve embraced the idea that it’s okay to create a different image about who we are and our look. It’s not so much about who we are but who they are.
Diane Ragsdale:
I’m glad to hear you say that you’re not necessarily obsessed with turning these visitors to your parties into ticket buyers, because I think the days of only selling tickets to your shows has got to stop. We have to understand that we’re critical in creating social context, cultural context, ways for people to meet one another. Being a space that young artistic people can go to meet other young artistic people after work is a great thing. I’m so taken with these projects, Sunder, that you’ve been talking about and how they go right to the heart of redefining value and relationship to people. It’s not about: We have a show, so if you’re hip and culturally literate enough you’ll get it and, if you’re not, go away, we’re not interested in you. But it’s about what this relationship is between each other and brokering that. That’s what audience development is. It’s brokering relationships between people and art and people and people. I applaud all three of you. I think it’s extraordinary what you’re doing.

Ross:
I was just reading an article about a new movie theatre that just opened up in downtown Baltimore, and in the article the general manager was quoted as saying, “We have a bar and they’re sitting and standing there and we don’t actually care if they come see the movie.” And I think that’s it exactly. It’s the use of the space and they’re making money that supports the mission, and they don’t care if they go see the movie.

Audience:
Did you receive any negative dissent when you moved into these alternative programs? And how did you deal with that to convince people that this was a good thing?

Ross:
(Laughter.) I don’t think we’ve convinced everyone about that yet! We did it in measured steps as well and the whole rental thing does take a lot of people’s time. We really had to measure it and not do too much all at once. With these parties, we realized the first time that we did it, it did upset a lot of people. They were thinking that they already had too much work to do and that it was extra work for them. And we said, “Well, think about it as part of your job and job description. That yes, we’re going to be doing these things and you should embrace it in that sense.” We do this big gala and we have dinners all over the place and a performance and every one of our production people works on it and everyone in the building works on it, and there’s no question about working on the gala. So what we did was to say that it’s the same thing with this. This is now part of our programming and part of what we do and embrace it as such. We did, though, hire on more people to add to the mix. But it is tough to change your image in so many ways.

Ganglani:
I might eat my foot after saying this but we know from the work that we’re doing that young people are just as excited about this programming as well as new forms of theatre. And as you said, these dual campaigns are going to converge. It is exciting to me to see how a yoga studio, green spaces and commissioning of new work that’s being done, so there’s this trifecta in the way that your audiences are being engaged with your work

Ross:
As Diane said, it’s about a new relationship with the audience. It’s not passive; it’s not “sit in the dark and shut up.” It’s got to be an active relationship.
Audience:
Your site-specific work—can you talk a little bit about the process?

Ganglani:
Our audience cap on the top is limitless. If someone has an apartment that can handle a lot of people, we’ll take it. On the bottom, it’s 15 but we have accepted apartments that are only 10 because the hosts are so wonderful that we want to do the shows there. How we found them was we just started spreading the word among the writers’ communities, our own personal communities; we sent email blasts; we got some marginal press, and people found out about it. The people who were interested kind of rose to the surface and self-selected themselves. And what’s been interesting, too, is that we’ve gotten low-income housing on the periphery of Staten Island, and we’ve gotten penthouses on the Upper East and West Side. It’s been this remarkable diversity and disparity between these two places, and their relationship to their neighborhood and our art-making is completely dissimilar, which enlivens and makes the work even more interesting to see it in these different locations. What we’ve started doing, too, is inviting some of the hosts from these disparate locations to attend locations in opposite places. Everyone who self-selected themselves is really interested in the meat of the project. And what the meat of the project is, is the economic disparity in the city and these huge varying discourses of life in the city. So someone who has a penthouse on the Upper West Side is really interested in having the hosts on the periphery of Staten Island in low-income housing attend their performance. And the opposite occurred too, which was a big surprise to us.

Michael Robertson:
In not having a space, what are the freedoms and challenges that you have? What is your office space? Where do you rehearse? There’s some space somewhere, right?

Ganglani:
Our office space is literally the size of my thumbnail. It’s like a holdover from the 1960s Ukrainian era. It’s directly next to Veselka on 2nd Avenue and 9th Street. It’s really tight quarters with orange carpeting, and it’s packed, packed, packed with stuff that is either outdated or useless or that we could probably use a couple of years later. We’ve established a network of rehearsal spaces in our neighborhood, primarily with Ukrainian establishments and organizations. We have a rehearsal space that is directly next door that functions during the day as a place for the Ukrainian community to use as a rehearsal space for a youth orchestra. For Open House, we rehearsed in the actors’ homes and in our homes, which is ideal because we all live someplace. (Laughter.) We’ve also established a network of theatres that have spaces, like P.S. 122 and St Ann’s Warehouse. But ultimately how we think about space is predicated on how we think dramaturgically about what particular work we’ve commissioned. So if Aaron’s piece wanted to be at Lincoln Center, we would have tried to get it to Lincoln Center. But it wanted to be in people’s apartments. Kirk Lynn’s piece, Major Bang, wanted to be at St. Ann’s Warehouse, so we put it there. It’s really that kind of trajectory that we follow in regards to finding spaces and it’s predicated solely on what the intentions of the artists. It’s pretty green not to have a space. (Laughter.)

The benefits are that we actually can commission artists to do whatever the hell they want to do. They don’t have to make something for a particular space that has a particular audience capacity, where the audience experiences the work in a particular relationship. If they want to do something on a boat, which is one of our commissions
now, or if they want to do something on a rooftop, which is also one of our commissions now, we can accommodate that. The bad part is more on the administrative level. We have to keep establishing an organizational brand around every single project. So we have a core group of audience members who understand who we are and have seen most of our shows for years, but the audience around each of our productions is completely different sometimes. Three years ago, we did a production that was in Russian and wasn’t translated. So now we have this huge population of Russian people who keep coming back to see our work We want to keep them but they keep forgetting who we are because we don’t have a building. It’s really about identity problems. But we actually decided that it wasn’t going to be a problem for us anymore because we really wanted to continue supporting artists in the way that we do. So we made a decision.

Audience:
Do you document the things you do, and do you have a website?

Ganglani:
Yes, we document all of the things we do. We have a functional website, we viralize the work on YouTube when it's legal to do so, and we have really strong connections with the virtual world. In fact, one of our current pieces is happening solely online. So all of the regular ways that one keeps in touch, we do but there’s no center for community building. There’s no place for them to come and engage with us unless we’re in production.

Ross:
It’s interesting that we’re all talking about identity. Whether we have space or don’t have space, it’s about our brand and our identity and this image that we’re trying to project out about who we are. And everybody does this. Certainly your space does project your identity and your image and everybody’s does, but don’t think about that dollar in the coffee can. If that’s your purpose, great, think about it. Every retail store does this. They think a lot about their environment and they change it. We renovated our lobby eight years ago and when we were going to change it everybody said, “Well we just did this eight years ago.” But eight years is a lifetime ago when people think about space and environment. I said, “We have to do it again.” If you go to any of these retail stores these days, they are changing their space every three to five years.

Frasier:
Continuing on about branding, that’s been one of our challenges we’re going through right now. We have a branding taskforce who are looking at our brand because, for so many years, we were Portland Center Stage. Now people refer to us as the Gerding Theater. Or people say they’re going to Portland Center Stage and others say isn’t that the Gerding Theater or the Armory? We’re three different things—we are a historic building and a new theatre, but we’re still us. And we’re trying to bring the focus back on Portland Center Stage and that is the brand, and the Gerding Theater is the place where the shows happen, and the Armory is this historic building. But we want people to refer back to Portland Center Stage, not all three of these. And, for some, your title and the name of your building is all one thing. But we’re grappling with three different things. That’s one of our challenges, but we’re beginning to figure it out.

Ganglani:
One more benefit when thinking about not having a space is there’s a whole community of companies in the city that don’t have spaces, and that’s what defines them as a
community. So our resources are shared constantly, our artists are shared. There’s a support group of people who are constantly networking and thinking about making work together and they tend to have the same ideology about theatre. So it establishes a supportive artistic community that shares resources but also shares in a dialogue what their ideas are for new art-making, which is an incredible benefit.

Ross:
One other thought that I’ve been thinking about our industry, you know, the museum world has done a remarkable job about creating destination places, a place to go, with cafes and restaurants, bookstores and whatever it is, but other ways to go to a museum and make that museum relevant. Are our places relevant to our own communities? It’s a question for us all. Okay, one more question, and make it a good one as it’s going to be the last one! (Laughter.)

Audience:
It’s about the technical details about the LEED certification. Did you estimate the cost that LEED would add to the project, and, on the other hand, were there either traditional or non-traditional sources of funding that came to the project that otherwise might not have?

Frasier:
Absolutely! The project itself is a $36.1 million project, which we still have a little over $8 million to raise. We did the whole campaign backwards. Usually, you say let’s do a feasibility study, a philanthropic study, how much money is out there, what can the community support and all of those things. And with the building being up already and it could have been sold for something else or demolished, we had to go the opposite way and not do a silent phase but get some money raised so that people knew we were committed. In doing that, all of these partnerships were formed—with the development commission, with the Portland Family of Funds, all of these different entities. And we were eligible for tax credits that we wouldn’t have otherwise gotten. We got money from the Housing and Urban Development that we wouldn’t have gotten. We certainly have gotten money from people who care about sustainability that wouldn’t have given to us otherwise, some foundations that might not have given to us. So it certainly helped us attract money. Yes, doing LEED did cost more money but the saving comes back in that we’re not spending as much money to operate. So, in the long haul, it worked to our benefit. But there were a lot of things that the designers wanted to do or were challenged to do because of certain limitations that were put on us. By and large, though, we still would do it the same way—preferably with half of the campaign raised before we kicked it off publicly because it is a bit more of a challenge now to raise that remaining amount of money. However, for a lot of people in the community, they couldn’t fathom what this was going to be and how it was going to happen. Now they get it and can see it and the cultivation continues. Technically, we don’t own the building until the loan structure is paid off. A separate nonprofit owns it—the Armory Theatre Fund. Once we pay it off, then it’s ours officially. We have six more years to do that, but we intend to do it within two years.

Ross:
Our time is up. Thank you panelists and thank you all for joining us today.