

Pittsburgh is Art -- And it's evolving

By Debra Smit

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While the Pittsburgh arts sector has experienced significant financial hardship, contraction and a few casualties as a result of the economic distress of the past two years, the arts remain a key driver of the region's economy and quality of life. In fact, when *Forbes Magazine* recently named Pittsburgh as its "Most Livable City" for a second year, the arts scene was on top of the list as the reason why.

Small and mid-sized arts organizations contribute a great deal to the vibrancy of the local arts scene and have weathered the downturn with an optimistic spirit. Mid-sized organizations have been hit especially hard. With more staff than small organizations and less cash reserves than large organizations, those in the middle are particularly stretched. Smaller groups, more accustomed to operating on shoestring budgets, managed better but continue to engage in an ongoing struggle to survive.

Each year, The Pittsburgh Foundation makes roughly \$350,000 in grants specifically to organizations with budgets under \$600,000 through The A. W. Mellon Educational & Charitable Trust Fund. This fund works to assure the exceptional quality of small and mid-sized arts and ensure their existence on the regional cultural landscape. In addition, The Foundation invests in the work of service organizations like the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council (GPAC) and special initiatives like the Pennsylvania Cultural Data Project, which strengthen the sector as a whole.

"In the face of diminished resources all around, there is a real sense of collaboration among local arts funders in supporting small and mid-sized organizations," says Germaine Williams, Program Officer for Arts and Culture at The Foundation. "It's hard to talk of opportunity in crisis, but the financial crisis has forced arts organizations to chart a mission-critical course, reevaluating every part of their operations and deepening relationships with constituents and partner organizations. Arts advocacy against funding cuts and as a part of regional events like the G20 have truly galvanized the arts sector."

The Foundation has sought balance in its approach to prioritizing the arts within the context of the economic downturn, says Williams. After the economy rebounds, The Foundation does not want to have squandered years of investment in the region's quality of life by neglecting the arts.

"We also recognize that the arts have real economic impact, supporting over 10,000 full-time equivalent jobs in Allegheny County, and that the community relies on the arts in complex ways socially," he adds. "So, we have made tough decisions and will continue to do

so, but our commitment to the arts and to small and mid-sized organizations in particular, remains very strong."

Pittsburgh medium and smaller organizations have their own stories to tell when it comes to the challenges they are facing. Silk Screen Asian American Film Festival's Executive Director Harish Saluja braced himself for the worst when the economy took a dive in 2008. A medium-sized arts organization that relies on foundations and sponsorships, Saluja knew it would mean belt tightening, which ultimately has come to pass. Silk Screen has reduced staff and salaries and cut its budget.

The organization's mission to share authentic Asian and Asian American history, culture, and experiences has suffered as a result, he says. With diminished resources, Silk Screen can't begin to provide the aesthetic value if they can't bring artists here from Asia.

"This is the first year we've been unable to invite anyone from Asia to the film festival," says Saluja, clearly disappointed. "We normally have almost a dozen filmmakers who visit us. Santosh Sivan, one of the leading film directors from India, was so taken by Pittsburgh that he vowed to use the city as a future filming location.

"Good stuff is still happening," he points out. "We're doing programming with children's museums and schools, just not at the level we wanted. We've bitten the bullet, especially on salaries."

"We've been going on for 28 years and we're still on a shoestring, so we really didn't have a problem during the crisis," says Pamela Johnson, co-founder of the Afro-American Music Institute, a small arts group that relies heavily on grants from foundations and tuition to run the music classes and special programs it offers to children in Homewood. "Sometimes I wonder how we've done it over the years, but we've been doing it for so long, and we're still in business. We must be doing something right."

"Everyone has had to pull back, including our own operation," admits Mitch Swain, CEO of GPAC. "Many have had to cutback not so much on the program and delivery of their mission but in every other way they can. Others are hiring smaller casts."

The fiscal pulse of the arts scene is best told through a series of three surveys conducted by GPAC since February 2009. This snapshot of 65 local organizations raises several concerns, says Swain.

The biggest is the decrease in state grants. The Pennsylvania Council on the Arts' (PCA) funding for the arts across the state has been cutback about 15%, from \$11 million to \$9.5 million in 2009-2010.

Because of its own cash flow problems, PCA has had to freeze distribution of funds to local arts agencies. Other funding sources have also contracted significantly.

Secondly, funding through the Allegheny Regional Asset District (RAD) is down by 10%. RAD, which comes from half the proceeds from the 1% Allegheny County sales and use tax, supports the funding of regional parks, libraries, recreation facilities and arts and cultural organizations.

RAD recently approved a 2010 budget that held the line on funding for libraries and regional parks and made modest cuts in other areas. Included is funding for a new Connections Grant Program that recognizes groups that submit plans to lower overhead and administrative costs by sharing or merging operations. Among the first recipients were Attack Theater, Pittsburgh Irish and Classical Theater, and the Multi-Cultural Arts Initiative.

Business and corporate sponsorship is also down. Foundation grants have decreased by 20 to 35%. Of the 65 agencies participating in GPAC's survey, 30% have cut a total of 75 people. Individual giving has been mixed, with some reporting an increase in donations while others were hurt because previous donors were no longer able to give.

Quantum Theatre's Karla Boos believes that the dark clouds surrounding the economy are lifting a bit. "We've grown every year in our 20 year history until this crisis, then we flattened. We haven't grown at all this year," says Boos, whose theatre falls into that middle range. "But people didn't want us to lose momentum. Thanks to their generosity, we've ridden out this crisis extremely well. We're used to doing much with little."

Andrew Paul, co-founder of Pittsburgh Irish and Classical Theatre, sees the crisis as an opportune moment for the group, which has a 2010 budget of \$1.1 million. The theatre had accumulated a significant deficit in 2007-2008 and had a strong financial plan in place when the economy began to slide. "In a way, we were ahead of it. If we had not already had a sustainability plan that involved cost cutting, we would have been blindsided."

Silver Eye Center for Photography offers a different perspective. Awash in new energy with the arrival of Ellen Fleurov as executive director last year, the organization brought on a new marketing and membership manager and welcomed several new board members last year.

"With turmoil comes tremendous potential," says Fleurov, who moved here from Atlanta. "We're all affected in terms of our funders and donors and the ability to give. This crisis forces us, whether we like it or not, to rethink things and take risks. The time of crisis is not the time to retrench. Now is the time to be innovative, take calculated risks that can move the organization forward."

Swain agrees that 2010 is bringing a sense of calm, shifting the tenor from one of fear to a cautious optimism. Nine months ago people were cutting back. Now there's a greater sense of comfort in what the future holds, he says.