

PERFORMING ARTS: INFRASTRUCTURE

A plan to end Vancouver's theatrical brain drain

University of British Columbia theatre-design prof Robert Gardiner says his city urgently needs a permanent multipurpose arts incubator - and he's not the only one feeling the crunch, Marsha Lederman writes

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January 1, 2008

VANCOUVER -- University of British Columbia theatre-design professor Robert Gardiner is tired of seeing his students leave Vancouver for more lucrative and dynamic pastures such as Toronto and Los Angeles, tired of seeing local theatre companies struggle for rehearsal and production space, and anxious to see Vancouver get on the world theatre map. And so, he has a plan.

Gardiner's not-so-modest proposal would see part of the eight-hectare Great Northern Way Campus in East Vancouver - owned and operated jointly by four postsecondary institutions as an extension of their teaching spaces - transformed into a grand permanent production and rehearsal facility for the artistic community. He calls it "the Great Northern Way Art Factory, a creation, infrastructure and production centre." The broad artistic mandate, formal structure and funding model would make the facility unique, he says, in Canada - and possibly North America.

He figures by constructing this sort of arts incubator, he can keep more creative brain power in Vancouver and help establish the city as a world leader in the arts. "It's a city that's right on the cusp of a cultural explosion," he says. "It just needs a bit of a boost."

The pitch is informed by Gardiner's years in academia, where postsecondary institutions frequently team up with science-based corporations (for example, in pharmaceuticals or engineering) to fund labs where students can run experiments alongside industry professionals. So if the sciences can do it, Gardiner reasons, why shouldn't the arts employ a similar model? His creation labs would give professional arts groups access to badly needed space and students access to professionals who can offer industry experience - and give them all access to the funding and infrastructure that being associated with a university can provide. "If you put all those resources together then you get a very powerful model," he says.

There has been much wringing of hands by theatre people of late over the dearth of performance space in Vancouver, especially after a failed campaign to save the old York Theatre (recently purchased by a developer who plans to build housing on the land).

But Susan Stevenson, executive director of the Greater Vancouver Professional Theatre Alliance (GVPTA) says the issue Gardiner is trying to address is even more pressing. "At this point, the theatre community is at a crisis in terms of all the inadequate production and rehearsal and storage-space facilities," she says. "Where are people supposed to build their sets?"

Take Kim Collier, one of the founding artistic directors of the Electric Company theatre group. She has teamed up with three other theatre companies who are together looking for a large space that would serve as their headquarters, their own rehearsal/production space and a rental facility available to other arts groups. "There are only a couple good rehearsal halls in town and they're so in demand that if you don't have your programming sorted out a couple of years in advance, it can be impossible to access those spaces," she says. "The Electric Company has done some really radically complicated rehearsal scenarios in order to try and build our shows."

Another Vancouver group, The ARTS CO-OP (Artists Resource and Technical Services Co-operative), has found a 39,000-square-foot former furniture warehouse it wants to lease and convert into a production/storage/rehearsal space. Last month, the group applied for a grant to fund a feasibility study. "Even if we don't get this feasibility-study money, we're going to continue on with our side of it and push this thing forward," says Patrick McMullen, a theatre technician who co-founded the group.

But the group is only being offered a 10-year lease, and while that may be extended, the owner ultimately plans to demolish the building and develop the land. This is the uncertain future that comes with leased spaces.

Gardiner knows that uncertainty well. Currently, UBC is leasing a production space on the Great Northern Way campus, a 9,700-square-foot scene shop it rents out to arts groups - an operation Gardiner helps run. It is part of a complicated arrangement that governs the campus: The land, the equivalent of about six city blocks, was donated by Finning International Inc. in 2000 jointly to UBC, Simon Fraser University, the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design and the British Columbia Institute of Technology. (The buildings, huge structures once used to build machinery, were part of the package but will ultimately need to be demolished due to safety concerns.) In order for the individual institutions to use the land and buildings, they must lease them from Great Northern Way, which they jointly operate.

But this scene-shop arrangement is fairly ad hoc; not the permanent, stable production centre Gardiner believes the city needs. "Right now, we're very hand to mouth," he says. "[The Art Factory] would be long-term. It would actually have an identity and an official existence and funding and an endowment and be able to dependably keep going."

Gardiner makes these comments sitting on pins and needles as he awaits news about the production space's lease, which expired yesterday. It has not yet been renewed by UBC, so he faces the prospect of going month-to-month until a new lease is signed.

While erecting new theatres is a glamorous affair involving naming opportunities for corporations and philanthropists, building rehearsal halls and scene shops is less sexy. But Gardiner says a permanent centre could attract all kinds of funding, thanks to the different

opportunities open to universities and the arts community. He applied for a Canada Foundation for Innovation grant - which generally funds infrastructure for scientific research (think laboratories) - in his attempts to get his proposal off the ground. He was turned down, but only, he was told, because the proposal was too local in scope. He plans to re-apply with a nod to potential international use.

The Art Factory proposal has been run past many of Gardiner's colleagues in the arts community, and the response, it seems, has been overwhelmingly positive. "There's quite a buzz about it right now," says Stevenson, with the GVPTA.

Gardiner has also presented the idea to a city committee he sits on. The recently established cultural-facilities committee is conducting an audit and will make recommendations in the spring for growth. Stevenson, who also sits on the task force, sees potential in the plan. "Given that the governments at various levels did not invest heavily in infrastructure in the arts here in the past when they could have when real-estate prices were lower ... the universities play a much bigger role in building the infrastructure. You could see the potential with Great Northern Way if the universities can access some money. It would have a huge benefit for the arts community."

Even with all this buzz, Gardiner's Art Factory is years away from any ribbon-cuttings (as opposed to the ARTS CO-OP and Electric Company projects, which should be established this year). There are governments and universities to bring on board, money to raise (the project will cost \$30-million to \$50-million, he estimates), and an Olympics to get through before any construction can realistically begin.

But if and once it does, Gardiner hopes his Art Factory can help provide a permanent solution to the theatrical brain drain that keeps him up at night - and put Vancouver into the international spotlight his students crave. "I'm exporting the artists, and what I want to be doing is exporting the art and keeping the artists," he says. "With the right kind of place to work, I think our theatre artists could quite quickly become well known all over the world."