Impacts of the COVID-19 Crisis on Boston Arts Venues Findings



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Project Overview

- The Mayor's Office of Arts and Culture commissioned a study to explore how the COVID-19 crisis has impacted the ecosystem of arts venues and renters in Greater Boston.
- Hypothesis: The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated existing faults in the ecosystem, and most of the challenges noted in the City's 2018 facilities study will be even harder to overcome in the pandemic's wake.
- MOAC's aim is to explore this hypothesis and, if feasible, engender a discussion on potential interventions to improve the system.

2018 report found a misaligned marketplace for performing arts venues.

- Boston is missing enough venues appropriate to space users' programming, operations, and finances to fulfill demand.
- Space users are sometimes pushed to use inappropriate venues under terms that are potentially harmful.
- The business model for venues is challenging, and venues struggle to access resources to operate and maintain facilities.
- Boston's reliance on universities and commercial entities results in a disregard of the needs of nonprofits and artists.

Methodology

- MOAC engaged TDC to conduct the research.
- 31 interviews conducted in June and July 2020.
 - Included venues and space users mainly in the performing arts
 - Mostly Boston based but a few important locations in surrounding communities.
- Secondary research sources consulted.
 - 2018 report, Boston Performing Arts Facilities Assessment
 - National Independent Venue Association pandemic-related advocacy materials
 - Creating New Futures: Working Guidelines for Ethics & Equity in Presenting Dance & Performance.

What impact will the crisis have on supply and demand in the venues market?

- Venues may be more at risk than renters.
 - 90% of NIVA survey participants note that they may close without federal funding.
 - Interviewees worry that mid-sized organizations, the core of their market, will not be able to weather the pandemic shutdown.
 - On the other hand, small organizations report being less affected, though there is concern that they may lose out on bookings in the anticipated post-pandemic rush.
- Constraints in the market have been exacerbated.
 - Universities prioritizing student needs: tighter access to remaining affordable venues.
 - The demand for large, traditional theater spaces is even lower.
 - Heightened need for outdoor or unconventional performance space.
- Entrepreneurs interested in opening new venues are discouraged.
 - Gentrification may be accelerated in oncoming commercial real estate crisis.
 - Developers and landlords not supportive of venues, and business model for smaller, affordable venues is impossible.

Are there specific groups that have been more heavily impacted?

- Artists and arts workers in general
 - Artists' and arts workers' incomes decimated by pandemic.
 - Two bright spots:
 - Venues are dedicating space to artist residencies, teaching, and digital performances.
 - Venues that usually book touring acts may focus on local talent.
- BIPOC renters, artists, and arts workers
 - Before COVID, BIPOC artists and audiences were not always welcome in white-controlled spaces.
 - Venues friendly to BIPOC artists have been particularly at risk from COVID-19.
 - Since racial justice uprisings, BIPOC artists have received a flood of bookings.
 - A potential Catch-22 where they either ask communities to put themselves in harm's way or risk appearing ungrateful/uncooperative by declining participation.

What limitations do venues face as they seek to reopen?

- Most agreed that it would be cost-prohibitive to reopen with public health constraints.
- Many venues are still figuring out pricing in this environment.
 - Should they increase prices because of cleaning costs? Or, should they reduce prices because social distancing reduces renters' revenue potential?
 - Will venues who price with an eye to support artists and organizations be recognized and supported or will they undercut themselves?
- Both venues and organizations wondered about their perceived value in Boston's economy.
 - Will audiences and the City support their businesses?
 - Can developers and landlords make decisions with their value in mind?

What interventions might help?

Interventions	Issue(s) targeted
Community conversations	 Lack of alignment and recognition of sector-wide principles when it comes to community commitment and value of performances
Resource sharing and collective action	 Accessibility of scarce resources to groups who may not otherwise have access Resource efficiency across multiple organizations or groups in shared spaces
Supporting BIPOC artists and communities	 Lack of focus on systemic inequities that disproportionately impact communities of color
Financial support or rent subsidy	 Affordability of venues for arts organizations Ability of venues to fully cover operating costs
Investments in long-term infrastructure	 Lack of support for capital improvements Lack of affordable and appropriate venues