Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation (CAST) Presents:

**Boston Children’s Chorus Design Lab**

April 19th, 2016  
2:00pm - 4:50pm  
Brandeis University  
Rose Art Museum

**Summary Report**

**Introduction:**

A design lab is a process for bringing together various constituencies related to a problem, issue or possibility to think in creative ways and to design structures, processes, or expressions that lead to a more just, peaceful, resilient, and vibrant communities. This design lab was a collaboration between CAST students, faculty, staff and The Boston Children's Chorus (BCC). The BCC mission is to "harness the power and joy of music to unite our city's diverse communities and inspire social change. [Their] singers transcend social barriers in a celebration of shared humanity and love of music." The chorus aims to break stereotypes and foster meaningful relationships between segregated communities through music training and performance. To date, the chorus has over 450 students from over 100 communities in the Greater Boston area, ranging widely in age. They are organized into thirteen different choirs spanning five locations: the South End, Allston-Brighton, South Boston, Dorchester, and the Lower Roxbury section of the South End.

Due to mounting gentrification pressures, the BBC is facing a relocation challenge. The BCC office building in Downtown Boston was recently sold to a developer and, due to high market property values and specific acoustic requirements, suitable and affordable spaces are increasingly difficult for them to find. Most financially available options are less central than the current downtown Boston location and moving the location out of downtown will impact 45-60% of participating families who drive or take public transportation to the downtown office. This possibility is discouraging many families from continuing their involvement in the program. Despite these challenges, the BCC wishes to use this relocation opportunity as a way to consolidate the now dispersed choirs. It is believed that creating a single common space of practice would significantly increase interactions across different communities and age groups. This design lab was created in order to assist the BCC decide what values should inform their decisions about relocating: should they seek to retain as many of their current participants and bear the higher costs of staying in downtown Boston? Or, should they potentially sacrifice some participants in favor of group consolidation and lower costs? This report summarizes the proceeding of the design lab, participants, key learnings, discoveries, ideas, recommendations, concerns, and questions that arose from the design lab.

**Key Questions:**

1. How does the BCC balance meeting its organizational goals alongside the economic realities of commercial real estate in Boston, including negotiating the politics of gentrification and equity of resources in the neighborhoods they serve (i.e transportation accessibility)?
2. When considering relocation sites, which principles should guide the decision?

3. What organizational and community needs should be prioritized?

4. Who should play a role in the decision making process?

Explanation of CAST 150b:

The Introduction to Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation explores how to use art as a means in moving toward social change and reconciliation. The course explores several forms of creativity and expression including oral history, the visual arts, music, dance, theater, and storytelling. In studying these art forms, students learn how to build peace, mitigate conflicts, and establish social justice. The class lays out a framework for the Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation minor, but it is also for students who study politics, peace and conflict studies, international and global studies, and the arts.

Explanation of CAST Minor:

The Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation minor encourages students to study the intersection of the arts and theory and practice of social change and peacebuilding. Students in the CAST minor will learn about how to impact change on society by thinking critically about the arts and developing their own projects that contribute to building peace. The CAST minor will challenge students to consider aesthetics and story when it comes to building peace by encouraging them to engage in written, visual, oral, and performing arts.

Explanation of Assignment/Roles Students Played:

Prior to the design lab, the students in the Spring 2016 CAST 150b course were assigned to research different organizations in Boston that use art and/or cultural expressions to address or facilitate social change. Students were asked to compile information about the organization’s mission, practices, challenges, and solutions. This information was consolidated in a session prior to the design lab in an effort to expose students to the similarities and differences between Boston-based organizations doing socially engaged work through art. During the design lab, students were able to draw upon this knowledge and offer relevant examples from these other organizations in order to place the BCC’s relocation challenge within a larger context.

Additionally, students were assigned with different roles during the discussion. The notetaker was tasked with keeping detailed notes, and the rapporteurs was tasked to summarize and report the discussion to fellow students and participants, who engaged in different design labs.

Participants:

- David Briand (Brandeis, Oral History Project Manager; Facilitator)
- Ben Hires (BCC, Director of Programs; Presenter)
- Cynthia Cohen (Brandeis, Program in Peacebuilding and the Arts, Director)
- Dan Feldman (Brandeis, Vice President for Planning and Institutional Research)
Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation (CAST)

- Leigh Swigart (Brandeis, Programs in International Justice and Society, Director)
- Kat Page (Brandeis, Fitness Coordinator)
- Julie Maschler (Brandeis, Undergraduate student; Notetaker)
- Eric Lin (Brandeis, Undergraduate student; Rapporteur)
- Isabel Lahn-Schroeder (Brandeis, Undergraduate student)

**Key Learnings:**

During our analysis of the challenges associated with relocating, we identified the most crucial consideration in decision-making: transportation. Ben Hires was clear in expressing that accessibility for students to attend rehearsals and practices could not be compromised. A location that could not bring participants from diverse communities would greatly undermine the fundamental mission of BCC. With the understanding of this crucial factor in relocating, the group discussed multiple suggestions:

- Relocating to a community interested in strengthening its art programs: Introducing BCC to a neighborhood historically less invested in the arts would open up new opportunities for community engagement, support local efforts in building quality programs, and highlight cultural gems in the neighborhood. However, this approach would raise the issue of serving one or all communities. Once situating itself into a neighborhood, BCC’s role and impact would then be closely tied to the neighboring community. On the other hand, being in downtown offers more accessibility in terms of being a focal point for all communities. This suggestion would lead to re-evaluation of BCC’s mission and approach.

- Alternative transportation method: The group also came up with ideas of carpooling neighboring participants or purchasing a rental bus for pick up. These alternative methods of transportation could reduce some difficulty in getting to the new location. However, the logistical and financial feasibility raised new concerns.

- Non-physical consolidation: Instead of finding a single location for all participants, the choirs could be in interaction through frequent collective programming, such as events or performances. This suggestion not only could eliminate the need of finding a permanent large space, but also could achieve the goal of consolidation. The logistical challenge of frequently finding a large venue would need to be further addressed.

- Space sharing with other non-profit organizations: Instead of BCC renting a space on itself, it could partner with other organizations and share usage to make the new location affordable. This suggestion has great possibility, since BCC only need the rehearsal space Monday through Thursday in the afternoon and Saturday morning. With scheduling, multiple organizations could potentially utilize the space, and share the rent. This suggestion would require more research on possible organization to collaborate with, to minimize the overlap and conflict of space and time.
• Space sharing with educational institutions: Many universities have wonderful spaces suitable for chorus rehearsals, many of which are not always in use. BCC could partner with educational institutions for scheduled usage. However, these institutions often could not provide the permanent office spaces needed for BCC staffers. Our discussion led to considering the separation of office and rehearsal space.

• Compromise: Looking at the current state, some level of compromise seemed to be inevitable. A 24,000 square-feet sized space, which would be enough for both office and rehearsal spaces, in downtown Boston might not be an available option in the current real estate market. However, the BCC could find a suitable temporary location after the end of its current lease and continue the search for a permanent location in the next 5-year market cycle.

Many of these suggestions were already explored by the BCC with detailed surveys on financial feasibility, economic impact, and community/parental impact. The insights in those surveys raised further logistical, financial, or organizational challenges, some of which are mentioned above. Throughout this discussion, issues of socioeconomic inequality, inadequate distribution of resources, and oppressive systemic structures were continuously referred to and play a large role in shaping the BCC's relocation decision process.

Next Steps:

The conclusions drawn from this design lab have led to further questions identified, such as what the role of the municipality is. Could (and should) cities provide shared spaces which multiple non-profit organizations’ could use as communal rehearsal or performance spaces? Other questions that arose were: How can spaces be more effective for multi-functional purposes in order to suit the needs of different performance arts? Could the municipality be the bridge between different institutions and organizations by facilitating collaborations?

Reference:

http://www.bostonchildrenschorus.org/