

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Lack of alignment and recognition of sector-wide principles when it comes to community commitment and value of performances
Resource sharing and collective action	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Lack of focus on systemic inequities that disproportionately impact communities of color
Financial support or rent subsidy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Affordability of venues for arts organizations▪ Ability of venues to fully cover operating costs
Investments in long-term infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Lack of support for capital improvements▪ Lack of affordable and appropriate venues