

**The Feasibility  
of a Cultural Art Center  
for Oak Park**

A report of the Oak Park Area Arts Council<sup>i</sup>

June 2005

## **Background**

The Oak Park area has a rich cultural heritage and a concentration of art-related activity unparalleled in Chicago's suburbs. At present, the community touts nearly 40 non-profit arts organizations, including theater groups, musical and dance organizations, historical and architectural foundations, visual and applied arts organizations, choral societies, school art programs, and social programs – along with a number of for profit venues -, that contribute to the health and vitality of the community.<sup>ii</sup> The scale of operation, budgets, needs and capacities of these various organizations ranges widely as do their venues for work and presentation, the principal subject of this report.

Periodically, over the past several years, there's been discussion about the need for a cultural and/or performing arts center in the community. In 1987, a feasibility study, "Toward Reality for a Vision: a study of the need for, interest in and usage of a cultural arts center in Oak Park," was commissioned and conducted for the Civic Arts Council of Oak Park (the predecessor organization to the Oak Park Area Arts Council).

This study concluded, "There appears to be a need for a cultural arts center in Oak Park and apparently enough potential usage to justify according to normal criteria. However, the amount of actual interest and enthusiasm for developing such a facility seems marginal among potential audiences, community leaders and even the arts groups that would use it. There is little of the passionate conviction or commitment about a center that is necessary to bring it into being and make it successful."

The study went on to find that many in the arts community felt that a number of the objectives being set for a cultural arts center could be achieved "by programs rather than bricks and mortar" and that the arts council should "help artists/arts organizations make better use of existing facilities, strengthen their promotion and audience development efforts, carry out long-range planning, and develop cooperative activities to foster a spirit of unity and commitment". The study therefore recommended that "...a feasibility study be put on hold while the Civic Arts Council of Oak Park implements programs to strengthen the ability of potential user groups to function effectively in a new facility and to develop unified support and enthusiasm for the venture." Indeed, since 1987, the arts council has developed programs consistent with the report's recommendations, to strengthen the local arts community.

In 2003, the time seemed ripe to revisit the idea of a cultural arts center. There was a growing maturity and quality of arts programming, arts were increasingly a defining feature of the community, and economic development – including restaurants, art galleries and studios, tourism, and the potential for additional entertainment options – had reached a point where there appeared to be a real synergistic opportunity to connect and advance the arts to commerce and community development, though care would need to be taken to balance the valued "grass roots" aspect of the arts with growing commercial possibilities. In fact, in the meantime, one of the area universities had undertaken a study

and concluded that a performing arts center was warranted, an idea that was set aside for financial reasons.

Therefore, in late spring 2003, the Oak Park Area Arts Council convened an art center study group to assess anew the feasibility of a cultural arts center. The study would have three components: 1) a survey of existing local arts organizations regarding their space needs and interests; 2) a review of the experiences of other regional art centers, in terms of structure, programming, and finances; and 3) a market survey of the community – especially culturally active people –, to assess their current and potential level of participation in the arts and related activities.

## **Findings**

### **Local Arts Groups' Survey/Focus Group**

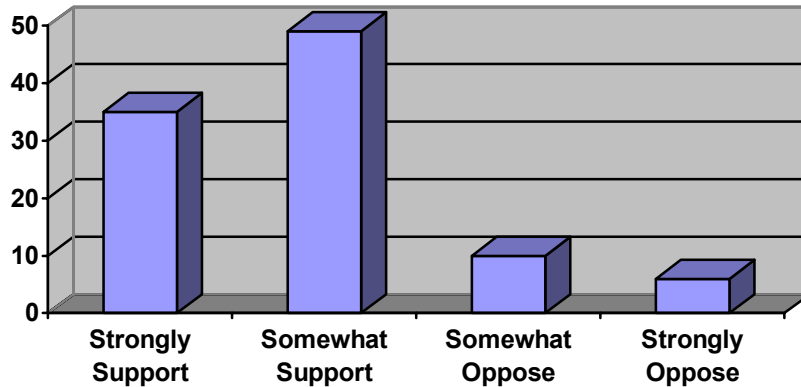
A survey of the full range of local arts organizations (17 out of 35 responded) and a related focus group (7 groups participated)<sup>iii</sup> found that: there was a real interest in discussing the concept of an art center; currently, groups are using spaces ranging from schools, churches, and university auditoriums to spaces they own or rent; in terms of seating, space needs varied widely, ranging from seating for 75-125, 150-300, 250-500, and 750-2000, though most existing groups have needs in the 75-350 range; space needs include spaces for performances, exhibits, rehearsals, teaching, storage, ticket sales, food service, and administration.

A number of the grassroots groups, though they have wish lists and identified limitations with their current spaces, seemed generally satisfied with their arrangements, though several indicated that they could benefit from a more centralized, identified community space where they could at least periodically present their work, and, better coordination among groups and/or sharing of certain resources, such as those related to marketing and administration. In fact, harkening back to the earlier study, with some exceptions – for instance, local theater groups seem the most motivated to identify a space that would better serve their on-going needs –, there wasn't a tremendous passion or drive associated with the idea of a "central" art center.

### **Market Survey**

Turning to the issue of the potential for new and expanded arts activities and the interest in or commitment to a cultural arts center on the part of the community and likely "consumers," let's now review the findings from a market survey. As part of the feasibility study, a targeted community survey was conducted, on top of a general community survey conducted in 2004 that found that 84% of respondents supported the idea of an art center, 35% "strongly".<sup>iv</sup>

### General Community Support for a Performing Arts Center



The market survey, which consisted of questions related to current participation in the arts in the Chicago area, interest in and potential participation in art-related activity locally, assuming it were available, and use of related services such as restaurants, was conducted of a targeted group of culturally active people in the community. The survey was sent to 1,100 households in the Oak Park area, using subscriber information from a number of local arts organizations, including Circle Theater, Open Door Theater, the Symphony of OPRF, Chicago a capella, and Center Stage at Dominican University, and local subscribers to the Steppenwolf and Victory Gardens Theaters and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. The results of these surveys, with 305 responses, were organized, analyzed and tabulated at Columbia College.<sup>v</sup>

Here are the results:

71.5% of respondents had attended the Art Institute in the past year, with Chicago area theaters, the CSO, and the Field Museum coming in as close seconds for venues attended by most respondents.

In terms of entertainment activities, 91% indicated that they had attended theater in the past year; 53%, 10 or more movies; 49%, a concert; 40%, a jazz concert; 25%, a night club; 27%, an educational class; and 17%, purchased art valued at more than \$500.

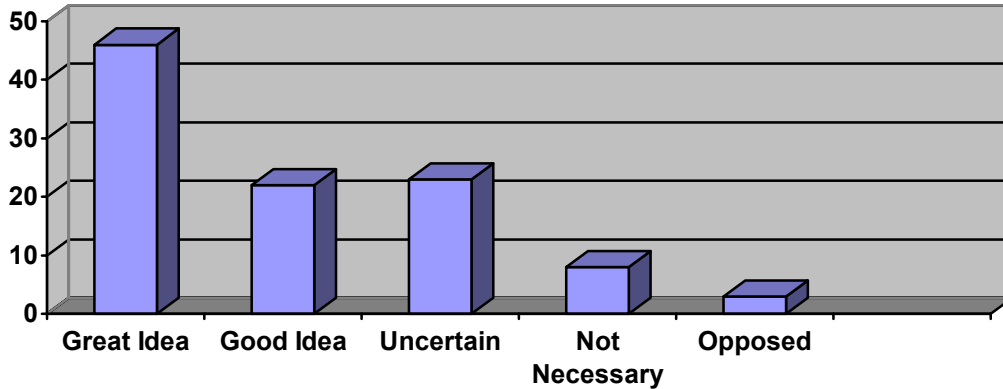
Locally, keeping in mind that it was a subset of local arts groups' subscribers who were surveyed, 40% had visited the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio within the past year; 31% Circle Theater; 23% Unity Temple Concert Series; 23% Festival Theater; 22% Pleasant Home; 20% OPRF Symphony; 20% Open Door Theater; 20% Center Stage; 19% Oak Park Art League; and 16% Village Players. Other local venues had been visited/attended by 1-14% of respondents over the past year.

When asked what kind of art-related activities they would most likely attend if such activities appeared in Oak Park, 86% indicated they would most likely attend a theater event; 81%, a film event; 80%, a classical music event; 79%, an art exhibit; 71%, an historical presentation; 67%, a jazz concert; 61%, a musical; 61%, a folk music concert;

59%, a photography exhibit; 59%, a lecture; 55%, a comedy event; 53%, a ballet performance; and 49%, a modern dance presentation.

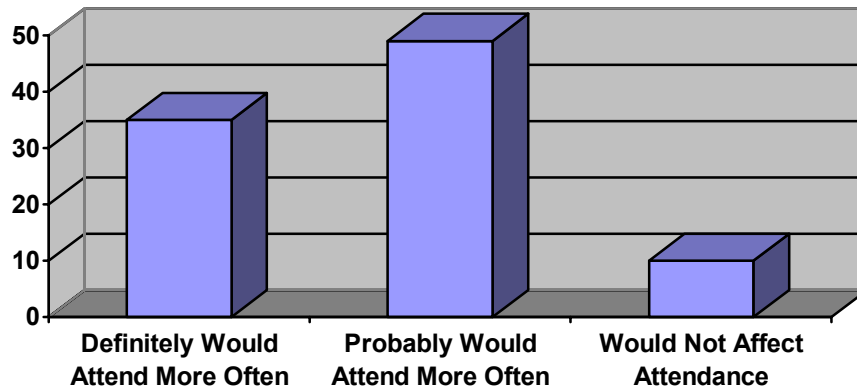
When asked what they thought of the idea of a new cultural arts center in Oak Park, 46% of respondents indicated they thought it was a “great idea,” 22% thought it was a “pretty good” idea, 23% were “uncertain,” 8% thought it was “not particularly necessary,” and 3% were “opposed”.

**Support for a Cultural Arts Center among Culturally Active Residents**



When asked if Oak Park had a cultural arts center how it would affect their attendance, 86% of respondents indicated they would “definitely” or “probably” attend “more often.”

**How the Presence of a Culture Arts Center would affect Attendance among Culturally Active Residents**



Incidentally, but significantly, 43% of respondents reported that they eat out locally before attending cultural arts events in the community.

## **Other Area Art Centers' Experiences**

The final piece of this study involved site visits at three art centers in the region; two in the western suburbs and one in the northern suburbs. In each case, their structures – in terms of ownership, governance, management, and financing – and scope of programming and services varied greatly.

The largest center, which opened in 1996, was created under the Illinois Civic Center Statute, which allowed the community to finance the structure through the issuance of bonds. The facility is overseen by a 9-member board, and at the end of 20 years, the facility will be owned by the community. Comiskey Park, Navy Pier, McCormick Place, the Peoria Civic Center, the Paramount Theater in Aurora, and the Rialto Theater in Joliet were financed through a similar mechanism.

This center, which includes three resident companies (including a symphony and a theater), consists of an 848 seat main stage theater, a 420 seat theater, and an expansive lobby that accommodates banquets of up to 250 and administrative offices. One of the resident companies presents a schedule of nationally-recognized touring acts. The center hosts over 1,000 events per year. In addition: an adjacent hotel has exclusive rights to provide catering to banquets and private parties at the facility; there is a 50 cent facilities fee on every ticket sold for events (except for the local theater company); the community provides an annual \$250,000 operating grant (though this has been less in recent years); and a foundation provided an initial \$1,000,000 grant toward the project. The center's director indicated that keys to success are: by January 1 the year must be 50% booked; at least one resident company; and a hotel/banquet affiliation.

A second facility, a theater started in 1929, owns its property, is organized as a 501(c) 3, has 330 very committed subscribers, and gets no financial support from the municipality. This center consists of a 410 seat state-of-the-art theater, a 120 seat black box space<sup>vi</sup>, and class rooms, a rehearsal room, scenery room, costume room, and a laundry. There are seven shows per year, each with 10 performances. In addition, the theater operates a children's theater school, with over 400 children enrolled, each paying \$350 in tuition.. The children put on four plays per year and a summer camp is offered.

The final center is also a theater, though organized on a for-profit basis. It occupies the second floor of a commercial space. It includes two black box theaters, one that can accommodate 135-150 seats, the other 65. The venue is considered a "rental house;" both theaters are available for rental. Rental agreements can take one of three forms: straight rent; straight percentage of the gross; or a combination of rent and percentage.

In this case, the owners are part of the original production group of a long-running show in Chicago that they relocated to the suburbs. It is still being presented in the smaller of the two theaters. Rental groups are provided support via joint marketing and promotional efforts, including the sharing of mailing lists. They haven't found the community to be all that supportive and its going to be a real challenge to sustain this arrangement over time.

## Conclusions and Next Steps

A number of the questions raised in 1987 study are still relevant today, including: Are there existing spaces that could be more effectively utilized and should some kind of space clearinghouse be created? Should an arts center be primarily for sponsoring local arts groups or “booking in” touring events? Is one central location important or necessary? How does Oak Park’s proximity to Chicago and its cultural attractions affect the planning and the market for cultural attractions?

In terms of the needs of local, essentially community-based arts organizations, it’s hard to imagine that one cultural arts center could meet their varied and disparate needs. Having made this observation, however, based on feedback from the survey of local arts organizations, it is imaginable, if the right kind of space were available at a reasonable price, that a number of groups could occupy and use such space. By way of example, in Evanston the Noyes Cultural Arts Center – located in a former school – houses an art gallery with a number of annual exhibitions of area artists, a theatre space available for use by amateur and professional companies and 28 studios leased to professional arts organizations. Such a location isn’t presently available, to the study group’s knowledge.

It should be noted that there was an expression of interest among local groups for space where they could at least periodically present major shows, and local theater groups seem most motivated to find a suitable space. With respect to theater needs, based on feedback and the review of spaces in other communities, it appears that a space that would accommodate at least two black boxes<sup>vii</sup>, one larger, the other smaller, but both modest in size, would be of real value, along with space for storage, dressing, a box office, and food service. Whether this could be accommodated in an existing space or newly built space would be required is a question for further exploration. And, the issue of which theater companies might be resident companies would have to be addressed.

Turning to the issue of the market for arts programming, the community and market survey would suggest a greater potential for cultural events, including high caliber touring and professional programs. Combined with the community’s cultural tradition and recent economic development trends – including the addition of a number of art-related businesses and a burgeoning restaurant trade – the findings here suggest that the community should actively be planning and investing in this area of community development. In terms of future or expanded programming, theater, film, music (especially jazz, classical, and folk), art and photography exhibits, historical presentations, lectures, comedy events, and dance were the most commonly identified preferences.

In future planning, the presence of current, professional entertainment venues, including places like Fitzgerald’s and Dominican’s Center Stage, need to be taken into account. In addition, it should be observed that the community’s close proximity to cultural events in Chicago could, on the one hand, provide potential competition for developments here; on the other hand, with the right kinds of activities and venues, Chicago and the larger region could serve as potential markets. Again, even locally, in this study’s survey of

culturally active residents, 68% of respondents thought the idea of a cultural arts center in Oak Park was a “good” to “great” idea and 86% indicated they would “definitely” or “probably” attend “more often” if such a center were located in the community.

In terms of location, centrality is one consideration but proximity to existing or potential compatible commercial enterprises and parking are other major considerations. For instance, the recent Cap the Ike, Harrison Street, South Oak Park Avenue, and Crandall-Arambula Downtown Oak Park planning process have all identified art activities and possible centers as elements of redevelopment plans. The Art Center at Oak Park and Ontario and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Club at Forest and Ontario have regularly been identified as potential sites for additional programming. (Parenthetically, on a somewhat related matter, in the course of community interaction, many people observed that the lack of a banquet facility – post Mar Lac House – is a real shortcoming for the community.

Going forward, the needs of the local grassroots art community have to be accounted for as does the potential for new enterprises that can enliven and enrich the community, in terms of quality of life as well as economically. At this juncture our study group can imagine a series of art nodes or centers, perhaps two or three major centers that involve compatible activities, including local and professional touring groups. This could be a real boon to the arts community and the community as a whole, and, again, arts and cultural programming should definitely be a central part of the community’s future strategic planning.

The structure and financing – including on-going operating costs – of such centers would need careful consideration and probably involve some combination of public and private involvement and resources, including donors and/or investors.

The next step in this process would need to involve one or more professional planners, leading, hopefully in short order, to recommendations for action by the Village and various private parties.

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<sup>i</sup> The art center study group included OPAAC board members John Lukehart, Ed Doherty, Dennis Rich, and John Troelstrup, arts-involved residents Teresa Powell, Lance Taylor, and Bob Trezevant, and OPAAC Executive Director Camille Wilson White.

<sup>ii</sup> *State of the Arts in the Tri-Village Area*, a report produced by the Oak Park Area Arts Council March, 2004.

<sup>iii</sup> The focus group was conducted, pro bono, by Scott Dunnell of ESW Partners.

<sup>iv</sup> *Community Survey: Report of Results*, a survey commissioned by the Village of Oak Park conducted by National Research Center, Inc., October 2004.

<sup>v</sup> *Oak Park Arts Center Survey*, prepared by Allan Waite (graduate student) and Paulette Whitfield (Supervising Graduate Faculty), School of Fine and Performing Arts/Arts, Entertainment, and Media Management, Columbia College (OPAAC Board Member Dennis Rich, Chair of this department at Columbia, made this analysis possible.)

<sup>vi</sup> A black box typically consists of a simple space, usually a large square room with black walls and a flat floor. Such spaces are usually used for plays or other performances with basic technical arrangements, including limited sets and simple lighting. The seating is typically chairs that can be easily moved to allow the space to be adapted to the needs of a production.