

# Community Engagement Plan For Vision Theatre



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As an arts leader and practitioner, I dedicated my professional career to building, supporting, and developing artists, arts organizations, and cultural institutions that center the culture, importance, and relevance of African Americans.

Over 30 years ago, my first job in the performing arts was working with Marla Gibbs at Crossroads Arts Academy and Theater. At that moment, the arts became my vehicle for community impact and social change. My tenure at Crossroads aligned with Marla purchasing the Watchtower Theater and its auxiliary spaces in Leimert Park, which became the Vision Theatre.

As a native Angeleno, I know of the rich and deep presence of Black creatives in the cultural ecosystem. From the Dunbar Hotel, Watts Writers Workshop, and Ebony Showcase to Inner City Cultural Center, Black cultural spaces have played a critical role in the development of Black creatives and our city's cultural life.

For the past six months, I had the pleasure of working as a consultant for the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA) to create this Community Engagement plan for its Vision Theatre. This process brought me full circle, providing the opportunity to reconnect with Leimert Park Village (LPV) after years on the East Coast. My national experiences have informed my perspective on how institutions like DCA's Vision Theatre can shape neighborhood and community cultural identity and vitality, and impact how the city sees itself and on how the world perceives it.

As a leader of national art organizations, I collaborated on the creation of new cultural spaces and on the restructuring of legacy institutions; I supported the development of emerging artists and worked with established artists who are exploring new ways of working. As the Vice President of Programs for the newly-built August Wilson Center in downtown Pittsburgh, I witnessed first hand how critical it is to gather community input and earn community trust to establish a sense of ownership and investment.

As part of this engagement, I spoke with LPV merchants, artists, community leaders, national funders, and leaders of Black organizations in other cities, and facilitated multiple community town halls in sessions leading up to the opening as part of our process. This report includes the findings of those conversations and recommendations on how community involvement can be activated, and how local artists and organizations can utilize and embrace the space.

My role in this process was two-fold, both as documentor and contributor. My goal was to capture the wishes and concerns of participants in the interviews and town hall sessions. For participants' responses to be more than perfunctory, the process required a trusted source, with roots in, and a wide-angle perspective on, the community; with "no dog in the fight," I was able to fulfill that role.

LPV is about to come into a new season, one that has been discussed and planned for many years. This season will see the actualization of the Vision Theatre as the epicenter for culture and community - a space for diverse Black creatives to call home. The Vision Theatre will become one of a few performing arts organizations in the country with a mission dedicated to Black arts. It will be a safe haven, a place for celebration, restoration, and healing for our City.

Shay Wafer  
Vision Theatre  
Community Engagement Plan Consultant

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Shay Wafer  
Consultant

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The Department of Cultural Affairs' **VISION THEATRE** will be a cultural and community place that will amplify Leimert Park and South Los Angeles, invest in the community's future, and incubate the next generation of performing artists in South Los Angeles. A treasured venue with great historical significance to the city, the Vision Theatre is one of the last few Art Deco theaters in Los Angeles.

## HISTORY

Designed in 1931 by Stiles O. Clements of the architectural firm, Morgan, Walls, and Clements, it opened in April 1932 with 1,100 seats as the Leimert Cinema. It remained a movie palace until 1963. Later, it became a Jehovah's Witness Chapel known as The Watchtower. In 1990, actress Marla Gibbs purchased the theater and renamed it the Vision Theatre. It was her dream to create an 800-seat theater, with room for larger Main Stage events, classrooms, and administrative office space. However, the civil unrest in Los Angeles in the early 1990s coupled with an economic recession pushed the theater into foreclosure in 1997.



The City of Los Angeles acquired the property in 1999 and began a long-term plan for renovation and occupancy. Following the completion of Phase I of the renovation, which established the Manchester Youth Arts Center, the City embarked on Phase II in 2017, to include the historic refurbishment and expansion of a 750-seat auditorium and the addition of: an orchestra pit; lounge; 100-person lobby and event space; dressing rooms; work and meeting rooms; backstage; and fly loft.

Concurrent with the physical renovations in Phase II, the City of Los Angeles engaged the operational and programmatic development of the Vision Theatre. Of primary importance was ensuring that programs and services reflect the needs and desires of the South Los Angeles community and other potential clients and patrons of the venue.

***The City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA) currently manages the Vision Theatre and both embraces and supports the heritage, legacy, and glory of the theater and supports it as a cornerstone of community-based cultural and economic development. With a national scope and a local impact, DCA's goal for the Vision Theatre is to turn it back into a cultural hub for the residents and artists of South Los Angeles and the city of Los Angeles as a whole.***

With the many residential and commercial transitions happening in, and around, the Leimert Park Village (LPV) community, a need exists for an institutional anchor that is nimble, responsive, and communicative to residents, partners, and renters, as well as the wider performing arts community. The community interviews conducted and analyzed as part of this project reflect the importance of the Vision's public mission and vision statements aligning with the space reflecting the African American community. One participant mentioned the theatre should be "As Black as possible," to stress the programming should primarily reflect the cultural expressions of the African Diaspora.

The Vision Theatre, the largest stakeholder in LPV, should be people-centered in its institutional thinking and understand that its size and physical stature can not only be additive to the existing community, but also be damaging to the existing and fragile ecosystem if managed incorrectly. A thoughtful Vision Theatre plan should therefore be inclusive of both community and national arts organizations so that it can strengthen both the neighborhood and the larger arts community. The Vision Theatre is uniquely positioned to be one of Los Angeles' leading cultural spaces and a leader of African Diasporic culture within the United States.

## **BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

### **Neighborhood Cultural Expansion**

The Vision Theatre is currently under renovation and scheduled to open in Fall 2021, pending no delays. Scheduled to open within this same time frame is the Leimert Park Station on the Crenshaw-LAX Metro line, providing increased access to one of the oldest remaining and historic Black arts and cultural hubs in Los Angeles. Both of these openings will be amplified by the newly remodeled Leimert Park Plaza, Destination Crenshaw, and a number of improvements to area streets and sidewalks. DCA has dedicated over \$32 million to renovate the theater and will own and maintain the facility as part of a suite of seven City-owned venues it professionally administers.

The Vision Theatre is one of four venues being actively renovated and restored since the relaunch of DCA's Performing Arts Program. An opportunity exists to review best practices and learn from some of the other DCA-administered spaces such as the Warner Grand Theatre, the Madrid Theatre, the Los Angeles Theatre Centre, and the Nate Holden Performing Arts Center to understand what works and what could be improved upon, especially with the hiring of professional DCA staff. In addition, recommendations for future use should be based on both the local reality—the residential and commercial makeup of the area—in conjunction with the stewardship of various community partnerships, thus placing it within a national and potentially



international funding and financial reality for performing and community arts centers of its scale.

Leimert Park Village, Inc., is a nonprofit organization supporting the LPV community and businesses and promoting the history and relevancy of LPV to the city's Black arts and cultural scene. The following passage is from its 2017 20|20 Vision Initiative Charette:



*In the past half-century, Leimert Park Village has established itself as a hub of African-American culture with a national and even international reputation. From the visual arts to film, poetry, jazz and blues and hip-hop, the neighborhood has generated an impressive artistic and cultural legacy—prompting filmmaker John Singleton to dub it a “Black Greenwich Village.” It didn’t start out that way. Founded in 1927 by developer Walter H. Leimert, Sr., it was one of Southern California’s first planned communities, its wide tree-lined boulevards and iconic park designed by the Olmsted Brothers, whose father famously designed New York’s Central Park. In its first decades it was an exclusively white community, as housing in Los Angeles was effectively segregated by racially restrictive covenants. The Supreme Court struck down those covenants in 1948, and slowly but surely more affluent African-American Angelenos began making their way westward from historic South LA.*



*In 1967 Alonzo and Dale Davis founded the Brockman Gallery on Degnan Boulevard, and the Village found itself at the center of a citywide Black Arts movement. In addition to promoting young Black visual artists, the Davis brothers hosted performances by local jazz legend Horace Tapscott, and screened films by Charles Burnett and other young filmmakers.*

*When the Gallery closed in 1987, the Village saw some quiet years. But in 1989, jazz drummer Billy Higgins and poet Kamau Daáood founded The World Stage, and soon after filmmaker Ben Caldwell opened up his multi-media center Kaos Network. Along with Richard Fulton's coffee house and jazz club, Fifth Street Dick's, which opened just two weeks before the Rodney King verdict in April of 1992, they formed the heart of a revived Leimert Park Village scene—a safe haven for community and the arts whose importance was only magnified during the unrest that followed.*

*Though the Village has at times struggled economically over the years, it has continued to attract new talent, energy, and initiative, including Eso Won Books, the Barbara Morrison Performing Arts Center, the Fernando Pullum Community Arts Center, and Mark Bradford's Art + Practice. The long-standing Regency West has upheld the value of the Village as a cultural entertainment center.<sup>1</sup>*

### **Vision Theatre Community Engagement Plan Objectives**

DCA's previous Performing Arts Program was inactive for a number of years, and was recently reinstated in 2016. This progress benefits the Vision Theatre as increased effort and interest in the reopening and having the theater utilized by the community and local arts organizations is gaining in importance and growing.

A lack of official information was available for distribution to the LPV community during this hiatus regarding the status, intended use, and future positioning of the Vision Theatre until recently. As a result, a large percentage of time spent to produce this community engagement plan was spent updating community members and stakeholders.

The community engagement planning process maintained four essential objectives at its onset, with a fifth emerging over the course of planning:

1. Outline local stakeholder concerns, expectations, and interests for the venue and ascertain any potential conflicts of interest as they pertain to the use of the space;
2. Identify a roster of principal users and potential/proposed producers from the art/cultural/theatrical/nonprofit/commercial/entertainment fields;
3. Benchmark at least 5, but no more than 10, similar venues across the country;

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.leimertparkvillage.org/2017-charrette.html>



4. Identify scenarios for public, private, philanthropic, and corporate support for this venue in relation to the feedback received from the stakeholder engagement;

and,

5. Cultivate enthusiasm, rigorous input, and partnerships with community stakeholders including art leaders, artists, and merchants.

For the ideas developed during this process to succeed, the plan requires: a specific and grand vision; a business plan; a fundraising development strategy; a solid management team; invested partners who believe in the concept; a roll-out strategy; and people implementing the ideas.

## Recommendations

- As a celebrated cultural landmark and community space, the Vision Theatre should avail itself as a safe space to heal, decompress, or passionately examine and discuss urgent matters of community consequence. Where are community members to go to process the acquittal of George Zimmerman or the disappearance and death of Sandra Bland? Where should they go to celebrate the life of Nipsey Hussle? The Vision should open its doors as a space of counsel in the face of difficult sociopolitical times such as these, and whenever space is required for collective community healing. It should also be a space for celebrating the best of artistic excellence, to incubate the next generation of creative change makers, and to be a source of community and civic pride.
- In accordance with the BlackSpace Manifesto, created by Black urban planners, architects, artists, activists, designers, and leaders working to protect and create Black Spaces, the Vision Theatre should also:

**Promote Excellence:** Amplify, elevate, and love Black vanguards and their variety of challenging creative, exceptional, and innovative work...allow excellence to build influence that builds opportunities for current and future generations;

**Celebrate, Catalyze, and Amplify Black Joy:** Black joy is a radical act. Give space to joy, laughter, humor, and gratitude;

and,

***Protect and Strengthen Culture:*** Make visible and strengthen Black cultures and spaces to honor their sacredness and prevent their erasure. Amplify and support Black assets of all forms, from leaders, institutions, and businesses, to arts, culture, and histories.<sup>2</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

Over the course of five months, meetings were held with interested community members, past DCA employees who oversaw the first stages of the Vision Theatre, local business owners, and leaders of existing cultural institutions in LPV as well as nationally-known cultural institutions investing in presenting arts and artists of the African diaspora. In addition, three community Town Halls were hosted by DCA, partners, and the consultant with the purpose of updating the community stakeholders on the status of the Vision Theatre project and garnering potential programmatic feedback by soliciting ideas from a broad range of community voices.



With over 30 years in the performing arts and arts administration, the consultant leaned heavily on past experience in capital expansion projects, and reached out to potential national funders to gather success and failure stories which helped provide critical armature for this report, its findings, and recommendations.

The procedure began with creating a list of individuals to be interviewed and creating a list of questions while allowing for the addition of new names and discussion areas. The consultant conducted individual interviews with 42 individuals with either intimate knowledge of LPV or the current or historic Black arts cultural landscape. The interviewee composition included: 14 local artists and representatives of art organizations, 12 LPV merchants and tenants, six community leaders, five national art leaders, and five DCA former and current staff members.

Insights were gathered on the potential value proposition of the newly renovated venue and the role it will play in the larger Black arts ecosystem. As the major cultural anchor in a transitioning neighborhood, it was impossible to talk about the Vision Theatre

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.blackspace.org/manifesto>

without speaking about the economic impact it will cause to area residents, existing local commercial and cultural institutions, and the future demographic identity of the community.

The programming models and operations of several local cultural institutions were also reviewed and analyzed, and three national funders were interviewed to determine the viability of a proposed funding strategy. These activities principally transpired between September and December, 2019.

## **TOWN HALL SESSIONS**

Renovations of the Vision Theatre have taken place over the past 20 years. With the relaunch of DCA's Performing Arts Program in 2016 and the final renovation of the theater scheduled to be completed in 2021, hosting a series of public forums was an important step in the community engagement process.

The Town Hall sessions were structured to share detailed updates on the status of theater, provide recommendations for an overall vision for the theater, and obtain feedback and input from three specific segments of the community: performing artists, LPV merchants, and members of the local cultural community.

Vision Theatre Town Hall Series I - "Community and Culture"

Hosted by Dr. Maulana Karenga at the African American Cultural Center

35 attendees

Vision Theatre Town Hall Series II - "Leimert Park Village"

Hosted by Robert Saucedo, Executive Director of Community Build, at Barbara Morrison Performing Arts Center

40 attendees

Vision Theatre Town Hall Series III - "Performing Artists"

Hosted by Lula and Erwin Washington, Tamica Washington-Miller, and Kaya Dantzler (We Love Leimert) at Lula Washington Dance Center

60 attendees

During each of the sessions, community information sheets were distributed asking attendees: to identify as an *art maker* or *art consumer*; if they support the arts; what adult and youth programming they would like to see at the Vision; and what they felt was the most important consideration to the community that would support a successful opening and continued operations. Participants returned 45 surveys, representing 30%

of the total number of attendees during the town hall sessions. Additional surveys were gathered during the writing of the report, and their information was also included.

### **Emerging Major Themes**

- 1) The majority of respondents stated that programming should be contemporary performing arts (including local, national, and international artists) and center around African diasporic art and artists.
- 2) Programs for youth were seen as critical to the success of the venue and should provide training in not only the performing arts, but also in the fields of technical and trade skills, financial literacy, coding, and robotics.
- 3) Listed as most important for the success of the venue were: community inclusion, professional staff, ample marketing and communication, parking, and affordable ticket prices and rental fees.

### **Programming Challenges Identified by Stakeholders**

#### ***Lack of a Cohesive Artistic Voice***

Operating solely as a rental venue denies the space the largess and branding that a majority-named artistic voice can bring to the community. Even as it remains open to the public and community for use and programming, at 750 seats, only through consistent and dominant curation by a presenter to contextually frame and brand the Vision's offerings as high-quality artistic, intellectual, and entertaining programming, will the theater thrive and become a place organizations *seek out* to present their own artistic offerings.

#### ***Affordability and Accessibility / Sustainability of Business Model***

A mid-size presenting space will present access barriers and affordability challenges for small area arts organizations without fundraising on behalf of the Vision to secure an across-the-board subsidy. Through our research and conversations with national arts organizations and consultants, the 750-seat limit of the Vision Theatre will consume much of a small organization's budget, and without comparable ticket prices, very few productions will be profitable. The existing model will price out the organizations who want to use the venue as well as the audience members who might want to patronize the theater.

#### ***Area Infrastructure***

The infrastructure of the LPV will need a major overhaul to accommodate a 750-seat performance venue with a regular schedule. If current Council District plans include proposed removal of existing parking, there is a serious concern about whether the infrastructure can support parking and transportation needs. Other critiques from the listening sessions included needs for safety, amenities, and the Department of Sanitation or another entity to take care of the grounds after major events to ensure a certain level of cleanliness and to keep patrons and make sure they return.

### ***Professional Staff***

Any DCA venue manager working with the Vision Theatre should have an arts production and facility management background, with special emphasis on the performing arts. It is not enough that the person manages the bookings and use of space. The theater must be staffed with a team that represents, and is committed to, the Vision Theatre's artistic voice and vision, proactive in seeking out strategic partnerships and curated rentals that will help the financial bottom line of the theater, and amplify its profile in Los Angeles and beyond.

### ***Audience Development***

Without a major artistic voice(s) to anchor the programmatic offerings and a regular schedule utilized by community and national partners, it will be hard to draw a consistent audience to the area that will return. Area infrastructure also impacts audience development for this type of build. It will be difficult for audiences to see LPV as a competitive cultural destination if they have difficulty getting to the venue, and don't have sufficient places to visit before and after a performance for food and comfort.

## **MANAGEMENT AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS**

This report leans heavily on the consultant's national perspective and decades of experience running performance venues and organizations, particularly those organizations rooted in the arts and artists of the African Diaspora. DCA's Performing Arts Program, to date, has been able to activate the Vision Theatre only as a rental facility used by community organizations and performing arts institutions. Unlike the relationship DCA established between its Nate Holden Performing Arts Center and resident operator, the Ebony Repertory Theater, an independent operator is not designated for the Vision Theatre, leaving some organizations and community members unsure about its immediate use upon opening and its future use. Additionally, not specifically stating that the artistic vision will center around Black Arts and artists was a recurring concern expressed during the interview process.



*“One of the greatest challenges...is getting [the existing LPV community] involved in something. Getting the African American community involved in something...the question is what can the city do that recognizes this as a historically important site and not just another opening of a theater? I see it as part of preserving our heritage or historical sites, and it should be one for the state as well as the city.” \**

It should not be taken for granted the ways in which artistic vision and leadership can better anchor the institution, not only within Leimert Park, but on a national scale, enabling potential national partners such as the International Association of Blacks in Dance, Dance Theater of Harlem, The Apollo, The August Wilson Center, and others to view the Vision Theatre as a West Coast venue and partner of Black artistic excellence in the performing arts. The city-approved Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Grand Vision Foundation and The Warner Grand Theatre could be another possible methodology to explore, and there is currently a defunct “Friends of the Vision Theatre” organization that might be reinstated.

The main components for the successful operation of the Vision Theatre and Manchester Youth Arts Center include:

- 1) A cultural hub / community coalition;
- 2) Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs Administration and Performing Arts Program staff;
- 3) A public / private partnership and creation of a new, independent foundation serving as a major economic engine for the Vision Theatre’s presenting programs; and
- 4) Active and supportive council district support.

### **Cultural Hub / Community Coalition**

The Vision Theatre Cultural Hub / Community Coalition will be a consortium of performing arts and educational organizations that will cooperatively use the Vision Theatre. As a DCA-owned and operated facility, the Vision has a responsibility to actively reflect the community in which it resides and to support local artists and creators. This group will be the primary providers of community-based programming. The organizations will bring their audiences to the Vision and reestablish the space as a world-class venue. As a member of the Cultural Hub, each organization will be guaranteed a certain number of days in the theater at a subsidized nonprofit rate. DCA

staff will work in tandem with the Hub to address issues of capacity and agency to ensure active use and access the venue.

Based on consultant meetings and professional opinion, the recommended organizations to launch the Vision Theatre Cultural Hub as founding members include:

**Debbie Allen Dance Academy (DADA)** is a nonprofit organization that offers a comprehensive dance curriculum to students ages four and up. Each year DADA produces and presents “The Hot Chocolate Nutcracker” for 3 to 4 nights at a major venue. In 2019, DADA produced the 10th anniversary of the performance, which was held at the Redondo Beach Performing Arts Center with 1,400 seats.

**The Lula Washington Contemporary Dance Foundation (LWCDF)** is a nonprofit organization founded in 1980 by Lula and Erwin Washington to provide a creative outlet for minority dance artists in South Los Angeles. In addition to a robust training program, the company has a repertoire dance ensemble that performs innovative and provocative choreography by Lula Washington, tours internationally, and presents an annual Kwanzaa concert.

**Fernando Pullum Community Arts Center**, based in Leimert Park, FPCAC provides quality performing arts instruction to at-risk youth primarily through the study of contemporary music.

**The World Stage** is an educational and performance art space in Leimert Park Village. It was founded in 1989 to fill a cultural void in the Los Angeles community. The World Stage has grown to assume a pioneering and pivotal role in South L.A.'s music and art landscape.

**Eso Won Books** is a Leimert Park merchant and one of the country's oldest Black bookstores. The venue has hosted literature events for then-Senator Barack Obama and President Bill Clinton, among many others.

**Versa-Style Dance Company** is an ensemble that consists of committed and conscientious artists representing the diversity and beautiful complexity of Los Angeles. Creating highly energetic work that fuses dances that are culturally significant to the community, Versa-Style specifically aims to instill the roots, history, social, and political issues surrounding the art of our generation to Los Angeles young people.

**Technology Entertainment Convergence Leimert (TEC Leimert)** connects individuals in the South Los Angeles community to art and tech thought leaders and exposes them to innovations in entertainment and technology.

**The Pan African Film Festival (PAFF)** is dedicated to the promotion of cultural understanding among peoples of African descent. PAFF is dedicated to racial tolerance through the exhibition of film, art, and creative expression. Since 1992, PAFF has showcased over 150 quality new films and over 100 fine artists and unique craft persons from the United States, Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, South America, Europe, the South Pacific, and Canada.

Working closely with DCA and its Performing Arts Program, these partners will collaborate to ensure the venue is meeting needs and providing high-quality experiences for audience members. A fair and equitable process will allow each group to request and submit their date preferences at least six months to one year in advance of the following calendar year. Members of the Hub will potentially receive either a reduced rental rate or a subsidized fee. DCA staff will also queue up potential new Hub members to allow for additional access and inclusion. In subsequent years, membership can be expanded through an open call process, with criteria determined with input from Cultural Hub members, community stakeholders, and city policy.

#### **Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs Administration and Performing Arts Program Staff**

As the steward of the Vision Theatre and Manchester Youth Arts Center as well as the agency overseeing the theater's renovations, DCA has a deep investment in the long-term success of the Vision Theatre. Similar to the other performing arts facilities in DCA's care, the Vision Theatre will open as a



medium-sized venue to greatly benefit the Los Angeles cultural workforce and challenge potential barriers to equitable access. The recently adopted fee structure by the City of Los Angeles ensures the future Vision Theatre will remain one of the most affordable city facilities of its kind.

In addition to the back-of-house technical crew and front-of-house staff that all entities renting the venue will utilize, DCA will hire and staff the Vision Theatre with a professional team. This is consistent with all other properties with a similar MOU and

aligns with the best practices of theater management both locally and nationally. The venue team will create a process that allows these organizations to use the theater on their first or second date choices. The group will meet twice per year to discuss policies and procedures that are working, solve collective challenges, and evaluate ongoing city policies. Having regular and on-going communications with the organizations will assist in identifying any staffing issues and mitigating solutions.

*“We want knowledgeable people, and when I say knowledgeable, people that know the fields or the different art types/artists that will come into this space that know how to facilitate contracts, set the fees and handle what is needed to make that a successful event at that facility. That’s what we are interested in.” \**

### **Public / Private Partnership and New, Independent Foundation Funding Strategy**

#### **Friends of the Vision Theatre**

An advisory board should be re-created for the Vision Theatre comprised of individual volunteer members called the “Friends of the Vision Theatre,” to communicate with DCA’s Performing Arts Program. This group would provide non-binding, but preferential advice on the Vision’s use by community organizations.

Groups represented by the individual members of the Friends of the Vision Theatre should be considered “partner” organizations and have an official MOU with the City. The friends group would follow guidelines set forth by the Los Angeles City Council for partner organizations as an independent nonprofit in good standing. The proposed Friends of the Vision Theatre must adhere to all city policies as they pertain to conflicts of interest and ethics.

The selection of a nonprofit to enter into an MOU as the Friends of the Vision Theatre will be through a competitive process. Once established, the Friends of the Vision Theatre will invite participation by some board members of the proposed new, independent, Vision Theatre Foundation that will be able to leverage additional fundraising for the overall goals and community cohesion for the Vision Theatre.

A major challenge of the rental-venue model is the reliance upon a significant portion of earned income, especially for those whose target organizational users are coming from historically-disinvested and underrepresented backgrounds. The current community-use rental prices at other City-owned venues were reported as a stretch for many small organizations, and require a significant lift, not only to fill the seats of the venues, but also to raise the individual organizational capital needed to produce a professional-level

production at a mid-size venue. Some level of rental subsidy will be required to support local organizations access to the venue on a regular basis.

### **Vision Theatre Foundation**

It will be nearly impossible to raise the needed funds to sufficiently capitalize the Vision Theatre through earned income alone without financial support from the city. As such, it is recommended that a new, independent foundation be created as the nonprofit Vision Theatre Foundation.

The major and significant organizing body of the Vision Theatre Foundation will be its national and international members of the Board of Directors, many of whom will fill executive-level seats of the organizations with which the Vision Theatre hopes to partner with (the Apollo Theater and the August Wilson Center, for example), and seek funding from (Mellon Foundation, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Ford Foundation, etc.). Other members would come from the local business community, policy makers, and individuals capable of leveraging high net worth relationships and networks on behalf of the activities that will take place at the Vision Theatre. The Foundation, as a producing and presenting entity, will be able to provide consistent storytelling, branding, advocacy, and programming necessary for an institution of its target size and stature.



One of the major purposes of the Foundation will be its fundraising efforts to help support the subsidy of rents for Hub organizations. As such, the Foundation should hire and staff paid fundraising, marketing, and communications professionals. A community engagement specialist will negotiate between the community and the Foundation, and ultimately support the cohesion and cooperation of fair use of the space and incorporation of Manchester Youth Art Center programs.



The Manchester Youth Arts Center has mandatory programmatic requirements, and is principally managed by the Community Arts Division at DCA. The Foundation will invite at least one member of Friends of the Vision Theatre to its membership, and can only be successful if it also encompasses a significant representation of next-generation community and leadership. Before proposing this model, Foundation leadership will first assess the pros and cons of operating this kind of facility based on challenges represented by similar MOUs like the Latino Theatre Company and the Ebony Repertory Company.

Adapting from the Operator Model of use of city-owned buildings, the Vision Theatre Foundation will be the major economic engine of the Vision Theatre. Through traditional fundraising models (grants, fundraising events, major and individual donors, and corporate sponsorships), managing the community use, and straight-rental use of the space, the Vision Theatre Foundation will fund the occupancy of the venue as was expected through earned income alone.

A single and majority operator of the Vision Theatre ecosystem with a strong mission, vision, and artistic voice creates the opportunity to raise funds from national funders. This will allow for a diversified revenue stream, attached to an enduring organizing body, and will encourage contributions year-over-year to a trusted and long-term entity. Additionally, individual and major donors will be able to see a wider use of their contributions, and major brands will have a mission with which to demonstrate their alignment through sponsorship.

We believe the following projected distribution of revenue sources will support the mix of proposed programming:

- 40% contributed income (foundations, individual donors, memberships, and fundraising events)
- 35% earned revenue (subsidized and straight rentals)
- 5% corporate sponsorships by local, state, and national brands
- 20% funding from the City of Los Angeles

## PROGRAMMING

The Leimert Park Village area will greatly benefit from an integrated vision that encompasses big ideas, partnered arts organizations, art forms, local businesses, and the broader community. The Vision Theatre, with its size and scale comparative to its immediate surroundings, can be such a place. It can house and anchor the existing heritage legacy programs and events, as well as incubate and invite new programs for the future. One thing is certain, however, there needs to be a singular and majority artistic voice coming from the Vision Theatre if it is to be all of these things effectively. Arriving at this juncture will not happen without the aforementioned challenges being addressed: Committing to a mission that centers African diasporic arts and culture; Developing strategies to ensure the venue is affordable and accessible to community organizations; Creating a sustainable business model; Improving the area infrastructure; Hiring a professional staff to manage the venue and creating a plan for audience development.

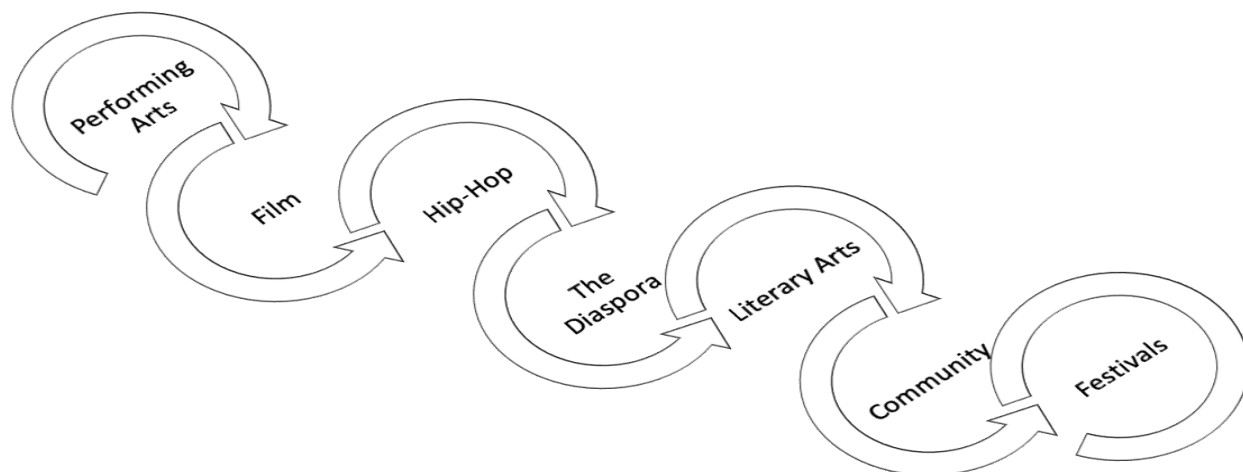
### Future Programming

*“My feeling is there needs to be time set aside in the space for the dance world, theater world, the poetry world, and the music world...not only for theatrical presentations.”\**

The Vision Theatre is uniquely positioned to be one of Los Angeles' leading cultural spaces and a leader of African Diasporic culture. Far from being a harbor where Black culture comes to dock, the Vision will be a space where Black ideas are launched and incubated. The opportunity exists with the relaunch of the Vision to operate an arts center that is a channel to, and for, Black creative thought. A place where people come to see art and a place of cultural production.

An interconnected web of programming is proposed to establish the identity of the Vision Theatre and engender intentional ties to the local and global community. It is the Vision Theatre's intention to generate momentum for the organization and to set a context that the emergent venue staff can respond to and evolve.

## Seven Connected Areas of Practice for the Vision Theatre



The selected programs will activate the Vision by meeting most, if not all, of the following benchmarks:

- Creating quality, artistic programming specifically for communities in the LPV area;
- Activating and engaging a diverse spectrum of collaborators and community members (intergenerational, family, individuals, businesses, cultural partners, etc.);
- Elevating intersectional issues through programming and addressing topics such as climate change, food justice, economic justice, reproductive rights, education, digital rights, workforce development, gender, community development, and health and wellness, among others;
- Illuminating cultural expression and ideas of creatives from the contemporary African Diaspora, thus manifesting greater cultural equity and social justice; and
- Resonating with and educating audiences across differences.

With this slate of benchmarks, the organization can become a cultural laboratory to test ideas and activate local and global collaborations, actively fortifying a cultural network that extends beyond the Vision Theatre's walls.

## Programs

In addition to potential programming sourced from Cultural Hub members, there is a great opportunity for synchronicity with existing emerging and established artists to be featured on the stage of the Vision Theatre. The full season should attract a wide range of audience members including family, seniors, youth, and general arts-enthusiasts.

The Vision Theatre provides the community an opportunity to present art and artists of the African Diaspora that are familiar and boundary-pushing, and representative of multiple disciplines of the performing arts. A season at the Vision Theatre should represent the full expression of Black artists locally, nationally, and internationally. Below is an example of artists and projects that can be presented to the LPV community. Some of these projects would require partnerships to produce them and others may be more straight forward presentations.

### ***National Tours***

The theater configuration and location is an excellent opportunity to work with nationally touring projects created by recognized Black artists. These projects are interdisciplinary new works that will thrive in a Black cultural space, for example:



- ***Can I Get a Witness?***

***The Gospel of James Baldwin*** is a musical theatrical tribute to writer James Baldwin created by musician Meshell Ndegeocello.

- Octavia Butler's ***Parable of the Sower*** was adapted into an opera by Toshi Reagon and Bernice Johnson Reagon.

- ***We Shall Not Be Moved***, a chamber opera directed by Bill T. Jones with music by Daniel Bernard Roumain and book by Marc Bamuthi Joseph.

### ***Film, Video, Media***

The Vision Theatre's location in the epicenter of the film and television industry presents a great opportunity to exhibit independent and major studio films. These events will range from hosting independent film screenings and the opening night of the Pan African Film Festival, to the curation of an International Children's Film Festival. Partnerships with the Pan African Film Festival, Array Films, and local studios will be valuable to gaining access to filmmakers and films.

Another idea includes a Sound and Screen series where local musicians perform portions of the soundtrack to family friendly films, (e.g., *Purple Rain*, *The Wiz*, or *Dreamgirls*) with a corresponding film following. As an alternative, the series could include a family sing-along where the lyrics are projected on the screen.

### **Festivals**

Currently, LPV is home to many festivals throughout the year. Once opened, the Vision Theatre and the newly formed DCA Leimert Park Cultural Hub can potentially be able to provide the infrastructure and resources to enhance current events, collaborate with existing festival producers, and introduce new events to the area. Some of the existing festivals include: the Day of Ancestors - Festival of Masks, MLK Day, Heritage Day, Kwanzaa, and the Juneteenth Festival. New ideas include: AfroPunk, Jazz, Gospel, and Blues festivals.

### **Dance**

The Vision Theatre will function as a Center for Black dance by presenting a program that cultivates and honors emerging and established dance artists whose work represents a wide range of aesthetic interests. The theater will also support the dance community by providing a home for local, national, and international companies and for audience members to experience diverse, popular, and challenging performances. By forging partnerships with The International Association of Blacks in Dance and national presenters: Dance Theater of Harlem; Urban Bush Women; Camille Brown Dance Company; Versa Style Dance; Lula Washington Dance Company; Debbie Allen Dance; Viver Brasil; Vuyani Dance; Dada Masilo; and more will use the theater as its primary Los Angeles venue.



### **Music**

The intention of the Vision Theatre is to present musicians who work in sonically different fields and exemplify the area's greatest musical artists such as: Herbie Hancock, Kamasi Washington, Barbara Morrison, Dwight Trible, Quincy Jones, and many others. All forms of music will be showcased including jazz, contemporary, gospel, blues, Broadway,



classical, cabaret, hip hop, and electronic. Partnerships can also be established with many music events and producers and major institutions including the Afro-Chamber Music Ensemble, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Amplify Africa, and others. Also, a continued presence of African drumming and music by practitioners and experts in African diasporic musical traditions should take priority.

### **Theater**

The venue will once become a home for theater, inviting local companies to use the space for mid-size to large-scale productions. The local Black theater companies expressed concern about the financial viability of producing in a 750 seat space without significant subsidy. Even with subsidies, producing more than a one-night event is not realistic for these companies. Possible scenarios for use of the space is producing a one-night special performance as a fundraiser or using the stage for seating and performances.



Partnerships with national organizations and creating theatrical events will be essential to the success of a theater program. 50IN50, a reading of 50 short plays written by Black women playwrights and read by celebrity actresses, is such a project. Produced by the Billie Holiday Theater in New York City, the program is easily transferable. The Apollo Theater has a similar project with the stage reading of Ta-Nehisi Coat's book, *Between the World and Me*. Extensive partnerships within Los Angeles-based organizations can also support the theater program, including working with Black theater companies, universities, and institutions like Centre Theatre Group and Geffen Playhouse.

### **Literary Arts, Spoken Word**

LPV is home to one of the oldest Black bookstores in the country. Eso Won Books is a well-respected around the country by both writers and readers. Creating a Leimert Park Book Festival is the perfect pathway for working with this local merchant. Other literary events could include hosting the Well-Read Black Girl Conference and a poetry and spoken word event with Cave Canem Foundation, a home for African American poetry that is committed to cultivating the artistic and professional growth of African American poets. A signature event could occur at the Vision with corresponding sessions happening at venues in LPV.

### ***Hip Hop, Social Justice, Creative Technologies***

Providing opportunities for the younger generation of artists and audiences is imperative for the growth and sustainability of the theater. The Vision can be a leader in presenting, producing, and creating programs that celebrate, explore, and uplift hip hop culture, afrofuturism, and the intersection of the arts, social justice, and technology. Program choices should signal to young artists that the Vision is a welcoming home. The organizations Kaos Network, We Love Leimert, Flying Lotus, and Tec Leimert will support hip hop programming at an institutional scale with a sharp curatorial edge.

### ***National Partnerships***

The Vision has an opportunity to create viable partnerships with presenting and producing organizations around the country with a focus on presenting art and artists of African descent. These organizations include the Apollo, August Wilson Center, 651 ARTS, African Exchange 2.0, Harlem Stage, the National Black Theater Festival, and the National Black Arts Festival. Partnerships will allow the Vision to create new programs or strengthen existing ones which can also include national service organizations like Western Arts Alliance, Arts Presenters, Women of Color in the Arts, The Gospel Music Association, Black Fraternities and Sororities, National Performance Network, and National Dance Project.

National partnerships are essential to the programmatic success at the Vision. Partnerships have been proven to be an effective tool for enhancing participation in the arts by strengthening participation and understanding of a target audience; connections to artists; administrative expertise; artistic and curatorial expertise; fundraising and financial capabilities; space in which to present cultural activities; and overall knowledge, experience, and/or information that is needed, but not possessed by other organizational partners.

It is recommended that up to 60% of the available evenings be reserved for original and commissioned productions, and presenting partnerships with major cultural institutions in Los Angeles across the country, and the world.

### **RENTALS**

Programmable evenings will be available for commercial and large and small nonprofit rental use. As such, commercial and large nonprofit use of the space will allow for the consistent and community use of the theater. The renting organizations will work closely with the DCA venue team. However, it is important to consider that the programming and use—even if the entity can pay the full price—be relevant to the community in

which it sits. The Venue Manager should center and prioritize rentals where the artists or the artwork is of the African Diaspora and local Leimert Park community.

Operating challenges found with other city-owned buildings who use the majority-rental model included:

- Inconsistencies in tracking attendance (and impact/use) because of the individual use of each rental venue—there was no best-practices tracking system that organizations who were renting the space could adapt for the use of the space;
- No centralized ticketing or marketing system impacts the venue's ability to obtain or create a user profile to understand growth/funding opportunities;
- Lack of philanthropy for investing in viable artistic production;
- Reliance on commercial rentals to support overall operating budget; and
- Challenges of tracking ongoing facility upgrades, repairs, and being a landlord.

## **MANCHESTER YOUTH ARTS CENTER**

As per the funding of Phase I of the Vision that has been designated for the mandatory creation of the Manchester Youth Arts Center, space and time will be created for youth-centered programming on premises of the Vision Theatre, and potentially within the wider LPV and Los Angeles community. Within the LPV there already exists discipline-specific arts exposure and development programs for young children.

The Vision Theatre and Manchester Youth Arts Center should not duplicate those efforts. Instead, partnering with an established and professional-grade venue with a local impact and national reach could provide youth expansive opportunities and experience in the areas of artistic technical production, arts administration, and front-of-house theater management.



This will not only provide experiential opportunities while the students are progressing along their educational tract, but also provide moments for South Los Angeles young

people to understand alternative entry points into the arts, especially in areas that continue to lack diversity.

The Manchester Youth Arts Center will present cohesive educational programming within the Vision Theatre. The co-location of the Manchester Youth Arts Center will only serve to enhance and augment programs happening in the space.

## **THE VISION THEATRE IMPLEMENTATION**

- Development of the artistic vision and mission for the Vision Theatre
- Creation of an operating plan that support all aspects of the venue
- Development of the program plan and time line
- Hiring and training of the DCA Performing Arts Program Vision Theatre staff
- Formation of the MOU and Selection of the Friends of the Vision Theatre
- Formation of the MOU and the Vision Theater Foundation
- Creation of applications for national funding for performing arts
- Launching of the Cultural Hub and subsidy budget model
- Celebration of the Vision Theatre and Manchester Youth Arts Center Reopening – Spring 2021

## **CONCLUSION**

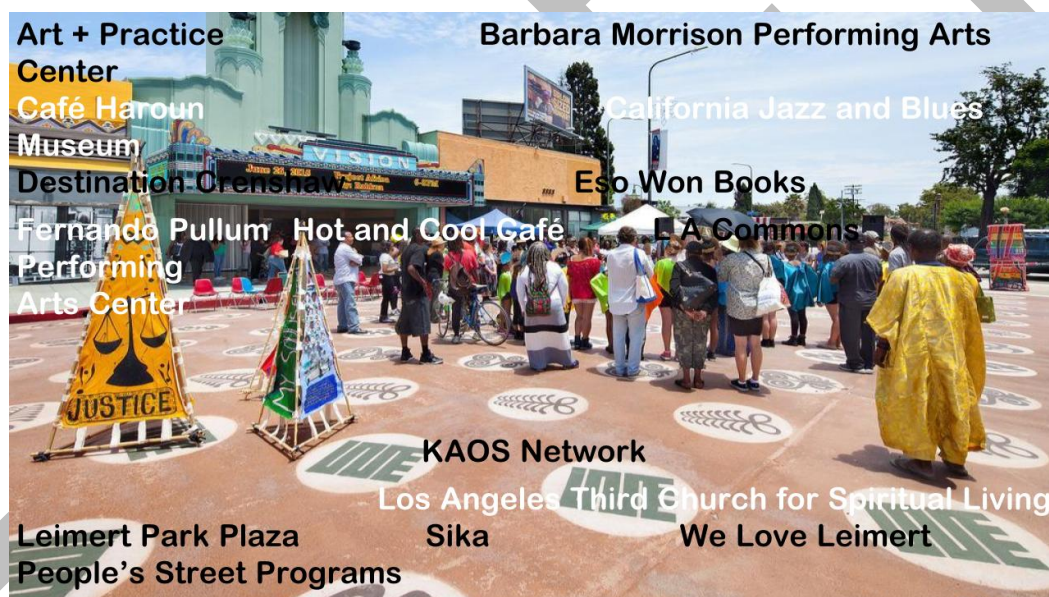
The community members who made themselves available for one-on-one interviews and attended the town hall sessions were very clear that without a written mission and use of the space rooted in the culture and history of the African American experience, it will be very hard to trust and believe that generations from now the Vision Theatre will reflect the LPV community, even as it shifts and changes as a result of economic pressures and gentrification.

To that end, it is imperative that the Vision Theatre adopt major and minor artistic voices that program the majority of the available presenting times. These entities should have deep local Los Angeles roots and national reach and appeal. Without this, it will be

significantly difficult to attract national foundation funding, touring partners, and commercial sources of revenue, in addition to strengthening the Vision's ties to its audience within Los Angeles and abroad, encouraging continuous returns to the space and LPV.

Any available community use of the space will need to be truly affordable and accessible. This means putting a significant subsidy in place to present in the theater. The creation of the Vision Theatre Foundation would directly address this need.

Overall, a general excitement exists in the community about the opening of the Vision Theatre and the potential for creative placemaking. By igniting a vital spark that will enhance the life of LPV, DCA's Vision Theatre will make it a place full of artistic and cultural activity that will attract residents and visitors alike.



*\* All quotes were provided by interviewees listed in the appendix of this document. For their participation, it was agreed that any published quotes would remain anonymous.*



## **APPENDIX**

### **LPV Merchants & Tenants**

Ade Neff  
Barbara Morrison  
Ben Caldwell  
Damon Turner  
Dwight Tribble  
Fernando Pullum  
Karen Mack  
Kaya Dantzler  
Sophia Belsheim  
Tony Jolly  
Robert Saucedo  
Allen DiCastro

### **Community Stakeholders**

Clint Rosemont  
Jonny Raines  
Diane Robertson  
Dr. Maulana Karenga  
Marie Keller  
Terry Scott

### **DCA**

James Burks  
Rosie Lee Hooks  
Leslie A. Thomas  
Emily Wanserski  
Yvonne Farrow

### **Local Artists and Art Organizations**

Ana Maria Alvarez  
Angela Gibbs  
Ben Guillory  
Debbie Allen  
Lula Washington  
Erwin Washington  
Tamica Washington  
George Davis  
Michael Sheppard  
Nancy Davis  
Tafari Bayne  
Richard Lawson  
Wren Brown  
Gayle Hooks

### **National Representatives**

Kamilah Forbes  
Olga Garay English  
Roberta Uno  
Maria Rosario Jackson  
James Burley Wilson