

**An Interim Progress Report
of The August Wilson Center Recovery Committee**

September 2014

"Community Conversations"

PART ONE: Community Conversations & AWC Recovery

Inspired by August Wilson

“...the idea of an audience as a community of people who gather willingly to bear witness. A novelist writes a novel and people read it. But reading is a solitary act. While it may elicit a varied and personal response, the communal nature of the audience is like having five hundred people read your novel and respond to it at the same time. I find that thrilling.”¹

“Honesty. Something to say and the courage to say it. The will and daring to accomplish great art. Craft. All that is necessary then is ambition . . . which is as valid and valuable as anything else.”²

About the AWC Recovery Committee

The purpose of the independent AWC Recovery Committee is to guide a process for generating a new view of how the August Wilson Center’s mission and vision for rich African-American cultural programming that can be fully realized and sustained. AWCRI, or AWC Renewal, Inc., is an entity that was formed in May 2014 as a Pennsylvania non-profit corporation to manage and/or operate the August Wilson Center as a venerable community institution valued for its mission of connecting diverse audiences to experience, understand and celebrate the art, culture, and history of people of African descent. Thanks to the volunteer Committee members including:

James E. Abraham

Terrance Hayes

Clyde Jones

Cecile Springer

janera solomon

E.J. Strassburger

Bonnie Van Kirk

Nancy Washington

Sala Udin

Jasiri X

¹On why he loves theater as an art form

²Q: If you had to construct an imaginary playwright, what qualities would you endow him or her?

The Beginning of a Conversation

This spring, the AWC Recovery Committee began a series of community conversations because we believe the future of the Center's success must be rooted in deep connections to a diverse community.

Community Recovery Effort

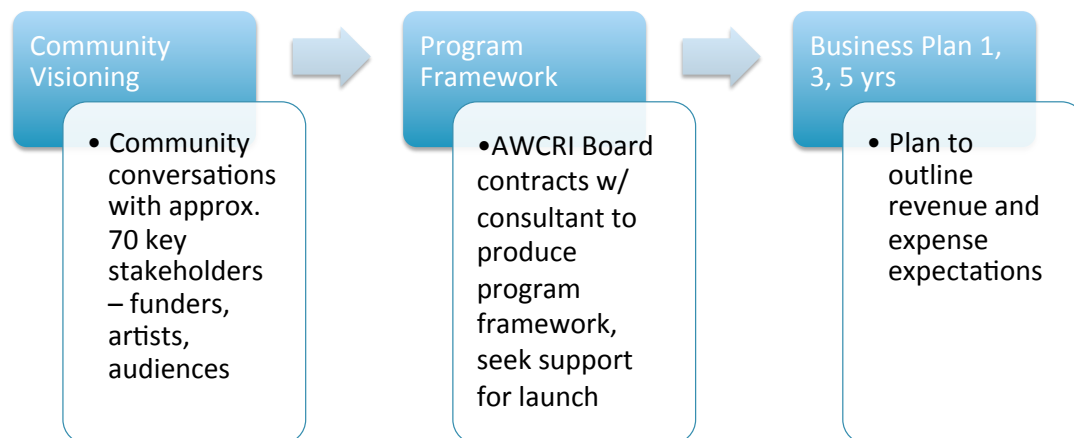


Concerned citizens participated in these conversations discussing the mission, vision, disappointments, and hopes for recovery. Joining us in these conversations were national leaders in community-based arts, Ken Foster (Associate Professor & Director of Arts Leadership Program at the Thornton School of Music, University of Southern California, previously the Executive Director, at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts from 2003 – 2013) and Mikki Shepard (Executive Producer, Apollo Theater), both adding unique and valuable perspectives on how communities can recover valuable cultural assets.

The purpose of these spirited conversations was to provide a framework that would guide the future business, program, and engagement plans for the new AWC. We believe the failure to engage and adhere to community expectations was a key failing of the first incarnation of the AWC.

Planning Process

The AWC Recovery Committee has adopted a three-part planning process as described in the diagram below.



Expanding the Sphere of Support

Thus far, this process has helped to expand the understanding of and support for a new approach to managing and advancing the August Wilson Center's vision and mission as truly a "Center" for the entire community's cultural enrichment.

In just a short period of time we have experienced a number of early successes:

- We expanded the recovery effort beyond the Founders to include a wider, more diverse representation of experiences and values.
- We formed a diverse committee to guide the community conversation process, and have reached out to leaders in the community for input and advice.

In addition to our AWC Recovery Committee, outside experts and others comprise an extraordinary group that crosses generations, leadership experience, artistic tastes, and cultural perspectives. The committee is chaired by Janera Solomon, executive director of the Kelly Strayhorn Theater.

In the course of Part 1 of our journey...

- We held three public forums for concerned citizens to contribute to the Recovery Plan and a formal notice was made to the Hon. Judge O'Toole expressing our interest in having community input and foundation participation in the recovery process.
- Our conversations opened the door for others to articulate their support for the Center and additional letters to the editor and op-eds were submitted and published in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.
- City of Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto, Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald, the Urban Redevelopment Authority, and Pennsylvania's Attorney General's Office, together, have played a pivotal role in opposing the sale to a hotel developer and in articulating the significance of the property's deed covenants, which restrict the modification of the building façade without the URA's prior review and approval. We support their efforts.

Results/Highlights of Community Conversations

The following are highlights represent a summary of the Community Conversations in which there was a consensus around the following topics and perspectives:

- 1. The AWC is a place for education and learning for young and old and everyone in between. Through dynamic programming, it needs to be a place that sparks discovery and an appreciation for art and the role it plays in our lives and in our region.** Education programs should be intergenerational opportunities that bring parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles for a theater experience whereby they can learn together...to create a forum for what they think they need to see or achieve, and then, how they can get it.
- 2. People want to see the Center more connected to the greater arts community.** First, programming activities must support the growth and development of the Center and for Pittsburgh-based black artists. Also, there is a need for partnership programming with established institutions – for example, an opportunity to collaborate or co-produce an August Wilson play or festival with other local theater companies. AWC 2.0 needs to be more integrated into Pittsburgh’s theatrical and cultural community.
- 3. Accountability and sustainability are paramount for any cultural organization that wants to thrive.** There needs to be a mutually balanced system for the place and the programs to thrive. We need to make sure that it’s clear that the Center’s programming principles and schedule of performances, exhibits, conferences, meetings and events articulate a path to sustainability and success.
- 4. An innovative organizational model is necessary for sustainability.** In these times of dramatic change and incredible stress on traditional nonprofit structures, alternative models of governance and community engagement have emerged and should be considered when thinking about AWC in its new incarnation.
- 5. We need to fully embrace August Wilson as an iconic Pittsburgher.** Much like we admire the works and successes of Andy Warhol, Rachel Carson, Jonas Salk and H.J. Heinz, August Wilson was self-made and a product of Pittsburgh.

Pittsburghers must realize the importance of August Wilson not only to our city but to the world and everyone in it. Wilson took every day experiences to create stories about relationships between people and how they connect and co-exist with each other. He wrote about unemployment, crime and displacement, friends who lost their connection and people who fell out of love. We were just at the beginning of enjoying and exploring his works before August Wilson passed away in the midst of his blossoming career and national recognition. It’s about the spirit in which his work was created – helping people to see themselves and realize the pride they have or the pride they lack.

6. **The August Wilson Center needs to be a gathering place where culture and social significance intersect. Embodying August Wilson’s spirit is the essence of programming for the Center. The Center needs to be a place for young people and place for fresh new ideas.** While we want to celebrate history and the accomplishments of the black community, it needs to be relevant and current in terms of helping people to think, talk about, investigate, explore and celebrate what’s happening right now in our world. The Center is in need of a serious schedule of critical events that help to bring this intention to life. Effective and sustainable programming is essential to making the new AWC successful. We believe this is completely doable and must attract the interests of a wide audience of Pittsburghers and visitors.

7. **More than 20 years in the making, the August Wilson Center is more than a building. We believe the acquisition of the current August Wilson Center building is more than the purchase of a building; it must be a cultural investment in our region. It symbolizes Pittsburgh’s recognition of the value of African American culture and the African Diaspora that can help to make Pittsburgh an even greater city and destination.** A “center” (not merely a venue) is a place that many people feel connected to — it’s a comfortable, safe and welcoming place to be who you are; a “center” feels like coming home. The building is but a mere vessel where all the right programming can happen in one physical place. AWC 2.0 must be built on a collective vision for a dynamic center that welcomes diverse audiences to celebrate cultures of African diaspora, of which we as city and region can be proud.

Acknowledging Important Lessons & Steps Forward

From the many conversations throughout the community, the AWC Recovery Committee validated views and facts about the reasons for AWC's earlier failure. In the process, the Committee also achieved a consensus for the path ahead for AWC 2.0 as outlined below.

Reasons for AWC "failure"	Steps Forward
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A new facility required more financial support and more strategic partnerships from the start• Many programs and initiatives all at once without clear focus• August Wilson's name and legacy as key focus of the Center's program was not clear• Focus on programming, not enough on development and marketing• Failure to stay connected to the community – lack of consistent communication• National crisis for arts organizations during economic crisis across the country; many organizations had difficulty weathering the storm• Governance and management failures• Damaged relationship with Foundations and key supporters• Fledgling arts organization, launched during recession w/ \$12 million debt	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fund adequately (multi-year)• Rebuild slowly• It is a "cultural" center – with a variety of programs and producers – varying in scale and aesthetics. Designed to be responsive.• Through local and national partnerships the Center addresses social, political, economic issues of the day through art.• August Wilson's legacy as a man of the people and artist provocateur with love for Pittsburgh is at the center.• Equal focus to program, audience and donor engagement; through fiscal agency programs, producing partnerships, and artist fellowships, the AWC plays a vital role in addressing social inequities in Pittsburgh's arts community.• Board leadership that engages a broad local constituency is key• Stay connected to the world ----- with national advisory• Executive leadership with appreciation for Pgh and national local connections

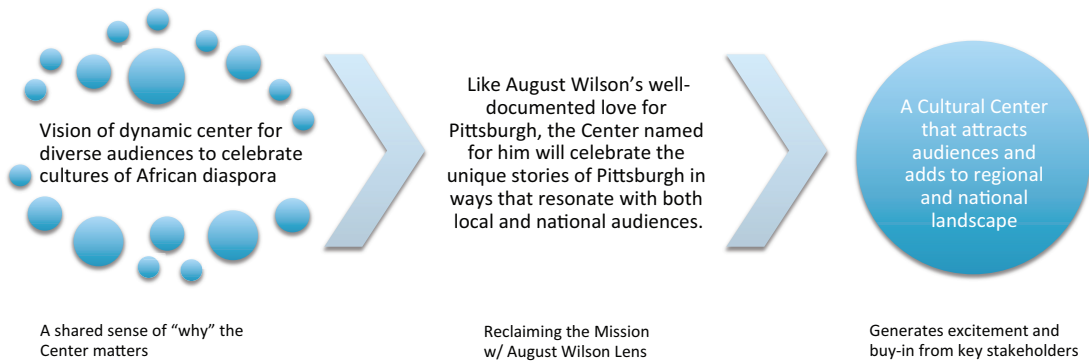
About Mission, Vision & Purpose

- 1. Live-up to the stated Mission & Vision.** The original impetus for the formation of the AWC, for the black community, and all of Pittsburgh, to have a center that celebrates black arts and culture remains a strongly expressed need. The Center needs a sense of openness, vibrancy, and connectedness to the street and the community. As a downtown arts center, it would be a stimulant of activity during the day, evening, and weekends. There's an opportunity to reframe the way we think about the "downtown" arts center. AWC 2.0 can serve as a stimulus for a new kind of downtown arts activity. Maintaining the "downtown place" while greatly enhancing AWC's programming supports the reality that black culture in an important part of our region's history our future.

The Center's Mission as a vibrant, regional, national, and international "center", or gateway to black arts and culture for diverse audiences, still resonates but was not fully realized by AWC 1.0.

Our Shared Destination

By having a shared vision for a dynamic center that reclaims mission the August Wilson Center as seen through a new lens, the community believes that we can achieve buy-in for an AWC 2.0 from local, regional and national stakeholders.



- 2. More than a name, the Center must embody August Wilson's pioneering (and progressive) spirit and love of community.** Like August Wilson's undying love for Pittsburgh, this Center must celebrate and critique the experience of African Americans in Pittsburgh. The AWC programming must have local and national partners because the stories of Western Pennsylvania celebrated in the work of August Wilson tell universal stories that have national resonance.
- 3. More than a place, it is the vessel of what takes place and 'lives' on the inside.** – Programs will feature true art in multiple forms from performances to exhibits and furnishings to the attitude and sense of place to the food, music and welcoming appeal.
- 4. The new AWC must establish national partners and stay connected to national and international trends in programming, black arts, and culture; it must also set new trends.** There is an opportunity at the AWC to create national recognition for black arts and culture that resonates with people all over the world. The Fellowship Program is one of many ways AWC programming can support Pittsburgh-based artists and impact the world. Programs like this that connect Pittsburgh to the rest of the world are vital to the health of AWC 2.0.
- 5. A focus on education and learning.** The AWC must be a center that fosters civil discourse, where people of many different backgrounds and ages come to learn and experience art that sparks discovery and dialogue. It is a place of learning and discovery for young people and adults alike.
- 6. Contemporary artists are important to the center.** While AWC celebrates the history of black arts and culture, it must also be equally committed to discovery and the work of contemporary artists who are changing our world today and tomorrow. The Center must be a place that brings audiences together to debate, discover, and understand the complexities of the city and the world we live in today through the eyes of today's artists.

About Structure, Innovation & Accountability

1. **Accountability.** The former AWC lost the community's confidence and trust. This must be re-established. The new leadership will need to establish strategic priorities for the organization's development and annual plans implemented and monitored. This is an iterative process.
2. **A diverse & dynamic board committed to strong governance.** The new leadership of the AWC must do more than represent key constituencies or have areas of expertise. This group should possess and demonstrate a commitment to the same values August Wilson espoused in his work:
 - (1) commitment to community;
 - (2) passion for dialogue and expression of ideas;
 - (3) understanding the value of August Wilson's artistic impact; and
 - (4) demonstrate willingness and capacity to advocate strongly for AWC and secure partnerships and financial support.

Board leadership that engages a broad local constituency is key, as well as having a national presence.

3. **Innovative organizational model is necessary for sustainability.** In these times of dramatic change and incredible stress on traditional nonprofit structures, alternative models of governance and community engagement have emerged and should be considered when thinking about AWC in its new incarnation. This model is influencing the creative place-making movement. These have been and continue to be models that exist in neighborhoods and communities of color. For example, institutions who center their work in community, and whose artistic processes and products evolve out of that relationship, are beginning to emerge in downtown areas around the country as sites of important and engaged arts activity.

AWC 2.0 could benefit from examining and perhaps adopting an alternative structural and organizational design influenced by these ideas.

Programming Possibilities

The following is a list of preliminary ideas for possible programming in the first year of the new August Wilson Center:

- National Symposium: New Ideas in Black Arts
- New Holiday Traditions
- Music and Dance from Ellington's Jazz Nutcracker – Pittsburgh Jazz Orchestra
- Kwanzaa Celebration with multiple community partners
- “August in February” Vignettes from Wilson plays – co-presentation w/ Pittsburgh Cultural Trust
- Artist Commissions – to create performance or interactive art projects
- August Wilson Annual Birthday Celebration
- “August Wilson’s Women, a project that examines female characters in Wilson Plays”
- Select a new class of Wilson Fellows utilizing a national jury
- Summer Residencies/Performances including Courtyard Series
- Re-define resident companies and start with the AWC Theater and AWC Dance Ensembles
- Re-brand First Voice Festival as multi arts & venue festival showcasing what’s happening NOW in black arts and culture around the region
- Annual Gala
- AWC LIVE! – four performances; national works for the first season
- Annual Black Dance Festival Returns
- Trust JazzLive Festival Co-Presentation

About Immediate Strategic Priorities

- 1. The path to recovery will be slow and steady.** Rebuilding the Center’s program and reputation will take some time and focused attention to program development, audience, and donor engagement.
- 2. AWC 2.0 requires a well-defined business plan which outlines revenue and expense expectations in alignment with anticipated funding.**
- 3. Redefine “Hub and Spoke” with AWC as “nexus” of neighborhood-based arts activity.** The Center must be a nexus for the black arts and cultural scene. Rather than be seen as competitor—as with AWC 1.0—the Center, through its partnership programming, must connect with and benefit from the experience of dynamic artists and organizations in our neighborhoods.
- 4. Programming design must lead, not follow.** Programs should be a blend of timely, edgy, traditional, thoughtful, provocative and able to stand the test of time and audience desires.
- 5. The AWC needs a dynamic executive leadership team to succeed.**
The executive leadership and management team must be a dynamic group with connections to the local community and an understanding of the national scene. The individuals are dynamic communicators, comfortable working across racial and cultural lines, with a track record of demonstrated commitment to the mission.
- 6. Stay connected to the community of supporters who value the AWC.**
People have many reasons for supporting the Center. Participants expressed that communication, in its basic form, and of more complex notions of brand identity and messaging were never clear. Communicate a clear message and do so often.

You might wonder — why does this matter? How does it help to “save,” and more importantly, revive the AWC? The answer is not simple. It is rooted in the understanding of a new reality for arts nonprofits. The world of nonprofit arts, like everything else in our lives, is undergoing rapid change. Long gone are the days when arts organizations could rely solely on foundation support or that of a few key donors. AWC 2.0 is emerging in a world vastly different from the one in which AWC 1.0 was conceived and developed.

In times of transitions, times like these, community input matters because an arts organization’s “community” of concerned and passionate supporters must work to be the foundation to preserve it. The loss or lack of community connection with the AWC is perhaps the reason it floundered so quickly.

These conversations are part of a process to spark renewed interest and support for the vibrant center of unparalleled black cultural programming that brings diverse audiences together.

In Summary, A Different Collaborative Effort

Here’s how the AWC Recovery Committee sees the organization and structure for mobilizing the plan for AWC 2.0:

- Foundation coalition purchases the AWC from Dollar Bank and transfers ownership to a newly-created entity.
- A working group of foundation and community partners (perhaps the board of the ownership entity) will oversee a three-year business plan developed by a national consulting firm.
- AWCRI launches with a diverse group of board members with blend of African-American and broader communities carefully selected to provide programming and fiscal oversight.
- The Pittsburgh Cultural Trust is retained and a management agreement is developed with AWC Recovery Committee input.
- AWCRI is retained to produce cultural programming for AWC Facility.
- A community advisory board will support the AWCRI board to help ensure a continuing focus on the mission of an African-American culture.

What's Ahead...

The work of the Recovery Committee is on its way to achieving three goals: (1) creating opportunity for new leadership voices to emerge; (2) gathering a range of ideas for recovery efforts; and (3) creating ways for community participation in the continuance of the Center's impact on the cultural life of the region. It is our understanding that this work is parallel to the efforts of the Foundations, URA, Mayor, and County Executive to secure ownership of the facility for a black cultural center.

The Recovery Committee is eager to work collaboratively with the foundations and other partners to explore and ensure a revitalized AWC 2.0.

The Committee and those we engaged in the Community Conversations discussed what the new August Wilson Center could be as a new cultural place for Pittsburgh:

- The new AWC inspires a different kind of “downtown” arts center – open daily for a variety of activities, not only an evening destination.
- Produces and presents provocative programming that brings audiences together to debate, discover and understand our city and improve the quality of life here for everyone.
- A place where art is presented and created by local, natl. and international artists with local and national partners.
- Serves as a hub that builds producing capacity of black arts/neighborhood-based organizations; redefines downtown as a hub.
- Improves the physical spaces near the Center in ways that inspire arts discovery and community connection.

This interim report was organized and respectfully submitted by,

janera solomon

Chair, AWC Recovery Committee, September 3, 2014

NOTE: The Committee's work continues and additional interim reports will be provided as the next two phases of this recovery planning process are completed.