

CREATING CREATIVE PLACES



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18TH STREET ARTS CENTER

Located in the beach-side community of Santa Monica, CA, 18th Street Arts Center has been home to innovative, avant-garde artists for more than 25 years. The Center was conceived as an inter-generational, inter-cultural, multi-disciplinary “beehive.” Shortly after its founding, it became a creative cluster of studios, galleries, offices, and public spaces, housing tenants as well as visiting artists working in visual, performance, and media arts. The Center was committed to providing artists with affordable studio, exhibition, and live/work space. Over the ensuing decades, it formalized an arts residency program and developed an international artist exchange program, a public presenting program to curate and produce exhibitions, and an arts education program – while at the same time leasing office space to community-based nonprofit arts organizations. Today, 18th Street Arts Center is a coveted destination for national and international artists wishing to publish, perform, work, and exhibit in Los Angeles County.

In 1998, the Center had the opportunity to purchase its 1.25 acre site from one of its founding board members. Over the years, the site had evolved into a unique assembly of buildings, amounting to 25,000 square feet of space, much of it leased to tenants and providing for an exhibit space.

PROJECT DATE:

2007-2009

SECTOR: *Community Arts,
Land Use*

FTA SKILLS AND SERVICES:

*Strategic planning,
institutional visioning,
group facilitation*

18TH STREET ARTS CENTER is an artists' residency program in Santa Monica, California, that promotes contemporary art, fosters inter-cultural collaboration, and engages the public through exhibitions, publications and other events.

18TH STREET ARTS CENTER

However, the opportunity to purchase the property (which was in need of repair) came with a long-term obligation to repay a \$2.5 million loan to the seller. This condition posed a potential financial challenge for the small organization as it sought to raise funds for programs and operations while at the same time paying interest and principal due on the loan, and attempting to address a long list of deferred maintenance items.

In 2006, the Center was approached by a local, nonprofit affordable housing developer, with an unusual offer. In line with the City of Santa Monica's priority to increase the stock of affordable housing, the nonprofit hoped to forge a development partnership with 18th Street Arts Center to create an arts and housing complex. The plan called for 66 residential units, a parking garage, and 30,000 square feet of studio and exhibition space. In exchange for a 99-year ground lease and development rights on the property, the housing group would act as lead developer, secure financing, and perhaps most importantly, lead efforts to form a tax-credit syndicate. 18th Street Arts Center would be responsible for developing plans for the new arts complex and raising funds for the construction of its new space.

Faced with an unprecedented opportunity, the art organization's Board determined that such a partnership – replete with long-term financing and tax credits – could offer the chance to pay off the burdensome property loan, while at the same time upgrading existing facilities and significantly expanding private work space and public exhibition and meeting space.

Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party" was created between 1974 and 1979 with the help of hundreds of volunteers working in a studio space in what is now known as the 18th Street Art Center in Santa Monica. During those years the project prompted interest from near and far including a visit from Joan Mondale, wife of then Vice President Walter Mondale.

18TH STREET ARTS CENTER

The Board realized that prior to embarking on a major redevelopment project and accompanying capital campaign it was important to conduct a market feasibility study to assess demand for artist space and programs. That's when 18th Street Arts Center was referred to Fern Tiger Associates (FTA).

After an initial series of conversations, the Center's leadership decided the organization would benefit from a full strategic planning process to re-affirm its mission, assess program offerings, analyze budget and funding issues, ascertain governance and management capacity, and determine the community's awareness of and support for the organization. More important, the findings and recommendations of the comprehensive strategic plan would guide any future development of the site and directly inform a market feasibility study.

Through in-depth research, stakeholder interviews, and a carefully-planned series of board retreats, FTA led the organization through conversations about the vision, priorities, and future of the organization. FTA found that 18th Street Arts Center occupied a highly unique niche in the cultural landscape of the region, and was respected nationally and even internationally for its artists' residents program. However, despite its long history, the Center had not moved beyond a "start-up mode" with regards to infrastructure, funding, and decisionmaking. Moreover, cumbersome financial obligations seemed to be pushing the organization to consider the property development as a financial solution that could "hijack" its mission and focus.



18TH STREET ARTS CENTER

FTA developed a strategic plan for the Center that helped to re-focus the organization, first by refining its mission, and then developing goals and strategies linked to supporting artists and arts organizations while becoming more deeply connected to the local community. Additional goals defined specific actions for more effective long-term management of the organization. In conjunction with the strategic plan, FTA performed a market feasibility study, highlighting the risks and urging caution in pursuing a redevelopment project. The Center ultimately did not pursue the development project, but remains an even more vibrant hub of artmaking.

