



STAGE FRIGHT

With the economy reeling, arts organizations are looking out at more and more empty seats. Local groups are struggling, and some around the country are starting to close their doors for good.

Will we step up to save ours before it's too late?

BY CHRISTINE LARSON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MAX WHITTAKER

► In the theater world, a single light (a "ghost light") is always left burning overnight on stage to ward off ghosts of past bad performances and ensure that the theater never "goes dark."



Lately, Sacramento Ballet dancers have been springing up in the most unlikely places. In December, they were pirouetting on the corner of 19th and J, waving signs that read “Honk if you Support the Sacramento Ballet.” And if you caught a statue winking at you at the Solomon Dubnick Gallery on Second Saturday last month, don’t worry: It wasn’t the wine. It was a dancer posing as a living statue to promote the Ballet.

The one place you won’t find the dancers: the Community Center Theater. In January, the Ballet canceled its remaining eight shows at the 2,400-seat hall (and four more at the Sacramento Theatre Company Main Stage). The company has opted instead for more, but far smaller, productions at 100- to 200-seat venues like the Mondavi Center’s studio theater and the Ballet’s own rehearsal studio. For the first time in a decade, *The Nutcracker* had failed to sell out most of its three-week run. When ticket sales landed a disappointing 35 percent below the ballet’s \$1 million target, co-artistic directors (and married couple) Ron Cunningham and Carinne Binda realized they had no chance of meeting their \$2.5 million budget. Canceling the big shows, which cost some \$90,000 a week, “was the only responsible thing to do,” says Cunningham.

With his carefully slicked-back white hair and neat black turtleneck, Cunningham exudes a calm dignity at odds with the stress he’s been under. In his 21 years at the ballet, he says, “This is as bad as it’s ever been.” It’s a rainy February morning and the ballet’s studio on K and 17th hums with subdued energy. A handful of the company’s 20 dancers drift into the spacious studio before class. Up a flight of rickety stairs, in a conference room long overdue for a coat of paint, Cunningham is going over the numbers yet again when Binda, her abundant hair swept up in a bushy ponytail, stops in to say hello.

“We’ve been sleeping just four or five hours a night,” Cunningham admits. “We’re doing a lot of ‘what-if’ scenarios.” What if ticket sales and donations remain low? What if they have to hire fewer dancers next year? What if the community fails to rally around the ballet? Or around the arts in general?

That last alarming question is plaguing nearly every arts group in the region. Most saw ticket sales, donations or both plummet when the bottom dropped out of the market last fall. “The phones stopped ringing on Sept. 15,” says Marc Feldman, executive director of the Sacramento Philharmonic. That was the day the stock market launched its downward spiral with the single biggest

one-day drop since Sept. 17, 2001, the day markets reopened after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center towers. Suddenly, nobody felt like giving. Donations dried up and within months, the Philharmonic found itself \$100,000 behind on its expected contributions. In meeting after meeting at the renovated Victorian in Oak Park that houses the Philharmonic’s administrative offices, staff and board debated the next steps: Cut community outreach concerts? Education? Slash a big event—or make small cuts in everything? For now, the Philharmonic has decided to cut back one major concert next year, dropping from six to five performances at the CCT. Further cuts are still on the table. Meanwhile, Feldman flew to Los Angeles in early March to meet with Michael Kaiser, president of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, who’s offering free advice to struggling groups.

Other organizations aren’t waiting, either. Earlier this year, Sacramento Theatre Company, B Street Theatre and the Ballet laid off some 14 staff members among them. With contributions down 15 percent, Sacramento Theatre Company shuttered its small Pollock Stage this year, and in February, announced it would swap out *Lysistrata*, with 13 actors, for the three-person cast of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)*, saving at least \$30,000. Likewise, Capital Stage aboard the Delta King will save \$50,000 (about 20 percent of its budget) by swapping larger shows for smaller ones. In Folsom, for-profit Garbeau’s Dinner Theatre launched a last ditch e-mail campaign to raise \$100,000 to keep its lease. Meanwhile, advanced ticket sales for the Jazz Jubilee are down \$20,000-\$30,000 from last year and sponsorships are off by about \$100,000, so director Gene Berthelsen has booked 65 bands, down from 100 last year. And he’s working without pay.

These groups aren’t just tightening their belts—they’re fighting for their lives. “We did a survey of 60 arts groups in December,” says Rhyena Halpern, executive director of the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission (SMAC), the joint city-county agency that provides grants to local arts groups. “Sixteen out of 60 were in urgent or critical condition.” Eight of those were in danger of folding in 2009. At 13 percent, that’s worse than in other cities: Americans for the Arts, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group, says that nationwide about 10 percent of nonprofit arts groups are in danger of folding.

Some already have. In March, the Baltimore Opera closed its doors for the last time after 58 years. The Connecticut



► Sacramento Ballet dancer Isha Lloyd helps raise money for the company by performing at midtown's Mochii Yogurt during Second Saturday.

Opera went dark in February after 67 years. In October, the Milwaukee Shakespeare theater company lowered the curtain after nine seasons. And closer to home, the American Musical Theatre of San Jose—that city's version of Sacramento's own California Musical Theatre (CMT)—shuttered in December in the middle of its 74th season.

It could happen here, too.

While CMT isn't on the ropes, early sales for next season are down 50 percent. "Unlike supermarkets, we are discretionary spending," says executive producer Richard Lewis. "It's a struggle right now."

Looking at the big picture, killing a concert, shuttering a theater or doing small plays instead of large may seem like a relatively small problem, especially at a time when many Sacramentans are losing their jobs and homes. After all, the city's homeless problem drew national attention in February when Oprah featured local shelters on her show; donations soared after the segment aired. With such fundamental needs, it's well worth asking why even a single dollar should go toward the struggling arts scene. But Mayor Kevin Johnson suggests that pitting homeless shelters against the arts is a false choice. "It is never an either-or proposition," he says. "We need to figure out how to have balance."

Besides, it's not a zero-sum game: The arts "spur positive economic conditions," says Matt Mahood, CEO of the Sacramento Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce. Just look, he says, at the Community Center Theater, which abetted development of downtown's restaurant scene, or at Second Saturday arts walks, which did the same for midtown.

Check out the numbers, too. In 2004, the performing arts alone generated \$228.6 million for the Sacramento metropolitan

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region, according to a study by regional economist Robert Fountain. That's nearly *twice* the \$116 million generated by spectator sports (think Kings and River Cats). And consider: The average arts patron spends \$28 above and beyond ticket prices on a night out, according to Americans for the Arts. So a single sold-out night at the Community Center Theater pumps some \$67,000 into the pockets of local businesses.

All that money means jobs. Not just for actors and musicians, but for box office staff, stagehands and caterers, as well as bartenders, parking attendants

and babysitters. According to economic impact formulas provided by Americans for the Arts, spending by Sacramento's eight biggest arts groups alone (in descending order by budget: California Musical Theatre, Mondavi Center, the Crocker, Sacramento Ballet, Sacramento Opera, B Street Theatre, Sacramento Theatre Company, the Sacramento Philharmonic) creates 1,890 full-time jobs, generating almost \$3 million a year in city taxes. No wonder Obama's stimulus package included \$50 million for the arts. (Sacramento arts groups that have applied for stimulus funding may receive grants by as early as July.)

Meanwhile, a lively arts scene helps put Sacramento on one "best place" list after another. We were eighth on *Kiplinger's* 2008 "Best Cities to Live, Work and Play" list, which factored in the number of artists, writers, musicians and other creative types. And we made *Fast Company's* "cities on the verge" list in 2007, which highlighted Sacramento's innovative industries.

All this artistic energy is a magnet for a valuable workforce, the "creative class" that author Richard Florida writes about who, in turn, draw more jobs. "Employers go where the workforce is," says Barbara Hayes, executive director of the



▶ A conceptual rendering of a new performing arts center at the downtown Railyards project

Sacramento Area Commerce & Trade Organization. Losing arts groups “would set us back,” she says. “It would definitely take away from what people feel we’ve gained.”

But we’re already losing ground. Those 12 canceled ballet performances (assuming they drew full houses) could cost local businesses some \$571,000 in patron spending. Next year, we’ll have at least one fewer big Phil concert, maybe fewer plays. Will we have fewer arts groups, too? Almost certainly if the trends SMAC spotted continue. And the loss of even a single arts group can “tarnish other organizations,” says the Kennedy Center’s Kaiser. “It creates a lack of respect for the arts organizations and their ability to manage themselves.”

Case in point: the Sacramento Symphony, which folded in 1996, taking subscriber ticket money down with it. “The demise of the Sacramento Symphony,” says Rod Gideons, director of the Sacramento Opera (one of the few bright spots on the financial front), “created a lot of mistrust in our community.”

That was more than a decade ago. Imagine the impact if the arts go extinct en masse in this climate. You don’t have to look very far back to picture Sacramento without a thriving arts scene. Fifteen years ago the ballet had just moved into its current digs, and the corner of K and 17th “was derelict and kind of drug-infested,” says Cunningham. Downtown was all but abandoned. There was no Mondavi Center, no Wells Fargo Pavilion. Music Circus still performed in a tent.

We’ve come so far since then. The opera does twice as many performances as it did six years ago. Since 2002, the Mondavi Center has brought renowned performers from Yo-Yo Ma to Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater practically every week. Additions like the progressive Capital Stage and the experimental B3 series at B Street are pushing the boundaries of theater. As the cherry on top of it all, the Crocker’s expansion campaign raised a staggering \$90 million (90 percent of its goal) between 2001 and 2009 to build a massive new wing designed by renowned architect Charles Gwathmey—the single largest and most successful arts campaign in Sacramento’s history. This record-breaker took place while B Street was raising funds for its new \$30 million theater, and the CMT, Ballet, Phil and Opera were nearing their \$11 million goal for the E. Claire Raley Studios for the Performing Arts, providing offices and rehearsal space for all four groups.

Then came the recession. While the Crocker’s construction is

well underway, the arts studio needs another \$2 million to \$4 million to break ground; the B Street needs \$10 million to \$12 million for its new digs. Such projects are likely to remain stalled in this climate, as arts groups pull back and focus on their core mission. But it’s not just the artists who need to look to their values, now—so does all of Sacramento. Our response to the arts crisis is, in many ways, a test of how far we’ve come in recent years.

“Great cities always continue to make the arts part of their fabric, even in down times,” says Mayor Kevin Johnson, who shepherded development of a retail-residential complex in Oak Park that includes the 40 Acres Art Gallery. So are we a great city? Have art, music and creativity become such integral parts of our identity that we’ll fight for them in tough times?

The members of the Sacramento Ballet say yes. “We’re still here,” Cunningham says. If you ask him and his dancers—none of whom have quit—this drama doesn’t have to end in tragedy. In fact, it could set the stage for a boffo second act.

THE SHOW MUST GO ON

On the incongruous stretch of Del Paso Boulevard, where upscale eateries like The Supper Club and Enotria Restaurant & Wine Bar share turf with pawn shops and liquor stores, sit the offices of the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission. With a \$1.2 million

operating budget derived mostly from hotel occupancy tax, SMAC provides training and support, and last year gave \$4 million in funding to 200 artists and arts groups.

SMAC has also been chief therapist to dozens of panicked groups. In two meetings earlier this year, 46 arts leaders filled the gray-paneled conference room to swap ideas. The meetings were sober, but—as you might expect—they buzzed with creative ideas. Plans are now underway for two June benefits: a concert in César Chavez Plaza and an “Edible Art” event where restaurants will add special dishes to benefit the arts. Another possibility: an ambitious “Arts

Aid” concert at Raley Field next year.

Groups also shared survival strategies. Some had new marketing ideas: B Street Theatre, STC and Capital Stage had jointly promoted a “3 for \$33” package (tickets to a show at each of the venues). The ballet dancers were enlisting “Ballet Businesses” to donate a percentage of proceeds. “The thing that really *makes* downtown is the culture,” says Mark Otero, owner of Mochii Yogurt, who agreed to donate 20 percent of the revenue he earned on two Second Saturdays. “The ballet is a very important part of that culture and we definitely don’t want to see that go away.”

Meanwhile, other arts groups were launching Obama-style grassroots fundraisers. The Center for Contemporary Art e-mailed 700 supporters asking for \$33 each. Capital Stage fired off an e-mail blast hoping to attract 2,500 donations of \$25 by August. And in March, the Philharmonic debuted a “Thousand Friends for the Phil” campaign, seeking to boost donors from 450 to 1,000; the campaign Web site, reached from a link on sacphil.org, lets donors create their own mini-campaign sites and challenge their friends to donate.

So far, those viral campaigns seem to be working. For instance, in three weeks, the Center for Contemporary Arts’ e-mail campaign raised \$3,000 to help cover the year’s operating costs. This suggests

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a larger scale grassroots effort could start to address a fundamental problem: Sacramento has simply never been the Daddy Warbucks of mid-sized American cities. In 2003, when the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* ranked the nation's biggest 50 metro regions in order of philanthropic giving per capita, Sacramento wasn't even in the top half. We were a humble 27th, with residents giving just 6.9 percent of discretionary income to charity (that's an average, so it factors in very big gifts—and it only counts residents with incomes over \$50,000, because people who make less than that amount usually don't itemize deductions, including donations). Compare that to other mid-sized regions: San Antonio gave 8.1; Charlotte, North Carolina gave 7.9. Many other similarly sized or even smaller regions out-gave us: Cincinnati, Portland, Denver, Indianapolis...

The truth is, with a few notable exceptions, Sacramento is not a philanthropist's town. Instead, there's "an expectation that government, corporations and foundations should pay for everything," says Lial Jones, the director of the Crocker. "The reality is that across the country that is not how organizations are funded. They are funded by individuals." And Sacramento does have a small handful of big-time arts patrons, most notably Joyce Raley Teel and Mort and Marcy Friedman, who respectively gave \$13 million and \$10 million to the Crocker, and Barbara Jackson, who gave \$5 million to the Mondavi Center.

But these are the exceptions, not the rule.

It's time to change our skinflint ways. Even if funds are scarce. Even when jobs are uncertain. If not now, when the need is so great, then when?

And the best thing is—it's fun to support the arts. Ask Caleb Mittelstet, a branch manager for Wells Fargo who lives in Natomas. At the Philharmonic masquerade fundraiser in October, he bid on the chance to conduct the orchestra, and made his debut (and probably final) guest conductor appearance in February, leading a Mozart piece. "It was very moving," he says. "I feel like I stole that from the Sac Phil—it was worth everything I paid for it and more." You don't have to give big; just go to a fundraiser for a hot date. Drive up the bidding on a silent auction. Make small donations to your favorite groups (think of it as a tip). Or volunteer: The Arts & Business Council runs a program called Business Volunteers for the Arts that can match your professional skills to the needs of arts groups (sacabc.org).

And, most importantly, turn off the TV and go see a play, a concert or a painting. "Every single ticket buyer counts," says the Philharmonic's Marc Feldman. Check out sacramento365.com for dozens of arts events happening every day. Because if there's one thing the Ballet debacle has shown us, it's this: If we're not there for our favorite arts events, they won't be there for us anymore, either.

UNITED ARTS FUNDS

In another conference room on the other side of the country, a whiteboard lists marketing efforts underway in February for the massive community-wide fundraiser held by the Arts and Science Council of Charlotte, North Carolina, a not-for-profit association that raises money for all the region's arts, science and culture groups.

It's a long list. There's the hockey night, where the Charlotte Checkers, an NHL minor-league team, give \$1 of every ticket to the arts fundraiser. And there are two different talent shows held by two competing hospitals as part of their employee giving drive (each raises more than six figures annually).

Not listed are the countless visits by arts groups to local businesses: A comedy troupe called The Chuckleheads dropped by a real estate firm; a science museum team played with liquid nitrogen at a law



► The proposed E. Claire Raley Studios for the Performing Arts at 14th and H would bring several major arts companies under one roof, encouraging collaboration and cutting costs.

firm. The point of all this: To cajole employees into donating a tiny slice of their paycheck to the arts through workplace giving. Last year, the employee-giving portion of Charlotte's campaign raised \$8.3 million (another \$2.7 million came from corporate donations, for a total of \$11 million raised). Most of those employee contributions were less than \$50 each. But when you have 40,000 workers and 450 companies participating, big things can happen. Last year, the Arts & Science Council gave \$14 million in grants and direct funding, and more than \$548,000 in training and development. No wonder the Charlotte region ranks as the 12th-most generous philanthropic metro area in the country.

The council's united arts fund (so called because such funds benefit all the arts, not just one group) impressed Matt Mahood. The Sacramento Metro Chamber head visited Charlotte in 2007 as part of an annual trip to a comparable region (Charlotte's metro population is 1.65 million, Sacramento's 2.1 million). "I think we should take a hard look at it," he says of the region's united arts employee giving campaign. "They don't just put it on the business community and employers. They say, 'Let's also talk about what the average Joe can give.'"

In Louisville, Kentucky (metro population: 1.2 million), a similar united arts fund raised \$9 million last year, with \$4 million coming from 26,000 individual employees in 250 workplaces. And in Portland, a workplace giving effort by the Portland Regional Arts & Culture Council yielded \$560,000 from 65 workplaces in 2008. (Some \$230,000 of that came from government matches—another great idea that could work here.)

United arts funds are "the grown-up way to fund the arts," says Buck Busfield, co-founder of the B Street Theatre. The larger efforts raise more awareness and, arguably, more money than groups could raise on their own. Making it happen here, Busfield says, would require "someone who's dedicated to talking to businesses about funding the arts, which we don't have now."

Actually, we do, but in a limited way. The Metropolitan Arts Partnership, run by former SMAC director Michelle Walker, conducts workplace giving campaigns for the arts, but only with government employers—state offices, the post office, police departments, schools—and one private employer, GenCorp. In 2008, the group collected about \$106,000 from a total of 900 employees and gave back \$93,000 in grants to arts and cultural groups; last year, its biggest grants went to Capital Public Radio (\$14,000), KVIE (\$11,000) and the Crocker (\$3,500).

Still, 900 employees isn't even 1/1000th of Sacramento's labor force—in January, we had 954,000 workers in the metro area. Part of the problem: MAP hasn't gained traction with private employers, unlike similar campaigns in Charlotte, Louisville and Portland, which

leave no stone unturned. “You never know who’s going to give,” says Eloise Damrosch, executive director of the Portland Regional Arts & Culture Council. Employees of one local burger chain, for instance, gave a combined \$9,000. MAP also doesn’t have a truly united fund: Employees donate to the arts or cultural group of their choice, and MAP grants the money accordingly.

Maybe a bigger, bolder workplace giving campaign, with money directed into a truly united arts fund, could be launched by SMAC. Or maybe by the newly re-energized Arts & Business Council, originally formed under the Metro Chamber to foster business support for the arts. The group spun off from the Chamber in 2006 and spent two years in rebuilding mode before hiring a new executive director, Michelle Alexander, just last spring.

Wherever its final home, a united arts fund with a vigorous employee workplace giving campaign would require full-time staffing by a creative, energetic arts leader. In Charlotte, *six* full-time staff members work on the campaign for most of the year. During the six-week drive, they’re assisted by temps, plus a whopping 1,300 volunteers. All that staffing costs money: Charlotte’s Arts & Science Council devotes a cool \$1 million to the campaign. But just look at the return: \$11 million back on a \$1 million investment? If only the stock market would do half as well.

But we wouldn’t necessarily need \$1 million. How about a salary or two? Some computers and office space? Maybe some matching funds?

And might some support be available right now? The Sacramento Region Community Foundation recently received a three-year, \$450,000 grant from the Irvine Foundation, partly for grants and training to arts groups and partly to cultivate a larger pool of arts donors. “We’re trying to build a general fund for the arts so we can continue to be a permanent source of funding,” says Ruth Blank, CEO of the community foundation. Could some of that grant go into laying the groundwork for a far-reaching united arts campaign? If not, could we pursue other grants or stimulus money? It’s time to start finding out.

FUNDS FOR LIFE

Of course, there’s another way to generate big money from small contributions: It’s called a tax. Before you cringe, take a look at Denver. There, citizens pay an average of \$16 a year—yes, \$16—to support the arts. In 1989, voters in Denver’s six-county region agreed to pay to the arts one penny of sales tax each time they spent \$10. Through that funding, which now includes a seventh county, more than 300 organizations of every size received a total of \$42 million in support last year.

“It’s not Kumbaya and it’s not Camelot, but boy has it made a difference for us,” says Peg Long, executive director of the Denver area’s Scientific and Cultural Facilities District. Since the tax kicked in, the Denver Art Museum has been expanded and a new symphony launched, and Denver’s economy received a jump-start. In 2007, arts and cultural activities produced a staggering \$1.7 billion in economic activity, twice the amount generated a decade earlier. At the same time, jobs related to arts, culture and scientific nonprofits increased 76 percent. And in January, the Pew Research Center released the

results of a poll asking where Americans most wanted to live. No. 1: Denver. Likewise, a one-tenth of one percent sales tax, approved by voters in 1996, raised \$20 million in Salt Lake City in 2006. A larger 0.5 percent tax, authorized in 1994, raised \$78 million in 2007 in Allegheny County in Pennsylvania.

Might it work here? In 1994, it almost did. That year, arts supporters lobbied for a ballot measure called Arts to Zoo, which—if approved by voters—would have dedicated one-tenth of one percent sales tax to arts and cultural institutions—just like Denver. “We did a lot of polling and showed that people were really supportive of something like this,” says Susan Willoughby, a Sacramento art consultant who worked on the proposal. Because the measure would have created a new tax entity that wasn’t city or county but something in between—it would have taxed the city and some surrounding core areas, but not outlying parts of the county—it required legislative approval. The initiative passed the Assembly and Senate, but Gov. Pete Wilson vetoed it.

Many in Sacramento’s arts community think it’s high time for another run at the tax idea. In February, SMAC invited Willoughby, planners from the nonprofit Valley Vision, a regional group that seeks to cultivate economic growth, and several arts representatives to its offices to explore the idea. Interest was high: The group will meet in

April with Anthony Radich, executive director of the Western States Arts Federation, an expert in such taxes.

The Arts to Zoo measure made it through the Legislature in just six months. Could a new tax measure hit the ballots soon? “No,” SMAC’s Halpern says flatly. She’d rather do it right than do it fast: Denver’s first attempt, in 1986, flopped because it lacked buy-in from all the right quarters. So did Salt Lake’s first go at it. The earliest a quality of life tax might get on the ballot, she says, would be 2012. “We need time to listen to what voters want and build support,” she says.

Could it move faster? The idea has already attracted interest from one

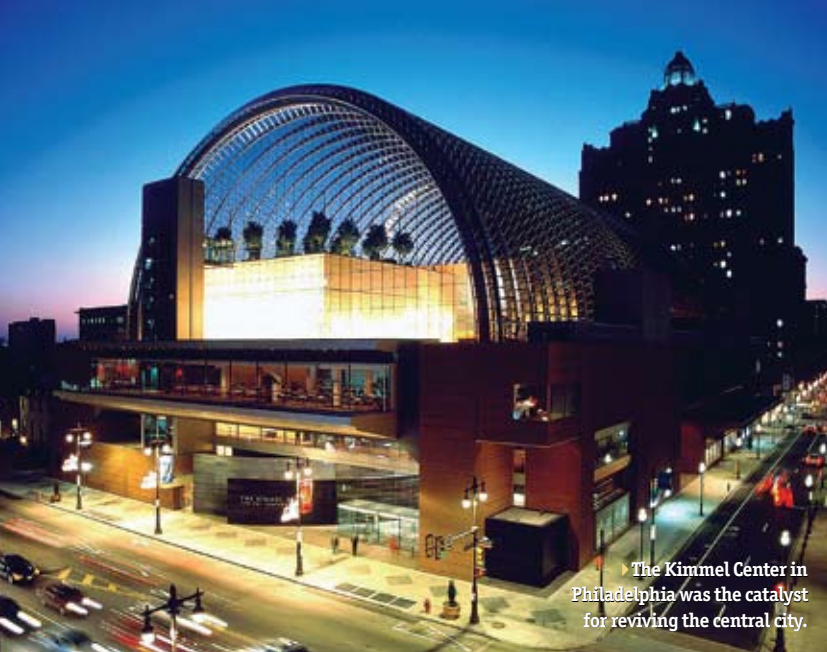
potential supporter with a reputation for speed: Kevin Johnson. At a table in the “bullpen”—the wide-open third floor of the new City Hall that Johnson prefers to isolated offices—he talks earnestly about the importance of the arts. “If you’re going to make a world-class destination city, arts are such a critical component,” he says. “I’ve seen other cities do it, set aside certain funds for the arts,” he says. There’s precedent: Sacramento already puts 2 percent of construction dollars for public building projects toward artwork.

The quality of life tax is one of several models he’s studying as he prepares to throw his weight behind the arts. “This one’s a priority for me,” he says. Johnson also mentions Oregon’s Cultural Trust, which provides tax credits to individuals in exchange for their donations to the arts, and Delaware’s arts stabilization program, funded by public, private and corporate donors. He’s nowhere near ready to commit to a model yet—but recognizing that we need change, he’s planning to hold a forum of arts leaders this spring. “Once I convene the arts community and hear directly from them,” he says, “I want to be out there spearheading the charge.”

A SIGNATURE CENTER

But as Johnson sees it, permanent arts funding through a tax, united arts fund or both is just the first step in a long-distance trek to a far

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▶ The Kimmel Center in Philadelphia was the catalyst for reviving the central city.

more ambitious future. “What mayors have done in other cities, especially in cities like Philadelphia and Los Angeles, is lead the charge for dramatic performing arts centers,” he says. “We need a signature project *here*.” That might be a jaw-dropping venue to replace the bunker-like Community Center Theater built in 1974, boasting few windows and far too few bathrooms. Or it could be a cutting-edge museum or a mid-sized theater. But in his view, an outstanding signature arts project could finally push Sacramento to the next level. “I’m one to believe in big, bold ideas,” Johnson says. “We have an opportunity to do something that distinguishes us from every other city in the state of California.”

It worked in Bilbao. Frank Gehry’s legendary Guggenheim museum had such a massive economic and cultural impact on that sleepy Spanish city that the phenomenon now has a name: “the Bilbao effect.” If a spectacular museum can turn Bilbao into a cultural epicenter, just think what could happen here. We’re *already* a major city. A touch of the Bilbao effect could be just what Sacramento needs to blossom.

Of course, all this might sound like crazy talk in this economy if it weren’t for what happened in Philadelphia. When Ed Rendell became mayor in 1992, the city was still reeling from the previous year’s recession. Manufacturing jobs had left the region and the city faced a \$250 million deficit. Rendell, whose wife is a trained opera singer as well as a federal judge, seized on arts and culture as the remedy. “He became the champion and you can’t get better than that in a city,” says Karen Lewis, executive director of Philadelphia’s Avenue of the Arts nonprofit association.

To turn around the center city, where buildings had a vacancy rate of almost 20 percent, Rendell teamed up with businesses and private philanthropists to advocate for an arts and entertainment district, anchored by a one-of-a-kind performing arts center. Among other major donors, Philly native Sidney Kimmel, founder of Jones Apparel, contributed \$55 million to the project and Verizon bought naming rights for the concert hall portion for \$15 million. Today, the 150-foot glass vault over the city’s \$265 million Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts—designed by one of the world’s top architects, Rafael Viñoly—draws visitors from around the world. Along the Avenue of the Arts outside, a lively restaurant scene has replaced the formerly bleak streetscape. Building occupancy now hovers near 90 percent. And Rendell? Well, he got voted governor.

We could do it, too—or something like it. Two years ago, Richard Rich, development director for Thomas Enterprises’ railyards project, started meeting with arts leaders. For 18 months he worked closely

with STC artistic director Peggy Shannon to explore the idea of a performing arts center and cultural district as the centerpiece for the railyards. But energy petered out in mid-2008 as the economy soured. “Everyone said they were interested in supporting it,” says Rich. “But not everyone was willing to take the steps to make it happen.”

Those steps, of course, would include raising money for further study. And not all groups felt the timing was right. Still, the idea and the drawings remain on the table.

Exciting projects don’t come cheap, of course: Frank Gehry’s Walt Disney Concert Hall cost \$274 million. But they can pay off for years to come. Look what happened in Redding when the Sundial Bridge opened over the Sacramento River in 2004, linking the two sides of the city’s Turtle Bay Exploration Park. Designed by renowned Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava, the bridge drew visitors in droves: By 2007, the hotel occupancy tax revenue had risen some 20 percent above 2003 levels.

“People go there just to see a bridge,” says Pat Hume, Elk Grove’s mayor. That’s one reason why the City Council selected the world’s most celebrated female architect, Zaha Hadid, to design its new civic center, which will include a performing arts hall. Hadid’s only other U.S. structure is Cincinnati’s Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art, which *The New York Times* called “the most important American building to be completed since the end of the Cold War.”

“There are few opportunities where you get to create something iconic for your city,” Hume adds. The city is still collecting public input for the project and Hadid won’t submit a more detailed design concept for a year after that. But Hume doesn’t mind the wait. During a time of economic woe, he says, “It’s nice to have the chance to focus on something visionary and long-term.”

THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE

Of course, none of these examples could be transplanted here wholesale. None is easy. And none is a silver bullet. But taken together, they do suggest just how many options we have.

What all these solutions have in common is the need for a new level of cooperation among arts groups, business and government. Such collaborations have failed before. In 2004, the Metro Chamber launched the Sacramento Regional Arts Initiative, a business venture to promote the arts, including a \$1 million marketing campaign. The effort flopped. Arts organizations say they felt excluded from the process; Mahood says arts organizations didn’t work as a team.

That last factor is starting to change. The CMT, Ballet, Opera and Philharmonic have been collaborating successfully on the performing arts studio. The recent meetings at SMAC have also engendered a new sense of camaraderie. “The groups are coming together and cooperating and brainstorming at a whole new level,” says Halpern. “There are strong feelings that we have to unite because we’re stronger together.” If those groups can marshal their resources and gain the support of citizens and civic leaders, the arts community might just emerge better than ever—and lay the foundation for a healthier economy and a new level of civic pride.

For now, even the most beleaguered of the groups is determined to survive. “We are going to fight to stay alive and will do whatever we have to do to make that happen,” Cunningham says.

But it can’t happen without us. Whether we’re theater buffs, art lovers, concertgoers or shower singers, it will take the unwavering commitment of every Sacramentan to help the arts survive and thrive. In the end, if we all work together, our whole city will finally have the chance to step into center stage and enjoy the applause for years to come. ♦