

CAC New Orleans

Strategic Direction for the Future

Introduction

The Contemporary Arts Center of New Orleans (CACNO) is a leading cultural institution in the city, dedicated to presenting and supporting multidisciplinary contemporary arts. The CAC has a distinguished history, dating back to its founding in 1976. For decades, the CAC has presented a wide range of exhibitions, performances, and programs, and has become a vital part of the New Orleans cultural landscape.

In recent years, the CAC has faced a number of challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing economic downturn, and leadership changes. To prepare for the search for a new leader, CAC hired the international consulting firm of Lord Cultural Resources in November 2023, to facilitate an organizational assessment to forge a strategic direction for the future. The assessment process included robust internal and external stakeholder engagement, extensive research, and an Organizational Mapping Tool (OMT) process. Following presentation of key findings and discussion with CAC leadership, CAC adopted the resulting strategic direction outlined here.

Radical Rebuilding

The overarching key finding from the consulting process was the need to rebuild the organization – both internally, by creating clear systems and protocols with transparency and accountability, and externally, by repairing damaged relationships in the community and ensuring a foundation of trust and mutual respect. Radical Rebuilding at CAC, writ large, is about pausing CAC-initiated programming in order to allow CAC staff and Board to focus primarily on these tasks, which require significant time, energy, and in some cases financial resources.

The very process of creating this strategic direction process is in itself the beginning of Radical Rebuilding, as many conversations occurred with internal and external stakeholders to better understand the specific aspects of CAC that need rebuilding. Crucially, this rebuilding will require the assistance of a 3rd party consultant, given evidence that CAC has not successfully achieved reforms in the past without such assistance. Additional components of the Radical Rebuilding process are as follows:

- Reform Board (i.e. off-ramp some trustees, add more diverse and committed new trustees, ensure structured Board-staff interactions, revise Board by-laws, improve onboarding and ED oversight)
- Improve procedures & policies with clear metrics of success, accountability, and transparency
- Ensure safe respectful spaces for civil, honest, inclusive dialogue
- Acknowledge past missteps and need to recalibrate to model humility and effect deep change
- Improve relationships with artists, vendors, visitors, and the overall public
- Rebrand to fix CAC's "broken image" in the community
- Revisit CAC mission, vision, and values and integrate into day-to-day work
- Invest in staff with clear onboarding and professional development
- Hire new staff: new ED, Development Director. Longer term: Finance, Marketing, Education staff

Community Hub

The Radical Rebuilding will lay the foundation for CAC to truly be a Community Hub that leverages its space and resources for programming in collaboration with community. Community Hub components include:

- Undertake collaborative programming such as with current Gestures of Refusal
- Share CAC's greatest asset – its building – with community members i.e. by co-creating / co-presenting programming, providing additional educational programs i.e. summer camps
- Focus primarily on supporting and uplifting local community
- Position CAC as a resource for the community, in line with CAC roots
- Work with NOCCA as a site for art exhibits by NOCCA students
- Provide convening space for artists and arts organizations
- Ensure culture bearers are elevated and honored in CAC's spaces
- Greatest community need and opportunity is around performing arts
- Offer resources around professional development i.e. programs to train community members in sustaining artistic practice
- Offer space for dialogue and challenging conversations

Leadership needs

The overarching goal of this strategic direction engagement is to inform the search for CAC's new leadership. Qualities sought in a leader overwhelmingly crystallized around the following qualities and skills:

- Management and administrative skills are paramount rather than artistic/curatorial skills
- Integrity, honesty, transparency and tenacity
- Deep understanding of New Orleans and Louisiana
- Commitment to equity, diversity, inclusion and accessibility
- Must be face-forward in the community to rebuild and nurture relationships
- Healer and community builder
- Excellent fundraiser

Timeframe

- Radical Rebuilding to continue through 2026 as CAC ramps up to celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2026 and fundraise around this anniversary for the 2026-2027 season.
- Community Hub would overlap with the Radical Rebuilding idea – as during this rebuilding, CAC would serve as a community hub for programming not initiated by CAC.
- Deepening and expanding performing arts at CAC can occur by offering/renting CAC space to performing artists/organizations.
- During the Radical Rebuilding period of 2024-2025, CAC will refine a vision around longer-term Community Hub model, with a deeper emphasis on performing arts.
- Concurrent with Radical Rebuilding, CAC must develop a business plan for financial sustainability.