



IMPACT STATEMENT – Performing City Resilience

It was a privilege to participate in the work of Dr. Stuart Andrews and Dr. Patrick Duggan at several points over the course of their Performing City Resilience (PCR) project in New Orleans. Their program coincided with a particularly dynamic moment in the history of Southern Rep Theatre, and the PCR project provided a fruitful framework for our own institutional plans and priorities during that time.

When Drs. Andrew and Duggan visited New Orleans in spring 2018, Southern Rep was in the midst of construction on a long-awaited permanent venue, after years of performing itinerantly in multiple venues across the city. By the time they returned in 2019, we had spent nearly a full season on site in our new space—where we were pleased to host a workshop event. Our participation in PCR project events was materially significant in shaping our approach to programming in the new venue, and it deepened our understanding of ourselves and our work within a context of resilience—both at the institutional and civic levels.

As a result of engaging with the PCR research events in 2018, Southern Rep significantly broadened our strategy around programming for our new venue, with a particular emphasis on anchoring ourselves not only within our artistic community (a given throughout our planning processes), but also within the City of New Orleans. Our second stage has always been imagined as a home for performing arts of all kinds, but due in no small part to our participation in the PCR project, we found ourselves bringing many different events into our space once we opened the doors. City agencies in the areas of public health and economic development hosted meetings and convenings on our second stage in the early days of operation in our new building; we are also working with the city's leading community foundation to host a high-profile donor circle event right here at Southern Rep.

The informal networking opportunities provided by the PCR workshops were of palpable benefit to our thinking as well, particularly by providing insight into other organizations' perspectives on resilience in a civic context. To see how small arts organizations are grappling with these issues and to learn that both our city's Arts Council and City Hall itself are placing the arts within a broader resilience framework is instructive, heartening, and inspiring; it also showed us where we have allies in this work within our field locally.

Similarly, the distillation of the researchers' 2018 visit into their Situation Rooms paper for *Liminalities* provided a useful reflection back to us on our own work and our role within a community context. In the paper, our own questions and priorities about issues of permanence, gentrification, and the porous relationship between indoors and outdoors were placed in juxtaposition with both another performing arts venue and our city itself. In this transitional year, as we planned to move to a venue after being itinerant, this deep consideration of how venues themselves are still permeable, flexible, and *themselves* a performative negotiation of identity provided helpful context for our programmatic plans for the new space.

This expanded scope for our vision might seem insignificant, but it represents a fundamental shift in our own understanding of the role of the arts in our city's fabric. As theatre-makers and as an institution, we believe inherently in the power of art to change people's lives and to build



community. As a theatre taking hold of a major physical plant with an ambitious programmatic vision, we are committed to making Southern Rep a hub for the arts and a home for artists. In these ways, we certainly understand ourselves as part of a vibrant city.

However, our work with the PCR project deepened that understanding to place us within the framework of resilience specifically. In New Orleans more than in most places, perhaps, we are all intimately acquainted with the notion of resilience in terms of disaster recovery and water management. But we at Southern Rep are resilient, too, as a theatre forging a new and powerful identity after six years without a home. (We lost our long-term lease in 2012.) As artists, we have not framed the work we do within that context until now—we make art because that's what we do. However, the PCR research and the subsequent workshops (one hosted at Southern Rep in 2019) helped us raise our gaze and think seriously about how our programming fosters resilience more broadly, and how it fits into a city-wide cultural infrastructure.

This is not an inconsequential movement in our thinking. After our work with the PCR project, now, when we ask ourselves how our programming helps build community, we have a wider view and more solid grounding in this resilience framework. As just a small example: we have committed our outreach and engagement strategies even more fully than we had originally envisioned to activities that incorporate the shops and restaurants on our immediate block. We have organized a neighborhood pub crawl, we have hosted block parties led by neighboring arts and education non-profits, and we have built a community gathering series on our second stage around healing and wellness.

Art remains at the heart of what we do at Southern Rep, and it anchors all our programmatic plans and priorities. What has changed thanks to the opportunity to work with the PCR research has been to root our art even more firmly in the fertile ground of resilience. How does the mere act of art-making shore up our community? How does our new venue function as a supportive home base for a resilient network of artists? How do the connections we foster among artists, audiences, and our neighbors penetrate into civic spaces we never imagined? These are questions that are real and motivating for us in our planning and programming as we grow into our new venue, and we firmly believe that a framework of resilience for our own institution and for our place within a resilient city is a powerful and transformative tool moving forward. We would welcome future opportunities to work with the project authors or to host subsequent workshops and events that push this exciting research forward.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Aimée", is positioned above the typed name.

Aimée Hayes
Producing Artistic Director, Southern Rep Theatre

New Orleans, Louisiana
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