

SQUARE FEET

# Theater Renovation Welcomed as a Gain for Arts in Brooklyn

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Published: September 21, 2010

An experimental music organization has plans to renovate a dilapidated 600-seat theater space near the [Brooklyn Academy of Music](#), a move that some hope will re-energize an effort to build a cultural district around the academy in downtown [Brooklyn](#).

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Benjamin Norman for The New York Times

In an old theater at the Brooklyn Y.W.C.A. are, from left, Stephen Powers and Paul Wolf of Denham Wolf Real Estate; Martha Kamber, the Y.W.C.A.'s executive director; Jim Staley, Roulette Intermedium's founder; and Jonathan Denham of Denham Wolf.

The music group, [Roulette Intermedium](#), which has been based in [Manhattan](#) since 1978, signed a 20-year lease in August for a total of 14,000 square feet of space at the [Y.W.C.A. of Brooklyn](#), which will include its administrative offices and the theater, at the corner of Atlantic and Third Avenues.

Roulette expects to spend \$700,000 to \$900,000 restoring the theater, which was built in 1927, into a top-notch performance site for its artists, who include [Meredith Monk](#), [John Zorn](#) and visiting musicians, said Jim Staley, Roulette's founder.

"It's just the right kind of place and a very public space, with good acoustics and a lot of character, so we jumped on it," Mr. Staley said. Roulette had been seeking a permanent home for 15 years, he said.

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For almost three years, the Y.W.C.A. weighed leasing space to various arts organizations against tenants like [McDonald's](#) and Duane Reade.

Those operations would have paid more but would have destroyed the theater's architectural integrity to create a conventional retail or restaurant space, said Martha Kamber, the Y's executive director.

Apart from the theater, the building contains housing for low-income women and a community center.

"We were really looking for a partner who loved the space as much as we did and was committed to restoring it," Ms. Kamber said.

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While the Y.W.C.A. was initially asking \$60 a square foot to lease the space, the organization ended up accepting a total of about \$50,000 a year less to lease it to Roulette, she said.

“Some of that was because we fell in love with Roulette and thought they were the perfect fit, and some of that was because of the poor market,” Ms. Kamber said. “And I think our neighbors would not have been too happy with a Duane Reade.”

The Y.W.C.A. sits on the southwestern edge of what is called the [Brooklyn Academy of Music Cultural District](#), an area between Fulton Street and Hanson Place south of Fort Greene Park that the city has been slowly transforming into a cultural haven for artists and performers over the course of a decade.

Several locations and offices for arts organizations were created earlier in the decade out of vacant and underused properties in the area, though activity has slowed in recent years with the pressure of the recession. The city says that more than 50 arts and cultural groups now exist in a concentrated area around the academy.

Though central to the BAM Cultural District, the academy does not oversee its development. In January 2009, however, it announced a \$300 million expansion plan that includes a new 263-seat theater for the district. Called the BAM Fisher Theater, it is expected to be completed in the summer of 2012.

The city is leading the cultural district’s development and has pledged to spend \$100 million, some of which could be used to subsidize developers of arts and cultural venues or offices.

“Over the next several years, we will invest \$100 million in new and enhanced cultural venues and infrastructure to expand downtown Brooklyn’s cultural district and create an even more vibrant arts destination for Brooklynites, all New Yorkers and visitors from around the world,” Kate Levin, the [New York City](#) cultural affairs commissioner, said in an e-mail.

Besides the BAM Fisher Theater, other projects, most of which have been on the drawing board for years, include a 27,500-square-foot site for the Theatre for a New Audience — for which ground has not yet been broken — and a streetscape enhancement project for Ashland Place and Lafayette Street within the district, both to be completed by fall of 2012.

Two other projects, which are expected to be completed by the end of 2012, are the renovation of the former Strand Theater on Fulton Street to create more space for arts organizations already there, and the creation of an 8,000-square-foot public Arts Plaza on Ashland Place.

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In the meantime, the scattered parking lots ripe for redevelopment that have been the hallmark of the cultural district for the last decade remain. Still, many hope that Roulette's relocation to Brooklyn will provide inspiration to move forward with the district.

"The grand gestures of major development on those parking lots haven't happened yet," said Paul G. Wolf, a principal with [Denham Wolf Real Estate Services](#), a commercial real estate firm focusing on nonprofits that put together the Roulette deal. "But certainly, the idea of a cultural district inspired a lot of people to think about that area in a different way, and Roulette should be a driver of the neighborhood."

Roulette will have its main entrance marked by an awning on Third Avenue at the corner of Atlantic, near a development called Atlantic Gardens, a collection of eight three-story row houses on Atlantic Avenue restored for retail and residential space in 2006.

Owned by [Atlantic Assets Group](#), Atlantic Gardens has been trying to attract as tenants arts and cultural organizations, said Barbara Koz Paley, a partner in Atlantic Assets. Currently, tenants include the De Castellane Gallery, a chocolate maker, a cafe and a salon spa, but Atlantic Gardens has also had more than a dozen pop-up or temporary retailers in recent years, most of them arts organizations.

"We're very excited Roulette is coming," Ms. Paley said. At Atlantic Gardens, which has a 5,000-square-foot community garden, "we're holding a fund-raiser for Roulette in October."

Jaime Schultz, a senior retail leasing associate at [GFI Retail Group](#), which is leasing remaining spaces at Atlantic Gardens, said a majority of the businesses seeking retail space along Atlantic Avenue, which holds an annual Art Walk, were creative ones. Roulette's presence should spur even more activity, she said.

"This major retail corridor, which is Atlantic, will encompass the flavor of all the surrounding communities," Ms. Schultz said, "and support for the arts has been such a collaborative effort here, by landlords and residents, that I think the arts will be nurtured along Atlantic Avenue for a long time to come."