Sony Centre for the Performing Arts Design Charrette

Executive Summary

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The purpose of this project for the Sony Centre for the Performing Arts was to explore new applications for the Centre's interior spaces, with a strong focus on the main lobby. With the departure of former flagship tenants, the National Ballet and Canadian Opera Company, the Centre is positioned to build upon its reputation for high quality performances and history of loyal audiences and evolve into a facility that supports the changing entertainment interests of the 21st century. This is an opportunity for the Sony Centre to redefine itself as both a national and international platform for the fine and performing arts, with the integration of cutting-edge technological, multimedia and digital capabilities.

To explore this opportunity from a holistic and comprehensive point of view, the Institute without Boundaries worked with the management team from the Sony Centre using a design process called a charrette, which brought together professionals from different disciplines to consider all aspects of a problem and address the needs of the client and community in a week-long event. Brainstorming sessions and client reviews produced a wide variety of ideas, each of which was separately evaluated through various lenses, including:

- Potential clients in the digital arts field, including corporations, events and festivals;
- Precedents for digital centres, both locally and internationally;
- Program concepts and utilization options for the Centre's lobby and basement spaces;
- Risks and returns of various program opportunities;
- Design schematics for the spatial layout and furnishings required to support the proposed programming;
- Feasibility and practicality of the proposed, programming, long-term business planning, and cultural development;
- Impact on the City of Toronto's arts community, residents and visitors; and
- Compatibility with the Centre's existing brand.

Through a process of idea generation and refinement, a final strategy was chosen and expanded to a set of recommended next steps. This strategy, a proposed Digital Innovation Centre, would incorporate the Centre's reputation as a performance arts hub with Sony's reputation as a digital entertainment leader, enabling it to facilitate arts production and audience experiences that are interactive and digitally enhanced. In addition to strengthening the reputation and brand of the Centre, the designs proposed have the potential to be implemented as a phased multi-year pilot project and should be further refined to target Toronto's growing digital arts culture.

Initial Concepts

The initial team brainstorming resulted in eight distinct ideas, which were then evaluated based on how they satisfy the Centre's main objectives. With reviews from external guests and the Sony Centre management, the team identified that the Centre should focus on several priorities that catered to a specific audience. By becoming a gathering space for Toronto's digital arts community, the Centre would attract partnerships and participation from artists, industry and educational institutions, and position the Centre as a pioneer and leader in an emerging field that is currently under-represented in Toronto.

A learning facility with activities and programs that cultivate and support creative thought, imagination and innovation during the day would facilitate outreach and partnerships with school groups, which would also introduce the Centre's seasonal and weekend programming to a younger audience that is interested in the digital arts. Lastly, the Centre could also establish itself as a digital media events venue that could play host to a growing niche market of digital festivals, galas and product launches, drawing on Sony's existing gaming and interactive media community and providing a place for them to network. The Society for Arts & Technology [SAT], which is an existing centre for digital arts in Montréal, also provided feedback on their technology and facilities, and opportunities for collaboration.

Proposed Ideas

Each of the initial concepts were analyzed on their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, return on investment, market impact and brand cohesion. The results illustrate the strongest projected performers and identify concepts that balance revenue generation potential and cultural development, a key factor in the Centre's long-term viability as an important asset to the City of Toronto. The team presented four distinct programs:

Design Concepts

1. Centre Spot

Centre Spot is a digitized stage that uses Sony technology to extend and enhance the entertainment experience before and after the main event happening on stage. The objective of this program is to influence ticket sales by providing local communities with a taste of the Centre's main stage shows. Centre Spot would be open to a walk-in audience prior to main stage events, and would host special pre-show programming linked to the feature production. This program could be presented by the show producer, or by a local community group, and could incorporate live and digital content. The pre-show could also include an audio-visual light display, which demonstrates how Sony technology was used to enhanced the theatre experience.
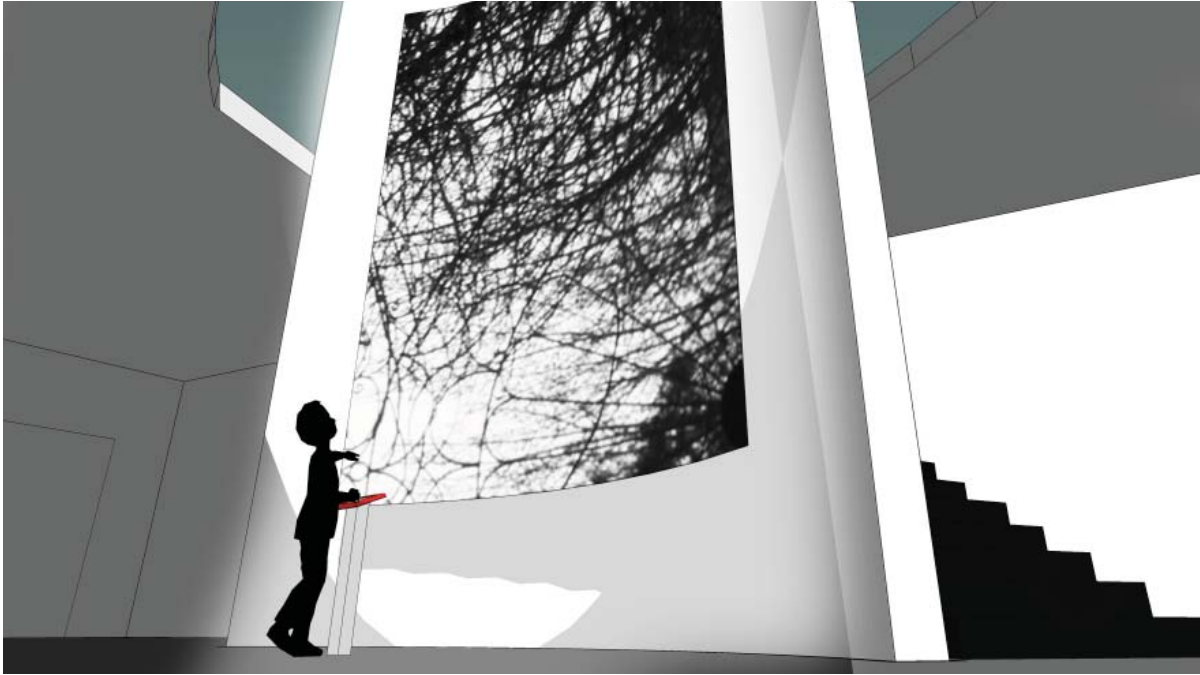
2. Digit

Digit aims to attract new audience groups for the Sony Centre, while extending and reinforcing its brand identity. Strategic partnerships, hosting industry lectures on current topics, and offering workshop space to artists for software testing or the production of new work allows the Centre to make the theatre relevant to audiences who are looking for entertainment that incorporates both artistic and technological elements.

Through this initiative, the Centre could reach out to art and design communities through the curation of special exhibitions; to industry by hosting special events such as launch parties for websites, PSP games and conferences like Flash in the Can and Cut & Paste; to educational institutions by offering research space and learning opportunities; and to local communities by offering unique interactive experiences for schools and families.

The Digit program includes gallery, learning and event spaces with breakout rooms and state-of-the-art technological infrastructure. A gallery could be curated by an advisory committee, with representatives from educational institutions and technology companies, artists, and digitally savvy young people. A learning space could be operated by one of the educational partners in collaboration with the Director of Technology, and school groups could be hosted for full- or half-day field trips. Finally, a marketing specialist who would recruit corporate events and festivals within the digital arts and entertainment industry could manage the event space.

Digit draws inspiration from other digital centres such as the Digital Arts Museum [DAM] in Berlin, the Society for Arts and Technology [SAT] in Montreal, the Hong Kong Arts Centre and the V2_Institute for Unstable Media in Rotterdam. The Centre could also seek to collaborate with these groups to share resources and exhibition content, and jointly commission new work.

3. Cafe D

This concept for a café/bookstore would be operated by one or more retail tenants, and would physically extend the Centre into the community during the day. With glass windows that expose parts of the main lobby, the café could help to open the Centre's doors to the streetscape while bringing a sense of transparency of the theatre's ongoing programs to its audience. As a resource for literature on the fine, performing and digital arts, Café D would reinforce the Centre's brand and become a meeting spot for local residents and business people, and might host events such as interviews with show directors, book readings and signings, and roundtable discussions. In addition to food, beverages and books, Café D would sell show tickets and merchandise.
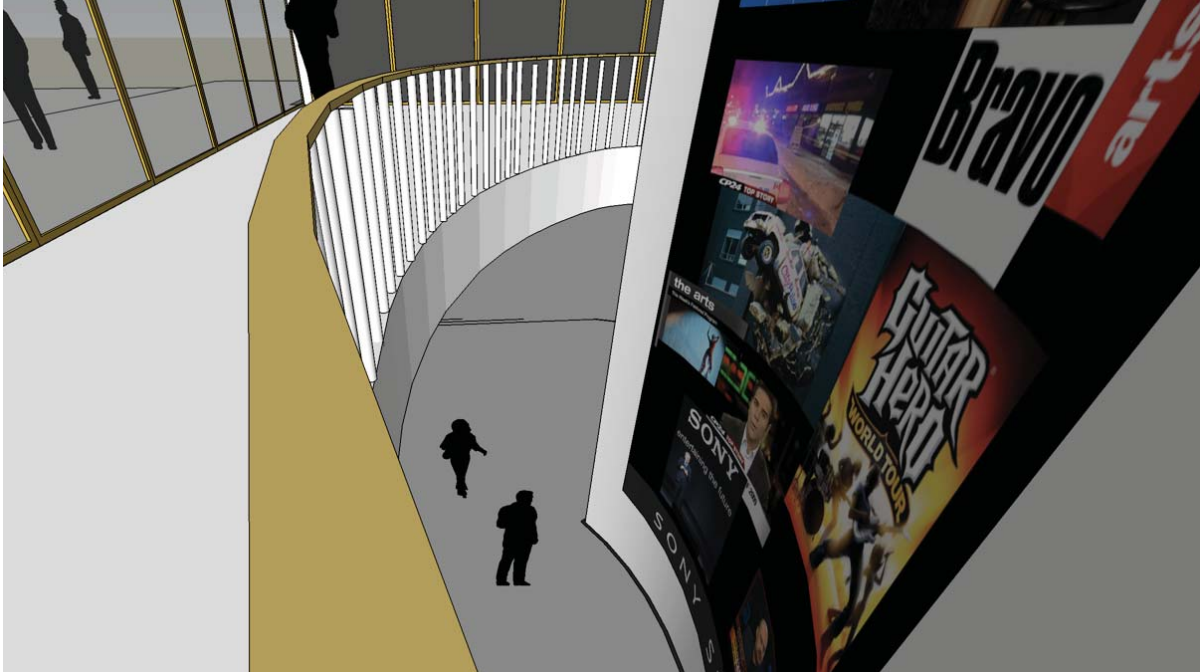
4. City Info Centre

This portal would provide the latest news in performing arts and entertainment, acting as a kind of 'Ticket Master' where anyone can come to book tickets for municipal and provincial cultural events. Partnering with a broadcaster such as CTV, the Info Centre would televise current arts and entertainment news, as well as content specific to the Centre's shows and other cultural topics. The Centre could also partner with the City of Toronto and the Province of Ontario to provide digital access to tickets and information on cultural events hosted by the City or Province.

Tech Recommendations
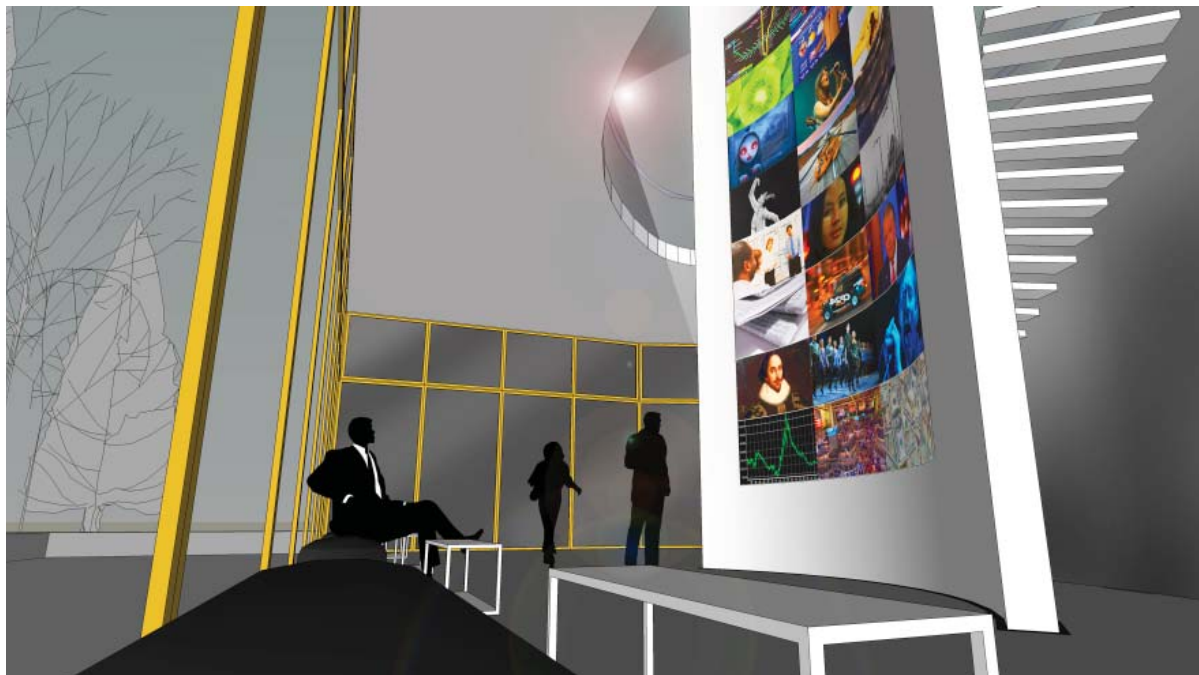
To operate as a state of the art digital centre and a high-tech rental venue, the Centre will require significant technology upgrades and a plan for technology operations management. Digital arts installations will have differing hardware requirements, so the Centre should aim to design an adaptable environment that can accommodate a range of digital devices, which can be easily upgraded or replaced. The basic infrastructure of this flexible environment could include components such as accessible cable-runs and control panels, wifi repeaters, and networked lighting and surround sound.

A combination of projector and OLED screen technology will result in stunning images and flexibility for large or small-scale installations. High quality internet access will be critical for many projects, and would allow remote involvement for events with international audiences and/or multiple stages in various locations. This could be accomplished using a fibre optic connection with scalable bandwidth to suit the needs of the installation.

Next Steps

The concepts proposed in this report would require further development that might include the cultivation of new partnerships, market research, technological needs evaluations, design idea refinement and testing of possible products. This process could be phased over several years and seek support from various levels of government and other project partners.

Next steps include: investigating the business model, visiting other centres such as [SAT] in Montreal and discussing possible collaborations; investigating Toronto's digital arts community; developing a business model based on these investigations, outlining services, fees, management and staffing requirements; completing a detailed feasibility report including evaluation of revenue streams; garnering support from board members and municipal government; cultivating partnerships with organizations and businesses; developing the design in more details; executing a pilot project based on the concepts presented to this point.

It is the intention that after successful completion of a five-year pilot project, the Sony Centre for the Performing Arts will become known as a place for unique entertainment experiences that reflect the diversity, innovation and creativity of the City of Toronto. A complete version of the report is available from the Institute without Boundaries. If you would like to see additional information, please contact Priscilla Li at pli@georgebrown.ca or call 416.415.5000 x.2029.

Annual Potential Revenue

1. Digital Innovation Centre
$4.5-5 million per annum
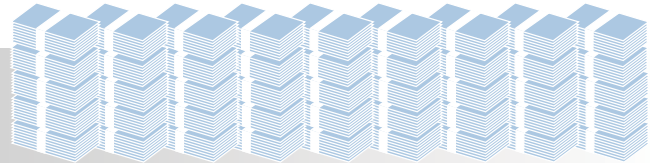
(10% goverent, 35% rentals, 25% R&D grants, 10% kids programming, 10% concessions, 10% services based on SAT model)

2. Creative Lab
$550,000 per annum

(Fee for visits, workshops, and sponsorship)

3. Community Theatre
$50-100,000 per annum

(Sponsorship, rentals)

4. Market Theatre
$200,000 per annum

(Stall rentals)

5. Agora
$700,000 per annum

(Sponsorship, rentals)
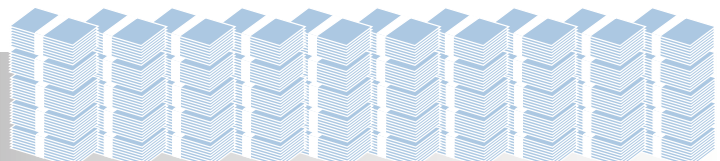
6. Media Play
$500,000 per annum

(In kind sponsorship for advertising)

7. Trailer Cafe
$500,000 per annum

(Trailer placement fees, cafe rental, and revenue share)

8. Gala & Events Centre
$5,430,000 per annum

(Rentals, food, and beverage, based on 100 days per year)