

# Arts



**Fusebox**  
Washington, D.C.  
CORE

**Green Street**  
Middletown,  
Connecticut  
Centerbrook Architects and  
Planners

**Halcyon**  
Fayetteville, Arkansas  
Maurice Jennings Architect

**p:ear**  
Portland, Oregon  
SERA Architects

**Prospect.1**  
New Orleans, Louisiana  
Eskew+Dumez+Ripple

**Soft Cube**  
Omaha, Nebraska  
Min | Day

## Fusebox Gallery

**Location** Washington, D.C. **Date** 2001 **Client** Fusebox Gallery **Client liaison** Sarah Finlay **Design firm** CORE **Design team** Dave Conrath, Peter Hapstak, Brian Miller, Thomas Quijano, Dale Stewart **Area** 1,500 sq. ft. **Cost** \$102,000 **Estimated value of pro bono design services** \$15,000 **Website** www.coredc.com

**Sarah Finlay**  
Founder, Fusebox Gallery,  
Washington, D.C.

**CLIENT** Washington, D.C., as a city, never had much light industry, so there are not many big spaces for arts organizations to occupy. There is also a real rift between the gallery and museum worlds. The city has wonderful museums, but for galleries and collectors, it has always been second tier because of its proximity to New York. I had worked in other galleries in the city and met a lot of talented artists in the community—some amazing younger artists, as well as midcareer artists with teaching positions at the Corcoran College of Art + Design and the Virginia Commonwealth University—but they were selling to a limited group of local collectors.

I realized that a major reason many people in the city, especially younger collectors, didn't participate in the art market was because they were intimidated. They would ask, "How do I know that I'm making the right decision?" My cofounder, Patrick Murcia, and I wanted to open a space where patrons felt welcome and artists and curators felt wanted.

When we started looking for a home for the gallery, we did not have many local models to follow. There were many tiny, jewel-box-like spaces in the Georgetown and Dupont Circle neighborhoods of D.C., but not much more. Patrick had worked in community development and had written about the U Street Corridor, an interesting part of Washington with deep history. It had been part of Black Broadway, one of the most famous intellectual and cultural African American communities in the country in the early twentieth century. We decided that would be the perfect place for our gallery. ▶

**Peter Hapstak**  
Principal, CORE,  
Washington, D.C.

**ARCHITECT** The art scene in Washington, D.C., has always been a little frenetic. It is a transient city, and because it turns over every four years, the environment for art never really jells consistently. Fusebox cofounders Sarah Finlay and Patrick Murcia came into this environment, and they brought a wealth of knowledge about art. Sarah had educated herself on what was happening in Miami at Art Basel and what was going on in Europe and other places around the world, and she wanted the gallery to reflect that. The people they wanted to showcase were doing much more abstract work than most of what you see in this city. Some of the stuff was really out there, so we got a crash course in the local art scene.

The project was very urban; it wasn't meticulous. There were flaws. From our standpoint, it's not a perfect world, so we don't try to build perfect architecture. The building itself was a retail space on 14th Street. It had sound bones; we were kind of lucky that we had this box that was inherently intact. We focused a lot on light. The walls were evenly illuminated to see the work in the most minimal ▶



way. For the floor, we used concrete board, which is frequently used as siding on homes in areas prone to inclement weather. We screwed 4-by-8-foot sheets to the floor, so the whole space got an industrial feel from that.

What made the gallery really unique was the idea we developed to create a pivoting wall. It became the signature element of the space. The wall rotated 360 degrees on a car axle and large ball bearings that we had set into the floor. It was really amazing that you could push the wall with your finger, and it would fly. If you turned it one way, it created a large opening on one side of the room; turned the opposite way, it created an equal opening on the other side. ▶



If you placed it parallel to the wall, it opened up the whole space. The gallery could change its shape and accommodate larger projects or gatherings of people.

Not only did CORE design the gallery, but we built it as well. We have taken on that role in the past with other projects, but we don't do it on a regular basis. We had a young associate, Dave Conrath, who was trained as a contractor before he went to architecture school. He did much of the building, and he was relentless. He really fell in love with it. We saved Fusebox an enormous amount of money, and I think Dave made it possible for everybody to come together and get it executed. ▶



Sarah and Patrick were trying to create a progressive institution in a conservative city, and it was really challenging. As their reputation grew, the gallery's events were more and more packed. So many people would be standing around that the fire marshal would have to break up the crowds. Fusebox was a catalyst for many changes in the neighborhood.

We took possession of a space in July 2001 and started demolition the next month with the help of Peter Hapstack and CORE. The property we found had been fallow for six years; it was in terrible condition, and there was junk everywhere. We pulled out the ceiling to reveal the existing wooden beams, because we wanted to show some of the history of the building. It was so beautiful, and those beams ended up being amazingly useful.

We also needed a place to store the art that was not on display. I had worked in galleries where the art was wrapped in bubble wrap and then shoved onto shelves. It was awkward, inaccessible, and the art was often damaged. With Peter, we worked out an idea for racks that came out on tracks in the floor. They slid out silently, and the work then could be mounted on them, opened, and unwrapped. It sounds minor, but it was important to what we were trying to create. The little galleries in Georgetown and other parts of the city always had cramped back offices where the deals were done, and we wanted everything in our space to be very open.

We opened the gallery two weeks after 9/11, which was a crazy but wonderful experience. We were in the neighborhood working for hours and hours, day after day. The owner of the liquor store, which had been there for years, was so excited and optimistic about what was happening that he wanted to make his own improvements. He had this horrible, old metal sign that was hanging from one screw on the front of the store, but the day before our gallery's opening, he was out there with a contractor and wanted our input on his new sign. It was really sweet. We had entrenched ourselves, and the arts, in the community.

# Green Street

## Green Street Arts Center

**Location** Middletown, Connecticut **Date** 2005 **Client** North End Action Team **Client liaison** Izzi Greenberg **Design firm** Centerbrook Architects and Planners **Design team** Russell Learned, Mark Simon **Area** 15,000 sq. ft. **Cost** \$1.5 million **Estimated value of pro bono design services** \$130,000 **Websites** www.greenstreetartscenter.org, www.centerbrook.com

**Mark Simon**  
Principal, Centerbrook  
Architects and Planners,  
Centerbrook, Connecticut

**ARCHITECT** Middletown is a large town, almost a small city, and it has one district, the North End, that is home to a relatively disadvantaged community. Wesleyan University has a very vibrant arts department, and organizing arts programs was something the school could offer that part of the town. Wesleyan is only a few blocks away from Main Street and the North End, so the university was keen to make an improvement that would benefit the town and its own campus.

NEAT has worked hard to increase the amount of affordable housing in that district, and the team's original vision was to have arts facilities that were flexible and could be used by many different people. The idea was to teach classes for kids, and then in the evenings, the space could be used for adult education. We knew building the center would be a tough project in terms of budget, but solving difficult problems is rewarding to us. ▶

**Izzi Greenberg**  
Executive Director, North End Action Team,  
Middletown, Connecticut

**CLIENT** The North End Action Team (NEAT) is comprised of people who live in and are committed to the North End neighborhood of Middletown, home to Wesleyan University. In many ways, our neighborhood has an unfair reputation; it's considered the wrong side of the tracks. It is also one of the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods in the region, so it's been a good place for Wesleyan University students to get involved in the community. NEAT, in partnership with Wesleyan and the city, decided that the neighborhood needed a community center.

There was no place that was safe and engaging for families and youth in the community to spend time. Our main goal for the center was to ensure that kids feel connected to it and that it could be used by a variety of different people for different purposes. We wanted the neighborhood to have ownership over the building. We also wanted to make sure that the building itself fit into the neighborhood and not stick out like a sore thumb.

We quickly identified the site: a structure that had been home to an old school. It was rickety and had undergone a horrible internal renovation in the 1970s. Centerbrook's architects were conscientious about trying to keep its historic bones while creating a modern space. They also worked to ensure that it remained an open design. Instead of having a walled-off space at the entrance where there would normally be a reception area, there is a smooth transition into the building.

Our focus was on creating a safe and engaging place for the community, so during the design process we constantly asked questions like: "Is it welcoming? Is it open? Will people want to spend time there?" We interfaced with people in the neighborhood to make sure that they were happy and felt involved, and that effort paid off. Since opening, the Green Street Arts Center has been very successful. It has a specific focus ▶



The city donated a Victorian building that had been a school but had not been occupied in years. Our firm is interested in the reuse of old buildings—our own office is in an old factory from around 1900. The building dictated much of what could happen and where, but throughout the process, we kept in mind that spaces would be used in different ways at different times.

The older part of the school had high ceilings, so we used part of it to make a large dance studio. To make it flexible for other uses, we painted it dark, almost like a black box theater. We even designed a curtain system that could go across the windows and darken the room entirely. The high rafters in that space allowed us to install theatrical lighting.

We took a number of old classrooms that faced north, including one that had a skylight, and turned them into art studios with nice, even light. There are small music rooms that we made soundproof for private lessons, and we created a funky recording studio where the kids can make music. Those spaces don't need much daylight, so they are on the lower floors.

NEAT also saw the arts center as an opportunity to provide after-school help, such as mentoring and tutoring, for local children. What we call "the café" does double duty; it is a lobby, where people wait for classes to start, but it's also a study hall. We were very security minded, so whoever ▶



on the arts, but it has served lots of functions within the neighborhood. We have used it for community meetings, an after-school program, and adult finance classes. NEAT and Green Street together ran a sort of youth invention group called the DaVinci Club, in which the kids learned construction and built a club house. A lot of the kids in that program helped paint the light fixtures at the center. Almost every parent in the community wants his or her child in that kind of program, and it has become a great entrance point for the rest of the family to use the center. They spend time there and spread word about it to their friends.

During the design and building process, the NEAT team worked to ensure that Wesleyan University was responsive to the needs and desires of the neighborhood. The university had a reputation of not coming off the hill to be a part of Middletown. This project started to change the city's impression of the university. NEAT already had a mentoring program that paired Wesleyan students with children in the community, and now they meet at the art center. Professors, who might have been hesitant to be in this neighborhood because of its reputation, come here and meet the families, which changes their opinions about the North End. That goes a long way toward breaking down mostly unfair stereotypes that historically have plagued our community.

is at the entry desk can see who is coming and going at all times.

The project as a whole was on a real shoestring budget. The irony is that low-budget projects sometimes require more work than those with big budgets because you are trying to make something out of little or nothing. We were concerned about how we would finish it, but we were also determined to be clever and solve problems.

In a number of places, we left pieces of the old building exposed. For example, we found a pair of blackboards—the old-fashioned kind with lines for kids to practice handwriting—so we built around them. We made the windows in the doors round and playful, and they're different sizes depending on the room. We had fun making the place feel special within the tight budget. But, in the end, it was our interaction with the people who use the space that was the most rewarding element. All sorts of people who might not normally be involved got involved and made something together.



# Halcyon

## Halcyon Playhouse

**Location** Fayetteville, Arkansas **Date** 2009 **Client** Court Appointed Special Advocates of Northwest Arkansas **Client liaison** Crystal Vickmark **Design firm** Maurice Jennings Architect **Design team** Maurice Jennings, Walter Jennings, Lori Yazwinski **Area** 121 sq. ft. **Cost** \$10,000 **Estimated value of pro bono design services** \$8,000 **Websites** [www.nwacasa.org](http://www.nwacasa.org), [www.mauricejennings.com](http://www.mauricejennings.com)

**Crystal Vickmark**  
Executive Director, Court Appointed Special Advocates  
of Northwest Arkansas,  
Springdale, Arkansas

**CLIENT** Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Northwest Arkansas is one of 900 such programs in the United States that recruits, trains, and supports community volunteers who advocate for children in foster care. The children have most often been abused and neglected and are no longer safe in their homes. We believe that every child should have a happy and safe childhood.

For about seven years, we have been running a fund-raiser called Playhouse Palooza. In it, local builders construct playhouses that we auction off, and the proceeds help fund our organization. The program has raised over \$400,000 to support our cause. The playhouses are a metaphor for the sense of safety we want to give children, and the sales of the structures help provide for the kids.

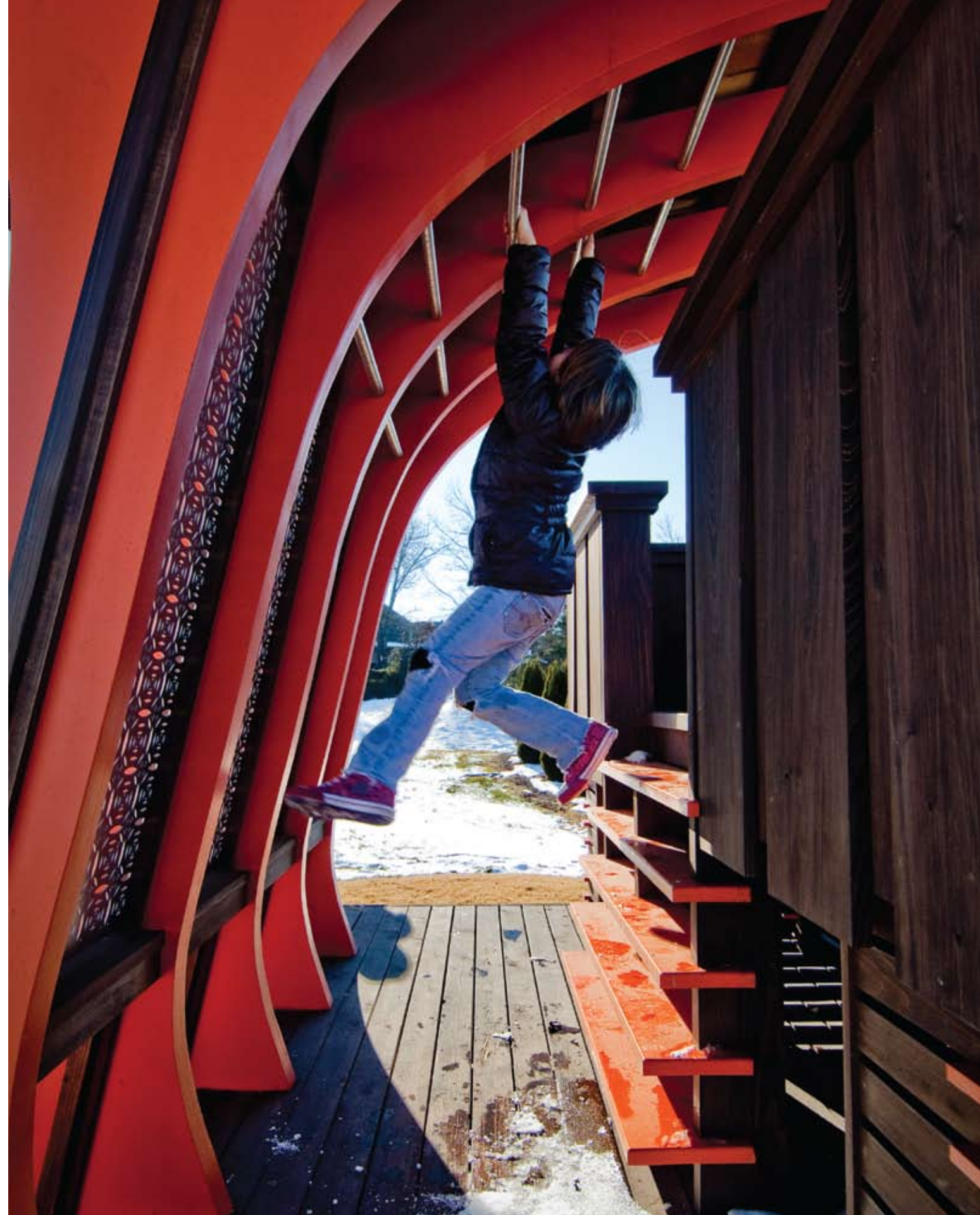
When the playhouses are completed, they are set up for two weeks in the local mall. They're configured as if they are a small neighborhood, with potted plants, trees, and mailboxes in front of the houses. Each house also has advertising in front of it and spec sheets with the same kind of information you get when you buy a home: the amenities of the house, who designed it, who built it, and the estimated cost. On the Saturdays of those weeks, we hold an open house where visitors can walk through the playhouses. They are asked to vote on their favorite houses and make comments about those they liked. We end the event with a live auction of the houses. ▶

**Walter Jennings**  
**Maurice Jennings**  
Architect,  
Fayetteville, Arkansas

**ARCHITECT** The purpose of the playhouse project is to raise money and awareness for CASA. To do that, the organization has several builders, architects, and people in the community design and build playhouses that are then displayed in the local mall. To make money, the houses are auctioned off later in the month.

Before building our playhouse, we had heard about CASA's work in the community, but it was Neal Hefner, a contractor we had worked with previously, who got us involved in this project. Neal approached us about working together; he thought this would be a way to do something different than a house or chapel, which are the typical structures we design and build. We all thought it sounded fun.

From the start, we knew we could make something that inspired more imagination from the children—something that could simultaneously be a stage, a hideout, a house, or just a sculpture. There were a lot of constraints from CASA in terms of space. ▶



The team there needed to be able to move the piece into the mall and show it off, so we had to stay within a 9-foot cube. We prioritized having different degrees of openness within the structure. Kids can crawl up on the top and have a privileged view out, or they can go underneath to peek through the lattice. If they want to hide, they can crawl in the back, or that area can act as the backstage if they are putting together a performance or playing make-believe.

To approach the design, we got together with Neal and sketched out on a napkin what we thought we could do in our cube. We had a palette of materials from previous projects to work with, and Neal had some leftover pieces from a cedar shake roof. There were several extra sheets of plywood and pieces of cypress wood, and we knew a metal fabricator who could donate some of his time. His material was all water-jet cut, and it shows up well when the sun is setting.

I think the interesting thing when working with volunteer design and labor is that you don't have as much control as you would on a paying job. When you pay someone, you can tell him or her to build it as it is drawn. However, with this kind of project, we say, "We have a little opening in the next week, and we could knock this one out pretty quickly." In the end, we had something that we were really happy with. ▶



We have requirements for the playhouses in terms of dimensions and safety. Builders need to use Plexiglas instead of real glass. We also ask them to keep in mind that their clients are children, with short fingers and legs. Doors should not be heavy, handles should not be too high, steps should not be too tall. Builders are encouraged to be very creative within our guidelines. Many choose to collaborate with architects, design firms, and even interior decorators to make the playhouses special. We came in contact with architect Walter Jennings through one of our builders, Neal Hefner.

Compared to our other projects, the structure Walter and his team developed is unique. We mostly see pavilions, barns, or replicas of trees, and everything here is very different. This is the first time that we have had anything of this caliber and style. The bold color is great and the openness is soothing. This playhouse could fit anywhere, in nature or a residential neighborhood. Several adults commented on how this would be great to use for both children and adults. You could sit out there and have a cocktail in the evening or coffee in the morning. It appealed to all generations. Walter put his heart, soul, and imagination into this pro bono project. It is not your cookie-cutter playhouse.



This was the largest pro bono project we had done. Our other work was small: for example, a basic sign for the school district and playground equipment for Greenland Public Schools, here in Arkansas. This project gave us the opportunity to show a different side of design than we normally do. Sometimes you get known for doing what you do well—in our case, chapels and houses. That is good, but it is nice to show people that you can do something else.

**p:ear Gallery**  
**Location** Portland, Oregon **Date** 2009 **Client** p:ear **Client liaison** Beth Burns **Design firm** SERA Architects **Design team** Suzanne Blair, Jessamyn Griffin, Christina Tello **Area** 5,258 sq. ft. **Cost** \$523,000 **Estimated value of pro bono design services** \$60,000 **Websites** www.pearmentor.org, www.serapdx.com

**Beth Burns**  
 Executive Director, p:ear,  
 Portland, Oregon

**CLIENT** We started p:ear (which stands for program: education, art, and recreation) about ten and a half years ago as a small nonprofit serving homeless youth. We had been running an alternative school for homeless youth through the Portland public schools, but the Salvation Army decided to close our program, so we started p:ear.

For our first independent facility, we wanted street-level access, many windows, and enough space to have lots of us in one room—to create a community, eat together, and share our lives together. What we ended up with was the ground floor of an abandoned building that had flooded two years before we moved in. Whenever it rained—and it rains a lot in Portland—water came through seven floors and dripped into our space. There were two toilets and one sink with only cold water. The kitchen consisted of a microwave and a toaster, but we somehow managed to serve 12,000 meals a year. Then, after six years, we found out we were losing the space because the building was being turned into a boutique hotel, and it became severely rat infested as they started construction.

Our space had to represent the aesthetic and values we bring to the kids. We are asking young people to re-evaluate themselves and how they feel about their community. A really beautiful, light-filled space is the place to start that process. I swear, almost immediately after learning we needed to find a new home, we got a phone call about a building that was up for sale. When we walked in, my cofounder and I didn't say a word to one another. When we walked out, we said, "That's it."

The building was divided into two big squares. We had this completely blank slate. One square had a mezzanine, which instantly we thought could be the office. The back space, the second square, had a big garage door. It fulfilled two functions: It let us participate with the program below sound-wise, but it also gave us some separation and privacy. The building would provide a huge amount of space for our art gallery and art-supply storage. We found the space in November 2008, and put it in escrow for six months to see if we could raise the money to buy it.

During that time period, at a fund-raiser dinner party, I met an employee from SERA Architects. At a subsequent meeting, we told SERA that we had this beautiful space but no money, so they took us on pro bono. ▶

**Suzanne Blair**  
**Jessamyn Griffin**  
**Christina Tello**  
 Designers,  
 SERA Architects,  
 Portland, Oregon

**ARCHITECT** We were sold the second we met the p:ear staff. They're such a dynamic group, and what they've built in the past seven years is pretty incredible. Their dedication to their mission really resonated with us.

Initially, our firm sought out pro bono work through personal connections, which yielded a handful of projects that we considered taking on for our commitment to The 1% program. By chance, one of our coworkers was at a fund-raiser and chatted with a p:ear staff member. She mentioned the group was looking for design services, and it just kind of fell into place. From that point on, it was obvious that p:ear was the right choice for us. We had other great project opportunities, but the organization was in our community, literally down the block from our office.

We employed the same integrated-design process that SERA Architects uses for almost every project. To get started, we organized a design charrette with the p:ear staff and board of directors. We are used to charrettes and building consensus, so we re-created that environment for p:ear, being careful to make sure the process wasn't intimidating but instead was more hands-on, and, honestly, more fun. Getting everyone together to talk really helped move us forward. ▶



Since we are all fairly junior staff, we decided we needed to pick a mentor within the firm, someone who would guide us through the process, cross our t's, and dot our i's, but not take over. Tim Richards, a project architect at SERA, was kind of like our visiting professor; we'd do most of the work and then every couple of weeks show him where we were, and he would give us comments. His goal was to help us learn how to manage the process and take control of it.

The hardest and most important part was getting the contractor, because while it's great to be architects and draw things, we needed to get this built. We had originally worked with a different firm on pricing at ▶



a schematic level. However, that firm donates to a lot of other public service agencies around town, and it was kind of tapped out that year in terms of pro bono work. We were really disappointed at first. Then we had one of our principals at SERA make a call to Fortis, and it turned out the president of that firm was interested in the project. That was a critical link and moment. In the case of all the other consultants, we pretty much just asked them, and they said yes.

In the design, there are two main program areas. The front room houses the kitchen and p:ear's main activities. The majority of the kids hang out in that space. There's also a library, a quiet study room, a computer room, restrooms, and a mezzanine with offices. The other section of the existing building is a former garage, which we converted into a gallery. It's more of a public space, and it's where p:ear hosts its "First Thursday," a monthly event open to the public that shows the kids' art along with that of local artists.

Giant folding doors open up to the street. When you walk by on those nights and the space is all lit up, it feels really welcoming. At the first opening, an artist came in and painted a big mural all over the walls. It was something p:ear couldn't really do in the other space. The flexibility of the space now is, by far, much better than what the organization had. The open kitchen is at the heart of the building. ▶



The project incorporated donated items and salvaged building materials, so it ended up having a really cool, funky personality. That feel emerged because we didn't have a lot of money, and things couldn't be ultramodern or sleek. We utilized salvaged doors, windows, and lumber, and specified local, regional, recycled and low-emitting materials. While p:ear decided not to register the project with LEED, we did pursue tax credits and grants for some of the improvements made to the building. We had to roll with what we had.



We all cared so much about the success of the project. We really believe in p:ear's mission, the people we worked with, and what they are trying to do. We appreciated their dedication to us, too. They weren't trying to get the cheapest project possible; they were trying to solve their problems and create this space with us.



One of the first things they did, which was definitely the most crucial part of the entire process, was sit down with us and run through exercises to help us clarify what we wanted. Out of this exchange, we came up with the idea to try to market the space and rent it out. I think we've rented it out twenty times in the last six months for \$1,000 per event, which is really good money for us.

When the architects at SERA designed the space, we still had no contractor, so they brought on Fortis Construction to do the project. Fortis was amazing; the employees have so much heart and donated most of their costs. We were given the phone number for each subcontractor, and before Fortis accepted bids, we called each of them to ask if the firms would donate part of their services, so that cut costs tremendously. The folks who did the casework donated tens of thousands of dollars' worth of time and materials.

Since we moved in, there has not been one time when we said, "We wish we had done this; we wish we had done that." The prep work SERA did with us—particularly the firm's constant questions about our vision for the space—was amazing and created a product that is 100 times more functional than our last space. The kids are spending a lot more time here. Our old space would get crammed really quickly, and kids would bolt. The kitchen creates a very homey, nurturing, caring environment. A lot of the kids we work with have been living in extreme poverty their whole lives. This space acts as a central hub and home base for hundreds of kids throughout the year. They rely on us.

# Prospect.1

## Prospect.1 Welcome Center

**Location** New Orleans, Louisiana **Date** 2008 **Client** U.S. Biennial **Client liaison** Dan Cameron  
**Design firm** Eskew+Dumez+Ripple **Design team** Steve Dumez, Nicole Marshall, Thaddeus Zarse  
**Area** 300 sq. ft. **Estimated value of pro bono design services** \$22,000 **Cost** \$30,000 **Websites**  
[www.prospectneworleans.org](http://www.prospectneworleans.org), [www.studioedr.com](http://www.studioedr.com)

**Dan Cameron**  
Director, U.S. Biennial,  
New York, New York

**CLIENT** The idea for the biennial in New Orleans came to me about five months after Hurricane Katrina roared through the Gulf Coast. In terms of bricks and mortar, I felt we, as artists, weren't the people to rebuild New Orleans; that is for other people. Instead I wanted to create a signature event and develop something that the city could rally around culturally. Through a series of attractions that focused on contemporary art, I believed there was a way to draw to New Orleans the tourism that comes with successful biennial events. We looked at models, like the Venice Biennale and the São Paulo Biennale, and worked to create something comparable.

Eskew+Dumez+Ripple (EDR) first became involved casually in the summer of 2007, when a mutual friend invited Allen Eskew and me to dinner. We got to talking about what would become Prospect.1, the first art biennial in New Orleans. It would be organized under the auspices of U.S. Biennial, Inc., and Allen offered to help in any way, such as securing permits or doing actual design work. We met again soon after, and during the course of a two-hour meeting, EDR divided our approximately twenty requests into four categories. The process had the potential to be messy and complicated, but the firm sorted it out from the beginning and came up with a plan.

We found the historic Hefler Warehouse on Magazine Street, and the owner signed a six-month lease with us for \$1. The space was very bare bones; it was a big, open, empty warehouse, with no interior walls. It was also dark, cold, dusty, dirty, and a bit damp. Allen evaluated the space with us and then started having meetings with different architects on his staff. We had a lot of space, but more than that, we had a very open-ended set of needs.

The architects got a sense of our requirements, but we really wanted to treat them as artists in the exhibition and give them creative control. We were not just a client; we were partners in the project. As a curator, it is my role is to bring out artists' best—to get an artist excited about and invested in a situation. The proposal that I presented to Allen and ▶

**Steve Dumez**  
Design Director,  
Eskew + Dumez + Ripple,  
New Orleans, Louisiana

**ARCHITECT** All three of us who are principals at EDR are members of the boards of different organizations in the community. As part of that service, we tend to do pro bono work—not just consulting work but actual design services, design reviews, and constructability reviews. Allen Eskew, a principal here, is a board member and past president of the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans, and he came in contact with Dan Cameron.

Dan approached Allen about us helping on the Prospect.1 biennial project, initially just ▶



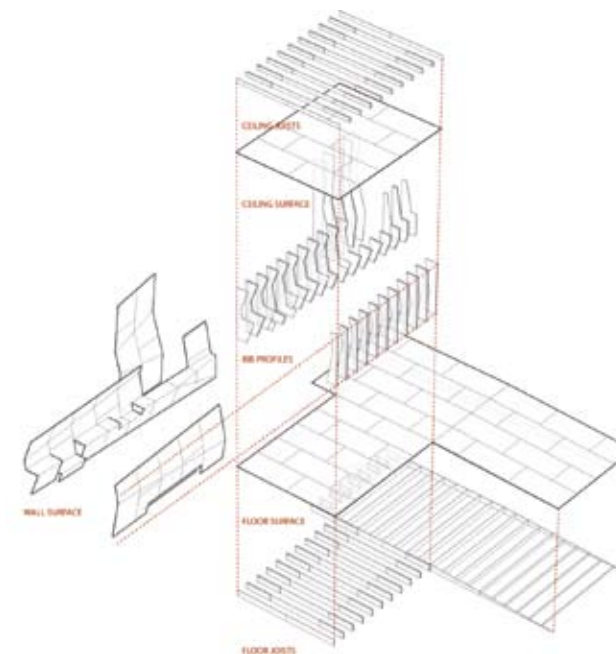


managing permit questions for the sites. There were eighty-one separate art installations scattered around New Orleans. Some of those projects were in found spaces, unutilized or underutilized buildings that were reopened just to hold an installation. In a lot of cases, these areas were still somewhat devastated by Hurricane Katrina.

Some money emerged from the Downtown Development District to help Prospect.1 finance a welcome center. Located in the Warehouse Arts District—part of the Downtown Development District—the center would be a jumping-off point for visitors to find information about the biennial and the arts community in New Orleans. The district offered \$10,000 to help put together the project.

By the time Dan found the spaces and organized the events, the opening was probably about eight weeks away. That is when Dan engaged us to help with the welcome center. Allen was very concerned about our ability to pull off the construction, but I thought we had to do it, since it was clearly an important art event. Our firm has designed a number of galleries and museum facilities both locally and regionally. We are invested in the arts community, and I knew we had a lot to offer.

It was difficult to assess what could be done because the U.S. Biennial didn't have a real budget—just this \$10,000, which had to pay for not only the center itself but also ▶



some upgrades to the warehouse site. There wasn't really any sense of the true cost.

In the end, the welcome center was designed and built within a seven-week period at a low budget. Very early on, we got involved with a contractor who was interested in doing small work. Together we came up with a strategy to use just one relatively inexpensive material: plywood. We developed a way to construct it and came up with the concept of making it look like fins on the outside and then shaping the wood to act as structural ribbing to support the interior wall. There was a nice dialogue about plywood and the relationship of a wooden box within a timber warehouse building.

We were quite lucky to have a client who was not challenged by a strong concept. Since he's a curator, Dan has a sophisticated eye. As soon as we came up with an approach that was somewhat unconventional, he was ready to embrace it. Convincing a client to go out on a limb sometimes is an issue in and of itself. This wasn't an issue with Dan.

The real struggle was with budget and security. The warehouse's main entry was a roll-up overhead door. We needed a new front door that telegraphed to the outside that something special was happening within and that was also operational in inclement weather. We came up with an iron gate faced with a translucent polycarbonate, on which we printed large graphics ▶

themed to the event. At night, there was a constant glow coming through the doors, which made people wonder what was going on inside. Even just slightly ajar, the new doors allowed glimpses in and gave off a sort of mysterious quality. Having to find a solution for something as prosaic as replacing a garage door gave us an opportunity to add something significant to the space.

The public relations benefit to our firm from this project has been significant. We submitted it to some interior-design awards programs, and it clinched the first two, from *Contract* and *Interior Design* magazines. It is terrific to see that kind of benefit from a donation of services. You cannot buy that kind of press. Pro bono work is a chance to get involved in the community in a way that is important. On that level, the benefits are both personal and professional.

his partner Steve Dumez was really along those lines. I said, "If you could make a fantasy out of this project, what would that consist of?" I knew they were creative and had a clear sense of New Orleans and the architecture.

EDR's design for the welcome center for Prospect.1 was very simple but gorgeous. As you entered the warehouse building from the front door, you faced the actual welcome center structure, which was about 40 feet away. It was perfectly framed inside the space; you could see all of it. People were viscerally involved in the approach. Crossing those 40 feet, getting closer and closer, was really a lot of fun. The contrast between the warehouse and the structure was compelling. The only thing that I would have done differently would be to push the scale out a bit. The piece could have been a little larger, a little more looming and monolithic, though it had a fantastic aerodynamic sharpness to it. With other work on display, there was art, but, really, it was a place where we wanted people to have a look around, sit down, and take a load off.

From this project, I have learned that the interaction of art and architecture doesn't need to adhere to the typical boundaries. The overlap between the two fields used to make me nervous. I worried that art would end up losing its autonomy and its role when combined with architecture, but this particular collaboration has helped me leave that feeling at the door. I'm now much more interested in these kinds of partnerships. In fact, I would love to see an architecture biennial in New Orleans on the off-years of the art biennial, as is the case in Venice. New Orleans is a really exciting place to be in terms of architecture and design. When there is so much happening, it doesn't take much to kick off some of these ideas. Prospect.1 was a free event—there was no admission charge—nonetheless, it generated \$25 million for New Orleans.



# Soft Cube

## Soft Cube Gallery

**Location** Omaha, Nebraska **Date** 2008 **Client** Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts **Client liaison** Hesse McGraw **Design firm** Min | Day **Design team** Jeff Davis, Jeffrey Day, Drew Seyl, Maura Trumble, Eric Zuerlein **Area** 2,466 sq. ft. **Cost** \$2,000 **Estimated value of pro bono design services** \$16,500 **Websites** www.bemiscenter.org, www.minday.com

**Jeffrey Day**  
Principal, Min | Day,  
Omaha, Nebraska

**ARCHITECT** I have been involved with the Bemis Center since 2001. The opportunity actually came about accidentally; I met some people who worked there, and they were interested in expanding the programs in the center's existing building. Previously they only made use of the basement and two of the five other floors in the building. I started talking with them about collaborating with Min | Day and engaging architecture students to help keep costs down. Out of this relationship with Bemis, we developed the FACT program—which stands for Fabrication and Construction Team—through the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where I teach. The program works to engage architecture students in our pro bono work. At the time, though, this was our firm's first experience with a pro bono project.

We determined that what the center needed first and foremost was a master plan for the entire complex. We shifted gears ▶

**Hesse McGraw**  
Curator, Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts,  
Omaha, Nebraska

**CLIENT** The Bemis Center is a contemporary, multidisciplinary arts center that was founded in 1981 as an artist-in-residence program. We invite about twenty-four artists annually to live and work here for three months at a time. When I began working at the Bemis Center, I was quite fortunate to discover that Jeff Day was heavily involved with the organization. Jeff was doing high-caliber work nationally and previously had worked on architecture and design projects for the center. He and I began talking about other design possibilities that could be integrated into existing programs here.

At that time, one of the three galleries in the center's 10,000-square-foot exhibition space was unscheduled for an entire summer, and we had the idea to do a twelve-week event series instead of a gallery exhibition. We called it "Endless Summer," and it consisted of concerts, performances, lectures, and special screenings. The problem was that the area was a gallery space, essentially a drywall box. Jeff and I were worried about the acoustics for the programs and discussed what could be done to address the sound problems.

That conversation expanded to address what kind of architectural intervention could happen within our gallery to make it more suitable for events and gatherings. Min | Day jumped on the idea of altering this space, now known as the Soft Cube Gallery. Initially, when we began the conversation, we were talking about a temporary installation, something that would only remain through the completion of "Endless Summer." When that ended, however, we realized that turning the gallery into an event space better took advantage of the square footage, and that Min | Day's installation really supported that use. ▶



from a design/build project to a planning project. Our work with Bemis evolved over time into a host of different projects, some of which have come and gone because of changes in the organization's overall mission and its understanding of the space. However, even these unbuilt projects help us understand how the staff uses the space. In one case, we designed a store for the center to sell catalogues and books. After a trial run, the employees decided they weren't prepared to actually run a store. So our design work, at times, leads to decisions *not* to do things, which is pretty interesting.

The idea for the Soft Cube Gallery began over a lunch meeting with Hesse McGraw, the center's curator. He told me he was planning a series of events in one of the galleries and wanted to do an architectural intervention to support a greater variety of activities. To add fuel to the fire, the project had to be finished within two months of that meeting. We started thinking about how we could fix certain aspects of the space so that it could become more conducive to public activities. Everything also had to be flexible so it could be reconfigured depending on the performance. Out of this came the most prominent feature of the gallery—what we call the "soft wall."

The primary function of the wall is to serve as an acoustic baffle. It doesn't have any parallel surfaces, which is a way to bounce the sound around. The structure is made ▶



It took less than two months to complete the renovations. Min | Day had a number of summer interns from the architecture program at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, and their work helped the process move quickly. The students were paid through a grant, so Jeff was able to work with them on the design development, and then they actually built the Soft Cube Gallery elements on the site. They produced a combined unit that we call the “soft wall.” It’s composed of a sound baffle with a lighting element and a bench. They also created a stage and a curtain that separates the backstage area.

The stage is built modularly, so it can be reconfigured depending on where events are taking place in the building. It has been quite useful for us. The soft wall has become a permanent fixture. Depending on what is happening in the space, its character can be changed by something as simple as turning the lights on and off. The installation is neutral enough that it doesn’t overshadow the event. That concept was based on my first conversation with Jeff about ideas for the center, and it really brought about a shift in the program as a whole, not just the space.

What we have with Min | Day is not a traditional client-architect relationship; it’s much more along the lines of a curatorial conversation. Over the last year, our staff at the center has started to address some basic circulation issues for the first floor of the building. We’ve been consulting with Jeff throughout that process, and at a certain point, it gave rise to a conversation about how we could change the entire entrance to the building. We are thinking about how you put people on their toes as they enter.

The interesting thing about our collaborations with Min | Day is that they can happen on multiple levels. It can be a floor plan improvement that costs a few hundred dollars; the Soft Cube, which cost a few thousand dollars; or something much larger, like long-term capital improvements to the building. That sense of scalability is key. If we’re trying to support exceptional talent working in contemporary culture, then that has to extend to designers and to having conversations about design. With Jeff, we’ve gotten to a point where the conversation is really seamless. Jeff understands what I’m trying to work toward and the aims of the Bemis organization as a whole. There’s a lot of mutual respect, both in terms of what we’re trying to achieve and in the kind of intellectual dialogue that gives rise to the work. It’s been very fruitful on both ends.

out of Homasote, which is compressed paper, so it absorbs certain frequencies. Since we were creating this porous wall, we wanted to backlight it so the room could be softly lit during dance parties and evening events. The design sounds complex, but it’s actually done simply. The center of the wall has a 12-foot radius going in one direction, and the two ends have 12-foot radii in the opposite direction. This creates a convex to concave to convex pattern, so the multicurved surface warps the sound. The ribs are made of plywood, which we cut ourselves. The wall probably cost less than \$2,000, if you don’t include the time and labor that we donated; yet it’s an extremely functional component.

Initially the soft wall was only supposed to last for six months, but the team at the center liked it so much that they’ve decided to keep it. They use the space for all types of events. The center’s symposium about architecture in the Midwest, which happens annually, has met there. There have been dance parties and experimental music concerts. People always think, “Oh my gosh, I’m moving to the Midwest; it’s going to be horribly boring,” but there’s a powerful contemporary art scene in Omaha. There aren’t very many galleries, but Bemis is at the center of the action. They do pretty radical exhibitions, so it’s become a hub for this community.

We never really did pro bono work of this kind before, but it has become ▶



a big part of our practice since then. Our experience with Bemis showed us that we can actually do much more experimental work through these pro bono partnerships than we often can with our other clients.

My partner, E. B. Min, and I both have art backgrounds from before we went to architecture school, so we've always been very interested in contemporary art. Through this work, we've been able to forge long-term relationships and become true advisors to Bemis. At this point, I've actually been involved in the center longer than any of the staff, so I have a real base of knowledge about the facility.