



Reimagine TOJ Upstairs

2021 Survey Report

A community-informed approach to redesigning our Upstairs space.

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Our Project

The Reimagine TOJ Upstairs Project aims to create a safe, vibrant arts and culture space for the Chinatown-International District community. With an opportunity to renovate its 6500 square foot Upstairs space on the horizon, Theatre Off Jackson (TOJ) sought to understand how this space could best serve community needs. A community interest survey was distributed to residents, local businesses, TOJ patrons, and arts and community organizations. We received over 200 responses and earned press coverage in the International Examiner and Northwest Asian Weekly. The responses from this survey process will inform design and use decisions to guide the renovation of TOJ's Upstairs space.



International Examiner – Seattle Vol 48, Number 8, April 24 - May 4, 2021

Northwest Asian Weekly – Vol 40, Number 17, April 24 - 30, 2021

Why It Matters

The Chinatown-International District (CID) is the historic and contemporary heart of Seattle's Asian-American and Pacific Islander communities, which has included residents who are of Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, and Vietnamese heritage. The CID comprises the neighborhoods of Chinatown, Japantown, Manilatown, and Little Saigon. During the early 20th century, the neighborhood also welcomed Black communities, who played a pivotal role in the creation of Seattle's jazz scene and solidified the CID as a vital part of the city's arts and culture scene. According to 2010 US Census data, 47.7% of CID residents identify as Asian-American, with 12.1% identifying as Black, 4.6% identifying as Hispanic, and 8.1% identifying as mixed race or another non-white racial identity.¹ With only 27.7% of the neighborhood's population identifying as white, the CID is one of the most culturally diverse neighborhoods in Seattle and hosts numerous Asian-American businesses. It is the home of the Wing Luke Museum, originally located in the Upstairs space at TOJ, which houses both permanent and temporary collections dedicated to the preservation of AAPI history in the Pacific Northwest. The Wing is also the only community-based museum in the United States dedicated exclusively to the history of pan-Asian Pacific Americans. A handful of art studios, small galleries, dance studios, and rehearsal studios also contribute to the neighborhood's artistic culture. This diverse neighborhood is also home to TOJ, the CID's only mid-sized performing arts venue.

Cultural spaces make neighborhoods worth living in. The City of Seattle's 2017 Cultural Space Report notes that neighborhoods with access to arts and culture spaces have happier residents, higher walk scores, and thriving businesses.² Arts spaces play a crucial role in connecting the community. Several arts spaces have been unable to survive pandemic closures, creating an even greater need to preserve and enliven spaces which remain. TOJ does not hold a long-term lease. However, TOJ has the opportunity to negotiate one, ensuring that residents and business owners in the CID continue to have arts and culture spaces that increase the vibrancy of the neighborhood.

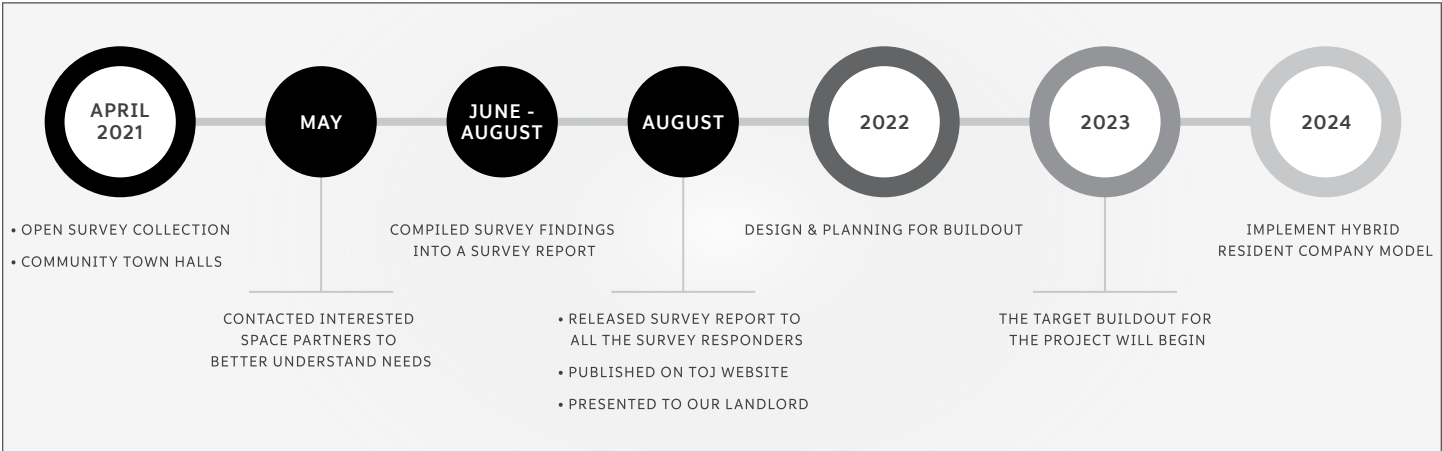
With the rise of gentrification in our CID neighborhood, it is critical that we preserve our art spaces for those who find a sense of belonging here. Reimagine TOJ Upstairs is an exciting opportunity for us to come together to co-design a 6500 square foot space located at 7th and Jackson on the upstairs floors of TOJ.

Our Process

To kickoff our visioning process, we created an online survey to better understand the frustrations and hopes for how space in general as well as TOJ space could be better leveraged in the community. We opened the survey on April 1, 2021 and had an open call for responses until the end of the month. Survey links were live on our website and distributed through the TOJ mailing list, our social media profiles, and in Facebook groups such as Seattle Theatre Artists, Seattle Theatre Network, and Seattle POC ACT. In addition to press coverage by NW Asian Weekly and the International Examiner, community organizations such as ACRS, Artist Trust, CID Coalition #HumbowsNotHotels, CuriosityBased, Friends of Little Saigon, Seattle Office of Arts & Culture, and the Wing Luke Museum increased our reach by sharing the survey to their members. During the time the survey was open, Theatre Off Jackson hosted three informational Town Hall sessions via Zoom where interested community members could ask questions about the project. By the time the survey closed on April 30th, we received 202 responses.

In May, we began analyzing the survey results in tandem with follow-up meetings with potential space partners. We met via Zoom with 12 different arts groups and community organizations to discuss their potential space needs in greater detail to supplement our data with qualitative analysis.

In August, we compiled and released this public report of our findings to all the survey responders, published it on the TOJ website, and presented it to our landlord. We also have been in conversation with interested potential space partners about engaging with TOJ in a hybrid Resident Company model until renovations are complete, scheduled for 2024.



Survey Takers

Our survey was completed by people from all over the city, but primarily by those with some kind of affiliation with or investment in the CID community. Of the 202 survey respondents, 29% indicated they were affiliated with “formal or informal groups that are invested in the CID community.” This cluster of respondents represent business owners and community organizers in the CID, as well as arts groups that work out of CID venues. An additional 40% responded that they were loosely affiliated with CID groups and activities, meaning that they “support here and there by are not formally involved or committed.” This group of respondents includes patrons and volunteers of Theatre Off Jackson, independent artists who have performed at TOJ, and members of the CID community. Only 30% of survey respondents indicated no affiliation or involvement with the CID community.

While the majority of participants completed the survey on their own behalf, 6% responded on behalf of an organization. These 12 organizations also indicated their interest in becoming space partners with Theatre Off Jackson. Their feedback has inspired a Resident Company model that will be detailed later in this report. 10 out of these 12 organizations are non-profit entities. Of these, 8 consider themselves to be theatre organizations and 4 are other types of arts non-profits and arts affiliates.



JOURNEY WEST! The Legend of Lewis & Clark by Andrew Lee Creech, directed by Linnea Ingalls, presented by Copious Love Productions. Photos by Brett Love.

Left Photo: Jeremy Behrens as Meriwether Lewis, Matt Dela Cruz as Thomas Jefferson, and Jordan Moeller as William Clark

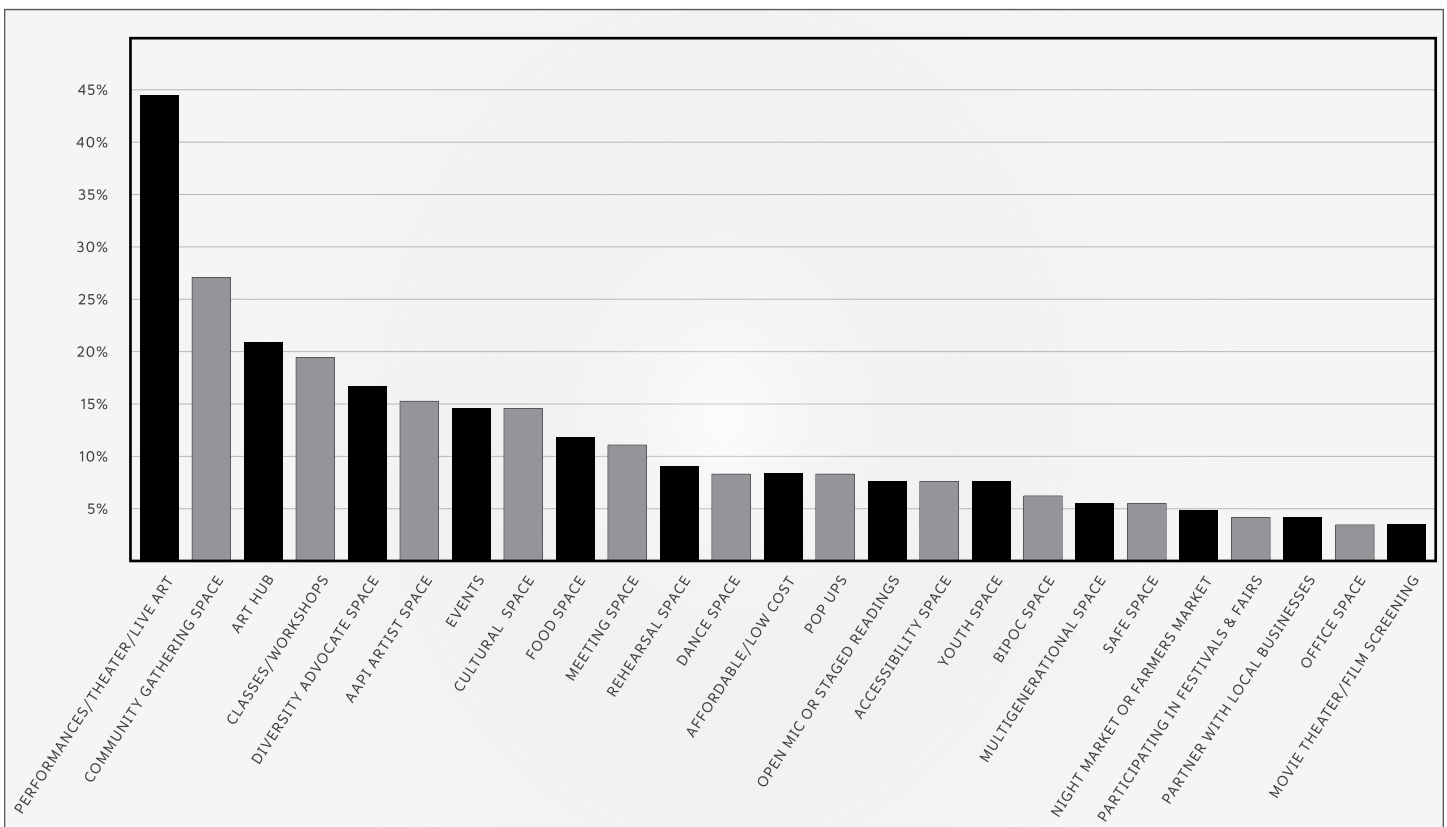
Right Photo: The Cast with Nikki Suyama as Sacagawea in the front

What We Learned

QUESTION - What facilities/activities would you like to see?

When we asked what type of facilities or activities community members would like to see in the CID, the need for cultural and community-oriented spaces emerged as a dominant theme. Our survey participants had myriad ideas for the kinds of spaces they wanted in the CID, which are detailed in the table below. Performance space was the most common response at 44%. Similar ideas such as “arts hub,” “AAPI artist space,” “events,” or “open mic/staged reading” were also frequently mentioned. 27% of respondents said that the CID needed a community gathering space. “Cultural space” and “meeting space” were also identified as needs. Other facilities and activities the respondents identified included elder and youth spaces, night markets, pop up businesses, and film screening rooms.

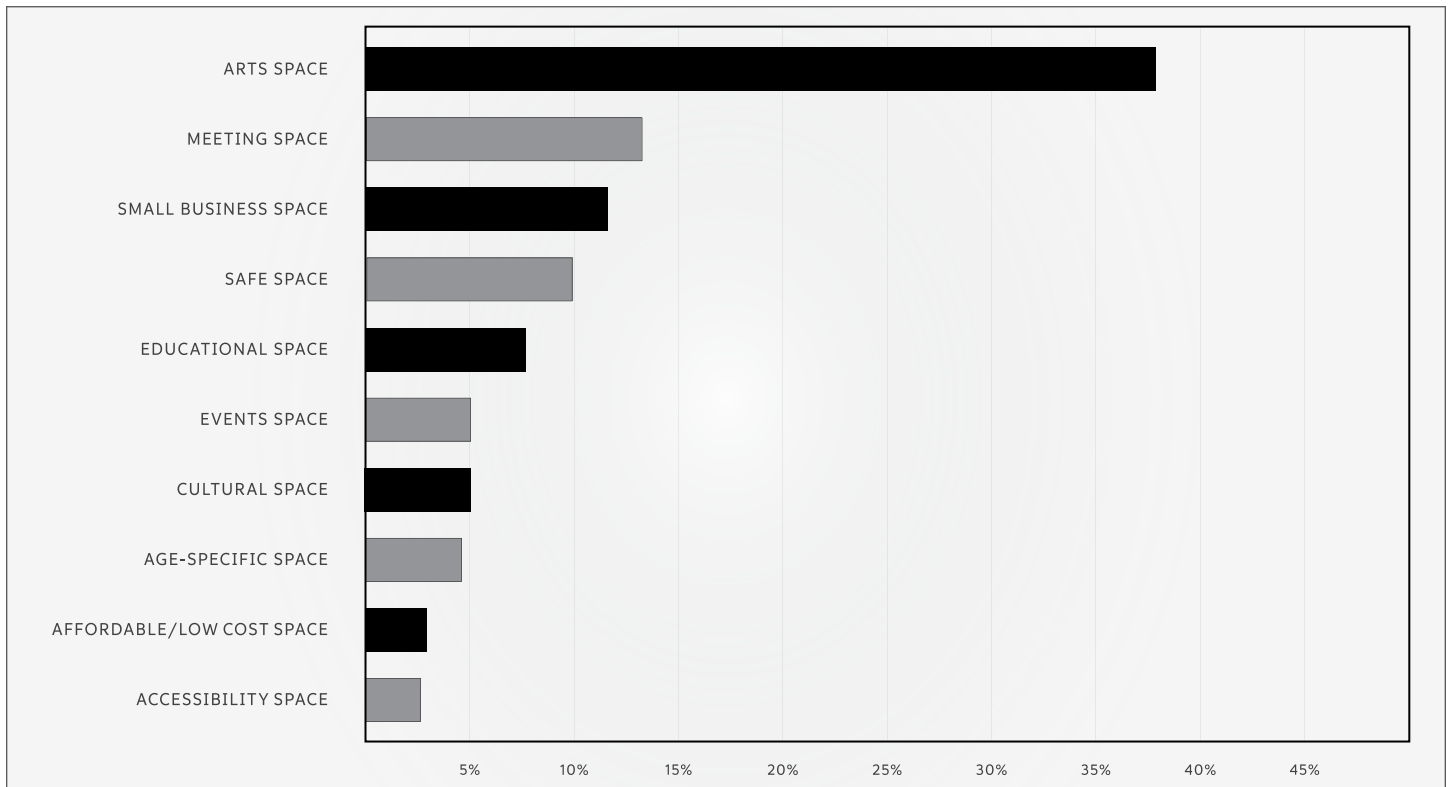
Facilities and Activities Desired in the CID



Percentages of responses per activity types people desire in the CID

We examined the individual responses above to identify trends. We then sorted the data into categories based on primary space function (e.g. arts, culture, educational, age-specific, etc.) and found that 37.6% of respondents indicated a need for arts spaces in the CID community, with an additional 5% of respondents advocating for cultural spaces and another 5% suggesting a need for events spaces. Educational spaces such as libraries and museums were preferred by 7.7% of those surveyed.

Responses Sorted by Space Function



Raw response data from the previous graph recategorized by space function

Various types of community-oriented spaces were common responses. 13.2% of respondents identified meeting spaces as a community need. Respondents highlighted the desire for age-specific spaces with 4.7% indicating a need for youth, elder, and/or intergenerational gathering spaces. In addition, 9.8% of respondents requested safe spaces in the CID community for residents of color and BIPOC affinity groups to gather.

Another 11.5% of respondents suggested a need for spaces that were specifically oriented toward small business use, perhaps as shared offices or as pop-up retail spaces. Finally, several responses indicated that spaces in the CID should be affordable/low cost (2.9%) and accessible (2.6%).

Key Finding: Arts space and flexible community meeting spaces re-emerged as a dominant theme among survey respondents for use of space.

“

Thanks for being open to new possibilities and serving communities.

”

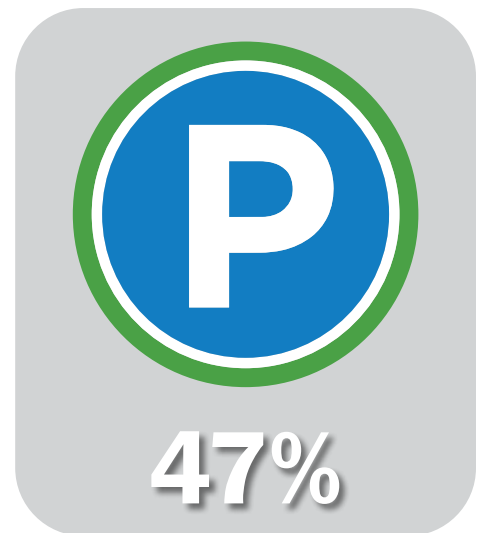
– Yin Yu, PARASOL & CID Coalition

QUESTION - What is frustrating?

Survey respondents were asked what they found frustrating about using space in the CID. The three most common responses were: parking, safety, and accessibility.

PARKING

47% of the respondents noted that they find parking to be challenging in the CID. Street parking often fills up quickly during prime dining and nightlife hours, leaving higher-priced pay-to-park lots as the only option for drivers coming from areas that aren't served by public transit. During sporting events, many drivers seek out cheaper parking in the Chinatown-International District compared to stadium lots, which reduces the available parking for CID businesses overall. Theatre Off Jackson is interested in exploring options with local lots, including Interim Parking, which controls the large paid lot under I-5 at 8th and King, to incentivize safe, affordable parking for events at the theatre.



SAFETY

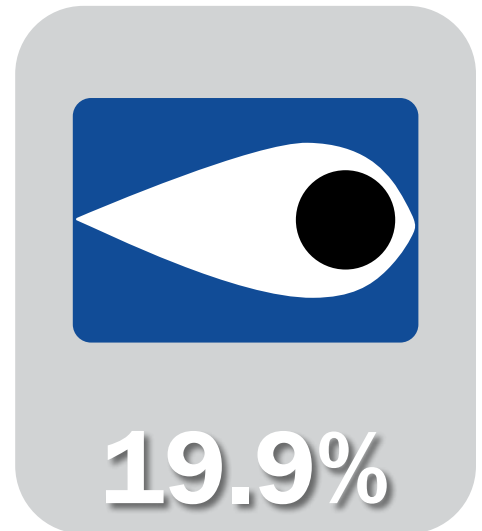
Safety in the CID was a concern for nearly 20% of respondents. It is unclear from the survey what the specific safety concerns are, but it seems reasonable that national patterns of

violence against the AAPI community may be one of them. Stop AAPI Hate reports that hate crimes against Asian American communities have nearly doubled between March 2020 and March 2021.³ In the CID, nearby restaurants like Jade Garden and others were vandalized early in the pandemic as a result of anti-Asian sentiment, which presents a growing safety concern to the community.⁴

Lack of streetlights in the neighborhood and sanitation issues stemming from vermin and litter also create unsafe conditions. Over the past year, Theatre Off Jackson has begun to remedy some of these concerns by cleaning and removing pigeon roosts over the entryway area. Humane anti-roosting strategies have been implemented, and the venue's signage has been cleaned. Additionally, TOJ patrons have reported theft of personal property from automobiles, underscoring the need for safety and better parking options. Theatre Off Jackson is in conversation with the CID Community Watch, www.cidcommunitywatch.com, to discuss how collaboration can improve community safety in and around the venue.

ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility is a concern in the CID, where many historic buildings lack appropriate accessibility upgrades. 15.9% of respondents made note of this issue. Theatre Off Jackson is committed to making accessibility upgrades as we Reimagine TOJ Upstairs. We are currently conducting a feasibility study to plan appropriate upgrades for wheelchair access to both the Upstairs and Downstairs spaces.



“

I am excited to think about more of the existing space being used/upgraded/made available. ”

– Anna Allen

Key Finding: Parking, Safety, and Accessibility are concerns for CID business owners and patrons when it comes to creating community spaces.

QUESTION - What would you like to see in this space?

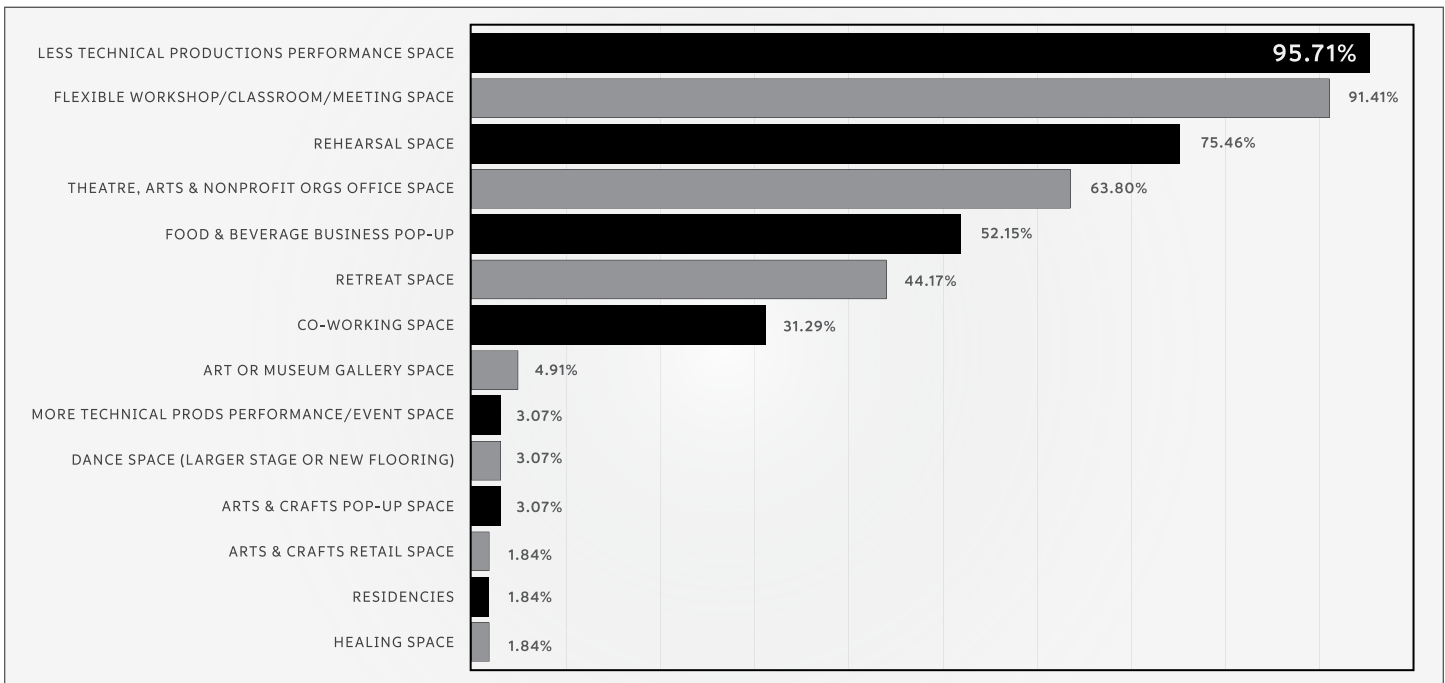
The goal of this project is to ensure that the space we create is responsive to community needs. We asked survey participants what kind of uses they might imagine for the Upstairs space at Theatre Off Jackson. Theatre-related uses and office-related uses emerged as the top two categories of space use.

Current Layout of TOJ Upstairs



The overwhelming majority of respondents said they wanted the Upstairs at TOJ to remain a performance space. Currently, the Upstairs space at TOJ has a small stage with a simple lighting grid and sound board. It is the home of Sunday Night Shuga Shaq, an all POC burlesque show, and Salon of Shame, an event where participants read embarrassing entries from their old diaries. 95.7% of the respondents indicated that they would like the Upstairs space to remain available for productions of this type. Likewise, 74.5% of those surveyed indicated that they would like the Upstairs space to be available for rehearsals.

How Respondents Want to Use Space at TOJ Upstairs



Percentage of responses for various types of activities that might take place at TOJ Upstairs

The second most popular response indicated a need for flexible classroom and meeting space. 91.4% of respondents said that multi-use spaces for classrooms, workshops, and meetings was something they valued in a space.

“

I love the potential this project has. I live right next door and I would love to meet more people in the neighborhood and find ways to engage with what's going on. I've had the pleasure of meeting folks at bars and restaurants, but it would be cool to have a more open-ended gathering space to connect with folks.

”

– Bailee Hiatt, Wing Luke Museum employee

Similarly, office space for small theatre and arts non-profits was highly desired by 63.8% of respondents. 44.1% of respondents thought the Upstairs would be a good space to host retreats and another 31.3% envisioned it as a co-working space. 52.1% of respondents also saw the space as rentable for short-term pop-up food and beverage businesses.

In brief, these results indicate that the space should remain flexible enough to accommodate a number of organizations needing access to space for meetings, retreats, shared offices, and pop-up business ventures while maintaining its availability as a performance space.

Key Finding: Flexible use spaces that can accommodate both performances and community events are highly desired in the CID.

QUESTION - Would you be interested in being a potential space partner?

The community interest survey had two distinct sections: the first was for any interested community member and the second was for anyone who was interested in becoming a prospective tenant. At the end of the second section, we asked if they wanted to be contacted for a follow-up meeting in May to learn more about their interest. In late April and early May we reached out to those interested in a follow-up meeting and 12 people signed up for virtual meetings. Of these 12 people, 3 were interested community members, 1 was a community-based non-profit and the rest were theatre and cabaret companies.

“

Thank you for engaging creatively in preserving and housing this community treasure. I would love to see the Chinatown-ID be a hub for adventurous theater artists to live, work and play.

”

– Harold Taw, Local playwright & Infinity Box Theatre Project board member

When we met with the 12 potential space partners for TOJ’s Upstairs, a model emerged from our conversations that would help Theatre Off Jackson design a space that meets the community’s needs as both a performance space and flexible meeting space, while furthering its mission to be an affordable venue for artists.

Imagining the Future

RESIDENT COMPANY MODEL

We are considering a “Resident Company Model” in which arts and nonprofit organizations could partner with TOJ to become shared companies-in-residence of the Upstairs space and mainstage producers in the Downstairs space. Under this model, resident companies would have access to office space, rehearsal space, storage space, and meeting space for production meetings, intimate readings, and workshops. No one company would have exclusive use, therefore making the space more affordable and accessible to a large number of companies by sharing costs.



A Hand of Talons by Maggie Lee, directed by Amy Poisson, presented by Pork Filled Productions. Photo by Joe Iano Photography. Ahbijeet Rane as Preston Hodges and Stephanie Kim-Bryan as Wilhemina Yao

In addition, resident companies would be able to plan out their season programming years in advance instead of on a year-to-year basis with the right of first refusal for programming dates. We believe the Resident Company Model would solve space access needs for small to mid-sized arts companies and independent artists and promote greater diversity through space access.

We will select Resident Companies that reflect TOJ’s mission and values which spotlight Asian American, BIPOC, women, LGBTQ, and trans/non-binary artists. In our 2019 season, 73% of our shows were produced by female-led companies, 56% were POC-led, and 39% had LGBTQ+ creators. Of our producers of color, 34% identified as Asian-American and 21% identified as Black. As we finalize details for our Resident Company Model, our intention is for TOJ’s Upstairs and Downstairs programming to reflect diverse communities.

“

Having a place to call home would allow me to produce more.

”

– Sadiqua Iman, Earth Pearl Collective founder

COMMUNITY USE

While Resident Companies would have primary use of the space, the Upstairs will also be available to the community in a variety of ways:

- The space could be rented for one-off community events like advocacy group meetings, pop-up restaurants, youth poetry slams, game nights for AAPI youth and elders, rehearsals, craft fairs, and more.
- Low-tech monthly or bi-monthly performances (like our current Salon of Shame reading series) could expand in the Upstairs space.
- During the months of July and August, the Upstairs and Downstairs could be made available for community summer programming with breakout sessions, low-tech and hi-tech performances. In the past, we have rented out the entire venue for Rain City Rock Camp’s LADIES ROCK! Camp and for 14/48: The World’s Quickest Theatre Festival.

About TOJ

Theatre Off Jackson's mission is to help maintain a vital arts culture in Seattle. We accomplish this by offering and operating an affordable, sustainable venue dedicated to performance, art, and community. We amplify the voices of Seattle's diverse artistic community by supporting new and established artists through the production process, and assisting them in achieving their unique vision on our stages.

TOJ was formed in 2005 after the dissolution of the Northwest Asian American Theatre. Founders Patti West, Frank Phillips, and Amanda Slepiski believed that maintaining a live performance space in Seattle's CID was important both to the vibrancy of the neighborhood and to the city's artistic landscape as a whole. Sixteen years later, TOJ remains a vital part of Seattle's theatre community and offers a home to itinerant theatre companies that do not operate out of their own venue, as well as space for solo performers, burlesque and cabaret artists, puppeteers, filmmakers, and other kids of experimental theatre.

The Upstairs space at TOJ was once the home of the Wing Luke Museum, housing a vast historical collection of materials relevant to the history of the AAPI community in Seattle and the greater Pacific Northwest. The dragon boat that hangs in the Upstairs space is a remnant of its time as a museum and a reminder of TOJ's roots as an Asian-American cultural space and place in the CID community.

As an organization, we believe:

- In empowering artists to tell their unique stories and the stories of our community.
- We can help artists develop and flourish by providing an environment where taking risks and trying new things is encouraged.
- That performance shouldn't break the bank - artistic performance should be affordable for artists and patrons.
- That building pathways to opportunity requires broad, systemic change and TOJ wants to be a part of this change in the Seattle arts community.
- That our stages and audiences should reflect the rich diversity of Seattle and surrounding areas.

About the Survey Committee

The Reimagine TOJ Upstairs survey project was led by Executive Director Patti West, arts consultant Susan Lieu, Board President Kristi Barnhill, and Board Secretary Stevi Costa, with assistance from Board Member Kelley Rozo and artist Rainier Oakstone.

- Patti West is the Executive Director of Theatre Off Jackson. She is a former staff member of the Northwest Asian American Theatre, a Gregory-award winning lighting designer, and dog lover. Patti has worked in the CID since 1988 and her deep knowledge of the community guided this project.
- Susan Lieu is a Vietnamese-American playwright, performer, producer, and author who premiered her debut solo show “140 LBS: HOW BEAUTY KILLED MY MOTHER” as a co-producer at TOJ. A past management consultant and MBA graduate, Susan served as the TOJ Reimagine Upstairs Community Engagement Project Manager to gather community input, dream with potential space partners, and synthesize results in our final report.
- Kristi Barnhill is the current President of the board of directors for Theatre Off Jackson and she has been on the board since 2019. She is a project manager, data analyst, and performing artist who designed and administered the community need survey. She is an avid gamer and dogs are her favorite people.
- Stevi Costa has served on the board of directors for Theatre Off Jackson since 2014. She is an educator, grant writer, and performing artist who holds a PhD in English from the University of Washington. Her skills as an academic researcher and writer shaped the survey design and reporting of this project.
- Kelley Rozo has been a TOJ fan since 2008 and recently joined the board of directors in January 2021. She utilized her design skills to update the TOJ website and compile the survey report.
- Rainier Oakstone is a visual artist and wordsmith who has been writing and drawing for most of their life. They have been producing posters and illustrations for the Seattle performing arts community since 2014 and designed the TOJ unicorn mascot in 2015. They created the logo and International Examiner ad for the TOJ Reimagine Upstairs project.

Footnotes

¹ The Demographic Statistical Atlas of the United States
<https://statisticalatlas.com/neighborhood/Washington/Seattle/International-District/Race-and-Ethnicity>

² 30 Ideas for the Creation, Activation & Preservation of Cultural Space
<https://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/Arts/Downloads/Space/CULTURAL%20SPACE%20REPORT.pdf>

³ 2021-05-06 Stop AAPI Hate National Report
<https://stopaapihate.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Stop-AAPI-Hate-Report-National-210506.pdf>

⁴ Vandalism in Seattle's International District delivers another blow to struggling restaurant
<https://www.king5.com/article/news/vandalism-at-chinatown-international-district-restaurant-adds-another-blow-to-a-hard-year/281-fb8f554d-5435-46a6-8985-13d0d2670eaa>



CULTURE

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