

Arts, media center opens in Downtown Brooklyn

Written by Michael R. Bloomberg
Tuesday, 15 October 2013 14:44



BROOKLYN Borough President Marty Markowitz, Cultural Affairs Commissioner Kate D. Levin, New York City Economic Development Corporation President Kyle Kimball and I recently joined BRIC Arts | Media | Bklyn Executive Director Leslie G. Schultz and UrbanGlass Executive Director Cybele Malone to open the BRIC Arts | Media House and UrbanGlass Renewal Project.

A multi-disciplinary arts and media complex at the former site of the Strand Theatre at 647 Fulton Street, the \$41 million city-funded renovation project doubles BRIC's operating space to 40,000 square feet and expands UrbanGlass by 3,300 square feet, modernizing its 17,000-square-foot glassworking facility.

Two years ago we launched this project to provide a state-of-the-art home for BRIC and UrbanGlass.

I'm thrilled with the result of this public-private partnership, which has brought an extraordinary addition to the burgeoning Downtown Brooklyn Cultural District, and new and renovated space for unparalleled access to the terrific programming of these two dynamic organizations.

The Thomas Lesser-designed renovation of the historic city-owned Strand Theatre improves homes for two Brooklyn-based art organizations, BRIC and UrbanGlass.

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Constructed in 1918, the 3,800-seat movie palace and Vaudeville theater was home to performers, including Harry Houdini and John Phillips Sousa in the 1920s.

The theater went into tax foreclosure in the 1950s, and the city demolished the interior, creating three floors and a cellar with 66,000 square feet.

The theater turned into multi-use space, housing a printing company on the ground floor until the late 1990s, as well as a bowling alley.

The upper two floors were vacant until the late 1980s; the ground floor and basement were vacated for the final time in the late 1990s.

The building was turned over to UrbanGlass in 1988 and BRIC in 1993.

This renovation project is the result of a public-private partnership.

The New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, the City Council and Borough President Markowitz provided \$41 million in capital funding for the project which was managed by the New York City Economic Development Corporation.

Additional support for BRIC was provided by Booth Ferris Foundation, Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, Goldman Sachs, National Grid, The Rockefeller Foundation Cultural Innovation Fund, Verizon and the Andy Warhol Foundation.

UrbanGlass received funding support from the Agnis Varis Trust, Corning Incorporated, Tiffany & Co., and the Dana Foundation.

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The Department of Cultural Affairs and the New York City Economic Development Corporation provided extensive technical assistance as plans for the ambitious project developed.

The renovation of BRIC Arts | Media House doubles the organization's operating space from 19,000 to 40,000 square feet — bringing BRIC's programming under one roof for the first time since its founding in 1979 — and will include a 3,000-square foot contemporary art gallery, a 240-400 capacity flexible performance space, a glass-walled television studio fully visible to the public lobby, an artist work/performance studio, a public lobby with a café and full state-of-the-art media broadcasting center.

The renovated home will allow BRIC to expand its performing arts, exhibition, community media and educational programming; increase its support for emerging artists from Brooklyn and beyond; and serve more than one million people each year.

Programming in the facility will include BRIC House Fireworks Residency, a residency program for multidisciplinary artists; a multi-year, six week annual residency for Ronald K. Brown's Evidence: A Dance Company; a year-round program of exhibitions in the main Gallery and Project Room with an emphasis on representation of Brooklyn's visual arts community; BRIClab, an incubator program for artists who are developing new work; BRIC House Parties, a new, monthly series of all-ages programming culminating in a live DJ and dance party; and additional events and free programming in the new ground floor space.

The organization also manages Brooklyn's only public access television station, the BCAT-TV Network.

The new UrbanGlass includes an expansion into an additional 3,300 sq. ft. street-level retail and gallery space on Fulton Street and a rebuilt and modernized 17,000 sq. ft. glassworking facility on the third floor.

UrbanGlass' renovated third floor studios offer a 30% increase in energy efficiency, and expanded space for glassblowing, education programming, and visiting artists.

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New third floor spaces are tailored for classes and workshops for professionals and students; fellowships for visiting artists; and The Bead Project, a workforce development program that teaches jewelry-making.

For the first time, UrbanGlass has a ground floor presence on Fulton Street, the Agnes Varis Arts Center, which encompasses The Robert Lehman Gallery and UrbanGlass|ware, the organization's store.

The Center is named for the philanthropist Agnes Varis in recognition of the Agnes Varis Trust's \$1 million gift to the capital campaign.

Jeffrey Beers International designed the new storefront gallery and retail environment.

The Robert Lehman Gallery will present changing exhibitions highlighting and exploring the different ways that artists and designers use glass in their work.

The inaugural exhibition, A Tree Grows, a site specific project by artist Katherine Gray, features close to 800 handmade and recycled glasses.