



# **Towards a Healthy and Sustainable Dance Ecosystem**

**A working paper exploring Dancers' Group's role  
in the San Francisco Bay Area Dance Ecosystem**

**Prepared as part of Dancers' Group's 2014 strategic  
planning process**

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*The Executive Summary provides a high level analysis of the structure and overall health of the SFBA dance ecosystem. It may be circulated as a stand-alone document or included as an introduction to the longer paper, which also includes a detailed discussion of Dancers' Group's programs through an ecosystem lens.*

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*The first section explores the ecosystem metaphor, describing the species and resources exchanged in the dance ecosystem. A preliminary diagram of how some choreographers "make work" is used to illustrate the utility of the ecosystem metaphor using the principles of systems dynamics. The idea of "leverage" is explored, and the transferable characteristics of ecosystems are discussed.*

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*The second section delves into Dancers' Group's programs and services, examining individual programs and groups of programs in terms of species, resources exchanged, leverage, and implications for strategy.*

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*This paper is the result of many consultations and conversations involving Dancers' Group board members, staff, members, funders and other stakeholders. The authors are indebted to the many individuals who shared their candid and considered views on the state of the San Francisco Bay Area dance community. The ideas developed in this paper will inform a strategic plan for Dancers' Group, to be completed in June 2014.*



Dancers' Group is the primary dance service organization of the San Francisco Bay Area (SFBA), home to the one of the largest and most diverse dance communities in the US. The organization's mission is to promote the visibility and viability of dance, and it serves SFBA artists, the dance community, and its audiences.

Recognized as a national model in the field of dance, Dancers' Group has roots that are broad and deep within the SFBA dance community. Begun in 1982 as a small collective of dance choreographers in need of studio space, Dancers' Group has always been, first and foremost, an artist-centric organization closely connected to its constituents, with programs, services and advocacy work developed specifically to address the wide-ranging needs of the region's diverse dance community.

In 1983 Dancers' Group began its presenting program, which is now a central part of its operations and reaches an audience of more than 30,000 each year. At present, the organization manages approximately 20 programs, including: fiscal sponsorship; Dancers' Group Presents (the *Rotunda Dance Series*, *ONSITE*, and *Dance Discourse Project*); the *In Dance* monthly print publication; Regranting (five different funds); the annual 10-day, region-wide Bay Area Dance Week festival; Membership Services; and local, state and national Advocacy.

## Executive Summary

*"Nature's economy is built on the principle of interconnectedness, that everything in the ecosystem is connected to everything else...As the organic gardeners say, for the health of the plant look to the health of the soil." – Jeff Todd Titon<sup>1</sup>*

Since its founding in 1982, Dancers' Group has evolved from a local school and rehearsal space for master artists that included a black box theater, to a hybrid presenting and service organization that serves the San Francisco Bay Area. In October 2013, Dancers' Group began a strategic planning process, with a goal to sustain and strengthen its role in supporting the dance community for the next 30 years. In considering an overall approach to strategic planning, WolfBrown asked what sort of conceptual framework would allow for critical reflection and offer a holistic assessment of Dancers' Group's service to the dance community. Ultimately, we reached for the ecosystem metaphor (e.g., a rainforest) as a means of building a stronger understanding of the dance community and how Dancers' Group's various programs influence the larger system. Most importantly, the ecosystem framework provides a means of understanding the myriad interconnections between people and organizations in the dance ecosystem, and how they both generate and consume resources.

Ecosystems can be defined in many ways, based on factors such as geography, climate, shared resources, etc. Initially, we set out to explore "the San Francisco Bay Area dance ecosystem" and quickly realized its enormous diversity and complexity. We acknowledge that this frame of analysis (i.e., the SFBA dance ecosystem) is subjective, and that other definitions would be equally valid. Ultimately, this analysis is exploratory in nature, and very much in service of Dancers' Group's strategic planning process.

### Species and Resources in the Dance Ecosystem

In the SFBA dance ecosystem, a species is defined as a grouping of organizations or people that occupy the same "niche" and engage in similar patterns of exchange. For example, audiences are a species; dancers and choreographers are species; and so are funders and philanthropists (see page 12 for a complete list). In the dance ecosystem, an individual may be a member of one or more species in any given instance or exchange (e.g., a dancer may also be a choreographer, a teacher, an audience member, etc.) This is an important characteristic of the SFBA dance ecosystem, lending species vitality and improving their survival and sustainability.

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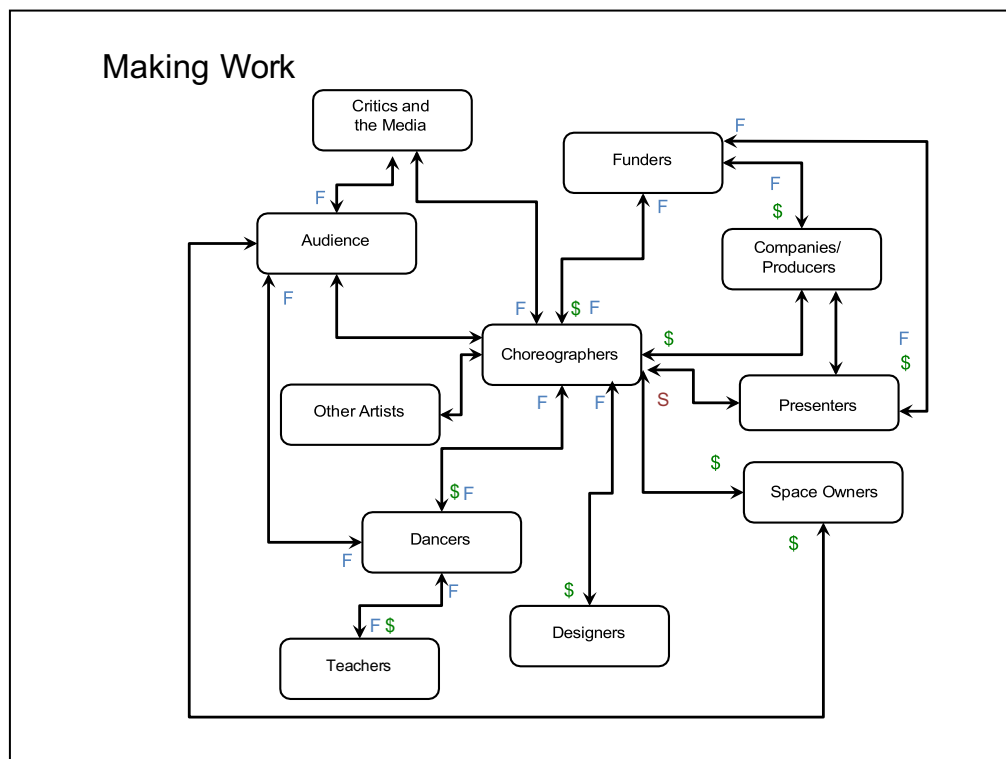
<sup>1</sup> Jeff Todd Titon. "An Ecological Approach to Cultural Sustainability." Sustainable Music Blog, 29 October 2009.

Equally important to identifying the species in an ecosystem is the matter of what resources they exchange in fulfilling their intended outcomes. Our analysis identified five different kinds of resources: know-how (e.g., skills and creativity), money, meaning (as conveyed through art), fulfillment (feeling satisfied in that you are able to achieve a desired goal), and socially constructed resources such as legitimacy, respect, esteem, and recognition (see page 14 for a complete description).

Assets are another type of resource within the ecosystem that are not readily exchangeable, but lay dormant in the ecosystem until “animated” by individuals who generate one of the aforementioned resources. For example, choreographic works are assets that require animation. Artists, both professional and non-professional, might also be considered as assets that require animation.

Having identified species and the resources they exchange, the next challenge was honing our skills at modeling a subsystem, before diving headlong into an analysis of Dancers' Group's programs. For this purpose, it seemed appropriate to start by diagramming the subsystem encompassing how some choreographers make artistic work (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. The “Making Work” Subsystem**



Shorthand is used to illustrate some of the resources exchanged between species with “\$” indicating an exchange of money, “F” signifying an exchange of fulfillment, and “S” an exchange of space (see pages 14-18 for further discussion). This preliminary diagram allows for critical reflection on how choreographers make artistic work,

exchange resources along the way, where they encounter barriers, and how their work is supported by Dancers' Group and others. Of course, this diagram represents only one way of looking at the way artistic work gets made, and perhaps reflects a bias in western-based forms. We acknowledge that there are other, equally valid systems for making work that remain to be diagrammed.

This analysis helped to illustrate a few key characteristics of ecosystems that have direct applicability to the SFBA dance ecosystem:

- Healthy ecosystems are characterized by diversity, resilience and equilibrium.
- The growth of a species or individual changes the ecosystem. Dramatic growth of a species or individual threatens the stability of the ecosystem.
- Species in an ecosystem “earn” their place through mutually advantageous exchanges of resources with other species in the ecosystem.
- Most exchanges involve more than one resource.
- Non-monetary resources are most commonly exchanged (i.e., fulfillment, know-how, and socially constructed resources).
- Many individuals move between species, making them more likely to survive and making the ecosystem itself more resilient.

### Observations and Discussion

The ecosystem framework sparked a good deal of discussion and dialogue amongst a cross-section of Dancers' Group's key stakeholders, including dancers, choreographers, teachers, administrators, and funders. A synthesis of these conversations offers the following key observations about the SFBA dance ecosystem:

**Observation #1:** The SFBA dance ecosystem has grown by leaps and bounds since the 1970s and 80s in terms of the numbers of choreographers, companies and dancers and the volume and quality of work being made. Numerous stakeholders observed that the availability of resources has not kept up with the growth in artistic activity. Some described the ecosystem as “starved” for resources – like a rainforest existing in desert conditions. Yet, the dance community here persists and even

**Discussion:** While monetary and physical resources (space) are in short supply for some individuals and species, non-monetary resources are in abundant supply, such as fulfillment, meaning, and know-how. Sweat equity is often substituted when money is unavailable, and a great deal of bartering occurs. This makes the ecosystem resilient, but at a high cost to certain individuals and species. Demand for additional financial resources is vast and beyond the capacity of existing exchanges between funders/donors and artists. This raises the question of what might be done to expand the pool of funders/donors or create new exchanges that catalyze new philanthropy.

**Observation #2:** Historically, the SFBA dance ecosystem has provided numerous subcultures and disenfranchised groups with an important creative outlet. With the professionalization of the dance community, monetary resources have consolidated in a few organizations, some argue, to the detriment of the ecosystem's diversity. Others say that diversity of expression is alive and well.

**Discussion:** Diversity of species (and constant mutation) is a hallmark of a healthy ecosystem. Everyone in the ecosystem has a role to play in fostering a culture of radical inclusion. Dancers' Group and its peers must always ask what more can be done to celebrate and support the artistic contributions of a wide array of subcultures and communities, and invite new voices to the table while supporting existing members of the community who bring continuity and depth.

**Observation #3:** Stakeholders described a significant change in the modality of artistic production – more artists are satisfied producing artistic work without a nonprofit infrastructure, and prefer to decide on a project-to-project basis how, with whom, and where to produce.

**Discussion:** One choreographer commented, "It seems as though everyone is moving to project-based work instead of a company." With the breaking down of the "company" model of producing has come increased flexibility, individualism, and a more fluid exchange of artistic collaborations. Producing outside of the nonprofit legal structure is an artistic choice for some, not just a financial imperative. This highly adaptive aspect of the ecosystem contributes to resilience and productivity, and suggests that demand for fiscal sponsorship and related services is likely to increase.

**Observation #4:** Some stakeholders voiced concern over the lack of a sufficiently large pool of mid-sized dance companies. Individuals and small organizations are plentiful, they say, and large, well-established organizations command the lion's share of resources. This suggests a break in the continuity of artistic pathways through the ecosystem, a sort of structural fault.

**Discussion:** This may be a naturally occurring phenomenon in the ecosystem, as when the tallest trees in a forest absorb most of the sunlight, limiting the development of shorter species that grow underneath. This could also be a result of the growing trend of more artists working outside the nonprofit legal structure (per Observations #3). Regardless, the ecosystem benefits from a diversity of artistic expression and should allow for the emergence and growth of new aesthetics. Leaders in the ecosystem should investigate the extent of structural impediments to mid-sized growth and discuss what can be done to mitigate them. As one stakeholder noted, "There are artists that have the creative maturity and should be able to live here and run a 501(c)3 company."

**Observation #5:** Numerous stakeholders are extremely anxious about the lack of affordable housing for artists and the deleterious effects on the ecosystem of the high cost of living in general. Whereas young artists in the 1970s could work 10 to 15 hours a week to pay the rent and devote the rest of their time to artistic ends, they now have to work full-time just to survive. Some cite an exodus of artists from San Francisco to Oakland, where living costs are lower.

**Discussion:** The dance ecosystem is vulnerable to changing economic conditions (i.e., the effects of another ecosystem). Individuals and species can be expected to relocate where conditions are more favorable for their artistic work – for example, several stakeholders commented on the shift in energy from San Francisco to the East Bay. However, as long as artists stay in the SFBA, the ecosystem is not weakened by this migration, although there may be second order effects on other species, as when a studio closes and moves to another neighborhood. Long-term harm to the ecosystem can occur when species leave the ecosystem entirely. This is a complicated and vexing problem, driven by forces beyond anyone's control. It is also a test of the dance ecosystem's "self-efficacy" – its capacity to self-organize, diagnose the problem, and formulate solutions.

**Observation #6:** Stakeholders voiced a concern that access to resources is not purely Darwinian, as in a biological system, but influenced by historical biases such as classism and racism.

**Discussion:** The ecosystem metaphor has limitations, specifically in the context of species that don't have equal access to resources. One stakeholder commented, "While competition for resources can be a healthy catalyst for growth, not all species are in a position to compete." Whether this liability arises from natural conditions or entrenched biases, it raises the question of whether certain species should be prioritized for resources and/or supported in order to level the playing field. The environmental movement, for example, has a well-developed system for protecting endangered species. When an individual is threatened, it does not constitute a systemic threat to the ecosystem. But when a species is threatened, there is cause for intervention. Whose job is it to protect endangered species in the dance ecosystem?

**Observation #7:** Among the resources that flow through the dance ecosystem, space plays a pivotal role.

**Discussion:** Much as a musician cannot play without an instrument, or a painter cannot paint without a paintbrush, "space is the biggest issue for dancers." In our interviews with stakeholders, we heard much about the key role that space plays in allowing artists and artistic work to flourish. When appropriate space is not available, the ecosystem adjusts and work is diverted to

suboptimal spaces, but at a cost to the ecosystem. Several voiced the opinion that San Francisco lacks a sufficient number of mid-sized dance venues. Others cited lack of affordable and accessible rehearsal and performance spaces in general. While most facility development projects come about to meet the needs of an individual organization, “solving” the long-term space needs of the dance community is very much an ecosystem-level issue.

**Observation #8:** As the “stock” of artists and companies matures, some artistic activity will inevitably sunset. Generational shifts are inevitable, but the ecosystem has little existing capacity to support end-of-lifecycle transitions.

**Discussion:** Birth, growth and competition for resources, and dying and regeneration are all necessary for a healthy ecosystem. “The reality is that everything, every place, every institution or act is temporary, and at any given moment is in the process of growing or of dying.”<sup>2</sup> Historically, funders and service organizations have focused on incubating new infrastructure and sustaining existing assets. While it may be unpleasant to talk about, the ecosystem will inevitably reveal end-of-lifecycle events with increased frequency. Extraordinary leadership will be required to support artists and organizations through their endings while preserving artistic assets and ensuring their legacies.

As with all ecosystems, the SFBA dance ecosystem is in a constant state of flux, adapting to changing conditions both within and outside of the ecosystem. Unlike a rainforest, the dance ecosystem has a cohort of stewards – individuals and species who choose to nurture, support and sustain the ecosystem, including Dancers’ Group. While their resources may pale in comparison with the demands of the ecosystem, they can still play a catalytic role in identifying need and strengthening and democratizing the natural exchanges between species.

While much of this paper focuses on Dancers’ Group, we hope that it provokes others to consider their role in the dance ecosystem both individually and collectively.

The dance ecology belongs to all who inhabit it.

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<sup>2</sup> Darrell Grant. “The Jazz Scene As an Ecology.” (unpublished manuscript)

## Establishing an Ecosystem Framework

*Ecosystem: A system formed by an ecological community and its environment that function as a unit*

The San Francisco Bay Area dance community is much like a rainforest – expansive, dynamic, and replete with diversity. And within the “dance ecosystem,” species are linked together through a network of interactions and exchanges. The analogy isn’t a stretch. In fact, researchers in the cultural sector continue to explore the idea that culture is a highly complex and interdependent ecosystem.<sup>3</sup> This metaphorical leap offers a helpful framework for analyzing various subsystems, programs, and processes found in the arts sector using the principles and tools of systems dynamics. Most importantly, the ecosystem framework promotes a holistic viewpoint – helping us see the forest for the trees, so to speak – and demonstrates that everyone and everything within an ecosystem is connected.

As the “primary dance service organization of the San Francisco Bay Area”<sup>4</sup> Dancers’ Group aims to support the greater dance ecosystem through a portfolio of approximately 20 programs and services. In addition to its various capacity building programs, advocacy efforts and information exchanges, it presents and produces artistic events in an effort to develop audiences.

Dancers’ Group plays a central role in supporting the dance ecosystem, and so do many artists, dance companies, schools, presenters, funders, and others.

In considering an overall approach to strategic planning for Dancers’ Group, we asked what sort of conceptual framework would allow for critical assessment of an artist-driven, artist support organization. Rather than taking stock of individual programs, we reached for the ecosystem metaphor as a means of building a stronger understanding of the dance community, and specifically how Dancers’ Group’s various programs influence the larger system.

This paper attempts to “map” those parts of the dance ecosystem in which Dancers’ Group plays a supporting role. The goal is to explain how Dancers’ Group does and does not currently support the dance ecosystem through its various programs, and where Dancers’ Group and its partners might find additional leverage in strengthening and supporting the dance ecosystem. We also hope that the vocabulary

*“The essence of ecological thinking is to see the pattern of life as a connected whole. There is just one overall ecosystem of our lives, and within it there are many economies that support different ways of sharing and exchanging things, knowledge, and experience.”*  
- Bill Sharpe

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<sup>3</sup> Sharpe, Bill. 2010. *Economies of Life: Patterns of health and wealth*. International Futures Forum. Published by Triarchy Press Ltd. See [www.triarchypress.co.uk/economies\\_of\\_life](http://www.triarchypress.co.uk/economies_of_life).

<sup>4</sup> Dancers’ Group mission statement. See [dancersgroup.org/about/mission/](http://dancersgroup.org/about/mission/)

and concepts developed through this analysis will be helpful to Dancers' Group and its current and future partners in talking about how to collaborate.

It is important to note that the intent of this research is not to develop a comprehensive or definitive theoretical model. Ecosystems can be defined in many ways, based on factors such as geography, climate, shared resources, etc. We set out initially to explore “the SFBA dance ecosystem” and quickly realized its enormous diversity and complexity in terms of species, resources, external influences, and the many subsystems in which resources are exchanged. For example, consider that the “SFBA dance ecosystem” would encompass:

- Multiple sub-systems for making artistic work (e.g., a sub-system around the presentation of folk and traditional dance)
- A sub-system around teaching and training;
- A sub-system for describing the conditions artists face in trying to exist in the ecosystem;
- A sub-system around audience development;
- A sub-system around criticism and the media; and
- A sub-system around financial support and philanthropy.

To reduce complexity, one could narrow the geographical frame (e.g., Oakland). Or, one might carve up the ecosystem aesthetically and look only at contemporary dance or ballet. We acknowledge that our frame of analysis (i.e., the SFBA dance ecosystem) is subjective, and that other definitions would be equally valid.

Ultimately, this analysis is exploratory in nature, and very much in service of Dancers' Group's strategic planning process. To narrow the scope of analysis, we focused on the sub-systems most directly involving Dancers' Group's programs and services.

This paper was informed by a variety of sources, including Dancers' Group staff's extensive knowledge and understanding of the SFBA dance ecosystem; a community forum with a group of 17 key Dancers' Group stakeholders; and in-depth interviews with a cross-section of 34 individuals selected by Dancers' Group to represent the diversity of the ecosystem.

### Species in the Dance Ecosystem

Any given ecosystem includes a diverse array of species. A rain forest, for example, is home to numerous plants and animals. And while the science of biology ultimately defines a species around DNA and propagation – our ecological analysis is more concerned with the resources that a species exchanges with other species. In the SFBA dance ecosystem, a species is defined as a grouping of organizations or people that occupy the same “niche” and engage in similar patterns of exchange. Essentially, the exchange is an “individual signature” of a species.

As with any ecosystem, there are inherent complexities. For example, in the dance ecosystem an individual may be a member of one or more species in any given instance or exchange (e.g., a dancer could also be a choreographer and a teacher.) In

the individual in-depth interviews, all 34 of the interviewees identified themselves as three or more different species, and many identified themselves as belonging to six or more species. This multifaceted nature is an important characteristic of the SFBA dance ecosystem, lending species vitality and improving their survival and sustainability.

In conversations with Dancers' Group's board and staff, the following species were identified: (ordered alphabetically)

- Artists from other disciplines (e.g. filmmakers, visual artists, actors, writers) who might collaborate with dance artists
- Audiences – defined broadly to encompass those who currently attend and those who might attend in the future
- Choreographers (e.g., artistic directors, freelance choreographers)
- Critics and the media
- Dancers – those who are employed, paid or seeking employment through their art
- Dancers – not seeking employment (e.g., social dancers, student dancers)
- Funders and philanthropists
  - Foundations (some provide project support, some provide general operating support – the role played in the ecology is quite different between the two)
  - Individual donors
  - Corporate supporters
  - Government funders
- Presenters and their staff representatives
- Producers (i.e. dance companies) and their staff representatives
- Schools and universities (i.e., institutions conduits for research and teaching)
- Service and support organizations/agencies
- Teachers (i.e., private studios, colleges)

#### Support and Service Organizations as a Species

Although service and support organizations are a type of species, they play a unique role in that they have an effect on the ecosystem that is disproportionate to their individual activity. In biology, these types of individuals are referred to as “keystone species.” For example, the jaguar in a rainforest, which helps to prevent certain herbivores from decimating a local plant species. And much like a keystone at the apex of a masonry vault or arch, the removal of such an individual would be catastrophic to the structure and support of the whole. Further exploring the notion of keystone species might be a worthwhile topic for future research.

The following organizations and groups of organizations provide support and services to the SFBA dance ecosystem, along with Dancers' Group. We regret any omissions, and encourage others to take up the cause of mapping out the wide array of support and service entities.

1. **Alliance for California Traditional Arts (ACTA)** is a service provider, advocate and funder for folk & traditional artists in the SFBA and throughout California. ACTA partners with five other dance service organizations, including Dancers' Group, to maintain the California Dance Network.
2. **CounterPULSE** provides resources to emerging artists through a variety of programs, including fiscal sponsorship opportunities, artist residencies, classes and workshops, subsidized rehearsal and rental space. CounterPULSE offers the Dance Discourse Project, a series of artist-driven discussions, co-produced with Dancers' Group.
3. **Intersection for the Arts** is a long-standing community development organization that supports artistic investigation through artists' residencies, commissions, fellowships, fiscal sponsorships, performances and workshops.
4. **Theatre Bay Area** is a regional theatre service organization that provides extensive membership services to theatres and actors, as well as dance companies and dance artists. TBA also administers grants – in partnership with Dancers' Group – to theatre and dance artists.
5. **World Arts West** serves the traditional and folk-dance communities by presenting the SF Ethnic Dance Festival, as well as workshops, symposiums and master classes. In partnership with Dancers' Group, World Arts West co-presents the Rotunda Dance Series.
6. Some **single choreographer organizations and dance companies** support the dance ecosystem beyond their producing and presenting work. These organizations may provide subsidized rehearsal and performance space to other artists/companies, or may offer mentorships or professional development programs to emerging choreographers and artists. Examples include Joe Goode Performance Group, LINES Ballet, Margaret Jenkins Dance Company, ODC/Dance and ZACCHO Dance Theatre.
7. **Dance community centers** are spaces that not only offer dance classes and performance spaces, but also serve as a hub for the dance community. These spaces go beyond transactional learning – helping to nurture and mentor dancers and choreographers while supporting an environment for creative expression and exploration. Examples include Dance Mission Theater, Shawl-Anderson Dance Center and The Garage.

Together, these organizations play a key role in supporting the dance ecosystem. Further dialogue between and amongst these organizations may help to identify opportunities and gaps in the provision of support, and could assist individual organizations in finding leverage in each other's programs.

### Resources and Assets

Equally important to identifying the species in an ecosystem is the matter of what resources they exchange in fulfilling their missions. Here we depart from the typical language of “inflows,” “outflows” and “stocks” associated with systems dynamics, in favor of a taxonomy of “resources” – the things that are manipulated, depleted and exchanged across species in the dance ecosystem. Our analysis identified five different kinds of resources:

- **Know-how** refers to the information, skill and effectiveness that is transferred within the ecosystem (e.g., dance teachers transfer know-how to their students, and choreographers transfer know-how to each other when they collaborate). Creativity is regarded as a form of know-how that can be conveyed from one individual to another.
- **Fulfillment** is both the experience of coherence and the experience of meaning. Coherence occurs when an individual feels satisfied by being able to achieve a desired goal, role and/or outcome. For example, a philanthropist experiences coherence when she donates to a project. Meaning occurs when an individual is impacted intrinsically by artistic work. For example, when an audience member is moved by a dance performance, the meaning conveyed through the art leads to a sense of fulfillment.
- **Space** is a resource that can be purchased or exchanged for non-monetary resources, as when a studio provides free space to a choreographer in exchange for fulfillment.
- **Money** refers to cash or currency paid for rent, artist fees, tickets, costumes, tuition, advertising, or any other resource that can be purchased.
- **Socially Constructed Resources** refer to things of social value – legitimacy, respect, esteem, reputation, etc. – that depend on a general recognition by another species. For example, a foundation confers legitimacy – as well as money – on a choreographer by funding her project.

**Assets** are another type of resource within the ecosystem. These resources are not readily exchangeable, but lay dormant in the ecosystem until “animated” by individuals who generate one of the aforementioned resources. For example, choreographic works are assets that require animation. Artists, both professional and non-professional, might also be considered assets that require animation.

### What is “Leverage?”

In the study and practice of systems analysis, leverage points are “points of power”<sup>5</sup> – places where a small amount of resource can produce a disproportionately large benefit or change to the system – more bang for the buck, so to speak. Points of leverage are sought after due to the spillover benefits to a wider spectrum of players (both intended and unintended), as well as the potential to strengthen adjacent sub-systems. Examples of leverage in the dance ecosystem include:

- Matching funds that stimulate additional philanthropy
- Crowd Funding platforms that attract new donors into the dance ecosystem
- Subsidized space that allows artists to fulfill their creative potential
- Advice or inspiration that advances the career path of an artist
- Teacher training that has spillover benefits to students for years to come
- A well-placed capital investment that creates a new stream of revenue and thereby transforms a non-profit's business model
- A partnership that extends the reach of an artist's or company's work
- Grants to late-career artists to ensure that their knowledge and experience continues to enrich the ecosystem
- Investments in libraries and archives that make knowledge accessible to future generations

In reality, leverage is often difficult to find and nearly impossible to quantify. But most people have an intuitive sense of leverage and a strong instinct to find it – to make the most of their precious resources. The concept of leverage is especially relevant to Dancers' Group in light of its aspirations to support the dance community *at scale* in the context of its modest human and financial resources.

### Making Work: A Preliminary Diagram

Having identified species and the resources they exchange, the next challenge was honing our skills at modeling a subsystem, before diving headlong into an analysis of Dancers' Group's programs. For this purpose, it seemed an appropriate exercise to start by diagramming the subsystem encompassing how some choreographers make artistic work. Since its inception as an artist-run organization, “making work” has always been central to Dancers' Group, as reflected in its core values and its programs. Its fiscal sponsorship program, for example, exists to facilitate the making of artistic work. Indeed, one might argue that the capacity to “make work” is *the*

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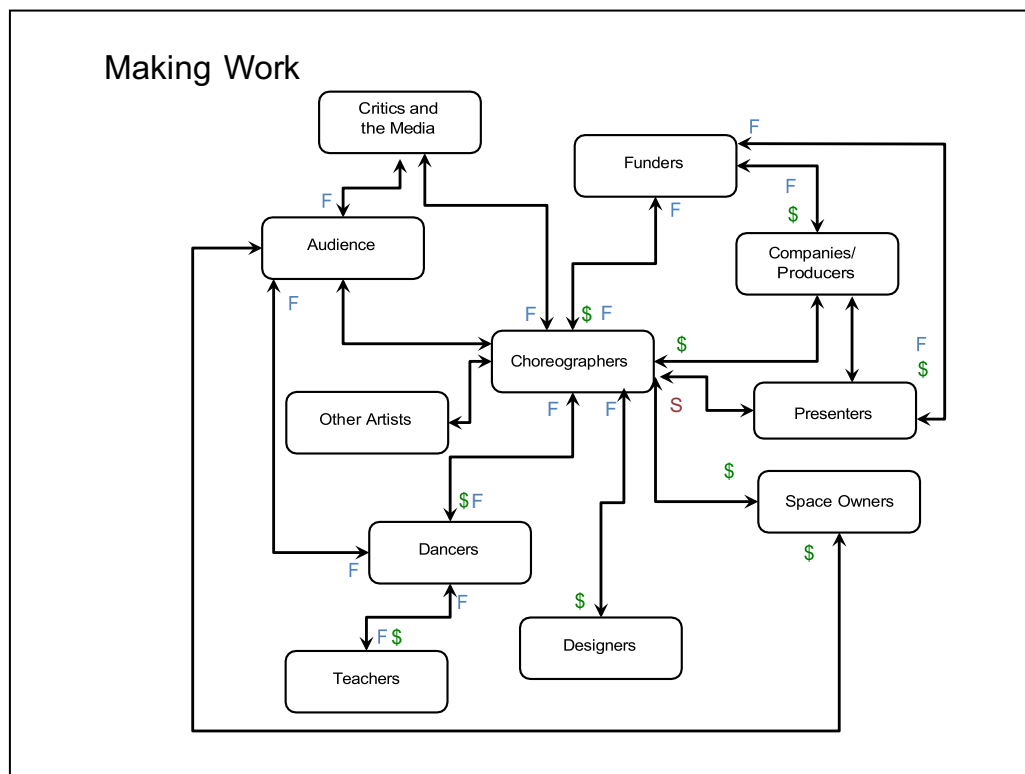
<sup>5</sup> Meadows, Donella. “Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System.” The Sustainability Institute. 1999.

essential process within the larger dance ecosystem, without which it would be a hollow shell.

Choreographers and their collaborators are at the center of the “making work” subsystem, and a good deal of the early conversation with Dancers’ Group revolved around “choreographers” as a species. They are some of the most resourceful individuals in the ecosystem and can “survive” with minimal resources. It seemed a natural starting point to place choreographers at the center of the subsystem, and work out from there.<sup>6</sup>

Using the vocabulary and definitions outlined earlier, the “making work” subsystem was diagrammed and vetted with Dancers’ Group board and staff, and revised numerous times (Figure 1).<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 1. The “Making Work” Subsystem**



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<sup>6</sup> Systems are about the many components that work together to achieve some result. Within that basic definition is the assumption that each component plays an equally important role. However, the “Making Work” diagram breaks that rule in allocating the choreographer as central; a catalyst for everything else.

<sup>7</sup> Note that systems analysis is primarily concerned with the process of making work, not the outcomes.

Shorthand is used to illustrate the resources exchanged between species with “\$” indicating an exchange of money, “F” signifying an exchange of fulfillment, and “S” an exchange of space.

The Making Work diagram suggests that choreographers may interact with space owners, presenters, companies/producers, funders, critics, audiences, dancers, designers, and other artists.

It is impractical here to enumerate each of the many exchanges in this diagram. In meetings with Dancers' Group, this preliminary diagram fulfilled its purpose by catalyzing critical reflection on how choreographers make artistic work, the resources they exchange along the way, where they encounter barriers, and how their work is supported by Dancers' Group and others. This diagram also served as a discussion-starter for the community forum with the group of 17 key Dancers' Group stakeholders.

Of course, this diagram represents only one way of looking at the way artistic work gets made, and perhaps reflects a bias in western-based forms. We acknowledge that there are other, equally valid systems for making work that remain to be diagrammed.

### Characteristics of Ecosystems

To summarize, we believe that the ecosystem metaphor is useful in thinking about the arts and its myriad subsystems. Key observations about the characteristics of ecosystems have direct applicability to the SFBA dance ecosystem:

- Healthy ecosystems are characterized by diversity, resilience and equilibrium.
- The growth of a species or individual changes the ecosystem. Dramatic growth of a species or individual threatens the stability of the ecosystem.
- When ecosystems expand, they do so at the expense of another ecosystem.
- Species in an ecosystem “earn” their place through mutually advantageous exchanges of resources with other species in the ecosystem.
- Most exchanges involve more than one resource.
- The most common resource being exchanged in the dance ecosystem is fulfillment, in particular the kind of fulfillment that comes from having greater coherence between the identity one asserts for oneself and one's actions.
- Anecdotally, we see a lot of bartering in the dance ecosystem, which is both a source of resilience and a sign of scarcity.
- Many individuals move between species, making them more likely to survive and making the ecosystem itself more resilient.
- Dancers' Group and its peer support and services organizations are members of a keystone species that creates leverage throughout the ecosystem.

- Funders are another species that aims to support the ecosystem, although they tend to support individuals within a species, not the species as a whole or the exchanges between individuals.
- The focus of many of Dancers' Group's programs is facilitating the exchange of resources.

The ecosystem metaphor also has limitations in terms of its applicability to the dance community. Several important deviations from biological systems are noted here:

- The dance ecosystem is not entirely Darwinian in several respects. In some biological ecosystems, individuals and species routinely destroy (i.e., eat) each other in order to grow. Thankfully, this is not yet the case in the dance ecosystem.
- In the dance ecosystem, funders and philanthropists (esp. large gifts from wealthy individuals) often sustain artists and companies that cannot survive by exchanging their own resources. One can argue both sides to this type of exchange (i.e., this distorts the ecosystem, or this supports the ecosystem.)
- Biases such as racism and classism have a distorting effect on the ecosystem, in that members of certain species historically have not had equal access to resources.
- Whereas biological ecosystems have evolved over millions of years, the SFBA dance ecosystem is relatively new and has not yet experienced the natural cycles of growth, decline and death associated with all ecosystems.

## Looking at Dancers' Group's Programs Through the Ecosystem Lens

As noted earlier, the primary purpose of exploring the ecosystem metaphor is to allow for a nuanced discussion of the role that Dancers' Group plays in the SFBA dance ecosystem, and to allow for critical reflection on Dancers' Group's programs in terms of how they relate to the ecosystem. This section explores specific Dancers' Group programs (or groupings of similar programs) as "sub-systems" of the dance ecosystem, asking:

- What species are served?
- What resources are exchanged in this subsystem?
- What exchanges does Dancers' Group facilitate, and how?
- What are the spillover benefits to other subsystems?
- Where are the leverage points in this subsystem?
- How might Dancers' Group strengthen its support of these exchanges?

At present, Dancers' Group supports approximately 20 different programs of varying sizes and purposes. In its previous strategic plan of 2010, these programs were grouped into three overlapping categories (Figure 2, below):

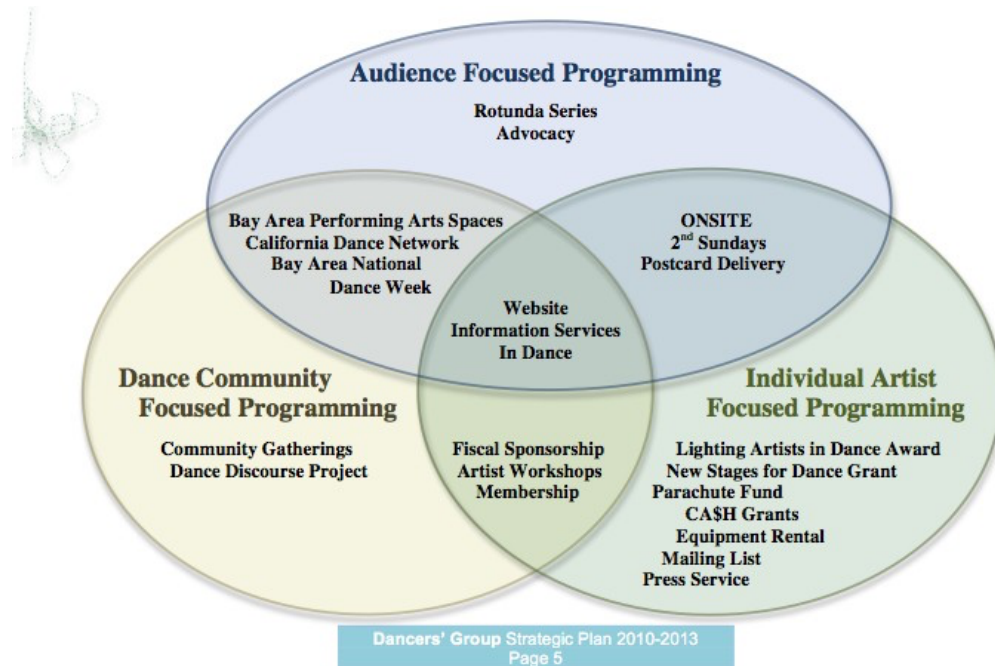
1. Audience-focused programming (i.e., presentations and productions of artistic work)
2. Dance community focused programming (e.g., convenings, advocacy events, communications, and information exchanges)
3. Individual artist focused programming (e.g., grants and awards, fiscal sponsorship services, professional development)

It was not necessary or feasible to analyze each and every one of Dancers' Group's programs through the ecosystem lens, although many are covered over the following pages, either specifically or in groups, as follows:

- Fiscal Sponsorship
- Bay Area Dance Week
- Audience Development (i.e., programs through which Dancers' Group exercises a curatorial role in bringing artistic work to the public)
- Marketing Support (i.e., programs that assist artists in promoting their programs and finding an audience)
- Information Exchanges and Convenings (i.e., programs that facilitate communications within the dance community, promote the exchange of ideas, and foster a sense of belonging)

These programs all involve the expenditure of resources to create value for the dance community, and are therefore candidates for critical reflection.

**Figure 2 Dancers' Group Program Framework from 2010 Strategic Plan**



Dancers' Group's grants and awards programs, such as the Parachute Fund, Lighting Artists in Dance Award, and CA\$H Grants, inject new resources into the ecosystem at minimal cost, and are not discussed in this paper. These programs serve a strategic purpose in that they: 1) illustrate how the philanthropic community can support dance at the 'ecosystem level' (i.e., not funding individuals or companies, but species and exchanges); and 2) position Dancers' Group in the eyes of artists as a conduit for new resources into the dance ecosystem, in juxtaposition to the fiscal sponsorship program, which facilitates investment in individual artistic projects. In omitting them from this paper, we in no way mean to suggest that these grant and award programs are not important to Dancers' Group or valued by the community.

The discussions that follow are intended to raise questions and provoke discussion and debate amongst Dancers' Group's staff, board and stakeholders as to the optimal mix of programs.

## **Fiscal Sponsorship**

As one of Dancers' Group's largest and most active programs, fiscal sponsorship provides administrative support and guidance to choreographers and dance organizations. This service supports the production of a wide range of performance projects and community initiatives; ensures funding agencies and contributors that donations and grants received on behalf of the artists/projects are well-managed and funds are disbursed according to the grant proposal and their guidelines, as applicable.

In 2013, 122 artists received fiscal sponsorship to reach at least 53,808 audience members, offer classes/workshops for 95,631 adults and children, and engage 2,966 participating artists. Approximately 1,660 individual donors and institutional funders supported these projects with tax-deductible gifts, and many projects also processed their earned revenue (i.e. ticket income) through DG. In 2013, fiscally sponsored projects brought in a total of \$863,667 in contributed and earned revenue. In exchange for providing sponsees and their supporters with a variety of support services, Dancers' Group retains 10% on most charitable contributions (grants or donations over \$20,000 incur a 5% fee) and 2.5% on earned revenue. These fees do not cover Dancers' Group's costs to operate the fiscal sponsorship program. Therefore, general operating support from institutional funders helps to sustain the fiscal sponsorship program.

This program serves artists and organizations working across all forms of dance throughout the SFBA, from Bharatanatyam ensembles (e.g., Nava Dance Theatre – new to the fiscal sponsorship program in 2013), to Sins Invalid – a veteran of our sponsorship program, whose work celebrates artists with disabilities (e.g., artists of color and queer and gender-variant). Over the years many accomplished artists have gone on to create their own nonprofit entities, having developed enough resources and infrastructure to incorporate as a 501(c)(3). Furthermore, the close working relationships between Dancers' Group and the sponsored artists/projects have resulted in additional collaborations and engagements that might not have otherwise been possible. Figure 3, below, illustrates the fiscal sponsorship subsystem from a systems dynamics perspective.

#### Species Involved in the Fiscal Sponsorship Subsystem

DG's fiscal sponsorship program facilitates an exchange between artists (i.e., non-501(c)(3) creators) and philanthropic supporters (primarily individual donors, but also some corporate supporters and institutional funders). Dancers' Group plays an intermediary role in this exchange, adding value in both directions. Institutional funders also play an indirect role in supporting this exchange by providing general operating support to Dancers' Group that helps to underwrite the administrative and accounting activities needed to run the program.

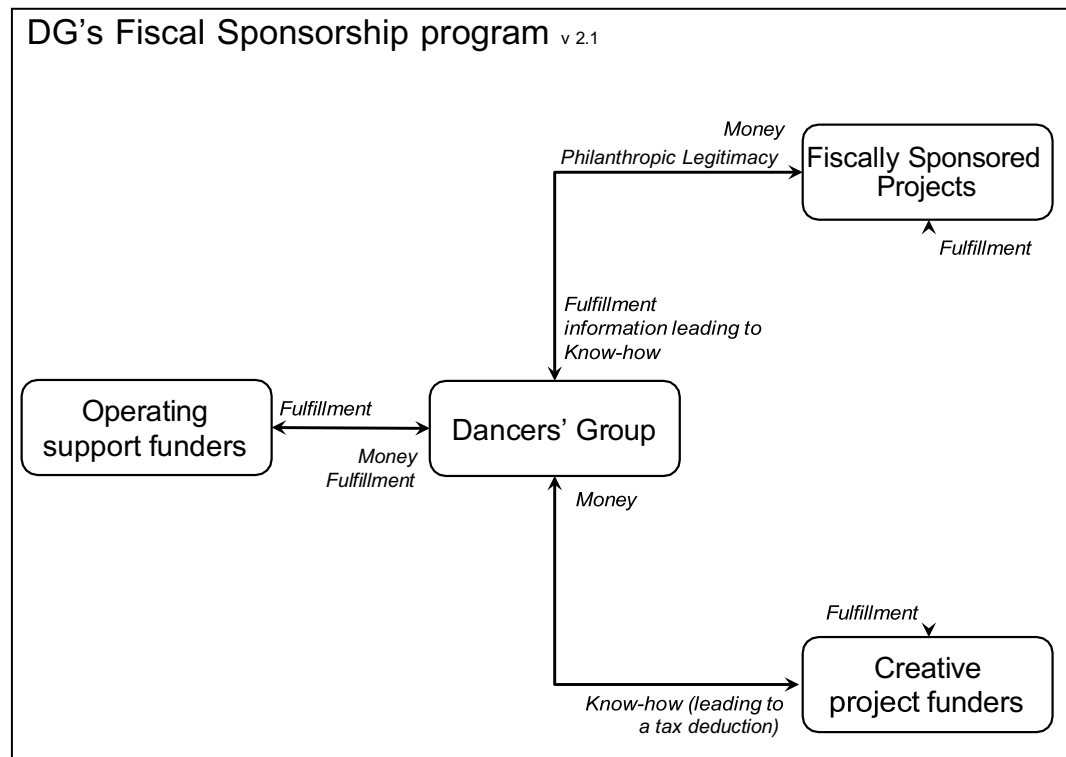
#### Resources and Exchanges

Money is exchanged between project donors and Dancers' Group, although, according to staff, some donors are not aware of the role that Dancers' Group plays in the exchange, despite the fact that they receive an acknowledgement letter confirming the tax deductibility of their gift from Dancers' Group. In turn, Dancers' Group oversees and administers funds raised to support the artists work and/or community initiatives that must align with Dancers' Group's mission of “promoting the visibility and viability of dance.”

Other resources are also exchanged:

- Artists receive as-needed coaching from DG staff on various aspects of their artistic projects (e.g., referrals, help with grant applications, advice, access to other programs and services), thereby building long-term capacity to make work;
- Participation in the program confers on artists a certain level of legitimacy in the eyes of potential funders, a narrow but important socially-constructed resource;
- Donors receive tax-deductibility and assurance that the projects they are supporting are expending those funds in alignment with the donor's stipulations;
- Donors gain fulfillment in supporting (and hopefully engaging with) artistic work;
- Dancers' Group, by virtue of being at this nexus, learns about the kinds of artistic projects and collaborations artists are generating, and gains a deep understanding of the challenges they encounter in making work, thereby enhancing DG's diagnostic capacity and "know-how";
- Dancers' Group gains fulfillment in being able to accomplish its mission;
- Dancers' Group's institutional funders gain fulfillment in knowing that their operating support contributes to the viability of this subsystem.

**Figure 3. Dancers' Group Fiscal Sponsorship Subsystem**



### Leverage and Spillover Benefits

It should be noted that DG is not the only organization offering fiscal sponsorship services to SFBA dancers and their supporters, although it is the largest fiscal sponsorship program for dance operating in the region.

Fundamentally, this program facilitates the making of artistic work, which is the engine of the ecosystem. It therefore generates extensive spillover benefits to other areas of the ecosystem: 1) audiences get to see more work; 2) dancers get employment and/or fulfillment; and 3) collaborating artists (e.g., designers, musicians) gain opportunities to create work. The artistic canon grows.

By focusing on assisting “unincorporated artists” in making work, this program specifically addresses artists who choose not to incorporate for one reason or another, whether they are early-, mid- or late-career artists, as well as artists who may aspire to incorporate some day, but who are not yet ready to do so. In our interviews, we spoke with a number of accomplished artists who prefer to keep their options open when it comes to making work, sometimes producing work through nonprofits, and other times creating work as individuals through fiscal sponsors. This flexibility is highly valued.

The fiscal sponsorship program illustrates how DG supports an exchange without artificially growing the ecosystem. Artists are responsible for raising their own funds, so there is a natural equilibrium between the number of creative projects and the number of donors. DG provides mentoring to the artists and dependable oversight to the donors, but does not directly fund the projects, and is therefore agnostic as to which projects gain the most funding.

Year over year, the fiscal sponsorship program spins out “alumni” who represent an important constituent base for DG. The cumulative number of generative artists who’ve benefited from this program represents a large portion of the ecosystem and an important constituency for DG.

- What might be done to further activate and engage alumni of this program, such that skills and experience they gain continue to enrich the ecosystem?

### Implications for Strategy

We view the potential of the fiscal sponsorship program as both scalable (but within definitional limits) and highly integrative in terms of a variety of benefits to Dancers’ Group as well as funders and the sponsored artists. It fires on a number of DG’s core competencies, including artist support, capacity building, making work, audience development, and building the philanthropic base. It allows artistic work to come to fruition that might otherwise not get produced. Sponsees are able to draw on other DG programs. Financially, it represents a reliable, repeatable source of earned revenue for DG.

Interviews with leaders in the dance community suggest a high level of frustration that philanthropy (of all kinds) has not kept up with expansion of producing activity. Everyone seems to agree that the dance ecosystem has significantly expanded, diversified and improved over the past 20 to 30 years in terms of the amount and quality of creative work. But there is also a sense that the concurrent expansion of resources needed to support that work has not kept pace, especially in the area of individual donors and institutional funders. No single organization or even species can address this problem alone, although it does raise questions for DG in terms of how it might better facilitate the exchange between donors and artistic projects, either by enhancing artists' capacities to raise funds, by expanding the pool of interested donors, or by making the exchange more efficient through technology or other means. The ecosystem analysis raises a number of provocative questions about the fiscal sponsorship program:

- Is the exchange between donors and artists strong enough? How might it be strengthened?
- How might DG grow the pool of donors? Is this even DG's role?
- How might DG enfranchise project donors in the larger ecosystem of dance? What would need to change for this to occur?
- Is tax-deductibility really the most valuable resource for donors, or are there other resources they value as much, or more?
- What technologies might further open up the exchange between artists and donors, and bring a new focus to this exchange?
- What other giving opportunities or capital initiatives might DG construct to motivate both artists and donors?

Finally, we wish to point out that a fiscal sponsorship program serves not only to incubate new infrastructure, but also to prevent unnecessary infrastructure from starting in the first place. It also allows for the dismantling of unsustainable infrastructure without losing the capacity to make artistic work. As the SFBA dance ecosystem continues to develop, nonprofits will increasingly come and go, subject to the natural ebbs and flows of resources (and retirements). Death and regeneration are a natural part of a healthy ecosystem. The recent dismantling of the New York-based Cunningham Dance Foundation offers an excellent example of a highly successful end-of-lifecycle transition.

- What role might DG play in facilitating end-of-lifecycle transitions and the preservation and regeneration of artistic assets? What partners would share an interest in building such a capacity?

## Bay Area Dance Week

The annual Bay Area Dance Week (BADW) festival offers a fine example of a highly collaborative and scalable programmatic intervention in the SFBA dance ecosystem, involving many (if not all) species. Each year in April, Dancers' Group organizes this 10-day festival of free public dance events for the purpose of raising public awareness, appreciation and involvement in dance. At its core, BADW is a public advocacy and marketing program produced by, and for, the dance community, although it serves a number of other purposes from an ecosystem perspective. Dancers' Group describes the program as follows:

As a celebration of our local dance community's extraordinary diversity, BADW provides an opportunity for dance-lovers of all ages and experience-levels to take a grand tour of the many movement styles..." Free events include classes, performances, open

rehearsals, lecture demonstrations, and the popular kick-off event (*One Dance*) in Union Square Park, in which thousands of community dancers join forces to learn and perform original choreography. In 2013, BADW included nearly 500 free events and attracted over 22,000 participants throughout the SFBA.



Photo by Kegan Marling

Dancers' Group produces a printed program for the festival, and supports the BADW budget with registration fees and ad sales. Other financial support for this program comes from an array of corporate, foundation and government sources. In general, this program commands a great deal of staff bandwidth.

While the short-term outcomes of this program are straightforward (i.e., the intrinsic enjoyment experienced by participants in the kick-off event, attendance at free events), the longer-term outcomes associated with this festival (e.g., increased appreciation for dance, and, ultimately, increased attendance and participation) are notoriously difficult to attribute to a festival like this. Nevertheless, free events of a large scale (such as SF Opera's free simulcast event in AT&T Park) are often considered an essential part of a healthy ecosystem, in that they can awaken large numbers of children and adults to an art form and sew the seeds of future participation.

### Species Involved in the Bay Area Dance Week Subsystem

This subsystem draws its vitality from the rich exchanges occurring between the many species involved: dancers (both professional and non-professional), choreographers, teachers, studios and other spaces used for dance (i.e. parks, public plaza's), presenters, audiences, and even the media.

### Resources and Exchanges

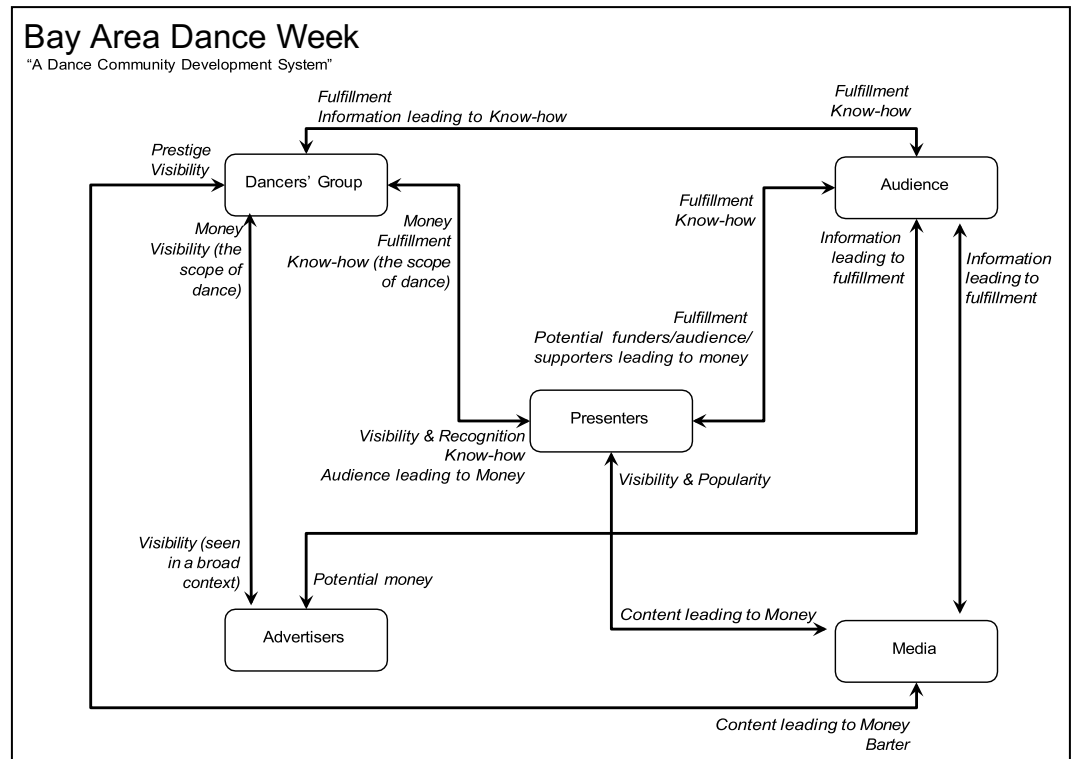
Most of the resources exchanged in this subsystem are non-monetary. Although the presenters might incur costs for space rental, performer and or teacher fees that are viewed as an investment in the potential for future audience/students/donors. Through the kick-off event, dancers achieve fulfillment from personal participation in learning and performing the choreography. The choreographers, dancers, teachers also gain exposure and legitimacy. The dominant exchange of resources in this subsystem, however, occurs between participating dance studios, presenters and companies and the audiences and participants who attend their free programs (e.g., workshops, classes, demonstrations and short performances).

Depending on the nature of the event, audiences and participants may gain specific dance know-how (e.g., learning a step or movement) or they may experience meaning arising from taking in a live dance performance. In exchange, audiences and participants offer participating dance studios, presenters and companies fulfillment (i.e., coherence with mission) as well as the potential to develop new audiences, students, or supporters, eventually leading to money – especially when participants share their contact information. In marketing terms, this would be called “prospecting” through “trial experiences.”

In their exchanges with Dancers' Group, participating dance studios, presenters and companies offer money (in the form of a nominal registration fee) but mostly provide DG with an opportunity to reach deeply into the dance community (conferring access and trust) in order to leverage the collective BADW activities of all parties into something larger. In the abstract, this event demonstrates what Maria Rosario Jackson calls “collective efficacy”— the ability of a group of individuals in an ecosystem to work together to solve a problem. In this sense, BADW illustrates the dance community's ability to come together around a common goal of increasing awareness and visibility.

Other exchanges of a more tactical nature include the exchange of money and visibility between advertisers and Dancers' Group, and the exchange of money and information between Dancers' Group and the media.

Figure 4. Dancers' Group Bay Area Dance Week Subsystem



### Leverage and Spillover Benefits

Bay Area Dance Week sends a short but strong electrical charge through the whole dance ecosystem. It aims to grab the public's attention for a short period of time with an invitation to participate in dance. Annual events like this can take on a life of their own and evolve into ritualized gatherings of symbolic importance to the community. The challenge of this program is harnessing the energy and interest released during the event.

### Implications for Strategy

We believe that BADW plays a strategic role in DG's program portfolio for several reasons, but mostly in that it illustrates the ability of DG to galvanize the dance community around a common purpose. Many service organizations struggle to mobilize their stakeholders.

- How might DG build on its capacity to mobilize the dance community, as evidenced by BADW? For what other purposes could this capacity be used? Expanding the philanthropic base for dance? Advocating for affordable housing for artists?

The primary question in our minds about BADW is how it can be further scaled in order to reach more deeply into the public consciousness, and how it can be further aligned with DG's other programs and goals such as expanding membership and growing the base of philanthropic supporters for artistic projects.

- What programmatic designs would allow BADW to achieve greater scale of public involvement?
- What programmatic designs would lead to follow-up activity and additional trial experiences?
- How might BADW also serve to expand financial resources for fiscal sponsees' dance projects?
- How might DG increase capture of participant contact information? What technologies would be required?

## **Presenting and Producing Artistic Programs**

DG has a long history of presenting artistic work, rooted in its beginnings as a collective of artists. While other service organizations in the arts sector generally avoid producing artistic work – some see it as a conflict with their members' programs – for DG, it is a natural fit. Interview data suggests that DG stakeholders accept and celebrate this work.

This program area places DG squarely in the center of the “Making Work” subsystem, a large and highly diverse engine of producing and presenting activity involving numerous species and touching nearly everyone in the ecosystem. A key definitional distinction here is DG's role in curating/selecting the art. Whereas BADW draws on many of the same skills (e.g., coordination with artists, production logistics, promotion, communications), it does not require much of DG in terms of curating, unlike the Rotunda Dance Series and ONSITE.

- Rotunda Dance Series (first Friday of each month, generally from March through December) is a series of free lunchtime dance presentations in San Francisco's historic City Hall, planned in collaboration with World Arts West, presenter of the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival. Most of the programs feature the work of one artist or company, although one or more programs may feature multiple artists, companies or traditions. The curatorial impulse is to highlight the extraordinary diversity of the Bay Area's dance aesthetics and traditions. Like BADW, the Rotunda Dance Series is also free and very much serves an advocacy purpose, especially given its setting in the seat of municipal government.
- ONSITE is an annual large-scale, site-specific dance event, produced and



Photo by Maureen Walsh

promoted by DG free-of-charge to the public in highly visible locations throughout San Francisco. This production serves to fulfill DG's unique curatorial vision that values taking dance out of traditional theaters and engaging with the public, especially random viewers or "accidental audiences." The selection of the commissioned artists varies substantially from year to year, (e.g., artists creating site-specific work for the first time to seasoned artists like Anna Halprin who have been making site-specific work for over 60 years). The impulse behind this program is to support a milieu of dance aesthetics and visions that is not as often produced by other species in the ecosystem (i.e., outdoor, site-specific work), and to explore the role that this kind of programming can play in building public interest in dance. The 2014 ONSITE program takes place during BADW, adding a curated component to the BADW program while bringing the promotional energy behind BADW to bear on the ONSITE program. Previous years' ONSITE productions have not aligned with the BADW calendar.

DG presents both ONSITE and the Rotunda Dance Series in San Francisco, due to annual funding received from San Francisco's Grants for the Arts program that only supports public activities taking place in SF. DG staff has been successful in raising additional grant funds to support these two programs from various foundations (e.g., Rainin, Wattis, Hewlett, Gerbode, Osher, San Francisco and Walter & Elise Haas Fund) that are in alignment with the goals and objectives of the respective funders. Additional project based funding has been received from the SF Arts Commission that also requires activities to take place within the city limits, therefore providing a broad and often consistent funding stream. Each ONSITE project budget is tailored to the scale of the project with budgets ranging from \$20,000 to as large as \$120K, making the risk of the project manageable based on available funds.

ONSITE's 2010 production of Erika Chong Shuch's *Love Everywhere* at SF City Hall prompted the director of Grants for the Arts, Kary Schulman, to invite Dancers' Group to create the monthly Rotunda Dance Series. This is an example of the success of ONSITE's impact and the spillover benefits organizationally and to the ecosystem.

DG tends to frame these programs in terms of audience development outcomes (i.e., expanding the pool of dance appreciators) and "to increase the visibility of local dance and dance artists." Similar language is used to describe the desired outcomes of BADW. There is also a "placemaking<sup>8</sup>" dimension to the ONSITE program that connects it to a much larger movement and value system.

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<sup>8</sup> Placemaking is an approach to improve public spaces by strengthening the "connections between people and the places they share" (Project for Public Spaces – [www.pps.org](http://www.pps.org)). By using the arts as a central catalyst to this approach, placemaking – or creative placemaking – can "animate public and private spaces, rejuvenate structures and streetscapes, improve local business viability and public safety, and bring diverse people together..." (*Creative Placemaking*, The National Endowment for the Arts.)

Both programs are designed to draw in people who are not already a part of the dance ecosystem, such as business owners, workers, residents of neighborhoods in which the programs occur, etc. Beyond this, the ONSITE program also fulfills an artistic impulse and core value of Dancers' Group – a belief that commissioning local artists to create a site-specific dance plays a key role in the ecosystem.

#### Species Involved in this Subsystem

The Rotunda Dance Series primarily involves two species – dancers/companies (i.e., performers) and audiences. The symbolic importance of this program is obvious – placing dance at the physical and metaphorical center of civic life. Unlike the Ethnic Dance Festival, which involves hundreds of artists in auditions and in this manner achieves a large scale of impact on the ecosystem, the selection of artists and companies for the Rotunda Dance Series is curated and therefore limited in terms of its scale of impact on dancers/companies. This does not in any way diminish the benefits to the artists who are selected to perform.

With respect to audiences, Dancers' Group believes that the Rotunda Dance Series serves as an introductory experience for San Francisco residents and visitors who are not familiar with the world of dance (e.g., construction contractors coming to City Hall for a permit might unexpectedly find themselves at a live dance performance), while also exposing existing audiences to a wider spectrum of dance styles and traditions. It is difficult to gather audience data in an uncontrolled setting such as City Hall, and therefore the extent to which this program actually serves newcomers to dance is not clear.

- What further efforts can be made to capture audience contact information at Rotunda events, or promote further involvement with DG?
- Are there opportunities to leverage this program in partnership with other cities and funders in the SFBA, such as in the rotunda in the city of Oakland?

The number of performers in each ONSITE program expands and contracts based on the interest of each choreographer. Some projects have involved up to 30 dancers and musicians, although this year's program involves a smaller group. In terms of audiences and participants, the ONSITE programs typically reach several thousand people, some as passers by and others as actively engaged participants. For example, in 2012, the total audience for *Niagara Falling* numbered over 6,000. Some ONSITE programs involve multiple locations around the City, while others focus on one location. The scale of public participation, therefore, is largely a byproduct of the artistic concept.

#### Resources and Exchanges

The resources exchanged in this subsystem follow the same pattern as those diagrammed in the earlier "Making Work" section.

- Choreographers and dancers selected to perform in the Rotunda Dance Series or ONSITE programs receive a fee for their services, but also receive exposure and legitimacy arising from selection.
- While money is not exchanged with audiences, an intangible resource is exchanged between artists and audiences in the form of meaning.
- These programs do not provide significant earned revenue opportunities to DG, but are leveraged in philanthropic appeals. The primary benefit to DG is one of fulfillment – both in terms of mission fulfillment in general and in manifesting the possibilities of site-specific work.

### Leverage and Spillover Benefits

Dancers' Group's presenting and producing programs provide limited opportunities for local artists and position DG as a source of work in the eyes of its members. As with the grants and awards programs, DG's presenting and producing activity reinforces its role as a provider of new opportunities and resources to artists.

In general, the ONSITE program is not scalable like BADW. Resources are consumed with each new production without much spillover benefit to individuals and species that are not involved in these programs. This raises the question of the degree to which scale of impact is a priority for DG in all or some of its programs. There are many reasons for producing new artistic work, but scale of community impact is not necessarily one of them.

Arts presenters and producers achieve economies when they build audiences over a period of years. As audiences grow to appreciate their work and trust their artistic choices, patron loyalty increases and blossoms into funding. This is not (yet) a relevant model for DG. Yet, DG has generated strong institutional support that would reflect a value and even respect for this programming from funders.

- Is DG's commitment to site-specific work sufficient to justify an expansion of programming in this vein, such that it could enfranchise and monetize an audience/donor base for this type of work?
- Alternatively, and in the spirit of open access, how might DG employ crowdfunding to support its presenting and producing activities, if it will not charge for tickets?

### Implications for Strategy

There are philosophical, artistic and financial dimensions to the strategy argument for presenting and producing artistic work. In an ecosystem crowded with presenters and producers, clarity of intention is critical.

In its presenting and producing activities, DG is not really facilitating an exchange between species in the ecosystem, but acting as an interested individual, much like a dance company or presenter, albeit with altruistic intentions. This is an important distinction in terms of strategy – catalyst vs. producer. In a catalyst role, DG might

design a system of incentives for artists and investors to produce site-specific work, perhaps as an offshoot of its fiscal sponsorship program. In the producer role, DG self-produces the work. Both are valid approaches to exploring the possibilities of site-specific work. From a systems dynamics perspective, however, the catalyst role creates leverage in the ecosystem in ways that the producer role does not.

- Curating site-specific art is a priority for DG. What critical mass of programming would allow DG to fulfill this role in a more substantial way?
- To what extent should scale of impact be a priority in terms of the design of DG's presenting and producing activities? DG already has a scalable audience development program in BADW.
- Could the Rotunda Series be extrapolated to other historic locations around the Bay Area, with a minimum of additional funding and effort?
- What approaches to curating site-specific work would more deeply engage the community in this area of exploration?
- Would the ONSITE program benefit from a stronger placemaking frame of reference? For example, could the ONSITE program one day become a laboratory for exploring the role of dance in creative placemaking?
- If audience development is truly a priority, what other, ecosystem-wide approaches to audience development might DG spearhead (e.g., trial offers for new movers), to stimulate first-time attendance amongst potential audiences?

## **Marketing Support Programs**

Dancers' Group provides a number of services to its members and the larger dance community in the area of marketing and publicity. These include a free community calendar (print and online), advertising opportunities, a postcard distribution service, and a public relations guide and media contact list. These last three activities generate a small stream of earned revenue for DG, in the form of per-use fees. They all serve to underscore DG's value proposition to its members.

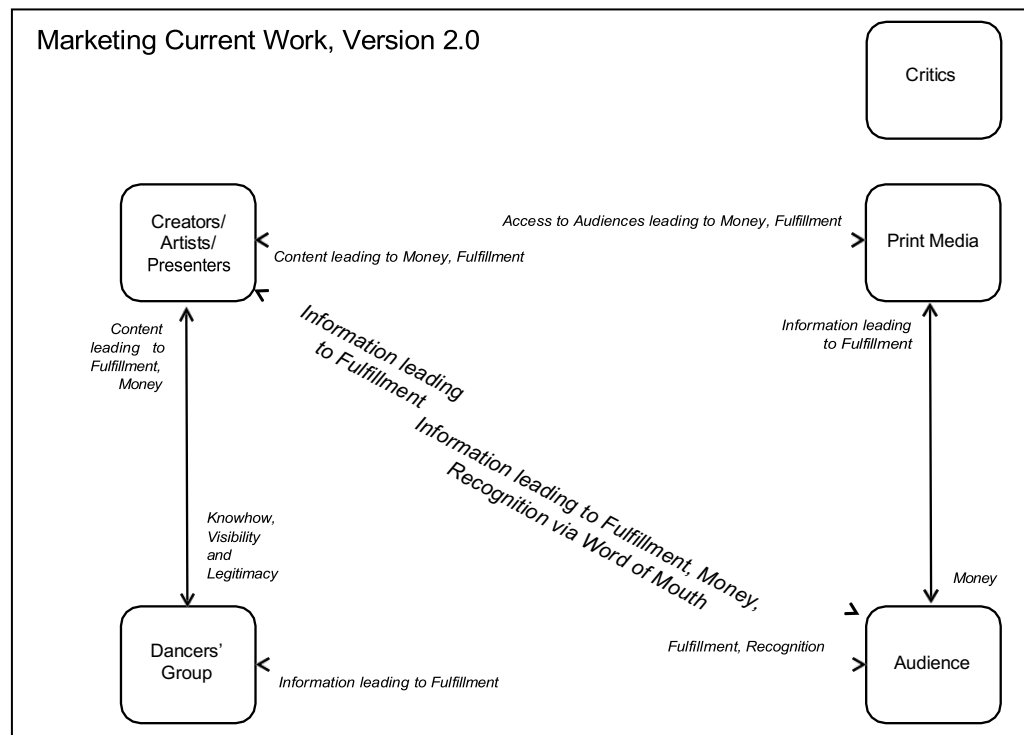
From an ecosystem perspective (Figure 5), these programs facilitate the recurring exchanges between "artists" (i.e., choreographers, teachers, presenters and producers) and potential audience members and participants, and therefore help to fuel tickets sales, registrations and awareness. DG is not an 'at-risk' partner in these exchanges, but rather creates value by making these exchanges more convenient and efficient. This subsystem is quite easily located within the larger "Making Work" subsystem described earlier. As long as artists create work they'll need to publicize it.

In addition to facilitating the exchange of promotional information, DG also plays a subtle role in influencing the content and messages that get disseminated through informal coaching, and also advises artists on which constituencies to reach out to.

### Species Involved in the Marketing Subsystem

The primary species involved in this subsystem are “artists” (i.e., choreographers, teachers, presenters and producers) – anyone who creates work for public consumption, and “audiences.” Depending on the situation, “audiences” might include students, audiences, studios, companies, college teaching programs, etc. In fact, we discussed the possibility of defining a separate species of “potential audience members” as distinct from (existing) audience members. The exchange of money is a key distinction (i.e., once a “potential audience member” buys a ticket, they ostensibly become part of the “audience” species). In reality, the distinction is blurry. Many in the “audience” species attend infrequently. Perhaps a better solution to his dilemma is to use a broad definition of “audience” to include anyone who participates in dance in any fashion, including those do not regularly attend live dance performances.

**Figure 5. Dancers' Group's 'Marketing Current Work' Subsystem**



Media (print, broadcast, online) are also a species in this subsystem, receiving content (stories, advertisements) from artists, and leveraging it into readership and advertising. This includes critics, who are generally assigned to stories by editors or “content managers.” In that DG also produces its own publication, *In Dance*, DG also doubles as a member of the media species.

### Resources and Exchanges

In the direct marketing model, artists promote their programs directly to potential audiences (i.e., information leading to meaningful artistic experiences), through promotional email messages, printed brochures and social media. Some artists also access audiences through print and broadcast media (e.g., SFGate, radio) to reach larger numbers of potential audience members. To gain this access they offer the media content and/or advertising dollars, which enables the media to earn money and fulfill their mission.

In facilitating these exchanges, DG receives a small amount of money, but also, perhaps more importantly, enhances its utility to members and gains marketing know-how. In turn, artists receive exposure, marketing know-how, and perhaps legitimacy.

- How might DG attempt to further raise the quality of marketing content being distributed to potential customers, perhaps through additional coaching or design assistance?

“Audiences” receive information that may or may not lead to attendance. But this exchange is not just about a (potential) monetary transaction. In receiving information, audiences are continuously reminded of the vibrancy and diversity of the ecosystem, and encouraged to participate, with the ultimate goal of fostering a sense of belonging.

To the extent that DG, by maintaining and expanding stakeholder lists, actually grows the market for dance, then this program also serves an audience development objective at the ecosystem level, a key source of fulfillment for DG.

### Leverage and Spillover Benefits

The potential spillover benefits of DG’s marketing support programs are quite substantial, at least in theory. As DG succeeds in drawing more people into dance through these marketing programs, the artistic work being made finds larger audiences, generating incremental additional resources for artists (money, fulfillment) and audiences (meaning) that, in turn, enriches the ecology and probably fuels more work.

The underlying assets driving these programs are: 1) staff expertise, and 2) good services that utilize and stay current with technology. The marketing services themselves represent important assets that generate financial and mission dividends for DG at little incremental cost.

### Implications for Strategy

In general, we see this group of programs as low risk, high value, and integrative across DG’s core competencies. It is one of the purest examples of how DG creates leverage in the ecosystem by supporting an exchange in a highly cost effective manner.

At the core of this subsystem are the size and quality of the various services that DG maintains, the ability of staff to quickly and easily access this information, and the effectiveness of DG's publications in reaching a large and diverse cross-section of species in the dance ecosystem.

- What investments in database systems would strengthen the underlying assets driving this program area?
- What strategies and approaches to expanding the list of dance appreciators might help DG grow its lists, and create additional leverage?

Along with the “information exchanges and convenings” (discussed below) DG's marketing support programs demonstrate its ability to enumerate and enfranchise the Bay Area dance ecosystem.

Another aspect of this subsystem that deserves mention is the problem of insufficient media coverage of dance. The wholesale withdrawal of commercial media from arts coverage is an old story, but one that continues to impair the field. Historically, writers and critics have played a disproportionately large role in driving attendance. Dancers' Group works to counteract this problem by supporting dance writers and publishing articles in *In Dance*, but the analysis raises the question of what more DG and/or its partners could do to foster critical public dialogue about the art form, given the strategic importance of writing and criticism to the ecosystem.

- What strategies might DG consider to further supplement the volume and quality of critical writing about dance?

## **Information Exchanges and Convenings**

In its mission statement, Dancers' Group aspires to unify the dance community, strengthen its capacity, and amplify its impact on Bay Area residents. While other DG programs speak to the “strengthen” and “amplify” goals, this grouping of programs and activities speaks to the “unify” goal.

To some extent, all of DG's programs serve to foster a sense of belonging amongst individuals and species in the ecosystem, although some DG programs aim to accomplish this goal more explicitly than others. We include DG's various publications, media, and convening activities in this program category because they serve not only as an information dissemination purpose, but also serve to accomplish the more abstract goal of community building.

- Dancers' Group publishes *In Dance* 10 times a year, with approx. 2,000 copies distributed (~600 by first-class mail to members and the other 1,400 distributed free of charge to locations in the SFBA for stakeholders). The May issue of *In Dance* is distributed locally and nationally (~15,000 copies), and includes a Summer Workshop Guide – a full list of Bay Area workshops held between May through August, as well as a comprehensive performance calendar. Advertising revenue helps to offset a portion of the costs of producing this publication.
- Weekly eBulletins sent to DG members, with information on auditions, jobs, grant notices and discounts on classes, performances and other events, etc.
- Four websites, conveying information to stakeholders, including:
  - [dancersgroup.org](http://dancersgroup.org), the organization's main website, which includes organizational information, calendar listings, community news bulletins, audition and job notices, etc. (27,752 unique visitors in 2013, up 50% from 2012)
  - [bayareadance.org](http://bayareadance.org), a site devoted to publicizing Bay Area Dance Week (17,512 unique visitors in 2013, down 2% from 2012)
  - [bayareaspaces.org](http://bayareaspaces.org), a searchable database of performing arts spaces in the greater Bay Area for performances, classes, workshops, auditions, rehearsals, etc., produced in partnership with Theatre Bay Area (19,528 unique visitors in 2013, up 85% from 2012)
  - [californiadancenetwork.org](http://californiadancenetwork.org), a website and email list of approx. 1500 names maintained by Dancers' Group on behalf of a statewide network of dance organizations (5,166 unique visitors in 2013, down 23% from 2012)
- Dance Discourse Project provides several opportunities each year for members of the dance community to come together to explore issues and ideas relating to dance (e.g., lectures, panel discussions).
- In previous years, DG has hosted national convenings, such as the Dance/USA annual conference in 2012.



In the past, Dancers' Group has collaborated with other organizations such as CounterPULSE and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts to present additional

opportunities for dialogue and cross-fertilization of ideas. And it should be noted that many other dance organizations in the Bay Area play important roles in bringing together choreographers, dancers and other species around topics, ideas, and artistic work.

These programs exist not just to exchange information and foster dialogue but also to strengthen connections between species and build a collective sense of inclusiveness that contributes to long-term resilience of the ecosystem.

DG's membership programs are, in essence, a means of intervening in these information exchanges. By joining DG, members gain access to these and other services and benefits. A more detailed analysis of DG's membership programs is beyond the purview of this paper and will be undertaken in subsequent stages of the planning process.

#### Species Involved in this Subsystem

All species in the dance ecosystem very much need, and benefit from, strong information exchanges.

#### Resources and Exchanges

In terms of resources, these programs all represent exchanges of know-how (i.e., information and ideas) between species in the dance ecosystem. For example:

- Teachers exchange information with potential students
- Choreographers exchange information with dancers about performance opportunities
- Writers exchange ideas with readers
- Artists exchange ideas about artistic work with other artists
- Panelists exchange opinions and know-how with workshop participants
- Presenters and producers exchange information about performance dates with potential audience members (although technically this would be a part of the marketing support subsystem).

Dancers' Group is not an uninterested bystander in these exchanges. By facilitating them, Dancers' Group acquires know-how (i.e., knowledge of what's going on in the ecosystem) and influence that stems from being a gatekeeper of information and occasionally a curator of topics and ideas. This activity supports DG's ability to attract and retain members (core to its financial model), and ultimately leads to fulfillment of the "unity" aspect of its mission.

#### Leverage and Spillover Benefits

Healthy exchanges of information are crucial to the functioning of the dance ecosystem. Timely, high quality information is a common currency that runs throughout the ecosystem. Without good information, individuals in the ecosystem cannot fulfill their roles and freely exchange resources. Therefore, these programs

are scalable and create maximum leverage, with staff time being the primary cost element.

Convenings such as Dance Discourse Project are not scalable, but create spillover benefits for participants.

- How might “discourse” opportunities be designed in a way that it is both intimate and scalable?

### Implications for Strategy

Interviews with stakeholders uncovered a strong sense of value around DG’s various information exchanges.

- Most of DG’s information exchanges require database and communications technologies. What technologies will DG need to acquire to sustain its information exchanges over the next three to five years?
- Many other organizations play a role in sharing information and convening the dance community (or parts of it). How might DG broker its existing content and connections to extend the value of this information?
- What partnerships might DG forge to create incentives for additional writing/publishing about dance?

The scalability of these programs underscores the importance of strategic thinking about how to exponentially grow the base of stakeholders that DG is able to reach through its various communications vehicles. For example, what if every ticket buyer to a dance program in the Bay Area was offered a free DG community membership? How might BADW be further leveraged to infuse DG’s information exchanges with new readers? How might donors to fiscally sponsored programs be engaged in DG’s information exchanges?

At a community meeting of DG stakeholders conducted as part of this planning process, participants voiced a desire for more regular dialogue about the health of the dance ecosystem.

- How might DG strengthen its capacity to diagnose the issues and ideas of greatest importance to various species in the dance ecosystem, in order to curate discourse?
- How could DG become even more central to the exchange of ideas – either through additional convenings, debates, town meetings, salons or artist-to-artist events, or by supporting discourse initiated by others?
- What coalition of dance organizations might DG galvanize to bring the dance community together more regularly around key issues and ideas?

## **Final Thoughts**

The ecosystem framework provides a helpful means of critically analyzing complex and dynamic systems; it is no surprise that arts and cultural institutions continue to explore its various applications and uses. While the ecosystem metaphor helps to describe and simplify complicated or abstract systems, its utility lies in an ecosystem's most defining quality: persistence. Ecosystems seek longevity. They achieve a size based on the amount of resources available, and, if left alone, will persist indefinitely in a dynamic equilibrium. This is important to considering Dancers' Group's current and future role in the ecosystem, because it suggests that the health and sustainability of the ecosystem lies not only in the amount of resources coming into the system, but in the efficiency of the exchanges of all types of resources.

This ecosystem analysis has laid the foundation for more holistic thinking about Dancers' Group's role in the SFBA dance ecosystem, and will continue to inform the strategic planning process. We encourage others who concern themselves with the health and sustainability of the dance ecosystem to further explore this framework – applying the tools and analyses to the many other programs, exchanges and subsystems they believe must flourish.