

# MAKING “SENSE” OF CULTURAL COLLABORATION

*By Derek Woodgate, Chief Creative Officer, Plutopia Productions, Inc.*

Back in March 2009, directly following our large-scale, highly successful production of our third annual SXSW sponsored Plutopia extravaganza at the Palmer Events Center, we decided that we needed to find a venue that we could call home, if we were to continue to undertake such extravagant, complex, multi-disciplinary future-focused, signature events that converge technology, arts and



entertainment. With 71 artists, performers, installations, etc., and an audience of nearly 2000, the Palmer event was questionably too large, too complex to manage and although we are proud to have pulled it off and accelerated our production services expertise learning, we decided to find a venue that better suited our needs, was a cultural bastion of Austin society and would provide us with a long-term collaborative solution.

As Chief Creative Officer and the person responsible for theming and designing the content of our main Plutopia events, I have learned considerably over the years from my work with The Crossing Border Festival and V2 in the Netherlands, as well as my long-term membership of the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London and regular attendance at Ars Electronica in Linz, Austria. All of these organizations either have their own venue or have a decades-long relationship with a unique venue. This fact alone has provided them with remarkable continuity, quality of programming, focused, desirable branding and a clear and distinctive sense of who they are, which has been simulated in and transferred to the minds of their audiences. With that knowledge and experience in mind, my fellow core Plutopians (Jon, Maggie and Bon) and I set about locating a venue that met both the content facilities and state-of-art requirements we were setting ourselves. If one plays in the cutting edge arena, then there is a clear need to have a venue that facilitates and augments that status and positioning.

The Palmer Events Center is owned by the City of Austin, and for such a large and auspicious venue, producing an event there, despite its level of complexity, was in some ways relatively easy, although extremely labor and time-intensive. The Palmer is virtually an empty shell with a lot of surrounding “hallways” and does not have many of the on-site facilities that we require, which meant bringing in virtually everything from staging, rigging, sound and lighting to creating a simulated TV studio and all the supporting structures. To be fair, it was not built or intended for our type of event.

It was through our relationship with the City of Austin that we were able to begin to consider the possibilities of locating and securing a longer-term venue. It was back in the immediate aftermath of Plutopia 2009 that, during a presentation and show by Tijuana artists Nortec Collective, Bon and I began to look at the wonder of the then relatively new Emma S. Barrientos Mexican American Cultural Center (MACC), the first phase of which was completed in 2007. Yet even then we did not fully realize its full potential. That came later, when on a day-long scouting expedition for a long-term venue, we, the core team, first realized just how amazing the MACC would be for Plutopia events. While we were all previously aware of its impressive award-winning architecture, its beautiful location along the banks of Lady Bird Lake and venues-within-venues structure, we really had not

until then visualized the degree to which the MACC not only had on-site state-of-the-art technology, but - by virtue of its flexible, multi-purpose configuration and dynamic composition - fully matched the architecture, aesthetics and tone of our Plutopia “sense events” and their ability to deliver unparalleled levels of sensation and experience.

That same evening, as we took a respite in the newly opened bars of East Austin, the excitement about the MACC became very tangible. We wanted it and we wanted it bad, but we had no idea of costs or availability, or even whether events such as ours would be permitted there.

As the early weeks of preparation for the Plutopia 2010 event passed, we became more and more convinced of the virtues and suitability of the MACC and went about securing it as the venue for our next event.

So what is the MACC, what does it do, what makes it the perfect fit, and why have we since then taken our relationship with the City of Austin and the MACC to a wholly new level?



The idea of establishing a cultural facility for Latino artists and the community emerged in the early 1970s. After decades of dialogue and planning, a Master Plan for the Mexican American Cultural Center was developed with input from the community. The architects were: CasaBella Architects from Austin, Del Campo and Maru from San Jose, California, and Teodoro González de León, from Mexico City. Construction of the Mexican American Cultural Center began in January of 2006, and the facility was completed in June of 2007. The Master Plan of the MACC facility was designed for construction in phases, but Phase I was designed to stand alone and look like a completed project.

Phase I: A Plaza along with site work (including site utilities); a multi-purpose building; offices and meeting rooms / class rooms; surface parking; and one of the three shading structures for the Plaza. Total square footage: 22,591 square feet.

Phase II: Extension of the classrooms and offices; a small three hundred-seat theater. Total square footage: 13,680 square feet.

Phase III: Additional classrooms and offices; gallery; a bigger theater (1200 seater); and a parking garage. Total square footage: 20,000 square feet.

Phases I and II are now completed. The total cost of the project was originally stated at \$50 million.

At its core, the MACC sees its purpose as providing a vibrant community resource dedicated to the preservation, creation, presentation, and promotion of Mexican American cultural arts and heritage, but above all, any culture in its broadest sense.



Accordingly, the MACC reflects the wide range of cultural interests of Austinites, and MACC administers programs and educational curricula that include the areas of visual art, theater, dance, literature, music, multi-media and the culinary arts. It also, of course, hosts other cultural events like ours.

While these are the raw facts, the MACC is much more than the sum of these extensive offerings and facilities. The MACC is not only about the building or its serene architecture. It's about its heart, its soul and the people that run it, the focused, but ever-collaborative Board and City of Austin management. It's about its communal spirit, its love of the arts and everything cultural and its fluidity to transform itself into a world of hope, originally envisaged by chief architect, Teodoro González de León, who had worked in France for 18 months with Le Corbusier, back in the late 1940s. Dr. Gonzalez de Leon is an honorary member of the International Academy of Architecture and holds the Gold medal of the International Union of Architects.



It was at our first show at the MACC, Plutopia 2010 that we began to fully understand how we could create a deeper collaboration with the MACC beyond our annual event. Plutopia 2010, which was themed the Science of Music, was headlined by DJ Spooky. Along with a four-piece wind orchestra, he presented the world premier of a piece he wrote based upon the Brian Greene book *Elegant Universe*.

We were able to not only optimize the use of the main auditorium by setting up three very large screens for audio visual projection, but also used sensors and interactive projections to create fluidity of appearance throughout the evening to create and deliver a uniformed look to the whole event, which also included robot performances, music studios, performances by Chinese stars Xiao He and White , combinations of electronica and dance by the Black Pig Liberation Front and much more.



The MACC provided the perfect venue for our multiplicity of performances, talks, installations, catering, sponsors and general fun and games. Only the late night rain put a little damper on the last hour, but by then the 1200 or so visitors were more than in the mood to continue with their cultural party spirit.

Immediately after Plutopia 2010, as we began planning for 2011 and the expansion of Plutopia Productions activities overall, we began in earnest to discuss our desire for a deeper relationship with the MACC. We wanted to create a collaboration that would bring our unique cultural “sense events” to the MACC, while providing us with a venue that we could begin to call home and to give Plutopia a sense of belonging.

As discussions for 2011 progressed, we quickly saw that not only were Plutopia and our events deemed desirable, but there was a firm basis for deeper and more expansive collaboration. Plutopia Productions' program of events was considered to be of cultural relevance to the MACC and its vision and mission. With that in mind we set about developing programs that would enhance the standing of the MACC and Plutopia. We brought headliner Text of Light (featuring Sonic Youth's Lee Ranaldo), keynotes Joe Tankersley of Disney Imagineering, TED presenter and founder of Sifteo Alternate Gaming System, David Merrill, and Sci-Fi writer, Bruce Sterling to our Future of Play event, while delivering educational and cultural contributions to the Mexican-American and general Austin community as well as the national and international visitors that attend SXSW and other events during the year.

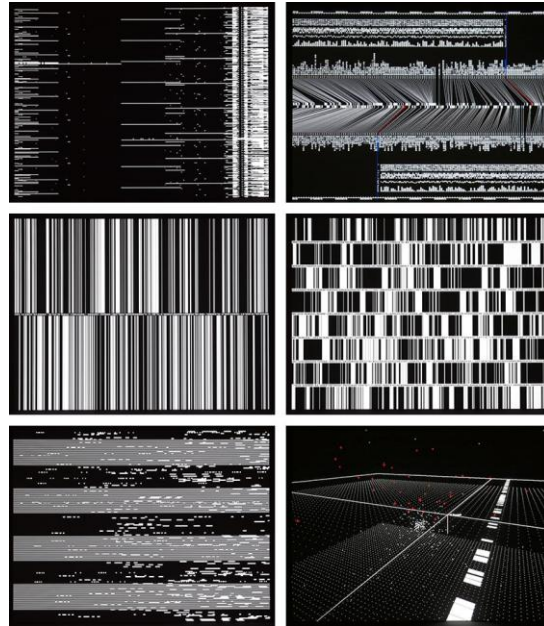


As preparations continued, we were able to include a number of Hispanic performers in our Plutopia 2011 line-up, including Intimate stranger and Telefonken from Chile, local Mexican-American artist Johnny Villarreal's The Edge of Imagination Station, as well as to develop a music-making workshop for Mexican-American youth on the day of our big event.



Throughout, 2011, we will be working on developing additional collaborative cultural programs with the MACC, one of which will be bringing to Austin one of the world's foremost audio-visual artists, Paris-based Ryoji Ikeda, and his project "Datamatics, which is an art project that explores the potential to perceive the invisible multi-substance of data that permeates our world. It is a series of experiments in various forms - audiovisual concerts, installations, publications and CD releases - that

seek to materialize pure data. This is yet another great example of exposing cutting edge events that converge technology, arts and entertainment to new audiences and communities.



As our relationship with the MACC matures and we develop jointly more extensive and inspiring programming, we hope to that the MACC also sees Plutopia Productions, Inc. as much at home in the MACC as we ourselves feel.

Creating and delivering unique, world-class “sense events” is our way of making even more “sense” of our cultural collaboration.