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by David Gonzalez

In New Home, Bronx Dance Academy Seeks to Step Up Its Presence

Arthur Aviles knows how to balance. He can jump onto a pedestal, strike a loose-limbed pose then leap to the ground. Once upon terra firma, he confronts an even more delicate balance: how to ensure the future of his group, the [Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance](#), as it settles into a new home and a new neighborhood and — he hopes — attracts new audiences and backers.

After 14 years in Hunts Point, where he and Charles Rice-Gonzalez, a fellow founder, were at the vanguard of a migration of artists who reinvigorated the area, the group was priced out of its space in the historic [Banknote Building](#). Without missing a beat, it landed in an even more historic location last year, a Gothic Revival stone chapel on the grounds of [St. Peter's Episcopal Church](#) in Westchester Square.



Photo: David Gonzalez/The New York Times

Known for throwing festivals that focus on gender, race and sexual orientation, Mr. Aviles and Mr. Rice-Gonzalez are looking to the future with an eye toward engaging their neighbors, who hail from everywhere from the Caribbean to South Asia.

“We begin from the stage,” Mr. Aviles said. “We’re not asking Bangladeshis to come to us if we don’t engage their culture. If we’re in the area, the engagement has to go beyond just ourselves and our own.”

Actually, it begins below the stage. In a cool basement with a low ceiling, long sheets of paper line the walls. Written on one are words and arrows outlining the themes and challenges of running a small nonprofit arts group. On another is a calendar with performance dates and funding deadlines. It is a different but vital choreography that groups like this must master to survive.

The Bronx Academy began in the late 1990s in Hunts Point, originally inside a local community center. Mr. Aviles approached the owner of the Banknote Building about using vacant space for a performance, which evolved into a long-term, low-rent lease. Their first show relied on the kindness of friends, whose donations included a parquet dance floor, lights and a sound system.

Its tenure in the area made it a cultural anchor, as the building’s owner, the Blauner family, carved out 600-square-foot studios for a variety of other artists.

“We ended up renting the whole floor to artists,” said Gail Blauner, whose father bought the building in the 1980s. “But they were the beginning of the art community in my building,” she added, referring to the academy.

The Blauners sold the building in 2007 to an investment group led by Taconic Investment Partners, which promoted it as a mecca for creative types. But the real estate market soured, rents rose and almost all the artists left. The building will soon house New York City's [Human Resources Administration as a major tenant](#).

The Bronx Academy held on until last year, when the group decided it had to move; apart from not being able to afford a rent increase, it needed a long-term lease to assure its supporters that it was sustainable. A partner of Taconic's put the academy in touch with St. Peter's, whose chapel had once housed a theater group.

"We needed somewhere to land and figured this could be the place," said Mr. Rice-Gonzalez, the Bronx Academy's executive director. "With a five-year lease, that gave us breathing room to go on with our programs and be able to plan."

The academy's new home puts it a short walk from the future headquarters of the [Bronx Council on the Arts](#). It is a strategic fit, said Bill Aguado, the council's former executive director who gave the Bronx Academy its first major grant to move into the Banknote.

"The council's building was always thought of as one of the anchors for the arts and economic development in the area," he said. "Having Charles and Arthur move there adds another major arts organization. It's the perfect community, largely middle-class homeowners, Latino, Indian and African-American and white. If you want to build audiences, you have to go where there is a potential for earned income."

A chance to appeal to those neighbors will come in May, when the group stages its "[Boogie Down Dance Series](#)." It is something the academy takes seriously as standard bearers for an art form that gave the borough its nickname.

"You think about the Bronx and you think about dance," Mr. Aviles said. "It's the Boogie Down Bronx. No other borough refers to itself in that way, talking about movement and culture. We are known in the world as the Boogie Down. When you come to the Bronx, you got to get down, move your body and get funky."

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