

The Luminato Festival Turns a Former Power Plant Into a Creative Engine

By SHAUN PETT JUNE 12, 2016



TORONTO — In just three and a half weeks, workers here built one of the world's largest cultural performance spaces inside an abandoned power plant. There are stages for theater, dance and music, as well as multiple art galleries and a high-end French restaurant.

And after 17 days, they're going to tear it all down.

The temporary site was built for the 10th edition of the [Luminato Festival](#), which opened on Friday. It is the first time that the festival has located all of its ambitious programming in a single place: the Hearn Generating Station in Toronto's industrial Port Lands area.

The festival includes the only North American performances of the National Theater of Scotland's trilogy of "[The James Plays](#)"; the immersive "Situation Rooms" of the Berlin theater group [Rimini Protokoll](#); and the thunderous [Unsound Festival](#). Music events span the sonic spectrum, from Beethoven to a queer hip-hop dance party. And the power plant's former control room has been transformed into Le Pavillon, an ode to the storied [New York restaurant of that name](#). Around 850 artists are participating in 162 events; last year's festival drew more than 600,000 visitors.

Jörn Weisbrodt, the outgoing artistic director of Luminato, described the Hearn, which was

decommissioned in 1983, as a creative achievement. "It's an artwork in itself," he said. "It's not just a venue."

Galleries, an interactive video installation and bars line a grand hallway that cuts through the towering concrete plinths of the plant's former turbines, and a vast mirror ball hangs in the cavernous hall.

Drawing on his early experiences reanimating abandoned spaces in Berlin after the Berlin Wall wall fell, Mr. Weisbrodt sees this year's festival as a live proposal for the Hearn's future as a new kind of 21st-century cultural institution.

"If you look at the Barbican or the Pompidou, these are places that try to bring all the arts closer together, but they still build individual spaces," Mr. Weisbrodt said. "We don't separate in space, but we separate in time," he said, referring to the events. "And in that way we give the audience freedom to migrate to so many different art forms and for audiences to mix."

To create a space that would be responsive, adaptable and accessible, Mr. Weisbrodt took inspiration from the influential British architect [Cedric Price](#) and the theater director [Joan Littlewood](#). They envisioned the "Fun Palace," a repurposed space for the arts and sciences that could accommodate different fields of creativity and ways of life.

The starting point for Luminato's overall design was the 1,200-seat theater for "The James Plays," which required some original thinking. Jerad Schomer, a designer with the theater consultancy Charcoalblue, said it was the most ambitious project he has been involved in to date. Because of the challenging acoustics of the power plant, the designers hung almost 100,000 square feet of fiberglass duct liner to absorb echoes that would make dialogue incomprehensible.

Fitting the theater into a space where the plant's 120-foot tall boiler used to be required precision. A detailed 3-D model was created by [Partisans](#), the Toronto architecture and design firm, which spent months scanning every girder, duct, pipe and hole. When the installation was complete, they had 1.5 inches to spare.

The key breakthrough came with a decision to repurpose shipping containers to create the balconies and wraparound box seats. Rolling with the idea, Partisans embraced Mr. Price's ethos of off-the-shelf architecture by repurposing industrial items.

A construction elevator provides public access to a mezzanine gallery and restaurant; electronic road signs are used to display information; and the grand staircase is built from scaffolding. The 45 shipping containers in use are scattered throughout like "God's Jenga," said Alex Josephson, a co-founder of Partisans. "There's such beauty in the Moduloc stock fencing put together to make the pathways," he said.

"This is the anti-Bilbao," he added, referring to Frank Gehry's fantastical titanium-clad Guggenheim Museum in Spain. "It's ready-made monumentalism."

The construction job fell to [Clyde Wagner](#), Luminato's executive producer, and his production team. Much of the labor and the \$2 million budget went into bringing the decaying building, which had no sewer connection, water or electricity, up to code in less than a month.

Nine cement trucks' worth of concrete was used to patch the floor, and more than 6,000 feet of barricades were put in place to close off ruined areas. Elaborate temporary plumbing snakes up to the restaurant's kitchen.

Unexpected challenges arose. A planned third-floor space proved too difficult to make accessible, and the leaks from a torrential rain last week necessitated readjusting part of the layout.

"Creating access to something that's forbidden to the entire city is the project," Mr. Josephson said.

What will happen after the festival ends is unclear, but interest in the Hearn's future has been growing. Some locals believe it could be a catalyst for development in the Port Lands, which are to be transformed in coming decades into a mixed-use community, housing tens of thousands of people.

Cost has always been a stumbling block to development, but the former plant's future is further complicated by the fact that Ontario Power Generation, the government agency that owns the building, leased it in 2002 to a group of private investors.

In 2011 the group announced a plan to demolish the Hearn. That seems unlikely for now, but it is still an option under the terms of the lease. Investors have been considering many local and international proposals, said Paul Vaughan, the president of the investors group.

The festival may well have generated a new regard for the value of the physical plant. "One would have to think very hard before they took the building away," Mr. Vaughan said, "because it could never be put up again."

Time is a factor, because the structure could quickly deteriorate. Toronto's mayor, John Tory, has said he would like to get the decision process moving by holding a future "international competition of imagination" to solicit ideas.

Mr. Weisbrodt, the outgoing artistic director of the festival, has his own suggestions for how the space could be used: for culture, of course, but also hockey rinks, a rock-climbing wall with commissioned murals and a school. "It should be the world's Hearn Generating Station," he said. "Why don't we do something that encompasses basically everything people do in their spare time?"

One idea is visualized along 960 feet of wall space in the mezzanine gallery. Partisans has made [digital renderings](#) of an art gallery that could be built inside the turbine hall; it is filled with a collection of significant objects from the city's history photographed by the Toronto photographer Scott McFarland.

Gazing upon the images can open up a space-time continuum in which the viewer contemplates the past but also glimpses the future.

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