



Cellspace
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Etc.

By Mike Kushner

Cellspace is a collectively run community arts space that opens its 40,000 square foot warehouse to neighborhood organizations and arts programs for a small fee.

In the last three years they have hosted spectacular events with a variety of themes including anti-police violence youth rap performances, robot wars, omni-media festivals, fire sculpture and cutting edge improvisational dance competitions. Acrobats, trapeze troupes, theater companies, music groups, youth drummers, clowns, filmmakers, celebrations, community activists and unconventional ritual observers have a place in the Mission where they can rehearse, congregate, meet other people with similar interests and find out about neighborhood alternative arts activities.

Resident groups include Monkey Thump Theater Collective, The Body Cartography Project, Velocity Circus, Men's drawing Group, SF Roller Jam Community and the Sunday Teahouse. Youth organizations have also utilized Cellspace. They include Third Eye Movement, Loco Bloco, Peer Resources, Youth Leadership Institute and Coleman Advocates for youth.

Cellspace is a drug, alcohol and tobacco free environment where anyone can take the opportunity to become involved with what's going on at the moment or create their own project. Cellspace puts together "in house" productions for the public to help pay rent. They always looking for volunteers to help out with any aspect of running the place in exchange for using the facilities.

Cellspace is a place to make new associations, become skilled in other media and combine forces with artists who share common goals. Dedicated to arts education of the young and presenting cutting edge productions, Cellspace members have always tried to give energy back to a community that has allowed it to exist and flourish in so short a time.

The size of the space and its design allows a great outlet for expression and the Cell people, like little elves in Santa's Workshop, help behind the scenes. Like the Lilliputians in Gulliver's Travels, there is a magical way that everyone pitches in what they can do so mammoth feats are accomplished and there is some spiritual gain. Something that might take someone else the hiring of experts and thousands of dollars, this merry band of underpaid servants-to-muses seem to build with ingenuity. It seems that somehow, someone that somebody knows through the network at Cell always has the uncanny way of knowing a method and having the means. A new kitchen, handicapped ramp and computer network all came about with donated goods and volunteer time. The building blocks of a

great tomorrow are there, if you have the ability to see them and your heart can handle the ride. Cell can provide it all. How they survive on so small a budget is a miracle.

Cellspace is currently applying for non-profit status so they can collect grant monies they've been offered. Recently, building inspectors have demanded \$100,000 in improvements to the space. They are calling for ventilation and seismic retro-fitting.

The main characters in this ever evolving "alternative arts group" are comprised of the caretakers (who live next door), day studio artists who rent workspace, cluster representatives of the various disciplines and services at Cell, the volunteers, the people that run workshops and classes and the thousands of individuals who have benefited by their participation as audience and cast in the metamorphosis and synthesis that goes on there. Cellspace's greatest strength is how everyone pitches in with emotional support and physical presence when a task is to be done.

Cell stands for "Collectively Explorative Learning Labs" and was founded by a "Coalition of Collectives" at a community potluck "envisioning brunch" four years ago. The core members were Tom Koch, Allison Chase, Tryntje Rapalje, Jonathan Youtt, Paradox Pollack and Justin Bondi. Bernie Klein, owner of 2050 Bryant Street signed the lease on the spring equinox, March 21, 1996, with those who had who envisioned a multi-purpose communal space in the abandoned silk-screen business that was once a steel foundry and mill. Cell has recently renewed the lease and feel secure in their home for a while.

There is an incredible ongoing evolution of collaboration between core members, spin-off/satellite groups and new talent. Cell is truly theater in motion, with fascinations in every form, meant to change your routine, everyday role in life and perhaps touch your soul; to get you out of your apartment's four walls, away from the bars and clubs and parties into a new and wondrous world that exists in San Francisco, this rarely publicized oasis in the heart of the live/work district.

Cellspace exists by word of mouth an e-mail list of over 2000 people.

Cellspace organized an arts organization and artists resource guide, focusing on the local Mission Area. The arts and opportunities to be involved in different disciplines are offered like a friendly raffle and the prizes are the means and skills to grow up and increase communication abilities. This is a chance to become more human and learn to love all living things, seen and unseen. Here, one might find new meaning and dreams to reawaken an inner spirit, a childlike feeling that has been buried by urban alienation. Honest human caring, a consensus democracy for leadership, an open invitation policy and neighborhood potlucks are the cornerstone on which Cell is built. There are no prima-donnas here, everybody wears many hats. Great lengths have been taken to secure the spectrum of medium at your fingertips, yet everything is donated or borrowed or found.

This place runs on a shoestring budget. With stage lights, sound equipment, graphic artists, computers, a bunch of willing participants, sound engineers, song writers, spiritual energy and a waterfall of supplies, one could invent your own holiday and start a global celebration all from this brain center. It is fun when all the tools are available. When there is a need, the group puts their heads together and figures out an artistic and philosophical solution. When decisions or direction is needed, everyone is consulted. There is no power struggle at the Cellspace collective headquarters like in most of corporate America. The people of Cellspace believe in the greatest good for the greatest number. "What kind of unconventional contraption or alternative method can we use to accomplish the building of our vision while including everybody?" is the motto of Cellspace. Necessity is the mother of invention. Personal growth, wild enjoyment, self-accomplishments and rainbows of entertainment are in abundance.

Cellspace is like an ongoing three-ring circus, a surrealist

movie and a private school for independent thinkers all rolled into one. It is an idea "incubator" for the future and upcoming social trends. It is a platform for political movements that have no home. It is a backdrop for a million scenes played out to enrich our lives. It is a stronghold of creativity and of the poor, in a neighborhood whose changing demographics are forcing the evictions of hundreds of fellow artists. It is an Alice in Wonderland experience from the moment you pass through the doors.

They are open from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily. You will be amazed at what you see. The mystery of the Cell's unique existence is that time, space and place in the universe has converged and developed into a social and communal need of higher consciousness energy that has manifested itself in an unprecedented appearance like the Great Emerald City in the Wizard of Oz, in the mind of Dorothy. Like a mass prayer, society craves more to do with their lives than watch TV. The physical presence of Cellspace gives one the ability to think freely in a nurturing atmosphere. The Cell itself seems to be a living poetic metaphor, a painting on a canvas in progress, a breathing entity with mind, soul, arms and feet, where personalities make up the nucleus. It is all fun and games and hard work, and the rewards are plenty.

Your innermost dreams and fantasies can come true by coming to Cellspace. You are invited to belong. It is open to anybody off the street to visit and become a part of the ever-growing and expanding network of fun and creation. There are no prejudices or double standards. They accept all new members at face value.

When you first peek in you will see the Crucible Steel Gallery, where 35 group shows have been exhibited. They provide an open forum and discussion group for emerging artists. Twice a year they invite the public to a show and tell workshop, so neighborhood artists can speak directly to the gallery collective members and present proposals for their work. The curators then review the work and form groups to plan shows for the upcoming six months. Participating in the annual city-wide open studios and allowing colleges to exhibit there as well, provides them exposure and status.

Cellspace allows youth and teen shows, unconventional installations, video and crossover disciplines. By sponsoring holiday and winter solstice crafts fairs, they allow small business street vendors a viable and affordable venue. They operate solely on donations. Cellspace is a unique outlet for expression of the human condition by talented upcoming artists. They even hosted a City College sponsored photography show in July 1998.

Most first-time guests are usually awestruck at the sheer size of the main space. At first it seems like an empty warehouse or a forgotten zeppelin hangar where only a few momentos and remnants still hang. But on closer inspection, behind those rags and boxes on a walkway seemingly floating in air is an amazing arts and crafts loft where Joelle, the French lady, quietly stacks and catalogues a wide assortment of donated goods and found/recycled objects that might be used to create art. There is a variety of fabric in all colors, every style and type paper, painting/gluing medium, three sewing machines, buttons and doo-dads, sparkles, glitter and papier-mâché for any imagination. Joelle, a puppeteer, constructs puppets and dolls, does theater, and teaches children to make and use all kinds of puppets and masks. She gets a great amount of pleasure from seeing the kids' faces when they create stuff for themselves, or get to use it a show. She cooks healthy vegetables to share at dinner and she holds an open mending workshop to repair clothes or invent costumes.

The magic of Cellspace is in the ability to convert the space for different uses in a few hours. Stacked couches and hidden folding chairs, a projector and screen and sound and light boards are all neatly tucked behind curtains. To the right are the bathrooms and nutrition kitchen and on a platform to left is Connectivity Lounge housing three computer stations where anyone can access he inter-