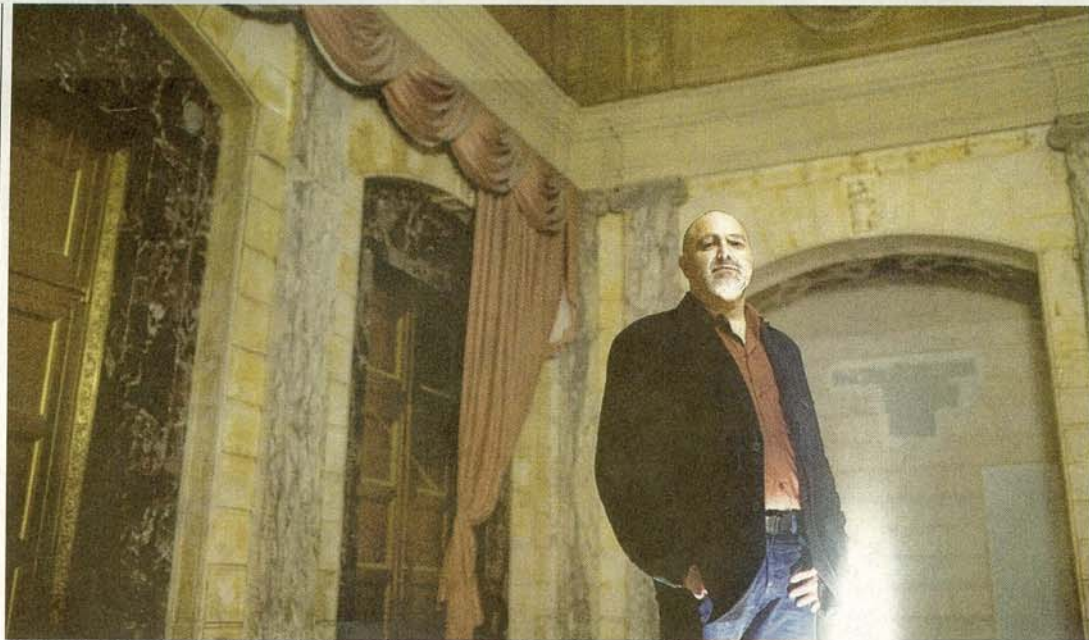


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Philip Montgomery for The Wall Street Journal

ISSUE Project Room director Ed Patuto in the venue's new space on Livingston Street, in downtown Brooklyn.

A New Leader in the Room

Brooklyn's Leading Avant-Garde Venue Confronts Obstacles and Opportunities

By STEVE DOLLAR

When Suzanne Fiol, the founder of the Brooklyn-based performance space ISSUE Project Room, died in October 2009 at age 49, she had pulled off two major coups for her scrappy nonprofit organization.

In 2008, she won a 20-year, rent-free lease on the ground floor of 110 Livingston St., the former Board of Education building in downtown Brooklyn whose developer, Two Trees Management Company, had reserved the 5,000-square-foot space for a cultural institution as part of its conversion of the property into condominiums. Then, Brooklyn borough president Marty Markowitz allotted \$1.1 million in public funds for renovations to the space, which were initially estimated to cost \$2.5 million.

"Suzanne described this space as something like 'a Carnegie Hall for the Avant Garde,'" said Ed Patuto, who took over as executive director of ISSUE Project Room on Nov. 1 and will oversee its relocation to the new space.

A former Brooklyn resident with more than 20 years of arts administrative experience on the West Coast, Mr. Patuto fills a post that had been an around-the-clock labor of love for his predecessor. Ms. Fiol, a photographer and gallerist, founded the organization in 2003 and shepherded it from an East Village gallery to a renovated oil silo on the Gowanus Canal to its current industrial loft space at the Old American Can Factory, off Third

Avenue in Brooklyn. Its calendar now boasts more than 200 events a year.

"She was amazing, and her vision for Issue is still at our core," Mr. Patuto said.

As he arrives, much to the relief of a staff that has sustained momentum in the wake of Ms. Fiol's year-long battle with cancer and subsequent death, Mr. Patuto faces daunting challenges. The Livingston Street space, a gorgeous Beaux Arts-style building designed in 1926 by the architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White, is captivating. But the interior is completely raw, and its walls reverberate so powerfully as to mandate substantial soundproofing. To do so, without altering any of the site's historic detail, will require some highly creative—and highly expensive—acoustic solutions.

Indeed, Mr. Patuto said, the major portion of the renovation budget is dedicated to this cause. Meanwhile, in addition to intensive fund-raising efforts, he has to manage a tricky transition: stepping up IPR's profile as an evolving arts institution without losing the homespun core that has endeared it to a broad cross-section of artists and enthusiasts.

Despite its international reputation for presenting the latest in avant-garde music and performance—from vintage minimalism to mixed-media experimentation to transcendental rock music—IPR's most loyal supporters know it as a place where Ms. Fiol

would serve home-cooked meals.

"Suzanne was really wonderful at building community," said Mr. Patuto, who most recently served as the co-founder and director of VOLUME, a California-based organization that commissions and produces programs of interdisciplinary new-media work. "She made people feel welcome. The staff during the last year has worked really hard to do that in her absence."

When IPR founder Suzanne Fiol died at age 49, she had pulled off two major coups for her beloved nonprofit.

Zach Layton, one of two full-time curators for IPR, said that spirits are high. "Ed has a really positive energy," he said. "He's got a pretty strong background in fund-raising, and he's a very charming and sweet guy. The transition over the past two years, particularly in the beginning, was really rough. But Issue feels like it's in a very good place in terms of our future."

Over breakfast at a Park Slope coffee shop recently, Mr. Patuto discussed a range of plans and hopes for IPR, many focused on a deeper engagement with Brooklyn communities, and using the organization's infrastructure to elevate emerging local artists alongside the better-known performers who appear on its programs.

"My dream for Issue," he said, "is to be able to say to certain artists with whom we've worked for a while or who we've seen do interesting work: 'Tell us what would take your creative practice to another level. Tell us something you wanted to do for a long time but haven't had the resources or the opportunity to do, and let's see if we can help you realize that. But I still want it to be a place where these young folks call us up and say 'Hey, we're coming to town next week can we play a gig?' We have to become more of an institution but not become institutionalized."

The goals are similar to the those he pursued while working in the 1990s with the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, when that city's developing multicultural art scene had yet to achieve renown. For now, Mr. Patuto envisions IPR's transition as happening in stages, and said he's conscious of making the most of the opportunity.

"There are people who may not come to the Gowanus to see experimental music being made, but now we're going to have an architecturally notable cultural space opening up downtown next to Boerum Hill, Cobble Hill, Brooklyn Heights," he said. "We can have this corridor running from Dumbo to the Brooklyn Academy of Music. But I don't want to fall into the trap of having a glorious edifice with no money to program. We want the programs to evolve as we move into the new space."