

# LE PLUS PETIT CIRQUE DU MONDE (Bagneux)

*When community meets circus*



**THE PURPOSE-BUILT CENTRE SOARS HIGH ABOVE THE SURROUNDING SUBURBAN LANDSCAPE, A SURPRISING ARCHITECTURAL STATEMENT AMONG THE CONVENTIONAL HOUSES AND APARTMENTS OF BAGNEUX. IT COULD BE MISTAKEN FOR A CHURCH, WITH ITS BLUE SPIRE RISING SKYWARDS OVER THE LANDSCAPE AND IT IS A PLACE OF WORSHIP, OF SORTS, AS PEOPLE DEDICATE THEIR TIME TO OVERCOMING GRAVITY, BOTH ACTUAL AND METAPHYSICAL, BY CHALLENGING THEMSELVES AND SOCIETY THROUGH CIRCUS SKILLS.**

Founded in 1992, PPCM was created by inhabitants from Bagneux, a suburban town close to Paris, sharing circus arts and urban culture, to transform daily life and the future of their children and

neighborhoods. PPCM states their mission as: “developing an economic and social vision of the performing arts, as a force driving individual and community changes and positive social, economic and urban transformation in disadvantaged areas”.

PPCM mixes hip hop dance and emerging urban practices with more conventional arts such as music, contemporary dance and theatre and, at the centre of it all, is circus arts. In practice they have three main strands of activity: Social (bringing people together across the community through art to create positive change); Artistic Education (teaching circus through an amateur school, training for pre-professional students, training for disabled people etc.); Artistic Research, Experimentation and Production (hosting artists’ residencies, supporting young talent and encouraging artistic innovation, producing local as well as international artistic projects and presenting shows including an annual festival – Hip Cirq).

The project has developed over the years, from those small but visionary beginnings back in the early 1990s. In 1998 Kader Belbachir was appointed the first permanent member of the association and he created holiday centre training for young people in circus arts near their homes. ‘Baby Circus’ classes were also developed for children under 4 years old.

In 2007 the current director was appointed, Eleférios Kechagioglou, and he launched an international focus for PPCM working with partners such as the European network CARAVAN, a network of circus schools with a social vocation. In 2011 PPCM expanded its projects for community groups across Bagneux e.g. within prisons, and work started on building a venue to house the company and as a resource for the community. This amazingly designed space was inaugurated in 2015. The centre is now a substantial local employer, with 80 employees, representing 32 full-time equivalents. Putting aside artistic contracts, PPCM now have 15 part-time and 25 full-time people employed in the centre, along with volunteers. Financially the centre also has an exceptional record of raising and making money, with a yearly turnover approaching €2 million.

This success was hard won and required a lot of commitment from the local community. Looking at PPCM more closely, there were three core drivers for the growth and development of it:

Change designed to enhance their social vision: 40,000 people live in Bagneux, an area that is underprivileged with 75% of people living in social housing. There is an ongoing need to evolve and grow, to produce new services to support the socio-economic development of the area.

Change designed to retain artistic quality: a few years ago, productions would have had 9-10-week runs. The cost of producing has escalated, and it is now only feasible to have 4-5-week runs; PPCM needed to find alternative ways to finance high-quality artistic productions.

Change designed to drive financial sustainability: PPCM realised that it was no longer viable to assume that public funding alone will always continue to subsidise this kind of work. There was a need to diversify income streams to future-proof the organisation.

At the core of change solutions at PPCM is the fact that no gap between the artistic work and communities exists. Work is not produced *for* the community, work is developed *with* the community: showing work in progress, developing young creatives, building relationships over time. Art is the tool that brings people together. This has built trust and support. It is enabling PPCM to identify and develop relevance, not waiting for the public to come to the venue, but facilitating change and making genuine links across the community.

In turn, this has made the centre a highly desirable partner for a range of other organisations and funders. PPCM has also become a highly networked organisation. It works with partners across many industries and sectors to broaden its reach and enhance its impact. This includes work with schools (including special needs schools), universities, prisons, other arts and cultural organisations, corporate companies etc.

Building a home for PPCM that was central to the community has been an essential part of the company's development. This provided visual evidence that change was occurring. They can now 'host people at our place'. There is an open-door policy and anyone can come in, any time, to use the foyer, to meet for coffee and connect with others. This took 7 years to realise, including attracting funding.

A great part of this success was and is developing the correct organisational culture. PPCM see their role as facilitators and enablers. This requires a certain type of personality and skillset. Recruitment and training practices were adapted to identify the right mix of people, including looking outside the arts, for example, to people who had previously worked in areas such as social businesses. This brought in essential skills such as financial management, as well as different perspectives, broadening the horizons of the team and inspiring new ways of thinking and working.

An interesting outcome of this cross-sectoral and cross-skill approach is that PPCM has increased its ambition. Originally when they set a target of 50% growth, it felt like the limit of their ambition until they realised that this was a tiny aim in comparison to start-up companies in the commercial sector. An international focus has also enabled them to think big - they are currently developing activities with partners in the Caribbean asking how their model of incubating and facilitating artistic experiences might enable socio-economic benefits for people there.

The vision is now to work on new growth, to be an activator of socio-economic change, creating an ecosystem that helps pay the investment back in the community. PPCM are considering alternative forms of finance to make this happen including social investment funding for a project establishing a circus school within a local high school, developing a social start-up incubator, and more.

*'See the reality. Don't wait for funding cuts, search for inspiration now - try things, test things, work out what works and what doesn't, adapt your business model before any cuts happen.'*

## AMBASADA (Timisoara)

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*"You can only be relevant for a limited time – make things happen"*

**AMBASADA'S AIM IS TO BRING TOGETHER BOTH THE NON-PROFIT AND CREATIVE COMMUNITIES TO GENERATE NEW PROJECTS AND IMPACTFUL SOLUTIONS (WHILE DRINKING A FAIR-TRADE COFFEE!). THEIR CENTRE IN TIMISOARA HAS BECOME A CROSS-SECTORAL SPACE FOR BOTH ARTS AND NON-ARTS NGOS AND THEY FIND THAT IT IS EQUALLY INTERESTING FOR THE CORPORATE SECTOR, AS AN ALTERNATIVE SPACE FOR LEARNING AND INSPIRING EMPLOYEES, ALL THE WHILE CONNECTING TO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY AND SOLVING ISSUES IMPORTANT TO THEM.**

Ambasada's roots are in a world music festival established in 2006 by Andreea Iager-Tako and Norbert Tako. From 2010 onwards, the team began to produce other events and developed from concerts and workshops to promoting active citizenship, diversity and more. This led to formally establishing Ambasada as an independent cultural centre in 2015, under the NGO Asociația CASA PLAI.

The team behind PLAI is a community of volunteers dedicated to positive civic action and social change. The original group saw an opportunity to increase the impact of their three-day festival by creating a space that encourages collaboration between organizations and people from the local creative and non-profit community. They stepped in to deliver free access to space, support and guidance and created a platform to develop ideas and businesses in the absence of government provision.

Ambasada is now a meeting place for NGOs, freelancers, artists, musicians and social and creative entrepreneurs. It consists of a bistro, co-working space, meeting rooms, performance and rehearsal spaces and an event hall accommodating between 100 and 300 people. It offers free facilities and services, supported by income from the bistro and related commercial activities (bistro and related services 70%, corporate sponsorships 30%). The number of full-time employees is around nine but such employment is also part of Ambasada's developmental approach. For example, bistro employees are people with disabilities and young people from the foster care system. This not only provides employment opportunities, but also a framework that is safe and structured, enabling employees to develop confidence, life skills and a much-needed support network. From the outset, Ambasada was a partner in a European-funded project, the objectives of which were to create job opportunities for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. This drive to secure and sustain jobs meant that the project started with a social enterprise outlook, rather than a volunteering mindset.