



Basement Theatre

Case study as part of an evaluation of Auckland Council's investment into Arts and Culture in Auckland.

November 2025





Mihi and acknowledgement

Our grateful thanks are extended to all who provided their input and assistance to this project and the preparation of the report.

Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou katoa.

This case study forms part of a broader evaluation of the Value of Auckland Council's investment in the arts and culture sector. This project was commissioned and funded by Auckland Council.

The overall project has been undertaken by Adrian Field (Dovetail), Georgia Parslow (Dovetail), Cat Ruka (Dovetail Collaborator) and Amanda Hunter (Dovetail).

The report cover image was photographed by Ankita Singh.

Basement Theatre: Background

About Basement Theatre

Located in the heart of Auckland's arts district, Basement Theatre is an artist-led venue that programmes a wide range of multidisciplinary performing arts. Basement Theatre is widely known as the home for emerging artistry in Tāmaki Makaurau, with a clear presence in the city's arts ecosystem. It is located close to larger venues including the Civic Theatre, Aotea Centre and Q Theatre. Originally developed by a group of young creatives, Basement Theatre began as a grassroots initiative in 2009 and quickly grew into a hub for artists and producers.

“It is the most accessible part of Auckland to get to... everyone knows where it is... and not only is it visual for artists but it's visual for audiences, it's keeping art in the CBD.”

- Basement Theatre staff

Despite a relatively small core team and venue capacity, Basement Theatre runs a high volume of programming at roughly 160 productions per year, around half of which are developed under the Hire-For-Nothing initiative. The theatre shows performances across diverse artistic genres and offers flexible support infrastructure to feature works from new and emerging artists through to established performers. In addition to functioning as a venue, the space is also an artist and producer incubator, with dedicated support resources, a well-established audience and a diverse year-round programme that prioritises 'urgent and adventurous' artistry. Basement Theatre has presented thousands of performances, many of them debuting local talent, and has played a formative role in the early careers of prominent New Zealand artists including Rose Matafeo, Chris Parker, and Morgana O'Reilly.

“It's solidified its status as a space for the community and for creation, regardless of what point of the process that be...for artists to create actual productions but to also residency in developing those ideas.”

- Basement Theatre staff

Basement Theatre operates with a formal commitment to Vital Voice Artists, including tangata whenua, people of colour, rainbow communities, immigrant communities, and disabled communities; all of whom are creatives who have historically been marginalised within the arts due to systemic barriers in programming, access, and funding. This commitment is embedded across programming, operations, and strategic decision-making, with Basement Theatre's Vital Voices policy ensuring that diverse cultures and communities are represented and prioritised.

“We are making sure that artists who may not feel comfortable working with larger, professional theatre... and possibly their communities who don't feel comfortable coming and being an audience, have equitable access.”

- Basement Theatre staff

Basement Theatre provides a unique platform for independent artists by removing many of the traditional barriers to staging new work. At the heart of this is the Hire-for-Nothing programme, which gives artists access to two fully equipped performance spaces free of venue hire costs, while allowing them to keep 100% of their ticket revenue. This kaupapa is complemented by wraparound production support, including technical expertise, venue management, and targeted marketing that leverages Basement Theatre's established audience base.

Basement Theatre also invests in artist capability and long-term growth. The Artist Base digital toolkit offers publicly accessible resources such as budget and project templates, marketing guides, access and inclusion checklists, and wellbeing support. Development opportunities extend to structured initiatives like the Producer Pals residency, which provides paid mentorship for emerging producers, and Makers Week, a series of free workshops on creative and practical topics. Commitment to accessibility and equity is also central, with options such as 'Choose What You Pay' ticketing and support for accessible performance formats ensuring that diverse communities can participate in and enjoy the work.



Basement Theatre: Working in partnership to deliver value through investment

Basement Theatre is sustained through a number of discreet investment streams, including Auckland Council and other creative funders. The most significant contribution from Auckland Council is free venue leasing and venue subsidies, complemented by modest operational funding to support artistic development in Tāmaki Makaurau. Together, these investments ensure artists and audiences have access to an affordable central city venue anchored in the arts precinct.

Funding infrastructure

Basement Theatre receives a range of leases, supplements and grants from Auckland Council entities that complement investment from other creative organisations. These include:

Community lease: Most significant among Auckland Council's investments is the community lease of Basement Theatre's 1921 heritage venue on Lower Greys Avenue, managed by the Auckland Development Office (formerly Eke Panuku). While the ageing building presents infrastructure challenges, according to the venue's manager, Auckland Council support through a fire safety rebuild and ongoing advocacy has been critical to keeping the theatre in its much-loved location at the heart of the city's arts precinct.

“This building is a bit of a head sore for everyone just because of how old it is... they [Auckland Council] are able to actually keep advocating for it to not fall out of people's priority after so many years and it is really, really appreciated.”

- Basement Theatre staff

Peppercorn lease and accommodation supplements: Auckland Council also provides a peppercorn lease for the Makers Space at 313 Queen Street, giving the Basement Theatre community access to a dedicated rehearsal venue for show development, workshops, and residencies. In addition, Basement Theatre received an accommodation supplement of \$10,000 from the Waitematā Local Board to offset office tenancy costs on Queen Street.

Multi-year operational grants: In 2024, Basement Theatre received a renewal of the Regional Arts and Culture Strategic Relationship Grant, a three-year operational grant of \$65,000 per annum. This is one of the few multi-year funding streams supporting its operations, alongside Tōtara organisational funding from Creative New Zealand (\$435,000) and a grant from Foundation North (\$147,000).

City centre revitalisation funding: Auckland Council has recently supported the venue through the City Centre Activation (CCX) Fund, designed to revitalise CBD vibrancy and foot traffic during major developments. This funding enabled the added delivery of free public programmes including Makers Week, No Drama Nights, and the Forage Music Festival.

Revenue and donations: Basement Theatre generates some income through box office sales, bar revenue, and venue hire, but this covers only a small share of its budget. To bridge the gap, it runs digital fundraising campaigns, most recently raising nearly \$50,000, and receives ongoing support from around 20 patrons through its Basement Mates membership programme.

Strategic partnerships

Basement Theatre partners with a diverse range of organisations to enhance its offerings for both artists and audiences. These partnerships span the arts sector, education sector, and commercial spheres, helping to strengthen the creative ecosystem around the venue. These include:

Industry partners to support venue sharing, co-programming, and the creation of artist development pipelines. Longstanding collaborators include Proudly Asian Theatre, Prayas Theatre, Black Creatives Aotearoa, Tuatara Collective, FAFSWAG, as well as major institutions such as the New Zealand Comedy Festival, Silo Theatre, Auckland Live, and Auckland Theatre Company.

Education partners provide pathways for emerging artist development, upskilling, and early exposure to careers in the creative industries. These include relationships with Toi Whakaari: New Zealand Drama School, the University of Auckland, Performing Arts Network New Zealand (PANNZ), and Western Springs College.

Commercial partners operate on a more informal, mutually beneficial basis. Basement Theatre maintains a longstanding partnership with iTICKET, and also collaborates with Tanuki's Cave, a neighbouring restaurant that supports the theatre through referrals, catering, and prioritised service for audience members attending local performances.

Basement Theatre maintains close, values-based relationships with other venues in the Aotea Arts Quarter, providing a natural pathway for artists as their careers develop. Partners such as Auckland Live, which manages several central city theatres, described a longstanding open-door collaboration, sharing space, coordinating festival programming, and exchanging knowledge to collectively navigate sector-wide economic challenges and support the progression of talent into larger venues.

“We engage with Basement as part of the Aotea Arts Quarter... the kind of circle of creative communities that wrap around Aotea Square... we’ve used Basement for showings, residencies, or when they don’t have space... it’s been a mutual support system over the years.”

- Auckland Live



Equity-based programming

Basement Theatre's programming approach acknowledges the broader influence of platforming urgent, experimental, and diverse work within the arts ecosystem, with programming staff recognising themselves as 'tastemakers' within the sector. A recent shift to a horizontal programming model reinforces this kaupapa, with programming decisions now made collaboratively by a panel of staff, centring community need over profit and promoting equitable resource allocation in decision making.

"We're thinking much broader on programming... sometimes the decisions are not what will sell? ... but is this a good fit for community?"

- Basement Theatre staff

The Vital Voice mandate guides programming decisions, demonstrated by the 87% of Hire-for-Nothing productions that were developed by Vital Voice artists in 2024. Thematic analysis of artist survey responses suggest that the Vital Voice programming is experienced by many artists as a powerful and affirming mandate, with respondents describing feeling welcomed, supported, safe and visible.

"Basement has communities they deem to be Vital Voices, and they work to amplify those, which is appreciated by artists in those communities."

- Artist survey respondent

Evidence gathering

Basement Theatre takes a reflective and adaptive approach to its operations, regularly using artist debriefs and artist surveys to self-evaluate the effectiveness of its programming and support. Insights gathered through these channels directly inform practice, allowing the team to respond to artist needs and refine delivery. In addition to internal evaluation, Basement Theatre actively participates in sector-facing innovation, serving as a testing ground for new models such as 'Choose What You Pay' ticketing, improving affordable access to artistic performance for audiences and providing valuable learning for the wider performing arts sector seeking to adopt similar initiatives.

Basement Theatre: Building artistic, social and cultural capital

As a long-standing fixture in the city's arts infrastructure, Basement Theatre continues to enable accessible arts engagement for a wide range of artists and audiences, operating as a venue run by and for the city's vibrant community of young and emerging creatives.

Creating a platform for emerging artistic development

According to tertiary partners and artists, Basement Theatre fills a gap in the post-tertiary ecosystem as one of the few venues in Tāmaki Makaurau designed to bridge the transition from graduate to professional creative practice. By offering accessible, low-risk opportunities to create, it supports new work while absorbing much of the financial risk faced by emerging artists. Stakeholders see this as a vital steppingstone for artistic careers, providing practical experience and a pathway to larger venues, with many artists crediting their success to formative years at Basement Theatre.

“It’s the only venue currently... that so many people can trace their artistic incubation to. I learned more from having shows there than I did doing an entire three-year [university] paper.”

- Basement Theatre artist

Basement Theatre has become a hub for artistic experimentation and discovery, with several artist-led shows evolving into established weekly events. A notable example is Snort (now Bull Rush), an improvised comedy show that built a loyal following at Basement Theatre while launching the careers of many prominent New Zealand comedians. Basement Theatre artists often cite it as evidence of the theatre's role in supporting emerging talent through consistent, low-barrier opportunities to perform, developing their audiences and progressing into larger venues.

“Look at the Snort crew... all of them started at Basement and they had a weekly space to hone their craft. All of them have flown hugely... that could only happen at Basement, it’s the only venue that would support it.”

- Basement Theatre artist



Basement Theatre's 15th Birthday Party - photo by Ankita Singh

A hub for artistic collaboration, connection and community

Basement Theatre also plays a vital role in fostering a cross-disciplinary artist community, where the diversity of its programme enables relationships that often grow into future collaborations and lasting friendships.

“I’ve made nearly all of the industry connections that I have through that venue... I have met all my closest friends through that space.”

- Basement Theatre artist

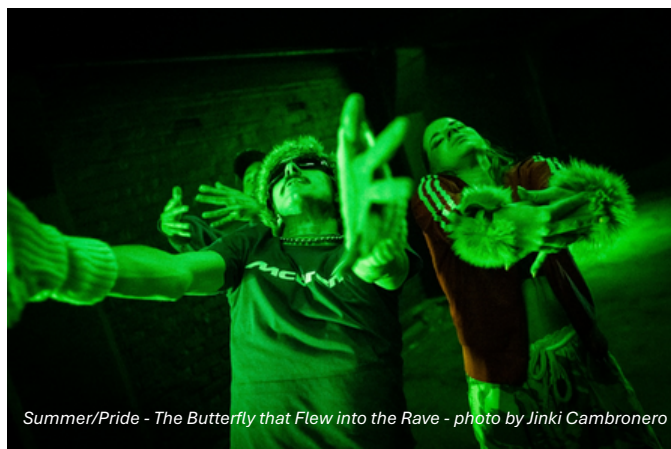
Stakeholders see the theatre’s greatest strength as its trusted relationships with Auckland’s grassroots artist community. Industry partners described the theatre as a go-to hub for new talent, creating opportunities to connect with independent artists and identify the next wave of creatives who will likely appear in theatre circuits in years to come.

Creating welcoming and inclusive access to performances and experiences

Stakeholders consistently identified Basement Theatre’s accessibility and affordability as key features of their kaupapa. The Hire-for-Nothing model, risk-sharing approach, and embedded support structures enable early-career and self-funded artists to create work without institutional backing, industry connections or financial pressures, lowering barriers to produce work that is authentic to them.

“The Hire for Nothing Programme enables me to try my hand at producing in a way that was low risk; it fully enabled me to be able to do this and, as a result of its success, has given me the encouragement to do it again.”

- Artists survey respondent



According to Basement Mates and audience survey respondents, Basement Theatre attracts diverse audiences through its central location, inclusive programming, and accessible pricing. Audiences also highlighted the venue’s welcoming atmosphere as distinct from other venues, describing it as a casual community space with approachable staff that foster a strong sense of belonging regardless of their involvement in the theatre’s artist community.

“I really like the inclusive vibe; I just feel really safe there. It's just a beautiful space and that's down to the staff and what they're programming... I refer to the space as my living room because I live really close by... I like I go hang out at the Basement and meet my mates there.”

- Basement Mate

Creating early career arts administration roles

In line with its kaupapa of supporting emerging talent, Basement Theatre creates jobs for early-career administrators, addressing the scarcity of junior roles in the New Zealand creative sector. This approach has proven effective, with many former staff moving into creative roles. Several current staff are also practising artists who first connected with Basement Theatre through its programmes or tertiary partnerships. Flexible working arrangements enable them to pursue their own projects alongside their roles, ensuring programmes are artist-led, shaped by lived experience, and remain responsive to the evolving needs of the creative community. As one staff member described:

“It's a great way to learn how to be in the arts sector without losing the spirit of being a practitioner... it's an opportunity to still be really deep within the artist community and learn about the arts industry, lobbying and advocacy.”

- Basement Theatre staff



Club Ruby, Forage Festival - photo by Alex Twindle

Basement Theatre: Delivering value for the people of Tāmaki Makaurau

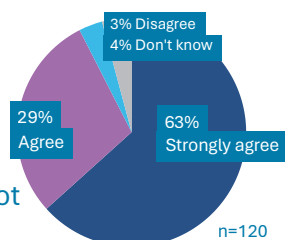
As a key stakeholder in the arts ecosystem as well as place-making in the central city urban infrastructure, Basement Theatre contributes to the social and economic health of arts and culture in Tāmaki Makaurau.

Fostering social cohesion and civic engagement through performance

Artist and audience survey data show that Basement Theatre attracts a diverse, atypical theatre audience. Its reputation as a home for marginalised and experimental artistry creates space for a broader range of social and cultural perspectives and experiences to be presented on stage. This is reflected in survey results, with 92% of respondents agreeing that Basement Theatre helps them encounter perspectives they might not otherwise see platformed elsewhere.

Audience survey:

Basement Theatre helps me see perspectives and experiences I might not encounter elsewhere



“I go to some shows that resonate with my background, and some to learn about other cultures... that educative value is super important.”

- Basement Mate

Audience survey respondents noted that Basement Theatre provides exposure to the diverse voices and perspectives that make up Tāmaki Makaurau. This includes Māori artforms alongside a wide range of cultural experiences, and representation from women, non-binary, and rainbow communities. Audiences valued the chance to step outside their own ‘bubble,’ engaging with underrepresented voices and learning from the performances they attended.

“I've been able to see a range of affordable shows about different cultures that give me snippets into other communities. It always feels unpretentious, affordable, encourages open minds, and is a safe space.”

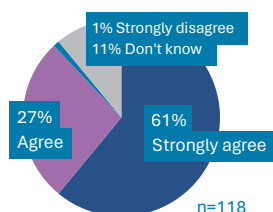
- Audience survey respondent

Representing and affirming diverse communities in Tāmaki Makaurau

Audiences and artists reported seeing themselves reflected in the theatres diverse programming, enabled through its Vital Voice mandate. According to the artist survey, 88% felt that Basement Theatre fosters new community relationships, while 87% said their show at Basement Theatre created pride and affirmation for their community. This sense of representation motivates artists to continue producing work that strengthens wellbeing, connection, and relevance within their networks.

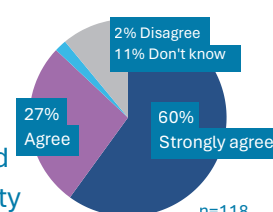
Artist survey:

Communities are forming new relationships through Basement



Artist survey:

Our show at Basement enabled a sense of pride and affirmation for my community



Making Auckland a creatively rich and liveable city

Across stakeholder groups, Basement Theatre is regarded as a vital arts institution in Tāmaki Makaurau, contributing to a more liveable, diverse, and creatively rich city through accessible, community-focused programming. Described by stakeholders as a “radical” initiative, Basement Theatre is seen as a reliable presence that houses independent artistry as broader urban changes unfold in the city centre.

“[It creates] huge amounts of artistic value and a real connection to the night-time economy. It keeps Queen St relevant and alive.”

- Audience survey respondent

Audiences and artists regard Basement Theatre as essential to sustaining Auckland’s creative economy, helping to prevent ‘brain drain’ by providing development opportunities and reasons for artists to stay in the city. Many highlighted the commitment and enthusiasm of the Basement Theatre team as key to keeping artists engaged and contributing to the region’s cultural life despite economic pressures.

“The enthusiasm that the Basement team has for these artists and the extra mile that they can go...contributes to people being able to give that extra part of themselves and get themselves over the line.”

– Basement Theatre artist

A stable institution in the face of sector turbulence

Stakeholders consistently described Basement Theatre as a revitalising force for Auckland’s arts sector, particularly in the aftermath of COVID-19 when many artists had lost access to funding and performance opportunities. The theatre played a critical role in helping artists and companies recover, for example by providing letters of support for funding applications that enabled shows to remount and organisations to resume activity.

“We got a massive amount of help from Basement and letters of support ... without that, we wouldn't have been able to get the show back.”

– Basement Theatre artist

The pandemic exposed the fragility of the arts ecosystem, underscoring the importance of cross-organisational collaboration. Basement Theatre continues to play a key role in this space, engaging in regular strategy and insight-sharing with sector counterparts in Auckland and other emerging artist venues across the country, including BATS (Wellington), Meteor (Hamilton), and Little Andromeda (Christchurch). This collaboration is particularly important as ongoing urban regeneration projects such as the construction of the City Rail Link continue to disrupt central city arts and hospitality businesses.

Despite sector-wide pressures, including reduced disposable income affecting audiences, fluctuating funding, and the vulnerability of artists in a difficult market, Basement Theatre has remained a resilient and reliable presence. It continues to deliver a consistent, high-volume year-round programme that surpasses other local venues in both stability and output, providing artists and audiences with confidence and continuity amidst uncertainty.

