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# UP FROM THE ROOTS:

Cultural Policy Hub Report  
May 2025

Conversations of precarity  
and resilience with arts and  
heritage leaders

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# Acknowledgements

## The Cultural Policy Hub at OCAD University

The Cultural Policy Hub is a national, bilingual network of researchers, policymakers, artists and creators from across Canada's academic, government, non-profit and private spheres. Through policy research, convening and analysis, we support cultural policymaking from the local to the national levels. We are an independent, objective partner in public policy issues to which the cultural sector contributes.

This report is presented as part of a two-year project titled Mapping Drivers of Change Across Arts Organizations. The project's objective is to support an evidence-based national policy conversation to address organizational precarity in Canada's not-for-profit arts and cultural sector, and explore the shift to a more sustainable, resilient and equitable system of practice and support for the arts and heritage in Canada. This project arrives during a time of considerable uncertainty in the sector and is part of a larger conversation in which many are engaged around what needs to change for the sector, not only to recover in a post-pandemic reality, but continue to grow and nurture a more sustainable, equitable and resilient sector in the years and decades to come.

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*This project is funded in part by the Government of Canada.*

# Canada

*The Cultural Policy Hub acknowledges the generous support of its funders:*



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In February 2025, the Cultural Policy Hub at OCAD U interviewed 20 leaders, researchers, thinkers, service organization leaders and funders from the arts, culture and heritage sector from around Canada to discuss the root causes of precarity and uncertainty currently facing the industry.

From the outside and from within, the arts ecology is perceived by many to be on fire, in peril, deeply suffering, uncertain and facing worsening precarity. However, as with all perceptions, they have corresponding realities that provide a more nuanced situation, one that is not focused on peril but on rebirth, renewal and newfound understanding of the need for deep, meaningful and sustained change.

The summary below of the root causes of uncertainty and precarity is intended to bring together as many of the similarities and connections as possible to find collective solutions and actions to move the ecology forward.

## ROOT CAUSES

These root causes are aggregated from discussions with the 20 arts and heritage leaders, who shared the challenges they see in their organizations and in their communities, as well as their understanding of the regional and national ecology.

### ■ Disconnection from Community or: “Where Did Everyone Go?”

Many arts organizations lack a definition of their external communities and feel disconnected from community needs. Participants asked: Can our organizations find new ways to understand the needs of a community? Can we embrace new tools, new technologies and new ideas to build a better understanding of the desires of the community? Could we learn more from our patrons by building more regular and accessible polling on our work?

## ■ **Mental Health and Staff Well-being:**

Every respondent we spoke with noted a need for better care for their leaders, staff and artists to serve their mental health and well-being, not only during this tumultuous time, but as policy for making a better organization. Artists and leaders are increasingly seeing "compassion" and living wages as the solution and are doing what they can to invest resources and build organizational structures that reflect this shift.

## ■ **Systemic Inequity:**

The current arts ecology has been built on colonial structures and systemic inequities that span generations. This moment is an opportunity to examine the colonial power and funding structures that have long underpinned and supported the arts and build new ones that will support a more resilient and equitable sector.

## ■ **Unknown Funding Futures:**

Current arts sector advocacy is hyper-focused on increased public funding. As most noted, the arts ecology can no longer wait to see what the future holds from the public funding world. Instead, they seek to find creative solutions to build ecologies and communities through diversified community engaged funding plans (i.e. diversified earned revenue, individual donors, corporate partnerships, new relationships with funders) that can bring security and long-term commitment from communities as partners in artmaking for generations to come.

## ■ **Lack of Adaptability & Governance Blockages or: "Why Is It So Hard to Change?"**

Organizations of all sizes and across the sector are open to change but are suffering from a lack of adaptability and immutable governance structures. Many solutions surfaced in this discussion, including using new technology and experiments to break down knowledge and process barriers to understanding and engaging with change within an organization. Participants also expressed a desire to access more case studies and build their understanding of new/changed/innovative models of board leadership and governance that could be considered and tested by more organizations.

## ■ **Undervaluation of Arts Expertise and Insufficient Risk Capital or: "Why Don't You Trust Us Anymore?"**

Participants expressed the view that the arts ecology has lost the battle of building the kind of imagined art world that allows investment at powerful levels and encourages lifelong engagement. Two needs were identified: the need to build extensive and collaborative partnerships with the commercial arts sector; and the need to engage together in building the arts ecology whether organizations are charitable or commercial.

## ■ **Rightsizing, Downsizing, Merging and Sunsetting Organizational Models:**

There was philosophical discussion of what the correct “size” of an organization is based on the needs and size of community and on available funding. There was discussion of how to “rightsizing” organizations based on income potential and the intended impact for the community. To date, organizations have tried utilizing income generation models, engaging with financial and investment advisors, testing new community and engagement programs, having frank conversations with funders and donors and seeking out long-term partners with potential income-positive relationships.

## Conclusions and Actions

Based on all of the conversations, and in addition to the many potential actions noted in the research, here are actions that all arts, culture and heritage communities can take right now to fight against the root causes and stem the uncertainty of precarity in this current moment. (See the full narrative for detailed actions, recommendations and examples of next steps being taken within the ecology.)

### ■ **Stop The Crisis Narrative:**

The arts, culture and heritage sector is not in crisis mode, it is in chrysalis mode.

### ■ **Collaborate. For Real:**

The arts can flourish together. Leaders must get past ego, competitive nature and funding challenges to collaborate deeply with one another.

### ■ **Focus on Care:**

Organizations of all types, sizes and locales will benefit from additional support to focus on care for artists, staff, leaders and community.

### ■ **Embrace Technology and AI:**

It's time for the arts, culture and heritage sector to embrace the coming future of technology and AI.

### ■ **Share Data and Knowledge:**

Organizations cannot remain siloed in their operations, creativity and resources.

## ■ **Get Loud, Get Local and Advocate:**

The arts, culture and heritage sector has always suffered from a lack of understanding of its collective impact on the economy, and more importantly day-to-day life of a Canadian.

Throughout these conversations, the message being communicated by these leaders emerged as follows:

- **Only through deep collaboration can innovative models of operation emerge that allow the flexibility to build a new ecology;**
- **Advocacy, the ethical embrace of AI and technology can help us send the message, build the processes and fill the gaps;**
- **The new arts, culture and heritage ecology must be focused on new models, financial stability and care for artists and staff.**

In considering all of the root causes, challenges and gaps raised during these conversations, it's clear that there are too many for arts organizations and their leaders to resolve on their own.

The leaders we spoke to see these challenges and are working to solve them. They are ready to contribute to change and collaboration across the sector.

With the right support and resources in place, new models and innovations will emerge from within the sector. The next phases of the Cultural Policy Hub's project will focus on working with partners on how to make this happen.

# Introduction

**In February 2025, the Cultural Policy Hub at OCAD U interviewed 20 leaders, researchers, thinkers, service organization leaders and funders from across Canada’s arts, culture and heritage sector to discuss the root causes of precarity and uncertainty currently facing the industry. The discussions were focused on finding next steps, amplifying new ideas, building examples, learning from tests and ideating the future. From these discussions, a map of potential pathways emerges, actions for leaders to take are highlighted and stories and examples to inspire and guide future decisions are featured (for more on methodology, see Appendix A).**

As the current moment in the arts, culture and heritage sector is considered, it is important to look at the 30,000-foot view of the state of our ecology. From the outside and from within, the arts ecology is perceived by many to be on fire, in peril, deeply suffering, uncertain and facing worsening precarity. However, as with all perceptions, they have corresponding realities that provide a more nuanced situation, one that is not focused on peril, but on rebirth, renewal and newfound understanding of the need for deep, meaningful and sustained change.

Leaders, thinkers and engaged advocates from across the cultural landscape discussed their fear for the overreliance on the crisis narratives that have guided the news about our sector since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. These narratives have changed how organizations engage with their closest supporters in all areas, and in some cases have eroded support from patrons, donors, funders and/or municipalities. The organizations must shift the support back in their favor. It takes time and effort to reintroduce themselves to their communities and build new pathways to support.

There were many reasons noted for the current ecological and operational state. Many have opined about COVID shutdowns, fearful audiences, frustrated artists, disengaged communities, immutable boards and unresponsive funders. All of these are true for many in our community. They are more true for some, and less for others. This is the reality of a diversified ecology of cultural organizations. Some are finding success financially, while struggling with staffing and engagement. Others are finding financial stability to be difficult to control, while seeking deep partnerships and potential new pathways forward. Their realities are diverse. The assessment below of the root causes of uncertainty and precarity is intended to bring together as many of the similarities and connections as possible to find collective solutions and collective actions to move the ecology forward.



## Root Causes—Disconnection from Community or: “Where Did Everyone Go?”

Many arts organizations lack a definition of their external communities and feel disconnected from community needs. Participants in the interviews asked questions that reflected that sense of disconnection, such as: “Do we know who we serve?” and “Do we understand what constitutes a member of our community?” They questioned the extent to which the average Canadian views the arts as important, or the importance Canadians place on having access to arts spaces in their everyday lives.

Many participants in the conversations noted that the arts have a delivery problem, especially post-COVID. Throughout the early months of the arts shutdown period, some organizations were forced to make difficult concessions in how they engaged with the community. Some were, by their own admission, solely focused on keeping their organizations solvent; others were able to make space for community, and still others leaned heavily on their community. In these interviews, most organizational leaders shared that they were focused on crisis management and organizational survival for the first six months of the pandemic. As they regained capacity and focus, those organizations saw the communities they served change, shift, shrink and disengage, and have struggled to get them back to galleries, theatres, museums and other cultural spaces in the time since.

They spoke about how attempts at “back to normal” campaigns have built a deeper disengagement from audiences as many of their tastes and ways of accessing art have changed. There are powerful and amazing artistic presentations on offer, but the industry has not mastered delivery models for the current moment that meet the prevailing cultural, social and intellectual climate. There was agreement that the connection to the community is based on the effort and creativity shown to them, not just on performance or opening days, but all year long.

**“We must serve as a living, breathing part of the community and not just a traditional institution.”**

**“Our gallery, historically, has been free to the public. That is an example of entire accessibility. It means there’s no economic requirement to have access. Well, last year, due to our current situation, we introduced a \$15 fee to get into the gallery. It was terrible. We saw our visitorship go down by two thirds that summer.”**

## More Current Discussions/Tests in Connecting to Community:

- One respondent spoke of communities, throughout the world, where the arts and the spaces connected to the arts are communal, used for arts and non-arts life alike. A community resource. How do we reach those that are not interested or ready to join us for our creative output? Even if our work doesn't resonate with them, art is still essential, and building other access points for the community is necessary.
- Another respondent discussed the need for seasons of non-arts programming at arts spaces.
- Multiple respondents discussed more open-door policies and providing essential services, such as serving as polling and community meeting places.

All these ideas are being tested and assessed by organizations throughout North America. Participants asked many questions about what is possible in regard to the future of communal connections:

- “Can our organizations find new ways to understand the needs of a community?”
- “Can we embrace new tools, new technologies and new ideas to build a better understanding of the desires of the community?”
- “Could we learn more from our patrons by building more regular and accessible polling on our work?”

## Root Causes—Mental Health and Staff Well-being

Every respondent we spoke with noted a need for better care for their leaders, staff and artists to serve their mental health and well-being, not only during this tumultuous time, but as policy for making a better organization. The ecology's overreliance on “passion” to justify artists and cultural workers working more and earning less than those in other sectors is starting to shift. Artists and leaders are increasingly seeing “compassion” and living wages as the solution, and are doing what they can to invest resources and building organizational structures that reflect this shift.

**“The old ways lead to burnout, burnout in leadership, in staff, in terms of people’s mental health as well. This seriously impacted us, because of this precarity, and it affects how we hire, who we can hire and how we retain people, which is critical to the health of our organizations.”**

**“I think we truly need to celebrate our wins and so often we don’t. We have no time to do that, because we’re just running. One of my staff pulled me aside, and she was like, you need to pause, you need to celebrate...I was just like, well, this is what I need to do to make sure we have money to pay you all in three months.”**

To build an artistic class in our culture, some encouraged governments to participate in discussions around Universal Basic Income (UBI) for artists, to ensure their continued engagement in the fabric of the community. It was highlighted that our ecology needs artists to serve our communities, provide creative solutions, build beauty and engage with other elements of the common good. To do this, many noted, there must be advocacy to better grasp and accept the value of artistic expression.

**“My blue sky is to really see a strong pilot for universal basic income for artists, and to see after a few years, what the impact of that could be. I think that would be really powerful.”**

There were many discussions of the effects of inaction around mental health. Organizations without support for mental health care and well-being are experiencing low retention rates, workers leaving the sector, salary concerns, lack of workplace stability, toxic workplaces and a lack of sustained momentum on organizational change. Workers in the sector are realizing they can be compensated better in other industries and this reality, along with high stress and crisis-focused workplaces, is guiding the best potential workers away from the sector. Existing research ([Hill Strategies](#)) shows that less than 50% of arts, culture and heritage organizations currently have mental health support in place. Many noted this situation is in crisis and needs immediate attention from organizations, funders and service organizations.

### **More Current Discussions/Tests in Mental Health and Staff Well-Being:**

- **Implement trauma-informed and harm-reductive frameworks in organizations of all kinds.**
- **Provide training and development opportunities focused on mental health and well-being for staff members.**
- **Pilot other benefits to support mental health, such as community leave programs, sabbaticals, and additional paid leave options.**
- **Plan a thriving wage pathway for employees to reduce financial stress.**
- **Develop clear reporting protocols for incidents that may impact mental health.**

- **Implement Universal Basic Income pilot programs for artists to alleviate financial pressures and build cultural engagement.**
- **Foster a culture of collaboration and support within the arts sector to address mental health challenges collectively.**
- **Explore innovative community-driven initiatives that promote mental well-being, such as co-working spaces and retreat-like annual camps.**

## Root Causes—Systemic Inequity

The current arts ecology has been built on colonial structures and systemic inequities that span generations. This moment is an opportunity to examine the power and funding structures that have long underpinned and supported the arts and build new ones that will support a more resilient and equitable sector. This rebuild provides an opportunity to repair the disparities in funding and support for underrepresented communities and to better reflect the diversity of our communities. As has been noted previously, this ecology is a mosaic of elements and there are many narratives of what the root causes of our uncertainty are.

In discussion, leaders of Indigenous organizations noted that they are experiencing a unique set of challenges due to their direct service to their communities. While their work has audiences and garners public interest, they are having difficulty securing artists from their community who are available for/interested in these opportunities to present their work. These organizations have the funds, the space and built-in audiences, but they lack the local artists to build their artistic output. Leaders noted how the commodification of Indigenous artists' time and efforts (especially through engagement by/with non-Indigenous organizations) has a potentially negative impact on the larger Indigenous arts communities' growth.

Funding challenges are different than they were just a decade ago for Indigenous organizations: while funding is more accessible and inclusive of their work, building a diverse ecology of Indigenous organizations of different sizes and focuses continues to be a struggle.

Indigenous leaders discussed reparation programs that could help build arts and culture organizations that have been systematically underserved. These reparative funding practices exist in Canada in reaction to residential schools and treaty contravention, and arts-based programs exist in the US, that have worked to find ways to build reparative practices towards building Indigenous-, Black- and racialized-led organizations to levels that are on par with white-led organizations.

**"Seven years ago, there was not an Indigenous performing arts company with an operating budget over a million dollars. Now there might be three. So I think there are still lots of reasons to worry. I don't see that there's any stability."**

**"When Indigenous leaders move to non-Indigenous organizations, we leave a void within our own community, and we don't have the funding necessary to create succession plans so that we're actually able to mentor people within our community or from our community to take on these leadership roles."**

In discussion with Black and racialized leaders in the sector, they experienced different realities than white-led organizations based on their proximity to community and mission to direct service. Some noted that they are not experiencing a loss or disconnection from community the way that many white-led organizations are, but they are experiencing challenges from the changes imposed by government and private funding bodies.

**"There's a study in Australia where they invest funds that can focus on certain groups in order to benefit the long-term objectives and benefit culture and society and the country as a whole. And in this study, they focused on investing in Black women. And because Black women have this really unique position within society when it comes to their experience, and by directly investing into Black female leadership, there was a huge uptake and measurable benefits across the entire culture and society."**

**"I learned how to lead in a white led arts organization, and that didn't quite fit into running an arts organization for Black, Indigenous, people of color. And I learned that within the first three months of leading in that job, that all the things that I've learned don't really work here."**

### **More Current Discussions/Tests in Counteracting Systemic Inequity:**

- Many noted that amplification of the work being done in community by both Indigenous leaders and Black and racialized leaders and organizations could serve as pathways towards a new arts ecology. This could include:

- Building case studies of the community engagement process to build understanding of the deep connections held by these organizations.
- Supporting and resourcing these organizations to continue to develop innovative ideas for continued engagement.
- Community-led curation and programming, for example: small museums that hand over curation to the community, transforming narratives and spaces. Vancouver's **Chinese Canadian Museum** is an example of an organization working for and with its community.
- In Toronto, **Balancing Act's initiatives, such as its Level UP! program**, are funding specifically for caregiving and accessibility in arts organizations, addressing barriers that disproportionately affect certain communities and supporting consultation and evaluation for organizations to implement greater supports for caregivers and parents.
- The Indigenous Infrastructure Audit, a concept focusing on knowledge and resources needed to support Indigenous artists and productions, could help address gaps in infrastructure that prevent full participation.
- Several organizations are revising policies to be more culturally informed, including observing cultural and religious holidays, offering summer hiatus periods, and finding pathways to commit to paying living wages, with input from full time and part-time staff to ensure inclusivity.
- Some discussed introducing honoraria for board members to improve retention and diversity, recognizing that unpaid board positions create barriers to participation.

## Root Causes—Unknown Funding Futures

Current arts sector advocacy is hyper-focused on increased public funding. The future of public funding is unclear and provides no security for an ecology already reeling from loss of income in the recent past due to the global pandemic. Relationships with funders are transactional, lacking effective communication and collaboration. As the vast majority of participants noted, the arts ecology can no longer wait to see what the future holds when it comes to public funding. Instead, they are seeking creative solutions to build ecologies and communities through diversified community engaged funding plans (i.e. diversified earned revenue, individual donors, corporate partnerships, new relationships with funders) that build security and long-term commitment from communities as partners in artmaking for generations to come. In response, there is a growing movement within the arts sector advocating for new models of funding that open up access and remove barriers to inclusion, as well as more equitable and forward-thinking uses of existing funding.

Most of the participants interviewed called for innovation, beta testing and learning how private, public and earned funding can be best engaged for each organization. Support is strong for breaking the current models and considering significant changes to the way the industry functions, funds and engages with the community.

**“My sense is that the pervasive call of the arts sector to ask for more public funding is a plea to retain its position as a social good, as a public good. However, this public good aspect of the arts sector has been eroded by neoliberal capitalist frameworks.”**

Many in our conversations discussed the need to reassess the charitable donation potential at the federal level and in conversations with community. There was agreement that more could be done through advocacy to enhance the value of individuals providing charitable donations to arts organizations. This area of funding has untapped potential based on the innovations in artmaking around the country.

**“I would make it much, much easier in Canada and much more valuable in Canada to donate money. I think that the system right now and how little impact it has on somebody’s tax outcomes is problematic.”**

One concept that continued to be amplified was the need to learn to depend on public/foundation funding less and how to use it more strategically and thoughtfully rather than through its historical structure of having a set number of granting programs. On the other side of the discussion, funders noted an erosion of trust between themselves and grantees due to repeated crisis narratives, the funders’ need for changes to accountability and expectations that have been reset during the pandemic period.

**“Let’s stop talking about public funding, and let’s start talking about public incentives. Because public funding implies that we’re just asking for money. Public incentives implies that we’re asking for a partnership where we’re going to deliver on something.”**

### **More Current Discussions/Tests in Public Funding Practices:**

- There was acknowledgment that funders hold significant power in the ecosystem, which can perpetuate the status quo. Discussions centered on how to use this power responsibly, and share the power equitably, to encourage positive change.

- Respondents noted they wanted to build new, deeper and more innovative relationships with funders as organizations continue to change. The better their relationships with funders are, the more open and transparent this shared journey becomes.
- Funders discussed the challenges of creating flexible funding programs that support operations while offering the flexibility for organizations to respond to unique opportunities or react to unexpected challenges. There's a need to maintain some operational support while allowing for strategic flexibility.
- Initiatives to develop a cohort-led platform were mentioned as a positive example of funders working with grantees to navigate equity conversations and challenges.
- The idea of term-limited funding programs to encourage organizations to develop sustainable business models or build another plan for their lifecycle (i.e. merging, sunseting, etc.).
- There was emphasis on the importance of arts organizations creating belonging and connection within their communities, suggesting funders should prioritize grantees who effectively engage with their local populations.

## Root Causes—Lack of Adaptability & Governance Blockages or: “Why Is It So Hard to Change?”

Organizations of all sizes and across the sector are open to the idea of change but are suffering from a lack of adaptability and immutable governance structures. The current challenges seem centered around legacy employees who are unwilling to change, or executive- and mid-level leaders with gaps in their knowledge or inexperience with how to manage during change. The challenges that are most recognizable are those around delayed or rogue board governance, disconnected or over empowered board leadership and leadership fear of change. Organizations that are averse to risk will be unlikely to find new opportunities for their future. How can the industry equip leaders with the skills they need along with the freedom to build forward-thinking organizations?

**“As we pivot into our new reality, I find that it calls for a different kind of employee, it calls for a different kind of professional. That extends to a different kind of board member and partner.”**



**“We are struggling with finding the employees that can make change... that can take who it is that we are today and work alongside me, and in some cases, lead ahead of me, where we become this organization that we are promising to be and that I know we can be.”**

There were many actions that surfaced in the discussions in regard to building more adaptability and working through governance blockages. Many of them focused on using new technology and experiments to break down knowledge and process barriers to understanding and engaging with change within an organization. Participants also expressed a desire to access more case studies and build their understanding of new/changed/innovative models of board leadership and governance that could be considered and tested by more organizations.

**“Nobody should ever be paying a grant writer ever again in the age of AI. In fact, nobody needs to right now, and very few people I know are still doing that old school grant writing. Pretty soon all grants will be written by your AI, and then it’s only a matter of time before they’re read by AIs as well.”**

**“Data and technology, both the tools and the expertise are a really big issue...almost no arts [organizations] in Canada is really being data driven. Similarly, we lack the capacity, technology and funding to onboard AI and all of the things that could be tools to serve our potential.”**

### **More Current Discussions/Tests in Adaptability:**

- Talk to your fellow arts leaders, professors, funders and advocates and discuss the work being done in AI and technology to build adaptable models of operation and to help governance issues. Collaborate. Convene. Test. Learn.
- Utilizing AI models for grant writing, proposal writing, research for funding opportunities, paying bills, financial reporting, notetaking, drafting agendas and meeting scheduling.
- Technology to schedule communications, automate report financial and operational results. Feed your annual report into a chatbot and then tell your board they can ask the chatbot anything about the company and it will answer their questions. Use technology to better understand by-laws and ways to enhance and diversify governance models.

- Engaging on the impact of climate change on outdoor events and on long-term planning. How can the arts, culture and heritage sector become leaders in working with new climate technology?

## Root Causes—Undervaluation of Arts Expertise and Insufficient Risk Capital or: “Why Don’t You Trust Us Anymore?”

Participants expressed the view that the arts ecology has lost the battle of building the kind of imagined art world that allows investment at powerful levels and encourages lifelong engagement. Respondents noted that many community-changing creative and cultural projects are being built by the wealthiest organizations and the wealthiest of patrons. They asked: Have we lost the ability to explain the value of our expertise? The value of our critical thinking, collaboration and creativity? Have we forgotten to mention that the content on Netflix is art? That Mirvish and Broadway are art? As a Canadian arts ecology, has the community ever had the power to demonstrate that innovative, engaging, inspiring and communal creative projects can bring people together in powerful ways?

**“There is an artificial impression within the community that we are funded to a greater degree than we are. So most citizens of our community believe us to be primarily government funded, and [we endure] all the cynicism that comes with that.”**

Some in conversation spoke about the need to build extensive and collaborative partnerships with the commercial arts sector. They noted a need to engage together in building the arts ecology whether organizations are charitable or commercial. How can the charitable sector access the risk capital inherent in commercial art to engage artists and communities in new experiences?

**“One thing I would love is to have a commercial theater scene in Canada. I think that the inability to have a pass back of private capital that isn’t just through a charitable frame is very problematic. So we have no West End, we have no Broadway. There’s one commercial producer who basically just does whatever the hell they want, and it means that there’s nowhere for the work to go from the nonprofits to anywhere else, and there’s no pass back of significant capital that commercial theaters can create.”**

## More Current Discussions/Tests in Building Value:

- Encouragement, support and collaboration with commercial producers, venues, and other elements of the commercial arts industry to better share resources and engage our communities more widely. There is a need for innovation in regard to the structure of these partnerships, allowing for testing of new ideas, as well as financial and resource support for those processes. Ideas include:
  - Commercially funded investment capital for production and development
  - Re-use of materials and administrative capacity from commercial productions (imagine a closed immersive or theatrical production that is recycling tons of construction material, that could be reused by the charitable sector).
- Encouragement of commercial structure for new arts organizations, where appropriate.
- Impact investing has continued to be discussed. But for many, early discussions of the impact investing potential continue to leave more questions than answers. There are current research projects delving into the potential and many are awaiting more information before pursuing this pathway.
- Building tax credits and a financial structure for creative exploration.
- Having rehearsal studios, music recording rooms and dance studios in libraries and publicly owned spaces. Bring artists into everyday buildings, into everyday life.

## Root Causes—Rightsizing, Downsizing, Merging and Sunsetting our Organizational Models

Interviewees asked many questions for our industry to consider, including:

- “What size are our organizations supposed to be?”
- “Are we supposed to be financially inflated as organizations, based on our funding relationships rather than our income potential?”
- “Why do we continue to assume government funding will fill the revenue “holes” in our budgets?”
- “Why are our budgets aspirational, rather than being based on data and research?”

These questions from leaders and thinkers were a large part of the discussion regarding how to “rightsized” or “downsize” organizational models. This discussion, along with discussions of leadership structures, staff structures and board structures were front and center in assessing what the future ecology looks like.

In some of the interviews there was philosophical discussion of what the correct “size” of an organization is based on community needs, size of community and funding. There was discussion of how to “rightsize” organizations based on income potential and intended effect on the community. There were multiple pathways that organizations have taken, including utilizing income generation models, engaging with financial and investment advisors, testing new community and engagement programs, having frank conversations with funders and donors and seeking out long-term partners with potential income-positive relationships.

Other questions that arose from leaders were “What is the lifespan of an arts organization?” and “Should it live forever?” There was discussion of potential mergers, asset allocations, long-term operational partnerships, closures and sunseting. And there was agreement that there is a need for more innovation, data sharing and case studies in this area.

**"We need to be more collaborative in our approach. We can't do it alone. We need to work together to address the challenges facing the sector."**

With regards to future models of operation, there were questions about the viability of the dual-leadership model (artistic and operational leaders sharing power). Participants noted that explorations, examples and case studies of other models of leadership models were needed. There were deep discussions of potential partnerships, mergers and collaborations and the potential value they bring to communities. There are innovative ideas in partnership, including shared spaces, shared operations and co-fundraising happening around Canada, and arts leaders benefit from staying informed on their progress and potential impacts.

### **More Current Discussions/Tests in Organizational Modeling:**

- Arts service organizations were highlighted in these areas as a portion of the ecology that could provide more support to organizations in change processes:
  - There are a great deal of needs that an organization faces when it is undergoing change (usually while continuing to deliver programming), and Arts Service Organizations (ASOs) are in a position to provide support based on their missions to serve organizations in the current moment.
  - It was also noted that ASOs need to increase their level of expertise and meet the moment for organizations in change with useful, realistic and action-based resources.
- New coalitions between the arts community and sectors like healthcare and education that already function on different organizational models.

- Embedding arts organizations within local communities with deep support, balancing community-focused work with commercial viability.
- Need for a more relational and collaborative approach to organizational structures, moving away from the hierarchical and competitive models.
- Establishing community ownership models for arts venues and organizations, such as cooperatives or community investment initiatives.
- Accessible, thorough and easy to understand resources for leaders to begin considering new organizational, staffing and leadership structures.

## Conclusions and Actions

The root causes that have been discussed in this work provide a window into the day-to-day decisions and difficulties faced by leaders in the arts, culture and heritage sector. Interviewees spoke openly and honestly about their experiences, as well as their hopes and their fears. This is not, however, a comprehensive assessment and it does not define everyone's experience of the current moment. Some organizations are facing one, two or all of these root causes, and each organization is experiencing them uniquely.

Based on all of the conversations, and in addition to the many potential actions noted in the research, here are actions that all arts, culture and heritage communities can take right now to fight against an array of root causes and stem the precarity in this current moment.

### ■ Stop The Crisis Narrative:

The arts, culture and heritage sector is not in crisis mode, it is in chrysalis mode. It is being reborn, not being torn down. Philosophically, this is the stage when the ecology realizes that life is shifting and the old ways of doing things are no longer working for communities. The arts, culture and heritage world is a mature industry that is based in a colonial and biased power structure. The sector is fighting to let go of the past and achieve its deep economic potential. Things that are being reborn deserve and require support and engagement. It is much more valuable to the community to be in rebirth, rather than crisis or peril.

### ■ Collaborate, For Real:

The arts can flourish together. Leaders must get past ego, competitive nature and funding challenges to collaborate deeply with one another. This can not only save time, effort and money in operating organizations, but will help those organizations serve communities more effectively. This must go beyond artistic collaborations and settle fully into operations, management and most importantly, fundraising. If organizations can learn to raise funds collectively to support themselves and their communities, it opens new opportunities for income streams. The collaborations should include ASOs and funders. This could even allow the industry to address our facility needs in a communal way, learning from such current and past ideas as Artscape and current land trusts.

### ■ Focus on Care:

Artists and leaders are increasingly seeing "compassion" and living wages as the solution and are doing what they can to invest resources and building organizational structures that reflect this shift. Funders and policymakers can acknowledge this shift

by supporting resource allocation that has positive impacts on artists' and cultural workers' quality of work, and quality of life. The recruitment of a future arts, culture and heritage workforce depends on the sector's ability to build welcoming and resilient workplaces.

## ■ **Embrace Technology and AI:**

It's time for the arts, culture and heritage world to embrace the coming future of technology and AI. Organizations need individual, internal policy addressing the ethical use of AI and to begin collaboratively building their own tools to serve their work effectively. The arts ecology needs better literacy on AI tools, clarity on why they are useful, training and skills for back-office and collaborations with others who are experts at building solutions. Technology and AI can shift work in astronomical ways. Learn. Engage. Test.

## ■ **Share Data and Knowledge:**

Organizations are siloed in their operations, creativity and resources. Canada's colonial history has led to a scarcity mindset that pervades many cultural management models. Breaking those models and building partnerships and communications channels takes time and effort. But this is the moment for organizations to invest in sharing new models and ways of working with each other and their community. Organizations need to come together to learn from one another as they all manage unprecedented times. They need to build more opportunities to convene, engage, learn and rest together. Start small. But start sharing now.

## ■ **Get Loud, Get Local and Advocate:**

The arts, culture and heritage sector has always suffered from a lack of understanding of its collective impact on the economy, and more importantly the day-to-day lives of Canadians. In the current environment of chaotic and pervasive change, the sector can only be stabilized by its success stories and the fruit of years of showing impact across communities. Those stories need to be told now more than ever, and louder than they ever have. It's time to show the impact of the arts on the health and well-being of the average Canadian. It's time to change the narrative from "more money" to "more respect, more time, more attention, more artists in more rooms."

There are connections between these actions and their corresponding root causes. Within the context of all of these root causes is a desire to take better care of our staff and artists by increasing salaries and benefits, building more resilient workplaces and developing policies that encourage retention. However, that then requires more resources and funding to do the same programmatic work. For many it is that simple. And stark. That is a reality for many as they assess how to better structure their organizations to serve communities of the future. Then there are modifiers to that equation in the face of AI, Technology, Advocacy, and Collaboration.

Each of these modifiers, themselves root causes of our precarity, can serve to open up capacity and provide the space for innovation and a future-focused ecology. In considering all the discussions, their root causes, challenges, gaps, solutions and actions, the message being communicated by these leaders emerges as:

- Only through deep collaboration can innovative models of operation emerge that allow the flexibility to build a new ecology;
- Advocacy, the ethical embrace of AI and technology can help us send the message, build the processes and fill the gaps;
- The new arts, culture and heritage ecology must be focused on new models, financial stability and care for artists and staff.

In considering all of the root causes, challenges and gaps raised during these conversations, it's clear that there are too many for arts organizations and their leaders to resolve on their own.

The leaders we spoke to embrace these challenges and are working to solve them. They are ready to contribute to change and collaboration across the sector.

With the right support and resources in place, new models and innovations will emerge from within the sector. The next phases of the Cultural Policy Hub's project will focus on working with partners on how to make this happen.



# Appendix A

## OCAD Precarity and Resilience Project: Phase I Methodology

### Project Overview

In the summer of 2024, researchers at the Cultural Policy Hub began compiling arts and culture data from a number of public sources as part of the first phase of a two-year project titled Mapping Drivers of Change Across Arts Organizations. The project's objective is to support an evidence-based national policy conversation to address organizational precarity in Canada's not-for-profit arts, culture and heritage sector, and explore how to shift to a more sustainable, resilient and equitable system of practice and support for the arts and heritage in Canada. This project arrives during a time of considerable uncertainty and is part of a larger conversation in which many are engaged around what needs to change for the sector—not only to recover in a post-pandemic reality, but continue to grow and nurture a more sustainable, equitable and resilient sector in the years and decades to come.

### Research Approach

A qualitative research methodology was employed to capture in-depth insights and lived experiences from leaders across various disciplines within the arts, culture and heritage sector. Our research included organizational leaders, industry experts, researchers, professors, funders and arts service organization leaders from across Canada. This approach allowed for an exploration of the interconnected factors that contribute to precarity and uncertainty in the sector.

### Data Collection

Participants were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods to ensure a broad and representative cross-section of voices, including those from well-established institutions and other essential parts of the arts ecology. Interviews were conducted via online platforms to maximize accessibility and participation.

### Interview Structure

The interviews were guided by a framework designed to explore key themes related to precarity in the sector, including but not limited to:

- The challenges faced by organizations and artists in this precarious moment;
- The gaps to finding solutions for our most pressing challenges;
- The solutions arts organizations and artists are currently engaging in, partnering on, discussing, ideating or considering at this moment.

Participants were encouraged to share their perspectives openly, allowing for emergent themes to be captured alongside predefined research areas.

## Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed (with the assistance of Otter AI) and subjected to thematic analysis by two researchers. In addition, using an iterative AI process, themes were identified and categorized based on frequency, relevance and impact. ChatGPT software was used to assist in data organization and pattern recognition. The analysis prioritized intersectionality, recognizing the compounding effects of various systemic inequities on different demographic groups within the sector.

## Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical research standards, ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent and confidentiality. Participants were given the option to remain anonymous, and data security measures were implemented to protect interview transcripts and findings.

## Limitations

While this research provides critical insights into the challenges facing the arts, culture and heritage sector, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The study's qualitative nature means findings are not statistically generalizable, and perspectives may vary based on regional and institutional contexts. Additionally, the focus on larger organizations and leadership voices may not fully capture the experiences of frontline workers, small- and mid-size organizations or emerging artists.

## Conclusion

By documenting the root causes of precarity and uncertainty, this research aims to contribute to ongoing sectoral discussions and inform policy recommendations that support greater stability and sustainability in the arts ecology. The findings serve as a resource for practitioners, policymakers and advocates working toward systemic change in the arts, culture and heritage sector.