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# ARTS OTTAWA:

## A human-centered merger to respond to community needs

Cultural Policy Hub  
Case Study  
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In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the newly appointed executive directors of two Ottawa-based arts service organizations, Ottawa Arts Council and Arts Network Ottawa, met to discuss how they could collaborate to address a range of issues impacting their community. Galvanized by the unprecedented challenges the arts, culture and heritage sector was facing at that time, these two organizations saw an opportunity to move past cooperation and merge into a new organization—Arts Ottawa. This merger was guided not by the need to reduce administrative overhead or optimize finances, but by a desire to transform their models and activities to expand their impact and to help address the root causes of the precarity they were observing.

#### Key facts about Arts Ottawa

Type: Arts service organization

Location: Ottawa, Ontario

Budget: \$600K to \$900K

Staff: 5 full-time employees, 1 part-time, over 30 volunteers

Community served: ~ 50 organizations and 280+ individuals

In this case study, the Cultural Policy Hub explores the history of the merger of Ottawa Arts Council and Arts Network Ottawa into Arts Ottawa, the motivations and processes that led to this merger and its outcomes. This study is based on an interview with Cassandra Olsthoorn, Arts Ottawa's Co-Leader in charge of Strategy & Community Mobilization, formerly Executive Director of Arts Network Ottawa.

## 1982–2020: Parallel operations and mixed signals

The Ottawa Arts Council and what was first known as Arts Gloucester (then Arts Ottawa East, AOE Arts Council and finally, Arts Network Ottawa) started their activities in the 1980s with distinct jurisdictions. The idea to merge the two organizations was first raised during the City's amalgamation in 2001, but the Ottawa Arts Council and Arts Network Ottawa (Arts Ottawa East, AOE at the time) were pursuing different goals, with AOE focusing its efforts on lobbying to get an arts facility in Eastern Ottawa.

Throughout the 2000s, the two arts service organizations remained independent but often found opportunities to collaborate. As part of the Ottawa Cultural Alliance, they advocated for the completion of the City of Ottawa's *Renewed Action Plan for Arts, Culture and Heritage in Ottawa (2013–18)*, and they worked together to facilitate the creation of a community-driven *New Cultural Roadmap for Ottawa 2019–2022* to guide and inform decision-making regarding future cultural policy, planning, programs, investment, infrastructure and services.<sup>1</sup> In this roadmap, the Ottawa Arts Council and Arts Network Ottawa (ANO) spoke in favour of sector collaboration, but did not at the time consider merging as an option.

According to Co-Leader in charge of Strategy & Community Mobilization Cassandra Olsthoorn, the Ottawa Arts Council and ANO were both financially healthy arts service organizations in 2020, the year they started exploring a radical transformation of their models. While many

<sup>1</sup> The Ottawa Cultural Alliance includes these two organizations along with: Capital Heritage Connexion (CHC|CPC), Heritage Ottawa, Ottawa Festivals Network, Ottawa Museum Network and Ottawa Music Industry Coalition.

mergers are born out of crisis situations or severe strains on resources, in this instance, both organizations had good membership, stable staffing and what they describe as a “solid financial position.”<sup>2</sup> They received positive responses to their programs from the non-profits they served, and there was a lot of trust between the organizations and their community, though the relationships were often “very transactional.”

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*“There was a feeling of split leadership within our sector, because there were two broad arts voices, so who is supposed to be saying what? And so, we were collaborating all the time, but still it kind of split the attention, (...) split the focus of the messaging.” – Cassandra Olsthoorn*

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Olsthoorn describes that it felt to the Ottawa Arts Council, to ANO and to the non-profits they served that the same conversations were happening repeatedly without getting to the root cause of issues, leading to frustration and a lack of efficiency in their advocacy.

## 2020–2024: Undertaking a rapid organizational transformation to achieve long-term systemic change

The idea for a potential merger was brought up again during a period of organizational transition that saw the departure of long-time leaders of the Ottawa Arts Council and the Arts Ottawa Network.

In the summer of 2020, both the Ottawa Arts Council and the Arts Ottawa Network (ANO) welcomed new executive directors: Nicole Milne and Cassandra Olsthoorn, respectively. During their first meeting, where they shared their goals and visions for their respective organizations, they came to a joint realization: what if the best way to support the arts, culture and heritage not-for-profit organizations they served was to present a united front, to combine advocacy efforts for greater impact?

After building rapport for the rest of 2020, Milne and Olsthoorn floated the idea of a change in organizational structures towards a potential merger to their leadership and staff in early 2021. By the summer of 2021, board members had begun to assess what deeper collaboration or a merger would mean, and a business consultancy firm was hired to conduct an in-depth financial analysis of both organizations in order to give each organization's board a guarantee of the other's financial health.

At the same time, both leaders were engaging their staff internally and realized that there was built-in openness and a high level of trust between the organizations due to their long history of collaboration. From the start and throughout this process, Ottawa Arts Council and ANO

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<sup>2</sup> In 2024, Ottawa Arts Council operated with a budget of \$382K and Arts Network Ottawa operated with \$463K. Both received 85% of their revenues from public funding, mostly from the City of Ottawa.

adopted a management approach focused on one message: “building a wheel, not a pyramid,” meaning keeping space for all staff members no matter the changes to the organizations.<sup>3</sup>

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*“It would have been a lot easier to just do an A+B=AB approach (...) and operationally we would have saved money on administrative costs, but the driver of this merger was not to just reduce our operational overhead.”*  
*– Cassandra Olsthoorn.*

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Nonetheless, there was hesitation to move forward due to the administrative hurdles, budget pressures and time constraints this process demanded. That changed when the Ottawa Community Foundation expressed interest in supporting the merger. The Foundation shared that they were “very receptive to supporting the exploration and the development of organizational collaborations, partnerships or mergers,” especially for arts and culture organizations facing unique and sustained pressures and challenges.<sup>4</sup> Other opportunities for project grants also became available at the time, enabling both the Ottawa Arts Council and ANO to secure the funds needed to continue with this project.

In the year that followed, the organizations hired consultant services to guide them through interest-holder engagement on how to transform their organizations, and an Advisory Council was formed to support Ottawa Arts Council and ANO in weighing different options for organizational change. But staff and leadership were still struggling to make time for this work alongside their regular activities.

By the spring of 2023, both the Advisory Council and board members pointed out that the debate around which models of collaboration to choose seemed moot: the idea of a merger had gained so much traction among staff and leadership at both organizations that they saw it as “the next logical step.” From this point, the engagement process needed to be reframed to align with this direction.

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*“Actually, the question isn't do we or don't we merge, the question is what do we do with our merger? How do we merge and what do we create? And I think that was the mindset shift that helped to open up the possibilities of doing something new and different.” – Cassandra Olsthoorn*

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The Ottawa Arts Council and ANO enlisted the help of a consulting firm, EVOKE Culture 2.0, to engage their community in October 2023. They first convened a series of seven “Community Conversations” with presentations by thought leaders from across Canada. They followed those conversations with community workshops, including one session on “fostering Indigenous self-

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<sup>3</sup> This logic is also the source of Arts Ottawa's co-leadership model, with Milne in charge of Operations & Revenue Generation and Olsthoorn in charge of Strategy & Community Mobilization.

<sup>4</sup> Excerpt from Ottawa Community Foundation's November 22, 2021 e-newsletter as quoted in Arts Ottawa's case study [Transforming Together: Systemic Change for Community Benefit](#).

determination and meaningful collaboration” and one on how “to engage more deeply with the Francophone community and establish a unified bilingual voice.”<sup>5</sup> Then, applying a Human-Centered Design approach (Understand, Define, Ideate, Prototype and Model), they co-designed solutions directly with “end-users” and made sure to align community priorities with the capacities and goals of the arts service organizations.<sup>6</sup> Olsthoorn shares that both organizations were concerned that they would be “screaming into the void” trying to get community members interested, or that dialogue around options for the future would be limited by “nostalgia attachment” to long-term programs. But most community members joined the process with curiosity, hopefulness and excitement. Over 400 community members participated in this engagement over the course of two years.

This engagement process resulted in eight prototype models for the merged organization, with common themes of “shared decision making, transparency, community care and keeping artists at the centre.”<sup>7</sup> From there, Ottawa Arts Council and ANO leadership proposed and tested a model at a session with 85 art leaders from their community, and the merger process was formally approved by both organizations at their respective Annual General Meetings in June 2024, with the launch of the new entity, Arts Ottawa, slated for early 2025.

Looking back, Olsthoorn says of this tight timeline that it was aggressive and demanded a lot from their teams, but that it was the right choice to keep the momentum going and force decision-making. Logistically, “we were trying to line up with when do we have our AGM, when do our three-year operating cycles renew” and from a change management standpoint, their mindset was “we need to fail fast. If it’s not going to work, we need to know that quickly.”

At the end of the 2024 fiscal year, Ottawa Arts Council wound down its not-for-profit organization and officially donated all its assets and its staff to Arts Network Ottawa, which then formally changed its name to Arts Ottawa.<sup>8</sup>

## 2025–Present: Rolling out new methods for a new mission

Art Ottawa’s core purpose is not to deliver programs like its predecessors, but to drive collective action in responding to community needs and priorities, fostering a thriving arts sector. As Olsthoorn explains: “our strategic plans [used to say], we’ll achieve these things through these programs. But now we’re saying, collectively the sector will achieve this if we all work collaboratively towards these goals.”

For the Arts Ottawa team, this implies a radical mindset shift—from centralized to distributed decision-making. The new organization does not aim to simply provide services: it facilitates real collaboration and supports the ownership of shared objectives between arts and culture

<sup>5</sup> Excerpts from the 2025 case study published by Arts Ottawa [Transforming Together: Systemic Change for Community Benefit](#).

<sup>6</sup> “End users” is the terminology used by EVOKE Culture 2.0. In this case, it refers to participating community members, who were compensated with stipends for their involvement.

<sup>7</sup> See [Transforming Together: Systemic Change for Community Benefit](#) for more details on the prototyping process.

<sup>8</sup> For more details, see the [Ottawa Arts Council 2024 Annual General Meeting \(AGM\) Minutes](#) and the [Arts Network Ottawa 2024 AGM Minutes](#).

organizations, to foster collective leadership and collective action. “Action Labs” have been created to focus on pressing needs for community members.

Arts Ottawa is currently iterating on an aspirational, non-hierarchical governance model. Over 300 Community Advisory Members (CAMs) are encouraged to play a role in stewarding the organization on behalf of the community: working alongside a board of directors and a Leadership Circle, the CAMs are described figuratively by Olsthoorn as “the owners” of Arts Ottawa, the people the organization is meant to exist for and the people it exists because of. They can also collectively nominate, block the appointment of or remove board members, but the board of directors retains fiduciary responsibility over Arts Ottawa. To embrace this shared decision-making model, Arts Ottawa has to dedicate much of its activities to develop sustainable relationships not only with arts, culture and heritage nonprofits, but also between them.

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*“It’s about building the understanding in the community that it’s not about us Arts Ottawa staff doing all the work for all of these priorities. It’s about mapping the collective work that’s happening. It’s about putting in shared knowledge and resources to make sure the work can happen. It’s about helping the sector set the priorities (...) and then pulling the resources and the people towards achieving that goal together.” – Cassandra Olsthoorn*

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This new organizational model was and still is meant to be iterative, and Olsthoorn explains that “taking things one step at a time” was crucial for Ottawa Arts Council and ANO leadership to navigate the often overwhelming process of this merger. With so many organizational changes to manage, they felt comfortable postponing some decisions if they weren’t of immediate concern to their staff or community members. For instance, the question of office space was not brought up during the process, so it was pushed back until the fall of 2025, when Arts Ottawa leadership re-examined the function of their spaces and decided to let go of one lease.

Funding has been a source of uncertainty for the new organization, as policies across public funders are uneven when it comes to mergers between large organizations. Merging resulted in a decrease in public funding for Arts Ottawa in 2025, but the organization now hopes to bounce back with some new projects and operating grants in 2026.

Moving forward, Arts Ottawa is looking to redefine what it means to be an arts service organization. Its team is currently working to solidify its role as a facilitator within the sector and to help it develop new advocacy efforts towards policymakers but also towards other economic sectors: Arts Ottawa hopes to bring light to the goals they might share with the arts and cultural sector and grow mutually beneficial relationships, contributing to long-term sustainability and empowerment for their community.

## Arts Ottawa's Insights for Arts Leaders

- **Build equity as a practice and not just a value:** Arts Ottawa aims to embed equity in its governance model, its organizational structure and all of its actions. As stated in the case study where Arts Ottawa leadership describes its merger process and new organizational model, “Equity is not a value—it’s a practice. From decision-making to volunteer roles, governance must remove barriers and center diverse voices.”
- **Engage early and deeply with Indigenous nations and minority language communities:** while Arts Ottawa engaged the Anishinaabe Algonquin Nation and Francophone communities during the design process, leadership acknowledges that they could have embedded a stream of Francophone engagement and a focus on their relationship with their host nation more deeply while redefining their model.
- **Test assumptions on structure to build new models:** “There are few rules you have to follow.” When redesigning their organization’s model, Arts Ottawa realized that most of what they thought of as legal imperatives or mandates that defined their status as an arts service organizations were in fact customary. This empowered them to freely explore potential goals and organizational models beyond what they knew.
- **Don’t hesitate to bring in experts to support you:** “We DIY too much,” according to Olsthoorn. Arts Ottawa credits the creation of its new model to the team’s awareness of their strengths and limits, and to the addition of complementary skills such as those brought by consultants specialized in Human-Centered Design.
- **Give yourself space to innovate and try new community-driven models:** Arts Ottawa is experimenting with a governance model that includes rotating leadership, touchpoint individuals, non-hierarchical structures, feedback loops and more consideration for the role of volunteers.

## Arts Ottawa's Insights for Policymakers & Funders

- **Make your support for radical, transformative change explicit in your policies:** Boards often lack the risk tolerance required to consider mergers and other transformative models in the absence of dedicated support. Policies can provide pathways and reduce resistance to change by including transformative models that build sustainability in their funding policies explicitly.
- **Take the time to understand the reasons behind a merger or other transformational change:** Deep organizational transformations such as mergers can be driven by a desire to “rationalize” operations or reduce administrative overhead, but can also be motivated by a desire to transform the core purpose of an organization, resulting in different support needs.
- **Accept that having reasons to change is not the same as feeling the impulse for change:** When encouraging organizations to undertake transformative actions to build resilience, funders should remember that the impulse for change only happens with the right alignment of conditions. New and willing leadership, alongside support for transformation and opportune timing in the lifecycles of the organization, often weigh more heavily than the state of an organization’s balance sheet.