

Why Shared Spaces Are the Future of a Thriving City

Arts Ottawa's Shared Ground initiative is hosting conversations about cultural spaces – how they are formed, run, and how the arts sector accesses land use. These discussions underscore that cultural spaces are not merely facilities, but rather they are vital third-spaces in our communities, incubating artistic creation, fostering belonging and driving local economic development.

With this perspective in mind, it becomes necessary to revisit a foundational question: What does it take for a city to feel alive?

Not just active or busy, but genuinely alive. Spaces that are animated and welcome creativity, dialogue, and belonging. Spaces where artists, entrepreneurs, and neighbours can build something together. **This was the question at the heart of (Un)Common Grounds & Community Living Rooms, a recent gathering hosted by Arts Ottawa as part of our ongoing work through Shared Ground**—an initiative designed to position arts and culture as the connective tissue of resilient communities and a revitalized downtown.



Facilitated by Kwende Kefentse of [Mimetic Media](#), the conversation explored how cultural spaces contribute to systems of care, collaboration, and belonging. It revealed what happens when people stop waiting for permission to create and start building the kind of city they want to live in.

"That's the commonality between all of us, that we've taken the risk. To take that leap – the vision to see what we think Ottawa needs five years or ten years down the road...that is a place where all of these different communities and people and different endeavors can overlap."

- Lindsay Machinski

Lindsay Machinski embodies this ethos in her work. **As founder of the Urban Art Collective**, she runs a multifunctional art hub in Hintonburg featuring rotating art shows, street art, merchandise, a dry bar (mocktails), and night markets to support artists and dismantle the “starving artist” trope. “You have to go with passion,” she said, “and build it with people.” Her approach demonstrates how creative entrepreneurship can drive neighbourhood destination development without losing sight of community purpose. She advocates co-creation with the community and iterative growth over rigid planning, seeing success in projects that overlap or align with others in their community.



A similar commitment to community-rooted development emerges in the work of **Valérie Stam, co-founder of a forthcoming arts and social justice hub**. She described a plan to unite artists and activists in shared space, with long term goals of aligning affordable housing and live-work studios for artists. She envisions a place that “activates space and creates places that people want to go through,” where creativity and social change move in the same rhythm. Her vision draws from global examples such as Havana’s Arte del Fabrico and Amsterdam’s Volks Hotel.

This emphasis on community-centered, purpose-driven spaces is further mirrored in the efforts of **Matias Muñoz, founder of Ottawa Showbox (RIP), Greenroom Rehearsal - and most recently Fono**. Muñoz spoke about opening Centretown’s “living room,” a new cultural venue shaped by the belief that “people need art, music, and community.” His project embodies a shift away from transactional venues toward places that make connection the business model.



Muñoz’s approach to creating connections also informs the strategic decisions behind operations. In discussing corporation/organizational structures. He reflected on the strategic considerations involved in choosing between for-profit and social enterprise models. He noted that a for-profit structure can offer access to loans, provide greater operational flexibility, as well as the autonomy to make decisions and respond quickly. And this flexibility is not a hypothetical, local businesses have similarly seen success with government-backed loans, like the Canadian Small Business Financing Loan, which can offer crucial support at all stages of development.

As cultural-space operators weigh these financial and structural considerations, it becomes equally important to examine the conditions that can influence long-term stability. Reviewing options like tiered rent, long-term (ie:10 year) leases, or first right of refusal clauses can align the practical realities of securing space, while keeping in mind the larger goal of sustaining cultural infrastructure in the community.

So, the next important consideration is one of tenure: What form of residency best supports the vision and durability of your space?



The pros and cons of renting and leasing versus ownership reveal different pathways, both with benefits and challenges. While ownership allows long-term planning and equity, and protection from being “priced out” of a neighborhood, it can be burdensome. Renting provides flexibility and lower risk, but requires a good relationship with a landlord, especially for more “adventurous” undertakings. The good news is, not all landlords are bad.



However, understanding the practical implications of renting, leasing or owning a space is just one piece of the puzzle for cultural space operators. Ultimately, all these decisions contribute to the conditions in which creativity, community, and collaboration can thrive. This is evident in the work of the leaders who spoke at (Un)Common Grounds & Community Living Rooms, who each showed that shared space—both physical and social—forms the foundation of a thriving cultural ecosystem. Their work shows what happens when artists, entrepreneurs, and citizens are given the freedom to co-create solutions that are practical, imaginative, and rooted in community.

Building on this foundation, each speaker emphasized the value of shared services, such as vendor and market platforms, space for presentation, or co-working areas.

This not only creates multiple points of access for the community but also diversifies revenue sources.

While shared services can provide practical support and financial resilience, it is important to recognize that no amount of preparation will eliminate the inherent risks of starting a cultural space. There is never going to be a “perfect time” to pursue your project. Take the leap, but do it with passion, risk tolerance, and a knack for adaptability.



In fact, now, more than ever, the need for these cultural spaces is urgent.

Beyond the creative and cultural outcomes, they generate tangible benefits across sectors: improving social and mental health, supporting recovery from addiction, and increasing neighborhood vitality, creating ripple effects that strengthen entire communities. Yet, many creatives lack the tools to capture this impact, which could be leveraged for equity, investment, and influence to scale and sustain projects.

Recognizing the wide-ranging benefits of these cultural spaces highlights the importance of sustained support from municipal institutions. Continued investment in cultural placemaking, along with adapting bylaws, and policies to facilitate creative initiatives, ensures these impacts can be realized and expanded. When paired with community-minded procurement that prioritizes local artists and organizations, the support generates both social and economic value, contributing to long-term community wealth and resilience.

In line with the principles of Community Wealth Building, such efforts anchor wealth locally, build democratic ownership and control, and strengthen community assets. By reinvesting in local talent and infrastructure, cultural spaces become engines of creativity, equity, and collective prosperity, ensuring that benefits circulate within the community rather than being extracted externally.



Framing cultural spaces as both community assets and economic drivers highlights why these efforts extend beyond individual projects. For Arts Ottawa, these examples are not isolated stories; they are signals of a movement. Shared Ground exists to strengthen that movement, to make collaboration easier, and to ensure that creative spaces remain accessible, equitable, and essential to Ottawa's growth.

The next chapter of our city will be written in places like these, where connection is the medium, and community is the art.



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www.artsottawa.ca