

SHAR E GROUND

 | ARTS OTTAWA

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Why Arts Spaces Matters in the Future of the ByWard Market

As conversations continue about the future of the ByWard Market, we've been reflecting on one idea that keeps coming up in conversations with artists and cultural workers:

Space is not neutral.

The spaces a city creates — and who can access them — shape what gets made, who gets to participate, and ultimately what kind of cultural identity a place develops.

This isn't just a philosophical point. Research from Mass Culture in their report “**Scaffolding for Change: Artist-Led Insights from The Space Project**” (on Why Not Theatres's **Space Project**) highlights just how transformative access to creative space can be for artists and the communities around them.

As Ottawa considers redevelopment in the Market (and elsewhere), these insights feel particularly relevant.

Space Is Infrastructure for Creativity

One of the clearest findings from *The Space Project* is that **free or accessible creative space fundamentally changes how artists work.**

When artists aren't spending limited resources on rent, they can redirect that energy and funding into the work itself.

Artists in the study reported that access to space allowed them to:

- ▶ **Pay collaborators fairly — sometimes for the first time**
- ▶ **Invest in accessibility tools like ASL interpretation or sensory supports**
- ▶ **Spend more time experimenting and developing work**
- ▶ **Build stronger portfolios and professional opportunities**

In other words, space doesn't just house art — **it enables the conditions that allow it to exist in the first place.**

From “Venues” to Creative Labs

Another powerful insight from the Mass Culture research is that artists don't just need finished venues.

They need **spaces to experiment.**

Many artists described these spaces as “labs” or “sandboxes” — places where lighting, projection, movement, audience interaction, and storytelling could be tested early in the creative process.

Without the pressure of high rental costs or strict timelines, artists were able to slow down, collaborate more ethically, and take creative risks.

This kind of experimentation is often what leads to the most compelling cultural experiences — the kind that give a neighbourhood its unique identity.

Cultural Activation Starts with Cultural Production

Cities often talk about “activation” — programming, events, and experiences that bring people downtown.

But activation doesn’t come from nowhere.

It comes from **artists who have the time, resources, and space to create.**

When cities invest in accessible creative space, they’re investing in the cultural ecosystem that produces the festivals, performances, exhibitions, and events people travel to experience.

Without that foundation, activation can become temporary or imported rather than rooted in local creative communities.

But Space Alone Isn’t Enough

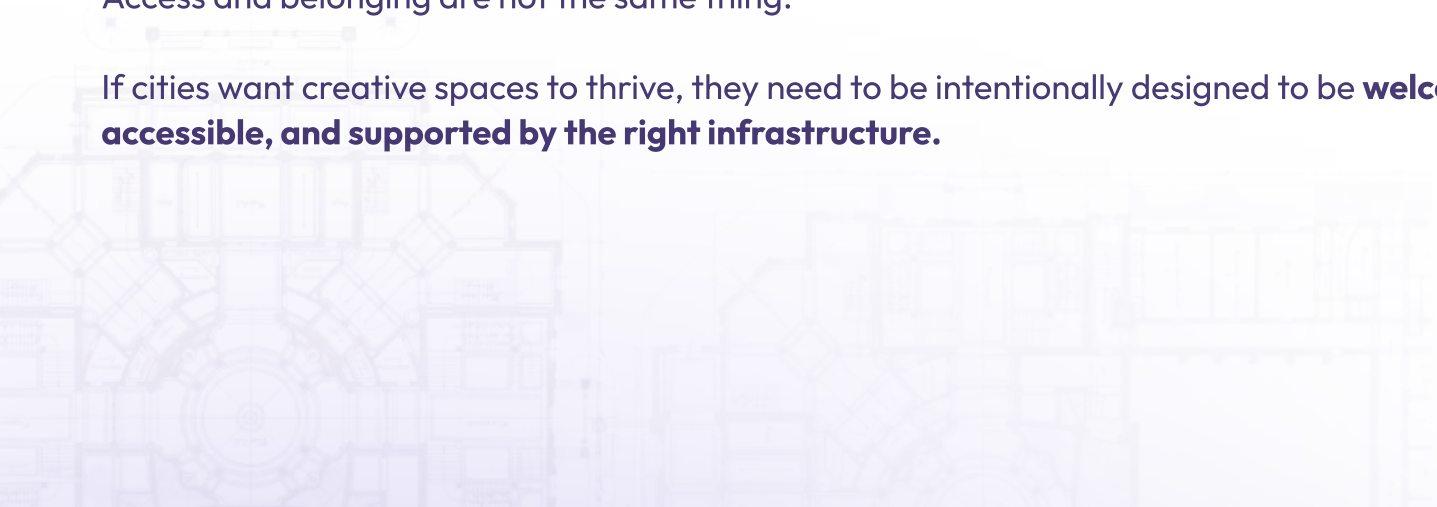
The Mass Culture report also highlights an important truth: **free space alone doesn’t solve everything.**

Artists in the project pointed out ongoing challenges like:

- ▶ **Physical accessibility barriers**
- ▶ **Burnout and financial precarity**
- ▶ **Lack of technical or administrative support**
- ▶ **Feeling unsure if they truly belonged in certain spaces**

Access and belonging are not the same thing.

If cities want creative spaces to thrive, they need to be intentionally designed to be **welcoming, accessible, and supported by the right infrastructure.**



A Bigger Opportunity for Ottawa

As redevelopment continues in the ByWard Market, there's an opportunity to think about space differently.

Not just as retail units or event venues — but as **creative infrastructure**.

When artists have access to space, they don't just produce art. They:

- ▶ **Create jobs and collaborations**
- ▶ **Build small creative businesses**
- ▶ **Develop work that can tour and generate future revenue**
- ▶ **Animate neighbourhoods in authentic ways**

In other words, space becomes a catalyst for both cultural and economic vitality.

Looking Ahead – Arts are the Infrastructure of Belonging

The future of the ByWard Market is about more than buildings. It's about the ecosystem that will inhabit those buildings.

If we want Downtown to be a vibrant cultural district, supporting artists and creative workers needs to be part of the conversation.

Because ultimately:

Space shapes art.

Art shapes identity.

And identity shapes the places people want to visit, live, and return to.

This reflection draws on insights from “Scaffolding for Change: Artist-Led Insights from The Space Project” by Mass Culture, which explores how access to creative space impacts artistic practice, equity, and sustainability across Canada.

Watch the delegation on this issue:

[Watch here!](#)



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