Culture Is How We Build the City We Planned

A framework for delivering Ottawa's Official Plan through arts and cultural investment

A Partnership Platform for Ottawa's Next City Council| ArtsOttawa

Ottawa is in transition, moving from a big town feel into a bigger city. The population is planned to rapidly grow, downtown is being reimagined, and the expectations of residents and visitors have changed. This growing scale asks something new of every part of civic life. It asks something specific of arts and culture: to help this city figure out who it is as it grows.

The Official Plan (2022–2046) sets a clear destination: Ottawa is to become *"the most liveable mid-sized city in North America."* To get there, the Official Plan outlines that liveable cities "are resilient, with a variety of safe, affordable, vibrant, mixed-use areas, with access to green space and cultural life and social harmony." It projects 189,000 new jobs by 2046 and names a skilled workforce attracted by quality of life - cultural life included - as the engine of that growth. The Plan's flagship concept, the 15-minute neighbourhood, names culture explicitly as a required component of complete communities. The City's own Public Art Policy calls culture "the fourth pillar of sustainability." The 2025 Cultural Funding Policy not only acknowledges the cruciality of City of Ottawa cultural funding programs, but also the changing nature of culture in Ottawa as a direct result of population growth. It notes the importance of supporting this growth within creative industries. **These are not external positions. They are Council's own understanding of a funding model that must evolve to match this growth, within formally adopted documents.**

Why arts and cultural sector strength matters

A strong, connected arts sector delivers returns councilcan measure.

Nationally, arts and culture contributed $65 billion in direct GDP in 2024, rising to $131 billion once indirect and induced spending is counted. The sector is growing nearly twice as fast as the overall economy, supporting 1.1 million jobs and generating $29 in economic activity for every dollar of federal investment.[1] Ontario alone saw $28 billion in cultural GDP and over 458,000 jobs in 2023, representing 43% of the sector's national impact[2], a scale Ottawa's own cultural economy contributes to and depends on. Arts and culture tourism also punches above its weight, delivering roughly triple the economic impact of other tourism types and drawing visitors who stay longer and spend more.[3]

Beyond the balance sheet, a vibrant cultural sector is part of how cities compete for people and investment. Municipalities that invest in culture are more successful at attracting and retaining the talent driving today's knowledge economy, and cohesive, culturally engaged communities are better positioned to support business growth and investment attraction.[4]

For residents, the return is just as direct: three-quarters of Canadians who attend arts and cultural events report a stronger sense of belonging as a result.[5]

Investing in cultural infrastructure and a sustained funding envelope isn't a cost separate from Ottawa's economic and social goals - it's one of the more efficient ways to advance them.

What Peer Cities Are Doing

Peers are building durable, indexed commitments.

- **Toronto** committed a $10-million increase to the Toronto Arts Council over five years ($2 million annually, 2025–2029) plus an annual inflationary increase.
- **Montreal** is moving its arts council budget toward $30 million by 2030, up from roughly $22 million.
- **Calgary** layered a $1-million-per-year increase across four years.

Ottawa's total cultural funding envelope sits at **$12.2 million** for a city of just over one million people. The gap is structural and it is growing.

We acknowledge that investments like the Arts, Culture and Entertainment (ACE) District and the ByWard Market public realm are genuine contributions. However, they do not fund the artists who fill those spaces, the organizations that run programs, or the operating conditions that allow a sector to sustain and grow. A building without a well-funded sector to animate it results in infrastructure without purpose. This platform addresses the structural gap that capital spending alone cannot close.

To get to the next stage of Ottawa's development, two budgetary investments need to be met:

1. Establish a Cultural Infrastructure Reserve Fund

Accessible, affordable, and appropriate space to create and present

Artists and organizations need stable, suitable places to produce and present work. They need spaces to welcome community, drive expression, and keep culture visible in the life of the city. As Ottawa redevelops, these spaces are exactly what's at risk of being priced or planned out.

What the City can do: Establish a Cultural Infrastructure Reserve Fund. This Fund would be a dedicated, recurring mechanism to fund the renovation, retrofit, and creation of cultural spaces, capitalized through Community Benefits Charges under Ontario's Planning Act. Treat cultural space as a civic asset the City invests in and operationalizes, not a one-off grant.

How this delivers on the City's Official Plan: The Official Plan commits to 15-minute neighbourhoods as 'complete communities' with cultural facilities as required infrastructure. Without a dedicated instrument, cultural space will be lost to market redevelopment pressures precisely as the city scales. A Reserve Fund capitalized through Community Benefits Charges (a tool already available) is the mechanism that turns the Official Plan's cultural access commitments into durable physical outcomes.

What Arts Ottawa is doing: Complementing the City's work by releasing emerging research on cultural land-use modelling in November, in partnership with Memetic Media and Carleton University's CIMS Lab, and convening a learning cohort to support the sector through redevelopment.

2. Permanent increase to the cultural funding envelope

Fair work and scaled support for the sector

A growing city cannot build its cultural life on underpaid and unpaid labour. Sustaining and scaling the sector means real operating stability and more room for artists and organizations to be properly compensated for the public value they create.

What the City can do: Commit to a permanent increase to the cultural funding envelope, with increases tied to inflation and population growth so funding keeps pace with the city rather than eroding against it. A modernized, indexed envelope opens up additional operating and project grant opportunities and underwrites fair-work models across the sector.

How this delivers on the City's Official Plan: The Official Plan's 189,000-job growth projection depends on attracting a skilled workforce drawn by quality of life of which cultural life is named explicitly in the Plan. The City's own Cultural Funding Policy recognizes that the funding model must evolve with growth. A permanent indexed increase is the specific budget action that fulfils that commitment and makes the incoming Municipal Culture Plan implementable rather than aspirational.

What Arts Ottawa is doing: Complementing the City's work by exploring fair work practices through its Community Wealth Building professional development sessions and seeking investment for a sector labour market study in 2027-28 to put real evidence behind the case.

The Sector is Ready to Activate – City Coordination is Necessary

Artists are already meeting the moment. They are contributing to the social, economic, and cultural life of Ottawa right now. Across the city artists are part of building 15-minute communities. They are animating public spaces, drawing visitors, creating the settings where neighbours become community, and contributing to our collective sense of identity and belonging. This isn't potential to be unlocked someday. It is work being delivered today, often under fragile conditions and on flat budgets, by a sector that has kept pace with the city out of sheer commitment.

The sector is ready to implement. It has the ideas, the relationships, and the will. What it needs is a City organized to move with it, rather than department by department.

What the City can do: Include arts and culture in the 2027 Governance Review. Commit to coordination within and across departments, commit to data sharing and shared frameworks, and finish and release the Municipal Culture Plan.

What Arts Ottawa is doing: Driving collective action through its community advisory members, and working actively in community, bridging, connecting, and coordinating the arts across sectors.

This is a partnership. Arts Ottawa is doing the connective work, and what remains is for the City to invest in the conditions that scale with the growth of Ottawa itself. The dividends - safer streets, more vibrancy and expression, stronger belonging, prosperous economy and a civic brand rooted in cultural dynamism - come back to every resident.

Equity by design: These conditions must reflect Indigenous leadership, Francophone presence, and the full range of equity-deserving communities, with accessibility and belonging built in from the outset.

Appendix: Evidence, Context & Connected Priorities

Supporting context and sources for each condition, followed by the broader advocacy priorities these three asks connect to. Sources are listed at the end of each section.

1: Cultural space

The context. Ottawa's downtown is being actively reimagined: the City's Downtown Revitalization Framework (2026) commits to rebalancing residential, commercial, institutional, and tourism uses to sustain a vibrant core day and night. Redevelopment on this scale is precisely when affordable cultural space is most at risk of being priced or planned out. Ottawa has no dedicated, recurring instrument to protect or create it.

The ask: a Cultural Infrastructure Reserve Fund. A dedicated, interest-bearing municipal reserve capitalized through Community Benefits Charges under Ontario's Planning Act, funding the renovation, retrofit, and creation of cultural spaces on a recurring basis. This mirrors proven Canadian precedent within Ontario's own legislative framework.

The precedent. Vancouver's Cultural Spaces Fund is a dedicated, development-capitalized reserve (launched at $4.8 million toward a $10-million goal) sitting within a 10-year target of 800,000 sq. ft. of affordable cultural space and an explicit "no net loss" commitment built on documented evidence of studio-space loss. Calgary contributed over $315 million alongside civic partners to the Werklund Centre expansion, treating cultural space as capital infrastructure.

What Arts Ottawa brings. Emerging research on cultural land-use modelling, in partnership with Memetic Media and Carleton Immersive Media Studio Lab (findings released November 2026) will give Ottawa the spatial evidence it currently lacks, and a learning cohort will support organizations through the redevelopment phase. This is the diagnostic groundwork a reserve fund needs to target investment well.

Sources

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- Avenue Calgary, funding surge reshaping Calgary's arts landscape (Werklund Centre) https://www.avenuecalgary.com/city-life/massive-funding-surge-reshaping-calgary-arts-landscape/
- City of Ottawa, Official Plan 2022–2046 (15-minute neighbourhoods; cultural access as infrastructure) https://ottawa.ca/en/planning-development-and-construction/official-plan-and-master-plans/official plan/volume-1

2: Fair work & sustainable funding

The context. The City administers cultural funding through a framework first approved in 2002, distributing more than $12 million a year across the local arts, cultural and heritage sector. The 2025 Cultural Funding Policy (approved by Council on March 26, 2025, the first major update in over twenty years) modernized categories and eligibility but did not add new investment. As the city grows, a flat envelope means declining per-resident support and mounting pressure from more qualified applicants each cycle. Organizations are asked to professionalize, scale, and pay artists fairly while operating within largely static funding frameworks.

The ask: a permanent, indexed increase. A permanent increase to the cultural funding envelope, with increases tied to inflation and population growth, so the City's investment tracks the city it serves. Indexing protects gains from quiet erosion and gives organizations the multi-year stability that fair-work models require.

The precedent. Toronto committed a $10-million increase to the Toronto Arts Council over five years ($2 million annually, 2025–2029) plus an annual inflationary increase. Montreal is moving its arts council budget toward $30 million by 2030, up from roughly $22 million. Calgary layered a $1-million-per-year increase across four years. Peers are building durable, indexed commitments, not one-time top-ups.

What Arts Ottawa brings. A Community Wealth Building professional development exploring fair-work models, and a sector labour market study (sought for 2027-28) to quantify how much public value is currently delivered through unpaid and underpaid labour, converting an anecdotal case into an evidenced one.

Sources

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2. CBC News coverage of the Artworks report, Ontario figures, cbc.ca
3. Canada Council for the Arts, The Impact of the Art, canadacouncil.ca/research/arts-impact
4. Business / Arts, Arts Vibrancy Index 2026, businessandarts.org
5. Nanos Research for Business / Arts and the NAC, Sept. 2025, cited via Canada Council for the Arts
6. impact page (source 3)