

# SHAR E GROUND

 | ARTS OTTAWA

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## **Ottawa Has Culture. What It Doesn't Have Is a Cultural Economy Strategy - and Downtown Will Pay the Price**

As Ottawa prepares to make major investments in redeveloping its downtown core, there is a tacit issue: we are planning the physical transformation of downtown without a coherent strategy for the cultural economy that is supposed to animate it. Beneath the rhetoric of “arts-led” downtown development lies a harder truth: Ottawa’s economic development institutions do not have a systemic, strategic plan to build cultural industries as a sector of the economy. What we have now is a patchwork of organizations and municipal departments doing piecemeal work in a governance gap. This matters because downtown revitalization is an economic and cultural project, not just an urban design one. Office vacancy, declining foot traffic, and changing patterns of work mean Ottawa’s core will increasingly depend on experiences, culture, and creative businesses to generate activity and value. If the cultural economy that is supposed to animate downtown is not intentionally developed, new investments risk producing attractive spaces without the local economic engines needed to sustain them.

Over the last decade, the City's Arts & Heritage bureaucracy has shifted away from industry-building toward recreation, programming, and city-delivered services. This is a marked departure from the [pre-pandemic](#) approach, when Ottawa explicitly framed culture as an engine of economic growth and worked to cultivate creative industries alongside community life. That strategic orientation has largely shifted. The cultural funding unit remains, but it operates within tight ceilings. Organizations are expected to professionalize, scale up, pay artists fairly, upgrade facilities, and deliver more sophisticated work - without a corresponding increase in investment, capacity support, or business development tools. Growth is encouraged rhetorically but constrained structurally.

Today, the City's [Economic Development bureaucracy](#) formally "owns" tourism and creative industries. While these creative industry files were inherited from Arts & Heritage, crucially, Economic Development still lacks staff with deep knowledge of Ottawa's cultural industries landscape. [Invest Ottawa](#) - the city's non-profit economic development arm, responsible for attracting investment, driving job creation and helping local businesses scale - haven't had anyone focused on any cultural or creative industries since the [Ottawa Film Office](#) moved out in 2015. The people who understand how these industries work are mostly in different silos - or outside City Hall altogether. The result is a classic municipal Ottawa problem: the people who know the sector don't control the levers, and the people who control the levers don't really know the sector.

Layered on top of this is [Ottawa Tourism](#) - a powerful, well-funded, stand-alone nonprofit supported by the [Municipal Accommodation Tax \(MAT\)](#). With dozens of staff and a clear mandate, Ottawa Tourism pursues imported events to fill hotel rooms. Its model is fundamentally FDI-driven: attract experiences from elsewhere, stage them in Ottawa, and measure success by overnight stays. What tourism does not systematically do is invest in building local cultural capacity - the festivals, venues, artists, nightlife scenes, and creative businesses that would make Ottawa genuinely magnetic year-round. Local culture seems regarded as a bonus for visitors, not the critical infrastructure that attracts and keeps them here. Meanwhile, Economic Development's direct cultural investments tend to focus narrowly on film, music, and nightlife. These are vital sectors - and ones I care deeply about - but they are only pieces of a much larger creative ecosystem.

Put these pieces together and questions naturally emerge: Institutionally, who is actually leading this? And what is the plan? Across Culture, Economic Development, and Tourism, municipal Ottawa deploys significant public resources related to arts and creativity - yet no one is clearly responsible for the long-term growth of cultural businesses. There is no shared theory of how local cultural production generates local income. No coherent plan for how high-level artistic work connects to tourism, investment, or export. No integrated strategy that aligns grants, economic development tools, and tourism marketing around a common goal.

We have a "system" that fails the very sector it claims to celebrate.

## Why this matters for downtown.

As Ottawa debates the future of its core, from vacant office buildings to reimagined public spaces, this governance gap becomes existential. If we proceed with major downtown investments without first aligning our cultural, economic, and tourism strategies, we risk repeating a familiar pattern:

- ▶ Beautiful spaces with little local cultural identity
- ▶ Pop-up programming instead of permanent creative infrastructure
- ▶ Imported events instead of homegrown scenes
- ▶ Short-term activations instead of long-term industries

In other words, we will build a nicer looking downtown, but not one that performs the way we need it to.

## The real gap is governance, not talent.

So, we have a cultural welfare state for artists, a hotel machine for tourists, an investment attraction / business scaling engine for other industries, a generational opportunity to reimagine the downtown economy, lots of lip service about the role of arts and heritage in downtown renewal, and a great big gap for cultural entrepreneurs trying to build durable, scalable businesses.

Cities that win in the 21st century - from Montréal to Berlin to Barcelona - treat culture as both a public good and a productive sector. They invest in local creators, nurture the export potential of creative businesses, support festivals as anchors, and align tourism around homegrown culture rather than constantly importing it. The gap is not creativity. Ottawa has extraordinary cultural organizations, artists, producers, curators, venue operators, and festival builders. Nor is the gap simply money; taken together, Culture, Economic Development, and Tourism control substantial resources. The gap is governance.



## A different model is possible.

A more strategic approach is possible – but it begins with better diagnosis, not a single program or project. This is why Arts Ottawa’s [Shared Ground](#) initiative matters. Not as the solution, but as foundational research that Ottawa currently lacks. Shared Ground treats culture as a spatial, real-estate, and land-use system, not just programming.

By modeling how creative activities occupy space – where artists cluster, where venues are viable, and how organizations evolve – this work helps answer practical questions we still can’t:

- ▶ **What kinds of culture-driven activity can realistically move into redeveloped downtown spaces?**
- ▶ **Where do existing organizations have room to grow; and where are they being displaced?**
- ▶ **What conditions allow cultural organizations to move from survival to scale?**

There is also a question about tools. In Ottawa, the Municipal Accommodation Tax is almost entirely oriented toward hotel-driven tourism. But in other cities, hospitality taxes are used to directly invest systemically in deeper local cultural economic development. That is a viable future option for Ottawa if it chooses to treat culture as infrastructure rather than added benefit. But to do that we would need a real plan.

Underlying this is a broader pattern about how cities scale. Smaller cities begin with culture as largely recreation; something people consume as a pastime. But as population, density, talent, and colocation grow, a tipping point arrives where culture becomes a business ecosystem, not just a leisure activity. When that threshold is crossed, the lens on culture must grow from just recreation into economic development; with dedicated cultural economic developers just like other industries have. In my view, Ottawa is already well past that tipping point. The creative sector here is a maturing, increasingly sophisticated and globally connected ecosystem – but our institutions still plan and invest in it at hobby levels. Until governance catches up, downtown redevelopment will remain misaligned with the cultural economy that should be driving it.





## A challenge to the Downtown Forum.

As the Downtown Ottawa Forum considers the future of the core, the question should not only be what buildings we want, but what kind of cultural economy and identity we are building to fill them.

Until there can be agreement on who is responsible for growing the cultural economy - and that agreement is backed with real tools and resources - Ottawa will remain a city that enjoys culture, and punches above its weight in producing it, but fails to meaningfully benefit from it.



Photo: James Park

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