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Introduction

The *Shared Ground* initiative represents a timely and strategic response to the complex challenges facing Ottawa's cultural sector: reimagining underused properties as inclusive, community-driven cultural infrastructure.

Space challenges are experienced across rural and suburban communities, and predominantly in the downtown core. Amidst shifting urban landscapes, increasing commercial vacancy and increasing rent prices, and rising inequities in access to space, *Shared Ground* seeks to reposition arts and culture as essential infrastructure for inclusive economic development, urban revitalization, and social equity across Ottawa. Grounded in a methodology that centers co-creation, equity, and embedded learning, the initiative aligns with broader public policy efforts to revitalize communities through arts and culture. These include the City of Ottawa's **Downtown Revitalization Strategy**, **Rural Summit 2024**, and **Municipal Culture Plan**, as well as federal initiatives like the **Creative Export Strategy** and **National Housing Strategy**.

As participants of the June 25 Learning Day affirmed, space alone is not the solution; structural systems such as governance, funding, and policy must evolve in tandem to support sustainable cultural development. *Shared Ground* addresses this need by fostering collaborative leadership across sectors, supporting evolving and inclusive planning, and embedding Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) tools to guide its adaptive progress. In doing so, the initiative not only activates space but also continues to build the capacity of communities to lead cultural transformation citywide and prepare them to innovate and deliver public value when windows of opportunity arise.

As we engage in conversations about physical spaces, who designs them, who has access to them, and who feels a sense of belonging, it is essential to pause and recognize the deeper context of the land beneath our feet. Every space we occupy, discuss, or transform exists within a broader history, one shaped by colonization, displacement, and the enduring resistance of Indigenous peoples.

With this in mind, we acknowledge that our offices and all the sites apart of the Shared Ground initiative, stand on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Anishinaabe Algonquin Nation. For generations, the Algonquin people have lived on, cared for, and protected this land. It remains their homeland to this day.

This acknowledgment is not a declaration of history alone, it is a recognition of the ongoing presence, rights, and sovereignty of Indigenous peoples. In offering this statement, we aim not only to honour the Algonquin Nation but also to actively resist the erasure of Indigenous identities, cultures, and voices from our shared history and present; many of whom continue to be denied the opportunity and resources to make, share, and experience their traditional art and ways of life on these very lands.

1.0 Purpose

Launched on June 25, 2025, the initiative brought together diverse stakeholders and laid the groundwork for collective action on sector readiness for activating underused spaces. Independent artists, for-profit and non-profit professionals, and representatives from Memetic Media, ArtsBuild Ontario, and Carleton University's CIMS (Carleton Immersive Media Studio) Lab gathered to exchange ideas, build networks, and explore new approaches to preparedness and cultural space stewardship.

2.0 June 25th Event Highlights and Key Themes

2.1 Overview of the Event

On June 25, 2025, Arts Ottawa set in motion the *Shared Ground* initiative with a full-day event at 300 Sparks Street. Designed as a series of professional development sessions, the gathering brought together community members to explore how underused downtown spaces can be reactivated through arts-centered placemaking.

2.2 Event Format and Activities

The day was structured to guide participants through a multi-stage process of immersion, reflection, and co-creation.

The *Shared Ground* Learning Day began with a site tour of 300 Sparks Street, offering participants a direct look at underused cultural spaces and setting the stage for the day's discussions. The program also featured a series of reflective and practical sessions focused on space activation and community-led cultural development. The day concluded with a facilitated charrette, where participants envisioned both immediate and long-term uses for vacant spaces. Their responses were synthesized to identify shared priorities and inform future planning.

2.3 Key Themes Identified

Several cross-cutting themes emerged throughout the event, highlighting that in addition to space, the systems in place are also an issue. Therefore governance, funding, and policy frameworks must evolve in tandem with any physical space activation to ensure long-term impact. Key themes identified include:

- a. Accessibility and Affordability
- b. Community-Led Governance
- c. Artist Housing and Workspace
- d. Cultural Permanence
- e. Cross-Sector Collaboration

As the Shared Ground initiative moves forward, these key themes can serve as guiding principles, ensuring that revitalization efforts are not only artistically ambitious but also socially equitable and locally grounded.

2.4 Implications for Future Work

The key priorities identified by the community will provide a framework for shaping future programming, partnerships, and policy advocacy. This will be done with a clear emphasis on inclusive access, community-led decision-making, and long-term sustainability. Embedding these priorities into every stage of the work will be essential to building a cultural ecosystem that responds to community needs while remaining resilient through change.

2.5 Supporters

The event was sponsored by the Downtown BIA, Crown Realty and Marriott Hotel.

3.0 Methodology and Learning

3.1 Guiding Approach

The *Shared Ground* initiative continues developing with an emphasis on balancing strategic progress with inclusive, practice-based learning. Recognizing that meaningful revitalization of downtown and across Ottawa must be rooted in community realities, Arts Ottawa employed a methodology that prioritized co-creation, grounded experience, and reflective engagement.

This approach is informed by a commitment to:

- **Collaborative leadership**, centering diverse voices from the arts, culture, business, and nonprofit sectors.

- **Iterative development**, allowing ideas and models to evolve through use.
- **Equity and access**, ensuring participation from underrepresented groups and arts practitioners.
- **Embedded learning**, using real-time feedback and reflection to guide decision-making.

In parallel, Arts Ottawa began the integration of a Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) framework to build capacity for long-term impact assessment and adaptive planning.

3.2 Methodological Design

The methodology for the *Shared Ground* Learning Day (June 25, 2025) combined experiential learning with structured facilitation, designed to build both shared understanding and actionable insights. The day was structured around the following components:

a. Immersive Site Engagement

Participants explored the vacant and underused spaces at 300 Sparks Street - including two historic theaters and adjoining commercial areas. The spatial context grounded subsequent discussions and workshops in tangible assets, opportunities, and limitations.

b. Reflective Practice Workshops

Arts Ecosystem Modeling **(led by Memetic Media)**

This session supported participants in identifying their place within the broader arts ecosystem, including flows of resources, relationships, and barriers in their work. It helped surface structural inequities and deepened awareness of how different parts of the ecosystem interact and rely on each other. [LINK TO PRESENTATION]

Digital Twin for modelling the Ecosystem of Cultural Land Use **(presented by Nico and Laura, Carleton University CIMS Lab)**

The CIMS Lab presented their research on spatial data modeling and introduced an emerging “digital twin” prototype for modelling cultural infrastructure in Ottawa. A digital twin is a dynamic, real-time virtual representation of physical space. In the context of *Shared Ground*, the CIMS Lab is developing this model to help visualize, simulate, and plan the use of cultural spaces across the city. The tool aims to support evidence-based decision-making by enabling stakeholders to test scenarios, track availability and usage patterns, and map gaps or opportunities for activation across both public and private infrastructure. [LINK TO PRESENTATION]

Space Activation Strategies (led by ArtsBuild Ontario)

Participants were introduced to the concept of “meanwhile spaces,” temporary activations of vacant or transitional properties. Using case studies and lessons learned from ABO’s pilot projects, the workshop highlighted creative leasing models, adaptable partnerships, and low-barrier space access as being vital tools for cultural space activation. [LINK TO PRESENTATION]

c. Collaborative Visioning: Charrette Process

A facilitated charrette invited participants to respond to two key prompts:

- Short-Term Activation: What would you do to activate these spaces today, if given immediate control?
- Vision for 2030: What do you envision these spaces becoming over the next five years?

The resulting ideas emphasized accessibility, affordability, community co-governance, revenue sustainability, and long-term cultural infrastructure. The charrette process supported idea generation, prototyping, and multi-sector alignment toward a shared vision for downtown revitalization.

3.3 Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Integration

To support continuous improvement and strategic scaling, Arts Ottawa is integrating an MEL framework into the *Shared Ground* initiative.

The MEL framework is designed to:

- Monitor engagement levels, equity in participation, and use of activated spaces.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of space-use strategies, partnerships, and community impacts.
- Support Learning and iteration by capturing key insights, identifying gaps, and informing next steps through participatory reflection.

MEL integration ensures that:

- Feedback from participants and community members informs future programming.
- Activation models are tested and refined through real-world application.
- Outcomes are not only assessed by deliverables but also by shifts in practice, policy, and capacity.

By embedding MEL early in the initiative, *Shared Ground* becomes both a program and a learning ecosystem, where success is defined by its ability to adapt, include, and evolve in response to changing conditions and community needs.

3.4 Method as Message

The methodology employed reflects the broader ethos of *Shared Ground*: that city-building through arts and culture must be collaborative, inclusive, and grounded in lived experience. By fostering learning through practice, and ensuring accountability through MEL, Arts Ottawa is cultivating a process where both progress and participation are valued equally. This dual emphasis will continue to shape the initiative's future direction, partnerships, and policy influence.

4.0 Barriers and Challenges Identified

4.1 Overview

Shared Ground highlighted both systemic and site-specific challenges facing Ottawa's arts and culture sector, particularly around access, sustainability, and inclusive participation. These barriers emerged through participant feedback gathered during workshops, group discussions, and the charrette process.

The following section summarizes the key challenges identified by attendees, many of whom brought lived experience from across the creative, nonprofit, and community sectors. Identifying and addressing these issues is essential to building an inclusive, resilient, and effective foundation for cultural infrastructure efforts.

4.2 Summary of Key Barriers

Barrier	Community Impact	Participant Insight
Inaccessible Vacant Spaces	High-potential sites like 300 Sparks remain underused despite demand.	Artists and community groups lack mechanisms to access or activate these properties affordably.
Financial Constraints	Grassroots organizations and artists face prohibitive costs for leasing, renovating, and maintaining space	Calls for sustainable funding models and income-generating strategies tied to community values.
Fragmentation Within the Sector	Lack of coordinated infrastructure leads to	Participants highlighted the need for clearer and more accessible social networks

	duplicated effort and less effective, isolated advocacy.	and support systems across organizations to help reduce the sense of disconnect between individuals and teams.
Limited Availability of “Meanwhile Spaces”	Temporary use models exist but are inconsistently supported or scaled.	Barriers include legal risk, lack of matchmaking tools, and short timelines.
Exclusion from Long-Term Planning	Artists are often brought in for short-term activations but excluded from the decision-making in long-term planning.	Participants emphasized the need for shared leadership and sustained cultural presence in urban development.
Housing and Studio Insecurity	Rising costs push artists out of the core, weakening its cultural fabric.	Proposals included artist co-op housing, live-work spaces, and subsidized studio models.
Weak Cross-Sector Relationships	Limited engagement between artists, developers, and policymakers.	Participants saw opportunities for relationship-building through shared space and joint initiatives.
Event-Driven Burnout	Participation can sometimes be centred around big, singular moments like isolated learning days or events that are short-term, and high-energy. Participants noted that after the event is over, there is sometimes no clear next step for a given initiative.	The solution is to provide ways to stay involved in meaningful, manageable, and ongoing ways. There should be an emphasis on and an investment in sustainable, long-term structure, strategy, and support systems to turn that burst of energy into sustained action or deeper involvement.
Lack of Common Base of Knowledge	The sector lacks a clear, shared understanding of its own infrastructure, scale, or needs.	Participants stressed the absence of core facts: how much cultural space exists per capita, what forms it takes by neighbourhood, its value, and future demand. Without a big-picture view, planning and advocacy are fragmented.

4.3 Analysis and Implications

The barriers identified by participants reflect a broader set of structural challenges that are common to arts ecosystems but are particularly acute in Ottawa’s downtown context. Many of these issues are interrelated, such as financial inaccessibility feeding into artist displacement, or weak sector coordination limiting advocacy power.

Importantly, participants did not present these barriers as reasons to slow down—but rather as calls to co-design more intentionally, distribute leadership, and build mechanisms for shared ownership and accountability.

A few critical insights emerged:

- **Space is not the only issue**—systems are. Access, governance, funding, and policy must evolve alongside physical space activation.
- **Sustainability requires new models.** Creative sector resilience will depend on hybrid funding, cross-subsidization, and structural supports beyond one-time grants.
- **Artists belong in core planning.** Cultural infrastructure cannot be treated as peripheral to development—it must be embedded in land use, housing, and economic strategy.
- **Learning must be ongoing.** A strong MEL framework is essential to track outcomes, adapt approaches, and maintain transparency as barriers are addressed.

4.4 The Missing Knowledge Infrastructure

A key challenge identified is the sector’s lack of a common, reliable knowledge base about its own infrastructure, value, and needs.

While cultural interest-holders bring lived experience to the table, the absence of foundational data (from total square footage and per capita access to infrastructure types, distribution, and financial valuation) means the sector is often working without a map.

This knowledge gap manifests in several ways:

- **No shared “big picture”:** Most organizations operate with limited visibility into the full extent of Ottawa’s cultural infrastructure, making citywide planning difficult.

- Poor sector benchmarking: There are no consistent metrics for comparing cultural space supply or demand. Either by neighbourhood, by art form, or by demographic.
- Weak evidence for advocacy: Without quantifiable data, it is harder to make compelling, system-wide arguments to policymakers, funders, or developers.
- Fragmented decision-making: Organizations interested in leasing or owning space often do so without access to aggregated knowledge from others who have navigated similar processes.

This feedback underlines the need for a shared knowledge infrastructure as a foundation for long-term cultural development. As the *Shared Ground* initiative continues, building this base, potentially through the collaboration between Arts Ottawa, Carleton's CIMS Lab, and sector partners, will be essential. Doing so will strengthen evidence-based planning, support scenario modelling and digital twin efforts, inform future advocacy, investment, and policy alignment, **and enable the sector to act collectively**, rather than in silos.

5.0 Why This Work Matters – Policy Alignment

This work is aligned with the current investments by all levels of government, federal, provincial, and municipal, in building community resilience, strengthening local economies, and revitalizing urban and rural areas through cultural engagement. While it begins with temporary space activations in the downtown core, it is designed to be a model for long-term, citywide transformation.

This work is essential for several interrelated reasons.

- a. Advancing Equity and Community Leadership:
A core objective of *Shared Ground* is to embed equity, access, and co-governance into Ottawa's cultural infrastructure. The initiative prioritizes leadership from historically excluded communities, particularly artists, cultural workers, and grassroots organizations, ensuring they have a meaningful role in shaping public space and policy.
- b. Revitalizing Downtown Through Culture:

Downtown Ottawa is at a crossroads. As commercial vacancies rise and foot traffic declines, the city faces urgent questions about the future of its urban core. *Shared Ground* responds by placing culture at the center of its revitalization, activating vacant properties, supporting public life, and fostering a sense of place. It leverages arts and culture not as a decorative afterthought, but as a foundational strategy for regeneration.

c. Building a Shared Knowledge Infrastructure:

One of the most urgent needs identified through *Shared Ground* is the lack of a shared, citywide base of knowledge about Ottawa's cultural infrastructure. Without access to common data, many organizations, artists, and planners are left to operate in silos, with limited visibility into:

- How much cultural space currently exists per capita
- What types of space are needed (studios, galleries, rehearsal rooms, etc.), and how these vary by neighbourhood
- How much space is projected to be needed, based on population growth, market demands and sector trends
- The approximate financial value of cultural real estate in Ottawa
- The sector's collective footprint, and how different components of the ecosystem contribute to broader social and economic goals

This knowledge gap undermines the sector's ability to coordinate, advocate, and plan for long-term sustainability.

Shared Ground recognizes that space activation must be supported by knowledge activation. Through partnerships with research institutions like Carleton University's CIMS Lab and data-focused collaborators like Memetic Media, the initiative is helping to develop tools, such as the "digital twin" for cultural land use, that can begin to close this gap. This work lays the foundation for a more informed, agile, and strategic cultural sector that is capable of acting collectively and making evidence-based decisions.

d. Recognizing and Strengthening Ottawa's Cultural Infrastructure:

Shared Ground builds on the city's broader network of cultural spaces, recognizing that cultural infrastructure exists in many forms, not only in municipally funded centres, but also in independently operated venues, grassroots initiatives, and community-rooted cultural hubs.

City of Ottawa-owned facilities such as the Shenkman Arts Centre (Orléans), Meridian Theatres (CentrepoinTE), Arts Court and the Ottawa Art Gallery (downtown), and the Richelieu-Vanier Community Centre offer critical access points for programming, rehearsal, performance, and exhibition. These centres provide an important foundation for civic cultural life and often act as anchors in their respective communities.

At the same time, a growing network of independent and privately operated cultural hubs plays an equally vital role in supporting Ottawa's cultural ecosystem. These include artist-run spaces, DIY venues, creative co-working studios, and adaptive reuse projects that often arise from community initiative rather than public funding.

These spaces are often more agile and responsive, and more embedded in community than large institutions, but they also face greater precarity due to unstable leases, rising costs, and a lack of long-term support.

By activating both already established and underutilized publicly supported centres, as well as community-based cultural hubs spaces, *Shared Ground* supports the development of a distributed, accessible cultural infrastructure that reflects the reality of how arts and culture thrive in Ottawa. This is further aligned with the principles of 15-minute neighbourhoods, ensuring that residents can access arts and culture close to home.

It also positions *Shared Ground* to connect these diverse spaces through transit infrastructure networks, creating stronger citywide linkages between cultural activity, mobility, and community development.

e. Aligning with Public Policy at All Levels:

Shared Ground is strategically aligned with cultural and community development priorities at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels:

- Federally, it supports the **Department of Canadian Heritage's** goals of strengthening cultural infrastructure, expanding access to arts programming, and improving the social and economic conditions of artists. It also aligns with the **Creative Export Strategy** and the **Federal Action Plan on Housing and Homelessness**, particularly in its exploration of live-work models and affordable housing for artists.

- Provincially, the initiative supports the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport's focus on cultural inclusion, space innovation, and regional development. It intersects with the **Ontario Place-Based Economic Development Framework** and the **Affordable Housing Supply Action Plan (2025–2028)**, offering creative, community-led solutions to shared space and housing challenges.
- Municipally, *Shared Ground* directly contributes to the **City of Ottawa's Strategic Plan (2023–2026)** and the **Economic Development Strategy and Action Plan**, which emphasize City building projects like developing cultural attractions, placemaking opportunities and public realm developments through intensified cultural use. The initiative also complements key efforts under the City's **Municipal Culture Plan**, **Public Realm plans**, and Ottawa Board of Trade's **Downtown Ottawa Action Agenda**, which recognize the arts as an essential component to building a vibrant, inclusive, and economically resilient capital. Furthermore, *Shared Ground* aligns with the City of Ottawa's rural development priorities as outlined in their **Rural Summit 2024**. This summit addressed inclusive cultural participation in rural areas through mobile programming, shared-use facilities, and rural artist networks. This approach contributes to broader municipal goals related to economic diversification, youth retention, and community cohesion in rural and village communities.

6.0 Moving Forward Together

Building on the insights and priorities identified during the Learning Day on June 25th, Arts Ottawa and its partners are now advancing a coordinated set of next steps. These actions reflect a commitment to continuity, accountability, and structural change, ensuring that the momentum sparked by the launch leads to sustained and inclusive progress across the entire region.

6.1 Immediate Actions (2025–2026)

As *Shared Ground* enters its next phase, a coordinated set of immediate actions is underway to strengthen governance, deepen sector knowledge, and ensure inclusive participation. A primary focus is the evolution of the shared governance model, which Arts Ottawa is developing with an emphasis on transparency, equity,

and multi-sector input. This model aims to ensure that decision-making processes remain accountable to those most impacted by issues of space, access, and cultural development.

To support this work, Arts Ottawa is establishing a Research Leadership Circle composed of community members, artists, and sector representatives. This advisory body will provide strategic input to Arts Ottawa, Memetic Media, and Carleton University's CIMS Lab, ensuring that research, planning, and evaluation activities are grounded in lived experience and practical insight from across the arts, nonprofit, and civic sectors.

An equally important priority is the development of a shared knowledge base to address long-standing gaps in cultural infrastructure data. Participants identified a critical absence of baseline information about the scale, distribution, and function of cultural space in Ottawa. Questions remain unanswered around how much space currently exists, what forms it takes, how needs vary across neighbourhoods, and how much additional space will be required as the city grows. There is also a need to understand the economic value and collective impact of Ottawa's cultural infrastructure, including both public and privately operated spaces. To address these gaps, *Shared Ground* is collaborating with Carleton University's CIMS Lab and Memetic Media to build data and mapping tools to visualize the existing ecosystem, simulate future scenarios, and guide decision-making on space activation and policy. This foundational work will enable more informed, strategic action at the community, municipal, and regional levels.

In the immediate term, we are also reflecting on valuable feedback from the *Shared Ground* Learning Day, particularly regarding the cost of participation. While fees supported key elements such as meals, professional development, and networking, we recognize the need for ongoing dialogue around accessibility. Moving forward, we remain focused on balancing project deliverables and services with inclusive decision-making, ensuring equitable access and meaningful participation throughout the initiative.

6.2 Long-Term Vision

In the long term, *Shared Ground* aims to support the transformation of underused spaces into community-driven cultural hubs across the city. **The digital twin modelling tool, developed in collaboration with the CIMS Lab at Carleton University, will be a long-term tool for visualization, planning, and prototyping site activations.** This work supports broader goals such as the integration of

affordable housing and studio infrastructure for artists, the establishment of sustainable, community-led governance models, and the creation of inclusive spaces that reflect and respond to the needs of residents and cultural workers.

6.3 Next Steps

The success of *Shared Ground* depends on ongoing collaboration across sectors and communities. All partners are invited to participate in this next phase: offering space, sharing knowledge, building policy, and investing resources to ensure that Ottawa remains a place where creativity, equity, and community thrive together.

Arts Ottawa will continue to act as a facilitator, advocate, and connector, bringing together artists, civic leaders, funders, developers, and the public to co-create the city's cultural future.