

Making Spaces for Art

A Case Study: ROCS / Place des Arts

“Talent without discipline is like an octopus on roller skates. There’s plenty of movement, but you never know if it’s going to forward, backwards, or sideways.”

H Jackson Brown Jr

Such is not the case with ROCS—or the Regroupement des organismes culturels de Sudbury. Like an octopus, there are eight extensions. But there are no roller skates involved here. ROCS has both talent and discipline and is only moving forward.

ROCS is made up of eight Francophone arts and cultural organizations in Sudbury. Varying in size from staffs of eighty to solo operations, they are embarking on a journey to move forward together to create a shared facility. ROCS is comprised of the Carrefour francophone, the Centre franco-ontarien de folklore, the Éditions Prise de parole, the Galerie du Nouvel-Ontario, the Nuit sur l’étang, the Salon du livre du Grand Sudbury, the Théâtre du Nouvel-Ontario and the Concerts de musique contemporaine 5-Penny New Music Concerts. These organizations represent approximately fifty years of francophone arts and culture in Sudbury, mostly in the creation of new works with a growing community of professional artists.

Throughout these fifty years, these organizations have made several attempts to cohabitate and collaborate. There is a long history of “collaboration, cohabitation, and co-management.” In the 1970’s, many were housed in the same building for a few years. Structural issues with the actual physical building itself ended this. They were forced to move but had to disperse as no other shared space was available. In the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, three of the organizations worked on a development project together. Sharing the bond of language, culture, and audience, these organizations have consistently shared a desire to collaborate and grow together and to “consolidate [their] sector”. It is a tricky business. The intent is to maintain the integrity of the parts of this whole and simultaneously function as a whole. Paulette Gagnon, Director of Development says, “We can’t afford to lose or compromise the legacy they represent for our community.”

In 2010, the City of Greater Sudbury undertook a study on the economic revitalization of the downtown core. The study involved some twenty-five stakeholders in the downtown and the consulting group Urban Strategies Inc from Toronto. Two and a half years later, the results indicated that the Art Gallery of Sudbury, a soon to open (September 2013) architecture school, and Place des Arts were pivotal. And the City put their money where their mouth was. They were the first to confirm \$50,000 to help pay for a feasibility study on the Place des Arts. Further funding was provided from FedNor and the Ontario Trillium Foundation to help all eight organizations build their capacity as a group in preparation of the Place des Arts project. ROCS is committed to being “accountable to the community and the committee that is implementing the action plan that followed the Francophone Community Forum of 2008.”

Given the lack of existing infrastructure for these initiatives, ROCS had a great deal of work cut out for it. Rather than plunging headlong with unbridled enthusiasm, ROCS is taking the slow route. They are using a very thoughtful, well-planned and phased approach for the creation of this arts facility. The creation of a unique and functional governance structure and a methodical approach rule the development process.

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The initial phase was concept development and a pre-feasibility study. In the early months of 2011, ROCS began a needs assessment for the eight groups that will eventually be occupying Place des Arts. Then began the development of a Functional & Technical Program, or pre-feasibility study in 12 steps, as per a guide the City of Montreal developed for such projects. This itself has taken a year to complete. Gagnon also interviewed twenty-five arts organizations across Canada. She inquired about their governance structures, business models, and capital projects. She asked about their strengths and weaknesses. She asked for their advice. Fifteen months and two seventy-five-page reports later, Phase I was complete.

Phase II will be the actual feasibility study and business plan, which will be completed with independent consultants. Working with eight groups could be unwieldy—like an octopus on roller skates. But with the measured and methodical approach to this project, this is not the case. Gagnon says, “such a big project can make you fragile if you aren’t careful.” ROCS is very careful. Next, comes the business model analysis, site selection, and eventually construction. The goal is for fundraising to begin in 2014/2015, construction to begin in 2016-2017 and ultimately for the groups to occupy the space by 2018. At this moment, they can tell you the square footage required, what it will feel like to inhabit the centre, who will occupy the space on what days of the week, taste the food in bistro, savour a sip from the micro-brewery, purchase a few items in the boutique that will some day be. It is almost that real. There is a shared and well-defined vision. Each member has grown attached to these ideas and this next phase will require open-mindedness. Gagnon foresees that the consultants may challenge their vision with fresh ideas but is eager for a new perspective at the same time.

“History, experience, and the present tense have brought us together,” says Gagnon. And these organizations are determined to achieve both short and long term success. Underpinning this is a unique and pivotal governance structure. A steering committee made up of the eight executive directors of the groups. As well, there is a co-ordination committee comprised of the executive directors of the two largest groups of within the eight and Gagnon. These are the administrative levels. As these committees began meeting, it became quite apparent that working groups were required. As such, there are two sets of working groups. One is devoted to capacity building: the marketing committee and the cultural enterprise committee. Another is devoted to capital: the governance committee, the construction committee and the liaison committee. As all these committees work together, they are also committed to growing and learning together. They host social innovation workshops and participate in webinars to continue their own learning.

Regroupement des organismes culturels de Sudbury recognizes that working with eight boards of directors can sometimes make decision-making slow. But they are all unwilling to compromise the integrity of this project. It is necessary that they move forward at a pace that all are comfortable with. It is this dedication to the process and building a very strong foundation that will make building this Place des Arts its own work of art as they move forward with talent and discipline.