



Creative Spaces Case Study Series

Carousel Players

This Creative Spaces Case Study Series is supported by:



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Introduction

These in-depth case studies will serve as a resource for arts and heritage organizations embarking on a capital project to learn from the successes and challenges of others in the sector.

In these case studies, we will be analyzing the **why** (why they took on this capital project), the **what** (what were they building and creating), the **who** (who are they serving, who supported this project, who led this project and who they hired), the **how** (how was the project financially supported and what positions were created/how were they funded), and **the ongoing** (what happened after? How is the building maintained/operated? Is it sustainable? How is revenue generated?) behind each project.

We have engaged a wide range of spaces from across the province from varying operational models, size, location, project size and artistic discipline. The case studies will focus on each organization's respective process for completing each project; from the planning phase, to the building phase, to the operations and maintenance phase. Following the completion of all 20 case studies, a Best Practice Summary will be developed and released on ABO's website, free for all to access.

The case study series is supported by the Learning Series, which is a collection of webinars and workshops that support ABO's core programs. Webinars that highlight the capital projects featured in this case studies series will be made available throughout 2018 – 2020. Please check www.artsbuildontario.ca/learningseries for upcoming dates.

The case study series is supported by the Department of Canadian Heritage and Canada Council for the Arts.

ArtsBuild Ontario

ArtsBuild Ontario is the only organization in Ontario dedicated to realizing long-term solutions to building, managing and financing the sustainable arts facilities needed in our communities.

ABO offers tools, resources and programs that support arts organizations with their creative space projects. ABO's core programs include Accessibility in Creative Spaces, SpaceFinder in Canada, Arts Facilities Mentoring Network, and Asset Planner for the Arts.

Carousel Players

Interviewee

Kate Leathers, General Manager

Mandate

Carousel Players is an award-winning professional theatre company for young audiences. We are committed to the development of new work and the production of theatre that entertains and challenges our audiences. We present inspiring and creative plays for children in theatres, schools and other performance venues. We ensure that our performances, summer theatre school, and outreach programs can be accessed by all children and families regardless of their socio-economic background.

In order to support meaningful dialogue around our productions, we provide study guides to all educational professionals to help them connect classroom material to each production. Our actors also facilitate a short question and answer period after each show.

We believe live theatre develops artistic awareness, learning skills and a sense of well-being in children.

Vision

Young people are at the heart of our work. Carousel is committed to inclusive and diverse stories that contribute to a dialogue about how young people interact with their peers, their friends, their families, teachers, and society at large. Our work as a company is to listen to that voice and reflect it in our work. We provide a space where young people's stories and dreams can be supported and heard, and where they can be active contributors to their current narrative.

We consider nurturing and development of new work one of our core activities. Our new play development program will continue to strive for the achievement of entertaining and challenging new productions that expand the body of work for young audiences in North America. Our work in the arts is through not only providing theatrically compelling work, but through our advocacy of how it can be created.

In our community and beyond we work to provide family programming that inspires life-long lovers of the theatre. We are interested in how young people engage with theatre, and how it transfers into their everyday lives.

As we look to our 50th year, we wish to cultivate passion for the arts in our community and, most importantly, in the schools where our audiences first grow.

Historical Background

Carousel Players is a non-profit charitable organization founded in 1972 by Desmond Davis, a professor of Drama at Brock University in St. Catharines. Des and his wife Faye came to Canada from Australia and created a theatre to serve youth in Niagara. The name for the company is inspired by one of Canada's oldest carousels in nearby Port Dalhousie, where you can still enjoy a ride for just a nickel.

Throughout their history, over 2.8 million students, teachers and families have seen their productions. Carousel Players regularly perform in schools across Ontario, and have also toured nationally and performed on international stages as far away as England and Japan.

From 2000 to 2016, Carousel Players operated out of the historic Courthouse on King Street in St. Catharines. They have since relocated their offices to Silver Spire Church in downtown St. Catharines in 2017 and operate out of several buildings across the city including the Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre and Brock University.

Project Summary

After 16 years of operating out of the Historic Courthouse in Downtown St. Catharines, Carousel Players responded to a change that discouraged them from renting their 120-seat theatre to the community. As they would no longer be able to finance their organization without their rentals program, Carousel re-oriented their operational model in 2016. In lieu of securing one building, they incited partnership agreements to secure three buildings to support their varying programming and administrative needs. These facilities include; the Silver Spire United Church; The Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre; and The Marilyn I Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts (MIWSFPA). Through their agreement with the Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre, Carousel was able to facilitate the transfer of their stage to this new facility, ensuring its availability for the local performing arts community.

The “What”

What has been the evolution in Carousel Players' operational model?

From 2000 – 2016, Carousel operated out of the second floor of the municipally owned, historic Courthouse in downtown St Catharines. In this building, they held administrative space, a rehearsal hall, a 120-seat theatre, and event space to rent to other arts organizations. This facility enabled Carousel to expand their programs and offer a theatre space that would act as an incubator space for many community arts groups, several of which are now established, professional companies.

When Carousel's operational model no longer coincided with the City's vision for the building, they chose to relocate. They have maintained all of their previous programs and offerings, but have split

across multiple locations. Each of the new buildings Carousel calls home address varying organizational needs. The Silver Spire United Church houses administrative offices, the Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre provides storage space as well as rehearsal space, and is home to a smaller version of the Courthouse Theatre. Carousel has also partnered with Brock University to exchange equipment for play development space in the Marilyn I Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts.

Who owns and operates Carousel Players' current facilities?

The buildings Carousel Players operate out of include:

- The Silver Spire United Church; owned and operated by the Church
- The Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre; municipally owned by the City of St. Catharines, non-profit operated by the Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre
- The Marilyn I Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts (MIWSFPA); owned and operated by Brock University

What did Carousel Players build?

In order to maintain their stage as an asset to the community, Carousel moved their pre-existing theatre from the Courthouse to the Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre. This involved disassembling the theatre and all of the specialized equipment, including the trusses, lighting, and curtains, then reassembling it in the new building. While the Centre acted as a partner by providing the space, Carousel took on all other aspects of the project including planning, labour and funding. After a year of planning and implementation, a 50-seat theatre was installed in the Centre.

The “Why”

Why did Carousel leave the Courthouse?

While there was a great deal of charm and character in the historic courthouse, there were also many challenges that came with operating out of a heritage building. This included structural limitations like poor insulation and an inaccessible building with physical barriers to entry. Finally, when Carousel was discouraged from renting their theatre to local arts groups, they determined the financial loss of ending their rentals program would be too large of a hardship for the organization to take on. With their lease ending in 2016, Carousel decided it was time to leave the courthouse.

Why did Carousel choose to adopt their new operational model?

Through consultations with all the users and renters of the Courthouse, Jane Gardner, the previous General Manager of Carousel Players, was able to confirm the need for Carousel to maintain their theatre. The 120-seat theatre was of tremendous value to incubator sized theatre groups and collectives that were in need of smaller venues for their programming. One of the main users of the space was

Essential Collective Theatre (ECT). Along with renting workspace and rehearsal space from Carousel, they used the theatre at least three times annually for readings and productions. While they were not involved with the actual implementation of the build or move, they were supportive of Carousel's decision to relocate and agreed to move with them.

While Carousel was committed to ensuring their new space would be viable for themselves and their partners, one building that met all their requirements for rentals, programming and administration, did not exist at the time. Instead, Carousel secured space through formed partnership agreements with varying organizations in the region. Based on newly developed relationships as well as existing staff and board connections, Carousel was able to secure three different sites to fulfil their various needs.

The “Who”

Who do these spaces strive to serve?

Carousel utilizes all three venues to fulfil their mandate and support internal operations as well as the local emerging theatre groups within the Niagara region. Their new homes have also fostered interactions with a much more diverse group of users. Carousel often welcomes collectives and groups into their large administrative offices in the Silver Spire Church, including Newcomers & Refugees in Niagara Community Forum who host social activism programming through the church. Moreover, by installing their stage in the Folk Arts Multicultural Centre, it has been made available to varying cultural groups within the region. Acting as a performance or presentation space, the stage has welcomed Niagara's Newcomer Association and the Latin Immigrant Niagara Community Association to name a few.

Who opposed the project?

When Carousel informed renters they would be leaving the courthouse, many were disappointed, as a large number of local groups and organizations grew out of the courthouse. They viewed it as their home base and had a strong connection to the space. Carousel understood their disappointment and was able to mitigate opposition by remaining transparent. They addressed the reality that they could no longer offer rentals in the Courthouse and were working to ensure they still had a space to rehearse and perform. They reminded these groups that their new venue would only be a couple blocks away and would not be leaving the downtown core. When moving out of their space, Carousel also held a yard sale, which enabled renters to keep any of their cherished props and offered Carousel relief in the moving process.

Who led the project within Carousel Players?

Within the organization, then General Manager, Jane Gardner and Production Manager, Kate Leathers were the leads on the projects. Gardner took the lead on partnership development and leveraged her grant writing skills to secure funding for the project through the Community Foundation. Working closely with Gardner in her previous role as production manager, Kate Leathers oversaw the implementation of the move and building of the stage. Leathers was also able to leverage her history working alongside consultant Janis Barlow to create a cost-benefit analysis of the project to determine the feasibility of the move. Artistic Director, Jessica Carmichael was also involved in partnership discussions, specifically with the Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre, and integrating their members in Carousel's programming.

Within Carousel's Board of Directors is an ad-hoc facilities committee that is typically consulted when the organization is faced with a facility issue. For this project, the committee confirmed the need for Carousel to maintain their theater, and offered suggestions on new venues to consider for other programming initiatives. The committee performed most of the research and investigation into where the organization should move.

Who were the members of the Facilities Committee?

The committee was populated by board members, a recruited architect and Carousel staff. Members included:

- Patty Parr, Board Member
- Norm Bradshaw, Board Member
- Nigel Scott, Architect
- Jessica Carmichael, Artistic Director, Carousel Players
- Kate Leathers, Production Manager, Carousel Players

These individuals were key in deciding what the best space would be. During the inception and planning phase, this group met monthly. Once constructing began, this committee disbanded and Carousel staff completed the project.

Who are the partners in the project?

The three main partners involved in this project, were the three new venue organizations. They include:

1. The Silver Spire United Church

The church came on board relatively early in the project as they had been looking for tenants to occupy their space. General Manager, Jane Gardner, facilitated this connection, and a lease was signed a couple months into their search. This venue now hosts Carousel's administrative offices and some space for set creation.

2. The Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre

This partnership was formed through both committee and staff efforts. Several meetings were held to ensure the space would be suitable to house the theatre and both parties were clear on the partnership agreement. The agreement was signed in 2016, and included the Centre providing the space, and Carousel facilitating the move of the theatre. It was also agreed that the Centre would coordinate use of the theatre to the community of St. Catharines and keep the profits. In return, Carousel does not pay to use the space, and is given priority when reserving their programming dates in the venue.

3. Brock University

This partnership was formed through a connection within the committee, and solidified through equipment rentals. Since Brock was in need of flexible seating for their new performing arts facility, Carousel offered 80 seats in exchange for the use of their studios. This agreement provided Carousel with three years of free use of the Brock arts campus' studios for new play development work. Carousel works directly with the theatre department staff to arrange this use time.

Who facilitated the transfer of the stage?

While Gardner lead the charge on moving offices, Leathers oversaw the design and implementation of transferring the stage from one venue to the other. For this project, she engaged the help of architect Nigel Scott and William Mackay, an engineer who volunteered with the Folk Arts Multicultural Centre. Carousel also hired Labour Plus, a contracting team, based in Toronto that specializes in installations. This was the same group that originally installed the stage in the Courthouse.

The “How”

How did the project move from conception to realization?

The largest challenge Carousel faced in this project was securing the best partnerships for their organization. While site location and facility specifications were important, a major consideration in this process was insuring mission alignment between organizations. Considering the purpose of Brock's MIWSFPA is to support the Department of Dramatic Arts' mission to foster creative development and educate drama, there was a clear alignment of proprieties. Similarly, the Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre offers a variety of youth programs and is based in serving community. Finally as the Silver Spire United Church's three main pillars in their strategic plan include faith, community and the arts, they have identified the arts as a priority within their operations, and recognize the value of the arts. Once partnerships were solidified, Carousel was able to move on to facilitating the move and transferring the stage into their new venue.

How was the construction plan formed and realized?

Once Carousel confirmed their decision to dismantle and recreate the theatre in the Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre, Leathers, drew up the plans. Since they had to be confirmed by an engineer, Carousel leveraged their partnership with the Centre and asked their board member to sign off on the plans. Following their approval, Labour Plus, came to install the specialized tresses. Carousel's local crew then came in to finish install, which included hanging the curtains and running the cables.

How were contingencies in the timeline managed?

Carousel disassembled their theatre in May 2016 with plans to reassemble within a one-week period. In order to complete the project Carousel required one week of interrupted use of the venue. Considering the high volume of activity in the Centre, securing this proved to be more of a challenge than anticipated. Carousel did not receive access to build until the end of November, which set their expected timeline back by six months. This delay was not felt too heavily by users as there was not much of a demand for the stage over those summer and fall months.

How were day-to-day operations impacted?

Relocating the theatre and moving administrative offices proved to be all consuming for the two leads within Carousel. Although it was challenging, both the General Manager and Production Manager, took on most of the responsibility to ensure other staff members could focus on their respective roles and not get too absorbed in the project. In order to compensate for all the overtime accrued, they took an extended vacation when operations had settled.

How was accessibility included in the project?

Since Carousel had previously been operating in an inaccessible building, having a safe and accessible venue for performances and programming was top of mind in their search. As a newly built facility, Brock's MIWSFPA is fully AODA compliant. Both the Folk Arts Multicultural Centre and the Church address physical accessibility needs through elevators and accessible washrooms.

How was energy efficiency and the environment incorporated?

As renters and partners in the new venues, Carousel is not involved with energy considerations in the buildings. They do remain conscious of their carbon footprint and energy use.

How was the project funded?

Funding for this project came exclusively from the Niagara Community Foundation. Due to the engineered trusses, contracted, specialized labour was required to transfer the theatre. In the end, it cost approximately \$8,000 to move the theatre. Though it was not needed, Carousel had planned on selling some of the engineered trusses if the grant was not secured, or did not cover all costs.

How were programs managed during construction?

The only change in programming that occurred throughout this project was the relocation of Carousel's summer theatre school. While this required informing parents of the relocation, the new space in Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre was far superior to the courthouse. Having a physically larger space enabled Carousel to increase participant rates and having an air-conditioned venue was much more comfortable for participants and staff alike.

Carousel purposely planned the move from their previous administrative office to take place during the two months between their final show closing and their children's summer programming beginning to avoid any major disruptions.

The "Ongoing"

How have new financials been projected?

For Carousel, this organizational change was understood as a cost reducing initiative. In their new space at the centre, their rent has decreased by almost 50%. And while the Centre manages and receives the revenue from use of the theatre, Carousel saves on their programming expenses through their compensated use of the centre's facilities. Similarly, rather than paying rent to use Brock's new facility, Carousel offers use of equipment and use of expertise by participating in their mentoring program. While there are different operational costs associated with working out of multiple venues, such as multiple cell phones to stay in contact with one another, they have been factored into the budget.

Were any new staff hired?

No new staffing positions were introduced as a result of this project. Carousel has maintained operations with the same contracted staffing model.

How will the buildings be operated and maintained?

In terms of their use of the Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre, Carousel's Production Manager is responsible for the maintenance of the space. They are responsible for ensuring storage is being properly maintained, and repairing any physical damage to the spaces used by Carousel. They are also the primary point of contact for the Centre's Facilities Manager.

While Carousel is not involved with facility management at Brock University, the Production Manager takes the lead on maintaining their relationship. This includes ensuring they have a balanced and strong reciprocal relationship in which all asks are met. As this relationship is continuously evolving, both parties remain cooperative and keep communication channels open.

Finally, in regards to their partnership with the Silver Spire United Church, the General Manager upholds the relationship. This includes negotiating the lease and use of the facility. Carousel initially signed a one-year lease in 2016 and is currently on a rolling lease. Under this agreement, both parties meet to discuss whether there are any changes or upgrades to be made to the lease. A rent increase is then negotiated followed by a signed letter to that effect.

How will Carousel Players address any future repairs to their assets?

Carousel maintains a capital reserve fund, which is used when new equipment is needed. Contributions to this fund are typically made through surpluses generated at the end of their fiscal year. They foresee applying this fund towards replacing their truck within the next five years. This large, 20 foot long truck is instrumental to operations as it enables Carousel to transport their equipment for performances.

What lessons were learned in the first 90 days?

The biggest lesson Carousel staff learned in the initial stage of this project was to be prepared for all types of unpredictable challenges to arise when moving a theatre company. A major cost and inconvenience Carousel did not originally consider was changing over the phone lines and voicemail system. Similarly, unpacking and settling into their new administrative office in the Centre took three times as long than originally anticipated. Being realistic with timelines and allotting oneself as much time as possible is advantageous to the success of any project.

What lessons were learned in the first year?

Within the first year of experiencing these partnerships, the importance of detailed agreements and checking assumptions was highlighted. As the agreements are based on partnerships and negotiations, certain aspects had to be finessed once they were put into practice. For example, scheduling challenges arose within a couple of the facilities, and coordinating use of Brock University's facility with the students' schedule proved to be quite challenging for Carousel. Both parties assumed they would have access to the space on a schedule that was favourable for themselves. Moving forward, Carousel began providing ample notice on the hard dates they required for the programming. When they were operating in the Courthouse, they were the sole users of the space and had free rein. Accordingly, this transition in operations took some time for Carousel to adjust to, and they have learned to be more flexible ready to make adjustments to schedules.

Case Study Summary

Carousel Players' change in operational model and subsequent renovation project can be understood as an innovative use of space and response to the dynamic realities of the arts sector. Based on mutually beneficial relationships and shared values, these partnerships have offered cost reducing benefits to Carousel, and enabled them to create a new theatre space within their community and continue providing space for groups in need.

Resources

The following resources below have been provided by Carousel Players as additional information for readers.

- [2017-2020 Strategic Plan](#)
- [The Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre, Robby Lower Hall Floor Plan](#) (New home of the theatre)
- [Truss Plans](#)
- [Niagara Fall Review Article – Carousel Players Leaving Courthouse Theatre](#)