

ARTS BUILD ONTARIO

## Creative Spaces Case Study Series

# The Great Canadian Theatre Company: Irving Greenberg Theatre Centre



This Creative Spaces Case Study Series is Supported by:

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## Introduction

These in-depth case studies 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 analyze 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 looked at a wide range of spaces from across the province with varying operational models, sizes, locations, project sizes and artistic disciplines. The case studies focus on each organization's process for completing their project; from the planning phase, to the building phase, to the operations and maintenance phase. Following the completion of all 19 case studies, a Best Practice Summary 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 the 2018-2020 case studies series are available on the ABO website. Please check <https://www.artsbuildontario.ca/learning/webinars/> for more information.

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 Asset Planner for the Arts, the Creative Spaces Mentoring Network, and the Learning Series.

## Great Canadian Theatre Company

### Historical Background

The Great Canadian Theatre Company (GCTC) was founded in 1975 by a group of professors and graduate students at Carleton University that envisioned a company that would only produce Canadian plays, especially those with social relevance. With a mandate in hand, the GCTC launched its first production in August of 1975 and it hasn't looked back since.

After spending the 1980s and 1990s operating out of a renovated truck garage on Gladstone Avenue, GCTC moved to the Wellington West neighbourhood of Ottawa. GCTC now calls the Irving Greenberg Theatre Centre its home. The Irving Greenberg Theatre Centre, which includes a 262-seat mainstage theatre, a flexible black box studio theatre, and two spacious lobbies, allowed GCTC to expand its activities and become a hub for community-based and artistic activities.

### Mandate

To foster, produce and promote excellent theatre that provokes examination of Canadian life and our place in the world.

### Project Summary

The Irving Greenberg Theatre Centre (IGTC) consists of approximately 1850 square metres of floor space on the lower levels of a ten-story building shared with The Currents, a residential condominium. The IGTC includes a ground floor, a second floor and a mezzanine (partial third floor), with administrative offices on the third floor, which is the first floor of the residential tower. There are two entrances: GCTC's main entrance at 1233 Wellington Street West, at the corner of Holland Avenue; and 1227 Wellington Street, the entrance to the residential tower, which is GCTC's mailing address and also provides access to GCTC's administrative offices.

## The "What"

### Who owns and operates GCTC?

The Irving Greenberg Theatre Centre is owned and run by the Great Canadian Theatre Company. As the IGTC is housed within The Currents condo building, the majority of maintenance and upkeep is managed by the condo property managers – however, the GCTC is responsible for 25% of overall upkeep costs.

## What did GCTC build?

The project took 10-12 years to complete. The GCTC entered into a private/public partnership with Windmill Development Ltd. and the City of Ottawa to develop a mixed-use condo and theatre facility. The partnership would help pave the way for future private/partnerships between developers, municipalities and community organizations around joint capital projects.

The partnership between GCTC and Windmill Development Ltd. led to the construction of the Irving Greenberg Theatre Centre as a 262-seat purpose-built theatre. The theatre is housed beneath 10 stories of condo apartments. The Currents Condo and the Irving Greenberg Theatre Centre opened in 2008.

The main theatre is two stories high, including the mezzanine. The audience has access to the theatre on the first and second floors of the building. The main theatre space also includes an extensive catwalk system and control booth. The centre also has a flexible studio theatre, with up to 90 seats. Other theatre essentials were included in the build, such as a construction workshop space, dressing rooms, a green room, mechanical rooms and a freight elevator between both floors. GCTC's administrative offices are located on third-floor of the condo building.

The lobby, located on the first floor, includes a ticket booth, coat check, washrooms and a café that is managed by a third party. The second floor is also home to the Lorraine Fritzi Yale Art Gallery.

The condos and theatre both have access to shared spaces within the facility. These include the main lobby, elevators, area outside GCTC's administrative offices, second floor/mezzanine, garbage room and underground parking.

## The “Why”

### Why did GCTC take on this project?

The former theatre space used by the GCTC was on 910 Gladstone Avenue – now known as The Gladstone, a facility that supports independent theatre. The facility was a former garage and had a capacity of 77-99 seats. The GCTC was outgrowing the facility and needed more space for dressing rooms, storage and administration. The new space in the IGTC expanded the GCTC's facility footprint and provided more space to meet the growing theatre company's needs.

## The “Who”

### Who does GCTC strive to serve?

The GCTC’s evolving audience impacted its move to a new space and a new neighbourhood. Their programs have expanded as a result of increased space for student and senior programming, and the GCTC now presents 6 plays per season while providing rental access to other theatre groups and arts/community organizations.

### Who led the project?

The project was led by various directors at the GCTC throughout the project timeline. These individuals include:

- Arthur Milner – former Artistic Director
- Nancy Oakley – former General Manager
- Lise Ann Johnson – former Artistic Director
- Barbara Crook – Danbe Foundation
- Hugh Neilson – current General Manager

### Who were the key partners in the project?

The primary partner on the project was Windmill Development Ltd, who also continues as a shared space partner of the multi-use condo/theatre facility.

Windmill’s original plan for the building site was to build an energy efficient and environmentally responsible residential condominium (the building currently meets LEED Gold standards). In an effort to gain support of the local community and the City of Ottawa, Windmill approached GCTC for a shared space partnership. A proposal for the project, which included the purchase of the theatre centre within the condo, was approved by the GCTC Board of Directors.

Other key partners invested in the project included:

- Irving Greenberg Family – private donors who gifted 2.5 million to the capital campaign; the new theatre centre was named after the late Irving Greenberg.
- City of Ottawa – one of the first funders to support the project and instrumental in reducing the capital debt.
- Apollo Management Company – property managers of The Currents condo/theatre building.

### Who opposed the project?

While some municipal councillors opposed the project, the City ultimately voted to support the GCTC’s new theatre centre with a contribution of 1.3 million dollars. The GCTC has been a cultural anchor in their community and the value of the project was widely understood.

## Who was on the project team?

GCTC's Board of Directors and its members played a major role in initiating and overseeing the project. The Building Committee, also composed of volunteers, went through several configurations as its role changed through the six years of finalizing, designing, and building the new theatre centre/condo. An estimated 50 volunteers played a role on the GCTC Board and its committees.

Legal advice was provided by Susan Gibson of Soloway Wright LLP.

## Who was contracted for the project?

While the GCTC and Windmill took a lead on the design of the new building, outside consultants and contractors included:

- Griffith Rankin Cook – Lead architects on the IGTC project Martin Conboy Lighting Design – Theatrical consultant
- AECON Buildings Ottawa – Construction managers
- David Caulfeild – Project Advisor

## The “How”

### How did the project go from concept to construction?

It was a combination of the City of Ottawa's confirmation of 1.3 million for the project, followed by other significant financial contributors and the partnership with Windmill, that allowed the GCTC to build a new space. The City's initial contribution was key as it helped justify and support funding requests from both provincial and federal governments. While the partnership with Windmill did not lower building costs, the private/public partnership made the capital project possible for the GCTC.

### How was a construction plan formed?

The theatre centre was designed by Windmill's architects to meet the needs of the GCTC. The GCTC's architects and theatrical consultants then designed the “construction fit-up” and “theatrical fit-up,” respectively.

### How was accessibility included in the project?

Accessibility, at the time of design and construction in 2002-08, was not at the forefront of the project. While GCTC's customer service and experiential offerings provide accommodations for people with disabilities, the physical space lacks accessible features, such as an accessible studio door. As the facility is a mixed-use space, accessibility needs vary from condo use compared to theatre use. The GCTC continues its operations in the IGTC, and it continues to explore ways to physically improve the accessibility of the space.



### How were energy efficiency and the environment incorporated?

For Windmill, energy efficiency was at the forefront of overall building design for both the condo/theatre facility. The Currents is a LEED-certified building; energy efficiency features include rainwater toilets, windows, HVAC, and a solar wall that harvests heat from the sun throughout the cold winter months to preheat air that is used to ventilate the residential units.

### How were contingencies managed?

The GCTC faced a difficult cash flow situation which resulted from staggered confirmations from key funders that supported the project. This unfortunately meant that the GCTC was unable to pay its bills for months. It was only through the patience and generosity of consultants and contractors that delayed payments were accepted.

Another challenge the GCTC faced was meeting estimated project costs, specifically during construction. The GCTC submitted a revised application to the Canada Cultural Spaces Fund in October 2005 to address a 39% increase in construction costs. While there were many challenges that contributed to the increase in cost, the main factor was the differing cost projections from the architects and construction managers. A redesign was required to bring costs down, but the overall project costs still increased by 11.6%.

Another challenging area was the GCTC's partnership with Windmill. First, sharing the site on Wellington Avenue required compromises: the total space available to GCTC was somewhat less than optimal and, as a result, there are no wings or backstage area in the main theatre, and the studio theatre and construction workshop are somewhat small. The two projects (condo/theatre space) were intricately intertwined, and necessitated collaboration for each partner to achieve their respective vision. But, as with any space partnership, full autonomy over the facility is not possible and must result in compromise. The GCTC experienced these limitations and moments of miscommunication throughout the project.

### How was the project funded?

The total cost of the project was \$11.6 million and was mainly funded by a combination of municipal, provincial and federal government support. The remaining funds consisted of donors and a loan to temporarily cover capital costs.

- \$1.3 million from City of Ottawa
- \$3 million from Canada Cultural Spaces Fund
- \$2.6 million Government of Ontario
- \$2.5 million from the Irving Greenberg family as a gift for the project
- One capital campaign plus an additional campaign after opening called "Taking Care of Unfinished Business" to address the shortfall
- \$1 million from "Making it Greater" capital campaign
- \$1.2 million loan to cover capital deficit

GCTC was quite successful in raising funds from government sources, but fundraising from private sources, with the exception of the Greenberg contribution, was a challenge and resulted in a loan of \$1.2 million dollars to cover remaining capital costs. A unique arrangement was made with the Danbe Foundation, who guaranteed the loan. Part of the loan, once paid off, went towards operating expenses and was recognized in books when the loan was paid off.

## The “Ongoing”

### How did GCTC project their new financials and did the IGTC provide new revenues?

The GCTC projected their new financials for the IGTC with the arts at the centre of operations. Facility rentals were not a priority at the start of operations in the new space. However, a business plan was soon developed to incorporate rentals, the lobby café/restaurant, and catering as revenue generators to offset increased expenses of the IGTC. The GCTC rents spaces within the IGTC to over 45 theatre groups and arts/community organizations. The large theatre spaces allowed the GCTC to increase audience numbers and revenue from productions – they have seen an overall increase of 10% in revenues.

### Were new staff hired after the new space opened?

Positions that were originally part of the GCTC’s business plan for the IGTC were let go at the beginning of operations. This included their Production Manager, Publicity Manager and others as a result of the debt incurred from the capital project. However, the GCTC gradually grew its operations, increased revenues, paid its loan, and now operates with a full team with 8 staff that includes an Artistic Director, General Manager, Production Manager, Finance & Office Manager, Technical Director, Assistant Technical Director, Head of Props, and Head of Wardrobe.

### How is GCTC being maintained and operated?

The Apollo Management Company is the property management company that maintains The Currents. For any capital components within the IGTC specific to the theatre spaces, the GCTC remains responsible. All assets within the IGTC are tracked using Asset Planner for the Arts, provided by ArtsBuild Ontario, and paid for through a capital reserve fund. The GCTC has been able to build up their capital reserve fund by adding a facility fee to every ticket sold.

### Lessons learned in the first year?

The following challenges became apparent within the first year of operations. Because the residential tower has no on-site staff, GCTC box office staff were often asked to provide access to residential areas and address other problems, including helping residents stuck in shared elevators. Negotiations over access to shared spaces was a challenge as well as problems experienced from both residents and the GCTC. These included the smell from the garbage room (the GCTC's workroom is above the garbage room), smells from the café/restaurant, theatre noises from rehearsals and performances, and use of the parking garage. These problems often take longer to resolve as a result of the shared space partnership.

The Board did accept that GCTC would be giving up a degree of independence by entering this partnership, but the details of that trade-off could not be known in advance. On the other hand, without this partnership, no capital project would have succeeded at the time. Once an agreement was reached with Windmill the project became a reality. Ottawa is a great city that deserves the art that comes out of this space. There is an incredible core of people that want to see it succeed. The GCTC through the IGTC provides a platform for artists and continues to support indie and new companies.

### Case Study Summary

With an increased need for space, GCTC took on this capital project to relocate from their original home of 910 Gladstone Avenue and construct the Irving Greenberg Theatre Centre, in partnership with Windmill Development Ltd. Now GCTC's permanent home, the Irving Greenberg Theatre Centre is a 262-seat theatre located beneath the Currents Condo. This build and move allowed GCTC to expand their artistic and community-based activities, now producing 6 plays per season as well as providing rental access to 40+ theatre groups and various arts/community organizations. Increased space alongside these rentals have allowed GCTC to see an overall increase in revenue, enabling them to thrive within Ottawa's performing arts scene.

## Resources

The following resources are provided as additional information for readers.

### Websites:

- [Great Canadian Theatre Company](#)

### Documents:

- [Windmill Developments Case Study: The Currents](#)