

ARTS BUILD ONTARIO  
**Creative Spaces Case Study Series**  
The Westdale Theatre



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.

## The Westdale Theatre

### Interviewees

- Fred Fuchs, Chair
- Dan Fournier, Operations Manager

### Vision

The Westdale will be a community-based cinematic, cultural and economic hub for Westdale Village, the City of Hamilton and the surrounding region.

### Historical Background

The Westdale screens art and independent films, and provides an intimate cultural space for public performances and exhibitions, showcasing Canadian and world content. The Westdale is a fully licensed and fully accessible theatre with described video and closed captioning technology.

The Westdale Theatre has been an important part of Westdale (Canada's first planned neighbourhood) since it opened in 1935. It was the first theatre in Hamilton built expressly to show sound motion pictures. The theatre remained in operation until it was put up for sale in December of 2016. The newly incorporated Westdale Cinema Group (WCG) submitted an offer to purchase the building that was accepted on January 27, 2017.

The full purchase and restoration budget was raised in Hamilton, by Hamiltonians, both residents and the City of Hamilton. After over 18 months of restoration and modernization of services (washrooms, wheelchair access, heating and air conditioning, etc.), the theatre reopened its doors on February 14th, 2019 as a cultural hub showcasing films, talks, music, performance and special events

### Project Summary

In January 2017, the Westdale Cinema Group (WCG) initiated a \$4.5 million renovation project that resulted in the historic Westdale Theatre being reopened as a community based, cultural hub. Motivated by their vision of creating a multipurpose facility to support films, music, performance and special events, the group saw the value of preserving this historic site, and reinvigorating the theatre to serve its community once more. In less than two years, a group of local visionaries set up a charitable organization to purchase the compromised building, restored the infrastructure, modernised the interior and reinstated operations. With invaluable support from the community along the way, the WCG was successful in realizing their community-based, capital project.

## The “What”

### What is the Westdale’s Operational Model?

The Westdale Cinema Group is a charitable corporation that owns and manages Hamilton’s premier repertory cinema and arts venue at the historic Westdale Theatre.

### What did the Westdale Cinema Group Build?

The Westdale’s history of serving as a community cinema dates back to 1935. Built in the centre of Canada’s first planned neighbourhood, the 600-seat theatre acted as a gathering place for decades. Under its previous ownership, the building had experienced a significant amount of wear and tear without appropriate maintenance or preservation. When the Westdale Cinema Group purchased the building in January 2017 for \$2.4 million, the facility was severely compromised. Along with insulation issues and holes in the bricks and mortar, all of the seating and projection equipment required replacing.

What followed was \$2.5 million capital project that transformed the facility, and restored the Westdale to a community-based, cinematic cultural hub. Most of the funds were attributed to repairing the infrastructure of the building, patching the roof, and purchasing a new HVAC system with intentions of keeping the theatre running for another 50 years. When the seating in the theatre was replaced, the WCG chose to reduce the theatre to 340 seats, making room for a stage where live shows such as concerts, stand-up comedy and other community events could be performed. The project also included a \$40,000 digital projector, two separate sound systems, one for film and another for live music shows as well as a custom-built concession stand. The newly designated Heritage facility is now operating as a charitable organization, intended to serve as a multi-purpose community hub.

### What was the project timeline?

When the theatre was put up for sale in December of 2016, the newly incorporated WCG submitted an offer to purchase the building with their personal savings. The offer was accepted on January 27, 2017 and the group moved forward with restoration plans without having project funding secured. After taking possession on June 1st, 2017, the WCG closed the theatre for the duration of the renovation project. On February 14th 2019, the Westdale Cinema reopened to the community with a Valentine's Day gala and showing of Casablanca.

### What partners were involved in the project?

Along with the donors that were instrumental to the success of the project, the WCG formed a partnership with their booking agent early on in the renovation project. The Handsome Brothers were selected to support the theatre’s commercial operations and program film screenings based on their previous experience owning and programming theatres across Ontario. Their previous expertise proved to be very beneficial for the group, supporting programming as well budgeting and operational planning.

## The “Why”

### Why did the Westdale Cinema Group take on this capital project?

Prior to the re-opening of the Westdale, the City of Hamilton did not have an independent, art house movie theater. The team recognized the value of such a facility, and wanted to see the Westdale reinstated as a cultural hub, showcasing films, talks, music, performance and special events. Their goal was to create a state-of-the-art space to serve as a cultural and economic hub for Westdale Village and the Greater Hamilton Area.

Notably, the City of Hamilton had recently performed an extensive study of the arts venues in the city. Along with acknowledging the absence of an independent art house movie theatre, they identified a lack of venues that could accommodate 350 seats for non-union music and event performances. As this project aligned with the city’s cultural priorities, it received municipal support and assured the project team that the need for this theatre was genuine.

### Why did the Westdale Cinema Group engage the community in the project?

Throughout the renovation project, the WCG consulted with several organizations and community groups to get an understanding of how they might use the venue, and what their needs would be. Among these consultations were conversations with the Hamilton Art Gallery, the Hamilton Film Festival, McMaster University, as well as local cultural associations that might benefit from the space. Considering many of the smaller scale, grassroots organizations and community groups could not afford, or fill the seats of the large scale venues, the WCG wanted to insure the Westdale would be able accommodate the renters and users of the facility.

## The “Who”

### Who led the project within the organization?

This capital project was undertaken by the Board of Directors, and lead by Board Chair Fred Fuchs. The four members that initially formed the Westdale Cinema Group to manage the project included:

- Fred Fuchs, Board Chair, Independent Film and Television Producer
- Ruth Liebersbach, Board Treasurer, Chief Financial Officer for McMaster Innovation Park
- Robert (Bob) Crockford, Ex Officio Board Member
- Graham Crawford, Board Member
- As the project went on, additional members were recruited to support the project.  
Members included:
- Chris Firth-Eagland, Board Member, Retired Project Manager
- Mark Tamminga, Board Member, Partner at Gowling WLG’s Hamilton office

As the Board of Directors acted as the project managers, they were highly involved in planning and approval throughout the project. The group attended weekly project meetings and budget

reviews with the architect and contractor. Board members were volunteering approximately twenty hours a week throughout the project.

### Who supported the project outside of the organization?

This project received insurmountable community support, demonstrated by dedicated volunteers that donated their time and expertise to the restoration of the building. Over 150 volunteers supported the project by assisting with cleaning, painting, and even seat removal. Notably, Gerald Stanley, a Hamilton resident who designed many of the classic Loew's theatres in Toronto, designed the interior and exterior of the theatre at no cost. He worked meticulously with the project team to ensure the facility maintained its original Art Deco design.

### Who was contracted for this project?

Hiring local contractors and vendors was a top priority for the project team. The hired architect, Graham McNally of Toms and McNally Design, was selected due to his previous experience working on heritage projects and community ties to Hamilton. The contractors, Ira McDonald Construction Ltd., were also well known in the community and had previously worked with a board member. Local vendors were selected by the architects and contractors, and then approved by the board of directors. The WCG was looking to support the local economy as well as assemble a project team that would be working towards the same community based goal. The three predominant vendors hired for this project included: Langton ClimateCare, Amplitude and Adam's Plumbing and Pumps Ltd.

Jeremy Freiburger, founder of Cobalt Connects was engaged as consultant throughout this project. They supported fundraising and fund development to support the restoration project.

### Who opposed the project?

While there was no major opposition to the project, some community members had articulated their disapproval. They were concerned the team would not raise enough money to support the project, and believed the theatre would not succeed due to a lack of nearby parking spaces. The group dealt with these hesitations by remaining articulate of the vision of their project. Having spoken to local community groups who stated a need for the space, and receiving support from the City, the team was confident these hesitations would dissipated once the theatre opened.



## The “How”

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

The Board of Director’s chairperson, Fred Fuchs, initially conceived the project. As an experienced movie producer, he previously completed a similar capital project in which a struggling theatre in California was purchased and restored as a successful non-profit, community-based space. With hopes of recreating this project in Hamilton, Fuchs held a meeting with local community stakeholders to determine if this type of project could be funded and realized with The Westdale Theatre. Attendees included representatives from Cobalt Connects, the Art Gallery of Hamilton, the Hamilton Film Festival, a music promoter as well as other arts donors and supporters. With their support, Fred and his partners formed the Westdale Cinema Group. As a developer had recently submitted an offer to purchase the lot and demolish the building, the group had to act fast. They submitted an offer to purchase The Westdale Theatre with their personal savings. Founding board members Fred Fuchs, Robert (Bob) Crockford and Graham Crawford financed the deposit. Despite not having project funding secured, the group moved forward with the design and construction.

### How was the construction plan formed?

Ensuring the project was completed on a short timeline was critical for the WCG. The group felt delivering the project within a two-year period was imperative to maintaining community-buy in and excitement. Not only did they want to see the community space realized as quickly as possible, but there were economic incentives associated with the opening date of February 14th 2019. The group had already planned a Valentine’s Day gala and film screening fundraiser, and were prepared to improvise if certain features such as the concession stand were not finalized by the predetermined opening date.

When deciding on project materials, the team considered more than just the bottom line. Understanding that they were looking to ensure the building would be in good condition for at least another 50 years, they incorporated high quality building materials, equipment and furnishings throughout the building.

As the Board of Directors were highly involved in planning and scheduling. The group attended weekly project meetings, budget reviews, and kept the vendors and contractors on schedule.

### How were day-to-day operations impacted?

When the WCG took possession of The Westdale Theatre, the building remained closed to the public until the project was completed. While they could have chosen to maintain operations during construction, they chose to reopen the The Westdale Theatre as a rejuvenated space.

### How were contingencies managed?

Considering the old age and compromised state of the building, there were countless problems that the project team could not have anticipated until construction began. When the group originally purchased the building, they anticipated spending \$1.8 million on repairs and construction. This estimate was created before they received quotes from contractors and vendors. After the first month of the project, they increased their budget to \$2.5 million to accommodate the estimated costs of repairing the building's infrastructure and insulation, as well as filling a sinkhole in the basement.

The team was successful in staying just under their \$2.5 million budget by completing the project earlier than the contractor anticipated. They also benefited from charitable rates given by local vendors and the support of volunteers, guided by a board member with a strong background in project management. There were a couple features that were value-engineered out of the project to stay within budget, for example, the team chose not to repave the sidewalk and installed a fixed lighting grid instead of a motorized grid.

### How was accessibility included in the project?

Accessibility was a major consideration from the beginning of the project, as the group wanted to insure the theatre could welcome a diverse audience. The floor plan of the auditorium was redesigned to accommodate accessible and companion seating, and a ramp was installed to access the stage. Accessible washrooms were also introduced on the first floor. In order to accommodate their older audiences and those with low vision or hearing, The Westdale offers devices that can be attached to the armrests. They provide audiences with screens to read closed captioning, or the option to plug in headphones and receive descriptive video. These accessible features were included to serve the varying needs of their users, ensuring the Westdale could truly perform as a community hub.

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

The newly renovated Westdale Theatre features a high end, energy efficient heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) system. This was a major investment that was deemed necessary to improve climate control and create a comfortable visitor experience year-round. The WCG also introduced LED efficient lighting and an efficient projection system that has dramatically reduced electricity costs.

### How was the project funded?

The building was purchased through "the Founders Mortgage". This mortgage included a \$1 million investment from the Hamilton Community Foundation, to be repaid over a seven-year term with four percent interest and no principal payments. A mirroring agreement was made with private investors to secure another \$1 million. It had the same basic terms including a seven years term, four percent interest and no principal payments required. Many of these private investors have since donated the interest payments back to the Westdale.

Funding for the \$2.5 million building restoration was secured through municipal and provincial funding, an additional mortgage from the Hamilton Community Foundation and a capital campaign. The City of Hamilton funded the project through a \$225,000 contribution specifically for the restoration of the facade from the Ward 1 participatory budget. \$125,000 was also provided by the City of Hamilton's Historic Heritage Fund. A \$250,000 contribution from the Future Fund, an initiative created when the city sold the utilities to a private operation, funded the build of the Westdale's stage. The final grant that supported the restoration was a \$150,000 Ontario Trillium Fund Capital Grant. They borrowed another \$500,000 from the Hamilton Community Foundation as a second mortgage and a line of credit for \$250,000 was also provided by one of the private funders.

The remainder of project funds were secured through private donations, initiated by a board and volunteer based fundraising committee. Selling the naming rights for the lobby, the projection room, and other features in the building resulted in approximately \$500,000 for the project. \$150,000 was also raised through a digital crowd funding campaign that offered naming rights for theatre seats. Finally, The Westdale's opening Valentine's Day gala raised \$25,000 for the theatre. These extensive fundraising initiatives generated a positive cash flow for the organization, as they came in \$100,000 under budget. These funds were instrumental in supporting the theatre's first year of operations.

## The "Ongoing"

### How were finances projected for the new facility?

The Board of Directors projected financials based on estimations of revenues and operational expenses. Considering they had not previously assembled a facility budget, they researched sample budgets and consulted with other theatres including the ByTowne Cinema in Ottawa and the Screening Room in Kingston. They worked to determine film margins and concession models with their booking agent and estimated that they would earn 20% of revenues from charitable donations and grants, while 80% of revenues would be earned through commercial operations.

After opening to the public, adjustments were made to reflect the realities of operations, but their 80/20 revenue projections held true. As The Westdale is concluding their first year of operations, the most challenging aspect of their budget has been securing grants and building a donor base. With accessibility and community inclusion at the centre of the project, The Westdale's rental program includes fluctuating rates to ensure a variety of groups and local organizations can utilize the space.

### What staff was brought on to support operations?

Within their first year of operations, The Westdale's staffing model evolved. The WCG Originally anticipated having an Executive Director responsible for fundraising marketing and

programming, along with an Operations Manager. After determining that the Executive Director role was not well suited for operations, they transitioned into a model in which staff working in charitable operations report directly to the Board. Along with the Operations Manager, these positions include a Grant Writer, a Fundraising Consultant as well as a Sponsorship and Marketing specialist.

The Westdale's commercial operations and facility booking are managed by the Operations Manager. This role also trained two full time and one part time supervisor positions to assist with operations and managing front of house staff. The Westdale currently fluctuates between 12 and 15 staff members, based on part-time contracts. These positions are allotted in the facility's annual budget.

### How will the facility be maintained?

The WCG intends to allocate a section of their budget for facility maintenance and repairs. This budget line will be reevaluated every year, based on the anticipated maintenance as the facility ages.

### What lessons were learned in the first year?

Throughout their first year of operations, the organization has been learning how to maintain a balance between commercial operations and accommodating not for profit community groups. The Westdale requires large-scale commercial rentals and programming to sustain operations, and also strives to be an affordable space for the community. Currently, the facility is offering between 40 to 50 days of non-commercial, community discounted dates. The WCG also learned that creating two separate budgets for commercial and community initiatives lead to better financial management. Moreover, after a year of operations, they learned how to appropriately staff The Westdale, and best practices related to programming and marketing to attract their target audiences. Such adding 4pm matinee for older audiences and finishing screenings by 9pm on Sundays and Mondays.

## Case Study Summary

After an 18-month restoration project, The Westdale Theatre reopened to the community as a cultural and economic hub. Along with screening independent films, it provides cultural space for public performances and exhibitions, showcasing Canadian and world content. Led by board members with an unwavering vision, The Westdale Cinema Group realized a \$4.5 million restoration project with support from local community partners and volunteers throughout Hamilton. With community acting as the primary motivator as well as funders, designers and builders of the project, the WCG has successfully preserved this historic site, and revitalized the Westdale to serve as a community driven theatre.

## Resources

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

### Website:

- [The Westdale](#)

### ArtsBuild Ontario Webinar:

- Restoring and Revitalizing a 1934 Independent Cinema - The Westdale Theatre
  - [Recording](#)