

The logo for Arts Build Ontario features the word "ARTS" in white, "BUILD" in a multi-colored bar (yellow, green, pink, blue, orange), and "ONTARIO" in white.

# ARTS BUILD ONTARIO

## **Creative Spaces Case Study Series**

### FirstOntario Performing Arts 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.

## The FirstOntario Performing Arts Centre

### Mission

The mandate of the FirstOntario Performing Arts Centre Board is to promote, develop and encourage the performing arts in the City of St. Catharines; operate the FirstOntario Performing Arts Centre and associated business; and provide related services for the benefit of the City of St. Catharines.

### Historical Background

Opening its doors in 2015, the FirstOntario Performing Arts Centre is a city owned and operated facility. It was created to act as a vital component in the renaissance of St. Catharines, serving as the catalyst in thoroughly modernizing the area and reinforcing the brilliance of Niagara Region's diverse cultural cluster. The local economy is poised to boom through attracting not only new visitors, but also new business development.

### Project Summary

Opening its doors in 2015, the newly built FirstOntario Performing Arts Centre (FOPAC) is a 95,000-sq.-ft. cultural complex comprised of four custom-built performance venues. This investment by the City of St. Catharines was intended to stimulate the local creative economy, and support efforts to revitalize the downtown core. With Brock University's adjacent Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts, the centre provides an integrated cultural hub for music, dramatic and visual arts. Under their agreement with the University,

students will also have access to two of the four venues in the City's building. Amid the support of local champions, this \$60 million building project resulted in a multifaceted centre that successfully serves a multitude of users.

## The “What”

### What was built?

Prior to the creation of FOPAC, St. Catharines did not have a multi-purpose built facility for performance. While some groups performed in local churches or The Courthouse Theatre, many performed out of the Brock Centre for the Arts. This converted lecture hall served as St. Catharines performing arts facility for close to 45 years. In order to address the need for a large scale, multi-purpose arts centre, FOPAC was built.

The capital project was a \$60 million build that resulted in a 95,000 square foot cultural complex comprised of four state-of-the-art performance venues: Partridge Concert Hall, Recital Hall, Robertson Theatre and the yet to be named Film House. The Partridge Concert Hall is a 770-fixed seat multi-purpose concert hall with acoustical structures integrated within the architecture of the room. FOPAC's featured venue can accommodate a wide range of musical experiences for the audience and performers alike. The 304 seat Recital Hall was designed as a more intimate venue to experience small musical ensembles, singer songwriters and/or spoken word. It features adaptable acoustics, state-of-the-art sound and sightlines. The

Robertson Theatre serves as a flexible “black box” space with 2,600 square feet of floor space. This multi-purpose and intimate space can hold up to 200 people. Finally, the building features a 199-fixed seat Film House that can be adapted for screenings or lectures.

The complex is built next door to Brock University’s Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts, which opened a few months before FOPAC. Through their partnership with Brock University, the school has access to the Recital Hall and the Film Theatre for performances, screenings and lectures.

### [What was the project timeline?](#)

While this project was being contemplated by the city of St. Catharines since the mid 1960s, the modern vision for the facility was introduced in 2002. The idea began to gain traction in 2006, construction started in 2013, and the facility opened in late 2015.

### [What partners were involved in the project?](#)

Brock University was the City of St. Catharines’ main partner in this capital project. Under their agreement, the Brock’s Fine Arts department would have access to the Recital Hall and the Film Theatre. The City would be responsible for covering all construction costs in exchange for operating support from Brock for 10 years. Through this unique partnership, the university provides \$750,000 annually to help drive the activity of the performing arts center. The terms of this umbrella



agreement will run from 2016 to 2026 with the ability to renegotiate in 2021.

## The “Why”

Why did the City of St. Catharines take on this capital project?

The decision to build FOPAC was ultimately motivated by the City’s desire to reinvigorate the downtown core, and fulfil a long-term dream of building a large scale, multi-purpose arts centre in St. Catharines. Over the past few decades, downtown St. Catharines was facing a major decline. Businesses were being boarded up and security was a major concern for residents. In order to address this decline in the early 2000s, City Council agreed that downtown revitalization should be a priority.

A steering committee was assembled by the City to produce the St. Catharines Downtown Creative Cluster Master Plan.

According to the publication: the plan was initiated to create a guiding framework for revitalization of the downtown that utilizes the growth and intensification requirements of new

Provincial policy and converging development investment interests and other initiatives for the downtown.

Following this plan, a feasibility study was undertaken by the consultant team of Levitt Goodman Architects Ltd., Martin Vinik Planning for the Arts and Urban Strategies Inc. They evaluated

the potential for a cultural and academic complex to be created through a partnership between Brock's School for Fine and Performing Arts (SFPA) and a new arts centre, confirming the project's operational feasibility and physical development. The cost of this study was split between the University and the City. The City paid for this study through a provincial grant from the ministry of economic development and industry.

## The "Who"

### Who led the project?

This project was led by a project team composed of representatives from varying departments within the City. They included urban development, recreation and culture services, transportation, environmental services, planning (now planning and building), with support from the CAO and finance.

The Theatre Centre's Executive Director was highly involved in the project's design construction, fundraising, community outreach, and operational planning.

The former Centre for the Arts in St. Catharines was located at Brock University and the FirstOntario Performing Arts Centre would provide a new facility that would supplement space for performing arts for the University and community.

Representatives from the Centre for the Arts, Brock University and local arts organizations formed a sub-committee who were all involved in the preliminary design phase of the project. Staff

from the former Centre for the Arts were also the initial staff for the FirstOntario Performing Arts and supported an initial connection with the local arts community.

### Who was contracted for this project?

In order to secure contractors, there was a formal Expression of Interest (EOI) and Request for Proposals (RFP) process. When choosing an architect, four representatives from the City and four representatives from Brock University reviewed the EOIs submitted. Three architectural firms were shortlisted and asked to provide a proposal. After a group interview was held, the City and University separately decided on a firm. When they reconvened, both had chosen Diamond Schmitt Architects.

The firms and companies contracted for this project include:

- Diamond Schmitt Architects (Architect)
- Bird Construction Group (General Contractor)
- Blackwell Structural Engineers (Structural Consultant)
- Crossey Engineering Ltd. (Mechanical Consultant)
- Mulvey & Banani International Inc. (Electrical/Security/IT Consultant)
- Jaffe Holden (Audio Visual/Acoustical Consultant)
- Fischer Dachs Associates (Theatre Consultant)

### Who opposed the project?

The City faced two issues during this project. The first was that affordable housing was being displaced as older and

inexpensive apartments were being knocked down to enable the build. The second was that the City would also be demolishing a heritage building. In order to address this concern, the Heritage Committee went in and documented the building and FOPAC agreed to preserve the stone, which is currently integrated in the back of the new facility.

The most outright opposition was directed towards Brock University. Many students were concerned about the location of the new building, and audience members that frequented the Centre for the Arts at Brock University and did not want to lose their home. The downtown location of the new FirstOntario Performing Arts Centre was also a concern for the community due to social welfare issues. But the FOPAC also brought about the concept of vibrancy and animation to the downtown core that would bolster tourism, attract shows as well as patrons both within and outside of St. Catharines.

Importantly, the project team had internal advocates and support of the local media as well as the chamber of commerce to communicate the value of the new facility and help mitigate concerns. Once the new arts centre opened, much of this concern dissipated and the community felt proud and excited for the future of the centre and their city.

## The “How”

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

While the idea to build a performance centre in St. Catharines had been percolating for a few decades, the project was able to move from a concept to a finished project thanks to local champions, as well as the availability of public funding. Support from the Mayor of St. Catharines and the President of Brock University was imperative to the project moving forward. Another key player in the success of the project was philanthropist Marilyn I. Walker. In 2009, she donated \$15 million to the development of the new Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts in downtown St. Catharines. Her donation came at a time when the value of arts had been diminishing, and brought hope to the revitalization of the arts in the region. A few months later the feasibility study was brought to council at the same time the federal infrastructure program was introduced. As such, the availability of funding paired with support from local leaders and community buy in enabled the project to move forward.

### How was a construction plan formed?

FOPAC was ultimately designed by the centre’s Executive Director and a user group committee, composed of local organizations that would be using the space. As the Niagara Symphony Orchestra and Chorus Niagara would be the main users of Partridge Hall, their input was incorporated into the

design plans. Other user committee members included local producing theater companies; Carousel Players, Suitcase in Point Theatre Company and the Essential Collective Theatre. The design process also included public meetings to get the community's input on the design. Once the design was established, the project team met bi-weekly with the architects and contractors on construction elements and how it would move forward.

### [How were contingencies managed?](#)

The Expressions of Interests that responded to the RFP for the FOPAC project determined that scope would be \$10 million over budget as part of their cost analysis. As a result, the project team and architects needed to value engineer certain aspects out. Choosing not to compromise on the design of their theatres, most of cutbacks were targeted towards their lobby, storage space and finishes.

After spending eight months redesigning their facility, FOPAC brought the design back to their project contractor who predicted the facility would now be \$6 million under budget. To maximize funding available, FOPAC could now return elements to the design that were previously removed. Upgrades included improved windows in the black box theatre, a higher quality brick and better flooring. While these re-designs added a year to their timeline, the project came in on budget.

## How was accessibility included in the project?

Accessibility was a key consideration in project, and addressed in the beginning stages. During the design phase, plans were influenced by an Accessibility Committee to ensure the facility was accessible from a user's perspective. Accessible features in the facility include; accessible washrooms on most floors, an adult change table in the central washroom, elevators that provide access to all floors, two elevators with access to all levels of the building, handrails in the theatres to assist patrons with navigating the aisles and steps as well as wheelchair accessible seating in all sections of the house. The theatres are also equipped with the Listen Up Technology hearing assistance system, and intended to be scent-free zones. The back of the house is accessible with booths, stages and greenrooms that are physically accessible for staff and performers.

## How was energy efficiency and the environment incorporated?

While FOPAC is designed to LEEDS specification, they chose to omit the distinction to save on the high cost of being certified. The centre closely monitors their energy usage and revises operational procedures to ensure they are being as conscientious as possible. This includes simple operational efficiencies such as ensuring lights in the theatres are off when they are not in use and the use of blinds to optimize HVAC efficiencies.

## How was the project funded?

The project was funded through federal, provincial and municipal funds as well as a capital fundraising campaign. The Government of Canada contributed up to \$18 million to this project from the Major Infrastructure Component of the Building Canada Fund. The Government of Ontario also contributed \$18 million, and the City of St. Catharines funded \$24 million of the \$60 million project.

For the capital campaign, they hired a fundraising consultant that helped develop their program. The main tactic they employed was securing the major gifts before going out to the community for smaller gifts. The first major gift they received was a \$1 million donation from the Partridge family, which resulted in naming rights to the main venue. Similarly, FirstOntario Credit Union's contribution of \$3 million dollars grants them the naming rights of the centre for 25 years. All major capital donations were met with naming rights throughout the facility. The entire list can be found on FOPAC's donations webpage. In the end, the capital campaign raised \$7.1 million dollars for the facility.

## The "Ongoing"

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

To begin, an estimation of the facility's revenues was made. This included earned revenues and grants. This projection was



then compared with the estimated expenses of operations to create a balanced budget. They chose to examine revenue first to ensure they would not be over promising on programming or staffing they would not be able to afford. When determining prices for their rentals program, they made sure to consider the groups that would be using the space, ensuring it would be feasible for them to rent the space and still make a profit on ticket sales. Throughout these projections, the feasibility study was also consulted, as it featured operational projections for the facility.

### How was staffing determined?

Staffing was determined based on the facility's operational capacity and expectations. Human resources were divided into three sections; operations, programming/marketing, and administration. Leaders were selected for each of these departments and supported as required. This staffing model was approved by City Council through the facility's budget. Staff was hired in the summer of 2015 for the expectation of being opened in the fall of 2015. Staffing has slightly evolved since the facility has opened as day to day operations have dictated a few needs.

### How will the facility be maintained?

As a city owned and operated facility, the municipality is responsible for maintenance of the facility. FOPAC uses ArtsBuild Ontario's Asset Planner for the Arts to track the

facility's condition and estimate replacement costs and dates for key building components.

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

The biggest lesson for FOPAC was not completing the project before opening the doors to users and the community – now that they are open it has delayed the ability to finish and address deficiencies. As a result, 5 years after opening, the FOPAC project has not been commissioned.

From an operational standpoint, it took a year for staff to settle in to their role and understand how the building worked. Staff worked tirelessly and problem solved the first year, took the summer to understand the building, and felt much more confident the following fall. An important lesson learned is that there will never be a perfect time to open a new facility, and much of the first year of operating any new venue is spent addressing unforeseen issues.

### Case Study Summary

FOPAC was an ambitious project, innovative in both design and in partnerships. The multi-venue design, influenced by its users, supports the vision of creating a multi-purpose venue that can accommodate symphonies, choirs, theatre and film. The partnership with Brock University will also enable students to utilize the centre as a teaching and performance space, enhancing the synergy of entertainment, culture, outreach and

education. As a vital component in the renaissance of the downtown core, FOPAC will serve as a catalyst for the cultural and economic revitalization of St. Catharines.

## Resources

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

### **Website:**

- [FirstOntario Performing Arts Centre](#)

### **Documents:**

- [Feasibility Study - Academic and Cultural Arts Centre for Downtown St. Catharines](#)
- [St. Catharines Downtown Creative Cluster Master Plan](#)

### **Media:**

- [Federal Funding Announcement - Setting the Stage in St. Catharines: Construction of Downtown Performing Arts Centre Moves Forward](#)
- [Media Release - FirstOntario Credit Union acquires naming rights for Performing Arts Centre](#)