

ARTS BUILD ONTARIO
Creative Spaces Case Study Series
The Theatre Centre



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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 Theatre Centre

Interviewee

- Franco Boni, Former General & Artistic Director

Mission and Mandate

The Theatre Centre is a nationally recognized live-arts incubator that serves as a research and development hub for the cultural sector. We are a public space, open and accessible to the people of our community, where citizens can imagine, debate, celebrate, protest, unite and be responsible for inventing the future. The Theatre Centre's mission is to nurture artists, invest in ideas and champion new work and new ways of working. The company fosters a culture of innovation by embracing risk and questioning traditional notions of failure and success.

The Theatre Centre pursues a mandate of supporting artists who wish to develop works of an experimental or alternative nature, that challenge the definitions of theatrical performance by embracing music, dance, visual art and new media. The company provides space, mentorship, exposure and a sense of community through a series of carefully-conceived programs, which are adapted regularly in order to remain responsive to each successive generation of creation-based artists. The Theatre Centre's Residency Program is at the core of the company's activity. A structured two-year program provides groups/artists with the necessary space, funding and

mentorship to craft ideas still in their infancy into finished products that are both provocative and innovative.

Historical Background

The B.A.A.N.N. Theatre Centre was formed in 1979 by a co-operative of five independent theatre companies – Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, Autumn Leaf Theatre, AKA Performance Interface, Necessary Angel and Nightwood Theatre. They wanted a space to create, rehearse and present new work, a space where provocative ideas could be seen and heard. This group of artists went on to define a generation and inspire a new way of thinking about performance in Toronto.

By the mid-1980s, the founding companies left, and The Theatre Centre remained to assist other artists and groups. In 1984, the R+D (Research and Development) program was established and became the leading proponent for theatrical exploration in the city. In 2004, R+D was replaced by a two-year Residency Program. Over the years, The Theatre Centre has supported an unprecedented number of companies, productions, artists and ideas and continues to cultivate an environment that assists artistic risk takers.

Project Summary

This case study will explore The Theatre Centre's \$6.2 million renovation that transformed the former Carnegie Library at 1115 Queen Street West into the permanent home of The Theatre Centre. This capital project that spanned just under a

decade from conception to completion, saw the re-integration of a former historical landmark into a 21st century live arts hub and incubator. Complete with custom made spaces for performance, gathering and experimentation, The Theatre Centre's adaptive reuse of the space transformed the building into a unique live arts facility to serve its users.

The “What”

What did the Theatre Centre Build?

Prior to gaining tenancy in the former Carnegie Library at 1115 Queen Street West, The Theatre Centre had a nomadic existence, occupying 12 different buildings in their 33-year history. Their most recent space was located in the basement of the Great Hall in Toronto, a historic building that exuded warmth and creative spirit. It was enjoyed by occupants as a malleable space that held new ideas very well. It also had its shortcomings as it was dimly lit with cramped dressing rooms and out-dated washrooms. With a steep rent increase looming, The Theatre Centre chose to find a new home, and was able to secure tenancy in the City-owned former Carnegie Library that was being used as an office building for Toronto Public Health.

Before The Theatre Centre could occupy their new building, it underwent major renovations to reflect the mission of their organization and restore the building to its original function as a place of public use and cultural significance. This \$6.2 million renovation included the instalment of a black box theatre, a

white space gallery, a rehearsal/performance hall, meeting rooms and offices, a new lobby and a roof top terrace. An addition was added at the back of the building, which included the café/bar and entrance into The Theatre Centre.

What was the project timeline?

From conception to completion, this project spanned just over a decade. In 2004 The Theatre Centre was facing a rent increase, and began their search for a new home. After securing their new building in 2012, they underwent an eighteen-month capital project and opened as the permanent home of The Theatre Centre in March 2014.

The “Why”

Why did the Theatre Centre take on this project?

With a change in ownership of the Great Hall, the Theatre Centre’s rent doubled. This increase threatened the Theatre Centre’s ability to fulfil its mission of providing space, subsidy, and mentorship to nurture the development of new works by the next generation of artistic leaders. As they were previously able to rent affordably to companies and even occasionally offer space for free, paying more for rent would decrease the extent to which they could offer programming and partnerships.

The Theatre Centre’s General & Artistic Director also believed artists deserved a more comfortable home they could feel

proud of. He wanted to deliver a place that fuelled inspiration and could transform to accommodate innovation and creative ideas. Rather than a large performance hall, The Theatre Centre required an intimate space where artists could execute these ideas properly. As the venue they found had a history of acting as a place of gathering, The Theatre Centre would be able to inherit its history and restore the facility as a place of public use and cultural significance.

The feasibility of this project was confirmed by a project feasibility study undertaken by Janis Barlow as well as a design feasibility study undertaken by the project's architect, Philip Goldsmith.

The “Who”

Who led the project?

The project leads included The Theatre Centre's General & Artist Director, Franco Boni and Consultant Jenny Ginder. A building advisory committee composed of community and board members was also formed to assist with the project.

Building Advisory Committee members included:

- Kevin Helfand, Board member with law and fundraising experience
- Gail Packwood, Board Chair and Executive Director, Associated Designers of Canada
- Janice Oliver

- Lindy Cowan, CFO, Canadian Opera Company
- Jenny Ginder, Consultant
- Ryder Dyce
- Kathleen Sharpe
- Rick Matthews

Who was contracted for the project?

For this project, the Theatre Centre's building advisory committee members Janice Oliver and Rick Mathews coordinated the hiring of a project manager to be a representative for the organization. Tom Finan was hired as an expert to oversee construction and act as their eyes and ears in the construction process. He was hired one year before construction began, and served as primary liaison between staff and construction team during the project. Through an RFP process, the three then coordinated the hiring of Eastern Construction Company Limited, followed by the architect, Philip Goldsmith from Goldsmith Borgal & Company Ltd. Notably, both the construction team and architect were hired after public funding was confirmed.

Who opposed the project?

While there was no major opposition to the project, there were a couple of hesitations to be mitigated. By being involved with Active 18 – a Toronto community organization that influences developments in the Queen St. West triangle – The Theatre Centre's General & Artistic Director had community buy-in from

the get-go. He advocated for the value of the facility before plans were established and effectively communicated how the building would serve the community. As a result, the project was able to come to fruition without major opposition.

An obstacle that had to be overcome however, was a community member who voted against the space being allowed to have an alcohol permit, arguing it would set an undesirable precedent for other businesses. After a few months, this was escalated to include the involvement of lawyers. While the argument was eventually won by The Theatre Centre, it came at a cost of over \$5,000 and cost of time for the organization – the license wasn't approved until 5 months after the building opened.

The “How”

[How did the project go from concept to construction?](#)

While The Theatre Centre knew they needed a new home, securing an acceptable and affordable space was no easy feat in the City of Toronto. Real estate developers were quickly buying land in the neighbourhood of Liberty Village and South of Queen St. West. In order to develop community buy-in and communicate the value of the arts, Boni joined Active 18. This association of community residents and business owners advocates for sustainable development in Ward 18. It is a voice of the community in collaboration with elected officials, the developers, the architects, and landowners in the West Queen

West Triangle to define and convey what residents want to see in their neighbourhood. By joining this committee, Boni increased his presence in community and was able to develop buy-in from the community and leverage with city council. As a result of this active role, The Theatre Centre was able to secure tenancy in the former Carnegie Library and begin plans for renovating the building.

Community buy-in was also instrumental for The Theatre Centre in securing public funds to make the renovation project a reality. The Theatre Centre was able to communicate and demonstrate buy-in to the funders in their applications, which enabled the project to be able to go from conception to construction.

[How was a construction plan formed?](#)

The construction plan was a collaborative effort with decisions being made during regular meetings. The plan was ultimately formed by The Theatre Centre's General & Artistic Director and the Project Manager from Eastern Construction Company Limited. Input was sought from the Building Advisory Committee as well as The Theatre Centre's Technical Director, to represent needs of artists on a more in-depth level.

[How was accessibility included in the project?](#)

While accessibility was a consideration in the project, the realities of renovating a historic building were also considered. The project addressed physical disability needs, including

washrooms, ramps and elevators, as well as ensuring that dressing rooms would be accessible for performers and those back-of-house. The backstage area features an accessible washroom, complete with wheel-in shower, a barrier free dressing room and green room.

How were energy efficiency and the environment incorporated?

In order to address energy efficiency, The Theatre Centre worked with Hydro One through their Save on Energy Program. While the building does feature LED lights, the theatre lighting still requires significant hydro costs. In order to cut down on waste, the facility has banned the sale of single use plastic water bottles and supplies glassware and mugs. All disposable coffee cups and lids are compostable.

How were contingencies managed?

With \$600,000 of their \$6.2 million budget set aside for contingencies, The Theatre Centre had a contingency fund just under 10% of their overall project budget. The major contingency The Theatre Centre faced was the misconstruction of their grid in the theatre. Despite spending \$400,000 to reinforce the roof by constructing a steel structure to support the wooden beams, it was not weight-bearing. Additional costs were spent on altering the steel structure to bear the weight of the grid. This also meant plans for offices and storage on the third floor were removed for cost-control. In response to

this contingency they reconfigured the floor plan, moving the washroom and creating offices on the first floor instead.

How were day-to-day operations impacted?

The project took a toll on the capacity of all staff. During construction, priorities shifted to ensure the project was being completed on schedule. Staff consistently worked twelve-hour days and were able to pull from their belief in the mission of the organization and the vision of the project to stay committed.

While programs took a backseat during construction, The Theatre Centre held pop-up programming in the building next-door. As a developer had recently bought the property, they were able to negotiate free space before the building was torn down. This flexible space enabled them to continue to provide experimental programming during construction and remain relevant within the community.

How was the project funded?

The project was funded by public funds and private donations and financing was provided through a loan from the Community Forward Fund. General & Artistic Director Franco Boni felt hiring a fundraising coach provided significant value to the project team, and effectively helped himself and Board member Kevin Helfand recognize the potential of their donor base, and ways to effectively secure donations. For this project

the fundraising coach was instrumental in motivating and training the project team.

Public Funds were provided by:

- The Canada Cultural Spaces Fund, through The Department of Canadian Heritage for \$1.8 Million
- The Province of Ontario for \$1.2 Million
- Ontario Trillium Foundation, \$500,000
- The City of Toronto from Section 37 funds for \$1 Million
- Ana Bailoa, donor, \$250, 000

A Capital Campaign Steering Committee was formed. Members included:

- Don McKellar, Honourary Campaign Chair
- Michelle Fidani, Campaign Chair
- Deputy Mayor, Ana Bailão
- Steve Beatty
- Kevin Helfand
- Rick Matthews

The Theatre Centre held a fundraising gala called 'BOUNCE' before construction began, and was able to secure just over 200,000 through corporate sponsorships for the event as well as ticket sales.

For this capital project, The Theatre Centre received a loan from the Community Forward Fund. The loan was acquired for two reasons: 1) Most of the private pledges were to come in

over 3 or 5 year terms, so the loan helped with cash-flow over the course of the project while the pledges were received over time and 2) At the time of construction, The Theatre Centre was also short of pledges (between \$750k and \$1 million, depending on how many years it took to pay back the loan, with interest payments). The Theatre Centre closed the campaign with multi-year pledge in 2016 with an announcement of \$1 million in contributions and pledges.

Theatre Centre received a loan of up to \$1.5 Million. The first \$1 Million was guaranteed by The City of Toronto. By the end of the project, they used \$1 Million of the loan. With their financing plan, they will have paid back their loan before 2022.

The “Ongoing”

How did The Theatre Centre project new financials?

In order to project financials for the new space, The Theatre Centre kept a similar business plan to their previous space for the first year. The largest change was transferring the cost of rent to the cost of operations. In their new business plan, their overall budget grew from \$300,000 in 2013 to nearly \$1.4 Million in 2019. The new breakdown of their revenue is approximately 25% public funds, 25% private donations and 50% earned revenue.

Did the new space provide a new revenue source?

A major revenue source for The Theater Centre is the addition of their Café/Bar. Designed to complement the organization's mission, the Café/Bar is intended to serve as a welcoming space for all communities to gather. Along with serving a selection of coffee and tea, it is a fully licensed bar that serves locally brewed beer, wine and liquor. The Theatre Centre Café/Bar showcases their commitment to incubating new ideas and new ways of working by featuring a Baker-in-Residence, monthly community meals and workshops. The Theatre Centre Café/Bar is available to rent to the community for a variety of functions including meetings, special events or workshops.

The Theatre Centre also introduced a rentals program that enables the community to rent the 180-seat Mainspace Theatre as well as the BMO Incubator for Live Arts that can accommodate up to 90 people for performances, workshops, meetings or rehearsals. These rooms are available to rent on a weekly/monthly-booking schedule. A booking committee meets weekly to review submissions and confirm scheduling.

Were new staff hired after the new space opened?

In their new space, staff grew from four to eleven people. New staff included marketing personnel, technicians for the main stage and the BMO Incubator, a café manager, and curatorial, producing, and development staff. The justification for these positions came from obvious operational needs to manage the

increase in programming, rentals and administration. These new positions are supported by new earned revenue.

Lessons learned in the first year?

A valuable lesson learned was the importance of managing your own café or bar. Managing a café in-house will ensure operations remain consistent with the vision of the facility, and enable the leaders of the organization to ensure the cafe is being operated as intended. Another lesson learned was the importance of branding and signage. Providing cohesive and frequent signage will ensure patrons know exactly where they are and feel at ease in the venue. If done in a creative manner, it may also serve as a distinguishing feature of the space, supporting marketing and branding efforts. In their facility, The Theatre Centre makes use of the phrase ‘this is’ for the signage. For example, throughout the building there is signage that indicates: ‘this is a patio’ or ‘this is a staircase’. This signage playfully answers the question often asked by our neighbours, “what is this place”, in a way that lets them know they are welcome.

A final major lesson learned was the necessity of a creative facility that serves community needs. Rather than simply deeming its use, an organization should aim to provide a space that can adapt to the desires of its artists and audiences. A facility will only be successful if it serves community and allows

the engagement of all users. The question we ask our community members most often is, “what do you need”?

Case Study Summary

After a decade of advocating, fundraising, planning and building, The Theatre Centre successfully completed their \$6.2 million capital project. The adaptive re-use of this City-owned building has undoubtedly had an immense impact on The Theatre Centre and the community it serves. By reviving a historical landmark into a facility that welcomes innovation and creation, The Theatre Centre is able to realize their mission of being a true incubator and community hub.

Resources

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

Websites

- [The Theatre Centre](#)
- [About the Facility/Project](#)
- [Blogged Construction Updates](#)

ArtsBuild Ontario Webinar:

- Securing Permanent Space – Stratford Perth Museum and The Theatre Centre
 - [Recording](#)