

ARTS BUILD ONTARIO
Creative Spaces Case Study Series
Toronto Centre for the Arts



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.

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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.

Toronto Centre for the Arts

Interviewee

- Kristopher Dell; Director of Production

History of Toronto Centre for the Arts

Built in 1993 in the region formerly known as the City of North York, the Toronto Centre for the Arts (TCA) was envisioned by the local municipal government to serve as an arts centre for its community. Initially operated by the North York Performing Arts Centre Corporation, the venue featured three stages.

These included:

- The George Weston Recital Hall; a one thousand seat, acoustically ideal rectangular room, designed for concerts
- The Studio Theatre; a 189 seat, community mandated theatre space utilized by local performing arts organizations and cultural groups
- The Main Stage; an 1,800 seat, Broadway style theater at the centre of the building

Project Summary

The Toronto Centre for the Art's Main Stage theatre went underused for many years following the closing of Dancap Productions – their primary client for the theatre, bringing the renowned Jersey Boys to the TCA. Audience sizes were changing and the needs of local theatre organizations were evolving. The TCA consulted its local theatre community and

heard their desire for smaller theatre space. Plans were made to divide the Main Stage into two smaller theatre spaces. Supported by the City of Toronto and City Council, the TCA's renovated its Main Stage into two theatres: the Greenwin Theatre (296 seats) and the Lyric Theatre (574). The project was financially supported by the Toronto Centre for the Arts and the City of Toronto, and was completed through 2014-2016.

The “What”

What circumstances led to the renovation of the Toronto Centre for the Arts?

From 1993 to 1998, the Main Stage acted as the venue's primary revenue generator. Programmed and managed by The Live Entertainment Corporation of Canada Inc. (also known as Livent) the Broadway style theater successfully hosted large-scale productions. Under their agreement with the North York Performing Arts Centre Corporation, Livent also programmed concerts seasons in the 1,000-seat recital hall. Over these five years, both stages were ultimately programmed, filled and managed by Livent, while the Studio Theatre remained available for use by local organizations and community groups. When Livent ceased operations in 1998 however, the venue lost its primary producer and partner.

This period also reflected a change in operations on the municipal level, as it coincided with the Amalgamation of the

City of Toronto. Now managed by the City of Toronto, new management structures were put in place, and the Toronto Centre for the Arts was designated as an agency board.

Municipally owned and non-profit run, the TCA now exists within the Department of Economic Development and Culture. The TCA remains accountable to a Board of Directors made up of City Council members and volunteer members, facilitated by the City Clerk's office.

Under this new model, the TCA was relying on small, block rentals that varied from monthly, weekly or single day rentals. A brief return to stability came with their partnership with Dancap Productions in 2008. However, when they stopped producing shows on the Main Stage in 2012, the TCA experienced a vacant Main Stage once more.

[What was the Toronto Centre for the Arts creating?](#)

Through this capital project, the TCA was looking to create a venue that could effectively serve the evolving performing arts community and their audiences. A market survey conducted by Net Gain Partners Inc. concluded a lack of interest in an 1,800-seat theater. Net Gain completed a second market survey that verified the need for a 300 seat and a 600-seat theater. It was at this stage that the TCA realized it could divide its Main Stage into two smaller theatres and expand its space offerings to the community, while also presenting large productions.

The Board of Directors engaged George Freidman Architects to conduct a feasibility study to determine if this project was physically possible within the space. TCA staff followed with a business proposal with the support of Net Gain Partners. The business plan formed a five-year strategic plan for construction and operation. The TCA brought the project forward to the City of Toronto which was approved by City Council.

The “Why”

Why did the Toronto Centre for the Arts take on this project?

By transforming a three-staged venue into four, the TCA was looking to more effectively serve its theatre community, fill their rental calendar and expand relationships. During an initial search for new anchor tenants for the Main Stage, consultants met with local performing arts and cultural groups who identified that they were not looking for long-term rentals of a large theater. Instead, the need for a 200, 500 or even 700 seat theater was repeatedly mentioned by those consulted.

Additionally, the 189 seat Studio Theater, used primarily by community groups, was booked beyond capacity. With long-term renter, the Harold Green Jewish Theatre Company and a growing list of organizations utilizing the space for several days a year, there was a multi-year long wait list for the theatre. It became clear that that the TCA had to make their theatre

spaces more relevant to the needs of theatre and performing arts organizations and the evolution of audience numbers.

Why did the Toronto Centre for the Arts engage its community?

The arts community provided the foundation for the vision of the TCA's renovation project. At the heart of this capital project were several market surveys and feasibility studies where theatre and performing arts organizations were repeatedly consulted. Traditional theatre presentation was evolving and the theatre sectors needs were changing. As supported by the waitlist from the Studio Theater and the empirical data from their market surveys, there was an undisputed need for more small to medium scale venues. This solution to maximizing the facility's full use presented a happy medium to one space to the overbooked Studio Theatre and underused Main Stage.

The "Who"

Who does this space serve?

The TCA's renovated theatre spaces aimed to serve both not-for-profit arts organizations and cultural associations operating at both a professional and community level.

Who led the project?

While capital projects require a team of dedicated individuals to be successful, former General Manager Pim Schotanus and Councillor John Filion were the two main internal drivers

behind this project. Schotanus, who was with the TCA from 1993 until 2017, always had a strong desire to see the venue utilized to its fullest potential. Similarly, Councillor John Filion, who served on the Board of Directors, had long been inspired by the concept of “Walkable Cities.” They were both motivated to effectively serve the local community and engage them with the venue.

Who was the project team?

Within the Board of Directors, a sub-committee was formed to head the renovations. The subcommittee included:

- Pim Schotanus: former General Manager
- Bob Cooper: the Committee Chair, background in Project Management
- Len Glickman; lawyer, entertainment lawyer, Board Chair
- John Filion: City of Toronto Councillor, Ward 18, Board Vice-Chair
- Frank Molinari: Properties and Real Estate, City of Toronto
- A project team was subsequently formed to work more directly on the project. This team included:
 - Pim Schotanus: former General Manager
 - Kristopher Dell: Director of Production
 - Bruce Bennett: Production Manager assigned to the Project
 - Frank Molinari: Properties and Real Estate, City of Toronto

- Joanne Pynn: Department of Economic Development and Culture, City of Toronto
- Gary McCluskie: Diamond Schmitt Architects
- Sybil Wa: Diamond Schmitt Architects
- Antra Roze: Diamond Schmitt Architects
- Patrick Johnson: Diamond Schmitt Architects
- Andy Gee: Gillam Construction
- Benjamin Valliquette: Gillam Construction

Prior to construction or even the design development stage, the timeline was tight, and the TCA needed support from TCA staff for the project. Accordingly, they reassigned Bruce Bennett, part of the TCA Production team, to be the main liaison with the incoming Construction team.

[Who was contracted for the project?](#)

Once the City approved the project, the TCA used an open bid process to secure an architect. The TCA released a Request for Proposals and engaged Diamond Schmitt Architects for this project. Gary McCluskie was the primary architect, while Sybil Wa and Antra Roze provided most of the designs. Another major player on the Diamond Schmitt team was Patrick Johnson. As the Project Manager throughout the entire project, he was TCA's main point of contact and kept them informed as the project progressed.

Due to their tight timeline, the TCA decided a construction management approach would be most effective. Construction

supervisor Andy Gee and construction manager Benjamin Valliquette from Gillam Construction were engaged in early stages of the project to manage construction. All bids and trade contracts were tendered through Gillam Construction and they oversaw the building process. Overseen by Diamond Schmitt Architects, they were instrumental to the success of this project.

[Who were they key partners in the project?](#)

Throughout the capital project, the City of Toronto acted as an invaluable resource. Not only did they provide some financial support, they offered staffing expertise from the departments of Economic Development and Culture as well as Properties and Real Estate. Having support from experienced municipal staff was especially helpful in guiding the early stages of the project.

Two key municipal staff provided support throughout all stages of the project: Joanne Pynn from the Department of Economic Development and Culture and Frank Molinari from Properties and Real Estate were both key players in the success of the renovations.

Another instrumental partner that came on board was The Harold Green Jewish Theater Company, who were primary tenants of the Studio Theatre. They expressed a specific interest in becoming a resident company the Greenwin Theatre – one of the two new theatre spaces resulting from dividing the Main Stage. Through this partnership, the TCA was able to

secure a partner before construction began and create more availability in the Studio Theatre for other community organizations.

Who opposed the project?

In its first decade, the TCA's Main Stage typically served large scale for profit production companies and presenters.

Undoubtedly, this one of a kind, Broadway-style Theater was missed by those able to fill all 1,800 seats. As one of the region's few large-scale theaters closed its doors, a few organizations and presenters lamented the loss of a well-built and centrally located stage.

The TCA was able to deflect much of the criticism by keeping lines of communication open with municipal staff, neighbouring property managers, the local community and the media. By keeping all these channels informed of their progress and inviting them to the space and see renovations as they unfolded, the TCA was able to generate good will and overall support for the project.

The "How"

How did the project go from concept to construction?

There were several factors that helped this project go from concept to construction. First, the community's expressed need for more small to medium theatre venues and a compelling business plan secured a positive vote from City Council. Second,

the TCA had adequate financial resources to support the project. Leveraging their existing capital reserve fund, they were able to generate additional buy in from the municipality to support the project prior to construction. Finally, they had a dedicated team supporting the project, including TCA staff and municipal staff, consultants as well as industry professionals.

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

The design development phase of the project was an immensely collaborative process that relied on open dialogue from the architect, the Board of Directors subcommittee, senior management, theatrical consultants and community stakeholders. Discussions began between senior management and the architects to develop plans for realizing the vision of the new TCA. After conferring on designs with Theater Collaborative Consultants and Aercoustics, the TCA invited community stakeholders to provide input on the designs. Stakeholders included long-term renters of the facilities, interested community non-profit theater groups and cultural associations. Their input along with frequent feedback from the TCA team was reflected in the refined designs. After a final round of consultations with all parties, designs were established.

In order to build two stages, they divided construction into two phases. The initial phase included building the Greenwin Theater first to relieve the pressure of the overbooked Studio

Theater. This plan would also allow the architects more time to work through the designs of the more complicated floor plan and features of the Lyric Theatre. Once the Greenwin Theatre was opened, more concentrated efforts were directed on constructing the Lyric Theatre.

1. The Greenwin Theatre

Construction of the Greenwin Theater began in January 2015 and ended in April of the same year. Now a 296 seat theater, the Greenwin Theatre was built on the stage of the former Main Stage Theatre. They kept original fly ropes from the Main Stage, and the high ceilings allow for two grids: a high grid and tension-wire grid directly above the stage and part of the seating area. The theater also features retractable seating, which can turn the theatre into an event space, allowing for versatile use of the space.

2. The Lyric Theatre

The second phase of construction saw the Lyric Theatre built from April 2015 to September 2016. To create the Lyric Theatre, Diamond Schmitt designed a new stage, and created an overhead truss with motorized rigging. They also adjusted the rake of the pre-existing orchestra and balcony seating to allow for better viewing of the newly designed stage. The most prominent features of the Lyric Theater however, are the geometric chevron walls that envelop the audience. These programmable panels are customizable with backlit colour-

changing LED lights, and individually controlled to augment any type of performance. Inclusive of the balcony and orchestra levels, the Lyric Theatre can seat up to 574 audience members.

How was accessibility included in the project?

Accessibility was a major consideration for the renovation project, with both spaces exceeding required accessibility standards. Accessibility is prominent in the following main areas of the renovation project:

- 1. Seating:** Doubling the required number of accessible seats, both the Greenwin and the Lyric Theatre have accessible seating inside the theater. The Lyric Theatre offers accessible seating throughout the theatre rather than having one designated accessible area, helping all guests experience performances from different view points.
- 2. Assistive Listening Systems:** Both rooms offer assistive listening systems and exceed the minimum number of required devices.
- 3. Upgrades for Performers:** The venue includes accessible washrooms in the back and front of house. A service elevator and ramps were also installed to accommodate performers. The Greenwin Theater features sunken seating, creating the effect of a raised stage. This feature simultaneously changes the site lines and allows the stage to be barrier free for performers to access. The stage itself is on the same level of the dressing rooms.

4. Safety: Strobe lights were incorporated in the fire safety systems to accommodate those with low hearing. Along with an auditory que, alarms now offer a visual warning.

How was energy efficiency and the environment incorporated?

The TCA retrofitted both theatres with LED lighting. This includes the chevron walls in the Lyric Theater, and all new light bulbs installed in both theatres. To make the architectural and theatrical features more efficient, MAC 301 and MAC 350S intelligent lights, colour force lights and LED driven lights were installed where possible. Utilizing their existing HVAC system, the TCA made adjustments that allow the heating and chilling complex to use a variable speed drive and run at a slower rate. The facility is able to run at optimal efficiency based on demand.

How were contingencies managed?

As with any capital project, contingencies arose during the construction of the Lyric Theater. In North America, the installation of chevron lighting panels, along the sides of the theatre, had not been completed ever before for a theatre of this scale and size. It took approximately six months longer than anticipated to install.

During construction, the TCA discovered the initial design was going to bring them \$2 million over budget. The design build process requires constant adaptability and there were no

established blueprints to rely on. The team was working off a concept, and as the work progressed, the design was refined. To bring down project costs, they re-evaluated plans with Theater Collaborative Consultants and were successful in lowering expenditures by focusing on “the bones” of the project. In the Lyric Theatre, hemp line sets were introduced to replace some of the motorized line sets in the short term. The capacity to add motorized line sets later remained. Other equipment purchases were differed to a later date and would be outside of the Project’s scope. A decision was made to refurbish the seating instead of replacing it.

A contingency fund supported the TCA when unexpected issues arose, which they kept for the end of the project. For their \$10 million project, the TCA budgeted 15% for their contingency fund.

[How were programs impacted during construction?](#)

While construction unfolded, the Studio Theatre and the Recital Hall maintained their programming schedule. In order to manage guests, there was signage throughout the building indicating that construction was taking place. TCA also provided descriptive signage explaining the project to patrons and had booths set up during open houses or larger events, with staff to explain the project and answer questions.

How were day-to-day operations impacted during construction?

There was an obvious increase in workload that led to longer and busier days. The workload increased for the housekeeping staff as it was impossible to fully contain the dust to the construction zone. The lobby and two open theaters required a significant increase in maintenance and daily cleaning.

There were also unavoidable staffing cutbacks during construction. Support for theatre positions is largely show driven and with less functional theatre space some positions could no longer continue.

The “Ongoing”:

How did the Toronto Centre for the Arts project new financials?

Prior to renovations, the TCA developed a business proposal with Net Gain Associates to determine financial projections and the estimated growth cycle for the venue’s first five years of operation.

This proposal included three principal factors:

- Staffing costs
- Maintenance and upkeep
- Rental fees

Ultimately, they planned for operating costs to be offset by rental fees. The TCA consulted several venues of similar size around space rentals and revenue, including; Markham Theatre, Richmond Hill Theatre, The Rose, Vaughan Theatre and the Mississauga Living Arts Centre to inform projections.

[Did the new space provide a new revenue source?](#)

An increase in expenses with no revenue growth was expected for the first couple of years of operating the Greenwin and Lyric Theatres. Influenced by an economy of scale business model, the TCA understood the need to make investments early on to secure lasting and profitable partnerships with local organizations in the upcoming years.

After three years, the TCA's revenues started to grow. The operating costs for the Greenwin and Lyric Theatre are lower than the Main Stage, and the TCA increases its theatre use and in turn, rental revenues.

[Were new staff hired after the project was complete?](#)

New staff hires were built into the budget from the beginning of the project. Once construction was complete, more housekeeping staff were hired to compensate for an additional theatre space. Additionally, another round of hires brought new stagehands, technicians, and front of house staff to work with both professional and community theatre organizations.

How is the Toronto Centre for the Arts being maintained and operated?

The TCA continues to maintain and operate its facility under T.O. Live and alongside The Sony Centre for the Arts and The St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts.

The City of Toronto maintains ownership of the bricks and mortar of the TCA. After completing a Building Condition Assessment, the City and TO Live have a ten-year plan to maintain the facility, which includes timelines and strategies for the replacement of varying elements of the theatres.

TO Live currently uses EBMS Ungerboeck, which is a comprehensive booking and financial system used by staff to book and manage the theatres at the TCA. While it primarily functions as a rentals program, it also features modules for inventory and facility assets. The system offers graphical and trend analysis reporting on equipment and rental data.

What lessons were learned in the first 90 days?

Despite ample planning, consultations and careful considerations, some issues will only become known once the project is underway, or once the facility is in use. For instance, a couple minor issues arose when the new theaters opened to the public. This included the realization that certain fabric and carpeting was not as durable as originally anticipated. Accordingly, staff removed and replaced these features. Moreover, they discovered the need for a light lock in the

Greenwin Theater, preventing outside corridor lighting from coming in, which was caused by latecomers opening the main doors to the theater. Although it did not affect visuals on stage, it was an annoyance from the audience's perspective.

Ultimately, the key to managing these surprises is acknowledging that issues will arise, remaining open to suggestions and being transparent with your team.

What lessons were learned in the first year?

In terms of physical space, even when things go as planned, outcomes are not always received as anticipated. For instance, while the construction team was able to successfully transform the Greenwin Theater into a flexible Black Box Theater, only a handful of users have embraced the flexible aspects of the space. Rather than pulling out the curtains and the soft-goods, most renters use it as is.

As soon as a project starts, there is no more opportunity to save money. It is important to look for cost efficient methods and materials in the design development stage, as costs only increase once construction is underway. Use conservative spending where possible, and building a healthy contingency fund into the project budget.

Finally, the team learned the importance of “creative tensions” in a successful project. In most instances, healthy dialogue and discussion lead to stronger plans and projects. When they discovered an issue with the acoustics after opening, it became

clear that it was not properly noted or discussed in the construction phase. In hindsight, the TCA could have avoided post-opening alterations if the acoustician had worked directly for them rather than the architects. Ultimately, there needs to be a system of checks and balances with all those employed, to ensure a top down management approach does not limit the potential of the project.

Case Study Summary

Faced with the problem of underutilization of their Main Stage, the TCA thoughtfully considered feasibility studies, market studies and community consultations to determine how to better serve their local performing arts community. Backed by their municipality, they leveraged the strengths of their staff and building committee, outside consultants, the construction team and architects to realize an ambitious renovation in just under two years. The project allowed the TCA to move from 100 days of use in the Main Stage in 2014 to a combined 235 days of use with the two theatres. Their capital project has enabled them to increase accessibility for community and non-profit groups and bring a new diversity of shows to their stages.

Resources:

Website:

- [Toronto Centre for the Arts](#)

Documents:

- [Lyric Theatre Seating Plan](#)
- [Greenwin Theatre Seating Plan](#)
- [2015 City of Toronto - Project Overview Presentation](#)
- [2016 City of Toronto - Toronto Civic Theatres Approved Budget](#)

ArtsBuild Ontario Webinar:

- Engaging Community in Municipal Performing Arts Space Projects
 - [Webinar Recording](#)
 - [Webinar Transcription](#)

Media:

- [Act II for a Toronto theatre – The Globe and Mail](#)
- [When One Theatre Becomes Two: Combining the old and the new to deliver exceptional acoustics – Construction Canada](#)
- [Toronto Centre for the Arts: A Re-Imagined Lyric Theatre – Urban Toronto](#)
- [Archello Project Overview](#)