

Mapping Northern
Creative Spaces

Executive Summary and Project Highlights

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Acknowledgments

Thank you to the project partners for their time and energy in promoting the project, participating in the virtual forums and their insights into the arts, culture and heritage sector in their communities.

Kenora and Sioux Narrows–Nestor Falls



City of Kenora

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Northwest Business Centre

Allyson Pele



Lake of the Woods Arts Community

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Lake of the Woods Museum and Douglas Family Art Centre

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Township of Sioux Narrows–Nestor Falls

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Sioux Narrows Arts Festival

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Sault Ste. Marie



Future SSM

Todd Fleet



Sault Ste. Marie Museum

William Hollingshead



Sault Ste. Marie Indian Friendship Centre

Cathy Syrette

Timmins



Steering Committee for an Independent Arts Council for Timmins

Nicola Alexander, Cameron Grant, Kelsey Luxton

Wawa



Economic Development Corporation of Wawa

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ArtsBuild Ontario (ABO) is dedicated to realizing long-term solutions for building, managing and financing the sustainable arts facilities needed in Ontario communities.



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NORDIK Institute (NORDIK) is an innovative community-based research hub affiliated with Algoma University that supports the region's community economic development initiatives.



The final report does not necessarily reflect the views of the funder, ArtsBuild Ontario, NORDIK Institute or Algoma University.

Executive Summary

Northern Ontario's economy has been based primarily on resource-extraction around forestry and mining which has become precarious in many communities following decades of globalization. Most jurisdictions have made efforts to diversify their economies by developing local assets and resources. This is casting increased attention on the arts and culture sector's potential to redefine community through creative placemaking initiatives, leading to greater quality of life, attractiveness and the emergence of place-based creative economies throughout the region.

The arts and culture sector operates through the social milieu, including complex linkages between producers, intermediaries and consumers. Symbiotic relationships are developed through social networking at galleries, institutions, events, cafes, clubs, and restaurants that enable a continual supply of unique cultural goods and services that define a place. The sector's vitality is underpinned by connectivity—a combination of networks, private and public infrastructure (e.g. creative spaces) that facilitate engagement, education, innovation and commercial activity (Currid, 2007a; 2007b). Research conducted in Northern Ontario's arts sector indicates that artists and arts organizations understand their contribution to resilience, are vibrant with potential, but feel they are largely under-resourced, undervalued, underdeveloped and underutilized; isolated as though they are a separate community within the broader whole. Limited cultural infrastructure spanning the continuum of creation, production, marketing, consumption and financing are cited as deficits that hinder sector visibility, vitality, and viability. Communities vary in their commitment and investment in the sector for many reasons. There is, however, a wealth of untapped potential in the

region that could be developed and leveraged to create healthy resilient people and places (Ortiz, 2017).

A foundational component of cultural infrastructure is creative space. It is an enabler, facilitating engagement in the production and consumption of cultural goods. It plays an integral role in the sector's flow in two foundational streams:

- i) the continuum of creative processes and products to the circulation of goods (e.g. for personal use, gifts to others, or for selling in the marketplace); and,
- ii) connectivity: the formation of networks and relationships that build capacity; and linkages between producers, consumers, the general public, and policy and decision-makers, which impact a sense of community, influence local policy and planning, and foster local creative economies.

When assessing creative space needs, it is important to recognize the two intertwined threads of investigation: the space itself, its existence and suitability; and, the operationalizing of it (i.e. activities that occur within the space) (Ortiz, 2017).

Key arts organizations and sector representatives from Kenora and Sioux Narrows–Nestor Falls, Timmins, Sault Ste. Marie and Wawa partnered with ArtsBuild Ontario (ABO) and NORDIK Institute (NORDIK) to conduct the Mapping Northern Creative Spaces project. The study undertook to map the four communities' existing creative spaces, assess if spaces are meeting current and future needs, and identify the potential demand and feasibility for additional creative spaces within the community. The resulting reports are informational, providing a statistical base for future projects, programs, and advocacy and serve to encourage cross-sector discussion and dialogue to support further development.

An ethics review was conducted by Algoma University's Research Ethics Board, with Dr. Jude Ortiz as principal investigator. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic the project design pivoted from drawing on in-person gatherings in each community to online surveys as the primary data collection method. With unique versions tailored to individual and organizational respondents, the surveys ran from October–November 2020, and partners were provided promotional materials to encourage participation throughout their networks. Although the surveys did not attract a large number of participants, community partners considered the responses to be representative of their understanding of the sector and a valuable tool to advance the sector. Each community was presented with an initial analysis of the data at a virtual community forum, followed by a draft report for their review. A 4-Community Virtual Forum was held on March 25, 2021 to collectively gather the partners to share learnings and mobilize knowledge. Finalized Community Reports are available online at www.artsbuildontario.ca.

Surveys found the creative space and its animation is contributing to local identity and belonging, and the development of innovative, unique products and services that are recognized beyond its borders, and in some cases, provincially and nationally. It is engaging a wide range of ages, illustrating the importance of art in one's life over time. Current activities are attracting local and seasonal residents as well as tourists. Within the four communities there are at least 16 organizations that have been operating for at least 20 years, including at least three for more than 50 years. They have a variety of management structures, drawing on paid employment, volunteer labour, and combinations thereof.

The study identifies the need for space (percentage of those who have it and those who do not); disciplines of underutilized artistic capacity (e.g. music, theatre, heritage, visual; multi-disciplinary); the type of space needed (e.g. retail, discipline-specific studio; exhibition, performance, multi-disciplinary); and preferences for space, (for example, whether or not the space was public/private; leased or owned; located in the city/town or rural; the number of respondents willing or interested in partnering to purchase rent and/or build space; and if some rental/leased space is currently available).

Kenora and Sioux Narrows – Nestor Falls

NEED FOR SPACE:



28/50 respondents



30 have space

13 do not have space

UNDERUTILIZED ARTISTIC CAPACITY:

Music, theatre, film, performance, heritage, mixed-media, multi-disciplinary

TYPE OF SPACE NEEDED:

Retail and discipline-specific studio space, exhibition, performance, and rehearsal space, multi-disciplinary hubs

- Most want public space
- Lease or own: majority no preference
- City/town rather than rural
- 13/50 respondents are willing or interested in partnering to purchase, rent and/or build space
- Some rental/lease space available in existing space

Timmins

NEED FOR SPACE:



18/35 respondents



24 have space

5 do not have space

UNDERUTILIZED ARTISTIC CAPACITY:

Music, craft arts and multi-disciplinary arts

TYPE OF SPACE NEEDED:

Exhibition, discipline-specific studio space, retail space, multi-disciplinary hubs

- Most want public space, rather than private
- Lease or own: majority lease
- City/town rather than rural
- 6/50 respondents are willing or interested in partnering to purchase, rent and/or build space
- Some rental/lease space available in existing space

Sault Ste. Marie

NEED FOR SPACE:



24/33 respondents

72%



17 have space

13 do not have space

UNDERUTILIZED ARTISTIC CAPACITY:

Heritage, literary, multi-disciplinary, visual arts

TYPE OF SPACE NEEDED:

Private discipline-specific studio space exhibition space, multi-disciplinary hubs, rehearsal, performance, administrative space

- Most want public space
- Lease or own: no preference
- City/town rather than rural
- 6/33 respondents are willing or interested in partnering to purchase, rent and/or build space
- Some rental/lease space available in existing space

Wawa

NEED FOR SPACE:



18/37 respondents

49%



13 have space

14 do not have space

UNDERUTILIZED ARTISTIC CAPACITY:

Theatre, dance, craft arts

TYPE OF SPACE NEEDED:

Exhibition, multi-disciplinary hubs, private discipline-specific studio space, rehearsal and performance space

- Most want public space
- Lease or own: no preference
- City/town rather than rural
- 14/37 respondents are willing or interested in partnering to purchase, rent and/or build space

Similarities across communities are summarized as:

- Need for space, especially that which is suitable for specific art forms and activities
- Have a variety of underutilized capacities/disciplines
- Interest in expanding operations
- Have expertise in the community
- Seeking skill development, connections, relationship, communications
- Need for sector advocacy
- Development needs are connected to various municipal and/or community plans.

Many of the key pieces to build capacity and spark growth currently exist; however, the missing 'dots' inhibit sustainability. Themes emerging from the research revolve around connectivity, viability, and innovation and are organized into three interconnected categories:

- i) Link Artists and Organizations to Existing Resources;
- ii) Leverage Capacity; and,
- iii) Lead by Developing Models of Sustainability.

In each community the municipal government has invested in the cultural sector. Many of the areas where the sector is seeking resources directly connect to culture sector development plans, and/or community planning documents. Identifying where arts, culture and heritage sector development gaps link to community planning documents is not intended to imply the municipalities

are solely responsible for its development. Rather it serves to illustrate the identified areas of need, their alignment with broader local priorities, and advocate for sufficient resources to enable the communities to meet their stated objectives. Those in the arts, culture and heritage sector demonstrate expertise, commitment and perseverance; however, sector investment (financial, in-kind support, and leadership) would advance community health and wellbeing and foster the skills for ongoing innovation and renewal in response to the dynamic knowledge economy.

Moving forward, it is recommended that a dedicated full-time, limited term contract be hired in each community to create a development plan to address the creative space needs identified in this study. The person would collaborate with their respective project partners and local government representatives to:

1. Ensure diverse voices, particularly youth and Indigenous residents, are consulted regarding creative space needs;
2. Create a development plan based on the study and additional consultations;
3. Liaise with the local project partners in prioritizing action items, funding sources and implementation of the plan;
4. Connect with ArtsBuild Ontario as a key player.

An overview of the creative space needs follows.

LINK ARTISTS AND ORGANIZATIONS TO EXISTING RESOURCES:

Networks of relationships are critical to utilizing local resources and creating resilient communities. Every locale has people with knowledge and skills that could support development. Creating critical connections to those resources is key to facilitate that development. The sector is composed of individuals and organizations (i.e., micro businesses with limited resources) that may not be aware of, or may not have the time or resources to individually source or gain the necessary tools to sustain or advance certain operations.

Key areas include: Facility management; Business training and education; Coaching, mentoring and/or training and education in specific areas of concern; And access to capital.

LEVERAGE CAPACITY

This section identifies areas of existing artistic and space capacity that are underutilized and/or in need of improvement, where further inquiry is needed to determine goals, and resources that could be leveraged to assist in developing strategic pathways and timelines to achieve aspirations and maximize operations. The process involves determining the scope of work; assessing the feasibility; and developing a pathway to meet goals.

Key areas include: Improve functionality of existing physical space; Increase future activities; Increase operating hours; Increase demographic engagement; Increase accessibility to creative space; Increase recurring engagement; Increase building utilization; Increase partnerships and collaborative efforts; And increase micro-businesses.

LEAD WITH DEVELOPING SUSTAINABLE MODELS

Rapidly changing contexts, from the impacts of globalization, technological advancement and most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, necessitates revisiting models of sustainability. Attempts to document the sector within traditional economic frameworks exclude a vast amount of transactions — economic, cultural and social — that occur outside of traditional working hours and primary occupations (i.e. the sector is largely unmeasurable).

One significant challenge facing the perception of the sector is the scale of operations. The region remains dominated by mills and mines that privilege large scale operations, from employment incentives, to funding, to models of prosperity. In contrast, the arts is composed of micro operations, individuals or organizations, many with few paid employees, but that provide critical secondary and/or supplemental income, assist in maintaining health and wellbeing and cultural maintenance. Surviving the boom-bust cycle of extractive industries and the seasonal nature of farming, logging, hunting, fishing and tourism frequently depends upon finding ways to bridge the financial gap between jobs, particularly at this juncture in time. Notably, as the economy fractures, more people are turning to the arts and culture sector as a means of survival (Ortiz, 2017).

Key areas include: Raise the profile of the arts, culture and heritage sector; Marketing and online presence; Advocacy; Investment and sustainable funding models; Acquiring or developing Creative space; Social enterprise models; And peer lending circles.

The 4-Community Virtual Forum engaged representatives from the study's partners and interested citizens for a total of 26 participants. ABO presented a comparative overview of the four communities' creative spaces and a summary of the recommendations. The community partners unanimously agreed that a dedicated person was critical in addressing sector needs. Potential human resource funding options were highlighted as well as ABOs' continued support for plan implementation. NORDIK noted that they could support further research, if needed. There were shared perspectives regarding the importance of hiring a local person, or at least someone from Northern Ontario who understands the community context, is able to bridge silos, and who respects local knowledge and lived experience. Participants noted it may be challenging to find someone to lead the development of the project's plan, or be its 'legs', however, investing in community and building on existing capacity was seen as a principled cornerstone to supporting the sector. Concern was expressed regarding one person's ability to coordinate diverse sector disciplines as well as having to navigate silos and nuanced community histories. A more collaborative, team approach was proposed. The job description, level of experience, and the person's role may vary between communities.

Community partners raised questions and shared their current strategies for sector development which generated a lively discussion around staffing, relationship building and connectivity (i.e., Linking Artists and Arts Organizations to Existing Resources). Partners from Kenora and Sioux Narrows-Nestor Falls will be gathering to continue investigating ways to support the plan. Lake of the Woods Artists Community (LOWAC) representative promoted the 'amazing success' of their Arts@Home program being delivered throughout COVID-19. The representative

from Wawa expressed an interest in adapting such a model and the two are planning to connect. In Wawa, the Economic Development Corporation is leading a community effort to build local capacity through the formation of a cultural circle. Recognizing the need to start with who is in the community, it is taking a strengths-based approach in gathering together people who want to learn and grow and engaging them in different projects to gain practical experience. Over time, they acquire the skills and experience to take on bigger projects to grow a larger arts, culture and heritage hub.

FutureSSM's model that provides a dedicated arts and culture coordinator position was envied, as was their collaborative approach to connecting with the business sector. A number of activities mentioned support the study's Leveraging Capacity recommendation. They conduct 'cold calls' to identify what type of engagement may be of benefit to the owner, pitching it, and then being open to wherever dialogue may lead. For example, if the business has a storefront where art work could hang, or a wall for a mural that would draw attention to their business, FutureSSM staff create a plan to move it forward. Another approach in their toolbox is relationship building with other organizations, within or outside the sector, to identify parallel mandates or events that could be 'piggy-backed' to create a larger event, or cost savings, etc. Concerns were expressed about the longevity of FutureSSM's Arts and Culture Coordinator position and its dismantling now that the original funding is expiring, and the consequences should it not continue. Council, however, has recently extended the current contract until 2022, and moving forward has approved the creation of a new permanent position within the Recreation and Culture Department.

The Independent Arts Council of Timmins Steering Committee representative commented that the potential municipal partners are ready to work with the artists. The missing piece in Timmins right now, the outstanding work, is getting key arts organizations and artists to organize themselves, which would facilitate the hired coordinator person's ability to work with both groups; one that is driven by the artists and one driven by the potential partners.

These points led to a robust discussion regarding the burgeoning success of the northern film industry, due in part, to its network that connects resource people in various communities. A participant from the Timmins Economic Development Corporation mentioned she speaks with film colleagues in Sault Ste. Marie and North Bay on at least a weekly basis. It was suggested a similar network for the arts, culture and heritage sector be developed. Past efforts to create a northern arts network have been challenging. Factors include limited funding for personnel to lead the initiative; the dearth of paid arts administrators who would have time to take this up; the volunteer and/or part-time employment of artists engaged in the sector; and lack of internet infrastructure. Participants pointed out the internet connections and peoples' technological capacity have improved, garnering enthusiasm for a network with a suggestion the conversation continue between partners to explore how it might evolve. Caution was also expressed in relation to workload capacity and ensuring strong local connections were in place to support broader networks. A representative of the Sault Ste. Marie Museum stated that the network "... should be community-based, equitable, grassroots, collaborative and (of course) asset-based." Overall, participants seemed quite eager to meet again to discuss the potential regional network.

The Mapping Northern Creative Spaces research indicates each community has considerable assets upon which to further enliven and strengthen the arts and culture sector. Municipal government has invested in cultural infrastructure in both locales in the past. Individual community reports provide statistics, trends, and identified needs that serve as a guide for local resource development and expansion, as well as rallying points for community vision and action. They also show where ArtsBuild Ontario and other regional, provincial or national organizations may offer meaningful learning resources and may be strategic future partners. Those engaged in the arts demonstrate expertise, commitment and perseverance; however, sector investment (financial, in-kind support, leadership) would advance community health and wellbeing and foster the necessary skills for ongoing innovation and renewal in response to the dynamic knowledge economy.

In closing, it is important to note that although this study's focus is the arts and culture sector (specifically creative space needs and gaps), many of the building and operational concerns raised by survey participants are not exclusive to the arts and culture sector. Non-profit organizations and those operating micro businesses face similar challenges and would benefit from the support, connectivity and further research noted in this section.

