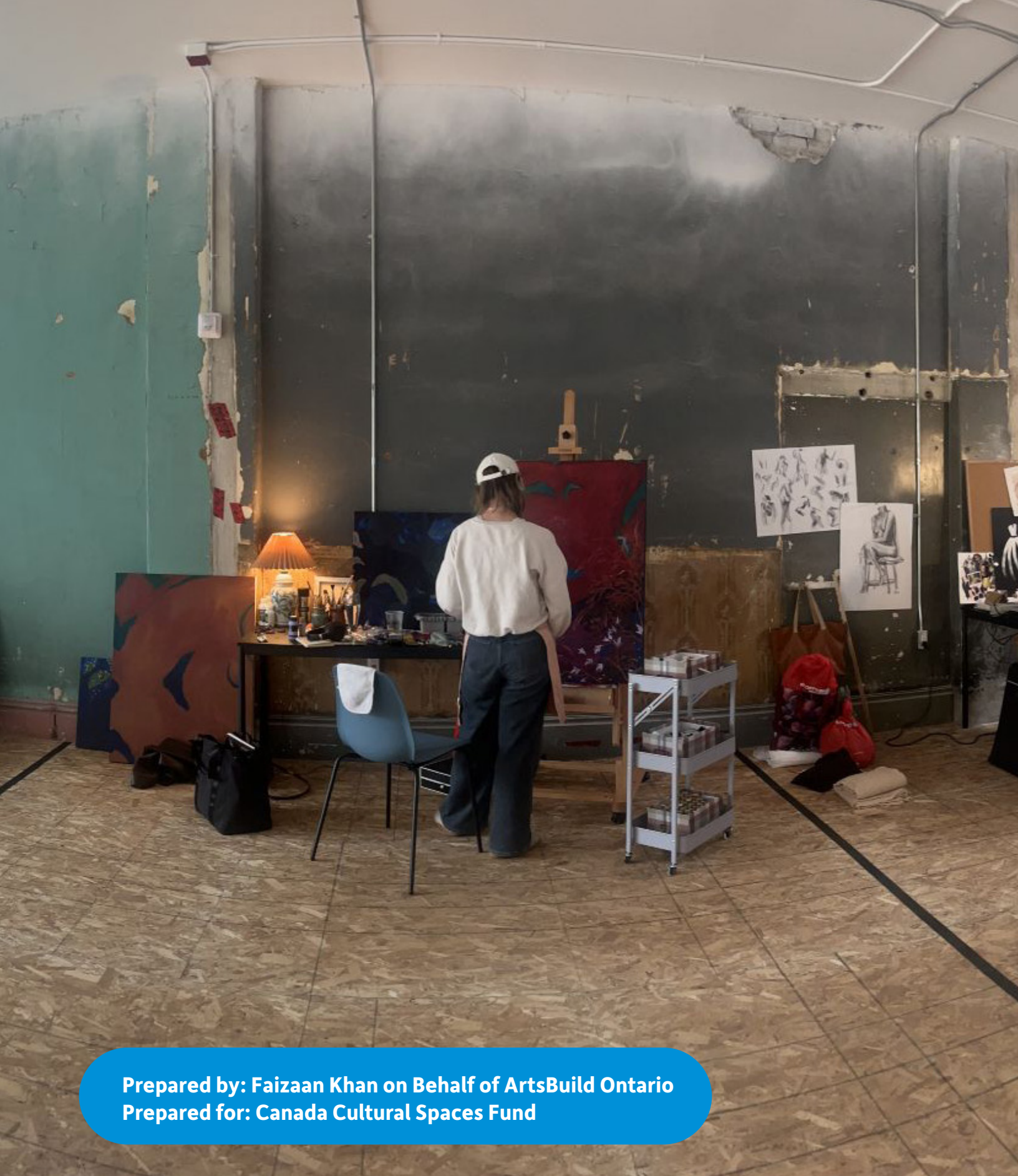


Meanwhile Spaces in Mid-Size Cities

Local Spaces for Local Artists

March 2026



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Prepared for: Canada Cultural Spaces Fund

Funded by the
Government
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THE CITY OF
Waterloo

whynot



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About ArtsBuild Ontario

What We Do

ArtsBuild Ontario (ABO) is a provincial arts service organization that provides small and medium-sized organizations with tools, training, and advice to successfully manage physical and digital creative spaces. ArtsBuild works to reimagine the future of creative spaces through dedicated research projects and an engaged network of supportive partners.

Who We Serve

It is both the honor and duty of ArtsBuild to serve Ontario's arts, cultural, and creative communities. This includes communities who are or have been historically marginalized or underrepresented. With a focus on small to medium-sized organizations, ArtsBuild supports all those with a desire to build and manage spaces across all arts, creative, and cultural disciplines. ArtsBuild proudly works with non-profit, grassroots, and for-profit entities, as well as Indigenous communities and groups, and municipalities. In recent years, ArtsBuild has grown its service offerings in partnership with Indigenous and Northern Ontario communities.

Our Impact

For over 20 years, ArtsBuild's services have supported arts organizations, artists, and municipalities. ArtsBuild exists as an arts service organization with a unique role on the provincial and national stage. There is no other organization in Ontario or Canada dedicated to supporting arts organizations of all disciplines

With their cultural infrastructure needs. ArtsBuild's network is wide-reaching with over 3,000 arts managers from across Ontario and beyond—in fact, over 25% come from outside of the province! With just over a third of its network based in major city centers, ArtsBuild takes great pride in supporting arts organizations.



Executive Summary

The Canada Cultural Spaces Fund (CCSF) supports the improvement of physical conditions for arts, heritage, culture, and creative innovation by investing in cultural infrastructure that delivers public benefit, increases access, and strengthens the long-term sustainability of the sector. The Meanwhile Spaces Pilot, led by ArtsBuild Ontario (ArtsBuild) in the Kitchener–Waterloo Region, advances these objectives by testing a low-cost and adaptable approach to delivering cultural infrastructure in a mid-size city.

Across Canada, artists are facing a growing crisis of affordability and access to space. Rising real estate costs, redevelopment pressures, and limited investment in cultural infrastructure have made it increasingly difficult for artists to secure affordable, accessible, and suitable places to create, rehearse, perform, and gather. While these pressures are most visible in large metropolitan centres, they are now increasingly acute in mid-size cities, where rapid growth and redevelopment often outpace cultural infrastructure investment and policy tools.

In response, ArtsBuild implemented a Meanwhile Spaces Pilot that activated two vacant properties, Wing 404 and 99 King Street, for temporary, non-commercial cultural use. Supported by CCSF investment and municipal and sector partnerships, the pilot prioritized adaptive reuse and activating existing but underused real estate over new construction, maximizing public benefit from existing assets while minimizing capital costs. The program tested a model in which ArtsBuild assumed responsibility for site readiness, risk management, coordination, and equitable access, reducing barriers for both artists and property owners.

Through an open and competitive Expressions of Interest process, 71 applications were received, and 19 participants across multiple disciplines were selected in total. Artists used the spaces for rehearsals, production, administration, community gatherings, and public-facing activity, with consistent demand during afternoons and evenings, aligning with sector-wide findings on artists' preferred working times. Participants reported that access to space enabled sustained artistic production, supported grant development and organizational administration, reduced financial precarity, and created opportunities for collaboration and community engagement.

The pilot also generated systems-level learnings, particularly around regulatory timelines,



non-capital coordination, and the staffing required to sustain temporary spaces. While modest capital investments supported health and safety, code compliance, and basic functionality, findings underscore the importance of non-capital supports to manage scheduling, risk, and stakeholder relationships. Regulatory processes, including permits and zoning, emerged as key sources of delay, highlighting opportunities for improved alignment between cultural infrastructure funding and municipal approval timelines.

Many existing meanwhile space pilots were initiated in large urban centres and prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, under different market and policy conditions. This pilot contributes new, post-pandemic evidence demonstrating that meanwhile space models are feasible in mid-size cities when supported by targeted capital investment, operational funding, and municipal partnership. While meanwhile spaces are not a substitute for permanent cultural infrastructure, the findings confirm their value as a complementary, interim tool that addresses immediate need, supports cultural participation, and informs longer-term planning and investment.

This report presents outcomes, lessons learned, and recommendations intended to inform future CCSF program design, municipal policy development, and cultural infrastructure strategies. It demonstrates how flexible, adaptive models can expand access to cultural space, maximize the impact of public investment, and strengthen the resilience of local cultural ecosystems in mid-size cities across Canada.



1. Report Purpose and Relevance

This report is presented to the Canada Cultural Spaces Fund (CCSF) to summarize findings, outcomes, and recommendations from the Meanwhile Spaces Pilot, implemented by ArtsBuild Ontario (ArtsBuild) in Kitchener-Waterloo. The pilot was designed to test an alternative approach to cultural infrastructure delivery in a mid-size city context, with a focus on activating existing vacant properties rather than developing new, purpose-built facilities.

The objectives of this report are to:

- › Document the Meanwhile Space model developed by ArtsBuild, including its governance structure, operational approach, and implementation in partnership with municipal and sector partners.
- › Assess the feasibility of meanwhile space as a cultural infrastructure strategy, identifying benefits, limitations, and conditions for success in mid-size municipalities.
- › Summarize impacts on artists and local communities, with particular attention to how temporary access to space enables artistic production, community programming, and cultural participation.
- › Identify lessons learned and practical recommendations that can inform future iterations of the program and similar initiatives across Canada.

1.1 Alignment with the Canada Cultural Spaces Fund

The Meanwhile Spaces Pilot aligns closely with the objectives of the Canada Cultural Spaces Fund, particularly in its emphasis on:

- › Maximizing public benefit from existing assets by activating underutilized and vacant buildings for cultural use.
- › Improving access to cultural spaces for artists and communities in locations where capital-intensive new builds are not feasible or timely.
- › Supporting innovation in cultural infrastructure delivery, including flexible, interim, and adaptive models that respond to real estate pressures and changing community needs.

By focusing on adaptive reuse and temporary activation, the pilot demonstrates how CCSF investments can support cultural infrastructure in contexts where long-term ownership or construction is not immediately possible, while still delivering meaningful community impacts.



1.2 Policy and Systems-Level Contributions

Beyond site-specific outcomes, the Meanwhile Spaces Pilot contributes to broader policy and systems learning relevant to cultural infrastructure planning in mid-size cities. Findings from the pilot may support:

- › Municipal policy development, particularly in relation to zoning, land-use permissions, and the role of cultural uses within employment and commercial areas.
- › Public-sector risk mitigation, demonstrating how municipalities can support cultural activity in vacant properties while maintaining flexibility for future development.
- › Funding program evolution, offering insights into how capital and non-capital funding tools can be structured to support temporary, adaptive, and community-centered cultural spaces.

Meanwhile space projects are a complementary tool, rather than a replacement, to permanent cultural infrastructure. The pilot highlights how interim approaches can serve as a stopgap in periods of transition, support local cultural ecosystems, and inform longer-term planning and investment decisions at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels.



1.3 Scope of the Report

This report focuses on outcomes and learnings from two pilot sites from October 2024 to October 2025. This reporting period includes project start-up processes including program development, hiring various staff to run the pilot, forming partnerships, preparing sites for occupancy, selecting participants, and at least one cohort of artists using each space.

Wing 404

A former community centre activated for theatre, dance, and mixed-media rehearsal, production and administration.

99 King

A centrally located site suitable for quiet creative practices such as painting, sculpture, multi-media, etc.

Together, these sites provide insight into how meanwhile space models function across different building types, locations, and community contexts within the Kitchener-Waterloo Region.





2. Background and Context

2.1 A Crisis of Affordability and Access

Artists across Canada are facing a long-standing but increasingly acute crisis of access to affordable, accessible, and suitable space in which to create, rehearse, perform, and gather. While space insecurity in the cultural sector is not new, it has intensified in recent years as real estate costs rises and redevelopment pressure accelerates. These pressures have tangible local consequences: artists delay or abandon projects, community programming is reduced or cancelled, and opportunities for cultural participation diminish, particularly for those most reliant on affordable and informal spaces.

In response to these conditions, meanwhile spaces or meanwhile use have emerged as a pragmatic model of cultural infrastructure procurement and governance. Meanwhile use refers to the temporary activation of vacant or underutilized properties, often during periods of transition prior to redevelopment or leasing, for non-commercial cultural purposes at reduced or no cost. While not a substitute for permanent cultural infrastructure, meanwhile spaces function as a critical stopgap, addressing immediate needs while longer-term planning and capital investments are underway. They are particularly relevant in contexts where the timelines for new construction or acquisition far exceed the urgency of current space shortages.

Large metropolitan centres such as Toronto have contended with intense development pressure and real estate speculation for decades, leading to the early emergence and testing of adaptive strategies such as meanwhile use, temporary activation, and pop-up cultural spaces. These models have been piloted, evaluated, and refined in large city contexts by organizations with significant institutional capacity. As housing affordability challenges and redevelopment pressures increasingly extend beyond major urban cores, mid-size cities like Kitchener–Waterloo are now experiencing similar dynamics, often without the same depth of tested tools or intermediaries to respond. In these contexts, the loss of even a small number of cultural spaces can have outsized and lasting impacts.

This is particularly significant given the cultural sector's role in local and regional economies. According to the Ontario Arts Council's 2025 Impact Report, the cultural sector contributed



approximately \$3.9 billion to Ontario's GDP in Southwestern Ontario, with the Kitchener–Cambridge–Waterloo region contributing approximately \$361 million. Despite this contribution, cultural infrastructure in mid-size cities remains comparatively fragile and under-resourced, increasing vulnerability to displacement and long-term loss.

Recognizing both the urgency of the space crisis and the lack of mid-size city-specific evidence, ArtsBuild launched the Meanwhile Spaces Pilot Project in the Waterloo Region. The pilot was designed to assess the feasibility of a meanwhile space model in a mid-size city context, with a deliberate focus on activating existing vacant properties rather than new construction. In doing so, the pilot seeks to generate locally grounded insights that can inform future cultural infrastructure policy, funding program design, and municipal approaches to space activation.

There is a substantial body of research demonstrating the economic, cultural, and social benefits of Meanwhile Spaces. Many earlier pilots, however, were launched in large metropolitan areas and largely pre-dated the COVID-19 pandemic, operating under very different economic, social, and public health conditions. The purpose of this pilot is not to re-prove these benefits, but to test whether the Meanwhile Space model is feasible in a mid-size city context. The pilot demonstrates that, even outside a major urban centre and in a post-pandemic environment, vacant or underutilized properties can be effectively activated to provide accessible space for artists, support diverse creative practices, and deliver local community impacts. These findings generate locally grounded evidence to guide funders, municipal partners, and cultural policymakers in adapting the meanwhile use model to mid-size cities, where institutional capacity, real estate dynamics, and community needs differ from those of larger metropolitan areas.

2.2 What the Literature Tells Us About Meanwhile Use

Research on meanwhile use helps clarify why vacant space exists, when temporary activation is most effective, and what conditions determine whether these interventions deliver public benefit. This evidence is particularly relevant for funders and policymakers seeking to support interventions that provide both immediate and lasting value to communities.



Not all vacancy is equal

Research consistently shows that vacancy is not a single condition, but a spectrum shaped by market dynamics and development timelines. Rabianski (2002) distinguishes between frictional vacancy (short gaps between tenants), cyclical vacancy (linked to economic downturns), and structural vacancy, where buildings remain empty due to obsolete layouts, deferred maintenance, or pending redevelopment. Structural vacancy is the most difficult to resolve through conventional leasing, but it presents a clear opportunity for meanwhile use, as temporary activation can occur without undermining long-term redevelopment plans. More recent frameworks, such as the STAR Toolkit (Armstrong et al., 2024), further demonstrate how identifying vacancy type and building condition is critical to matching appropriate interim uses and minimizing risk for both owners and users.

Temporary use is more than an interim fix

Urban research emphasizes that temporary and meanwhile uses actively shape cities during periods of transition rather than merely filling gaps. Scholars argue that these uses influence how spaces are perceived, tested, and valued, particularly in contexts of uncertainty or delayed development (Lehtovuori & Ruoppila, 2017; Madanipour, 2018). Temporary activation allows communities and municipalities to experiment with uses, build social relationships, and maintain vibrancy while long-term plans evolve. This flexibility is especially important in environments where planning, rezoning, or capital projects take years to complete, and where leaving space vacant can accelerate decline.

Cultural meanwhile spaces generate layered benefits

Evidence from cultural and commercial contexts shows that meanwhile use can deliver multiple, overlapping benefits. Studies point to increased street-level activity, improved perceptions of safety, and strengthened community stewardship when vacant spaces are activated (MacDonald & Stokes, 2020; Rosenbaum, Edwards, & Ramirez, 2021). In arts-specific contexts, meanwhile spaces support experimentation, collaboration, and skill development, allowing artists and organizations to test programming, build audiences, and



strengthen operational capacity without the financial burden of long-term leases (Hill, Light, & Dearden, 2013; Watts, 2018). These benefits are particularly valuable in resource-constrained environments where permanent space is out of reach.

However, benefits are not automatic

The literature also cautions that meanwhile use is not inherently equitable or sustainable. Without clear governance, timelines, and exit strategies, temporary activation can reinforce precarity for artists or contribute to displacement and gentrification (Harris, 2020; Madanipour, 2018; Lehtovuori & Ruoppila, 2017). Some studies highlight how cultural activation has been used to increase the attractiveness of areas prior to redevelopment, with limited long-term benefit for the temporary users themselves. These findings underscore the importance of intentional program design, transparency, and alignment with broader cultural and community goals.

Intermediaries matter

Across case studies, successful meanwhile use initiatives rely on active intermediaries or brokers. These organizations play a critical role in negotiating access to space, managing risk, coordinating multiple users, and ensuring that public benefits are realized (Hill, Light, & Dearden, 2013; School of Cities, 2021). Intermediaries help translate between artists, property owners, municipalities, and funders, reducing barriers to participation and enabling equitable access. This function is especially important in mid-size cities, where individual artists or small organizations may lack the capacity to navigate legal, regulatory, and operational complexities on their own.

A gap in mid-size city evidence

Much of the existing literature and many high-profile pilots originate in large metropolitan centres, where vacancy patterns, institutional capacity, and market conditions differ significantly from those in mid-size cities. As a result, there is limited place-based evidence on how meanwhile space models function outside major urban cores, particularly in post-pandemic conditions. This gap highlights the importance of pilots like the Meanwhile Spaces



Pilot in Waterloo Region, which test established models in new contexts and generate actionable insights for funders and policymakers seeking to support cultural infrastructure in a broader range of communities.

Why This Matters for This Report

This literature underscores that meanwhile spaces are not neutral interventions: their impact depends on vacancy type, governance, intermediaries, and local context. The Meanwhile Spaces Pilot contributes directly to this evidence base by testing an arts-focused model in a mid-size city, producing lessons that can inform funding programs, municipal policy, and broader cultural planning.



3. Program Overview

ArtsBuild launched the Meanwhile Spaces Pilot in partnership with the CCSF, the City of Waterloo, and Why Not Theatre to assess the feasibility of a meanwhile space model for arts in a mid-size city context. The pilot was designed to test how temporary access to existing vacant properties could support artists, enable community programming, and generate local cultural benefits while maintaining flexibility for property owners and municipalities.

3.1 Pilot Sites

To examine how the model performs across different spatial and regulatory conditions, ArtsBuild secured access to two vacant properties with distinct characteristics. Together, these sites allowed the pilot to explore a range of use cases, constraints, and community impacts.



SITE 01



Wing 404 (510 Dutton Drive)

Wing 404 is a decommissioned community centre located in an employment area in Waterloo. Its size, layout, and separation from sensitive land uses made it particularly suitable for movement-based and sound-intensive artistic practices, including dance, theatre, music, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

- › **Land Use Designation:** Flexible Industrial
- › **Zoning:** E3-27 Flexible Industrial (lowest-density category)
- › **Primary Uses:** Rehearsal, studio practice, administration, community gatherings, workshops, and public showings
- › **Key Characteristics:**
 - › Ability to accommodate large-scale movement and ensemble work
 - › Limited noise sensitivity, enabling artists to rehearse and experiment freely
 - › Flexibility to support both individual practice and collective use
 - › Minimal physical accessibility barriers, and ample parking

The site's industrial context allowed artists to work without many of the constraints typically associated with commercial or residential-adjacent spaces. However, its location also presented challenges related to transit access and visibility, which influenced patterns of community participation.

SITE 02



99 King Street

99 King Street is a centrally located site with a smaller scale and a different spatial configuration than Wing 404 (open concept, as opposed to multiple rooms). Its downtown location positions it closer to transit, pedestrian activity, and community amenities, offering opportunities for increased visibility and public engagement. 99 King is currently home to its third cohort of artists.

- › **Land Use Designation:** Strategic Growth Area B (renamed Mixed Use Area B in the Official Plan Update)
- › **Zoning:** Strategic Growth Area 1 and 2
- › **Primary Uses:** Quiet practices, painting, drawing, photography, digital and multimedia
- › **Key Characteristics:**
 - › Greater proximity to transit and public-facing activity
 - › Different noise, size, and scheduling constraints compared to Wing 404
 - › Increased potential for informal community interaction and audience access

99 King's generally open concept space, coupled with its designation for quiet practices and lack of scheduling logistics meant that artists in this space crossed paths more, exchanged ideas, skills, and tools, leading to a more community oriented space.



3.2 Establishing Partnerships

Through the Meanwhile Spaces Pilot, ArtsBuild developed partnerships across the public and private sectors that were essential to securing space and testing the feasibility of the model.

City of Waterloo

ArtsBuild's partnership with the City of Waterloo led to the identification of two potential properties: Wing 404 and St. Columba Church. Wing 404 proceeded as a pilot site and is documented in this report. As part of this collaboration, ArtsBuild provided an interim impact report to the City's Economic Development team outlining artist use, impacts, and early findings to support municipal policy discussions related to cultural space and interim use.

The City of Waterloo also explored other potential future sites, such as St. Columba Church. While not activated during the pilot period, this indicates that there are opportunities for future program expansion, either through ArtsBuild, through other agencies or the City itself, using learnings from this pilot.

Lowland Properties

ArtsBuild partnered with Lowland Properties, a private real estate group with a portfolio of commercial properties, to activate 99 King Street through the pilot. Lowland Properties invested in the space and worked with ArtsBuild to enable cultural use while maintaining flexibility for future tenancy. The partnership allowed the space to remain partially unfinished, while still meeting code requirements, avoiding the need for full interior build-out and creating flexibility for both parties.

St. Matthew's Centre and Perimeter Development

St. Matthew's Centre and Perimeter Development were also explored as potential partners during the pilot development phase. St. Matthew's Centre was ultimately not included, as the chapel space did not meet the program's criteria for suitable creative use.



ArtsBuild also explored a potential partnership with Perimeter Development, which has an established track record of working with non-profit organizations and community partners. A space at 309 King Street in Kitchener was considered as part of these discussions. While this site was not included in the pilot, it represents a potential opportunity for future partnerships informed by the learnings from this program.

Why Not Theatre and Mass Culture

ArtsBuild collaborated with Why Not Theatre and Mass Culture to align evaluation approaches and share learnings from the pilot. These partnerships support sector-level knowledge building and contribute to strengthening a broader meanwhile space ecosystem.

Advisory Committee

To support program design, equity considerations, and sector relevance, ArtsBuild established a nine-member Advisory Committee with representation across artistic disciplines, municipal government, and equity-deserving communities. The Advisory Committee provided strategic guidance throughout the pilot, helping to ensure that site selection, artist engagement, and operational decisions were grounded in sector expertise and local context.

Members included:

- › Chair: Sam Varteniuk, Executive Director, The Registry Theatre
- › Lead Advisors: Ravi Jain (Why Not Theatre); Oliver Pauk (Akin Collective)
- › Members: Eric Rumble (City of Kitchener); Astero Kalogeropoulos (City of Waterloo); Sam Nabi (Musician & Urban Planner); Matt White (Green Light Arts); Jorge Pineda (Just Ideas); Fitsum Areguy (Artist / Textile Magazine)



3.3 Pre-Launch Groundwork

Significant pre-launch groundwork was required to prepare both pilot sites for safe, functional, and low-cost cultural use. This phase of the project focused on balancing necessary site readiness and compliance requirements with the core objective of preserving flexibility and minimizing capital investment in order to maintain the feasibility of temporary use.

Capital vs. Non-Capital Interventions

At both sites, ArtsBuild prioritized non-capital interventions wherever possible. Physical improvements were limited to essential health, safety, and operational requirements rather than full renovations or permanent upgrades. This approach aligned with the temporary nature of the pilot and avoided over-investing in spaces intended for interim use.

At Wing 404, the existing layout required minimal physical alteration. No major construction or interior finishing was undertaken, allowing the space to remain adaptable for a range of artistic practices. At 99 King Street, only limited modifications were made to bring the space up to code, and certain elements such as unfinished flooring were intentionally left in place to preserve the low-cost and temporary nature of the use. Other options to ensure low costs included keeping the studio open concept, without dividers.

Regulatory and Site Readiness Challenges

The pre-launch phase was impacted by regulatory and administrative delays. Rezoning approvals, construction requirements, and City inspections contributed to delays in launching programming at 99 King Street. Similarly, finalizing the license and lease agreement for Wing 404 extended the timeline, with site access not secured until mid-May. These delays affected overall scheduling and underscore the importance of early alignment between program timelines, regulatory processes, and property access.



Essential Equipment and Shared Resources

To support safe and effective use of both sites, ArtsBuild purchased a set of essential shared items, including first aid kits, oily waste bins, basic furniture, cleaning supplies, signage, and projector and presentation equipment. These items were selected to support a wide range of artistic and community activities while remaining transferable between sites and future projects.

Operational Preparation

Additional pre-launch activities included executing license agreements, notifying selected applicants, setting up Wi-Fi access, and preparing a landscape scan and resources document for participating artists. ArtsBuild also coordinated practical logistics such as copying keys, establishing access protocols, setting up a booking platform, and confirming basic operational procedures. Together, these activities ensured that once access was granted, artists could begin using the spaces with minimal disruption.



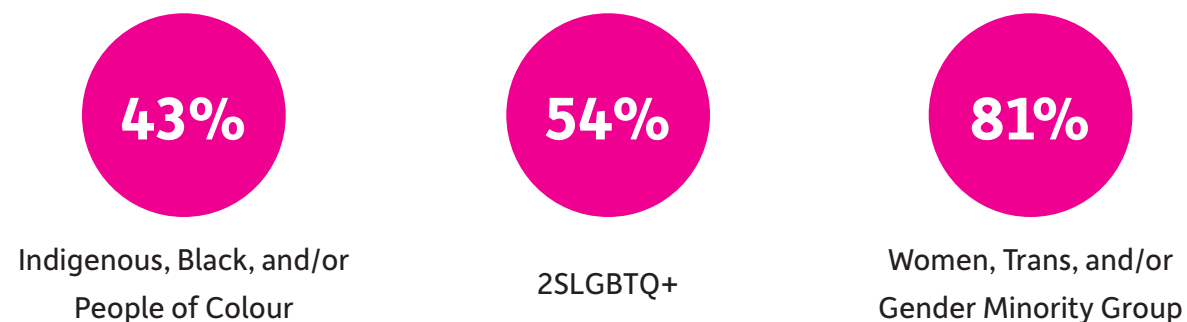
3.4 Artist Selection and Program Operations

Participating artists and organizations were selected through an open Expressions of Interest (EOI) process. ArtsBuild received 71 EOIs, demonstrating significant unmet demand for affordable and accessible creative space in the Waterloo Region. Selected participants represented a range of disciplines, practice scales, and community engagement approaches.

The program provided:

- › Free access to space until December 2025, removing cost as a barrier. *(Note that artist cohorts after December 2025 will pay a fee to access spaces. Comparison of the free versus paid cohorts, once complete, will enable analysis about cost-savings for artists.)*
- › A shared online scheduling platform for Wing 404 (Skedda)
- › A dedicated program and operations coordinator, responsible for:
 - › Day-to-day site operations
 - › Artist onboarding and scheduling support
 - › Liaison with property owners and municipal partners
 - › Addressing health, safety, and operational needs

Within the first cohorts of participating artists across both sites, equity priority groups are represented as follows





3.5 Activities and Patterns of Use

Wing 404 supported a wide range of activities, including rehearsals, workshops, community gatherings, public showings and performances, as well as internal administrative meetings. 99 King was focused on quiet practices such as painting, sewing, photography, and more. **This diversity of use reflects both the flexibility of the space and the varied needs of participating artists and organizations.**

ArtsBuild's project partner, Why Not Theatre, conducted an Arts Sector Survey in 2023 to assess demand for temporary space. These survey results were focused solely on Toronto, and the majority of responses were from theatre, performing arts, or dance. The findings from this survey align with the space usage statistics surfaced through the Meanwhile Space Pilot, particularly in Wing 404, which was dedicated to theatre and performing arts uses.

Wing 404

Total booked hours: 612.5

Approximate utilization rate between 9am–9pm: 30%

Typical booking duration:

- › 2–4 hours: 67%
- › 4–6 hours: 23%

Peak usage times:

- › Weekday afternoons: 12:00–3:00 PM
- › Weekday evenings: 6:00–9:00 PM

99 King

Patterns of use varied among participants:

- › 2 artists: 5–7 times per week
- › 1 artist: 2–3 times per week
- › 2 artists: approximately once per week

These patterns closely align with findings from Why Not Theatre's 2023 Arts Sector Survey, which identified afternoons and evenings as the most desirable working times for artists.



In comparing ArtsBuild's statistics to Why Not Theare's findings, it becomes clear that artists' space needs do not vary drastically between a big city like Toronto, and medium sized cities like Waterloo, however there is a disparity in access to resources and space options. This indicates that meanwhile spaces can be a feasible solution for artists' space needs in mid-size cities, just like in the larger cities where these pilots and experiments have proved successful.

The peak usage times for Wing 404 indicate that space usage was often defined by artists' 'day jobs' and/or childcare schedules. Artists who benefit from the meanwhile space program are less likely to have established self-sustaining careers, and as such, external time pressures will impact their ability to access the space. With an official cohort size of 11 artists and organizations, this distribution of usage indicates that potentially larger cohort sizes may have been possible to accommodate. Alternatively, selecting artists based on time preferences would minimize the amount of time that the space was left unused.

Notes on Data Interpretation

It should be noted that despite a recorded usage rate of 30% at Wing 404, booking data reflects scheduled use, not actual time spent. Artists explicitly noted that they often extended sessions, shared time informally, or used unbooked spaces when available. As such, utilization of the space was certainly higher than booking data indicates. These adaptive behaviors illustrate the dynamic and responsive nature of meanwhile spaces in practice. It should also be noted that the pilot program is still ongoing and these statistics may shift as new cohorts begin to use the space. Furthermore, while the official cohort size for Wing 404 during this reporting period was 11 artists or organizations (counted as single participants), many participants brought in collaborators or members of their organizations, and as such more than 11 artists accessed and benefited from the space.

Booking data provides a useful baseline, but it does not fully capture how the space was used in practice. Artists frequently adapted the space in real-time to meet emerging needs.

- › Artists brought in shared furniture, kitchenware, a microwave, and a kettle, making the space more functional for extended work and community gatherings

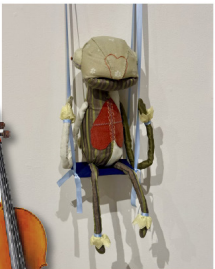
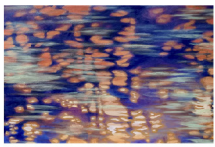


- › Artists created a shared WhatsApp group as a community notice board and communication platform for coordination, informal scheduling, and peer support
- › Artists were friendly and talkative, regularly taking breaks from their own work to chat and offer feedback on other artists' pieces

Artists at 99 King did not need to book time to use their space and instead had 24 hour access through key fobs. Below are some images of the space actively being used, and a poster for a public facing artist studio tour.

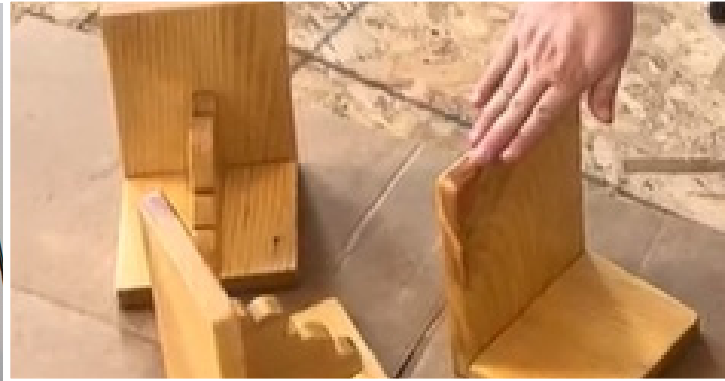
ARTIST STUDIO TOUR

July 19th 11-3pm



99 KING STREET WEST, DTK
(3rd Floor - Red doorway beside Four All Ice Cream)

MEET & CHAT WITH THE ARTISTS IN RESIDENCE
VIEW ARTWORKS & PROJECTS
ENJOY MUSIC BY OUR CELLIST





Since ArtsBuild officially kicked off the pilot in October of 2024, the project has achieved significant growth in a 1 year span. Starting with zero spaces dedicated to this pilot, in a year ArtsBuild managed to activate 7,959 square feet of unused real estate as new space for artistic production. From an initial callout for expressions of interest in November of 2024, ArtsBuild has supported 19 individual artists and over 11 arts groups and collectives. The following statistics demonstrate a year of work beginning from the project kick-off in October 2024 to the end of this evaluation period, in October 2025. The project is still ongoing and these numbers are expected to grow over time.

71 Expressions of Interest received

4

Partnerships formed

19

Artists supported

7,959 sqft

of cultural space
activated

11+

Groups supported



4. Impacts on Artists

The following section outlines the impacts that participating in the meanwhile space pilot project had on artists. Feedback was collected through mid-point and exit surveys. The impacts are grouped into five overarching themes and feature direct quotes from the participating artists.



Growing and Sustaining Artistic Practices



Leveraging Additional Opportunities by Balancing Craft and Administration



Enabling risk-taking and innovation



Collaboration and Strengthening the Cultural Ecosystem



Extending Impacts to Community and Economy



4.1 Growing and Sustaining Artistic Practices

Artists have reported that the pilot program has allowed them to grow and sustain their artistic practices, whether as collectives, collaborators, community, or independent practitioners. This ensures that the cultural sector remains a strong economic engine in Ontario, and in the face of a rising cost of living crisis, artists' ability to sustain themselves contributes to Waterloo's overall economic health. Since the pilot launch, one artist is now actively seeking a shared studio space, having seen how dedicated space outside of her home positively impacts her practice. Another artist has completed nine pieces since moving her practice into the studio, noting that separating her creative work from her role as a parent has made it significantly easier to produce new work.

“We’d both taken a hiatus from producing new work back in December, and the gatherings we’ve held with community practitioners have got us both reengaged and producing new work.”

“We've ended up using it more as a space to further individual artistic practices within our organization rather than using it as an event space.”

“As an independent artist, finding affordable rental space for consistent practice can be very challenging, and having this opportunity has made a tremendous difference in my ability to sustain myself.”



4.2 Leveraging Additional Opportunities by Balancing Craft and Administration

Artists have reported that access to Wing 404 has been equally productive for development, grant-writing and administration as it is for rehearsal and production. The program has provided artists with a dedicated space for administration that can support the ongoing sustainability of their practices. While spaces appropriate for grant-writing and administration, such as cafes, libraries, or private homes, are more accessible, artists note that dedicated arts spaces are more comfortable, and enable greater collaboration. With the pressure of securing space removed, artists are better able to leverage additional opportunities such as using funds on documentation and applying for larger grants.

“Accessing a free rehearsal space allows me to open up funds for documentation, which in turn might increase my access to grant funds. I have the intention of applying for an OAC Recommender Grant in January for both pieces.”

“It provided a stable environment that supported both the practical and reflective aspects of my work, helping me build confidence and develop my artistic voice.”

“While we knew that we could do grant writing from one of our homes or a café or the like, we found it much more comfortable to have a dedicated, quiet space to get together and do that.”



4.3 Enabling risk-taking and innovation

Access to appropriately sized spaces for movement, and the ability to make noise were key barriers cited by artists when trying to access creative spaces. Beyond just creating a logistical hurdle, lack of space to stretch out and make noise actively stifles artists' creativity, ability to take risks, and innovate in their practice. Wing 404 has provided artists with the physical and psychological space to take the necessary risks to improve their craft.

“It is very rare to find a huge space without neighbours and that means you can really get loud.”

“It's been nice to have a space that is far enough away from other people that I'm able to confidently take musical risks in my recording practice without worrying about annoying neighbours and as a result I've found the quality of my work has significantly improved”

“I love the character of the building. It breaks the mould of the kind of rehearsal spaces I'm used to and pushes my brain in new directions.”



4.4 Collaboration and Strengthening the Cultural Ecosystem

Access to shared space has fostered peer learning, multidisciplinary collaboration, and creative inspiration. Being surrounded by other artists working across mediums has enhanced participants' ability to experiment, gain new skills, and develop projects that might not have been possible in isolation.

"I'm excited to be with other artists, especially being a multidisciplinary artist, I can pick up skills from the different mediums that they're all working in. I really do think it'll enhance my ability to complete projects and also inspire new ones."

"Being in this space, I'm most excited for the collaboration aspect of it all. Being able to work amongst and with the different artists in here makes me feel that I am gaining insight and inspiration from said artists and it will help enhance my work."

"It's been difficult to let go of how people perceive me which in turn has muddled my perception of self since picking up my art again. It's taken a while for me to connect the dots for both myself and my audience. Being in a new space with new people has really given me the change I needed to figure myself out."



4.5 Extending Impacts to Community and Economy

The pilot program enables the participating artists to not only sustain their own creative practices, but to extend these benefits to the broader community and economy. Artists are able to host gatherings with their broader community, share resources, and deliver low-cost/free programs. This enables participation in arts programming from those who wouldn't normally have access.

“You help one artist, you help nine”

“Programs like this ensure that diverse creative voices, including newcomers and refugees, can thrive and contribute to the community.”

“We need more of it! I know so many artists that would benefit from access to free space for their practice.”



5. Constraints and Considerations

5.1 Geography and Accessibility

Wing 404 is not easily accessible by transit. This has led to some artists having to drop out of the program, and has been a barrier for audiences and participants in ongoing programming. In contrast, 99 King faced no transit access barriers as it is in proximity to several transit routes. With regard to physical accessibility, Wing 404 was physically accessible, whereas 99 King was not. Physical access barriers were noted publicly and artists would have determined if the space works for them prior to submitting their expression of interest.

Future iterations of the meanwhile space model may consider leveraging vacant properties in greater proximity to transit, however the flexibility of spaces in employment areas like Wing 404 for creative practices that make noise or involve larger spaces cannot be understated. Ultimately, aligning creative practice with the space is important, and advocacy for mixed-use, light industrial districts with access to transit is important.

5.2 Adaptive Reuse vs Purpose-Built Alterations

The low-cost nature of the program is achieved through the use of an existing vacant space. For example, the flooring in the 99 King site was left partially unfinished as expensive finishes were not necessary for the artist studios. However, this means that the spaces are not purpose-built for artist use. For example, multiple artists have noted that the floors in Wing 404 are too hard for their dance rehearsals, and noise issues when multiple artists used the space simultaneously were also noted. Artists in 99 King noted that they being able to hang work on the walls would have been helpful for their work, but this wasn't permitted by the space owner.

Future iterations of the program may consider funding for minor alterations or purchase of specialized equipment for communal use. For example temporary sound proofing for spaces intended for noise, such as Wing 404, or pin boards for 99 King. These types of temporary solutions can be re-used at different sites.



5.3 Predictability & Stability

Delays due to rezoning and construction meant that artists at 99 King missed out on certain opportunities and were unable to align their participation in the program with their ongoing funding cycles or planned programming timelines.

Community partners may consider longer-term leases for meanwhile spaces. This permits intermediaries like ArtsBuild to plan for sufficient buffer time for start-up processes and site readiness. This ensures that site readiness processes do not eat into the amount of time that spaces are available to artists. While meanwhile spaces can be suitable for short-term activations, this is contingent on sites being ready for occupancy. A 1-year lease can quickly be cut in half by planning approvals and permitting processes.

5.4 Provincial Planning Policy Directions

Wing 404 is designated Flexible Industrial in employment areas as per the City of Waterloo Official Plan. It is also zoned E3-27 Industrial Flexible, which permits artist studios. Bill 97 narrowed the definition of area of employment to only include heavy industry and other employment uses that cannot be located near sensitive uses. This new definition may exclude certain artist studio uses.

While currently permitted in Employment Areas, the City of Waterloo should consider how artist studios, rehearsal spaces, and other creative spaces are zoned and designated moving forward in order to minimize the planning costs associated with establishing a meanwhile space. While Wing 404 is less vulnerable to this change in policy due to its history as a community centre, other sites in Employment Areas that are well suited to arts practices may require closer study.



6. Learnings & Recommendations

6.1 Funding Recommendations

Meanwhile-Specific Funding Packages

Funding programs should recognize that meanwhile spaces operate under different conditions from permanent arts infrastructure. CCSF could consider:

- › Targeted small-scale capital support to address minor repairs, accessibility improvements, and equipment needs, enabling rapid activation of vacant properties. For example, at 99 King Street, minor building modifications (lighting, flooring, partitioning) were important for safe and effective use but could be accomplished quickly with modest funding.
- › Decentralized, quicker funding approvals to match the short-term and flexible nature of meanwhile projects, allowing organizations to act when opportunity arises. Long timelines for conventional capital grants can undermine the temporary nature of the space.
- › Support for rezoning and municipal approvals where needed to facilitate temporary cultural use, particularly in industrial, commercial, or mixed-use areas. Small grants to offset planning application fees or consultant costs could accelerate project launch.

Operational Funding is Crucial

- › Provide dedicated funding for a project or site coordinator to manage day-to-day operations of meanwhile spaces. Responsibilities include scheduling, health and safety compliance, onboarding of artists, and liaison with property owners, municipal partners, and community stakeholders.
- › Evidence from both pilot sites demonstrates that a dedicated coordinator significantly improves operational efficiency and ensures equitable access across multiple users, while freeing artists to focus on creative and community programming.
- › Operational funding should be flexible and scalable to the size and complexity of the site, recognizing that multi-site or high-demand spaces may require full-time or part-time coordination support.

Funding Municipal Partners

- › Encourage municipalities to leverage existing vacant or underused buildings for cultural programming by providing CCSF grants to offset minor renovations, insurance, or operational supports.
- › Promote partnerships between funders and municipalities to identify buildings suitable



for meanwhile use and to ensure that municipal resources can be mobilized efficiently. For example, Wing 404, owned by the City of Waterloo, was successfully activated because the City committed the space and staff support.

Cohort-Based Pilots

- › Fund multiple sites in a coordinated cohort approach to allow cross-site learning and evaluation. Comparative analysis across Wing 404 and 99 King Street highlighted differences in scale, location, and accessibility, which informs future funding models.

6.2 Policy Recommendations

Streamline Lease and Site Readiness Processes

- › Launch delays at both Wing 404 and 99 King Street were due to lease negotiation timelines, building inspections, and minor construction or renovation approvals. Municipalities should consider developing pre-approved frameworks for temporary cultural leases to reduce administrative barriers. Early alignment between building owners, municipal planning, and funding agencies can prevent lost opportunities.

Integrate Temporary Cultural Uses into Planning Policies

Ontario planning policy changes (e.g., updates to industrial and employment area designations) may limit where creative and cultural uses are permitted. Municipalities should:

- › Review zoning and land-use designations to explicitly allow arts, rehearsal, and cultural production in mixed-use areas and consider how to implement ‘light industrial’ type zones.
- › Consider temporary use provisions or “meanwhile use overlays” to formalize short-term cultural activities.
- › Clarify building and fire code interpretations for temporary cultural activities to avoid unnecessary delays or costs.



Support Predictability and Stability for Artists

- › While meanwhile spaces are inherently temporary, where possible, multi-year agreements or phased leases (reduced rate leases that escalate in stages, or leases that gradually increase square footage over time) should be considered. These structures can help artists and organizations plan programming, administration, and artist usage more effectively.
- › Implementation of these lease structures depend on the site. For sites with low redevelopment potential, multi-year agreements between two to three years may be reasonable. For sites with higher redevelopment potential, these structures may not be suitable. Short-term leases are not inherently inadequate, however they may be better suited as event spaces, rather than spaces for creative production and development.

Promote Equity and Accessibility in Space Allocation

- › Policies and guidelines should ensure that meanwhile spaces are accessible to diverse artists, including equity-deserving groups and early-career practitioners.
- › Consider incorporating criteria for geographic accessibility, public transit proximity, and inclusive programming into municipal or funder requirements.

Embed Evaluation and Knowledge Sharing

- › Develop a cohesive evaluation framework and require projects to track outcomes such as hours of use, participant engagement through artist use, number of events or artworks, and community impact.
- › Develop municipal/funder toolkits or guidance documents that summarize lessons learned, supporting replication in other mid-size cities.



7. Conclusion

The ongoing Meanwhile Spaces Pilot demonstrates that meanwhile use can meaningfully address persistent access barriers faced by artists in mid-size cities. Across both sites, artists made consistent use of the spaces during peak afternoon and evening hours, and many chose to continue participation in the program across multiple cohorts, underscoring both demand and program value.

At the same time, the pilot highlights that “interim” does not necessarily mean short-term. While short-term access can be effective for certain activities, it may not align with longer artistic production or funding cycles, as well as start-up site preparation processes, suggesting a need for more flexible timelines within meanwhile models. Where continuity was possible, artists were better able to sustain and grow their practices, complete new work, apply for further funding, and engage more deeply in collaboration and experimentation. The pilot delivered clear impacts on artists’ career sustainability, supporting increased production, administrative capacity, creative risk-taking, and peer learning. These benefits extended beyond individual participants, strengthening the broader cultural ecosystem through shared knowledge, collaboration, and community engagement.

Wing 404 and 99 King Street demonstrates that the success of meanwhile spaces is contingent on site characteristics, including location, scale, zoning, and transit access. These factors shape not only how spaces are used, but who can access them and what types of practices they can support.

While meanwhile spaces are not a substitute for permanent cultural infrastructure, they represent a flexible tool for mid-size cities to relieve demand pressures on existing cultural infrastructure when supported by municipal partners, appropriate policy alignment, and capital investment. As a stopgap solution, they require a cultural infrastructure system that is nimble, with funding and policy mechanisms that can be deployed quickly to respond to time-sensitive opportunities.

The findings and recommendations from this pilot are intended to support the ongoing evolution of programs such as the Canada Cultural Spaces Fund, as well as municipal approaches to cultural space provision, by reducing barriers and enabling more responsive, adaptive models of cultural infrastructure delivery.



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In Memory of Shannon Lee

This report is dedicated to the memory of our dear colleague and friend, Shannon Lee, who served as the Meanwhile Spaces Coordinator for ArtsBuild Ontario from November 2024 until their passing in November 2025.

Shannon was the heart of the Meanwhile Spaces Project. A gentle, determined, and genuine advocate, Shannon possessed a unique ability to connect with artists and help them feel seen and supported. It was through Shannon's compassion and thoughtful leadership that this program flourished; they didn't just activate physical spaces, they transformed them into places of community, safety, and authentic connection.

Beyond their invaluable contributions to ArtsBuild Ontario, Shannon was a pillar of the local music community. As a gifted singer, songwriter, and technician, Shannon's powerful voice, both in song with their band House Cat and in their advocacy for others, inspired everyone who had the privilege of knowing them.

The success of the pilot sites documented in these pages, and the vibrant relationships built between the artists and partners involved, are a direct reflection of Shannon's passion and hard work. Their impact continues to resonate through the creative spaces they helped build and the many lives they touched.

We miss Shannon's warmth, their humor, and their unwavering belief in the power of local arts.



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