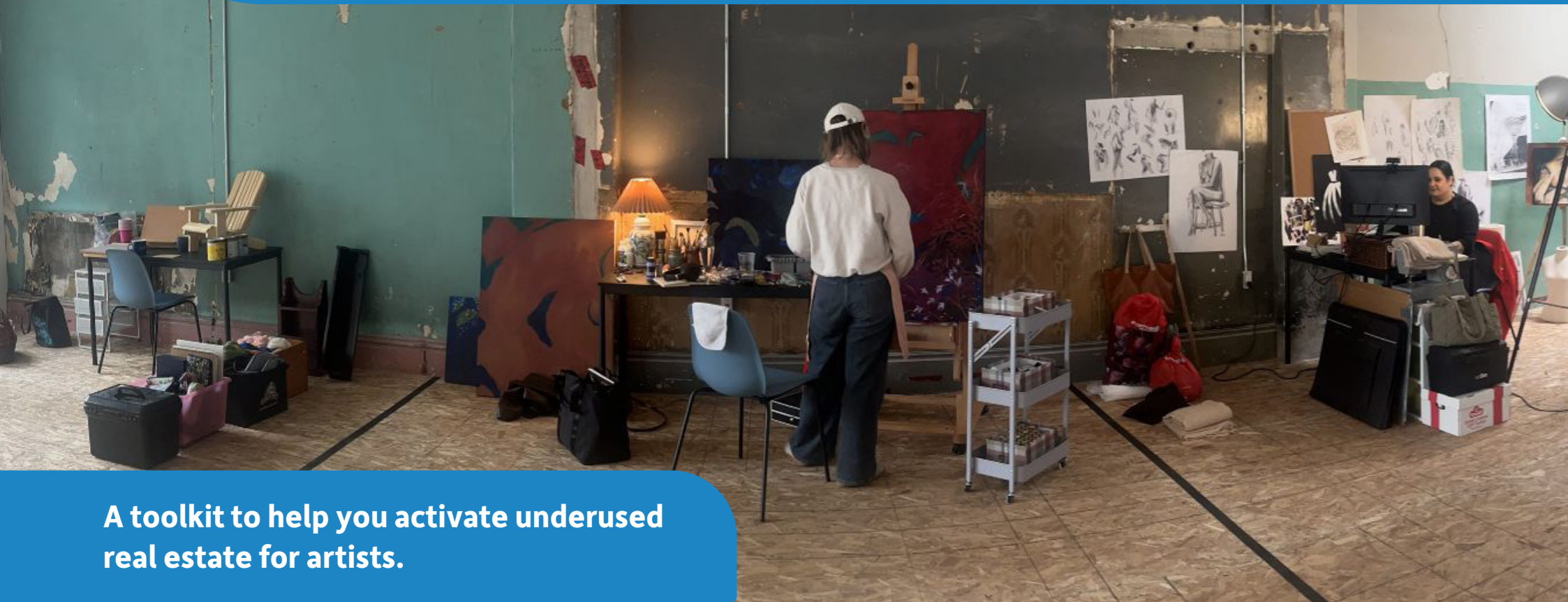


Pathways to Meanwhile Arts Spaces



**A toolkit to help you activate underused
real estate for artists.**

Access to affordable creative and cultural space for artists has always been a challenge. You already know that. Artists have always been innovative and resourceful, finding a way to make things work and carve out space for themselves. **Meanwhile Spaces have emerged as a potential solution to bridge the gap between artists and access to affordable studio and creative spaces.**

This toolkit is designed to support **artists, arts organizations, and community groups** who are considering creating a meanwhile space for arts and cultural use. Our hope is that **wherever you are in your meanwhile space journey, this toolkit will help you move along your path.**



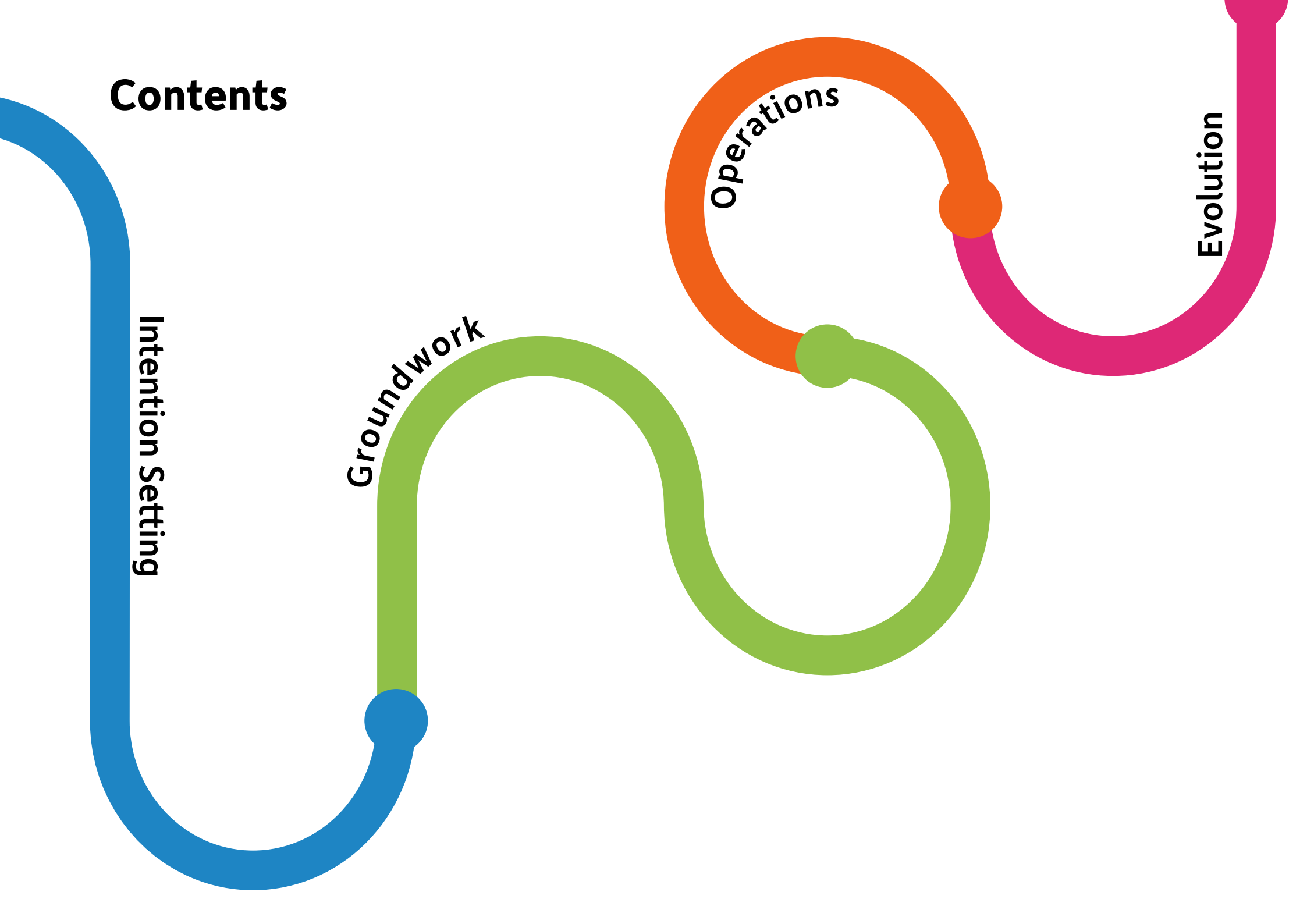
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About ArtsBuild Ontario



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.

Get In Touch



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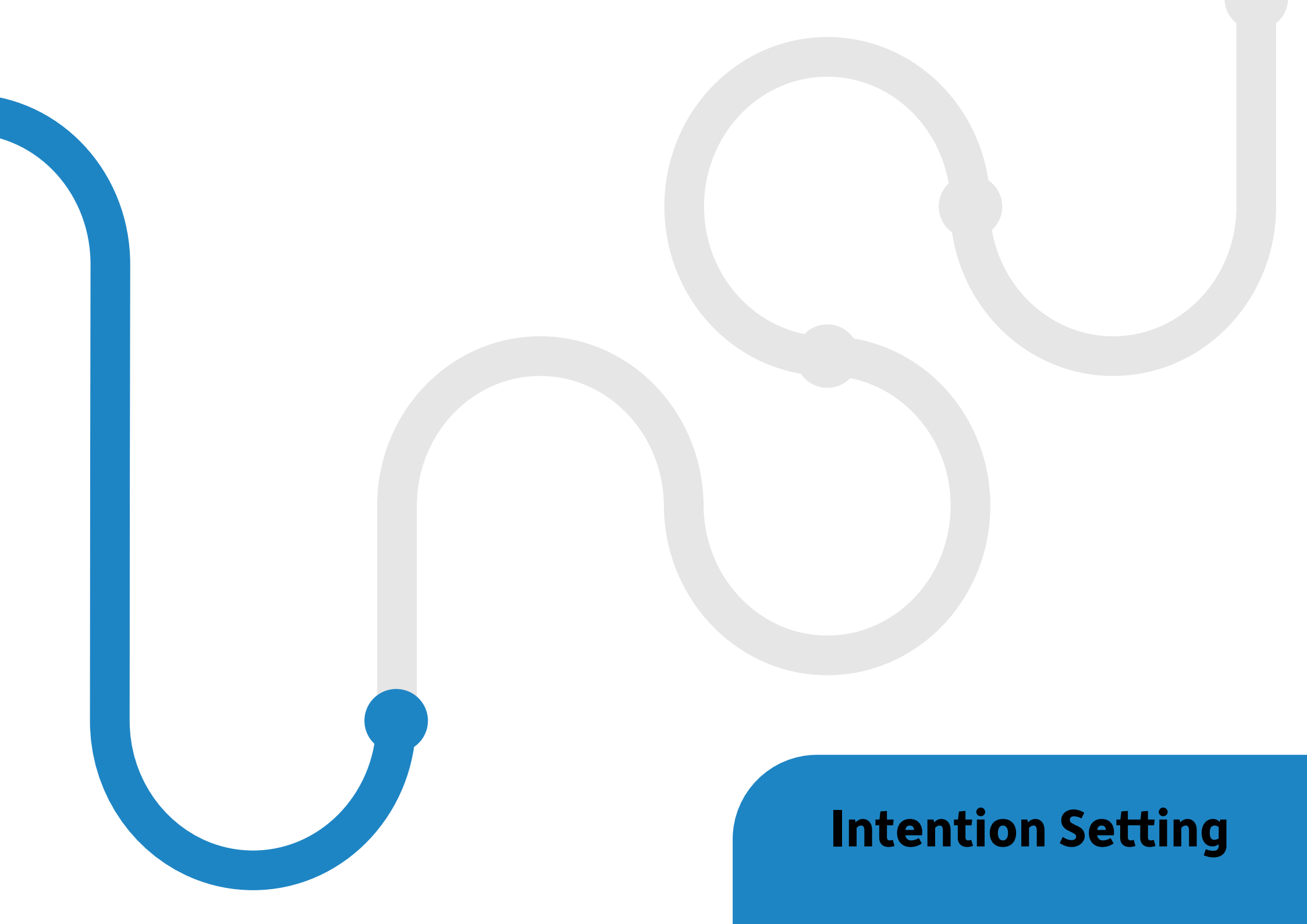
Who We Serve

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.



Intention Setting

1. What Is a Meanwhile Space?

A meanwhile space is a space that is made available for short- to medium-term use while a property owner prepares for a future, higher-value use of the site such as leasing to a long-term tenant, major renovation, or redevelopment.

Most often, these spaces are:

1. Owned by private developers or institutional owners (governments or religious institutions)
2. Vacant or underused for a defined period
3. Offered at below-market rent in exchange for flexibility and reduced security of tenure.

A meanwhile space provides for artists or arts organizations to access space during this “in-between” period—trading long-term certainty for affordability.

What makes a space “meanwhile” is not just that it is temporary, but that its use is shaped by the relationship between the property owner and the tenant, and by the owner’s future plans for the site.

Meanwhile Space models can vary quite drastically in how they are implemented. There are lots of factors that can be tweaked and tooled to develop a unique meanwhile space model that fits your situation.

OTHER TERMS TO KNOW

You may see different language used to describe similar ideas:

- › **Temporary space / Temporary use**
- › **Adaptive reuse**
- › **Pop-up space**

These terms overlap, but they do not always imply the same relationship to ownership, risk, or affordability. This toolkit uses “meanwhile space” to emphasize **negotiated interim use tied to a future change in the property.**

Let's break the term down a little

Meanwhile

Time

How long do you have the space?

By definition, meanwhile spaces are temporary but “temporary” does not always mean short. Some meanwhile uses last days or weeks (pop-ups, exhibitions). Others last years, sometimes even a decade.

What distinguishes a meanwhile space is not duration alone, but:

- › **The ongoing uncertainty of tenure**
- › **The future intent of the property owner**
- › **A lease that reflects this uncertainty, often through reduced rent and flexible terms**

In practice, this often means trading security for affordability.

Space

Use

How do you use the space?

Meanwhile spaces can be used in many ways, but different spaces are suited to different activities. Studios, rehearsals, performances, exhibitions, and community uses all place different demands on a building.

The key question is not only what you want to do, but what the space can support based on its physical characteristics, permitted uses, and the length of time it is available.

Governance

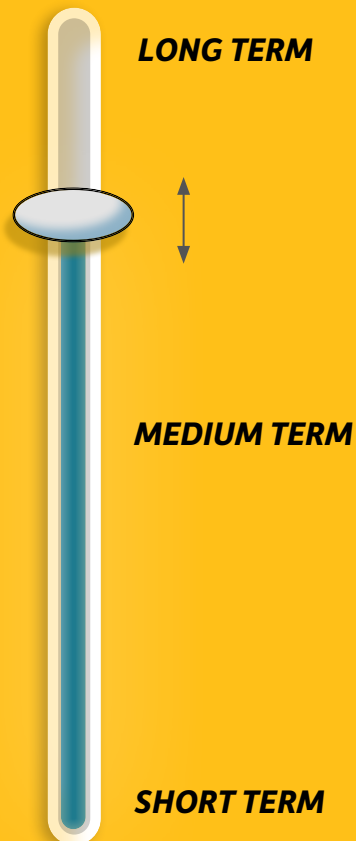
How do you govern the space?

Meanwhile spaces can be governed in different ways. Some are highly centralized, with one organization holding the lease and overseeing operations. Others distribute responsibility across artists, collectives, or partners.

There is no single right model. What matters is clarity: who holds the lease, who makes decisions, and who is responsible when conditions change. In a context defined by uncertainty, clear governance supports sustainability and helps manage risk.

Think of it like a control panel - you can tweak different settings to create a meanwhile space that suits your specific needs, context, and community.

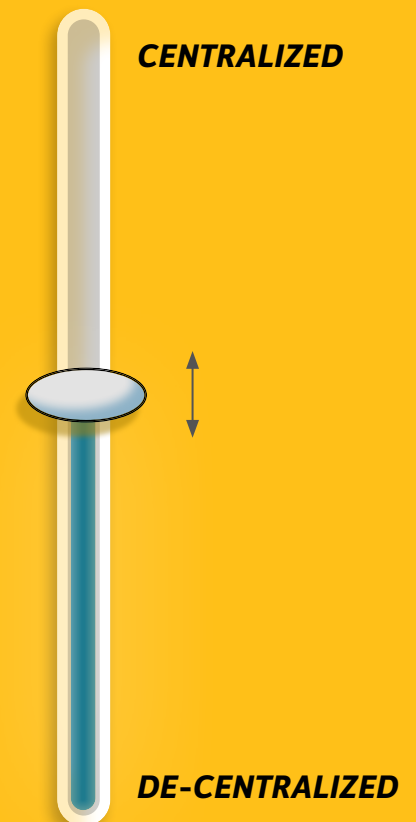
Time



Use



Governance



2. Why Use a Meanwhile Approach ?

Common Goals

People often pursue meanwhile spaces to:

- › Increase access to affordable space for artists
- › Support artistic production that cannot occur at market rents
- › Activate vacant or underused buildings
- › Test new models of cultural infrastructure
- › Build relationships between artists, communities, and property owners

Trade-offs

Meanwhile spaces also come with significant challenges:

Precarious tenure.

You may be asked to leave with limited notice as a byproduct of the meanwhile space agreement. This depends on the specific

agreement you end up with, but it is generally the case that the tenure is precarious.

Administrative and bureaucratic complexity

Permits, inspections, and approvals can be costly and complex, especially in non-standard situations like meanwhile uses.

Risk aversion from property owners

Many owners are unfamiliar with meanwhile models and may be hesitant to participate.

Timing pressures

Aligning leases, renovations, permits, and programming with development timelines can be difficult.

Understanding these trade-offs early helps set realistic expectations and avoid burnout.

What a Meanwhile Space is Not

Meanwhile vs. Temporary Rental Space

Artists and arts organizations have long operated temporary spaces - renting studios, rehearsal halls, or event venues and covering costs by charging artists daily or weekly rental fees.

These spaces typically:

- › Pay market or near-market rent
- › Rely on sub-leasing or short-term rentals to recover costs
- › While these spaces may be time-limited, they are not usually considered “meanwhile” spaces, because the tenant bears full market risk.

3. Community Context

Every meanwhile space is shaped by its context. Before pursuing a project, it is important to understand the conditions that will influence what is possible and how much effort it will take.

Community context includes the artists and cultural workers in your area, the spaces that already exist, and who can access them. A meanwhile space may fill a gap, or it may unintentionally compete with existing initiatives.

Market and development pressures shape the availability and lifespan of vacant space. In some areas, vacancy reflects genuine transition. In others, it may be speculative or short-lived. Understanding development cycles can help you assess how long a space might realistically remain available.

Policy environment matters as well. Zoning permissions, building and fire codes, and municipal attitudes toward interim or non-standard uses will affect timelines, costs, and feasibility.

LEARNING FROM DOING

ArtsBuild Ontario identified the need for meanwhile space in the Waterloo Region through community consultation, high demand for arts space, and rapid development across Waterloo, Kitchener, and Cambridge. In Fall 2023, ArtsBuild convened a Creative Spaces Roundtable with approximately 30 artists, arts workers, and municipal staff from Kitchener and Waterloo. The concept of meanwhile space was met with strong interest and support.

Demand was further evidenced through ArtsBuild's operations at 44 Gaukel, where a waitlist of 40+ artists and a 25% increase in short-term rentals since the pandemic highlighted ongoing capacity constraints. Across the region, existing arts spaces were largely full or unavailable.

The two pilot sites leveraged distinct zoning and land use permissions. One site was located within a downtown mixed-use strategic growth area, while the other was situated in an industrial area. Although these areas face different development pressures, each offered unique types of space that could be adapted to meet different artistic needs through a meanwhile approach.

Key Takeaway

Meanwhile models work best when they respond to local zoning, land use permissions, and development dynamics—rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach.



ArtsBuild Ontario Events

4. Accessing Space

Accessing a meanwhile space often begins with a simple question: Do you already have access to a space, or are you looking for one?

Some projects emerge from existing relationships—with property owners, institutions, or community partners. Others (most) require proactive outreach and patience.

Potential sources of space include:

- › **Private developers**
- › **Institutional or corporate owners**
- › **Municipal or arm's-length agencies**
- › **Community or faith-based organizations**

Meanwhile opportunities are rarely advertised publicly. They are often unlocked through trust, timing, and persistence. Being able to clearly articulate what you are proposing and why it benefits both artists and owners can make a difference.

LEARNING FROM DOING

Starting Without Space

When ArtsBuild Ontario launched its Meanwhile Spaces Pilot, it did not begin with access to vacant properties. Finding space required active outreach and relationship-building rather than responding to advertised opportunities.

How Access Was Secured

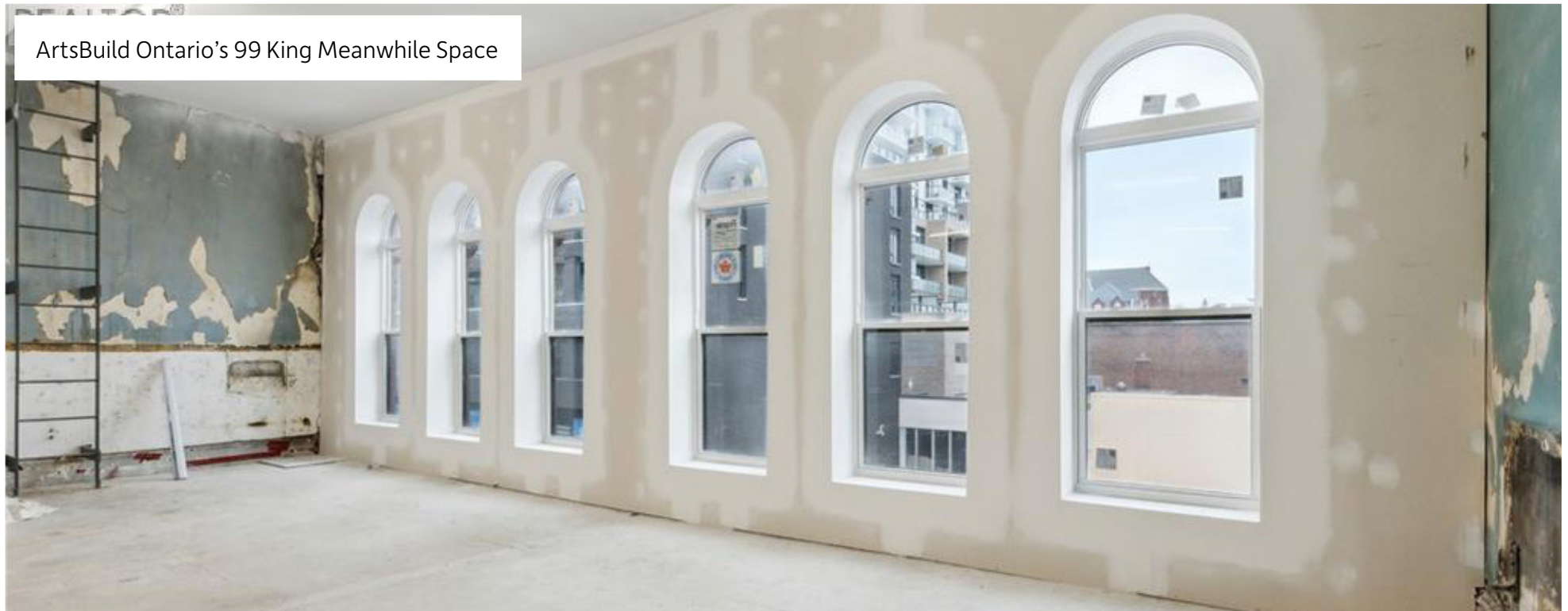
ArtsBuild Ontario reached out to potential partners early and focused on clearly explaining the benefits of meanwhile use for both artists and property owners. Through this process, ArtsBuild partnered with the City of Waterloo and a private developer, aligning interim cultural use with municipal priorities and development timelines.

Key Takeaway

There is no single path to accessing a meanwhile space. Success often depends on early outreach, clear communication, and tailoring your approach to the priorities and constraints of different property owners.



ArtsBuild Ontario's Wing 404 Meanwhile Space



ArtsBuild Ontario's 99 King Meanwhile Space



Groundwork

5. Partnership Development

Meanwhile spaces are rarely solo efforts. They rely on partnerships between artists, operators, property owners, funders, and municipalities.

Strong partnerships help:

- › **Distribute risk**
- › **Clarify responsibilities**
- › **Build shared understanding of expectations**

Key questions include:

- › **Who holds the lease?**
- › **Who manages day-to-day operations?**
- › **Who is responsible if something goes wrong?**

Partnerships work best when roles are clearly defined and revisited over time. Ambiguity can strain relationships—especially under the time pressures that come with meanwhile spaces.

LEARNING FROM DOING

Why Not Theatre (2019 Pilot Project)

When Why Not Theatre conducted its meanwhile space pilot in 2019, it tested partnerships with a range of property owners and institutions. The project revealed that while many organizations are interested in activating unused space, the feasibility of partnerships varies significantly by ownership type.

Real estate investment and development companies offered strong potential due to large portfolios and short-term vacancies, particularly when activation benefits were clearly articulated.

Multicultural community centres provided access to large spaces but required longer timelines and deeper relationship-building.

Faith-based organizations often faced physical constraints or high demand, limiting feasibility for interim use.

City-owned spaces presented administrative and procedural challenges that required significant navigation.



Check out WhyNot Theatre's Space Project

<https://whynot.theatre/work/space-project/accessibility-webinars-and-toolkit/>

whynot
make•share•provoke

**space project:
2019 pilot summary**



6. Lease Negotiation & Legal Considerations

The lease is one of the most important documents in a meanwhile space.

Meanwhile leases typically differ from standard commercial leases. They may be shorter, include flexible termination clauses, and reflect reduced rent. They may also limit the owner's obligations around maintenance or improvements.

Key considerations include:

- › Length of term and renewal options
- › Notice periods
- › Responsibility for repairs and upgrades
- › Insurance and indemnification
- › Permitted uses

Even short-term leases carry legal implications. Seeking legal advice can help protect both artists and organizations from unexpected risk.

LEARNING FROM DOING

Meanwhile Space (UK)

Meanwhile Space UK provides guidance, templates, and tools for short-term leases, sub-leases, and licenses. Key resources include:

- › Guidance notes explaining legal provisions in meanwhile leases
- › Statutory declaration templates for tenants where landlords contract out of security of tenure



Check out these lease templates by the Meanwhile Foundation in the UK

<https://cultureinourcity.com/resources/meanwhile-use-toolkit-2/>

LEARNING FROM DOING

cSPACE (Calgary, Alberta)

cSPACE is currently running a SPACEPILOT Meanwhile Lease for arts and cultural tenants, developed in partnership with the Alberta Real Estate Foundation (AREF) and Calgary Arts Development (CADA). These leases are typically:

- › Short-term (under 2 years)
- › Flexible, with termination clauses often around 30 days
- › Intended for non-commercial or arts use
 - › Structured around the landlord eventually securing a long-term tenant.

Spacepilot



Check out cSPACE's Spacepilot initiative

<https://arts-spaces-playbook.cspaceprojects.com/i-need-space/long-term/spacepilot/>

Design

7. Risk and Liability

Meanwhile use does not eliminate risk. Meanwhile spaces must still consider:

- › **Public liability**
- › **Damage to property**
- › **Safety of participants and audiences**
- › **Compliance with local regulations**

Insurance requirements can be complex, especially in non-standard spaces. Clarifying what coverage is required, and who is responsible for securing it, is essential. Addressing risk openly can also build trust with property owners and partners.

8. Funding and Resourcing

Meanwhile spaces are often underfunded by design. Below-market rent may reduce costs, but it does not eliminate them.

- › **Common expenses include:**
- › **Insurance**
- › **Utilities**
- › **Fit-up and basic repairs**
- › **Staffing or coordination**
- › **Permits and professional fees**

Funding may come from a mix of sources: grants, philanthropy, in-kind contributions, or owner concessions. Even modest funding can significantly improve sustainability by reducing reliance on unpaid labour. Resourcing is not just about money, it is about time and capacity.

9. Permits, Approvals, and Compliance

Even meanwhile spaces must comply with applicable regulations.

This may include:

- › **Zoning permissions**
- › **Building code requirements**
- › **Fire and life safety approvals**
- › **Accessibility standards**

Approvals can take time, particularly for unconventional uses. Starting these conversations early can prevent delays and last-minute compromises. Temporary use does not exempt a project from responsibility—but flexibility may be possible if expectations are clear.

LAND USE & ZONING 101

The type of uses you can have in a space are dependent on the land use designations and zoning bylaws that apply to the property your meanwhile space is in. In Ontario municipalities have Official Plans that will tell you what land uses are generally allowed in your area, and a Zoning Bylaw that will get specific about exactly what uses are permitted or not permitted. You can usually find these on your city's website. The Official Plan will likely be a document with attached maps, and your city may even have an interactive zoning bylaw map.

Generally, mixed use areas, growth areas, employment areas, commercial areas, and industrial areas might work for creative/cultural uses, whereas areas focused on residential uses will likely involve re-zoning and may be met with opposition from neighbours.

In mixed use and growth areas you may find private developer partners who have land that is flagged for redevelopment down the line (e.g. 99 King Street). In employment and industrial areas you may find spaces that are just underutilized or vacant for other reasons (e.g. Wing 404). These are both suitable potential options for meanwhile spaces.

10. Renovations, Fit-Up, and Accessibility

Most meanwhile spaces are not move-in ready. They may require:

- › **Basic safety upgrades**
- › **Temporary partitions or lighting**
- › **Washroom access**
- › **Creative accessibility solutions**

Budgets are often limited, requiring prioritization. In many cases, the goal is not perfection but functional, safe, and welcoming. Accessibility should be considered from the start, even when resources are constrained. Small interventions can make meaningful differences.

LEARNING FROM DOING

ArtsBuild Ontario's meanwhile space at 99 King St carefully balanced renovations to keep things cost-effective but still safe and functional. 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.

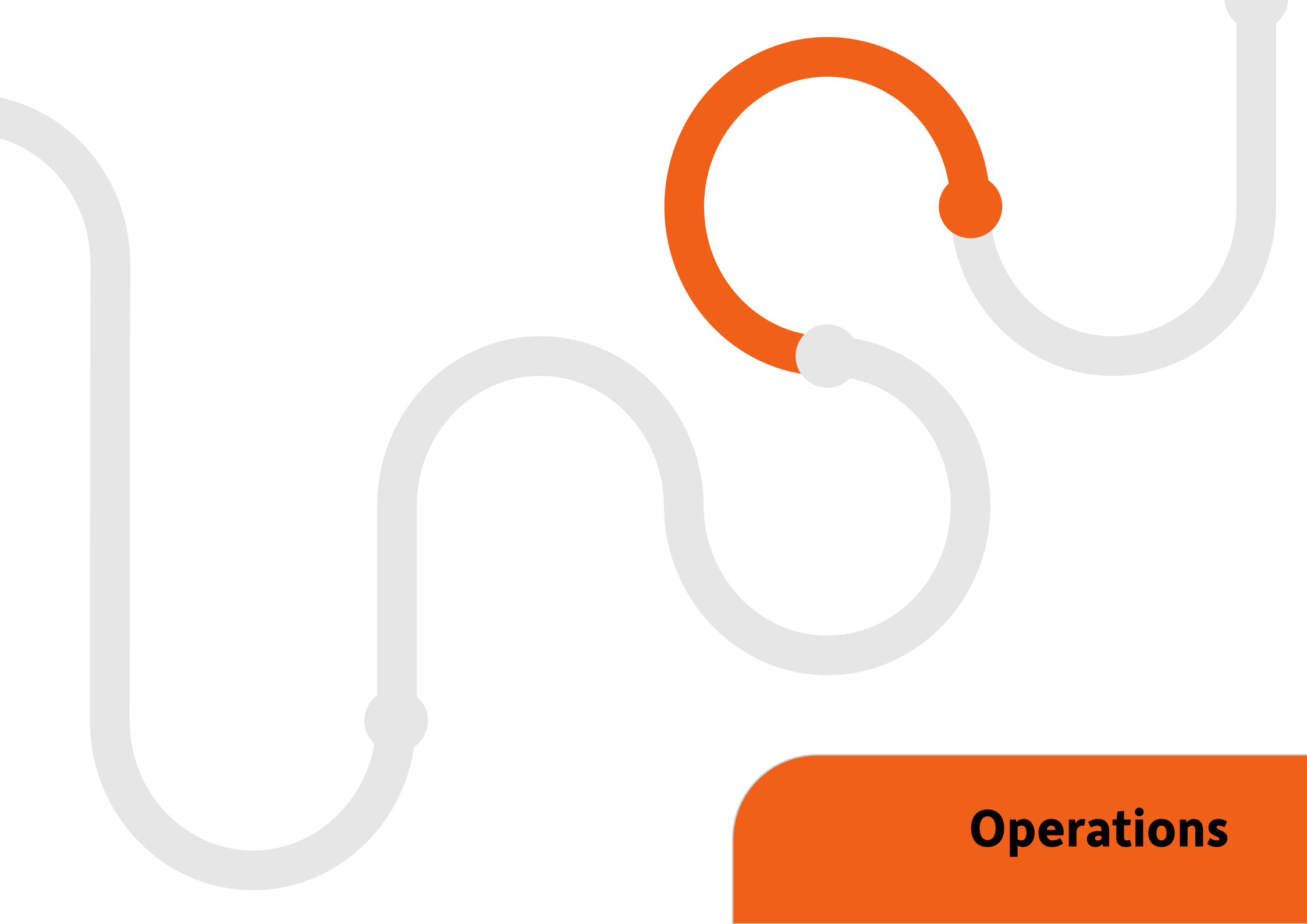
Learn more about accessibility in arts spaces

ArtsBuild Ontario has developed a Webinar Series and a Toolkit for creative spaces aimed at increasing awareness of the Design of Public Spaces Standard under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disability Act (AODA). These resources feature innovative ideas and solutions to support creative spaces such as galleries, museums, theatres and culture hubs, in making their spaces more accessible.



Check out the ABO Accessibility Toolkit

<https://www.artsbuildontario.ca/building/accessibility/accessibility-webinars-and-toolkit/>



Operations

11. Governance

As discussed previously, there are different types of ownership and governance structures for a meanwhile space. With a meanwhile space model, you will likely not own the property, and will instead be leasing or sub-leasing the space. As such, the owner of the property will have a lot of decision-making power.

It is important to understand who in the governance structure gets to make what decisions. For example, are the artists in the space allowed to drill or pin into the walls? Who gets a say in how the artists that get access to the space are chosen?

Ultimately, it is important to be clear on who gets a say on what.

LEARNING FROM DOING

ArtsBuild Ontario acted as the intermediary for both pilot sites, managing day-to-day operations, artist onboarding, and scheduling. At Wing 404 (city-owned), ArtsBuild used Skedda to coordinate theatre and dance bookings, while the City handled building maintenance and cleaning. At 99 King (private developer-owned), ArtsBuild and artists shared responsibility for daily cleaning and tidying.

Strategic guidance was provided by a nine-member Advisory Committee representing diverse artistic disciplines, municipal partners, and equity-deserving communities. This governance model allowed ArtsBuild to balance artist needs, property requirements, and operational flexibility, demonstrating an effective approach to managing temporary cultural spaces in mid-size cities.

Key Takeaways

ArtsBuild's intermediary role, supported by an advisory committee, enabled flexible management of meanwhile spaces. Municipal support at Wing 404 and shared artist upkeep at 99 King allowed artists to focus on their work.

12. Day-to-Day Operations

Strong operations support artistic sustainability. Running a meanwhile space is a team effort, so it's important to be clear on who is responsible for what.

Day-to-day considerations include:

- › **Staffing and volunteer labour**
- › **Maintenance and cleaning**
- › **Scheduling and shared use**

These operations require a lot of hands-on labour. Ensuring there is someone who is dedicated to managing these day-to-day operations can be vital.

If your meanwhile arts space is meant for artistic practices that need dedicated space and can't run concurrently, then it may be worth looking into software that can handle space bookings.

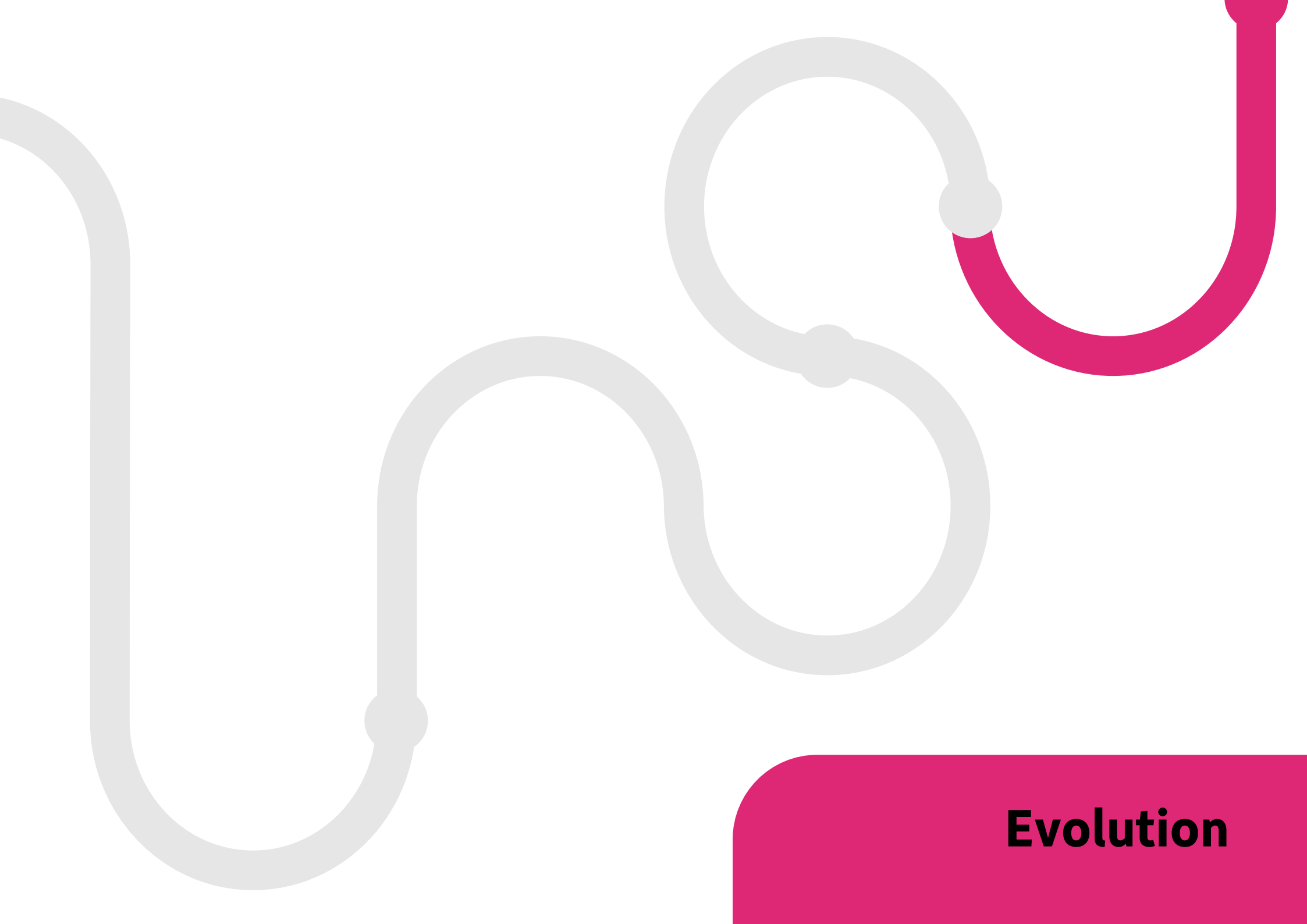
LEARNING FROM DOING

ArtsBuild Ontario hired a part-time Project Coordinator specifically for its Meanwhile Space pilot, with time split across the two pilot sites.

The coordinator serves as on-the-ground support for artists, acting as a first point of contact, liaising with property owners and municipal partners, and responding to day-to-day operational needs. This role helped ensure scheduling, access, and shared use ran smoothly, while also addressing issues as they emerged in real time.

Key Takeaway

Dedicated operational capacity was critical to the success of the pilot. Having a clear point of coordination reduced strain on artists, strengthened partner relationships, and supported the overall sustainability of the meanwhile spaces.



Evolution

13. Exit, Transition, and Evolution

By definition, all meanwhile spaces are meant to be temporary, so it is important to plan for the eventual transition out of the space. Planning for exit includes:

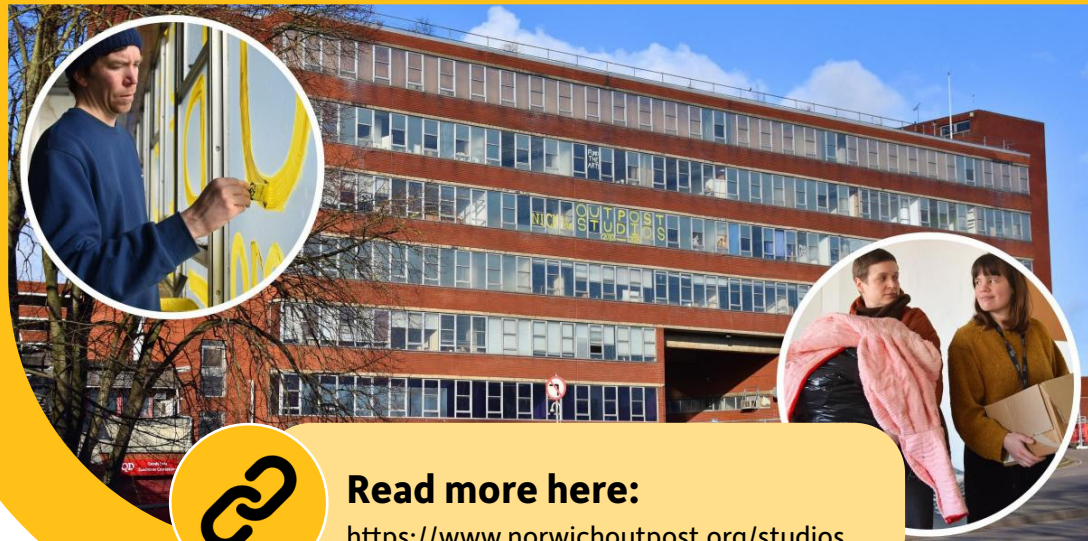
- › **Clear communication with artists and partners on when the space needs to be vacated**
- › **Clarity on what state the space needs to be left in when vacated**
- › **Supporting artists in transitioning to new spaces..**
- › **Documenting lessons learned**

A successful meanwhile space is defined not by how long it lasts, but by how well it serves artists and what it leaves behind.

While it is true that all meanwhile spaces come to an end, this does not mean that the space is always lost. Some meanwhile spaces can become permanent within the same space, and in other cases one partnership leads to another. You may not stay in the same space, but the legacy of meanwhile spaces often lives on in future programs and spaces.

LEARNING FROM DOING

OUTPOST Studios ran for 15 years from 2010–2025. OUTPOST Studios was based at Gildengate House in Anglia Square, Norwich as an artist-run studio complex. There have been plans to regenerate Anglia Square since the late 2000s, however due to the credit crunch and various other reasons development didn't pick up until 2025. OUTPOST Studios ended up stewarding the space, creating affordable arts spaces for **15 years**. In 2025 due to the pending development, they have had to move.



Read more here:

<https://www.norwichoutpost.org/studios>

14. Evaluation, Learning, and Storytelling

Evaluation helps meanwhile spaces build momentum forward. Thoughtful evaluation can:

- › **Demonstrate impact, showing how artists used the space and what was made possible**
- › **Surface challenges and trade-offs, helping future projects plan more realistically**
- › **Support advocacy and future projects, including funding applications and partnership development**

Both qualitative stories (artist experiences, moments of collaboration, community response) and light-touch metrics (number of users, duration of use, types of activity) are valuable. Together, they paint a fuller picture of what meanwhile spaces can achieve.

Storytelling is especially important in a meanwhile context. Sharing clear, accessible examples of how spaces were activated and how risks were managed helps property owners, municipalities, and funders see that

meanwhile spaces can be viable, responsible, and beneficial. Over time, this reduces hesitation, lowers barriers, and makes it easier for future projects to secure space and support.

LEARNING FROM DOING

This toolkit was produced as part of ArtsBuild Ontario's Meanwhile Space Pilot Project. ArtsBuild Ontario launched the Meanwhile Spaces Pilot in partnership with the Canada Cultural Spaces Fund (CCSF), the City of Waterloo, and Why Not Theatre to assess the feasibility of a meanwhile space model in a mid-size city context. **Many of the lessons included in this toolkit have emerged directly from ArtsBuild's own learnings from doing this work on the ground.**

This toolkit is one example of storytelling from ArtsBuild's experience running meanwhile spaces. ArtsBuild has also written a full summary report with more substantial findings and evaluation of their pilot program.



You can read the full pilot project summary here:

<https://www.artsbuildontario.ca/>



Whether you're in a big city, or a small town, hopefully this toolkit will help you reduce barriers to spaces for artists in your community.

We hope that this toolkit has given you a better idea of how to take the next step on your path to a meanwhile space.

This toolkit was produced by Faizaan Khan on Behalf of ArtsBuild Ontario

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