



*Summary of Feedback from Community Engagement on the Action Plan
for Toronto's Culture Sector*

May 2024

A report submitted to the City of Toronto and Toronto Arts Council

monumental

Land Acknowledgement

The land we are discussing in this document is the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Métis and Inuit.

We also acknowledge that Toronto (Tkaronto) is covered by Treaty 13 signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit, and the Williams Treaties signed with multiple Mississauga and Chippewa bands.

We also take this time to acknowledge the water that flows through and across the territory.

Many of us have come here as settlers, immigrants, newcomers in this generation or generations past. We would like to also acknowledge those of us who came here forcibly, particularly as a result of the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade. Therefore, we honour and pay tribute to the ancestors of African Origin and Descent.

Can a Zoom Call Change the World?

Invited Protectors and Caregivers
Thank you for your courage and vulnerability

There is a sacred duty in caring
Future gazing while cradling the past
Looking around the corner
To a room full of noses pressed against the glass
Asking us to help them find the entrance

Taking hammers to the walls themselves
No structure can contain what we hold
Every creation requires us to conceive anew
What it means to have space
What it means to be alive

No more cutting off parts of who we are
Wholeness beyond labels
We rise, thrive, and twinkle
Brilliant stars
Look up and notice

We have been all along

Poem written by Facilitator Shay Erlich, Artist & Ready for Access Founder,
during the Disability Arts Community Conversation on Dec 7, 2023.

Title page artwork created during Creative
Facilitator Leila Fatemi's Culture Plan
engagement on Nov 25, 2023.

Image description: Multi-colour string
forms an Islamic geometric pattern in the
shape of a hexagon.

About Monumental

Monumental is a business working in service of the public good. We are supporting an equitable recovery from COVID-19, by building fair and just institutions, profiling and amplifying BIPOC leaders, and launching creative, socially-driven initiatives.

Monumental is committed to building more fair and just cities, where social power is increasingly redistributed to local communities and neighbourhoods. We do this through research, public engagement, policy development and civic education to craft pragmatic solutions for critical urban issues.

We believe change happens everywhere, and is not limited to a particular sector. We resist siloed work that focuses on short-term outcomes, and are passionate about spearheading bold, changemaking initiatives that are collaborative in their design, flexible and responsive in their implementation, and grounded in strong relationships.

Image 1. A view into one of the Community Conversations at Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, exploring barriers and ideas about the need for space.

Image description: A group of approximately 25 people sit in a circle in a large auditorium with wood floors on black chairs, discussing reflections from their breakout groups.



About the team



Photos above of the Monumental team:

Top row (left to right): Zahra Ebrahim, Seema Jethalal, Sara Udow, Kofi Hope

Bottom row (left to right): Trina Moyan, Ameer Idreis, Jao Dantes

Our team is made up of passionate community and city-builders, including current and former artists, cultural planners, urban designers, arts administrators, consultants, and leaders who have managed festivals, cultural hubs, and artist capacity-building programs. We have led engagements at the local and national scale, and written culture plans for various cities. We represent a team that spans multiple generations, and has worked in non-profit, public and private sectors, for grassroots and large-scale institutions.

One of our common threads is our dedication to enhancing quality of life and equity for communities in every corner of Toronto. Our orientation as individuals and a collective is to listen deeply and create space for underrepresented voices who are often at the margins of shaping their cities. We believe that by designing for the margins, everyone gets included.

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Land Acknowledgement..... | 2 |
| About Monumental..... | 4 |
| Executive Summary..... | 7 |
| State of Culture Today..... | 8 |
| Visions for 2034..... | 9 |
| Introduction..... | 13 |
| What is the Action Plan for Toronto's Culture Sector?..... | 14 |
| Engagement Approach..... | 14 |
| Engagement Goals..... | 15 |
| Our Activities..... | 17 |
| Gratitude & Acknowledgement..... | 19 |
| How to use this document..... | 19 |
| State of Culture Today..... | 22 |
| Culture in Toronto is in Crisis..... | 23 |
| Visions for Culture in 2034..... | 29 |
| Principles..... | 34 |
| Centre Indigenous knowledge and approaches..... | 35 |
| Be equitable, fair and accessible..... | 37 |
| Be bold..... | 39 |
| Make it easy..... | 41 |
| Insights..... | 42 |
| Insight 1: Address critical space issues..... | 43 |
| Insight 2: Re-Imagine Funding & Support..... | 51 |
| Insight 3: Build Community & Capacity..... | 56 |
| Insight 4: Collective Advocacy & Coordination..... | 61 |
| Reflections from Monumental..... | 68 |
| Appendices..... | 71 |



Executive Summary

From September 2023 to April 2024, Monumental designed and delivered an engagement process to inform the development of the City of Toronto's Culture Plan (working title: *Action Plan for Toronto's Culture Sector*). This work was done in partnership with the City of Toronto's Economic Development and Culture Division and the Toronto Arts Council (TAC). This report includes insights and feedback from the community engagement process for the City of Toronto and Toronto Arts Council to consider as they develop the Culture Plan.

The engagement was delivered through a variety of activities, delivered both virtually and in-person, engaging approximately 3,650 participants in total across Toronto. Activities were designed to meaningfully engage those working in the culture sector (artists, not-for-profit organizations, for-profit creative industries, etc.) as well as audiences and the general public. Over the seven months of engagement, the Monumental team delivered:

- **5 themed Community Conversations:** Deep dive conversations with a diverse and intersectional group of participants on the key issues and trends facing artists, creatives, and the culture sector. The Community Conversations covered the following topics: *The Need for Space (2 sessions), Arts for Social Change, Recovery and Economic Health, and Technology and the Future of Arts, Culture & Creative Industries*.
- **3 population-specific Community Conversations:** Deep dive conversations into the experiences of specific equity-deserving groups facing disproportionate barriers in the culture sector. These dialogues were focused on engagement with the following groups: *Indigenous artists, creatives and communities, Black artists and creatives, and the Disability arts community*.
- **Toronto-wide Creative Facilitator Engagements:** Five creatives across the geography of Toronto engaged their communities and the public using artistic methods.
- **Community Conversation Toolkit:** Eight organizations and residents led their own discussions within their workplaces and communities using a Community Conversation Toolkit developed by Monumental and shared online for public use.
- **Online Survey:** A questionnaire organized into two streams of questions - one for those working in the culture sector, and the other for the broader public.
- **Virtual Town Hall events:** Two online forums to engage the public, share emerging themes, provide feedback, and explore ideas and visions for culture in Toronto in 2034.

In parallel to the activities delivered by Monumental, the City of Toronto also conducted additional engagement activities to gather feedback from members from specific segments of the culture sector (feedback from these sessions are included in Appendix F and incorporated into this report).

State of Culture Today

We heard from participants over the course of our engagement that Toronto has a unique concentration of creative hearts and minds, diverse talent and cultural offerings. The general public, and those working in culture, appreciate the value of arts and culture in Toronto. Participants agreed that investing in arts and culture has a significant impact on individuals as well as communities, businesses, tourists and international audiences and collaborators. Community members we heard from, including those working in culture, understand the strengths of Toronto's cultural activities and creative offerings - from street festivals to concerts to film productions and more - and also understand its untapped potential. The overarching theme that we heard was that many Torontonians are struggling not only to thrive, but simply survive, and many are finding it hard to create and engage with arts and culture. The impact of this struggle can be felt across organizations, neighbourhoods and communities.

Artists and those working in culture are concerned that their health and wellness - and by extension creative potential - is threatened because basic needs like affordable housing, adequate funding, as well as space to work in, are not being met. Creative organizations are also struggling for many reasons, including changes in audience behaviour since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (which impacts revenue), decreases in public and private funding, loss of talent to other cities, and more. These impact not only employees and volunteers in those organizations, but also the general public served by them. We heard that people are struggling to engage in arts and culture for a few reasons: many have gotten accustomed to staying home in the aftermath of the pandemic lockdowns, have less disposable income due to rising costs of living, don't have energy or time to make long commutes across the city (and often can't find accessible events and venues), and simply aren't aware of opportunities to participate in artistic and cultural activities. Although the general public is increasingly seeking connection, meaning, and inspiration, they need better infrastructure and support to leverage cultural offerings to do that.

Many of the key issues identified in Toronto's previous culture plan (Creative Capital Gains, published in May 2011) continue to plague Toronto, and some have worsened - such as loss of cultural spaces and venues, rapid technology shifts (like Artificial Intelligence), limited arts education for children and youth, pipelines to enter creative careers, inequitable wages, increasing costs of production and rising ticket prices. We heard that individuals and organizations working in culture are "hanging on by a thread".

Those who continue to do this work do it because of the profound impact it has on the people and communities they create and share work with.

Visions for 2034

Participants were asked to envision Toronto in 2034 - to imagine that great progress has been achieved with the Culture Plan. They shared dreams of a city where arts and culture is central - where the arts are embraced, valued and prioritized. Leaders will understand its benefits and increase investments in arts and culture knowing it will make Toronto a stronger, healthier and more vibrant place to live, work and visit. The City will be responsive and coordinated in changing systems, processes and policies that are not working well, and advocate with other key players and departments to improve conditions for the public, including artists. It will feel easy to create and access culture - from smooth transportation to reach events, to tickets that feel affordable, to increased operational funding for important creative and cultural organizations. In ten years, artists will not worry about basic needs; artists and cultural organizations will thrive and create meaningful art, experiences and jobs. The diversity of Toronto will be reflected across the board - from leadership teams to characters portrayed in video games made here - which will impact how art is created and shared. Children in Toronto will be exposed to artistic experiences at a young age, and develop the desire to continue participating in the arts as both creators and audiences down the road. The city will feel more connected - residents from all walks of life will come together in every neighbourhood to build bonds, share ideas and support one another. Toronto will be known as a city where it is "accessible to both create and enjoy arts and culture" across every neighbourhood.

Participants had strong perspectives on *how* the City could move forward with implementing the Culture Plan, citing *key principles* that should inform the City of Toronto and the Toronto Arts Council's activities to ensure that investments in culture represent the diverse realities and identities of Torontonians. We heard:

- **Centre Indigenous knowledge and approaches:** Expand and decolonize the definition of what is included in the City of Toronto's definition of "culture" to include other ways of being, sharing and gathering. Meaningfully build relationships with Indigenous communities and engage them in all cultural planning, policy and decision-making.
- **Be equitable, fair, and accessible:** The Culture Plan should be designed with a lens of equity, diversity, inclusion and accessibility at the core, keeping *all* Torontonians in mind - particularly those who have been systemically disadvantaged and excluded.

- **Be bold:** An urgent call to key decision-makers in Toronto to move away from a risk-averse reflex towards ambitious, courageous and innovative policy and solutions.
- **Make it easy:** Simplify burdensome processes and systems by designing them in collaboration with the communities they are made for. Removing or reducing barriers to making or participating in art would be a win-win for artists and the general public who benefit from their offerings.

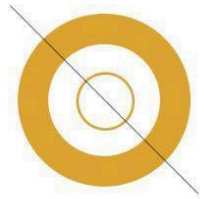
In addition to these key principles, participants shared specific, practical community priorities, outlined in this report as *insights* that point to a need, challenge, or area of opportunity. Participants implored the City to respond to these through the Culture Plan, and shared some ideas for each insight that could inform the work ahead for the City of Toronto, Toronto Arts Council, and other key players (outlined in more detail in the report and the attached Appendices).

- **Insight 1: Address critical space issues:** Toronto's arts organizations, artists, creatives and cultural workers as well as visitors, patrons and audience members have been experiencing a space crisis. For the general public, this means a decreasing number of places to experience culture and a sense of grief and loss about shuttered venues that once improved their quality of life. Those working in culture have had less space to live and work in, which has had compounding negative effects. Ideas related to improving space issues include: access to affordable housing, cultural spaces that are accessible for diverse communities and suitable for many creative practices, and spaces for culture in every neighbourhood. Participants hope the City will take bold actions to re-imagine how we protect and access cultural spaces such as repurposing vacant, underused and "meanwhile" spaces, supporting Community Land Trust movements, and even facilitating space-sharing by having the City or another organization play a 'matchmaker' role between artists, creatives, cultural workers and developers/landowners.
- **Insight 2: Re-imagine funding & support:** The top barrier that makes participating in culture challenging for the general public is affordability. Those working in culture are also experiencing significant funding challenges. Artists, creatives, cultural workers and organizations shared that while public funding has been instrumental to seeding and growing their projects and programs, many feel that the processes are unnecessarily complicated, onerous, outdated and, many shared, inequitable. They shared a plea to overhaul the granting system and shift towards multi-year funding, simplified application and reporting, microgrants, and new assessment approaches, which would have positive impacts for creators and audiences. Some ideas shared to address financial challenges include subsidies or discounts and tax incentives, increasing investments for cultural programming, operations, and venues - particularly outside Toronto's downtown core.

- **Insight 3: Build community and capacity:** We heard across the board that participants are increasingly feeling isolated, lonely and disconnected from culture and from each other, particularly after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has left audiences less inclined to attend concerts, festivals, etc. Both artists and audiences shared a deep desire to build a sense of community through informal gatherings and spaces to build and deepen relationships. Those working in culture specifically dreamed of spaces to share ideas and feel inspired, without an explicit end goal. We also heard that audiences and artists are craving connection and opportunities to build networks and share resources, ideas and skills. Some ideas shared by participants include: developing a centralized database for all arts and culture opportunities and events, increasing training and mentorship opportunities, spaces for shared resources, and more opportunities for children and youth arts education programs.
- **Insight 4: Collective Advocacy & Coordination:** Participants shared that there needs to be a strong, collective effort across the City, the Toronto Arts Council, the Toronto Arts Foundation, and partners in the sector to better understand, illustrate and evaluate the impact of arts and culture, in order to continue making a strong case for investing in it. Participants also shared perspectives on key issues that, if addressed, could improve the health of the sector, including collective advocacy for increased public funding in arts and culture, equitable wages, Universal Basic Income (UBI), social supports including childcare, better public transportation, and opportunities for artists to shape policy within and beyond the realm of culture. Ideas shared include improved data collection and evaluation of the impact of arts and culture, advocacy for basic needs like Universal Basic Income and public transportation, awareness about the role of culture in climate change, and stronger protections for intellectual property technological shifts like Artificial Intelligence which impact creators.

Leaders of arts organizations also shared the missed opportunity of a strong domestic cultural sector that can help drive international opportunities for cultural workers and the City as a global player and destination. That said, throughout the engagement activities, the discussions moved beyond cultural production to include broader issues such as affordability, the housing crisis, issues with public transit, inclusion, even mental health. Many of the challenges shared across the engagement activities fell out of the traditional domain of “arts and culture” - artists, cultural workers, and audiences need to have their basic needs met to attend concerts, screenings, plays and art shows, and so they can afford to create these opportunities for the general public. In other words, *a thriving sector is not possible without thriving people and thriving arts organizations*, and the Culture Plan is an opportunity to reignite culture in Toronto by starting with the basics: taking care of the quality of life of its artists, creatives, cultural workers, cultural institutions - and by extension, residents.

While some of this feedback may feel different than what is typically included in a Culture Plan, and beyond the domain of the City's Economic Development and Culture Division and the TAC alone, it's an exciting opportunity to recognize that we need a different approach to ensuring the longevity and vibrancy of Toronto's cultural scene.



Introduction

What is the Action Plan for Toronto's Culture Sector?

The City of Toronto, in collaboration with Toronto Arts Council (TAC) and Foundation, is developing a Culture Plan (working title *Action Plan for Toronto's Culture Sector*) to help guide cultural services, policy and programming over the next ten years. The Plan will set out a vision to strengthen Toronto's culture sector and identify actions that the City, TAC and community can advance across arts and culture, creative industries, museums and heritage services. The goal is to ensure that residents in all corners of the city have opportunities to engage with the arts.

The following report outlines the feedback gathered through the engagement activities which will support the City's development of the Culture Plan.

Feedback gathered and shared in this report represents advice presented to the City and TAC based on the engagements led by Monumental. They do not represent the final ideas that will be proposed in the Culture Plan.

Engagement Approach

From September 2023 to April 2024, Monumental designed and delivered an engagement approach that created numerous touchpoints for Torontonians to participate in the discussion about the new Culture Plan. The engagement happened against the backdrop of dramatic change for the city and the culture sector, coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, and in a climate of rising costs of living and working, philanthropic austerity, and ongoing challenges with inclusion and access affecting both artists and audiences.

The approach to engagement was delivered across two streams. The first stream focused on targeted, smaller, deep conversations with groups of participants from across the culture sector and from equity-deserving communities who face disproportionate challenges. We designed smaller group discussions, allowing participants to dig deep, probe, unpack, and ideate in ways that can be challenging in larger group settings. The second stream focused on broader public engagement using different methods to ensure more voices were captured in the engagement process. In this second stream, we provided opportunities to engage together, in real time, as well as asynchronously, on an individual's own time, in order to maximize public participation.

Across both streams, the engagement team collaborated closely with City of Toronto and Toronto Arts Council staff both in planning and delivering the events.

Engagement Goals

Across all activities, our process focused on the following goals:

- **Increase awareness and understanding of key challenges facing Toronto's culture sector.** This includes non-profit arts, cultural heritage and creative industries.
- **Create opportunities for people working across sectors to discuss and co-create solutions to shared challenges.**
- **Inspire Torontonians and create pathways for participants to develop and deepen relationships.** We created safe spaces for people to do and see things differently through rich conversations.
- **Build capacity for artists and community.** We supported local artists through skills-sharing and support, particularly through five artist-led creative engagements. Participants from the general public also built skills related to policy development and advocacy.
- **Ensure broad public engagement activities are inclusive, safe, inspirational, educational and designed with a decolonized approach where possible.** Engagements were designed to include and amplify under-represented voices.

Who Engaged

Over eight months, over 3,650 Torontonians participated across the various engagement activities. Across both streams, the voices of equity-deserving communities were prioritized, with a specific focus on those who identify as Indigenous, Black, or part of the Deaf, Mad and Disabled Community as well as organizations, businesses and individuals living and or working outside of the downtown core.

Detailed voluntary demographic data was submitted from participants who engaged through the online survey and virtual town halls (see [Our Activities](#)). Detailed summary of that demographic data is included in [Appendix G](#). Collected data does skew more to participants who identify as white, able-bodied, heterosexual, 30 years old or older and who lived or worked in downtown Toronto. The Community Conversations, Creative Facilitator engagements and Community Toolkit sessions prioritized outreach and deep and detailed discussions with more diverse participants. Summaries of that demographic data, per tactic, is included in [Appendix G](#).

Survey participants were asked to voluntarily identify the fields and disciplines they work in. The disciplines identified include:

- Performance arts (32%)
- Visual and applied arts (32%)
- Arts administration (27%)
- Music (23%)
- Community arts (23%)
- Festival and events (21%)
- Film and television (20%)
- Education and training (16%)
- Galleries (16%)
- Dance (13%)
- Literary arts (12%)
- Design (10%)
- Cultural heritage (9%)
- Creative technology/interactive digital media (9%)
- Museums (8%)
- Accessibility/Disability Arts (7%)
- Business development (7%)
- Fashion (4%)
- Tourism (4%)
- Culinary arts (2%)
- I'm not sure (1%)

Note on Disaggregating Data:

The online survey specifically included two branches: one for those who identified primarily as audience members (“the general public”), which had 722 responses, and a second branch for those who work and volunteer in the culture sector, which had 1,773 responses. We specifically analyzed responses for commonalities and differences between the general public, the non-profit, and the for-profit culture sector. It is important to note that we disaggregated data to analyze and understand perspectives specific to Indigenous, Black and Mad, Deaf, and disabled participants. As identified in the report below, the majority of sentiments, challenges, and ideas remained similar across all groups. There are specific notations throughout where perspectives diverge for specific user groups. For more details, the [Appendices](#) include the detailed summaries from the various engagement methods.

Our Activities

The table below outlines the specific activities undertaken under each engagement stream, the number of people engaged, intended audience, and objective of the activity.

| Tactics | Purpose | Audience | Participants |
|---|--|---|--------------|
| 5 themed Community Conversations (in-person) October - December 2023 | Deep dive conversations with a diverse and intersectional group of participants on the key issues and trends facing artists, creatives, and the culture sector. Explored four issues /themes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>The Need for Space (2 sessions)</i> <i>Arts for Social Change</i> <i>Recovery and Economic Health</i> <i>Technology and the Future of Arts, Culture & Creative Industries</i> | Targeted individuals and organizations involved in the culture sector (With priority given to equity-deserving communities, and those representing geographies outside the core) | 86 |
| 3 population-specific Community Conversations (in-person/ virtual) November - December 2023 | Deep dive conversations into the experiences of specific equity-deserving groups facing disproportionate barriers in the culture sector. Explored issues with people identifying as part of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Indigenous artists, creatives and communities</i> <i>Black artists and creatives</i> <i>Disability arts community</i> | Targeted individuals and organizations from equity-deserving communities, specifically those involved in the culture sector | 70 |
| Creative Facilitator Engagements (in-person) October 2023 - January 2024 | To share resources, build capacity and engage Torontonians creatively, five creatives from Etobicoke, Scarborough, North York, Downtown Toronto and East York engaged with their communities and the general public using creative methods. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sarah St-Fleur (Sista Got Jokes) led an interactive comedy event in Etobicoke Kevin Ramroop hosted a book launch and discussion in Scarborough kumari giles facilitated an outdoor gathering and discussion on culture and care Johl Whiteduck Ringuette led a walking tour of Red Urban Nation | General public and creatives, with a specific focus on those outside of the downtown core, and for folks that may not have access to virtual meetings or online surveys | 180 |

| Tactics | Purpose | Audience | Participants |
|---|---|---|---|
| | <p>Collective' murals at Bickford Centre in downtown Toronto</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leila Fatemi hosted a community arts gathering in east end Toronto | | |
| <p>Community Conversation Toolkit</p> <p>Late January - Early March 2024</p> | <p>Monumental developed a toolkit for interested residents and organizations to host their own conversations to seek feedback to inform the Culture Plan. This toolkit was posted online for all to access. Interested organizations and residents led their own discussions within their workplaces / communities using the Community Conversation Toolkit, and shared key takeaways with the Culture Plan Engagement Team.</p> | <p>General public, with specific outreach to organizations and community networks outside the downtown core, equity-deserving communities and diverse disciplines</p> | <p>89</p> |
| <p>Online survey</p> <p>Late January - Early March 2024</p> | <p>Online survey was organized into two streams of questions, one for those working in the culture sector, and the other for the broader public.</p> <p>Survey questions focused on understanding sector priorities and audience experiences.</p> | <p>Targeted (culture sector, culture sector adjacent) and general public</p> | <p>2,670 (722 of which identified as mostly being audience members) were members of general public)</p> |
| <p>Town Halls (virtual)</p> <p>February 2024</p> | <p>Two online town halls engaged the public to share key messages, high-level themes, priorities and goals, collect feedback and provide an opportunity for visioning.</p> | <p>Targeted (culture sector, culture sector adjacent) and general public</p> | <p>380</p> |
| <p>City-led consultations</p> <p>February - April 2024</p> | <p>In parallel to the activities delivered by Monumental, the City of Toronto also conducted additional engagement activities to gather feedback from members in specific cultural sectors and industries, including museums and cultural heritage, creative industries sectors, post-secondary educational institutions, the Local Arts Services Organizations, and various Council Advisory Bodies.</p> <p>Documentation of those engagements can be found in Appendix E.</p> | <p>Targeted conversations</p> | <p>158</p> |

Gratitude & Acknowledgement

We would like to thank the approximately 3,650 participants who shared their views generously in hopes of shaping the future of arts and culture in Toronto!

We are also grateful to:

- The five creative facilitators: Johl Whiteduck Ringuette, Kevin Ramroop, kumari giles, Leila Fatemi, and Sarah St Fleur, who engaged over 180 residents from across Toronto through a mural tour, community art event, comedy show, Islamic geometry weaving workshop, book launch and facilitated discussions.
- Organizations that hosted their own conversations and submitted Community Toolkits: Bad Dog Theatre Company, Deputy Mayor Malik's office, Don Valley Art Club members, École secondaire Toronto Ouest, élèves MHS en Arts et Culture, Ontario College of Art & Design University Cultural Policy Hub, Red Head Gallery Collective and The Theatre Centre.
- The Culture Plan External Advisory Panel, a group of leaders who shared wisdom, guidance and insights that strengthened every stage of this project.
- Guest speakers at the Town Hall events: Cameron Bailey, Leila Fatemi, maxine bailey, Rajni Perera and Sean Lee, who shared their dreams for Toronto.
- Shay Erlich, Ready for Access Founder, who facilitated the Disability Arts Community Conversation and advised Monumental on best practices for accessibility design.
- Outreach partners including Flaunt It, Native Earth Performing Arts, POV Film, Sketch Working Arts, and Workman Arts who helped spread the word far and wide.
- Venue and catering partners including Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, Spadina House, City Hall, Out of This World Catering (CAMH), Afghan Women's Catering Collective and One Love Catering, who provided nourishing meals and welcoming spaces to ground our conversations.

The City of Toronto acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, whose generous contribution helped to deliver engagement sessions related to cultural space.

How to use this document

Our hope in writing this document is to bring you into the energy of the community engagements we hosted over the last seven months. Our goal was to hear a broad range of perspectives from the general public, including members of the culture sector. By bringing together people from diverse backgrounds, neighbourhoods, professions, and communities within Toronto, we created space for generative conversations around the issues facing both those working in the culture sector as well as audiences participating in it, while also generating ideas for potential responses and solutions.

We've done our best to capture the rich data from the engagement in the subsequent pages¹. The [State of Culture Today](#) section outlines the context of creating and participating in culture in Toronto, shared with us by engagement participants. This section is meant to supplement the City's existing work around the state of the culture sector with wisdom gleaned from the public. Key perspectives are summarized in the section [Vision for Culture 2034](#).

From there, we move into [Principles](#) and [Insights](#), which is the analysis of feedback we heard. The [Principles](#) outline four "lenses" shared by participants that focus on *how* the Culture Plan can come to life, encouraging the City of Toronto to apply these approaches across all of their activities. They are considerations shared by participants that can underpin the actions the City of Toronto and other key players take in the Culture Plan. Following the principles are the core [Insights](#): specific, practical priorities we heard - a synthesized collection of challenges, opportunities, and needs.

For each insight you'll find:

- **Overview:** A summary of the feedback we heard on that topic including shared perspectives across several engagement activities.
- **Ideas and Solutions posed by participants:** Specific and higher-level strategic comments and ideas shared by participants. While not all of the ideas listed here represent broad consensus, they are compelling ideas that help bring insights to life! (See Appendices for more detailed ideas and solutions.)
- **Quotes:** Verbatim comments shared by participants throughout the report to help illustrate feedback and insights. These are intentionally unattributed to protect privacy, except for guest speakers at the town halls who provided consent.
- **Green boxes:** These primarily include quantitative data from the online survey, highlighting feedback from the general public and audiences as well as other nuanced input.

We close the document with [Conclusion & Next Steps](#), which includes our reflections on what we heard, as well as considerations for the City of Toronto and TAC to keep in mind as they develop the Culture Plan. Detailed summaries for all of our engagements (as well as those conducted by the City of Toronto) are included in the [Appendices](#).

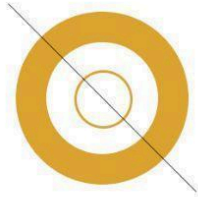
NOTE: The content shared in this report details what was heard from the public, and is intended to inform the City of Toronto and Toronto Arts Council as they develop the Culture Plan.

¹ See appendices for detailed summaries from each engagement tactic.



Image Gallery 1. Photo series from Community Conversations and Creative Facilitator Sessions.

Image descriptions: A cluster of six photos. Top-right: Two people standing and having a conversation with each other. Top-left: Hima Batavia, performance artist, shares an excerpt of her work entitled "Higher Hair" at a Community Conversation session. Middle-right: Four people gathered together with two sitting on the floor and two on a couch having conversations and a meal together at a Creative Facilitator session led by Leila Fatemi. Middle-left: Small group discussion in a circle with participants sitting down. Top-center: Small group discussion with people on the floor. Bottom-center: People standing and having one-on-one conversations.



State of Culture Today

Culture in Toronto is in Crisis

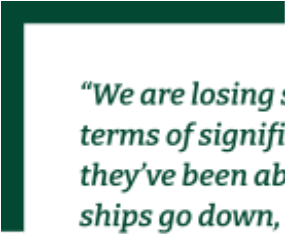
Culture in Toronto today is a story of polarities. Participants across the board shared that the city is home to a unique concentration of creative hearts and minds, diverse talent and cultural offerings. Many participants shared appreciation for the ways arts and culture improves the quality of life in Toronto for everyone - from creating a much-needed sense of community and belonging; improving mental health and general wellness; creating meaningful jobs as well as opportunities to develop transferable skills; providing inspiration and joy; driving economic growth and tourism and highlighting vital stories. And some participants shared that the organizations they work for - from film production studios to national festivals - have chosen Toronto as their home intentionally - because of the strong workforce and easy access to creative collaborators. Participants shared the ways that investments in arts and culture have a positive impact on individuals, communities, businesses, tourists and international audiences and collaborators. Despite this, we heard that many Torontonians - the general public and those working in culture - are struggling not only to thrive, but *simply survive*, and many are finding it hard to create and engage with arts and culture.

When asked how Torontonians experience culture, participants highlighted a broad spectrum of activities such

as: street festivals, live music, podcasts, movies, culinary experiences and more. They emphasized Toronto's diversity and talent as key strengths, citing its wide range of traditions, experiences, festivals, food and unique neighbourhoods that attract people from all corners of

the world. It is worth noting that the general public consider trips to public libraries and community centres as a primary way to engage with culture, whereas people working in culture are more inclined to visit cultural spaces like art galleries. The general public has a very broad understanding of culture - they highlighted restaurants and food, nightlife and natural attractions as important ways to engage with culture, while those working in culture primarily engage with it by supporting fellow creatives at their arts and cultural activities.

61% of survey respondents indicated that their participation in cultural events and activities changed since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic because of safety concerns (and a reluctance to attend large or indoor gatherings), limited time, increased costs of



"We are losing some major organizations - in terms of significance, in terms of what they've been able to contribute...We see those ships go down, and we think 'Oh geez, that's too bad'. We don't see the waves coming that will hit all of us."

living, shifts in their own behaviours after having experienced pandemic lockdowns and a lack of information about cultural events. As one survey respondent explained, “I go out less, unfortunately. I feel like I lost my flow and my drive to participate. The lockdowns made it really hard to want to get back into cultural activities.” Some participants shared new ways they engage with arts and culture, and a renewed interest in it since the pandemic. They are more inclined to attend virtual arts and culture events and programs or explore local community events like local community programs at public libraries.

Below are some responses to the question of how participation has changed since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic:

- “Cultural venues such as museums and galleries have restricted their hours and cut back on membership activities. I work and cannot attend during daytime working hours.”
- “I tend not to go to events that will be packed with people if there is an option. I pick and choose times that might be less busy.”
- “I can’t afford it anymore. If I do spend on activities then I can’t afford to eat.”
- “My interest in cultural activities has increased since the start of Covid-19. During Covid, we were restricted to purchasing from big box stores and getting takeout. I have come to realize I want so much more than that in my life.”

The overarching theme we heard is that Torontonians are struggling. Artists, cultural workers and creatives explained that their health and wellness - and therefore creative potential - are stifled because basic needs - like affordable housing, adequate funding, health benefits, and space to work in - are not being met. Cultural organizations and creative industries are also treading water. Many of the key issues identified in Toronto's previous culture plan (Creative Capital Gains, published in May 2011) continue to plague the sector today, and some have worsened - such as access to cultural spaces, rapid technology shifts and uncertainty, and rising cost of production. The COVID-19 pandemic wide ranging negative impacts on both individuals, organizations and entire cultural industries. We heard that many organizations and their participants have not bounced back.


Although the general public is increasingly seeking connection, meaning, and inspiration, they need better infrastructure and support to access cultural and artistic experiences. At one of the Town Hall events, guest speaker Cameron Bailey (CEO of the Toronto International Film Festival Inc.) shared, “In order to participate in cultural production in a city like Toronto, first you need the stability and the safety and the time to even think

about engaging and going out and taking it in... housing, economic health, physical and mental health, and social services are all culture issues.”



“Culture should bring us closer, help us trust each other and inspire delight in our city and community.”

“Survival mode can be the wet blanket over creative mode. It gets in the way of just making cool things, and getting people as enthusiastic as they would be over a sporting event. Our work is just as fun and enriching.”

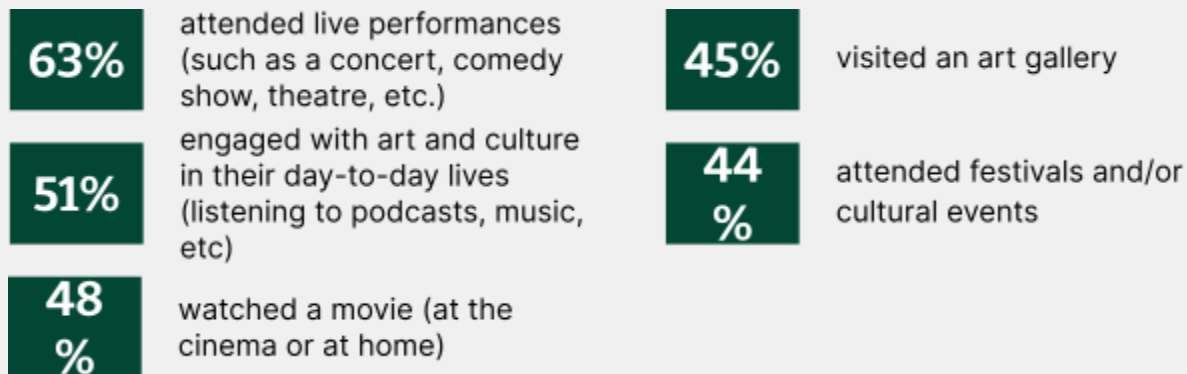


“Artists are human beings and citizens, not just producers of art. You cannot give a couple more million [dollars] to a theatre organization or festival. You need to offer more funding and financial, medical and housing resources directly to artists...The City of Toronto Culture Plan needs to include how it plans to take care of artists as a whole. We are sick, we are marginalized. We cannot make art if we are trying to survive.”

Survey highlight: How culture is experienced today

Note: Percentages indicate the portion of the participants who selected or agreed with the specific response

Overall, in the past 12 months, survey participants engaged in the following activities (top five):



Note: When isolating participants who identify as the “general public”, visiting public libraries and community centres was included in the top five activities and visiting an art gallery was not; differing from the overall insights.

Overall, we heard that the five top strengths for arts and culture in Toronto include the following:

1. Toronto is home to many diverse cultural groups and traditions (66%)
2. The city is full of unique neighbourhoods with lots of creative energy and cultural history (51%)
3. Toronto offers a range of live performances, including music, theatre and dance (48%)
4. Toronto has a one-of-a-kind food scene that lets you discover food from all over the world (46%)
5. Festivals and events help me to discover cultures and neighbourhoods across the city (37%)

Overall, we heard that the top three challenges to experiencing arts and culture in Toronto include:

1. The costs to participate are too high (57%)
2. I have a hard time finding information about cultural activities and events (36%)
3. Cultural activities are too far to travel to or too hard to get to by public transportation (27%)

When asked, artists, cultural workers, and creatives indicated the top five challenges facing the sector:

1. Undervaluing Arts and Culture: Lack of understanding and devaluation of arts and culture among funders, decision makers and the public. (65%)
2. Funding Availability: Grant funding available is not adequate or is too low to meet the needs of artists, creatives and cultural workers. (58%)
3. Meeting Basic Needs: Difficulty affording rising costs of living and access to housing as an artist or creative in Toronto. (52%)
4. Space: Limited affordable, accessible and/or suitable spaces for working, performances and other cultural uses (such as for office use, events, production, and creation). (50%)
5. Increased Costs of Production: Increased production and daily operational costs, including supply chain disruptions and insurance coverage complexities. (43%)

Note: When comparing responses between for-profit and non-profit culture sector participants, the top five challenges remained the same.

Note: When isolating specifically for self-identified Black survey participants, “Bias and Discrimination” was identified as a top challenge which differs from the overall findings.

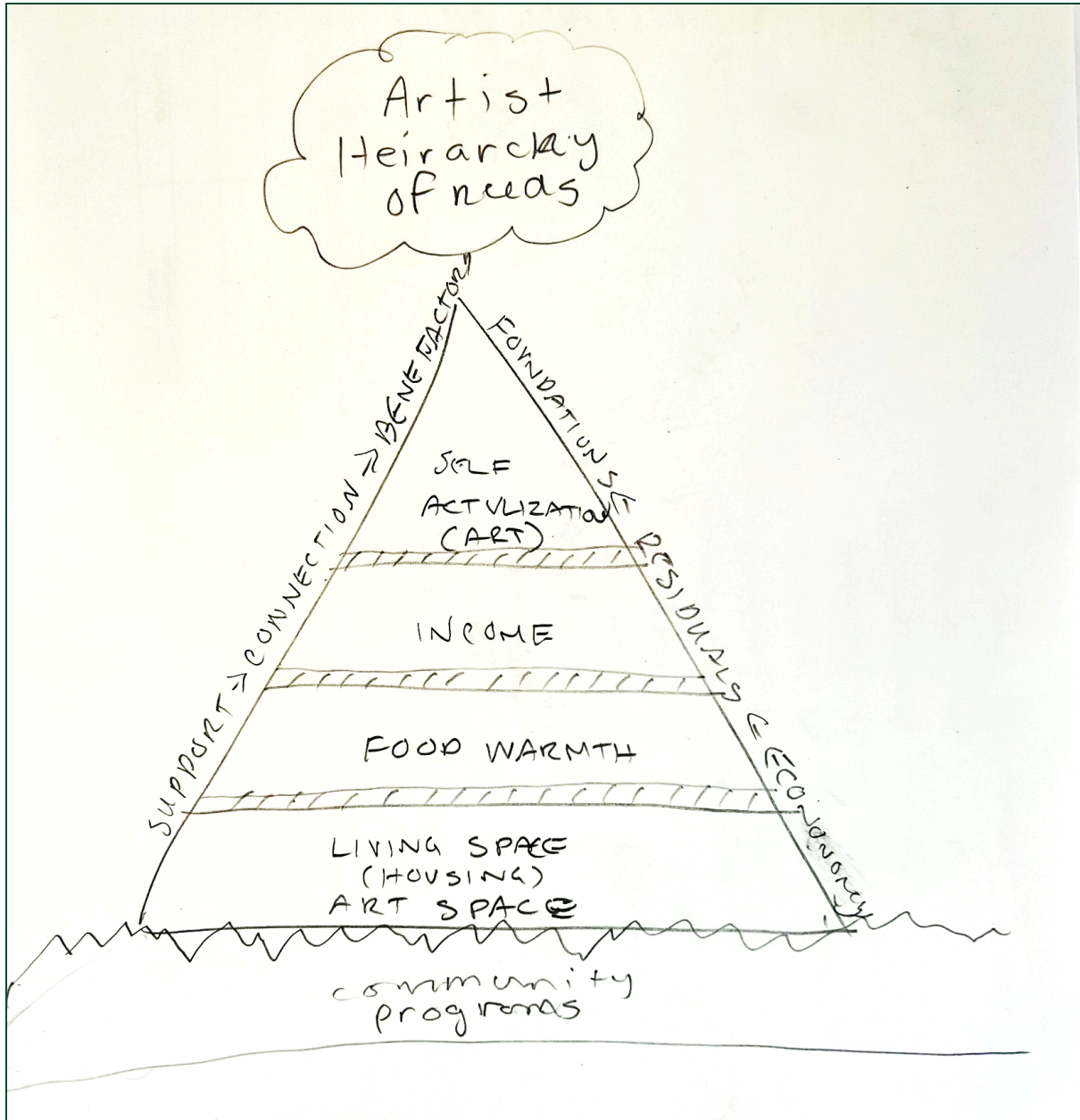
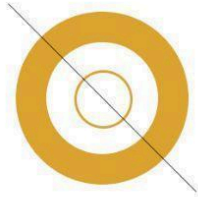


Image 2. A drawing by Chris Decorte (a participant of the Community Conversation for Indigenous Artists and Creatives) entitled "Artist Hierarchy of Needs".

Image description: The image shows a triangle with four categories: living space at the bottom, food & warmth above it, then income and finally self-actualization (art) at the top. Community programs are located below the bottom of the triangle. indicates that space is a core baseline need for artists, followed by food and warmth, then income and finally self-actualization and art at the top.



Visions for Culture in 2034

Across all engagement activities, participants were asked to imagine what the future of Toronto could look and feel like. Below is a summary that highlights the themes across participants' responses.

- **Art and culture is valued.** The importance of arts and culture is celebrated and has broad support akin to sports. Increased investments enable arts and culture to be accessible and affordable to the general public (starting at a young age) and audiences can afford cultural events and discover them with ease.
- **Basic needs are met.** Affordable housing, living wages, accessible transit and other fundamentals are addressed so Torontonians can experience and embrace arts and culture. Artists and creatives have a baseline income support (e.g. Universal Basic Income), cultivating an environment for them to innovate, dream big and take risks.
- **Arts and culture are part of everyday life.** High quality performances, shows, and activities happen across every Ward, including public spaces like parks, community centres and subways. Art is affordable and available in every corner of Toronto.
- **Cultural space is protected and prioritized.** Throughout the city, including the inner-suburbs, music venues, theatres, public spaces and other spaces where culture happens are safeguarded and supported.
- **The idea of "culture" is broader.** Culture means many things to many people and in the future, participants hope the City's definition will include fashion, culinary arts, comedy, storytelling, and other forms of culture - especially Indigenous forms of culture and culture-making.
- **Artists, creatives and cultural workers have support.** Regardless of age or stage of careers, they have access to equipment, mentors, training and other support to develop professionally.
- **The City of Toronto and Toronto Arts Council embrace experimentation, innovation and risk-taking.** They make bold choices to try new programs, policies and opportunities that centre community needs.
- **Toronto celebrates and honours its diversity.** Arts and cultural activities and opportunities are inclusive, fair and accessible. Diversity is reflected in the make-up of leaders, artists, and cultural workers. Audiences see themselves reflected across the board - from the stories told on stage to policies developed that impact them.
- **People feel more connected to each other because of art and culture.** They come together to share ideas and resources, collaborate, broaden their networks and support each other. There are informal gathering spaces and cultural hubs in each neighbourhood that are easy to access from creators and audiences.

Survey highlight:

How can we support Vision 2034?

Percentages indicate the portion of the participants who selected or agreed with the specific response.

Overall, we heard that the top three ways to motivate survey participants to get more involved in arts and culture activities include:

- More low-cost or free options (63%)
- More events and cultural experiences that are in my local neighborhood (46%)
- Better advertising/information on events taking place (43%)

When asked, the general public said the top three ways that the City of Toronto and TAC can support the sector include:

1. Offer affordable and accessible space for cultural uses and creative industries (41%)
2. Provide funding and grants (to artists, creative industries, cultural institutions, community organizations, etc.) (36%)
3. Identify policies to protect existing, significant venues (such as live music venues) from redevelopment (30%)

Note: When isolating specifically for self-identified Indigenous survey participants, “simplifying and enhancing process to access funds, space and support” was identified within the top three ways the City of Toronto and TAC can support the sector.

“Imagine a Toronto where community hubs are spaces for non-transactional experimentation. These spaces would exist as sanctuaries where we can come together and collaborate and grow and learn from each other. In my vision, experimentation is not just encouraged, it is celebrated as a fundamental part of the artistic process. It is a fertile ground for which groundbreaking ideas sprout and a catalyst that propels artistic pursuits forward ... And perhaps most importantly experimentation fosters a culture of openness, curiosity and dialogue.”

- Leila Fatemi, contemporary visual artist,
Curator of Education and Community
Outreach, Gallery 44, and Guest Speaker
at Town Hall

Headline News

We asked the Culture Plan's External Advisory Panel to imagine that the state of culture in Toronto has improved significantly in ten years. They were tasked with writing imaginary newspaper headlines from the year 2034. Here are some samples of headlines:

- Toronto: The Global City that built Affordable Housing and Arts Centres in every new building in the last 10 Years
- Cities across the globe have been asking the same question: How did Toronto's arts and culture sector become the global hub for accessibility in the arts?
- New York, Tokyo, Paris, London, Accra all attending The Arts and Culture Summit to learn from the ones who did it BEST
- Toronto's cultural offerings overtakes the auto, and financial industries
- The people of Toronto agree: arts and culture is valuable without needing to produce capital
- Art and culture recognized as top driver of well-being for 10th year in a row!
- Creatives around the world flock to Toronto as a global centre of opportunity
- Toronto is all in for the arts, and it shows
- Toronto's massive influx of new residents credited to its vibrant cultural ecosystem
- Canadians from coast to coast to coast participating in National Culture Day in record numbers
- Toronto's culture scene is explosive. Mix of local neighbourhood cultural spaces and companies, aided by a connected transit system, and Toronto artists on the world stage make for a thriving community.
- Arts tourism hit an all time high this summer as GTHA local tourism and global tourism animated Toronto throughout the summer and autumn months
- Toronto has it all, culturally rich and vibrant - see the world in one place.
- Toronto tops NYC, Paris, and London as a cultural hub
- How Toronto transformed its arts and culture in 10 years

When asked to imagine an ideal Toronto in 2034, some survey respondents said...

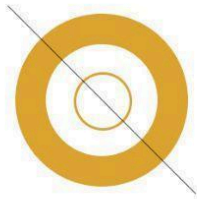
"In 2034, I wish culture would be localized, from neighborhoods to cafes. [Culture] hasn't seamlessly integrated into everyday life."

"Toronto 2034 should definitely have more of an Indigenous arts and culture scene."

"My Toronto would have more art in local neighbourhoods, more music outside of street festivals in the local bars and restaurants. Concerts and theatre productions would be more affordable. And online or hybrid versions for those who are immobile or unable to attend in person."

"Arts and culture are nested into a much more 'green' city with projects that actually enhance the environment, allow birds and other animals to thrive in the spaces and shelters they provide. Instead we have a vision of art plopped onto natural places creating jarring contrasts with nature."

"Toronto is a vibrant cultural hub, boasting a diverse array of immersive experiences. A futuristic blend of virtual and physical art installations transforms public spaces, engaging residents and visitors alike. Interactive street performances, inspired by global events like the Venice Carnival or Rio's Carnival, bring energy to the city. A cutting-edge digital arts festival rivals Tokyo's teamLab Borderless. Local theaters showcase experimental performances, echoing the innovation of Berlin's art scene. Toronto's streets are alive with dynamic murals, drawing inspiration from the vibrant street art of Mexico City. The city has become a global cultural destination, embracing innovation while celebrating its rich diversity."



Principles

Across all of our engagement activities, participants had strong perspectives on *how* the City could move forward on implementing the Culture Plan. We also heard that at this critical moment for the sector, there are key principles or lenses that should inform activities led by the City of Toronto and Toronto Arts Council, to ensure that investments in culture represent and honour the diverse realities of Torontonians.

We've gathered feedback about "how" the City and key partners should move forward designing and implementing a new culture plan.

The four principles we recommend are:

- *Centre Indigenous knowledge and approaches*
- *Be equitable, fair, and accessible*
- *Be bold*
- *Make it easy*

Centre Indigenous knowledge and approaches

Core to the success of the Culture Plan will be using a lens that centres Indigenous knowledge, approaches, and ways of being. Through the engagement activities, many Indigenous participants pointed to the [Reconciliation Action Plan](#) as a necessary starting point for the team working on the Culture Plan to consider, review and incorporate into the priorities for the Culture Plan. Specifically, we heard that before the City explores policies connected to culture planning, there needs to be commitment to the actions of the Reconciliation Action Plan. We heard that many Indigenous people live under the poverty line, have experienced significant trauma due to colonialism² and therefore recommend that basic needs, healing and commitment to self determination be prioritized.

Across our engagements with Indigenous communities, we heard about the importance for the City of Toronto to decolonize its definition of "culture", and transition away from the idea of culture as simply cultural production. As one participant shared, "Culture as we know it is a colonial term: [for us] it is our way of life." Participants were clear that to embody the City's commitment to reconciliation, we must redefine culture to capture ways of being, sharing and gathering, which were the subject of intentional suppression and erasure through colonization. Redefining culture would include recognizing family, storytelling, language, ways of gathering, connection to land, food, and many other aspects central to Indigenous life. This includes recognizing that care is a part of that

²Colonialism, the theft of lands and knowledge, and the many other harms perpetuated by the colonial state have fractured relationships, and make journeying together now down a mutual path very difficult. The fact is that colonial state actors have attempted to forcefully assimilate, displace, and systemically erase Indigenous Peoples from this place, perpetuating grave injustices, inequities, and fatal consequences. (Source: City of Toronto 2022-2032 Action Plan)

definition of culture, and acts of care that consider broader wellness of body, mind and spirit, are critical. Another example is to recognize that Indigenous Elders are the core of the community, and that part of “culture” means ensuring that Elders are supported so they can pass on their knowledge and traditions to younger generations.

Engagement participants urged the City to continue to consider the history of this land and its original stewards in all cultural planning and policy-making. One approach is to ensure a more prominent presence and visibility of Indigenous practices, ways of being, artists and craftspeople in Toronto’s cultural landscape, through investments in public art, cultural spaces, and signage (some referenced Vancouver, BC as an example). We also heard that any investments in culture should be environmentally sustainable and minimize negative impacts on the planet and future generations. Additionally, there is a desire to see increased Indigenous representation in decision-making positions across all City of Toronto divisions, to ensure that Indigenous values and ways of being are embedded into the design and implementation of all policies and action plans, including this one.



“You can’t take these recommendations and interpret them without us there. We need to be involved at the table when the Culture Plan is being written.”

Image 3. Photo from the Creative Facilitator Engagement led by Johl Whiteduck Ringuette where participants joined for a walking tour of the Red Urban Nation Collective murals at Bickford Park.

Image description: A crowd of participants gather with their backs facing the camera. Johl is in the centre speaking in front of a small green courtyard and a mural of a person with red and yellow radiating rays behind them.

We repeatedly heard that across Indigenous communities, strong relationships and partnerships are foundational to any endeavour, and that *engagement itself* is relationship-building. It is critical for the City to continue to work with diverse Indigenous communities of Toronto - to engage and collaborate early and often - as the Culture Plan gets developed and implemented. Participants want the City to prioritize relationships over transactions, and to take into account a more holistic appreciation of what culture means to Indigenous communities.

"My dream for Toronto and as an artist and a cultural practitioner is that every single Canadian that comes to live in this city and beyond understands that you are on Indigenous land. That we are the original peoples. That we are the only people that hold sovereign nation-to-nation treaties, and that sadly we struggled to have accessibility to culture and art because we're living on or below the poverty line."

Be equitable, fair and accessible

The Culture Plan should be designed with a lens of equity, diversity, inclusion and accessibility at its core. Whether designing solutions to support people from Deaf, Mad and disabled communities to participate more in culture; distributing or redistributing public funds more equitably; or considering *who* to develop new solutions to old problems with, it is essential to keep *all* Torontonians in mind - particularly those who have been systemically disadvantaged and excluded in the past.

"We need an equity lens, not an equity policy... We need an equity lens on everything."

We heard that it is important not only to involve people from equity-deserving communities in decision-making, but also to engage them early and often, and provide ongoing opportunities to influence policy. Continuing to deepen our understanding about the challenges facing

these communities will support better and fairer decisions.


The disability justice philosophy of 'designing for the margins' so everyone gets included is a helpful framework. For instance, if designing a wheelchair ramp to a theatre, elders, people using strollers, and others benefit as well. While new regulations for Accessibility for Ontarians with Disability Act (AODA) and the Accessible Canada Act may incentivize accessible design in the coming years, accessibility requirements should be considered minimum standards for designing the kind of cultural landscape Toronto needs.

Communities at the margins (e.g. Indigenous, Black; Deaf, Mad and disabled; youth and seniors, racialized, 2SLGBTQ+, etc.) should not be treated as monoliths. Engaging members of these communities meaningfully (ideally on staff, and also through meaningful and paid community engagement) is a great way to minimize exclusive and unfair decisions.

There were recommendations to increase representation of equity-deserving community members in decision-making processes and staffing positions across the board, including at the City. Participants were wary of tokenism at some cultural organizations, including inauthentic diversity, inclusion and accessibility efforts designed to help secure funding. They shared concerns about the “glass cliff phenomenon”- in which people from equity-deserving communities are hired in leadership positions (often during times of crisis or instability) with insufficient support and a high likelihood of failure. This trend reinforces stereotypes and perpetuates biases that get in the way of meaningful change.

Several participants referenced “spoon theory” - a theory in which spoons are used as a metaphor for physical or mental energy within the Deaf, Mad and disabled community. The world of arts and culture is often designed with an assumption that people have a certain amount of “spoons” in order to work at a fast pace, attend in-person events, etc. without understanding that some tasks take significantly more energy for certain communities.

Continuing to learn (and unlearn) about injustice, ableism and other forms of systemic discrimination will help us understand the subtle ways that inequity shows up in our work - for example cultural appropriation of Indigenous designs. The Culture Plan presents a much-needed opportunity to model policy development that is progressive, fair and truly leverages Toronto's diversity.



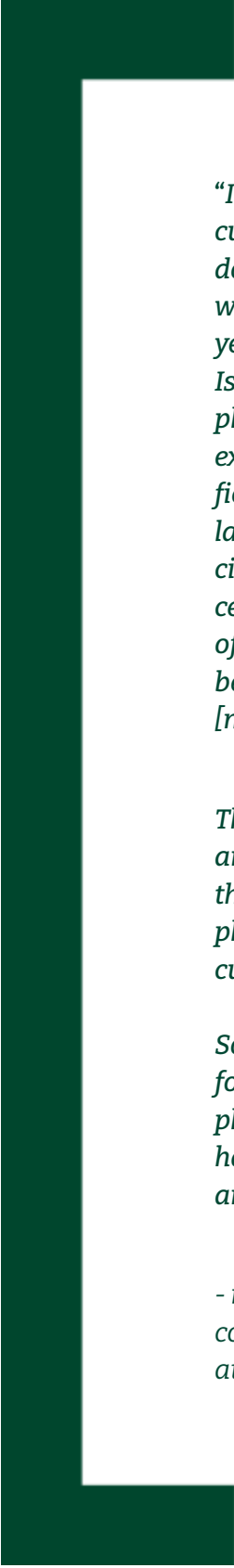
"My dream for the city is an accessible cultural sector. Access in every sense of the word. So we can all feel invited and considered and welcomed by the culture that we are purported to experience. And this is really a future where we imagine disabled folks not just surviving, but thriving and leading and shaping the culture that we all experience together...we have a chance to dream bigger than AODA compliance."

- Sean Lee, Director of Programming, Tangled Art + Disability, member of the Culture Plan External Advisory Panel and Guest Speaker at Town Hall

Be bold

We consistently heard that Toronto feels conservative, unimaginative and risk-averse. There is an urgent call to decision-makers in Toronto to move away from risk-averse reflexes, towards courageous, ambitious and innovative policy and solutions. Participants urged decision-makers to get comfortable with measured experimentation, looking for inspiration from other cities that have adopted creative solutions. Bold ideas might come from collaborations with other partners - within and beyond the public sector - including artists!

Examples of what 'bold' can mean in the context of a culture plan can include taxing landlords with vacant storefront spaces and encouraging them to share those "meanwhile" spaces with artists for rehearsals, pop-up performances, meeting space and more. In the context of funding, a bold idea would be to move away from process-heavy, risk-averse funding models towards trust-based philanthropy, with simplified application and reporting processes, shorter turnaround times, and multi-year and unrestricted funding. These types of process-based changes would yield significant benefits for Toronto's cultural community and the people they serve.



“I worry about our city. Our city is the financial - and arguably the cultural and diversity hub - of the province and country. So, why doesn't it feel like a winning world-class city? When I think about what I love about Toronto, the city I have called home for over 50 years, I reflect on my youth and spaces like Caravan ... and Centre Island, which I attended with my family, and all the affordable places that we could participate in with music and new experiences (which I believe led me to my work in this creative field). However ... for a city that claims to be so diverse... there is a lack of public art and benches to enjoy art, and places to enjoy the city and... a lack of green spaces and a lack of gathering spaces to celebrate and to have our voices heard...I have mourned the lack of streets with sidewalk cafés. When did the city of Toronto become the city of naysayers and where did all of these [naysayers] come from?”

This is not just an incredible natural landscape with bike trails and parks, but with world-renowned artistic talent, film festivals, theatre, dance and opera companies, art crawls and photography, fashion exhibits, museums... it is a mecca for culture!...

So, are we willing to embrace beauty, interesting buildings, parks for walking and lounging, and transportation to get you to those places, and to enjoy music, film, theatre and food and all that we have to offer? Are we willing to challenge our current view on how and where art and entertainment and beauty and joy find us?”

*- maxine bailey, Executive Director, Canadian Film Centre,
co-Chair Culture Plan External Advisory Panel and Guest Speaker
at Town Hall*

Make it easy

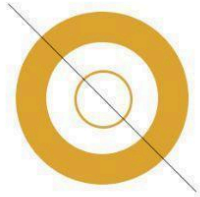
Participants want support for the general public to be able to attend cultural events, venues, programs, etc. more easily - whether visiting a museum, attending a music festival, or taking a silk screening workshop. They also want to see commitments in the Culture Plan that will make it easier for artists, creatives, cultural workers and cultural organizations to thrive.

There are many ways to make creating and participating in the arts easier. For example, increasing visibility through strong marketing and information-sharing and exploring new or improved levers beyond financial support (e.g. tax incentives, subsidies, etc.). This could lead to greater participation, while building strong communities, exposing residents to new ways of thinking and creating, cultivating transferable skills, and more. Redesigning programs, processes and policies, minimizing administrative burdens, and centring the 'user,' can improve the experience people have doing things like booking spaces, applying for funding, or signing up for city programs.



Image 4. Photo of the Leila Fatemi Creative-led Engagement session.

Image description: People gathered around a table working with yarn to make Islamic geometric patterns on paper while talking.



Insights

Insight 1: Address critical space issues

“Going beyond the language of gentrification...there’s something deeper that’s happening and we don’t have the language in this moment to describe it...”

Toronto’s artists, creatives and cultural workers as well as visitors, patrons and audiences have been experiencing a space crisis - a decreasing amount of space to live, work, produce and attend cultural events and offerings in. The news of Artscape³ moving into receivership was concerning to many, and a marker of the state of the environment. The decrease in cultural space is extremely frustrating at a time when development is booming across the city at significant rates. Participants who described a decline in mental wellness and morale within the culture sector, shared that it is in part due to challenges finding places to live and work.

“I need to sit down and draw, but our apartment isn’t that big. And I work in the horror [illustration] genre... my daughter shouldn’t be seeing my drawings. So I go to the library to work. Being a parent is expensive, and finding a co-op workspace is expensive - and they all seem to be south of Bloor street.”

A few overarching themes are highlighted below:

Loss of Cultural Space

Experiencing beloved cultural venues and studios closing down, creative community members being priced out of Toronto, and the burnout from juggling multiple jobs to pay rent, have all taken a toll on the creative community.

Organizations that operate dance studios, live music venues, theatres, art galleries, production houses, rehearsal spaces, studios and other spaces have been struggling to keep their doors open. Many

“It’s largely racialized communities and artists being displaced from their spaces and having to move back to their parents’ place in Brampton and running an art studio out of their garage.”

³ For over 30 years Artscape provided below-market space for artists and creatives to live and work in. In January 2024, Artscape formally entered receivership.

have shuttered in recent years because of changes in audience behaviour, policy, operational and production costs, sponsorship and funding, earned revenue and the real estate market more generally. Participants want protections to preserve and enhance existing cultural and community spaces, as well as support managing infrastructure challenges, including facilities that need upgrades.

“We are seeing condo development but not the development of the creative spaces we also need. The same can be done for shopping malls, many of which have empty spaces that could be prime arts spaces”.



Affordable Housing

Many participants spoke to growing fears of being evicted or “renovicted”, and many have already been priced out of their neighbourhoods, and out of Toronto - which has had a negative impact on their livelihoods, the people they serve, and their families. Participants shared that as the city rapidly gentrifies, artists, creatives and cultural workers are unable to build roots and invest in communities in a long-term way. Participants from creative industries explained that housing concerns affect their ability to attract and retain talent. As employees are forced to move outside the downtown core, long commutes and poor public transportation are affecting talent pools and, most importantly, quality of life.

Affordable housing is also tied to the urgent need for a living wage for artists, creatives and cultural workers. It is worth noting that people who face multiple systemic barriers (e.g. a racialized person who is also disabled) are among the most vulnerable when it comes to affordable housing.

“I dread that folks are moving further out from downtown due to precarity in housing and financial stability. With in-person events being an important intersection for creation, they have less and less access to events”.

Survey highlight:

Current space types

Percentages indicate the portion of the participants who selected or agreed that specific response.

When asked, artists, cultural workers, and creatives said that they practice art or work in the following spaces:

- Rental space(s) (separate from where a participant lives) (52%)
 - Residence/dwelling space(s) (in a participant's house/condo/apartment, etc.) (41%)
 - Shared space(s) within other individuals or organizations (26%)
 - Owned space(s) (separate from where a participant lives) (20%)
 - No access to space at all (10%)
 - No need a physical space (3%)
- We also heard that some respondents are using public spaces like parks and community centres as well as schools to get work done.

Note: *When comparing for-profit and non-profit culture sector survey participants, there was no significant difference in the breakdown of space types and uses to practice art or work.*

Accessible and Welcoming Spaces

In our conversations, we heard that many spaces for in-person cultural activities are inaccessible. Members of Deaf, Mad and disabled communities continue to face accessibility barriers even when baseline regulations have been adopted. For example, tech booths that are not designed with accessibility in mind prevent people living with disabilities from getting hired as event/venue technicians. People also shared that other factors such as geographic location and proximity to subway lines, safe transit drop-off and pick-up etc. impact accessibility significantly.

We heard that the best way to make cultural events or experiences fully accessible is to provide a hybrid option where possible for people who face significant barriers (e.g. have physical disabilities, health and safety concerns, challenges booking accessible transportation and personal support workers). See [Appendix A](#) (Key Takeaways -

Disability Arts) for more information on specific challenges shared by people from Deaf, Mad and disabled communities.

To many, accessible spaces are spaces that are also affordable. Artists, creatives and cultural workers are not simply in search of space that they can afford *today*, but also spaces that are sustainable over the long-term. The demand for affordable workspace for artists and creatives is significant. For example, Akin Studios, an organization which offers (temporary) subsidized space to visual artists across the city, shared that they have a 450+ person waitlist that grows by the day. Participants shared frustrations with the increasing number of vacant buildings since the onset of COVID-19, citing underutilized office spaces, shuttered retail stores and restaurants as potential spaces for culture.

“It’s frustrating in a city that has so much underused space that artists can’t access those spaces”

Creatives are also struggling to find suitable - ideally purpose-built - spaces that support their practices. For instance, some visual artists require access to sinks to clean their supplies, as well as ventilation systems for toxic fumes. Some musicians and dancers require sound proofing. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for space that can meet the needs of everyone working in culture and many participants we heard from have adapted to space that is not optimal (e.g. condo party rooms or church basements) due to limited suitable and affordable options.

“The average hourly fee for spaces in Ontario is \$42 per hour, almost double the average fee the community says it can afford - \$22 per hour.”

We also heard that people want easier access to public spaces like parks, libraries and community centres to share and experience cultural activity with ease. Currently, there are several barriers to accessing these spaces including bureaucratic processes, permits and insurance. In addition, many participants do not feel welcomed in many spaces, and feel surveilled - particularly Black, Indigenous, queer and trans folks who are surveilled disproportionately. Public space is also at risk of being lost (e.g. Ontario Place) and people who are cautious of indoor cultural offerings (particularly since the onset of COVID-19) have fewer places to experience arts and culture.

Some Indigenous participants reminded us to think about creating spaces that are culturally appropriate. For instance, some participants need access to spaces that can accommodate smudging, access to land and green spaces for cultural ceremonies, and

access to spiritual advisors. Some participants spoke of racism and discrimination in both public and private cultural spaces, such as harassment of firekeepers. We also heard that there is a deep need for more spaces for Indigenous people to come together, teach protocols, make crafts and share knowledge, stories, and food.

“To have a sacred fire [in a park], we need a fire permit!”

“We are sovereign, let us be...we know the solutions, and we know how to manage ourselves and do it well: just give us the spaces, opportunities, funding to do it.”

“I’d like to see more art in public spaces and parks.”

Spaces for Culture in Every Neighbourhood

Many participants shared that several cultural spaces outside of Toronto’s core are thriving - and critical to the communities they are situated in - and they have a strong desire for more cultural spaces. We heard from many participants that the concentration of cultural spaces downtown is frustrating, especially with congestion and inadequate public transportation. The third most common barrier to participating in arts and culture, according to the online survey, was distance and poor accessibility in terms of public transit. We heard a strong desire for a better transit system, as well as art and culture *in every neighbourhood* - places people can walk, bike, or easily commute to, as many participants noted is the case in Montreal. This is true for both artists and audiences. While many feel that Toronto’s libraries and community centres have potential to develop into stronger artistic and cultural hubs, others felt that they are not accessible for a variety of reasons such as limited hours of operation.

“LASOs [Local Arts Service Organizations] outside the downtown core are well-liked but they can’t be everywhere. There is a lack of local hubs and cultural connections in ‘suburban’ areas creating barriers to community building and cultural resource sharing.”

“I would love to see a major train system that can take you from the far north east to the north west end of the city, in under an hour (zoo to Pearson airport) which would allow cultural and art events to be found all around the city not just down town.”

Participants want more third spaces - spaces that facilitate interaction, community-building and relaxation. Artists and creatives are keen to expand their communities and need places to facilitate connection - during *and after*

regular business hours. We heard that people want opportunities to meet new people, share ideas, explore collaborations, talk, and even heal together.

The loneliness epidemic is on the rise in Toronto, and given people are working remotely more than ever, the desire for “non-transactional” spaces (where people can connect with friends, colleagues or strangers, without feeling pressured to pay an entrance fee or purchase a drink) - not to mention spaces that feel safe and foster a sense of belonging - is hugely desired.

“When there's no place to unify, it becomes tricky to build community.”

“As a place [Scarborough] that is about to, I believe, boom into a Renaissance akin to Brooklyn, to Manhattan, if we play our cards properly and pay attention to the variety and multitudes of cultures that come from that part of GTA. And pay special attention to that and nurture that in the right way.”

**- Rajni Perera, visual artist,
member of Culture Plan
External Advisory Panel, and
guest speaker at Town Hall**

We also heard concerns about the risks of artists being censored at a time of increased global conflict. Participants we heard from want to be their full selves, and be free to express their views safely.

Ideas and Solutions Proposed by Participants

In this section we have captured ideas shared by multiple participants on ways to help improve cultural space challenges in Toronto.

- Provide tax incentives and property tax measures to encourage landlords and developers to include cultural spaces in their projects, whether by transforming vacant commercial spaces, subsidising rents for cultural uses, or including cultural spaces in new developments. This includes broadening eligibility for the Creative Co-Location Facilities Property Tax Subclass Program⁴.
- Repurpose underutilized buildings: Whether with municipal buildings or through partnerships with developers and landowners, repurpose underused buildings

⁴ The [Creative Co-Location Facilities Property Tax Subclass](#) supports the sustainability and growth of creative enterprises and live music venues in Toronto. Properties must be designated as a Creative Co-Location Facility by the City of Toronto to be included under the property tax subclass. A property may apply if it is either a tenant-based operating facility, a membership based co-working facility or a live music venue.

such as vacant offices, faith spaces (underused churches) into affordable workspaces and rehearsal venues.

- Support community ownership and alternative models: Increase support for community bonds, alternative financing models, and capacity-building programs to empower communities (especially equity-deserving community members) to purchase and manage spaces.
- Build partnerships with Community Land Trusts and promote the concept of “Creative/Cultural Land Trusts” to secure and preserve cultural spaces.
- Increase awareness and access to “meanwhile spaces”⁵ to support people in accessing them through databases and creative partnerships. This could include use of buildings on laneways or other creative opportunities to provide affordable venues.
- Advocate for policy changes, including rent control, inclusionary zoning to protect cultural spaces and improve access to venues.
- Decrease red tape and improve access to public spaces like libraries, public gardens, parks and community centres with simplified application processes, sensitivity training for staff, and supports for renting (e.g. insurance).
- Facilitate space-sharing (play a ‘matchmaker’ role) between artists, creatives, cultural workers and developers/landowners.
- Provide capacity-building assistance such as support to develop business plans to buy, rent or manage spaces.
- Raise awareness about recourse and rights when artists and arts workers are mistreated by landlords.

Although suggestions for addressing space were shared across all engagements, [Appendix A](#) (Key Takeaways - The Need for Space) includes additional ideas on this topic shared by participants.

⁵ Meanwhile-use: The activation of underutilized space on a temporary basis – often of space that sits empty between tenants – for various uses including pop-up retail and cultural use. See as an example Why Not Theatre’s [Space Project](#), which through unique cross-sector partnerships accesses meanwhile use spaces.



Image 4. Image drawn by artist and graphic recorder Radha Pithadiya, capturing key themes from one of two Community Conversations "The Need for Space". **Image Description:** Text on gradient backgrounds categorizing different challenges, needs solutions, and examples of space. Vines, flowers, and geometric lines frame different sections.

Insight 2: Re-Imagine Funding & Support

Participants had strong opinions about funding, including some polarizing views. On the one hand, public funding - particularly from the Toronto Arts Council (TAC), Toronto Arts Foundation (TAF) and the City of Toronto, has been instrumental in helping individuals and organizations get their start, develop projects, sustain and grow operations, and leverage funding from other sources. Generally, participants working in or with non-profit organizations were more concerned about the state of funding than those working in creative industries.

Participants feel that most funding processes are unnecessarily complicated, onerous, outdated and, many shared, inequitable. The needs of the general public and audiences have changed (in terms of rising cost of living, accessibility, health and safety, etc.) and funding opportunities should reflect these changes as well.

The two most common themes shared about funding were the need for more investment in arts and culture by the City, and the need to overhaul the granting system. There was a plea from many artists and creatives to explore new funding models altogether, and a baseline need to revamp how funding is promoted, accessed and distributed - especially given the needs and capacity of applicants which feel secondary to funders' priorities. Indigenous participants shared that funding applications do not align with Indigenous worldviews (due to colonial eligibility criteria, written application formats, etc.) and consideration should be paid to decolonizing funding and providing alternative processes for some communities.

Survey Highlight: Funding Source

Percentages indicate the portion of the participants who selected or agreed that specific response.

When asked, artists, cultural workers, and creatives shared that the top five ways they fund their practice, business, or organization are (participants were allowed to select all that applied):

- Product sales or fee-for-service work (example: selling product or licensing rights to product, ticket sales, commissioned work, subscriptions) (48%)
- Provincial / Federal grants, loans, or equity investments (42%)
- City of Toronto / Toronto Arts Council grants (36%)
- Donations (31%)
- Funding from independent funding bodies (for example: The Bell Fund, Metcalf Foundation) or philanthropic organizations (25%)

A few overarching themes related to funding are included below:

Funding is inadequate

Participants who do not work in culture shared several challenges in participating in cultural events and activities. One participant shared a common sentiment when he said, “I used to enjoy going to concerts but now I have to spend that money on expensive groceries.” Funding to subsidize cultural events and programs is needed given the increasing cost not only of living, but also tickets, transportation to events, etc. The impact of not making arts and culture accessible to young audiences was also highlighted - young people in particular need affordable ways to participate in culture to drive interest in careers, and to develop future audiences for creators.

“Make the arts available for everyone to enjoy, not just the people who can afford it.”

The sentiment was virtually unanimous: there is not enough funding - public and private - to support arts and culture in Toronto. With recent funding cuts by some funders, participants working in culture shared a sense of increased competition for limited funding. Many people are disappointed in the City’s “marginal budget increase” in arts and culture in 2024, and hope that the City will show how much it believes in the positive social, economic and cultural benefits of arts and culture with increased investments in the future. Other government funders, sponsors and donors are also cutting back and many participants shared concerns about implications on communities across the city. They also shared that costs of operating and programming, and general costs of living, are increasing disproportionately to funding levels. Participants working in creative industries also highlighted growing concerns about technology shifts and inadequate funding for equipment, software and new technologies that are shifting rapidly and will have long-term impacts on the workforce, audiences and culture sector.

“Our industry has been struggling since COVID. The numbers are not coming back, funding flatlined and organizations cannot keep up with inflation. We see organizations downsizing across the board, terminations because of tough financial decisions, and annual programming cut in half. We are struggling. With each organization that goes under, it is a huge loss for the community. Increasing capital for organizations to hire new talent is crucial for the success of our sector. We need people invested in what we do and want to continue doing it.”

“Despite frozen and decreased levels of funds, artists are expected to produce the same levels of programming despite many challenges like inflation.”

“Companies are feeling the pinch, with production costs rising but funding streams not meeting the increases which means there is no money to be able to pay artists/employees more to match increased cost of living.”

Funding is inequitable

Participants from across engagements are concerned that funding is not being distributed fairly, and some have questions about how some funding decisions are made. Many artists and smaller arts organizations shared concerns about historical inequities between the ‘haves’ (typically larger organizations, focused on Eurocentric art forms) and the ‘have nots’, and the need to prioritize equitable rebalancing to level the playing field and allow for the true diversity of Toronto’s culture to access financial support. Survey participants shared that this would be an impactful and critical first step to rebalancing, and funding smaller and underrepresented organizations that need more support.

“Within the visual and media arts, there are a lot of organizations that are obsolete that are still getting funded at a high level. Many smaller organizations [are] being under-funded.”

Accessibility supports are limited

While some organizations are making stronger efforts to be more accessible, there is a lot of work to do to support disability arts. It is worth noting that there is no organization or alliance dedicated to advocating for Toronto’s Deaf, Mad and disabled communities, in part because of the barriers many of those members face that make advocating for themselves difficult. Deaf, Mad and disabled participants generally felt that there is not enough funding or flexibility to accommodate full (and often hidden) costs. Access is always contextual: access needs vary depending on participants, venues, location, etc. - hence the need for flexibility in funding. Examples of granting constraints include: limitations to cover unexpected costs (e.g. a last minute participant with unique access needs) or ample funding to support artists with multiple disabilities on a project. We heard from a few Deaf participants who expressed that within the community, they are often *the most marginalized*; even accessible events and venues tend to prioritize people who can

hear. We also learned that accessibility statements are rarely in place for funded artists showing their artwork in public-facing places, which limits how accessible they are.

“Almost 30% of all Canadians have a disability of some kind, and that is increasingly significant. The question is about why any public funds are spent without considering accessibility at the granting stage. Every project funded should be asked who they are making it available to, and should be assessed by a disabled person.”

For more details about additional challenges facing Deaf, Mad and disabled people, please see [Appendix A](#).


Funding processes are limiting, burdensome and outdated

Funding eligibility is often limited to certain disciplines and prioritizes ‘traditional’ forms of cultural production like film, music and visual arts. Creative practices like fashion and culinary arts are often excluded as are cultural groups that host festivals and events but don’t qualify as ‘artists’ - which feels random and unfair to some participants.

Requirements to qualify as a ‘professional’ artist can feel limiting and exclusive.

Participants also want funders to widen the scope of eligibility expenses to include more accessibility costs and mental health-related expenses. Some participants also shared that eligibility requirements such as years of incorporation as an organization prevent many newcomer and emerging applicants from accessing funding. People from creative industries also indicated that there is limited funding for emerging industries, such as e-sports and other creative startups that want to focus on streaming and social media instead of traditional arts or film production.

Artists, creatives and cultural workers expressed many issues with the granting process. Some participants shared how difficult it is to find out about opportunities for public funding, corporate sponsorship and private philanthropy. If they do find the opportunities, many find navigating the application and reporting processes challenging;



“One-year projects don’t breed sustainability. The very framework does not lend itself to the needs of the community. If you make bread, you don’t need to make statements about making bread. After making art for 20 years, I don’t need to keep justifying my art.”

-
Participant in “The 54
Need for Space”
Community
Conversation

these processes are unnecessarily bureaucratic and use complicated 'grant speak' that can get in the way of genuine accessibility. Even when they find the opportunities, the application process is lengthy and time-consuming, and many participants lack the experience or skills needed to develop strong applications (e.g. some participants cited needing support with tasks like developing project budgets). The amount of effort invested - often for short-term project funding - feels out of sync with the amount of money awarded. The turnaround time to hear back from funders about successful applications is too long and can stifle the development process. Participants also feel that rejection rates feel high, and funders have little time available to provide feedback to unsuccessful applicants who want to improve their chances for future applications.

With respect to evaluation, many participants believe that the way funders measure impact is problematic. Metrics like attendance numbers and other measures of "output", for instance, do not necessarily indicate how impactful and transformative their initiatives or organizations are. Instead participants want other ways to demonstrate impact and relevance.

Ideas and Solutions Shared by Participants

In this section we have captured ideas shared by multiple participants as high-level or specific strategies that could help improve funding.

- Investigate and consider alternatives to the current funding model, and move towards trust-based funding models that:
 - Simplify application and reporting processes
 - Decrease response times for applicants
 - Provide multi-year and unrestricted funding
 - Prioritize relationships and support (e.g. provide mentorship)
 - Allow for flexibility and adaptability as needs evolve
- Redistribute funds and close the equity gap: Evaluate how *equitably* funding is and has been distributed, and redistribute funds from large well-funded institutions to newer organizations, particularly those led by equity-deserving communities.
- Consider ways to support and subsidize arts and culture, such as providing discounts at hotels during major events, providing free TTC access to attend, etc.
- Explore ways to remove barriers to funding such as financial support for grant writing, video and oral applications, office hours for support, etc.
- Provide micro-grants to distribute smaller amounts of funding efficiently
- Be flexible. For example, adjust expectations given rising costs, re-imagine eligible expenses (e.g. therapy and counseling, tobacco, etc.), broaden applicant eligibility (e.g. eligible disciplines) and fund unforeseen expenses in unique circumstances.

Insight 3: Build Community & Capacity

We heard that Torontonians are feeling increasingly isolated, lonely and disconnected from culture and from each other. This sentiment is especially prevalent among seniors, newcomers, and Deaf, Mad and disabled communities. Amongst artists and cultural workers, there is a sense that Toronto lacks a fulsome and holistic arts and culture ecosystem, where people working in culture can easily engage with others to strengthen skills, share resources, discuss partnerships or even experience art and culture together. Being in connection, for many, is central to their growth as creators of art and culture. We heard that making connections and building community ultimately leads to capacity building.

“Senior artists feel pushed out...as they reach the point where they cannot afford to keep going and so many programs are for emerging and next gen artists.”

A few overarching themes we heard about building community and capacity are included below:

Deepening Relationships

Participants we heard from have a desire to deepen relationships and build community, both formally and informally. Across engagements, we heard about the need to reframe how we build connection - away from a transactional approach to a more reciprocal and relational one. The Creative Facilitators we hired relayed a strong desire from their participants for informal gatherings and spaces for people to connect with potential collaborators, audiences, and others without an agenda or end goal.

In 2034, “the cultural ecology would be humming and organizations of all kinds and types are working together to keep it that way.”

Sharing knowledge, skills and training

Participants who work in culture shared challenges engaging with others to strengthen skills, share resources, discuss partnerships or just experience art and culture together. Many participants - particularly those working in creative industries - shared the strong sense of collaboration and mutual support in Toronto, and across the board (for instance to strategize and come together during strikes). Participants are seeking more

opportunities to network, access mentorship and training, and to informally share ideas and skills which strengthens creative processes and propels career growth, while building a more sustainable sector. Participants mentioned that the City of Toronto could play a key role in facilitating support and capacity building.

Specifically, there were calls to remove barriers to education and training, mentorship and networking opportunities. Many participants shared that affordable and accessible professional development opportunities and peer networking events will help to also address inequities within the sector.

“There is a strong desire in Toronto to have a healthy [cultural] ecosystem. Coming out of major strikes in the film industry, there are lots of working groups and informal opportunities, and places where competitors are coming together to figure out how to make their pocket of the industry thrive”.

Participants also expressed concerns about uncertainty with respect to technology and Artificial Intelligence in particular, and hope that more opportunities for skills training (both retooling for jobs that may be lost due to new technology, as well as training to understand how to leverage technology) will be made available to protect Toronto's cultural workforce.

We heard that there is a digital divide in the Toronto arts and creative sector, and that we need to bridge it through investing in infrastructure, programs, education and online resources. Specific solutions suggested are outlined below.

Education and Youth Programming

In order to ensure a holistic arts and cultural ecosystem, participants across the board shared the need for increased exposure and access to arts and culture at a young age to instill the value of arts and culture early on, and to promote the various career paths. Some spoke to the long-term and systemic impacts of not providing wide access to artistic programming for children and youth - Toronto's youngest residents may not attend theatre and art exhibitions because they may not have developed the habit of participating in culture in these ways at a young age. This may lead to decreasing audiences for arts and culture, not to mention the host of other impacts this could have on the wellness and vitality of communities. Participants suggested increased exposure through school programs, libraries and community centres. Specifically, participants from the creative industries suggested the need for technological programming at a young age to develop interest in and talent for the sector.

“Looking at the public school system, and the lack of emphasis on culture and art is depleting the momentum and the spark on a community-wide basis. Comparing it against the public education system I was in, there was choir, school play, and art was such a big part of our education. And now my kids don’t have any music classes because their school can’t afford it. It definitely feels like something that is missing from a lot of childhoods right now.”

Survey Highlights:

Community & Capacity Building

Percentages indicate the portion of the participants who selected or agreed that specific response.

Overall, we heard that the top five ways participants hear about arts and culture activities include:

- Social media (Facebook/Meta, Instagram, Twitter/X, TikTok, etc.) (79%)
- Word of mouth from friends, family or colleagues (74%)
- Cultural organization websites or mailing lists (43%)
- Flyers or posters in public spaces (41%)
- Event listing websites or apps (Eventbrite, Meetup, Toronto-specific websites) (37%)

When asked what would motivate participants to get more involved in art and culture activities, 37% said better advertising and information on events taking place.

Ideas and Solutions Shared by Participants

In this section we have captured ideas shared by multiple participants as high-level or specific strategies that could help build community and capacity.

- Foster spaces where people can connect, formally and informally, specifically that are accessible and free or low cost (e.g. for multiple disabilities, neurodivergence, etc.) where communities can gather, share, and co-create. This includes both physical and virtual spaces that cater to diverse needs and abilities, and allows for intergenerational connection to share knowledge, co-create, etc.
- Invest in arts and culture education for children and youth, integrating arts education in schools and community spaces, ensuring that children have easy access to art classes and activities. For instance, consider arts programming at Toronto's EarlyON centres.
- Increase skills training, mentorship, and information-sharing opportunities for a diversity of careers, at each career stage.
- Increase access to technology to address barriers such as affordability, access to educational technology opportunities. Specific examples include providing access to subsidized software, digital tools, equipment and fabrication labs, integrating STEAM education with creative industries to prepare students for diverse career paths.
- Offer more free or subsidized arts programming and increase the number of City-funded recreation programs for all ages (e.g. adult woodworking programs).
- Support and incentivize more arts incubators that offer artists more stability and flexibility.
- Create events or opportunities for connection (e.g. monthly socials) to enable artists and creatives to share ideas, build networks, etc.
- Encourage and support "super-connectors" - people and organizations that can build connections between artists, creatives and people working across sectors e.g. a partnership between a small and large arts organization. The City of Toronto should play a key role as a matchmaker or facilitator.
- Provide support to bridge the gap between people working in culture and the private sector. Support them in building the skills to diversify their revenue.

Insight 4: Collective Advocacy & Coordination

We heard that many people in Toronto - including decision makers, funders and the general public - undervalue arts, culture, and creativity. This was a source of disappointment and frustration across all engagements. Some participants also shared concerns about the City of Toronto's 2024 budget investments in arts funding, particularly in relation to the significant investment in the Toronto Police Services.

Many members of the public also shared challenges with awareness and visibility - many don't know how to find out about cultural events, activities and programs happening in the city. Participants also shared a desire to promote all that Toronto has to offer in terms of arts, culture and creativity to help garner public excitement, support and investment.

"Advocacy and connection-making should not be a 'nice to have' from the City, rather it is the City's role to play."

"It's good to build talent but then we're losing that talent. Toronto definitely has a marketing problem. People come out of Waterloo engineering but immediately want to go work in San Fran; or from film move to LA... We have great success stories coming out of Toronto but we don't talk about it here or promote it."

A few overarching themes are included below:

Awareness, Information Sharing and Promotions


Many people don't participate in cultural events in Toronto because they don't know they exist. People shared challenges finding out about events, as well as opportunities, resources and training. They want support from the City and local marketing and tourism agencies such as Destination Toronto to spread the word about their activities. They spoke to a missed opportunity not only with Toronto residents, but also tourists who may not be aware of cultural attractions and opportunities. Artists and participants working in cultural organizations also shared the need for more support with international

"I wish there was a website where all the information would be available. For example I always go to the Winterlicious or Summerlicious events but I don't see ads anywhere. Because I already live here for 15 years I know where to find information. It would be nice having more ads or even a centralized website with all the events promoted by the city (culture sector, library events, festivals, etc)."

exposure and opportunities, like trade missions, to connect with international audiences.

Evaluating Impact and Telling Stories

When it comes to illustrating the impact of arts and culture, we heard that there needs to be a strong, collective effort amongst the City, TAC and other organizations to encourage City Councillors to invest more. This also includes reframing how arts and culture are valued, and looking beyond economic impact to other benefits on Torontonians and communities here. Part of the challenge is the lack of data to help demonstrate the value of investing in arts and culture.



“If we can’t value arts and culture, we aren’t going to get the funding, or supports.”

“You can’t just put it on us to advocate more – we’re doing as much as we can. We are so tired.”

Broadening Advocacy Efforts

Some participants highlighted the collective power and momentum for arts and culture advocacy that seems to have decreased in recent years, due in part to the daily struggles that people working in culture are facing. Some spoke of the Beautiful City Billboard Tax initiative⁶ which led to the increase in per capita funding in arts and culture in 2012. Funding levels are still too low to support this sector, and too low to support the general public who need more financial assistance to participate in it. We heard that the City needs to prioritize a promotional campaign of culture in the city, to highlight the important role art and culture plays in our lives, community and city.

⁶ The Billboard Tax Initiative was a community and collective advocacy movement that resulted in new revenue by taxing billboard advertisers and directing funds to support the arts.

Participants complained about precarious, under-paid and often short-term work engagements, and need support in advocating for fair and equitable wages, as well as timely payment. There was a common appeal across all engagement activities for some form of universal basic income. Many artists, creatives and cultural workers reflected on how valuable the federal government's COVID-19 Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) was during the pandemic in enabling people to continue their creative pursuits while enhancing wellness. While participants recognize that this kind of support is not within the City's jurisdiction, and they are keen for the City, TAC and TAF to continue to play strong roles - with other key leaders - in advocating on behalf of the culture sector. One town hall participant shared Ireland's recent pilot for Basic Income for Arts (BIA), describing the 3-year program that offered participants €325 per week and resulted in a reduction in reduced depression and anxiety, as well as a decrease in time spent working in other sectors (i.e. an ability to better support themselves through creative work).

"If there is not a genuine appreciation for art among the general public, then any prioritization is ultimately doomed to failure. The success and viability of arts funding at its core relies on the support of the general public."

"I cannot emphasize how important having a stable income is to our experiences. I believe it is something the City of Toronto can advocate for. I am so tired because I work multiple jobs ... it is literally killing me and making it hard for me to manage my chronic illness.... How can we thrive when we're just surviving? I am being paid so much less than I am worth, and less than my industry standards. This is so achievable, looking at what we were able to do with CERB [Canada's Emergency Response Benefit]... The City of Toronto and other government systems need to work on this."

"Funding during COVID for arts was fantastic... It gave us a baseline to try to figure out how we can operate in a cost-effective and stable way but now that it's gone, it's back to trying to catch separate small grants here and there."

People working in culture shared concerns about the lack of social supports for parents who work in culture and the need for advocacy to improve access to these supports. Some participants spoke of the trend in which cultural workers starting families either leave the industry/sector, or switch jobs to more administrative or institutional jobs not only for sustainable income but also access to health benefits and other social supports.

“One of the reasons I left [my freelance job] and went in-house was because I was struck by a car. Creatives don’t have any safety nets. They often work with substances that are toxic...The health and safety risks are a barrier for artists. We need benefits, supports and UBI... We don’t expect the city to solve these things. I recognize this means all three levels working together, but we just need to know you’re listening and trying to align these pieces.”

Finally, some participants discussed the need for increased advocacy regarding climate change within the realm of arts and culture. For instance, Music Declares Emergency⁷ is pushing for more sustainable transportation methods in cities because of the significant carbon footprint from audience travel to music events. This aligns with audiences’ concerns about the lack of transportation to cultural events. Others are advocating for stronger regulations e.g. against fast fashion. Some pointed to interesting initiatives linking climate and cultural work including Julie’s Bicycle⁸ in the UK and Green Tools Canada⁹ in Canada.

Improving coordination

We also learned that improved coordination between the City’s different divisions is essential to support the broader arts and cultural community. Many participants spoke of the need for various City departments to work together in order to better respond to needs of the public and people working in culture. This could include revamping city processes such as park permits, vendor licences, insurance requirements, responses to noise complaints for film productions, etc. One town hall participant, a program director of a Scarborough nonprofit, illustrated the lack of communication internally at the City. She shared that their project proposal received funding from the City’s Economic Development and Culture team but was rejected later by the City’s by-law office. This kind of disconnect impacts small organizations with limited time and resources negatively.

Additionally, there were calls to ensure that the voices of artists and cultural workers are not only heard but also actively included in decision-making processes and policy development within the City of Toronto, given their ability to creatively problem solve, and their lived experiences as end users of decisions made across City divisions. This could

⁷ <https://www.musicdeclares.net/>

⁸ <https://juliesbicycle.com/>

⁹ <https://www.cgtoolscanada.org/about/creativegreen>

include expanding the City's artist-in-residence programs and inviting artists to shape policies for other sectors like health, transportation and parks. Participants also made it clear that there is not adequate representation of equity-deserving communities in organizational leadership in the sector, and that both policy and advocacy are needed to ensure that leadership teams of publicly funded organizations reflect the diverse communities of Toronto.

"It would be great to get the chairs of the different advisory committees together to talk about opportunities for collaborations - music advisory, film board, fashion advisory... instead of operating in isolation, work together. The City can help bring that connectivity. That is low-hanging fruit."

"If we need to think beyond the budget and funding increases, then we have to look at the opportunity for the City to collaborate with other services. But is there the political will to make this happen?"

"If you don't have people who understand the arts involved in these discussions, it will very quickly become bureaucratic and focused on mitigating risk to the institution."

Ideas and solutions proposed by participants

In this section we have captured ideas shared by multiple participants as high-level or specific strategies that could help improve advocacy and/ or coordination:

- Explore opportunities to improve data collection and evaluation about the impact of arts and culture. Raise awareness about its impact and encourage decision-makers across sectors, including City Councilors, to look beyond its economic impact.
- Find new ways to build awareness and share information for events, activities, venues, and programs (including mentorship and professional development opportunities). Create a centralized database for all arts and culture opportunities and events, as well as support for neighbourhood based or discipline based promotions.
- Collaborate with key partners, including other levels of government to increase more arts and culture funding at all levels - particularly at the municipal level.
- Connect large, established arts and cultural organizations, businesses and industries with smaller organizations to share resources.
- Increase opportunities for artists and creatives to shape policy across City departments, through artist residencies and other creative opportunities.
- Find ways to increase wrap-around supports for individuals and organizations e.g. increasing financial literacy (via private or public sector partners).
- Equip Toronto Employment and Social Services to support emerging artists, creatives and cultural workers and connect them to opportunities.
- Promote Toronto e.g. through an annual campaign showcasing creative accomplishments and activities.
- Improve protection for intellectual property given rapid shifts in technology.
- Create a fee schedule for artists (of all disciplines), creatives and arts workers, including arts administrators to increase awareness of and expectations for equitable wages.



Image 6. Hasheel playing the Bansuri to start one of our Community Conversations.

Image description: Classical musician perched on a windowsill playing a Bansuri (Indian flute) in front of participants sitting around tables.

Reflections from Monumental

As a team of professionals and practitioners with lived experience working in arts and culture, we want to share some thoughts as we wrap up this community engagement process to inform the development of the next Culture Plan.

Throughout the document, we've shared feedback that the City of Toronto needs to expand the notion of what is considered "culture." In conversations with Indigenous participants, we heard that "culture" as it is currently defined, excludes important ways of being, knowing, and gathering. In our survey, we heard that some residents experience culture through a visit to their local library or park. Across the board, the message was clear: this is a moment for Toronto to recognize that "culture" is more than cultural production, it is about how we connect to each other, learn together, and expand our perspectives on the world. As a way to honour and recognize that culture in Toronto means different things to different people, we highly recommend the City of Toronto and the Toronto Arts Council rename the Culture Plan to *Toronto's Action Plan for Culture*, instead of the *Action Plan for Toronto's Culture Sector*, recognizing the diverse ways Torontonians are contributing to our rich cultural fabric.

We also heard that artists, culture workers, and audiences need to have their basic needs met in order to both develop work and enjoy Toronto's cultural offerings. Throughout this engagement, participants focused less on creative and cultural production, and more on issues of affordability, space, access, inclusion and mental health. In other words, *a thriving sector is not possible without thriving people and organizations*, and the Culture Plan is an opportunity to reignite culture in Toronto by starting with the basics: taking care of the quality of life of its artists, creatives, cultural workers and creative organizations, and prioritizing solutions to ensure cultural activities are accessible and affordable for the broad public. The City of Toronto's previous plan, *Creative Capital Gains* shared some of these priorities, calling out the need for affordable and sustainable cultural space, equitable distribution of cultural services to "all segments of the population", sustainable funding, the need for greater collaboration, and support for cultural clusters across neighbourhoods. Today, Toronto faces even greater challenges related to the increasing cost of living, technological shifts, deep inequities across communities, and growing instability among artists, creatives and cultural organizations. The Culture Plan could use more focus on how the City coordinates across departments and sectors to make it easier to produce and participate in culture. It could also focus on how the City as well as public and private partners can form meaningful partnerships to find creative solutions and better advocate for arts and culture together.

As we think about arts and culture over the next ten years, Torontonians are hopeful that the Culture Plan will be grounded in concrete actions to support not only the recovery of cultural sectors but also future proofing this vital part of our city's fabric. As one artist

shared, culture is more than just an economic driver, it contributes to our quality of life in Toronto.

Designing and delivering the engagement to inform the Culture Plan has been an incredible opportunity to bring the culture sector together at a time where artists, creatives, cultural workers, and audiences are feeling more disconnected than ever. Participants are feeling the rapid disappearance of hubs and informal spaces to meet and connect, and shared that the engagement process itself was an embodiment of what is needed in the City: time together to heal, to share, and feel reconnected to the transformative power of arts, culture and creativity. We strongly encourage the City of Toronto and the Toronto Arts Council to continue the dialogue with the sector and the public, knowing that engagement itself is an act of relationship-building, and knowing that the people most impacted by the Culture Plan may be the same people who can help develop the strongest ideas for it. We heard time and time again that more conversations are needed in order to take action on the learnings that surfaced.

“You need a home in order to practice your art. That's where you begin to dream and envision your art. If we don't have homes, we can't do that. It's all interconnected.”

The future for Toronto is unpredictable: from economic uncertainty, to technological innovation and disruption, to environmental degradation, to political and social shifts and more - the time has never been more urgent to do what we can to safeguard culture as we know it in Toronto. Investment in culture is like an insurance policy for the City - it's a way to ensure that we stay connected to each other, stay in conversation with our neighbours and communities, and are exposed to and celebrate our differences at a time when the impacts of these disruptive shifts means that we can find ourselves more isolated and divided.

The good news: those who participated in our process know that Toronto has the potential to nurture thriving and vibrant culture for people within and beyond our borders. When asked what their dream for Toronto is ten years from now, we heard that people want a city where everyone - from youth to seniors, across every neighbourhood - can move beyond the struggle of meeting their basic needs, towards a place where they have the space, ability and desire to connect to culture in its many forms. A place where those working in culture are resilient and no artist is living below the poverty line. A place where access to quality arts education is introduced at a young age everywhere, and where people can access support throughout their lives to pursue a creative career path or participate in arts and culture. A place where they can feel welcomed in many cultural and

public spaces to hang out with friends, collaborate on projects and experience dance, storytelling, fashion, art and countless other cultural activities.

Writer, activist and educator Adrienne Maree Brown says, “What we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system.” If we play our cards right, and work with partners across sectors to address fundamental needs for people working in culture, the rest of the city will flourish, and Toronto’s potential will not only be realized, but will reverberate across borders.

Appendices

| | |
|--|----|
| Appendix A: Meeting Reports Community Conversations (8) | 74 |
| Appendix B: Summary of Key Findings from Town Hall | 75 |
| Appendix C: Summary of Key Findings from Creative Facilitators Engagements | 76 |
| Appendix D: Summary of Findings from Public Survey | 77 |
| Appendix E: Summary of Findings from Community Toolkits | 78 |
| Appendix F: Summary of Findings from City of Toronto-led Engagements | 79 |
| Appendix G: Demographic Data from the Online Survey and the Town Halls | 80 |



Appendix A: Meeting Reports Community Conversations (8)



Appendix B: Summary of Key Findings from Town Hall



Appendix C: Summary of Key Findings from Creative Facilitators Engagements



Appendix D: Summary of Findings from Public Survey



Appendix E: Summary of Findings from Community Toolkits



Appendix F: Summary of Findings from City of Toronto-led Engagements



Appendix G: Demographic Data from the Online Survey and the Town Halls