

NEW SOUNDS, NEW SPACE

BUILDING HUBS AND NETWORKS
FOR TORONTO'S GRASSROOTS
MUSIC COMMUNITIES



WAVELENGTH

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Canada Council
for the Arts Conseil des arts
du Canada

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Toronto's grassroots and independent live music communities have long faced challenges accessing purpose-driven spaces that are essential to artistic creation and presentation. This exploratory study draws on interviews, focus groups, desk research, and concert listings data to assess the viability of music community hubs in Toronto. In a slowly recovering live music scene post-COVID, this space concept, viewed in a networked approach, is based on a multi-use, community-oriented venue model identified in Wavelength's previous study, *Reimagining Music Venues*.

A SNAPSHOT OF TORONTO'S LIVE MUSIC SCENE, POST-COVID

Since COVID-19, Toronto has seen a partial but uneven recovery. The recent or impending closures of several iconic venues (e.g., Phoenix Concert Theatre, Velvet Underground) and numerous venues failing to launch, particularly those in the small to mid-size capacity ranges, underscore the need to move beyond traditional business models.

The seeming rebound of large events and festivals in Toronto mask a weak underlying infrastructure. Our reports on the scene and concert listings data highlight pervasive issues:

- Promoter consolidation: The city's five largest organizers now drive over 45% of events, raising concerns around innovation and cultivating homegrown talent
- Downtown dominance: Despite concerted policy and civic efforts, there has been only marginal growth of live music activity in Toronto's inner suburbs
- Unsustainable costs: Rental inflation, fewer all-ages rooms, and shrinking alcohol revenues challenge the already-fragile economics of live music

LESSONS FROM TORONTO'S PAST // WHAT'S WORKING: CASE STUDIES FROM TORONTO MUSIC NOW

Artscape's collapse and TMAC's failed hub at 32 Lisgar highlight the pitfalls of fragmented governance and developer-dependent financing. But recent successes — such as Small World Music's newly acquired space, Hugh's Room Live's innovative community financing, and It's Ok* Studios' "meanwhile-use" tenancy — show that space tenure and community-oriented operating models are possible and successful.

CONSIDERING: STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT FINDINGS

Our extensive consultations with music promoters/presenters found strong demand for:

- Affordable, accessible small to mid-size venues suitable for a variety of genres and audiences
- Shared support services (e.g., rehearsal and recording facilities, support services for artists)
- Inclusive, non-institutional spaces for youth and artists representing equity-deserving groups
- Governing structures based on principles of autonomy, and avoiding top-down control

In forging a path forward, our findings underscore that established, commercial models — which represent 90% of Toronto's venues — fall short of meeting important community goals, yet upstart initiatives and non-profits risk instability without intentional support and sustainable planning.



BRINGING HUBS TO A COMMUNITY NEAR YOU

Drawing from real-life examples in Toronto and Ontario, we outline six pathways that interface the public, private, and non-profit sectors to bring music hubs online, outlining their pros and cons:

- Municipal-run
- Non-profit/community-led
- Community-municipal hybrid, version 1: community management
- Community-municipal hybrid, version 2: municipal management
- Community-commercial hybrid, version 1: event venue
- Community-commercial hybrid, version 2: developer contribution

These options, united by creative, context-specific partnerships, demonstrate the possibility of successfully balancing economic and real estate conditions with grassroots cultural stewardship.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution for Toronto's diverse music ecology, which is why we do not recommend one music hub, but rather advocate for a network of community-focused hubs that restore missing rungs in the venue ladder, foster a local music culture, and build resilience through sustainable ownership and financing.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The grassroots music community is driven by creative and entrepreneurial practitioners who benefit from a supportive policy environment. Based on our findings, we advance six policy recommendations to support a sustainable network of music spaces relevant to municipal, provincial, and federal levels

▲ = municipal ● = provincial ■ = federal

- Modernize land use planning to unlock new music spaces ▲ / ●
- Expand tax incentives to support the full music ecosystem ▲ / ●
- Require major developments to contribute to permanent cultural infrastructure ▲ / ● / ■
- Create a Toronto music space inventory and opportunity strategy ▲
- Establish a music space acquisition and partnership fund ▲ / ● / ■
- Protect existing grassroots music venues through planning and redevelopment policy ▲ / ●

INTRODUCTION

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BACKGROUND:

REIMAGINING MUSIC VENUES, CONTINUED



photo: Green Yang

The fifth anniversary of COVID-19 wasn't a birthday anyone was keen to celebrate. The global pandemic continues to define the 2020s, perhaps nowhere more so than the live music sector, which thrives on physical togetherness. More than four years have passed since the end of Ontario's final COVID lockdown, and live music spaces reopened their doors tentatively in that spring of '22. During this time, Wavelength and our partners at the University of Toronto began work on Reimagining Music Venues, a hybrid academic-industry study on the future of Ontario's live music spaces, co-authored by Prof. Daniel Silver (University of Toronto) and Jonathan Bunce (Wavelength Music).

We were thrilled with the positive response to Reimagining Music Venues upon its publication in September 2023, even as it illuminated the grim economic reality facing all grassroots music venues. This document is a follow-up of sorts, an exploratory study zooming in on one of the new venue models we profiled that garnered the most enthusiastic reception — the idea of a Music Centre, often synonymously called a “hub.” While our previous study took a province-wide view, here we have scoped our study to the City of Toronto, Ontario’s capital and Canada’s largest metropolis. As the de facto capital of the English Canadian music industry, almost one-fifth of the country’s artists reside in Toronto.¹

From Reimagining Music Venues:

“A Music Centre would include a venue (or multiple venues) at the heart of a building that could also incorporate rehearsal space, recording studios, workshop/educational space, cafe/socializing space, office space for music businesses or companies, and more.”

Based on this definition, this study includes a temperature check of Toronto’s music venue ecosystem, placing it in the wider North American context, particularly as experienced by presenters/promoters. We present cautionary tales of music and arts hubs in Toronto, as well as successful case studies to underscore that it’s not all doom and gloom. We also document best practices and, importantly, suggest actionable outcomes. Our methodology includes desk research, stakeholder interviews, and focus groups, supplemented by concert listings data. We make the case for community-driven music hubs in Toronto as a major asset to the city’s independent music scene across all genres, and identify several success stories and innovative models in our own backyard that point the way forward.

While the concept of a music centre or hub is not place-specific, this study explores how this type of venue might look and function in Toronto — and in some cases, where it already does. With a commitment to accessibility, affordability, innovation, and community, this space model would be a welcome outlier in Toronto’s venue ecology, where approximately 90% of spaces operate as for-profit businesses.² Such a space could be a complementary addition to a slowly growing ecology of intimately sized, non-profit, or charitable spaces such as Array Space, Hugh’s Room Live, It’s Ok* Studios, the Music Gallery, Small World Centre, the Tranzac, and Wavelength’s own venue pilot space at St. Anne’s Parish Hall, as well as hybrid models that combine a commercial



photo: Green Yang

license with a non-profit presenting arm, such as Lula Lounge/Lula Music and Arts Centre and DROM Taberna/Drom Artist Collective.

And any new venue would be a welcome addition to the Toronto musical landscape which, as our previous report showed, lost 13% of its active music venues during the pandemic. Almost all of these were independently owned, neighbourhood-centric businesses, while all the major corporate or institutional rooms survived. Though post-COVID data on the state of the city’s live music ecosystem remains scarce, the outlook in some corners of the sector remains frightening, with existing challenges faced by venue operators, promoters, and musicians only exacerbated by market conditions. A music-focused hub that offers rehearsal and recording facilities would also mitigate the city’s parallel rehearsal space crisis, which became acute during the pandemic following the closure of the chain of Rehearsal Factory buildings.³

¹ Kelly Hill, “Artists in Ontario in 2021,” Statistical insights on the arts, July 25, 2025, <https://statsinsights.hillstrategies.com/p/artists-in-ontario-in-2021>.

² Nordicity, Re:Venues – A Case and Path Forward for Toronto’s Live Music Industry, October 8, 2020, <https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/9846-Re-Venues-FINAL-REPORT.pdf>.

³ Mike Tanner, “Music Rehearsal Spaces in the City of Toronto,” January 6, 2022, <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2022/ec/bgrrd/backgroundfile-174917.pdf>.

PART I:

A SNAPSHOT OF TORONTO'S LIVE MUSIC SCENE, POST-COVID



DROM Taberna, photo: Camille NG

*“Someone Comes to Town,
Someone Leaves Town”*

— Cory Doctorow (Toronto science fiction author), 2005

PHOENIX FROM THE ASHES

The Phoenix Concert Theatre is likely the highest profile venue closure — or imminent closure — since the end of pandemic lockdowns. The venerable concert club, a favourite place to see rising artists or legacy acts since 1991, announced in June 2024 that it would be closing its doors at 410 Sherbourne Street on January 15, 2025, to make way for the site's redevelopment as a residential condo. The resulting outcry — and support from the City, within its limited means — gave the Phoenix an extension on the end of their lease, a year-plus reprieve that will allow them to operate in their current building until some point in 2026.⁴

Though the City is committed to assisting the Phoenix in its search for a new home, finding a suitable location for a 1,300-capacity venue — with a current footprint of 20,000 square feet — is not an easy task in a city with an overheated real estate market. Toronto's traditional venue-rich strips on Queen, Dundas, Spadina, College/Carlton and Bloor/Danforth are maxed out in terms of available space, and Toronto no longer has a post-industrial frontier of untapped building supply. The City also lacks the ability to approve licenses for entertainment establishments in industrial areas zoned as employment lands.⁵ Neighbourhoods in development such as Ookwemin Minising on the Port Lands are still years away from welcoming residents, let alone supporting a major music venue.

THE THREAT OF A MUSICAL MONOPOLY

With the future of the independently owned Phoenix — a vital step for artists on Toronto's venue ladder — uncertain, a more worrisome picture has emerged: that of increasing consolidation of ownership of Toronto's venues in the hands of one multinational company.

In July 2023, Live Nation Canada (LNC) — the Canadian subsidiary of the world's largest concert promoter — announced its acquisition of the Opera House, a 950-capacity club in Toronto's east end that had been family-run since 1989. The purchases added to LNC's roster of Toronto venues, which includes the RBC Amphitheatre (formerly Budweiser Stage; 16,000 capacity), Echo Beach (5,000), History (2,500), the Danforth Music Hall (1,400), and, until its closure in October 2025, the Velvet Underground (440). This has raised understandable fears within Toronto's independent venue community around Live Nation's increasing



photo: James Peacock

grip, considering its ownership of Ticketmaster and over 300 venues worldwide, use of restrictive ticketing contracts, and control of international touring. These practices, which have dramatically hiked up ticket fees, led to an antitrust investigation by the United States Department of Justice in which a jury determined in April 2026 that Live Nation had been operating an illegal anti-competitive monopoly. Another worrying development has been the increased investment by AEG, the world's second-largest concert promoter, into mid-sized venues across Canada, pushing out independent and local competitors.

Though we have yet to see the same level of corporate scoop-up of independent venues in Toronto as has happened in many American markets, many are nervous that the Opera House is but the next domino to fall. Nevertheless, promising grassroots mobilization efforts are working to buck major corporations' dominating the live music landscape in the United States, including the COVID-era establishment of NIVA (the National Independent Venue Association).

BOOM TOWN?

The post-COVID concert economy has been a boom time for the majors, with the RBC Amphitheatre's summer concert season consistently selling out even as ticket prices creep ever higher. LNC's opening of History — a 2,500-capacity club with a state-of-the-art sound and lighting system — in November 2021 has been welcomed by fans for its seamless concertgoing experience and for its size, making it an alternative destination to Rebel, the comparable-scale hall in the Port Lands district. An ideal place to see higher-profile (but not stadium-level) artists like PJ Harvey, Tokyo Police Club, LCD Soundsystem, or Men I Trust, History is also something of an outpost on the edges of the east-end Leslieville and Beaches neighbourhoods, pushing Toronto's venue ecology outside the downtown core.

⁴ Alex Nino Gheciu, "The Phoenix Concert Theatre to stay open in current location until 2026," The Canadian Press, October 25, 2024, https://www.thecanadianpressnews.ca/entertainment/the-phoenix-concert-theatre-to-stay-open-in-current-location-until-2026/article_79bfa60e-1fe2-55a1-b236-b0507351f325.html.

⁵ Official Plan: Chapter 4 Land Use Designations," City of Toronto, last modified June 2024, <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/planning-development/official-plan-guidelines/official-plan/chapters-1-5/official-plan-chapter-4/>.

History was one of a handful of multi-million dollar openings and reopenings that coincided with the fall 2021 lifting of pandemic capacity restrictions by the Ontario government.⁶ The others were located closer to the city centre and traditional venue strips, and all considered iconic: 2,500-seat jewel Massey Hall was relaunched following a gorgeous \$184M renovation as part of the Allied Music Centre, which included a new 500-capacity club, TD Music Hall; the once-scuzzy El Mocambo, on which merchant banker Michael Wekerle spent a princely sum of \$35M to return it to its two-floor rock-club glory; and the Mod Club Theatre reopened as the upgraded Axis Club, before reassuming its previous identity in 2025 — though it could be argued that this was only a corporate purchase of the naming rights by LNC, who partnered with the building's owners in 2023.⁷



photo: Erik McLean

While Live Nation rides high with History, others were not so lucky. In April 2025, Wekerle put the El Mocambo into receivership, having defaulted on \$56M in loans tied to the property. It also appears that Wekerle's business model was based on a rosily optimistic hope: booking high-priced underplays by touring artists — a plan that didn't pan out, on which Wekerle blamed Live Nation's stranglehold on international touring.⁸ Yet the club remains open, with a concert calendar dominated by cover bands. Meanwhile, as of press time, a new owner, Cyrus Madon, a longtime executive at Brookfield Asset Management, has come forward, with the intention of keeping the club alive as a music venue.⁹

Another notable reopening post-lockdown is the Concert Hall, the historic 1,200-capacity room in the Masonic Temple building at 888 Yonge Street. Known for hosting legendary shows from the 1960s through to the late '90s, the building had been out of use as a venue for over a decade.¹⁰ The tech company that currently owns the property put in the due diligence to make the hall a viable concert venue, with general manager Shawn Creamer (formerly of the Dakota Tavern) helming a successful relaunch in mid-2023. We Are in the Future (formerly Collective Concerts) is among the venue's most active promoters, alongside Modo Live, Not Dead Yet, Rapseason, Live Nation

Canada, and others. With the Concert Hall's grand ambience restored, this adds another mid-sized hall in the same bracket as the Danforth and the Phoenix, indicative of growth on the higher rungs of the venue ladder.

At the very top tier, Live Nation Canada added another missing piece in summer 2025: Rogers Stadium, a 50,000 person open-air arena in uptown/suburban Downsview Park. Intended to take the pressure off the downtown core — as the only comparably sized venue in the city is the dead-central Rogers Centre (frequently booked up by sporting events) — the new stadium provides a sprawling locale for mega-tours such as Blackpink, Coldplay, and Oasis. A partnership with Northcrest Developments, Rogers Stadium is intended to be a temporary structure during the massive, long-term redevelopment of the former Downsview Airport Lands. Garnering plenty of media attention, the venue's first handful of shows saw sellout crowds, another indicator of booming business for the big players.

This boom draws a counter-weight to the perceived trend of the city's venues closing down. But what does it mean for the grassroots music venues, where emerging artists build their careers and hone their craft?

SMALL VENUE RENAISSANCE — WITH A CAVEAT

While the local live music industry has faced challenges, their economic and social impacts are dwarfed by the overlapping challenges affecting the city's major arts institutions, which have required numerous public bailouts. Cultural developer Artscape went into a high-profile receivership in 2023, related to the failure of their ambitious Daniels Launchpad development (see Part II). Meanwhile, major non-profit institutions including Harbourfront Centre, Luminato Festival, TIFF, and Hot Docs have been shaken by multiple crises, with massive deficits exacerbated by the loss

6 Becky Robertson, "Capacity limits finally lifted further for events in Ontario," BlogTO, October 28, 2021, <https://www.blogto.com/city/2021/10/capacity-limits-finally-lifted-further-ontario-events/>.

7 Stefano Rebuli, "The Mod Club Returns to Toronto," Billboard Canada, May 28, 2025, <https://ca.billboard.com/business/touring/mod-club-toronto>.

8 David Friend, "El Mocambo: Legendary Toronto concert venue hits the market again," Global News, April 11, 2025, <https://globalnews.ca/news/11127723/el-mocambo-legendary-concert-venue-for-sale>.

9 Phil Tsekouras, "Toronto's El Mocambo will continue as concert venue: new owner," CP24, August 6, 2025, <https://www.cp24.com/local/toronto/2025/08/06/torontos-el-mocambo-will-continue-as-concert-venue-new-owner/>.

10 Jonny Dovercourt, "Tales from The Concer Hall at the Masonic Temple," spacing, May 28, 2020, <https://spacing.ca/toronto/2020/05/28/tales-from-the-concert-hall-at-the-masonic-temple/>.

of major sponsors such as Bell and TD, reluctant audiences, an unpredictable post-pandemic economy, and the abrupt cutoff of COVID-era subsidies in 2023.

Beneath all this macroeconomic churn, Toronto's grassroots music venues survive. Many longtime scene stalwarts — The Cameron House, DROM Taberna, The Garrison, Bambi's, The Piston, Monarch Tavern, Bovine Sex Club, Supermarket, Sneaky Dee's (at publication time, saved from a looming redevelopment threat by a concerted community effort), Handlebar, Hard Luck Bar, Rivoli, The Rex Hotel, Burdock Music Hall and others — all book bands and DJs multiple nights a week, stubbornly staying afloat in spite of the low profit margins endemic to the business.

There have been more casualties, such as roots music mainstay The Dakota Tavern — the victim of insurance challenges and post-pandemic revenue shortfalls which led to its sale, renovation, imminent reincarnation under a new name, and uncertain future as a music venue. More recently, the Velvet Underground announced its closure 30 years after opening as a goth club. The loss of the 355-capacity Queen West fixture again stoked fears about the endangerment of grassroots venues, though the club had been owned and operated by LNC since 2019. If even the multinational entertainment giant can't keep a small venue afloat, it speaks volume to the business model's precarity. And many locals mourned the closure of the historic Imperial Pub, in business for 81 years, which hosted small performances in its back room.

Underground music still continues to thrive in Toronto in spite of doom-laden headlines and the runaway cost of living. Over the last two years, the live independent rock-and-adjacent scene has been bolstered by a wave of new and renewed smaller rooms booking bands, including the Collective Arts Toronto Taproom, Collision (f.k.a. Ted's Collision), Houndstooth, See-Scape, the Sound Garage at Blood Brothers Brewing, and Dina's Tavern (the new identity of the historic Silver Dollar Room). But many of these spaces are outright tiny — under 100 capacity — which does not translate into a big payday for working musicians when artists are only paid through money collected at the door.

The electronic music scene has also seen a new wave of more intimate, DJ-friendly spaces, such as 915 Dupont, BSMT 254, The Little Jerry, and Standard Time. All of these venues survive off of bar sales, and some of these boutique listening rooms have correspondingly high-priced drink menus. But some did not last: Sounds Good closed its doors after less than two years.

The live music scene's tenacity can be attributed to the persistence of its ever-entrepreneurial operators, who now also benefit from some newfound support from City Hall in the form of a tax break. The Creative Co-Location Facilities Property Tax Subclass, which includes a specific category for live music venues, allows eligible properties to receive up to 50% off their municipal property taxes for the qualifying portion of the building on the condition of booking live music



DROM Taberna. photo: Camille NG

on a regular basis.¹¹ Yet, this survival story remains rooted in old ways: the traditional bar model of venues funding their operations through alcohol sales. The *Reimagining Music Venues* report demonstrated a hunger for alternatives, but as of yet, no one has been able to crack the code.

And for every bit of good news, there's a horror story. Mercy, slated to open in a former cinema property on Gerrard Street in the east end, saw a first-time operator get stuck in a lease for a building unfit for occupancy, with a landlord reportedly unwilling or unable to do anything to help.¹²

11 "Resources for Music Venues," City of Toronto, accessed May 9, 2026, <https://www.toronto.ca/business-economy/industry-sector-support/music/resources-music-venues/>.

12 Alex Hudson, "East Toronto Is Getting a New Independent Music Venue," Exclaim!, March 4, 2025, <https://exclaim.ca/music/article/east-toronto-is-getting-a-new-independent-music-venue>.

PART II:

FAREWELL TO COMMUNAL ART SPACES: LESSONS FROM TORONTO'S PAST

Toronto is a city where the spirit of collectivism and community building runs deep, especially in its music and arts scenes. This is demonstrated in the names of several local music and arts stalwarts that evoke themes of collectivism, such as promoter Collective Concerts (now known as We Are In The Future), Hamilton-based craft brewery and operator of its own eponymous Toronto concert venue Collective Arts Brewing, former heavy-music venue Coalition, and management firm Coalition Music.

Historically, Toronto has championed communal spaces such as 401 Richmond, a turn-of-the-century tin lithography factory that has housed countless arts group tenants since 1994 — and to this day is home to venerable artist-run institutions such as A Space Gallery, CARFAC, imagineNATIVE, Images Festival, Musicworks, Summerworks, and YYZ — and the membership/coworking model offered by the Centre for Social Innovation, though it has downsized its footprint in recent years. And the saga of the rise and fall of Artscape — the city's original purveyor of multi-tenant arts buildings since the 1980s — is a story well told but always worth revisiting.



The dream of a collective hub for the music community in Toronto is one that should be tempered by some cautionary tales. And it's worth remembering that no hub can serve the entire music community given the size and diversity of a city like Toronto. There are micro-scenes with their own dreams. Since the mid-2000s, the idea of a state-of-the-art centre for the city's presenters of contemporary classical music (or "new music") modelled after Amsterdam's Muziekgebouw has been discussed and dissected.¹³ Twenty years later, such a temple of modern sound has not yet been built.

¹³ Jason van Eyk, "From NuMuFest to Muziekgebouw: New music in Toronto" in *The State of the Arts: Living with Culture in Toronto*, ed. Alana Wilcox, Christina Palassio, and Jonny Dovercourt (Coach House Books, 2006), 306.

CREATIVE CLUSTER-HUBS: THE SAGA OF TMAC AND 32 LISGAR

The idea of a music hub is in line with the concept of creative clusters, which was very much in vogue in cultural planning circles in the late 2000s and early 2010s following the rise of Richard Florida's work, which touted the benefits of making cities attractive to the "creative class."¹⁴ According to the British Council (2013): "By 'hubs' is meant a very specific location, usually a building or group of buildings, that provides affordable workspace, support and exhibition or sales space for creative entrepreneurs and acts as the central point of a wider network – hence the analogy of a hub as the centre of a wheel."¹⁵



Prior to its highly publicized 2023 receivership, non-profit organization and cultural developer Artscape was long viewed as the city's leader in "creative placemaking" (a term they laid claim to coining in 2006)¹⁶ and creating affordable space for artists and arts organizations — a challenging task in the context of the city's overheated real estate market.

Back in the 1990s, however, disenchantment with Artscape amongst its tenants led a collective of non-profit media arts organizations, self-identified as Artist Run Centres, to propose an alternative — even resulting in a 1994 feasibility study for what was then called CACTI (Cultural Arts Centre Toronto Inc.). Out of these early discussions came the formation of the Toronto Media Arts Cluster (TMAC) in 2003, later rebranded the Toronto Media Arts Centre, which coincidentally shared the same acronym as City Hall's Toronto Music Advisory Committee. Rather than letting Artscape call the shots as landlords, however benevolent, TMAC would run their own building. After many years of negotiations, in 2011 the collective struck a deal with the City and a developer, Urbancorp, to take over a 30,000 square-foot space at the base of a condo tower at 32 Lisgar Street south of Queen, in the West Queen West Art + Design District.

It was all quite promising: the initial plans for TMAC included several contemporary art galleries, a cinema/performance space, ample workshop space, and a cafe/bar, in one of the city's hippest creative districts — whose artist population had been decimated by gentrification throughout the 2000s. Unfortunately, what ensued became a cautionary example on how establishing a multi-arts centre can go off the rails. The purpose-built space

was financed through a municipal density bonus — at the time, Section 37 of Ontario's Planning Act was the mechanism by which developers could add height or density to developments in return for funding projects that would benefit the community, such as an arts and cultural centre.

Though an agreement was finalized in 2014, a year later the City reneged "citing a lack of confidence in TMAC management, in part due to infighting between the various organizations," according to *Now Magazine*.¹⁷ This kicked off a legal battle with TMAC, who then sued the City and developer. To make matters worse, in 2016 Urbancorp filed for bankruptcy. Eventually it was agreed the collective could take occupancy, provided they met a \$2.5M fundraising target to prove their financial viability. The building finally opened its doors in 2018, but in a half-finished state — doors that opened backwards, raw concrete floors, a never-completed cinema — and only a handful of the groups that had originally driven the project ended up moving in.

Four brave organizations soldiered on — Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre (CFMDC), Charles Street Video, and two later gaming arts additions to the collective: Dames Making Games and Gamma Space. Briefly, TMAC was a hub of activity and buzz within the city's arts community, including some musical happenings. But the détente with the City didn't last long, and in March 2019, TMAC were asked to vacate, the City citing a lack of confidence in their claims of fundraising success. The legal wrangling continued on into the pandemic, and in July 2021, the remaining arts groups were finally, sadly, evicted.¹⁸

The City took over the space in 2022 and issued a Request for Expressions of Interest (REOI) to secure a new operator, ideally

14 Frank Bures, "Richard Florida Can't Let Go Of His Creative Class Theory. His Reputation Depends On It," *Rust Belt Magazine*, December 13, 2017, <https://beltmag.com/richard-florida-cant-let-go/>.

15 John Newbigin, *New and Changing Dynamics: How the Global Creative Economy Is Evolving*, British Council, 2016, <https://firebasestorage.googleapis.com/v0/b/creative-hub-87c59.appspot.com/o/files%2Fb3672f5d-1027-41dd-873f-d624b8320134.pdf?alt=media&token=d81a23dc-d763-4330-a872-05e84c460cb4>.

16 "Artscape – Making space for creativity since 1986," Artscape, accessed May 9, 2026, <https://www.artscape.ca>.

17 Rosemary Heather, "Why Toronto is trying to evict an arts organization on Queen West," *Now Magazine*, March 9, 2020, <https://nowtoronto.com/culture/art-and-design/tmac-city-of-toronto-civil-dispute/>.

18 "Timeline," Toronto Media Arts Centre, last modified 2025, <https://www.tomediaarts.org/timeline>.



Camp Wavelength 2016. photo: Stephanie Keating

within the spheres of media arts or creative digital programming. The REOI indicated that the City would be effectively waiving the rent (a nominal \$2 a year) but that operating costs would be approximately \$12,000 to \$16,000 CAD per month, plus property taxes. With operating costs still high for most community-based arts organizations, the REOI process did not result in securing a long-term operator. Instead, the City offered short-term licenses to a handful of cultural groups, including the Toronto Biennial of Art, which used it as a hub for its 2024 exhibition, and, more recently, InterAccess, a media arts gallery that was one of the original TMAC collective members.

In May 2025, the City hosted a Town Hall about the future of the space — inviting attendees to “dream big” and unveiling a more open-ended REOI process, which launched later in the year. There was no mention of the building’s tortured history. A post about the forum on the ousted TMAC collective’s website was caustically titled “An Empty Invitation to Dream.”¹⁹

The 32 Lisgar site remains full of potential, with many of its galleries well maintained and functional, though its theatre space remains unfinished. The ground-floor cafe space was recently taken over by long-running queer- and trans-centric bookstore Glad Day. The right operator may still yet come along, and the City has committed to preserving the asset for the creative community. But it’s a textbook example of how ambitious albeit well-intentioned cultural development projects — mired by mismanaged expectations around parties’ contributions and capacity — can go off the rails.

ARTSCAPE: CREATIVE PLACE-BREAKING

There is no bigger beached whale on the shores of Toronto cultural real estate development than Artscape. The case of Artscape’s receivership and subsequent collapse in 2023 serves as an essential cautionary tale for arts and culture space managers on the risks of unmanaged growth, scaling up and pulling the trigger on risky financial and real estate decisions — what cultural worker and curator Caitlin Jones called a “magical thinking [that] was deeply disconnected from the organizational, policy, and real-estate reality in which we all exist.”²⁰ The Artscape story underscores the importance of arts organizations to maintain focus on their mission, stated goals, intended beneficiaries, and attainable outcomes.

Founded in 1986 in response to the city’s real estate boom and crackdown on live/work spaces, Artscape was initially an affordable studio provider. The 1991 opening of 60 Atlantic in Liberty Village (then simply known as “the warehouse district”) was an early success story. After further victories including the 1999 opening of Artscape Gibraltar Point on Toronto Island and the 2003 revitalization of the Distillery District, the organization continued on a hot streak of new cultural buildings across the city, including Wychwood Barns (2008), Daniels Spectrum (2012), and Youngplace (2013).²¹ Artscape properties housed a range of

19 “An Empty Invitation to Dream,” Toronto Media Arts Centre, May 8, 2025, <https://www.tomedarts.org/articles/an-empty-invitation-to-dream>.

20 Caitlin Jones, “Magical/Market Thinking: Reflecting on the Rise and Fall of Artscape,” Momus, February 2, 2024, <https://momus.ca/magical-market-thinking-reflecting-on-the-rise-and-fall-of-artscape/>.

21 Tim Jones, “The Evolution of Artscape,” Artscape 5.0: Strategic Plan 2018–2022, Artscape, October 2017, <https://www.artscape.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Artscape-Strategic-Plan-2018-to-2022.pdf>.

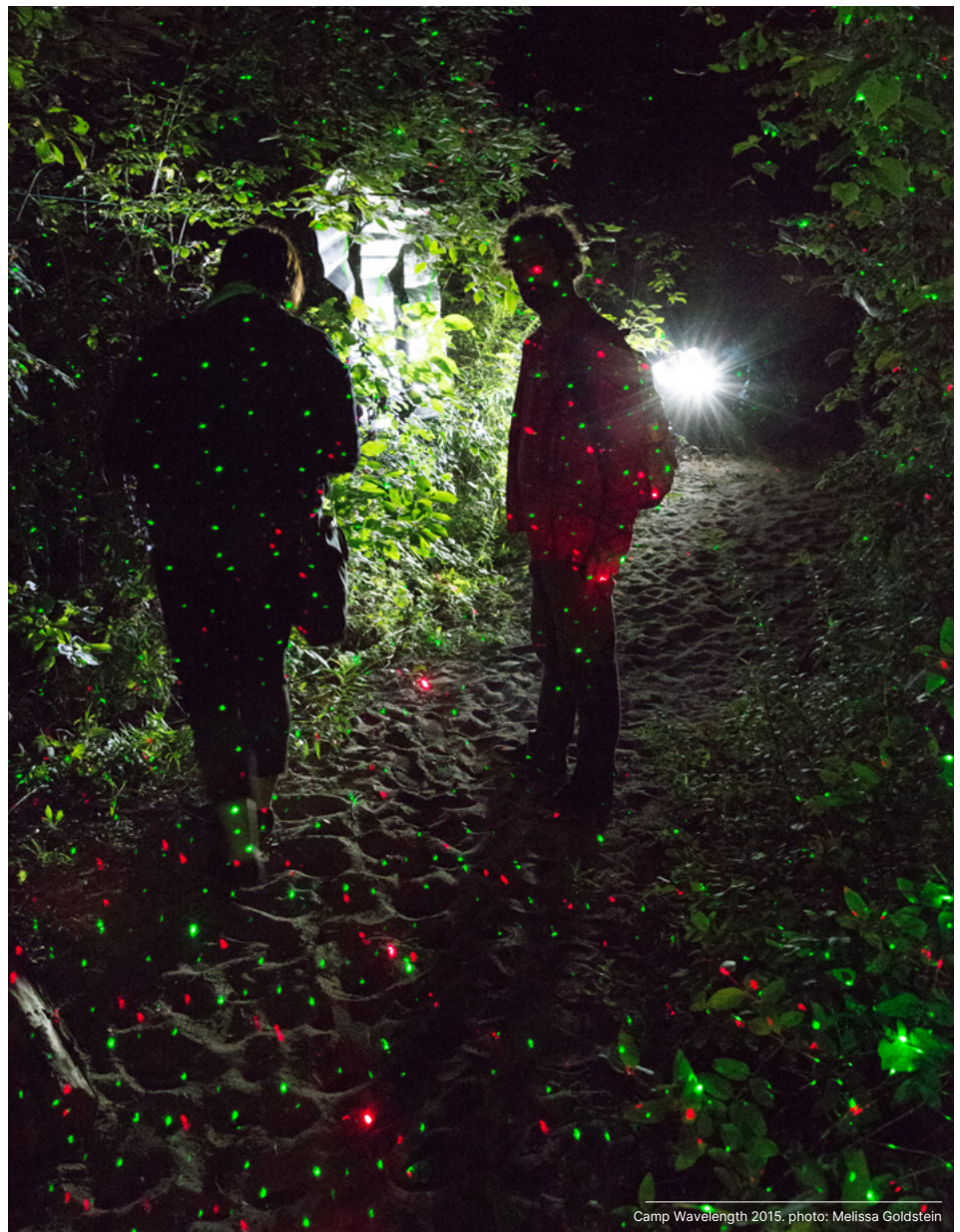
tenants including both professional artists and arts organizations, mostly for the purposes of administrative or exhibition space, while some offered live/work units.

In terms of live music, several of Artscape's buildings offered a rental program through Artscape Performance and Event Venues, though few concert promoters made regular use of them, mostly due to cost barriers and competition with more lucrative bookings such as weddings and corporate events. Though Artscape provided space to the city's many creatives, their rental-driven business model meant that their buildings often housed a collection of tenants that had little in common with each other, resulting in their facilities failing to develop a distinct character. Many tenants also complained privately that the cost of Artscape buildings was not that affordable relative to other options on the market.

That said, when it worked, it worked: Artscape's community-driven model for venue rentals has been reported as a positive experience for presenters at spaces such as Daniels Spectrum in Regent Park, which allowed for dedicated technical and programmatic support. "What stood out was the opportunity to have a more in-depth dialogue with the people running the space," said one concert presenter. "It wasn't just a basic 'Can I get a hold on this room?' kind of exchange, [which is] usually the extent of the conversation elsewhere."

Artscape Gibraltar Point, a unique artist retreat centre on the idyllic beachfront of Lake Ontario, developed an authentic sense of community amongst its resident and visiting artists, and, prior to the devastating flooding of 2017, hosted outdoor live music events including Wavelength's summer festivals and NXNE concerts. This distinct character may have been due to Gibraltar Point's Toronto Islands location giving it physical and mental distance from Artscape's head office. Other buildings, such as Youngplace on Shaw Street, became home to vibrant incubators such as Small World Centre (see Part III).

At its height, Artscape managed 14 properties and provided live and work spaces for 265 residential and 125 commercial tenants.²² The late 2010s saw an aggressive expansion including the launch of ambitious new projects such as Artscape Daniels Launchpad — opened in 2018 on the Queens Quay waterfront



Camp Wavelength 2015, photo: Melissa Goldstein

on the site of the former Guvernment nightclub. Launchpad was a 30,000-square-foot "cultural entrepreneurship" hub with a membership-based, coworking model aimed at young artists and entrepreneurs, based in the tech startup and creative-cluster culture of the early decade. Members gained access to shared facilities including recording or woodworking studios. Many critics observed that this represented a fundamental drift from Artscape's original mission to provide affordable, dedicated spaces to artists and organizations. The costly, over-budget \$31 million project overstretched Artscape's financial capacity, leaving the company overleveraged with debt. The optimistic and laudably affordably priced membership model failed to deliver projected revenues — and then the pandemic hit, grinding earned revenue to a halt.²³

22 "Agenda Item History - 2023.MM11.32," City of Toronto, October 12, 2023, <https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2023.MM11.32>.

23 Josh O'Kane, David Milstead, and Greg Mercer, "Artscape tried to launch a 'game changer' for artists. Now it's on the brink of collapse," *The Globe and Mail*, November 10, 2023, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/article-artscape-launchpad-daniels-receivership/>.

Meanwhile, Artscape's large portfolio of buildings, combined with their mandate to deliver below-market rent, was resulting in what Jones characterized as "chronic operating shortfalls." By the end of 2022, Artscape's long-term debt had grown to \$31.7 million.²⁴ Interest rates and inflation had both risen in the post-pandemic economy, and, combined with the departure of longtime CEO Tim Jones in 2021, Artscape's management faced the perfect storm of insolvency in mid-2023.

Following an unsuccessful attempt to sell the toxic Launchpad asset, in August 2023 Artscape announced that it would be placed into receivership, citing its "unsustainable" level of debt.²⁵ The news sent shockwaves through Toronto's creative community, with many artists and organizations fearing they would lose their homes. Mercifully, the City stepped in to bail out the company so it could continue operations and avoid evictions. Following the formal start of the receivership process in early 2024, two successor non-profit organizations were founded: ArtHubs Toronto Inc. — which currently operates some of the former Artscape cultural hubs, including Daniels Spectrum, Gibraltar Point, Wychwood Barns, and Youngplace — and ANPHI Affordable Homes Inc., encompassing the various affordable residential assets where hundreds of artists lay their heads.

As arts consultant Menon Dwarka wrote in a post-mortem of the Artscape saga, "One of the clearest lessons is the danger of overexpansion without stable funding."²⁶ Furthermore, Dwarka points out a key takeaway from Artscape's more long-term financial challenges, beyond the death blow dealt by the Launchpad misadventure: that "affordable cultural spaces often cannot be sustained by earned revenue alone without ongoing subsidy or support."

Also relevant to the conversation about Artscape are the caveats of using real estate development to fund arts spaces. Artscape Distillery Studios was considered a successful hub model, housing dozens of artists and arts organizations, but after the 20-year lease's end — initially secured through a developer contribution — a new path forward could not be found, resulting in the tenants' displacement.²⁷ This inflection point in Artscape's saga points to the tough realities around planning for long-term sustainability.

Without reliable public or private support for operations, would-be cultural developers are left playing a shell game of seeking out capital project funding to keep the cash flowing — but at the risk of getting burdened with buildings that are empty shells. The spectre of Artscape haunts Toronto's arts and culture community with the key lesson: *don't reinvent Artscape*.

24 Josh O'Kane, "Artist-space provider Artscape owed \$21-million to TD, faces receivership court date next week," The Globe and Mail, January 5, 2024, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/article-artist-studio-provider-artscape-owed-21-million-to-td-faces/>.

25 Zakiya Kassam, "Toronto's Artscape To Be Placed Into Receivership Citing 'Unreasonable' Debt," Storeys, August 29, 2023, <https://storeys.com/artscape-toronto-placed-into-receivership/>.

26 Menon Dwarka, "The Rise and Fall of Artscape," LinkedIn, May 1, 2025, [linkedin.com/pulse/rise-fall-artscape-menon-dwarka-if01c](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/rise-fall-artscape-menon-dwarka-if01c).

27 Peter Edwards, "Artscape Distillery Studio tenants face displacement after early lease termination," Toronto Star, December 8, 2021, https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/artscape-distillery-studio-tenants-face-displacement-after-early-lease-termination/article_26210887-87cc-5a1d-bb03-1ea265b13060.html.



Daniels Spectrum, photo: James Peacock



Wavelength at Brothers Dressler photo: Green Yang

PART III:

WHAT'S WORKING: CASE STUDIES FROM TORONTO MUSIC NOW

While Toronto continues Artscape's autopsy, some innovative space operators are in promising pursuit of a white whale: a financially sustainable artist-run or artist-oriented music and culture hub. This section will profile three of these spaces.

SMALL WORLD CENTRE

Small World Music is a recent success story emerging from near-disaster, not of their own making. Since 2014, the charitable organization and long-running global music presenters had operated a small venue space — the Small World Centre — out of Artscape Youngplace at 180 Shaw Street, south of Dundas. The Artscape receivership of 2023 put the future of the former public school building's 30-plus tenants into doubt, though the City of Toronto's stewardship eventually put Youngplace under the management of a new non-profit, ArtHubs Toronto Inc.

But the Artscape breakdown highlighted the fragility of commercial tenancy and the need for community ownership to secure cultural spaces for the future. In early 2025, the City put forward \$1.5M — alongside \$2.6M from the federal government's Canada Cultural Spaces Fund — to allow five groups at Youngplace, including Small World Music, to purchase their spaces.²⁸

Small World Music are no longer tenants and now are owners of their own space, ensuring its long-term security. Though the Centre has a small capacity — 60 to 70 seated or 100 standing — and comes with other venue-related challenges, including the lack of a green room, bar, or streetfront exposure, being located inside an institutional building on a side street, it is just one of three units that Small World Music will possess. The other two include their administrative office, which they intend to make available to other arts groups for meetings or coworking, and a post-production studio dedicated to immersive audio. In lieu of food and beverage revenue, these support facilities can be modest revenue drivers.

The Centre's limited capacity challenges the venue's economics — as it is hard to break even while paying equitable artist fees — but it is serving other vital functions as an incubator. The space fills a niche in the local music ecosystem, offering a vital and well-suited stage for emerging artists, many of whom are newcomer Canadians or refugee artists performing in non-mainstream genres. As such, Small World Music subsidizes its rental program in order to ensure its financial accessibility, while also creating a development pipeline for performers that are new to the stage or the city.



Small World Music. photo: Camille NG

Small World Music CEO Umair Jaffar relates a story highlighting the Centre's unexpected benefits:

"We get high school kids from the Jane and Finch neighbourhood who want to do hip-hop shows. The kids tell us that at a lot of venues, they ask them to bring in a police officer. But since we're not a public-facing venue, we don't have those extra requirements or regulations. The kids find it very accessible and affordable to come here. We don't ask them questions, as an organization we don't judge them. There are less hoops for them to jump through. But it's not a hip-hop space, right? It's not set up to be like that. However, it works for them because it's affordable and no assumptions are made for certain groups who feel that they are being either targeted or intentionally scrutinized in other, more mainstream spaces."

The Centre also gives all of its artists video and audio recordings of their performances which, going forward, they will be able to have edited on-site in the new post-production facility. This is an emerging new model, both in terms of operations and ownership, that provides a sense of inspiration for other arts groups looking to build resilience through diversified, values-driven revenue streams.

HUGH'S ROOM LIVE

While the pandemic was devastating for some, for others the lockdown provided an opportunity for reinvention. In the case of Hugh's Room, the folk and roots music club that had been operating since 2001 at 2261 Dundas Street West, there was the fortuitous coincidence of foresight and timing.

On March 5, 2020, a week *before* a global pandemic was declared, it was announced that the venue's lease would expire on April 1 due to failed negotiations — their landlord wanted a significant

28 Daniel Ramos, "Former Artscape tenants at Youngplace receive \$4.1M from city, feds," Toronto Today, February 19, 2025, <https://www.torontotoday.ca/local/artscap-tenants-youngplace-receive-41million-10256123>.

rent increase the club could not afford.²⁹ Thankfully, they had learned from a near-death experience three years earlier, when Hugh's Room closed down temporarily due to near-insolvency in January 2017, amidst Toronto's alarming "vanishing venues" crisis of that year, which also claimed the Silver Dollar Room, Holy Oak, Soybomb HQ and the Hoxton, among others.³⁰ The supportive community around Hugh's Room acted quickly, and within three months reinvented their small business by incorporating as a not-for-profit organization with a crowdsourcing campaign helping them reopen their doors as the rechristened Hugh's Room Live.³¹ Two years later, they gained charitable status.

It was ironic, then, that the eviction happened not just right before lockdowns, but also after the newly charitable Hugh's Room Live was back on stable financial footing. "I think that any music venue that didn't own their building in March of 2020 did not come out the other end of it unless they had a very understanding landlord," observes Hugh's Room Live executive director Michael Booth. It was ultimately the landlord's loss — he was stuck with an empty building he could not rent out, and Hugh's Room Live was not saddled with a monthly rent bill and no earned revenue.

When concerts returned in 2021, Hugh's Room Live began presenting itinerant events at other venues around the city, including the reopened El Mocambo. In the meantime, the charity had begun hatching plans to acquire their own building. In mid-2023, Hugh's Room Live announced the purchase of 296 Broadview Avenue, in the east-end Riverdale/East Chinatown neighbourhood, the other side of downtown from their previous home. The 19th-century building — designed by E.J. Lennox, famed for Old City Hall and Casa Loma — was the home of the Broadview Faith Temple Church and, since 2013, had also been operating as Broadview Place, a sporadically active centre for music, dance, and education.

The Broadview building was owned by two real estate agents, one of them a Bulgarian musician who had already used it for events, such as concerts by the Lemon Bucket Orchestra. The owners were interested in selling to Hugh's Room Live and waited for them to put their financing together throughout 2022.



Beams at Hugh's Room. photo: James Paul

Ultimately, Hugh's Room was able to purchase the \$4.2M building without needing to go a major financial institution, and instead put together a blended financing package consisting of:

- A vendor take-back (VTB) mortgage from the sellers
- A 0% mortgage from the church congregation that previously held it
- A \$1.3M private loan
- A community bond campaign to cover the private lender's exit (very unique within the Canadian not-for-profit landscape)
- A loan guarantee of \$2.2M from the City of Toronto

Hugh's Room Live's former Board chair Brian Iler, who has been at the forefront of social finance through his work with the Centre for Social Innovation, Toronto Renewable Energy Co-op, and elsewhere, was key to developing this creative scheme to allow the arts organization to own their own venue. "You're seeing this in the not-for-profit housing world as a way to more responsibly leverage yourself to do capital builds or ownership," says Booth, referencing the work of the Kensington Market Community Land Trust and others. "But I think for cultural institutions, if you can make it go, it's a perfect model, right? Because you're spreading the amount that you owe, you're leveraging your indebtedness across your own community."

Hugh's Room Live was then able to pay off the balance of the VTB mortgage with a major donation from the Green Sanderson Family Foundation. "Now our debt is the remaining amount of the church mortgage," explains Booth. "And then to our own community." Bondholders have the option to donate the interest

²⁹ Lauren O'Neil, "Toronto music institution Hugh's Room Live is shutting down again because of rent," *blogTO*, March 5, 2020, <https://www.blogto.com/music/2020/03/toronto-music-institution-hughs-room-live-shutting-down-again-because-rent/>.

³⁰ Carla Gillis, "Vanishing music venues: three months into 2017 and we've already lost seven," *Now Magazine*, March 1, 2027, <https://nowtoronto.com/music/vanishing-music-venues-three-months-into-2017-and-weve-already-lost-seven/>.

³¹ Diane Peters, "How Hugh's Room was brought back to life," *Toronto Star*, May 4, 2017, https://www.thestar.com/business/how-hughs-room-was-brought-back-to-life/article_9057ba34-592c-5833-bcca-02140b3ac175.html.

they are making on their bonds back to Hugh's Room Live, as some have done, in return for a tax receipt. Booth expects the last mortgage payment to the church to be made within the next year.

"I think it's a great model for cultural institutions because a challenge we face in the city is extreme property values. If you don't own, you're always going to be at the mercy [of a landlord], as we were."

The Broadview home of Hugh's Room Live officially opened its doors in September 2023, and over the last two years has gradually transformed the handsome church into a more secular concert space, upgrading their sound and lighting system, and making some required changes in order to secure a permanent liquor license, which was granted earlier in 2025. In terms of programming, the room suits the slate of singer-songwriters across genres including folk, blues, reggae, rock, jazz, world, and traditional music — with a focus on LGBTQ+ artists including icons like Carole Pope and up-and-comers like T. Thomason and Tempo Chorus.

One thing the new Hugh's Room Live space does not have is a restaurant, which was a feature of its previous incarnation on Dundas Street West. Management is less interested in adding food service due to both its location — which offers more nearby amenities than its somewhat isolated old location — and start-up costs: Booth estimates the price of transforming the on-site kitchen into commercial grade would be in the ballpark of \$1M. Instead, they are replacing this revenue stream with a heavy focus on event rentals, or "guest shows" as they call them, by external presenters and groups — which, unlike at the Small World Centre, are a moneymaker.

The room offers tiered pricing based on the night of the week, and is building their rental business for daytime bookings with regular clients including local music schools. This also helps meet their mandate of acting as a community centre by providing space for education, while building brand awareness across generations. Though the per-seat rental rate may be higher than most bar venues, Booth is committed to offering an affordably priced space as well as mentorship for emerging presenters: "I don't like to nickel and dime people. I'd like to try to make the service that we provide conform to what the event needs, not the other way around. Some folks know exactly what they want to do, and that's great, but sometimes they don't know what they want to do. It's important to me that we help them figure that out so they have a good event, because it's good for us that they have a good experience."



IT'S OK* STUDIOS

It's Ok* generated well-deserved buzz when it opened the doors of its Studios in Queen West during 2022. What was originally intended to be a two-year "meanwhile-use" tenancy has been a smash success, now going into its fifth year of operations. The Studios' fate had been uncertain for some time, but now looks to have a bright and hopeful future.

Though identified as a space for music performance, it's certainly more than just a venue: It's Ok* Studios is also a hub for skills development and community building, particularly for BIPOC artists and youth. The Black-led DIY collective It's Ok* (now a non-profit) was founded as an event series in 2018 by Said Yassin and Alicia Bee, building its reputation by transforming unconventional spaces into inclusive, community-driven music pop-ups.

During the pandemic, It's Ok* secured a temporary home at a City-owned building at 468 Queen Street West, converting the 10,800-square-foot former sneaker shop into a dedicated space for performances, exhibitions, coworking, and creative projects. In a novel, interdepartmental effort by the City of Toronto to provide affordable space to DIY music organizations, It's Ok* leases the building before it is demolished to build a new park on Queen Street West and Denison Avenue. Under this short-term lease, It's Ok* pays nominal rent and covers the operating costs, such as utilities, insurance, and repairs.³²

Prioritizing accessibility and keeping costs low for users, It's Ok* has relied on affordable occupancy costs, brand partnerships, and occasional corporate bookings to sustain operations. While "sliding scale" rental fees — in which commercial users are

32 Patrick Matozzo and Cheryl Blackman, "Nominal Lease Agreement with It's Ok Community Arts – 468 Queen Street West," March 8, 2022, City of Toronto, <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2022/gl/bgrd/backgroundfile-222652.pdf>.

charged a market rate in order to subsidize community users' access to arts and culture spaces — are an established practice, It's Ok* has been mindful of not letting commercial bookings overtake the calendar. NXNE made use of the Studio as a festival hub, while other notable bookings included Venus Fest, music industry networking events hosted by CIMA, and the photography exhibition Black Is the Nite. Meanwhile, It's Ok* expanded its year-round programming to include It's Ok* World, a free outdoor festival as part of the SummerSeries in Trillium Park at Ontario Place.

The unique, inclusive, multi-purpose, and community-mobilized space on Queen has resonated deeply within Toronto. "It's Ok* is not merely a Black-run studio," observed writer Phillip Dwight Morgan, "but rather a community space in which knowledge, ideas, experiences, and insights can be readily shared amongst each other with the aim of deepening connections and opportunities with Toronto's Black arts scene."³³ At the Queen West location, small touches like a community library and coworking areas help to make the space inviting, while maintaining a purpose-agnostic feel that allows it to be used for a range of programming.

Though some hoped the temporary space might become permanent, the planned demolition of the former retail building is still going ahead, to make way for a new park slated for construction at 464–470 Queen Street West. Though it was the City's Music Office that identified the City-owned property as a viable venue, the responsible division, Parks & Recreation, was unable to change its plans to permanently accommodate It's Ok* Studios.

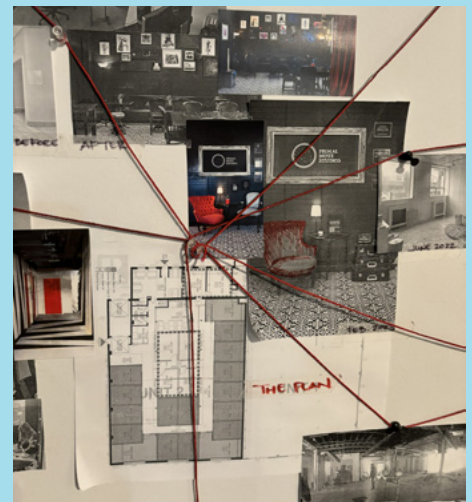
Support by the Toronto Music Office to navigate bureaucratic complexities, as well as a Council-approved strategy to back the effort, was essential to unlocking the space for cultural use, which was a two-year process.³⁴ With the end of It's

Ok*'s occupancy looming after multiple extensions of their lease, the non-profit has been working with City staff across different departments to find a more permanent location.

It's Ok* executive director Said Yassin remains unfazed, and is hopeful their new location will work as a more intimate music venue for emerging artists. "The hope is to get it to be a 180–200 capacity room," says Yassin. "That's the big blind spot in the city, aside from the [Drake] Underground, so that's the goal."

Though they intend to continue with their exhibition and coworking programming, music will play a more central role in the new It's Ok* Studios location. "I definitely want to leave at least three nights a week to be dedicated to live music. In those three days, I want to be like DROM [Taberna]," says Yassin — referencing their current neighbour, the borderless global-music venue — "just top-to-bottom, all-day musical programming in the space."

Inspired by the legendary Blue Note Jazz Club in New York City, Yassin hopes to book artist residencies to engender more creativity in the local scene. "I want to create space for people to showcase their original selves. I hope this new space can be the premier space for music in the city. I want people to be like, 'I don't even know what's happening here, but it's always good.'" The key lesson here is the combination of an affordable operating model made possible by municipal support, versatile space uses, and prioritizing access for equity-deserving groups, all underpinned by It's Ok*'s values of community development and togetherness around art.



PRIMAL NOTE STUDIOS

A DIY example of a music centre/hub, Primal Note Studios is significant for being one of the only combined rehearsal/venue spaces in Toronto — and in an underserved part of the city, no less. Located at 1141 Roselawn Avenue, the facility is tucked on an unassuming side street north of Dufferin and Eglinton in the former City of York, now one of Toronto's inner suburbs. It's a mostly working-to-middle-class residential area, with some light industrial employment lands to the north. And it's not far from the vibrant Little Jamaica commercial strip, now more connected to the rest of the city with the recent opening of the Eglinton Crosstown LRT.

Opening its doors in 2023, the rehearsal studio offers over a dozen soundproofed rooms with a mix of hourly and monthly rental options. A welcoming front room also serves coffee and snacks alongside spare drum sticks and guitar strings. A strong design aesthetic elevates Primal Note beyond jam-space grubbiness — and it doesn't hurt that one of the owners is also a practicing architect. In addition to recording sessions, the one-level building's central atrium can also be booked as a venue for DIY shows. Primal Note Studios has become a hub for the network of emerging alt-rock and prog-rock bands that rehearse their sets within the tiny maze of hallways. It shows the potential of a commercial enterprise, run with a community ethos, to accomplish a truly multi-purpose space for musicians.

³³ Phillip Dwight Morgan, "A Space to be Honest and True," *The Grind*, November 17, 2023, <https://www.thegrindmag.ca/its-ok-novdec23/>.

³⁴ "DIY Music Spaces as Sites of Opportunity for Marginalized Communities in Toronto: Music Industry Labour and Entrepreneurial Diversity" Eryn Maloney 2025



PART IV:

TAKING THE POST-PANDEMIC TEMPERATURE: TORONTO'S LIVE MUSIC SCENE SINCE COVID-19

Lucid Express at The Baby G, photo: Joshua Best

To ensure the long-term success and sustainability of a cultural hub, an operator would need to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, and not take an overly optimistic view of the community's financial capacity and actual uptake/usage — which could result in a facility that either lies empty or whose calendar is dominated by commercial, corporate, private, or non-cultural uses. We underpin our case for music community hubs with quantitative data to assess the true demand for such a facility.

In *Reimagining Music Venues*, using data provided by the concert listings sites Exclaim! and Just Shows, we gauged the health of live music venues across Ontario by looking at overall churn rates, the types and frequency of shows presented, and event sales performance within a limited yet novel dataset. With the help of University of Toronto sociology professor Dan Silver, we revisit these findings with concert listings data provided by Now Playing Toronto and thisweek.to to explore the state of Toronto's live music scene in the post-pandemic period of 2023–26. Anecdotally, the concert market in Toronto appeared to have a strong recovery following the long two years of lockdowns, but does the data confirm this?

Note: We were unable to make use of the previous two platforms due to Just Shows' ceasing operations and Exclaim!'s move to a new database that was not compatible with our study's methodology. We sincerely thank both for their contributions to our previous report.

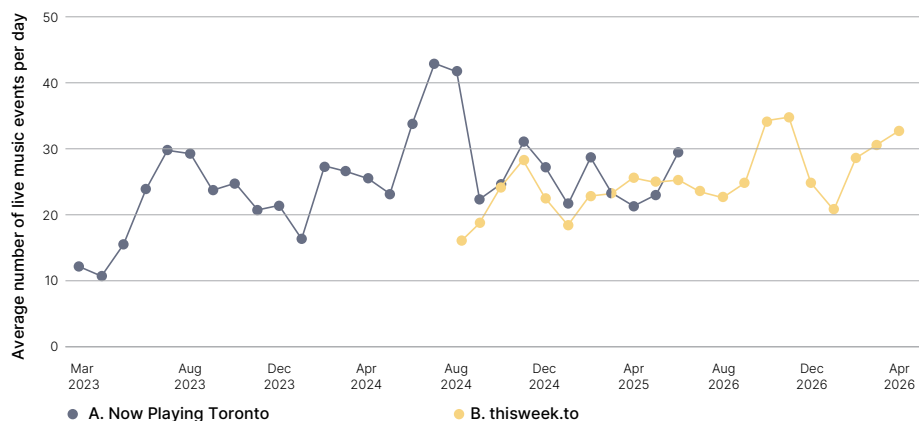
ABOUT OUR DATA SOURCES

Now Playing Toronto was an event listings site run by Destination Toronto, the city's destination marketing organization, as a service to the local arts and cultural sector. The site launched in 2022 and sunsetted in mid-2025, but while active provided robust concert listings alongside events across other disciplines. The site had less uptake from smaller, more grassroots venues or promoters but major festivals and concerts were well represented. The site launched within weeks of live music events restarting in earnest after COVID-19 lockdowns, and its wrap date also prevented us from accessing complete event listings for summer 2025.

This data is complemented by concert listings from thisweek.to, an independent website run by as a DIY passion project by a community member. Launched in fall 2024, the site compiles show listings on a weekly basis for smaller clubs and music venues across the city — with listings collected or scraped from promoter or venue websites or social media — which helps capture trends among more grassroots venues and organizers.

Considering these platform effects, this data analysis should be viewed as a sample of concert activity within the post-pandemic period, not a census. A future feasibility study for a Toronto music community hub would benefit from more exhaustive

Figure 1. Toronto live music activity on a monthly basis, 2023–2026



These figures represent a snapshot of live music activity by comparing monthly trends in concert listings on Now Playing Toronto and thisweek.to. The graph counts the average number of live music events in Toronto per day, which when viewed on a monthly basis, shows substantial but uneven activity levels across the two data sources.

Figure 2. Concentration among live music promoters (A) and ticketing platforms (B) in Toronto



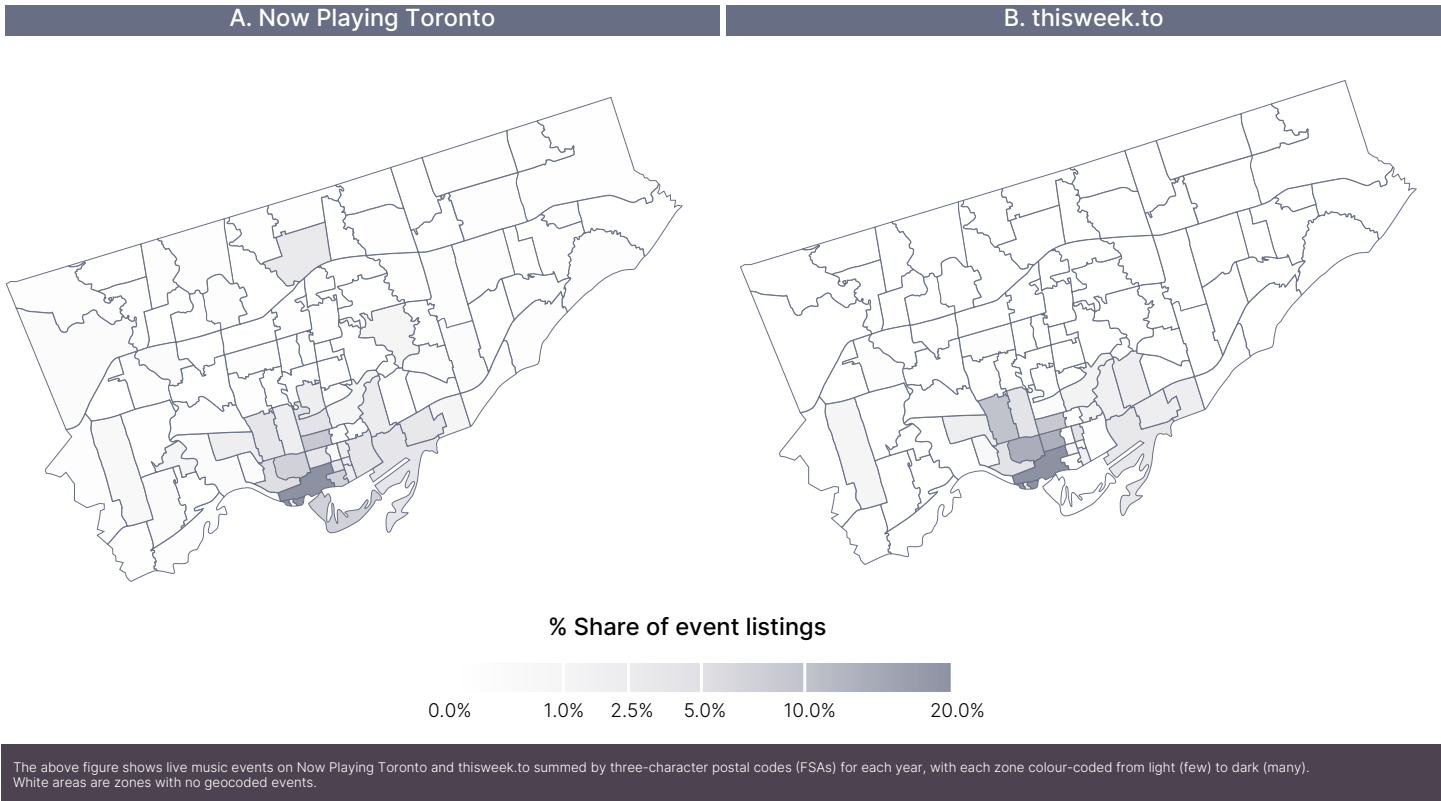
The above figure shows the share of live music events associated with the five most active event organizers on Now Playing Toronto (A), and the share of events linked to the five most common ticketing platforms, linked to events listings on thisweek.to (B).

market research and access to data from across a wider swath of the live music sector.

SLOW YET UNSTEADY RECOVERY

Data analysis by Prof. Silver shows that post-COVID recovery is real, but "lumpy." The monthly activity lines chart (Fig. 1) shows that the largest level of activity is festival-driven: when big summer events return, the total volume jumps, yet the underlying infrastructure (i.e., how many venues and promoters exist) grows only slowly.

Figure 3. Spatial distribution of live music activity in Toronto, 2023-2026



Though we see a strong rebound in the first half of 2023, leading to a summer festival peak that year, this may be a platform effect as Now Playing Toronto onboarded more users during its first year. This shape was mirrored in 2024 at a higher scale, though July 2024’s spike suggests a single large series or cluster of festivals rather than a broad expansion of the everyday scene. A similar trendline appears in 2025 with a summertime spike and subsequent downturn.

It is worth noting that these seasonal fluctuations may appear more pronounced since grassroots venues — which were less active on the Now Playing Toronto platform — tend to see busier spring and fall seasons. The data from thisweek.to confirms this, with seasonal spikes during the spring and fall, when smaller venues and promoters are more active. Outside of the summer outdoor festival season, the club-level touring calendar has traditionally followed the academic school year, peaking when student audiences return to class or complete their studies, with post-holiday, mid-winter lulls in January. This annual rhythm has continued post-pandemic.

GROWING CONSOLIDATION

Prof. Silver’s analysis indicates a slow consolidation of shows among the city’s largest promoters, with the five largest accounting for over 45% by early 2025. Silver writes: “A few major promoters have been increasing their share of the total events on offer in Toronto. While the market is far from monopoly levels, it is consolidating.” Similarly, advance ticketing platforms for concerts at venues on thisweek.to are highly concentrated, with an average of 71% of tickets sold

through five platforms: Eventbrite, Ticketmaster, Showclix, Ticketweb (owned by Ticketmaster), and DICE (Fig. 2).

A similar concentration is happening geographically with regard to event venues within Toronto. According to the data, the downtown concentration of live music activity illustrated in Reimagining Music Venues has continued since the end of the pandemic. For smaller club venues, the concentration is even more marked, skewing toward the downtown/west end and along Bloor-Danforth (Fig. 3).

Prof. Silver writes: “Geographical concentration persists. Live-music recovery showed some expansion outside the core from 2023 to 2024, but at least partway through 2025 it was not clear if that trend was persisting.”

HEALTHY LIVE MUSIC OPTIONS
ANY NIGHT OF THE WEEK

As an optimistic counterweight, a sign of the Toronto live music economy’s resilience is that activity is not limited to Friday and Saturday nights only. Though weekends carried over half of all activity in early 2023, the share dropped to around 40% for most of 2024 on Now Playing Toronto. Weekday shares tend to grow during summer festival months as audiences embrace outdoor events. The thisweek.to data supports this, displaying an overall lower share of weekend events in smaller club venues that are less tied to the summer festival season.

Prof. Silver writes: “Weeknight programming appears to be resilient; mid-week shows are the majority.” One possible explanation is the prevalence of touring acts that are routed through Toronto on a weeknight after playing New York City or other East Coast U.S. destinations on a Saturday. Another is the continued health of stalwart Queen West club venues that book ongoing residencies and one-off bookings seven nights a week (Fig. 4).

ROCK MAY APPEAR TO DOMINATE, BUT MANY DIVERSE GENRES CAN BE FOUND ON STAGE

Concert listings data provided by thisweek.to offered new insights into how musical genres are represented across Toronto’s grassroots music venues, with event-days classified by one or more genre categories. Unsurprisingly, rock dominates small bars and clubs, an effect of the traditional dominance of rock’n’roll and offshoot genres such as punk, metal, indie and alternative, particularly at the independent club level. Yet jazz/blues and roots music are well represented, reflective of both the genres’ strong history in Toronto and dedicated genre-specific clubs with nightly bookings.

Hip-hop and EDM (electronic dance music) are not well represented in this snapshot of Toronto’s live genre ecology. This can likely be accounted for by there being few dedicated venues or promoters for the former, and the use of more non-traditional venues such as warehouses, churches, community halls, and loft spaces by the latter (Fig. 5).

Though this snapshot from a single source cannot capture the full picture of Toronto’s musical diversity, it does show the range of styles on the city’s stages in spite of concentration at the top for one genre or musical tradition. This is a topic worthy of further research in future.

Overall, this data shows that Toronto’s live music infrastructure serves certain artistic communities really well—with lots of indie and rock programming in small clubs in the shoulder seasons, for example—but a larger inventory of independent venues is critical to maintaining, growing and diversifying the concert calendar,

Figure 4. Weekday vs weekend (Friday - Saturday) live music programming in Toronto, 2023-2026

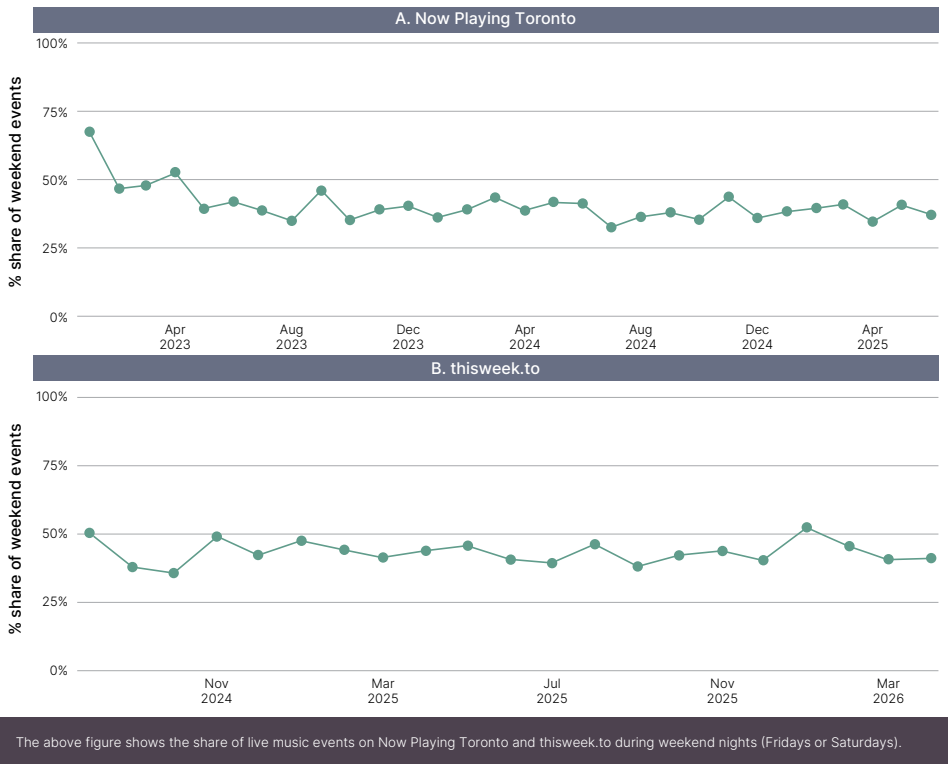
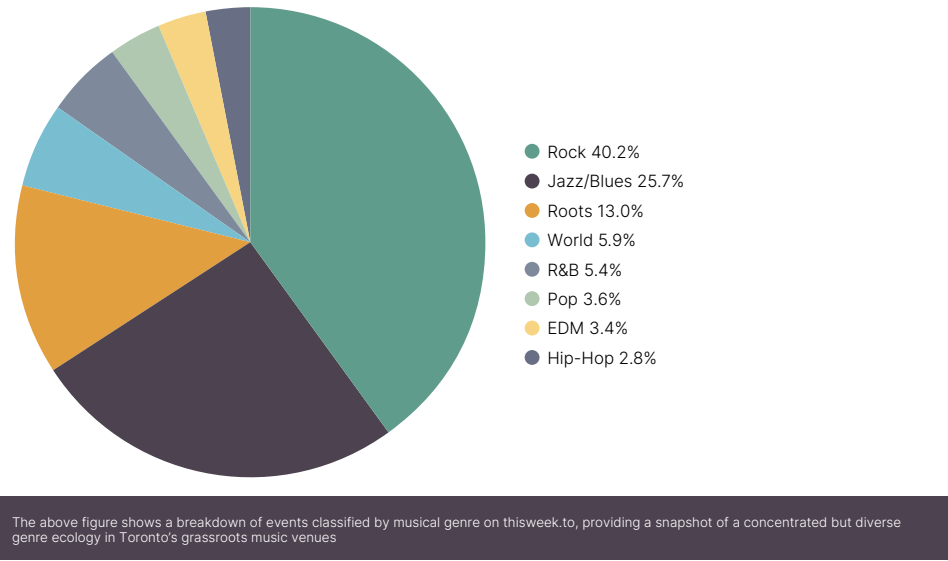


Figure 5. Genre classifications on thisweek.to show listings, 2024-26



especially for local and emerging acts in under-represented genres. This is also important for resisting consolidation and supporting new entrants to the scene, especially for communities that rely more heavily on DIY spaces and resources.

PART V:

CONSIDERING A HUB: THE CHALLENGE OF ACCESS



DJ Sadstab, photo: Green Yang

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

This study kicked off in spring 2025 with two focus group sessions that included 14 active presenters and event organizers who might be potential users of a hypothetical hub, as well as select policymakers. Genres represented included electronic, experimental, global, indie, jazz, rock, and beyond. The focus groups envisioned a community music hub as being a flexible, inclusive, multi-purpose space that strengthens grassroots music across Toronto. It should empower marginalized communities, support artists at different career stages, and provide resources without undermining autonomy. Participants also saw a hub's potential as an incubation space essential to developing artists' and music workers' skills. The major challenge will be building sustainable governance and funding models while keeping access affordable and community driven.

There was, however, a lack of unanimity around the very concept of a music community hub. Some participants were skeptical that such a facility was feasible or even desirable, citing the size and diversity of Toronto's music scene. Indeed, while Toronto may be too large a city for there to be one hub to represent the entire community, participants were enthusiastic about a network of smaller, community-oriented spaces spread across the city, in recognition of Toronto's geographic, cultural, and demographic diversities.

Highlighting the importance of supportive music-adjacent industries, there was also enthusiasm for shared services that a hub (or network of hubs) might provide such as tax accounting or poster printing. There was also general agreement that a music community hub should not feel too institutional, pristine, or sterile. Many focus group participants envisioned these spaces existing in raw, industrial buildings.

WHAT: USES AND FUNCTIONS OF THE HUB

The “music hub” concept was compared to a multidisciplinary arts centre, clustering multiple music-centric uses under one roof. Desired facilities include:

- **Performance venues** (small to mid-sized, intimate, flexible)
- **Rehearsal and recording studios**
- **Educational and workshop space**
- **Café / social space and extended green rooms**
- **Offices or co-working space for music businesses and collectives**
- **Storage, soundproofing, and basic PA/backline infrastructure**

Support services such as production support, scheduling, grant writing, accounting, marketing, printing, and virtual office resources were also highlighted. Participants pointed to examples like It's Ok* Studios (a blank canvas space with resources provided) as inspiration. While polish and “bells and whistles” were seen as unnecessary, the hub should be safe, accessible, close to transit, and capable of hosting both structured and DIY programming.

WHY: RATIONALE AND NEEDS

Participants emphasized that Toronto's grassroots music communities are fragmented and underserved, especially outside the downtown core. Many noted the need for hubs in Scarborough, North York, and other suburban neighborhoods so that young people don't have to travel far to access opportunities. A recurring theme was inclusion: creating spaces for those whose first language is not English, weren't raised in Canada, or come from communities where parents might not support artistic pursuits. The hub should provide safe, autonomous spaces where youth can participate on their own terms. Participants discussed balancing grassroots autonomy with institutional support — artists and organizers want resources without feeling controlled. “A place where artists are trusted to do their art form,” as one participant put it.

WHO: STAKEHOLDERS AND VOICES TO INCLUDE

Participants stressed the importance of defining “community” and involving a wide range of stakeholders: early-career musicians, grassroots organizers across different genres and backgrounds, students, educators, and communities not currently served by existing venues. Attention should be paid to marginalized groups, broadly defined to include different cultural, linguistic, and genre communities. The conversation also suggested engaging parents, but without making the hub dependent on their approval — focusing instead on youth empowerment. Councillors, city staff, and cultural policymakers should be consulted to align the hub with broader civic priorities.



Cinna Peyghamy, photo: Green Yang

HOW: GOVERNANCE, ACCESS, AND SUSTAINABILITY

The governance model was debated: should the hub be City-run, a non-profit, a co-op, or for-profit? Many feared that municipal ownership could come with stifling regulations, while non-profit boards risk losing sight of the mission if not staff-driven. A recurring principle was community buy-in: users should feel ownership rather than having a model imposed on them. Membership or co-op structures were suggested as ways to encourage respect and accountability.

Access considerations included affordability, subsidized transit, rehearsal rooms, and sober daytime programming. Business models should avoid over-reliance on concessions and instead focus on sustainable revenue streams, partnerships, and diversified programming. Communication and outreach will be essential so that people know the hub exists. Ultimately, the hub must balance flexibility with governance and structure, while ensuring it serves both new entrants and established grassroots organizers.

INTERVIEW FINDINGS

In a second phase of the study, one-on-one interviews were conducted in summer 2025 with eight active Toronto presenters/promoters and venue/facility operators. The participants represented a range of genres including hip-hop, R&B, electronic, rock, indie, global, and jazz, as well as a range of sizes and a mix of for-profit, not-for-profit, and charitable organizations.

A consistent theme that emerged across all interviews was the need for **financial accessibility**. This means pricing that is scaled to the economic realities of concert presentation — a line



Deerhoof. photo: Green Yang

of business that can be high-risk and subject to uncontrollable factors such as weather, transit delays, fickle audience behaviour, and competition from other entertainment options.

VENUE GAPS AND ACCESS CHALLENGES

- **Mid-size gaps:** Several presenters identified missing venue sizes. One noted the lack of seated 1,500–2,500-capacity venues, while others saw a need for ~200-capacity rooms for emerging acts.
- **All-ages access:** A promoter flagged the near-total absence of all-ages venues, with only a single consistent option available.
- **Booking difficulties:** Multiple interviewees noted the loss of smaller independent spaces and the difficulty of securing holds at surviving ones. Spontaneous or last-minute bookings are nearly impossible due to most rooms scheduling over six months in advance.
- **Physical barriers:** Accessibility issues (stairs, outdated buildings, distance from transit) remain deterrents for audiences and presenters.

ECONOMICS AND FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

- **Unsustainable math:** Several described the dysfunctional economics of small venues, where limited ticket revenue cannot alone cover artist, tech, and production costs, making bar sales, grant funding, or sponsorship contributions essential.
- **High costs:** Rising rental fees at some Toronto halls were widely cited as prohibitive, particularly in redeveloped or “premium” venues.
- **Bar sales decline:** Multiple promoters mentioned that younger audiences drink less, further weakening the alcohol-driven revenue model for grassroots venues.
- **Ticket inflation:** Ticket prices have doubled since COVID, with \$20–\$40 now common for local bills. Audiences are reluctant or selective at these prices.
- **Fragmented audiences:** Interviewees observed audiences splitting between blockbuster arena shows and free/low-cost DJ nights, squeezing out mid-level concerts.

AUDIENCE BEHAVIOUR TRENDS

- **Last-minute buying:** Ticket sales are increasingly last-minute, making advance planning and show offers riskier.
- **Fragmentation and fatigue:** Some estimated that half their pre-COVID audience has dropped off, due to rising cost of living, aging out, shifting life priorities, or preferring to stay home.
- **Gen-Z habits:** Younger audiences were described as less reliable concertgoers, more oriented toward streaming and DJ culture, and less inclined toward alcohol consumption.

COMPETITION AND MARKET PRESSURES

- **Oversupply of shows:** Several noted the “insane volume” of concerts post-COVID, leading to slower sellouts and audience fatigue.
- **Sponsorship scarcity:** Competition for private dollars has increased, with corporate support shifting toward professional sports and large-scale entertainment.
- **Cuts in education and infrastructure:** Some linked the collapse of rehearsal spaces and declining artist pipelines to cuts in music education.

From these accounts from leaders on the ground, the need for multi-use space is recognized across a wide swath of the music community, from newcomer groups to youth to under-represented genres and beyond. Yet the means are limited. For concert promoters to sustainably access venues, costs must be minimized to the greatest possible extent. The music community in Toronto is grounded in realism, making clear the economic limitations that need to be kept in mind for a successful hub model.

PART VI:

THE CASE FOR A HUB: OPERATING AND GOVERNANCE MODELS



Slash Need. photo: Green Yang

The devil is in the details, they say. Grand ideals of creating an artist-focused community hub, accessible to all at no cost on any night of the week, can collapse when they collide with the unromantic realities of scheduling, staffing, equipment upkeep, cleaning, waste removal, insurance, rent, and utilities.

Venue management is both an art and a trade. It requires understanding all the steps along the journey of an event from conception to execution, as well as the ongoing needs of a building outside of its daily or nightly usage. The operator of a successful hub must be a hands-off yet empowering curator of experiences, someone who understands the ineffable quality of community vibrancy and what gives spark to a set of four walls so that it can become a container for future memories, though not overly prescriptive in their vision. They must also be a skilled diplomat, able to balance the often competing needs of artists, presenters, renters, landlords, suppliers, funders, donors, policymakers, and elected officials, not to mention staff, boards, and audience members. They must be able to manage the high-stress environment of an entertainment venue including the demands of food and beverage (F&B) and labour challenges. And they must be top-notch financial managers, given the thin profit margins on which most venues operate.

This section walks through multiple blueprints for a hub's operating and governance model, which can be applied to different land or property acquisition scenarios. Please note we have left out privately-run event venues such as 918 Bathurst Centre — the former Buddhist temple in the Annex that operates primarily as a

rental space for cultural events and until recently was home to the Music Gallery — or PHI Centre in Montreal. Such spaces are an important part of the ecosystem but often are supported by a benefactor — a rarity in the Canadian music scene.

Operating model type	Who programs?	Who operates the space? (inc. maintenance, upgrades)	How is the property brought online?	How to make revenue?
Municipal-run (e.g. Assembly Hall, Conrad Centre Kitchener)	Municipality	Municipality	Municipal-owned	OpEx (operating expenses) paid by municipality
Non-profit/community-led (e.g. Hugh's Room Live, Small World Music)	Community group programs	Community group	Lease a commercial property Own a commercial property CLT ownership	Earned revenue (tickets and F&B), grants, foundations, social financing, etc.
Community-municipal hybrid version 1 (e.g. It's Ok* Studios)	Community group programs	Community operator handles	Municipal property	OpEx paid by non-profit operator
Community-municipal hybrid version 2 (e.g. Arts Court Ottawa, 32 Lisgar, AOCC Toronto)	Community programmer	Municipality handles	Municipal property	OpEx paid by municipality
Community-Commercial hybrid version 1: event venue (e.g. Lula, DROM)	Community programmer (non-profit presenter arm)	Commercial operator	Commercial own or lease	OpEx paid by commercial enterprise (i.e. rental bookings, F&B). Non-profit arm can additionally apply for grants, fundraise etc.
Community-commercial hybrid 2: developer contribution (e.g. Crow's Theatre, Allied Music Centre)	Community programmer	Community operator (commercial property manager)	Commercial own, transferred or leased to community	Financial contribution from developer plus high-level mix of earned, private and public revenue

All examples are in Toronto unless otherwise specified.

MUNICIPAL-RUN

Examples: Assembly Hall, Meridian Arts Centre, Conrad Centre (Kitchener, ON)

This model entails a municipality taking on the task of acting as programmer, promoter, marketer, production lead, and venue manager. In recognition of the importance of accessible and stable music spaces, some jurisdictions have leveraged existing infrastructure and staff resources to re-activate underused venues. This approach tends to favour City-owned facilities with a history of performance or presentation rather than new builds or conversions, given the costs and administrative lift associated with establishing a new line of service. It points to the possibility of an "in-house" municipal model that operates directly in service of community, rather than through partnership.

In Toronto, this model currently exists only at a limited, community scale. The City operates a handful of municipally run cultural centres and galleries in the inner suburbs—such as Assembly Hall and Etobicoke Civic Centre Art Gallery in the west, and Cedar

Ridge Creative Centre and Clark Centre for the Arts in Scarborough. These properties are owned by the City, operated by staff in the Economic Development & Culture division, and programmed in-house. However, their focus is almost exclusively on community arts — classes, camps, and exhibitions — with concert programming remaining rare. Assembly Hall does include a 120–250 capacity performance space, though it is primarily used by local theatre and dance groups through rentals. And an institutional, fluorescent-lit community-centre atmosphere can sometimes be a challenge for audiences, artists, and presenters alike.

At a larger scale, the City operates through arm's-length governance. TO Live manages Toronto's three major civic theatres: St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts, Meridian Arts Centre, and Meridian Hall.³⁵ Working within a hybrid presenter/venue model, TO Live promotes its own programming alongside rentals from external presenters, ranging from independent organizations

³⁵ "TO Live," City of Toronto, accessed May 9, 2026, <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/accountability-operations-customer-service/city-administration/city-managers-office/agencies-corporations/agencies/to-live/>.



Atish and Gandhaar at Small World Centre

to major promoters. These venues are generally large — Meridian Hall, at 3,100 seats, is the largest soft-seat theatre in the country — and therefore largely inaccessible to smaller promoters or emerging artists. Efforts to bridge this gap have begun to emerge: in September 2025, TO Live launched Studio Sessions in the Meridian Arts Centre’s smaller, 178-capacity Studio Theatre, curating programming in collaboration with community presenters such as Link Music Lab to bring more contemporary music into the system — and to audiences beyond downtown.³⁶

A more direct example of a municipally led model can be found outside Toronto. In 2024, the City of Kitchener released a new operating vision for the Conrad Centre for the Performing Arts, a 24,000-square-foot downtown facility with a flexible 300-seat theatre and 100-capacity rehearsal hall. After taking over ownership in 2023, the City proposed repositioning the venue as an accessible, community-focused cultural hub. Its analysis compared non-profit-led, commercial, and City-led operating models using a “path of the presenter” framework — evaluating scheduling, costing, contracting, ticketing, and event services — alongside different financial scenarios ranging from low-cost/low-service to high-subsidy/high-service.

Pros	Cons
Secure tenancy	Less suitable spaces available
Access to additional subsidies	Less choice of location
Access to additional staff resources	Likely more institutional atmosphere
Championing by local councillors	In-house curation less likely to reflect community
Affordable/accessible to community	Less nimble bureaucracy for problem-solving
Capital maintenance and facility integrity	City Council infighting and over-involvement
	Brand-bland marketing/communications

The City of Kitchener ultimately endorsed a City-led model, citing the importance of neutrality in booking, consistency in user experience, and the role of public subsidy in maintaining accessibility. Commercial management was deemed least aligned with community values, as programming would be driven primarily by financial return. A hybrid financial model was recommended, with modest staffing and an annual municipal subsidy of approximately \$382,000. Early indications suggest that staffing up the venue did not represent a disproportionate cost increase, while contributing to job creation, economic activity, and the provision of safe third spaces.

With bookings still skewing toward theatre and comedy, it remains too early to determine whether the revitalized Conrad Centre will meaningfully expand opportunities for the Kitchener-Waterloo region’s independent music scenes. Nonetheless, it offers a notable example of a municipality choosing active stewardship of its cultural infrastructure. At the same time, the differences in scale and complexity between Kitchener and Toronto are significant; what is feasible in a smaller city may not translate easily to a larger municipality with a more complex bureaucracy.

NON-PROFIT/COMMUNITY-LED

Examples: *Hugh’s Room Live*, *Small World Centre*, *Array Space*, *the Tranzac*

In this model, a non-profit, co-operative, or other non-commercial community arts group takes the lead in establishing a space, through securing a commercial tenancy or, ideally, ownership. This allows creative programming and community access to be prioritized over commercial space usage, with brand identity and vision kept in the hands of artists and curators.

As outlined in Part III, *Hugh’s Room Live* used creative financing tools to acquire an old church on Broadview Avenue and convert it into a full-time music venue, while *Small World Music* secured

36 “TO Live Launches New Cabaret Series Showcasing Local Talent: Studio Sessions: Persian Psychedelia kicks off the series on September 26, 2025 at Meridian Arts Centre,” TO Live, 2025, <https://www.tolive.com/Story-Detail-Page/reference/Studio-Sessions-2025-press-release>.

government support to purchase their units in a former Artscape building. Other local examples include the Tranzac, a non-profit, multi-genre, multi-room venue in the Annex, and Array Space, a 1,200 sq ft rehearsal and performance space run by Arraymusic, a long-running charitable chamber music organization.

Though still more theoretical in the cultural policy space, a Community Land Trust model would put ownership in the hands of arts organizations and ensure more long-term occupancy. This would require investment by the City through creating a program equivalent to MURA (Multi-Unit Residential Acquisition Fund) but aimed at supporting cultural space in addition to affordable housing, which would assist Cultural Land Trusts in kickstarting a development which they could then leverage for other private fundraising.

Pros	Cons
Community-led	Less secure tenancy (when not owned)
More adventurous programming	Grant-dependent financial model
Capacity for more diverse fundraising	Staff turnover and burnout
More nimble in decision-making	Burden of governance (increased with ownership)
Freedom in marketing/comms	Potential for community infighting and “drama”
Affordable/accessible to community	One organization cannot reflect entire community

COMMUNITY-MUNICIPAL HYBRID, VERSION 1: COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT

Example: *It's Ok* Studios*

In this model, City-owned spaces are turned over to the community — usually at nominal rent — with a non-profit taking the lead to fit out the space, seek funds for renovations and equipment, manage daily operations, and direct the programming vision and branding. This unlocks underutilized space for cultural purposes and allows the City to support the creation of new music venues or rehearsal spaces at minimal cost to the taxpayer, since the asset is already owned.

It's Ok* Studios is the gold standard for this model (see Part III). Such a dynamic hybrid model furthers the City of Toronto's Action Plan for Culture target to support the development of one million square feet of new cultural space by 2035. The success of It's Ok* *should* work as a template that can be replicated elsewhere in Toronto but, as of yet, suitable City-owned space appears to be in short supply.

The City of Toronto's Community Space Tenancy Program acts as a template for this model, connecting non-profits providing social and community services to municipally-owned or managed spaces for a nominal base rent (\$2 a year, plus additional rent and leasehold improvement) on both short and long-term timelines.³⁷

Pros	Cons
<i>As above plus:</i>	<i>As above plus:</i>
More secure tenancy	Limited supply of suitable properties
Potentially more affordable/accessible	Less choice in terms of location
↑ <i>when the right space is secured</i>	Subject to changes in political leadership

COMMUNITY-MUNICIPAL HYBRID, VERSION 2: MUNICIPAL MANAGEMENT

Examples: *ArtsCourt (Ottawa, ON), 32 Lisgar, Association of Community Centres*

Here, the municipality owns the arts facility and is also responsible for property management — e.g., staffing, utilities, cleaning, maintenance — and, depending on the nature of the facility, space and event rentals as well. This allows arts groups to focus on the area at which they excel: programming.

ArtsCourt in Ottawa — profiled in 2023's *Reimagining Music Venues* study — is also a municipally owned facility, located in a former courthouse that since the late '80s has been home to numerous arts organizations, including SAW Gallery, which operates a vibrant year-round music venue, Club SAW. This model sees the individual arts tenant manage their own programming and operations, but they are not responsible for management of the building.

This model is also similar to the current interim model at 32 Lisgar in Toronto, where the City owns and manages the shared arts facility — though ultimately it may be handed off to an independent and/or non-profit operator. Glad Day Bookshop's current tenancy at 32 Lisgar provides an example of another community usage of a cultural space that also provides both hospitality (as the bookstore also includes a small café) and another attractor for foot traffic.

Perhaps one reason this model is somewhat rare is that cities are usually unwilling to absorb the additional costs of staffing and maintenance. Another is that space management for arts facilities — particularly booking and rentals — may not be municipalities' core competency.

37 "Community Space," City of Toronto, updated 2026, <https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/get-involved/community/community-space-tenancy/>.



The City of Toronto provides a compelling alternative: its own community centre model. Toronto's Association of Community Centres (AOCCs) is a network of 10 community centres stewarded by volunteer Boards of Management, "to meet the recreation and social needs of local communities."³⁸ Admin salaries and rent are funded by the City while programming is supported through fees, donations, and grants.

Examples include the 519 — a key cultural hub of Toronto's 2SLGBTQ+ community — and the Cecil Community Centre, which has recently hosted DIY concerts by psych-rock band Mother Tongues and local punk promoters Not Dead Yet. The volunteer-based Friends of Allan Gardens similarly acts as a liaison between the City's Parks management and event organizers to hold events in the historic greenhouse, which has recently hosted concerts and gallery exhibits by the likes of Long Winter and Venus Fest. Adapting this model to a dedicated music hub (or network of hubs) is worth exploring, not least due to the social and public health benefits associated with attending music events, fostering a sense of togetherness and connection. Using the AOCCs as a template, revenue gaps could be closed by establishing a channel for private donation, such as the Ontario Space for Music Foundation concept proposed in the *Reimagining Music Venues* study.

Pros	Cons
As above plus:	As above plus:
Arts groups focus on programming	Overly hands-on management by City staff
Capacity not overstretched by facility management	Less flexibility in space usage

COMMUNITY-COMMERCIAL HYBRID, VERSION 1: EVENT VENUE

Examples: Lula Lounge/Lula Music and Arts Centre, DROM Taberna/Drom Artist Collective

This hybrid model sees a for-profit bar/restaurant and live music venue that is bolstered by a non-profit presenting arm. Two Toronto examples are local institutions at the heart of the city's vibrant global music community: Lula Lounge opened in 2002 on Dundas West in Little Portugal and is known for Latin, Brazilian, jazz, and global roots music, its colourful tropical decor, and its popular Salsa dance nights, while the associated non-profit Lula Music and Arts Centre (LMAC) runs the Lulaworld festival, record label, and educational and outreach programs.

DROM Taberna began bringing countercultural vibrancy back to Queen West upon opening in 2018, with its mix of Eastern European music and food, jazz and rock jam sessions, affordable convivial atmosphere, and charismatic co-owner Misha Artebyakin's legendary "hat speeches" (before passing the hat to collect artist payment). DROM recently also launched a non-profit offshoot, Drom Artist Collective, in part to allow them to present larger events that the bar's capacity might not accommodate.

LMAC primarily presents events at its "home venue," Lula Lounge, approximately 200 nights a year — giving them the flexibility to take risks on grant-supported programming and rely less on bar sales.³⁹ DROM hosts a massively high volume of events on its small stage — roughly 100 shows a month, often four per night — and the new non-profit offers them the freedom to present off-site events at larger-capacity venues.

³⁸ "Association of Community Centres," City of Toronto, accessed May 9, 2026, <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/accountability-operations-customer-service/city-administration/city-managers-office/agencies-corporations/agencies/association-of-community-centres/>.

³⁹ "Lula Music and Arts," Lulaworld, archived February 15, 2026, <https://web.archive.org/web/20260215202800/https://www.lulaworld.ca/>.

Pros	Cons
<i>Best of both worlds</i>	<i>Worst of both worlds</i>
Diverse revenue: bar sales, event rentals	Managing two parallel organizations
Access to grants and donations	Capacity stretched in different directions
Home venue stability and external events	Continued reliance on bar sales and 24/7 facility management

COMMUNITY-COMMERCIAL HYBRID, VERSION 2: DEVELOPER CONTRIBUTION

Examples: Crow's Theatre, Allied Music Centre

Developer contributions can take many forms, from concretely building facilities for cultural uses to heritage designation that requires conservation of a space to more transactional sponsorships involving naming rights. Though partnerships between real-estate developers and cultural facilities are common in major cities around the world, Toronto became a hotspot for this development model thanks to a now-changed section of Ontario's Planning Act. Before it was modified by the provincial government in 2020 — in part to speed up housing approvals and standardize development charges — Section 37 helped bring to life civic culture cornerstones such as Crow's Theatre and TIFF Lightbox by allowing municipalities like Toronto to negotiate with developers to secure community benefits in exchange for granting additional height and density on development projects, though often at the behest of individual councillors. These benefits could include either cash contributions or capital facilities, which local councillors had significant influence over directing toward projects intended to improve residents' quality of life, such as parks, community spaces, and cultural infrastructure including theatres, cinemas, and arts centres.

As modified, the new section 37 now requires developers pay Community Benefits Charges (CBCs), capped at a flat rate of up to 4% of land value. Rather than site-specific negotiation, funds are pooled into the City's coffers for disbursement through the annual budgeting process. It's telling that, as of this writing, no notable new cultural facility has opened with the direct support of CBCs — this can partly be attributed to the post-pandemic construction slowdown, yet the loss of both funding and leverage for the City is considerable.

Developer contributions for cultural space in Toronto can take many forms. Crow's Theatre is cited as the premier example of a performance space animating the ground floor of an otherwise sterile glass condominium tower. Founded in 1983 as an artist-driven company, Crow's has grown into a leading mid-sized Toronto theatre with a focus on contemporary work and community engagement. Its long search for a permanent home led to an occupancy deal with Streetcar Developments, brokered by



Dumai Dunai, photo: Joshua Best

the City, which integrated the purpose-built Streetcar Crowsnest venue into a new condo project on Carlaw Avenue that opened in 2017.⁴⁰ This project engaged three parties — Streetcar, Crow's, and the City to allow Crow's to acquire control of the theatre space and operate it independently as a multi-use cultural hub. Notably, Crowsnest received the space outright, rather than cash contributions from Section 37 funding, an example of that era's culture-forward approach to development.⁴¹

The Allied Music Centre may have less name recognition to Toronto music fans than its crown jewel, Massey Hall. One of Canada's most historic concert halls, its \$184M renovation included a modern, multi-level expansion of the heritage building, encompassing two new smaller venues. Behind the neoclassical facade, a secondary entrance whisks concertgoers via elevator to the 500-capacity club TD Music Hall, alongside networking, educational and studio space located on other floors. Unlike the Crowsnest, there is no residential component to the Allied Music Centre.

How was this project financed? A classic legacy-institutional mix of philanthropy — including a major gift from the Slight Family Foundation — alongside public funding from all three levels of government, with the City of Toronto contributing \$2.5M in Section 37 funds, plus the donation of the adjacent land for the venue expansion and the all-important developer contribution.⁴² Allied Properties, best known for commercial and office space development, contributed \$21M over 16 years in exchange for naming rights.⁴³

40 Agenda Item History - 2014.TE29.53," City of Toronto, February 20, 2014, <https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2014.TE29.53>

41 "Agenda Item History - 2012.TE19.6," City of Toronto, December 1, 2012, <https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2012.TE19.6>

42 "Agenda Item History - 2013.TE24.10," City of Toronto, June 13, 2013, <https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2013.TE24.10>

43 David Friend, "Massey Hall facelift becomes part of major Toronto music complex under deal with Allied Properties," The Globe and Mail, December 9, 2020, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/music/article-massey-hall-facelift-becomes-part-of-major-toronto-music-complex-under/>

For smaller organizations, it's not easy to scale up the same way. Major institutions have easier access to capital, greater internal capacity, and the ear of policymakers. Partnering with developers can make for uneasy alliances for arts groups: in the eyes of many in their community, these are the same capitalist corporations responsible for the affordability crisis that has driven so many artists out of the city. Developers rarely act philanthropically, and as in the case of the heritage-driven Silver Dollar Room music venue/rental tower redevelopment on Spadina, as a default they only incorporate cultural space when required to. And as examples like the 32 Lisgar saga demonstrate, artist-run centres and property developers are sometimes simply too strange as bedfellows.

But when the values align, and a developer approaches their work from a social-purpose mindset — as best exemplified in Toronto by the Daniels Corporation and their support of Daniels Spectrum arts centre in Regent Park and the TIFF Lightbox — developer partnerships can be win-win. The developer gives something back to the community, providing not just (ideally affordable) housing but also a third space for people to gather and enjoy live music and the arts, rather than yet another pharmacy or fast-food outlet. And event presenters and venue space providers have access to a new, stable source of revenue beyond public funding — which often has a multiplier effect on their existing grant portfolio — as well as allowing them to move out of precarious or sub-standard facilities into more permanent new homes with upgraded tech and full accessibility.

It's unfortunate that the City's loss of Section 37 mechanism, combined with the softened housing market, has meant that developers are currently wary of new cultural partnerships. But grassroots music venues and rehearsal spaces are low-cost alternatives to major cultural institutions. Our sector is resourceful and often shines when doing more with less. A raw space — with basic sound isolation and acoustic treatment — can work wonders.

Pros	Cons
Access to capital beyond the public sector	Difficult to access for smaller organizations
Permanent, purpose-built cultural infrastructure	Risk of value misalignment
Potential for mixed-use community spaces	Reliance on market conditions and timing
	Less viable under current policy planning framework (CBCs)

Ultimately, no single operating or governance model will resolve the complex and interlocking challenges facing Toronto's grassroots music ecosystem. What emerges from this analysis is not a definitive blueprint, but a set of principles: stable and affordable access to space, governance structures that prioritize community autonomy, and financial models that acknowledge the limits of earned revenue in this sector. Whether municipally led, community operated, or hybrid in form, successful hubs will require a careful balance between flexibility and accountability, and between public support and grassroots stewardship.

Toronto's path forward lies not in replicating any one model wholesale, but in adapting these approaches to local conditions — including the realities of land use, policy constraints, and the diversity of its musical and creative communities. A networked approach, in which multiple hubs operate across different neighbourhoods and scales, offers the most resilient and responsive framework. In this context, governance is not just a structural question but a cultural one: the long-term success of any hub will depend on trust, shared ownership, and the ability to evolve alongside the communities it is meant to serve.



Alex Cameron, photo: Green Yang

PART VII:

HOW TO BUILD A HUB: CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



Bibi Club. photo: Green Yang

This study began with a simple question: is there a place for music community hubs in Toronto? The answer, grounded in data, case studies, and extensive consultation, is yes — but not in the singular. Toronto’s music ecosystem is too large, too diverse, and too unevenly distributed to be served by a single,

centralized facility. Instead, what is needed is a network of community-driven hubs: multiple spaces that restore missing rungs in the venue ladder, provide affordable access to infrastructure, and support artists and organizers across genres, geographies, and career stages.

At the same time, the challenges are clear. The post-pandemic recovery has been uneven, with consolidation among major promoters, persistent downtown concentration, and increasingly fragile economics for small and mid-sized venues. Historical precedents in Toronto — namely TMAC and Artscape — demonstrate that even well-intentioned cultural infrastructure projects can falter without clear governance, realistic financial planning, and long-term sustainability strategies. However, the success stories highlighted in this report show that alternative approaches such as community ownership models and meanwhile-use spaces are not only possible, but already taking root.

If there is a unifying takeaway, it is that space alone is not the solution. What Toronto's music communities require is a combination of space, support, structure, and smart governance: physical venues that are accessible and adaptable; operating models that are financially viable and mission driven; and policy frameworks that recognize live music as essential cultural infrastructure. Building this ecosystem will require coordinated action across sectors — from artists and community organizations to policymakers, funders, entrepreneurs, and benefactors — but the opportunity is clear. By investing in a distributed network of music community hubs, Toronto can strengthen its grassroots culture, nurture the next generation of artists, and ensure that live music remains a vital, inclusive, and sustainable part of city life.

Connecting back to the pathways outlined in Part VI, the following are recommendations to policymakers at multiple levels of government to support new sounds to flourish in anew spaces in Toronto:

▲ = municipal ● = provincial ■ = federal

The pathways listed below are colour-coded according to the chart on page 29. Multiple colours are used to denote where more than one type of an operating model is relevant to the policy recommendation.

MODERNIZE LAND USE PLANNING TO UNLOCK NEW MUSIC SPACES

▲ / ●

Relevant pathways: Municipal-run; Community-led; Community-municipal hybrid

Broaden and harmonize zoning permissions for live music venues and other cultural uses, particularly in employment areas where current permissions remain limited or inconsistent, and streamline approvals for the adaptive reuse of existing buildings for cultural purposes. The City should also continue to identify underutilized public buildings suitable for “meanwhile use” or permanent cultural activation.

Rationale: While Toronto's zoning framework already permits rehearsal and performing arts studios across many commercial, mixed-use and employment zones, live music venues face more restrictive and inconsistent permissions. Removing these remaining barriers — and making it easier to adapt existing



Charles Spearin, photo: Green Yang

buildings for cultural use — would expand the range of viable sites for new music hubs. Our research identifies land availability — not demand — as one of the primary barriers to creating new hubs. Case studies such as It's Ok* Studios demonstrate how publicly owned properties can successfully incubate community-led cultural spaces.

EXPAND TAX INCENTIVES TO SUPPORT THE FULL MUSIC ECOSYSTEM

▲ / ●

Relevant pathways: Community-led; Community-commercial hybrids

Expand Toronto's Creative Co-Location Facilities Property Tax Subclass to include rehearsal studios, recording studios, and other shared music infrastructure while increasing the municipal property tax reduction from 50% to 100% for qualifying non-profit and community-serving music facilities.

Rationale: Our findings show that earned revenue alone is insufficient to sustain most grassroots spaces. Reducing fixed operating costs improves the long-term viability of community-focused hubs and diversified music centres.

REQUIRE MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS TO CONTRIBUTE TO PERMANENT CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE



Relevant pathways: All six pathways, particularly municipally-supported and developer partnership models

Through Community Benefits Charges, density-related agreements, public land negotiations, or similar planning mechanisms, governments should require property developers to secure permanent, affordable music and cultural spaces as communities grow. Wherever possible, these spaces should be transferred into community ownership, long-term non-profit stewardship, or protected affordable leases rather than relying on one-off developer commitments.

Rationale: Our report demonstrates that one of the largest obstacles to new space creation is capital cost. Treating music hubs as public cultural infrastructure would make community-led projects financially achievable while strengthening developer partnerships.

CREATE A TORONTO MUSIC SPACE INVENTORY AND OPPORTUNITY STRATEGY



Relevant pathways: Municipal-run; Community-municipal hybrids

Develop and maintain a public inventory of existing music venues, rehearsal studios, recording studios (building on the ongoing work of the Music Office), vacant commercial properties, publicly owned buildings, and potential redevelopment opportunities that could accommodate community music uses. This should function similarly to existing municipal inventories for other cultural facilities.

Rationale: Better data will allow governments and community organizations to proactively match operators with available spaces rather than relying on ad hoc opportunities. It would also support our report's vision of a distributed network of hubs across Toronto rather than a single flagship facility.

ESTABLISH A MUSIC SPACE ACQUISITION AND PARTNERSHIP FUND



Relevant pathways: Community-led; Community-municipal hybrids; Community-commercial hybrid

Create a dedicated capital program to support acquisition, renovation and long-term stewardship of community music facilities through grants, low-interest loans, loan guarantees, and community finance. Priority should be given to projects involving community ownership, land trusts, public-private partnerships, or long-term affordable tenure.



Wavelength Summer Thing, Trillium Park. photo: Green Yang

Rationale: The report's strongest success stories — Hugh's Room Live, Small World Music, and It's Ok* Studios — all depended on innovative financing and/or public partnership rather than conventional commercial real estate models. A dedicated fund will allow more organizations to replicate these approaches.

PROTECT EXISTING GRASSROOTS MUSIC VENUES THROUGH PLANNING AND REDEVELOPMENT POLICY



Relevant pathways: Community-commercial hybrid (developer contribution); Community-municipal hybrids

Build on Toronto's existing Agent of Change policy by requiring redevelopment proposals that would displace an established music venue, rehearsal facility, or other community music space to assess opportunities for its retention. Where retention is not feasible, planning approvals should seek suitable replacement space on-site or nearby, with comparable capacity, functionality, and long-term affordability. Municipalities should also use heritage tools, adaptive reuse, planning agreements, and public acquisition strategically where a venue has demonstrated cultural or community significance.

Rationale: New spaces for new sounds benefit from a strong underlying venue network. Our report identifies venue closures, redevelopment pressures, and limited opportunities for new mid-sized spaces as ongoing threats to Toronto's grassroots music ecosystem. Prioritizing the retention or replacement of existing venues will help preserve the city's venues ladder while advancing a resilient network of community music spaces.

