

Current State of Edmonton's Arts and Heritage Sector

This attachment provides an overview of the current state of Edmonton's Arts and Heritage sector through the lens of three key organizations: the Edmonton Arts Council, the Edmonton Heritage Council and Arts Habitat Edmonton.

Edmonton Arts Council

In 2024, the Edmonton Arts Council distributed 235 grants totaling over \$10.7 million to arts and festival organizations and \$3.4 million to 254 projects by individuals and collectives. Four new artworks were added to the City of Edmonton Public Art Collection, all by Alberta-based artists. The collection now contains 294 artworks and will reach 300 artworks in 2025, with more than 30 projects in progress. Community Animation and Creative Partnerships brought 89 artists to 132 Edmonton neighborhoods through Green Shack Shows and hosted over 230 days of programming on Churchill Square. Edmonton Arts Council Shop & Services in Churchill Square also showcased 227 artists and garnered \$419,000 in ticket sales for local arts organizations.

Highlights in the implementation of *Connections & Exchanges* include progress on 32 of 35 Actions assigned to the Edmonton Arts Council. The Edmonton Arts Council undertook an operational planning process at the midway point of *Connections & Exchanges* to assess progress on the Actions assigned to them, and next steps to implement remaining Actions. The result is a living operational work plan, which will assist the Edmonton Arts Council to direct resources towards *Connections & Exchanges* goals.

The Edmonton Arts Council's Research, Measurement Analytics and reporting team captures municipal level data related to the Edmonton arts ecology and the artists and organizations the Edmonton Arts Council serves. This data shows that Edmontonians value the arts and engage at high levels. Edmonton Arts Council research found that 87 per cent of the general public in Edmonton said that arts and culture make their communities better places to live and 87 per cent attended at least one type of live performance or arts event in Edmonton in the past 12 months. In alignment with those results, 47 per cent of Edmonton arts organizations have had higher audience numbers in 2024 compared to the previous year.

However, arts organizations are under pressure due to inflation, long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and other economic stresses. Forty per cent of organizations reported that their organization has become less financially stable in 2024 and 25 per cent of organizations anticipate that they will be less financially stable in the coming year (2025).

For national and provincial trends in the arts, the Edmonton Arts Council looks to resources from national arts researchers and arts funders. Canada Council for the Arts¹ recently conducted a national survey of arts practitioners and organizations. The findings stated that "the financial health of the arts sector has been deeply impacted by funding challenges, rising costs, and decreased revenues. All respondents emphasized the critical need for more public funding to transform and adapt to be more sustainable." The majority of respondents also indicated that their financial security has been unstable in the past two years and noted decreases to their total income or revenue and increases to their total expenses in the past year. They found that 94 per cent of respondents from Alberta reported that additional public funding for sustainability is very or extremely critical.

Similarly, recent research by Stone-Olafson², funded by the Edmonton Arts Council and partners across Alberta, found that "the mindset of Albertans has shifted decidedly negative." The report describes how "a lack of economic stability and ongoing uncertainty is causing difficulties for Albertans, leading to feelings of lethargy and unease, which creates a challenge to showcase the value of experiential offerings to residents who are becoming more and more strict about their time and money." Despite these challenging conditions, the data shows how important arts and culture are to the overall health of the community and helping audiences deal with uncertainty. The report outlines how "the effort put forth by artists and those within the experience economy positively impact one's attitudes. Albertans are clear: our communities need to come together now more than ever. Given the ability of arts experiences to bring people together, arts and cultural experiences are essential for one's quality of life." The report also outlines some key differences between Edmontonians as compared to other Albertans. It states that "more than most areas in the province, Edmontonians know they don't need to go far to get authentic arts experiences. They see how prominent the arts and cultural scene is in their community and believe some of the best experiences exist right here. They also take in arts and cultural festivals more than the rest of the province.

Edmonton Heritage Council

In 2024, the Edmonton Heritage Council (EHC) celebrated its 15th anniversary with record levels of community engagement across its programs. The Heritage Community Investment Program (HCIP) funded 26 projects, 10 career development applications, and provided operating funds to nine organizations, distributing just under \$700,000 to support Edmonton's heritage sector. The Funding Indigenous Resurgence in Edmonton (FIRE) grant program saw a 79 per

¹ <https://canadacouncil.ca/research/research-library/2024/12/arts-community-pulse-survey>

² <https://www.rozsafoundation.com/spotlightonartsaudiences>

cent increase in applications and distributed \$190,452 to 20 diverse projects. Edmonton City As Museum Project initiatives connected over 1,140 Edmontonians to heritage stories through exhibitions, tours, and neighbourhood-based programming.

The Edmonton Heritage Council's funding was discussed by Council twice in 2024³, with community members advocating for the organization's importance during both budget discussions. These funding uncertainties created challenges in advancing the organization's work, with heritage community members expressing concern about the future of their operating funds, Indigenous grants through Funding Indigenous Resilience in Edmonton (FIRE) and the sustainability of heritage programming in Edmonton. Despite these challenges, the Edmonton Heritage Council continues to contribute significantly to the city by providing opportunities for belonging and connection, elements recognized as important through the Community Safety and Wellbeing strategy and several actions in the City Plan related to heritage.

Highlights in the implementation of Connections & Exchanges include the Edmonton Heritage Council's commitment to equity, with 50-67 per cent of the Heritage Community Investment Program project funding directed to equity-deserving communities. The formalization of the Community Heritage Activation Support program created clearer guidelines for micro-funding heritage events, programs and projects, with 80 per cent or more of recipients coming from equity-denied groups. In collaboration with the city of Edmonton and Edmonton Community Foundation, Edmonton Heritage Council contributed \$25,000 to the Black History Month Initiative, which supported 15 organizations with a total funding pool of \$70,000. Edmonton Heritage Council is supporting the National Trust of Canada's *Heritage is Living* Heritage Reset work, which aims not only to preserve and protect heritage "but to spark what makes us fundamentally human." Additionally, Edmonton Heritage Council staff were crucial in hosting the first-ever circle of Black heritage practitioners at the National Trust's Conference in Montreal in 2024, with plans to continue growing this initiative at the upcoming conference in Halifax.

In partnership with organizations throughout Alberta, the Edmonton Heritage Council is leading the creation of a provincial network of heritage organizations to promote and advance heritage work province-wide. The organization is also a key stakeholder in developing the Heritage Places Strategy with City

³ January 30, 2024, City Council, OCM02233, Operating Budget Amendment and December 2, 2024, City Council, FCS02529rev, Fall 2024 Supplemental Operating Budget Adjustment

Administration, ensuring that Edmonton's diverse heritage is appropriately represented and protected.

Looking at sectoral health, the Edmonton Heritage Council's 2024 Heritage Practitioners Survey revealed high satisfaction with programs (87 per cent satisfied or very satisfied with HCIP and 76 per cent with Edmonton City As Museum Project) while identifying key sector challenges: financial resources (63 per cent), succession planning (54 per cent), and adequate staffing (50 per cent). The organization conducted a strategic engagement session with operational grant recipients to gather insights that will inform program improvements in 2025.

The Edmonton Heritage Council's neighborhood-based initiatives brought heritage experiences directly to where Edmontonians live, with programming reaching all corners of the city. Key partnerships included the Commonwealth Walkway digital story map update with 46 additional Indigenous stories, K-Days Heritage Hall exhibiting Edmonton Living Rooms⁴ and Black Presence in Alberta⁵ initiatives (with 8,970 recorded interactions), and the Iskwehew and Ihwehew Kamik ceremony in partnership with the Indigenous Relations Office and Edmonton Public Library.

The next four-year budgeting cycle will be crucial for maintaining the stability of the heritage community. The Edmonton Heritage Council anticipates seeking resources to further develop Edmonton City As Museum Project, the grants programs and Indigenous initiatives like the Indigenous Burial Sites Working Group. The organization's strategic priorities for the next chapter, identified during its October 2024 visioning session, include developing stronger advocacy capabilities, creating sustainable funding models, expanding storytelling platforms and building relationships with allied sectors.

Arts Habitat Edmonton

In 2024, Arts Habitat Edmonton (AHE) doubled its ArtsHub inventory. Despite Arts Habitat Edmonton's increased space counts, the demand for purpose-built below-market-rate art space for artists and makers to create continues.

ArtsHub Ortona — the purpose-built result of the Ortona Armoury Building Rehabilitation Project — is managed by Arts Habitat Edmonton as a broad-access arts facility for the benefit of professional artists, not-for-profit professional arts organizations and the Edmonton arts community of today and

⁴ <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/exhibitions/edmonton-living-rooms/>

⁵ <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/exhibitions/a-black-presence-in-alberta/>

in the future. ArtsHub Ortona's Project Studios (available to professionals for project term lengths of up to 1 year), in its first year of operations, are 100 per cent licensed with a waitlist to fill the next intake period. ArtsHub Ortona's bookable learning, rehearsal, meeting and performance spaces are frequently booked and programmed for a variety of arts disciplines, and it's only getting busier. ArtsHub Ortona had 23 bookings from September 1 to December 31, 2024, which grew to 33 bookings in 2025 thus far, with 43 individual bookings confirmed for April 2025. ArtsHub Ortona connected with The City Arts Centre to extend their programming to the learning spaces while their building is currently undergoing renovations from April to September 2025.

ArtsHub Creative Studios, Arts Habitat Edmonton's newest ArtsHub, offers a mix of 28 office and studio spaces for long-term licensing and a variety of learning, meeting and exhibition spaces to be booked for events. Since opening, ArtsHub Creative Studios has been over-inquired for, and Arts Habitat Edmonton is licensing all office and studio space on a first come first-served basis.

ArtsHub Creative Studio's high demand was to be expected as a variety of arts facilities in Edmonton closed this year. The Great West Saddlery building, a prominent artist studio fixture in the downtown core, has closed due to increasing costs. The Alberta Conservatory of Music was dropped from MacEwan University's portfolio which led to the Alberta College building that was home to the Conservatory being sold to Edmonton Public Schools. The Winspear is going to take in the Conservatory program, which has been with MacEwan since 2002, and the Winspear will offer the instructors and students classrooms, and large ensemble rooms, but no teaching studios to support music instruction as it was at Alberta College. Another organization that was at risk of losing its art space was the Harcourt House Artist Run Centre. Alberta Infrastructure, who owns the buildings, informed the tenant (Harcourt) that the provincial government would not be renewing their lease. After negotiating a 1-year extension to give them time to raise money to buy the building, they were able to do just that, having W.E.C.A.N. Society purchase the two buildings, allowing artists to stay in the building.

In the past year, Edmonton's arts space inventory reminded us how volatile affordable and appropriate art spaces can be. It was unnerving to the Edmonton arts community to see some of its most strongly rooted institutions be threatened to lose their space, and ultimately the place of these artists' livelihoods. Again, artists were asked to remain flexible and grateful for any space, regardless of whether it was appropriate (purpose-built) for their art discipline.

Fortunately, Arts Habitat Edmonton was able to launch ArtsHub Ortona and ArtsHub Creative Studios at this pivotal time and was able to provide space options to artists during a period of uncertainty. Arts Habitat Edmonton is also proud to say its two previously established properties — ArtsHub McLuhan House and ArtsHub 118 continued to thrive as spaces for the arts in their historic neighborhoods.

Edmonton is not alone in being subject to the volatility of arts spaces, due to increasing operating costs and growing financial restraints faced by artists and arts organizations. On November 14, 2024, in her open letter to the arts community (*It's Time to Change the Story About the Arts*⁶), Michelle Chawla, Director and CEO of Canada Council for the Arts, said this state of crisis is felt in numerous communities across the nation. Chawla's advice is simple: with the economic realities we face today, we must remember the impact the arts have economically, socially, and culturally. *Canada Council for the Arts' impact by the numbers*⁷ states that for every additional dollar the Council invested in organizations receiving core (operating) funding, those organizations spent six dollars in their communities. This is a reminder that the residual impacts of investing in the arts are transformative for communities, in sixfold, and with proper funding will develop sustainable sectors.

The arts community's reach is wide, and a strong arts and heritage sector is supported federally, provincially, and municipally. Canada Council for the Arts granted \$19.2M in funding across Alberta⁸, which, if the six-fold theory above remains true, would have had an impact of roughly \$115.2M on arts and culture in Alberta. This example shows the massive impact the arts and heritage sector can have on the local scales of economies.

⁶ <https://canadacouncil.ca/spotlight/2024/10/changing-the-story-about-the-arts>

⁷ <https://canadacouncil.ca/#impact>

⁸ <https://canadacouncil.ca/research/stats-and-stories>