



ABOUT MEMOS RESEARCH & TOOLS

DESIGN CHALLENGE RESTORE THE CORE | EN FR

JOIN

Viewpoints

# Memo #19: Meanwhile leases can turn the city into a theatre

By Tom Arthur Davis, Producer at Why Not Theatre, Head of Provoke Activities (Toronto)



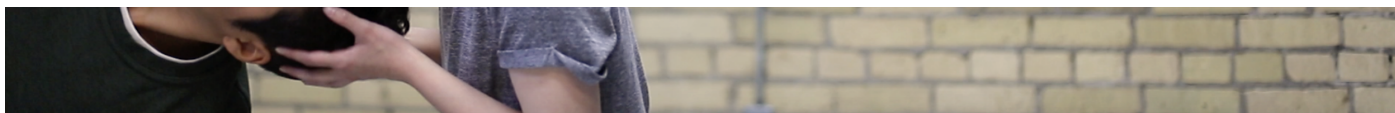


Photo of Sofi Gudiño and Kathy Vuu by Patricia Allison

## Why Not Theatre

Prior to the pandemic, Why Not Theatre was experiencing a period of rapid growth. In a short period, we had grown our annual operating budget from \$500k to \$2m, and grew our team from four employees to eleven. It was at this time that we were advised by our peers to build a purpose-built performing arts venue as a way to firmly establish ourselves as an arts institution.

While we recognize that these cultural spaces are vital to the arts ecosystem, we were hesitant to direct all of our efforts into such a large fundraising campaign. Rather than build a single space that can only support a finite number of artists at any given time, we instead asked ourselves if there was a different way to support more artists with existing infrastructure. We wanted to turn the city into our theatre.





Photo of Armon Ghaeinizadeh by BatChan Media

### Scarcity of affordable space for artists

At the time, space was at an unprecedented premium in Toronto. As real estate became increasingly expensive, cultural spaces became untenable to acquire and to operate. This meant that the model for space in the city relied on artists paying high rent for short-term-use spaces, or making long-term commitments and building their own infrastructure. Even spaces that offered below market rate space were unaffordable for fully-funded arts organizations, let alone the most vulnerable independent artists.

And vulnerable is the key word. According to the Toronto Arts Foundation, the median income for artists in 2019 was only \$30,000, less than half of the \$65,000 median income for Toronto residents. According to the Ontario Living Wage Network, an annual living wage in Toronto is \$46,000, meaning that Toronto artists aren't meeting basic living standards. Add on the economic pressures from COVID-19 to an already precarious freelance working culture, and you have a recipe for a devastating impact on the Canadian cultural industries.

This isn't something that the country can afford. The Toronto Arts Foundation also notes that arts and culture contribute \$11.3 billion annually to Toronto's GDP, with every dollar the city invests in the non-profit arts sector generating an additional \$12.46. And yet 73% of artists have considered leaving Toronto for financial reasons, with 47% of those artists citing a lack of affordable creative space as a key factor. Toronto has become unliveable for the very people who are so greatly contributing to its economic growth and prosperity.





Photo of Bilal Baig and Virgilia Griffith by Daniel Carter

### **Meanwhile leases can be a win-win solution**

So upon reflecting on how to support artists while benefiting the economic growth of the city, we identified two key problems:

1. Artists have little to no access to space which is causing them to leave city centres, yet it's their presence that makes a city dynamic.
2. Property developers/investors have significant portions of their real estate portfolios sitting empty at any given time (which COVID-19 has only exacerbated), and they are seeking to activate these spaces to make them attractive for future lease or sale.

Our goal in creating *Space Project* was to solve these two problems by activating temporarily vacant spaces across Toronto, turning them into pop-up creative studios for artists.

Our focus is on building new networks and connections to maximize the use of temporary space that suits a specific need in time, instead of constructing permanent brick-and-mortar infrastructure. By focusing on temporarily underutilized spaces on a **meanwhile lease** basis - with Why Not acting as the lease holder until a new renter takes over - we are able to access highly valued properties for free, at the cost of utilities alone, or at highly-discounted rates.

Why Not acts as a broker, connecting artists to an inventory of existing spaces, including those not currently considered cultural spaces, at either no cost or highly-subsidized rates. We increase the supply of available space, with possible new spaces that include:

- Storefronts
- Warehouses
- Churches
- Community centres
- Other temporarily vacant buildings.

We believe this approach minimizes the strain on individual artists, reducing their expenses to allow them to invest more in themselves and their work. It also reduces rental costs and opens up access, removing a significant barrier for underserved artists, allowing more diverse artists to participate in making work, which will reach more diverse communities and audiences.



Photo of Aria Evans by Ximena Huizi

Benefits also extend to potential space partners. By providing access to spaces in their portfolios that were sitting empty already, Space Project partners receive benefits such as:

- Covering some/all of their running costs

- Charitable tax receipts (via cheque exchange) for companies looking to increase their charitable contributions
- Increased foot traffic with artist activations, including installations, performances, workshops, etc.

Having run a successful pilot in 2019, we have begun building vital partnerships with real estate developers and community leaders. During our pilot:

- We supported 50 artists with 2,500 hours of free space
- We accessed three venues across the city (market value \$33,000)
- We accessed space for artists for less than \$4/hour

While participating in the pilot, 63% of the artists used the savings they accrued to increase artist fees. If we can build a replicable and scalable version of this program, artists across the country will be able to financially benefit.

But in order to do so, we need to advocate for policy change on a municipal, provincial, and federal level, including:

- Funding program changes at Canadian Heritage, to allow eligibility for temporary space in the Canada Cultural Spaces Fund
- Policy changes to the City of Toronto's Community Space Tenancy Policy, to allow for meanwhile leases on temporarily vacant/dormant city venues
- Tax abatements, refunds, and/or subsidies for participating space partners

Every year more and more artists are driven out of Toronto by the rising cost of living. Yet their contribution to our city is vital. Artists reignite neighbourhoods, boost economic growth, and make Toronto a more communal and liveable place. With our model we hope that artists will play an even bigger role in the recovery after COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing economic crisis. But, as we continue to grow and develop Toronto, we are starving out the very people who make the city great. We want to find ways to change that, to value these artists by finding cheaper, more innovative, and more sustainable ways to support them. We want to ensure that they continue making art in the city, and not somewhere else.

**Memo #18: New BIZ** >  
**Ambassador Team**  
**focuses on data and**

# member connections

Bring Back Main Street is developed in the public interest by the Canadian Urban Institute with the support of partners from across the country.



© 2021 Canadian Urban Institute  
All rights reserved.

## #BringBackMainStreet