



National Meanwhile
Space Network

Réseau National des
Lieux Transitoires

October 18, 2022

Honourable Dominic LeBlanc
Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, Infrastructure and Communities
Canada

Dear Minister:

We are writing to you today as representatives of the National Meanwhile Space Network/Le Réseau National des Lieux Transitoires (NMSN/RNLT), a collective of arts organisations and Non-Profit Organisations/Organismes à But Non Lucratif (NPO/OBNL) from across the country which are looking to find solutions for sourcing affordable space for the arts and non-profit sectors.

Artists and non-profits have been consistently struggling to secure and offer workers livable wages and the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated this problem. One of the key barriers faced by our sectors across the country is access to affordable space.

One solution that we have identified in our research is building 'meanwhile-use' models that allow for temporary use of vacant spaces. Such models allow artists and non-profit organisations access to space at a greatly reduced rate, allowing them to contribute these savings to their living expenses or operational/project budgets. Our studies have shown that our proposed space activation model provides a mutually beneficial situation that serves the interests of long-term lease holders, provides an opportunity for community building, and contributes to the preservation and animation of our empty heritage buildings. It also enhances public and community safety, and supports job creation/retention by local businesses that are dependent on local commercial activities and foot traffic along main streets and city centres.

nmsn-rnlt.com

contact@nmsn-rnlt.com



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There are few funding opportunities available, however, for facilitating temporary use of space for arts and non-profit purposes. This is why we respectfully recommend that the Department of Intergovernmental Affairs, Infrastructure and Communities support our national collective with:

- the research to compile a comprehensive inventory of temporarily vacant spaces, especially heritage properties;
- funding to provide sustainable infrastructure to build an accessible digital brokerage system, including an online meanwhile-use application connecting vacant spaces with artists/non-profits; and
- Clear avenues to access the ministry's unused government space for meanwhile use, especially heritage properties.

We have included a briefing note that outlines our recommendations in greater detail. As you'll read, we believe that your Ministry's timely support could greatly benefit independent artists, small arts organisations, non-profits and community groups across Canada, as well as the many Canadians who benefit from their vital work. We hope you'll be able to support us.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us. Or you can reach out to the NMSN/RNL's organisers, Ravi Jain, Marie-Josée Vaillancourt and Mary Rowe at contact@nmsn-rnlt.ca.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

The National Meanwhile Space Network/Le Réseau National des Lieux Transitoires

Handwritten signature of Ravi Jain in black ink.

Ravi Jain,
Why Not Theatre

Handwritten signature of Mary W. Rowe in black ink.

Mary W. Rowe,
Canadian Urban Institute

Handwritten signature of Marie-Josée Vaillancourt in black ink.

Marie-Josée Vaillancourt,
Entremise

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briefing note

Re: Meanwhile-Use Arts and Community Spaces

Date: October 2022

Introduction

Independent artists across Canada are financially struggling. Canadian artists have a median employment income of \$17,300, less than 50% of the median of all Canadian workers (Hill Strategies). Startups and non-profit organisations share the same struggle. Real estate prices are surging across the country, pricing out artists and non-profits in major cities. The economic pressures from COVID-19 and an already precarious freelance working culture within social organisations have created a recipe for a devastating impact on the Canadian cultural industries, particularly for BIPOC artists who are disproportionately affected by these changes.

One solution being brought forward by the NMSN/RNL is to create one or more models that allow artists, non-profit organisations and startups to access temporarily vacant spaces for free or at highly discounted rates. To achieve this, we are recommending that the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, Infrastructure and Communities create programs to research and potentially fund this kind of initiative, find ways for non-profits, startups and independent artists to access the government's vacant spaces¹ on a temporary basis, or find other creative ways to provide support.

About the National Meanwhile Space Network/Le Réseau National des Lieux Transitoires

¹ Which include Ministry of infrastructure, Ministry of Heritage (Park Canada), Public Services and Procurement Canada, SCHL, SIC, etc.

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The [National Meanwhile Space Network/Le Réseau National des Lieux Transitoires](#) is a collective of organisations that are working on finding more affordable space models for artists, social organisations, and startups with a focus on meanwhile-use strategies.

NMSN/RNLT was formed under the initiative of [Why Not Theatre](#), [Canadian Urban Institute](#) and [Entremise](#) during an initial research project funded by the Metcalf Foundation, on meanwhile-use as an affordable space model for artists and arts organisations. By bringing together organisations across the country, all of whom were working on affordable space solutions, NMSN/RNLT became a place to address common barriers and share knowledge, information, and solutions.

The NMSN/RNLT founding members are: Why Not Theatre (Toronto, ON), Entremise (Montréal, QC), ArtsBuild Ontario (Kitchener, ON), The Arts, Culture & Creative Industry Development Agency (Brampton, ON), Arts Habitat (Edmonton, AB), GRIP Artists Kingston (Kingston, ON), Calgary Arts Development Authority (Calgary, AB), cSPACE (Calgary, AB), Akin Collective (Toronto, ON) and Canadian Urban Institute (Toronto, ON).

Meanwhile-Use Arts and Community Space

NMSN/RNLT has identified two key problems:

- Artists and non-profits have little to no access to space which is causing them to leave city centres, yet it is their presence that makes a city dynamic.
- Property developers/investors/governments² 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.

NMSN/RNLT seeks to find unique ways to solve these two problems by creating models that access temporarily vacant spaces across Canada, turning them into pop-up creative studios for artists, and community spaces. These Meanwhile-Use Arts and Community Spaces are a cost effective way to support more artists and non-profits in creating more work. Keeping vacant space active is also an excellent way to preserve the space, provide public and community safety, especially when the space is professionally monitored.

Our focus is on building new networks and connections to maximise the use of temporary space that suits a specific need in time, instead of constructing permanent brick-and-mortar infrastructure. By focusing on temporarily underutilised spaces on a meanwhile lease basis, we are

² Especially the Ministry of Heritage with Parks Canada.



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able to access highly valued properties for free, or at highly-discounted rates. It is also a way to build a new business model and develop longer-term projects if possible.

Recommended Policy Changes

The members of the NMSN/RNLT respectfully recommend the following policy changes in order to benefit those seeking to implement a meanwhile use model.

- **Funding:** Our first recommendation is that the Government of Canada create a funding program to seed the piloting and testing of meanwhile-use models across the country. Many of the NMSN/RNLT members (including Why Not Theatre, Entremise, and Calgary Arts Development Authority) are currently working with and researching meanwhile-use models that include brokerage processes. Funding would help NMSN members and other organisations build efficient management processes and continue sector research that is already taking place.
- **Access and Equity:** Our second recommendation is for the creation of clear pathways to accessing any excess space owned or leased by the Government of Canada, that may be temporarily vacant, for meanwhile-use. With this access, artists will have the opportunity to workshop new creations, rehearse, and produce artistic works with a much smaller overhead. This will remove barriers for underrepresented groups as far as cost, location, and even physical needs.
- **Research:** Our third recommendation is for the Government of Canada to invest in researching the federal government's real estate portfolio, and create a complete and comprehensive catalogue of its properties in all Ministry or services (across all ministries) who can contribute to build this catalogue³ which will be made available to the public, with professional administrative oversight. Having greater transparency on the federal government's properties will help the general public, including artists and NPO/OBNL, understand what government space is available for potential meanwhile use.

In general, the NMSN/RNLT encourages the Government of Canada to provide support to small arts organisations, startups and non-profits access to temporary use of space, whether through amending current policy, creating new funding programs, or other alternatives.

³ The list we had so far: Ministry of heritage and Parks Canada, Public Services and Procurement Canada, SCHL, SIC, National Defence, Transport Canada, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Correctional Service Canada, Federal Heritage Buildings Review Office



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These kinds of policy changes would:

- Lead to a more accessible, equitable, and sustainable performing arts sector, startup and non-profits;
- Help to preserve our heritage buildings which sit empty, at a low cost;
- Support Canada's many Main Streets and commercial districts struggling with the myriad of challenges vacant space poses; and
- Aid in the country's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Making Room for Meanwhile Use Arts and Community Spaces

NMSN/RNLT has been collectively assessing the viability of different arts and collective space models that could increase the number of affordable spaces across the country. A Meanwhile-Use model has been proven to:

- Reduce artists' and non-profits' space expenses;
- Increase artists' and non-profits' wages with savings being passed on to pay artists a livable wage;
- Bring new audiences to artists engaging in new communities;
- Increase the leasing velocity of spaces activated;
- Enhance the vibrancy of local community;
- Draw people to main streets, making empty spaces more attractive to long-term tenants; and
- Increase access by Canadians to arts, culture and community associations.

Access to affordable space has been an issue for some time and the pandemic has only exacerbated this problem. Making room for Meanwhile Use models will ensure that artists and non-profits can remain in their communities, with significant and long-term benefit to the Canadian cultural sector and audiences across the country. It will also be a great strategy to protect and preserve empty public buildings that have a significant value.

NMSN/RNLT - In Action

Across the Network, we have been working to build a scalable model which may be shared across the country to allow individuals and organisations to access affordable meanwhile space. Why Not Theatre's [Space project](#) began with a pilot in 2019, providing empty space to artists in the Toronto community, and in 2021 partnered with Metcalf Foundation and the Canadian Urban Institute on a study that put together much of the information we have provided in this letter. NMSN/RNLT

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founding partner Entremise similarly created [Projet Young](#), [Cité-des-Hospitalières en transition](#), [Courtepointe](#), and [Espace Ville Autrement](#) in Montréal, all providing opportunities for artists, startups and community organisations to use space in otherwise empty buildings.

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In Closing

The Government of Canada notes that the arts sector provides 630,000 jobs, and \$54.6 billion in economic activity in Canada. In our largest community, according to the Toronto Arts Foundation, arts and culture contributes \$11.3 billion annually to Toronto's GDP. Every dollar the city invests in the non-profit arts sector generates \$12.46. And yet 73% of artists have considered leaving Toronto for financial reasons. Our urban centres have become unlivable for the very people who are greatly contributing to their economic growth and prosperity. With so many artists working on a precarious (freelance or contract) basis, countless artists have lost significant income during the pandemic, exacerbating an already dire situation.

Many government spaces sit empty between leases for long periods, sometimes for a year or more. We want to find ways for artists to access those spaces. A meanwhile-use model not only builds the opportunity for affordable rehearsal space/space for NPO/OBNL use, but the mass proliferation of spaces across the country.

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