

Creative Hubs in Suburban Communities

Deanna Galati, Canada

Part One: Mapping It Out

What is a suburban community?

Often when I travel, meet new people, or converse with friends, I refer to Toronto as my home. In reality, I have never had a Toronto address in my life. My impetus for focusing the duration of my residency with L’AiR Arts on the importance of cultural hubs in suburban communities was my way of reclaiming where I come from and better understanding the importance of a creative identity. If we continue suppressing creative communities in suburban centres, people will continue to flock to city centres and neglect the places they grew up. This summation is not meant to deter people from speaking about where they generally come from. I will surely continue to tell people I meet outside of my geographical scope that I am from Toronto because it is more globally recognized than Richmond Hill, Newmarket, Markham, Brampton, or Oshawa. This paper is also not meant to educate anyone on a suburban community, because Google can tell you that, but to resonate with those that continue to live and work in suburban centres on the importance of developing the place you live, specifically its arts and culture.

About York Region

As a region that neighbours Canada’s largest city, artists often flock to the downtown core of Toronto to learn, create, and connect. This poses a threat for York Region as we are losing local artists and great talent to Toronto. In 2018, the York Region Arts Council (YRAC) and Shadowpath Theatre Productions (Shadowpath) received funding to conduct a study to support our community’s need for a cultural hub, a place for York Region-based artists to call home. The study included conversations with key stakeholders, existing arts hubs, and local artists.

To put it in perspective, York Region covers an area of 1,762 km². It houses over one million people in nine different cities and towns including Vaughan, Richmond Hill, Markham, Whitchurch-Stouffville, Aurora, King Township, Newmarket, East Gwillimbury, and Georgina. Of the population, five percent work in arts and culture.

Commuter Story

The luxury of living close to a city centre means that York Region artists do have the opportunity to work in the downtown core of Toronto. That means, those who do so will likely commute for at least an hour whether it be by car, bus, or train and there is a good chance many are using more than one mode of transportation to get to where they need to go. While we are fortunate to have these opportunities in Toronto for work and leisure, it sure does not always need to be the case, especially for arts and culture.

About York Region Creative Space Feasibility Study

The *York Region Creative Space Feasibility Study* report and action plan is the culmination of 12 months of research. This study was funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation and was conducted in collaboration between two independent non-profit charitable organizations, Shadowpath and YRAC, who both serve the York Region arts community in their respective ways. The intention of the study is to explore potential solutions in creation and presentation struggles that local arts professionals currently face.

The long-term goal of this project is to establish multi-functional, sustainable spaces for York Region artists to work and perhaps even live. Shadowpath and YRAC researched 17 existing creative facilities and analyzed the regional community's unique needs through several stakeholder input sessions. The spaces that are recommended in this report will serve individual artists and arts organizations in acting as a collective creative home base. The spaces would be places for collaboration and cross pollination that would connect the region's creative community and further promote arts and culture in York Region.

Shadowpath is a registered charitable organization and has been turning everyday spaces into creative places since 2002. Shadowpath is the recipient of Newmarket's Chamber of Commerce Business Excellence Award for Innovation, 2016 and Richmond Hill's Creativity Connected Award for Best Innovation for their Café Cruise project in 2016.

YRAC is the only York Region-wide non-profit charitable arts service organization focused on capacity building, creative placemaking and community engagement in support of artists, arts organizations and creative entrepreneurs.

Cultural Industries in York Region

As mentioned, of the one million people who live in York Region, five percent of those work in the arts and culture sector. To better map out the creative sector in the region, artists taking part in the *Creative Space Feasibility Study* were asked to offer personal information on age, geographical location, and artistic discipline. The largest age demographic was 30-49 at 40%, the largest artistic discipline was visual arts at 54%, and majority lived in either Richmond Hill or Newmarket at 19.6% each. These majorities did not come as a surprise in analyzing the York Region Arts Council's typical programming statistics, as well as regional demographic data (york.ca). Where new information was given was in *where* artists were conducting their work. 74.2% of artists across all disciplines worked from home, while in second, 16.2% had studio or office space. For those who work in the sector, the act of producing and creating art is often communal, and with the majority of our artists working from home, this poses large barriers in terms of having adequate space and potential for collaboration. While working from home should not be frowned upon and is conducive to many types of work and processes, the need of an arts hub in York Region came through in the study when artists were asked about what they are missing in their community and the types of spaces that they needed.

Now that you have a clearer picture of where this research has come from, who York Region is, and the expressed need for a cultural hub, I encourage you to keep this at the back of your mind when reading the research and recommendations that have come from the study.

Part Two: What we found

Artists' Input

There are a large number of artists in York Region who work from home and few have an external place to create or build their work. There is nothing wrong with having a home studio, but with the majority of artists working in solitude, the region as a whole loses the interconnectedness and sense of community that comes with being in a collaborative space. Where do artists work? Where do they turn to? And where do we go to experience and live art as it is meant to? I often ask myself these questions sitting on the arts management side of the sector and want to help build a clearer path and picture for the arts community around this.

Artists surveyed for the study were asked to dream big when responding to the questions and to imagine living and working in a place with endless opportunity. When asked *What is stopping you from being an artist and/or running an arts organization in York Region?*, a similar pattern appeared. There were five key needs brought up that were stopping individuals from being an artists, which included:

1. **Physical Space:** this included lack of physical creation and/or presentation space for artists to work. There was a general sense of confusion in knowing where they would rehearse their next show or store their collection of art.
2. **Community:** this included lack of feeling connected and wanted that exists due to working in silos. Artists are unsure of who to turn to and where to go for advice and support.
3. **Finances:** this included lack of income and financial stability, as well as high costs for living in the region. Richmond Hill, Vaughan, and Markham are on the list of places with the highest cost of living in Ontario, Canada (YorkRegion.com 2018).
4. **Accessibility:** this included accessing physical locations, as driving is often necessary and bus routes are not always accessible. With such a large land mass, this also included proximity to places in the region.
5. **Resources and Opportunities:** this included professional development programming, administrative support, press coverage, and more that was missing in order to support arts and culture careers in York Region.

Space is a commonality amongst these top five needs, whether it is physical space, access to space, or affording space.

So, we dug deeper and asked artists what kinds of space they lacked. The following were the top responses: open studios, performing arts/film studios, rehearsal halls, exhibition/gallery, and storage space. When asked how often they would use these types of facilities, the majority said **weekly** (38.6%), while **daily** came in at a close second (34.1%).

Municipal Input

In order to have the support and strength that this study needed, key stakeholders were brought in as they have the largest influence on operations within the region. It was important to include municipal leaders such as mayors, councillors, economic development staff, and cultural department staff. The study included conversations with these individuals within each of the nine municipalities.

The majority of municipalities in York Region agree that a cultural hub is certainly needed. What emerged from conversations with municipal leaders included ideas on how they as each municipality would support the idea and implementation of a cultural hub, should it happen. Support came in many different forms including subsidized rates on already existing spaces, marketing and promotional support, community engagement, staff to navigate through zoning and permit laws, and in some cases, funding or partnership development.

All municipalities have already developed culture plans and are in various phases of implementation of their respective plans. Noted in the study was that culture plans and economic development plans recognize the importance of supporting artists and cultural groups, but the development of spaces to support local arts is not specifically identified. Most municipalities that operate professional theatres and galleries reported that over 70% of performances and exhibitions are part of a professional program series that bring national and international artistic talent to York Region, while 30% or less is used by local artists and arts groups. It was not noted why this may be the case, but I personally speculate that due to high costs to operate such facilities, and very little funding support for local arts and culture, local talent will have a hard time affording these spaces.

In cases where space is occupied entirely by an independent local arts group, only that one group is served per location and other artists and organizations never to rarely access these spaces. This part of the study adds to the issue of lack of space, even in already existing spaces, making it almost impossible for artists to start up or continue their practice locally.

To model after what?

The study also included research of different types of existing cultural hubs to analyse their current models and gain a deeper understanding of functional business models and partnerships that enable these spaces to exist and thrive. At each facility, owners, managers, and facility operators were consulted and responded to a series of questions about the development and current operation of their space.

Spaces visited included Toronto-centric, national, and a few international spaces. Noted thoroughly in the study includes: The Cotton Factory in Hamilton, Ontario, Akin Collective in Toronto, Ontario, and Canadian Music Centre in Vancouver, British Columbia.

The purpose of including research on other spaces in the study was to develop ideas around what works and what does not work when it comes to creative spaces. This portion of the study yielded factors to consider when moving forward on building a creative hub in York Region and will certainly serve a purpose in the planning phases.

Where does Paris fit in?

I was fortunate enough to spend time in Paris doing cultural research and speaking with an intelligent group of cultural leaders from around the world with L’AiR Arts in January 2020. While completing my residency, I wanted to focus on two key things in my short time:

1. How arts hubs are used in Paris today and what models have worked for Parisian artists?
2. How was the rest of the world feeling about arts spaces? Was there a lack of room for artists to work around the world?

I would get this information at surface level, but knew that it would only help strengthen the already existing study by Shadowpath and YRAC by adding research on hubs that were not already looked at and in speaking to new individuals in the sector. I gathered this information through visits to cultural hubs and conversations with local artists in Paris.

Throughout the L’AiR Arts Residency, I was able to visit cultural institutions that either previously served as arts hubs or continue to do so today for both local Parisian artists and artists from around the world. In delving into hubs and models that worked in Paris, I gathered research on La Ruche and Villa Vassilieff primarily as two hubs that still operate in Paris. La Ruche is a very unique, enclosed, live-work space for artists who apply for a studio space and upon approval receive a studio to work in indefinitely. The artists there included predominantly visual artists who either had a studio space or both a studio and place of residence. Villa Vassilieff on

the other hand is a gallery and arts residency space, also for primarily visual artists. This space houses artists-in-residence and showcases their work to the public in its open gallery space.

In speaking to local artists, the theme brought up most frequently was an artist's search for belonging and seeking *space* to call their own. Historically, many have found this sense of belonging in Paris and as I learned, this dates back to the 1920's when a large wave of artists went to Paris to live and create. This need for belonging and space was evident still today through the conversations I had. Local artists to Paris that I met included individuals from Canada, England, Ireland, Russia, Peru, Argentina, China, and more.

For me, the idea of relocating for your art career to Paris felt very similar to the artists that York Region was losing to Toronto. I began to think about why it may be that these individuals left their respective places of home for a new home in Paris. The responses were the same - space, whether physical or metaphysical.

Next steps

With this research, Shadowpath and YRAC identified four recommendations on what a creative hub could look like in York Region. Details on what each model would include, the business model behind it, and ideal locations were identified for both small-scale and large-scale hubs. Here is a breakdown of each recommendation:

1. **The Mothership:** The “Mothership” would be a large-scale, interdisciplinary and multi-purpose space that would offer a variety of amenities for artists, arts organizations and the public, and promote collaboration and cross-sectoral exchanges. The size of the facility should be no smaller than 25,000 square feet.
2. **The Akin Model:** It's not always about reinventing the wheel. Akin Collective has established a great reputation and very unique and innovative model that has positively impacted hundreds of artists throughout Toronto. They are already exploring partnerships in other suburban and rural communities so there is an opportunity to work with them to expand into York Region. This would address many visual artists' needs for open studio space.
3. **Live-Work with common amenities and space:** One of the biggest challenges artists and cultural workers in York Region face is the high cost of living. This study explored a few models where regions, cities, independent non-profit housing corporations and condo corporations have worked together to provide below market housing units for arts professionals. In some cases, these residential buildings did not include common amenities and shared spaces for its tenants, which is something that would be important to include to promote collaboration rather than isolation.

4. **Building on Existing Models:** NewMakeIt and the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority are two organizations which own and/or operate spaces that are ripe for artists and cultural workers to inhabit more regularly. They have equipment and natural spaces that are already available to use and are very open to introducing new features, facilities and services that can further serve the needs of the local arts community.

The study shed light on the creative facility needs of approximately 100 artists and arts organizations in York Region, the position of municipalities on grass-roots arts facilities, and viable business models that currently exist. The recommendations in this report are the first steps towards realizing creative spaces that support local artists.

My time in Paris has inspired me to help push this agenda forward in visualizing a creative, cultural hub for artists in York Region.

Conclusion

We in York Region lose many artists to Toronto because of the lack of available resources and opportunities that remain within the region. People flock to the city centre for training opportunities, classes, work, and entertainment. The story of living in a hotel community is far too real in our case and individuals in the region, myself included, spend a lot of time commuting into Toronto. Arguably, artists can spend more time doing what they are meant to do and love if given available space and resources to do so. So, why not build and create these spaces and resources?

I believe that a creative hub in York Region would allow the five percent of artists to collaborate, learn, perform, exhibit, and ultimately work. It would encourage artists who already live in the region to want to stay and work where they live. It would welcome artists from Toronto and surrounding areas - heck let's think even larger and say it would be a call to artists globally - to create a community of artists in York Region. We would not compete but work with Toronto artists, while also developing our own unique voice. Physical, accessible space is important.

With this research, we are able to have clearer and stronger conversations with municipal stakeholders, potential funders, and region-wide representatives in the arts and culture sector. I dream of a York Region that is thriving with artists and cultural leaders, and hope that this study and the voices behind it act as an entryway to build on the already extraordinary communities.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank the York Region Arts Council, Shadowpath Theatre Productions, Samantha Wainberg, and Alex Karolyi for initiating and completing the leg work of this study and for continuing to inspire me with their leadership and dedication to the sector. I want to thank the York Region Arts Council for supporting me through my time during the L'AiR Arts Residency to speak about the work. I'd like to thank L'AiR Arts and Mila Ovchinnikova for trusting me to deliver on this topic and for allowing me to develop my creative practice and add to this research throughout my time in Paris. And of course, the Creative Power ladies, who have all inspired me in each of their unique ways to keep fighting, keep working, and keep making art happen.