

Creative Construct Presentation
The State of Cultural Infrastructure in Ontario
April 30, 2008

It will be a significant challenge to discuss the state of cultural infrastructure in Ontario in five minutes, so I have decided to focus on five issues – **inventories, money, policy and planning, partnerships and standards** – or **IMPPS** for short, if you need a mnemonic device.

On the subject of the **I or inventories** - in the background paper that I prepared for the Ontario Round Table last November, I found about \$110 million of *documented* cultural infrastructure needs in Ontario. I estimated that there was at least another \$100 million or so of *undocumented* cultural infrastructure needs, for a total of over \$200 million. The participants at the Round Table, however, felt that this was still grossly underestimated. The trouble is, we have few accurate inventories readily available that would allow us to confirm or disprove this estimate. What we do know is that 45% of all facilities in use by small and medium-sized performing and visual arts organizations are over 75 years old, only 26% of francophone performing arts spaces in Ontario meet minimum professional performing arts technical standards, and that a large percentage of public libraries have crumbling infrastructure and need to be better integrated within community cultural development plans.

Moving to **the M – money** – the Round Table participants felt strongly that federal and provincial infrastructure money in Ontario was skewed either toward large flagship facilities intended to attract tourists (under the SuperBuild and ReNew Programs) or toward smaller communities and organizations (since only municipalities with populations under 20,000 are eligible to apply for Trillium Foundation cultural infrastructure funding). The gap in the middle is exacerbated by a couple of factors: 1) lack of stable, ongoing funding programs, particularly in the heritage area, and 2) lack of a dedicated envelope within large federal-provincial infrastructure programs for cultural infrastructure. The small and medium-sized performing and visual arts organizations in Ontario favour the idea of an independent, non-profit endowment fund to finance cultural infrastructure, which would de-link support from government budget cycles. In addition, some felt that a percentage of capital funding should be provided in the form of an endowment to support the operation of new or expanded facilities, since many organizational budgets may not be adequate to cover ongoing maintenance costs. It was also felt that the planning legislation should be changed to allow development charges to be used for cultural infrastructure.

On the subject of **policy and planning – the first of the Ps** – it was generally agreed that municipalities should take the lead when considering what cultural infrastructure is a priority in a given community. However, all but the largest municipalities and cultural organizations lack the resources for “soft planning”, feasibility and pre-construction studies and project management, so some shift in the policy and the resource weight to this level of government needs to take place. In addition, it’s hard to get cultural infrastructure projects high on the municipal priority list. As one participant at the Round

Table put it, under SuperBuild, “municipalities had to say that they had no sewer, water or other basic needs in order to get a cultural infrastructure project on the table” – hardly realistic and another strong argument for a sustained, multi-year cultural envelope within the big fed-prov infrastructure programs. There is also a widespread perception that amalgamation in Ontario worked against the cultural sector because before amalgamation, each municipality was allowed to submit one project annually to SuperBuild and – guess what – after amalgamation each municipality was still only allowed to submit one project annually.

Turning to the **second P of IMPPS – partnerships** – many Ontario municipalities have become quite creative in using public-private partnerships (P3s) to develop cultural infrastructure. But these partnerships sometimes bring problems of their own. The Ontario Round Table participants felt that there needed to be more flexibility in the 1/3, 1/3, 1/3 tri-level funding formula. Currently, if one level of government fails to commit, the whole project can be unsuccessful, even if there are other partners willing to fill the gap. Another source of tension is disagreement among the partners about what type of cultural space would best meet the needs of both the cultural sector and the public – purpose-built, single-use, storefront or multidisciplinary. Each one requires a different funding model and each one is suited to a different sizes and types of communities or neighbourhoods.

That brings us to **standards – the S part of the IMPPS** equation. There is a tension here too because some are in favour of legislation, similar to the *Libraries Act*, which mandates a certain level of cultural infrastructure investment based on standards for different sizes of communities. However, others fear that such guidelines would in effect become a cap beyond which municipalities would refuse to spend. Be that as it may, smaller communities and organizations have a great need for reference information that would provide guidelines for size, accessibility, minimum square footage and technical standards for different types of cultural infrastructure. Because of the lack of time, knowledge and resources within the cultural sector, some Round Table participants felt that more intermediaries were needed, such as Artscape, the Toronto organization that offers planning and consulting services on a fee-for-service basis to support capital project planning and development. The alternative is more investment in capacity building within cultural organizations. However, this may not be very realistic, as one participant said: “We’re all fighting over a few crumbs – it’s way too hard to make anything happen, and it’s not really the way you want by the end of it. Most of us don’t do these capital projects more than once because it kills us.”

So that’s Ontario. Thank you.