

Artist-run centres – Notes on space, facilities and autonomy

- All organizations require a space of some kind to carry out their mandates.
- Even organizations that are mobile or virtual have some requirement for or relationship to space.
- Most artist-run centres obtain space by rent renting access to property from a landlord.
- Some artist-run centres obtain space by being hosted or provided with space by another entity.
- Some artist-run centres have become owners or co-owners of a space, building or facility.
- The nature of its space and the terms under which it is accessed affect the way an organization operates.

The notion of self-determination (*auto-gestion*) can be interpreted spatially. Along with other factors that are typically the focus of discussion in artist-run culture (funding, governance, constituencies, programming...), the extent to which an organization has the appropriate degree of flexibility, security and autonomy in its access to space will influence its operations and potentials for development.

The relationship between an organization and the space it occupies can be expressed in terms of:

- occupancy cost per square foot or square metre (*how much does the organization spend on its space; what does it get for the money it spends*)
- security of tenure (*for how long into the future can an organization expect to occupy its current space*)
- the operational possibilities and constraints the space provides (*is the space in the right location; is the space the right size; is the space appropriately configured for the programing and activities the organization carries out*)
- the extent to which the space supports the organization's mandate, values and goals (*what kind of connotations does the space have; do these accord with the organization's present or future self-image*)
- the effect of the space on the organization's sustainability or durability (*is the space conceived as a temporary, medium-term or permanent occupancy; is the space enhancing the organization or dragging it down*)
- the role of the organization's mode of space occupancy in its "business plan" (*does the organization want or need to change the cost of its space; does the organization own its space; would it want to if it could*)

Reflecting on these considerations can help organizations think about how their use of space relates to current operations and future goals. These considerations are an open framework – every organization is a distinct amalgam of institutional histories, mandate, governance, finances, stakeholders, and so on. Because each organization operates in a particular geographic location with its own urban history and real estate market, the conditions under which organizations negotiate access to space vary enormously across the country. Each condition is unique: no one model of space occupancy can be conceived, proposed or promoted as a general "solution" for all organizations.

Yet it is clear that many artist-run centres either:

- face challenges in their relationship to space (*end of lease; rent increases; ill-adapted facilities*)
- wish to change their type of space occupancy as part of organizational evolution or long-term planning (*partnering with other entities; wanting to stop having to move every time a lease ends; seeing potential in owning a building*)

Organizational challenges around space are often further complicated by a lack of:

- capacity (*staff and board resources are fully occupied in delivering existing programs*)
- specialized knowledge (*about real estate markets, project planning, architectural design and construction*)
- access to capital

Addressing organizational challenges around space involves:

- understanding where to start
- articulating needs and goals
- developing consensus among stakeholders
- moving from ideas to actions

Undertaking an activity or project to address identified needs involves:

- building a case that justifies the project (*cost/benefit, compatibility with organizational vision*)
- understanding risks and potential impacts (*deciding which are acceptable, and which are not*)
- defining objectives and outcomes (*what are the requirements; what criteria will determine if they have been met*)
- determining the scope, timeline and resources for what is to be accomplished
- planning the phases of a project
- evaluating a project plan and making an informed decision to proceed - or *not* to proceed