

# URBAN renewal and revitalization

Published by the Creative City Network of Canada  
with the support the Canada Council for the Arts

[creativecity.ca](http://creativecity.ca)



Canada Council  
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts  
du Canada



# URBAN renewal and revitalization

Published by  
**Creative City Network of Canada**  
#415 — 402 West Pender Street  
Vancouver, BC V6B 1T6  
T 604-688-2489 F 604-688-6701  
info@creativecity.ca creativecity.ca

For more information and  
other *Making the Case* features,  
profiles and resources, visit:  
creativecity.ca

**C**ulture-based initiatives have been essential to urban revitalization and urban renewal programs in Canada. The arts ensure a community's habitat reflects who residents are and how they live.

## **Key arguments** for renewal and revitalization through culture-based initiatives

### **LOCAL INTERESTS AND OBJECTIVES**

#### **Arts and culture can help regenerate a city's core.**

Main street revitalization programs that include arts and culture programming **increase community vitality.** (Alberta Main Street Program, AB)

Regeneration initiatives such as street façade improvement **contribute to economic regeneration** for ailing commercial streets. (Chilliwack Business Association)

The construction of new public squares creates **new "spaces" for community activity and interaction.** (Art City, Edmonton, AB)

Greening initiatives and landscape art **improves the sense of place** of urban streets and blocks.

Urban regeneration through the arts can spur local economic growth and development. (Custard Factory, UK)

#### **Arts and culture can re-identify negatively stereotyped communities.**

Cultural branding and community identity building, through commonly designed or characterized infrastructure, can **create a new character** in a typecast community. (Drummondville, PQ)

Artistic detailing of public space can **foster community cohesion** and perhaps **interconnected identities**. (Wansborough, 2000)

**Arts and culture can improve the physical and emotional state of urban space through creative means.**

Arts and culture initiatives are often the first initiatives to be introduced into communities that suffer from low economic and social conditions, and they most frequently produce **positive and nourishing results**. (CMHC, 2001)

Regeneration through arts and culture can **increase the quality of life for residents** of the urban core. (Vancouver Agreement, BC)

**Heritage and local history is rediscovered through revitalization and regeneration.**

Retelling old heritage buildings (landmarks) historical significance can **give heritage resources new life**. (Old Port Montreal, PQ) (see images left and right)

Revitalizing urban landmarks can **promote cultural tourism and regional economic benefits**.

**Redefining the meaning of neglected historic centres** can be achieved through urban revitalization. (St. Norbert, MN)

**Necessary work and living spaces for new artists and cultural workers are created through urban revitalization.**

Heritage buildings can be revitalized into **work space for multiple artists**, which in turn can create **growth of the creative sector**. (Artscape Distillery Building, Toronto, ON) (Photo on left)

Urban buildings can be revitalized into “**arts and culture**” **incubators**—creating spaces for diverse artists to share creative ideas and space.

Revitalized space developed for artists can help **bridge commerce culture and community**. (401 Richmond, Toronto, ON)

Urban spaces that have been revitalized provide **affordable housing or work-live space for emerging artists**. (Ace Art, Winnipeg, MB)

Revitalization allows for **affordable practice space** for performance artists. (Art Space, Winnipeg)

**Permanent infrastructure for artists and cultural organizations are created through regeneration, which gives essential support to the arts and cultural sectors.**

Arts and culture organizations **gain legitimacy and a competitive edge** when they secure permanent space in the city. (Russell, 2000; James 2000; Donald & Morrow, 2004; Goar, 2004; Gordon, 2004; Adam, 2004)

Revitalizing aged cultural venues (theatres, stages, studios) can **add new vitality to the surrounding community.**

Introducing arts into the commercial core may **stimulate economic growth in the surrounding area.**

Introducing arts into the commercial core may **establish the arts and culture as key industries** of a city.

**People's access to arts and culture increases through the development of urban infrastructures.**

Developing new infrastructures or expanding existing ones (theatres, venues, performance space, etc) will **directly increase access** to arts and culture for residents and visitors.

**Cultural tourism and economic profit** is promoted through infrastructure development.

Overall local **social development** may be fostered by combining arts and cultural facilities with sports and recreation facilities.

**Aesthetic appeal and attraction to “the real city” is regenerated through the revitalization of urban areas.**

Suburban communities design urban environments to mimic the **aesthetic appeal** of urban places. (CUI, 2003)

**Authenticity** is key: People and tourists are drawn to spaces that illustrate “real cities,” city culture, or nostalgic memories of cities past (emerging demographic of “city tourists”).

## **NATIONAL INTERESTS AND OBJECTIVES**

### **Infrastructure renewal**

Revitalization through the arts and culture can **give new meaning to decaying and low-profit urban infrastructure.** For example, many buildings do not require a great deal of retrofitting to equip them with the services required by arts and cultural organizations. (You You Chen, 2000; Russell, 1999, 2000; James, 2000)

### **Economic revitalization and tourism**

Urban revitalization through the arts:

**Spurs economic growth** of the arts and cultural industries. (Donald & Morrow, 2004; Gordon, 2004; Adam, 2004)

**Stimulates the economic status of the surrounding neighbourhood or districts.** (Fort Saskatchewan; Sternberg, 2002)

**Encourages cultural tourism** and subsequently economic growth when cities adopt and broadcast urban revitalization initiatives through the arts and culture (theatres, museums, sports facilities, etc.). (Wascana Lake, Regina)

## **Environmental sustainability**

Urban revitalization through the arts combined with and for greening initiatives supports **environmental sustainability** (Greenways, parks, etc.).

By preserving heritage buildings, demolition waste and new construction **waste are eliminated**. Natural environments from which building materials are derived are not disturbed while **cultural and architectural heritage is preserved** (Heritage Foundation Canada 2001).

## **Increased quality of life**

Urban revitalization through the arts increases the quality of life of urban residents (Un-Habitat, 1986; Carter, 1991). Recent studies on quality of life in Canada indicate that **diversity, culture, and the arts are essential to our self-definition and our well-being**.

## **PROFILES**

### **Edmonton, AB**

Urban renewal anchored on legacy and community: Edmonton's Churchill Square.

[creativecommons.ca/project-profiles/Urban-Renewal-Edmonton-Churchill-Square.html](http://creativecommons.ca/project-profiles/Urban-Renewal-Edmonton-Churchill-Square.html)

### **Greater Victoria, BC**

Youth reclaiming & transforming their environment: The story of Greater Victoria's Trackside Art Gallery.

[creativecommons.ca/project-profiles/Greater-Victoria-Trackside.html](http://creativecommons.ca/project-profiles/Greater-Victoria-Trackside.html)

### **Halifax, NS**

Integrating urban design and cultural activity for cultural connection and vibrancy: Halifax urban renewal.

[creativecommons.ca/project-profiles/Urban-Revitalization-Halifax.html](http://creativecommons.ca/project-profiles/Urban-Revitalization-Halifax.html)

### **Quebec City, QC**

Designing a space for arts and culture: The story of Quebec City's St. Roch Quarter.

[creativecommons.ca/project-profiles/Urban-Renewal-St-Roch-Quarter.html](http://creativecommons.ca/project-profiles/Urban-Renewal-St-Roch-Quarter.html)

## BACKGROUND / CONTEXT

### Background

With the growth of suburban neighbourhoods in the 1950s and the 1960s, the urban core experienced an outmigration of residents, resulting in loss of vitality and liveliness. Without evening shoppers and nighttime pedestrians, the once bustling streets became vacant and formidable.

Beginning in the 1980s, however, Canadian cities began “pulling up the bootstraps” of their abandoned urban centres. Developers and governments saw great potential in the empty heritage buildings and in cheap office space. Many urban centres rezoned office space into residential space to encourage a return of the urban community.

Artists and other individuals who worked in the cultural sector were among those initially interested in the urban core. Artists snatched up unfavourable office and industrial space which, for low rent, provided living space and ample working space for practicing visual arts and performing arts.

Cities and districts that attracted artists soon experienced economic growth and regeneration (sometimes called gentrification) as other industries gained an interest in these creative, innovative, and artistic communities. Revitalization followed as entrepreneurial crafts (fashion, woodworkers, etc.), new media, information technology, start-up companies, and eventually more mainstream commercial ventures became attracted to these spaces.

Since the 1980s, interest in urban revitalization through the arts and culture has grown from communities, to local government, to provincial interests and, more recently, to the national agenda. These different levels of government have both distinct and shared visions and hopes for urban regeneration through the arts. The following section elaborates on the interests of different levels of government and explores the origins of these interests.

## LOCAL INTERESTS

Local and city-based investment in culture-based urban revitalization and urban renewal serves **eight predominant goals**:

To regenerate a community

To re-identify a negatively stereotyped community

To improve not only the physical but also the emotional state of urban space through creative means

To rediscover heritage and local history

To create necessary work and living spaces for new artists and cultural workers

To create permanent infrastructure for artists and culture, which gives essential support and legitimacy to the arts and cultural sectors

To develop infrastructure that increases access to arts and culture for residents and visitors

To regenerate the aesthetic appeal and attraction to “the real city”

## The current context:

### Motives and interests driving culture-based urban revitalization in Canada

Within the past decade, cities have gained increasing power in the planning, governance, and management of their city spaces. Many major Canadian cities have developed and implemented **official development plans** which detail the city’s principles and philosophy towards urban development and growth. Within these city plans, many municipalities have included **arts or cultural mandates**. In addition, many municipalities have performed **feasibility studies** and established separate and elaborate **arts and culture plans**. Local governments often develop **partnerships** with provincial and federal levels of government as well as with private and non-profit organizations in order to further their arts and culture goals.

The contemporary interest in urban space has also resulted in cities recognizing the importance of urban revitalization through the arts as a means of **regenerating communities** and of **developing community cohesion and community identity**. Cities and local organizations have encouraged these mandates with initiatives such as: community and city branding initiatives and community signage; building façade initiatives and streetscape initiatives; the development of culture-specific spaces (e.g., First Nations); the construction of public squares and community houses (Quebec); and the construction of memorials, museums, and landmarks of historical significance.

Cities and communities are also taking advantage of the federal government’s extensive funding for urban revitalization initiatives that improve **infrastructure**. These programs encourage urban revitalization through the arts and culture not simply to create economically viable projects, but with deeper goals that **serve the interests and livelihoods of artists**, and of local Canadian arts and cultural development. Many Canadian cities and agencies are investing in revitalization initiatives that **create permanent infrastructure for artists** and culture, which **supports and gives legitimacy to the arts and cultural sectors** through the creation of artist enclaves, artist incubators, and local media centres.

Local revitalization initiatives also facilitate the development of arts and culture by **creating necessary living spaces at low-rent for new artists and cultural workers**. In addition to living space, revitalization initiatives **provide funding for workspace** and for the **acquisition of specialized equipment for professional artist practice**.

The reclamation of city space for the arts and culture on one hand and the **increase of residents returning to live in the urban core on the other subsequently increases these returning residents’ access to the arts and culture**. Many urban revitalization plans in Canadian cities aim to **advance quality of place** through the construction, programming, and administration of performing, visual, and media arts centres as well as cultural facilities. Access is also increased to heritage facilities and venues through the urban revitalization process of their improvement, renovation, and dedication.



## NATIONAL AND PROVINCIAL INTERESTS

Federal investment in culture-based urban revitalization and urban renewal serves **four pre-dominant goals:**

To improve infrastructure

To foster economic revitalization

To increase greening and sustainability goals

To improve quality of life

The federal department of infrastructure Canada is one of the major contributors of redevelopment and regeneration funds for Canadian cities. Federal investment in urban revitalization and urban renewal serves four predominant goals: to improve infrastructure, to foster economic revitalization, to increase greening and sustainability goals, and to improve quality of life.

Infrastructure Canada has signed a **federal–provincial partnership** with every province in Canada. These federal–provincial funding agreements support the development of economically viable projects such as waterfront redevelopment initiatives, infrastructure supporting tourism, rural and remote telecommunications, and high-speed Internet access for local public institutions promoting communication and support through networking. They link urban infrastructure with economic development with the goal of seeing the funded projects for urban renewal and revitalization becoming economically viable and sustainable.

Influenced by the Kyoto Protocol and other international environmental initiatives, many federal level agencies are interested in combining urban revitalization and renewal with **greening initiatives**. All of industry Canada's provincial partnerships declare that city initiatives that have environmental and sustainable prerogatives will receive increased attention in the funding process. Many case studies and examples of urban revitalization for the arts and culture are combined with greening and beautification initiatives (i.e., Green Infrastructure, Smartgrowth Urban Design Initiatives).

Several federal departments are also gaining interest in **quality of life** indicators. An intensive national survey of Canadians, which aimed at establishing a set of Canadian quality of life indicators, revealed that **health, sport, the arts, culture, diversity, and community** were essential values and principles of Canadian citizens. Subsequently, federal agencies such as Industry Canada and Heritage Canada tend to fund urban revitalization and renewal projects that promote and sustain these aspects of Canadian sociocultural daily life. Some of these federal initiatives include recreational facilities, main street revitalization, and cultural branding (city adopting an overall branding identity and subsequently plan and construct distinctive infrastructures, i.e., Edmonton Centre, AB).

## REFERENCES

For a current list of references (articles and weblinks), visit: [creativecommons.ca/making-the-case/urban-renewal-4.html](http://creativecommons.ca/making-the-case/urban-renewal-4.html)

*For more information and other Making the Case features, profiles and resources, visit: [creativecommons.ca](http://creativecommons.ca)*