

Bridging the Gap



Connecting Arts Communities Across Toronto
Notes from the April 21, 2011 Community Conversation at AccessPoint

Background

On April 21st, 2011 the **Neighbourhood Arts Network** and **Scarborough Arts** brought together artists and cultural workers from across Toronto. The topic for discussion was bridging the gaps that exist between arts communities in the downtown core and the inner suburbs.

The event started off with two short presentations, providing context for the following discussions. **Tim Whalley**, Executive Director of Scarborough Arts touched on some of the realities of arts programming in the inner suburbs. Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival's **Heather Keung** (Artistic Director) and **Louanne Chan** (Director of Marketing) then spoke about Reel Asian's work connecting with new audiences outside the downtown core.

Over forty representatives of arts organizations based in the inner suburbs and the downtown core participated in small group discussion. Wide-ranging conversations touched on issues such as: infrastructure, communication, and partnering. The following notes capture some of this discussion; they are organized into three sections: **Challenges and Solutions**, **General Observations and Misconceptions**, and **How Can We Connect?**

Looking for more information? To learn more about Neighbourhood Arts Network events or to join the network, please visit www.neighbourhoodartsnetwork.org

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Challenges and Solutions

Challenge: Geographic Barriers

- Distances are great, too much time lost in travel
- Expensive for large organizations to bring people in or for people to travel alone.
- Artists and groups segregated by distances
- Very difficult to get people from downtown to attend suburban events

Possible Solutions to Geographic Barriers

- *Hold Skype meetings*
- *Organize central meeting locations*
- *Coordinate an “art bus”*
- *Forge partnerships with public transit*
- *Learn from organizations like Scarborough CARES and Red Pepper Spectacle Arts, who have done some mobile work*
- *Hold events in different areas, bring programming to the people instead of trying to bring people to the programming*
- *Make suburban locations the site of important arts sector events and use this as an opportunity to educate attendees about the area’s organizations, spaces and activities*
- *Engage people through bringing them to different neighbourhoods*
- *Link downtown events/projects with simultaneous suburban located events*
- *Make transportation part of programming budgets/proposals*

Challenge: Communication

- Language issues between youth and funders
- How to include different linguistic communities in suburbs

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- Organizations are also figuring out how to communicate with their own communities who have never walked in the door

Possible Solutions to Communication Challenges:

- *Bring youth and funders together in other ways besides grant and proposal writing.*
- *Hire more youth in the non-profit sectors in the government, use the Grassroots Youth Collaborative more often to help with barriers*
- *Advertise and promote projects/events in different languages*
- *Do outreach in different languages and reflect knowledge of different cultures*
- *Partner with settlement organizations, language and cultural groups, to reach a better understanding of newcomers' needs and language facilitation*

Challenge: Funding

- There is a perception that most funding goes downtown
- Some organizations – particularly youth-led organizations, are hesitant to approach funders and partners; often feel intimidated
- Funding for suburbs doesn't cover additional program costs (travel, space)

Possible Solutions to Funding Issues:

- *Third parties can build a standard package and help make connections between artists and funders, help those who have difficulties getting funding with their proposals*
- *A TAC travel grant for admin costs, to encourage travel within the city*

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Challenge: Lack of Time

- Takes time and resources to get artists out to different communities
- Hard to get people to commit their time

Possible Solutions to Time Issues:

- *Have shorter meetings or online meetings*
- *Share notes with people who can't attend*
- *Hold meetings multiple times so people can come when they have time*
- *Online-hosted documents that everyone can view and edit*

Challenge: Local Capacity and Infrastructure

- Lack of arts facilities in inner suburbs
- Difficult to find accessible space
- No real arts hubs—downtown core thinks nothing is going on in the suburbs, there is nothing for them to see
- Lack of childcare

Possible Solutions to Infrastructure Challenges:

- *Funding to create arts hubs/space in inner suburbs so art in those areas has a visible presence/home*
- *City of Toronto could create an online hub that is open to the public, like NAN but on a larger scale*
- *More opportunities for families (children and adults) to participate in programs/events together*

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Challenge: Forging Partnerships

- Challenging to find like-minded organizations to sponsor/partner you
- How to match ideas with suitable organizations
- Preconceived ideas about other groups make it hard to get past assumptions and have a real dialogue
- Who to talk to? Who to contact? It's not always clear how to approach a larger organization

Possible Solutions to Partnership Challenges:

- *Share existing partnership agreements with others to help them gain more understanding*
- *Share contacts for sponsors and sponsorship packages*
- *Sharing what is rightfully public knowledge with the public*
- *Go through relationship brokers—NAN, LASOs, Arts Services*
- *Create liaison positions, “Ambassadors” (volunteer and paid) to connect with different organizations*
- *Do your research*

General Observations and Misconceptions

Observations

- There are real differences between suburbs and downtown—no need to replicate what is going on somewhere else, what is successful in one place may not necessarily be successful somewhere else

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- All the major art institutions (eg. AGO, Light Box) are downtown and there aren't many art destinations in the suburbs
- Downtown groups don't really know what's going on in the suburbs
- Downtown groups want to engage communities outside the downtown core
- Big organizations get stymied in the process; smaller organizations have the capacity for flexibility

Misconceptions

- There's a hierarchy between suburbs and downtown (downtown gets all the money, it's where everything is happening, it's "Us" versus "Them") when in reality artists are everywhere and there is a larger presence of funders and city workers in the suburbs
- Downtown is elitist, richer, privileged, not interested in communicating with suburban organizations
- Suburbs are ethnic enclaves, amateurs
- Large organizations have more money and resources
- Assumption that "fine" arts and community arts have different needs and goals and therefore do not partner as readily
- Luminato is not open to partnering with community organizations (it is still in its early stages but is looking at Regent Park , St. Jamestown, Parkdale)
- Soulpepper is downtown focused but actually already working with many youth from the inner suburbs (idea of exchange—each youth has an artist in the building that they have lunch with)

Ways to Overcome Misconceptions

- More funds to build art destinations in suburbs
- Have a bus that travels from downtown to suburbs to showcase the arts destinations that do exist

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- More promotion in the downtown core to promote events taking place in inner suburbs, or an online hub that has the information
- Have more meetings between groups to dismantle misconceptions and share real information
- Incremental development of partnering/collaboration to experiment and develop understanding without any immediate “high stakes”
- Large organizations could be more transparent with their budgets and how they operate, make this information easily accessible to the public
- Invite “fine arts people” to community arts sites/programs and invite “community arts people” to fine arts studios, behind the scenes, as a way of connecting and developing mutual understanding
- Luminato: to increase audience engagement, could run a project that starts small, has youth involved, not overly formal. Could grow over the years

How Can We Connect?

Strategies to Connect Creative Communities

- Social media (Facebook, Twitter, Google Chat, etc)
- Facilitate transportation: contemporary art bus to shuttle people around, create a TTC supplemented ART CARD that artists or members of arts groups can obtain through the Toronto Arts Council
- Set up Skype meetings or connect meetings across the city through live internet feed (eg. Live Aid connected concerts around the world to each other on big screens)
- Have rush tickets in other locations so people can get tickets in their neighbourhood
- Offer internship/volunteer opportunities to build expertise, understanding and relationships

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- Conduct organizational exchanges
- Reach out to other organizations doing the same thing—why reinvent the wheel? If another organization is doing something similar, share resources and come together to make the project better
- Find specialized grants for collaborations
- Find out what YOU can offer other groups (i.e. don't just focus on what you can get back)
- Initiate social enterprising projects
- Work on building friendships
- Make attending networking events part of job descriptions, built into employees' hours
- Hold tours of program/project sites by neighbourhood or region (eg. a bus tour where people visit different sites, share a meal and have presentations during the ride) as part of professional development
- Create inter-organizational hubs or spaces (could be cross-sector hubs like York Woods Library in the Jane-Finch community)

How Can Established Arts Organizations Better Serve the Inner Suburbs?

- Problematic question: Why are we expecting downtown organizations to serve the inner suburbs? Do they have the expertise? Not everyone believes it's the role of downtown organizations to "serve" the suburbs
- Yet every organization has a responsibility to engage and know their community—if your community is Toronto, that includes the inner suburbs
- Make serving the inner suburbs a priority, a mandate
- Larger organizations could provide funding to smaller suburban organizations (eg. Luminato puts money into smaller projects) and be open to proposals or initiatives developed/led by smaller groups
- Rather than larger institutions initiating and being in control of relationships there should be more possibility for *equal* partnering where

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both partner organizations have equal input and direction over the relationship

- More support in kind (sharing space, facilities, materials, staff) instead of monetary funding
- Larger downtown groups could share networking, outreach, facilitation
- Set up collaborative town halls (partner with other organizations to better serve the suburbs)
- Spend time getting to know the communities
- Less centralized programming

How Can Smaller Groups Connect with Larger Organizations and Raise their Profiles?

- Webinars (Web-based seminars) could be helpful (eliminating the travel factor)
- Network online—find organizations with compatible mandates and reach out/connect
- Attend events where they can network
- Make videos
- Engage the public through events and community consultations
- Pay more attention to and support knowledge of volunteers and community members in relation to how to communicate
- Situate programs in community contexts with increased involvement of community members in planning and implementation
- Focus on long-term commitments/relationships rather than “parachuting” to foster more of a sense of reciprocal belonging and connection between communities and arts organizations

How Can Service Organizations and Network Facilitators (such as Scarborough Arts and NAN) Facilitate City-Wide Collaboration?

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- Organize more networking events
- Minutes from meetings and networking sessions should be made available online
- Set up templates for artists to use
- Set up a network that everyone can add to and truly support one another
- Give workshops on grant writing, sponsorship, and fundraising
- Map web so people can see where various organizations are
- Hold meetings that support artists (eg. live performance or mini art project in the meetings to help non artists understand the importance of art)
- Get city leaders and city council involved in the networks' agendas
- Don't just target directors of education and outreach—bring producers, artistic directors to networking sessions
- Include business community in networking sessions, share different perspectives
- Websites can post links to videos etc on different organizations' websites
- Facilitate the sharing of resources among organizations (contacts, templates, packages)
- Put like-minded groups in contact with each other—people do want to work together, sometimes they just need a helping hand

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Organizations Present

Toronto Arts Foundation

Scarborough Arts

Reel Asian Film Festival

Art Starts

Creative Mosaics

U of T Scarborough Campus

Mural Routes

City of Toronto Arts Services

Cedar Ridge Creative Centre

Arts for Children and Youth

Toronto Arts Council

Scarborough C.A.R.E.S.

Luminato

Lakeshore Arts

Arts Etobicoke

YOUnted Neighbourhoods

South Asian Visual Arts Collective

bcurrent/reConnexion

SKETCH

Soulpepper

Canadian Opera Company

Art of the Danforth

Ontario Arts Council

Toronto Public Library

Ontario Trillium Foundation

Operation Vote: The Next Edition

Community Arts Ontario

Yellow Door Learning Centre

COBA Collective

Studio561

Arts North York Feasibility Study

Neighbourhood Arts Network

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Toronto Arts Foundation exists to provide the creative opportunity for donors to support the arts in Toronto. TAF believes that a great city demands great art, and by supporting, celebrating, financing and advocating for Toronto's local artists, we're improving the quality of life of all Torontonians.

To learn more, please visit www.torontoartsfoundation.org



A project of the Toronto Arts Foundation, the **Neighbourhood Arts Network** is the place where arts and community engagement meet in Toronto. We catalyze new discussions and relationships. We collect research and share information. We help artists and community organizations do what they do best: enrich Toronto and transform it into a more vibrant, beautiful, liveable city.

To learn more, please visit www.neighbourhoodartsnetwork.org



Scarborough Arts develops, delivers and promotes arts programming and cultural initiatives in collaboration and partnership with the community. We bring artists to the community and community to the arts.

To learn more, please visit www.scarborougharts.com



Thanks to Katie Fry, Leah Burns, Cee Robinson, Jaime Wilson, and Cindy Rozeboom for their assistance with compiling this document. To learn more about the **Neighbourhood Arts Network**, to become a member, or to find out about upcoming events and opportunities, please visit our website at www.neighbourhoodartsnetwork.org