Life Cycles, Loss, and Leadership: Designing Regenerative Futures in the Arts

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Abstract

Through systems, foresight, and design research, this MRP explores what systems and mindsets are influencing performing arts nonprofits today and imagines a bold future where organizational life cycles and endings are reframed as vital and regenerative practices that sustain the people, the practice, and the power of the form itself.

The output is a written report and the description of an Aspirational Future where the value of the arts is redefined, leadership is reimagined, and the sector has embraced impermanence and regenerative organizational practices. This is accompanied by two artifacts and various calls to collective action.

Acknowledgements

Though this section appears at the beginning of the report, it is the final piece of my writing journey—the last moment before submission. It carries the culmination of many lessons, feelings, and relationships that have shaped this project from beginning to end.

The collective energy, wisdom, and care that helped bring this work to life deserves more than a simple thank you, so this is simply one expression of my deep and ongoing gratitude.

I'll begin with the land. I am profoundly grateful to the original caretakers of this land I am blessed to have lived, studied, worked, cooked, created, and laughed on. Nature (and intentional rest) was my greatest teacher throughout this process. Whenever I became caught up in too much thinking or selfing, I turned to the moonlight, the waterside, or the trees. They always soothed my spirit and brought me back to what mattered most.

To the generous interview participants—thank you for your time, energy, and insight. Each of you brought brilliance and lived wisdom to our conversations. I could have listened much longer. I hope you see yourself somewhere in this report. I look forward to continuing our conversations in the future.

To all my past artistic collaborators: thank you. Our shared passions, lessons, triumphs, and heartbreaks deeply informed this research. Special love to my theatre school families, and the members, collaborators, and mentors of obra anais, Cabal, and Diasporakidz.

To the visionary leaders, artists, and culture-shapers of the broader arts sector—thank you. The dialogue I encountered through blogs, journals, books, forums, songs, stories,

plays, films, gatherings, and acts of resistance shaped this inquiry in multidimensional ways.

To my dreamy SFI cohort—thank you for building a space of learning where our differences were superpowers, and our collective intelligence was a rich constellation of ideas. Special love to those I've grown close to over these two years, and to those I'll continue walking and creating alongside.

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To my AMAZING parents, my sister, and my Canadian and Brazilian family—thank you for letting me talk nonstop about the program and this project, for holding space through every doubt and breakthrough.

And finally, to my wife, Milena—mamor da minha vida. None of this would have happened without you. Thank you for your unconditional patience and encouragement, for taking care of me in every way, and for keeping me grounded in the present as we dream and create our future together. This is MRP is ours!

Dedication

This MRP is both a tribute to what has been achieved by Canada's performing arts community—and a call to action for what can still be created together in the years ahead. May these questions and offerings serve, soothe, stir, and inspire.

This research is for anyone who has found lasting relationships while making something that was never made to last.

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PART ONE: THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Brief: Welcome! This first section introduces the researcher's positionality statement, the scope of the project and focus space, the research questions and the methods used.

There are five sections to this report. At the top of each will be a brief description of the section and the methodology it is connected to.

Positionality Statement

I approach this research through a deeply personal and embodied lens. My lived experiences as a white, queer, neurodivergent woman, as an artist and former arts leader—shaped by cycles of change, grief, community, and creative survival—form the foundation of both my inquiry and my methodology. This project is not only an academic investigation into organizational (human) wellbeing within the performing arts sector; it is also an act of personal reckoning and renewal.

Raised in a military family, I grew up moving a lot. As the eldest of four children, I took on a leadership role early, while learning to adapt to new schools, social dynamics, and environments. Change was not a choice—it was life. I developed a sensitivity to relational and systemic dynamics, seeking belonging through my friendships, artistic spaces, and later, queer community. My formative years taught me that relationships are essential for survival, but also that letting go—of people, places, identities—can be just as defining.

My love affair with theatre began in childhood, softened in my teens but became central to my sense of self in my early twenties. After studying at an acting conservatory and pursuing a BFA in Performance, I co-founded and led an award-winning theatre collective for over six years. During that time, I also worked as a sex worker to financially support my *vie bohème* —a reality that underlines the precarity of professional art-making and that effectively blurred the lines between labour, intimacy, and performance in my life.

The collective's dissolution after the first year of the pandemic was a rupture. After securing our largest grant to date, we made the difficult decision to return the funds and close the company -- without a public announcement. This decision was shaped by years of chronic burnout, relational fractures, and the residuals of a deeply painful public conflict that unfolded during the height of the #MeToo movement. The closure of the company—quiet, unceremonious, and under-resourced—left me grieving not only a dream, a closeknit community, but also an identity. Without a roadmap for closure or transformation, I entered a period of intense introspection.

In the years since, I have been rebuilding. I began a journey of sobriety, healing, and spiritual reconnection that led me to the mysterious Strategic Foresight and Innovation program. This diverse academic space offered a new language and framework for understanding the intuitive strategies I had long employed in my creative and relational work: sensing systems, holding paradox, navigating change, facilitating emergence, and leading without clear authority. I entered the program unsure of where I'd fit in after an unconventional career journey. But I started to see my artistic experiences—that I once

considered failures-- as deeply relevant to conversations around leadership, systems change, and organizational resilience. It's been a deeply aligned and transformative experience, to say the least.

This research is informed by both firsthand experience and critical observation. I have witnessed how power avoidance, lack of structural clarity, and over-identification with our work (which, when we've given our lives to our art and when *we are the product,* is very hard to separate) can erode even the most well-intentioned groups. I have learned how the nonprofit funding paradigm reproduces cycles of scarcity, identity performance, and burnout. And I have asked hard questions of myself: Who am I without my work? What systems am I complicit in? What does it mean to step away from a dream, or to transform it?

Three primary experiences led me to this MRP: the dissolution of my own collective, witnessing burnout and disillusionment among arts leaders I admired, and the process of unbraiding my sense of worth from artistic productivity. I am also interested in the invisible structures that shape collective life: assumptions about leadership, the dance of interpersonal dynamics, and the cultural avoidance of endings. In particular, I am curious about how artists, activists, and cultural workers might begin to reframe closure—not as failure, but as an integral part of an ecosystemic, life cycle-based approach to organizational life. Because as life continues to remind us – all things do come to an end.

This project is deeply personal, but it is not solely about me. It is also about the people and communities I have been in relationship with—artists, sex workers, educators, caretakers, cultural workers—many of whom carry brilliant and resilient skills and gifts. Our work and stories matter. Our contributions—presence, imagination, intuitive and relational intelligence, and creative rigor—are central to collective transformation. And yet, they often go unsupported, underfunded, or unacknowledged within dominant systems.

By exploring how for profit and not for profits outside of the arts navigate endings, I hope to surface new possibilities for more intentional, humane, and future-oriented practices. I hope to contribute to a conversation about how we might lead differently—through relational clarity, collective care, and structural integrity. I am interested in how we build, sustain, and let go—with courage, with discernment, and with room for what might emerge next.

Ultimately, this research is a gesture of integration. It weaves together my past and present—artist and student, leader and learner, survivor and visionary. It reflects my belief that letting go is not failure, but a vital part of change. And that by examining what we are willing to release, we also clarify what we are ready to embrace.

Scope of Research

The performing arts are nestled within Canada's broader arts and culture sector—a vibrant and diverse ecosystem that encompasses everything from visual arts and literature to media arts and Indigenous cultural expression.

The performing arts are defined as "music, dance, theatre, opera, circus, and interdisciplinary performance that is presented live to audiences across Canada." (Conceptual Framework for Culture, 2011).

Within the performing arts landscape, there are multi-functional arts centers that run rentable theatres and studios. They might have in-house theatre, dance, and music companies, and host touring productions or satellite performance companies.

There are established performing arts educational institutions like the National Theatre School and the National Ballet School of Canada.

There are performing arts festivals, touring and industry markets, performing arts associations, advocacy groups, and unions.

There are many small satellite (unattached to a physical location) theatre companies, established ad hoc collectives, and of course the many freelance artists who work across companies, disciplines, and regions.

Despite the dynamic and often overlapping relationships between disciplines, language, organizations and spaces, this MRP focuses specifically on theatre nonprofit organizations working predominantly in English. The reason for this is that the francophone performing arts space is its own vibrant ecosystem that would require a unique framing and approach.

Although included in research sources, this MRP does not specifically focus on: disability arts perspectives, Indigenous governance models, or international case studies.

Introduction

Live performance is a powerful, embodied act of witnessing. It creates a shared space where time, story, and relationship converge—inviting us to reflect, to feel, and to reimagine. It is ceremony, protest, celebration and critique. Both ancient and contemporary, personal and collective, ephemeral and enduring, performance is a form that demands collaboration, attunement, and presence. There is a beginning, middle and end to a show…but the story and experience might live and swirl on in and around us timelessly.

It is also deeply shaped by the systems in which it operates— structures that influence not only what story is told or by whom, but every touchpoint along the journey from idea to realization, from dream to page to stage.

In recent years, the arts sector in Canada has been navigating significant challenges, in what has been increasingly called a crisis. In 2024, the Just For Laughs Festival was cancelled, the beloved indie theatre Mainline Theatre recently announced its closure, and the 2025 Regina Folkfest was called off. “Artists and arts organizations are already really stretched in terms of resources.,” said Kelly Langgard, director and CEO of both the Toronto Arts Council (TAC) and Toronto Arts Foundation. “And if it gets much worse, I think that, for me, is untenable and unthinkable” (Chong, 2025).

Since reopening after the pandemic many nonprofit theatre organizations are still struggling to calibrate. Some have taken to cutting staff, cancelling programming and closing venues. Gideon Arthurs, Chair of the advocacy committee at Toronto Alliance for Performing Arts said, “There’s an active conversation happening in the sector about when we declare a state of emergency” (Chong, 2024).

Critiques of leadership and the industry’s lack of climate action have intensified in the wake of intersecting global crises. The sector’s fragility was amplified by the pandemic and competition for audiences’ attention has only increased in the era of streaming platforms and videogames.

When it was clear the industry would not ‘go back to the way things were’ -- and perhaps the belief that it *should* is worth questioning -- concern about its fate and future surfaced:

What does it mean to be a ‘professional artist’ in an age of AI, influencers, and the precarity of the gig economy?

How do we balance care for self and care for the collective—and have we truly been honest with ourselves about that balance? What does community *actually* mean? What does abundance look like? Is the current system sustainable? Where to even begin?

Above all: what is the role of live performance in a world on fire?

Performing arts organizations have been trying to respond to the complex moment in a myriad of ways: doubling down on equity-oriented initiatives, repurposing venues, and investing in strategic cross-sector collaborations to connect with different audiences.

But when it comes to values-aligned systemic change within the organizations themselves, what is the story? How is its *raison d'être,* governance model, and desired future reflected in the organizational design? When survival is the priority, what room is there for transformation *from the inside out*?

Dominant mindsets shape how decisions are made, how conflict unfolds, which languages are centered, and how progress is defined and measured. Deeply embedded mindsets and mental models arise out of paradigms, which are beliefs and assumptions, shared social agreements about how the world works. (Meadows, 1999).

Beliefs and mindsets inherited from hierarchical structures and colonial paradigms continue to shape institutional frameworks, labour and leadership practices within the arts.

This shows up in extractive and exploitative engagements of arts workers, tokenism and the pressure of assimilation, the myth of a heroic visionary, gatekeeping, the rewarding of Eurocentric aesthetics and standards of professionalism related to speech, work style, and temporality (Carter, 2021; Gray, 2019). Despite the industry's efforts to foster safe and inclusive work environments, it grapples with a "persistent misalignment between a national identity defined by diversity (at least in English Canada), and a nonprofit cultural landscape reflective of the 1950's" (Maggs, 2022).

Artistic and executive directors, boards of directors, and administrators alike are contending with a disconnect between their aspirations for meaningful change (and the willingness and time it takes to agree on what that means) and the reality of working with chronically underfunded budgets, burnt out teams and the risk of getting it all wrong, especially in public.

Given these tensions, one possibility is to turn toward frameworks that mirror natural systems—like organizational life cycles—as a way to better understand where arts organizations are now, and what pathways forward might emerge.

Although not always linear, organizations move through dynamic stages of development that shape how they function and adapt to change. From ideation and start-up to maturity, decline, and eventual renewal or closure -- each stage brings distinct challenges and opportunities in governance, communications, and impact.

For some small to medium performance organizations, success is simply opening their doors for the next season. The prospect of taking big swings, adopting new systems, reimagining radical and generative futures, and leading meaningful systemic change may

seem like a Sisyphean feat. For historically privileged institutions, change can be harder in different ways and organizational innovation might not seem like the most obvious place to start.

When applying an organizational lifecycle framework to Canadian theatre nonprofits, it offers insight to where they are at in their evolutionary journey and where they might be heading. Are the legacy institutions on the precipice of decline or will they transform into renewal? What does that look like, who is impacted and what comes next? How are they all connected in the ecosystem? Can the newly seeded collectives be nourished by the organizations that have closed? What leadership and resource networks might that call for? What emerges when an ecological lens is applied? How might this inform the art itself?

The first part of this report unpacks the context in which the Canadian performing arts exists: from the adoption of the nonprofit model and its boundaries to a discussion on leadership and the nuanced challenges artists face today.

The second part introduces Susan Kenny Steven's Nonprofit Lifecycles framework and couches Stafford Beer's Viable Systems Model within it. Participatory leadership strategies that embrace complexity are touched on, followed by a proposal to consider nature's wise rhythms and processes as a compass to organizational transformation and sector-wide vitality.

Inspired by the research findings and my own experience, the final section shifts the focus from systems thinking to strategic foresight and offers an Aspirational Future set in the year 2053.

This learning journey invites reflection on how organizational life cycles might guide collaborative leadership through complexity—and, in doing so, shape the future of nonprofits and the role of the performing arts in a rapidly changing world.

Research Question

The primary research question driving this inquiry is:

What are the factors shaping how performing arts nonprofits navigate organizational change?

With the secondary:

What mindsets and practices related to leadership and life cycles might contribute to shaping more sustainable futures?

Methodology

Research Paradigm

In a reader-friendly breakdown of academic and scientific approaches to research, Matthew DeCarlo (2018) defines a research paradigm as "a way of viewing the world and a framework from which to understand the human experience."

Research paradigms reflect a researcher's underlying assumptions about the nature of reality, how knowledge is understood and pursued, the methods used to generate it, and the values that inform the research process (Ayton & Tsindos, 2023).

This Major Research Project (MRP) is grounded in a paradigm in which knowledge is understood to be relational, contextual, and co-constructed through human experience.

I approach this work as an artist, scholar, and designer with the awareness that my perspective is shaped by my own experience as well as conscious and unconscious biases and assumptions, and an inherited colonial context. In terms of axiology, I carry this with humility, curiosity and discernment in my attempt to reflect an authentic and balanced interpretation of the research findings and results. It is not, nor ever will be, objective.

Epistemologically, I view knowledge as an understanding that emerges through relationship and interpretation. This informs my gravitation to qualitative methods including interviews, observation, and personal reflection, as ways to make meaning rather than claim certainty. My approach aligns with social constructivism, which is the idea that social context and interaction frame our realities (DeCarlo, 2018).

Ontologically, I understand reality as socially constructed and pluriversal. I believe that multiple truths and realities are layered and shaped by language, history, embodiment, and power. Within an academic research context, this aligns with both critical and postmodernist theories.

I've approached this research as a snapshot in time, reflecting a moment of sensemaking shaped by subjective interpretation. The insights that emerged through dialogue are situated within a specific constellation of cultural and systemic conditions. Each interview was approached as a cup of water drawn from a deeper river of lived experience — never representative of the whole but offered and received with care and reverence. Since the

foundations of OCADU's Strategic Foresight and Innovation program are framed through the lens of systems thinking, I want to mention that the work of Melanie Goodchild and Donella Meadows were the doors in which systems thinking finally cracked open for me. Both offer expansive perspectives on paradigms, perspective, and the deeper dimensions of systemic change. Meadows (1999) identifies the ability to transcend paradigms as the most powerful leverage point within a system—recognizing that dominant worldviews shape not only decisions, but what is perceived as possible. Goodchild (2020) expands this further by foregrounding Indigenous ways of knowing, emphasizing that systems change requires relationality, humility, unlearning, and a recognition of the spiritual dimensions of knowledge. Both scholars position systems thinking not merely as a method of analysis, but as a reflexive, values-based, and spiritually grounded orientation to transformation.

Research Design

The research design was structured in three parts which were supported by the corresponding research methods:

1. Gathering the information	*Desk research, Literature Review, Interviews*
2. Processing the findings	*Systems Mapping, Three Horizons, CLA*
3. Using the information	*Drivers of Change, Visioning, Backcasting*

Gathering Information

Desk Research & Literature Review

This process began with **desk research** and a **literature review** on leadership theories and practices in the arts, the history of the nonprofit model and organizational life cycles, and the state of the Canadian performing arts industry.

Gathering prevalent and existing publications served as both a foundation on which to build as well as illuminating possible gaps and connections. This reinforced the relevance of the research questions outside of my current understanding.

Interviews

After approval by the Research Ethics Board, I began by hosting **semi-structured interviews,** prioritizing a range of perspectives with the goal of establishing a holistic and diverse understanding of the challenges and practices of performing arts leaders, and those who work closely with them. As a qualitative research method, semi-structure interviews capture information that is not numerical in nature, but records attitudes, feelings, and behaviors through a 'conversation with purpose' giving new ways of seeing and understanding the topic at hand. (Burgess, 1984),

A call for voluntary interview participants was distributed through social media channels and performing arts organizations, plus my network sent out posters and shared recommendations of individuals they thought fit the criteria.

Eleven interviews were held with individuals whose experience ranged from past and current artistic directors, designers, arts and policy scholars, arts administrators, board members, public funding officers, arts consultants and strategists. While eleven individuals cannot possibly capture a diverse industry's many perspectives, the criteria prioritized length of experience (15-25 years) and proximity to leaders and leadership in the arts, be it through personal experience or collaboration.

An interview guide with open-ended questions on the themes of leadership, sector challenges, innovation, and possible futures were developed and used, while giving space for curiosity and for the conversation to flow organically and follow relevant lines of inquiry.

Processing the Findings

The information from the interviews was processed through System Mapping, Three Horizons framework, which was then followed by various iterations of a Causal Layered Analysis.

System Mapping

The information was applied to iterative systems design tools from *Design Journey to Complex Systems* to visually map tensions, influences, and relationships which helped frame the system (Jones & Van Ael, 2022).

The following tools were used and can be found in the Appendix:

Actors Map: a tool which helps identify relationships and map potential power dynamics within the system based on knowledge of the challenge and ability to influence and change the system.

Iterative Inquiry: a tool designed to support critical reflection on the boundaries and hierarchies of a system, and to explore possible purposes, functions, structures, and processes.

Influence Map: a general technique that seeks to locate patterns and pathways of influence within a complex system by identifying possible root causes.

These exercises not only revealed my own bias and knowledge edges but supported the framing of the system in focus.

Three Horizons

I originally planned to facilitate a **Three Horizons workshop** with participants from the performing arts sector.

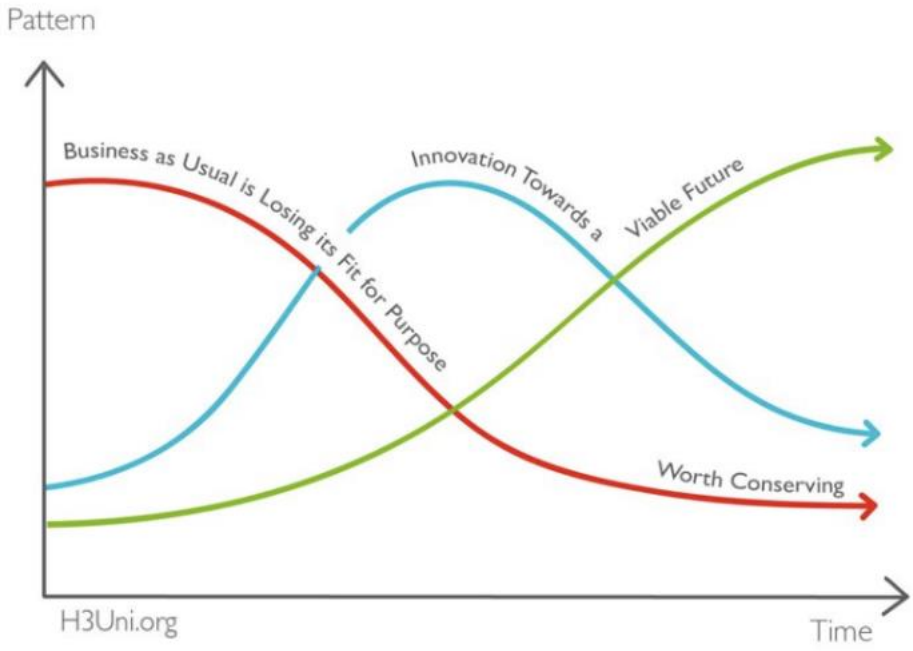

Figure 1: The Three Horizons Framework (H3Uni, 2024)

Developed by Bill Sharpe, Three Horizons is a participatory foresight tool and approach to reflecting on the present system (Horizon One), imagining the desired (or hoped for) future (Horizon Three), and illuminating innovative methods that link the two (Horizon Two).

The Three Horizons method demonstrates how waves of change shift patterns over time, and the mindsets and perspectives that accompany each horizon. Rather than framing change in binary terms, the model invites a mature perspective—one that simultaneously

sustains present systems while cultivating seeds of long-term transformation. (H3Uni, 2024).

"The Three Horizon model gives us a deeper understanding of the significance of what we usually call short, medium and long term futures. The model is based on the observation that businesses, technologies, political policies and even whole civilizations exhibit life-cycles of initiation, growth, peak performance, decline and even death. These cycles can be viewed as waves of change in which a dominant form is eventually overtaken and displaced by another.

This pattern also shows up in our personal lives where we go through a change of life that is not an extension of the past but has a quite new pattern emerge. In this process we go through a disruptive crisis of transition and transformation" (H3Uni, 2024).

Despite the framework's fit for the context of the research, as the MRP research progressed, hosting a workshop no longer felt like an ethically appropriate tool.

Asking more time of artists and arts workers to participate in an in-person workshop on the challenges and futures of the industry without adequate financial compensation would be asking for more from an already chronically under-resourced community.

Therefore, the Three Horizons became the framework through which the interview data was processed and analyzed. The decision to adjust the methodology was made more than halfway through the interview period.

At that point, after analyzing data from the interviews it was apparent that Horizon One (the current system) was effectively saturated. In the effort to build out the other horizons, I leaned into more future-oriented questions in the second half of the interviews.

From the Three Horizons map, emerging patterns and thematic clusters of data began to paint a rich landscape of the current system.

These findings then served as inputs into several iterations of **Causal Layered Analysis (CLA)**.

Causal Layered Analysis

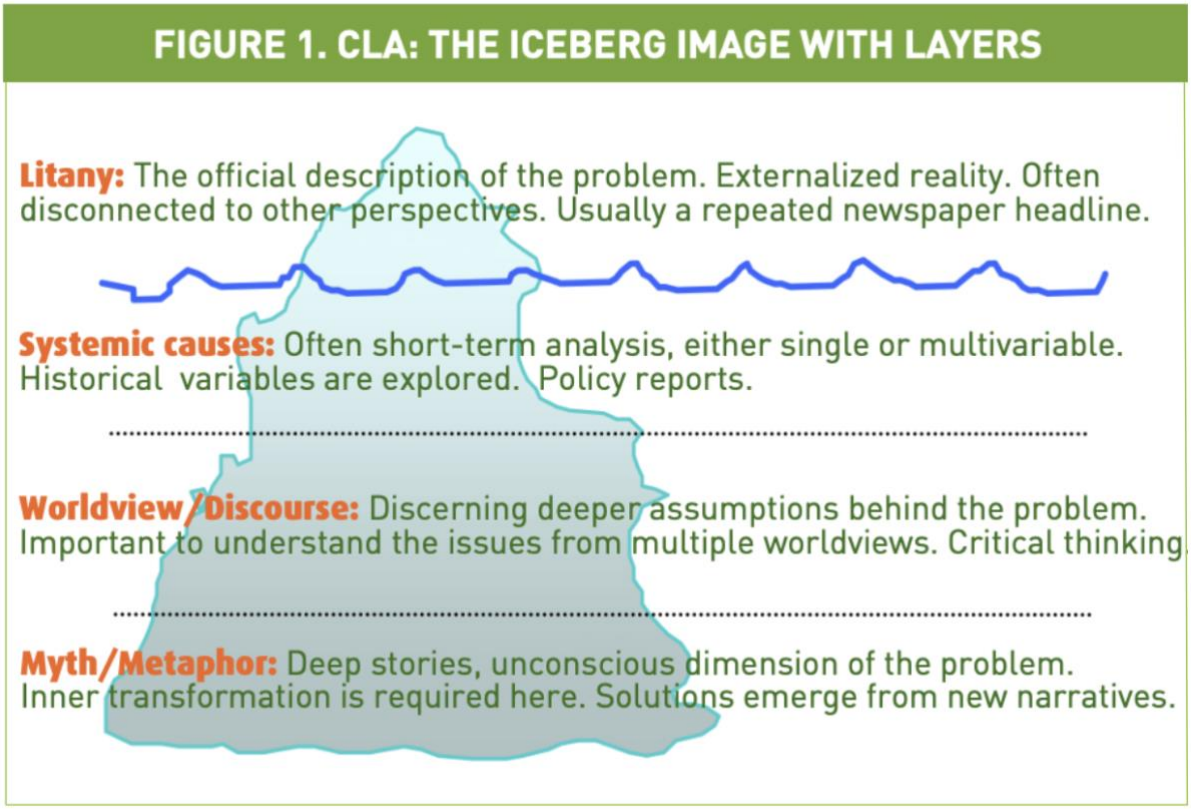

Figure 2: Causal Layered Analysis (Inayatullah, 2009)

Designed by prominent futurist Sohail Inayatullah, the CLA is a critically reflective foresight method that supports a multi-perspective exploration and analysis of complex issues through four layers:

1. **Litany**: the surface-level view, observable data, trends, and immediate concerns
2. **Systems & Structures**: the structural and institutional factors driving the litanies (economic, political, social systems)
3. **Worldview**: the cultural and ideological frameworks that shape the systemic causes
4. **Myths & Metaphors**: the deepest layer exploring collective archetypes, unconscious narratives, and emotional dimensions that underpin worldviews

CLA can be used for scenario generation, in which case new narratives are created by altering myths or metaphors to generate new worldviews, systems and structures and litanies. (Inayatullah, 2009).

Through the exploration of various CLAs focused on leadership, organizational sunsetting, and the complexities in the performing arts industry– resonant metaphors and myths emerged that would support the design of a future scenario.

Using the Information

After processing the data through the CLAs and Three Horizons, the information was instrumental in the design an **Aspirational Future.**

The objective of an Aspirational Future is to reflect and synthesize the research findings, while existing within the realm of plausibility and offering a provocative and bold vision of the future. This would be achieved with the implications and support of Drivers of Change, Backcasting, and Visioning.

Drivers of Change

Drivers of Change are significant disruptive forces that influence and interact with elements in every scenario over long periods of time. Although the impacts and outcomes might be different, change drivers influence trends, which start as signals of change, which are collected during ongoing research and environmental scanning.

Since the domain of this research is in the Canadian context and the arts and culture sector are longstanding advocates of democracy, OCADU CO's published DemocracyXChange 2024 Toolkit (OCADU CO, 2024) was selected as the primary source for the Drivers of Change.

This collection of nearly 100 drivers of change was composed in 2023 and updated in 2024 for the annual DemocracyXChange conference held in Toronto. The drivers cover four key factors: trust in governance, social equity, integrity of information and climate change.

Backcasting

Backcasting is a strategic foresight method in which a scenario or vision of the future is traced backwards in time to determine what steps, events, and circumstances were required to attain that specific future. If laid out linearly, it would "construct a plausible causal chain leading from here to there" (Bibri, 2018).

The backcasting was largely informed by what might be plausible impacts of the Drivers of Change.

Visioning an Aspirational Future

Used as guide for strategic visioning and planning within the foresight discipline, an **Aspirational Future** "pushes beyond current realities and desires, representing an audacious, visionary, or "stretch" goal. It is not just what is wanted, but what *could be* possible if barriers were removed or if transformational change occurred" (Bezold, 2009).

Insights from the literature review, interview data points within Horizon Two and Three, and the Drivers of Change served as the scaffolding in the design of the Aspirational Future.

PART TWO: THE FINDINGS

Brief: Part II begins with key insights from the interviews and how they were translated into the Three Horizons framework.

It then introduces a deeper context of the current landscape performing arts organizations exist within (where are and how we got here).

In response to the current context, the concept of organizational lifecycles and viable systems models are introduced, as well as relational approaches to leadership within complexity.

The final third of this section proposes applying an ecological lens to lifecycles and emphasizes endings as vital regenerative transitions that reflect the performing arts as an art itself: impermanent, ritualistic, and timeless containers for collective sensemaking.

Methodology: This was informed by ongoing desk research and literature reviews, which was then processed through system mapping. It was at this stage of the research that the invitation to dig deeper into transitional life cycles emerged. The insights from the interviews that were assigned to Horizon One and Horizon Two, which largely informed this section.

Key Insights from Interviews & Three Horizons Mapping

Interviews

Based on qualitative interviews with artists, leaders, and cultural workers in the performing arts, several key themes emerged around leadership, power, innovation, and organizational life within the Canadian arts landscape. The question guide can be found in the Appendix.

These insights were organized thematically into six interrelated dimensions of leadership and organizational life.

1. **Leadership Philosophies & Mindsets**

There is no single definition of leadership: a leader is within all of us, and a leader requires a follower. Leadership in the arts is relational, it is about stewardship, care and guidance, seeing the skills and wisdom in everyone, awareness, interdependence. A group can ask:

where is our leadership right now? What does our work/vision mean to us at this moment, and who is best to lead it? What do they need to be successful?

Co-leadership, rotational and cyclical leadership, sociocracy, horizontal and circular models are growing in popularity.

2. **Power, Agency & Positionality**

Understanding how power is shared, where it is being held, claimed, divest, and given is critical in arts organizations, particularly for leadership roles.

This looks like being aware of and responsible for one's privilege, identity, and positionality to the culture of the organization, to the communities it is connected to, to the activities and art being offered, and to what is happening in the world at large.

Feeling powerless within the arts can be associated with financial precarity, uncertain or lack of belonging within the arts community, and in the feeling of being unseen and undervalued by Canadian society.

There is agency:

- in whom you accept money from or choose to partner with
- in knowing and honoring one's values
- in trusting that artists would continue to make art no matter what
- in believing that art is timeless food for the soul and spirit
- in knowing that culture grows where and when people gather

3. **Relational Leadership & Organizational Culture**

Successful leaders are deeply empathetic and skilled listeners. They understand their own gifts and see the gifts that others bring to the group.

They are always learning, they own their mistakes and are open when they do not have the answers.

They ask for help and embrace imperfection and authenticity. They can adapt easily.

Leaders are actively cultivating resources for the organization and responsibly connecting people through cultural knowledge.

Founders, like entrepreneurs, tend to identify closely with the organization they brought to life. Individual ego and the myth of singularity make it difficult for leaders to imagine life outside of or beyond the organization. The more a founder is invested in an organization, the stronger the blinders.

Lack of post-leadership roles and senior artist retirement support amplifies attachment and fear of future.

Knowing when to leave is important. Five to seven years was seen as a reasonable time frame to be in a leadership position. Over seven years can lead to stagnation and 'rinse and repeating'. See the runway, have sober conversation about what is possible and who it is good for.

Entrepreneurial-related skill-building for and between arts leaders is limited.

Under conditions of persistent uncertainty and precarity, individuals often struggle to think long-term or imagine new futures.

4. **Team Dynamics & Stewardship**

A leader's job is to care, to create guardrails for the team as they work towards a shared vision. To be present and attentive to team dynamics and wellbeing.

'Leading from the back' is an expression of leadership that responsibly facilitates the conditions that allow a team to feel empowered and achieve their goals.

Facilitative, servant and stewardship are leadership styles that support a flourishing arts organization.

Understanding the colonial histories, models, and mindsets that the industry exists within is important.

Finding a shared understanding of the meaning and implications of concepts like 'live' performance, abundance, community, justice, decolonization, success, progress.

Co-designing processes and making decisions *with* the team rather than for them. Honest and hard conversations between stakeholders are critical and yet not being had.

As an industry, the trauma of chronic burnout and scarcity affects decision making, capacity levels and labour practices.

5. **Community Integration & Mutuality**

Moving beyond inclusion in the arts means making the communities in focus *integral* to an organization's structure and direction. Audiences do not need to be developed.

Reciprocal relationships grow over time, not as one-offs for projects or applications.

The art of authentic relationship has been lost, honest and out in the open dialogues within the community are not being had.

Modelling relationships that are not transactional, performative, or conditional. Being there for one another when a leader or group makes a mistake or hits a growth edge. The vulnerability of not being safe to stumble in public limits innovation.

An outcome of 'celebrity culture' tends to concentrate on an individual's success for short-term periods. This might look like being built up to a touring status and exporting the work to international markets but not investing in sustainable infrastructure in Canada for the long-term.

Processing and sharing knowledge and resources from cross-company collaborations: what is possible, what have we learned in working together, and how can we share those learnings with the local community? How can we be in active dialogue with the community at large? Arts cooperatives and pods, challenging silos.

Practicing healthy conflict within organizations and between the arts community will strengthen the sector's ability to meet the moment and transform.

6. Sustainability, Legacy & Systems Innovation

It can be challenging to know how an organization is really doing from the outside. Sometimes the loudest groups are not the ones doing the work needed for systems change.

Right-sizing an organization to pay staff well elevates who applies, who stays, and overall agility.

Creation and ownership of cultural knowledge: how is an organization's cultural embodied and documented knowledge being held and shared?

Partnering with knowledge keepers, cultivating intentional cultural practices and protocols in an organization.

How is legacy being shaped and passed on? Discernment between preservation and evolution. What is the role of archiving in the performing arts?

Integrating data and digital literacy and leveraging technology in arts organizations is important.

Challenging dominant perceptions/narratives of success markers, for example:

- Getting a space - facilities can weigh a group down; they are costly to maintain and require different competencies to manage; no two groups have the same path
- Using international artists and work as yardsticks for excellence, but not considering they exist in different markets with different resources and practices
- Stability = progress; instability = failure
- Comparing growth between how many people are reached, vs the depth to which they are impacted
- Mergers are wins; move to shift reliance from public funding

7. The Arts as Systemic Agents of Change

Creativity and sector innovation as ongoing practice; demand to invest in research and development across the arts and in collaboration with other systems and sectors.

The skills artists hold are critical to shifting paradigms: imagination, play, empathy, critique, metaphor, story.

They should be involved in how cities are adapting to climate change, how the public gathers, and how space can be used to support the communities they serve.

The value and power of art and creativity transcends capitalist value systems.

Three Horizons Mapping

While Three Horizons is typically used to convene conversations about short-, medium- and long-term futures, it is also a useful framework for sensemaking insights from literature review and interviews. As a result, the Three Horizons mapping exercise informed the development of the following elements of this research report

Horizon One informed the Canadian Arts Landscape.

Horizon Two and Three informed the Aspirational Future.

Horizon Two and Three informed Calls to Collective Action.

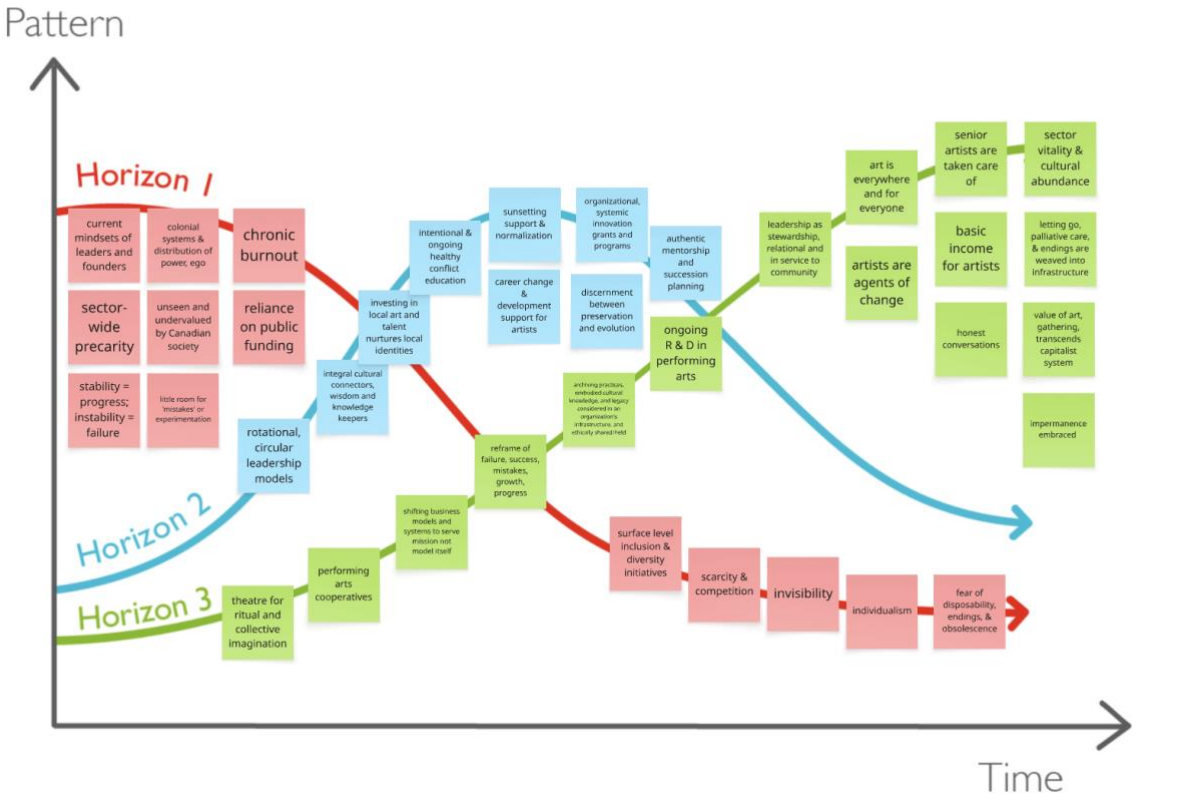

Figure 3: Three Horizons with Interview Insights

The Canadian Arts Landscape

The History of Nonprofit Theatre in Canada

The merging of the nonprofit model with arts groups is inseparable from what is known as Canada's broader cultural policy and nation-building agenda.

Before WWII amateur theatre companies and grassroots arts centers were decentralized meeting points and artist spaces, ran like donation-oriented voluntary societies.

But in 1951, the Massey Report, (also known as the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences) was released. Known as the first cultural report of its kind, the report described a bleak landscape, and spurred what cultural worker Shannon Litzenberger describes as a highly effective strategy of the colonial project

that shaped the narratives, voices, and aesthetics of what came to be known as 'Canadian' culture and content (2022), effectively erasing centuries-old Indigenous art and excluding the culturally rich communities that existed outside of the French and Anglo heritage.

The recommendations from the Massey Report led to the creation of the Canada Council for the Arts in 1957, an "arm's-length body established to fund the arts in the public's interest" (Harvey, 2011).

But the funding came with a framework: to access these new streams of public support, theatre groups and other cultural producers were incentivized to register as formal charitable, nonprofit organizations.

The nonprofit structure promised stability: the ability to issue tax receipts for charitable donations, and the *legitimization* of arts as a public good rather than a private venture.

The model also aligned with government goals: to develop institutions that could carry the weight of shaping and expressing a unified Canadian identity that reinforced Eurocentric roots, conceptions and canon of art.

The ripple effects of this period are still felt today: "its ethos still leads to policies which define, officially, what that Canadian "culture" and "content" is—to the exclusion of much actual Canadian art-making and actual Canadian artist experience" (Verjee, 2018).

Over the following decades, the nonprofit arts sector expanded significantly. Many theatres across the country transitioned from grassroots collectives and experimental ensembles into established institutions. While companies like Native Earth Performing Arts and Black Theatre Workshop have long centered cultural perspectives beyond the dominant settler narrative, public funding was poured into the larger culturally hegemonic institutions, further reinforcing a vision of Canadian identity rooted in settler cultural norms. This was bolstered by an evolving ecosystem of grants, foundations, boards, and policy frameworks. (Rodriguez, 2022)

By the 1990s, the sector began to show signs of strain when a wave of federal budget cuts significantly reduced the availability of public arts funding.

Around the same time, the introduction of cable television, pay-per-view, and the rise of the internet began to fracture public attention. Audiences that once reliably attended the local theatre now had unprecedented access to global entertainment—often for free, and from the comfort of home. The economic recession in 2008 was another hit on the sector.

Over the last few decades, nonprofit performing arts organizations have learned to live and create precariously. They've managed to survive on a mixed funding model—public grants, private donors and sponsorships, and earned revenue sources—that, while diversified in theory, introduced new layers of competition and complexity.

The Current Funding Paradigm

Today, nonprofit performing arts organizations must maintain a web of revenue streams and funding partnerships. In addition to federal support from the Canada Council of the Arts, most provinces, territories, and municipalities offer operational and project grants. However, the number of artists and organizations seeking support has outpaced the growth of available funds. (Wilhelm, 2024).

Fierce competition, shrinking government arts budgets, and rising costs have made many nonprofits financially brittle. Operating costs have risen by as much as 41 per cent since 2019, due in part to wage hikes, while corporate sponsorships shrink and public funding flags. Government funding to the Canada Council for the Arts decreased by $3.63 million last year and will be reduced by $7.33 million in 2025 (Langgard, 2024).

To survive, they increasingly rely on donations, sponsorships, memberships, and ticket sales. This setup demands extensive effort: nurturing relationships, year-round grant applications, creative outreach initiatives-- all while navigating the pressures of market-driven expectations that might clash with their artistic vision or community-rooted values.

While public funding continues to play a central role—often making up 40–70% of total revenues for many arts nonprofits—it also creates a paradox: organizations must not show a surplus, for fear it will reduce future eligibility, leaving little room for building reserves or investing in long-term sustainability (Wilhelm, 2024).

The Nonprofit Dilemma

The nonprofit industrial complex is often critiqued for its neoliberal dilemma: the government—often an actor in systemic injustices to begin with—offloads responsibility for public wellbeing onto the nonprofit sector, offering unstable and insufficient funding in return. Organizations are then burdened with addressing deep-rooted social issues that they are neither resourced to meet, nor, frankly, ever empowered to resolve within the current systemic context.

Within the context of nonprofit arts organizations, funding is often awarded to those able to align their work with a funder's definition of public good—articulating clear outcomes and community impact that fit within established priorities.

Given the volume of applications and limited capacity of program officers, direct feedback on grant proposals is not always available. Still, grant juries—composed of peer assessors from within the arts and cultural sector—engage in robust deliberations behind closed doors. Their decisions are shaped not only by artistic merit, but also by the mandates of the funding bodies they represent, government policy, and institutional strategic plans.

According to Culture Days (2022), 84 percent of Canadians believe that the arts are essential to a healthy society, citing benefits to education, health, and community wellbeing. In 2022, the culture sector contributed $60 billion to Canada's GDP and supported 850,000 cultural jobs (Chawla, 2024).

Yet, within a system where the arts have historically been instrumentalized to support dominant power structures and cultural hierarchies, questions remain: How is public value measured? What counts as impact? Who defines standards of excellence or talent?

Artist and researcher Meghan Lindsay suggests that, as affect-producing experts, artists have learned to 'instrumentalize instrumentalism'—navigating evaluative frameworks with fluency. However, she cautions that formal processes like grant writing, program evaluation, and impact reporting can create a felt experience of oppression by placing artists and groups in a perpetual state of self-commodification. These systems may also produce anxiety, alienation, and powerlessness by privileging particular ways of demonstrating impact—namely written communication, linear causality, and rational justification (2023).

The language, labour, and foresight to compete and gamble on funding within shifting or subjective value systems not only increases the pressure on artists and organizations, but can also end up being a barrier for projects that may not meet the funding bodies' desired criteria, or that seem too much of a 'risk' for an already vulnerable market.

As a result, organizations serving specific and often marginalized communities are operating on lean budgets, which as philanthropy strategist Kelly Wilhelm writes "can lead to under-investment in artistic work, particularly in risky or new work that may not attract a large audience" (2023).

If there isn't enough to sustain 'business as usual' amid the rising costs and realities of the economy, it is unlikely that there are reserves set aside for repairing venues, investing in research and development, or weathering major disruptions.

The theatre, once a powerful vehicle for experimentation and public discourse, struggles simply to survive under the weight of the nonprofit model. The margins are too thin for innovation, administrative labour is stretched, and sector burnout is abound. "We have designed a system that rewards survival, not transformation." (Litzenberger, 2022).

The companies still standing have a right to be proud. It takes perseverance, courage and rigor to keep a performing arts organization open. But one might ask how many stories have been lost or excluded over the last seventy-five years, how many brilliant artists continue to fall between the cracks, or due to the relentless precarity the arts are known for – simply don't even try.

Governance and Leadership

Of course, the realities and demands of the external environment shape the inner life and workings of an organization. In the nonprofit theatre sector, this influence shows up not just in what gets programmed or funded, but in how people work together, make decisions, and define their roles and responsibilities.

It's important to distinguish between **governance**—the structures, policies, and oversight mechanisms that guide an organization's accountability—and **leadership**, which is more about vision, relationships, and the everyday living of the values. Governance sets the formal rules of engagement; leadership determines how those rules are lived, challenged, or transformed in practice.

How does the nonprofit model inform governance?

Organizational Infrastructure

Under the Canada Not-for-profit Corporations Act, a nonprofit organization must establish a formal governance model. This includes: a volunteer board of directors, annual financial reporting, adherence to nonprofit bylaws, and a clearly defined mission. These requirements shape not only how decisions are made, but also who gets to make them.

In practice, a theatre company may include a 3+ person board of directors, one or more senior staff (Executive, Artistic Director), a General Manager, and a core administrative team responsible for marketing, fundraising, or communications. Creative professionals—directors, writers, technicians, designers, performers—are typically contracted by the project.

Together, the board and senior leadership are tasked with aligning the organization's activities to its mission and viability. But how this plays out often depends on more than structure alone—it depends on how power, trust, and responsibility are shared across the system.

Board of Directors: Roles & Realities

Boards are often responsible for setting revenue targets, running financial audits, approving budgets, assessing risks, considering policy alignments, and overseeing the hiring and firing processes of staff. Depending on the organization, the board of directors might be more involved in monitoring the organization's performance and operations, or more hands off.

When competition for funding intensified in the 1990's, arts groups started to bring in board members who had connections to wealth, and that could offer legal, marketing or financial expertise. This led to boards today being more often than not composed of growth-oriented corporate professionals who may or may not understand the realities of artists and the nuance of the creative process.
This might present a challenge or clash between the values of a board of directors and the artistic leadership when it comes to addressing the nuanced and fast-changing realities of today's arts ecosystem.

Cracks in the Structure

Whether through programming, partnerships, or public messaging, an organization's ability to respond meaningfully to systemic shifts depends on the alignment of its leadership and board—specifically, their shared understanding of purpose, ethical principles, and aesthetic values. Arts governance expert Diane Ragsdale (2023) asks: "How many boards take the time to find creative-ethical-aesthetic alignment, and how does it come through in the processes, policies, and protocols of the organization?"

Group-based decision-making—especially when rooted in culture and storytelling—requires time, self-awareness, and a willingness to examine one's positionality and power. This becomes particularly important when decisions are time-sensitive or when those involved bring different lived experiences to the table.

In theory, boards exist to support the artistic vision as approachable, accountable stewards of the organization's mission. Ideally, they are connected to the communities the organization serves and are attuned to its responsibilities beyond institutional survival.

The 2020 murder of George Floyd catalyzed a global reckoning with racial injustice, renewing calls across the arts sector to examine how systemic inequity is embedded in leadership structures and workplace cultures. These conversations are ongoing. As Hanula-James (2025) reports, the sector is in active dialogue about how race, ability, gender, and other systems of power shape the field—and what strategies are needed for authentic diversity, equity, decolonization, and belonging.

While board-level diversity is essential, it must be accompanied by change across all levels of staffing, operations, and decision-making. As Lesage and Newman (2021) caution, even organizations that prioritize inclusion may find that "day-to-day work culture and programs can still reproduce unhealthy work dynamics, white supremacy, and exploitative work environments" (p. 49).

In response, several Canadian performing arts organizations have begun to reimagine their leadership cultures. Nightwood Theatre, Canada's longest-running feminist theatre company, has implemented co-leadership models and anti-oppression frameworks that challenge traditional hierarchies and center care. Their *Anti-Oppression/Anti-Racism Accountability and Actions* plan outlines goals shaped through ongoing dialogue and training, grounded in the pursuit of anti-racist futures (Nightwood Theatre, n.d.).

Similarly, the Paprika Festival—a youth-led organization—emphasizes mentorship-based governance and emerging artist leadership. Through paid opportunities and hands-on labs, they foster professional development while cultivating more equitable pathways into leadership and production roles (Paprika Festival, n.d.).

Despite these efforts, tensions remain. A Canada-wide survey on governance and leadership within performing arts nonprofits revealed a persistent sense of frustration and ambiguity around roles and responsibilities (Lesage & Newman, 2021).

Litzenberger (2021) sums it up well:

"Relationships that bridge class and power divides are nascent, as are collective learning processes focused on embodying more inclusive, equitable cultures. Institutions will not likely lead the way toward the new world because of how entangled they are in the dynamics of the world that made them"

Leading Today

Leadership in the performing arts has always required imagination. To follow an artistic vision through to its realization is both a creative and operational act—passionate and strategic, deeply relational and collaborative. Leaders in the arts and culture sector are often intrinsically motivated by the drive for social change, creative expression, and a deep commitment to the craft.

In many nonprofit performing arts organizations, artistic and executive directors (ADs and EDs) come from within the sector—as directors, producers, or arts administrators. Their lived experience is valuable, but they are stepping into roles that require not just vision, but a fluency in navigating boards, funding systems, and the broader politics of the nonprofit sector.

When an AD position opens at an arts organization, it's not uncommon to feel the industry-wide holding of breath. Who's brave enough to take it on?

One article put it plainly: *"Running a theatre is a thankless job. No wonder people are saying no"* (Maltby, 2023). In recent years, with mounting pressures, many arts leaders have entered a kind of "flight mode," leaving positions vacant or unstable. Few are stepping up to take the helm. This tension, paired with a shifting demographic landscape, has contributed to more international hires and younger artists entering leadership roles. In response, some organizations are investing in built-in succession strategies through mentorship programs, associate or assistant director roles, leadership retreats and intensives.

Yet these leadership pathways often raise their own questions. How many of these programs are building capacity for emerging leaders in navigating increasing complexity, or for experimenting with business models, unlikely sector partnerships? Are they supporting a reinvention of the industry itself that isn't based on individualistic or colonial leadership paradigms?

As an arts leader who stepped into the role of CEO of the Arts Center in Calgary a month before the pandemic hit, Alex Sarian has since fundraised half a billion dollars to revitalize the downtown cultural center (2024). He writes, "The need to compete in an increasingly saturated market, with an increasing dependency on private-sector philanthropy, has increased the need for an evolved model of arts organization, which in turn, calls for a new kind of arts organizational leader—someone who can build bridges between artists, audiences, and the resources required to develop a sector that outlives any one individual" (p.138).

Today's arts leaders, often in solo roles, are expected to scale up, resist burnout, navigate scarcity, manage conflict, maintain political fluency, and embody organizational stability—all while sustaining a creative vision. No amount of vision or resilience can offset the sheer volume of expectations being placed on one person within under-resourced, overstretched systems.

To lead an organization where people can experience what they truly desire, and where learning and leading go hand in hand, systems leadership scholar Margaret Wheatley writes "we must understand the underlying agreements we have made about *how we will be together*. Instead of focusing on training programs or structures related to organizational learning, we first need to explore the agreements people have used to organize themselves, since it is within such agreements that our organizations take form. What is the cost, the price, of belonging to this system?" (Fritz, Senge, Wheatley, 2016).

When leadership becomes synonymous with self-sacrifice, we risk designing roles that are fundamentally unsustainable.

Burden and Burnout

In this context, leadership has come to mean carrying it all: performing steadiness, preserving institutional legacy, managing stakeholder expectations, and putting out endless fires. For founder-led institutions, this often shows up as hypervigilance, poor work-life balance, and enmeshment with the organization's identity.

For newer leaders—especially those from equity-deserving communities—the burden often takes the form of under-resourcing, isolation, and exhaustion. Women and BIPOC leaders are frequently hired into unstable organizations with quiet expectations: rescue the company from obsolescence, *gently* coach the team on equity, and 'fix' structures that were not designed with them in mind (Victor, 2022).

Dismantling burdensome leadership expectations means unlearning ego-driven or extractive narratives in favour of policies and practices that are emergent, relational, and attuned to the organization's needs. As Susan Kenny Stevens notes in her work on nonprofit lifecycles, leadership must be fluid and recalibrated to meet the stage the organization is in (2002). Yet many leaders are held in roles that were designed for perpetual growth (or in most cases, survival) not for experimentation, pause, or intentional evolution.

When it comes to leadership styles organizational strategist Alicia McKay proposes three common archetypes:

Figure 4: Types of leaders (McKay, 2024)

While each has a place, the Hero Leader's mentality—rooted in martyrdom, self-sacrifice, and individual over-functioning—often undermines team resilience and long-term sustainability. This kind of leadership is not about having all the answers, but about asking the right questions—and knowing when to pause, let go, or begin again (2024).

The risk of burnout is not hypothetical. A 2018 report in the UK flagged an "increasingly high risk of burnout" among arts leaders, leading to cognitive overload, diminished problem-solving, and reduced creative capacity. The authors called for "genuinely collaborative" leadership—leaders who are self-aware, willing to delegate, make mistakes, and be able to lead across networks, not just hierarchies (Romer, 2024).

That was before the pandemic. Burnout is now a default condition in many arts organizations.

Interestingly, in a Canadian leadership study, ADs and EDs were asked to rank attributes essential to their roles. For executive directors, problem solving was seen as most important—risk-taking was ranked least. For artistic directors, collaboration topped the list, while delegation was ranked lowest (Lesage, 2017).

If delegation and risk-taking are considered low ranking attributes, what does that say about the work culture being shaped? How does this affect an individuals' ability to gauge capacity? To try something new, ask for help, or to say no?

Burnout and scarcity mindset go hand in hand. Scarcity is especially amplified in the arts, where limited funding and overstretched workers create a relentless pressure to stay afloat and remain visible. Both burnout and scarcity inhibit our capacity to rest, play, dream, problem-solve, heal—and imagine alternative futures.

Futurist Steven Lichty notes that unresolved trauma—whether individual, communal, or generational—can impair our ability to think about the future (2023). This is particularly significant in a sector that depends so heavily on imagination and collective liberation. Artists are futurists, leaders are vision-builders. If the entire system is running on empty, how can transformation take root?

Yet Lichty's work offers a way through: he suggests that when trauma is addressed through *community-led* healing—not just individual effort—neuroplasticity enables the brain to reset, restoring our capacity for foresight and possibility (Lichty, 2023).

Collective repair is essential for sector-wide transformation.
But at the same time, the weight of survival—of healing, succeeding, creating—often falls squarely on the individual. And in the arts, where work and identity are deeply intertwined, disruption can feel less like a professional setback and more like a personal unraveling.

Identity, Work and Failure

Whether seen as a calling or a privilege, pursuing a career in the arts demands passion, resilience, and a deep love for the craft. Artists are among the most overeducated and underpaid professionals in Canada. In a recent survey, more than 72 per cent juggle multiple jobs to make ends meet, and 51% have total annual incomes below $40,000. (Hill, 2024). Even successful theatre artists are taking out lines of credit to keep up in between gigs (Sumi, 2024). In a precarious industry working for free is a given. Paid creative work is a win. Saying no is rarely an option. Disruption to one's professional path can be detrimental since they essentially have to be all-in to juggle the moving pieces.

For leaders in the arts, being busy often becomes a proxy for success—proof that they're holding it all together, even when they're not. The hustle needed to string together unpredictable, often underpaid gigs is intense—and the appearance of being 'in-demand' can be a form of currency, busyness a status symbol. Stacking the pressure to be active within the community and creatively productive, and with the economic pressure to make ends meet, with the often physical, emotional and intimate nature of art-making—it is a recipe for overidentification with work. How can it not become one's life, across all dimensions?

What some scholars call 'identity engulfment' is when one's relationships, routines, financial security, and self-worth revolve entirely around their craft. In this context, the lines blur between art and self, between reputation and survival, between output and worthiness (Zvosec, Baer, Hughes, Oja, Minjung, Dahlin, Howell, 2023).

The stakes are high when your livelihood and sense of self are tied to a vulnerable sector. In this context, failure doesn't just feel like risk—it can feel existential. The shadow is a quiet shame and grief when work isn't flowing, or an injury occurs or an artist has aged out of the craft.

Being a common case for athletes and dancers, there are programs designed to support career transitions and change, as it is easy to be unsure of what exists in parallel or beyond sport or stage. (Sumi, 2024)

For arts leaders, particularly founders, this tracks. Founders have "a calling, a mission, an internal mandate fueled by classical entrepreneurial characteristics: energy, drive, intensity, self-determination, and urgency" (Stevens, 1999). If an organization is an extension of oneself, letting go can feel like losing part of one's identity, the years, 'blood sweat and tears' that were poured into it, even if what one might stand to gain is liberating.

Stevens continues, “the most strategic decision a founder-led organization must make is whether or not it is bound for permanence or, instead, is limited to the founder’s tenure” (1999). For aging artists and founders in particular, prospects of retirement might be slim, and starting another career feels too late. Where do the elder artists belong? How are they being taken care of?

When we talk about change, endings, or reinvention in the nonprofit arts sector, we are not just talking about logistics—we’re talking about identity, purpose, and legacy.

The fears, pressures, and possibilities held by individuals are mirrored in the organizations they steward. Just as leaders wrestle with legacy, scarcity, and burnout, so too do the structures they inhabit. And if we understand leadership as a system of relationships—not just a role—then we can begin to see how organizations, like people, have life cycles of their own. Change is not just inevitable—it is ecological.

Structural Foundations — Lifecycles and Viable Systems

The performing arts sector is rich with creativity, cultural memory, and collective spirit—yet as Part I revealed, many of its organizations are struggling to stay alive within the current ecosystem. Traditional assumptions about growth, permanence, and institutional success are being challenged, and with them, our frameworks for organizational development.

To better understand the evolving needs of performing arts nonprofits, we must critically examine how we conceptualize organizational life itself.

This section explores three lenses—structural, relational, and ecological—that shape how organizations might grow, change, and end. Each lens offers an alternative to dominant models that prioritize longevity, hierarchy, and scale, and opens space for more adaptive, life-honoring approaches.

Nonprofit Lifecycles

Understanding the life cycles of nonprofit organizations is essential for navigating growth, transition, and sustainability. In mission-driven sectors where resources are limited and expectations high, the question of how organizations evolve—how they emerge, mature, plateau, and potentially end—carries both strategic and emotional weight.

One widely used framework in this area is Susan Kenny Stevens' Nonprofit Lifecycles model. Drawing on her background in social work and influenced by Erik Erikson's psychosocial stages of development, Stevens developed a stage-based approach to assessing organizational capacity across five key areas: programs, management, governance, financial resources, and administrative systems.

The model outlines seven stages of organizational development:
Idea, Start-up, Growth, Maturity, Decline, Turnaround, and Terminal.

Each stage reflects a particular alignment (or misalignment) between mission, structure, and capacity.

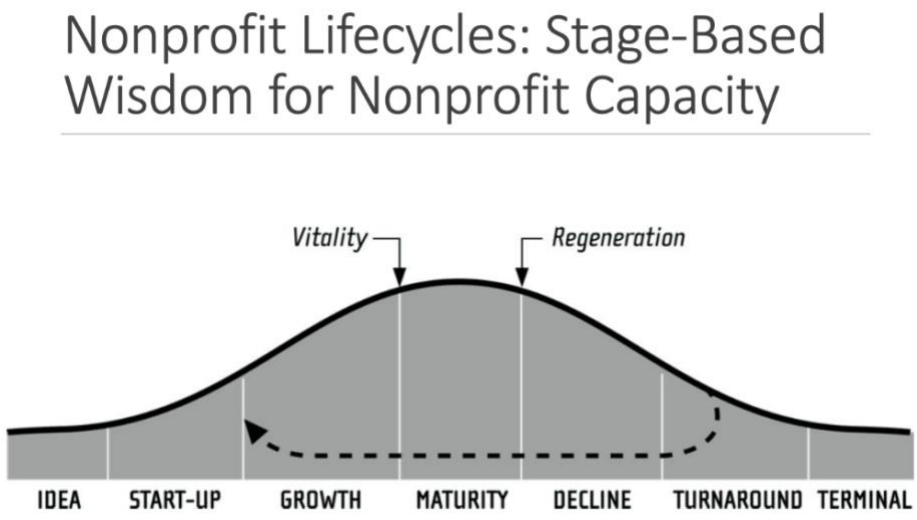

Figure 5: Image of the lifecycle from book Nonprofit Lifecycles: Stage-based Wisdom for Nonprofit Capacity by Susan Kenny Stevens (2002)

For example: a start-up theatre company may rely on founder energy, informal roles, and volunteer support. In contrast, a mature organization likely has paid staff, stable infrastructure, and a board with defined governance practices. The decline and turnaround stages, often overlooked in strategic planning, signal the need for recalibration, restructuring, or leadership change. The terminal stage acknowledges closure or transition as a *legitimate phase* of organizational life.

For performing arts organizations, this model is especially useful. Many companies are founded by passionate artists with bold visions and thrive in the start-up and growth stages, but struggle to scale infrastructure alongside creative ambition. Mature

organizations may carry historical weight while internally facing governance fatigue, bureaucratic rigidity, or diminished innovation. Turnarounds are the industry stories we want to hear, and organizations that embrace the terminal stage are few and far between, although what 'terminal' looks like is up for interpretation.

Stevens' model offers language and structure for naming these dynamics, supporting organizations to assess capacity and plan for change.

Limitations of this model

However, the model is not without its limitations. While its clarity and pragmatism make it widely applicable, it is rooted in a linear, psychology-based paradigm that implicitly frames growth, professionalization, and maturity as aspirational endpoints (Onder & Bower, 2004). Although Stevens includes decline and terminal stages, they are often presented as crises to manage rather than natural or regenerative transitions.

The model also focuses inward—on the organization as a self-contained unit—rather than situating it within broader ecosystems, histories, and cultural shifts. This inward focus, while valuable for diagnostics, may miss opportunities to reimagine what vitality, sustainability, and legacy could look like beyond traditional structures.

The Viable System Model

To add systemic depth, we can draw from Stafford Beer's Viable System Model (VSM for short), which complements lifecycle analysis as a "conceptual tool for understanding organizations, redesigning them (where appropriate) and supporting the management of change". (Espejo & Reyes, 2011).

The VSM is in fact much easier to use than it looks in the image provided.

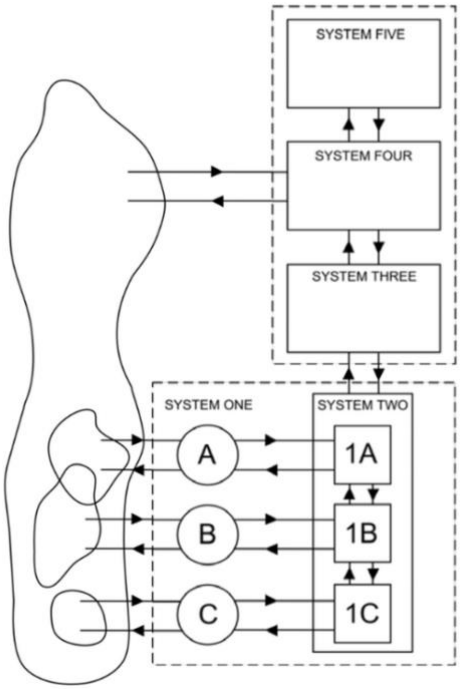

Figure 6 : Viable Systems Model (Overleaf, 2019)

There are five interrelated functions essential to an organization's long-term viability:

- **System 1: Operations** – the core activities of the organization
- **System 2: Coordination** – ensures harmony between parts
- **System 3: Control** – monitors and allocates resources
- **System 4: Intelligence** – looks outward and forward
- **System 5: Identity** – holds purpose, values, and ethos

When layered with Stevens' model, VSM encourages a shift from siloed diagnostics to **relational health**.

It helps identify how different functions communicate, adapt, and learn across lifecycle stages. For instance, if the organizations' identity (System 5) is disconnected from operational activity (System 1), or if strategic intelligence (System 4) is ignored by leadership, stagnation or decline may follow—not because of age, but because of broken feedback loops or misaligned identity. Identity holds a lot of influence in the model.

Wheatley reminds us that "organizations cannot be changed at the level of what we see, but only at the level where its identity is forming itself" (Senge, Fritz, Wheatley 2016).

The VSM also emphasizes **recursion**: each part of an organization is itself a viable system, and the organization is nested within larger systems—neighborhoods, communities, networks, ecosystems, society. This is especially relevant for the arts, where collaborations, partnerships, and interdependence are central to sustainability.

Together, the lifecycle model and VSM allow us to ask:

- *What stage is the organization in?*
- *How well are its systems communicating, adapting, and learning- together?*
- *How/are these related?*

This integrated view opens the conversation not only about structure, but about how vitality flows through and between the systems we build.

Ways of Working and Leading in Complexity

The Chaordic Path and Facilitative Strategy

While structural models like Stevens' Nonprofit Lifecycles Model provide clarity on *where* an organization may be in its lifecycle, they offer less guidance on *how* to move through uncertainty. In today's cultural sector—shaped by social upheaval, ecological precarity, and rapid technological change—many performing arts organizations are navigating conditions where control is elusive and linear planning often falls short. Perhaps what is needed in these moments isn't necessarily a roadmap, but a practice of adaptive strategy—one that centers collective learning and a toolkit for emergence.

The chaordic path, a concept developed by cybernetician Dee Hock and further refined by the Art of Hosting community, offers a compelling framework for this work.

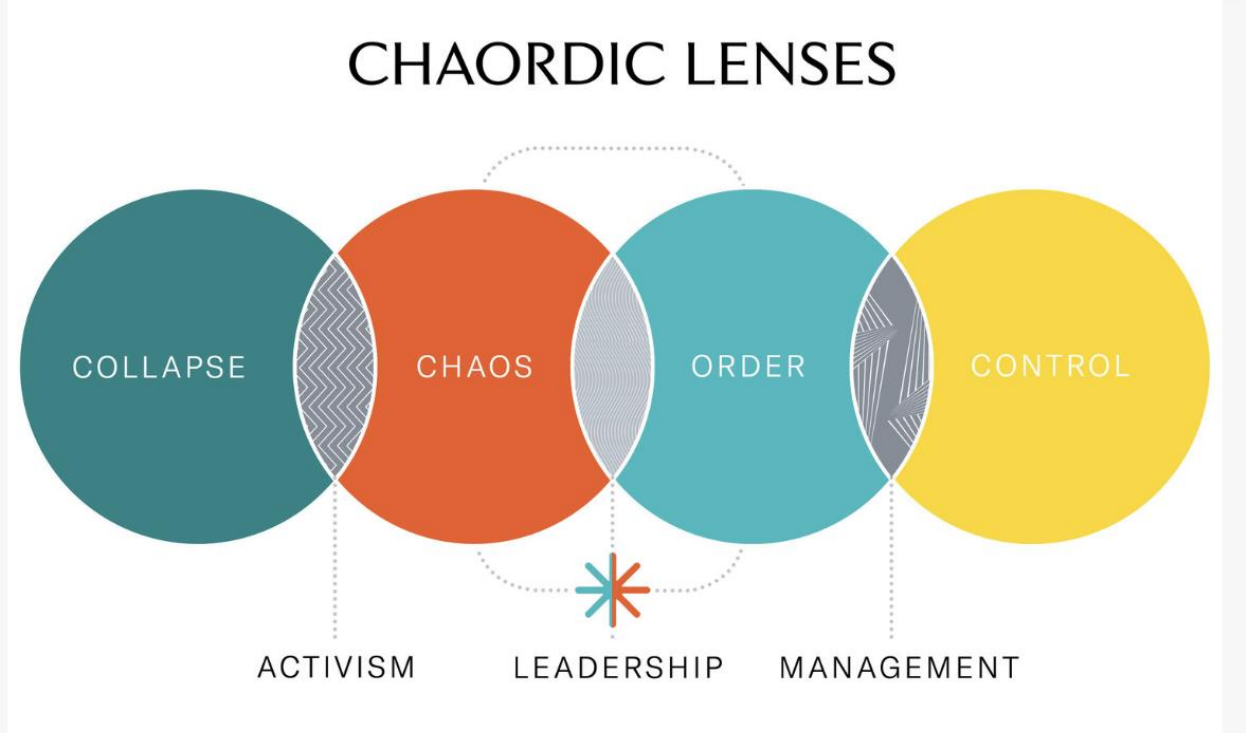

Figure 7: The Chaordic Lenses (Merry, 2019).

The term *chaordic* combines *chaos* and *order*, referring to the generative tension that exists between them. Hock observed that living systems—and the most adaptive organizations—do not thrive in either extreme, but in the space between, where uncertainty meets intention. On sustaining 'organizations of the future' he writes:

"It will require radical change in our individual perspectives, our internal model of reality, and our present concepts of organization and management. It will require a huge increase in wisdom, spirituality, and imagination." (Hock, 2023)

When it comes to creating spaces of wisdom, the Art of Hosting is a global community of facilitators who use participatory and conversational processes to design minimal yet robust structures—enough to hold emergence, but not so rigid as to block innovation. Rather than relying on top-down decision-making, the chaordic path centers facilitative leadership. Practices such as storytelling, World Café, open space technology, and appreciative inquiry are used to surface collective wisdom, navigate transitions, and align purpose with process. These approaches slow down planning, decentralize authority, and treat conversation not as a distraction from action, but as a form of action itself.

These frameworks are not abstract. They are increasingly used across nonprofit and cross-sector contexts to support innovation, transformation, and systems change (Wheatley & Frieze, 2011). They also resonate with Indigenous and relational worldviews, in which change is understood as a collective, unfolding process—not something to control, but something to tend (Wilson, 2008). Facilitation, in this context, is not a soft skill—it is a form of stewardship.

Emergence

In this same current, adrienne maree brown's *emergent strategy* offers a complementary logic. "Emergent strategy is how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for" (brown, 2017, p. 3). Drawing from complexity theory, biomimicry, and Black feminist organizing, brown proposes that small, relational, and iterative actions—rather than fixed plans—are seeding the foundations of meaningful transformation. She reminds us that *"everything we do is either growing, with roots going deeper, or it is decomposing—leaving its lessons in the soil for the next attempt"* (brown, p. 116).

Together, the chaordic path and emergent strategy offer a powerful counterpoint to dominant leadership norms. They challenge the urge to manage uncertainty through control and instead affirm that change is nonlinear, relational, and ongoing. For performing arts organizations—whose work is process-based, embodied, and improvisational—this logic is not foreign. It is native.

Devised theatre processes, artist collectives, rehearsal-based discovery, and experimental curation all reflect the values of emergence, collaboration, and iteration. Sometimes a project takes decades to bloom, or it has multiple lives of its own over a span of time. Sometimes it's best for a project to be buried. Sometimes it's a miracle (or mystery) that they are still going. Artists themselves experience cycles and seasons of creativity.

But unless they are self-resourced, funding and evaluation systems often demand a degree of certainty. Project grants ask artists to articulate outcomes and impacts, sometimes years in advance—pressuring them to speak with a confidence that art-making rarely allows. The intention is understandable, yet the result is a disconnect between how art is made and how arts organizations are expected to operate.

The principles of the Chaordic model and brown's emergent strategy offer mindsets that might be useful for not only a range of stakeholders to consider, but for leaders of

nonprofits. As facilitative frameworks that are designed to embrace unknowns and reframe stretchy growth edges into generative springboards, they are especially relevant in liminal moments—leadership transitions, shifts in vision, post-crisis recovery, or even considerations of closure. In these times, the work of leadership is not to impose resolution, but to harvest meaningful questions and steward transformative dialogue:

What is shifting? What are we being invited to release? What might emerge if we make space for the unknown? What does care look like within ambiguity?

When paired with structural diagnostics like Stevens' lifecycle model, facilitative and emergent leadership practices help organizations move from simply locating themselves within a stage, to navigating how they want to move forward with an inclusive approach to stewardship.

Presence and Impermanence

Leading not only through growth, but through change, new beginnings, and possible endings, requires something deeper than strategy: it calls for presence.

As mindfulness teacher Tara Brach reminds us, transformation begins not with action, but with the willingness to pause and witness *what is*. "A moment of radical acceptance," she writes, "is a moment of genuine freedom" (2003, p. 4). For organizations in flux, this sacred pause becomes a space to acknowledge loss, make meaning of change, and begin listening for what wants to emerge beneath the surface.

In this way, the chaordic path, emergent strategy, and practices that root us in the present offer more than a methodology—they offer a way of being with complexity. A way of meeting transition not as an emergency, but as an invitation.

And if transition is an invitation, what if we looked to nature—our ultimate teacher in presence, impermanence, and transformation.

If organizations are living systems, perhaps we can learn from nature how endings and renewal are not only inevitable, but essential to the health of the whole.

It is in this spirit that we turn to composting—as both metaphor and method—for reimagining organizational life.

Composting Culture — Ecological Approaches and the Case for Endings

Breakdown to Breakthrough

Over 300 arts organizations have closed across Canada in recent years (McRae, 2024). These closures stem from a convergence of challenges – but the most pressing issue may be cultural: we don't know how to talk about endings. This is part of a larger story in the West, where death and endings are avoided in all kinds of contexts.

"Within modernity, the idealized life hides away any signs of death, decay and destruction… The falling apart of things: breakdown, collapse and disintegration are seen primarily as negative experiences… From the breakdown of a fixed idea of identity to the disintegration of a building, from the collapse of a dam to that of a power structure in an organization" (Spencer, 2023).

In the arts, decline is often met with shame or denial (Artley, 2018). Winding down is delayed. Burned-out teams cling to survival long after the mission has gone dormant. Closure is framed as failure—both personal and professional.

While there is an 'endangered arts organization' fund offered by the federal government, it aligns more with the turnaround phase as a last-resort restructuring grant, established for "those rare instances where a professional arts organization faces the prospect of closure." (Canadian Heritage, 2024). Rare instances?

Few resources exist for sunsetting, let alone closure processes *led with care*. *C*onversations about the decision and process of letting go are often avoided until after the doors have closed.

But a shift has begun. Systems-oriented organizational change initiatives within the arts have emerged over the last two years. For example:

The Catalyst and Transformation Fund (CAT Fund), launched by the Metcalf Foundation and Work in Culture, directly supported organizations in winding down with intention. Among them was the iconic Peggy Baker Dance Projects, which closed in 2023 after fifty years of transformative work. Rather than disappear quietly, the company designed a closure process rooted in legacy, redistribution, and transparency.

“The most significant action I can take,” Baker said, “is to free up space and resources… to contribute to an environment in which artists who have been historically marginalized can thrive” (Baker, 2023).

The company archived its work, passed on production materials and space, and redirected funds to support Indigenous and Black diasporic dancers. This was not a retreat or failure—it was an offering and celebration.

Across the Atlantic, the UK-based nonprofit The Decelerator provides anonymous support for nonprofit leaders considering closure. In their 2023-2024 Impact Report, they reported a 300% increase in calls—a sign that leaders are craving space to even ask: *What if we didn’t keep going?* (The Decelerator, 2025).

Their research suggests that “leaders who pause— even briefly—are able to identify more thoughtful and effective ways to navigate endings centered in care, impact, and legacy.”

In a similar spirit, the Stewarding Loss community, initiated by The Farewell Fund, hosts monthly gatherings to explore the nuances of nonprofit endings. Participants reflect on questions of legacy, a range of end-of-life cultures, and share practices for managing grief, data, memory, and transition.

These initiatives offer a powerful cultural reframe: endings don’t have to be emergencies. They can be designed.

Composting as Practice and Principle

The shift toward dignified endings is not just technical or administrative—it is ecological, emotional, and even spiritual.

In natural systems, composting is how matter transforms. What appears to be decay is actually a process of breakdown and redistribution: nutrients are returned to the soil, supporting the growth of new life. Composting is not loss—it is contribution in another form.

When applied to organizational life and the arts ecosystem, composting becomes both a metaphor and a methodology. It invites us to ask:

- What is no longer serving?
- What can be released, repurposed, or returned to the community?
- What needs to decompose so that something new might grow?

Consider the image of the nurse log—a fallen tree that, as it breaks down, becomes a vital support system for new organisms. It releases nutrients, creates habitat, and opens the canopy to light. It doesn't disappear—it *transforms*. Its death is a gift to the forest.

In the performing arts, the "nutrients" of a closing organization might include rehearsal space, materials, archives, grant-writing templates, funding relationships, mailing lists, institutional knowledge, or even rituals and values that can be passed on. When thoughtfully composted, these materials become cultural soil—enriching the landscape for others.

This is not about glorifying closure. It's about naming the power of redistribution, and **challenging the myth that sustainability means institutional permanence.** Ecological thinking reminds us:

The health of a system isn't defined by what survives the longest, but by what renews, adapts, and shares.

In this light, sunsetting a nonprofit may not signal loss at all. It might be an act of generosity. A strategic return of energy and attention to the wider cultural field.

The Power of a Final Act

The performing arts have always understood impermanence and the power of a final act.

Performance itself is the most ephemeral form. It begins, builds, and ends—leaving behind memory, resonance, and, at its best, transformation. Artists are trained in this rhythm. They rehearse presence. They practice letting go. They play with temporality. They know how to hold space for endings, grief, and transition. A competency built into artists is that no two ensembles are the same, and every run has a closing show. N*ot everything is meant to last*.

Are arts organizations designed with this wisdom in mind? The neoliberal capitalist paradigm demands continuity, productivity, and evidence of growth. As a result, the systems that support artists and art are misaligned with the nature of the art itself.

We ask artists to innovate and take risks, but we don't offer the same permission to their organizations.

What would it mean to bring the logic of performance—its cycles of emergence, climax, and closure—into organizational design?

What if an organization could be conceived as a seasonal body, not a permanent institution?

What if its end could be crafted with the same care and intention as an opening night? What if legacy was not something to protect, but a gift to give back to the ecosystem?

When we see organizations as living, creative systems—not static structures—endings become part of the form. Not a failure. Not an absence. A closing act…deserving of a standing ovation.

Gathering to Witness — Ritual and Grief

Having explored how nonprofit performing arts organizations in Canada are navigating exhaustion, leadership transitions, and complex cultural shifts, this MRP examined systemic pressures, structural models, and emergent possibilities.

And now, we return to the fire—because performance has always known how to gather and witness ritual.

In many cultures, performance and ritual are inseparable, both serving as communal acts of meaning-making, transformation, and renewal (Schechner, 2003). Ritual is what marks time. It makes loss visible. It gathers attention around what is changing—what is no longer, or what could be—and gives that moment form. It metabolizes complexity, holds contradiction, and offers a vessel through which both grief and imagination can be shared.

Today, as organizations close, as dreams dissolve, as ecosystems collapse, we are collectively grieving—often silently, often without ceremony. Our sector, our communities, and our bodies carry this grief. And yet, grief is not a dinner table topic.

But artists know how to transform pain into beauty. How to sit in uncertainty. How to embody ambiguity. And this, perhaps, is one of the most potent offerings of the performing arts: to remind us how to be with what is ending.

Even small, symbolic rituals can help people move through grief. It is not the scale of the ritual, but its intention that matters. A final show. A closing circle. A moment of silence in rehearsal. A performance that lets the audience cry.

In a time where we are losing gathering spaces, losing language, losing each other—performance remains a space where grief can be public. Where we can be witnessed not

just in our becoming, but in our unbecoming. Could performance be a form of public health, of cultural metabolism, of care beyond the clinic or individual therapy sessions?

This is not just a spiritual insight -- it is strategic.
Grief is part of systems change.
Ritual is part of organizational design.
Impermanence is not the opposite of sustainability—it is its teacher.

If we want to build futures that are sustainable and just, and organizations that are regenerative and relevant, we must begin with what is ending.
We must build cultures that can name loss, hold one another, and close with care.

PART THREE: THE FUTURE

...scenarios are visions from the head...visions are futures from the heart... - Clem Bezold

Brief: Part III introduces selected Drivers of Change and a simplified version of the Backcast, followed by *The Commons in Bloom* an (Aspirational Future) and an artifact from the designed future in the form of a letter.

Methodology: The Three Horizons framework and multiple iterations of the Causal Layered Analysis were methods used to deepen understanding and process the findings the interviews and literature review. The data points from Horizon Two and Horizon Three were the foundation of the Aspirational Future. My own experience also informed the output.

The Aspirational Future was influenced by the following selected drivers of change, sourced from the 2024 DemocracyXChange's Toolkit. The possible implications of these key drivers of change served as the foundation for the Backcast and iteratively informed the design of *The Commons in Bloom*.

Driver of Change	**DXC Toolkit Definition**
Increasing Climate Emergencies	The rise in frequency and intensity of catastrophic climate events disproportionately impacts people of colour, increasing homelessness and contributing to the perpetuation of generational economic trauma.
The Circular Economy	*The circular economy* narrative offers the opportunity to rethink and reconceptualize the current economic approach instead of relying

	on hyper-consumption and waste for projects, the arts sector commits to addressing human and environmental needs.
Environmental Impact Data	With environmental and social initiatives organizations require ethically sourced, accurate and complete data to inform and report on their activities' impact.
Nature Positive	A goal, approach and business model to halt destructive practices and shift to an operating model of regeneration, resilience and recirculation, aiming for a resilient biosphere recovery by 2050.
Life-centered organizational design	Flourishing business models and regenerative practices prioritized by consumers
Decolonization	Colonial ideologies about the superiority and privileges of Western thought and approaches, which often exclude rather than include, are being deconstructed and challenged in systems and institutions.
Spaces to Foster Community	New or renewed spaces to encourage social connection and community continue to be critical, including physical hubs with programming, services, and amenities such as libraries, that may also function alongside or in addition to other growing online/digital creative, activist and social communities.
Mental Health Crisis	With the isolation of the pandemic and the rise of social media, there has been a marked decline in mental well-being and a rise in awareness and the need for greater mental health support, which were already scarce and difficult to access.
Rise of Eco-Anxiety	The rise of eco-anxiety and the fear of the future from the youth is also driving the arts to be a space of collective sensemaking, grief, add positive imagination practices.
Rise of Digital Worlds	The growing presence of digital worlds (via social media, video

	gaming, VR/AR, etc) can create connections between strangers, while also drastically reducing in-person human contact and connection as many are reaching their “social quotas” online.

Here is a high level Backcast that served as the roadmap for how *The Commons in Bloom* was designed.

A Commons in Bloom: Year 2053

It's 2053, and the performing arts in Canada are a cornerstone of communal resilience and cultural regeneration. What was once an industry teetering between burnout and bureaucratic survival emerged from the ashes as a life-centered, place-based system of mutual flourishing. The country is adapting as quickly as it can to the accelerating climate crisis, which effectively worsened after a decade of profit-oriented leadership. Since the mining and oil industries came under shocking restrictions (nearly closed), the economy, agriculture, and consumerism overall has taken a major hit. Many Canadians are in crisis, many are upskilling, many are turning online, or to the arts and culture spaces for escape and support. The performing arts - ever used to precarity and survival – are the community harbors, the wise lighthouses in turbulent seas and transformative times.

This all began decades earlier, catalyzed by systemic upheavals: the closure of the Canada Council for the Arts, the introduction of Universal Basic Income, the impacts of accelerating climate emergencies, and a widespread mental health reckoning across care-based professions. Artists and organizations responded not by scaling up or buckling down, but by letting go—of the capitalist rat race, of extraction, of colonial expectations of what "success" looked like. The cost of living became unmanageable for most, AI's questionable presence in the arts dominated, social mobility became a myth of times past, and artists (ever progressive and future-oriented) took back their power by orienting their creative energy and skills where it carried the most visceral impact: to the community and ecological healing.

Today, performing arts organizations are deeply embedded in the ecological and social fabric of their regions. Municipalities formally recognize the arts as part of their adaptive strategies and climate infrastructure—designating some venues as cooling centers, resilience hubs, and care anchors where both the joys and sorrow of modern complexity are held.

Rehearsals follow seasonal cycles. Materials are locally sourced and reused. Ceremonies acknowledge the land and its stewards. Hyper-local aesthetics replace Euro-American influences with stories rooted in regional histories, global citizen perspectives, and Indigenous knowledge systems. Cultural production is aligned with climate adaptation and ecological reciprocity.

The new arts landscape has shifted from institution to ecosystem. It is fluid, agile, and relational, and the following types of organizations exist:

- **For-profit social enterprises** now house multi-use cultural sanctuaries—part performance, arts and cultural playground, part neighborhood commons that also hosts potlucks, political forums, local markets, workshops, and mutual aid organizing. Challenged profit vs. Integrity narrative in the arts, leaders in arts R&D, bridges to the creative economy and the revenue flows back into the community through micro-loans, artist health centers and housing.

- **Artist-Run Healing Centers** have become foundational places for processing change, navigating creative and financial trauma recovery, and reconnecting with self, spirit and land. They were built by artists for artists in response to the collapse of the sector, but they've become popular with the public too, particularly after the mass burnout of the healthcare and education sectors inspired folks to look

elsewhere for holistic care.

- **Time-bound cooperatives** (referred to as *Swells*) emerge for up to twelve years, fulfilling community mandates before gracefully dissolving, with assets redistributed into long-term community trusts. Rooted in solidarity, they blend the ethics of mutual aid with the structure of cooperatives, while remaining agile, adaptable, and resistant to institutional creep.

The Swells are designed to end. Every new initiative is launched with a defined life cycle, a sunset strategy, and an ethos of intentional impermanence. This approach replaced the outdated story about "growth at all costs" with a more regenerative one: sunsetting as stewardship; presence now, not forever.

The myth of the heroic arts leader has been replaced with rotational leadership models that emphasize team-based governance, elder mentorship, and shared accountability. Leadership cycles (typically 7 years) are scaffolded by training in systems thinking, trauma-informed facilitation and conflict mediation, and community wealth-building.

As important as planning for future generations has become, aging and elder artists today are central—not just as memory keepers, but as active guides.

Retirement support and housing co-ops for elder artists are normalized and publicly supported, as part of a larger societal commitment to intergenerational care and cultural continuity. Mutual-aid revenue funds have become commonplace, supporting elder care, artistic risk, and transitions between projects or careers.

Rather than rely on outdated economic impact metrics, the sector evaluates its vitality through:

- **Relational density** (how many people know and support each other)
- **Community wealth gains** (e.g., shared housing, resource-sharing platforms)
- **Cultural contribution** (stories told, stoking of local cultures, beauty offered)
- **Emotional impact** (how audiences feel, heal, and connect)

Performance today is less a product and more a practice—a cultural technology for sensemaking, healing, and worldbuilding.

Events might blur the line between audience and artist, between ceremony and stage. People gather not only to watch, but to participate: in grief rituals, community storytelling, and local celebrations of place.

With AI now dominating mass cultural production, the value of embodied, imperfect, relational art has surged. Audiences crave what machines cannot generate: intimacy, spontaneity, presence, collective resonance and reaction.

Artists are not entertainers—they are interpreters of complexity, emotional translators, facilitators of belonging, imagination activators, cultural memory holders, and change doulas.

The transformation of the Canadian performing arts sector wasn't a matter of innovation alone. It required unlearning, grieving, and a collective willingness to shift from individualistic, extractive logics to relational, reciprocal ones.

By 2053, the sector isn't "sustained"—it breathes, it composts, it regenerates. It knows how to die with dignity and be reborn in new forms. And in doing so, it has become a model for how other sectors might evolve too. The future, it turns out, wasn't something to arrive at—it was something to return to, like a forest growing back after fire, fed by what came before.

Artifact #1: A letter from the future

Dear friend,

It is 2053, and I write to you with a full heart from a place I never quite imagined we'd arrive at — and yet, it feels like we were bound to flow in this direction.

So much has changed in our corner of the arts. And somehow, what matters most has stayed. We still gather. We still witness across time and space. We still make and share stories from breath, body, bone, and gesture. But the mindsets and *ways we're working together* have shifted. The pace, the purpose, the relationships, the stakes — all of it has softened, deepened, and strengthened.

Let me tell you how we got here.

Do you remember when federal arts funding dried up? How it rocked all our (somewhat already sinking) boats? That rupture wasn't the end. It was the beginning.

A few companies became for-profit social enterprises, not to sell out, but to survive — and more than that, to root deeper into community needs. They transformed their venues into multi-use cultural sanctuaries: art and dance studios, stages for public forums, garage sales, parties and meetups, even warming and cooling centers.

They began rotating leadership every seven years. They've been working in long-term partnerships with neighboring Indigenous nations and the municipal governments. They became agile, transparent, reciprocal companies…and a critical third space for locals.

Profit stopped being a dirty word when it started to be shared: they poured money into local economies and artist recovery initiatives.

Other arts organizations — many others — didn't transition. They chose instead to sunset. Some were out of defeat, but with the majority were with ceremony and clarity.

The final shows were exquisite. Farewell parties spilled into the streets. Teams invested in creative archiving, 'leather-bound' legacies, community asset-sharing, and seven-generation planning. And in the space that opened up, something astonishing happened:

We slowed down. We reflected. We gathered.

We held each other through the grief of what had been, and the uncertainty of what was next. We let go of founder-attachment and the 'hero' leadership story. We woke up to the damage of hustle culture and began the deep work of peeling apart the rampant over-identification with creative work, and busyness as status symbol. We redefined success as rest and wellbeing, as spaciousness, as authentic relationship.

We realized we'd been trying to sustain systems and models that didn't sustain us – and that that was *by design*…to keep us dreamers and storytellers focused on competition and survival…when all along our ability to imagine, innovate, and share powerful stories were critical skills to shift the paradigm.

And so, we asked better questions.

What does vitality feel like? What is our vision of abundance? How are we relating to impermanence, to endings, composting? What are we *really* here for? And how has being squeezed into colonial/capitalistic/commercial forms served us? What would success and sufficiency look like, on *our* terms?

From those questions, new forms emerged. 'Swells' of arts groups came together.

Now, our sector is made up of constellations of arts cooperatives who operate as mutual-aid networks, time-bound collectives, and spiritual-creative residencies to nurture and restore the collective imagination. Organizations name their lifespan up front. They define success not only by what they build, *but how they close*. Sunset planning is a standard part of every project, and the shame that used to hang over endings and 'flopped' projects has become opportunities to learn, grow, and shake it off – because we no longer associate powerful art with money, worthiness with ego, success with growth, death with failure.

Elder artists are honored, housed, and respected mentors. Artists are celebrated not just as entertainers, but as agents of change, healers, futurists, interpretors of complexity and bridge-builders between culture, time, and space. We are no longer in survival mode. We are in relationship. Like the vines and trees that grow in the cracks of a decaying concrete jungle– we rose through, against, and around capitalism.

Our performances are more than events. They are soul work. Eco-grief rituals. Joy portals. Cultural feasts. Local and alive. We do not imitate America or Europe's styles or bend for prescriptive funding narratives. Our art speaks with the cadence of our own landscapes and is made for and by the locals.

We make space to grieve, to rest, to wonder, to imagine. We are supported in this because our industry has learned: life cycles matter. Endings are sacred. Relationship and presence *are* the real wealth of the 21st century.

And listen, it isn't perfect. I speak from where I stand and the eyes and meanings I see the world through. There are conflicting Swells. There are artists who pushed back. And let's not forget the fight to keep the public funding bodies alive. It was hard and real and fierce. But change had to happen, even if it's not the changes that everyone was keen on.

So, my friend, if you are there now, in 2025 or 2030, wondering how to keep going — I invite you to imagine letting go. Not everything. But enough to shift. Enough to breathe. Enough to ask: what would it mean to be in an authentic relationship with change?

The world needs artists who know how to live and die with grace. Who can lead with courage and compost what no longer serves. We need you to rest. To remember. To gather and to imagine.

The future is not built. It is received.

And you are part of what makes it possible.

With care,
A friend and fellow arts leader from the future

Artifact #2: A speech after a local Swell's last piece together

August 2053, a small corner of a public park in Winnipeg.
A large wooden riser with quilts and flower garlands sits in a grassy open area, bordered by big trees that are decorated with glowing fairy lights. Groups of people are clustered in loose circles around the stage, some lounging on islands of blankets, a few are cleaning set pieces and gear from the show. Members of a band tune their instruments. Someone strums a guitar out of tune, laughing. It smells like earth and rain, and something roasting on a nearby fire. Some kids chase each other barefoot around garden beds.

A woman stands up on the makeshift platform. Behind her, light from the golden sunset spills like honey over the trees and park.

She clears her throat — no microphone, just her voice, low and steady.

"Family, friends, neighbours, and the curious souls who wandered over tonight, welcome! I hope you enjoyed the show, because it happened to be the last show.
We made it. We made *this*.

She sweeps her arm across the air, some cheer and claps from the people.

Tonight, as the sun puts itself to bed after a long summer day, so too does our little Swell meet the end of its story.
Six and a half years of weaving, dreaming, failing, mending, playing, making again — all of it, composting into the soil we stand on now. Deepening the bonds to our craft, our love of storytelling, and to each other.
They told us once that art had to prove itself.
That anything good had to come from the hustle, it had to be *chosen*, hard won, sellable.. to be worthy.
And we said no.

A voice from the crowd shouts out: WE did, but ya can't say that for everyone!
Some laughs, a clap or two ripple for a moment.

The woman looks down and then up, smiling knowingly. She continues.

Well said…*we* said: art is not for sale. It's food for the soul and spirit, and spirits don't run on myths of merit or scarcity..

They run on beauty, wonder, faith, and timeless belonging.
And you — all of you — all of us! --- we proved it.
We proved it when we turned the old ticket booth into a seed library.
When we swapped the black tie gala for a back alley clown party.
When we let a seven-year-old direct the final scene because, frankly, she saw the truth straighter than we could.
We proved it in smaller ways too:
Like always bringing leftovers and homecooked meals to the studio. Which was – by the way -- generously shared with our fellow Swells-- to whom we are eternally grateful ! *(a cheer and woop in the audience, a horn and drum boop)*

Like the rooftop journals filled with confessions, recipes, love letters to tomorrow.
Like that time we had to cancel a show because the river was flooding, so instead we watched the water rise and sang together.
We don't need to institutionalize or keep growing in a certain direction. Our mark has been made, in little acts of courage and love, in connection, and time.
Its about becoming a commons.
A place where people could co-exist without apology, where grief could sit right next to joy, without apology.
Where ideas and creativity could flow, and even the most banal day to day actions could be fun and loaded with meaning and for the greater good.
We were never building to last forever..
We were building for presence.
For relationship.
For the kind of wealth that doesn't vanish when the lights go out or your fifteen minutes have passed.
And tonight, we are not closing the doors of this beloved Swell because we failed.
We are closing because we completed.. We arrived. We are here.
Because we honored the shape of this season.
Because all that it took to bring theatre to life… damn well deserves a good ending.
So — to the Echo of Honey and Smoke:
May what we made over the last six, sorry, almost seven years.. ripple out like drops of rain on a still lake.
May it feed what grows next.
May it be enough.
Thank you for staying, thank you for letting it be real, messy, sacred.
Goodnight, dear ones.
Let's dance.

She steps down, cheers and claps. Someone else starts a drumbeat on the side of a garden bed. The night blooms open, and the party begins.

PART FOUR: From Vision to Practice

This section outlines seven key strategic themes drawn from the research and aspirational future vision, each accompanied with calls for action for actors across the performing arts ecosystem: arts leaders, artists, funders, policymakers, educators, and sector connectors.

These initiatives have been inspired by the outputs of Horizon Two and Horizon Three.

1. Leadership for Complex Times

Leadership today calls for systems leadership - the ability to see the big picture, facilitate collaboration, share power, and care for the wellbeing of teams. Leaders must also be skilled at navigating conflict and preventing burnout. This is vital for the arts, where collaboration and adaptability are at the heart of the practice.

- **Arts leaders** can practice facilitative leadership by inviting input from all team members and adjusting leadership styles to match the organization's current needs
- **Artists** and **teams** can seek training in conflict resolution, build peer mentorship circles for mutual support

- **Funders** can invest in leadership coaching and trauma-informed capacity-building, helping leaders develop the skills needed for organizations, projects, and their own learning journeys.

2. Organizational Life Cycle Awareness

Understanding the organizational life cycle helps leaders make timely, stage-appropriate decisions, allocate resources wisely, manage risks, and guide change effectively. It can prevent crises by anticipating challenges and adapting before issues escalate.

- **Arts Leaders & boards** can explore lifecycle models (e.g., Susan Kenny Stevens) and Viable Systems Model to assess stages, relationships, and vitality of the whole.

- **Funders** can develop grants that align with life cycle realities: scaling, stabilizing, or ending. Cut back institutional funding for historical relationships, make space for emerging cultural movements.

- **Community at large**, by adopting lifecycle language can contribute to the de-stigmatization of decline and closure by reframing narratives about endings.

3. Regenerative Business Models

Moving beyond traditional nonprofit structures, regenerative business models prioritize social, environmental, and economic sustainability. Educate emerging artists on entrepreneurial literacy that will help them build the arts sector of the future.

- **Arts leaders** can explore alternatives to the nonprofit model (e.g., for-benefit corporations, social enterprises, cooperatives, mutual-aid pods).

- **Artists** can explore time-bound collectives or "swells" with rotating membership and shared purpose. As freelancers (essentially art solopreneurs) consider personal business models, use as guardrails for viability and strategy.

- **Funders & Policy Makers** could support hybrid models, discourage arts groups from adopting nonprofit and charity status, remove barriers to structural experimentation.

- **Connectors** might offer business model design labs that integrate systems thinking, flourishing business models, and values-led entrepreneurship.

4. Sector-Wide Healing & Cultural Sufficiency

This theme addresses the need to heal from scarcity mindsets, hustle culture, and intergenerational trauma in the arts, emphasizing sufficiency, wellbeing, and collective care as pillars in social justice and change.

- **Organizational Leaders** might name and disrupt scarcity and burnout narratives; create shared language around abundance. Model asking for help, merging resources, taking breaks, and making mistakes.

- **Funders** & **Policy Makers** must advocate for Artist Basic Income and extended care for elderly artists. Fund mental health support, creative healing residencies, and artist career transition programs. Connect the arts with social prescribing, art therapy.

- **Educators:** Normalize conversations around failure, burnout, and endings in arts training.

5. Legacy, Archiving, and Sunset Planning

Encouraging intentional closure, memory keeping, and redistribution of assets before reaching the terminal phase mitigates the possibility of a crisis closure, and the fear that they will fade away, be forgotten, or go to waste. Instead, they can close trusting that their legacies will be honored and valuable knowledge and resources can be shared with the sector.

- **Founders, Arts Leaders & Boards** could create legacy mapping processes; plan for sunset with dignity, develop a generative relationship with loss

- **Connectors** can facilitate empowering rituals and systems that honor the past.

- **Funders:** Develop 'graceful closure' funds and invest in digital or community archives initiatives.

6. Infrastructure & Space Activation

Physical spaces for the arts should be multipurpose, accessible, and considering the impacts of increasing climate change. They can serve as 'third space' community hubs beyond performance venues that bring people together.

- **Funders** could support upgrades that increase accessibility and climate resilience; municipalities integrate arts and culture infrastructure into resilient city planning.

- **Arts Leaders** can partner with communities to reimagine traditional theatre spaces.

- **Artists** can continue to turn unconventional spaces into performing venues, bringing life and story to empty or underused locations.

7. Futures Literacy & Sector Foresight

Developing the ability to think long-term and strategically imagine multiple futures is crucial for navigating uncertainty and emergence in today's times. Futures literacy helps

organizations anticipate change, innovate, and remain relevant. It enables leaders to move from reactive to proactive strategies, and imagine possible alternative futures.

- **Arts Organizational Leaders** might integrate foresight and systems thinking into board and staff retreats.

- **Educators & Connectors** can embed futures thinking into arts leadership and production programs, host workshops on complexity and designing for emergence

These recommendations are not a checklist but a field of invitations. Organizations and leaders are encouraged to find themselves within these themes and adapt them to their own rhythms, relationships, and realities.

Conclusion

This research project explored the complex realities facing nonprofit theatre organizations in Canada, tracing the ways current structures shape both possibility and limitations.

What emerged from conversations and analysis was a deep love for the art, alongside a steady concern for its future. The performing arts community in Canada is marked by passion and persistence, but it's also burdened by chronic underfunding, a bumpy colonial history, and a cultural reluctance to acknowledge endings. Too often, we hold onto organizations long past their vitality—not because it's what's best, but because we've been taught that closing means failure. This research challenges that narrative. It asks: what's possible beyond the story of permanence? what if endings were designed for? what if closure was form of care? a symbol of success?

My perspective and experience as the sole researcher, coming from the performing arts, is weaved into this project. It has been both activating, validating, and healing to engage with the industry from a systems, design and futures standpoint. The fear of getting something wrong, stepping on somebody's toes, or changing my mind (as it does!) have been with me through the process. In the end, the MRP is a sandbox to play, think, and develop a practice within. The subject, although close to my heart, is a conversation I have had the privilege to spend time with, without the pressure of moving towards solutions or claiming expertise. I hope this research illuminates the resilience and brilliance of Canada's performing arts sector, while inviting a new relationship to impermanence and purpose.

In the end, what emerged was a call to apply an ecological, cyclical lens to groups engaging in the creative process, and to promote the act of letting go to make space for a more just, regenerative future. By honouring the natural rhythms of organizational and creative life, we can create the conditions for new forms of leadership, creativity, and community to emerge.

Some key takeaways include:

- Embracing lifecycle thinking and ecological frameworks in organizational design
- Resourcing leadership models that are relational, distributed, and grounded in care
- Designing rituals and collective practices to witness, grieve, and celebrate endings
- Advocating for funding and policy that values closure as growth, artists wellbeing and financial safety, and that encourage organizational innovation and interdependence

This report ambitiously attempted to bring heart and mind, past, present and future together – the way the theatre itself does. In the most life-affirming way, I hope you, dear reader, have left with the notion that letting go, when done with intention and care, is not failure—but rather a brave and powerful release that can sustain the people, the practices, and the possibilities at the heart of the performing arts.

Next Steps

This MRP feels less like a conclusion and more like a starting point—an opening into deeper inquiry that I hope to continue *with collaborators*.

I would still like to do a Three Horizons workshop with artists to imagine a collective Desired Future. It feels like it would be both healing and necessary.

Processing this research through performance itself also feels like a next step—whether its creating a piece about the content, or moving the information through the body and soul in a different form.

I would like to design a futures workshop to explore some of the ideas in motion.

I'd love to further develop a framework that weaves together the Viable Systems Model, Stevens' lifecycle model, and the Chaordic perspective, and explore tools from the Art of Hosting to support organizations in assessing where they are and navigating transitions

with care. If I can bring these together in a case study, I'd learn quickly what sticks and what is possible beyond theory.

Ultimately, I'd like to witness and support an organization through a real-time turnaround or intentional ending—continuing to explore how thoughtful closure can be a creative, regenerative act.

PART FIVE: SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Limitations to research

This research was shaped by several limitations that influenced its overall scope, depth, and methodological choices. As a time-bound graduate project conducted by a single researcher, it was not possible to undertake a multi-year, large-scale study. The research was conducted within a specific timeframe, which limited the number of interviews I was able to schedule, host, and transcribe. While the conversations I did have were incredibly rich, I often left wishing I had more time to listen—more voices to hear, more space to hold what was shared. With more time and resources, I would have expanded the number of participants and deepened the engagement in each dialogue. And while there are benefits to being a solo researcher, I wish I had had a partner or team to unpack it all with. And it's true what they say, I might have gotten to some parts faster alone, but with others we could've gone further.

Additionally, the scope of the project was intentionally focused on nonprofit performing arts organizations within Canada, and interviewees were selected based on specific criteria aligned with the research focus—such as experience in organizational leadership, governance, or transition processes. While this focus allowed for depth within a particular context, it also meant that other geographies, disciplines, and perspectives were not included.

Finally, my own positionality as a researcher played a significant role in shaping the project. I hold power in how stories are framed, interpreted, and presented. Despite efforts to remain reflexive and accountable, my worldview inevitably influenced the meaning-making process. There is always a risk of unintentional misrepresentation or extraction, particularly when participants offer personal reflections, emotional labor, and cultural insight. To mitigate this, I prioritized care, consent, and transparency—approaching each conversation not as a data point, but as a moment in relationship.

Glossary

Research Paradigm: A framework of assumptions, values, and practices that shape how knowledge is produced and understood in a particular discipline or context. Paradigms influence what questions are asked, what methods are used, and what is considered valid knowledge.

Interpretivist: A philosophical stance in research that sees knowledge as socially constructed and context-dependent. Interpretivists seek to understand meaning from the perspective of participants, emphasizing depth, subjectivity, and cultural nuance over generalization.

Ontology: The branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of being and reality. In research, ontological assumptions shape what is considered real or knowable—such as whether organizations are fixed entities or fluid processes.

Epistemology: The study of knowledge—its origins, scope, and validity. Epistemological perspectives inform how we know what we know, and in research, guide the selection of methodologies and interpretation of findings.

Pluriversality: A concept that recognizes the existence of multiple, coexisting ways of knowing, being, and organizing life. It resists the universalizing tendencies of dominant (often Western) worldviews and affirms epistemic diversity rooted in place, culture, and relationality.

Qualitative Methods: Research approaches that explore meaning, experience, and complexity through non-numerical data. Methods such as interviews, observations, and document analysis enable deep understanding of context, emotion, and social dynamics—often through an interpretivist lens.

Future Studies: Futures is the evolving field that uses a variety of tools to consider the future more consciously and to create the future more effectively. Foresight is the application of futures tools in specific policy making or decision making settings. *(Bezold, 2019)*

Strategic Foresight: A discipline that helps organizations and communities explore possible, probable, and preferable futures. It combines trends analysis, scenario planning,

and systems thinking to support long-term, adaptive strategy development in the face of uncertainty.

A System: A set of interrelated elements organized to achieve a purpose. Systems can be natural (ecosystems), human-made (organizations), or conceptual (economic models), and they often exhibit behaviors not evident from their individual parts alone.

Systems Thinking: An approach to understanding complex phenomena by examining relationships, patterns, and interdependencies among components within a system.

Organization: A structured collective of individuals working toward shared goals, typically with defined roles, systems, and practices. In the nonprofit performing arts sector, organizations are shaped not only by mission but by governance models, funding structures, and cultural values.

Chaordic: A term coined by Dee Hock to describe the space between chaos and order. In organizational life, chaordic systems embrace emergence, adaptability, and complexity—valuing both structure and creativity, particularly in times of transformation or uncertainty.

Decolonization: A political, cultural, and epistemic process that dismantles colonial systems of power and knowledge. In research and the arts, it involves unsettling dominant narratives, centering Indigenous and marginalized voices, and reclaiming sovereignty over cultural expression and meaning-making.

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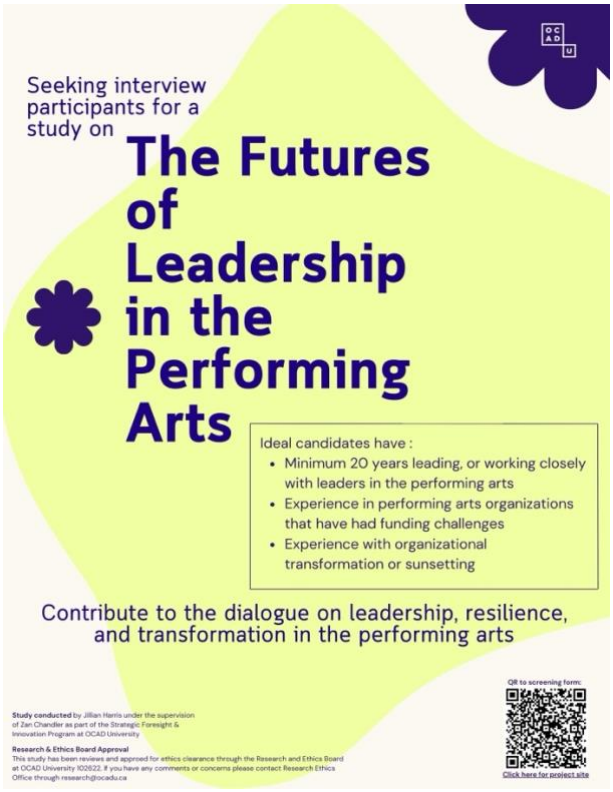
Appendices

Appendix A: This is the **poster** that was distributed calling for the interviews:



Appendix B: The following **questions** were the scaffolding for the semi-structured interviews:

1. *What is your role in the arts ecosystem?*

2. *What does leadership mean to you?*

3. *What has your experience sunsetting or winding down an organization been? (insights from the process, outcome, leadership)*

4. *What do you see as the most pressing challenges facing the performing arts sector today?*

5. *What innovations do you know about (anywhere in the world) that are responding to the pressures for change, that might be growth points for future systems?*

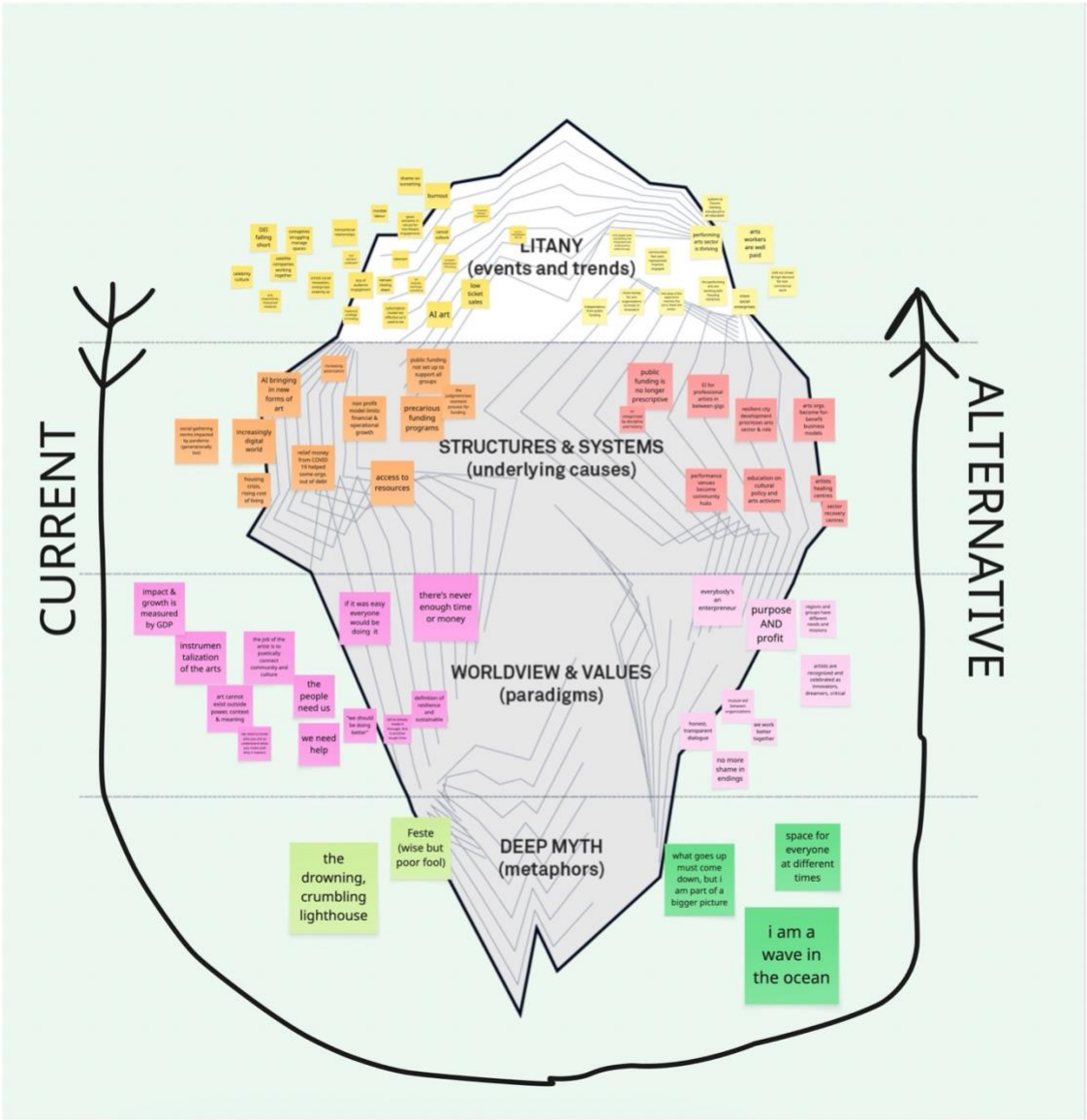
6. *What might a future arts organization/network/leadership structure look like and what values and norms would support it?*

7. *Do you know of any long-term trends that are driving towards these changes?*

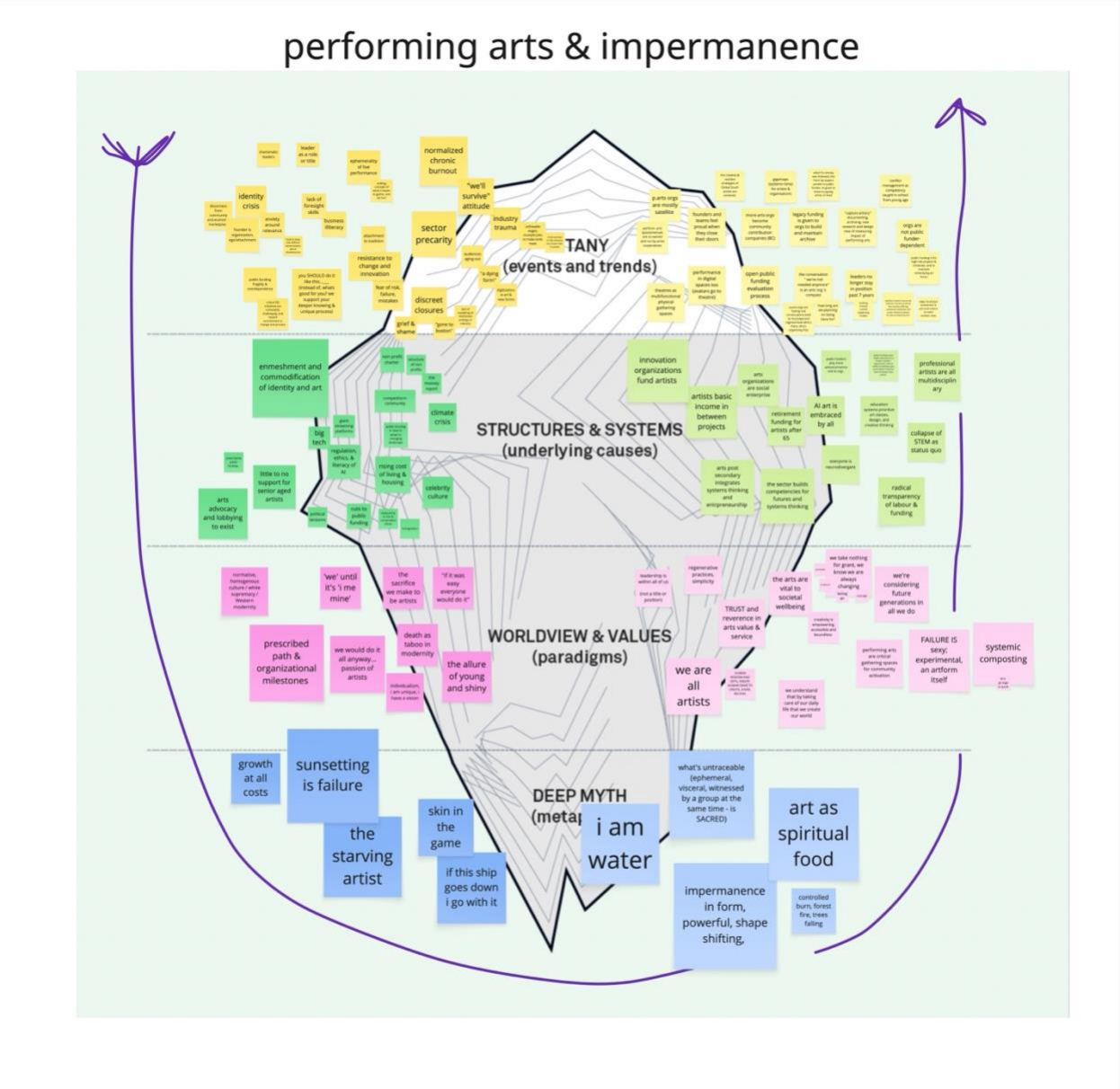
8. *What is your vision of the emerging future?*

Appendix C: Causal Layered Analysis: The following are three versions of the tool, looking at the current context and then looping up towards an alternative future based on the arts sector, arts leadership, and the performing arts (sector & attitudes) and impermanence.

the arts sector



leadership in the arts



1. Direct link to the to