PHILANTHROPY AND THE ARTS

A Convening at Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity

April 6–9, 2026 Takeaway Report

Chatham House Rules apply throughout. No remarks are attributed to individuals.

SHAPING THE FUTURE OF ARTS PHILANTHROPY IN CANADA

Thank you for your participation, your candour, and your willingness to sit with things that weren't resolved. Over three days at Banff Centre, a small, invitation-only group of senior arts leaders, philanthropists, board chairs, and fundraising professionals came together to examine the real tensions in how the arts are funded, governed, and sustained in Canada.

This was not a conference. It was a working conversation—designed for candour, not polish. Chatham House Rules created the conditions for people to speak about what they are grappling with, not what they wish were true. What emerged was honest, sometimes uncomfortable, and genuinely hopeful.

What made this convening unusual was who was in the room together. Executive directors, development professionals, board chairs, philanthropists, foundation leaders, and public funders all working the same questions—a configuration that rarely happens, and whose rarity was named explicitly. The conversations that followed were unlike the usual siloed forums. They went further.

The convening opened with a prayer song and teaching from an ÎYârhe Nakoda (Stoney Nakoda) artist and Banff Centre faculty member, grounding what followed in a spirit of presence, reciprocity, and accountability to place. That spirit became a through-line for the three days. The closing session asked each participant to name one concrete shift they were prepared to make—not a resolution, but a commitment. What happened in between is what this report attempts to capture.

THE CONTEXT: NUMBERS THAT FOCUS THE MIND

Data presented at the outset set the stakes. Donations to arts and culture organizations in Canada declined 22% over a five-year period—against only a 4% decline in overall charitable giving. Over half of all charitable giving now comes from people over 60. Less than 10% of individual donors are under 40. And the average income gap between artists and all other Canadian workers sits at 32%.

These are not abstract statistics. They are organisations laying off staff, cancelling programmes, deferring maintenance, and making compromises that quietly erode what makes them valuable.

Against that backdrop, the room was asked not to despair—but to look clearly, imagine boldly, and commit to something concrete.

EMERGING THEMES

The arts are essential—but we don't make the case

The opening keynote established the intellectual framework for the three days: great leaders and great artists share three capacities—the courage to see reality as it is, the courage to imagine possibility, and the courage to inspire others to move from current reality toward that possibility. Research from Yale Medical School showed that art history training produced more accurate medical diagnosticians—not because art made doctors smarter, but because it trained them to observe more, assume less, and tolerate ambiguity. El Sistema in Venezuela, the Estonian Singing Revolution, the Pontanima interfaith choir in war-torn Sarajevo—these were offered not as feel-good examples but as evidence: the arts are transformative infrastructure, not a cultural luxury.

And yet the sector consistently struggles to make this case to those who hold economic and political power. Healthcare, mental health, poverty reduction are understood as essential services. The arts are still treated, in many quarters, as discretionary spending. Closing that gap—with aligned voice, shared evidence, and the courage to stop accepting the convenient falsehood that the public already knows—was named as one of the sector's most urgent tasks.

> *"In such ugly times, the only true protest is beauty."*

Philanthropy is a relationship, not a transaction

The Shaw Festival's decade-long transformation—from 15% philanthropic revenue to 40%—was anchored not in a new fundraising strategy but in a philosophical reframe: arts as a basic human need, and philanthropy as evidence that the relationship-building and shared values work has been done well. When organizations invest in deep relational engagement rather than transactional fundraising, the returns are not just financial. They are measured in audience loyalty, staff retention, community belonging, and the quality of artistic risk an organization can afford to take.

The Shaw Festival's Associate Artistic Director offered one of the most resonant insights of the convening. Every character, she said, distilled to their essence, comes on stage looking for love—looking for their people, their community, their tribe. When a moment of transformation happens in a theatre—when the room shifts and something is electrified—the audience member's artist self is activated. That point of contact is the beginning of a philanthropic relationship. The community-building work of an arts organization is not separate from its development work. It is its development work.

> *"What if fundraising wasn't about money? What if philanthropy was the evidence that we had done the relationship-building and the exchange of shared values well?"*

What philanthropists actually want

A panel of four philanthropists offered one of the convening's most candid sessions—funders speaking in their own voice about what draws them to arts giving, what they wish organizations understood, and what they want more of. The frame that opened the session resonated throughout: the arts may be the only sector where the donor is also the beneficiary. They come to the theatre. They sit in the concert hall. They are changed by the work. Most organizations haven't yet fully claimed that invitation.

What the panellists wanted was consistent: purpose over project, partnership over transaction, the good and the bad and the ugly rather than just the highlight reel. Accountability is mutual. Their time horizon is generational. Several spoke about the personal transformation behind their giving—childhood encounters with art that opened a picture of what the world could be. One was moved to tears when they learned a family member had decided to put the family name on a major arts centre. The goal is not the name on the wall, another said. It is the invitation it extends to others.

> *"The issue is not money. It has to be joint purpose. We want to get involved where we can be a catalyst to change."*

Who gives, who doesn't, and why it matters

98% of Canada's population growth now comes from international migration. In 2024 alone, more than 3,200 millionaires moved to Canada. The largest spikes are in the cities where Canada's major arts institutions are located. This is not a future demographic shift—it is a present reality. And yet the sector's approach to philanthropy largely reflects the legacy structures of a different Canada, built around the same inherited relationships and the same assumptions about how giving is practised and why.

Research shared with the group surfaced direct insights from affluent newcomers approached by Canadian charitable organizations. Some experienced DEI initiatives as othering rather than welcoming. Others felt that organizations were trying to teach them how to give rather than learning how they already give—experienced as patronising. Others asked the hardest question: will their gift actually change something, or will it serve as window dressing? Every culture in the world has a culture of giving. The task is not to instruct newcomers in Canadian philanthropic traditions. It is to genuinely open to other traditions of generosity—which are often older, more relational, and more communal than the formal structures Canada has built.

A session on reciprocal allyship and Indigenous ways of knowing reframed how the sector thinks about Indigenous partnership. The issue in Canada, the presenter argued, is not 'whiteness' but 'rightness'—the assumption that one set of ways of knowing, being, and doing is the correct framework. Her counsel: start by understanding what happened on the land you are building on. And never ask one Indigenous person to be the sole voice for an entire community.

> *"In their story is your gift. The power of listening is what allows us to connect the dots and find where they feel they could belong in this story."*

What we put on our stages matters

An evening provocation on Canadian creation and cultural sovereignty traced a lineage from the Massey Report of 1951 to the present. Seventy-five years after the creation of the Canada Council, the central question was sharp: Are we still answering the call? Many of Canada's major producing theatres generate significant earned revenue through large-scale American commercial productions—while public funding underwrites those same works. The usual justification—box office success with familiar titles creates the margin for riskier Canadian work—is real. But the question that followed was equally real: is the deal being honoured? If royalty flows to Canadian creators are not tracked, if the ratio of Canadian to imported content is not reported, if the promise is never audited, then the justification becomes a convenient falsehood.

Blyth Festival—a small rural theatre that more than doubled its audiences over a decade by producing stories from and about its immediate community—was offered as a model. When audiences see themselves on stage, they come back. And they bring their friends. Philanthropists, it was noted, are in a position to ask organizations to account for how much of their royalty spending flows to Canadian creators. Not as a purity test—but as a legitimate accountability question.

> *"Are we world curious, or merely Broadway and West End curious?"*

What the case studies revealed about sustainability

Three case studies — the Confederation Centre of the Arts, the Shaw Festival, and Werklund Centre — anchored the convening, chosen not because they were triumphant but because they were honest. Taken together they illuminated a structural problem that the whole sector shares: arts institutions built in the 1970s and 1980s were capitalised for construction but not for sustainability. Forty years later, a generation of organisations faces aging physical assets, legacy naming agreements that are expiring or unfunded, and operating models designed for a different cost structure.

The Werklund Centre case brought one of the convening's most thought-provoking questions. The $75 million Werklund naming gift — the largest known philanthropic investment in the Canadian performing arts — was structured as a funded perpetuity: a restricted endowment generates sufficient interest income to automatically renew naming rights every 25 years, ensuring future leadership inherits a revenue-generating agreement rather than a stranded obligation. This sparked genuine debate. Is funded perpetuity responsible stewardship — or does it constrain future leadership by permanently removing a high-value naming asset from the market? The room did not resolve the tension, but it framed it precisely: the question is not whether to honour transformational gifts, but how to do so in a way that doesn't inadvertently burden the very institution a donor wishes to strengthen.

Across all three cases, endowment emerged as a structural priority — not as a rainy day fund, but as the foundation of operating resilience. And a striking insight from the Shaw Festival: of 50 new

legacy commitments made in two years, nearly all came from donors who had been giving for a decade or more at relatively modest levels. Endowment growth is fundamentally a relationship challenge, not a major gifts challenge.

Governance is long-horizon stewardship

The governance panel surfaced hard-won wisdom on what boards do well and where they consistently fail. The clearest formulation: boards measure their impact in years, not moments. Their job is to lay the groundwork for the next generation of leadership, not to manage the next production. The digital environment has added a new layer of complexity—the conflation of social media, social justice pressure, and AI means that a donor can be researched, and a reputational crisis launched within seconds. Organizations need pre-established gift ethics processes, not crisis reactions. And the sector's smaller organizations—which lack crisis communications capacity—need collective support.

Equity, anti-Blackness, and Truth and Reconciliation were named as governance responsibilities, not programme add-ons. Questions were raised about how boards navigate these obligations—named as governance challenges the sector has not yet fully confronted. One panellist proposed deliberately recruiting people to the board who will function as its conscience on these questions: people willing to put their hand up in the middle of a financially-focused meeting and ask—what about diversity? What about reconciliation?

> *"It is not a matter of if, but when. The question is whether you've built the processes to respond—and whether your board and team are prepared to stand behind them."*

The responsibility no one has yet claimed

The final morning turned toward action. Participants were asked: Is there responsibility in this room that no one has yet claimed? Across multiple table conversations, a consistent observation emerged: the arts philanthropy ecosystem in Canada has no one looking after it as a whole. Canada is, by some international accounts, a global leader in culture-based economic development. This standing is largely unknown, even among arts sector leaders. The sector has not built the narrative infrastructure to claim this position—or to make the systemic case for arts as infrastructure, rather than individual organizations making individual asks.

The question left with the room: how do we hold on to what happened here? Things move at the speed of trust. The convening itself was evidence of what becomes possible when senior leaders from across the sector can speak candidly, without attribution, in a space designed for honest reflection rather than performance. Several participants named it as unlike any forum they had been part of—not because the problems were new, but because the quality of conversation was different.

PHRASES FROM THE ROOM

"In their story is your gift." — On listening as the foundation of philanthropy

"Shh—and listen more deeply." — A participant's closing commitment

"The arts may be the only sector where the donor is also the beneficiary." — On the unique opportunity of arts philanthropy

"It has to be joint purpose. We want to be a catalyst to change." — On what transformational donors are actually looking for

"Are we world curious, or merely Broadway and West End curious?" — On Canadian creation and cultural sovereignty

"Impact is measured in years, not moments." — On what governance actually requires

"The problem is not whiteness, it's rightness." — On power and Indigenous ways of knowing

"If not us, then who?" — The convening's closing challenge

WHAT WE'RE CARRYING FORWARD

Commitments made in the closing session

- Shift from investing in individual organizations to investing in the ecosystem
- Shh—listen more deeply
- Deepen the culture of philanthropy in my organization, rooted in reciprocity and mutuality
- Double down on being better friends to people and organizations
- Make philanthropy and fundraising a team sport
- Learn more about the culture of philanthropy in the countries our newest community members come from
- Address what happened on the land where our office is located before us
- Recognize that access to philanthropic knowledge isn't equal—and step into a role making it more accessible
- Open conversations to partner with funders to increase our fundraising capacity nationally
- Increase the Canada Council's engagement and collaboration with the philanthropic sector

The Philanthropy and the Arts Convening was a valuable a space where senior leaders from across Canada's arts and philanthropic ecosystem spoke honestly about what they are actually grappling with—and left with something more than a summary. The tensions named here are not resolved. They are not supposed to be. But they are now shared—and shared differently than they were before this gathering.

We look forward to continuing the conversation with all of you—and to building on what this room started.

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