



Arts & Culture as a Driver in Downtown Seattle's Revitalization

Introduction

This paper focuses on the need to bolster downtown Seattle’s arts and cultural sector to ensure it remains one of the premier arts hubs in the United States, helping further revitalize Seattle’s urban core. This paper:

1. Summarizes the key input and recommendations brought forward through a recent collaborative process led by the Downtown Seattle Association (DSA) and informed by a cross-section of leaders from the local arts sector;
2. Examines the substantial contributions of the sector to economic growth, cultural enrichment and urban revitalization;
3. Aims to fortify arts recovery through strategic initiatives, investment and advocacy.

Advancing these efforts is essential to ensuring a thriving and inclusive downtown arts and culture scene and aligning with Mayor Bruce Harrell’s Downtown Activation Plan (which emphasizes the pivotal role of the arts sector in downtown’s resurgence).

The State of the Sector

Downtown Seattle was the first urban center in the U.S. to experience the impacts of COVID-19, resulting in a sudden and dramatic economic downturn. As the hub of cultural, economic and social activity in the heart of the Pacific Northwest, downtown was hit particularly hard as social activities were restricted.

While federal pandemic relief initially helped, arts organizations, regardless of size or tax status, are still adapting to significant changes in their customer base, managing increased operating costs, and struggling to find new, sustainable funding approaches. Well-established institutions are facing immediate and immense financial challenges; midsize venues dependent on beverage sales are adjusting to shifting consumer demands; and newer entities are encountering difficulties securing long-term space and funding beyond initial investments.¹

The arts sector plays a pivotal role in shaping the city’s identity, fostering a sense of community and strengthening the economy. Downtown is home to



Diana Huey from Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* at The 5th Avenue Theatre / Photo credit: Tracey Martin

more than one-third of the cultural spaces in Seattle, including major art institutions, music venues, theaters and art galleries, making a thriving arts sector a key component to downtown revitalization.² The arts sector comprises 10.3% of Washington state’s GDP, representing more than \$72 billion in value.^{3,4} It is also a key economic driver, generating employment for restaurants and hotels.

Downtown is home to two-thirds of Seattle’s art sector jobs (66%) and 20% of the region’s overall arts employment base.⁵ Due to the pandemic, this sector experienced a significant drop in employment in 2021, declining nearly 45%. However, the sector is slowly recovering. In 2022, arts employment downtown increased by 48% compared to 2021, but remains at only around 83% of 2020’s level. Additionally, beyond economic figures, the sector fosters creativity, community cohesion and a sense of place, enhancing the quality of life for residents, drawing tourists and bolstering Seattle’s reputation as a cultural destination.



"Middle Fork," 2014–2017, John Grade, American, B. 1970, cedar, 105 ft. long x 30 ft. diameter, Seattle Art Museum commission / Photo credit: Ben Benschneider

DSA's Arts Sector Engagement Process

DSA has taken a proactive role to explore and help address the challenges and opportunities facing the arts sector as part of downtown Seattle's recovery. In August 2023, DSA formed a dedicated work group of leaders within the arts community tasked with seeding this engagement effort. Between August and December, members of this work group (listed below) convened three times to provide their expertise and input on a variety of issues affecting the sector. They also suggested others in their networks that should be consulted as this process moves forward.

Drawing on these recommendations and pre-existing DSA connections, DSA staff conducted additional interviews with leaders from large arts institutions and organizations, gallery/performance spaces and government partners. These conversations and roundtable work group meetings centered on participants' reactions to three main prompts:

- What are the current challenges and opportunities facing the sector?
- How can DSA help advance or catalyze ongoing sectoral recovery efforts?
- What support is needed from the city or others?

Downtown Arts & Cultural Organizations At-a-Glance

Data are aggregated from the most recent fiscal year available

\$333,576,753

Annual Budget

Total operating budgets for downtown arts organizations

4,196,993

Onsite Attendance

Total attendees paying admission to arts and cultural programs and events

5,126

Number of Employees

Total number of full-time, part-time and contract workers employed

438,088

Students Served

Total number of Seattle-area students served

490,736

Free Access

Total number of people enjoying free experiences

Source: Data from the most recent fiscal year of 19 downtown organizations in the Seattle Cultural Roundtable; National Assembly of State Arts Agencies; Arts Action Fund

While efforts were made to connect with a diverse group of leaders within the Seattle arts community, it would be inaccurate to say this paper is entirely encompassing of every voice. With great credit to candid input from the work group, we developed this document with a focus on progress over perfection. As we continue to build out the coalition and take action, we will continually seek input and support from interested stakeholders.

This body of work was informed by a dedicated work group that included:

Brian Carter

Executive Director
4Culture

Jonathan Cunningham

Deputy Director
4Culture

Bernie Griffin

Managing Director Emeritus
& Senior Advisor
The 5th Avenue Theatre

Calandra Childers

VP of Strategic Initiatives
& Communications
ArtsFund

Michael Greer

President & CEO
ArtsFund

Nick Ferderer

Founder / Creative Director
Base Camp Studios

Chris Pink

Artistic Director, Producer,
Owner
Can Can

**Dr. Raymond
Tymas-Jones**

President
Cornish College of the Arts

Andy Fife

Owner & Principal Consultant
Fife Consulting

Matt Midgley

Artist and Curator
Gallery Ergo

Laurie Kerney

Founder and Curator
Ghost Gallery

Manny Cawaling

Executive Director
Inspire Washington

Kate Becker

Creative Economy Director
King County

Steven Severin

Co-Owner
Neumos

Rachael Comer

Co-Owner & Resident Artist
Nii Modo

Jeff Draeger

COO
Seattle Art Museum

Sarah Michael

Director of Institutional Giving
Seattle Art Museum

Jeffrey Herrmann

Managing Director
Seattle Rep

Gabriel-Bello

Lawrence-Diaz
Program Director
Shunpike

Line Sandmark

Executive Director
Shunpike

Avery Barnes

Founder & CEO
TASWIRA

Hunter Motto

Talent Buyer
The Crocodile

Randy Engstrom

Co-Founder / Principal
Third Way Creative

Joël Barraquiel Tan

Executive Director
Wing Luke Museum



Photo credit: Otto Greule

Shared Challenges and Opportunities

Throughout the engagement process, five primary challenges facing the downtown arts and culture sector emerged:

1. **Public Safety:** Perceptions and experiences of public safety and disorder downtown are negatively impacting both workers and patrons of the arts, particularly in the evenings. Local visitor foot traffic to the downtown core has not returned to pre-pandemic levels and remains around 50% of the level seen in 2019.
2. **Accessibility:** Financial barriers, most pronounced in the lack of affordable housing options within the city, exist for downtown’s workforce, including artists. Additionally, challenges persist related to acquiring and retaining affordable commercial space for studios, galleries and performance venues. Access to safe, reliable transportation options into and through downtown also exist for patrons and artists.
3. **Cross-Sector Collaboration:** There is an opportunity for innovative partnerships between the arts and other industries.
4. **Positive Messaging:** Opportunities exist to amplify positive narratives about arts and culture recovery.
5. **Funding:** There is a need to deal with complex resource allocation issues within the arts sector.

Recommended Areas of Impact

To achieve DSA’s efforts to boost arts recovery and ensure strong support for the sector as a force in revitalizing downtown Seattle, the work group’s recommendations focus on the following areas of impact.

City-Led Initiatives

Create a Focused Arts Plan for Downtown Seattle: Develop a dedicated downtown arts plan that prioritizes specific areas within the center city for cultural development, paving the way for dedicated resources for infrastructure improvements, artistic installations and cultural preservation tactics. This comprehensive plan must guide the growth and development of the arts and culture sector and serve as a roadmap, bringing together the collective interests of downtown arts organizations into a common vision.

Align Permitting and Code Processes to Enable the Creative Economy to Thrive: Artists and organizations looking to establish their work and remain in downtown long-term frequently run into impenetrable administrative and regulatory barriers. Permitting and code processes, including land use, occupancy and public space activation, should be examined and modified where possible.

Recommended Areas of Impact con't

Public-Private Partnerships

Improve Public Safety: Central to the underlying goals of this project is addressing public safety. For the arts sector to thrive it is critical to reassure the arts community and visitors that downtown is safe and welcoming. DSA will continue to actively engage with government agencies and lawmakers to ensure progress is being made on issues affecting the safety of our urban environment and that the unique perspectives of arts organizations and patrons are represented.

Increase Public Realm

Visibility: Undertake a public space branding effort to build awareness of and highlight the significance of the arts downtown (e.g., banners, art installations, public signage and wayfinding kiosks).

Support Efforts to Diversify

Funding Sources: Work toward diversifying funding sources for the arts sector, including seeking support from private donors, philanthropy and corporate sponsorships to reduce reliance on public funding.

Promote the Sale of Local Art

Downtown: Seek creative ways to incentivize public-private partnerships to display and promote the sale of local art in high-foot-traffic businesses and retail establishments.

Increase Accessibility to the

Arts: Collaborate with downtown businesses and parking operators to reduce barriers to accessing downtown's art organizations and

performance venues (e.g., partner to provide free or reduced-cost car and bike parking programs during peak performance hours). Increase awareness of opportunities for residents and visitors to engage with the arts (e.g., develop and promote a comprehensive event calendar, provide marketing support and amplification, particularly for smaller organizations or solo artists). Explore innovative sponsorships or partnerships with the private sector to enable free or reduced-cost admission or transportation for patrons with barriers.

Continue to Collect and Share

Data: Use data to track the state of the arts sector and measure its impact on the local economy. Ensure data collection efforts are transparent, coordinated and widely cited – ideally through a central repository. (e.g.,

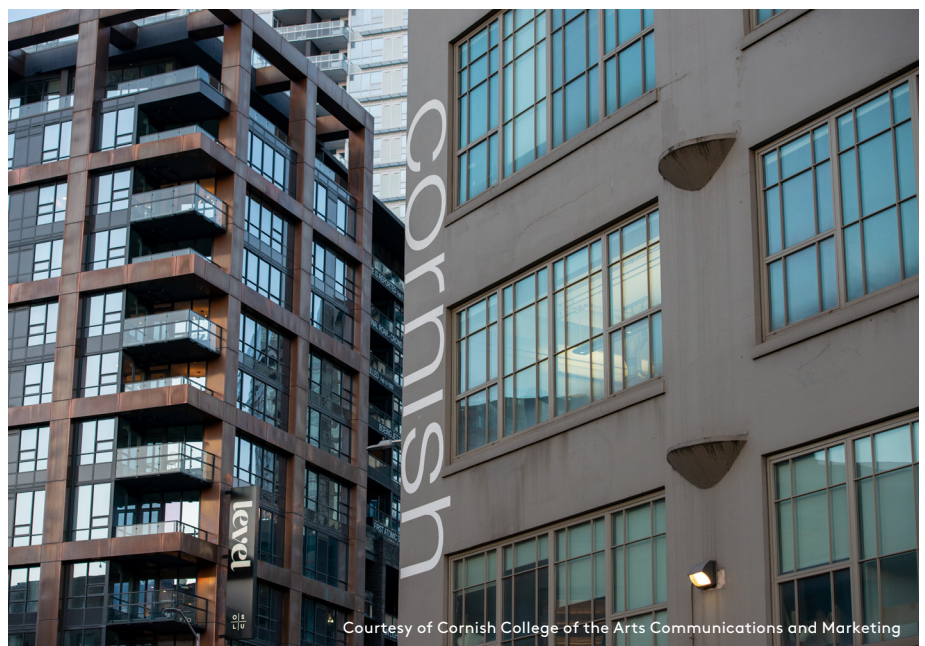
partner with higher education institutions or other nonprofits to explore additional intersection points between the arts and other issues such as mental health, community safety, social connectedness, etc.).

Improve Access to Resources

for Artists: Document existing efforts to connect artists to resources, identify any efficacy or utilization barriers and scale best practices (e.g., support the creation of a digital matchmaking platform that pairs artists with potential sponsors, patrons and collaborative partners).

Coordinate Messaging:

Deploy a coordinated messaging strategy across public, private and government agencies that highlights positive stories that reinforce downtown as a safe, welcoming, fun and inclusive space.



Courtesy of Cornish College of the Arts Communications and Marketing



DSA's Commitment

To ensure the advancement of the priorities identified above, the DSA Advocacy Team will continue to convene and grow this aforementioned coalition, facilitate new relationships between sectors, expand on best practices and advocate for policy-level changes. The organization will also remain flexible and adjust to new or emergent ideas as warranted.

DSA will continue to market downtown and all it has to offer, including robust arts, culture and entertainment offerings.

Presentation and Work Ahead

DSA will jointly present this initiative in collaboration with the city's Office of Economic Development and the Office of Arts and Culture in January 2024. Our audience will include leaders from various sectors, such as downtown developers, property owners, businesses, funders and policymakers, ensuring a comprehensive representation of stakeholders.

To refine and implement these recommendations and gather further input, DSA will establish a standing coalition made up of the diverse stakeholders described above who will organize quarterly discussions serving three core functions:

1. **Fostering Collaborations:** Encouraging partnerships across diverse sectors to establish an integrated cultural ecosystem.
2. **Implementing Recommendations:** Fine-tuning and putting into action the suggestions outlined in this paper.
3. **Maintaining Agility:** Remaining organized, adaptable and prepared to seize emerging opportunities.

By championing these recommendations and committing to ongoing engagement, we can realize our shared vision of a thriving arts sector that strengthens our cultural identity, thereby supporting a vibrant urban center.



Measures of Success

Measuring the success of downtown Seattle’s art sector will require a multifaceted approach and will need to consider a diverse range of indicators measuring cultural vibrancy, economic impact and community engagement. Some of the key quantitative metrics to track will be employment data, ticket sales and attendance figures, sector funding levels and visitor foot traffic. Additionally, qualitative data will also be key to measuring success, which could take the form of periodic surveys tracking perceptions of safety.

Notes and Sources

1. Seattle’s arts scene: Why fall 2023 starts a season that will be crucial | The Seattle Times
2. Seattle Cultural Space Inventory dataset. City of Seattle Office of Arts & Culture, <https://data.seattle.gov/Community/Seattle-Cultural-Space-Inventory/vsxr-aydq/data>.
3. U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis & National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, 2022. https://nasaa-arts.org/nasaa_research/creative-economy-state-profiles/
4. In terms of total arts sector value, Washington’s \$72 billion only trailed California (\$261 billion) and New York (\$143 billion), the first- and fourth-most populous states in the U.S.
5. Arts sector employment is defined as jobs under NAICS code 71. Note: Data were suppressed for NAICS 71 for the City of Seattle in 2022.

