

Creative City Summit October 2012 Arts Habitat Edmonton

My name is Linda Huffman and I am currently the Executive Director of Arts Habitat Edmonton. How did that happen? I started out as an actress, living the nomadic life working at theatres across this great country of ours. Eventually I combined my acting career with theatre administration: I was an Associate Artistic Director at the Globe Theatre in Regina and General Manager of the Shakespeare Festival in Edmonton. Then I moved into arts administration as a Grants Officer for the Manitoba Arts Council and Executive Producer of Edmonton's Cultural Capital Program. And now I'm a property developer - how did that happen?

As an artist I have always been keenly aware of the needs of arts organizations and individual artists to have affordable, appropriate and sustainable space in which to create. I have personally lived the life of a freelance artist and know that making a living in any arts profession is a challenge. So I can get pretty passionate about the need for affordable housing for artists and the importance of ensuring our artists and arts organizations have affordable and appropriate spaces in which to create and present their work.

Arts Habitat is a not-for-profit company in Edmonton mandated to find, manage and develop space for the arts. I'm going to tell you a story this morning-the story of our past three years. And while Arts Habitat could be considered the lead role, any good actor will tell you that the supporting cast are the ones who really carry the story.

Three years ago Arts Habitat began to receive operating funds from the City of Edmonton and advertised for an Executive Director, I applied and now I find myself:

- Managing two facilities as artist residences
- Planning a community arts centre renovation
- Completing a Feasibility Study for a \$30M mixed-use facility that will house 10 arts organizations and 64 artist live/work units
- Managing an historic house that we're turning into an arts and ideas centre
- And we just completed a three-year review of all City Bylaws that impact the arts, which has resulted in major revisions to bylaws and zoning.

In all of this I am grateful to be joined by my colleague Katherine Kerr, our Project Coordinator. Katherine has a background in architecture, arts administration and public art.

Obviously we are not experts in the field of property development. But we are trying our very best to respond to the needs of the arts community and to rise to the challenges presented by the opportunities that have come our way. So, the last three years have been pretty exciting for us at Arts Habitat. But as I said, all of these projects didn't just start three years ago. Prior to our involvement there were numerous organizations and individuals including, most importantly, city administrators from many different

departments, who were laying the groundwork. I intend to highlight and give credit to them as well.

Arts Habitat was founded in 1996 as a not-for-profit company with the mandate to work with the arts community on space issues. In 1999 a property owner who had an empty 3rd. floor of a downtown commercial building thought the idea of renovating the space into live/work units for artists was a tremendous idea. With the help of a grant from the city for renovations, because the city at that time was looking to increase the downtown population, this space was turned into ArtsHab 1 and an artistic community was born.

The 3rd floor contains 10 live/work open concept studios and 3 work only studios ranging in size from 500 to 1,500 square feet, with high ceilings, great natural light and basic finishings and appliances. For 13 years it has been home to a community of artists from all disciplines. The hallways are used as a gallery space and throughout the year they open their doors to the public with events and exhibitions.

For the next ten years Arts Habitat was in what I call a “Quiet phase”. Five members of the original board kept the organization together with the belief that at some point in the future Arts Habitat would be able to fulfill its mission and respond to the obviously still growing need for space in the arts community. The Board of Arts Habitat is fortunate to have members who bring expertise in many key areas of our work, including an architect, lawyer and communications specialist along with artists and representatives of arts organizations

In 2008 two key events happened. The first was that Edmonton was named one of the Cultural Capitals of Canada. This designation was given in part to acknowledge the City’s already demonstrated commitment to the arts. Our Cultural Capital Year was a way of galvanizing that support. The Cultural Capital program had many amazing projects that took place over the year, including several granting programs for individual artists and community groups, the Poetry Festival began, we held a series of symposia, a speaker series and created a cultural inventory.

The City of Edmonton conducts a survey annually to measure citizen satisfaction with city services. The survey that was circulated near the end of our Cultural Capital program for the first time ranked “arts and culture” among the top three reasons for rating Edmonton as having a positive quality of life. Obviously the citizens had taken note and so did City Council!

The other key event was the Edmonton Arts Council completing work on a ten-year cultural plan for the City.

(I cannot stress how important the Edmonton Arts Council is to us and to the Edmonton arts community. They are our main point of contact with city administration. They guide us and support us. The Edmonton Arts Council has worked to build trust and respect for the arts community. Without them we would simply not be here and the arts in Edmonton would not be enjoying such strong support from the City.)

The cultural plan was called “The Art of Living”. This is a beautiful document. It’s filled with thoughtful and inspiring essays on the arts from Edmonton artists and thinkers along with its twelve recommendations, the first of which was to “reinvigorate” Arts Habitat, providing it with funding to allow it to strengthen its mandate and hire staff

Which brings me to the spring of 2009 and my hiring as Executive Director of Arts Habitat. As I said, I’m not an expert, so one of the very first things I did was contact Artscape Toronto. I’m sure most of you are familiar with Artscape but if not Artscape has for more than 20 years been developing a portfolio of unique facilities that deliver sustainable and affordable production, rehearsal, exhibition, and living space for creative practitioners, entrepreneurs, and organizations. They also have a reputation for sharing their knowledge through conferences and workshops. So I gave them a call to see if there was some way that I could tap into their knowledge and experience. As luck would have it they were reassessing their “Knowledge Exchange” program with the thought of finding a way to more directly share their knowledge with practitioners. My timing couldn’t have been better. We became one of the first pilot projects for their one-year mentorship program!

Through this program we worked closely with Artscape’s senior specialist staff led by Tim Jones, Artscape’s President and CEO, across a range of areas including:

- Organizational development and project planning
- Strategic planning
- Community engagement and project governance
- Operational development and management
- Capital project management
- Fundraising
- Business planning
- Property Management
- Leasing

The year included three visits to Edmonton by Tim Jones. On each of these visits Tim would spend three power packed days with us primarily focusing on our Cycle Building Project. (Which you’ll hear more about later) He helped us prepare our Business Plan, met with stakeholders, the Mayor and City Councillors. He worked with the Board of Directors on strategic planning and board development. And he ran working sessions with us and our partners, reviewing all aspects of our various projects.

My colleague Katherine Kerr and I spent a five-day residency in the Artscape Toronto offices meeting with all their senior staff. These people were so generous with their time and their knowledge. We had meetings with their Tenant Manager, their Fundraising Team, Communications Director, Property Manager, Project Manager, as well as their Special Events coordinator. Artscape also provided samples and templates of numerous documents, making our job so much easier! Through out the year we had direct email and phone access. Any question or problem we were experiencing we could turn to our Mentors for help. And we did, and they did.

Our year of mentorship with Artscape Toronto was without question a key component to our early success.

In the summer of 2009 we partnered with the City of Edmonton's Avenue Initiative and an organization called Arts on the Ave, to begin work on the renovation of what's known as The Old Alberta Cycle Building. This is a 16,000 sq. ft. storefront building that had been empty for many years and had been identified by the community as a perfect site for an arts centre - a place for the community to meet and create.

The Avenue Initiative is the City of Edmonton's pioneer neighbourhood revitalization project. It began in 2005 with a request for additional pedestrian lighting along a few blocks of 118th Avenue in Edmonton, a street notorious for the crime and prostitution that had invaded the neighbourhood. The two city councillors for this ward were inspired at the time with the belief that while lighting would indeed address some of the communities concerns, it was going to take a lot more than that to actually turn this neighbourhood around. With a then unprecedented injection of \$100,000 from City Council, the City staff convened a series of consultation meetings, workshops and walking tours of the neighbourhood to identify the assets and the challenges and to figure out what changes were needed.

Around this same time artists started to literally flock to this neighbourhood. During Alberta's boom years when house prices skyrocketed, there remained this neighbourhood called Alberta Avenue where it was still possible to find a house at an affordable price. The neighbourhood had once been a thriving community with a main street that included shops, a cinema, even a celebrated hotel which in its day hosted jazz greats. However, in the 1980's it started to decline as people moved to the suburbs and Alberta Avenue became notorious for its problems with drugs and prostitution. But off the main street there were still these quiet tree-lined streets with beautiful character homes that despite the boom were still "affordable". Artists started to move into the neighbourhood in noticeable numbers.

In 2005 a group of these artists gathered together to form Arts on the Ave, a grassroots organization whose goal is to cultivate artistic fellowship through arts celebrations, signature art festivals and the creation of community traditions.

French artist Paul Cézanne once wrote, "The day is coming when a single carrot, freshly observed, will set off a revolution." Arts on the Ave opened a community coffee house that they named The Carrot with this phrase on their wall as inspiration.

Since 2005 the Avenue Initiative and Arts on the Ave have worked with the community to revitalize and transform this historic area. The City of Edmonton has invested \$23.7 million in infrastructure streetscape improvements. This has led to the creation of an attractive, safe and walkable avenue, providing a solid foundation for vibrant commercial development. There has been a 23% reduction in crime, 26 businesses have enhanced their exterior appearance with funds from the City's Façade Improvement program, and 19 new businesses have located in the area since 2005. Arts on the Ave hosts two major

arts festivals. In the fall the Kaleido Family Arts Festival, which is multidisciplinary and free, takes over the avenue. It is devoted to experimentation; you'll see performances on rooftops and exhibitions in back alleys. Deep Freeze: a Byzantine Winter Festival is held in January. Thousands of people brave the cold to play street hockey, jam-pot curling, stroll through ice sculpture gardens and enjoy outdoor performances.

Numerous community initiatives are continuing to grow, The "We Believe in 118 Avenue" is a campaign, which targets stores that sell knives and drug paraphernalia, and has resulted in all but one store discontinuing the sale of these items. The "Eyes on the Alley" project has taken a notorious problem alley and turned it into a contemporary example of art providing both beauty and social comment.

So you see, prior to our involvement The Avenue Initiative and Arts on the Ave had been making the case for the City to focus the revitalization of Alberta Avenue on the arts. As part of that they wanted to acquire and renovate the Cycle Building. When we came on board the stage was set. Very quickly it started to come together. The City purchased the Cycle Building with the understanding that together we would transform this old, neglected building into a vibrant and sustainable centre where arts and the community would meet to create and breath new life into the neighbourhood. The revitalization of this urban landmark would contribute substantially to the revitalization of Alberta Avenue, and provide much needed space for the arts in Edmonton. The arts centre would include: a black-box theatre with seating for 100, plus office space for non-profit organizations and studio workspace for visual & craft artists.

In the summer of 2009 we started work on the Cycle Building. Tim Jones says, "A successful cultural building project has to come from an idea rooted in the community".

We hoped to follow those words of advice.

We assembled a community advisory committee.

We created a steering committee.

A Working Agreement between Arts Habitat and Arts on the Ave was crafted.

A Business Plan was developed.

We conducted a Request for Proposals for architectural services and contracted our consultant team.

We held a community charrette to confirm the vision for the building still met the original vision that had originally been expressed in 2007. The charrette was a gathering of over 60 members of community held in the empty space of the cycle building. We spent a Saturday afternoon imagining what the Cycle Building would look like, feel like....

We held community consultations as we worked with the architect. More gatherings on Saturday afternoons...

We went through a process of community consultation relating to the variances that were required for our Development Permit. Specifically there was a parking issue (everything always comes back to parking!) According to our planned uses we need to provide parking stalls and that wasn't going to be possible given the building footprint which took up the entire site. It took many months to put together our case but in the end we were granted all needed variances including parking!

We then waited for the city to complete their upgrades for fire and safety code.

We're now in Dec 2010 (basically a year has passed) and progress has slowed, perhaps even stalled. We met with representatives from the Community Services Department that December to try and figure out what to do to get it moving again. We proposed that the City appoint a project manager to oversee their work on bringing the building up to fire and safety code, which they did. Suddenly the momentum changed. The project manager was terrific. He bought into the vision wholeheartedly and was able to convince the city that as this would remain a city building, and we were going to be leasing it on a long-term non-profit lease, the city should actually address all the needed upgrades for the building surpassing the basic deficiencies, now including a new HVAC system, repairs to the roof, increased insulation, an accessible entrance, and more.

Things were starting to cook!

We were hard at work on the Cycle Building when in November 2009 another amazing opportunity presented itself to us on Alberta Avenue.

We received a proposal from Edmonton Inner City Housing Society regarding a sixteen-unit condominium project they had built in partnership with the Nina Haggerty Centre for the Arts. Edmonton Inner City Housing provides affordable housing to individuals and families in Edmonton's central communities who cannot afford market housing and The Nina Haggerty Centre for the Arts provides a supportive place where people with developmental disabilities can become practicing artists.

The building houses the Nina Haggerty on the main floor and the 2nd and 3rd floors hold 16 one bedroom + den apartments. The condominiums had originally been built with the vision of selling them as low-cost affordable housing to first-time homeowners. Unfortunately when they went on the market the economy and Alberta's boom had burst and not a single unit sold. However, if ArtsHabitat were to purchase them and turn it into an affordable housing cooperative for artists EICH felt that their mandate would be met. We hired the Communitas Group as consultants for the project. The Communitas Group has over 35 years experience in the development of housing projects with a focus on cooperatives.

We also joined forces with an organization called Artists Urban Village, which is a chapter of PAL Canada, a national organization devoted to affordable housing and continuing artistic opportunities for Canada's senior artists. There are PAL chapters forming across the country, maybe some of you have met them in your cities.

Through research from Hill Strategies we know that artists in Alberta earn, on average, 52% less than the average earnings of the overall provincial labour force - \$20,000 as compared to \$42,400. With these statistics able to demonstrate need, we secured \$2M in funding from the Cornerstones Program for Affordable Housing-a program supported by the City of Edmonton and the Government of Alberta. We secured mortgage financing for \$1.1 M.

We chose the co-op model for this project because it was clear from neighbourhood consultation and the arts community that what people wanted to see along with the provision of affordable housing was a focus on creating community. It has been demonstrated that the co-op model excels at creating community. I have to confess that the meetings I attend for this co-op are my favorite meetings. The twenty artists who make up the co-op have worked for many, many hours creating bylaws and governance documents, forming committees and setting up the co-op. All of this time and effort is given freely because they recognize that the co-op is more than an apartment, it's their community and they have a personal stake in its success.

The co-op had its official opening on June 30, 2011. It was a warm summer morning on the rooftop deck overlooking the neighbourhood as a burst of taiko drumming announced our arrival. All sixteen units were full when we opened and we continue to have a waiting list of artists anxious to join this vibrant community in what is becoming a new arts hub in Edmonton.

Coming back to the Cycle Building. We're now at the fall of 2011. It's been two years since we started.

We've done a call for tenancy and have more than enough artists eager to move in to the studios. Performing arts groups are lining up to schedule events in the theatre. A contractor is hired! The interior demolition begins for hazardous waste abatement. They tear down walls and rip up floors. The building turns into one big open space and it's beautiful! We hire a theatre consultant to prep for the rental of the performance/event space. We hire another consultant to help with the creation of leases for the studios and offices. We meet one on one with everyone who has expressed interest in the studios.

We've been told that it will be ready for occupancy in July of 2012, but as we meet with artists we are very careful to not give a time yet. We are being pragmatic; we will need several months after we take possession to complete interior partitions etc. Let's keep it open until we see how it goes.

All through this period we are also working on what we call the Bylaws and Zoning initiative. Also in the Cultural Plan-The Art of Living was a recommendation to review zoning bylaws to identify issues and find solutions toward a more sympathetic regulatory environment that would stimulate and improve opportunities for a broad range of arts activities and space uses in the City. A tall order, indeed!

In 2009 a working team was assembled with representatives from Planning and Development, Licensing & Permits and Community Services. Over the next three years:

- We launched a survey to the arts community
- We held seven focused conversations with various arts disciplines including individual artists and organizations. These discussions helped us to identify specific bylaw issues and to hear directly from the community what they saw as the problems as well as making suggestions for what they might see as solutions.

- We investigated the current regulations to identify gaps and opportunities
- We researched best practices in other cities

Again, this initiative involved numerous representatives from many different City of Edmonton departments. Without their commitment to see the recommendations from the Art of Living successfully implemented this initiative could not have been accomplished.

One major change that was crucial for our future affordable housing projects was the need to revise the definition of live/work. We organized a meeting with Planning and Development, transportation, licensing, housing and sustainable development along with artists who are currently living in our residences. At this meeting we were able to explain that we want to create residences that respond to the way that artists actually live. Most artists intimately integrate their work in their residential lives. If we are building specifically for artists then we want to clarify the implications of identifying it as live/work.

Some artists like writers, actors and photographers don't need anything different from a regular, conventional residence. But others, such as musicians, visual artists, potters, and dancers require very different accommodation - often referred to as live/work. It needs to include:

- Open spaces
- Advanced Sound proofing
- Increased Ventilation
- In some cases public access for classes, showings etc.

If we are building a purpose built facility for the arts it must fulfill the special needs of the artists who we want to live there.

On September 10 this year the recommendations for bylaw and zoning changes were unanimously passed by City Council.

Specifically we succeeded in modifying use-class definitions to reflect the needs of the arts community. This means that more definitions will actually name the arts and in addition, most uses have been added to multiple zones.

We modified and revised two definitions into:

- A Creation and Production Establishment that unequivocally describes studio space for artistic disciplines across the board.
- A Media Studio that makes room for new modes of digital design and production. Both of these new definitions are now discretionary uses in the coveted industrial zones

The work isn't completed, we have to continue to review permits and licenses and several of the bylaws that we wanted changed, in particular the ones that relate to music venues are still a work in progress. But as I keep reminding myself, this is part of a "10 year" plan and we are only in year 3!

My story continues in 2011. For many years the City has been working on a redevelopment plan for an area east of our downtown called The Quarters. In 2011 we partner again with Artists Urban Village and begin discussions with the City regarding a major new development that could be a pioneer development in the Quarters.

Working with the City's Department of Sustainable Development we are invited to prepare a Feasibility Study for what we now call The Artists Quarters. Once again we contract the services of the Communitas Group to act as Project Manager and hire Kasian Architecture as our lead consultant. The Feasibility Study is financed by the City and Canada Mortgage and Housing.

The project will be a mixed-use facility that will provide home and studio space for multi-generational, mixed-income artists of all disciplines above five floors of space for non-profit arts organizations. These could include a small performance studio, galleries, artist studios and space for production, teaching, and administration. Our goal is for the spaces to be at a level of affordability to allow these non-profit organizations to own their space.

The project will contain 64 live/work residential units that will be modeled on the co-operative structure.

Our Phase I Feasibility Study has just been completed. The study has highlighted the areas that need further development and we are embarking on phase II of the Feasibility to address these. At the same time we will be going back to the arts community to ensure that the project continues to meet their needs.

In January of 2012 yet another opportunity came our way. This beautiful heritage residence that was once the childhood home of Marshall McLuhan, Canada's famous intellectual and thinker, whose most famous quote is "The medium is the message" was about to come onto the market.

The house had gained a bit of profile in the writing and academic community. Over the years the owners had allowed many interested in McLuhan into the house and they had been approached by people who felt that if they ever wanted to sell they should approach the Edmonton Arts Council to see if the City could be encouraged to buy it and turn it into a writers' centre. The owners were now ready to sell. A business plan was developed and the process of negotiations commenced. On June 1, 2012 we were able to purchase the property with the financial support of City Council.

We worked with the Edmonton Arts Council and the City's Heritage Department on this one. Along with the Planning Department to prepare for the application for Heritage Status and a Change of Use. These applications are still in process, and it could take up to a year to complete. In the mean time we felt we couldn't leave the house empty and we couldn't rent it out as offices, we need to ensure good relationships with the

neighbours if we don't want to have our change of use challenged. So, we have temporarily moved our offices into this beautiful gem of a house.

We are working closely with the McLuhan Family and the McLuhan Estate to ensure that we are doing a good job of presenting his legacy. Since this was his family home when he was a child, we are focusing on his personal story. The family have provided us with many pictures from his childhood and we will be displaying them in an area devoted to his history which can also be used as a meeting room or seminar room. The rest of the house will be used for offices and writers' studios.

So, time to come back to the Cycle Building. We are now in April 2012. As I mentioned the contractor is on site. Work is starting to gain momentum. They have begun work in earnest and I'm personally thrilled to hear that one of the first jobs is laying in the drains for what will be our beautiful public washrooms. At the same time they are starting to open up a new area of the facade to install our accessible entrance that requires the removal of one storefront window. Word comes to Katherine who is acting as our Project Manager that something is amiss. Work has been suspended! Uh-oh!

A week goes by- no word, another week- no word. What's happening????? Katherine gets a meeting with the project team. The roof that we knew needed repairs is now going to need to be fully replaced in one area. Problems with the foundations and load bearing walls have been exposed. Where the bathroom drains are to be installed, every shovel in the ground under the floor results in the earth just falling away! The removal of the window in the storefront resulted in the entire brick facade around it crashing to the ground. The whole stability of the facade is questionable. I'm getting a very bad feeling!

Work is temporarily suspended as the engineers start another assessment on the building's foundations and load bearing walls. It is important here to note that over this whole time the City's commitment to this project had continued to grow significantly! In the original assessment of the building's "deficiencies" back in 2007, the estimated cost for addressing these was about \$500,000. By 2009, that had increased to over \$600,000. By 2011 after further study by our architect the cost of bringing it up to code was now over \$1M. Through all these increases the City had found the money to honor their commitment. However, these were major, major structural deficiencies. Word came back there was a dollar figure attached and it was HUGE. A decision had to be made. IF the city could find these dollars was the right decision to proceed? Even after this HUGE amount of money was invested we would still end up with a building that didn't show any of these funds, it would just have a solid foundation and a facade that wasn't going to fall down.

In the end it was the City's very difficult decision to make. On July 16 the city and ArtsHabitat announced to the community that the Cycle Building was going to be demolished! After 31/2 years of community consultation, planning, negotiating and dreaming we're left with nothing but an empty lot and the need to start over.

The impact of this decision is huge for all involved: the Alberta Avenue community, the arts community, the City and Arts Habitat. Now, we are back to the drawing board! Will it be a new building housing what we had originally envisioned, or should we try to expand the vision? Maybe build up to four stories? Include residential?..A new business case is in the works. No doubt it will be complicated and difficult. The community and City Council are anxious for it to work. We'll make it work somehow. The city's project manager said, "In five years we will all look back on this and know that it was right decision". I hope so!

So that brings our story to today. Yes, we have accomplished a fair bit. But, the crisis in space is still there. We know that four of our mid-size theatres could be homeless in three years. A group of twelve artists that have for many years been using space in a downtown office building for studios have just been evicted...

There is much that we need to do. It's a work in progress. We'll keep up the momentum. Stay aware of the needs of our community and continue to provide space for the creation and presentation of art. I feel like we have only just begun.