

Case Study

The Premise

Art practice and patronage in small places or rural communities can have notable impact not only on the artist and the quality of the work, but on the vitality of the community as a whole.

The story of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador and its establishment as a new place with a distinct identity in Canada since 1949 is also the story of the value that art and culture played in defining this sense of place.

One resource that was implemented to help develop this sense of place was the network of provincial Arts and Culture Centres.

Being an artist in a small place – Aiden Flynn

I am from, live, and work in a small place. I've called Newfoundland and Labrador my home for most of my life. Growing up, one of the ways I was constantly reminded that I was from a small place was through cartoon depictions of the globe. You would see them pop up on school posters, text books, and television. And more often than not, the artist who was tasked to draw the globe would get to the North American continent, see a little island portion sticking out the side of Canada, and would decide it just wasn't worth their time and effort to draw it.

When I would leave NL for family travel to larger places, the itinerary was filled with visits to museums, galleries, and historic points of interest, like they are for most families visiting bigger cities. This could have left the impression that important cultural things were only to be found in big places, and you had to leave small places to really appreciate big places.

But there were entities that were in my small place that allowed me to feel connected to the broader world of culture. One of the most important was the Arts and Culture Centre. The Arts and Culture Centres in NL were amazing places. When you crossed the threshold, you felt like you were being transported and being connected to something bigger than your surroundings. When one lives in

a small place, especially if one doesn't feel connected inside their own small corner of the world, these experiences can mean a great deal.

In my position now as director of the Arts and Culture Centres, I have come to appreciate the large role that this institution has played in shaping the distinctive identity of this place, and how identity can be important to small places. It can often be overlooked for its importance.

When I chose to pursue the arts as a career, it was almost a given that I could not make a living in a place the size of NL. If one wanted to make a career in the arts, especially if one wanted to do important and notable work, one would have to go to a place like Toronto. But the value that the residents of NL, and subsequently government entities, placed on arts and culture allowed for individuals like myself to work in the arts. The reward for me was a career that has allowed me to live and raise a family and make an important contribution to my community. The reward for my community is that cultural workers have made (and continue to make and alter) a distinctive place.

Newfoundland and Labrador, a small place

In 1949, the country of Newfoundland, became the province of Newfoundland and Labrador in the country of Canada. The decision to join Canada was fraught with debate, infighting within the citizenry, and political intrigue. In fact, the debate over the merits of the decision is still contended today in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Newfoundland and Labrador was and is a small place. Perhaps not geographically at about 400k sq km, but today's population of roughly 530k would only make it the 10th largest city in the country. The capital city, St John's, has a metro population of about 220k, and the remaining population is scattered along coastlines in small communities, with some larger centres located inland. Fishing used to be the principle economic driver in Newfoundland. Now it's oil and gas.

Newfoundland is an island. Labrador is a remote northern territory. It's a difficult place to live, to visit, and to leave.

Newfoundland as a place has a difficult history. Its Indigenous population, the Beothuk, were eradicated by the arrival of European peoples who had been present on the island for centuries until colonized by the English in the late 16th century. It has been a place that has known poverty by many, but also has been very prosperous for some.

In 1949, through a process of referendum, the country of Newfoundland voted itself out of existence, and became a province of Canada. To oversimplify the reasons why this happened would be to say the decision was made in order to secure the viability of the population and its collection of small towns and outports. Major efforts were made to transform the old country into a new thriving entity as part of Canada. Part of the long-term plan for this new effort at place-making was to introduce new and modern infrastructure to the province. New roads, new utility, and new schools were constructed, and in 1967, the province decided to build an arts and culture centre in the capital St. John's. In subsequent decades, the province built 5 more centres across the province.

The investment into these centres, and the decision to operate them as a division of the provincial government, has yielded great dividends, well beyond their original mandates. The emergence of a dynamic arts community in this small place and its value economically, socially, and in the establishment of a unique cultural identity is due in no small part to the investment the government made into the arts.

Newfoundland and Labrador and the arts

NL is noted in Canada for having a distinct cultural identity. Probably one of the most notable global cultural markers today for NL is the musical *Come From Away*. The musical tells the story of a small town in NL during 9/11 and is currently running on Broadway, the West End, stages worldwide including Australia and Ireland, and last week the film version of the Broadway musical debuted on Apple TV. The Broadway version actually features a NL actor Petrina Bromley.

If one were to look at the professional artistic output of NL over the past 50 years and its impact on the country's art scene, it would well exceed the expectations of a market of its size. In the current arts and entertainment scene, there are many notable Canadian celebrities and elite professionals from this province in the field of music, theatre, film and television, dance, and the visual arts. Some of the country's most important art institutions see Nlers at the administrative helm. The province is also home to major national and international festivals and showcases that see international artists working alongside professionals from the province. These enterprises provide valuable contributions to the local economy as NL relies on tourism for a significant portion of its GDP and cultural tourism is a major incentive for visitation.

The province for its size, and more importantly, the size of its economy, does make considerable investment into the arts. There are granting agencies for arts, cultural, and heritage organizations, economic development programs for the arts, and special contributions for infrastructure. This is not to say that the province could do more, but these contributions are notable.

The province owns and operates significant cultural facilities. This includes a network of historic sites, "crown corporations" (arms length government orgs) housing museum and archive facilities, and 6 Arts and Culture Centres.

The province of NL owns and operates the Arts and Culture Centres and is responsible not only for staffing and programming, but for the physical envelope of the structures as well. These arts centres are owned by the people of NL. There are many examples in Canada where facilities are partnered with government institutions. There are very few examples of governments owning them and operating them outright. I find this to be very progressive and illustrates the initial importance that was behind their construction and for the 50 years of operations.

The Arts and Culture Centres will serve as focus for the case for place-making for this presentation.

The Arts and Culture Centres

One of the most important investments the province has made in the arts has been the investment into the network of Arts and Culture Centres. There are 6 Arts and Culture Centres in NL located in the capital city St. John's, and smaller facilities in smaller centres in Gander, Grand Falls, Corner Brook, Stephenville, and Labrador City.

The first centre was built in 1967. As stated in the introduction, NL was still in its infancy as a province of Canada. The version of the country that was presented to the citizenry prior to the referendum by pro-confederation supporters was a nation that was stuck. The feeling was that NL was mired in old economies that only benefited a few, and confederation would provide for support systems and investments that would improve the lives of all. Confederation won the day, and NL began the process of re-imagining itself.

Large infrastructure projects would be the indicators of progress. New highways, utility, hospitals, and schools all were said to mark the success of the transition of Newfoundland from country to province.

In the 60's, sincere efforts we made to develop a plan to build a major art centre in St John's. Canada would celebrate its centennial anniversary in 1967, and was building a series of major art centres across the country. The Arts and culture centre in St. John's was constructed and commissioned that year. It housed a 1000 seat main-stage theatre, art gallery space, a public library, restaurants and lounges. It was the shining jewel of the province's infrastructure plan and was heralded as a state of the art facility. It was the "place to be". The theatre also had costume, set, and property construction. The art gallery had framing and restorative facilities. The Arts and Culture Centre was built between the legislature and the university and featured brutalist architectural styles that were in severe contrast to the gothic and Victorian influenced styles that were prevalent in the city up to that point. The Arts and Culture Centre was something

truly new to the people of the province and a window on the world that had never been seen before.

The initial program offerings of the Arts and Culture Centres, certainly on the main-stage, saw multi-disciplinary touring companies from across the country and internationally come to St. John's. The goal of the centre was to establish the province as a connected place. The planned network of centres were intended to bring the world of art and culture to the people of NL. The model was seen to be a great success and the 5 other centres were subsequently constructed and commissioned during the 70s and 80s.

The initial performance presentations saw many classic styles from top level professionals. Premiere ballet companies, operatic and theatrical presentation, classical music styles, and top tier music artists from across Canada. There was access to the stage for local groups as well. Community theatre festivals and community singing festival events were among the key clients.

There was an issue here however. These events were seen by a significant portion of the community to be exclusionary. While popular and well attended, the Arts and Culture Centres were not seen to be for everyone. The institution was unconsciously drawing the societal lines that were intended to be erased by confederation.

But in the 70s, a groundswell of local artistic practice began to emerge in the province. As art became more woven into the lives of young people through the establishment of resources like the Arts and Culture Centres, young people began to build an impressive movement of art creation in the province. While many were drawn to classic styles, some of the most vibrant and dynamic work was being created by groups that were going back to reclaim the songs and stories that had preceded confederation. Individuals and companies were making strong connections to the small places they and their families were from in order to create an arts community that was distinctly from Newfoundland and Labrador. These young creators were invited to the Arts and Culture Centres, and its facility began to be dedicated to creation, not just display. The NL arts community was challenging the merits of confederation, raising issues around societal imbalance,

and retelling the stories of their families to challenge history and its impact on the present. They were doing this through the styles that had sustained a sense of place in the outports in the past. Through songs that featured traditional instruments. Through stories that used a natural sense of humour that seems to be innate in the population. And through styles that were unique, raw and exposed, not guarded and borrowing from classic artistic formats.

The remarkable result was that there was an immediate audience response. People started to see the stories of their small places being represented in large ways on the stages and gallery walls of the Arts and Culture Centres. Through the 80s and 90s, Newfoundland and Labrador artists were the premiere attractions on ACC stages as they toured across the province. As their success and proficiency grew in their own community, the NL arts community began to seek opportunity across Canada and across the globe. And it was through the cycle of import of ideas, subsequent local creative activity, and then export of the work that Newfoundland and Labrador began to truly establish an identity, and was recognized as a distinct place.

What is that identity of this place? Our landscape and terrain is generally regarded as being rugged but beautiful. This has certainly been exhibited in our visual arts. We are regarded as being humorous and hospitable. Some of the most notable Canadian comedic talents are from NL, and our music tends to be celebratory, fast, and we align our traditional music closely with Irish roots. We are soulful and have a strong connection to our history, particularly the points in our history where we have endured crisis and struggled against forces beyond our control. This is reflected strongly in our writing styles, and curated museum installations that focus on our ability to overcome adversity. We have a unique dialect that borrows from Irish, English, and French origins. This might be the single greatest identifier for Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, certainly across Canada.

For 50 years, The Arts and Culture Centres have dedicated their resources to creators and their audiences in order to share these feelings of identity with each other and to prepare new generations as they grow up in this place. Prior to

COVID, the ACCs were selling roughly 160k tickets for events per year and were seeing close to 500 events over the 6 centre division. The rehearsal room system in St. John's was seeing close to 3000 booked sessions per year and local groups were using mainstages for about 1000 booked sessions across the division. The numbers representing creation usage truly tell the story of the Arts and Culture Centres. The facilities are primarily focussed on the development of community work or professional work that is home-grown. These centres represent a portion of the story as there are roughly 5000 cultural workers in the province today working in small museums, theatres, and galleries in all the small places across the province. These workers not only help to shape identity through intangible ways, but add valuable contributions to the economy of the province in very tangible ways.

New Place-making

The role that arts and culture played in place-making after confederation in Newfoundland and Labrador needs to be taken on again. The population of NL has been stagnant for decades and population decline is the trend in our small communities. Local economies that had been centred around fishing for centuries saw a decline of local fishing industries in lieu of large scale commercial fishing enterprise that was owned and operated by companies without vested interest in the province. These coastal communities saw residents move to larger centres across Canada for work. As the population of young workers declined, and the resident population aged, fewer opportunities emerged to diversify the economy.

The emergence of cultural tourism became a way to reinvigorate these communities, as local creators would organize to present traditional songs, stories, crafts, and now culinary arts for visitors. This provided some stability to the economy, but has not addressed the population issue of the province.

A strategy to promote immigration is developing in the province, and to meet the goals of this plan, a strong effort for place-making needs to be undertaken for new residents. As the cultural sector provided the voice for this place after confederation, now it must provide opportunities for new Canadians to be seen in

the cultural landscape and to share new stories and traditions as we enter a new phase of connectivity.

Another focus for place-making in NL is now focussed towards truth and reconciliation with our indigenous populations. As stated previously, the history of engagement with indigenous people has been troubled to say the least. Disastrous might be a better description. In new efforts of cultural place-making, especially in our small remote places, we must undertake better ways to communicate and understand how to live alongside indigenous communities. Cultural connections have proven to provide great opportunities for shared experience and can broaden understanding.

The Arts and Culture Centres are endeavouring to focus programming and experiences in order to facilitate better engagement with indigenous communities and new Canadians. Once again, local events are marking some of our greatest successes, and visiting artists are helping to define the path for engagement and broadened understanding across the province. Our goal now is to expand our notion of identity and give rightful place to these communities as we continue the work of place-making.

Conclusions

When the Arts and Culture Centre in St. John's was constructed, one of the most interesting features to me was the concourse. The architect's vision for the concourse was to force the perspective of the people congregated there in order for them to "see each other".

One advantage of being from a small place is that we all see each other. A lot. This can often be seen as the downside of living in small places. Small places are seen to limit knowledge and understanding because of their isolation. Distance from places where larger congregations of people gather is viewed as a means to narrow perspectives .

This can be true, and can be challenging when addressing issues like the ones I alluded to regarding immigration and reconciliation . But my experience in this small place has proven to demonstrate the opposite. The ability to see each other

with more frequency allows us to understand each other better and work with each other better. It makes us more tuned in to each others rhythms. When you're programmed to allow for deeper connection with others, this extends to visitors as well. This might be why NL is naturally inclined towards hospitality. This also points to how we go about our creative processes in arts and culture. Many of our cultural success stories are rooted in work that comes from collaborations, collectives, and creators borrowing and sharing with each other.

I see this practice continuing well into the future and I certainly see Arts and Culture Centres playing a role in providing the required resources to facilitate the engagement between artists and their communities.