



Halifax Performing & Visual Arts Venues Study

Appendix B: Qualitative Inventory of Performing Arts Venues

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Appendix B

The following is an inventory of professional performing arts venues in the region, based primarily on stakeholder input. We also draw on two surveys: one sent to gallery owners and operators, and another sent to performing arts venue owners and operators.

Note that the contents of this appendix reflects the perceptions of stakeholders, including artist groups and venue owners and operators. We have not conducted independent, physical evaluations of the claims made by stakeholders.

We do not include a list of visual arts venues in this list because participants were less specific in their feedback on galleries and studios in this first stage of consultation, or because we were able to capture this feedback in Appendix A.



Photo of City Natives performing live. Photo from HRM Corporate Communications.
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1. Alderney Landing

1.1. Alderney Theatre

Strengths

Flexible. Participants praised Alderney Theatre for offering a flexible space that can accommodate a variety of configurations for shows. It has retractable inclined seating for 285 people and can fit more when seats are retracted. Alderney is one of only two black box theatres in the city, and fills a niche larger than the city's other black box, the Bus Stop Theatre. The stage — at 40 by 30 feet — is appropriate for medium-sized dance and theatre productions.

Sprung floor. Alderney Theatre is one of the only venues in the city with a sprung floor for dancers.

Rotunda. The theatre has a round room (the rotunda) at its entrance, which is itself a popular location for events. However, events cannot happen simultaneously in the rotunda and theatre because the entrance to the theatre passes through the rotunda.

Challenges

Small wings. Alderney Theatre has small wings, which means theatre companies cannot take large sets off stage. This greatly limits the types of theatre that can be produced there. When dancers leave the stage, they risk hitting the wall. It is difficult for large numbers of dancers or cast to gather in the wings before entering the stage.

Entryway. The entrance to Alderney Theatre is a nondescript stairway, resembling a fire escape. The theatre lacks a prominent entrance, which makes it difficult to find, and undermines the sense that it is a destination. An association representative expressed that many shows do

not book there because, “You have to go up the elevator, or you have to go up the stairs, and it's just not like the vibe that a lot of things are looking for.”

Lack of a view. Alderney Theatre faces the harbour, but this view is mostly covered by a blank wall and a stairway.

Overbooked. It is difficult to book Alderney Theatre during prime nights of the week, and for long theatre productions.

Potential areas for investment

Lighting. Alderney Theatre has static lighting for shows, which stakeholders reported work well. However, it does not have moveable, modern LED lights, limiting the options for artists.

Sound equipment. Bands generally need to bring their own sound equipment for shows. While Alderney Theatre has a PA system, it is not of professional quality.

Missing catwalks. Alderney has catwalks over most of the stage area. However, two catwalks — above the audience area — were not built for budgetary reasons. These two catwalks would be needed for Alderney to act as a fully functional black box theatre, with the flexibility to stage shows “in the round,” meaning the actors are in the centre of the audience, lit from all directions.

Major renovations. The Alderney Landing team is working on proposals for a major renovation to the space, which could include a new entry and a reception area facing the harbour. This would make it possible to expand the wings and provide a separate entrance to the rotunda. HRM has not evaluated this proposal and this study provides no assessment of its viability.

1.2. Alderney Outdoor Stage

Alderney Landing has an outdoor stage at the entry to the market facing the parking lot.

Strengths

Size. The outdoor venue has a capacity of 8,000, making it one of the largest spaces for outdoor events in the region.

View. The waterfront is a striking location for events.

Facilities. Alderney Landing comes equipped with built-in bathrooms, power, water, and a roof for the stage, substantially reducing setup costs.

Challenges

Capacity. The outdoor stage was originally intended to accommodate 15,000 people. However, the train tracks make it difficult to ensure safe egress, because the train could block the way during an emergency.

Egress issues. Egress requirements constitute a barrier to Alderney adding other amenities to the stage area — such as tables, umbrellas or kiosks — because each would undermine egress calculations, further reducing capacity.

“Alderney has never met the loftiest ambitions for what that space was going to achieve.”

— Performing group member

Potential areas for investment

Setup required. While the outdoor stage has a permanent roof, it does not have a permanent stage, sound equipment, or lighting, meaning substantial setup is required. Additional bathroom facilities also need to be added for large events. Some presenters who organize outdoor shows did not perceive Alderney as a permanent outdoor venue, due to the setup requirements.

Expanding capacity. If HRM invested in additional methods for people to cross the tracks, the Alderney Outdoor Stage could potentially have a larger capacity, and could better fulfill its potential as the region’s preeminent location for outdoor events. There are a number of reasons that providing sufficient egress is complex, however, and this issue requires further study.

2. The Dalhousie Arts Centre and School of Performing Arts

The Dalhousie Arts Centre contains the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium (1,023 seats). The same building also contains venues owned and managed by Dalhousie's Fountain School of Performing Arts, including the Joseph Strug Concert Hall (300 seats) and the James Dunn Theatre (198 seats).

Challenges

Some challenges for all three venues derive from Dalhousie's role as a university:

University priorities. Many participants emphasized that these venues struggle to meet the wider needs of the arts community because they are owned by a large university, for which the arts is one goal among many.

Student priority. The venues owned by the Fountain School prioritize the educational needs of their students. As a consequence, the venues are rarely available to outside artists, and it is especially difficult to rent them for long periods (as is needed for theatre).

"We just run up against 'no' far too often."

— Performing arts group member

"It's run by people who... they are basically custodians. They're not in the music business. They don't do anything except rent a hall."

— Promoter

Staff. One presenter noted that they are required to hire the university's union staff for shows in these venues, and that these staff follow strict rules with regards to when they start work, when they open the venue for setup, or which jobs can be performed by which people. Presenters who wish to bring their own staff need to pay for two sets of staff.

"I'm pro-union, but they were very difficult to work with. The call time for the rehearsal is like 5:30. And there's like, 20 people ready, and at 5:23, they just stood there. And they had the doors locked because they don't want to let you in. It wasn't a positive working environment."

— Presenter

"Every time you want to move a chair in a place like that. It's like someone's like, hey that's a union job."

— Presenter

2.1. Rebecca Cohn Auditorium

The Rebecca Cohn Auditorium is Halifax's largest performance hall. It is home to Symphony Nova Scotia and many of the city's largest concerts.

Strengths

Large shows. The space is attractive with comfortable seating, suitable for major events.

Challenges

Too small. Many participants expressed that the Cohn has too few seats (1023) to be the largest venue in the city (other than stadiums). Promoters expressed that if there were a larger venue, it would be easier to turn a profit with large shows. It would also be possible to make shows more affordable by spreading costs out over more seats, and by having a larger "spread" between the low-cost and high-cost seats.

"At 1,500 seats, you could attract a different bracket of artist, and you could actually make some money."

— Promoter

"It's a spectacular venue. But it's not big enough, it hasn't been big enough for years."

— Promoter

Aging. A representative of the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium believes the venue will need either a major renovation, or will need to be replaced with a new venue, within 20 years, due to HRM's population growth, and the expectations of audiences and performing arts groups. Other large regional venues built at a similar time have already been modernized through major renovations, including the National Arts Centre (Ottawa), Confederation Centre of the Arts (Charlottetown), the Eric Harvie Theatre (now the Jenny Belzberg Theatre) at Banff Centre (Banff), and the Jubilee Auditoriums (Calgary and Edmonton). The Cohn stage is not well designed for theatre because it is wide but not sufficiently deep. It lacks a fly tower, and there is a cement wall at the back of the stage, which reduces its versatility for theatre, circus, dance, and some touring concert acts.

Entrance. The lobby is not renovated to create a high-quality experience for someone going to see a show.

Location. The Rebecca Cohn's location is not ideal for a major regional venue. There are no nearby restaurants and few bars.

University priorities. Stakeholders report that the university has not prioritized issues that matter to arts groups. However, stakeholders note that new leadership at the Dalhousie Arts Centre (which manages the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium) hope to address some of these problems. Stakeholders identify the following issues:

- The Arts Centre does not have a modern digital system for tracking ticket sales, making it difficult to communicate and organize with promoters.

- The Arts Centre uses the university's website for its venues, rather than having a website optimized for this need. (A representative of the Arts Centre says they hope to soon fix this problem with a new website.)
- The university has not prioritized fixing issues that an arts organization would prioritize, such as the Cohn's acoustics.
- The university tends to be conservative in making changes to policy, such as allowing alcohol. (A representative of the Arts Centre says they intend to change this policy).

Acoustics. The Rebecca Cohn does not have high quality acoustics, according to presenters who have used the space, despite having been designed for this goal.

2.2 James Dunn Theatre

The James Dunn Theatre is a 198-seat proscenium theatre.

Strengths

Complete theatre. One participant, who is a stage manager, noted that the James Dunn Theatre is the region's only venue that meets all requirements to be classified as a proper theatre, including stage area, the fly gallery, wings, and backstage areas.

Half-height fly towers. The James Dunn Theatre has one of the few fly towers in the city, enabling a greater variety of theatre and dance performances. However, it is only half-height, limiting its potential utility.

Sprung floor. The James Dunn Theatre is one of the only venues in the city that has a sprung floor, which is an important requirement for dance, reducing the risk of injury.

Stage size. The stage is large enough to host medium-sized dance productions, but not the largest dance shows.

Challenges

Lack of Availability. The James Dunn Theatre has limited availability — “only two weeks a year,” according to one participant. The theatre may meet the physical needs of theatre and dance, but it does not meet their needs in practice, due to this lack of availability.

2.3 Joseph Strug Concert Hall

Joseph Strug Concert Hall is a space designed for classical music and singing.

Strengths

Acoustics. The Joseph Strug Concert Hall has high-quality acoustics, and is well-suited to small orchestral and chamber music.

Challenges

Lack of availability. The venue is often not available for rent because the Fountain School prioritizes the needs of students and faculty.

Unaffordable. Participants said the fees are out of reach for many kinds of performances.

Inadequate amplification. The sound equipment is located behind the stage, likely because the equipment is intended for lectures and background music between sets. However, this means the sound system cannot be used for amplified live music, because it would create feedback. Music shows therefore need to bring and set up their own equipment.

“[The Strug is] so beautiful, but it is very limiting in terms of what it actually can accommodate in terms of different types of art.”

— Performing arts group member

“[The Strug is] a small part of this huge organization, Dalhousie, which has many other goals before being an excellent entertainer.”

— Performing arts group member

3. Venues Inside Schools and Libraries

3.1 Spatz Theatre

The Spatz Theatre is part of Citadel High, with a seated capacity of 780 people.

Strengths

Size flexibility. Its balcony can be closed for smaller shows, which enables it to meet the needs of a broader range of show sizes. Dance group members, for example, say they often use the theatre, but only need 300 seats.

Challenges

No dressing rooms. The Spatz Theatre has a classroom on one side that doubles as a dressing room. A makeshift curtain provides some level of privacy on one side of the room. One stakeholder said it “boggles the mind” to have a “reasonably good theatre” that does not have a dressing room.

Flat back wall and inadequate backstage. The Spatz has a wall behind its back curtain, which reduces its versatility. (Actors cannot, for example, enter centre stage). It has a large wing stage left that partially serves as a backstage. Behind the stage there is only room for people to pass from one side of the stage to the other.

Inadequate stage-right wings. The Spatz Theatre has shallow wings stage right, and it has a bright, wood panelled back wall that is visible from many seats.

Acoustics. The theatre has “substandard” acoustics for non-amplified music, according to a stakeholder who organizes non-amplified music events.

Owned by a school. The Spatz Theatre is operated by a non-profit, but the venue is located inside a school, which limits its ability to prioritize the arts community. Theatre groups report that they need to strike and rebuild their sets daily to avoid interfering with the school’s functions. It is not possible to design a box office or reception area to prioritize the arts, due to this dual function. In general, the school’s needs take precedence over outside renters.

Location. There are no bars, restaurants, or other venues within the immediate vicinity of the Spatz Theatre.

Potential areas for investment

Paint the stage-right wall black. The wood panelling detracts from the stage.

Major renovation. It may be possible to add a larger backstage, wider wings, and a proper dressing room to the Spatz Theatre, but this would require moving walls, repurposing a classroom, and potentially building an addition. Replacing the stage’s floor with a sprung floor would allow it to better meet the needs of the dance community. HRM has not investigated the feasibility or desirability of such changes and there are no current plans for such a renovation.

Create a youth venue. The theatre has an empty space above the theatre that has the potential to be used as a youth venue. However, the space requires substantial renovation, including the addition of an elevator, meaning it likely cannot fulfill the city’s dire short-term need for a youth venue.

3.2 Lilian Piercey Concert Hall

The Lilian Piercey Concert Hall is a 200-person theatre inside the Maritime Conservatory of Performing Arts.

Strengths

Affordable. It costs between \$300-\$600 for a rental, depending on the time of day, which stakeholders say is affordable.

Acoustics. The Lilian Piercey Concert Hall offers excellent acoustics for non-amplified music.

“The quality at the Piercey is unparalleled anywhere in the city. It doesn’t matter where you sit: the music comes and just wraps around you.”

— Music Presenter

Challenges

Competing priorities. The venue is located inside a larger educational organization, whose own priorities take precedence. It is difficult to book events in prime times, such as Thursday or Friday night, because there may be music lessons in the next room that can disrupt performances.

3.3 Paul O’Regan Hall

Paul O’Regan Hall is a 300- seat auditorium in the Central Library.

Strengths

Affordable. Paul O’Regan Hall is free so long as groups do not sell tickets. If groups do sell tickets, they are required to pay, but it is still relatively affordable for nonprofits and charities holding short events, costing \$65-\$100 per hour.

Accessible. It is one of the most physically accessible places to host music in the city, according to participants.

Visibility and connectivity. There is a removable wall between the library and the performance hall. For free events, performers can remove the wall, and draw random onlookers from the library. For groups that wish to bring art to the public or forge community connections, this is a desirable option.

Acoustics. Music presenters report that the acoustics in the Hall are reasonably good for non-amplified music.

Challenges

Revenue Barriers. It is difficult to cover the costs of events for free events without selling tickets. The library used to allow groups to collect donations at the door during free space rentals, but it no longer allows this. One for-profit presenter said the space is “unaffordable if you sell tickets.” It costs \$125-\$200 per hour for for-profit events, depending on the time of day and week.

Difficult to book. The library only rents the Hall six months in advance. This makes the Hall difficult to use for ticketed performances, or any arts groups or festival that organize their calendar further in advance. HRM and the library, however, are allowed to book their own events further in advance. A festival organizer reported attempting to book dates minutes after they became available, and discovering the dates were already taken.

3. Venues Inside Schools and Libraries

Absence of changing rooms, backstage, wings.

The Hall is inadequate for many kinds of theatre, dance, and other performances because it does not have facilities to change, it has no proper backstage (except for a narrow corridor for walking), and there are no wings adjacent the stage. The stage's wide, shallow dimensions are also a poor fit for many kinds of performances.

Inadequate green room. The green room works “well enough” for music, according to one presenter. It does not, however, provide a sound-insulated space for performers to talk and relax, which is a problem for types of performances in which there are long gaps between when performers come on stage.

Technology. The sound board was recently updated, but the sound technology is otherwise not fully professional. A presenter reports it is somewhat difficult to use.

Not ideal for cinema. The Hall has built-in sound equipment and two projectors and screens, and it is sometimes used to show films. However, the space is not ideal for this purpose. The stage backs onto large windows, and the backstage curtain does not fully block out sunlight. Film presenters also said that it would be preferable to have the audience facing a single large screen, rather than two small screens.

“The central library is a great space for accessing community and promoting events. But it is quite problematic for screenings because the screen is not very large, and it's quite far from the seats. And the curtains don't go all the way to the ground, so you always have light leak.”

— Film festival organizer

3.4 Bella Rosa Arts Centre

The Bella Rosa Arts Centre is a 600- person theatre in the Halifax West High School in Clayton Park with wings and a sprung floor for dance. It was not mentioned during interviews or focus groups. In a survey, a stakeholder expressed that the professional “arts sector does not perceive it as viable” due to its location and because it is part of a school. It likely plays a valuable role as a community venue, however, thanks to its location in Clayton Park, where there are not many other venues.

4. Churches and Former Churches

Churches have become more popular as venues in recent years, especially for music, due to the lack of other venues. Some attributes apply to most or all churches:

Strengths

Affordable. Participants characterize churches as affordable.

Challenges

Cultural accessibility. Not everyone feels comfortable visiting shows in churches, according to some stakeholders.

Potential areas for investment

Physical accessibility. Churches tend not to be highly accessible, and it would be expensive to fix this problem.

“I think the churches have been shouldering far too much of the responsibility for the Performing Arts in Halifax. Churches are a cultural barrier for many audience members and many performance members.”

— Performing group member

Three churches were highlighted by stakeholders because they are popular for shows. We address the strengths and weaknesses of these three, but not the other churches in the region.

4.1 The Stage at St. Andrews

Strengths

Renovated. Its stage was recently renovated and expanded, making it more usable for a greater variety of musical acts.

Challenges

Availability. One presenter said they now need to book St. Andrews two years in advance.

Acoustics. The venue was not designed as a professional performance space. While it is appropriate for baroque or youth performances, it is not appropriate for a professional orchestra.

4.2 St. Matthew’s United Church

Strengths

Location. It is in the centre of downtown Halifax.

Size. It has been used as one of the primary indoor stages for the Halifax Jazz Festival for many years because it is roughly the size they need, at 450 people, which is “a good fit for more traditional jazz or relatively smaller Canadian artists.” It is also rented regularly by Sonic Concerts.

Challenges

Not affordable. It is no longer affordable, participants reported.

Poor acoustic quality. One presenter expressed the acoustics are “not great,” particularly for loud, amplified music.

Potential areas for investment

Physical accessibility. There are steps and other impediments that make it difficult to access parts of the space by wheelchair. People with accessibility needs have to leave the building and descend a sidewalk to access an accessible washroom.

Physical comfort. The space does not have air conditioning and can become very hot in the summer when full of people.

No built-in sound system. Event organizers need to bring their own sound equipment.

4.3 The Sanctuary Arts Centre

The Sanctuary Arts Centre is a former church in Downtown Dartmouth that has been converted into a venue. It and Alderney Landing are the only nonprofit venues in Downtown Dartmouth. It also has two other spaces: an art hall and a rehearsal room. A music association representative said it is “filling a void” in Dartmouth, because there are very few venues on that side of the harbour.

Strengths

Overall quality. Presenters expressed that the sanctuary is an attractive space with good acoustics. One described it as “fabulous.”

Hip-hop. The African Nova Scotian Music Association is working with the Sanctuary to host hip-hop shows there, which is valuable, because there is a lack of venues in the city for hip-hop, according to participants.

Heritage. Many participants expressed a desire for HRM to invest in venues that have a strong sense of local history and identity, such as the Sanctuary.

Potential areas for investment

Lack of sound baffling. The Sanctuary cannot hold shows in its three spaces simultaneously due to a lack of sound insulation. An investment in sound baffling would expand the number of venues available in Downtown Dartmouth, which is important, participants express, because of the current lack of venues in that area.

Challenges

Physical accessibility. The Sanctuary management has invested heavily in making the venue more accessible. However, some areas of the building are more difficult to access for someone in a wheelchair (such as the green room), as is common for a heritage building.

Stage size. The Sanctuary’s main theatre has a small stage, which makes it suitable for live music, but not many other types of shows (theatre, dance, etc.).

Lack of wings on one side. It will be difficult to add wings to both sides of the stage because it has an external wall on one side, and the wall cannot be changed due to heritage restrictions. This issue can be partially solved with curtains, but it is unlikely to become a suitable destination for professional theatre. (It is, however, already used for small, local theatre productions.)

5. Light House Arts Centre

The Light House Arts Centre is a former conference centre that has been converted into a multidisciplinary space. It includes a large performance hall, a media production studio that can be used as a performance space, a carpentry workshop, dance studios, office space, and more. Not all of the available spaces in the building have yet been renovated.

Strengths

Location. The Light House Arts Centre is located in the centre of downtown Halifax.

Cultural Cluster. The venue was designed to incubate social capital in the arts scene by locating multiple facilities for the arts together. Its location downtown contributes to its potential to build this kind of social capital.

Accessible. Almost everything in the building is accessible to wheelchairs, except the control room.

“It’s in our DNA, to be downtown, and to contribute to the downtown cultural scene... I think having the Khyber nearby, having Neptune nearby, just builds on the strengths.”

— Light House representative

Challenges

Expectations. Participants shared that there is a widespread sense of disappointment in the arts community that the Light House did not fulfill the goals that were initially promised. This was one of the most oft-repeated sentiments we heard during consultation. One challenge the venue faces is to repair relationships and address these feelings of disappointment. In particular, participants expressed concerns with the following:

- **Affordable space.** The Light House has struggled to fulfill its mandate to provide affordable space for local arts organizations. A representative says the organization faces financial shortfalls that make it difficult to offer their space at affordable rates, in part because building costs rose significantly during the pandemic, construction was halted multiple times, sources of revenue were delayed, and builders had to implement expensive safety protocols. Organization representatives say they offer a lower price to small nonprofit organizations, and for shows that require less setup. Nonetheless, stakeholders we spoke with do not currently perceive the Light House as a viable option for most nonprofit shows.

“The Light House Arts Centre is one of the biggest misses for the arts industry in the city, unfortunately, because it’s built really well, it has a lot of the things that are needed, they did take the time to make sure that they had the lighting, the sound system, the things that were needed. But then the price point for it, for a nonprofit organization, is not feasible at all.”

— Festival organizer

“The Light House is a nice space, I think the concept was really a good idea. But it doesn't seem to be coming out to be what it was promised to be. It's way too expensive. People can't afford it. And there is no ability to shrink the space. The venue is beautiful. It is one of the best sounding venues that we have. And if that was publicly funded, and there was the ability for people to put on shows, that would be amazing.”

— Association representative

- **Delayed activation of nonprofit arm.** In its initial plan, The Light House intended to use 60% of its profits to fund a nonprofit arm that would work directly with the nonprofit arts community to provide affordable access to the space. However, the organization has not yet made a profit, and the nonprofit arm is therefore currently dormant.
- **Space availability.** CBC's This Hour Has 22 Minutes, a TV production, rents the Light House studio space for seven months of the year. This arrangement helps the Light House survive financially, but reduces the availability of the space to the broader cultural sector.

“It is supposed to be a space available for the city. And if it isn't, we need to be asking the questions: why isn't it? And how can we make it that? ”

— Association representative

“It was supposed to be a communal space for art's presentation, especially for us independent organizations... But 22 Minutes is in the Studio for [seven] months of the year... Which is kind of outrageous.”

— Festival organizer

“They had a whole booth just for audio mixing live while the music was happening. They had a video booth. Everything you need is there. They built it very well. The studio in the Light House Art Center is what we need. That's what we need. But you can't use it.”

— Dance performing group member

- **Monopolized funding.** Participants expressed a perception that while the Light House was being planned and built, it absorbed most of the available funding for venue projects, and it was difficult for other organizations to access funding for other potential projects. They “took all the air out of the room,” according to one stakeholder. Light House representatives assert they accessed Federal sources of funding that would not have been directed to the region otherwise.

- **Diverted funding from other projects.** There was a perception among some participants that the project reduced available funds for The Legacy Centre project, which was an effort by multiple local organizations to create a larger performance venue in Halifax.
- **Financial Challenges.** The Light House's finances have not yet fully recovered from the pandemic, and it will need further government support to stay open, according to Light House representatives. The Light House has received Covid-related assistance from the Federal Government, but are requesting further support from the Province.

Potential areas for investment

Unused spaces. There remain large areas within the building that have not yet been renovated, and it may be possible to use these spaces to fill some of the gaps identified in this study.

"It's not affordable. I mean, no one, no one uses the concert space except for Sonic entertainment."

— Festival organizer

- **Coworking offices.** Many participants expressed there is an acute lack of affordable office space for people working in arts organizations, and that they would like to work alongside others in the same sector. The Light House included office space for both nonprofit and for-profit arts sector organizations, and they have considered adding more.
- **Black box cinema.** In earlier plans for the Light House, the organization intended to build a small blackbox cinema for film screenings in the atrium of the building, according to a Light House representative. However, this would require removing at least one load-bearing pillar, and the installation of metal beams at considerable cost.
- **All-ages music venue or gallery.** The organization has also considered using the atrium space as an all-ages music venue or gallery, but this would require adding another wall. For the venue, the wall would be needed to block sound, whereas for a gallery, it would be needed to protect artwork. Other security and curation investments would also be needed to fulfill its potential as a gallery.

HRM has not investigated the feasibility of any of these investments. It is also uncertain whether HRM could play a funding role in any such project due to legal barriers, which are beyond the scope of this project.

5.1 Light House Performance Hall

The Light House Performance Hall has 750 seated capacity and 1,150 standing capacity.

Strengths

Equipment. The Light House Performance Hall has high-quality modern sound and light equipment, which the organization was able to acquire at relatively low prices during the pandemic. Organizers describe it as “turnkey.”

Sprung floor. The venue has a removable sprung floor for dance events.

Stage size. The space works well for live music performances.

Flexibility. The retractable seating makes it easy to switch between seated and standing capacity. The venue also has 20 large round tables that can be deployed in the space for events where this is needed.

Greenroom. The venue offers a large, comfortable greenroom.

“It was built really well. It has a lot of the things that are needed, they did take the time to make sure that they had the lighting, the sound system, the things that were needed, the seats are malleable, you can create a wall to cut the space in half. It is really nice in the way that you can use it.”

— Festival organizer.

Challenges

Inadequate wings, backstage. It is difficult to use the space for theatre because there is a large gap between the stage and the entrances on either side, and the backstage is too small for storing sets.

Gap between stage, audience. There is a substantial gap between the venue’s bleachers and the stage’s usual position, which is a challenge for some types of art, such as dance. It is possible to move the stage forward, but this requires substantial setup, including the need to move ceiling lights and equipment.

Not ideal for cinema. The venue has a cinema projector. However, a film festival representative described the performance hall as “too big and cavernous for screenings.” She noted it may be possible to use curtains to make the space feel smaller.

Due to these challenges, stakeholders perceive the performance hall as primarily useful for amplified music. Stakeholders report that it works well for this purpose.

“It’s still a great place. We’re having our hands of awards there in October. It’s nice, because they have new and modern equipment in their theatre.”

— Association representative.

6. Stand-Alone Venues

6.1. The Music Room

The Music Room has a maximum capacity of 105 people, or 94 seats in its usual configuration. It is located in Halifax's North End.

Strengths

Grand Piano The Music Room is one of the city's only non-university venues to have a full grand piano.

Challenges

Availability. The Music Room is utilized for the Scotia Festival of Music. Participants said it can be difficult to book because the festival takes precedence.

Location. The Music Room is located in the North End far from the downtown, reducing its utility for festivals. This location does mean it is more accessible for north end local residents. However, it is located on the edge of a commercial/ industrial area and arterials on a large hill, rather than in the centre of a neighbourhood, reducing its potential value as a local destination.

6.2. Bus Stop Theatre

The Bus Stop Theatre is one of the city's only black box theatres, in addition to Alderney Landing. It has a seated capacity of 75, which can be expanded slightly by adding chairs. It has a space in its basement that can be used for rehearsals, meetings, or even small shows (though its ceiling is low and it is not ideal for shows). It has a sink, coffee machine, and microwave, making it useful for community meetings.

Strengths

Popular. The Bus Stop Theatre is one of the most sought-after venues in the region, especially for small or new artists, according to multiple stakeholders. Participants describe it as highly affordable. Its small size also makes it easier for small acts to fill the room.

"As of June, we had recorded turning away about 200 days worth of rentals for lack of availability. And keep in mind that, we make ourselves available roughly 340 days of the year."

— Bus Stop Theatre Representative

Values. The Bus Stop Theatre is run by a nonprofit that prioritizes affordability, accessibility, and inclusion. The venue could charge substantially more for the space, given the surfeit of demand, but chooses not to because its leadership feels a sense of responsibility to support the arts scene in Halifax. Stakeholders expressed that one reason they want to book shows at the Bus Stop Theatre is because of this set of values.

"The Bus Stop is a venue that aligns with our values, but it is usually booked."

— Festival organizer

Accessible. The Bus Stop Theatre's bar, stage, washrooms, green room, and backstage are all on one flat floor, making it highly wheelchair accessible. It also offers a \$100 subsidy for groups who want to offer additional accessibility services, such as sign language interpretation.

“When we had that funding for renovations, accessibility was number one in terms of what we want to do here.”

— Bus Stop Theatre Representative

Heritage and character. Some stakeholders expressed that they prefer venues that have a sense of heritage and character. The Bus Stop Theatre used to be a drug store, and has a long history in the community, reinforcing its character as a grassroots organization.

“For us, vibe is really important. You can serve booze there you can serve food there and it's really easy and the, you know, the stage maybe isn't perfect, but it has a lot of character.”

— Literary Festival Organizer

Challenges

Overbooked. The Bus Stop Theatre is solidly booked, and it is very difficult for organizations to access it. The non-stop nature of the bookings is also hard on staff, as they have few breaks between shows. It is also difficult for the Bus Stop to apply for grants to host programming in its own space, because if the organization sets aside time for programming, this further reduces the space's availability, and sometimes the grants are not approved.

“The reality is like, there's nowhere else to go. Yeah. So everybody is hitting us up. There are some alternatives, but not often not ideal, or with limited availability, or just way more expensive for many projects that just don't make them viable venues.”

— Bus Stop Theatre Representative

“Part of the reason our festival is the date that it is this year is because those were literally the only two nights that were available at our venue of choice, which is the Bus Stop Theatre.”

— Festival organizer

“I don't even know my dates for my 2024, but I booked that space, because it is in such high demand. It is literally the only affordable space.”

— Festival organizer

“We need 10 more Bus Stop Theatres.”

— Performing group member

Small. While the Bus Stop Theatre's small scale is a strength for small or new productions, its small scale precludes many types of shows.

Impractical for dance or circus. The Bus Stop Theatre is too small for most kinds of dance, except solo shows. The ceilings are also too low for some kinds of dance and circus performances. It does nonetheless host dance shows, in part because it has a wooden floor, which is less dangerous for dancers than concrete, and because there are so few venues for dance in the city.

Low ceilings. The ceilings are relatively low for a theatre, limiting options for lighting design, hanging set pieces, aerial acts, or anything that requires vertical space. It is therefore not ideal for many kinds of dance, circus, or theatre performances.

Potential areas for investment

Risers and Water Damage. A Bus Stop Theatre representative reports that if the organization had funding, their top priorities would be to acquire risers for the stage, and to fix water damage on the front facade of the building.

6.3 Neptune Theatre

Neptune is a theatre downtown Halifax that largely produces its own shows. It has two sections: a full professional theatre with 458 seats, and a smaller theatre with a thrust stage and 180 seats. It is a major employer for the theatre industry in downtown Halifax.

Strengths

Fully equipped. Neptune Theatre has the core requirements of a full theatre, including a fly tower and large wings.

Challenges

Availability. Neptune prioritizes its own shows for its space. While others may rent a stage for a night, it is unusual for another theatre company to rent it for an entire show (which may last weeks). It therefore does not fulfill the need for a rentable roadhouse theatre available to artists.

Accessibility. Neptune Theatre's most recent renovation focused on accessibility, but more can be done. Neptune staff would also like to renovate more bathrooms to be non-gendered.

Stage size. The Neptune stage is relatively small, meaning it would be inappropriate for many theatre productions. One participant referred to it as a "postage stamp."

6.4 Radstorm

Radstorm is a small multi-use community space that is used part-time as an all-ages venue. It is also used for meetings, workshops, rehearsal space, recording studio, visual art lessons, and more.

Strengths

Fills gaps. Stakeholders report a severe lack of all-ages venues and rehearsal spaces for musicians on the peninsula, and Radstorm helps fill these gaps. In 2023, Radstorm's rehearsal spaces were booked 748 times, and the venue was booked 70 times for live events.

Challenges

Risk of closure. Radstorm's landlord has said the organization will soon be evicted unless it can find funds to acquire the building, according to Radstorm representatives. They are currently working on a fundraising campaign to acquire the space.

7. Outdoor Venues

Halifax's regional centre has a shortage of outdoor venues (See section 3.8: "Outdoor Venues.").

There are a number of parking lots and informal stages in where presenters periodically hold events. Here, however, we only list Citadel Hill and Alderney Landing (see Section 1.2 above:

"Alderney Outdoor Stage"), because they are the only two with electricity and other permanent infrastructure.

7.1 Garrison Grounds

Citadel Hill has a large, flat grassy area next on the side of a hill that can act as a natural amphitheatre, called Garrison Grounds. The area was recently renovated to reduce moisture and to give more structural integrity to the grass, so that machinery does not rip it up when setting up shows.

Strengths

Access to power. Garrison Grounds provides access to high-voltage power.

Challenges

Not accessible. It is difficult for wheelchairs to navigate on the grass. The hill is especially inaccessible. This is the primary reason Halifax Jazz Festival does not hold events here.

Potential areas for investment

Lack of permanent infrastructure. The site does not have a permanent roof, stage, or washrooms. It is therefore expensive to hold events there.

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