STRATEGIC PLANNING AT INDEPENDENT MUNICIPAL ARTS COUNCILS

Rationale, Process, and Impact

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Abstract

Independent municipal arts councils shape the arts and cultural experiences in their cities. In the face of multiple competing issues—reconciliation, COVID-19, accessibility, digitization, climate change, and more—these organizations constantly make decisions about how to allocate funding and to whom. In order to do so, they utilize many tools, one of which is the strategic plan. Strategic planning is a common administrative practice undertaken by an organization to develop a strategic plan. At independent municipal arts councils, the strategic plan attempts to speak to the realities of the organization, the community it exists within, and the world at large, noting by which priorities and values decisions will be made. But who decides on the priorities and values, how are they decided upon, and, once the plan is finalized, what is its impact?

This research paper details the strategic planning process at independent municipal arts councils, with an emphasis on why organizations undertake the process, how they go about the process, and how the finalized plans get used. The methodology involved a review of the literature on strategic planning and on arts councils, two strands of research that have yet to be brought together. The methodology also involved an analysis of published strategic plans of five independent municipal arts councils in Canada and ten semi-structured interviews with individuals who worked on and/or were impacted by their arts council's strategic planning process. While the findings are not generalizable due to the sample, they do paint a picture of strategic planning and the published strategic plan as a process and document that each hold at least some value, though the degree to which, and what kind of value, is organization- and individual-dependent. This study is one of the first in bringing the subjects of strategic planning and arts councils together, and there are plenty of avenues for future research, including expanding the number of arts councils and individuals interviewed or focusing the research on provincial and federal arts councils rather than municipal ones.

Table of Contents

Introduction to Arts Councils and Strategic Planning

Independent municipal arts councils shape the arts and cultural experiences in their cities. They choose how much money is allocated to different art forms and programs. They help creators grow their craft through continued funding and support emerging artists break into the scene. When it comes to decision-making at all levels of operation, they utilize many tools at their disposal, one of which is the strategic plan.

Strategic planning is a common organizational practice. It has its beginnings in the business world and in the 1980s it was adopted by public and nonprofit organizations. Strategic plans, which often contain values statements, can provide knowledge for better decision-making, however their usefulness has been debated, with critics calling strategic planning a rigid process that requires a lot of resources and is disconnected from the actual operations of an organization. Even so, as an administrative practice, it has become woven into the fabric of organizations, including arts councils.

Independent municipal arts councils release their strategic plans at different timeframes—some do so every couple of years, others nearly every decade. These documents purport to reflect the realities of the world and of the community at large at a specific moment in time, acting as a North Star, noting by which priorities and values decisions should be made. But who decides on these priorities and values? In this day and age of reconciliation, COVID-19, sustainability, language debates, economic precarity, climate change, accessibility, income inequality, urban versus rural divides, digitization, and more—even what constitutes "good" or "valuable" art—what gets prioritized? And how? Moreover, once the priorities and values are chosen and the plan is finalized and published, what is the impact of the document on the arts council and its staff, as well as the sector as a whole? These important questions have not been explored very much in academic literature, yet insight into the what, why, and how of strategic

planning can be of benefit at both the scholarly and the practical level. This research study has the objective of helping to fill this knowledge gap.

Part One: Research Design

Research Question and Conceptual Framework

This paper aims to detail the strategic planning process at independent municipal arts councils, with an emphasis on the way these organizations go about the process and how the finalized plans get used. At the core of this exploration is the research question:

- What is the rationale behind strategic planning at independent municipal arts councils, how is the process undertaken, and what is the impact of the finalized plan?

The conceptual approach taken to explore this question is rooted in an analysis of the existing strategic planning literature as well as the literature on arts councils. These sets of applied literature have seldom been brought together: while there is much literature on strategic planning as an organizational tool and some on the operations of arts councils, not many scholars have taken up the task of looking at strategic planning as it relates specifically to arts councils, municipal or otherwise. This research aims to fill this gap in the literature. The focus on municipal is increasingly relevant. Whereas a few decades ago it was argued that cities were not doing their fair share to support arts and culture in Canada (Saint-Pierre, 2006; Portman, 1987), they are now seen as key players (Saint-Pierre, 2006; see also Durrer et al., 2019), facilitating social harmony and an increasing quality of life for citizens (Resonance Creative Consulting Partners, 2008), helping attract residents and businesses (Hill, 2012), and enabling innovation and productivity (Bell & Stolarick, 2008).

The first part of this paper is focused on the research design, including the aforementioned research question and conceptual framework, as well as a description of the

methodology used. The second part of this paper is dedicated to a review of relevant literature. It begins with an overview of the scholarship on arts councils, noting the body of research this study is positioned in relation to. Next, the focus shifts to what an independent municipal arts council is, notably as it relates to its positioning in the community, looking at how operating in a diverse society influences how it functions and providing detail on how arts councils, as public-sector organizations, allocate funding. Of note, there is very limited academic research on independent municipal arts councils, a gap in the literature to which this study aims to contribute. Then, there is a review of the literature on the strategic planning process itself, offering a history and overview of the organizational practice, what the process typically encompasses and how strategic plans are used, its various benefits and drawbacks, and a reflection on its value specifically for public-sector organizations. Building off this, the importance of public-sector organizations making decisions—inherent in the strategic planning process—with values and ethics in mind is explored. By reviewing the literature that exists, pulling from various sectors and various thinkers, the goal is to provide a picture of why these independent municipal arts council undertake the strategic planning process, what the process can look like, and how the finalized plan can impact the organization. Importantly, there is next to no academic research focused on municipal arts councils and strategic planning. This study, therefore, aims to begin filling this gap in the literature.

In order to answer the research question, this study is furthered by two strands of empirical work: a review of strategic plans at five independent municipal arts councils and the conduct and analysis of ten semi-structured interviews with individuals who were part of and/or impacted by their arts council's most recent strategic planning process. This makes up the third part of the research paper. The strategic plans themselves offer insight into what the process can

yield and the interviews provide information that cannot be learned simply by reading the plans. Through all of this work, the aim is to fill a gap in the literature on municipal arts councils and strategic planning and to offer the arts community valuable knowledge that can be reflected upon for the future. A conclusion, including avenues for future research, wraps up the paper.

Methodology

In addition to the literature review noted above, this research employs two empirical methods. First, published strategic plans of five independent municipal arts councils—Calgary Arts Development, Conseil des arts de Montréal, Edmonton Arts Council, Toronto Arts Council, and Winnipeg Arts Council—were analyzed to better assess how these organizations have put their deliberations onto paper. These arts councils were chosen as they are the biggest ones that fit the description of an arm's-length organization that exists to financially support artists and arts organizations, the focus of this paper. (For more on the definition of independent municipal arts councils, see the section "Arts Councils and Canadian Society" in Part Two.) Studying the documents themselves offered insight into what plans look like and how they can communicate an organization's values and priorities. Second, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the strategic planning process at independent municipal arts councils, how decisions around priorities get made, and the impact of the plans, qualitative data was gathered through confidential and anonymous face-to-face (virtual) semi-structured interviews with leaders, staff, and board members at three independent municipal arts councils. Piggybacking off of Dick et al.'s (2019) argument that "organizations (including municipalities) do not really make decisions—people do. Therefore, to understand organizations, we must examine the individual actors within them" (p. 9), speaking to individuals involved in the decisions that get made around

strategic planning at arts councils provided a greater understanding of the process, as well as the plans themselves.

The orientation towards primarily qualitative research is grounded in the reality that this kind of data sourcing "allows for an understanding of how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their words, and what meaning they attribute to their experience" (D'Andrea, 2017a, p. 16), which is valuable in this case given that the strategic planning process is deliberative in nature and likely filled with nuances experienced uniquely by each person involved. In particular, interviews with open-ended questions give participants the freedom to elaborate on their answers as much as necessary to provide rich, full accounts of their experiences and beliefs (Singleton & Straits, 2017), while a structured questionnaire would limit the possible answers participants could share (see Langley, 1988). Face-to-face (virtual) interviews give researchers the opportunity to interpret body language and eye contact, which can influence the direction of the conversation, including if they want to probe for more on certain topics or move onto the next question (D'Andrea, 2017a).

While there are not an infinite number of independent municipal arts councils across Canada, there are more than could be focused on for interviews here. Three were chosen for this part of the research, which allowed different viewpoints from arts councils of different sizes and various regions; it was also what was feasible without compromising quality, given the scope of a major research paper. In order to create a space where interviewees felt comfortable to be as candid as possible, the interviews were confidential and anonymous, which means that arts councils are not named and interviewees' identities are anonymous. Due to the small sample size and keeping confidentiality and anonymity in mind, interviewees are identified by a participant number—one through ten—and are not connected to their arts council. (For a copy of the Ethics

Approval Notice Certificate from the University of Ottawa's Office of Research Ethics and Integrity, see Appendix A: Ethics Approval Notice.)

In terms of the interview's direction, the focus was on the most recent strategic planning process the interviewee was part of, however, if the interviewee had been part of previous processes they were welcome to speak to those experiences as well. An interview guide was created (Appendix B: Interview Guide), and was adapted based on the individual being interviewed and as the interview process progressed. The interviews covered topics such as what the strategic planning process looks like, including which stakeholders are engaged and how; what factors influence the process, including governmental priorities; challenges, including what happens when there are differing opinions on the priorities to be chosen; how plans get finalized; and if and how plans get used and adapted over time. Between one and five individuals who took part in or were privy to their organization's most recent strategic planning process were interviewed per arts council—including senior executives, staff members, and members of the board of directors—for a total of ten interviews; this diversity of voices offered a variety of perspectives on the process. The CEO/director in charge of the most recent strategic planning process was contacted first, per publicly available information (see Appendix C: Recruitment Text), and interviewed, and then snowball sampling was used to gather names of others who could be interviewed; in one case, the CEO/director told me no one else could feasibly be interviewed. Rather than aiming for a representative sample that would yield generalizable results, the intention was to learn as much as possible about how specific arts councils go about their individual strategic planning process, making connections and drawing insights from there. With the participants' consent, interviews were recorded to transcribe and refer back to.

The qualitative data was analyzed using an approach based in grounded theory. According to Timonen et al. (2018), grounded theory is a "concept- and theory-generating methodology" (p. 6), most commonly used with qualitative interviews, where researchers must always "try to elucidate and explain all or parts of a process or phenomenon under study" (p. 8); Glaser and Strauss, who coined the term, note it is about "generating theories based on the 'emergence' of theoretical categories through a constant comparisons between groups sampled on theoretic" (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 169). While grounded theory has different strands, one common element is the researcher's approach being open to discovering new findings (Timonen et al., 2018). Inspiration was also taken from D'Andrea's (2017a) thesis, where she examines the peer-review process at arts councils. D'Andrea used the constant comparative model, a method used in grounded theory, for her analysis, which "advances coding, categorization, and conceptualization" (Timonen et al., 2018, p. 7) by "taking one piece of data (such as one interview, theme, or statement) and comparing it to all the other responses from the participants" (D'Andrea, 2017a, p. 10; see also Durrer et al., 2019), as well as discourse analysis, which allowed her to capture participants' way of using language. The interview transcripts for this research were manually coded, starting with line-by-line coding, per grounded theory, which can "distill and conceptualize" the data (Charmaz, 2015, p. 1616), and the analysis began immediately following the first interview. As the data was being coded on a rolling basis, common themes and ideas were pinpointed and then compared with the new data coming in. Conclusions were drawn based on the findings. All citations included have been reviewed by participants for accuracy of meaning and transcription.

This research study has a few limitations. First, because snowball sampling was used and a limited number of individuals were interviewed, inferences and generalizations about the

strategic planning process at independent municipal arts councils across the country cannot be made. Rather, the analysis offers a snapshot of how some of these councils go about this work and the impact of their plans. Second, the nature of semi-structured interviews allows for the possibility of bias being introduced into the study, including social desirability bias, or the desire on the part of the interviewees to respond to questions in ways they assume is desired.

Arts and culture are what make cities vibrant, and in a world filled with many competing priorities that deserve consideration, as well as the need for arts and cultural experiences to reflect the values of our diverse societies, understanding the tools that are used to decide who and what gets supported is necessary—including strategic planning. This report has the intention of contributing valuable knowledge to the literature on strategic planning as an organizational practice, specifically as it relates to independent municipal arts councils.

Part Two: Literature Review

Arts Councils and Canadian Society

The first part of this section offers a brief overview of arts councils, identifies the specific kind of arts council this study focuses on, and summarizes the research this study is positioned in relation to. The second part showcases how these arts councils, as arm's-length public-sector organizations, are situated vis-à-vis government and the public, including how the diverse environment arts councils are situated within influences their operations. The final part examines the arts council's main role as a funder and explains who decisions get made by and how. All of this provides context for understanding the subsequent analysis of the strategic plans and the interviews.

Overview and research focus

Arts councils in Canada exist at the federal, provincial, and municipal level. In general—and in this research's definition—they are funding bodies for their region's artists and arts organizations, run by staff and governed by a volunteer board of directors, accountable to government, and often including committees made up of artists and cultural workers (see D'Andrea, 2017b). At the federal level the arts council (Canada Council for the Arts) is a Crown Corporation and at the provincial level arts councils are agencies of their governments (see Chong & Bogdan, 2010). At the municipal level, however, the organizations that call themselves "arts councils" are sometimes associated with the government, as independent arm's-length bodies, but not all fit this description. While some mimic provincial arts councils, "which are particularly dedicated to supporting professional artists and arts organizations through grants and scholarships" (author's translation of Saint-Pierre, 2006, p. 524), others are "small organizations, often with modest budgets, relying heavily on the energy of volunteers and promoting primarily community-based and educational cultural activities" (p. 541). For example, the Hamilton Arts Council does not offer grants (Hamilton Arts Council, 2020), and the Community Arts Council of Vancouver is not an arm's-length government entity (Community Arts Council of Vancouver, 2023); the City of Vancouver (2023) disburses their own funds for artists and arts organizations.

This paper focuses on independent arm's-length municipal arts councils that fund individuals and organizations. Arm's-length bodies are non-ministerial organizations separate from government (Boswell, 2018; Hillman Chartrand & McCaughey, 1989), which "keep political and social concerns separate from decision-making, eliminating pressure from certain sectors related to the public or government" (Santini, 2013, p. 15; see also Durrer et al., 2019; Hillman Chartrand & McCaughey, 1989; Lowell & Ondaatje, 2006; Upchurch, 2016); this is notable in the arts and culture sector as many people believe government should not be involved

in what gets supported (Santini, 2013). The structure "is the basis of a general system of 'checks and balances' deemed necessary in a pluralistic democracy to avoid undue concentration of power and conflict of interest" (Hillman Chartrand & McCaughey, 1989, p. 7). Arm's-length bodies are often seen as more efficient and effective in service delivery (Buttazzoni et al., 2019). Their positionality allows them to create their own strategic plans for their operations, rather than be part of the municipal government's more general strategic plan or cultural plan; however, in some cases, there is overlap (see, for example, Edmonton Arts Council, 2018; Winnipeg Arts Council, 2018).

Little has been published on independent municipal arts councils. Articles have been written about provincial and federal arts councils (Dewing, 2013; Gattinger, 2017; Vanasse, 2001; Vigeant, 2001) moreso than municipal ones (though see Saint-Pierre, 2006), and there is often an emphasis on peer-reviewing and the disbursement of funding (D'Andrea, 2017a; D'Andrea, 2017b; Fournier & Misdrahi, 2014; Misdrahi, 2015; Misdrahi Flores, 2013), the arm's-length structure itself (Santini, 2013), or the history of the arts council in general (Upchurch, 2016). Studies have also been undertaken on other kinds of provincial and federal arts and culture involvement and implications, such as on cultural policy (Gattinger et al., 2008; Saint-Pierre & Gattinger, 2021) and equity-related topics (Brunette, 2020). Further, research has been published on artists and arts support in various cities (Boustany, 2019; Dubuc, 2021; Reid, n.d.), and there are also reports published or commissioned by independent municipal arts councils that reinforce their values and visions (see, for example, Conseil des arts de Montréal, 2016; Hill, 2013) or the needs and realities of their sector and/or stakeholders (Léger, 2019). Sometimes, cities publish reports of consultations they have had with their primary stakeholders (see, for example, MASS LBP, 2013). For cities without arm's-length arts councils, the

municipalities themselves often publish cultural plans (City of Regina, 2016; City of Saskatoon, 2018; City of Vancouver, 2020; City of Victoria, 2017) and sometimes progress reports, providing updates on those same plans (City of Vancouver, 2022; City of Victoria, 2022). While there does exist plenty of related research at the municipal level—such as research on cultural planning (Baeker, 2005; Dick et al., 2019; Kovacs, 2010; McVay, 2014) and reports on arts and cultural funding (Bell & Stolarick, 2008)—the literature on the actual functioning of independent municipal arts councils is slim. This research is positioned vis-à-vis what exists in the overall literature landscape of arts and culture support at all levels of government.

Arts councils' positioning in Canada

As arm's-length organizations, independent arts councils have a high level of autonomy in their decision-making. Technically, they are allowed to pursue paths and make choices that make sense to them and the community they operate primarily in service of, which is the arts community. However, some scholars have noted that governments do influence arts councils in some capacity (Brunette, 2020; Fatona, 2011). D'Andrea (2017b) states that while the government decides "what the mandate and budget of an arts council will be (…) the arts council is free to decide who and what it will fund without political interference" (p. 245). She further reports that, throughout history, the government has interfered "if councils resist abiding by its agenda" (p. 246). This reality places the arts council as a middleman between two groups whose desires don't always overlap (Brunette, 2020), as governmental priorities and visions don't necessarily align with those of the arts community. (To make no mention of the public who consume the art.) Arts councils, though, can't stray too far from governmental priorities, given that they depend on the state for funding (D'Andrea, 2017b). In the UK, for example, "conflict has arisen in protecting its 'arm's length' status from government who see it as their prerogative

to shape the arts to the current social policy preoccupations" (Tattersall, 2018, p. 228). When it comes to creating strategic plans, it has been argued that arts councils' priorities have to at least somewhat reflect those of the government (D'Andrea, 2017b). In some cases, the strategic plans at arts councils make specific reference to aligning their plans with those of the municipality they are part of (see, for example, Calgary Arts Development, 2018).

As will be detailed shortly, part of the strategic planning process includes engaging stakeholders. For an independent arts council, the primary stakeholder is the arts community. However, this community is not a monolith—each person who is part of it has their own customs, interests, history, lived experience, and values. As a report from Resonance Creative Consulting Partners (2008) notes, in diverse cities "communities and social structures are never homogenous and rarely is there consensus about their development" (p. 12). However, arts councils need to do their best to consider the wide diversity of viewpoints and opinions as they work in service of this community, including during the strategic planning process when they are choosing priorities and values for their strategic plan.

Historically, the cultural sphere in Canada has been inequitable (Fatona, 2011; Paquette et al., 2017), and in multicultural societies, like Canada, "there is a risk that a dominant group imposes its own – dominant – conception of identity" (Paquette et al., 2021, p. 72). The arts and culture sector, though, is filled with artists from all backgrounds and walks of life, many of whom have long advocated for equity and inclusion in arts funding. This began in earnest in the mid-1980s, when "artists of colour and First Nations artist [*sic*] formed coalitions and organized separately to advance their cause" (Fatona, 2011, p. 95), and continues to this day. While the state espouses the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion (Ashley et al., 2021), there is a need for it to uphold these values. The arts offer a strong opportunity for doing so, and independent

arts councils play a role in that process through the decisions they make. This is not easy at any level. For example, Guylaine Normandin, the former director of the Canada Council for the Arts' theatre section, has deemed it complex to "address all inequities" and "dream of a perfect system where systemic barriers do not exist" (Teitel, 2016, p. 15). Despite this, independent arts councils are increasingly interested in working towards equity (see, for example, Toronto Arts Council, n.d.; Winnipeg Arts Council, 2020), and one way they can live up to this is through their strategic planning processes and the plans themselves.

The disbursement of funding at arts councils

One main role for arts councils is to disburse funding to artists and arts organizations. When it comes to the actual granting process, though, the arts council is not the one actively allocating resources. Decision-making is typically done by peer-review committees comprised of artists who know the landscape and deliberate thoughtfully over the allocation of funds on the basis of merit; they are experts in their disciplines, each with their own understanding of and appreciation for the art form, as well as their own values and subjective opinions (D'Andrea, 2017b; Gattinger, 2017; Rushton, 2002; see also Hammonds & Bhandal, 2011; Lewandowska & Smolarska, 2020). Impartiality and objectivity are of utmost importance (Fournier & Misdrahi, 2014). However, it is argued to not all be down to the committee's subjectivity. Even though applications are evaluated primarily on merit, the deliberations and decisions themselves can be guided by arts councils' strategic plans; in some cases, at the beginning of the evaluation sessions, a grant officer reminds jurors of these priorities (D'Andrea, 2017b).

While peer reviewing is a norm in the arts funding world, lying "at the heart of the arm's length arts council" (Hillman Chartrand & McCaughey, 1989, p. 5), there do exist concerns that peer reviewers may be opportunistic, may make decisions not entirely honestly (Rushton, 2002),

or may “reinforce selective elitist and heritage-driven perspectives of culture and artistic output” (Hammonds & Bhandal, 2011, pp. 197–198). It has further been noted that the diversity of the evaluators and their interpretations of the funding proposals makes the evaluation of submissions complicated (Fournier & Misdrahi, 2014). This worry is based in history. In Canada, the early days of arts-based state funding “produced practices of imagining, shaping, and narrating the fledgling Canadian nation as white, modern, and European [which] produced a system of exclusionary arts funding practices that persist to this day” (Fatona, 2011, p. 63).

Governmental agencies are “bound by their mandate to give reasons for their decisions in terms that are amenable to review and public scrutiny” (Eriksen, 2021, p. 789), a notion that could extend itself to arm’s-length arts councils. This would include funding decisions as well as other choices arts councils make. Against this backdrop, strategic plans are intended to be useful tools to ensure an arts council’s priorities—which should be democratic in nature, given the council’s positionality—are embodied in their decisions, funding or otherwise. However, this is only possible if strategic planning addresses the individual and institutional biases at the root of the process.

Strategic Planning and the Strategic Plan

The first part of this section details the history of strategic planning as an organizational practice as well as provides an overview of the process. The second part offers a description and the uses of the strategic plan itself. The third looks at the benefits and drawbacks of strategic planning and the finalized plans. The final section examines strategic planning and strategic plans specifically in relation to public-sector organizations. Together, the subsections aim to provide a clear picture of both the process and the final document.

History and description of strategic planning

Strategic planning is a common organizational practice with roots in the private sector; researchers began looking into strategy and strategy formulation at private corporations in the 1950s and 1960s (Bryson, 2015; Grant, 2003; Hendrick, 2003). While it has been said that the public sector began taking part in strategic planning exercises in the 1980s, in particular related to military and statecraft activities (Bryson et al., 2018; see also Bryson, 2015), it has also been noted that strategic planning existed under other names and forms prior to then (George et al., 2019). However, it became more common practice in the public sector thanks to the New Public Management (NPM) reforms, which came about in the 1980s to "make public sector organizations – and the people working in them! – much more 'business-like' and 'market-oriented'" (Diefenbach, 2009, p. 893). The assumption was that because certain practices worked for businesses, they would be beneficial to government (Hendrick, 2003), so the public sector began borrowing management practices that helped corporations perform better, under the assumption that it would benefit them as well (George et al., 2019). Today, strategic planning—which requires substantial resources from organizations—has become engrained as an organizational tool in the public sector (Davenport & Leitch, 2005), existing as one of the most common ones organizations utilize (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011; Wolf & Floyd, 2017).

Importantly, strategic planning is not one specific thing. An "ambitious undertaking" (McHatton et al., 2011, p. 243), requiring a substantial amount of resources, it helps organizations clarify and articulate their values, goals, and objectives; develop targets and performance measurements; and allocate resources (Galloway, 1990; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011; Stone & Brush, 1996). It has been called "structured problem solving by a group of individuals rather than one person" (Hendrick, 2003, p. 493) and often includes engaging with key stakeholders, both inside and outside the organization, to better understand what priorities

need to be focused on in order for an organization to better meet its mission (Giffords & Dina, 2004). As strategic planning is used to "influence an organization's strategic direction for a given period and to coordinate and integrate deliberate as well as emerging strategic decisions" (Wolf & Floyd, 2017, p. 1758), the process itself can act as a consensus-building activity among members of an organization (Abdallah & Langley, 2014).

While different organizations go about the strategic planning process in various ways that make most sense for their individual realities (George et al., 2019), there are several typical stages to the process in order to ensure the decisions made are informed. Wright (2020) lists seven commonly used steps: 1) developing a mission and vision statement, 2) conducting a strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results (SOAR) analysis, 3) drafting a plan, 4) receiving feedback on the plan, 5) revising the plan based on the feedback, 6) publishing the plan and communicating it with stakeholders, and 7) monitoring the plan. It is important to note that many organizations have existing mission and vision statements, as well as a list of values their organization embodies, and not all follow a SOAR analysis prior to drafting their plan, though they might undertake other analyses, such as a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis (see Bryson et al., 2018; Hendrick, 2003). Elsewhere, it has been argued that the formulation of strategy can be "subdivided into three components: analysis of the current situation, environmental analysis and the assessment and selection of strategic options" (Galloway, 1990, p. 8).

Strategic planning requires collaboration among those involved in the process, a process that values "the knowledge, skills, and perspectives of all stakeholders" (McHatton et al., 2011, p. 236). Creating space for stakeholder participation in the process has been deemed crucial to finding consensus on priorities (McHatton et al., 2011; Wolf & Floyd, 2017), however,

Eisenberg (1984) argued that consensus is not the answer; rather, the focus should be on "the development of strategies which preserve and manage these differences" (p. 231). Either way, this regard for collaboration means that many organizations connect with outside stakeholders prior to the drafting of their plans (Bryson et al., 2018), something that is particularly necessary in public-sector organizations (Hendrick, 2003), including arts councils (Upchurch, 2016). That said, research from Resonance Creative Consulting Partners (2008) notes that engaging with stakeholders is not an easy task, as there are various reasons why citizens may feel disconnected and not want to participate. Giffords and Dina (2004) assert that the strategic planning process should be conducted by a team comprised of individuals from the board of directors, management, and line staff, but also in consultation with clients, volunteers, community members, and even potentially funders. For public-sector organizations, this can include the more general public, as they will be impacted by the organization's decisions. In the earlier stages of drafting the strategic plan, incorporating comments from a variety of stakeholders is "useful in validating the results of the process and ensuring credibility of the results" (Wright, 2020, p. 45). Plans go through multiple iterations and approvals before getting finalized (George et al., 2019), and the end product emphasizes appropriate strategies, sometimes based on articulated actions or targets, that organizations can follow in order to achieve their goals and tackle problems that arise (see, for example, Conseil des arts de Montréal, 2022; Edmonton Arts Council, 2018). The final plan is ultimately reviewed and signed-off on by executives and the board of directors (Wright, 2020).

The strategic plan acts as a "vision for the organization's future that may change as time goes on and new information about the market and stakeholders emerge" (Wright, 2020, p. 47). This is important, as changes in the internal and external environment will bring about new

tensions and priorities that need addressing (Galloway, 1990). Therefore, strategic planning is a recurring process that typically is undertaken anew just prior to when the plan's set timeframe ends. As Abdallah and Langley (2014) articulate, this does not mean an earlier version of the strategic plan failed, just that "another cycle of strategizing and rethinking may be needed, perhaps using a different approach" (p. 263). While it might seem like shorter timeframes for plans are ideal, given how uncertain the future actually is (Mintzberg, 1994a), organizations go through the strategic planning process at different timeframes; as noted, at arts councils, the process is, for some organizations, done every three years, while at others it is done every ten years (see, for example, Calgary Arts Development, 2018; Conseil des arts de Montréal, 2022; Edmonton Arts Council, 2018; Toronto Arts Council, 2016; Winnipeg Arts Council, 2018). While it is possible that plans will change drastically each iteration, findings from a study on Arts Council England indicate they are typically more incremental than radical (Tattersall, 2018).

Description and uses of the strategic plan

The tangible outcome of a strategic planning process is the strategic plan, which details "concrete strategies, goals, and plans aimed at addressing strategic issues" (George et al., 2019, p. 812). Some scholars have wondered if it is a document used to guide organizations in future decision-making or a document that communicates the values and goals of an organization to their stakeholders (Abdallah & Langley, 2014), while others have questioned whether it is procedural or functional (Bryson et al., 2018). Effectively, it can be all of the above. Bryson et al. (2018) note it "consists of a set of concepts, procedures, tools, and practices that combine in different ways to create a variety of approaches to being strategic" (p. 320) and helps those in the public sector "decide what their organizations should be doing, why, and how" (p. 319).

Strategic plans have multiple uses, including acting as a document that provides internal direction and one that is used as a communications tool (Langley, 1988; see also Goransson & Fagerholm, 2018). As functional documents, strategic plans can act as implementation guides for organizations to meet their objectives (Langley, 1988), reminding staff members of the organization's unified vision as they go about making decisions in their day-to-day work (Wright, 2020). They can also help organizations allocate their resources in a way that best aligns with their objectives (McHatton et al., 2011). Moreover, there is the chance that strategic plans act as sources of motivation for employees, as staff members may be galvanized by an organization that "promotes a strong image and has a good reputation" (Melewar et al., 2006, p. 140), which can be done through the strategic plan. However, the degree to which they are used in practice has been debated; for example, findings from one study about a cultural organization show that while some staff members used the strategic plan as a tool to implement strategy, many staff members did not use it in their day-to-day activities, with some calling the document "irrelevant" or "not a prescription document" (Abdallah & Langley, 2014, p. 254). Strategic planning and the plans that get generated, though, also exist for symbolic reasons (Wolf & Floyd, 2017), for example representing the values of an organization rather than acting as a document that indicates where the organization is headed (Abdallah & Langley, 2014). They can also be used by organizations as a way to communicate the organization's strategy and priorities externally (Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011); when an organization presents its curated identity to the public, it can garner support from a diversity of stakeholders (Melewar et al., 2006). Langley (1988) argues that for public-sector organizations especially, the public-relations angle—plans as communications tools—is likely a motivator (see also Davenport & Leitch, 2005); similarly, Abdallah and Langley (2014) note that in this

environment the plan "can also play important roles in the legitimation of the organization and its strategy with external stakeholders" (p. 236). This does not mean that the plan is necessarily used for virtue signalling—though it could be—but that it might be an important document in informing stakeholders outside the organization about their priorities so stakeholders can help the organization attain them (Mintzberg, 1994b). Importantly, the way strategic plans are designed—the writing, the visuals, the overall presentation—matters: it influences how various stakeholders respond, whether they ignore a plan or fully embrace it, or anything in between (Wolf & Floyd, 2017; see also Bryson et al., 2018); that said, the meaning stakeholders make of the published plan will be different for everyone, because interpretation is based on social context as well as each person's unique experience (Goransson & Fagerholm, 2018). Finally, sometimes an organization produces a strategic plan simply because organizations similar to theirs have done so, which can "enhance an organization's external legitimacy or support" (Bryson et al., 2018, p. 319); a parallel can be made between Dick et al.'s (2019) research finding that "municipalities are also influenced by other municipalities ('horizontal shaping') because of the pressure on managers to adopt what are perceived to be 'best practices'" (p. 9) and how independent arts councils—existing at arm's-length from municipalities—behave.

In theory, strategic plans can also be used for accountability reasons. As Jeannotte et al. (2019) state: "those involved in strategic planning should have mechanisms to: 1) understand the current state; and 2) track progress in achieving the objectives of their plan" (p. 17). At times, measurement and evaluation criteria are incorporated into a strategic plan, though this is not guaranteed. However, by including specific or even vague goals in a strategic plan, organizations are, in a way, holding themselves accountable, as stakeholders can inquire how the plan is unfolding and compare the actual results with what was stated. Furthermore, while some

organizations may find it difficult to include specific measurements related to their priorities in their plans (Bryson et al., 2018), establishing evaluation metrics and then subsequently monitoring and evaluating progress can help an organization achieve their objectives (McHatton et al., 2011), as well as inform their future planning processes and plans (Giffords & Dina, 2004). Ideally, the monitoring and evaluation of the plan's objectives should be done at regular intervals, using the metrics decided upon during the planning process (Wright, 2020). When it comes to the arts sector, it has been noted that measuring culture is not necessarily a simple task (Jeannotte et al., 2019), which is perhaps why not all arts councils include clear measurement goals or evaluation frameworks in their strategic plans (see Calgary Arts Development, 2018; Conseil des arts de Montréal, 2022; Edmonton Arts Council, 2018; Toronto Arts Council, 2016; Winnipeg Arts Council, 2018).

Benefits and drawbacks

The value of strategic planning and strategic plans has oft been debated, with many researchers highlighting various benefits and drawbacks of the process. For example, whether or not strategic planning and strategic plans promote flexibility is a major point of contention. Wolf and Floyd (2017) argue that strategic plans can be used as guides for "flexible development" (p. 1768), while Arend et al. (2017) stress that strategic plans are rigid documents that are, by design, inflexible (see also Grant, 2003). This is underscored by Bryson et al. (2018), who wrote that there is a "widely held view that strategic planning is typically too formal, rigid, and analytic to be useful" (p. 322), and is similarly shown in George et al. (2019), who note that "frameworks hold that [strategic planning] is overly rational, planned, and fixed" (p. 812) and that organizations "require more flexible, ongoing methods of strategy formulation that are particularly open to emerging strategies rather than planned, deliberate strategies" (p. 812).

One of the earliest arguments against strategic planning comes from Henry Mintzberg, who argues that strategic planning "does not equal or necessarily contribute to strategic thinking" (George et al., 2019, p. 811; see also Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011), an idea that was supported by Stone and Brush (1996), who underscore how the rigidity of strategic planning impedes strategic thinking. An evolution of this rational leads to the argument that plans might not actually be incorporated into the fabric of an organization in a real way, becoming "nothing more than window dressing" (Galloway, 1990, p. 21). Furthermore, George et al. (2019) note that "the politicized and adaptive contexts of public organizations have been argued to militate against its effectiveness" (p. 811). Another issue that can arise centres on the fact that those involved in the process are biased—as everyone is—and that bias can influence the priorities each individual favours for the organization, which can "breed political resistance, if only from people who represent other beliefs" (Mintzberg, 1994a, p. 15).

Despite Mintzberg's hesitations, he also asserts that planning, as an organizational practice, "brings order to strategy, putting it into a form suitable for articulation to others in the organization" (Mintzberg, 1994b, p. 23). It can contribute to the stability of an organization as well as how an organization manages change (Wolf & Floyd, 2017) and can give stakeholders a clearer picture of what an organization stands for (Stone & Brush, 1996), both in the formulation of the plan through stakeholder participation and through the final product (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011). Finally, it can arguably act as a "framework for adaptation" (Wolf & Floyd, 2017, p. 1768), help organizations tackle "intractable social and economic problems" (Bryson et al., 2018, p. 323), and can lead to improved organizational performance and the implementation of strategy (Bryson et al., 2018; see also George et al., 2019).

Strategic planning at public-sector organizations

Given that this paper focuses on strategic planning at independent municipal arts councils accountable to government, it is worthwhile to briefly distinguish the different ways strategic planning is undertaken and utilized in the public sector versus the private sector, in order to properly frame the forthcoming analysis. Public-sector organizations are often more focused on values and ethics than private-sector ones (Diefenbach, 2009), and their goals are often "more vague, ambiguous, and complex" (Hendrick, 2003, p. 498). When it comes to strategic planning, the aim of public-sector organizations is more geared towards "continuity of effort, and performance-related effectiveness" (Bryson et al., 2018, p. 318), whereas in private-sector companies it is often done with the aim of maximizing profit or market share (Bryson et al., 2018). Public-sector organizations also exist in a political environment more so than private-sector ones (Hendrick, 2003), which affects their operations, and there is also the concern that, at public-sector organizations, the high levels of bureaucracy and numerous rules might impede the strategic planning process (George et al., 2019; Hendrick, 2003).

Public-sector organizations have the mandate of creating value for the public (Bryson, 2004). As mentioned earlier, this means that, moreso than companies in the private sector, public-sector organizations, including arm's-length bodies, are targets for public scrutiny (Eriksen, 2021; see also Galloway, 1990), and they should be in conversation with their stakeholders around how they can distribute their resources and manage their operations "in a way that will create the most value" (Bunting, 2018, p. 323). For this reason, a public-sector organization might feel pressure from the public and as if their strategic planning processes require outside participation (Hendrick, 2003). Davenport and Leitch (2005) write about how government agencies have a larger number of stakeholders whose interests they need to consider than private-sector organizations, and that due to the political environment these organizations

"must be seen to give due consideration to the diverse aspirations of their stakeholders" (p. 1604); while Davenport and Leitch are speaking specifically about research funding bodies, a parallel can be made to arts councils. Indeed, Lowell and Ondaatje (2006), writing about state arts agencies in the United States, note that involving stakeholders in strategic planning helps them "assess constituent needs and thereby meet them more effectively" (p. 10).

The need for public-sector organizations to consider their publics necessitates a look at how diverse, pluralistic settings influence strategic planning. As Spee and Jarzabkowski (2011) emphasize, "the construction of a text is a recursive process, in which the context of text production – its talk, purpose, participants and setting – shapes the text" (p. 1221). As mentioned earlier, Canada is made up of a large diversity of people, each with their own ways of living, values, and desires—a pluralistic society—whereas organizational strategy is "a sustainable compromise among competing values" (Denis et al., 2007, p. 193). While all organizations are at least somewhat pluralistic in nature (Denis et al., 2007), public-sector organizations exist in these contexts to a greater degree, "shaped by the divergent goals and interests of different groups inside and outside the organization" (Jarzabkowski & Fenton, 2006, p. 631). More specifically, the way Canada funds arts and culture is pluralistic at all three levels of government (Santini, 2013). Involving the public in strategic planning processes gives these stakeholders a feeling of ownership, as they can share the issues they find most pressing and influence solutions, a process that has the added benefit of reducing skepticism about the organization (Bryson et al., 2018). However, organizations must do their best to not have this involvement be surface-level or risk it being deemed shallow and/or elitist (Bryson et al., 2018). It is also important to note that, just as external environments change, the priorities of the public will change over time (Jarzabkowski &

Fenton, 2006), which necessitates the updating of the strategic plan on a regular or semi-regular basis.

The varying interests of the public can lead to tensions when it comes to strategic planning and choosing priorities (Jarzabkowski & Fenton, 2006), and it can be a challenge for decision-makers to "develop texts that can draw together diverse interests" (Abdallah & Langley, 2014, p. 236; see also Denis et al., 2007). This renders the process complex, as it is important that the organization consider how the various stakeholders are involved (George et al., 2019), not to mention who, exactly, is involved (Giffords & Dina, 2004). Choosing which stakeholders to include is also a complex process, not to mention a political and ethical one (Bryson, 2004). In order to go about this in a fair way, and in a way that will lead to public value, it is important that organizations are comprehensive in who they deem to be their stakeholders and to undertake stakeholder analyses in order to best understand the "morally and ethically sound version of the common good to pursue" (Bryson, 2004, p. 47). While tension is a potential outcome, public participation can also lead to improved processes and a stronger final plan (Bryson et al., 2018; see also George et al., 2019), not to mention a document that is seen as legitimate (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011).

As mentioned, for public-sector organizations, the diversity of stakeholders—whether internal or external—means that there will likely be a wide variety of perspectives when it comes to what gets prioritized, as well as how the organization should go about achieving its stated goals (McHatton et al., 2011). Moreover, even if stakeholders have the same ultimate goals—for an arts council, for example, perhaps increasing the diversity of the artists being funded—they may have very different ideas about how to achieve these goals. Each individual might also have a number of goals or views that contradict each other (Eisenberg, 1984), arguably an indication

of values pluralism, which is "the idea that many of the values or ends that we hold dear are incompatible and cannot be reconciled with one another" (Molina & Spicer, 2004, p. 293). This complex reality makes it difficult for public-sector organizations to develop their strategic plans and choose priorities (George et al., 2019), which often leads to what is called strategic ambiguity (Abdallah & Langley, 2014).

It has been argued that ambiguity—being intentionally vague—can help organizations manage the competing demands and various perspectives of stakeholders, which is useful for organizations as they work to arrive at an agreement for their strategic plans (Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Davenport & Leitch, 2005; Jarzabkowski et al., 2010). Moreover, strategic ambiguity allows stakeholders reading the final plans to interpret the stated strategies and goals in a way that aligns with their desires and perspectives; it helps "reconcile needs for cohesion and coordination with the freedom required to ensure flexibility and creativity" and "allows deniability, enabling communicators to maintain consistency and avoid loss of face when circumstances change" (Abdallah & Langley, 2014, p. 237; see also Davenport & Leitch, 2005; Eisenberg, 1984). Another benefit of strategic ambiguity is that it makes it possible for an organization "to deny that certain interpretations were ever intended" (Davenport & Leitch, 2005, p. 1618), should that be necessary. In other words, "ambiguity allows for both agreement in the abstract and the preservation of diverse viewpoints" (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 232). A downside of ambiguity is that it can, over time, lead to confusion, contradiction, and perhaps more work than is necessary (Abdallah & Langley, 2014). Another is that it might make the implementation of the plan difficult; writing about cultural plans, Kovacs (2010) asserts the "vagueness of particular goals and, in particular, … the lack of a specific implementation strategy" (p. 222) is problematic for staff, which could be true for strategic plans as well.

Decision-Making in Public-Sector Organizations

Strategic plans can act as guides to help arts councils make decisions in the day-to-day. When it comes to the actual decision-making that happens in the strategic planning process—for example, choosing what values and priorities will be reflected in the plan—it has been noted that, in the UK, the "selection of strategies depends to a lesser or greater extent on the pattern of strategies selected in the past" (Tattersall, 2018, p. 240). However, there is a healthy degree of debate over the various possibilities as well. The conversation about values and priorities trade-offs in decision-making is especially relevant in the context of public-sector organizations, as these organizations are accountable to their communities, and the communities want to see their values and priorities reflected back to them.

Kernaghan (2003) breaks public-service values into four categories: ethical, democratic, professional, and people. He notes that conflicting values is common in the public sector, and that one of the biggest challenges when writing values statements, which are often part of strategic plans, is "to decide whether values should be included from each category and, if so, which values" (p. 716). As Denis et al. (2007) note, the act of strategizing is "more a task of combining and weighting existing value frames than of shaping them directly" (p. 195) and strategy "takes shape by demonstrating an affiliation or identification with core values that are central for a specific organizational and environmental context" (p. 195). Burke (2000), for his part, argues for "focusing on the individual value orientations of administrative officials and attempting to define them in ways that are consonant with the aims and purposes of democratic government" (p. 612).

Stakeholders, though, have different ideas about what matters most in the context of the organization's future, and they will push for their respective priorities, attempting to "define

dominant organizational values, means and ends" (Stone & Brush, 1996, p. 634) and have their visions included in the strategic plans (Wright, 2020). It is important to remember, too, that it is not only about the values held by those involved in the strategic planning process but also about the values of the organization itself (Giffords & Dina, 2004). Denis et al. (2007) argue that those undertaking the strategizing "must attempt to simultaneously tap into the value systems that reflect key aspects of organizational identity while bridging alternate identities and value systems that are nevertheless inherent to the organization's existence and survival" (p. 209).

There are other stakeholders to consider, too. In order to think democratically, especially considering Canada's diverse society, arts council staff can't make decisions about which values and priorities to include on their own. When it comes to strategic planning, soliciting participation from external stakeholders is just as important as involving internal stakeholders; this allows decision-makers to arrive at solutions that will be most efficient for society (Boisvert, 2008). For Burke (2000), "democratic decision-making essentially requires that those affected by policy be given a chance to participate in its making or otherwise exercise influence in some way" (p. 611). This kind of community involvement "may be able to offer a better environment in which ethical behavior might flourish" (p. 611).

On the one hand, some artists and arts workers believe this is happening. As Cseke, an artist based in Calgary, Alberta, asserts, "our Canadian arts funding bodies love to communicate" (Cseke et al., 2016, p. 34); not only do they host "town hall meetings, open houses, info sessions, and roundtables" (p. 34), they also send out newsletters, alerting recipients to new strategies related to equity, community impact, and other related topics. Lepp (2016), an arts worker based in Toronto, Ontario, has had a similar experience: that arts workers, artists, arts advocates, and volunteers are brought into various planning processes. On the other hand, arguments have been

made that while arts councils say they reach out to the community, there can be a lack of transparency with the greater public about who is being spoken to and what the findings are. On the national scale, for example, in revisiting the Canada Council for the Arts' strategic plan for 2016–2021, Brunette (2020) notes that while the institution stated it had consulted with the community through surveys, the public needed to take their word for it, as neither the survey nor the report of consultations were made publicly available. (This criticism may have struck a chord, as the Canada Council for the Arts (2021) published a *What We Heard Report* about the strategic planning process for its 2021–2026 publication.) In order for communication to work, though—whether with the community or with colleagues—real dialogue needs to be had, meaning that each decision-maker must put aside their own truths and truly listen to others, working to understand where they are coming from (Boisvert, 2008).

When it comes to choosing the values and priorities to include in a strategic plan, given the diversity of perspectives of all stakeholders, how can this be done? In his seminal essay on strategic planning and ethics, Hosmer (1994) laid the groundwork for the importance of incorporating ethics into the process, as it "is the only means available to resolve conflicts in values, goals, and 'projects'" (p. 18). Following an ethical analysis will "determine whether the decisions or actions that either have led or will lead to an expected mixture of benefits and harms are 'right' or 'wrong,' 'just' or 'unjust,' 'fair' or 'unfair'" (Hosmer, 1994, p. 20). Public ethics pushes decision-makers to uphold democratic values like fairness, justice, and the common good, as well as think about social cohesion, balancing the desires of individuals and similar groups alongside the interests of society as a whole (Boisvert, 2008).

Rather than focus on ethics, another approach to decision-making foregrounds moral standards and value judgements. Moral standards or claims are "a matter of personal preference"

(Stewart, 1991, p. 359) or, put another way, the manner in which individuals "intuitively feel about the rightness or goodness of various actions" (p. Hosmer, 1994, p. 23). When it comes to decision-making, though, the idea of "intuition" is debated: some scholars believe it can lead to more creative strategies while others believe strategies chosen this way are inferior to those decided upon by rational processes (Elbanna, 2006). Intuition, which is made up of a "reliance on judgement, reliance on experience and the use of gut feeling" (Elbanna, 2006, p. 10), suggests that individuals simply *know* the right answer, that they have a feeling that drives them in one direction. But what happens when values compete and decision-makers are confronted with conflicting convictions? The worry is that a decision-maker will lack the ability to "evaluate and justify his or her own moral feelings" (Stewart, 1991, pp. 357–358).

This dilemma applies quite well to arts councils and the building of strategic plans. What with all the competing priorities at hand—economic precarity, reconciliation, urban versus rural divides, and more—it's likely both internal and external stakeholders think, *Each one of those values matter* or, at the very least, *Many of those values matter*. So while one decision-maker may feel a strong moral pull in one direction, another might feel pulled the opposite way. On top of this, one of the problems that can arise if strategic planning decisions are made based on morals is that those who occupy positions of power may push their particular principles to the fore (Burke, 2000). Given the complications of relying on intuition and the potentiality of power abuses, there needs to be a more stable decision-making process in place.

For Eriksen (2021), "reasoning in the name of a public institution requires an aspiration to ground decisions on conceptions of value that respect reasonable pluralism of religious and moral views" (p. 790)—and, it could be argued, cultural views. According to Hosmer (1994), value judgements are the "second means most people use to decide what is 'right' and 'just' and

'fair' when confronting a moral problem" (p. 23). These are especially used for more complex dilemmas, and competing issues like reconciliation, sustainability, and the other major issues of the day certainly adds complexity to the strategic planning process. However, there's a wide range of opinions among scholars about which values are most important for public servants to keep in mind when making ethical decisions. Eriksen (2021) offers three main virtues to consider when making decisions—integrity, independence, and inclusiveness—as they allow organizations "to make value judgments in ways that respect reasonable disagreement about political values" (p. 786). There is also the belief that public administrators, in their decision-making, should promote social equity "by redressing the balance of power that exists in civil society which favors the wealthy, the articulate, and the well organized within the core of the state" (Fox, 2000, p. 113).

The arguments for stakeholder involvement and turning to moral standards and value judgements, if not ethics, in the decision-making process are strong. To better understand how the process actually unfolds and what the outcomes are, this research reviewed five independent municipal arts councils' strategic plans and undertook ten interviews with individuals at three independent municipal arts councils across Canada. The following section analyzes the findings.

Part Three: Empirical Findings

Analysis of Municipal Arts Councils' Strategic Plans

Organizations face the challenge of constructing and presenting their identities to internal and external audiences, which can be done through documents that include both language and images (Maier & Andersen, 2014). According to Goransson and Fagerholm (2018), "it is essential to design compelling message tactics for a fortunate strategic communication campaign" (p. 58). Designed and published documents like strategic plans, then, become useful communications tools to achieve this goal, as they convey pertinent information about an

organization's essence. With this in mind, the publicly available strategic plans of five independent municipal arts councils—Calgary Arts Development, Conseil des arts de Montréal, Edmonton Arts Council, Toronto Arts Council, and Winnipeg Arts Council—were reviewed for this analysis. Some of these arts councils have published multiple strategic plans over the years while others have only recently created a full strategic plan for the first time, even though they may have published similar documentation previously. Each published plan is unique, and each arts council presents their values and priorities in their plans in a different way.

All of the most recent plans from the aforementioned arts councils include targets—such as increasing the number of artists being supported, reaching a certain level of donations, or improving access to the arts—though some are more specific, including percentages and dollar amounts (Calgary Arts Development, 2018; Conseil des arts de Montréal, 2022), while others are less so, making statements without quantifying them (Edmonton Arts Council, 2018; Toronto Arts Council, 2016; Winnipeg Arts Council, 2018). Most do not include clear measurement or evaluation frameworks and/or are vague about how and when the targets will be achieved; however, one does offer these specifics (Edmonton Arts Council, 2018). Four plans make explicit connections to their city, stating things like how their plan aligns with the city's priorities (Calgary Arts Development, 2018) or by quoting the city's cultural plan and stating that it guides the arts council's strategic plan (Winnipeg Arts Council, 2018). Two speak of the plan as a "living document" that can be updated over its lifespan (Edmonton Arts Council, 2018; Toronto Arts Council, 2016).

The length and design of strategic plans varies by arts council. For example, the Edmonton Arts Council's (2018) most recent plan is over a hundred pages (including its three accompanying "books," as the arts council calls them) whereas Calgary Arts Development's

(2018) is ten pages. All five recent strategic plans include photos, narratives, and/or graphic design, whereas older strategic plans are often, but not always, less artistically evocative and shorter (see, for example, Calgary Arts Development, 2015; Conseil des arts de Montréal, 2013); this aligns with the notion that visuals "help increase the likelihood that a message is seen/heard, received, understood, and acted on" (Pressgrove et al., 2018, p. 317). Some plans detail the process they undertook to complete the plan (Calgary Arts Development, 2018; Edmonton Arts Council, 2018), whereas others barely mention it (Conseil des arts de Montréal, 2022; Toronto Arts Council, 2016), if at all (Winnipeg Arts Council, 2018). Four of the strategic plans very clearly articulate their organization's values, using bolded or all-capped keywords in succession, as well as their mission and vision; the one that does not (Calgary Arts Development, 2018) arguably still communicates its values through the text and graphics included.

It is clear from reviewing the strategic plans that the strategic planning process does not yield identical documents, which implies that the reasoning behind undertaking them, the process itself, and the impact of the final plans are different across the board.

Interview Analysis Introduction

Interviews were undertaken with ten individuals—organizational leaders (CEO/senior executives), board members, project team members, general staff—involved in and/or impacted by the strategic planning process and strategic plans themselves at three municipal arts councils. Two important notes before diving into the analysis: 1) two of the arts councils produced strategic plans for themselves only, while one produced a strategic plan that also acted as the city's cultural plan, and 2) arts councils use different terminology for similar positions—for example, program manager versus program officer, peer-review committee versus evaluation

committee, action plans versus operating plans—but in this paper one term (the former in each of the aforementioned options) has been chosen and applied in all cases.

Rationale and Value of Strategic Planning and the Strategic Plan

The first part of the research question focused on the rationale behind strategic planning at independent municipal arts councils. Based on the interviews, there seems to be four main reasons these arts councils undertake strategic planning and produce a strategic plan:

1) To establish common objectives and create a guide that can facilitate their achievement, equipping staff to respond to challenges in the sector and uniting and motivating them in their mission
2) To be used as an advocacy tool, helping arts councils better position themselves as the right organization for the city to funnel arts funding through and to encourage an increase in their budget and solidify support for that
3) To demonstrate to artists and cultural workers that the arts council is listening and responding to the sector's needs and working to build a healthier arts community
4) To meet an industry expectation, as other arts councils and arts organizations go through the process and create plans themselves

Value of the strategic planning process and uses of the strategic plan

Digging into the value of the strategic planning process and uses of the strategic plan allows for a greater comprehension of why independent municipal arts councils undertake the work. According to three interviewees, strategic planning is a process that allows for deep reflection and helps answer vital questions about an organization's vision and mission, such as: "Where are we now?" "What are our community's needs?" "Where do we want to go?" "How do we get there?" and "How should each of us be contributing to that aim?" As for the plan itself,

interviewees referred to it as a bible, a touchstone, a roadmap, a lever, a Clarion call, a lighthouse, a dictionary, and the heart of an arts council's work. One leader likened it to the wind that moves the organization's sails. Five people deemed it a communications document, whether an internal-communications tool, a values-communications tool, or a public-relations tool. Two called it a guide. It was also called an advocacy tool, a political tool, a visibility tool, a visioning tool, a work plan, a collective game plan, and an instrument that offers reassurance.

While most people believe there is at least some value in the strategic planning process and finalized strategic plan, opinions were split on the actual usefulness of a strategic plan in a day-to-day capacity. One individual, echoing a finding from the literature review, said they didn't believe in strategic planning but they felt it was necessary: "It's expected. Arts councils as public bodies need to do things that are expected… That is so true of politics or anything with public accountability" (participant 3). Leaders across the board noted it is an expensive and time-consuming process that involves a lot of effort by a lot of people. Ultimately, though, the belief stands—even for the individual who did not believe in the process—that it is a useful endeavour, and that plans can be used for internal, external, and symbolic purposes.

Internal use

As an internal document, strategic plans can be used as a tool for decision-making, as a way to bring staff together and boost morale, and as a benchmark for reporting on achievements. In terms of decision-making, strategic plans can act as functional documents used by staff members to craft their own action plans for their individual work, helping them direct and articulate how they will concentrate their energy, and to communicate with—or be used by—the peer-review committees when they make funding allocation decisions. Whether or not the finalized strategic plan gets used by staff members depends on the organization. At one arts

council, staff turn to the plan regularly, with one individual saying it allows the teams to frame their actions for the year. It was noted twice that every decision that gets made—for example, about whether to partner on an initiative or to offer a new funding avenue—has to be attached to the strategic plan. However, at another arts council, the document holds less influence in the staff's work. It was stated that while theoretically the document is valuable, in practice it is less so, and one person said, "It's been quite laughable to me at how flippant we are about it. It's a huge, missed opportunity" (participant 7). That said, another individual noted that staff sometimes use the strategic plan as a way to advocate for something they want, saying things like, "In line with the strategic plan, [X] would be a good thing" (participant 5).

As for the ability to unite staff, strategic plans can do so by channelling a common vision and common values. This can help "everybody row in the same direction" (participant 6) and is particularly useful for a team that may otherwise work more or less in silos, giving them shared goals to work towards and/or helping instill in them organizational principles. It can also act as an aide for new hires, helping orient them and ensure they are on the same page as everyone else. For any of this to stick, though, there needs to be buy-in from the staff.

Strategic plans, as documents that reflect an organization's values, can also be used in times of crisis. Ideally, when society is faced with major upheaval—a global pandemic, a racial reckoning, a war—the plans should remain useful to an arts council. This, however, was not felt evenly across the interviewees. For one individual, it was true: during the pandemic, the arts council "found resilience and adaptability within the strategy" (participant 10) and was able to pivot. However, a different individual said that while staff members at their arts council see the plan as a document that can help them stay on course when unexpected events occur, when the

pandemic hit and they wanted to turn towards the strategic plan for guidance, leadership apparently replied, “Why would we do that?”

Internal reporting is also a way strategic plans are used. Three leaders noted that they regularly report back to the board using the plan as a benchmark so that the board knows they are following through on their commitments.

External use

Finalized strategic plans also have external value. Six interviewees noted how their arts council’s plan was used more as a public-relations tool than anything else. As an external-facing document, it has several different audiences, including politicians, the arts community, and the general public. Two individuals at different arts councils said their organization’s strategic plan was used for political purposes, as it communicated the arts council’s positioning as the right place for the government to funnel taxpayers’ money in order to build the arts and culture sector, demonstrating their value to the general population as well. In this sense, the document presents the values and vision of the arts council that drive all of its investment decisions.

The arts community itself is one of the main external stakeholders of an arts council, and most everyone interviewed was clear that the finalized document needs to reflect this community. Demonstrating the arts council’s position and values was said to be especially useful for ongoing communication with the sector—a way of noting how the council is building on what they have articulated as their ambitions—and getting buy-in. Consultations with this group of stakeholders done at the outset of the planning process are an important component in this, and the final plan offers transparency around the work an arts council is planning on undertaking in service of the community. It can also be helpful in communications with current and potential

partners as well, including local arts service organizations. In these instances, the plan's priorities can help both parties see where they can work together to have a greater impact in the sector.

Interviewees from two of the three arts councils did not think of the general public as a main stakeholder (the only one that did was the arts council whose strategic plan was going to double as the city's cultural plan), but individuals from both acknowledged that arts councils are public-sector organizations and therefore there is a connection to the general public, especially as it relates to accountability. The most common way this links to strategic plans is through annual reports, which are public-facing documents that are sometimes shaped based on the priorities articulated in the strategic plan. However, not all arts councils use the strategic plan in this way.

Symbolic use

Finally, for one individual, the plan's value was mostly symbolic, in that the strategic planning process was more important than the plan that emerged. The work of determining an arts council's focus "gives you a reference point and can help propel you" (participant 9) and this work shapes the way an organization functions automatically. "You start living it as you're doing it," this person said, even if, once the plan is complete, the organization may not look at it again.

Potential pitfalls

While there are many purported values of strategic planning and the finalized strategic plans, there are also downsides and potential pitfalls. For one, a strategic plan may not actually be used. As one interviewee said, "Depending on who you speak to, either they're great or they're sort of a useless piece of paper that sits in a drawer until the ten years are up or whatever" (participant 6). This is especially problematic given all the money, time, and other resources that are put into the strategic planning process. Given this, one person spoke about the necessity of

being smart about the way the strategic planning process is undertaken, especially given the massive amount of resources involved: “Doing it in a half-assed way or check-the-boxes way, you don’t end up with something that’s of value” (participant 5). Someone else said that if the plan is not what allows staff to make clear decisions then ultimately “it becomes a waste of time” (participant 2). This person also noted that because arts councils are public-sector organizations, the arts council’s plan is open to scrutiny by the arts community and other partners, which aligns with a finding from the literature. Care needs to be taken in the process and plan’s elaboration because if expectations are not met there would be legitimate reason to criticize the arts council.

The Strategic Planning Process

The second part of the research question asked about the strategic planning process itself. In order to arrive at a finalized, publishable strategic plan, arts councils must go through a lengthy and intensive process. As one person said: “That ‘gut feeling’—you can’t just go with that” (participant 1), supporting the literature that argues against intuition. Someone else had the same idea, stating that you do not set out a vision for the next however many years “as if it’s just grown out of your head….. It’s a refinement. It’s a reflection” (participant 3). This process of reflection and refinement can look different for different arts councils, span different lengths of time, and be influenced by a variety of factors to different degrees. However, there are several steps that are consistent, notably choosing a timeframe for the plan, reflecting on the arts council’s current state, discussing the arts council’s values and mission, and undertaking stakeholder consultations, particularly with the arts community. All three arts councils also engaged consultants to help with the process.

Choosing a timeframe

Organizations choose any timeframe they deem appropriate for their strategic plan. Some people believe in shorter-term plans, anywhere from a year to three years, some believe more in longer-term plans, like nine or ten years, and others fall somewhere in the middle. These decisions come from leadership or even the outside firms that are consulted on the process and are based on numerous factors. There are pros and cons to all options.

In this research, the timeframe of the strategic plan for one council was chosen because it aligned with the city's strategic plan, which meant that the strategies articulated could be nested within the larger municipal plan. In other instances, the timeframe was chosen for more practical reasons. Arguments for longer-term plans included the expense and time commitment of the strategic planning process, how longer timeframes allow for expansiveness and aspirations rather than sheer practicality, and how plans are meant to be used to change the arts community, which is "not something that you can do over one, two, or three years" (participant 6). The main argument for shorter-term plans was wanting to stay relevant vis-à-vis the frequently changing sector; longer-term plans "paralyze the organization's development a little bit" (participant 8) because they do not allow for agility. Most interviewees noted the importance of complementing the strategic plan with action plans: granular documents that could be created yearly or every two years to help keep the council on track.

Undertaking an analysis of the arts council's state of affairs

For two of the arts councils in this research, assessing their organization's state of things—their positionality and accomplishments vis-à-vis their previously stated goals, whether in strategic plans or other communications like announcements—was an important early step in the process. This analysis took different shapes—gap analysis, SWOT analysis—and provided information to the arts councils on how they were working well, how they were not working

well, and where they no longer needed to be working. This early work of understanding their impact and how the organization is viewed by the arts sector and the city, as well as how they are positioned in relation to other arts councils, can inform the strategic planning process itself. The consultants that were hired helped create a framework for this reflection.

Articulating values

Values make up "the foundation of a strategic plan" (participant 1). All leaders, as well as most other interviewees, spoke of the importance of clearly articulating their organization's values in the strategic plan. The goals, priorities, and targets that then get chosen are often based on those values and/or reflect those values. Sometimes the values embedded in the strategic plan are carried over from previous plans or other organizational documents, whereas in other cases the deliberation over what to include is part of the strategic planning process itself. Influences can come from a variety of places, for example the organization's culture, external factors (like a global pandemic), or how different stakeholders—the arts community, the government, civil society—view the council and their positioning.

Strategic plans as values documents can, in theory, help staff members when it comes to decision-making. Individuals at each of the three arts councils talked about the importance of staff and leadership embodying the stated values, which then helps with the implementation of the strategic plan. For one arts council, this came from staff developing a system of values and aspirations themselves prior to the elaboration of the strategic plan, which was used by leadership when the priorities for the strategic plan were being set. Other times, this happens on a subconscious level. One interviewee said "there are values that just are evident and absorbed and reiterated" (participant 5) through things like newsletters or on social media, to which staff are privy. Being clear about values is also important for external communications, as it can reassure

stakeholders, especially those in the arts community, about what the organization stands for. One individual said: “Other organizations might question some of our priorities, but if they’re in line with our values, with what we believe, then we can defend them” (participant 2).

The values included in a strategic plan are often vague enough to allow “for a lot of movement” (participant 3). If an arts council uses their strategic plan as a guide when it comes to making big decisions, this vagueness—what the literature calls “strategic ambiguity”—helps the organization adapt to changing circumstances more readily. One interviewee articulated this using Black Lives Matter as an example: “The ability to respond to that would be because the plan sits at a strategic level and because it is so values based” (participant 9). An individual at a different arts council talked about how this ability to pivot can be baked into the plan itself, for example if an organizational value is to be flexible.

Involving stakeholders

In order to make sense of the process, it is important to understand who is, or can be, involved, both internally and externally. As one person said, “Don’t go [into the process] with the plan in your brain before you start, it has to be adapted to the community and all the stakeholders” (participant 5). This multi-level engagement gives the plan credibility. On an internal level, it can include leadership (CEO/senior executives), the board of directors, a project team, and staff. On an external level, it can include the arts community (artists and arts workers), the general public, and city council. In the middle, straddling the internal-external border, is the consulting firm or consultants brought on to facilitate the process.

Internal stakeholders

The decision to undertake a strategic planning process, as well as how the process will unfold and which consultants will be hired, comes from leadership. During the process itself,

leadership is involved to different degrees depending on the arts council. They attend some consultation sessions and take part in many conversations with project team members who are leading the process. They work on revisions of the plan and approve the final draft before it goes to the board of directors for sign-off.

An arts council's board of directors does not necessarily play a major role in the elaboration of a strategic plan. In the early stages of the planning process, and even in an ongoing way disconnected from the strategic plan in general, a board chair may also have larger strategic discussions with leadership around, for example, "anchoring a more permanent place for the council within the municipal political environment" (participant 6), which can potentially influence what gets included in a strategic plan. Board members may also be involved in some consultation sessions. However, it is during the final stages of the process that the role of the board becomes more pointed, as they are asked to give feedback on drafts and must sign off on the final designed document. It is helpful to recognize that, at arts councils, at least some board members are part of the arts community themselves, so they are very much in touch with the community they represent, and some board members are city councillors as well. However, one board chair was clear about the limit of the board's involvement:

> "As chair, I'd be saying, 'At times some of you may feel you are here as a representative. But it doesn't matter, that doesn't matter. That's great if you have that passion and you feel holistically you represent artists, or holistically you represent the citizens…. But when you walk in the door, we are a board of the whole. We serve the organization. And

you're not here to lobby, you're not here to negotiate. You have to declare your conflicts and biases.'"[1]

In two arts councils, the strategic planning process was led by a project team, which in one case was driven entirely by staff members and in another case was a mix of staff at the arts council and other individuals outside the arts council. In both, staff were chosen by leadership to take part. One leader stated that being part of this team was voluntary, however the staff chosen had a different perception of the situation: "There was no call to everyone…. We were kind of parachuted into the committee without any prior conversation about whether we had the time, whether we were interested, whether we were really the right people." Despite leadership insisting the process would be transparent, the reasoning behind who was chosen and why remained cloudy.

Members of the project team brought their own perspectives and experiences to discussions, which has both benefits and drawbacks. Their deep knowledge of the sector can help when it comes to homing in on priorities and noting what or who is missing from drafts, but this has the risk of leading to bias: "With the priorities I brought to the table, for sure they were influenced by my reading of the community, [as well as] our own experiences as employees." This was true, the interviewee said, of everyone involved in the discussions.

At the three arts councils, general staff participated in the strategic planning process at different capacities and different stages. Sometimes, the consultants opened a dialogue with staff on certain topics that ended up informing the priorities and orientations chosen for the strategic plan. For one arts council, it was only after the board approved a near-final version of the

[1] Given that the title of the interviewee is being identified because it's relevant to the context, the interviewee's participant number has not been shared to avoid compromising their anonymity. Any quote without a participant number is done this way for the same reason.

strategic plan that it was brought to the general staff. One interviewee said this was unfortunate because it meant losing out on the full team's collective experience and intelligence, which would have nourished certain discussions around the strategic plan that were "not contentious but were a bit grey" (participant 8). However, one individual said they believed having a project team was somewhat necessary, even if it meant general staff not being involved as deeply as they would have liked, because that kept the process more efficient. At another arts council, one leader shared that, despite regular updates on the plan over the course of the process, staff were not consulted on the majority of the plan and they had expected more involvement. Lack of deep engagement with staff was apparent at the third arts council, too, and was a central point of tension: the process "wasn't as collaborative as I think I would have liked to have seen it" (participant 6). On the whole, leadership's perspective was positive: they recalled staff being invited to participate and see iterations of the plan before it was published.

External stakeholders

For all of the arts councils, engaging with the artists in their community was paramount: "listening to the community is what fuels strategic planning" (participant 8). This is in alignment with general findings from the literature review. One interviewee said that everything their arts council printed could be scrutinized by the community, and "if the council started moving directionally away from what people feel is the need, there would be an uprising" (participant 9). Someone else had a similar take: "If we had not gone out and done consultations with the arts community and invited in grant recipients to be a part of the process, they would have just been pissed and kind of ignored the results" (participant 5). Even though independent municipal arts councils are public-sector organizations, the general public did not always factor in as an important stakeholder in the minds of those interviewed. For one arts council, because their plan

was also being used by the city as a cultural plan, engaging the broader public—beyond artists and cultural workers—was vital. A staff member at a different arts council said they couldn't recall any direct attempts to connect with the public, and that the process was focused more on the arts community writ large. An interviewee at the third arts council responded to the question of general public engagement decisively, saying the general public was not at all a consideration, as the arts council's focus was on the artists.

Arts councils, through their consultants, engaged other stakeholders too, including other arts councils at the municipal level, the provincial level, and the federal level, professional associations, influential cultural workers, and public servants working in culture at the city level. At one arts council, there was a particular focus on engaging Indigenous communities.

Consultants

Hiring consultants was the norm across all three arts councils, and they "provided a lot of input into how to create the discussion forums and the engagement sessions and all of that, which was going to bring forward the information that they would use to put together the strategic plan" (participant 6). Working alongside leadership, consultants took care of many details, including deciding on a timeframe; which stakeholders to reach out to and when; how the consultations would be undertaken, as well as how the data gathered would be analyzed to avoid influence based on individual values; how priorities would be weighted and chosen; and when and how the drafts should be open to feedback. It was important that the consultants had knowledge of and be respected by the arts community and be able to manage the conversations at hand, which would lend credibility to their role and help the arts council avoid blind spots. As one interviewee said, consultants have to be "able to pull things out, able to reflect back to people what they're telling them, so [the stakeholders are] not surprised by the end document" (participant 5).

There was an overall neutral-leaning-positive perception of the consultants. At one arts council, project team members felt that the consultants always kept them abreast of the work they were doing, including sending out summaries at each meeting and circulating drafts for comments. One person noted how the consultants' presence at meetings led to better decision-making outcomes: the consultants had "this ability to perceive the subtext [in a discussion] or pull out elements that we hadn't been exploring deeply" (participant 8). A board chair appreciated how, at the consultation they attended, the consultants threw out thought pieces to get everybody thinking in new ways and enrich the discussions. One interviewee noted that there were lots of opportunities to provide feedback to the consultants, things like: "I think the emphasis is wrong here" or "You've missed the point here." The ability for the consultants to engage intelligently in these discussions was vital—"Sometimes they would say, 'Yes, you're right. We'll reframe that' and sometimes they would say, 'You're not understanding what we meant, maybe the wording needs to be different, but we stand by this as the right point to make'" (participant 5)—and ultimately consensus was achieved through discussion. The ability to have discussions with the consultants, and be heard, was echoed by interviewees at another arts council. In that process, the consultants gathered their data through consultations before presenting the project team with a first draft, after which there was the opportunity for the project team and leadership to provide feedback and discuss possibilities for improvement.

Other factors that influence priorities

Apart from the stakeholder consultations, other elements influence the priorities that get articulated in the strategic plan. One example is previously published documents, which include not only the organization's prior planning documents but also the city's strategic plans and policies, sector surveys and impact reports, and theories of change ("theories of change" are a

tool used to help organizations in their planning). Other influences include internal meetings disconnected from the planning process, such as sector updates with program managers and discussions on internal working mechanisms; the arts council's values and mission, which are sometimes worked on at the beginning of the process but also may have existed prior to it; and what is happening in the world, like COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter.

As arm's-length organizations, municipal arts councils are built to be independent from government, however they are financially supported by government and city councillors sit on their board, which means a connection between the two does exists, and government can have an influence on their decisions. One interviewee said that in general their organization wants to be sure that they "are achieving and working towards what the city needs and sometimes wants" (participant 7). And while this rarely includes explicit directives, it can happen. For example, in 2020, one city dictated that the arts council create a new program for Black artists. At a different arts council, two staff members noted that they also think governmental priorities—at all levels—can be reflected in the arts council's values as well as the priorities chosen; "it's important to stay connected with the urban reality … and if we did it in a way completely disconnected from the governmental priorities, there would be incoherence" (participant 4). However, they do not think anything is imposed. This was reiterated by someone else: "Is it [the government] that dictates [what's chosen]? No! But for sure they influence it" (participant 1).

The general strategic planning process

The strategic planning processes at each arts council have similarities, though not all are the same, notably at the arts council where the plan doubled as a cultural plan for the city. In addition, the processes take different lengths of time, from a few months to almost a year and a half. As one interviewee shared: "It's an intricate dance, isn't it? You've got your values, you

have a sense of what worked, of where you'd like to be, and you've got the stakeholders who have their own ambitions and desires and needs, and then you've got to weave it together" (participant 3).

In general, the first step is leadership deciding on consultants and meeting with them to discuss needs and wants. Then, consultants meet with stakeholders—peer-reviewers, artists and cultural workers, other arts councils, partners, team members—while the arts council works on honing the arts council's values, vision, and mandate, if that has not already been done. In some cases, a measurement framework may be developed for better evaluation of the plan. The consultants develop a draft and bring it back to the council, which the project team and/or leadership review and provide feedback on. Following that, the project team and/or leadership work with the consultants on revisions. During this time, leadership also keeps the board, and sometimes staff, updated. When the plan is almost complete it may be presented to the full staff, who may have the opportunity to provide comments. The finalized plan is approved by leadership and signed off on by the board, and subsequently published. When a strategic plan is doubling as a cultural plan for the city, the city is presented with a draft and later approves the final version. Typically, only after this whole process are action plans created, which usually involve the whole staff. The process is generally collegial and consensus-based.

Decision-making in the process

Consultants play a big role in what decisions get made, because they are the ones facilitating sessions and distilling those conversations into priorities. However, internal stakeholders do typically have opportunities to provide feedback on drafts. Leadership most often has a high-level view of the organization and the landscape, meaning they have a more macro lens, whereas staff have a more micro one. This can lead to differing visions and ideas on

what needs to be prioritized. While one leader said the whole team decides on what priorities will be articulated, ultimately leadership makes the final call. In order to create a harmonious decision-making environment, this leader sees their role as one of making connections: rather than shutting anyone down, they try to simplify ideas to get them to the highest-level possible. Across the board, interviewees said that while everyone had different perspectives, there were no disagreements—it was all about consensus-building discussions to deepen the reflection.

One interviewee said that decisions were ultimately made based on the central thing they were hearing from the consultations as well as in internal meetings. An interviewee at a different arts council made a similar statement about how decisions got made based on the vast amounts of data gathered: "It really is a convergence of the number of people who mentioned an issue" (participant 1). However, this was not the only factor as the consultants and sometimes the staff, who knew the sector well, would also bring up priorities that had been overlooked but they knew to be important and would encourage the arts council to include them.

Challenges in the process

Given the many moving parts of strategic planning, there are bound to be challenges. One finding of this research is that almost everyone at an arts council had a different experience of the process. Those with more involvement—leadership, project team members—often felt like there was more opportunity for feedback from the staff than general staff did. As an example, one project team member talked about how a near-final version of the plan was presented to the full team and there was space for comments, whereas a general staff member at the same arts council said that while they were provided updates and given opportunities to provide feedback, the plan was more or less complete by the time it was presented to them, and even when they did give an opinion, it was dismissed: "I did not necessarily feel that we could have completely

questioned certain priorities or certain approaches." They furthered that thought by saying: "I think that when you're in a big team … and you feel a lot of enthusiasm about a plan, you don't necessarily have the audacity to say, 'Oh, I really don't agree with that.'" In other words, the chance for participation from the general staff was more of an illusion.

Transparency also seemed to be an issue. Not only were staff not always alerted to why certain choices were made—for example, why certain individuals and not others were chosen for the project team—but even as they were being consulted they may not have known what for. One person talked about a meeting where staff were asked to put their thoughts on stickies and paste them on the wall, but "they may not have realized that was part of the strategic planning process" (participant 3). Another interviewee mentioned how a critique from staff was that the process felt "a little opaque at times" and that "the conversations kind of happened at the high level, executive and board level, but that didn't necessarily trickle down to the [program managers], who are the ones who really had the day-to-day daily contact with all of the different artists and arts organizations in the city" (participant 6). Someone who was part of a project team said by the time they had been tapped to participate, they "had the impression that the broad outlines were already kind of decided upon between the consultant, who received a clear mandate, and management" and that they did not know what their role was, "if it was just to bring legitimacy to the strategic planning process, like, 'Employees participated, so we can say we're listening.'" This same person said those who were chosen for the project team got along very well and shared similar values and vision, which made them wonder if that was the best choice or if the project team should have been comprised of people with notable differences.

Another challenge was the length of time the process takes. At one arts council, the project team had been told it would take three meetings but it ended up taking seven, and the

process also came at a time when two of the project team members were extremely busy, and they were informed relatively last-minute that they would be heading the project. On a related timeline note, one interviewee said the pressure to deliver something meant they ended up making decisions a little faster than they would have liked. Further, for some arts councils, getting buy-in from staff was a challenge, particularly given their lack of substantial involvement in the process: "Bringing your own team on board proved to be a little bit more difficult than bringing the broader community on board" (participant 6). Similarly, finding the right balance between being ambitious enough to respond to the arts communities' needs but realistic enough so that the team would not get demoralized was tough. Finally, there was the challenge of quantifying the goals—creating clear targets—and creating an evaluation framework in order to measure them.

The Plan

The third part of the research question focused on the impact of the strategic plan, which is the tangible outcome of a strategic planning process and which gets published on the arts council's website. As an internal and external tool, the strategic plan has multiple uses and therefore thought must go into how it is presented. This includes reflection on the language choices and design of the document and whether it is a "living document"—i.e., can be updated over time. On top of this, there is thinking done around how the plan will be adopted, including the elaboration of action plans, if and how the peer-review committees will use the plan, and how the plan will be measured and the arts council kept accountable.

Language and design of the document

The decisions made around the plan's language matter, especially, according to one leader, as the arts community does not care for corporate, bureaucratic speak. Discussions were

often had in this regard; “the wordsmithing that went on, the back and forth and the back and forth…” (participant 3). For one arts council, many of the adjustments around wording happened as the project team reviewed the drafts and cleaned up repetitions: “We merged things and reworked the narrative side” (participant 2). One person wondered how helpful it is to have a singular strategic plan, with one set trajectory, when the future cannot be accounted for. This is where strategic ambiguity is useful—as someone else said: having “a gateway that’s wide enough for a couple of cars to drive through” (participant 3). For example, when targets are included in a plan, they may be vague enough so the specifics can change over time, which allows an arts council to be responsive to unexpected events, like a pandemic.

According to one leader, if a strategic plan is going to be effective, it has to be seen, because stakeholders have to be able to associate the arts council with their objectives and vision. Supporting findings from the literature, designing the plan can have an impact in that capacity, making it more readable. Another leader talked about the importance of design in a different way: “Very early in the process I said, ‘I want this to be not just the plan, I want this to be a thing of beauty, because this is an arts plan.’” Visuals, as well as the right language, can also help make the plan “accessible for different populations, different sectors” (participant 4).

The strategic plan as a “living document”

Though the strategic planning process spans anywhere from a few months to over a year, plans are, arguably, crafted in a particular moment in time—especially considering they last for up to a decade. While sometimes a plan indicates that it is a “living document”—adaptable based on changes over time—the question of whether this is true or not is real. While one leader called that wording a bit of a misnomer, three interviewees spoke to how it worked. One individual said that, as an orientation, the strategic plan is not fixed in time and in the actions included; rather, it

tells an arts council in what direction they are headed, however, "it is possible that the winds turn right and there are things that we will let fall, or the winds turn left and there are things that we will add, because the context change, evolves" (participant 1). Others noted that while strategic plans are useful, they should "never bind you or restrict you from doing the right thing" (participant 9). In some cases, they shared, plans may need to be thrown out the window—and if there was a big-enough event that affected the plan, "we would stop it early and develop a new one, or write a sort of codicil or something" (participant 5). However, someone else was cautious about what it would take to actually edit an existing plan: "You don't just change things because of a moment's situation" (participant 3); rather, you look at what the issue is, how things have changed, and work to eventually develop a new plan. If an arts council receives feedback—which does not always happen—the information might influence how the organization or individual staff put their priorities into action "but it's not going to change the strategic plan that's already in place" (participant 2). However, in order for a plan to be useful over time, it can be important to some people to build in touchpoints, which allow organizations to reflect on the goals set out and assess whether they have been accomplished, which ones still need to be activated, and which are no longer relevant.

Action plans and ongoing work

Two leaders were clear that the elaboration of a strategic plan is not the end of the process: once the priorities are chosen, the plan goes back to the staff in order for them to create an action plan, which is more specific, tailored to the individuals tasked with implementing the strategic plan. As one interviewee noted, "You can't publish [the strategic plan] and put it on a shelf and then come back in four years…. You do need to incorporate it into your daily planning [and] working objectives" (participant 5). For staff who are less involved in the strategic

planning process, this is their opportunity to participate or participate more deeply. At one arts council, two staff members were put in charge of creating an action plan based on the strategic plan, which involved internal consultations with other staff; the plan was for this process to happen semi-regularly, however after that first action plan no more were created. At another arts council, everyone worked on their actions individually, and three staff members worked to bring everything together. A leader at the third arts council talked about the importance of creating a robust action plan—using timelines and a RASCI matrix, which is a framework that articulates who is responsible, accountable, supporting, consulted, and informed—and then creating check-in moments with staff, like at the midway point of the plan, where together everyone can ensure that the actions are being activated in a way that aligns with the strategy.

Creating action plans can also allow an arts council to go deeper on their stated goals and targets, if those are not included in the strategic plan itself. At one arts council, each staff member had the opportunity to take ownership of certain actions and determine for themselves how the impact would be measured.

Staff adoption of the plan

Staff have a role to play in the strategic plan's implementation—although "whether [program managers] remember they have a role in it depends on the manager" (participant 5). At arts councils where leadership truly believes in the strategic planning process, as well as the value of the final strategic plan, staff are more receptive and connected to the document, and the plans are more often used. At an arts council where leadership was less enthusiastic about strategic planning, a staff member said that there was a lot of momentum around it for the first six months or so afterwards, but it was easy for it to drop off; one thing after another happens and, two or three years down the road, the document has been forgotten.

Peer-reviewers' use of the strategic plan

Peer-review committees are a fundamental part of an independent municipal arts council, making funding allocation decisions. The question of whether the decisions made by peer-review committees are based on or informed by the strategic plan is important, then, in understanding the strategic plan's value. However, there was a lot of uncertainty about if and how the strategic plans are used in these situations. Two interviewees did not think these committees used the plans at all or were even briefed on them; "I doubt they're even aware of it" even if "the results of the plan are very much a part of the work they are doing" (participant 5). However, according to two people, peer-review committees receive other documents to help in their decision-making—documents that are grounded in the same values as those in the strategic plan—which emphasizes the importance of the values elaboration during the strategic planning process.

Accountability and measurement frameworks

Two of the key ways arts councils account for the priorities, goals, and targets stated in their strategic plan is through annual reports and reporting back to the board. Some annual reports are structured, whether explicitly or not, based on the strategic plan and perhaps even more specifically on the action plans. At one arts council, this is a process that involves everyone, as each individual must report on the actions they were responsible for. In some cases, organizations embed key elements of the strategic plan into the standing minutes of board meetings, however "there are different ways to do it formally and informally, and that very much depends on the culture of an organization" (participant 9). According to leaders at two of the arts councils, they do report back to the board on progress; "It's a very useful document to say, 'As you recall in our 2016 strategic document…' which the board approved, right? So it's a way of

keeping everybody a bit on track." However, someone else noted that their arts council's reports to the board on the strategic plan's progress are done more informally—and with next to no questioning from the board:

> "[Leadership] created a document that just listed all of the things and then … put, like, 'in progress' or, like, 'achieved'…. They did it this way because when they created the current strategic plan, no one developed any processes or systems for tracking progress towards any of our strategic goals. This is where I get even surprised at our board not going, 'Where is the evidence? Where do we see this?'"

On this note, measurement frameworks can allow an arts council to evaluate if they are truly responding to the issues the sector is faced with. At one arts council, there is a research and data plan that underpins a measurement framework, which "is now very much part of how people think and how people plan" (participant 10). However, it is not always common for arts councils to include specific-enough targets or goals that can be evaluated clearly in their strategic plans themselves, and quantifying the priorities and goals, as well as evaluating them over time, can be a big challenge.

Conclusion and Avenues for Future Research

Grounded theory is often used to uncover new theories and insights into a topic at hand. While this research has a few limitations that prevent the findings from being generalizable—due to snowball sampling, the limited number of interviewees and arts councils interviewed, and the relatively limited scope of a major research paper—it does offer a picture of why some independent municipal arts councils undertake the strategic planning process, how the process unfolds, and what the impact of the strategic plan is. The review of strategic plans themselves and the analysis of interviews with individuals who took part in and/or were impacted by their

arts council's most recent strategic plan suggest that the thinking and actions surrounding the process and the plan are organization- and person-dependent. While overall strategic planning seems to be a worthwhile practice for clarifying organizational values, articulating goals, and/or bringing staff together, and the finalized strategic plan is of value as an internal and external document to varying degrees, the extent to which this is true depends on the organization and is personal to each individual within it. The process does follow similar steps across the three independent municipal arts councils chosen for the interviews, though each arts council puts their own spin on it, which may be influenced by the consultants hired to support them. The impact of the finalized strategic plan is also highly dependent on the arts council at hand, and the findings indicate that the more leadership believes in the process, the more the plan will be used in a daily way and thus have a greater impact on the arts council's operations.

This study has theoretical value, adding to the literature on strategic planning by showcasing what the process is like at some public-sector organizations and how the plans are, and are not, used by these organizations. In several ways it supports what is in the literature. For example, interviewees talked about how the strategic planning process indeed allows them to articulate their values and goals, and most noted how important it is to engage stakeholders, especially external ones. Furthermore, the strategic plans all went through several iterations and levels of approvals before being signed off on. As for the finalized plans themselves, the literature debates their usefulness. This was also echoed in the empirical findings, as not everyone believes the plans carry high value or the same kind of value. That said, interviewees touched on many of the purported benefits identified in the literature review, such as how the plans can act as implementation guides, can unify staff around a vision and motivate employees, and can communicate the arts council's vision and values externally. A compelling finding

surrounds the positive correlation between leadership's belief in strategic planning and the finalized plan's usefulness. Finally, while this study primarily complements the existing literature on strategic planning, it also adds to the literature on arts councils, a topic that is not often studied, especially at the municipal level, providing insight into the inner workings of this kind of arm's-length organization. It is especially interesting to note that the strategic plans at the arts councils interviewed are not typically used by peer-review committees, and that some program managers do not use them either, which raises the question of what tools, if any, are actually used when it comes to making the decisions that shape a city's arts and culture sector.

The findings of this study can also be useful for practitioners in various ways. Firstly, they indicate that strategic plans may be more valuable as internal tools if staff play a larger role in the development of the plan and if leadership more adamantly believes in its usage. The research also affirms the idea that including targets is useful but measurement frameworks are also necessary so staff understand how they must work to achieve the goals set out. Moreover, this kind of framework is useful to the organization more generally so it can collect the relevant data to actually measure results and report back to stakeholders. The findings show that there might be a disconnect between how leadership views the process and impact of the plan versus how employees and board members do, which can remind practitioners to increase transparency.

There are a few potential areas for further research. While it is clear that strategic planning and strategic plans do have value, given that they are not always used by arts councils it would be beneficial to explore whether the process that leads to the plan is the best tool for clarifying an organization's values and long-term vision compared to other tools. It would also be interesting to explore what tools, if any, are actually used when it comes to the different kinds of decisions that get made at arts councils, whether by leadership, program managers, peer-

review committees, or general staff. Finally, it would be valuable to deepen the study by conducting more interviews with leadership, staff members, board members, and peer-review committee members at these same independent municipal arts councils to see whether similar results are found or not. Similar studies could also be undertaken at the provincial level and the federal level, examining how arts councils on those levels engage with strategic planning and use their strategic plans.

The world is full of prominent issues and evolutions—reconciliation, climate change, accessibility, and digitization, to name a few—that impact the arts and cultural sector. Arts councils need to make decisions on how to allocate their funds in this ever-changing world, and one tool they can use is the strategic plan. While there exists a significant amount of literature on strategic planning and some on arts councils, few studies have been undertaken to bring these two strands together. The aim of this research on an academic level is to contribute to filling this gap by looking specifically at how strategic planning plays out at independent municipal arts councils and what the impact of the strategic plan is on these organizations and the decisions they make. It is also hoped that the findings presented here are of value on a practical level, in that this research, which highlights several values and pitfalls of strategic planning and strategic plans, can help individuals working at independent municipal arts councils make more informed choices when they undertake the process in the future.

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Appendix A: Ethics Approval Notice

25/11/2022

Université d'Ottawa
Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa
Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

CERTIFICAT D'APPROBATION ÉTHIQUE | CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS APPROVAL

Numéro du dossier / Ethics File Number	S-09-22-8321
Titre du projet / Project Title	Strategic Planning at Municipal Arts Councils: Rationale, Process, and Impact
Type de projet / Project Type	Mémoire de maîtrise / Master's major research paper
Statut du projet / Project Status	Approuvé / Approved
Date d'approbation (jj/mm/aaaa) / Approval Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	25/11/2022
Date d'expiration (jj/mm/aaaa) / Expiry Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	24/11/2023

Équipe de recherche / Research Team

Chercheur / Researcher	Affiliation	Role
May ANTAKI	École d'études politiques / School of Political Studies	Chercheur Principal / Principal Investigator
Monica GATTINGER	École d'études politiques / School of Political Studies	Superviseur / Supervisor

Conditions spéciales ou commentaires / Special conditions or comments

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Appendix B: Interview Guide

Strategic Planning at Municipal Arts Councils – Interview Guide

Section 1: Strategic Planning's Rationale

1. When did your arts council begin creating strategic plans? What was the impetus?
2. How has the thinking around strategic planning evolved over the years?
3. Why did your arts council decide on the specific timeframe for the strategic plan, and has this evolved over time? If so, why?

Section 2: The Strategic Planning Process

1. Can you walk me through the strategic planning process at your arts council? (Prompt if needed: Who is involved? How are they chosen?)
2. Do governmental priorities play into the choices made during the strategic planning process and, if so, how? Are the general public and the arts community engaged in the process and, if so, how?
3. Does the timeframe chosen for the strategic plan (eg. a three-year plan or a ten-year plan) influence the priorities that get chosen and, if so, how? What other factors may influence the decision-making that happens during the strategic planning process?
4. When it comes to making decisions about priorities, what methods are used? How do plans get finalized and who has final say?
5. What are some challenges to the process and what happens when there's a disagreement?
6. Do you know if your arts council receives feedback on the strategic plan after it gets released and, if so, what do they do with it?
7. Has the design of your arts council's strategic planning process evolved over the years? If so, can you walk me through what you know?

Section 3: Impact

1. What are some challenges for your arts council around implementing your strategic plan?
2. What is the intended value of strategic planning to your arts council? How can strategic plans live up to this value or fall short of it?
3. Strategic plans are developed at a particular moment in time. What happens when major changes in society, technology, or politics transform the context within which the arts council functions? Are plans able to remain relevant in the face of major change? (Prompt if needed: Examples include the war in Ukraine, Black Lives Matter, etc.)
4. Does the strategic plan influence or guide the peer-review committees' work and, if so, how? What are some challenges here?
5. How does your arts council engage with the strategic plan in the months and years after it gets published? (Prompt if needed: Does the arts council turn to the strategic plan every time a decision needs to get made? If not, what kind of decisions trigger the organization to consult its strategic plan? Does this remain consistent over the timeframe of the plan (eg. for a ten-year plan, for all ten years)?)

Appendix C: Recruitment Text

[*city*], [*date*]

Dear [*name of potential participant*],

Invitation to participate in a study about strategic planning at municipal arts councils.

My name is May Antaki, and I am a master's student in public administration at the University of Ottawa in Ontario, Canada, working under the supervision of Dr. Monica Gattinger. With a decades-long history of working with artists and arts organizations, I have a particular interest in arts and cultural policy. It is with this interest that I am undertaking a study about strategic planning at municipal arts councils. This study examines (1) the rationale behind strategic planning; (2) the strategic planning process itself, and (3) the impact of the strategic planning process.

Strategic planning is a common organizational practice, and as a public-facing document a strategic plan acts as a prominent reflection of an arts council's values and priorities, as well as accountability and performance measures. Given this, strategic plans are powerful documents that influence the relationship between arts councils and the artists and organizations applying for funding, as well as the relationship between arts councils and the public. What's more, strategic plans are intended to be used by the arts councils themselves as a guide for their own internal decision-making. However, strategic planning's usefulness has long been debated in organizational planning literature. The purpose of this study is to get to the heart of the strategic planning process at municipal arts councils and offer an in-depth look at its value.

Through interviews with individuals responsible for the strategic plans that arts councils publish publicly, the study aims to address the following research questions: What is the rationale behind strategic planning at municipal arts councils? How does the process unfold at various municipal arts councils? What is the impact of a strategic plan on arts councils themselves, once the plan has been published?

Interviews with participants involved in the strategic planning process are an indispensable component of this study. Given your expertise and experience, I would like to invite you to take part in a confidential interview (roughly 60 minutes) to discuss this topic. Our conversation would focus on your experience in the strategic planning process(es) at [*insert arts council name*]. I will be gathering information on topics such as how the arts council incorporates governmental priorities, the public's views, and the arts community's interests into its planning; how the process is undertaken and what challenges are encountered; how plans get finalized, including who has final say; how the published plans influence decision-making within the organization; and what some challenges are in implementing the plans.

I sincerely hope you will agree to participate in this study. I believe better understanding the strategic planning process—its rationale, relevance, and impact—will be beneficial for the arts and culture sector in the long run.

Please let me know by reply email if you would be willing to participate in a confidential interview. I would be pleased to answer any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

May Antaki
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University of Ottawa, School of Political Studies
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