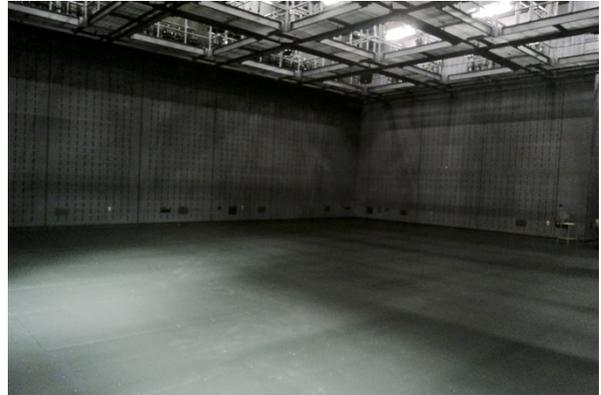


ARTSCOMMON 118

COMPARATIVE REVIEW OF BLACK BOX MODELS



Clockwise from upper left:
Fringe Studio Theatre, Timms Centre Second Playing Space, L'Unitheatre, The Living Room

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REVIEW PROCESS

REASON FOR RESEARCH

Alberta Avenue has a rich performing arts community that animates its main streets every fall and winter with festivals that draw thousands to the Avenue. Local venues are ad-hoc: churches, community rooms and cafés. The single local performance venue (The Avenue Theatre) shut down in 2014 due to disrepair. Since 2009, partners for ArtsCommon 118 have envisioned a performance venue that could also be a community event space. Years of community engagement activities have affirmed this vision. To this end, Edmonton CDC is doing research to understand artist needs and issues, and how existing performance venues operate and sustain.

METHODS FOR RESEARCH

- **2012 - Arts Space Needs and Issues Survey** attracted 194 participants to respond to a city-wide callout for feedback.
- **Fall 2018 – Focus Group conversations** with (amongst other creatives) performance companies interested in using a purpose-built venue at ArtsCommon 118.
- **Spring 2019 – a detailed Request for Expressions of Interest (REOI)** regarding a Black box venue and/or community event space in ArtsCommon 118 with background information, a needs survey, and a current situation survey, sent to over 300 individuals and organizations, as well as to several mass email distributors in the Edmonton arts community monthly for three months.
 - Over 50 responses indicated general interest in a Black Box Venue.
 - Of these 20 have completed the detailed REOI.
- **Summer 2019 – One-on-one Interviews** by phone or in-person with 12 performance companies or individuals with in-depth experience about the venues, operating models, and the needs facing Edmonton’s performing community to better understand issues, barriers, and successful operating models.
- **Summer 2019 – internet research** into existing Edmonton venue models, capacities, configurations, rental rates, and support systems.

OUTCOMES

From the 2012 Arts Space and Needs and issues Survey, 39% of respondents noted an urgent need for rehearsal space, and 31% noting an urgent need for presentation/performance space. The top 3 reasons for not finding adequate space were cost (79%), scarcity (56%) or that available space was in the wrong location (28%). Others included accessibility issues (23%), hours of operation (17.5%) and safety at 15.8%.¹

From focus group sessions held in fall of 2018, Edmonton CDC heard that a black box concept that can hold an audience of 200 seated people could be made viable for participant operations; that more usable performance and audience space, less lobby, and higher (more than 5M high ceiling) are required; that flexible seating arrangements are preferred, as is a “unique” space in the City; that sprung floors are essential to accommodate dance. Expected infrastructure include overhead grid with professional lighting, soundproofing, set-building space, rehearsal space, storage space (huge need) dressing rooms, and, of course a design that functions well. Feedback confirms that local halls are not appropriate, too small, and that other venues have closed down, are in disrepair, or are too expensive.

The responses to the REOI released in Spring 2019 more or less confirm the previous findings, and add detail. This report focuses on this data.

One-on-one interviews held in Summer 2019 confirmed, elaborated, and provided more insight into venue models, structures, and rates, and the ongoing need for rehearsal space, and for a black box venue in Edmonton.

¹ Arts Space Needs and Issues Survey 2012, AHE (summary report)

Ongoing internet research provides a map of comparable existing spaces, configuration and capacities, rental rates, and funding models.

From all of this, Edmonton CDC seeks to confirm

- The need for a Black Box venue in Edmonton that supports a socially diverse clientele and audience.
- The kind of space and infrastructure needed by performers
- An operating model that will best serve the vision of ArtsCommon 118 and its immediate community.
- Ways of making the venue sustainable.

SPACE COMPARISONS

MODELS

This review looked at approximately 25 performance spaces. They have been grouped in five general models:

Models	Description	Funding mechanisms
1. Single operator with few or no outer rentals	One or more home company curates a season of performances based on their artistic director’s vision and under the mandates of the society(s)	Government funding, land donations, corporate sponsorships, Trust funds, member subscriptions, volunteer drives, non-profit Society, charitable foundation to guide donations, legacies, and funding activities.
2. One or more operators with other rentals (Either off season or between booked dates)	One of more company operates the venue all year round, administrating the box office, calendars, operating, etc. They take over the space for designated periods for home productions	Government funding, land donations, corporate sponsorships, member subscriptions, volunteer drives, non-profit Society, charitable foundation to guide donations, legacies, and funding activities.
3. Community or independent Venues	Small intimate spaces that cater to Indy groups, emerging artists, and the non-equity (union) performance crowd.	Subsidizes, space rentals, some government funding, volunteerism, food, beverage, and ticket revenues
4. Government owned /run venues	Limited rental times available due to programming planned and filled long in advance	Government funding, corporate sponsorships, member subscriptions, volunteer drives, non-profit Society, charitable foundation to guide donations, legacies, funding activities.
5. Commercial venues	House programmed entertainment	Ticket, food, and beverage revenues

The first four models are non-profit. All venues require outside funds for operations and/or support through the larger organization they are within. Commercial venues are rare (dinner theatres) with a key purpose to sell food and beverages.

Goals for ArtsCommon 118 Black Box most similarly fit “Model 3: community or independent venue”. If the operator is a festival producer (for example), “Model 2: home for one or more operators with other rentals” could fit, keeping enough rental times open to serve the target community.

SCAN OF COMPARABLE SMALL SIZED VENUES IN EDMONTON

We scanned established, new, on the horizon and lost venues to better understand what performers can work with. Spacefinder Alberta includes 244 “performance” venues² in Edmonton overall. This summary focuses on purpose-built spaces that are frequently used by Edmonton’s performing community and that surround the City core; it excludes very large and very small venues, community centres, churches, galleries, cafés, bars, and venues dissimilar than what is being explored for ArtsCommon 118.

² Alberta Spacefinder Alberta | <https://alberta.spacefinder.org/communities/Edmonton>

Venue	Status	Location	Capacity	Configuration
Triffo Theatre, Allard Hall	New	Downtown	415	Proscenium
Theatre Lab, Allard Hall	New	Downtown	140	Black Box
Orange Hub	New to public	West Jasper Place	120 363	Black Box, Proscenium
The Aviary	New (5 yrs.)	McCauley	140	Music
Amiskwaciy Theatre (RAM)	New	Downtown	250	Proscenium
La Cite Francophone – L’Unitheatre	New (5 yrs.)	French Quarter	196	Hybrid black box
CKUA Performance Space	New (5 yrs.)	Downtown	180 standing	Flex venue
La Cité Suzanne Thibaudeau Auditorium	Established	French Quarter	180	Raked auditorium
Auditorium at Campus Saint Jean	Established	French Quarter	230	Raked auditorium
Walterdale Playhouse	Established	Old Strathcona	145	Community theatre
Studio A, Old Strathcona Performance Centre	Established	Old Strathcona	250	flexible
Fringe – Studio Theatre	Established	Old Strathcona	80	Black Box
Fringe – The Westbury	Established	Old Strathcona	315	Proscenium, raked, flex
Fringe- Backstage Space	Established	Old Strathcona	120	Proscenium, raked
Citadel – Maclab Theatre	Established	Downtown	702	U Proscenium
Citadel – Zeidler Hall	Established	Downtown	215	Proscenium
Citadel – Rice Theatre	Established	Downtown	170	Black box transformed into cabaret
Timms Centre - Second Playing Space	Established	UofA campus	125	Black box
Nina Haggerty	Established	Alberta Ave	50	Flexible
The Roxy Gateway	Temporary	Old Strathcona	200	Black Box
The Living Room Playhouse (2013)	Lost	Queen Mary	50	Black Box
The Alberta Cycle Building (2013)	Lost	Alberta Ave	50	Black Box
Avenue Theatre (2014)	Lost	Alberta Ave	700	proscenium
Mercury Room (2016)	Lost	Queen Mary	150	flexible
Winspear Project	On Horizon	Downtown	600	Flex- use acoustic hall
The Roxy 124 Main Stage	On Horizon	Westmount	200	Proscenium and black box

RENTAL COMPARISONS AND WHAT’S INCLUDED

The following comparisons look primarily at venues that hold approximately 200 people in flexible configurations. There are so many variables between the venues, that the comparison gives us a preliminary guide, rather than detailed list for understanding what is available. Research was collected online, via performers’ experiences, or by cold calls to venues.

Most, but not all, venues have for-profit (FP) or commercial rates and non-profit (NP) rates. The non-profit rates can be between 20- 50% lower.

- The median non-profit rate for an eight-hour booking between all six venues listed below is \$1,400.
- The (estimated) median non-profit rate for a four-day booking between four venues below is \$4,110.
- The median non-profit rate for a ten-day festival booking between three venues below is \$6,950.

Additional fees vary per venue, and are especially high for IATSI (International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, Artists and Allied Crafts) venues.

- Venues charge full rates for broken, damaged, lost, stolen lighting, sound, or other equipment.
- Some venues do not include house technicians in the base rental costs.
- Users’ rental, cancellation policies and insurances apply and are similar for all venues.

Venue	Capacity	Run	NP rate	Type of venue	included
Citadel - Westbury Theatre, Citadel	200 – 315	8 hr 4 dy. 10 dy.	\$1,200 est. \$4,800 est. \$12,000	- Top quality - proscenium - 4,466 sq.ft. - Theatre	- 1 or more tech, 1 FOH, box office, all preliminary meetings with on-site staff. - Coat check, lobby, drinks / snack by house - Scenery shop, costume area, props room - dressing rooms - draperies - sprung floor - high ceiling (28' u/s grid) - Full light and sound grid/equip - stage – 30' x 15' max - sound/light booths - set-up and restoration of the configuration of your choice: rolling raked seats store under sound booth for other configurations. - parkade and area parking
Theatre Lab Allard Hall	140	8 hr 4 dy.	\$1,600 est. \$3,500	- New student learning venue. - high quality. - theatre experts consulted in design process - Dance, music, small theatre	- no tech (add \$3k/3 techs/4 days) - tech support throughout performance - all in state of art lighting, projection, - all equip and set up, moving furniture - perimeter catwalk - concrete floor - 2 dressing rooms - shared university lobby - parking lots
Citadel – Rice (the Club)	200	8 hr	\$2,280	- Self Sufficient space transformed from Black box to cabaret event space.	- 1 FOH, Box Office staff. - Additional Staff, \$100/4hr/ person. - built in bar, - private washrooms, - dressing rooms, - small green room with fridge - BYO guest food/beverage permitted. - Full light and sound grid/equip - Additional furniture and rentals available - Parkade and area parking
Timms Second Playing Space	125	8 hr	\$2,500	- Black Box - 2,250 sq.ft. - Top quality student and alumni venue - Music, dance, installation, rehearsal workshops etc.	- min 1 tech - 20' ceiling to u/s grid - sprung floor with Masonite surface - theatre lighting, catwalk stage management booth - set/up and strike of seating, special lighting sound are factored into rental quotes - parkade
La Cite Francophone L'Unitheatre	196	8 hr 4 dy. 10dy	\$1,180 \$4,720 \$6,950	- Hybrid space, - gallery seating - Theatre, festivals, music, dance, etc.	- Tech support, FOH, lobby, box office, staffed concession - large rehearsal room (1000 sq.ft.) - 2 dressing rooms - lighting and sound booth - stage – 38' x 25' - lots of ceiling height. - full sound and light grid - Marley laid floor - rehearsal and performance pianos - washrooms - parking lot, street parking
Old Strathcona Performance Centre – Studio A	250	8 hr 4 dy. 10 dy.	\$500 \$2,000 \$5,000 Negotiable based on use	- Proscenium - Concert hall - band and music, banquets, and social events - Acoustically controlled auditorium -3416 sq.ft.	- onsite manager, no staff - user's kitchenette, bar, and lobby area, - Wings/backstage space, Stage curtains, - Rigging points - wood floor with carpet - Sound system, PA system, Amplifier, - pre-set lighting and public address system - area parking lots and street

GOING RATES AND AFFORDABILITY

While the median rate mentioned above is one way of looking at rental rates, another is to see what groups pay:

For Performance space -

(Timeframes include set-up, rehearsal, and take down. It isn't clear if they all include technical support services.)

- \$300 - \$700 per day or evening rental
- \$6,500 per four-day rental (with three expert technicians included in this rate).
- \$3,500 per four-day rental (technicians would be approximately \$1000 extra, per technician)
- \$3,000 - \$4,000 per week rental
- \$4,200 per 10-day rental (All infrastructure or human resources extra.)
- \$12,000 per 10-day rental (all in)
- 13,000 per 10-day rental (house technician, seating set up and rehearsal space/time included).

Comparing what the user group pays to what the median venue rate is:

- The median rate for an eight-hour booking is comparatively very high and would not be affordable.
- The median rate for a four-day booking looks comparable, but only if it includes technicians and other services
- The median for a ten-day event looks comparable to what our sample group pays. However, we have heard these rates are not affordable or sustainable.

TARGET USERS AND THEIR TARGET VENUE

USERS

Working with information gathered from focus groups, REOI responses and one-on-one interviews, Edmonton CDC has a picture of what the performing arts community wants in a performance venue for ArtsCommon 118:

- Small independent performance groups or individuals looking to rent on a show-by-show basis (over 50% of REOI respondents),
- Professional organizations or individual artists and independents without professional status.
- Community organization-led festivals
- Non-profits; some with charitable status.
- Individual "for-profit" artists emerging in their careers.
- May represent a specific cultural practise, and/or produce material with content and message that lies outside the mainstream.
- Those with innovative or experimental productions.
- Those who have a home venue but do not have rehearsal space.

"We are looking for an inclusive space where the foundation of social diversity and inclusion of audience and performer opportunities can experiment together through process. A space whose programming is fundamentally flexible, where structure is kept to a minimum and diversity is welcome. We believe in ally-ship, where barriers are removed. Our goal is to collaborate, mentor, build, support."

~ The Maggie Tree | Azimuth Theatre ~

WHY 118?

The inclusive “community first” aspect of the Alberta Avenue District, its relative centrality and accessibility, the built-in vibrant audience base, and the opportunity to perform somewhere “new” are reasons respondents give for being interested in a venue on 118 Avenue.

TYPE OF VENUE

Respondents are clear that the type of space desired is a truly flexible black box that can accommodate any imaged type of performance:

- An intimate space where performers can experiment.
- A flexible black box for any type of set up imagined.
- A venue they can regularly rent and perform in.
- A venue for dance as there are few in the City.
- A venue that can work for festival or unique uses.
- A venue accessible to diversity of content and culture,
- A home base for rehearsals, workshops, and for Collectives.

USE OF SPACE

Of 19 completed responses to the REOI, seven groups are interested in running shows only, and 11 are interested in running shows and in accessing ArtsCommon 118 for other reasons, including a home for rehearsal, events, workshops, AGMs, festivals and more. Performance uses cited include:

- Small experimental theatre – 5
- Music – 5
- Dance – 3
- Interactive mixed media – 3
- Festival events -2
- Other unique performance - 3

The sample group says they want to be able really “use” the space: it needs to be designed with correct infrastructure, yet be unpretentious. This will create an inviting atmosphere for performers - and audiences - to play and feel welcome in.

FREQUENCY OF USE

Of the REOI respondents, 15 say they can use the space occasionally throughout a year. These groups want to book on a show-by-show basis rather than presenting throughout the season. Shows might run one evening to four, depending on whether it is a music event, a dance installation, or an experimental theatre show.

Others have fixed festival dates. Festivals may run 3 to 10 days where bookings would need to include set up, rehearsal and take down times. Five respondents are interested in using a workshop space as well as a Black Box.

The overall frequency of use per respondent varies widely from as few as three to as many as 25 performances or events in a year. Bookings could feasibly be Tuesday through Sunday, however Wednesday to Saturday evenings are the most popular rental times in our study. One professional dance company wants to book the space every Sunday morning for a regular community dance class.

Rehearsal times also vary widely from a couple of hours to do a sound check to up to two weeks for a full production. These could be booked in the Black Box venue or a properly sized rehearsal space. Dress rehearsals two to four days before the event would occur in the Black Box itself, and otherwise in another rehearsal space that has similar dimensions to the “staging” area. This will clearly vary for every type of performance. There are comments that eight hours of included rehearsal time would be insufficient. Additional costs could prevent groups from using the venue

“One of our specialties is creating theatre experiences for very small audiences. Non-traditional staging, hyper-intimacy between audiences and artists, found spaces, and small black box theatres excite us. We like to perform in houses of less than 100 ‘seats’, and even as small as five. It would be a positive step for us to have a home working space for workshop and performance. 118th is a blossoming community and excellent fit for our adventurous fair.”

~ Theatre YES ~

SIZE OF SPACE

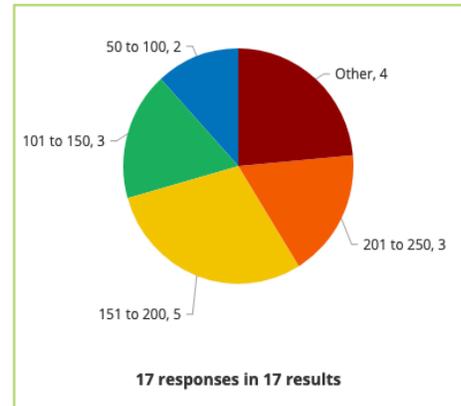
Responses to the question of audience size ranges widely from 50 (smaller emerging independent groups) to over 250 (those with festival components).

One participant of the focus group said that 200 seats make a five to six actor show viable through ticket sales, while another interviewee suggests that a 50-seat venue would be more welcoming for a diversity of independent groups. Still another suggested that the venue should simply be what “fits” on the site and in the facility program and budget.

The median audience size in this study is 151-200.

By looking at other venues, we can see that the area needed for an audience of 200 is over 3,000 sq.ft.

This user group prioritizes volume over area. Multiple respondents point out that the venue needs a ceiling higher than the 15-foot height proposed. Lighting grid and lamps will occupy three feet of that height. A configuration using risers would put audience members in the lights. Our feedback says that theatrical and lighting projection all need height for good effect. One technician said that a low ceiling would even be a “deal breaker” for their use of the venue. Aerobic performers need 30 feet clear to perform.



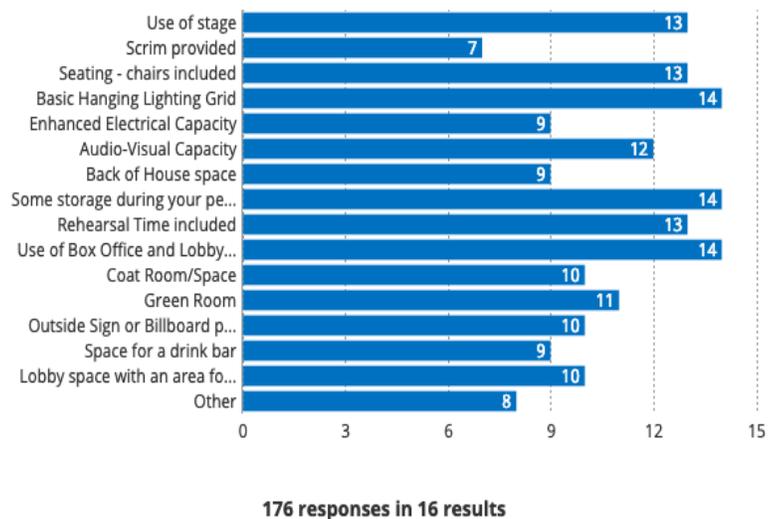
ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS INCLUDED IN THE SPACE

Beyond height, floor material is very important. The proposed concrete floor drew a reaction as concrete is so hard on bodies. Almost all other venues reviewed for this report have a sprung floor. A sprung floor is necessary for all dance and any kind of movement. Providing a floor that is “soft”, but also robust and easy to maintain will allow for set props – impossible with concrete.

This bar graph provides a good picture of what components our user group makes use of in existing venues. The lighting grid, storage space, box office and lobby, along with rehearsal time, stage and seating arrangements are generally included in rental fees. Not included here but frequently mentioned are dressing rooms, washrooms, and at least one in-house technician included in rates.

Users also said they could be willing to pay fees for additional tech support, set-up/take-down of “unusual” stage/seating arrangements, the use of a modular stage if not included in rates, and in-house catering/liquor license.

Not listed here, but desirable is a workshop/props making space that is not the rehearsal space – as it would be full of set materials.



SPACE CHALLENGES

Edmonton CDC asked all participants the following: “What challenges do you currently face when holding performances and/or community parties or events? “The following were universally agreed to:

- Cannot find spaces large enough
- Other spaces are not available when we need them
- Rental and related rates (e.g. food service) are too costly
- Other venues have too many restrictions
- Venues don't have what we need in terms of equipment, theatre, and multi-disciplinary needs
- We don't have enough black box spaces with appropriate ceiling height

Additionally, participants shared their personal challenges with venues in Edmonton:

SPACE

- Really there is only one option that is a true black box: The Backstage at Fringe Theatre Adventures (FTA.) It is often booked 18 months to 2 years in advance. It is serviceable but not cheap.
- We really don't have a properly appointed black box -size, height, location, equipment, affordable.
- Edmonton is in dire need of a venue for dance and other intimate performances that can hold 200.
- There are no spaces in Edmonton that are large, or small, enough to hold intimate dance performance, or that are affordable.
- I need a space for a three-piece band with proper acoustics. Food venues are not often conducive to a stage with keyboards, drums, and guitar.
- Our largest challenge is finding appropriate venues for unusual shows – venues are too large, expensive and/or only available for long-term rentals.

ACCESS

- Our shows are intimate and interactive, so we need to run them several times per-day. Finding venues that have access all day and for an extended run is difficult.
- Too many venues in Edmonton are so cost prohibitive that they exclude the community.
- Existing theatre “structure” doesn't align with our values. We want something created ground-up not top-down. Those are limiting and exclude many. We need something new that includes all the possibilities. The Living Room Playhouse was perfect until the landlord inflated the rent, so it's gone.
- Dance gets poor times and lower prioritization.

DEMAND

- Theatres in the city are not enough and all are in high demand, or not affordable.
- We need affordable, multi-disciplinary performance space.
- We have a very busy Department with orchestra, choirs, recitals, and drama productions, as well as graduates every year looking for rehearsal and performance space as they start out.
- We are always in a space crunch!
- Our company is losing its rehearsal space next year - we are desperately trying to find a new home.
- Art space/performance space is in DIRE NEED.

COSTS

- The rental rates and ancillary costs are not appropriate to scale for the size of venue is. Example: 250 people/\$250 rental is great! 500 people/ \$1,200 rent is too expensive. State of art theatre 400 class seats for \$3000-4000 or \$10 per head is ludicrous in the arts community.
- Rental rates are too costly for indie producers and as a result, there are fewer productions made.

WHAT WORKS?

- Working with a black box specialist from the start.
- Hiring an excellent in-house technical operator.
- Building for, and working with, community.
- Flexibility not just in terms of how the space can be used, but in optional features. For example, I want a bar/lobby space, but I'll run the bar and take those proceeds.

PARTICIPANTS

VISIONING, FOCUS GROUP, REOI AND INTERVIEWS

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- Good Women Dance Collective
- Linda Huffman, Arts Habitat Edmonton (retired)
- Link to the Past Productions
- Lucky Wolfe Creations
- Maggie Tree
- Mile Zero Dance Society
- National Stilt Walkers
- Ribbon Rouge Foundation
- SkirtsAfire Festival
- Society for New Music in Edmonton
- Theater Prospero
- Theatre Yes
- Thousand Faces Festival
- Theatre Network
- Workshop West Playwrights' Society

LINKS

- Arts Space Needs and Issues Summary Report 2012:
<https://www.artshab.com/app/uploads/Arts-Space-Needs-Data-Summary-Mayors-Taskforce.pdf>
<https://www.artshab.com/app/uploads/Arts-Space-and-Needs-Survey-Results-Exec-Summary.pdf>
- Summary of Focus Groups Sessions Fall 2018
- <https://edmontoncdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/0-Artist-Focus-Groups-REPORT-FINAL.pdf>