

A REPORT FOR:



**Mercer Union**  
a centre for contemporary art

# 2022-2027 Strategic Plan Report



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# Mission, Vision and Values

## Mission

Mercer Union is a non-profit, artist-run centre dedicated to commissioning and producing new works of contemporary art, and providing an engaging program that encourages critical inquiry and conversation. We champion ambitious exhibitions that empower diverse Canadian and international artists in formative and established stages of their practice.

## Vision

As a leading artist-run centre, Mercer Union will be recognized as an international space for contemporary art, where artists at pivotal stages in their practice are supported, and vital conversations at the intersection of contemporary art and civic life are fostered.

## Values

- **Artistic Expression:** We provide a unique platform for artistic expression and believe that contemporary art can inspire curiosity, discovery, and transformation.
- **Risk-Taking:** We are committed to supporting experimentation in contemporary art practices and are a test site for artists working through new ideas.
- **Equity:** We purposefully invite, uphold and embody a culture that challenges imbalances of power and structural inequities. We foster an environment that inspires a more equitable future.
- **Collaboration:** We actively develop meaningful, reciprocal relationships with artists, audiences, supporters, peer organizations and other community members, recognizing that diverse lived experiences enrich cultural dialogue.
- **Support:** We empower artists at every stage – from research and technical expertise to sustained curatorial dialogue before, during and after their exhibitions.

# Goals and Strategies

## 1. Visionary Exhibitions and Programming

### 1.1 Continue presenting a wide range of thought-provoking exhibitions that promote artistic integrity and expression.

- A) Partner with diverse artists and organizations that are engaged in experimentation, risk-taking and critical thinking.
- B) Sustain efforts to support artists and connect them to opportunities before and after the Mercer Union exhibition, including collaborative partnership on exhibition touring.
- C) Ensure a balance between the local, national and international scope of exhibitions.

### 1.2 Strengthen the narrative around our curatorial direction and commissioning strategy.

- A) Engage the Programming Committee in assessing our commissioning framework to ensure that it includes a multi-pronged approach: art world critical programming, commissions that nurture long-term relationships with artists, and exhibitions that serve as entry points for new audiences.
- B) Share the commissioning framework internally and externally.
- C) Integrate the *Artists First* narrative into communications to increase awareness of and support for the commissioning platform.

### 1.3 Ensure our exhibitions and programs are consistently accessible.

- A) Enhance the visitor experience by including additional guided tours, wall texts, printed guides and artist or video walk-throughs.
- B) Create public programming that makes exhibitions more inclusive of, and accessible to, new audiences (as identified in the community engagement plan – goal 2).
- C) Explore opportunities for increased accessibility in our space, online and touring exhibition sites.

## 2. Meaningful Community Engagement

### 2.1 Gain a deeper understanding of our community to improve engagement efforts.

- A) Implement a time-limited discovery initiative to understand who our most involved constituencies are. Engage visitors, artists, members and other stakeholders through individual conversations and focus groups/small events; speak with lapsed or disengaged individuals to understand barriers.
- B) Leverage the CRM to analyze existing public engagement metrics.
- C) Deploy an online survey to uncover the motivations, interests and demographics of our community.
- D) Ensure that constituent information (including visitor) is captured in the CRM going forward.

### 2.2 Design and implement a community engagement plan to develop meaningful relationships with our audiences.

- A) Based on the learnings from the discovery initiative, develop a community engagement plan with strategies to steward and retain active community segments, and to connect to newly identified priority segments.
- B) Assess the engagement tools and opportunities within Mercer's disposal (digital platforms and programs, marketing/communications, offsite programming, events, partnerships and networks, etc.) and align strategies.
- C) Develop and monitor measures of engagement.
- D) Evaluate whether existing capacity is adequate to enhance community engagement work and consider calling in external expertise or support as needed.

### 2.3 Demonstrate leadership in the artist-run centre (ARC) community.

- A) Partner with other artist-run centres on advocacy that advances the collective values of these centres.
- B) Host ARC-specific programs or events and lend our space to such initiatives more frequently.
- C) Regularly promote the work of the ARC network in our communications.
- D) Continue nurturing relationships with ARC groups and artists.

## 3. Sustainable Fund Development

### 3.1 Build financial resilience through the diversification of funding streams.

- A) Develop a multi-year fundraising plan for individuals, corporations, foundations and events that aligns fundraising efforts and goals with aspirations for commissions, programming and community engagement.
- B) Articulate specific multi-year fundraising priorities.
- C) Increase focus on individual giving – both major (with an emphasis on multi-year commitments) and annual – to grow unrestricted funds and support of top priorities.
- D) Continue actively seeking public funding that supports operations and strategic priorities.
- E) Adopt customized donor stewardship practices that foster connection and retention.

### 3.2 Transform the membership program into an annual supporters' circle that emphasizes and celebrates the role of donors in advancing Mercer Union's mission.

- A) Reframe the narrative around membership to focus on impact and philanthropy (for unrestricted needs), rather than transactional benefits.
- B) Simplify membership benefits through an engagement and stewardship lens, developing an internal stewardship strategy instead of promoting tangible perks.
- C) Relaunch the supporters' circle with a planned annual campaign cycle (digital and personal appeals) to renew and upgrade former "members," and convert visitors and friends to donors.

### 3.3 Bolster capacity to execute fund development.

- A) Evaluate whether existing staffing and expertise are adequate for growing and sustaining fundraising.
- B) Consider adding capacity to the fund development function with a professional staff position and/or outsourcing.

## 4. Robust Operational Integrity

### 4.1 Sustain and further develop equity-centred organizational ethics.

- A) Regularly review our policies and their ongoing implementation, continuing to prioritize actionable improvements toward equity-seeking activities.

### 4.2 Invest in the technological infrastructure that will further strategic goals.

- A) Assess whether our online and digital tools support the programming and community engagement direction; determine where enhancements can produce a return-on-investment.
- B) Assess the efficiencies of internal technologies and systems; determine where enhancements can produce a return-on-investment.
- C) Standardize procedures for data collection and hygiene in the CRM.

### 4.3 Evaluate and plan for our future facility requirements.

- A) Explore options and corresponding budgetary considerations for the Mercer Union site in advance of the lease expiry in 2023. Develop a timeline associated with decision-making.
- B) Engage the Building Committee to evaluate how our physical space supports our goals on an ongoing basis, beyond the potential 2023 transition.
- C) Ensure there is continued real estate expertise on the Board and/or Building Committee.

### 4.4 Invest in our people and culture.

- A) Develop a staff career growth plan to foster retention.
- B) Develop a succession plan for key leadership positions.

# Appendix A: List of Participants

## Strategic Planning Working Group

Sarah Heim, Boards of Directors  
Christie Kirchner, Secretary, Board of Directors  
Julia Paoli, Director & Curator

## Workshop Participants

Femi Adeyinka, Treasurer, Board of Directors  
Matt Brown, Board of Directors  
Beatrice Douaihy, Communications & Administration Intern  
Sonya Filman, Audience Development Coordinator  
Miles Gertler, Board of Directors  
Sarah Heim, Board of Directors  
Christie Kirchner, Secretary, Board of Directors  
Yaniya Lee, Board of Directors  
Aamna Muzaffar, TD Assistant Curator  
David Neligan, President, Board of Directors  
Julia Paoli, Director & Curator  
Chiedza Pasipanodya, Board of Directors  
Erica Russell, Board of Directors  
Brigid Tierney, Board of Directors