

Urban design is less a technical discipline than a mindset among those of varying disciplinary foundations seeking, sharing, and advocating insights about forms of community. What binds urban designers is their commitment to improving the livability of cities, to facilitating reinvestment and maintenance, and indeed to enhancing urbanity.... [T]hey realize that to renew the centers of cities, build new cities, restore the parts of old cities worthy of preservation, and construct equitable growth management programs on the periphery requires vastly different strategies, theories, and design actions. Indeed, one may rejoice that there are many spheres of urbanistic action for those who are passionate lovers of cities.¹

Alex Krieger, "How and Where Does Urban Design Happen?"



push and pull: city morphology

Cities are fantastically complex, dynamic entities. Their dispositions are constantly shifting, growing, atrophying according to any number of global and local developments.

Vancouver has been undergoing changes similar to other major cities around the world—escalating costs of land and living are pushing some of its population aside, and in some cases all the way out. Among them are the artists, craftspeople, cooks, writers, photographers, filmmakers, musicians, actors, dancers—all those who constitute the city's apparatus of cultural production—who are finding it nearly impossible to balance the costs of living with the costs and challenges of practicing their craft.

affordable creative spaces: the black hole of development

The central impediment for the creative class is the scarcity of affordable space to produce, practice, and perform. These spaces—the key to a thriving creative culture in our city—have been disappearing as older buildings with inexpensive studios and practice spaces are replaced with new developments not conceived to reinstate arts-related programming. From 2009 to 2023 Vancouver saw a loss of 460, 000 sf of artistic production space.² In the performing arts, the same story of rapid decline: between 2014 and 2019 the total area of rehearsal space in Vancouver fell from 76, 289 sf to 43, 505 sf.³ Exhibition space for visual artists is at such a premium that, according to local artist Kyla Bourgh, it can take up to two years to secure a spot to display her work.⁴ And since the early '90s, Vancouver has also seen the steady erosion of its music venues—of the 80 now-defunct performance spaces, a large portion were lost to condo development.⁵

¹ Krieger, A. (2006) Where and How Does Urban Design Happen? In the Origins and Evolution of Urban Design, 1956-2006. Harvard Design Magazine, Spring/Summer 2006.

² Vancouver risks becoming a 'city without art' as studio spaces become harder to find, artists say. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/vancouver-risks-becoming-a-city-without-art-as-studio-spaces-become-harder-to-find-artists-say>

³ By the numbers: The disappearance of arts spaces in Vancouver over time. <https://vancouver.sun.com/news/local-news/by-the-numbers-the-disappearance-of-arts-spaces-in-vancouver-over-time>

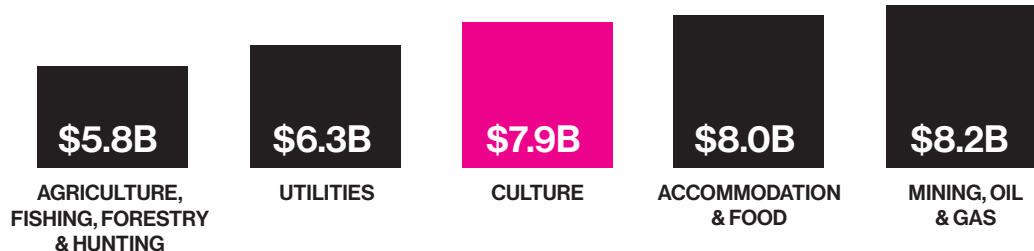
⁴ Kyla Bourgh, Artist-in-Residence introductory presentation, hcma. June 14, 2024.

⁵ Vancouver artist creates open-source map of lost spaces, struggling community latches on. <https://bc.ctvnews.ca/vancouver-artist-creates-open-source-map-of-lost-spaces-struggling-community-latches-on-1.623832>

struggling artists: economic actors

That artists tend to struggle financially is by now a well-worn meme in popular culture, but the raw economic data suggest they make a surprisingly significant contribution to the ecology of a healthy city:

The creative industries and cultural sector are critical to economic prosperity. Research conducted by Hill Strategies on culture's economic impact in Canada and BC reveals that cultural economic production outperforms many traditional industries. The economic impact of the creative industries and cultural sector include a 2.7% makeup of British Columbia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and 4% of total employment.⁶



GDP of British Columbia by sector

Those in charge of city-craft understand the importance of the creative class, and are investing time and money to conceive and realize the infrastructure required to retain them. According to their own published reports on the issue, “The City [of Vancouver] is set to *position arts and culture at the centre of city building*.”⁷

countering cultural entropy: the call to action

If arts and culture are to become our core drivers of city building, this offers designers of the built environment the opportunity to help shape the contours of this new mandate—everything from high-level policy and regulations to the contours of formal and material response.

This studio makes this opportunity its point of departure. As the studio leads are practicing architects, this will be a practice-based studio, and students can expect to bring a practice-based rigour to the class. We will meet as a group on Tuesday and Friday afternoons, and will do three projects exploring built form and program in urban space, each exercise escalating in scale and complexity—one working in groups, and two solo.

The class will do three site visits. All sites are within downtown and Mt. Pleasant and are easily accessible by transit. The studio will be guided by a series of generative questions we see clearly at the outset (and more we'll surely discover in our process):

How can we use our imaginations to see space in the urban commons—fallow parking lots, underutilized structures, prime but mysteriously derelict lots—as available for the project of building cultural infrastructure?

How can we challenge any encumbering regulations to open the possibilities for this infrastructure to best serve the ambitions of the City's mandate?

How can we envision this infrastructure as also activating public space and extending time for 24-hour use?

How can we seize upon and expand creative business models of development that can fund this infrastructure and ensure a healthy arts and culture sector in perpetuity?

How can we leverage our commitment to urbanism—as lovers of cities—to answer the question, *Who is this city for?*

⁶ Culture|Shift: Blanketing the city in arts and culture. <https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/vancouver-culture-shift.pdf>

⁷ Making Spaces for Arts and Culture: Vancouver Cultural Infrastructure Plan. <https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/making-space-for-arts-and-culture.pdf>