

Creative resilience in Wood Buffalo

How the arts and culture can be a major contributor
to local recovery and rebuilding

Summary of research evidence prepared for Arts Council Wood Buffalo
by Hill Strategies Research Inc.



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**RESEARCH SHOWS THAT THE ARTS AND CULTURE
CAN PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN COMMUNITY
RESILIENCE AND TOGETHERNESS FOLLOWING A
DISASTER.**

Introduction

The traumatic wildfire that swept through Wood Buffalo in early May has led to a determined recovery effort and will require a rebuilding of parts of Fort McMurray and surrounding communities. The Wood Buffalo Recovery Committee (WBRC) is leading the resettlement and rebuilding process on behalf of the municipality, with the motto "Safe ... Resilient ... Together." More specifically, the WBRC is working "to engage, communicate, develop and implement a forward facing plan that delivers a safe, sustainable, economically resilient, caring community that people are proud to call home". (WBRC presentation, July 2016)

This report contains findings related to the arts and community well-being that appear to be particularly relevant to the Wood Buffalo situation.¹ Many of the research reports reviewed for this study involve arts and culture activities in the aftermath of Hurricanes Sandy and Katrina in the United States, bushfires in Australia, and earthquakes in Christchurch, New Zealand. Other useful reports pertain to the arts and regeneration more broadly (i.e., not in post-disaster situations). Additional information about local support for the arts and culture in Wood Buffalo is provided by a custom survey that was conducted for the Arts Council Wood Buffalo in March of 2016.²

In general, the research shows that the arts and culture have an important role to play in community resilience and togetherness following a crisis situation. It could also be argued that the arts and culture also play a role in the safety of communities, but that research stream has mostly been related to providing positive, creative outlets for at-risk youth. As such, this report focuses on findings related to other elements of quality of life and community recovery, with an emphasis on resilience and togetherness (important elements of "social profit", "social cohesion", or "social capital").

¹ Individual summaries of 11 research reports related to the arts and regeneration were also produced for Arts Council Wood Buffalo (under separate cover). This brief document is a synthesis of the key findings of those reports.

² The survey results, based on a telephone survey of 407 local residents conducted by R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd., are a statistically representative sample of residents of the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, with a maximum margin of error of 5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Arts and culture activities help with community resilience after a disaster

An Australian report highlights how a grassroots community arts initiative helped “engender healing, resilience and regeneration through art and creativity in rural Tasmania” after a 2006 bushfire. (*Arts, Health, Community Resilience and Healing: Responding to Natural Disaster*, by Dr. Rosa Maria McManamey and Janita Maria Sparkes, 2009) The main artistic response was the publication of book of community stories related to the fire, with a total of 160 contributors to the book.

Researchers used an extensive interview process to show that “the regeneration and resilience project did achieve its aims of acknowledging loss and gratitude engendering healing; the retention of history pertaining to the event; and the sharing of local knowledge both contributing to the regenerative process and as evidence for ongoing practice and learning”.

Furthermore, interviewees indicated that the project’s major outcomes included:

- Bringing the community together.
- Encouragement of social cohesion and sense of community.
- Enhancing local pride and identity.
- Sharing of stories that “showed areas of recovery, bravery, resilience and understanding of suffering”.
- Inclusivity.
- Helping with closure after the traumatic fire.



Arts and culture activities help bring the community together, encourage a sense of community, enhance local pride, and help with closure after a traumatic situation.

A 2015 study of post-earthquake Christchurch, New Zealand (*Gauging the Impacts of Post-Disaster Arts and Culture Initiatives in Christchurch*, published by the New Zealand Ministry of Culture and Heritage) shows that “arts and culture can be key tools in preserving, recovering and creating new social memory, with positive impacts on community members’ abilities to be resilient and appropriately engage and participate in the emerging post-disaster city”.

Participants in post-disaster artistic and creative initiatives have positive perceptions of the initiatives’ physical and mental health benefits, including stress reduction, increased self-confidence, social cohesion, and community empowerment.

However, for some, “there is a perception that artistic and creative initiatives are impractical or superfluous in a post-disaster context.... Some residents and authorities doubt the value, importance or necessity of these initiatives.”

In reality, “arts and culture initiatives feature prominently as some of the primary ways citizens felt able to participate in the creation of a new city identity.” Given these findings, the report recommends that “arts and culture initiatives should be included in the official recovery process”.



Arts and culture initiatives are some of the primary ways in which citizens are able to participate in the creation of a new local identity. As such, arts and culture initiatives should be included in official post-disaster recovery processes.

Arts help build new connections and new communities

After floods and a cyclone in Queensland, Australia in 2010 and 2011, a *Creative Recovery Pilot Project* was instituted to work “with local communities, artists and arts workers to facilitate high quality arts and cultural activities that contribute to community recovery, rebuilding and renewal”. A report evaluating the arts initiatives (*Evaluation of Creative Recovery Pilot Project*, by NSF Consulting for Arts Queensland, 2012) found that they contributed to the recovery and rebuilding of communities by:

- “Building new communities and connections and supporting existing communities to reconnect following the disasters;
- Allowing people to tell their stories about their experience of the natural disasters;
- Creating rituals and symbols for reflection and commemoration;
- Supporting local arts organisations, artists and arts workers to deliver creative recovery projects and activities; and
- Building ongoing partnerships and networks that will enable projects and activities to be sustained into the future.”

Key success factors include timing, conducting high quality arts activities, addressing relevant issues, and using existing networks. The report indicates that successful activities:

- Started “at a time when the participating communities were ready to start reconnecting with others”.
- Engaged strong arts practitioners who brought a high level of expertise to the table.
- “Used activities to address issues specifically identified by communities”.
- “Utilised existing local arts and non-arts networks and service providers”.

An ongoing challenge involves ensuring that there is recognition for the importance “of creative practice in a disaster context”, including integration of the arts in broader recovery efforts. Another challenge is ensuring that all voices are heard in consultative efforts, including those of Aboriginal people, children, and younger residents.



After a disaster, the arts can help build new connections and new communities, while also helping to reconnect existing communities.

Artists have much to offer in the aftermath of a disaster

Noting that, “whenever an extreme event happens, ... there’s a need to come together”, a recent article in Public Art Review indicates that “the power of art to restore some wholeness to psyches and souls shaken by disaster has emerged as the major leitmotif in artist-led recovery efforts”. After disasters, stories and other creative outlets can be “a jumping-off point for a deeper understanding of a shared experience”. (*Artful Relief* by Jon Spayde in Public Art Review, September 2013)

The article identified “nine good reasons for cities to call on artists to help with disaster recovery” (*note: order modified and emphasis added from the original article*):

- 1) Artists can **help restore a sense of community and common civic purpose** by connecting people through story, song, and other arts.
- 2) Artists not only entertain and amuse dislocated and relocated people, but they **inspire people to see themselves as fully human, not mere victims of the disaster**, hastening psychic recovery and supporting the optimism needed for rebuilding.
- 3) They’re **resourceful and usually know how to do a lot with limited financial and other resources**.
- 4) They’re **creative problem solvers**, used to thinking outside established paradigms.
- 5) Clichés about elitism, dreaminess, and disengagement notwithstanding, today’s artists are **generally “plugged into” their communities**; they know their neighbors and are good sources of information about their needs.
- 6) They **are often media-savvy and can set up effective online resources to connect people** and coordinate local relief and recovery efforts, including handling volunteerism.
- 7) They **usually know and value local institutions**—especially the quirky, offbeat, and colorful ones that add value to communities—and will advocate for their restoration.
- 8) Artists **have proven their willingness to help in many ways**, from rubbish removal to performance, by volunteering in massive numbers after disasters like 9/11, Sandy, Katrina, and the Japanese tsunami.
- 9) Artists can **help underline civic problems revealed by a disaster and initiate creative conversations about solutions**.



Given that artists have much to offer in post-disaster situations, efforts should be made to engage the arts community in local rebuilding efforts. It is also important to ensure that artists and cultural workers successfully return to Wood Buffalo.

Creative resilience

After Hurricane Sandy in 2012, many artists and arts groups were active in recovery efforts in New York. An essay on *Creative Recovery and Cultural Resiliency* (by Caron Atlas in Grantmakers in the Arts Reader, 2013) argues that “cultural work that is rooted in community and social networks can advance a just and creative recovery and a truly resilient city.... Organized compassion, unified communities, and powerful stories last long beyond a storm.”

Another brief article (*Recovering the Story: How Arts Contribute to Emergency Recovery and Resilience*, by Amelia Brown in Creative Exchange) also talks about recovery after Hurricane Sandy through the Sandy Storyline initiative, which is an “online platform that lets residents share their own stories about living through and rebuilding after Hurricane Sandy through videos, images, and narrative text. The multimedia website acts as a living history of the community, as told by its members.” The article indicates that “storytelling can be a tool to process, heal, connect and educate, playing a vital role in individual and community recovery from disasters”.



Cultural work that is rooted in community and social networks can advance a just and creative recovery and a truly resilient city.

Rachel Falcone, one of the creators of Sandy Storyline, believes that, in the face of trauma, “individuals can live beyond circumstance through story”. She also believes that “artists play a vital role in both short-term response and long-term recovery”, because “art strengthens the community’s ability to respond in every way. It brings us together, connects us; it’s a critical piece that would be missing otherwise in how we are thinking about rebuilding.” In short, art and artists support “the social part of the community”.



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In a creative context, resilience has been defined by anthropologist Alaka Wali as “the capacity to strategize, make effective use of support networks, and innovate new forms of social relationships”. Many artists are able to identify and work with aesthetic elements that “underlie the design of social relationships”. (cited in *Creative Recovery and Cultural Resiliency*)

In her essay, Caron Atlas indicates that, after a disaster, creative initiatives are an important part of community agency – the “critical community power to shape the narrative”. However, “there is no formula” for the long-term maintenance of creative efforts in community resilience. Longer-term challenges include keeping artists activated, ongoing infrastructure needs, maintenance of neighbourhood networks, remaining on the agenda of long-term recovery efforts, and financial support for ongoing creative efforts.

The essay notes that “artists’ ability to create ongoing methods of engagement throughout phases of recovery helped sustain community connection and inform rebuilding efforts”. However, Rachel Falcone notes that physical infrastructure receives so much support, and “often little is given to the social and emotional infrastructure. It’s almost harder to do artistic work because there is less support for the artistic work.”



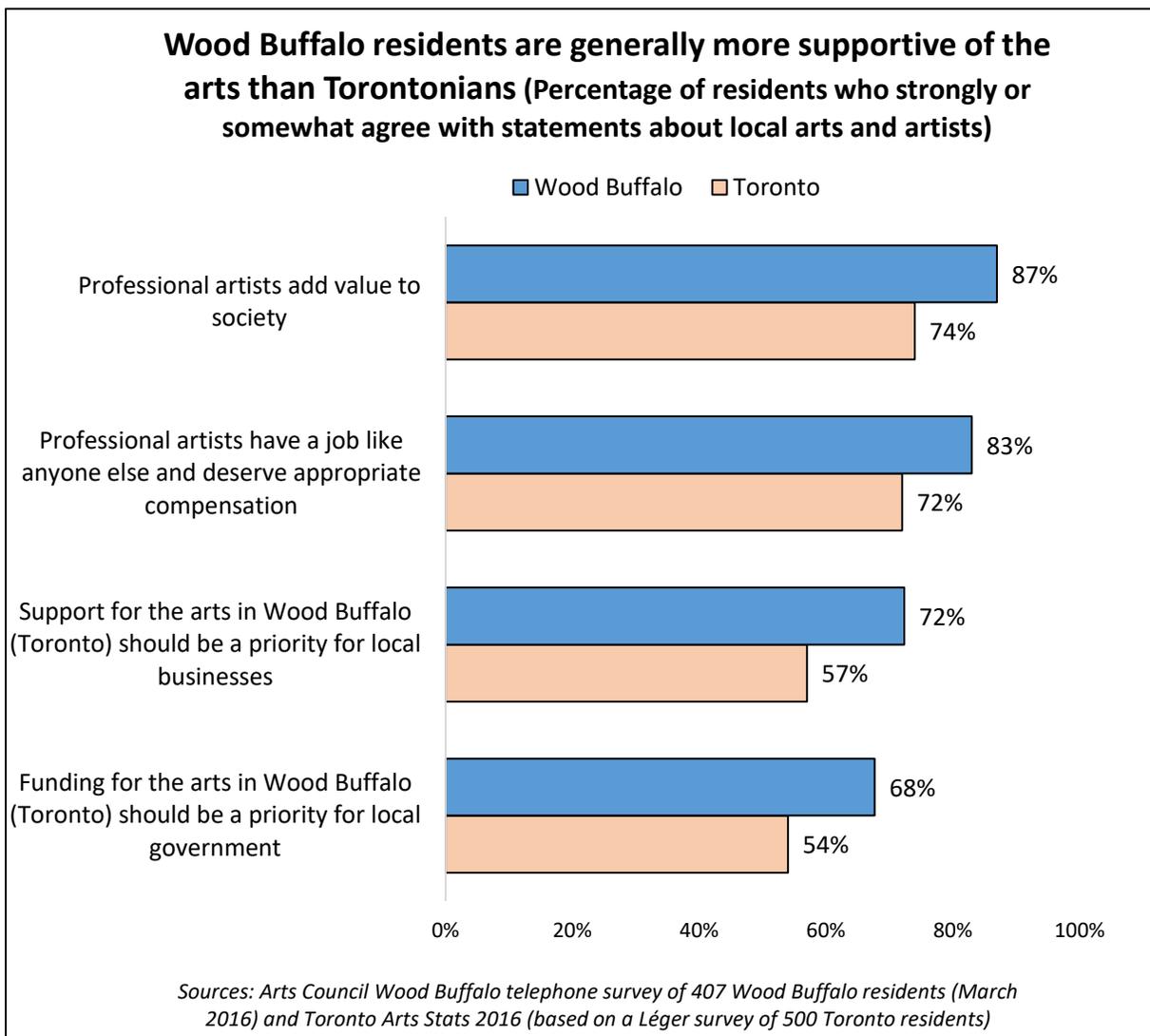
Challenges in longer-term recovery efforts include keeping artists activated, ongoing infrastructure needs, maintenance of neighbourhood networks, remaining on the agenda of recovery officials, and financial support for creative efforts.

Wood Buffalo residents have favourable perceptions of artists and do support the arts

Recent survey results show that Wood Buffalo residents are more supportive of the arts than Toronto residents when it comes to recognition of professional artists and local support for the arts. (This question was asked in Wood Buffalo in March 2016 and is benchmarked to a Toronto survey, also from 2016.)

The following chart shows that Wood Buffalo residents are more likely than Torontonians to agree that:

- Professional artists add value to society
- Professional artists have a job like anyone else and deserve appropriate compensation
- Support for the arts in Wood Buffalo (Toronto) should be a priority for local businesses
- Support for the arts in Wood Buffalo (Toronto) should be a priority for local government



Don't forget about the children

A special issue of the *Natural Hazards Observer* in 2015 provides a series of articles related to "Art and Disaster". It is the only report in this review that specifically addresses children's reactions and healing post-disaster. One of the articles in the series observes that "children are one of the most under-served populations among disaster survivors".

The creator of the *Art Feeds* program (which was active after a major 2011 tornado in Joplin, Missouri) indicated that, "as part of the healing program we created a variety of projects that encouraged students to express their feelings, grow resiliency, and heal". The organization even "developed a curriculum called Trauma Response. It includes 12 lessons that begin the expressive and healing process with students. In the event of a disaster, Art Feeds can offer the curriculum and an art supply pack to traumatized students."



Children might be one of the most under-served populations among disaster survivors. Creative activities can help them express their feelings, increase their resilience, and heal.

In general, the report indicates that "art in the face of disaster [can be] a form of creative expression, a pathway to healing, and a means for contributing to community". The series' editor notes that "art may be especially important for children and adults in the aftermath of seemingly unbearable trauma. Art can obviously empower disaster survivors to take control of their thoughts, their feelings, and their narratives, and thus to begin the long process of recovery."



Art can empower disaster survivors to take control of their thoughts, their feelings, and their narratives, and thus to begin the long process of recovery.

Small-scale arts and culture activities contribute to community resilience and wellbeing

In a synthesis of a major series of reports in the United Kingdom (*Understanding the Value of Arts and Culture*), the authors argue that “it is the strengthening of the connections between people, and increasing social capital, which matters, rather than the direct economic impact often associated with culture-led regeneration.” They cite the example (not disaster-related) of a smaller community in England (Folkestone, population 47,000) which established a grassroots festival, including public art works, which helped to make the town “a better place to live, work, visit and study”.

Another example cited in the report concerns grassroots historical societies in the isolated Outer Hebrides islands of Scotland: “the process itself, the shared experience of participating, collecting and listening with others; the sense of producing something of worth for the community and its ability to bring people together, contributed to a sense of wellbeing and cohesiveness.” (David Beel, *Exploring Value in Digital Archives and the Comainn Eachdraidh*, p.14, cited in *Understanding the Value of Arts and Culture*, p. 84).

As noted in the report, the “more informal participatory and everyday cultural activities” (such as knitting circles, book clubs, dance groups, church choirs, and community festivals) help to build community resilience and social capital.

The report concludes that “there is evidence that smaller-scale cultural assets have a more positive effect on neighbourhoods and communities: that small commercial, community and participatory arts, including for example design studios and small music venues, have more sustainable positive results, and may constitute a more balanced and organic path to regeneration.”

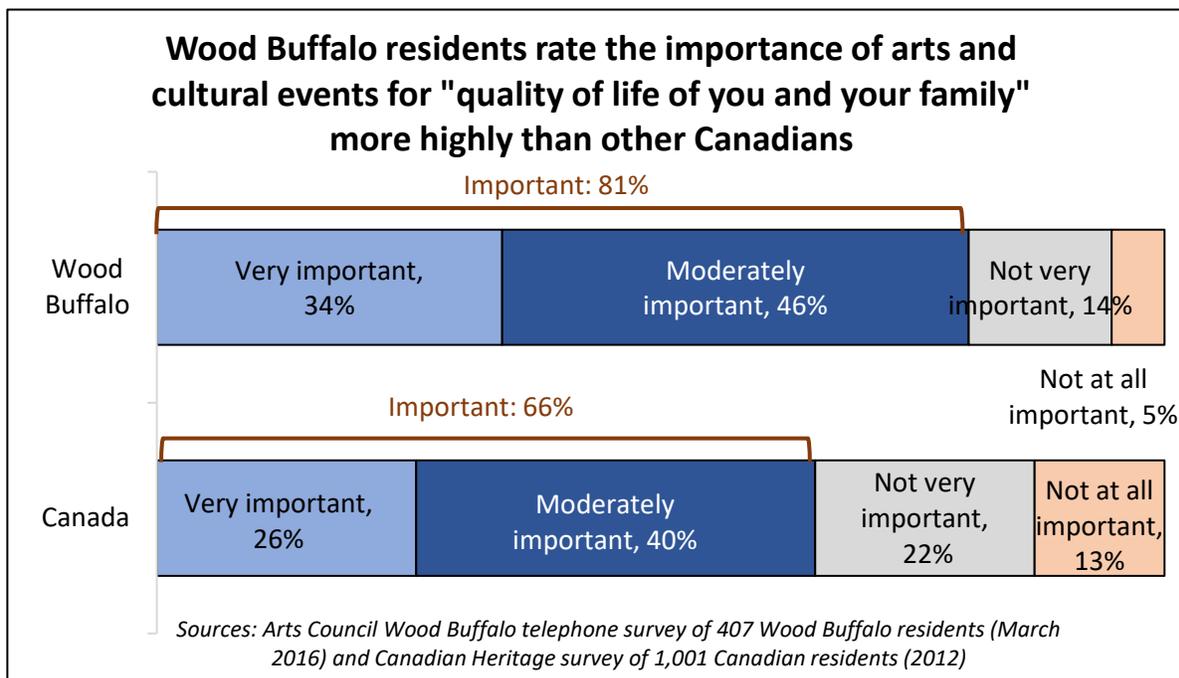


Small-scale and participatory arts and culture activities (the kinds of activities that are most common in Wood Buffalo) can have an important impact on community wellbeing.

Wood Buffalo residents have a strong recognition of the importance of the arts for quality of life

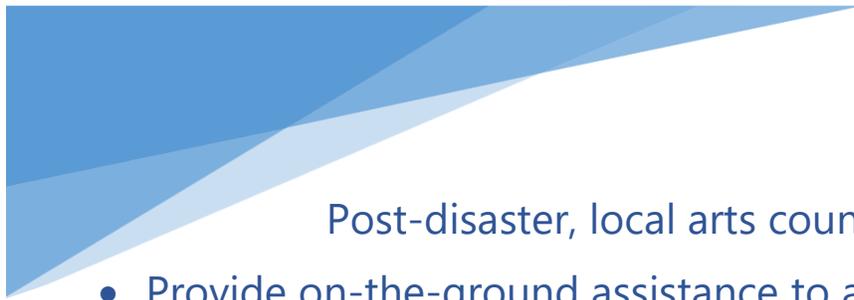
The results of a March 2016 survey show that Wood Buffalo residents recognize the importance of the arts and culture for their quality of life. The chart below compares the Wood Buffalo results to a national survey from 2012.

When asked "How important to you are arts and cultural events in terms of the quality of life of you and your family?", Wood Buffalo residents are much more likely than other Canadians to say that arts and culture events are either very or moderately important (81% vs 66%), including a higher proportion who say that these events are very important (34% vs. 26%).



Local arts councils can provide valuable post-disaster assistance

A case study of post-wildfire Australian towns (in *Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities Through Arts and Creativity: Australia*, Kim Dunphy, 2009) indicates that the arts council in Victoria (Australia) provided on-the-ground assistance to artists and cultural workers in order to ensure their return and effectiveness after the fire. A Regional Arts Development Officer was engaged to work directly in towns affected by fire, providing administrative support, developing contact information databases, as well as helping to write grants, manage small projects, and get small cultural organizations back on their feet. Arts Victoria also established a cultural working party to coordinate efforts regarding support programs and to ensure that arts and culture remained on the agenda as the fire-affected towns and communities entered a rebuilding phase.



Post-disaster, local arts councils can:

- Provide on-the-ground assistance to artists and cultural workers in order to ensure their return and effectiveness.
- Help to get small cultural organizations back on their feet.
- Establish a cultural working party to coordinate efforts regarding support programs and to ensure that arts and culture remain on the agenda as the community enters a rebuilding phase.