



Create and Commemorate

October 13, 2020

reimagine NS: Create and Commemorate

Report by Brian Lilley and Jacqueline Warwick

Personnel

Peter Dykhuis, director/curator and visual artist, Dalhousie Art Gallery

Martine Durier-Copp, academic dean, NSCAD University

Kevin Lewis, visual artist and film industry professional

Raeesa Lalani, artistic director, Prismatic Festival

Brian Lilley, professor of architecture, Dalhousie

Véronique MacKenzie, dancer and choreographer

Holly Mathieson, conductor and musical director, Symphony Nova Scotia

Nathan Simmons, actor

Karen Spaulding, performance presenter and owner, The Carleton

Jacqueline Warwick, director, Fountain School of Performing Arts, Dalhousie

Jeremy Webb, artistic director, Neptune Theatre

Overview

Our team discussed the roles and functions of the creative and performing arts in healing Mi'kma'ki/Nova Scotia from the terrible harms of 2020. We asked ourselves:

- What are the obligations and the challenges for creators and creative communities in Mi'kma'ki/Nova Scotia today?
- What specific identities of creative communities in Mi'kma'ki/Nova Scotia distinguish us from other Canadian and international arts and creative communities?
- What is needed—and will be needed—to support careers for artists and creators in Mi'kma'ki/Nova Scotia?
- What role can Dalhousie play in supporting a vibrant arts/creative culture in this province?

Our stimulating conversations included critiquing the limitations of reductive stereotypes and clichés, reflecting on the role the arts play in healing from trauma and in commemorating the past, and deep thinking about the land itself and how landscape shapes our communities, our opportunities and our creative expression.

In one vivid example, we acknowledged the tremendous power of art in claiming space, for good or ill. The grinning sculpture of teeth outside the Portland Street denture clinic owned by mass killer GW was taken down only three days after his murderous rampage because its

monstrous imposition over the street was no longer tolerable.¹ The sculpture was merely the least damaging way the murderer victimized the land itself; he roamed unchecked along beautiful country roads that were themselves defiled by his deeds. Thus, unlike with other mass deaths (e.g. 9/11, the Montréal Polytechnique, the SwissAir crash), there is no single site where mourners can gather to commemorate and commune with the spirits of the victims of April 18–19. Yet the sprawling terrain that was harmed was also healed by several spontaneous acts: the solemn cavalcade of cars and trucks past sites of significant remembrance allowed for a creative communal response; a four-day bonfire in Enfield by local First Nations communities smudged and cleansed the land; and the flight path in the shape of a heart over Portapique by pilot Demitri Neonakis created powerful, ephemeral art on April 19.²

In our discussions of the killings, then, we saw that public art can harm and can heal, and that the land is a crucial partner in all of our endeavours. We are inspired to advocate for more permanent art projects to commemorate and honour the victims of Portapique and other affected communities.

In tackling the questions we set ourselves, we touched on themes of space, venue and accessibility and also commemoration and cultural memory, and we saw that all of these concepts are interconnected. As we move forward into new and unimagined kinds of community, we are humbled and inspired to consider ways in which Nova Scotia's arts sector can help facilitate the work of healing, recovery and reinvention. Artists shape narratives about historical events and human experience; their work must be carried out responsibly and sensitively, with support from and engagement with the community, academic institutions and thinkers.

Memory & Commemoration

In the broadest sense, art is concerned with telling stories. Through dance, music, architecture and theatre, we express stories and ideas about the past, present and future of our communities. The retention of one's own language is an inalienable human right that has been denied through colonialism in this region (and others), and we mourn the lost possibilities for storytelling and erosion of metaphor, imagery and ideas. As well as acknowledging the deliberate destruction of Indigenous languages, we talked about how immigrant groups preserve or lose language, and how language is intertwined with community and identity. The

¹ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/police-remove-denture-clinic-signage-from-shooter-s-business-amid-community-outcry-1.5541632>

² <https://atlantic.ctvnews.ca/i-wanted-to-hug-the-community-n-s-pilot-pays-heartfelt-tribute-to-victims-of-mass-killing-1.4904165>

power of language in shaping identity is enormous, and the metaphors and parables of different language groups illuminate the range of ways in which the world is experienced and navigated. We may also recognize that art offers channels for communication that go beyond language, and that can express emotions and ideas that are “beyond words.” Moreover, we identified and analyzed the shifts in our own communication modes during the first wave of the pandemic: as restrictions begin to lift, we find ourselves having to relearn face-to-face interaction, and we note the ways in which social norms have eroded—or at least changed—due to our months-long reliance on online platforms for communication. We wonder: what will be the languages and social norms in a post-pandemic world? We may perhaps develop ways of communicating that are more understanding of and hospitable to people on the Autism spectrum and/or people raised in cultural contexts that do not favour direct address.

Through processes of abstraction and defamiliarization, artists and creators gain some distance from their themes, and this necessary distancing can itself allow for healing. Processes of making art can be therapeutic for the creators, who may find it safest and most restorative to confront trauma through art, and also for audiences, who may find the art work transformative in their healing and to their worldview. In this context, the role of the artist is to corral ideas and honour human relationships, making tangible, healing experience out of shared trauma.

In recent weeks this concern has been brought into sharp worldwide focus with the revitalized and newly visible #BlackLivesMatter movement, in response to growing recognition of police brutality and anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism. Protests in Halifax honoured George Floyd when thousands knelt silently in Spring Garden Road and then danced with defiant, joyful abandon, claiming a central downtown intersection as a space for communion and commemoration. In our conversations, we contrasted the ease of coming together in the city’s centre with the difficulty of visiting the Africville Museum, which is located on the site of a village destroyed to make way for industrial development in the 1960s. The museum offers a powerful and moving commemoration of the community that was devastated, yet it is hidden away from the city that benefited from Africville’s destruction, difficult to access by public transit, nearly impossible to reach on foot and easily missed by drivers passing by.

We acknowledge the powerful ‘Speak Truth to Power’ seminar series sponsored by Dalhousie, particularly Aaron Prosper’s contribution; he spoke insightfully about the challenges of sharing cultural space from a First Nations perspective. In what ways can we address the issue of separation by remote location? Actor Nathan Simmons mentioned the yearly Africville festival that commemorates the loss of community and, perhaps paradoxically, builds community around that shared sense of loss. This presents an opportunity for greater presence at the city scale, particularly for engagement with the performing arts, as well as for University support.

Of all art forms, Architecture has perhaps the longest history of wrestling with the commemoration of tragic events and for finding the proper translation of a society's grief into permanent cultural markers, such as the obelisk-shaped war memorials common in Canadian towns. Our discussions of memorials returned often to Maya Lin's paradigm-shifting Vietnam memorial in Washington, DC (1982). Lin's work was site-responsive, engaging the landscape, the physical experience of procession and the otherworldly effect of material reflection, and it broke the mould of imposing colonial obelisk and statues.



An aerial view of Maya Lin's V-shaped design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. (Photo: © Maya Lin Studio/The Pace Gallery/Photo by Terry Adams/National Park Service)

Statues of this sort have been toppled or corralled with a change of regime, as occurred in the former communist bloc. We are now seeing this happen in the southern United States with statues and imagery celebrating the Confederacy, and with monuments to slave traders such as Edward Colston (Bristol) and Cecil Rhodes (Cape Town). In Halifax there has been controversy over the statue of Cornwallis being removed from Cornwallis Park, as his policies toward the Mi'kmaq people have been increasingly recognized as inhumane. A recent article in *The Coast* magazine suggests new public statues honouring leading figures from Black and First Nations

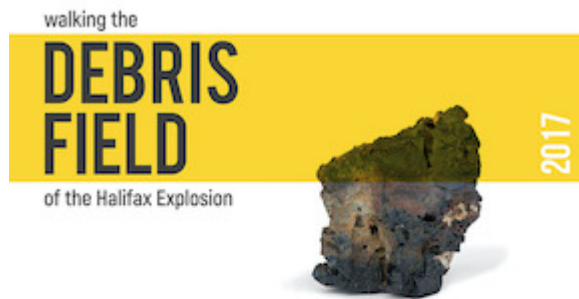
communities, including Nora Bernard, Chief Membertou and Rose Fortune.³ This opens up deeper cultural issues for debate, and new territory for artistic expression. Our group strongly advocates for a shared sense of safety, inclusion and meaningful engagement in the public realm.

In Halifax, the explosion of 1917 has been commemorated regularly throughout the last century, and these commemorations have taken many forms. In the Halifax Regional Municipality, there are numerous physical monuments to the explosion, including artifacts where they fell (cannons and anchors), buildings (the Gottingen Street Library), the Hydrostone district and, of course, the Bell Tower monument in Fort Needham Park. Performing artists have also offered responses to the tragedy as when Xara: Choral Theatre marked the centenary of the event with a stage production, *The Hours Turn to Nothing*, about the little-considered work of nurses and midwives in the immediate aftermath.

Our group discussed the 2017 exhibition *The Debris Field* at the Dalhousie Art Gallery, curated by Peter Dykhuis. One aspect of the work considered the anti-monument as a local marker of resistance and commemoration.⁴ The Narratives in Space and Time Society in Mulgrave Park and Shannon Park also addresses this idea with a yearly festival and the installation of spray-art on the walls of housing units in Mulgrave Park. Finally, there is the circle ceremony and smudging led by Dr. Cathy Martin (Dalhousie) and Elder Joe Michael at Turtle Grove on the Dartmouth Shore, held yearly at the site where an entire First Nations community was wiped out, erased by the tidal surge of the 1917 Halifax explosion.

³ <https://www.thecoast.ca/halifax/thirteen-people-more-deserving-of-a-statue-in-halifax-than-cornwallis/Content?oid=24214644>

⁴ <http://www.narrativesinspaceandtime.ca/projects/walking-the-debris-field/>



NIS+TS

Narratives in Space+Time Society is an interdisciplinary creative research group working on projects involving mobile media and walking. Beginning in 2014, NIS+TS has created public walking events that explore the ways in which the Halifax Explosion of December 6, 1917 continues to shape our experience and understandings of this city. The members of NIS+TS are Robert Bean, Brian Libby, Barbara Lunder and Mary Elizabeth Luke. Over 80 individuals and organizations have collaborated with NIS+TS in Walking the Debris Field.

For more details, visit the following sites:
<http://www.narrativesinspaceandtime.ca>
<https://www.facebook.com/narrativesinspaceandtime/>
<https://www.instagram.com/narrativesinspaceandtime/>
<http://artgallery.dal.ca/halifax-explosion/>

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| Oct | 11 | Wed 4:00pm | Walking the Debris Field: Public Geographies of the Halifax Explosion, Dalhousie Art Gallery exhibition opening, panel, reception, and launch of Debris app |
| | 14 | Fri 4:00pm | Public Art Walk: Debris Field Drive: Around the Halifax (part of Hochschule 2017), starting at St. Paul's Cemetery, Geary Street, Dartmouth |
| | 21 | Fri 2:00pm | Panel discussion with NIS+TS members, and collaborators Angela Henderson, Nitina Robit, and Derek Rully, Dalhousie Art Gallery |
| Nov | 02 | Thu 7:00pm | Storytelling roundtable featuring Catherine Martin, Jason Maybin, Ben Stone, and others, Dalhousie Art Gallery. Facilitated by Mary Elizabeth Luke |
| | 05 | Sun 2:00pm | Public Art Walk: North of North Street, starting at the corner of Barrington and Richmond Streets, Halifax |
| | 08 | Wed 2:00pm | Augmented Reality workshop, Dalhousie Art Gallery. Facilitated by members of NIS+TS and collaborators from the Dalhousie Faculty of Computer Science |
| | 09 | Thu 7:00pm | Reassembling the Victims of Turtle Grove: Honors the Narratives, Alderney Library Panel, Alderney Library, Dartmouth. Featuring Catherine Martin, Mary Elizabeth Luke, and Barbara Lunder |
| | 19 | Sun 2:00pm | Public Art Walk: Atholville, starting at Walk House, Walk Street near Young, Halifax |
| Dec | 03 | Sun 2:00pm | Debris Field Archives, Narratives in Space + Time Society, Nova Scotia Archives Exhibition opens, NS Archives, 805 University Ave., Halifax |
| | 03 | Sun 2:00pm | Public Art Walk: Cemetery Procession, starting at the parking lot, Devonshire Avenue, Devonshire Ave., Halifax |



A series of seminars and events organized by the Narratives in Space and Time Society in collaboration with the Dalhousie Arts Gallery, commemorating the centenary of the Halifax Explosion in 2017.

In our meetings, we contemplated Nova Scotia's resilience through long patterns of tragedy and healing and commemoration through various art forms. We acknowledged such famous examples as Seeger & MacColl's 1959 song "Ballad of Springhill" and the Swissair Memorial Site as well as the reconstructed 2010 Africville Museum, but we also noted the lack of permanent commemoration at the site of Turtle Grove. As the federal government has recently returned this land to the First Nations, we see an opportunity for collaboration with the proposed trail system. Any work created here, or to commemorate Portapique, must honour the land and must create space for social interaction and engagement.

Space, Accessibility and Engagement

This discussion topic took on a life of its own, partly because it is shared ground that all performers, artists and architects deal with by necessity. The conversation considered the roster of performance spaces available on an official basis, and the possibilities of uncovering performance space in daily life. This approach, similar to environmental theatre, is seen locally in the work of [Zuppa Theatre](#) and the programming of the [Nocturne: Art at Night](#) festival. Our

group members reported on the successful strategies of arts organizations that have built reciprocal relationships with venues and sites that anchor festivals like Nocturne and RESPONSIVE: International Light Art Project Halifax to engage our communities and transform city spaces into art events.

We mused also on the significant distinction between “public art,” often corporate-sponsored and anodyne installations in controlled spaces, and the notion of “art in public space,” which can be spontaneous and radical reimaginings of community space. Curator/visual artist Peter Dykhuis offered a delightful example of his own, describing how he encouraged neighbourhood children to paint rocks and display them in his garden, ultimately curating a collection of art works that engaged families and neighbours with spontaneous interactions.

We discussed the growing and rapidly evolving use of digital public space as a forum for building community. Currently, social media tools such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook provide platforms to shout and pose rather than spaces to play, experiment and be vulnerable. How can Dalhousie research expertise contribute to building healthier digital space for artists to tell stories? We imagine a series of podcasts in which artists discuss their work and philosophies in conversation with Halifax’s current and former Poet Laureates. This approach would also allow for a close focus on the role of language in storytelling and memory.

In our discussions, we critiqued the terms “diversity and inclusion,” acknowledging that these terms are used by well-intentioned white allies yet are less commonly embraced by BIPOC communities. The concept of “diversity” is often manifested in tokenistic attempts to include “one of” every marginalized community, flattening the diversity of non-dominant groups as simply “other.” Artists from equity-seeking groups need identity-specific spaces that belong to them, in addition to ones in which they feel merely welcome. Group member Nathan Simmons, a Black actor who works locally in film and stage contexts, notes that

Artists need to feel comfortable being vulnerable. Vulnerability is an important factor when trying to develop as an artist. Being surrounded by those you can identify with helps one feel accepted and/or comfortable. In an ideal world you have a group of like-minded people, or those you can empathize with, once or twice a week— this would truly aid in the growth of underrepresented artists.

Simmons advocates supporting communities of artists of similar background and experience, to create work without the interference of white members, no matter how well-meaning. His argument is echoed by Raeesa Lalani, artistic director of the Prismatic Arts Festival: “to create a safe space you have to welcome everyone and there needs to be representation in the room of all people (for ex. if a Black artist walks into a room full of white artists there will be an

immediate sense of discomfort).” This line of thinking underscores the immense value of the Africville Museum and community, who celebrate and commemorate the specific community of Black Nova Scotians pushed out of their village for the sake of industrial progress in the 1960s, through the reconstruction of the village church and through annual reunion events.

As noted, our team joins Lalani and Simmons in advocating for equity, not mere equality, of representation and investment of resources, urging that established arts venues need to create safe spaces for all artists and communities, making particular effort to hold space marginalized and underrepresented communities to bridge the gaps. We noted that Dalhousie’s Arts Centre building, now undergoing renovation and expansion, includes an open-air amphitheatre on its roof: this space has been closed for decades because its inaccessibility and lack of barriers make it unsafe by current standards. We urge the University to install barriers and elevator access so that this central, open space can benefit our students and the broader community. This site could be particularly valuable as a performance venue now that inadequate ventilation is a major barrier to using theatres and concert halls.

Rigid space and acoustic requirements have long governed music-making and theatre-making in the classical European tradition. Current requirements for increased ventilation negate the acoustic benefits of a sealed concert hall, and social distancing norms undermine the authority of a conductor. Holly Mathieson, incoming conductor and musical director of Symphony Nova Scotia, explains that:

Traditional performance spaces are designed and built, sympathetically, around a particular iteration of performance—the concert hall with its focus on acoustics, the theatre with proscenium to allow the audience to peer through the fourth wall, etc. But, in time, those spaces take on another function, which is to entrain, and potentially constrain, performance. The performance tradition becomes reiterative, in order to remain something to which the performance space is ideally suited.

Things like artistic values, programming trends, funding structures, training methods, marketing language, and audience and performer identities grow through that environment-led system, are interwoven and interdependent, and have a tendency to ossify. So when—as is the case with COVID-19—we lose access to something as inherently structural as those habitual performance spaces, it is like the leg of a table being removed. The table wobbles, and the other legs (value systems, behaviours, identities) also become unstable.

Our discussions identified a need for synergizing architecture with social interaction, acknowledging that standalone, single-purpose buildings are an outdated idea. Mathieson

suggests that new performance conditions in the post-pandemic world, unnerving and destabilizing though they are, may lead to a decisive end to the hierarchical and reactionary climate of classical music culture:

If we remove control over something like acoustics, and therefore lower our expectations of sound quality, perhaps we allow the growth of an alternative value system in which “good” performance is measured by how many people had access, or how much the musicians enjoyed themselves, or the extent to which the barrier between orchestra and audience was blurred to create space for shared music-making, rather than doers on one side and observers on the other (in itself a relatively recent and contrived activity).

We glimpse, then, a vision of music-making that celebrates connection and community over precision and virtuosity. In her work with the Nevis Ensemble in Scotland, Mathieson is already engaged with bringing musicians into unexpected performance venues, and performing for listeners not trained in the protocols of classical music audiences, and her work here presents an exciting model for music-making in Nova Scotia.

Movement & Migration

We explored many themes about patterns of movement and migration as they relate to cultural memory. In considering the artfulness of maps, we acknowledged the biases constructed in Mercator maps, which distort the size of land masses so that European and North American countries appear larger than they are in reality, while the continents of Africa and South America appear smaller. What are the consequences of these misrepresentations? We agreed that Mi’kma’ki/Nova Scotia is, geographically and metaphorically, at the edge of everywhere, and that our location lends itself to telling stories of diasporic communities and colonial sprawl; the land and the water are the connective tissues of stories of displacement, expulsion and adventure alike.

We returned again and again to the powerful metaphor of water, a force that cannot be bound yet connects and shapes all it touches. We wondered how a worldview organized around oceans instead of land might metaphorically shift our province’s place in the world. Building on this metaphor, we considered that existing on the edge, or the fringes, emancipates our artists from convention and positions them at the cutting edge of future art forms.

Knowing that artists are accustomed to frequent travel for work opportunities, we acknowledged that Halifax is actually at the centre of vibrant networks between arts

communities in Atlantic Canada, Greenland, Iceland, Ireland and the United Kingdom, Europe, North Africa, the Caribbean and the Eastern seaboard of the U.S. As an exploration, dancer/choreographer Véronique MacKenzie drew lines representing recent work-related travel over Mercator and AuthaGraph maps, reflecting on her previously taken-for-granted privilege of mobility in pursuit of creative opportunities. We pondered the realities of limited travel in a post-pandemic world, and what these restrictions will mean for art, creativity and innovation.

We hypothesized that, in the near future, Nova Scotian art will be inward-looking and responsive to our immediate terrain, and we hope that this work will draw on the rich and vibrant history of all who have shared the land. We hope to encourage creative work that tells the stories of this region in innovative ways that can be meaningful in other communities as well. For example, Neptune Theatre's early 2020 production of *Controlled Damage* was an innovative telling of the story of Viola Desmond's civil disobedience, and this original stage play can illuminate a crucial chapter in the history of Civil Rights activism, and inspire audiences across Canada and the U.S.

Recommendations and Proposals

As our group speculated on the possibilities for a more permanent marker for the recent mass murder in central Nova Scotia, we agreed that it should embody some idea of communal endeavour and be open to all art forms. The hard lessons of 2020 will require concerted efforts to help communities process and recover, and our approach must involve cooperation, multi-faceted and multi-disciplinary approaches, and a willingness to have art permeate all corners of our region. Dalhousie can play a role in providing and supporting transformative, healing experiences on and off our campuses, and can be a leader in forging new forms of community in the post-pandemic world.

A number of proposals have arisen from our conversations, which touch on multiple points of our shared concerns and seek to move from listening and analysis to proposals for action.

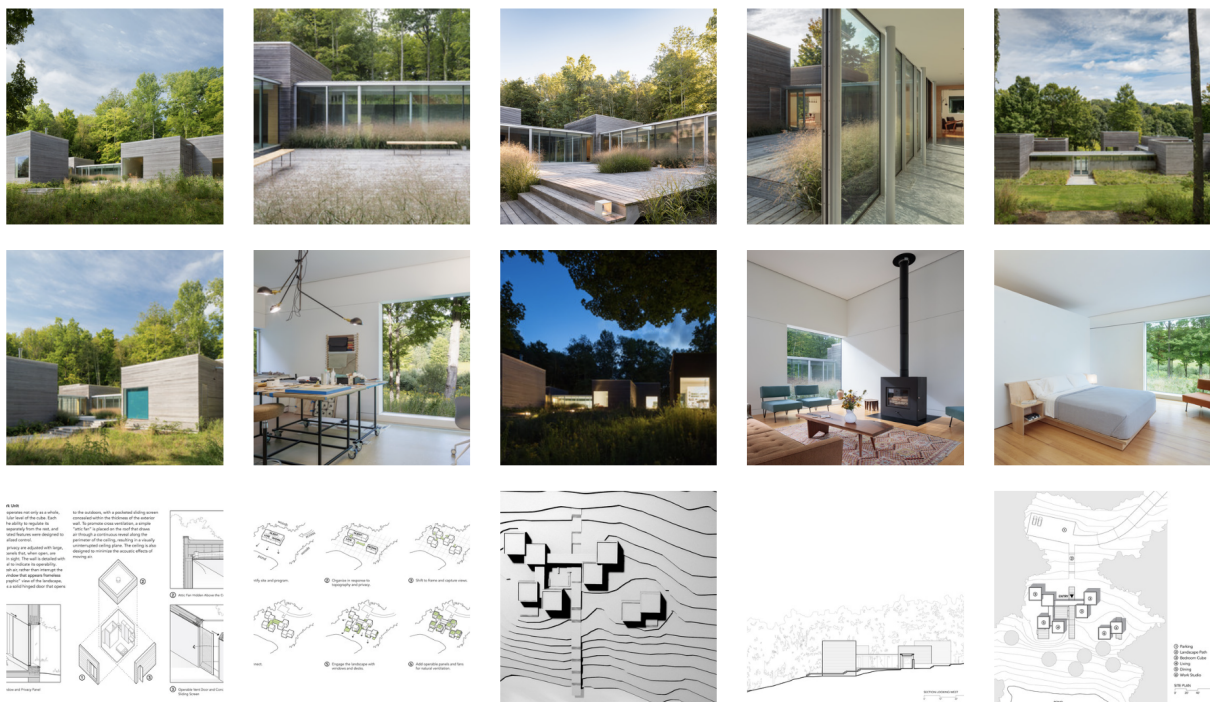
1. Artist talks that deliver insights into the identified issues and how they play out through a particular art form and culture: Fine Arts, Architecture, Theatre, Film, Music Orchestra, Dance, Curation. Current and former Poet Laureates of Halifax could serve as moderators/hosts of conversations that would be broadcast (podcast) into digital space. Each interview could performatively "locate" in an undiscovered, underused or liminal space and respond to the site selection (why and how it contributes to the art form, creation of safe space).

2. Dalhousie's Arts Centre building, now undergoing renovation and expansion, includes an open-air amphitheatre on its roof: this space has been closed for decades because its inaccessibility and lack of barriers make it unsafe by current standards. We urge the University to install barriers and elevator access so that this central, open space can benefit our students and the broader community. This site could be particularly valuable as a performance venue now that inadequate ventilation is a major barrier to using theatres and concert halls.
3. A lecture series (modelled on The Massey Lectures) and seminars that explore and develop approaches to healing on a personal and cultural level. The series and seminars could engage the broader community on particular themes: for example, the Cornwallis statue and possibilities for its replacement. These would chart a path forward, exploring the creation of safe, inclusive space that can be shared respectfully by various communities, and fostering hybrid approaches to storytelling and sharing of resources.
4. Mobile performance and embedded residencies that explore the reciprocal benefits of locating artists' studios and performances in the community, for example, in elder homes such as Northwood or Parkland. Building on the model of the Nevis Ensemble in Scotland, mobile performances would be community-building events, collaborating in the development of community and public venues to accommodate both the spatial and temporal arts and every possible hybrid version thereof. These performances and residencies could overlap with local festivals.
5. The proposal with the largest scope is the idea of a retreat series, modelled on expanding the Pugwash Conference into the realm of the arts. The Nobel Prize-winning Pugwash Conference represents one of Canada's shining moments on the world stage. Founded in 1957 by Joseph Rotblat and Bertrand Russell in Pugwash, Nova Scotia, the conference took "dialogue across divides" as its central tenet. This motto applies very well to our concerns for healing the community and looking forward to a mindful, equitable future, so the conference is an excellent model for a retreat series at Dalhousie.

The model of a 14-day retreat is particularly apt during the pandemic as it neatly transforms the standard self-isolation period into an active, creative period for reflection and dialogue.

Dalhousie already hosts retreats and think-tanks for various groups on a regular basis; expanding to include retreats for hybrid cultural groups in the Arts and Architecture would

require a venue that accommodates diverse artistic activity. Flexible spatial arrangements that could accommodate, for example, an orchestra or a dance group (or both) would allow for developmental and intersectional work. A remote location would facilitate the positive advantages of (temporary) migration, as well as reinforcing Dalhousie’s role as a regional network. Asking retreat participants to leave a trace of their activities would build a rich, commemorative collection over time, giving character to a strong cultural landmark. We believe that such windows of opportunity are important in creating a time, space and unencumbered atmosphere for collegial work on the serious issues that presently confront our University and society at large.



*An example of a Retreat in Upper New York, focusing on landscape, health and well-being; Architects: Gluck+⁵
<http://www.narrativesinspaceandtime.ca/projects/walking-the-debris-field/>*

⁵ https://www.archdaily.com/942775/artist-retreat-gluck-plus?utm_medium=email&utm_source=ArchDaily%20List&kth=5,193,248