



2025

Somerville Armory Master Plan

A roadmap for successfully managing the
Somerville Armory as a community arts center.

CITY OF SOMERVILLE

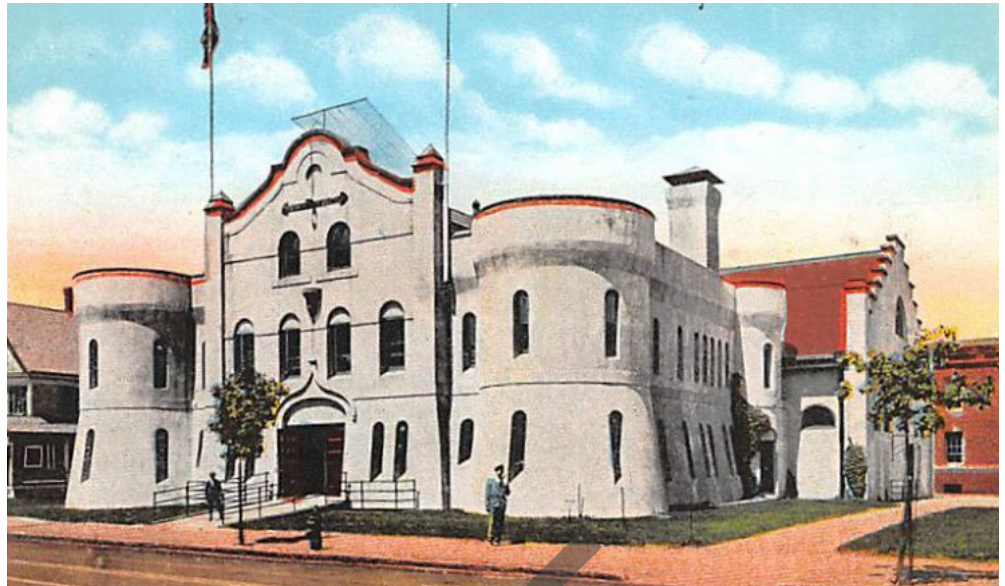


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Introduction



Throughout this document the term “Armory” is used to refer to the Somerville Armory as a building, located at 191 Highland Ave, and should not be confused with one of the building’s current tenants, Center for Arts at the Armory (sometimes referred to as “Arts at the Armory.”)

INTRODUCTION & BUILDING HISTORY

The Somerville Armory has evolved since it was built for the Somerville Light Infantry of the Massachusetts Volunteer Militia in 1903. After more than 50 years as a military facility (first the militia and then the National Guard), in the 1960s the Armory was reorganized into a State Police office building, and ultimately lay vacant for decades before being sold in 2004. When the Commonwealth sold the building the Somerville community expressed a range of interests for the property’s unique drill hall and other spaces. Many advocated for it to become a community center or arts venue, and ultimately the Commonwealth sold the facility to the Sater brothers, the experienced operators of the Middle East club in Cambridge, who converted the Armory into the spaces we know today. Over the years, the range of tenants in the Armory changed with more and more non-arts-related businesses brought in to help finance operations. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic forced many tenants to temporarily close and pushed the private owners to consider turning the Armory completely into an office property. The resulting outcry spurred the City to acquire the Armory by eminent domain in 2021, to serve the public with artistic and civic uses for decades to come.

To fulfill this new purpose as a public community arts center, the City of Somerville’s Economic Development Division and Arts Council partnered to develop a Somerville Armory Master Plan. A consultant, Create Today LLC, was selected to work with the City on community outreach and research to develop this Master Plan to:

1. Establish guiding principles for maximizing the arts use of the building
2. Outline the financial realities involved in operating the Armory as a public arts center.

The Armory Master Plan is a guide and roadmap for the next iteration of the Somerville Armory, meant to guide decision-making for years to come. It is written to be the reference point for those making governance decisions for the building and intentionally leaves space for those empowered to make decisions to address changing needs in the community. The Armory Master Plan also leans into an expectation that incremental change is both practical and purposeful, recognizing that the people who will bring life to this building – the artists and creators who produce events, classes, performances – are core partners in bringing the Armory into its future as Somerville’s home for the arts community and need to be consulted along the way.

ART AND CULTURE AT THE ARMORY

Current Arts Tenants

The Armory currently hosts vibrant arts tenants who contribute to the rich creative fabric of Greater Boston. From nonprofit cultural hubs to specialized audio services, each tenant fosters a unique space for artistic expression and community engagement. These tenants offer invaluable resources and platforms for local artists, musicians, and performers, supporting both emerging talent and established professionals. Below is a summary of the organizations and businesses that make up this artistic community.

Acoustic Strings of New England & Angela Leidig (1A)

Acoustic Strings has been a trusted provider of fine European instruments and top-tier music supplies in New England since 1999. The shop works with schools and rental programs throughout New Hampshire, Greater Boston, and the wider New England area. Acoustic Strings is dedicated to offering exceptional service and competitive pricing for string players of all levels. Angela Leidig is a violin instructor specializing in the Suzuki Method and the Alexander Technique, offers private lessons for learners of all ages.



AcousticStrings.biz

Audiotech Services (B7)

Audiotech Services supports Greater Boston’s music community with over 40 years of audio engineering experience. Their mission is to offer affordable, specialized tech support for artists – services that are not widely available in the broader market. Their offerings include repair and restoration of vintage tube amplifiers, professional studio equipment, and audiophile gear. Audiotech Services also provides high-quality analog equipment for rent, with delivery, setup, and operation handled by professional sound engineers.



AudiotechServices.com



ArtsattheArmory.org

Center for Arts at the Armory (1B, 1C, B9)

Arts at the Armory is a non-profit dedicated to providing an inclusive, accessible space that fosters opportunities for artists and cultural workers. The center brings diverse audiences together, enriches lives, and supports the creative economy. It hosts over 750 events annually, spanning music, dance, theater, literature, visual arts, film, circus, comedy, and more. With its affordable venues, Arts at the Armory is committed to serving performing arts, cultural, and community groups in Greater Boston. The Performance Hall and Café offer a broad range of arts and cultural events, while the facility also organizes markets that promote local businesses and community development. Both spaces are available for private rentals.



DeadMoonAudio.com

Dead Moon Audio (B1)

Dead Moon Audio is a recording studio designed to serve local artists and engineers. With a spacious Live Room, Isolation Booth, Control Room, Isolation Cabinet Room, and Lounge, the studio is equipped to accommodate nearly any musical ensemble. Its acoustically designed Live Room captures performances with exceptional sound quality, while the Control Room, crafted by Michael Blackmer, utilizes advanced acoustic treatment and non-parallel surfaces to minimize resonances and achieve a “flat” acoustic response.



OutoftheBlueArtGallery.com

Out of the Blue Community Arts Gallery (3B, B6, Common Area Walls)

Out of the Blue Gallery is committed to showcasing the creative work of local and international artists, musicians, and other creatives from all backgrounds. Its mission is to create an inspiring, supportive, and empowering environment where people can come together and celebrate creativity. They provide a platform for artists of all skill levels to express themselves through painting, music, dance, poetry, storytelling, acting, and singing. The Gallery fosters collaboration and growth, encouraging artists to learn from one another across disciplines.

Figure 1: Armory Building Usable Space Occupation (January 2025)



Legacy of Art within the Somerville Armory

Since its transformation into a private arts and culture center in 2008 by Joseph and Nabil Sater, the Somerville Armory has become a vibrant home for artists, creatives, and businesses. While its tenants have evolved over the years, many have made lasting contributions to Somerville's arts and cultural landscape. Not all tenants have been arts-focused, however – fitness centers, accountants, and various offices have also found space within the building.

When the COVID-19 pandemic threatened the survival of arts-based businesses, the Armory's future as a cultural hub was at risk. To preserve its legacy as a place for art and culture, the City acquired the property from the Sater family. This ensured the Armory's continued role as a home for creativity and community permanently.

Below are a few of the former tenants whose work and presence have contributed to our creative and cultural community since opening its doors as an art center in 2008:

- Actors' Shakespeare Project
- Armory Sound
- Case AVP Photography
- Center for Arabic Culture
- Červená Barva Press
- Daniel Ostergren Visual Arts
- David's Dance Center
- FOLK New England
- Henley Design
- Hi-N-Dry Music Studio
- Mark Sandman Music Project
- Moving Celebrations
- Scout Magazines
- Tim Jones Illustration
- University of the Middle East Project
- Yesterday Service Sheet Music

PURPOSE

The Armory Master Plan is a roadmap for successfully managing the Somerville Armory as a community arts center through the 21st Century. It lays out a community driven mission and vision of success that support recommendations on fairly and clearly operating the Armory as a public asset serving Somerville's diverse needs for arts and civic spaces. After the Master Plan is adopted by the City, governing, financial, and investment decisions on the Armory will be aligned to the Vision and Mission contained in this Master Plan.

Somerville Armory from above



MISSION AND VISION OF SUCCESS

Mission

The Mission of the Somerville Armory, its governing body, and this Master Plan is to protect and ensure the long-term vitality of the historic Armory property as an affordable and accessible public center for art, community, and culture.

Vision of Success

The Somerville Armory will serve as a successful public arts center by:

I. Focusing on Artists and Arts:

The Armory is a center for art, community, and culture where a broad range of arts programming is offered to the Somerville community. To encourage this, the Armory is also an affordable, stable, and supportive home for artists to focus on their work.

II. Nurturing Collaboration and Synergy:

Tenants and programs at the Armory are carefully chosen to produce a complementary but diverse range of activities. The Armory welcomes a broad array of creators, allowing for a mix of long-term tenancies and short-term or periodic rentals to meet different needs of artists and arts organizations.

III. Inspiring Community:

The Armory is a welcoming and inspiring place where visitors not only enjoy diverse arts and cultural programming but are also inspired to flex their own creative muscles.

IV. Supporting the Creative Life Cycle:

The Armory fosters artistic and cultural creativity at all levels and scales by users and visitors.

V. Making Clear and Community-Based Decisions:

The Armory remains flexible for the needs of the artistic community and the tenants. Decisions about the Armory's future are made through transparent and fair governance where neighbors are appreciated and engaged.

VI. Mitigating Conflict:

Management considers noise impacts, building capacity, and other physical constraints when choosing tenants to minimize conflict, and should anticipate and address conflicting needs.

VII. Ensuring Financial Stability:

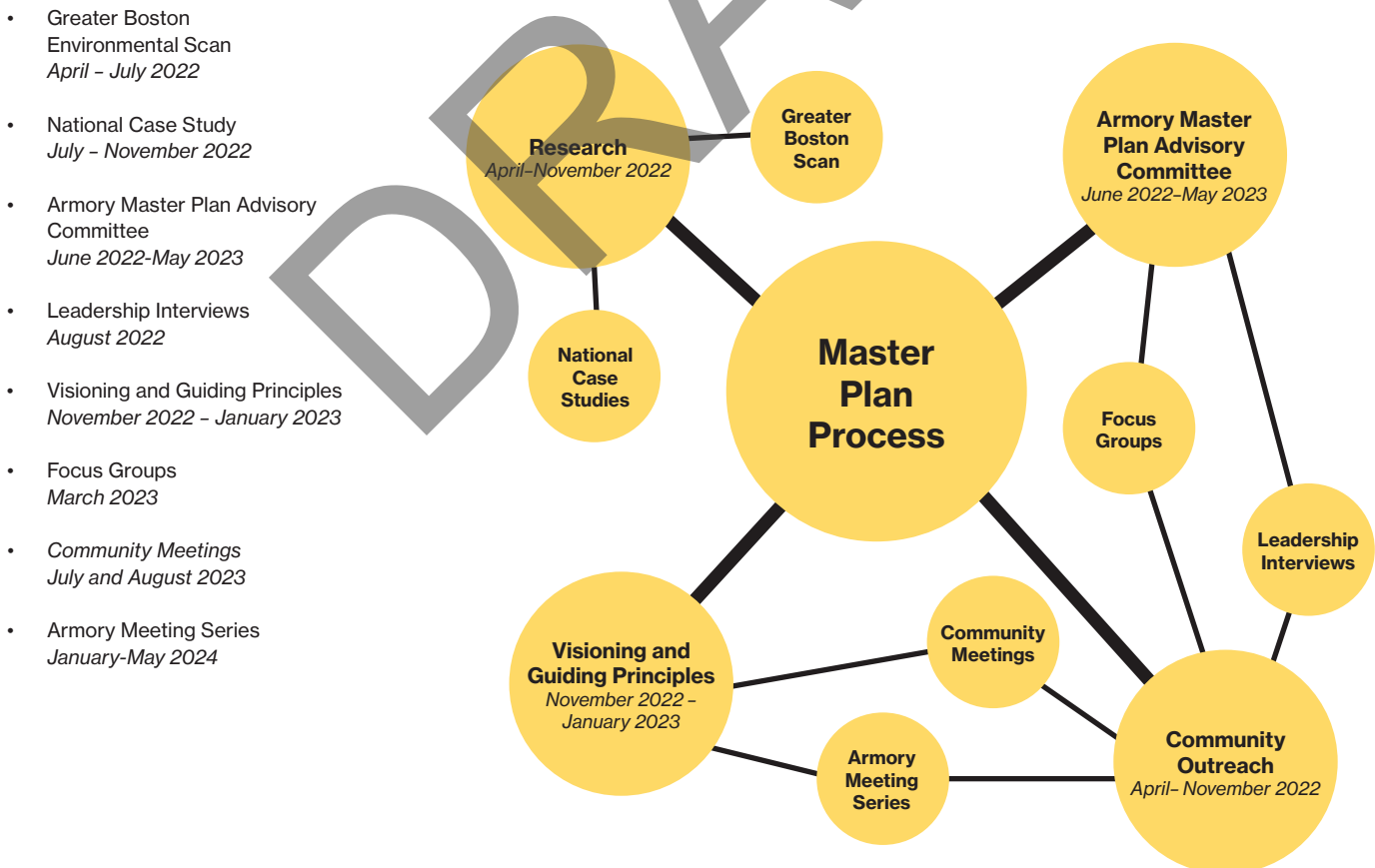
The Armory is a public asset of the City of Somerville. As such, its operation generates revenue that is sufficient to maintain the property in a clean, comfortable and orderly manner, and to fund upgrades and renovations to preserve and enhance its future utility as a municipal arts center.

PLANNING PROCESS AND TIMELINE

Overview

After the City of Somerville acquired the Armory in 2021 and took responsibility for daily operations, the City began the process to develop a master plan for the long-term stewardship of the Armory as a public arts center. The City selected Create Today LLC as a consultant and work began midway through 2022, also creating the Armory Master Plan Advisory Committee, comprised of local artists, elected officials and Armory neighbors. The City's Economic Development Division and Arts Council staff oversaw Create Today's research and helped convene meetings for public opinion outreach. The City and consultant team conducted various community outreach activities to learn about community needs and aspirations for the Armory from the general public, art organizations, individual artists, neighbors, and current tenants. Expanding public outreach further, the City undertook a four-part meeting series beginning in January 2024 that explored the Armory's role in Somerville's ecosystem and imagining its future. These outreach methods, combined with the research has informed this Master Plan.

Figure 2: Outreach Activities



Preliminary Research

Create Today began the master planning process by conducting an environmental scan that researched 46 nearby art spaces to determine the Armory's advantages and weaknesses within Greater Boston's cultural environment. Overall, the Armory is a unique space with competitive advantages, including its large performance hall, on-site parking, and flexible layout that provides an array of spaces for a wide variety of artists and creators to both produce and present their art.

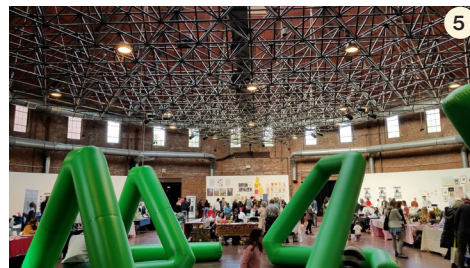
Create Today supplemented the environmental scan with detailed case studies on six (6) model arts facilities that are owned and operated by either public agencies or non-profit corporations to provide insight on best practices for operating the Armory as a public arts center. These models each:

- Focus exclusively on serving artists and providing arts programming
- Accommodate short and long-term users
- Have clear use policies, fees and expectations, such as requiring users to provide public benefits (classes, performances, exhibitions, etc.)

Model Art Facilities Case Studies

1. African Heritage Culture Arts Center
Miami, FL
2. Archie Bray Foundation
Helena, MT
3. Headlands Center for the Arts
Sausalito, CA
4. Torpedo Factory Art Center
Alexandria, VA
5. Boston Center for the Arts
Boston, MA
6. Mudflat Studio
Somerville, MA

Images are sourced from each of the organizations represented.





Above: Historical postcard of the Somerville Armory

Community Outreach

Create Today's research was supplemented with public outreach efforts to inject community feedback into the planning process. In 2022 twenty (20) local artists, cultural leaders, policy makers, Armory tenants, and abutters were interviewed. More than half (11) of these people were artists and over a third (7) were people of color. The stakeholders interviewed stressed that the Armory should serve Somerville as an innovative and affordable public arts center. They also felt it was vital that a vision be developed for the Armory to ensure its long-term success as a diverse public arts center.

In 2023 four focus groups with a diverse array of local artists, residents, Armory tenants and neighbors were hosted. Overall, participants wanted the Armory to remain a "...space that features a blend of arts and cultural programming as well as community events." Specifically, artists wanted the Armory to focus on artists and creators and offer diverse arts and cultural programming. Visitors and abutters wanted the Armory to remain accessible to the public and accommodating of community needs. Existing arts tenants wanted to stay in the Armory and continue creating and presenting art to the public while operating under clear and fair management. Finally, many focus group participants acknowledged that the Armory was not large enough to accommodate all of Somerville's arts and community space needs.

In 2022-23, the Armory Master Plan Advisory Committee (AMPAC), made up of local artists, elected officials, and Armory neighbors, met four times with Create Today and City staff to review research and advise on how the Armory should be governed for long-term success as a public asset. The AMPAC recommended that:

- The City identify the Armory as a community arts center accommodating a diverse range of arts, artists, creators and visitors (including current arts-oriented tenants)
- The Armory operate with clear policies, fair user selection criteria, and affordable fees that cover maintenance and long-term facility costs
- Armory management should be overseen by an independent body to ensure fairness, access, and affordability and to incorporate community input

During the summer of 2023 three public meetings (two in-person and one virtual) were held to review work that had been completed over the past year: the assorted planning research, case studies, and draft a vision of success for Armory governance. Most importantly, these meetings sought feedback about the community's preferred management style for operating the Armory as a public arts center, ranging from total City involvement in all areas of operations to City delegation of operating responsibilities to independent third-party organizations. Attendees were also asked whether the City should control, occupy, and program all the spaces in the Armory, or whether it should lease space in the property to one or more arts-related tenants to help defray operating costs and programming responsibilities. The participants in these meetings expressed a few clear desires that the City of Somerville:

- Retain ownership of the Armory
- Continue to lease space in the Armory to artists and arts-focused groups
- Invest in the building, both management services and the physical infrastructure

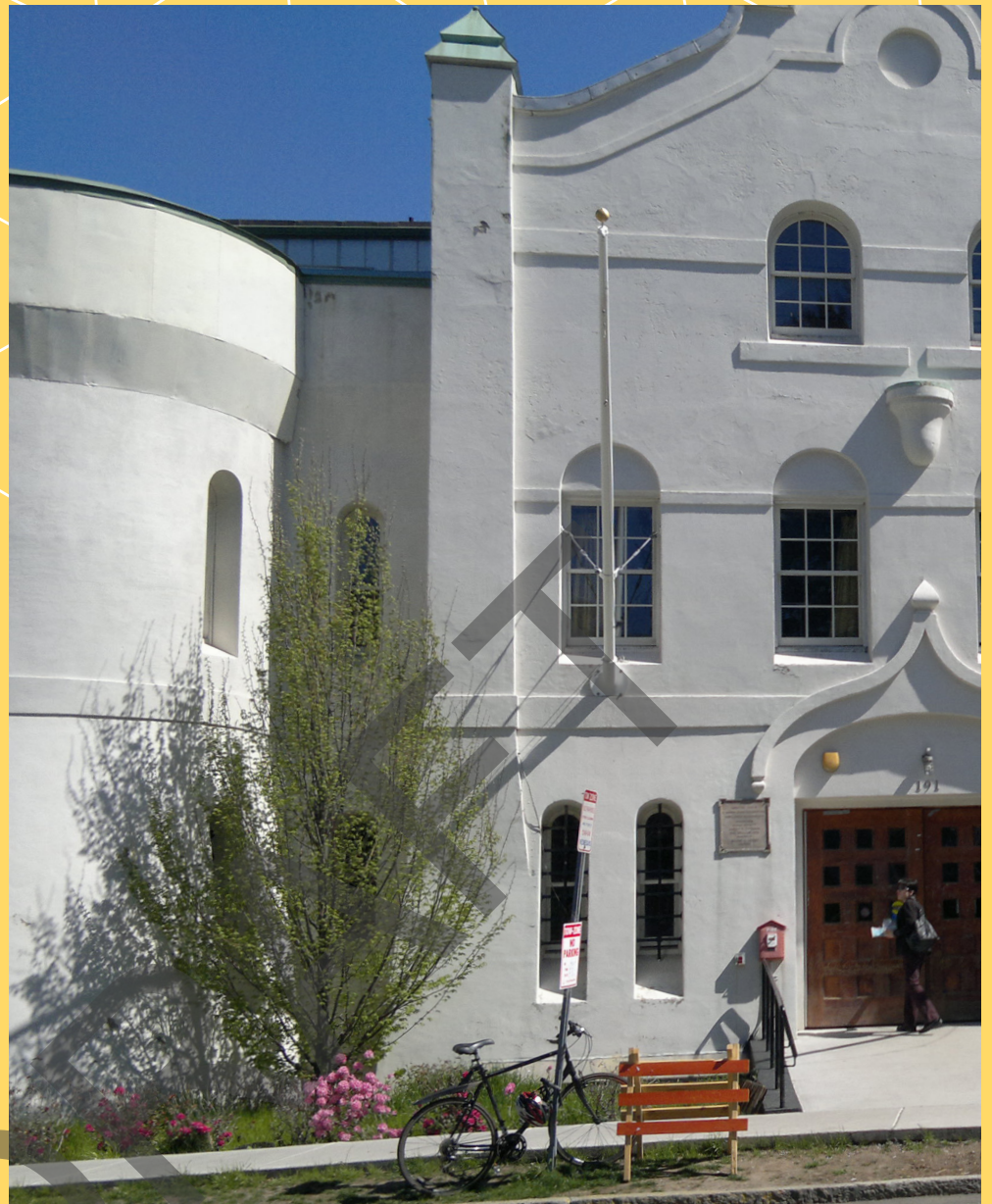
Right: Feedback from community members at a community meeting held in the Rooted Cafe



Material from the Armory Meeting Series in 2024 can be found on Somervoice

Following this engagement, the City expanded outreach efforts through a second series of community conversations to delve deeper into future goals for the Armory. The City organized this four-part meeting series from January–May 2024 with an aim to deepen the understanding and context of the Armory. This series explored the Armory’s relation to the arts ecosystem of Somerville, its context in the community space needs of Somerville, its existing physical conditions and uses, and what future governance might entail. The feedback gathered informed the vision of success. From these meetings it was established that:

- The Armory should host a broad range of art and the tenant mix should be complementary but diverse
- The Armory should serve the broader community but retain an artistic focus
- The Armory should contain a mix of short-term and long-term rental opportunities
- Management should anticipate and address conflicting needs
- Governance should not be the role of a single tenant and should be the role of an independent body



Roadmap for a Public Arts Center

Transforming the Armory from private ownership to successful public stewardship will take time and resources. Fortunately, the City can draw on the Armory's heritage as an arts center to hasten this process. Three years of municipal operations, public feedback and research on arts facilities has revealed how Somerville wants the Armory to be governed as a community asset. This Plan is a blueprint for successfully governing this unique public property sustainably, equitably, and transparently as a multi-tenant public arts center for decades to come.

Achieving this Plan's vision needs to be accomplished in stages, with a short-term transition program followed by long-term sustainable operation. This approach focuses on making critical changes to management, staffing, revenue generation and occupancy first, followed by continued improvements that could potentially lead to full independence from the City. The implementation of this plan is rooted in a fundamental fact – setting the Armory on a path for long-term success requires resources (revenue and staff), time, and patience.

The City has three tasks ahead to ensure the success of the Armory as public arts center:

- Fully tenant the Armory with arts tenants and scale up to independent governance
- Enhance Armory management and operating conditions
- Plan for stable finances, balancing affordability and investments in the building

During 2025, the first steps on the road to success for Armory include:

1. Forming an Armory Advisory Board guiding the Mayor and City Council on tenant selection and building investments.
2. Allocating staff time and investing in building upgrades to enhance property conditions
3. Recalibrating rents and fees for usable space in the Armory.
4. Carefully selecting occupants for Armory spaces by releasing a Request for Proposals (RFP).

Governing a Public Arts Center

The Armory has hosted and supported artists and cultural establishments for years before it became a public asset in 2021. The City of Somerville will build on this legacy by continuing to lease spaces in the Armory to a diverse mix of arts focused tenants. The City will set up an initial governing body to oversee this process while also exploring more independent governance over time.

Set-Up an Advisory Board and Path for Future Governance

The first recommendation is to establish a Somerville Armory Advisory Board. As envisioned today, this body will meet to oversee selection of tenants and spending of Armory revenues for building services and capital investments.

Massachusetts law places the authority to lease municipal property and allocate municipal revenues with the Mayor and City Council and therefore the Advisory Board is not the final decision maker but a key partner in the crucial first step of filling vacancies in the building and the ongoing investments in the property. The Advisory Board will be a part of the executive branch, under the Mayor, but because the authority for the decisions this body will oversee is held jointly by the Mayor and City Council, both the Mayor and City Council will have a role in Advisory Board member selection.

The Armory Advisory Board is envisioned as a five-member board consisting of three representatives of the Somerville arts community and two residents of Somerville.

The scope of work before the Advisory Board includes:

1. Advise the Mayor and City Council on ways to align investments with the Mission and Vision of Success.
2. Review requests for proposals for tenancies in detail and make recommendations on the tenant mix of the Armory.
3. Make recommendations on the utilization of funds generated from tenant rents, fees and grants for investments in the building & grounds, including any supporting service contracts.
4. Engage with current tenants and neighbors regularly to inform recommendations.
5. Advise on when and how to transition governance to a more independent structure

Community Voices

Community input is crucial to ensure that the Armory mission is successful. There are various ways that community input can be regularly incorporated into Armory governance to ensure decisions are fair, transparent, and align with the vision and mission.

The scope of the Armory Advisory Board includes tenant selection and investment in the building to sustain it and make operations easier. That said, operational policies are specifically not included in their purview. Throughout the Armory Master Plan, there is a distinction between governance (the long view to assure the mission is met for years to come) and operations (the daily adjustments that keep the building running). The Armory Advisory Board is expected to regularly seek feedback of tenants, neighbors, and the broader community with respect to tenant decisions and financial investments.

The Armory Advisory Board will notice any meeting about financial investments at least 48 hours in advance to all tenants by email and in all the standard channels of the City of Somerville for resident notice and take public comment on all matters related to investment recommendations. This standard of public notice is set as a minimum requirement, and it is fully expected that while the Armory is governed by the City that staff and the Advisory Board are regularly connecting with tenants and neighbors about the topics in discussion.

The Armory Master Plan engagement with current tenants and the community articulated that the Armory should be a home to diverse artistic organizations and the initial re-tenanting should accommodate any and all of the current arts tenants who would like to be considered to stay on. When it comes to future tenant selections, whenever they occur after the initial selection in 2025, the voice of the then tenants and broader arts ecosystem is essential ahead of bringing in someone new. A public arts center can and should be positioned to meet the needs of artists that are going unaddressed by the private real estate market. In the years to come, the ecosystem of arts facilities and supports will shift and it will be important to check in with Somerville artists to know what the greatest need is. For example, during the development of the Armory Master Plan, artists working in music, dance, and movement said their access to space has been constrained by changes in the ecosystem of rehearsal and performance venues in greater Boston. This knowledge will help with considering what channels to market the request for proposals so that organizations feeling the pinch are aware of the Armory as an opportunity.

To understand the evolving needs of working artists, the City will develop and regularly administer a survey to assess the ecosystem and what role the Armory might play to address these needs.

The Armory Advisory Board will additionally be providing advice on how to invest further in the building utilizing the revenue generated by tenants, be that a new service contract like hiring a parking lot attendant for days when multiple tenants have events or a capital project like replacing windows. These decisions should be guided by the input of tenants and neighbors and as such the Advisory Board is expected to host listening sessions and brainstorming conversations to solicit ideas from key stakeholders about where investment is needed. This could look like an annual meeting of the board like the Jobs Creation and Retention Trust hosts to review its priority list with stakeholders as well as more routine public comment periods for things that come up at other times.

Governance Transparency

Armory tenants, visitors, and Somerville residents have advocated for Armory governance to be as transparent and public as possible. With the goal of setting the Armory on a path to independent governance in mind, one of the first actions of the board will be to establish a set of norms that can be carried forward when governance shifts to a non-profit or cultural trust. This begins with creating bylaws that outline the policies by which the board will operate and will be formally adopted by the Board. There will be dedicated City staff time for planning and organizing the Advisory Board's meetings and preparing and distributing meeting materials. A link to the draft bylaws is included in the appendix.

One element of the draft bylaws to highlight is the meeting notice standards. The Armory Advisory Board will notice any meeting about financial investments at least 48 hours in advance to all tenants by email and in all the standard channels of the City of Somerville for resident notice and take public comment on all matters related to investment recommendations. This standard of public notice is set as a minimum requirement, and it is fully expected that while the Armory is governed by the City that staff and the Advisory Board are regularly connecting with tenants and neighbors about the topics in discussion.

Paths Towards Independence

Forming the Somerville Armory Advisory Board is the first step to transition the Armory administration away from City staff to an independent entity. This initial structure will provide a platform when there is readiness to transition governance to an independent third-party entity, such as a non-profit corporation or a quasi-government agency like a cultural trust. Such independent entities have more direct decision-making power on administrative and fiscal matters and with less oversight by the City.

The City can seek the services of a non-profit corporation to govern the Armory. Such a corporation would have an independent board and staff that can expand the scale of Armory programming and increase the facility's public exposure and brand, while also fundraising for major building renovations or improvements. Alternately, creating a special purpose, quasi-governmental agency requires special state legislation but combines the efficiencies of a non-profit corporation with heightened access to municipal resources. Passage of pending state legislation may allow the City to create an independent cultural trust to run the Armory and any future municipal cultural assets, leveraging all available efficiencies of scale and resources to maximize arts and culture programming to the public.

The Advisory Board will need to advise on how the City should structure that future relationship with a separate governing entity to maintain consistency with the Mission and Vision of Success and create the checks and balances that assure the Somerville community that the public purpose is continuing to be met.

Right: Artwork in the hallways of the Armory curated and shown by Out of the Blue Community Arts



CASE STUDIES



The Umbrella Arts Center in Concord, Massachusetts, provides an example of how management of a cultural institution can evolve to improve facilities and enhance programming and public engagement. Started in the 1980's by local artists who wanted to start a public arts center, the Umbrella started life being run by a small non-profit corporation governed by its artist tenants that leased and renovated a surplus school from the town. The Center operated this way for thirty years, when the Arts Center Board determined that local demand for cultural programming far exceeded the capacity of the original building. In 2010, the Board shifted its mission from managing operations to marshaling resources for an extensive expansion of the facility and its programmatic offerings. Board membership shifted towards people skilled in fundraising while daily management shifted to professional staff overseen by a director hired by the Board. In 2019, the new Board had raised over \$20,000,000 to dramatically expand the Center's building, hire additional staff and instructors and offer more cultural programming in new facilities, including two theaters, maker spaces, a computer graphics laboratory and an art gallery. Since the Umbrella board has focused on raising funds to support the Center's expanded operations.



The Northampton Community Arts Trust provides a great example of how a third-party entity can govern an arts center. The Arts Trust is the owner of 33 Hawley Street, a building that provides an affordable space for Northampton Center for the Arts, Available Potential Enterprises (A.P.E), and Northampton Open Media, each conducting an active presence in the building through their own programming. This building is the first and only project of the Arts Trust, adapting the model of conservation and community-land trusts. By acquiring 33 Hawley the Arts Trust removed the building from the speculative real-estate market and are protecting the space, in perpetuity, for acts of creativity and imagination. This model can provide an example of how a cultural trust, or a non-profit governing body can function at a higher level, leaving programming to the tenants of the building.

Select Diverse Yet Complimentary Tenants

As a multi-user building, the Armory will be programmed by the tenants in the spaces that they lease; they will enliven the building with rehearsals, meetings, classes, and performances. Potential tenants should be considered both individually on their artistic merits and how they fit into the building as a whole, using a fair, transparent, and public process. It is also important that the Armory remains open to new tenants, new artists, new ideas, and community priorities, with fresh programming and access to emerging artists encouraged. This should be accomplished by offering spaces in the Armory at a range of price points and durations (daily, weekly, long-term lease) so income and artistic practice need is not a significant barrier to accessing Armory space. The Advisory Board should also regularly reflect on how the Armory and its tenants are serving the broader community and adjust subsequent leases and lease renewals to stay aligned with the mission and community need.

Right: Dead Moon Audio's recording studio located in the Armory basement.



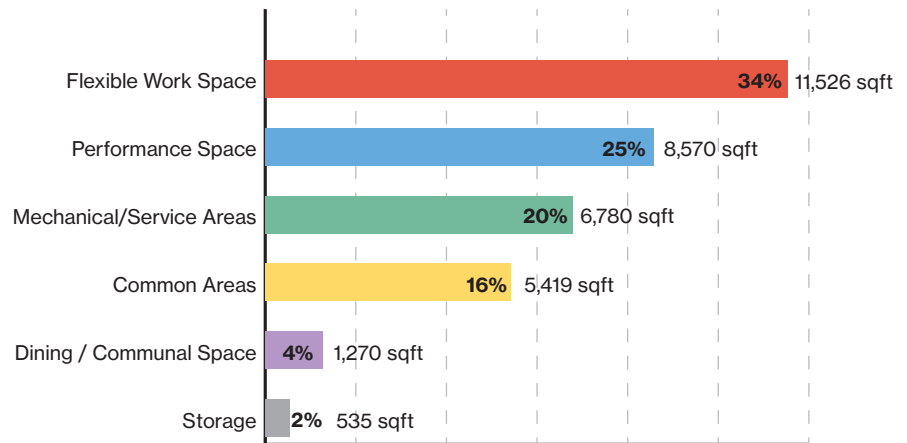
Left: Audiotech Services offers affordable equipment repair and tech support to artists of Greater Boston and is located in the Armory.



Right: Acoustic Strings New England, a musical instrument rental and repair shop located in the Armory



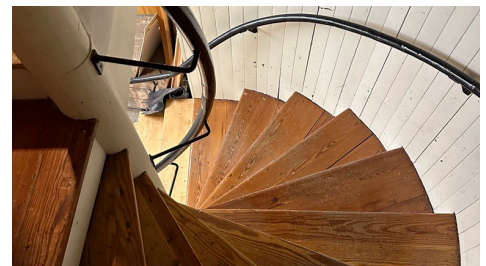
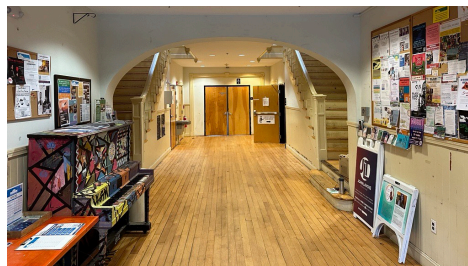
Figure 3. Armory Building Square Footage



While the Armory should try to attract many types of artists, its design, construction, and occupancy limit the disciplines it can realistically host. The presence of the large performance hall with specialized lighting and media equipment lends the building to accommodating performing artists (musicians, dancers, media artists, etc.), but, as Figure 3 shows, there is nearly 10,000 square feet (SF) of space that can easily host relatively low-impact disciplines that will not generate significant noise, dust, or vibrations. Disciplines requiring equipment that generate heavier impacts may be able to use spaces in the basement, which have concrete floors and walls and generally more robust construction. Additionally, the third floor of the building was designed in 2009 as two residential units. There are functional limitations and substantial challenges with having residents living above a performance venue. All of the residents who have lived at the property so far have moved in knowing they will live above a music venue and harmony between tenants has mostly been achieved. That said, there are significant challenges with hosting a private residence in the context of a public arts center. Long-term residential leases are not recommended, but accessory residential functions (like an artist in residence program or sleeping quarters for visiting artists) may be a good utilization of the existing facilities. During tenant selection, the Advisory Board will have to keep property limitations in mind as each space has its own distinct set of features.

Left: Armory common area on the 1st floor

Right: Back stairwell of the Armory



Artists utilizing the 2nd and 3rd floor spaces of the Armory as part of the SomArt Program of the Somerville Arts Council

Left:
Artist Michael Talbot and Sean Webster (Copper Collective) present their work in the 2nd floor BIPOC Gallery.

Right:
Continuum Dance rehearse a dance piece in the 3rd floor rehearsal space for their AIR residency.



Support Art and Creation

Some artistic practices are unsustainable in the free market economy, but that does not mean they do not deserve space. The benefit of a publicly owned arts center is the ability to subsidize space for users who cannot afford market prices. Often the work artists present is just the tip of the iceberg. There are countless hours spent preparing, writing, ideating, researching, and experimenting, all which may require low-cost space. Supporting art at all levels and not just the final stage is important in supporting a thriving and diverse arts ecosystem. Fortunately, the Armory has a variety of spaces, some better for production and others more suited for artistic presentation or performances, all of which can be offered to artists and organizations at different price points.

Artists participating in the Master Plan process also desired for the Armory to support artists with different business models and varying time-in-space needs. Some organizations will need dedicated access to space on a long-term basis (e.g. a performance venue needs a multi-year tenancy to allow for booking shows 1-2 years in advance) while other businesses need access to space by the hour or day (e.g. a music teacher needs space to teach Thursdays from 4pm – 8pm). Some of the Armory's current tenants offer space to other artists as a regular part of their own business models, and this is common practice for many arts organizations as a means of fostering collaboration and expanding their network. During the development of the Master Plan, the City of Somerville also opened some vacant spaces in the building to artists for short term use through the SomArt program of the Somerville Arts Council. The City should continue this legacy by offering at least one if not multiple spaces in the building to artists at an hourly or daily basis with clear price transparency, managed either by an Armory tenant or the City.

**Massachusetts Procurement Law:
Chapter 30B**

In 1990 the Massachusetts state legislature enacted the Uniform Procurement Act, also known as Chapter 30B. In general, this law governs how municipalities handle:

1. Supplies and services procurements
2. Surplus supplies
3. The acquisition or disposal of real property

Chapter 30B regulates how cities offer long term leases to municipal property like the Armory.

Recommended Tenant Criteria

The Somerville Armory is intended to be multi-tenanted, and community based. Each time requests for proposals are issued to fill vacancies in the building the Somerville Armory Advisory Board will review the criteria for the upcoming selection against the specifics of the available space and its own limitations. In 2025, the City of Somerville, guided by the Somerville Armory Advisory Board, will lease all Armory spaces through a procurement process compliant with Massachusetts law and consistent with the criteria recommended in this Plan. Current tenants occupying space in the Armory before it was acquired by the City of Somerville can participate in this process and must if they would like to remain tenants in the building. The Somerville community said clearly throughout the process, that all current arts-organizations in the building are valued and applications should be welcomed from all current tenants.

Below: A music event taking place in the Rooted Cafe operated by the Center for Arts at the Armory.



The City is looking for diverse tenants that can deliver on the Mission and Vision for Success. The following tenant selection criteria are generally applicable whether the Advisory Board is considering filling one space or multiple:

- **Mission Alignment:** Does the prospective tenant's mission or purpose align with the Mission and Vision of Success for the Armory?
- **Facility Alignment:** Is the prospective tenant's space needs compatible with the type and amount of space available including any particular restrictions related to that unit?
- **Building Mix:** Does the prospective tenant's offerings add to the diversity of offerings in the building? Is it compatible with other uses? What potential conflicts of noise bleed or conflicting uses will need to be mitigated in selecting this tenant?
- **Community Breadth:** Does this prospective tenant reach a wide spectrum of Somerville's community and/or offer a wide variety of activities that are responsive to community needs? Or does the prospective tenant reach an under-resourced community and fill gaps in our current creative ecosystem?
- **Community Benefit:** Does this prospective tenant contribute to a benefit to the Somerville community in ways that align with identified community needs in the arts ecosystem or broader community? If making space available to others in the ecosystem, do they have defined and approachable pricing structures?
- **Collaborative Nature:** Does this prospective tenant have a proven record of collaborative experience?
- **Economics:** How does this tenant's price proposal fit within the goal of making the Armory a financially stable building? Is it a tenancy that would need subsidy or offer the ability to subsidize others?

Community Uses & Public Purpose

Residents stated often that they want the Armory to continue serving artists as well as wider community needs by hosting public markets, meetings, and other civic events. The building currently hosts a Winter Farmers Market, city elections, blood drives, and other civic events while maintaining its artistic identity and focus. Just as with making space for artistic producers, this desire to mix in civic uses embedded in the arts ecosystem can be met through the partner selection criteria and the rent structure. During selection, tenants could, for instance, be asked to describe their offerings to the public; how they could provide access for a range of potential artistic partners; and how they will accommodate civic uses. These answers could provide the Advisory Board and Mayor guidance to negotiate with a selected tenant/partner to clearly outline their commitments in their lease. This could take the form of reserving specific dates for civic functions like voting or set pricing for non-profit or independent artist space rentals.

The café situated on the first floor by the entrance is an intermediate space that welcomes all and promotes intermingling of artists, patrons, and members of the public. It is also flexible, serving as a performance space as well as a retail establishment. There is a desire for there to always be ground floor space that is designated for community gathering like the café has been in recent years. A space where people can gather and congregate in the building will help foster synergies within the building and provide a foundation for a strong community.

There may be needs in the city that would align with the Armory's mission and vision of success but that are not being proposed by potential tenants. This could take a variety of forms not fully anticipated at this time, but an example might be addressing the need for affordable spaces available by the hour. In such a case, the Advisory Board could recommend dedicating a space to a function that is staffed by the City of Somerville instead of being rented out to a tenant. If required, this can be done by:

- The Armory Advisory Board identifies an unmet need and recommends that the City fill that need in a specific space in the building to the Mayor.
- The Mayor and City staff determine whether the City can fund the Board's recommendation.
- If the City can support the Board's proposal, the Mayor and staff develop a budget and scope for meeting the Board's recommendation, if additional funding is needed the City Council approves the funding request.

Summary of Recommendations: Governing a Public Arts Center

Establish a Transparent Advisory Board & Governance Structure:

- Set up the Somerville Armory Advisory Board to oversee tenant selection and revenue distribution.
- Collaborate with the Mayor and City Council for decisions, ensuring the Board's advisory role is clear.
- Make meeting agendas and minutes publicly available to ensure transparency and community access.

Support Artists and Engage the Community:

- Hold regular meetings for the Advisory Board to gather input from tenants and the community.
- Launch and regularly administer a survey to assess local artists' needs and adjust the Armory's role accordingly.
- Provide low-cost or subsidized space to support artists in various stages of creation and presentation.
- Facilitate a mix of tenants that provide civic and cultural programming.
- Maintain a flexible, community-focused space that encourages public engagement and interaction with artists.

Select Diverse yet Complementary Tenants:

- Implement a transparent, public process for selecting tenants that aligns with the Armory's mission and vision of success.
- Prioritize tenants based on mission alignment, space compatibility, and community benefit.
- Utilize community survey results to cross check that the Armory is meeting the needs of the artistic community.
- Offer flexible pricing and lease options to ensure accessibility for a range of artists and arts organizations, including opportunities for both traditional long-term leases and short-term space rentals.

Evaluate and Adapt Governance:

- Continuously assess tenant selection, space utilization, and community engagement to ensure alignment with the Armory's mission and broader community needs.
- Adjust programming and space offerings based on feedback and changing needs in the arts and local community.
- Use the Advisory Board as a sounding board for transitioning to an independent governance structure, such as a non-profit or cultural trust.

Managing and Maintaining the Armory

Managing the Armory efficiently, transparently, and fairly while continually maintaining and improving the property is fundamental to achieving the Vision and Mission. Armory revenue must be stable and sufficient to support management, enhanced building upkeep, technical upgrades, and renovation of major building components. This plan uses industry benchmarks for similar facilities to recommend ways to improve the Armory's daily operations, upgrade building conditions, and minimize user conflicts while maintaining the Armory's long-term financial viability.

An unoccupied space on the second floor of the Armory.



Improve and Standardize Daily Operations

Improving and standardizing daily building operations is crucial for enhancing efficiency, reducing costs, and ensuring a consistent quality of service in the Armory. Standardization allows for better staff training, improves communication, minimizes errors, and optimizes processes, resulting in time savings and increased productivity. Additionally, standardized operations can lead to better compliance with safety and regulatory standards, ultimately fostering a safer and more sustainable environment for tenants and visitors alike.

During the engagement process, the City heard from current tenants that they would like future decisions about operational policies to include deeper tenant engagement. As much as possible, the Armory Master Plan recommends distinguishing between governance (assuring alignment with the Mission and Vision of Success) and operations (day-to-day coordination). With this in mind, the scope of the Armory Advisory Board explicitly does not include advising on operational policies. Instead, City staff will be responsible for working with representatives of all tenants once the building is filled in 2025 to create a standard for engagement. Tenants will be consulted as policies are developed for a broad range of issues described in this section of the master plan – common area use policies, parking lot signage, and shared marketing of the building are all likely topics in the first years.

Expand Cleaning and Maintenance Protocols

Maintenance is crucial for the Armory to be a successful public asset for the City of Somerville keeping the property functional and welcoming to tenants, visitors, and the public. Currently staff from the Department of Public Works cleans the building's common areas, maintains the grounds, and makes minor repairs as needed. Structural renovations, servicing and replacement of building systems, and installation of major upgrades require the services of private contractors. The Armory is only one of the many public buildings that Public Works cleans and maintains. It is unique in that it is currently maintained and serviced in part by City staff but primarily houses private tenants and hosts private events. This arrangement could lead to conflicts between the needs and priorities of City management and private tenants and the rights of unionized employees. Determining the right mix of City staff and outside support services will necessarily evolve over time as the needs of the building change.

The Advisory Board will be advising the Mayor on spending from the Armory budget, that could include recommendations on additional contract cleaning and maintenance services. Regular maintenance, including weekend cleaning and trash removal, and system upgrades including wireless intercoms for the front door and greater interior sound dampening. City staff will be needed to assist the Advisory Board in planning and organizing all aspects of daily administration of the property as a public arts center. The Advisory Board and their necessary support staff may also need to contract consultant services to assess how the Advisory Board can better integrate the Armory's needs into the Department of Public Works current systems. This assessment will help streamline operations and make management more efficient, reliable, clear and fair for Armory tenants and the public, while taking advantage of the economies of scale gained from utilizing existing City resources.

Below: Community bulletin board located in the first floor common area of the Armory.



Ensure Safety and Security

To fulfill its mission as a public asset, the Somerville Armory needs to be both safe and accessible to the general public while also being a secure place for artists and arts organizations to create and conduct business. Successful operation will make common areas (lobbies, halls, and the grounds) secure and welcoming. These common areas are due for system upgrades as a result of aging infrastructure. Modernizing the call box would go a long way in simplifying the visitor experience. Beyond these physical issues, City staff will also work with tenants to determine public hours of operation for the Armory to clarify how the public is welcomed in and ensure that there is a designated point-person for City communications to address safety, security, and questions from general public visitors to the Armory.

As part of transitioning the Armory to public stewardship, the City published a code of conduct for Armory visitors in 2024 that applies to the property's common areas and grounds. The City is also enacting a set of building rules for Armory tenants and their patrons. The code of conduct together with these rules outline what is expected of individuals within the Armory and will be enforceable if violated.

A thorough safety plan should be developed with property management and tenants. Part of this needs to include a detailed analysis of the building's spaces, their capacities and uses, and egresses. The Armory's current infrastructure is not designed to accommodate tenants of every use. Beyond the performance hall, the building currently lacks sufficient bathrooms to handle large numbers of people in the building at one time. Additional emergency exit doorways were added after it was converted into a private arts venue and some have direct access to the street, making them a better fit for large gatherings. For example, if there were two or more large events simultaneously in the building, the safety plan would need to address emergency egress and coordination. Additionally, types of artistic use need to be considered and planned for – the Armory can only accommodate some artistic practices with its current infrastructure. For example, if an artist wanted to work with spray paint, there is not adequate ventilation in place to allow for the safe use of materials with toxic fumes. To install a spray booth or fume hood the artist would need to work with the City on creating system upgrades and coordinating a safety plan for using and storing hazardous materials on site. It is recommended that the Advisory Board conduct a comprehensive study about building upgrades that can allow for a broader range of art practices safely but continue to work on an as needed basis until a complete study can be completed.

Maintain and Improve Existing Infrastructure

Ensuring the Armory serves local artists and the greater public successfully in the future requires reliable and sustainable revenue streams that are sufficient to pay for desired building services, building upgrades and renovations.

Near-Term Site Investments

To jump start improved management of the Armory by implementation of this Master Plan, the City should undertake relatively inexpensive, but strategic, building upgrades as soon as possible:

- Intercom and security infrastructure
- Wayfinding signage and directional maps in interior and exterior common areas
- Common area painting and floor refinishing

Mid-Term Site Investments

The Armory was fully renovated fifteen years ago, and as noted, is in generally good condition. However, several building systems require repair or replacement to prolong the structure's lifespan and its ability to be operated with financial stability into the future. These are medium-sized capital investments and may require bond funds or large grants from the City or State to be completed.

- Accessibility upgrades, i.e. upgrading the elevator and making all bathrooms ADA compliant.
- Exterior facade renovation – Repair cracks, replace broken masonry, replace deteriorated stucco and repaint
- Roof replacement – Replace existing rubber roof, shingle roof, and replace gutters, scuppers and drainage systems.
- Window replacement (east side) – Replace deteriorated second floor windows on the east façade with double-glazed aluminum windows.
- Emergency door renovation – Replace deteriorated wood doors and door frames of emergency exits on east, north and west sides of the Armory.
- Apply for municipal funds from the Somerville Community Preservation Act (CPA) program, Capital Improvement Program, as well as state and federal grants, to fund mid-term capital improvements.

Right: The Armory in 2006 prior to renovation after being sold by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts



Long-Term Site Investments

Protecting the Armory for future generations is a major reason for operating the property as a successful community arts center and municipal asset. Several building system upgrades and improvements can increase the Armory's operating efficiency and utility for users and visitors. These investments do not have to be made immediately but should be pursued within the next three to five years.

- Elevator replacement – Replace existing elevator car system with a modern, more reliable model.
- Structural insulation – Insulate the Armory's structural shell to enhance energy efficiency.
- Window replacement (north, west and south sides) – Replace remaining windows with more efficient, soundproof models
- Mechanical systems – Install modern, more efficient HVAC systems in all rooms. Upgrade interior/exterior lighting
- Site improvements – Regrade the Armory grounds for better drainage and universal accessibility. Replace and reevaluate layout of the parking lot.
- Interior renovations – Install soundproofing and upgrade finishes in common and tenant areas.
- Apply for municipal funds from the Somerville Community Preservation Act (CPA) program, Capital Improvement Program, as well as state and federal grants, to fund long-term capital improvements.

The Armory is a building where people gather in both large and small quantities to enjoy art.

Left: People gather for an visual art exhibition opening in the SomArt Space.

Right: A large audience watches The Brazilian Theater of Boston present: BRASIL: The Land of Samba in the Armory performnace hall



Nurture Community and Coordinate Programing

Creating a thriving arts center involves effective coordination among diverse programming and tenants. The Armory, with its multi-functional spaces, must navigate the complexities of simultaneous uses to ensure all users can coexist harmoniously. Establishing clear expectations, promoting communication, and implementing a cohesive marketing approach will better serve the Armory tenants and the wider community. These recommendations aim to cultivate a supportive environment that highlights the Armory’s unique offerings and ensures a seamless experience for all visitors and tenants.

Coordination of Building Programming and Capacity

As an arts center with multiple uses occurring at once, it is important to keep in mind what activities the building can simultaneously accommodate. Competing music performances in spaces that are not adequately sound-proofed, multiple large events that rely on the common bathrooms, and artistic production that requires the use of loud or messy machinery can all cause disruptions to other users of the building. Setting clear expectations and creating a collaborative environment will ensure that the tenants within the Armory are mindful of each other and are supportive of each other’s programming.

While this synergy needs to be thought of during tenant selection, it will also be important for tenants to communicate amongst themselves and determine best courses of action for their overlapping programming. It is recommended that the tenants and City staff track potential issues, especially ones that may be resolved with future building improvements such as mitigating noise bleed between spaces.

Parking and Mobility

The Armory is situated in the center of Somerville between Davis, Magoun, and Union Squares. The property is highly accessible to city residents via MBTA buses that run down Highland Avenue, a short walk to the Magoun Square green line station, and a Blue Bike station located two blocks away. The Armory is unique among Somerville arts venues because it also has a relatively large parking lot with forty-eight (48) vehicle spaces behind the building and 2 accessible spaces at the right side of the building. A loading zone and public parking are located along the Highland Avenue curb line in front of the building. Arts at the Armory also has arranged an overflow parking area at a nearby Cambridge Health Alliance property on Highland Avenue for major events. The following parking and mobility strategies are recommended to maximize access to the building by the public:

- Encourage building tenants to apply for municipal Business Parking Permits.
- Require hosts of performances to hire parking attendants for the Armory parking lot.
- Encourage performance attendees to walk, bike, or take public transportation.
- Conduct a site mobility plan for improvements to loading zones, event parking management, fire lane access, accessible parking, EV charging, dumpster access, and other circulation issues.

Below: Somerville Armory parking lot seen from above.



Mitigating Conflict

One of the items outlined in the vision of success for the Armory is the fostering of community within the building and mitigating any potential conflict. It is a goal of the Armory Master Plan that all conflict is mitigated through resolution systems and mindful selection of tenants and programming. Following all recommendations outlined in this Plan, the Armory should be able to function with minimal conflict. If any issues and conflicts should arise and cannot be resolved between the tenants, they can bring the issue to City staff. Tenant leases will include standard penalties for violating the code of conduct and building rules. The code of conduct and building rules may from time to time be updated to reflect new policies agreed to among tenants and the City to mitigate conflicts that arise.

Showcase the Armory's Tenants and Programs

It is important that the public knows what is happening at the Armory, how to access the Armory, and knows of its existence. Awareness will help the community further engage with the Armory's offerings and help tenants attract more visitors to their programming.

Currently each individual tenant is responsible for their own marketing, resulting in a fragmented approach. This Master Plan recommends that the City adopt a marketing strategy that compiles promotional material from all tenants so there is a single source for all building related events and news that can redirect visitors to the appropriate building tenant. This can be in the form of a building website, social media feed, etc. This recommendation would not replace individual tenant marketing strategies and still encourages individual tenants to do their own marketing to their audiences.

It is also recommended by this Master Plan also recommends that mechanisms be put into place for the public to feel further involved with the building. This can be done through a group like the community organization Friends of the Somerville Library, who help raise money, fill in with programming support, and organize annual book sales. This Plan recommends such a group should be explored by the Advisory Board after the tenants have been selected so that the tenants can have a voice in shaping such a group if one is valuable.

Beyond a digital presence, the visibility of the Armory can be improved by creating a strong building identity and sense of place. Fostering strong place-based branding can help identify the building and create cohesion between the physical space and the digital presence. The physical place-based branding can come in many forms such as signage, outrigger banners, flags, wall murals, architectural and/or multi-media lighting and public art. In addition to providing a visual identity, this material can also provide functional benefits like wayfinding and tenant information.

Summary of Recommendations: Managing and Maintaining the Armory

Standardize and Expand Operation Protocols:

- Implement standardized operational procedures for improved efficiency, cost reduction, and consistent service quality.
- Increase cleaning and maintenance services for common areas, including weekend cleaning and trash removal, through the Advisory Board's budget recommendations.
- Streamline operations by integrating the Armory's needs into the Department of Public Works systems.

Ensure Safety & Security:

- Upgrade intercom call box and security infrastructure systems, including installing video surveillance in common areas and improving door security.
- Develop a more comprehensive safety plan, considering building capacity, usage types, and emergency protocols.
- Ensure compliance with safety and regulatory standards to foster a safe, welcoming environment for tenants and visitors.
- Address building infrastructure limitations (e.g., ventilation for hazardous materials) to safely accommodate diverse art practices.
- Require parking attendants for major events to ensure fire lane access and safety.

Invest in Infrastructure:

- Plan to invest in infrastructure improvements and prioritize based on need and available funding
- Near-Term: Implement low-cost upgrades like wayfinding signage and interior painting.

- Mid-Term: Undertake repairs and upgrades, including exterior facade renovation, roof replacement, and window replacements
- Long-Term: Pursue major improvements such as elevator replacement, energy-efficient insulation, and upgraded HVAC systems to improve sustainability and operational efficiency.

Nurture Community & Coordinate Programming:

- Establish clear communication and coordination among tenants to prevent conflicts from simultaneous programming (e.g., noise management, shared facilities).
- Create a collaborative environment to encourage mutual support and understanding among tenants.
- Foster a community-oriented atmosphere by addressing conflicts proactively.
- Implement conflict resolution systems and enforce building rules and the code of conduct through tenant leases.
- Develop a comprehensive mobility plan addressing parking lot improvements, accessible parking, EV charging, and fire lane access.

Showcase Tenants & Programs:

- Adopt a unified marketing strategy to promote Armory events and activities via a centralized platform (website, social media, etc.).
- Create a strong, cohesive visual identity for the Armory through branding initiatives (improved signage, murals, lighting) to attract and inform visitors.
- Encourage public involvement and support through community organizations, like a "Friends of the Armory" group.

Financing the Armory's Vision

“Ensuring Financial Stability” is the final statement in the Vision of Success. The Armory requires stable and sustainable finances to operate and maintain the building as well as to modernize and improve the facilities. Finances encompass revenue (funds coming in to support the property's operation) and expenses (funds spent on the property's operation). While under City management, the broad goal is for revenue to equal expenses in the short-term and with time, to build up a reserve to allow for deeper investments. Throughout this section you will see references to the average expenses that the Armory faces as estimated in 2024. These are not suggestions for what the rents should be but rather indicate what needs to be covered by all revenues to make the building work.

Right and Left: Vacant spaces in the Armory on the 2nd and 3rd floor



Stabilize Revenue

The Armory's revenue under private ownership was fully driven by space rentals. The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on attendance at arts centers like the Armory was harshly felt and the ability of tenants to pay rents that kept up with inflation made the economics of the building untenable. The instability of revenues for an arts center was at the heart of why the City of Somerville stepped in to take this building and also continues to be a core challenge for the Armory's future.

Filling Vacancies & Diversifying Revenue

When the City took the Armory for a public arts center in 2021, the building already had several tenants (some arts-focused and some not), and while the building had vacancies it was mostly occupied. Unlike a private sale, a government taking obligates the purchaser, in this case the City, to provide relocation to tenants who leave as a result of the government's new ownership. That opportunity combined with COVID-driven changes in the economy lead several of the tenants to take relocation payments and leave the building. As of November 2024, there are five remaining tenants, with more space vacant than occupied. Remaining tenants continue to pay rent based on their leases with the prior property owner, the exception of which is Arts at the Armory, who was granted rent relief related to COVID-19 shutdowns in 2021 and 2022. As a result of vacancies, revenue is much less than what it had been under private ownership. Filling vacancies with tenants will certainly increase the revenue of the building.

One need in the arts community that emerged during the City's Cultural Capacity Plan work was for extremely low-cost rehearsal and exhibition space. The Arts Council first ran such a space in a vacant storefront in Assembly Square. That lease ended just as vacancies were starting to tick up at the Armory, and so the City opened two spaces in vacancies at the Armory on a temporary basis: a zero-cost gallery and workspace for artists who identify as black, indigenous, or persons of color (BIPOC) and a low-cost hourly rental rehearsal space for dance and movement artists. What this experience has shown is that a low-cost hourly rental space can generate comparable revenue to a long-term lease, while also meeting community space needs. During the Armory master plan process, the community expressed interest in seeing both hourly and long-term rentals made available to meet different artists' needs.

Accounting for Escalation and Inflation

As with everything, dollars one year are not worth the same as dollars the year before. Inflation will inevitably raise the costs of operating the Armory year-over-year relative to costs for labor, materials, utilities, and services. Recent global supply chain disruptions, driven by COVID-19 and similar events, have increased inflation in building operations. Delays in the production and shipment of materials and building systems, coupled with increased demand for construction and renovation projects, have contributed to recent price spikes. Inflation in the energy sector has also significantly impacted utilities, especially for facilities and programs that rely heavily on electricity. Create Today estimates that inflation in operating costs for arts facilities nationally currently averages 3% per year, fairly close to the prevailing Consumer Price Index. As such Create Today has recommended utilizing this national standard in leases so that rents keep pace with changing inflation year-over-year. The Armory Advisory Board will need to account for this inflation rate as it considers recalibrating Armory rents and planning for expenses in future operations.

Right: The Armory's former drill hall, now the performance hall space of Center for Arts at the Armory



Balance Resources

As a public arts center, the Armory will need to balance three competing resource needs: subsidizing arts tenants, improving operational quality, and reserving funds for capital investment. No matter whether the Armory is managed by the City of Somerville or an independent non-profit, these tensions for resources will remain. A benefit of municipal ownership is the ability to tap into the City's resources and existing systems. The City of Somerville is however constrained with investments needed across the schools, emergency services buildings, and city offices. The degree to which the City can fund operational support and/or capital investments will always be dependent on the current financial situation. In 2024, it is anticipated that the next few years will see stable but flat local, state and federal budgets, which will limit the expansion of resources flowing from the City to the Armory.

Subsidizing Art

Whether governed by the City or a non-profit, maximizing rents is not the goal. That said, not all artists will be able to afford rents that cover the full operating costs of the Armory. Under private ownership, the Armory had a mix of higher paying business tenants that allowed the owners to support lower rates for some of the arts spaces, including the performance hall. There may be a need to develop criteria to subsidize some tenants in the future just as when the building was operated privately. Setting a flexible range of rents and income-adjusted fee structures are ways that the Armory can continue offering spaces to artists, creative businesses, and community members of varying income levels.

Economy of scale allows the City to support the Armory at lower costs than a private entity. Currently, the City annually spends about \$5 per square foot (SF) for minimal level maintenance of the Armory's common areas, building systems, and grounds, using current municipal staff and existing vendor contracts (e.g. trash hauling). Create Today estimates it would cost an independent operator without access to municipal staff and resources approximately 20%-30% more (\$6/SF annually) to run the Armory at existing service levels or any level of service for that matter. For instance, snow clearance at the Armory is currently worked into existing routes for plows and shoveling crews, without passing these costs on to the tenants. This is one way the City can provide significant subsidy to the Armory that increases affordability. As transition to independent governance is considered, there will need to be conversations about which services and maintenance responsibilities stay with the City and which transition to the independent entity.

Covering the cost of utilities is another way to subsidize the arts tenants in the Armory. The City has covered water and sewer charges for all tenants in the building since it was acquired in 2021, whether they have private restrooms and sinks or are sharing the public facilities. Since the Armory was renovated in 2009, most tenants have paid for their own electricity and gas service from separate utility meters. In contrast, the performance hall shares meters with the common area, and the City has covered those costs since the acquisition. A step toward fairness between tenants might be to install a separate meter, or the City could continue to take on this cost as a means of subsidizing the operation of that space. Similarly, separate water meters may be a logical step if a tenant with particularly high water use is selected for the building, or the City could continue to take on this cost as well. Transitioning to an independent operation would necessitate separate metering or bolstering the endowment of the organization to continue utility subsidies to tenants.

Improve Operations

Tenants have continually requested better building services over the past three years to improve building conditions up to industry standards. Some tenants have requested the presence of dedicated management staff on-site when the Armory is open to the public, more frequent trash pickup, deeper cleaning, and heightened maintenance. Such service improvements will cost more to implement, requiring careful consideration to balance better conditions with preserving the Armory's affordability.

To assess the cost of improving Armory operations, Create Today built a financial model for the Armory modeling to a "best practice" standard of service. They looked at the service priorities that the current tenants and community raised in the engagement process as well as industry standards, the case study research, and expense data from the City. The "best practice" operation of the building is modeled to have four full time equivalent (FTE) staff including the governance coordination functions, welcome desk staff, and custodial services every day of the week including weekends. That level of service would cost approximately \$20/SF, four times the current investment. The operating budget is not the only expense that the building has either, so getting to that best practice would require revenue above \$20/SF in order to sustain the level of services. Please note that this represents the expenses that revenues need to cover, and not the anticipated rents for any given unit in the Armory.

Below: The Somerville Winters Farmers Market operated by Center for Arts at the Armory



FTE = full time equivalent job. This is reflective of either City or private sector workers

Table 1: Management and Operation Service Tiers

Management and Operations Level	Estimated Cost Range	Staff and Services
Tier 0: Current Service	\$5 – 6+ per sf/yr	No dedicated staff, 5 days/week of custodial service, low operating reserves
Tier 1: Modest	\$8 – 10+ per sf/yr	1 FTE dedicated staff, 7 days/week of custodial service, extra trash service, modest reserves
Tier 2: Moderate	\$10 – 12+ per sf/yr	1.5 FTE dedicated staff, 7 days/week of custodial service, extra trash service, moderate reserves
Tier 3: Standard	\$13 – 16+ per sf/yr	2.5 FTE dedicated staff, 7 days/week of upgraded custodial service, extra trash service, standard reserves
Tier 4: Best Practice	\$20 – 24+ per sf/yr	4 FTE dedicated staff, 7 days/week of custodial service, enhanced maintenance and security services, high reserves

In order to help the Advisory Board put this in perspective, Table 1 describes several potential tiers of service that could be achieved between the current level (Tier 0) and the best practice (Tier 4) and rough estimates of the costs associated with each tier.

Staffing is one of the most expensive differences in the level of service options. As described in previous sections, the City intends to dedicate staff time to support the Armory’s governance. This person will staff the Armory Advisory Board and support engagement with tenants and neighbors. That role will necessarily touch on operations issues as well as larger governance topics. Revenue from a full building will also give the City the capacity to retain supplemental vendors and possibly additional staff. Determining a target level of service tier and additional staff needs will need to go hand in hand with the selection of tenants, because the revenue from rents will not be known until then nor will the need for staff services be known until tenants are selected. Another way to lower the costs might be to work with a volunteer program like Americorps to staff a welcome desk. All of these operational staffing considerations will require the input of the Armory Advisory Board.

The possible or desirable level of service is also likely to change over time. Transitioning from the current investment at Tier 0 to the best practice at Tier 4 would take at least a year, as that would involve hiring for roles that do not currently exist. Rather than immediately targeting the Tier 4 best practice level, the Advisory Board should work with tenants to address the critical needs and target the level of service accordingly. The Board will also need to consider having reserves on hand for the times when there are vacancies in the building and less revenue coming in, even if just for a few months while new tenants are selected. The ultimate balancing act is to target a level of service that meets the needs while not pushing rents out of reach of the artists and arts organization the building is intended to serve and still also preparing for larger capital investments.

Right: The mechanicals of the Armory performance hall.



Plan for Capital Investments

Buildings have life cycles, and their components degrade despite regular upkeep. It is important to tenant stability that the timely replacement of older systems is addressed. Replacement of major building systems and large-scale renovations are sporadic costs that are beyond the scope and more expensive than regular preventive maintenance. These are considered separate from standard operating expenses and require large capital infusions. Funding for such investments can come from a variety of sources – reserves built up from rental revenues, community fundraising, municipal taxes or bonds, and state/federal grants.

Somerville’s Capital Projects Division determined in 2021 that the Armory has short and long-term capital investment needs totaling over \$14 million (2024 dollars) summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Armory Capital Investment Needs and Estimated Cost (2024 Dollars)

Short-term Capital Investment Needs	Investment Required
Exterior repair, roof and window replacement	\$4,800,000
Entry and call box upgrades	\$300,000
Common area investments	\$300,000
Total:	\$5,400,000
Long-term Capital Investment Needs	Investment Required
HVAC/electrical improvements	\$4,600,000
Interior renovations & upgrades	\$2,700,000
Regrading grounds and parking lot rebuild	\$1,900,000
Total:	\$9,200,000

The Armory's capital investments needs cannot be supported by rent revenue alone without pushing rents beyond the reach of the artists and arts organizations it is intended to serve. Fortunately, there are other public and private sources of capital to pay for replacement and modernization of crucial building systems. As a municipal property, the City can bond for capital investments in the Armory, just like it does for the schools, fire stations, and City Hall. Investments funded through the typical municipal process are managed through the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) process, which allocates municipal tax revenue and bonding to improve City assets. The CIP evolves based on funding and priority projects, meaning the Armory is evaluated against the needs of schools and other facilities for the limited funding available. The funds raised locally from the Community Preservation Act (CPA) could also be a source for capital projects. CPA funding has a more limited range of purposes so there is less competition for these resources. One such purpose is to renovate and upgrade historic buildings, such as the Armory. CPA monies are awarded annually through an application process and could potentially provide up to \$1,000,000 for the Armory.

Grants and fundraising are further opportunities to finance capital investments. An important program to track is the operates a Cultural Facilities Fund (CFF) from the Massachusetts Cultural Council, which supports capital investment in public cultural facilities through an annual grant process. Municipally owned and managed cultural facilities are only eligible if they are more than 50,000 square feet or at least 125 years old, which means the Armory is not eligible for this source at the moment (34,000 square feet and 121 years old). Waiting four years or transitioning to non-profit governance would open up this important state-level funding resource. Most CFF grants are made to non-profits and grants are made for capital investments even if the organization leases their space. Further conversations with the Massachusetts Cultural Council are needed to understand if the CFF could be a resource for a project on municipally owned infrastructure (e.g. the HVAC) but that is used exclusively by a non-profit tenant.

In general, transitioning to a non-profit structure would allow for more flexible fundraising as there are more grant opportunities and soliciting for donations is allowed. However, such an organization then needs to have the staff to do that fundraising and grant seeking. In either case, municipal or non-profit governance, all possible options for public and private financing should be explored to ensure the Armory is a resource for the next generation of Somerville residents to enjoy.

Summary of Recommendations: Financing the Vision

Stabilize and Diversify Revenue:

- Fully occupy the Armory with arts-focused tenants to increase rental revenue.
- Offer flexible rental options (long-term leases and hourly rentals) to maximize space usage and revenue generation.
- Pursue fundraising, public/private grants, and municipal tax revenue to diversify revenue sources and support operations (as allowed).
- Anticipate inflation to align with the Consumer Price Index and build escalation into leases.

Subsidize Art:

- Offer space at a range of price points to ensure affordable access for different artists and creative businesses.
- Consider subsidizing rents for arts tenants that meet certain criteria (e.g. public service).

Balance Resources:

- Leverage the City's economy of scale to subsidize operations (e.g., snow clearing, utilities) and reduce overall expenses.
- Ensure that as the Armory transitions to independent governance, discussions are held to determine which services will remain City-supported and which will be transferred.

Incremental Operations and Management Upgrades:

- Gradually upgrade services as occupancy increases, allowing for better property management aligned to tenant needs.
- Prioritize incremental upgrades to avoid large operating deficits while improving experience for tenants and visitors.
- Balance the level of service with the goal of keeping the Armory affordable.

Plan for Capital Investments:

- Address short-term (\$5.4 million) and long-term (\$9.2 million) capital investment needs
- Secure capital funding from public and private sources, including municipal bonds, state/federal grants, and community fundraising.



Conclusion



2022 Somerville Arts Council's SomArt program's 2022 AiR awardees, Claire Lane and Caroline Bradbury of Detritus Dance, performing at Arts at the Armory in an accumulating performance.

The Somerville Armory has a dynamic 120-year history, transforming over the decades to meet different needs. Residents want the Armory to be a stimulating, vibrant public arts center that is efficiently managed and transparently governed. Hosting a variety of creative, arts-focused tenants will help maintain the Armory's dynamic character over time.

The Vision of Success includes seven core statements to guide every decision taken. Whether deciding about filling a vacancy in the building, the level of service that can be provided next year, or making a change to a common space policy, every decision should reflect these values:

- Focusing on Artists and the Arts
- Nurturing Collaboration and Synergy
- Inspiring Community
- Supporting the Creative Life Cycle
- Making Clear and Community-Based Decisions
- Mitigating Conflict
- Ensuring Financial Stability

The task ahead is threefold: to stay true to the mission and vision of success, be responsive to the evolving needs of the Somerville arts community, and to establish a lasting foundation of resources and infrastructure that ensures the Armory's long-term vitality. By thoughtfully balancing investment with subsidy, the Armory can and will be a model center to empower working artists and deepen the connection between the community at large and the arts community in Somerville.



Appendix

APPENDIX DOCUMENTS

	Armory Master Plan Advisory Committee (AMPAC)	
1.1	Roster of Members	2022
1.2	Workshop #1	June 2022
1.3	Workshop #2	September 2022
1.4	Workshop #3	January 2023
1.5	Workshop #4	May 2023
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	Research	
2.1	Greater Boston Environmental Scan	August 2022
2.2	Case Study Report	January 2023
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	Community Engagement	
3.1	Leadership Interview Report	August 2022
3.2	Focus Groups Report	May 2023
3.3	Create Today Community Engagement Summary	September 2023
3.3	Community Engagement Methods	2022–2023
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	Armory Meeting Series	
4.1	Armory & Arts Ecosystem Presentation and Notes	January 2023
4.2	Armory & Community Spaces Presentation and Notes	February 2023
4.3	Armory Existing Conditions Presentation and Notes	March 2024
4.4	Armory Governance Presentation and Notes	May 2024
4.5	Armory Governance Handout	May 2024
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	Findings	
5.1	Business Plan	November 2024

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