



Major the Bull, Artist Michael Waller-Foushee

Executive Summary

Durham Cultural Roadmap

Phase One

Phase One of the Durham Cultural Roadmap, facilitated by AMS Planning & Research (2024), offered a comprehensive look at the city's cultural ecosystem through interviews, focus groups, surveys, asset mapping, and community conversations.

Participants consistently affirmed the need for:

- Recognition of Durham's creatives and culture bearers
- More accessible cultural spaces
- Greater racial equity in leadership and funding
- Affordable housing and working spaces for artists
- Clear, inclusive, multilingual communication
- More public art in more places
- Expanded opportunities for youth
- Preservation of heritage, memory, and cultural identity

Phase I Engagement and Findings Summary

Situation Analysis conducted and reported by AMS Planning & Research

AMS Planning & Research provided the Durham Cultural Roadmap with a robust foundation for planning. As the City and County's lead consultant, AMS orchestrated a discovery process that reached over 1,350 voices through community and venue surveys, public input sessions, a visioning workshop, focus groups and interviews.



As AMS moved through its “assets and opportunities” phase (Phase 1), their inquiry concentrated on gathering and analyzing quantitative data, 987 community survey responses, 55 venue-user surveys, public input sessions, interviews, and focus groups to identify broad themes. These research assets provided the following data-rich background knowledge that would inform continued planning:

Participant profile: Survey respondents were overwhelmingly white (78 %), female (68 %), older (63 % aged 40+), and homeowners (76 %); nearly half reported household incomes above \$100K. This underscores that Phase 1 feedback came mostly from higher-income, longer-term residents and suggests that Phase 2 outreach should intentionally broaden participation.

- High interest and engagement – More than two-thirds (69 %) reported being extremely interested in arts and culture, 52 % identify as artists or cultural workers, and 87.9 % had attended a public performance in the past year. These statistics capture the respondents’ strong cultural participation.
- Top barriers and needs – Affordable housing was the top priority for 62 % of artists and cultural workers. Key barriers to participation included cost, lack of centralized information outlets, the expense of creative space, and competition for public and private funding support.
- Five structural themes – Growth pressures on affordable housing, the need for multiple forms of support, a strong desire for public-sector leadership, geographic/spatial equity (access to venues and neighborhood-based offerings), and information/visibility gaps.
- Priority areas – Increased funding, equity /accessibility/ inclusion, arts learning for young people, information and awareness, protection of Durham’s cultural identity.

Phase I Strategic Takeaway:

- Phase II should focus on:
 - Policy-based solutions
 - New funding models
 - Governance structures for the City/County
 - Implementation strategies tied to measurable outcomes

MJR Partners Phase Two

In February 2025, MJR Partners was commissioned to continue the planning process. The MJR Partners process is grounded in extensive listening, research, and relationship-building while remaining mindful of community survey fatigue. Residents and stakeholders participated through questionnaires, site visits, focus groups, town halls, and individual conversations across the city and county.

MJR Partners' data collection was informed by a qualitative, community-engaged research methodology designed to elevate lived experience, surface diverse perspectives, and ground recommendations in the realities of Durham's cultural ecosystem. The approach emphasized depth over breadth, recognizing that meaningful cultural planning requires trust-building, contextual understanding, and sustained engagement.

Research Design

The methodology combined purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews, open-ended dialogue, and facilitated group conversations to gather rich, narrative-based data. This design allowed for both consistency across conversations and flexibility to follow themes emerging from participants' lived experiences.

The research process unfolded in two interconnected phases—*Building Understanding* and *Implementation Readiness*. Each was intentionally designed to deepen insight while supporting actionable outcomes.

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling approach was used to ensure representation across roles, geographies, cultural traditions, and levels of institutional access. Participants were intentionally selected based on their direct engagement in Durham's cultural life, including:

- Artists and culture bearers
- Leaders of cultural and arts organizations
- Educators and youth-serving professionals
- Community historians and tradition-keepers
- Civic partners and public-sector stakeholders
- Informal cultural producers and grassroots organizers

This strategy prioritized voices that are historically underrepresented in cultural planning processes, including artists and leaders of color, artists with disabilities, immigrant and diasporic communities, and individuals working outside formal nonprofit or institutional structures.

The MJR Partners approach was strengthened by the City/County-contracted, locally based Creative Engagement Team led by Monèt Noelle Marshall & R. Stein Wexler* (AKA The Department of Make/Believe). This team of artist/action researchers reinforced the "grit" of Durham as they embedded their research into the spaces and places where residents work, play, shop and bring their authentic selves and identities into the cultural fabric of Durham. Their sensitivity and advocacy for the multiple ways in which creativity shows up in Durham was underscored by a steady sense of loyalty, respect, and care. MJR Partners was honored to work alongside this powerful team.

The Creative Engagement Team facilitated:

- 6 public community-wide events
- 378 attendees/participants
- 15,010 social media engagement touchpoints

Their emphasis on listening to a wide range of voices and gathering stories ensured that the Cultural Roadmap moved from data collection into a deeper exploration of lived experiences.

This evidence-based narrative ensures that the Roadmap is both data-informed and anchored in the lived experiences of Durham's diverse cultural communities.

As Phase I progressed, MJR Partners' work in Phase II engagement reinforced and deepened these findings. Across conversations, the Durham community proved to be not only responsive, but remarkably forthcoming and clear in how residents see themselves, grounded in a strong sense of place, and proud of the city's cultural history.

Participants spoke with honesty about both preservation and change. There was a shared understanding that Durham's cultural identity is not static but actively shaped by those who live and work here. Community members expressed a deep respect for the histories that define Durham—particularly those rooted in African American legacy, civil rights, and long-standing neighborhood traditions—while also articulating a forward-looking vision for how culture should evolve.

What emerged was not simply a list of needs, but a collective aspiration: to build a cultural system that reflects Durham's distinct character—one that is inclusive, locally grounded, and responsive to its full range of voices.

Residents were willing to engage in difficult conversations about equity, access, and representation, while also expressing optimism about what is possible with objective civic leadership and sustained investment. There is a clear desire for fairness in a cultural ecosystem that supports artists and culture bearers, protects heritage, and creates opportunities for future generations.

This combination of candor, pride, and vision provides a strong foundation for the recommendations that follow, anchoring the Cultural Roadmap in both community voice and a shared commitment to shaping a cultural future that is uniquely Durham. Durham's cultural sector does not lack vision—it requires alignment, infrastructure, and sustained investment to meet the ambitions the city has set for itself. This roadmap outlines a practical, achievable path forward: clarifying roles, strengthening systems, and expanding access to resources across the cultural ecosystem. The question is no longer whether Durham can become a leading arts and cultural destination, but whether it will make the deliberate choices necessary to do so. The opportunity is clear. What comes next is execution.



Margie Johnson Reese, Principal
MJR Partners

James Adams
Yolanda Alameda
Gerry McCants
Brandon McKnight

Dr. Marlena McKnight
J Reese
Constance White

**The full Department of Make/Believe report can be reviewed in Appendix A: The Department of Make-Believe Community Engagement Reports*