EMERGENCE

THE STORY OF THE
CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION
The Centre for Social Innovation catalyzes and supports social innovation in Toronto and around the world. We create community workspaces, incubate emerging enterprises, and develop new models and methods with world-changing potential.

We believe that society is facing unprecedented economic, environmental, social and cultural challenges.

We also believe that new innovations are the key to turning these challenges into opportunities to improve our communities and our planet. We are working together to fix our future.
The Centre for Social Innovation opened its doors in June 2004. At that time, we had incredible passion, extraordinary vision, and only an inkling of how we would make it all work. It was, needless to say, an adventurous start. At the time, we weren’t aware of any other similar models. It felt like everything we were doing was new. We were making it up as we went along, and through hard work, clear vision, and a fair amount of good fortune, we made it work. Our model and our team proved their mettle and within a few short years we were running a 23,000 square foot facility that was home to over 180 members representing missions from arts to environment to education to social justice.

Slowly, as our model grew, we began to attract the attention of others who were interested in what we were accomplishing. Some were at the idea stage and interested to know ‘how we did what we did’. Others were already building shared spaces and wondered what they could borrow and adapt to their community. Still others were asking if we would come to their city to establish a Centre for Social Innovation.

What began as an occasional trickle began to gain steam. By our fourth year we were overwhelmed with requests and inquiries about our model. We were, and continue to be, absolutely delighted and honoured by this attention. But we struggled with our own capacity. We are a small social enterprise that has been stretched to the limits evolving our own community and programs.

We tried to share as much information as we could, as frequently as we could, but we began to realize that we needed another strategy to meet the growing interest in creating shared spaces for social innovation...

...So we created this series.

Shared Spaces for Social Innovation is about sharing our story and empowering others to learn from our experience. The Centre for Social Innovation (CSI) has always been open with its model. We’ve long preached the benefits of shared spaces and we’ve been doing our best to encourage as many new spaces as possible. We figured that the best way to open our model – to reveal everything we’ve learned in hopes of supporting the emergence of new and better spaces – was to document what we’ve done and make it available to anyone who was interested.

It has taken a fair amount of courage for us to let it all hang out and give it all away! Many people advised us that we should be franchising, licensing, and holding our knowledge close to our chests. But this went against our values. Instead, we are putting this whole series into the creative commons for others to benefit from and contribute to.

We believe that good ideas scale when they are open. We also believe that ideas get better when we share. We look forward to working with you on this journey to create and grow new strategies for social innovation.
The Shared Spaces for Social Innovation Series is made up of three books:

- **Emergence: The Story of the Centre for Social Innovation.**
  In this book we weave a narrative around our genesis and development. Starting back when the Centre was just a glimmer in the eyes of a few social entrepreneurs, Emergence follows our growth from concept to operation to scale.

- **Rigour: How to Create World-Changing Shared Spaces.**
  This book is a manual for those planning or operating a shared space. It reveals the accumulated knowledge of six years of experience and offers a ton of tips, lessons and tools for developing a strong organization and vibrant community.

- **Proof: How Shared Spaces are Changing the World.**
  This report shares our most recent research on the impact of the Centre for Social Innovation in order to demonstrate just what shared spaces for social innovation can accomplish.

Each book can be read on its own. Together they provide a comprehensive picture of the Centre for Social Innovation.

**A WORK IN PROGRESS**

Of course, the story of the Centre for Social Innovation is still unfolding. And yet the challenge with writing a book is the finality of it all. We therefore invite you to participate in our online space. At first, we’ll have pdf versions of the series publications and a set of templates and tools available for download. In time, we’ll make amendments to these books, release additions to the series and create a platform for a community of practice.

**OPEN SOURCING OUR MODEL**

Shared Spaces for Social Innovation reveals just about everything we’ve learned about creating and growing shared workspaces. We’re telling our story, sharing our research, and offering the tools and templates we’ve created along the way.

But sharing is a two-way street. Actually, it’s more like a highway interchange!

While it is truly our pleasure to provide this material, our hope is that you will embrace the Creative Commons spirit. This means recognizing our contribution and letting us know what you’ve used, adapted, and developed. More importantly, it means sharing your experiences and tools with other shared spaces.

By contributing to a shared body of knowledge, we’re empowering others to be even more successful, building this field and advancing our own spaces in the process.

We’re not yet sure what it will look like, and we’re very sure that it won’t be up to us alone to determine. But we’re hoping this effort starts us along a path to an open community of practice that is creating the spaces where people change the world.

**Look to build or grow your own shared space for social innovation?**

CSI offers tailored consulting, training, and speaking services to help you with challenges from start-up to scale. Get in touch by sending a note to sssi@socialinnovation.ca.

**Access new releases and supporting materials.**

[socialinnovation.ca/ssi]

**Identify yourself as part of this growing community.**

[socialinnovation.ca/ssi]

**Download all of our templates and tools.**

[socialinnovation.ca/ssi]
Looking forward

This series starts with the Centre for Social Innovation. But we know there are dozens of like-minded spaces around the world, and we hope to add other stories, experiences, templates and tools over time.

Our vision is a vibrant, shared platform that includes the experiences of shared spaces dedicated to social innovation around the world – your experiences. We’re hoping to work with a community of like-minded people that is sharing ideas, strategies and… who knows?

Just imagine a network where we can share promising practices, collaborate on joint projects and infrastructure, replicate good ideas and leverage investments from community to community.

Let’s work together to support each other, our members and to build this exciting field!

Thank you

We would like to express our heartfelt appreciation to the many people who have made the Centre for Social Innovation and this series possible. First, a thanks to the CSI Staff and Board team, whose vision and industry have made the Centre what it is today. Second, a special thanks to our incredible network of partners and supporters, including UrbanSpace Property Group, Canadian Heritage, The Ontario Trillium Foundation, Canadian Alternative Investment Co-Operative, Ashoka, Harbinger Foundation and the Province of Ontario, Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration.

A publication like this only comes together with incredible dedication. Eli Malinsky has played author, editor, project manager and overall superhero on this project; Shared Spaces for Social Innovation provides only a glimpse of the value that Eli brings to CSI and to this emerging field.

Hamutal Dotan deserves special recognition for her writing on Emergence and Proof – her effortless style perfectly captures the tone of the Centre for Social Innovation. For turning beautiful words into compelling publications, The Movement continues to mesmerize and engage. We’d also like to recognize Margot Smart, who meticulously designed and analyzed the 2008 member survey, which forms the basis of our statistics.

Finally, we would like to recognize our members. They are the reason we do what we do. They inspire us, they motivate us, they ground us and they challenge us. Their passion, commitment and creativity are what make it all worthwhile, and it is truly our honour to support their work.

Now let’s change the world together!

Tonya Surman
Executive Director
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“We’re part of a community that’s building the spaces where change happens.”

TONYA SURMAN on the emerging shared spaces sector
Co-location refers to spaces that are shared among a number of separate organizations. Multi-Tenat Nonprofit Centers are types of co-location spaces that focus on the nonprofit sector.

Coworking refers to the sharing of workspace among freelancers and other independent workers. Coworking spaces provide workspace and community to people who are often working on their own.

Community Hubs are shared spaces that provide direct services to the geographic community in which they are situated. Community Hubs co-locate service providers that offer a range of supports such as language instruction, job training, after school programs and drop-in groups.

Hot Desks are temporary, shared workspaces that are typically found in coworking spaces.

Incubators provide programmatic, strategic, administrative and/or financial support to small projects and organizations.

Social Innovation refers to new ideas that resolve social, cultural, economic and environmental challenges for the benefit of people and planet.

Even more simply, a social innovation is an idea that works for the public good.
For-profit and nonprofit strategies are blending together. Shared spaces – and frequently their members – are examples of how mission-based and market-based approaches can coincide.

There is increasing recognition that the problems we face are too complex to be addressed by any single player. Shared spaces connect diverse organizations and individuals, giving them the chance to collaborate, share knowledge and develop systemic solutions to the issues they are trying to address.

The incentives for cost sharing have been growing. Nonprofits and charities are enduring ongoing cutbacks in administrative budgets while facing increasing demands from communities and individuals.

Alongside new technologies has been the rise of ‘independents’ who work with several clients but who are not bound by the restrictions of any one physical space.

Real estate prices are soaring worldwide, making it increasingly difficult for small groups and individuals to find affordable workspace.

The pendulum is swinging from global back to local. While the 90’s promised ‘virtual work’, the new millennium is reinforcing the importance of space.

Why are Shared Spaces emerging?

Shared workspaces are themselves a social innovation – an entirely new way of working. The dominant workplace model has been separate organizations working separately. That may have made perfect sense at one time and it may still make perfect sense in many instances. But it is by no means a universal or desirable approach. The nature of work is changing – and with it the workplace. These changes offer incredible potential for economic, social, cultural, and environmental progress in the coming years.
As we’ve built and expanded CSI over the past few years, we’ve developed our theory of change—it’s our way of capturing how the Centre for Social Innovation creates the conditions for social innovation to emerge.

Serving as the foundation is the physical space, the environment which our members see and feel and touch and inhabit every day. It’s at the very base of the pyramid because it’s what sets the tone for everything else: our members want to come to work simply to enjoy the space. The physical space is the container for everything that occurs at the Centre.

The physical space sets the conditions for community. Community develops as people start to feel comfortable in a space, are happy to spend time in it, and develop relationships with other members doing the same. A kitchen, for instance, isn’t just a place to eat; it can also allow for shared meals and impromptu gatherings, and those, in turn, are the basis of the relationships which lead to a real sense of kinship among the members. With some delicate animation, the bonds of community are forged and strengthened, building social capital and a network of relationships.

Community relationships allow members to exchange ideas, to collaborate easily, to find services and access knowledge that might otherwise be hard to come by. In short, community is what leads to innovation, because a community of other creative, engaged people is what blows away the cobwebs, allows you to see an old problem in a new light, and helps you find creative ways of implementing solutions you might not otherwise have considered. And that—all the myriad ways in which space and community foster social innovation—well, that’s the whole purpose of the Centre for Social Innovation.
We have witnessed the birth and growth of three distinct but related movements. The first is a movement toward co-location. Co-location generally refers to the more-or-less permanent sharing of space among organizations. Within this field, there is a particular trend toward co-location of non-profit organization within a single facility, often known as a Multi-Tenant Nonprofit Centre. The members in these centres are individual organizations who have decided to share space, often an entire building, as a strategy to save costs and advance their missions. The Nonprofit Centers Network in San Francisco (nonprofitcenters.org), a project of Tides Shared Spaces, is the primary organizing body for a network of over 200 such shared spaces, mostly in the United States, and is leading the charge in developing and connecting the field. CSI is a proud member of the Nonprofit Centers Network.

The second movement is often referred to as coworking. Born of ‘independents’ (freelancers, sole practitioners, consultants, etc.) primarily in the tech and design sectors, coworking spaces are generally more informal and of smaller scale than co-locations. Many members are motivated by opportunities for social connectivity; as independents, they are too often working alone.

Coworking spaces provide shared space for part-time members and are popping up all over the globe. This movement, more ad-hoc than the co-location movement, is being loosely connected and organized through the Coworking Wiki (blog.coworking.info). While most coworking spaces do not apply a ‘social change’ lens to their work, one notable exception is The Hub (the-hub.net), a global network of coworking spaces now reaching into over 20 countries around the world. CSI is an affiliate of The Hub Network.

The third movement is a movement toward incubation of social change projects. Although it’s a fuzzy term, incubation generally refers to support given to early-stage projects and organizations. This support can include programming, trusteeship, shared services, investment and financial back-end services. The past few years have seen an increase in the application of traditional incubation strategies for commercialization to social enterprises.

A THREE-PRONGED MOVEMENT

The shared spaces movement is exploding. While various forms of shared workspace have been around for decades, the idea of shared space as a unique field of practice is more recent, and the past few years have seen a dramatic rise in the number of shared spaces and in the interconnections among them.
The Centre for Social Innovation is a hybrid of these movements. Like co-locations we provide permanent, stable office rental to organizations. Like coworking spaces, we provide part-time desk spaces to ‘independents’. Like an incubator, CSI provides programming and shared services to its members, and offers a handful of projects support ranging from strategic advice to back-end financial services.

This makes us unique. In fact, there are a few other unique characteristics of the CSI model.

### A SOCIAL CHANGE LENS
The Centre for Social Innovation is designed to support and foster social innovation. All of our members are selected based on their commitment to that goal, and all of our programming is designed to increase the capacity of social enterprises, non-profits, charities, green businesses, artists, designers, creators, and activists to improve the well-being of people and our planet.

### A FOCUS ON SMALL
We focus on groups with five or fewer staff. The vast majority of our members are one- and two-person operations. It is these small groups that are in the greatest need of shared facilities and administration; it is also these groups that are best positioned to collaborate and connect with others.

### PHYSICAL DESIGN
We understand the critical role of physical design in setting the tone of a space and the behaviour of its users. We have developed a very specific approach to physical design that has been a key ingredient in our success and in the ‘experience’ of the Centre for Social Innovation.

### ANIMATION AS PRACTICE
Community animation is what turns “a place to work” to a space of social innovation. We’ve been building the practice of animation and developing its role as a central feature of successful shared spaces.
In November 2008 we conducted a comprehensive member survey. The survey comprised more than one hundred questions, investigating everything from customer service to the effect of membership on organizational revenues. The results include, in addition to quantitative measures, more than 2,000 submitted comments, anecdotes, and suggestions. We are honoured and grateful that so many of our members were willing to share their thoughts and insights with us, and thrilled to now be sharing them with you.

52% of members describe themselves as working on the environment, 39% in culture, 31% in social justice, and 25% in technology (respondents were allowed to select multiple sectors).

Incorporated for-profit and incorporated nonprofits are equally represented among our members, at 23% each. 25% of members are registered charities, and 24% are unincorporated.

We are a community of the small but mighty: 94% of CSI members have three or fewer full-time equivalent staff.

Two-thirds of members are under the age of 40, doing their best to keep the other third feeling young! Thirty-seven percent of members bicycle to work every day (fewer in Toronto winters!).

So, just who are the members of CSI? It’s an eclectic mix that cuts across sectors and organizational types, ages and skill sets, and it’s an altogether glorious jumble.

MEMBER SNAPSHOT

Throughout this report, unless otherwise noted, any statistics or feedback attributed to CSI members refers to the information gathered from the 80 respondents to our November 2008 survey, who represent about 30% of our membership.
Getnet Ejigu, one of the CSI’s community animators, and front-desk-greeter/problem-solver extraordinaire, has turned the lights on now, and put the big urn of coffee on to brew.

It’s quiet, for the moment.

The lights are off and the hallway is still.
Bagels! Fresh from Montreal and laid out on the counter in the kitchen, for any and all to snack on.

People start clustering round chatting about their latest projects.

Getnet Ejigu, one of the CSI’s community animators, and front-desk-greeter/problem-solver extraordinaire, has turned the lights on now, and put the big urn of coffee on to brew.

A couple of others are on the phone, returning last night’s voicemails.
11:00 a.m. The lounge is going full throttle: impromptu consultations by the fridge, a scheduled meeting on the couch in the centre of the space, a strategy session at the round table in the corner. Someone reaches behind the reception desk to grab an ethernet cable—the wireless has been on the fritz but a conference by instant-messenger must go on regardless.

11:01 a.m. The lounge is going full throttle: impromptu consultations by the fridge, a scheduled meeting on the couch in the centre of the space, a strategy session at the round table in the corner. Someone reaches behind the reception desk to grab an ethernet cable—the wireless has been on the fritz but a conference by instant-messenger must go on regardless.

1:10 No more Indian food.

2:12 p.m. Pant, pant, pant, lick, woof, pant. There’s a dog in the lounge! One of the tenants felt bad leaving Maisie at home all day and brought her in for the afternoon. (She’s friendly, and soon settles down.)
How do I make more coffee?

one of the tenants asks, trying to combat afternoon doldrums.

Executive Director Tonya overhears and helpfully steps in, going through the procedure step-by-step.

Oh, would you like some of my peanut butter?

I have a thing about peanut butter.

and then she passes over a spoon for dipping straight into the jar.

Voices echo in the aptly named Think Tank—someone’s having a meeting. A couple of other members wander up to the rooftop patio for a chat. Someone else comes out of the bathroom in a party frock, on her way to a function straight from work.

One by one, lights start going off at desks across the floor.

The lights are pretty much all out now. It’s quiet again—for the next ten or eleven hours, at least.
Housed on two floors of the Robertson Building, a historic factory building in downtown Toronto (located at 215 Spadina Avenue), CSI is home to more than 180 social mission projects and organizations. It provides — as all good homes do — physical shelter, but a great deal more than that as well: security, community, the wisdom of those a generation older than you, and the boundless energy of those a generation younger. The organizations are all small, ranging in size from one to maybe a half-dozen staff. Some are just starting out, newly hatched in the minds of their creators and recently liberated from their basement home offices. Others are well-established, with secure grants or revenue streams and a track-record of years of accomplishment. What they share: a commitment to systems change; to not just improving people’s lives but finding new approaches to tackling social, environmental, economic, and cultural challenges. And, significantly, membership in a community of like-minded organizations.

CSI both fosters social innovation and is a social innovation — a new model for how individuals and organizations committed to social and environmental progress can pool their energy to both create a more humane working environment and do more effective work. And while that sounds like a wonderful goal, one whose merits are so obvious as to not even require defending, this was not always the case.

CSI was founded in early 2004, and barely anybody understood what it was meant to be or do back then. This is the story of how CSI came to be.
“If you’re in, I’m in…”

“Well if you’re in, I’m in!”

TONYA SURMAN and MARGIE ZEIDLER making a pact
Ask those who’ve been involved in CSI from the outset just why or when it got its start and you’ll get slightly different variations on a theme each time. This, immediately, tells you something: CSI is a collaboration, and like all collaborations it draws on the various experiences, proclivities, and perspectives of its creators. There is no agreed upon storyline because there is no single answer to the question of how CSI was founded. Nor, more importantly, does there need to be. Some key players cite certain academic trends or developments in workplace culture, others government research projects, still others economic crises which forced nonprofit organizations into creative cost-reduction. All are correct, and none tell the whole story.

But begin somewhere we must, and so we shall start with an organization charmingly named Spadina Bus. Spadina Avenue—the street on which CSI is located—is one of the oldest and busiest thoroughfares in Toronto, home to many historic buildings that date to the city’s earliest days. In the late 20th century Spadina went through something of a rough patch, with many of those buildings becoming prohibitively expensive to maintain, and some even regrettably being left vacant. Zoning by-law changes eventually turned the neighbourhood around—specifically some new regulations which freed the area up for mixed-use development, and allowed for innovative utilization of the existing infrastructure. As the King and Spadina neighbourhood was reborn it became a hub in the downtown core, humming with both commercial and residential activity. New businesses, and especially “new economy” businesses based on technology, gravitated to the area, as did the young people who worked at these firms.

Older buildings in the area were filling with technology and internet companies. They felt authentic, there was a lot of space, the price was right.

Spadina Bus was founded in 2000 by Eric Meerkamper, a partner in DECODE—a strategy firm dedicated to understanding young people and this new economy. “It was basically a networking association that was created to brand the King and Spadina area of Toronto as being an innovation cluster,” he recalls. “A lot of these old beautiful buildings were fantastic,” and were filling with technology and internet companies. The people starting these businesses “really loved the authenticity of the buildings,” and young people began flocking to the neighbourhood. Four-hundred-and-fifty people showed up at the first meeting of Spadina Bus, a testament to how invested the neighbourhood’s new residents were in its development. Though Spadina Bus is now defunct, that first community of people served as a kind of signpost, an indication that innovative redevelopment on Spadina—redevelopment which prized liveability and respected the neighbourhood’s history—was not only possible but welcome.

Over the next couple of years Eric started wondering not just about neighbourhood developments but about some other urban issues as well, and specifically about the role of social mission organizations. He had been having some conversations with Patrick Tobin, in the Department of Canadian Heritage (an agency of the Canadian federal government) about the challenges facing small nonprofits. “Pat and I... started to speak with a number of not-for-profits, social enterprises, charities, and so on, to really try to understand what the key barriers were for growth.” The answer they got? “A lot of it was space.” Funding is often project-based, not stable, and these small organizations were trapped because they couldn’t tap into reliable infrastructure and establish a firm foothold.
DECODE prepared a study for Canadian Heritage on a potential solution to this problem: providing better space for these organizations. The report was titled “Establishing a Social Innovation Centre in Toronto,” and published January 31, 2003.

From his perspective, Pat Tobin too had multiple overlapping reasons for becoming interested in the state of the union at small organizations. In addition to his conversations with Eric, Pat had been doing some work with Margie Zeidler, the founder of Urbanspace Property Group, a mission-driven real estate development company. Margie had already opened a co-location for artists and cultural entrepreneurs in the King Spadina neighbourhood, at the building that became known simply by its address — 401 Richmond. A study released in September 2003 showed that 401 members were healthier than many comparable organizations housed independently, and that community focused design and programming is what made the difference. (401 Richmond has, in the years since it opened, become an inspiration for many other cities across the globe.)

Clearly momentum was building around the notion of using shared space and shared resources to ease the burdens on small organizations, but the concrete path to developing such as space was not yet clear. Pat came to the conclusion that government perhaps wasn’t cut out to for this particular task since government, as a guardian and distributor of taxpayer money, wasn’t necessarily in a position to accommodate something so new and unpredictable.

The wheels had begun turning, however, and within a matter of a few months Eric and Pat would become instrumental in the not-yet-named CSI’s development, and Eric one of its founding board members.

Another of CSI’s founding principals was Mary Rowe, who at the time was president of Ideas That Matter, an organization which ran events and issued publications inspired by the work of urbanist Jane Jacobs. Mary agrees that the origins of CSI are impossible to pin down: “Like all good ideas you don’t really know where they started…CSI was an amalgam of a whole bunch of different energies and ideas…and different people.” She goes on to emphasize the way in which this exemplifies the kind social innovation CSI seeks to foster: “I think it’s an emergent idea…in that way it was a great instance of social innovation.”
Mary, it so happened, knew both Pat Tobin and Margie Zeidler. According to Mary, Margie was already well on her way to understanding just how powerful collaborative spaces could be: “Margie was developing her ideas around how she was developing an ecosystem of users around her building (at 401 Richmond, the cultural industries co-location space)...she was constantly watching and trying to learn from the ecology.” In May 2003 the two went to a conference in New York on the subject of shared facilities in this sector. As Mary tells it, Margie got so inspired that one day while on a break from the conference, while they were sitting together at a bar, Margie turned to Mary and simply said, “I just think I should do this.”

Around the same time, Robert Barnard, DECODE’s CEO, came to Alan Broadbent with a proposal to fund a meeting in Toronto with three generations of social innovators. Robert had been at a conference in Geneva in the Fall of 2002 organized by the Schwab Foundation where the idea of gathering social innovators was discussed. As a major supporter of urban issues (Alan is chair of the board at Ideas That Matter’s parent company, Avana Capital), Alan agreed to support and host the event. Mary Rowe and Margie Zeidler were both at that event and the idea of establishing a social incubator was floated.

Margie, of course, attended. “It did come up among a lot of the younger people that they felt isolated,” she recalls, “because they were working in basements or wherever. They thought it would be a useful idea to maybe share some simple equipment, like maybe a fax machine or phones—that was about as far as it got technologically—but mostly what they wanted was community, they wanted to be able to discuss with other people what they were doing.” This was a subtle but important shift in the conversation, moving from co-location (housing organizations in the same building) to shared spaces (having communally-accessed infrastructure and facilities).

At the time, Margie happened to be finishing up renovations of 215 Spadina, an old factory building she had recently acquired to accommodate the overwhelming unmet demand for space at 401 Richmond (which, at the time, had 200 members on its waiting list). She had a 5,000 square foot space still available on the ground floor; and thought that it might, just maybe, have the potential to serve as just such a shared space.

At the exact moment Margie was getting excited about the potential for actualizing the notion of shared space, someone else across town was getting similarly energized—specifically, a woman named Tonya Surman.

Tonya was a former member of Margie’s at 401 Richmond and a partner in the Commons Group, a consulting firm dedicated to helping social mission groups build effective and fruitful networks. Tonya had been building online and offline communities and undertaking social ventures for fifteen years, in fact, and was becoming an expert in the field of collaboration, enterprise, and innovative governance models. Tonya had also been thinking about clustering and constellations—bringing capacity builders in the social mission sector together—and had even looked at some office space that might be used in this capacity.

Tonya and her husband Mark happened to throw a dinner party one night—only it wasn’t just any night, it was the very night after Maytree’s social innovation conference took place. And to this din-

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Tonya and her husband Mark happened to throw a dinner party one night—only it wasn’t just any night, it was the very night after Maytree’s social innovation conference took place. And to this din-

Like all good ideas you don’t really know where they started... CSI was an amalgam of a whole bunch of different energies and ideas...and different people. MARY ROWE

Younger people felt isolated... mostly what they wanted was community. MARGIE ZEIDLER
ner party they happened to invite Philip King, the CEO of an online fundraising company. Philip had been at the conference and so, in typical fashion, it came up as a topic of conversation at dinner. Philip happened (this story involves a charming and jaw-dropping number of things that just “happened” to be the case) to mention that his favourite moment of the day involved “this one woman, I think her name was Margie or something, who was talking about bringing together some nonprofits—she said she basically had a building, and was thinking about how to bring some folks together.”

Tonya, in her own words, “interrogated him,” and gleaned as much information about the project as she could. She called Margie the next day and told her that she’d been thinking about working on a similar shared-space project. The two got together for coffee once, and then Margie introduced Tonya to Mary Rowe. The three met a few times over the next few months, refining their thoughts on the subject. “Tonya’s an instinctive mixer,” says Mary, and has “a kind of web understanding of interrelations…at the time Tonya was trying to concretize these ideas about interrelations that she was seeing in the technology world.” Tonya, as soon as she heard what Mary and Margie had been discussing, basically said “let me at it,” in Mary’s words. “She was ready to jump in with not just hands but hands, feet, fingers, toes…”

For all three of them, the prospect of combining social innovation and shared space was becoming ever-more compelling.

In December 2003 Tonya, Margie, and Pat had a meeting with a cultural affairs officer at the City of Toronto. Tonya’s eyes invariably light up when describing, not this meeting exactly, but what happened right after: “Margie and I walked out of the meeting and it was one of those moments that I’ll never forget…We walked out and there was this blizzard of storm, and there was this crazy hail, and we were standing out…and I don’t even remember what we were talking about, but there was just this moment where she looked at me and she said… ‘If you’re in, I’m in.’ And I said, ‘Well if you’re in, I’m in.’ And it was just this pact.”

The five of them—Margie, Mary, Tonya, Pat, and Eric—held their first meeting as now official founding partners of the Centre for Social Innovation in January 2004, decided that they wanted to move things along as quickly as possible, and set themselves a six month deadline for getting the operation up and running. Canadian Heritage provided $15,000 for a feasibility study of a shared spaces venture; the principals, already were convinced of its feasibility, used that infusion of cash to draw up the concrete plans to back the vision up. Tonya happened to have some time available, having recently returned to working life after taking time off to have a baby, and was on the lookout for interesting opportunities. Her absolute enthusiasm for the project, and her deep knowledge of collaboration, proved irresistible: the group decided she would make the perfect executive director of the new venture.

(Well, it wasn’t quite that simple. Tonya and Pat had, as a matter of fact, gone to meet with a potential executive director. Fortunately, someone else was astute enough to see what, in retrospect, seems obvious. The founders were having a meeting one day and Pat raised the issue of establishing a hiring process for the execu-
tive director. At which point, Tonya recalls, Mary Rowe piped up and said “Well Tonya, don’t you want that job?” Tonya, of course, said yes, and then Mary went on: “Tonya, can you leave the room please?” Tonya stepped out for a few minutes, and about ten minutes later she stepped back in and was offered the job by her fellow founders.)

Tonya (whose enthusiasm has abated not one iota in the past six years) likes to refer to Margie as CSI’s “angel” — the fairy godmother of the whole operation, as it were. Her conceptual and material contributions were, simply, what made CSI possible. Entirely in keeping with her character, Margie speaks far more humbly of her own role than others do about it: “we gave the rent at a good deal,” she says modestly, “it wasn’t half of other people’s rent, it was just a tiny bit lower—but we didn’t require that they start paying rent until they had members.”

CSI was created on a cost-recovery model, that is, on a plan according to which there would be enough revenue from the rents to cover operating expenses. Thus, the primary financial challenge was getting started in the first place. Margie lays out the problem CSI would otherwise have faced: “Landlords typically don’t like members who are very nebulous—they don’t like members where there are multiple members; they don’t like members that don’t have three years worth of financial statements to show; and so on.” Why then was Margie so eager to get on board? “In a sense I kind of considered myself the member, because it was an organization I co-created, because it was something I wanted to try.”

Urbanspace Property Group underwrote the build-out of the space and the start-up for CSI tenancy, including partial support of the salary of the Executive Director and half the salary of an administrator for the first year, as well as an interest-free loan of $52,000 — An initial investment totaling over $250,000. Tonya, meanwhile put in buckets of sweat equity: she brought her successful consulting practice and its revenue into the Centre, and continued to take on consulting work until CSI’s fourth year of operation—essential to making the Centre work financially. Both were hooked on the idea of what might be possible.

Other financial start-up schemes, you might think, could have been found: government assistance, grants, or private donors might all have gotten CSI off the ground in alternate universes. Maybe. But as Pat had considered earlier, the barriers — born of the fact that CSI was a new kind of enterprise and didn’t fit neatly into any funding model anybody recognized—proved insurmountable. In their initial quests for funding, in fact, nobody wanted to touch the project, since it didn’t fall into any recognizable or existing funding categories. “It was the brokenness of the boxes,” says Tonya, “that was the problem.” Margie’s and Tonya’s contributions of money, time and labour allowed CSI to circumvent all those roadblocks and enabled the space to go from idea to execution with lightning speed.

Tonya developed marketing materials in January and February and the founding members sent an email out, relying on all their existing networks, announcing the availability of member spaces in the now-named Centre for Social Innovation. At the same time, Tonya and the board also fleshed out financial projections, pricing models, space designs, member recruitment guidelines, and a whole host of other documents that were essential to starting up. The Centre was registered as a nonprofit on March 22, 2004.
“Trust me, it’ll look like this in three months.”

TONYA SURMAN reassuring a soon-to-be member
Developing the facilities and developing the community happened simultaneously, and each had—or attempted to have—an effect on the other.

“There were things that were difficult,” remembers Margie, “but we stuck to the decisions we’d made. For example, we wanted to make it very open and visible and airy and light, and people immediately wanted to put filing cabinets in front of their glass walls to block themselves off so they couldn’t be seen, or put drywall up instead of glass.

There was a bit of fighting about that, and so it had to be laid down in the leases.”

Design, in short, mattered an awful lot to everyone involved. There were some design principles which Tonya and Margie viewed as indispensable: they were part of the very character of the Centre they were trying to build not just physically but psychologically.

Part of that was to bring light into the centre but part of it was also to create community.

There was a bit of fighting about that, and so it had to be laid down in the leases.”

This particular Centre happened to be housed in a heritage building, an old warehouse with exposed brick and wood floors, which were, it goes without saying, pretty to look at. But they weren’t the essentials: those materials were the specific manifestation in this case, but others might have served the same purpose. It’s the purpose—the effect those materials produce—which matters.
“It has to be open, I think,” says Margie. “Even though members have their own individual spaces, we’ve tried to open up…to have the doors be glass and have some parts of the walls be glass, to bring light into the hallways and also to increase visual communication between people in their suites and people in the hallways. It’s a security thing too: if everyone’s locked behind their doors you don’t know what’s going on—the more people can see each other, the better.” This approach to design is rather like taking a mixed-use block of your neighbourhood—the kind of space Jane Jacobs is famous for advocating—and bringing it indoors. In fact, Margie even borrows one of Jacobs’s metaphors to describe the interior of CSI: “eyes on the corridor,” a play on Jacobs’s slogan of “eyes on the street.” Buildings and workplaces, like neighbourhoods, function best when they are held in common.

“There has to be lots of light, and I think that’s just common to any working condition,” Margie continues—light is how you achieve openness. North America lags behind Europe on this matter: in Germany, she points out, there’s a rule that “you cannot place a worker more than fifteen feet away from a [natural] light source. Here the cores in these [office] towers are typically sixty feet deep…executives get the best space and the walls go up and so everybody else is sitting in the dark…that’s inhumane. I don’t think people should be anywhere where they can’t have access to natural light.”

Margie (who can talk for longer, and far more interestingly, on light than anyone you’ve ever met), continues: “Somebody did a calculation once: even on the darkest day the intensity of light outside is something like ten times what we can recreate in an interior space with even fantastic intensity of artificial light—it’s just the quality of it, the distribution of it, etc. is so much greater.”
Equally essential to creating and sustaining this sense of community are common spaces. Everyone coming into or out of their office in CSI has to pass through the common area, and much like the living room in your house, it contains all the essentials for a comfortable break: an arrangement of couches, a rug or two, a coffee table piled with newspapers, a few plants and knick-knacks that have been picked up over time.

Walls, in fact, can be the biggest barrier to light, which is why the ones in CSI don’t go all the way up to the ceiling. “All the offices are on the perimeter,” Margie points out, “where the windows are, and if you put [walls] up, that’s the end of the story—you get no more light.” Though they were counter-intuitive and took some getting used to, these partial walls had other benefits. Prime among these was their use in supporting good air circulation, and doing so affordably. Without these open walls people in the interior of the floor space wouldn’t have gotten any air, and the cost of building out the duct work would have been prohibitive. Compared to traditional office towers, with un-openable windows and artificially controlled environments, “if you put trees outside, so you’re getting more shaded light, and you can open your windows to get some breezes, and you can use fans (which reduce heat by about 4º C in summer), you can do without air conditioning and you can also lower your heat load because you don’t have as much artificial light and therefore you don’t need as much cooling. It’s simple—people have forgotten.”

The walls not going all the way up to the ceiling had another effect, and another intention, that was at least as important: it’s a design feature that fosters community. It is impossible to maintain insularity, to keep entirely to yourself, when you can’t help but overhear your neighbour’s conversations sometimes, and you know that they can’t help overhearing yours. The goal wasn’t to be invasive (private phone booths are available for confidential calls, for instance), but to generate a sense that all the members were somehow in something together.

It’s a space which allows for a melding of the personal and the professional which crystallizes the kind of interaction typical of CSI.
In keeping with the open-concept ethos which underlies both the space and the philosophy of CSI, the kitchen has no walls, and blends seamlessly into the cozy couch area. The cupboards are stocked with dishes and utensils, the coffee pot is always on, and recycling bins are clearly labelled.

There is much wisdom in the old adage that bonds are forged and friendships formed over the breaking of bread. It is wisdom that holds to this day, and it was over shared meals and communal lunches that CSI’s members first and most strongly developed connections to one another. Coffee klatches in the morning, a communal salad bar at lunch, an impromptu glass of wine to celebrate the end of a long week—the kitchen is the heart of CSI like it’s the heart of any home. All the small but essential meetings, which characterize the texture of a day at CSI and are its life’s blood, would be impossible without it. “That’s the magic sauce,” says Tonya, “community is built around food.”

THE KITCHEN

Of course, of all the various kinds of common space, kitchens are most important. Margie and Tonya, quite sensibly, knew from the beginning that their new space couldn’t do without one.
While Margie and Tonya were working on the physical infrastructure of CSI, Pat, along with the other founders, were working on developing its membership. (Though CSI is technically a landlord, renting out space to the small organizations which are its members, people use landlord-member language far less than is typical when describing the Centre. It’s designed, and experienced, as something far more intimate.) The group used their collective social networks to recruit potential members, sending out emails to advise everyone they knew that space would soon be available. Representatives of forty organizations came out to the two information sessions the founders held, and twenty-five of those submitted applications for the fourteen available spots.

Tonya, eager to flex her muscles as the newly installed executive director, made it her mission to personally bring in some of CSI’s first members. She had, in addition to the general email which the founding group had sent out, called friends who were running the kinds of organizations she wanted to see in CSI. One in particular was Paul Bubelis, executive director of the Sustainability Network, a capacity-building organization that works in the environmental sector. He recalls getting a call from Tonya, who introduced CSI, he remembers with a laugh, with the words: “I have an idea. Bear with me.” She pitched him and another contact, Chris Winter, at the Conservation Council of Ontario, and both agreed to take spots at the Centre.

Pat, recalls Tonya, “was instrumental in filling the space with people. He was the one that made sure we had multicultural communities here, he was the one that made sure arts groups were brought in.” In fact, each of the founders brought their own experiences, com-
munities, and perspectives to the selection process, advocating for the groups and potential members with which they had already had positive experiences. Tonya fought to ensure space for environmental groups while Margie, like Pat, went to bat for arts organizations. Mary Rowe, the complexity expert, was committed to a mix, and wanted to ensure that the members who were ultimately selected came from as wide a variety of backgrounds as possible, and Eric made sure there were a couple of for-profit members, further enhancing this diversity.

The selection process itself was an exercise in breaking traditional workplace models in which factors far beyond a potential member’s ability to make rent were taken into account. Selection criteria included consideration of an organization’s social mission, its physical fit in the available space, its reach and profile, and its innovative nature. The founders were also mindful of wanting to create the right balance in the group of members as a whole, making sure that they came from a diverse array of backgrounds and were at different stages of maturity. Selection ended up being weighted one-third in favour of emerging organizations, which were still in their formative stages of development, and two-thirds in favour of more established, sustaining organizations.

Sandy Crawley, executive director of the Documentary Organization of Canada, heard of the Centre via the email the founding members had sent out, and was the very first member to move into CSI; he also wound up joining the board of directors. Before CSI, he says, “we were located in a little cubbyhole of an office up in a building on College Street.” When the email landed in his inbox, therefore, he was intrigued enough to attend one of the information sessions and take a tour of the facilities.

“One-third in favour of emerging organizations”

“Trust me,” Paul remembers her saying at the meeting, “it’ll look like this in three months.”

“One-third in favour of more established, sustaining organizations”

“Facilities,” of course, was something of a loose term—the Centre at that point consisted of a gutted, completely raw space. There were exposed brick walls, some fantastic wooden floors, and pretty much nothing else. Of course, this is a great improvement over what had been there previously: Tonya recalls the “horrible” dropceilings and the “awful, disgusting drywall disaster” with a shudder. Folding chairs were set up amidst the construction debris and Tonya and Margie spoke to prospective members at two meetings in February and March. The information at the meeting, like the space itself, was bare bones but effective at conveying the key ideas. Tonya distributed a one-sheet rundown of the rental costs, and a copy of the floor plan Margie had drawn up.
Sandy had never encountered terms like “clustering” before, but got hooked on the idea and, like Paul and Chris, decided that he wanted to take one of the spaces. Flashing back to that early meeting, the message Sandy took away was that:

it could be social enterprise, it could be not-for-profit, but the thing was—you had to want to change the world.

The Documentary Organisation of Canada moved in June 1, 2004—just a year after the conferences in New York and Toronto which sparked the idea of building CSI in the first place. (This isn’t to say that there was a direct causal link between the conferences and the foundation of CSI—innovations are never born out of such simple connections. But there was something in the air, a shift in the gestalt, which helped CSI along and which CSI itself then helped strengthen in turn.) The founders had met their first major goal, and had members coming in to CSI right on the six-month schedule they had set themselves.

“They weren’t ready,” laughs Sandy, “but we moved in anyways. The phones didn’t work for a month on and off…there was a table saw outside the office—it was a quite a go.” Plastic sheets curtained off the Documentary Organization’s office, and sawdust was flying as Sandy settled into his new desk.
“Are we expected to run this place as well?”

JINI STOLK to TONYA SURMAN, asking about governance
he fledgling CSI needed organizations that were healthy enough to be responsible members—but after that it was creating an exciting mix of people that was important. Among the organizations that moved in were not just arts-based groups like the Documentary Organization, and environmental groups such as the Sustainability Network and the Conservation Council, but humanitarian organizations like the Stephen Lewis Foundation (which developed so successfully that it eventually outgrew CSI space and moved into its own office down the street).

Jini Stolk had just started the Creative Trust (a collaborative group whose membership includes dance, music, and theatre companies) when CSI was putting out feelers for members. “I had moved from my home to a desk in someone else’s office,” she says, when she heard about the new space. Pat Tobin put her in touch, and like Sandy at the Documentary Organization of Canada, Jini came in for an information session and a tour. The meeting, she remembers, was held in CSI itself, which at the time was “absolutely raw, unfinished warehouse space.” Tonya’s presentation was “about a vision for a space where people from the various nonprofit sectors, and social enterprises, might share space and common activities.”

Though this sounded great, says Jini, “I did have one question, which was: ‘I’m really busy running my own organization—are we expected to run this place as well?’” Worried about the “horrors of co-op or collective, which would have sent me over the edge of workload” Jini was essentially concerned that membership in CSI would add a whole new layer of responsibility rather than alleviate pressure. This was also something Tonya and the other founders had been discussing—just what the respective roles of CSI and the member organizations should be. “Tonya said that this immediately clicked with her,” Jini remembers of that meeting, “and that [CSI] would need to be professionally managed and facilitated in a friendly and enabling environment.”

Tonya still recalls this exchange as well, calling it “the defining moment of our governance.” CSI would not be a co-op but a community, in which members could join in as little or as much as they individually wanted.

CSI steered away from the co-op route in another respect: it was, from the outset, treated as and run like a customer service-oriented business. Not only were members free to partake in as little or as much of the social and organizational life of the Centre as they wished, they were freed from the routine daily duties that could hinder their efficiency and hamper their success. The Centre itself, rather than any members’ collective, assumed responsibility for basic office functions: it would take care of everything from copiers to cleaning, phone lines to parties. Yes, the members have to put away their own dishes and would be expected to take responsibility for their own messes, but the vast majority of mundane, time—and money—consuming details would be cleared off their desks. Crucially, this would allow CSI to afford its members the latitude and ability to enhance and program the space they shared, since members were freed of the need to expend energy on the space’s basic maintenance. Members would be encouraged to self-organize things like a weekly Salad Club or the occasional meditation session.

The Centre would allow its members to focus on leading healthier lives and give them back many of their own internal resources, which they could put where they belonged—towards achieving their social missions.
STAFF AND MEMBERS BROUGHT VITALITY TO THE SPACE EVERY SINGLE DAY.
Of course, running a high quality customer service operation requires service providers: CSI needed staff. Annie Hillis was the Centre’s very first staff member, hired to assist in the implementation of the space—everything from member recruitment to leasing photocopiers. Annie helped with all the nitty-gritty details that are essential to getting an organization up and running and took her leave when the Centre opened; she was replaced by another key early staff member, Audrey Vince. Audrey implemented organizational systems and helped the members troubleshoot any problems, creating a sense of order and security in the early days. And Audrey, a year or two later, was replaced by Maria Pazo, whom members remember for her vibrancy and energy—for epitomizing CSI’s sense of fun and community. “This place wasn’t run by the founders,” Tonya makes a point of saying, “it was run by the staff. They, along with the members, brought the vitality to the space every single day.”

Once the matters of organization and governance were settled, Jini, like Sandy, not only signed up her organization with CSI, she joined its board of directors. The founders wanted to hear from members and made a point of including member voices in the board. (These members joined the board as individuals rather than being nominated by their peers to officially represent the members as a whole.) Jini still smiles when remembering those first couple of months: “I loved having the new people move in— that was always really fun… They had to be very flexible. If you were too buttoned up, then this wasn’t the place for you.”

Though members began moving into CSI in June 2004, the space didn’t host its official launch party until October. Eli Malinsky, an acquaintance of Tonya’s husband Mark, came by to check out the new space and reconnect with Mark, who he hadn’t seen in a while. He remembers being immediately impressed: “I came in and I looked around and I said ‘This is it… It’s a smart idea, it’s a necessary idea, it’s an idea that should have been done a long time ago.’” He was pursuing his Masters degree at the time, and not in the market for office space of his own, but CSI stuck in his memory. In the spring of 2005, CSI, wanting to develop its community and the relationships between its members further, put out a job posting for a Program Manager. At this point, Tonya freely admits, CSI hadn’t yet figured out—beyond establishing the physical space—how to bring about the bigger-picture goals of collaboration and innovation. The Centre hadn’t, in other words, landed on quite the right strategy for actualizing that part of its vision (“the methodology and the practice were virtually non-existent,” says Tonya), and the hope was that a new staff member might help with this.

The organizations which joined CSI in 2004 were of similar staff sizes and at similar stages of development, but had different experiences to share. And so, says Jini, “it was just easy to talk to people and ask questions and start having lunch together.” The members started to take a familial interest in each other’s work, she goes on: “The mail would come and it would be just loaded with cheques for the Stephen Lewis Foundation…it was exciting.”
Eli heard about the opening and asked Tonya to have lunch to discuss the position. After they met, he laughs, he “insisted on getting the job, basically.” He got it, too, and started in September 2005. When Eli joined the staff CSI had what he describes as a very friendly work environment, “friendlier than most,” in fact, “but looking back it wasn’t hyper-dynamic and any formal collaboration was more or less nonexistent.” Eli’s mission was to try and boost communal engagement within CSI, and his first attempt was to offer some programming around topics in which the members expressed interest.

These, as it turns out, didn’t go all that well; though many of the members had any number of subjects about which they wanted to learn more, only a couple of them showed up for any particular event. Says Eli: “People want to learn what they want to learn when they need to learn it… Unless it’s really pressing for you you’re not going to try to accommodate it, so it’s mostly a matter of scheduling and juggling that amongst other priorities… They were interested and they were saying they were interested but it wasn’t as important as finishing the day-to-day tasks that they had to do.”

What all of these early programming experience pointed to was that, while CSI had fulfilled its first appointed goal — to create a shared space that would lighten the load of its member organizations — there was still a lot of room to grow, and lots of untapped potential in terms of developing networks to connect those members.

This prompted a seemingly small change of course, but one that would prove profoundly significant, towards what CSI calls “community animation.”
Animation, as opposed to programming, is all about enabling community rather than directly trying to create it.
Animation, as opposed to programming, is all about enabling community rather than directly trying to create it: it’s a philosophy of supporting and fostering an environment in which collaboration emerges naturally rather than intervening to try to instigate collaboration by sheer force of will.

In short, CSI shifted gears and decided to focus on creating the conditions for innovation — to provide the atmosphere and the infrastructure and the opportunity — and let member organizations take it from there.

Rather than working directly to form new relationships between members the Centre decided it would act as a facilitator, clearing logistical questions (like those pesky phones and fax machines and internet connections) off small organizations’ desks, thereby freeing them up to pursue their goals as creatively as possible.

Animation, explains Eli, “is the idea that we are curators of an environment—a physical environment, a social environment, a psychological environment—and that the magic is taking serious your responsibility to curate those three things.” The goal is to “spark instigation” among CSI members rather than for CSI to be that instigating force itself.

“Why write a plan when you should just open the doors?”

MARY ROWE, exuding entrepreneurial confidence
One of the catchwords at CSI is “learnings.” Like all sensible people, its staff and members knew from the beginning that there would be some unexpected realizations along the way, and also some false starts, and that paying attention to these and integrating the insights garnered along the way would be essential to CSI’s continual growth and development.

In fact, the learnings go back to before CSI even opened its doors. Mary Rowe, reflecting on CSI’s establishment, says: “I remember Jane Jacobs saying that you can accomplish anything if you don’t care who gets the credit…and I think that’s really critical here.” She, and many others involved in founding the Centre, are convinced that without this collaborative approach, in which the core group avoided ego-driven battles, didn’t pursue media attention, and didn’t compete for rank in CSI’s hierarchy, not only typifies CSI but is essential to its having gotten off the ground.

Mary herself is responsible for one of the most important learnings of all—one which is built into the very DNA of CSI. “She was the complexity guru,” Tonya emphasizes, “she was the one who planted the seeds of complexity theory from the get-go. She was amazing.”

She was also, by all accounts, the no-nonsense voice who could cut through organizational Gordian knots fearlessly. One of the key learnings at CSI, after all, is that traditional models for organizing work needn’t necessarily be followed: that collaboration rather than hierarchy, flow rather than regimentation, can be both more effective and provide a healthier working life. Tonya goes on: “[Mary’s the person who, when I walked in and I said, in one of our meetings, ‘should we do a business plan?’—thinking that that’s what a consultant does, a consultant writes a plan—said ‘well, who are you selling what to, and why in God’s name would you write a plan when you should just open the doors?’ She was right.”

The process of canvassing for and selecting members was also a very valuable learning opportunity. “First contact matters,” Tonya points out, “that was one of the most important learnings. How you define a culture happens in the first moment of contact.” Related to that is the significance of what might be called mythology: the way in which an organization figures in the minds of its founders, members, and the surrounding neighbourhood, communities, and city in which it is embedded. “The story of the beginning is the story you will tell for years to come,” Tonya goes on to say.

And once the doors were open, the learnings continued in earnest. Eli Malinsky, reflecting on CSI’s initial programming, says that several key insights emerged from those early efforts. One was that “given our small numbers, what we had to do was open up learning opportunities beyond the doors of CSI—we couldn’t expect fourteen members to pack the room.” This pointed to and reinforced CSI’s ambitions to both expand its membership and physical space, as well as to have some greater interaction between CSI members and the social mission sector at large. And the other, as we’ve already seen, is that you can’t force people into community, much less do so on a schedule. Providing avenues by which people can start talking to one another—be it via an informal and spontaneous lunch gathering or an internal listserv on which members can ask each other for advice or put out calls for bits of work that other member organizations might be able to do—is far more congenial, and far more effective, than relying on a steady stream of workshops to build community.
Jini Stolk highlights the significance of these informal means of communication, and the kind of learning-by-osmosis which started happening once the members had spent a bit of time together in the space: “For me personally and for our members it’s been I think a real benefit—an unexpected benefit—to be able to see my organization…in the context of the nonprofit world and of the social innovation and social change world. [Before moving in] it was relatively easy to avoid having a lot of interaction with people in other sectors—your sense of yourself in relation to the landscape at large was really hard to see. It’s helped me to verbalize and analyze things that I had not really thought much about before but just accepted.”

There have been, fortunately, relatively few challenges from CSI’s point of view in terms of managing its members. Eli says, gratefully, that the “CSI is blessed with the least imaginable amount of office politics. I don’t know how it happens. All things considered we spend relatively little of our time dealing with emotional and interpersonal problems. We deal with them, but given the nature of this it’s shocking how little.” The snags that do arise tend to be practical rather than cultural or interpersonal, and thus, while sometimes difficult, have clear solutions.

When CSI was founded there were, as there are in any new venture, lots of questions to which the founders had no easy answers. Perhaps the most significant, says Eric, was that “we didn’t know going into this was the level of interaction that could be expected from the members.”

As Eli points out, some of the earlier thoughts on how to make this happen didn’t entirely pan out, but over time a consensus emerged that laying the groundwork for collaboration, innovation, and systemic change was far more effective than trying to create it via direct intervention.

Creating a shared space to foster a community of social mission organizations was all well and good in theory, but what would it look like in practice?

One day, several years after the Centre opened, Tonya and Eric sat down to try and refine and condense this learning into a readily comprehensible form. “Tonya and I literally did this on a napkin in [local bistro] Peter Pan,” Eric recalls. On the napkin in question was a diagram in the shape of a pyramid. The CSI pyramid has three levels, with space at the base, community above it, and innovation at the peak. What this pyramid captured was that shared space is the essential foundation for building community, and community the foundation for creating innovation. The CSI is the pyramid as a whole: not aiming at innovation itself, but a holistic ecosystem in which innovation was supported and from which it naturally emerged.

Tonya and Eric called this CSI’s Theory of Change, and though seemingly simple, it represented the distillation of four years’ worth of experience, experimentation, successes and failures, and continual fine-tuning.
“We needed to become something more.”

ELI MALINSKY musing on the expansion
The Centre for Social Innovation has been a restless organization from the outset. Though it started in a relatively small space, some of the founders hoped from the beginning that it would soon outgrow those five or six thousand square feet, both literally and metaphorically, and take on new members and new projects. More importantly, it became clear that growth was a business imperative. Scaling up was necessary if CSI was to generate enough income to be self-sustaining: at full capacity the Centre was only bringing in about 60% of the revenue it needed. By 2006, says Eli, “we knew we wanted to expand. We had a waiting list of forty organizations, and we knew that in order for us to achieve our vision—which was being much more than shared space to fourteen organizations—we needed to become something more.” And, when the time came, the perfect opportunity presented itself.

CSI considered buying or leasing a building externally, and began looking at some candidate spaces. Almost immediately they ran up against the problem any relatively new venture does: though appealing, these real estate opportunities would be challenging for an organization that didn’t have much by way of an accumulated surplus. Right as they were wrestling with this question, says Eli, “we received word that the fourth floor [of the Robertson Building; CSI was located on the ground floor] had opened up, and it was just fortuitous magical timing.” Much bigger than the first floor space CSI already inhabited, taking over that new terrain gave CSI the opportunity to really come into its own. Once again, Urbanspace stepped up to underwrite the entire build-out to CSI’s specifications.

Eli, the detailed-oriented pragmatist of CSI family (Tonya, by contrast, is its fearless visionary), explains the expansion in the matter-of-fact terms anyone running an enterprise needs to respect: “I think it was clear that there was more market demand than we could satisfy, and so just like in a typical entrepreneurial business case you’ve got to be a complete idiot if the market’s asking you for something that’s going to be profitable and you’re not finding a way to respond.”

That wasn’t, however, the only reason to grow. The other “was a sense that whatever collaboration and dynamism we had with fourteen would be multiplied and magnified with more.”
The fourth floor space gave CSI the chance to offer not just more but more kinds of workspaces: in addition to full-sized offices there were spaces for permanent desks, including lockable storage, that were ideally suited for one- or two-person organizations. There was also—and this became key to the development of the atmosphere and culture of the fourth floor—an area set aside for a robust “Hot Desk” program, in which individuals can buy access to workspace for a set number of hours per month. And the heart of the fourth floor is the huge, open-concept reception, lounge, and kitchen area which hums with activity at pretty much any hour of the day. In fact, CSI’s Noise Policy describes it as “the place to talk, laugh, meet, connect, ramble, introduce, hula hoop, party and engage.” (Yes, there actually is a hula hoop hanging there, ready for anyone to use.)

The fourth floor opened in March 2007 and reached full occupancy within four months. It became clear soon after that CSI was not just expanding its physical footprint—it’s culture was evolving too. Because it contained organizations that were, as a rule, smaller and less established than those on the first floor, and because a significant percentage of the members were Hot Desk members who came and went according to the demands of their schedules, the fourth floor was from its beginning a much more fluid and fast-paced environment than the first. Founding first floor member Jini Stolk puts it this way: “I kind of tend to think of the fourth floor as the kids…there seems to be just a lot of wacky, slightly untamed energy up there —it just seemed to me to be a bit more like the Wild West.” Eli Malinsky echoes this sentiment, though in slightly different terms: “The fourth floor is a dynamic community of a wide variety of people and sectors coming in and out of the space in a very fluid way, with lots of programming and excitement, and lots of energy and public-ness about all of it.”

The way that many members describe the cultural differences between the two floors is that the first floor is like the grown-up and the fourth floor the teenager of the CSI community. “Teenagers” isn’t meant pejoratively here: it’s rather a way of capturing the fourth floor’s tendency to attract more of the brash experimentalists, the ones willing to throw something at the wall and see if it sticks. It’s louder and more rambunctious. The first floor, by contrast, is calmer, and its members more tightly-knit. The pace is slower and the atmosphere more placid. As Tonya puts it: “There’s a steadiness that exists down here [on the first floor]. Upstairs there’s a diversity and a vibrancy and a life, but a lack of stability. Way more emerging [organizations] upstairs, way more transition, way more noise—but life.”

The opening of the fourth floor ushered in another major shift: with so much more physical space, and so many more members, it became clear that one support staff person wasn’t going to be enough. The increased revenue brought in by the additional rental space was enough to cover the cost of some additional staff members, and gradually, over the next couple of years, the Centre hired several community animators. Each community animator had specific areas of activity (communications, administration, etc.), but all were responsible for enlivening and activating the space. It can sound kind of ephemeral, but it’s really rather simple when you put it in concrete terms—and, fortunately, one of CSI’s animators has done just that. Yumi Hotta has been an animator based on the fourth floor of CSI for quite some time now, and she recently described that experience in Rabble.ca, a Canadian online magazine.
Community can’t be reduced to a formula, but if it could it would look something like what she’s describing. Or perhaps like something Mike Bric describes when he explains why, after a life of choosing not to work in offices, he made an exception to take a position at CSI: “The main thing for me was being involved in a community of people who share similar values, who are inspiring and inspire me and inspire each other.”

A further sub-group within CSI was created in the summer of 2009, when the Centre opened a third space in the Robertson Building. The 3,000 square foot area (referred to by its location in the building, Suite 160) has nine offices, two meeting rooms, and five permanent desks. Plus, of course, the essential ingredients for a vital and happy group of members: a common space, an open-concept kitchen, lots of natural light, and an aesthetically appealing design.

The majority of the members in Suite 160 have relocated from CSI’s fourth floor, and are now occupying offices that are bigger and quieter than the spaces they had there. Colleen Diamond, Executive Assistant and Project Coordinator at CSI, was given the fun, and the responsibility, of managing the renovation of Suite 160 in preparation for its new members — a sign of just how much trust the founders now put in the Centre’s staff.

Interestingly, the opening of Suite 160 has helped change the dynamic of CSI as a whole, and recalibrated the relationship between the floors. “Now that we’ve got this new space on the first floor, there’s this new energy [in the original first floor space],” says Tonya gladly, a kind of redistribution of collective engagement across the spaces.
These projects, by nature, work under the surface.”

A familiar refrain from the STAFF and FOUNDERS
Though CSI is thought of first and foremost as a physical site, the Centre does not just create an environment in which organizations can flourish. It spends a considerable amount of its time, energy, and resources on trying to better understand the principles it exemplifies in the physical space—like collaboration, network-building, systems change—and putting this understanding to work in helping to get some new projects off the ground.

Since its very inception people have often described CSI as an incubator, but in its earliest days this wasn’t actually the case. After a little while though, the Centre decided to take this felt sense of nurturing to heart and begin experimenting, to see what an incubator for social change might really look like. Its first experiment was to support the work of green entrepreneur Chris Lowry by fostering the creation of Green Enterprise Toronto (GET), an initiative that helps strengthen the community of sustainably-minded independent businesses and customers in Toronto. Playing things by ear and learning as it went, CSI offered GET trusteeship, bookkeeping services, coaching, and management support. Once GET was up, running, and on stable footing, CSI repeated the success, working to help build projects like TechSoup Canada (which provides technological assistance to nonprofit organizations), Frontline Partners with Youth Network (which connects frontline youth workers so that they can support and learn from one another), and the Ontario Nonprofit Network (which facilitates the sharing of knowledge and development of coordinated policy initiatives amongst nonprofits in all sectors across Ontario).

In all cases, these projects met the Centre’s increasingly strict incubation criteria: they are based on networks, focussed on systems change, and embody an entrepreneurial, bootstrapping spirit. CSI’s distinctive kind of incubation is perhaps best thought of as something like venture capitalism for social change: the Centre tends to play a more active role than a typical incubator. It sits on projects’ advisory committees, provides management oversight, leverages its networks and relationships, and ultimately brings whatever it can to the table to ensure success. And it’s working.

The incubated projects have attracted constituencies, funding, and momentum, and CSI has already seen a number of these initiatives leave the nest—a sure sign of success.

The Centre also has a natural attraction to policy advocacy, due to its essentially systems-changing nature. Through Tonya’s consulting, CSI led a multi-stakeholder policy consultation on toxics and children’s health in 2007, one which ultimately helped produce a ban on Bisphenol A in baby bottles in Canada, triggering a market transformation. Meanwhile, CSI’s work on the Social Entrepreneurship Summits of 2007 and 2008, and on the Social Enterprise Council of Canada, has been instrumental in building a movement of practitioners and decision-makers who are beginning to create the conditions that will enable social enterprise to thrive.

Since one of the defining and distinctive characteristics of CSI is the way in which it fosters networks and collaboration, these subjects have been central to its research and theoretical work as well. The Centre has explored questions around the impact of networks sector. Many of us have invested time and resources in networks are increasingly prevalent in the social change

This book contains the results of our exploration. The Centre has explored questions around the impact of networks. The Centre for Social Innovation catalyzes new models and methods with world-changing potential. The Centre does not just create an environment in which organizations can flourish. It spends a considerable amount of its time, energy, and resources on trying to better understand the principles it exemplifies in the physical space—like collaboration, network-building, systems change—and putting this understanding to work in helping to get some new projects off the ground.

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to home, CSI co-hosted “Sharing for Social Change” in 2007, convening 230 practitioners to explore how collaboration might build more resilient social mission groups.

More recently, CSI has found itself playing a leadership role in convincing funders and policy makers to see the potential of social enterprise with its replication of the highly successful Enterprising Nonprofits (ENP) program. Based in Vancouver, the original ENP supports the ongoing growth and success of selected nonprofits by providing them with grants to help underwrite their business development. CSI brought this innovative micro-granting program to Toronto, and convened twelve funders to support social enterprise in Toronto. Crucially, ENP doesn’t just hand over a cheque and leave nonprofits to their own devices: it offers skills training, programming, and networking opportunities to help the nonprofits along the way, and screens applicants thoroughly to ensure they have the best possible chance of success.

Like its incubation activities, all these initiatives hold a few things in common: they all rely on networks, work across sectors, and demonstrate entrepreneurship in action.

These projects are at once integral to CSI and incredibly easy for the casual observer to miss. They are integral because they exemplify the spirit with which the Centre was created, and are instances of its social innovation principles in action. But if you don’t have reason to be directly engaged in one of them you might never know they were there.

CSI is continually refining its social innovation programming and clarifying its social innovation work. It has made the most of opportunities as they presented themselves, experimented, and tried things out along the way to separate the truly effective ideas, tools, projects, and methodologies from the ones that are merely good in theory. Because in the end, it’s the practice of social innovation that makes a difference — and it’s the practice of social innovation that CSI is dedicating itself to.

**ALL THESE INITIATIVES HOLD A FEW THINGS IN COMMON:** THEY ALL RELY ON NETWORKS, WORK ACROSS SECTORS, AND DEMONSTRATE ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN ACTION.
“Our calling is pulling us into the broader community.”

ELI MALINSKY sees a need for CSI to extend its reach.
Though CSI, like all healthy organizations, is continually honing its practices and fine-tuning its operations, it is also looking into the future. By its nature an organization that embraces uncertainty and emergence, there is never perfect clarity about what the coming years will bring. But CSI also knows when a framework or plan has landed. And recently, a new framework for understanding the Centre’s trajectory has landed.

“We’ve really always prided ourselves on this idea of local knowledge and the importance of understanding context—we’ve always rejected the idea of franchising,” explains Eli. CSI knows Toronto, and knows that the city isn’t satiated—there is a great deal of pent-up demand for shared workspace in the social mission sector. CSI has had a members’ waiting list for as long as it has existed, a waiting list that now numbers several dozen organizations.

What was at one time a vague intention became suddenly clear in December 2009 as CSI came face to face with an opportunity to purchase a building in the Annex neighbourhood of downtown Toronto. Having explored the market and rejected a few potential spaces, it became clear that 720 Bathurst Street had all of the ingredients for success: size, character, condition and location. The next part – the hard part – would be structuring and closing a deal on a super tight timeframe.

But once again, CSI proved its mettle. Within four short months, the Centre for Social Innovation secured a City of Toronto Loan guarantee, a mortgage for 75% of the building’s projected value, and $1.7 million in private debt financing. On May 18, 2010, the Centre for Social Innovation took possession of its newest project: the Centre for Social Innovation Annex.

The first aspect of growth for CSI is physical and locally rooted: the creation of more shared spaces for social innovation in Toronto.
And this segues nicely into the second area of growth CSI envisions: working internationally to advance the field of shared spaces to support social innovation. Of course, this very book is a step in that direction. CSI would like to support a global community of shared space practitioners, allowing each one to share its learnings, tools, knowledge, and strategy, and stimulating the overall development of the sector. A related goal is to network shared spaces, building connections between them that will eventually lead to the development of shared tools and the free flow of ideas and services that are changing the world.

The third major area of growth involves a deepening of the understanding and practice of social innovation. Resting on the knowledge that local, contextualized knowledge is essential, CSI will focus on social innovations that are possible and needed at home. “We are focusing on prototyping new methods and models that are achieving real impact in the world” says Tonya, “and we want to start right here at home.”

In Toronto, there is an increasing focus among urban leaders on civic entrepreneurship and on the ways in which citizens can actively co-create solutions to the myriad challenges facing our city. “This appetite for change speaks volumes about how we can work together to fix our future. People are hungry to be a part of the solution. We just need to find a way to leverage their passion.”

And so, CSI is shifting from developing the conditions for change to actually going out into the world and creating change using the tools of innovation and collaboration to tackle real-world problems. “How can we become more intentional about fostering social innovation in our communities?” asks Tonya. “What will it take to gener-
ate and apply the new ideas that will break the log-jam and achieve systems change? The dream is to build a series of innovation labs within CSI in which citizens and organizations can proactively collaborate, innovate and create models that will change the world.

“We’ll also be reflecting on and sharing the results of our experience globally,” explains Eli, with the aim of “creating an international dialogue around social innovation.” In partnership with colleagues around the world CSI will work toward a global platform that empowers local action through an international lens.

CSI is also beginning to release a series of publications that share its own models and methods with an international audience. After six years of working at a local level, it’s now time to reveal its learnings to the broader social innovation community; a coming out party for all of the Centre’s great work.

All in all, it’s a full slate for a growing organization that’s fostering social change... and having some fun along the way.
The common area on the fourth floor is crowded, and the crowd is feeling rambunctious. Cheering, shouting, whoops from every corner. And in the very centre of the room: a battle of wills. Two contestants are waging battle, each with a steely gleam of determination in their eyes.

THE STAKES? HONOUR, GLORY, AND BRAGGING RIGHTS FOR THE NEXT YEAR.
Welcome to CSI’s annual Cookies and Cocktails Smackdown. Every December, just before the winter holidays, CSI throws a fabulous bash. Along with providing the usual holiday party entertainment (grateful speeches, snacks, and the entertaining antics of mildly tipsy colleagues), this party offers a special treat: finely honed, carefully mixed cocktails, and an array of artfully crafted, home-baked cookies. It’s a friendly rivalry writ large, an annual tradition that CSI members wouldn’t dare miss.
Tonya explains:

For four years running now we have been holding the Cookies and Cocktails Smackdown. Now, the Cookies and Cocktails Smackdown is a holiday celebration which is an excuse to get everyone to bring out their best drinks and baked goods and compete with one another. We collaborate all year round and it’s time to just hammer each other and compete.

“WE COLLABORATE ALL YEAR ROUND AND IT’S TIME TO JUST HAMMER EACH OTHER AND COMPETE.”
It’s all in good fun, of course, and it gives CSI members and staff an opportunity to revel in each other’s successes.

MORE WHOOPS. A WINNER HAS BEEN DECLARED!

JUST ANOTHER DAY IN THE LIFE OF CSI.
This book was designed by The Movement, as part of our effort to work with people and groups who are doing better. Working with social entrepreneurs and innovators, we use the power of design thinking & doing to give form to complex ideas. We’re a network of committed people ready to tackle complex problems, and a studio dedicated to delivering results. We work openly with groups, on challenges that matter.

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