

Publication



Shumka Centre for
Creative Entrepreneurship

Co-ops By and For Artists and Designers



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Andrea Harris,
Executive Director, British Columbia Co-operative Association

Do you shop at MEC? Are you part of a credit union? If so, you're part of a co-op! Often times people are members of co-ops without even knowing it. **What is a co-op exactly?**

A co-op is a model for organizing and solving problems collectively. It is a collectively owned enterprise that is democratically controlled by the people who benefit the most from it otherwise known as the members. The co-op business model can be applied in almost any industry or sector, for different purposes.

This model is used in multiple different ways across the globe, from outdoor gear, to financial services, housing, farming, and art — any collaborative problem you might have can usually be addressed through a co-op framework.

The Co-operative Principles

A distinguishing feature of the co-operatives from other business models is that co-ops operate based on an internationally developed set of principles. While the co-op structure is the same around the world, there is variation within the co-op framework, from how it translates to different organizations to how the business or organization is run.

Below are the 7 guidelines established through the Statement on Co-Operative Identity in 1995 by the [General Assembly of the International Co-operative Alliance](#):

1. Voluntary and open membership.

Co-ops are formed through people voluntarily coming together with a common need, and are open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political, or religious discrimination.

2. Democratic member control.

Co-operatives are democratic organizations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making

decisions. Co-operative members have equal voting rights based on a one member, one vote system.

Note: Co-ops are not government forms of organizations and are not mandated by a government system. Government co-ops are not co-ops!

3. Member economic participation.

Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their co-operative. At least part of that capital is usually the common property of the co-operative. They usually receive limited compensation, if any, on capital subscribed as a condition of membership. Members allocate surpluses for any or all of the following purposes: developing the co-operative, possibly by setting up reserves, part of which at least would be indivisible; benefiting members in proportion to their transactions with the co-operative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.

The Co-operative Principles

4. Autonomy and independence.

Co-operatives are autonomous, self-help organizations controlled by their members. If they enter into agreements with other organizations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their co-operative autonomy.

Note: This is especially key in other countries without democratic governments.

5. Education, training and information.

Co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives. They also strive to inform the general public – particularly young people and opinion leaders – about the nature and benefits of co-operation.

6. Co-operatives among co-operatives.

Co-operatives serve their members and strengthen the co-operative movement by working in solidarity with other co-ops and national, regional, and international co-operative organizations.

7. Concern for community.

Co-operatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members.

Co-operatives in BC are incorporated under the BC Co-operative Association Act.

Democratic member control is a mandatory defining trait of co-operatives required by the Co-operative Association Act in BC.

The Co-operative Difference

1. Co-ops serve a different purpose.

Compared to other business enterprises, co-ops primarily focus on their community and meeting the community's needs when generating profit.

2. Co-ops have a different set of values.

Co-ops are based on self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity. These values are not necessarily much different from most non-profit organizations.

3. Co-ops have a different governance structure.

Unlike corporations, co-ops have members instead of shareholders. The hierarchical governance structure of corporations, where shareholders who can afford to buy more company stakes get to make decisions, co-operatives are democratically controlled businesses. Each co-op member gets one vote no matter how much money they have in the business. Control is relinquished in order to share risks.

4. Co-ops have a different allocation of profit.

Co-op members decide on how to distribute any surplus the organization makes. They can choose to use it to build the enterprise, improve service to its members or distribute the profit amongst members.

Pros and Cons of Art and Design Co-ops

Pros

- Economies of scale: bulk buying, sharing costs and expenses, joint branding, shared equipment
- Community based
- Supportive network of fellow artists
- Collective marketing
- Opportunity to learn business skills
- Shared space, can share costs of hiring an accountant/insurance etc.

Cons

- Can be difficult to access debt capital/ outside investments
- Not well known, so can be difficult to access professional services from people who understand co-ops (e.g., accountants, lawyers)
- Requires cooperation and compromise — not well suited to people who want to work alone

Co-ops + Resources in BC

BC Co-op Association

The BC Co-op Association, or BCCA, represents co-ops across the province—700 in BC! It is a member services organization that helps co-ops address their needs and obstacles through a unified platform. The association has created numerous jobs, with half of them focusing on housing, while the other half consists of a mixture of diverse issues. BCCA represents co-ops to the government and attempts to get the word out about the co-op model to the public, with the belief that co-ops are a positive component to society.

BCCA can help in the development of your own co-op through assistance over the phone or through various online resources, in-person workshops and events:

Cooperate Now is a 4-day intensive co-op bootcamp course on business education created in collaboration with Vancity and BC co-ops and credit unions. It includes interactive sessions that allow students to connect and collaborate with BC co-op leaders from organizations such as BCCA, Vancity Credit Union, MEC, and more. Participants create projects and business plans while learning about the advantages and challenges of numerous co-op models.

Co-op Cafe gatherings provide attendees the opportunity to communicate with the co-op community about current affairs and ideas through workshops.

Examples of Art and Design Co-ops

110 Arts Co-operative

Consisting of affordable shared space in downtown Vancouver, with shared administration for different non-profit societies, 110 Arts Co-operative was formed to help emerging artists and organizations with access to centrally located, professionally equipped spaces at a low cost. 4 organizations—DOXA, Music on Main, PuSh International Performing Arts Festival, and Touchstone Theatre came together to form this co-op.

Circle Craft

Circle Craft is organized as a producer co-op dedicated to providing opportunities for craftspeople to connect with the community. They are self-sustaining and supported by the commission on sales and participation fees.

CORE Artist Live/Work Co-op

Members of this housing co-op are artists that live and work on location. Their shared problem is affordable housing—creating a co-op was a way for them to bring in collective bargaining power to get access to housing development.

Meduse

10 different arts organizations negotiated with the City of Quebec municipal government to acquire shared working and presentation space, administration, and equipment. They became a hub for community and revitalization and a space where the public could connect with artists.

Nanaimo Pottery Co-operative

The Nanaimo Pottery Co-operative is an example of a super small co-op. Members do not share equipment or work space, but instead come together to share and discuss ideas and projects. They hold 2 shows a year.

Neighbour Lab

Neighbour Lab is also a worker co-op that is focused on building resilient communities and neighbourhoods through creativity, design and dialogue.

Examples of Art and Design Co-ops

Stocksy

Stocksy is a platform co-op with multiple stakeholders; this includes the photographers and videographers who use the service as well as the staff who work for the company. Their model is to return as much as the revenue possible from the stock photography back to the artists. This contrasts from Getty Images, which is owned by shareholders who may not even be photographers—their motive is often fueled by profit.

Because artists own and control the business, Stocksy has a different ethos around what kind of images they sell; they do not just create things that they think people will buy. They believe in creative integrity, fair profit sharing and co-ownership, with every voice being heard. Members around the globe pay based on how much they use the site.

Terminal City Glass Co-op

Functioning as a non-profit community service co-op, their mandate is to provide access to high quality glass making equipment and resources for emerging and established artists, as well as the public. They also provide shared studio and storage space.

VALU Co-op

The Vancouver Artists Labour Union Cooperative (VALU CO-OP) is a unionized workers cooperative with a mission to transform labour practices within the arts and cultural sector for more equitable, community-oriented, and supportive work environments that meet artists needs.

Examples of Art and Design Co-ops

Vancouver Co-op Radio

The Vancouver Co-op Radio is a non-profit community radio station and podcast recording studio for those underrepresented in mainstream media. Their programming presents the work of local artists, especially those not yet established or those dealing with contemporary social issues. They present a forum for artists to showcase their work and promote local shows and performances.

Wood Shop Workers Co-op

The Wood Shop Workers Co-op is a for-profit workers co-op, that aims to create meaningful employment for their workers with living wage standards. 5 individuals came together with the common goal of building furniture from recycled wood, without the vulnerability of going into business alone. The co-op is not a place for shared equipment and is not open to the public—instead, it functions as a furniture company.

Appendix

This document is based on the Co-ops by and for Artists talk delivered by **Andrea Harris**, Executive Director, BC Co-operative Association in Fall 2019. These resources are produced by the Shumka Centre for Creative Entrepreneurship at Emily Carr University of Art + Design with the generous support of the Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills & Training.

Andrea Harris is passionate in her belief that businesses have a key role to play in creating a more socially just and environmentally sustainable future. Following her passion for marrying business with social change, Andrea joined the British Columbia Co-operative Association as their Executive Director in May on secondment from Vancouver City Savings Credit Union (Vancity). She is looking forward to working with the BCCA team for the next year to support a stronger, values-based co-operative economy. At Vancity, she held several senior leadership roles, most recently as Director, Member and Community Insights where she led a team of researchers, analysts, and data scientists to uncover insights to drive growth, continual improvement and innovation. Previously she led the Sustainability Group in implementing strategies and programs to create positive change in community, focusing on social enterprise, poverty alleviation, and climate change. Her accountabilities also included the development of metrics and

systems to measure the impact from Vancity's lending and community initiatives. Prior to joining Vancity, Andrea's previous positions included managing Mountain Equipment Co-op's community programs and strategic partnerships, consulting and developing agricultural co-operatives across Canada, and conducting academic research on new models of co-operative enterprise for the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives. Andrea holds a Masters of Science degree in Applied (Agricultural) Economics from the University of British Columbia and a Bachelor of Arts in Economics and Business from the University of Calgary.

The Shumka Centre for Creative Entrepreneurship launched in 2018 to create programs and partnerships that help artists and designers realize their ideas in the world. The Centre is a place where creative practitioners can find the community, knowledge, and resources they need to launch, fund, and organize projects across the spectrum of contemporary art and design activities- products, projects, curatorial initiatives, platforms, companies, organizations, and more. We believe that tactical support specifically designed for the needs of artists and designers is the first step in achieving a systemic change to empower creative people. The Centre is operated by Living Labs.



The Shumka Centre for Creative Entrepreneurship
Emily Carr University of Art + Design

shumka@ecuad.ca
[@shumkacentre](https://www.instagram.com/shumkacentre)

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