

# Applying Design Thinking for Business Model Innovation for a Nonprofit Organization – Case Study: Art á la Carte

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## Abstract

The challenges facing many small nonprofit organizations are increasing at a greater rate than the internal capacities of many within this sector are able to address effectively. This situation has small nonprofits questioning their sustainability and ability to deliver their services in the long term. Often these small nonprofit organizations are working within a business model and communications paradigm that has remained unchanged for decades and one which is proving no longer effective in attracting awareness, engagement, and support. Many of these organizations are facing a critical failure requiring significant business model innovation to achieve both their short-, mid- and long-term goals. Design thinking is an avenue for nonprofits to achieve business model innovation by developing new, unique concepts supporting an organization's viability and the processes for bringing those concepts to fruition. This case study outlines the design thinking process applied to business model innovation for a small, 22-year old, nonprofit approaching critical business failure.

*Keywords: Design Thinking, Business Model Innovation, Nonprofit Sector, Patient Services, Art Therapy*

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## The Not-for-Profit and Voluntary Sector In Canada

The nonprofit and voluntary sector accounts for a considerable part of the economy in many countries around the world, contributing a sizable portion of gross domestic product (GDP)

(Jaskyte, 2015). Because of its long tradition of relying on nonprofit and volunteer organizations to address the needs and interests of its population, Canada has one of the largest and most vibrant nonprofit and voluntary sectors in the world (Hall, Barr, Easwaramoorthy, Wojciech Sokolowski, & Salamon, 2005). In Canada, the nonprofit and voluntary sector accounts for 6.8 percent of the GDP and when the value of volunteer work is incorporated, contributes 8.5 percent of the GDP. When organizations that are hospitals, universities, and colleges are excluded, the remaining organizations contribute 4.0 percent of Canada's GDP (Hall et al., 2005). The nonprofit voluntary sector in Canada employs almost as many full-time equivalent workers as all branches of manufacturing in the country (Hall et al., 2005). Despite the significant role that the nonprofit and voluntary sector plays in Canadian life, it faces serious challenges affecting its long-term sustainability.

Michael Hall et al, in *The Capacity to Serve: A Qualitative Study of the Challenges Facing Canada's Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations* (2003), identified a number of issues facing this sector, including problems planning for the future, recruitment of volunteers and board members, and obtaining funding from governments and private philanthropic interests. Those organizations that rely on external funding from governments, corporations and foundations report serious problems (Hall, et al., 2003). Insufficient and inappropriate funding is a significant constraint for many organizations in the pursuit of their missions (Scott & Pike, *Funding Matters ... For Our Communities: Changes and Opportunities for Funding Innovation in Canada's Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector*, 2005). In addition, many organizations do not have sufficient financial resources to meet the training and professional development needs of the sector (HR Council for the Nonprofit Sector, 2011). External pressures such as government program reviews, growth of at-risk populations, economic downturns and changes to funding models also present significant challenges to this sector (HR Council for the Nonprofit Sector, 2011). In terms of funding models, the trend toward project funding over core funding has had a considerable impact on the nonprofit and voluntary sector.

This sector's primary sources of revenue are charitable donations, government funding and earned income. Government and charitable funding is declining and pressure towards earned income is increasing. However, in Canada, charitable regulations prevent many formal charities from earning income (Eakin & Graham, 2009). Most organizations need to rely on more than one revenue stream. The sector profile is one that is struggling to obtain financing from all of these sources (Eakin & Graham, 2009). The challenges of needing external funding from a range of funders was identified as a pressing issue for community-based organizations across the country. Many of these organizations are at a financial crossroads. With traditional revenue sources declining, charities are increasingly looking at alternative ways to finance their nonprofit activities through business income both in areas directly related to their charitable missions, and in areas that are not (Emmett & Emmett, 2015). For example, earned income was the most important revenue stream for nonprofits in Alberta. Many of these groups express concern that insufficient and inappropriate funding presents a significant constraint for these organizations in fulfilling their missions. (Scott & Pike, *Funding Matters ... For our Communities: Challenges and Opportunities for Funding Innovation in Canada's Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector*, 2005).

Nonprofit and volunteer organizations identify human resources both as one of their greatest strengths as well as an area that presents challenges (Hall, et al., 2003). The most frequently mentioned staff-related problem was insufficient funding to hire enough staff, especially those with specialized skills. The chronic understaffing that faces many organizations in this sector leads to a host of issues such as employee burnout, high rates of staff turnover, and, staff undertaking tasks for which they feel poorly qualified. This issue is compounded by changes in the availability and nature of volunteers. Many organizations are faced with shrinking volunteer pools as well as volunteers who are increasingly unwilling to take on leadership or administrative roles or making a long-term commitment to the organization. The HR Council for the Nonprofit Sector identifies a significant level of stress in the sector, particularly among small and mid-sized organizations (HR Council for the Nonprofit Sector, 2011).

Another significant human resource issue for the nonprofit and volunteer sector is their capacity to undertake strategic planning and development initiatives. Many of these organizations feel forced to concentrate on immediate service and programming issues to the exclusion of organizational management and planning. (Hall et al, 2005). In 2011, the HR Council for the Nonprofit Sector found that the majority of organizations were not spending or did not have access to sufficient financial resources to meet the training and professional development needs of the sector.

These organizations need to explore creative ways to lower administrative costs and to build organizational capacity in financial management, fund development as well as in operations and strategic planning. Innovation is critical for the nonprofit and voluntary sector to respond to these changing environmental conditions (Jaskyte, 2015). In 2016, Canada's volatile economy has required nonprofit and volunteer organizations to make numerous adaptations including increased reliance on volunteer staff, reduced professional development budgets and increased fundraising efforts. Many organizations have reported increased demands on their programs and services, particularly social service organizations in Alberta (Cave, 2016). Significant business model innovation is required in this sector to adapt to the many resource challenges it faces. Design thinking can provide an effective methodology to achieve meaningful change and innovation.

Design thinking is a foundational reframing process that has a broader vantage point and a more holistic approach than traditional business planning processes. A design thinking mindset is not problem-focused but solution- and action-focused geared toward creating a preferred future. In this context, design thinking provides a platform for innovation that is critical for nonprofit and volunteer organizations' effective response to changing environmental conditions.

### **Case Study: Art à la Carte**

Design thinking is not graphic design, web design, product design or other tactical activities. Design thinking uses abductive reasoning as a third way of reasoning to be added to deduction and induction. A problem-solving cycle is formed, with abduction used for the generation of ideas and solutions followed by deductive reasoning for the predicting of consequences of those ideas, and then to inductive reasoning for the testing and generalization

of proposed solutions. This problem-solving cycle generates data that is then fed back into the abductive reasoning mode for the process to begin again (Johansson-Skoldberg, Woodlilla, & Mehves, 2013). The design thinking process is a holistic cross-disciplinary approach that leverages systems thinking to complex human-centered problem solving (De Guerre, Séguin, Pace, & Burke, 2013). This case study examines the benefits of applying design thinking methodologies (Figure 1) to achieve business model innovation in the context of a small nonprofit organization. The concepts of “abductive reasoning”, “systems thinking” and “human-centered problem solving” play a major role in this case study.

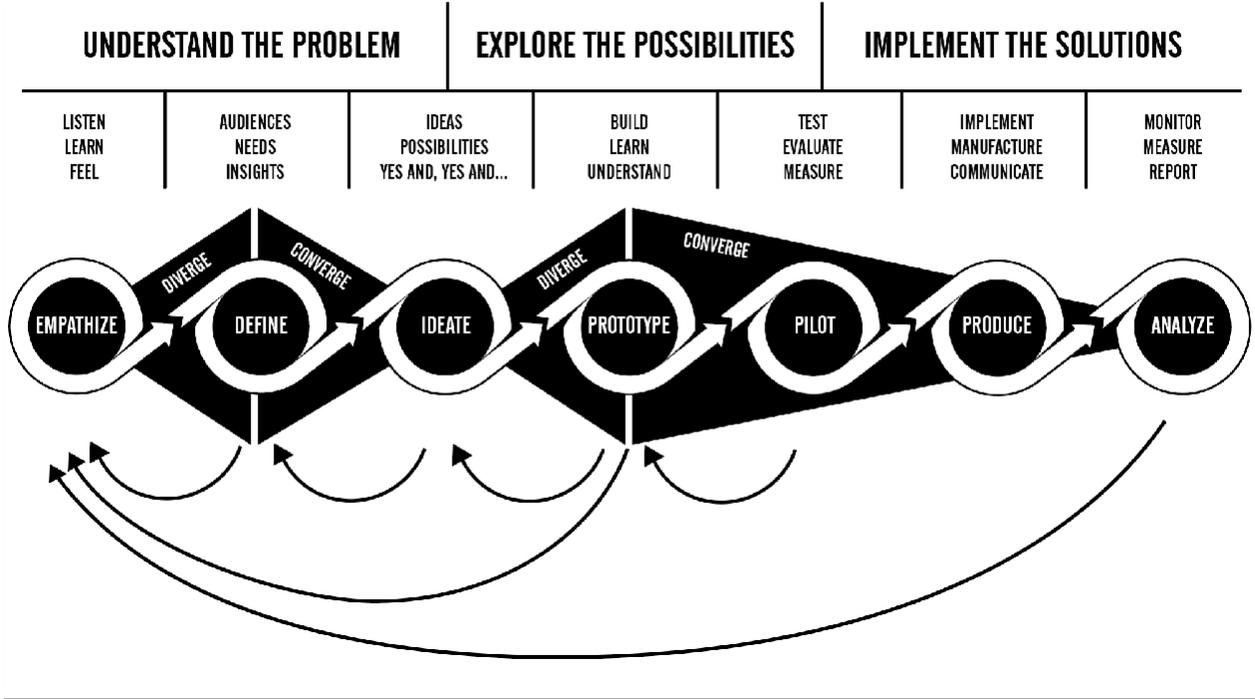


Figure 1: DAIS Design Thinking Model

**DAIS Centre for Social Innovation**

DAIS Centre for Social Innovation at the Alberta College of Art and Design is a catalyst for collaborative problem solving toward the betterment of society (Figure 2). DAIS offers nonprofit organizations, government and businesses a transformational opportunity to develop solutions using design thinking as a process for problem solving. The Centre works with organizations whose current processes or efforts are not enabling those organizations to achieve their missions and reach their goals. DAIS exists to challenge, reframe, and collaboratively develop solutions through a commitment to design for good. Design thinking is the key differentiator of the DAIS Centre for Social Innovation with respect to other consulting and strategic planning processes.



Figure 2: DAIS logo

### Art á la Carte

In 2016, Art á la Carte (AALC) was a nonprofit organization in crisis (Figure 3). Art á la Carte is a Calgary, Alberta based, nonprofit organization founded in 1994 that provides artwork and art activities for critical care patients and patients waiting for treatment at Calgary hospitals and healthcare facilities. The organization has one paid staff member – the Executive Director – Debbie Baylin and 35 bedside volunteers as well as 55 event volunteers who collectively have delivered in excess of 63,000 hours of volunteer service. Since its inception Art á la Carte has served over 400,000 patients through their activities in two hospitals and three hospices in Calgary. The organization depends entirely on contributions from individuals, businesses, and charitable foundations to sustain its programs and operations. Art á la Carte does not receive any government funding for either its programs or operations.



Figure 3: Art á la Carte logo

Art á la Carte has three primary programs – the Bedside Program, SkyCeilings™, and Create While You Wait™. The Bedside Program provides artwork for the hospital and hospice rooms of critical care patients. Patients are offered an assortment of artworks and are encouraged to share their life stories as they select images that speak to them. The selected images are installed in the hospital room and help transform the space into one which is more comforting. In an atmosphere where the patient often feels out of control, art can serve as a therapeutic and healing tool, reducing stress and loneliness (Rollins, Sonke, Cohen, Boles, & Li, 2009). Art in the healthcare environment can help patients focus on a life perspective that is broader than their disease (Monti, et al., 2006).

Art á la Carte's SkyCeilings™ are virtual skylights created from photographic reproductions on acrylic panels that convey the color, scale and perspective of actual sky and daylight. The SkyCeilings™ are installed in select treatment areas of the Tom Baker Cancer Centre and the Foothills Hospital in Calgary, Alberta. Integrating art into healthcare settings has a positive impact on patient health outcomes by aiding patients in their physical, mental and emotional recovery, including relieving anxiety and decreasing the perception of pain (Rollins et al., 2009).

Create While you Wait™ began as an opportunity for patients waiting for medical appointments and treatments to participate in individualized creative art activities to relieve stress and boredom. Art á la Carte's trained volunteers now offer the program on a medical care unit where patients are recovering from brain injuries and strokes. This type of arts programming can provide a more normative environment and offers an opportunity for creativity and self-expression that allows patients to healthfully integrate their experiences and emotions. This art therapy process provides patients an avenue for communication and expression as well as enhancing their quality of life and helping the patient move from a distressed mood to a more quiet and reassured state of mind (Gabriel, Bromberg, Wlaka, Kornblith, & Luzzatto, 2001).

Despite the significant and recognized services Art á la Carte has provided for over 22 years, the organization faces a financial crisis as its primary revenue streams – charitable donations and grants – are not meeting resource needs. The economic downturn that began in Alberta in 2014 is among the worst on record, and charitable giving in Canada in 2016 was at a 10-year low, resulting in fewer and smaller donations and more competition for grants (Cave, 2016). Many Alberta nonprofits are struggling to balance high demand for services with a low supply of donations to support their programs. After a series of unsuccessful grant applications in 2016, Art á la Carte approached the DAIS Centre for Social Innovation to examine their business model and value proposition.

## **Research Methods**

Art á la Carte was approaching critical business failure by the end of December 2016. The efforts of the organization to secure grant funding were unsuccessful, a number of key donors did not support the organization financially that year, and the signature fundraising event was

cancelled due to poor uptake. The founder and executive director of the organization contacted the DAIS Centre for Social Innovation for advice on business model innovation. In June 2016 DAIS began a design thinking process with Art á la Carte to develop a series of recommendations and strategies that could improve their business model, and that the organization could implement with their limited resources.

The discovery process began with a “coffee talk” with the Executive director of Art á la Carte, Debbie Baylin. During this session Baylin briefly outlined the vision, business model, and history of the organization, the key challenges and barriers to the continued success of AALC, and her hopes for the future. Cressman and Miyauchi of the DAIS Centre for Social Innovation then provided an orientation to the services of the Centre and developed a process specific to the needs of AALC that the client felt comfortable working with. It is important to note that not one size fits all in this approach and working collaboratively with the client is critical in defining goals and a way forward.

The discovery session helped synthesize our understanding of Art á la Carte and its challenges. We projected back to the client what we heard to ensure both parties had a shared understanding of the key issues. This was followed by a review of Art á la Carte’s company documents and marketing materials, which prompted a frank discussion with the Executive Director around the realities of the marketplace, challenges to success as well as realistic short-, mid- and long-term plans. A working session with AALC was scheduled two weeks later.

In the interim, DAIS conducted an environmental scan including a review of existing and potential competitors in the space, which revealed increasing competition for Art á la Carte in the publically funded sector, particularly with respect to hospital foundations. A detailed digital environment scan was also conducted in order to determine how AALC was connecting with potential audiences through their digital, web, and social media presence. This background research allowed DAIS to conduct a gap analysis to determine what was missing from AALC current operations, what was not adding value, and what opportunities might exist with volunteers and AALC existing and potential clients. Insights gained from the current state of AALC led to new perceptions of what the organization could achieve. The initial scan included an online share of voice analysis, keyword analysis, search performance analysis as well as a website content and perception audit.

The first working session was comprised of a “Power of Story” presentation followed by a “Why Workshop”. The “Power of Story” presentation outlined what story can accomplish, as well as how art and images provide a means for people to connect on different levels. Particular emphasis in the presentation was placed on how art and images enable transformation, connection, motivation and acceptance. This had strong resonance in terms of the primary client base of Art á la Carte. Research has shown that in the hospital atmosphere patients often feel out of control and the arts can serve as a therapeutic and healing tool reducing stress and loneliness and providing opportunities for self-expression (Rollins et al., 2009).

The “Why Workshop” is based on the idea that if you do not understand why you do what you do, the “what” and “how” of what you do will not be effective. “Why” is core to brand, and critical in understanding an organization’s value proposition(s). “Why” is an essential part of connecting with concepts, messages, services etc. on an emotional and human-centered level. “Why” is the primary enabler of belief creation and behavior change and can provide deep and lasting connections between a brand and its audience. The “Why Workshop” is designed to be a highly collaborative and interactive discovery process that pushes participants to consider what is at the heart of why they do what they do. This act of contextualization is essential given that it is necessary to understand a small universe of contexts to achieve a deep understanding (Wylant, 2016). The outcome of the “Why Workshop” was a foundational document intended to focus and guide subsequent working sessions and to evaluate potential solutions.

In the second working session a review of the findings of the “Why Workshop” was conducted to reinforce and strengthen Art á la Carte’s understanding of the “whys” that have value and strength, to guide decision-making for the organization. This was followed by a facilitated and collaborative business model and value proposition review and analysis (Figure 4). Using the Strategyzer™ Business Model Canvas and Value Proposition Canvas to focus the discussion, AALC was asked to identify the following:

- What products and services are offered to whom?
- How value is created?
- Who benefits and who contributes?
- What are the costs and resources?
- What are the sources of revenue?
- What are the pains and what are the gains?

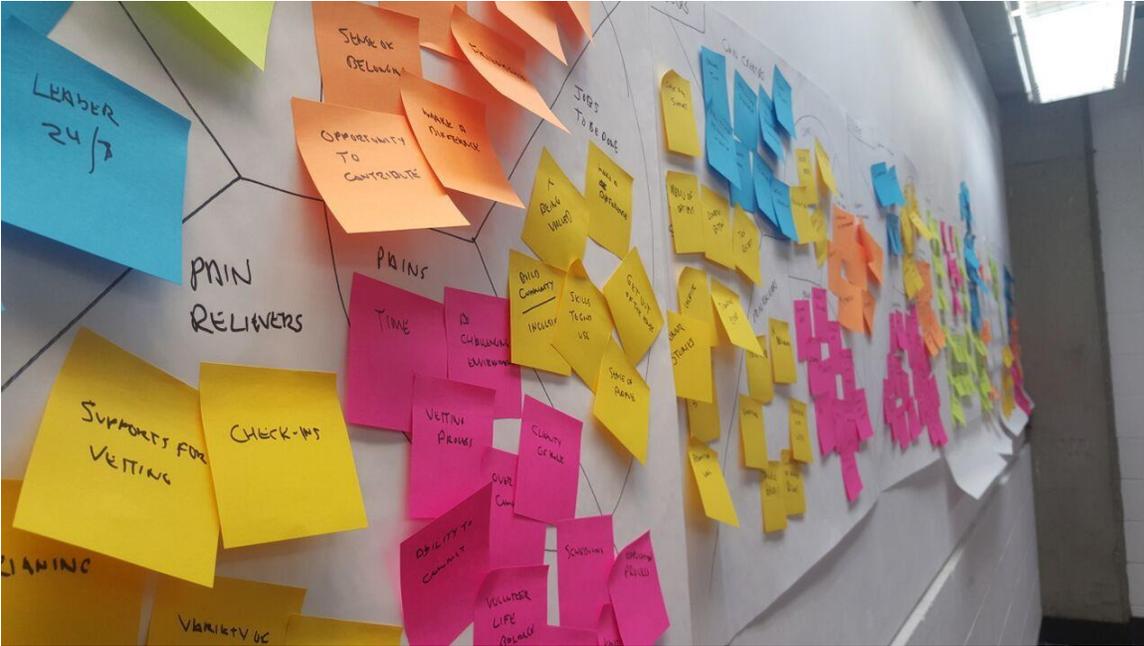


Figure 4: Business Model and Value Proposition Review Process

The business model review was completed for AALC, which identified its three primary audiences – patients, donors, and AALC staff/volunteers. A value proposition review was conducted for the three primary audiences to provide a better understanding of how AALC products and services answer specific patient, donor or staff needs. This exercise provides valuable information regarding the AALC’s gain creators and pain relievers of their products and services, mapped against the gains and pains of the audience segments and the audience needs that AALC’s products and services address.

Once all of the content of the Why workshop and the business model review were analyzed DAIS met again with Art á la Carte for a third working session to provide insights gained from the prior sessions and to conduct a “Possibilities Workshop”.

This workshop was a facilitated brainstorming session to identify new avenues of revenue generation, support, resources and services, so that AALC could develop a more sustainable and practical business model for the organization while keeping the needs of the users at the center of the discussion. The application of a human-centered design process incorporates “people centricity” in all aspects of transformational design (Das, 2016). This human-centered, creative, iterative, and practical approach enables finding the best ideas and ultimate solutions (Brown, 2008). Through the course of the “Possibilities Workshop” a number of new services were identified as well as how existing services could be transformed.

## Discussion

The findings derived from the discovery and working sessions were summarized in a presentation for the Board of Art á la Carte that highlighted the ramifications of this new

thinking and new processes that could take AALC to a new level. The presentation of the business modeling work and its potential to transform the organization garnered unanimous support from Board members who agreed that the new directions proposed should be pursued in order to help AALC become sustainable as well as to enable growth of the organization.

When the DAIS Centre for Social Innovation was first engaged by Art á la Carte, the stated focus of the Founder and Executive Director, Debbie Baylin was the art that was provided for critical care patients, and the challenges and limitations of the artwork itself in the controlled and sterile environments of hospitals and healthcare facilities. The Executive Director's attention was locked within a very limited AALC and patient interaction.

As a result of our work with Art á la Carte, we were able to help the Executive Director to step back from her day-to-day business challenges and to focus on what might be possible. As a result, we were able to move her to consider shifting from an arts model to a service model, a shift that would enable AALC to pursue additional avenues of business and revenue generation through a range of services and to diversify the audiences that would find value in the AALC concept. Our findings also supported a move from focusing solely on critical care to embracing other areas of care including seniors' facilities, at risk youth centers, and other medical facilities and care providers. In addition, we identified an opportunity in expanding the range of artwork provided for patients to fine art photography.

To augment what is a limited selection of artwork currently available in the Art á la Carte collection we identified the benefits to AALC of supporting artists and photographers through a call for artists and photographers to support AALC in turn. With many artists and photographers wanting exposure and the chance to give back to their community, we recommended that AALC consider expanded engagement with the Calgary creative community to secure artwork. In addition, we recommended that AALC engage area businesses to provide in-kind or financial contributions to making the selection and production of framed work possible.

## **Conclusion**

Art á la Carte is at a pivotal point in its history. The organization is on the edge of either being a viable not-for-profit or closing all together. The design thinking process employed with this organization used design sensibility and methods to match the organization's needs with what is technologically feasible and what a viable business strategy could convert into customer value and market opportunity (Brown, 2008). The design thinking process has helped AALC to determine the viability and limitations of their current model in the short term, and provided options for true business model innovation and new streams of business and engagement opportunities. The key findings were presented to the AALC board in December 2016 and received unanimous buy-in. At its core, Art á la Carte is art therapy and art for good. Art connects, it conjures memories and it helps patients make sense of difficult realities (Ettun, Schultz, & Bar- Sela, 2014). It provides avenues for communication and expression, and it enhances quality of life (Wood, Molassiotis, & Payne, 2011).

Having an opportunity to engage collaboratively with highly qualified, design-minded professionals is invaluable to a grassroots organization such as Art à la Carte. We are honoured and excited to meld innovation and design thinking into a model of success for both organizations. (Debbie Baylin, Executive Director, Art à la Carte)

At this point AALC has made the shift from an arts focused organization to one that emphasizes a patient service model, which has opened additional funding opportunities and resulted in a “Care” grant from the CREB foundation. In addition, the first phase of SEO optimization with a patient service model has been completed and has increased traffic to AALC’s website. A brand-visioning workshop, based on the new service model will be conducted in the next month to enhance the organization’s engagement strategies. DAIS is in the process of identifying additional nonprofits to further examine the potential benefits of applying design thinking to business model innovation and evolution.

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## Author Biography

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Alison Miyauchi is the Vice President, Strategic Enrollment Management at Watkins College of Art. Prior to Watkins Alison was the Acting Vice President, Research and Academic Affairs at the Alberta College of Art and Design in Calgary, Alberta. Alison is the co-founder of the DAISCentre for Social Innovation. She is a graduate of Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania and a former Research Fellow of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Alison is a practicing artist, designer and educator. Her research interests include curriculum design, graphic design and design education. Alison has lived and worked in Milan, Italy; Rome, Italy; Glasgow, Scotland, and London, England. She returned to Canada in 1992. Alison Miyauchi was a Faculty member of the Visual Communications Design program at the Alberta College of Art from 1993 to 2012 and was founding Chair of the School of Communication Design.

## Scott Cressman

Scott Cressman is the Chair of the School of Communication Design at the Alberta College of Art and Design in Calgary, Alberta. He is a veteran of Canadian design, marketing, communications and digital industries with over 26 years of experience. Scott is also Director of Integrated Strategy with V Strategies and Strategic Advisor to Alberta Health Services. Scott's industry experience spans many types of organization including Adobe, Getty Images, WestJet, Agrium, Coca-Cola, Asia Pacific, Kraft Foods, Apple, HP, Microsoft, Pfizer, Roche Pharmaceuticals, Astra Zeneca, Canadian Centre for Energy Information, Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, Energy Council of Canada, Imperial Oil, Calgary Stampede, Government of Canada – Foreign Affairs, and many others. He is founding partner of Australia-based Creative Skills Training Council, Creative Leadership Forum, Management Innovation Index and The Innovation Ecology. Scott's research pursues the evolving nature of storytelling in business and the development of communication processes that connect on a deeper human level in brand and marketing communications. To that end he has developed the 100 Stories Process™ and is working with WestJet, Intact Insurance, MNP, Calgary Economic Development and other organizations to understand how storytelling can lead deeper engagement, belief creation and loyalty.