

# Circus

Building Infrastructure





**Circus Building Infrastructure Research  
Executive Summary**

Report for The Arts Council / An Chomhairle Ealaíon

by Promenade, 2022

## 1 Overview

This study is the first of its kind – certainly in Ireland – and has involved thorough consultation with members of Ireland’s circus sector both at home and overseas.

The research involved:

- On-site visits and interviews with seven Arts Council-funded Irish building-based circus organisations
- A sectoral survey, one Zoom and three in-person sectoral focus groups in different locations with over 150 individual circus artists and circus companies

This Executive Summary aims to provide an overview of Ireland’s existing circus building infrastructure, particularly with regard to the challenges, under-resourcing issues and building and wider development supports needed. There was extensive consultation through the sectoral survey and the focus groups regarding the building-related challenges facing circus artists when training or creating work. Given the growth of the Irish circus sector over the past ten years, these challenges cannot be taken lightly.

The Executive Summary also provides a picture of today’s Irish circus sector, the range and level of circus specialisms and a mapping of where artists and others in the sector live across the country. This includes distances travelled for accessing training and rehearsal facilities for circus-related activities and demonstrates the broad range of venues and spaces currently used. The circus sector has been immensely generous in providing time to suggest improvements and priorities for this very specialist industry.

Many of Ireland’s circus sector are well-travelled and have experience of international circus facilities, for example through residencies or training opportunities. This Executive Summary provides a short analysis of six international building-based organisations, some of which have been highlighted by this study’s focus groups and surveys as examples of good practice. There are several examples of French/European circus networks with a focus on national circus centres and/or circus schools and centres. These have an important function in sharing knowledge, advocacy, training and support among its members.

Such examples will be important in establishing future supports for the circus sector and specifically for circus building-based infrastructure. A series of recommendations in the final section of the Executive Summary highlights the importance of a holistic, partnership-focused approach. These are underpinned by the commitment of the Arts Council in the areas of The Artist, Public Engagement, Investment Strategy, Spatial and Demographic planning and Building Capacity.

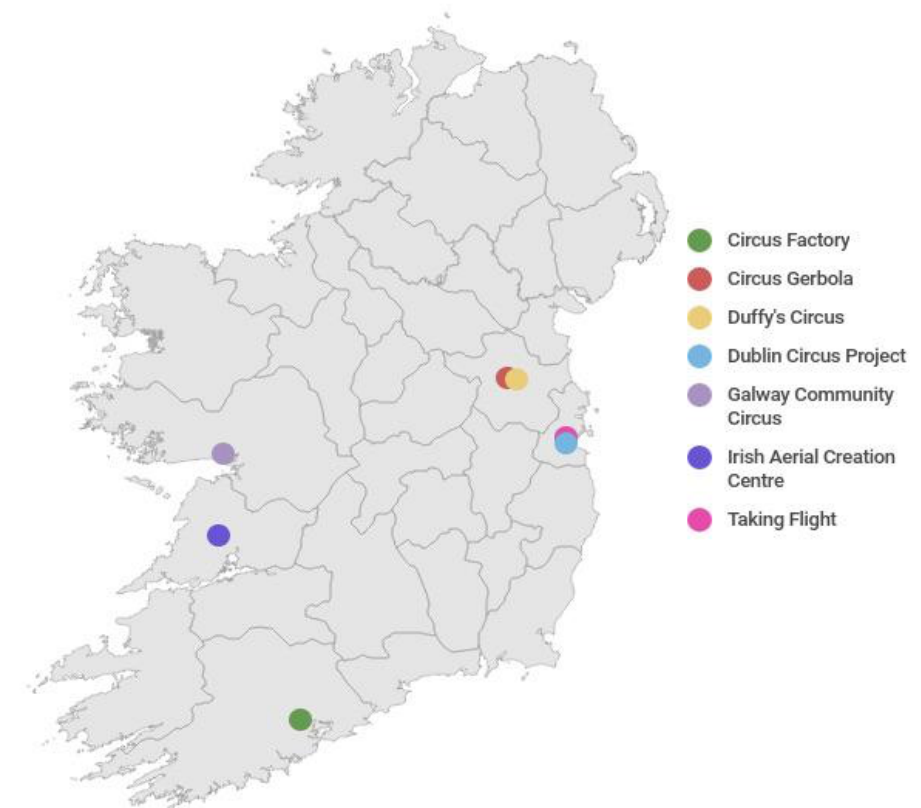
***This is an extract from the Art’s Council’s Circus Building Infrastructure Research report. For detailed survey results, national and international case studies, technical specifications for the development of circus buildings and more, please see the full report, which is available at:***

***<https://www.arts council.ie/Arts-in-Ireland/Circus/>***

## 2 Current position

Ireland has only seven circus building-based organisations that serve the entire country, excluding commercially-based studios. These organisations are all supported by the Arts Council in some capacity, and all participated in this study. They are two traditional circus organisations, Circus Gerbola and Duffy’s Circus, and five contemporary circus organisations, Cork Circus Factory, Dublin Circus Project, Galway Community Circus, Irish Aerial Creation Centre (IACC) and Taking Flight.

Some centres are more specialised such as the Youth and Social Circus focus of Galway Community Circus, or IACC’s specialism in Aerial Arts. Two of the organisations, Circus Gerbola and Duffy’s Circus, have a touring-based model and use their home-based building facilities only partially during the year. The map below shows that four circus organisations are concentrated in the wider Dublin/mid-Eastern region, with the other three concentrated in the South-West, Mid-West and Western regions.



Map of circus building based infrastructure supported by The Arts Council

Led by dynamic and committed individuals, such circus buildings have been developed as a direct response to the country’s lack of purpose-built buildings specifically for circus. All these individuals are consistently finding ways to improve their facilities, even those on shorter-term leases. The Irish Aerial Creation Centre has negotiated the longest lease (21 years), and with a supportive landlord, this has enabled them to develop significant longer-term plans for upgrading their existing space. However, some of these building-based organisations face considerable challenges:

- Six regard a lack of insulation as a major problem when it comes to heating their buildings to adequate temperatures
- Six of the seven surveyed buildings require more space as well as separate spaces for training and creation

- Four out of the seven buildings have a single space for circus work. Of the others, one has a small, low second space; one has two areas but with no partition between them; and one has a shared space that can be used when needed.



Single training and creation space – Circus Factory, Cork. Photo: Claire Keogh.

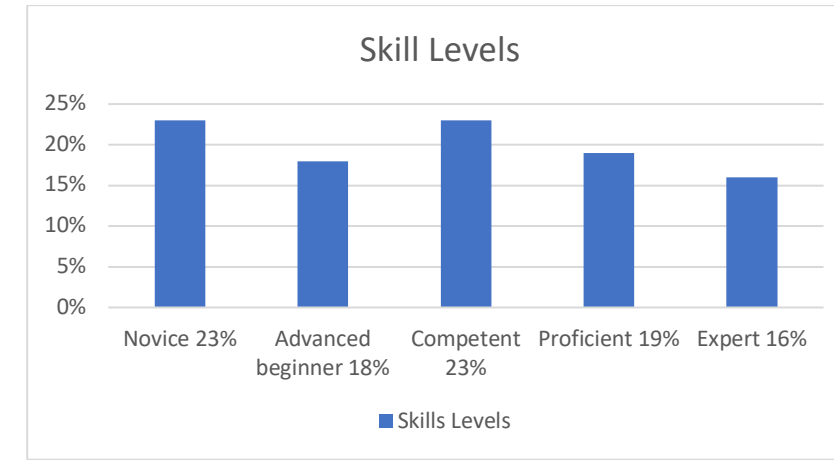
- A lack of affordable accommodation close to the centres was an issue for six of those surveyed
- Five require increased storage
- Three of the buildings presently without a kitchen or canteen space would hugely benefit from having such facilities
- Three that do not have showers at present would like to have such
- Two spaces have to rent additional spaces elsewhere for residencies and masterclasses by visiting artists, particularly for longer periods
- Two of the centres without changing rooms have cited this as an issue

Ultimately, these building-based circus organisations either need upgraded premises and/or new permanent homes with more space to address the key issues highlighted above. These organisations recognise that partnerships with their local authority and other stakeholders are central to making this possible. In addition to capital investment, they also reported the need for wider supports such as:

- Dedicated time and investment for team members to focus on building-related infrastructure
- Investment in technical and building management personnel
- Support for all stages of circus artists' careers and support to encourage the setting-up of additional circus companies

As part of the research for this study, the team created a survey asking those involved in the field of Irish circus to participate and invited sectoral attendance at in-person focus groups on Achill Island, in Cork and Dublin as well as online.

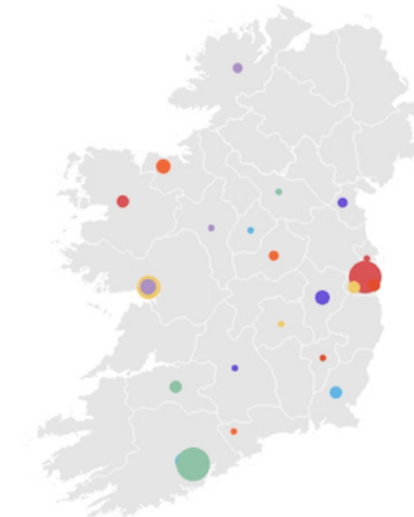
The survey revealed that this is a sector with skill levels spread fairly evenly from novice to expert levels. However, 41% are either novices or advanced beginners, indicating that this is an emerging artform with increasing numbers joining the profession:



Three of the five most-mentioned specialisms were aerial-based, highlighting the impact of the Irish Aerial Creation Centre as the first and only purpose-built aerial dance centre in Ireland. The five least-mentioned circus specialisms were funambulism, Chinese pole, magic, Cyr Wheel and teeterboard.

A lack of sufficient space within circus buildings makes it harder to accommodate some of these lesser-practised specialisms. This opinion was reinforced by some focus group members taking part in this study who highlighted the need for facilities with sufficient space, flooring and apparatus to accommodate artists practising Cyr Wheel, funambulism and teeterboard.

The majority of people base themselves in Ireland full-time; 58% live in urban areas, 25% in rural areas and 17% in towns. Despite higher living costs, city living is still attractive to many, for example because of access to wider work opportunities, arts and social networks, public transport and other amenities.



- Cork City Council (23)
- Dublin City Council (22)
- Galway City Council (11)
- Cork County Council (6)
- Galway County Council (5)
- Kildare County Council (4)
- Sligo County Council (4)
- Dun Laoghaire / Rathdown County Council (3)
- Limerick City & County Council (3)
- Mayo County Council (3)
- South Dublin County Council (3)
- Wexford County Council (3)
- Donegal County Council (2)
- Louth County Council (2)
- Westmeath County Council (2)
- Carlow County Council (1)
- Cavan County Council (1)
- Fingal County Council (1)
- Laois County Council (1)
- Longford County Council (1)
- Roscommon County Council (1)
- Tipperary County Council (1)
- Waterford City and County Council (1)

Map of locations of circus practitioners in Ireland who responded to the survey.

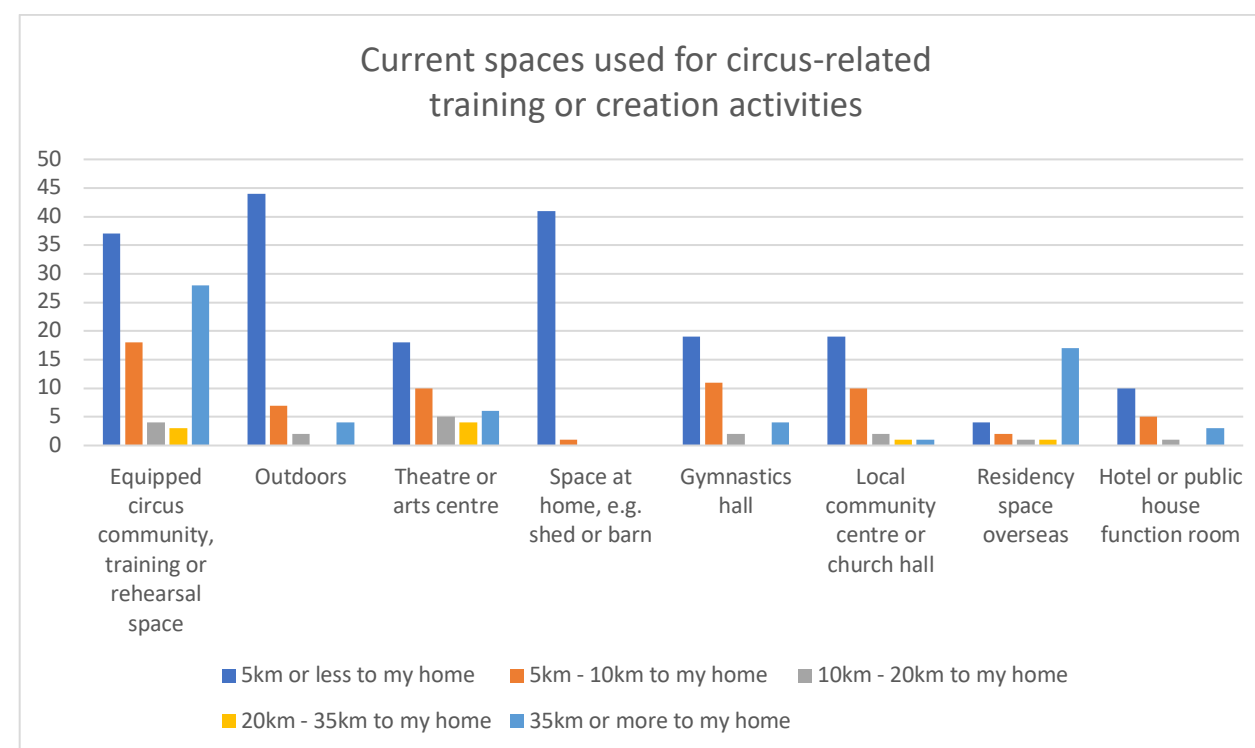
The largest clusters of respondents were found in the South-West (29%), Dublin (29%) and the Western regions (20%), which aligns with where building-based circus organisations Circus Factory, Dublin Circus Project, Taking Flight and Galway Community Circus are based. The Irish Aerial Creation Centre was also cited as a practice space, but on average, people travelled further distances to attend.

This sector has to be very resourceful in finding spaces in which to train and rehearse, particularly those without reasonable access to dedicated circus spaces. For a significant minority of people, travelling distances to circus spaces are considerable, with approximately one third of circus artists reporting that they have to travel 35km or more from their home to use a circus space for training or rehearsals. Travelling longer distances is certainly not sustainable, either in terms of expense or keeping up motivation and energy levels. It is particularly difficult for those who do not have access to a car and who have to rely on public transport.

Only six respondents were based abroad either full-time or most of the time. 29 respondents based themselves partly abroad, varying from year to year. Most importantly, 70% of those either partly or fully based abroad agreed that

*“...[they] would be more likely to base [themselves] in Ireland if suitable circus spaces were available for training and creation.”*

The pandemic has also led some artists to move to more affordable regions, including more rural locations, which means longer travel distances for accessing dedicated circus spaces. The second most popular type of practice space after dedicated circus spaces was the outdoors, such as artists’ own back gardens, which makes sense considering the need of circus artists to train consistently. However, this is certainly not without its challenges as it is subject to weather conditions and understanding neighbours. Furthermore, circus artists use a range of spaces for training or creation activities, particularly within reasonable travelling distances to their homes:



Most crucially, the research found that 75% of respondents said that the existing buildings they use for circus training or creation activities meet their needs only partially or not at all. In particular, these related to:

- **Location issues**, particularly if not easily accessible by public transport or involving long commuting distances.

*“Currently, without being able to drive, accessible and affordable circus spaces are hard to find ... and accommodation is near impossible.”*

- **Suitability of space**, either due to problems with getting available space or space not always meeting creative or technical needs, for example lacking sufficient warmth, suitable height, rigging points or suitable flooring.

*“The main issue is not having a properly-heated training space to develop work from October to April”.*

*“Aerial spaces are always too cold due to the fact that they’re usually just converted warehouses. Also, a lack of pulley systems, counterweights and winches ...”*

These concerns were reinforced by the focus groups, which highlighted some rather fundamental needs of the sector that must be addressed, such as adequately-heated spaces, sufficient height for different circus disciplines and rigging points for different types of apparatus.



### 3 Sectoral needs and thematic areas

Based on the consultation in connection with this study, the key themes and needs listed below emerged.

**Fragile and insecure building arrangements.** The tenacity of the circus sector in creating spaces in which to train and develop work is admirable, but there is a need for:

- More affordable, secure and long-term tenancies of suitable buildings that allow for proper building improvements
- Increased assistance and support from local authorities in finding suitable spaces that can properly meet the needs of the circus sector as identified below
- Additional professional development supports in furthering capital development aspirations and plans, e.g. training, skills development, additional staffing, peer-to-peer learning and exchange

**Safer working conditions.** Circus is a strenuous and physically-demanding activity that may involve close contact with others and use of specialist apparatus.

The top four facilities seen as essential among the 88 survey respondents were:

1. Safety features/crash mats – 95% of survey respondents
2. Adequately-heated spaces – 94% of survey respondents
3. Rigging suitable for apparatus/practice – 90% of survey respondents
4. Multiple spaces for different training needs/types of circus skills – 81% of survey respondents

Therefore, there is a need for:

- Better-insulated buildings heated to recommended industry temperatures
- More safe and appropriate spaces in which to work that comply with good safety practices
- More dedicated spaces for particular activities, e.g. uncluttered spaces for rehearsals
- Working environments conducive to psychological as well as physical health, e.g. a welcoming ethos, appropriate policies and an increased number of properly-trained staff

**Higher-quality facilities.** While circus has seen a growth in recent years, the artform has only a limited number of suitable spaces in which to develop. In particular, there is a greater need for:

- Spaces that are suitable for different aspects of circus arts, including some less-developed circus arts, e.g. teeterboard
- Greater ceiling heights for aerial-based work
- Available dedicated rooms for professional development and creation activities, e.g. residencies and production rehearsals
- Multiple spaces for different types of activities conducive to both training and more creative-based circus activities
- Production standard facilities – with sound, lighting etc. – that enable artists to work in high-quality performance facilities that allow for test audiences
- Buildings suitable for cross-disciplinary collaboration
- Facilities with energy-efficient measures to reduce costs and carbon footprint

**Public-friendly facilities.** Circus is characterised by a strong community ethos and those consulted frequently mentioned the importance of a meaningful connection with their local communities. The overall feel and welcome of a space, a strong community ethos and different types of developmental support were highlighted as important by a significant minority. The welcoming nature and accessibility of the building were seen as major factors in thinking about children and young people, including either designated spaces or timetable considerations.

This demonstrates a need for circus buildings that are:

- Designed to create a welcoming and friendly atmosphere
- Able to accommodate audiences for sharing work in progress

- Able to accommodate work with different age groups, particularly children and young people
- Fully accessible and useable by people with disabilities

**Changing socio-economic environment.** The short supply of affordable city housing, which has led some artists to move to more affordable parts of the country including more rural locations, highlights the following needs:

- Accommodation on-site or nearby circus buildings for those travelling from further afield, e.g. for longer residencies
- Circus building-based infrastructure that is easily accessible by public transport
- More accessible, affordable and suitable facilities across the country in which circus artists can train regularly

**Insecure and precarious career paths.** The industry lacks structured and stable career paths for those involved both in the artistic and the management side of circus arts. This has a knock-on effect on developing building-based infrastructure and the ecology of circus development. It leads to a potential drain of talent as people either leave the industry or move overseas. In particular, there is a need for:

- Structured traineeships or other supports to develop more people with dedicated circus venue management skills
- Production supports to encourage circus artists to establish companies, including talent development opportunities for recent graduates

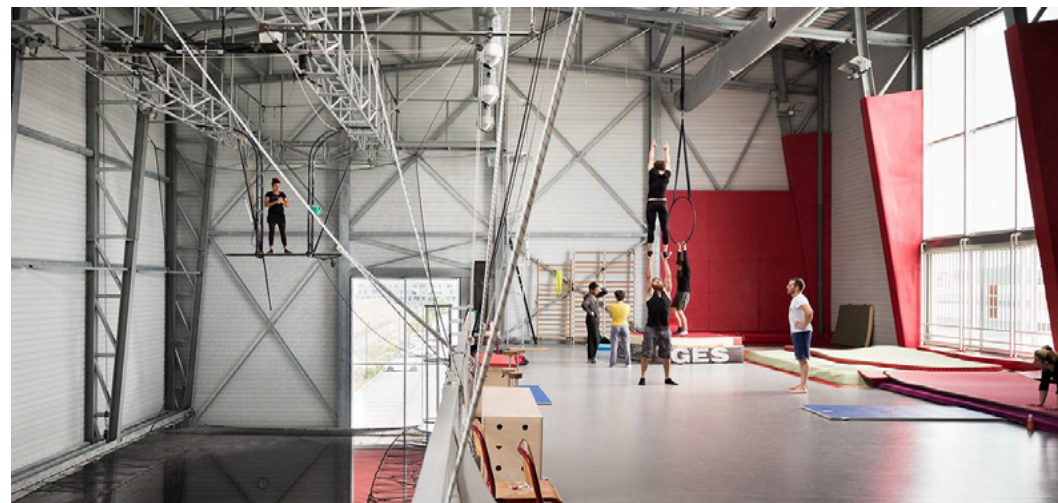
#### 4 International examples of good practice

The team shortlisted six key international building-based organisations for circus whose facilities and programmes relate closely to needs raised by artists in Ireland in connection with this study. The buildings are all examples of good practice that illustrate how organisations can successfully offer multiple strands of circus activity, such as training and creation in one building. Several of the buildings were also referenced by the artists themselves during the focus group process and survey feedback as examples of good practice.

During the research of overseas circus buildings, no one type was found to replicate, but the best circus buildings all met the expected provision of heating, height, access, health and safety maintenance, and provided circus equipment and apparatus as a minimum requirement. Each building is also dedicated to professionalising the current and future generations of circus makers; and each has a unique structure with provision relevant to its locality and its national needs, and is determined by funding and its particular history. One commonality is how positive reputations and distinctive achievements are determined by funding, leadership and the creative ethos instilled in the organisation.

The need for inspirational environments in which to create and provide the optimum opportunity to develop talent was frequently mentioned by members of Ireland's circus sector. In this, [La Central Del Circ](#) in Barcelona is a benchmark.

Members of Ireland's circus sector noted the need both for multi-spaces and for sharing and meeting like-minded people. [La Grainerie](#) in Toulouse, France, is a good example of a fully-equipped multi-room building with extensive facilities for both training and production/creative work, leading to professional pathways.



La Grainerie, Toulouse, France

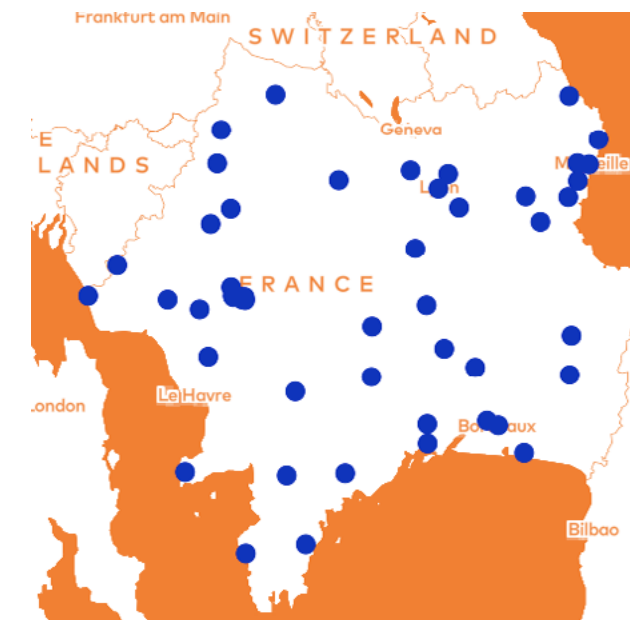
Feedback from the circus sector in Ireland also reinforced the importance of buildings in creating a circus community. [Cirko – Center for New Circus](#) in Helsinki is a good example of having both permanent resident companies and a year-round residency programme.

[La Brèche](#), Cherbourg, France, is an example of a circus building supported by a forward-thinking local authority. At the heart of a regeneration programme on waste land, it brings community values and economic benefits to the town.

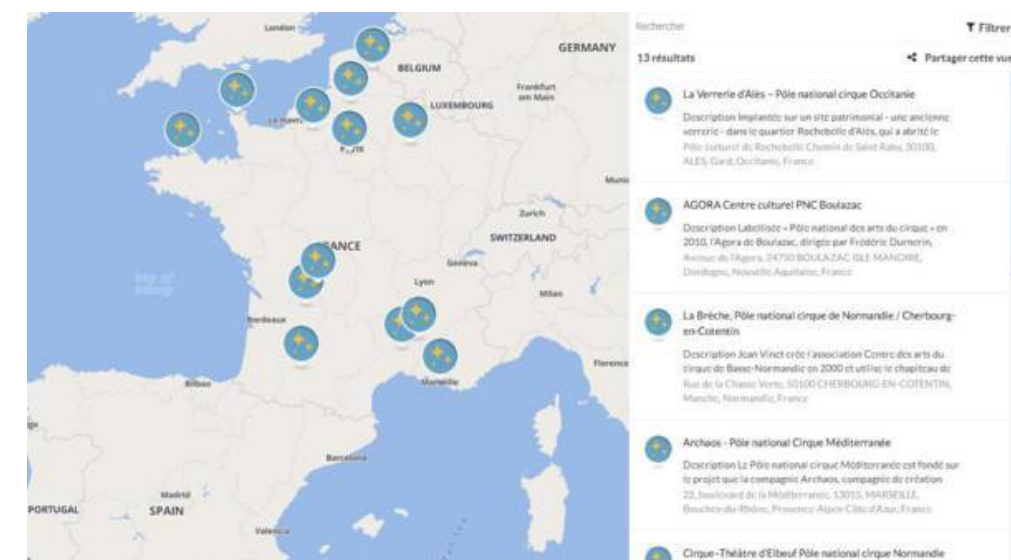
Professional development support for artists within circus spaces was another need raised by artists in Ireland. [Subtopia](#) in Stockholm is an example of how an organisation can give significant development support to its artists. Its success is due to a hands-on team of mentors and advocates that nurtures and follows the artists' journey on their career paths. Subtopia is also home to a variety of creative industries and hires out studios, spaces for filming and performance space.

[101 Outdoor Arts](#) likewise is very good at providing a supportive environment, with staff on hand to advise on artistic, administrative and production matters. They also have a dedicated fabrication space for developing set and street arts/circus apparatus. In 2018 they installed purpose-built cabins – a good example of what can be provided in terms of artist accommodation, something highlighted as a sectoral need in this study.

There are several examples of French/European circus networks with a focus on national circus centres and/or circus schools and centres. These have an important function in sharing knowledge, advocacy, training and support across its members.



The [Territoires de cirque network](#) has nearly 48 structures involved in supporting the emergence, creation and dissemination of circus in France.



The [Pôle National des Arts Du Cirque \(PNC\)](#) is a network of 14 designated national circus centres in France.

[FEDEC \(the European Federation of Professional Circus Schools\)](#) on the other hand, is a European and international network of about 70 members (two thirds secondary, vocational and higher education circus schools and training programmes, and one third organisations involved in information, research and circus arts advocacy), located in more than 20 countries in Europe and beyond



## 5 Recommendations

The Arts Council must prioritise the following actions, aligning with Making Great Art Work and with relevance to the Arts Council's Spatial Policy and, in parts, to the International and Equality Human Rights and Diversity Policies. Project Ireland 2040 also highlights particular professional development needs across a number of sectors, including culture, that are highly relevant to the circus sector.

### *The Artist*

- **Advocate internally and externally for the rights and needs of circus artists** for more accessible, suitable, safe and secure circus building-based infrastructure
- **Communicate the specialist nature and needs of circus arts** to relevant government bodies

### *Public Engagement*

- **Ensure that circus building-based organisations consider facilities for children and young people** in the adaptation/development of new buildings
- **Ensure that the needs of diverse audiences and communities are carefully considered**, particularly of those less represented in the arts, in the adaptation and development of any circus building infrastructure

### *Investment Strategy*

- **Work closely with the Department** to develop an optimum circus building-based infrastructure for the future, particularly in the priority areas identified

### *Spatial and Demographic Planning*

- **Partner with local authorities and the circus sector** to encourage wider regional spread of circus building-based infrastructure
- **Encourage cross-agency partnering** with the circus community to develop more sustainable circus building-based infrastructure
- **Support more regional and rural Arts Centres** to provide suitable facilities for circus artists

### *Building Capacity*

- **Provide additional sectoral staffing plus training and development supports** to create a strong and resilient circus sector ready for capital development projects
- **Expand** international mobility opportunities for the circus building-based sector and potential partners to enhance circus building knowledge and networks
- **Continue to provide supports for circus artists** at all stages of their careers, enabling them to flourish and build sustainable pathways

## 6 Conclusion

Ireland has a small number of circus training and creation spaces, primarily concentrated in the West, South-West and wider Dublin regions. These spaces have been established by pioneering and dedicated members of the circus community as a direct response to the country's lack of purpose-built buildings specifically for circus. Financial investment in capital infrastructure has been modest and ad hoc to date. Together with insecure tenancies for some and the high cost of insurance generally, this has made for an extremely challenging environment in which to operate. All circus building-based organisations are committed to improving their facilities continuously. However, for some, their planned improvements are short-term measures only as the limitations of their spaces make it difficult to realise fully their aspirations to meet all the needs of the circus sector.

The growth in both professional and community-based circus in recent years means that existing circus spaces are not always available nor are there nearly enough for the many circus artists to train in regularly. Circus is a strenuous and physically-demanding activity that may involve close contact with others as well as the use of specialist apparatus. Therefore, safe working conditions are critical. Some of the needs highlighted in the sectoral survey pertain to rather basic safety requirements, in particular the need for warmer and properly-insulated spaces. This study also identified a whole range of sectoral needs that are crucial to enabling circus to develop properly and flourish as an artform, to support circus artists at all career stages and raise production standards. The needs identified include suitable rigging for apparatus/practice, buildings with multiple spaces for dedicated training or rehearsal/creation activities including production-ready facilities, higher ceilings for aerial-based work and more spaces that could support some of the lesser-developed areas of circus arts, such as teeterboard or Chinese pole. The look and feel of spaces for circus are also important for creating a welcoming environment that is conducive to creativity.

Circus is now at a crossroads in Ireland. Despite the welcome increased investment by the Arts Council in artistic development and public engagement activities in the last two years, the lack of adequate circus building infrastructure will seriously hamper the development of the artform. Ireland is falling considerably behind many European countries in terms of circus building-based infrastructure, with a significant minority of Irish circus artists basing themselves overseas to avail of better facilities.

Undoubtedly, circus has been the poor relation of arts building infrastructure to date, with no major capital funding awards allocated to it. The drain of circus talent will continue if proper support is not provided. However, to support the development of circus building infrastructure properly, a holistic, partnership-focused approach will be required. To this end, the Arts Council will have to play a key role in advocating, communicating, partnering and supporting such plans to create a properly sustainable, accessible, safe and thriving circus sector.

***This is an extract from the Art's Council's Circus Building Infrastructure Research report. For detailed survey results, national and international case studies, technical specifications for the development of circus buildings and more, please see the full report, which is available at: <https://www.artscouncil.ie/Arts-in-Ireland/Circus/>***



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