

5 Principles for Building Work That Lasts



For visionary founders, cultural leaders, and practitioners building something new or fortifying what exists — with the intention to strengthen, deepen, or endure.

In twenty years of working inside cultural organizations and alongside visionary founders, cultural leaders, and practitioners doing purposeful work, I have seen the same gap appear again and again — organizations dissolving before their time, work that could not fund itself, impact that was real but could not scale, deepen, or endure. A meaningful vision. An undeniable passion. Masterful artistry. And yet something essential was missing. The work does not carry itself. It needs a vessel.

That gap — work without a vessel — is a stewardship problem. Stewardship is not about oversight or management — it is about building the framework for work to be held, deepened, and carried across generations. It is the difference between work built for the moment and a body of work designed to outlast its founder.

These five principles are what I return to — in every Stewardship Blueprint, every advisory conversation, every moment when powerful work is struggling to endure.

— Janeen Johnson, *Cultural Architect* | *OYA Strategies*

5 PRINCIPLES FOR BUILDING WORK THAT LASTS

01

Precision over expansion.

The instinct when describing cultural work is to expand — to make it bigger, broader, and more inclusive. Expansion blurs. Precision signals maturity. It names who this is for, what it does, and what it does not do. That naming — that clarity of purpose — is how stewards build.

SIT WITH THIS

Where in your description of this work are you expanding to avoid making a choice?

02

Timing is the argument.

Timing is often treated as context — a line about what is happening in the world that frames the work as relevant. But timely and necessary are not the same thing. Timing is the argument. It is the answer to the question every funder, collaborator, and supporter is quietly asking: *why now?* When you can answer that clearly, your work stops being interesting and starts being necessary.

SIT WITH THIS

If someone asked you why this work matters right now — not in general, but right now — what would you say?

03

Sustainability is a design choice.

One of the most common gaps in cultural work is the absence of a sustainability plan. There is always something more immediate: a vision still forming, a program still stabilizing, resources still uncertain. Either way, sustainability can come later. Designed in from the start, the work's continuity becomes the vessel it lives within. That is the design choice: project or institution. Work that belongs to its moment, or work built to outlast you.

SIT WITH THIS

What would allow this work to continue if the most essential person stepped away?

04

The inner circle comes first.

Work at any stage — new or existing, building or stabilizing — needs the right people to receive it. Not the most enthusiastic. The most honest. The inner circle are the first stewards: the ones whose understanding shapes how work grows, who holds it, and how far its impact carries. Without them, work moves without a foundation. With them, vision begins to find its vessel.

SIT WITH THIS

Who are the people whose honest understanding of this work would change how you move forward — and have you shared the work with them?

Vision needs a vessel.

Vision is where cultural work begins. Structure is what allows vision to become legacy — understood by people who were not in the room when the idea was born, funded by people who will never meet the community it serves, and sustained by people who come after the founders.

The work of translating vision into structure is not administrative. It is strategic. Without structure, work stays where it is — dependent on its founder, or without a path to grow beyond where it stands. With it, the work has a vessel: something that can deepen, scale, and carry impact across generations. That translation — from what you see clearly to what others can hold — is the work of stewardship.

SIT WITH THIS

If you stepped away from this work tomorrow, would the people left behind be able to carry it forward — and would they know what it was for?

WHAT'S NEXT

If this guide surfaced something worth sitting with — join the OYA community. I write about what I'm seeing in the sector, the questions worth sitting with, and what it actually takes to steward purposeful work across generations.

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