
| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Project-Based Management in Arts and Cultural Programs: Emerging Practices for Sustainable Program Delivery

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| **ABSTRACT**

Arts and cultural organizations have increasingly adopted the language and tools of project management to plan, fund, and deliver their work, yet the fit between mainstream project management doctrine and the emergent, multi-stakeholder nature of cultural production remains uneasy. This article synthesizes research spanning cultural animation, sustainable development planning, and organizational studies to examine how project-based management — both predictive and adaptive approaches — is being adapted to the realities of arts and cultural programming. It argues that sustainable program delivery depends less on the wholesale import of standard project frameworks than on their selective translation: loosening rigid scope assumptions, treating sustainability as a structural design parameter rather than an afterthought, building transdisciplinary teams, and constructing programme-level infrastructure that allows learning to accumulate across successive project cycles. Drawing on case evidence from cultural animation projects, festival design, and cross-disciplinary collaboration, the article proposes a working framework of emerging practices and identifies the organizational and evidentiary gaps that remain, particularly for smaller, community-based cultural organizations operating with limited resources. The discussion concludes that the tension between project logic and cultural value is unlikely to be resolved outright, but that organizations which manage this tension deliberately are best positioned to sustain high-quality, socially embedded program delivery over time.

| **KEYWORDS**

Project-based management; cultural sustainability; arts administration; adaptive project management; program delivery; cultural animation

| **ARTICLE INFORMATION**

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1. Introduction

Arts and cultural organizations have always worked in bursts of intense, time-bound activity: a festival season, an exhibition cycle, a community mural, a touring production. What has changed over the past two decades is the vocabulary used to describe that work. Terms once confined to construction sites and IT departments — scope, milestone, deliverable, stakeholder — have migrated into galleries, theatres, and community arts centres. Project management, as a discipline, promises structure, accountability, and predictability. Cultural production, by contrast, tends to prize openness, iteration, and the freedom to change course when the work demands it. The result is a productive but uneasy marriage, one that cultural managers now navigate on a near-daily basis.

This article examines how project-based management is being adapted, resisted, and reinvented within arts and cultural programming, with particular attention to sustainability — understood here in both its environmental and its organizational sense. Drawing on research spanning cultural animation, sustainable development planning, and organizational studies, it argues that the most effective cultural organizations are not the ones that import project management wholesale, but the ones that selectively translate its tools while protecting the conditions that make artistic and community work meaningful. The discussion moves from the conceptual tensions between project logic and cultural values, to concrete practices around sustainability, coordination, and community embeddedness, before closing with a framework for what sustainable program delivery might look like in this sector.

In pursuing the below question, the discussion also considers what specific assumptions in project management — including both predictive and adaptive approaches such as Agile — create friction in cultural contexts, what emerging practices allow organizations to retain useful project discipline while accommodating artistic and community realities, and how sustainability functions as a structural design choice rather than a compliance add-on.

This Article Addresses the following questions:

Primary Research Question

How can arts and cultural organizations adapt project management practices to deliver sustainable arts and cultural programs while responding to the distinctive characteristics of arts and cultural work?

Supporting Research Questions

- A. What characteristics of arts and cultural work create challenges for the application of existing project management approaches, including traditional and agile methodologies?
- B. What adaptations to project management practices can help arts and cultural organizations respond to these challenges while maintaining effective program delivery?
 - i. Governance
 - ii. Stakeholder engagement
 - iii. Iterative planning
 - iv. Artistic flexibility
 - v. Risk management
 - vi. Evaluation
- C. How can sustainability be embedded into the design and delivery of arts and cultural programs rather than treated as an end-stage objective?
 - i. Financial sustainability
 - ii. Organizational sustainability
 - iii. Community sustainability
 - iv. Cultural sustainability

2. Literature Review Approach

This article is based on a narrative, rather than systematic, review of the literature, undertaken to identify recurring themes and practices rather than to exhaustively catalogue every study on project management in the arts. Sources were identified through targeted searches of academic databases and publisher platforms, using combinations of terms such as "project-based management," "cultural project," "project-based learning," "sustainability," and

"programme management," together with forward and backward citation tracking from key sources once identified. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters published within roughly the last decade, supplemented by a small number of earlier foundational works where they remained directly relevant to a specific theme.

Sources were selected for inclusion where they addressed at least one of three areas central to the article's argument: the organizational or theoretical relationship between project management and cultural, creative, or educational work; the integration of sustainability into project design and delivery; and coordination, learning, or quality-assurance mechanisms relevant to project-based organizations. Studies concerned only with software development or engineering project management were generally excluded unless they offered a transferable conceptual contribution, such as the coordination and digital-infrastructure literature drawn on in later sections.

Synthesis proceeded thematically rather than chronologically. Sources were grouped according to the tension, practice, or mechanism they spoke to most directly, and these groupings were then organized into the broader framework presented later in the article. Where multiple sources addressed the same practice from different angles — for instance, sustainability as a structural design parameter — they were read together to identify points of convergence and to select the most representative illustrative source for each element of the framework. This approach does not claim the comprehensiveness of a systematic review; it is intended instead to surface a coherent, evidence-informed set of emerging practices that can orient further research and practical application in the sector.

2.1 Framing Project-Based Management for Arts and Culture

Project-based management is, at its simplest, the coordination of temporary, goal-directed effort: a defined start and end, a scope of work, a budget, and a team assembled for the duration of the task. This structure suits much of what cultural organizations do. A biennial exhibition, a youth theatre residency, a heritage restoration campaign — each has a horizon, a budget ceiling, and a group of collaborators who may disband once the work is delivered. Ćwikła, Góral, Bogacz-Wojtanowska, and Dudkiewicz (2020) describe this pattern of organizing as characteristic of cultural animation initiatives, where the project format allows organizations to mobilize resources and partners around a specific community or artistic goal without committing to permanent infrastructure.

Yet the fit between project management as a discipline and cultural work as a practice has never been seamless. Ćwikła and Jalocho (2015) make the case bluntly: despite operating almost entirely through projects, the cultural sector has contributed remarkably little back to the theory and practice of project management itself. Their argument is that cultural projects are treated as a marginal, almost decorative application of mainstream project management frameworks, rather than as a distinct organizational form with lessons of its own to offer. This is a curious asymmetry. Cultural producers routinely manage ambiguity, shifting audiences, volunteer labour, and outcomes that cannot be fully specified in advance — conditions that mainstream project management, with its emphasis on defined scope and linear phases, was never designed to handle gracefully. The implication is that arts and cultural programs are not simply consumers of project management technique; they are, potentially, a source of innovation for how project-based work is understood more broadly, particularly in sectors where meaning, not just output, is the point of the exercise.

2.2 Where Project Logic Meets Artistic and Cultural Values

The tension identified by Ćwikła and Jalocho (2015) plays out at the level of daily practice in several recognisable ways. Project management, in its classical form, assumes that success can be defined early and measured precisely — on time, on budget, to specification. Cultural work resists this in three respects.

First, artistic outcomes are frequently emergent rather than predetermined. A theatre director may not know the final shape of a devised piece until weeks into rehearsal; a community mural project may shift direction entirely once residents are consulted. Rigid adherence to an initial scope can suppress exactly the kind of responsiveness that gives cultural work its value.

Second, the "customer" in a cultural project is rarely singular. Funders, audiences, participating artists, and the communities represented in the work often want different things, and project frameworks built around a single client relationship struggle to accommodate this plurality.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, cultural organizations often measure success in terms that project management tools were not built to capture — social cohesion, artistic risk-taking, cultural memory, wellbeing. Blandy and Fenn (2012) frame this directly in their discussion of community cultural development, arguing that sustaining cities and communities through cultural work requires attention to social fabric and long-term civic value, outcomes that sit outside the conventional triangle of cost, time, and scope.

It is worth being precise about which project management this critique targets. The description above applies to predictive, or "waterfall," project management specifically, not to project management as a discipline overall. Adaptive approaches such as Agile were developed in large part to resolve the first of these three tensions: rather than fixing scope at initiation, Agile allows requirements to evolve through iterative cycles, with priorities reviewed and reset at each sprint or phase boundary (Dong et al., 2024). Evidence from outside the arts sector supports the idea that this iterative approach delivers real benefits: in a global survey of more than a thousand projects, Serrador and Pinto (2015) found that greater use of agile methods was associated with improved time, budget, and scope outcomes, and was particularly effective at improving stakeholder satisfaction. Conforto, Salum, Amaral, da Silva, and Magnanini de Almeida (2014) further showed that agile practices are not confined to software development; organizations across a range of industry sectors were already experimenting with agile enablers for innovative projects, suggesting the model travels reasonably well beyond its original context. For a devised theatre piece or a community mural project, an iterative process of this kind — short cycles, regular reflection, scope that solidifies gradually rather than all at once — may already resolve much of the friction described in the first point above.

What Agile does not resolve, however, is the second and third tensions. Its iterative model still generally assumes a single product owner or client whose priorities determine what gets built and in what order (Dong et al., 2024); it does not by itself accommodate the reality that cultural projects typically answer to funders, artists, and communities whose priorities can genuinely conflict, with no single figure positioned to arbitrate between them. Nor does it supply a vocabulary for success criteria — social cohesion, artistic risk, cultural memory — that sit outside conventional delivery metrics, regardless of whether those metrics are organized around a fixed plan or a rolling backlog. Adopting an adaptive methodology, in other words, addresses the scope problem but leaves the ownership and evaluation problems largely intact, which is why the practices discussed later in this article remain necessary even for organizations that have already moved away from purely predictive planning.

None of this means project structures are unsuitable for cultural work. It means that cultural managers who apply them wholesale, without adaptation, risk squeezing out the very qualities that make the work worth doing. The emerging practice, visible across the literature, is not rejection of project management but its selective and often quiet modification: retaining the scaffolding of milestones and budgets while loosening the assumptions about fixed scope and single-stakeholder accountability. Table 1 summarizes the main points of friction between conventional project management assumptions and the realities of arts and cultural project work.

Table 1: Predictive Project Management Assumptions Compared with Arts and Cultural Project Realities

Dimension	Predictive Project Management Assumption	Arts and Cultural Project Reality	Illustrative Source
Scope	Defined and fixed at initiation	Emergent; may shift substantially during creative development *(largely addressed by Agile/adaptive approaches)*	Cwikla & Jalocha (2015)
Client relationship	Single, identifiable client or sponsor	Multiple, sometimes competing stakeholders (funders, artists, communities, audiences); no single product owner to arbitrate priorities	Blandy & Fenn (2012)
Success criteria	Time, cost, and specification (the "iron triangle")	Artistic risk, social cohesion, cultural memory, wellbeing	Blandy & Fenn (2012)
Team composition	Assembled for technical fit to a defined task	Transdisciplinary, often blending artistic, technical, and community expertise	Sorici et al. (2023)
Knowledge transfer	Captured in formal project documentation	Frequently informal and person-dependent, vulnerable to staff turnover	De Groot et al. (2022)
Sustainability	Often addressed as a compliance requirement	Most effective when treated as a structural design parameter from inception	Sánchez-García & Reyes-de-Cózar (2025)

Note. Adaptive methodologies such as Agile already address the scope dimension above through iterative, evolving requirements. The remaining dimensions — stakeholder plurality, success criteria, knowledge transfer, and sustainability — persist regardless of whether an organization follows a predictive or an adaptive methodology.

2.3 Sustainability as an Organizing Principle, Not an Add-On

Sustainability appears throughout this literature not as a bolt-on requirement but as a lens that reshapes how projects are conceived from the outset. Cwikla et al. (2020) frame cultural animation projects explicitly through a sustainable development lens, comparing cases to understand how project-based cultural work contributes to — or falls short of — broader sustainability goals. Their comparative approach suggests that sustainability outcomes in cultural programming are highly uneven, dependent less on formal commitments made at the funding stage and more on how project teams actually structure participation, resource use, and follow-through once the initial funding cycle ends.

This distinction between stated intention and structural practice recurs across the sector. Sánchez-García and Reyes-de-Cózar (2025), in a systematic review focused specifically on optimizing the structural design and implementation

of project-based learning with a sustainable focus, argue for treating sustainability as a design parameter that shapes project structure from the beginning — how teams are formed, how milestones are set, how outcomes are evaluated — rather than as a checklist applied retrospectively. This structural view has direct relevance for cultural program managers: a festival or exhibition designed with sustainability as a late addition tends to produce sustainability theatre — recycling bins and a paragraph in the program notes — whereas one designed with sustainability as a structural parameter changes decisions about venue, materials, staffing, and audience travel from the earliest planning stages.

Hou, Lai, and Wu (2023) provide a concrete illustration of this structural integration in their case study of a university course using virtual reality to teach green building education through project-based pedagogy. Although the immediate subject is architecture rather than the arts, the underlying model — using immersive digital tools to let learners and stakeholders experience the consequences of design decisions before they are built — has clear application to cultural infrastructure projects, where the environmental cost of temporary structures, touring sets, or exhibition builds is a growing concern. Volz and Briant (2023) offer a directly cultural parallel: their account of designing a pavilion for the Botanica Festival through authentic project-based learning shows how sustainability considerations around materials, structure, and site can be woven into a creative design process from the outset, with students negotiating environmental constraints as part of the creative brief rather than as a separate compliance exercise.

At a broader organizational level, Wang, Bai, Huang, Du, and Zhang (2019) introduce the concept of "social project culture" as a mechanism for embedding sustainability into how project-based organizations operate on an ongoing basis. Rather than treating each project as a discrete, self-contained unit, they argue for cultivating shared values and social norms that persist across an organization's project portfolio, so that sustainability commitments survive the turnover of individual project teams. This is particularly relevant to arts organizations, which often rely on freelance and contract staff who move between projects and even between organizations; without a durable social project culture, sustainability practices learned on one project can simply walk out the door when that project ends.

2.4 Coordination, Digital Infrastructure, and Cross-Team Learning

Sustainable program delivery is not only about environmental outcomes; it is also about the organizational sustainability of the delivery process itself — whether an organization can keep running high-quality projects without burning out its staff, losing institutional knowledge, or duplicating effort across teams. Whyte and Lobo (2010) address this directly in their study of coordination and control in project-based work, showing how digital objects and infrastructures — shared drawings, models, and data systems — allow dispersed teams to coordinate delivery without constant direct supervision. Their focus is construction and engineering, but the underlying insight travels well to cultural production, where a touring exhibition or multi-venue festival similarly depends on shared documentation, scheduling systems, and digital assets that allow geographically separated teams to stay aligned.

The challenge, as several sources note, is that coordination tools are only as good as the organizational learning that accompanies them. De Groot, Leendertse, and Arts (2022) examine how learning happens across teams in project-oriented organizations, identifying programme management — the layer of coordination that sits above individual projects — as the mechanism through which lessons from one project are actually transferred to the next. Without this connective layer, cultural organizations risk what might be called organizational amnesia: each new exhibition, festival edition, or touring production relearns lessons that a previous project team already discovered, because there was no structural mechanism to capture and pass on that knowledge. Programme management, in this sense, is less about controlling individual projects and more about creating the conditions for cross-project learning to accumulate over time, which is precisely what sustainable delivery over multiple years or multiple project cycles requires.

Quality assurance frameworks offer another route to this same goal. Almuhaideb and Saeed (2020), writing on outcome-based education and the lessons of ABET accreditation in computing programs, describe how structured quality assurance processes can be adapted to support continuous improvement in outcome-focused, project-based environments. While their context is technical education accreditation, the underlying mechanism — defining

outcomes clearly, gathering evidence of whether they are met, and feeding that evidence back into program redesign — is directly transferable to cultural programs seeking to demonstrate not just artistic quality but consistent, improvable delivery over successive project cycles.

2.5 Community Embeddedness and the Long View

A recurring theme across this body of work is that sustainable cultural program delivery cannot be achieved by optimizing individual projects in isolation; it depends on the relationship between projects and the communities and institutions that surround them. Blandy and Fenn (2012) argue that community cultural development should be understood as infrastructure for sustaining cities, not as a series of discrete cultural events. This reframing matters because it shifts the unit of evaluation from "did this project succeed on its own terms" to "did this project strengthen the community's capacity to sustain cultural life going forward." A festival that is brilliantly executed but leaves no lasting relationships, skills, or infrastructure behind has succeeded as a project and arguably failed as cultural development.

Zintgraff, Daza, Vides, Fletcher, Kaszuba, and Webb (2023) illustrate what this looks like in a specific setting: their account of a project-based learning training program in Medellín, Colombia, traces how cultural and historical context shaped both the design and the reception of the program, demonstrating that project-based methods imported without adaptation to local context can misfire, while those grounded in local cultural and historical realities can generate durable civic and educational value. This is a caution against treating project-based management frameworks as culturally neutral technical tools. A management approach developed in one institutional and cultural setting will not transplant cleanly into another without deliberate translation, and cultural program managers working across regions or with diverse communities need to treat that translation work as part of the project, not as a side issue.

Bertolini et al. (2012), writing on planning education more broadly, extend this argument into professional training itself, framing project-based learning as a core mechanism for preparing planners — and by extension cultural and spatial development practitioners — to manage the pathologies that arise when planning processes are disconnected from the practical, situated realities of the places they affect. Their broader point, that planning education needs to move from a marginal add-on to a central part of professional formation, echoes the argument running through the cultural management literature: project competence is not a specialist add-on skill for arts administrators, but a core professional capability that needs to be built into how cultural practitioners are trained from the start.

2.6 Emerging Practices: Toward a Working Framework

Drawing these threads together, several emerging practices stand out as characteristic of organizations that are successfully adapting project-based management to sustainable cultural program delivery. Figure 1 presents these practices as an interconnected cycle rather than a linear sequence, reflecting the way organizations in the literature tend to revisit and reinforce each practice across successive project and programme cycles rather than completing them once and moving on.

Figure 1. An Emerging Framework for Sustainable Project-Based Delivery in Arts and Cultural Programs



Figure 1. An emerging framework for sustainable project-based delivery in arts and cultural programs

Table 2 summarizes each practice, its core mechanism, and the primary sources from which it is drawn.

Table 2: Summary of Emerging Practices for Sustainable Project-Based Delivery in Arts and Cultural Programs

Practice	Core Mechanism	Primary Sources
Selective adaptation of project tools	Retaining useful project structures (budgeting, milestones) while loosening rigid scope and single-client assumptions	Cwikla & Jalocho (2015)
Sustainability as a structural design parameter	Embedding sustainability into team formation, venue, and materials decisions from the outset, not as a late addition	Ćwikła et al. (2020); Sánchez-García & Reyes-de-Cózar (2025)
Transdisciplinary team formation	Bringing together artistic, technical, and community expertise from project inception	Sorici et al. (2023)
Programme-level learning infrastructure	Creating a coordination layer above individual projects to capture and transfer lessons	De Groot et al. (2022)
Digital infrastructure for	Using shared digital objects and systems to coordinate multi-site, multi-	Whyte & Lobo (2010)

Practice	Core Mechanism	Primary Sources
distributed delivery	partner projects	
Contextual sensitivity in method transfer	Adapting imported methods to local cultural and historical context rather than direct replication	Zintgraff et al. (2023)
Outcome-based quality assurance	Using structured, evidence-based review cycles to demonstrate and improve delivery quality	Almuhaideb & Saeed (2020)
Durable social project culture	Cultivating shared values and norms that travel with staff across projects and organizations	Wang et al. (2019)

Selective adaptation rather than wholesale adoption. Organizations that succeed do not import standard project management frameworks unchanged. Following the critique offered by Cwikla and Jalocha (2015), they identify which elements of project structure — budgeting discipline, milestone tracking, risk registers — genuinely serve the work, and which elements — rigid scope lock, single-client accountability — need to be loosened or replaced with structures better suited to multi-stakeholder, emergent creative processes.

Sustainability as a structural design parameter. Rather than adding sustainability requirements after a project is scoped, leading practice treats sustainability, following Sánchez-García and Reyes-de-Cózar (2025) and Ćwikła et al. (2020), as one of the parameters that shapes team composition, venue choice, materials, and timeline from the outset.

Transdisciplinary team formation. The most resilient project teams, as modelled in the extracurricular training described by Sorici et al. (2023), bring together participants from different disciplinary backgrounds early, rather than treating collaboration across artistic, technical, and community expertise as an afterthought.

Programme-level learning infrastructure. Following De Groot et al. (2022), sustainable organizations build a layer of coordination above individual projects specifically to capture lessons and pass them forward, preventing the loss of institutional knowledge that plagues organizations reliant on short-term or freelance project teams.

Digital infrastructure suited to distributed delivery. As Whyte and Lobo (2010) demonstrate, shared digital objects and systems allow multi-site, multi-partner cultural projects to coordinate without constant centralized oversight, a capability that has become essential as touring, co-production, and multi-venue programming have grown more common.

Contextual sensitivity in method transfer. Practices imported from other regions or sectors, per Zintgraff et al. (2023), require deliberate adaptation to local cultural and historical context rather than direct replication, particularly when cultural programs operate across diverse communities.

Outcome-based quality assurance. Structured, evidence-based review cycles, adapted from accreditation practices described by Almuhaideb and Saeed (2020), give organizations a mechanism for demonstrating and improving delivery quality across successive project cycles, which funders and partners increasingly expect.

A social project culture that outlasts individual projects. Finally, following Wang et al. (2019), organizations that sustain good practice over time cultivate shared values and norms that travel with staff and collaborators across projects, rather than relying on any single project's documentation to carry institutional memory forward.

2.7 Case Illustrations in Brief

Several of the studies reviewed here function as compact case studies in their own right and are worth drawing out explicitly. The Botanica Festival pavilion project described by Volz and Briant (2023) shows sustainability, design, and authentic learning converging in a single deliverable: students negotiated real material and structural constraints while producing a functioning piece of festival architecture, collapsing the usual distance between educational exercise and professional output. The virtual reality green building course examined by Hou et al. (2023) shows how digital simulation can let stakeholders test the sustainability consequences of design choices before physical resources are committed, a capability increasingly relevant to cultural organizations designing temporary structures, stage sets, or exhibition builds under tightening environmental expectations. The Medellín training program documented by Zintgraff et al. (2023) demonstrates how a project-based training model can be reshaped by local cultural and historical conditions, offering a cautionary and instructive counterpoint to approaches that assume methodological transfer is straightforward. Together, these cases suggest that the most valuable innovations in this space are rarely abstract methodological breakthroughs; they tend to emerge from the specific, situated work of adapting general principles to a particular festival, building, or community.

2.8 Challenges That Remain

None of this should suggest that the adaptation of project-based management to arts and cultural work is a solved problem. The asymmetry identified by Cwikla and Jalocha (2015) — a sector that manages almost entirely through projects but contributes little back to project management theory — persists, and it has practical consequences. Cultural managers often adopt terminology and tools from other sectors without the accompanying research base that would tell them which adaptations actually work in a cultural context, leading to trial-and-error implementation that is costly in time and morale.

There is also a persistent risk of what might be called sustainability formalism: adopting the language of sustainability, structural design, and outcome-based evaluation without the underlying organizational commitment that makes those practices meaningful. Sánchez-García and Reyes-de-Cózar's (2025) argument for treating sustainability as a structural parameter is compelling in principle, but implementing it requires organizational capacity — time, budget, and staff expertise — that many smaller cultural organizations simply do not have. The literature is more populated with examples from well-resourced university programs and large festivals than from small, community-based cultural organizations operating on precarious funding, and this is a genuine gap in the evidence base.

Finally, the tension between emergent artistic process and structured project delivery has not been resolved so much as managed. Every practice described above represents a compromise between the discipline that funders, boards, and delivery partners require and the openness that good creative and community work needs. Cultural managers who treat that compromise as a permanent, ongoing negotiation — rather than a problem to be solved once and then forgotten — are, based on the evidence reviewed here, the ones most likely to sustain high-quality program delivery over the long term.

3. Conclusion

Project-based management has become an unavoidable part of how arts and cultural programs are planned, funded, and delivered. The evidence gathered here suggests that the organizations doing this well are not the ones that have most faithfully adopted mainstream project management doctrine — predictive or adaptive — but the ones that have most thoughtfully adapted it: loosening rigid scope assumptions, treating sustainability as a design parameter rather than an add-on, building transdisciplinary teams, building coordination infrastructure that captures learning across projects, and remaining alert to the ways that imported methods need to be reshaped by local context. The relationship between project logic and cultural value is likely to remain unresolved in any final sense; what the emerging practice shows is that this tension, managed deliberately, can itself become a source of

resilience rather than a liability. As cultural organizations face growing pressure to demonstrate both artistic excellence and sustainable, accountable delivery, the practices described throughout this article offer a grounded, evidence-informed starting point for that ongoing work.

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