Islanders turn condemned school into an arts centre

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The ferry ride from the foot of Toronto’s Bay Street to Centre Island is crowded this summer morning people crossing Lake Ontario to visit the amusement park, play baseball, ride bicycles and enjoy a respite from the city heat.

But down the road from the park where the visitors are headed, there is not much relaxation. Hard at work with paint peppers and scrub brushes and rakes and brooms is a team of heat-reddened labourers who, for now, are ignoring the seductive lap of the water on the shore. All are united by a noble cause: to give new life to a condemned building.

The resurrection of the Island Public and Natural Science School, sought to become a multidisciplinary arts facility scheduled to open in the fall, is a summer project that one of the workers is particularly glad to embrace.

Long-time resident Jimmy Jones, 69, was part of a group of 10 other Islanders who last winter lobbied City Hall to prevent the demolition of the school which has seen thousands of students walk through its doors since the beginning of the century.

Jones was a student there himself, starting in 1896. His children attended, as did his grandchildren. But now a state-of-the-art public school, designed by architect Jack Diamond, has been built down the road. A wreckers ball was scheduled to visit the old school after the last day of classes in June. But the Islanders, a feisty bunch who have been pushing City Hall for decades to preserve the area’s heritage, made an emotional plea that not even hardened politicians could ignore.

"I have seen a lot of destruction on the island over the years and I have seen a lot of buildings torn down," said Jones, a slight man with hair so white it looks bleached by the sun. "This is a special building filled with history and it needed to be saved."

Coming to the rescue was Toronto Artscape Inc., a non-profit organization whose mandate is to create and sustain arts facilities within city communities and neighbourhoods where artists and arts organizations can rent low-cost work and living space.

It got involved with the island school project in February at the request of the city to see if the old building could be recycled. Executive director Tim Jones said Artscape took one look at the 30,000-square-foot building and fell in love. It has since secured a 20-year lease from the city for $1 a year, and a $125,000 grant to help with renovations.

It is estimated that the facility, to be called Gibraltar Point Centre for the Arts after the nearby historic Gibraltar Point lighthouse, will cost about $300,000 a year to run. Operating costs will be offset by artist rental fees, corporate conferences and retreats, to name just a couple of money-producing schemes Artscape will implement in the fall.

"There’s so much potential here," said Tim Jones, walking through the still-to-be-renovated classrooms. "We’re going to create an arts centre that is bubbling with creative energy. We have huge dreams of what this place can become."

First on the agenda is to transform the building into a series of studios and workshops where artists from across Canada can ply their trade while paying among the cheapest rental fees in Toronto. At $8 per square foot, the fee is about half the going rate. The building will also make way for a darkroom, two collectively run galleries, a music performance venue with recording facilities and 31 live-work units.

In the spring, Artscape alerted professional artists to send submissions for tenancies. The deadline was June 30. A five-member tenant-selection committee, made up of four artists and a community activist, is in the process of selecting who will work at Gibraltar Point as early as September.

Artscape is also working on its second plan: to turn part of the complex into a retreat that will attract artists to the island from across the country. At present, the only such retreat in Canada is in Banff.

Gibraltar Point will offer one-month residencies for artists working on projects for intensive periods. The winter rate will be $1,000 a month, which includes accommodation in one of the building’s 14 bedrooms. Without accommodation, the fee will drop to $500. During the summer months, the cost rises to $2,000.

Artscape is accepting applications now.

Occupants will work in large rooms whose windows overlook the island’s natural wonders.

“Our real goal, in the long term, is to integrate the building with its natural environment,” Tim Jones said. "I like to think of it as funky meets cottage."