It's still the same old story—art and artists survive while waiting for politicians to act.

By Christopher Hume

A city without artistes is like a body without a soul. And Toronto is fast losing both its artists and its soul—deeply because there's nowhere for them to live and work.

The cause is rising real estate values and the inescapable gentrification of gentrification. For a city like Toronto, it's hard to imagine itself as the cultural capital of Canada, the consequences of which is much more than just real estate values.

But signs have been taking with both artists and their supporters to maintain their foothold in Toronto. The arts community is just starting to organizing.

Indeed, the arts and culture community has never been more politically active today. Artists and activist groups have struggled hard to ensure their voices are heard in the decision-making process. As a result, the community has managed to put in place several large co-ops, some of which are moving to different areas of the city and more are planned. Various schemes have also been proposed that would allow artists to live legally in the arts districts or even work in schools, and live in community centres.

The city has seen several hundred artists at a time. Despite the efforts of the city, several thousands, who live in Metro, will be able to take advantage of these opportunities. The rest will have to make do the best they can trying to stretch their meagre resources far enough to cover the cost of life in Toronto, the world's most expensive city.

The exodus has already started. Artists are fleeing the city in record numbers to the small towns all over southern Ontario. Flesherton, for instance. Located 140 km northwest of Toronto, it is evolving into an improbable artists' colony. Please see Correspondent.
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Without question, there is a deep and profound crisis of affordability for artists in this city," says Dale Martin, who represents downtown at Metro Council. "The essential health of the city depends on the health of the arts and cultural community. That community needs the confidence of knowing it belongs in the city."

Artscapes is a not-for-profit, non-profit, non-governmental organization that provides space, services and support for artists. It was founded in 1990 by a group of artists and community leaders who recognized the need for more affordable space for artists in the city. The organization has grown to include a board of directors, staff and volunteers who work to ensure that artists have access to the resources they need to create and share their work.

Artscapes is currently working on a number of projects to address the needs of artists in the city. One of these projects is the production of a new building for artists in the city. The building will provide affordable space for artists to work and live, as well as a range of support services to help them succeed.

Despite the challenges faced by artists in the city, there is a growing recognition of the importance of the arts and culture to the city's vitality. Artscapes is working to ensure that artists have a voice in the city's planning and decision-making processes, and that their work is valued and supported.

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However, Artscapes doesn't have all its eggs in one basket. The group has been involved in a number of projects to provide affordable housing for artists, including the development of a new building for artists in the city. These projects are supported by partnerships with other organizations and government agencies, and they help to ensure that artists have access to the resources they need to create and share their work.

Artscapes also works to ensure that artists are represented in the city's planning and decision-making processes. The organization has worked to develop a range of tools and strategies to help artists share their ideas and perspectives with decision-makers, and to ensure that their needs and concerns are taken into account.

Artscapes believes that the arts and culture are essential to the vitality of the city, and that they should be supported and valued by all citizens. The organization works to ensure that artists have access to the resources they need to create and share their work, and to ensure that the arts and culture are valued and supported by all citizens.

The essential health of the city depends on the health of its arts and cultural community, and the community needs the confidence of knowing it belongs in the city.
Martin, who was a Toronto councillor, concurs. "The arts are a priority with the city," he says. "But not yet with Metro. However, I still think a lot more energy could be put into it."

The question remains whether or not artists can survive while they're waiting for the politicians to act. A survey published in a recent CARO Bulletin painted a bleak picture. Questionnaires were sent to 300 artists in all disciplines from a list of 19,086. Among the findings:

- "In 1988, the artists' average gross income from all sources was $23,000 (but) through art-related income, artists averaged a gross income of $11,771. When art-related expenses were subtracted, artists were left with $1,561 of their art-related income and $13,514 from all sources."

- "One-third of the artists owned their own work space, two-thirds rented... and 10 per cent... were both living and working in the same space. Two-thirds of the artists surveyed knew at least one artist who had recently left Toronto due to increased costs of working."

- "Of the visual artists surveyed, 28 per cent are currently looking for new work space and 57 per cent required over 400 sq. ft., while the current average studio is 180 sq. ft."

- "The survey also suggested a need for an additional 3,200 (artists) work spaces in the city of Toronto."

"Artists are making a mark in the city," says Bruce Peres, Executive assistant to Ward 5 Councillor Liz Amer. "We have to start thinking that artists are brought under the Building Code."

Pearce is hopeful that City Council will adopt a cultural facilities policy that, in conjunction with changes to the Official Plan, will enable artists to inhabit live/work spaces legally."

The difficulty is creating a balance between the need for affordable studios and conversely industrial space where businesses can operate and residents work. The city wants to preserve its industrial base and the jobs that go with it.

But like most players, Pearce feels that co-ops are the most promising alternative. Already two have been built; Arcadia Co-op at the west end of Harbourfront at the foot of Bathurst St. and Beaver Hall Co-op on McCaul St. Both were built during the '80s and are apparently successful."

"The Beaver Hall Co-op had a tough time getting off the ground," Pearce recalls. "They wanted different individual heights and windows."

In addition, to 25 St. Charles Ave., there are plans to build an artists' co-op on Coxwell Ave., east of the main. Again, it will be located on city-owned land and will give artists a place both to live and work.

Some of the most interesting ideas have not come from the public sector but from concerned entrepreneurs," David Jackson, a Toronto art critic stated. "Artists and Betty Rosser, for example, are small-scale developers who have made a number of artistic projects very busy with their relatively inexpensive condominium projects tailored to suit their specific needs. Curved out of three old warehouses in the downtown area, they represent a rare blend of social commitment and profit-motivation."

A much grander scheme foresees a 16-storey multi-use tower built on a site south of the newly-restored Pantages Theatre. It will contain 43 live/work studios for artists, rehearsal halls for dancers and musicians, office space for non-profit arts groups and even a small recording facility. The proposal, not surprisingly, comes from Garth Drabinsky, the impresario of the Canadian Opera Company, who now heads his Live Entertainment Corp."

"Even major artists are having to leave the core of Toronto because they can't afford it," Drabinsky grumbles. "I think that's shocking. Toronto is the visual arts capital of Canada. If we let that happen, ultimately, we'll have a void in the city."

Drabinsky, once a part of the Vase collection of the National Gallery of Canada, was president of the Toronto Civic Forum and head of the Toronto Atmospheric Fund. He's now been named vice-president of the Canadian Theatre Council, a position he's held for the past two years.

"It will be spectacular," Drabinsky declares. "It's a fabulous live/work space that artists could gain access to through competition."

That's certainly the most novel suggestion to have emerged so far. And who's to say that it won't be eagerly received by all concerned? One thing's clear, however; it'll take many more ideas and much more action in this area before the problem is solved. And before the city can finally provide its artists the place of honor they deserve.