

THE PROGRESS ZONE



The Arts Project

Looking to Toronto's Artscape for inspiration

by Susan Scott

Despite being temporarily delayed by the Millennium Committee, The Arts Project – the group proposing an arts incubator for downtown London – has not been idle.

TAP has incorporated, applied for charity status, and initiated a program to help artists display their work in non-traditional settings. It's applied for a 4-year, \$250,000 grant from The Trillium Foundation and is poised to do a site analysis. And after meeting with city administrator Linda Reed, it's updating its business plan.

Last month, TAP's Debra Bray and Lawrence Karn, who are active participants in Advance London, also met with Heritage Canada and toured Toronto's Artscape.

Since 1991, Artscape has started-up and managed five arts facilities in downtown Toronto. Four buildings provide 98 low-cost artists' studios, 31 live/work units, and a cooperatively run art gallery. The fifth is for musicians and includes a 150-seat performance centre and recording studios.

Recently, the non-profit group acquired a sixth building on Toronto Island, leased from the City for \$1.00 annually. Plans are to convert it into a multipurpose centre that houses 20-25 artists' studios and offers short-term residency to artists from other locales. The centre will also be a retreat where non-profit organizations can hold meetings and

small conferences.

Artscape grew out of the Toronto Arts Council when real estate prices skyrocketed during the 1980s. "There was a great deal of concern about the barriers artists faced in trying to (find) safe, affordable, and secure places to work and live," says Tim Jones, Artscape's executive director.

At first the group focused on working with Toronto's planning department to promote favourable facilities-related policies. Then in 1989 Artscape co-published "No Vacancy," a major report on the state of Toronto's arts facilities, and it became proactive by opening its own no-frills centres.

"We're not an organization that builds the brass and glass kind of palace for the arts," says Jones. "We look at the basic needs artists have... then try to find ways to provide them at the lowest possible cost."

Because of reduced federal and provincial funding, Artscape forms strategic partnerships to finance their facilities. Partners include sympathetic private sector landlords, economic development groups, and various government bodies.

"We don't have a cookie-cutter approach to development," says Jones. "So many things have to line-up in order to get a new project off-the-ground. You need political support, the right real estate, the right market conditions, the community will to make it happen. And not the least is the money to reacquaint or build what you (require)."

While 12% of Artscape's budget comes from the municipality to help cover overall operating expenses, each facility runs on a cost recovery basis with revenues from rents and subsidized housing grants. Although the City's support has been essential to Artscape's success, that support is based on economic returns.

"Artists help revitalize local economies when they move into neighbourhoods," says Jones, citing Yorkville and Queen Street West as examples. "Before long a process of gentrification happens, where (the area) becomes such a hot spot that high-end retailers want to be there too."

But gentrification is a double-edged sword. For when cafés, funky shops, and posh retailers follow, real estate prices rise and drive artists out. It is this constant displacement that Artscape hopes to stabilize. And in the process, it's become a model for groups like TAP.

"I think (TAP) is a fantastic initiative," says Jones. "The arts community needs to join together and support something as exciting as this, which could really benefit everybody in the downtown core."

Debra Bray believes Artscape is an inspiration for London. "If Toronto can have six downtown arts facilities, why can't London have one?" she asks. It's a question worth repeating until The Arts Project is on the fast track again.