

## **Pave Paradise, Put Up A Condo Tower**

### **The converted factory at 48 abell is exactly the type of housing toronto needs for artists -- too bad they're knocking it down**

The ugly plywood hoarding that snakes along the back of 48 Abell -- a 119-year-old factory building now home to 80 live/work studio spaces -- prevents Matt Wyatt and Cam deLaat from trucking music equipment and art supplies to and from the garage door that forms a section of wall in their 2,000-square-foot apartment. Wyatt and deLaat rehearse in the back of the space they share with architect Michelle Van Eyk and OCAD student Tanya Osmond. Wyatt shows his artwork here too. His large paintings hang on the walls surrounding the 600-square-foot sprung dance floor, built by the previous tenants who used the space as a dance studio.

Working from home means they don't have to pay to paint and practice elsewhere. And when they have gigs, they often don't have far to go -- the old lamp factory where they live is just south of Queen Street West, near the Gladstone Hotel, the Drake, the Social and other cultural hotspots, including scores of galleries, that line the streetscape west of Ossington. The West Queen West neighbourhood (or, in technical terms, the M6J postal code) is home to the fifth highest concentration of artists in all of Canada. That Wyatt and deLaat must now carry their equipment down a narrow alley between the hoarding and their building is little more than a nuisance, all things considered.

Yet they speak of the hoarding with disdain, as do many of the other residents in the crumbling brick building. The eight-foot wooden wall is a sign of unwanted change. Three years ago, when artist Jessica Rose moved her furniture onto the deck of her third floor, 650-square-foot apartment to make extra space to create artwork for an upcoming show, she looked across a small forest of weed trees that ran between the building, the train tracks and Abell Street to the west. The hoarding was put up when the greenery was cut down to make way for "stacked townhouses" to be built next door. All that's there now is a desert of sand and dust.

The technically illegal live/work spaces at 48 Abell (and the community of artists, architects, musicians, dancers, publishers and other creative types that came to fill them) are now one step closer to suffering the same fate as the weeds. A structural report saying it'd be too expensive to bring the old building up to code was presented to city council two weeks ago. The building's owner intends to demolish the old factory to make way for a high-rise affordable housing building and a tower of condominiums, both up to 19 storeys tall. Three other developers in the area have applied to build residential high-rises as well, between nine and 19 storeys tall.

That artists are being displaced to make way for condos isn't anything new. "Artists have always had a really bizarre relationship with the real-estate industry," says Reid Henry, researcher for Artscape, a non-profit organization set up 20 years ago to help create affordable spaces for creative entrepreneurs. "They tend to be this catalytic energy in these transition zones. The development industry certainly recognizes that and they follow."

But 48 Abell has slowly evolved into the type of building that houses the type of community ArtScape spends months, even years, building partnerships and finding funding to create and sustain. In 2003, the city adopted a Culture Plan for the Creative City with plans to "position Toronto as an international cultural capital and to have arts, culture and heritage at the centre of the economic and social development of the city." Now, in the midst of what's been dubbed Toronto's cultural renaissance -- during which

the city has invested millions into revitalizing institutions such as the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Royal Ontario Museum and the National Ballet School -- affordable spaces for emerging artists to live and work in are becoming harder and harder to find.

Rose, who's lived at 48 Abell since she moved there with her mother when she was 15 years old, has spent the last year attending community meetings and in working groups with developers and planners to try to save her building, or at least ensure any spaces lost are ultimately replaced. "The difference between now and 1972, or whatever, is that we're running out of spaces," she says. "Where are we going to go?"

Henry describes the kinds of spaces artists tend to gravitate towards: "High ceilings, lots of light, flexible, adaptable buildings that can change over time -- these are what these old warehousing districts were able to provide," he says. Living near other artists and being able to exchange ideas and collaborate also allow creative communities to prosper, says Rose. "Having a bicycle is a major thing, having access to other people is a major thing. Being close to your gallery or museum or whoever's representing you is important," she says. "If you can afford to have a home and a studio, they need to be close by."

Rose, who's participated in shows at many of the galleries in the area, attributes much of her success to her location and the people around her. "My neighbour Sabrina is a journalist and producer for the CBC; her boyfriend is a well-known comedian and video artist. My other neighbour is a filmmaker. Down the hall, Lisa is a fiction writer. Across the hall from me is a recording studio and down the hall are the offices for The Clothing Show," she explains. "The tenants of 48 Abell Street form a community that has a 15-year legacy."

While the city acknowledges the important role artists have played in the success of the West Queen West neighbourhood -- their own reports describe the neighbourhood as "the nucleus for the creative sector in the west downtown" and "an example of what a creative city has to offer to its residents and the world" -- the planner for the area, Elise Hug, says there's little they can do to ensure the 80 spaces that will be lost if 48 Abell is torn down will be replaced. "We're recommending [80 live/work spaces] be a target [for future development in the area], but we can't require it," Hug says.

Joe Lobko, an architect in South Riverdale, is frustrated with the city's inability to permit developers to create live/work spaces here and in the east end -- he points out that planners refused an application to build a mixed-use community where the Toronto Film Studios now sit. "The interesting thing is that, while the city and the GTA continue to grow significantly every year, job growth in the city is [slower than population growth]. That's not healthy," he says from his office in the old Wrigley Factory on Carlaw. "We have the third largest concentration of designers in North America. It's an increasingly important part of our economy. Toronto is a creative hub, but there's very little space for this creative stuff to happen."

Ken Greenberg, the former director of design and architecture for the City of Toronto, argues that Toronto needs to be less hidebound in its approach to regulation. "These are examples of taking all the winning conditions and turning them into losing conditions," he says. "In the case of 48 Abell, the bitter irony is that this was all in place. It wasn't as if you had to go out and create something that didn't exist. So it's not only that we can't seem to confront the difficulty of creating [affordable spaces for artists], we're not even able to hang on to what we already have."

Not being able to hang on to buildings like 48 Abell may also mean not being able to hang on to our artists, which doesn't bode well for those cultural institutions we're spending so much money on. Henry argues that, if we're going to build a creative city, there's got to be a better balance: "Councils typically understand the feeder system for hockey -- minor hockey investment can lead to guys in the NHL -- but they don't put the same investment into the feeder system for art."

Rose is still hopeful her building can be saved. "It's hard to accept that everybody wants to come in here and wants a piece of it," she says. "I just want my life back."

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