

Toronto Star	(Daily)	Page B4 B1	Code 440	AYO	Circ.: 705,336
Toronto, ON	2001-11-02				

Distillery to become a village for art

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The 160-year-old Gooderham and Worts distillery is about to be transformed into a centre for culture and the arts.

The announcement was made yesterday after Cityscape Development Corp. revealed it would buy the historic downtown complex from its current owner, Allied Domecq Pension Fund.

With 44 buildings on the site, the bulk of them from the 19th century, the distillery is one of the finest remaining examples of High Victorian industrial architecture in Canada.

Though Berman would not discuss the cost of the property, he confirmed it was in the tens of millions.

"The site will become an important cultural mecca for the city," predicts Cityscape partner John Berman, "which will include galleries, artists' studios, artists' workshops and ven-

ues for the performing arts. Restaurants, retail and market uses will augment the cultural focus and help us bring the precinct to life."

The first step, explains Berman's partner, David Jackson, is to open up the site for studios: "Artists will go where other people won't and help rejuvenate a part of town and turn it into something wonderful. They've done that in many areas, but now they're being kicked out of buildings all over

the city."

Tim Jones, executive director of Artscape, a non-profit agency established 15 years ago to increase the amount of space available for artists to live and work downtown, has high hopes for the distillery.

"We're really excited," he said yesterday. "We have met with Cityscape a couple of times already to explore

ways we could work together. We have more than 300 individual people and organizations on our waiting list. There's huge demand for more space."

Though details are unclear, Cityscape hopes to begin rehabilitation as soon as possible. In addition to providing studios, they want to turn the complex into a major entertainment venue for audiences as well as artists.

"It's an ambitious plan," Berman agrees. "We want to restore all the buildings. We're going to develop them in pods, starting at the east end of the site. What we have in mind is a strictly pedestrian precinct with galleries and restaurants, street vendors and live music. We've spoken to the city about bringing craft shows

and the jazz festival to the site. There's enough room around the perimeter for parking and new construction if we need it in the years ahead."

As the Cityscape partners see it, the distillery already has its own street grid, enabling it to accommodate a community. The main thoroughfare, Trinity St., extends north-south through the heart of the site; other smaller arteries run east and west from it.

"We all appreciate that what's important is the historic character of the site," Jackson adds. "The first time we toured it last spring, we fell in love with it. We'll begin by working with artists."

Both partners are convinced the soil contamination is not as serious as reported, and that it should not present an obstacle to

their scheme. Though formed just five years ago, Cityscape has an extensive track record in restoring heritage properties. It renovated the magnificent Stewart Building on College St. several years ago and is currently redeveloping four 19th-century mansions on Jarvis St.

"I needed some good news," said an enthusiastic city councillor Pam McConnell (Toronto Centre-Rosedale). "I think the arts community really deserves a place to call its own in the centre of the city. That's why the fit with artists makes so much sense; they can move into a community and make it come alive. I'm terribly excited about it."

Cityscape doesn't gain legal possession of the distillery until Dec. 10. But the company insists changes will be visible by spring.

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