

Islanders turn condemned school into an arts centre

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Arts Reporter, Toronto

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 peelers 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, soon 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 island 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 1936. 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 wrecker's 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



Jimmy Jones and Tim Jones

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 (no relation to Jimmy) 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 other 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 \$1,200 and \$600, respectively. 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."

Artists build island retreat

Clean-up is first task as Artspace begins makeover of school near Hanlan's Point

By ROBERT CHAW
ARTSWRITER

Imagine you are an artist with a major exhibition coming up. You need to get away from a city for the finishing touches on that great northern landscape you're creating.

Perhaps you're an author who has a suitcase-full of proofs to read so you can make sure your great Canadian novel has no typos. What you need most of all is to be alone.

Maybe you are organizing a retreat for your book club, or to plan strategy for the next campaign to plant street trees in Toronto. Artspace has the perfect place for you.

Artspace has just taken over the former Toronto Island Public and Natural Science School, leasing it from the city for 20 years at \$1 a year.

The newly named Gibraltar Point Centre for the Arts is on the southwestern edge of Centre Island, near Hanlan's Point and a few steps away from an idyllic, secluded sandy beach.

Peaceful, it certainly is. Seagulls cry and waves lap the shore. Look hard enough and you might just be able to see the city near of your eye.

Islanders' lifestyle by giving a friendly wave as they pass the blue-grey sprawl of buildings where so many of them went to school.



The single-story school was built in six stages, beginning in 1960 and with a major expansion from 1965 to '81. There are a variety of out-buildings, including five ugly porta-bathrooms.

Altogether, there are 46 rooms many of which have abundant natural light. Ceiling heights range from 8 to 12 feet. There is a large dining room and kitchen and a common room, complete with working fireplace, that will be the centrepiece of a retreat centre.

The corridors have child-level drinking fountains and there are tiny toilet urinals in the boys' washrooms. The rooms are mostly empty, with stacks of furniture left here and there. A map of Canada still hangs in front of a blackboard in one classroom. Another room is filled with junk — an old toaster, a TV, piles of boxes, a pair of red ski pants, a stack of 17 records.

The clean-up is just beginning. Artspace plans to spend at least \$750,000 on repairs, including some painting, boardwalks, parking up one building that has slipped in the middle. The Trillium Foundation has kick-started the project with a \$150,000 grant.

A mix of professionals and volunteers will be used for the renovations, which are expected to cost \$300,000 over the next three years, says Tim Jones, Artspace's executive director.

Artspace is also running a design competition for Ontario College of Art students, with a \$1,000 first prize and \$500 runner-up purse to be awarded on July 6.

The challenge is to come up with a low-tech, economical plan to spruce up the school, inside and out.

Particular attention is being paid to the main entrance, the facades of both the main building and the portables and the public corridors. The coming up with a design that is both functional, appealing and creating some green areas are also a priority.

I tend to see a school until only a month

ago, the 11-shaped centre will become a haven and meeting place for artists from all disciplines, taking in its first customers in about two months' time.

"The only limit on what we can do here is our imagination," says Susan Serran, Artspace's partnerships and community relations officer.

The 30,000-square-foot centre will have several types of tenants.

■ Long-term users who sign one- to three-year leases for studio space at \$8 per square foot per year, half the average rate in downtown Toronto.

■ Long-term tenants who provide a space for other artists, such as an art-inn or training service.

■ Short-term rentals by individuals, collectives or non-profit organizations that would use facilities for rehearsals, classes, workshops, lectures or

■ These renters will be charged \$25 to \$100 per hour, depending on the room or rooms being used, and would be responsible for everything, including marketing, registration and transportation.

■ Living/working rentals of the centre's 15 former staff dormitories and work studios that will be "highly subsidized" but for short stays only.

"We are not running a hotel out here," says

Jones. "There will be long-term tenants, people who anchor the place, but also people moving through every month.

Artspace is a non-profit organization that manages five other properties —

at 60 Atlantic Ave., 900 and

1313 Queen St. W., 96 Spadina Ave. and the Music Gallery at 179

Richmond St. W.

Founded in 1985, its main aim is to provide low-cost work and

livework space for individual

artists.

Artspace grew out of the Toronto Arts Council and receives 12 per cent of its budget from the municipality.

Philosophically, it represents a shift away from the old governmental thinking of pouring money into large arts centres.

"We are community-driven, not edifice-driven," says Jones, who points to Yorkville and Queen St. W. as examples of artists helping to revitalize local communities.

And it was to Artspace that a committee of Islanders turned in its fight to save the school from demolition.

"We wanted to practise what we preach to our children and recycle the building, rather than seeing it to go

to landfill," says Islander Linda Wilson.

With she and her mother, 82-year-old Rose Wilson, were pupils at the school and both joined the committee to save it.

The committee's passion and determination, allied with Artspace's political savvy, and contacts, won the day.

Islanders have been hired by Artspace to act as caretakers and to supervise the clean-up. They also are represented on the various committees that will choose tenants for the new arts centre.

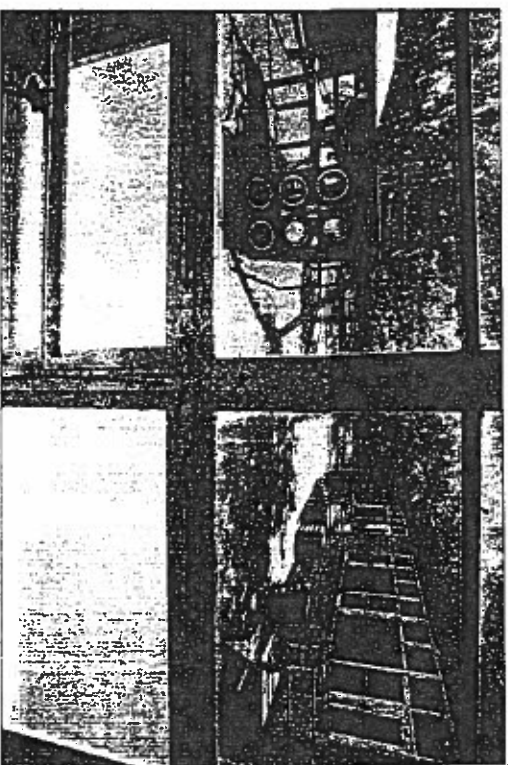
The centre will cost about \$300,000 to run.

"We have budgeted very conservatively," says Jones, a former general manager of Buddies in Bad Times Theatre.

"Our aim is to make it self-sustaining within 18 months and to recover our capital investment.

Soon the influx of artists will begin to arrive, taking the Centre Island ferry and walking, cycling or rollerblading to the arts centre.

"I'd like to see as many people as possible on the ferry, you see their shoulders drop as they begin to relax," says Jones. "It's great to see"



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NOT YET GIBBRALTAR: Non-profit Artspace organization is looking for a low-tech, recommissioned plan to spruce up the former Toronto Island Public School, inside and out, and plans to spend \$300,000 over the next three years in converting the grounds into a haven for artists from all disciplines.

