

Artists build island retreat

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

BY ROBERT CREW
ARTS WRITER

Imagine you are an artist with a major exhibition coming up. You need to get away from it all to put the finishing touches on that great northern landscape you are 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 ballet company, to plan strategy for the new millennium.

Toronto Artscape has the perfect place for you.

Artscape 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 — out of the corner of your eye.

Islanders bicycle by, giving a friendly wave as they pass the blue/gray sprawl of buildings where so many of them went to school.

The single-storey school was built in six stages, beginning in 1909 and with a major

ago, the H-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 Susa Serran, Artscape'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 service for other artists, such as an artist-run gallery, a music/recording studio or a framing service.

- Short-term rentals by individual collectives or non-profit organizations that would use facilities for rehearsal classes, workshops, lectures and camps.

These renters will be charged \$25 to \$40 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," say Jones. "There will be long-term tenants, people who anchor the place, but also people moving through every month."

Artscape 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 17 Richmond St. W.

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



Old Island school saved, artfully

By MOIRA MacDONALD
Toronto Sun

For Toronto Island's historic old public and natural science school, it looks like art is about to triumph over the wrecking ball.

It's expected the school will be turned into an arts centre by a non-profit, taxpayer-funded group called Artscape. Toronto Islanders who wanted to save the school, parts of which were built in 1901, approached the group.

On Tuesday, Toronto city staff will recommend the city's economic development committee amend an August 1997 contract that gave the go-ahead for a new \$8.4 million Island Public/Natural Science School, condi-

tional on the demolition of the old school.

"We're not asking the city for any money. We're asking for a 20-year lease on the building at \$1 a year," said Susan Serran, coordinator of Artscape's project. "Here's a building that has many good years in it. Why not reduce, reuse and recycle?"

'A new idea'

Artscape has managed to overcome environmental, financial and contractual arguments against saving the school.

The city's parks department had originally opposed the idea when islanders started working on it last fall. But Frank Kershaw, the de-

partment's policy and development director said Artscape is "a new idea not present at other times. They are prepared to refurbish the school."

The project is also planned to be financially self-sustaining after three years, Serran added.

Artscape plans to renovate the 26,000-square-foot school over three years, creating up to 25 artist studios for lease as well as a "mini-conference" centre that could be used for meetings of up to 250 people. The economic development commission is supporting the idea partly because of its potential for contributing to the city's cultural life.

Artists get island haven as school saved

BY SHANNON BLACK

An old school on Toronto Island slated for demolition will be reborn as an arts facility later this year.

The former site of the Island Public and Natural Science School, a sprawling 30,000-square-foot building bordered by an inspiring stretch of beach, will be

remodelled to serve professional artists in search of affordable studio space.

"It is a place that is meant to embrace individual artists," said Tim Jones, executive director of Artscape, a city-sponsored non-profit arts organization.

"But it is also meant to welcome other sectors of the not-for-profit community in Toronto."

The school, located at Gibraltar Point, on

the southwestern edge of the island, will be split into different types of space, available for rent by the square foot. Artists wish to secure a long-term lease (up to three years) will pay \$8 per square foot — the average rate in downtown Toronto, according to Mr. Jones. Small bedrooms previously used by school staff, will be rented to out-of-town and international artists for shorter periods. And the large rooms in the school, including a common room and a dining hall, will be remade as retreat centre and studio space for non-profit organizations and arts programs.

Artscape hopes to raise \$250,000 to refurbish the facility and naturalize a third of the asphalt-covered school grounds over the next three years.

National Post

1948 to '53. There are a variety of outbuildings, including five ugly portables (all mould-free).

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 toilets in the boy's washrooms.

The rooms are mostly empty, with sticks 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 boots, a stack of LP records.

The clean-up is just beginning.

Artscape plans to spend at least \$75,000 on repainting, replacing some rotting boards outside, propping up one building that has sagged 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, Artscape's executive director.

Artscape 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, common rooms and dormitories. Tearing up the asphalt and creating some green areas are also a priority.

Used as a school until only a month

ual artists.

Artscape 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 Artscape 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 landfill," says Islander Linda Wilson.

Both 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 Artscape's political savvy and contacts, won the day.

Islanders have been hired by Artscape 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 roller-blading to the arts centre.

"As soon as people get on the ferry, you see their shoulders drop as they begin to relax," says Jones. "It's great to see."