

Globe and Mail	(Daily)	Page	Code		
National	2002-01-05	A14	180, 480	DJE	Circ: 396,389

# Space-seeking artists' group sets sights on TTC barns

BY CHRISTINE BOYD

★ The unused TTC Wychwood Barns — long considered an eyesore — could soon be transformed into a thriving community centre with a park, artists' studios and galleries, vegetable gardens and other facilities.

The five red-brick barns — located south of St. Clair Avenue W. between Wychwood and Christie Avenues — are some of the city's few examples of industrial architecture that survive from the early 20th century.

However, they have slowly deteriorated over the years, and the city, their current owner, lacks the funds to redevelop them.

Last fall, the city asked Artscape, a non-profit organization founded 15 years ago, to find cheap workshop and living space for artists, to gather feedback from the community and to come up with a redevelopment plan.

While the exact future of the facilities has yet to be determined, the group hopes to lease at least some of the buildings from the city for \$1 a year, then raise funds from government and private sponsors to renovate the space and rent it to artists as well as to community groups within three years.

The city could then develop the two hectares of surrounding property into a park.

"This is the most exciting initiative to hit the West End of Toronto in a long time," said city councillor Joe Mihevc, whose office in Ward 21 (St. Paul's) is a short walk away.

"We're not just doing this for the arts community because we're nice people."

A long-time advocate for redevelopment, Mr. Mihevc said a thriving cultural community at the site would pump welcome dollars into the neighbourhood's economy and help revitalize the region.

He envisions that several of the barns — which range from 60 to 99 metres long and 11 to 13 metres wide, and are flooded with natural light from a central skylight — might perhaps be hollowed out to create a central piazza with performance space surrounded by shops, galleries, studios and apartments.

While little has been done so far on the site itself, beyond a bit of tidying, he said it's come a long way since several years ago, when the barns were nearly demolished.

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*Councillor Joe Mihevc*

The site has a unique history. The Toronto Civic Railway built the first two barns in 1913 and 1916 for light servicing of streetcars, and the newly formed Toronto Transit Commission added the other three in 1921.

Until 1978, the barns formed one of seven streetcar houses operated

by the TTC, and serviced about 10 routes and 167 streetcars at their peak. After 1978, the barns were used for little beyond storing vehicles and they slowly deteriorated. In 1998, the TTC declared the land surplus and it decided the land back to the city a year later.

The redevelopment is still in its earliest stages and wide open to public input. Tim Jones, Artscape's executive director, said.

"Nothing has really been decided yet. A large community of very interested people want to have a say in what happens there, and we want to hear from (them) and get people's reaction to it."

Artscape is working closely with the city, other community groups and community members, he said. More than 150 people — double what was expected — attended a public brainstorming session in mid-December.

The group plans to hold a second public meeting on Jan. 22 and hopes to present a tentative design plan at a fundraising dinner on Feb. 16.

But Mr. Jones and Mr. Mihevc agree the plan should include space for artists.

"We could fill five times the number of barns that are there, that's how much interest there is in the arts community and how much need there is," Mr. Mihevc said.

Artscape fields more than 15 calls a day from artists and arts organizations in search of space. According to Mr. Jones, they have more than 300 names on a waiting list for studio and office space, and another 500 who want a place to work and live.

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