

Streetcar barns make long journey to become artists' colony

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One of the barns has been turned into a greenhouse where food security organization The Stop will grow food. (Wychwood Barns/Artscape)

A community initiative has transformed a set of 95-year-old streetcar maintenance barns into an artists' colony and community centre in mid-town Toronto.

The Wychwood Barns Project opens Thursday after a \$21.2-million redevelopment of former Toronto Transit Commission barns unused for more than 25 years.

The barns, built between 1913 and 1921, were converted into:

- 26 units of housing for artists and their families.
- 15 affordable studio spaces.
- 13 offices for non-profit arts and environmental groups.
- Two theatre spaces and an art gallery.
- A community space that will be home to a farmers market.
- A year-round greenhouse.
- Parkland and playgrounds.

Toronto-based duToit Architects Ltd, the architects who redesigned the site, started with five long, narrow brick barns, each with a deep pit where maintenance workers could fix the underside of a streetcar. DuToit was working with landscape architects Planning Partnership and heritage specialists E.R.A. Architects Inc.



A doorway leading into one of the studios shows the streetcars, dating from 1913, once repaired here. (Wychwood Barns/Artscape)

They were juggling the desire to preserve heritage buildings with the community demands for parkland, affordable housing and space for community use.

Four of the barns remain with their old industrial brick, glass skylights and exposed steel structure, but one is now a greenhouse, a second has space for offices of environmental and arts organizations and a third is an open community space.

There is a small gallery run by the Green Arts Barns Community Association, a new non-profit with local members, and theatre spaces to be used by a children's theatre group moving into one of the offices, Theatre Direct.

The fourth barn has small artists studios opening onto the community space, with the idea that school groups or people attending local events could peek inside and see the artists at work. Natural light from the community area, with its glass roof, streams into the studios.

Have own space

Artist Leanne Davies is sharing one with fellow artist Karen Cantello. Both live nearby and have been working from home, struggling with the distractions of family and laundry.

"Having my own space will be very different for me," Davies said.

The studio door stands open and she's willing to have school groups and neighbours walk in and watch her paint.

Davies says she was impressed with the community effort behind the Barns project.

"It's the first time I've been involved with an project with so much organization behind it. It's like being involved in a great Jane Jacobs moment."

Jacobs was the Toronto-based urban thinker who pushed for grassroots urban renewal and believed that the wealth of cities came from the collaboration of groups of creative people.

When plans to redevelop the Wychwood Barns site were first put forward, the local community was split over what should be done. Some neighbours wanted the barns razed to make way for parkland — others feared condo developers would move in and create new housing, without any amenities.

The local community group in favour of redeveloping the barns into an artists' colony eventually won out. In 2004, the City of Toronto chose non-profit arts group Artscape, which has been involved in arts-related redevelopment in the Distillery district, Parkdale and other Toronto neighbourhoods, to manage the redevelopment.

Artscape worked with food security organization Stop Community Centre, which is managing the greenhouse, and with local groups. It also co-operated with Housing Connections, the social housing authority, to select artists for the affordable housing units.

Moved in and ready to create

Those chosen include a writer, an actor, and several visual artists and their families and they were selected based on their incomes and willingness to adapt to the new community.

Nadia Tasci, a glass-blower, and her partner, Uros Jelic, a painter, moved into a one-bedroom unit last week.

Along with the couch and the cat, they moved in an oxygen concentrator and installed an industrial exhaust system so Tasci can make her glass jewellery in their small unit without putting toxins in the air.

"It's very important to have a clean environment for this kind of work," she said, adding that she needs a landlord who understands she will be working with glass-blowing equipment.

The low rent and good location will allow Jelic to work less and paint more, he says.

"It's important for artists who are starting out," Tasci said. "It gives us the opportunity to grow as artists and get involved in more business opportunities. I will be able to go to more shows in the U.S. and sell more."

Mexican-born artist Jesus Mora, who has rented one of the tiny bachelor units, is looking forward to living in an artists' community and hopes to collaborate with other artists to show work.

He's also involved in the Latin American Canadian Art Projects which has rented office space in the building next door.

The building has been designed to be environmentally sustainable, with geothermal heating, a grey-water reuse system, energy efficient lighting and water conserving plumbing.

An opening ceremony for Wychwood Art Barns, which is located near St. Clair Avenue West and Christie Street, is planned for 3:30 Thursday, with a community fair planned for Saturday. Admission is free.