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FEATURES



Wych Will

BY PAUL GALLANT November 19, 2008 09:11

The Artscape Wychwood BARNs officially open Nov 20 at 3:30pm. The weekly farmers' market opens Nov 22 9am-noon. 76 Wychwood (at Christie).

www.greenartsbarns.ca or
www.torontoartscape.on.ca.

The restored brick walls and soaring ceilings conjure marketing campaigns for pricey lofts. The ad copy writ and park views in a heritage building just a stone's throw from a reinvigorated St. Clair West.

"Just wait till you see the other side," says Tim Jones, CEO of [Artscape](#), all property-developer proud. His e The Studio Barn contains sparkling loft spaces with unique floor plans and lots of natural light.

But Jones is no real-estate mogul — not quite. If there are traces of lifestyle-driven property development i that's because there are traces of pretty much everything at Wychwood. What's planned for the four barns interior space sitting in a four-acre park — would give [Richard Florida](#) an orgasm. There's 26 rent-geared-tc for artists and their families, rental office space for 12 arts and environmental organizations, 15 artist retail run by The Stop Community Food Centre, a group that provides food for low-income families and education weekly farmers' market, an environmental education centre and a spectacular event space the width and length of a short city block.

"We call it the Covered Street Barn," says Jones. The not-for-profit Artscape has been providing live-work spaces for Toronto artists since 1986. organization has pushed its own limits, partly because of its growing ambitions and partly out of necessity: the locals had their own ideas about t the Wychwood BARNs, including tearing them down. Artscape's solution was to go big and to provide something for everybody. Cramping more t tenants into Wychwood than any of its other five complexes (which include 900 Queen West and Gibraltar Point), it struck more deals than ever

That collaboration is the project's strength and also where it gets tricky. After eight years of planning and construction, hundreds of meetings, th elections, an aggressive campaign to stop the project and a ballooning budget which rose to \$21.2 million from original estimates of \$14 million, Wychwood this month takes the project's future out of Artscape's hands. When you're in the business of unlocking "the creative potential of peop PR material proclaims), you eventually find yourself handing the kids the keys to the candy shop.

"We knew that, at the end of the day, Artscape was going to be on the hook for everything," says Jones. "If we were going to take this on, it hac to be environmentally and financially sustainable. And it will be."

Other developers are in the business of selling granite countertops and floor-to-ceiling windows; Artscape is in the business of "building a world t and creativity." Just try putting that in a rental agreement.

The Wychwood BARNs — no-frills maintenance garages, really — were built in the 1910s and '20s to service Toronto's growing fleet of the busiest time for the barns, a grease-stained industrial hub tucked awkwardly into a residential neighbourhood off Christie, just south of St. C fallen into disuse and it soon became hard to imagine them as anything more than dilapidated eyesores. A mid-'90s study declared them unsafe them to be structurally sound). In 1998 the city finally decided to grapple with them and, since there was no money to save them, any practical options: tear them down for a housing development or tear them down for a park.

"Some people wanted ritzy-pitzy townhouses because it would best serve their property values," says Roscoe Handford, who has lived near the V years. She works with The Stop and is one of the farmers' market organizers. "Nobody knew what was possible, but some people felt they would [besides townhouses] there." At one point, Handford went door-to-door with a clipboard, asking for suggestions. Library, swimming pool, bowling wanted something different.

In a 2000 survey of 136 neighbours, 84.7 per cent favoured an option that carved three single-family homes out of the property and turned the definition of park, as it turns out, is slippery: some interpreted it as nothing but green space and playgrounds, while others thought the barns th

role.

"I could understand how someone could say, 'Dump them all,'" says Joe Mihevc, councillor for Ward 21. "But when you went in and saw the maji were impressed. I took Tim Jones through and he was sold." The first church-basement meeting about Artscape's involvement had chairs for 50 in the middle of a blizzard. While some locals were intrigued with the pitch for some kind of arts-environmental centre hybrid, others decided Art

"Artscape's development exudes contempt for both the neighbourhood and of all things heritage," wrote an anonymous contributor to www.wychwood.ca online voice of the group Neighbours for 100% Green Park. "The proposal is to gut the original 1913 heritage barn and transform it into nothing snappy exclusive space where artists [...] can interface with thespians and activists from the barn. Neighbours may intrude if they dare [...]. Can subsidized G-A-T-E-D C-O-M-M-U-N-I-T-Y?"

When they weren't worrying that the project was going to be an exclusive enclave, the group were predicting Harbourfront-like traffic jams with children on education tours, crowds coming to food banks, crowds coming to theatre performances and galleries, local green grocers facing comp subsidized green barn food co-op." (Neither the webmaster nor group members returned calls or emails requesting an interview for this story.)

In addition to the website smears, opponents made legal threats and in 2002 called in a city auditor to look at the Wychwood books. He found "r evidence of any improprieties." In the 2003 election, Howard Levine, who had been a city councillor from 1988 to 1994, ran against Mihevc, argu much "hocus pocus" in the Artscape proposal, with its multiple funding sources and tax-free status. (The city owns the property and will maintain obtained its 50-year lease on the buildings for a token fee.)

"Artscape paints itself as a goody two-shoes organization, all goodness and light, but it's really a developer working with public funds," says Levi street from the site. In 2005, he appealed the project to the Ontario Municipal Board and lost. He still has doubts about how the place came to b boycott.

"What's the point? I'd be the first to commend them on the transformation," says Levine. "The landscaping is nice. But anybody can do a great j unlimited money to spend."

Artscape raised \$11 million from various government sources, \$3.5 million from private contributions and \$2.5 million in private financing. The a be covered by the rents, Jones says. "We have a 22-year track record of annual surpluses. All our buildings operate at capacity and as a landlorc collecting rent is incomparable."

Mihevc estimates the whole project cost the city \$2 million for the park plus about \$1 million for other expenses, not counting the lost revenue t project would have generated.

"I was willing to suffer defeat on this project," says Mihevc, whose 2003 votes outnumbered Levine by 10-to-1. "I believed in it and I thought it v projects don't happen in Toronto without some social controversy."

The attacks from Levine and Neighbours for 100% Green Park might have been frustrating for Artscape and its supporters, but they certainly res and consensus-driven process. Meeting after meeting, survey after survey, most complaints were met with an answer of some sort and, by 2003 evaporated.

From the start, the city couldn't afford a community centre but, in effect, that's what Artscape has delivered. Its programming will come from th the neighbours who volunteer. If Stephen Harper talks about artists like they're a financial burden, Artscape knows that, if you manage artists r something out of them for nothing. You just have to trust them.

John Campbell used the second bedroom of his apartment at Yonge and Eglinton as a music studio until he and his wife had their first have a studio at all. He applied for Wychwood, passed the rent-geared-to-income test and met the criteria as a professional artist. Their unit is a an open-concept loft where Campbell is planning to create his studio space a comfortable distance from the family's sleeping quarters.

"I wanted an affordable live-work, but I wouldn't want to go anywhere I felt wasn't a dignified place to live with my kids," says Campbell, a 36-y who performs regularly at the Rosewater Supper Club.

There's a lot of dignity at Wychwood Barns, even a cool factor. But it's not fancy. Differentiating themselves from glamour-driven projects like th renovation, Artscape encourages creativity (and saves money) by keeping its own contribution simple. There are no fussy finishes in the suites a how community spaces like the Covered Street Barn and the gallery will be used. It's all up for grabs.

"We only take things so far and let the residents take it to the next level," says architect Joe Lobko of du Toit Allsopp Hillier, who has worked wit projects. "There are a number of risks, that's certainly true. But what we're trying to do is [have an] impact [on] behaviour, change the way peo and sustainability. There might be a wrinkle or two down the road but it doesn't keep me up at night." That means that artists working in their st used to public functions next door. Neighbours who got green space instead of a parking lot will have a tougher time finding a place on the stree

Many of the buildings' innovative features do double duty, demonstrating leadership — Wychwood Barns is expected to be the first heritage pres Canada to earn a LEED Gold rating for environmental sustainability — and providing long-term cost savings. The expensive-to-install geothermal system is expected to save money down the road, as is the roof's rainwater recovery system. The project has already won a Brownie Award from Institute, which recognizes leadership, innovation and environmental sustainability in redeveloping brownfields (abandoned or underused industr property).

Awards recognize the tangible. The magic Artscape promises is harder to put your finger on, but it's starting to happen already. While moving in, to chat with people at Theatre Direct about renting their studio space in the Community Barn for an idea he had. Campbell's encounter with The

happenstance, but that's the point. By putting so many forces in motion Artscape is hoping they'll feed off of each other. Even if the housing is not market produce is fresh, the project won't be successful until the results of these synergies start materializing. Maybe the Green Barn will, horror buses full of children or maybe it will remain a neighbourhood secret. Who knows?

In the run-up to the Nov. 22 launch of the farmers' market, Roscoe Handford is still nervous. In recent months, she's walked around the construction staring at it for hours.

"I'm pleased beyond what I can express with the shape of it," she says. "But it's not until I'm sitting there hanging out with my neighbours that I'm happening."

With the tenants and neighbours bringing their creative energies to the complex that Artscape built, Tim Jones' ambitions are already focused on the Artscape formula and the people who breathe life into it.

"We have 20 projects we're looking at right now," Jones says, getting all real-estate developer again. "This is a great showpiece project, but we

BARNs & NUMBERS

Underneath a section of the park are 50 400-foot-deep boreholes which draw geothermal energy from the bedrock to heat and cool the complex. dramatically reduce non-renewable energy consumption and, it is hoped, help the project achieve the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental standard — a first for a heritage building in Canada.

The greenhouse, operated by The Stop Community Food Centre, will grow produce year-round for low-income families. Tucked in the east end is aimed at luring locals out for pizza nights and bread making.

The 26 live-work units will, in total, house about 65 people: professional artists and their families. Early in the discussions about what to do with the area, opponents fretted that the artists would enjoy beautiful park views without paying market rents; all the units were built to face the street.

Early in the 20th century, locals flooded this area to create a wintertime ice rink. Before the Artscape project moved ahead, a community group tried to bring the area and bring back the rink. The meadow stayed.

Artscape has been careful not to over-program the huge Covered Street Barn. Starting Nov. 22, The Stop's farmers' market will take over the space on mornings. The rest of the time, the volunteer-driven Green Arts Barns Community Association will control who gets to use it and when.

"We could have covered a good chunk of the site with onsite parking," says Artscape CEO Tim Jones. Instead, they counted the available street parking in the vicinity and discovered there were already more than enough places to park. This limited parking contributes to the Barns' LEED certification.

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