

ARTSCAPE'S DREAM NOW A REALITY

At last, a barn-raising in Wychwood

For years, five historic TTC streetcar-repair barns on Christie Street sat empty. A \$21.2-million makeover has transformed the site to house 15 artist studios, 26 live/work spaces and 12 not-for-profit groups. The official opening is Nov. 20, but the artists begin moving in today. Zosia Bielski spoke with three of them as they prepare for life in the city's ultimate creative playground

ZOSIA BIELSKI

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The illustrator John Coburn

After spending five months bouncing between friends' homes, visual artist and illustrator John Coburn will move into a live/work studio in Wychwood today. The single dad will get a rent-geared-to-income three-bedroom in the artists' colony.

Where are you moving from?

My studio burned down two years ago up on Dupont and Westmoreland, which I'd been in for 10 years. It was a great space. It used to be a barn that housed police horses 100 years ago. Ever since then, I have been bouncing around between studios and sharing spaces with other artists I know in the city. I've also been painting in my apartment in Little Italy on Rusholme Road that I'd rented for the last four years. I actually thought we might be moving into the barns earlier [so I moved out] five months ago. I've been staying at friends' and cousins' and that kind of thing. It's going to be really wonderful to have a home again.

Did you have any input into the space at Wychwood?

We didn't have any input in terms of the design. I have two children, Lukas, who is 14, and Kiyomi, who is 11, and they spend two nights a week with me. ... The main floor is a studio space with a kitchen at the back of it. There's a nice amount of light rolling in. It's off of Benson [Avenue]. It's just a dream up there, a classic hotel boutique for artists. It's a dream to have all the infrastructure built all around you, like the playground and the

indoor garden. It's quite a large communal garden and they put in state-of-the-art lights. I'm a real gardener so I appreciate that. How long did you have your eye on Wychwood?

My friend, who's a publicist, Ingrid Hamilton, told me about this project. I guess that was early December of last year. We had to fill out various forms and write an in-depth summary of our lives as artists. They definitely wanted legitimate artists as opposed to people who thought it might be sexy to have a cool studio.

The private community of Wychwood Park, just south of the TTC yard, was historically intended to be an artists' colony. What do you make of continuing the tradition at the barns?

I have been living in Little Italy ... for the better part of 25 years and it actually feels [like] Little Italy up north because St. Clair has the same kind of energy and eclectic feel. I can't help but think of the energy of all these artistic types flowing up onto St. Clair and into the cafés, restaurants and dry cleaners. I think it's going to be fascinating to see how the fresh life of the wandering artist will affect the area.

What will living in Wychwood do for you?

The only reason there aren't more artists who are millionaires is certainly not the lack of talent or artistic vision. It's a lack of business skills. We're exploding with creative ideas 24 hours a day and just don't want to slow down enough to do the math and figure out a budget to live by. When cash comes in from art sales or commission work we're so damn excited to see it, we run out and celebrate. I've been around a lot of very successful business people and one common element I envy is the fact that most people working for a company have the infrastructure and support from fellow employees and insightful superiors. ... Painting alone in a studio is about as good as it gets: Watching a canvas take shape with all the dramatic emotions that process takes you on is very seductive. But artists need a balance of creativity and business. This is what excites me most about the [Artscape Wychwood] barns. We'll have a team of creative people in one building. That means a traffic flow of ideas and the chance to implement them on a day-to-day basis.

The painter Tamara Toledo

Visual artist and painter Tamara Toledo will move her work studio to the barns from another Artscape location in Liberty Village. She will also work from a second studio for Latin-American Canadian Art Projects, an initiative she launched with Rodrigo Barreda. Ms. Toledo will now walk and bike through Wychwood Park from a co-op she lives in with two generations of her family down the road.

Where are you moving from?

I have a present work studio at 60 Atlantic near Dufferin and King. It's an Artscape building as well. I live in the Christie and Dupont area, so the move will be a bonus. I received a Canada Council grant for a residency and it ends in November so I plan to focus on my own art career after the residency. So it's perfect timing. ... I live just south of the [Artscape Wychwood] Barns. It's my neighbourhood and I've been here for more than 10 years. My parents are political exiles from the 1970s. I first came to Toronto in 1974 when I was 6. [The family then moved between Toronto, Vancouver and Chile for a period of 15 years, returning finally to Toronto in 1989.] My parents moved back to a co-op on Lambert Lodge, one of the first co-ops to be built in the area. It was initiated by Chileans in the early 1980s as a place for Chilean refugees to come to. ... We've stayed at the co-op ever since. I got my own place, so family is close by. My parents are still here and I'm raising a child [Tomás, 2] here as well. ... The barns were a dream because they will be so great for the neighbourhood. As an artist, I was always inquiring about studio space and when the applications would come out.

What's the space like?

It's a small room. I was expecting for them to be larger than they are. They're like small little cubicles. There isn't a lot of light. Our studios are facing the second barn that is a pathway, sort of a street barn that people can walk through. In that way it's appealing because our studio will be facing the public; they can look through the glass. This will certainly help increase sales and exposure so that's attractive. It also has a downside because there's less privacy. The studio where I'm at now is very secluded and there's hardly any traffic at all. I know if I go there, I'll have peace and quiet and be able to work intensely at my own paintings.

The artists' spaces have been touted as affordable. Are they?

It's a lot more expensive than what I'm paying at Atlantic. The last fee they gave was \$437 for the space a month. ... I know from other tenants [of the barns] that they were expecting a lower rent. But the space will give me more possibilities for exposure, rather than being in an isolated space. It's just going to be such an exciting place to network and make contacts. And it's close to home.

What will the barns do for you?

I think it's a great opportunity to create community and organize events and group shows with other artists. I'm looking forward to that collaboration. ... I'm heavily involved in the Latin American arts community and I pushed toward getting a studio space there because of the neighbourhood and how many local restaurants of Latin American descent have been established on St. Clair, also the establishment of [the street festival] Salsa on St. Clair. ... There is a huge dropout rate for Latino high-school students - it's 39 per cent, [according to a] Toronto [District School Board] report. I'm very interested in doing workshops and leading youth programs for Latino youth in the area and I'd do it through the arts, because that is what I know.

The photographer Matthew Foley

Photographer and visual artist Matthew Foley grew up in Markham and later moved to Davenport and Christie. In his mid-20s, he would break into the Toronto Transit Commission barns and photograph them. Two years ago, Mr. Foley was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, better known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Although his mobility and speech have deteriorated, he continues to work. Now living with his brother near the Rogers Centre in a condo, a place the artist calls "cold," Mr. Foley will return to the Christie area on Nov. 8 when he moves into his new live/work studio.

What kind of art do you do?

I work with photography and photosculpture. I was fascinated with pop-up books. Photos have always been in my blood. I got my first camera [a classic Kodak photo disc camera] when I was 8. I was attending Ryerson in 2000 [for image arts]. My love for photography is stomping around and finding treasures. My feet led me to the barns because if a building could talk, that one would have a lot to say.

Do you know the community?

I lived at Davenport and Christie for two years before I was diagnosed with ALS. I had to move because I lived on the north side of Davenport. The houses are all built on a hill and I had many flights of stairs. My roommates [and I] would play tennis [in Wychwood Park]. When you walk by in the summer on Davenport where the gate is, it's just a bit more fresh because there's an underground river [Wychwood Creek] flowing.

When you snuck into the barns, what did you see?

I was most fascinated with the barn doors.

Do they slide?

Almost like a blind or an accordion. I have a fascination with forgotten or discarded things, from garbage to buildings, old cars. I loved how the concrete alley heaved and the tracks still wound around inside.

Have you seen the transformation?

I have driven by, but have not seen my new home. Living at [the condo] is very cold and I have been able to isolate myself without much of an effort. There is no community, no grocery stores, but you have three banks on every corner. ... Anyway, my point is that I cannot even leave my building. The disease progresses and my needs changed.

Are you excited to return to this nostalgic place?

Everything in my life points to Wychwood as being a very positive move. I know it is easier to hide, but in my heart I want to be part of a community and share my spirit and my art. I am living with my younger brother, Adam, right now. I want to maintain my individuality, my personal space for as long as I can and my brother needs to have his own life: I want Adam to live it up. I will have a community and home care.

Do you know other artists at the Barns?

One I know and I am aware of one other one. I have friends who live in the neighbourhood and Adam will be living in the neighbourhood.

What will the move to Wychwood do for you and your art?

It will allow me to live and grow more. It is a challenge for me, but if I'm not uncomfortable or nervous, I'm not growing. I could easily lock the door and put my head under the pillow, but I want to make a difference in my life and I want to live every day. ... I have faith since I was diagnosed. I have learned that there are many more beautiful, kind people in the world than I ever realized before. ... I want to have an art show of my work as a meditation or a way of processing the new me and I want to celebrate, not mourn.

THE BARNS: THERE'S A FARMERS' MARKET TOO

SASHA CHAPMAN

November 1, 2008

This Wednesday, the Palais Royale returns to its former glamour for one of the most delicious fundraising events of the season, What's on the Table. Fifteen restaurants and food shops, from Amaya's Bread Bar to Canoe to the Cheese Boutique, will be serving up local bounty while raising funds for The Stop Community Food Centre's drop-in

programs at Davenport and Symington. The event raises awareness for The Stop (which is also involved in the Artscape Wychwood Barns).

A year-round farmers' market launches on Nov. 22, 9 a.m. to noon.

Next spring, The Stop's Green Barn (the name of its barn at Wychwood) will have a satellite there.

\$225 at <http://www.thestop.org/wott> or 416-652-7867 ext. 250.