

GLOBE AND MAIL HOUSING

In constant exile, artists seek next colony Creative types can transform down-trodden neighbourhoods into trendy new addresses, but by then, it's time to move on...

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Urbanus diasporus artistus — Easily recognized by their odd manner of dress and intense gaze, the species more commonly known as the "urban artist" prefers burrowing into spaces that are large, cheap and formerly industrial. Co-habitation with subspecies (such as *urbanus dancierius* or *playwriterii dramatis*) is common, but the urban artist will seek isolation when necessary. In recent years, habitats of this gentle creature are being threatened by *yuppibus gentrificatillius*.

Perhaps it's a byproduct of being a huge and successful city. Perhaps it's because artists can see beauty in spaces before the rest of us can. Perhaps it's corporate greed.

Whatever the reason, Toronto artists are in constant exile. Just as their communities begin to pulse and thrive, external forces slowly dismantle them.

Upscale galleries replace grittier artist-run affairs; coffee shops come to cater to gallery-goers; funky boutiques fill neighbouring buildings in an effort to create "destination" shopping and, finally, the old, crumbling buildings that once housed artists for pennies a square foot are sold to developers and converted into lofts or, worse, torn down for new construction.



Kingston Road near Warden in eastern end of Toronto. The Scarborough locale of strip malls and gas stations may be the next stop for artists fleeing high prices downtown. (PHOTO BY DAVE LEBLANC)

Driven from 1960s Yorkville, they moved south down Yonge Street, ending up at the first "Queen West," near Spadina Avenue (and the garment district) by the late 1970s and '80s. Next, it was the area from Queen to Bathurst Street, then as far as Ossington Avenue. Today, they've leapfrogged over the Dufferin underpass to Parkdale (now called West Queen West) and spread north to Dundas West in the Junction. Some have gone east to Leslieville's factories on Carlaw Avenue.

Glass artist/restorer John Wilcox (profiled in this section in June and the inspiration for this column) is so frustrated after having been chased from four different spaces since the mid-1980s — the first being last year's headline-grabber, 48 Abell St. — that he's planning to orchestrate the next move himself.

When he leaves his current digs at 500 Keele St., it'll be for the lake breezes, streetcar line and "stock of smaller '60s buildings" in Long Branch, New Toronto or Mimico, where he can afford to buy his own shop.

"By chance or survival, being an artist also means being resourceful and adaptable," says Ric Santon, an artist and co-owner of Parts Gallery in Leslieville. He agrees that south Etobicoke is a logical choice and, as a result, will experience an influx of creative types over the next decade; some of the artists he represents have already made the pioneering move.

To the east, Mr. Santon suggests a likely destination will be the O'Connor Drive strip in East York, since it, too, has ingredients he considers crucial. "I believe any neighbourhood that at one time relied on light manufacturing and warehousing and is accessible to public transit is a readymade artist colony."

But how far will artists go for large, bright, cheap studio space? Will they stick to the romance of subway and streetcar lines or will they board buses, too?

It depends on the type of art they're creating, Adam Thom says.

"Sculpture can't travel very easily," explains the architect, who started his professional life creating large, kinetic metal sculpture. While those engaged in "quiet" art, such as painting, can work in an apartment or house given enough space and light, the hammering, cutting, grinding and welding necessary to shape and connect metal would wake the neighbours should inspiration strike at 3 a.m. So sculptors may travel a little further for the privilege of isolation and the practicality of concrete floors (a must over hardwood floors for safety reasons, Mr. Thom points out).

And while artists need the city for "cross-pollination," it's also possible that certain groups may see value in Scarborough's Kingston Road strip between Fallingbrook Road and Warden Avenue, Mr. Thom says. "They have keener noses about these things.

"Artists see rich urban grit before developers and gentrifiers can; they're often the ones that find cool bars."

Perhaps, in years to come, other pockets of inner-ring, 1950s suburbia — Caledonia Road, north and south of Lawrence Avenue West, Scarborough's former "golden mile of industry" along Eglinton Avenue East, or Progress Avenue near Highway 401 — will become viable options. And because these areas aren't subway-adjacent with spectacular views of the downtown skyline, they may resist gentrification for decades ... perhaps forever.

Some artists may abandon Toronto altogether and head for what could become our version of Brooklyn. Hamilton, with its city amenities, expansive industrial areas and incredibly low real estate prices may blossom, says Mr. Thom. Unfortunately, since it's doubtful StatsCan will ever be able to track a massive art-brain-drain to Steeltown, Toronto may not notice until it's too late.

Initiatives by the Artscape may help stem the tide. They include the conversion of the former art deco police station in Parkdale into a gallery and live/work spaces, the transformation of the building at 60 Atlantic Ave. in Liberty Village, and the remodelling of the former Wychwood TTC repair barns, a project that officially opened yesterday. But many more such undertakings (including suburban ones) will be necessary to keep artists within our borders.

The alternative? Sitting on the balconies of our "authentic" lofts and in snazzy sidewalk cafés and watching the artist migration.