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URBAN REVIVAL BALANCES PAST AND PRESENT

Rejuvenation of Wychwood Barns maintains link to the past while successfully creating perfect mix of beauty and utility

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Perhaps because some things are worth waiting for, it has taken almost a decade to remake the old TTC barns on Wychwood Ave.

Built in the early years of the last century, these humble but immensely dignified structures are now a live/work and studio complex for several dozen artists and their families, as well as various cultural and environmental organizations.



VINCE TALOTTA

Architect Joe Lobko, on far swing, president of Artscape Tim Jones, and Councillor Joe Mihevc, front, take a full tour of the grounds surrounding the redeveloped Wychwood Barns.

When the TTC abandoned the maintenance sheds in the 1980s, many wanted to tear them down and turn the 5-acre (2 hectares) site into a park. In the end, however, the forces of reuse, led by Toronto city Councillor Joe Mihevc, prevailed. The result is a project that gives one hope for the future of Toronto.

This stands among the most accomplished examples of enlightened redevelopment the city has seen. Despite the bureaucratic and political fears – of what it's hard to say – this was the right thing to do. No, it won't solve the city's housing problem, or keep the urban arts sector alive, but it's a significant step forward.

"We've created a shell here," explains Tim Jones, president of Artscape, the not-for-profit agency that oversaw the scheme. "The idea is that the arts community and environment communities will animate the space. We spent five years getting the city to agree, then another three to raise the money."

Twenty-one million dollars later, the barns, to be officially unveiled this afternoon, support a community of between 100 and 150 people.

"We wanted to be respectful of the old stuff," says architect Joe Lobko, who has been with the project since 2000, "but give it new life to make it inhabitable. You've got to find that balance. The barns were fundamentally sound, though the roofs were leaky. Basically, these buildings are incredibly accommodating of new and diverse uses. We tried not to do more than was necessary. It's a question of knowing when to stop."

Certainly, there's much evidence of earlier days – exposed walls, trusses and concrete blocks. It's worth noting that this is not gentrification; there was no effort to smooth every rough edge, fill every crack. Much of the project's charm lies in these details, the dialogue between what was and what is.

Several barns have been maintained almost intact, while one has had its roof partially removed and another has been reconfigured as a ruin. The frontage along Benson Ave., with 26 live/work units, completes the streetscape nicely; large arched windows have been cut out and inner wall added.

Although Lobko says the budget was "very tight," he also points out that no expense was spared to achieve sustainability. For instance, rain water is collected and every unit is heated and cooled using geothermal technology; 50 holes, each 130 metres deep, were dug on site. Lobko admits the system cost an extra \$200,000 to \$400,000, but he adds it will pay for itself within seven to 10 years. And by the way, those who demanded green space can't complain; 4 of the 5 acres are parkland complete with playground, volleyball court, stages, benches and a meadow.

Among the most interesting tenants, Stop Community Food Centre, will operate the Green Barn. It will be used to grow fruit and vegetables to sell locally. In addition to its large greenhouse, Stop also has an outdoor sheltered garden, as decorative as it is practical.

More than anything, it's this mix of beauty and utility that gives the barns their appeal. And as a model for further growth, the complex sends a powerful message. Other Toronto sites await renovation, most notably the Don Valley Brick Works, which the Evergreen Foundation plans to resuscitate.

If the barns are any hint of what lies ahead, the past has a bright future.