

Barns raising a big success

By **JOE MIHEVC, GUEST COLUMNIST**

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If there is one key lesson to be learned from the opening of the Artscape Wychwood Barns this week, it is positive things happen when Torontonians step up and take charge. It is only when we shake our "do nothing" attitudes and apathy that we can build this city from the ground up.

The Barns project, from its early vision to its final construction, is an example of what can be done when Torontonians think creatively and passionately about the future of their neighbourhoods.

The Barns' story is a model for how other projects can move forward to build our Toronto, neighbourhood by neighbourhood, if residents are willing to put in the work.

The Barns, a \$20-million arts and environmental complex has breathed new life into a row of historic TTC streetcar repair buildings and has already become an anchor in Toronto's west end.

Ten years ago I discussed the future of this site with the then commissioners of Economic Development and Parks and Recreation who told me the city of Toronto would not be in a position to even consider building anything on the site until at least 2015.

Clearly, we had to take a different approach and find vision and leadership from within the community. Everyday residents became organizers and made things happen. Local fundraising activities helped bring money to the table. Community events like environment days, community picnics, soccer games and skating parties showed the city the community wanted to keep the space public.

In the end, not one piece of it was sold to developers.

The community helped bring together the key players on this project. Artscape came on board to develop and manage the project. Organizations like the Stop Community Food Centre, with its focus on urban agriculture, shared the community's vision and added its financial resources. Also sharing the vision were city staff in a variety of departments who went beyond the call of duty to lend their expertise, and local MPP Michael Bryant and MP Carolyn Bennett, who each added value to the project.

The passion and dedication of hundreds of people created a critical web of support. None of the parties could muster the resources to undertake the project alone. Together, with each holding a piece of the puzzle and needing the cooperation of the others to make it happen, the Barns project was an unstoppable force.

When we talk of city-building, we tend to focus on the physical or architectural side of projects, while omitting the effect multiple and diverse stakeholder projects have in developing different kinds of relationships and organizations.

Personal relationships grew within the community that saw shared schooling and daycare efforts, an increased level of street organization, higher participation rates for community clean-up days, an incredible energy around a naturalized skating rink on the site, a weekly community bake oven and a farmers' market.

Good city-building projects can take neighbourhoods in unpredictable directions. In the end, successful development depends upon citizens who take ownership of their community. The Barns project developed a community that knows its mind and how to articulate its needs and dreams. This community will serve as the foundation for the Barns' success and, I hope, as an inspiration to neighbourhoods across the city.

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