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## The Big Reveal

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Toronto's newest multi-use space, the Artscape Wychwood Barns, has just opened. But what are we supposed to do with it?

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Brett Gundlock/National Post

Almost every Torontonians seems to agree that restoring our heritage buildings, making them sustainable and opening them up to the public is a great thing to do. But with projects such as the Don Valley Brickworks conversion and Artscape's renovation of the Wychwood Barns, a lot of words like "community" and "integration" are thrown around, along with concepts such as "the flourishing of ideas" and "fostering a strong sense of belonging and inclusiveness," which makes it hard to figure out what, exactly, these places are going to offer.

It all sounds good, of course, but it also sounds incredibly vague, at least to the average person who doesn't work in public policy or the non-profit sector.

Yet, on a recent tour of the Barns -- which just opened to the public on Thursday and are located south of St. Clair West between Wychwood Avenue and Christie Street -- things became somewhat more concrete.

Speaking of concrete, this material is a common sight in all of the buildings, which were originally constructed between 1913 and 1921 but became derelict by the 1980s. There's also lots of brick, plenty of glass, soaring ceilings and light, light, light.

First impressions upon walking into the main entranceway in Barn 2 are of a space that's clean yet filled with history. This hallway will most likely get a lot of use as a common area and event room (so start booking those summer weddings now).

Moving next door to Barn 3, most of this unit is reserved for non-profit offices, such as LEAF (Local Enhancement ... Appreciation of Forests), as well as various cultural organizations. However, parents with young children might want to take a peek at the daycare upstairs, the walls of which are covered not in alphabet letters or nursery rhymes but enormous Burtynsky photographs of the barns in their pre-restored state.

The most impressive part of Wychwood, though, is the Green Barn, designed and operated by the managers of The Stop Community Food Centre.

This appears to be where stuff will actually happen: There's a compost demonstration site, a massive greenhouse (which Stop director Nick Saul joked could easily be turned into a grow-op if the city's budget continues to worsen),

an outdoor bake oven, a cooking area and an open garden, which will eventually be planted with everything from fruit trees to zucchini plants. A weekly farmers' market is also in the works.

It's hard to predict just how successful all the food-themed initiatives will be with local residents, but Saul is a big fan of the Field of Dreams strategy: If he builds it, they will come.

"Any good party ends up in the kitchen," he says, "because food brings us together. I've been inundated with folks coming up to me saying, 'I can't wait till the bake oven gets going, I can't wait to enroll my kid in one of the cooking classes, I can't wait to get into the garden.' So I think they will come, and this neighbourhood is ready for it."

Joe Mihevc, the infectiously earnest city councillor for the St. Paul's West ward, where the barns sit, agrees - wholeheartedly.

"You know, if you've been part of creating and implementing a vision, then it's yours and you have a real sense of ownership with it," he says. "There's been nothing this community hasn't had an active voice in when it comes to the Wychwood Barns. I bet this place will be jammed with people."

However, packing crowds into this single square block isn't the overarching mandate of Wychwood; as Artscape's Tim Jones points out, it's smack in the middle of a residential neighbourhood, so there's a fine line between creating

a hub of activity and maintaining a quiet, family-oriented environment.

"With the Distillery, we wanted to reimagine that as a cultural tourism destination, so we asked ourselves, 'How do we get as many people as possible down to the site?' " says Jones. "But here, we can't overwhelm our neighbours with traffic and noise."

Instead, says Mihevc, the goal with this project is to increase the tourism and consumerism along St. Clair West while maintaining a more low-key community vibe at Wychwood. One of the ways in which the city is doing this is keeping parking spaces south of St. Clair to a minimum.

"We see this as somewhere you come by public transit," says Mihevc. "There will be a well-serviced set of bicycle racks, and we also see walking - wow, we're going to rediscover walking! - as a way to get here."

It's a nice idea, but are Toronto residents willing to schlep over to the barns on foot in the middle of winter to learn about composting?

One person who won't have far to walk is John Coburn, an artist who just moved into a studio apartment in Barn 1, where there are also 26 social housing units. This past Monday, he could be found working on a large-scale painting in the middle of his kitchen.

"You can't help but have fun in this location," Coburn said, adding a few strokes of white to his canvas. "It's a great nucleus of painters and actors and musicians. I think we're all going to learn a lot from each other here."

Indeed, learning and education are also components in the overall vision for Wychwood - something not necessarily tangible or quantitative but valuable nonetheless.

The question of what will actually transpire at this place (besides cooking demonstrations, LEAF meetings and Burtynsky-themed childcare) will undoubtedly be answered as years go by and the building finds its niche, cultivating a distinct personality and reputation.

Fortunately, all the components are ready and waiting - \$21-million worth of components, in fact - so it's now up to the public to decide how to make the most of them.

"You have to remember that buildings like this only start paying off 20 to 30 years down the road," says Joe Lobko, lead architect at du Toit, the firm that spearheaded the LEED-certified restoration project. "The way you convince developers and the government to stop tearing stuff down is by demonstrating the increase in value with great examples, like the Distillery, and the Brickworks and now Wychwood. But it takes time."

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