

Wychwood Barns

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Wychwood Barns-raising

Artscape's \$10-million fundraising goal looks easy compared with the effort to earn local goodwill for its art and green space

BY CHRISTINA VARDANIS

There is a lifeless quality to the deserted TTC streetcar repair barns on Wychwood Avenue. The five lanky brick buildings bear the typical signs of abandonment — the windows are boarded up, the “no trespassing” signs are posted, and the surrounding fence seems to whisper, “Keep your distance ... nothing to see here.”

You'd never guess that these sleepy-looking buildings once led to a debate so heated that one city councillor was compared to Satan and given the Nazi salute.

But after years of what some media reports described as neighbourhood infighting, plans are now under way to restore at least four of the historic barns on the industrial site near Bathurst Street and St. Clair Avenue and transform them into a multi-tenant arts and environmental community centre.

The Green/Arts Barns Project is the brainchild of Artscape, a non-profit organization that marries real estate and the arts sector. To get the project off the ground, Artscape will need to raise \$10-million in capital funding — a figure it hopes to make at least a small dent in this month when it hosts a fundraising event.

Local councillor Joe Mihevc calls the project “a neighbourhood Gooderham and Worts,” referring to the Distillery District arts and entertainment zone. But Tim Jones, executive director of Artscape, says the project will operate on a smaller scale and isn't aimed at attracting residents from across the city. “The community didn't want a cultural tourism destination,” he says. “They want something that adds

value and brings programming, but that doesn't overwhelm the neighbourhood.”

It's a solution that seems to satisfy most of the surrounding residents, though there is still a small group of detractors.

The dissenters, who called themselves Neighbours for 100% Green Park, pushed to have the barns torn down in favour of a sprawling park. At one event on the grounds, Mr. Mihevc was called Satan for his championing of the community complex. Residents of the area also remember someone yelling, “Heil Mihevc” at one of the deputations at City Hall.

Meanwhile, members of another neighbourhood group called Friends of a New Park backed the vision of an arts/environmental community complex. Debate dragged on for at least three years, and signs of the tension are still apparent.

Amy McConnell, a leader of Neighbours for 100% Green Park, said this week that the group is not giving interviews. Its website, www.truepatriotlove.com, refers to the “war zone barnscape” and contends that “much good money will be hurled after bad.”

But most residents say talk of a neighbourhood divided is misleading. “Certainly there was opposition,” says Vid Ingelevics, a member of the pro-Artscape camp, which he says represents about 700 people. “But they were hardly a majority.”

Mr. Mihevc says the voice of the development's opponents has died down substantially. “It took some time to work through, but a lot of that stuff has been mended.”

Early meetings discussing the fate of the barns — which were constructed between 1913 and 1921 as a storage and repair facility for the Toronto Transit Commission — were generally positive, Mr. Ingelevics says.

By 1978, use of the long, red brick sheds had become minimal. The barns, which were taken out of active use by the late 1970s, had come close to being demolished. But in 1998, the TTC declared the four-acre land surplus, and handed it over to the city. The site was then listed on the City of Toronto Inventory of Heritage Properties.

“When the possibility that the site could be saved came up, it was very exciting,” Mr. Ingelevics says. “People wanted to save the buildings — and to save them for cultural reasons. It sounded so um-Toronto.”

The rezoning application is due before city council in the next couple of months, and at its April 21 fundraiser, Artscape will reveal the names of arts and environmental groups chosen to be housed in the complex — something that will make the project more real in people's eyes, Mr. Jones says.

He said he's pleased with the momentum around fundraising so far, with pledges and commitments in the millions.

Residents of the area still act as liaisons on issues such as parking, and have even weighed in on the tenant-selection process, he adds. “It's important to build trust over time with a project like this. ... We've done our best to do so.”

Construction could start as soon as next year.

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