

Throwing Open the Barn Doors

**Artscape
Wychwood Barns
are a community
for artists and a
haven for creativity**

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DAN EPSTEIN

Toronto's recent art renaissance has been characterized by the addition of fresh modern designs to historic institutions such as the Royal Ontario Museum, Royal Conservatory of Music, and Art Gallery of Ontario. Nestled in a residential neighbourhood bordered by St. Clair and Christie, the Artscape Wychwood Barns incorporate environmental innovations (geothermal heating and a storm water reuse system) and preserve the industrial history of the 60,000 square foot, 85-year old buildings. For their commitment to the environment, the Barns were designated the first Leadership in Energy and Environment Design (LEED)-certified heritage building in Canada.

The former Wychwood Streetcar Barns stood abandoned for 20 years before Artscape's multi-million dollar renovation made it the creative enclave that it is today.

The eight-year, \$21.2 million redevelopment was funded by three levels of government in addition to private donors. The finished project provides 26 units of rent-geared-to-income housing for artists and their families, 15 affordable work spaces, 13 offices for non-profit arts and environmental organizations, as well as rehearsal, performance and event spaces that connect art, environment, and community.

The Barns herald a new generation of community centres in Toronto—for the community by the community. The project is a collaboration of arts, environmental leadership, and urban agriculture, emphasizing sustainability in response to the neighbourhood's needs. "We heard from the local community their aspirations for a place that was a centre for the environment, a centre for the arts, and people wanted affordable housing. We decided to combine all of those things together," says Artscape President and CEO Tim Jones.

Built between 1913 and 1921, the Wychwood Streetcar Barns served as a streetcar repair facility for the Toronto Civic Railway, boarded up and left derelict in the 1980s. It wasn't until 2001 that Artscape received the green light to begin the design and consultation process. It was quickly discovered that the Barns were a brownfield site.

Brownfield sites range from abandoned commercial properties to underutilized industrial parks where previous usage has resulted in contamination. "We had to lift out two metres of dirt around the entire site in order to bring it back to life," says Jones. "We were inspired to think as green as possible and we were motivated when we learned there were no other LEED gold-certified heritage buildings in Canada."

The rehabilitated site, complete with 127,000 square feet of park grounds, a community art gallery, and urban gardens earned a Canadian Urban Institute Brownie Award for Excellence in Project Development, recognizing the site's innovation, environmental sustainability, and leadership in brownfield redevelopment in Canada.

Established in 1986, Artscape has developed six multi-tenant art centres with a mandate to create an infrastructure to advance Toronto arts and culture. Artscape projects have helped to redefine historic neighbourhoods, regenerating Parkdale, Queen West, Toronto Island, the Distillery, and Liberty Village.

The completed project was very much a community endeavour. The November 20 launch, presided over by Jones, Mayor David Miller, and city councillor and staunch supporter Joe Mihevc, saw hundreds of locals and art enthusiasts fill the Covered Street Barn. The event opened the doors to publicly accessible spaces, but also studios and artist live/work space, as a way to connect community members with their new neighbours.

This project was not always met positively by local residents. An aggressive campaign to stop Artscape from redeveloping the property included legal threats, a website dedicated to anti-Artscape sentiments, and an audit proposed by a small enclave. Residents stressed their concern for lost park space and fears of increased traffic in the form of crowds from theatre productions, visiting educational groups, and patrons of the food bank housed in the Barns.

Visual artist Erin Munro leases one of the studio spaces, and has waited years for something to be done. "I grew up in Toronto," she says, "and I would walk by here everyday and see it boarded up and wonder what was going on with this property. There were talks for a long time about it being redeveloped, but it didn't look like it was going anywhere."

Set up in a modest-sized space flooded with natural light, she's excited to settle into her new space. "The best part is there are multi-disciplinary people around. There's a real sense of community and diversity. It's really a dream come true to finally be here."