



THE GLOBE AND MAIL 

November 22, 2013

How an old school building is bringing artists back to Queen West

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Artscape's latest venture repurposes the Shaw Street School into Youngplace, a home for artists, galleries and cultural institutions

Although she isn't sentimental about old buildings, Marta Legrady knows the one at 180 Shaw St. inside out.

"How many times did I do this?" she wonders, climbing up a mammoth stairwell. Peering into a pristine washroom, she's surprised: "There isn't toilet paper stuck to the ceiling!"

Ms. Legrady is the last principal to have worked inside the hulking, Edwardian-era Shaw Street School. Declared surplus and shut down by the Toronto District School Board in 2000, the 75,000-square-foot, century-old building sat vacant for nearly a decade. Last week, following a \$17-million renovation, it has opened its doors again, reborn as Artscape Youngplace. Billed as the "new social heart" of the West Queen West neighbourhood, it's the latest project from Artscape, the organization behind the Wychwood Barns, a shuttered streetcar repair yard resuscitated into a hive for foodies uptown. On Shaw Street, the repurposed three-storey school will serve as a community hub and a new home for artists, galleries, cultural institutions and a children's centre.

"Given the history here, given the community, this is absolutely the right thing to do with this building," Ms. Legrady says. "If this had become some fake-chic, condo type-place that would bother me a lot. We've got more than enough of those."

Inside Youngplace, former classrooms with towering, 10-foot windows have been converted into sun-filled studios and rehearsal spaces, some with their original slate chalkboards intact. "The ceiling height at 14 feet and the incredible natural daylight, these are the things that artists need to do their craft," says Artscape president and chief executive Tim Jones.

In a sense, this project is a throwback – albeit a highly polished one – to the Queen West that was before gentrification and a condo boom priced out working artists occupying clandestine studios in the West end. Youngplace pays tribute to a past that doesn't exist so much here any more. With this and Artscape's earlier project, the Triangle Lofts on Abell Street, Mr. Jones says artists are being embedded into this landscape, this time for the long haul thanks to more secure spaces.

"This is part of a trend that's bucking the usual pattern of gentrification and displacement of artists from the neighbourhoods that they helped revive," he says. "We really believe that artists are powerful agents of change. If that's the case then surely it's possible to put them more in the centre of city building and urban development."

Artscape has long held the unique talent of bringing together local activists, the arts community, developers and the city with its "creative placemaking" efforts that leverage the power of art culture to transform spaces. Mr. Jones

believes there's a long-term interest for condo developers investing in projects like this: "They help build quality of place." At Youngplace, multi-disciplinary artist Heather Nicol has a studio on the second floor, overlooking a still active junior public school next door. "The idea of just being right above a schoolyard here, I just love the sound of kids playing," Ms. Nicol said.

Built in 1914, the Shaw Street School housed army barracks with students arriving after the war. British and later Portuguese, Polish, Chinese and Vietnamese students filled the wide hallways, which became de facto race tracks when the children trained ahead of track and field meets. Those hallways would spell the school's demise. Under Bill 160, a funding formula that requires schools have certain number of students per square foot of space, the building was deemed inefficient with 40 per cent of its square footage dominated by common space. Before the doors shut Ms. Legrady had 500 students; capacity was apparently 900. "It had become a real community here. It was very bad. Parents were very upset," the former principal said.

In the decommissioned years, locals hosted yard sales, bike swaps and haunted house Halloweens inside the majestic building, which also scored a cameo in the 2004 cult classic film *Mean Girls*. Urban explorers also found their way in and interlopers covered the place floor to ceiling in graffiti.

In 2006, the school board hired Artscape for a feasibility study. Neighbours resisted condos on the site, which sits cozy with the operational Givins/Shaw Junior Public School. With an eye to cultural and community programming, Artscape bought the building in 2010. The heritage-listed school needed a complete overhaul of its electrical, mechanical and plumbing systems, as well as a new roof and elevator for wheelchair accessibility. Its exterior sandstone had to be restored and its 285 historic windows replaced.

"Everyone sees these big old schools and they think, 'Oh, wouldn't it be great to just move in here.' To do that you have to bring the buildings up to code," said Mr. Jones. Artscape landed its lead gift of \$2-million from the Michael Young Family Foundation; the rest came from government funding as well as philanthropic donations from private donors and developers keen on further enhancing the gentrified area's cachet.

Following the Triangle Lofts, this is the second of Artscape's projects that lets artists own their studios at market and below-market rates. From 400 to 2,000 square feet and priced between \$140,000 and \$850,000, some 27 per cent of the suites are owned. The rest are long and short-term rentals, including four "Flex Studios," a pay-as-you-go program that lets visual artists, designers, performers, writers, curators, producers and "creative practitioners" rent by the hour – \$15 for four hours at the lowest end. For prospective tenants and owners, the selection process was competitive and a waitlist for space is long. Artscape Youngplace is zoned commercial, so while artists will not be able to live in their studios, they will have 24-hour access.

"We need a lot of room and we take our time," Ms. Nicol said of the stability Youngplace can offer artists. "A lot of artists do have to move regularly and it's quite frustrating, destabilizing and sometimes it comes at a really inopportune moment professionally to suddenly be given the heave-ho."

Ms. Nicol curated two exhibitions mounted throughout the school's cavernous stairwells and hallways: "UnArchive" features wooden vitrines filled with commissioned art done by the children at adjacent Givins/Shaw school, as well as artifacts from the shuttered one. Tarnished trophies, yearbooks, attendance ledgers, teachers' scrapbooks and registration cards demarcating each child's date of birth, country of origin and religion – they're all encased. There are nods to the building's previous use everywhere, from the heavy-duty and child-friendly terrazzo flooring to vintage exit signs and classroom clocks. (These all read 8:31, the moment workers shut off the school's electricity.)

The hall and stairwell galleries are one way Artscape is inviting the public inside. Another 3,000-square-foot hallway on the first floor has been repurposed as a "community living room" with free WiFi. "This is where people are really welcome to hang out, write their novel and drink lattes all day," said Artscape managing director Natasha Mytnowych, who also envisions openings, readings and community meetings here. An Art Deco staircase leads to the Youngplace Coffee Pub, a space previously home to offices of principals, guidance counselors and nurses.

"Hopefully," said Mr. Jones, "people will come in here, they'll see part of their past and also part of their future in this place."

Milling through the trendy crowd at Youngplace's grand opening were Terri and Jessica Adams and Beatrice Morris, three generations of women from one family who attended the school between the 1930s and the day it closed. Ms. Morris, 83, arrived in 1935. She pointed down the hall to a classroom filled with young party people fresh out of art school. "I got the strap in that classroom in Grade One because I ran in the basement. The sign said don't run in the basement, but I didn't know how to read."

Ms. Morris's blue eyes shone as she took in the celebration. "For the years the school was closed, I thought what a waste. It was such a nice building, it's terrible to leave it sitting here. Then Artscape said they were coming in and I thought, I don't even know what an Artscape is. I think it's beautiful."

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