



real estate development
construction
architecture

[FREE NEWS ALERT](#)

[TABLE OF CONTENTS](#) Oct 2013 - 0 comments

Extra-curricular thinking

Falling enrolment often means school closures. But on the bright side, the buildings themselves are ideally suited to be preserved and repurposed as cultural spaces.

By: Peter Sobchak

2013-10-01

There are few building types that come as loaded with deep emotional resonance as schools, particularly elementary and secondary schools. We all went to school, and for many of us it was in those buildings that we had the best times of our lives. So it is no surprise that few events are met with such volatile reactions in a neighbourhood as the closing of a school.

But this is a reality many municipalities are facing today. Due to declining student enrolment – Ontario elementary schools decreased by 15 per cent between 1997 and 2009, and secondary schools by 14 per cent between 2002 and 2009 – and the budget constraints that come with it, many Ontario school boards are consolidating and unloading properties to maximize revenue and access provincial funding for new schools, as well as to obtain capital grants to renovate older facilities. A great example of this is the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). With the amalgamation of seven former boards in 1998, the TDSB became the fourth largest public school board in North America, the largest in Canada and the owner of the largest real estate portfolio in the City with 600 schools that serves more than 250,000 students each year. Yet because of declining enrolment, the TDSB does not receive sufficient funding through the Ministry of Education’s enrolment-based funding formula to renew, renovate and improve its aging existing school buildings or build new schools or additions in growing neighbourhoods.

So in an effort to accelerate this “disposal” and revenue generation process, in 2008 the TDSB created the Toronto Lands Corporation (TLC), a real estate subsidiary with a mandate to sell surplus land and squeeze more revenue out of dozens of school sites that are leased to community groups and private academies. Not surprisingly, that initiative met stiff resistance from parent and community groups concerned that private developers would set their sights on valuable land for less-than-ideal intentions.

The TLC portfolio currently includes 131 properties (not all properties are closed surplus schools: they also include administrative buildings and vacant lands), and since their inception have sold 58 properties generating more than \$338 million dollars for the TDSB. “Close to 60 per cent of those properties were sold to property developers,” says Shirley Hoy, TLC’s CEO. “The remaining 40 per cent were sold to other school boards, the City of Toronto and provincial ministries who are given first opportunity to buy school property before it is offered to the private sector.” If the City of Toronto, the three other school boards and a list of public agencies and governments don’t submit an offer (they have 90 days to do so), the TLC is authorized to list the property on the open market.

Keep it local

Without question, “school closures can be politically charged and have significant social and physical neighbourhood impacts, especially if properties are expected to be sold on the open market,” says Simona Rasanu in a paper titled *The Acquisition and Redevelopment of Surplus Schools in Toronto, Ontario*. But the reality (and something many neighbourhoods don’t understand), is that “school boards and municipalities are separate agencies in Ontario that often make independent decisions.” So while the City faces public and political pressure to keep sites in public ownership, they have only bought 10 between 1998 and December 2011, which leaves many up for grabs.

Some neighbourhoods not happy with that scenario therefore take it upon themselves to more forcefully dictate the future of their beloved school, which is exactly what happened in the West Queen West neighbourhood when their Shaw Street School, a Edwardian-era heritage building originally constructed in 1914, was declared surplus in 2001. With the school's operations transferred to the adjacent Givins/Shaw Jr. Public School, the Shaw Street School was vacant for nearly a decade. In 2006, responding to significant pressure exerted by the community, TDSB hired Artscape to conduct a feasibility study of its potential reuse. When the study demonstrated strong community support for repurposing the site as a centre for arts and community programming, Artscape purchased the 75,000-sq.-ft. school in December 2010 and began a multi-year, \$17.6 million renovation to turn it into a cultural hub that will provide production, rehearsal and exhibition space for individual artists and organizations.

Artscape Youngplace (taking its name from lead donor the Michael Young Family Foundation) is the latest in a portfolio that includes [Artscape Wychwood Barns](#), [Artscape Gibraltar Point](#), [Artscape Distillery Studios](#), [the Parkdale Arts and Cultural Centre](#), and [Daniels Spectrum](#), among other projects (*Building*, October/November 2010 and April/May 2013). “But because of the scale, the age of the building and the fact that it is zoned non-residential but is in middle of a residential community, this is really in many ways a first for Artscape,” says Celia Smith, executive vice-president of Artscape.

The first step was to re-zone it, to which there was no opposition (undoubtedly because all political parties involved are under pressure to “save a school” in some fashion). In truth, opposition to for-profit development of the property was so fierce from the community that it would probably dissuade many private development companies from trying to buy the property. Coupled with the fact that the Shaw Street School is in an area already steeped in an arts environment, and Artscape has had a presence in the West Queen West area for decades, in many ways the conditions couldn’t have been better for Artscape.

No longer evictees

However just because Artscape projects are built with the support of local communities, they are not what might be called “blue-sky” exercises. Artscape projects must function as self-sustaining social enterprises. In Artscape’s model, funds raised from public and private sources are leveraged to make the one-time capital investment required to open a new project’s doors to the public. Once operational, Artscape facilities are sustained through planned revenues generated from below-market rents, memberships and user fees. Long-term debt is kept to a minimum and ongoing operating subsidies are not required.

Youngplace is unique in that while this is the second Artscape project that offers ownership opportunities -- the live-work condo Artscape Triangle Lofts is the first -- this is their first commercial condo. They’ve sold 25 per cent of the space (both at- and below-market) to professional artists who will use the space as their studios. Artscape achieves its below-market purchase price on ownership studios by providing a 25 per cent no-interest, payment-free second mortgage.

The rest is rented below-market to artists and community organizations through two occupancy models: long-term studio rentals and a short-term space rental program called Flex Studios, which offers a pay-as-you-go space-sharing program with hourly rates. In many ways, the occupancy models “turn the idea of artists as victims of gentrification on its head, instead making them owners in this neighbourhood,” says Smith.

Extensive renovations by Teeple Architects and The Dalton Company were done to the century-old building, included upgrading all mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems; replacing all windows with double-paned, new wood-frame windows; installing a new roof; making substantial structural reinforcements; restoring the exterior sandstone; landscaping; and ensuring the entire site is fully accessible with the addition of a new elevator. When finished later this fall, the building will have approximately 30 tenants and hundreds of bodies passing through its halls every day, just like it used to.

Decades ago, schools in neighbourhoods like this one were overflowing with children from immigrant families. But times have changed – many newcomer families have since moved to the suburbs, and many homes in this area bought by or rented to DINKS (dual-income, no kids) have not picked up the slack. But just because the city's Official Plan calls for increased population growth in the core, that doesn't mean we can suddenly unlock the doors of mothballed schools, as various groups have suggested.

Yet a neighbourhood's personality is defined by its buildings, and schools are by their very nature in the heart of a community, so to tear one down is to rip out the heart of that community. If handled correctly, converting an empty school into one that features public-serving and community-enhancing functions – arts, childcare, parenting centres, indoor recreation, seniors' activities, after-school activity centres for teens, community education and Adult ESL classes – can not only turn a building that is in the heart of a community back into being the heart of that community, [it is also the ultimate form of recycling.](#)

Photos



[Larger photo & full caption](#)

File size: 627.5 KB (1024px X 685px)

Caption: The Shaw Street School, a heritage building originally ...



[Larger photo & full caption](#)

File size: 363.4 KB (1024px X 685px)

Caption: The 9,350 square feet of hallway and stairwell space ov...



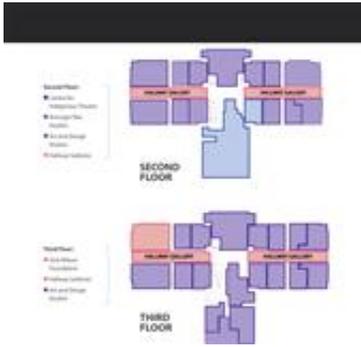
[Larger photo & full caption](#)

File size: 64.6 KB (1024px X 682px)

Caption: Formerly an elementary school, the new Artscape Youngpl...

[Larger photo & full caption](#)

File size: 120 KB (811px X 768px)



[Larger photo & full caption](#)

File size: 133.1 KB (792px X 768px)

Companies in This Story

[Teepie Architects Inc.](#)

Related Topics

[Educational Facilities](#)

[Top of page](#) © 2014 Business Information Group [Copyright](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Feedback](#)

