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Artscape Youngplace: School is now in session

Artscape has scored another hit with its massive Youngplace project. But how much does it really help the city's arts community?



RICHARD LAUTENS / TORONTO STAR

Tim Jones, president and CEO of Artscape, stands at the top of an art-decorated stairwell at Youngplace. He has ambitious plans for the not-for-profit organization's future.

By: **Murray Whyte** Visual arts, Published on Sat Nov 23 2013

It's the afternoon before the evening opening, at last, of Artscape Youngplace, the brand-new name for the battered old hulk of a school building on Shaw St. given up for dead, more than a dozen years ago. And if Artscape CEO Tim Jones — who virtually willed it into existence over six trying years — is allowing himself a moment of quiet satisfaction, well, fair enough.

For close to 30 years, Artscape has been on a mission to carve out affordable space for creative types in a city, with its skyrocketing property market, that has been less than eager to accommodate. For the past 15, under Jones, it has taken leaps forward, culminating with this, the not-for-profit developer's biggest project to date: 75,000 square feet, offering space to two-dozen tenants and owners, large and small, at below market rates.

The building teems with energy, with art installations in the hallways and stairwells, a ground floor lounge and café, and, on this day, the space buzzing with local schoolkids on tour and the busy work of tenants and owners moving into former classrooms.

Even so, Jones is looking forward, not back. "One of my great ambitions is, 'How do we really scale this up?'" he says. "That's what's exciting for me."

It's hardly surprising that Jones would waste little time savouring the moment, says David Young, chair of the Michael Young Family Foundation, whose \$2 million gift came at a critical time in 2011, allowing Artscape to buy the building from the Toronto District School Board.

“I always say, he has some kind of master plan in the back of his mind,” Young says. “Tim has unbelievable perseverance. He’s completely unruffled. I think he sees ‘no’ as a ‘not yet,’ and just keeps going.”

He has to. Artscape needs to keep pace. The past decade has seen unprecedented growth in real estate values in central Toronto, and along with it, wholesale displacement of low-income earners of all kinds.

Time and again, Artscape has stepped into the middle of this shift and done its best to create a bulwark for arts workers against a tsunami of gentrification that has wiped clean almost all of the city’s central neighbourhoods. It lists nearly 1,400 tenants or owners of its spaces city-wide, and Youngplace is its most fully realized project to date, Jones says: Providing affordable work space for artists in an area that had become the “Art and Design District” largely in name only, after a decade of intense gentrification.

Affordable, in the Artscape scheme, is this: Monthly rent for a 500-sq.ft. studio, \$750 — not cheap, though a deal compared to the boutiques on nearby West Queen West..

Still, Artscape has evolved into a major player in a well-worn narrative: Artists have become a global cause-célèbre in recent years, as cities ready themselves for what a post-industrial economy might look like. Artscape’s mandate dovetails perfectly with the zeitgeisty notion of the “creative class,” coined by Richard Florida, now at the University of Toronto, which contends that cities outfitted with urbane amenities like cultural attractions, cafés and, of course, the visible presence of artists, would be the most successful in attracting investment.

Artscape presents as a living embodiment of that Floridian model: Walking the suddenly lively hallways of the former Shaw Street School, it’s hard to see it as anything other than wildly successful.

But Artscape chafes among some urban theorists who worry that its dynamic privileges one low-income group (artists) over countless others with more pressing needs. Heather McLean, an academic who is completing her PhD in urban studies at the University of Toronto, has spent years critically unpacking ideas like Florida’s. Before beginning her doctorate work, McLean was working in planning at the City of Toronto when Artscape’s [Wychwood Barns](#) proposal arrived in the office in 2007.

A wholesale reconfiguration of a streetcar storage facility in Wychwood, the project was sold as a cultural hub. “There was a lot of pressure to put it to the front of the line, right away,” she says. “It was exasperating: There was serious racialized poverty and a housing crisis in the city, and these cool signature projects were being prioritized.”

The problem, McLean says, isn’t so much with what Artscape does, but the overshadowing effect it can have. The same week Artscape Youngplace opened, the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association reported the longest waiting list for affordable housing in a decade. “It’s a difficult situation: We have an affordable housing crisis in the city right now, and the priority isn’t on social justice; it’s about this aesthetic economy.”

Deborah Leslie, a geographer professor at U of T, has studied the city’s transformation as manufacturing gave way to industries in line with the “creative city” agenda. Artists, she fears, end up

as a symbolic salve to nefarious process. “While Artscape is doing important work, I think it is often being used to paper over and gather support for broader processes of gentrification and real estate development in the city,” she wrote in an email.

Jones, in his quiet way, disagrees. “All our projects are about figuring out how they can play a larger city-building role,” he says. “How they can contribute to the local economy, how they can enrich the social fabric.” In the spirit of the creative cities movement, Jones suggests culture as a lifeboat for a rising tide — providing employment, increasing density and making space for all.

Artscape’s roots are in the real-estate boom of the mid-1980s. With the city cracking down on illegal live-in warehouse studios, artists were kicked out by the dozen; Artscape was born in 1986 to keep them in, leasing blocks of studios around the Queen and Spadina axis and renting them back to artists at cut rates.

By the time Jones arrived in 1998, from the Canada Council for the Arts, Artscape had managed to acquire and refurbish one warehouse building at the corner of Queen St. W. and Crawford St., but the us-and-them rhetoric had reached an apex. Developer warehouse conversions were putting more and more tenant artists out of their studios to make way for condominium refurbishment, and tensions were high.

Artscape had been surviving on an operating grant from the city (which it still does) and private donation. But the stakes were increasing well beyond their means. “It was the days when people were marching against buildings being closed down. There was this sense of powerlessness,” Jones said. “Some of these protests were being organized by Artscape staff, so I went to one, and I just thought ‘This is futile.’ One of the things I realized fairly early on was that, if we were serious about making an impact on this issue, we weren’t going to do it alone.”

In 2001, Jones had his first test case. Cityscape, a private developer, had bought the derelict Distillery District, with grand plans to rebuild it as an entertainment hub. They called Artscape with a proposal: Cityscape would refurbish 60,000 square feet of its buildings according to Artscape’s plan, then lease it back to them for 20 years at below-market rent. Artscape could then pass on the saving to dozens of artists needing the space. For its efforts, Cityscape took on a sheen of cultural altruism, and something potentially more valuable: Under the city’s Section 37 provision, it was able to swap the studio space (as being a “community benefit”) for a height extension on its condo development that increased profits.

The process was an eye-opener. “Within 15 months of our first conversation, the studios were ready to move in,” says Jones. “In the public sector, that would have taken years. Ultimately, it’s about momentum, and in the development community, that’s a precious commodity.”

For a developer looking to portray its project as unique and in-tune with the urbanity it’s selling, culture is a great momentum-producer. It’s a good pitch, one Artscape has been able to make to an array of developers, installing below-market spaces for cultural activity in such places as the redeveloped Regent Park’s Daniels Spectrum and the Triangle Lofts in the gentrification hot zone of Queen St. west of Dovercourt Rd. “We can’t just go around, hat in hand, asking for money,” Jones says. “We have to show that we bring value.”

Through the Creative Placemaking Lab, Artscape’s consulting arm, they export knowledge globally.

Locally, Jones' thinking is infectious. Case in point: The [Toronto Media Arts Cluster](#), a group of long-standing artist-run organizations that looked at Artscape Youngplace as a potential home.

There wasn't a fit — below-market notwithstanding, it was still too expensive — but Jones was able to connect them to UrbanCorp, a developer building a condominium nearby. Using the Section 37 provision, TMAC secured a new space, which they own, via the developer itself. “We couldn't have done it without Tim's help,” said Laura Berazadi, executive director of InterAccess gallery, part of TMAC. “He had no obligation to do that. I thought it was remarkable community building.”

And that scaling-up process? Jones keeps his cards close to his chest. “There are some suburban communities that are knocking on the door,” he says. He won't say where, but Artscape has a feasibility study online in city documents for the Mount Dennis area, near Weston Rd. “There are an infinite number of possibilities just here in the city,” he says, and adds, with characteristic restraint and that hint of a smile: “So yes, there's a lot going on.”

Artscape Youngplace, at 180 Shaw St. between Queen and Dundas Sts., is open to the public daily from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.