

MAGAZIN

Home for the Arts

It's still the same old story—can artists survive while waiting for politicians to act?

By Christopher Hume

A CITY without artists is like a body without a soul. And Toronto is fast losing both its artists and its soul — simply because there's nowhere for them to live and work.

The cause is rising real estate values and the inexorable juggernaut of gentrification. For a city that likes to think of itself as the cultural capital of Canada, the consequences could be much more dramatic than many seem to realize.

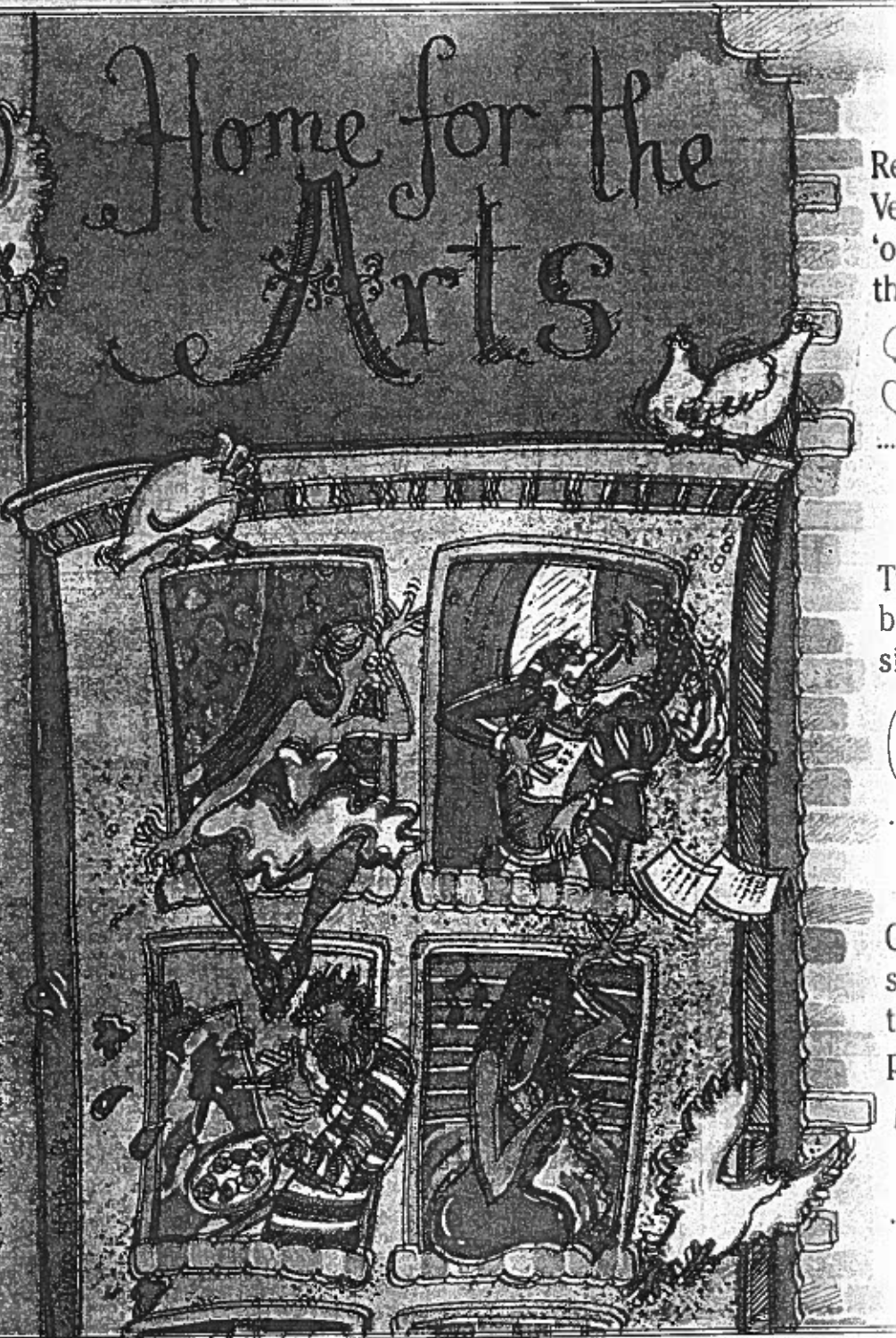
But steps have been taken to help artists maintain their foothold in Toronto. The arts community isn't just agonizing, it's also organizing.

Indeed, it's unlikely the Toronto cultural community has ever been more politically active than now. Artists and artists' groups have struggled hard to ensure they are consulted in the decision-making process.

So far, the results have been mixed. A handful of co-ops have sprung up in different areas of the city and more are planned. Various schemes have also been proposed that would alternately allow artists to live legally in their studios or even work in schools and live-in community centres.

Unfortunately, no more than several hundred artists at most — of what must be several thousand who live in Metro — will be able to take advantage of these new opportunities. The rest will have to make do the best they can trying to stretch their meagre resources far enough to cover the cost of life in Toronto, the "world-class" city.

The exodus has already started. Artists are fleeing the city in record numbers for small towns all over southern Ontario. Flesherton is the best example. Located 140 kms northwest of Toronto, it is evolving into an impromptu artists' colony. Please see Centrespread



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whose members are all former downtowners.

"Without question, there is a deep and profound crisis of affordability for artists in this city," says Dale Martin, who represents downtown at Metro Council. "The essential health of the city depends on the health of its arts and cultural community. That community needs the confidence of knowing it belongs in the city."

Judy Stephens-Wells, arts activist and founding director of Artscape, one of the groups most active in the fight for artists' housing, agrees completely.

"Artists," she adds, "have become more political in sheer desperation. By the mid-1980s, the consensus was that the time had come to form a special group, such as Artscape. A vast number of artists in Toronto need studio space."

Funded by the city, Artscape is a non-official body that acts as an advocate for artists' housing. Formed in 1985, the organization was created in the wake of No Vacancy, a report commissioned by the Toronto Arts Council to study artists' housing needs. The Artscape board of directors "leans towards the visual arts," and includes people such as Garry Conway, executive director of Canadian Artists' Representation Ontario (CARO), photographer April Hickox, and multimedia artist Diane Pugen.

Artscape's hopes right now are riding on a co-op development at 25 Strachan Ave. at Wellington St. It has obtained a 25-year lease on a three-storey city-owned warehouse which it plans to convert into homes for 75 people. Two-thirds of the 35,000 square feet will be given to artists, the rest will be rented to non-profit arts groups.

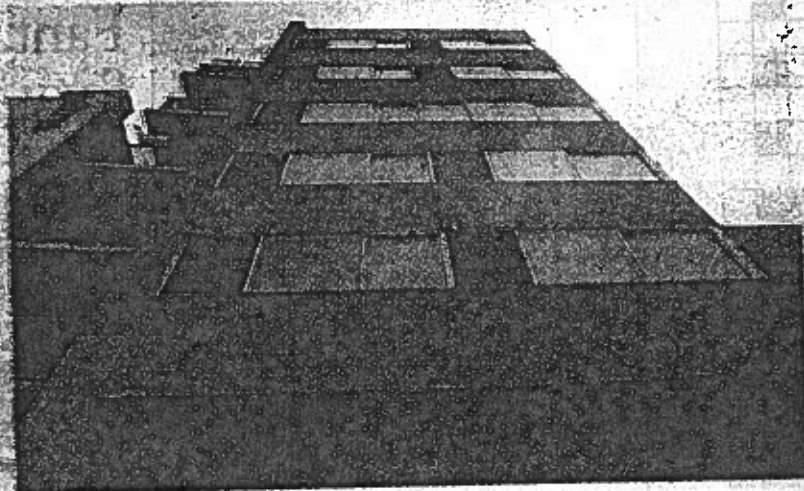
"We're carrying out a feasibility study now," explains Stephens-Wells. The heart of the issue is whether such a warehouse can be put to residential use despite being located in an area zoned for industry. "Instead of re-zoning," she says, "we want to see if there is a structure within industrial zoning that would allow for special use by artists."

If all goes well, the Artscape co-op will



KEN FAUGHT/TORONTO STAR

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JOHN MAHLER/TORONTO STAR

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be ready for occupancy early in 1992. In the meantime, many battles remain to be fought at City Hall. In addition, the group must raise \$2.5 million.

"It's difficult to ensure a building will remain available to artists without owning it," Stephens-Wells points out. "It's too bad the city didn't go out and spend \$7 or \$8 million when the problem was first recognized in the early '80s."

HOWEVER, Artscape doesn't have all its eggs in the renovated warehouse basket. The group has been involved in the exhaustive planning process for Ataritari, the massive housing development scheduled to be built in the east end of the downtown core between Parliament St., the Don River, King St. E. and the railway tracks. The enormous project has been the subject of numerous studies — social, architectural, economic, environmental — and won't be complete for probably 12 to 15 years.

Artscape representatives sit on Ataritari's economic development subcommittee. According to city officials, some of the preliminary schemes included one to turn the magnificent 19th-century Gooderham and Worts distillery into a new home for the Ontario College of Art. That's unlikely to happen, but it offers an insight into just how much more aware the city has grown of the cultural sector.

Local artists and cultural types are also participating in Cityplan '91, the Toronto Official Plan review now under way. The blueprint, which sets urban and design guidelines and establishes regulatory framework, has never before included measures intended specifically for artists.

"The city has to come in very strongly," insists Stephens-Wells. "The reform caucus is supportive of the arts."

Martin, who was a Toronto councillor, concurs. "The arts are a priority with the city," he says. "But not yet with Metro. However, I still think a lot more energy could be put into it."

The question remains whether or not artists can survive while they're waiting for the politicians to act. A survey published in a recent CARO Bulletin painted a bleak picture. Questionnaires were sent to 300 artists in all disciplines from a list of 19,698. Among the findings:

□ "In 1988, the artists' average gross income from all sources was \$23,000 (but through art-related income, artists averaged a gross income of \$11,771. When art-related expenses were subtracted, artists were left with \$1,561 of their art-related income and \$13,514 from all sources."

□ "One-third of the artists owned their own work space, two-thirds rented . . . and 10 per cent . . . were both living and working in the same space. Two-thirds of the artists surveyed knew at least one artist who had recently left Toronto due to increased costs of working."

□ "Of the visual artists surveyed, 28 per cent are currently looking for new work space and 37 per cent required over 400

Steps have been taken to ensure artists live and work. Among the co-ops are, left, 29 McCaul St., at Queen's Q

sq. ft. while the co-op space is about 200 sq.

□ "The (survey) also found for an additional 100 spaces in the City of Toronto."

Like many artists (name) has a crude toilet off Adelaide St. W. The problem is that it also serves as his living quarters. He is unable to live where the rights and protections of a tenant.

"We must have zoning," says Bruce Pearson, assistant to Ward 5 Councillor. "We have to ensure it's brought under the planning process."

Pearce is hopeful that the city will adopt a cultural plan in conjunction with the City Plan, which will enable artists to work spaces legally.

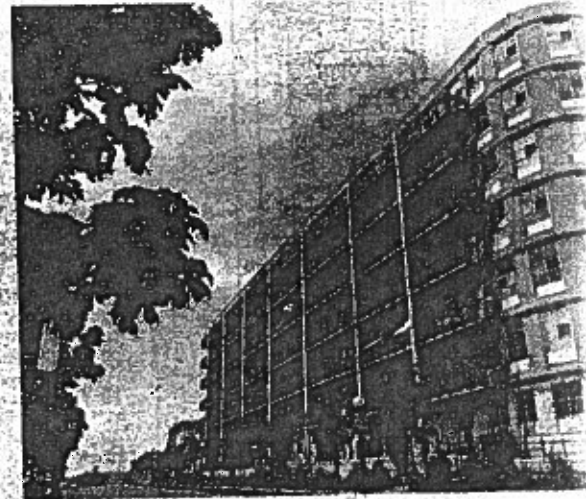
The difficulty is that it is between the needs of artists and conversely in the businesses can't do their work. The city wants to create a trial base and the jobs.

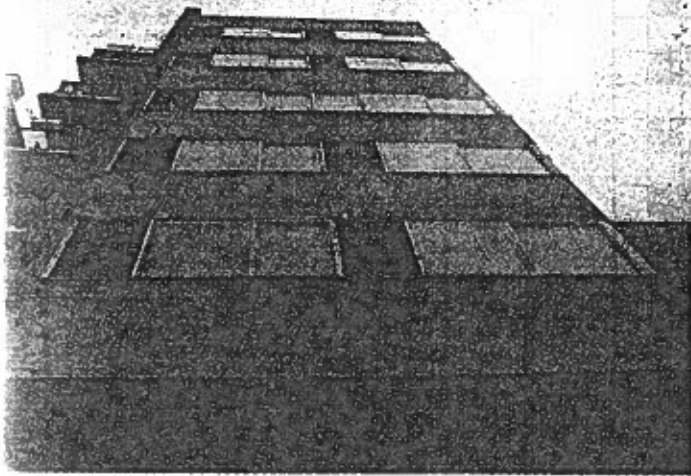
But like most people, co-ops are the most affordable. Already two have been set up at the west end of Bathurst St. on McCaul St. Both were set up in the '80s and are apparently successful.

"The Beaver Heights time with the Building Department calls. "They want to increase heights and windows."

In addition to the plans to build a new well Ave., in the east end, are plans to build a new one located on city-owned land. Artists need a place both affordable and suitable.

Some of the money does not come from the government. The concerned entrepreneurs.





JOHN MAHLER/TORONTO STAR

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occupancy early in 1992. In many battles remain to be fought. In addition, the group has spent \$5 million. It is difficult to ensure a building will remain available to artists without owning it. Wells points out. "It's too expensive to go out and spend \$7 or \$8 million when the problem was first identified in the early '80s."

DR, Artscape doesn't have all the answers. The renovated warehouse building has been involved in the planning process for Ataritari, a housing development scheduled to be built in the east end of the city between Parliament St., Queen St. E. and the railway. A massive project has been the subject of numerous studies — social, economic, environmental — and is not complete for probably 12 to 15 years.

representatives sit on Ataritari development subcommittee to city officials, some of the schemes included one to turn a 19th century Gooderham distillery into a new home for the College of Art. That's unlikely but it offers an insight into just how aware the city has grown of the arts sector. Artists and cultural types are also included in Cityplan '91, the Toronto City Plan review now under way. The plan sets urban and design guidelines and establishes regulatory mechanisms that has never before included provisions specifically for artists. Wells says he expects to come in very strongly. "The reform caucus is a positive of the arts."

Steps have been taken to help artists live and work in Toronto. Among the co-ops springing up are, left, 29 McCaul St., and bottom, at Queen's Quay.

sq. ft. while the current average studio space is about 200 sq. ft."

□ "The (survey) also suggested a need for an additional 3,420 (artists) work spaces in the City of Toronto."

Like many artists, Tom (not his real name) has a crude but comfortable studio off Adelaide St. W. It suits him fine; his problem is that it also serves — illegally — as his living quarters. All Tom wants is to be able to live where he does and enjoy all the rights and protection of a regular legal tenant.

"We must have a look at industrial zoning," says Bruce Pearce, executive assistant to Ward 5 Councillor Liz Amer. "We have to ensure that artists are brought under the Building Code."

Pearce is hopeful that City Council will adopt a cultural facilities policy that, in conjunction with changes to the Official Plan, will enable artists to inhabit live/work spaces legally.

The difficulty is in creating a balance between the need for affordable studios and conversely industrial space where businesses can operate and residents work. The city wants to preserve its industrial base and the jobs that go with it.

But like most players, Pearce feels that co-ops are the most promising alternative. Already two have been built; Arcadia Co-op at the west end of Harbourfront at the foot of Bathurst St., and Beaver Hall Co-op on McCaul St. Both were built during the '80s and are apparently successful.

"The Beaver Hall Co-op had a tough time with the Building Code," Pearce recalls. "They wanted different ceiling heights and windows."

In addition to 25 Strachan Ave., there are plans to build an artists' co-op on Coxwell Ave., in the east end. Again, it will be located on city-owned land and will give artists a place both to live and work.

Some of the most interesting ideas have not come from the public sector but from concerned entrepreneurs. David Jackson

Martin, who was a Toronto councillor, concurs. "The arts are a priority with the city," he says. "But not yet with Metro. However, I still think a lot more energy could be put into it."

The question remains whether or not artists can survive while they're waiting for the politicians to act. A survey published in a recent CARO Bulletin painted a bleak picture. Questionnaires were sent to 300 artists in all disciplines from a list of 19,698. Among the findings:

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TONY BOCK/TORONTO STAR

Garth Drabinsky's tower will contain live/work studios, rehearsal halls, office space.

and Betty Kaser, for example, are small-scale developers who have made a number of artistic types very happy with their relatively inexpensive condominium projects tailored to suit their specific needs. Carved out of three old warehouses in the downtown area, they represent a rare blend of social commitment and profit-making.

A much more grandiose scheme foresees a 16-storey multi-use tower built just south of the newly-restored Pantages Theatre. It will contain 43 live/work studios for artists, rehearsal halls for dancers and musicians, office space for non-profit arts groups and even a small recording facility. The proposal, not surprisingly, comes from Garth Drabinsky, the deposed founder of Cineplex Odeon who now heads his Live Entertainment Corp.

"EVEN major artists are having to leave the core of Toronto because they can't afford it," Drabinsky grumbles. "I think that's shocking. Toronto is the visual arts capital of Canada. If we let that happen, ultimately we'll have a void in the city. I think that's sad."

Drabinsky has hired none other than Moshe Safdie, the architect of the National Gallery and the Ballet Opera House, to design his proposed cultural palace. Although it still has to go through re-zoning, the complex was approved by City Council in June.

"It'll be spectacular," Drabinsky declares. "a fabulous live/work space that artists could gain access to through competition."

That's certainly the most novel suggestion to have emerged so far. And who's to say that it won't be eagerly received by all concerned.

One thing's clear, however; it'll take many more ideas as innovative as this one before the problem is solved. And before the city can finally provide its artists the place of honor they deserve.

Christopher Hume is *The Star's* art and architecture critic.



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