

Hume: New cultural centre breathes life and colour into Regent Park

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There was a time Torontonians avoided Regent Park like the plague; now they seek it out like a breath of fresh air.

And as a massive and innovative revitalization changes the face of Canada's largest and oldest social housing complex, one of the lessons learned is about the connection between culture and civic health, creative expression and urbanity.

It's early days still, but the Regent Park Arts and Cultural Centre, which opens Thursday, has already brought new life to the long depressed neighbourhood.

The new facility sits at the heart of Regent Park, on Dundas St. E. east of Parliament St. Already it is attracting users and visitors from across the city. They come for the dance courses, music classes, painting lessons, movie-making and, this being the 21st century, to learn the art of being an entrepreneur.

Designed by Diamond Schmitt Architects, the brilliant new centre forms part of a larger complex that also includes a condo tower. The eye-catching

development is instantly recognizable by the brightly coloured stripes that adorn the exterior. Of course, compared with what was here before, almost anything would be eye-catching. This new structure and the others going up on every side have redefined this stretch of Dundas. Gone are the nondescript residential boxes that made the neighbourhood a well-intentioned failure.

Under the leadership of Artscape, the centre is a place of many uses as well as colours. The non-profit agency specializes in assembling hybrid spaces dedicated to various creative endeavors and the synergies they produce.

The spacious three-storey structure has been conceived for maximum flexibility. The architect's job here was to stay out of the way, and to design a multi-purpose building that serves multiple disciplines and audiences. It also had to be fully accessible, physically and psychologically, the kind of place that puts people at ease and makes them feel comfortable.

Inside, the most obvious feature is the sense of transparency, and the light it allows into the building. The ground floor, the most public, includes a 310-seat theatre as well as amenities such as event spaces and a café. On the east side, the centre will face a new *woonerf*-like street, Regent Park Blvd. The short tree-lined artery has been kept narrow so it can be closed off to traffic when desired.

The most distinctive element on the second floor is a large open space that doubles as an art gallery. There's even a small screening room and a music school. One floor up is the Centre for Social Innovation and a series of rental offices.

Above all, however, the message is one of total inclusion. Unlike the old Regent Park, which provided communal space — empty communal space — the new neighbourhood is all about connections. The architecture not only makes that possible; it sets an example.

Artscape CEO Tim Jones rightly calls it an "exercise in creative place-making and a catalyst for community growth."

Indeed, the design process, which lasted two years and involved hundreds, was as much a part of that as the actual building. Keep in mind that half the population of Regent Park is under 25, which means the centre will be a youth magnet.

Yet many feel unconvinced, even threatened, by Toronto's transformation into the most advanced city in North America. That's not hard to understand; the future has never looked so bleak. But projects such as this are powerful reminders that we can make the world, let alone the city, a better place. The forces that created Regent Park decades ago — planning and architecture — have moved on from past mistakes. This proves it.

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