

# Regent Park's Arts and Cultural Centre Prepares to Open Its Doors

The new Regent Park Arts and Cultural Centre takes art out of church basements and school cafeterias and into a custom-built space.

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The new Regent Park Arts and Cultural Centre is hard to miss. It's covered in glass and blocks of colour, a continuation of the design from the [Painbtox condos](#) attached to it. Sitting on a block of Dundas Street just east of Parliament, the new 60,000-square-foot building is part of the second phase of the ongoing [revitalization](#) of Regent Park. Last Friday, we joined a media tour of the inside.

Funding for the \$34-million project came from the federal and provincial governments, who each contributed \$12 million. The remaining \$10 million was raised by [Artscape](#), who manage the space. The building opens to the public this Saturday.

The architects on this project, Diamond Schmitt, are no strangers to building monumental arts centres. (They're the firm behind the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts at Queen Street and University Avenue.) But with this project, says Artscape President and CEO Tim Jones, designers couldn't "look at a model [for cultural centres] and plop it down," because they had to consider what culture meant to this community.

The result: a space custom built to house seven tenants, showcase art, and foster cultural connections and innovations. Most of the tenants are arts groups that had already been operating in the neighbourhood.

Before moving into their space on the second floor, [ArtHeart Community Art Centre](#)—which offers completely free studio space and visual arts materials—was working out of the church across the street. The [Regent Park School of Music](#) down the hall had been operating from a church too, and more recently from a row house they bought on Queen Street East. In the new building, they have space that includes heretofore unknown luxuries like soundproof practice studios and a classroom space that doubles as a recital room.

Tim Svirklys, a studio manager for ArtHeart, told reporters last Friday that his organization's new proximity to the School of Music has already helped attract some students. Parents visiting the music school wandered down the hall and found the art

studio.

“Now the kids are signed up for music class *and* art classes,” said Svirklys. It’s this sort of collaboration and cross-pollination that the centre strives to foster. As project architect Jennifer Mallard said, the hallways were all built wide to allow for interaction among community members. The idea was for parents picking up their kids from art class to have space to mingle with, say, staff from the [Regent Park Film Festival](#).

The [Centre for Social Innovation](#) occupies the entire third floor of the centre, making this their third co-work space in Toronto. There is still desk space left to rent, according to manager Natasha Stephens.

The ground floor houses performance and practice spaces for [COBA Collective of Black Artists](#), a dance and music group, and [Native Earth Performing Arts](#). In addition to the tenants’ performance spaces, there is a 400-seat theatre on the main floor with flexible seating and room dividers to accommodate a range of programming. It will also serve as the permanent screening room for the Regent Park Film Festival, which has been *nomadic* for the past few years after losing its office space in the revitalization process.

The theatre opens onto a courtyard with an outdoor stage, which will be the site for [Manifesto Festival’s](#) launch party on Friday night. And though the area, like much of the neighbourhood, is currently surrounded by heavy construction equipment, it will eventually be situated on a new street: Regent Park Boulevard. The roadway will run along the eastern perimeter of the centre, from Nelson Mandela Park Public School in the south to the park on the north side of Dundas Street. The plan is for the new street eventually to be a place for farmers’ markets and other outdoor community events.

The Arts and Cultural Centre opens onto the outdoors with large sliding glass panels that line most of the eastern side. This northeast corner on the main floor is home to the Artscape Lounge. Tim Jones calls this space Regent Park’s living room. It’s the kind of gathering space that had been lacking in the neighbourhood’s original design.

Tenants are starting to make themselves at home. COBA has already hosted some open houses. Native Earth is running rehearsals. When we visited last week, floors were being mopped, lights rigged, and pianos tuned.

Break a leg, Regent Park Arts and Cultural Centre.

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