

Regent Park dance studio heralds culture of change

Arts to be at heart of redevelopment of troubled neighbourhood

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Co-artistic directors Bill Coleman and Laurence Lemieux celebrate the Valentine's Day launch of The Citadel, Coleman Lemieux & Compagnie's new contemporary dance centre in the heart of Regent Park. (John Lauener)

A Toronto dance company opens its new home Tuesday in Regent Park — the neighbourhood with Canada's biggest social housing project.

The building, called the Citadel, was formerly a Salvation Army kitchen, but soon will be hosting dance and yoga classes and the new home of critically acclaimed dance troupe Coleman Lemieux & Company.

Regent Park is currently undergoing a massive revitalization that will include [new condos and townhouses](#) for a mix of low-income and middle-class households.

As CBC's Margo Kelly reports, arts and culture is a key thrust of the re-development.

Bill Coleman and his wife, Laurence Lemieux, founders of [Coleman Lemieux](#), chose to stay in the neighbourhood and renovate the former soup kitchen after moving the company to Toronto from Montreal.

“For us to be dropped down in a really, really interesting, vibrant community is going to have an infectious effect on the company in terms of creativity,” Coleman told CBC News. The neighbourhood is “an intersection of cultures and people. It’s really interesting.”

In that tradition, Coleman Lemieux will offer pay-what-you-can yoga classes every day — and free dance lessons for kids on Saturdays.

“Movement itself is really healthy. Movement inspires creativity and problem solving,” Coleman said.

The company prides itself on having a transparent creative process and both founders feel at home in their neighbourhood.

The \$1.8-million project has received government money, free work from Diamond Schmitt Architects and help from developer, The Daniels Corporation, as well as dozens of local supporters.

The Citadel is just the beginning of the creative injection.

Later in the year, the Regent Park Arts and Cultural Centre will open a three-storey, 60,000-square-foot building to be managed by Artscape.

It has received \$24 million in federal and provincial infrastructure money.

Tim Jones, president of Artscape, one of the agencies involved in the Regent Park redevelopment, highlights the importance of community participation in planning the changes in a neighbourhood formerly considered an eyesore and a hotbed for drugs and crime.

“So layers and layers of collaboration here and it feels like everybody is going beyond what they would normally do to create a model for how these communities can be redeveloped,” Jones said.

It will provide a permanent home for nine community groups, along with performance and studio space. Among the new tenants are an aboriginal theatre company and an African dance and drumming group.

“More than half the people living in Regent Park are under the age of 25,” Jones said.

“We know there are issues of community safety and gangs and other unhealthy things that are competing for young people's attention, so to create a floor in the centre that's devoted to arts-based learning for children and youth was kind of a no-brainer.”

Nearby, the Regent Park School of Music offers private lessons for as little as \$2 to children from low-income families. It's the same school whose choir [appeared with Roger Waters two years ago](#).

Director Richard Marsella said the school will more than triple the number of kids it teaches in the new centre.

“We're giving them unforgettable experiences with music and through that you save people, you really do,” Marsella said. “How? You give them a point of focus, you give them something to latch on to, to live for.”

It's hoped the new arts centre will become a creative hub and give people a reason to visit Regent Park instead of avoid it.

"One of the big ideas our community advisory committee had at the beginning of this project was to create a place that was rooted in Regent Park, but open to the world," Jones said. "So maybe today you don't think about coming down to Regent Park to see a show or connect with a social innovator, but in the future, it's going to be a destination."



The Citadel was formerly a Salvation Army kitchen and was redesigned by Diamond Schmitt Architects. (John Lauener)



*Inside the newly opened Citadel. It is a 'no-brainer' to get kids from troubled neighbourhoods into the arts.
(John Lauener)*