

GOING FOR GOLD



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WYCHWOOD BARNS GREAT OLD BONES IN A NEW NEIGHBOURHOOD

FLAVIE HALAIS

The Artscape Wychwood Barns have exceeded all expectations, redefining the role of neighbourhood centres and the meaning of heritage preservation. The story of the Barns is the story of enlightened leadership, with community at its core. The series of five buildings, once the Toronto Transit Corporation repair barns, has become a one-of-a-kind community hub: an unorthodox mix of offices for associations, a greenhouse, a theatre, housing and studio units for artists and a surrounding park. The Artscape vision was in some ways controversial, such as the decision to do away with parking. Instead, the 60,000-square-foot-complex (5570 m²) would be the country's first heritage building aiming for LEED gold certification. The Barns' legacy is substantial: it points to the possibilities offered by public-private partnerships, and the inclusion of local communities into the decision process.

► More than a year after opening in the fall of 2008, the Artscape Wychwood Barns have exceeded all expectations, redefining the role of neighbourhood centres and the meaning of heritage preservation. The story of the Barns is the story of enlightened leadership, with community at its core.

Scarcely a decade ago, the former Toronto Transit Corporation repair barns were the subject of much speculation. Should the barns be demolished to give place to a much-wanted park? Or should they be renovated...and for what purpose? Beautiful and bearing tremendous historical significance – yet empty and cumbersome – they had been derelict for decades in the city's former north end district, a world away from the transportation hub they were during the early 20th century.

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Enter Artscape, a local non-profit involved in real estate development for artistic purposes. Why not turn the series of five buildings into a one-of-a-kind community hub? They envisioned an unorthodox mix of offices for associations, a greenhouse, a theatre, housing and studio units for artists, and a surrounding park. The decision to include 26 live/work spaces for artists was controversial, but fundamental to the Artscape vision. Even more controversial was the decision to do away with parking. Instead, the 60,000-square-foot-complex (5570 m²) would be the country's first heritage building aiming for LEED gold certification.

The uniquely ambitious plan was carefully crafted to respond to the surrounding neighbourhood and limit subsequent surprises. Often, says head architect Joe Lobko of Du Toit Allsopp Hillier, architects simply “come up with an idea and impose a vision” – which may or may not be in phase with the needs of the community. With this project,” he says, “we brought everybody to the table from the beginning.” Committed to an integrated design process, Artscape partnered early on with a team of architects, community representatives, engineers and environmental consultants to ensure each aspect of the project would be connected in an organic way.

Technically, some reverses were inevitable. As they worked to preserve the building's historic value and architectural characteristics, the team discovered structural problems that caused the budget to soar dramatically. But instead of abandoning costly elements that would increase the building's sustainability, Artscape went on a hunt for additional funding. They chose to install energy-saving features such as a geothermal system to heat and cool down the buildings, a white roof and a rain water collection and reuse system. “I give Artscape a huge amount of credit,” says Lobko. “They could have saved a lot of money by abandoning the geothermal system.”

SAYING NO TO PARKING

The parking issue, too, required full commitment, according to landscape architect David Leinster from The Planning Partnership. “I really think that



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downtown parks shouldn't have parking space... We fought very hard about it," he remembers.

The team was convinced there was no need for parking since a majority of visitors would come either from the neighbourhood or by public transit, a theory that has been proven right by the absence of complaints from residents. What's more, because asphalt stores heat and contributes to the heat island effect, including parking space in the park would have prevented the complex from reaching LEED standards.

The space which would have been occupied by a sterile parking lot was given to the park. The result is a porous building complex where public and private spaces coexist. The buildings and their surrounding park complement each other, inviting visitors to walk freely from one to the other. One entire barn is a massive high-tech greenhouse run by The Stop, a local non-profit which came on board early on, seeing an opportunity to expand its activities. The greenhouse supplies a food bank and serves as an educational facility, offering after-school programs. The Stop also organizes a popular weekly farmers market that promotes local food and crafts, and reflects the importance of food security in the modern urban landscape.

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT?

Since their opening, the Wychwood Barns have received numerous awards. But when asked if he has any caveats, Leinster replies that the surrounding park is far from perfect. The space is equipped

with a children's play area, an off-leash dog area, a beach volley ball court, picnic tables and more. "In parks like that one, there is generally a significant percentage that is just grass and trees," Leinster explains. "At Wychwood this doesn't exist; it is entirely programmed from one end to the other. The over-programming issue was a big one."

He believes the city felt pressured to respond to the demands of residents, who had been asking for a neighbourhood park for years. A more sensible approach, he says, would be to let The Stop take over the entire park and turn it into an edible landscape.

COUNTING ON COMMUNITY

The Wychwood Barns' biggest success, however, might be the legacy they leave behind as more and more buildings are being retrofitted, and as environmental guidelines find their way into construction codes. Ontario's Green Energy Act already requires government and public-sector buildings to meet LEED Silver standards. The project also points to the possibilities offered by public-private partnerships for the development of public lands and the inclusion of local communities into the decision process. "We shouldn't count on city hall to do everything," sums up Lobko.

"...the Artscape Wychwood Barns have exceeded all expectations, redefining the role of neighbourhood centres..."

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