

Real Estate Edge

Neighbourhoods get artistic makeover

From Toronto to Vancouver, artists help transform struggling areas

By James Bow
Business Edge

Artists have always been known as catalysts of change. And across Canada, many are helping to transform their neighbourhoods and pull them out of poverty.

One example is Parkdale in the west end of Toronto, which entered a period of decline in the 1950s. Many of the stately homes became run-down and the area had one of the highest crime rates in the city.

"It was quite poor and there weren't many organizations working in the area when I was a kid," says resident and writer Emily Pohl-Weary. "I remember my mother and my stepfather lobbied the city to get a parkette created on Beaty Avenue. In other words, the neighbourhood was pretty bleak, but there were residents working to change that."

There are still some cheaper apartments in the neighbourhood. But Pohl-Weary says there has also been an influx of artists and film-industry people, who are transforming the area by creating galleries and cafes and infusing the community with money.

Local councillor Gord Perks says that Parkdale is now among the top three Toronto neighbourhoods in terms of receiving Canada Council for the Arts grants for artists.

"We have some interesting little things, like a project that's joined the Parkdale activity recreation centre and the local BIA (business improvement area) to support local artists in creating bike posts that are themselves works of art. You get a mix of job creation, and unique street furniture, all coming out of the social capital that exists in Parkdale."

The change started in the early 1990s, when the local business association issued a call for artists. "Fifteen or so came together from different parts of the city," says Phil Anderson, director of Gallery 1313. "We sat down and started to plan ArtBeat, a summer street arts festival. We ran that for four years and we did some shows in other venues in the area until we got the Gallery 1313."

Gallery 1313 operates in a building that housed a police station from 1931 to 1963 and was then used by the city for emergency housing. By 1994, the property had been vacant for five years and the BIA wanted to find a new tenant.

Quotable

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— Gord Perks,
Toronto area councillor

"It turned out that Artscape, a non-profit which manages live/work/studio space for artists, was looking for such a venue," says Anderson. "So the BIA, Artscape and a number of groups got together with our councillor, who was then David Miller, to petition Metro council to get the building turned over as a community space."

As well as housing Gallery 1313, the building offers nine live-work units for artists, space for cultural offices and the local business association's offices.

A similar transformation is occurring in Edmonton, along 118th Avenue (also known as Alberta Avenue).

"I live on 118th Avenue, the main thoroughfare that a bunch of wonderful neighbourhoods live around," says Christy Morin, a theatre artist. "Over the past 20 years, the area became derelict. Crime came into the neighbourhood."

For Morin, the biggest obstacle was a lack of awareness of who was in the community. "We didn't know who else was around. But three years ago, I became friends with a young actress in the neighbourhood and heard through the grapevine that there were several musicians, lighting designers, artists, etc. in the community. We wanted to meet them."

Morin put a note in the local newspaper, and soon 12 artists were meeting regularly. In September 2006, the group set up Arts Alive, a day-long festival featuring art galleries, theatre productions and dance performances, all in empty storefronts and other "reclaimed spaces" in the area.

"That was the catalyst in bringing

people out of the woodwork," says Morin.

The artists' endeavour attracted the attention of the City of Edmonton and the Alberta Avenue Business Association.

"We were in the midst of a community-based revitalization, and, out of that consultation, it became apparent there are lots of artists in the area," says Judy Allan, co-ordinator for the Alberta Avenue Initiative Revitalization Strategy at the City of Edmonton.

"We worked with them to establish them as an organization and to create places for them to showcase their artistic skills," she adds.

Peter Raush, executive director of the Alberta Avenue Business Association, agrees that the artists were a resource that needed to be tapped.

"The bohemian movement comes in, and the unique funky stores open, then the coffeeshops and the craft stores," Raush says. "That fits nicely with our business members, because we're mainly mom-and-pop stores. You can't just turn on a master plan, you have to work with individual people."

The once ad-hoc gathering of artists and performers has now transformed into Arts on the Avenue, a group boasting 150 members with Morin as their executive director.

In Vancouver, artists are sparking a similar revitalization in the city's Downtown Eastside.

Located at the corner of West Hastings and Abbott streets, the Woodward's Development hopes to provide a diversity of housing and jobs anchored by a new art school.

"Woodward's was the B.C. equivalent of Eaton's," says architect Gregory Henriquez. "There's been a store on that site for over 100 years."

The store was the economic anchor of the neighbourhood. But after the chain was bought out in 1993, many nearby Hastings Avenue stores were also boarded up, providing a haven for drug addicts.

There have been a number of unsuccessful attempts to redevelop the Woodward's site, but they went sideways, adds Henriquez. In September 2002, the building was occupied by homeless and poverty activists demanding affordable housing for the downtown Eastside. The protest became known as the Woodward's Squat.

"After homeless advocates set up a civic encampment, the city government changed," says Henriquez. "The city bought the site, and held a competition to develop it."

Henriquez Partners Architects won the contract, with Westbank Peterson as developers.

"This is the most inclusive development program in Canada," Henriquez adds. "Units selling for \$1.5 million will be standing alongside 120 units set aside for homeless people. Single-family non-market housing will be available. Over 1,200 people will live here at the end of the day, and 2,000 or so will be working or going to school here."

Anchoring this development is a centre for contemporary art for Simon Fraser University.

The province is contributing \$49.3 million of the \$71.5-million budget for the campus, and B.C. Advanced Education Minister Murray Coell says the school is expected to increase economic activity in the Downtown Eastside by up to \$7.5 million.

Anderson, of Gallery 1313 in Toronto, says if there is a downside to revitalization, it is that it improves the neighbourhood to such a degree that increased rents drive out the artists who made the neighbourhood desirable in the first place.

"That's happening to some degree here in Parkdale," says Anderson. "Rents are going up . . . A lot of artists are moving up to the Dupont/Lansdowne area, where I live, and that's becoming a really large art community as well, because it's more affordable."

(James Bow can be reached at bow@businessedge.ca)