
COMMUNITY WE CAN BELIEVE IN

THE BARNs, THE STOP, AND A NEIGHBOURHOOD'S RENAISSANCE

BY HAMUTAL DOTAN



In 1913, the area around Davenport Road and Christie Street lay on the outer fringes of Toronto. Incorporated into the city only a few years earlier, it was sparsely populated and at the very edge of the transit network. The St. Clair Carhouse – a new streetcar barn to house the Toronto Civic Railway's (later the TTC) fleet of vehicles – had just been built. Bracondale Village, as the district was known before being annexed to Toronto, had been settled by one Robert John Turner, a British émigré who built the five-acre estate that anchored the community and gave it its name. Over time, the Turner family divested itself of most of its land, houses were built on nearby plots, and the estate itself was eventually sold to the City.

Flash forward nearly a century: Davenport and Christie is near the centre of Toronto, transit service extends for kilometres in every direction, and Hillcrest Park lies on the site of the old Turner homestead. The St. Clair Carhouse is still standing, though, having weathered several lifetimes' worth of change. It has been by turns expanded, repurposed, abandoned, slated for demolition, and reclaimed. Finally, after

years of work and more than a little struggle, the renamed Artscape Wychwood Barns are once again a vital part of the surrounding community, having re-emerged as one of the most innovative multi-purpose facilities in Toronto.

The Wychwood Barns have, in just a few short months, become such a beehive of activity, so full of life and heart, that it is almost impossible to believe that they very nearly didn't get rebuilt at all. Not too long ago, the old buildings were on the brink of demolition, and the story of how they were saved involves a heady mix of bureaucratic wrangling, pitched neighbourhood battles, many dedicated citizens, one very patient city councillor, and a stroke of remarkably good fortune. Many of the details are already a part of neighbourhood lore, and many more will likely always be in dispute.

What is known for certain is that by 1998 the TTC, after several decades of use and several more of neglect, had officially ceded any interest in the site. Control reverted back to the municipality, which had plans to tear down the buildings and sell the land to developers. Some

Photo by Laura Berman



8866. St. Clair Car House, looking W. (2), July 10/24



8864. St. Clair Car House, looking S.W. July 10/24



Photos are from the City of Toronto Archives, courtesy of Councillor Joe Mihevc

local residents, appalled by this prospect, began working to save the old barns and retain the land for community use. By sheer happenstance, one of these residents, Carol McLaughlin, struck up a conversation with an elderly neighbour, a lifetime denizen of Wychwood. That neighbour vaguely recalled that people used to skate near the barns, on a little rink nicknamed Poverty Pond.

McLaughlin, eager to make good use of this information, went down to the City archives. “I spent a couple of afternoons trying to find out everything I could,” she modestly relates – though what she learned proved to be instrumental in saving the barns. McLaughlin discovered an old photograph of the site, one which showed people playing on a baseball diamond, as well as a newspaper article describing the area as a park. She was able to use these items to demonstrate to Toronto City Council that the land had been earmarked as a park prior to its use as a transit facility – which meant that any future use of the site would need to respect that original intention. The planned demolition was

called off with just days to spare, and a series of meetings was held to determine a new course of action.

The so-called Battle of the Barns that followed was heated and sometimes ugly: At community consultations, in local newspapers, and on posters tacked up throughout the neighbourhood, residents fought bitterly over their competing visions for the site. Gradually, one model emerged, that of a revitalized community development that was as eclectic as could possibly be. It would include both the buildings and an outdoor component, low-cost live/work units for artists, offices for non-profit groups, art galleries, and community-friendly event space. According to most reports, resistance to this plan was soon limited to a small band of naysayers. Armed with a “100% Park” slogan, these opponents raised concerns over introducing a mixed-use facility into the neighbourhood – reluctant to find social service organizations and their accompanying client populations on their back steps. As we now know, the enthusiasm of the neighbourhood majority, backed by the unwa-

vering support of Joe Mihevc, the very determined Ward 21 city councillor, eventually won the day.

Mihevc's love for the Barns is immediately evident: When asked if he might have a spare minute to discuss the project, the councillor literally stops his day and devotes the better part of his lunch hour to the conversation. Mihevc is the last to credit himself with the success, simply saying that "it could not have happened without strong community support," and proceeding to name many local residents, detailing each one's contribution in turn.

In May 2002, at the behest of the City, the non-profit organization Artscape completed a feasibility study on reanimating the Barns. Soon after, Artscape joined forces with The Stop Community Food Centre, and by 2004 the project had begun in earnest. Architectural plans were bolstered by a raft of sustainability measures designed to minimize the Barns' environmental footprint; it's the first heritage redevelopment in Canada to have received gold LEED certification. Lead architect Joe Lobko designed a rainwater-harvesting system, complete with a giant cistern, to provide for the Barns' non-potable water needs – everything from the toilets to irrigation for the gardens. A geothermal heating and cooling system regulates the building's temperature, collecting heat from the soil via shafts dug 130 metres deep.

The Stop was chosen as the anchor tenant of the Wychwood Barns at the very outset and, like the Barns, the organization defies easy classification. The Stop is a food bank, a community kitchen, an education centre, an advocacy group, a runner of farmers' markets, and a food producer, to boot. It has a whole barn of its own – aptly named the Green Barn – and a generous expanse of outside space for gardening, composting, and building a community bake oven. The Green Barn itself is another marvel of multi-functionality: it houses an extensive greenhouse, a classroom, and a sparkling new kitchen in addition to the more standard-issue office space. When asked what the Green Barn facilities add to The Stop, executive director Nick Saul's eyes light up. "People know about us now," he says excitedly. "It gives us a platform to tell our story." Saul goes on to explain that the Barns is The Stop's first experience in a mixed- (as opposed to low-) income neighbourhood. "Here, for the first time, we can maybe bake an artisanal loaf of bread in our bake oven and charge someone \$5.00 in our [new] farmers' market. They'll buy it and we can plough the proceeds back into a community kitchen... that's exciting!"

Welcome to the next generation of food-based social action.

The Stop's front-line services run the gamut from emergency food relief to nutritional guidance and perinatal classes. They also include, most crucially, a serious outreach effort: The Stop has an outstanding track record of bringing service users into the fold, offering them training in the kitchen or the gardens, bestowing skills that foster increased independence. Above all, The Stop is animated by an intense respect for the individuals it assists. This is exemplified in its belief that food relief should consist of something better than canned goods and boxes of macaroni. Much of the food The Stop provides to its clients is impeccably fresh, local, and sustainably produced, the point being not merely to sate hunger but to acknowledge that eating well is a matter of basic

humanity. As Opal Sparks, a program participant involved in one of The Stop's seeding projects, points out, "The Stop supports diversity of palate and preference," a level of consideration not usually accorded those drawing on emergency social services.

The Stop's mission, however, is not only to provide food support for the individuals who cross its threshold; it's also to challenge the larger social and political systems that allow such needs to arise in the first place. Saul is a passionate and persuasive advocate for using food as a kind of gateway, a means of opening up a larger conversation about the socio-economic structures that underpin hunger: "It's not that there isn't enough food out there – we're awash with food; it's that people don't have enough income, and the answer to that is not giving people a hamper of food out of a food bank for three days.... The issue [is] ensuring that people have enough income to access on a regular basis, in non-emergency settings, good, healthy food."

The Stop, in short, is engaged in its own small revolution, reinventing the very notion of what a social mission organization can be and do. Matt Galloway, known to many as the host of CBC Radio's *Here and Now*, was recently elected to The Stop's board of directors. Because he spends every day learning about the best the city has to offer, it is perhaps especially telling that, of all the organizations he's profiled, The Stop is one he chose to personally support. Galloway explains that it was "in particular the possibility that the site could bring in members from diverse and different communities and, through its farmers' market, bake oven and educational component, connect those communities in ways that might not otherwise be possible."

Exactly right. That The Stop and the Barns are category-busting enterprises can sometimes be a roadblock, making it hard for the newcomer to see just exactly what they are up to. But once the dials click, once the picture of a holistic, integrated model of community development is properly in view, it is precisely that category-defying, category-melding nature that makes them so utterly compelling. □

Artscape Wychwood Barns
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Artscape
www.torontoartscape.on.ca

The Stop Community Food Centre
www.thestop.org

Hamutal Dotan is a freelance writer living in Toronto. She never planned on becoming obsessed with food, much less with sustainable food – it crept up on her when she wasn't looking. Now she relaxes by growing, cooking, baking, canning and pickling whatever she can get her hands on. In addition to her fascination with food, Hamutal is particularly compelled by local politics and sustainable urban development. Her writing can be found at www.hamutaldotan.ca.