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Letter from Wychwood Avenue: A community success story

Posted: November 20, 2008, 9:07 PM by Barry Hertz

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The Wychwood community Thursday night gave a hero's welcome to City Councillor Joe Mihevc, with hoots, hollers and catcalls, as he opened the Artscape Wychwood Barns, a row of streetcar repair garages reborn as an arts community, greenhouse, theatre and cultural centre.

At least 1,000 people crowded vast Barn No. 3, which looks much as it did when it opened in 1913 — a long hall with a cathedral glass ceiling. Mayor David Miller won hearty applause, too, but the night belonged to Mr. Mihevc, who wore a vintage grey wool TTC conductor's jacket with silver buttons and brought his parents to the party. His father, Joe Sr., worked 35 years repairing rolling stock for the TTC.

"Thank you, Joe, for all your hard work," said Jerry Austin, a solar panel salesman who walked over from his home with his wife, Bonnie Pascal, and their son Aaron, 4 1/2. "You gave the neighbourhood a heart transplant. You gave it a heart."

The barns hail from the heyday of the streetcar. A photo from the restoration, among those on sale at a gallery here, depicts signs saved from the streetcars that once rumbled to Scarborough Town Centre, Eglinton & Pharmacy and Yonge & Steeles. When the TTC cut its streetcar fleet, it locked the doors here in the mid-1980s and left the place to rust.

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After the pomp died a little last night, councillor Mihevc recalled a 1998 TTC meeting, where he, a newly minted commissioner, timidly opposed a contract to demolish the unloved site.

“It was boarded up and raccoon-infested,” the councillor recalls. “It was not pretty. Then in 2000, someone said, ‘Joe, you’ve gotta go inside.’ ”

His first glimpse of the interior of the six barns turned the councillor into a believer, but well-heeled Wychwood residents quickly rallied to oppose saving the barns.

“Wychwood Park hated the place,” Annie Hillis — who in 2001 wrote a feasibility study for turning the barns over to Artscape — recalled at the barns last night. “I remember the first meeting with Joe Mihevc. They kept saying, ‘This is a dog park. We walk our dogs here. That’s what it’s going to stay.’ Really heated, people shouting. It was tense for a long time.”

In the end, the city sold the barns for \$1 to Artscape, a city agency that provides live-work and studio space to artists in restored industrial buildings. Artscape cobbled together \$19-million, including \$2.3-million from Ottawa, \$3-million from Ontario, \$4.5-million from the City of Toronto and \$1.8-million from the province and feds to build 26 units of subsidized housing for struggling artists.

Joe Lobko of du Toit Architects Ltd. conceived a pipe and cistern network which harvests rain water from the half-hectare roof to flush 26 toilets here. And pipes in 50 holes, each drilled 130 metres deep, draw heat from the earth to warm the complex.

Local Enhancement and Appreciation of Forests (LEAF), which plants trees and shrubs in back yards, has space here, along with the Stop Community Food Centre, which is setting up a huge greenhouse in one barn, irrigated with rain water. Theatre Direct Canada is building a rehearsal and performance space.

Elizabeth Cinello, from Friends of Wychwood Park, beamed last night as she told the crowd, “We don’t have to go see Hollywood films anymore. We can tell our own stories.” And she said the barn restoration is a community success story that others should copy.

“Take a look at the buildings in your neighbourhood,” she said. “Find the sleeping beauties and wake them up.”

A farmer’s market on Saturdays in Barn 3 will feature 40 vendors, but be forewarned: there is no parking at the barns. Ride your bike, the St. Clair streetcar or the Bathurst bus. Taking the TTC here is an appropriate way to honour the heritage of this magnificent complex.

*Photo: Councillor Joe Mihevc gets a hero's reception at the Wychwood Barns (Aaron Lynett/National Post)*

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