

CITYSPACE: 48 ABELL

## Toronto is growing up urbsurd

**This city likes to boast about its West Queen West arts district. Too bad it is unwilling to protect it, LISA ROCHON writes**



LISA ROCHON

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There is a city that I want to recognize as my own -- where artists are not driven from their homes, but treated as essential agents -- so essential as to be left alone. In this metropolis of genuine texture, there's a thriving urban ecology of artists -- painters, filmmakers, videographers, writers and dancers -- and, in one instance, about 100 of these people live and work in a century-old former lamp factory with industrial steel doors and freight elevators lined with inky wood and lanky cables. In this creative city of deep imagination, there is no chance this venerable old building will be knocked down.

In the city I want to call my own, the artist Jessica Rose, 28, would not fear for the future of her studio. But she lives in Toronto at the remarkable but threatened 48 Abell factory warehouse. The city will not save her home.

Mayor David Miller will not defend her neighbourhood. In Toronto, the desiring developer is being allowed to overlay the historic human scale of Queen Street West with tall, antiseptic towers. Soon enough, they'll wonder what scared the artists away.

Once upon a time, steelworkers fuelled the modern economy. Now, creative thinkers are cranking up urban economies. Keep them happy in their homes is the message coming at us from New York and London even while Toronto's leaders have approved the cultural dismemberment of its designated arts and design district. Thank you for breathing life into the district of West Queen West, now shuffle on, the mantra goes -- make room for Starbucks and shiny towers and bohemian poseurs.

With the possible destruction of 48 Abell, Toronto has entered a new era of cultural evisceration. In September, city council voted against giving the building a heritage designation. If the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) grants approval (a hearing is under way), four developers will be set to begin constructing their towers in an area called the

Queen West Triangle, a parcel of land bounded by Queen Street on the north, the railway tracks to the south and Sudbury and Abell streets on the west and east.

Citizens, under the leadership of Margie Zeidler and the Active 18 coalition, have organized enlightened design workshops to counter the banalization of their neighbourhood. A march of artists and a funeral for the beloved 48 Abell were held a couple of weekends ago. On Wednesday, the artists gathered under the name of Model 48 will make an official plea for their factory home at the OMB, the quasi-judicial agency that has final say over some of the province's most significant developments. Will the outcry be heard? At this dysfunctional time in Toronto's development, it's unlikely.

Rose has lived on the quiet lane at 48 Abell, located just south of the Gladstone Hotel, since she was 15 years old. She moved there with her mother, Penny Rose, when the neighbourhood was rough and there were teenage prostitutes working the street corner. The underground arts movement drew them there at a time a community of creative risk-takers was beginning to form inside the factory warehouse. Half of the faculty of the Ontario College of Art and Design is said to have once resided at 48 Abell; Jessica Rose's stepfather, the acclaimed abstract artist Jaan Poldas, is among its current residents.

The warehouse is living proof of just why Toronto, according to University of Toronto urban-geography professor Meric Gertler, managed to grow its creative industries during the 1990s faster than any other city in North America, including New York and Los Angeles. Sometimes, as in the case of 48 Abell, benign neglect has been on the side of Toronto's artists. The vast U-shaped factory is exactly the kind of original urban gem the city of London, England, is desperate to find and renew, the kind of flexible, old building that New York City's Landmarks Preservation Commission protects within its arts districts. There are massive Douglas Fir beams, high ceilings and plenty of natural light flooding into flexible spaces. Artists and designers live there in 80 units, borrowing supplies from each other, inviting local bands to play, holding legendary parties and arranging for the woodworker on the ground floor to help construct part of an artist's installation.

Even while the building has suffered from neglect -- at one point the owners applied a harsh epoxy to the exterior brick -- the space still sits, happily, on the wild side.

The development proposal calls for the cultural crucible to be demolished to make way for 17-storey and 18-storey towers (one of which will contain some subsidized units), with a 9-storey building at their base, designed by Climans Green Liang, a firm with a large portfolio of shopping malls and racetrack-casino combos called racinos. A short walk along Queen Street West is the pulsating red showroom of Bohemian Embassy flats and lofts -- justifiably renamed by bona fide artists of the area as the Bohemian Embarrassment. Designed by the buttoned-down firm of Page + Steele with Baywood Homes as its developer, the plan is for a prosaic eight-storey building at 1171 Queen St. W., with a bulky tower of 19 storeys rising up behind it. The saving grace is meant to be the gap-tooth tunnel in the middle of the proposed Queen Street elevation, which, architect Brian Sickle indicated during a recent OMB hearing, is actually intended as a

passage in the Parisian tradition and should be pronounced with a French accent, as in *passage*. A lovely touch. During cross-examination at the OMB, Sickle was asked whether he was aware of the context of the Queen West neighbourhood during the design of his towers? Sickle declared: "I was instructed by my client to do a scheme that showed highest and best use" -- this, in an area where the typical building along Queen West rises three storeys high.

When something happens to a city that is both stupefying and dumb, it may be remembered as urbsurd. Urbsurdity number one: The city is replacing the pleasure of urban dissonance and the wonky disorder of the historic fabric with clinical towers of glass and steel. Why wouldn't artists want to simply move in and keep on creating great, risky stuff on the 17th floor? Urbsurdity number two: In 1999, the owners of the 48 Abell warehouse, the Hollander family, filed an application with the city to legalize the existing live/work studios in the three-storey building and add an extra floor of rentable space. The city rejected the application. Why? Because the landscaping hadn't met the city's requirement and there were some outstanding parking issues to be resolved. It was a classic case of bureaucratic bungling. Several years later, the owners have returned with a vengeance in a joint-development venture. Now, if OMB approval is received, there's only one major impediment for the development -- the project is contingent on receiving affordable housing funding.

Jessica Rose is a performance artist and curator who was the arts programmer at the Drake Hotel. Like many artists from Toronto's West Queen West, Rose is a cultural connector who worked tirelessly to recruit artists for the Toronto Alternative Art Fair International, as well as helping to program the city's wildly successful Nuit Blanche, the recent all-night love-in with artists. But, after investing nearly 15 years of her energy in helping to revitalize her neighbourhood, Rose feels unappreciated and, yeah, bitter. "It would have been nice for the Mayor to champion the neighbourhood, but who is standing up? I think I'm moving to Brooklyn," says Rose. "It's terribly upsetting."

Wait, don't go. This is exactly the kind of creative person Toronto needs to hold onto. Creative human capital -- in other words, Rose and her artsy friends -- should be courted by the city to stay, rather than being forced to pack their bags. "It's critical for a city-region to create and protect affordable space for creative activity in the city," says Gertler, project author of *Creative Spaces: Strategies for a Creative City*, a study commissioned in part by the City of Toronto and the City of London, England. "A lot of our old buildings are being knocked down and redeveloped in Toronto," says Gertler. "Clearly there's a role for planning that recognizes the social benefits that arise in recycling these old buildings -- they become crucibles for new activities."

The moment a neighbourhood becomes trendy is the moment its raw edge slips away. Over the past decade, Katharine Mulherin, whose Contemporary Art Projects is located at 1086 Queen St. W., has opened several galleries along the Queen West strip, mostly in spaces that were sitting empty. But she was always wary of formalizing the groove of the neighbourhood. "Seven years ago, a bunch of galleries wanted to designate the Queen West area as an arts and design district. I knew that as soon as we called it an arts district

we would be in trouble," says Mulherin. "I liked the underground feeling that it had. Now, in the back of my mind, I'm already thinking of where I'm going to have to go." That's urbsurd, but part of the harsh reality of Toronto, our hometown.

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