

Ontario Workers Arts & Heritage Centre

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Renée Johnston shows off
'a product of passion.'



Tucked beside the rail line in Hamilton is a heritage building with an interesting past and a dynamic present.

It's a cultural centre unlike any other in North America, dedicated to the arts and heritage of working people. Neither museum nor art gallery, it runs rotating exhibits interpreting the experience of working people to more than 10,000 visitors a year. People come from all over Canada and the U.S, and from as far away as Australia and Scandinavia.



An architectural gem, the centre shows off both its history and its exhibits to advantage.

“We’re unique,” said development director Renée Johnston. “We focus on popular education. We combine heritage and contemporary arts. We collect stories, and work with artists to develop them.”

The combined focus on art, heritage and labour draws in people who have never worked together before.

“There are stories and history that have been forgotten; that aren’t taught in school; that are undervalued. We aren’t art or artifact based. We’re more into the process linking people to history, learning from the past and planning for the future,” she said.

Hard times for a hidden treasure

The 1860 Customs House has known its share of hard times.

Marilyn Miller, a conservation advisor with the Ontario Heritage Foundation, recalls a boarded-up derelict that had been a macaroni factory from 1956 until the health department closed it in 1979.

Marilyn saw it as “a hidden treasure.”

Behind the neglect was a fine stone structure. The Foundation offered \$10,000 to anyone who would fix it up and donate an

easement, and later paid \$400,000 for a new roof and other restoration.

For Marilyn (now chair of the Employee Relations Committee for the Ministry of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation), it was “fun to see it finally become a labour museum, and a real plus that the building is now accessible to the public. It’s a public use. It has the right owners, who are really going to be able to show the place off.”

A product of passion

The centre is a product of passion, said Renée.

A core group of about eight activists met in each others homes in the late 80s asking why their lives weren’t reflected in museums, books and magazines.

They were looking for a way to balance negative media and be a force for change. They set up a non-profit corporation and did a feasibility study.

In 1995, they bought the old Custom House for \$475,000, and spent \$1 million on restoration, largely with grant money.

They opened with pride a year later, and now they run on an annual budget of about \$250,000

Steve Daynes photo



“We work with municipalities and other ministries to implement the Ontario Heritage Act to see they care for their designated buildings and other heritage resources. We’re concerned with environmental assessment, archaeology, museums, and buildings. The province and government have a role in heritage.”

– Marilyn Miller



The exhibit that's on until Dec. 17 is called Building Your Own Home.

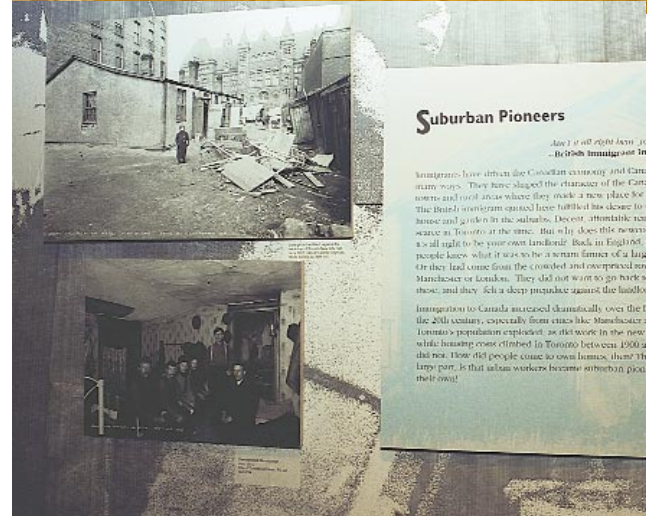
– from foundations, unions, union locals and individuals. OPSEU provides an annual donation of \$5,000.

The impact of housing

People used to build their own homes then developers took over and gave us suburban sprawl. The results include schools closing in inner cities, and the decline of housing in the core areas, said Renée.

“How do we reclaim the activity of building our own home? We want to show ways in which, with government cooperation, but at little or no cost, owner building might help address the shortage of affordable housing.”

The blight of owner-built shanties has returned to haunt our cities in the form of lean-tos under the Gardiner Expressway and tent structures in the Don Valley. “Other countries have programs where people can create their own space. Why can't we?”



It's a history of owner-built housing. In the early part of the century, people built their own homes from what they could find by necessity.

The scope of service work

The exhibition which will open in January explores service work in Canada over the last century.

“We talk about work, life, love and family, domestic challenges, unionism, activism. We use heritage as a tool for activism,” said Renée.

People have contact with personal, community, commercial and public services every day. The exhibit will look at the common factors and the differences in these faces of the service economy. It will highlight the roles of youth, immigrants and women and look at the future of the service industry.

Among the themes to be explored are the difference between good and bad jobs and who does which; unionization in the service sector; the effect of privatization on service workers and the recipients; and the impact of volunteerism.



Then municipal councils became concerned about urban blight. The places looked terrible.



People were ordered to install plumbing or move out, if they couldn't afford the plumbing.

Workshops and outreach

The Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre plans workshops and seminars in connection with its exhibits. An exhibit on child labour was planned by students from five area high schools, and included about 100 students in a discussion of Canada's role in child labour.

The centre wants to get its message into schools, and works closely with teachers and their unions.

It hosts performances, plays and music, and is looking to reach labour studies programs in the community colleges.

It's important because of the way that society is changing. People are more product-focused. Students don't know that people fought for things they now take for granted, said Renée. ▲

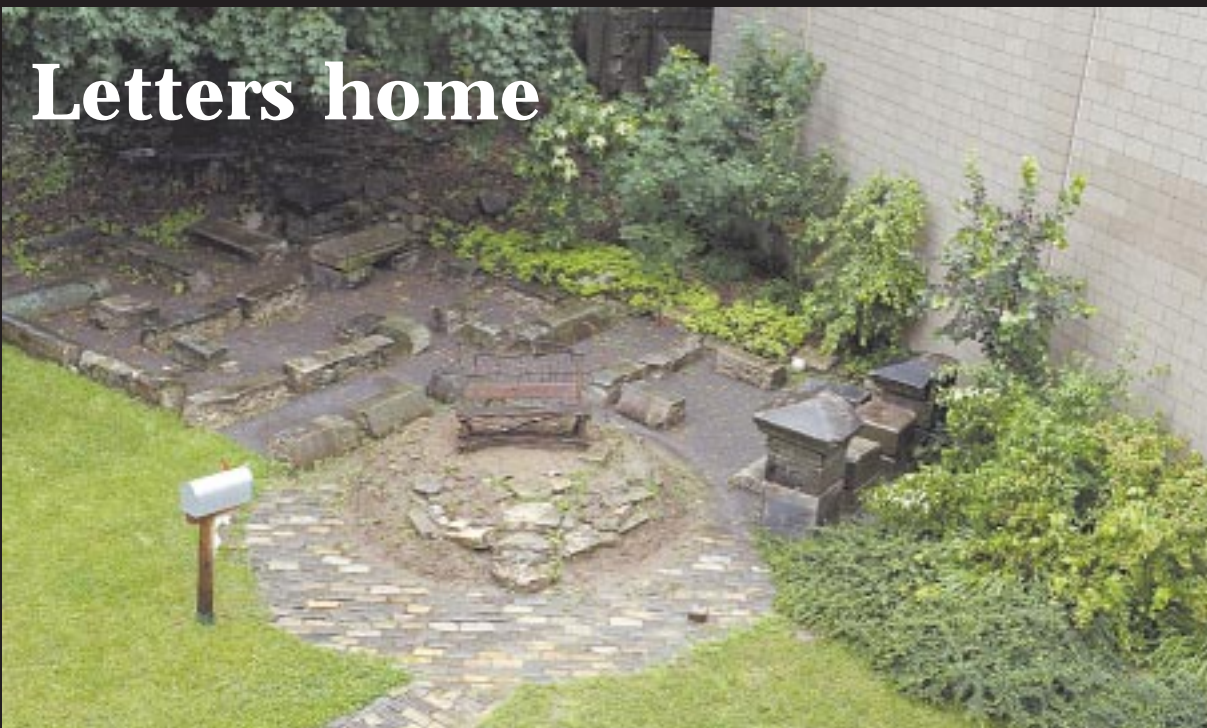
What does 'community art' mean?

Community art involves a collaboration between artists and a community of interest.

It could be a group of women, retirees, health care workers, or food bank volunteers. They come together and tell their stories, and decide what is the best vehicle for their story. It could be a video, poetry reading, a publication or an installation – like the garden (below).

Whatever the vehicle, the process is more important than the product. The product is a bonus, but the understanding and knowledge that come from the process are the main goal.

The artist's role is facilitator and interpreter and working with the group of people. ▲



In the garden of the Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre is an installation of stones, earth and plants – the result of collaboration among immigrant women in Hamilton's North End and artist V. Jane Gordon. The stone maze tells of the difficulties and challenges the women faced getting services, learning English, and adapting to their new country. The mailbox holds letters in their own languages telling of their sorrows and struggles. Creating the work allowed the women to share their experiences, draw strength from each other, and find peace in their new land.