

Aurora Town Square offers new opportunities for arts programs: Cultural Centre

It might still be a few months before the Aurora Town Square redevelopment welcomes its first visitors, but one of its key partners, the Aurora Cultural Centre, is already looking forward to all the opportunities the new space will provide.

Since its establishment in 2010, the Aurora Cultural Centre has been based at the historic Church Street School building located at 22 Church Street.

The organization has been displaced from their home for the duration of the build, but once the finishing touches are in place, they will enjoy many more programming spaces within their traditional home and within the expansive addition to the building at the heart of the Square.

"22 Church Street is our home, we have lived there since 2010, and we have built strong programming components, we have built relationships with hundreds of clients who activated the space, we know the quirks of the space, when people want to use it, and in what ways," Suzanne Haines, Executive Director of the Aurora Cultural Centre, recently told Council.

Rental revenue from the spaces within the Church Street School helped support Cultural Centre programs over the years and in the new "hybrid" governance model that will operate Aurora Town Square, there will be some changes in the air.

Haines says this shift was part of "negotiations and discussions" that have led to the hybrid model, but having the Town oversee bookings in the majority of spaces within the Square, a "comprehensive" model, is something that "made a lot of sense."

"That allows for conferences, it allows for multi-use across the entire space and, in doing so, within the structure of the Town taking that one, it allowed us to just think about programming and the artistic programs that we have," said Haines. "We were really behind this idea and what we did and there was a revenue source attached to that. The challenge is when you give up that programming you give up the revenue. We don't want to charge the residents more for the programs because of that loss of revenue. We're working with staff on how we can look at the new opportunities afforded to us through Aurora Town Square and perhaps look at covering that loss in other ways; but it can't happen immediately because obviously these programs have to grow into the new space."

To that end, there are no shortage of ideas for how that space can be used.

The Aurora Cultural Centre's three primary pillars are visual arts, performing arts and education, the heritage pillar largely now covered by the Aurora Museum and Archives.

Once the new and previous spaces are ready to be occupied, gallery programming from the Cultural Centre will kick into high gear.

"We plan to extend our Mayor's Celebration of Youth Art across Town Square in the dedicated gallery rails installed throughout the new infrastructure," said Haines on how art will be displayed in the spaces. "This allows us to include more students, more opportunities, and showcase the whole venue as a professional art gallery through this special annual exhibit. As noted in the business plan, there are numerous studies that show artists have difficulty [finding] space to build art. Our contribution to supporting Aurora and York Region artists is to offer space through a residency program in the basement of 22 Church Street. Artists working with us in our gallery program will be able to access resources in this space.

"As there are gallery rails throughout the infrastructure, we have offered to curate a community gallery on the main floor of the building around the corner from the café. This would be a great opportunity for community artists to have works exhibited in the space and encourage visitors, families and friends to support the economic viability of the café itself."

Before ground was broken for Aurora Town Square, Brevik Hall, the largest room on the second floor of the Church Street School was the Centre's primary performance area.

Following the grand opening, the bulk of performance programming will take place in the black box theatre that is at the heart of the addition to the historic building.

This, in turn, will spur a revised purpose for Brevik Hall.

“As we move the bulk of our performing arts events to the new performance hall, we gain technical capabilities and audience size. In doing this Brevik Hall becomes more available,” said Haines. “In our history of managing the space, we know there are months where traditionally there were no rentals in that space. Along the same lines of what we’re doing for visual artists in the gallery program, we plan to activate Brevik Hall during those times with a residency program for performing artists. This program would be for artists working on projects that build into our performing arts programs.”

The outdoor amphitheatre, which is situated just to the west of the historic building, will be a further opportunity for performance space, with Haines stating it will see programming similar to the Centre’s Aurora Pops Up! series of musical pop-up performances find a home outdoors.

“As our education programs moves out of the various spaces in 22 Church Street, they will be primarily focused in the visual arts studios where appropriate, purpose-built storage, drying racks, material and supplies will support learning,” Haines added. “This move also enables us to get back to the number of programs we had back in 2019 and grow to meet the needs identified in our recent 2023 Community-Wide arts survey.”

“We are very excited to move back into our home and welcome our patrons home, too. This program enables us to reduce isolation by creating more community connections, provide creative building opportunities for our artists, and have a lasting and inspiring impact on residents through the power of performing and visual arts.”

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