



401 (NOT THE HIGHWAY)

By Erin MacKeen

Open Studio - Scotiabank
Nuit Blanche 2009.
Opposite: The exterior of 401
Richmond Street, 2011.

401 RICHMOND STREET WEST IS A WELL-KNOWN ADDRESS TO TORONTO'S ECLECTIC CREATIVE COMMUNITIES, BUT WHAT GOES ON INSIDE THE RESTORED TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY FACTORY REMAINS A MYSTERY TO MANY. THE IMPRESSIVE 200,000 SQUARE FOOT COMPLEX TAKES UP NEARLY A CITY BLOCK, AND CONTAINS A THRIVING GROUP OF ARTISTS, ARTISANS, NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS, DESIGNERS, FILMMAKERS, FESTIVALS, GALLERIES, ARCHITECTS, BUSINESSES, MAGAZINES, MUSICIANS AND SHOPS. THE BUILDING IS HUMMING WITH ACTIVITY, AND ALL IT TAKES IS STEPPING THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR TO GET IN ON THE ACTION.



Inside 401 Richmond Street

When 401 Richmond was first purchased by the Zeidler family in 1994, it was quickly nicknamed “401” and the question “Do you mean the highway?” kept popping up. The comparison was pretty ironic; 401 Richmond is about place in a way that a highway never can be. The whole project was about bringing people together in one place to see what happened. It all started with affordable, character-filled work space in the downtown core designed to encourage people to build community around their work. Balancing old and new, public and private, work and leisure, the space appeals to creative and innovative thinkers.

Originally built for the Macdonald Manufacturing Company in 1899 as a tin factory specializing in lithography, the building's history is rooted in the arts. Macdonald was famous for the artwork they printed on tins that held staple items like starch, flour, honey and lard. The first Ontario license plates were made at 401, as well as more ominous items like gas mask canisters during World War II. As industry shifted out to the suburbs, the building changed ownership numerous times before finding itself in the midst of a real estate recession and lined up for a meeting with a wrecking ball. The building was saved and quickly had its unflattering '80s renovations peeled away to expose original wood floors, double-hung wood windows, exposed brick, and douglas fir post-and-beam construction. Now award-winning and heritage designated, it's a shining example of the possibilities that lie in

revitalizing old buildings. As urban thinker and author Jane Jacobs wrote in her famous book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, “Old ideas can sometimes use new buildings. New ideas must use old buildings.”

The intention from the get-go was to create affordable workspace for artists with a balanced mix of other uses framed by what was coined the Three C's: community, culture, and commerce. The idea was to include all the key ingredients of a vital neighbourhood in one building: work space, green space, common space, a place to eat, a place to meet both purposefully and accidentally, shops and services. Added to the mix were less tangible but equally important elements like safety, inclusivity, and diversity. The assortment of tenants is purposefully varied, but not just anyone can rent space at 401. Tenants have to be the “right fit” and invested, for their own reasons, in community-building. Choosing tenants is a curatorial project that creates both intended and unexpected synergies.

401 is owned and operated by Urbanspace Property Group, and the values that guide its management speak to a deep understanding of the arts as an instrumental part of an economically successful and livable city. Urbanspace is a mission-driven developer, and on the list of multiple bottom lines, many items sit above profit. This doesn't mean it's not a successful business model, but the focus is on longevity rather than quick



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returns. Investments in the environment, community and culture are able to rise to the top of the overall vision.

Urbanspace creates a quarterly newsletter that highlights the activities of tenants and is always working to bring new visitors to the building with events like Doors Open Toronto, Jane's Walk, and the Brickolage Monthly Tour Series. This fall, there's lots planned for Culture Days and Scotiabank Nuit Blanche, the all-night contemporary art celebration on October 1. There will be tenant artists doing installations and performances, gallery exhibitions, and creative engagements with the built environment.

Over time, the ground floor has been designed to be the most public face of the building. Of the 11 galleries, nine of them are on the ground floor, including Open Studio, A Space Gallery, Red Head Gallery, Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography, WARC Gallery, Urbanspace Gallery, Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art, YYZ Artists' Outlet, and Wynick/Tuck Gallery. There is also a lounge, café, courtyard, a rare instrument shop called Musideum, and one of Toronto's last independent bookstores, Swipe Design Books and Objects. The other floors have their own character resulting from their particular blend of tenants and open-to-the-public spots like Trinity Square Video, Vtape, and Gwendolyne Hats.

Emphasizing the building's relationship with city-building, a year ago the Urbanspace Gallery took shape in the central "atrium" on the main floor. As a presentation space to "create conversations about cities," the gallery features exhibitions and events that

celebrate and analyze city issues that are related to the physical shape and human energies of urban space. Curated by Max Allen and Margie Zeidler, the space is a repository for exciting ideas about what it means to live in Toronto and how to influence changes to improve how we do that.

Since the beginning, Urbanspace Property Group has undertaken a number of eco-restoration projects that bring back the green that was pushed out by bricks and mortar. This includes a roof garden, designed to be both a social and green space for tenants, that is a popular spot for lunches, meetings, and the occasional event. The garden — winner of a Green Toronto award in 2008 — is best described as magical, and is a labour of love for property manager Mike Moody. In fact, Mike has been instrumental in many other things that have taken root at 401 such as tree planting, green parking, and urban agriculture — all of which are being documented on a blog called *Old Plant, New Plant*.

In a recent Toronto Star article, Councillor Adam Vaughan chose 401 Richmond as the "secret" place he thought everyone should know about, referring to it as a "factory full of ideas." Mayor Rob Ford's Special Advisor on Arts and Culture Jeff Melanson also named 401 Richmond as a must-see spot for tourists looking for an attraction a little off the beaten path. The sense is that 401 is holding its own as a Toronto destination by bringing something unique and inspiring to the city.

VISIT WWW.401RICHMOND.NET TO FIND OUT WHAT'S HAPPENING AT 401 RICHMOND AND THE MANY WAYS TO STAY CONNECTED THROUGH A MONTHLY WHAT'S-ON EMAIL, TWITTER, AND THE UPDATE NEWSLETTER.