



>> As Canada's largest Heritage Conservation District, Old East Village played a significant role in London's history. Image: The Palace Theatre, 1937.

Old East renaissance

By Kym Wolfe

Revitalizing an inner city neighbourhood is no easy feat, but thanks to a strong cultural community, London's Old East Village is gradually becoming a destination for people with an interest in the arts. And the economic spin-offs are helping breathe new life into this historic neighbourhood.

Three anchor organizations – London Community Players at the Palace Theatre (710 Dundas), Aeolian Performing Arts Centre (795 Dundas) and the newly opened London Clay Art Centre (664 Dundas) – have played an integral role in the area's rejuvenation. East of Adelaide may have had a bad rap as an undesirable part of town, but with more people coming down for music, theatre and other cultural events, the public's perception is slowly changing for the better.

"The arts are increasing awareness of the area and bringing more people in," says Ken Keane, President of the Old East Village

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Business Improvement Area. Keane has owned Centretown Pawnbroker for more than a decade, and says he has always been pleasantly surprised by the number of shoppers along Dundas Street, but now he is seeing different faces.

People who have never visited the neighbourhood before come for a play at the Palace or a performance at the Aeolian, says Keane, and the restaurants and coffee shops are benefiting from that evening traffic. "While they are here they notice the different shops along the commercial strip – the comics and collectibles store, the goldsmith, the little antique shops. There is such a diversity of offerings, and I think people are coming back during the day to browse and shop."

The arts have also played a role in spurring property development in the area, says Clark Bryan, owner of the Aeolian Performing Arts Centre and the Aeolian Music School. When Medallion Corp. first looked at developing

apartments and condos along Dundas Street last year, their London realtor met them in a studio at the Aeolian. "They were very impressed with what they saw happening here, and they said it was a factor in their decision to invest in this area," says Bryan.

Bryan has also gotten to know a Florida investor who was raised in Old East and who has purchased properties along Rectory Street, neighbouring the Aeolian. "He has a vision of transforming the block into an artists' residential area," says Bryan, who notes there are already a number of artists living in the Old East Village. "It is becoming a destination for them."

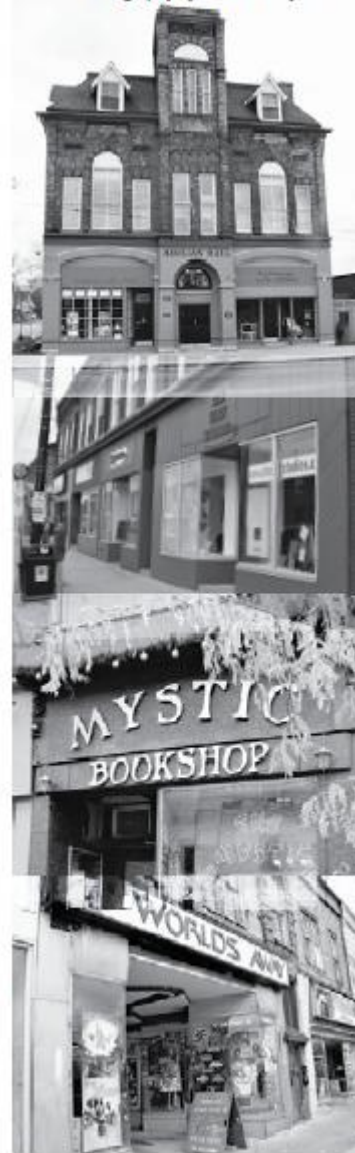
The Aeolian Music School, with its 14 teachers and more than 200 students, also brings a significant number of people into the area on a regular basis. Marketing and cross-promotion with local businesses is resulting in direct spin-offs, with students and their parents spending time and money in stores while they are in the neighbourhood.

There are a number of other arts initiatives operating in the area. Just down the street from Aeolian is The East Village Arts Co-operative (757 Dundas), which hosts a variety of concerts, exhibits, workshops and other events that strengthen community ties and the local arts and music scene. Off the Dundas strip but still in the Old East area is the London City Music Theatre, located at the former Imax Theatre on the Western Fairgrounds.

The concentration of live entertainment pulls hundreds of people into Old East, says Karen Killeen, General Manager of London Community Players and The Palace Theatre. "We give the sidewalks evening and weekend foot traffic," she says. "We are creating a buzz in this area."

The Palace seats 350 people and has been LCP's home since 1991. Between the LCP playbill, London Musical Theatre productions and one-off performances like December's special presentation of *The Nutcracker*, Killeen says there is something happening at the Palace one out of every two nights throughout the year.

Photography by Paul Miszczyk.



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Aside from patrons, the Palace's employees and volunteers and the shows' casts and crews all support area businesses on a daily basis, says Killeen, from the diners to the local variety store.

The new London Clay Art Centre is the third in a triumvirate of very strong arts organizations taking its place alongside the Palace and Aeolian, says Darlene Pratt, chair of the London Potters Guild's "Seize the Clay" campaign, which raised money for the Guild to establish a permanent home.

The Guild had a wish list for their new location – a store front, on a major bus route, a loading dock, and at least 5,000 square feet to accommodate classes, studios and meeting space. The building they purchased EOA exceeded their expectations.

The London Clay Art Centre has 7,000 square feet of space on two floors, with potential for basement development in the future. Three major bus routes run past the front door and the space is large enough for the Guild to rent working space to artists – four to start on the main floor, with an eye to having ten more upstairs in the near future.

The building was vacant and dilapidated, says Pratt, and needed a new roof and other basics. But with a price tag of only \$150,000 the Guild could afford to renovate the property to meet their specific needs.

Members can access the building 24 hours a day. At first, Pratt says, some artists had misgivings about working alone late at night because of the area's reputation. "Once you spend some time here you realize it's no different than other neighbourhoods in the city," Pratt says. "It's just as safe." And members enjoy the tea shop and coffee house and other amenities the village has to offer.

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