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Pier Genius

The Halifax Port Authority has a 10-year plan to transform the waterfront piers from pigeon infested sheds to a viable cultural district for supercitizens and tourists alike.

Starting on May 13 to October 30, passengers disembarking from cruise ships into Halifax will face some unusual sights: Colleen Wolstenholme's collection of *Alice in Wonderland*-sized psychoactive pills, Thierry Delva's chiselled granite *Two 45 Gallon Drums*, Gerald Ferguson's cascading pile of one million pennies. This artistic haven, just next door to Pier 21 where over 180,000 ship passengers enter the SuperCity each year, is the home of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia's new contemporary art exhibition space.



You may be wracking your brain trying to figure out exactly where it is. That's probably because the 30,000 square feet of warehouse space to the right of the museum's registration desk has been empty for a very long time. Now the floor's hosed down, the pigeons evicted (thanks to a hungry falcon) and the cobwebs replaced with a wall-length painting by Gary Neill Kennedy.

Jeff Gray, manager of development for the AGNS, says that the

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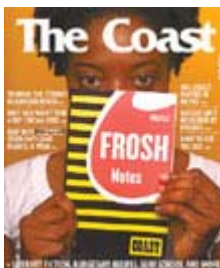


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donation-only exhibition already has a built-in audience of 15,000 cruise ship tourists who will enter the city directly through the gallery, but that he's hoping for a good local turnout too. Even if a portion of these art-curious visitors quizzically turn their noses up at contemporary work, he calls the space an "interactive billboard" that will help round up visitors for the mainstream summer exhibitions of Asian ceramics and mummy masks.


Tourists and locals alike should get used to seeing art down at the waterfront. If all goes according to Halifax Port Authority's ambitious 10-year redevelopment plan, the AGNS exhibition space is just the first step towards transforming the entire Seawall. Extending from Piers 20 to 23 along the southern end of the city's waterfront, the Seawall area currently includes Pier 21, the Cruise Pavilion, the Immigration Annex building and a gateway connecting to the Halifax Harbourwalk. By 2015, the area will be transformed into an environmentally friendly, mixed-use development, and the centre of the city's cultural life and economy.

Inspired by the wise words of Jane Jacobs, the Toronto-based author of *Death and Life of Great American Cities*—"old ideas can sometimes use new buildings. New ideas must use old buildings"—the pier's empty cargo sheds will be stripped down and transformed into two distinct areas. There will be a Visitors' District to accommodate the increase of tourist and cruise traffic, expected to double within the next 10 years, and potentially host over 120 events a year identified by the Port Authority, including Word on the Street, Tall Ships and the Atlantic Film Festival.



The second area, deemed the city's new Cultural District, will


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house the new NSCAD University campus, the AGNS exhibition space, and a mix of offices, artist studios, galleries and retail spaces, aimed at promoting, packaging and selling the province's pathetically underrecognized and underfunded cultural industry.

The almost too-good-to-be-true design proposal includes plenty of open spaces, clusters of restaurants and access to the water. Although there are no public architectural plans available yet, the Port Authority is interested in developing a design aesthetic that will maintain the open, airy feel of the warehouses, and pay homage to the Seawall's industrial past. For those who have travelled across the country, Vancouver's Granville Island is perhaps the best comparison: tin-sided factories, smack-dab in the middle of the city, transformed into a vibrant area teeming with galleries, restaurants, hotels, markets and the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design.

Ron Taylor, senior vice president with the Toronto-based real estate firm O&Y Enterprise, is the man with



the plan. Taylor was originally brought to Halifax by the Port Authority as a member of the redevelopment master planning committee, which also includes Bishop's Landing architect Andy Lynch and Eb Zeidler, the Toronto architect who's credited for changing that city's landscape with culturally minded developments such as 401 Richmond, a downtown manufacturing building reborn as a home for artists of all disciplines, non-profits and other like-minded businesses. After several public consultations and a review of successful waterfront arts districts such as Granville Island, the committee developed a comprehensive, long-term strategy. It's now Taylor's job to make it happen.

At first glance, Taylor, sitting in the Port Authority's corporate-uniform boardroom, does not look like a typical arts advocate. He has the blue suit, but no tie and the top shirt button's undone. It's his gentle but obvious enthusiasm for the project, depth of knowledge and credentials that give him away. Taylor wants to replicate his previous success with Toronto's Fashion Incubator,



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an organization that offers rising fashion designers production and retail space, plus valuable marketing and business support. He sees the Port Authority's partnership with NSCAD University, which plans to renovate 50,000 square feet into studio and classroom space, as the creative heart of the project.

"The whole chain is that NSCAD trains the students, and others come here to work and have their workshops. Not only is it cost-effective space, but then we can provide sustainable rents and create a community," Taylor says. "If a fashion designer needs something welded or a metal worker needs a pattern made, people can work together." He also expects that there will be opportunities for shared kilns, forges and other materials that individual artists can't afford on their own.

Although Taylor peppers his language with soft words like "community" and "fertile creativity," he's very clear that the bottomline of the development is to create jobs and stimulate an undervalued economy. He's also not afraid to use business speak, which may tick off some artists, but will appeal to those on the numbers side: "You have one of the prime holdings of cultural resources in North America but no one has located it," he says, referring to those working in the cultural industry. "And no one has found a way of extracting it—taking it out of the ground—in a way which makes it an economy."

In fact, Taylor sees walk-by tourist traffic as icing on the money cake. The real benefit of a centralized cultural hotspot, he says, is the development of a new trade component; luring international buyers to the city through consolidated marketing efforts and programming such as fashion shows, conferences and symposiums.

Across the street, the atmosphere in the Immigration Annex—home of the Cultural Federation offices and 40 artists' studios—is much more relaxed than their corporate neighbour. Walking down the studio corridor on a Tuesday morning, only the woodshop seems busy, filling the air with heady perfume. Uniform green nameplates on the walls indicate that some of the province's best-known artists may be toiling away behind closed doors.

In Studio 148, jewellery designer Dorothee Rosen polishes one of her One-Footer rings, created by meticulously wrapping a one-foot string of sterling silver around and around until it becomes a delightful spiraling tower. When Rosen started sharing a studio space with glass beadwork designer Candice Prior, it didn't cross her mind to use the space to sell her work, but since a successful open house in January, she's had a minimum of one person a week book an appointment.

"For some people, it really adds something to their experience of owning that piece of jewellery," she says. "They want to learn about how it's made, the inspirations behind it. It's different buying something from the person directly than from a gallery."

As a mother of two, Rosen admits that the last thing that she wants to do is to be tied to a retail operation or regular studio hours. Other tenants object to the risk of constant distractions, voicing this concern at a Port Authority tenants meeting, held back in March. Although the space will be flexible enough to allow for studio spaces closed to the general public, the issue is still of concern to many artists whose creative processes don't allow for distractions.

"I found out there's a bit of resistance of having people come through, it takes people's time, concentration. Personally I don't find that an issue, because I love to talk about my work," Rosen laughs. "But there are people here that oppose the development for that reason."

Taylor believes that the proposed modular design for the district will accommodate artists that would prefer to not feel like a performing monkey for cruise passengers. Doors and walls can be easily erected to accommodate individual tenant needs. Some artists or artist cooperatives may prefer an open space, or a combination production/retail space to both create and sell their wares. Some artists will want to keep their studio doors shut, and that's OK too.

Although Taylor is hopeful that the artists' concerns will be

addressed, the development has at least one opponent in City Hall. In late March, mayor Peter Kelly appeared on ATV News to debate “containers versus culture,” suggesting that some day the sheds may be required again. In a statement released on March 17, he “urge[s] the Port Authority to refocus its efforts on operating a world-class competitive port, rather than looking to land developments and other interests to diversify their operations.”

Michele Peveril, manager of corporate communications for the federally run agency, understands this concern. “That’s something that we’ve looked at over time,” she says. “Probably no, most of our cargo activity is at the container terminals and at bulk facilities (located further down the waterfront). That stretch of activity doesn’t need to be done at the sheds.”

While the mayor may need some convincing, the redevelopment has already attracted tenant interest. NSCAD University should be moved in by September 2006. Garrison Brewery is rumoured to be opening a beer store, and hushed whispers suggest CBC Radio has also looked at the area as a possible future home. Taylor sees opportunity to further build the film and media industry around the success and proximity of Electropolis Studios.

Rosen says that so far, she has confidence in the Port Authority’s vision because of attention to details such as commissioning public bench designs to local artisans, proposed marketing and business planning mentorship, and Taylor’s personal commitment to using sustainable, smart-growth development and high environmental standards. Above all, Rosen values the early commitment to the artists.

“He [Taylor] has it in mind, that in this artist area, there will be products for sale that will be made here. The cruise ship passengers looking for a five-dollar memento will be out of luck,” she says. “As people who handmake things piece by piece, we can’t compete with that. But if there is a willingness from the side of the Port to do this, that’s already a brilliant sign that they’re willing to work with us and for us.”

A public information meeting about the pier shed is happening at 7pm, may 19, at the south cruise pavilion of pier 21, 1061 marginal road. 490-4436.

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