

MAKING SPACES FOR ART

NORTH YORK ARTS

Nothing but Blue Sky: North York Arts and the Toronto Centre for the Arts

It's hard to miss the glass-walled office of North York Arts when you enter the grand main lobby of the Toronto Centre for the Arts. Affectionately dubbed 'The Fishbowl,' what was once the gift shop of the Toronto Centre for the Arts is now the front-facing office of North York Arts. This interesting space-sharing arrangement is the result of an opportune partnership between the arts service organization and the performing arts venue.



North York Arts' home, Toronto Centre for the Arts

North York Arts is a local arts service organization dedicated to bringing art and community together throughout the eleven wards of North York. Formerly an initiative of the Toronto Arts Foundation's *Creative City: Block-by-Block* program, North York Arts represents a strategic investment in arts development outside the downtown core of Toronto. Originally operating out of the Toronto Arts Foundation offices downtown, Executive Director Lila Karim led the charge to bring North York Arts to the heart of the community it serves. North York Arts became an independent not-for-profit this past summer, and will celebrate their 5th anniversary this fall.

Since 2011, North York Arts and the Toronto Centre for the Arts have worked cohesively to build the profile of arts in North York, celebrate the artistic community and bring arts and culture programming to the region. Originally there was a vision that North York Arts would be located in a house across the street from the nearby Mel Lastman Square, but as time went on they discovered a demonstrated need to bring the community into the well-established Toronto Centre for the Arts outside of their regular performances and shows. The two organizations saw a perfect opportunity to forge a partnership - as community connectors, North York Arts operates as a conduit between the Centre and the creative community of North York,

animating the space with programming and bringing the community into the only professional performing facility north of Bloor St.



[The Curve Lounge during the 2015 Emergence Symposium | Arts & Equity: Leading Social Change](#)

North York Arts moved into their hub space at the Toronto Centre for the Arts in 2014 and have since more than doubled their programming capacity. At North York Arts, the mandate is to bring art and community together, and Development & Communications Manager Ely tells us they approach that concept in a number of ways. North York Arts provides access to arts and culture programming to the

communities of North York, highlighting the

arts outside the downtown core. They also champion and engage the artistic community, providing professional development, networking opportunities and exposure to the incredible artists working and living in North York. Their home in the Toronto Centre for the Arts allows them to meet their mandate from a state-of-the-art facility, animating the fully-equipped space with artistic events and programming and bringing the community into the beautiful venue in their own backyard.

North York Arts' front-and-center hub offers a sense of transparency that goes beyond the glass walls. They are both visible and accessible – a perfect combination for such a community-centric organization. They literally greet you when you walk through the lobby doors, and Ely tells us that a number of incredible community partnerships have developed as a result. North York Arts also programs the Toronto Centre for the Arts' Curve Lounge and lower gallery, as well as connecting performers and presenters with the Studio and George Weston theatres. The vision for the Curve Lounge space is a community hub where artists can meet with clients, art organizations can connect and network, and creators can access hot desk space for day-to-day operations. North York Arts maximizes the use of the existing space to serve the needs of local artists, and the Curve Lounge allows them to use the assets that already exist in the Toronto Centre for the Arts to provide a much-needed service for the artists living and working nearby.

The next step in the partnership will involve the renovation of an outward facing doorway, giving North York Arts its own entry into the Toronto Centre for the Arts, making them even more accessible and visible to the community. The door will face the appropriately named North York Boulevard, and Ely tells us, “the project will give [North York Arts] the opportunity to greet people, not just through the office space but through the community hub and give direct entrance into the gallery.”



The soon-to-be North York Arts entrance, facing North York Blvd.

The Toronto Centre for the Arts is a major supporter of the project, working closely with North York Arts to make the vision a reality – the renovation of the doorway is slated to begin in winter of 2017.

When asked about other future plans, Ely tells us with a smile, “as [Executive Director] Lila says, ‘blue skies!’” The possibilities are endless for North York Arts, both with their programming opportunities and facilities. When asked if he has any advice for organizations that may be operating without a partnership with a facility like the Toronto Centre for the Arts, he suggests looking to the buildings, local arts service organizations and resources that already exist. He tells us, “the strength of art organizations in this city will come from recognizing each other, and from championing each other [...] we all speak the same language, even if we’re doing different kinds of programming. So I would say if you’re lacking a partnership, like an incredible facility like this, keep looking.”

North York Arts and the Toronto Centre for the Arts are a picture-perfect model of what a partnership can (and should) be. They mutually benefit each other, with North York Arts animating the fantastic, grandiose space of the Toronto Centre for the Arts, helping it establish itself the true epicenter of the North York community. In return, North York Arts is able to execute their planning from a dynamic, welcoming space that allows them to operate and flourish as a prominent, visible community organization. We sense nothing but blue skies ahead for this duo.