

Making Spaces for Art

A Case Study: Thunder Bay Art Gallery



After a few decades in school, the Thunder Bay Art Gallery is finally graduating. The gallery has been located in a hidden away corner on the campus of Confederation College for the past thirty-seven years. Those years are in the process of coming to an end.

The Gallery has outgrown its current location. Home to one of the largest collections of contemporary Aboriginal art,

the Gallery needs more space to exhibit and properly store these works as well as to present public programming. The idea to move came about during a strategic planning exercise in 2009.

With a strong Board of Directors behind the idea, the Gallery engaged in a feasibility study in 2010 and 2011. The study was conducted by Jenny Ginder, backed by a top-notch team including Janis Barlow, Louise Poulin and Phil Goldsmith. The team looked at the potential of the Gallery to serve the community over the next ten years. They examined the costs and benefits of two possible scenarios - one, to expand the current location and two, to move to a new location on the waterfront on Lake Superior.

The decision to look at a waterfront location was prompted by the City of Thunder Bay's redevelopment of the area. Significant effort has gone into this redevelopment which now includes an arts building, a splash pad, a skating rink, a skateboard park and many exceptional pieces of public art. A hotel and condominiums are currently under construction and will make the waterfront a year round destination for people to live, work and play. It seemed like a natural fit for the Gallery. After the feasibility study was completed, the Board thought so too.

Not satisfied to take that information at face value, Thunder Bay Art Gallery proceeded with another study on a specific piece of land on the waterfront. A complete site assessment and economic impact study were conducted to examine what would happen if the Gallery moved there. Armed with the facts, the Gallery began negotiations with the City of Thunder Bay on the

parcel of land. “The city has been extremely supportive” says Sharon Godwin, Director of Thunder Bay Art Gallery. “A true partnership has been formed between the two organizations as we work together on this important project”. It took some time but last July City Council approved in principal the plan for Thunder Bay Art Gallery to lease the land on the waterfront. “It is the perfect location for the Gallery and the Board of Directors is completely committed and sure that this is the right decision for the Gallery.” Godwin confirms

Right now the Gallery is in the middle of yet another study which is examining the feasibility of capital funding to do the build as well as developing the Business Plan for the new facility. Again Jenny Ginder is leading the team of consultants that also includes Glen Boy of Campaign Coaches. The study which has been funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation will be complete in January of 2014.

They have also applied for funding to start the design phase of the project, which they hope to start in May or June of 2014. They anticipate the process taking nine to twelve months to complete with a price tag of one million dollars. Once they have the schematics they will have a better idea of the costs involved to commence their funding applications for capital.

Gallery Director Sharon Godwin is a participant in the ArtsBuild Mentorship program. “ArtsBuild has done a lot for us” she says. Through the program Godwin has been matched with mentor Aziza Chaouni, an architect from Toronto. Chaouni teaches in the school of architecture at the University of Toronto as well as having her own design firm with offices in both Toronto and Morocco. Thunder Bay Art Gallery will be issuing an RFQ shortly for an architect to start the design phase and Chaouni’s help has been instrumental in preparing for this next phase. Chaouni has gone to Thunder Bay to see the current Gallery space and the waterfront site and has met with members of the Gallery’s Renewal Committee. “She is really mentoring the Gallery, not just me” Godwin says of the experience.

Godwin says going through the process has been very positive for both their internal community and the community at large. She maintains that it has been challenging and rewarding work for the Board of Directors, bringing them close together. “Boards of non-profit organizations can easily lose sight of their strategic goals and become immersed in short term projects and in receiving reports from staff.” Going through this process has seen the Board engaged in strategic work - the long term planning for the future of the facility. The broader community has also been engaged at various stages of the feasibility studies through consultation processes. This Fall, the Gallery will be hosting a World Café style conversation to

further engage stakeholders. Godwin says the response to the Gallery's plans has generally been very positive.

Although excited about the move, Godwin admits, "there is a sadness to leaving the location that has been the Gallery's home for thirty-seven years. We are very appreciative and conscious of those who established the institution in this original location and worked so hard to make the Gallery the success that it is today." To address this they are planning a legacy aspect of the new building that acknowledges where they came from. "A gallery is much more than just a building" she says. Words of wisdom clearly indicative of a graduate.