

Making Spaces for Art

A Case Study: MacKenzie Hall Cultural Centre



With a speedy response from Google, one can easily find a great deal of information about Mackenzie Hall. The address, current events calendar, a programming overview and links to even more detailed information. Even with all of that information just finger flicks and nanoseconds away, there is so much more to be said about Mackenzie Hall.

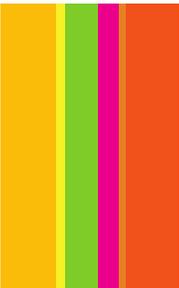
Much of the currently accessible information, according to Supervisor of Community Cultural Programming for the City of Windsor, Merry Ellen Scully Mosna, is due to the high level of interest in the history of the building.

Canada's second Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie who was at the time, a stonemason, built Mackenzie Hall in 1855. Mackenzie Builders won the contract to build the limestone building, which included Alexander's brothers Hope and Robert. Constructed in a classic revival style, it was originally a gaol and courthouse. The cornerstone of the building was laid May 24th, 1855 on the Queen's birthday. It served as the County Courthouse until 1963 when it became County headquarters. In its current incarnation, it is the venue of choice for everything from life celebrations, to meetings, to concerts and art exhibits. It is a cultural hub for the City of Windsor but it took a while to get there.

As of 1975 the County offices were moved to a new location and the building was sold to the Ministry of Government Services and then boarded up. In 1978 the building was designated under the Ontario Heritage Act. In 1979 the Ministry offered the building to the County or the City of Windsor and the Arts Council Windsor and Region encouraged City Council to engage in a feasibility study to look at repurposing the facility for cultural activities. The study was undertaken by consultants Kalman, Wagland and Bailey and was paid for by the City and Wintario at a cost of \$20,000. The Arts Council was ultimately dissatisfied with the study's findings and in 1981, a group of citizens calling themselves the "Friends of the Court" was formed to advise City Council on the best use of the building and to fundraise for its restoration. Meanwhile City Council voted in favour of purchasing the building for \$200. After years of fundraising and renovations, Mackenzie Hall opened to the public in October of 1985.

Today the programming of Mackenzie Hall reflects the diversity of their community. There is an amazing mix of community generated and facility generated offerings. While the numbers are approximate and fluctuate, roughly 30 % of the programming is municipally generated, another 30-40% is community generated.

There are over a thousand events each year. The hall is home to a multitude of life celebrations from weddings to wakes to baby showers. There are three to five works of theatre produced each year by the resident theatre company, Purple Theatre Company which has seen the co-production of over 100 original plays of a variety of genres, and is a vital line of revenue for facility operation. The number of dark nights in the Hall has inversely changed for the better since the introduction of theatre presentation. A strong daily rental clientele, many of



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them from the quasi-judiciary realm, gleans much in the way of operational costs. Anchor tenants also assist with achieving the goal of earning most of the operational costs of this historic building.

With diversity as an ongoing theme, the anchor tenants of Mackenzie Hall do not fit a specific profile. There is a psychoanalyst, the Common Ground Art Gallery, a counselor, and the offices of the Friends of the Court.

The Common Ground Art Gallery is made up of artist-members. The group runs a series of two-week exhibits at the hall with the unique attribute of having no jury process. Working on a first-come, first-served basis, the process is equally accessible to emerging artists and recognized ones although, often enough, half of these shows tend to be the work of well-established artists. This openness allows for an eclectic mix of shows that are characteristically of high quality.

Operating in a 26,000 square foot building that is well over a hundred years old, with such diverse programming is not an inexpensive task. Mackenzie Hall is dedicated to preservation, and innovation. It has in place a full life cycle upkeep and maintenance plan. 2011 saw the installation of a new slate roof at a cost of \$600,000. Luckily it will last for one hundred years. By 2017, they are looking to replace their windows and do some masonry work. Earlier this decade Mackenzie Hall was awarded Best in Class Arts & Culture Facility in the Municipal Energy Performance Benchmarking Project, a designation only bestowed on 12 of 393 municipal facilities that participated. This is an indication of the intrinsic value of re-use of heritage building envelopes for contemporary artistic programming. Next spring, the Friends of the Court group have raised the funding to install ornamental rails reminiscent of those that would have been part of the street facade historically. Scully Mosna contends that, “there is real value in those replacements as the next few generations won’t be paying for it. Mackenzie Hall is a little gem that is valued by residents of the neighbourhood and the City”

From 1855, to today, and beyond, Mackenzie Hall is a signature building in the City of Windsor for public meetings and for cultural development. The true measure of its value however, far exceeds the parameters of the square footage of the space.