

Making Spaces for Art

A Case Study: Coleman Lemieux & Compagnie



Sometimes, it is best to just dive in. A cool lake on a hot summer day or a delicious plate of pasta, both deserve the dive in treatment. Renovations...not so much. Bill Coleman and Laurence Lemieux, Co-Artistic Directors of Coleman Lemieux & Compagnie did just that and admittedly, “did it all wrong”. The end result however is more than all right.

In 2007, Coleman Lemieux & Compagnie was looking for a new space for their dance studio. Such a space is difficult to find to begin with; an

affordable space in Toronto is like trying to find a unicorn. To create a dance studio there can be no pillars or other structural things breaking up the space. There is the required amount of space to contend with. It needs to be a BIG, and open. Coming in on the budget of a not-for-profit renders the process even more challenging. And then a promising discovery was made. The Salvation Army Citadel was for sale.

The Citadel had been built in 1912 on the edge of Toronto’s Regent Park neighbourhood. It had no pillars. It was the required width. It was a wide-open space that with some renovations would be ideal as a dance studio. The only catch was the million-dollar price tag. Coleman Lemieux offered \$700,000.00 and were declined. It seemed that this seemingly perfect match was not meant to be.

A mere two months later, the owners of the Salvation Army Citadel, facing bankruptcy, came back to Coleman Lemieux and for the tidy sum of \$750,000.00, the space was theirs. For the next two years, with the minor renovation of a new dance floor, the dance company had a new home.

A turn of the century building inherently faces some modern challenges. When being repurposed as a dance studio, those challenges multiply. This is where Coleman Lemieux “did it all wrong” says Laurence Lemieux. “It was completely stupid.” They decided to undertake all the renovations themselves. Without the benefit of a feasibility study or much in the way of planning, the changes began. Lemieux says that in hindsight, had they known what they were about to undertake, “It would have been an impediment.” But they dove in.

The estimated costs of the renovations were 2.2 million dollars. With funding from the Department of Canadian Heritage, the City of Toronto, and the Ontario Trillium Foundation, they began. Immediately, the City of Toronto provided \$51,000.00 in emergency repairs. Canadian Heritage provided \$260,000.00. Trillium provided \$150,000.00 for an elevator to make the space accessible. A further \$199,000.00 was provided from community programs. Diamond and Schmidt provided pro bono architectural design. A local developer, Daniels Corporation, donated materials including new flooring and windows. With no equity, this not for profit agency was facing a serious financial challenge. Fortunately, a donor offered a low interest loan of 1.4 million dollars. The rest of the funding for the renovations was raised.



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And so the transformation of this very old space began. The walls were one hundred years old, very thick and therefore great. Everything else needed some work. Lemieux says they basically “gutted the building.” All the electrical work and all the plumbing had to be redone. Essentially, there was no power. They had to dig down under the building to increase the ceiling height in the downstairs studio. Because the former use of the building had included raked seating in the auditorium area, the floor was on a thirty-degree slant. Rather than remove it, they opted to level it out with a platform on top. An HVAC system, designed especially to keep the floor warm and the audience cool, and remain silent during performances was installed. All windows were replaced. LED lighting was installed. To maximize dance space, a staircase had to be moved out of the studio. An extension was put on the back of the building to house a new staircase which meant moving a supporting wall. All floors and stairs were redone.

The results are fantastic. Tradesmen were brought in by the contractor Craig Soper from BC General, to do the drywall and brickwork. As such, there is clean, historic exposed stonework in the basement. The building was restored....not just renovated.

All of this has taken place in a neighbourhood where the company was told that they “couldn’t live there.” Fortunately, both Coleman and Lemieux feel this is all a matter of perspective. They feel that the Salvation Army Citadel chose them. It was an affordable space at the right time. “There is a lot of negative propaganda about Regent Park but I am not a fearful person. There is nothing scary about poverty. Dancers are used to poverty.” says Lemieux. In fact, not having grown up in the neighbourhood, she feels blessed not to carry the bias of social baggage associated with Regent Park. All they saw when they looked at the Citadel was a special building with “good vibes and soul.” What more could you want for a dance space?

At this point, the dancers feel at home in Regent Park. Coleman Lemieux has become a contributor to the renewal of Regent Park. The community has embraced the building and the company. In fact, the building itself has proven to be a much-needed space in the community and is often rented. The urban dance community in particular is quite grateful to have a space to perform and rehearse in.

By November of 2013, the company expects to have the final word on more funding for some more renovations. This project is much smaller and far more manageable. They are looking to repair the facade and build an addition to house new dressing rooms and green room space. Lemieux says they are, “much more prepared.” They are hoping to begin work in the spring of 2014.

Lemieux sees this as a “community in motion” and is quite happy “to be a part of social change.” It seems thoroughly appropriate that a building constructed in 1912 to help people, although repurposed, is staying true to its philanthropic roots. Coleman Lemieux is making its own positive changes one dance move at a time.