

# Making Spaces for Art

## A Case Study : Dufferin County Museum & Archives



**“We are well placed in the middle of nowhere.” Darrell Keenie, General Manager**

Dufferin County Museum & Archives is located at the intersection of Highway 89 and Airport road. It is the crossroads of a major route for cottagers and a road that leads to Pearson International Airport. There is a particular irony that many of the pieces that make up this museum and

archives have themselves, travelled to this location.

The Dufferin County Museum & Archives was built in 1994 as a “repository for material culture.” It is an impressive structure that many like to refer to as the “Guggenheim of the north.” Located on a six acre site is a rather high tech 26,000 square feet barn. This is not a historic barn but was specifically designed to represent the agricultural history of the area. Within this building are the three other structures that the museum had moved and reconstructed piece by piece. There is a two-storey log home, an Orange Lodge, and a train station. Beyond these three historic buildings, are a gift shop, archives, gallery spaces, artifact storage and offices.

The acquisition of these buildings by the DCMA was a result of a bylaw passed in Dufferin County. The volunteer-run Historic Society had been maintaining a campus of buildings and artifacts. In 1988, the county passed a bylaw at the behest of the society, to take over the maintenance of these buildings. They became the first part of the collection the museum would amass. By November 1994, it was the logical conclusion that the Museum & Archives would be a more logical and suitable place for these buildings. Thus piece-by-piece, log-by-log, brick by brick, the three buildings made their way to the intersection of Highway 89 and Airport Road.

On the grounds of the site is yet another building that was moved to the location. The Historic Corbetton Church was brought to the DCMA in 1999 from a hamlet thirty kilometres away. Getting the church relocated involved an OPP lead, “long procession”. Ontario Hydro even had to remove hydro lines to make way.

The cost of this project was \$250,000—all of which was raised by local donations. Once the church had been moved, the task of renovating it to what it would have looked like back in 1885 began. That meant removing the 1970’s panelling, red carpet, drop ceilings and adding a new cedar shake roof.



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Having become rather expert at the movement of historic buildings, the DCMA is now wrestling with the possibility of moving yet another building to its location—a pre-confederation stone hotel.

The Dufferin County Museum & Archives is a bonafide department of the county and is well supported. With an annual acquisition budget of only one or two thousand dollars, ninety percent of what is on display and in storage are donations. The benefit of having donated items is it provides an opportunity to collect the stories behind those artifacts. When visitors come to the museum, the staff is able to tell the story of the family that donated the artifact and much more.

Geography has played a key role in defining what the DCMA has in its collection, but it also plays a key role in programming. The museum goes beyond being a museum & archives. Keenie says that it is a “centre of community life in a rural area.”

The DCMA plays host to community meetings about waste management, weddings, as well as symphony events. It is a good business model for a rural area. First and foremost it is a museum. However through joining forces with the arts community, the repertoire of the museum has expanded.

Initially these partnerships were what determined programming. But as time has past, the programming has become more homegrown. The gallery has four to six local artists in their contemporary gallery space each year in addition to a historic art show. Their popular Summer Concert Series features symphony calibre artists in an intimate setting. Keenie likes to say, “Why go to the TSO when you can go to the DCMA?”

Keenie says one of the highlights of their exhibition history included art from local residents including relatives of Sir Wilfrid Laurier and the artist Joyce Wieland- prominent in the Toronto art scene in the 1960’s. Mashing these together resulted in the show Wieland and Wilfrid showcasing the personal effects of our former Prime Minister and the rarely scene artwork of Wieland. The AGO then went on to showcase the Wieland part of the exhibit.

The partnerships that inform programming also include working with local schools. Students are able to garden in the farmer’s field and join the pumpkin carving contest at harvest time. A heritage orchard and herb garden is also onsite. There are historic drive sheds with many tractors and vehicles to explore. A final detail is that all trees and shrubs are heritage stock. Even the onsite rocks have been moved to the DCMA. No detail has been neglected though many stones have been turned. It may be located in the middle of nowhere, but the Dufferin County Museum & Archives is well worth the stop.