

Making Spaces for Art

A Case Study: Dundas Valley School of Art



“In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what you want and the other is getting it.”
Oscar Wilde

Dundas Valley School of Art has turned the tragedy of getting what you want into triumph. The catalyst for some transformations is sometimes so deceptively simple. The Dundas Valley School of Art turned a minor injury into a

major overhaul. A broken ankle for Executive Director Arthur Greenblatt resulted in the renovation of the entire facility. The experience has left Greenblatt with some cautionary tales about closing your venue and renovating it tip to top, about accepting money from the Federal Government, and about navigating politics. But his biggest caution echoes the thoughts of the famous playwright Oscar Wilde. “Be careful what you wish for,” Greenblatt says.

Ten years ago Greenblatt broke his ankle and could be found shuffling backwards up the back stairs of the DVSA on his bottom. “It wasn’t like people hadn’t been telling us. But it wasn’t until I experienced it for myself that I realized what a problem [accessibility] was.” The experience prompted Greenblatt to talk to his Board of Directors. They needed an elevator. Initial estimates placed the cost of such a renovation at \$80,000-\$100,000. But this is a tale from a minor injury to a major overhaul. They quickly discovered the total was closer to \$400,000. The elevator needed to be on the outside of the building which made it much more expensive. “We had never tried to raise that much money before” Greenblatt says. The broken ankle was the catalyst; the transformation had to begin.

The Dundas Valley School of Art is a deeply entrenched and appreciated local institution. More than eighty classes are offered in their spring catalogue. The place is bustling with exhibitions, art parties and performing arts events. The organization was co-founded by two women who took a class once upon a time at the Dune School of Art. They enjoyed it so much that they wanted to take more classes, albeit locally.



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They privately hired an art teacher and rented some space. It went viral—long before it was an Internet phenomenon to do so. They went from students themselves to administering a number of classes in a short time. The Dundas Valley School of Art was born. They registered as a charitable organization in 1964. In fact, one of the co-founders, Marion Farnan is still on the Board today at the age of 102 and her son John Farnan is the current Board Chair.

DVSA bought their current facility, located at 21 Ogilvie Street in Dundas, Ontario, about thirty years ago. The building has its own illustrious history. Built in 1836, before electricity, heating or indoor plumbing, it has been home to Canada Screw Works, a school for girls and during World War II was the home of Pratt and Whitney where they manufactured aircraft engines. DVSA did some basic but less than ideal renovations when they moved in. “We froze in the winter and died in the summer. It was a rough ride,” says Greenblatt.

When it came to the elevator in the present day, this time around, the renovations had to be ideal. Around the same time that the DVSA was working away on their elevator plans, Greenblatt began discussions with two other groups in town—Carnegie Gallery and the Dundas Museum. All three groups were facing facility issues and it seemed to make sense to collaborate. The Federal government had just announced their infrastructure grant program. With advice from their city councilor, MP and MPP they put in a request for approximately \$11 million. And then they waited.

They didn’t hear anything for quite some time until one Friday afternoon. The answer was quite a surprise. Greenblatt explains, “They told us they didn’t like it. They didn’t understand the three of us working together. They wanted three separate proposals, one from each of us.” The call had come on a Friday afternoon; they had until Monday to resubmit.

Eventually, the Feds chose DVSA to receive up to \$2.4 million in funding. The program was for matching funds. This meant that DVSA would have to raise money and the Feds would match it up to \$2.4 million dollars. The catch was that only had a year to raise the money AND complete all the renovations. “At that point we figured we would raise about \$200,000 and they would match it and we would build our elevator”, Greenblatt half jokes. In a move that surprised everyone, The City of Hamilton stepped up and committed \$2.4 million to match the funds from the Feds. All of a sudden, DVSA was looking at a construction budget of \$4.8 million. Be careful what you wish for!



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All this was well and good, however there were some strings attached to this purse. One of the first things DVSA learned is that although the government had committed to giving them \$2.4 million, they had to spend the money first and then be reimbursed for it. Even then, they were only reimbursed 90% of the expenses until the end of the project. Suddenly, they were faced with borrowing over \$2 million.

“How do you borrow a couple million dollars [when] a contract with the Federal government is not collateral?” Yet another string on this purse full of money, they found out that the Federal money wouldn’t cover certain expenses such as electronics that were included in their budget. Furthermore, they had to figure out how to manage the money. Although their annual budget has doubled in the last ten years to about \$1 million, “we don’t normally deal with that kind of money.” The bank wanted them to hire an external accountant to audit the money. DVSA declined as it would have cost them \$10,000-\$15,000 and cut into their budget significantly. All of this before they had even started the actual renovations!

Once all of the fiscal arrangements were settled, the major overhaul, inspired from the minor injury, could actually physically begin. The jobs went out to a bidding process and two separate contractors were selected—one for the elevator job, one for the interior of the building. This fact in itself was problematic. It is difficult for two separate contractors to work on the same site, at the same time, under provincial rules.

A number of issues surfaced as the construction went on. They had to move the hydro, build a new trench, and began unearthing artifacts under the building. “We found layers of Dundas”, offers Greenblatt. This treasure trove of history however became problematic in its own way. Construction was halted. The city was anxious to have an archeologist onsite for the remainder of the build. Ultimately, they reached an agreement wherein the city would be notified should anything more significant than water pipes be unearthed. They were back at it. Greenblatt emphasizes that the entire team worked well together. Two “die hard” members of the Board were there each week to check up on things.

As if elevators, broken ankles, and archaeologists aren’t enough to contend with, there were of course the students to consider. Remember, this is the Dundas Valley SCHOOL of Art. With the facility closed for six months to accommodate the construction, the staff set about setting up programs in temporary rented and donated spaces across the city. They were able to keep up with about 40% of their programs. This ended up being one of their biggest challenges.



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Greenblatt likens it to a restaurant moving across the city, “where do your customers go?” “If you sign up for a class on Wednesday nights and then we close, you are going to find something else do on Wednesday nights. How do you keep your operations going while you are closed?” Although registrations are now rebounding, numbers have been lower in the last couple of years since they reopened. “It is a difficult task to get people back.”

Last, but by no means least is velocity. The speed at which everything happened also proved to be challenging. “We didn’t ask what everyone wanted, we didn’t have the time. You can’t make everyone happy.” This sort of renovation included the interior and the exterior of the building. And they had but a year to accomplish this monumental task. Typically, community consultations, feedback on initial drawings, and a million other considerations would have been part of the journey. Although he agrees it would have been ideal to go through a process and get consensus, it simply was not possible.

At the outset DVSA merely intended a few minor renovations to increase the accessibility of the building. Those who been a part of the process understand the depth and breadth of experiences, obstacles and challenges that went into this intended elevator turned facility overhaul. For Greenblatt and the DVSA, the tragedy of getting what you want, has become a moment of triumph.