



THE RENOVATED AND REIMAGINED GASWORKS, AT 141 PARK ST. N., IS THE CONSUMMATE COMMUNITY ARTS FACILITY AND PROVIDES A MUCH-NEEDED HOME FOR THE HAMILTON MUSIC COLLECTIVE. PHOTOS: SUBMITTED

WITH THE GASWORKS, THE HAMILTON MUSIC COLLECTIVE HAS CREATED A CULTURAL HUB FOR THE COMMUNITY – AND BEYOND. BY JAMIE TENNANT

MAKING MUSIC FOR ALL

Music makes a difference. It draws individuals together, creates friendships, and helps build communities. It invests young people with confidence, drive, and passion. It enriches life itself.

Something so fundamental should be accessible to everyone in our society – but it isn't.

The Hamilton Music Collective exists to help people overcome the economic, social and educational barriers that stand in the way for many. Its most celebrated program, An Instrument For Every Child, has seen enormous success

by reaching out to Hamilton neighbourhoods and at-risk populations via schools and Boys & Girls Clubs, providing instruments, education and opportunities for our youth to discover the potency music can have in their lives.

The HMC, however, has many other programs. Its vision was to create a true community hub that could enrich anyone's life. Without a permanent, appropriate home base, this vision was difficult to turn into reality.

The Gasworks, at 141 Park St. N., is not only the headquarters HMC needed – it's the con-

summata community arts facility.

Built in 1850, The Gasworks takes its name from the property's original purpose – an industrial space where flammable coal gas was produced to power the lives of Hamiltonians. As coal gas was replaced by hydroelectric power, the building changed purposes but remained a heritage fixture in the downtown.

In 2016, The Gasworks was purchased by the John and Ellie Voortman Charitable Foundation. The Voortman Foundation works alongside charities that share their community-first values.

Voortman Foundation chair Carl Joesse saw this inner-city heritage site, magnificent but tired, as a place where someone could foster bright futures for Hamilton youth. The Foundation purchased the building knowing that our inner-city was a place of hope but also hardship, of progress but also poverty. The organization believed in the HMC mission to the point that it was willing to purchase The Gasworks, but also to fund its revitalization. To help realize the joint vision of the Foundation and the HMC, they turned to Hamilton firm Curran Gacesa Sote Architects (formerly Thier + Curran Architects) who designed and oversaw the project.

The Gasworks will be a true cultural hub — a centralized location that will make education, exploration, and entertainment accessible for its inner-city neighbours and anyone else who wishes to participate. That participation can take on many forms, thanks to the HMC's variety of programs. There are performance programs for youth, such as JAMBASSADORS, where middle- and high-school students have an opportunity to demonstrate their skills. There is the Open Jam for Kids, which brings novice players together with local professional musicians, also in a live setting. At the most introductory level, there is the Instrument Petting Zoo, where anyone can try a variety of musical instruments at community events city-wide. Older youth can learn about hip-hop, electronic dance music and other electronic production techniques through the Beats By U! program. This fall sees the launch of Music for Mental Wellness, a songwriting program for older youth, utilizing songwriting and recording of pop songs to engage and promote wellness and empowerment in a time when the challenge of mental wellness has become a crisis in many populations.

The Gasworks contains classrooms, collaborative spaces, a recording studio, and event rental areas. The Gasworks is not only for musicians, but for music and performance lovers, whether it's a presentation by HMC youth programs or simply a great concert for everyone. Throughout the pandemic, the excitement about live music has only grown.

The building itself is a heritage structure, one that is both old and new, both traditional and forward-looking, much like the city itself. The Park Street façade has been returned to its former splendour, while the new back-end addition provides what was lacking — the new lobby, a green room, a loading dock, all things a modern performance space cannot do without.



It also features more classroom space. The covered porch welcomes you into the building and doubles as a performance space. Large seating areas, windows, and even a fireplace make the space feel welcoming as opposed to intimidating — because for some, being involved in the community is intimidating enough already. Everyone should feel welcome and naturally, to that end, the space is now fully accessible.

Urban renewal is important for the city's future. Yet we must never lose sight of those who are often left behind. Communities must be improved for all, not for a select few. The HMC has always extended a hand into the inner-city community, and it made no sense to design a space that felt elitist, out of touch or, more importantly, out of reach. The Gasworks is functional and beautiful, and it

feels accessible without feeling institutional. With creativity and an understanding of what was needed, Curran Gacesa Sote Architects ensured that the modest renovation delivered a metamorphosis. This building is exactly what it needs to be, where it needs to be, for those who need to be part of it.

The arts have suffered immensely over the last several years. Yet after a time when both adults and children have lost opportunities, we must respond by *providing* opportunities. With The Gasworks, the HMC and the Voortman Foundation have created something visionary and important. Cities across Canada should look to The Gasworks as a blueprint for innovative and direct community engagement, and as a model arts facility for our rapidly changing world. ■