

THE ARCHITOURIST

## In Hamilton, 'lives are being changed' through music



**DAVE LEBLANC** >  
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The Gasworks at 141 Park Rd. N., Hamilton. Thier + Curran Architects have just finished an expansion of the building.

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A necessary, yet undesirable, cage has been placed around all of us these past months. We peer at video simulacra of each other, sing in the shower instead of attending concerts, and trips to the grocery store are akin to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

But the global pandemic cannot quash dreams, or anticipation of the future gift of hugging, playing, and watching music.

And Thier + Curran Architects have just finished tying an even bigger bow on the Hamilton Music Collective's dream for 2021, and many years to come.

"What we've accomplished together, to me this is quite remarkable," says HMC CEO Astrid Hepner, her German accent still shaping her words after decades in North America. "We, as a fairly new not-for-profit, to have a building like this is quite unusual, and I really hope that this will set an example of what actually can be done when people work together."



The Gasworks is just awaiting permission to reopen its doors for Hamilton's children.

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Ms. Hepner, architect Bill Curran and John and Ellie Voortman Charitable Foundation director Carl Joose have worked very well together indeed. With the massive expansion of The Gasworks at 141 Park Rd. N. now complete, all that remains is permission to reopen the doors. Hamilton's children are depending on it, after all.

But first, a little backstory is in order.

Shortly after leaving a record executive career in New York (with Hamilton-born husband and lauded musician Darcy Hepner) in 2005, Ms. Hepner founded the Hamilton Music Collective with a group of like-minded individuals. And, after witnessing the success of the German program "For Every Child an Instrument" (*Jedem*



*Kind ein Instrument*), the HMC's largest initiative, An Instrument for Every Child (AIFEC), was born; now, the most underprivileged of Hamilton's children would receive loaner-instruments and lessons, free of charge.



Left to right: Carl Joose, Bill Curran, Astrid Hepner at The Gasworks.

FELIX VLASAR/FELIX VLASAR

Like most charities, Ms. Hepner first ran AIFEC out of her house. After that, it was housed in the kitchen of the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra. Fundraising, then as now, was always a challenge, and Ms. Hepner admits to wanting to throw in the towel more than once. “I was ready to say ‘I’m done,’” confirms the saxophonist who lists Tito Puente and Celia Cruz, among others, on her musical résumé. “And that’s when you came on the scene and that was such a game changer in so many ways,” she finishes, looking over at Mr. Joose, who is all smiles underneath his wool beanie.

That was 2014, and Mr. Joose – which Mr. Curran describes as “a lovely surfer-type” – was just about to get the keys to 141 Park St. N. His parents, John and Ellie Voortman – the bakery Voortmans, not the cookie Voortmans – had entrusted him to find worthy causes to support, and he’d just been introduced to Ms. Hepner by local recording engineer/producer Trevor Titian.

“We realized that here in Hamilton, one of the biggest impacts we could make was to give music to the children,” Mr. Joose says with a twinkle in his eye. “And then that self-esteem gets raised, and the [school] attendance goes up, and postsecondary rates go up ... and it can affect, literally, everyone.

“Everyone is a little better when they have some art in their lives.”



The building hosted many successful concerts, events, and jam sessions.

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And the 1850 building needed betterment in its life. While the handsome structure began with the noble purpose of feeding the Victorian city with street lamp fuel as the Hamilton Gas Light Company, most Hamiltonians remember it as the site of the notorious Dominion Christian Centre, which often made headlines for the wrong reasons.

And while the building worked well for Mr. Joosse and HMC for the first few years – there were many successful concerts, events and jam sessions – its many inadequacies needed to be addressed. “It came with the ghosts, but it also came with a pile of fire orders because the previous owners had done a whole bunch of things without building permits,” Mr. Curran says. “So we had to fix that, and at the same time there was an opportunity to add the things that were missing.”

To wit, Mr. Curran and associate Kyle Slote have doubled the size of building, adding a much-needed lobby – “After an event you basically plowed out into the parking lot and went home,” Mr. Curran says – green room, recording studio, elevator, accessible washrooms, triple the classroom space for Ms. Hepner, instrument storage, one-on-one rehearsal rooms, fire stairs and office space for other groups supported by the Voortman foundation.







Some new inputs to the building include a green room, recording studio, and one-on-one rehearsal rooms.

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Though you'd never know it from the street. Ever mindful of heritage and the importance of scale, the architects placed 95 per cent of the new stuff at the rear, adding only a covered walkway to the side of the building – highlighted by a glassy stair-tower at midpoint – so that guests, students, or concertgoers know where to direct their feet.



The designers have used warm woods, sculptural light fixtures and a cheerful colour-palette to keep things homey and welcoming.

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Inside, warm woods, sculptural light fixtures, gobs of natural light and a cheerful colour-palette keep things homey and welcoming rather than stuffy and institutional, which was important to Ms. Hepner: “You don’t

always have to build this institution that screams, ‘You have to have money to enter this’ ... it could be a great example to other communities.”

That the building is quietly located a few streets over from the action on James Street North, and rubs shoulders with houses from the 1870s and 1970s helps also. Although the neighbourhood is a little hardscrabble today, the Gasworks and its occupants will no doubt act as a catalyst for positive change ... with all of those happy children, how could it not?

“It’s kind of like a non-profit Disneyland that we’re in,” Ms. Hepner says with a big smile.

“Lives are being changed now by the programs that are coming out of this building,” Mr. Curran says.



The architects have doubled the size of the building, adding a much-needed lobby.

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More than 6000 children have gone through HMC programs over the past decade. Although many corporate sponsors are already on board, with HMC's outreach program providing music lessons in over a dozen Hamilton elementary schools, more are always welcome. Visit [hamiltonmusiccollective.ca/](http://hamiltonmusiccollective.ca/) for more information.

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