

FEATURES



# Old School is New Again in Artscape's Latest Revamp

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The exterior of Artscape Youngplace during renovation of 180 Shaw Street, the former Shaw Street School building / Image courtesy Koffler Centre for the Arts

Artscape, the Toronto not-for-profit that has aimed at developing sustainable and below-market spaces for artists since 1986, made a further move into Queen West last week with the opening of [Artscape Youngplace](#). Located in the former Shaw Street School—which was decommissioned in 2000—the 75,000-square-foot facility has been altered with more than \$17

million in renovations. Now, Artscape Youngplace (named in honour of its lead donor, the Michael Young Family Foundation) is home to a variety of arts organizations, studios and educational centres.

It is easy to get lost in the nostalgia and novelty of the school space at 180 Shaw Street, and the initial projects at Artscape Youngplace have only just begun to tackle the strange terrain they have inherited. Considering the strong educational mandates of many of the organizations that now inhabit the building—such as [Sketch](#), a working arts program for street-involved and homeless youth—the development presents potential as a site both to serve the existing communities of Queen West and to explore new kinds of engagement.

Notable highlights of the November 19 opening included the chance to explore new homes of well-established organizations. The [Koffler Centre of the Arts](#), Toronto's staple Jewish cultural institution, has put its Koffler Gallery in the former school library—one of the largest spaces in the new building. The gallery's inaugural exhibition "We're in the Library" reflects on the library as a site both for imaginings and explorations, as well as for the grinding forward of established systems of knowledge.

Filling the centre wall of the gallery, Barbara Astman's expanded bookwork—with each page arrayed in a grid format—evokes both the sense of discovery that accompanies reading and the systems of knowledge categorization which rule the archive. The face of the librarian who introduced a young Astman to a children's encyclopedia of fossils recurs among the technical diagrams, framing the library as a space of intellectual intimacy as much as one of unfeeling facts.

Works by Sara Angelucci and Ido Govrin both use audio to drum up the nostalgic and memorial potential of reading. In *The Readers*, Angelucci pairs audio snippets of children reading from classic books with fading tintype portraits of children, which the artist arranges into accordion-fold books. Govrin's sculptural audio work (a set of 192 speakers set into a bed of soft white fur, whispering the titles of authors' last works) has a kind of ghostly presence. At the same time, in conversation with Adam David Brown's works (a set of rotating, re-covered encyclopedias arranged in a greyscale circle, and a chalk-dust recreation of the Rosetta Stone), Govrin's piece joins a conversation on the Western canon and the voices represented by "great books."

Further pieces by Michelle Gay, Jon Sasaki and Vid Ingelevics explore the missteps and imperfections of epistemological systems. Vid Ingelevics's video work asks current students from the adjoining Givins/Shaw Public School to reimagine an undocumented award-winning mural made by grade 7 and 8 students in 1969. The results are a mix of humorous and historically accurate. Continuing to playfully critique the notion of historical accuracy, Michelle

Gay's *onwhat is* is a piece of software developed in collaboration with Colin Gay that engages in an ongoing game of broken telephone, translating and further fragmenting an already fragmentary text by ancient Greek philosopher Parmenides.

Sasaki's video work *After a Mural I Painted In Grade Four* plays on the iconography of ethnically diverse children holding hands around the globe, but his circle of Benetton-esque hand-holding students becomes restless after a few minutes of the exercise. As Sasaki continues to document over a half-hour, a new kind of harmony begins to emerge once students have given up on the task of posing for the camera: they lean on each other, play tag, clap out hand-games and converse quietly. The scene could easily be heartwarming if set to the right music, but its reality is awkward, echoing, and only fleetingly touching.

In addition to the Koffler Gallery, several smaller exhibition spaces are scattered throughout the building. At the opening event, [Paperhouse Studio](#) invited visitors to make their own paper, and the independent curator-led space [Typology Projects](#) presented video installation work by Lyla Rye. The enigmatic Atelier Ascenceur provided a dreamy, meditative installation space, Sketch showcased the talents of street-involved youth in an open house, and a beauty salon performance organized by Moynan King in [Luminato's](#) office space invited visitors in for manicures, hairstyles and self-esteem boosts. The [Centre for Indigenous Theatre](#), now housed in Artscape Youngplace, is still under renovation, but it promises to be an integral part of the building's programming.

The Artscape Youngplace building is also notable for the proliferation of artist projects beyond formal gallery spaces. Heather Nicol—an artist who curated the [“Art School Dismissed”](#) exhibition in Shaw Street School in 2010, just renovations—has returned to the space with the “UnArchive” project which is installed along Youngplace's hallways. It unfolds as an exploration of the building's history—both real and imagined. The projects on the first floor involve collaboration with current students from Givins/Shaw Public School, whose guided responses to the building's archive make some valuable first steps towards addressing the colonial legacy of Colonel James Givins, after whom the school is named. Children's sculptures of Givins, and members of the Mississauga of New Credit he commanded, accompany a letter by a grade 6 student which suggests the plaque honouring Givins fails to tell the whole story of this colonial hero. In this letter, the student asks that the plaque be changed to “give equal credit to the Mississauga of the New Credit First Nation as well as Colonel James Givins.”

The “UnArchive” artist projects in the building's second- and third-floor hallways engage both the playful and difficult. Nina Levitt's *Elemental* includes texts recounting vivid school memories of the artist's friends and family, while Dave Dyment asks current elementary-school students to illustrate scenes from movies shot at their school. Jessica Vallentin stealthily places mirrors around the hallways to play with the seen and unseen in the everyday, Lee Henderson excises

trophies and banners from archival photographs, examining photography and school sports victories as mechanisms of haunting, and Ian Carr-Harris and Yvonne Lammerich announce that we should be watchful for their ongoing project. (Whether to expect something, and when, is left ambiguous, as many of these “UnArchive” projects are in progress.)

The stairways at Artscape Youngplace, also curated by Nicol, have been filled with artist projects by Seth Scriver, Melissa Fisher and Debbie Adams. Scriver’s project features an expressive cartoon character that bounces around; it emotes pain, excitement, mania and discomfort, and it is increasingly battered by its downward journey. Fisher’s *lately, I’ve just been trying to find a balance*, explores contrast, geometry, positive and negative space, and the cultural cues (such as archways, pennants and water) these simplistic forms evoke. Adams’s project mimics flash cards and books for early readers, providing black-and-white graphic illustrations with strange, repetitive phonetic diagrams underneath. Provoking visual confusion in the mismatch between word and object, the installation teases our familiarity with language and questions the cultural space of symbols and signs.

The opening of Youngplace is a promising continuation of Artscape’s project to increase the volume of accessible arts spaces in Queen West and elsewhere. Still, the neighbourhood remains contested—often with arts organizations serving as preliminary agents of gentrification. With some future programming slated for its gallery spaces, and still more left to open calls, Youngplace now has the opportunity (and indeed the responsibility) to critically engage with questions of community, the colonial histories of the neighbourhood, and the delicate terrain of development, renewal, and gentrification.

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