

Crow's Theatre getting east-end home

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After 30 years without a permanent home, Crow's Theatre plans to settle down in Leslieville on the ground floor of a condo opening in 2015.

By all accounts, partnering with Streetcar Development on its 12-storey building was "serendipitous."

Local councillor Paula Fletcher played matchmaker after hearing in 2011 that Crow's was looking for a home, after years of focusing on touring. Meanwhile, Fletcher was encouraging Streetcar's Les Mallins to incorporate ground-floor community space in his new condo, saying the former industrial area needed more than residential buildings.

"There are creative industries in this area, and yet it has no centre," Fletcher said. "This seemed like a good anchor."

The resulting deal makes Crow's the owner-operator of most of the building's ground floor at Dundas St. E and Carlaw Ave., where it will also host community programming, including farmers' markets and clothing swaps.

The \$8-million project will give the company a 3,000-square foot theatre with a capacity for 200 people and other space, including a studio, lobby, offices, kitchen and dressing rooms.

"Like the majority of contemporary theatres in Canada, particularly in Toronto, the company has been using space as needed," said managing director Monica Esteves. "We've been a nomadic company . . . this will be Crow's first actual space that it owns."

Crow's current production, *Someone Else*, is at the Berkeley Street Theatre, while the company has office space in the east-end.

Private donors are helping with the initial costs and over time, the new location will be made financially sustainable by renting out some of the space, Esteves said.

A neighbourhood improvement plan in 2000 said arts-oriented business should be encouraged, while retaining the historical industrial character, left from a Colgate-Palmolive plant and textile manufacturers. Some of those spaces were turned into artists' studios.

As well as changing the area, award-winning artistic director Chris Abraham said the move will change the company, which was founded in 1983.

"It's a shift by design," said Abraham, who has been with Crow's since 2007 and has also directed productions at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival.

"I wasn't interested in sustaining an organization as just a touring entity. . . I felt the call to have more of a sustained conversation with my neighbours."

Touring will still happen but the focus will be on the new location that will host Crow's productions and curate others.

The building required a Section 37 agreement, which allows the city to okay increased density or height in exchange for community benefits.

In this case, the design exceeded both the height and density regularly permitted and a zoning amendment was adopted by community council last fall.

Technical issues about balancing residential and theatre needs also had to be resolved before demolition began late in the fall.

"We put considerable resources into additional acoustical soundproofing between the spaces," Esteves said.



Crow's Theatre managing director Monica Esteves and Artistic Director Chris Abraham outside The Carlaw, where their new theatre space will be on the ground level in 2015 at the corners of Dundas and Carlaw.

STEVE RUSSELL/TORONTO STAR

Response to the partnership has been positive so far, with concerns being limited to typical development issues, such as the height of the new building, according to Mallins. He said about 250 condo units have been sold, with about 45 left.