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Creating the transformational Crow's Theatre

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Designing a live theatre in a concrete condominium has its challenges, as Toronto architect Joe Lobko will attest.



On the ground floor of a new 12-storey condominium in Leslieville is the Crow's Theatre, which is designed to be a versatile facility that will house three venues for various events. The theatre features a 3,000-square-foot, 200-seat, multi-configurational theatre; a 1,400-square-foot studio space for rehearsals and community programming; and a 2,500-square-foot open concept lobby with a gallery bar and cafe. - Photo: DTAH

Lobko, a partner with DTAH Architects, says integrating the 200-seat, 3,000-square-foot theatre and 1,400-square-foot studio rehearsal space into the base of a residential condominium was a novel concept in Toronto and not easy to accomplish.

The architect is referring to the Crow's Theatre in The Carlaw, a 12-storey residence developed by Streetcar Developments in Toronto's east end.

He says while most of the city's theatres are in "adapted old buildings with (design) compromises all over the place," the objective for the owners of Crow's Theatre was to build a contemporary theatre without compromise.

One of the design challenges was to create a "black box theatre" for 200 people that is "very flexible and very adaptable," he points out.

Such a design allows a theatre company to stage shows in a variety of ways and configurations appropriate to particular productions.

To meet that end, Lobko's team created a space with a movable stage and adjustable platform seating to accommodate different stage arrangements.

"What was critical from an architectural perspective was taking into account the exiting arrangements," he says. "We added multiple points of entry and exit into the space to allow

for different theatre configurations."

Lobko says another challenge was creating a theatre that could quickly be transformed to "a rentable venue that generates income to support the theatre aspect of the space."

Weddings, lectures and community meetings are examples of alternative uses. Designing for that flexibility of use is not as straightforward as it could be if the theatre did not require a black box design, he adds.

DTAH chose to line the interior space with the same brick on the exterior of the building.

"It's a relatively neutral esthetic but Crow's felt the theatre function could still work," says Lobko, adding it can be easily embellished, particularly through lighting, when the room is used for other purposes such as weddings.

He says the tall room features catwalks for the theatre that are painted dark "to disappear" when the room is in other use.

For acoustic separation from the lobby, the adjacent restaurant and vehicular traffic at the busy street corner, the architect installed two sound and light locks (vestibules) to the room.

"For some productions, you go in a main door; for others you will go in a secondary entrance," Lobko explains.

Another challenge is that the 12-storey condo is a concrete structure that "can transmit structural-borne sound very easily," he says.

The acoustic solution? A box within a box.

"There are double layers of walls, floor and ceiling throughout the main theatre box" to isolate the space from the outside, he adds.

The acoustical ceiling and structural steel catwalk are suspended on acoustical hangars rated to prevent noise transmission to the condos above. He says his firm worked with Streetcar Developments on the design to create the shell.

The acoustical design is by Swallow Acoustic Consultants Ltd.

Lobko says the City of Toronto was involved in linking the owners of Crow's Theatre with Streetcar Developments when the initial project was simply proposed as a 12-storey residence.

"It resulted in Crow's being able to purchase the space affordably," he says.

"We don't have a shortage of residential condos in Toronto but we have a shortage of social and cultural infrastructure to support our growing population.

"This is an example of a developer creating a community space in effect. Yes, it is a not-for-profit private organization but the city participated in its making and it will be available for community meetings and gatherings plus children's programming."

Lobko, who has led design teams on "incredibly creative" not-for-profit developments with public amenities such as Toronto's Evergreen Brickworks and the Wychwood Barns, puts the new Crow's Theatre in that group.

"Government doesn't have to do everything," he adds. "Local groups, not-for-profits can take the initiative and accomplish amazing things and this is an example of that."