

MARKET LANDS CREATIVE HUB

KEEPING ART ALIVE IN THE EXCHANGE

The Exchange District's vibrant arts and culture scene will soon have a new hub, thanks to a unique partnership between CentreVenture and the University of Winnipeg Renewal Corporation. The Market Lands project will be constructed on the site of the City's former Public Safety Building, a once contentious, mid-century brutalist icon, beloved by some and despised by others, that was demolished in November 2020.

The new building will be comprised of three integrated and complementary components: the Creative Hub, a 20,000 square foot area dedicated to arts and culture organizations, a mix of affordable and market-rate rental units, and a community-focused area that is still in the planning phase.

During the past several decades, The Exchange District has transformed from a gritty haven for the arts, thanks in large part to the profusion of affordable warehouse space, to an upscale, trendy neighbourhood with boutiques and fine dining. Many of the warehouse buildings formerly occupied by creatives have been converted into condos, others fell into disrepair, and the costs to rent or lease space rose dramatically, creating a precarious environment for arts organizations operating on shoe-string budgets.

Rendering of Marketlands courtesy of CentreVenture.





Urban Shaman staff Theo Pelmus, Debbie Keeper, and Liz Garlicki in unintentional but delightful matching stripes in the gallery at 290 McDermot Ave.

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“We felt that [Market Lands] should reflect the heart and soul of The Exchange District, that is our arts community,” says Angela Mathieson, CentreVenture’s Chief Executive Officer. After a year of consulting with community partners and members, Mathieson says those conversations helped determine strategies to keep arts organizations in the area “because if we lose them from The Exchange, we’re losing the soul of The Exchange, and we didn’t want to see that happen.”

The building is one of the first net zero carbon projects in Canada, with Mathieson explaining it will produce as much energy as it consumes. The design includes a state-of-the-art building envelope, with the front of the building being clad entirely in solar panels.

Mathieson says The Winnipeg Foundation has played an instrumental role in supporting the Creative Hub after supporting two organizations, Urban Shaman and Mentoring Artists for Women’s Art (MAWA), with grants

to help them move from their current spaces into Market Lands. She explains the new space “provides these organizations with lifetime homes that will have a very low-cost structure, which allows them to focus on what they do best, which is making art.”

According to Shawna Dempsey, MAWA’s Co-Executive Director, Market Lands is a prime piece of real estate and artists are worthy of occupying the space; the arts are central to Winnipeg’s identity. “Creating a custom build space is recognizing that artists need certain things and artists deserve those things,” Dempsey added.

Since 1984, MAWA has provided space for women to develop their artistic practices through education, theory, and criticism informed by an intersectional feminist perspective. The organization also welcomes non-binary, trans, and two-spirit participants. As the organization continues to flourish, Dempsey says MAWA has outgrown its current space at 611 Main Street.

“We found some of our programs were so popular, we simply couldn't accommodate people. We had to turn people away, or we'd have so much going on we'd have to rent space elsewhere for some of our programming,” Dempsey says, “So more space and kind of a better configuration of space was super attractive. Artists are professionals. They deserve a professional space in which to show their work and learn.”

MAWA will occupy a corner unit on the ground floor in the Market Lands Creative Hub, which features street-facing windows to entice people into the new space. Dempsey says the organization's current programming brings in heaps of foot traffic and “that's people enlivening our downtown.” The arts community contributes to Winnipegger's sense of place and pride, with Dempsey noting that “We really are the visual arts capital of Canada. Despite our small size, we punch far above our weight.”

Another big advantage of moving is the sense of synergy the venue facilitates. “We already collaborate with Urban Shaman and with Creative Manitoba,” says Dempsey, “so to be in the same building, we could really make that active and engaged and seamless, and make more art happen for less resources by working together.”

MAWA's neighbour on the ground floor at Market Lands will be Urban Shaman, an Indigenous arts organization focused on contemporary and emerging art. Urban Shaman is currently located on the second floor of 290 McDermot Avenue, a heritage building with some unfortunate issues, including a lack of accessibility. While the building holds a lot of charm, Debbie Keeper, Urban Shaman's Interim Director, says it is not conducive to hosting certain exhibitions as the infrastructure isn't up to gallery standards.

Urban Shaman has been a vital part of Winnipeg's arts scene for nearly 30 years, yet a lot of people aren't aware of the organization's existence. “Having this new space will be great because we would have a street presence. People could see us, then they'd be more curious to come in,” says Keeper.

“It's a safe space, where we don't have to defend what we're doing to anybody. We just can create art - Indigenous art.” Keeper says artists who exhibit at Urban Shaman, one of three Indigenous artist-run centres in Canada, may one day go to the National Gallery of Canada; it is important to foster the relationships created through artists-run centres, “they birth artists and the culture.”

“We're about showing artwork promoting artists. For us, we take a lot of pride in giving an artist their first show, and then watching their careers blossom,” says Keeper, noting that it is important to have a facility that reflects artists' needs and keeps people engaged with the arts community.

Market Lands Creative Hub goes beyond enriching the lives of artists; the new go-to destination will contribute to an already vibrant community in the downtown core, cementing Winnipeg's reputation as a city where art and creativity are valued by all.

For more information about Market Lands, visit marketlands.ca.



MAWA's Shawna Dempsey outside the current gallery space at 611 Main Street.