



ARTIST CO-OP THRIVES IN RENOVATED CLOTHING FACTORY

The artists living in the newly renovated Co-opérative d'habitation LeZarts in Montreal don't have to go far to find their muse. Once a clothing factory, this two-storey brick building now blends apartments with custom-built loft studios where tenants can sculpt, paint, design, and create without leaving home.

Tenants get an affordable place to live, and they don't have to pay for studio space elsewhere—a big savings that in part attracted 450 people to apply for one of the 33 new units.

"The creative synergy is also important," says Colin Munro, project architect with Groupe CDH, a 26-year-old Montreal technical resource group that develops housing for families with low incomes or distinct needs. "People are doing different things, but they're all creatively related. One person's work can easily inspire another's."

The project started in 1999 when six artists met with Groupe CDH to discuss turning the then abandoned clothing factory into a housing co-operative. Groupe CDH ran the proposal by the City of Montreal, which agreed to help fund renovations. With the City of Montreal on board, Groupe CDH felt optimistic that the Société d'habitation du Québec (SHQ) would also subsidize the project under its AccèsLogis program. Using some of its own money as a down payment, Groupe CDH purchased the building in 1999. "We didn't sleep much for a while," says Mr. Munro, "but we had a good feeling about the building and its prospects."

The building contained 22,000 square feet on two floors, each with 12-foot high ceilings. The high ceilings lent themselves ideally to lofts, a proposal that the artists applauded. But to make the building financially viable and to keep the rents low, Groupe CDH needed to maximize the number of units, which could cut into the loft spaces.

Mr. Munro came up with a smart design that offers lofts, yet keeps the cost per unit down. The front of LeZarts retains its two 12-foot-high ceilings, but the back is divided into three 8-foot floors for living rooms, kitchens, bedrooms, and bathrooms.

Groupe CDH completed the renovations in March 2002. Société d'habitation du Québec funded 38 per cent of the project's \$3.2 million cost, the City of Montreal subsidized 12 per cent, and the property's mortgage covered the balance.

"Everybody wanted to see the project work," says Mr. Munro. "The City wanted to see it work. The SHQ wanted to see it work. Both organizations went the extra mile to make it work. The clientele and the lofts make LeZarts unique in Montreal!"

Rents at LeZarts range from \$349 to \$634 a month, and 14 units are subsidized under a rent-geared-to-income program. "Tenants take care of all managerial, administrative and maintenance functions," says Neil McNeil, Development Officer for Groupe CDH. Residents can enjoy living and working in a beautifully restored factory—an arrangement that hundreds of other artists would happily snap up in the stroke of a brush.

Colin Munro, Architect/Groupe CDH is a finalist in the Concept and Design category of the 2002 Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) Housing Awards Program, **Affordable Housing Innovations**. The Housing Awards recognize individuals, companies and organizations that have made significant contributions to improving housing affordability in Canada.

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