

**THE GLOBE AND MAIL** 

Gary McCluskie, Principal at Diamond and Schmitt Architects, at the New Burlington Performing Arts Center

Fernando Morales/The Globe and Mail

city planning

## Banking on culture to fight big-box sprawl

ian merringer

From Saturday's Globe and Mail

Published Friday, Dec. 02, 2011 4:44PM EST

---

When Sarah McLachlan hits the unblemished stage of Burlington's Performing Arts Centre on its opening night tonight, she'll be met by a capacity crowd. In attendance at the brand-new \$41-million facility will be fans, perhaps some dignitaries and boosters of the local arts scene.

There's another way to look at the audience though, and that's as cultured cash cows.

Even as a Toronto city hall task force is considering a fire sale of three city-owned theatres, officials in at least six municipalities around the extended Golden Horseshoe are hoping theatre lovers will be the supporting cast in a script that ends with the economic and cultural rejuvenation of their downtowns.

Brampton led the pack in 2006 with the 880-seat Rose Theatre. A 631-seat theatre opened in Richmond Hill two years ago. Barrie saw the premiere of a smaller venue last month. Cambridge is building a 500-seat complex to open next year. Just last week, St. Catharines approved the budget for a four-stage,

\$60-million venue, the largest public investment the town has ever made.

This rush of public money is intended to do more than just provide comfortable seats for the comfortable classes. The location of each theatre – set squarely downtown in cities that have suffered from big-box development on their fringes – suggests that music, drama and dance are being asked to deliver a shot of vitality to urban centres.

Burlington mayor Rick Goldring would concur. He says studies indicated the local and regional economies would see a \$7-million spin-off effect when the expected 100,000 annual theatre patrons spent money on transportation, dining, drinking, accommodation, shopping and nearby attractions. Locating the theatre downtown and within walking distance of other businesses was always central to the plan, he says.

Even less tangible than economic projections – but no less enticing for him as mayor – is the idea that a city with a vibrant arts scene is one with an expanding tax base.

“We are competing with the whole of the GTA as a place to live, work and locate businesses. It's been proven that businesses are attracted to communities where people want to live. Culture, health care and education are the three most important factors for people deciding where to live,” says Mr. Goldring.

On the southern shore of Lake Ontario, St. Catharines mayor Brian McMullan exudes enthusiasm about his city's planned performing arts centre, but the idea of art for art's sake doesn't come up for discussion.

Mr. McMullan campaigned on the idea that culture has a special ability to kick-start economic activity. His Creative Cluster Master Plan – which promotes live/work communities – pegged the building of a live performance centre as a key step in rehabilitating a city that had lost tens of thousands of jobs in the last two decades.

To fund the centre, the city teamed up with the federal and provincial governments and Brock University (the city's contribution was roughly \$24-million). When the footlights go on, the centre will seat 1,500 and the new, adjacent Brock University drama facility will draw another 595 students and staff to the area on a nearly daily basis.

Terms like “critical mass” enter the conversation frequently when Mr. McMullan talks about the expected effect on local businesses. To help set the stage and encourage more retail-minded visitors, the city has re-instated two-way traffic on St. Paul Street after more than 50 years of it being a one-way car conduit. Next week a 600-space parking garage will open down the street as a hulking testament to the mayor's vision – one that was bolstered last month by the announcement of a 200-unit townhouse development. The mayor claims it is the most significant downtown project in 35 years.

Of course, the halls themselves have more than an indirect effect on the downtown streetscape. Architect Gary McCluskie explains the street presence of the buildings has its own role to play.

Mr. McCluskie is a principal at Toronto's Diamond and Schmitt Architects. He designed the theatres in Burlington, Cambridge and St. Catharines, and had a hand in Toronto's own Four Seasons opera house. He says each of the new halls strives to both add to and draw from street life on the sidewalk by featuring expansive windows that try to bring large lobbies out onto the sidewalk, and vice versa.

“The arts are about building and binding communities, so we made the buildings engaging and inviting,” says Mr. McCluskie.

By using windows instead of walls, Mr. McCluskie hopes to open up events that have had a reputation for exclusivity since Europe's grand opera houses went up, brick by brick. “We have highlighted the sense of

occasion, and used it as a draw,” says Mr. McCluskie.

In downtown Richmond Hill, audiences seem to be feeling the draw.

Michael Grit has been theatre manager at that city's Centre for the Performing Arts since it opened on Yonge Street in 2009.

Mr. Grit says the parking lot starts filling up at six-o'clock as people head downtown for dinner or drinks before eight o'clock shows. And it's not just Saturday nights that are lively.

“Our schedule is insane. I turn away more business than I book,” says Mr. Grit. “We have only twelve dark days for the first six months of 2012. I'm already booking dates in 2016.”

Mr. Grit estimates that three quarters of the acts come from within York Region, which suggests the theatre might be fulfilling one more of the goals that Mr. McCluskie aims for when he designs a theatre.

“People could go to Toronto and see a show, but they like being in their own communities,” says Mr. McCluskie. “At their best, these buildings are new sources of pride.”

Special to the Globe and Mail

---

© 2011 The Globe and Mail Inc. All Rights Reserved.