

# The Gazette

They just need some space

**Alternative performance venues are fostering tight-knit communities and contributing to the artistic diversity of the city**



**SCOTT W. GRAY, Freelance** | Published: Thursday, August 02 2007

Clinton the cat has just returned from a traumatic visit to the veterinarian, and his human caretakers, Sarah Byrnes and Michelle Williams, make sure I am gentle with him as they welcome me into their home. They live at St. Laurent Blvd. and Prince Arthur St. in a building full of converted studios, in a long loft that boasts a typical urban domesticity - except that it regularly doubles as the art venue and performance space known as My Hero Gallery.

The two women established My Hero last year to offer emerging visual artists a place to display their work outside the traditional gallery spaces of the city, and to foster community.

Michelle Williams (left) and Sarah Byrnes (with cat Clinton) in their home/art space My Hero Gallery, which they established last year for artists and performers looking for non-traditional venues.

"There's so much energy in this city toward independent music," Byrnes says. "I wanted to take that energy and combine it with art. This gallery is about merging art and music together and then getting that energy to be fun."

"We wanted to use the space." Williams continues. "We wanted to do something that interested both of us - being that Sarah could curate art shows and I could do music shows once in a while."

The two women praise the community that develops around the events they host in this unusual performance space. Every month they welcome strangers into their home, charging no admission and operating on a BYOB bar policy to showcase talent they believe in.

"Smaller venues create communities," Byrnes says. "An intimate show is priceless. Going to a show where you are close to the band and you are interacting with them as they are interacting with you - it's something that's memorable. It moves you."

In fact, the idea of providing a space for community to gather, whether physically or virtually, recurs frequently when discussing Montreal's alternative performance spaces with their curators.

Emmanuel Madan and his colleague Thomas McIntosh (known collectively as The User) are the creative force behind the Silophone in Montreal's Old Port. The Silophone uses recording and playback equipment installed in an enormous, empty grain silo built on the Lachine Canal in 1903. The project was designed to allow audiences to explore the natural acoustics of this abandoned space, albeit from a distance.

The public can send files across the Internet, speak across a phone line, or use the "Sonic Observatory" (a permanent installation The User has built on the boardwalk of the Old Port) to hear their voices reverberating inside the giant metal grain silo.

"When we got access, what we wanted to do was bring the public inside because it's such an amazing space," Madan says. "The thing that we were attracted to when we first explored the building was what it sounds like inside. But, unsurprisingly, the Old Port wouldn't allow the general public in. So, what we chose to do instead was bring the acoustics of the space outside to people in other places."

Audio files are uploaded to The Silophone's website, [www.silophone.net](http://www.silophone.net), from all over the world, and remain there for others to play back through the space. By adding files to the sound bank, audiences can participate in the Silophone's international community.

Madan says that we turn to non-traditional venues for culture because the number of "conventional spaces where people can play and gather" is limited.

"Not to say there aren't concert spaces in Montreal," he says, "but for a certain kind of music and art, I think that you see a lot of marginal spaces being reclaimed because there are a lot of those spaces."

Guy Sprung is a firm believer in community gathering spaces. His theatre company, Infinitheatre, operates out of the converted Bain St. Michel at Maguire and St. Dominique Sts., a space that was initially the community bathhouse when it was built in 1911.

As we speak, Sprung shows me renovation plans for the pool, adjusting various pieces in a cardboard mock-up of the Bain St. Michel that is sitting on his desk. With a movement of his hand, the building's interior is exposed, and a tiny stage is neatly fitted into the pool's deep end.

Relying on three-month contracts from the city to stage performances, and facing the realities of an aging building, the converted Bain St. Michel operates on a fairly provisional lease. However, Sprung is undaunted by the challenges.

"I think it's amazingly flexible and the idea of it redefining itself as a community gathering place is so neat," he says. "This would have an edge - you would walk in and your mindset would be shifted and you would maybe see things from a different perspective."

"It goes back to something, you know," Sprung adds, carefully putting the roof back on the cardboard model of the pool. "It would be the area's little gathering point for the community."

For information on My Hero Gallery, go to [www.myherogallery.ca](http://www.myherogallery.ca). For the Silophone, go to [www.silophone.net](http://www.silophone.net). For Infinitheatre, go to [www.infinitheatre.com](http://www.infinitheatre.com).