



46 Essex has evolved dramatically over its 70 years, from a garage to a paint-your-own-T-shirt business to a venue 'for adventurous new sounds.' Photography • Nick Iwanyshyn



# a space for silence

The history of 46 Essex  
is almost as curious as  
the music made inside

By Dawn Matheson

**BACK IN 2012** when Ben Grossman was looking for a home for his experimental music series called “Silence,” he wanted something cheap and dirty, a place where people wouldn’t have to take their shoes off at the door.

The internationally renowned hurdy-gurdy player envisioned an accessible, affordable playground for various artistic expressions, where people would gather to drink coffee, create and take chances with their art; where anyone and everyone felt free to make noise, free to experiment.

“I’d hate to make a space where someone couldn’t nail a goat’s heart to the wall if that’s what they felt compelled to do.”

Grossman found the space for Silence at 46 Essex.

When you look at it, 46 Essex is just a box, certainly not architecturally significant or attractive in its basic design, especially compared to Guelph’s other stunning, historical showpieces (those that remain standing).

The building fit Grossman’s bill: cheap, easy to modify and, yes, a bit dirty. “In fact, where people shouldn’t take their shoes off ... but open to so much possibility,” which, as I came to learn, is how Grossman sees everything.

In a book Grossman got me into, “How Buildings Learn,” author Stewart Brand says the form a building takes tells us much about its function.



In the mid-1940s, Alvin Hammill built the box at 46 Essex.



Photographer Rick Kowalczykowski once ran his business there.



Soon, Kowalczykowski had several tenants, including Silence.

Photography • Icon Photography Inc.

Photography • Icon Photography Inc.



How we function in that space can tell us who we are and who we were.

Buildings adapt best when constantly refined and reshaped by their occupants. More than any other human artifact, buildings improve with time — if they're allowed to.

It may just be this box shape and inherent low-cost, easy-to-modify design that has allowed for 46 Essex to function as it has throughout history.

Essex Street is an in-between place: the edge of downtown, an area bridging industrial, commercial and residential use.

The earliest-known inhabitants here — back when only dense forest grew at the confluence of Guelph's two rivers — were the Attawandaron people, or “the Neutrals,” politically neutral people living between the warring Six Nations and the Huron-Wendat. When the Canada Company “bought” the land, one of Guelph's first residential areas was established, due to the adjacent road that ran south to Hamilton (Highway 6). With the main traffic route at its door, Essex Street and area became the hub for the city's carriage makers, which eventually gave way to car dealerships. Guelph's first auto mall was born.

According to Neil Ryan, who owned the building for a stint in 2004, the land at 46 Essex was first registered in 1928 under Guelph Auto Wreckers, but just for a year. A coal yard followed, then Silverwood Dairy absorbed the property (you can still see the old trough next door at number 44). In the mid-1940s, Alvin Hammill came along and built the box that stands there today. Mac's Auto Collision, then John's Repair

Shop, operated as garages out of the box Hammill built.

In 1964, a refrigeration and cooling company moved in and stayed for 40 years — its large bulky wares stacked high inside and outside the building, much to the chagrin of the neighbours.

When big box beat out the little guy in the appliance market, the refrigeration business closed up shop, opening up number 46 to a series of dubious sublets. Here's where history becomes hearsay: stories spread of illegal squatters, a mom-and-pop delivery service run on cheap cars and walkie-talkies, a grow-op, even a chinchilla breeder. Neighbours recall cars shuttling in and out of the garage at odd hours, the one window out front blocked up and a closed-circuit security camera surveying the property.

“There was a couple living in there ... banging on a drum set all night in the back addition,” said Ryan, whose family residence on Nottingham Street backed onto the Essex property.

“I wanted my kids to sleep,” said Ryan, so, for what he called a bargain, he bought his family some silence. “We cleaned it right out. Bins and bins of garbage. We tore down walls. We gutted the place.”

Ryan said the city kept going back and forth on the zoning — commercial, then residential, then commercial again. He lent it out to some tenants who opened a business selling “paint-your-own” T-shirt kits. Eventually, fed up with all the zoning changes in the neighbourhood, Ryan and his family moved out, putting 46 Essex on the market. That was in 2007.

“It was hard to pass up at that



Neil Ryan was sick of his noisy neighbours, so he bought the building in 2004 and cleaned it out.



Above and below: Icon Photography Inc. operated out of 46 Essex Street for several years. Photography • Icon Photography Inc.







Silence was born in 2013, after Ben Grossman proposed an experimental concert series.



**Above and below:** Soon, 46 Essex was home to concerts, jams, workshops and film screenings. Photography • Ben Grossman



price,” said portrait and fine-art photographer Rick Kowalczykowski, especially since the building bragged a huge bonus: a garage door. Equally taken with old cars as photography, Kowalczykowski parked his ’61 Buick inside his studio and tinkered away when business was slow.

With his two sons, he finished up the back addition, making room for his first tenant: a retired carpenter who handcrafted artist easels. “The place worked for him since he could drive right in on his scooter.”

Next came an abstract artist, and then Grossman, who initially rented out a small office in the back for recording and instrument building.

Soon Kowalczykowski could no longer justify all that studio space (digital photography only requires a laptop and a camera), so Grossman proposed to host a little experimental concert series in the building. On New Year’s Eve 2013, Kowalczykowski, Grossman and a bunch of family and musicians threw up a makeshift wall right down the middle and Silence, version one, was born.

Grossman wanted a “third space,” not home, not work and not commercially driven. This didn’t mean the all-too-common concept of “community,” where people who already think alike congregate and do things they all like to do. Rather, Grossman’s space would attract people who think differently yet are willing to hear each other out and make space for their differences by practising something he calls deep listening, “where a string quartet could engage with a band who only uses power tools for instruments.”

The name Silence for a noise-making venue wasn’t merely

meant to be ironic. The reference, for Grossman, comes from the potential between the notes, the necessary silence from which the sound emerges. This listening is what builds real community.

**I**n no time, Grossman was curating hand-made music nights (think science fair meets music rehearsal), community-led, free-fall musical improvising sessions on Monday mornings, expressive voice workshops for non-singers, salsa jams, experimental film screenings, “odd-meter punk ballads written for gerbils” — art-making for young and old, celebrated and obscure. Grossman’s Silence was all about the democratization of art.

Eavesdropping from the other side of the wall, Kowalczykowski began to dub Grossman “The MacGyver of Music.”

“He could make amazing sounds from rubber bands and pieces of tin. Sometimes, I thought, ‘My God, these people are talented!’ Other times, I couldn’t listen for very long.”

Word of the space got out to Guelph’s art scene and beyond. Collaborations arose with Kazoo! Fest (independent music and art), Guelph Jazz Festival and the University of Guelph’s Improviser in Residence program, bringing artists from across the world.

Then people started physically moving in and modifying the space to suit their needs. Publication Studio Guelph (a publish-on-demand, handmade book publisher) brought in its glue gun and cutter, plus some much-needed rent money. The Department of Lost Records sold albums onsite, and an ad hoc, pop-up arts and craft market started up on Saturday mornings,



with Grossman as barista, roasting and brewing coffee. CFRU, the University of Guelph's campus radio station, broadcast a live improvisation show during market mornings as musicians began to tinker.

When famed local conceptual artist Janet Morton erected a giant faux smokestack made from more than 3,000 discarded tape cassettes on the rooftop — “a metaphoric vent for all of the creative output from inside” — Silence was christened the hub of Guelph's alternative culture scene.

Trouble was — if we return to the book “How Buildings Learn” — we're told that not only does form follow function, it also follows funding. In Grossman's case, he had very little. While Kowalczykowski was barely squeaking out the mortgage, Grossman was fixing pipes and paying bands out of pocket when the pay-what-you-can model didn't pay. Kowalczykowski told Grossman he had to sell 46 Essex.

Two diehard enthusiasts from Monday's Morning Music improvisation series, English professor Daniel Fischlin and music therapist Gary Diggins, couldn't bear the thought of Silence coming to an end.

“The place was just so transformative. Huge international musical networks were developing, plus there was just such a tremendous community need for it,” said Fischlin.

Having already invested emotionally and artistically in 46 Essex, a financial investment was the necessary next step. Along with partners Martha Nandorfy and Catherine Kormendy, they bought the building in the spring of 2014.

The first thing they did was to modify the space. “It needed to be loved into a new level of being,” said Diggins.

Down went the first Silence wall, in came an accessible front door and gorgeous modern washroom, radiant-heat flooring, a sleek new coffee bar with blond wood cabinets and retrofitted windows in place of the now-redundant garage door. A “living art wall” was painted out front by a local graffiti artist: a “shape-shifting wall that can change to suit the user of the space,”

said Fischlin. The inside walls invited the visual arts into the space, staging rotating art shows.

The open box design erected in the 1940s magically allowed for the easy reconfiguration from concert hall to intimate salon with no stage barrier, something the owners desired — “We wanted to break down the walls between performer and audience to allow a more equal playing field.”

The concrete floors and non-absorbent structure of the former garage happen to also create the perfect acoustics for sound making.

In order to be sustainable, Silence needed to go legit.

“We went from nobody being paid to three paid staff running the space,” said Fischlin. The team incorporated as a not-for-profit, set up a board and a curation committee so as to broaden the programming, which included a partnership with Essex Street's more famous site: Guelph's British Methodist Episcopal Church, now run by the Guelph Black Heritage Society. Silence would now rent out to groups who could pay, while still maintaining the pay-what-you-can model for those who couldn't.

Publication Studio Guelph moved up front with its print-on-demand showcase of unusual handmade books. In the formerly crumbling back addition, owner Diggins, with more than 200 instruments culled from around the world in tow, hung up his “beanock” (bean chair and hammock) and opened the doors to his sound and cognitive therapy studio, the “Sound Sanctuary.”

With all the changes, plus some of his own burnout, Grossman determined it was time to pack up his coffee machine and move on. (His former room has become “Sparrow's Nest,” after

the passing of Cathy (Sparrow) Cassel, who was an active participant in Morning Music. The flexible-use space serves as a green room for musicians and is rentable for meetings and music lessons.

In came local author Thomas King, who, with the donation of a new espresso machine, playfully hung up a “Dead Dog Café” sign (from his former national CBC Radio drama) and took over as resident barista for Morning Music on Mondays, now running unbroken for three years, \$5, or free with a breakfast contribution.

In September of 2014, Silence Re:Launch, in partnership with Kazoo!, mounted three eclectic nights of “genre-defying music,”





with a “little something for everyone.” The crowds went gangbusters.

“Community music doesn’t mean the music isn’t very good or unprofessional. It is all about the access and openness — for both the audience and the musician,” said longtime Guelph sax teacher Brent Rowan, whose Youth Jazz Ensemble performed an evening of jazz standards in the space.

Rowan speaks as more than a musician. He is a new graduate of North America’s first master’s program in community music at Wilfrid Laurier University.

In the new, reconfigured Silence, there is a wide range of presentations from more popular appeal to the specialist, who just might not find another place in town

to share their work. Today, the curators welcome “all forms of expression, as long as it makes us think and feel and challenges what we believe we know about sound, art and esthetics.”

“There will be no goat hearts nailed to the wall, though,” says Nandorfy, referring to Grossman’s tongue-and-cheek dream of giving artists free rein on expression. “One of our part-timers is vegan.”

Highlights include Korean percussionist Dong-Won Kim’s free Ding Dong sessions, and his partnership with Guelph symphony members; a baroque opera both sung and danced; James Gordon’s satirical musical on Stephen Harper; and William Parker (one of the most important leaders of the

avant-garde scene in jazz) releasing his record with former Guelph percussionist Jesse Stewart.

The portal Grossman first opened for “adventurous new sounds” in a once cheap and dirty box is seeing local and global arts traffic like never before.

“We can’t keep up with the demand. We’re getting inquiries from as far away as Norway to high school bands here in Guelph,” says Fischlin.

“There is a really different feel about Silence,” said Rowan. “The music is what is of value here — not what the owners will get for the rental or the sale of beer and pizza. It is a real gift to the community and you can feel it in the space.” ●



Kevin Breit, featuring Rebecca Jenkins and the Upper York Mandolin Quartet, perform June 24 at Silence. Photography • Nick Iwanyshyn