

**University of Toronto gives eviction notice to school for the gifted –
Wants the independent University of Toronto Schools downtown site for its own use**

By ANNA MEHLER PAPERNY

A high school created a century ago as a unique testing lab for would-be teachers and a haven for the academically gifted has to pack up and find new digs after the University of Toronto said it will need the downtown space for itself.

The University of Toronto Schools has had a special partnership with the University of Toronto since its inception in 1910: Their programs were linked, and the university sent its student teachers to the “independent” high school, which earned a reputation for creating Rhodes scholars and mathletes.

The U of T, which owns the site on Bloor Street just east of Spadina Avenue, told the high school earlier this month it won’t accept its proposal for a \$48-million refurbishment of the aging facility. Instead, it gave UTS until 2021 to find and move to a new space.

The university isn’t sure what it will do with the property, although it plans a redevelopment that would act as a “gateway” to the downtown campus.

In the meantime, UTS board members casting about for a Plan B say they’re disappointed but not surprised. In many ways, this is the latest loosening of the 101-year-old ties between the once-symbiotic secondary and post-secondary institutions. But nostalgic alumni figure this will be the end of a unique inter-institutional relationship.

“It’s a watershed, I think, for the school,” said alumnus Don Schmitt, now a principal at architecture firm Diamond + Schmitt.

“At first blush, yes, it’s a loss.”

The Class of ‘71 grad credits the school with helping instill in him a sense of urban wonder after he came to Toronto from northern Ontario. He helped put together the rebuffed proposal, and is helping design the school’s next incarnation - whatever that happens to be.

Alumnus and building committee chair David Rounthwaite said a letter from the U of T earlier this month indicated it had decided the proposal “was not in the long-term best interest of the university,” and that it didn’t want to pursue a plan that would reserve the site “for a non-university use in perpetuity.”

U of T vice-president of business affairs Cathy Riggall said there are no immediate plans for the site, “beyond a vague idea that this will be important in the future. No

timeline, because there is no money.”

The high school is committed to staying downtown, and councillor Adam Vaughan said he’s committed to keeping it in the area. But with real-estate at a premium, finding (and paying for) a new site will be no mean feat.

Mr. Rounthwaite said the school has been in touch with developers about the possibility of partnering to include condo developments on a new site, similar to the model pioneered by North Toronto Collegiate. But in addition to fundraising (a call to alumni has already gone out), the high school plans to negotiate with the university for financial relocation assistance.

So far, Ms. Riggall said, the U of T has offered pro bono real estate staff to help find a site.

Experiments with “laboratory” schools like this have been cropping up for a century or more. Alice Pitt, dean of York University’s faculty of education and herself a graduate of U of T’s Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, said it’s a seductive idea: Post-secondary institutions get a unique environment and a control group to foster new teachers while giving gifted students special academic attention. But they’re rare for a reason. And, in this case, OISE has grown so much it would need to add more schools to the program.

“They don’t need a lab school; they need a lab school board,” she said. “It’s probably hard because of the different mandates of institutions. ... It’s so complicated to work out these relationships.”

But many of those symbiotic academic relationships continue - Jim Slotta is proof of that.

The OISE professor and Canada research chair in education and technology is deeply embroiled in work at UTS, creating a futuristic “smart classroom” and, in discussions starting this week, developing a technology design community to help teachers and students bring a collaborative Web 2.0 flavour to their curricula.

The projects give his grad students thesis work and the high school “heavily, heavily wired,” experimental ways of teaching.

“It doesn’t matter [where the school is located] ... ,” he said. “It’s about knowledge, it’s about technology, it’s about pedagogy, it’s about learning from each other.”