

# My Neighbourhood is Normal

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My earliest memories of London start in the shadow of a lofty brick building. It was church-like in structure, and even with its massive towers and rose windows, it faded into the background of these recollections. The gathering always happened the weekend near my birthday in early June. Somehow, I never remember the poor rainy weather, that often follows the ending of spring, staining the day. The first image that comes to mind is green, a blurred grass field of children playing. Making The Gathering on the Green a suitable name. The second memory I have is yellow, the backstop of the dunk tank, my favourite part of the event. The dunk tank was always situated with the Normal School as the background. My first encounter.



Between 1898 and 1899, the London Normal School was constructed. The third of its typology to be built in Ontario. The first foundations of teacher's college, Normal Schools were introduced to Canada as a way of unifying the education curriculum across the nation and to restore patriotism in the wake of the rebellion. The school opened in February 1900, but significant changes were seen from its first opening to 1923. The student population grew from a mere 96 to 333.<sup>1</sup> The school was open for fifty-eight years, and over its time educated over 12,000 teachers.<sup>2</sup> After its time as a Normal School, the building briefly became a Junior High until 1963. The London Board of Education coopted the space for their headquarters until later sold to the Ministry of Government Services and rented by the Catholic School Board. Over the century from its first construction, led by architect Francis Heakes, the Normal School has been devoted to the advancement of Ontario's education.<sup>3</sup> Due to the architectural and historic significance of this building, in 1985, the City of London declared the Normal School, and the five acres of land it sat upon, a heritage building that is now protected by a Conservation Easement Agreement and the Ontario Heritage Trust<sup>4</sup>. In 2005, the Catholic School Board left the building vacant and in disarray. After three years of vacancy, the Province of Ontario funded a much-needed exterior renovation between 2008 and 2011<sup>5</sup>. Now, the only withstanding issue was finding its new occupant.

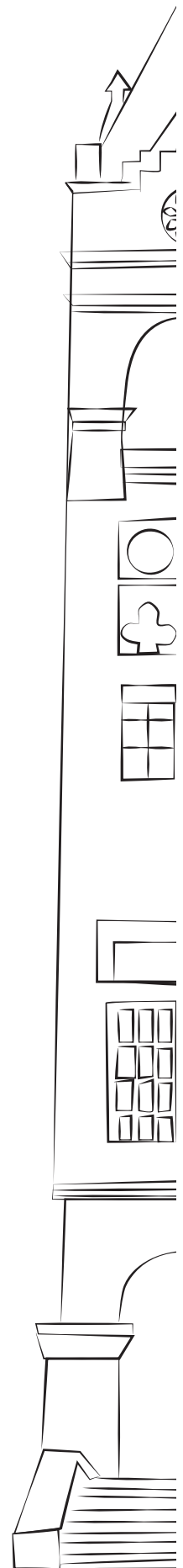
2011 marked the start of OSCO's, Old South Community Organization, campaign for a new resident of the Normal School that would accommodate the communities needs. The Normal School was both important iconography of Old South (featured prominently on OSCO's logo), and also a valuable resource. Since the ownership of the School by the London School Board, the residents

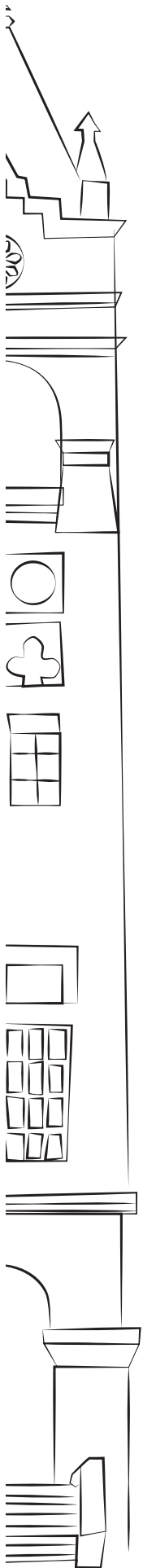
of the Wortley Village had been using the accompanying green space for recreational purposes<sup>6</sup>. Most notably, Gathering on the Green. The Gathering on the Green was an annual, outdoor market and festival. There were vendors, games, food, and was a great place to engage with the community. This event was also my first memory of the Normal School.



1. Simner, *The London Normal School*, 6, 9.  
2. *The London Normal School: The Site*, 1.  
3. *Statement of Significance*, 1.

4. *Most Appropriate Use*, 2.  
5. *The London Normal School: The Site*, 1.  
6. Interview with David Miller





The fight to keep this monumental building a community space took place a year ago. They called it looking for the ‘New Normal’. I was eight years old at the time and had only known of the greenspace adjacent, always assuming the Normal School to be an old church, which was abundant in my neighbourhood. I knew this space as a place of gathering and community yet had never set foot in the building itself. Around this time, signs reading “My Neighbourhood is Normal” kept appearing on lawns within the Wortley Village. The community was protesting large development on their beloved space. Various proposals were made to the city including office space (as per zoning laws), senior residences, or total demolition for development.<sup>7</sup> None of these options were desirable, as the community wished to preserve their historic, iconic building and the green, gathering space. In the end, the best proposal was from the YMCA, they would use the building as office space mostly unaltered except for a glass addition for accessibility. The YMCA would also introduce childcare and language services for the community and allow for the continued use of the green space. The space, which was never designed to be a community space, was given a liveliness by the community, which ended up preserving it.

Now the green space holds seasonal festivals for the community, hosts new pathways and refurbished picnic tables, and contributes valuable services to the community. Since the renovation and new occupation of the Normal School, the building and its surrounding park are teeming with community activities. On a summer day, you might find a yoga class, a soccer practice, picnicking families, dog walkers, YMCA children’s day camps, or festivals. You might even spot the Red-tailed Hawk family that has taken up residence in the front tower. Even in the freezing cold of winter, you will find a flood of footprints in the snow, a snowman or two, and people skating on the ice rink built yearly by the community.

In the beginning, the building was one of the first bricks laid in Canada’s education system. Throughout the decades, educators and students passed through the spaces, and a community formed just outside. Now, over a century later, the Normal School has become the center of the Old South community and continues to invite newcomers into the community through its education. This old, abandoned building transformed into a community space because the neighbourhood never gave up on it. This is not a one-off miracle story, many communities have started to reclaim their history and their forgotten, and many neighbourhoods could use this as a blueprint for their own story. After all, my community is just like any other. My neighbourhood is normal.



## References

Miller, David (member of Old South Community Organization with expertise in real estate), interview with author, November 10, 2021.

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Simner, Marvin L. 2009. *The London Normal School and Rural Education in Southwestern Ontario*, 6, 9. London: London & Middlesex Heritage Museum.

*Statement of Significance London Normal School*, 2006. 1. Toronto: Ontario Heritage Trust Easement Files.

*The London Normal School: The Site*, 2012. 1. London: Old South Community Organization.

