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Catherine Porter

Wallace Emerson was the last rink house I visited this week. I barely made it. It was dark and the snow was whipping. I was on my fifth streetcar of the afternoon. It meant getting off and waiting for the Dufferin bus.

But it was worth it – even the delicate wobble over snow-covered ice around the building to reach the rinks at the back. (I later discovered the route through the community centre. Next time.)

There, behind the rink house doors, was something completely unexpected: Charlene Small and her 9-year-old daughter, Breanna, sitting on a bench by the front window, singing. Loudly.

No skates. They had just stopped by on their way home for a cookie and a few dreamy moments watching a kid push a chair around the teardrop-shaped ice outside.

They were practising a song called "*(Where Do I Begin) Love Story*" for Breanna's choir. The lyrics are lovely, the tune aching. It could be in *Les Misérables*.

"She fills my heart with very special things/

With angels' songs, with wild imaginings..."

Emerson was the fifth rink house I visited that day. If this song had greeted me in any of the others, I would have worried for my safety. But here, it was just part of the happy atmosphere.

To note: fairy lights twinkling from the back corners, cut-out drawings of spaceships decorating the back wall, a kids' corner with miniature chairs around a table and a little shelf jammed with children's books, \$2 skate rentals, and the pièce de résistance – a service counter by the front door that not only had living, breathing, smiling workers behind it, but fruit and juice and promises of mini pizzas, macaroni and cheese and cups of hot chocolate for 50 cents. Hot chocolate makes everything better.

I ordered one, took my coat off and settled down for the concert, wondering, how did they do this?

How come most skating rink change rooms in the city resemble forgotten war bunkers, and a few chosen others have become community hubs?

It was the first time I took my coat off all day.

I have spent the past week writing about skating in the city. Truth be told, I'm not a great skater. I still can't stop properly. I spin instead. But I have two little children, and it seems only right that I teach them the basics of our national sport. So I have been twirling around skating rinks this winter with my 4-year-old shrieking between my knees.

In the summer, when I take my children to the park, I run around with them between my knees too. But, I bring a picnic, some bathing suits, maybe a book. We make a day of it. Usually, we meet people. That's an unexpected perk of parenthood. We have an excuse to talk to strangers again. Parks offer the perfect venue.

Many good things spring from those random conversations. In my neighbourhood, they led to a residents' association and later, a farmers'



While twirling around skating rinks with daughter Lyla Burt, 4, pictured, Porter found dark, smelly rink houses — which could be community hubs. (Feb. 24, 2010)

CATHERINE PORTER/TORONTO STAR

market.

The problem starts in November, with the pelting rain that turns to snow. It lasts until April or May. Where will we meet our neighbours?

The answer lies beside the ice rinks, I think.

Unfortunately, most of the rink houses look more like the Jimmie Simpson rinks than Emerson's. I travelled there on the eastbound Queen streetcar earlier that day. It's also tucked around the back of a community centre. It also demands some delicate wobbling over snow. But the reward is macabre: three concrete rooms splattered with graffiti, blinking lights, gasping pipes. Not a single window. It feels like a dungeon. It is empty.

"There's no place for moms and dads to warm up a little and see their kids on the ice," says Heather O'Meara, her voice echoing as we step inside. She's the chair of the centre's community advisory council, a real estate agent and a mom.

The rink received a hefty facelift recently from Maple Leafs Sports and Entertainment and Home Depot. Other than a quick splash of paint inside, the money went to the rink, O'Meara said. That's great for hockey players, but not for community. It means only diehard skaters will come here for the afternoon. The others will arrive, go for a spin and leave as quickly as they can. No singing.

"It's an underutilized rink," says O'Meara, taking me outside and up the side of the building to another door. A woman in a fur head band opens it. She's the parks worker and she's lovely. She offers us skating schedules and cheerful banter. How much nicer would her presence make the dungeon?

That's one of many changes O'Meara has in mind. The council has asked for doors to the women's washrooms and outdoor bleachers. They've offered up the \$5,000 going stale in their bank account.

"They start talking about building permits, approvals, city workers' time – even if we buy the concrete," she says. "The hoops we have to jump through to get things done are prohibitive."

Perhaps the problem is bureaucracy. Perhaps it is budgeting – although Councillor Adam Giambrone tells me the changes made to Emerson tacked only 5 per cent on to the renovation budget. But I think the problem is in our heads. We still think of rink houses as high school change rooms. They are supposed to be dark, smelly and overheated.

It's time for some "wild imaginings," as the song says.

The skating season is almost over. The rink house season has begun.

How would you like to restructure or change your neighbourhood rink house to make it more welcoming? Send the *Star* photos and ideas at newspix@thestar.ca. We'll post them online. I'll collect them and march them over to Parks, Forestry and Recreation general manager Brenda Patterson's office as a call to action.