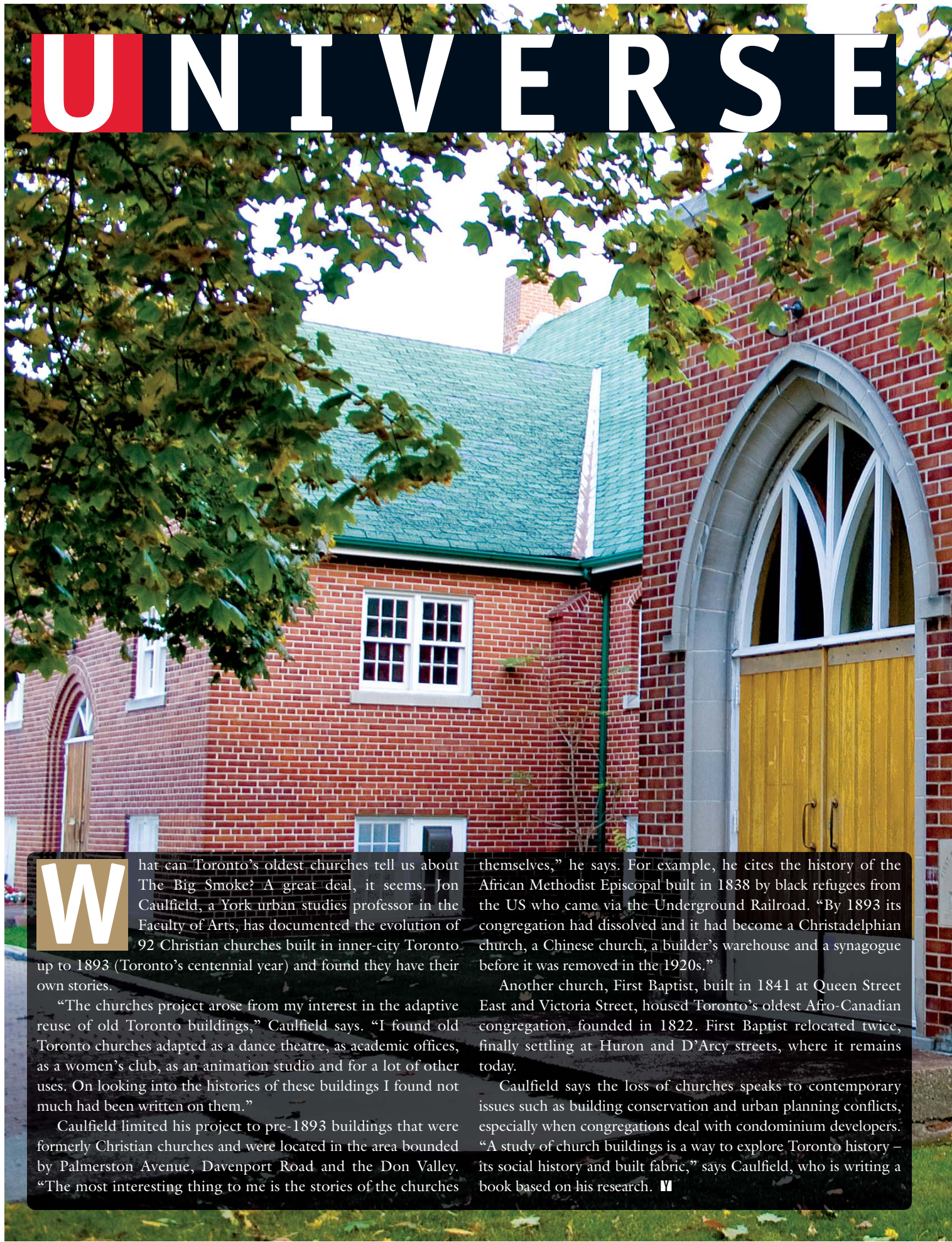


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hat can Toronto's oldest churches tell us about The Big Smoke? A great deal, it seems. Jon Caulfield, a York urban studies professor in the Faculty of Arts, has documented the evolution of 92 Christian churches built in inner-city Toronto up to 1893 (Toronto's centennial year) and found they have their own stories.

"The churches project arose from my interest in the adaptive reuse of old Toronto buildings," Caulfield says. "I found old Toronto churches adapted as a dance theatre, as academic offices, as a women's club, as an animation studio and for a lot of other uses. On looking into the histories of these buildings I found not much had been written on them."

Caulfield limited his project to pre-1893 buildings that were formerly Christian churches and were located in the area bounded by Palmerston Avenue, Davenport Road and the Don Valley. "The most interesting thing to me is the stories of the churches

themselves," he says. For example, he cites the history of the African Methodist Episcopal built in 1838 by black refugees from the US who came via the Underground Railroad. "By 1893 its congregation had dissolved and it had become a Christadelphian church, a Chinese church, a builder's warehouse and a synagogue before it was removed in the 1920s."

Another church, First Baptist, built in 1841 at Queen Street East and Victoria Street, housed Toronto's oldest Afro-Canadian congregation, founded in 1822. First Baptist relocated twice, finally settling at Huron and D'Arcy streets, where it remains today.

Caulfield says the loss of churches speaks to contemporary issues such as building conservation and urban planning conflicts, especially when congregations deal with condominium developers. "A study of church buildings is a way to explore Toronto history – its social history and built fabric," says Caulfield, who is writing a book based on his research. ■