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Why parks are important

No longer considered frills, green spaces are integral to intellectual and physical growth

July 13, 2007

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If the 20th century was dedicated to buildings, the 21st will be about the spaces between them.

In communities around the world, this one included, interest in the public realm – parks, squares, plazas, piazzas – has never been greater.

But Toronto, like many other cities, has neglected its green spaces and chronically underfunded them. As a result, there aren't enough parks to serve a growing population, and those we do have are deteriorating.

Finally, even municipal politicians have realized that parks are not civic frills but urban necessities. The backdrop to this is a growing awareness that the future will unfold in cities. In Canada, for example, more than 80 per cent of the population now inhabit urban centres. And for the first time in history, more than half the planet's population lives in cities.

Though most of this explosive growth has happened in sub-Saharan Africa, the cities of the developed world are not immune. As fuel prices rise, congestion increases and the global warming crisis heats up, people are beginning to grasp the benefits of dense, compact, transit-based, amenity-rich life.

But with these growing urban populations comes growing need for communal spaces. Keep in mind, too, that many new urbanites live in highrise condos so small they barely have room to breathe. As a result, they look to the city to provide many of the features house-owners take for granted. In this sense, life in Toronto has become more European; we no longer just *live* in the city, we *inhabit* it. The city is where we eat, drink, sit outside, meet friends, or simply watch the passing parade.

At the same time, as developed cities move from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy, vast swaths of land have been abandoned and are ripe for revitalization. Examples abound: everything from Chicago's Millennium Park (an old train yard) and the Olympic Sculpture Garden in Seattle (formerly an oil tank storage depot) to Parc Citröen in Paris (a disused car factory).

In Toronto, of course, this scenario is being played out on a grand scale along the waterfront. Parks big and small are now underway from Scarborough to Etobicoke and beyond.

But unlike green spaces of earlier generations, today's facilities are not passive lands intended for communing with nature. They seek to engage us, intellectually and physically.

The godfather of landscape architecture, Frederick Law Olmstead (Central Park in New York, Prospect Park in Brooklyn and Mount Royal Park in Montreal), saw his work as part of a larger effort to civilize humanity and improve the lives of people who existed in crowded, cramped and dirty conditions. His belief in the restorative powers of nature was widely shared. Indeed, when parks first appeared in their modern form in late 19th-century industrial Britain, they were seen as a way to reconnect city-dwellers with the natural world.

But in the aftermath of what has been called "the death of nature," the park has become less a place of trees and flowers than a space of engagement. Compare, say, Riverdale Park with Yorkville Park. The two are wildly different in size, but other than that, they illustrate the evolving philosophies of public space.

The former, a huge green desert, occupies what is basically leftover land not suitable for any other purpose. It offers the usual complement of wide-open spaces, sports fields, tennis courts and even a swimming pool. Well used and immensely popular, it attracts people from across the city.

By contrast, tiny Yorkville Park addresses issues of local history, geography and the now disappeared ecosystem. Though it also provides an opportunity to sit, look and eat lunch, don't go expecting to play soccer or toss a Frisbee. It's not that kind of place.

But in its way, Yorkville Park signals the direction in which we're headed. It replaced a parking lot; others have been built on garbage dumps, underground garages and various industrial sites.

One of the most innovative new facilities will be the High Line Park in Manhattan, a 1.5-mile-long green space built on an elevated railway track that stands two storeys high. Construction, which started in 2005, is scheduled to finish next summer. Though still a year from completion, the "park in the sky" has been embraced by New Yorkers, some of whom now refer to it as "the Central Park of the 21st century."

The High Line has already created a real estate boom in the surrounding areas and seems destined to attract international attention.

Another such scheme is Millennium Park, which has redrawn the map of downtown Chicago. The much-admired facility includes an outdoor concert stage designed by Frank Gehry and a pair of the most popular public artworks in the Windy City.

Olympic Sculpture Garden, which opened in Seattle last year, transformed a dismal and badly polluted industrial site into an exquisite park that connects the heavily condo-ized city to its waterfront.

Despite having been financially starved for more than a decade, Toronto's park system could be on the verge of a renaissance. If the proposed waterfront parks are built as designed, this city will be an international leader. Indeed, some of the most-respected landscape architects are now working in Toronto.

Among them is Adriaan Geuze of Rotterdam, whose firm, West 8, is redefining the central waterfront. Construction is due to begin this fall, but there are worrying signs that city bureaucrats will prevent the plan from being fully realized.

Michael Van Valkenburgh, a leading New York landscape architect, has designed Don River Park, a small facility that will anchor a new neighbourhood south of King St., west of the river.

He also heads the team that is now reconfiguring the Lower Don Lands, perhaps the most important element in Toronto's waterfront revitalization.

Among the most encouraging signs recently was the opening last month of HtO, the much-delayed "urban beach" directly south of the Rogers Centre on the edge of Lake Ontario.

Bureaucratic hand-wringing ensured it was two years late and much watered down, but HtO is the best thing to have happened to the public realm since Yonge-Dundas Square three years ago.

Though not all the designers hoped for, as Toronto's new front yard, it will make living in the city that much easier.