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Hume: Radical new waterfront park could transform Toronto

Underpass Park suggests a whole new way to inhabit the city

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By **Christopher Hume**
Urban Issues, Architecture

If you can't beat it, use it.

That's the mantra heard these days at Waterfront Toronto, which yesterday announced plans for Underpass Park. The idea behind the brilliant \$5.3 million project is to transform the nasty derelict spaces beneath the raised sections of Richmond St., Adelaide St. and Eastern Ave. west of the Don River, south of King St.



Underpass Park: The design envisions a recreational, urban park that embraces the otherwise ugly off-ramps that bisect the West Don Lands neighbourhood.

Known now as the West Don Lands, this is where the Pan Am Games athletes' village will be located. It will also be a sustainable neighbourhood unlike any in Toronto. The streets will be *woonerfs*, narrow curbless roads where pedestrians take precedence over cars.

But because the 32-hectare site is bisected by underpasses, waterfront planners have had to take a hard look at how to knit the two halves together. A design competition was organized and the winners, Vancouver's Phillips Farevaag Smallenberg and The Planning Partnership of Toronto, have now unveiled their scheme.

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"The question," explains landscape architect Greg Smallenberg, "is how to turn a constraint into an opportunity. These spaces are everywhere. But design can change the way they're used. It's a huge challenge.

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That means a massive lighting program, ball hockey and basketball courts, recreation facilities, benches, trees, kiosks, cafes, the whole paraphernalia of outdoor urban life. The park doesn't try to ignore the overpasses; indeed, it embraces them. If nothing else, Smallenberg says, they provide shelter from the storm.

Work won't start until next month, but the sheer audacity of the plan is enough to take your breath away. The very notion that this sort of space could be transformed into a park runs contrary to decades of practice. Yet this is exactly the kind of thinking the city needs to lift itself into the future. As Smallenberg also notes, when you add up all the land that lies hidden in the shadow of elevated highways, it's vast.

In a city like Tokyo, this would be old news. But until recently, Toronto has had the luxury of space; in the new world order, however, every last parcel of land matters. The story in the decades ahead will be whether we can figure out how to reintegrate these forgotten areas. Thanks to Waterfront Toronto, we now have an answer, or at least, a glimpse of one.

"It's about the everyday," Smallenberg insists. "We need to respond to how people will actually use the space."

The rest of us must wait until the park opens in 2011 to find that out, but keep in mind that when complete, West Don Lands will be home to more than 12,000. The neighbourhood green space will be Don River Park, now under construction; the purpose of Underpass Park will be to reclaim the wasteland they live beside.

Making things extra difficult will be the growing pressure exerted on Waterfront Toronto by the province, which cares more about delivering the 2015 Pan Am games on-time and on-budget than what happens after the two-week shindig ends. A program that would have required more than a decade to complete must now be done in less than five years.

Given the radical and enlightened nature of Waterfront Toronto's program, no one will be surprised if provincial agencies such as Infrastructure Ontario are a little taken aback by what they see. Nothing like it has ever been attempted in these parts. That's why the waterfront matters to the whole city — and the rest of the country. This could be our last best chance to get it right.

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