

Urban planning: The public domain

June 25, 2010

Ryan Starr

Special to the Star

David Leinster has a clear sense of what ails this fair city.

"Toronto has a really mean public realm," says the landscape architect, one of six principals in [The Planning Partnership](#) (TPP), an urban planning and design firm.

"Planning in the city has been dominated by the car and accommodating it in every respect. There needs to be a shift in how we think about our streets and public spaces."

For Leinster and his TPP colleagues, that's the mission: Make the public realm — the environment around buildings that includes streets, sidewalks, alleys, parks, plazas and other open spaces — a primary focus of Toronto's ongoing development planning.

As the city looks to add density in existing residential areas, TPP hopes to reverse years of automobile-centric urban design and help transform Toronto into a more pedestrian-friendly town.

TPP is currently working on projects such as the John St. cultural promenade, Union Station, the Front St. civic plaza, the West Don Lands and the Sheppard East LRT — initiatives that highlight public space and street life, which The Planning Partnership co-founder Dan Leeming says must be top priorities.

"Toronto is a world class city, but we don't have a world class public realm," he says in an interview with his partners at the firm's Bay Street office.

"We've got amazing cultural diversity and good government, but we've got a built-form (the relationship buildings have with their surroundings) that's not meeting that standard."

TPP hopes to change that.

On John St., the firm has designed plans for a streetscape that will tie together landmarks along that north-south



RICK EGLINTON/TORONTO STAR

David Leinster (seated) and, from left, Dan Leeming, Donna Hinde, Harold Madi and Rick Merrill.

corridor, including the Art Gallery of Ontario and the CN Tower.

"It's an important route that links a number of attractions," says TPP partner Harold Madi. "But the public realm, the adhesive between those destinations, is currently an unremarkable street."

To make the main drag more remarkable, TPP wants to add trees, widen sidewalks, include more squares and plazas, and enhance existing parks and open spaces.

With the influx of people moving into condos in the Entertainment District, Madi says it makes sense to improve public spaces.

"You're doubling the population there, and the majority of them are walking to work, not using cars.

"They're the ones who are going to experience this environment, but at the moment there are no trees, not enough greenery, and the sidewalks are too narrow."

Andrew De Gasperis, a principal with Aspen Ridge Homes — currently developing a two-tower, 750-unit condo project at Richmond and Duncan Sts. — sees the value in offering homebuyers the promise of inviting public spaces.

"The city is transforming quickly, so when we sell to a potential buyer they want to know what an area's going to look like when they move in," he says. "If there are improvements being done to an area like John St., that's what you want to see; you want it close to your development so there's a benefit for purchasers."

The Planning Partnership has also been working on a public realm plan for the West Don Lands, the first residential neighbourhood in Waterfront Toronto's redevelopment of the industrial area.

The neighbourhood ultimately will include 6,000 homes, one million square feet of working space, an elementary school and two childcare centres.

To create a more engaging community vibe, TPP plan calls for plenty of public art and loads of landscaping and parkland.

Construction recently began on Underpass Park, a derelict area under the Richmond/Adelaide Sts. overpasses that's being transformed into a new 2.5-acre park with recreational space, children's play areas and community gardens.

The West Don Lands will also showcase a type of street never before seen in Toronto: the woonerf.

"It's a model imported from the Netherlands," Leinster says. "It's a space where pedestrians, cars and bikes all share the same areas. It's probably more similar to a lane than to any other street we know, except buildings front onto it."

A woonerf is also curbless and has different surfacing materials than regular streets. "This signals to drivers that you're entering a different zone, so hopefully you act differently," TPP partner Rick Merrill says.

Achieving greater motorist-pedestrian harmony is the focus of another project in TPP's pipeline: a Union Station/Front St. public mall.

The firm's vision is for a "grand civic plaza from the Royal York to Union Station, building face to building face,"

Madi says. "This is the front door to the city and it's a very important civic building."

TPP hopes to make the area less treacherous to pedestrians, but Leinster acknowledges it will be impossible to eliminate all vehicle traffic along bustling Front St.

"At Union the cars are moving in one direction and the pedestrians are moving in another, so there's this inherent conflict," he says, adding that a woonerf-style approach might work well in this environment.

If calming Union Station traffic sounds like a tall order, TPP should be up to the task; this is the firm that gave car-loving Houston a reason to embrace public transit.

Last year TPP won an award from the American Society of Landscape Architects for its work on plans that are helping transform Houston's gridlocked urban core into a place that now accommodates a light rail transit system—and pedestrians.

It wasn't easy.

"We spent a lot of time on cross sections and how to make pedestrian zones work," Merrill says. "Sometimes we had very narrow right of ways, and when you have a limited right of way, the pedestrian always suffers.

"But that's actually the most important part of the corridor," he adds, "because you're trying to get people to the corridor to use transit."

Back in Toronto, TPP is incorporating lessons learned from Houston into its plans for revamping the streetscape along the route of the new Sheppard East LRT, a 14-kilometre line that's part of the Transit City megaproject.

"We're looking at how people are going to get to the trains — is it accessible and how do we shape the pedestrian environment so that people are comfortable walking there," Leinster says. "Because God knows you would not want to walk on Sheppard today, it's miserable."

In the end, Leeming says, effective public-realm planning — whether in the suburbs or downtown Toronto — comes down to challenging the "dominance of car culture."

"Car drivers have had the right of the road for 60 years," he says. "And they have this idea that the car has a God-given right to move at a certain speed, and a certain level of service is expected.

"Well, those rules went out the window 20 years ago. It's shared space, but we haven't learned how to share it yet."