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If you can't beat it, use it: That's the idea behind the new Underpass Park in downtown Toronto.

Construction of the innovative scheme, which began officially Thursday, will last until the end of the year. But already it's safe to say the park will transform the lower east side of Toronto, and with it the rest of the city.

This is a part of downtown people have avoided for decades. Formerly industrial, these lands west of the Don River, south of King St. E. have been a hole in the urban fabric for as long as most of us can remember.

But as reimagined by Waterfront Toronto, the tripartite revitalization agency created by the three orders of government in 2001, the site will become a mixed-use, mixed-income neighbourhood for 6,000. The West Don Lands, as it's known, has also been chosen as the location of the 2015 Pan-Am Games Athletes' Village.

Though it remains a sea of mud, the land's enormous potential is easy to see. From a planning perspective, however, the problem is what to do with a series of shadowy overpasses that run through the site, separating one half from the other.

Elevated expressways are right up there on the list of most effective city-killers, but here at least the space beneath Toronto's infamous raised highways will be transformed into something open, accessible, usable, and even enjoyable.

That's a lot to ask, but Vancouver landscape architecture firm Phillips Farevaag Smallerberg has devised a program of sports courts, cafes and wooden strips that rise out of the ground to become benches. Not surprisingly, lighting will feature prominently in the new facility, part of an effort to make up for the lack of daylight.

"This is transformative," declared federal Finance Minister Jim Flaherty. "It's important not just for Toronto, but for Canada."

On hand for the ceremonial shovelling of the earth Thursday, Flaherty joined a gaggle of dignitaries that included provincial Minister of Research and Innovation, Glen Murray, and local municipal councillor Pam McConnell.

Conspicuous in his absence was Toronto Mayor Rob Ford, whose doppelganger, Doug Ford, has been happy to share his thoughts about the waterfront, as half-baked as they may be.

"In terms of his business and economic understanding, Doug has got it all wrong," said McConnell. "He'll start to understand; his business connections will see that he gets it through his head."

Even Flaherty found himself having to answer for the actions of his friends, the Fords. Clearly unwilling to make them look even more foolish than they do, he assured reporters there was plenty of land on the waterfront to accommodate various demands.

And as activist Cindy Wilkey, also noted, "Underpass Park is a huge step forward in encouraging city departments to get out of their silos and start thinking differently about infrastructure."

No kidding. Along with Toronto's notoriously dysfunctional council, the hidebound bureaucracy has kept the city years behind where it should be. As much as anything, Underpass Park offers hope that the city might manage to keep up with the future after all.

On the other hand, the planning for the park predates the Fords. If it were up to them it would never have happened.

Following on the success of [Sugar Beach](#) and [Sherbourne Common](#), Underpass Park is yet another Waterfront Toronto project that will change the city forever. What was once unimaginable is now there for even the most ardent cynic to behold.



An artist's rendering of Toronto's new Underpass Park. Construction of the project, located in West Donlands around Eastern Ave. and St. Lawrence St., started officially on Thursday, May 26, 2011.

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The Fords call Waterfront Toronto a “boondoggle,” but that’s nonsense. Indeed, it’s more crucial to the city’s future than they are.