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The Spaces In Between

Introduction

by Gordon S. Grice OAA, FRAIC

"You learn a city through your feet."

— Mayor David Miller, introducing the TSA Rants, Arts and Letters Club, Toronto, December 8, 2005.

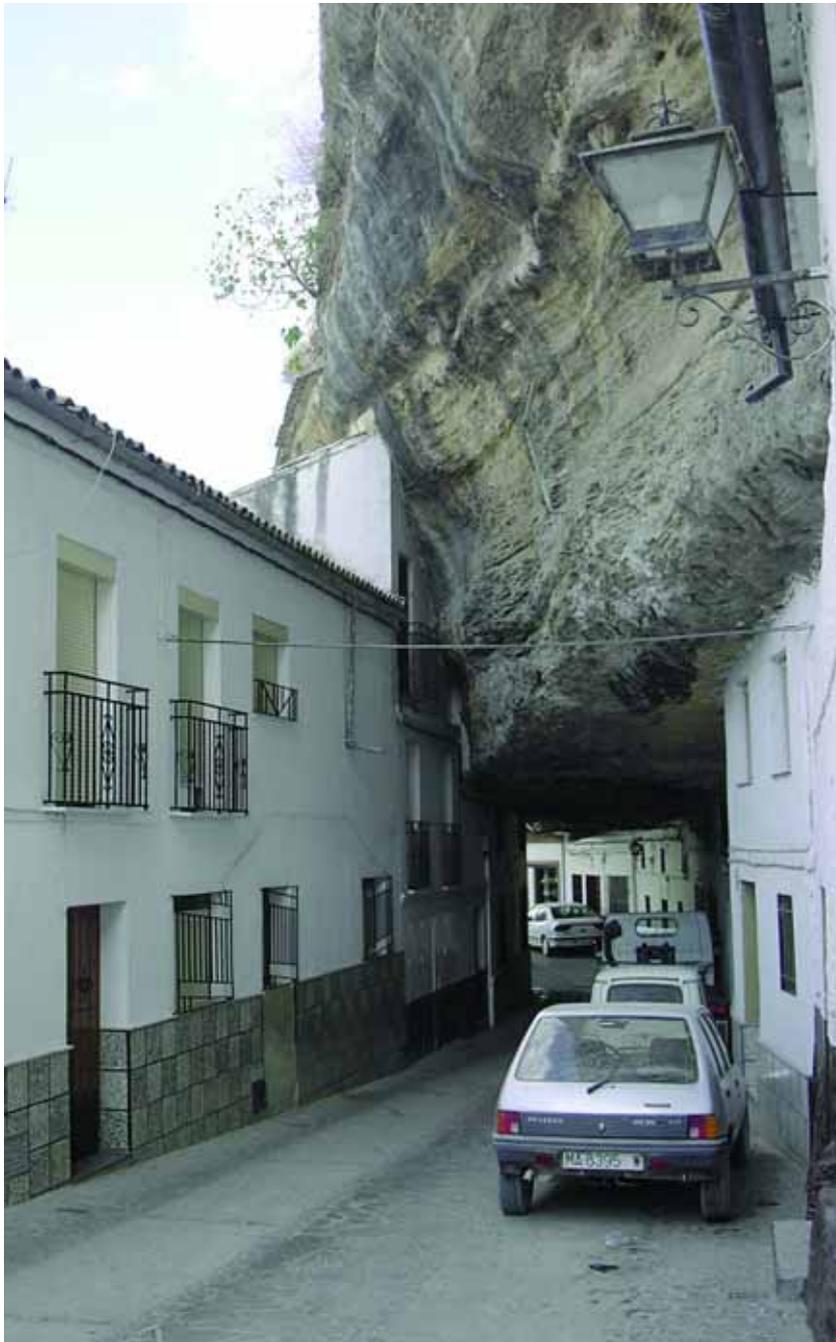


Photo: Marcelo Graca

Public space is one of our most valuable assets. It belongs to all of us, it's all around us and it's free. The vast majority of this space is broken into tiny pieces — sometimes planned, but frequently haphazard, accidental, tucked away, leftover. Underappreciated and often ignored, small spaces help define the character of our cities, but we take them for granted, we turn our backs on them and allow our trash to collect in them.

In his recently announced initiative, Clean and Beautiful City, Toronto Mayor David Miller has targeted public space as an indicator of civic pride and has put forward two proposals to improve public life by improving public space. The City at Large is a program aimed at strengthening urban design activity. The Orphan Space Program will "[engage] neighbourhoods and individuals in improving leftover spaces across the City" (more than 360 of them according to the press release). Public space is back on the agenda.

But if you look around, you will find that public space, especially neglected public space, is being discussed in a lot of places.

Spacing Magazine

Now in its fourth issue, *Spacing* is a small magazine dedicated to promoting a greater appreciation and a more intense involvement by the citizens of Toronto in their own public spaces, large and small. *Spacing's* articles and essays describe every imaginable use

Setenil, Andalucia, September 2003.

and aspect of public spaces, from living on the street to idle strolling to visual pollution.

An ongoing discussion/exposé deals with the scandalous misappropriation of public space for the use of advertising. In a recent essay, "Skybandits", Edward Keenan (*Spacing*, Spring/Summer, 2005) describes the city's futile attempts to rein in illegal billboard advertising. In one example, city councillor Joe Mihevc attempted to find out whether all of the billboards in his ward were legal and paid up. Astoundingly, "City staff reported that they couldn't find permits for 50% of the billboards." A paradox that is hammered home in several other articles is that the city goes to great lengths to legislate and otherwise restrict the public's ability to erect useful posters and public notices, while large commercial advertisers continue to pollute the visual environment.

Another topic of continuing interest is the inevitable appearance of advertising on every imaginable surface. In "Public Space as Currency" (*Spacing*, Winter 2004/2005) Dave Meslin reveals how close we were to having the Prince Edward Viaduct serve as a support structure for an enormous video billboard. And you thought that the trash disposal bin and TTC shelter advertising was intrusive. *Spacing* discusses that too. In fact, if I haven't already mentioned it, *Spacing* discusses every conceivable aspect of urban space: use, design, history, and future.

Spacing costs \$5.00. If you ever walk anywhere in Toronto or any other city, you should buy it. For more information, go to the Web site www.spacing.ca.

DX Orphan Spaces

In partnership with the City of Toronto Clean and Beautiful Cities secretariat, Toronto's Design Exchange organized a modest design charrette to take place on a Tuesday, afternoon last November. It would be difficult to imagine a more appropriate and worthwhile micro-urban design project than this. Approximately 40 students, designers and others convened to come up with imaginative and inexpensive ways that ten selected "Orphan Spaces" might be rescued from the vast stock of small neglected urban spaces. A small step, to be sure, but one with the ability to make a crucial contribution to the incremental beautification of the entire city.

"Orphan Spaces", according to DX press releases, are areas that have "become lost in the shuffle of creating homes, businesses, parks, utility and transportation corridors and all other phenomena associated with large urban spaces". The project was based on the belief that "design direction and community involvement can reintegrate these spaces and make each and every space in Toronto livable and beautiful."

Solutions varied from team to team. A few of them recommended the participation of nearby public schools in creating artwork. Many teams suggested methods for redefining the space, giving it some geographical integrity. Some schemes relied on local motifs to lend character to the space. Perhaps the most startling was the solution for

the small triangle that lies between Front Street, Eastern Avenue and Trinity Street. Surrounded by low industrial buildings and most recently the site of a gas station, it is now a vacant lot in the truest sense of the word: featureless and empty. As a remedy for the site's relentless flatness, the team, which included architect Peter Gabor proposed a mini-mountainous landscape with wild vegetation. Most encouraging of all, the team suggested that graffiti and a skateboard park might also be incorporated to introduce a little vitality into the site.

The TSA Rants

Now happily an annual event, the TSA Rants take place at the Annual General Meeting of the Toronto Society of Architects. AGMs can be ho-hum affairs, but the rants are anything but. This year, 14 architects presented heartfelt opinions on the state of public open space in the city. Some rants were well organized, others were relatively spontaneous but all were thoughtful.

Topics included the fanciful:

- An idiosyncratic scorecard by Antonio Gómez-Palacio for rating the success or failure of small public spaces indicators included: (i) how many lost cat posters are there? (ii) do people sit on the pavement?, (iii) is there an old chair anywhere?
- "Who doesn't Love Open Space?", an open question posed by Leo Desorcy. Leo's examples included Landscape architects (without open space, they would have no work), Big Box retailers (without open space there would be no parking), and architects (open space means you can stand back and look at their buildings, but please, no trees).

The plaintive:

- the "Tyranny of Safety" and urban design panels — a particularly well-informed and poignant rant by City Councillor Kyle Rae against the damaging effects on healthy urban design of an overly safety-conscious approvals process.
- A case for more creation and better selection of public art (Brad Golden).

The constructive:

- It's not about beautification, it's about having a space to gather, presented by Kim Storey. "Everywhere we can get public space, we should get it." See Kim's essay below.

And the ironic:

- Ivan Martinovic's "Barbarians at the Gate" See also Ivan's essay, below.

The TSA Rants have been remarkably successful in helping to keep the discussion of public space on the architectural agenda. This sort of thing should happen a lot more often.

A Web Sighting

I found the following posting on ArchNet Discussion Forum — Zuhair Alam, May 9, 2005:

“Karachi is a big city, big cities always have big problems and spaces are too costly and even not being used properly: less public spaces, transport out of control, and many other urban problems.

“So we as architects thought to use left over spaces for city. Left over spaces are: Waste space below the bridges, Roof tops of buildings, Spaces around the railway lines.

“Can anyone help me in any way?”

By December 22, Zuhair had received seven responses. three were fairly pessimistic: any conceivable solution just

presents its own problems. The most helpful was a suggestion to put (architecturally designed) restaurants under bridges. A similar scheme having proved successful in Delhi. Another suggestion was to create green buffer zones next to rail lines.

I don't know whether Zuhair has received any more useful responses. If I think of it, I'll send him the DX Web address.

Suffice it to say, the neglect of public space is not a local problem. Zuhair Alam has perhaps shown more initiative than many of us by seeking solutions from Web surfers all over the world. In our case, the concerted effort of the province's architects might be more productive.

Gordon S. Grice is Editor of Perspectives.



Photo: Aleksandar Janicijevic

The square of Alexander the Great

By Aleksandar Janicijevic

On the corner of Danforth and Logan Avenues, in the middle of Greek town, there exists a small, public space with all the elements of a traditional European square. It seems that traditional habits and needs are still alive, even after a couple of generations. All the services, comforts and resources necessary are there. Let's list them: One monument of Alexander the Great, a significant Greek historical figure; one backdrop with vines, a reminder of the grapevines of the Mediterranean; one fountain with running water, an important sound during summer nights; a few patios where one can have a bite or refreshments; a few quite comfortable benches where people can exchange experiences and ideas; a couple of mature trees to keep cool under that protect from the elements; dozens of people (even at 1 o'clock in the morning) and some visitors from "out-of-town" seen here leaving after a well deserved rest. An excellent example of how with little effort, a very pleasant urban space can be created when the community is willing to pay attention to the messages sent by their city.

Aleksandar Janicijevic is an architectural graduate from the University of Belgrade, a designer and urban enthusiast. He invites readers to go to his Web site www.urbansquares.com.

Photo: Aleksandar Janicijevic



Travel notes & Musings on Open Spaces and Cities: on beauty, utility, density and the forty-five minute lunch.

By Marcelo Graca OAA, MAIBC, AAA, MRAIC

On Beauty

All in the world know the beauty of the beautiful, and in doing this they have (the idea of) what ugliness is; they all know the skill of the skilful, and in doing this they have (the idea of) what the want of skill is.

—*The Tao Teh Ching*, by Lao Tse

Venice, October 1992

I enter Corte dei Pali Già Testori. This is an outdoor room, an expansion of space that in contrast with the dense building volume and narrow, constricted 'calles', makes me slow down and notice. There is nothing remarkable about the surrounding structures, typically Italian worn rosé facades. But in the middle of this space, I now can see kids playing with a small toy, an objet trouvé. A centenary stone fountain spouts its soothing watery cantation. This was their castle, their tree house, and their repository of memories. Is it possible that humans can grow amidst unrequited beauty and not be affected indelibly by it?

The concept of what constitutes acceptable or meaningful urban open space varies according to locale and traditions. In our western, industrialized world, there seem to be two main contrasting notions: In medieval European cities, solid mass prevails over tight open space that compresses and decompresses. Terrain and topography, self-defence consideration and authoritarian rule have made their mark, resulting in a generally vital communal open space where street, square and loggia interact through the centuries with multiple and changing functions. The other Western idea comprises the more familiar open-ended grids of newer North and South American towns and cities. These two understandings of space between buildings have roots in traditions that in many cases are polar opposites.

In dense urban Europe, people live in close proximity and buildings are smaller, they work fewer hours and pay attention to leisure time. Cultures and generations have meshed and interacted for centuries, right in the streets. The *passeggiata*, the *promenade*, the *paseo* are the

Far left: Midnight social interaction at Alexander Square, Toronto.

Centre: A statue of Alexander the Great stands guard night and day.

Above: Soho, London, June 2005.



Photo: Marcello Graca

On Utility Brampton, November 1988

I wait for the lights to change to green. Scattered teenagers in dark winter clothing plod in twos and threes along the grass on the East side of Kennedy Road. The walk between their brand new yellow brick school and the intersection is about 750 meters. There is no sidewalk, no trees, and there are no other buildings: the area is in "transition." At the intersection, a gas station occupies one corner, a greasy spoon that has seen better days holds another corner, a brightly coloured donut shop (with plenty of free parking for patrons) brightens the third corner and, yes, on the remaining corner of this divine geometry I can now see another gas station offering gas three-tenths-of-a-cent-per-litre cheaper than across the street. I pull in, put my mitts on and self-fill the tank. As the wind blows harder, flurries stick to the toques of our future adults, and I hear one of them say to the others: "Dunkin' Donuts? No, we're better off in my mom's basement."

A culture that has historically leaned towards labour and utility, and regards its buildings as facilities for processing or trading goods, for basic shelter or mere real estate, will not value open space— at least not in the same way as a European does. In old European towns open space is place and memory. In North America open space seems more a matter of practicality.

In North America all types of buildings wear billboards to take advantage of marketing opportunities. The space between them and us is no more valuable than the space between a TV screen and us. Streets, sidewalks and spaces between buildings are by-products of the shiny and sometimes not-so-shiny building envelopes that "define" them; these byways are expected to perform ancillary functions: moving goods and people and allowing services to run under and, sadly, over them as witnessed by the brutally honest power lines and wooden poles obscuring sightlines along main streets. Finally, streets are designed and scaled according to increasingly urgent transportation considerations. As a culture we undervalue the aesthetic, environmental or psychological quality of spaces between buildings or along streets.

On Density Tokyo, May 1991

The fish market opens early, as it should. The mix of colours, sounds and smell is dizzying. Its sheer size and energy make it a world unto itself. However, the trading spreads to the edges and beyond. The whole cho east and north of the market is a wider market of narrow streets and low-lying decrepit buildings, their edges completely open to the public. I roam the stalls between buildings and take it all in. Canvas canopies cover the space and compress the space downwards. I come to the end of a very narrow street at the outside edge of the district and I feel the explosion: six lanes of traffic, people everywhere; across the street an elevated train

outward expression of people's desire to share their time with others — in environments often shaped by monarchs, bishops or other absolute powers, over centuries of evolution, creating spaces that live on and affect generation after generation.

By contrast, in the Americas, settlements have grown and developed along trade routes such as roads, water edges and later, along rural concession roads, for the most part planned in advance and for utilitarian purposes by relatively recent arrivals. Spanish cities were laid out in accordance to strict manuals developed by Renaissance Franciscan priests. Lots were repetitive and narrow and city blocks were compact. English North American grids were most often a result of surveying and engineering concerns, — as artificial an imposition on the landscape as their Ibero-American counterparts — but a matrix without formality or symbol, a way to organize agricultural buildings, sparse hamlets, towns and, later, low-density semi-urban conglomerations. Open spaces were a synonym for clean air and light, a romantic new beginning, a break from the squalor of medieval towns and a taking of possession of the land — an expression of optimism, by the industrious self-governing communities facing harsh climate and geography. Since the end of World War II, there has remained an unresolved conflict between the rural (regressively romantic) and urban (aspiringly global) ideals of North American city dwellers. Density, even in a resource-scarce world, continues to be resisted, and green (or simply open) space between buildings is a much sought-after bonus, although in a quantitative rather than a qualitative way.

goes by parallel to the road and an elevated expressway crosses it overhead, at right angles and then swerves into space, flying above and barely scraping the roof of an elementary school's fourth floor. In its beautiful ugliness, Tokyo is never dull, is always exhilarating.

Contrary to what many urban design specialists and miscellaneous revisionists espouse, open space in North American cities cannot and should not emulate Venice or Barcelona. In Canada especially, the essence of cities — Toronto, Montreal or Vancouver — is grit and hard work, business and optimism ; not philosophical speculation or sidewalk café idle *dolce far niente*. Why shouldn't our cities articulate their own brand of open space and why shouldn't the nature of these spaces evolve directly out of our local soul? A first step would be for the public and architects alike to think of our cities, their buildings and the resultant spaces between buildings as a holy playground, celebrated and used intensely.

urban centres, bringing coherence and significance to open space would be much easier if density were intensified. This intensification, could be achieved selectively, augmenting building footprints, lowering height, filling up the blocks to define street edges and creating opportunities for secondary and tertiary paths — vehicular and pedestrian. Unfortunately, in a flat relentless continuum of low density, amorphous voids and never-ending setbacks, a good open space — humanly scaled, inviting and environmentally comforting — is hard to find. Instead, the most valued open space in the city continues to be the ravine, a place of privacy and seclusion. Our romantic roots insinuated into the city fabric. Compare this with the energy of a local town square on market day, where people dress up and go to see and be seen .

Photo: Marcelo Graca



Toronto, June 1982

On my first ascent to the top of the CN Tower, I was a freshly arrived landed immigrant from Buenos Aires, my birthplace and, at that time, a megalopolis with ten million inhabitants. I strolled around the viewing platform perimeter searching for something worth looking at. Looking north, east and west, all I could see was an immense carpet of tree crowns, except for a few lumps of mid-sized unremarkable buildings along some ruts in the grid of streets. The first question that crept into my mind was "how many people actually live in this city?"

We crave what we do not have. Unfortunately, in our cities open space is what we have in excess. But there is a correlation between the quality of open space and the dense volumes that encircle it. Densely built-up cities, because of the contrast between compression and decompression, will have more meaningful open spaces, even if the buildings defining this space are mediocre. In modern North American



Photo: Marcelo Graca

On Forty-five minute lunches
Toronto, February 1989

I watch a prime time CTV newscast where a reporter butts a fluffy microphone in a middle aged woman's face standing in front of the almost-finished Toronto domed baseball stadium and giddily asks her opinion of the new building. She replies wisely: "It's wonderful." The next morning, in the Saturday Globe even Adele Freedman praises its aesthetics. I scratch my head. To me it resembles a sewage treatment plant.

Far left: Camden Locks, London, June 2005.

Above left: Rue De Vaugirard, La Sorbonne, Paris, June 2005.

Above right: Plaza de las Carmelitas, Toledo, September 2003.

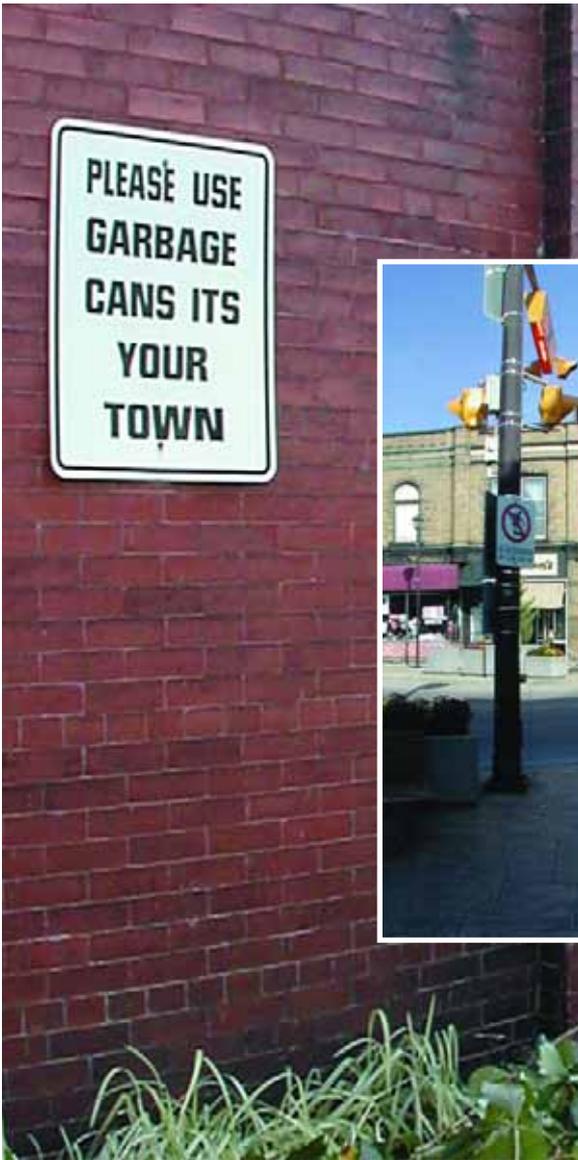


Photo: Aleksandar Janicijevic

Extended grid pattern development on wide open and affordable land allows and even encourages a concentration of land in large lots, warping planning principles. In larger, newer buildings, scale is dependent on the amount of surrounding open space. The space vibrating (or not) around these impervious shells is not as important to the public's perception as is the addition of a building to the landscape. To many of us buildings represent the positive; accomplishment, something out of nothing, tangibility. Space is what's left over: inactivity and emptiness. Naturally, in our busy society, purposeful, labour-intensive buildings seem more beautiful than left-over lay-about spaces.

The great European urban spaces are clearly defined by the masses surrounding them, even though the buildings are not necessarily memorable on their own. Whether it is a surprise element, an ancient tree canopy, or the texture or fenestration of the walls enclosing the space, the most memorable spaces are almost always short on histrionics

and long on understatement.

There is another persuasive argument to make for the proper design of open space in Canada, and that is the potential to temper the environment. Well sited and sensitively configured open space can provide respite from harsh weather (summer and winter) and make pedestrian use of the city possible, even pleasurable, promoting



Photo: Aleksandar Janicijevic

commerce and communal life. Depending on how commodified this created space becomes (see Toronto's Distillery District for an example of a brave attempt), its success will depend on how intimately connected to tradition and locale the solution is. The success of the former Gooderham-Worts site is proof that, given a reasonably sized site, talented designers and an imaginative developer, who relies on the site's strengths and gathers compatible uses, in Toronto and in other cities, beauty in public spaces can prevail.

Open space can take many forms, from small interstitial gap to massive big-box retail parking lot. In all cases, with a little wisdom and care, an attractive space can be created, or even — years later — resurrected.

Appropriately designed open space, needn't be expensive to build and can perform many positive functions. It can advertise the project's sensitivity to the community at large. It can generate corporate good will, as well as helping to maximize potential returns to adjacent commercial establishments. Most importantly, it can adapt to provide new uses as the community evolves and it can set the tone for future growth and intensification of adjacent properties. Who knows? The space could even entice summer lunch crowds to stay past 1:00 PM on weekdays....

Marcelo Graca is a principal of OCA Architects in Toronto.

A grand space in Grand Street, in the city with a grand name, Paris, Ontario

By Aleksandar Janicijevic

Someone in this tiny town of 9,500 inhabitants had the grand idea to create this open, social space by stealing exactly eight parking spots from Grand Street, the main shopping area. He or she selected a spot at the intersection of the main street and a pedestrian pathway, connecting a larger parking space in front of row of buildings. A couple of benches, some potted bushes and flowers, and there it is — almost a public square. Even on this summer, Sunday afternoon there are few people using it. Many of the square's amenities are missing, and the space is not clearly defined, but obviously it was needed.

Hardly noticeable at first glance, there exist signs indicating that the square is used by the "wrong" people. Two very shy, little stencil designs and a few traces of urban art are immediately targeted by a reprimanding tone: "Please use garbage cans, its [sic] your town!" On the other side one more, very serious, street sign with official colours and design states: "No skateboarding".

Is there any way we can guess the next move? Does this look like a chess match? Can we interpret this chain of urban messages that the square itself is sending as a signal that there are needs in Paris that are not being met?

Conciliatory Public Space

By Kim Storey OAA, MRAIC

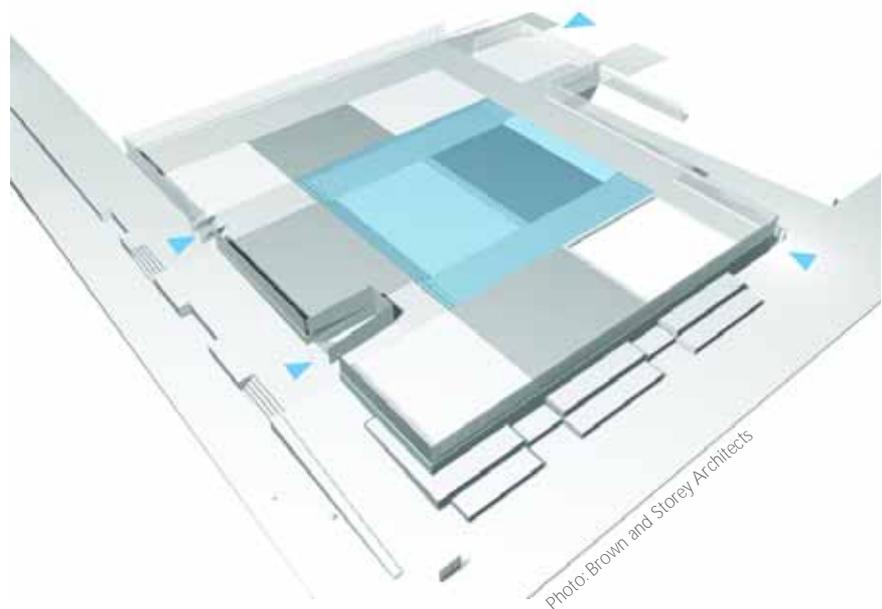
By acknowledging the complex agenda of downtown neighbourhoods, — retail, homes, schools, churches — a public space can be designed that enhances the neighbourhood and adapts with it over time.

The *piazza* prototype has been designed to work with typical "main street" frontages, using the usual parking agenda as a funding generator to improve the public realm of the street. It was developed for a modestly sized green remnant space along a busy main street in Toronto — part of a public school property but not used by students because of its proximity to the street and overuse by the local dog population and drug users. This space was fiercely guarded as "open space" but was surrounded by a chain link fence and abandoned. Parts of the space had been given over to a surface parking lot for the school, recognizing the perceived chronic parking shortage for both the school and the main street retail.

The role of the prototype was to acknowledge the importance of this space to the overall community: as an outdoor classroom for the students, for an event space for the local BIA's (Business Improvement Associations made up of main street merchants), and a garden for receptions for the adjacent church. In short, the *piazza* is a transformation of derelict space into public space.

The *piazza* creates a new surface by half-submerging a parking lot into the site. By conceiving of the site as a half-in-ground parking structure, and utilizing its upper roof as a *piazza*, the ground plane is twice utilized. For main street sites, more parking is generally on the top of everyone's agenda. The prototype uses this desire for parking as a real generator for funding a second generation of modestly sized but ambitiously programmed public spaces.

Ironically, a sign of a busy and successful main street is its congestion: a constant building face, lots of people on the street, cars cruising for parking, — a street where parking is not readily available. Providing more parking on a main street generally means that under-appreciated or financially unviable buildings are making way for empty



Far left: A call for civilized behaviour, if not correct punctuation, in Paris, Ontario.

Centre: Generations mesh and interact.

Above: The Piazza, showing a diagram of surfaces, edges and access infrastructure. The raised upper surfaces of the patchwork permit thicker planting areas.

parking lots, or for suburban style arrangements with drive-throughs and parking in front — a scourge not frequently found in downtown Toronto, but having a disastrous influence on main streets in smaller communities. All these effects cause the deterioration of the street and the loss of the very congestion that had signalled a robust main street culture.

For the prototype, safety and visibility are of foremost concern: instead of a complete underground parking solution, this slightly raised parking area means that it is not hidden, but highly visible and easily accessible, in particular to safeguard the community and school children and other users. Raising up the *piazza* requires



Photo: Brown and Storey Architects

unique treatment along its edges, places to enter the parking garage below, views, waiting areas and safe walls that demand special consideration.

The upper surface of the *piazzetta* along its north edge includes a trellis and shaded seating area for outdoor use, creating a delineated and functional edge at the back. This would draw users deep into the space, as well as providing protection against the sun and inclement weather. Other surface features could include special water displays, lighting, seating and surfaces that facilitate events and community uses. The connection to the larger area of the schoolyard, which crosses over the vehicle access ramp to the parking, is made by a generous "land-bridge" that underlines the continuity of the ground plane.

The object of the prototype, the actual public space, has been arranged as a patchwork infrastructure to suggest a framework of planting, steps, ramps, hard and soft surfaces that can be programmed to suit the many demands that are made of public spaces. The balance between garden, pavement, shelter, and security becomes a topic of negotiation for the community within an infrastructure that allows for changing priorities over

time. While it is the hope of all designers that the popular use of their public space projects will promote security because of overlook and intensity, this prototype also experiments with the notion of a nominal fence around the site to allow for closing the space at night to avoid the abuses the space currently experiences. Again, the community's programming of the space may suggest over



Photo: Brown and Storey Architects

time that the fence can be removed — almost like training wheels — when the public-ness and security of the *piazzetta* has become well established. As the community changes, the *piazzetta* adapts to these changes, providing a public space that is always an amenity for its users — a place of activity and a focus for neighbourhood interaction.

Kim Storey is a partner in the office of Brown and Storey Architects in Toronto, a multi-disciplinary office practicing architecture and urban design.

The design team comprised James Brown, Stephen King, Margaret Goodfellow, Kim Storey.



Barbarians at the Gate

By Ivan Martinovic OAA, MRAIC, AIA/IA

Ed. Note: This essay has been adapted from a prepared "rant" delivered at the TSA Annual General Meeting in December, 2005. An abbreviated version appears in the TSA newsletter, Winter 2006.

Leaside is an upscale community in east-central Toronto. It is quiet, posh, and very popular with young families. The renovation business is booming and existing bungalows, ready for major renovation and magnification, are overpriced. In a word, an idyllic neighbourhood to move into.

But, Leaside is under attack. The attackers come from the east, from across Laird Avenue. The hordes of barbarians have been gathering for a couple of years now, in the form of big box retail stores. They started slowly and innocently with Canadian Tire and Future Shop at the corner of Laird and Eglinton. And then they multiplied: Home Depot, Best Buy, Linens 'n' Things, LCBO and Urban Barn gathered to form a new plaza at Laird and Wicksteed. The defining space of the whole development is a huge parking lot in the middle. The transformation is not over yet: the panel on one side of the parking lot shows an artist's impression of the final product, when all the pieces of the mosaic finally fall into place. Photographs here hardly do justice to the space itself. To really experience it, you have to go there; any cold, windy February afternoon will do.

What is wrong with this place? (Note to reader: if you think nothing is wrong with this place, skip to the end of the article and save yourself time). First: scale. The relationship between the open space and the buildings is lost because of the extreme horizontality of the parking lot compared to the heights of the surrounding buildings. The area does not read like an urban space because it was never meant to be one. Second: massing. Although from close up the individual building boxes look quite imposing, they are actually lost in the vastness of the whole block. They are relegated to the fringe, adorning the perimeter of the defining element of the block, neither part of the central open space nor participants in the life of the streets behind, to which they turn their backs and loading areas. Third: materials, urban language, absence of any

pedestrian-related features, single-mindedness of purpose, and uniformity, in spite of the apparent collage of shapes and colours. Fakeness (is this the word?) permeates the whole place. And if you're still not sure, the final question: is this a place the tourists will talk about when they return home? Even if the intent was to create a huge outlet mall in the middle of the city, this does not seem like a success. Heading south of the border and visiting any mall on the side of the freeway shows that boxes with the same size, appearance and context can be arranged in a much more pleasing way.

And dare we even mention a mid-rise (horrors!), mixed-use (god forbid!) development, with reduced parking requirements, that would create transition from and complement the low-rise residential area that exists across Laird Avenue? No, this is it: the best and brightest that we could collectively, as citizens, as politicians and professionals, architects and urban planners, and as owners and developers, come up with. And it is going to stay with us for the next 40 years.

Whose vision, or lack of vision, is responsible for the existence of this kind of urban space, not even five kilometres away from Yonge and Bloor? How can we expect to be a world-class city, something that we so easily proclaim we are, when we have a space, bordering one of the most sought-after residential areas of the city, so unimaginatively developed? Is this where the "shopping experience" — which retailers tell us is supposed to replace mere "buying" — is going to happen? I would bet that even the residents of Leaside, living just across the street, do not dare to venture here on foot. You have to drive in, and you have to drive out. You probably even drive from store to store.

Let's bring up the list of usual suspects.

Residents. We easily blame any area residents for their, almost, built-in resistance to any development, especially when intensification of the area is proposed. But, in this case, there was no other visionary proposal, no Florence-like space of plazas and fountains that was

Far left: A view across Piazzetta looking east.

Centre: A plan view of the Piazzetta showing St. Clair Avenue at the bottom of the image, vehicular access at the top right corner and landscape bridge connecting to the existing school on the left.

Below: Urban Space in Leaside, December, 2005.



Photo: Ivan Martinovic

shot down in order to make this development happen. No, this was what they got, without even asking for it.

Politicians. Well, if residents were not paying attention, then politicians were surely not stirred to make their word heard. All too often, the political action regarding an urban development is just a reaction. The civic leadership and vision of how the city should be shaping up is replaced by reaction to the real or perceived need of the constituency.

City Planners. Do you have enough parking spaces? Are you below allowed eleven metres in height? Good. Next?

Architects. They tried their best, but couldn't do better than this? I don't believe for a moment that this is a reflection of the capabilities of any particular architect or practice that was involved in this development. We have very idealistic notions of our own importance in the overall scheme of things; in reality, most of the time, we just do whatever we are told to do — architects, creating objects of eternal beauty and saving the world at the same time? Not likely. Surely, we can make a difference, but only when the conditions are right and not all the cards are stacked against us. In the case of Laird Plaza (and I use this term in the most generous way possible), architects did not stand a chance.

Developers. Well, there are some good ones, and there are some not so good. And the worst kind are the ones with a hit-and-run philosophy — anonymous, gone tomorrow, with no pride of ownership and no incentive to associate their name with anything that may have long-lasting value. If that was the case here, I don't know, but it sure seems like it. Do you know anyone proudly pronouncing; "This development here, this is my labour of love"?

As a sidebar, I went to Disney World last summer with my family, for the first time in my life. I approached the whole trip with apprehension, thinking that this could be the lowest kind of visual experience that any self-respecting architect could have. Surprisingly, I kind of liked it. Sure, the Cinderella castle was a fake, of stone done from painted concrete, and cheap stucco was everywhere, and the plastic was imitating wood, and wood was imitating metal, and, apparently, Mickey is not even a real person. But there was scale, and proportions, and clear intention to create something worth experiencing. You had a feeling that spaces were created with heart, with conviction, with clear intention to achieve something more than just a sum of parts. It is still a souvenir-driven place, but it surely has some redeeming qualities. In contrast, Laird plaza is just stucco without soul. Mickey could never live here.

If we couldn't envision a better and more urban-friendly space here, how can we hope for a better result next time around? If you're hoping for a Tony Robbins moment now, where a perfect solution is revealed to you in a few simple words, I'm sorry, I'll have to disappoint you. The only solution I can think of is a painfully slow process that might only make things

better for the next generation, or the generation after that. It is a process of education — education on design, on architecture, on qualities of urban spaces, and on values of cities and of city living; education of kids and young people, not to convince them to become architects and designers when they grow up, but in order to have more lawyers, more doctors, more firefighters, and more bank clerks with a real understanding and appreciation of the spaces that surround them. In spite of our professed love of nature and open spaces, most of us have chosen to live in cities, as cities were, are and will be, the generators of strength and progress in any society.

Now, put this magazine down, and start this process right now: go find your kid and show him or her a beautiful photograph of a fountain in a city square (Fontana Trevi in Rome will do). If you don't have a kid, go and make one. Good luck.

Ivan Martinovic is principal of Archdesign Architects, Toronto.

Post Script

Ivan's essay provoked more than the usual amount of email discussion among members of the editorial committee.

"We have met the enemy, and it is us."

—Pogo poster caption (Walt Kelly, Earth Day, 1971)
later, part of a book title by Kelly, 1972

From: Gordon Grice
Sent: January 16, 2006

Ian;

As you know, my office is just a few hundred metres north of the big box plaza in question. I think the biggest sadness is that the parking lot is so incredibly convenient and well laid out, I invariably drive there. I also drive between stores because it's a whole lot easier, just as Ivan has speculated.

We really have two questions to answer: (1) Many non-architects will find this plaza attractive and convenient. Why would architects have a problem with it? (2) This plaza could have been a much worse place. At least it has colonnades and nice colours. Given the usual pressures from clients and irrefutable studies of shopping habits, could a better response have been made?

From: Ian Ellingham
Sent: Mon, 16 Jan 2006

Gordon:

I know the place well. I shop there often. But I am usually distressed now when visiting it. Before the current phase

(just the LCBO and Best Buy existed) I thought there might be some promise. Now, I tend to be perplexed more than anything,

Perplexities:

- Inevitably, how do the rank and file of Leaside consumers react to it?
- Or, the worst question, do they even notice? Does the design solution have any impact on consumption? After all, I go there because of the good parking — is this what we have come to?
- This I find frustrating — I now live near a small shopping centre in which I was involved some years ago — what else could have been done there? With lots of hindsight, I have no real idea. We seem somehow trapped, not by architects, politicians, developers, and planners, but by our own culture in which we are all immersed (Ivan acknowledges this). So I wonder if the title is right. It implies that the barbarians are outside. Perhaps: Barbarians Inside the Gates? OR We Have Met the Barbarians, and They Are Us?

From: Ian Ellingham
Sent: Wed, 18 Jan 2006

Gordon;
Thinking about the pre-WW1 period, when buildings were done in various historical styles, it was not unusual to relate the style of the building to its use. Many of the arguments for one style or another have seemed somewhat foolish in the later 20th century (classical for courthouses and museums, Romanesque for municipal buildings, and, inevitably, bogus castles for prisons), but maybe there was something in it.

But of all of the issues associated with the space between the buildings, the most significant is the tyranny of the car. The nice spaces between buildings in Europe and the more urban spaces in North America are a result of not having to accommodate cars. I know all about the planning meetings which create places like the Leaside shopping area. There is somehow a popular terror that at some unimaginable peak point, someone may have to park a car on a street. The architects at Leaside have my sympathy. How frustrating to have such a great site, with such potential, and have to submit to the tyranny of the automobile.

From: Gordon Grice
Sent: Wed, 18 Jan 2006

Ian;
A final reflection. There was a tall observation tower on the site when an industrial building existed there. It took, I think, over a year to demolish the plant to make way for the new plaza and all the while, the



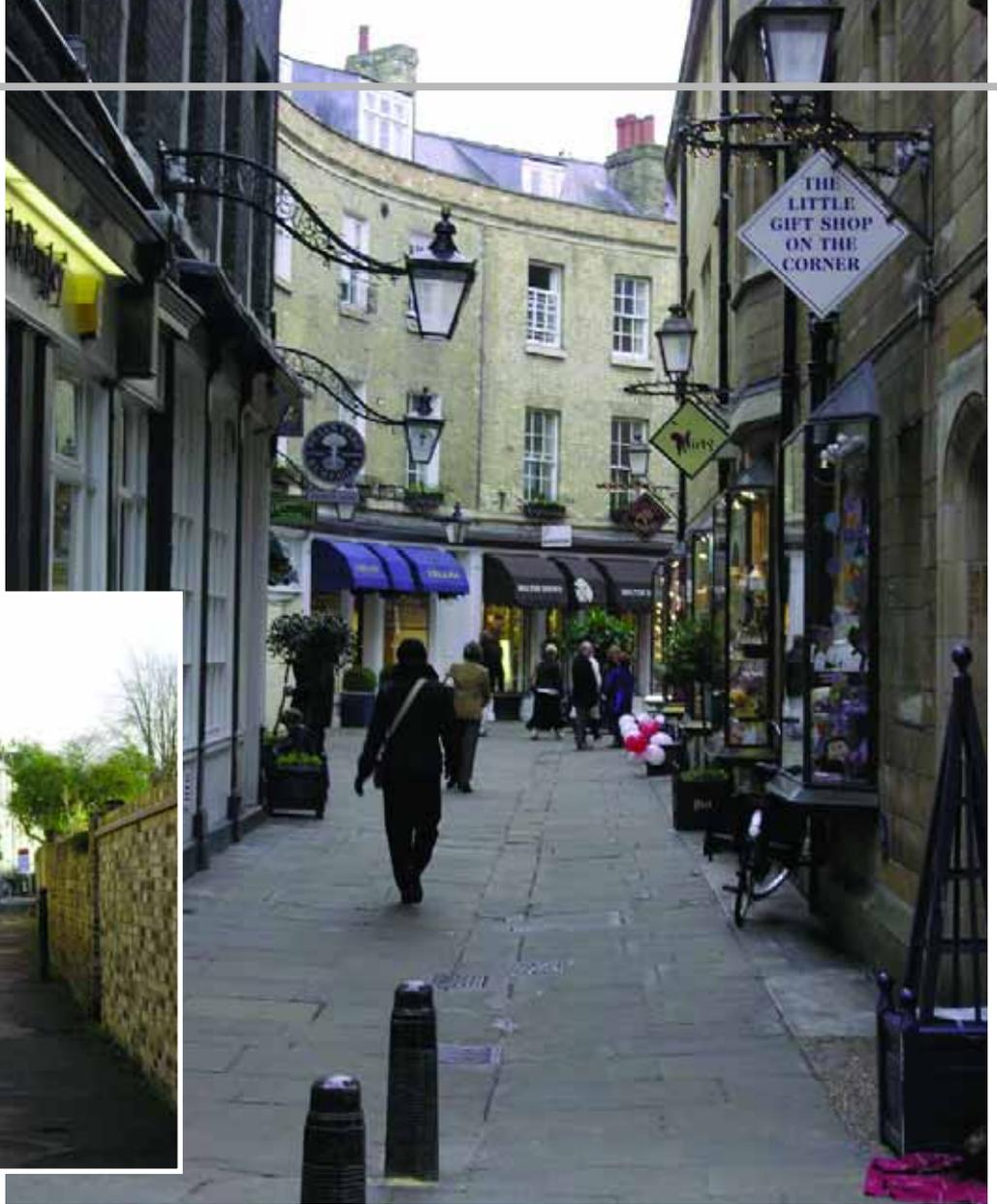
Photo: Marcelo Graca

Above: Portobello Road, London, 2005.

tower stood guard amid the rubble. I honestly believed that the tower would be spared — it didn't use up much space and it was an honest, utilitarian, good-looking tower. One morning I came to the office and the tower was gone. Of course it had to go. It would have been in the middle of the parking lot and people would have crashed into it. I like the convenience of the plaza, but I miss that tower.

From: Ian Ellingham
Sent: Mon, 23 Jan 2006

Gordon;
I think you can reasonably say that (i) the Leaside project does make one wonder about the destiny of Ontario's spaces between buildings, (ii) even with the most conscientious efforts of architects, if the space between is not right, the project as a whole does not come together as a satisfactory part of the environment, (iii) architects will attempt to deal with the problem (as at Leaside), but the framework for such development has to be changed, and that is something for society to do, acting through the political process, and in the way they consume.



Rambling Spaces

Is it always so difficult for a Canadian to wander through spaces such as these? What is it about these spaces that continues to feed my imagination and offer a curious feeling of warmth? It doesn't seem to matter whether it's a Mediterranean village in summer sunlight or a gloomy mediaeval village in a north European January drizzle.

By Ian Ellingham OAA, MRAIC

No matter how many times I have followed some of these routes, there is always a sense of wonder and surprise as the vistas unfold along curving streets, with courtyards opening up, only to be followed by constriction into intimate passages. Magnificent buildings mingle with the quite ordinary, in a fascinating medley. Even in the busiest cities, quiet intimate enclaves are only a few steps off the major thoroughfares. Are these places truly inspirational, or merely the detritus of another time and another place, a diversion and an antique curiosity for a strolling twenty-first century visitor?

How did these leftover spaces come to exist? What happened to create the happy chaos of these spaces between the buildings?

Here is, simply, complexity at work. Offices, housing and even the odd bit of manufacturing intermingle, comfortably located above, below and behind street-front shops. A variety of street setbacks, building heights and uses — presumably responding to ever-changing economic and geographic imperatives — creates infinite possibilities for the creation of small spaces, changing through the centuries.

Our modern need to control everything doesn't produce random, rambling fascinating spaces. Instead of collecting uses, buildings and traffic patterns over time, our modern spaces are



ready-made. Planning bylaws, economic constraints, safety concerns, agoraphobia, and fear of the unknown have all conspired to rob us of the opportunity to experience small, haphazard spaces. Maybe our values have changed. So, private affluence accompanied by public squalor*, or at least boring uniformity, has become acceptable or, even worse, somehow desirable.

Certainly, despair accompanies delight while one strolls alone through these well-worn streets. Why do newer spaces and routes so often fail to satisfy us? The twenty-first century offers a wealth of knowledge and resources upon which to draw. We should know what has worked and what has not. We even have computers now. We are smarter, it seems, but not wiser.

Why don't we all go rambling in a small European town and think about it for a while?

* Paraphrased from J.K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Houghton Mifflin, 1958),

Ian Ellingham is an architectural consultant living in St. Catharines and Chairman of the Perspectives Editorial Committee.

Far left: In The East of England, scale and texture make small spaces pedestrian-friendly, even in winter.

Above: In sunny Southern France, chairs and umbrellas provide evidence of human activity even when spaces are uninhabited. Cars (compact and few in number) are not incompatible.

Immediate left: Market Day (Southern France again) provides a periodic intense use of space between buildings.

Photos by Ian Ellingham.



Photo: Dan Brunton and Michele Rodrick

The “Bogwalk” into the Alfred Bog

By Frank Pope BSA, MSA

On rare occasions it is possible to see how a simple architectural intervention serves to both protect an environment and make it more accessible to the public. In turn, public access leads to improved understanding of the character and value of the place. What may have been interpreted as a wild wasteland can now be seen as a garden, deserving of our attention and care.

The Alfred Bog is located between the villages of Alfred and Fournier in the United Counties of Prescott and Russell, Eastern Ontario. It is the remnant of a boreal bog formed 8,000 years ago in an abandoned channel of the Ottawa River. At 10,000 acres, it is the largest peat bog in southern Ontario, yet just one-third the size it was when the first surveyor arrived in 1806. The bog is a Provincially Significant Wetland and is now protected as a nature reserve.

Bogs owe their unique features to sphagnum moss. This plant wicks up water. As it grows upward, the bottom of the plant dies. Over the millennia, the centre of Alfred Bog, where conditions are best for sphagnum moss, has risen higher than the edge, resulting in a dome in which water drains to the edge and the only nutrients come from the air. In places the peat reaches 7 metres in depth. This acid, oxygen starved, nutrient-poor, water-saturated habitat creates conditions in which a unique suite of plants and animals has evolved. Accordingly, the size of the bog is critical for the preservation of the genetic viability of the species marooned here. This is what the naturalists were trying to protect.

The “bogwalk” was part of a campaign launched by two nature clubs to raise funds to purchase the bog. They faced a dilemma: the natural value of the bog was little understood, locally or beyond. They had to find some way of introducing people to the challenge of preserving the bog without letting them enter it.

Entering the bog is undesirable for two reasons: 1) it damages the bog, and; 2) it is dangerous. Not only could an unguided person get lost because of the extent of the bog and lack of site markers but the exertion required to walk in

sphagnum moss quickly brings on exhaustion. Furthermore, access points were hard to find, most of the land privately owned and property boundaries indistinct. The answer was to install a boardwalk. A grant was successfully applied for and with the help of the conservation authority and the local municipality, it was built. This turned out to be a very good investment.

Constructed in August 1994, the bogwalk is about 1,000 feet in length and provides access from the road allowance of a concession road blocked by the bog. The first section is 5 ft. wide for two-way traffic and it leads into a 3 ft. wide one-way loop. The first section was constructed of planks made from recycled plastic and wood fibre, the rest of cedar. Benches are placed at strategic locations. It is a floating boardwalk, resting on 3 by 8 inch planks. There is parking for 4 cars on the road allowance. The boardwalk is not up to the standard of the parks service for handicapped access but it was the best that could be afforded at the time. Over time it has been observed that although the plastic/wood fibre planks were more expensive, they are weathering better than the cedar.

One walks through a shrub screen to see the flat open heath of Alfred Bog receding into the distance. From the bogwalk one can see a variety of plants that are unique to bogs. Popular with children are the insect eaters; Pitcher Plant, and Sundew. Orchids such as Dragon’s-mouth, Grass Pink and Moccasin Flower attract orchid fans. Labrador Tea, Bog Rosemary, Small Cranberry and Blueberries are favourites of bog lovers. The heath turns pink when Sheep Laurel comes into bloom. In November the heath turns golden with Tamarack. Seldom have I dropped by and not seen a visitor strolling along the boardwalk, absorbing the bog experience.

Frank Pope is Chair, Alfred Bog Committee, Past President, Ottawa Field Naturalists and a frequent letter-to-the-Perspectives-editor writer.”

The Alfred Bog is open to visitors.

Above: boardwalk in the fall.