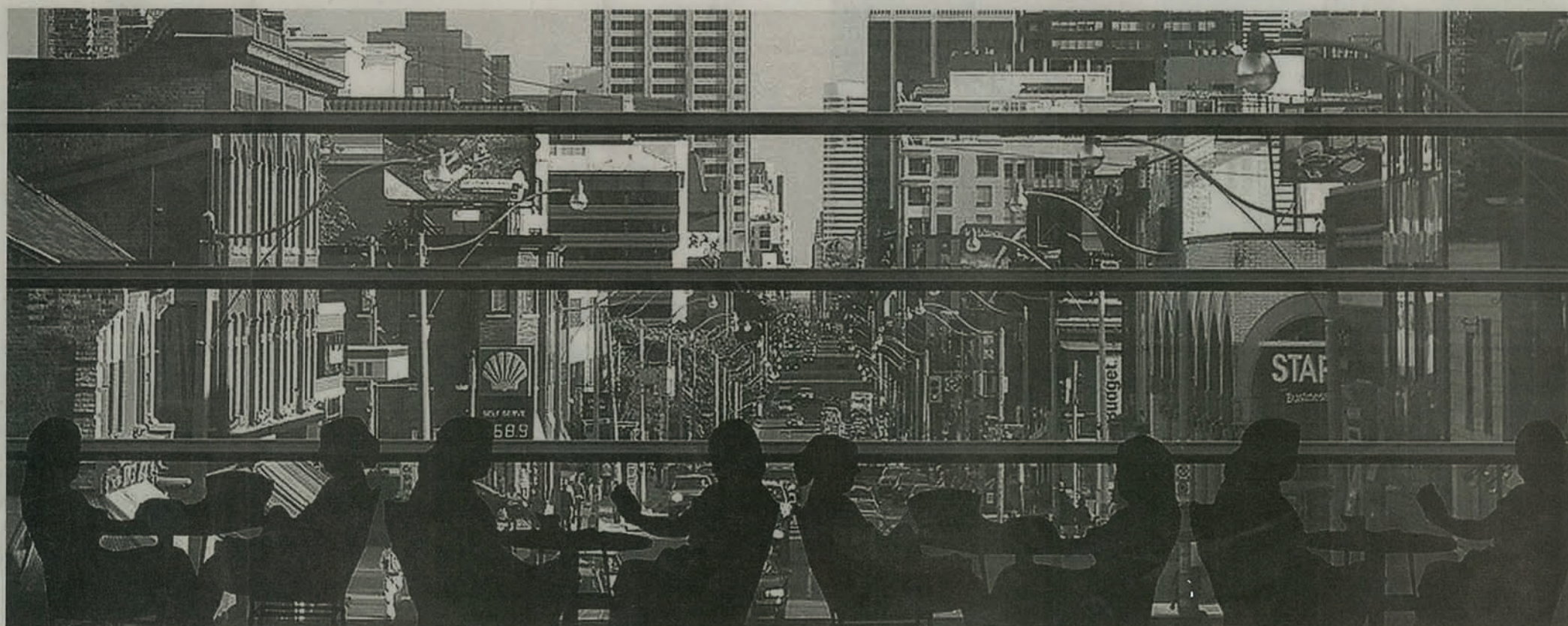


ARCHITECTURE » LAUGHING MATTERS

Urban confections that go heavy on the light



Off the beaten track: Michael Taylor of Taylor_Smyth Architects is proposing to build a restaurant (envisioned above) in Toronto that would stretch over the top of Yonge Street. TAYLOR_SMYTH ARCHITECTS

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A city built on convention and mediocrity can make us mourn. Or condemn us to feel nothing at all. So it comes as a shock to the system when we happen upon architecture that makes us smile. Or laugh out loud.

A restaurant proposed to sit on abandoned rail tracks; urban agriculture inserted into low-cost housing; a dumpster converted into a swanky hotel room – these are urban interventions that are wry and self-deprecating.

They jolt us from our normal slumber to a fully wakeful state. Surprise! We need more of these to sustain our belief in the intensified city.

Why do we smile? “The universals of humour are surprise and appreciation, backed by our understanding of intention,” says John Kennedy, a professor of the psychology of perception at the University of Toronto. “For appreciation to kick in, we have to be surprised, features have to oppose what we think of as normal, and there has to be lightness and self-awareness.”

Lightness comes in the form of a restaurant proposed for the Summerhill rail overpass in central Toronto. Michael Taylor of Taylor_Smyth Architects has designed the restaurant to be a minimal slice of glass with fantastic views to the south.

A RESTO ON THE RAILS

Paul Oberman, president of Woodcliffe Corp., dreamed up the idea. He's the developer responsible for the restoration of the adjoining North Toronto Station (1916) into a grand LCBO liquor store. Once upon a time, Oberman was building shopping malls in places such as St. Catharines and Barrie, Ont. That was then.

As owner of many significant heritage properties in Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal, he's become a passionate defender of historic architecture. Oberman is the force behind Toronto's King James Place (1991), an exemplary piece of restored architecture merged with contemporary infill by Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg Architects (KPMB).

More recently, he worked with heritage architect Phil Goldsmith to accomplish the pristine restoration of the North Toronto Station, the city's main station before Union took over. Now, he's hoping that city planners might appreciate his latest ideas for lightness and surprise. The idea is for a 100-seat restaurant to span the Canadian Pacific Railway overpass, occupying the abandoned tracks on the south without interfering with the regular travel of freight trains on the north tracks.

This is not your average redevelopment scheme. Measured against stick-'em-up condominiums or retail, this is a complicated and frankly unbelievable scheme. There have been meetings with CP to address the need for a crash wall, so that visitors to the proposed restaurant would be saved in the unlikely event of a train crash on the overpass. A thick concrete wall would be cantilevered off a structural truss and slid horizontally between the floor of the restaurant and the bridge. “Doing something like this doesn't have a lot of precedent,” says Taylor. “There's really no zoning for this at all.”

A chic restaurant juxtaposed against a gritty, noisy piece of infrastructure. Sound incongruous? Absolutely. And that's one of the key elements re-

quired for humour, says Victor Kennedy, a professor of English literature at the University of Maribor, Slovenia, who has written on humour for publications such as *Vanity Fair*. “Incongruity is the source of wit, and is perhaps best exemplified in puns and other situations in which there is a double meaning,” he writes to me by e-mail.

In the intensified metropolis, there is surely room not only for incongruity but interesting instances of superiority.

BLUE-SKING GREEN GARDENS

What if people living on meagre incomes could have easy access to freshly grown produce? That's the vision now being promoted by a couple of significant builders of low-income housing in the City of Toronto. Levitt Goodman Architects are currently designing an 82-unit housing complex in Toronto's west end for St. Clare's Multifamily Housing, an organization dedicated to building affordable housing. Principal Janna Levitt is currently trying to raise about \$300,000 to ensure that the structural upgrade, drainage systems and planting materials will be part of the complex. Their designs are importantly informed by a landscape firm, Gardens In The Sky, which specializes in ways to grow food on rooftops.

Meanwhile, Teeple Architects Inc. is currently designing an \$18-million housing complex for 60 Richmond Street East with generous gardens for tenants to grow tomatoes or cucumbers – or whatever they'd like – on the building's roofs and terraces. The Toronto Community Housing Corporation, led by Derek Ballantyne, is asking its

architects to find ways of layering an extra depth of usefulness into their housing complexes. All roofs on the project are green surfaces. The building's insulation is increased and the heat-island effect is limited. Storm water is better absorbed. A cistern is also provided so that any overflow can be used to water the extensive gardens.

There's vision at work here. The tenant group at 60 Richmond consists primarily of people who work in the hospitality industry – there were enough members from the Hospitality Workers Union being moved out of Regent Park, currently undergoing a massive redevelopment, to form a housing co-operative. A restaurant on the ground floor of the complex will allow the tenants to hone their skills as aspiring chefs and sous-chefs. Some of the food for the restaurant will come from the building's rooftop.

Approximately 43 square metres will be dedicated to food gardens, with another 24 defined by planters. A maintenance-free green roof on the 12th floor occupies some 650 square metres. A grow wall will descend vertically into the building's atrium. “The idea was to connect the making of the food with the growing of the food,” says principal and lead designer Stephen Teeple, “and to see how a really urban building can also be green.”

To be stewards of the planet, to be part of the hip slow-food movement, and, by the way, to be all of these things without a lot of money – these are the conditions required for a positive superiority. There's a wonderful lightness to this idea. It makes me smile.

DUMPSTER DELUXE

One of my favourite conditions for humour in the city has to do with catharsis. Quite often, as Victor Kennedy so wisely advises, “Catharsis is just the old Aristotelian release of tension, and explains why sometimes people burst out in what seems like hysterical laughter after stressful situations like taking an exam, surviving an accident, or attending a department meeting.” Or surviving the crappy stuff that defines, for the most part, the North American city.

Catharsis helps to explain my laughter, and it was occasionally hysterical, when I happened upon the Dumpster Diver's Paradise, an installation and performance by the artist Swintak, and one of the true highlights of the otherwise ho-hum *Nuit Blanche*. In a back alley east of Spadina Avenue, Swintak presented to the public a dumpster lined with rosewood and furnished with a night table (and writing paper) as well as a queen-size bed equipped with a big white duvet and luxurious linens.

The idea of gentrifying a dumpster is so steeped in the history of the city – and cities around the world – that it sounded a beautiful, minor note. Being served sparkling wine in saucers – Swintak had exhausted her supply of wine glasses – was funny. Witnessing a pastry being thrown over the wall of the dumpster as part of the room service was extra funny.

Humour in architecture is a risky business. But when we happen upon interventions of incongruity, superiority and catharsis, there's nothing to do but relax the gag reflex and smile.