

Reconnecting with our streets



MARK WESSEL
GREEN
LIVING

Any day now, the City of Toronto will announce the winners of its Design Build competition, an important next step in the King Street Pilot project that will involve creating public space along the 2.5 km stretch of road between Bathurst and Jarvis Streets.

As most city residents are aware, the one-year pilot project was launched in November to divert vehicular traffic from King Street, to reduce congestion and improve the reliability of public transit. And as part of this, about 180 parking spaces have been removed for the duration of the project.

So, what then to do with this freed up parking space? In terms of possibilities, the city has thrown out such temporary installation examples as space set aside for go karts, hopscotch, yoga and even zip lines for the contest's Public Space Installations category.

The city is also looking for

project ideas tied to accessible seating areas and green spaces for the Destination Parklets category of the competition.

According to Barbara Gray, general manager of the Transportation Services Division, they have received over 80 submissions so far, from contestants ranging from university students to planning and architectural firms.

"We're going to be announcing two really exciting parklets as well as a number of pop up and public realm installations," comments Gray. "The weather has been a bit nutty, but we are hoping to begin rolling some of these projects out by the end of April and early May."

We should celebrate this effort to animate King Street, even if the installations end up only being temporary, because it represents an important shift in mindset on the part of the city.

A departure from the view that streets are nothing more than a place to get from A to B, to the belief that major arteries such as King Street should also be deemed a place for

residents and visitors alike to meet and interact.

The latter is a world-class view of how we should perceive our streets that a growing number of visionary cities have embraced. In some instances, projects such as Les Berges along the Seine in Paris, involve taking cars off the road altogether.

With others, such as the Mariahilfer Strasse in Vienna, which is the city's longest and most lively shopping street, the cars are prohibited from the centre section, with limited vehicle use on both ends for deliveries and drop offs, not unlike the approach the King pilot has taken.

One of the most memorable temporary street projects I've seen, was a pop-up playground/obstacle course on the street directly in front of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The installation consisted of thousands of brightly coloured temporary overlay markers (normally used as short-term road dividers), affixed to the street in a unique series of patterns that compelled passersby to explore. You could tell it was

a hit, especially with kids who were keen to walk or run the course.

Whether it's a maze of road markers or something as simple as a picnic table in a parkette, the common thread of these pop-up initiatives, is they can provide citizens with an opportunity to stop and enjoy their surroundings, not unlike what they would be inclined to do when visiting a park. Only in a street setting.

And through this approach, residents are encouraged to interact and begin to view our streets not just as a stretch of asphalt or concrete designed to facilitate traffic, but also, as a place to connect with one another.

What's interesting to note about the King Street Pilot project since it was launched in November, is that based on monthly stats produced by the city, street car reliability and ridership has improved considerably, without negatively affecting business revenue.

Or for that matter, the transit times of cars on adjacent streets. And moving forward, the injection of parkettes and



This imaginative pop-up playground in Montreal in front of the Museum of Fine Art is nothing more than thousands of multi-coloured rubber bands.

places to play and stay represents a unique opportunity to attract more people to King Street and improve quality of living along this busy corridor.

And that's world class thinking that doesn't have to cost a lot of money to bring about.

— Mark Wessel lives in Collingwood, Ont. and is a passionate advocate for living more sustainably at home and in the greater community. Visit his blog at www.sustainablebuildercommunity.com.

Students spark better thinking for Toronto's waterfront

Transformational plan from Cornell wins 2018 ULI Hines Student Competition

DIANNE DANIEL

Special to Postmedia Network

A team of graduate students from Cornell University has demonstrated creativity can go hand in hand with responsible development when envisioning a vibrant future for Toronto's waterfront.

Their winning scheme, Montage, took home top honours and a \$50,000 prize in the Urban Land Institute's 2018 Hines Student Competition, a prestigious event that challenges North American students to re-think large-scale urban areas.

This year's canvas was a parcel of land on Toronto's East Bayfront near the mouth of the Don River, representing the first time a city outside of the U.S. was selected to host the event.

The Cornell team was one of four finalists invited to Toronto to present before a 12-member jury. Though there's no intent to implement the winning proposal, it does present "powerful ideas," said first-time juror Paul Bedford, chairman, Waterfront Toronto Design Review Panel.

"The reality is it's a student



A parcel of land on Toronto's East Bayfront near the Don River was the subject of a recent urban design contest aimed at re-thinking large urban areas. It's hoped the contest will create a totally new spark of interest among land owners and developers.

is an environmentally sustainable cultural hub that mixes cinema, creative industries and a lush park system. Underneath is an engineered flood mitigation and water recycling system.

What stood out about the Cornell submission is that it offered the "most comprehensive financial pro forma analysis," added Bedford. "The whole idea of decking over

At the heart of the design

the Don Valley Parkway for that site would be paid for and absorbed by the economics of the development. There's no public cost there," he said.

Richard Joy, executive director, ULI Toronto, said all four finalists in the competition challenged current city vision by looking at broader opportunities for development, beyond protecting employment lands. According to Joy, the Cor-

Canada. Joining Cornell in the final presentation were two teams from Georgia Institute of Technology and one from the University of Maryland, each awarded \$10,000.

Being selected as a host city is a sign that Toronto is standing out as an "example of how you can do things better," said Joy. "Toronto has made an amazing representation of what ULI is all about - to advance responsible use of land as we consume ever more of it," he said. "In order to inspire good city building, you need to foster competing visions. You're never going to do a straight line to excellence ... it's always a collision of ideas from which you harvest over time."

Winning team members from Cornell are: Gary Esposito, Master of Architecture; Paul Heydweiller, Master of Real Estate; Jamie Mitchell, Master of Architecture; Rawinthira Narksusook, Master of Real Estate; and, Peter Romano, Joint Master of Regional Planning and Real Estate. For more information on the competition and the four finalist designs, visit www.urbanland.uli.org.