



# Grounds 05

Landscape  
Architect  
Quarterly

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**Features**  
**Trees: Myths,  
Debates, and  
Some Truths**

22/  
**Round Table**  
**Keeping Urban  
Forests Growing**

**Spring 2009**

  
Ontario  
Association of  
Landscape  
Architects



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01 URBAN RENEWAL  
towers in a park

The reigning orthodoxy identifies Toronto’s extensive ravine system as the feature that makes the city unique. Graeme Stewart of E.R.A. Architects Inc. posits a radical, myth-busting alternative. According to Stewart, what makes Toronto distinctive is that it is a city of towers. With more than 1,000 high-rise concrete residential buildings (approximately 25 percent of the city’s housing stock), the Toronto area contains North America’s second-highest concentration of high-rise buildings, many of them built in the 1960s and 1970s. A further unique feature is that, unlike most other cities, these modern towers are dotted in high-density pockets throughout the city and its suburbs, not just downtown: “Toronto may be the only city where the juxtaposition of bungalows and concrete towers is the typical landscape,” says Stewart.

Due to zoning and density bylaws, these towers are often surrounded by large areas of open space, “a huge resource,” says Stewart. However, just as many of the buildings are neglected and falling into disrepair, so too is the open space often underutilized and uninviting, largely relegated to surface parking and in many cases surrounded by chain-link fence.

Touring a quintessential tower landscape in Toronto near Kipling and Steeles on a bleak November day with Stewart, these lost opportunities are brought into sharp focus. We’re in an area that’s home to 13,000 people (a population density comparable to the third largest city in Manitoba), yet we see no one. We’re standing on what was once some of the best farmland in the province, yet nothing

other than grass is actually growing. We’re overlooking the Humber River, with one of the best panoramic views the city has to offer, yet to access the nature trails we have to clamber over a breach in the fence. The original design intent of this particular housing model—“towers in a park,” says Stewart—is clear, yet something has just as clearly gone wrong.

Stewart is on a mission to rejuvenate the city’s tower neighbourhoods and, for him, the landscape is crucial. “Landscape-based changes could have a huge impact,” he enthuses, listing everything from simple fixes (“removing some fences”) to more committed research studies (“solar analyses of sites to see where community gardens could go”). “So much of this is about engaging open space,” he says.

Stewart has championed renewal schemes that include building over-cladding (currently under development at the University of Toronto by Professor Ted Kesik), so that buildings would become far more energy efficient, saving money and reducing their ecological footprint. His focus doesn’t end with architectural renovation, however. He believes it is possible to create sustainable and vibrant neighbourhoods using ideas like infill housing, district energy, new community facilities, transit, pedestrian, and cycling connections, and urban agriculture. Integrated into the emerging regional transit, growth, and climate change plans, and fueled by the remarkable cultural diversity within these neighbourhoods, Stewart sees the rejuvenated tower communities as a type of neighbourhood that will be uniquely Torontonian. The challenge for local designers is to create new, vibrant, and dynamic “complete communities” that respect the historical characteristics of the concrete towers in the park and respond to local needs. These communities can connect residents to the landscape while remaining affordable and diverse.

0A/ Some European cities, such as Rotterdam, are rejuvenating their tower neighbourhoods.  
IMAGE/ OB/ Graeme Stewart  
A typical tower landscape in Toronto, Weston Road  
IMAGE/ Jesse Colin Jackson

# Up Front: Information on the Ground



In recent months, the goal of rejuvenating Toronto's tower neighbourhoods has gained a lot of traction. Following an international tour of tower refurbishment sites, Stewart was enlisted by the city to publish an "Opportunity Book," and the city has branded the project "Mayor's Tower Renewal." In September, City Council voted to re-examine its policies surrounding apartment neighbourhoods in an effort to help them become more ecologically, socially, culturally, and economically sustainable. An office—Tower Renewal Office—has been established to coordinate the initiative and is to report back to Council in March 2009. The province's Climate Change Secretariat is on board.

Landscape architects are currently providing input into some of the open space resource systems associated with Toronto's concrete towers. Brendan Stewart, an MLA student at the University of California, Berkeley, is developing landscape strategies for tower renewal in his thesis. "Engaging landscape architects in this project is fundamental," says Graeme Stewart, "and they need to be involved from the beginning. There is tremendous opportunity for innovation."

For more information on the tower renewal project, visit [www.towerrenewal.ca](http://www.towerrenewal.ca) and [www.towerrenewal.com](http://www.towerrenewal.com).

TEXT BY LORRAINE JOHNSON AND NETAMI STUART, BOTH OF WHOM ARE MEMBERS OF THE GROUND EDITORIAL BOARD.

02

SOIL  
valuing the rhizosphere

"As far as I'm concerned, if we're going to talk about trees," says Michael Ormston-Holloway, "the first thing we need to talk about is soil." Trees are of passionate interest to Ormston-Holloway, a recent graduate of the University of Toronto Master's of Landscape Architecture program now working at Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates in New York.

Prior to studying landscape architecture, he obtained a B.Sc. in Plant Biology and a professional M.Sc. in Forest Ecology: "I thought that I was studying forests, but much to my surprise, my M.Sc. in Forest Ecology was virtually a degree in soil science." Now, he's taking that same message about the importance of soils to his work at a landscape architecture firm: "As landscape architects, we need to direct our attention below ground."

Ormston-Holloway believes that, for too long, landscape architecture has focussed on the two-dimensional linear surface of the earth—"this is the dimension we activate in our work," he says. "And we also leap into the fourth dimension of time, with our phasing strategies, for example." What's often missing, he believes, is the third dimension—the rhizosphere. "This is the medium of growth," he stresses, "and yet soil is probably the most under-appreciated natural resource in the developed world."

While he's keenly interested in "getting people to look down, to ask themselves, 'what am I walking on,'" Ormston-Holloway is also looking up, to the trees. For his work with Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates on the Lower Don Lands in Toronto ("yes," he says, "it's a little strange that I've moved to New York to work on a project in Toronto"), he's involved with the urban forestry issues on the site, particularly as they relate to biodiversity. "We probably all agree that we don't need



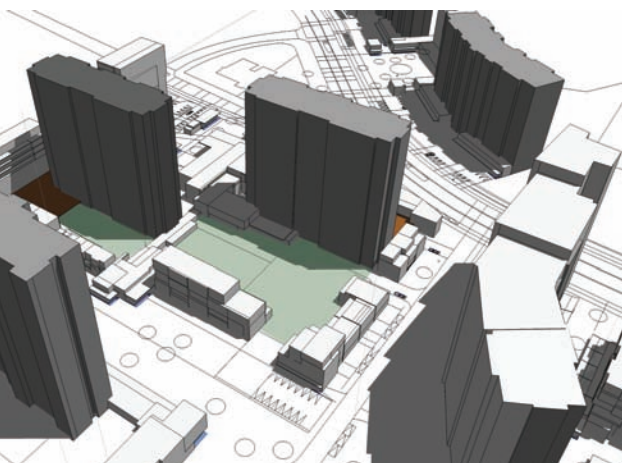
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any more honey locusts in Toronto," he says with a laugh. "There's a much wider palette we could be using."

Ormston-Holloway suggests that there is a simple question landscape architects should ask themselves, and it's a question that might seem somewhat odd coming from someone steeped in forestry: "We can put a tree in the ground, but why are we putting it there?" He suggests that once people start considering the "why" question and making choices based on a wider range of goals—say, choosing a species not just for the aesthetics, but also for wildlife, for example—the benefits will magnify: "The idea of biomagnification of benefits is just a fancy way of expressing the basic idea of ecology," he notes. "Everything is connected."

TEXT BY LORRAINE JOHNSON, EDITOR OF GROUND AND A BOARD MEMBER OF LEAF (LOCAL ENHANCEMENT AND APPRECIATION OF FORESTS).

- OC/ Currently underutilized green spaces surrounding Toronto's residential towers represent a huge opportunity.
- IMAGE/ E.R.A. Architects Inc.
- OD/ Michael Ormston-Holloway's thesis poster, "Urban Ecologies as Landscape Infrastructure"
- IMAGE/ Michael Ormston-Holloway



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