

Seeking design on the edge

Five teams compete for chance to put Toronto on the map as a waterfront city

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To those jaded by years of faux pas and failure on Toronto's central waterfront, now comes reason to hope.

Today, five top international teams will be asked to come up with bold ideas on how to bring the public to the water's edge -- and put Toronto on the map as a waterfront city.

It's a tall order. Despite pockets of waterfront success -- notably the music garden at Queen's Quay, west of Spadina -- the 3.5-kilometre stretch from Bathurst to Parliament Streets is a homage to years of ad hoc planning, dismal architecture and disjointed traffic flows that block public access to the water.

But those involved in this latest exercise -- a design competition to be unveiled by the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corp. -- say there are grounds for optimism.

"We are trying to make a statement -- that the waterfront belongs to the people of Toronto," said Robert Fung, chairman of the TWRC, the agency responsible for waterfront renewal. "But we also want this to have global appeal so that people all over the world say 'wow, look at what they've done in Toronto.'"

From an entry list of 38 competitors, five have been selected for the short-list. Each team brings its own mix of urban and landscape architects, environmental experts and artists to unlock Toronto's waterfront.

The winner will be selected by a blue-ribbon jury, led by Toronto architect Brigitte Shim, along with filmmaker Atom Egoyan, Montreal landscape architect Claude Cormier, Toronto architect Ken Greenberg, New York (and Canadian) architect Lise Anne Coutoure and Toronto designer Bruce Mau.

The teams will be asked to solve a variety of problems that, together, limit public access to the waterfront. For example, how to:

create a continuous public promenade from Bathurst Street to Parliament Street, much of which is publicly owned but feels private.

complete the Martin Goodman Trail so it is accessible for pedestrians and cyclists through the central waterfront area.

revive Queen's Quay, the grim-looking main waterfront street.

develop a uniform identity, through signage and other fixtures.

devise sustainable approaches to water quality and habitat improvements.

This month, the five international teams will arrive for a firsthand look at the area and have until May to present their solutions to the jury. Also in May, the TWRC will invite the public for input, during a 10-day event to showcase the competing bids. The winner will be selected in June. Funding is in the 2006 budget, with construction set for September and completion by next June.

The short-list

Foster and Partners, U.K., and Atelier Dreiseitl, Germany.

Stan Allen Architects; Sarah Whiting and Ron Witte Architects.

Tod Williams, Billie Tsien Architects, U.S., and Martinez Lapena-Torres Architects, Spain.

West 8, Holland and du Toit

Allsopp Hillier, Toronto.

Snøhetta, Norway ; Sasaki

Associates, nArchitects; Weisz + Yoes Architecture, H3, Balmori Associates, Halcrow Yolles HPA, all New York.

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