

Mission impossible on the waterfront

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They came, they saw, now they must conquer.

A gaggle of five international design teams arrived in town yesterday to look at Toronto's waterfront and figure out how to deal with its many problems.

They are the finalists in an international competition organized by the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corp. The expectation is that the winning group will be able to devise ways of knitting the water's edge into a single coherent feature that runs from Parliament to Bathurst Sts. and beyond.

It's a tall order, perhaps too tall and verging on vagueness.

That didn't dampen the enthusiasm of the visiting designers. As members of the various teams made clear, however, the single greatest question they face is how to bring a sense of connection to the waterfront. As it exists, this vast swath of land is not only cut off from the city; it encompasses a dizzying array of uses ranging from residential to industrial to leisure.

"Nothing adds up," said Claire Weisz, a New York-based architect who hails from Edmonton. "There's a big disconnection problem, but we also need to make places and spaces that are memorable and unique to this environment.... There's a huge potential here, but mostly it needs some element that doesn't exist anywhere else in the world."

According to architect Stan Allen of Princeton, N.J., "The key is to calibrate the long-term vision with more immediate projects. We want to intensify the emotional and psychic connection people have with the waterfront, preserve its diversity and avoid sanitizing it."

Surveying the area from a tour boat, Rotterdam landscape architect Adriaan Geuze shook his head in bewilderment.

"The easiest thing would be to just take down the barriers such as the Gardiner Expressway, but that's not part of the brief. Toronto's waterfront is extremely disconnected; people need to be able to identify with it. You need people living down here. You need to build communities."

What struck Londoner Owen Jones, of Foster & Partners, the U.K.'s most successful architectural firm, was Toronto's devotion to the car.

"The whole area is dominated by the vehicle," he noted. "It doesn't have a human scale, but what it's about is people and how they interact. The water's edge has fantastic potential, but it's seriously underused. And so many of your new buildings turn their back on the city."

New York architect William Vincent said overcoming the barriers will be a huge task.

"There are pockets of interest, but they need to be linked together," he said. "There's a lot of infrastructure that has to be overcome - the Gardiner, the railway embankment and even the proposed light-rail line. Not only do we have to strengthen the east- west connections ... but also the north-south connections back to the city. "

But as Paul Bedford, tour leader and former chief planner of Toronto, pointed out, waterfront development has been piecemeal, each conceived in isolation without regard to the larger context.

He also lamented the city's history of giving priority to private waterfront development over the public realm. He pointed to the parking lot at the foot of Yonge St., which, he rightly noted, has enormous symbolic value. Though the land was

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originally publicly owned, the city sold to a developer, then approved a highrise condo project for the property. Though nothing has appeared yet, the owners can do what they want.

"If it goes to highrise condos," Bedford told the visitors, "I think public faith in waterfront revitalization would be eroded."

That's assuming such faith existed in the first place.

The teams will make their final presentations on May 11, and after that, a winner chosen.

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