

# Project keeps nature close to city's heart

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While City Hall turns in ever-smaller circles, the city itself manages to move ahead regardless.

The latest example of how leadership has migrated away from council chambers to other sectors, mainly cultural and non-profit, is the emergence of the \$55 million Evergreen project at the old Don Valley Brick Works.

After years of grinding away, the Evergreen Foundation has revealed its plans for the redevelopment of the 16-hectare site. Headed by architect Joe Lobko of DTAH, the ambitious scheme will transform a former industrial property into a sustainable multi-use complex dedicated to the idea of nature in the city.

With 16 buildings and a load of history, the Brick Works has the same kind of potential as the Gooderham and Worts Distillery, now establishing itself as a cultural/entertainment/residential centre. Already there's a market on site and various educational programs, but basically, in proper Toronto fashion, the Brick Works has sat empty and deteriorating for a quarter of a century.

Owned by the Toronto Region Conservation Authority and managed by the city, the place never really had a chance until Evergreen came along.

Its intention is to create a destination whose many attractions are all based on nature.

Evergreen founder Geoff Cape calls it "Canada's first full-fledged large-scale environmental discovery centre."

The idea is to retain as much as possible of the existing architecture and intervene minimally into the site. When it's complete, visitors will be able to shop, view natural flora nurseries, skate, walk on nature trails and explore the valley's much-studied geological features. "We want to make it a laboratory for sustainability," Lobko explains. "We've realized that we're creating a village in the middle of the city. The intention is to bring a light touch and a loose fit."

To its credit, Lobko's team didn't set out to answer all the questions, or solve all the problems; instead it understands that its efforts are "part of a continuum," and that other generations will come up with new ways of rehabilitating the site.

When construction starts next fall, much will be left unresolved. The first task is to create the critical mass of awareness and use that will give the Brick Works a position in the public consciousness.

The irony of the place – if that's the right word – is that although it occupies space in the very heart of the city, it sits in splendid isolation, close at hand but hard to reach, and certainly psychologically disconnected from the urban hubbub.

This has been a blessing as well as a curse. Already the property has had to be expropriated from one developer who had a better idea. Mostly, though, it meant being ignored. For Lobko, this will necessitate a lot of remedial work, but on the other hand, here's a collection of industrial structures the likes of which won't be seen again.

Especially interesting is the vast brick box known simply as Building 16; it's about 0.4 hectare in size, which makes it big enough to accommodate a huge diversity of uses. At the same time, filled with bizarre brick-making equipment, it can also serve as a museum of industrial history.

Also interesting is the fact that although Building 16 has been officially closed since the 1980s, it has been the location of many a clandestine party, or what used to be called raves.

The walls are covered in graffiti and everywhere you look, illicit revellers have done damage. The result is an eerie mix of abandonment and counterculture squatting.

The current round of work will be completed late in 2010. And that will be just the beginning.