

Toronto as it might have been

A display at the Royal Ontario Museum looks at some bold city-building ideas — old and new — that missed the boat

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Since the 1873 publication of Henry Scadding's *Toronto of Old*, Hogtown has enjoyed the attention of numerous civic historians, amateurs all, fighting the good and unending fight to keep urban memories alive.

The tradition begun by Dr. Scadding has continued down to the present day in the historical writings of John Sewell and Robert Fulford, journalist John Lorinc and the writers around *Spacing* magazine, and in Rick Bebout's excellent Internet survey of Queen Street.

In September, Toronto lawyer Mark Osbaldeston joined this circle by showing some images from his new book, *Unbuilt Toronto: A History of the City that Might Have Been* (Dundurn Press), at the International Interior Design Exposition.

Given the fugitive nature of trade fairs, the display was very brief. But a more durable show of the engaging things Mr. Osbaldeston has discovered opened last week at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), and will remain on view until Jan. 4. Everyone interested in Toronto as it is — and Toronto as it isn't — should catch this concise exhibition.

The Don competition was won by a remarkably beautiful re-naturalization plan by U.S. designer Michael Van Valkenburgh (whose name is misspelled on a wall-placket). But the runner-up proposal, presented here — a team effort by the firms Weiss/Manfredi and du Toit Allsopp Hillier — is hardly less lovely. It too incorporates all that we want in this meeting of waters: a return of Don outflow to the marshy conditions of ancient times, and the area's reconstitution as a patch of wilderness parkland at the heart of the city.

While both the winner and loser in the Don competition embodied much the same high measure of thoughtfulness, the same can't be said for the different visions offered for the scrap of former industrial land known as the Queen West Triangle.

A development scheme for this small strip along Queen Street West, which has gotten the go-ahead from city officials, is architecturally inferior and overscaled for its historically low-rise residential and commercial neighbourhood.

In reaction, the vivid citizens' group Active 18 — incorrectly referred to in the past tense on a wall placket in this show, as though this lively movement had died out — commissioned an alternative plan, displayed here, from Toronto architects Janna Levitt and Dean Goodman.

The work of Ms. Levitt and Mr. Goodman has everything the developers' scheme grievously lacks: proper attention to civic space, proper scaling of buildings, mindful attention to the interesting and various streetscape of this stretch of Queen West. It is a shame that the Levitt-Goodman approach to resurrecting the Triangle will not be followed.

One caveat: While informative and engaging, the show is poorly installed. The large placards have been hung in two long parallel rows that run around the small exhibition area, with the lower row so low the visitor has to stoop to read it. This evocative display of the architecture Toronto didn't get deserves more room to breathe — not the cramped room in which we find it.



Toronto city councillor Herbert Orliffe and councillor (later mayor) William Dennison (second and third from left) talk to reporters at the official unveiling of plans for the Eaton Centre, March, 1966. (ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM)