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A gallery exhibit looks beyond the construction cranes

Dave LeBlanc

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Visitors tour the Born Again: The Repurposed City exhibit at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre. (Dave LeBlanc/For The Globe and Mail)

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Construction fencing, heavy machinery and dusty pylons litter the forecourt of Harbourfront Centre as it undergoes a transformation that will be complete in 2013. In every other direction are cranes, cranes and more cranes, as new office and condominium towers pop up, mushroom-like, in this city's never-ending makeover of itself.

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Yet, inside Harbourfront's architecture gallery, a very different message of adaptive reuse and neighbourhood transformation quietly asserts itself at *Born Again: The Repurposed City*, despite the apparent irony.

"Irony might be one way to describe it; I would describe it maybe a little differently," offers architect Joe Lobko. "What we see is that there's a lot of new construction going on, especially in residential towers. ... Nevertheless, when you put that in total terms – total housing, total population, total growth – across the country we add maybe 1 to 2 per cent to our building stock on an annual basis. Where the real challenge is, perhaps, is not in new building but in renewing our existing communities.

"Many areas of the city are not seeing investment; so [in] Jane-Finch, people aren't lining up to buy property to put condos up."

To that point, Mr. Lobko and his team at DTAH have created a striking installation within the exhibit called *Buildings, Streets, Neighbourhoods*, that offers up bite-sized chunks of wisdom within dozens of small plastic frames grouped under the categories "A Community Renewed," "A Street Reborn" and "Buildings Reclaimed."

"You can skim it in 30 seconds, you could take five minutes," explains Mr. Lobko. "It's kind of weaving a story together that's deeper or less deep as you might want to get into it, and it may or may not raise more questions."

Interestingly, the community, Black Creek/Jane-Finch, is not viewed through the typical high-crime lens, but rather as an area lacking in the basic necessities other neighbourhoods take for granted, such as good transit, walkability, community facilities and access to fresh food. In fact, a small map proves the area can be considered a "food desert," with far more fast food outlets than greengrocers; another panel, from Toronto Public Health, suggests that higher rates of illness and premature death are the result. "As we start to think about the city that way," says Mr. Lobko, "as a city that has parts of it that are less healthy than others ... those places really need renewal." Other panels attempt to provide solutions via urban agriculture, which not only grows food, of course, but community pride.

The reborn street is Queens Quay West – just outside the gallery's window – a DTAH and West8 design about to start construction, and the reclaimed buildings are the former TTC streetcar repair barns that now make up the highly successful, multipurpose Wychwood Barns community. Wychwood, says Mr. Lobko, is an "unconventional" example of the pride of ownership that can happen when public land is given over to not-for-profit groups to run: "Government, as a general rule, is only going to be able to go so far – it can put the hand out, it can set the conditions right – but often the local community can really take things further and make something special go on." Could that happen in Jane-Finch?

Screening DTAH's info-panels from the exhibit's other installations are suspended lengths of pipe removed during excavation work underway at the Pan Am Village. What's surprising here is the incredible age range, from barnacle-encrusted decrepitude to shiny turquoise plastic. "It's kind of that iceberg phenomenon," finishes Mr. Lobko. "You see something at the surface, but below, boy, there's usually a lot going on."

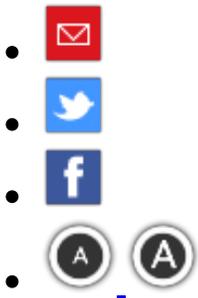
Equally as visually arresting are the wooden shipping pallets used to create *Lost & Found* by Unit A Architecture: sawn and reassembled into two opposing "skylines," a closer examination reveals daubs of coloured paint and bits of metal edging. Just beyond the pallet skylines, floating in the air like an enormous orange storm cloud is artist Gareth Lichty's *Tangle*, made from strands and strands of hand-cut, zig-zaggy construction fencing. Both of these installations seek to recontextualize common, throwaway material to illustrate that abandoned/obsolete buildings can be reborn if given new uses, and these new uses don't necessarily have to

wipe out traces of the old.

To give further shape to this concept, Kongats Architects has inserted an open-ended room into the gallery. Called *Regenerate*, the all-white walls, ceiling and floor offer tangible proof to gallery-goers that layers of history are created in any space. Visitors are invited inside (there is a white Eames shell chair to sit on) and asked to “record his or her experience” via the dirty soles of their shoes, greasy fingers or what-have-you. Each week, the room will be rotated 90 degrees to allow a different surface to suffer the same fate; during the last week of the exhibition, the cube will be unfolded and mounted on the gallery wall.

Since older layers of the city can sometimes be obscured by the new sport of crane-spotting, with this exhibit curator Patrick Macaulay has revealed a hard truth: While it may not be as sexy, the coming decades will see a much greater emphasis on the “repurposed city” rather than the one in which the developers would have us live.

Born Again: The Repurposed City runs until Sept. 16, 2012 at Harbourfront Centre’s Architecture Gallery, 235 Queens Quay West. Admission is free.



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