

ATELIER ANONYMOUS: ARIEL VERNON, ALYSSA SCHWANN, JAN HAENRAETS

# AN INTIMATE ENGAGEMENT WITH NATURE



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ON NOVEMBER 16, 2012, ground was broken on the Queens Quay Boulevard in Toronto, marking the initiation of a long-awaited revitalization of a 3.5-kilometre stretch of Toronto's Central Waterfront. The Boulevard will bring the city an important step closer to realizing the award-winning vision for the Central Waterfront generated in 2006 by the Dutch landscape design consultancy, West 8, in joint venture with Toronto's DTAH.

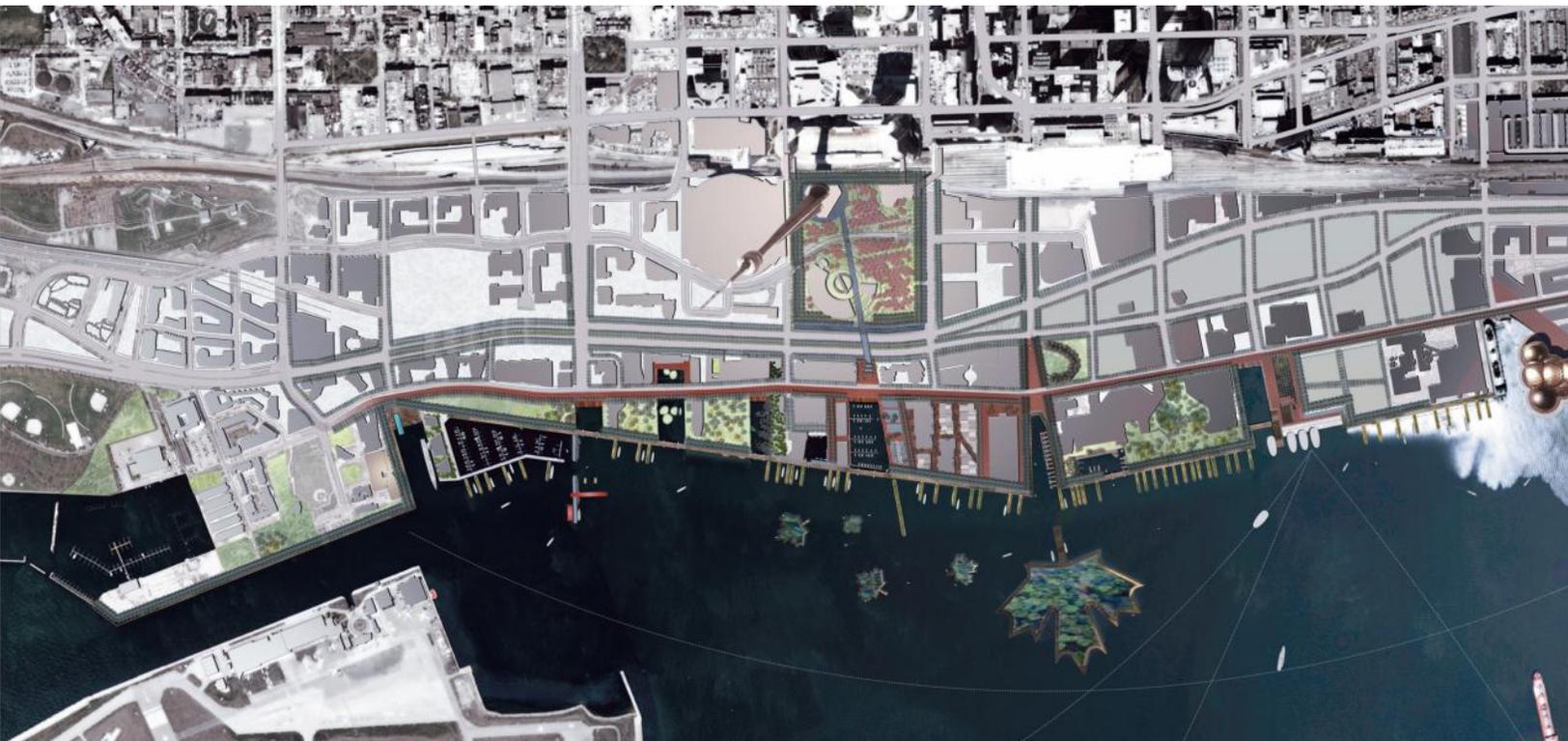
The wavedecks have created a distinct waterfront identity for the Central Waterfront, and were a central component of the visionary masterplan. Yet the real reach of the original design proposal extends much further than these iconic elements in its examination of how nature can be represented and integrated in our cities.

## THE BIG PICTURE

Over the past 25 years, the waterfront has become one of the central fields for large-scale urban renewal and city branding. Indeed, the stated objective of Waterfront Toronto's 2006 design competition was to produce "a bold and compelling image that expresses Toronto's unique character and has the same kind of instant recognizability of other waterfront cities like Barcelona and Sydney." West 8 and DTAH's design met this challenge through two key strategies.

The first was to create a continuous water's-edge public promenade for the length of the central waterfront, principally constituted by an 18-metre-wide granite walkway and cantilevered wooden boardwalk, a series of floating wooden docks, and arching pedestrian bridges.

The second was transforming Queens Quay into a generous city boulevard where the "city kisses the lake." The wavedecks – a series of dramatically undulating timber structures built on three of the quay's slips – articulate this point of contact or "kiss" between the city and the water.



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### A SINGULAR GESTURE

The wavedecks are the most visible portion of the built components of the masterplan to date. Reflecting the sinuous shoreline contours of the Canadian lakefront, the wavedecks suggest a new typology of urban dock, identifiable as sculpture as much as a gathering place. The distinctive wavedecks have become instantly recognizable features, yet some have interpreted them as symbols of redevelopment, rather than as elements within a fully robust and functional waterfront redesign; their scale is simply too small. However, they were never intended to stand on their own. The Queens Quay boulevard and the slip heads are meant to act together as a singular gesture with surprising variations that articulate the city's first contact with the water's edge. Until now, the wavedecks have been like bodies without arms: beautiful in and of themselves, but unable to reach out and provide an essential continuity between them.

### A NEW THRESHOLD TO THE LAKE

Three years after the building of the wavedecks, the next phase is underway. The new boulevard will exhibit a powerful design language that will have the strength and simplicity to overcome the existing visual noise along Queens Quay and provide a coherent connection to the lakeshore.

Today, Queens Quay is a traffic-heavy liminal roadway sitting between Toronto's central business district to the north and one of the city's most heavily used pedestrian areas, the Central Waterfront, to the south. It is also an important east-west transportation corridor

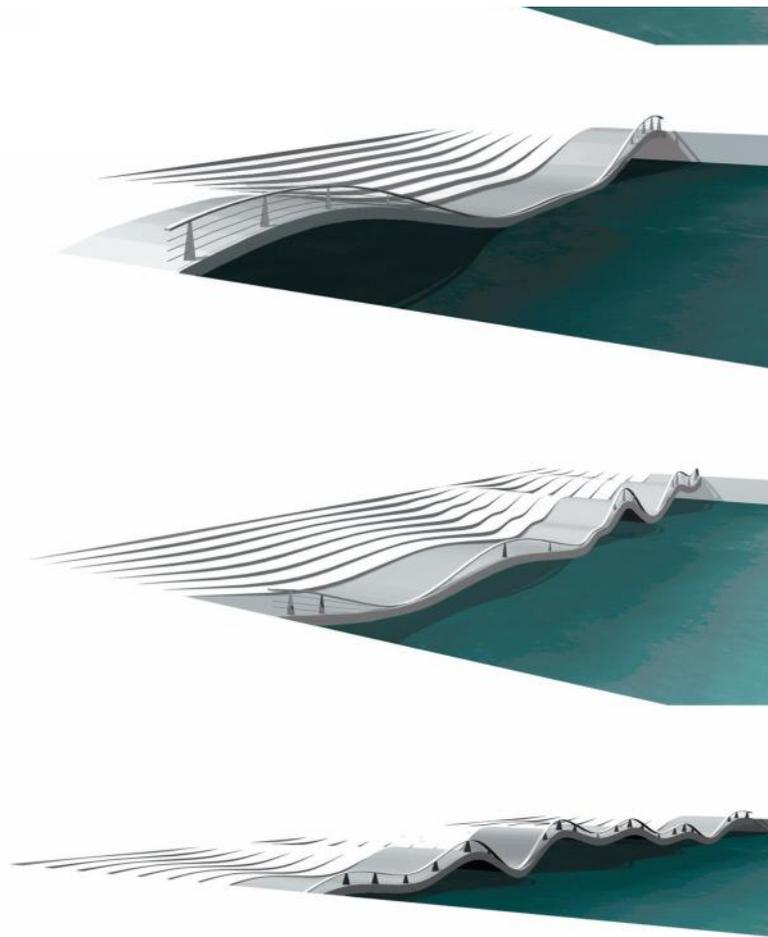
... this euphoric feeling of connection... hearing water lapping the rocks, or soothing hollow footsteps on the wooden boardwalk...seeing the sunlight glint on the water or the seasons change through the shifting hues of thickly planted and skillfully choreographed native trees.

between the city's burgeoning waterfront communities. It is the spine of current and future waterfront development, and yet for pedestrians and cyclists who are forced to inhabit the narrow and disjointed spaces that have been leftover once cars and streetcars are accommodated, the Quay is an inhospitable barrier to the lake. The re-imagined boulevard will include a new streetcar corridor and traffic lanes with improved turning lanes and signal timing, but the design will put people first. It will enable pedestrians and cyclists to move comfortably along the waterfront, and a vibrant native tree canopy and bold pavement patterning will create a welcoming threshold to the lakeshore.

1 TORONTO CENTRAL WATERFRONT AERIAL PLAN 2 QUEENS QUAY AT HARBOURFRONT CENTRE: LOWER SIMCOE | 1 VUE AÉRIENNE DU FRONT D'EAU DU CENTRE DE TORONTO 2 LE QUAI QUEEN À HARBOURFRONT CENTRE : RUE LOWER SIMCOE  
PHOTOS 1 WEST 8 + DTAH 2 COURTESY WATERFRONT TORONTO | 1 WEST 8 + DTAH 2 COURTOISIE DU PORT DE TORONTO



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### CITY + NATURE

Both the wavedecks and new streetscape work to create an architecturally coherent public realm imbued with a distinct waterfront identity. There is a third objective, however, that informed the entire design process and which has yet to be fully realized: reconnecting Toronto with its greatest natural asset, Lake Ontario.

West 8 and DTAH recognized that the divide imposed between the city and its lakeshore by the heavy infrastructure of Queens Quay and the Gardiner Expressway is as much a cognitive schism as a physical one. Their design foresaw an engagement with nature that would reconnect Torontonians emotionally to Lake Ontario.

### LONGING FOR WILDERNESS

It could be suggested that the design team were striving to capture the same slightly mystical feeling that one gets from observing many early Canadian 20th century Group of Seven landscape paintings: even though you know you are experiencing a nature that is mediated through art – the heavy impasto and bright colors of the paintings draw your attention to the surface patterning – you inherently feel that they are incredibly robust representations of the Algonquin wilderness.

The paintings invoke fantasies of being in an Ontarian landscape unaltered by human development. Perhaps because of their mediated nature, they are even closer to the imaginative ideal of the northern Canadian wilderness that we all share – those idyllic landscapes of untrammled woodscapes, serene open spaces, vivid colors and endlessly emotive and diverse waterside vistas.

## Queens Quay [will become] a generous city boulevard where the “city kisses the lake”...

Hoping to satisfy this inherent longing for wilderness felt keenly by so many city dwellers, and to capture the poetic monumentality of the Canadian landscape, the idea was to offer a compelling experience that would induce visitors to momentarily escape the city and feel a kind of euphoria offered by an interaction with nature.

The designers understood that this euphoric feeling of connection is only created through an intimate engagement with nature: by hearing water lapping the docks, or soothing hollow footsteps on the wooden boardwalk...by seeing the sunlight glint on the water or the seasons change through the shifting hues of thickly planted and skillfully choreographed native trees.

The most important aspects of the design proposal – the simple and regional material and plant palettes, the spaciousness of the boardwalk, the diversity of spatial qualities that allow for shade and protection within the tree canopy and the openness and exposure along the lake edge – all serve to generate these ephemeral qualities. These more subtle design moves contrast with the spectacular and surreal curves of the wavedecks, providing the context within which people should encounter them.

### A SUSTAINING VISION

The 2006 Innovative design competition was the inaugural architectural competition within a much larger program. The design was met with great optimism by the newly constituted board of the Toronto Waterfront Revitalisation Corporation, the competition judges and the public at large. Enthusiasm was perhaps fueled by a rare confluence of political will, strong planning foundations and the external incentive of the 2012 Olympic bid. That vision has been slow to materialize, however, challenged by successive shifts in government priorities, a failure to secure the Olympic bid and a protracted three-and-a-half year environmental assessment.

Perhaps the wavedecks have acted as a catalyst for securing enthusiasm and funding for the current redevelopment along the Quay. Yet, for those who are committed to the original vision, their existence has acted as a persistent reminder of all that still remains to be accomplished.

There are many vital aspects of the masterplan that risk falling into obscurity. The issue of pedestrian connectivity has not been fully resolved for what about accessibility along the eastern end of Queens Quay between Bay and Parliament? Will we ever be able to play on the fourth and most ambitious wavedeck on the Parliament slip?

Most importantly, we must address the discontinuous condition along the water's edge. Through the boulevard redevelopment, Toronto is moving closer to connecting with its waterfront, yet



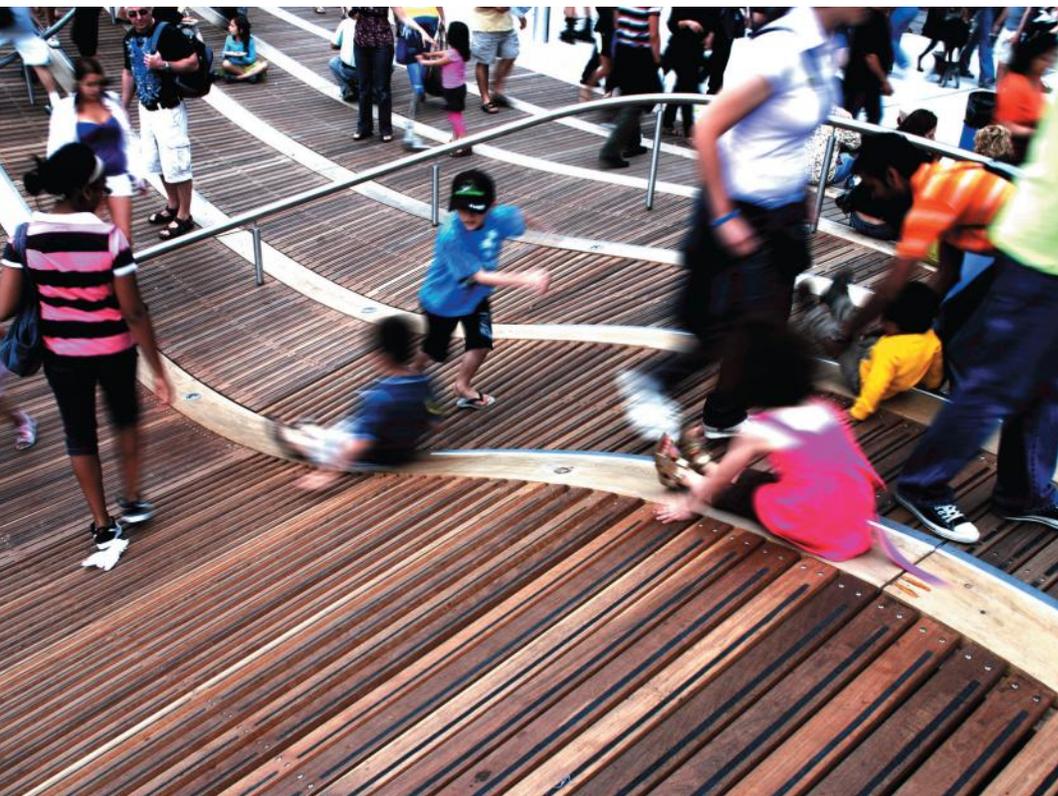
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many of the realized elements of the original plan remain fragmented, disconnected and even underwhelming through their isolation. Only with full realization of a connected and coherent Central Waterfront will a re-imagined nature in the city emerge.

**3** SLIP HEADS AT THE INTERSECTION OF MAJOR AVENUES: DRAWING THE LINES OF CULTURE FROM CITY TO WATERFRONT **4** THE QUAY TO THE CITY EVENT, 2006, TESTED REAPPOINTING A LANE FOR PEOPLE **5** A GREEN FOOT FOR TORONTO: MULTIPLE ROWS OF ROBUST NATIVE TREES AT THE WATERFRONT TO EQUAL THE MAJESTY OF THE CITY SKYLINE **6+7** THE WAVEDECKS - PART RAMP, PART DOCK, PART STAIR, AND PART NEW HABITAT - BECKON PEOPLE TO THE WATER'S EDGE | **3** INSECTION D'AVENUES MAJEURES : TRAÇANT LES LIGNES DE LA CULTURE DE LA VILLE À LA RIVE. **4** L'ACTIVITÉ QUAY TO THE CITY, EN 2006, A MIS À L'ESSAI LA RESTITUTION D'UNE VOIE AUX CITOYENS. **5** UN PIED VERT POUR TORONTO : DE MULTIPLES RANGÉES D'ARBRES ROBUSTES FAISANT ÉCHO À LA MAJESTÉ DE LA SILHOUETTE URBAINE. **6+7** LES WAVEDECKS - À LA FOIS RAMPES, QUAIS, ESCALIERS ET NOUVEAUX HABITATS, INVITENT LES CITOYENS À S'APPROCHER DU BORD DE L'EAU.

**PHOTOS 3 + 5** WEST **8+** DTAH **6** BLOGGY MARY. FR **4+7** COURTESY WATERFRONT TORONTO | COURTOISIE DU PORT DE TORONTO



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