

Exploring the city's relationship with its ravines

HIDDEN GEMS

By Leah Wong

DTAH partner **Megan Torza** has curated an exhibition called RavinePortal looking at the past, present and future role of the ravine system in the lives of Torontonians.

The exhibition also looks at the work that has been done in the ravines, as well as what projects are currently underway to further open the conversation about what the future system will look like. As the city's population grows, Torza told *NRU* she feels the ravines will become an increasingly important part of the city.

"The ravine system will become, in some respects, the last resort as far as open space is concerned," she said. "At the moment the ravine system in Toronto is not really designed to take a lot of people."

Torza said as the city grows the demand for accessible public open space will also increase. The exhibition is intended to add to the conversation about what role the ravines will play in the city.

RavinePortal is part of the WorldWide Storefront Initiative, launched by New York-based not-for-profit **Storefront for Art and Architecture**, which aims to bridge the communication gap between the design community and the general public. The Storefront Gallery in New York opens up onto the street like stores in the Lower Manhattan. The worldwide initiative was launched to replicate this model around the world, with local firms putting together exhibitions on local issues in their cities.

RavinePortal is one of the initiative's 10 projects. Alongside the exhibit and events happening in Toronto, DTAH will be contributing to the worldwide discussion by posting work on the Storefront for Art and Architecture's website.

The exhibition has transformed the entrance of DTAH's 50 Park Road studio. Completed in 1954, the building was designed by architecture firm **John B. Parkin Associates** as the first permanent headquarters for the **Ontario Association of Architects**.

"It was designed, very much, to be a social hub and the hub of discourse around design in Toronto at this time," said Torza. "The front of the building was designed to be open to the street and welcoming to the public."

Though the outside of the building has had very minimal changes over the years, the interior of the building underwent several changes to meet changing office space requirements prior to the OAA's relocation to Don Mills in 1992. Torza said the



RavinePortal installation at DTAH office, 50 Park Road SOURCE: DTAH

openness of the original design was lost over the years, though DTAH has tried to recreate the openness since it took over the building. RavinePortal is really the next phase.

For the storefront initiative DTAH has converted the front of its building into a gallery, with

images projected onto the street in front of the building. Two artists, **Michelle Gay** and **Dan Bergeron**, are also producing works on the ravines for the exhibition. The storefront initiative runs until November 21 and RavinePortal will feature rotating exhibits up until that date.

One of the reasons DTAH was interested in getting involved in a project that looks to bridge the gap between the design world and the general public is because about 70 per cent of the work the firm does is for the public sector. While many of these projects involve community consultations, Torza says these consultations are often poorly attended.

"I've always had an interest in how to break down the barriers that exist between the design community and the general public," said Torza. RavinePortal is one way DTAH can look at how its building can once again become a venue for generating discussion between these groups.

Through working on RavinePortal Torza has talked to a number of other organizations that are working to highlight the ravine system. This includes local environmental organizations such as **Evergreen** and **#LovetheRavines**, as well as public sector partners such as the city and the **Toronto and Region Conservation Authority**.

#LovetheRavines was created out of a partnership among **Pantagonia**, **Friends of the Greenbelt**, **Environmental Defence** and **Dot Dot Dash**. The project, which started about a year ago, was intended to bring more public awareness of the ravine system. Though the organizers have found that those who use the ravine system regularly really love it, there are still many people that don't know about it.

"There's still a lack of awareness about the ravines as a gem in the crown of Toronto's landscape," Dot Dot Dash partner **Blaine van Bruggen** told *NRU*. She said this contrasts to Central Park in New York City, which unlike

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Toronto's ravines is a major tourist draw. "People don't come to Toronto and say, 'when I'm in Toronto I have to go to the ravines.'"

One of the problems commonly heard in regards to the ravine system is the lack of signage and wayfinding, both in terms of how to get into the ravines and where to go once you're inside.

"Many of the entryways are not signed properly and are not easy to navigate," said van Bruggen. "If you don't know how to get there, then you won't go."

The city is currently developing a wayfinding strategy for its

park and trails. Torza said this strategy will make a huge difference by connecting more people with the ravines. While the city works on its wayfinding and master plans for the ravine systems, work like #LovetheRavines and RavinePortal are generating attention and getting people talking about Toronto's ravines.

"It's just another way to start the conversation," said van Bruggen of RavinePortal. "It's another hit into the dialogue about what the ravines are and why they matter, what their story is and what they offer to us." 
