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Toronto Places: A Context for Urban Design [Review]

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Author
Bressi, Todd W

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TORONTO PLACES: A Context for Urban Design

Edited by Marc Baraness and Larry Richards. Photographs by Geoffrey James and Steven Evans. Essays by Barry Callaghan, Austin Clarke, Katherine Govier, M. T. Kelly and Josef Skvorecky. University of Toronto Press, 1992, 108 pp., $50.

A few years ago, Toronto city officials began planning an awards program for recent urban design projects. Their first step was to examine places that already had become meaningful to Toronto. What places, the officials asked, are notable for both their aesthetics and their role in democratizing and urbanizing the city? In what way do those places create a context by which recent projects can be judged?

The program organizers convened a jury, which selected 25 such places, and have published photographs, descriptive essays and jury comments about each selection in this book.

Toronto Places reveals the range of places, ideas and energies that comprise a great city; it reminds us of the importance of memories and the persistence of powerful ideas. The jury's selections are divided into four categories: large places, such as the "Front Street Sweep," a composition of neoclassical civic buildings that creates a monumental streetwall; small places, such as the Alexander Muir Memorial Gardens, a transition between Toronto's street grid and its citywide network of natural ravines; and elements, such as the green-copper roof of the Royal York Hotel, which dominated the city's skyline until the 1970s. The jury also recognized two large-scale plans, contrasting the power and boldness of their vision to the unevenness of their execution.

Unfortunately, though, the diversity presented here is misleading. The program organizers solicited nominations from "40 prominent Torontonians" and narrowed those recommendations to 100, from which the jury of "six distinguished professionals" made selections. A more broadly constituted jury, choosing from a wider range of nominations made by a larger group of people, might have made an even broader range of selections.

What *Toronto Places* does not reveal (at least to a nonresident) is a sense of what gives Toronto its specific identity. Many of the selections, such as the neoclassical streetwall and a revitalized waterfront warehouse, are typologies of which examples can be found in countless North American cities. Even unique selections, such as the Sunnyside Bathing Pavilion and O'Keefe Center canopy, do not speak distinctly of Toronto.

Perhaps the jury sensed this lack of connection in suggesting that recognition also be given to Toronto's "inherited civic structures," such as its grid, ravine and streetcar systems, which so strongly establish Toronto's identity. By that measure, one also might recognize architectural and urban forms, such as housing types, that contribute to the civic design language by repeating throughout the city.

This question raises provocative questions for designers. Do the places the jury selected suggest fundamental principles of urban design that, when followed, will result in better (or better-liked) places, regardless of their location? To what extent should a place convey its position in the city, region and world, and how can that be accomplished?

With this project, Toronto has done its citizens and the larger design community a double service. *Toronto Places* will help the city's residents find delight and inspiration in their city, and it urges them toward a greater level of patience, attention and care for their surroundings. Moreover, it will keep debates about city design alive by offering fresh insights into the decisions and assumptions about what gets built and how it affects our lives.

— Todd W. Bressi