

ARCHITECTURE

At street level, our soaring skyline is a dud

Getting what architects call the 'ground plane' right is a big deal, and Toronto is blowing it



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Toronto is growing up – way up. Tall buildings are rising left and right as the office and condo boom continues. That's a good thing for the city, bringing vitality to the streets and filling the skyline with soaring pillars of glass and steel. But approach the base of many new buildings and the view is less inspiring.

A structure that might look dramatic to someone sitting in a nearby tower or a passing plane is often a dud at the ground level. Tall glass walls like those you might see at an indoor shopping mall face the street. The boxy spaces inside sometimes remain empty long after the building has opened, giving it a woebegone air. When those spaces are filled, the new occupant often turns its back to the street, covering the glass and concealing what is within. Passersby are presented with a blank, faceless wall that is the furthest thing from the inviting diversity they get on an old shopping street like Queen Street West.

These design failures make a big difference to the feel of the street outside. People encounter buildings at eye level, not from some perch in the sky. Good streetscapes draw people in, not shut them out like the chain drug marts or grocery stores that often emerge at the base of new buildings. Getting what architects call the "ground plane" right is a big deal, and Toronto is blowing it.

Architect Gianpiero Pugliese notes that condo ads often present the buildings they are promoting as objects, passing over how the buildings will relate to the street. But "that's how people interact with their city – at the ground plane, from the sidewalk



The Shops of Summerhill was designed by Audax Architecture to have elements that connect the shops to the street. KEVIN VAN PAASSEN FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

to the building. That is really where the city is experienced. It's critical that we get that zone right."

He says the city can do all it wants to beautify the sidewalk when a new building goes up – adding new trees or attractive paving work – "but if the building that fronts the sidewalk doesn't work, what's the point?"

When his firm, Audax Architecture, did over the Shops of Summerhill, a row of high-end stores on Yonge Street, it took care to see that they had traditional elements such as awnings and recessed doorways that tie the shops and the street together.

That architects are thinking harder about the ground floor is a good sign.

For a long while, modern buildings ignored the street. Tall buildings were set in sprawling plazas. Developers often put nothing on the ground floor but a huge lobby. That is the pattern in many big office complexes that rose in Toronto's core.

Urban thinking has evolved since then, and most new buildings pay more respect to what is around them. Many have a "retail podium" at the bottom and a tower on top. Planners encourage "active uses" on the ground floor.

The aim is noble; the execution

lacking. Developers tend to fill ground floors with big spaces that they can rent out easily. So you get a drug mart. Smaller spaces are often afterthoughts, lacking the proportions and clear space that retail or restaurants need.

Retired Toronto architect Peter Tovell says these spaces sometimes make no allowance even for a store sign, so the retailer slaps up tacky posters or signs on the glass. The texture you see on older streets is lost. "What makes Queen Street or Bloor Street interesting," he says, "is you can look at something as you're walking along."

The ground plane matters. People know it intuitively. When city hall conducted a public consultation on urban design in 2014, "recurring feedback indicated that the relationship between the base of a building and how it meets the sidewalk with active ground-floor uses, setbacks, step-backs, building materials, architectural features, landscaping, etc., is important regardless of building height."

In other words, Toronto needs to focus less on how tall a tower is and more on what happens at street level. That is where city life happens. That is where builders need to fix their attention.

VALENTINE'S DAY

SHOP TALK | BY JENNA ZUCKER



The Sweet Cupid Package comes with flowers and chocolate. JILL BOTTING

Tonic Blooms

416-770-6219, tonicblooms.com

The owners

Michael Smaye and Raphi Aronowicz

In a nutshell

A quick, easy way to send flowers online.

The story

Our epiphany stemmed from an online order of flowers going wrong. After some research, we realized the current solutions are not transparent. We are planting a new vision for an outdated business. I work in hospitality and my partner Raphi works in finance, so we're a match made in heaven. Before we launched our site, we were taking orders via text message. All flowers are still delivered within two hours of ordering – by bicycle. We're

ture. We focus on the "what you see is what you get" promise. And offering a curated selection of flowers – the limited options we make available – allow us to sell at a lower price. Your typical flower shop has 50 different options, and they have to have all those flowers in stock. But really only 25 of them are actually being purchased – so half of the bouquets are wasted.

The stock

There are plenty of flower growers to support along the Niagara peninsula. We have various rose selections from Dunnville and we get our tulips from St. Catharines. These flowers have not travelled halfway across the world and will therefore last more than three days. Each bouquet is denim-wrapped – we are focused on a modern design to satisfy a variety of tastes.

The buy

We partnered with local chef Brandon Olsen and his confec-

HOGTOWN STORIES | BY JEREMY KORN

Hogtown Stories is a series of portraits and short stories about Torontonians by Jeremy Korn, a photographer and urban planner. Find more photos of Lea-Ann and past stories at hogtownstories.com.

Lea-Ann Belter

I grew up in Lambeth, Ont.. Just outside of London. It was a small place, with only one stoplight. But my family is from Toronto. They lived near Dundas and Broadview.

I used to hear stories about Riverdale. My uncle always liked to go tobogganing at Riverdale Park. One time, when he was a kid, he was run over by a bob-sled. And my dad wiped out at Dundas and Broadview on his Harley. I guess I thought it must have been a dangerous place!

Since my dad was a painter, art was always important in my family. I was always interested in painting, drawing and making things. I went to art school, but got a bit disillusioned with that. It wasn't exactly what I was looking for.

I still wanted to do something that was creative, so I decided to study fashion design in Toronto.

When I graduated, my brother's fiancée asked me to design her wedding gown. I've been a bridal designer ever since, and now I live in the neighbourhood where my family grew up, and my shop is right at Dundas and Broadview.

I remember driving by the building when it was an old cof-

