

Erik Rutherford

## **Toronto: a city in our image**

Here in an Irish pub on the trendy rue Montorgueil, my friends and I have gathered to share a last drink. After seven years in Paris, I am moving back to my native Toronto. In only a few days, in a similar bar on College Street, I will be asked, sincerely or out of courtesy, why I have renounced life in Paris to come to 'dreary' Toronto. And yet for my friends here – most of them young expatriates from the U.K., Canada and the U.S. – no such explanations are needed. On the contrary, they spend my farewell evening sheepishly justifying their own reasons for staying behind and repeating the refrain: 'You are right to go.'

Like them, I feel that life will be better in Toronto, not because I have better friends or a better job there, but because the city itself will allow things to happen. Why this sentiment should be so strong, especially when set against Paris, one of the world's most envied and prestigious cities, has much to do with the very aspect of Toronto that shames many Torontonians: its physical landscape.

In Jonathan Raban's classic study of urban living, *Soft City*, he says that 'Cities, unlike villages and small towns, are plastic by nature. We mould them in our images: they, in their turn, shape us by the resistance they offer when we try to impose our own personal form on them.'

Paris strongly resists our attempts to 'impose.' As we sit in its cafés, wander its manicured gardens, or stream down its corridor streets from one monument to the next, we bend to its dictates. Arrows and signs tell us how to look. The city poses and struts, flaunting its grand perspectives and elegant architecture. We, in turn, feed its vanity, move and dress our bodies to please it, submit to its geometry.

Toronto does not require us to adopt its shape, to move as it prescribes. Its porous streets spill into back alleys and parking lots or descend into a

labyrinth of underground passageways. New glass condos rub up against arterial highways and old warehouses; low-rise subdivisions and office blocks make way for advancing armies of electrical pylons; Victorian houses border drive-in doughnut shops and gas stations, lonely schoolyards, ravines, strip malls and industrial zones. It is a city in which you walk in quiet solitude, pulled into its folds and crevices, whimsically cutting your own path.

Paris is so seamlessly put together, so uniform in its edifices and furnishings, you feel you could drive in a wedge where the city comes up against the highway that encircles it and pop it out in one piece – like a jewel that has been superficially encrusted in the earth's surface. Where would you drive in the wedge in Toronto? And how deeply would the wedge have to go?

In Toronto, we work in buildings that are younger than our parents. We shop in practical, matter-of-fact constructions that have a makeshift quality about them; we can almost see the wrecking ball waiting in the wings. Everywhere there is the presence of demolition and construction, the sense that what surrounds us is not the product of careful planning, of a contract between the generations, but rather the caprice of chance and private interest. It feels, as Robert Fulford has said, *accidental*, as if what remains has simply survived – a residue of the past, and a recent past at that (in 1793, while the revolutionaries were leading their king to the guillotine in Paris, an advance party of Rangers had just begun clearing virgin forest on the shores of what was to become Fort York).

Paris is anything but accidental. What you see is what you were meant to see. It is the slow accumulation of selected symbols, an anthology of French heritage, a model of fastidious urban housekeeping. Its edifices appear to us as inviolable and timeless, not because of their beauty

(though, as Zola said, 'Paris is art, all around us'), but because they are the physical embodiment of the mythology, history and values of France. Otherwise functional buildings – hospitals, law courts, police stations – are monuments and memorials in themselves, vectors of cultural identity. 'Liberté, Egalité et Fraternité' is engraved into their stone. The reason for their existence is written onto plaques that stand next to them. The city's parks, squares, bridges and subway stations bear the names of momentous events from French history – its military victories and ideological triumphs. Street signs include mini-curricula vitae of the *grands hommes* they are named after – year of birth, year of death, profession and achievements.

Little has changed since Baron Haussmann, the infamous city planner working under Napoleon III, completed his massive reconstruction of Paris in the middle of the nineteenth century (with notable exceptions – the Centre Pompidou or Mitterrand's Grands Travaux). Impracticable buildings that cannot be rescued are torn down reluctantly, but their facades are preserved, held up by wooden scaffolding until a new construction is built up behind them. Throughout Paris, these facades (paper-thin against the sky) stand forlorn, reminding us of the Wild West towns of a Hollywood movie set. Meanwhile, monuments like Notre Dame Cathedral and Tour St. Jacques are sandblasted and refurbished. They emerge looking unfamiliar, artificial, like restored paintings – clearer, more distinct, and yet the lines of experience gone from them along with much of their character. Little by little, Paris is becoming a pastiche of itself, an airbrushed city of reconditioned stone. How could it be any different? Each new generation of city administrators and architects labours under the restraints of historical and aesthetic continuity. Theirs is, in many ways, the work of curators: taking inventory, maintenance, merchandising, applying the finishing touches – new street fixtures, improved signs, better access.

Torontonians live in a city where the beginning is forgotten and the end is unknown, and so whatever happens can only surprise and surpass. Tremendous historic events do not resonate in its cement, glass and brick. The city was not built upon sturdy founding mythologies, and only historians and enthusiasts know the names on its street signs, who designed the CN Tower, what the Aboriginal word 'Toronto' means, or what any of the mysterious little Discovery Walk signs that dot the city might refer to. Distinctive monuments are few and far between, as attested to by the souvenir shops (how would you pick Toronto out of a crowd without the CN Tower?). And Lake Ontario, the city's most important feature, is a strangely discreet presence, making only fleet-

ing appearances, peeking up now and then from beyond the streaming expressway. The result is an undemonstrative, secretive city, unsure of how to represent itself, with no identifiable brand of metropolitanism. No wonder it is 'accommodating' to novelty and newcomers, to renovation and ugliness, to bold idiosyncrasy. In Paris, 'beginnings' are so manifest that what happens bears out only what is meant to happen. Its values are well defined, and so its buildings – even the new ones – are the means to an end that is already known. Thus the overwhelming sense that life is happening elsewhere. As Marx puts it, 'The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.' How heavy the weight of iconic, self-regarding Paris.

The pub is now dense with cigarette smoke. Trevor, a Dubliner with a fledgling career as a literary translator, stares into his empty pint glass and sighs. 'I was going to leave this year, I really was.' He has been saying this ever since I met him five years ago.

'No need to explain,' I say.

'You're a passenger in this city. You don't have to make an effort. And it's not as if you feel like you belong, but in time you just feel it's harder to belong anywhere else. You lose your will to advance and accumulate.'

Keith jumps in: 'You'll never go,' he says. Keith is a journalist who left London in the early nineties to be with his French girlfriend. Together, they now have two boys and live in a chic neighbourhood near the Parc Monceau. 'You've coasted for too long, Trevor. You're here to stay.'

'I'm just waiting for the cash,' Trevor says.

'You're waiting for the courage.'

This nagging feeling that living in Paris is somehow a failure to engage with life, a kind of cowardly evasion, has much to do with being an expatriate. But there is also the effect of the city itself. Whether tall buildings break open the sky as they do in Toronto or cut the sky into ribbons as they do in Paris; whether we have space or feel someone at our back as we walk down the sidewalk; whether cars circulate haltingly or flowingly; whether we feel scrutinized or ignored; whether there are places to congregate; whether in parks we can sit on the grass; whether it is noisy or polluted; whether there are horizons – all these things inform what we believe to be worthwhile, or possible, or necessary, both as citizens and individuals. Paris seems to inhibit the natural process of making the city one's own, that process in which shops and street corners become mnemonic for the people we know and the experiences we live. The walls of the great city have no need of our yearnings and judgments. They are already blackened with stories, like carbon applied to paper an infinite number of times.

We are all latecomers, and as latecomers we let the city assign a role to us, write a story on our behalf. If we allow it to, Paris *completes* us, making up for what we lack as individuals by turning us into citizens – public property. It requires only that we perform our civic duty. And so the brain of the living, straining to express itself, grows weary or complacent.

As urban people, we yearn for crowds, but our stronger instinct is to be free of the crowd, to be alone in our own secret places in order to experience our uniqueness. In Toronto, our solitude is dense. Whereas in Paris a tree is decoration, symbol or artifact ('Under this tree, Victor Hugo used to write...'), in Toronto a tree might just be a tree – barely noticed, forgotten in the corner of someone's yard, home to a family of birds. Toronto's houses bind you to the instant; they do not draw you away along a chain of aesthetic and historical associations. We are in the domain of the intimate and the appropriated rather than the public and the designated. Wooden telephone poles punctured by thousands of staples – the trace of countless homemade messages – are totems in a city that has not institutionalized every human interchange. These same telephone poles hold aloft a tangle of wires that form a patterned ceiling above the street, itself cluttered with mismatched street furniture. Everything tells us that Toronto is a bricolage of atomized privacies, that we have few obligations to it and, equally, little guidance from it. Jan Morris called Toronto a city 'conducive to self-doubt and introspection.' Toronto is also conducive to self-realization, brimming with opportunities to mould its malleable stuff in our own image.

When we move to a new city, the sediment of the soul is stirred up as new waters flood in. These new waters slowly evaporate, leaving behind that same sediment, dried into the patterns of the city we have lived in. In Paris, the sediment maps Haussman's streets. In Toronto, it maps not merely the city but also some part of our elsewhere selves.

Pierre the bartender has been listening in. He decides to defend his city. 'I don't understand you people. Paris is the most beautiful and brilliant city in the world. Do you condemn a woman for being too brilliant and too beautiful?'

Trevor, with a hint of drunken slur, offers an answer: 'She *was* brilliant and beautiful. Now she's well past her finest hour, but because she thinks she's still got it, she bores you with stories of how she used to be the life of the party. She shows you her photo albums, all scrupulously indexed and labelled. And when you offer to take her memoirs home for a read, she forces them into your hand and makes you read aloud.'

'Okay, then,' says Pierre, slapping his towel on the countertop. 'What is Toronto? *Une jolie jeune fille?*'

Everyone turns to me. I have never considered the question, but the conversation has conjured an image: 'Well, I suppose Toronto is a young man, just out of university. He's done a degree in commerce with a minor in the humanities, where he shows surprising talent. He's always been an A student and done what is expected of him. When you praise him, he doesn't believe you; when you criticize him, his pride is wounded. He's still a little inexperienced, poorly dressed, a touch diffident, but full of youthful energy and ambition. And though he doesn't yet know the best way to achieve glory, he makes you feel he will.'

And so I return to rekindle my friendship with him.

Edward Keenan

**Making a scene:  
a bunch of youngish indie rockers, political activists  
and small-press literati are creating the cultural  
history of Toronto**

It was pouring rain in Toronto the night of November 3, 2003. Still, several hundred people queued up for more than an hour along Queen Street West, some huddled under umbrellas, others sopping wet, stretching in a line from the doors of the Gladstone Hotel east to Beaconsfield and around the corner. There was an un-Parkdalian giddiness in the attitude of the crowd, an expectant optimism that had been spreading throughout the city for the previous few weeks as left-ish reformer David Miller – once considered an unthinkable long shot – had emerged as the leader in the dwindling fall mayoral election campaign. One grey lady from the Annex, wearing a yellow rain slicker, surveying the architectural glasses and purposefully unkempt hair of the predominantly twentysomething crowd, asked, ‘What the heck is Trampoline Hall? I’ve never seen a crowd like this for an election speech before.’ It’s unclear whether she was referring to the assembly’s size or its fashion sense, but she could easily have meant either, or both. She’d likely

never been turned away at the doors of a political speech before, either, but that’s what happened around eight o’clock, as word trickled down the disappointed line that the Gladstone Ballroom had reached capacity and no one else would be allowed in.<sup>1</sup>

Indoors, 150 or so people witnessed a most unusual campaign event. One

<sup>1</sup> Citing a journalistic obligation as a reporter for urban news and entertainment thingy *Eye Weekly*, I managed to sneak in. A surprising number of others also refused to take ‘go home’ for an answer, with less success – several dozen shivered in the rain, while a gradually shrinking crowd stood, like candidates for a Zen monastery, outside the closed and locked doors of the event, expecting their patience to be eventually rewarded. As far as I know, it was not.

week to the day before the election,<sup>2</sup> David Miller had taken three and a half hours out of his schedule to share the stage with an assortment of writers, thinkers and artists (including playwright Deanne Taylor, novelist Nino Ricci and urban-planning guru Jane Jacobs<sup>3</sup>) to discuss a topic assigned to him by Trampoline Hall lecture series curator Sheila Heti: ‘Beauty and the Aesthetic City.’ The event was billed – misleadingly, since Millermania had very clearly taken hold of the crowd – ‘Trampoline Hall vs. David Miller.’

But what left an impression on me most is not anything the candidate said<sup>4</sup> but a point Nino Ricci made early on as part of a panel discussion. I forget the question, but it concerned what he liked about Toronto. As a child of immigrant parents, Ricci explained, he’d grown up feeling like an Italian – an outsider – in Canada. But when he went ‘home’ to Florence to study, he was, of course, an outsider there too, not a real Italian. Furthermore, he found there was a very rigid definition of what it meant to be Italian – and of what it meant to be Sicilian or Roman or Florentine. Thousands of years of history had gone into creating the Italian identity, its customs and architecture and art and literature, its cuisine and politics. ‘The mythology of Florence had already been written,’ he said.<sup>5</sup> It was an atmosphere he found smothering. Nothing one could do could have the smallest hope of contributing to or evolving the cultural life of the city or the country.

2 On election night, Miller would hold a broom over his head in the now-famous celebration of his victory, earning himself the nickname ‘Broom-Broom.’

3 She held one of those big horn-type hearing devices you see in cartoons next to her ear to field questions from the audience.

4 Though he did impress me, as was evident from the cover-story back rub I filed for *Eye Weekly* the next day. It’s called ‘What a Mayor Can Be: David Miller Thinks More, Calculates Less,’ and ran on November 6, 2003. It’s online, in the unlikely event that you’re interested in looking it up.

5 Or so I remember. Here and following, I am paraphrasing from memory, as my notes of the night’s events are distressingly Miller-centric.

Toronto, by contrast, is a young city in a young country, famously grappling with its identity. It is populated largely by a diverse collection of first- and second- and third-generation immigrants from other cities and provinces and countries. This is what Ricci found exciting about this city. 'Toronto,' he said, 'is still deciding what it will be. We're still finding out what it means to be Torontonians. Our mythology has yet to be written.'

It was hard, that night, not to agree. For in a sort of corny but real way, it felt like those of us in that room were in the middle of writing a chapter in the mythology of Toronto: in the half-renovated, half-gutted charm of Toronto's oldest continuously operating hotel, with those who couldn't fit inside congregated outside the windows in the rain, the crowd inside was enraptured by an hours-long discussion of civic identity and city planning and (briefly, as it was a topic supposedly off limits) electoral politics. A group of normally alienated independent artists suddenly realized that a candidate they had something in common with, a politico they could actually root for, was about to be elected. Long-time fans of the Trampoline Hall lecture series – described that week by *NOW* magazine as 'oddball popcult'<sup>6</sup> – all at once awkwardly found themselves important enough to occupy valuable final campaign hours and to dictate terms to the man who would be mayor of the city. Later in the evening, a woman in the back of the room stood up and cried as she explained that she'd hated Toronto since moving here from Montreal, but finally, tonight, she suddenly got it and was in love with the city and wanted to thank everyone for sharing it with her. It was that kind of night. We, in that room, were shaping the future history of Toronto. At least a little bit, we were writing our own mythology.<sup>7</sup>

6 *NOW*, listings, Oct. 30, 2003.

7 Some of us (ahem) maybe more literally than others.

There's been a lot of that going around lately – the feeling that this is an important moment in Toronto's history, that we're in the midst of shaping what the city will become, of defining what Toronto will come to mean. That ever more widespread perception is, I can only assume, the reason someone would decide to put

together a book devoted to considering the city's present and future. The intersection with Miller – and the traditional institutional structure of city building he represents, by virtue of his being in electoral politics – was significant but atypical. The feeling I'm describing occurs more often at smaller events that are still, if ever less so, on the fringes of mainstream city life. It exists most noticeably in three growing and increasingly overlapping scenes, which can be loosely grouped together as literary, musical and political. In the Trampoline Hall lecture series, the city's independent literary crowd has found a gathering place and a governing aesthetic. The Wavelength music series (and the on-again, off-again magazine that accompanies it) has become more than a weekly live-music event, more, even,

than a home base for a community of music fans; it's barely an overstatement to say that Wavelength is the Toronto indie-rock scene. Meanwhile, the Toronto Public Space Committee and its affiliated magazine, *Spacing*, have served as an umbrella for a legion of political activists who express their love for the city in any number of unconventional ways and have, in the process, accomplished the near impossible task of making politics seem cool.<sup>8</sup>

These three broadly defined circles have grown over the past four or five years, both in size and in influence, and have recently been overlapping and cross-pollinating in varied and interesting ways.<sup>9</sup> They appear sometimes to be coalescing around shared interests and aesthetics in a way that multiplies the excitement attached to each. I'd hesitate to call what they're collectively becoming a 'movement,' but it certainly is, as Misha Glouberman told me in conversation, a moment: 'Cultural history is happening.'<sup>10</sup>

8 This may be as good a place as any to acknowledge the awkward fact that people closely involved with all these events and organizations I'm writing about have also contributed essays to this anthology – Jonathan Bunce (or Jonny Dovercourt, as he's known in indie-music circles) of Wavelength, Sheila Heti and Misha Glouberman of Trampoline Hall, Dave 'Mez' Meslin of the TPSC. This may appear incestuous, and maybe it is, but I'm afraid it's impossible to write about this moment in Toronto without focusing on these people. It's also impossible to put together an anthology about this moment in Toronto without including submissions from these people. So here we are. Deal with it.

9 I should maybe also point out that I have some sort of personal connection to many of these people. I work as a writer and editor for a magazine that covers their work, and I travel in social circles that overlap with theirs. I can't help it. For your conflict-of-interest tracking pleasure, I'll try to document any relationships as I go. So far: I voted for David Miller; I have once been the editor of an article Sheila Heti wrote for *Eye Weekly* and have attended parties in the former home of her husband, Carl Wilson; Misha Glouberman also wrote something for me at *Eye* and came recently to my birthday party; Jonathan Bunce plays in a band with Kate McGee, who is a something-removed cousin of mine (though I did not meet her until a few years ago); and I have written three times for *Spacing* magazine (once they paid me about ten cents a word).

10 This conversation took place in Kensington Market, while I was taking notes for this essay. He later told me that he'd decided he hated being quoted. Oh well.

Wavelength came first. As *Eye Weekly* Senior Editor Stuart Berman<sup>11</sup> wrote on the occasion of Wavelength's fifth anniversary:

Before the weekly Sunday-night indie revelry made its modest debut on Feb. 13, 2000, ... [T]he community was a disconnected cabal of locally recognized but internationally neglected warriors ... each fighting their own wars, trying to crash through a glass ceiling clouded by a fog of apathy that historically confined bands to within city limits.

What Wavelength founders Jonathan Bunce, Duncan MacDonnell and Derek Westerholm realized was that, in order to smash that ceiling, you needed a united push from all corners of the underground: the indie rockers, the punks, the jazzbos, the tech-heads. Wavelength's agenda was as universal as an ABC after-school special: be proud of what you've got. Don't worry about being cool. Don't resist the unknown; learn from it. And please, don't be afraid to dance.

... Before Wavelength, Toronto simply lived; after Wavelength, we loved, proving hippie hearts and Converse soles are not incompatible.<sup>12</sup>

As Jonathan 'Jonny Dovercourt' Bunce remembers it, that's exactly what he and the other founders of Wavelength set out to do when they created the series. Sitting on the patio of the 360 on Queen just east of Spadina<sup>13</sup> in the spring of 2005, Bunce says that in 2000, while he was working a day job as listings editor of *Eye Weekly*, with hopes of becoming a rock star, the Toronto music scene was 'splintered into little cliques and enclaves.' After more than a decade of playing gigs in Toronto in various bands, he and his friends were finding it hard to create any kind of buzz. There wasn't much of a sense of a musical community – there was no central record label, magazine or venue to bring the indie crowd together. Everyone was just doing their own thing in hopes of moving on to New York or Los Angeles, where they might get some attention. 'We wanted to see something happening in Toronto,' says Bunce. 'There was a lot of good music, but there was no one around to celebrate it and raise it up.'

11 One of several authorities on indie music in Toronto – also, inconveniently, my direct supervisor at work.

12 'On any given Sunday,' *Eye Weekly*, Feb. 10, 2005.

13 One of Toronto's great dives and best music venues until it was shut down by the Ontario Command of the Royal Canadian Legion – the regulatory body that oversees the Canadian Legion Ukrainian Branch, which owned the club – on June 7, 2005, just a few weeks after my chat with Bunce. That it was operating mainly as a music venue instead of a legion hall was the main reason for the RCL's decision.

On September 11, 1999, he and his then bandmate Alex Durlak<sup>14</sup> called a ‘heads of state meeting’ at the Green Room, a pleasantly shabby back-alley coffee house and bar in the Annex. There, Bunce, Durlack and various friends from bands around Toronto – Duncan MacDonnell of Folk Festival Massacre, Greg Chambers of Mean Red Spiders, Derek Westerholm of Parts Unknown and Paul Boddum of Neck, among others – discussed their frustration with the Toronto scene and came up with a three-pronged plan to address it: they’d start a music zine, a website and a weekly concert series to give themselves and the bands they liked a platform. Wavelength, which encompassed all three, was born.

14 Their band, for the record, was called Kid Sniper.

The debuts of the weekly music series at Ted’s Wrecking Yard on College Street<sup>15</sup> – featuring Mean Red Spiders and Neck – and its accompanying photocopied and hand-stapled zine came together in February 2000. Fifty people attended the first show, and Bunce doesn’t remember having the sense that they’d created something monumental in the early months. Still, the editors’ letter in the inaugural issue of the zine laid out their ambitions fairly clearly:

15 Like the 360, another seminal music venue now shuttered and, in this case, half-demolished to make room for a boutique hotel that went broke midway through construction.

Wavelength is a loose collective of friends and fellow musicians who got together last fall to figure out how to boost our own scene. This is what we came up with – we hope you dig it. We all feel that Toronto is on the cusp of something, something exciting and potentially big. The music being made here – in all genres – is unparalleled on an international scale. We want to let people here, and in the rest of the world, know about it. And we want everyone to come out, get loose and have some fun.

A couple of gigs now remembered as seminal moments in the creation of today’s thriving and increasingly internationally recognized scene followed, among them the December 17, 2000, first-ever gig by what was then billed as John Tesh Jr. and the Broken Social Scene and the February 4, 2001, Toronto coming out of Guelph band the Constantines. But it was a week after the Cons shook the foundations of Ted’s, at Wavelength’s first anniversary show, that Bunce first really got the sense

that he was at the centre of something big. 'For the first six months or more, it was really just us and our friends... At the first anniversary show, we had bands on both floors over three nights,<sup>16</sup> and there were a whole bunch of new faces – faces of people we didn't know. It was really dawning that people felt we'd created a welcoming space for everybody.'

Since then, the series has moved from Ted's to the cavernous Lee's Palace and then on to its current home at Sneaky Dee's, and has played a pivotal role in the success of many of Ontario's now celebrated rockers – Broken Social Scene (and the solo and side projects of that ungainly group's various members: Jason Collett, Gentleman Reg, Leslie Feist, Do Make Say Think, Metric, Raising the Fawn ...), the Hidden Cameras, the Constantines, FemBots, the Deadly Snakes, Controller. Controller, Cuff the Duke, Royal City and Bunce's own new band – maybe his most successful yet – Republic of Safety. But more than just providing a venue and a launching pad, Wavelength has become the centre of a community that comes out week after week to see bands known and unknown, gathers to electronically chat on the message boards at Stillepost.ca and otherwise parties and plays together.<sup>17</sup> And, slowly, this scene has moved from the fringes of Toronto's – and Canada's – musical consciousness towards the mainstream.

At roughly the same time as a bunch of local indie musicians were planning a revolution in the musical scene, Dave Meslin was experiencing a revolution in his consciousness. In his early twenties, Mez, as his friends call him, had become a successful entrepreneur, running a T-shirt-printing factory in an industrial building in Leaside that doubled as a clubhouse for him and his pals. But by 1997, he'd become interested in, and troubled by, the politics of cotton. The fibres that made up the shirts that made up his products were often produced in horrible conditions in developing economies and then manufactured in sweatshops before arriving in his hands.

Getting out of the T-shirt business, he spent a few years becoming increasingly immersed in the world

16 Among them the Beethoven Frieze, Christiana, the Co-operators, the Connoisseurs, the Dinner Is Ruined, Fembots, G.U.H., It's Patrick, Kid Sniper, Mellonova, Mean Red Spiders, More Plastic, Picastro, Rhume, Someone Is Flying and Zebradonk.

17 The May 2005 wedding of Katarina Gligorijevic of Barcelona Pavilion and Republic of Safety to Matt Collins of Ninja High School was one of the scene's social events of the year. Music columnist, Trampoline Hall doorman and blogger Carl Wilson described the reception on his blog Zoilus.com as follows: 'We did go to the most indie-rock wedding reception ever, last night at Sneaky Dee's, featuring a welcoming barrage of silly string for the newlyweds, then Steve Kado and Greg Collins (of Ninja High School, Blocks Recording Club and dozens of other local bands between them) as MANSHT playing Elvis and Bruce Springsteen covers for slow-dance shout-alongs to start the night, and then the electro-make-out music of Kids on TV and a whole helluva lot of fog machine, climaxing with a mass half-naked, half-drunk audience-on-stage dance frenzy (followed by more dancing courtesy of DJ Jonny Dovercourt). Plus indoors smoking, and cake.'

of culture jamming. Under the banner of the Toronto Public Space Committee, Mez founded an e-mail newsletter in the spirit of the Reclaim the Streets movement, which was then picking up steam. A set of events in cities around the world, Reclaim the Streets was a vaguely defined group of anarchists, socialists and others who opposed globalization, pollution and automobiles and held events intended to clog streets with pedestrian protesters costumed and dancing in a celebration of disrupting traffic.

This awakened sense of the politics of global trade led Mez and his friend Matthew Blackett – then a *Hockey News* graphic designer and zinester cartoonist<sup>18</sup> – to travel to Quebec City for the demonstrations against the Summit of the Americas conference on free trade in April 2001.

As Blackett remembers it, the two came back with a sense of determination fuelled by the remembered smell of tear gas. ‘It started with the anti-globalization movement, but we really took the phrase ‘Think globally, act locally’ seriously. We wanted to be part of the movement here at home, affecting our home – helping shape Toronto into something better.’

Soon, the outline of a new kind of political movement took shape: the TPSC brought together whole groups of until then disparate activists – environmentalists, cyclists, indie rockers who depend on postering, graffiti artists, anti-consumerists – under a galvanizing central concern: public-space issues. The TPSC has approached its campaigns with a certain rock’n’roll playfulness, from Guerrilla Gardening campaigns, in which members plant flowers on roadsides and patches of dirt, to the Toronto De-fence project, in which the TPSC will provide free labour to remove chain-link fences from private property at the owner’s request. At the core of their work has been an apparent paradox: rigid opposition to the growing use of public spaces and sightlines for commercial advertising, such as transit posters, billboards and garbage cans featuring corporate messages on the side; and an equally steadfast defence of small-scale postering on utility poles

18 His strip is called M@B (pronounced ‘Matt Bee’), and the title doubles as a nickname, by which Blackett is widely known. And, of course, in the interests of transparency, please note that M@B is published in *Eye Weekly*, Matt is my editor at *Spacing* magazine, and I consider him something of a friend.

of the sort used to promote local bands and lawn sales or to plead for help in finding a missing pet.

It was in the service of the latter concern that the TPSC really came into broad public view when, in 2002, it successfully galvanized various activists and the local music community to fend off a proposed bylaw that would have outlawed postering on public utility poles.

In December 2003, the TPSC took another step in what Blackett calls its 'maturation' when it launched the first issue of *Spacing* magazine. Devoted to chronicling, pondering and proselytizing on issues of public space – in Toronto in particular – and how people interact with it, the magazine was perhaps surprisingly successful from the start. Running calls for action on issues such as billboard advertising in Dundas Square and the threat to free speech posed by anti-postering bylaws next to meditations on getting lost in the city and making eye contact, and finding rich photography from the growing community of photo-bloggers, the magazine found a ready audience among urban planners<sup>19</sup> and politicians, among activists around the city and in an arts community that's recently begun looking less frequently to New York for success and instead taking pride in its hometown.

By 2005, the TPSC and *Spacing*<sup>20</sup> have become major players in Toronto politics – Meslin, Blackett and *Spacing* editor Shawn Micallef are ubiquitous interview subjects whenever advertising and public-space issues arise in the media, and leftist politicians such as Joe Mihevc and even the mayor often seem in a rush to align themselves with the group.<sup>21</sup> From its origins as an e-mail newsletter, the TPSC has become an influential player at city hall and a leader of public debate on how the city should be shaped in the years to come.

One of the earliest high-profile contributors to *Spacing* was Sheila Heti, who had by that point spent a couple years making her own contribution to the city's growing cultural renaissance. In 2000, the then twenty-four-year-old University of Toronto undergraduate exploded into the Canadian literary consciousness when *McSweeney's*<sup>22</sup> published six of her stories as a chapbook and *Toronto Life*

19 I found this out first-hand at a recent *Spacing* fundraiser thrown by ERA Architects, where I witnessed a series of planners and architects in very expensive glasses behave like teenybopper groupies in the presence of the magazine's editors.

20 They are now separate but affiliated entities, the TPSC driven by Meslin as a sort of loudmouth activist and lobbying organization, *Spacing* run as an interested but less agenda-driven forum for discussion and meditation.

21 Such as when the mayor wore a *Spacing*-produced lapel button bearing the name of a local subway station into council chambers when he threw his support behind a TPSC-backed push to kill a revised postering bylaw in May 2005.

22 Dave Eggers's then Brooklyn-based literary journal phenomenon, which was successful in the realm of literary journals to an unheard-of extent; magazines such as *US* and *People* were noticing it, and its founder was propelled to appearing-on-Rosie-O'Donnell's-talk-show-level stardom.

published another of her stories in its summer fiction issue. A book deal with House of Anansi followed and, with the ecstatic reviews that accompanied the release of her short story collection, *The Middle Stories*, in April 2001, a bona fide literary celebrity was born.<sup>23</sup>

On the heels of her successful book, she created the Trampoline Hall lecture series in December 2001, a monthly gathering (originally) at the Cameron House at which three lecturers would discuss subjects about which they are not professionally expert. Question-and-answer sessions would follow, moderated by host Misha Glouberman. Every show featured a set designed by Leah Walker. And the man who would become Heti's husband, Carl Wilson, collected the cover charge at the door.

The range of topics was quizzically diverse. Matthew MacFadzean lectured on the number 32 in January 2002, Ruby King lectured on temping in September 2002, Kate Rae spoke about dry humping in February 2003 and, in May 2004, James O'Reilly discussed his hometown of Uranium, Saskatchewan. Sometimes lectures were well researched and professionally presented; sometimes they were entirely made up or a confusion of mumbles. Along the way, special events were thrown in: the 'What Is Beauty?' pageant in May 2002, the night devoted entirely to lectures on Heti's friend Patrick Roscoe in August 2002, and the 2003 Trampoline Hall vs. David Miller political event mentioned earlier.

The mixture of elements was a tremendous success out of the gate; every Trampoline Hall in Toronto<sup>24</sup> except one (held at Club Rokit on Church Street during the 'venue tour' of 2004) has been sold out, often with queues of disappointed hopefuls stretching out into the street.

This was, Glouberman told me in Kensington Market in May 2005, the plan: 'It was clear from the inception that the project was bigger than a party; we were creating a scene, and we were very aware of that.'

There were a few things that set Trampoline Hall apart from the run-of-the-mill reading series it might have resembled: the quirky subject matter, for one, and the interesting interaction between Heti's selections of

23 Do you doubt this? Consider that in 2004, when she had only the one book under her belt, the Canadian Magazine Publishers Association took out ads that read: 'Atwood. Coupland. Davies. Heti. Ondaatje. Quarrington. We have our own library, we have our own magazines.'

24 After a successful tour of the U.S. in late 2002, a New York edition, also hosted by Glouberman, was started and continues to run today.

lecturers with their chosen topics and Glouberman's mastery of the ceremonies, for another. But the most remarkable thing about Trampoline Hall is the interaction between the audience and lecturer – the question-and-answer sessions that follow lectures are routinely the most interesting part of the evening. Often a crowd is charitably supportive of an unsure lecturer, and nearly as often they'll antagonize and get outright belligerent. In either case, the lectures seem more an excuse for the audience to interact than anything else: certainly no one I've ever talked to has attended the lectures for their informational value.

Again, Glouberman says, that's happened by design. Trampoline Hall is about getting a group of people together and interacting with them – the audience is a part of the show, not merely witness to it. 'Trampoline Hall is about the city,' he says.

And though he says he was slightly disappointed with the result, that connection between Toronto broadly and Trampoline Hall was never clearer than the night the mayor lectured.

These three elements of Toronto's current cultural/political landscape share some broad traits: a passion for quirkiness, for a start, and a small-is-beautiful, DIY aesthetic (aside from the TPSC's hate-on for corporate advertising and love of indie postering and *Spacing's* advocacy on behalf of the beauty of laneways and overlooked areas of beauty in the city, witness that both Trampoline Hall and Wavelength rejected larger venues after experimenting with them<sup>25</sup> because they felt intimacy was essential to their events).

They also share an aversion to commercialism that borders on the fanatical. In the case of the TPSC, with its *No Logo*, anti-corporatist roots, this is explicit. But Trampoline Hall has always operated with a money-losing cover charge of \$5,<sup>26</sup> and not only is there no merch table, but lecturers are forbidden to sell their latest book or album – or even plug it – from the stage. Wavelength, for its part, has always been Pay What You Can.

<sup>25</sup> And both, curiously, now find a home in the upstairs of Sneaky Dee's.

<sup>26</sup> Except twice when they had to rent chairs at Club Rockit, when it was \$6.

Up until this point, I may have implied that Wavelength, Trampoline Hall and the TPSC exist as solitary signposts. Far from it. They are merely the most visible and representative of tens and possibly hundreds of projects taking place within these three increasingly overlapping communities. Alongside Wavelength, there are a few influential record labels – Arts and Crafts, Paper Bag, Three Gut<sup>27</sup> – driving the Toronto indie-rock scene, and many music/dance/performance-art event series in roughly the Wavelength mould: the annual Fake Prom; Vazaleen, Will Munroe’s celebration of Alt-queer culture<sup>28</sup>; Jason Collett’s Radio Mondays songwriters’ night at Supermarket in Kensington; Tyler Clark Burke’s<sup>29</sup> Santa Cruz, a night of live music, slow dancing and fun art projects like the ‘video make-out booth.’ Trampoline Hall seems to be of a piece with Emily Schultz and Brian Joseph Davis’s<sup>30</sup> Pocket Canon series of anonymously authored chapbooks, Paola Poletto and Emily Pohl-Weary’s *Kiss Machine* literary magazine, the live ‘magazine’ run by Damian Rogers<sup>31</sup> called Pontiac Quarterly, and Glouberman’s own Room 101 game nights, at which people play games like Scrabble and charades. And, finally, the TPSC soldiers alongside people like the City Beautification Ensemble, who paint such things as concrete curbs and metal bike posts in bright colours; the [murmur] project, which records neighbourhood history for people to access by calling phone numbers posted on signs; the urban-exploration movement<sup>32</sup>; the Pedestrian Sundays in Kensington crew; and the New Mindspace collective, which has organized games of Capture the Flag in city streets and parties on subway cars.

Sometimes the events are hard to categorize. Take Manhunt, a weekly game organized by Ninja High School singer Matt Collins. It’s a game of tag played in public places – such as the financial district – every Thursday night. Most of the players are indie rockers who know each other from the Stillepost message board, but increasingly it’s attracting people from various other areas. It’s interesting to psychogeographers like the *Spacing* crew because it repurposes commercial space for recreational

27 Which, sadly, folded up shop in summer 2005.

28 Which predated Wavelength by a few months. I don’t mean to suggest that any of these are copycats, just that they share the same sensibility and excitement – and serve the same community – I’ve been discussing.

29 I have worked with Tyler at *Eye Weekly*, where she’s done design work.

30 Both have written for me at *Eye*, Emily once published a short story of mine in a magazine she edited (for which I was not paid) and I consider both friends.

31 Damian is the arts editor of *Eye Weekly* and is a close friend of mine. I’ve also read at every installment of Pontiac Quarterly.

32 Led by the recently deceased Ninjalicious of [www.infiltration.org](http://www.infiltration.org).

use – who says the PATH system is okay to work and shop in but not to play in? And, of course, it's lots of fun.

This points to another element of what's happening in Toronto right now. Not only is the scene larger than I have portrayed it, it's also less distinctly defined, and increasingly less so. Like the Catholic Trinity or a shamrock, there are three parts, certainly, but they form one whole. Many Wavelength performers have lectured at Trampoline Hall, for example, and indie-rock bands routinely play TPSC and *Spacing* fundraisers. In fact, Maggie MacDonald of the Hidden Cameras and Republic of Safety shared a house until very recently with Matt Blackett and Dave Meslin. Blackett has written for the Wavelength zine, and Sheila Heti was among the earliest contributors to *Spacing*. And on and on.

This is a community that's marked, above almost all else, by an irreverence that is notably lacking in cynicism. In fact, these groups I've been writing about are defined by an almost naive positivity about all of their events and undertakings, a desire to celebrate the communities they serve and the city at large.<sup>33</sup> It's one of the things that leads those in attendance at a concert or lecture, or those flipping through a copy of *Spacing* magazine, to begin to have the feeling I had at Trampoline Hall when Nino Ricci was speaking: the feeling that we are participating in something larger and more exciting than simply a cultural event, that we're actually a part of cultural history, of a mythology in the making. Because, very consciously, all of these things are meant to be something more than what they are on the surface. A concert. A night of lectures. A political protest. A magazine. In every case, the sense of community is primary and the performers or writers are almost secondary. And the community feels a tremendous sense of ownership. When Jonathan Bunce talked to a young Wavelengther about the possibility that it was time to retire the series, she told him he should just hand it over to another generation. The institution (his word; she compared it to a church) he and his friends had created in five years had become vastly important to hundreds of others in the city.

33 This is sometimes very explicit, such as in the case of the CD *Toronto Is Great!!!*, put out by Steve Kado's Blocks Recording Club and recorded in part at Wavelength, and Kado's Torontopia shows. Also notice the title of this book, and its contents.

It will be interesting to see, in the coming years, as the participants of this thriving arts and cultural circle mature into ever more prominent and influential demographics, how the Toronto of the future will look when people like Heti, Bunce, Meslin and their friends and followers – now almost all in their twenties and early thirties – move into a position to run things. In a way, with the election of Miller, the Torontopia movement already has one of its own in office. It's hard to predict how a Toronto built on the principles I've been describing will look – it will be, perhaps, a city in which the small, often overlooked details are celebrated, in which corporate wealth is suspect and a bizarrely irreverent playfulness is the prevailing ethos.

Perhaps, as Misha Gouberman told me, it's better not to play the dangerous utopian game of looking at how we can transform Toronto in the current scene's image; there's really no need to sit down and try to map out a strategy for a movement. The question of what this generation of Torontonians will do is already being answered. At concerts and in magazines and through political actions, tomorrow's history is being written right now by people who, for once, are not glancing south to New York or San Francisco or across the Atlantic to the Old World to gauge how we measure up against what a former mayor of ours always considered real world-class cities. This chapter of our mythology will feature a crowd of people who think there is no better place in the world to live than Toronto, people who are making Toronto a better and better place to live all the time.

**Pssst. Modern Toronto just wants some respect.**

Queen Victoria and her son King Edward still rule Toronto – the city’s older neighbourhoods are full of houses built in the style of their respective reigns. It’s a comfortable style, and a lot of us live on those streets and in those houses. But an outsider, or even a Torontonian, might be surprised to find out that Toronto contains a lot of buildings built in the modernist era. Some of them are grand and stand out, like the TD Centre, while others are quiet and go unnoticed, maybe tucked away in a cul-de-sac in Don Mills or North York. Even as we make a lot of noise about gingerbread and white picket fences, Toronto is still a relatively new city, and these modern buildings are just as much a part of our civic and geographic ontology as those neighbourhoods we revere because they’re a little bit older.

The mixed bag of architectural styles and the surprises we encounter as we walk through Toronto makes this city unlike any other. Toronto was once described to me as a cyber-punk city because of the way its glass skyscrapers blend in with those Victorian and Edwardian buildings. It’s new and old co-existing, a city built with *Blade Runner’s* production values, minus much of the filth, squalor and darkness. Instead, Toronto is filled with trees, parks and ravines. And while Toronto may not be a leader in historic preservation, the modern city hasn’t completely obliterated the past yet. The old stuff is still around and in use, so the cyber-punk analogy makes sense to me. This was the Toronto I saw on my all-too-brief visits to the city when I was a kid. In particular, I would notice the way bits of modernism stuck out from the older fabric of Toronto. Few things are as beautiful as seeing an Uno Prii apartment building, with curving concrete soaring to the sky, rise above the Annex. Better yet, the proximity of some of these urban, big-city buildings to some of Toronto’s wild and natural ravines makes our city of contradictions all the more striking. If

Toronto is a 'City Within a Park,' then these buildings are Le Corbusier's 'Tower in a Park' ideal writ large – and more exciting and populated than he may have envisioned. We've only just begun to celebrate these places, perhaps because we're not done venerating the pre-war era yet. Because we've focused on the old, we've let some of our truly optimistic places, in the modernist sense, slide into disrepair, neglect and, most shamefully, disrespect.

Toronto's modern 'revolution' sort of snuck upon us. Canada came of age in Montreal with Jean Drapeau, Expo 67 and Trudeauania. Montreal was our most important city, so that's where the big stuff happened, while Toronto was still a dirty provincial town. But while the nation was focused on Montreal, Toronto built itself up with little fanfare – bits and pieces here and there, scattered throughout the city like little modern utopias.

Certainly the biggest concentration of our optimistic modernism is found at the CNE and Ontario Place. Here our past and present are most at odds. As our values change like fashion, the modernism we built in the 1950s and 1960s is not being accorded the same respect as some older parts of our city. Ontario Place was our answer to Expo 67, but without the cultural importance. I've visited Ontario Place only once in the past sixteen years – and yet I've walked through the empty Expo 67 site numerous times, looking for relics. The white pods suspended over Lake Ontario are certainly the most striking part of the place, yet I'm not sure what they were used for, then or now. Toronto's Ministry of Hopefulness should be housed in them because they look as if they're waiting for just such a noble purpose.

My parents went there when it opened in 1971. The album that held pictures of that vacation was one of my favourites. I thought all of Toronto

must be like this: young, happy, clean, modern and undivorced. In the pictures, the people working there seemed to be very Ontario-proud, decked out in lime-green miniskirts with trilliums on them. A choir sang outside the Cinesphere. I don't think they do that anymore – singing probably isn't in Ontario's present-day budget or sensibility.

Though it's supposed to be happy, Ontario Place is a sad place. The sense of idealism has evaporated as the site is allowed to either fall into disrepair or be used in ways at odds with the original design. The Forum has been replaced by the Molson Amphitheatre, a generic outdoor concert venue, complete with frightening signs warning of 'Disallowed Items.' Toronto folk could see concerts in the round at the Forum, relaxing under the tent-like roof, surrounded by trees, with the city in the background. But what was a casual affair is now an overly regulated, secure, plastic-cup-only experience.

Across Lakeshore Boulevard, the CNE hasn't fared much better. We still have wonderful structures like the Better Living Centre, complete with the multicoloured Piet Mondrian/de Stijl-inspired ornament on top, and the Queen Elizabeth and Food buildings, as well as various fountains and monuments nearby. These buildings – like Gothic churches before them – were designed to lift our spirits and make us think of some kind of higher power (in the CNE's case, peace, order and good government perhaps). The Better Living Centre's north elevation remains as intended, but the south side, with its grand and wide staircase that looks as if it could float up to some Bauhaus heaven, now leads majestically to a chain-link fence and Lakeshore Boulevard's six lanes of arterial traffic. There's no reason to enter or exit here anymore. It's painful to see such design thwarted, either by lack of care or by redesigns that take structures out of their original context.

Perhaps the greatest blow to this optimistic age was the 1985 destruction of the Bulova Tower (originally the Shell Oil Tower), the first example of a welded steel and glass structure in our city when built in 1955. It was in the way of the Molson Indy. In fact, Molson paid the \$150,000 it cost to demolish it. Many didn't see an architectural value in it, including then mayor Art Eggleton, who told the *Toronto Star*, 'I think the money could be better spent on the other fine old buildings on the site.' Though Eggleton speeds towards the dustbin of history now, we're still without our tower and stuck with the Molson Indy. It's because of the Indy, and the need for empty space for its grandstands, that there is so much empty, treeless, underused space at the CNE.

Exhibition Stadium used to fill up some of that parking lot. Just to the east of the Better Living Centre is a plaque in the ground that outlines the

footprints of the old grandstands, as well as some of the old seats from the stadium. In 1988, on our Grade Eight class trip to Toronto, the bus dropped us off in this spot. We sat in the outfield, right behind George Bell. The Jays lost that day, but I was in awe of it all. The whole site is a landscape of our collective memories, the best days of all of our lives, memorialized in a parking lot.

As much as I would miss it, I almost think it would be better to tear down this wonderful stuff if it isn't going to be treated right. In 1893, Chicago built a magnificent 'White City' of pristine Beaux Arts buildings for the World's Fair. As the fair came to a close, people began to wonder what might happen to these buildings; the fear of letting them fall into disrepair was a worry even then. In *Cosmopolitan* that December, after the fair came to a close, Norwegian-American writer Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen wrote: 'Better to have it vanish suddenly, in a blaze of glory, than fall into gradual disrepair and dilapidation. There is no more melancholy spectacle than a festal hall, the morning after the banquet, when the guests have departed and the lights are extinguished.' I felt that melancholy in full one quiet night last year, when a friend and I were wandering around the empty grounds after the CNE was over. We climbed up the back of the Music Building, an older building with a glass dome. We sat on the roof for a while, looking at the city rise above the empty land, listening to the hum of the Gardiner.

I'm not ready for a blaze of glory here. For me, the lights at the CNE, or even Ontario Place, haven't been extinguished yet, but I wonder if it's just my imagination filling in the blanks, and my love of these buildings, that causes me to feel good when I'm near them, even while they are being treated so poorly.

These modern utopias are scattered throughout our city. When our crown jewel, the new City Hall, was opened in 1965, it was one of the indications – maybe even the exact moment – that the city was evolving from its uptight 'Toronto the Good' reputation to something else – something Victoria or Edward could not have dreamed of. Even as heavyweights like Ludwig Mies van der Rohe built the TD Centre, Toronto architects were quietly filling our city with new buildings. Peter Dickinson built structures like the Benvenuto Place apartments at the top of the Avenue Road hill, the Continental Can Building on the southwest corner of Bay and College, and the Juvenile and Family Courts building on Jarvis. John B. Parkin Associates designed the Ontario Association of Architects building at 50 Park Road, Don Mills Collegiate Institute and the Sidney Smith Hall at the University of Toronto. Unsung Toronto modernist Peter Etherington

designed the bank building on the southeast corner of College and Spadina (now home to a generic Burger King — but notice how its cornice matches the rooflines of the older buildings to the south). The O’Keefe Centre, both New and Massey Colleges, the Colonnade on Bloor and apartment clusters around places like Davisville were all part of Toronto’s modern building boom that took place in Montreal’s shadow. Even the Pavilions on the Toronto Islands were well done in the modern style, winning a Massey Medal in 1964.

I got to live in one of our unsung modern utopias when I first moved to Toronto in 2000. My roommate, Heather, and I lived at 40 Pleasant Boulevard, one block south of Yonge and St. Clair. We moved from Windsor together, her to be near her boyfriend, me to live in the city I had always wanted to live in. A high-rise tower wasn’t where I expected to live; the image I had had of my Toronto life was somewhere in the Annex, maybe on Brunswick Avenue, on the third floor of some old house, with a claw-foot tub and other quaint stuff. But in 2000 we were having trouble finding a house like that because it was the height of a tight rental market, just before the condo glut started opening things up. As a result, we saw mostly apartments in buildings, not in cute little houses.

So we looked up, riding the elevators of some of Toronto’s finer mid- to low-end buildings. On an overcast day we went to see a place in the horrific-looking building that sits in the wedge of land at Vaughan Road and Bathurst, just south of St. Clair. Though it’s an ugly building, the view from the apartment we saw was stunning. People who disdain apartment buildings forget that the view from the top is often pretty good. With the open vistas and sprawling views, it’s almost like living in the country.

We had one more place to see, but Heather and I agreed we would take this place if the next one wasn’t better. That place was 40 Pleasant, the left half of two connected buildings called Commonwealth Towers. The thin white buildings, built in 1968, rise from one shared eight-storey-high rectangular parking garage podium. On the eighth floor, in between the two buildings, there is a grassy park with little earthen mounds and paved paths. In the middle, there’s a small swimming pool.

The Serbian superintendent showed us the apartment on the nineteenth floor. After we saw the place, we went to the Timothy’s on the corner to figure out what to do. In the bathroom, I decided that this was the one to take. It wasn’t an old house or in the Annex, and it was sort of expensive, but I couldn’t say no. It was that childhood vision of modern Toronto, and it seemed like what big-city living was all about.

The building became home, and I got a kick out of showing off some of the features to visitors. The lobbies of 40 and 60 Pleasant each have

an identical fountain that looks like a Sputnik spraying water into its own little pool. Urban-planner types now call this sort of thing a 'water feature,' an underwhelming term for a wonderful thing. Unfortunately, they are behind locked iron fences, so I called them the 'caged Sputniks.' I still bring people by the buildings when we're in the neighbourhood to look at the fountains behind the glass.

The area around the elevators has big rectangular couches underneath square wooden tubes with lights installed in them; the lighting is directed down so it's soft and low. The colours are various shades of dark brown. It's all vaguely Japanese, or what I think of as 1960s Japanese: the kind of place where Kurosawa would have shot one of his modern epics. On a completely different cultural note, one of the walls has a Mayan-like concrete mosaic. It's exotic ethnic appropriation at its best. This place must have really been swinging when it was built, so much so that people wouldn't worry about the mixed metaphors used in the design. That our building was attached to the St. Clair subway station made it seem extra cosmopolitan – as if the building were part of the infrastructure of the rest of the city. I could count the steps from my bedroom to the subway platform.

The apartment itself was standard building fare, but there was lots of glass and we could see the CN Tower, the lake, and even St. Catharines on the few smog-free days Toronto gets. In fact, with the doors open, the bathroom had a clear view of the tower – the mark of any good Toronto home, I figure. It could have met the sidewalk in a better way – there is too much parking garage there now – and the rooftop park is private rather than public space, but the demographic is still fairly heterogeneous, making it an interesting place to live.

There is a cluster of similar apartment buildings in the area, built in the same era as our building. A fine place to see it all was from the Rosehill Reservoir Park, just to the south. The reservoir has been covered over with grass and reflecting pools. The grass is often soggy because the soil isn't deep enough to absorb big rainfalls. The park is surrounded by buildings on two sides, with trees around the other two. I would sometimes walk the dog in the park and watch the sun set behind those buildings, casting long, perfect shadows across the grass. In the middle of the park is another space-age fountain – this time a big atom-like structure. There are plaques around dedicating it to the anniversary of Confederation in 1967.

To the east of the park is a deep ravine. There's a path off Avoca Avenue that descends quickly into the ravine. The sounds of the city disappear, replaced by cool humidity and mosquitoes. I would often go running through the park, under the road and railway bridges high overhead, along the stream that flowed beneath the Rosedale mansions perched

at the top of hills. Abruptly, the stream disappears into a culvert, reappearing on the other side of Mount Pleasant, on its way to the Don River. Toronto is firmly in control of nature here.

There's something particularly magnificent about the way clean modern lines rise up out of both the natural and older parts of the city. I'm glad this was my first Toronto apartment. I think I'd have always wondered what it was like had I not lived at a place like 40 Pleasant. And maybe I understand, or appreciate, a place like Ontario Place better for having lived in a building of that era. Where you live affects the way you view the city. Right now I do live in one of those three-storey Annex homes on Dupont. I can hear sidewalk conversations from my kitchen window as people walk by. When I lived up in the air, I didn't get such a street-level show, but I felt a little more connected to the city in a wider sense. I watched thunderstorms cross the city from west to east, and on Victoria Day I saw hundreds of backyard fireworks displays in one glance.

I like that our modern experiments remain with us, and if some of us choose to, we can still live in them, or visit on occasion. We have a complicated relationship with these buildings; I feel as if we've let them down for the time being. But when fashion comes around and we decide these are valuable parts of Toronto, we'll take down the chain link fences and give them new coats of paint worthy of the utopian visions that created them.