

Entrepreneurial

Landscapes

Creating inventive spaces for micro-enterprises

TEXT BY JON WOODSIDE

The gradual decline of the inner-suburbs in Toronto has generated a lot of discussion in recent years. In 2010 the University of Toronto's City Centre re-released a report called "The Three Cities within Toronto," which focused attention on the economic disparity between different areas of the city. It is the inner-suburbs that have fared the worst, often physically cut off from economic opportunities by poor transportation infrastructure and a lack of services.

However, my own experience in the Markham and Eglinton community, one of the "priority neighbourhoods" that are common in the inner suburbs, revealed a community that, while frustrated, is still vigorous, energized by diversity, and full of entrepreneurial spirit. Tapping in to that spirit has inspired several people around the city to execute a new approach to community development. Many of these experiences reveal that landscape architecture can play a critical role in the renewal of inner-suburban communities. In particular, landscape architecture with a focus on growing small business can help to enhance economic resiliency.

Michael Donahue, the director of the Toronto Business Development Centre, explains that the vast majority of new businesses begin in the home using the intellectual capital of the entrepreneur. But the challenges come quickly once these businesses try to expand outside the home. Donahue asks us to consider the ideal context for such a transition. He points to the Wychwood Barns in Toronto as a model of a highly successful transition. This old, decommissioned TTC transit yard has been repurposed into a live/work space featuring a farmers' market—a great venue for small businesses to "launch an item, test that market, and generate revenue."

Yet the average suburban landscape has few such amenities for small businesses. Donahue suggests that a lack of similar opportunities among suburban styles of development is because rental opportunities for retail or warehouse locations tend to be too large to be affordable for small businesses. For Jeb Brugmann, a Toronto-based urban consultant and the author of *Welcome to the Urban Revolution*, this is the jumping-off point of a real opportunity for designers.

Brugmann's solution is to create an infrastructure ladder for micro-entrepreneurs, leading step-by-step from informal home-based businesses towards more formal businesses with employees, which benefits the entire community. For example, a business currently advertising catering or laundry services with a sign in an apartment window could expand by finding "a place to [work] two days a week like a market" before becoming full time from a "little hole in the wall or a sidewalk in front of someone else's store," and then finally to a location in a strip mall or integrated into the business of another retail outfit.

In this vision, what emerges is a "high density of compatible economic uses" that lets businesses build on their neighbours' efforts and provide complementary services which circulate money through the community and multiply the value of each local success.

At Scadding Court Community Centre, at the corner of Bathurst and Dundas in Toronto, a striking line of orange shipping containers is an example of how this approach might work. Remodeled as small shops or food vending outlets and assembled along the Dundas Street sidewalk next to the community centre, these repurposed shipping containers create a low-cost yet engaging marketplace that has become a lunchtime hot spot.

According to architect and lead consultant on the Scadding Court project, Janna Levitt, of Levitt Goodman Architects, creating a welcoming face from a shoestring budget is the ultimate balancing act when working on this type of project. The budget must be geared to a frugal micro-entrepreneurial class.

Could the same treatment be successful on the underused lawns along sidewalks in the shadow of Toronto's suburban concrete towers? The people at Scadding Court think so, and have just received a grant to help encourage these projects throughout suburban locations across the city.



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Or, perhaps these projects will have to start even smaller, with even more temporary structures being used to minimize costs. Thinking through these stages of growth, surveying the existing small and medium-sized business community, and integrating the necessary infrastructure into a landscape currently dominated by large-scale land uses is what landscape architects will have to work through if they are to take advantage of these opportunities. As Brugmann sees it, landscape architects have a terrific understanding of how to mold physical density to create vibrant spaces, "and must bring that same craft and sensitivity to economic density."

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01-02/ Repurposed shipping containers on a sidewalk in Toronto have revitalized the area with entrepreneurial economic activity.

IMAGES/ Courtesy Scadding Court Community Centre