





When you look at an image of a cityscape, do you see merely buildings, billboards and traffic lights? Or do you see architecture and landscape co-existing in a harmonious flow, one complimenting the other to form continuous, functional aesthetics. PLANT Architect Inc. sees the latter. In fact, they design the latter in Canada's largest urban canvas — Toronto. They are an award-winning practice that combines architecture, landscape and design with a vision toward timeless urban redevelopment and renewal across spatial scales and traditional disciplinary borders.

PLANT was founded in 1995 by partners Lisa Rapoport, Chris Pommer, and Mary Tremain. The studio is based in Toronto and is comprised of architects and landscape architects. They specialize in institutional, commercial, and residential architecture and landscape architecture, interiors, public space design, urban infrastructure, feasibility studies, and master planning.

Spotlight on Business spoke with partner Lisa Rapoport about PLANT's beginnings, their unique interdisciplinary design approach, and PLANT's commitment to public engagement.



# PLANT

By John Allaire

Like many small, young architecture offices, we were taking on residential work at first," Rapoport explains. "At the same time, we were taking on projects that were also focusing on the landscape. I had done work on my thesis about the interconnection between architecture and landscape... this rolled into a project called 'Sweet Farm.' It was a widely publicized project, and its success really launched our direction in the office."

PLANT's website illustrates that Sweet Farm was more than just a pivotal project for them in defining their place in the world of architecture and landscape synergy. It opened their eyes to redefining spaces and their usage on a number of scales and levels.

It's worth taking a moment to explain what Sweet Farm is, and why it is significant in the world of architecture. Physically, it is an 85-acre private park in Quebec's Eastern Townships. The project developed a series of architectural, sculptural, and landscape 'interventions' along a network of natural paths through a varied natural landscape. Interventions such as a forest dining area, a woodshed, tower, mink cage garden and belvedere enhance and point to natural and man made features and the sensuous aspects of the site — heightening the visitor's experience of the existing landscape — as if one were seeing them for the first time.

Interventions were built with material harvested from or found on the site. A continuously evolving project, Sweet Farm has began construction in 1994, and interventions were built over the following seven years.

Transposing that experience to the hustle and bustle of the big city, Toronto's overall architectural style lends itself perfectly to a design studio that places emphasis





on both the interior and exterior living spaces. Rapoport explains, "A very typical situation in Toronto is, you have an old house and it's probably Victorian, so they're very cramped with lots of little rooms, and they have a poor connection to the backyard, because at the time, Victorians thought yards were the place where you put your garbage. They weren't really valued usable places. So typically, people would renovate and open up the interior, put big beautiful windows on the back of the house, and look at a crappy backyard!"

## "The city needs to be a place that is actively nurturing social interaction."

PLANT decided that, when they undertook such projects, they would educate clients on the benefits of renewing the outdoor space to compliment the architecture. "We started doing, what we referred to as 'outdoor living' spaces," Rapoport points out. "In some cases they were gardens, and in some cases they weren't. But they were spaces that had synergy with the architecture."

The ensuing work followed two quite different streams of scale: the typical narrow 20'x110' Toronto lots with existing Victorian or war-time housing, and; larger public spaces and urban landscapes that followed a familiar model. "We were exploring these much larger landscapes that launched off of the popular Sweet Farm project.

In essence, it was looking at a landscape that already existed where there was poor human interaction in the space... we were designing these architectural structures that were more about navigating and interacting with the landscape than they were about the architecture itself."

Looking at projects through this wider lens meant bringing new faces and new talents into the fold at PLANT. "There was a point in the practice where we said, if we really want to change the conversation about what we want to design and produce, then we have to start having conversations with actual landscape architects, and start hiring them to work with us. So now, the office is actually close to 50/50 between architects and landscape architects."

Eventually, this philosophy, armed with this wider breadth of talent, brought them right downtown to work on some very high profile public spaces. PLANT was working with the City of Toronto, re-designing public parklands and creating monuments with a view toward improving human interaction. The thinking behind the renewal was along the lines of better public engagement with the city's outdoors. "If people understand the landscape, they will become stewards of the landscape. They can embrace it and feel a sense of ownership with it. This helps with the City's mandate to provide spaces people enjoy living in and are proud of."

One of PLANT's largest and most visible of the public space developments is Nathan Phillips Square, an urban plaza in Toronto. It forms the forecourt to Toronto City Hall in the city's core, and is named for Nathan Phillips, mayor of Toronto from 1955 to 1962. The square itself was originally designed by City Hall's architect at the time Viljo Revell and landscape architect Richard Strong. It opened in 1965 and is the site of concerts, art displays, a weekly farmers' market, the winter festival of lights, and other public events. During the winter months, the reflecting pool is converted into an ice rink for ice skating. The square attracts an estimated 1.5 million visitors yearly.

PLANT won a design competition to revitalize the Square



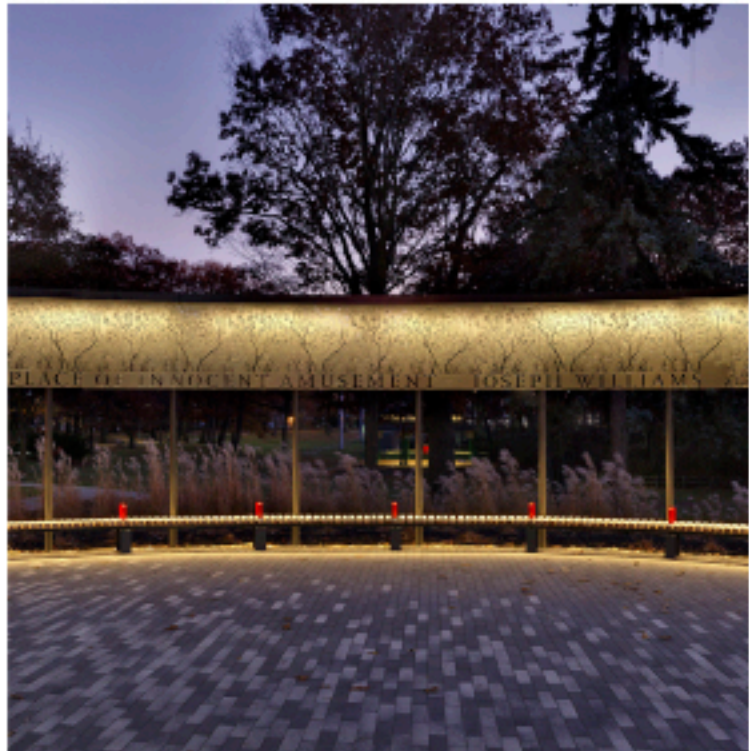
and modernize its aesthetics and functionality. Rapoport explains that they were perfectly suited to implement their design outlook and process to this high-profile public space. “We really felt the big challenge with Nathan Phillips Square was, that there are these amazing buildings and amazing architecture in that public space, but there was a very poor understanding of how to activate the space into an area that the public would use and embrace.”

Rapoport offers that PLANT’s improvements to the space have made the iconic area of Toronto a single, identifiable entity, rather than a collection of independent elements. “Today it’s difficult to tell where the architecture ends and the landscape begins. It’s completely integrated.” Moreover, successfully completing this project opened many doors for the firm and their desire to redesign public spaces around Toronto, including landscapes in and around universities and other public institutions. In fact, PLANT received a Governor General’s Medal for the Nathan Phillips Square project.

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However, much of PLANT’s interest remains in the neighbourhoods and the opportunity to do a bit of urban planning that is representative of the community’s culture and vibe. Rapoport explains, “Public space is a place for community building and social interaction. The reason for living in the city is for abundant social interaction. So if you think about it that way, then the city needs to be a place that is actively nurturing social interaction.”

She points out that beautification is just one of many



elements that make for a usable and sustainable public space. “Obviously we want to make it beautiful and easy to maintain. But there are many spaces that don’t exude this nurturing and socially encouraging feeling. So we work with communities and even do streetscape plans with them. Maybe 4 to 10 blocks long, for example. We look at doing things like parkettes or gathering places. Or maybe it’s a street that could be closed down on Saturdays for a market. We can design the spaces that draw people in, not rush people through. That’s where our interest is.”

PLANT’s versatility has led them into a number of adaptive reuse projects for the corporate world. For example, recently they converted an old warehouse space formerly

used to process garbage into a craft brewery. These types of projects are on the upswing as cities continually redefine their industrial and corporate base, and therefore, their use and reuse of physical structures and assets.

One word that Rapoport shies away from is "style" — style in the sense that she finds linking PLANT's projects with any one manner of design is limiting. "We're very process oriented," she insists. "We don't come to a client in the first design meeting and say 'here is the answer.' It's a very collaborative process with the clients, but it also builds on itself throughout the project. So we start off and only show plans and ideas. We never show what the overall form is going to be to start with. So people are making decisions as the design progresses based on flow of space, connectivity, their lifestyle, efficiency of space, and so on."

Rapoport also admits that budgets for many of their residential rehabilitation projects can run from five to seven figures depending on the client and their needs. But she stresses that, regardless of budget, there are methods of making a difference in the synergy between house and land. "We are very conscious of making the space feel very open with good flow, long views and connectivity to the landscape. And we can usually do this within the budget presented to us."

When choosing PLANT to design renovations, many clients have told them that their work, while modern and contemporary, looks more "livable" than the stiffer, less inviting offerings of other contemporary offerings. Rapoport says they design with warmth and colour in mind. "There's a kind of softness to much of our design. It's still contemporary, but you can also feel OK putting your grandmother's antique dresser in the space. We like to make sure we accommodate real life."

A large part of being able to accommodate real life, whether it be in a backyard on a residential street or in a grand public concert space, is dealing with the client on their terms. Rapoport explains, "When you work on big public projects, you work with bureaucracies and large developers. When you work on houses, you are generally working with people who have never hired a consultant before. It's a very personal process. What sets us apart is we are comfortable working in both these worlds."

From boardrooms to backyards, PLANT is making a difference in how the residents of Canada's largest city interact with their surroundings. So go ahead. Take a walk through Toronto. If you find yourself in an inviting public space where you feel connected to the landscape, now you'll know why! ●

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