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MATTHEW KIM

NEWS & VIEWS

Breaking the icyness

TORONTO NEEDS TO DROP THE ATTITUDE AND INTERACT
MATTHEW KIM

Forget sustainable buildings, eco-friendly cars, and renewable energy. Designer's need to solve that infamous Toronto reticence.

That's the premise behind *Icebreakers – Creating Common Ground by Design*, the latest from those urban re-thinkers *OpenCity Projects*. In partnership with *Luminato* and OCAD, they've put together an student exhibition of design solutions to solitude.

Really, Toronto? It's come to this?

The solutions proposed are intelligent, considered, and progressive, if a little quixotic. A game of pong to be played by commuters on either side of the divide while waiting for the subway; a street furniture program for the financial district powered by pennies; a Kensington Market project intended to foster a cultural dialogue with the Chinese community through the symbol of the dragon.

The problem is anything but. It's the result of base, selfish, regressive thinking that favours complacency and comfort over public concern.

How many times have we witnessed a pedestrian move slowly across an intersection while a car waits to turn? Or have had to walk onto the grass because a couple ignored the need to share the sidewalk? How many times have we pushed through a crowd gathered at the front of subway doors only to find that the middle of the car is empty?

It's utterly humiliating that third-year students from OCAD had to devise ways to interact in a city where coldness extends far beyond the winter months. Isn't it?

I posed this question to Job Rutgers, whose third-year OCAD industrial design class he teaches with Wendy Gold produced the exhibition.

"Toronto is like a salad bowl," he says in a mild but noticeable Dutch accent that tapers each word, "but nobody does the mixing."

Rutgers arrived in Toronto four years ago from the Netherlands and was "shocked" by the "ugliness."

Our thoroughfares were crude but functional, the people a bit cold. It took him some time to discover the tree-lined streets, where the animated Torontonians smiled as he passed, was to be found in between the major streets.



"This city is like a beautiful jacket worn inside out," he says.

When asked if he thinks this is an absurd problem to have to solve, he said, "Yes, in the sense that Toronto is an urban city and it should have learned this a long time ago. No, in the sense that Toronto, being an experiment in immigration, having people from all other countries, could do a better job in facilitating connections between the very diverse population."

OK, it very well may be that Toronto's diverse make-up inhibits socializing in a way that more homogeneous cities like Turin don't have to think about. I'm not sure what the cause is. But, as a citizenry, we should take this exhibition to be wake up call from the tired, redundant, and absurd problem of a legendary inconsiderateness that borders on sociopathic.

In other cities, public works don't include bridges spanning the person-to-person divide. It doesn't have to in ours either.

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