

## **Saving Toronto**

From the series *Saving Toronto* published in the Toronto Sun  
August 2008

Saving Toronto from what? Saving it from becoming just another global city, that's my guess.

Global cities are all replacing culture with lifestyles, obsessed with wealth generation, prosperity, negotiated space, retail optimization, gimmicks and museums and theme parks to wow tourists and investors. All of them touting "knowledge economies" and creativity as a tag line to wishful branding.

The equation everyone fails to get is---economic prosperity follows on good urban citizenship. What does that mean? It means living in a neighborhood where your neighbor knows at least as much about you as the government does. It means civic care, it means loyalty and even love for your city or community. This means fewer surveillance cameras, more trust, less culture of fear...in short, it means a strong "social capital".

Toronto had that. We are losing it. Lots of flags waving diversity and no means of really finding what bonds us together .

Civility was Toronto's greatest resource. Now it merely works because of protocol, bylaws and an old Upper Canada ethic of business before pleasure and an entrepreneurial macho attractive to lifestyle lovers.

David Miller, David Crombie, and some others have tried very hard to place passion as a foundation for getting out of silos and working together to make a great town. We don't have a great town; we have a flashy town and a somewhat safe one.

The truth: Toronto has attracted, and still does, some of the gentlest people in the world (we call them "open-minded", "tolerant"). We have a civic grace that we hide from each other, because we worship "peace, order and good government". Time to get past that and manufacture an appetite for life.

Tourists and investors will come, not for the amenities and conveniences they can get anywhere else but because they might see in Toronto a kind of inter-civic grace they can't find anywhere else.

No point building pedestrian-friendly environments if people don't look at each other as they pass each other. No point to safe environments if there are no children or lovers playing on the streets. Drive the subdivisions. They are evacuated. Balmy summer nights, and hardly anyone taking a stroll except on the trendy metropolitan byways. The GTA is witness to the disaster of the global city....the public realm is being evacuated. This means no quality of life, however prosperous the economy.

Torontonians have to rediscover, acclaim and enjoy the gentle nature that seeks the act of hospitality by civic interaction. This means more benches, more designs that lead people to each other, fewer prohibitive signs and a budget for signage that encourages people to mix, risk and create. No point to a lovely public park if you've got a sign saying "park closes at 10 pm".

It ain't the councillors that do this. It's the people who are afraid and joined to a culture of fear propagated by media and the screens they surf on an average of four hours a day.

The great city of the future will be that city which is expert and happy in civil encounter -- not IT connectedness, but inter-civic intimacy with a citizenry that knows a city is a place where you discover your destiny through others, by meeting them! And we are all of us less and less willing to do that, so we use each other as information resources, sources of labor and measurements of lifestyle success.

The job of saving Toronto is in each citizen. Not leaders, not designers, not culture managers, much less banks, foundations and capital spending.

Reclaim the public realm. Make it vibrant. Enter it without retail justification, purposiveness. Ignore the cruisers, the no loitering signs, the watchful paranoids who are leery of your entering within two feet of their proximity. Remember that cars only take you so far, bikes only take you so far, walking only takes you so far...but a smile goes a long, long way. Therein lies the liberation of what Richard Florida calls a city's "psychology". Remember that a great city is not just a place where you can enjoy yourself, but where you enjoy yourself by enjoying others. Walt Whitman once said, "A great city is a place with the greatest men and women; even if it be a few shacks, it is still the greatest city in the world".

Truth is a smile=inter-civic hospitality=creativity and innovation= economic prosperity. We might save our bank books as well as our souls.

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