



Architecture

## A plan to make a tough spot a welcoming one

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River City is among the best-designed condominium projects to come on to Toronto's real-estate market so far this year. Crafted by the celebrated Montreal firm of Saucier + Perrotte Architects and Toronto-based ZAS Architects for Urban Capital Property Group, the complex of buildings and green patches is artistically svelte, urbane and intellectually sharp.

But it has, or had, a problem: the Eastern Avenue flyover across the Don River, a massive chunk of infrastructure that cuts the River City site in half.

The architects' solution involved an intelligent division of their scheme into two workable sections, one on each side of the ramps. For its part, Urban Capital decided last spring to turn a lemon into lemonade by developing the muddy wasteland beneath the traffic decks into an unusual public park that links the two components of the scheme. Last week, Toronto got its first substantial glimpse of Underpass Park, the playground for people of every age that Urban Capital has in mind.

The unveiling took place at a public event hosted by River City developer David Wex in the condo's east-side sales centre. (Judging from the display of chic urban gear, I'd guess the audience of a hundred or so was composed of real-estate industry professionals, some architects and a sprinkling of design-savvy citizens without portfolio.) On hand to serve up their visions of Underpass Park were its architect, Greg Smallenberg, partner in the Vancouver firm of Phillips Farevaag Smallenberg, and Toronto artist and architect Paul Raff, the award-winning founder and principal of Paul Raff Studio, who will supply the public artwork.

The images Mr. Smallenberg presented underscored his intention to deliver no ordinary prettification of the ramps' underbelly. The ceiling is hard and low, the architect said, "but high enough to create an urban room." If all goes according to plan, this spacious room will become a zone of recreation and relaxation, sheltered from rain and snow, for the new River City community and for the city.

Different kinds of paving – crushed granite, rubberized material and so on – will define the walkways that meander through the site and the locations designated for the community-level activities Mr. Smallenberg hopes will emerge there. They might include farmers' markets, sports, theatrical performances, even allotment gardens in the portions that receive sufficient sunshine through gaps in the fabric of the flyover, or some other deployment, unknown at this stage, to be determined by the neighbours. Underpass Park will be that kind of open space: neither vacuous nor fastidiously programmed, not overfurnished, and, because it is

so spare, frankly at peace with its situation underneath a mammoth structure of concrete and steel.

Lighting will be crucial, as it is in every public destination. The trick, Mr. Smallenberg said, will be to maintain a sense of safety and security for users, while not over-lighting and thus banishing the tough, shadowy, underground atmosphere beneath the transportation decks. If it works, the architect's plan for illuminating the park – subtle and not too bright, but deft and smart – could become an example for other designers faced with lighting difficult spots in the urban landscape.

In the artwork he has proposed for the park site, Mr. Raff plays a similarly sophisticated game, this time with sunlight, the artificial radiance of downtown buildings, the glow of the city sky at night.

Mr. Raff's piece, entitled *Mirage*, will consist of many finely polished stainless steel panels suspended from the underside of the ramps. The parts of the panels that are opaque will create a mirage-like reflection (hence the title) that mirrors the parade under the decks and seems to double the height of the ceiling. The transparent slices in the panels will admit views of the sky into the composition. The result should be a shifting field of semi-abstract imagery gathered from earth and sky, from darkness and light, all of it hovering like a shining cloud over the heads of passersby.

Concern with the sky – especially with the ways atmospheric phenomena are framed by the intervals between buildings, by windows, by cracks in the urban ceiling – has long been central to Mr. Raff's art and architecture. The Underpass Park work, his first permanent outdoor art project, promises to be a complex, arresting embodiment of his interest, and a remarkable contribution to Toronto's array of artworks in the public realm. We'll be watching with interest the place-making of Mr. Smallenberg and Mr. Raff as it unfolds in the months and years to come.