

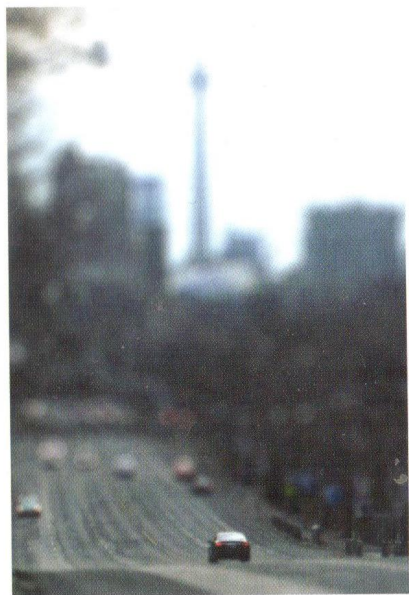
TORONTO'S SPATIAL ODDITIES



Visitors to Toronto — or any new city — immediately notice differences between our city and theirs. A Dutch friend of mine was recently surprised by our hydro poles: “They’re like giant trees in the middle of the sidewalk!” In our own city, we stop seeing these things as unique, if we notice them at all.

But sometimes we temporarily gain the vision of a visitor’s eyes. On a recent trip to Mexico City, I was confronted with a completely new world of urban typologies: temporary street “restaurants” erected daily, entire intersections taken over by tire shops (with a very liberal view of street encroachment), and sidewalks resurfaced in varying materials by private residents and businesses.

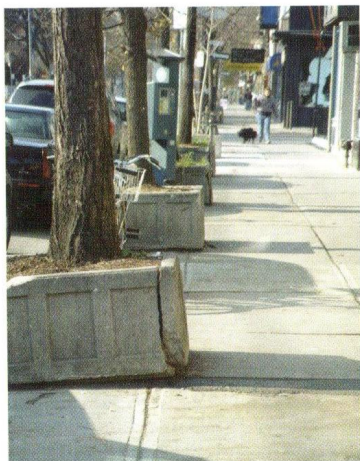
Once back in Toronto, I was struck by spatial curiosities that I had stopped noticing — or maybe had never really noticed at all. These physical details contribute to the city’s identity, but are often overlooked in favour of more photogenic features like our ravines, parks, and collection of distinct neighbourhoods. † **EMILY WAUGH**



† The convenience store/garden centre

Paris has its newsstands, New York, its bodegas. But in Toronto we have the most curious of conveniences. In this true “variety” store, you can find cigarettes, candy, light bulbs inside, and a full selection of annuals — or pumpkins, or Christmas trees — outside on the sidewalk.

photo by Patrick Cummins



← The saddest street trees in the world

For a city whose oft-lauded urban forest is worth a reported \$7 billion, Toronto has surprisingly pitiful street trees. Wedged optimistically into cramped concrete planters, they’re so embarrassing that many small businesses try to spruce them up with flowers, benches, turf, and even installation art.

photo by Alexa Clark

→ Washroom? On the left, down the stairs

If you’ve ever dined out in Toronto (even in fairly fancy restaurants), you’ve probably had the experience of navigating the rickety stairs with the “Watch your head” sign, past the root cellar/mop closet/prep kitchen/manager’s office to the dank basement washroom. It always feels oddly like trespassing, but, owing to the city’s characteristic long and narrow lots, there’s really nowhere else to go.

photo by Wayan Vota



† Brick!

Like the terracotta of Florence’s roofs or the mud brick of Shibam, Yemen’s tower houses, Toronto’s local red clay informs the city’s visual identity. Much of Toronto was rebuilt with bricks from the Don Valley after the fire of 1904 destroyed many older wooden structures.

photo by End User

† Flat. Except where it isn’t

At first glance Toronto is as distinctively flat as San Francisco is sloped — until you try to bike north toward St. Clair Avenue and find yourself walking your bicycle up the Bathurst Street (or Christie Street, or Dufferin Street, or Avenue Road) hill marking the ancient Lake Iroquois shoreline. [see map on pg. 12.]

photo by Half my Dad’s age