In defence of glass towers

While some warn against glass-walled structures, technological advances and imagination have led to some amazing designs

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I like the shine, lift and futurism of numerous glazed residential towers that have dotted Toronto's downtown cityscape in recent years.

That's not saying all of these buildings measure up uniformly to high artistic standards. But it is saying that even the less imaginative ones often show what a beautiful, luxe and urbane material contemporary glass has become.

Nor, as I found out a couple of weeks ago, have developers run out of ways to apply glass solutions to the outfitting of high-rise buildings.

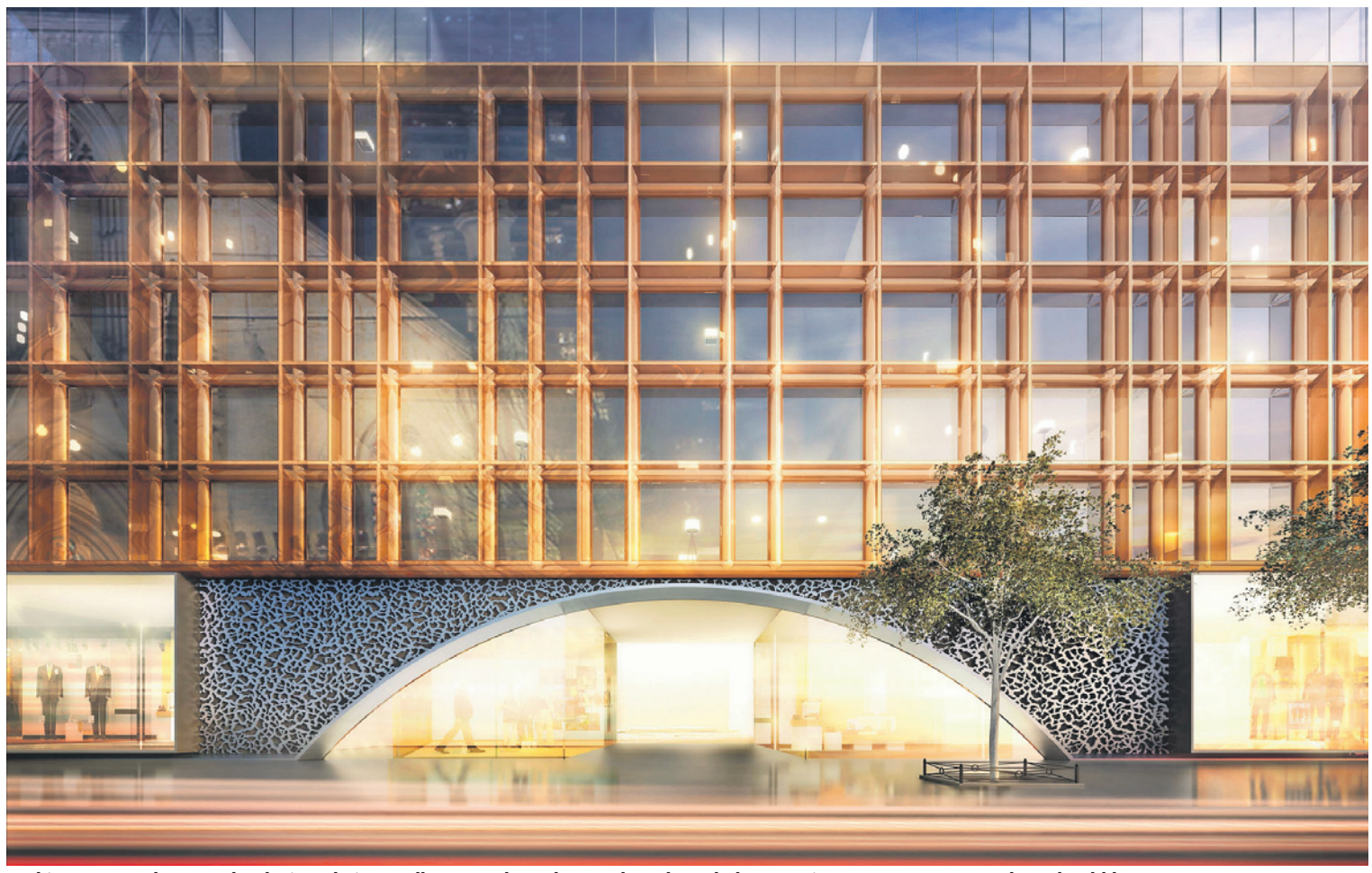
Take, for example, what is happening at Sixty Colborne, a glassy new inner-city condominium project by Peter Freed just east of Yonge Street. Four ample units stand at the corners of the complex, each with an area between about 1,000 square feet and 2,000 square feet. (Prices range from just under $705,000 to over $1.4-million.) The problem: At those prices, prospective home-owners would probably want a balcony, and none of the suites has one.

To remedy this lack, Mr. Freed is offering (for about $50,000 on top of the unit price) to modify the glass walls of the suite so they can be slid aside. The result, when the wall is fully open, will be a gap 16 feet wide and extending from floor to ceiling, which should transform a corner of the apartment into a balcony-like space.

This modest move – which I've not seen in high-rises elsewhere – will attractively blur the normally firm line between outside and inside, city and home. With Mr. Freed's innovation in place, house-owners can have the pleasure of a terrace (when they want one) without paying for a balcony they only use a few months of the year.

But despite the facts about its celebrity and versatility – manufacturers are churning out new products all the time, consumer demand for glazed apartments is high, developers and architects continue to come up with interesting things to do with it – glass has been attacked far and wide in recent years.

To cite just one local instance: CBC Toronto's popular Metro Morning website advises us that "building scientists have known for a long time that glass-walled structures are less energy efficient than the stone and concrete buildings that were put up forty or fifty years ago … [I]ndustry insiders warn that as energy costs climb, glass towers may become the 'pariah' buildings of the future."



Architect Peter Clewes, who designed Sixty Colborne and nearly 20 other glass-clad towers in Toronto, says new glass should last 35-40 years.

Four units at Sixty Colborne that don't have balconies will be offered the option of having sliding glass walls.

The same series of witheringly critical articles and broadcasts quotes high-profile researchers who have weighed in against the cladding of tall towers with glass. One of them is Ted Kesik, an engineer and professor of building science at the University of Toronto, who has separately published his findings and remarks on the Web. (His article can be easily located by Googling the author's name.)

The current real-estate boom, Mr. Kesik writes, has created a generation of towers wrapped in glass systems that will probably fail after only "15 to 20 years," and that are, from the outset, "thermally inefficient compared to curtain walls or punched windows."

"There is no villain in this story," he says, but virtually everyone with any connection to the world of real estate – developers, manufacturers, architects, agents, consumers – has "collectively contributed to the present situation." Which, by Mr. Kesik's accounting, is or soon will be a bad situation indeed.

"Preposterous" was the word Peter Clewes used, when I asked him last week to characterize the apocalyptic scenarios sometimes forecast by the anti-glass faction. (Mr. Clewes is the architect of Sixty Colborne and nearly 20 other glass-clad towers in downtown Toronto.)

"Conventional double-glazed units," he said, "whether they are in punched windows in a fancy Rosedale house, or in a cheap, cheap condominium in Scarborough, have a life expectancy of between 35 and 40 years. After 40 years, the seal around the perimeter starts to break down, and you can get some moisture."

Like a roof or floor, "glass has to be ultimately replaced. That has to be built into anyone's maintenance budget," he said.

Mr. Clewes attributes the durability of contemporary glazing systems to industry advances over the past few decades. "We built throwaway buildings in the fifties and sixties, with single-glazed sliding windows that leaked like a sieve. We know how to keep water out now. We have solved the big technical problems. What we are into now is refinement. How far do we want to take energy performance, for instance?"

The answer to that question will be determined by the tolerance and expectations of the marketplace. Mr. Clewes advocates high energy taxing as a proven way to encourage personal conservation and good public policies – and a much more effective way than preaching at people to be "greener."

"Once we stop the moral rhetoric, and start taxing energy," he said, "then we will quickly have a more sustainable city"

In hectic condo land, a park designed to slow you down

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While there are many aspects to agriculture, the root of it (if you'll pardon the pun) is the control over nature to benefit humankind. Indeed, throughout most of human history, the majority of the population worked to tame the land.

When farm machinery came along – and there was no bigger manufacturer than Massey-Harris – it allowed for the creation of a new class free from manual labour: the middle-class.

And because this middle-class toiled in grey, downtown offices, they needed small patches of green in which to sit and contemplate this newfound freedom over brown-bag lunches. Parks, in their own way, are also about the control of nature to benefit humankind.

You see where this is going.

No? Well, while this may be a lousy connect-the-dots history lesson, there's no denying the connection between the former Massey-Harris complex that once stretched along King Street West between Strachan Avenue and Sudbury Street, and the park that filled one small part of that site in 2006.

Massey Harris Park, on King Street West near Strachan Avenue, is a small public space that's big on variety.

One of the most thoughtful, pause-worthy and inviting of Toronto's public spaces, Massey Harris Park is the creation of architects James Brown and Kim Storey, the husband-and-wife team responsible for that vibrant and pulsating gathering space that's intentionally un-park-like, Dundas Square, "the picnic blanket," says Mr. Brown, that Torontonians have embraced and created the ongoing picnic for.

And while there is plenty of grass and shade to picnic or brown-bag it at Massey-Harris, it, too, has a few un-park-like qualities. For instance, most park pathway systems are shaped "like a Union Jack," offers Ms. Storey, in that they direct the walker across the space in as straight a line as possible: "As soon as you get in the park, it says 'now get the hell out,' " she jokes.

"… There's no seduction, there's no magic, there's no poetry," Mr. Brown adds. At Massey Harris, however, the paths "go for a walk themselves." It's true: They wiggle, meander and criss-cross, and a few even come to a dead end. In a couple of places, two bend dangerously close to one another, which forces interaction between strangers. In essence, they offer choice and, by doing so, force the urban walker to slow down.

"So you could loiter here," Ms. Storey says.

Also, there are short stairways to nowhere. Well, they look like stairs but really, they are yet another way to offer pause to the user. Climb them or, better yet, have a seat: "When you sit there, you're in the site, not just passing through it," Mr. Brown says. The stairs are possible because of subtle elevation changes – low-to-high and high-to-low – that Brown + Storey Architects (with Daedalus Design) have inserted throughout the park using a "striation" pattern. These striations, combined with the meandering paths, are meant to symbolize furrows in a farmer's field. Further, the striations run east-to-west to emphasize the length of the park, since condo buildings loom on both sides. The condo of note, of course, is the former Massey-Harris office building, an 1885 red brick Georgian beauty by E.J. Lennox. Various species of trees have also been planted in an east-west direction.

A wooden boardwalk frames the east and west edges of the park. This, says the duo, makes it clear that the grassy bits are not a "side yard" for the condos. In a few other places, wooden planks are used to create an almost dock-like feel; one is positioned over the park's splash pad, which is triggered by a button on a stanchion (so if there aren't any kiddies around, an adult can enjoy it as a water-feature).

To contrast with the east-west emphasis, a large metal trellis stretches from north to south in the approximate location of Crawford Street, which was still a public road when the architects received the desolate site from the city. This large rectangular area adds "vertical density" to the park while also offering privacy from prying balcony eyes above. The underside of the trellis features a stainless steel sculpture by James McLeod, *Evolution Unrolling*, which represents rope, chain and DNA. "That's the impression that I wanted to give," he says on the City of Toronto website, "that I was tying all this together and reflecting on …times and cultures that had lived in the area."

The trellis also acts in the same way a doorknob does, Mr. Brown says, in that it tells the user how it should be used. Known as "affordance," it clearly states here that it is an outdoor room that can host farmer's markets, performances or art shows. "You have to construct that; it just doesn't happen by itself."

Massey Harris Park is a small public space that's big on variety. Here, a cluster of trees offers a shady nook, while over there stairways offer a cozy perch; under the trellis, the eye can choose to look up at a bright red streetcar reflection, or the dancing shadows *Evolution Unrolling* creates on the ground below. Wiggly pathways take walkers from rushed to hushed in only a few steps.

"That's a lot for the city to let us do," Mr. Brown says.

Hard to believe this is B+SA's first park in Toronto … let's hope it's not their last.