

**BRITISH COLUMBIA**

A creative, collaborative solution to Vancouver's housing crisis ■ H7

**OTTAWA**

The country's capital has become the hottest real estate market around ■ H8



The offices of Foundry Inc., near Bathurst and Dundas Streets in Toronto, were designed by Agathom Inc. to create a 'civic square' at the front of the building. STEVEN EVANS

# From throwaway land to tiny civic square

How a nondescript building on a major street was transformed to include a neighbourhood green space

**DAVE  
LeBLANC**  
ARCHITOURIST



TORONTO

For almost two years, Toronto has been abuzz with talk of Rail Deck Park. Floating over the railway lands from the Rogers Centre to Bathurst Street, this engineering marvel has an estimated price tag of \$1.7-billion. And, mired in studies and controversy over land rights, that price will surely swell.

While I'm all for this grand urban space — especially if money were available to buy a *Cloud Gate* equivalent sculpture — I fantasize about what would happen if 10,000 private landowners split that money to create tiny, neighbourhood green space.

An example exists just north of Bathurst and Dundas Streets, thanks to architect-sculptors Adam and Katja Thom, who co-founded Agathom.

"As a Dane," says Ms. Thom, her accent softened by decades in North America, "the most important part of our built environment is what we occupy every day, and this is bringing joy and a sense of community to a space that did not have that. ... It is exactly what the city needs."

"A large, onetime park has lots of gifts to the city," adds Mr. Thom, her partner in life and business at Agathom Inc. "But it doesn't take the place of places to be; it's celebrating pedestrian existence."

Once an urban scrap in front of a nondescript building across from Toronto Western Hospital, this throwaway space did nothing but celebrate cars back in 2010.

■ LeBLANC, H4





The exterior of the building includes a serpentine path and a curved patio for the adjacent Starbucks, to which the coffee chain's head office initially objected. PHOTOS BY STEVEN EVANS

## LeBlanc: 'As you approach the building, it opens up'

■ FROM H1

When tech/design entrepreneur Jake Koseleci purchased the "ugly building" — area residents might remember it as "Balloon King" — his plan was to create Foundry Inc., an event- and co-working-space that housed startup tech companies and artists.

"I kind of liked the idea of having both mingling in the building, and hopefully have some cross-fertilization going on," he remembers. And because he'd secured Starbucks for the retail portion, he realized the latte crowd might not enjoy the asphalt-and-automobile surroundings, so he called in Agathom, knowing their sensibilities would be perfect: "I find them to be artistic in their creations; I [was] looking for somebody who was going to do something interesting."

The program he handed them was no less interesting. Not only was the timeline supertight, it called for more than just a patio for coffee-sippers: a wheelchair ramp was required; a place to house garbage and recycling containers was now necessary; bicycles needed to be locked up; and, because the building would now host visitors at all hours, ample lighting for personal safety was a must.

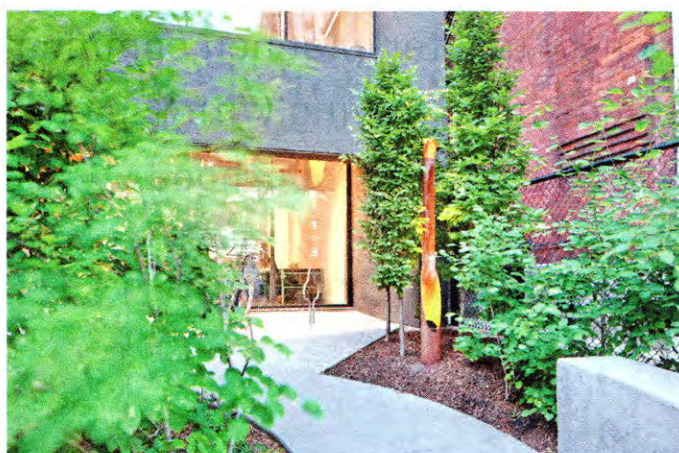
And speaking of lighting, Agathom was charged with bringing more natural light into the office portion. No easy task for this "very mean-looking elevation," explains Mr. Thom, since it sported thin ribbon windows and "the open space faces north and east rather than south, and then the hospital is looming across the road."

The solution, the architect says, was twofold: since it is open to the sidewalk, treat the forecourt as a "civic square," and enlarge the windows.

The program, however, did not include greenery. The design duo insisted on it. Luckily, it was while figuring out how to lessen the slope of the wheelchair ramp — when shallow enough there is no requirement for landings and railings — that the opportunity presented itself. By creating a "serpentine, sweeping, Yellow Brick Road-type of route" that brought folks up from Bathurst to the café and office doors, curved interstices would be created, and, into these, greenery could be planted. For those who "just want to get to the bloody door," continues Mr. Thom with a laugh, a more direct route was created and demarcated with different paving material.

Custom railings, a picket-fence-style metal enclosure for garbage and bicycle posts in the shape of a cloverleaf were built for Agathom by Linton Green.

The five lighting standards are perhaps the most delightful parts of this tiny composition. Each fashioned from a single piece of thick-walled pipe, they pop up from the greenery like rusty periscopes. "By cutting it in certain



ways, the light grazes all the wall up the pipe," Mr. Thom explains. "Thousands of people are zinging by on streetcars and Katja and I thought they should be like reeds coming up: One day you see them and the next day you look out for them."

Hugging one curve of the serpentine path, the duo designed a raised, concrete bench; to echo the walkway curves, the fence separating Starbucks' patio was curved as well, which resulted in "a lot of grief" from the coffee chain's head office in Seattle. "They said, 'Starbucks has no curved patios, what is this architect doing?' but we convinced them it was okay."

While enlarging the windows on the second floor proved uneventful, there was more grief — this time from the contractor — when Agathom proposed a rather novel solution to help with natural light on the main floor. Tucked back under a cantilevered second storey, the first floor's newly enlarged window-wall was

still partly blocked by an odd, false wall of brick. While the contractor wanted to knock it down, Agathom decided to turn this sow's ear into a silk purse. Removing the drywall soffit, the whole, weird underbelly was clad in mirrors and the metal braces that secured the floating wall to the building were dressed in honey-coloured "wood boots." A lighting trough, painted bright red, was added also.

"As you approach the building, it opens up," Mr. Thom says.

"And when Jake would have concerts here, the stage was right there," Ms. Thom says. "So it became a nice backdrop for the music."

"It was magical," Mr. Thom says.

You might wonder why the architects have used the past tense. In 2017, Mr. Koseleci sold 376 Bathurst St., and, today, there are construction permits in the window. Let's hope Agathom's tiny civic square remains intact.



As the building would be used at all hours, the outdoor lighting was essential for safety reasons. The creative solution was to use thick-walled pipes that pop up from the greenery like rusty periscopes.