

ARCHITECTURE » SACRED SITES

Hallowed be thy secular space

At Toronto's Harbourfront Centre, three architectural firms explore spiritual places that have nothing to do with religion



LISA ROCHON
CITYSPACE

lrochon@globeandmail.com

It's very private and beautiful with the light that comes into the alley. Artists are expressing themselves in a way they're not allowed to in traditional institutions. The alley has a sense of ruin, of sweet decay.

— Anne Frobeen, intern architect with Taylor Smyth Architects, on her choice for sacred space

Sacred space is hallowed ground. Where people have shed their blood or died the death of martyrs. It is also, depending on whether you are Christian, Muslim or Jewish, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Dome of the Rock or the Temple Mount. Sacred space is also specific to nation and culture. Once upon a time, the right to a sacred experience had to be sanctioned by a religious institution. But why should hallowed space be an immutable fact? What about a back lane glowing with sunlight at 4 p.m.? Or a room translated into a sculpture of colour moving through a sequence of dark to light?

At best, there's only a delicate consensus around what makes a place sacred. That's what three Toronto architecture firms discovered during their intense investigation of sacred space for an exhibition opening today at Harbourfront Centre. It's the second exhibition to open at a new gallery at York Quay Centre, one of the few in Canada to provoke architects to move beyond the preoccupations of their practice to explore edgy and sometimes radical ideas.

Had he been born at a much earlier time, Aaron Finbow might have opted for a contained religious space. Instead, he considered the moment, occasionally transformative, when the Broadview streetcar sweeps along the open expanse of Riverdale Park in Toronto. "Not that this space is sacred all the time," says Finbow, who



The new gallery at York Quay Centre is one of the few in Canada to provoke architects to move beyond the preoccupations of their practice to explore edgy and sometimes radical ideas.

Intern architect Anne Frobeen singled out a graffiti-covered back lane as a place 'away from judgment' for people who might not even have a home.

ANNE FROBEEN
TAYLOR SMYTH ARCHITECTS

works as an intern architect at Taylor Smyth Architects. "It's fleeting, and you can't control it, but it takes you away from the banality of being in the streetcar, and I can temporarily release myself from the noise and the congestion of the city." Using a digital camera, he shot his sacred site, of the Broadview streetcar intersecting with the sloping park, at dusk.

Firm principal Michael Taylor says that, after asking everyone in the firm to write a personal statement about their notion of the sacred, the group agreed to focus on places in Toronto that break with the "chaos of homogeneity." Taylor himself chose the enormous granite rock that defines the Village of Yorkville Park. "I think it appeals to people on a very primal level. Once you climb on it, you're the king of the castle. You see the world in a different way."

For some, gazing upon Michelangelo's ceiling at the Sistine Chapel may stir a spiritual experience. What does it say about our society if a gritty laneway surrounded by graffiti-covered walls of brick can be tagged as a sacred space?

Anne Frobeen, an intern architect at Taylor Smyth, selected and photographed a back lane that runs parallel to a section of Queen Street West. She captures the power of the space in poetic, observant ways: "You go in there, and there's art work, and the sounds are really muffled. At sunset, you see a lot of people wandering in and sitting in the sun, away from the business of the street. My thought is that the alleyway provides a place to rest, and contemplation for people who aren't always welcome in traditional religious buildings, for people who might not even have a home. It's a place away from the public eye. It's away from judgment."

"Sacred space is such a loaded concept, architecturally," says Janna Levitt, principal of Levitt Goodman Architects, whose firm created an intervention of projected light, sound and movement for the recently opened architecture gallery. "We didn't want anything that framed any kind of religious experience, but to offer, in an abstract but sensual way, a chance to connect with the sacred space within."

The team, including collaborators David Warren, Brock James, and Kevin Krivel, has designed a series of curved, lightweight scrim onto which a 24-hour day has been compressed into a six-minute cycle of shifting light. Inspiration about the need to connect people to place came from academic and author Andrew Levitt (Janna's cousin). To guide their work, the group also returned to the early light works of artist James Turrell and the mesmerizing light projects of Olafur Eliasson. A sound piece by artist Yui-Bin Chan accompanies the light cycle — not to augment the colour as it shifts from very light shades to intense blues, but to run parallel to it. In order to "create a consciousness of the ground," says Levitt, the floor vibrates slightly.

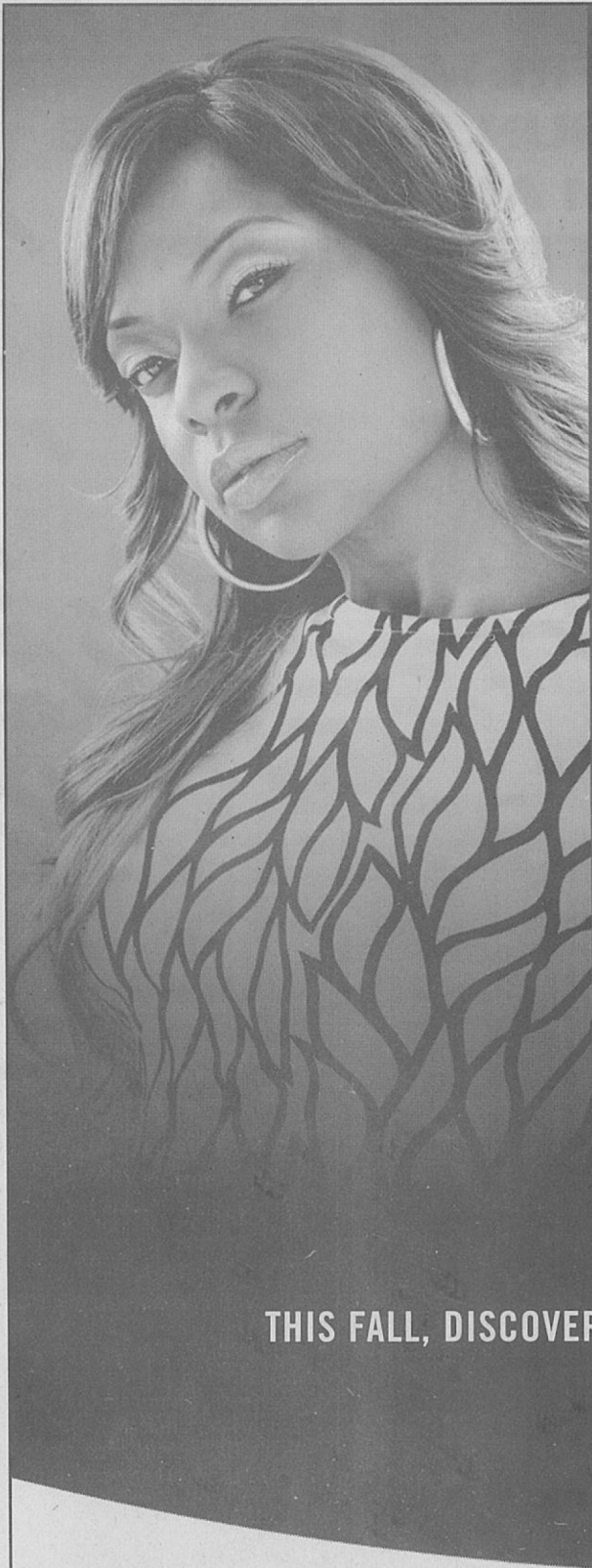
Kearns Mancini Architects decided early on that sacred spaces can take on any number of forms and meanings, depending on who is doing the experiencing.

Wanting to acknowledge the significance of the individual voice the firm created a field of vertically suspended, transparent rods illuminated with fibre optics in a fairly dark gallery room. Visitors to the space are invited to reflect on what their own sacred space looks and feels like. There's an option of describing their hallowed ground on a piece of acetate, and then tying it to one of the rods.

Are there lessons to take back to the workaday world of architectural practice? Because they plunged into the essentials of architecture, the answer for all three teams is yes. The Levitt Goodman team, for one, studied "for hours and hours and hours" the intensity of colour, and what, for instance, it means when sound follows the undulation of light. "This has given us an opportunity to really unpack ideas," says Levitt. "Many weeks of building, thinking and talking."

The humanism of design emerged from their discussions. So did the need, given this exhibition's hyper-mosaic of Toronto, for all citizens to access it. "I think, in the end, it's sometimes good not to be didactic," says Trevor Kai, a graphic designer at Kearns Mancini. "We can't tell people what's sacred."

» Sacred Space runs at Harbourfront's York Quay Centre in Toronto until Sept. 7.

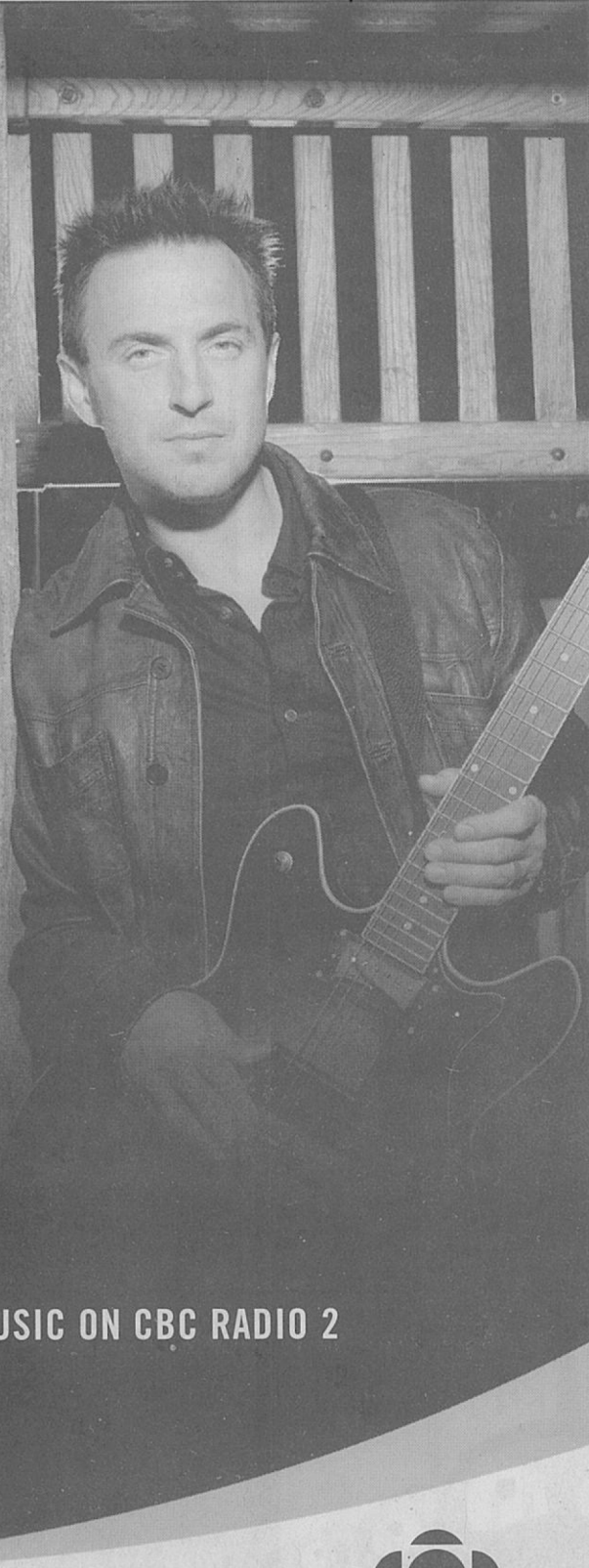


"My Radio 2 grooves to the blues"

— July Black
multi-JUNO nominee

"And mine celebrates Canada's most soulful voices"

— Colin James
2008 Blues Performer of the Year



THIS FALL, DISCOVER THE BREADTH OF CANADIAN MUSIC ON CBC RADIO 2

cbc.ca/radio2



CBC