

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

How to make your mark

Structural landscaping elements are increasingly seen as a must-have for front yard projects

JOHN LORINC

Not long after Cheryl Swan and her husband, Alan Jette, bought a home on a tight lot on Mathersfield Drive, near the Summerhill LCHO, they embarked on a front-and-back landscaping project, partly to fix a broken backyard patio. There was a small piece of land at the front, next to the pad parking space. Ms. Swan initially reckoned it could be a small terrace with a couple of chairs. But, she soon realized, "It's not a place we would have sat."

When she posed the problem to designer Joel Loblaw, he proposed something that's not on the menu of most higher-end residential landscape amenities: an illuminated smoked-glass cube.

Made from tempered and sandblasted 1/2-inch glass, the object sits on a plinth of pressure-treated dark wood, with an accessible interior LED light. To soften its icily luminous bulk, Mr. Loblaw surrounded the cube with hydrangeas. "It was a little bit of a risk because I really haven't seen one any place else," Ms. Swan says.

While hardly commonplace, such structural landscaping elements are increasingly seen as important ingredients for front-yard projects, along with other more traditional architectural forms, such as hip walls or stylized benches. Some designers say that the appetite for these items reflects the growing interest among homeowners in modernist design, innovative landscaping and trendy materials, such as concrete or corten steel.

The markers vary greatly in size, material and function: Some serve as house-number markers, while others are more ornamental or serve to connect internal and external design elements, says Robert Wright, a professor of landscape architecture at the University of Toronto's John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Design. "There's an integration of form that's happening."

Such objects also suggest that designers are exploring ways of moving beyond ground-based landscaping, says Mike Swift, owner of SciScape Contracting, who points to examples in Leaside and the Kingsway, especially with modernist renovation projects. "You can only do so much with a walkway."

Some are straightforward in their design and function: metre-high slabs made from concrete or wood slates, situated close to the sidewalk and inscribed with the street number.

Others serve multiple purposes. Designer Cindy Rendely cites a curtain project that uses a corten steel structure that functions as a guard rail for the front steps, supports the hand rail and also shows the home's address in laser cut lettering. For that project, she says, this corten element matches other materials used in the both the backyard and the interior.

Ms. Rendely points to another



application, which is to use these structures to incorporate aspects of a home's facade into a more integrated landscaping and renovation project. She cites an example in Forest Hill where the front wall of the home included a large chimney flue. Her recommendation was to work with the protruding brick mass "because it wasn't going anywhere."

The resulting object is a perforated aluminum and plexiglass "light box" that envelops the flue, and picks up on some white

interior surfaces.

With the glass cube in front of Ms. Swan's home, which Mr. Loblaw describes as purely aesthetic, the final design emerged from mock-ups that were three by six feet and not surrounded by plants. Ms. Swan preferred a lower version, and Mr. Loblaw says it could have worked as an even smaller size. "Good design is about balance, scale and proportion," he adds. "You have to be very careful that the object is in context."



He points out that such vertical landscaping elements don't necessarily need to be made from durable materials, which tend to be more expensive. Mr. Loblaw's firm has designed cubes made from shrub species such as yews or boxwoods.

Because these objects are situated in front yards and are therefore potentially more exposed to pranks or vandalism, Ms. Rendely adds that they should be constructed from durable and easily repaired ma-



Some landscape designers say the appetite for unique structural yard elements reflects a growing interest in modernist design, innovative landscaping and trendy materials.

TOP, BOTTOM LEFT: VIRGINIA MACDONALD; FAR LEFT, TOP LEFT: ROB GARRIC; ABOVE, JOHN LORINC/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

terials. "It can't be too precious."

She also points out that while designers are experimenting with new shapes and materials, such markers shouldn't be too obtrusive otherwise they risk becoming less of a design element and more of a status symbol.

Ms. Swan admits that she was initially concerned about how her neighbourhood would respond. Most of the homes on her street have traditional exterior stone walls and front yard landscaping, but none have anything that could be described as modernist or sculptural.

Two or three days after Mr. Loblaw's firm completed the project, she says, a man who lived across the street ventured over to speak with her. "I thought, 'Okay, here we go,'" recalls Ms. Swan, adding that she anticipated criticism. Instead, the neighbour expressed praise for the unusual glowing object. "He said, 'I just wanted to tell you how much I liked your light box.'"

Special to The Globe and Mail

ON SITE | BY SYDNIA YU

159 SW CHURCH-YONGE CORRIDOR

Score one for cyclists as a condo offers more parking for bikes than for cars

BUILDER/DEVELOPER

Alterra

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SALES CENTRE

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Phone 416-223-1500 or visit 159SW.com

Cyclists often fight with cars for room on the roads of downtown Toronto, but Alterra's new high-rise development will give more priority and privilege to riders over motorists.

For instance, a limited number of parking spots will cost \$5,000 in the 30-storey building, but extensive bike storage facilities and a fully equipped repair area will be complementary to all residents.

"We have one bike parking space per unit, which is considerably more than the car parking facilities," says president and avid cyclist, Rob Cooper.



At Wellesley and Sherbourne, 159 SW will include lockers and a repair depot for bicycles, all geared to attracting residents who commute by bike.

"[Plus] there will be pumps, tools and work benches, and whatever someone would need to do their own servicing on their bikes. That's something that I don't think we've seen in any other condominium building in Toronto, and it seems to be very positively received by our buyers."

Furthermore, these areas will have direct elevator access for easy transport throughout the 360-unit tower.

"We will also allow people that may have higher-end bicycles — that they don't want to leave in one of the storage lockers — to take them up to their condo," Mr. Cooper notes.

More importantly, the community derives its name, 159 SW, from its location at the southwest intersection of Wellesley and Sherbourne Streets, which carries a 100 per cent Bike Score.

"We are at the corner of two

very prominent bike lanes in the city that are actually separated from vehicular traffic ... so we see this as very attractive to people who commute by bike or are recreational cyclists," Mr. Cooper says. "It's also close to the trail system on the Don Valley, so you can pretty well get anywhere downtown by bike today."

Non-cyclists might also appreciate other attractions nearby, such as two subway lines, university campuses, shops, restaurants, a library and community centre.

"We've had a preview opening and we are already 75 per cent sold out, so it's been very positive; we've only been on sale for two months," Mr. Cooper stated in mid-October.

[Buyers] recognize Wellesley and Sherbourne is really a central location, close to Bloor Street and the subway, so there's very good value and affordability in the price with respect to other projects being marketed in downtown Toronto.

Private facilities will span three floors, including one for a library, study and conference rooms, and another for exercise studios, outdoor fitness equipment and a running track circling the tower.

Social quarters will consist of a games zone with billiards, foosball and Ping-Pong tables, and two patios, including one overlooking a wraparound terrace with cooking and dining stations.

"It's quite an extensive collection of amenities you don't normally see in buildings of this size," Mr. Cooper adds.

In another unconventional move, El Richmond Architects Ltd. conceived a black steel facade framing balconies and floor-to-ceiling windows of the one to three bedroom suites above.

"There are a lot of lighter coloured buildings around that area, so we thought the dark contrast would really make the building stand out prominently on the corner," Mr. Cooper adds. "From all directions, the views are unobstructed and we do believe it will remain that way."

Standard appointments by U21 will consist of plank laminate floors, custom European-style kitchen cabinets, including one with ceramic tile backsplashes and integrated appliances, plus energy-efficient heating and cooling systems.

Once occupancy begins October 29, monthly charges will be 59 cents a square foot.