

THE GLOBE AND MAIL by Lisa Rochon
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Globe T.O.



YOUNG AT ART
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A SENSE OF PLACE



The Vancouverite who coined Generation X is shaping our city with three public-art projects, writes **Lisa Rochon**. Big, playful and intelligent, they are awash in his lopsided sense of irony

DOUGLAS COUPLAND takes Toronto

In his core is his desire to create joy with his artwork.

Karen Mills,
Public Art Management

Mr. Coupland got a little cheeky with *Monument to the War of 1812*, above; his bold clock tower will grace a corner of the green at the Shops at Don Mills, right, opening Wednesday.

DEBORAH BAC/KEVIN VAN PRASEN
/THE GLOBE AND MAIL
/IMAGE, DOUGLAS COUPLAND

Doug Coupland is all over Toronto. Remember this as the time when the Vancouver author, designer and, yes, prolific public artist descended on Toronto like Peter Pan and made us believe all over again in Neverland.

For the three-hectare park opening this August within the Concord CityPlace development on the city's south side, Mr. Coupland has created a canoe big enough to stand in. There will be gigantic fishing bobbers. And a white beaver dam that glows myriad colours in the dark.

His glorious, amusing and slightly controversial *Monument to the War of 1812* unveiled near the lakefront last November monumentalizes two toy soldiers: The Canadian is the golden guy with adorable creases in his pants. He's standing over the dead silver guy, the American.

And this week, when the Shops at Don Mills open to the public, the installation of his quirky clock tower will be complete: The 10-metre column wears a crown of bright, shiny models of middle-class houses, which were originally built for Don Mills, Canada's first master-planned suburban community. "Cadillac Fairview builds shopping malls. It's conservative by nature," says Mr. Coupland of the developer behind the Shops. "They made a leap for this one."

Mr. Coupland is staging his own private invasion of Toronto.

To prepare for the jured competition for the new clock tower, Mr. Coupland referred back to some housing guides prepared postwar by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp. "Don Mills was a treat," he says from his home and design studio in West Vancouver. "My dad has a farm outside of Vancouver near the American border, and we'd often go across for groceries. And the moment you cross the border you know you're in the States and it's because of the absence of CMHC houses," he says.

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FROM PAGE 1 » COUPLAND

On the cutting-room floor: Bacon-striped paving

» "They really define the Canadian landscape. They pointed to a better tomorrow through better housing."

The clock tower, built of galvanized steel by Mike Bilyk of M.C. Laser Werks Inc. of Barrie, is sited at the edge of the Don Mills town square. A digitized banner wrapped around the column indicates the time. The big, highly detailed, stainless-steel models are of actual houses, some of which still exist in Don Mills, and the undersides feature the corresponding house plan. For night-time viewers, Mr. Coupland integrated into the column a paparazzi strobe light.

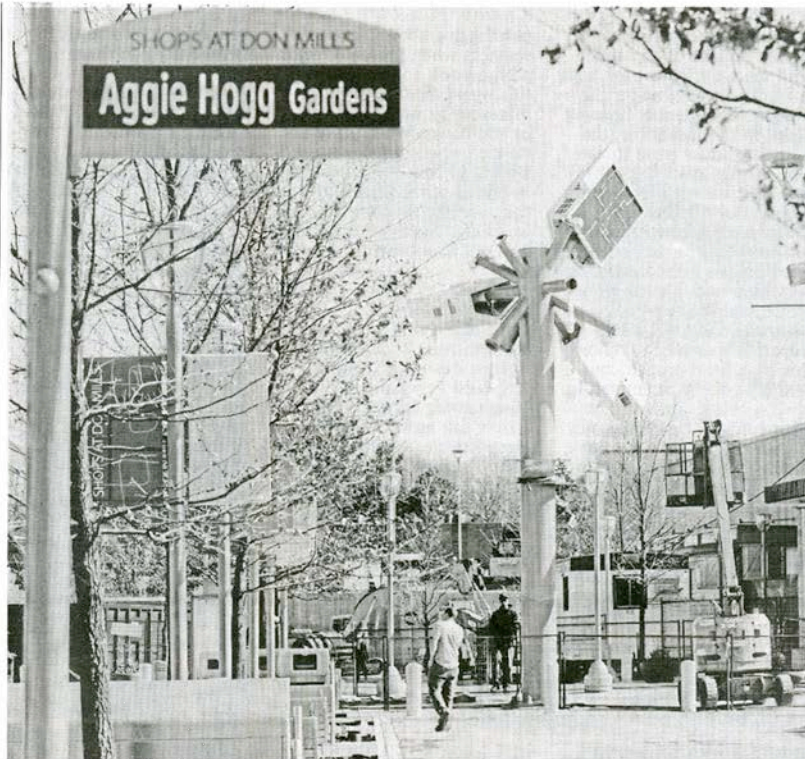
All those houses built at an alarming rate in what used to be a bucolic landscape – that's why Mr. Coupland calls his Don Mills totem the Big Bang. His client prefers to call it the Starburst.

How is the author of *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991) and *iPod* (2006) managing to single-handedly brand public space in Toronto?

Put aside the brilliance factor: He's coming out with a biography of Marshall McLuhan for Penguin Books this September and has a show opening at the Darius Clark Gallery in the Distillery District this June. Ignore the fact that he likes to toil through the night in his inspiring 1960 Ron Thom-designed home and studio in West Vancouver. Or that he has a genuine interest in connecting the Canadian public to its quirks of history.

Why Toronto is sampling a large chunk of Mr. Coupland's creative brain has to do with many factors: Toronto's unique public-art program; decent clients such as Cadillac Fairview Corp. and Concord Adex, as well as build-it people such as Karen Mills, a Canadian maven of public-art consulting, based in Toronto.

Years ago, it was Ms. Mills who took senior people from Concord Adex Development (the company building dozens of condominium towers at



Mr. Coupland calls the clock the Big Bang. Others call it the Starburst. KEVIN VAN PAASSEN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Front and Spadina) on a tour of Mr. Coupland's studio. They were suitably wowed and, shortly after, decided that the *Generation X* writer should be commissioned to help design the major downtown park, along with team members Greg Smallenberg of Phillips Farevaag Smallenberg Landscape Architects and David Leinster of the Planning Partnership.

Ms. Mills also served as the public-art consultant for Malibu Developments, builders of two condominium towers located directly south of historic Fort York. Mr. Coupland's name was also put forward by Ms. Mills for that juried competition. Ms. Mills has worked with a variety of major public

artists, including James Turrell, Anish Kapoor and Vito Acconci. But Mr. Coupland's lack of ego, she says, makes him an excellent team player. She proposed that he be considered by the Don Mills' public-art jury.

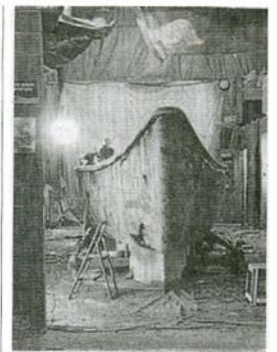
"Doug has a way of connecting with not only the serious elements of what art is all about but also ways of engaging the public. In his core is his desire to create joy with his artwork," she says.

Compared to Toronto, public-art commissions in Vancouver are scarce. (Mr. Coupland is likely to announce his first Vancouver piece in the near future, and my hunch is that it has to do with sparking up the 2010 Olympics.) He's been at work on a \$2.8-million collec-

tion of public-art pieces for Concord Adex since 2005.

Though the park is only scheduled to open this summer, his pieces have already been completed. The young, Calgary-based firm of Heavy Industries fabricated the fish bobbles. Mr. Coupland, whose delight in Canadiana is washed with a lopsided sense of irony, says when he saw them with their bright colours and stripes his brain "turned to ginger ale." A couple of white, jagged "iceberg" benches that will perch, as if floating, next to the beaver dam, have been created with wooden piers excavated from the Concord Adex site.

And for the first time in Canada, a Terry Fox Miracle Mile



Whimsical Canadiana such as this mammoth canoe is coming to Toronto. COURTESY KAREN MILLS

track has been conceived as an homage to the athlete, fully endorsed by the Fox family. The track will be integrated into the park site, with 10 large photographs taken from Mr. Coupland's book on Terry Fox to mark the way. A large rock taken from the spot outside of Thunder Bay where Mr. Fox collapsed at the end of his epic run will be placed at the beginning and end of the Miracle Mile in Toronto, "like a touchstone," says Mr. Coupland.

Public art in Toronto? It's been a journey for Mr. Coupland: Along the way, there have been nervous-making public consultations, brainstorming, and ideas left on the cutting-room floor. The idea of a monumental library of huge tomes of Canadiana didn't make it. Neither did the bacon-striped paving for part of the park. To prepare for the design of the major beaver dam, Ms. Mills's assistant, Justin Ridgeway, sent Mr. Coupland a bunch of sticks that had been seriously chewed by beavers in wetlands north of Toronto. Mr. Coupland opened the package and set the wet sticks out to dry on his dining-room table. Ten days later, he came down with a case of giardia – a.k.a. beaver fever. So, now you know: Vancouver and Toronto have been united in a uniquely Canadian way.