Wild things: landscape architect Michael Hough wants to bring nature to the city


ABSTRACT

Revisiting an earlier concept to assess its relevance is something that distinguishes [Michael Hough] from many in the design world. It's also a hallmark of his writing. Hough's latest book, Cities and Natural Process, was published in 1995. An updated version of his 1984 classic, City Form and Natural Processes, it revisited case studies cited in the original. Like Hough's third book, Out of Place, published in 1990, it became a widely used university text for students of landscape architecture.

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Hough's partners at Hough Woodland Naylor Dance are a generation younger than he is, but none fits the stereotype of wild-eyed environmentalist. Carolyn Woodland, president of the firm, joined when Hough was struggling to refine his own philosophy, defending his principles to sometimes skeptical clients and evolving out of the mainstream of landscape design.

FULL TEXT

IT'S A HOT August afternoon, and in the little garden, butterflies dance through the cosmos, bees hover over the thyme, and plump red tomatoes hang from neatly staked vines. The raspberry canes have been picked clean, but the cucumbers are almost ready, and scarlet runner beans climbing the house wall are still coming on.

Not remarkable, perhaps, as vegetable gardens go, but on this quiet street in Moore Park, where a manicured lawn is still the norm, a front yard bursting with tomatoes and a boulevard planted with an apple tree prompts a double take.

But this quirky little garden happens to belong to landscape architect Michael Hough, the man who, thirty years ago, was a prime force in putting the study of landscape architecture on the curriculum at the University of Toronto. Who has chaired task forces and committees charting the future of everything from the Don River to Lake Ontario's water - front to the Niagara Escarpment.

So though he loves gardening, what Hough is growing in his front yard is really an edible manifesto, writ in vegetables. And what it proclaims has less to do with advancing the cause of city farming than with questioning the skewed aesthetics and bylaw-enshrined design conventions that have made cookie-cutter clones of front yards throughout North America.
It’s questioning this "anyplace syndrome" – every place, to its detriment, managing to look the same as anyplace else – for which Hough is known. And it’s a question he attempts to answer in his books, in his university classes, on the international lecture circuit, through his prodigious design work and as a community-based environmental activist.

HOUGH WAS BORN in 1928 in Nice, France, his father a British diplomat, his mother the daughter of France’s Commissioner of Customs in China. While his parents moved from one diplomatic post to another, their son grew up in English boarding schools, with the occasional summer spent in les Alpes Maritimes helping his uncles harvest carnations for the Paris flower market. Following a two-year stint with the British army, he attended the Edinburgh College of Art on scholarship, receiving his diploma in architecture in 1955.

I wasn’t very good at architecture," he says, disclosing something more deep-seated than the usual philosophic chasm between architecture and landscape architecture. "I really didn't understand what the hell they were talking about, and it’s only rather recently that I concluded perhaps they didn’t either."

He worked briefly in an Edinburgh architectural practice before pursuing a master’s degree in landscape architecture at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1959, Hough and his wife, Bridget, brought their young family to Canada. He began teaching at the University of Toronto, where he helped structure a degree program in landscape architecture. Meanwhile, his young design firm, which had just finished an award-winning plan for the Scarborough College grounds, embarked on a project that would articulate his ecological approach to landscape design.

ARCHITECT Eberhard Zeidler recalls how Hough joined the Ontario Place design team in 1969, as they were struggling with the problem of how to design the islands that would connect their lake Pavilion to the CNE grounds.

The result was islands and planting that looked as if God had been the landscape genius. From no one place could you see everything at once. As you walked, you encountered different activities, and on the west shoreline there was simply quiet and solitude. The original Forum was nestled between trees to dovetail with the seating areas and the banks surrounding it to create a wonderful ambience for evening concerts.

The concept was to create an urban park that, despite its density, would seem natural," says Zeidler. "Michael fulfilled this admirably. However, with the recent changeover into an amusement project, this feeling is disappearing."

The "amusement project," of course, is MCA Concerts' new Molson Amphitheatre, a hulking steel-and-glass venue built on land leased from Ontario Place. Its construction involved massive changes to the landscape, the felling of more than 250 trees – and the end of Hough and Zeidler's intimate little valley of a Forum, which could only accommodate half as many spectators as the new 16,000-capacity amphitheatre.

Says Hough, "Architecturally speaking, this new building has completely destroyed that quality of green pastoral islands. In any other place, it might be okay, but there it competes with Eb's buildings, it strikes a discordant tone."

In 1971, Hough left U of T to teach in the new Department of Environmental Studies at York University. Bill Granger, former chair of the Metropolitan Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, was a graduate student under Hough. He recalls how unhappy his mentor became with the way Ontario Place was maintained.
Michael was always disappointed with the hillsides, which were meant to be evolving natural landscapes with early pioneer plant materials – sumac and that kind of thing – that would evolve into a Lake Ontario woodland. But the maintenance staff kept going in and taking out any tree that seeded in. If they'd left it alone, by now it would have been a really marvellous woodland, but as it is, it’s a fairly static landscape with the original plantings manicured and clipped and kept heavily gardened."

But if Ontario Place disappointed Hough, another lakefront landscape miles west stands as testament to his design philosophy: set the framework and let nature do the rest.

THE GULF Canada Clarkson Refinery, now owned by Petro-Canada, was a barren moonscape in 1975 when Hough was asked to buffer the vast storage tanks and facilities from the gentrified Mississauga neighbourhood to the east. The budget was huge, mature trees were dropped in to create an instant woodlot, hills were bulldozed into place and ponds filled. Over the years, a forest of willows and dogwood sprouted, and deer adopted the place as their own.

For Hough, however, the biggest achievement here has been his annual consultation with the client and the community. "The collaborative process has gone on for twenty years. It's that commitment, the fact that I'm still involved, that's allowing me to prove a lot of points that are very difficult to prove when you're moving from job to job."

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In City Form, he attacked the lawn as a universal design application. "As a high-cost, high-energy floor covering, it produces the least diversity for the most effort. As a product of a pervasive cultural aesthetic, it defies logic."

He also wrote how climate could be ameliorated in downtown cores through the use of rooftop landscapes and described cities where civic ordinances were used to establish acceptable levels of tree canopy. He explained the need for alternative sewage treatment technologies such as wastewater crop irrigation, retention ponds and marsh ecology, and he outlined the advantages of restoring "ecosystems" or native plant and wildlife communities.

In fact, much of what Hough advocated in the book is now slowly gaining acceptance. Alternatives to the front lawn, such as ground cover and native wildflowers, are increasingly popular. "Ecosystem planning" is now a routine buzz phrase at city hall. Toronto has naturalized parklands and begun restoring native plants in its ravines. Last year, city council passed a bylaw protecting the tree canopy by prohibiting removal of large trees on private property without a permit. And although rooftop landscaping as an ecological notion is more popular in Europe than in North America, that's changing too. In Toronto, the mammoth Roundhouse Park is taking shape atop the roof of the convention centre addition. And a huge wetland marsh is being created south of the Bloor Viaduct to assess, among other things, whether marsh ecology can reduce pollution in the lower Don.

In espousing a framework of biological principles rather than merely ornamental objectives as the basis for landscape architecture, Hough was one of a few early radical voices in North America. That, combined with the widespread environmental shift since the seventies, has moved Hough's field of ecological design into the
forefront, gaining him some admirers along the way.

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He could be difficult then,” she says. “He was in his own world, and you just didn’t want him over your desk, but he’s mellowed now. Keep in mind that in the architectural community, you can be the greatest planner, the greatest visionary, but you have to test your philosophy by building things and making them work.”

Eha Naylor joined the firm in 1980, a landscape architect and MBA who, like Woodland, is brainy and beautiful. Typical of the work-with-nature philosophy instilled by Hough (but refreshingly unusual in the design world), she says her role is often to meet with the client and "determine whether there really is a need for a design solution" rather than taking a more nature-based approach.

Ian Dance is the third partner, a Ryerson graduate and now sessional instructor there, whom Hough calls "probably the best designer I've ever had."

Although the firm has done its share of conventional landscapes (a sophisticated downtown parkette for SunLife, the University Avenue courthouse mall, the master plan, with the Garden Club of Toronto, for the Casa Loma garden renovation, a landscape for IBM’s administrative offices), it is "restoration," the task of returning a site as near as possible to its natural state, for which it is renowned.

Recent projects have included transformation of a polluted section of the Charlottetown waterfront into Confederation Landing park. The master plan for the Brickworks Regeneration Project in the Don Valley. Two unique courtyards — one a boreal forest, the other a deciduous woodland — outside the Earth Sciences Building at the University of Toronto. Remedial work on a 1.5-kilometre stretch of shoreline in Burlington’s LaSalle Park, which incorporates engineered coastal islands of tree roots, brush and timbers emerging from the breakwater to provide new fish-spawning areas and bird habitats. The Cobourg waterfront. A master plan for the motel strip on the Etobicoke waterfront.

In September 1995, the Waterfront Regeneration Trust under David Crombie published Restoring Natural Habitats, coauthored by Hough’s firm, to provide assistance to those engaged in habitat restoration in Greater Toronto.

Michael would probably be happy,” admits Woodland, "teaching, writing his books, doing research, selectively picking two or three of his causes – the Lower Don Lands or whatever – and going off to international conferences. We keep pulling him back, saying if you really are going to preach this, you’ve got to figure out a way to work with developers, make sure it’s economically viable, keep at it and stay grounded."
SITTING ON HIS deck in the filtered shade of a crabapple tree planted long before native species became de regueur in an environmentalist's garden, Michael Hough sips his wine and gazes out through the long, leafy bower of trees and shrubs in the back yard.

The garden, which he designed and built more than twenty-five years ago, is divided by a narrow boardwalk running the length of the property. Along the way is a tiny pond, a deck with a vine-covered pergola for a roof, thickets of downy dogwood and witch hazel, a terrace made of brick reclaimed from the old mental hospital on Queen Street.

There's a baby balsam fir brought down from the solar-powered cottage near Huntsville where he and Bridget pick blackberries and where he indulges in a favourite hobby, carpentry.

He talks about the firm. "I think my role is changing there. I still do a lot of work but not as much as many of the others do. It's stuff that I particularly want to do, like that little project down at U of T, which is small but I think a gem."

And he reflects on his work with the Don, and concedes that it might take a hundred or more years before the river regains the dignity it once knew.

Maybe that's why I enjoy carpentry so much, because I get to see things finished." He pauses, then adds, "But I think life comes to an end when you stop worrying about things."

Figure not transcribed Consult original publication

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