

The value of York's hidden landscape

Discovering the potential of York's social and ecological environment

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York may soon be described as a place with wooded trails, actively-used heritage buildings and outdoor areas which are lively and fun all year round.

The skeleton of these places exist — with better planning the full potential of York's existing landscape can be fleshed out.

It could happen, but it may not.

York University Development Corporation (YUDC) has developed its new 'Master Plan,' a plan which will affect campus growth and change into the next century.

With such far-reaching effects, it's no wonder that a number of groups want input into YUDC's Master Plan.

One of these groups — a group of graduate students from Environmental Studies — has a series of three proposals which complement YUDC's plan. Their project is called Green Liveable University Environments, or GLUE.

Their ideas arose out of a workshop held in the faculty of Environmental Studies last term.

The Master Plan falls short

A few years ago York administrators decided that the old plan was out-dated. The university's student population had grown within a framework originally designed for half of what it is today. The new Master Plan addresses concerns with the harsh climatic conditions and the need for academic and residential space.

The plan, approved in the fall, unlocks the economic potential of the campus lands. Funds acquired from the sale and lease of peripheral campus property will be made available for the plan's phased development strategy.

The Master Plan adopts a 'green campus' theme; it was proposed that green open spaces (existing woodlots and grassed areas) act as "foci" for the campus. The intent is to preserve and enlarge the woodlots at the edge of the campus core. Within the core, a new outdoor 'common' area east of the Ross Building, and greens are planned to help diversify the university's social environments.

Unfortunately, the plan does not recognize the intrinsic value of York's hidden landscape. Much of York's population does not know that just west of the campus lies the landscape of the old Stong farm gone wild. The processes of nature which have taken root give the land a sense of the present; this is an evolving natural history. The farm's old stone foundations, orchard, hedgerows, and historic houses are a reminder of the land's cultural past.

Streams, ponds, wetlands, woodlot, pine groves, expansive fields of tall grasses and rare wildflowers are inhabited by a number of wild animals. This diverse landscape offers another dimension to one's experience of the York campus.

Various university-related development projects have been proposed for this 'surplus' land. GLUE project proposals were initiated by students in tune with growing environmental awareness, who recognize that these sensitive areas should be preserved for their aesthetic, educational, ecological, and social value.

Current discussions with the YUDC to address these environmental issues began with last term's workshop. Seven graduate students studied different aspects of people's interactions with York's built and natural environment.

They decided there is enormous potential for a variety of environments.

For example, one enlightening observation was that the kids in the day care here use and experience the campus in ways adults may never think about. Places that we rush by are considered sacred to them: raspberry bushes in the

woodlots, a toboggan hill by the "rainbow fountain," a pine "forest." It was observed that the children's confined outdoor playground offered them little diversity. This sterile playground is microcosmic model of the larger space of the built university.

York, as an educational institution, could provide a model for solving environmental problems and at the same time become a richer more meaningful place to live. The initiative can be taken. The basic premise: think globally, act locally.

To act, the students derived working principles. One principle is the use of landscape diversity for both human and nonhuman users, in recognition of the need to lead a

including cost, safety, and the likelihood of vandalism.

There are liveable winter city precedents. Although Nathan Phillips Square at Toronto City Hall is made of cold grey concrete, it is very popular at all times of year. If York feels like open tundra in February (and a baked prairie in August) then we should realize that landscaping can be used to create more liveable winter environments, for example, by creating natural windbreaks.

A third GLUE project proposal is a green trail network, linking natural areas. This will increase the access and opportunity for enjoyment of the campus.

Significant areas can be linked using naturalization techniques (aiding and abetting mother nature). The



RESTORING YORK'S HERITAGE: The Hoover Homestead (above) located south-west of Stong Pond, is an example of the unexplored potential of York's "hidden landscape. The Homestead could easily become a meeting and education centre.

more harmonious existence within a natural world. A second principle is the creation of spaces which can support diverse social and educational activity. These two principles are not mutually exclusive. Together they create the potential for green liveable environments.

Green alternatives

The workshop proposals, outlined in a summary report, were presented to the YUDC Advisory Committee on December 13, and now serve as a basis for the continuing input of the current GLUE project.

The GLUE project has defined three proposals that help realize this liveable goal: the first is a natural heritage park. As part of York's "hidden landscape," the area along Black Creek is an important aspect of a green liveable campus. It is an area which deserves to be cherished and preserved as one of the last remnants of natural diversity on the campus. The Master Plan proposed playing fields in this area; discussions with YUDC now include alternative sites on campus.

The university could recognize the Black Creek section of the campus as a natural heritage park. This would be an example of a commitment to natural preservation, an issue of increasing global concern.

Also, the abandoned Hoover Homestead, southwest of Stong Pond, could become a nature centre, a place to relax, read, gather, and learn.

It is apparent that values are shifting and that these must be translated into how we treat the land we live on. Witness for example the concern for the Rouge Valley and the Leslie Street Spit.

A second proposal is for an active common. If a space provides many opportunities, social activities will evolve within the space at people's own initiative. York Lanes, the proposed shopping mall, does not create an active edge. It becomes a centre unto itself, drawing people indoors, away from the currently-planned "dished" common — an open space dug out in the middle. Alternatives to this plan are currently being discussed. An active common means a place that has the potential to attract people for formal and informal events. A soccer and rugby field can do this, a pond that freezes for skating in winter can do this.

The Master Plan responds to winter conditions by creating more indoor environments rather than better outdoor environments. There are questions about the liveability of the proposed glassed-in walkways around the common,

green trail network can provide opportunities for many recreational and educational activities. For example: jogging, birding, cross country skiing, nature studies, film making, dog walking, and fitness stations.

These three GLUE proposals — a natural heritage park, an active common, and a green trail network — are only small contributions toward an overall vision of a green liveable campus. The York U Can Recycle Committee has suggested a waste-free campus; this affects building design, landscaping, composting, and the products we use. There is a potential link for the University to a body of knowledge and local industries which are researching new "low tech" waste management. Simply put, this means better ways to compost and recycle, use passive solar and other conservation techniques.

Values are shifting; more people are showing concern for the environment. Creating a place at York that people can value is a starting point — a model — for how we see our environment as a whole.

The Master Plan does in fact recognize that people should have a say in how places they use are planned. YUDC has made efforts to involve people at York in the campus planning process.

Reference is made to the process of updating the plans to respond to different needs:

During the ongoing process of consultation and implementation with the University, the plan will become more prescriptive, as creative responses are made to issues as they emerge. (Section 6.0 of the Structure Plan)

In a process that is truly responsive to the many needs that exist at York, anyone should feel free to express their concerns about the campus environment. Some may say: "I'm concerned with the ecological health of natural environments; what can we do about it here?"; or "I'd like to have a place where I can sit down with a cup of coffee and wait for the bus"; or "I feel scared walking through campus at night, if there was more street life I would feel safer." The challenge is in seeking out what really matters in places for people. An active search for new ideas takes a group effort.

Anyone can get involved. Currently, a copy of the Master Plan is available in Scott Library's periodical room. Or, take a walk on the wild side through woodlots or along Black Creek by Hoover Homestead.

GLUE members can be reached through the Faculty of Environmental Studies at 736-5252.

