

Urban park signals renewal in Newmarket

A sea of parking spaces becomes home to skaters and swimmers at redesigned community centre



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Cynics might argue that all Superkül did was put lipstick on a pig, and all Janet Rosenberg & Studio did was get rid of a whole lot of useful parking spaces.

Then again, cynics usually miss the point. Plus, they're a cranky bunch.

There's no question the architects at Superkül were handed a pig of a building to work with: a long, utilitarian, 1974 cinder-blockasaurus of a community centre in Newmarket. And the Rosenberg landscapers were indeed looking to send cars packing for more suburban climes by draining a huge sea of asphalt.

But the point of it all was urban regeneration.

The site in question, you see, is smack-dab in the middle of town. In fact, Google Maps drops its pushpin a mere 500 metres away when you ask it to find "Newmarket, ON." So, asks founding principal Janet Rosenberg, rhetorically: "How do you put into place a process that allows Newmarket to grow, and have more flexible amenities that meet the needs of a diverse community?"

"And how do you become urban?"

Well, you start by sloughing off what isn't being used on the 3.3-hectare site, and changing the way other things are. Decommissioned in 2007, the 1922 Newmarket Community Arena – a long, windowless affair that held first-time skating memories for many townsfolk – was hogging precious real estate, so it came down in 2010. Superkül, a firm that usually watches things go up, took care of this task, as well as "capping" the hole left in the 1970s addition where it had been joined.

Then, as instructed by town council, Ms. Rosenberg's studio set to work on the sea of parking spaces that stretched all the way south to Water Street – parking spaces that were almost always full, by the way, because Main Street retail workers' cars and even a few police vehicles would occupy them all day long. "There's a very different thing about parking to skate with your kids for three hours and running a daycare and all your employees have to park there," says Ms. Rosenberg.

The location was "too valuable" to give it to the automobile, she says, because in addition to its proximity to Main Street and the congregation/celebration potential it held, new linkages to the



The community centre in Newmarket has a skating surface in the winter and a water park in the summer. TOP: JEFF MCNEILL; BOTTOM: GREG KING



Holland River and man-made waterfall at Fairy Lake, as well as the two existing trails, Tom Taylor Trail and the Nokiidaa Bike Trail, could be created. "You have to find other ways to creatively look at parking and reducing it down," she says. Besides, this wasn't the location of a big box store, which is "all about the shopping experience," but rather "about the environment."

While JR&S was working the new urban park design, Newmarket town council realized it'd be a missed opportunity if they

didn't spruce up ol' cinderblockasaurus – saved because it contained much-needed halls and meeting rooms – so Superkül's scope of work was expanded. The community centre would now be re-clad, and outdoor washrooms to serve the new asymmetrical outdoor skating rink (a water feature in summer), a new mechanical room, and a garage for the Zamboni would be tacked on. Because the building looked rather puny to Superkül's eyes, the new metal cladding would extend upward to create a

parapet, and a wrap-around canopy would create horizontal heft.

Andre D'Elia, one of the founders of the 10-year-old firm, remembers looking up at the jumbled backs of Main Street stores while inspecting the construction site on Doug Duncan Drive. The blues, greys and reds of the buildings became the inspiration when choosing colours offered by cladding supplier Vicwest. His striped Hugo Boss shirt with similar colours also played a role: "So I was sitting [in the

office] and I said, 'Okay, we have to make it look like this shirt,'" he says, laughing. After JR&S's swoopy, winged band shell went up on the south portion of the site, its columns were painted red to match the community centre.

First used on their "Crescent Road House" in 2005, Superkül fought hard to use warm, reddish ipe wood on the bottom portion of the building. "We wanted something that would be friendly, something that wasn't going to be imposing," says Mr. D'Elia. The municipality was concerned, rightly, about maintenance, refinishing and lovestruck initial-carvers, but tests proved the "iron wood" could take the abuse.

Inside, the community centre was left much the same as it was in 1974, as the limited budget allowed only new bamboo flooring, new T-bar ceilings, paint, and some sexy marble for the bar areas.

Enjoying its second winter and flooded with happy strollers and skaters, Newmarket Riverwalk Commons and the refurbished Newmarket Community Centre and Lions Hall are urban oases. Where once there was a sea of cars surrounding two long, dark, shed-like buildings, there is now a long, landscaped finger around a bright architectural beacon. "In the 'burbs, you don't come together," offers Ms. Rosenberg. "You might meet over a Wal-Mart aisle, but you don't come together with that same level of recreation."

"Revitalization is critical," she finishes. "More towns are just falling apart because their downtown cores are really dying."