



DEVELOPMENT

New public art promises to be out of this world

Celestial figures on a pair of condo towers will be anything but banal, setting them apart from much of the outdoor art in Toronto



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Space aliens are coming to North Toronto. They will land outside a pair of condominium towers rising near Yonge and Eglinton. The developer wanted a striking work of art for his towers, which will stand 34 and 38 storeys tall at Roehampton and Redpath. A jury chose *Stargate*, by Anna Passakas and Radoslaw Kudlinski of the “multidisciplinary art collective” Blue Republic. It features two colourful fantasy figures and several smaller ones that will appear to emerge from glass murals as if from another dimension.

A publicist describes the impact: “Imagine walking through a giant 3-D intergalactic universe on your walk to work ... towering alien characters weighing over 1,000 pounds each and standing 15 feet tall ... next to a Starbucks.”

It’s hard to say how dear old North Toronto will react to this invasion from beyond, but at least *Stargate* will not be banal. That sets it apart from much of the art that adorns public spaces in Toronto.

By one estimate, Toronto boasts about 500 works of public art. Some are charming, like the reclining cows in the square at the foot of the TD Centre towers. Many are corny, like the long-eared dog-like animals on the grass on Wellington Street West near Metro Hall, or the kid pulling an obelisk on a wagon at police headquarters. Most are simply forgettable – a pretzel of chrome or bronze in a tower plaza that thousands of people walk past every day without a glance.

Public art in Toronto was once so dreadful that artists themselves rose up to fight for something better. Art dealer Avrom



Renderings show the proposed *Stargate* display outside a pair of condominium towers rising near Yonge and Eglinton. COURTESY OF BLUE REPUBLIC

Isaacs helped stage a protest when a monument to Canadian airmen went up at University and Dundas in 1984. The soaring humanoid with raised arms was dubbed *Gumby Goes to Heaven*. That naked figure surrounded by doves that stands outside Union Station is in the same kitschy vein.

But public art is getting bolder and better. Consider the two toy soldiers of Douglas Coupland’s *War of 1812* memorial or the giant canoe and multicoloured fish lures in Canoe Landing Park. Or get an eyeful of *Rising*, the dramatic, stainless-steel creation by Shanghai-based Zhang Huan that stands outside the Shangri-La Hotel.

Toronto still has nothing with the impact or the drawing power of Anish Kapoor’s *Cloud Gate*, the giant blob of polished metal nicknamed “the bean” that anchors Chicago’s Millennium Park. Here, public art is still too much an afterthought. But look around a bit and you can find some remarkable stuff popping up.

The emerging neighbourhood known as the West Don Lands

has a whole suite of engaging public art, from a cluster of tangled lampposts and a trio of blue figures with illuminating eyes called the *Water Guardians* to a 40-metre-long wall with silhouetted images inspired by the area’s history. Down the road outside a condo tower on Front Street West, two sets of black monoliths are embedded with hundreds of LED lights that react to the movements of passersby. Not far away at the Bay Adelaide Centre is *Straight Flush*, James Turrell’s gorgeous light panels that change colour as you watch, giving life to the lobby and the street outside.

At the Union Station subway platform, a wall of glass panels show black-and-white images of commuters interspersed with splashes of colour and snippets of poetry. Some subway riders called it depressing when they first saw some of the melancholy figures sketched by artist Stuart Reid. But what an improvement in quality and ambition on what used to pass for subway art, like the hideous murals at Queen station depicting, among other things, an orange-faced William

Lyon Mackenzie.

The new wave of public art is often provocative and interactive. It doesn’t just sit there waiting to be admired. These days, says Mr. Kudlinski of Blue Republic, “public art is about creating an event.”

Stargate took shape after he found himself drawing some strange creatures on the paper in front of him. They looked like something from science fiction. The idea of the visitors from another place was born. Moving into an apartment in the sky, after all, is a bit like entering a new dimension. He hopes the figures will be a “manifestation of hope for an exciting new life in a new location.”

Todd Cowan of Capital Developments, which teamed up with Freed Developments to build the towers, says that the \$1.5-million work will create an energized new public space where people will come to look, snap pictures and interact with the strange figures. As a news release puts it, “These characters will appear on the scene in a moment frozen in time, for a dance or a battle about to take over the street.”

The day is past when a devel-

oper would plunk some art work in the square or the lobby just to say (as Mr. Kudlinski puts it) “look at me, I can afford it.” Developers are starting to see that public art can add value to what they build and contribute to the life of the city.

Another reason for the improving quality of public art is, believe it or not, the involvement of city hall. City rules say that 1 per cent of gross construction costs for any significant development should go toward art. A public art commission oversees the process. Developers have to come up with a budget, a schedule and a selection mechanism, which usually ends with a short list of art works and a jury to choose the winner.

One of the jurors for *Stargate* was Melissa Bennett, curator of contemporary art at the Art Gallery of Hamilton. She chose the “fun, funny” aliens because they are different: “This is not just a bronze sculpture. There is nothing like this in Toronto.”

She’s got that right. One of the aliens has a bulbous head and seven legs. Like it or love it, no one is going to ignore it.