

BLUE REPUBLIC'S STARGATE

## The public art debate

Is the city's Percent for Public Art Program doing its job?

MATTHEW HAGUE

his spring, aliens will invade Toronto. The two tallest will measure over 10 feet high, one with five bright yellow legs and the other a giant blue head. And they won't be alone. They will be surrounded by smaller, multi-coloured friends

You might expect them to be am-

bling around the Entertainment District, looking for a raucous night club where they'll blend in. Instead, the creatures, part of new \$1.5-million art installation, will be bringing whimsy uptown, at Yonge and Eglinton. They will be spreading out between two new condo towers on Redpath Avenue, a joint project between Freed Developments and Capital Developments currently under construction.

The piece, called STARGATE and envisioned by Toronto art collective Blue Republic, was commissioned as part of the city's Percent for Public Art Program, sometimes simply called Section 37, as a reference to the planning item it falls under. As the name suggests, the initiative mandates that certain developers — those building for-profit projects over 10,000 square metres, and those asking for either a height or density

variance to the zoning bylaws — commit one per cent of their construction budgets for new sculptures or installations.

Section 37 has been around for 53 years but has taken on greater import recently. Of Toronto's 400-plus pieces of development-related public art, over two-thirds have been installed since 2005, owing to the city's long boom in condo buildings.

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Art isn't Section 37's only outcome. There is an option allowing developers to simply donate their one per cent to the city, who in turn can use it for other community benefits — refurbishing a public park, say. But according to the City Planning Division, the majority of developers — 60 per cent — choose to commission their own art, "recognizing that public art can add significantly to the marketability and value of a development," says Ellen Leesti, a communications co-ordinator with the city. This has turned developers into Medici-esque patrons, giving them significant creative influence over not just the city's skyline, but the city's street-level artscape as well. fits - refurbishing a public

street-level artscape as well. That power has risks. When successful, it produces iconic gathering points, while also boosting the marketability of the condos. A 2019 paper from researchers at both

Iroin researchers at both the University of Campania and the University of Naples noted that reputable art, including tags by popular grafiti artists, could boost property values by 10 to 15 per cent.

When wielded less successfully, though, Toronto Twitter has a meltdown. That's what happened in 2019 when a 25-foot-tall man in a plain white dress shirt was installed outside of One O One, a luxury rental tower on St. Clair Avenue West. The giant figure has a perplexingly blank expression and, even odder, is bear-hugging the base of a miniature highrise. Although proponents say its a comment on how the city is struggling to support the sharp jump in real estate prices, a crowded online peant gallery has used words like "terrible," "Soviet," and creepy" to describe the work. According to Ilana Althan, a public art advoctation of the Bentway, a sculpture or installation isn't necessarily a failure when it engenders negative reactions. "The role of art is not just to beautify and please," she says. "It hink the best public art provokes dilegue and challenges us." Think the best public art provokes dilegue and challenges us." The role of art is not just to beautify and please," she says. "It hink the best public art provokes dilegue and challenges us." The role of art is not just to beautify and please," she says. "It hink the best public art provokes dinished building is the more fainshed building is the more fainshed building is the most productive way to spark such discussions. "Rather than just waiting for a project to come to completion, why not use art during the transition."

period while a plot is being developed to bring forth im-portant dialogues," she says. "I think there are a lot of opportunities outside of our current development frame works that aren't necessarily

current development frameworks that aren't necessarily being explored but which could be impactuil."

Altman points to a temporary piece of art currently marking the demise of the Galleria Mail at Lansdowne and Dupont. Commissioned by developers Elad, who are turning the old discount shopping centre into almost 3,000 residential units across multiple towers, popular Toronto artist Thrush Holmes installed neon lettering over the mall's old sign pylon, spelling out Love Me Till I'm Me Again. Some critics have suggested the piece is merely a colourful harbinger of gentrification, but Altuma says "one of the things that excites me most about that piece is that it was developed in the midst of the transformation,



A temporary piece of art marking the demise of the Galleria Mall at Lansdowne and Dupont spelling out Love Me Till I'm Me Again.

so allows people to reflect in the moment about the transformation, as it's happening."
Importantly, because the piece is temporary — it's staying up over the next five or so years until construction takes over the site — it does not count as Elad's Percent for Public Art contribution. "We were not obliged tion. "We were not obliged to do the piece by the city," says Dror Duchovny at Elad. "We were motivated to do it because we will be working

we were motivated to do it because we will be working on the project for many years to come, and we believe art is great way to engage with the community we are working with." (As for any controversy, Duchovny isn't fazed: "Not everyone is going to love the art," he says. "The beauty of art is that it's up for interpretation. And we view all buzz about it as positive.") Savry developers take a similar view, going above and beyond Percent for Public Art. "The city is more concerned about the accounting, and about the dollar values being properly allocated to the artist communities and the arts," says Amanda Miltorne Ireland at Capital, overseeing the STARGATE, installation. "We are concerned about checking those boxes, too, but also much more interested in the effect of the pieces overall at the end of the day. With STAR-GATE, we worked extremely hard to produce something special, not just for the build-ing but for the neighbourhood because we know how important that is to engage people." Altman says sometimes

people." Altman says sometimes Actional says sometimes section 37 falls short because the artwork is commissioned entirely after the building has been designed. It's a reaction, rather than a core consideration. Time will tell whether Yonge and Eglinton embraces STARGATE when it's unweiled later this year, but the piece is site-specific, not a tack-on. After being selected in a juried competition, the artists in Blue Republic have spent the past four years working with Capital and their architects to ensure STARGATE will be harmonious with the build-harmonious with the build-Section 37 falls short because

to ensure STARGATE will be harmonious with the buildings — which, like the art, have similar pops of colour.

Slate Development also sees the benefit of pushing beyond the Percent for Public Art Program. After they acquired an old industrial building in the Junction at 2720 Dundas Street West to convert it into condos, they

Tim Me Again.

donated the property to different cultural groups for use until they started construction. An immersive rendition of Romeo and Juliet was performed in the space. An exterior wall was given to South African painter Ben Johnston, who created a text-based temporary mural on it. When the condos are finished, the building will be topped with neon lettering spelling out Junction, a signost for the neighbourhood.

"The sign was originally a place holder until we could find other art," says Brendan Donnelly at Slate. "But everyone who saw it liked it, so we decided to keep it, even though the city has said its not public art. It would be a lot easier for us to not do projects like that. But there's just something so awesome about these creative endeavours, and about the way they can bring a community together."

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