

URBAN ADVENTURE

Good vibrations

Take one activist. Take a voiceprint. Then design a beautiful forest based on its cadences. That is the dizzyingly cool idea behind a new park from architecture company gh3 that will honour the late activist June Callwood, brightening lands south of Fort York, reports Patricia Chisholm

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Park design can often be a conventional affair - a row of trees here, a pathway there. But when the team at Toronto firm gh3 set out to design a new park dedicated to the memory of June Callwood, they were looking for fresh ways to create a natural setting in a densely urban environment.

At the same time, they wanted to celebrate her legacy of activism and impassioned journalism without resorting to a sculpture or bust, an option Ms. Callwood had opposed.

The result is unique. Architect Pat Hanson and her partner in gh3, landscape architect Diana Gerrard, used a digitally generated image of a recording of Ms. Callwood's voice as a template for the formal organization of the new park.

The phrase they chose to map is taken from her last interview, with the CBC's George Stroumboulopoulos in 2007, in which she responded to a question about her religious beliefs with: "I believe in kindness."

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The voiceprint of those words will now be rendered in stone paving, with the arrangement of trees and gardens in the new park loosely following the cadences of Ms. Callwood's richly timbred voice.

Linda Rapson, a Toronto physician and long-time friend and collaborator of Ms. Callwood's, says the tranquil, intimate mood of the proposed park would have pleased her.

"When I saw the design, I went 'Wow!' " Dr. Rapson says. "June would have loved this."

Ms. Callwood died in 2007, at 82. But the \$2.2-million project had been in the works since 2005, when, after she had been diagnosed with cancer, the City of Toronto announced that a narrow, almost half-hectare wedge just south of Fort York would be named in her honour.

The idea to digitally map her voice came from Joel Di Giacomo, an architecture student in gh3's office, which recently won the competition to design

the park. "The voiceprint is executed in granite, so that it will last forever, together with the idea of a forest, which in this case is managed, but everlasting," says Ms. Hanson.

Ms. Callwood attended the ribbon-cutting in 2005. A long-time advocate for children and abused women, she had asked that the park be tailored to accommodate the needs of small children. Frisbee- and football-throwing teens, who have access to ample playing fields nearby, should not be allowed to take over the space, she said. Given its undulating linked clearings, pools and gardens scattered among densely grouped trees, dotted with angular benches and threaded with walkways, it's likely that Ms. Hanson and Ms. Gerrard have succeeded.

The assignment was demanding. The city appears to have woken up to one of its great, underused treasures, the broad sward of green, open land at Fort York, now known mostly for hard-to-get-to birthday parties and obscure military gatherings. The scheduled completion of June Callwood Park in 2011 is part of a larger city plan to refurbish the area with connecting bridges, walkways and a visitor's centre in time for the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812.

The city is also determined to punch more holes in the belt of roads and aging industry that still bars easy access to the waterfront in this neighbourhood. The new park and its mini-forest are an integral part of that plan, running from Fort York Boulevard on the north to Fleet Street on the south, bisecting a concrete forest of new 15- to 30-storey condo towers. As requested by the city, the park will provide visual and physical links between Fort York, the new residential developments in the area, and the waterfront.

With a nod to the fort's history, there will be a "time" garden: a series of parallel plots planted with a range of historically significant species. Nearby, at the park's southern edge, a large shallow pool for splashing will lap seamlessly at the edge of the granite paving. In winter, a geothermal-heating system will generate clouds of mist floating just above the surface. Ms. Hanson points out that, "It's conceivable that on a decent winter day it would be warm enough to do tai chi in the park."

Ms. Hanson and Ms. Gerrard champion an idea they have used to considerable effect in the new design, what they call the "super built forest." The notion is to help mend Toronto's frayed public spaces by planting trees in clusters in areas ranging from the waterfront's concrete lip to mangy parking lots. Large open areas where pedestrians either "bake or freeze," as Ms. Gerrard puts it, should be transformed. To that end, the June Callwood Park aims to make outdoor activity inviting throughout the year, whether it's animated play or quiet contemplation.

The design also charms with unexpected elements. A low-to-the-ground, bright pink maze of poured rubber will poke out of the trees, intended for small feet.

A flat pink "field" of the same material is close by. Further on, a vertical maze of curvy stainless steel will weave across an open section, creating another playful element with sculptural qualities. And the simple, boxy seating will contain motion sensors, lighting up white, translucent benches when occupied, and perhaps throughout the night.

While there will not be a conventional bust or sculpture of Ms. Callwood, a competition is currently being held to create a piece of public art for the park, with a selection likely to be announced in June. Ms. Hanson and Ms. Gerrard hope that the choice will involve sound, perhaps playing around the walls of the polished steel maze or wafting intermittently through the trees.

Above all, they would like to jump-start new thinking about urban parks. "Our palette of open spaces in the city is pretty limited," says Ms. Hanson. "But the more that get built, the more that people will understand what they can be."

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