

We can do better than a parking lot at the Badlands

As a landscape architect/urbanist, born and raised in Caledon, and currently doing my masters in Oslo, where I have been focusing my research on river deltas, I find the Cheltenham Badlands to be a highly interesting site.

The proposed future of the Badlands, part of a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve: a 33-car parking lot with accommodation for two buses, does not seem surprising to me in the least. The current consensus of Caledon seems to be that, 'Caledon is very beautiful,' and with good reason. The landscape is as picturesque as the hills surrounding Florence, or the countryside of the south of France. However, I fear that this consensus is somewhat blind, and that the Caledon that we are taught to love, appreciate and provide stewardship for is transforming from an amalgamation of rural villages to a quintessential form of suburbia. Is Caledon a suburb?

For instance the Town of Caledon, the supposed 'Greenest Town in Ontario,' continues to extract and dismantle the pristine landscape that flows throughout the rolling hills of its territory. This dependence on resource extraction (primarily aggregates) is not only detrimental to the local environment, but extends much further from micro to macro ecologies which migrate through this individual region, humans included. We have the luxury of fresh water, yet we very well know that when you dig a hole it effects the flow of water. So the aggregate king pins flex some muscle and show some cash, and suddenly gravity no longer exists, terrain no longer alters the flow of water and the extraction begins. With sand being considered 'the new gold' what future will evolve as the Town of Caledon continues to excavate its foundations? Why will the Town of Caledon be a desirable place to live?

As the glaciers from the last ice age made their slow retreat, they deposited masses of nutrient rich soils, sediments and carved rivers throughout the land, thus forming a highly habitable environment for species of all types, humans included. Most settlements throughout the Town of Caledon were based off of water, specifically the Credit River and its tributaries. Alton, Belfountain, Caledon village, Cheltenham, Cataract, Inglewood, Terra Cotta, etc. all formed along the hydrologic veins of the region.

Some of the cores of these hamlets still exist and do at times provide the atmosphere of a village, however the others have lost all purpose. It is highly interesting to note that the railroad follows the river, and runs through the majority of these hamlets. The logic was in the land, people followed the water, and so did its infrastructure. The river provided power, transportation, food, and irrigation for agriculture, and small resource based industries. It was not until the invention of the Jeffersonian grid, the automobile, and advancements in petroleum production/refinement that the urbanization of Caledon (and all of North America) chose geometry over geography. Throwing the possibility of using the 'old train' as a source of transportation out the window, we began engineering our infrastructure in the straightest of lines around 'the car' with a new logic, 'speed.' What would Caledon look like if our roads were not linear? What would it be like to take the train on your daily commute to 'the city'? What if you could walk, bike, or even canoe to the grocery store?

It would be a hard argument and ridiculous agenda to suggest removing the roads and to start over. However, I do question the allowance of what is obviously suburban development occurring along them. Does anyone ever question what is the purpose behind this community? In a day an age when we are in the midst of an impending petroleum crisis, the depression rate has risen vastly since suburbs became a cultural norm, and fertile land is diminishing 'Why would we be creating such places? These purposeless places have no life, there are no stores, no real nature, and are the summation of a fictitious dream consisting of two cars, a garage three-quarters the size of the house, kitchen with granite countertops, (unused) swimming pool, and children playing in the yard (video games in the basement) 'A vision of early 20th century planning that has been proven a failure.

I find the lack of attention that the Town of Caledon pays to this matter somewhat ignorant. For instance, what is going on with the four corners in Caledon village? Can this be called a 'village'? What aspects of a village exist here? The houses? A church? The thing I find most interesting about this is that it isn't often you see people there enjoying themselves 'Caledon Fair set aside. I can't blame them either, there is absolutely nothing to do, and it has been like this for ever 'since before Mac's was known as Becker's. Even more disappointing is that rather than perhaps re-thinking how this place could function as an environment for people and community, quite the opposite was done. A meeting place for cars has formed. Petro-Canada, which when put in scale is larger than the library, has sprouted up with its other corporate buddies McDonald's, and Pizza Pizza. So while you are feeding your car you can also remember to feed yourself something unhealthy and the pockets of the corporations, then commute 70 to 100 kilometres, complain about gas and traffic, in total spending three or four hours of your day with your car, no longer enjoying those Sunday drives that once whispered in your ear 'move here, its beautiful.'

There are many architects, urbanists, landscape architects who would be more than interested if this was seen as a project or a competition to rethink rural villages for the 21st century and beyond, who are capable of assembling multidisciplinary teams that are adept to handling the challenges, and have the knowledge and ingenuity to link economies of scale with ecologies. Why are these

aspects of town planning of no importance to the planning department of the Town of Caledon?

The Cheltenham Badlands are breath taking. This site has undergone an extreme geomorphology. From its beginnings, 445-450 million years ago as an Ordovician deltaic landscape, to present day, it has been and always will be a hypersensitive environment. Its previous life has been compared to that of the Ganges/Brahmaputra Delta, which is one of the largest mangrove forest in the world, and is seeing immense pressures due to humans, sea level rise and other impacts of accelerated climate change. It is novel to imagine these soft eroding mounds of queenstone shale to have once been part of a system that actually prevented erosion, and was a soiree of sea and land where ecologies thrived. Once teaming with life, this biotope slowly disappeared, a new succession of vegetation managed to grow within the badlands until the early 1900s. From the early 20th century until the 1930s, the land was cut of its vegetation and used for agrarian purposes.

Luckily, the citizens noticed that this was a unique terrain, and it was eroding at a rapid pace due to its geological formation. However the implications of this mistake in planning are still evident today. The badlands are a palimpsest of its successive owners, whether they were human, flora, or aquatic. It is a reminder of how truly special the landscape of Caledon is.

The fact that people want to take part in this phenomena should be embraced. However, proper design needs to be implemented for the best outcome to balance the effects of humans on such a sensitive environment. This requires multidisciplinary teams of landscape architects, architects, geologists, engineers, urbanists, ecologists, artists, municipal authorities and of course consistent interaction with local citizens. I believe that the Badlands need to be truly designed for human use, boardwalks, viewing platforms, historical data all should be considered before the establishment of a parking lot, if a parking lot is even necessary.

I would like to propose that the outcome of this site be determined through a design competition, as all public works should be. I believe that there are professionals who would provide interesting and provocative design solutions for the Badlands. This could also be a way of proposing questions regarding the future planning/development of Caledon, and ultimately using design to create a stimulating, vibrant, rural/urban Caledon. Can't we do better than a parking lot?

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Caledon