Designers Walk: Toronto’s New Forest in the Sky

By Tim Beatley

A new biophilic tower, Designers Walk, has been approved in Toronto that will likely transform the way we design and build urban highrise structures in cities throughout North America. It is the first highrise structure in this part of the world to include terrace-level trees as a primary design element—in this sense a unique design contribution to the growing biophilic design genre of the forest tower.

I spoke recently with the building’s architect and chief proponent, Brian Brisbin (of Brisbin, Brook, Beynon (BBB) Architects), who is unabashedly optimistic about this kind of design, even in a northern latitude city like Toronto. For Brisbin, the journey began with inspiration from the Milan project Bosco Verticale, the world’s first example of a forested tower, and the first such design by Italian architect Stefano Boeri. Brisbin has been inspired by this project and has learned much from it, even going so far as renting an apartment in one of the buildings, and taking apart and photographing floor panels and control systems.

Brisbin believes that Designers Walk will actually improve upon and extend the Boeri model. One improvement is in the design of the terraces and the placement of trees and vegetation. The apartments at Bosco Verticale are a bit dark, he believes, and the view from the inside is a bit obstructed. As Brisbin puts it, “we still want to see the world.” Brisbin describes Designers Walk as a building with “no balconies, but only terraces.” The terraces are essential extensions to the interior living spaces of the units.

The trees and vegetation are designed in to an exceptional degree, another distinguishing feature of the design. According to Brisbin, “it’s not a building with potted plants on balconies, it’s a building [where] trees and vegetation are integrated into the structure.” There are depressions in floor slabs, for example, that allow the trees to be flush with the terrace surface. It is a “much more gracious experience visually for people inside,” Brisbin says.

The design innovations of this project extend to the installation and monitoring of the trees and vegetation. The tree system is described as ‘plug and play,’ allowing the trees to be easily dropped in and connected quickly. The building will host around 400 trees, and thousands of plants. The vertical forest will be owned by the condo corporation, maintained and managed by a third-party maintenance company, and carefully monitored by a research team that includes faculty of the forestry department at the University of Toronto.

The project has recently received its permits from the City of Toronto, and Brisbin estimates construction will begin within a year and a half. The project is in the construction detailing stage as well as marketing. One interesting difference from the usual way building projects like this one happen is the very positive reaction of the residents of the neighborhood in which it will sit. Rather than the usual NIMBYism (Not In My Backyard), the neighborhood association actually advocated on behalf of the project, asking the city to approve it.

In a disparaging critique of the typical towers being built in downtown Toronto, Brisbin says that “90% of these buildings are simply glass boxes.” There is an unfortunate lack of texture and diversity of material in these buildings, he says, not to mention their high energy and carbon footprints. In contrast, he describes Designers Walk as something that will look like a “terraced hillside community of trees,” creating a “softer and greener, more natural environment.” No wonder neighbors like the design, with little concern even about the building’s height (often a major sticking point for nearby residents).

To Brisbin, the terrace design is the perfect antidote to the usual sterile glass tower. In his design, the green terraces create a kind of ‘privacy and sanctuary’ both for residents of the structure and the people looking back at it.

Buildings like Designers Walk are not only going to be more desirable visually, he argues, they will be essential if the city hopes to meet its goal of increasing forest canopy cover by 30%. There is simply not enough horizontal space left in the city, so Brisbin believes planting in the vertical realm will be essential. His forestry consultant from the University of Toronto agrees, believing the city’s target would be difficult to achieve without projects like this.

Tree planting details for Designers Walk

Image Credit: BBB Architects
There are few things not to like about Designers Walk but one might be the price of the units. This is not exactly affordable housing, something I raised with Brisbin. The condo units will be expensive, and these wonderful green features will be beyond the reach of most people. Brisbin acknowledges this, but argues that the development of the green systems will be subsidized and underwritten by the pricier units: “These high-end condos will be paying for research, technology, deployment and standardization.” He fully expects that the technology pioneered and tested here will filter down to mid-level housing and eventually find its way into affordable housing projects.

Brisbin has big plans for more tree towers in Toronto and is already working on two others, to be located just a few blocks away from Designers Walk. In his mind, these tree towers will serve as vertical, ecological “way points,” with the potential to connect several nearby ground level or “horizontal” parks, as he calls them. These structures will quickly become essential elements in a larger urban ecology, a place for birds and insects and other biodiversity. Projects like Designers Walk will (hopefully) help to bring about an increasingly complex network of buildings, trees and parks, all in a kind of “transmigratory relationship.”

It would be hard to object to the kind of building depicted in Brisbin’s renderings. No wonder residents have been actively advocating on its behalf. It is always possible to lie or distort with renderings, of course, and the resulting buildings often do not match the rosy picture conveyed by plans. But, if the resulting forest tower is anything close to what Brisbin imagines it will likely be seen as a positive addition indeed--soft and green, to be sure, a hillside town of trees that should help to cool this urban setting, sequester carbon, and provide an important dose of nature to those on both sides of these tree-lined terraces.

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