

Order in the Chaos: Examining the Leslie Spit

Contributed by Libby Peters

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If you were to visit the Leslie Spit on a Saturday afternoon you might find cyclists, hikers, birdwatchers, nature-lovers, lollygaggers... You might notice the unique wildlife, or the city skyline in the distance.

During the week you would likely find dump trucks carrying loads of landfill. You might notice the mounds of brick and rubble that amount to a virtual graveyard for the city's expired buildings.

The dump is where artist Michael Brown finds inspiration and materials for his work: since 2005, Brown has been creating environmental art installations using bricks from the spit.

"The material dumped at the spit is rich in history and meaning," says Brown. "It raises very interesting questions when doing installations: Where did these bricks come from? What is the history of these structures that no longer exist? Has the history been recorded anywhere? What value do we place on our architectural past in Canada and what does this say about the value we put on the future appearance of our communities?"

A graduate of OCAD, Brown has spent the past several years working with young artists through the

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Harbourfront Community Centre. It is that community art work -- work that often impacts the visual appearance of Toronto -- that led Brown toward the Leslie Spit.

"Some of the work I find most enjoyable is work that's done outside of the studio context, out in the open," says Brown.

Over the past few years he has begun scouring around the spit, collecting materials and building works of art amongst the debris. The resulting environmental installations are arresting: born from the rubble around them, the structures Brown creates both blend in and stand out from their surroundings. Bricks that have been dumped by the water's edge and polished take on a rounded, softer look. Individually they are lovely to look at; arranged into structures they become both comforting and challenging. Brown's effort in organizing the mess of rubble is appealing to the eye.

"By putting the pieces together, it puts a little bit of order in this chaotic display," he says. "There are hundreds of thousands of these pieces down there," says Brown. "It's impossible to tell where they came from."

The bricks and other materials are rich with the city's history. It is stirring to contemplate them reborn this way, into new structures.

"The bricks were manufactured from quays around the region," says Brown. "Someone told me the yellow brick comes from New York, or the escarpment area. The red brick comes from around here. Humans have taken it and shaped it into something usable. Then it goes back out into nature and I'm using it again."

He adds, "It's kind of like a full life cycle of the material. In a way there's a kind of poetry to that." Brown is concerned with the value we place on architecture in this city, the way "we rip down buildings and replace them... (to) build something with a retractable roof or whatever is the next phase." He points to examples such as Exhibition Stadium and Maple Leaf Gardens.

This commodity mentality is something Brown considers with his land art installations.

"If you look at artists like myself who were preoccupied with creating artwork -- on this treadmill of creating a consumer product -- for me it was like I was part of the problem, even though I wasn't... on an assembly line. It feels like you're a part of this creation of more and more stuff."

Brown's form of land art is unique, working with the existing environment but also manmade materials. The nature of the work also makes it transient: the first couple of wall installations Brown built disappeared in the process of bulldozing on the spit.

"You can't just hold onto everything that you make," says Brown. "That whole issue is just so out the window when you're working with natural material...You build a piece and then you must surrender it."

Of course the issue of ownership is out the window with this form of land art as well. Visitors to the spit often notice the artwork and interact with it; an equally large number of visitors never see the work though, because the Leslie Spit is so large, or because the work has vanished. On one hand it is completely accessible, but on the other, it's almost "underground" since so few people know the work is there.

One piece, "2000 Bricks: Remnants of Toronto's Lost Architecture," was installed on the grounds of the City of Toronto Archives to coincide with Doors Open Toronto last May, where it was viewed by a large number of people. Brown says some visitors knew immediately that the material was from the Leslie Spit. Others might have only had an indication of the historical aspect of the work.

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Currently, Brown is looking at possible installations in different locations, however he admits there are real challenges with transporting materials, permits, insurance, and other issues.

Until this point, he has completed 6 installations including the one at the City Archives and 5 at the spit.

“When I go out to the spit, there’s something like you’re back playing with lego when you were a kid,” says Brown. “It’s similar to working with these bricks. It’s just you and the elements there. There’s something really liberating about that.”

For more information about Michael Brown and his work on the Leslie Spit as well as other projects, visit his website at www.migulmarron.com.



Photo credits:

Top: Leslie Spit Wall No. 1, photo by Michael Brown; Leslie Spit Column, photo by Michael Brown;
Detail of 2000 Bricks installation at City of Toronto Archives, photo by Andrew Waller
Above: Michael Brown and partner Ana Silva gathering bricks, photo by Andrew Waller.