

# GLASS AND GREENERY

# LIFE



Westbank

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## KING STREET REIMAGINED



BIG things are coming to King West.

## HOW ARCHITECTURE CAN BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER

At its heart, KING Toronto seeks to provide a village green  
By Ian Gillespie, Founder, Westbank

When our partner Michael Emory at Allied reached out and asked us to look at the nearly 600 feet of frontage he had assembled over 10 years on King Street W in Toronto, it immediately struck us that this site deserved something extraordinary. To design the project, Bjarke Ingels and his team at BIG came first to mind, as we had been looking for an opportunity to work together in Toronto for some time. Allied was equally enthusiastic about that starting point.

I always had a fascination with Habitat 67, well before I was actually able to see it in person. I think it began with my interest in the ideals behind the kibbutz and building a community. We thought of this project as a way to demonstrate how architecture can meet this challenge and, hopefully, on completion, that will be its test: can architecture bring people together? In many respects, I think the project has the potential to be more successful than Habitat 67, which after all, was an experiment built on an island in the middle of a river. Here, we have the opportunity to infill within an already vibrant, successful neighbourhood.

King West is one of Canada's truly great neighbourhoods. Walkable, interspersed with parks and amenities, enjoying access to transit and a unique character made up of an eclectic mix of heritage and a fine-grain typology. At a different scale, using a variety

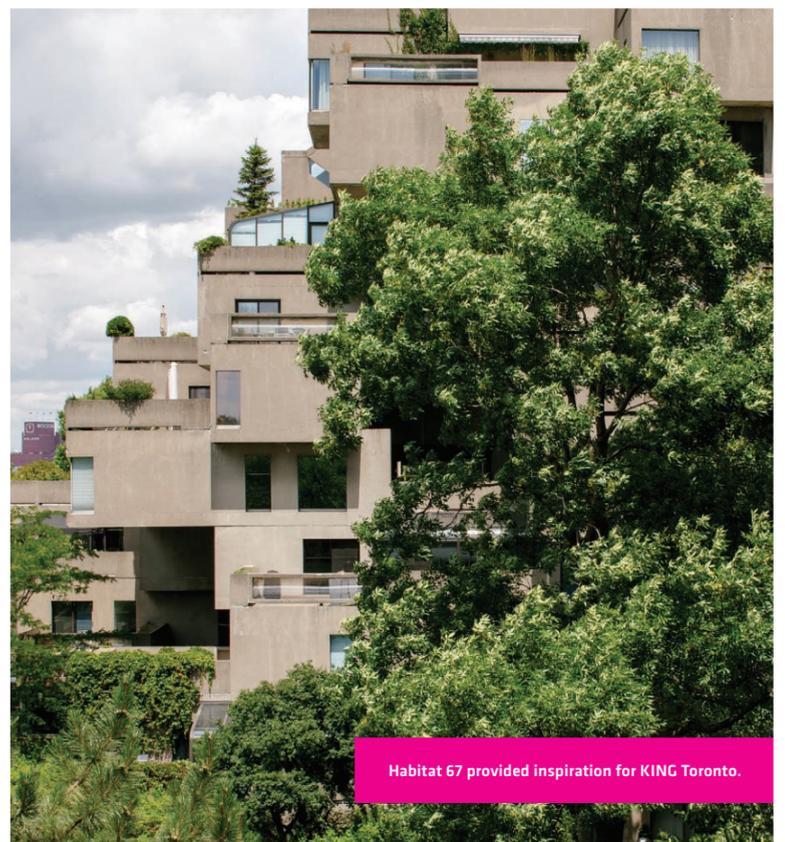
of ways to extend nature, we have managed to create a village green at the heart of our project and in the surrounding landscape.

The other interesting aspect of this project is the inspiration from Maison de Verre, in Paris, which led us to explore the use of glass block both on the building façade and within the project, playing with reflectivity, translucency and transparency to create a luminescent project that changes with the light. Building upon the success of Vancouver House and our adoption of the principal of Gesamtkunstwerk, we have once again taken up the challenge of creating the total work of art. It was through Vancouver House, our first project with Bjarke Ingels, that I first discovered the word and philosophy behind Gesamtkunstwerk, and embraced it as a guiding philosophy for all of our projects, current and future. We realized that, above all, our work expresses the integration of art and architecture, which we hope will elevate our projects to become living sculptures and total works of art. Today, this concept continues to manifest itself in our projects in new and interesting ways, no better than here with what we are calling KING Toronto.

We are also really excited about the chance to work with Public Work, the young, talented landscape architect who

has stepped up to meet the challenge of bringing nature into the urban environment. I think the landscape design on this project may be the best in the country. Finally, KING Toronto is also a project that is resonating strongly within the public discourse. We will be putting on our next exhibition onsite in Toronto, within our BIG-designed 2016

Serpentine Pavilion called Unzipped. This project and this conversation are among the ways we are helping contribute to a dialogue around urbanism and the opportunities of using architecture to create community in Toronto, a wonderful city that is considered amongst the most vibrant in the world today.



Habitat 67 provided inspiration for KING Toronto.

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# Q & A

with **BJARKE INGELS**



The Danish architect talks about his love for Toronto and his distaste for the term 'starchitect'

The night before being interviewed, Danish architect Bjarke Ingels was surrounded by autograph-seeking fans at the end of a talk at Roy Thomson Hall. Alongside developer Ian Gillespie, founder of Westbank, and writer/artist Douglas Coupland, Ingels told a nearly packed house about designing KING Toronto, a new development featuring heaving peaks of greenery-covered cubes set to break ground in one of the city's heritage districts.

The architect behind such buildings as the spiraling Danish pavilion at the 2010 World Expo, the ramps and terraces of Copenhagen's 8 House, the twisting tower of Vancouver House and the new Telus Tower in Calgary, Ingels and his BIG group of architects are recognized worldwide for their urban designs.

So how does he feel about the term "starchitect"?

"Nobody's in love with the term," Ingels says. "It sounds pretentious no matter who's saying it, right?" The only good that can come from such a moniker, he continues, is that it means the work of certain architects "has caught the interest of the public, so much that people take an interest in what they do and what they do to our cities. That's probably a good thing."

Historically, says Ingels, people have seldom been engaged with architecture, apart from the idea that the past was better and more beautiful. "The more people have an interest in architecture and architects, the more they'll be able to form informed opinions," he says, "and have a meaningful discussion about the cities we want to live in."

Since it was announced two years ago, the KING Toronto project Ingels designed for Westbank has had both passionate defenders and detractors. The strange thing is both sides

have been referencing the same things about the building: its greenery-covered complex of interlocking boxes or "pixels," as Ingels describes them, and its use of glass blocks instead of, say, Toronto's venerable red brick. The architect admits he wasn't surprised.

"When I started studying architecture, people would always ask, 'Can you tell me, why are all modern buildings so boring?' I think everybody has this feeling that it used to be charming, but you have to go a hundred years back, and now it's all glass towers on retail podia. So, I think there are a lot of people who think you could try harder, and others who find it disconcerting when things look different from what they're used to. Because you'll see that maybe the buildings that don't cause a lot of counter reaction also don't inspire a lot of love."

Ingels had just come from seeing a full-sized mock-up of a portion of the building that morning and was clearly pleased. He says what has been lost in all the concern about his design choices is how the building will look up close — and how different it will look from any other glass tower.

"There are no hundred-foot facades. The longest facade is 10 feet, because it's always stepping or pixelating, but even those surfaces are going to have so much variation because of the glass brick."

Apart from the public reaction, Ingels and Westbank have had to convince the city's planners a complex such as KING Toronto, so visibly different from anything built here until now, will complement and even enhance the heritage district where it's being constructed.

"When you work for a city you have to champion the past as much as you have to champion the future," says Ingels. "But you absolutely have to champion the future. Who are the most important people in the city? The children, because they are the future, and you have to make it possible for them to have an impact and not lock them up in what we used to do. I think the same is true with architecture."

As it's currently configured, KING Toronto will incorporate several red brick heritage buildings into its undulating of cubes and vegetation, in addition to public art, an interior courtyard and a new public park. Ingels has come to understand the importance the city places on preserving its streetscapes, and thinks he's struck the right balance.

"But you have to tread carefully, when you have existing qualities like we do at King Street," he says. "There should be a way where the two can successfully coexist. In my perspective, by not confusing what's old and what's new, but making sure they successfully coexist, you preserve the past and reinvent it and contribute something towards the future."

Ingels remembers coming to Toronto in 2003 for the first time at the beginning of his career to work on a project with local design guru Bruce Mau. He's had some time to contemplate the city's identity, and compares it sympathetically to his own home.

"Toronto has this interesting mix of classic, North American east coast city with some kind of combination of an Anglo-Saxon industrial heritage with some skyscrapers, combined with this really, really diverse population. As a Dane you relate a lot to Canada for a lot of reasons, as this socially democratic, environmentally oriented, somewhat self-ironic northern country sitting on top of a very aggressive big brother — there's some sort of kindred alignment there."

## THE INTEGRATION OF ART AND ARCHITECTURE

Roy Thomson Hall filled to capacity to listen not to an orchestra but to a developer, an architect and an artist

They were lined up around the corner and all the way down King Street outside Roy Thomson Hall, but not for a symphony concert or visiting soprano. Nearly every seat in the hall one evening in late October was filled to listen to a developer, an architect and a writer/artist talk about a new condo development.

It seems the building boom in Toronto can not only dominate blogs, newspapers and dinner table chat, but can also fill a downtown concert hall on short notice.

The buzz about the collaboration between Toronto's Allied Properties, Vancouver's Westbank and Danish architect Bjarke Ingels began when renderings of the King Street West project were released two years ago. Yet

Westbank founder Ian Gillespie began by praising Arthur Erickson's Roy Thomson Hall, a radical design that became one of the city's iconic buildings, and describing how he has a similar ambition for KING Toronto.

Gillespie doesn't focus his company's many ground-breaking projects, such as Vancouver House in his hometown or the Telus Tower in Calgary, but talks instead about the public art Westbank has commissioned to complement its projects. Projected on the screen were images of Diana Thater's multicoloured light sculpture on Vancouver's Shaw Tower, and Zhang Huan's Rising, the fantastical sculpture in front of Toronto's Shangri-La Hotel.

Over the years, he says his company has

Architect Bjarke Ingels followed Gillespie and began by talking about Moshe Safdie's Habitat apartments in Montreal, probably one of Canada's most famous modernist buildings.

"Why," the Danish architect wondered aloud, "didn't it have a greater impact?"

Ingels dove into explaining his building, from the inspiration he picked up from Safdie's Habitat, notably in the room-sized "pixels" that make up its structure, to the quest of BIG, his architecture firm, to blend the building with the King Street West neighbourhood and the heritage buildings it will incorporate.

He walked the audience through the street level of KING Toronto, from the cave-like opening on King Street to the new park that will be built on Wellington, indicating where public art — still to be commissioned — will be placed throughout the spaces. "We tried to maintain permeability," he explained, showing photos of the walls of glass block that will be a major part of the condo complex.

Demonstrating how each living unit can be reconfigured, Ingels described how the evolution of the building's layout from simple rectangles to a little mountain range dictates the unique character of every unit. He asked a question many condo shoppers have likely asked themselves: "If people are different, why are so many apartments the same?"

Douglas Coupland, author of *Generation X*, *JPod* and other novels, and creator of countless public art works, recalled his mother's skepticism of public art, saying her voice still rings in his head. He ran through his own catalogue of work, inspired by everyday objects like



**"This is Toronto's time. Take it and demand it."**

— Ian Gillespie

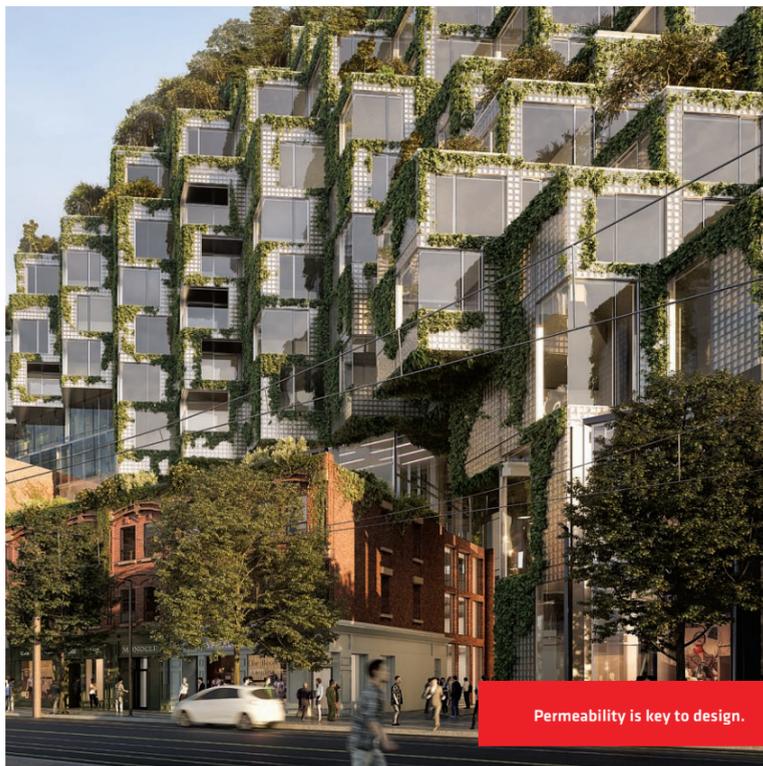
Laurentian pencil crayons, fishing tackle, tires and toy soldiers, and admitted nothing he's done is ever really finished, since the public creates a personal relationship with art the artist can't control.

He talked about the light sculpture he created for Westbank's Telus Tower in Calgary, and after mentioning he'll be helping select public art for KING Toronto, gave the city a compliment it rarely hears: "Toronto has the best public art system going."

Before the evening ended with a cluster of young architecture fans converging on the stage to get autographs from Gillespie, Ingels and Coupland, there was a group chat where Ingels echoed Coupland's thoughts on public art from an architect's perspective: "The great thing about the city as arena is that the artist can do whatever interesting thing they want, but once you put it out there, the public can change the meaning."

Gillespie closed by applauding the interest the city has in new developments and heritage preservation, emphasizing how the two meet in KING Toronto.

"This is Toronto's time," he told the crowd. "Take it and demand it."



Permeability is key to design.

many of the people filling Roy Thomson Hall were drawn by Unzipped, the pavilion designed by Ingels for London's Serpentine Gallery in 2016, recently rebuilt on the future site of the new development to help win over Toronto.

made the "transition from development company to cultural company." Gillespie spends up to 20 per cent of his time on public art. Projects like KING Toronto blur boundaries, he said: "This piece is both art and architecture."



From left to right: Bjarke Ingels, Ian Gillespie, Douglas Coupland at Roy Thomson Hall

# GREENING AN URBAN LANDSCAPE

Combining private space with public gardens  
By Marc Ryan, Founder, Public Work

Public Work is involved in designing public space in rapidly densifying cities, focusing on the quality of human experience in our evolving urban landscapes. KING Toronto challenged us with three fundamental questions: Can a city densify without losing its quality of life and connection to nature? Can the most multi-cultural city in the world find new built expressions of diversity through integrated architectural and botanical form? Can a project's public realm enhance the porosity and connectivity of the wider historic district and bring vitality to a much larger civic network?

From the start, the project implied a landscape, a new, organic form of mid-rise to counter Toronto's vertical skyline. The building massing developed by BIG suggests a series of peaks and valleys, creating a 'soft podium' grounded on King Street W. Westbank, Allied and BIG then asked Public Work to bring the maximum amount of green to the urban environment, and to add a 'softening' vegetal layer for the pixelated architectural form – a 'living skin' that could harmonize and support the built form while bringing another layer of differentiation and texture to the block. Here was an opportunity to demonstrate urban living that is more like inhabiting a landscape than a condo.

We approached the landscape and public realm at three scales: the domestic unit, the block, and the district. In the public realm we also emphasized three primary qualities: diversity of textures and atmospheres within a coherent form; leveraging the resilience of the wild through the selection of plants; and, softening the pixel as a complementary gesture.

We sought to create a landscape that works at the scale of the individual (resident on terrace garden, public visitor/shopper in courtyard) but combines in a collective garden – a green contribution to the district and city skyline – while also addressing the deficit of nature in one of the densest and most vital neighbourhoods in the country.

## THE CIVIC GROUND

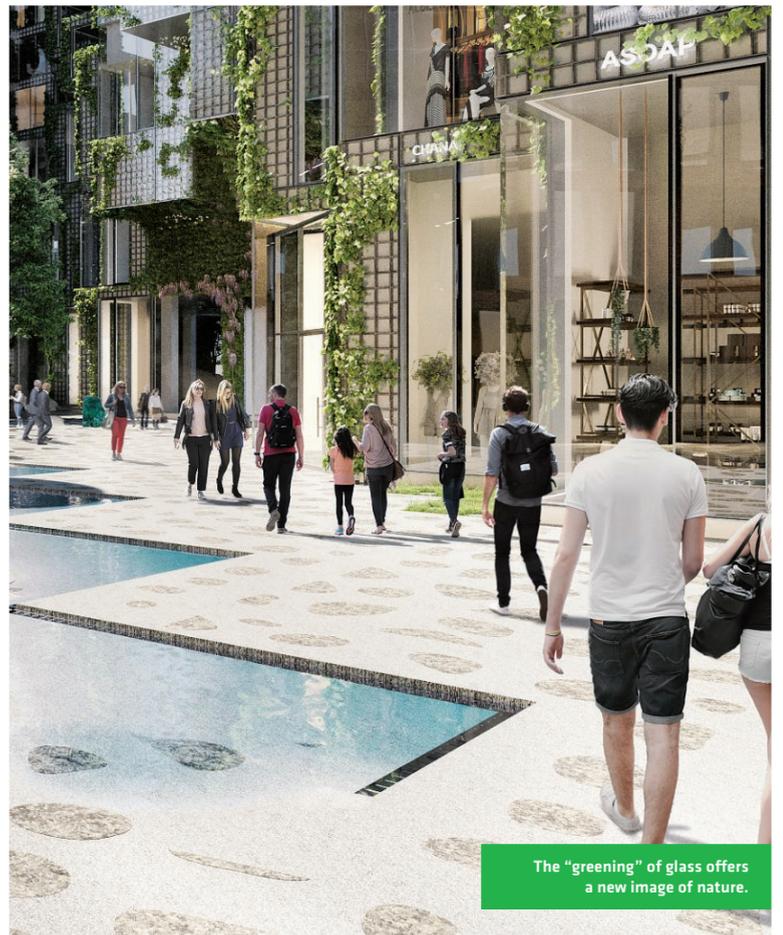
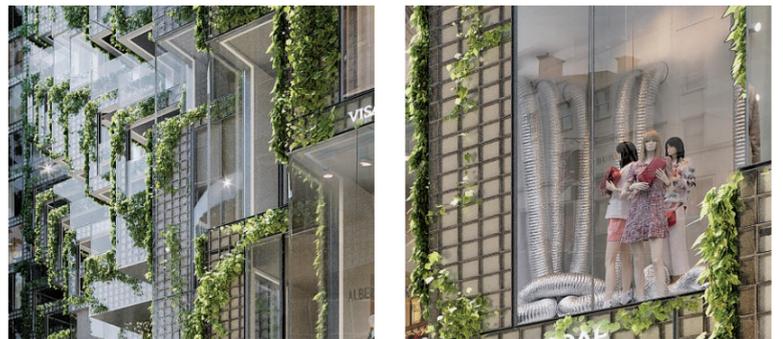
The courtyard is the social heart of a mid-block connection that facilitates movement through the district and enhances the sense of discovery. Varying from east to west, distinct blue and green spaces reinforce two unique atmospheres, from vibrant retail plaza with dynamic water feature to a contemplative green gathering space featuring the unexpected: mature specimen trees and massive rocks within the urban block. A mineral tapestry defines the courtyard floor. This urban-scaled, terrazzo-like paving, using diverse stone slabs, features a scale-shifting pattern that diffuses from a grid to organic, bringing diverse moments of colour and light and anchoring the glass building to a primordial floor.

## THE GLASS AND GREEN FAÇADE

Climbing vines will extend greenery across a cable-mesh system, complementing the glass-block building façade. Seasonally changing green swaths will soften hard edges and bring life to the skin of the building, rooting this luminous mass to the ground. The 'greening of glass' will reinforce the whole form as a 'soft podium,' offering a new image of nature within the dense city and bringing thousands of seasonally changing textures to the cityscape.

## THE TERRACES AND ROOFSCAPE

A collection of 370 individual garden terraces form a tapestry of living textures, a collective roofscape that adds biodiversity to the city. Each private terrace garden contributes to the collective landscape by providing soil volumes to support vines that climb and plants that cascade from terrace planters. The changing vegetal textures of diverse plants soften the peaks, presenting a total landscape composition.



The "greening" of glass offers a new image of nature.

# GESAMTKUNSTWERK A TOTAL WORK OF ART

KING Toronto aspires to become the result of a balance of art, design and imagination  
By Ian Gillespie

Every real estate project is a collaboration, but the best projects come off like a finely choreographed dance, with every contributor showing up at just the right moment and adding just the right touch. We depend so heavily on the imagination of the architects, the reliability of the engineers, the efficiency of the construction managers and the expertise and commitment of every individual worker. KING Toronto offered a strong reminder that, with a partner like Allied, we all benefit, as well, from the vision and ambition of an excellent city builder.

These learning experiences are endless, and in more than 30 years, Westbank has been tutored by some of the best architects and artists in the world, as well as by brilliant partners and subject area experts of every kind. In the process, we have added capacity and complexity to what we can achieve, always raising our level of ambition. We also have gathered an expanding vocabulary that explains and inspires what we do, and the way we do it.



KING Toronto will be an urban mountain range in glass and greenery.



Taking inspiration from design in all forms.

## GESAMTKUNSTWERK

One of the words in that new vocabulary was the German Gesamtkunstwerk: it was coined by a German philosopher in the 1820s and it translates as "total work of art." We came across Gesamtkunstwerk while working with architect Bjarke Ingels on our first project together, his remarkable design of Vancouver House, and the word fit perfectly. It illuminated his intention to create an unexpected and completely elegant high-rise form, married to a groundplane that melds so well with its surroundings that it is destined to transform the entire neighbourhood. In an extremely challenging property, this was a seamless and coherent solution, a total work of art.

## LAYERING

We were introduced to a second concept while we were working with the great Japanese architect Kengo Kuma on a Vancouver project on Alberni Street. Kuma is deeply thoughtful in his application of layering, which in Japanese translates as tsumikasane, meaning "to heap on top of." Let there be no misunderstanding, though, that Kuma-san throws anything down in "heaps." Rather, he takes delight in considering every element, every increment of space or additional piece of material to assure that they all fold together into an optimally realized whole.

Taking these concepts together – and applying them to the development not just of buildings but of whole new neighbourhoods, it becomes clear that a total work of art cannot be a stark monolith; rather, it must be a triumph of complementary components – of layers. That was the motivation for our design and our approach to KING Toronto. Instead of an indifferent collection of buildings, Ingels and his team at BIG have delivered an urban mountain range in glass and greenery. Neither does this new form seek to upstage or overwhelm the heritage buildings on site. On the contrary, BIG's pixelated landscape embraces and complements the existing buildings, and the neighbouring streetscape, as well.

As you turn the pages of this book – ultimately, as you move through the fully realized courtyard, lobbies, fine-grained retail, homes and terraces of KING Toronto – you will surely see an intricately, infinitely layered collaboration. When we add the culminating, carefully considered additional layers, the floating public art in the courtyard and the Ingels-designed Fazioli piano, we anticipate nothing less than a total work of art.

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