Towards an Ecological Agenda for Landscape Urbanism:
Within the Collaborations of Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates (MVVA)

Gullivar Shepard

22 July 2009
“Landscape Urbanism describes a disciplinary realignment currently underway in which landscape replaces architecture as the basic building block of contemporary urbanism. For many, across a range of disciplines, landscape has become both the lens through which the contemporary city is represented and the medium through which it is constructed.”

-Charles Waldheim
MVVA is a medium-sized landscape architecture office.

Recently developed specialties simultaneously in large-scale city-planning and technical implementation.

The studio does not have ecologists, hydrologists, soils scientists or civil engineers on staff.

Benefitted from a 25 year history of collaborations with these professions and have built more than 350 landscapes in the United States, Canada, Europe and Korea.
Lower Don Lands
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

300+ acres of Brownfield development
Engine for critical economic and infrastructure growth
Flood protection opens potential for redevelopment
Opportunities and Challenges

**The Site** – A keystone site for Toronto and the waterfront

**The Team** – The project scope necessitates a complex team

**The Client** – The master developer for the entire waterfront
The Open Waterfront 1800’s

- Previously the largest freshwater marsh in North America
- A dynamic landscape constantly in flux
- The waterfront is built on a fill condition that enabled industrialization.
Ecological agenda within an intensely urban condition?

“Nature” - Areas that reflect minimal human interference

“Restoration (of Nature)” - Recreation of conditions that approximate a site’s ecology prior to a significant transformation by humans

“Naturalization” - The design of reconstructed natural areas that support a program of human use

"Hyper Nature" - An exaggerated juxtaposition, by design, of the differences and interdependencies between the natural world and the human-built world
A Lower Don Lands Charter
1

Employing and empowering landscape as the engine of urban transformation allows designers to move beyond city/nature dichotomies in order to recognize the potential of an urban-natural continuum with the human-made landscape at its center.
Exploration

Balancing the Relationship Between Open Space and City

Encouraging a Complexity of Edges and Interactions
Analysis

Two Different Park Forms

Rectangular

Organic
Proposed Policy Shift

Asking Where the River Wants to Be

Redefining the Scope of the Project
Existing Conditions
There is a need to replace a broken approach to urban planning which treats urban and natural systems as isolated "problems" to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, and has been proven many times to be socially, economically, and environmentally unsustainable.
Multiple Interrelationships

Sustainability as an Organizing Principle

- Naturalization
- Flood Protection
- Neighbourhoods
- Microclimate
- Built Form
- Circulation
- Public Realm
Conceptual Solar Exposure Planes, constraining building massing, were considered for the entire Lower Don Lands site.

1. The Keating Channel and Esplanade (8 ha/20 ac)
2. The Don River Park System (40 ha/99 ac)
3
The urban landscape is richer, more elegant and most efficient when it takes advantage of overlapping systems--simultaneously design approaches can be aimed to improve a site’s performance (social, economic, and environmental).
Landscape as an Agent of Urbanism
Park System

Servicing Systems
4

In the evolution of a site from industrial to residential use, experiential range is achieved by taking advantage of the site’s natural and cultural structures.
Landscape architects are trained to understand ecology from an experiential perspective and urbanism from an environmental perspective, making us perhaps uniquely suited to synthesize the efforts of multiple related disciplines into a landscape-based urban planning approach.
## MVVA TEAM

**Team Leader**
Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, Inc.  
Landscape Architects  
New York, NY + Cambridge, MA

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>City, Country</th>
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<tr>
<td>Urban Designer</td>
<td>Greenberg Consultants, Inc.</td>
<td>Toronto, ON</td>
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<tr>
<td>Urban Planner</td>
<td>MMM Group Limited</td>
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<td></td>
<td>GHK International Consulting</td>
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<td>River Hydrologist</td>
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<td>Ecologist</td>
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<td>Architect</td>
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<td>Transsolar</td>
<td>Stuttgart, Germany</td>
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