

The ghosts of what might have been

Show will highlight megaprojects that never got off the ground, like a planned 140-storey Eaton tower

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TORONTO STAR

The Church of the Holy Trinity, established in 1847, is surrounded. The Eaton Centre shoulders up against it to the east, casting it in cool shadow, a towering Marriot looms high above it to the north and west; and from Bay Street, Bell Canada's squat headquarters curls toward it from the west and south.

Given Toronto's historical approach to city-building, the mildly predatory scenario is apt — drab modern structures stalking the city's past and hunting it to near-extinction.

It could be worse. "In the '60s, the church, as well as the Old City Hall, were very close to being demolished," says David Kopulos, seated on a slab of concrete that serves as both bench and boundary for the small slip of green space cradled in the crook of the Bell building, across from Holy Trinity.

"It was very typical of the era, actually. A lot of side streets, and everything on them, were destroyed. It was all about trying to impose a new order on the city."

He would certainly know. Kopulos, a newly minted, 23-year-old Ontario College of Art and Design graduate, is deeply invested in what could have been.

For his final thesis project — which will be part of the OCAD grad show, opening on Friday — he dug deep into Toronto's near past and found a surfeit of the never-was. Dusting off big-idea projects never realized, Kopulos

In the 1960s, Buckminster Fuller imagined man-made islands filling the harbour with apartments

extracted portions — silhouettes, renderings, architectural plans — and incorporated them in a series of ghostly oblique paintings.

He then took his research and built it into a website, *Toronto Pending*, that offers a chilling view of the city we might have had.

The Eaton Centre, for one, was intended to swallow every inch of the city bound by Dundas, Yonge, Bay and Queen. The Church of the Holy Trinity, as well as Old City Hall, would have been so much rubble, save the clock tower, which would have been preserved — a monolithic tombstone, perhaps, for a slice of city history deemed no longer necessary.

Toronto, of course, still has need for such a memorial. The city has lost no small number of heritage buildings over the years. *Lost Toronto*, the 1976 book by the late William Dendy, a University of Waterloo architecture professor, is a loving catalogue, complete with archival photos and drawings, of more than 150 structures razed in the name of progress. The City of Toronto itself lists more than 250 destroyed portions of its past worthy of recognition in its report *A Glimpse of Toronto's History: Opportunities for the Commemoration of Lost Historic Sites*.

Toronto Pending serves as an unintentional companion piece, adding to the register of ghost structures a collection of the stillborn.

It includes: a 140-storey tower proposed by the Eaton Company in 1971 for the corner of Yonge and College Sts.; the Scarborough Expressway, a 1967 plan that would have razed 1,200 houses in the Beach to connect the eastern suburbs to downtown; Harbour City, a 1970 proposal to build a network of low-rise concrete apartment buildings linked by canals on the current site of the island airport.

Some proposed to do no less than wipe the urban slate clean. In 1968, Buckminster Fuller's massive waterfront redevelopment plan imagined, a series of

man-made islands filling the harbour with apartment buildings.

Dubbed "Project Toronto," the U.S. design visionary's scheme would have been linked to the mainland by walkways that led to a massive pyramid brimming with more housing, and an expansive "galleria" filled with shops, apartments and a monorail that ran along University Avenue right to the water's edge.

As its name suggests, the plan was a comprehensive re-do: "Had this plan been seen through," Kopulos notes in his thesis, "scarcely any part of Toronto's present downtown would remain today."

How close did we come? Decades later, it's hard to tell. But the timing of the various megaprojects suggest closer than we might like to think. Through the '60s and '70s, the popular rhetoric of urban planning was very much out with the old, in with the new. The tenets of Modernism, hatched decades before by thinkers such as the architect Le

Corbusier, envisioned a new kind of urbanism.

"Modern town planning comes to birth with a new architecture," he wrote in *Urbanisme*, his theory of the future of cities. "By this immense step in evolution, so brutal and so overwhelming, we burn our bridges and break with the past."

By the '60s and '70s, his theories had taken hold in the mainstream of urban planning. Crumbling 19th-century, human-scale inner cities, with their narrow, crowded streets and bustling public squares, were to be replaced, and all was to be big — buildings and public spaces alike. Even bigger, in theory, were the urban highways meant to connect disparate zones separated by function: living, working, leisure.

Le Corbusier had the best intentions. His vision was of a utopia: urban living rendered efficient and democratic by a new brand of architecture and planning. Instead, it was rigid and authoritarian, and wherever it was attempted — in Brasilia, for one, or in Chandigarh, by Le Corbusier himself — it was an alienating failure. (Consider the much-fretted-over Gardiner Expressway and the waterfront, and you have a homegrown ex-



RON BULL/TORONTO STAR

OCAD student David Kopulos wrote his thesis on thwarted Toronto visions from the '60s and '70s.

ample of Modernist idealism gone awry).

It was hardly by accident that Dendy's book, at once aggressively nostalgic and damning of progress for its own sake, was published in the wake of this era of grand visions. And where Dendy mourned what was, Kopulos offers an opportunity to breathe a sigh of relief at what wasn't: the virtual ruins of an

all-too-Modern Toronto.

"People seemed to think the city could be completely reimagined," he says. "A lot of the identity of the city now has to do with the different neighbourhoods. Those may not have existed anymore. Where would we have been, 30 years later, if we had had a huge pyramid on the waterfront? What would be on our postcards, and what would

be our identity now?"

Despite their earnest optimism, history has judged Modernist ideals harshly. But here, in the shadow of the mall, where the church sits safely hidden, the final words of *Toronto Pending* offer some kindness: "Unsullied by the judgment of reality, these pending projects will remain forever in the realm of utopia."