

## **SUPPORTING THE PILLARS OF ART.**

by Laura Lind

The Gardiner Expressway extension was never a thing of beauty. It had merit, perhaps, as an engineering marvel. The decaying support buttresses had an industrial, dystopian elegance in their rhythmic placement. For the purpose of the film business, the road made a decent doppelganger for any number of ugly American streets.

But for traffic needs, it was a useless two-kilometre stretch of road.

The outcropping of the highway was intended to hook up the eastern end of Toronto with the downtown core. That link was never completed and the extension was finally torn down last year. Now that it is gone, it is even more obvious that it was never needed.

Yet drivers at the intersection of Lake Shore Boulevard and Leslie Street in Toronto cannot fail to notice a series of support pillars still standing where the entrance and exit ramps to the former Gardiner extension once were. The pillars, now meticulously restored, are ready to support another 20 years of traffic. But they will never lift another SUV.

They are meant to be ... wait for it ... art. Apparently, there will be adorned stainless-steel plaques commemorating the highway and the industrial and commercial history of the area. They will be surrounded by walkways and bike paths and it might even make for a nice little picnic area for Wendy's patrons once the contaminated soil in the area is removed.

So we are left to wonder: What do the remaining pillars, buried in the dirt like the Statue of Liberty in Planet of the Apes, say about Toronto? That the city planners in the 1950s had no foresight, that they built a highway that was never needed and now it's gone? How can the last vestiges of a useless highway butt be considered anything other than the butt of a joke?

The artist/design consultant in charge of the project did not return our calls, so I asked art experts to explain what highway art is and if a highway should be immortalized.

"A highway might seem like a weird thing to commemorate, but on the other hand, too much of our urban history is lost or buried," says Richard Vaughan, art critic for eye magazine. He says there are historians digging right now, trying to determine where roads in Toronto used to lie, so the act of preservation is important to the city.

Mr. Vaughan adds: "No matter how beautiful the final work is, there will be at least five editorials in the daily newspapers saying how crappy it is and asking how taxpayers' money possibly could have been spent on it. So you have to pity the artist."

One recent Boston project to enhance overpasses with an art installation was met with public confusion. Louise Sacco, financial director of Boston's Museum of Bad Art, says:

"They were huge pieces, deconstructional in intent, that were a complete failure. People driving by thought they were construction sites [and] kept asking when they would be finished. Then the city put up signs explaining they were art. People still didn't get it, so finally the art quietly disappeared."

John Kissick, dean of the faculty of art at the Ontario College of Art and Design, says highway art has its own aesthetic. "It has to be graphic, visible and simple. If you've only got two seconds to read it, it will be lost if there's text."

By that criteria, wouldn't the Wawa Goose and Cobourg's Big Apple qualify as the height of highway art?

Mr. Kissick says the Big Apple "reads very well for what it's supposed to do -- sell apple pies -- but it doesn't transcend what it represents and cannot be open to a variety of interpretations that subvert the original meaning."

Then highway art should be a mix between the obvious and the intelligent. "Public art is not for artists," says Mr. Vaughan. "It's for the public. Artists don't like it if it's too easy for them to connect the dots and see the meaning of a piece, so they tend to scorn public pieces; but there's enough art for artists only."

Most often, highway art is meant for drivers. In the case of the remaining pillars of the Gardiner extension, the plaques will be readable only for those on foot or bicycles. So what is more fitting -- subversive, in fact -- than a highway art project intended to commemorate a highway that is no longer there, that can only be fully understood by people who are not in cars?

Laura Lind, "Supporting the pillars of art." *National Post*, Toronto. March 15, 2002