

ARCHITECTURE » A WEEK IN THE LIFE

Banish thoughts of gloom: The future is now

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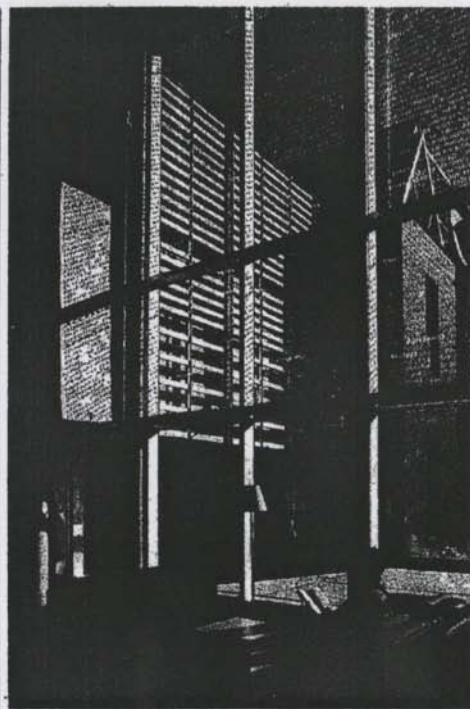
The world has become a tangle of dread - at least, that's what we're meant to think. Is it wrong to feel elation, then, at the current state of architecture? I refuse to think so. In Canada, the work has never been better, the ideas are rigorous and innovative, sustainability has entered the mainstream, and young designers are moving at lightning speed to connect ideas and people to each other. Unconvinced? Let me describe some of what I experienced last week.

MONDAY, FEB. 9.

LESTER B. PEARSON INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT
Midnight. Tauheed Mohammad, a 26-year-old architect from Dhaka, Bangladesh, arrives at Terminal One. More than two years have passed since he helped to guide me through the intense, symphonic city of Dhaka when I travelled there for The Globe to review Louis Kahn's masterpiece, the National Assembly. Mohammad's thesis adviser at the University of Asia Pacific was Shamsul Wares, the Bengali architect who spoke in the film, *My Architect*, with poetic conviction - through tears - of the significance of the National Assembly for the people of Bangladesh. Before landing in Toronto to visit for a week, Mohammad was in Long Beach, Calif., as a TED fellow (the Technology, Entertainment, Design think tank), one of 50 fellows selected from around the world for their original ideas, to present their experiences as change-makers during the TED conference.

TUESDAY, FEB. 10.

BOARDROOM BRILLIANCE
Janna Levitt of Toronto's Levitt Goodman Architects has arranged a meeting with Moham-



mad. About 20 of the firm's architects gather around its Queen West boardroom table, eating organic food on compostable plates, to hear Mohammad's ideas about the need to "unclassify" architecture so that it can reach more people. Copyright, he believes, needs rethinking: Design ideas can be borrowed so long as the authors are given credit. TED selected Mohammad - the only architect among its fellows - for establishing ArchSociety.com, an online community and library he designed in an internet café (before he owned his own computer), which allows architects from around the world to more effectively design for the "bottom billion," as he puts it, in places where resources are scarce, books are expensive, and learned professors are not always available.

The website now has 1,200 subscribers. The young architects around the table are curious and there is a volley of questions and answers. Levitt is an engaging host, her batteries recently recharged from a visit to New Orleans where she's designing a sustainable house. Besides that, the firm is designing libraries, apartment buildings with agriculture on the rooftops, and community centres. The studio feels upbeat. No sign of a recession here.

WEDNESDAY, FEB. 11.

SOLAR DREAMS
A fundraiser for a solar-powered home called North House, currently being developed by students and faculty at the University of Waterloo, Ryerson University and Simon Fraser University, otherwise known as



The Bibliothèque de Charlesbourg by Croft Pelletier architects of Quebec City: The library provides an honourable backdrop to a new public square in Charlesbourg, a historic suburb of Quebec City. It is one of the 40 projects selected as finalists in the Prix d'excellence en architecture.

ronto and supplier of sublime kitchens. This is not merely a theoretical exercise. North Team wants to deliver to market a version of North House for \$454,000.

THURSDAY, FEB. 12.
SUSTAINABILITY GOES MAINSTREAM

My Smart car is no match for the pounding rain and wind of Toronto's ugly weather. I finally arrive at the headquarters of the Ontario Association of Architects off Don Mills Road to serve as a jury member for the 2009 OAA-Design Excellence Awards. The esteemed architect Raymond Moriyama, who has given generously of himself to this country, is jury chair and bon vivant. It's a pleasure to hang with this guy, lead design architect of the Canadian War Museum, for the day. Other jurors are Matthew Blackett, publisher of Spacing Magazine, Joshua Chaiken, senior associate principal with Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates of New York and Suzanne Dimma, the newly appointed editor-in-chief of Canadian House & Home Magazine. We spend the morning reading project descriptions and studying plans and photographs. The work is extremely good (the winners will be announced in March). The buildings, from small children's centres and cottages to conservation centres as well as large civic institutions, share a remarkable sensitivity to scale and materiality. They're almost all warm to the touch. I can also say that sustainability is no longer a fringe obsession. These days, it's being accom-

plished with considerable grace on even the tightest budgets.

The OAA has borrowed the idea of a People's Choice Award from its Quebec counterpart, an excellent move and one that you can check out online at: www.oaa.on.ca. There is an inspired portfolio of work being produced in Quebec - architecture with a heightened sense of craft that is compellingly bound to site. Recently, 40 projects were selected there as finalists in the Prix d'excellence en architecture (awarded by the Ordre des architectes du Québec), including the meticulous restoration of the Parliamentary Library, delicate land art by Atelier Pierre Thibault, and the stunning Bibliothèque de Charlesbourg by Croft Pelletier architects of Quebec City. Constructed for \$7.4-million, the library literally lifts off from the ground, its green roof an extension of the ground, while providing an honourable backdrop to a new public square in Charlesbourg, a historic suburb of Quebec City. (For the Quebec People's Choice award, go to: www.pea-oaa.com.)

FRIDAY, FEB. 13.

AFTERNOON CUPCAKES
Mohammad has skipped a trip to Niagara Falls and the CN Tower to experience the enchantments of Toronto: Gehry, Calatrava, Mies van der Rohe, the neighbourhoods, the schools, the beach, the ravines, the historic Distillery District. He compares Toronto to Calcutta for its accommodation of things old and new. I take him over to the Design Exchange to meet Zahra Ebrahim, a DX Innovator in Residence who has plastered brainstorming ideas over all four walls of her office. She and Mohammad are both 26. Like many others of their generation, they treat the world as something to step into, like their front yard. Decadent chocolate cupcakes are served. Ebrahim is planning a 33-country summer tour to ask people this question: What has architecture done for you lately? There are many ways to approach that question. It might even take an entire week to answer.