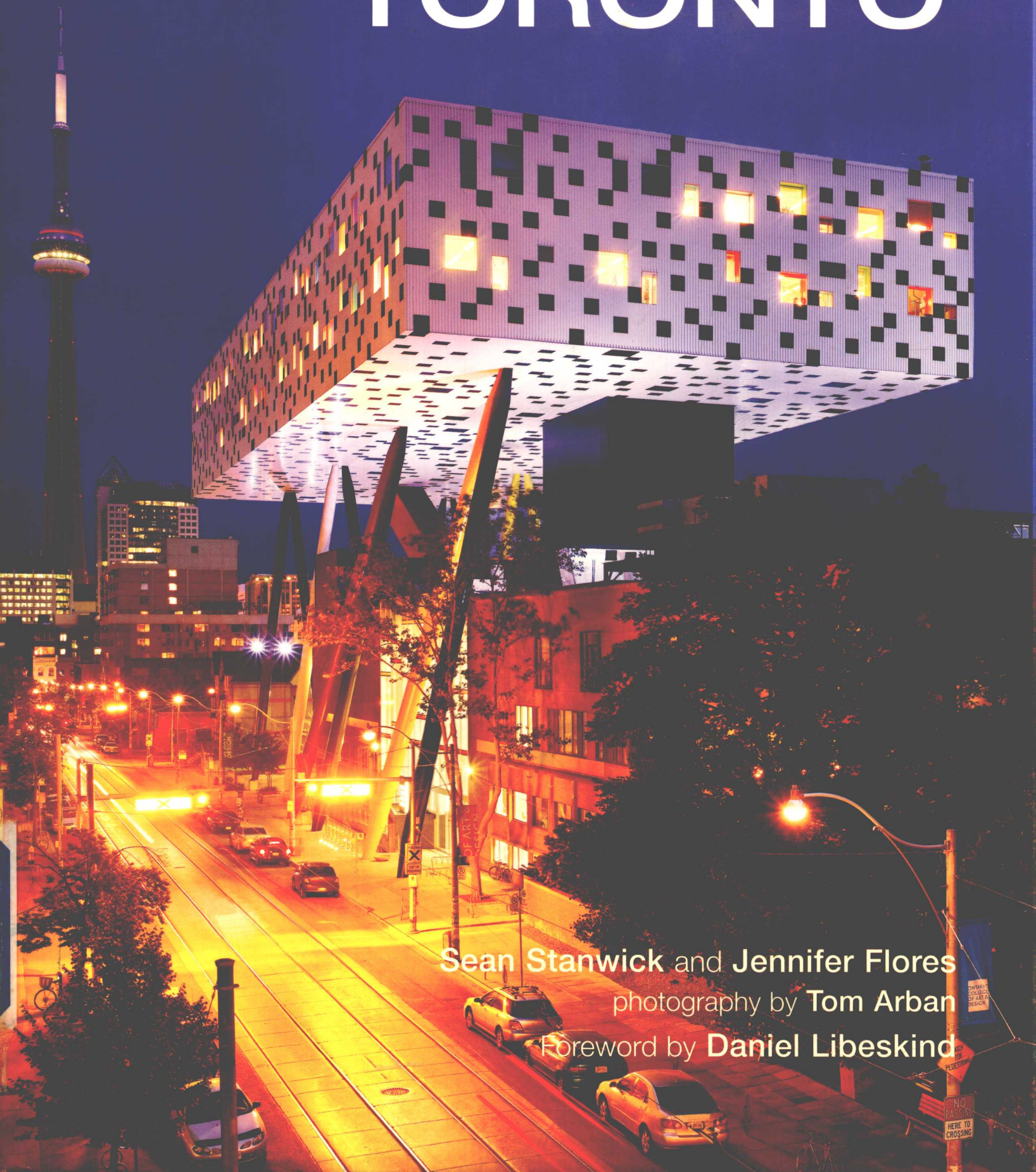


# Design City TORONTO



Sean Stanwick and Jennifer Flores  
photography by Tom Arban  
Foreword by Daniel Libeskind





**Design City**  
**TORONTO**



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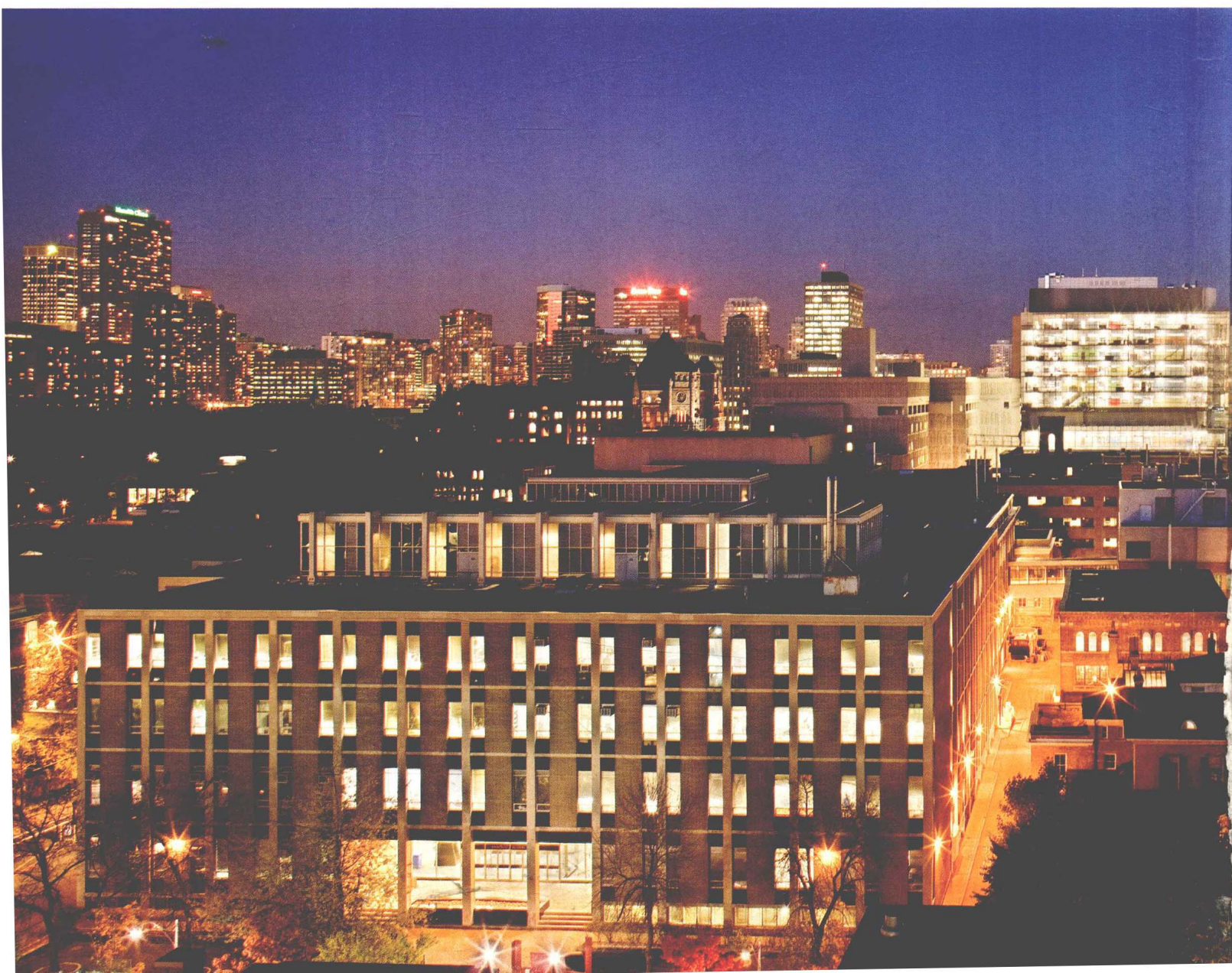
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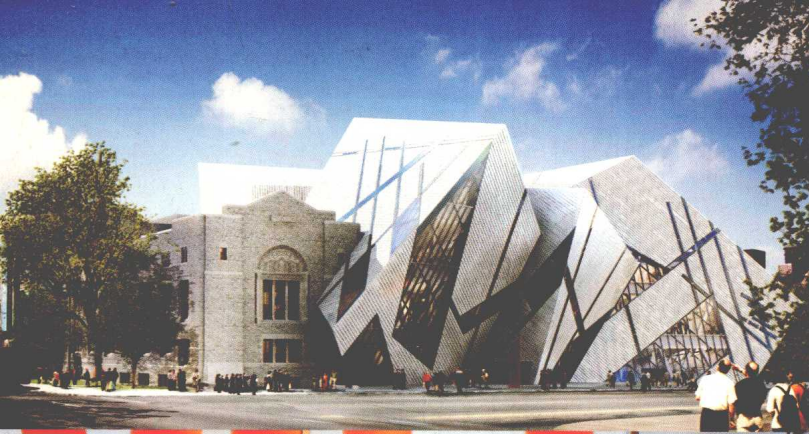
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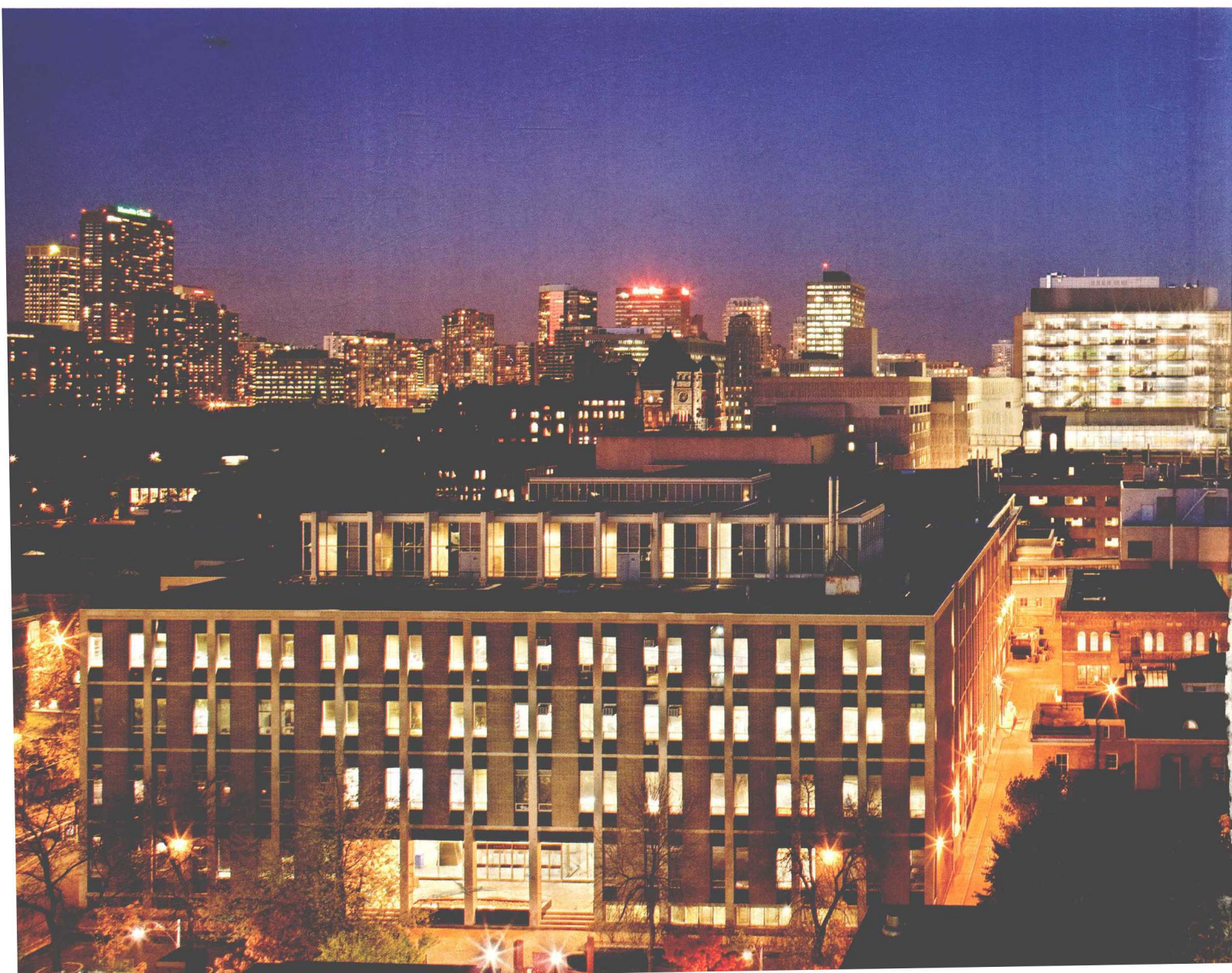
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Design City

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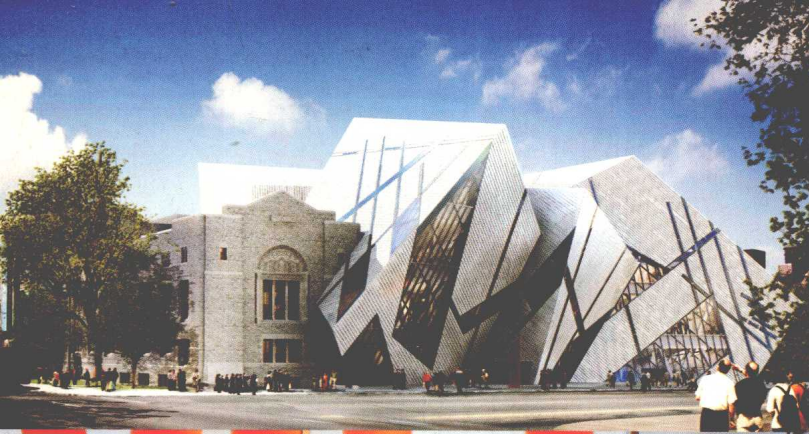
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# Preface

When our publisher first posed the question, 'Is Toronto a *Design City*?' we knew instinctively that it was. Toronto is experiencing a renaissance, as socially and architecturally, our cultural spaces take on new prominence. Living and working in the city, we can see the high rate of construction, especially in the downtown core, where the erecting of new buildings and the renovations of old are a daily sight. Yet we know that to be a *Design City*, there needs to be more than just beautifully designed spaces. Design exists in many forms – in the chaos of signage lining Chinatown streets; in the rhythmic patterns of commuters moving in and out of the subway tunnels; in the reflections of cars whizzing by the glass facades of shiny towers. For us, a *Design City* exists when city dwellers and tourists, the design educated and the design buffs alike can all equally see and appreciate the beauty of design in the city around them.

While we felt there was a need for a book that celebrated this wonderful time in the architectural story of our city, what confirmed it was a conversation we had with a friend. Looking at a picture of Will Alsop's Sharp Centre for Design, she questioned, 'Is *that* in Toronto?' Over and over again, that scenario repeated itself as friends and family were surprised by the projects found within the pages of this book. These were people who had lived here their whole lives yet had never seen nor even known these spaces existed.

This book was never envisioned as an analytical discourse on architectural theory or a thorough dissection of the Toronto style, nor was it written to be a tourist guidebook. We hope it resides somewhere in between, as a book that presents an approachable and personal architecture enjoyed equally by residents and tourists alike. Our photographer Tom Arban has given you one view onto the city; his pictures capture a Toronto that is alive and thriving, colourful, and optimistic about what lies ahead. We invite you to explore this city, consciously. In our interview with him, Daniel Libeskind said it best: 'Architecture at its deepest sense is about creating space that has never been there, and giving people a kind of vista ... as if one would see the city in a very different way through this new space.'

We hope this book helps you to see Toronto as it is – truly, a *Design City*.



# Foreword

Great cities have always been associated with great architecture. More than that, architecture has formed the substance, image, and uniqueness of each city. There are times when a palpable shift, a seismic urban energy, catapults a city to a new level. Whether it is eighteenth-century Paris or early twentieth-century New York, there is a moment in which a city's form emerges.

When I lived in Toronto in the early 1970s the city was eminently liveable, but outside vibrant neighbourhoods, the striking City Hall, and the memorable Mies towers, architecture was generally undistinguished. This is certainly no longer true. Suddenly, seemingly only in the past five years, the city is exploding with new and exciting architecture. There is a new horizon that has opened up – in a sense, we are what we look at. We are what we live in. We are what we aspire to. And what this new Toronto aspires to is an architecture that is as exciting as its culture, is as varied as its diversity, and is as open as the youthful minds that flood the streets.

What makes a renaissance? A renaissance is a connection between *what the city was* and *what the city can be*. This discovery entails digging deeper into possibilities. At the same time, it challenges architecture and planning to take risks because what is to be built is more than just 'one more building'. The renaissance implies bringing back the wonder of architecture to the public at large by breaking free from the straitjacket of 'this is how our city has always been'. The breaking of formulas, the challenge of building something that has never been built before, the daring that goes with originality – all these speak of a new sense of identity for a city. A dynamic development, such as the renaissance of architecture in Toronto, renews more than street fronts ... it explodes the myth that stereotypes 'Toronto The Good', suddenly making it 'Toronto The Great'.

**Daniel Libeskind**

November 2006



*Cities don't change gradually, they change suddenly... and this is one of those moments. There was a period of inertia in Toronto where there was little happening in design and architecture and suddenly there was a kind of energy reflecting a desire for architecture and design to be part of people's lives. It's a very special period... a real renaissance.*

Daniel Libeskind interview with the Authors  
Toronto – June 2006

# Introduction

## The New City Space

Whether you are an architect, an interior designer or simply a city dweller, it is almost impossible not to notice the large amount of construction that is currently underway within Toronto. With so many culture-based building projects all happening at once, it is without a doubt an exciting time to be in the city. Call it Hogtown, Toronto the Good, Design City, or even Torontopia, whatever moniker you choose, the City of Toronto, as we know it will be forever changed. Affectionately dubbed the city's architectural renaissance, the building boom has actually grown beyond bricks and mortar to include large-scale urban design projects, cultural initiatives, and even philosophical enlightenment as people's attitudes towards architecture and the city have grown more sophisticated.

Interestingly, the renewal effort has itself become a homespun media-darling as newspapers, websites, chat rooms and blogs are continually abuzz with news of the changing space and face of the city. Five years ago, it would have been inconceivable to the local design community that the world's most important architectural practitioners including Frank Gehry, Daniel Libeskind, Lord Norman Foster and Will Alsop would each be working here at the same time. Somehow, the impossible has happened and Toronto is now knee-deep in a phenomenal act of city (re)making. If a renaissance is about rebirth and enlightenment, then Toronto's architectural renaissance is certainly on its way to maturity.

Riding this wave of renewal is a number of significant and well-respected cultural institutions and when complete, they will have contributed to the largest renewal of the city's cultural infrastructure in decades. British architect Will Alsop has completed the first step with his perilous Sharp Centre for Design (the Tabletop) at the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD). At the hands of Frank Gehry the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) will undergo a massive internal renovation and facelift, while New York architect Daniel Libeskind is remaking, in the form of crystalline gems, another grand dame of the city, the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM). At the University of Toronto campus, Britain's Lord Norman Foster has delivered his first Canadian work for the pharmacy faculty, with a refined glass lantern that shrouds two suspended ovoid pods within the lobby. And next door, Stuttgart's Behnisch Architekten gives the city a lesson in sustainability at the Terrence Donnelly Centre for Cellular and Biomolecular Research, which features a unique double skin of glass and internal bamboo gardens.

While we revel in the arrival of star architects and marvel at their creations, Canadians are unfortunately often timid when it comes to lauding the creative talents of our own and flaunting their skills on the international stage. This is why *Design City Toronto* is even more relevant in order to celebrate the city's local talent. As the spotlight is aimed squarely at international star architects, we must not forget that Toronto is, and has been for many years, a creative design city capable of producing architecture that is historically on a par with that of our North American and even European contemporaries.

The city's modern architectural legacy runs deep thanks largely to the enthusiasm of architectural pioneers John B and John C Parkin and Peter Dickinson who, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, would translate their enthusiasm for



Above

The advanced Terrence Donnelly Centre for Cellular and Biomolecular Research sits within Toronto's Discovery District, one of the most concentrated clusters of research and medical institutions worldwide





Above

Champagne-coloured anodised aluminium will cover 75 per cent of the ROM's new crystal structure, with the remaining 25 per cent being a random pattern of slices and wedges of transparent glass

Below

From the orange lettering stencilled on the windows through to the bar on the back wall with a full panoramic view, Lux is designed to permit maximum gazing from all points within



Canadian design into their own style of modernism that emphasised simplicity and a respect for the local vernacular.<sup>1</sup> The Parkins' ecru-brick Salvation Army building (now demolished) and their stainless-steel Sun Life Building on University Avenue were both solid examples that served to galvanise the modernist language in the city core. Today, noted architectural firms like Diamond and Schmitt, Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg, and Montgomery Sisam carry on with a similar style that is both highly modern but also sympathetic to the city's rich architectural fabric.

Several interior designers are also helping fuel the renaissance. With a passion for the slightly schizophrenic, 3rd UNCLE design makes innovative use of found objects at The Drake Hotel to create an ad-hoc collage of textures and intellectual-kitsch, while munge//leung (who trained at the hip of Yabu Pushelberg, the Canadian design darlings responsible for W New York and Tiffany's Fifth Avenue), use a rich material palette to create warm and inviting spaces for Ultra Supper Club and then switch gears into retro-chic colours and translucent plastics for Lux, a trendy dinner lounge in the city's west end.

*Design City Toronto* celebrates, in approachable yet informative terms, many of these designers and their work. It is by no means a comprehensive manuscript on the history of modern architecture in Toronto, nor is it solely a tourist guidebook. Instead, *Design City Toronto* intentionally chooses to reside somewhere in between the two, in the space explored by architects, interior designers, tourists, the design-curious and urban dwellers alike. Very much like the architecture that makes up the city's urban fabric, *Design City Toronto* is a hybrid, examining the city from multiple kaleidoscopic view cones. Spawned by the need to capture this unique moment in time, its true hope is simply to inspire a refreshing reacquaintance with our city.

The projects featured in this book, over thirty in all, are organised around four central themes. The first chapter, 'discover **Explore**' recognises that creativity is ingrained deep within the soul of the city and as such, highlights a number of cultural projects including the ROM, the AGO and the Young Centre for Performing Arts. The second chapter, 'eat **Enjoy**' explores several popular restaurants that reflect both the breadth of cuisine and the depth of creative talent available. Chapter three, 'relax **Recharge**' proves that city dwellers can find an abundance of choice in their search for rest and relaxation. Projects featured range from the retro-chic Drake Hotel





Above  
Known as an *izakaya*, a red lantern typically means an inexpensive hot meal, a spot for casual drinks and an informal atmosphere

to a divine convent in the city's north end. The fourth chapter, 'learnStudy' shows how university and private learning spaces such as Canada's National Ballet School and the Schulich School of Business, can be vehicles for testing new ideas both in terms of teaching and city building. The book also features an informative narrative of the city's rich urban neighbourhoods from The Beach to Parkdale.

### **Design City Toronto**

What does it mean to be labelled with the moniker *Design City*? Is Toronto a *Design City*? Will Alsop suggested that Toronto is experiencing an exotic change, as we are designing a history that the city never had.<sup>2</sup> Is this the criteria: the ability to create history and the future of a city at the same time? Or is it the ability of a metropolis to import the world's best brand-name designers and architects to create globally recognised iconic works?

If these are the measures, then the arrival of Daniel Libeskind, Lord Norman Foster and Frank Gehry who are collectively shaping the future space of the city must surely be evidence enough of Toronto's *Design City* status. But, while attracting star talent from abroad certainly adds cachet, it fails to credit local talent, which in this city's case has been a driving force in developing its neo-modern architectural style. Or is a *Design City* one that is simply experiencing its 'fifteen minutes' of fame, as was the case in Bilbao Spain when Frank Gehry seduced the world with his Guggenheim Museum? Perhaps this is the case, however, it is unlikely that Toronto will receive the same international media fervour that landed on Bilbao.

Might it also be the result of curatorial examinations? If so, Toronto's architecture has been the subject of several significant exhibitions throughout its life, including the recent display at the AGO, which showcased several cultural projects currently under renovation, or the 1987 exhibition *Toronto Le Nouveau Nouveau*

Below  
British architect Will Alsop, designer of the new Sharp Centre for Design at the Ontario College of Art & Design

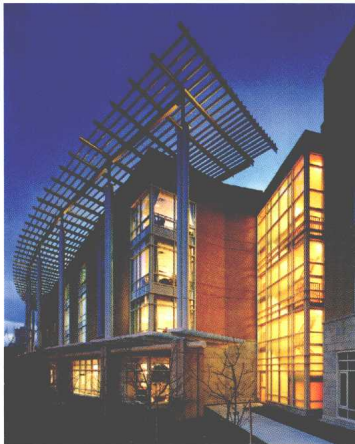




*Monde*, curated by architect Ruth Cawker, which examined twenty influential modern projects within the city core.

Likely though, the best measure is simply that to be a *Design City* there should be an acknowledgment of the value of design, and that the results must be pervasive across building types, communities and genres. To this measure, Toronto can easily lay claim to its *Design City* status.

One need only look around to see that the renaissance is contagious and not limited to singular iconic buildings. Of course, private patronage for these cultural projects is also at an all time high with massive donations in both money and art. Embracing our industrial heritage, the abandoned Brick Works will soon morph from a derelict industrial site to a working sustainable discovery centre. Nascent fires have been lit yet again on our Waterfront Revitalisation Initiative. Led by local design firm du Toit Allsopp Hillier and Rotterdam's West 8, the city may finally realise the full potential of the waterfront. Even healthcare projects, such as the Wellesley Central Place by Farrow Partnership Architects, are embracing a more humanistic attitude toward design incorporating wood, courtyards and green roofs. There is even growing interest in simply living in the city as a number of residential condominium projects are currently under construction within the core including a project by Donald Trump who has lent his name to a deluxe hotel and residential tower.

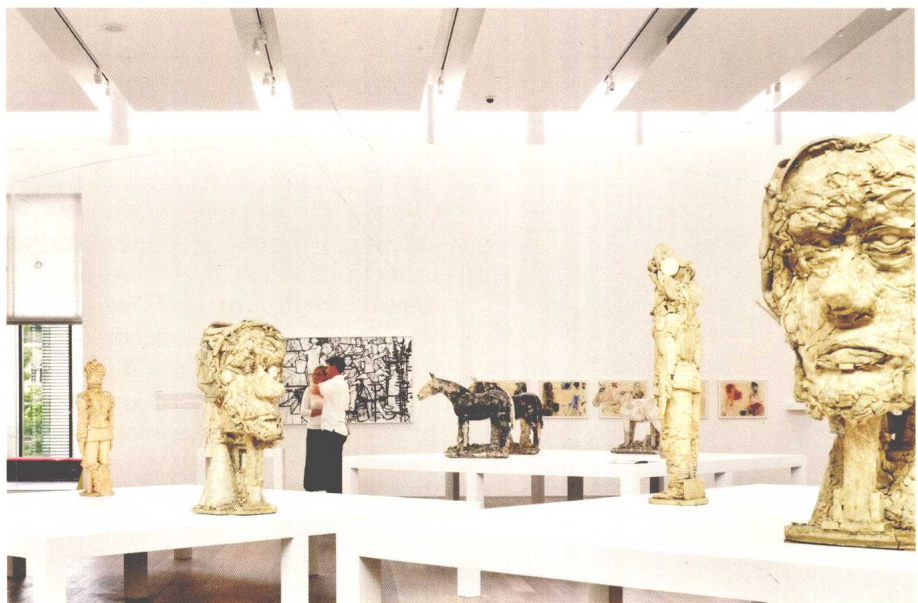


Above  
Wellesley Central Place. Even healthcare projects, like this long-term care facility in Cabbagetown by Farrow Partnership Architects, embrace a sustainable mandate and feature sunshades and 'green' roofs

### Culture City Toronto

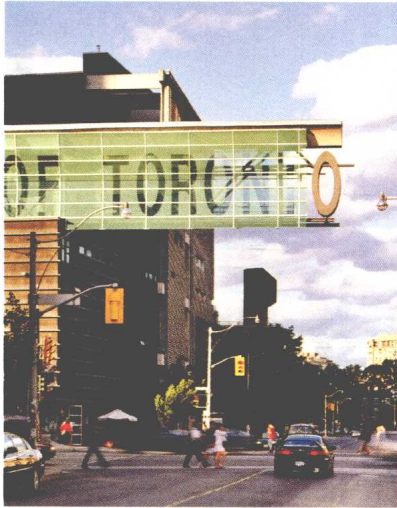
While Toronto is certainly beginning to look the part of a *Design City*, the question remains does it have the character to go with its new suit? The short answer is yes. Toronto is without a doubt, a creative city on a par with global contemporary metropolises such as Chicago, Milan, Montreal, New York and San Francisco. What enables us to lay claim to being Canada's creative capital is the simple fact that the city supports over 25 per cent of the nation's creative industry jobs.<sup>3</sup> We also place great value on creativity as a means to secure our identity within the country; the city's creative machinery generates over eight billion in revenue annually and accounts for over half of the Province's cultural revenues.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, Toronto is the most visited tourist destination in the country, welcoming over 18 million visitors annually, and to the tourists, participating in one of the many cultural attractions is second only to shopping.<sup>5</sup> We are also a city of great cuisines with an increasingly sophisticated palate. In short, today's Toronto is a veritable menu of cultural choices.

Not only is the city undergoing a broad sweeping architectural renaissance, as over a dozen significant cultural institutions, public and private are being transformed, we are also in the midst of a great cultural revival. Blogs posted on the Reading Cities<sup>6</sup> website, an open forum devoted to the city's current urban and architectural design issues, are abuzz with discussions by some of the city's most noted designers



Right  
The Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art contains more than 2900 pieces, including the world's most impressive cache of European pottery and porcelain from the 15th to the 19th centuries





Above

For the international open competition to build the Graduate House, the mandate was clear: the university was seeking a 'landmark' gateway project

and cultural mavens. The *[murmur]* project is an independent initiative that offers on-location, on-demand audio podcasts of significant architectural and cultural moments around the city. The annual Doors Open architectural tour, where well over a hundred normally private buildings, offices and residences open their doors to the public, is growing exponentially, while the annual Toronto International Film Festival is widely recognised as the world's largest film festival by attendance. The city also recently announced its newest summer arts festival. Titled Luminato, the event will showcase the best of Canadian and international artists over a 10-day period in June 2007.

Sponsored by the municipal government, a number of public initiatives are also investigating the role of culture, creativity and architecture in shaping the future city. The Live with Culture<sup>7</sup> campaign is a 16-month grassroots celebration of the arts at various venues across the city. On an economic note, the recently published *Strategies for Creative Cities*<sup>8</sup> project and the *Culture Plan for a Creative City 2003* both recognised that architecture could be a valuable asset in a broader tourism and economic action plan for the city.

Toronto is also home to a great cultural diversity within its borders. Like many, the city has undergone several waves of immigration with the Italians in the 1950s, the Greeks in 1970s and most recently, the Asians. This breadth of diversity is deeply rooted and reflected in the various neighbourhoods through local street festivals such as Greektown's Taste of the Danforth and Little Italy's Corso Italia Toronto Fiesta in July. In a city where over 100 languages are spoken every day, culture is clearly at the core of our city building initiative. With access to a high quality of life, environment, healthcare and education, it is no wonder that the Toronto is consistently rated as one of the most liveable cities in the world.<sup>9</sup>

### Birth of a Renaissance

No doubt the waves of cultural and civic change are infectious and spreading throughout the city, but the interesting discussion really centres on (if we borrow a term from author Malcolm Gladwell) the 'tipping point'<sup>10</sup> that inspired this renaissance in the first place.

Often we are tempted to look for specific causes to major events. While there are some manic examples that appear to have single-handedly spawned the building boom, Toronto's renaissance should be likened more to raindrops in a pond, each creating their own singular ripple, spreading and colliding with each other to create a collective up-swell of enthusiasm and energy. But what are these raindrops?

One could easily argue that the arrival of Daniel Libeskind at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) was the first. But predating the ROM by two years is Alsop's fantastical Tabletop at the OCAD. Perched precariously atop colourful stilts, the pixelated white box has rightfully earned its place as the new and definitive iconic image of the city. If iconicity is the measure, the discussion must look back to 2001 and Graduate House, a graduate student residence at the University of Toronto designed by local architect Stephen Teeple and Californian deconstructivist Thom Mayne of Morphosis. Brazenly invading the quiet space of the street, Graduate House single-handedly launched a long overdue debate on city making. One might also place credit in the hands of two of the city's cultural mavens, late media mogul Ken Thomson and ROM Director William Thorsell. Each were vital in their individual promotions of the value and necessity of bringing a star architect to Toronto; Thomson brought Frank Gehry home to the AGO while Thorsell raised the public awareness of the ROM by securing Libeskind through an open international competition.

But architecture cannot do the job alone. Many of the cultural projects underway, including the ROM, would not have even broken ground without the Provincial Government's SuperBuild endowment fund. Pouring over CA\$20 billion into the Province's infrastructure, the growth fund is the largest single injection of public sector monies in decades. Additionally, private patronage is a significant driving force as philanthropic donors have contributed over CA\$900 million to the city building initiative.

For all its support, the next question perhaps is not what started the renaissance, but rather will it last? While one could posit that this is the city's 'fifteen



minutes of fame', obviously there is hope that the momentum will continue and that this new and existing infrastructure will sustain long-term urban growth. Whether Torontonians carry on is uncertain, but there is optimism in Daniel Libeskind's words:

*I hope that Toronto will... continue to express itself and develop itself in design, architecture, and every other way, socially as well, to be what it is: one of the great world cities. It's not just a provincial city, its really part of the world. And now, I think it will become more and more one of the destinations in the world, where if you live in Paris or you live in Tokyo, you will come to Toronto because it's an important city to visit, to be in, to enjoy.<sup>11</sup>*

#### A Toronto Vernacular

While some cities can be immediately associated with a singular style or attitude toward design, such as Tokyo for its wild neonism, or Chicago as the birthplace of the skyscraper, defining a uniform Toronto style is indeed a complex distillation process. A relatively new city, having only risen as a contemporary metropolis in the post-war years, Toronto is split between a conflicted desire to endorse itself as a modern *Design City*, and its ingrained connection with our Anglo-Victorian small-town heritage; paradoxically evidenced by its ability to attract star architects such as Foster or Gehry, and the longevity of the annual agrarian Royal Agricultural Winter Fair.

Part of the difficulty also stems from the city's vast cultural diversity as a wealth of ingrained perceptions and values continually percolate through to create the rich



Right

At the Schulich School of Business, the adjacent woodlot and three landscaped courtyards provide a sense of calm and refuge from the bustle of campus life