

012 2013 2015 2020

TORONTO STAR
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Tempest in a composting toilet

Dufferin Grove | Park activists are no strangers to battling with bureaucrats. *By Christian Cotroneo*

Sep. 17, 2006. 01:00 AM

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For a few uncertain days, the future of one of the city's most celebrated and progressive public parks hinged on a toilet.

The Friends of Dufferin Grove Park, a grassroots collective of neighbours and volunteers who tend the west-end park, were hoping to build the facility so children and parents using the nearby playground and wading pool could relieve themselves.

The idea, championed by volunteer and activist Georgie Donais, was to construct the city's first composting toilet, and to do so as an art project, with parents and children working side-by-side. The loo would be completely enclosed by something called a "cob" — a traditional mix of sand, straw and clay. It would take much of the load off the only facilities within range of the must-pee-*now* crowd — an uncomplaining old tree near the playground.

But the city, ever an awkward dance partner with park activists, saw it not so much as art but construction. Thus a two-metre-high fence was installed, hard hats and safety boots were required — and children could be nowhere near the site.

Friends of Dufferin Grove, having tangoed with the city for years, knew the drill. They rallied, set up a meeting with city officials — even baking homemade bread for the occasion — and spent last Tuesday evening squaring off against the bureaucracy.

On Wednesday morning, the tale of the toilet came to a close, with activists celebrating a victory.

For Donais, the toilet isn't merely a toilet but the apotheosis of community activism.

"It's a really big deal," the 37-year old magazine designer and mother of two said of the 10-square-metre cob structure. "It's a huge comment on how we build things today. Everybody can build it. It's not a contracting firm that does it. It's not professionals that do it. It's actually the people who are actually going to use it."

But like so many ventures in this award-winning park, oft-compared to a community centre without walls, the project soon found itself mired in bureaucracy — and fenced in by order of the city.

So last Tuesday, nearly 100 people gathered in the park clubhouse to try to keep the entire enterprise from swirling down the, well, toilet.

There was Donais, leading the charge to build it and backed by scores of Friends.

There was Adam Giambone, the city councillor, who supports the project but had to grapple with the bureaucracy that threatened it.

And there was the aptly named Sandy Straw, the Parks, Forestry and Recreation department manager who has the unenviable task of enforcing building codes, policy and legislation.

"I think what we were butting up against was the whole notion of total community engagement, regardless of the existing rules and regulations that are set up through Occupational Health and Safety policies and procedures," Straw

said later.

"A lot of this particular group really likes to do things the old-fashioned way — that whole community engagement, everybody part of the team. Often, that philosophy butts up against those big towers at city hall."

The toilet and surrounding cob seemed to fall under existing safety codes, meaning kids would not be allowed to muck around in the clay and straw to help erect the structure.

According to building code, construction hats and safety boots would be mandatory — and the Modu-Loc fence would stay up throughout the project.

But the whole point, argued Friends of Dufferin Grove, was never about the end, but the process — a community sculpting its own space.

"It won't get built if the kids aren't allowed," vowed a frustrated Jutta Mason, standing outside the meeting. "We just won't do it. The whole idea is what happens when a community builds with very simple, natural materials. The building code says you can't build with simple, natural materials. We don't recognize that."

That defiant visionary spirit has been Dufferin Grove's guiding light for more than a decade. And it has invariably led to one wall after another. Not only is Mason a recipient of the prestigious Jane Jacobs Prize for her revitalizing efforts, but the park itself has been recognized as a beacon of green space on the international scene. Yet Dufferin Grove seems to battle the city at every turn.

"I was really hoping somebody would write a song called the `Bylaw Blues,'" Mason said, a tall glass of water and lemon in hand.

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Sandy Straw, Department

of Parks, Forestry and Recreation

A few years ago, when the park began hosting a weekly farmer's market, an anonymous complaint found its way to city hall.

"So then, the bylaw officer came out and told the farmers they were all going to get \$105 tickets for being at the market," Mason recalled.

But that soon passed, and today the Dufferin Grove farmer's market is a bustling affair on Thursday afternoons.

Then, there was the Great Zamboni Crisis of 2003.

The city said the Friends had to clear out the part of the rink house where the Zambonis were kept. No cohabitating with Zambonis.

So, some large puppets, as well as the tables, chairs and ovens essential for the park's Friday community suppers, had to go.

"That was definitely our biggest crisis," Mason recalls.

But a funny thing happened on the way to silencing a park.

"We asked them to go through the regulations. That took some months And it turned out it was not against the regulations. It was really amazing."

Crisis averted. Cue the next one.

"The city has a corporate model that's designed to administer roughly 1,450 odd parks," Giambone said last week.

"It does it fairly well. But when it comes down to something that doesn't fit the pattern, that's when big

organizations, big systems, throw up their hands and go, "Don't know quite how to deal with this."

"If the city planners look under 'C' in their procedure manual," summed up Henrik Bechmann, webmaster for the Friends of Dufferin Grove Park site. "They don't find 'cob.'"

The toilet meeting had all the usual elements — a dash of policy threatening to hamstring the project, as well as an anonymous complaint or two from the neighbourhood to draw the city's attention to it.

The complainants were no-shows, so Straw of Parks and Rec gamely fielded questions, accusations and angry outbursts from the crowd.

Even small children stood up to ask why they couldn't work on the project.

The meeting established that every side liked the idea. It was just those niggling legal details — or at least how they were being interpreted — that were the problem.

The next day, Donais and city-ordained architect Martin Liefhebber met at the project site.

He liked the project.

For Dufferin Grove, it would work like this: once the foundation is finished, the fences come down and the children can come in.

Then, when the "cobbing" begins, it's an art project everyone can take part in. The fence will go up again for a short stint while the roof is being built — and finally down again for the rest of the construction.

"Have you ever heard of people directly talking about things?" said a buoyant Mason after hearing the news. "Isn't that a fabulous invention?"

And so ended another tempest, this time, in a toilet.

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