

Porter: Richard Longley is determined to fix urban eyesore, the parkette at the foot of Brunswick St.

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Catherine Porter

The parkette at the foot of Brunswick St. at College doesn't have a name. It doesn't deserve one.

It is a grim scab of brick and pavement, littered with cigarette butts and graffitied benches. Lovingly planned, it's falling into neglect.

"I've seen human feces down here," says Richard Longley.

Longley lives just up the street in a grand Victorian brick house. For years, he lobbied the city and the director of the adjacent medical building — which owns one-third of the parkette — to beautify the space. Nothing happened.

Then, last year, the chair of his local Harbord Village Residents' Association had a radical brainwave: why not host an international competition to redesign the parkette?

A local architecture student helped Longley put together a professional design kit and submission requirements. He assembled some professional judges, including two professors of urban planning at Ryerson.

The website came next and the poster, setting March 31 as the deadline.

The radical bit? The residents' association not only doesn't own the land, it has no money to build anything there. "No one has money to do anything in this city," says Longley, a radio and television producer. "If you ask where the money's from, nothing will get done."

He made that clear with the competition. Still, they received 27 entries from eight countries, proposing everything from sinking the park to building a brick pyramid there.

Once the community has settled on a design or a mix of a few, Longley is certain, the money will come.

If you've been grumbling through your local park in search of inspiration, consider Longley's story. There are plenty of park innovators like him in the city. Each is struck by a simple idea. Then comes the hard part: convincing neighbours and legislators that it's worth pursuing. It almost always is.

Here's more inspiration: the Lawrence Ave. East bridge, which stretches over Highland Creek in Scarborough. For years, it hasn't been a bridge but a 300-metre barrier separating the communities on either side. Between the roaring traffic and memories of friends who jumped to their deaths, no one liked to cross it. And no one went below, despite the promise of Morningside Park's spawning salmon and great blue herons.

"It was a community asset nobody explored," says Ben Lopes, program coordinator for the Scarborough Arts Council. "People thought it was a place for deviant vandals."

So, as part of a summer-long arts project on top of the bridge, Lopes' team hosted a two-day festival under the bridge, with music, a local dance group and artists who transformed the concrete pillars into works of art.

More than 1,000 people came — most scampering down the path into Morningside Park for the first time.

This August, they'll do it again.

"Many more people go down there now," says Dib Habib, the special events coordinator at the nearby East Scarborough Storefront. "We are doing a community walk there this month."

One last one: the Friends of Christie Pits have been hosting neighbourhood pizza nights in the park for a couple years now. Last fall, after a spate of shootings nearby, they started to talk about the imposing grey building across the street. It could use some lighting, they thought.

So, they went over for a meeting. They discovered the building was not only a school for English as a second language students, but at night, it was home to the Toronto Opera Repertoire — a community opera program.

“It was an aha moment,” says Monica Gupta, who leads the Friends of Christie Park.

Aha, as in — if you do opera, why not do it in the park?

“A park is not just a green space,” says Gupta. “It’s everything else — the community around it.”

It is not a done deal. The opera singers are busy, and the park acoustics not great. But a relationship has started, and who knows what will come out of it?

Gupta will be hosting the inaugural talk of Park People — the city’s new park lobby group — at Christie Pits next Friday at 6 p.m. The topic will be “How to Start a Local Park Group (Or Improve Your Existing Group).” The pizza oven will be stoked up, so you can nibble and listen.

If you’re read this far, then go.

Catherine Porter’s column appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. She can be reached at cporter@thestar.ca