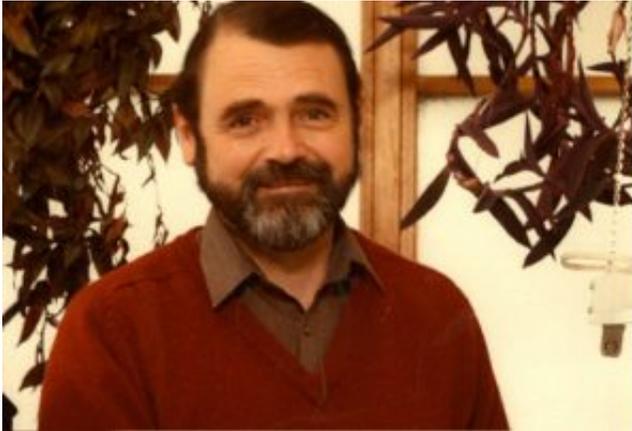




News / GTA

Toronto landscape architect Michael Hough leaves legacy of urban ecology: Hume

Pioneering Toronto landscape architect Michael Hough reaffirmed the role of nature in the city



/ COURTESY OF HOUGH FAMILY

Michael Hough, who died in late January, was a pioneer in Canadian landscape architecture.

By: **Christopher Hume** Urban Issues, Published on Sun Feb 24 2013

The late, great, landscape architect, Michael Hough, made no secret of his dislike for lawns.

The pioneering practitioner, who died in late January, was decades ahead of much of North America when he argued that nature plays a fundamental role in the city. And that did not include the sort of grassy expanses that once covered much of the built-up world.

“As a high-cost, high-energy floor covering,” he wrote in 1984, “(the lawn) produces the least diversity for the most effort. As a product of a pervasive cultural aesthetic, it defies logic.”

Today of course, lawns — “green deserts” — are increasingly the exception, not the rule. From side-street front yards to downtown corporate plantings, the man-made landscape has moved well beyond turf.

Hough, a prolific author who founded the University of Toronto’s School of Landscape Architecture in 1965 and later taught in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York, promoted ideas that now seem obvious. He was an early advocate of landscape as process. Natural forces, traditionally ignored or overridden, had to be incorporated into the planning of cities at the most fundamental level, he said.

Hough’s impact on his profession was huge; after him the notion of landscape architecture as a merely decorative art no longer seemed enough.

“He loves cities,” said former mayor David Crombie when Hough was given a Toronto Arts Award in 1994, “he loves nature, he insists on a link between the two, and he’ll tell you, every day if you ask him,

that the regeneration of one is the salvation of the other. He loves ideas and his ideas always surprise you. They startle you at the start, because they're new, but after a while they become inevitable. He is, I think, a gentle revolutionary."

Though Hough's work in Toronto was seminal, it goes largely unnoticed today. He and architect Eberhard Zeidler designed Ontario Place, which was ruined, Hough said, when the old Forum was replaced by the Molson Amphitheatre.

It was also he whom Crombie hired to serve on the Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront. Later Crombie made Hough chair of a working group formed to study the future of the Lower Don.

Both projects are once again major issues. In many respects, Hough's insistence on the essential connection between nature and the city set the stage for waterfront revitalization as we know it in Toronto.

"Ecology is urbanization," he declared, "and urbanization is ecology."

As the city continues to grow at a fast and furious rate, and as densities increase, the need for environmental awareness has never been greater. Hough brought up things like regional planning, watershed integrity and the need to consider cities as urban landscapes long before most of us had a clue what he was talking about.

Decades after the truth of his approach has become painfully evident, however, we still question the need for nature in the city. We prefer instead to view cities as places from which it has been banished.

But as we have been reminded over and over in recent years, there's no running away from natural phenomenon. That can mean anything from flooding and freezing to feral cats and coyotes.

Even the city's lowly street trees, Hough observed, "fail because they are seen as specimen objects instead of being part of a larger system." That's why the sidewalks of Toronto are lined with lifeless trunks.

"Total control is impossible," Hough said in a 2009 interview. "Biodynamics can only be triggered, manipulated, amplified, attenuated or registered. Nothing is new; everything exists already in one form or another."

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