

Getting Political about Public Space Design

By **PHIL POTHE**

When it comes to public space, good design does more than just look pretty. That was the consensus at the OALA's September 12 forum, entitled *Unauthorized: Political Functions of Public Space*, and held at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Design. That was about the *only* consensus. Panellists heatedly debated students, professors, OALA members, and members of the general public regarding the use of parks, sidewalks, light standards, retaining walls and planters as venues for political expression.

For panellist **Ashar Latif**, instructor in the Social Politics of Graffiti at **Anarchist Free University**, postering in public space is a natural function of living in a free society "People have a right to be more than just passive consumers of 'approved' and pre-designed space . . . Individual citizens have a right to express their views to the general public, and public space is about the only place where this can happen effectively." But an OALA member asked whether society as a whole is not entitled to dictate the appearance of spaces it pays for. Replied a student, "Think of the CBC – the fact it's publicly-funded doesn't entitle the government to dictate programming, let alone the opinions expressed on the news – that's the kind of censorship that happens in dictatorships."

Other audience-members raised the issue of the "broken-window effect": the 1970's theory which has been used to link "aesthetic blight", including sidewalk postering and graffiti, to increased crime: "That stuff lets criminals know nobody's watching -you can talk all you want about free speech, but what about people's right to be safe from crime." **Dave Meslin**, another panellist, and head of the **Toronto Public Space Committee** disagreed, distinguishing between correlation and causality, and arguing it was much more likely that crime and social discontent encourage higher levels of graffiti. "Even otherwise, the only reason people, including criminals, would have to think it indicates abandonment is the fact that people like [city Councillor] Rob Ford keep saying it does. If officials made a point of embracing Toronto's graffiti as art, and postering as a sign of a vibrant city, that would certainly change."

Later in the evening, discussion moved to economic issues. Even if we stop equating them with urban decay, not everyone –for example your average suburban resident - will necessarily enjoy looking at graffiti or posters, or listening to street preachers. "Isn't that bad for downtown businesses?" **Daniel Riber**, panellist and Marketing Director of citypostering.com, a private postering company with operations in Toronto, New York and Los Angeles responded: "Clearly graffiti on private property – for example storefronts- is a separate issue. But I think we also need to consider the economic *benefits* of postering." Riber argued that postering is essential to maintaining a competitive market in downtown areas. "Aside from non-profits, the vast majority of my clients are small or starting businesses like bars and musical acts, trying to compete with big chains and established artists. They cannot afford to pay thousands of dollars for billboards and television spots."

Discussion ultimately focussed on the design implications of public space's communicative function. The forum's moderator asked "Given that some of you regard public space as essential to the exercise of our fundamental freedoms, do you think there is a positive obligation upon governments to treat these functions explicitly as part of the program in contracts for the design of public space? Ethically-speaking, do landscape architects have an obligation to

'read them in' even otherwise?" While opinions naturally varied, panelists seemed to agree on the importance of effective design. David Meslin "Just look at our bus shelters – because officials prioritized a particular aesthetic sense for free expression, they had them designed as paid billboards for ViaCom." Riber drew attention to the complex consequences of limiting posterage to purpose-built kiosks: "What happens is that posters don't last as long - they get dominated by companies that can afford to poster every second day – and these are the same clients that can afford paid advertising anyway." Latif concluded, "If the design of public space doesn't accommodate free speech effectively, that's as bad as passing a law against it."

Unauthorized: Political Functions of Public Space may serve as a prototype for dealing with controversial questions around ethical practice in landscape architecture. The OALA Council initially dealt with a request that it endorse the campaign opposing a proposed City of Toronto "anti-postering" bylaw. Because there was no clear consensus among members on this issue, it was decided that an open and formal discussion would be more appropriate. The September 12th forum was held in partnership with University of Toronto's Graduate Architecture, Landscape and Design Students Union.

Phil Pothen represents student members on the Ontario Association of Landscape Architects Council. He organized, and moderated the forum, which was hosted by the University of Toronto's faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Design..