

## UPCOMING DATES

### APRIL

- 22 CreateTO, 1:30 p.m.
- 23-25 Council, 9:30 a.m.
- 28 Federal Election Day, 9:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m.
- 30 Etobicoke York Community Council, 9:30 a.m.
- North York Community Council, 9:30 a.m.

### MAY

- 1 Scarborough Community Council, 9:30 a.m.
- Toronto & East York Community Council, 9:30 a.m.
- 5 Board of Health, 9:30 a.m.
- 6 Economic & Community Development Committee, 9:30 a.m.
- 7 Infrastructure & Environment Committee, 9:30 a.m.
- 8 Planning & Housing Committee, 9:30 a.m.
- 12 General Government Committee, 9:30 a.m.
- 13 Executive Committee, 9:30 a.m.
- 14 Preservation Board, 9:30 a.m.
- TTC Board, 10:00 a.m.
- Toronto Design Review Panel, 1:00 p.m.
- 21-23 Council, 9:30 a.m.
- 27 Preservation Board, 9:30 a.m.

### MAY 28 - JUNE 1

FCM Annual Conference

### JUNE

- 2 Board of Health, 9:30 a.m.

CITY CONSIDERING HOW TO PRIORITIZE BEAUTY AND DESIGN EXCELLENCE ACROSS ITS PUBLIC AND BUILT SPACES

# MAKE IT BEAUTIFUL



Lana Hall

The City of Toronto is moving forward with a series of action items designed to “increase beauty” in Toronto’s public realm and buildings. Prioritizing design excellence in these spaces, say proponents of the action items, is an investment in Toronto’s tourist economy and the well-being of its residents.

At its meeting on April 14, the City’s executive committee approved a motion asking municipal planning, transportation, and parks and recreation staff to update the committee on how it recommends proceeding with five priority actions outlined in the “Towards A Beautiful City: The Path Forward” report.

The report, assembled by staff across multiple city divisions, was created in response to a member motion introduced at city council last year by ward 12 Toronto-St. Paul’s councillor **Josh Matlow**. Its priority actions include developing an internal governance model

to help achieve public realm design excellence, undertaking a review of current procurement processes for public realm projects, such as design competitions, and developing a “Considerate Construction” guideline to advance best practices for the design and aesthetics of construction setups and takedowns on City streets. The priority actions also include reviewing municipal maintenance and operational practices across divisions to identify opportunities for improving public realm quality and maintenance.

“As Toronto’s population continues to grow, its parks and public realm need to be

expanded, enhanced, and better maintained to serve residents and visitors as they face an increased intensity of use,” reads the report. “The quality of design in architecture and public spaces plays a crucial role in shaping the lived experience and quality of life of a city’s residents.”

As it stands, the City does mandate some elements of design through its Design Guidelines and Standards for Public Realm. Proposed developments must be assessed through the City’s design review panel. But there’s little in the way of City policy that considers the beauty and design of Toronto in its entirety, says Matlow, which

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Something’s got to be done with Nathan Phillips Square. We used to have all kinds of activities and animation there, and the farmer’s market and everything. But I just look out there ... and I just see this concrete slab, right in the middle of the city.

- Mike Colle



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# MAKE IT BEAUTIFUL

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leads to inconsistent quality of streets, parks, buildings, and other civic spaces.

“When we walk through our parks, when we walk down our main streets, when we walk through our neighbourhoods, what we see around us every day impacts our well-being. And when things are in disrepair, when there’s garbage thrown on our streets, when there’s broken garbage cans, when our architecture is uninspiring, and when our public spaces seem to reach for the height of mediocrity, we know it’s not good enough,” Matlow told the executive committee on April 14.

“There are things that are extraordinarily expensive to be the best. And often that is prohibitive because of our screwed-up governance structure. But there are some things we can do that aren’t

that expensive, but simply involve better practices: better procurement practices, better focus of priorities, a little more effort.”

In a follow-up interview with *NRU*, Matlow conceded that while the term “beauty” is often viewed as subjective, he believes more greenery, street furniture, better design and maintenance of public spaces, as well as more thoughtful architecture of public buildings would go a long way to making Toronto look and feel more beautiful.

Matlow isn’t the only councillor who thinks many of the city’s civic spaces have been designed as an afterthought, largely prioritizing efficiency of design over usability or aesthetics.

“Something’s got to be done with Nathan Phillips Square,” ward 8 Eglinton-Lawrence

councillor **Mike Colle** told the executive committee at its April 14 meeting, lamenting that despite the square’s regular, large-scale events, it has long ceased to be a “people place” on a day-to-day basis. “We used to have all kinds of activities and animation there, and the farmer’s market and everything. But I just look out there ... and I just see this concrete slab, right in the middle of the city.”

Others at the meeting pointed out that design is only one element of what makes a public space beautiful: cleanliness and maintenance matter too. Ward 14 Toronto-Danforth councillor **Paula Fletcher** praised the Beautiful City report for taking into account the need for multiple city divisions to work together, from planning, to parks, forestry and recreation, to solid waste.

“The service standards are something that’s really critical, whether it’s on our streets and we have our bins that are overflowing ... That’s pretty grungy and disgusting,

no matter how well you’ve designed that street, how beautiful the trees are.”

Amid more infrastructure priorities than ever competing for stretched municipal dollars, designing for beauty might seem like a luxury, or at the very least, like something that should be left to private developers with access to

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Rendering from the City of Toronto’s Midtown Parks and Public Realm Plan, which involves increasing greenery and pedestrian access across midtown. Public realm improvements like this that involve the concept of “beauty,” should be more commonplace, according to some. Earlier this week, the City’s executive committee approved a motion asking municipal planning, transportation and park and recreation staff to update them on how the City might pursue five priority actions outlined in the “Towards A Beautiful City: The Path Forward” report. The report contains five action items the city could pursue to encourage design excellence in Toronto’s public realm and civic buildings. Proponents of the action items say prioritizing beautiful design is an investment in Toronto’s tourist economy and the well-being of its residents.

SOURCE: CITY OF TORONTO



# MAKE IT BEAUTIFUL

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

significant capital. But beautiful and welcoming spaces aren't just about appearances, say some in the design field, they're an investment in a city's tourism economy, and the well-being of its residents.

"This discussion about beauty is something that's never talked about. I find that it's more about logistics and traffic, the basics. But we've got to get beyond the basics," says **Giannone Petricone Associates** senior associate **Michael Rietta**.

"I'm always baffled when I travel and I feel like, 'Wow I'm standing on marble inlays, with steel and lettering and texture.' And here, I walk up the sidewalks and it's not a pleasant experience." That kind of design experience draws tourists and encourages locals to linger in neighbourhoods, he explains.

As an example of a missed opportunity, Rietta points to a series of utilitarian concrete safety barriers that were installed in front of Toronto's Union Station during the COVID-19 pandemic to prevent vehicles from encroaching onto the sidewalks, which he says could easily have been designed with artwork or texture for better visual appeal.

"It cost two-and-a-half

million dollars to put in these ugly concrete blocks. Again, these are missed opportunities," he says. "Toronto is our biggest city and the financial capital, and it's really where we want visitors to see what we're all about. Like when people come to City Hall, they're greeted by a bunch of hot dog vendors that ... are really not well-kept. Imagine that's your front door..."

Rietta suggests that a committee of artists and urban designers—similar in composition to the City's design review panel—could be established to assess public realm spaces, while appointing a "City Architect" to oversee design excellence across the city might be helpful to reduce the "silos" that municipal divisions sometimes work in when planning public realm projects.

For **DIALOG** chair and partner **Antonio Gómez-Palacio**, the idea of a beautiful city is tied into the happiness and well-being of its residents, something cities—even entire countries—are increasingly trying to measure.

"The connection between beauty and health are increasingly associated, so there's an opportunity for us to also think about those in terms of how we do city-building

projects," Gómez-Palacio tells *NRU*.

"...Clearly from a mental health perspective, I will not be able to flourish if I don't enjoy the places in which I am. In the private space ... retailers or restauranteurs are starting to understand the benefits of having a place where people find delight and enjoyment. But cities are laggards in this."

In 2023, the Toronto Vital Signs report, which is released annually by the **Toronto Foundation** to track quality of life indicators, declared Toronto as the loneliest city in Canada. And while the reasons for those findings are likely more complex than a lack of urban design excellence, investing in the public spaces that residents move through on a day-to-day basis is an investment in a city's health and success, says Gómez-Palacio.

"Cities that are truly able to capture the imagination of people are generating success, and people are flourishing. But the reverse is also true. We can save a lot of money in the short-term and shoot ourselves

in the foot. A big part of it is really understanding what it is we're investing in, and our public realm is a key aspect of that."

City council will consider "A Beautiful City: The Path Forward" report and action item updates at its meeting on April 23. 🌸



## The City of Vaughan is Hiring!

The City of Vaughan is currently seeking a **Senior Planner - Development & Parks Planning for 2 Contract Positions (up to 15-months & 24-months)**

If you are interested in this position, click [here](#) to review the job posting details.

The application deadline is **April 25, 2025**.