

The Spit

by Lisa Hirmer

The Leslie Street Spit is a long finger of artificial land that stretches nearly five kilometers into Lake Ontario. Construction of the spit began in the late 1950s as part of a never-realized scheme for a new harbour planned in anticipation of increasing shipping traffic that was expected to arrive through the newly opened St. Lawrence Seaway. The spit was conceived as a breakwater to protect the new harbour, its construction therefore was slated as the first phase of the harbour project.

To build the spit a significant amount of infilling was required, necessitating large quantities of readily available material that could be dumped into the lake. The Toronto Harbour Commission resolved this issue by soliciting waste from developers, who were busy with urban projects that generated unwanted material as ground was excavated, streets torn up and old buildings demolished. Concrete, brick, metal, glass, and other materials that could be classified as “clean fill” came from these projects to the spit, simultaneously providing the material needed for the new landmass and a convenient disposal site for the remnants of urban fabric cleared away to make space for new development.

Only a few years into the construction of the spit it became obvious that changes in transportation technology would move shipping routes to the land and that the anticipated maritime traffic would never arrive. The plans for the new harbour were abandoned. And yet the expansion of the spit continued, sustained presumably by its secondary purpose as a repository of development waste from the city. The symbiotic relationship between the project and Toronto’s developers had such momentum that though the need for a harbour seawall had long since vanished, the dumping continued. In the late 1970s “endikement bays” were added to the sides of the long narrow spine of the spit to hold the contaminated dredged material from the mouth of the Don River and Toronto’s inner harbour, confirming the spit’s new purpose as a repository of urban waste.

Today the spit has a strange dual nature: an active dumping site during weekdays—with trucks full of construction waste arriving daily to add their load to the expanding landmass—and an urban nature reserve accessible to the public during weekends and holi-

days—a second, unplanned existence for the spit that emerged spontaneously through natural processes. After being covered by a thin layer of topsoil, the finished sections of the spit were rapidly colonized by vegetation and wildlife, including several rare plants and endangered animal species that thrived on the spit for years before they were discovered. Left alone, the spit became a hybrid urban-wilderness where, amidst the rubble of brick and bent rebar, a new ecology thrived. This state is one that has been fiercely defended by the public, particularly in the 1970s and 80s when schemes to develop the land were proposed. Public pressure has ensured that the spit be largely left to develop on its own.

This second identity as an urban wildness reserve has allowed the spit’s repository nature to remain throughout Toronto’s recent development. It is clear that the continuous expansion of the spit has no purpose beyond expansion itself, as a location to accumulate Toronto’s excess urban material. The spit feeds on the waste of the city’s development, ever continuing to expand as the city changes. The metabolism of the city is imperfect, and the growth of the spit is thus a measure of this flawed digestion. The unused and unneeded will, of course, never disappear; they can only be rearranged. And, into the lake, where the excess material of the city’s development accumulates, old iterations of urban fabric are crushed and piled up into landmass, half-digested fragments heaved into the water as a sort of petrified urban vomit—the city as the earth...✕

Bio

Lisa Hirmer is an artist, writer and designer based in Guelph, Ontario, Canada. Her work can be divided between two main practices, though the thematic overlap is significant: She is an emerging photographer and writer producing work that reflects her background in architecture and is primarily concerned with examining material traces found in complex landscapes, especially those that act as evidence of unseen forces. She is also a co-founder and principal of DodoLab, an experimental arts-based practice that has been producing innovative public research and socially engaged projects since 2009. DodoLab’s work is focused on investigating, engaging and responding to the public’s relationship with contemporary issues. Hirmer has a Masters of Architecture from the University of Waterloo.











