

# Downsview Park. Honouring the Past, Building for the Present, Cultivating for the Future

GARTH HARDIE PROVIDES AN UPDATE ON CANADA'S FIRST NATIONAL URBAN PARK

**H**erbert Boake proudly carries a briefcase full of memories – photographs, books, newspaper clippings, shopping receipts and pamphlets – of his childhood on what is now Downsview Park. The 87-year-old vividly remembers riding his favourite horse, Vesper Bell, milking prize-winning Holsteins on his family's farm, attending morning and evening services at the nearby United Church, planting his father's favourite trees and slinging snowballs with friends in winter.

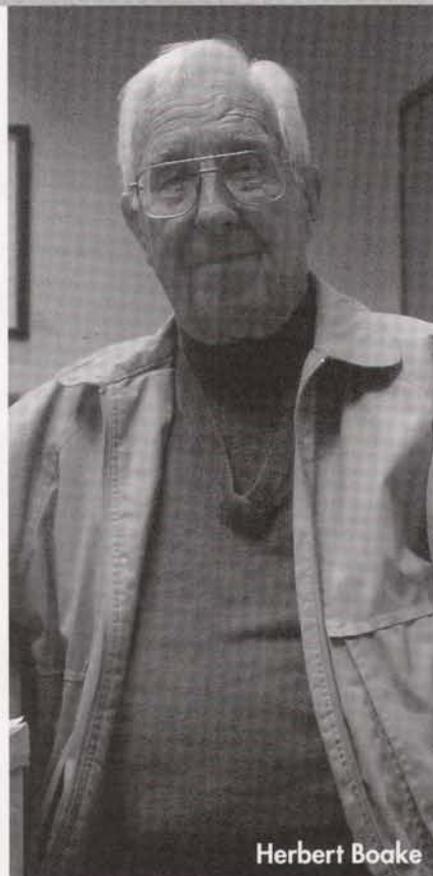
In 1824, his great grandparents Edward Boake and wife Sarah emigrated from Ireland, bought 100 acres of the present Downsview Park site, planted hay, wheat, oats and barley and raised 15 children. Edward used the money he earned as an ax man building Toronto's Bathurst Street to buy another 100 acres, and the Boakes farmed successfully for generations beside

their neighbours the Duncans, Elliots, Fars and the McGees.

Herbert remembers when de Havilland Aircraft of Canada bought 20 acres to build their first hangar in Toronto. He also remembers 1950, when the government expropriated the rest of the land to build a military base. As a soldier, wounded in Normandy, he understood the reasons. But he is delighted that the land on which he was born is now being returned to nature. After serving for more than 50 years as a Canadian Armed Forces base, the majority of the land in the heart of Greater Toronto is ready to be transformed into Downsview Park – Canada's first national urban park.

"Building a park is a great idea," Herbert Boake says of the new Downsview Park design. "It restores the land to its earlier uses and offers people in the city the opportunity to relax and enjoy their leisure time."

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Herbert Boake



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Today, Downsview is ready for a makeover. But before the vision of an action sports complex, cultural commons, meadow, promenade, lakes, paths, forests, gardens and business development facilities to finance the park can be realized, the parklands, fallow and leached from years of non-use, must be restored to fertility in order to serve as a legacy for future generations.

David Anselmi, Vice President of Park Development, says studies have been done to help determine the best strategy going forward.

"We have studied what kinds of soil are found at Downsview, how much of each type there is and where," says David,

who is responsible for creating a park plan and implementing the design developed by Tree City Inc. "Now that the design of the park is being finalized and we can tell what parts of the land will be used for what purpose, we know what needs to be done, in each area, to create ideal conditions for success."

David says one of the biggest challenges is the level of compaction the soil has undergone for the last 50 years. Because the land was regularly tilled, plowed and used for farming, it is highly susceptible to frost penetration. This means tilling, discing and some sub-soiling will be needed. Other challenges include assessing the level of organic

matter in the soil and the presence of gravel, stone and other building materials. For now, David says the grounds are being maintained as grassland. This helps to limit frost penetration until construction of the park begins. The first step in this process is landscaping.

Reudi Hofer is a partner at PMA Landscape Architects, which is a member of the Tree City Inc. design team, designers of Downsview Park. As a prominent voice in environmentally responsible landscape architecture in Canada since 1972 and designer of some of Canada's most imaginative projects, Reudi says Downsview Park is a unique opportunity to demonstrate environmental sustainability and social responsibility in the landscaping process.

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Reudi says the landscaping process starts with grading – creating the landforms that will give the park its distinctive look and accommodate the action, promenade and cultivation zones that are the keys to the design. This also includes installing sewer, water and hydro systems as well as a network of roads and pathways to serve the park. Then, effective water management, he says, provides opportunities for saving money and improving the environment.

"An effective water management and drainage system is important for Downsview Park," says Reudi, whose accomplishments include innovative green space projects in Erin Mills and an industrial project seamlessly integrated into the Niigon Aboriginal community in Georgian Bay. "Instead of sending the water to a storm drainage system, the goal is to manage the water collected on the site, use it efficiently, and then return it purified to the soil."

Water is needed to irrigate soccer fields and other natural sports surfaces that require maintenance. Creating lakes,

drainage streams and wetlands in the park are crucial parts of this strategy.

Then there is the task of planning the vegetation. Hofer says it takes about 70 years for many trees to mature and about 150 years before a forest can sustain itself without human help.

"If we want to create vegetation that future generations can appreciate soon, we'd better start now," Reudi says. "By integrating vegetation planning into the programming – having a nursery that generates the plants we need to cultivate the park and enrich the soil and educating visitors about cultivation – we start to see real benefits a lot sooner."

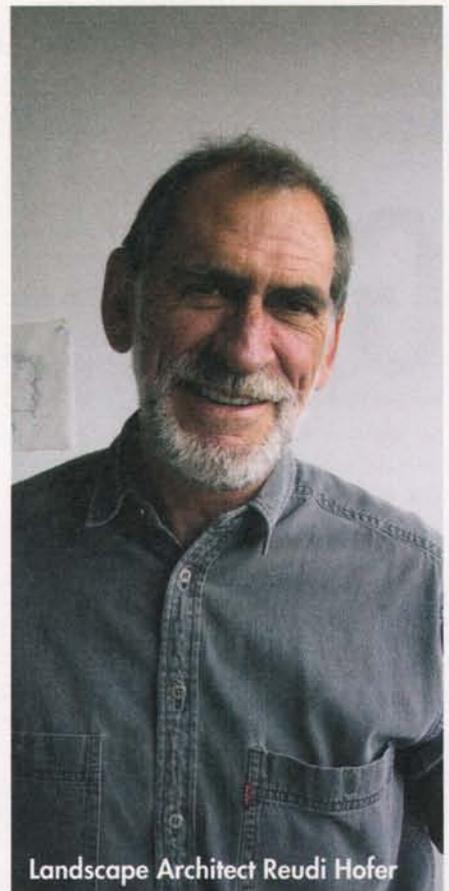
Tony Genco, Executive Vice-President of Parc Downsview Park agrees. Tony, who cherishes his own fond memories of his childhood in Downsview, says the task of returning Downsview to nature and developing the land according to the principles of social, environmental and economic sustainability is a gift from his generation to the children of the future.

"Nourishing the land and building ecosystems that sustain and regenerate themselves is crucial to our mandate of economic, social and environmental sustainability," Tony says. "It is also an important focus in this urban setting, to reconnect with nature, honour their heritage and reflect on the lessons learned over many generations."

For Herbert Boake, those values are priceless. His family's connection to the land is commemorated by a small forest near his birthplace in Downsview Park. It's known locally as Boake's Grove, celebrating his father's love of trees.

"Building Downsview Park and renewing the natural fertility of the land is a great way to capture the spirit of the past, Herbert says. "It is also a great way to connect our children to their past and give them a place to enjoy today as they create their own memories to pass along to future generations."

For further information on Downsview Park contact Garth Hardie at (416) 952-2229. ♦



Landscape Architect Reudi Hofer

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