

Will the circles be unbroken?

A tale of two roundhouses shows that urban planning can also be urbane—at least, in one case By Ivor Tossell



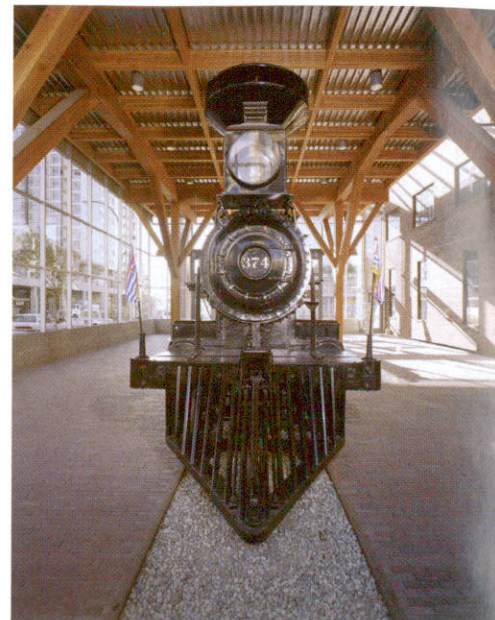
ON THE NORTH SHORE OF VANCOUVER'S False Creek, tucked inside one of the biggest condo developments the country has ever seen, there sits a roundhouse. It's the oldest building on that tract of land—in fact, it's the oldest original-location building in the city. The Vancouver roundhouse has cannily survived not only the death of the railway lands that once surrounded it, but also repeated attempts to tear it down, the coming and going of a world exhibition and the latest waterfront condo boom.

A roundhouse is a rare and fantastic thing, a unique construct from a bygone era. And yet, thanks to a bit of foresight, Vancouver's is as relevant as ever—but in an entirely new way. For a decade now, the building has been home

to the Roundhouse Community Arts & Recreation Centre, a gathering place that, at last count, commanded 345,000 visits a year.

Now flip across the country to Toronto, right to the base of the CN Tower. There, tucked at the edge of another one of the biggest condo developments the country has ever seen, sits another roundhouse. Like its Western cousin, it's a survivor, and until recently, it, too, was looking for purpose in the 21st century. Last year, it found one. Set to open in 2009, the roundhouse will greet the future as the home of a Leon's furniture outlet.

"Vancouver good, Toronto bad" is a refrain heard so often in city-building circles that it's become a hoary stereotype. But there's a grain of truth in there, and you don't have to look any



further than the debacle of Toronto's last roundhouse to see why this grain keeps flowering.

There are only a handful of roundhouses left in Canada. Vestiges from the heyday of steam power, they were essential because steam engines were never particularly good at going backwards. Built around giant turntables that could swing an engine around, roundhouses provided a place to both store and service locomotives, with a minimum of backing up. In a very real sense, they were the heart of the operation, the point at which all the tracks converged, the Rome to which all rails led.

Roundhouses went into decline with the arrival of diesel engines, which could just as capably move forwards or backwards. A second blow came when the railroads started pulling up the tracks that once dominated big-city downtowns, and most—but not all—were demolished.

That's how Toronto and Vancouver were saddled with a curiously similar legacy: a vintage roundhouse, marooned from the tracks that once led to it, surrounded by a growing downtown and facing an uncertain future.

The former railway lands in both cities are being developed into twin skyscraper communities of unprecedented size. Toronto's Concord CityPlace and Vancouver's Concord Pacific Place will each be home to tens of thousands of urbanites, with whom come concerns about whether a collection of high-rise towers can be knitted into a real community.

An answer can be found in Vancouver's roundhouse. Built in stages between 1888 and 1940, heritage enthusiasts saved it from demolition when the railway lands were cleared to make way for Expo 86. It was re-purposed as a pavilion, and when Concord arrived with its mega-development, it was designated for use as a public amenity.

The developer, however, had its own notion of "public amenity," which it liberally defined as a mini-mall of premium boutiques. It was only with strenuous efforts from the city and surrounding community that Concord was persuaded to foot the hefty nine-million-dollar tab for a community centre. Funding today is divided between the City of Vancouver and a charitable society that raises money to program the centre and run events.

In this condo-addled age, "community centre" increasingly seems to be a euphemism for "the gym," perhaps with a few tacky amenities and a squash court added on for good measure. Vancouver's Roundhouse Community Centre, on the other hand, offers everything from acting to Aikido, first aid to fencing and pottery to piano lessons. It maintains artist-in-residence programs, and stages performances—perhaps most ingenious of all, the turntable pit has been transformed into a stunning theatre-in-the-round venue. To bring it all full circle, so to speak, the engine that pulled the first steam engine into Vancouver is preserved in a pavilion outside.

If only the same could be said about its cousin down east. The Toronto roundhouse languished for years, as plans for conversion into a railway museum were mooted but never acted on, even as historic locomotives gathered dust within its walls. The tracks leading to the main line—which a museum could have used for historic train rides—were pulled up, and the land along which they ran was sold. In 1997, the roundhouse was partially disassembled to facilitate the building of the city's underground convention centre; when it was put back together, about a third of the rebuilt space was occupied by the Steam Whistle brewery (which, at the very least, brews decent beer).

Different visions about what to do with the remainder of the space competed, but last year, the City of Toronto announced that a tenant for much of remaining space had been found: Leon's Furniture Inc. A long-promised railroad museum would be sandwiched into the middle of the building, between the brewery and the furniture store. To put it in perspective, the roundhouse was originally divided into stalls (or "bays") for 32 engines. In the end, the museum will occupy a grand total of three, though it will also spill over into a side-building and the surrounding park grounds.

Reaction to the plan was less than enthusiastic.

"How do you spell creative bankruptcy? R-O-U-N-D-H-O-U-S-E," declared the *Toronto Star*.

"I find this the most pedestrian approach to the use of heritage that I think I've ever seen," Adam Vaughan, the local city councillor, fumed at the time.

"The thing is a total disaster," Jane Beecroft, a noted Toronto historian, told me recently. "This thing is a gift to the city, and they've blown it."

The Toronto Railway Heritage Association is in charge of the truncated museum (which, like Leon's, is still readying itself to open). The group is doing its best to give the situation positive spin, pointing out that a private-sector tenancy is the only way to finance restoring such an old building. One bright spot is the fact that the historic turntable in Toronto has been brought back to working order, even if it doesn't connect to a railway. And, as Heritage Toronto's conservation committee points out, the alterations to the building are designed to be reversible.

"Without the two tenants, we wouldn't have a museum," says TRHA president Orin Krivel, who notes that he couldn't imagine asking the City of Toronto for \$12 million when community centres and pools are being threatened with closure. "We'd be skidded out of council chambers so quickly our clothing would ignite."

He might have a point, but it's a continuing pity that Toronto's imagination should prove so limited. As the Vancouver experience has shown, there are options other than handing heritage spaces over to the private sector, shrugging that it's better than letting them collapse from neglect. It's true that both the brewery (which includes a popular event space) and the furniture store are public spaces in their own right. It doesn't negate the fact that it amounts to a colossal wasted opportunity.

In their day, roundhouses were the heart of their railway lands. Now they sit at the heart of Canada's downtowns, where the question has gone from how to move people across the country, to how to house an increasingly urban nation. The roundhouses' very design makes these buildings focal points—and what a city puts in such key places reflects what it values.

Alas, here we are again: Vancouver good, Toronto blah.

