

Some architectural evidence of the original space age includes, from left, the Mississauga spike, Humber flying saucer and a downtown biomorphic bench. PHOTOS BY DAVE LEBLANC FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

In search of a city's tattered, battered monuments to the space age



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This past September, pieces of the Upper Atmosphere Research Satellite (UARS) blazed back to Earth and crashed into the Pacific Ocean. Apparently, chunks of "space junk" this large hadn't been seen since Skylab hit remote parts of Australia in 1979.

I remember Skylab clearly, by the way, since my two older brothers had me petrified that pieces of it would rain down on my 11-year-old head as I cruised our East York street on my BMX bike. I don't know if there's a link between the two, but I've been fascinated with the space age ever since.

So, like folks who hunt for pieces of fallen satellites or meteors, when I'm architouring I seek out architectural evidence of the original space age, which started a few years before 1957's Sputnik and ended with the first U.S. shuttle launch in 1981. Like any large urban area, the GTA was once littered with stuff that co-opted the motifs of the space age, but, at 30 to 55 years old, there isn't much left, and what remains is often in poor condition.

But these remnants are anything but junk.

The next time you're finishing up a bite at the Satellite Family Restaurant (built the year after Sputnik launched) in Mississauga's Clarkson Village, head west on Lakeshore Road West and turn right at Southdown Road. After passing Bromsgrove Road and the still-intact swoopy "Googie" canopy over the Canadian Tire gas bar (designed in 1969 by Bob McClintock and designated a heritage structure by the City of Mississauga a few years ago), turn left onto Wiseman Court. In front of a low-rise 1960s apartment house, a tall, two-pronged concrete spike looks a little like the delta-winged Avro Arrow, or, perhaps, the 80-foot stainless steel pylon that once stood sentry at the CNE's 1954 Food Building. In either case, it's ready for take-off. Unfortunately, this relic's present role is to shield a yellow tub of road salt.

Until recently, another CNE-inspired artifact stood at the other end of Toronto. Just north of the crown-shaped "servery" portion of the former Midland Avenue Collegiate at 720 Midland Ave. in Scarborough, a Lilliputian Dufferin Gate marked the pedestrian entrance to the Midland Court Apartments. Those who question the validity of the arch as a space-age symbol need only look to the 1961 Theme Building at Los Angeles International Airport or Eero Saarinen's St. Louis Gateway Arch, completed in 1965. The last

time I saw the Scarborough Arch, bits of concrete had fallen off to reveal a rusty rebar skeleton underneath. That was 2008; shortly after that, I assume the building owners inspected it, didn't see any value in repairing it, and allowed it to give up the ghost.

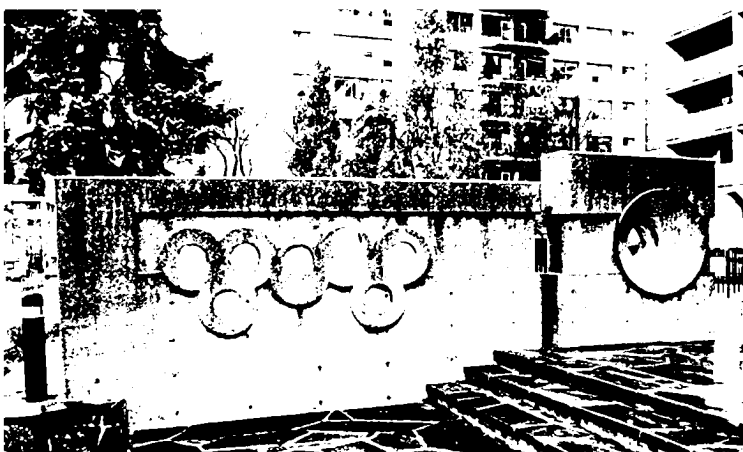
That's too bad, because "grass-roots monuments" (as I call them) are at least as important as official monuments in the telling of our collective story. Why? Because these hood ornaments of the architectural world weren't commissioned by benefactors, philanthropists, citizen's groups or government: they exist solely because the developer thought them important enough to finance and build. Despite not knowing who quietly put pen to drafting paper, these anonymous designers have loud voices, historically speaking, because their only agenda was to employ the motifs and signifiers of the era.

Although not quite space-oriented, there are a series of stepped concrete plinths at the corner of Wellesley Street East and Parliament Street arranged before a St. James Town apartment building. While some act as squat, low benches, the plinths increase in height and slim down as they gather towards the centre. With a little imagination, these can be viewed as a futuristic city ... albeit with cigarette butts as citizenry. A few blocks away, at another high-rise at 100 Wellesley St. E., a low concrete wall separating walkway from driveway has a porthole and an arrangement of jazzy circles; since the circle pattern is different on each side, it suggests a custom piece rather than a catalog selection.

Civically financed structures were not immune to space fever, by the way, as the rest stop/shelter in South Humber Park proves. While a much more utilitarian structure would be built to house washrooms today, during the space race no one thought it strange to erect an enormous flying saucer on stilts. Even with washrooms boarded up and the indignity of graffiti, the mid-century optimism shines through.

Similarly, a park bench at Glen Edyth Drive Parkette near Casa Loma cannot be a product of any other time. So biomorphic, sculptural and illustrative of the expressive nature of concrete, the hands that brought it to life must have been those of the Annex's favourite Flower Power architect, Uno Prii, or, perhaps, English master sculptor Henry Moore ... at least that's what I fantasize when I cradle myself into its curves.

I also have a fantasy that, one day, every park bench in the city will be based on this one, and the other monuments I've mentioned will be rebuilt or repainted and repaired. Until then, the search continues. If you know of any I've missed, send their coordinates to my e-mail address, and I'll feature them in a 2012 column.



Even this wall of jazzy circles located in front of the 100 Wellesley St. E. apartment building offers some architectural hint of a futuristic city.