

# Doors Open



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## It's easier being green

The 8th annual Doors Open, a weekend stroll through T.O.'s architectural gems, shows that going sustainable isn't a pipe dream after all



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In the case of St. Gabriel's Parish, you don't have to have faith to be a believer.

This extraordinary building, which opened just last November, embodies an approach to the environment that isn't simply religious, it's spiritual.

St. Gabriel's, one of 100 buildings included in this year's Doors Open Toronto, will be a highlight. Indeed, it is one of those rare projects that everyone should visit, not just for its architectural beauty, but for what it says about green building.

Given that this year's Doors Open Toronto theme is sustainability, its inclusion couldn't be denied.

Designed by Roberto Chiotti of Larkin Architects, 310 St. Patrick St. (416-922-1111), the church received prestigious Gold certification from the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating system — a process more so for all that green building need not be expensive, or unpleasant to look at or inhabit. If anything, it makes a case for sustainable architecture that's so compelling, it's hard to think it remains the exception.

Surrounded on every side by some of the most daring and depressing architecture, St. Gabriel's (670 Sheppard Ave. E.) stands as a beacon. Clinging around its place concrete, recycled pews, specially-treated glass and lots of (artificial) natural light, Chiotti has pulled off something miraculous. Essentially, he has reinvented that most ancient of architectural forms, the church.

Informed by traditional principles, specifically the ecophilosophy of Thomas Berry, this is a building that embodies, illustrates and teaches a new ontology based on respect for the planet.

"Berry's argument is that you can't have healthy humanism on an unhealthy planet," says Chiotti, who studied theology and ecology as well as architecture. "The church is part of an attempt to create a bio-centric cosmology."

In Chiotti's hands, the church has shed its traditional ele-



A green wall dominates the atrium at the University of Guelph-Humber. It literally breathes new life into an indoor environment.

ments, there's no spire here, for instance, no pointed arches, columns or flying buttresses.

Instead, there's a large glass wall, a facade made of Tynedal limestone, a copper-clad surface. Inside, the church is divided into two sections, with pews facing each other. The raw concrete walls serve as a blank

screen on which light shines through a rainforest glass ceiling. The effect is spectacular and serene — or spiritual, even magical. The vivid reds, yellows and blues are reminiscent of those gorgeous hallucinatory canvases done by Toronto pastor John Mordath in the 1960s.

This is not a building to be missed.

Neither are the SAS Building (280 King St. E.), the Toronto Botanical Garden (777 Lawrence Ave. E.), Thomas J. Mills Public School (99 Nisbet St.) or Blossomview Kids Rehab (330 Klugor Rd.).

All represent a contemporary

response to the environmental crisis that most architects and developers — not to mention politicians — would prefer to ignore. What's interesting, however, is not how different these projects are from conventional ones, but how much better they are.

The SAS building, for example,

begins as an attempt to build a corporate headquarters that enhanced productivity. That translated into a project with plenty of natural light, fresh air and open space. The hope was that by constructing a place in which employees actually liked to spend time, absenteeism would decrease and work would improve. Whatever the odds, once involved in going green, they would be more than compensated by higher output. Following SAS' lead, with a little help from their architects, NCBH, realized that workplace happiness and architectural sustainability associated to make the same thing.

Up at the Toronto Botanical Garden, the most obvious nod to the environment is a green roof. Given the nature of the complex, such a feature makes a lot of sense. The most recent addition to the T.B.G. incorporates recycled material from the two original buildings. The architects, Montgomery Sison, deserves enormous credit for turning a small commission with a limited budget into a major accomplishment.

A lot of attention has been paid to green roofs, but also starting to appear around town are green walls, which can greatly enhance a building's interior environment. St. Gabriel's has one. There's an even more spectacular example of a living, breathing wall, several stories high, at the University of Guelph-Humber, designed by Diamond + Schmitt Architects. Blossomview Kids Rehab, another hit design from Montgomery Sison, is an important project that takes what just decades ago would have been a mild and institutional facility, one that minimizes differences between able-bodied and disabled. With its dramatically sloping roof and a grid of laminated "staves," Blossomview is an extension of the city, not a place set apart from it.

But a special mention must be made of another variety of green buildings. One that adapt existing structures to meet environmental standards. By saving on material waste and resource architecture is dispensing an eco-conscious retrofit is the general solution of all.

The Beach Solar Landmark (2240 Queen St. E.), the Robertson Building (215 Spadina Ave.), 400 Richmond (101 Richmond St. W.) and St. Michael's Brewing (215 Bloor St. W.) are a few notable examples.

By returning old buildings to their original glory — then re-purposing it — they are a gift to the city.

The same might be said of Doors Open Toronto itself. In just eight years, it has become one of a handful of events that help increase awareness of the city and its suburbs. Public interest in architecture has never been greater, but unlike most art forms, architecture can only be indulged by allowing people to look.

Often that's easier said than done — except during this one weekend, when we're all invited to open our eyes.



St. Gabriel's Parish redefines that most ancient of architectural forms, the church.



Anything but institutional-looking, Blossomview Kids Rehab dares to declare itself a part of the city.