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Right foot forward

British architect Will Alsop's plans for a funky downtown pedestrian bridge have even got the anti-development activists excited

JOHN LORINC

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Literally and politically, architectural bad boy Will Alsop wants to go where no developer has gone before: all the way over the broad, leafy railway corridor downtown. That's the same corridor that has cut a divisive swath through dozens of Toronto neighbourhoods for decades.

Last week, the British architect, who was responsible for putting the Ontario College of Art & Design up on stilts in 2004, unveiled plans to erect a funky \$2-million pedestrian/cycling bridge over the CN rail line, at a location that would link the rapidly developing neighbourhoods along King West and Queen West, near Dufferin Street.

Building another pedestrian crossover may not sound like a radical move in a city that already has a handful of them stretching across major thoroughfares. But Mr. Alsop's plan for a gently sloped, playful-looking bridge has sparked the imagination of area residents -- not to mention urban-planning types, who see this kind of project as a critical step toward creating more pedestrian- and cyclist-friendly north-south connections linking downtown neighbourhoods with the waterfront.

"It's exactly the kind of thing we should be doing," Mayor David Miller says.

The Alsop bridge would also put Toronto at the centre of a global trend that's placing pedestrians at the forefront of urban development. In cities such as Chicago, London and Barcelona, signature foot bridges built in recent years have succeeded in connecting once-isolated neighbourhoods by straddling formidable transportation barriers, from railways to highways to rivers.

As the extraordinary popularity of London's Millennium Bridge over the Thames has demonstrated, such architecturally distinctive bridges have become destinations in themselves. Although he insists it will be publicly accessible, Mr. Alsop's span is primarily designed to connect a pair of controversial condo projects being built by his client, Urbancorp, on either side of the rail corridor: One is a mid-rise complex on the north side of the tracks, near Queen and Gladstone, and the other is a 19-storey tower on the south side.

He's proposed constructing the southern tower on six-storey-high stilts, so the bridge could land beneath it and connect with a small parkette being developed in a townhouse complex on the north side of King Street West.

Mr. Alsop's bridge design, acknowledging his penchant for eccentric curves and bright colours, couldn't be more different from the handful of forbidding foot bridges that currently span Toronto's rail lines: Located on Dundas West, near Summerhill Avenue and north of Gerrard Square, these three existing bridges are narrow, wire mesh-enclosed structures, accessible only by steep staircases and highly exposed. "We've envisioned curved sides that cocoon pedestrians," says Caroline Robbie, Mr. Alsop's Toronto associate. "But they aren't meant to be enclosed, because there's a great view of the city. People will want to get on the bridge to see those views."

In a long-neglected corner of the downtown core, where some residents have become uncomfortable with the breakneck pace of development, even those who oppose the construction of high-rises embrace building a pedestrian bridge over a railway corridor that's increasingly surrounded by lively neighbourhoods.

"It seems like a no-brainer," says broadcaster Jane Farrow, a member of Active 18, a group that has formed to push for a clear vision from the city's planning department for development in the area. "The more ways people can connect across an obstacle like train tracks, the better."

Mr. Miller says that such pedestrian links have the potential to transform neighbourhoods. This week, in fact, the mayor saw for himself how unique pedestrian bridges are transforming Chicago, by traversing the highways and rail lines that have long separated the city from its lakeshore. In 2004, Frank Gehry's first such structure, the shimmering BP Bridge, opened in Millennium Park. The city is pressing ahead with plans for no fewer than seven more architecturally distinctive pedestrian bridges. "It's fun and its attractive," Mr. Miller says of the BP Bridge, which cost \$14-million, all of it raised privately (including \$5-million for the naming rights). "The lesson that was reinforced for me is that people use these links, and the public spaces become that much more vital."

"The idea of interesting bridges is part of Chicago," says Ed Uhlir, executive director of Millennium Park. While there was some skepticism about the BP Bridge when it was first proposed in 1999, no one questions its importance today: Visitors and city dwellers have flocked to the winding structure with the burnished steel wings that meanders more than 300 metres on a gentle slope suitable for wheelchairs. It's also triggered the development of a new children's museum and a park on the other end. "People are willing to cross a long bridge, provided it's an interesting and easy experience," he says.

Chicago is also planning to hold an international design competition for six more bridges, intended to cross the railway tracks on the south side. "Having different designers doing these bridges is pretty exciting," Mr. Uhlir enthuses.

Back in Toronto, planning consultant Ken Greenberg, who is working with Active 18 to push for alternatives to high-rise towers in the Queen West triangle, says he would prefer to see such bridges built by public agencies rather than private developers. He points to the arching Humber River Pedestrian Bridge, financed by Metro Toronto and opened in 1995, as an example of the marriage of high-concept architecture and bridge development. He says creating destination bridges in Toronto isn't impossible, if there's the will to do it. "It's not as if we haven't done this before."

But Urbancorp project manager Mark Julian suspects building new bridges in this town will turn out to be easier said than done. "We're still trying to get the city to agree [to Mr. Alsop's idea]," he says, pointing out that municipal officials will have to pitch Urbancorp's foot bridge scheme to Canadian National, which owns the corridor and jealously guards against any commercial incursions on its turf. "Nobody's ever done this before."

Indeed, it's not a stretch to predict that Mr. Alsop's iconoclastic vision, like so many others before it, may slam into a wall of bureaucratic, regulatory and political barriers at least as insurmountable as the corridor itself.

With the exceptions of a little-known foot bridge between Liberty Village and the Canadian National Exhibition, and the renovated carriageways under Union Station, the city has little to show for all the urban-minded rhetoric that planning officials have been promoting for almost a decade about the need for more north-south connections.

The list of incomplete or suspended projects is extensive, and includes a long-delayed tunnel link beneath the tracks, connecting the north and south segments of Simcoe Street; and a proposed "land bridge" for pedestrians and cyclists that would have tied a King West park to Fort York and then the lakeshore park network. The latter appears to have died because funding for an environmental assessment was tied to the Front Street Extension, which is now on hold due to budget constraints and local opposition.

Mr. Greenberg says he's currently working with former mayor David Crombie on a "very preliminary" plan to build a pedestrian/cycling bridge extending from the foot of Jefferson Avenue, in Liberty Village, into the CNE grounds -- a point where it could cross over a below-grade stretch of the Gardiner and the rail corridors, providing a link between the King West communities and the lakeshore. But the proposal has yet to be approved by Queen's Park and the city.

Such forward-looking ideas mesh with the city's recent move to construct a cycling path at the edge of a bucolic out-of-service west-end railway corridor. Without such bridges there would be no way for cyclists and pedestrians to get over the tracks and onto lakeshore cycling routes, such as the Martin Goodman Trail, without getting back onto the major road network.

In fact, the city's recent efforts have focused on costly road-engineering projects -- eliminating the Dufferin Street jog; rebuilding the Bathurst Street bridge south of Front Street; and planning an overpass on Strachan Avenue, south of King, to replace the level crossing on a stretch of track that will soon be used by a new GO line and the shuttle trains running between Union Station and the airport.

Heritage consultant Stephen Otto, who belongs to the Friends of Fort York, says that if the city was serious about making pedestrian connections to the lake, it should be pursuing plans to build the land bridge or lower the rail tracks, instead of constructing yet another elevated major road that will be inhospitable to pedestrians and cyclists. "We're supposed to be engaged in city building here."

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