

On a Sunny Sunday Afternoon *Scenes*

You are sitting on your porch steps under the dappled sunlight of the old maples that line your Toronto street, enjoying a beautiful fall day. Out of the corner of your eye, you notice a steady stream of people walking out of the alleyway across the street from your house. What is this procession all about?

"Human River. A community walk along the Garrison Creek, Toronto's biggest buried river. The Garrison Creek still flows beneath our city. As it rushes hidden under homes, stores, roads and parks, we find signs of this lost river in tilting houses, dips in the streets, buried bridges and a string of green valleys."

Could this be why you always hear water gushing in the sewers even when there hasn't been rain for days? You had no idea there was once a creek flowing, no wait, there is still creek flowing under your house...

The Human River as an Initiative in Community Arts

In this paper I will explore the Human River as a community arts initiative that is engaging people in the reclamation of ecological history and public space. The term community arts has emerged over the past two decades to describe

It was here that the story of the Garrison Creek began: how the creek had its beginnings 12,000 years ago when the last remnants of the Wisconsinian Glacier melted off the St. Clair West lands; how it once visibly flowed through the city down into Lake Ontario; how it got its name because when Toronto was young, it entered the lake just east of the Fort York military garrison; how it was 7.7 km long and had several tributaries; how it used to be known as Bull's Creek in the upper portions because it passed through farms owned by members of the Bull family; how in the early 1900's settlement had become so dense and the creek so polluted with sewage that sewers became essential for public health reasons; how by the mid 1920's the creek had been completely buried to act as an underground sewer. This event being a co-production, the mandate and work of each organization, the Toronto Public Space Committee (TPSC), the Toronto Field Naturalists (TFN) and the Toronto Green Community (TGC), each added layers of meaning and intent. The TPSC are actively engaged in fighting the increasing commercialization and privatization of public space. TFN and the TGC have been organizing for eleven years to "reconnect the parks and potential parkland of the largely invisible Garrison valley from north of St. Clair to the lake." This co-production was a means of celebrating the ten year anniversary of

The Human River: The Playful Reclamation of Ecological History and Public Space

by Liz Forsberg

a diverse range of practices that seek to democratize and extend the creative process to the general public. Often they involve collaborations between artists and communities and the process of involving people in making the work is emphasized as much as the finished product (Cohen-Cruz, 2002). A number of socio-political forces have shaped its emergence. Perhaps the most pertinent force the Human River responds to is "the increasing commodification of culture through corporate globalization provoking a desire to reclaim public space and to relocate cultural production" (Barndt, 2004)

Context

The context for the Human River was very local. The event focused on an element of downtown Toronto's hidden ecology and efforts to raise peoples' awareness of lost rivers. The event attracted a small but sizeable group of people, many of them young families like us, affiliated in some way with one of the three sponsoring organizations. The event itself reflects a number of global and local forces converging: increasing awareness of our human impact on the planet, a lack of connection to our natural environments in urban areas, a growing awareness of clean water becoming a scarce resource and a growing movement exploring a wide array of issues pertaining to public space in Toronto.

their Lost Rivers walks that aim to "help people appreciate their intimate connections to the water systems that form an essential part of their lives" Their projects encourage the study of natural history and the preservation of our natural heritage.

As Michael and I made our way down the steps, stroller in hand, under the Bickford Centre and into Bickford Park, we rumbled along the grass, trailing at the back of the group with the other stroller pushers until we paused for our first interpretive stop narrated by Bernd Baldus. Our attention was drawn to a sewer grate at our feet where we could hear water rushing. The smell of sewage wafted up our nasal passages as we peered down to look through the bars and listen to the sounds of rushing water (or rather, rushing sewage). This, we were told, is what remains of the Garrison Creek

At the bottom of Harbord Park we went down a small set of stairs and passed by a planter bed acting as a monument to Garrison Creek. It was here that we began winding through the streets of Little Italy past tilting houses, ambling down Montrose, across College and eventually meandering through an alleyway.

Content

The message is deceptively simple given the layers of com-

plexity that emerge within the context the TPSC's work fighting the encroachment of private interests in public space. This is certainly not to say that the Human River is unique in doing so, but rather each time our streets, alleyways, parks and squares are used for such collective actions in addition to their utilitarian functions as pathways to work and shopping, it creates the space and inspiration for future imaginative use and humanizes the concrete face of the city.

Though the event itself was not explicitly political- it wasn't calling for people to write to their politicians to take action on the city's forgotten plans for the Garrison Creek Linkage project it placed the issue of Toronto's hidden ecology in people's consciousness via imaginative methods. Perhaps if it was a more 'political' event, calling for specific actions to be taken, the event might not have attracted so many people.

Production

The production process can be examined at a number of different levels. The Human River was structured and organized by the TPSC, the TGC and the TFN. The images generated for the event were collectively produced by those who attended the event - the only constraints being the materials provided by the organizers. The procession itself allowed people to participate as they saw fit to do within the confines of a parade.

Use

The Human River was a vehicle for a number of different uses. While it increased awareness among participants of Toronto's ecological history, it also triggered the curiosity of those we passed along the route. It provided a space for self-expression along the lines of a specific theme and created a place for dialogue where little existed before. The event reclaimed the public spaces of Toronto's alleyways and streets while reclaiming a forgotten part of our natural history. In facilitating the Human River, the organizers opened up a civic dialogue about an issue that doesn't have a large presence in city debates.

Final Thoughts

As a participant in the year's inaugural Human River I am inspired and hopeful about the pockets of imagination that this event creates in the overall landscape of the city. It confirms for me the role of community arts initiatives as a means of engaging people in the reclamation of ecological history and public space. I am also asking myself questions about the framework I used to explore the Human River as a community arts project. What did the categories I explored emphasize about the project? What did they conceal? I will carry these questions with me to future explorations of community arts projects.

**A procession of people
Flowing through streets and alleys
An undulating blue mass
Of gurgling conversation
And aquatic awareness**