

ANAKANA SCHOFIELD

How a family of owls brought together my Vancouver community ■ 09

SHEEMA KHAN

I'm not offended when someone praises the way I speak English ■ 011

MARSHA LEDERMAN

There might not be a happy ending for the Giller Prize ■ 011

A new trajectory for the Don River delta was already emerging in 2021. Many of the innovative bioengineering techniques used to fast-track naturalization at the site have been used in similar projects around the world, but what is exceptional about the Port Lands Flood Protection Project is how so many of them have been applied simultaneously, and on such a vast scale.

Looking southeast (below) we see the beginnings of the dramatic greening and renewal of a once-contaminated site and one of the new bridges that provides access and signals the positive aesthetic impact that public infrastructure can achieve.



A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT



Photographers **Vid Ingelevics** and **Ryan Walker** have had unprecedented access to document one of the largest infrastructure projects of its kind in North America. The Port Lands Flood Protection Project has transformed former industrial land to provide a new delta for Toronto's Don River and new parkland, which opens to the public this weekend 05

VID INGELEVICS / RYAN WALKER

My father was more than a statistic

As communities suffer through unprecedented housing and addiction crises, there's been a corresponding rise in callousness, **Jordan Foisy** writes

OPINION

Jordan Foisy is a stand-up comic and head writer for *This Hour has 22 Minutes*.

I hadn't seen my dad or heard from him in six years. All I knew was that he was addicted to drugs, his whereabouts could be best described as uncertain, and things were bad for him and getting worse. Everything else was glimpses and rumours. On a visit to Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., my hometown, my mom pointed out a men's shelter, and said she'd

heard that's where he was staying.

For years I'd been expecting the call. It would probably be my mom: "They found him," she'd tell me, "He wasn't breathing." But the call never came. For years, he existed on the periphery of my thoughts, a living ghost, an aching joint that acts up when I watch *Interstellar*. Sometimes, I would see an unlucky addict on the street, a face gaunt with misery, and I'd do a double take. Was that him? Could be. Might as well be.

And then, one day, my mom phoned me. It was later than usu-

al and I felt silly for all the other times I thought it was going to be the call, because immediately I knew. She spoke softly but deliberately. "Your dad's in the hospital," she told me. "They had to do some kind of surgery. He can't move, he can't talk." She didn't know the rest of the details. The hospital had called his sister, who had then called her. She didn't know what to do. His sister didn't know what to do. No one did. My dad had spent the last years burning every bridge around him, only pausing the bonfires to make sure the structures were covered

in enough gasoline. Favours were done that were never returned, money was loaned that was never repaid, friends were cheated, lines were crossed and the ends of ropes were reached. No one wanted to take this on.

The decision came easily. Maybe there is some ingrained determinism in being a son, especially the first born. A sense of duty or responsibility you might not know you possess. Or maybe I'm still just a theatre kid who knows the appropriate story beats for such a juicy role. "I can go," I told my mom, "I can take care of it."

The next morning I got hold of a doctor at the hospital. He laid it out for me. My father had gone to the emergency room complaining about numbness in his arms. Upon examination, they found an abscess growing near his spine, at the base of his skull. The doctor didn't know for sure the cause but it's common with people who do intravenous drugs. Dirty needles. The infection gets in through the injection site, and moves through the blood to where it can do real damage. You're only lucky until you aren't.

■ DAD, 04

WATER WORKS

In documenting the Port Lands Flood Protection project, two photographers have captured an effort unlike anything seen in Canada in 100 years

PHOTOS AND TEXTS BY VID INGELEVICS AND RYAN WALKER



By 1912, the Toronto Harbour Commission had filled in most of Ashbridges Bay Marsh, creating what was to be 400 hectares of industrial land. This resulted in the disappearance of the almost forgotten Fisherman’s Island and the causeway that once linked it to mainland Toronto. The excavation process in 2020 unearthed a significant section of the breakwater and with it countless household objects buried for nearly 100 years. The state of the causeway was documented by Toronto and Region Conservation Authority archeologists along with the Mississauga’s of the Credit First Nation. Within a week, the causeway once again disappeared, this time demolished to make way for the new rivers pathway to Lake Ontario.

VID INGELEVICS

OPINION

Vid Ingelevics is a visual artist and now professor emeritus at Toronto Metropolitan University. His exhibitions, curatorial endeavours and writings on art and photography have appeared across Canada and in the United States, Europe and Australia.

My connection with Toronto’s Port Lands began with a high school summer job at the Smith Transport offices on 150 Commissioners St., a company where my father worked. I remember the heady mix of fumes rising from the dozens of leaky gas and oil tanks and the sickly sweet odour of soap wafting from the nearby Lever Brothers plant just across the Don River. The Port Lands industrial sector was created in the early 20th century by filling in Toronto’s extensive marshlands that extended from the delta of the river. Years earlier, the Don’s already altered natural course was forced into a 90-degree turn westward through the concrete-lined Keating Channel. In the decades since, the potential flood risk to hundreds of acres in this area adjacent to downtown Toronto has risen dramatically as climate change has increasingly become a driver of extreme weather.

Fifty-six years later, I returned as a photographer to begin work with my colleague, Ryan Walker, on a six-year commission to “document and interpret” the Port Lands Flood Protection Project, one the most ambitious public infrastructure and climate-change adaptation plans in North America. The overwhelming prospect of capturing such a mammoth undertaking led to the idea of collaborating

with Ryan, a former student of mine in the documentary media program at Toronto Metropolitan University. Together we applied for the commission from Waterfront Toronto.

Today, 150 Commissioners St. no longer exists – the buildings and once-busy truck-loading docks were demolished back in the 1990s. The scruffy, once-toxic vacant land, home for a while to coyotes, is now lush, green and revitalized as part of the new Biidaasige Park, which opens to the public this month. The Port Lands Flood Protection Project has corrected civic mistakes made over a hundred years ago, creating a new mouth for the Don River with reintroduced wetlands, all engi-

neered completely from scratch.

Beginning in July, 2019, Ryan and I visited the site on a weekly basis and have hiked hundreds of kilometres around the area. Our presence there and relatively unrestricted access was seen, especially at first, as highly unusual. Resident photographers are a rarity on construction projects. Companies generally hire photographers temporarily for specific purposes, retaining control over the images and how they’re used. The representation of labour and sites of labour has become increasingly restricted, tending more to reflect corporate publicity goals than quotidian life on construction sites. Our work, we hope, offers an antidote

and a potential model for other such commissions.

Our unusual access has resulted in a large image archive spanning the gamut from the epic to the everyday – the surgical demolition of many industrial buildings, the takedown of the Gardiner Expressway off-ramp, the excavation of the new river course, heroic efforts to subdue pollutants found deep in the soil, and the arrival and installation of new bridges. We have witnessed the stages of the project shift from heavy machinery and excavation to hand labour, planting and weeding. We’ve documented First Nations’ ceremonial activities, returning wildlife and the emerging new ecosystem.

All of this work has been carried out through ever-changing and sometimes challenging weather conditions on a site that, for the first few years, existed mainly as fields of mud and dust.

It is worth reflecting that the scarcity of comprehensive, long-term documentation of sites of labour and labour itself includes that of Toronto’s own more ambitious civic infrastructure projects. One has to go back just over 100 years – yes, 100 years – to a set of remarkable and oft-cited photographs that inspired Michael Ondaatje’s celebrated novel *In the Skin of a Lion*. That record was created by Toronto’s first official photographer, Arthur Goss, of the construction of the Don Valley-spanning Prince Edward Viaduct – popularly known as the Bloor Viaduct. His work seem most aligned, at least in terms of historical value, with the visionary, multiyear Waterfront Toronto commission that Ryan and I have been privileged to work on. It would be gratifying to us if Toronto’s photographers, and those who love the city’s history, didn’t have to wait another hundred years for the next one.

■ STORY CONTINUES ON NEXT PAGE



In the early 20th century, City of Toronto photographer Arthur Goss photographed the construction of the Prince Edward Viaduct, which spanned the Don Valley at Bloor St. ATTRIBUTED TO ARTHUR GOSS/CITY OF TORONTO ARCHIVES



Early in our six-year commission, we witnessed the constant movement of vast mounds of carefully categorized soil around the site as the new river valley was being excavated. Here water is being pumped out of the excavation and this scene itself no longer exists but is likely now part of the new river bed.



At 130 Commissioners (formerly Cooper's Iron & Metal Recycling), the abatement team pauses for a lunch break in late 2019, while preparing the site for demolition. Beyond documenting the work itself, we are particularly interested in capturing the downtime and social aspects of labour. This includes the interpersonal connections, on-site communication and the collective camaraderie that arises from working toward a shared objective.

Reviewing plans for the Badlands Scramble (May, 2024) during the shotcrete application, which involved approximately two dozen skilled labourers carefully pouring and sculpting this sprawling play area and splashpad. This process was incredibly detailed; involving hand trowelling to form dips and valleys, and the precise sprinkling of hues and pigments onto the drying red concrete to mimic the depth and appearance of Ontario's Cheltenham Badlands. Highly skilled hand labour was on display.

Construction on this massive project was occasionally halted by something as small as an unidentified plant. During excavation for the river's new channel, a section of soil was exposed and left untouched for several weeks. Nourished by the sun and moisture, this soil allowed 100-year-old dormant seeds to sprout, revealing plant life that once thrived in Ashbridges Bay before the Port Lands were filled in during the early 20th century. These green plants are, in essence, living artifacts of Toronto's waterfront from a century ago. This serves as a reminder that even with the most meticulously planned naturalization processes, nature can still surprise us.

Revisiting and capturing similar vantage points over time allowed us to see and reflect on the massive change the site was undergoing. In this particular view, it is also fascinating to see the Toronto city skyline evolve. This image was taken on July 16, 2025 – days before Biidaasige Park opens to the public.

(below) In 2022 the use of large-scale machinery use for demolishing buildings and excavating the new river shifted dramatically as labour on a more human scale took over with large numbers of workers focused on planting and weeding.



ALL PHOTOS: VID INGELEVICS & RYAN WALKER

How to build a river: A return to something natural, through the weight of countless hands

RYAN WALKER
OPINION
Ryan Walker is a lens-based artist exploring land, identity, and society's response to climate change. He is an Adjunct Professor in the BFA Photography programs at TMU and Sheridan College. His work has been exhibited in Canada, the Netherlands, Italy, Russia, Australia, and the U.S.

The Port Lands Flood Protection Project is not just a story of infrastructure or flood mitigation. It's a story of time, of people, of history moving in cycles, of shifting social values and of the evolution of land itself. The site has always been in flux. Once a marshland, then an industrial hub, later a neglected brownfield and now, it's returning to nature. Vid and I watched

its current transformation unfold up close: from the flowing new river, where hundreds of machines and people worked along its bed and banks, to the edge of a newly established wetland, watching a Great White Egret fish in the exact spot that Cherry Street once ran. This return to something natural carries the weight of countless hands: designers, engineers, tradespeople, labourers.

But it is also a result of the passing of time that has led to a societal paradigm shift from conquering nature for the sake of industrialization, to respecting and cherishing natural ecosystems. That cyclical nature of the Port Lands' history became all the more apparent through its soil. As crews dug deep into layers of the once-buried marsh, they unearthed dark, damp and

ancient peat that's rich with memory. And from it, the past began to breathe. Seeds, long dormant beneath the surface, were stirred. Bulrushes and cattails of the original wetland from the 1910s pushed slowly toward the light. At first mistaken for weeds, they were, in fact, time travellers – remnants of the Ashbridge's Bay marsh that rose more than 100 years later to

meet a world that had long forgotten them. Some were carefully transplanted to Tommy Thompson Park, others studied, and some were replanted here, where the wetlands now return. As time passed and the project progressed, the labour, too, has evolved. Early on, the work was dominated by machinery. Massive diggers carved out earth, while cranes and deep-drilling rigs created a makeshift

skyline. But as the work progressed, it moved to a more human scale. Now its masons hand-lay stone, carpenters build intricate playgrounds, artists sculpt subtle forms of concrete. We've watched the site become a canvas for humanity to imprint, where people poured themselves into this space, not just in sweat, but in craft and artistry. Vid and I were embedded in

the Port Lands, which enabled us to become part of the rhythm of the site. In the beginning, we arrived with the intention of capturing everything, but it was the slow passing of time that revealed to us what truly matters: humanity and nature co-existing once more, thanks to the collaboration and camaraderie of those who spent the last six years bringing the land back to life.

Some stories aren't visible unless you wait. Small changes that eventually show up as big shifts require patience and persistence to document. It's this type of long-term work – which Waterfront Toronto had the rare foresight to invest in – that holds space for the invisible processes of time to become visible. This project was never just about documenting what was

built, but *how* it was built and what that incredible effort reveals. The tens of thousands of hours of labour and its results now hidden beneath the river and its lush banks may go unnoticed by future visitors, who will see only a thriving landscape. These images are our way of honouring the unseen: the moments, hands and histories buried in the earth, waiting for time to bring them to light.