



WALK ON THE WILD SIDE



Jane's Walk gives students, staff, alumni and visitors an alternative interpretation of the University landscape

**BY MICHAEL TODD
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MCKENZIE JAMES**

FOR THOSE READERS who aren't familiar with the term "Jane's Walk," it refers to free, community-based walking tours given by people who live or work in a particular neighbourhood for the benefit of people who don't – or for people who do live there, but want to learn a little more about the stories and history behind their locale. They provide an opportunity for people to come together to explore, talk about and celebrate neighbourhoods. It's estimated that more than 100 cities currently participate in Jane's Walks, and their popularity continues to grow. The initiative is named after renowned urban thinker Jane Jacobs, who for many years lived in Toronto's Annex community, where she died in 2006. Jacobs was an American-Canadian journalist, author and activist, best known for her influence on urban studies.



SACRED JOURNEY: York graduate student Jessie Thistle (left), a Métis-Cree from Saskatchewan; environmental studies Professor Anders Sandberg (middle); and Suzanne Carte (right), assistant curator at the Art Gallery of York University, in front of the York Tipi

In thinking about city issues and the meaning and importance of neighbourhoods, Jacobs was legendary. Although she had no formal training as an urban planner, her 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* was seminal to the subject. It introduces fresh ideas about how cities function, evolve and fail – ideas that now seem common sense, but in the post-war decades, as cities sprawled, were not.

Jacobs wrote about parks, sidewalks, retail design, mixed-use spaces and urban planning, all around the idea that cities were ecosystems that had their own internal logic and particular dynamics. A famous passage from her book reads:

Under the seeming disorder of the old city, wherever the old city is working successfully, is a marvellous order for maintaining the safety of the streets and the freedom of the city. It is a complex order. Its essence is intricacy of sidewalk use, bringing with it a constant succession of eyes. This order is all composed of movement and change, and although it is life, not art, we may fancifully call it the art form of the city and liken it to the dance – not to a simple-minded precision dance with everyone kicking up at the same time, twirling in unison and bowing off en masse, but to an intricate ballet in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other

and compose an orderly whole. The ballet of the good city sidewalk never repeats itself from place to place, and in any one place is always replete with new improvisations.

Jacobs believed cities would change and evolve over time depending on how they were used by their citizens. She felt that residents should have input on how their neighbourhoods developed – the places where people worked, played and lived. She was first and foremost famous for being instrumental in derailing the car-centred approach to urban planning.

The idea of a Jane’s Walk is to start a conversation about what you’re seeing. Leaders share their knowledge, but they encourage discussion, points of view and interpretation of “the facts.”

THESE TOURS CAN FOCUS ON almost any aspect of a neighbourhood, historical or otherwise, and anyone can lead one. Everyone knows something about their community, and Jane’s Walks are based on the belief that if you live there, then you’re the expert.

York University Faculty of Environmental Studies (FES) Professor Anders Sandberg was the host of a recent Jane’s Walk in



which he invited York graduate students to give small background talks about various aspects of campus – from the York Tipi and Stong Pond to the pioneer and aboriginal heritage and the now-naturalized green space in the courtyard of the Health, Nursing & Environmental Studies (HNES) Building. “As host of these walks, I like to think critically about the everyday and seemingly mundane – what these things tell us about how we live.”

SANDBERG, WHOSE ACADEMIC INTERESTS include the politics of science and planning, gentrification of conservation, and pedagogies of space and place, says, “York’s Jane’s Walk is a little bit different from the usual York tour. Here, we are trying to tell different stories about different features of the campus. The premise behind the walk is that you consider your place of work, study or home as an important place, a microcosm of the world, which you can interpret the same way you can the rainforest or the Canadian Arctic. There is of course an added benefit to your local landscape – all the resources are there for you, from the landscape to the history of the people who shaped it.”

Anders notes that postsecondary institutions are often viewed as “ivory towers,” distinct from the larger community and overall human experience. “For many people, universities and colleges are the backdrop of their fondest memories, critical social debates, thought experiments, character development and community building. But besides being halls of higher learning,” says Sandberg, “campuses are also important cultural sites.”

The idea of the “alternative campus tour” (ACT) was born about 10 years ago as an assignment in a first-year environmental studies course. The tour was meant to encourage critical thinking about different sites and aspects of the campus, pushing students to study their community. Several years ago, members of the ACT collective decided to take the tour beyond its course context so that some walks would be conducted for the York community as a whole, in conjunction with Jane’s Walk.

York’s Jane’s Walk began with a visit to the site of the York’s Tipi. There was a space created for it in the spring of 2013, says Jon Johnson, a York doctoral student and the guide for this particular spot, whose interests include indigenous history, health and healing traditions.



GUIDING SPIRIT: Jon Johnson hits the highlights on York's Jane's Walk

The structure itself – which is not a part of York's standard campus tour – and its locale are considered a spiritual site, situated in a small woodlot beside the log cabin near Osgoode Hall Law School. "This structure is indicative of the move to have more student services focused around indigenous peoples," notes Johnson. "There is also an indigenous student centre now where indigenous students can go, but it is open to anyone interested in aboriginal culture. This is real progress. York also has many more courses that focus on indigenous people than it did a decade ago."

Johnson notes that an interesting aspect of indigenous courses is that they often require spaces that are not simply classroom based – that is, in a concrete box. "The tipi is outside. It is a place we can bring aboriginal elders to talk about aspects of what students are studying in a space that's appropriate. For instance, often elders may want to do a smudge [ceremony], and you can't do that indoors because it sets off fire alarms, so it makes sense to have a space outside where teaching can take place as it should. Here, you can have a fire and connect with what's often termed the 'more-than-human' world

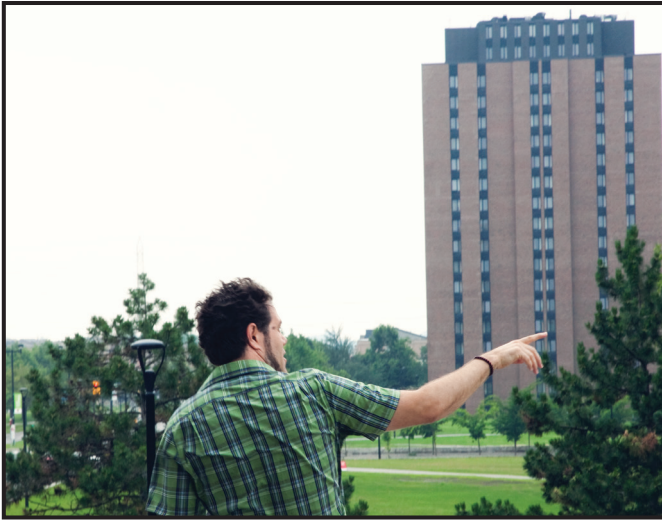
around you, which is an important part of Aboriginal Peoples' spirituality."

Part of the tour also included remarks on the nature of York's landscape to the west and south from the vantage point of the rise overlooking Stong Pond and taking in lands that were largely agriculturally settled by the pioneer families that lent their names to physical features of the campus itself – Stong Pond, Hoover Creek and the Boynton Woodlot, for instance. What is missing, notes Sandberg, is any naming of features relating to those people who lived along Black Creek and just to the south of campus, on the site of the present hydro corridor – namely Aboriginal Peoples. Among Ontario archaeologists, the area known as the Parsons Site is recognized as an extremely important place where indigenous people lived. It marks the remains of a hugely important ancestral Huron-Wendat village dating from the mid-to-late 15th century. As the Black Creek Community Walk website notes, "A 15th century visitor to the site would have found a well-fortified village with over 10 longhouses inside. Around the walls were fields growing the 'three

sisters': corn, squash and beans." During the mid-20th century, this was one of Toronto's most prominent sites for archaeological excavation.

SANDBERG SPOKE about the vista and the "visual text" of the landscape, and about what it may (or may not) tell us: "We had the early pioneer families, such as the Kaisers and the Hoovers. The western European notion of land and ownership was much different from that of, say, the Wendat. In the Western tradition, land is 'owned' and it can be speculated on. This is a notion foreign to the indigenous people who lived here hundreds of years ago. We also see how British surveyors left their mark on the landscape. It is divided into grids. The hedgerows reflect this. There are concessions and lines that later became roads, such as Steeles Avenue or Jane Street. Native peoples did not think about property the way we do."

The extent and importance of Parsons, and of the area's aboriginal heritage, is hinted at in a report by Toronto-based Archeological Services Inc., who did some minor excavating on the route



of a proposed water main extension in 1989. Their report notes, “The village at Parsons housed a large community of people living along the Humber watershed beginning in the mid-1400s. This was a continual occupation, as there are also 17th century sites present at the location. The site itself is more than twice the size of many of the known villages in the Humber region. The occurrence of exotic trade items indicate the people at Parsons were involved in long-distance trade and therefore could be considered fairly cosmopolitan and well-travelled.” Parsons is of major historical importance, and yet little hints at this heritage in the surrounding landscape. It is as if Ontario’s history only began with the region’s pioneers, suggests Sandberg.

WHEN IS A GARDEN NATURAL and when is it artificial? That was one of the questions posed by doctoral student Michael Classens about the “re-naturalized” green space outside York’s HNES Building. The actual space, which is located on the north side of the building, was up until 2005 simply a grassy area with some non-native plants and shrubs for decoration. FES Professor Gerda Wekerle spearheaded an initiative to have the green space “repatriated” and made more inviting – a place for study and contemplation. All grass and non-native or “exotic” species were torn out and replanted with native species.

In a sense, the HNES garden is a built environment much like York itself, says Sandberg, whether the building blocks are plants or concrete. “This garden, as nice as it is, is an artificial creation. All the soil and plants had to be shipped in. So, although it’s heralded as a ‘natural site,’ in fact it’s quite an

artificial construction.” On the one hand, the garden is exclusionary since all the exotics have been removed, but it is also inclusionary in that it brought together staff and students to work on its construction.

Sandberg notes that these types of gardens highlight the problematic assumption that somehow “native plants” are better or more highly regarded than non-native species, and that intruders are inherently bad. “That may be true in certain situations, but there is more to it and that’s what walks like this are all about – to get us thinking about our space in different ways.

“We invite participants to entertain various questions, such as: Why isn’t poison ivy, a native species, welcome in the native species garden? Or even questions about the static and categorical uses of the words ‘native’ and ‘invasive.’ For example, why aren’t the Norway maples, which line the pavement that encircles the garden and which came to Canada in the mid-19th century, considered Canadian citizens when Norwegians, who arrived at the same time, are?

York’s Jane’s Walk ends at Founders College, one of the first colleges to be constructed on former farm fields in the mid-1960s, as part of what was known as “complex one.”

“These walks, which began as the Alternative Campus Tour, are valuable for students and visitors alike,” says Sandberg. “The possibilities of the campus tour as a pedagogical, recruitment, retention and community-building tool are endless. I think the notion of digging where one stands, engaging with one’s immediate surroundings and day-to-day activities, and appreciating one’s immediate environment as a place of critical thinking adds to the educational experience.” ●