



## Promoting Environmental Education at the University

### The campus as a sticky wicket

BY L ANDERS SANDBERG

**A** critical university environmental education that tackles environmental sustainability, social justice and civic engagement issues often fails students by prioritizing complicated theoretical abstractions and developments and the reading of stuffy texts. One colleague neatly expressed this to me lately when describing her conception of the progression from undergraduate to graduate studies as moving from understanding and learning theory (the Bachelor's degree), to doing and applying theory (the Master's degree), to finally advancing theory (the PhD). In this pursuit, students often find themselves locked up in overcrowded seminar rooms or attending lectures of hundreds of students. To make things worse, environmental thinkers increasingly frame environmental problems and solutions as global, where, for example, global climate change looms large as a problem and global emissions trading constitutes a prominent solution. The combination of these conditions, Misery Studies 101, often alienates students from the academe and make them feel incapacitated to act for change and to engage in matters politically.

In a large full-year undergraduate class entitled "Taking Action: Engaging People and the Environment" in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University, I certainly cover the same type of theoretical perspective, but I also introduce the campus as a central focus for students to read and learn from. I ask the students to contemplate how the everyday environment is pregnant with politics, and how the physical and built landscape of the campus contains tensions, options, and possibilities where they may play a crucial role. During the fall term, we con-

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duct two campus tours where students are asked to tour and explore different stories surrounding several sites across the campus. The students prepare themselves by reading various information gathered by the Teaching Assistants and previous students in the class. I also lecture on the history and various other aspects of the campus and students have access to a set of readings on the campus contained in their course reader.

During the campus tour itself, half the students act as “guides” for one station one week and “tourists” for the rest of the stations the other week. Some of the contrasting stories told and debated at the various stations include: the campus as a private and public space; free speech; the provision of bottled versus tap water; sweatshop policies for the campus clothing store; the University’s exclusive contract with Pepsi; the appropriateness of advertisement; campus security; campus accessibility; preserving or developing the University’s extensive lands; the provision of food; the use of pesticides to control the West Nile Virus; and planning for storm water management on campus.

In this short essay, I illustrate how a series of stations and objects on the tour help students to think differently about one of the aspects of the development of the campus: the history of storm water management. We begin the exercise by contemplating the presence of an unusual object. In the middle of campus stands a large modern steel sculpture by installation artist — Mark Di Suvero. Di Suvero was born in 1933, educated in San Francisco, and launched his career as an abstract expressionist in New York. Working in steel, his structures span the globe. Most students don’t appreciate the sculpture and know very little about it. Many feel it is ugly and they have paid very little attention to it in the past. We begin by discussing the title of the sculpture, “The Sticky Wicket,” which is a phrase that is derived from cricket, where it depicts the difficult and unpredictable conditions of a pitch after a night of rain (Figure 1). The term is also a metaphor for a difficult circumstance. The name of the sculpture itself makes the crucial point to the students that the campus is not a given or a taken-for-granted object, it is a sticky wicket that presents all kinds of stories and possibilities.

We then proceed to talk about how the Sticky Wicket can challenge the buildings and landscapes that surround it. We first look at the buildings that surround the sculpture. Many, such as the



Figure 1: The Sticky Wicket (photo by author).

massive Ross Building and the Scott Library, were established in the 1960s on high modernist or brutalist architectural principles.<sup>1</sup> The buildings are huge and imposing, and the material is grey concrete. They entomb the students and isolate them from the nature and the outside world. A film about Stalin was once set on the campus. The buildings' and their surroundings' surfaces are impenetrable with regards to precipitation and an elaborate system of drains and concrete pipes carry the rain and snow that falls on the campus to surrounding creeks, streams and rivers that discharge in Lake Ontario. We ask the students to contemplate the campus as a site of natural engineering, where their educational lives and the natural processes that surround them are highly manipulated and controlled.

We challenge the students to think about how the Sticky Wicket suggests a different approach. The variable angles of the sculpture contrast with the rigid right angles of the structures that surround it. When you look at the Sticky Wicket from above, you can see the grass below. This contrasts with the grey concrete rooftops, parking lots and roads of the campus. When you stand inside the sculpture you can see the surroundings. The contrasts

suggest different buildings, buildings with different angles that melt into rather than work against the environment. The sculpture also suggests a different approach to dealing with drainage. Lacking a concrete base, the sculpture's steel beams make soft plunges into the ground that defy the paved surfaces of the campus.

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The snow and rain that fall on the beams slip down the beams and are absorbed into the earth. We then ask the students to imagine how buildings and drainage systems might look different. We bring up the concept of green buildings that are built for natural lighting, contact with the outside environment, and that have green roofs that absorb and cleanse precipitation.

At another station on the tour we continue to call into question the dominant landscaping pattern on campus. Just to the east of the Sticky Wicket, one of my colleagues, Jenny Foster, has established the Meadow Planting Experimental Plot, an ecological restoration plot of native species. In the fall when the tour occurs, the plot does not look very appealing, but we ask the students to think about the plot in the summer, when it flourishes. We also ask them to contemplate the absorptive capacities of the plot in comparison to the conventional lawns and gravel fields that surround it on the Osgoode-Atkinson Commons. We conclude that the tall grasses and wild flowers constitute an effective vegetation cover for retaining and absorbing rain. We also talk about the once existing prospects (since abandoned) to expand the plot over the entire Commons to its south (Figures 2).

At a third station, the students are put face to face with Stong Pond, a storm water pond on campus (Figure 3). We inform the students that before the university existed, the campus was an undulating farmland that drained into two watersheds, the Humber River watershed to the west and the Don River watershed to the east. But once the Campus was built, the land was bulldozed and the natural drainage pattern was altered by a storm water sewershed that drained all the water into the Humber watershed to the west. Stong Pond, was established in



Figure 2: Meadow Planting Experimental Plot established under the Faculty of Environmental Studies Sustainability Initiative. The Sticky Wicket is located behind the trees in the upper right hand corner of the photo (Photo by author).

the 1960s to cope with the added flow of water from the altered drainage pattern and the increasingly paved and impermeable surfaces on the campus. Such an engineering approach to storm water management proved disastrous in 2005 when Stong Pond overflowed during a hurricane and combined with other masses of water to wash out a bridge at an intensively trafficked road, Finch Avenue, to the south of the campus. In 2007, an expansion of Stong Pond sought to “improve” rather than challenge this system. We here ask the students to think about the alternatives to the engineering approach to storm water management on campus. Given the previous stations, they quickly put the pieces together. There are other strategies that go beyond the engineering strategy of expanding a storm water pond to deal with drainage. This may not only include the construction of green roofs on the many buildings on campus, but also the breaking up of parking lots (something that has been done in places but then the land has been sold for subdivision housing); and the creation of wetland features on campus.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 3: Stong Pond before it was expanded. The Pond in its old form was deemed deficient since it was considered too small to hold the runoff for the campus. However, this position ignores the deficiencies of the Pond's "headwaters," the paving over of the campus and the resultant massive amount of water that flows into the Pond (Photo by author).

Yet another station on the tour speaks about different stories and contestations about the campus' form. To the south of the Pond, students can see the massive Rexall Tennis Centre, the venue that harbours Tennis Canada's offices and that hosts the annual international Rogers Cup, which the University welcomed to the campus in 2004 (Figure 4). The Centre erased the once most significant ecological feature on the campus, the Black Creek Tablelands (the Black Creek is a tributary to the Humber River), another important vegetative cover that possessed an absorptive capacity for precipitation as well as adding to the natural surroundings of the campus. The Rexall Centre was deemed to contribute to the revenue and promotion of the University.<sup>3</sup>

The above stations and features of the campus tour help students conjure up a different geography of the campus than the one that has come to be. The Sticky Wicket and the still existing (and destroyed) green features that surround it can be imagined as





Figure 4: The Rexall Centre at York University (Photo by author).

part of a green wedge on the campus that harbours a different way of managing the campus's green areas and drainage patterns.

York is often made out to be, as one newspaper recently stated, like no other campus in light of frequent labour strife and confrontations between student activists and police. However, it is also very similar to other campuses across the country in the way it runs its day to day business. Thus a professional body of managers and developers, no doubt well-meaning, runs the campus with relatively little input from faculty members and students.<sup>4</sup> These professionals often have definitive ideas about development that blind them to alternatives. They contribute to the democratic deficit that is part of university life. Found and M'Gonigle put their fingers on the problem:

The challenge of democracy at the university is to create open and transparent processes in which conflicting views are freely debated, consensus is developed without coercion, and standards and legitimacy and accountability reflect substantive rather than promotional criteria. The rewards for achieving this balance are potentially great: universities could become true models of societal innovation, promoting advances in sustainability at the local, regional, and global levels.<sup>5</sup>

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Campus tours based on critical readings of the university environment are of relevance for students to begin such a challenge, to think differently, and to imagine and propose radical environmental alternatives.

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### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Brutalism, 2009. <http://www.ontarioarchitecture.com/Brutalist.htm>, accessed 1 July.

<sup>2</sup> Sandberg, L. Anders and Jennifer Foster, 2006. "Stormy Weather: On Hurricanes, Water and Hard Choices at York," *Critical Times*, 5, 3 (April), 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> Sandberg, L. Anders and Jennifer Foster, 2004. "Playing Tennis at York University: Game, Set, Match Tennis Canada," *Critical Times*, 3, 1 (January), 6.

<sup>4</sup> M'Gonigle, Michael and J. Starke, 2006. *PLANET U: Sustaining the World, Reinventing the University*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers.

<sup>5</sup> Found, Jason and Michael M'Gonigle, 2009. "Beyond the Reach of Democracy? The University and Institutional Citizenship," p. 207. In Laurie Adkin, editor, *Environmental Conflict and Democracy in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press).