



Embedded

Art and place- making

An interview with
Ferruccio Sardella

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY VICTORIA TAYLOR, OALA

The national non-profit organization Evergreen has been working since the early 1990s to advocate for more nature in our cities. Toronto-based artist Ferruccio Sardella has guided Evergreen's visual message for much of that time, playing a key role in the success of the Evergreen Brick Works site in Toronto. Sardella's installation at the Brick Works, titled *Watershed Consciousness*, is a precedent-setting exterior green wall for Toronto. The only one of its kind in the city, it provides an example of a design process in which disciplines blur to achieve a powerful result. Landscape architect Victoria Taylor, OALA, spoke with Ferruccio Sardella about his green wall project and his role as an artist in the design and site-planning process.



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01/ *Watershed Consciousness* by Ferruccio Sardella is an art installation and green wall at Toronto's Evergreen Brick Works.

IMAGE/ Cam Collier

02/ Artist Ferruccio Sardella working on the installation

IMAGE/ Cam Collier

Victoria Taylor (VT): First, I'd like to ask you about the history of this artwork.

Ferruccio Sardella (FS): This piece emerged when I was an artist-in-residence at the Evergreen Brick Works, in 2010-2011, embedded in the interpretation, remediation, and redesign of this historic cultural site. While working on interpretive strategies with the architects and Evergreen, thinking about place-making, questions emerged: "What is this place?" and "What is the mission of the project?" That's where this piece comes from.

VT: So it wasn't just a one-off commission. You were working with the whole team, in a holistic way, addressing the Brick Works site as a whole?

FS: It was very much a holistic approach. The piece is inspired by the watershed of Toronto. Water goes to the heart of why this place is here, why this place is important, and why we need to pay attention to ecology.

VT: Tell me more about your role as an artist working with landscape architects, planners, and architects, starting at an early stage, on the site. How can your work—from the position as an artist—reveal new possibilities?

FS: That's really interesting territory, and it speaks to the way both landscape architects and artists are engaged in the process. Sometimes it's very difficult for us to get together and work in an integrated way. But the Evergreen Brick Works design process purposely tried to disrupt what is often a very difficult collaboration. Now, however, I think we're seeing change. We're seeing RFPs that invite artists and architects to propose ideas together.

VT: What are some of the differences you found in the early days of talking with the design team?

FS: This was an adaptive reuse project. There were challenges even just to get the



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site remediated. There were many teams of architects: the structural architects, the heritage architects, the landscape architects. Evergreen was a difficult client in a lot of ways because they were inventing the place as the architects were designing. But that's very comfortable territory for an artist.

VT: Comfortable?

FS: Yes, because both pushing boundaries and an artistic process entail looking into the unknown.

VT: Could you talk about the heritage aspect of the wall?

FS: There was a certain degree of resistance to covering up a heritage wall. Also, structurally, the building couldn't hold such a large piece. Nothing can be attached to it. So the artwork had to be figured out as a free-standing piece. The heritage wall behind it isn't taking any of the weight of the artwork, but is still very much a part of the thinking and part of how you read the piece—a borrowed landscape in that sense.

The upper portion of the piece is left without a background; you have these pipes that represent the tributaries going through farmland and places that are being redeveloped. This piece is meant to show how delicate the whole watershed is. In terms of its structure, it's creating that sense of abstraction so you take a step back and think about what a watershed is from a different angle when you remove all the other information about it. It looks like an upside-down tree. The upper portion of the watershed is the roots of the ravine system. Without water getting to the ravine system, the ravine doesn't thrive.

VT: What is the environment that allows creative ideas to emerge?

FS: It's about making psychological space as much as making physical space. You don't want to fill a site like this. You want to make interventions that make the space bigger in your mind and your sensory experience of it. Often we fill spaces in a way that closes them off to possibilities. I want to bring forward interventions that keep it open.

Everybody enters into the subject from different points of view. Some people are



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03-06/ *Watershed Consciousness* by Ferruccio Sardella

IMAGES/ Cam Collyer

turned on conceptually; other people are turned on just purely by the sensory. A child can walk up to the piece and just want to play in the water. And then someone else who is into botany will walk up and be interested in the green wall. Some people are just not interested in the subject at all. I think that creates a lot of space and room for a more personal interpretation and experience. The content is waiting for them if and when they're interested.

VT: Maintenance is a tough sell. It's not the sexy part of design. What are the challenges to ensure the longevity of the various living and non-living elements? What did you learn over the four years since the installation?

FS: In terms of the plant material, probably about 50 percent of the plants we put in worked and 50 percent didn't. There was great concern that the steel would heat up the plastic plant cells to the point that all the plants would die, or that the plants would never make it through the winter with the harsh winds at the site. None of it turned out to be true. I mean, it's a garden, so if you leave it alone, it's going to be full of what we call weeds. Irrigation is another piece. Without proper irrigation, the plants die immediately. Getting the water right is absolutely crucial, and it's an ongoing issue.

There are a couple of water systems embedded in the piece. First there is a pumping system that sends water through tiny emitters to every cell holding plant material. This water can be drawn from collected rain water or the municipal water source.



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The second system is that rain water is collected at the roof of the building in a steel pan that floats above the heritage wall. This water is primarily used to create "the running of the rivers"—a water flow pumping through all the rivers in the piece, through the galvanized steel veins that stand out against the corten backdrop. This water is collected and recirculated.

VT: What types of plants have you found to be most successful?

FS: We've found that sedums and moss survive best. The ones that are more compact are the ones that make it. I'd like to augment it with some thyme or even some annual herbs. It would be great to see gardeners and botanists explore new plant combinations that thrive in a living wall like this.

VT: Tell me more about the placement of the plants. Is there any reason why yellow sedum is in one spot and pink sedum in another?

FS: It's just my aesthetic. I find that the more variety and textures, the bigger the green wall looks and feels.

VT: In terms of the composition, what are the different materials you used?

FS: It's stainless steel above, then corten steel for the lower part, with lines that represent the major arteries of how we move through the city, which are brass and copper. Etched into the corten steel are the lost rivers of Toronto that are buried underneath our city.

VT: Tell us more about your experience working with landscape architects, and the process of integrating an artist into the design process. How can we make this work?

FS: This project lasted eight years and it transformed me. I'm not interested in going back and being an artist who makes things in an artistic vacuum. I'm interested in being an artist who is process oriented and integrated into larger processes and visions. I love the energizing experience of working with architects, working with interpretive planners, and working with programmers who engage the community.

I just heard of a commission in which the artist was the one who brought the landscape architect onto their team. We need



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to find ways to have processes that allow for creativity, that allow breathing space for something to emerge that's different. There's a chemistry that unfolds with art. I lived in Europe for a year and I found there they are willing to break down the categories of designer and artist and architect; the line is blurred in a wonderful way. You also have artisans helping to bring forward place in a way that really values what they're bringing in terms of their craft.

VT: Is there something about landscape architects in particular that you find affinity with?

FS: I'm interested in exploring how we connect to our environments, how places come to feel meaningful and inform who we are. Landscape architects are front line in constructing meaningful relationships to land and ecology, so for me the affinity cuts deep.

The relationship between architecture and landscape is also intriguing to me. I've been involved with Michael Leckman of Diamond Schmidt Architects on the new building at the Brick Works, working on the building skin that is still in development—conceptualizing the skin so that it has a functional purpose to cool the building in summer, but it's also a canvas for expression. There will be planter boxes that allow for vertical gardens and movable, changeable panels that Evergreen, the occupants of the building, and the community can work with. The architect is willing to give over the facade of his building in order to create that connection to community.

BIO/ TORONTO-BASED MULTI-DISCIPLINARY ARTIST FERRUCCIO SARDELLA SERVED AS ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE FOR THE EVERGREEN BRICK WORKS THROUGH THE CONCEPTION OF THE PROJECT AND REDEVELOPMENT OF THE SITE; IN THIS POSITION, HE PERFORMED IN A VARIETY OF ROLES—FROM PRODUCER OF PUBLIC ARTWORKS AND EXHIBIT DESIGNER TO ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN TEAM MEMBER AND INTERPRETIVE PLANNER.

VICTORIA TAYLOR, OALA, DESIGNS SPACES INFORMED AND INSPIRED BY CONTEXT, ECOLOGY, COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, AND SOCIAL AND HORTICULTURAL POSSIBILITIES.