

feature:

Haultain at Belmont's Corner Project

>> STACEY CURTIS

The name of the group is Haultain at Belmont, sometimes referred to as “The Corners,” and originally titled Haultain at Belmont Beautification Project. While the crew of 7 community organizers have shrunk their group’s title, their project to beautify the intersection has done the opposite: grown as tall as the trees they’ve planted and blossomed like the bulbs they buried.

“We started with guerrilla gardening—put bulbs under trees and planted flowers,” says Kay Marshall. In 2002 Marshall and her across-the-street neighbour Lisa MacDonell stared up at the grey, concrete corners and said “it looks pretty bare and run down. Surely we could do something.”

In 2004 Haultain at Belmont received a \$3,000 matching grant from the city. It took near a year to get the grant, but paying for plants and bulbs out of pocket was becoming an unrealistic expense. “Now that we’re an established group, the city works really well with us,” says Marshall. MacDonell notes that “people were very receptive once the bulbs [now donated from the Beacon Hill nursery] started coming up. They started chatting a bit more. It’s unbelievable the impact a few bulbs can have.”

The momentum the flowers ignited turned out to be just what the city ordered. “It’s our ongoing labour that [counts as] the match to the grant,” says Marshall. The funds purchased benches, bike racks and concrete flower planters.

Shortly after installing their own bike racks, Marshall came home to drilling on the Corners. The city’s Greenway program—a 50-year plan to create a Greenway corridor and link destinations through non-motorized transport—had been awarded extra funding. “Oh, it’s a gift,” the drillers said, turning to Marshall. “We heard about your project. Where would you like your extra bike racks?”

Other spirited gifts include a bench, donated from a local family in memoriam of their grandfather who liked sitting at the Corners, 3 plum trees (south-east corner), gifted from a family who was so touched by the revitalization that they wanted to contribute, and 2 bonus plum



Clockwise from top left: Julie Macdonell and designer Mila Czerny pose in Haultain Corners t-shirts; Koffi showcases its greener wares; new benches and cement planters frame the Haultain/Belmont intersection; tiles painted by residents add some life to standard cement garbage cans.

trees (north-west corner) the City threw in when planting the family’s gift.

Most recently, Haultain at Belmont was rewarded a \$25,000 matching grant. This summer they break ground to bulb-out the sidewalks and slow down traffic at no

cost to parking-space availability. “What we know from workshops we’ve been to,” says Marshall, “when there’s something to look at (the corners) and you narrow the space, traffic slows down.”

While the flowers, trees and benches

created the look and warmth to keep graffiti taggers away, Marshall notes that the project went dormant from ’05 to ’07; she greatly acknowledges Michael Manhas and Alan Pang of Koffi—part of Haultain at Belmont’s group of 7—for the



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project's new life. "The Koffi shop helped us create what we were starting—a place where people want to be. There's knitting groups, scrabble groups, baby groups. [It's] the heartbeat of Corners."

Two of Koffi's baristas/local artists have climbed on board, designing t-shirts that feature the Corners' signposts and the Mayor of the Corners: Dexter the Cat. T-shirts are available at Koffi and a portion of the proceeds go to the beautification fund.

With Haultain designated the official border between Fernwood and Oaklands, the group is eligible for support from both

communities; a gift they return. When Oaklands was awarded an art grant to build 7 linked montages of their community, Haultain at Belmont's crew created the historical story board on the south-east corner, complete with photos of rowboats paddling down Haultain Street in the 1935 flood.

When scheduling commitments permit, the steering committee organizes a 500-person block party, providing room for street hockey, a stage with live entertainment, pocket markets, a large bbq, kids activities and a dunk tank. In 2008 and 2009 kids, adults and even the mayor

Painted over 400 tiles, some of which can be seen on the Corners' garbage cans. "We call it guerrilla garbage canning," says Marshall. "The kids love it because they're right at eye level. They're all looking for their own tiles."

"The kids run the stations when we have community parties," says MacDonell. "We don't go to church but this provides what that old church used to provide: a sense of community, safety and being a part of something. My son will come back and say 'somebody just tagged the corners. They're quite protective of it.'"

The Corners collective is Lisa MacDonell,

Kay Marshall, Barb Donaldson, Jim Kerr, Heidi Graham, Alan Pang, Michael Manhas and each member of the Fernwood/Oaklands community that smiles at their beautified corners. "Looking back on it," says Marshall, "none of this would have been possible without starting with small changes. People began to see possibilities and that made it possible for all of this to have grown on its own. That's what growing community spirit [our motto] is about. It takes on a life of its own."

Walking Fernwood's Hidden Stream

>> DOROTHY FIELD

On Sunday, March 28th, a group of people involved in the Fernwood Community Mapping Project met at the Cornerstone to walk Fernwood's buried stream. Dan Doherty was our leader and guru, having traced its path by following dips in the landscape over a number of years. The stream, unnamed on the Lost Streams of Victoria map, flowed from Harris Lake which lay along Stanley between Vining and Grant. We decided to name it Harris Stream until we receive official word to the contrary.

From the Cornerstone, we walked to Pembroke and Stanley, down Oregon to Bay, along Garden, down Haultain to Cook, and then down Kings to Quadra. The stream bed flowed through what are now numerous private properties, but we avoided the temptation to traipse through backyards. We fantasize deputizing ourselves as official mappers next time, replete with badges and following the stream wherever it leads. Dan pointed out how you can look down a street and see the low spots where the stream once ran. We noticed the prevalence of willows, cottonwoods, and birch along the stream's route, a sure indication of water. Our stalwart

group drew attention from neighbours along the route. We chatted about the wetness of their basements, boggy areas, and stories of former duck hunters. They cheered on our endeavours as we forged ahead.

The original stream emptied into Rock Bay at the foot of Princess. We only went as far as Cafe Fantastico where we stopped for some welcome refreshment. The walk was a great way to get a better feel for the lay of Fernwood's land. The stream is now culverted underground as part of the city storm drain system which empties into Rock Bay. Unlike Bowker Creek, which is still very much in evidence and has been the focus of some wonderful stream repair projects, our stream's voice has largely been silenced, along with our lost oak meadows, camas fields and the pastoral past of Hillside Farm. Still, we had a sense we could hear it sing when we slowed down to listen.

The mapping project is still in its early stages. We have plans for other exploratory walks. Email Dorothy Field (dotted@seaside.net) if you have any natural landscape stories to share, or want to be involved in any way. We'll put you on the mailing list and keep you up to date.

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