

Landscape architect blooming over BAC courtyard garden



New garden. Haig Seferian, left, of Seferian Design Group and Burlington Art Centre executive director Ian Ross admire the surroundings during the grand opening of the new Burlington Art Centre Garden Gallery. *Michael Ivanin – Burlington Post*

Dennis Smith, SPECIAL TO BURLINGTON POST

July 21, 2011

Haig Seferian has learned to expect surprises — like firefighters arriving during the filming of the Burlington Art Centre garden project.

“We were in the middle of an interview when the fire alarm went off,” recalled the landscape architect.

“The fire department came. An odour sensor had picked up some fumes.”

He said an old water feature connected to a waste water line had clogged. But that challenge was overcome, as were others, such as melting the ice to work in wintertime.

The grand opening for BAC’s redesigned and revitalized centre courtyard garden was held last Thursday (July 14).

“At BAC, they’re solid now,” said Seferian in a telephone interview afterwards. “As long as they have a building standing, they’ll have a landscaped garden.”

His firm led the project, which includes a new water feature, a large tree, tidy groupings of plants and an accessibility ramp.

“It would be easy to make a spectacular landscape for BAC,” said Seferian. “But the point of the garden is to act as a backdrop for the art.”

When visiting before the opening, he saw a children’s class at the garden.

“They were sitting around the water feature and the instructor was telling them about art,” said Seferian.

"It was not getting used before, it was not very inviting to people. Now, every square foot is accessible."

The garden also has water recycling, plus systems for underground irrigation and night lighting. It started last November with discussions of concepts, followed by a detailed three-dimensional design.

BAC donors, the city and Seferian's firm were stakeholders in the project, which met BAC's \$60,000 budget.

He praised his staff and other participants, estimating the garden was done at one quarter of the actual cost.

His Burlington firm, Seferian Design Group, and other companies donated to the project.

"My Dad always said give back to the community," he recalled.

"It will come back to you in good karma."

Other recent donations include gardens for Carey House for the disabled and the Canada Blooms show.

A \$500,000 free landscaping job Seferian's firm did for Joseph Brant Memorial Hospital's rear exterior courtyard was also memorable.

He brought in students and instructors at Humber College (where he taught) to work there as part of their classes.

A swimming pool was found at the hospital and removed.

"We had 22 guys standing there wondering what's going on," recalled Seferian.

Other bizarre finds during projects included a huge steel oil tank at the Burlington Golf & Country Club and an automobile chassis at a private property.

Seferian's approach is to budget for a surprise and to coordinate all project phases. He oversees most work for his firm, which also does long distance and international projects.

"We deal with situations before they happen and as they happen," he said. "Landscape architecture is not just pretty drawings."

Seferian was named to The American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) Council of Fellows for 2011.

"It's like finding the Holy Grail," he said.

Seferian was praised by ASLA officials for his leadership and management, advocacy work and building beneficial community projects, plus teaching and mentoring.

"It's all part of giving back," he said. "I was very fortunate I had certain people mentoring me when I was growing up."

Seferian belongs to other professional associations, citing the education and insurance that they provide.

"The associations' importance is to set standards and give clients some recourse if something goes horribly wrong," he said.

Seferian said consumers should use association members for projects because they're accredited, insured and policed.

Get a contract and set a project schedule, he adds.

Seferian started his career after reading about and enrolling in the University of Guelph Landscape Architecture program.

"I started getting A's," he said.

"I was having so much fun, I didn't consider it work."

Seferian began working for Aldershot Landscaping in 1980 and opened his firm in 1992. He studied design at California Polytechnic Institute.

He lectures about landscape architecture and design, has hosted HGTV shows like Garden Architecture and written a book entitled Hardscaping.

"I have a tremendous passion for what I do," he said.

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