

Bruce Mau's northern exposure

By John Allemang
November 13, 2009

High design meets nickel mines as Sudbury's prodigal son comes home

For once, the oracle of modern design seemed at a loss for words.

"Getting a standing ovation was incredible, man," said Bruce Mau, sounding more like a humbled rock'n'roller than the celebrated visionary who counsels governments and corporations on the transformative power of innovation.

Coca-Cola, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Minister of Education for Guatemala, even the leaders of Saudi Arabia (who sought guidance on reorganizing the way pilgrims made their way to Mecca) - they've all found themselves listening to the measured phrasings of this Canadian thinker who reimagines the world from his base in Chicago's North Shore.

Design is a deeply cool pursuit that doesn't generally lead to outbursts of uncontrolled enthusiasm: It's hard to imagine the Saudi royal family giving a standing O to a daring new transportation blueprint.

But this time, in this city, it's different. Bruce Mau is an unlikely child of Sudbury, Ont. The miner's son who fled the Big Nickel 30 years ago because he couldn't chase his artistic dreams in a rough mining community has returned to face one of the most daunting tasks of his fearless career.

He's aiming to remake his rugged hometown into a place of creative culture - a city unafraid to face the future, to revitalize its downtown, to re-envision its extended cityscape as the A.Y. Jackson country it once was, to keep its young people from fleeing at the first opportunity and generally to embrace the Bruce Mau concept of Massive Change.

Unafraid to face the future? Sudbury has been a city in transition for decades, continually looking for the next new thing as the one-industry town turned into a sprawling city where only 5 per cent of the work force is employed in the mines. The all-ages crowd that thronged the candlelit student centre at suburban Cambrian College to hear him speak on Tuesday night couldn't contain its longing for a fresh way of doing things.

He seduces a crowd into sensing its own power

But Mr. Mau doesn't preach to the converted. His years of working the corporate world, where even a change in typeface can excite terror, have schooled him in the softening-up process. And now, as he looks to turn the sometimes self-serving principles of design toward social activism, he still follows this method of making people who fear change come to the realization that they are already open to it.

So he began by establishing his Sudbury cred, showing cute boyhood pictures - the future cosmopolitan designer on his trike and in his Boy Scout uniform. He talked about a typical kind of Northern Ontario childhood spent roaming the forests behind his home, inventing games to pass the day.

"I credit that for the way I think at work now," he said, a local-boy-made-good pointer to why Sudbury had to reconnect with the nature all around it.

While reflecting on his time as a canoe instructor in nearby Algonquin Park and acknowledging with hometown pride that "I'm one of the few designers who can put a moose in the freezer," he also took pains to make it clear that the values of international design and Sudbury weren't all that incompatible - both were fixated on massive change.

"A lot of people hear the word design and think 'expensive' and 'fancy,'" he said. "But that's not actually what it's about. It's about a capacity to shape the world."

And if the image of Sudbury has been defined by anything, he noted, it's the determined and methodical way in which the very Earth itself has been transformed. "Think of the amount of the world that has been moved to shape this place. ... Change is in Sudbury's DNA."

Mr. Mau has perfected this approach of sly assimilation, a method of overriding doubt by making skeptics and potential critics realize they have already reached the starting point for his bold new initiative, whatever it may turn out to be.

Moving rock to find nickel and relocating rail yards to make way for fresh urbanity do not, on the face of it, have much in common as enterprises. But it's in Mr. Mau's interests to explain why a change that seems audacious (his favourite word) has an equally bold precedent that everyone can recognize and accept. But the people in this crowd were already onside. It was almost as if they were trying to will him to move faster, to accelerate their future transformation before the long-suffering present could pull them back to its hardened reality.

As his soft, boyish voice diminished into silence after an hour of observations, affirmations and aphoristic pronouncements that can only be described as Mau-like, 500 people spontaneously stood up and made the noise of 5,000 - all of it directed at this playful stocky man dressed in international-designer black, the optimistic prophet from afar who had patiently told them why their city needed to change its ways and create the kind of beauty that young people such as the adolescent Mr. Mau believed could exist only somewhere else.

He finally takes a sentimental journey

"I'm generally not a sentimental thinker," Mr. Mau said afterward in the solitude of a nearby classroom, catching his breath for a few minutes while his wife, Bisi Williams, tried to track down a restaurant that could grill them a late dinner. "But on a personal level, it's very exciting to think about the possibility of contributing to a place you grew up in."

The Sudbury where Mr. Mau grew up is far different from the Sudbury he returned to, even if the restaurants still have a tendency to close much earlier than their Chicago counterparts.

The mines have shed about 25,000 jobs over the years and no one pretends this is still the namesake venue for Stompin' Tom's *Sudbury Saturday Night*, where the boys were always getting stinko and trying to forget Inco - now Brazilian-owned Vale Inco, which has been quietly suffering through a prolonged strike that doesn't resonate the way strikes used to.

"In the past," Mayor John Rodriguez notes, with what will have to pass for pride, "this would have been a prescription for creating a ghost town. Yet now, even with the financial downturn, the economy hasn't ground to a halt."

The moonlike landscapes that many out-of-date Canadians still associate with Sudbury's polluted past have been "re-greened," as the people like to describe their tree-planting, though the city's bare, black rock outcroppings still give it a wild, unapproachable look.

Government money has flowed in, diversifying the economy into education, health care and a huge tax centre, while the next-generation mining industry has developed an outlook that is much more global, or even cosmic - the drill bit made for Mars-exploration missions was developed at NORCAT, Sudbury's Northern Centre for Advanced Technology.

You can see clear signs of growth in the look-alike malls and big-box stores that stretch out toward the endless bush where many of Greater Sudbury's citizens find their peace in nature. But that has created a new set of problems, as the city's small downtown struggles to hold on to its quirky vibrancy.

The satisfaction that comes from forever widening and repaving arterial roads in an absurdly sprawling city of 160,000 - which is really just an administrative catch-all for a disparate collection of railway towns, mining towns and new-growth suburbs ringed around old Sudbury - turns out not to be nearly stimulating enough to make the next generation's Bruce Maus want to stay and seek their fortune.

So what do you do, if you want to retain some of the 5,000 students who are graduating each year from Sudbury's three postsecondary institutions, or transform the anxious traffic jams into light-rail utopia, or rethink the industrial rail lands that needlessly occupy much of the city centre, or simply generate enough pleasant pedestrian life to keep the downtown's overachieving boulangerie and state-of-the-art cheese store in business?

You call on Bruce Mau.

He throws himself in at the deep end

Which is how the indefatigable Mr. Mau came to exhaust himself on Tuesday, devoting 14 straight hours to meetings, workshops and lectures, immersed in Sudbury's creative discontent.

His official hosts were a group of activists, thinkers and enthusiasts known as Imagine Sudbury, whose starting point was a desire to shift the industrial rail yards out of the downtown - "the term we use is 'liberate' the rail lands," says Imagine Sudbury member David Wood, who describes himself in classic Sudbury geological terms as a rock engineer. "But once we got thinking about freeing up the rail lands, it was easy to think about going further in what we might do."

Bruce Mau is the man to call on when you want to exploit the big picture. Imagine Sudbury members were, through their work and their passions, pursuing other transformative projects - a new Northern School of Architecture, connected with Laurentian University, that would make its home in the downtown; restoring the light-rail lines that were once a feature of the city; and linking local companies into the Sudbury Mining Supply and Services Cluster, now recognized as the largest integrated mining cluster in the world.

Mr. Mau, with his combination of global experience, native-son expertise and brand-name charisma, is perfectly placed to turn the whole into something greater than the sum of the parts.

"Bruce is really good at articulating a profound definition of design so that it becomes a method of problem-solving," says Warren Berger, whose new book, *Glimmer*, focuses on the transforming nature of Mr. Mau's thinking. "He's got the designer's way of turning everything on its head and challenging all the old assumptions.

"Designers are also good at empathic research, at figuring out what people need, which is what Bruce will do in Sudbury. They're also skilled at visualizing the future in front of people, in rallying momentum by making people excited about the potential of what could be.

"And they understand what to do to bring about change - it's important not to do it all at once, but to do prototypes and build failure into the process. To solve big problems and make big changes, you do it gradually, you don't do it overnight."

But can the impatient activists and thinkers of Sudbury wait for Mr. Mau to do his research, develop his vision and sustain it with the ideas expected to flow out of a Mau-inspired Centre for Massive Change at Laurentian University, its most likely home?

The design world has a reputation for articulating lofty visions and imagining grandiose schemes that never quite make it beyond gallery walls, public displays and ingenious projects by unpaid student interns.

So far, Mr. Mau's most captivating idea, to judge from the respectful attention it has been accorded, is to imagine Sudbury as a city within a park - a way of giving nature its fair share in a place that contains an astonishing 330 lakes but is fixated on moving cars through road works.

But does that vision really correspond to Sudbury's true nature, or does it simply acknowledge the vast amount of Northern map space that the expanded municipality of Greater Sudbury now occupies?

"I found that proposal had a lot of resonance and created a lot of excitement," Mr. Mau said. "Do you know Alfred Hitchcock's concept of the MacGuffin, the plot device that moves the story forward? The city-as-park may be the MacGuffin that organizes all the other energy in Sudbury."

He added, "It's not necessarily the solution to every problem - the results we're seeking may be much more diverse. But it captures the imagination - look, it got 500 people to come to a lecture on design in Sudbury."

And to rise up in united ovation when it ended. But perhaps the 500 witnesses to Mr. Mau's performance were not just celebrating the hometown hero's return. Perhaps Sudbury's people were also applauding themselves, for inspiring a man who used to think such grand designs could happen only somewhere else.