

Toronto

COMMENT » PHILANTHROPISTS TEAM UP WITH GOVERNMENTS

Next stop: Platform to turn heads – even a Torontonians



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The train squealed loudly to a stop. A window in its side slid open to reveal a uniformed attendant. He leaned out and looked intently in one direction, then another, sweeping an authoritative gaze up and down the bustling platform.

"Whaddya think?" I asked. "I like it!" he replied.

The window slid closed. The train squealed off.

Other travellers paid less attention. Some looked up to wonder about the fuss at normally placid Museum Station, where dignitaries and camera crews jostled for their share of the new view at its official unveiling. Others stared ahead in classic Toronto style, dead-eyed and disengaged.

But even they won't fail to notice eventually. Sculptures of totemic bears, mummies and ancient warriors now line up impressively where bland tiled pillars used to be – two ranks of them, standing back to back, gazing balefully at the fast-passing modern world, northbound and southbound.

They make their greatest im-



The newly unveiled sculptures drew some glances yesterday at Museum Station. ASHLEY HUTCHESON FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

pression when reviewed as a corps from a fast-passing train. Up close, they are impersonal. The bright colours that animated the concept drawings darkened into shades of dun on the platform, the glitter subsided into purposeful epoxy. The station wall the new figures gaze upon is largely painted concrete.

They are silent witnesses to clever budget cuts. But their suffering only serves to ennoble them. Like magical beings trapped in a shabby cage, they are fatally charismatic. Avatars with attitude.

But they are also pioneers – not only the first fruit of a plan for thematic transformations of two other downtown stations connected with major

cultural institutions, but also a so-far unique example of an entirely new way of getting cool things done in Toronto.

The nearest precedent of the Arts on Track program that made over Museum Station was philanthropist Judy Matthews's contribution of \$1-million a decade ago to enable a design-led reconstruction of St. George Street as it passes

through the University of Toronto. Ms. Matthews and her financier husband, Wilmot, appear prominently in the list of donors who helped finance the station. But so do another dozen families, foundations and firms, including the foundation named for the late Budd Sugarman, the last unofficial mayor of Yorkville.

What was once freak – phi-

lanthropists joining with governments to make basic improvements to public spaces – is becoming normal. With Arts on Track, the Toronto Community Foundation has developed one adventurous donor's gambit into a whole new city-building process. Although the TTC and the province provided the lion's share of the \$5-million required to make over the station platform, nothing could have happened without the private money assembled by the community foundation.

"It's our first P3 – a public philanthropic process," TCF chair Rahul Bhardwaj boasted at the opening.

The only potentially controversial aspect of this kind of partnership could be its aestheticism – the bold proposition that lifting spirits by sharing culture is socially useful. But Arts on Track makes no apologies on that score. No gesture could be more democratic than making a big splash at a subway station through which hundreds of thousands of bored commuter pass every day.

"Public spaces say a lot about who we are," Mr. Bhardwaj said, "and this one didn't speak well."

Museum Station no longer trash-talks Toronto. Instead it glares forbiddingly. Culture is alive in the subway. Eye contact remains risky.