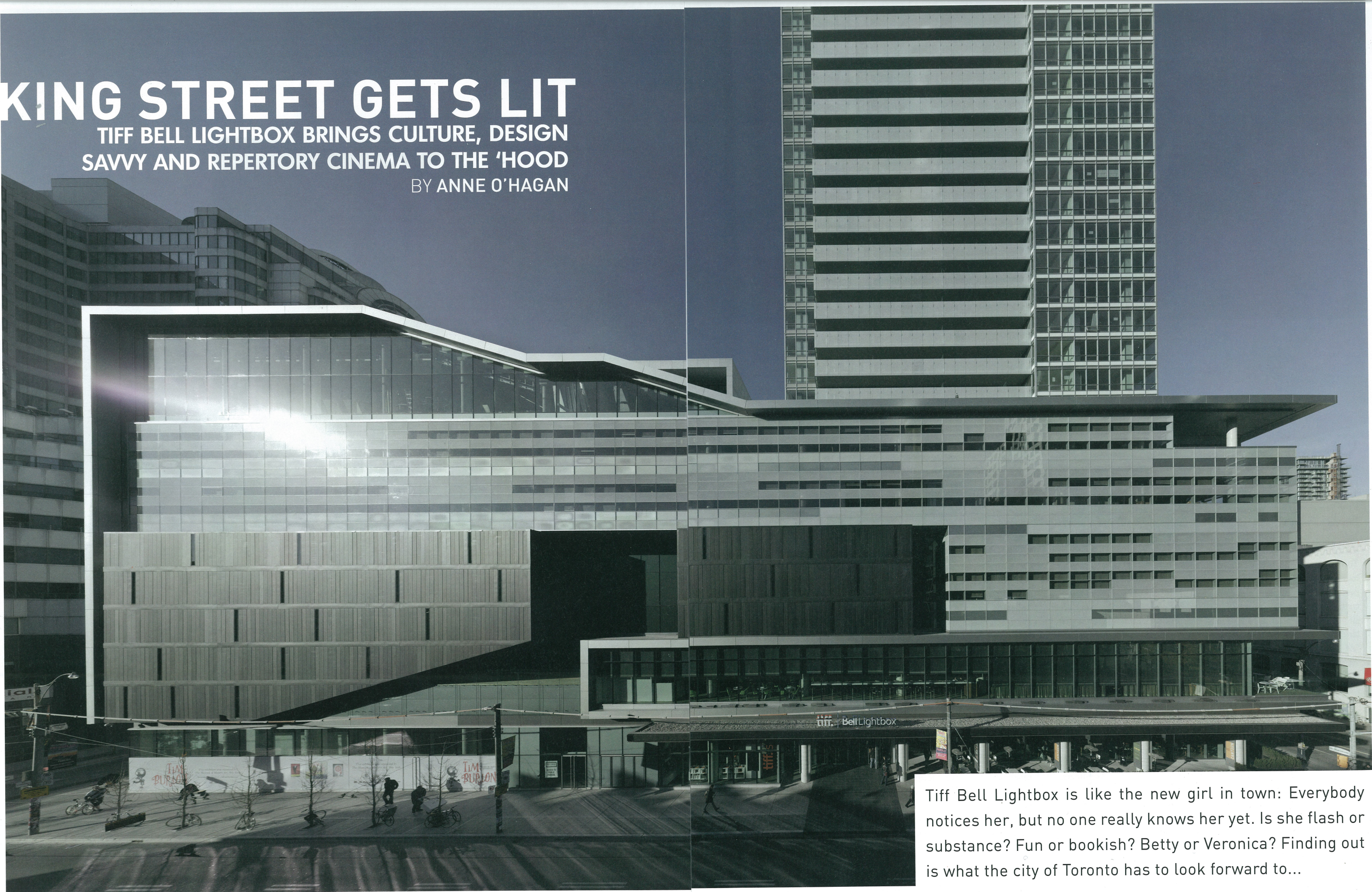


KING STREET GETS LIT

TIFF BELL LIGHTBOX BRINGS CULTURE, DESIGN
SAVVY AND REPERTORY CINEMA TO THE 'HOOD

BY ANNE O'HAGAN



Tiff Bell Lightbox is like the new girl in town: Everybody notices her, but no one really knows her yet. Is she flash or substance? Fun or bookish? Betty or Veronica? Finding out is what the city of Toronto has to look forward to...



O&B CANTEEN AND LUMA TAKE IT WELL BEYOND POPCORN

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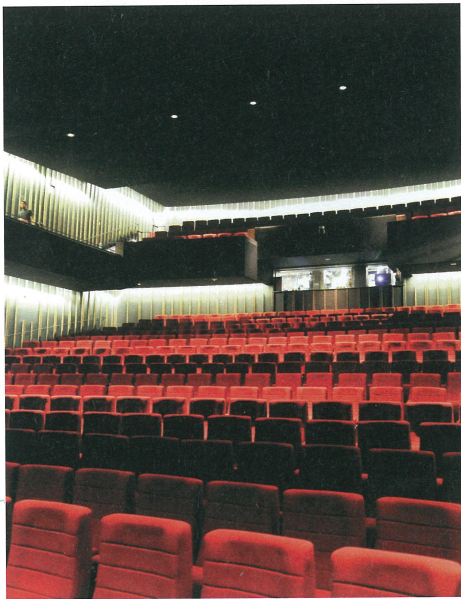
Of course, there are several constituencies of people who are already in the know: the city’s film cognoscenti, dedicated festival patrons, the inner circle and the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) board of directors who have struggled for a decade to get TIFF Bell Lightbox built, and possibly even the long-suffering merchants on King Street who have had front-row seats watching it come to life. During its annual 10-day juggernaut in September, the film festival’s red-carpet action would have also alerted the devotees of E Talk and the tabloid junkies that TIFF has a new home. And any resident of Toronto could hardly have missed its debut on September 12. Opening its doors to the public for the day, TIFF threw a street party with a performance by K’naan, a bouncy castle, free cupcakes and, for some, traffic headaches. But now that the party is over and the guests have all gone home, there are those who may still be wondering what just landed on King Street—and what the fuss is all about. “At its very core, it’s a movie house—a first-run movie theatre for artistically minded films,” says Noah Cowan, artistic director of TIFF Bell Lightbox. But just walk in the doors and it’s clear you’re a long way from the Carlton Cineplex. The five-story Lightbox may be TIFF’s new “home,” but it feels like a museum, functions like a gallery and offers five plush, state-of-the-art cinemas that double as musical venues, learning studios and multimedia platforms. It also houses, on its upper levels, TIFF’s assets that the public does not see: the Film Reference Library, industry archives and TIFF’s permanent staff. Thanks to its big-name architect, Bruce Kuwabara of KPMB Architects, TIFF’s new home shows like a spread in Architectural Digest. It also feeds and waters its visitors in style, thanks to local restaurateurs Peter Oliver and Michael Bonacini. There’s even some retail therapy. So while the Lightbox allows TIFF to extend festival-style programming year-round—a concept that isn’t hard to grasp—its broader, more high-minded mandate is not so neatly encapsulated. Nor is its journey to life. TIFF’s ambition to become more than an annual 10-day film festival

dates back 20 years when it took over the Ontario Film Institute (now TIFF Cinematheque). To develop its future audiences, and cultivate talent, the festival had to grow. And with that mandate, it launched the Film Circuit (a travelling mini-cinematheque that brings art and foreign films to smaller communities), added the Film Reference Library and the Sprockets Festival for Children. As a result, a sense began to develop by the late ’90s that there was a physical need—even “an urgency,” says Cowan—to put a roof over their heads. In his travels, long-standing TIFF director Piers Handling had visited the world’s venerated film centres such as the British Film Institute and the Film Society of Lincoln Center. But when it was time to get serious about developing the concept for a Toronto-based film centre, it was a collective effort. Cowan gives full credit to the TIFF board for carrying the torch through the years. It was very courageous of the board to take it on, agrees Helga Stephenson, a force on the city’s cultural scene who played key roles in the festival organization over a span of 14 years. Institutionalizing the festival was important to protect it, she adds, which hinged on an alignment of stars. It’s hard to imagine how destiny didn’t play a role in the creation of the Lightbox, now that it’s built and open. In fact, it’s a bit stunning: How did a Canadian not-for-profit cultural organization manage to pull off this feat? Not without overcoming obstacles—with fundraising at the top of the list. And yet in the 10 years since Handling and TIFF executive director Michèle Maheux began the process, they succeeded in rustling up enough support to develop a \$140-million facility and getting it built and opened in time for the 35th edition of the festival. Just like in the movies, it wouldn’t have come together quite so well without certain appropriately cast characters in leading roles. John Daniels is said to have written the very first cheque in support of the film festival. Now the patriarch of the Daniels Corporation, his firm stepped up to design and build both the Lightbox and the 46-story condo tower that sprouts up from it. And director-producer Ivan Reitman



“It feels like a museum, functions like a gallery and offers five plush, state-of-the-art cinemas.” }

PHOTOS: (PREVIOUS AND OPPOSITE PAGES) MARIS MEZULIS, (RESTAURANTS) ALLISON WOO



LIGHTBOX LOWDOWN

HOW TO ENJOY OUR CITY'S NEWEST CULTURAL LANDMARK:

FIND IT: 350 King St. W. [at John St.], 416.599.TIFF (8433)

BOOK IT: Box Office Hours: 10 am to 10 pm daily Pick up a programme guide. Or check screening times and order tickets online at tiff.net/tiffbelllightbox

CONSUME IT: Before, after or even instead of films, you can eat, drink and people-watch at...
 O&B Canteen – cafe and bakery / oliverbonacini.com/Canteen.aspx, 647.288.4710
 Blackberry Lounge – cocktails, light bites and a charger bar!
 Luma – reservations required, / oliverbonacini.com/Luma.aspx, 647.288.4715

SEE IT: Essential 100 Cinema

The 100 greatest films screened in the best cinema ever. For a complete list and showtimes: tiff.net/essential/about/essential100

Essential 100 Cinema Exhibition

From cinema artifacts (see Robert De Niro's actual cab license from *Taxi Driver!*) to specially commissioned sound and art installations, this permanent exhibition is essential viewing for film buffs. Free admission.

Tim Burton (until April 17, 2011)

A major exhibition of drawings, sculptures, maquettes, videos and sculptural commissions that firmly establishes Burton as one of the most important creative forces in modern cinema.



Tim Burton
Blue Girl with Wine
private collection

BUY IT: Film-themed gifts, books, DVDs, exhibition catalogues and TIFF special collections.

(*Ghostbusters*) and his sisters, whose family owned the old Farb's Car Wash at King and John where the Lightbox now stands, donated the land. In tribute, a short documentary film runs on a continuous loop on the ground floor of the building. It tells the story of the Reitman family's escape from the Nazis, their flight from wartime Czechoslovakia to Canada, their struggle and eventual success. Even in an art house, a touch of Hollywood-style symmetry doesn't hurt.

Dream big, build big—and in the case of the Lightbox, some say too big. In *The Globe and Mail*, Lisa Rochon was critical of the scale, calling it "King Kong on John," while on the street perplexed passersby ask whether it's not "a bit overblown for two weeks of the year." Architect Bruce Kuwabara says that's a "misconception" on various levels. Beyond TIFF's actual physical needs, which the design addressed, Kuwabara senses that the question is freighted in propriety. "Why does TIFF need a home? Well, why not? They earned it!" he says. And when you consider that TIFF generates \$170 million annually for the local economy, it does seem obvious. As TIFF's value to the city increases, so does its cultural relevance. It's very Toronto.

During the 20 years since the idea of a film centre was first floated around a TIFF boardroom table, the concept has morphed. It had to: trends emerge, technologies develop. In the '90s, as the film and art worlds grew closer together and film exhibitions started taking off, gallery space became an imperative. And one need only walk into the lobby of the Lightbox and look up at the large red-framed glass box seemingly suspended overhead to grasp the transformative power of technology. From this central command, every single moving image that appears in the building is controlled.

But technology will spare the Lightbox no downtime. "Staying ahead of the curve will be one of our biggest challenges," says Cowan (whose business card may read artistic director but who seems to be responsible for the facility's every moving part). So will growing its market. "Less of a love story than a marriage" is how Cowan describes the likely evolution of the Lightbox's relationship with its potential audiences.

"We're still working on ways to encourage Toronto's population to visit," he adds.

For Richard Florida, director of the Martin Prosperity Institute and a professor at the Rotman School of Management, that challenge isn't just about marketing. The author of *The Rise of the Creative Class and Who's Your City?* says that engaging new audiences among communities beyond the economically advantaged and culturally astute will be essential for the Lightbox. "It's not enough for cities to have opera, ballet and symphonies to stay vibrant," he says. "They need to be balanced with street-level culture." The Lightbox has the opportunity to "break down barriers," he says, because film, a young art, "navigates those two worlds."

Michael Budman, cofounder of Roots and a major donor to TIFF Bell Lightbox, would agree with Florida's view on the importance of developing non-elite audiences. He believes that while a city needs a strong cultural foundation, and visionaries and philanthropists to support it, the Lightbox must stay true to the festival's roots as a public event. "Torontonians have shown they love the festival and filmmakers love coming here for that reason," he says. "It's important to keep it that way."

If *Nuit Blanche* is any kind of an indicator, then it looks like the Lightbox will indeed be keeping it real. With close to a million people roaming the city in search of visual stimulation on the evening of October 2, the Lightbox made its post-TIFF debut featuring four distinctly different installations that drew a total attendance of 12,000. One of those, by the way, was a screening of vintage trailers for horror and exploitation films—in the programmer's words: "A cinematic celebration of the weird, the wild and the wonderful, balanced on the border between art and trash."

And that's about as close to trashy as the Lightbox will likely ever get. Airy and elegant, sophisticated and inviting, TIFF Bell Lightbox is the new girl worth getting to know. What is clear is that she has already made her mark on King West—and elevated Toronto's game. 🍷