



GREEN DESIGN AWARD

Branching out with privacy walls

Sound barriers made of willow trees take city prize for environmentally friendly design

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Tony Biglieri likes to put up walls.

He has built them all across Ontario, and he wants to expand their reach across Canada and into the United States. But instead of concrete, his walls are made of small willow trees, woven around two fence-like frames and rooted straight into the ground. The so-called living wall creates privacy around a property and blocks noise like any artificial barrier. Mr. Biglieri is the president of The Living Wall Inc., which last night won the Green Design Award, one of the Green Toronto Awards the city created in 2005 to honour environmentally friendly design. "I was just doing backflips," he said when he found out his company was a finalist. "I was phoning everyone."

An urban planner, Mr. Biglieri said he liked the idea of the living wall because noise pollution has a profound effect on quality of life.

"If you're in a noisy area and you walk behind a hill, the noise dissipates, right? That's what this does." With proper upkeep, the willows go from bare to leafy green in six weeks, and are able to survive like normal trees by their third year. A layer of soil is packed between the frames to absorb noise. Each wall has a surface area 14 times greater than the standard for noise barriers set by Ontario's Ministry of the Environment.

Living walls can also be built without the soil layer, for a fence with the aesthetic of a forest.

The idea was hatched more than two decades ago in Munich, where developer Karl Heinz Freitag designed the first living walls. The market in Germany quickly grew. When his colleague Josef Scholbeck moved to Canada 12 years ago, the walls seemed like an ideal match. "In my mind, Canada and concrete walls didn't really fit," Mr. Scholbeck said. "Canada is about nature and open space."

Mr. Scholbeck now runs the company with Mr. Biglieri and Mr. Freitag, who is still based in Germany. There are roughly 50 living walls in Ontario, including the longest one in North America. It extends almost 400 metres, dividing a Toronto subdivision from a TTC bus depot.

Murray Goldman, whose company Goldman Group built the subdivision, said he could not be happier with the result. "It shields the noise completely," he said. "Building it did not require any fossil fuels like a masonry wall, and it's much more restful."

The wall's 18,000 trees also suck up eight to 12 tonnes of carbon dioxide a year, Mr. Biglieri estimates.

The basket willows for the walls are grown at plantations in Ontario and upstate New York, and are installed by the company. Unlike messy weeping willows, they grow straight up and have non-invasive root systems.

Goldman Group wants to build more living walls. Mr. Goldman said he hopes they become a norm across the industry.

Mr. Biglieri is ready. Eventually, he would like to see living walls replace the unsightly concrete barriers that run alongside highways everywhere.