

Polka-dotted condos are for the birds

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Special to The Globe and Mail

Published Thursday, Apr. 10 2014, 11:34 AM EDT

Last updated Thursday, Apr. 10 2014, 6:29 PM EDT

Tiny dots, big difference.

Pedestrians breezing by the big glass walls of the new condo at 775 King St. W. don't seem to notice markings on the glass: one person who raps his knuckles to get the attention of a friend inside the drugstore looks right past them. If he thinks anything at all, it's probably: "Must be some sort of architectural feature."

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That's fine, because these little grey markers aren't designed for people – they're for the birds.

Every year between March and May and again in late summer/early autumn, migratory birds passing through our city meet their demise. Brian Banks, writing in Ontario Nature magazine, estimates that "one- to ten-million birds [are] killed every year in Toronto due to collisions with buildings and other structures."

And while the "Light's Out Toronto!" awareness campaign – which, since 2006, has encouraged building owners, tenants and private homeowners to turn off unnecessary lights to allow birds proper navigation – has been successful, nighttime confusion isn't the only problem.

Michael Measure, who co-founded FLAP (Fatal Light Awareness Program) in Toronto in 1993, and has seen similar organizations pop up all over North America, began to notice a 24/7 trend in the late-1990s. "We noticed that when we were doing our predawn patrols that if we stuck around after daybreak there would be another wave of activity that would happen, and the longer we stayed the more birds we picked up."

This second wave of collisions, he explains, is caused by reflections of trees and other vegetation in the city's myriad glass walls; moving from tree to tree, birds stopping over to refuel on

Toronto's insects find out too late that some leafy perches are just a mirage. And, he continues, these fatalities are happening much closer to the ground, from a meter or two above the sidewalk to about 12 metres.

“So you do not have to be a 50-storey structure to take large numbers of birds' lives.”

Clearly, something needed to be done. In 2005, FLAP had collected enough data to bring a notice of motion to Toronto city council. Meant only to educate, the motion went further when two councillors in particular, Glenn De Barermaecker and Joe Mihevc, “took the issue under their wings, so to speak.” Soon afterward, a “bird-friendly” working group was created and tasked with producing voluntary guidelines for building owners.

“You have to do something that causes the bird to realize it's not a fly-through; you can put lattices, scrims, netting,” says John Robert Carley, the only architect at the table in 2005. “People ask me why this wasn't a historic problem. Well, first of all, we didn't have curtain walls of glass in the past; [they] were broken up with brick, so that would mitigate it, but any window that was operable usually had a screen on the outside, and a bird would perceive a screen.”

Released in March, 2007, the guidelines suggested application of a laminate with a simple, opaque pattern placed close enough together to disrupt reflections on glass balcony enclosures, windows, or shiny spandrel panels up to treetop level, or 12 metres. Other solutions, such as stripes or, for new construction, placing panes at various angles, were offered as well.

Some of these guidelines were folded into the Toronto Green Standard (which includes energy efficiency, green roofs, etc.), which took effect in January, 2010, making Toronto the first city to take direct responsibility for our feathered friends. Planning applications must comply with the TGS, and developers can choose to go beyond mandatory “tier one” compliance to optional tier two (which specifies an even tighter pattern that rises to a height of 16 metres) that could, in future, result in a reduction in their development charges, according to City of Toronto environmental policy planner Kelly Snow.

Since the time from application to completed project is measured in years, buildings with bird-friendly markers are only now appearing on our streets; while we'll likely see dots like those at 775 King West, Mr. Snow says that, eventually, “as people become much more comfortable with the concept ... there will be a lot more creativity incorporated into the designs.”

And since Toronto is already a leader in this field, creativity will likely happen here first. Mr. Carley, a birdwatcher as well as an architect, says an older building, 33 Yonge St., has just been retrofitted with “stripes and photos” (I found the venetian blind-inspired stripes, but the only “photos” were at sidewalk level – silhouettes of bulrushes – that might not be dense enough to pass muster).

Which brings up an interesting point: while great to have new buildings in compliance, how to convince the owners of existing buildings to participate? In May, the city, in partnership with

the Building Owners and Managers Association, will announce a bird-friendly retrofit award, which Mr. Measure thinks will be quite effective. “I know from experience that these awards are very competitive.”

Mr. Carley suggests it could work well for office building owners, who will “advertise it, and tenants will like it,” but both men agree that condominiums are a challenge.

“Anything that we offered they felt threatened the architectural integrity of their buildings,” Mr. Measure says.

But perhaps early-riser condo-dwellers will grow tired of playing undertaker and ask their boards to take action.

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Editor's note: The print edition and an earlier online edition of this story contained an error of fact concerning a recent Ontario Court ruling. The original story stated that the Court, "found Cadillac Fairview guilty of 'certain regulatory offences' that resulted in migratory bird deaths at the Yonge Corporate Centre." In fact, Ontario Court Justice Melvyn Green acquitted Cadillac Fairview of all charges, ruling that the company had committed the offences but had exercised due diligence in addressing bird deaths. This online version has been corrected.

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