

'Little scribble' grew to big idea

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How does an artist come up with the idea to make a sculpture that looks like a giant scribble? That won a \$1 million public art competition? That will swirl around a little historic school house in Calgary ?

Are you scratching your head?

If so, Micah Lexier can talk about this.

Lexier's proposal for a sculpture called Half K, made of 500 metres of 12-inch metal pipe that will twist and swirl around and over the old Bungalow School building on 12 Avenue S.W., was revealed Thursday as winner of the Arriva Public Art Competition, held by the Torode Group of Companies.

The artist conceived the sculpture as "a giant scribble," a line drawing in the air, that came to him in the middle of the night, when the seemingly simplest flash of insight can be the most brilliant. He drew it in 30 seconds.

The backstory goes something like this. Lexier sent his qualifications to the Arriva competition in September 2007, was shortlisted with four other artists, flew to Calgary to look at the site in December and went home. He was living in New York then, though he returned to Toronto this spring after nine years away.

"It's funny, this happens often," the 47-year-old conceptual artist says. "I'll find out about the site and the context and an idea will pop in my head. I had one idea I was kind of working with and when I got to the site I realized that it wasn't possible. I thought there was a plaza and there wasn't a plaza.

"When I came back from the trip, I remember it was like a problem-solving thing. It's like, 'OK, there are six buildings on the site, there is little space for a work, but it's a large budget, they want a large piece.'

"How do you make a large piece for a site that's already very busy?"

When construction at the Arriva site is completed, the full city block will be occupied by three highrise residential towers, a podium and two renovated heritage schools. Half K will be fabricated and installed within the next two years.

Lexier's first thought for his 12th public art commission was to make the work stand tall. "But you could never go as tall as the buildings," he says. "This is the highest residential building in the city.

"So I couldn't go for tall, but there also wasn't a big footprint so I couldn't go for wide or substantive, either. Then it occurred to me that I could go up into the air, touch down and go into the air."

He was stopping over in Toronto on his way to New York when the idea came to him.

"I love a good problem," Lexier says. "I couldn't fall sleep. I was laying in bed and it just occurred to me. I jumped out of bed and I did this drawing on some renderings they had given us of the site, taken from a few blocks away and maybe a building high. I made this little scribble in space above the Bungalow School building."

Lexier moved on and discarded many more ideas, but the scribble in space stayed in his mind

"It's so close to what I finally proposed," Lexier says. "Scale was the big issue for me. I wanted to do it at a scale that would have an impact on the site. Since I couldn't go for height, I went for length."

If the scribble's tangles were ironed out, Half K would be a line that stretched for blocks and blocks.

Scribbles have had a place in Lexier's work since at least 1995, when he began the ongoing series, *A Minute of My Time*. The works in the series embody the period of time, one minute, that the artist spends making an automatic drawing. Some of these drawings have been turned into wall works or sculptures by greatly enlarging the linear images and fabricating them in laser-cut steel. Lexier's Calgary dealers have shown them at TrepanierBaer Gallery.

"I knew I wasn't going to make *A Minute of My Time*, but I knew I liked that imagery, the idea of the casual mark that everyone can relate to, that everyone's made, but on a scale that could function on the site."

All of the buildings on the Arriva site are at different heights, from the lowest, the Bungalow School; to the Victoria Park School, which is a floor or two higher; to the podium; to the 34-storey highrise tower, which is built and occupied. The two towers now under construction will each be 43-floors high.

Given the varying building heights, Lexier decided to relate his work to the smaller of the two school houses, because it had the most human scale.

"You see the line in relation to the building, which really gives it scale," he says. "Like a lot of my work, it's about context. If you just had the sculpture without the building, I think it would be a lesser sculpture."

School and the idea of being a student has also been a constant subject of Lexier's work. It goes all the way back to his first body of work, which he showed in Calgary at The New Gallery in the 1980s, and is key to a new project he did at an Ontario high school at which 1,334 students each hand wrote one word of the text of a 1,334 word story by Colm Toibin, which Lexier commissioned from the prize-winning Irish novelist.

"Not to get too corny about it, well, I will get corny about it: the idea of a school -- I mean life is a kind of school -- a school is a really poignant and powerful image. But at the same time, I'm interested in casual mark making. The scribble is what we all do as we're spilling time onto paper, wasting time.

"Many a scribble has been made in a school while the teacher is droning on. So there was a nice connection there."

Half K will touch the ground around the school house at about six points and rise to heights of 15 metres to 23 metres. It will weigh about 45 tonnes. Lexier's next step will be working out structural issues with an engineer and talking to fabricators.

It will take a lot of doing to execute a work that signifies the momentary, intuitive, casual marks made by a restless or daydreaming child or a bored grownup. The scribble might recall time past and every child who ever went to the historic school, or the marks you made today in the margins of your to-do list.

Most of all, Lexier wants the sculpture of this familiar image to function totally as a sculpture that engages the viewer at street level, looks intriguing from a distance and is beautiful from above.