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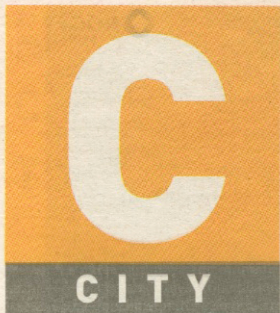
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## I ♥ TO?

A New York agency has been given the task of summing up our city in four words, tops **BY NICOLE COHEN**

The Toronto Branding Project chose a Tuesday morning earlier this month to publicly launch their mission to uncover Toronto's identity. Members of the theatre and performing arts communities, along with a handful of bystanders, gathered at Metro Hall Square to watch the unfurling of a green and white banner that asked, "What is your vision for the future of Toronto?"

It was the first question of We Are Toronto, the seven-week public consultation component of a \$4-million campaign to brand Toronto and sell it to the world. The plan is to ask Torontonians a series of questions about the city and figure out the essence of Toronto.

Here at Metro Hall, actors, dancers and theatre directors are sharing their vision of Toronto as a centre for the

performing arts. They want arts and culture to be a part of all Torontonians' daily lives. They want to see more plays open in the city. They want support for local performers and artists, and dream of arts being on par with sports in terms of popularity and promotion.

To wrap things up, Sharon and Bram (of Sharon, Lois and Bram) launch into an a capella version of their trademark rendition of "Skinnamarink," hand gestures and all.

Is this what Toronto is all about?

Over at the Frank Gehry-designed office of marketing agency TBWA\Toronto, at the foot of Spadina Avenue, Dave Nourse reclines in a boardroom and talks about branding as an exercise to uncover Toronto's soul.

"Branding is more than a logo and catchy slogan; we have to come up with something that's true to what the soul of the city is," says the account manager, who is working with New York firm Brand Architects International (BAI) on the Toronto end of the project. Nourse speaks in marketing metaphors.

"Branding is like a box of pearls," he says. "You're trying to draw a strand through all those pearls to keep them together. That's what we're trying to do, find out what that thread is that links what is Toronto."

Toronto has had marketing campaigns before ("You Belong Here," or "A World Within a City"). But never before has it been coherently packaged as a brand that nailed down the identity of the city in a synthesized message that can be transmitted to the world. And to sell a so-called world-class city as a tourist and business destination, it needs, apparently, to be branded. As Robin D. Rusch, editor-in-chief of brandnanni.com, writes, "From Singapore to Spain,



Estonia to Saudi Arabia, it seems the unbranded state is no longer worth living in." Hong Kong has branded itself as "Asia's world city." Johannesburg branded itself as Joburg to present a world-class image. Tourism dropped when Las Vegas tried to brand itself as something other than sin city, and so now, once again, what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. Cities such as New York and Paris have become their own brands. But all previous attempts to define Toronto have come to the same conclusion: our disparate, diverse city is hard to define.

"We haven't nailed it in terms of what one particular area is or will be, but our job is to try to find out what the DNA of Toronto is," says Nourse. "We're trying to basically uncover the truth. It's not like we're trying to reinvent Toronto, but there's a truth that exists out there, and our job is to find it."

The project is a partnership of the city, the province, Tourism Toronto and the post-SARS Toronto03 Tourism Recovery Alliance. The brand will launch in early spring, 2005, in time for the summer tourist season.

So far they've consulted with community leaders such as David Mirvish, Mayor David Miller and various city councillors. The Branding Advisory Committee includes the Toronto International Film Festival's Piers Handling, youth advocate Kevin King and director and CEO of the Royal

Is there a strand that ties all these bits together?

Ontario Museum, William Thorsell. "We've undertaken huge Toronto-from-the-inside-out research," says Bruce MacMillan, president and CEO of Tourism Toronto.

Despite holistic talk about uncovering Toronto's essence, the goal of this brand is to lure American tourists back to the city. The tourism industry has recovered from the \$500-million loss when SARS hit in 2003, but US business is still down. Toronto went from 18.2 to fewer than 16.9 million visitors to the city each year since 2000, which MacMillan estimates represents a \$2-billion loss. And with 150 million Americans living within a two-hour flight of Toronto, the US is a prime target for the new brand.

"We're checking extensively in the US market to make sure that the brand we're creating is compelling enough to bring Americans back," MacMillan says.

This month, interviews were held on both coasts of the US and in London, UK. It turns out Americans and Britons have very different impressions of Toronto. According to Nourse and MacMillan, Americans have an impression of Toronto and Canada as being full of lumberjacks and curlers. For most, the multicultural aspect of the city does not register. The people interviewed equate Toronto with an

unremarkable Midwestern American city. Many viewed Toronto, the most urban of Canadian cities, as the gateway to the great outdoors. Europeans, on the other hand, view Toronto as a sophisticated, safe, non-American city where they feel at home. This discrepancy is a problem for branders.

"If two audiences think differently of you, that identifies a problem," Nourse says. "You're not branding yourself consistently. We try to be too many things to too many people."

City or country brands are experiential, designed to deliver a vague promise of a particular experience. Vancouver plays on its geography. Montreal tried to capture the city's joie de vivre and the excitement and romance of French culture.

"Montreal has a very good brand," MacMillan says. "They've been working at it for six or seven years, and it's called Life... à la Montreal. It's a very strong brand that reflects French culture. They've had a funding structure in place; we finally got ours in place [in Toronto] this year. We're trying to make up for lost time."

Carlos Tribino, general manager of BAI — which has branded, among other things, Australia — flew here from New York for the unveiling of the first question. He's in the city

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### TORONTO, IN FOUR WORDS OR LESS (OR MAYBE A LITTLE BIT MORE)

We sent our crack team of reporters out to find out what people on the streets think Toronto's essence might be.

"Not so boring anymore."  
— France Paquet, East York.

"A more homey New York."  
— Tamara Brady, Yonge and Lawrence.

"Gateway to the Great White North, eh!"  
— Pete Kernaghan, Leaside.

"There's always something exciting to look at."  
— Amy, Cabbagetown.

"Open-minded communities, multicultural, reasonable compared to the United States. (And I hope they don't use the words 'world-class city')."

— Sherri Henderson, Burlington.

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often, and has noticed two prevailing attitudes.

“We see there is a little bit of discontent from some people,” he says. “But this is not a static city. We see forward thinking, excitement about the new ROM, the AGO and the Opera House.”

He’s noticed Toronto’s concentration on the downtown core, and has been trying to get a feel for other parts of the city, such as Scarborough and North York. And he’s picked up on themes that may work their way into Toronto’s brand.

“Diversity is quite unique and accentuated in Toronto,” he says. “This is an innovative and creative city, but not just artistically. People have a creative way of thinking. Also, the level of humanity is rather unique to find in a city of this size. There is something about the level of tolerance, civility. You just don’t see that quality in other cities of this dimension.”

And it’s on that platform the brand architects plan to build Toronto’s brand. ■