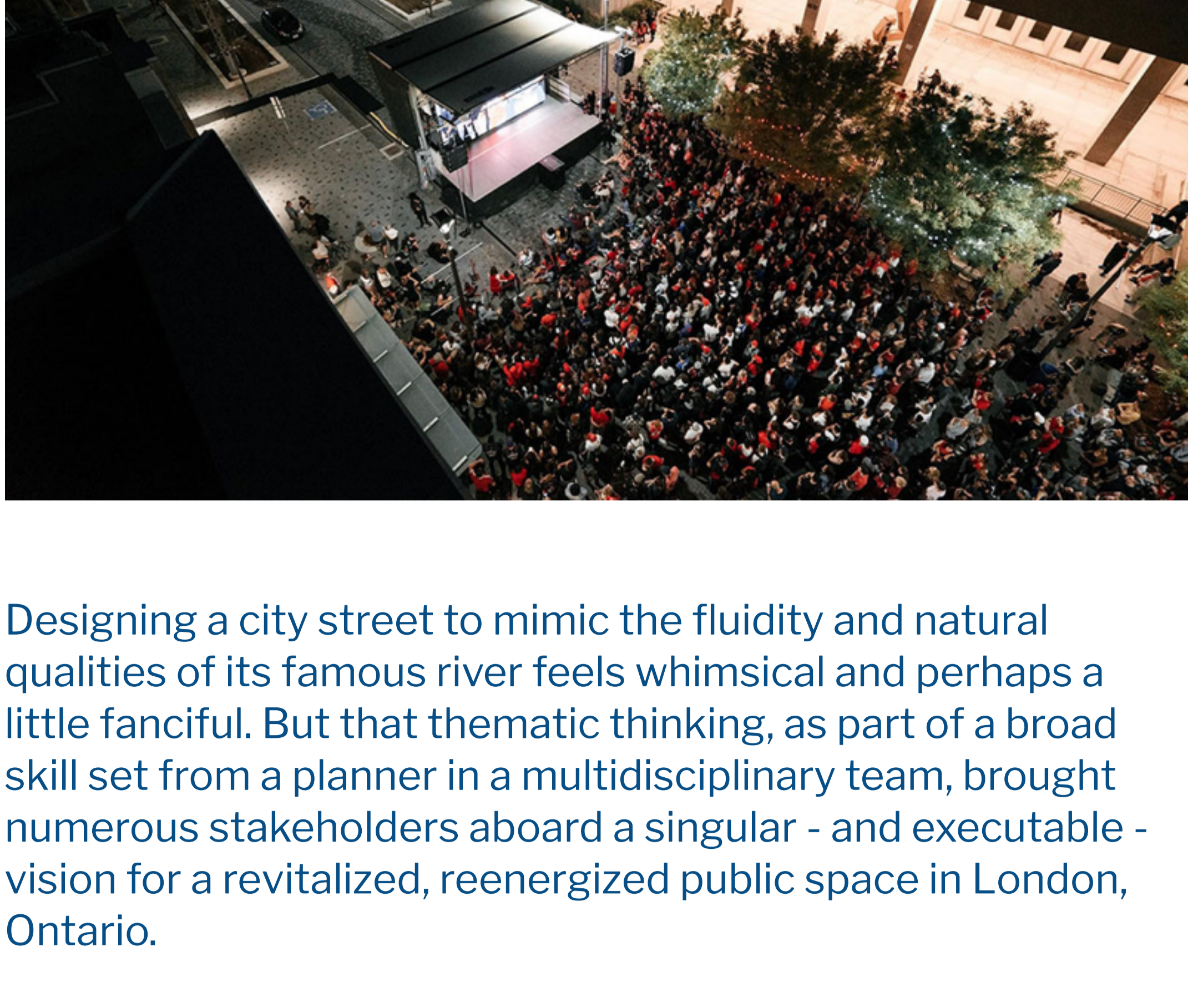


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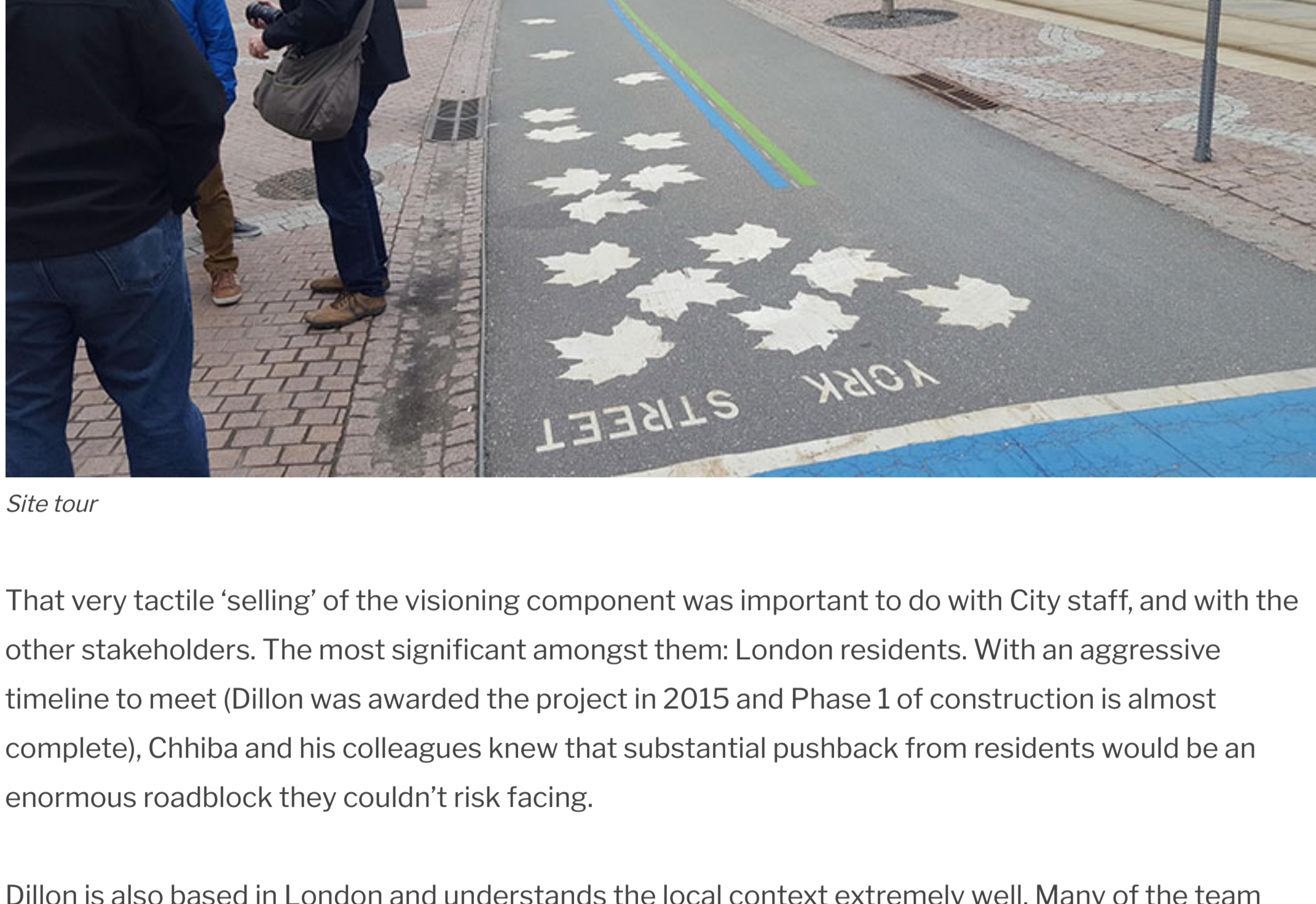
## DUNDAS PLACE: SHAPING AN INSPIRED VISION INTO A TANGIBLE SPACE.



Designing a city street to mimic the fluidity and natural qualities of its famous river feels whimsical and perhaps a little fanciful. But that thematic thinking, as part of a broad skill set from a planner in a multidisciplinary team, brought numerous stakeholders aboard a singular - and executable - vision for a revitalized, reenergized public space in London, Ontario.

There was an opportunity here to get into detail design earlier than other, similar projects would allow, as the City had identified the Thames River as a key geographical and historical feature to incorporate into the project. Chhiba and team could see that an aesthetic, thematic connection to the Thames River could be worked out in a very tangible way, from the undulating shape of the river into the paving stones within the street itself.

“We encouraged the City to have a series of workshops to help identify the theme and that required some investigation on what could be built, how it would be built...it was quite an interesting exercise,” says Chhiba. “We took City staff on tours of Toronto and Mississauga sites like Queen’s Quay and Streetsville [for a comparative experience]. We went to the actual unit paving manufacturer in Georgetown, so they could demonstrate how they would lay out something much more dynamic, in the four city blocks, as opposed to someone’s backyard pool. Educating ourselves on the practices and limitations of construction helped us stay connected to the project as planners and designers.”



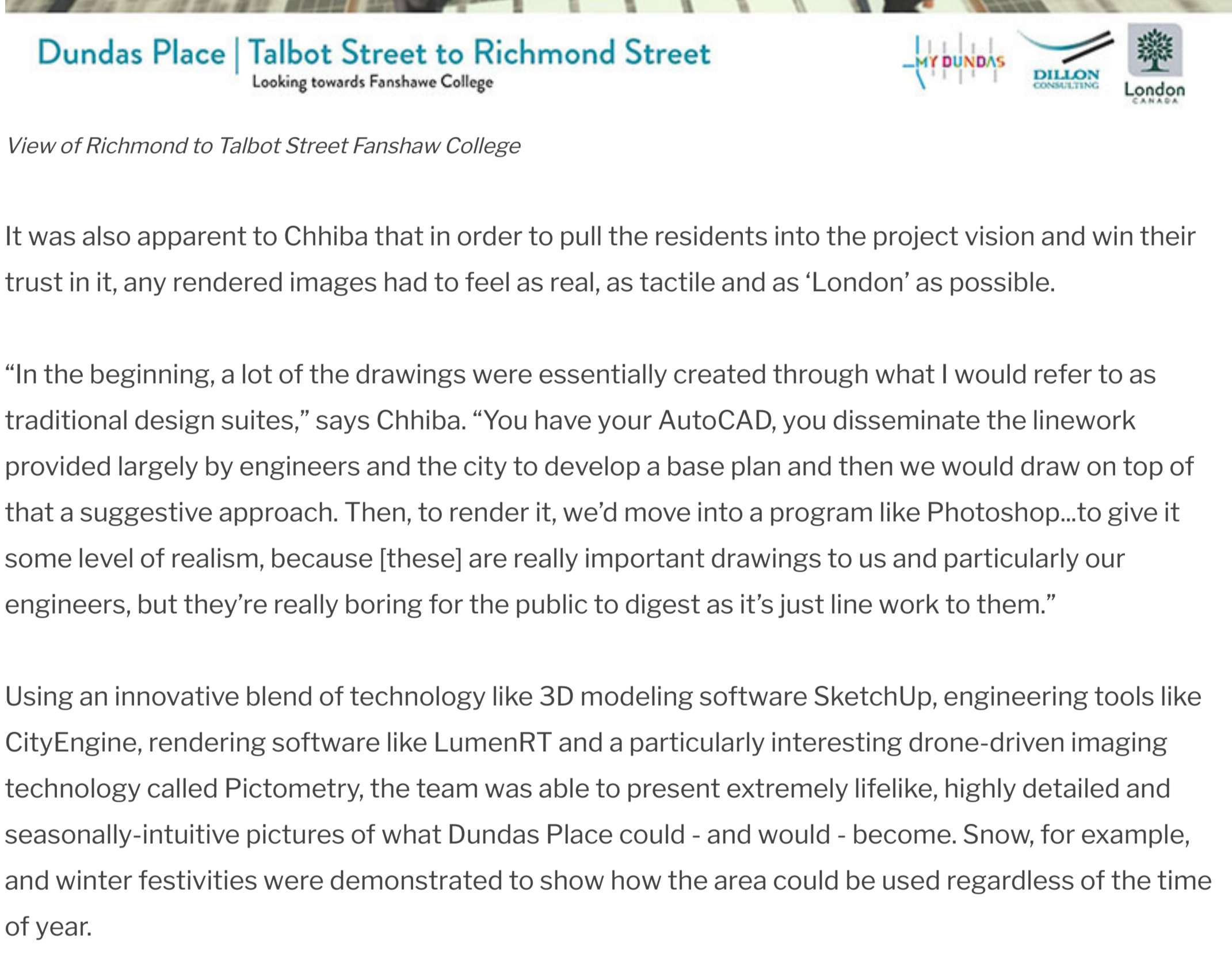
Site tour

That very tactile ‘selling’ of the visioning component was important to do with City staff, and with the other stakeholders. The most significant amongst them: London residents. With an aggressive timeline to meet (Dillon was awarded the project in 2015 and Phase 1 of construction is almost complete), Chhiba and his colleagues knew that substantial pushback from residents would be an enormous roadblock they couldn’t risk facing.

Dillon is also based in London and understands the local context extremely well. Many of the team members work, live and play within the Downtown daily. Dillon’s local presence played an important factor in balancing change for residents and stakeholders, considering that “change could be hard thing for them to take on.”

While a more walkable, more interactive public space was what the city desired and its residents had expressed as being greatly needed during the development of London’s ‘Our Move Forward: London’s Downtown Plan’, bringing it to fruition would require a shift in things like bus routes, and any closing down of the Dundas corridor during construction would put stress on local businesses. As Chhiba summarizes it, a project of this nature “is dramatic...It has major aesthetic and atmospheric impacts to the space [and] getting over that hurdle is really hard to do.” Chhiba and team took a two-step approach to winning over the London community beyond mere acceptance of the project, but to a point of excitement, engagement and pride in Dundas Place as a civic project.

The team also included the Downtown London Business Improvement Area association (Downtown London). The ultimate vision was a result of collaboration between the City, Dillon and Downtown London. Downtown London later acted as key communication bridge between local business owners and the wider team, helping to build the discourse and ultimately improve the project through this process. Working with the City and Downtown London, a marketing campaign was rolled out that included media like billboards to indicate “exactly what was happening, and how long it would take and the vision - always reminding them that there’s a vision behind this, and it should look like X afterwards, to get people excited,” says Chhiba. Ultimately it was Downtown London who helped reassure local business owners along the corridor that over the two-year build, “everything is business as usual and the phasing of all of this will not prohibit [customers] from accessing businesses on Dundas.”

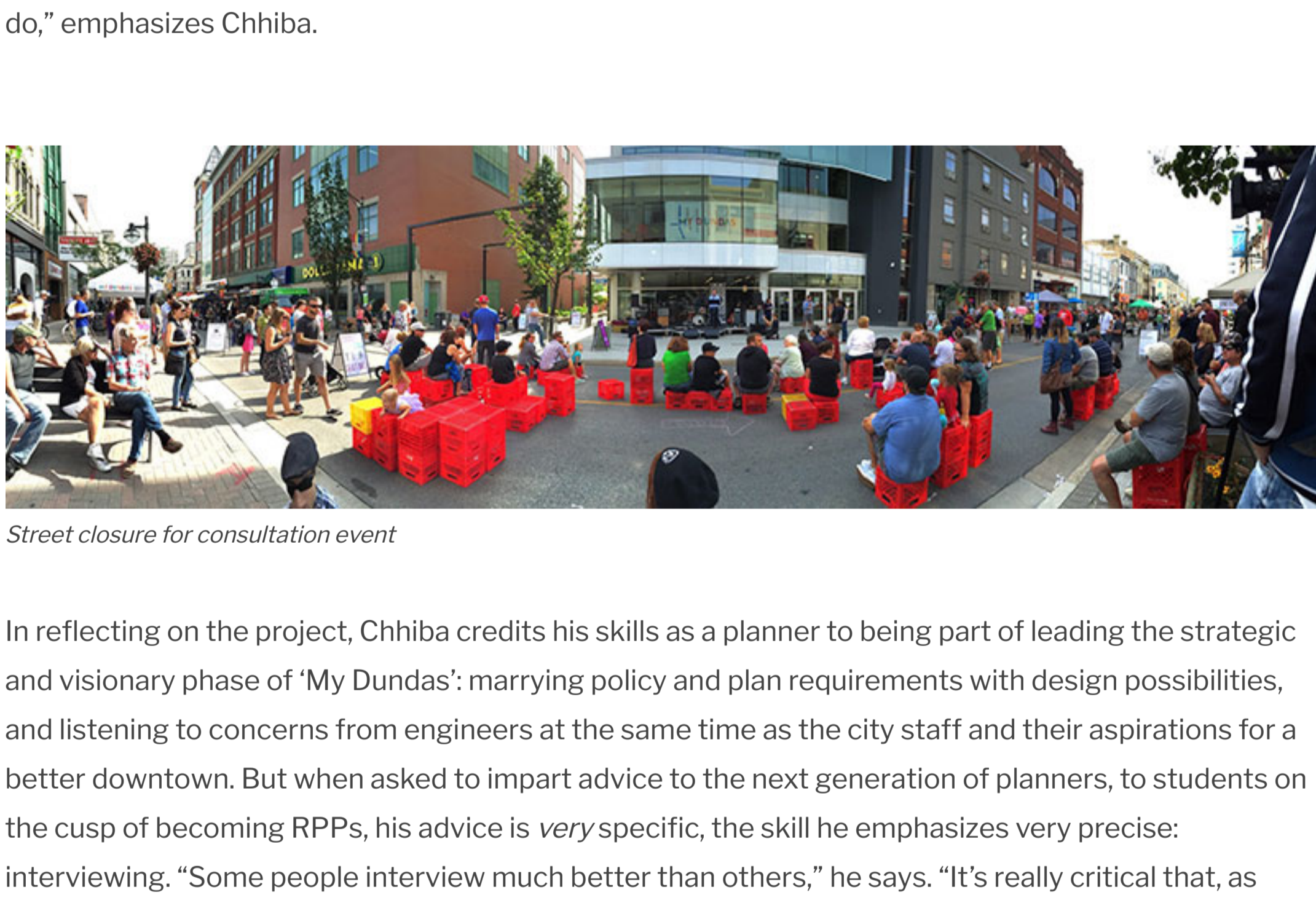


View of Richmond to Talbot Street Fanshawe College

It was also apparent to Chhiba that in order to pull the residents into the project vision and win their trust in it, any rendered images had to feel as real, as tactile and as ‘London’ as possible.

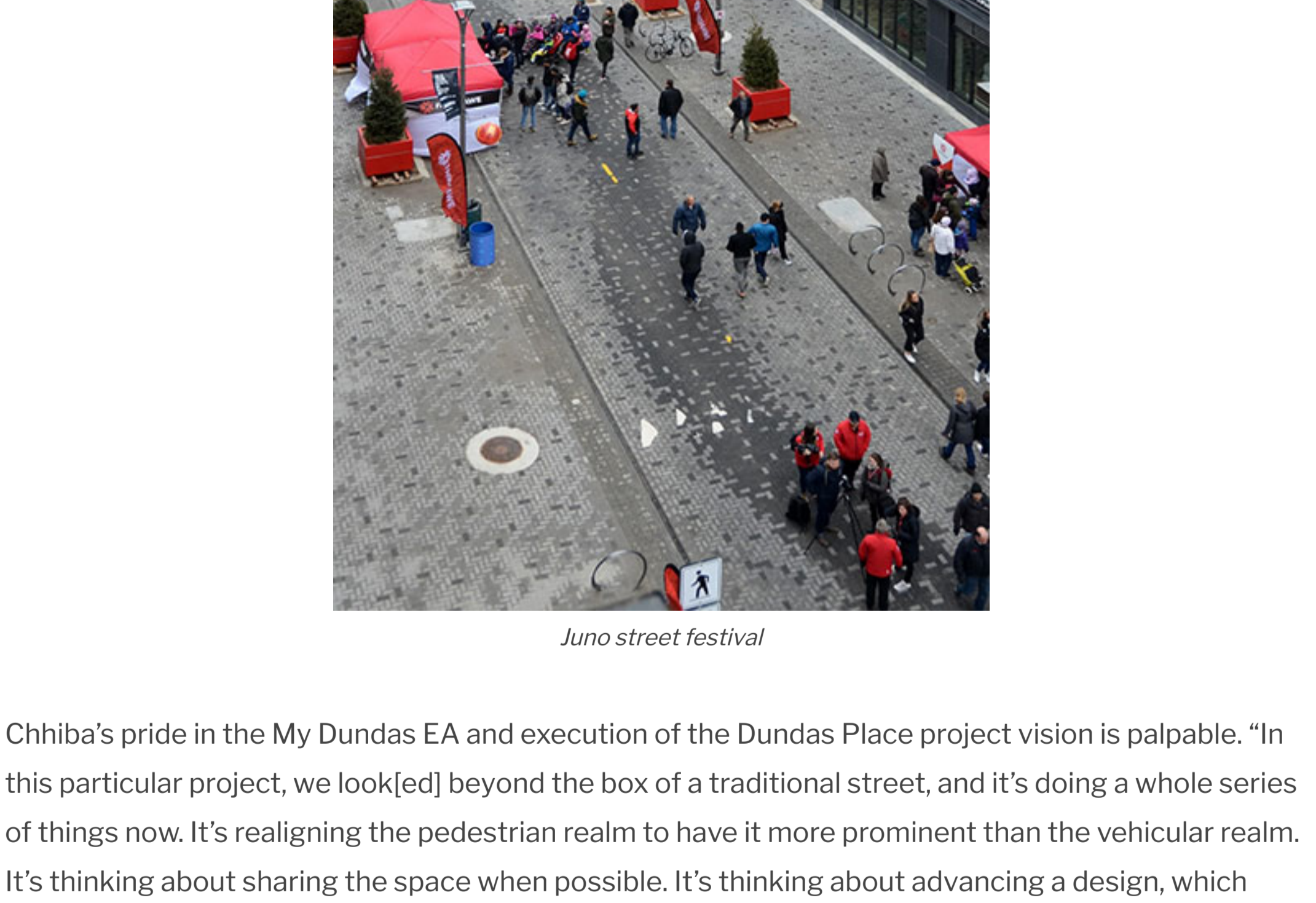
“In the beginning, a lot of the drawings were essentially created through what I would refer to as traditional design suites,” says Chhiba. “You have your AutoCAD, you disseminate the linework provided largely by engineers and the city to develop a base plan and then we would draw on top of that a suggestive approach. Then, to render it, we’d move into a program like Photoshop...to give it some level of realism, because [these] are really important drawings to us and particularly our engineers, but they’re really boring for the public to digest as it’s just line work to them.”

Using an innovative blend of technology like 3D modeling software SketchUp, engineering tools like CityEngine, rendering software like LumenRT and a particularly interesting drone-driven imaging technology called Pictometry, the team was able to present extremely lifelike, highly detailed and seasonally-intuitive pictures of what Dundas Place could - and would - become. Snow, for example, and winter festivities were demonstrated to show how the area could be used regardless of the time of year.



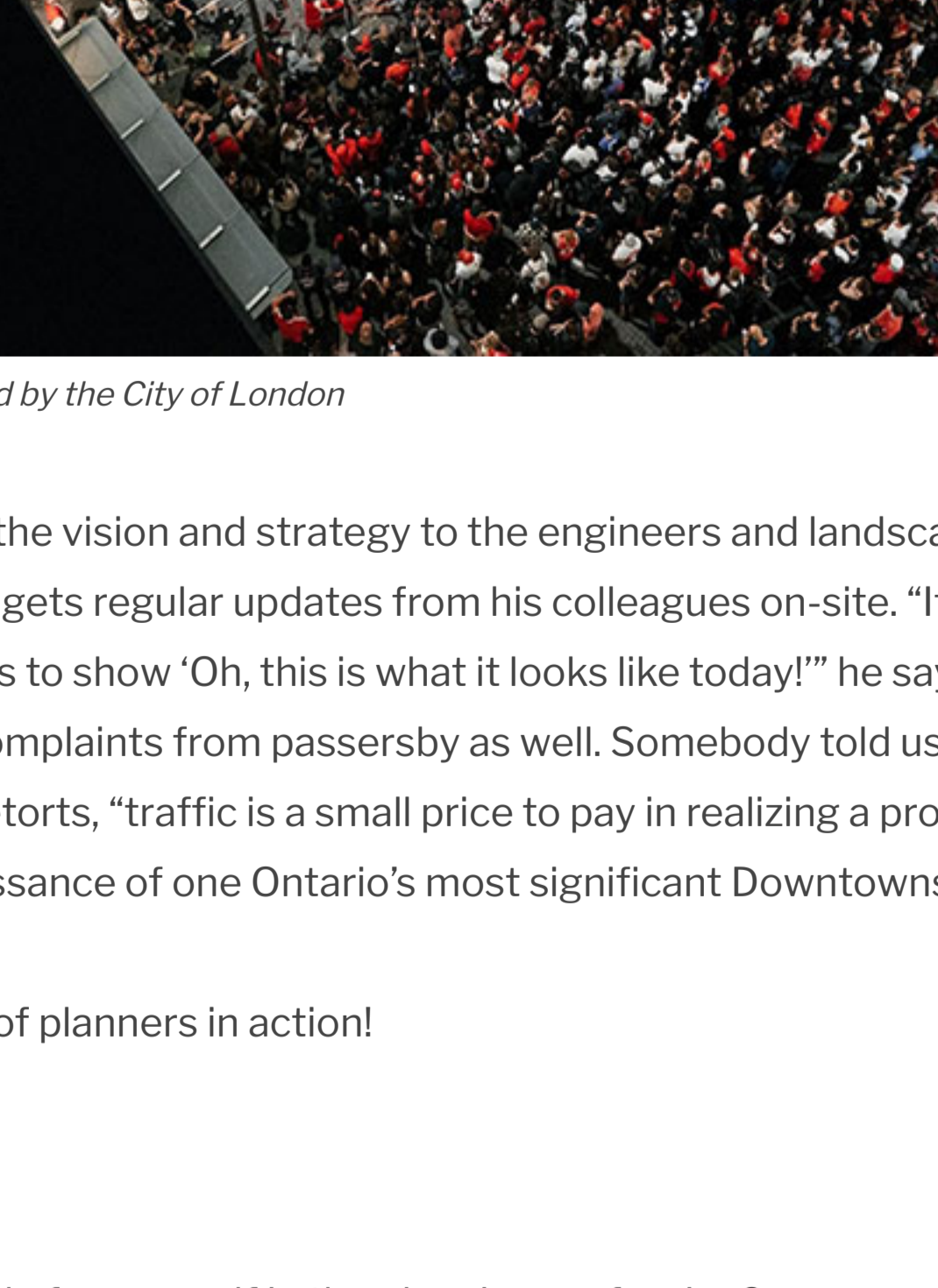
View of Talbot to Rideout Street Event

Beyond lifelike projections of the space, the blended team of city, business owners, Downtown London and Dillon also organized an actual street festival in the Dundas corridor, to prove its potential and invite interaction and feedback from the community. “[We] closed the street down just to showcase what could happen when you take cars off it...It was a groundbreaking information session. They had information boards and they had bands come play...there were boards that [you] could put stickers on to identify things that were wrong, or make suggestions like where a stage should go.” The Mayor also attended and spoke about the benefit of the project and how and why it was identified as key to the realization of the London Plan. “They’re really going to build on what they said they would do,” emphasizes Chhiba.



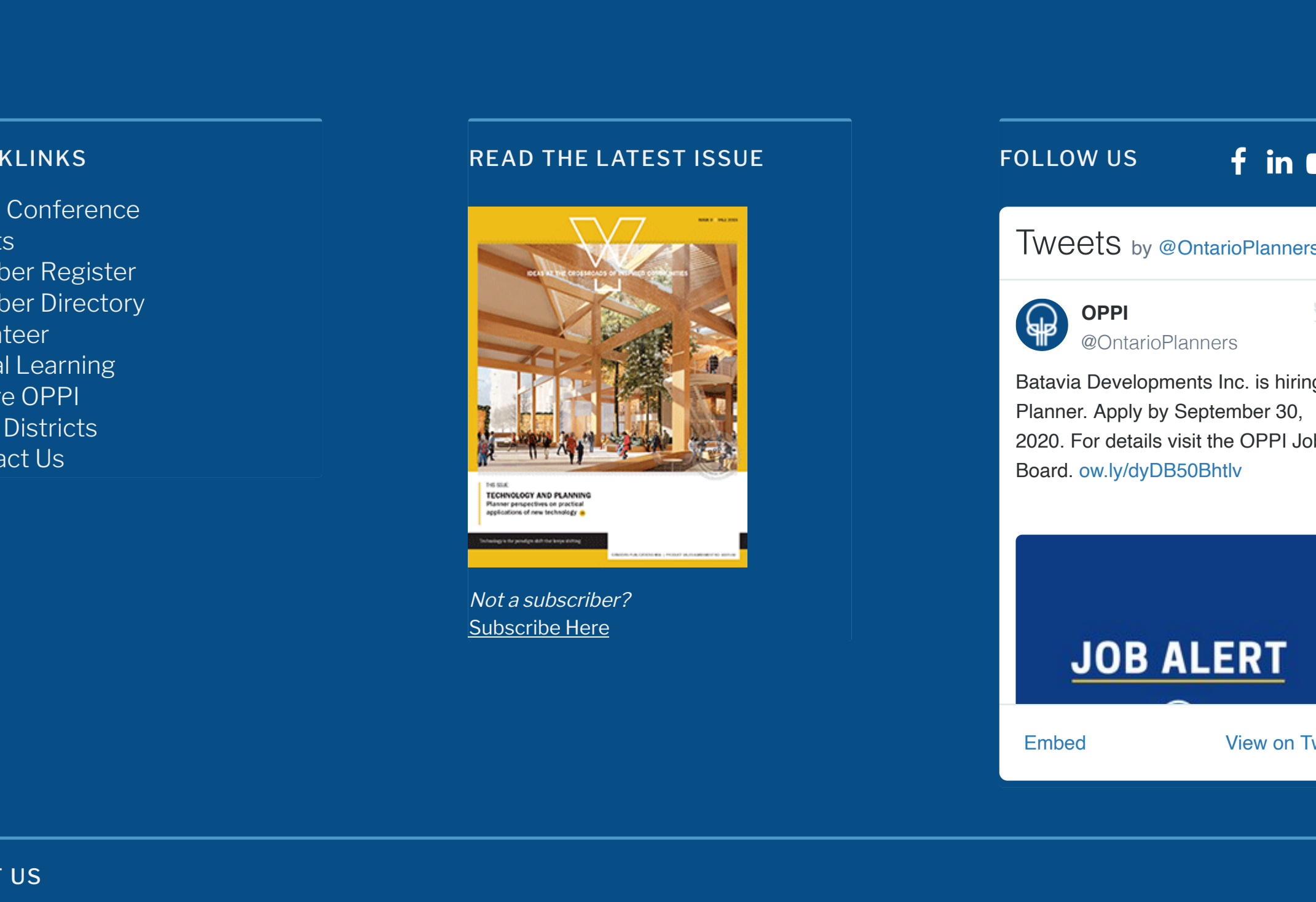
Street closure for consultation event

In reflecting on the project, Chhiba credits his skills as a planner to being part of leading the strategic and visionary phase of ‘My Dundas’: marrying policy and plan requirements with design possibilities, and listening to concerns from engineers at the same time as the city staff and their aspirations for a better downtown. But when asked to impart advice to the next generation of planners, to students on the cusp of becoming RPPs, his advice is very specific, the skill he emphasizes very precisely: interviewing. “Some people interview much better than others,” he says. “It’s really critical that, as planners, we communicate on a multitude of levels, being able to present confidently. You still get nervous, like I have been speaking at various conferences including the OPPI, CIP, and CSLA over the years and even though I knew this topic [of Dundas Place] so well, I was nervous before I spoke [at the [Symposium](#)]. It’s really critical that we can overcome that and be able to confidently express our ideas and vision verbally and that starts in the interview process.”



Juno street festival

Chhiba’s pride in the My Dundas EA and execution of the Dundas Place project vision is palpable. “In this particular project, we look[ed] beyond the box of a traditional street, and it’s doing a whole series of things now. It’s realigning the pedestrian realm to have it more prominent than the vehicular realm. It’s thinking about sharing the space when possible. It’s thinking about advancing a design, which serves so many other purposes: a cultural heritage purpose, and a way finding purpose. It takes you to the river. It’s celebrating this history that was lost before. It’s beyond the more tactile and it’s about the atmosphere and the history of the space.”



Jurassic Park London, provided by the City of London

Now, since handing over the vision and strategy to the engineers and landscape architects for construction, Chhiba still gets regular updates from his colleagues on-site. “It’s now in construction, so I just get great pictures to show ‘Oh, this is what it looks like today!’” he says with a smile. But he adds, “I hear about the complaints from passersby as well. Somebody told us this is causing too much traffic”, he laughs, and retorts, “traffic is a small price to pay in realizing a project that can become instrumental in the renaissance of one Ontario’s most significant Downtowns.”

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Photographs courtesy of Dillon Consulting via Kiran Chhiba, RPP and the City of London

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