



LISA ROCHON: CITYSCAPES

Across the great divide

LISA ROCHON | [Columnist profile](#) | [E-mail](#)

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Designers usually design for humans. Designing for the sake of animals – whether ferrets, elk or deer – and allowing them safe and poetic access to their habitats may sound unusual, but it is an urgent, lifesaving enterprise.

The challenge of keeping wildlife away from deadly collisions with cars inspired the ARC (for Animal Road Crossing) international design competition, which last year invited dozens of landscape architects from around the world to imagine animal-friendly, and eye-catching, bridges to cross over busy highways.

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Entries in the Animal Road Crossing competition

The competition's winner was announced in Washington earlier this week: A New York City partnership of designers MVVA, led by acclaimed landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh, and architectural builders HNTB has envisioned a crossing that merges seamlessly with the surrounding landscape, offering safe passage over the heavily travelled Interstate 70 at a high elevation near Vail, Colo. Shrouded in heavy landscape,

the ultrawide crossing appears to be more natural land than man-made infrastructure. Besides being visually alluring, estimates suggest it can be built for roughly half the current cost of the wildlife overpasses that dominate in Banff National Park.

It's a pleasure to notice wildlife in our rear-view mirror when we travel past city limits and into the country. There's something picturesque and

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romantic about watching deer graze or elk lift their massive heads as we speed past. But when animals wander blindly onto highways, the results can be devastating. There's the sad, ugly loss of life, of course (mostly of wild animals, but occasionally of humans as well). But there's also a more literal price tag. In the United States, the cost is estimated at \$8-billion (U.S.) a year in insurance claims and car repairs. In Canada, damages are pegged at about \$250-million annually, according to the Western Transportation Institute at Montana State University.

Wildlife crossings first appeared in Europe in the 1950s. Since the late seventies, Banff National Park has been at the vanguard of shepherding animals safely across vast territories. Scientist Tony Clevenger, one of the ARC competition jurors, has reported that the purpose-built crossings common in Banff have, over the past 25 years, allowed safe passage to some 240,000 large mammals, including elk, black and grizzly bears, deer, mountain lion, moose and coyote. Entire families of wild animals travel along the protective fencing and over the man-made structures; young animals learn how to reset their migratory patterns accordingly within three years of birth.

The problem in Banff – both in terms of cost and aesthetics – is that the crossings are overengineered and overbuilt. "They're strong enough to carry the load of five super dumpsters, not three elk and a moose," says Toronto ecologist and planner Nina-Marie Lister, the ARC competition's professional adviser and an associate professor at Ryerson University. Elsewhere at Banff, there are rudimentary metal culverts or prefabricated concrete boxes inserted underneath roads. They are narrow and dark; elegance and lightness of design never played a role.

The ARC finalists, short-listed from 36 submissions from nine countries, are invitations for animals to weave their way over a landscape located 150 kilometres west of Denver and next to massive ski chalets and high-profile resorts. Why similarly inventive bridges haven't been built in Canada "is a mystery" says Lister. "We know that they work, we know that there's a need for them. We also know that the cost of not having them is incredibly high, and it's compounded year after year."

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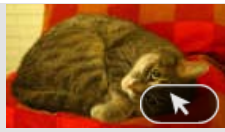
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