



Can Jennifer Keesmaat
help Toronto make a comeback?

BY MARTHA TANCOCK

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MCKENZIE JAMES

Livable City

WHEN HEADHUNTERS FIRST scouted her for the job of Toronto's chief planner, Jennifer Keesmaat (MES '99) didn't bite. Why not?

Well, her career as an urbanist committed to creating places where people flourish was really taking off. The firm she founded in 2003, Office for Urbanism, had recently merged with a creative powerhouse of Canadian architects and engineers to form Dialog, an integrated urban design group committed to sustainability and community engagement. Dialog had offices across the country, she was a partner, and she was winning award after award for master and culture plans that revitalized downtowns from Iqaluit and Mississauga to Halifax and Saskatoon. A vocal proponent of walkable, livable cities, she was in high demand as a speaker, chairing an annual summit on revitalizing downtowns and holding roundtables on planning practices with students. *Pedestrian Jar*, a short film she co-produced, satirizing attitudes towards pedestrians, had premiered at the 2011 Toronto International Film Festival. Last May, invited to give her first TED talk on "an idea worth spreading", she extolled the virtues of walking to school.

But the seed was planted, and when the headhunter called for the third time, Keesmaat paused. "I had poured an enormous amount of passion into working with communities across Canada," she says. "I started to imagine pouring that same energy into my own city, the city I love." Maybe she'd give it two years. Impossible, countered her recruiters, insisting it would take at least five years to even begin to understand Toronto's planning complexities. I'll do it, she decided, and she officially started on Sept. 10, 2012.

Keesmaat grew up in Hamilton, Ont., and studied English and philosophy at Western University. She intended to go into law, but changed her mind after a summer pushing paper in her uncle's office. One day, after she had married and moved to Vancouver, she heard poet-activist Bud Osborn speak about homelessness in the city's Downtown Eastside. It was an eye-opener for her, and after the lecture she asked Osborn what she could do to help. Squatters were occupying a vacant Woodward's store at the time, so Keesmaat threw herself into organizing public forums to raise awareness about the dire need for affordable housing. It was all she could talk about. At a party, a friend told her she was starting to sound like an urban planner. "What's a planner?" she asked. Read Jane Jacobs, her friend suggested, and Keesmaat devoured *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Intrigued, she took a few community planning courses and then moved to Toronto with her husband, eager to learn more about urban planning at York.

While her partner ran All-A-Board Youth Ventures, a private charity the couple set up to help at-risk youth find employment,

Keesmaat enrolled in graduate courses in urban development processes, politics and planning, social policy development and municipal governance. She also spent a year at city hall doing independent research for her major paper on a topic that still compels her – how competing interests and political decisions shape planning outcomes. She had discovered her passion.

Expectations are high for Toronto's first female chief planner, with just 12 years' experience; plucked, at 42, from the private sector and not from the city's planning division. "Everybody's watching her," says Roger Keil, director of the City Institute at York (CITY), who invited her to launch his CITY Seminar Series last October.

Frank and fearless, Keesmaat has already publicly weighed in on several controversial issues. Before she started at city hall, she tweeted that removing the Jarvis Street bike lanes was a bad idea. In December, when talk turned to tunnels to replace the city's crumbling Gardiner Expressway, she told the *Toronto Star*: "I'm not big on massive investments in infrastructure that are about moving more cars." That's not exactly the message city hall has been spreading in recent years.

Meanwhile, she's rewriting an antiquated planning framework, unchanged for 40 years, and hiring the new talent required to lead future planning directions for the city. What seemed like a gargantuan task when she started "is still a gargantuan task" three months later, she says. Toronto faces unprecedented growth. Like other cities, it can't afford to fix its rapidly aging infrastructure. And as the disparity between Toronto's rich and poor grows, so does the need for affordable housing, says Keesmaat. The city could use a cycling plan and a walking strategy, and, she adds, planners need to address climate change and find ways to reduce Toronto's environmental footprint.

If she could wave a magic wand, Keesmaat would wish first for a pot of gold (and then for more time with her husband, son and daughter). Instead, she reminds ratepayers that they can't have zero property tax increases and still expect the first-rate municipal services that make Toronto hum. "When you consider how much we spend on lattes every year, why are we freaking out about how much we pay in taxes? We need a reality check," she told the CITY Seminar audience last fall. "We need to start having this conversation: If you want something, you have to pay for it." Not one to dither, she kicked off that conversation in February with a consultation process on transportation called "Feeling Congested?"

"This is likely going to be the most important work I do," says Keesmaat. "I walked into this role because I saw an opportunity to set the vision and to clarify how we as planners can truly shape this city. There's always a sense of urgency around here, but this is a hopeful and exciting moment." ■