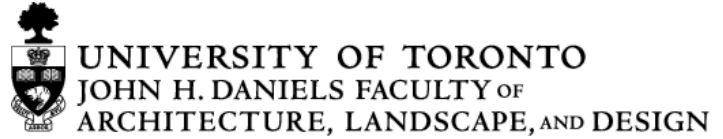


[View this email in your browser](#)



## **News from MTI**

Hello Mass Timber Colleagues!

# **Feature Interview: Alistair Vaz on his Ontario Forestry Tour Experience**

In October, the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and GreenFirst Forest Products hosted a tour of forestry and lumber manufacturing in northern Ontario. Among the attendees was Alistair Vaz, architect and senior planner at the University of Toronto. Alistair is also a decarbonization advocate on the steering committee of Carbon Leadership Forum Toronto, seeking to reduce the embodied carbon in buildings through knowledge sharing and connecting industry professionals. MTI Editor Sanjana Patel interviewed Alistair about his experience on the forestry tour.



*Images: Attendees toured the Romeo Malette forest (left). Forest gap dynamics in Romeo Malette (right). Credit: Alistair Vaz*

**Sanjana Patel(MTI): What was the purpose of this forestry tour? Why was it important to you?**

**Alistair Vaz:** The purpose of the tour was to bring design and procurement representatives to the forest to learn about the forest management and manufacturing process. It was hosted by FSC and Greenfirst. GreenFirst Forest Products in Chapleau, Timmins and Cochrane is responsible for forest management planning and forestry operations on the Missinaibi and Romeo Malette Forests located in northeastern Ontario. GreenFirst also has forest operations on the Abitibi River and Algoma Forests. GreenFirst does the full spectrum – they manage FSC certified forests, and they own sawmills and are well placed to speak to the whole process.

I've always been interested in material provenance. Akin to the farm to table movement, architects and engineers need to be more aware of where our materials come from, the communities the manufacturing process impacts, and the resource extraction involved. Having used mass timber, I was keen on going on this tour. I'm also quite interested in regenerative design, and timber and forest stewardship have a massive role to play in this effort.

**SP: What was the tour itinerary?**

**AV:** The tour consisted of 2 half days on either side of a full day. On the first day, we met at our base in Timmins. We had our welcome reception and dinner followed by the tour orientation, including presentations from FSC and GreenFirst and an overview of the Cochrane Sawmill that we would visit the next day. As part of the tour, FSC spoke about their processes around the world, and those specific to Canada, which has four pillars: environmental, economic, social, and Indigenous engagement. On the second day we drove to Cochrane to spend half a day learning about the sawmill part of the process. The Cochrane Sawmill is an exclusively 10' dimensional SPF (spruce, pine, fir) lumber stud mill. For lunch, we met with Chief Bruce Archibald and other members of the Taykwa Tagamou First Nation. They are among the rights holders in the area and a partner in the stewardship of the forests in northern Ontario. They described their history, their struggle for inclusion, their forest management practices, and how working in and developing their own forestry operation, Island Falls Forestry, has provided their nation with employment and economical sustenance. After lunch, we went on a short tour about botany and soil composition in the Romeo Malette forest to understand what conditions are required for each species we harvest in northern Ontario. On the third day, we went back into the Romeo Malette to witness the harvesting process, learn about forestry management. This included visiting a newly planted portion of the forest after a harvest as well as areas where wildfire has torched through and the forest has bounced back, and finally a conservation area, where harvesting is not permitted.





*Image: Jack pines growing in sandy soil among lichen (locally referred to as reindeer grass, as it provides nourishment in the winter months) in the Romeo Malette Forest.*

*Credit: Alistair Vaz*

**SP: What were your impressions of the forestry and manufacturing practices you witnessed? How might these operations evolve in the future to address new challenges?**

**AV:** GreenFirst leads forestry planning on the Romeo Malette Forest, which at over 600,000 ha is roughly the size of the entire GTA. The group is responsible for developing the ten-year Forest Management Plan (FMP) which includes a detailed description and mapping of timber and renewal operations and the development of planned road access. It also prepares the Annual Work Schedule (AWS) which identifies the location of operations scheduled for implementation during the year. The AWS includes information on the areas scheduled for harvest, road construction/maintenance, renewal, tending and protection operations. In another forests, another company may manage the forest even though GreenFirst has a share of the harvesting rights. There is a very collaborative, non-competitive relationship between the forestry companies.

Here at Romeo Malette, jack pine, black spruce, and balsam fir are the target harvest for the SPF mills it feeds. Birch and poplar species like Aspen are also harvested in the forest and diverted to other mills for other wood products like OSB. Nothing goes to waste. A portion of also the harvested area is always preserved to retain habitat. The FMP is a collaborative and extensively consultative process spanning up to 3 years before it is put into effect. The annual harvest area is only 1% of the total area



of the forest and has to adapt to natural factors like wildfires that can wipe out large swathes of the forest indiscriminately.

Forest economics is strongly impacted by trade. In Cochrane, 70% of the lumber gets sold to the US even with the tariffs involved (which are incidentally due to rise). There are no such restrictions in Ontario however on importing lumber. In BC, the Wood First program mitigates the diversion of Canadian business, but it's not the same in Ontario. Additionally, in Quebec and BC, forestry is a larger part of the provincial GDP so there is more funding available to match. In Ontario, these dynamics are the reason it's occasionally cheaper to bring in lumber and mass timber products from Europe. The economic situation is compounded by the challenges they face in attracting and retaining people to replenish the workforce there due to competition from the mining industry and other factors. Even if we could increase production, the next challenge is to build the workforce and retain the wisdom of those who have been stewards of our forests for generations.

**SP: What about Element5 in Ontario? What is their role in the larger picture of timber supply?**

**AV:** Yes, in Ontario, there is only one mass timber product manufacturer - Element5. Even if we take cost out of the equation, we don't have the manufacturing capacity to supply the demand we're seeing. Element5, also an FSC certified entity, is currently expanding their operations in partnership with an Austrian mass timber manufacturer as well as provincial funding. We are using more mass timber now in Ontario than we ever have, and Element5 is only able to supply 20%-30% of the projects, requiring the others to import from either Quebec, BC or Europe. We barely meet our allowable quota to harvest right now, so there's room for operations to grow. I believe we need to incentivize the Ontario way wood is sold. The mill that we visited only made dimensional lumber. The grade of what we need to produce mass timber is arguably much less than what we need in dimensional lumber, so there is an opportunity here to introduce diversification in the industry. As a result, I'd love to see a mass timber manufacturing plant developed in northern Ontario closer to these forests and sawmills. This would require both federal and provincial support and perhaps foreign investment.

**SP: Could you speak to any knowledge gap about forestry for design professionals? What key takeaways can you provide to those who would not typically have exposure to this environment?**

**AV:** As mentioned earlier, like all our building materials, design professionals need to educate themselves on their provenance. With timber, building an understanding of forestry management plans, the harvest and milling process is recommended. Architects and engineers have the agency to push for sustainable practices. They can specify FSC certified wood, because stewardship matters. The least we can do is specify. It doesn't have to be limited to the structure, it can be in the doors or other elements. I saw a project in Quebec that is using a timber curtain wall – the entire back section and front cap is glulam. Would love to see such ingenuity with Ontario wood come to the fore in the design industry here in southern Ontario.

**SP: It was interesting to hear how this tour impacted your perspective on your own work as an architect/planner. Any final thoughts on the tour?**

**AV:** I believe there are cross-education opportunities in tours like this. We should bring people using mass timber –including engineers, architects, policy and municipal decision makers – out to tour the forest and mills to demonstrate the impact their use of timber (and possibly Ontario timber) would have on these communities and the ability to continue looking after our forests. Conversely, it would be fun to bring the foresters out to see the buildings and work their timber helped build.

**SP: That's interesting, to imagine the tours go both ways.**

**AV:** Education is very important, and that's where organizations like the Mass Timber Institute can help. It can link students and professionals from both sides – the forest industry and the construction industry. Going on this tour, I was overwhelmed by the wonderful community of stewardship up north. It was a great opportunity to learn from the stewards of our forests. We were taken care of to the point of being spoiled, and hope that others get a similar opportunity to experience northern hospitality.



*Image: Alistair and other attendees explore harvesting equipment on the tour.*

*Credit: Alistair Vaz*

## News from the Institute

### MTI Welcomes New Student Intern

We'd like to welcome Michael Scafe, a Ph.D student in Forestry at University of Toronto, as a student intern with MTI. Michael describes his research work as follows:

“My research focuses on the dynamics of forest economy, understanding forestry value chains and technology and seeking to unravel the processes by which value is generated and propagated throughout the forest economy. I have become interested in mass timber as a building material and am presently engaged in statistical analysis and research to identify barriers in procurement, manufacturing, and installation of mass timber structures. This is done with an eye for growing the market for mass timber in





Ontario, both the production of engineered wood products and its use in off-site construction.

Recently, I have additionally been investigating the integration of mass timber demand into existing forest ecosystem models such as 4C to evaluate sustainability, as well as opportunities for greater recovery of wood residue for use as biomass in a variety of applications.”

## Other Updates

- A panel discussion hosted by WoodWorks provided an overview of initiatives to accelerate mass timber adoption across Canada. [Read about the event here.](#)

Mass Timber Institute Website



*Copyright (C) 2024 Mass Timber Institute. All rights reserved.*

**Our mailing address is:**

1016W - 33 Willcocks St,  
Toronto, Ontario M5S 3E8  
Canada

**You can reach us by phone at:**

416-978-0561

Want to change how you receive these emails?

You can [update your preferences](#) or [unsubscribe](#)