

Learning from Ontario Place



1. Aim high
2. Keep it human
3. Mix it up
4. We can do it
5. Talk to strangers

Ontario Place, designed by Eberhard H. Zeidler, opened in 1971. Photo: S. VanderKaay

What if we agreed that the purpose of Ontario Place must be to nurture what Ontario does best? What if we could discover better paths to inclusiveness right here?

We live in a global society that is threatened by wall-builders who incite fear and suspicion while breeding conformity. Ontario's greatest asset is its inclusive, diverse and creative culture. But much work needs to be done to keep our healthy spirit alive and to serve "citizens, not consumers" across the province and beyond.

"...what do we learn about ourselves... through creative thinking and productive dreaming..."

-Layne Hinton & Rui Pimenta,
Co-Artistic Directors, in/future
event "Welcome"



Scenes from in/future event September 15-25, 2016

What if we revitalized this spectacular place to feed our shared social and economic aspirations in ways that are innovative and exciting? What if Ontario Place was once again “a place to stand, a place to grow” —for Ontarians as well as on worldwide stage?

When it opened in 1971, Ontario Place was a high tech jewel by the lake. Four of the five pods contained exhibits touting the province's industrial achievements and abundant natural resources. The Trillium bar was an ideal place to wow friends and relatives from out of town. Suspended inside the fifth pod over the water, you could see that Ontario was bold, optimistic and far from provincial. The Forum amphitheater and Children's Village (see photos of the original structures, page 6 of this document) were hubs of activity, interaction and imagination.

Most visitors loved the architecture and the overall setting, but programming inside the pods was didactic and boring. Audiences for the exhibits were treated as passive consumers, rather than active citizen-participants. As decades passed, the assumption that citizens wanted mass market entertainment resulted in cheap, generic, mind-numbing theme park additions that drove diverse audiences away.

I was a frequent visitor (and a new Canadian immigrant) during the early days of Ontario Place. Over subsequent decades I was a less frequent visitor, although I worked with Eb Zeidler for fifteen years and thus enjoyed many annual Zeidler office parties in the Trillium Restaurant.

During four visits between September 15 and 25, 2016, I was captivated by the entire experience that the in/future event organizers and participants created. What have I learned by reflecting on this extraordinary site's legacy and potential over 45 years?

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Ontario Place needs specifically stated values that will allow it to achieve its full potential while avoiding wasteful, off-purpose investments. These values must be seen as defining a place to stand and grow for local visitors as well as Ontarians who come here from Windsor, Cornwall or Thunder Bay.

I see five core values that must be preserved and amplified for Ontario Place to thrive as it advances our inclusive, diverse and creative culture:

1. **Aim high:** Eb Zeidler believed that people have high aspirations, as well as a shared need to connect to each other and the land. He did not under-estimate his audience. The beautiful bones and enduring aura of Ontario Place are qualities that make the setting special and make us feel special. It is also important to understand that "aim high" does not necessarily mean "spend a lot of money on slick, one shot renovations." Instead, we need to pursue a phased "launch and learn" approach to what happens here, once structural remediation is addressed.
2. **Keep it human:** Humans are attracted to nature, texture, art, surprise, delight, discovery, imperfections, identity, meaning—and other humans. They ultimately resist artificial, generic, frenzied, sterile, meaningless, constricted, monolithic and predictable settings. The in/future event was captivating in part because it was self-directed, serendipitous, non-corporate, bottom-up and quirky. Keeping it human also means doing things that sustain human life and regenerate the environment. "Human" ultimately means seeing people as citizens, not consumers.

"...a new kind of urban park... responding to social and psychological needs of a growing metropolitan area..."

- Eb Zeidler, design architect of Ontario Place



3. **Mix it up:** The original Ontario Place aimed to attract people of all backgrounds, ages, abilities, cultures and economic means. It offered venues that ranged from high tech pods, to nature walks, to creative play. The in/future event further demonstrated the appeal of offering choice and challenge to diverse visitors, plus the art installations were varied in every sense. The social benefits of mixing it up include instilling empathy and helping us see things differently. Monocultures are bad from an economic, psychological and social standpoint. Ontario Place can bring us together, sparked by variety and united by our curiosity.
4. **We can do it:** When it opened, Ontario Place celebrated a can-do culture, which was also evident during the in/future event (but absent during the amusement park years). There's a reason that "maker spaces" are suddenly in high demand by schools and communities. Over the past two or three generations the natural human can-do spirit was overtaken by predominantly post-industrial "hands off" education. During that time, working with our hands was dismissed by many educators as a path to "blue collar" or "starving artist" careers. As a result, creative thinking, problem solving and collaborative skills that come from inventing, tinkering and making things diminished. Loneliness, boredom and anti-social behaviour can be linked to a "can't do" mindset. A culture of innovation is not all about technology; we need places that celebrate experiments and instill confidence by making things and knowing "we can do it."
5. **Talk to strangers:** Conversation is the antidote to fear and misunderstanding. The root cause of much suffering and pathology in the world is a failure to ask questions. Standard industrial era educational approaches discouraged questions and curiosity. How can we spark inquiry, connections, and conversations? As it stands, Ontario Place is a catalyst for

conversation with its many layers of history, dramatic architecture, views of the cit(ies) and integration of nature. It encourages interaction by offering a variety of places to relax and mingle. Stimulating art installations at the in/future event further encouraged people to interact. ("Hey, what do you think about that revolving tree?") Gathering spaces for all kinds of conferences, forums, fireside chats and spontaneous exchange can be designed into the pods and pavilions. What if the slogan for a revived Ontario Place was "Come on over and talk to strangers"? And how about a research-based Centre for Talking to Strangers?

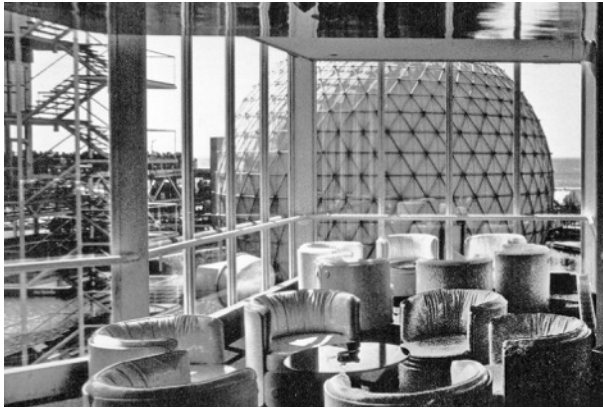
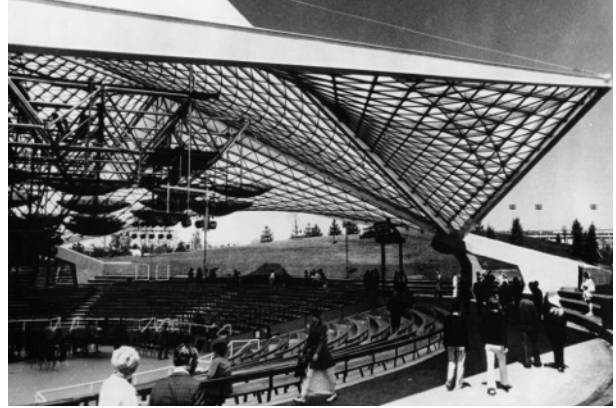


A place to grow during in/future and "SSSpun" revolving tree art installation by Robert Hengeveld

CONCLUSION: A recipe for building greatness

Whenever a project is under heavy public scrutiny involving diverse stakeholders that include naysayers and champions, there is a threat of settling for mediocrity. Project fatigue sets in, deadlines loom, and the inevitable cost-over-value critics criticize. Standard language vision statements and design principles are not strong enough to carry a project through all the stages required to see built reality—greatness—take shape.

In order to build greatness, that is to say, to create places people love and want to be, to stir our imagination and restore our energy, we must craft a purpose statement along with simple but meaningful shared values. These values must not be expressed in vague, generic corporate-speak because we are citizens, not consumers; we remove barriers, we don't build walls. We are humans talking with humans. Moreover we want a place to stand, a place to grow, Ontari-ari-ari-o!



Original structures, photos courtesy of E. H. Zeidler. Clockwise from top left, The Forum amphitheatre, The Forum interior view, reflecting pool on the West Island, crowds entering and exiting Cinesphere, Children's Village playground, restaurant pavilions, architect E. H. Zeidler, Trillium bar interior.