

Ontario Place is too valuable to squander

By **KEN GREENBERG** Opinion

BRUCE KUWABARA

PAUL BEDFORD

GEORGE BAIRD

Mon., Jan. 28, 2019

Contrary to what people have been told, Ontario Place is right now going through a renaissance. New life has returned, and the lakefront park is drawing crowds once again.

In fact, 1.4 million people visited Ontario Place last year, attracted by, among other things, the magnificent new Trillium Park and William G. Davis Trail, a reopened Cinesphere which was part of TIFF in 2018 and four individually themed festivals. The increase in attendance does not even include Live Nation attendance for Budweiser Stage and Echo Beach.



Ken Greenberg, Bruce Kuwabara, Paul Bedford and George Baird write: “This is our generation’s moment to creatively add new life and meaning to an already special place, not surrender it to some instant commercial makeover.” (ZEIDLER PARTNERSHIP PHOTO)

Ontario Place, which began as this province’s response to Expo 67, was initiated and executed by two former Conservative premiers, John Robarts and Bill Davis. Their governments reached out to two brilliant designers, both new Canadians, to interpret that era’s burgeoning sense of possibility.

Eb Zeidler is one of the most talented and prolific architects this province has ever seen. He designed and built many of his most important works in Ontario. Michael Hough was a celebrated landscape architect who pioneered landscape ecology.

With a unique blending of their talents, Zeidler and Hough created a highly original new waterfront place. It was fresh and inspiring. The bold forms of the “pods” and the Cinesphere (where IMAX cinema was invented) floated lightly on stilts. It was technologically precocious, and at the same time cheerful and family friendly. The vision for Ontario Place has been continually praised over the years. In his 2012 report to the

province, now Mayor John Tory asserted that Ontario Place must remain a “state of the art park on the edge of Ontario’s great lake.”

Ontario Place’s unique design has won a truly impressive list of awards including from International Committee for Documentation and Conservation of Buildings of the Modern Movement), the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada and The National Trust — Prix du XXe Siècle, and the American Society of Landscape Architects, to name just a few.

The province’s Statement of Cultural Heritage Value should give the government clear direction as to how it should approach the lakefront treasure: “Ontario Place was designed as an inclusive public entertainment, educational and recreational space and programmed to reflect the province’s people, culture and geography, as well as a vision for the province’s future The site in its entirety ... represents a bold visionary statement of its time realized at a scale and quality that earned international recognition and admiration.”

What Ontario Place really needs two generations after its creation is enlightened stewardship, not erasure and wanton destruction. We must not return to an era of urban renewal where we turn our backs on what we have and demolish vast amounts of irreplaceable heritage.

Believe it or not, 50 years ago St. Lawrence Hall, Union Station and Old City Hall were all on the chopping block in the name of progress. The best cities, the ones we admire most, are richly layered serial creations.

Ontario Place’s great bones are still there. The vision that inspired Ontario Place in the first instance is now more valid than ever. Since its creation, the city has come to out to meet and surround Ontario Place as

obsolescent industrial lands became vibrant new neighbourhoods like Liberty Village, Queen West, and the Fort York Neighbourhood.

The expanded Martin Goodman Trail brings additional thousands to its doorstep. Think of how Daniel Burnham’s vision for the Chicago waterfront gave rise to Millennium Park or the incalculable value that Frederick Law Olmsted’s Central Park brings to New York City.

The government needs to adopt a set of clear publicly endorsed principles to direct the next stage of revitalization of Ontario Place. Ontario Place For All, the group that is fighting to retain the iconic Cinesphere and pods, believes that:

- Ontario Place must be for ALL and kept publicly accessible.
- Before any changes, there must be a thoughtful, comprehensive public review, with a full and robust public consultation.
- Public interest, not commercial interest must drive the new vision.

- No casino

Future plans must:

- Acknowledge the waterfront's Indigenous heritage.
- Maintain Ontario Place as part of Toronto's waterfront park system.
- Be integrated with the revitalization of Exhibition Place.
- Celebrate Ontario

This is our generation's moment to creatively add new life and meaning to an already special place, not surrender it to some instant commercial makeover. A true call for ideas which taps the knowledge, inspiration and passion of Ontarians will open up vast new possibilities to build on a rich legacy.

Ken Greenberg is an urban designer, board member Waterfront for All, vice-chair City Building Institute at Ryerson University. Bruce Kuwabara is founding partner of KPMB, and the chair of the board of trustees of the Canadian Centre for Architecture. Paul Bedford is former Toronto Chief Planner. George Baird is a gold medal winner of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada and a recipient of the Order of Canada.