

# How Toronto sunk its own little Venice



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Architect Eberhard Zeidler, far left, unveils Harbour City, a proposed residential development at Ontario Place, in 1969.

COURTESY ZEIDLER FAMILY/DUNDURN PRESS/ZEIDLER FAMILY/DUNDURN PRESS

The first load of landfill broke the choppy, bluish-green surface of Lake Ontario in October, 1969, when I was 15 months old.

A few days before it opened on May 22, 1971, 2,500 schoolchildren were unleashed onto architect Eberhard Zeidler's futuristic, 38-hectare, white-city-on-the-water to "test" its facilities, the cheerfulness of its "young hosts and hostesses" and the medical-response teams, The Globe and Mail's John Slinger reported. While I was not one of them, my mother assures me that I did gaze upon Mr. Zeidler's creation – which cost Ontario taxpayers approximately \$20-million (reports vary) – that same summer, and practically every summer after that, despite the fact that the bouncy-floored Children's Village made up only a small fraction of the facility.

While it became known as a 'water-themed' amusement park during its twilight years, Ontario Place was designed in the glow of Expo 67's embers as a showcase to highlight the province's prowess as an industrial and agricultural leader; its history, geography and future potential. But Mr. Zeidler knew education and celebration wouldn't be enough: "Shouldn't there be other things for [visitors] to do as well?" the 45-year-old asked The Globe's Betty Lee a few weeks before opening. "Shouldn't there be a variety of restaurants? Places to swim or merely paddle? Somewhere for people to listen to classical or rock music? Somewhere for boat buffs to tie up their craft and wander right into the area?"

Ontario Place had all of these things. And I remember that I was never bored.

The reason Ontario Place was interesting, even to a little child, was because of this variety of uses. As contrast to the five floating, majestic pods over the lake – an engineering marvel too complex to deal with in this short space – there was an island with human-scaled villages (albeit with groovy, crystalline-shaped buildings and pop-art graphics) containing boutiques, stores and restaurants to "provide an emotional experience for people," Mr. Zeidler told Ms. Lee. Like an urban street, the potential for surprise, interaction with others and the delight of discovering interesting things in shop windows was there; all things championed by legendary urban thinker Jane Jacobs who, by 1971, was living in Toronto and friendly with the Zeidlers.

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The low- to mid-rise Harbour City development would have housed 60,000 people.

COURTESY ZEIDLER FAMILY/DUNDURN PRESS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

As a matter of fact, in 1969, the German-born architect hired Ms. Jacobs to consult with while designing a companion project to Ontario Place, “Harbour City.” Approved by all levels of government and positioned a stone’s throw to the east, Harbour City was to be home to 60,000 people, even though no building would rise above 10 storeys. Spreading into the lake like a butterfly’s wings, the community would use an extension of Strachan Avenue as a ring road to umbilical itself to the city proper.

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A canal system would have given all Harbour City residents a view of the water.

COURTESY ZEIDLER FAMILY/DUNDURN PRESS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Apartment buildings would be placed along the ring road, which would be served by public transit, and no through-traffic would be allowed in the lower-rise, single-family residential areas. In fact, a “terrace level would more or less conceal the car movement,” Mr. Zeidler writes in his 2013 autobiography, *Buildings Cities Life*. With its canal system, every resident, whether rich or poor – Zeidler and Jacobs fought hard to include everybody – would enjoy a view of the water. It was to be “Venice in Toronto,” complete with shops and restaurants.

And since land cost would be “extremely low,” Harbour City “could offer houses at half the price of equivalent housing being built at this time,” Mr. Zeidler writes.

Members of the newly elected city council, which included David Crombie and John Sewell, put their oars in the water and convinced a majority to vote against the project despite continuing approval from the feds, the province and the Toronto Harbour Commission (the agency that started the project).

The architectural model of Harbour City, which “caused great excitement among the public,” still exists today. It lies on its side in the basement of 401 Richmond (a Zeidler-owned property that supports many small, creative businesses), a thin coat of dust unable to obscure the optimism contained within tiny walls punctuated by groovy, arch-shaped, porthole and rectangular windows, the jutting docks, meandering canals and sprawling pedestrian plazas.



The dusty Harbour City model, now sitting in the basement of 401 Richmond.

COURTESY VICTOR MOLOTKOW/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Last week, Ontario’s PC government called on developers to submit ideas for what to do with Ontario Place, shuttered since 2012. Tourism, Culture and Sport Minister Michael Tibollo said he’d like the future site to be “an impressive attraction that could include exciting sport and entertainment landmarks, public parks, shopping and recreation.” He added, however, that his government would not consider proposals for residential uses.

Ignoring for a moment that Ontario Place already was an “impressive attraction” during its first decades, and further ignoring the enormous elephant in the room – that new Ontario Place chair Jim Ginou sees no heritage value and said “there is nothing that can be saved” – the decision to reject housing is wrong.

Dismiss the condo towers surrounding the historic Distillery District as ugly if you like, but in my opinion they are essential to its survival. While unit owners may not purchase artwork from the galleries, they visit the cafés, bakery and restaurants almost daily. And when owners have out-of-town house guests, those folks likely visit the clothing and houseware boutiques and drop serious money. Take that away and the Distillery would be a graveyard on all but sunny weekends.

Therefore, any reimagining of the once-bustling, now-isolated Ontario Place site must contain housing. While 60,000 residents may be a little much, what about 20,000? Dust off Harbour City and build one-third of it just as Mr. Zeidler, now 93, and Ms. Jacobs (1916-2006) planned: a low- to medium-density, mixed-income community with a variety of uses; but add live/work/retail studios for artists and craftspeople, as well. Imagine strolling along, lake breezes in one's hair, checking out an artist's work while canoes paddle by.

And when those first loads of landfill are dumped into the water, the restoration of the very heritage-worthy pods, village-buildings and Cinesphere can begin in earnest.

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