

It's Time for Ontario Place to Revive its Higher Purpose

The original soaring iconic design has been weighed down by a history of asking the wrong operational questions. There's a way to restore its extraordinary magic.

Tye S. Farrow and Sharon VanderKaay, April 3, 2012
www.farrowpartnership.com

WHEN ONTARIO PLACE OPENED IN 1971, it captured the public's imagination by introducing a bold, optimistic design that said to the world, "we are major league players, we are independent thinkers and we are fearless innovators."

Nothing like it had been seen before, and its stunning design received instant international acclaim. It had a luminous, futuristic elegance that in some ways parallels the "cool factor" of Apple products today.

Adding to the epic emotional appeal of such a showpiece was—as the theme song proudly proclaimed—the recognition that "...this is our place." Prior to Ontario Place, there was no memorable visual image that provided a special identity for the province; no distinctive icon existed to entice visitors in search of a unique, energizing experience. This identity gap is evident in the Expo 67 Ontario Pavilion promotional film, "A Place to Stand, A Place to Grow," which portrays a land of attractive yet unexceptional trees, trees, more trees and a bit of farming.

REFLECTING UNLIMITED POSSIBILITIES

Forty years ago, Ontario Place reflected its citizens' ambitious self-image; we were vibrant, confident and eager to grow. At a time when people were beginning to question the role of technology in their everyday lives, architect Eb Zeidler's revolutionary structures made a strong statement about being open to unlimited possibilities while preserving harmony with nature.

Zeidler's original concept emerged from a clear sense of the project's purpose; his vision was to create a striking, unified and enduring design for a park that would connect people with

a potentially spectacular natural waterfront asset. By the end of the 1960s, Toronto's lakefront had become a remote no-man's land, having languished through more than a century of heavy industrial use and auto-centric planning. The time was right for big thinking that would embody Ontario's hopes for the future.



"We felt there was a need in Ontario for something akin to a spiritual home."

-John Robarts, former Premier of Ontario, speaking on November 3, 1970 at the Ontario Place Countdown Reception

VISION OF URBAN PARKLAND

From both a physical and emotional point of view, Ontario Place was conceived, in Zeidler's own words at the time, as serene "urban parkland" rather than a hyper-active amusement park. The intent was to provide a setting for healthy social interaction and shared experiences as Ontarians, as well as a refuge from the

stresses of urban life. There was no attempt to offer relentless synthetic distractions within such a beautiful setting.

Today there are layers of visual clutter which obscure the power of the original structures, and obliterate any hint of confidence for the future. The Apple-quality sleekness of the initial design has been cloaked in the equivalent of a multi-coloured sequined case that assumed a never-ending desire for adding extra sequins. Located at the front door to Canada's largest city, the design creates a first impression of visual confusion and the overbuilt antithesis of sustainability.

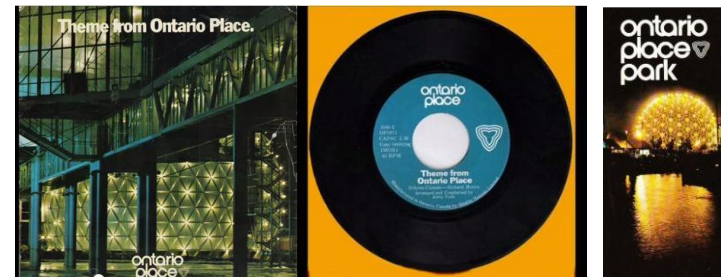
It is worthwhile considering how it came about that well-intended people began this counter-productive downward spiral of packing more and more so-called attractions on the site. This line of historical analysis can offer clues to the future success of what happens in this location—and whether the current Provincial Government will be celebrated as heroic social and economic innovators, rather than utterly bankrupt of ideas.

THE ECONOMICS OF GREAT PARKS

Contemporary urban parks seek to regenerate the body and soul by reconnecting people with nature, which in turn stimulates the creative mind. Pre-programmed, mechanical rides do not fit this model. Ontario Place now contains over a dozen rides and activities that entail high maintenance costs and offer no opportunity for creative expression. Admission charges over the years have set up the expectation that visitors will be passively entertained by a specific, external someone or something for hours at a time.

The overwhelming trend in urban park and playground design today, as well as the common element of great parks for over one hundred years, is to provide unstructured options. In other words, great parks recognize that people bring themselves and their own creative potential for enjoyment to the park, whether for brief or extended periods of time.

In addition to fostering a passive audience, charging admission to an amusement venue also sets up the expectation that it will pay for itself as an isolated entity, rather than return dividends as a regional amenity. As David Lepeska reports on *theatlanticcities.com*, "New York's High Line cost \$115 million, draws millions of annual visitors and has attracted more than \$2 billion of private investment to the surrounding area, creating jobs and sparking economic activity." The High Line, and Millennium Park in Chicago, do not charge admission. No one is suggesting that we charge admission to Toronto's High Park, nor the extremely popular Brickworks, as a means to ensure direct cost recovery; the very notion of doing so would destroy the innate capacity of these places to draw a wide audience.



Ontario Place has an irreplaceable role in our history.

NEED FOR A HIGHER PURPOSE

The old definition of insanity—doing the same thing over and over while expecting different results—can be applied to numerous Ontario Place studies through the years. When a study begins by asking the wrong questions, relies on outmoded models and builds on self-limiting assumptions, we should not be surprised if the results are disappointing.

What has been missing all these years is a meaningful, well-communicated, higher purpose for Ontario Place. Without a powerful, holistic purpose that stimulates the imagination of its citizens, Ontario Place has been subject to ad hoc decisions. Public expectations for the site have been lowered to the point that virtually any kind of meaningless revenue-generating “solution” might be constructed.

There is evidence of much linear, inside the (wrong) box thinking about the future of Ontario Place that is leading decision-makers to accept false constraints regarding what is possible. If Ontarians revive the big-thinking approach they celebrated here forty years ago, they will be able to see new ways to create a valuable public asset, thereby avoiding a deficit-driven race to the bottom of the idea barrel.

THE SWAGGER FACTOR

Great civic projects with enormous economic benefits, such as the transformational High Line in New York City and Millennium Park in Chicago, require *spunk* and *swagger*. As Frank McKenna, Deputy Chair, TD Bank Financial Group said at the Toronto Board of Trade’s Annual Dinner in 2010, this city needs to “get its swagger back.”

This renewal project can be a swagger-building exercise that expands our shared sense of opportunities—similar to the energy that was evident on these grounds circa 1971. Together we can revive and redefine our “spiritual home” for the 21st century.

Our spiritual home must not include silos (a particularly inappropriate metaphor for a future that depends on collaboration), nor pre-programmed spinning mechanical devices, nor paving over the land for the sake of amusements.



When a study begins by asking the wrong questions, relies on outmoded models and builds on self-limiting assumptions, we should not be surprised if the results are disappointing.

STRATEGIC QUESTIONS

The quest for a galvanizing purpose and a visionary solution must begin by asking the right questions. Rather than limit ourselves to assumption-laden paths of inquiry such as: How will Ontario Place generate more revenue?, we can begin by asking bigger questions: How can Ontario Place make a massive contribution to reducing the province's deficit and create happier citizens, now and for years to come? What might have kept someone away from the park in recent years?

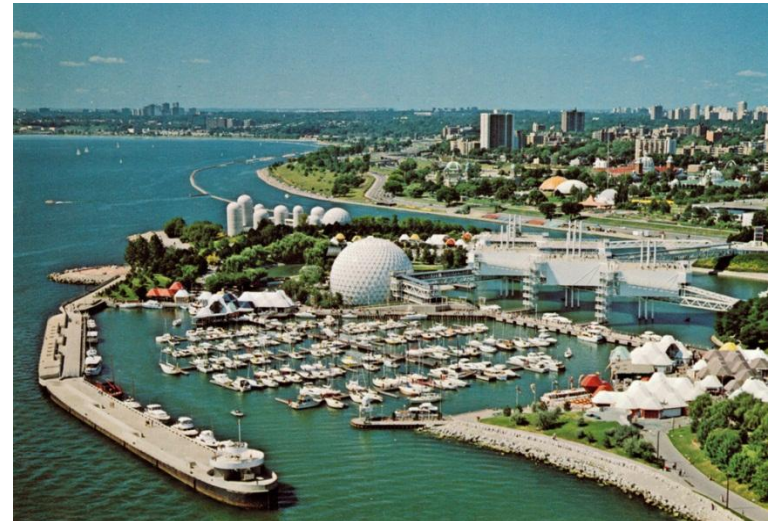
A HEALTHY APPROACH TO DEFICIT REDUCTION

A great leap forward in thinking through these larger issues can be found by consulting TD Economics' Special Report, co-authored by Don Drummond. In "Charting a Path to Sustainable Health Care in Ontario," a bright idea beckons. The report identifies "10 Proposals to restrain cost growth without compromising quality of care. Proposal #1: "Take bold action to promote healthier lifestyles." It goes on to say, "Ontario should become a leader in introducing innovative and effective strategies aimed at achieving broad improvements in health behaviours."

This is no time to think small about the root cause of our deficit dilemma. Lifestyle-based ill-health consumes 40% of Ontario's \$50 billion a year health care budget. We need revolutionary new models for reducing medical costs that engender the same spirit of can-do optimism one could feel at Ontario Place forty years ago.

Imagine Ontario Place as a restored and revitalized heritage site that changes how people think about their health. The

mandate of Ontario Place would be to look beyond eco-system sustainability to also encompass the sustainability of Ontario's medical system. This new realm would make the Province of Ontario a place that takes "bold action" to dramatically reduce the burden of preventable medical costs, as well as to attract visitors from around the world who want to learn from this dynamic exemplar of health-creating environments.



*"Take bold action to promote healthier lifestyles...
Ontario should become a leader in introducing...
broad improvements in health behaviours."*

- TD Economics Special Report co-authored by Don Drummond

A LIVING EXAMPLE FOR THE WORLD

Picture an internationally recognized living lab and experiential learning place, a “health interpretive centre,” perhaps the first of its kind. At a time when brain health research and measuring the happiness of your constituency is on the rise, the entire site can be conceived as a natural spa for the brain and body; a place where applied research, relaxation, physical activity, creative play, healthy social interaction and lifelong learning flow together.

A revived Ontario Place would exude and demonstrate the latest *salutogenic* (health-causing) practices. In contrast to the traditional *pathology-centric* orientation which has dominated the industrial age and focused on myriad causes of illness, the mission of Ontario Place would be to Cause Health. Every aspect of the site would contribute to the public’s understanding of their environment in health-centric terms. Examples could range from the world’s most advanced creative play opportunities aimed at stimulating young minds, to vertical urban agriculture, to community building spaces, to “adult playgrounds” (exercise stations), to eye-opening new ways to turn the lowly parking lot into a health asset.

Ontario’s long-term prosperity depends on reinforcing “health creation” as the epicentre of Toronto’s multi-sector regional hub. In his recent Board of Trade speech, University of Toronto President David Naylor highlighted the Toronto region’s enormous competitive advantage as the central attractor for an unusually wide range of business sectors. These sectors include finance, biotech, pharmaceuticals, legal, food and beverage, manufacturing, packaging, design, logistics, aerospace and high-tech. “More and more innovation worldwide is driven by cross-sectorial convergence,” said

Professor Naylor. Ontario Place can function as a highly visible focus of applied research in the health creation, serving as a catalyst for change from relying on costly downstream medical services to the active promotion of health upstream.



Photo by Dan Cronin

BUILDING ON ZEIDLER’S ORIGINAL VISION

There can be no better foundation for this *health creation place* than a return to Eb Zeidler’s bold, uncluttered, unified design for Ontario Place. Around this restored nucleus would be spaces that introduce diverse ways to make active living a part of our daily lives, as well as stimulate the brain through nature and creative play opportunities for all ages.

Consistent with Eb Zeidler’s original vision, as well as legendary urbanist Jane Jacobs’ concept of natural diversity, a community of creative enterprises, which have thrived economically in such locations as 401 Richmond Street West, would provide year-round vibrancy.

In recent years we have been conditioned to think small and mean by a pervasive message of scarcity. We must not allow this mindset, and a temporary situation, to persuade us that we have no option but to make irreversible decisions that destroy the original essence of Ontario Place.

FALLING OFF THE ROAD TO HEALTH

The extreme opposite of a health-causing, positive contribution to future generations of prosperous Ontarians is the casino solution. A casino in this location would not only send a highly visible message that our roots don't matter and that we don't care how other cities have defined creative urban spaces for the 21st century, it would also contradict the province's stated priority to promote health creation. Essentially the province would be introducing a limited access, generic edifice that promotes adversarial and/or addictive behaviour, attracts criminal elements and represents the antithesis of community-building. Moreover, a casino says we have no higher aspirations and no energy to innovate. As a result, our outlook on life and what we see in the media will continue to be dominated by the language of austerity.

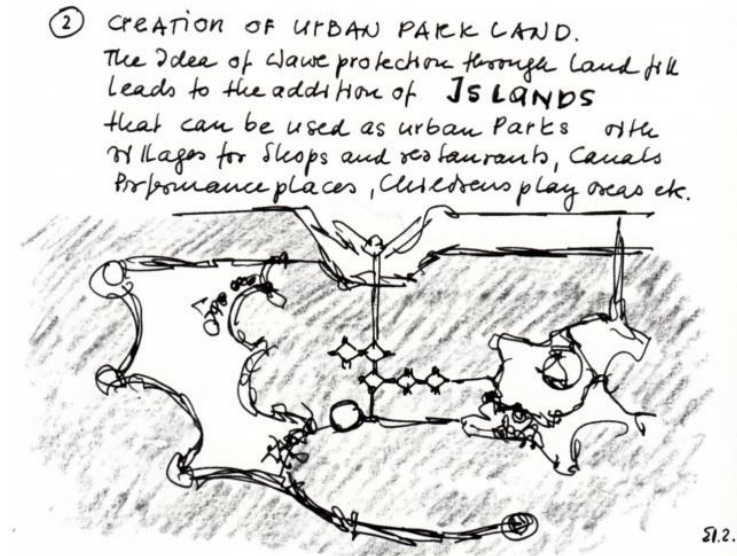
Is this where we've come to in Ontario? Are we going to merely shrug in defeat at the loss of our "spiritual home"? Is the exuberant, can-do attitude embodied by the original Ontario Place now gone? We think not.

TURNING "HEALTH CREATION" WORDS INTO ACTION

Instead, Ontario Place can make meaningful connections with our buoyant past, preserve an architectural masterpiece and

attract people to lead healthier lives. If the park's operating deficit is \$20 million annually, this cost represents 1/8 of one percent of Ontario's current deficit of \$16.3 billion, or the equivalent of 12¢ on a purchase of \$100. By contrast, projects such as Millennium Park and the High Line have raised the value of the surrounding tax base while increasing revenues from visitor spending throughout the city.

It's time for Ontario to turn words into action by creating an exemplary model of health creation that will lower the deficit by means of a long-term solution which, instead of causing disease, will cause health.



Eb Zeidler's original vision was the "creation of urban parkland," in a stress-reducing, regenerative setting, rather than a venue dominated by hyper-activities and mechanical amusements.