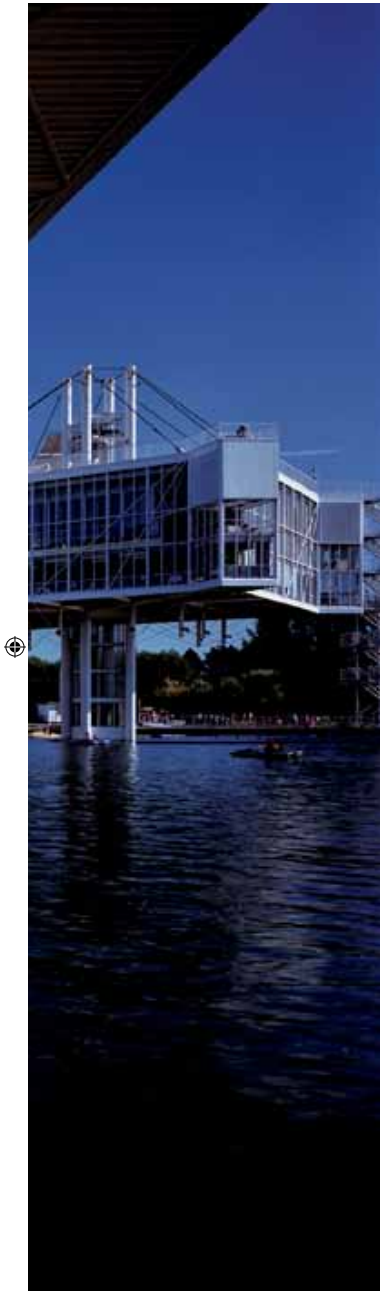


FIG. 7.1: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. The pavilions and the IMAX Cinesphere.

Chapter 7

Ontario Place (1968)

I WAS STILL WORKING on the McMaster Health Sciences Centre when I got a call from a government official named Jim Ramsey. He wanted to see me about a new project called Ontario Place. Since I did not reply to that request immediately, a second call — irate this time — came, saying that he would see me at 4:30 p.m. that day, otherwise I could forget about seeing him. I called Glen Creba, the provincial government's head of architecture, and asked him who Jim Ramsey was. We had always bugged Glen to get us a job from the government, but we'd never gotten one. He said to me, "You'd better see him quickly because otherwise I will never recommend you for another government project." So at 4:30 p.m., I rushed over to see Jim. We had a fascinating meeting and discussed his project in detail.

He had been asked to build a project for the Ontario government at the Canadian National Exhibition grounds. It would be a showplace for Ontario's achievements in the past and for what might be in store in the future. In the aftermath of Expo 67 in Montreal, Ontario had complained that they had been left out of federal funding. The province felt that the federal government should invest money not only in Quebec, but also in Ontario. The federal government said, "Okay, we will do that, but first you as a province have to invest some money yourself." So that was the beginning of Ontario Place (fig. 7.1).

I went home from this meeting and didn't think any more about it. A week later I got a call from Jim Ramsey, saying that

we had the project and we should start immediately. Well, that was wonderful but I didn't quite know how to handle two huge jobs because McMaster was still in full swing. I did have some talented young graduates, so I pulled them into a group to work. I called Noel Hancock, who had been with me earlier and was now working in Spain. I was very fond of him, and I thought he would make a good team leader. He was excited about the project and came back from his adventure in Spain.

Jim later told me why he hired us. He had several interviews with architects who arrived in groups of three or four and presented their credentials skillfully. Our firm arrived with only with one person (me), without any props or drawings, and proceeded, as he said, to insult him. I'd thought we were supposed to be discussing his previous project, the Expo building in Montreal, and I only tried to point out where it had failed. However, he liked my manner and felt I would be the person who could explore with him the kind of totally new solution for which he was searching.

The initial concept was to put the exhibition in the old government building at Exhibition Place, but we both felt that wasn't a solution. It would be drowned in confusion at Exhibition Place, which had no effective leadership and no meaningful organization. We felt that if the new project was going to be a showplace for Ontario, it should be on neutral ground. It could not truly represent all of Ontario in *Toronto's* Exhibition Place, and so the idea grew to put the building into Lake Ontario.

The exhibition part of the project was not yet developed. It was clear that it *could* be designed in a series of pods that would be connected to each other. We explored McMaster-type pods, which had worked quite well, but the columns at the ends of each pod looked rather clumsy. Since the exhibitions could work around columns quite easily, we put a single support of four columns in the centre of each pod and suspended the pod with steel wires. In fact, we made each pod a wire suspension structure and created an assembly of five pods that stood in Lake Ontario.

We had a budget of ten million in 1970 dollars to do the building, and it seemed possible if the footings were reasonable. Despite the fact that we were close to the shore, on a stormy day the waves in the lake could be up to eighteen feet high and have quite a powerful effect, as we later witnessed. To make the columns strong enough to withstand this power, Gordon Dowdell, our structural engineer, figured that the foundations alone would cost something like nine million dollars. I nearly collapsed.

I didn't know what to do. Jane thought this was the time to take me on a holiday. And we went to Harbour Island in the Bahamas. One night, Jane, the three children, and I went swimming in the ocean. We were shrieking and squealing in the waves, all totally naked, when suddenly a huge searchlight from the neighbouring house was turned on and aimed toward us. A voice yelled, "Are you all right?" We said we were, and he said, "You had better get out because there are sharks in there!" So we trotted out, not believing him, but he was right and we were lucky. During the daytime the sharks would not swim past the barrier reef into the shallow waters, but at night they did. Later, during a deep-sea fishing excursion, we learned that there were *huge* sharks out there. We did not swim during the day past the barrier reefs again, and at night we only sat and looked at the waves.

One day we rented a rowboat with a glass bottom, and I had an insight about barrier reefs. We rowed over a calm inlet and watched the fish through the glass bottom. Suddenly, we came to a wide opening to the ocean. To my surprise, the sea had huge waves that rolled toward the inlet, but the little inlet itself was absolutely quiet, with a surface like a mirror. I couldn't understand it. We went closer and discovered that the entrance to the inlet was covered with coral reefs that were just below the water level. The reefs totally broke the power of the waves. Eureka, I thought! This is our solution for Ontario Place. By building an underwater breaker that would calm the powerful waves, we could get away with normal foundations, at a cost of about half a million dollars — which is what we had calculated in our ten-million-dollar estimate.

Back in Toronto I investigated the "wave breaker" and the Toronto Harbour Commission said they could build one very easily and inexpensively. The problem seemed to have been resolved. But we hadn't reckoned on the Canada Marine Act. The Act said we couldn't install a breaker because the site was too close to a main shipping channel. So there went another great idea. We then suggested making the underwater islands extend *above* the water. We wondered if that was possible. Luckily, we got that idea approved.

Now we had to think up a great idea for what to do with our islands. We thought we might have a nature reserve on them, but this was a short-lived dream because the wild animals could easily escape from the islands. Finally, we developed another concept: the islands could become a recreation area for people who wanted to see the waterfront. This would bring Toronto's waterfront back to life and reduce the effect of the highway that cut the waterfront off from the city. The highway could be bridged and the new islands would create the kind of romance between Toronto and the water that had existed in the past. We developed activities of various kinds — mainly a public park with restaurants and shops, and a children's village — and we got money allocated for these purposes.

Ontario government officials were out selling the concept to the people of Toronto and it was well received. Of course, there were doubts, because the government had promised many things that never happened. We built a wonderful model that was used in these meetings, along with our drawings, perspectives, and photographs. As the months went by, many big words were spoken, but little else happened. I thought this would be one of these government projects that ended up in a filing cabinet.

But that was not the way Jim Ramsey thought of it. He was not really a government official; in his heart, he was a developer. If he set his mind to a task, he would drive it to completion. We had a discussion with the Harbour Commission about technical ways to solve many of the problems.

First, we had to build the islands from landfill, to get more protection from the waves before we sank our caissons into the lake as foundations for the columns that would hold up our five buildings. The general manager of the Harbour Commission was an engineer with a character similar to Jim Ramsey's. When he said he would do something, he did it. Jim finally said, "Okay, why don't you start on the construction of the islands?" And the manager said, "When?" Jim Ramsey said, "Tomorrow." That blew wind into the manager's sails. He said, "From whom do I have the authority to do that?" Jim Ramsey said, "From me." The engineer said, "Okay." The next day, his earth moving trucks arrived from some excavations downtown, and instead of driving their loads of earth to a dumping site on the eastern edge of Toronto, they dumped it practically at the foot of downtown. The manager saved a fortune.

A dam began to grow into the lake. One day, an army of metro police cruisers arrived and delivered a stop-work order, because we had no building permit. All hell broke loose.

The Ontario government certainly realized that the project had started without official permission, but there was still some confusion as to what should be done. If they complied with the stop-work order and said that Jim Ramsey had acted without authority, they would look very stupid, because they had talked about building the place for months. So they couldn't do that. They had to go the other way. Since they were the more senior governing body, the provincial government didn't have to get building permits from the city government. They told the city to pull their cruisers out quickly or else they would be fined. The cruisers disappeared and construction continued at full speed. The construction of Ontario Place was now officially sanctioned.

We had to work like crazy to get working drawings finished to call for tenders, but we also had to complete a design for the domed theatre, which was still in a stage of indecision. When we had our first design retreat to discuss what should be done, the IMAX people were there. They talked about their new film invention that should be included. We discussed projecting the film on to a dome, an idea we thought would give a feeling of total reality. We built a mock dome in the basement of our office on Madison Avenue and attempted to project slides on it. We thought we could place the public as close as we wanted to the screen, since a curved screen would not distort the image on it. For example, eight hundred people could sit in the IMAX theatre directly in front of a very wide screen and have a perfect view of the film.

It turned out that this didn't work. A normal movie screen curved on the dome would reflect too much light from the sides of the screen onto the centre screen, and what would be seen on a flat screen as black would turn grey. That is, the light projected on the screen would not be reflected straight back from the screen, as it would be from a flat screen, but would end up on part of the screen itself and wash out the contrast. So the wonderful idea of a curved screen on the dome that would give a beautiful reality to the film could apparently not be achieved. We investigated other screens that were available. There was supposedly a screen that reflected the light straight back to the audience and not sideways, and that would therefore not create the washout. While the patent for it had been issued, the system itself was still in an experimental stage and would not be finished until several years later.

Meanwhile, the IMAX people had walked away from our project, convinced that it wouldn't work. So here we were with a domed IMAX theatre under construction and nothing to put in it.

We had a big problem and we had to find a solution. We built a dome in the office, positioned the slide projector where the film projector would be, and started projecting images on the dome's wall. We tried out screens in front of the dome wall that had less curvature than the dome itself and we finally found a curvature in which the reflection was sufficiently diminished so that the black was not changed into grey. People could sit close to it without distortion. With our new discovery we went back to IMAX. They were excited about what we had discovered and the race to finish construction began.

I split the office into working groups to tackle various issues. The pods was one, the villages another, the outdoor forum a third. A fourth group dealt with all the structural elements, and a fifth with the landscaping. Michael Hoff was our landscape architect. He was a good one but he was a little bit too much of an architect. I told him the landscape should look as if God had made it and not Michael Hoff. He caught on and developed a wonderful scheme.

The pods were supposed to display an exhibition that would show the history of Canada. I thought it would have been a huge success, but as it turned out it received a lot of criticism. This was unfair, on the one hand, yet understandable on the other: there was nothing to which it could be compared. The designers did not realize it, but the exhibition should have been more like something you'd see in a museum. The response was unfortunate, since the exhibition was taken down within a short time. Nobody knew then what to do with the pods and it took a long time before they got new uses. This would not have been necessary if there had been better guidance, but the funny result was that the pods themselves became the main attraction — and they hadn't even been part of the original plan.

Before we could start on the foundations of the pods we had to secure a calm water basin that would not be attacked by the wild waves of Lake Ontario. Since this had to be done fast, the idea was developed to take three old lakers and create a breakwater. Ramsey, who never let an opportunity to have a spectacle pass, decided to sink these three lakers on a Sunday

and have a party. We boarded a ship and were taken to the future Ontario Place. We had a lot to drink, and were in an excellent mood to watch the ships gurgling down. At least that's what we thought we would see. But we'd forgotten about the engineers and their careful calculations. They had created the sand banks on which the ships would settle at just the right height and had loaded the ships with the right amount of sand so they were floating just inches above the sand bank. When the water was let in, they settled only a few inches and that was it. We were sitting there, waiting for the performance and asking when the *Titanic* would sink. We were told that the deed was already done. Robbie was with me. He was a little boy then, very excited about the whole event, and he enjoyed it thoroughly — even though almost nothing happened.

Shortly thereafter, the landfill was completed and linked with the sunken ships. The tower masts for the five pods began to rise, and the pods themselves were finally set into place. I have a wonderful photograph of the nearly finished structures standing gleaming in the frozen lake.

The over-water bridge was being built and put in place. Jim Ramsey, always eager for news coverage, had again arranged a huge party. There would be a ceremony of hoisting the bridge in place, and then everyone would walk over it and into the pods for a great buffet lunch. In the morning the bridge was bolted into its final position as a test, and then suspended above its resting place to wait for the party that was going to happen at noon. It was a beautiful sunny day. Everyone arrived for the ceremony that was going to be conducted by Ontario premier John Robarts. We all stood on land, ready to walk over the bridge when it was lowered into position. Many workmen were frantically trying to connect the bolts, but they wouldn't fit. Nobody had thought about the fact that the change in temperature between early morning and noon at this time of year was considerable, and that the steel of the bridge would expand sufficiently to not allow the bolts to be put back into the holes. After fifteen minutes, the premier left. Jim Ramsey got his news headlines, all right. There wasn't a paper in Canada that didn't have a headline like "The bridge that wouldn't fit." We got the bridge fixed half an hour later. By that time, though, everybody had gone home and the huge buffet stood lonely in the pods.

Slowly, the project came to a conclusion. Trees of respectable sizes were brought in and placed on the islands. The forum structure came together as a wonderful building with seating for around twenty-five hundred people under cover, and up to eighteen thousand on the hills surrounding it.

In the meantime, John Robarts had retired as premier. He had been a most impressive leader and diplomat. Bill Davis became his successor, and he was an equally successful premier. We knew him because his first wife had been Jane's roommate at university. She was the most beautiful and kind person imaginable. Unfortunately, she had died. Bill remarried an equally charming woman, an old childhood friend of his.

The time for the grand opening of Ontario Place arrived. On Sunday I had a group from Australia in town that wanted to see the hospital work we had done, so I had invited them to our house for lunch, as I had to go in the afternoon and evening to the opening performances at Ontario Place. It was "firecracker day" and I saw a number of little boys, Robbie's age, coming to our house with their hands in their pockets as if they were concealing something. I had a certain foreboding, called them together, and said that there would be no firecrackers lit close to the house, because they could burn the trees down and then the house itself. Any firecracker lighting should be done on the street. Then I rushed down to receive my guests. While we were having a delightful dinner in the living room, I suddenly heard explosions in the house. I excused myself and moved calmly to the door and then rushed upstairs. The corridor was full of smoke and when I went into Robbie's room there was a basket in which firecrackers were still exploding. I grabbed it and threw it into a deep sink in the laundry room, next door. The explosions finally subsided and the smoke cleared. The various doors into the corridor opened and little boys appeared, asking if anything was the matter. I was ready to strangle them, but took them into the playroom and gave them a good lecture. I told them that I didn't care who had done it but not to do it again. I asked them to disappear quickly outside. It turned out that they had collected all the firecrackers in Robbie's basket and wanted to go outside, but one of the boys, who was playing around with matches, accidentally threw one into the basket and the disaster occurred. Well, I straightened myself out and went back into the dining room, where not a word was said. When I later visited Australia, Dr. Blackburn asked me, "Whatever happened when your son tried to blow the house up?"

The opening ceremonies at Ontario Place included symphonies at the Forum, and the guns of HMCS *Haida* were fired during a performance of the *1812 Overture*. Ontario Place was a great success. Actually, it attracted more visitors than Niagara Falls and taught Toronto to appreciate its waterfront again. Future attempts to recapture the shoreline followed the example of Ontario Place. Unfortunately, none of these grand ideas ever came to fruition. The shoreline was parcelled out to developers who closed it off with condominiums. The idea of making the lakeshore a grand public domain was never realized.

Let me summarize the five main ideas that knit Ontario Place together: the Pavilions, the IMAX Theatre, the Islands with their natural settings surrounding activity villages, the Children's Village, and the Forum.

The Pavilions

We thought that the exhibition pavilions should address a sense of identity that cannot be expressed through formal icons like logos. They should encourage a sense of exploration and create

a feeling of enjoyment. They should respond to the spirit of the site as well as dealing with the many functional and technical necessities. Ultimately, the design should amalgamate and transcend all these needs in its architectural form. The idea behind the exhibition pavilions was to tell the story of Ontario's history, starting with the past. Unlike a museum that *only* tells about the past, however, the exhibitions would anticipate the changes of the future. To accommodate these ideas, space had to be created that allowed for flexibility.

Modules of approximately eight thousand square feet and three storeys in height would accomplish that, and walkways could traverse them in many ways. Rather than a set solution, a flexible functional layout that reflected the great exhibitions of the past was required. The memory of Paxton's Crystal Place in London is still exciting today, and we wanted to crystallize our own pavilions into an expression of our time. The five pods are joined by glass connections that create a viewing area over the lake between the individual exhibitions. A bridge connects the pavilions to the mainland as well as to the islands and the IMAX theatre.

One architecture critic compared the steel construction of Ontario Place to a deep-sea oil drill. The comparison is apt. The exhibition pods are held above the lake by steel in a tensile construction, so the pods float above the water, allowing people to enjoy views of both the water and the land. It's a glimpse into the future, like the Eiffel Tower in Paris or the Crystal Place in London were (figs. 7.1–7.2).

Inside the pavilions there was space for a fabulous exhibition. Unfortunately, the exhibition was built as if for a World's Fair, intended to stay in place for only a year. The exhibition space should have been like a museum that the public could explore year after year. Instead, the exhibition was dismantled after the first season. Other activities to animate the three back pavilions were sought, but never found. The two front pavilions

FIG. 7.2: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. The pavilions and the IMAX Cinesphere at sunset.

FIG. 7.3: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. IMAX Cinesphere on the right with pavilions in the background.

were designed for restaurant and entertainment uses and have continued to be used.

The IMAX Theatre

A major film invention was to be shown in the IMAX theatre, called the Cinesphere. It was the first such theatre in the world and it started the success of the IMAX corporation (fig. 7.3). The film technique was originally developed for the 1970 Osaka World's Fair, but the theatre there did not have a screen that showed the film's full potential.

The advantage of the curved screen we implemented was that a large audience could be placed close to the screen and enjoy the feeling of being completely involved in the imagery. The theatre's success started a new era of film projection that made IMAX a world-famous company with theatres in thirty-six countries. *North of Superior*, the film that Graeme Ferguson made to open the theatre (he was the co-inventor of IMAX), was a masterpiece that exploited the optical possibilities of this film technology, and the entrance bridges were often crowded by people who wanted to see the IMAX phenomenon.

The Islands

The main reason to create islands had been to protect the foundation pylons of the pavilions from the wave action, but in doing that, a second shoreline was created for Toronto in front of the one that had been destroyed by expressways and railroad tracks. This concept has become a model for Toronto's future waterfront developments. It was created to give people the enjoyment of experiencing the interface of water and land in various modes. The islands were animated by village-like areas with a variety of

events that one could enjoy on a summer's day, set into beautiful natural areas where one could watch the waves lapping on the shore.

One of the most challenging problems was to integrate the outside advertising for boutiques, stores, and restaurants with the individual atmosphere in each village. It was felt that the greatest amount of individual expression should be allowed, but without creating chaos. The restaurants and their canopies were designed on a modular system that had an inherent ability to grow. The concept was to emphasize the crystalline form of these restaurants and stores on the outside and relate them to the landscape, but to have a symphony of colour explode inside each village, creating a lively urban atmosphere (fig. 7.4).

The artists co-operated with this, and the individual concessionaires created an integrated environment that identified each particular village in a basic colour scheme. The West Village was in a yellow colour range, the Marina Village was blue, and the East Village was red. The individual execution varied widely from pop art to super graphics to merry-go-round images. The villages were separated by natural landscaping and connected by walkways along canals and playgrounds that created pleasant places to stroll.

The Children's Village

The Children's Village, designed by Eric McMillan, was filled with spaces in which infants and school-age children could take part in activities such as sailing boats or bouncing against big, soft bags hung from the ceiling on ropes. Under a program called "Sail Ontario," 150 sailboats were made available for children to learn sailing. There were walks for the sheer pleasure of walking and various events that created a wide variety of activities for children to enjoy. New vistas and activities were constantly

FIG. 7.4: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. Retail stores on the islands.

coming into view (fig. 7.5). One of the essential ideas behind the landscaping of Ontario Place was that the visitors would never find the same view repeated but would constantly experience new scenery, whether in a different view of the framed exhibition buildings, or the various villages, or by rounding a corner and viewing a quiet canal or a meadow surrounded by trees.

The Forum

We needed a way to accommodate a variety of live performances. A sheltered space was built of a novel glulam construction thanks to a spectacular engineering solution devised by Professor Douglas Wright from the University of Waterloo (figs. 7.6–7.7). This open-air theatre was host to the most diverse range of performances, from First Nation groups, immigrant ensembles, ballet groups, and opera performances to what became an annual highlight — the *1812 Overture* by Tchaikovsky, crowned by a gun salute from the destroyer *Haida*, then part of Ontario Place but now docked in Hamilton Harbour.

All these things are now only a wonderful memory. They were destroyed by the decisions of some of the site's subsequent managers, one in particular that really destroyed the life of Ontario Place. Unfortunately, the control of the place was out of the hands of its original architects. Any time work had to be done, there had to be a competition among all the available architects. Also, because the managers changed approximately every three years, a pattern developed where we only got approximately every second job and then tried to correct the damage that had been done in the previous job. Finally, the government realized that this was not a good system and appointed us as supervising architects.

A major entertainment firm wanted to build a huge amphitheatre for rock concerts and wanted it to be visible from Lakeshore Boulevard. We said this was nonsense: when a per-

FIG. 7.5: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. Aerial view.

FIG. 7.6: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. The Forum.

FIG. 7.7: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. The Forum.

formance was on, nobody could get to it from the boulevard, and when no performance was on, people could not see that there might be a performance coming up. Even worse, the amphitheatre would ruin the circulation patterns of Ontario Place. The location was at the centre of public activities. Eliminating the circulation hub would destroy the life of the surrounding restaurants and other facilities.

I suggested putting the amphitheatre on the far easterly end of the island so the audience could look out over the lake and the sound would not affect the other facilities. My idea was refused. A public protest of many thousands, organized by architecture critic Lisa Rochon, was ignored (the provincial minister in charge said we should all just go home because we would like the amphitheatre when we saw it). The result decimated Ontario Place. When the amphitheatre opened, it had not only destroyed the wonderful Forum, but overall attendance plummeted. For years attendance had been a steady three million people annually. It dropped to approximately one million and has stayed there since. No record of this result has ever been published.

In addition to the five major facilities I've just mentioned, there were a number of other concepts that were woven into Ontario Place.

FIG. 7.8: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. Tensile construction and bracing.

A New Waterfront

Ontario Place became a catalyst that revitalized Toronto's waterfront, although it was not initially planned to do so. Our plan for Harbour City, which I will return to in the next chapter, was an extension of the ideas that were developed at Ontario Place. Harbour City would have knit together living, working, and recreation on a very urban site, but in a water setting similar to Venice. Unfortunately, this concept lacked a Jim Ramsey for its realization.

A Yacht Harbour

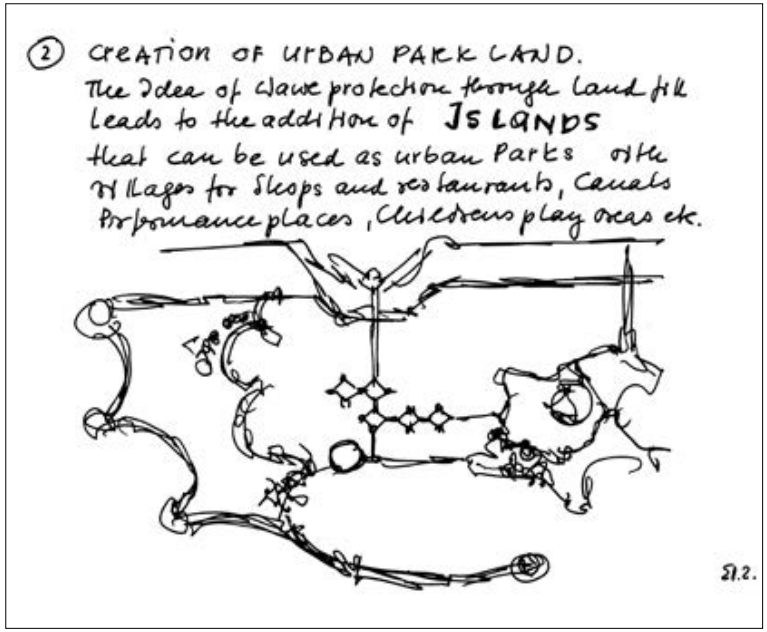
This was an idea we had trouble realizing. We were told that Ontario Place should not be a place for rich people, but a place for everyone. In the end, we succeeded with our yacht harbour idea, and the harbour has become a place of enjoyment for everybody — both for those who have enough money to own a boat and moor it in the life and excitement of Ontario Place, and for those who just like to watch the comings and goings of the boats.

Art at Ontario Place

We thought Ontario Place should be a place where art and life meet, where architecture, landscaping, painting, and sculpture would flow into each other. We wanted it to be impossible to separate art from the environment. Neither would replace or suppress the other, but each would be expressive in its own way. And so, many pieces of art were introduced into the environment of Ontario Place, its architecture, and its landscaping.

Other Activities

The destroyer *Haida* was moved to the shoreline of Ontario Place, and water slides were created for the West Islands. As well, many other activities enhanced the water's edge. The five ideas that created Ontario Place have proven to be valid over its forty years of life and have created a landmark for Ontario, a landmark that initiated innumerable changes along Toronto's shoreline. Unfortunately, the changes that Ontario Place itself has undergone since 1971 have not improved it. Yet despite everything, Ontario Place has sustained its powerful position as a wonderful escape for Torontonians and a place to encounter and enjoy our lake. Ontario Place showed the way for Toronto to *develop* the water's edge (figs. 7.8–7.28).



Left top:

FIG. 7.9: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. First sketch.

Left bottom:

FIG. 7.10: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. Aerial view looking west.

Below:

FIG. 7.11: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. The Forum.

Below:

FIG. 7.12: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. The Forum with seating on the grass.

Right:

FIG. 7.13: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. The beach.

Bottom left:

FIG. 7.14: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. Bridge from pods going east.

Bottom right:

FIG. 7.15: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. Reflecting pool with geese, at the west side.

Left:

FIG. 7.16: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. Forum hill on the east side.

Below:

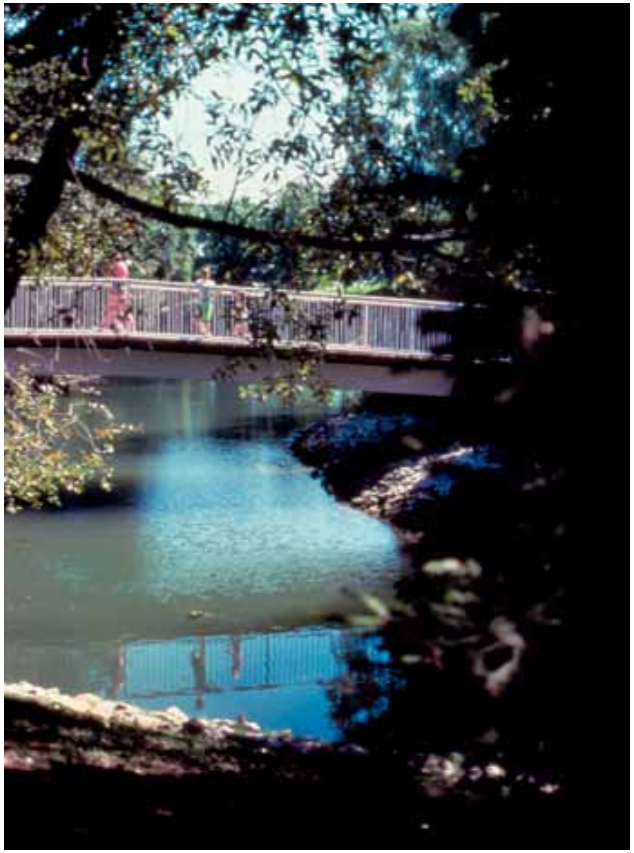
FIG. 7.17: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. Children's play area.

Bottom left:

FIG. 7.18: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. Paddle boats.

Bottom right:

FIG. 7.19: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. Parade.



Top left:

FIG. 7.20: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. Park.

Top right:

FIG. 7.21: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. Picnic area among the pines and rocks.

Above:

FIG. 7.22: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. Pods and Cinesphere looking east.

Right:

FIG. 7.23: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. River bridge.

Top left:

FIG. 7.20: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. Reflecting pool west of pods.

Top right:

FIG. 7.21: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. Reflecting pool west of pods.

Bottom left:

FIG. 7.22: Ontario Place, Toronto, 1968–71. Reflecting pool west of pods, with a band concert.

Bottom right:

FIG. 7.23: Ontario Place with the National Trade Centre (now the Direct Energy Centre) behind, across the bay.

Chapter 8

Ideas about the Toronto Waterfront

Facing page:

FIG. 8.1: Unveiling of the Harbour City model, Toronto, May 20, 1970. Toronto mayor William Dennison is in the centre, flanked by me on the left and Ontario's Minister of Trade Stanley Randall on the right. (Clara Thomas Archives, York University *Toronto Telegram* Photograph Collection). The political tug-of-war over Harbour City is detailed in Mark Osbaldeston's book *Unbuilt Toronto: A History of the City that Might Have Been:* "If you were opposed to the Spadina Expressway, you would be concerned that Harbour City would necessitate its completion down to the [waterfront]. If you were worried about the environment, you would be concerned about the impact of introducing a city-full of people (and their motor boats and waste) into the harbour. If you lived in the Beaches, you would be concerned that Harbour City [which would take over land used by the Island Airport] would result in a new airport in the harbour a mile away from the foot of Coxwell Avenue. . . . Opponents organized a "Sink Harbour City" campaign. For a provincial government already under intense pressure from the anti-Spadina Expressway lobby, the last thing needed was another controversial project in the city of Toronto."

This page:

FIG. 8.2: Harbour City proposal, Toronto, 1969–70. Model showing canals and "ring road" in a new sixty-thousand-person community.

Harbour City

Through the experience of Ontario Place, which through cheap landfill had created islands and a new shoreline in front of Toronto, the idea of Harbour City came into being. The Harbour Commission wanted to move the island airport to the east side of Toronto, where they had created landfill and could land the jet planes that were not allowed at the Toronto Island Airport (recently renamed the Billy Bishop Toronto City Airport). Toronto (fig. 8.1) as an evolution of the waterfront (figs. 8.2–8.6).

The Harbour Commission had started plans of that nature, but they were nothing more than the usual developer proposal to pack land in the lake and cover it with buildings. That wasn't our concept for Harbour City. I put an advisory committee together to discuss what should happen there and what kind of housing and other activities should be created. Jane Jacobs agreed to help us and so did Hans Blumenfeld. The difference between the two was quite remarkable. Blumenfeld felt that this was a marvellous site and should be developed like Rosedale (as a high-class, expensive district) and that the poor people should be pushed into available areas like Regent Park. The government could build them free housing with the excess money generated by Harbour City.

Jane felt differently, and so did I. We thought it should be a living city and should include everybody, from the rich to the poor, and incorporate buildings for living, entertainment, and working. We had many public meetings, and this last idea was

Top:

FIG. 8.3: Evolution of the Toronto waterfront, 1851. *Watercolour from the Toronto Public Library collection.*

Centre left:

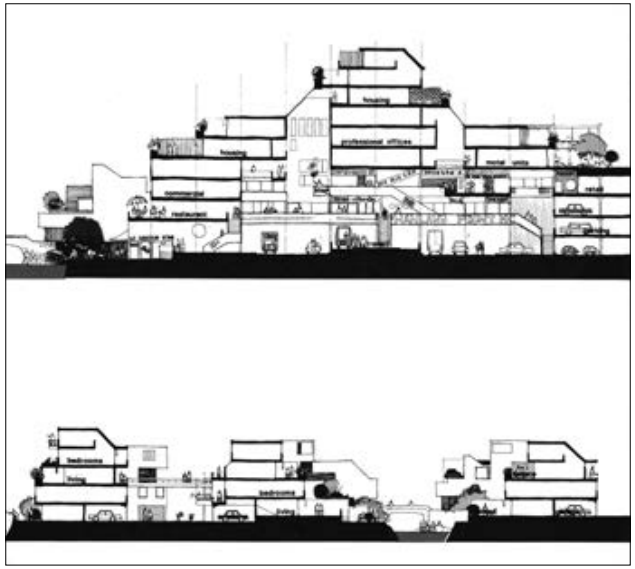
FIG. 8.4: Evolution of the Toronto waterfront, 1929, looking east from the Royal York Hotel with harbour landfill underway. *Photograph from the Metropolitan Toronto Archives, catalogue 1231-0976.*

Centre right:

FIG. 8.5: Evolution of the Toronto waterfront, circa 1967. *Photograph from a souvenir postcard.*

Bottom:

FIG. 8.6: Evolution of the Toronto waterfront, 2011. *Photograph from www.layoverguide.com.*



Top left:

FIG. 8.7: Harbour City proposal, Toronto, 1969–70. Cross-section showing mixed residential and commercial uses, constructed from prefabricated modules that could be arranged to form single-family homes, duplexes, apartments, stores, offices and restaurants.

Bottom left:

FIG. 8.8: Harbour City proposal, Toronto, 1969–70. Downtown Toronto is in the background. The massive Metro Centre development proposed at the time (blockading the water's edge) was not built; instead the area near the water is now occupied by the CN Tower, the Metro Toronto Convention Centre, and the forty-four-acre CityPlace condominium development by Concord Adex.

Below:

FIG. 8.9: Harbour City proposal, Toronto, 1969–70. The ring road loops between the foot of Strachan Avenue and the foot of Bathurst Street. Ontario Place is visible toward the bottom right. The Island Airport land is at the upper left.

Above:

FIG. 8.10: Harbour City proposal, Toronto, 1969–70. Model showing waterfront residences.

Facing page, top:

FIG. 8.11: Harbour City proposal, Toronto, 1969. Model of water-facing residences.

Facing page, bottom:

FIG. 8.12: Harbour City proposal, Toronto, 1969. Axonometric drawing of residences facing canal.

attacked many times because people in Toronto had become used to segregating the city into different districts: the wealthy and the poor, the commercial district and the living areas, et cetera. But we finally convinced everyone that the integration of all urban activities was a good idea (figs. 8.7–8.12).

But there were two other concepts that we also wanted to propose. One was the idea of a city of canals, like Venice or Amsterdam. We studied these two cities carefully. We found that Venice had a criss-cross arrangement between canals and pedestrian roads. The roads crossed the canals but never ran parallel to them. In Amsterdam, on the other hand, the roads ran parallel to the canals. The other idea was to design this city so people were not entirely dependent on the car. We ran a loop through the islands that carried the public transportation system. On its stations we located retail and entertainment areas as well as apartment buildings. No apartment was more than three minute's walking distance from a transit stop.

The apartments were organized in a way that I had learned from my own house. On one side is a connection with the social activity of the street, which is created by the transit stops. The view from the other side of each apartment was into nature. That view, in my house, was across a ravine; in Harbour City most of the views would be across water. The social "street" connecting the apartments was on the third level, so the townhouse apartments could be built with never more than two or three levels between the residents' front doors and the walkways. Car parking was below.

The single houses were arranged on adjacent islands with the road in the middle leading into the parking garages. Above, a terrace level would more or less conceal the car movement. The front walk of all units facing the water was public domain. The gardens were three feet above the public walkway along the canals.

All car traffic was directed onto the ring roads that connected with the city road system. There was never through-traffic in any residential area. This ring-expressway and the public transit loop moved through the archipelago, giving a wonderful view of these delightful islands.

It was a dream that seemed to be close to reality, creating Venice in Toronto. It was not only beautiful but also extremely practical and economical. Because of the extremely low land cost, it could offer houses at half the price of equivalent housing being built at this time in Toronto. The plan was unveiled and caused great excitement among the public. We had wonderful models, and details of the whole design unfolded before the eyes of an astonished city.

But then entered politics. A quick move by someone like Jim Ramsey, as with Ontario Place, was not possible. The idea was launched with everyone excited, including all the authorities that had to give permission — the federal and provincial governments, the Harbour Commission, and the City. All had rights on the various properties, and all were needed to approve the concept. The province was interested because it had an election coming up. Toronto's mayor, William Dennison, was fascinated and supported it, but he had made his calculations without his city councillors.

There were two new firebrands on the council, David Crombie and John Sewell, who wanted to take the council over, and there was no better way to achieve that than to oppose what the mayor wanted. When the vote about Harbour City came to council, the idea collapsed and the city voted against it. That was bad because the other three bodies — the federal and provincial governments and the Harbour Commission — had already signed the contract. But without the fourth signature Harbour City was dead.

When the city elections came, Crombie was voted in as the mayor — the tiny perfect mayor, as he was called. Now he was in *favour* of Harbour City and wanted to begin the negotiations again because the city could only gain from the project. But in the meantime there had also been a provincial election and there was no more need for the province to give anything to the

city. In addition, the province hoped to open a second airport in Pickering and needed federal monies to do it — monies that would otherwise have gone to Harbour City. The city was now ready to sign the agreement, but the provincial government wasn't. Also, Stanley Randall, the provincial minister who had pushed that concept, was no longer in the cabinet and the new minister had different views. So Harbour City was buried with many other dreams that had floated through Toronto, and we had to abandon a concept that had come very close to realization.

A Project for the Future: The Toronto Archipelago

Our actions affect the city in which we live, our nation, and even the entire world. We live on Spaceship Earth — a limited environment that we cannot expand at will. Not only do we influence others, the actions of others influence us. Sustaining Brazil's rainforests is *everybody's* problem.

In the same way that the citizens of Brazil have a responsibility to the world, so do we in Toronto. Our proliferation into the landscape, our metropolitan expansion that is flowing around Toronto in a sixty-mile radius, has created another problem for Spaceship Earth: the destruction of our atmosphere through the overuse of the automobile.

In recent decades Toronto has appeared to be a model for urban planning, a livable city where people continued to live

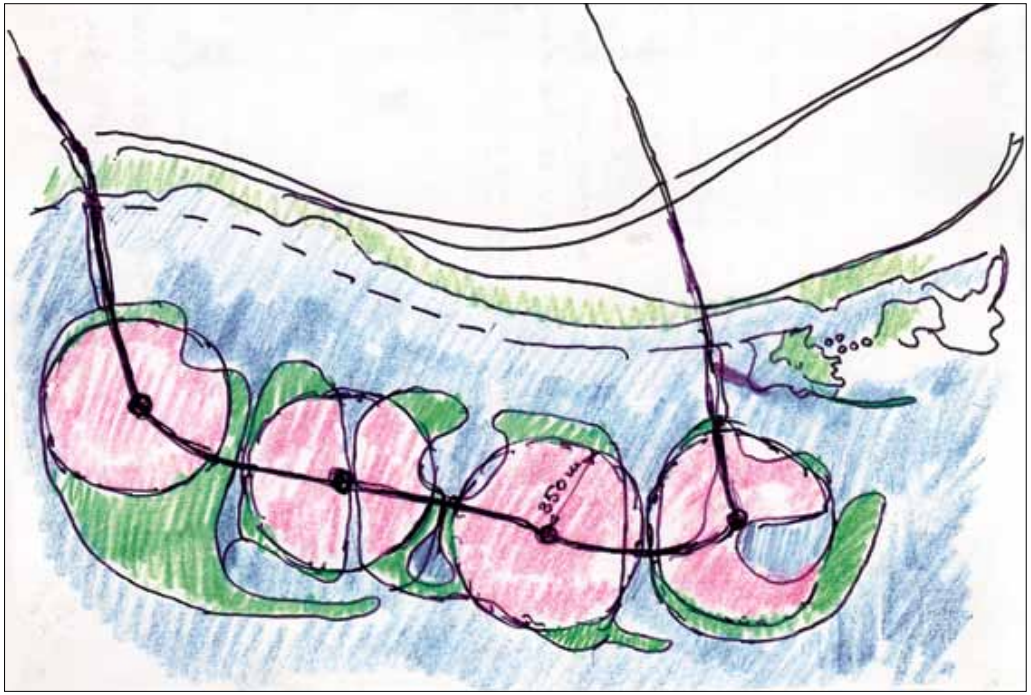


FIG. 8.13: The Toronto Archipelago, preliminary sketch with transportation link, 1970.

downtown. With a metropolitan government that encompassed five previously separate municipalities, we thought we had created a political structure that could regulate and even contain sprawl. Yet housing in Toronto's surrounding regions appears to be offered at considerably lower cost than in metropolitan Toronto. But have we calculated the full cost? When the time comes that people living in suburban housing require public transit, better road access to the city because the feeder highways are already jammed, and other services, the economic equation changes. The general taxpayer has to pay for these new services, and the cost of maintaining and driving so many automobiles is enormous.

You don't have to be a mathematical genius to realize that, in the long run, housing in the outer region is actually *more* expensive when all the "hidden" costs are taken into account — including the additional costs for providing roads in the outer regions, since those roads are used mainly by the people living there.

We should do everything we can to discourage the cancerous growth of an ever-expanding region and instead intensify use in the metropolitan area itself. We could create, even in the metropolitan area, a living environment that is equal to the suburban environment (or at least to the dream of it). In the 1980s and 1990s, there were discussion papers and possible regulations dealing with these issues, including those produced by the Commission on Planning and Development Reform in Ontario and the Royal Commission on the Future of the Waterfront. However, it takes a long time to develop the data that would encourage such developments, because the problem goes beyond municipal boundaries and even requires changes in federal laws.

Toronto has an opportunity to begin to solve this problem without major political upheaval. Toronto could demonstrate a new, sustainable urban life that would reduce the use of the car and the resulting atmospheric pollution and, in addition, give an economic alternative to those who now search for affordable housing in the regional hinterlands.

Our solution involves a project that that would take advantage of Toronto's waterfront. We call it The Toronto Archipelago (figs. 8.13–8.14). It is really an extension of the idea of the Ontario Place islands, created in the same way. This is not simply a mindless landfill project in the water. Rather, it is a project that ultimately would lead to the cleansing of Toronto's beaches. Simply described, the concept is to build clean stone cofferdams into the lake, which would not affect the water quality of the lake itself. The area inside these dams would be pumped dry in a way similar to the Dutch method of creating much of Holland's land extensions.

The land-shaping would be done by dry equipment (a fraction of the cost of dredging). At the same time, the extensive sewer problems currently plaguing Lake Ontario and the beaches around Toronto could be easily corrected at a fraction of the cost of doing it under wet conditions. The new lands would be shaped mainly with existing soil materials and small amounts of

FIG. 8.14: The Toronto Archipelago, conceptual proposal west of Ontario Place, 1970.

clean fill from excavation sites. When the land-shaping had been done, the stone coffer bank would be broken open between the islands to form waterways, and Lake Ontario would stream back in. The beaches would then have clean water in front of them, with a view of the archipelagos, which would consist of new parks, waterways, and buildable land.

The natural water movement of the lake would keep the inland waterways clean and would provide new protected environments for aquatic life. Miles of new parkland and protected canals for pleasure boating would make these new archipelagos desirable places for tourists and boaters to visit. Since all the water edges would remain in the public domain, miles of new parkland would be created for Toronto. The natural beauty of this area would be unsurpassed. In fact, the result would not be very different from what nature has done with the Toronto Islands by depositing the silt from the Scarborough Bluffs.

This would be a way to create low-cost buildable land, at a cost comparable to that in the far reaches of the Toronto region. In other words, the people who are currently forced for cost reasons to move fifty or sixty miles away from Toronto could find affordable housing in a setting that was visually superior to a suburban subdivision.

The use of the car would not be required here and would be discouraged. Of course, there are people who still require cars, and parking and rental services would be provided at the shore or within easy walking distance and would be as easily available as public transit. Vehicular air pollution would be much less than that generated by people living in the regional hinterland.

People (and families) who work in Toronto would think again about the advantages of living downtown. The key here would be to demonstrate that sustainable urban living is economically viable and has all the advantages we want without the disadvantages of a suburban dystopia.