

# ONTARIO PLACE: BUILDING ON OUR LEGACY

TEXT Helena Grdadolnik

**TORONTO'S ICONIC ONTARIO PLACE IS UP FOR REDEVELOPMENT. IS THERE A BETTER ALTERNATIVE TO TEARING IT DOWN AND STARTING AFRESH?**



In January, the Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport announced that it is accepting proposals to redevelop the Ontario Place site. Under its anticipated call for Expressions of Interest, the landmark's cultural heritage—including the Cinesphere, pods and islands designed by Craig, Zeidler, Strong Architects and landscape architect Michael Hough—may be available for demolition and redevelopment.

Ontario Place was built at a time when architects such as the young Eb Zeidler had political influence, bold ideas were welcomed, and expertise was respected. A 1971 Government of Ontario promotional video

calls the design, whose buildings and islands project into Lake Ontario, the “most imaginative urban waterfront concept in the world.”

At a panel co-hosted by the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario and the Toronto Society of Architecture, architect Phil Hastings spoke about moving to Toronto from England in the 1970s, and how Ontario Place made him feel his new home held a lot of promise. When his firm was awarded the refurbishment of the Cinesphere, the world's first purpose-built IMAX theatre, in 2010, he felt “a lot of pressure to get this right.” They studied the original hand drawings while strategizing



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how to accommodate a complete update to the audio-visual systems. Phil recognizes that, “Any building requires significant renovation 50 years later. If the Cinesphere can be renovated as a state-of-the-art movie theatre, then the rest of the buildings [at Ontario Place] can certainly be salvaged for today’s use.”

Ontario Place was closed by a previous provincial government in 2012. When it reopened in 2017, visitors converged on the revamped Cinesphere and the new \$30-million Trillium Park and William G. Davis Trail, by landscape architects LandInc and West 8. The park’s

**ABOVE** Completed in 1971, Ontario Place’s Cinesphere and Pods were designed by Toronto architect Eberhard Zeidler. The Cinesphere, which has been recently renovated, is a 35-metre-wide dome that housed the world’s first permanent theatre for IMAX technology. The Pods were first used to host a multimedia exhibition, but were designed to be flexible and accommodate different functions.



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designers worked with Carolyn King, former Chief of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation, to integrate First Nations' presence and ceremony with elements such as a fire pit and a large piece of granite etched with the Moccasin Identifier, by artist Philip Coté.

The incredible nostalgia at Ontario Place is a double-edged sword for considerations of its future, says Annabel Vaughan of publicLAB. The idea of a bold vision led by a single architect sits less comfortably today. When it was built, environmental assessments were not standard, and consultations with the Indigenous community and members of the public were not required. Carolyn King proposes that, by contrast, "Ontario Place [now] has an opportunity to represent the diverse populations that have built the Province of Ontario and the City of Toronto. Inclusion for all people—to visit, learn, play and envision a clean, sustainable future within the elements of land, water, air and the spirit of all the people."

But do we really need a new vision? Michael McClelland, principal of ERA Architects, says that the magic of Ontario Place is being by the water and that it "doesn't really need a heck of a lot more, but it needs access." Ontario Place was already on the upswing by 2010, attendance almost doubled in 2011 and the park was expected to break even by 2015. One year after reopening in 2017, it had as many visitors as the CN Tower.

It is the four pods—which cover an area the size of a World's Fair—that do not have a compelling current purpose. These structures are excellent containers, but their content has always been a little undercooked. (They originally held a very large exhibit about Ontario.) Architect and scholar George Baird, who places Ontario Place alongside the most seminal works of the Metabolist movement, says that patience may

be needed: "You can't rush reuse projects." He gives the example of Maple Leaf Gardens, and how it took many years to find its next incarnation. It now very successfully houses a large urban grocery store and a university athletic centre, complete with ice rink.

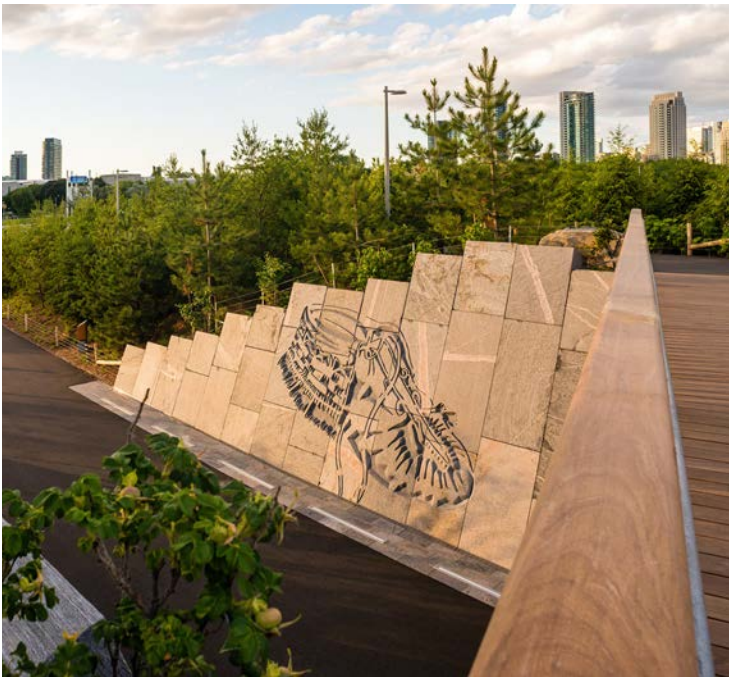
With acres of empty parking lots at Ontario Place, there is no need to knock down the pods and develop the islands. At a recent TSA-led charette for the site, my team proposed that the Province should run a Request for Proposals for the reuse of the pods alone, and leave the rest of the space to public waterfront uses, programming and incremental development by a range of partners. Toronto has a 2.7% office vacancy rate downtown, and spaces for artists and cultural production are being lost at a rapid rate. Long-term, commercial leases in some of the pods could cover their maintenance and refurbishment costs and subsidize artist live-work spaces. This approach could bring more regular activity to the park that would, in turn, support year-round cafés and restaurants. One of the pods could accommodate a museum of the city, or a space to tell the stories of the Mississaugas.

Toronto lacks the spaces that culture and industry need to thrive—and the pods have boatloads of room. They are a good place to start building a new future for the rest of the 155-acre site that includes all people, while also respecting the important cultural heritage landscape of Ontario Place. ▲

Helena Grdadolnik is director of Workshop Architecture, and was one of the organizers of a panel discussion on Ontario Place co-hosted by the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario and the Toronto Society of Architecture.



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**OPPOSITE** Gow Hastings Architects' 2011 renovation of the Cinesphere included the replacement of seating. The new seating is differentiated by colour: red seats lend a richness to the interior space, while black seats have the ability to swivel for optimal viewing of IMAX films. **TOP** The two lobbies include murals inspired by the early IMAX film *North of Superior*, which was commissioned for Ontario Place. **BOTTOM LEFT** The engraving of a moccasin at the entrance of Trillium Park nods to the traditions of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation. The park was designed by LANDinc, in collaboration with West 8 for the initial design phase. **BOTTOM RIGHT** The steep roofs of a park pavilion reference the peaks of evergreen trees.