



HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Born out of Canada's optimistic nationalism of the late 1960s, Ontario Place began as a desire to replace the Ontario Pavillion at the Canadian National Exhibition and revitalize Toronto's over-industrialized waterfront. Perhaps due to jealousy over Expo '67 in Montreal (and the sizable federal investment that facilitated it), the Government of Ontario proposed a brand new facility, separate from the CNE, and upon the suggestion of architect Eberhard Zeidler, they decided to "plunk it into the lake"—cavalier words that did not do justice to the challenges ahead.

Quickly, Zeidler found that engineering the elevated Ontario Place Pods against waves and wind would cost 90% of the project's budget. Distressed by this roadblock, he took a vacation with his family to the Bahamas where he observed the wave-breaking action of barrier reefs. He realized that by constructing an artificial reef of sunken ships and landfill around the foundations of the Pods, the cost of engineering them could be reduced from \$9 million to \$900,000.

As a result, the designers suddenly had 51 acres of landfill that needed a use. After some debate, they agreed to furnish the new grounds with the beloved Forum, the Children's Village, three commercial "villages," and a marina, not to mention a wealth of canals, walkways and wooded areas. Ironically, these secondary elements outlasted the exhibition in the Pods—the initial motivation for the project—by decades.

Almost all construction materials originated in Ontario: the steel of the Pods was mined and refined in Ontario, the landfill hauled from Toronto's booming construction sites, the Cinesphere's architectural processes and material hailed from Eastern Ontario, and many of the trees were transplanted from the Provincial lands near Barrie, Ontario.

YOUR ONTARIO PLACE

“Ontario Place is a mirror to show you yourself. Your heritage. Your land. Your work. Your creativity. And your tomorrow.”

—Ontario Place promotional brochure, 1969

Incredible change looms over Ontario Place. The iconic architecture and the bright colours of the village, the signs and the waterslides are at odds with the eerie silence. It is waiting for a decision from us.

How did we get here? How did the confidence that Ontario Place displayed in those early years slip into meandering uncertainty? Once we were able to say proudly, “Ontario Place: It's All Yours!” and now it's as if we're left to ponder a question: “Whose Ontario Place?”

This exhibition reconstructs your Ontario Place through conceptual drawings, previously unseen photographs, and the original model from the archives of Craig, Zeidler & Strong architects. Visitors can also contribute their own stories at our Memory Wall.

But revisiting the past is not enough. This exhibition also presents 3 crucial principles to guide whatever Ontario Place becomes, and 3 proposals for what it could be.

Above: Ontario Place, frozen.

BUILT TO ADAPT

From their inception, Eb Zeidler intended the Pods to accommodate nearly any use that might inhabit them, exhibitions or otherwise, so they were designed for maximum flexibility through simplicity. Despite the unique aesthetic of the bridge-like suspension structure that elevates the Pods over the lake, at the most basic level, each Pod is an 8,000 sq. ft., three-storey box. It can be clad in glass or steel, cut up with interior walls or floors, and have its pedestrian traffic redirected with ramps and bridges. The Pods were even designed for easy reproduction, so the cluster of five could theoretically grow in number endlessly. Zeidler writes in the architect's statement, "this principle of growth and change carries within itself the solution of the problems of our cities in the future."



The five suspended Pods were once the heart of Ontario Place. Built to replace the Ontario Pavillion at the CNE in 1971, four of the Pods initially held an elaborate multimedia exhibition exploring the past, present and future of Ontario. At the outset, the exhibition was so integral to the idea of Ontario Place that Premier John Robarts used "exhibition" and "Ontario Place" interchangeably in a speech promoting the project. The remaining Pod held four restaurants, each with its own distinct atmosphere.

To tell the story of Ontario, the exhibition employed a combination of multitrack stereo sound, artifacts, and projections onto hundreds of hanging, inflated shapes that the audience could move through. The first three areas presented the natural and human history of the province—

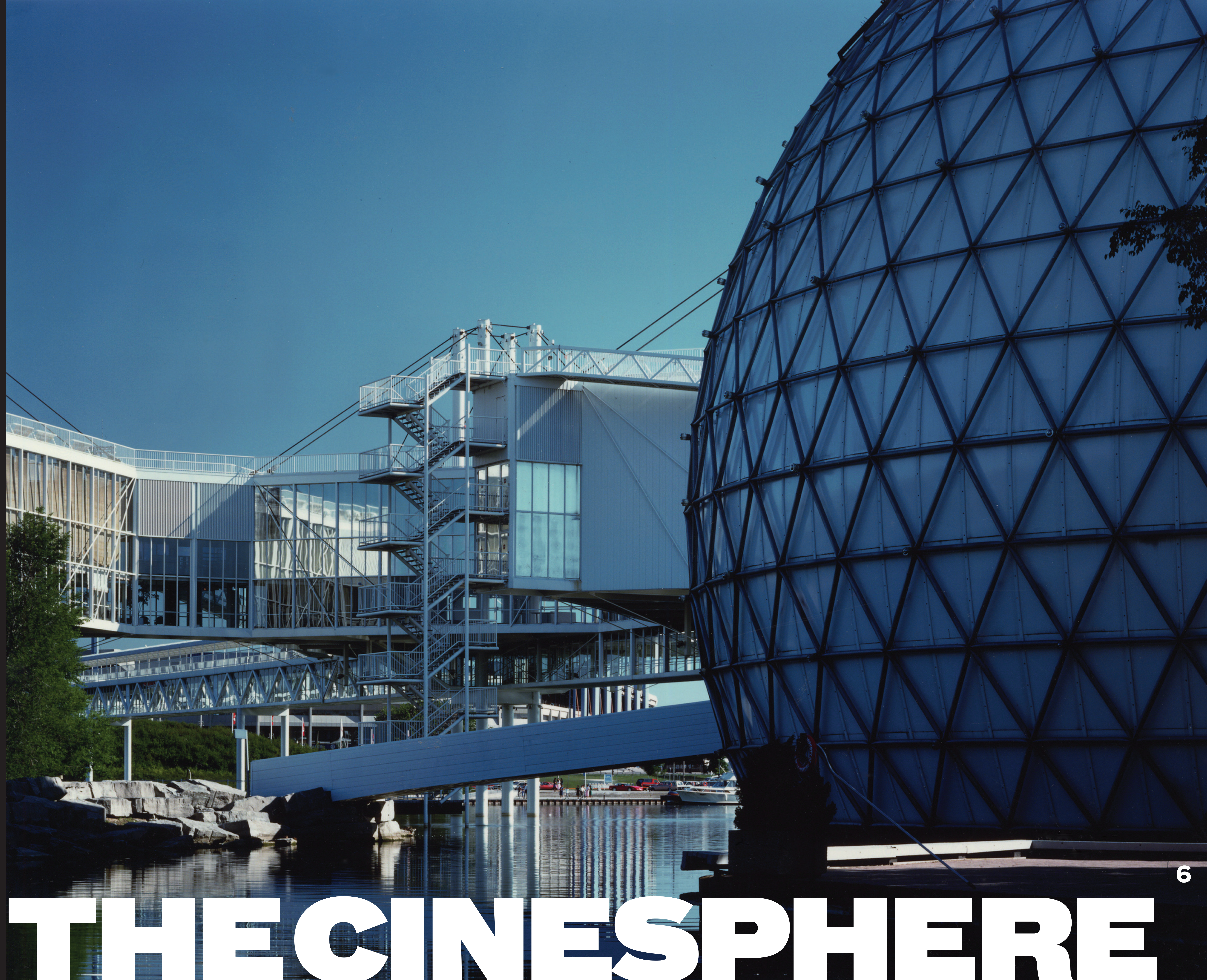
from the beginning of life on earth to the post-WWII economic boom. The fourth area explored the future, featuring emerging technologies alongside our anticipated challenges, notably the degradation of the environment.

Due to mixed reviews and diminishing attendance, the exhibition was dismantled shortly after Ontario Place opened. The Pods eventually found another life as an event rental facility, only allowing a select few to enjoy these unique buildings today. In this new life, the Pods abandoned their role as a public space for all Ontarians—a torch passed on to other parts of the park.

1 Suspension structures; 2 constructing steel frames; 3+4 exterior views; 5+6 two areas of the now defunct restaurant Pod; 7 crowd entering the Pods; 8 "Welcome Wall" of the opening exhibition; 9 view from the East.

FIRST FOUR FILMS

The first four films commissioned for presentation at the Cinesphere each examined a region of Ontario with a budget of \$270,000. The two lesser-known films, *Home By the Waters* and *Where the North Begins* (directed by David Mackay, producer of the award-winning *A Place to Stand*) showcased life in South-Western and North-Central Ontario respectively. Michael Milne and Peter Pearson's better-known *Seasons in the Mind* offered a lyrical portrait of the people of Eastern Ontario throughout the seasons. The most famous of the four, IMAX co-founder Graeme Ferguson's *North of Superior*, presented the wild beauty of Northern Ontario, from waterfalls and rapids to forest fires. Ferguson's stunning use of aerial cinematography became a staple of future IMAX documentaries.



THE CINESPHERE

On opening weekend, Ontario Place brought in far fewer visitors than expected, but even then, the Cinesphere attracted people in droves. The “golf ball” next to the Pods (technically, a triodetic dome) was the first permanent home of IMAX—a Canadian-made, large-format film projection system, invented for Expo '70 in Osaka, Japan. Refining earlier experimental techniques that used multiple projectors to create films that wrapped around the viewer, the first ever IMAX movie, *Tiger Child*, required only one projector, and filled a six-storey screen in Osaka. Ontario Place bought that projector from Expo '70, and used it at the Cinesphere for 40 years, finally retiring it in 2011.

A 1969 promotional brochure for Ontario Place proudly advertised the wonders of the Cinesphere a year before

Tiger Child had been produced, and in fact, before the technology itself was even usable. What's more, the Ontario Place dome attempted to push IMAX even further. Cinesphere was equipped to show conventional film formats alongside IMAX films. It also featured 24-track, 400-speaker audio and an innovative curved screen that even surpassed the Expo display's sense of immersion. IMAX went on to perfect this curved screen technique with Omnimax, as seen at the Ontario Science Centre.

Before its closure in 2012, Cinesphere still served as a cinema, presenting a variety of documentaries, popular films, and film festivals.

1 Lineup for the show; 2 resting in the shadow of the dome; 3 parade marching toward Cinesphere; 4+5 exterior lights by night; 6 view from the West.

HMCS HAIDA

Every year at the Forum, the Toronto Symphony Orchestra would perform Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture, punctuated by a gun salute from the warship HMCS Haida docked nearby at Ontario Place. The last surviving example of WWII-era Tribal Class destroyers built for the Royal Canadian Navy, the Haida sat in a basin North of the Children's Village until 2002, when it moved to Hamilton. One of the most famous ships in the RCN, the ship served during preparations for D-Day off the coast of France, sinking more enemy ships than any other in the RCN, and in 1952 it became the first ship ever to receive the title of Her Majesty's *Canadian Ship*. While at Ontario Place, the ship acted as a museum recounting its service history, and the lifestyle of the 250 men who served on it.



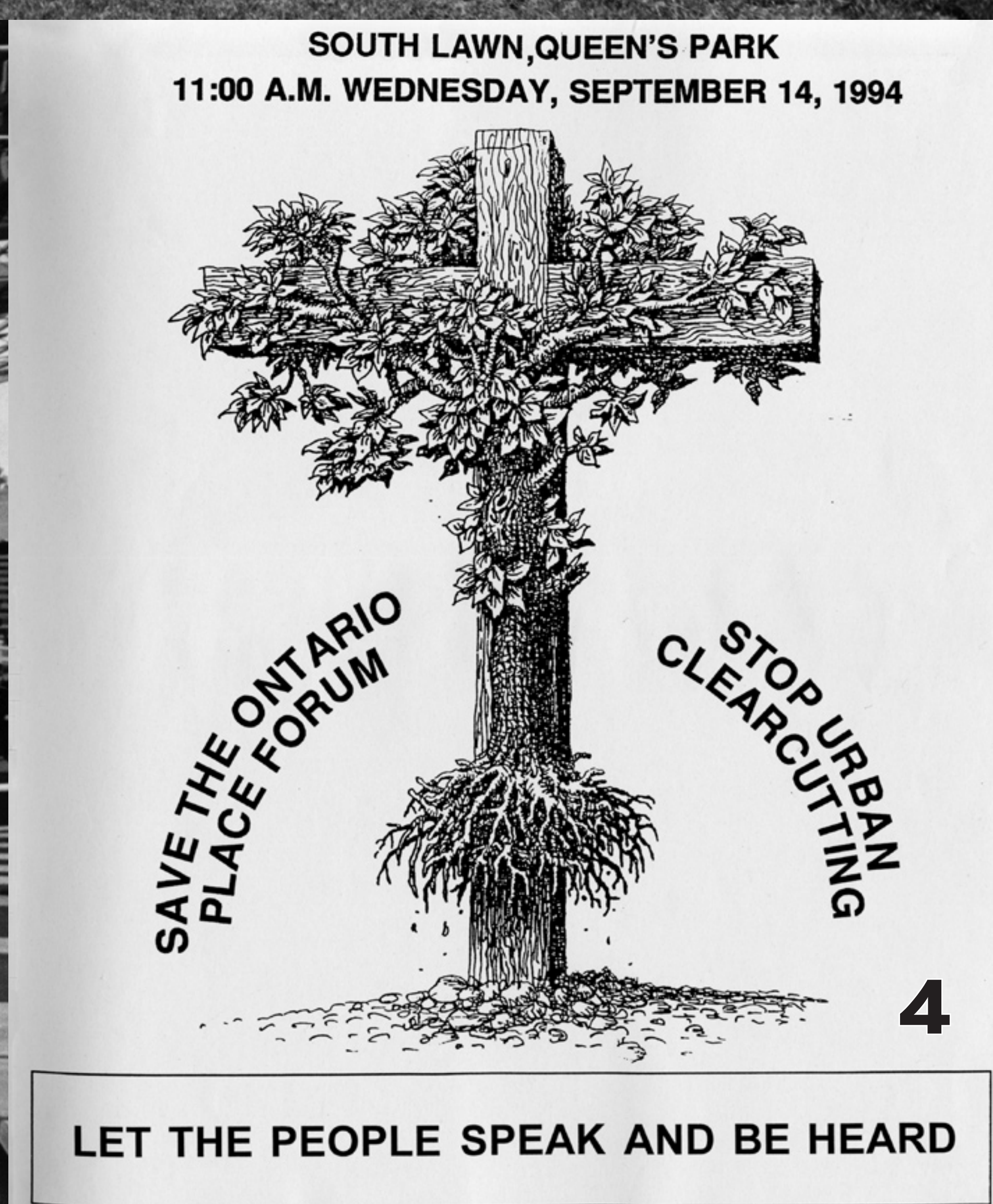
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THE FORUM

Over the years, the Forum hosted such big names in music as Ray Charles, BB King, Bruce Cockburn, Murray McLauchlin, Tina Turner and Gordon Lightfoot, not to mention a host of ballet, orchestral, and multicultural acts. With an impressive tented roof and a rotating stage, the Forum comfortably seated 2,500 under the canopy and 5,000 more on the surrounding hills, though the Canadian Encyclopedia claims some events packed in up to 20,000 people.

In 1991, talks began about adding a new amphitheatre to Ontario Place, which evolved into a plan to replace the Forum. In 1994, a group opposing its demolition (and the "chainsaw massacre" of 400 mature trees)

formed around journalist Lisa Rochon and architect Eb Zeidler. The demolition moved ahead regardless, protected by the autonomy Ontario Place held as a Crown Corporation located on Provincial land.

The Molson Amphitheatre that replaced the Forum seats 16,000 and sports updated audio-visual systems. It continues to draw crowds and top musical acts, however unlike the Forum, the Amphitheatre rarely shares patrons with Ontario Place itself due to its poor connection to the rest of the grounds.

1 Zeidler's proposed master plan for Ontario Place with new amphitheatre on East Island and Forum intact, 1991; 2 exterior view; 3 seating in the round faces rotating stage; 4 "save the forum" flyer; 5 view into the Forum from hillside.



THE ISLANDS

“When we’re finished, it should look like God made it.”

—Eb Zeidler, quoted in “The \$19 Million Magical Mystery Tour,” Toronto Week, May 22, 1971

Ontario Place was imagined as an integrated project, seamlessly fusing architecture, art, nature, and city, each element complementing and learning from the others. Landscape architect Michael Hough designed the islands as a complex network of wooded areas to explore, providing countless views of the Pods, Toronto’s skyline, Ontario Place’s 350-slip harbour, and the grounds themselves. Hough intended the islands to eventually evolve into an untended woodland, more like Tommy Thompson Park than the lawns and gardens of High Park.

Out of this landscape rose the East, West and Harbour Villages, the Forum, and the Children’s Village, which all used repetitive patterns to evoke the kind of beauty commonly found in nature. The Villages, in particular,

were meant to appear from one side like a rock formation jutting out of the land, and like the Pods, new modules could be added to them, growing in geometric patterns like crystals. From the other side, however, this natural image gave way to an urban one. Storefronts inspired by pop art and contemporary graphic design exploded with colour and liveliness, and crowded restaurant patios spilled onto the waterside promenades.

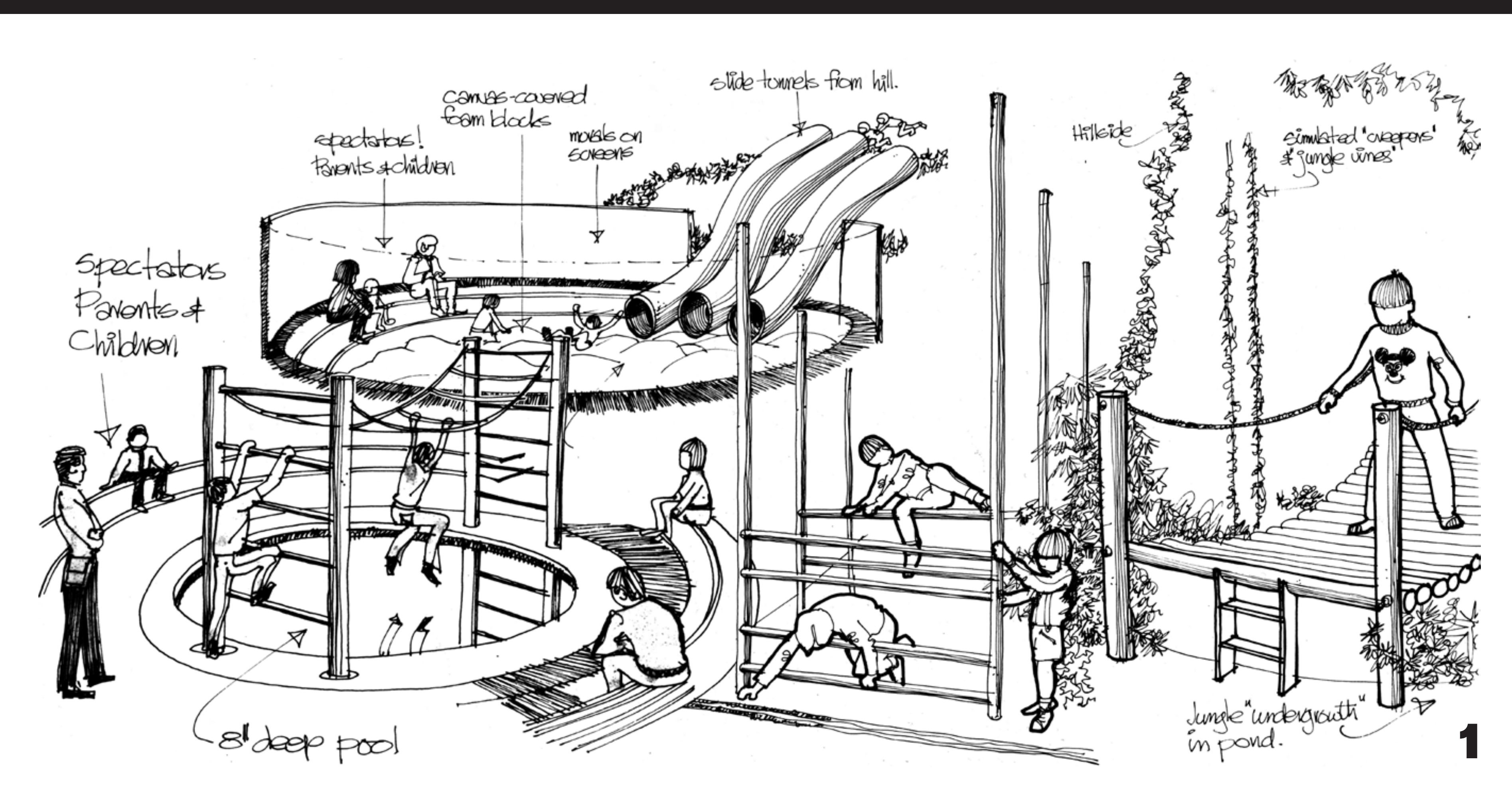
This balance between tranquil natural settings and bustling urban ones offered visitors a variety of experiences, but this subtle balance has slowly been crowded out by the ever-growing number of mostly child-oriented attractions.

1 Shady canal; 2 footpath; 3 feeding Canada geese; 4 restaurant patio; 5+6 West Island Village; 7 secluded beach; 8 aerial view of islands, 1979.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE...

“Ontario Place was a dream job ... Unfortunately the management of the project became driven by power struggles. I tendered my resignation three times to protest the strangling of the project’s spirit and potential. On the third occasion, the management’s response was to close down the whole design department.”

—Eric McMillan, “Dreams for North America”



THE CHILDREN'S VILLAGE

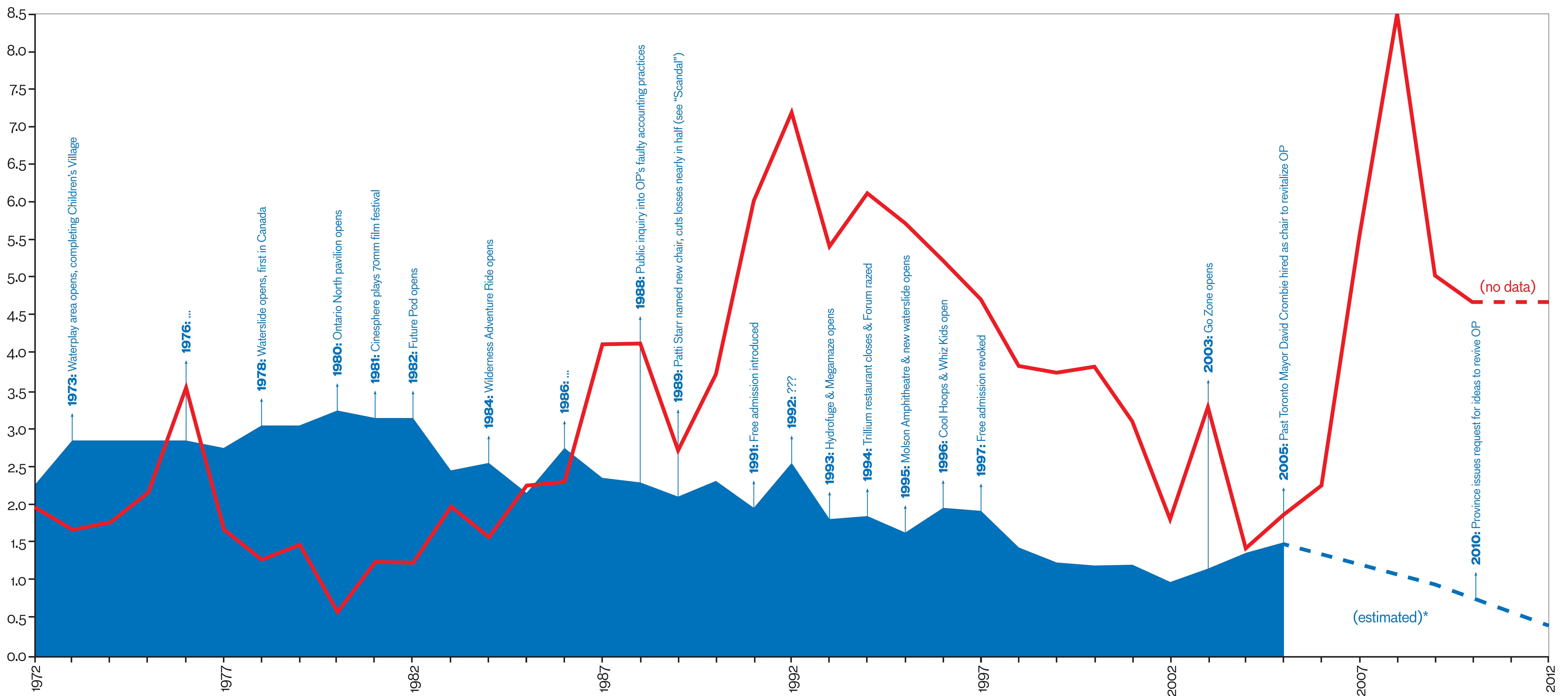
For the first year of its operation, Ontario Place offered no attractions designed for children. When the Children’s Village opened in 1972, attendance leapt by over 500,000—a success that marked the beginning of Ontario Place’s slow transformation into a children’s theme park.

However, the Children’s Village had a very different character than Ontario Place’s later child-oriented attractions. Designed by play structure pioneer Eric McMillan, it consisted of open-ended equipment where kids could test their skills in front of their parents and peers. Unlike amusement rides, which offer entertainment to be passively consumed, the Village relied on children’s own drives to run and scream, to build things and knock them over, to perform and flirt with danger.

The original play structure required relatively little maintenance and staff supervision (aside from a nearby First Aid tent), and no electricity. Much of the equipment could also be removed from under the tent, theoretically allowing the Village to double as space for events such as trade shows, and avoiding the need for a dedicated event area that sits empty when unused.

The conversion of Ontario Place at large into a profit-oriented, ride-based children’s theme park would eventually crowd out the simpler Children’s Village, which was free with entrance.

1 Collage of conceptual drawings; 2 mounted waterguns; 3 zipline over water; 4 climbing equipment; 5 bouncy inflated cushion; 6 towers, nets and bridges.



SCANDAL

In 1988, the Province launched a public inquiry into Ontario Place's accounting practices. Soon scathing articles began to appear in newspapers and magazines, enumerating the financial inconsistencies that Ontario Place had accumulated over the last 20 years of operation. Two of the more egregious errors involved the disappearance of 36% of contracts with suppliers, and an inexplicable leap of \$3.7 million to \$9.8 million in the valuation of some of the park's furniture from 1984 to 1987.

In 1988, control of the Ontario Place board was handed over to Patti Starr, a rising community leader in Toronto who vowed to clean up mismanagement and cut the park's losses. In her first year as Chair, she reduced the park's operating loss from \$4.3 million to \$2.2 million, largely through corporate sponsorship. However, the following year, Starr resigned from her post amidst allegations regarding the illegal use of funds from an unrelated charitable organization.

Since then, Ontario Place's operating loss has continued to fluctuate erratically. Despite reaching nearly double the operating loss that prompted the inquiry in 1988, no further investigation has been pursued.

THE LONG GOODBYE

The craggy line of Ontario Place's attendance figures tells a story of short-term solutions, ever-changing leadership, and over-specialization.

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FUTURE PRINCIPLES

These three principles for the future should be considered no matter what direction the revitalization process takes:

1. PROTECT HERITAGE: The revitalization committee has expressed that proposals for Ontario Place can take a “paper is blank” approach and that “nothing is off the table”— suggesting the iconic architecture there is unprotected. Because of its architectural and engineering prowess, as well as its historical and social significance, Ontario Place is currently listed on the **Heritage Canada Foundation’s** Top Ten Endangered Sites for 2012, and **Docomomo International’s** register of modernist masterpieces. Action should be taken to preserve the original elements of this one-of-a-kind site.

2. REFORM GOVERNANCE: In the past, Ontario Place Corporation has often put prospective profit ahead of its mandate, leading it to become more of a theme park than a showcase for Provincial accomplishments. In 1991, **Harbourfront Centre** made the transition from crown corporation to charitable non-profit organization, after concerns were raised that the condominiums the corporation built to fund its arts programming directly conflicted with its mandate of conserving Toronto’s waterfront for public use. Since then, it has become a model for cultural projects across the world. If Ontario Place followed suit, it could become more accountable to the public it serves.

3. IMPROVE TRANSIT: The revitalization committee has indicated that improving transit will be one of its top priorities. New routes should be chosen not only to create a tourist corridor, but to integrate Ontario Place into the city. Through better connectivity, neighbouring areas like Liberty Village or Parkdale could offer critical mass to the park, especially in its off-season. Unconventional transit such as water taxis, ferries or cable cars could become part of the Ontario Place experience by offering unique views of the city and the site.

POSSIBLE FUTURES

The following “possible futures” draw on the original ideas of Ontario Place. Rather than fully-realized proposals, they are building blocks for re-designers to play with:

1. ONTARIO SHOWPLACE: Ontario Place was built around the idea of an exhibition to showcase Ontario’s resources, accomplishments and potential. These goals are still expressed in the organization’s mandate, however they are not always fulfilled. By forming a museum of Ontario culture in the highly adaptable Pods, new temporary exhibitions and events about Ontario’s past and future could be presented regularly.

2. PROVINCIAL PARK: In 2010, Ontario Place replanted its gardens with native perennial plants to reduce labour and encourage biodiversity. By expanding this idea and returning to designers’ vision of the grounds as a native woodland with small urban amenities for all ages, economic and ecological impact could be lowered further, while reclaiming the park for *all* Ontarians.

3. HARBOUR CITY: Although not part of the original Ontario Place, the proposal for Harbour City was released the same year the park opened, and it extended many of the architectural and social goals of Ontario Place even further. Creating a dense, mixed-use development near Ontario Place could help generate a critical mass of habitual visitors for the park. Including well-designed public spaces in such a development could blend it seamlessly into Ontario Place.

WHOSE ONTARIO PLACE?

Ontario Place represents the boundless optimism of an era we have somehow left behind. The mundane conversations today revolve around how to reduce costs, around which international project we should imitate, rather than how we can harness the incredible resources, accomplishments and potential that already surround us in Ontario.

Nearly every inch of Ontario Place was from Ontario, and nearly every inch of it was award-winning. Eberhard Zeidler, Michael Hough, Eric McMillan, and the founders of IMAX — those innovators who first imagined such a place — have

gone on to revolutionize their fields. It seems inevitable looking back, but make no mistake, these ideas were untested and unproven. Yet Premiers John Robarts and Bill Davis, as well as the citizens of Ontario, boldly pursued them nonetheless.

Who are the new innovators today? And if they revealed themselves, would the citizens and government of Ontario have the vision to recognize them, and the confidence to take a chance on them? Only time will tell.

Above:
Ontario Place, thriving.





POSSIBLE FUTURES: THE HARBOUR CITY LEGACY

The Two Venices: Historic Inspirations Of Waterfront Living

VENICE, ITALY



Photos and sketches by Eberhard Zeidler in Venice, Italy, 1973. Images provided by UrbanSpace Gallery at 221 Richmond.

Eberhard Zeidler is thought to have been greatly inspired by his travels to Venice, Italy in the 1970s. These photos and sketches reveal Zeidler's interest in the intersection between land, water and public space.

VENICE BEACH, CALIFORNIA



Top three photos: Venice Beach, CA, ca. 1900s, Los Angeles Public Library collection; middle photo and view: Bob Levy; Left: Joshua Hill Photography; Bottom: Right: Roger Howard, Photographer

Venice Beach, California was modelled after its Italian predecessor and was officially opened in 1905. The plan included a 2-mile waterfront promenade, a beach and an amusement pier, which were surrounded by residential lots accessed by canals.

HISTORIC PRECEDENT

Harbour City, Toronto



Harbour City was a plan designed by Eberhard Zeidler in 1970 that would house 60,000 residents on reclaimed land between Ontario Place and the Toronto Island Airport. The plan called for a series of neighbourhoods connected by a water network of canals and lagoons and was to include a mix of residential and commercial uses as well as low-income housing. Although popular with urban leaders such as Jane Jacobs, the plan was ultimately rejected.

social housing _ reclaimed land _ water network _ mixed-use _ varied housing



Photo: Toronto City Council/UrbanSpace Gallery

CONTEMPORARY PRECEDENT

Malmö, Sweden



The Western Harbour project transformed an industrial park into a sustainable neighbourhood that includes parks, mixed housing types and a waterfront promenade. Launched in 1998, this urban design project is based on the principles of density and ecological responsibility. It houses approximately 4,500 residents made up of varied cultural groups and is powered by 100% local renewable energy.

sustainability _ waterfront access _ density _ multi-cultural



Photo: Aerial sourced from Bing Maps; other photos by OSA Architects

CONTEMPORARY PRECEDENT

Hammarby, Sweden



This sustainable neighbourhood project was first conceived of in 1990 and will be fully completed in 2015. The project, which is being developed on former industrial lands, will house 25,000 people in 11,000 residences and integrates green spaces, transit with residential and commercial areas. The goal of the project is to halve the total environmental impact of the area compared to a typical development of equal area and density.

green spaces _ integrated transit _ mixed-use _ environmental responsibility



Photo: Aerial sourced from Bing Maps; other photos by OSA Architects

CONTEMPORARY PRECEDENT

Ijburg, Amsterdam, The Netherlands



The Ijburg development project was first designed in 1965 and was revisited again in 1990. The project, which is nearing completion, will include 18,000 homes. The plan has adopted a true mixed-demographic model in which 30% of all houses will be for social rent, 30% will be for private ownership and the remaining 40% will provide rental units for middle-class incomes.

mixed housing _ varied demographics _ reclaimed land



Photo: Aerial sourced from Bing Maps; other photos by OSA Architects