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Expo 67's legacy is safe. What about Ontario Place?

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Société du Parc Jean-Drapeau

Half a century ago, Expo 67 showcased Canada at its boldest and most utopian. A few years later, that spirit travelled to Toronto with the opening of the waterfront Ontario Place.

Today, those two sites face two very different futures. Part of the Expo site, now called Espace 67, recently received a full rebuild and remains public. But Ontario Place recently made the World Monuments Fund's list of the 25 most endangered sites. One is a park, and the other could be sold for parts.

The WMF announcement is significant news for Canada. This year's list includes Notre-Dame de Paris and the Easter Island world heritage site in the South Pacific – along with the park designed by architect Eb Zeidler and landscape architect Michael Hough. “This year, local groups nominated Ontario Place to the 2020 World Monuments Watch, and we chose it because of what it can continue to offer to the Toronto community,” WMF chief executive officer Bénédicte de Montlaur said in an e-mail.

Yet, the Ontario government recently invited proposals from developers for the site. It seems Premier Doug Ford – who has long had bad ideas for Toronto's waterfront – does not appreciate its true value.

Meanwhile, in Montreal, it's another story. The area now known as Parc Jean-Drapeau has not been especially well used in recent decades; most of the buildings from Expo, including extraordinary works of experimental architecture, were temporary. Île Sainte-Hélène contains an aquatic centre that dates to the 1930s, and it is served by a Metro station, but its major use in the past decade had been for the Osheaga festival.

This summer, the city completed a redesign by the Montreal office of architectural firm Lemay. Architect Andrew King and landscape architect Patricia Lussier remade the site and clarified its relationship to the city and the landscape around it. “Being involved with something this important to Montreal's history is wonderful,” King said.

At one end of the site is the Montreal Biosphere, within the shell of Buckminster Fuller's dome for the U.S. Pavilion of Expo. From here, a long promenade stretches across the island, culminating in the large Alexander Calder sculpture *Trois Disques* – which now sits in the centre of the axis, with pride of place.

The promenade's paving follows an irregular grid of triangles, which become darker in some places and lighter in others. Three small washroom and support buildings also use a language of triangles in their plans and in the design of their cladding materials. So do the fences that now enclose the ticketed event space. All of that geometry, King explains, marks back to the Modernist graphic-design language of Expo 67 itself.

If so, it's not the strongest homage; the architecture, mostly clad in aluminum, is so restrained that it nearly disappears. And the park felt a bit barren on the cool day in October when I visited. But it is primarily meant for events, and its rational and legible design will serve that function well; it reportedly did this summer. When I was there, the shore of the St. Lawrence and the downtown skyline looked equally beautiful.

Ontario Place has the potential to be just as wonderful. In fact, it already is; much of its complex and rich landscape remains intact. The main architectural feature, its suspended pods, are among the best examples of high-tech modernism in the country – important

without a doubt in the cultural history of Canada for their design alone, never mind for their prominent place in the minds of Torontonians.

The Cinesphere, the world's first IMAX theatre, was recently renovated and is, right now, busy with visitors. The last film screening I went to there was sold out. The place is not a ruin. It just needs work.

What would it look like if it received the necessary attention? Look to Espace 67. The difference comes down to politics. "There's been a quiet protecting of the site, waiting for a moment when the city could reinvest in it again," King said. On the other hand, the current Ontario government sees Ontario Place simply as an asset to be sold. The assumption is that the private sector could make better use of it.

This is flat wrong. Urban parks deliver both direct and indirect economic benefits. The most famous landscape project of the past decade, the High Line in New York, proves this point in spades, [having paid back its cost many times over already in tax revenue.](#) But that shouldn't even be a question. In a rich society, in a growing city, you don't sell off parks that are rich of social history. You make them better. They can "become assets that sustain well-being, offer opportunities for activities, and form the setting for our daily lives," de Montlaur said. They can be "democratic space for community recreation and dialogue." Montreal figured that out, and hopefully Ontario will follow.