

Deputation

Toronto and East York Community Council

2023-04-12

My name is Bill Greaves and I am speaking on behalf of the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario, where I am the chair of the Ontario Place Committee.

I want to commend staff on a report that does an excellent job of outlining the many ways in which the provincial governments proposal for Ontario Place is deeply, and in our view irredeemably, flawed.

What I'd like to do today is call your attention to (and ring the alarm about) the imminent threat to cultural heritage value that this proposal presents; to outline the deeply flawed process the provincial government has followed to get us to this point; and to urge you to refuse to participate any further in that process and resist the destruction of our waterfront that it threatens.

Ontario Place has been widely recognized as an internationally significant example of 20th Century architecture and landscape design. In 2020 the World Monuments Fund included Ontario Place, along with only 25 sites from around the world, in its Watch Program that identifies sites of great heritage value that are at risk.

The WMF, and many others, have noted that in addition to its design value, it is also a cherished public space that celebrates Ontario-as it was explicitly designed to be. And that this public character is integral to its cultural heritage value.

Ontario Place has also received the highest possible level of designation by the Provincial Government under the Ontario Heritage Act. That designation specifies that Ontario Place is “*one of the most important expressions of late twentieth century modernism in the history of the province*”.

And that level of designation comes with rules.

Unfortunately, the Provincial Government's actions over the past three years have made clear that they view Ontario Place as a piece of waterfront property to be commercially developed, not as a heritage treasure to be protected.

But the Ontario Heritage Act is clear that when it comes to sites like Ontario Place, the Provincial Government must act as a steward, not a developer. Specifically, it states “*Ontario’s cultural heritage resources belong to present and future generations of Ontarians. Managing provincial heritage properties wisely is in the best interest of Ontarians.*”

So—how should the government wisely manage this site....and what have they actually done to date?

Under the OHA, what they should have done first was to produce a Strategic Conservation Plan—a legally required foundational document that is meant to guide all decisions about change and conservation at heritage sites.

Instead, a *Call for Development* was issued in 2019—and its terms specifically stated that anything on the site could be demolished (except for the already leased Budweiser stage).

After a public outcry they backed off and agreed to protections for the Cinesphere, Pods and Trillium Park.

But crucially, this ignored the fact that Ontario Place is a unified composition of architecture and landscape—you can't just carve it up and have it retain its value. A view of the Cinesphere framed by a 50 year old weeping willow is not the same thing as a glimpse of it behind a hulking spa.

Worse, they carved it up and handed it out before they had consulted anyone, including the City of Toronto a part owner of the site!

This tainted the whole process from the start by insisting everyone accept the privatization of the site for Therme, Live Nation et al, as a fait-accompli. Something ACO does not accept---and neither should you.

The process has resulted in a scheme that clear cuts a forest to build a convention center sized spa right next to the Cinesphere and the Pods, dwarfing them.

What would we think if other governments treated their iconic modern sites like this? What if, in Australia, the city of Sydney put an enormous spa in the park next to their Opera House? What if Toronto built a condo tower on top of the skating rink at Nathan Phillips Square?

It seems clear to us at ACO that the original vision of Ontario Place is still very much needed. A green place to enjoy city views from the breakwater, swim from the pebble beach, wander in the trees on the west island, see a film at the cinesphere or go to a restaurant in one of the villages at the water's edge or in one of the spectacular pods suspended above it.

We urge the City of Toronto to refuse to participate any further in this irresponsible plan that will lead to a generational mistake—privatizing and irreparably damaging a cultural heritage treasure and cherished public place on our waterfront.

And you certainly should not agree to sell or swap the City owned portions of this land to make this project possible.

Especially not while this is an active issue in a mayoral campaign—and a majority of candidates that have taken a position on the issue fundamentally oppose this scheme.

Finally, please try to think of another public site in Canada, designed by Canadians, that represents a more significant contribution to 20th Century Architecture and Landscape design—and you can't pick Expo because it doesn't exist any more. If you can think of one, ask yourself if you want to be part of a scheme to build a giant spa on top of it.