

Toronto's Harbourfront

The Harbourfront Corporation

Harbourfront is one of the largest redevelopment projects in Canada and represents an important example of multi level public and private sector partnership. The project, from its inception, has explored a range of planning and implementation approaches which have produced a number of lessons for Canadian planning practice.

Background

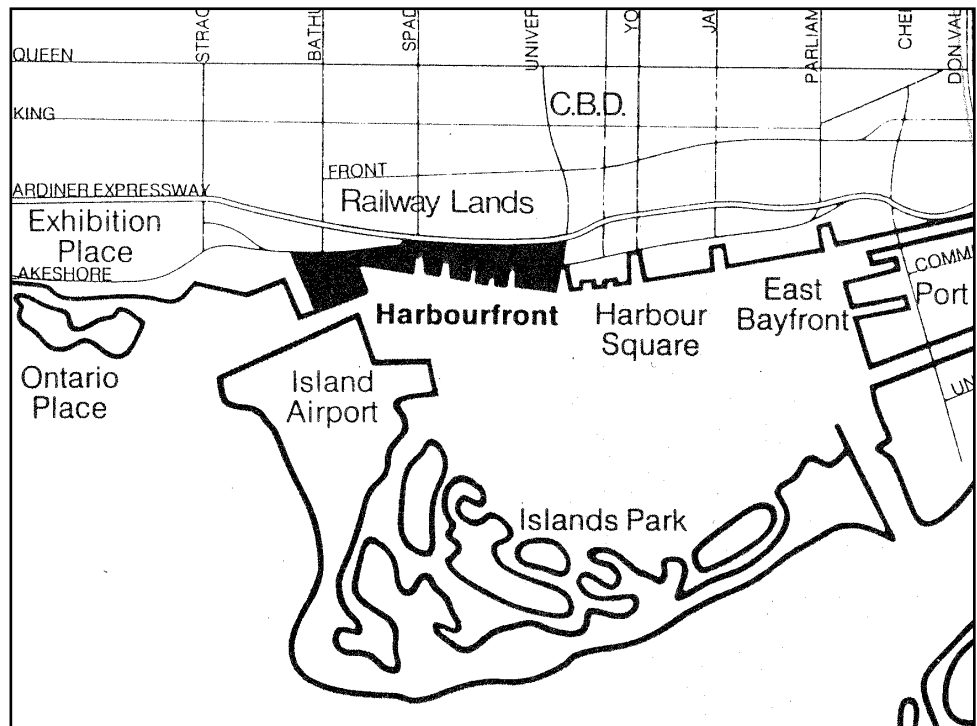


Figure 1: The Harbourfront Site

The 92-acre Harbourfront site is the western half of Toronto's central urban waterfront. The site was previously used for port facilities built in the 1920s. The warehouses and port industries became obsolete with the advent of modern container facilities and decline of port traffic in the 1960s. By 1970 the site was under utilized, despite its location only two blocks south of Toronto's Central Business District. The Harbourfront Project was a 1972 election gift from the Canadian government, and was originally proposed as a waterfront park.

After six years of debate with the City of Toronto, the Federal Government set up a quasi-independent agency, the Harbourfront Corporation, to develop a mixed use urban waterfront. The agency's parks, public programming, and initial redevelopment projects were acclaimed and popular with local citizens. However, the Corporation

was required to be financially self-sufficient and aggressively pursued private development in the mid-1980s. Public protests over new high-rise buildings led to demands for more parks and a moratorium on development. The Harbourfront Corporation was dismantled in 1990, with only half the project completed. The public programming centre struggles on with reduced financing.

Actors and Stakeholders: Political Issues

This case study could be devoted to the large number of actors involved in the planning and development of Harbourfront and their relationship. Because of space demands the actors are identified and not discussed. The sources listed at the end of the case will provide this information.

The City, regional and provincial governments, and the Toronto Harbour Commission all produced plans for the central harbour area throughout the 1960s. Frustrated with the demise of these individual efforts, the City formed the Central Waterfront Planning Committee (CWPC) in 1972. In 1972, after assembling harbour lands, the Government of Canada announced a waterfront park as an election gift to the citizens of Toronto. To deal with political differences, the Federal Government suggested the formation of a tri-level steering committee. The Intergovernmental Waterfront Park Committee (IWPC) was responsible for planning the 37-hectare (91-acre) waterfront “park”.

A new implementation agency, Harbourfront Corporation, was formed after a series of mistakes were made by the federal agency managing the Project from Ottawa. Harbourfront Corporation retained leading Toronto consultants, overseen by a well connected local Board of Directors. Harbourfront Corporation also built local support by creating highly visible public benefits, especially parks and public programming. This technique met the local government demands for more benefits from waterfront development without surrendering the authority’s control over implementation.

Harbourfront enjoyed a fine relationship with the Mayor from 1978 until it was disbanded in 1991. It was strongly supported by both radical and pro-development mayors despite ideological differences. Harbourfront also needed the support of a majority of City Council and the powerful senior officials who had both tenure and civil service protection in the City of Toronto. The agency lost the support of the Council and the staff in the late 1980s in disputes over parks and urban design. The City, province, and federal governments all took turns freezing development, eventually resulting in a federal-provincial Royal Commission on the entire metropolitan waterfront.

Planning Problem or Opportunity

Urban Design Issues & Development

Many plans were floated for the Harbourfront site after the 1972 announcement but all were sunk by local opposition. The election promise of a large park looked less appealing after it became apparent that the site’s micro-climate was quite inhospitable for half the year. The new reformers on City Council pushed for another mixed use urban neighbourhood to support their plans for a livable downtown. Harbourfront Corporation made little progress on this idea until it hired the City’s chief neighbourhood planner as their president. He promptly retained consultants with a good knowledge of local urban design values.

The Harbourfront Development Framework proposed an urban waterfront neighbourhood with 20 acres of public parks and a waterfront esplanade. The document was a guide to the physical growth of the site, rather than a master plan; it had no zoning maps or legal definitions. Instead, the planning principles and vision for the future were illustrated with sketches and photographs of the site and precedents from other cities.

Site plans for the quays illustrated many new medium rise buildings, oriented north-south to preserve views to the water. It was estimated that approximately 5,000 housing units could be provided on the site. Outdoor spaces were illustrated as urban plazas and promenades, with a larger neighbourhood park at Bathurst Quay. Fifty-six acres of the site were to be parks, open spaces, and water.

The Harbourfront Development Framework seemed to catch the spirit of the late 1970s in Toronto. Its components reflected the best of the new planning practices: medium rise, high density urban fabric, mixed uses, preservation of historic buildings, mixed income non-profit housing, and public programming to animate urban spaces. The Development Framework became a precedent for good planning in Canada and it received one of the first City of Toronto Urban Design Awards.

Changing the Image of the Waterfront

One of the first tasks of Harbourfront Corporation was to change the image of the waterfront edge. The site presented overwhelming images of isolation and decay as a result of the decline of the port-related activities and years of under investment in infrastructure. The redevelopment agency changed the site image with combinations of two strategies: historic preservation and public access. The industrial structures on Toronto’s waterfront were generally less than fifty years old at the time the project began. Several warehouses in poor condition and one set of grain elevators were demolished,

but other industrial buildings were adapted to public use, to much acclaim.

Harbourfront Corporation used the initial rehabilitation and open space projects as symbols of the rejuvenation of the waterfront. Dramatic “before and after” pictures were included in most media releases as evidence of early success to make the site more attractive for redevelopment. These images of new parks and restored buildings appear to have considerable emotive power and may also be important weapons in the symbolic politics of redevelopment. However, they can also be used by the agency’s opponents — unflattering images of high rise Harbourfront development projects were used to invoke a parks and environmental quality position.

Development Planning

Controlling the aesthetic quality of the physical environment during redevelopment of an urban waterfront is a long-term proposition. Harbourfront Corporation had architects on staff for design review and coordination, but the best long-term results came from a systematic approach to facilitating good design, rather than the benevolent dictatorship of an in-house architect. The elements which the agency manipulated to control environmental quality included the original

development framework, phasing plans, construction of the public realm, and the developer selection process.

Development Framework

The 1978 development framework seemed like a good guide to the future. It combined a medium rise built form with intensive building coverage to create a dense neighbourhood built at a human scale. Unfortunately, the agency abandoned this strategy to provide more land for public facilities, expressway ramps, road widening, and open space. Doubling the amount of public space on a site while maintaining the same quantity of development had a radical effect on built form. The original, tightly-packed medium rise projects had relatively modest gross densities, ranging from 1.25 to 3.25 Floor Area Ratio (FAR). The revised plans had the same gross density, but a built form of high-rise slabs to free up more land. The media and citizens of Toronto angrily rejected this new image and the flexible planning instruments that permitted it.

Multiple Sites and Urban Design Guidelines

The presence of design guidelines in plans or RFPs does not necessarily guarantee future environmental quality if Harbourfront’s experience is a guide. Quite good buildings were produced under both loose guidelines as well as tight guidelines. Perhaps the largest factor in the different outcomes was the attitude of the clients toward the projects. Design quality was a strategic advantage to the developers of the first two projects who were expected to be around for the long term as landlords of commercial mixed-use projects.

Building the Public Realm to a High Standard

Building high-quality public spaces was an opportunity for joint gains by Harbourfront Corporation and its developers. First-rate streets, sidewalks and parks could also improve the value of adjacent parcels by increasing local amenity and signaling that the agency was serious about creating a high-quality environment. Harbourfront Corporation did not maintain its good start in creating superior public spaces. The agency used high-quality design elements, but problems with development phasing and control undermined the agency’s efforts. Segments of the water’s edge promenade and the street level arcade were completed in several locations but were not connected. Unpaved parking lots and storage areas abutted new

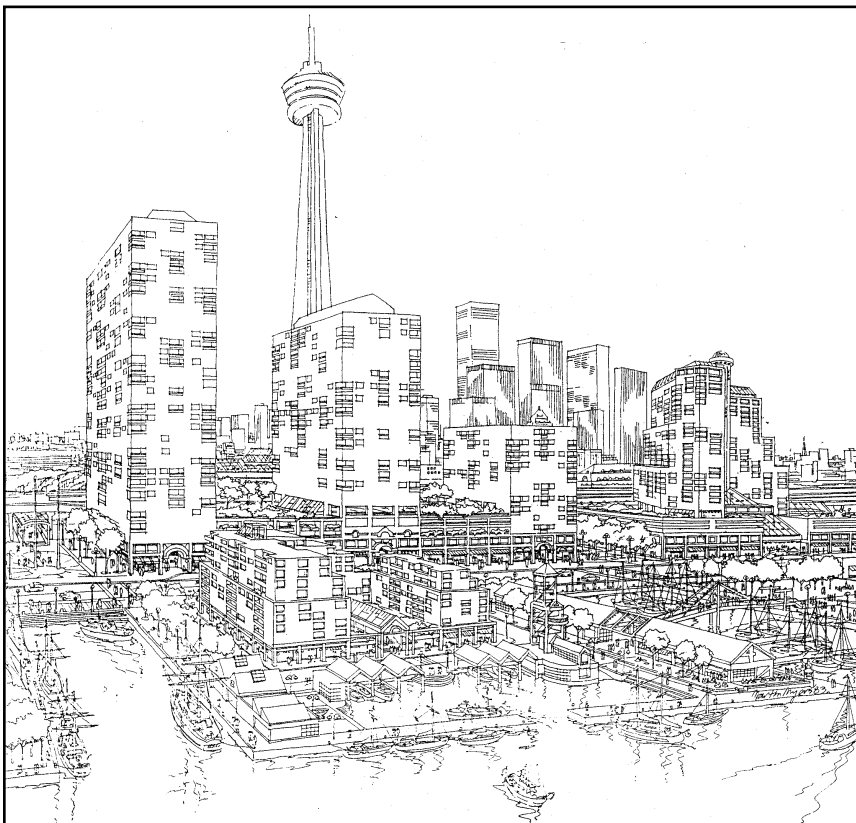


Figure 2: John Quay — 1984 Development Framework



Figure 3 John Quay — HarbourPoint

public spaces, diminishing their attractiveness. While this area is pleasant, its wider effect is lost in a sea of incomplete construction.

Encouraging Quality Through the Developer Selection Process

The developer selection process was another opportunity for the agency to influence environmental quality. The design information included with the requests for proposals (RFP) usually included both design guidelines and plans for the surrounding area to provide the developer with a context for their design team. However, the projected financial return was the main criterion for selecting proposals, despite the difficulties in forecasting future revenues.

Many of these problems were caused by a single-stage RFP process. Developers were asked to submit both a financial proposal and a preliminary design for the site. It was fairly common for the best financial proposals to have poor design characteristics and vice versa. The presentation costs for an RFP were fairly substantial and the design was often prepared for little remuneration, which created a moral and sometimes contractual bond between the developer and architect. Big developers and large architectural firms had an

advantage in this process, which may have reduced creativity and potential returns. It also prevented the agency from combining the best design ideas with the superior financial proposal.

Finance

Start-Up Finance

The start-up phase of waterfront redevelopment cannot be financed as a straightforward real estate investment given huge capital costs for land acquisition, site clearance, and infrastructure are incurred years before significant private investment begins. The Federal Government spent \$54.6 million to assemble the Harbourfront lands and its implementation agency spent another \$40.2 million on roads, parks, utilities, and other site improvements. Most of the capital investments were made before substantial private sector income arrived in the mid-1980s. Ottawa also provided an operating subsidy of \$11.3 million during the start-up period, but as early as 1976, it insisted that the new implementation agency should become financially self-sufficient to avoid a long-term commitment of federal funds. Harbourfront Corporation's 1978-80 corporate plan proposed a declining operating subsidy over seven years, after which all federal support would cease.

Long Term Financial Management

Harbourfront Corporation started small, looking for early opportunities to create modest successes while site clearance and infrastructure development were under way. They identified boaters and young urban professionals (high income, few children) as markets that might enjoy the advantages of a waterfront site, while ignoring short-term disadvantages such as construction and few social services. Although Harbourfront got small residential/commercial projects going early, the larger commercial developments which became the showpieces of the site took longer to start. The agency had to establish its credibility and change the image of the site before larger developers were interested.

Adjusting to Changes in the Real Estate Market

Private investment at Harbourfront built up slowly in the late 1970's upturn, but came to an abrupt halt in the 1982-84 recession. Real estate development was a highly leveraged activity and few projects proceeded after the financial institutions stopped lending. The builders controlled high profile sites for little cash outlay simply by negotiating slowly. Deliberate delays by developers frustrated the agency officials, but they had little negotiating power early in the renewal process. The authorities were reluctant to discard recalcitrant developers since nobody else could obtain financing during a bust. While it was difficult to keep committed developers on board during the late downturn, it was almost impossible to get new private investment during the recession.

The Harbourfront Corporation was dismantled in 1990, during the most recent downturn. The last interested developers stalled after the market collapsed. The Federal Government attempted a fire-sale of the remaining property during the worst part of the recession to establish a trust fund for public programming. In a classic example of "buying high and selling low," they found no takers for land which had previously been considered among the most valuable in the country.

The Federal Government proposed to eliminate the remaining operating subsidies for programming in 1995. The programming agency (renamed Harbourfront Centre) announced that it would close its doors before a short term rescue package was arranged. A decade after the development freezes began, the controversy continued, but few public benefits were on the horizon. No additional parkland had been created at Harbourfront by 1996 and the popular public programming lived from hand to mouth.

The underlying appeal of the waterfront edge of Toronto makes it likely that its transformation from port industries will continue. Many popular plans have been prepared for the waterfront but planning turned out to be the easy part of the job.

Interventions & Lessons Learned

Politics

1. Unilateral action should be avoided and good relations should be established and maintained with the local government.
2. Consensus should be secured by establishing an independent implementation authority, a representative board and clear and binding guidelines for development.
3. The board and agency should network, build, and maintain links with all levels of government and local staff, and use a negotiation and conciliatory approach rather than a confrontational one — since true independence is rare.
4. The development and maintenance of good relations with new residents is essential.

Planning, Urban Design, & Development

1. Local input and control of planning enhances the acceptability of the plan.
2. Image transformation of the site should be planned and supported by urban design criteria.
3. Clear and definitive physical plans (with height restrictions) that retain development flexibility, but allow for a more streamlined approval process should be adopted.
4. A good development phasing plan can reduce costs and improve the image of the site during implementation. Proper phasing allows infrastructure to be extended on an incremental basis and each neighbourhood to be completely finished, so the project minimizes its "construction site" appearance.
5. Developer selection is more important than design guidelines. It is important to select a developer with the right attitude. This can be enhanced through the use of a two-stage selection process for key sites.

Finance

1. Public sector investment (i.e., land assembly and infrastructure) is necessary in waterfront development.
2. The agency should be given ownership of the land and be permitted to obtain long-term financing. This allows the agency to survive and improve the site with the long-term development in focus instead of a concern for short-term survival.
3. It takes a long time to attract substantial private investment.
4. The agency should be prepared for its private investment revenues to cycle with the real estate market.

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