Toronto Waterfront's Revitalization: Planning Policy's Evolution and Commitment to Public Space Over Time

Charlotte Minnes, MES (Planning) Candidate,

Supervisor: Dr. Liette Gilbert

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores public space along Toronto's waterfront through an evolution of strategies, plans, and reports from 1999 to present day. I discuss the industrial history of the waterfront prior to its redevelopment. Additionally, I examine the fragmented land ownership structure of the waterfront land which has posed unique challenges to its redevelopment due to a lack of consensus or support. There is a particular focus on what public space is and how it can be positively linked to wellbeing and quality of life. My research question aims to understand how the public and private are negotiated in the redevelopment plans of the Toronto waterfront over time, with a focus on the commitment to preserve and enhance public spaces through an examination of language and priorities. Through an analysis of strategies, plans, and reports and conversations with professional planners I developed an understanding of how public space has been prioritized. Throughout this research it has become apparent that public space has always been a primary consideration in planning the waterfront but has shifted in terms of how it is presented. From 1999 to 2023, the language surrounding public spaces has evolved from "green", "parks", and "public access" to "wellbeing", "public realm", and "gathering places". This shift demonstrates the way public space is no longer being thought about simply as a park asset with public access, but as a space that is part of a greater public realm made up of connecting streets, parks, sidewalks, and trails that contribute to wellbeing, providing a place for social gathering. Within the last week of completing this paper, the waterfront reached a new milestone, opening Biidaasige Park in Ookwemin Minising, bringing 40 hectares of new parkland with public access.

FOREWORD

This Major Paper is the final component needed to satisfy the requirements of the Plan of Study for the Master in Environmental Studies (Planning) Program at York University. My Plan of Study focuses on an urban planning topic, and through courses and experiences I have met the objectives set out in my plan. My area of concentration is 'Planning for Sociability and Quality of Life' wherein I identify three components: community agency; planning for sociability; and housing and living spaces. My major research paper is anchored in component 2: planning for sociability and wellness through particular focus on public spaces as the planned element that contributes to social wellbeing. Sociability, which is linked to wellbeing, can be influenced by the way a community is planned, particularly through the integration of social infrastructure and third places. Through placemaking and planning with social wellbeing in mind, feelings of isolation and loneliness can be addressed. This paper addresses the provision of public spaces along the Toronto waterfront and the direct or indirect impacts these spaces can have on wellbeing and quality of life. This is achieved through an analysis of planning strategies, reports, and official plans to identify how priorities for public space have shifted, and how intended outcomes surrounding public spaces have changed over time.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I want to acknowledge the land on which I have grown up, received part of my education, and conducted this research. In the urban planning profession, especially, it is crucial to consider our individual and collective roles in building and maintaining relationships with Indigenous peoples, communities, and the land as we interact directly with it.

Tkaronto has been a gathering place taken care of by many Indigenous Nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples. The Toronto waterfront is covered by Treaty 13 signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. Today, the city and its waterfront are home to diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.

I am grateful for the support and guidance provided by my advisor and research supervisor, Liette Gilbert, during my time in the MES-Planning program. I also want to express my gratitude to the professors of courses I took, who challenged me to think critically about urban and regional planning and the various political, environmental, economic, and social factors that influence this field.

Finally, to the friends, family, and loved ones who have shown patience, kindness, curiosity and supportiveness throughout my master's – thank you!

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Introduction

Toronto's urban waterfront provides a unique opportunity to deliver parkland and public space in a city where high-density development is decreasing the ownership of private outdoor spaces. Once a shipping port, Toronto's former industrial lakeshore has changed dramatically since the 1900s. While interest in waterfront redevelopment has increased, Toronto has faced challenges with plan implementation due to land fragmentation and jurisdictional gridlock. Land ownership along the waterfront is split between various agencies at the federal, provincial, and municipal government level who own 28%, 26%, and 33% respectively (Eidelman, 2018). Waterfront Toronto collaborates with all three levels to overcome these barriers and takes on a "leading with landscape" model. This research paper examines the evolution of public space within strategies, reports, and plans from 1999 to 2023. Public space takes on many forms such as parks, playgrounds, and beaches but also streets and sidewalks. Literature finds that thoughtful public spaces and places promote social connection, a sense of belonging, and improved wellbeing. This major research paper seeks to understand how public space has been prioritized throughout its redevelopment efforts along the Toronto waterfront and hypothesises that the intentions for providing public space have developed a focus on the social and wellbeing outcomes of these spaces.

Methodology

My research primarily conducts a content analysis of key waterfront redevelopment plans from 1999 through to 2023. I have selected a 1999 and 2023 plan for a deeper analysis of the policies and language used regarding public realm and public space to determine how content and visions have evolved over time. The 1999 report *Our Toronto Waterfront! The Wave of the Future* helped to identify principles and set out a vision for Toronto's waterfront over the following 10 years. The 2023 report, *Waterfront Toronto Rolling Five-Year Strategic Plan* provides an update on where the waterfront currently stands in completing some of its goals and priorities and identifies where the waterfront is headed. I also review the 2005 Central Waterfront Secondary Plan in more detail, as it is an in-force document to which developments must comply, rather than a vision or intention-setting document. I also review other reports and plans, but the purpose of focusing on these main plans is to understand what has been realized in the built environment from the first plans and visions for the urban redevelopment of Toronto's waterfront. While the waterfront is an expansive piece of land spreading 46 kilometres along Ontario Lake, I have chosen to focus on the central waterfront depicted in the Central Waterfront Secondary Plan boundary map (Figure 7). The Central Waterfront is comprised of land generally south of Lake Shore Boulevard from Jameson Avenue to Greenwood Avenue, and includes the West Don Lands. I have chosen the Central Waterfront because it is one of the areas still under development which offers a greater opportunity to identify what has been realized so far and how ideas have changed over time in a still developing area.

Drawing on academic literature and conversations with planners, my research considers public space to be defined as all of the space between buildings. It may look like a park, plaza, sidewalk, street, or bench to name a few. This implies tangible, physical space but should also consider the intangible social and symbolic spaces that are a part of public life and happen in these in-between spaces such as protests and social gatherings (Bowman, 2025; Lehrer, 1998; Low, 2023). To understand public space and

its outcomes along the Toronto waterfront, I rely on qualitative data, drawing on existing research surrounding topics of land governance, waterfront development, and public space. In drawing from planning policy documents, I compare and contrast the policies in place to preserve, protect, or enhance public spaces along Toronto's waterfront. My review specifically looks for key moments in the development of waterfront, as well as similarities and differences between plans. Throughout the analysis of plans I look particularly for language that speaks to the public realm, and I identify projects that have been completed (partially, or fully), to determine the evolution of public space planning priorities. Some of this language includes words such as public, public realm, public space, health, wellbeing, open space, vision, and destination.

In addition, I conducted 3 interviews with private sector planners, public sector planners, and public developers who are actively working on the waterfront plans and development. Interviewees have included Carly Bowman, Director of Community Planning for the South District (including a portion of the eastern waterfront) at the City of Toronto; Melanie Hare, Partner at Urban Strategies and co-author of various waterfront plans; and Jed Kilbourn, Director of Development Planning at Waterfront Toronto. These interviews provide additional insight into how the existing policies are guiding or posing challenges to planning in the area and offer insights on where planners working in this area see the waterfront's redevelopment going.

Organization of this Major Research Paper

This Major Research Paper is organized into three major sections. The first section provides context to the area by explaining the history of the Toronto Waterfront and identifying why it has evolved into what it is today. This section touches on topics of Toronto's industrial history and waterfront land ownership over time. The second section seeks to understand what public space is and what its importance is more generally, and in the context of Toronto. The third section looks at the various visions for the Toronto waterfront. This section explores the evolution and contextual forces behind the waterfront's redevelopment from 1999 to present day. In this section I break down the major initiatives and visions of reports, strategies, and plans for the waterfront. This section is followed by a quantitative analysis of key terms related to the public realm and wellbeing to determine if there has been an increase in the number of times the public realm is spoken to, and also to determine how language around the provision of public spaces has changed. This section ends with a brief speculation on the future of the waterfront, through personal reflection and content from interviews.

A Brief History of the Toronto Waterfront

The Toronto Waterfront has undergone significant changes since the early 1600s particularly through the extension of land southward to make room for more industry. Over time, land was parceled and distributed among municipal, provincial, and federal authorities which has created a unique challenge to planning along the water's edge. This section seeks to explain the prior uses for Toronto's waterfront, what is currently existing, and how the land governance structure of the waterfront has impacted change.

Toronto's waterfront has historically been used for industrial, manufacturing, and transportation purposes. The Toronto Waterfront is commonly understood to be a 46-kilometre expansion (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 1999**)** along Lake Ontario between Mississauga and Pickering. The lake is fed by two rivers, the Humber River to the West and the Don River to the East.

Toronto's waterfront function began as a trade route for Indigenous peoples until the early 1600s and 1700s when the French set up trading camps along these routes. Toronto became a strategic site for settlement and expansion of the fur trade after the United States Revolution in 1776 (History & Heritage, n.d.). Governed by the British, the waterfront was used as a site for moving supplies and troops along Lake Ontario, should the United States gain control of Lake Erie. Coinciding with these efforts was the construction of Fort York which began in 1793 (History & Heritage, n.d.). In the 1800s, manufacturing facilities and factories were built on the lakeshore in response to the majority of Toronto – then named Town of York – conducting trade by boat. Shipping, industrial, and railway infrastructure were inhibited due to a lack of available waterfront land in the 1830s and 1840s (History & Heritage, n.d.). A campaign of lake-filling took place to expand shoreland south to accommodate these industries. While Fort York and Front Street were formerly the city's edge, this lake-filling extended the shore further south until the 1980s when the current shoreline was established.

Figure 1:Waterfront Toronto ~ c.1905

(Source: Digital Archive Ontario, circa 1905)

Figure 2: Waterfront Toronto c.1929

(Source: Digital Archive Ontario, 1929)

In the early 1900s post Second World War, industry was concentrated along the waterfront making the downtown core undesirable, and encouraging wealthy families to move away from the industrial urban areas to suburbs such as Leaside, Don Mills, and Parkdale (CBC, n.d.; Gibney, 2021; History & Heritage, n.d; Watson, 2014). To accommodate residents with vehicles who were living outside of the core, roads and highways were required to provide commuter access from homes to jobs in the downtown. This is what spurred the construction of the Gardiner Expressway in the 1950s. While the expressway was convenient for commuters at the time, it restricted access to the waterfront and created a city-waterfront divide (History & Heritage, n.d.; Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 1999). The early 1970s brought about an urban revolution of sorts, it was a time when many cities globally were rediscovering the potential of their urban waterfronts. Waterfront development included renewal and regeneration projects to turn prior industrial areas back into active uses, but equally to become a part of a world stage, and establish themselves as competitive cities in terms of economic prosperity and international tourism (History & Heritage, n.d.; Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 1999). Some of the outcomes of redeveloped waterfronts have been an attraction of residents, employment, and tourists. Toronto's waterfront redevelopment visions and physical efforts began in the early 1970s with the development of the Harbourfront Centre, the Queens Quay Terminal and its surrounding area (see Figure 3 below).

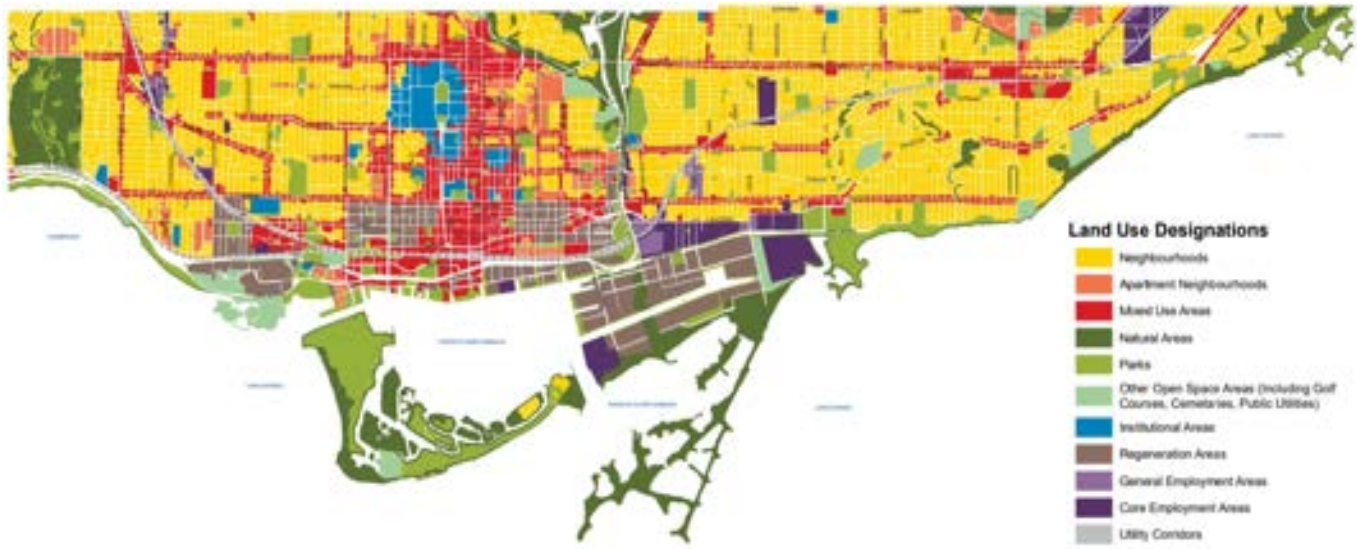
Figure 3: Harbourfront, Toronto, c.1974

(Source: Toronto Star, 10/17/1972)

Waterfront redevelopment became a key planning strategy in the 1980s-1990s following efforts in North American cities, with Baltimore as a prime example (Avni and Teschner, 2019). With waterfront redevelopment projects emerging in Australia, Japan, Spain, South Africa, and Canada, waterfront redevelopment was seen as an attractive opportunity for post-industrial market-oriented economies as it presents potential for new leisure, retail, tourism, and recreational uses and creates opportunities for labour and manufacturing to change and reflect present times (such as technological districts) (Avni and Teschner, 2019). Waterfront redevelopment projects are unique because they are different in "scale, use, purpose, geographic context, and organizational framework" from other forms of urban planning (Avni and Teschner, 2019, p. 410). Avni and Teschner point out the political, economic and sociocultural values shared by urban waterfronts. Politically, urban waterfronts can represent the face of a city, holding symbolic value as central locations of an urban core typically tied to former trade routes which emphasizes political ties with other geographic destinations. Economically, waterfronts represent high exchange value as they have desirable real estate with the potential for production, consumption, and tourism. Lastly, socioculturally, urban waterfronts represent a "perceived communal value", assumed to be a part of a city's open spaces (Avni and Teschner, 2019, p. 410). This idea of communal space is central to my research as I explore the importance, both real and perceived, of protecting and enhancing public space along the Toronto waterfront. The post-industrial landscapes of many waterfronts create opportunity for the natural environment of urban waterfronts to grow, creating new places for recreation, new vistas, and new communities. While many urban waterfronts share similar histories of trade, manufacturing, and industrial uses, they all differ drastically in their land ownership structures which may hinder or aid in the facilitation of redevelopment plans.

Presently, Toronto's urban waterfront is characterized by its waterfront pathway, multiple parks scattered along this pathway, the Harbourfront Centre, a Fire Station, the Toronto Ferry Terminal for access to the Toronto Island, and Porter Airport. Within Toronto's Official Plan (Maps 18 and 21)(Figure 4) the land is designated as mixed-use areas, apartment neighbourhoods, parks, other open space areas, regeneration areas, general employment areas, and core employment areas. The waterfront is divided from the urban core by existing rail corridors and streets and highways creating a sort of barrier between the downtown and urban waterfront spaces. Transit to the waterfront is connected via Union station with buses and streetcars, with less transit connectivity to the east side of the Central waterfront. During the summertime, the waterfront is often bustling with activity - various pop-up shops, food stands, rental water activities, children's day camps, and various cultural events. During the wintertime, the waterfront sees less activity due to the cooler weather. The harbourfront centre provides some winter programming such as an outdoor skating rink and Christmas market, but water-side walking trails get chained off which dissuades use and many of the stores that are open in the summer are closed.

Figure 4: Toronto Land Use Maps 18 & 21



(Source: City of Toronto, 2025 [adapted by author])

Waterfront Land Ownership

Land ownership structures have been identified as one of the primary barriers to waterfront redevelopment (Eidelman, 2018). Land ownership is defined as "enforceable rights to property differentiated according to three categories of property: private, common, and state" (Eidelman, 2018, p. 700). Private land refers to property owned by an individual with the right to exclude access, for example one's home. Common property refers to land which anyone has the right to, for example city streets or certain natural resources. State property includes a combination of private and common property but typically acts as a private entity. State property may include railways, government offices, or private

universities or colleges, to name a few. In short, land ownership stems from conflicts of land-use changes, essentially conflicts regarding who owns what and what are the interests of each party.

Private property can be understood "as a physical thing that can be physically divided" (Heller, 1999, p. 1170). However, as land gets continuously divided into private properties it reaches a point where the land is no longer productive as a small fragment, thus requiring the assembly of parcels. The challenge with this is that private property owners have a right to "use or exclude" and if a consensus cannot be made it can result in wasted property (Heller, 1999, p. 1170). Historically, private property has been a valuable asset generally passed down through generations to the male of the family. Over time as families grew, division of lands became common practice, fractioning large parcels into equal parcels of private property. The creation of private property is possible through law, police, and courts (Freyfogle, 2003). Private property is a social institution created through public and private forces, with the public being governance, legal, and policy structures.

Public property is defined by Eidelman (2018, p. 701) as "property in which any arm of the state (government department, agency, board, corporation, commission, or special-purpose body) holds an exclusive right, in title or material interest." This definition does not include reference to public benefit but rather emphasizes the right to meeting the interests of the land holder, which in this case is a public entity. There is often an expectation that 'public property' should benefit the community or the public more generally. However, the interests of the land holder, whether public or private do not have a duty to serve community benefits. In reality, public agencies may on occasion serve their own interests. An example of this might be postponing development and provision of new amenities due to the financial speculation of increasing land holdings value. Avni and Teschner (2018, p. 410) "[suggest] that public ownership in waterfront redevelopment plays a symbolic - rather than a pragmatic - role because a definition of a public domain may embody a certain ideology that supports and promotes principles such as common use and open access." In some cases, public land ownership is considered positively, as a way of pushing progressive policies for effective long-term planning (Eidelman, 2018). This idea is supported by community planner Carly Bowman (2025) who pointed out that publicly owned land provides opportunity for this public builder model, like what Waterfront Toronto does where all three levels of government are able to work together to deliver public land (Kilbourn, 2025).

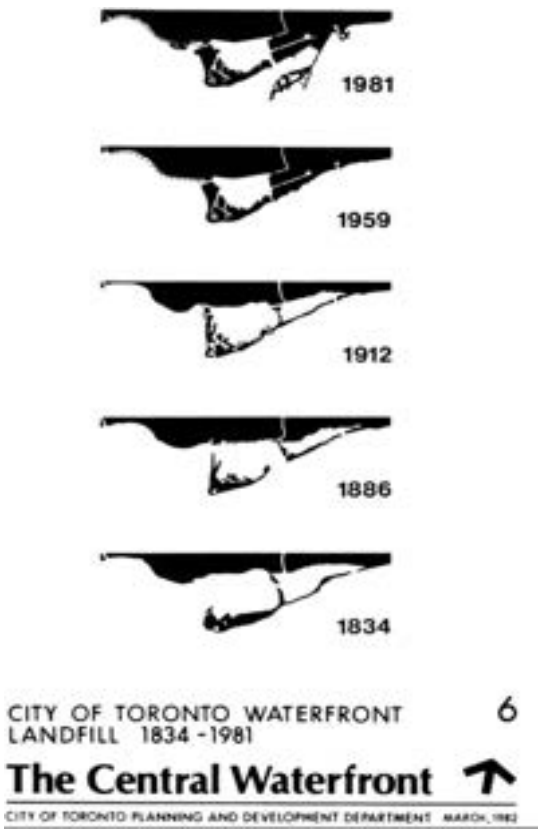
Eidelman (2018) points out that in urban literature it is often assumed that private property interests dictate city politics as opposed to public interests. This is an assumption that I found myself grappling with as I began to understand the layers of land ownership fragmentation along the Toronto waterfront. When it comes to land acquisition and redevelopment opportunities along the waterfront it is assumed that governments will assemble land that responds to a collective need such as social housing, community facilities, schools, or public parks (Eidelman, 2018). This land assembly is where the concept of fragmentation comes into play. Land ownership fragmentation happens when portions of land are broken up into several pieces and are controlled by different entities. In the case of waterfront areas such as shorelines, riverfronts, and coastal zones, these areas are typically publicly owned due to their historical uses as shipping and industrial hubs (Avni and Teschner, 2019). This is certainly true in Toronto's case and has created some additional challenges which have been acknowledged throughout various strategies, proposals, and plans, but have not necessarily been successfully resolved.

Toronto's redevelopment "has been characterized by unrealized and quixotic planning and design visions since the early 1960s" and often tarnished by various government agencies seeking development rights control (White, 2016, p. 2). Toronto's urban waterfront is an interesting case of fragmented land

ownership because the majority (81%) of the waterfront has been publicly owned since the 1960s (Eidelman, 2018). Over time, these publicly owned lands have become fragmented across dozens of public authorities (Eidelman, 2018). Eidelman (2018), through a comparative look at urban waterfront redevelopment in Chicago, Vancouver, and Toronto, identifies the key events that shaped the consolidation or fragmentation of lands.

Toronto's waterfront spans 46 kilometres, made up of approximately 3700 acres of land (Eidelman, 2018; Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 1999). In the late 1800s lake filling was undertaken in order to create more land upon which to conduct shipping, manufacturing, and industrial activity (Eidelman, 2018). Toronto's old land boundary is what we know today as Front Street. What is today considered the "fringes of the waterfront" are the result of Toronto's incorporation in 1834 reshaping where the city and Lake Ontario meet (Eidelman, 2018, p. 713). In 1834, the province of Ontario incorporated the town of York into the 'City of Toronto' which created a municipal structure allowing the city to urbanize further (Institutional Toronto, 2017). The growth of railway transportation in the 1850s and again in the 1960s further extended the shoreline southward creating new paths and rights of way and creating more access for businesses. The result of this new mode of access invited business which further pushed the water's edge southward from Front Street to the Esplanade and Lake Shore Boulevard (previously known as Lake Street) (Eidelman, 2018). Figure 5 below provides an illustration of Toronto's southward expansion from 1834 to 1981 as the waterfront limit existing today.

Figure 5: City of Toronto Waterfront Landfill 1834-1981



(Source: City of Toronto, 1982 as cited in White, 2016)

The new expanse of waterfront access, limited to business use, was seen as a new opportunity. At the turn of the twentieth century, local business groups lobbied civic officials to expand port and industrial facilities on the waterfront. In response, in 1911 the Government of Canada established a new port authority. The Toronto Harbour Commission was given two primary roles: as a development corporation and as a regulatory figure (Desfor, 1993). In fulfilling its role as a development corporation, the Toronto Harbour Commission was given the authority to convert over 1300 acres of marshland around Ashbridge's Bay into the Port Lands District to create space for new industrial activity via rail, road, and water (Desfor, 1993). This conversion was supported through the 1912 *Waterfront Development Plan.* The infill of Ashbridge's bay not only created development opportunity and the expansion of industrial uses possible, but also responded to public health problems that had been present since the 1880s when sewers were emptied into the waters, and meat industries would dump waste — the accumulation of which created fear of a cholera epidemic (Desfor, 1993). This is indicative of the thought process behind planning decisions meeting both financial interests through industrial expansion, citizens public interests for a healthy environment, and (as a result) environmental interests by helping to restore and de-contaminate lands.

By 1969 the original shoreline had been transformed by public authorities, having filled in half of Toronto Bay as it had existed in 1834 (Eidelman, 2018). Around the same time, functions of the shipping industry changed as containerization grew and Toronto's position as a commercial harbour dwindled, moving east to Montréal. The increase of containerization meant that cargo traffic and shipping infrastructure was relocating to the suburbs in favour of intermodal shipment transportation, leaving behind "open huge swaths of waterfront property for redevelopment" (Eidelman, 2018, p. 713; Wallace, 1975). Here, I highlight the chosen language of "property for redevelopment" because it should not be assumed that open land requires redevelopment. Often this argument is tied into the incentives for financial gain from open and profitable land through housing, or commercial operations. However, there are alternative uses to open space such as the creation of open and public space such as parks, plazas, and recreational areas or even novel ecologies — essentially allowing for natural ecological forms to regrow in their own time, re-wilding an area and restoring its function as a place for nature and animal forms (Foster, 2023).

Over the 30 years of infill development on the waterfront, four comprehensive redevelopment plans to 'revitalize the waterfront' were approved by Toronto City Council (Eidelman, 2018, p. 714). In 1967, *A Waterfront Plan for the Metropolitan Area* was released by the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto, which was at-the-time Toronto's upper-tier regional government. Around the same time in 1968, the Toronto Harbour Commission released *A Bold Concept* (Eidelman, 2018). These plans were envisioning the provision of new housing, and commercial and transportation hubs which would bring thousands of new residents to the urban centre, which had previously been an undesirable location to live due to its proximity to industry. Further to these plans, in 1984 the City of Toronto released a *Central Waterfront Plan* which had a vision of maximizing public access to the water, triggering new industrial and commercial uses, and creating public realm improvements in the Harbourfront District. Following this plan, a joint federal-provincial Royal Commission, known as the Crombie Commission, through Metro Toronto, published the *Metropolitan Waterfront Plan* in 1994. This plan focused on various environmental elements, such as cleaning up contaminated lands, restoring creeks and streams, and creating new mixed-use development in areas that were not reserved for industrial uses (Metropolitan

Toronto Planning Department, 1994 as cited in Eidelman, 2018). These plans were deliberated by the public and studied over many years but ever got implemented for various reasons. The 1967 and 1968 plans for Harbour City induced legal challenges from the province over land titles, but a change in provincial government discarded both the plans and the legal challenges. The City of Toronto's 1984 plan for the Central Waterfront presented many interests and ideas around the redevelopment of the waterfront but lacked methods for implementation and therefore was not carried forward. Finally, the *Metropolitan Waterfront Plan* from 1994 was considered "at best a token exercise never truly taken seriously by politicians or bureaucrats alike" (Eidelman, 2018, p. 714). The challenges and lack of implementation for these redevelopment plans demonstrated the need for both political backing and support, but also for real action to be taken. With political support the plans were partway there, but without enforceable ideas within a set time frame the plans could not be implemented in a built form.

After the Crombie Commission, the Waterfront Regeneration Trust was established in 1992 to help with the coordination of waterfront planning. The Trust did not however have the tools or the mandate to assume a land developer role (Eidelman, 2018). As Eidelman (2018, p. 714) points out, "to this day, over a thousand acres of waterfront land in Toronto remain either vacant, underutilized, or, in the worst cases, dangerously contaminated." Since 2018, when Eidelman's article was written, there has been progress made, particularly in the Port Lands where the mouth of the Don River has been reconfigured to stop flooding, and bridges installed to connect future Light Rail Transit to Ookwemin Minising (formerly named Villiers Island), while other areas, particularly in the Keating Channel Precinct under the bend of the Gardiner expressway, remain as he described.

The 1992 report from the Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront identifies "jurisdictional gridlock" as one of the factors leading to a lack of progress in the urban waterfront redevelopment (Eidelman, 2018, p. 714). The various public entities owning parcels of land along the waterfront made it difficult to advance plans and make decisions. This was due to the fact that not all of these public agencies, corporations, and authorities from various government levels had interest in participating in the redevelopment efforts. While governance and political leadership generally play a role in the outcome of urban planning, this is not entirely the case for Toronto. Historically, Toronto has had well-liked leaders such as Mayor David Crombie (1973-1978) and Art Eggleton (1980-1991) who were both supportive of plans for the waterfront's future (Eidelman, 2018). However, the fragmentation of Toronto's waterfront land created unique challenges. Land ownership disputes produced a political and legal paralysis disrupting the projects that were planned. For example, the Toronto Harbour Commission, in their 1968 *A Bold Concept* plan proposed to finance construction through land sales, but this was undermined by the provincial government who owned the lands and water associated with Harbour City – a mega project vision that did not get implemented (Eidelman, 2018). The Harbourfront District was later completed in the 1970s through federal government initiative. The funding for the Harbourfront District relied on leveraging federal crown corporation land and Canadian Pacific Railway lands (Eidelman, 2013). However, since the political and financial incentives of the federal government were not aligned with the City's objectives and plans for the harbourfront, the outcome was not consistent with the 1984 *Central Waterfront Plan* (Eidelman, 2018). Originally, the harbourfront was suggested to be a medium-density neighbourhood. Yet the outcome became large high-rise buildings with minimal public amenities and park space. The 1994 Metropolitan Waterfront Plan, for various environmental remediations of approximately 600 acres of East Bayfront and Port Lands land, generated lawsuits and court challenges over land titles between the City and the Harbour Commission, which were eventually abandoned. These

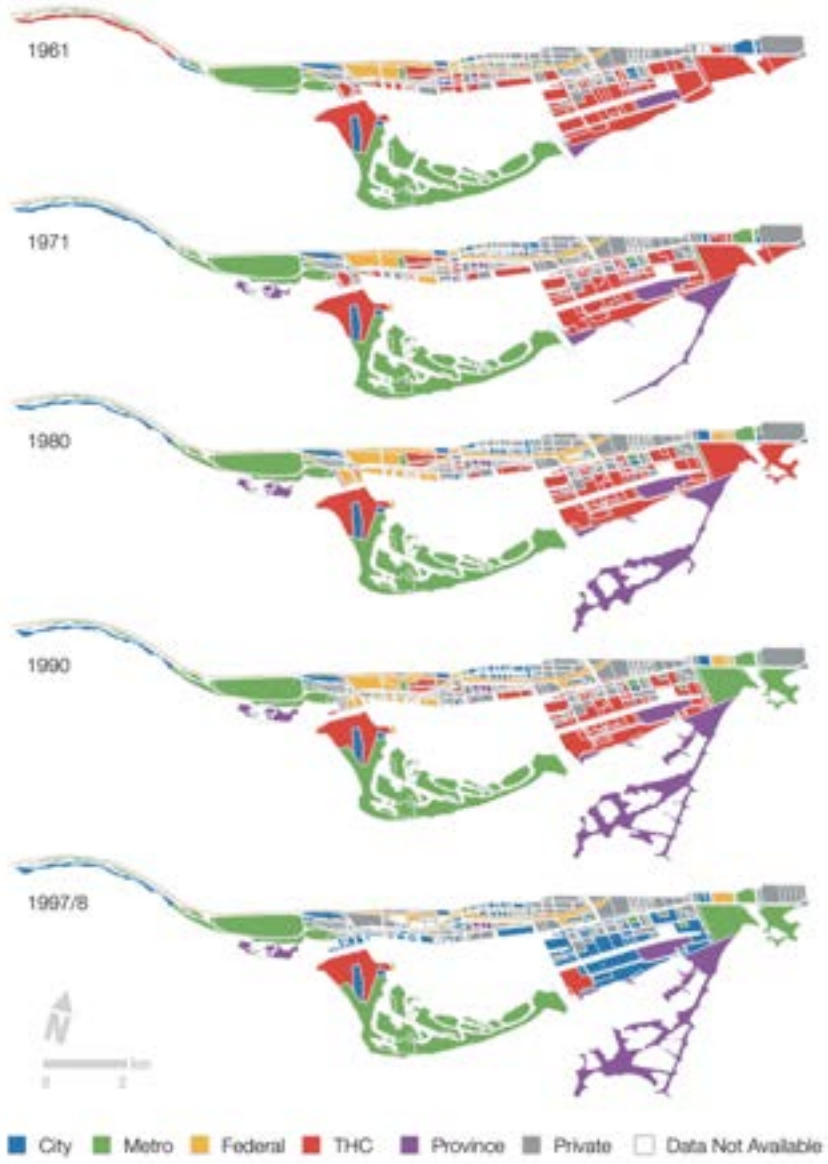
examples demonstrate the way in which government entities play a significant part in either advancing or stalling plans due to misaligned views between different levels of government.

While redevelopment efforts along Toronto's waterfront post-2000 continued to be challenged by land ownership fragmentation, new plans were created; and in 2001 the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corporation (now known as Waterfront Toronto) was established marking a change in the outlook for Toronto's waterfront (White, 2016). Waterfront Toronto was granted $1.5 billion in seed funding and jurisdiction over the preparation of precinct plans and specific phasing strategies, environmental remediation coordination, and private-sector partnership selection. Despite being granted financing and authority, Waterfront Toronto did not get any land ownership of properties and was prohibited from land asset assembly in the undertaking of plans (Eidelman, 2018). This means that Waterfront Toronto cannot make any assumptions in their plans that land titles and landowners will hand over land for redevelopment. However, they do act successfully as an intermediary among the three levels of government to advance projects within the city. In a conversation, Jed Kilbourn (2025), Director of Development at Waterfront Toronto suggested that Waterfront Toronto's job is "a consolidating and harmonizing role." Waterfront Toronto is not pushing through but rather is taking collectively established ideas, often from the City, and working with higher levels of government through the board of directors to help alleviate some of the tensions that were present particularly in the early 2000s (Kilbourn, 2025). Waterfront Toronto as a corporation has established a commitment to follow a design-led approach to redevelopment, which they call "leading with landscape", considering urban design and governance (White, 2016; Waterfront Toronto, 2022, p. 11).

According to Eidelman (2018), Waterfront Toronto owns less than 0.5% of the properties that are under its planning jurisdiction. Whereas, through various departments and agencies the federal, provincial, and municipal governments respectively own 28%, 26%, and 33% of waterfront lands (Eidelman, 2018). More recent issues have challenged planning along the Toronto Waterfront such as Mayor Rob Ford's (2010-2014) threat to seize municipal assets in the Port Lands and terminate relationships with Waterfront Toronto in 2011. Thanks to allies at City Council the political attack was defended, but it demonstrates the power that political actors can have on planning matters. In a conversation with Director of Community Planning at the City of Toronto, Carly Bowman (2025) suggested that there is more control when lands are in public ownership because there is an opportunity to create a public builder model, meaning that a government entity will take on a developer role. Often this public builder model is discussed in relation to creating housing, however Bowman (2025) suggested that Waterfront Toronto, as a tri-government agency, has been able to deliver a generous amount of public space on public lands partially due to this development model.

The challenges Toronto has faced in advancing plans for the waterfront's redevelopment demonstrate that property development with fragmentation among public interests can have the same collective action problems as private land ownership. Heller (1999, p. 1166) explains the dilemma of fragmentation by stating that "with too many owners of property fragments, resources become prone to waste either through overuse in a commons or through underuse in an anticommons." This applies to Toronto's context given the highly fragmented state of land ownership among various public entities which include City, Metropolitan, Federal, Toronto Harbour Commission, and the Province.

Figure 6: Geographic Distribution of Land Ownership, Central Waterfront Area, 1961-1998



(Source: Eidelman, 2013, Figure 6.2)

Understanding Public Space

Public space can mean a wide variety of spaces, both tangible and intangible. Lehrer (1998) puts public space into three categories: physical, social, and symbolic spaces. Physical space can be seen represented in the built environment through parks, plazas, beaches, sidewalks, playgrounds, streets, museums, and waterfronts to name a few (Lehrer, 1998; Low, 2023; Latham and Layton, 2019). The second type of public space is social space, which is defined by the practices and interactions that can take place in the space rather than by its physical location (Lehrer, 1998). Social space may take form as libraries, coffee shops, or public transit, for example. Finally, symbolic public space is a “space of remembrance and of

imagination" and is tied both to practices in the space and to collective memory (Lehrer, 1998, p. 6). An example of symbolic public space could be political protests or demonstrations where a political event may become symbolically tied to a public space. Community Planner Carly Bowman (2025) suggests that public space be considered as "the space between the buildings" which emphasizes the importance of sidewalks, streets, and roads. Roads can take up to a third of lands in a development and are often in public ownership connected to sidewalks and boulevards that are generous by design to create space in the public realm. Jed Kilbourn (2025), Director of Development at Waterfront Toronto, further supports this idea by explaining that streets as public realm offer important spaces for protests to happen legally. Other authors such as Mehta (2023) further broaden definitions of public spaces into more categories, which encompass the types of actions and interactions that may take place in these spaces such as political action and displays of unity; planned and unplanned social interactions; restorative healing; places to purchase and sell formally and informally; and spaces where people and vehicles move. This promotes the argument that public spaces can help to shape the actions and activities in which people participate when they are given the space to do so.

Physical public space is heavily influenced by landowners, urban designers, and landscape architects. These actors have the power to shape *how* a physical space is used and *by whom*, either intentionally or unintentionally (Lehrer, 1998). Ash Amin (2006, 2012) suggests that how a public or collective space is maintained and functions is highly dependent on creating a sense of trust (as cited in Latham and Layton, 2019). To an extent, this sense of trust is created by the policing of the area, or conversely, a lack of policing. Policing may be taken on by actual police forces or by neighbourhood residents creating a sense of inclusion and exclusion to certain groups of people. The Don Valley Brickworks is an example of a public space that at a time was exclusionary to people due to a lack of transit access, and unclear wayfinding through Rosedale, an affluent neighbourhood in Toronto. When the Don Valley Brickworks was first transformed from a former brick factory into a large public park, it was used as a dog park for Rosedale residents – rather than the intended public space accessible to Torontonians more broadly (Foster, 2023). Policing can create a sense of safety for some, while making others (particularly racialized populations) feel less safe. If public spaces are being used in a non-conforming way, those occupying the space are sometimes treated poorly, or even removed from the public realm (Stevens, 2009). Urban design is often used as 'defensible space' or a mode of reducing opportunities for crime or non-conforming use of spaces, such as the implementation of benches preventing laying down or sleeping (Stevens, 2009). Brain (2019, p.171) observes that space discussions often "slip from physical space to interactional space". This observation demonstrates the interconnectedness of these two elements of space.

Mehta (2023) discusses the implications that using terms such as *public* and *space* can create. *Public* implies "the shared, the collective, the accessible, the common people, and humanity itself", essentially a space for everyone (Mehta, 2023, p.39). *Space* is a broader term, and harder to define, which can take on various forms and locations. Space can be physical, digital, and even imaginary places; similar to Lehrer's (1999) definition of a symbolic space (Mehta, 2023). The term *public* assumes plurality. Mehta (2023) challenges the plurality of the term and questions how *publicness* is perceived in different societies, countries, and cultures. Latham and Layton (2019) highlight four qualities and dimensions of collective life that are related to the term 'public'. They suggest that the term public refers to the idea of being among other people; it addresses discussion about community concerns often with an audience or participation; it might refer to something of concern to a community; and it suggests the idea

of collective provision for public or private use (Latham and Layton, 2019). These elements contribute to an understanding of what public means, and identify that public almost always means that multiple people are engaged and involved.

While this research focuses on Toronto, planning precedents for urban waterfronts frequently draw inspiration from all over the world, and therefore it is helpful to understand the driving forces behind how public space is shaped in different geographic locations. In Eastern societies, the cultures, religions, political structures, and gender roles create different concepts of public space. The urban public spaces that are most frequently seen in Eastern society includes streets, markets, local parks, transportation, waterfronts, and spaces associated to communal or religious buildings (Mehta, 2023). Within many Eastern societies, public spaces are used in everyday life for activities of cooking and eating, buying and selling, and events and ceremonies (Metha, 2023). In contrast, Western conceptions of public space are more frequently tied to open spaces for recreation. Western society does not take part frequently in open-air markets and buying and selling along streets (unless highly organized) in the same way as some Eastern cultures do. Therefore the "social infrastructure" and public places of gathering or function of a similar space can vary greatly. In Latin American countries, the football (soccer) field is a social space, and in many Middle Eastern and African cities the souk is a bustling social atmosphere, and in cities like Shanghai and Beijing parks may be used for Tai Chi in the mornings, Iceland has geothermal pools that are used as civic spaces, and in many cities the zócalo/plaza/plaça/piazza is a place for gathering and socializing (Mehta, 2023). While different countries, and cities may gather in different places and spaces the social outcome is very similar.

I draw inspiration from Henri Lefebvre's theoretical framework of *Droit à la ville,* or the *Right to the City,* to understand origins of public space. Lefebvre (2003) poses the argument that the city is an "*oeuvre*- a work in which all its citizens participate", this *oeuvre* (meaning a work or production, often artistic) is rooted in the idea that cities are inherently public, where social interaction takes place (cited in Mitchell, 2003, p. 18). Lefebvre (2003) suggests that people have certain needs that should be met and implemented through city structure such as creativity, imagination, information, and play. He articulates the importance of city streets as a place for "interaction without which urban life would not exist", this promotes the idea that public space, in this case streets, are essential to creating an urban life (Lefebvre, 2003, p.18). Lefebvre (2003) also puts forward the idea that (social) interaction is an essential component of a city, requiring meeting places, and locations for chance encounters or planned encounters to take place. Without these elements of public space in urban environments, such urban life is extinguished. One of the overt assumptions relating to the right to the city, is that everyone has access to the urban environment. Access to space could be entirely its own research paper, however, what is important to understand is that accessibility goes beyond the physically accessible elements of spaces. Public space and access are a highly important idea because without equitable access is a space truly public?

Yuen and Johnson (2017, p. 297) go beyond the physically accessible elements of public spaces and suggest that accessibility relates to "social inclusion and judgment free spaces where there is a sense of acceptance and connection to the broader community." A public space may appear to be accessible to all, without evident gates or restrictive urban design features, but might be restrictive in other ways. If an open space or park is situated in a highly affluent area it may not seem as welcoming to individuals outside of the neighbourhood. In 2023, at the Ontario Professional Planners Institute's annual conference, keynote Mitchell Silver, Commissioner for New York City's Parks Department presented a community parks initiative combatting the inequality of New York's greenspaces by improving parks. Silver (2023)

mentioned an example, where a previously neglected park was revitalized in a predominantly poor area of New York City. On the day of the park's opening, a young Black boy walked by the park. When a member of staff invited him in, the young boy asked if it was free, and was surprised that something so nice could be free for him to use. Mitchell Silver explained that in many racialized neighbourhoods, the residents do not have the same access to parks and public space, and may develop a sense that these spaces are not for their use. As a practicing planner, the values that Silver (2023) wanted to convey to those in attendance were to think about diversity, equity, inclusion, and access when planning in urban settings. This example demonstrates the barriers to access that may be invisible. Toronto is a highly multicultural society, and the parks in the downtown core should be appreciative of and accessible to all residents and visitors alike.

For the purpose of this research, I am focusing on physical spaces in order to more easily conceptualize how Toronto is incorporating public spaces into the waterfront. An important component to these physical spaces is the acknowledgement that these spaces can have social and symbolic impacts which contributes to the importance of creating accessible public spaces within cities. Public space is sometimes referred to as the public realm, in this paper I will use the terms interchangeably. While public space can mean a variety of physical spaces, I am particularly interested in parks and open spaces since these are easy to determine in plans and on a map. Sidewalks, streets, and boulevards are considered public spaces as well, but they are more challenging to identify as an important social contribution to the public realm.

The Importance of Public Space

Public space holds importance for a multitude of reasons. Across the literature, public space is recognized as a conduit for social interaction, environmental resilience, and can help foster a sense of belonging. Setha Low (2023, p. 2) argues that public space matters because "it's where social interaction, community building, and political dissent take place." The COVID-19 pandemic heightened people's awareness to the dependence humans have on social interaction. When faced with directives to stay home, a second type of epidemic arose – one of loneliness. With the closure, or removal of what had previously been interior public spaces for social interactions such as cafés, libraries, restaurants, and gym facilities among others, a new reliance on outdoor public spaces was realized.

Furthering the idea of community, Mehta (2023, p. 75) argues that through public spaces "human needs of bonding, belonging, and recognition" are visible and can be met. The notion of "belonging" has become increasingly prevalent in planning literature and practice through the common terminology of placemaking. Placemaking has been around since around the mid-1990s and urges urban planning to put people and public spaces at the centre of both communities and the decision-making process (Project for Public Places, 2007). Community-based participation is at the core of placemaking and focuses on collaborative planning and design processes that help to achieve meaningful, "quality public spaces that contribute to people's health, happiness, and well being" (Project for Public Places, 2007). A similar concept that is brought up in conversations around placemaking is the integration of 'third places.' Ray Oldenburg (1997) first introduced this concept referring to places outside of the home and outside of work. He claims the home to be the "first" place, work to be the "second" place, and all areas outside of both these places to be the "third" place, where gathering and social interactions take place (Oldenburg, 1997, p. 6). Some of the outcomes that Oldenburg (1997) identifies as a result of these third places

include neighbourhood unification, “ports of entry” for newcomers, the creation of social zones where friendships are built and isolation is reduced (p.7,9). Yuen and Johnson (2017) argue that third places are not just public places but can contribute to communities through Oldenburg’s components of social dimensions: enjoyment, regularity, pure sociability, and diversity.

A commonality in conversations around third places, placemaking, and belonging is the desire for public spaces to meet a social function. Brain (2019, p.170) suggests that urban public space is “a key to repairing the material and social environment of a city”. Latham and Layton (2019) and Klinenberg (2002) describe social infrastructure; spaces that serve a social function for cities, allowing for people to socialize and connect with one another. Similarly, Klinenberg (2002) considers social infrastructure more specifically as public spaces and argues their importance “for society, politics, health, and wellbeing” (cited in Latham and Layton, 2019, p. 9). Klinenberg’s work stems from an analysis of a Chicago heat wave in July 1995 that resulted in the deaths of many residents. Klinenberg determined that aside from having access to an air conditioner (which increased survival by 80%), the majority of individuals who survived had social connections to family and friends, or even a pet. Heat wave mortality was strongly correlated to segregation and inequality, but what made the difference between two similar neighbourhoods was the “social infrastructure” of the neighbourhood, meaning the “physical places and organizations that shape the way people interact” (Klinenberg, 2018, p. 5). Klinenberg (2018) differentiates between social infrastructure and ‘social capital.’ While social capital measures relationships and interpersonal networks, social infrastructure is what helps this social capital to develop. Well-developed social infrastructure helps to create contact, support, and collaboration between individuals and communities (Klinenberg, 2018). Klinenberg (2018, p. 5) stresses the importance of social infrastructure as a “building block” of public life where people can bond “not because they set out to build community, but because when people engage in sustained, recurrent interaction, particularly while doing things they enjoy, relationships inevitably grow.” In times of political, economic, and social unrest locally and globally, Klinenberg (2018) argues that while social infrastructure will not necessarily fix the unrest, it can provide support and help people to navigate challenging times. He claims that “social infrastructure doesn’t just protect democracy; it contributes to economic growth” particularly through the conversion of old hard infrastructure such as shipping docks and rail lines (Klinenberg, 2018, p. 21). Using the heat wave as an example helps to illustrate what becomes vital in times of major distress, and speaks to the importance of having social connections, promoted through the social infrastructure of cities.

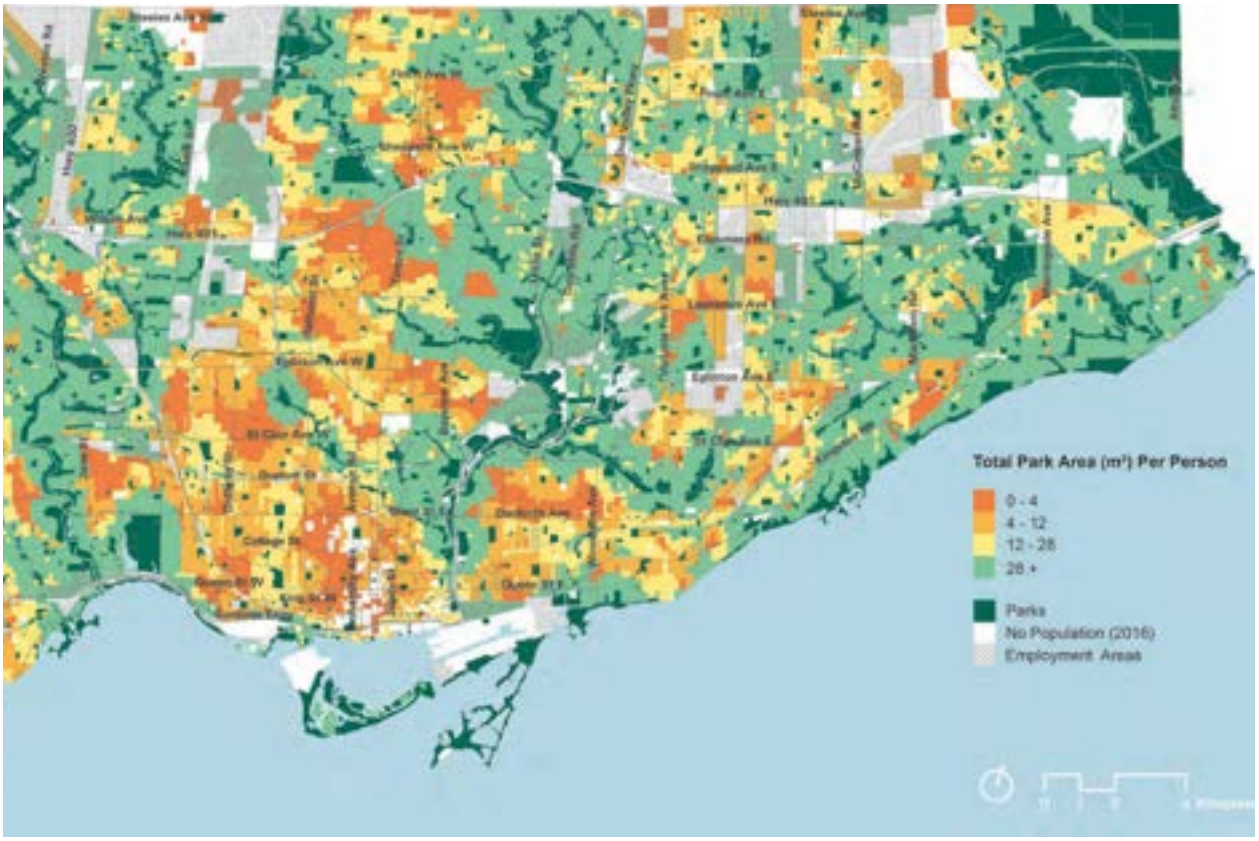
In a similar vein, while it is not the primary focus of this paper, public space has important additional benefits of promoting environmental resilience and helps mitigate or reverse the negative effects of climate change. Urban heat island (UHI) effect is what happens when temperatures increase significantly in urban areas as a result of increased “population density, building composition and structure, anthropogenic heat, and decrease in green space” (Seifeddine, Amziane and Toussaint, 2022, p. 1). Parks and open spaces provide appreciated relief to people and to the city from this extreme heat as tree cover, green spaces, and vegetation can help lower temperatures in cities. In Toronto, a Health Canada report found that mortality rates increase as temperature rises, and with longer summers there is more need for measures to lower temperatures in urban areas (Wang et al., 2016). Green space and parks, one of the prominent types of public space, and that which is being studied in this context, could help clean the air and provide a cooler, shaded spot for respite.

Public space can deliver different opportunities to different users. The way that a park is used by a young child, a teenager, or an elderly person will vary greatly, but the open space and freedom of use is one of the things that makes public spaces unique and important (Mehta, 2023). They offer a place for communal gatherings, organized events, as well as freedom of play or quiet reflection. Echoing the observations of other authors, Ha et al. (2002) conducted research on the impact of urban green space on mental health and found that access to public spaces can help to promote informal social interactions which lead to a feeling of belonging and thus boost mental health.

What is important to acknowledge is that public space is not public unless everyone is able to participate for free or at an accessible cost. For example, European bars and cafés have a low cost of entry which allows everyone (or nearly everyone) to participate. Cafés are considered a third place that conform to Lehrer's (1998) identification of physical, social, and potentially symbolic spaces. One of the reasons why parks as public spaces are so important is because they provide a space with no entry cost and in some cases host free community programming. For example, every summer in Toronto the Toronto Outdoor Picture Show (TOPS), a not-for-profit organization, hosts free movies in parks around the City of Toronto. A quote from an attendee states that "There is something very special about sitting in a park with hundreds of strangers, watching a movie as one large collective. The audible laughter, gasps and clapping; the shared snacks and blankets; the feeling of togetherness. Whenever I attend TOPS I am reminded that there is community in the city of Toronto" (Toronto Outdoor Picture Show, n.d.). I have personally gone to an outdoor movie at Corktown Common in the West Don Lands. This park is interesting because the park and general Canary District area was one of the first projects realized in proximity to the waterfront in advance of the 2015 Pan Am Games to house the Athlete's village, and is now a well-lived-in neighbourhood. The Corktown Common is unique because it serves as a flood protection land form, without which no further development could have happened in the area since it was a flood plain (Hare, 2025). This demonstrates the interconnectedness between providing environmental protection, creating recreational space, and creating park value by providing a space to bring people together in a more organized way.

Like many other cities, the COVID-19 pandemic brought to light a need for more park space, as people became reliant on these areas to get out of the house during isolating months. Torontonians were seen flocking to public parks and outdoor spaces when possible, albeit with some restrictions such as the social distancing circles in Toronto's Trinity Bellwoods Park. Moreover, with a rise in vertical development and consequent decrease in access to private outdoor space, there has been an increased reliance upon the public realm especially these outdoor parks and public spaces. This need is particularly prevalent within the downtown core where there are high density residential buildings, and very few parks. Toronto's *Parkland Strategy* promotes the idea that one of the values parks bring to the city is "acting as an extension of the home", their living spaces, and contributing to a sense of community (City of Toronto, 2019, p. 7; City of Toronto, 2018b). The diagrams of existing parkland in the downtown show how little space there is if everyone living in the core is reliant upon small, scattered parks. While the waterfront is not the only place where parks are needed, the expanse of undeveloped land provides an opportunity to change this and create a place that people are able to access and may even be willing to travel to, to spend time.

Figure 7: Toronto Parkland Provision (2016)



(Source: City of Toronto, 2019, Figure 8 [adapted by author]))

As someone who really enjoys walking through, sitting in, and visiting parks in other cities when travelling, I see a lot of benefit to increasing parkland in and around the downtown core. In 2018, Gehl Studio and Public Work prepared the *Downtown Parks and Public Realm Plan: Public Space Public Life Study* for the City of Toronto which took feedback from Torontonians and observational studies to assess where Toronto's public life thrives and where improvements can be made (City of Toronto, 2018a). This study demonstrates the interconnected nature of public spaces with public life and the way that creating parks and public spaces of a high quality contribute to supporting the lives of Torontonians. This study claims that the essence of a great city comes from the public life within it, which is enabled by the creation of spaces outside of the home and the workplace, supporting Oldenberg's (1997) theories of third spaces. "Public space weaves the components of public life – people, place, and culture – together" and demonstrates the way a city can be authentic, dynamic, contextual, inclusive, and spontaneous (City of Toronto, 2018a, p.5). Through direct feedback from residents about their favourite places in the city it was determined that the spatial qualities of public spaces most appreciated by Torontonians include "places to sit; lush & green; outdoor food & drink; safe; and dynamic/changeable" spaces among 14 other qualities (see Figure A1 in the Appendix) (City of Toronto, 2018a, p.8). Among 1,000 people who interacted with an online survey tool, Sugar Beach (located towards the eastern end of the Central Waterfront) was identified as one of the top 10 favourite places in the City. The Toronto Island Park System was also

highly ranked among these top 10, and speaks to residents' enjoyment to spend time in parks in a waterfront setting (City of Toronto, 2018a). The Downtown (PPR) Plan (2018b) came about as a result of this study and identifies the value and pivotal role that the public realm plays in creating a liveable city. Parks specifically are seen as a place where "people gather, socialize, celebrate and play" and bring liveliness and enjoyment to the city (City of Toronto, 2018b, p. 18). The Downtown Parks and Public Realm Plan claims that parks are linked to positive mental health and stress reduction thus improving health and wellbeing. Parks offer a place for rest and relaxation as well as active uses and recreational programming. Parks also offer a space for contact with one another and with nature (City of Toronto, 2018b). Not only do parks provide positive benefits to improve wellbeing and quality of life but they "beautify the urban landscape and strengthen the natural environment" to support biodiversity, provide tree canopy, absorb stormwater, improve air quality and reduce the urban heat island effect (City of Toronto, 2018b, p. 18). The City of Toronto's statement about the value of parks and the public realm is important because it demonstrates the city's stance on public spaces against which development proposals will likely be evaluated.

When public space was a discussion point of waterfront development in the early 2000s, the value of these spaces was partially to create an asset for future land value (Kilbourn, 2025) -- both for the land itself but also to bring a nice amenity to a neighbourhood, thus increasing the value of surrounding properties. Not only does public space bring an attractive element for active and passive recreation but it brings economic value. Kilbourn (2025) notes that "no one's questioning the fundamental need for these public spaces" anymore, but people have started to acknowledge that by creating these public spaces people feel as though they own a part of these special places through accessibility and placemaking efforts. Through the many experiences building public spaces in Toronto, it has been realized that it is more successful and exciting to build spaces that will attract people to the waterfront. When the Toronto waterfront started developing, Hare (2025) explains that the ambition had to do with community, and providing public spaces first, often before buildings are built. In addition, "there was a fairly emergent focus on resilience, biodiversity, [and] sustainability" which has to do with thinking about parks as providing an environmental service such as the Corktown Common flood plain protection, and now the revitalization of the mouth of the Don (Hare, 2025). What these conversations really emphasized is how hand-in-hand planning public spaces is for delivering additional benefits whether it be economic, environmental, or social. As Kilbourn (2025) points out, it is not a novel idea to provide public spaces, especially in the form of parks, but the new wave of planning is re-envisioning what these spaces look like to excite and attract people.

In February 2025, the City of Toronto hired new Chief Planner, Jason Thorne, who has come in with ambitious goals that further support the incorporation of parks and beautiful spaces. One of his first actions as Chief Planner is to push forward a report for action called "Towards a Beautiful City – A Path Forward" which proposes to beautify, improve safety, and the overall function of Toronto's public realm through the advancement of design excellence (City of Toronto, 2025). The report submitted by the City Planning, Transportation Services, and Parks and Recreation Divisions states that creating attractive, resilient, and livable cities is influenced by public spaces that are maintained, vibrant, and thoughtfully designed. The report identifies that "thoughtfully designed architecture and public spaces can enhance people's emotional and psychological wellbeing by creating environments that promote connection, safety, and interaction" which directly supports my hypothesis and the academic literature on public realm and wellbeing (City of Toronto, 2025, p. 3). City staff suggest that creating beautiful, safe, accessible, and

engaging public spaces can help people to develop a sense of pride and belonging which boosts shared identity among residents. The cultural and social significance of creating a high-quality public realm is further supported by helping economic growth since it can draw investors in and help ensure future generations are supported (City of Toronto, 2025). This report for action demonstrates the way city officials are thinking about the procurement of public spaces and finding ways to generate quality public space in the city. Bowman (2025) identifies that "embedded in that is the idea that quality public space matters" and that the intention is to have these public spaces "thought of as important design elements in their own right." We have established that these spaces are valuable and important to the urban fabric of cities, but to what extent are they actually being incorporated into the visions, plans, and policies that shape development? This value in public realm and public space is what is being explored within the reports, strategies, and plans for the redevelopment of Toronto's waterfront.

Visions of Waterfront Redevelopment

The following section explains and analyses the previous and existing strategies, reports, and plans presented for the Toronto Waterfront between 1999 and present day. Primary plans include 1999 *Our Toronto Waterfront! The Wave of the Future*, 2003 *Central Waterfront Secondary Plan*, and 2023-2024 *Built for This: Waterfront Toronto Rolling Five-year Strategic Plan*. These are the visionary documents that set the scene for the development of the waterfront. I aim to explain how these plans have evolved over time and identify what projects are now existing and still outstanding.

Toronto's Land Use Planning Framework

In Toronto, urban planning is dictated by provincial and municipal legislation. The *Planning Act* (R.S.O, 1990) is a provincial legal document that is the overarching piece of legislation to which all municipal planning documents shall have regard. The Planning Act sets the overall regulatory framework for Ontario's land use planning, describing how land use can be controlled and by whom. The purpose of the Act is to ensure planning processes are fair by making the process open, accessible, timely, and efficient. Additionally, the Act presents matters of provincial interest into provincial and municipal planning decisions by requiring consistency with the Provincial Planning Statement, 2024 (previously the Provincial Policy Statement 2020). Overall, the Act considers provincial interests; sets the basis for how official plans and planning policies will guide development; and establishes a streamlined planning process for decision-making.

The Provincial Planning Statement (PPS) falls under the Planning Act; it is a province-wide policy framework replacing the Provincial Policy Statement, 2020 and A Place to Grow: Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, 2019. The PPS came into full force and effect on October 20, 2024. The PPS helps to support the Planning Act's interest of providing more housing. Through the PPS, housing-supportive policies are presented which enable municipalities to increase housing supply across Ontario, foster long-term viability of rural areas, and protect agricultural lands among other tools. All official plans, and secondary plans are required to be consistent with the PPS, ensuring that policies and land use helps to realize the vision and objectives set out in the PPS.

An Official Plan is a municipality-specific planning tool that guides growth and development. Official Plans establish the urban structure, land use framework, and policies as they pertain to transit, land use development, and the environment. Municipal Official Plans are the primary implementation tool for the PPS, as they guide more specific land use and development choices within the municipality. In Toronto, the Toronto Official Plan is the document by which all development must conform. The Toronto Official Plan is broken into five chapters: Making Choices sets forth the vision and principles of the Plan; Shaping the City identifies the City's urban structure and develops a growth strategy; Building a Successful City presents policies for decision making based on human, built, economic and natural environment goals; Land Use Designations describes the land use designations across the City and applicable policies; and Implementation: Making Things Happen provides an approach for implementing the Plan. The intent of policies must be drawn out in applications submitted to the city for approval. The application process can take months, or even years and many projects do not get "shovels in the ground" for extended periods of time. Official Plans also sometimes enforce consistency with Urban Design Guidelines (UDG) which make suggestions for the design of the built environment. On their own, guidelines do not need to be met in entirety, however by including policies in an Official Plan that state guidelines need to be considered, they can be enforced more strictly.

Chapters 6 and 7 of the Official Plan present Secondary Plans and Site and Area Specific Policies. Secondary Plans are more detailed development policies for defined areas of the city. Along the Toronto waterfront there are 7 Secondary Plans. For the purpose of this research, I focus primarily on the Central Waterfront Secondary Plan Area (Area 31 on Map 35 of the Official Plan). Site and Area Specific Policies (SASP) vary provisions of the Official Plan and create layers of policy direction for more specific areas or addresses. Often, SASPs are carried over from previous version of Official Plans, as they get updated over time.

Zoning Bylaws are ultra-specific and work in conjunction with the Official Plan, they help identify land use zoning and permitted uses under each category. Zoning Bylaws are an equally important tool for implementation.

All of these legislative tools work together to guide the development within a city or region in a manner that is in line with the vision for that city's future. When development applications are submitted to the City they must demonstrate conformity to these legislative policies. There is lots of back and forth between applicants and City Staff to ensure plans are well thought out and represent high-quality planning, which means the development process can take months to years.

Waterfront Documents to Date

Toronto's waterfront has undergone tremendous changes since 1967. Pre-amalgamation Metro Toronto released *A Waterfront Plan for the Metropolitan Area* in 1967, followed by the *Central Waterfront Plan* in 1984. Neither of these plans were implemented due to legal challenges that eventually phased out along with the plans. In 1994, the *Metropolitan Waterfront Plan*, was released but ultimately did not get carried further due to a lack of serious consideration. The 1984 *Central Waterfront Plan* had a primary goal of creating public access to the waterfront, inscribing this theme in subsequent plans. While Toronto's waterfront has made major progress since its first plans in 1967, there are still large portions of land that

are yet ‘undeveloped’ which breaks up the potential for a continuous waterfront and the ability to enjoy all 46 kilometres, as envisioned in the 1999 plan.

Over the years, the following strategies, reports, and plans have established the directions and principles of Toronto’s urban waterfront redevelopment:

1999 - Our Toronto Waterfront!
2000 - Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force Report (Fung Report)
2000 - Our Toronto Waterfront - Building Momentum
2002 -Toronto Waterfront Design Initiative
2003 - Toronto Waterfront Scan and Environmental Improvement Strategy Study
2003 - Central Waterfront Secondary Plan (Adopted April 16, 2003)
2015 - Waterfront Strategic Review
2016 - Port Lands Flood Protection (2016)
2023-2024 Built for This: Waterfront Toronto Rolling Five-year Strategic Plan

While there were previous plans for the waterfront, Toronto began taking real action along the waterfront in 1998, followed by the first implementable strategy in 1999, coinciding with the City’s bid to host the 2008 Summer Olympics. This bid was expected to place Toronto on the map as a “world-class city,” attract tourism, *and* incentivize the redevelopment and regeneration of the urban waterfront, particularly the Central Waterfront portion. I have chosen to focus primarily on the first plan from 1999 and the most recent plan from 2023, to help determine the evolution of public space and wellbeing in the plans. This comparative look at the plans helps to illustrate what goals and visions have been realized in the past 25 years, and what still remains to be completed.

Formed in 1999 by Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, Premier Mike Harris and Mayor Mel Lastman (in a demonstration of tri-governmental support), the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force (renamed Waterfront Toronto in 2005) was established in 2001 to help guide the waterfront’s development through plans and recommendations. This organization was funded by federal, provincial, and municipal governments as a collaborative initiative to study the Toronto waterfront and help create and plan a vision for its future. Waterfront Toronto became the key actor in helping to progress land development along the city’s waterfront (History & Heritage, n.d.).

Our Toronto Waterfront! The Wave of the Future (1999)

The planning of Toronto’s waterfront really began to take off with the 1999 document *Our Toronto Waterfront! The Wave of the Future.* Written by the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, now Waterfront Toronto, this proposal for waterfront renewal was written with the specific goal of winning the 2008 Summer Olympics bid. While Toronto was unsuccessful in winning the bid, the City aimed to take advantage of the momentum spurred for redevelopment due to this proposal and vision (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 1999). This document is not an Official Plan, to which the development must comply, but rather serves as a proposal setting out the vision for the future of the Toronto waterfront and has played an important role in establishing many principles and values for waterfront redevelopment going forward.

This 1999 *Our Toronto Waterfront! The Wave of the Future* proposal depicts a vision for all 46-kilometres and 33 communities along the waterfront's edge and breaks up the proposal into three lenses: "areas of change; areas for protection; and areas of enhancement" (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 1999, p. 9). The industrial waterfront that still existed at the time was seen as an opportunity, that with the right kind of investment could be a fresh space with which to define the City. The proposal is divided up into sections highlighting the various priorities, goals, and visions to come out of this proposal. The first section identifies "Greening the Gateway" as a goal, with a vision to increase green land and parkland by 66% and create a 30 to 50 metre wide "greenway". It is notable that the first section of this proposal is focused on the environmental remediation and the provision of parkland and green space for the public. These green initiatives come primarily from a desire to sustain ecosystems for wildlife and vegetation and to become a leader in the Canadian-American drive to clean the Great Lakes and improve water quality (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 1999). The naturalizing efforts include seven key projects:

(1) The first project is to create a 30-50 metre wide green pathway along the entire 46-km waterfront expanse. This initiative would greatly increase parks and open spaces as well as create an active connection between the 33 communities along the waterfront.

(2) The second project is to restore the mouth of the Don River to solve flooding issues and create space to develop and expand the city closer to the water's edge. This project was realized recently in November 2024, and more recent plans demonstrate how this space is being planned further (Waterfront Toronto, 2024b). However, at the time of the 1999 proposal, the Port Lands were challenged by great flooding issues which created major development restraints on the infilled land.

(3) Additional projects to create wetlands at Mimico Creek, Humber Bay Park, and Ashbridge's Bay demonstrate the commitment to natural open spaces (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 1999, p. 11).

(4) This 1999 proposal identified a goal of opening Tommy Thompson Park, a strip of land entirely built from infill development, year-round to create more public space access at all times of year, especially for those interested in wildlife watching. This goal was realized, as the park is now a wildlife sanctuary and important destination for migrating birds, open all year to the public (Tommy Thompson Park, n.d.).

(5) One of the initiatives for supporting the creation of sustainable ecosystems includes creating butterfly reserves at both North Shore Park in the west end of the city and East Point Park in the east end of the city, which have been implemented at East Point Park and Humber Bay Butterfly Habitat. There have been additional efforts to create butterfly and pollinator-friendly parks along the waterfront and in various locations around the city.

(6) In terms of infrastructure, this proposal suggests upgrading and maintaining storm sewers and distributing city resources accordingly.

(7) The last key project is aimed at preventing overflow in the Western beaches by creating a storage tunnel. This project would help to reduce beach closures and with a goal of opening in 2001, this project was completed in 2000 (Stantec, n.d.).

The second section and priority area of this proposal paints a fairly hopeful picture of an active waterfront promoting Toronto as a "world tourist destination" by linking transportation networks between Pearson airport and Union station (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 1999, p. 15). One of the key features of this section is the proposal to remove the Gardiner Expressway by 2003, which was no longer deemed necessary, and instead hoped to encourage cars to arrive in Toronto via the 401 highway and to take "Lakefront Drive" (now Queens Quay), which would be a more scenic route. To ensure transportation remained after the demolition of the Gardiner Expressway, some key projects included creating a green pedestrian and bike corridors in its place, and the creation of a 46-kilometre streetcar line which would run along the entire waterfront (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 1999). Additionally, a ferry and water taxi service were suggested to be implemented that would connect the east and west sides of the waterfront. A wide promenade would be constructed along the major waterfront boulevard, what is today as Queens Quay Boulevard. It is interesting to imagine how different the city would feel had the visions been fully realized at the time, perhaps there would be less reliance on private vehicles to get across the city, and the subway, streetcar, and bus systems would be more robust to serve the community instead.

The third section of this proposal focuses on "Animating the Waterfront" through year-round cultural and recreational activities. This section presents project plans such as public art installations, a community arts centre, widened beaches and parkland, and a privately built waterfront aquarium. The city has been successful in achieving some of these proposals. The Harbourfront Centre acts as a community arts organization with year-round programming; there have been parkland additions since this plan was created such as the active Toronto Music Gardens and Sugar Beach; and an aquarium was built in proximity to the waterfront. However, there is also a strong focus on implementing competitive and revenue generating industry along the waterfront -- to be done through the creation of "imagination industries" which would host film, animation, media, and digital studios. In conjunction with providing art and creative displays at the water's edge, there is acknowledgment of the Port Lands potential to create new jobs in "good clean industries" (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 1999, p. 17). This goal points to an underlying focus of generating income from the projects and initiatives along the waterfront. When discussing employment creation in any given area, housing often follows, as does transportation, and as a result of these facilities in a place there becomes an increased need for public spaces.

This proposal also recognizes the Indigenous history of the lands and the prior use of Lake Ontario as a shortcut to the Georgian Bay area and the Upper Great Lakes. Part of the key projects in the redevelopment of the waterfront would aim to preserve heritage buildings, create interpretive displays, showcase the waterfront's history, and include murals and other art displays that speak to the history and landscape changes to the area. Keeping the waterfront's history alive is deemed important for local residents but is also considered as a tool for tourists to learn about the city's history. Attracting tourists is a

priority to the city and is reiterated multiple times. Some of the infrastructure that would be implemented for tourists includes a “waterfront welcome” information centre online and in-person, the creation of festivals, events, and “new attractions, more aggressive marketing, and better information” to increase visitors and thus create more jobs for Torontonians (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 1999, pp. 21-22). It is clear that tourism is a central feature for the future waterfront, particularly given its initial impetus to host the 2008 Summer Olympics, which would bring millions of people to the city and secure Toronto’s world city status.

One of the final priority areas related to built form is the creation of neighbourhoods and accommodation along the waterfront for locals and visitors to the city. Throughout this section on housing creation, there is a theme of live, work, and play which is frequently stated in modern public realm writing and is highly connected to Ray Oldenburg’s (1997) concept of third places and the need for public spaces (for play) outside of home (living) and work. This proposal presents the possibility of creating a floating hotel, which would be a unique waterfront feature (but was never realized) (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 1999). There is an appreciation for new neighbourhoods to serve diverse needs, which can be interpreted as ensuring that neighbourhoods are representative of Toronto’s multiculturalism. Creating new communities would also bring new services and local businesses, thus contributing to Toronto’s economy.

Overall, the proposal aims to create renewal projects along the waterfront that are financially viable and environmentally desirable ensuring that it contributes to “economic development, environmental health and social wellbeing of the city” (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 1999, p.25). While there is no prior reference to social wellbeing of the city, this seems to nevertheless be an important implicit aspect. Efforts to create green space and parkland (public space) contribute greatly to the social wellbeing of the city. However, most proposed projects are evaluated based on economic return, marketability, improvement to the city’s environment, ability to meet community needs, and “how the quality of life we enjoy is protected and enhanced” (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 1999, p. 25).

In order to realize the vision set out in this proposal, the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force acknowledges precedent cases and conditions that have helped successful waterfronts elsewhere. These characteristics include a need for “unified political will and leadership among governments” and consolidation of public lands under one corporation (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 1999, p. 27). The acknowledgment of these aspects is important as plans go forward and these characteristics that were deemed a requisite to making waterfront renewal and redevelopment happen are not achieved. Cooperation is considered a ‘need’ since ownership was very fragmented at the time this proposal was written. The waterfront lands were owned or regulated by federal, provincial, municipal, joint, and non-profit organizations, demonstrating the fragmentation of land and ownership along the waterfront.

A bold timeline of six months was suggested to move onto next steps to this proposal. These next steps included: the intergovernmental task force to develop an action plan; to submit a vision and plan to the City for approval; create a financial plan; complete inventory of lands and future acquisitions; meet with stakeholder advisory groups; conduct public consultation for ideas to secure involvement; and consideration and approval of the action plan by all three levels of government (Toronto Waterfront

Revitalization Task Force, 1999). Given Ontario's planning process, this timeline appears highly unrealistic as it can take months to years of back and forth between City officials and those writing plans to receive approval. The additional challenge of gaining support from all three levels of government who own different parts of the land adds another layer of complexity. Nevertheless, this document demonstrates a grand vision for the waterfront and the direction of its redevelopment, even though it might lack a layer of feasibility.

Many of the goals and priority projects in this strategy seem to be for the purpose of attracting visitors, attracting funding, or becoming leaders in one area or another – given its Olympic aspiration. However, overall, this strategic document lays out a great vision for the waterfront and its connectivity through the "greenway", active year-round accessibility, community programming, environmental remediation, and generally provides a strong basis upon which to further develop plans for the waterfront's redevelopment. In the ideating and visioning for the future of the waterfront, the 1999 *Our Toronto Waterfront! The Wave of the Future* imagines piers along the waterfront where people could jump off, gardens scattered along the waterfront (which we do have to an extent); and also envisioned people staying in houseboats docked off of the Toronto Island, which we have not seen implemented. All of these ideas contribute to an active public realm, bringing community to the waterfront and helping to create a series of public spaces for year-round use.

The terminology 'public space' is only stated once in reference to cleaning contaminated sites an improving the public realm to create new investment opportunities (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 1999, p. 7). However, there seems to be an implicit underlying understanding that public space is an important driver in helping to create a world-class destination for tourists and in order to animate the waterfront. The 1999 plan is optimistic and bold in its timeline of a 10-year strategy and has proven to take much longer than anticipated but provides a good springboard from which future plans have drawn inspiration. Two reports were presented after the release of the 1999 strategic report in support of the ideas and plans for the future of Toronto's waterfront. These reports include the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force Report (Fung Report) and Our Toronto Waterfront – Building Momentum in 2000.

Progress Between 2000 and 2023

The **Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force Report** was released in 2000 and extends the visions originally established in the 1999 report. This report is familiarly known as the Fung report because Robert A. Fung, who was the Chair of the Task Force at the time played an instrumental part in supporting the vision for the waterfront. Bowman (2025) identified this report as one of the key moments in the waterfront's development because it is somewhat an "originator idea of what kind of place [the waterfront] is going to be." The report places a significant focus on mobilizing the waterfront to attract tourism in Toronto. Toronto draws inspiration from the revitalization of Barcelona waterfront which became a top 20 destination for tourism and generated lots of investment after being chosen for the 1992 Summer Olympics. The report reviews cities that undertook waterfront redevelopment projects, thus putting themselves on the map as 'great capital cities,' of which Toronto is suggested to fit in (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 2000, p. 13). These cities include London, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, New York, Cape Town, Beirut, Barcelona, Boston, Shanghai, Sydney, and San Francisco. In addition,

these cities are strong precedents for Toronto because they all overcame challenges such as conflicts of governance and ownership, abandoned infrastructure and soil contamination from previous industrial activity, and transportation structures that are creating challenging environments for the public realm. At this time, the Task Force identified 2000 acres of waterfront land usable for redevelopment spanning from Exhibition Place in the west to Ashbridge's Bay in the east (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 2000). This plan uses the language 'under-used' land frequently which should be questioned critically in terms of what it means for land to be under-used, and what is the ultimate final form for land use.

Under the report recommendations, the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force establishes the need for agreements between the three levels of government and the Task Force in order to establish "clear, certain and concise regulatory regimes and fast approval systems" (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 2000, p. 5). This shows how the ownership structure has been a consideration from the beginning of redevelopment, and shows in some ways how it is a barrier to getting plans approved and completed. The Fung report examines "why renewal has not occurred" and highlights a lack of agreement on the vision of the Central Waterfront both among levels of government and the public mind (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 2000, p. 18). One of the lessons learned from precedents is the need for a shared vision. The Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force (2000, p. 16) writes that "this situation of widespread dereliction is, on one hand, a national and regional embarrassment, in that we have been unable to move deliberately to confront the situation. On the other hand, it also presents an extraordinary opportunity to move forward now." When this report was written, the publicly owned lands were considered to be an opportunity and advantage for reinvestment, despite this awareness of gridlock between the three levels of government (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 2000). Some of the common themes, objectives and principles that came out of precedent redevelopment examples include the need to accommodate nature and parkland in plans, to reconcile the importance of human settlement and economic activity for regions, and to coordinate the public and private investment (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 2000). The report acknowledges that despite Toronto's attempts to create development plans, these plans (as early as 1911 with the creation of the Toronto Harbour Commission) did not materialize. Since 1911, there has not been an agency or government level to help restructure and manage the development projects (until Waterfront Toronto's creation). For example, the Toronto Harbour Commission, now known as Port Toronto, held ownership and power over land but did not have comprehensive responsibility or the authority to deal with change, despite being created to address opportunities on the waterfront (Ports Toronto, n.d.). One of the stronger recommendations in the Fung report and the previous strategic plan includes the removal of the Gardiner Expressway. It is seen as a massive structure that "commands the landscape" of the Central Waterfront, making waterfront lands that should be considered prized lands less attractive (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 2000, p. 25). Additionally, the elevated expressway is expensive to maintain, and to take it down to help enhance the value of lands around it, and to remove this visual barrier between downtown and the lake.

In restating the goals *Our Toronto Waterfront! (1999)*, the Fung report recognizes six major development initiatives. The first initiative is to build a waterfront for public enjoyment, of which removing the Gardiner expressway is identified as an essential step to help create an international destination. This first initiative is recognizant of the importance of the public realm, with implications of the underlying value of these spaces created for the public. The second initiative is to add a technology

hub along the waterfront, drawing inspiration from cities like San Francisco and Singapore. Bringing a "media cluster" to the area would add a unique feature to Toronto and further draw tourism to the city (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 2000, p. 30). Furthermore, an initiative sought to develop a transportation system that would encourage bicycle use and light rail transit systems over private vehicles. A fourth initiative was to clean the environment by remediating water quality, and improving flooding from the Don River. The fifth initiative reconfigured the Gardiner Expressway in order to help "unif[y], rather than divid[e], Toronto with its waterfront" (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 2000, p. 39). The final, yet premised, initiative is to create a waterfront that can accommodate the 2008 Summer Olympic games.

When considering the central waterfront, the report states that "parts of the centre and western areas of the Central Harbour now have buildings that obscure or compromise the public access to the water's edge. A number of measures are introduced in the Development Concept to combat this perceived privatization" (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, 2000, p. 41). This is an interesting idea because despite efforts to make a space available to the public, the perception of privatization makes it a challenge to encourage people to use the space. The acknowledgment and desire to ensure spaces along the waterfront are not perceived as private is demonstrative of the values underlying the visioning. The Port Lands in the central waterfront is considered the largest resource of under-utilized land in any city and is suggested as the site for Olympic facilities, should Toronto win the bid. Overall, this plan further emphasizes and supports the 1999 proposal for the waterfront, encouraging public access and extensive public space integration throughout.

Following the Fung Report (2000), Toronto City staff released **Our Toronto Waterfront – Building Momentum (2000)** recommendations report to the Mayor and City Council. The five staff working groups were supportive of the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force proposal *Our Toronto Waterfront* and suggested that next steps would be for the City to prepare a new Official Plan and a Zoning By-law for the Central Waterfront (City of Toronto, 2000). These actions are important because they are the implementation tools. Unlike the first waterfront plans and ideas that never got implemented due to a lack of action, this time around with support from City officials and leadership, the waterfront's vision started to become a reality. The Central Waterfront became the main focus of redevelopment since it is where the most industrial activity happened and consequently had the most land for redevelopment potential. While the East and West waterfronts are spoken to in the first proposal report in 1999 for the purpose of submitting an Olympic bid, the Central Waterfront became the primary focus and would-be site for the 2008 Olympic games. One of the recommendations that staff presented is to adopt some principles to "guide the development of a waterfront governing body" (City of Toronto, 2000, p. 6). These principles include: ensuring that the waterfront governing body is accountable to government, ensuring the protection of the financial terms, developing public input mechanisms, enabling private investment through the structure and process of the governing body, enabling quick implementation decisions by the governing body (City of Toronto, 2000). The City report emphasizes the need to increase employment and tourism along the waterfront which would translate into economic benefits to the city.

City Council's initial support of *Our Toronto Waterfront* vision helped to spur the creation of the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, led by Robert Fung. Both the City and the Fung report extended the original vision of *Our Toronto Waterfront* by restating the intentions and goals of the plan

such as the inclusion of 170 hectares of park and open space in the Central Waterfront creating a continuous waterfront promenade and providing new cultural and tourism facilities (City of Toronto, 2000). To enhance public enjoyment through the expansion of parks and open spaces, the City staff's report supported the potential seen for park enhancement and expansion, and the creation of parks and open spaces to the needs of current and future communities. Staff suggested allocating development parcels within the public realm. This demonstrates the importance and focus on public realm as a first priority and developing other needs such as housing and transportation around the desire for public spaces like plazas, urban squares, walkways, and parkland. For City staff, to "successfully compete in the global economy," "Toronto has to offer better quality of life than its competitors" (City of Toronto, 2000, p. 51). The use of 'quality of life' language suggests that parks and open spaces, transportation, housing, and culture and tourism become part of Toronto's competitivity. Staff conclude that the proposal is "imaginative, achievable and aligned with emerging planning policies and other City initiatives" but still require provincial and federal financing support (City of Toronto, 2000, p. 8). The strong support that *Our Toronto Waterfront* received, and the repeated encouragement for the provision of a good quality of life through parks and the public realm is indicative of where priorities lay in the early 2000s. With public space as a top priority which would then attract investment, community, and international attention.

There are other plans and reports which are of secondary significance to my study due to their indirect relation to public space. I point these documents out because it demonstrates the additional efforts that have gone into planning and determining the best pathway forward in redeveloping the waterfront. These reports, strategies, and reviews include: The 2002 Toronto Waterfront Design Initiative; the 2003 Toronto Waterfront Scan and Environmental Improvement Strategy Study; the 2015 Waterfront Strategic Review; and the 2016 Port Lands Flood Protection. Additionally, one of the most valuable documents to come about after 1999 is the Central Waterfront Secondary Plan which went to the Ontario Municipal Board and was adopted in 2003, this plan is the most current plan to which all development in the Central Waterfront must comply and as such will be discussed in greater detail.

The Toronto Waterfront Design Initiative (2002) focuses on imagining the future built form along the Toronto waterfront. This initiative was co-led by the City of Toronto, Urban Development Services, and the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corporation (TWRC). This design initiative brought together six architectural teams from North America and Europe to propose solutions for Toronto's changing waterfront. Urban design plans for the six districts were created in collaboration with these renowned architecture firms. The six districts include the East Bayfront, the Mouth of the Don River, East Harbour, the North Ship Channel, the District for Creativity and Innovation, and Cherry Beach. The designs were created with incentive to create positive relationships between the built form and the public realm with direction for housing, parks, public spaces, and amenities (City of Toronto, 2002). One of the outcome objectives was to "explore relationships between the built form and the public realm, including the water's edge, green space, plazas, streets, sidewalk, parks, promenades or trails" which points to the importance of the public realm in land use plans in conformity with surrounding buildings (City of Toronto, 2002, p.4). Additionally, one of the ground rules for design was that "waterfront open space must be publicly accessible", encouraging the creation of public spaces that anybody can use as opposed to smaller broken up spaces that may only be accessible to adjacent mixed-use or residential buildings (City of Toronto, 2002, p. 4).

Notably, many of the design proposals assumed in this initiative that the Gardiner Expressway would remain and instead would focus on finding harmony between water elements and the expressway. An example of which was to put housing under the expressway thus filling the space and extending the public realm from the sidewalks to the water, blending the Gardiner Expressway into the built environment. I question perhaps whether this design *charrette* was the original impetus for choosing to redesign rather than remove the Gardiner expressway in its entirety, as will be touched on later.

At the end of this design workshopping, a series of key findings were presented, as an accumulation of the design ideas presented by the teams. To summarize, these key findings included a desire to connect the city with the lake, to physically and visually improve the quality of north-south connections from the downtown to the lake (City of Toronto, 2002). The second was to create special waterside places with interconnected public open spaces. Creating activity, scale, and climate on the waterfront was another objective which includes protecting public spaces on the waterfront from winter conditions. Restoring the mouth of the Don River was another key project, which has been instrumental in creating new viable land for development. Additional key findings were to conduct an incremental approach to development, to preserve the industrial heritage of the area, and to find a balance between neighbourhood development and open spaces and creating a low built form. Finally, there is a key finding and common desire to create "spectacular parks and open spaces" and "continuous waterfront access" through public promenades, parks, plazas, natural spaces, and connection with neighbourhoods (City of Toronto, 2002, p. 32).

This Design Initiative document is important because it helps to influence what elements are being provided to create a beautiful and high-quality public realm like what is currently being worked towards under the Chief Planner of Toronto's vision "Towards a Beautiful City" (City of Toronto, 2025). The report concludes by stating that "the Waterfront is a remarkable and largely unexplored opportunity to provide spectacular parks and recreational areas, to create new communities for living and working and to restore the linkages between the city and the lake" (City of Toronto, 2002, p. 36). This quote is particularly succinct in depicting the urban design vision and therefore public realm ambitions of the waterfront's redevelopment.

In 2003, the City of Toronto Works Committee produced the **Toronto Waterfront Scan and Environmental Improvement Strategy Study** to identify how the increase in CO2 emissions as a result of waterfront redevelopment could be offset across Toronto (City of Toronto, 2003a). This document only mentions parks a few times, in relation to natural heritage components and environmental assessments. I have chosen not to include this document in my review because it is not directly pertinent to parks, public space, or social wellbeing.

Written by the City of Toronto, the **Central Waterfront Secondary Plan** is the final version of *Making Waves – Central Waterfront Plan*. It was approved by the Ontario Municipal Board in April 2003 and defines in a more official capacity (Official Plan) what will be built along the Toronto waterfront. The plan identifies 23 "big moves", broken up into four different priority areas which include: 1) removing barriers/making connections; 2) building a network of spectacular waterfront parks and open spaces; 3) promoting a clean and green environment; and 4) creating dynamic and diverse new communities. Along with identifying the "big moves" for each priority area, policies are listed which help to implement these

big move projects. Toronto's commitment to the public realm is evident throughout the plan through each priority identified. The Central Waterfront Secondary Plan's first priority to remove barriers and make connections claims that "if waterfront renewal is to be truly successful, the waterfront will have to feel like and function as part of the city fabric" (City of Toronto, 2003b, p. 4). This priority encourages the creation of a cohesive public realm through its big moves and correlated policies of redesigning the Gardiner Expressway corridor to improve the road system, and turn waterfront streets into lively urban connections. Two of the policies highlighting efforts to improve the public realm include creating physical connections between the Central Waterfront and Downtown Core and its adjacent neighbourhoods through high-quality urban design, and to transform railway underpasses to create pedestrian-friendly corridors (Policies 8 and 9). The Bentway is one example of policy implementation to create a more inviting space under the Gardiner Expressway. However, most of the space dividing the Downtown Core and the Central Waterfront is poorly maintained concrete space, which does not contribute to the intention of removing barriers and making the waterfront feel more connected to the downtown. In this priority area it is also interesting to note that the language around the Gardiner Expressway's removal has changed. They no longer state that it will be taken down to eliminate this structure, but rather suggest it will be "redesigned", leaving room for interpretation and no longer promising that it will be taken down. Perhaps this change came about as a result of the design initiative and the urban design solutions and suggestions presented during the workshop in 2002.

Figure 8: Skating Rink under the Bentway

(Source: Shane Parent, thebentway.ca, n.d.)

The most relevant and largest priority section of this plan is “building a network of spectacular waterfront parks and public spaces”, recognizing the importance of Toronto’s public realm to transform the waterfront into a destination for tourism, national celebration, and local enjoyment through the inclusion of parks, plazas, and public spaces (City of Toronto, 2003b, p.6). The first big move presented in this section is “reserving the water’s edge for public use” by creating an accessible, promenade that connects a series of parks and open spaces, linking back to the city’s core through the pedestrian-friendly corridors previously mentioned (City of Toronto, 2003b, p.6). Additional big moves include enhancing the urban park system in various areas and creating connections between parks, plazas, and public spaces while reflecting upon the heritage of the waterfront. The foot of Yonge Street, Harbourfront Centre, and East Bayfront are three of the areas identified for creating designated public spaces. Additionally, Ontario Place is identified as a “waterfront destination” with an interwoven waterfront park system with public access, facilities, and additional paid attractions. It will be interesting to see how current redevelopment plans for Ontario Place unfold in conjunction with these elements. According to the Ontario Place redevelopment information website, the area is planned to be free for public access and open 365 days a year (Ontario Place, n.d.). Some of the intended outcomes include free waterfront access with beaches, trails, swimming areas, and waterside activities. Additionally, there are plans to expand and enhance the greenspace and parkland which would be publicly accessible and connect with existing parks in the area such as Trillium Park and the William G. Davis waterfront trail (Ontario Place, n.d.). These plans demonstrate the commitment to make the waterfront publicly accessible and highlights the value seen for expansion of parks and public spaces.

The Central Waterfront Secondary Plan encourages parks and public spaces to provide active and passive uses to visitors. The policies within this priority area cover two categories: defining the public realm, and park design. Defining the public realm encompasses policies that require the public realm to be of a high standard of excellence to establish a defining characteristic of a great city. The public realm is to be “defined by a coherent framework of streets, parks, plazas, buildings, viewing areas, walkways, boardwalks, promenades, piers, bridges and other public infrastructure and open space elements” demonstrating the variety of public spaces required to make a good public realm according to City standards (City of Toronto, 2003b, p. 7). Additional policies support parks and plazas in the public realm to help create activity points and define the end of North-South streets with unique public spaces. Wayfinding and landscaping are also encouraged throughout to help people navigate the public spaces along the waterfront and public art for public and private developments also helps to support the motive to bring art, creativity, and joy to the waterfront. The second policy area focuses on park design requiring that parks along the central waterfront be maintained, animated, accommodate a range of experiences both active and passive, offering spaces for relaxation and solitude (Policy 15) (City of Toronto, 2003b, p. 8). It also states that experiencing parks will be available and comfortable during all seasons. This is one of the areas which has yet to be fully realized. The existing Harbourfront Centre has some programming such as winter markets and ice skating during colder months, much of the waterfront does not have many of the required amenities necessary to keep the waterfront lively during all seasons. For example, facilities such as washrooms, or indoor spaces to be shielded from the cold during winter months do not currently exist. Community, cultural, and entertainment facilities are also required under Policy 16 and states that there may be private facilities within park systems “provide their associated open spaces remain publicly accessible” (City of Toronto, 2003b, p. 8). This places emphasis on the requirement for public accessibility of open spaces along the waterfront, ensuring that it is a place for everyone. It is also a policy that sustainable management practices be incorporated in park design to ensure minimal impact

on the natural environment (City of Toronto, 2003b). This section is thoughtful and demonstrates the City's goals for the public spaces along the waterfront and importance of creating a beautiful, and inclusive public realm. It does lack explicit connection to the importance of these spaces for social interactions, but it is implicit.

The third priority section is about the promotion of a clean and green environment along the central waterfront. It relates to creating an environmentally healthy waterfront space through the implementation of environmental strategies to create sustainable communities. This section demonstrates a commitment to creating a clean, green, safe, and healthy waterfront. There are three big moves under this section relating to sustainable transportation, flood protection in the West Donlands, and renaturalizing the mouth of the Don River. Aside from transportation, the flood protection and renaturalized mouth of the Don have been completed, creating more space for the implementation of housing, art, and parks plans.

The fourth and final priority section is about creating dynamic and diverse new communities. This involves creating unique places of "beauty, quality, and opportunity" for Torontonians and visitors (City of Toronto, 2003b, p. 12). This section is particularly focused on accommodating development for living and working and helping to create neighbourhoods that are socially, economically, environmentally healthy, and culturally vibrant to help foster long-term stability along the waterfront and for the entire city. The four big moves established in this section are focused on opening the Port Lands to development and creating new urban districts with places to live and to work. The renaturalization of the Don river mouth also creates new spaces for communities to evolve, and the East bayfront is identified as a prominent new neighbourhood. The fourth big move is for Exhibition Place to be a place for work, celebration, and living; as a space for festivals and gatherings and to support connections to Ontario Place. Policies within this section focus on specific areas: designing the built environment; nurturing a high standard of community living; housing options; creating special places to work; and creating special places to visit, relax, play and learn (City of Toronto, 2003b). Policies related to designing the built environment are focused on ensuring that the water's edge promenade remains publicly accessible and buildings are of a low to moderate scale. The secondary plan also requires excellence in design not only for dwellings but for parks and public spaces, demonstrating the importance of incorporating public space in community development along the waterfront. The third policy in this section requires that new development ensure corridor views from the downtown to the waterfront remain to support the public realm. The plan also "discourage[s] privatization of public spaces" encouraging development to create comfortable micro-climates in the public realm (City of Toronto, 2003b, p.1 1). This implies favouritism of spaces for public use, ensuring public access, and creating a comfortable environment that encourages people to use these spaces. The policy section on nurturing a high standard of community living includes policies related to creating balanced live and work places to keep community vitality, and ensuring schools and community services are incorporated with development. Policy 35 states that "local parks will enrich new waterfront communities" further identifying the need for public spaces in the waterfront's development (City of Toronto, 2003b, p. 12). Another part of creating a high standard of living is to support shared use of spaces and facilities and to ensure development in the area is accessible to people with disabilities. The shared use of spaces implies cross-over and attention to social and functional aspects of shared spaces. Policies for housing options focus on creating a mix of housing options for ages and incomes and offering 25% affordable rental housing as a priority goal. Policies around special places to work focus on accommodating various work activities including industrial activities, as have been

historical to the area. The Port Lands is also identified as a site for "green" industries and media companies to grow (City of Toronto, 2003b). There will not be large stand alone retail stores which implies that the waterfront is planned for a smaller-scale local-feeling community environment. The last policy area focuses on creating special places along the waterfront. The Central waterfront is envisioned to become the "face of Toronto to the world" with attributes comparable to international cities and creating a high-value tourism area (City of Toronto, 2003b, p. 13). Policy 47 speaks to the importance of creating year-round activities to attract all-season tourism, which city residents would also benefit from (City of Toronto, 2003b). While the waterfront develops there is care given to preserving cultural and heritage elements of the waterfront and highlighting its history. This includes ensuring that iconic industrial building of Redpath sugar factory remains. Additional specific land-use policies are provided for the Keating Channel where there is particular emphasis on letting the public realm and public space guide the development around it to ensure that publicly accessible spaces are at the core of development (City of Toronto, 2003b).

This document is particularly important because it is the current in force policy for the waterfront to which all development must adhere. Many of the initiatives, goals, and big moves can be seen as an evolution from the 1999 report. Overall, this secondary plan demonstrates great initiative and care for the public realm, parks, and open space areas through their incorporation in all elements of development.

The Waterfront Strategic Review (2015) is a strategic review particularly related to funding mechanisms for the waterfront. The City council adopted a request for an updated transition plan; the implementation of SMART goals; the creation of a common approach to project data management; strengthen Freedom of Information policies; and a request to adopt wrongdoing policies. In the strategic review, conducted by Ernst & Young LLP, it is noted that Waterfront Toronto's "precinct plans and public spaces have been internationally recognized for urban design, landscape architecture and planning excellence" demonstrating the importance and care that goes into creating a public realm (City of Toronto, 2015, p. 2).

The **Port Lands Flood Protection** (2016) identifies what is being done in the Port Lands to ensure development can continue to happen. This includes reconfiguring the mouth of the Don River to stop flooding, and touches on the future plans for Ookwemin Minising (formerly Villiers Island). Part of the importance of the Port Lands Flood Protection plan is to help deliver climate-positive solutions for the Toronto waterfront, and leading by example for other cities to follow (Waterfront Toronto, 2016). This project is one of the ways in which Toronto's waterfront is being put on the map on a global scale, demonstrating climate-positive innovation that creates opportunity for the expansion and creation of communities.

Built for This: Waterfront Toronto Rolling Five-Year Strategic Plan (2023-2024)

Toronto's most recent waterfront strategic plan, *Built for This: Waterfront Toronto Rolling Five-Year Strategic Plan (2023-2024)*, prepared by Waterfront Toronto, is the first update to strategies and plans for the waterfront since 2016. Approved by Toronto City Council in November 2023, the plan provides an overview of what has been achieved so far and identifies the ongoing projects and future areas for redevelopment within the Central Waterfront. While planning is still subject to conformity with the Central Waterfront Secondary Plan policies, this strategy helps guide future development. The 2023 strategy places emphasis on advancing priorities that matter to the public and to the government. The plan focuses on five key deliverables, promising that the waterfront will be built "to deliver what's needed

now; to deliver complete communities; to compete; to connect; and for value" (Waterfront Toronto, 2023, p. 3). In contrast to the 1999 vision, these areas of focus are less specific. So far, "43 hectares (106 acres) of parks and public spaces" have been added to the waterfront, contributing to the waterfronts "livable neighbourhoods" initiative (Waterfront Toronto, 2023, p. 45). This is still far from the initial 2,000-acre vision from the 1999 report, however the report in 1999 covered a much larger expanse along the waterfront. The Strategic Plan acknowledges the importance of public realm design such as parks, green space, and public access to the lake to increase physical and mental health which supports Klinenberg (2002) and Latham and Layton's (2019) research on the importance of open and public spaces for individual's wellbeing.

Figure 9: Current and Past Projects along the Toronto Waterfront

(Source: Waterfront Toronto, 2023, p. 15)

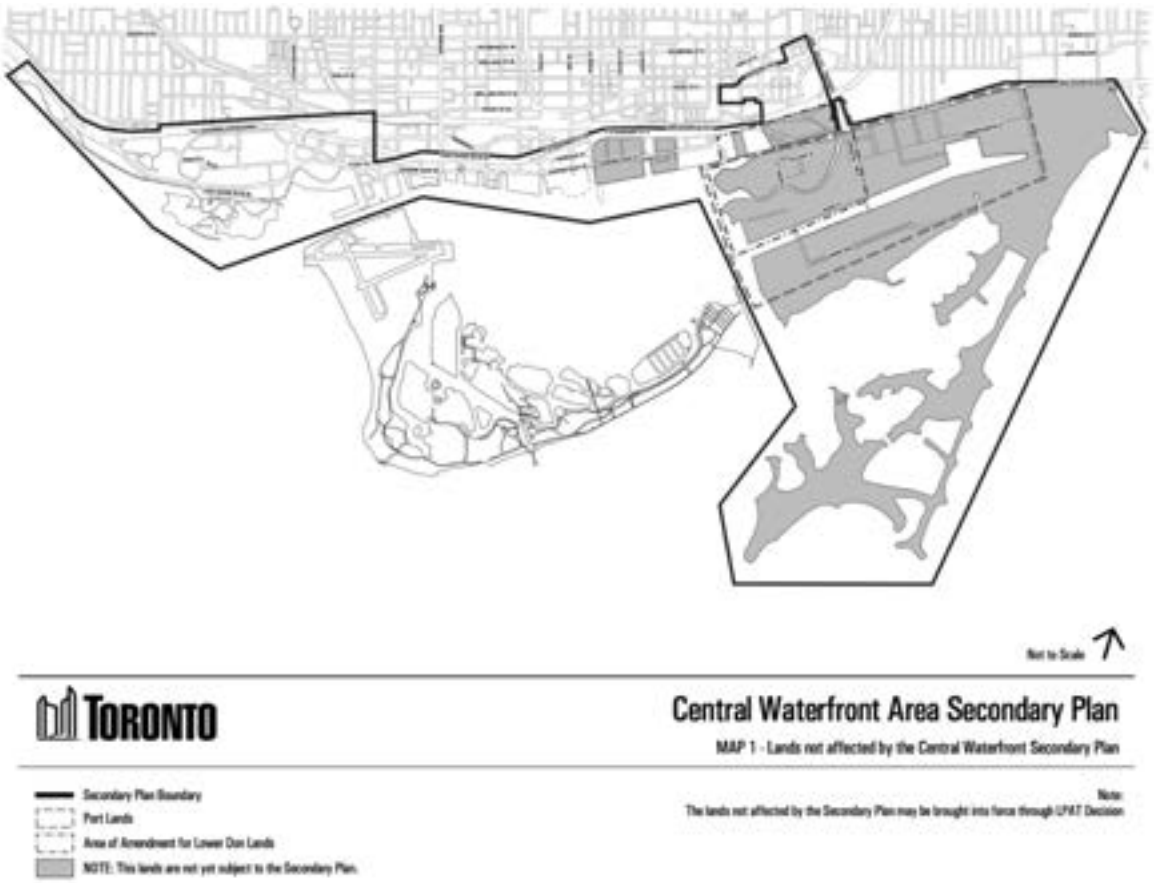
In the planning profession, there is an emphasis on understanding the *intent* of policies and recommendations. In my review of this plan, I was particularly focused on language that speaks to actions that will be taken and trying to read between the lines of what result is intended or implied. This plan demonstrates the shift in priorities within city building since the first 1999 plan with more emphasis on delivering infrastructure and amenities to meet the needs of the city in the moment. There are four priorities identified in this plan: "city building; the public good; financial sustainability; and innovation and job creation" (Waterfront Toronto, 2023, p. 15).

In 2005, Waterfront Toronto created the Waterfront Design Review Panel. The panel provides input and advice helping to set the design standards along the waterfront to help put Toronto on the map for international design recognition. The panel "promote[s] design excellence, improve[s] environmental performance, and ensure[s] a cohesive approach to waterfront revitalization" (Waterfront Toronto, n.d.). New projects, both public and private, along the waterfront are subject to review from the panel after which they receive a designation of support, conditional support, or non-support. The design review panel has a principle of "leading with landscape" to help create a public realm that is beautiful, distinct, and inviting (Waterfront Toronto, 2022, p. 11). Bowman (2025) points out that current developments along the waterfront often offer parks and public spaces first, which creates spaces for people to go and celebrate. In Ookwemin Minising, a new park opened in Summer 2025 "long before we've actually built anything", demonstrating how this principle of 'leading with landscape' is translating into the actual development on the ground (Bowman, 2025). This is also in alignment with Hare's (2025) view that park spaces are often delivered before additional infrastructure which draws people to the area, a concept that has been around since the waterfront began its redevelopment.

Under the leadership message in this document, an "urgent need for increased housing stock" was presented, with plans to provide thousands of units at Quayside and in the Port Lands (Waterfront Toronto, 2023, p. 7). There is a clear shift between the plan from the 1999 *Our Toronto Waterfront! The Wave of the Future* proposal and this new plan, as city priorities and needs are different. The 1999 proposal showed a strong desire for environmental restoration of the waterfront to make the land more viable and usable for locals and visitors. Thus, creating parks and public spaces was the first area of focus, while housing was a later consideration within the document. This shift is further supported by the working experience of Hare (2025), who was involved in the West Don Lands revitalization and provided corporate strategy for *Our Toronto Waterfront* (also known as the Fung Report) and ongoing projects along the waterfront. Hare (2025) describes the "emergent focus on resilience, biodiversity, [and] sustainability" in the early 2000s but with the additional focus of making a well-designed space that along with providing stormwater management, for example, also creates a place for a firepit where people can gather.

Within the *Built for This* plan, the goal is shifted towards creating complete communities, which includes the provision of everything a community needs to thrive both economically and socially, and to create climate-positive neighbourhoods with connections to parks and public realm. It is interesting to note how this connection to the public realm element is woven into the plan from the beginning. While it is not explicitly established as its own goal or priority, it is identified as an important element in conjunction with the high-priority need for housing. The Central Waterfront extends southwards and is bound by the Gardiner Expressway and Lake Shore Boulevard to the West, with a minor exception for a small portion towards the east that extends up to Eastern Avenue, it extends east towards Emdabiimok Avenue, and west towards Wilson Park Road. The Central waterfront does not include the Toronto Island or the Toronto Island Airport.

Figure 7: Central Waterfront Secondary Plan Boundary



(Source: City of Toronto, 2003b, [image updated 2020])

Extensive work has been done in recent years to address the flooding in the Port Lands, which has now made Ookwemin Minising, meaning “place of the black cherry trees” (formerly known as Villers Island), a viable land upon which to incorporate housing, and major park lands (Ookwemin Minising | Waterfront Toronto, 2022). According to Waterfront Toronto, the waterfront is an opportunity to address the housing shortage and necessities for residents as well as to create a major tourist destination with extensive public parks. Some of the major park networks that are planned are created with a goal of generating tourism and becoming a “world-class destination” (Waterfront Toronto, 2023, p. 8). The flood protection and naturalization of the mouth of the Don is identified by Kilbourn (2025) as one of the key moments in the waterfront’s redevelopment. Kilbourn (2025) speaks to the neat aspect of providing public good beyond the function of infrastructure. In this case, the function is to protect the eastern waterfront from flooding, but additionally it creates an amenity for people based on this infrastructure (Kilbourn, 2025). As Kilbourn (2025) states: “[infrastructure] shines when it provides an opportunity for social infrastructure and public space as a result of that one singular infrastructure use”, protecting the waterfront from flooding is providing a swath of land for a large and unique park network and destination playground. As discussed previously, social infrastructure is one of the intended or unintended values that can come out of parks and public spaces.

The first priority area of the waterfront's redevelopment is *city building*, to build what is needed now which are jobs, innovation, and housing. Housing is the main area of focus bringing thousands more units, 20% of which will be affordable housing. This priority is being achieved through collaboration between the City, Create T.O., and Bayside development partners from the private sector. This public-private collaboration is recognized as the driving force behind creating a successful waterfront community (Waterfront Toronto, 2023). Infrastructure that is necessary to go along with housing is transit. An Eastern Waterfront light rail train (LRT) is proposed from Union Station to the Port Lands. This transportation initiative was first presented in the 1999 report and has not yet been started. Transportation is highly important because it provides access for people from all over the city, and by connecting to Union Station it provides access for individuals outside of the city as well who may use GO transit. Since many people do not own vehicles, this transportation connection helps to create more inclusionary access, providing a mode of transportation to reach the waterfront after which people could walk, roll, or bike. Transit is highlighted by both Bowman (2025) and Hare (2025) as one of the important elements that the waterfront still needs. Once transit infrastructure is built it will help people to feel connected to the area. As a part of this first housing priority, there is a focus on climate resilience, and implementing green building designs. As part of Toronto's desire to be a leader in design, mass timber buildings have been constructed in the waterfront's Bayside neighbourhood. One of the major projects being taken on in the Central Waterfront is a "destination playground" which will integrate playgrounds and nature play. While it is focused on supporting developmental benefits to children, it will add 25 hectares (62 acres) of parkland along the new mouth of the Don River. This project is an example of providing new significant parkland to the city while also contributing to goals of attracting more tourism to the city and boosting the economic value of Toronto. The destination playground is anticipated to draw in 1 million visitors a year, from the GTA, outside the GTA, and abroad.

The second priority area of this strategic report is to create complete communities, this emphasizes connective transportation, livability, sustainability, and design excellence. This echoes many of the goals in the first section, emphasizing the desire to enhance natural aspects of the waterfront and create year-round amenities. This section highlights the four projects that hope to become "destinations as a beacon for locals and tourists" (Waterfront Toronto, 2023, p. 36). The first project is Parliament Slip, a parcel of land that will connect Queens Quay East with the Port Lands new development and is intended to provide amenities all year. This is an important aspect since, aside from the Harbourfront Centre, the waterfront does not have much programming in the winter, making it a desolate and cold place for many months of the year. The second project is the destination playground previously mentioned, with an intention to help draw in new young families who would help contribute economically to the area. This playground is expected to provide a public space for many ages and contribute to the parks and open space for the city, close enough to the downtown core that it will amplify supply per person that is currently lacking in the downtown core. The third project is creating an Indigenous Cultural Centre, which would create a gathering place for Indigenous communities as well as the broader public. The Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation are highly involved in planning the future waterfront and have led this initiative. This is an important project as the waterfront lands were historically used for Indigenous trade, but this history has been largely forgotten**.** Creating intentional spaces for Indigenous communities and for non-Indigenous people to learn helps reconciliation and educational efforts to understand Toronto's history. Bowman (2025) identifies this project as another significant focus in the waterfront's redevelopment. She shared that "making space to recognize, celebrate, and appropriately position [Indigenous] history alongside [the] industrial heritage" of the area is highly important to the

advancement of plans along the lake front (Bowman, 2025). The final project is the Keating Channel Pedestrian Bridge, designed through a design competitions (Waterfront Toronto, 2023). It will link the east Bayfront to Ookwemin Minising and also acts as a feature to exhibit design excellence along the waterfront. Through these plans there is an intention to include lots of public art through an artist in residence program, and a permanent commission from Indigenous artists. Public art is one of the features of public spaces that can bring vibrancy, interest, and uniqueness to a space. This plan elevates the waterfront as livable neighbourhoods by providing amenities that support a "quality of life" (Waterfront Toronto, 2023, p. 45). I note, however, that there is no explanation of what this "quality of life" means, how is this quantified? It seems assumed in providing amenities such as transit, parks, and accessible services to the community but does not state what a *good* quality of life would be for residents.

The third section of this plan speaks to building a waterfront that can compete. This means building infrastructure and promoting growth for employers, entrepreneurs, and institutions. Incorporated in this goal is the desire to promote public realm design that is natural, absorbent, helps biodiversity, and thus reverses the urban heat island effect. This is tied to Yuen and Johnson's (2017) argument that increasing green infrastructure throughout cities can have a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing. This is further supported through a focus on physical and mental health promotion through various design elements. This includes the incorporation of more parks, green space, and public access and free exercise facilities in public spaces. The fact that Waterfront Toronto identifies parks, green space, and public access as directly connected to goals of physical and mental health is evidence of these associated benefits and acknowledgment of their importance in planning. The Quayside project further demonstrates the desire to incorporate green space through the inclusion of a community forest, a car-free green space and the extension of this space towards Parliament Slip (Waterfront Toronto, 2023).

The fourth section of this plan "built to connect" relates to the government structure, and the decision-makers involved, making sure the plans for the waterfront are seen through to completion. Waterfront Toronto has been engaged with Treaty Holders, Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, and broader urban Indigenous populations in Toronto ensuring that there are mutual economic development opportunities, and that the presence of Indigenous populations in the area is enhanced. There has also been public engagement throughout the process which helps to ensure the decisions being made are reflective of Torontonians and the people who may one day inhabit the area. Involving the public in decision making is supportive of placemaking efforts, where individuals feel more connected to the spaces they frequent and can develop a stronger sense of belonging in their city (Project for Public Places, 2007).

The final section of the plan discusses how the waterfront is expected to bring economic value to the city. The funding for projects up until the years 2027-2028 will primarily come from governments (80%), while the final 20% comes from non-governmental sources such as land sales, philanthropy, and other revenue sources (assumedly private). This funding is generally reflective of the land ownership structure of the waterfront with 80% of the land being owned by government entities, while 20% is privately owned. Investment is happening in three key areas: through the priority projects discussed earlier; sustainable communities; and signature projects. Public places are one of the areas that receive annual investment throughout the five-year plan, further demonstrating how public space is incorporated and essential to creating a vibrant, and lasting space that will attract new residents for the long-term.

One of the greatest takeaways from this strategy is the incorporation of more explicit language around the benefits, whether direct or indirect, to wellbeing and sociability. While the 1999 strategy and

following reports and plan presented large visions for parks and public space, this strategy emphasizes the integration of elements that create positive outcomes for space, such as creating inviting spaces or gathering places. One of the challenges to creating public spaces is that it is difficult to make sure the space gets used as intended. What one landscape architect or urban designer deems to be an "inviting" space may appear uninviting to someone else. This is why the Waterfront Design Review Panel is important to help form consensus on plans and suggest ideal design with input from various people. After completing my own analysis of the plans, my conversation with Jed Kilbourn (2025) from Waterfront Toronto, highlighted that in some cases the change in language has shifted to be a sort of marketing tool. There is a general consensus that parks and public space should continue to be built and integrated throughout the city, but the marketing has changed to emphasize the impact that it can have on people. While language around creating a "sense of belonging" or a "quality of life" is partially a marketing tactic, academics have found that there is also truth in this, when people feel excited to spend time in a beautiful park space it can improve social, personal, and mental health and wellbeing (Mehta, 2023; Klinenberg, 2002; Low, 2023; City of Toronto, 2018b).

A strong example that demonstrates the waterfront's commitment to public space is Ookwemin Minising (formerly Villiers Island). The flood protection that happened at the mouth of the Don River created hectares of new land and waterfront access. The desire, plans, and action to make a large majority of the space a park with natural elements integrated throughout speaks to the importance of these types of public spaces. As previously mentioned, the new Biidasiige park opened in Ookwemin Minising in summer 2025, which shows how Waterfront Toronto, and its partners, are leading with landscape and providing parks and public space before developing other infrastructure.

Additionally, the strategy references planning for physical and mental health under which there are goals for providing parkland which demonstrates the direct connection between these two elements. Furthermore, through the priority projects identified there is an increased acknowledgment of the Indigenous roots to Toronto, and implementing more gathering spaces and public spaces that are informed by Indigenous ways of knowing. Overall, this plan expresses strong intent to include expansive parks and green space along the waterfront throughout the next stages of development. The inclusion of language around quality of life and wellbeing are also especially noticeable as these joint outcomes are more visible in this plan unlike previous plans and strategies.

Quantitative Analysis

Finally, in a quantitative analysis of the waterfront documents I took note of the number of times a strategy, report, or planning document made reference to public space explicitly or implicitly. However, if the public realm was referenced multiple times in a sentence or paragraph (following the same thought) I have only counted it once.

What I found was that while the 1999 plan references ambitious goals to create a "46-kilometre necklace of green", creating 2,000 acres of parkland, cleaning up contaminated sites, and creating a 30-50 metre greenway it does not expand greatly on specific ways this redevelopment will happen. This plan references quality of life only 3 times in relation to public spaces and social wellbeing once. In total, public space was referenced a total of 22 times throughout this document. The most seen terms include

parks, public spaces, and green or greening in reference to the green ribbon and turning previously industrial spaces into green space. While it is not a document of primary focus, I took count of the 2000 Fung report which references public space in various ways a total of 61 times. As a reminder, the Fung report came out in response to the 1999 report as a way of endorsing the waterfront's redevelopment suggestions. This report is indicative of Robert Fung and the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force's stance on public space, demonstrating a willingness to promote public space and connection among people and between the lake and the downtown core.

The Central Waterfront Secondary Plan (2003) is perhaps the most indicative of Waterfront Toronto and the City of Toronto's efforts to integrate public space along the waterfront. Since this plan is in full force and effect, all decisions made regarding development on Central Waterfront land must conform to the intent of this plan. The plan makes reference to public space a total of 46 times and contains a priority section for building a network of spectacular waterfront parks and public spaces. In this plan, the most used terms include public realm; public spaces; parks; and plazas. There is lots of emphasis on parks as gateways, a system of connections, and creating viewpoints along the waterfront with public access for all. There is no mention of parks and public spaces in reference to quality of life or social benefits of these spaces but rather implies that parks and public spaces need to be incorporated to create communities with longevity and vitality.

Waterfront Toronto's most recent strategy document discusses what has been completed to date and what is still outstanding for the waterfront's future development. Similar to the Central Waterfront Secondary Plan, this strategy references parks, public space, and quality of life a cumulative total of 51 times. What is most noteworthy in this document is that there is a connection made between public space and greenspace in describing what is required to thrive socially, using language such as "gathering places", "public good", and "wellbeing". Language about the public realm is tied to goals of creating "inviting" spaces, and engaging the public. Gathering places is also newly used terminology, particularly in reference to the envisioned Indigenous Cultural Centre, creating a space for Indigenous communities and the broader public. This is an example of language suggesting that public spaces be created for the purpose of bringing people together, with an implicit understanding that creating places for human connection is of importance.

Conclusion

Over the history of Toronto's waterfront planning and redevelopment, and through the course of my research I have determined that there is an ongoing commitment to providing and preserving accessible public spaces for Torontonians and visitors. However, the language around public space has changed significantly from a focus on green space, parks, and public access to a focus on creating an inviting public realm for wellbeing and gathering. While the waterfront has faced challenges to its redevelopment due to the fragmented ownership of land predominantly held by public entities, this has not appeared to impact the waterfront's development immensely. Yes, parts of the waterfront such as the Keating Channel are still lacking progress, but upon reflection the waterfront *has* developed significantly in the past 20 years bringing new and unique public spaces. Additionally, the progress being made in the Port Lands and

the recent opening of Biidasiige Park demonstrates the continued efforts and fulfillment of Waterfront Toronto's 'leading with landscape' approach to redevelopment.

After reviewing, analysing, and interpreting strategies, reports, and plans, it is evident that parks and public spaces continue to be a priority along the waterfront. Since the first report written in 1999, green space and public access to the lake front have been overarching goals, with public space being addressed first in some of the reports. The 2003 Central Waterfront Secondary Plan, still in force today, puts forth "big moves" wherein removing barriers, creating a network of parks and open spaces, and promoting a clean environment are among the first items addressed. While it may be argued that the order is unimportant, I would suggest that it is in fact an indicator of what the City wants to be considered first and throughout the reading of plans. The most recent 2023 strategy presented by Waterfront Toronto changes emphasizes the importance of providing housing, and employment, given the current need for this in Toronto. However, along with housing and employment opportunities, the provision of public space and the connected parks system along the waterfront and at Ookwemin Minising further highlight how "leading with landscape" is still at the root of planning for a high-quality public realm along Toronto's lakefront. This strategy also ties sociability and wellbeing more explicitly to the public realm and identifies the potential for improved social, mental, and physical wellbeing through these public spaces. I acknowledge that official plans and documents have their limitations. They are implementation tools, put in place to promote the generalised interests of city residents. They help readers to understand what the city's vision and agenda are, but they do not often include a full comprehensive analysis of the impacts on individuals and their communities. They are planning documents to offer guidance, but in reality, discourses, practices, and outcomes may differ from the document intentions.

I am optimistic about the future of the waterfront after having spoken to planners. There is still a considerable amount of work to deliver what has been described in the plans and strategies, and for the redevelopment of land to be complete. However, the conversations emphasize that the provision of public spaces will continue to be a priority within the planning profession, though perhaps more through small pockets and unexpected places, rather than large projects. Kilbourn (2025) spoke to this a bit by bringing optimism and excitement for street design, and thinking of street spaces as more than a location for traffic flow. He expanded on the idea that infrastructure can serve more than one function. In the case of streets, they serve a functional need, but the sidewalks and spaces between buildings can also serve as a well-designed, enjoyable public realm (Kilbourn, 2025). Kilbourn (2025) furthered this idea by expressing how streets serve an important social function and bring value by providing a space for protests to happen legally within a democracy. This supports Mehta's (2023) definition of public spaces as providing political functions within society. Additionally, through my conversations it was evident that bringing the waterfront's Indigenous history and industrial history to the forefront is a key priority. This is currently done through the creation of public spaces with walking trails, public art, and educational aspects such as Ookwemin Minising's destination playground, and is further planned through the future Indigenous Cultural Centre.

One of the barriers still existing along the waterfront is transit, once this is implemented the waterfront will be more accessible and inviting to residents and visitors. Along with transit, there is potential for creating better connections between the waterfront and city core, such as creating a more inviting space under the Gardiner Expressway as it has already been done in some sections. Additionally, Hare (2025) highlighted that the waterfront is lacking waterside experiences. This includes opportunities that allow people to look back at the city from the water's edge, a unique form of public space that would

be really great to see in the future. While my focus was directed at parks and public spaces, I have realized that when it comes to the provision of public spaces it is essential to consider all aspects and types of public space. Parks and open spaces contribute to sociability and wellbeing, but equally streets, sidewalks, and unexpected pockets of public space within the urban fabric of a city can bring excitement, joy, and a sense of belonging. To me, urban planning is about contributing spaces and places to a city for everyone to find enjoyment in. I look forward to seeing how the waterfront continues to deliver inclusive spaces contributing to elements of a good quality of life and wellbeing for all populations in the years to come.

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Appendix A

Figure A1. Favourite Places Outcome: Establishing Toronto's Quality Criteria from the Public Space Public Life Study
(Source: City of Toronto, 2018a, p.8)

This chart highlights the qualities appreciated by park visitors within the city of Toronto. Results were acquired by online engagement, workshops, and sidewalk pop-up events where thousands of responses were collected. These spatial qualities demonstrate what people look for in their public spaces (City of Toronto, 2018a).