

# Toronto's Recent Waterfront Struggles: *Much Ado About Nothing?*

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Toronto's newspapers were full of the story. At a public meeting on October 27, 2005, two local agencies were set to duke it out over plans to develop the East Bayfront in downtown Toronto. The Board of Directors of the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corporation (TWRC) was going to decide whether its own plan for 90 acres of waterfront land just east of Yonge Street would be recommended to City Council, or whether a competing plan would get the nod. Mayor Miller attended the sparring match in his capacity as a new TWRC Board Member – and as the *agent provocateur* behind the media-hyped battle. As the meeting began, Robert Fung, Chair of the TWRC's Board, ordered all egos checked at the door, but then proclaimed that if the Board rejected its own plan, the very existence of this three-level government funded quasi-public sector urban development corporation would be in jeopardy. These usually public prudent and temperate elite businessmen, bureaucrats and politicians were preparing for an open brawl.

The meeting had ostensibly been called to allow the TWRC's Board to consider the merits of the Toronto Economic Development Corporation's (TEDCO) alternative plan for the East Bayfront. The TWRC's plan, which had withstood the test of countless ritualized public consultation meetings, consisted of residential and retail development interspersed with cultural institutions, office space, and sites for tourist-oriented activities. As area landowners, however, TEDCO had commissioned its own plan. Although conceived without the benefit of public discussions, it differed only in that it featured significantly less retail activity and a narrower boardwalk, and placed a greater emphasis on creating private spaces within residential developments. While much of the meeting saw TEDCO's hired-hands outperform the TWRC's, the decision taken by the TWRC's Board to rec-

ommend its own plan to City Council had little to do with the merits of the plans. Rather, the decision had more to do with ongoing jealousies and institutional rivalries wrapped up in a jurisdictional wrangle between two public agencies.

So, will the outcome of these ongoing contests for legitimacy make any material difference to the people of Toronto? To answer this question, it is necessary to look at recent history, going back to initiatives that link waterfront development to mega-sporting events, and particularly to the roots of Toronto's recent "world city" dream to host the Olympic Games. By doing so, we hope to show that the current vision for the waterfront, the much-hyped formula by which the city is to be reconnected with its lake, was conceived by and reflects the interests of an elite group of Torontonians, and has little to do with fulfilling the dreams, needs and desires of many others in the city.

In the late 1990s, former mayor David Crombie was spearheading an attempt to win the 2008 Olympic Games for Toronto. After a three-year stint as head of the Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront, Crombie had become head of its successor agency, the Waterfront Regeneration Trust. Despite their apparent environmental focus, both of these bodies proposed that the answer to the waterfront's environmental, social, and economic problems was intensified development. As such, the Trust had taken on the business of coordinating a variety of development projects around the north shore of Lake Ontario from Hamilton to Port Credit along its flagship project, the Waterfront Trail. The environmental focus of the Trail and its associated notions of sustainability made waterfront development both desirable and palatable; after all, what local politician, community group, or corporate benefactor could resist the lure of beautifying the water's edge with a new park or a wetland

for educating kids, or cutting the ribbon on a beautiful new shoreline shopping centre? But as the political climate changed in the late 1990s with the Harris Tories' privatization agenda looming large, Crombie and the staff of the publicly-funded Waterfront Trust thought that the time was right for an Olympic bid, which would be aimed at consolidating the impetus necessary to propel the development of Toronto's Central Waterfront forward.

Toronto's Three Amigos – Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, Premier Mike Harris, and Mayor Mel Lastman – were rapidly brought on board in October 2000. With great fanfare, they jointly endorsed the campaign for the 2008 Games with a public promise to rebuild the waterfront regardless of the success or failure of the bid. This was music to the ears of a variety of private interests behind the Olympic bid, whose ability to realise the development possibilities of the nearly 2000 acres of waterfront land had long been frustrated. A number of factors forestalled large-scale development: public outcry over Harbourfront and the concrete curtain of Harbour Square, liability concerns over polluted soil and the threat of flooding, cross-jurisdictional wrangling among governments and governmental agencies which made investor certainty quite uncertain, and longstanding political and public support for waterfront industry and blue-collar jobs. These various impediments to large-scale development were washed away with the bid's mantra of a "Green Olympics" and its promise to provide a clean, green, and economically viable Toronto waterfront for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Plans for the Games, however, had to deal with the unfortunate reality that sewers, roads, water lines, electricity, sidewalks, and public amenities – all required to support the construction of sites for the Olympic Games – were either inadequate or completely absent from much of the →

waterfront. A massive financial infusion and big investment was needed in order for the Games to proceed.

But the IOC did not allow such massive infrastructure expenditures to be included as part of the Game's budget. So, a strategy to deal with these two problems was conceived following considerable behind-the-scenes discussion. Elected leaders pledged that the public would underwrite much of the waterfront infrastructure necessary for the Olympic Games. They were also determined to create a vehicle to funnel vast sums of public money to these efforts without the expenditures appearing on the bid's financial ledger. This vehicle – its corporate structure determined by representatives of the development, banking, and investment industries – turned out to



The Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corp's vision of "East Bayfront Promenade"

be a publicly-funded but privately controlled development corporation with its own provincial enabling legislation: the TWRC. As Fung revealingly wrote, "At its core, the revitalization of Toronto's waterfront is an infrastructure project driving an economic model that will help redefine Canada in the global economy."

Toronto's Olympic dreams were sadly dashed when, in July 2001, Beijing won the bid. Nonetheless, the Olympic Bid has had a long-lasting impact on the future of Toronto's waterfront. Crombie's political skills largely diffused the concerns raised by community and environmental groups, social activists and labour unions about past bids – and the wide public support garnered for the Olympics and its promise of ensuring waterfront revitalization has largely carried over into current development

plans. The bid's supporters successfully coupled the possibility of hosting a colossal, globally-recognized mega-event with the promises of cutting through jurisdictional grid-lock, attracting huge amounts of government and private sector investment, and 'cleaning up' the waterfront through development. This strategy has successfully de-politicized waterfront development to the point that contrary claims have been all but silenced, leaving the waterfront's power players – like the TWRC and TEDCO – to squabble over who steers the ship.

The TWRC's plan for the East Bayfront – indeed, its plans for the entire 2000 acre waterfront – have largely been shaped by the drive among Toronto's elites to position both Toronto and Canada as a

whole to operate more competitively in the global economy. Developers continue their quest to realize significant profit through longer-term "mixed use" development – the current cash cow blend of residential, commercial, retail, and cultural space. The TWRC's presence has facilitated this quest, with its stated goal "to put Toronto at the forefront of global cities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by transforming the waterfront into beautiful, acces-

sible new communities, parks and public spaces, fostering economic growth in knowledge-based, creative industries and ultimately, re-defining how the city, province and country are perceived by the world."

In other words, Toronto's waterfront revitalization mirrors a neoliberal development policy that is being implemented in cities around the world. The purpose of this policy is to construct particular kinds of spaces and places that will attract and retain the capital flows of a new and global bourgeoisie. TWRC plans speak of "re-branding Canada" through creating the kind of spaces and places that will capitalize on the "enormous competitive advantage" embodied in Toronto's "economic clusters" in such sectors as the media, information and communications technology, pharma-

ceuticals, and biotechnology. These are the "creative, knowledge-based industries" that are supposed to be the backbone of a post-Fordist and environmentally-friendly global economy. And the enormous innovative powers of the so-called "creative class" that works in these creative industries will supposedly inject new life into our economy, and thus the desire for a safe and sanitized urban life requires us to reshape our waterfront accordingly.

Whoever wins the current power struggle – whether the TWRC or TEDCO is at the helm of the waterfront development ship – the material circumstances of the people of Toronto will not be significantly altered. TEDCO has largely accepted the globally-inspired waterfront development principles embodied in the TWRC's scheme. The plans TEDCO presented at the TWRC Board meeting described above differ slightly in form, but do not deny the essential logic that currently dominates. Both corporations accept the current economic development model that privileges the wealthy, assuming the wealthy will provide Toronto with a competitive edge in a global economy. Neither of the plans makes provision for stable and well-paid working-class jobs. Neither provides affordable housing. Neither adequately considers the changes to lake levels that will surely arise due to global warming. Neither incorporates the culturally and economically diverse interests of a culturally and economically diverse Toronto. And, perhaps most importantly, neither celebrates the history, culture and struggles of the working people that built and continue to maintain Toronto's waterfront.

The future identity of the East Bayfront has been almost entirely dedicated to international corporate interests and the creative cultural elite who enjoy its privileges. The recent dust-up between the TWRC and TEDCO and their continuing battles for control, while important to the fortunes of the small minority of economic owners and financiers involved, is much ado about nothing for the majority of Toronto's diverse working class. **R**

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