

LOVE PARK OPENS IN THE HEART OF TORONTO WATERFRONT

Perhaps I can be forgiven for reminiscing on the early days in 2006 when the idea for this park at the intersection of Queens Quay and York Street was born.



Source: Artist rendering from Architect Claude Cormier and Associates

In mid-2004, I retired to Harbour Square, Toronto, after working almost twenty-two years abroad. I used public transit but explored different neighbourhoods on foot, sampling ethnic foods, popping into stores, mesmerised by the vibrancy of older and newer immigrant communities. I admired the easy peaceful integration and adaptation that seemed to come so naturally. I remembered Jane Jacobs, an American journalist and urban activist in the mid-sixties who campaigned against the destruction of economic and social neighborhoods, with prolific construction of expressways. Jacobs eventually emigrated from New York to Canada and made Toronto her home. She developed a following who shared her views and was able to influence some change.



Circular down ramp at York St. Source: Braz Menezes

However, Jane Jacobs was too late to save my neighbourhood on the central waterfront. We had the ugliest concrete eyesore of the Gardiner Expressway on our doorstep, with two down-ramps – a ramp to Bay Street, and circular ramp to York Street. The land belonged to the city. The Roads department showed little preoccupation with aesthetics or environmental concerns. A few self-seeded mature trees in the middle of the circle provided relief on hot days. The area was a scruffy patch of land with no attempt at upkeep. Landscaping consisted of an abundance of rocks and boulders to deter squatter occupation. I noticed frequent outbursts of graffiti on the supporting concrete supports that had to be hurriedly scrubbed.



Arial photo of both ramps. Source: Braz Menezes

In 2006, Waterfront Toronto's President and CEO, John Campbell, announced the commencement of a '*Redevelopment of the Central Waterfront to make it 'the most beautiful Waterfront in the world'*'. International consultants were selected through a public competition, and a detailed Environment Assessment was set in motion.

I was excited that finally something was happening. I wanted to contribute somehow to the effort, but reminded myself I had come home to retire and already had my hands full. I had also embarked on a course on creative writing at George Brown so I could chronicle the last fifty years of Portuguese and British imperial history in Goa and Kenya. My plans were about to be sabotaged.

One evening, as I was leaving for a quick stroll by the water I met a neighbour, Ulla Colgrass. She inquired if we were attending the same meeting. She told me that she

was the Chair of the YQNA (York Quay Neighbourhood Association) and invited me to join her and listen to what was going on in the community.

Around 30 individuals attended the meeting. They were ecstatic, among other things, over the recent successful shutdown of a raucous nightclub (Bamboo) on the Waterfront. Other items on the agenda were the need to strengthen communication with the Harbourfront Centre and increase contact with the police on general security issues. They discussed the necessity for YQNA to respond to Waterfront Toronto's request to send a representative(s) to the Waterfront Toronto Stakeholders Advisory Group. I was impressed by the group's energy and passion. I had a fleeting thought that we could perhaps harness this 'Community Power' for change. I walked back with Ulla.

We stopped at the bottom of York Street, opposite the Second Cup Coffee Shop (now Beavertails). I had a captive audience. "We could have a wonderful park inside that space if we can just persuade the city to eliminate those two hideous ramps," I said. I conveyed my thoughts on the numerous planning issues that needed to be resolved, as well as the potential that lay ahead. It would bring the Waterfront to life. Traffic could be re-routed down Harbour Street. We can create an *Oasis* for visitors and residents at the intersection of the Financial District and the Waterfront. A park could be a joyful meeting place that would mirror other iconic images of Toronto, such as the CN Tower and the skating rink at City Hall. These tourist memories are important and would help market our city.



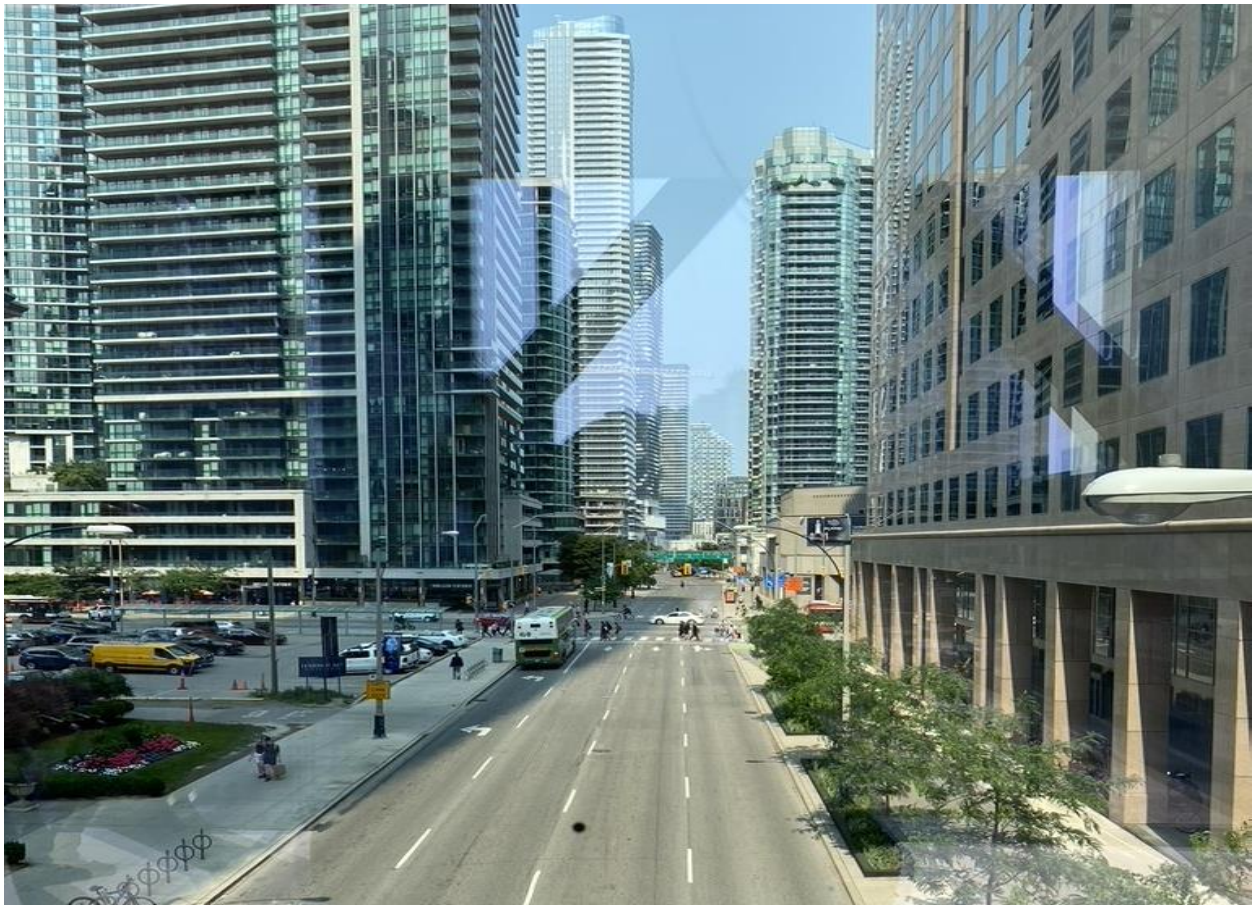
Meeting with Councillor Pam McConnell, - Ulla Colgrass, Carlo Bonnani, Braz Menezes.
Photo taken by Tom Davidson.

Ulla's reaction was enthusiastic. I offered to make a visual presentation for the October YQNA meeting. There was general agreement to the idea, and over the next week, Ulla

polished our presentation. We would only have one chance to persuade our elected Councillor Pat McConnell to buy into the idea. We met in her office at City Hall on November 5, 2006 with city planner Carlo Bonnani and Tom Davidson (the Councillor's administrative assistant).

Councillor McConnell was attentive. She had a few inquiries. At first, she appeared to hesitate. To me, she appeared to be calculating how she would sell such a bold concept to her own colleagues, as well as how the project would impact on the city and on her own legacy. Ulla and I were not unduly nervous. We felt the project would appeal to her because it was a project with broad popular appeal. "Yes, let's do it," she said. "It won't be easy, but I'll do my best to find help and funding."

Ulla and I left the meeting elated, knowing that YQNA would have to work hard to make it happen. We had YQNA volunteers for each of the many Stakeholder slots that WT had asked over the next few months (and years). This project was complicated by any standards. It involved detail transport and engineering studies to ascertain its viability. The teardown of the ramps was finally started in 2017, followed by the building of a short new ramp to Lower Simcoe Street and construction of Harbour Street with continuous complex traffic management to carry traffic.



Rebuilt Harbour St. Source: Braz Menezes



Demolition underway 2019. Source: YQNA

In 2018, Waterfront Toronto invited RFPs from a shortlist of international firms. From those a shorter list was invited to submit designs. Our special congratulations go the winning design by architect Claude Cormier and Associates (CC+A), who already has a legacy of beautiful public spaces in Toronto at *Sugar Beach*, *HTO park*, and *Berzcy Park*.



Love Park on eve of opening. June 22, 2023 Source: Cristina Palarca



Love Park on eve of opening looking south. June 22, 2023. Source: Cristina Palarca

On June 23, 2023, LOVE PARK was opened to general acclaim to a large crowd of visitors, including families and their pets. CC+A have produced a creative design - the central theme is a large heart-shaped shallow pond, surrounded with grassed berms and criss-crossed with wide paths. Plenty of seating on benches, and on café-type tables and chairs under a whimsical trellis that will eventually support a white wisteria vine.



Opening day. June 23, 2023. Source: Cristina Palarca



Opening day. June 23, 2023. Source: Cristina Palarca



Christopher Glaisek, Chief Planning
Design Officer at WATERFRONT Toronto
Source: Cristina Palarca



Tom Davidson, Councillor McConnell's
Administrative Assistant
Source: Cristina Palarca

We felt sad at the opening of Love Park that the late Councillor McConnell could not be there to celebrate with us. YQNA is appreciative for her political leadership during the critical years. YQNA wish to congratulate Waterfront Toronto, the City of Toronto, and the various consultants that finally brought this project together seventeen years from its inception.

Our Councillor Ausma Malik is a dynamic and extremely hardworking community- oriented leader. We wish to thank her for her invaluable support and encouragement. She together with other dignitaries officially cut the ribbon.



Councillor Ausma Malik. Source: Cristina Palarca



Source: Cristina Palarca

**For Ulla Colgrass and me,
this is a dream come true.
We never believed it would
happen in our lifetime.**

Author: BRAZ MENEZES, HarbourSide Resident, June 2023