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# ***Introduction***

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And to know the place for the first time

*T. S. Eliot*

*Four Quartets. Little Gidding, V*

Waterfronts have always been among humankind's special places: as centres of commerce; as points of departure and arrival; as places to build cities; as places on the edge of the real world and the world of imagination. New hopes rose with each new shoreline rising above each new horizon. New possibilities. New futures.

Indeed, the history of most of the world's cities (and for that matter, most of its towns, villages, and encampments) begins on and with their waterfronts. The practical reasons are fairly obvious: a need for readily available drinking and cooking water; water for cleansing and irrigation; and water vital for transportation and food. Until about 150 years ago, when the Railway Era began, the only way to move large quantities of raw materials and finished goods was over water routes; and even today, water transportation is important worldwide.

That many of the early waterfront encampments, or outposts, or granaries or depots went on to develop into some of the major cities of today was only partly an accident of history. The other part was by design, a strategy for growth that paid dividends.

Toronto was born on the waterfront. Long before the Simcoes. Long before the Town of York. Deep in the mists of aboriginal time, the Toronto Carrying Place was a centre of trade, stabilized by community and endowed with spiritual significance.

When Toronto embraced the Railway Era in the 1850s, there were few hints of the City that would emerge, the City the railways would help to create. And if the City was cut

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off from its waterfront by dozens of sets of tracks flowing in and out of each other in the new lands south of Front Street — and it was — it is also clear that the City and its people benefited mightily. Having secured a major share of a new technology, and established a formula for economic success that remains potent to this day, Toronto drew hundreds of industries to its shores over the years. And as energetic cities do, it began to attract people from other parts of Canada and from all over the world: creative people, people with dreams and ideas, people seeking freedom and better prospects, people whose children and their ensuing generations would keep Toronto vigorous. And the City prospered.

But as railways and then expressways cut people off from their waterfront, as people looked elsewhere to live, work, and play, and as our economic drive brought greater prosperity to more and more people, our perspective changed dramatically. The significance of waterfronts was lost and their importance diminished; the great contribution of our river valleys was no longer understood or taught and, save for a few hardy souls, the essential role of Nature in the City was all but forgotten. Progress meant industry and industry meant railways. Railways required land for track and cities agreed to separate themselves from their waterfronts in order to capture the opportunities the railways offered.

But in our time the railways have become more interested in profit from the land than in service from the track; ships have changed their technologies and their trade routes; the economic base of cities is being changed and there has been a significant shift in human values. People are coming back to our waterfronts for pleasure and solace in a way that their great-grandparents would have understood.

This is dramatic, powerful, and far-reaching historical change: from Barcelona to Boston, from Halifax to Vancouver, from Shanghai to Toronto, reawakened waterfronts are being reclaimed by their cities and, in the



process, both are being transformed in form, function, and image. And not just physically: as each city grapples with complex, unco-ordinated, and historic forces, we find ourselves rediscovering the meaning of waterfronts, economically, ecologically, historically, spiritually.

We are back to fundamentals. Back to basic principles and essential questions — here, in the City where, according to Lewis Mumford, “the separate beams of life” are brought together and “the issues of civilization are brought into focus”. The pull of ancient connections, origins, and identities merges with overwhelming events that suggest new opportunities, new dreams, and new questions. What purposes should our reclaimed waterfront serve? What should it look like? What should it become? A place to live? A place to work? A place to play? A combination of all of these? Only two of them? In what ratios? What proportion? What scale? What kind of work? What kind of play? And so on.

In answering these questions, cities define themselves, become distinct, and develop their own characters. As products of time, place, and circumstance, cities become what they are by the way in which they are treated by each generation.

The people of Toronto instinctively understand this. They understand the importance of what is being done on their waterfront today. They understand the unique historic opportunity that the waterfront gives this metropolitan city. And the care, indeed the passion, with which they have presented their views and ideas to this Commission says that they will accept nothing less than the best we can do — that they want it done right. That the chance to do it right will not come again for a long time.

That is why, early on, they expressed their dismay and anger at some of the redevelopment in the Central Waterfront. They feel that, at the moment their waterfront was reappearing, it was being lost again. That instead of

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being joined to it, they were being further separated from it. That instead of being opened up, the waterfront was being walled off.

But the hundreds of people coming before the Commission also registered a strong faith in what could be done to make things better. Time and again, they expressed their belief that Toronto's way of doing things, its values, its civic traditions could and should be used to deal with the forces that affect the future of the waterfront.

They offered words to describe their instincts about Toronto. Words like opportunity, tolerance, and orderliness. Words that speak of the virtues that reach back to our roots, explain our sense of civic stewardship, and underpin the City's ongoing success.

Calling opportunity a basic Toronto value comes close to being self-evident. With a few pauses, Toronto has been a place at the cutting edge, a magnet for new ideas, and a resource in realizing them. In Toronto, as in all vigorous cities, opportunities beget opportunities.

Moreover, there has always been an ongoing opportunity to affect the course of the city itself — a sense that Toronto is a work in progress and that its directions can be changed. People who have been in Toronto for a while begin to develop a feeling of what they want it to be, what of its many facets would benefit from change, what should stay the same.

Tolerance has meant the near-total absence of violent confrontation. There are forums where people grapple with ideas, interest, and beliefs. When compromise is possible, compromise is made, but even when it is not possible, "losers" are left with the knowledge that, next time, they could just as easily be "winners": an idea has been rejected, not the person who proposed it. This climate of tolerance has also meant that sooner or later, "New Torontonians" (new arrivals or new generations, or both) will have their ideas and aspirations brought to the city's and the public's



official attention and they will be given respectful consideration. Tolerance means that everybody learns that everybody counts.

Orderliness is a quaint and unwieldy word, but quaintness cannot detract from its importance in the building of Toronto. With all the transformations the City has experienced and all the conflicts it has had to resolve, nothing has ever truly gotten out of hand. That discipline (a better word, maybe, than orderliness) has been here from the beginning — a lingering legacy, no doubt, of Governor Simcoe's garrison days. It is a value, or a virtue, that has been drawn upon by each succeeding wave of New Torontonians, reinterpreted on occasion and adapted to specific circumstances, but always enriched along the way.

Toronto continues to recognize that freedom remains alive only in an atmosphere of order, that life here is played by a set of rules, and that the rules are meant to work for everybody. From this comes the assurance that nothing will ever get out of hand or out of control; that the City will never grow beyond its ability to solve its problems; that, when things start to go wrong, order will be restored and the right thing done.

Well, that's the faith. Easier to say than to do. Forging consensus rooted in these core values is the dull, hard work of democracy — an unrelenting, never-ending task that requires the energies, interests, and imaginations of many people over long periods of time. Sometimes their voices are not heard. Sometimes the thread is lost — or their visions are blocked. And sometimes the soul-numbing experiences of day-to-day battle create a tempting cynicism that obscures the progress being achieved.

Indeed, the values that we call opportunity, tolerance, and orderliness work best when people believe they themselves can make a difference; when they feel that their dreams can expand their realities; and when they feel that Toronto holds its own unique promise for them, a promise that can be



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fulfilled by their efforts, both individually and in community with others.

And so they came to the Commission to give us their vision of the waterfront. Pilots, boaters, sailors, and surfers representing a growing army of citizens seeking security of access and space to carry out their multiplying activities. Birdwatchers and field naturalists looking to preserve a sense of wilderness and the feel of Nature in the City. Residents and neighbours trying to extract from officialdom the basic rudiments of community services, facilities, and schools for themselves and their children. Housing advocates in desperate, endless pursuit of a fundamental human need. Industry staking its claim too, insisting with business and labour that jobs and economic opportunities are still basic to the idea of Toronto and the future of its waterfront. And many, many more people telling us that whatever is done, the waterfront should be open, accessible, public, and human in scale.

Environmental concerns, however, dominated the hearings. Whatever people's views on the future of the Toronto Island Airport, the Toronto Harbour Commissioners or Harbourfront, almost everyone urged the Commission to spend more time on environmental matters and to view the Commission's mandate through the prism of environmental responsibility.

There is, of course, no other choice. The Environmental Revolution is already here — and almost everybody knows it. Building on the perspectives of the conservation movement at the turn of the century and quickened by the tocsin sounded by the anti-pollution activists in the last 25 years, the environmental imperative today is hitting mainstream society with seismic force.

The Commission was immersed in new words as environmentalists mobilized language to describe their insights and to redefine our perception of life and reality: "ecosystem", "environmentally sustainable economic



development", "bioregion", and other terms laced their presentations and focused our attention. If they are long on concept and short on practice, it is only because it is no simple task to change the thought processes and every-day behaviour of the gross wastemakers and ecological profligates that we have become in such a short time.

The fact is that, in the pursuit of its needs and pleasures, our throw-away society has poisoned the air, polluted the rivers, and contaminated the earth, without worrying or caring to learn about the long-term damage to the environment or the diminished and damaged opportunities we are passing on to future generations. Unswimmable beaches, undrinkable water, and unfishable rivers that have become sewers are the visible, touchable signposts of environmental carelessness and degradation.

No longer. People will put up with it no longer. The environmental movement has already begun to reorganize government policies and priorities, recast corporate strategies, and redefine community and individual responsibility and behaviour. It is raising fundamental questions — spiritual questions — about the relationship of humankind to Nature and to God. It has become a force strong enough to change the face and the function of waterfronts and cities around the world.

It's a long road back. And people are anxious to get on with it. They know that environmental responsibility must be the basis for any actions involving the future of the Toronto waterfront; that the waterfront and its river valleys are as environmentally interdependent as they are economically linked; that it is time economics and environment were brought together.

In the following pages, you will see how, in the first phase of its work, the Commission has considered the waterfront in light of Toronto's history, values, and contemporary issues. Because they are so fundamental to understanding the past, and to shaping the future, these will remain the

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bedrock of all that we do, and all we recommend that others do to create a better waterfront and thereby a better community. We are about important matters. Some solutions will be easy. Some will be hard. Imagination, energy, patience, and subtlety will be required. And maybe in the end we will learn what Eliot knew.

David Crombie  
Toronto, July 1989

