Ontario Place: an excess of hubris

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It is the nature of governments to turn away from the petty concerns of little people to take care for the utopian visions of futur-eland. Inflated by the image reflected from a thousand billboards and bedazzled by the glossy spread purlored from the national press, our politicians turn to the architects, presuming them to be the theatrical stage managers of the city, to zap the masses with compelling masques and folies.

During the sixties, universitites, of all places, felt the full impact of this search for grandiose display. Simon Fraser University became an academic slum on a mountaintop; Scarborough College, a concrete fortress perched on a ravine, struggles to exist on breadcrusts. The forbidding graduate research library at Toronto overwhelms the campus. All point to an extraordinary breakdown of discussion and interplay between community, authority and the architect. Hubris, the sin of overwhelming pride, blocked the ears of presidents, chancellors and their architects to the smaller voices of faculty and students who wanted not palaces but shanties they could shuffle around in response to changing needs. But imperial administrators and ambitious architects ensured that the shape overwhelmed the spirit, and the shell crushed the life within.

Now, in Toronto’s new Ontario Place, the Ontario government applies the same treatment to the man in the street. First, the scheme was bred amid simple envy. After the stunning success of Expo 67, the Ontario government felt badly outdistanced by Drapeau and the Federal government and proposed to update the Canadian National Exhibition to compete with Montreal’s new Fantasyland. At which point the Toronto firm of architects, Craig Zeidler Strong, suggested a whole waterfront world which would slip over the Lakeshore Boulevard to create a fun city in the lake, leaving the CNE to eventually solve its problems. And why not? Here was a chance to look beyond the Gardiner Expressway and beyond the tatty remnants of the late nineteenth century warehouses and rail net which had cut Toronto away from the waterfront.

The artificial Mulberry harbour created by the sunken freighters with their nautical air of anchors and castles is great. Yet, the marina is scarcely for the masses and the rowboat from Parliament Street is not going to be particularly welcome amongst the elegant yachts. I foresee difficulties between the ‘vulgar herd’ and the executive sailors.

The landscape treatment as envisaged by Michael Hough and James Stansbury is fine. The hills designed to deflect the chill wind from the Lake, the protective earth surround about the forum, cutting it away from traffic noise and light, are well conceived and the planting textures on the land and water are particularly well handled. It’s true that the initial effect of dramatic architectural structures riding free is weakened by the breakwater and the encroaching ar- chitectural hillocks. Also, the added vertical exits from each pod, absolutely necessary as emergency escape, detract from the sense of hovering lightness.

The pods themselves have a fine bright cheerful shipboard quality. The detailing has that metallic sparsity expected where every pound is sung from guys. It’s a snappy structure, very pretty with its shackles to the cables and the concept of slinging of the cables over the core posts has a nicely braced tensile stress to it. Even the curiously arcaic nineteenth century struts under the floor decks add a light and spare touch to the complex. The heavy trusses, from which are suspended the floors and exhibit areas, are hidden within the upper service deck. It’s not the outside along the external sloping ramps a dramatic experience—and securely contained by the simply braced trusswork. Not so on the upper deck. The outer rail with its four sprung-steel wires for chairs is likely not enough. Children are liable to climb it and slip through as they jump on the wires. Vertiginous effects of anti-gravity can be carried just too far.

It’s a very pleasant place to be when not hurrying along an endless corridor or when not buffeted in a tangled theatre crowd. The loud clear message which came through from Expo 67 was to make circulation open and easy so that squads (and indeed battalions) of people could march through in parallel. Every choke point and every narrowing constriction at Expo created its lineup . . . and yet the architects for Ontario Place have chosen to isolate the pods above the water, and link them tenuously by chokes at the corners and make one narrow long major entry corridor—which in turn ends in a complex switchback to the theatre. The effect may be dramatic, but the message is simple. This could be an extremely constricted structure for mass use and narrowly restrictive for future use. As in the decorators and exhibit designers delight in traps, mazes and mirrored fantasies which befuddle, bemuse and disorient the multitudes, it may be difficult to maintain movement through the arbitrary shapes of the pods without continually grading or herding the public along. These pods are in reality anchored ships perched over the water with only tenuous ganways connecting them to land. Crowd control is going to be a continuing and disturbing problem as the pod, the narrow space and the people. And remember these are not temporary (like Expo) but are designed for continued use over the coming decades for heaven knows what special occasions and local frolics, packing peoplepl in by the hundreds and thousands.

Eberhard Zeidler claims that the initial idea came from the McMaster Health Sciences Centre in Hamilton, where isolated towers emerge from an immense circulation and services podium. Maybe so. Who knows where architects’ shapes emerge from? I suspect they all keep a locked Pandora’s box of shapes in the head office which is opened only at the dark of the moon in conditions of utter secrecy. Zeidler’s parallel here is a trifle strained. The McMaster building, though the single classic example of superscale in Canada (competitive with the Cape Kennedy rocket assembly building), is really a brilliant design in which the architect left open an immense acreage of services space for the medical staff to cut up year by year into ever-changing configurations of plasterboard space. At last, long last, an architect had the wit to see that what research scientists and academic specialists require is not florid drama but flexible working space.

Thus, in Toronto, we have five oil drilling rigs off the lake front. We have a Cinesphere built with a superscreen. We have some very nice additional parkland on the water with pleasant boutiques and so forth. This has cost about $23 million, Twenty-three million dollars! Enough to send Ontarions in turn ends at a complex Thorold or Napanee firmly into orbit.

So we may have gravel pits behind the screen of trees, and scum on our rivers, but in the fine old tradition of bread and circuses we are given the ultimate baroque folly: Ontario Place.
Above: main entryway — a 300-foot 2-level bridge 27 feet above lake leading from CNE. Below: view from the marina — a quarter mile seawall created by sinking three lake freighters end to end. The marina has capacity for 292 boats. This view from south also shows Cinesphere, pods and boutiques located on 90 acres of land, islands and lagoons — 46 acres of which are newly created islands. No land existed before March, '69.
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LEVEL 5: 1 reception (reception, 300-350 persons, banquet, 150-200 percent), 2 open, 3 rest, 4 delivery, 5 service, 6 coats, 7, 8, men, 9 upper restaurant.

Typical pod section:  A upper exhibition, B mechanical, C pedestrian, D lower exhibition, E water level, F lake bed. Each of the five pods is on steel columns rising 105 feet from lake and each pod measures 88 feet square and 32 feet high.

Top left: a long, crowded corridor. Left centre roofs of pods serve as observation areas. Left crowd control could be a continuing problem in restricted spaces such as emergency escape shown. These added vertical exits from each pod detract from the sense of hovering lightness and the initial dramatic impact of the architectural structure. Above: varying textures of land and water are very well handled. This view from the south shows part of the newly created islands.
Above: details – shackle and cable, anchorage sculpture on sunken freighters and corner detail of forum building. Left: main corridor from CNE to pods. Below, left: reflecting pool and boutiques. Below, right: view from upper deck of pod looking to triodetic dome cinosphere, 90 ft. high by 110 ft. diameter. Note railing: It is possible that the five sprung-steel wires may be nervously eyed by parents. The fragile appearance of rail often inhibits vertigo sufferers from standing near edge.

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Below and left: restaurant areas. Bottom on page: exhibition area—"mazes and mirrored fantasies could befuddle crowds and make movement difficult."