Ontario Place

genesis

reception
direction
information
Ontario Place is unabashedly chauvinistic. The 96-acre entertainment complex, built by the Ontario Government at a cost of $23 million, is a confection of buildings, exhibits, restaurants and shops. It hovers offshore from Toronto, frankly extolling the virtues of the province.

Ontario Place was masterminded by Jim Ramsay, head of special projects for the Ontario Department of Trade and Development. The project was conceived as a replacement for the 100-year-old Ontario building at the Canadian National Exhibition. He also saw it as an opportunity to spur redevelopment of Toronto's lakefront. The idea to build on landfill neatly dovetailed with this and also placed Ontario Place outside the jurisdiction of the City of Toronto.

The obvious precedent is Expo 67. However, there is more to Ontario Place than the rivalry of French-speaking Montreal and English-speaking Toronto. The infusion of such an amount of government money can only encourage the flow of private capital to develop the waterfront. "We've let it become an industrial slum and separated ourselves from it with rail lines and expressways," says Eberhard Zeidler, senior partner in the architectural firm of Craig, Zeidler & Strong. "But, potentially the waterfront could be the most exciting urban development in the world."

The planners and designers also derived inspiration from the Swiss National Exposition, held in Lausanne in 1964. Like SNE, Ontario Place's content is "national," that is, provincial. The thrust of the exhibits is to proselytize. Stewart & Morrison Ltd., the largest Canadian industrial design firm, was responsible for the symbol, the exhibits and informational graphics. S&M developed the exhibition story line, orienting the public to Ontario's role in federal and international affairs. The exhibitions occupy four out of the five main buildings—called pods and designed by CZS. As a result, S&M was acutely conscious of the need to have the content flow from one pod to the other. "The idea behind the story line is to acquaint the visitor with the development of Ontario," says Gerald Reilly, overall project director for S&M. "not to overwhelm him with facts and figures."

S&M involvement with Ontario Place began in 1969. The firm, which had worked with Ramsay on both Expo projects, had responsibility for all audio-visual material. Breaking the content down into four exhibits—Genesis, Explosions, Ontario Style and Challenges, S&M set out to trace the geological, economic, social, cultural and political development of Ontario, winding up with the future in Challenges. Each exhibit was placed under a project director, who was in charge of planning the presentation and procuring the slides, films and artifacts to be included. "Because the structure of the pods dictates one-way traffic," says Terry Heard, "and a visitor has to pass through all four exhibits to exit, we decided that the maximum time for each presentation had to be ten minutes." Heard, who directed S&M's work from an on-site trailer, headed up a staff of five designers and one draftsman. "We moved down here last December, and it was cold. In the spring everything turned to mud, and then dust—layers of dust. But we couldn't have done it in time, if we hadn't been here."

In the month before Ontario Place opened on May 22, Heard and the rest of the staff worked at night, in 12-hour shifts. "They started bringing people through, mostly schoolchildren, and this operated as a shakedown cruise, enabling us to check out the systems and time the flow of visitors."

Although the first thing the visitor
Genesis, Pod 2 south. Film images are projected on a 60x16-foot, floor-to-ceiling and wall-to-wall, screen formed by oblate, ellipsoid, spheroid and ovoid shapes. These pneumatic clear vinyl forms are covered in dots; two compressors maintain constant pressure in the event of puncture. While the dots retain images, the images also pass between the dots and are reflected from the other side, creating a three-dimensional illusion; Visitors stand or sit in front. Walls and ceilings are mirrored Mylar. Two 35mm No. 9 Ernemann Zeiss Ikons provide the projection. Designer was Richard R. Beal of Stewart & Morrison Ltd.

Explosion, Pod 3. An 8-foot steel grid is the basis for the various communication systems. The visitor stands roughly in the center, facing one of the four 16x32-foot screens. A Ernemann No. 9 35mm Xenon projector provides a cine image for each screen, while 80 Xenon 35mm carousel projectors alternately provide slides programmed with the film. In addition, 14 mechanical artifact shadow boxes, also on an 8x8-foot module, provide another dimension by appearing and disappearing. At floor level, there are 32 more display cases for artifacts. Designer was E. McMillan, of Stewart & Morrison Ltd.
Ontario Style, Pod 4. Seven hundred canvas cylindrical bags, 7½ by 2 feet, hang from the grid ceiling. Visitors can walk between or around the bags, which are air-filled, scotchguarded and fireproof. Images are projected on these bags by 31 RCA 16mm projectors with loop mechanisms and interlocked motors suspended from the ceiling, fifteen 25-inch to monitors and four EVR video tape recorders. Speakers are contained in 50 trillium-shaped white opaque acrylic “clouds” which are suspended from the ceiling. Designer was Richard R. Beal of Stewart & Morrison Ltd.

Challenges, Pod 5. Subject matter is popular history and the theme is “up with Ontario.” There is a heavy use of artifact as well as “fun figures,” sculptured characters. The only exhibit on two levels, it acts as a traffic valve. The conclusion is a film of children (symbolizing the future) projected on two 30 x 14-foot curved screens (13). The use of audiovisual equipment is staggering: 18 tv monitors, 18 tape decks, 1 McKenzie unit, 8 35mm projectors, 10 panacolor units, 3 16mm projectors, and 1 Super 8. Designer was Arthur Herriott of Stewart & Morrison Ltd.
sees CZS's white pods suspended 35 feet above a man-made lagoon, his first actual encounter with Ontario Place are the ultramarine pillar boxes designed by CZS to serve as admission gates. S&M simply applied the rates and other pertinent data right to the pillar boxes in white Helvetica. Here, the visitor also has his first encounter with the symbol for Ontario Place. A stylized trillium (the provincial flower) used here with a rounded custom logotype spelling out "ontario place," the symbol is also used alone. Much of the carpet, for example, used in Ontario Place's pods has this stylized trillium printed—rather than woven—on it as a pattern.

As the visitor crosses the 300-foot, two-level bridge that links the entrance to the pods, he becomes aware of the two man-made islands landscaped by Hough Stanbury & Associates. These islands—East and West—comprise 46 acres of landfill and accommodate shops and restaurants, featuring both indoor and outdoor facilities. Since the lower level of the bridge passes underneath the pods, a returning visitor can bypass the exhibits and go directly to one of the three "villages," as the clusters of shops and restaurants are called. West Village surrounds a reflecting pool, while Marina and East Villages are generally oriented to the 300-boat marina. This marina, two-thirds of which are transient berths, nestles behind a seawall formed by the concrete-filled hulls of three sunk lake freighters and provides a focal point for outdoor restaurant facilities. The shapes of the boats and their movement create a strong hypnotic effect.

In addition to the boats and the giant white pods, the visitor is also seduced by the graphics that have been applied to the surfaces of the shops and restaurants. These alternately square or octagonal spaces are painted white and have faceted roofs of stressed skin plywood. The brightly colored graphics on the walls and gables of these modules provide a distortion and avoid the visual rigidity otherwise implicit in the modular construction.

Ontario Place also offers Cinesphere, an 800-seat movie theater housed in a triodetic dome, the Forum, a 2000-seat concert hall under a tension-compression canopy on East Island. The effort has been made to provide a diversity of experience ranging from film to live entertainment, while permitting the visitor to choose for himself—J.R.G.

14, 15 In addition, Terry Heard of S&M designed this seating system with both indoor and outdoor applications. The three-seat, tubular steel units are modular and easily flipped to face either direction. For outdoor use, metal mesh is used as the sling seat and the tube is painted with epoxys. For indoor use, the units have leather slings and the tube is chromed.

16-20 Points East is a chain of Chinese restaurants. Again, S&M created the name and developed the symbol as well as the graphics for the menu and bar list. They also designed the tableware, the cash unit, and interiors including lounge seating, bar and service bar.