



LANDLOCKED:
Exploring Institutional Inertia on
Toronto's Waterfront, 1960-2000

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As part of my doctoral studies, I've spent the past year or so wading through heaps of government reports and correspondence, legal agreements and briefing notes, committee minutes and council debates covering the last 50 years of waterfront politics in Toronto. I've also conducted 20 in-depth interviews with past and present politicians, political staff, and bureaucrats at all levels of government, as well as several urban planners and designers, architects, journalists, and community representatives long involved in waterfront issues — some of whom are in the audience today.

Today's talk is an opportunity to share some preliminary insights I've come across during the course of this research. I'll begin by providing a brief overview of the broader project before digging a little deeper into one small aspect of my research, which is the theme of today's talk: what I describe as institutional inertia and the unique land ownership story which I believe is crucial in understanding the political history of Toronto's waterfront.

What I hope to impress upon you by day's end is that above and beyond ordinary challenges to policy implementation in any major urban redevelopment project — such as changing economic conditions, changes in political leadership, etc. — here in Toronto, issues of land ownership were critical. The extraordinary fragmentation of lands held across a multitude of government actors, as we'll see, added a layer of complexity to the conventional federal-provincial-municipal equation that, I would argue, helped paralyze redevelopment efforts for years.



Blanche Van Ginkel

Architecture-concept

May 1973

If I may, though, I'd like to start things off by first paying respect to one of the audience members in attendance, Ms. Blanche van Ginkel, the namesake of my fellowship.

A couple of months ago, while swimming in documents at the federal archives, I stumbled across this article in the May 1973 issue of a French-language magazine called *Architecture-Concept*. The article includes a feature interview of Ms. van Ginkel, at the time an architect practicing in Montreal.

I point this out because the piece struck me as a very forward-thinking reflection on the impact of politics on the urban environment. Entitled "The real effects of urban policy on cities", the article's key take-away is that governments have both direct and indirect influences on the shape of cities, their built form, and land use practices which should not be ignored.

I highlight this piece not only because it demonstrates Ms. Van Ginkel's clear wisdom in urban affairs, but also because its message has special relevance to the waterfront story I've immersed myself in over the last year or so.

Toronto's waterfront, perhaps more than any other urban development project in Canada's history, I believe, is an epic example of the remarkable, yet often overlooked and understudied, extent of government involvement in urban development.

What do I mean by this?



To understand the Toronto waterfront, one must first understand what might be considered the psychology of the waterfront.

Torontonians have been lamenting the state of the water’s edge for decades. The media (particularly the *Toronto Star*, with its headquarters located right at the foot of Yonge), have routinely fuelled such sentiment.

Going back to the 1960s, pundits have seen fit to characterize the waterfront as everything from a “disgrace” (*Toronto Star* 1962) to “dingy and ugly” (Lacey 1980), to my personal favourite, “a monument to civic dysfunction” (Hume 2007).



Most of these critiques revolved around what should or shouldn't be happening on the waterfront. Should we tear down the Gardiner? Should the island airport be closed?

Few pundits, though, seemed to focus on **why** things turned out the way they did. The stock analysis was always the same: Too many governments. Too many interests. Political bickering. Jurisdictional gridlock.

For a number of reasons, these interpretations never seemed to satisfy me.

I could think of any number of policy areas where multiple jurisdictions were involved. Health care, education, social policy, environmental protection — these issues, and so many more, all demand consultation and collaboration between governments.

True, intergovernmental relations can at times be tense, even bitter. But overall, problems generally tend to be resolved.

So why would the Toronto case be so different?



Why is it, one might ask, that so many plans have come and gone? Why is it that so many proposals have not substantially been followed through? Why has so little come from decades of committees, commissions, and consultations?

Even after years of debate and stacks of investigative reports, it still wasn't clear to me — and quite frankly, to many Torontonians as well — what forces were really at work.

And so I found myself a dissertation project.



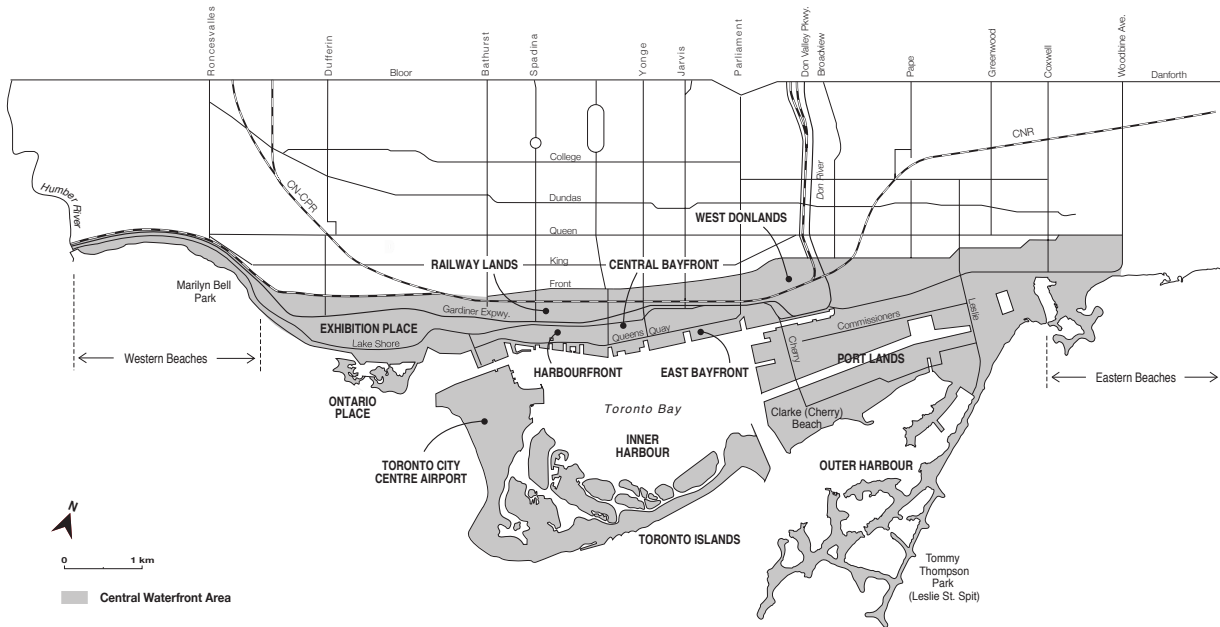
Now, before I continue, a few qualifications are in order. First, it's important to acknowledge that, contrary to popular opinion, a lot has in fact happened on the Toronto waterfront since the 1960s. I'm not contradicting myself here. Projects like the CN Tower and Harbourfront are now established parts of the city that obviously weren't around in 1960. The central puzzle underlying my research, however, is that these projects, like many others conceived during the time period in question, turned out vastly different than originally conceived.

The goal of my research, in other words, is not to evaluate the **quality** or **success** of any given development project — my colleagues in geography, architecture, urban planning and design have more to offer in this area than I do — but rather to better understand the range of political actors, events, relationships, decisions and non-decisions that shaped these outcomes, whether beneficial or not.

Secondly — and this is particularly important given recent comments coming out of the mayor's office — the decision to limit my study to the years 1960 to 2000 is a deliberate one. Doing so provides a historical buffer of sorts which I have found encourages interview participants to speak freely and openly about their experiences. Perhaps more importantly, it also helps me avoid drawing strong conclusions about contemporary events which — as we see in recent headlines — may change on a whim.

My focus is really on the **long term** political story.

The Central Waterfront



So, let's proceed by familiarizing ourselves with the waterfront.

To keep the project manageable, I've restricted the geographic scope of my analysis to what's known as the "central waterfront area."

Now, not everyone defines this area in the same way — its boundaries are rarely uniformly applied in planning documents — but generally speaking, the label refers to the lands bounded by Front Street/Eastern Avenue in the north, the Humber River in the west, and Woodbine Avenue in the east.

Altogether, the area encompasses over 15 square kilometres, or roughly 3700 acres within the city core.

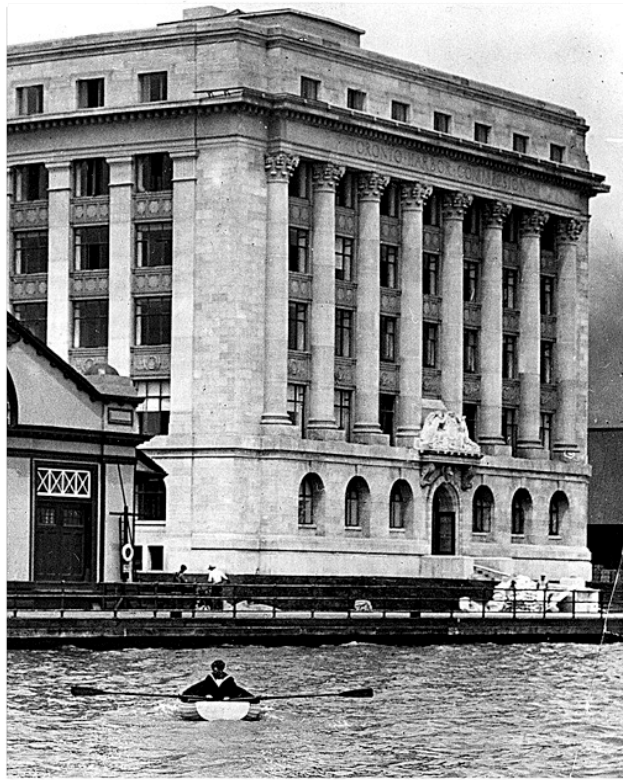


Toronto Harbour Commissioners Building, c. 1918.
City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 0920

Now, an interesting feature of this area not known to many Torontonians is that the majority of the land in question is actually man-made, the physical remnants of large-scale in-fill projects initiated as far back as 1912.

The land we think of today as the water's edge, in other words, has only been so for a few decades.

This, for example, is a photo of the water's edge in 1918. Notice the Toronto Harbour Commission building right on the water.



Toronto Harbour Commissioners Building, c. 1918.
City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 3178

This is a close up of the THC building around the same time.



Central Bayfront, c. 1950s
Source: Urbantoronto.ca

Over time, the shoreline was gradually built out to create various wharfs, docks, and port areas such that by the 1950s, the central bayfront, as we call it today, looked like this.



Toronto Harbour Commissioners Building, c. 1990.
City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 200, Series 1465, File 142

By the 1990s, the THC building was practically enveloped by surrounding office buildings.

Geographic Evolution of Toronto's Shoreline

Source: Waterfront Toronto

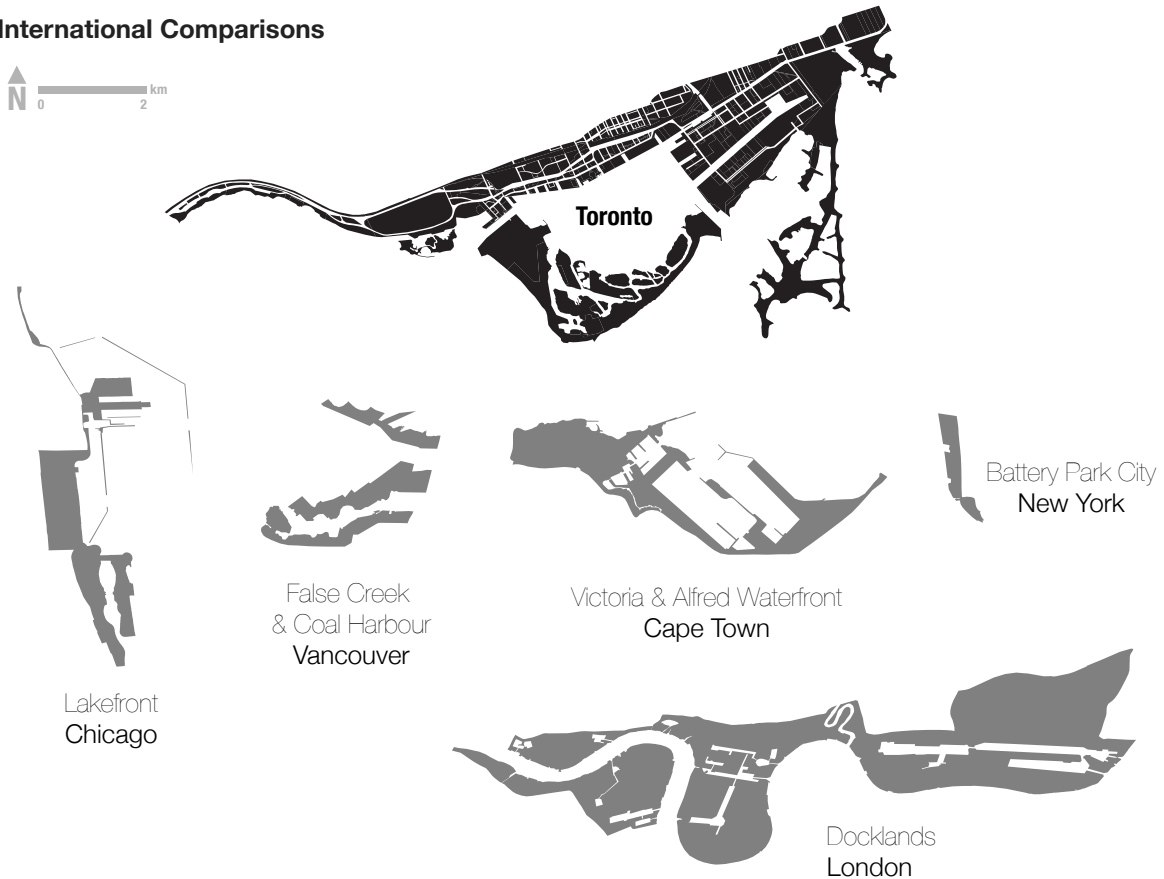
1886



This slide gives you an idea of this long-term transformation across the entire central waterfront.

The black outlines represent the physical shape of the waterfront as it exists currently, while the areas filled in black represent the physical landscape back in 1886.

International Comparisons



What we are left with is a huge expanse of prime land in the city core.

To give you an idea of scale, here is Toronto's waterfront compared to other notable national and international waterfronts.

Toronto = approx. 3700 acres, or 1500 hectares

Chicago = approx. 800 acres, or 320 hectares

Vancouver = approx. 550 acres, or 225 hectares

New York = approx. 120 acres, or 50 hectares

Cape Town = approx. 1100 acres, or 440 hectares

London = approx. 3775 acres, or 1520 hectares

As you can see, apart from London, Toronto's central waterfront is quite large in international context.



So that gives you a sense of the area we're talking about.

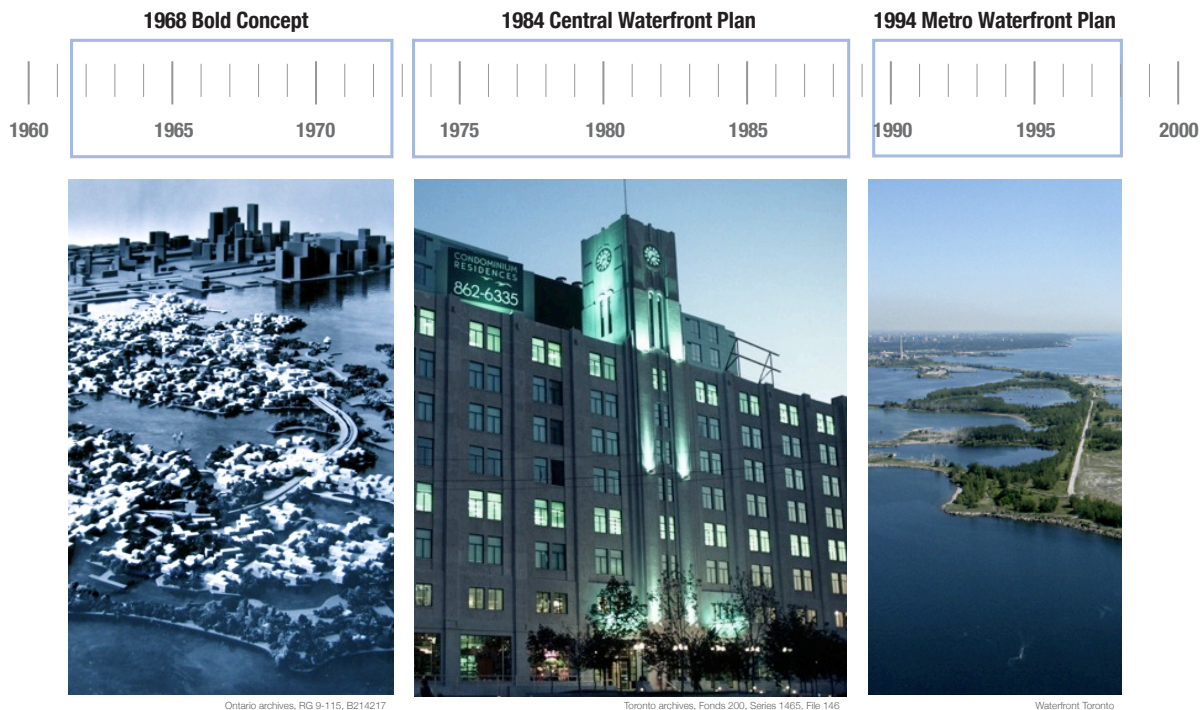
With this context in mind, we can turn to the modern story of waterfront development, which begins in the 1960s — a time when the harbour's industrial potential was beginning to wane.

Despite a brief period of sustained growth in cargo and bulk tonnage following the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959, by the mid-1960s there were signs that changes in port technologies — containerization chief among them — were beginning to leave secondary ports like Toronto behind.

- Between 1969-75, port activity dropped nearly 60%, leaving Toronto with 5% of Eastern Canada's shipping traffic.

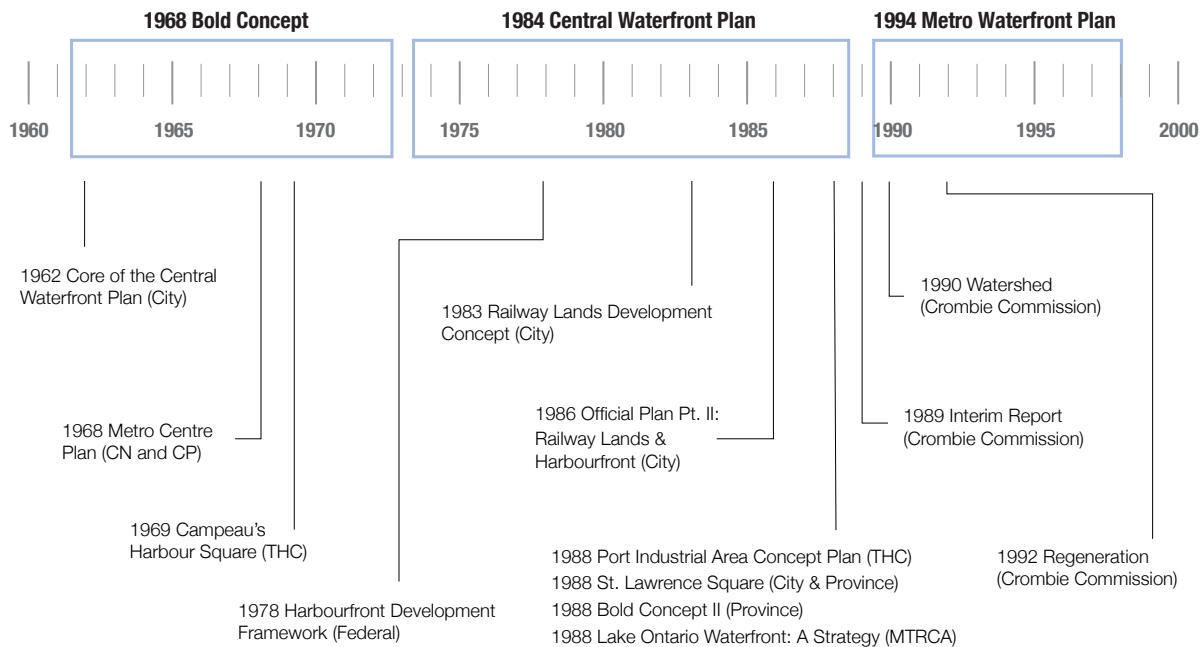
At the same time, industries previously drawn to sites close to the waterfront were also becoming attracted to the advantages of suburban locations: enticed by lower taxes, cheap land with plenty of room for expansion, and fewer conflicts with neighbouring communities.

Amidst this economic reality, planners from the City of Toronto, the former Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto, the province, as well as several federal, provincial, and inter-municipal agencies began to envision a new future for the waterfront.



My study focuses on three major plans which, I believe, are helpful in delineating three eras of waterfront planning and implementation between 1960-2000:

1. the 1968 Bold Concept, produced by the Toronto Harbour Commissioners alongside Metro Toronto's 1967 Waterfront Plan;
2. the 1984 Central Waterfront Plan produced by the former City of Toronto
3. the 1994 Metropolitan Waterfront Plan, published by Metro's Planning Department in the wake of the high profile Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront.



Of course, these are by no means the only redevelopment plans that have been proposed over the years.

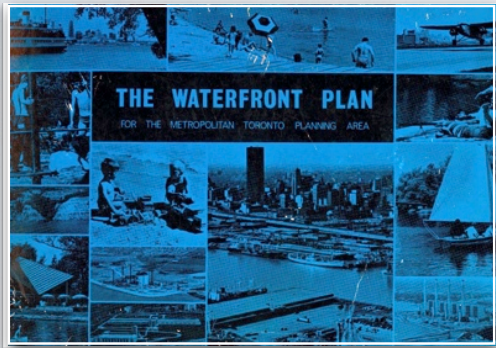
Dozens of official plan recommendations, supplementary planning reports, by-laws, and task force reports have attempted to build on or replace these strategic visions — some of which are listed here.

I've decided to focus on these three major plans in particular because, in my reading of events, each in many ways framed the broader range of plans published during each era.

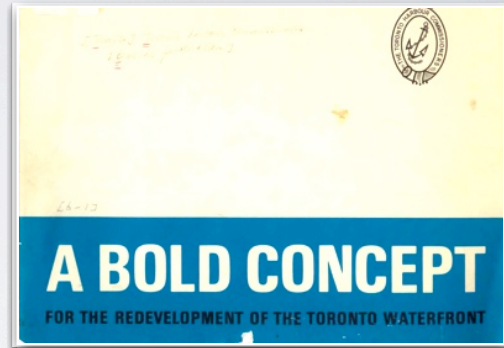
- Each marked the culmination of several years of study and public deliberation;
- And crucially, each was, at best, only partially implemented, or at worst, abruptly abandoned altogether not long after receiving initial approval from local councils.

Now, the specific reasons behind each implementation failure, like all implementation failures, largely vary according to the political conditions and circumstances at the time. Unfortunately, there simply isn't enough time to go through it all today.

Still, I'd like to spend a few minutes to at least introduce these plans to at least give you a sense of how different today's waterfront might have looked if each was completely followed through.



December 1967



January 1968

We begin with the 1968 Bold concept, released alongside the 1967 *Waterfront Plan for the Metropolitan Planning Area*.

The Plan marked the culmination of seven years of study initiated in 1961, and called for the central waterfront to be redeveloped almost exclusively by the Toronto Harbour Commission.



Created by federal legislation in 1911 in the wake of the first municipal reform movement of the early 20th century, the Harbour Commission was a special purpose authority vested with substantial powers yet few public oversight mechanisms.

Although often painted as a federal agency — it was created by federal legislation, filed annual operational reports to the Minister of Transport, and had two federal appointees on its board — technically speaking, majority control of the Harbour Commission was actually held by the City, which appointed three of the Commission's five-member board.

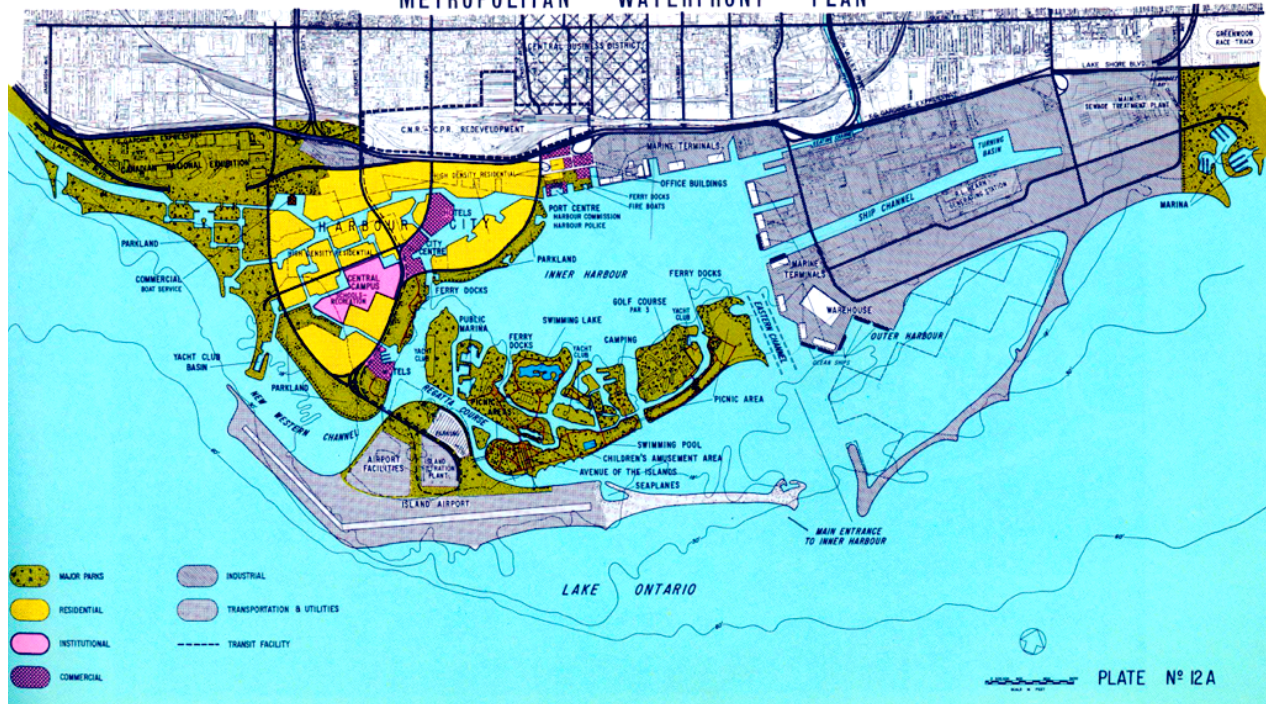
Until the early 90s, however, City appointees to the board were not expected to represent the City's direct interests. As an arms-length agency, operating in a political grey area between federal and municipal concerns, members of commissioner had a fiduciary duty, first and foremost, to the agency.

The result was a bizarre pattern of political theatre wherein the Commission routinely butted up against City Council.

This is a long and confusing story, to say the least. What's important to know for now is that Commission owned lots of waterfront land, and held lots of power to do with these lands as it wished. By statutory right, it could acquire, expropriate, hold, sell, lease and otherwise dispose of any properties it deemed necessary for the development of the harbour, as defined by legislation.

No surprise, then, that the 1968 Plan was a Harbour Commission production.

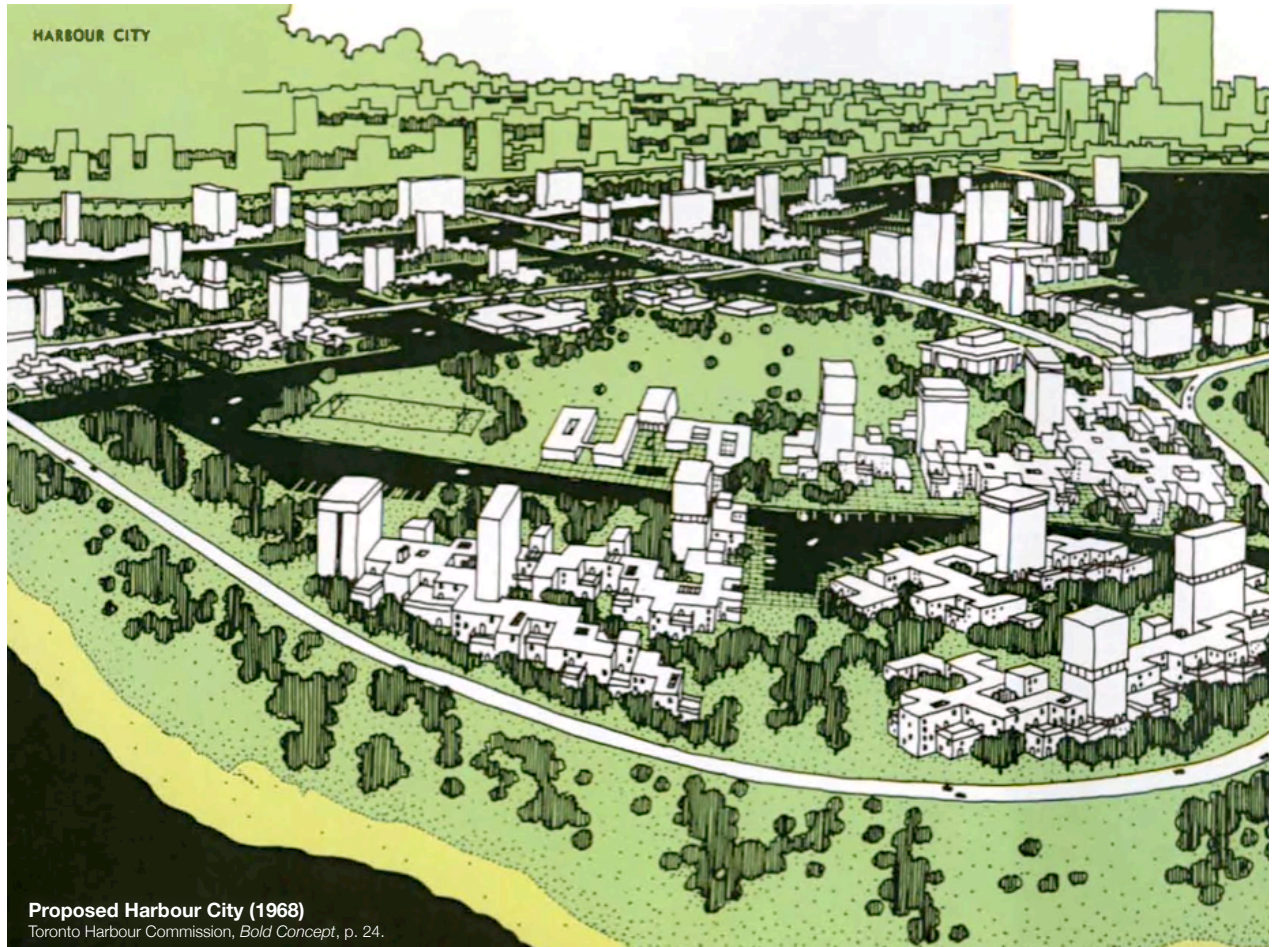
PHYSICAL DESIGN CONCEPT
CENTRAL SECTOR
METROPOLITAN WATERFRONT PLAN



1967 Waterfront Plan for the Metropolitan Area

The Concept centred on three broad proposals (shown here):

1. the creation of a new downtown airport southwest of the islands (to accommodate the latest generation of jet aircraft at the time, the DC-9 and Boeing 737);
2. the relocation of industrial facilities in the western harbour to an expanded, modernized eastern port and new 2.5 km long outer harbour headland (in order to double port capacity); and
3. the creation of a showcase ‘Harbour City’ residential neighbourhood in the western harbour.



The linchpin of the plan was undoubtedly Harbour City (*depicted here*), a high-density residential area to be constructed almost entirely from lake fill on the land currently occupied by the island airport. Initial plans were that it should accommodate some 50,000 new residents, or roughly 7% of Toronto's population at the time. The scale of the residential project would help finance the new airport, including a fixed link bridge (yes there were plans for a bridge even then!), double port capacity, and reclaim hundreds of acres of new parkland at virtually no net expense.

City and Metro Councils, which saw no risk to city coffers, both endorsed the plan in September and October 1968, respectively. As things progressed, however, the plan hit a major snag. Provincial lawyers had realized that the province actually held a substantial claim to the lands proposed for project — at least 450 of the 600 acre development, to be precise.

Finding itself in a legal battle beyond its means against the province, the Harbour Commission appealed to federal transport officials in Ottawa to persuade the province to ease its position. The federal rescue, however, never materialized. Transport officials were instead preoccupied with plans for a new regional airport in the area — yet another project that never saw the light of day, the Pickering International Airport — which not only killed the possibility of an expanded island airport, but also left the Harbour Commission to fend for itself.

If Harbour City was to proceed, it would have to be led by the province.

Provincial 'Harbour City' Concept

Archives of Ontario, RG 9-115, B214217 - "H.C. press kit"



And so, in May 1970, almost two years after first approached by local officials to review the waterfront plan, Stanley Randall, then Minister of Trade and Development, announced a revised plan for Harbour City led by the province. *[These are some of the images provided to the media at announcement]*

Drawn up by a range of high profile urban thinkers, the plan was a major revamp of the original Bold Concept.

“Harbour City is probably the most **important advance** in planning for cities that has been made this century..

Toronto will have one of the most **interesting and remarkable** city districts to be found anywhere in the world.”

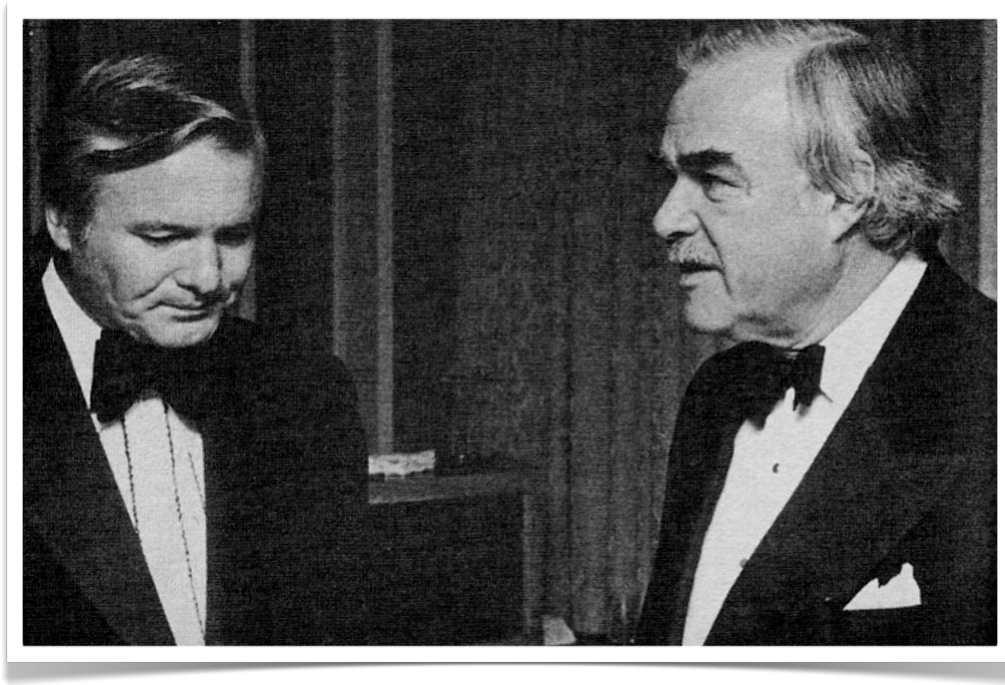
— **Jane Jacobs**
Harbour City Presentation
May 20, 1970



Jane Jacobs, 1963.
Credit: Bob Gornall/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images

So radical was this new waterfront vision that Jane Jacobs, asked to speak at the announcement, called it “probably the most important advance in planning for cities that has been made in this century” and “one of the most interesting and remarkable city districts anywhere in the world.”

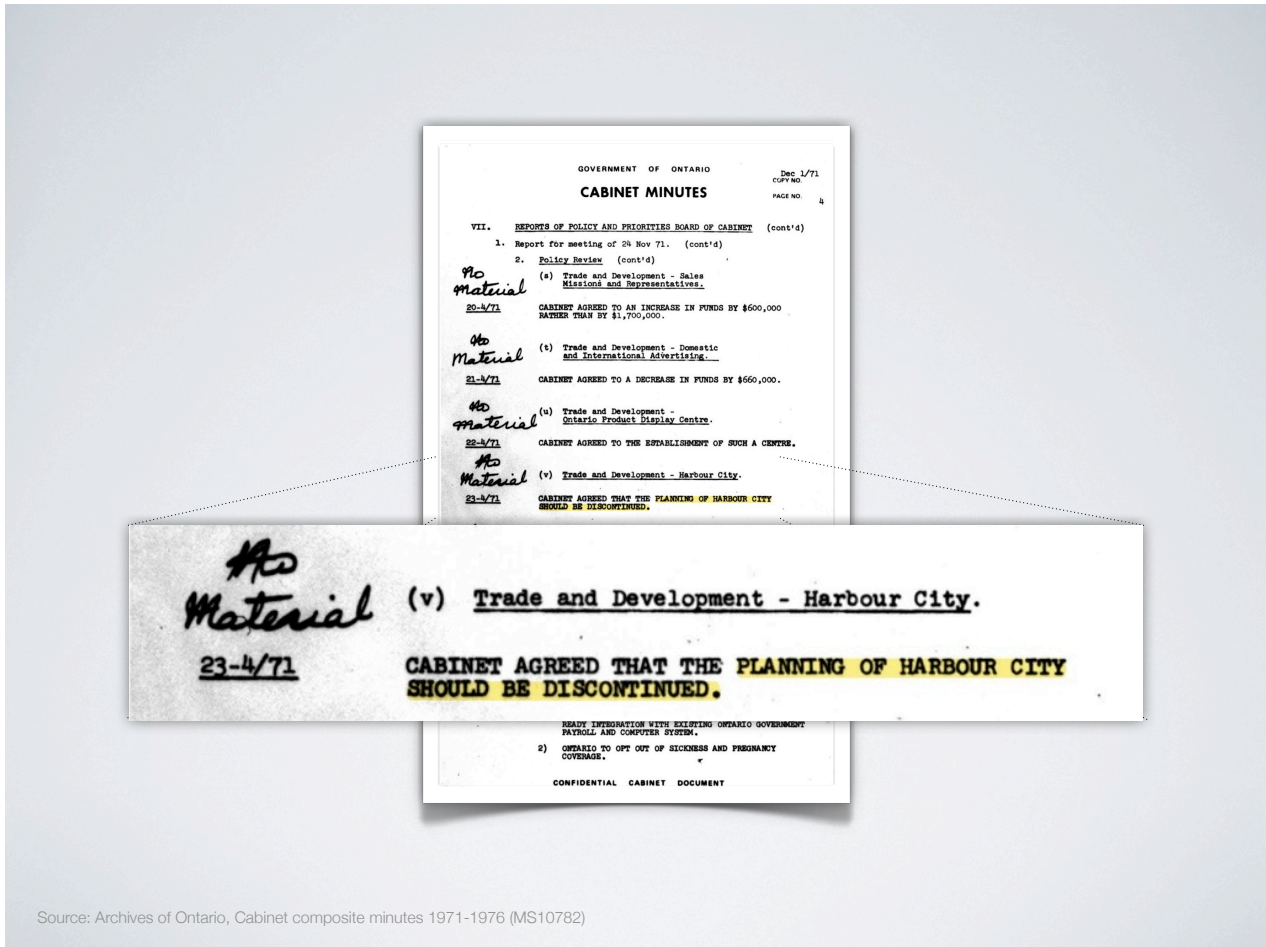
If all went well, construction would begin in late 1971, with completion by the mid 80s.



Bill Davis (left) and John Robarts (right), undated.
Credit: John Harquail / Archives of Ontario, F 15-7-1-54

1971, though, was an important year in provincial politics. Premier Robarts (*shown here on the right*) left the scene, replaced by his successor Bill Davis (*left*), who took office in March, and won election in October.

The delays created by the land ownership dispute, as well as uncertainty surrounding the possible relocation of the Island Airport — not to mention local resistance by the newly elected reform council — left the final decision to proceed with the plan in the hands of Davis, a leader seemingly disinterested in urban mega-projects.



Source: Archives of Ontario, Cabinet composite minutes 1971-1976 (MS10782)

Bill Davis, you will recall, is perhaps best remembered by Torontonians as the man who put the final nail in the coffin of the Spadina Expressway.

While that is certainly true, I would point out that it was in fact Harbour City which was the first mega-project to be abandoned under his watch. The decision to kill Harbour City, taken in Dec 1971 [seen here is a copy of the cabinet minutes] was taken well before the Spadina decision in late 1972 (or even the Metro Centre project, which fell apart in 1975).

If I can oversimplify in the interest of time, then, we can say that nearly a decade of planning leading to the Bold Concept and its provincial derivative collapsed amidst tricky legalities around ownership and a change of office.



The second major planning era I look at in the dissertation revolves around the 1984 Central Waterfront Plan.

In truth, the '84 Plan was never really one plan. It represented recommendations stemming from over a decade of discussion among a wide range of stakeholders — public, private, and community level — going back to the 1973 creation of the Central Waterfront Planning Committee (CWPC).

The CWPC was not a very effective committee; its authority was consistently undercut by the fact that it included few actual decision-makers (an interesting political story in its own right).

One of the few lasting recommendations from its work, however, was to update the City's Official Plan to recognize demographic and geographic changes on the waterfront that had taken place since the 1960s.

After 9 years, the City Planning and Development Department, finally released a draft of its Official Plan pertaining to the waterfront in 1982, which after public comment, was finalized as *The Central Waterfront: Final Recommendations* (or Central Waterfront Plan) in 1984.



In contrast to the 1968 Bold Concept, which proposed the creation of extensive new lands via infill, the 1984 Plan instead emphasized **incremental** enhancements to existing areas and, with the rare exception, intensification of **existing** uses.

The plan's overarching objective — still very much with us today — was to maximize public access, both in terms of improving the pedestrian environment along the water's edge as well as reducing the barrier effect created by the railway lands and Lakeshore Blvd./Gardiner Expressway. (Problems still very much with us today).

A second key feature of the plan was an express commitment to protecting and strengthening existing industrial areas by attracting new industrial and commercial uses in the eastern sections of the waterfront. (I point this out to remind everyone that redevelopment need not come in condo form.)



Plans for the east end, however, were in many ways dwarfed by events in the west end, namely those surrounding the Harbourfront project and the unprecedented controversy it created.

As I mentioned, the province stepped out of the waterfront ring, so to speak, at the end of 1971. Just a year later, though, in October 1972, the feds filled that void with a dramatic announcement.

Looking for an opportunity to make an electoral splash across Toronto, Pierre Trudeau and his Liberals made a campaign promise to create 100 acres of waterfront parkland, known as Harbourfront (*on lands, I might add, that would have formed the northern edge of Harbour City*).

Harbourfront was an election “gift,” conceived as nothing more than a way to buy votes in crucial Toronto ridings. But what began as a straightforward election pledge soon morphed into a paralyzing political saga.

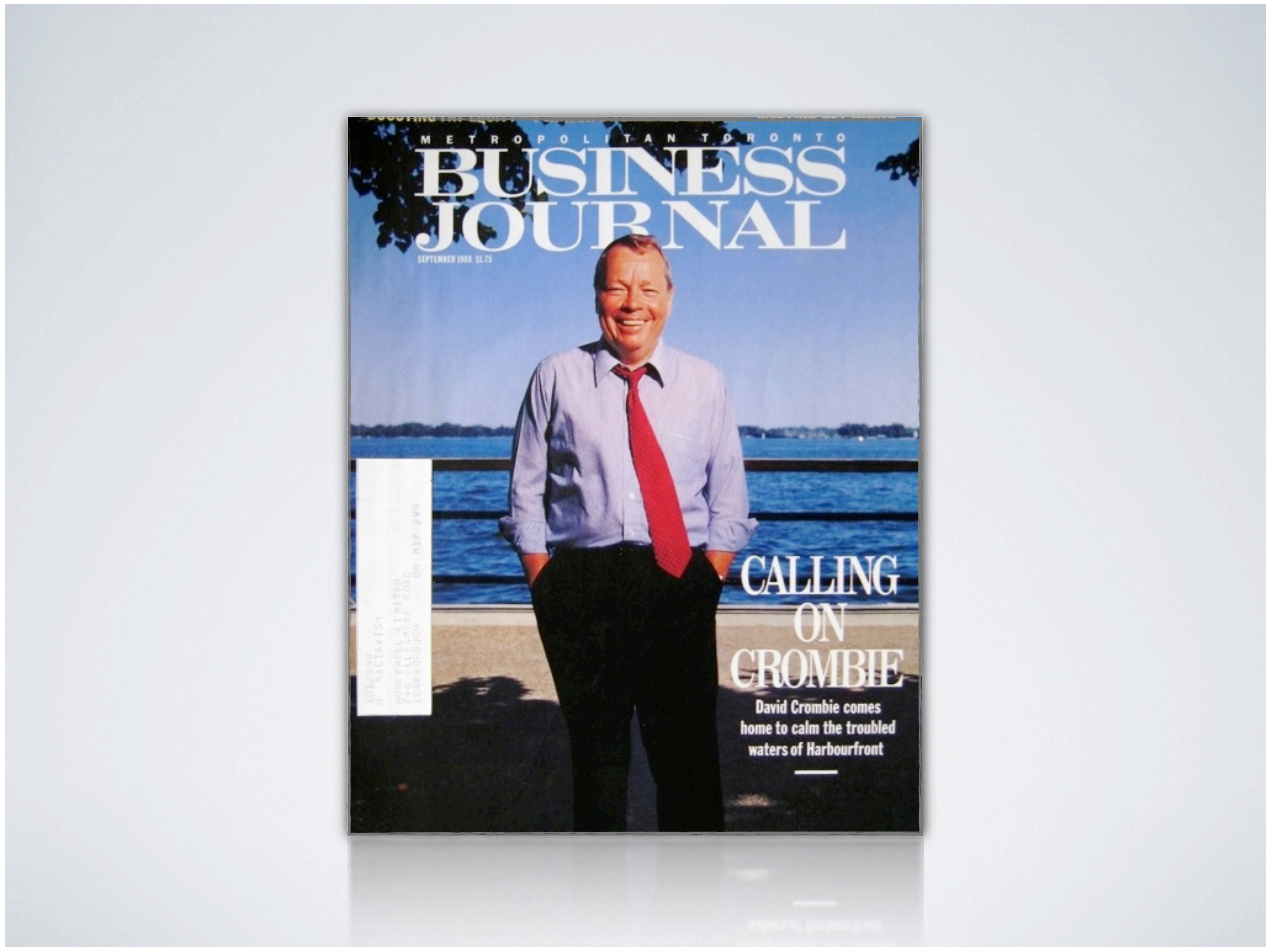


Local opposition to the development was fierce. The headlines rang sour for years: “Headaches at Harbourfront” (Freedman 1984), “Chaos on the waterfront” (Toronto Sun 1987), “Something’s screwy at Harbourfront” (Lewis Stein 1987).

Much like Harbour City, political tensions revolved around land disputes — both in terms of ownership and planned uses.

Tensions reached a boiling point in the mid-80s, sparking several policy reviews, control bylaws, and development freezes which left the ‘84 Plan to sit on the shelf until Council finally adopted it in June 1988.

Council’s decision, however, was just a formality. A complete rethink of waterfront development was already underway. The Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront, known as the Crombie Commission, had begun its work the very same month, effectively shutting down all development until the release of its final report in 1992.



To this day, the Crombie Commission remains the only joint federal-provincial commission of inquiry dedicated to an issue of general public policy in Canadian history.

(The only other commission established as a joint federal-provincial initiative, the Royal Commission on the Ocean Ranger Marine Disaster (1982-1985), was created to investigate the specific events leading to sinking of an oil rig and its crew off the coast of Newfoundland, not broader policy questions.)

Its original mandate was to make recommendations regarding the future of the island airport, the role and mandate of Harbourfront, as well the Harbour Commission.

But as the proceeding wore on, and the Commission realized the waterfront's broader ecological significance, Crombie convinced the province to expand the scope of the inquiry to consider waterfront issues across 250 kilometres of Lake Ontario shoreline covering seventeen local municipalities, four regional municipalities, and six conservation authorities.



Obviously, it's difficult to summarize an inquiry which lasted 4 years, with a budget of \$9.3 million.

What I will say is that the 1994 Metro Plan, the third plan around which my dissertation is organized, was visibly inspired by Crombie's work.

For instance, the Plan formally recognized one of Crombie's key recommendations: the importance of a "watershed" or ecosystem approach to redevelopment, which included the creation of a continuous greenway along the shoreline, and the remediation of contaminated soils.

Implementation details in the plan, however, were scarce. The Plan generally ignored the area's history of intergovernmental conflict, making no mention whatsoever of federal or provincial relations other than periodic references to the general need for inter-governmental cooperation.



Whatever momentum came out of the Crombie Commission, or the Metro Plan for that matter, faded in just a few short years.

A new provincial agency, the Waterfront Regeneration Trust, headed by Crombie himself, was conceived as a forum to bring all interested government bodies together.

In practice, though, the Trust had few real powers beyond an advisory role.

It served mainly as a clearing house and resource centre for planners and policymakers, particularly with regard to environmental remediation of contaminated lands — **not**, I would argue, a hub for active decision-making — at least not in the **central waterfront**, which was still plagued by legal disputes over land ownership (the most contentious being the transfer of land from the Toronto Harbour Commission to the City economic development corporation, TEDCO).

Although it's fair to say that the Trust did succeed in slowly breaking down feelings of mistrust among the interests involved, good faith alone wasn't enough to catalyze implementation efforts — at least not in keeping with the 1994 Metro Plan.

By this time, focus was already shifting to the city's ultimately unsuccessful Olympic Bid, which quite clearly set the stage for the contemporary era of waterfront planning, beginning in 1999, with the creation of the Waterfront Revitalization Task Force and later the Waterfront Revitalization Corporation — what we now refer to as Waterfront Toronto.



So where does that leave us?

Well, what I've tried to lay out for you in this brief history is that although each separate planning exercise fell pray to different political dynamics, there was at least one important constant involved: disputes over land ownership — **public** land ownership at that.

As a student of urban governance in Canada, this has always thrown me for a loop.

Most theories of local politics generally ignore the influence of multiple levels of government in urban development. Development is assumed to be dominated by private interests or narrow political alliances, not government actors.

Toronto's waterfront, however, bucks the trend. The overwhelming majority of waterfront land was — and always has been — publicly owned, fragmented across a wide range of departments and agencies at all levels.

So, to get a better sense what this looks like and what it really means, I embarked on two set of mapping exercises: one conceptual and one physical (*geospatial*).

The conceptual challenge was to map the extent of what I'm calling conditions of multilevel *non*-governance (as opposed to the literature on multilevel governance). I'll be presenting this analysis in a couple of weeks at the Canadian Political Science Association meetings.

Today, though, I'd like to focus on the second of these mapping exercises.

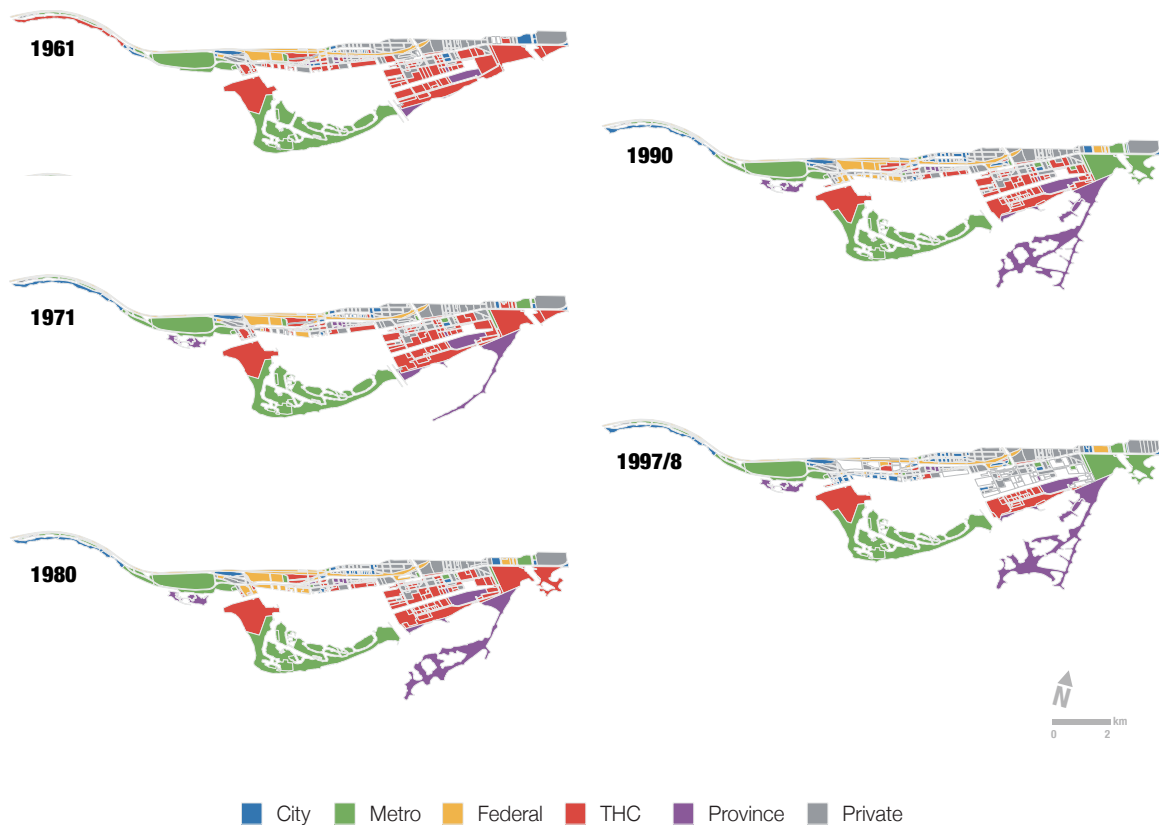


To really understand what transpired on the waterfront, I believe its imperative to first understand which specific actors owned land on the waterfront and when.

This may sound like a simple objective. But as I found out over several weeks and months, it's hardly a straightforward task, involves a whole host of methodological challenges.

So I started small and worked up.

First, I consulted a series of land surveys produced by the Harbour Commission covering much of the central waterfront going up to 1990. (*This one here is from 1973*).



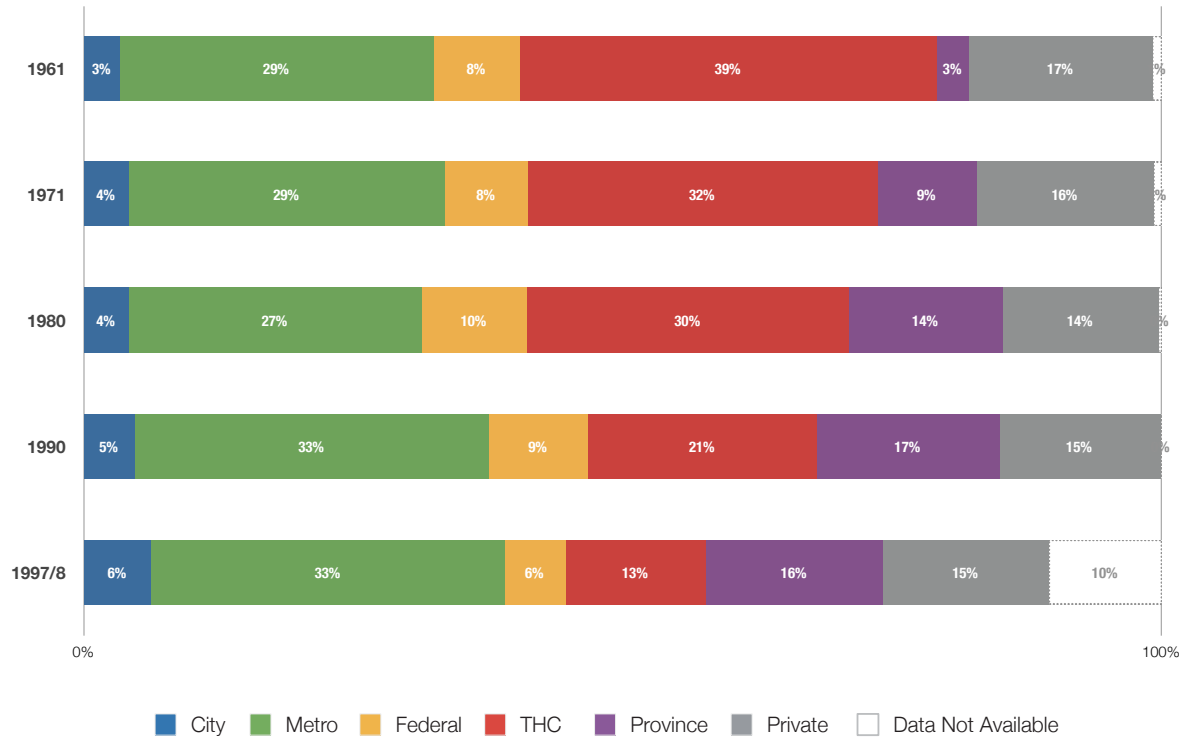
Using these maps as a starting point, I began manually digitizing and georeferencing ownership data down to the parcel level in order to generate roughly 10-year snapshots.

To ensure accuracy, I supplemented and verified the information using property data maps available through Robarts Library. Where there were gaps, I consulted municipal property assessments at the City archives, land transfer agreements housed at the provincial archives, as well as data generously provided by Waterfront Toronto.

This is an overview of what I came up with.

(Note: I've made arrangements with the Map & Data library here at the University of Toronto to make everything publicly available once I've finalized everything.)

Land Ownership, 1961-1998: Central Waterfront Area



The beauty of digitizing this information with GIS software is that it allows me to calculate changes in land ownership totals and percentages **over time**. (*There are several ownership maps floating around, but none of them track ownership changes over time.*)

This is what this kind of breakdown looks like. Here we see that, collectively, government bodies consistently controlled over 80% of waterfront lands during the four decades in question.

These aggregate totals, of course, mask variation between waterfront districts and neighbourhoods. The breakdown in the Port Lands, for instance, is skewed towards lands owned by the Harbour Commission (*up to 70% in the 1960s*). In the East Bayfront and West Donlands, the situation is weighted heavily to private ownership. And in the central bayfront, ownership was more evenly distributed.

For our purposes today, though, the key point from all this is that public ownership of the Toronto waterfront was substantially fragmented across different levels of government, and that this was the case for decades. And when you drill down further to the parcel level, each government's holdings were themselves dispersed across a range of agencies and departments.



Why does the distribution of land ownership matter?

Well, based on my reading of events both in Toronto and in some of the national and international waterfront examples I mentioned earlier, I would argue that things would have played out far differently if all the land in question was, say, predominantly in the hands of a single landowner — as it was in Vancouver and Cape Town and New York, for example.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that public landownership is necessarily detrimental to waterfront development. Only that we can't simply assume that public ownership necessarily generates public benefits.

When we say we want the waterfront to be "public", we have to be clear about what we're talking about.

Because when it comes to urban development, it would appear that government land owners respond to certain **incentives and constraints** that may in fact contradict these public goals.

“The incentives in the system are **against** the highest and **best use** of property... [It] is easier to obtain maintenance funds for uneconomic property than to get the capital to sell, regenerate or replace properties.”

— **Real Property Study Team**
Federal Task Force on Program Review, p. 19
May 1985

Several commissioned studies back up this position. Two reports from the Mulroney era, I think, are particularly interesting.

The first is a review of 62 property management programs run by federal departments and arms-length agencies as part of a comprehensive program review initiated in 1985. In it, the Real Property Study Group, as it was known, concluded that when it comes to managing publicly owned lands: “The incentives in the system are against the highest and best use of property.” Managers would rather sit on their properties than proactively redevelop them for public benefit because it’s “easier to obtain maintenance funds for uneconomic property than to get the capital to sell, regenerate or replace properties.”

Keep in mind that government departments and agencies don’t pay property taxes; they make “payments in lieu of taxes”, which are especially difficult to calculate in areas such as the waterfront where market values may not accurately reflect **potential** property values. In other words, it’s often cheaper to be a public landlord than a public developer.

And so we’re left with a hodgepodge of public agencies, corporations, and authorities — like the provincial LCBO, which has a distribution centre in the East Bayfront — whose main concern is to protect the status quo and its own balance sheet, rather than engage in and contribute to the waterfront’s long-term development.

“Passive land management is equivalent to **abdication.**”

— Stephen McLaughlin

Federal Land Management in the Toronto Region, p. 10
June 1987

Now, you may be thinking, “Well, this is a Mulroney report! It must have been ideologically driven, a Tory ploy to sell off federal properties.”

Perhaps so. But the Mulroney government also commissioned a second report, this time written by Stephen McLaughlin, Toronto’s former Commissioner of City Planning — by no means a partisan pushover — which came up with a similar conclusion.

Tasked with assessing the management of federal property specifically in the Toronto region, McLaughlin pulled no punches.

According to his analysis, federal departments, agencies, and corporations such as CBC, CN Rail, Harbourfront, Canada Post, and Public Works, all tended to work independently within their own narrow interests without any regard for the government’s broader inventory of public assets.

This tendency toward “passive” land management, as McLaughlin described it, was tantamount to nothing less than “abdication.”

Not surprisingly, McLaughlin’s report sat on the shelf for nearly six months before the government reluctantly released it to the public a few days before Christmas 1987 (the timing was intentional, no doubt).

“We had a situation where almost nobody could do anything, but **almost anybody** could **stop** something.”

— **Ronald Doering**
Counsel and Executive Director,
Royal Commission on the
Future of the Toronto Waterfront

Based on my research, the same dynamic described by McLaughlin seemed to be active at all levels of government.

This created a situation wherein each government body, as only one of several public land owners with partial claim to the waterfront, had only one clear power: veto power — a power enabled not by any claim to jurisdiction so much as a claim of ownership.

We had a situation, as Ron Doering, former Executive Director of the Crombie Commission, told me in an interview, “where almost nobody could do anything, but almost anybody could **stop** something.”



The historical fragmentation of land ownership, in other words, added a layer of complexity to the conventional intergovernmental equation which effectively crippled development efforts.

Add to this years of bureaucratic disputes which degraded any level of trust between the various waterfront actors, and you have a political space almost inimical to collaboration and coordination — a breeding ground for institutional inertia. No doubt, waterfront development faced various roadblocks. Economic cycles, property cycles, electoral cycles — these all had an impact on implementation efforts. But issues of ownership fragmentation clearly exacerbated the challenge.

Take the example of the province. Even if the province had been motivated to take the lead in redevelopment efforts (beyond its dalliance with Harbour City), could it really have done so? Remember, powers of eminent domain (that is, to expropriate property for public uses) do not extend up the federal hierarchy. Just as the City has no power to assume control over provincial lands, the province has no power to assume control over federal lands. As former Premier Davis reminded me during our interview, to the best of his recollection, even Harbour Commission lands, which were originally granted by federal statute, were considered “off limits” by the province. And so, for the most part, the province sat on the sidelines.



The result is a scenario which in many ways defies the conventional interpretation of federal-provincial-municipal relations.

Where there should have been four government actors involved — federal, provincial, and lower- and upper-tier municipalities (Toronto and Metro) — there were, effectively, five: the feds, the province, Metro, the City, **and** the Harbour Commission.

Where the province should have been expected to take the policy lead on an issue with regional and strategic importance, it remained distant.

And where the federal government should have kept a relatively low profile, it instead dominated waterfront headlines for decades, a constant thorn in the side of city officials.

The waterfront story, in other words, was about more than jurisdictional bickering. It was very much a story about land assets — highly fragmented assets with real monetary values, which were managed as such — which seemed to redefine the intergovernmental equation.

It's a story, I believe, which is often overlooked — something I hope this presentation, and my dissertation project in general, helps shed light on.

Thank you.

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