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# THE HARBOUR CITY THAT NEVER WAS... AND THE SMART CITY THAT MAY (NEVER) BECOME

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Pic 1 : Toronto Harborfront. Photos by Frans Ari Prasetyo (15/06/2019)

Toronto has become known for applying ‘smart’ solutions to modern urban problems. In 2014, the city was awarded the title of “Intelligent Community of the Year” by the Intelligent Community Forum for its array of technological answers to housing, transportation, and environmental issues. More recently, Waterfront Toronto has partnered with the Sidewalk Labs start-up to transform the city’s eastern waterfront into a ‘smart city’ hub. In their 198-page vision document, Sidewalk, a Google-derived company, lays out its plans to develop a futuristic socio-techno ecosystem along the Quayside and Portlands waterfront zones.

According to the website, “Sidewalk Toronto will combine forward-thinking urban design and new digital technology to create people-centred neighbourhoods that achieve precedent-setting levels of sustainability, affordability, mobility, and economic opportunity.” By transforming more than 800 acres of what they describe as “areas of underdeveloped urban land” on the eastern waterfront, Sidewalk Toronto proposes to launch Toronto into a utopic, technology-driven future. This project aims to improve traffic congestion with driverless cars and light rail transit, reduce housing costs through efficient building technology, and create an environmentally sustainable waterfront, all the while utilizing droves of digital data gathered from cameras and electronic sensors to improve the efficiency of service deliveries.

By February 2019, less than two years after the start of the Sidewalk Toronto partnership, the Toronto Star reported that of the approximately 50 percent of 600 polled Torontonians who had heard about the proposed project, 55 percent supported it, while 8 percent somewhat opposed it and 3 percent strongly opposed it. The remaining 34 percent had no opinion.

One of the most vocal groups opposing the idea is the #Block Sidewalk Campaign, a recently formed citizens group that aims to block the Sidewalk Labs project through activism. The group is organized by Torontonians from different professional backgrounds, including businesspeople, activists, academics, and environmentalists. During the first public meeting held by #Block Sidewalk on April 17, 2019, several areas of concern were raised about Sidewalk Labs' approach to developing land owned by the city. The first among these concerns was the process through which the project was initially proposed, which many felt was too opaque. In October 2017, a call was issued by the city for proposals to redevelop the 12 acres of land near the corner of Parliament St. and Queens Quay, which was eventually awarded to Sidewalk Labs.

Members of #Block Sidewalk at the April 17<sup>th</sup> meeting complained that this original proposal was secretly extended to include more than 350 acres of Portlands land located adjacent to the Queens Quay parcel, raising a sense of alarm around the apparent lack of transparency surrounding land deals. One member went as far as to claim that "this is a land grab," stating that Sidewalk Labs had changed its tune late in the game, refusing to move ahead with the 12-acre Quayside proposal if the additional 350 acres of Portlands were not included.

Another concern raised by the group was a sense that there was a lack of accountability to the public. For a proposal that was meant to design a mostly residential area, there was a feeling that not enough public consultation had taken place during the design process. Members were weary of repeated claims by Sidewalk Labs that 20,000 people had been consulted, pointing out that impersonal online statistics did not hold the same weight as in-depth face-to-face consultations.

The company's business model also came under fire at the meeting. After a proposal was put forward to fund a light rail transit project, citizens and city councillors like Gord Perks (not at the meeting) began questioning the role of companies in building infrastructure typically owned by the city. Where would taxpayer money go and who would control the infrastructure? Among rising anxieties about how private data would be used—a major source of contention for a Google sister company under pressure for its questionable use of personal information—some citizens have begun actively opposing the Sidewalk Toronto project altogether. On the eve of Sidewalk Labs' master plan finally being revealed to the public (after it was shared with Waterfront Toronto on June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019), tensions have risen about where this futuristic smart city proposal will take us.

## The Future in the Past and Present



Pic 2 : The harborfront development area. Photos by Frans Ari Prasetyo(02/06/2019)

Despite all of these musings and rising concerns about the future of Toronto's waterfront, the fact remains that the Sidewalk Labs proposal exists only in the realm of possibility. This realm is composed of written documents like the initial proposal submitted to Waterfront Toronto during the October 2017 bid for waterfront redevelopment, the master plan that has yet to be revealed to the public, whimsical architectural renderings of utopic cityscapes marked by all-season building raincoats, light rail transit, high-tech sidewalks, and driverless cars, and public meetings for public consultation and opposition to the proposal.

In the meantime, the proposed Quayside and Portlands site for the 'smart city of the future' remains an oddly desolate hodgepodge of vacant, industrial, and storage land interspersed with new condo developments in the west, the Don River mouth reconstruction in the Portlands, and various construction sites in-between. Whether Sidewalk Labs moves forward with the project or the government decides to consult with the public before designing its own vision, what remains in the present is a (politically charged) site for possibility.

As an anthropologist, I am intrigued by the processes of future construction in the present. Currently, the discourse around Sidewalk Labs has been dominated by discussions about both positive and negative 'what if' scenarios regarding interrelations between technology and society. Newspaper articles, public discussions, hashtags, and conversations abound about how Sidewalk Labs could and Jessika Tremblay and Frans Ari Prasetyo (2019) *The Harbour City that Never Was... and the Smart City that May (Never) Become*. A research report. Toronto: CA. School of Cities, University of Toronto.

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would transform a huge swathe of the city. But little ink has been spilled about the state of affairs on the waterfront as they are now, and how they have been imagined in the past. For this reason, I decided to take a look at two different sites that have a lot in common with the Sidewalk Labs proposal for comparison; one of these sites has existed since the 1970s and has since fallen into disuse and disrepair, and the other was never built. Both offer a glimpse into the possible fate of the Sidewalk Labs proposal.

## Ontario Place



Pic 3 : Ontario Place (15/06/2019) Photo by Frans Ari Prasetyo

On June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Frans Prasetyo (the photographer for this piece) and I wandered around Ontario Place, the erstwhile family-oriented theme park that attracted millions of visitors since its opening in 1971. We were taking in the scenery of dilapidated architecture and overgrown greenery adjacent to the hubbub of a seemingly incongruous Taco Fest on an overcast afternoon. As Frans was taking photographs, we encountered a man in his fifties quietly immortalizing with his camera the growing shrubs around what used to be a series of dome-capped silos filled with thrilling exhibits. After a brief greeting and an exchange of remarks about how the place had lost its lustre over the years, the amateur photographer admitted he was a regular visitor to Ontario Place, and enjoyed documenting the subtle changes in atmosphere, visitor density, and vegetation growth over the course of the seasons.

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Pic 4 : Ontario Place Condition Now. Photos by Frans Ari Prasetyo (15/05/2016)

When I asked whether he had been familiar with Ontario Place before the government shut it down in 2012, he replied, “I came when it first opened. I was 12 years old.” His eyes lit up and his demeanor became more animated after I asked him about the original purpose of the silos, their imposing concrete exterior acting as impenetrable barriers to my imagination. “There used to be a huge maze inside,” he replied, describing it as a place for treasure-hunting through various themed exhibits. Indeed, the handful of silos located on the west end of the artificial islands making up Ontario Place had served many exhibits over the years, after their original “Ontario North Now” display capturing the essence of northern Ontario nature starting in 1980. Briefly, he waxed nostalgic about how the area around these silos had once housed a water ride and a series of small canals for children to play at panning for ‘gold.’ He described how the once expansive waterpark at the east end of the park had recently been “tarred over” with a new set of asphalt basketball courts, a coincidental ode to the recently successful Toronto Raptors basketball team. He shook his head as he recalled Doug Ford’s not-too-distant ambition to turn Ontario Place into a “fucking casino” and shopping district, stating that he himself would prefer to see this public space remain open and free to all visitors. The once futuristic stilted glass pods (built by architect Eberhard Zeidler) now rusting over flood water at the centre of the park, he proposed, could cater to the richer demographic by housing a “nice restaurant” or other entertainment venues, but the bulk of the park he insisted should remain a public space.



Pic 5 : Ontario Place now, a former waterboom area. Photo by Frans Ari Prasetyo (15/06/2019).

As we politely parted ways, it became apparent to me that the complexity and tensions involved in visions for Toronto's waterfront (re)development could be captured in this one brief encounter. In much the same way that this amateur photographer grappled with memories of bygone history as he simultaneously considered possible futures for Ontario Place, Toronto's citizens, academics, and politicians would all do well to remember the past while designing for the future. Ontario Place had once been a place of promise, of futuristic architecture, and of family-oriented public entertainment. The glass pods and the triodetic structure of the Cinesphere, a dome-shaped Imax theatre which was once a major touristic attraction and has since obtained heritage status, once represented the future of Ontario. Defying both water and gravity and influenced by the successful futurism of Montreal's Expo '67 exhibit that had showcased appealing architectural possibilities, the buildings of Ontario Place had experienced a remarkable heyday in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Now that the park has been closed and its prized architecture has fallen into decay, overwhelmed by floodwaters during lake Ontario's highest recorded levels in the summer of 2019, this site of future promise has sunk into a past filled with uncertainty and regret.



Pic 6 : Cinesphere at Ontario Place. Photo by Frans Ari Prasetyo (15/06/2019)

## Harbour City

Although the proposed Sidewalk Toronto project appears at first glance to offer a uniquely hyper-modern solution to transforming the city through ‘smart city’ technology, the idea is eerily reminiscent of other futuristic projects proposed for the waterfront in the mid-twentieth century. The most remarkable of these proposals—and even more so because it seems to have been mostly forgotten by the public—is the late 1960s Harbour City design by architect Eberhard Zeidler (who also built Ontario Place). Had it been built, Harbour City would have resembled a modernist take on Italy’s canal-crossed Venice, comprised of a series of artificial islands spanning the aquatic space between Ontario Place and the Toronto Island Airport. Prefabricated building segments would have been assembled on site to create a densely populated live-work-play environment where up to 50,000 residents could have called home. Motor vehicle traffic would have been highly restricted, allowing for pedestrians, cyclists, and boats to dominate local circulation. And most appealing for many Torontonians would have been the multi-level housing scheme that would have catered not only to the rich but middle- and lower-income households. The project even received the endorsement of Jane Jacobs, who became an enthusiastic ambassador for the promise of improved living standards in this utopian future cityscape.

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Pic 7 : New Harborfront Development. Photos by Frans Ari Prasetyo (02/06/2019)

Despite its many promising features and famed supporters, Harbour City was never built. Authors like Mark Osbaldeston and Derek Flack have attributed the failure to fear of political opposition from citizens after the Spadina Expressway was nixed amid strong protests. To avoid potential political fallout from moving ahead with a project that some considered risky and environmentally questionable, municipal and provincial politicians quietly opted out of the proposal, and it was eventually all but forgotten.

Many of the same obstacles that plagued the Harbour City proposal have also beleaguered the Sidewalk Labs project. Both projects have proposed radical futuristic designs that draw on technological advancements and ideas for sustainable multipurpose architecture to improve the lives of Toronto citizens. Framed as utopic solutions to the problems of modern urban life, the proposals both appealed to citizens of different backgrounds and the techno-elites of Toronto, albeit more than fifty years apart. The question remains whether the Sidewalk Labs architectural drawings will have a chance to be built and eventually grow into either heritage sites like the Ontario Place Cinesphere and pods, or blights on the Toronto landscape like the decaying infrastructure from the same site, or even still whether they will fall into the pit of collective memory loss, casualties of corporate planning and citizen opposition.