

Art = Waterfront

*Creating a cultural corridor along
Toronto's entire Waterfront*

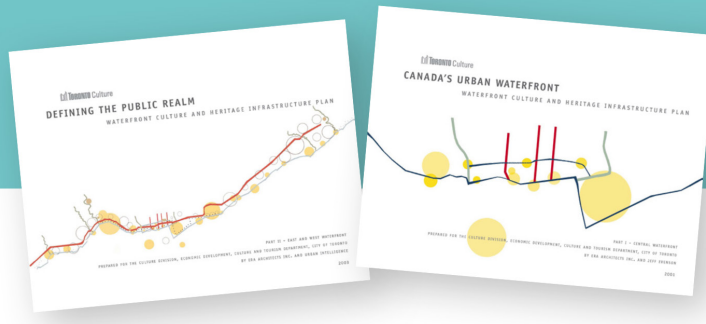




In 2001 and 2003, ERA Architects produced two policy documents exploring and defining culture on Toronto's waterfront for the City of Toronto: *Canada's Urban Waterfront* and *Defining the Public Realm*.

Both reports identified a series of north-south oriented "cultural corridors" that intersect with Toronto's waterfront at John, Yonge, and Jarvis Streets, which have since been adopted.

The proposal for a Cultural Corridor spanning Toronto's entire waterfront outlined in this document builds directly on the cultural and infrastructural values identified in these two reports on the city's waterfront.



MAY 2024

This is a *living document* that will be constantly updated to reflect the contributions of a growing coalition

If you would like to contribute to this document, or if you're interested in joining our coalition to shape the future of Toronto's Waterfront Cultural Corridor, connect with us!

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culture-on-torontos-waterfront

Mission, Vision, Principles

What we believe



Art = Waterfront

We are a coalition of designers, artists, urbanists, policy and place-makers advocating for the creation of a municipal Arts Corridor spanning the city's entire Waterfront, from the Rouge River in Scarborough to Marie Curtis Park in Etobicoke.



Vision

- ~ Unite and celebrate Toronto's waterfront
- ~ Build affordable live-work artist studios
- ~ Enrich Toronto's existing cultural infrastructure
- ~ Co-create a vision for Toronto's waterfront cultural corridor with Indigenous artists, artists of colours, and under-represented communities



Principles

Culture on the Waterfront is **LIVING**

A vibrant cultural district supports existing affordable spaces for artists to live, work, and exhibit while creating new ones

Culture on the Waterfront is **ECONOMIC**

Supporting artists is an investment in the local economy, creating opportunities for local and international tourism and support for local businesses

Culture on the Waterfront is **EQUITABLE**

Enhancing existing cultural infrastructure will create a consistency of accessible cultural opportunities throughout the city from Marie Curtis Park in Etobicoke to the Rouge River in Scarborough

Culture on the Waterfront is **VIBRANT**

A cultural corridor will support local artists to be in conversation and collaboration with international artists, attracting local and global attention and enhancing local quality of life

LEFT:

An audience gathers for a performance as part of the in/Future festival at Ontario Place in 2016

RIGHT:

Toronto's central waterfront is already home to a concentration of cultural facilities





Etobicoke



Toronto



Scarborough

CONTEXT

Toronto needs a Waterfront Cultural Corridor

Toronto is a global city with one the largest, most diverse and creative populations in North America. It is home to an ecosystem of cultures, economies, communities, movements, industries, services, and traditions as rich and active as those of any of the world's capitals.

Despite this great capacity for ideas, expression, and cultural output, Toronto's spaces are being outpaced by the ambitions of its residents: spaces for artists and creators to live, work, and exhibit are becoming increasingly rare and inaccessible.

Artists are leaving Toronto in significant numbers¹. Facilities that previously offered affordable studio and living spaces for artists are being replaced by market-rate residential developments, while institutions like Artscape are crumbling² and facing increasing uncertainty³. At the same time, Toronto's population is rapidly growing, and the demand for spaces to support artists is growing with it.

It is imperative for Toronto to protect and support existing cultural spaces, while creating more affordable and accessible culturally-enabled spaces.

LEFT:

Toronto's waterfront spans 46km across Etobicoke, Toronto, & Scarborough, and is home to a concentration of cultural infrastructure

Culture by the Lake

According to research by the Martin Prosperity⁴ Institute, the greatest density of cultural locations in Toronto—places where artists live and work as well as facilities accommodating cultural activities—is along its Waterfront. Based on this concentration, Toronto’s Waterfront is the ideal location to preserve and promote cultural spaces for generations of Torontonians.

The tendency for cultural activities to cluster along Toronto’s waterfront is no accident: drawn to the beauty of Lake Ontario, the waterfront is home to a broad network of existing cultural infrastructure that makes it an obvious place to live, work, and exhibit. Cultural facilities along the Central Waterfront like the Harbourfront Centre, the National Ballet of Canada, the Fleck Dance Theatre, and Art Hub 27 anchor a district that has been successfully programmed by organizations with annual artist residencies⁵ and pop up interactive sculptures⁶, while centering public art in the waterfront’s ongoing redevelopment⁷.

Ultimately, the existing institutions that anchor culture on the waterfront are limited in their jurisdiction and geographic scope: Waterfront Toronto’s focus is on the central waterfront and the Port Lands, Harbourfront Centre’s purview is the area immediately surrounding their facilities at Queens Quay West and Simcoe Avenue, and the Waterfront BIA is limited to businesses between Billy Bishop Airport and Cherry Street. Our vision for the waterfront extends across the entire city, from Marie Curtis Park in Etobicoke to the Rouge River in Scarborough, uniting the efforts of these disparate cultural institutions to create an accessible, equitable, and citywide waterfront district known for its cultural vibrancy, connecting and strengthening existing cultural initiatives and policies while creating opportunities to support new artists and cultural organizations with spaces to live, work, and exhibit.

Concentrating these efforts within a geographical corridor of the city where many of these spaces are already located provides a framework for safeguarding and stimulating Toronto’s cultural sector as a whole: Toronto’s Waterfront is the ideal location for that corridor.

RIGHT:

Bluffers Park in Scarborough is part of a chain of green spaces along Toronto’s waterfront that can be used for cultural activations



Who we are

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... and growing!

Want to join our coalition?

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Existing

Tools, Organizations, & Policy



The City of Toronto recognizes the centrality of culture to its economic and social health with a broad range of existing cultural and economic initiatives and partnerships with a diversity of cultural and city-building organizations.



A Waterfront Cultural Corridor district plan will be an overarching mechanism to unite these disparate initiatives, strengthening collective efforts to create an efficient and effective program to support existing cultural organizations and spaces while developing new ones and creating a cohesive sense of place.

Cultural Districts

HOW THEY WORK

Recognizing that heritage is more than bricks-and-mortar built form, the Cultural Districts Plan is being developed to support and protect access to the cultural spaces that are essential to the vibrancy of the city. The ongoing development of a city-wide Cultural Districts Program will identify planning policies to support the creation of cultural districts that strengthen local culture and communities, support small businesses and retail, and promote community-stewarded spaces.

CONTRIBUTING TO A DISTRICT PLAN

While the City of Toronto's Cultural Districts Plan is being developed to work with specific equity-seeking communities, the development of the plan will offer a strategic framework to safeguard and enhance the cultural spaces essential to waterfront communities' vibrancy. Through a city-wide Cultural Districts Program, specific waterfront areas can be designated as hubs of artistic expression, heritage preservation, and community engagement, celebrating diverse cultural traditions and fostering a sense of local identity. By preserving existing cultural spaces, supporting small businesses, and promoting community-stewarded venues, the plan ensures the waterfront remains a vibrant centre of cultural creativity and economic vitality.



Local Arts Service Organizations (LASOs)

HOW THEY WORK

LASOs are independent, not-for-profit, community arts organizations that promote arts and culture at the local level. The programming and services that they offer are affordable and customized for local needs. LASOs are funded by the City of Toronto. Three LASOs currently activate spaces along Toronto's Waterfront: Lakeshore Arts, East End Arts, and Scarborough Arts.

CONTRIBUTING TO A DISTRICT PLAN

By collaborating with waterfront LASOs, the proposed Waterfront Cultural District can leverage and support their existing networks, resources, and activities, ensuring that waterfront communities have access to affordable and inclusive arts participation opportunities that reflect their unique identities and aspirations.

Business Improvement Areas (BIAs)

HOW THEY WORK

BIAs are associations of commercial property owners and tenants within a defined area who work with the City to create business districts that support a wide range of cultural programming. By working collectively as a BIA, local businesses have the organizational and funding capacity to be catalysts for civic improvement, enhancing the quality of life in their local neighbourhoods. Toronto has 5 BIAs along the waterfront: Long Branch BIA, Lakeshore Village BIA, Mimico by the Lake BIA, the Waterfront BIA, and the Beach BIA.

CONTRIBUTING TO A DISTRICT PLAN

Existing waterfront BIAs will serve as key partners in realizing the vision for a dynamic and culturally rich waterfront corridor. By leveraging the organizational and funding capacity of BIAs, the Waterfront Cultural District can benefit from a wide range of cultural programming and initiatives that enhance community engagement, support local artists, and foster a sense of place along Toronto's waterfront. Waterfront BIAs could employ a district-based approach to coordinate activities, e.g. a "Waterfront Festival of BIAs".

LEFT:

The Humber Bay Arch Bridge is an artful gateway to Etobicoke and a vital link between the creative communities along Toronto's waterfront

Toronto Culture Plan

HOW IT WORKS

The City of Toronto is developing a new Plan for Toronto's Culture Sector to guide cultural services, policy, and programming over the next ten years. The previous culture plan was adopted in 2011 has guided cultural policy and programming since then. The new Plan will set a vision to strengthen Toronto's cultural sector, which prioritizes equity and ensures that residents in all corners of the city have opportunities to engage with the arts.

CONTRIBUTING TO A DISTRICT PLAN

The City of Toronto's forthcoming Action Plan for Toronto's Culture Sector presents an opportunity to shape the trajectory of cultural development within the proposed Waterfront Cultural District. Building upon the foundation laid by the previous culture plan, and by prioritizing equity and accessibility, the Culture Plan will ensure that residents from all walks of life, spanning the entire waterfront corridor from Scarborough to Etobicoke, have equitable access to arts and cultural opportunities.

Toronto Island Master Plan

HOW IT WORKS

In recent years, Toronto Island has faced many pressures, including increased demand, aging infrastructure, and flooding. As a long-term planning document that is being co-created with Indigenous rights holders and local communities, the Toronto Island Park Master Plan will address these issues and ensure the park can be a cherished gathering place for generations to come. The Master Plan will guide future decision-making around improvements, programming, and management of the park, influencing decision-making, operations, and future park improvements. The Master Plan will detail how the plan can be implemented, featuring Island-wide and site-specific plans and strategies that define detailed approaches to next steps and a phased approach to implementation.

CONTRIBUTING TO A DISTRICT PLAN

The Toronto Island Master Plan will specifically outline cultural opportunities on Toronto Island, including the Gibraltar Point Centre for the Arts. A Waterfront District Plan can leverage other funding to accomplish the goals outlined in the Master Plan.

RIGHT:

The cultural potential of Toronto's waterfront is demonstrated (quite literally!) by a 2017 Art Spin performance in Toronto Harbour

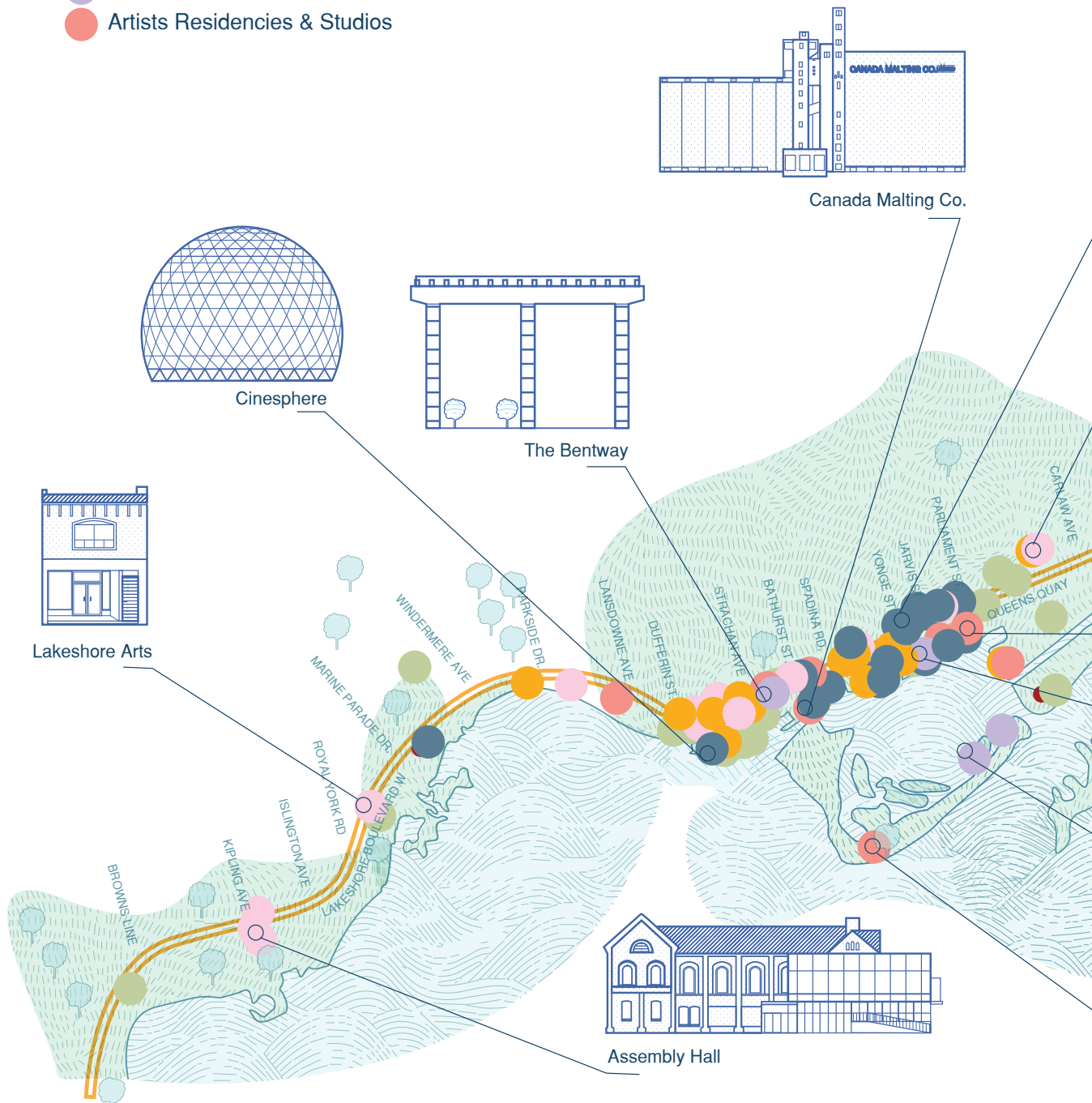


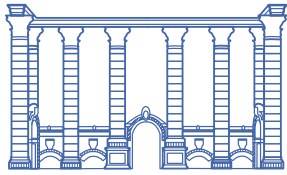
Art = Waterfront

Realizing a cultural network on Toronto's lakeshore

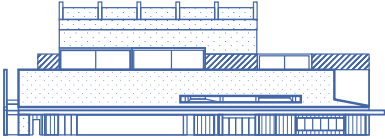
Legend

- Cultural Organizations
- Civic Art Spaces and Venues
- Commercial Venues
- Not-for-profit Arts Organizations
- Artists Residencies & Studios





The Guild Inn Estate



St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts



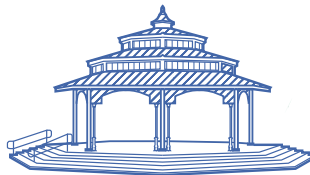
The Opera House



Fool's Paradise



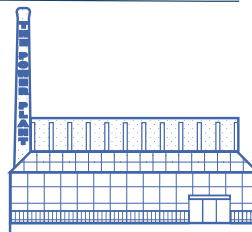
Scarborough Arts



Kew Gardens Gazebo



Akin Waterfront



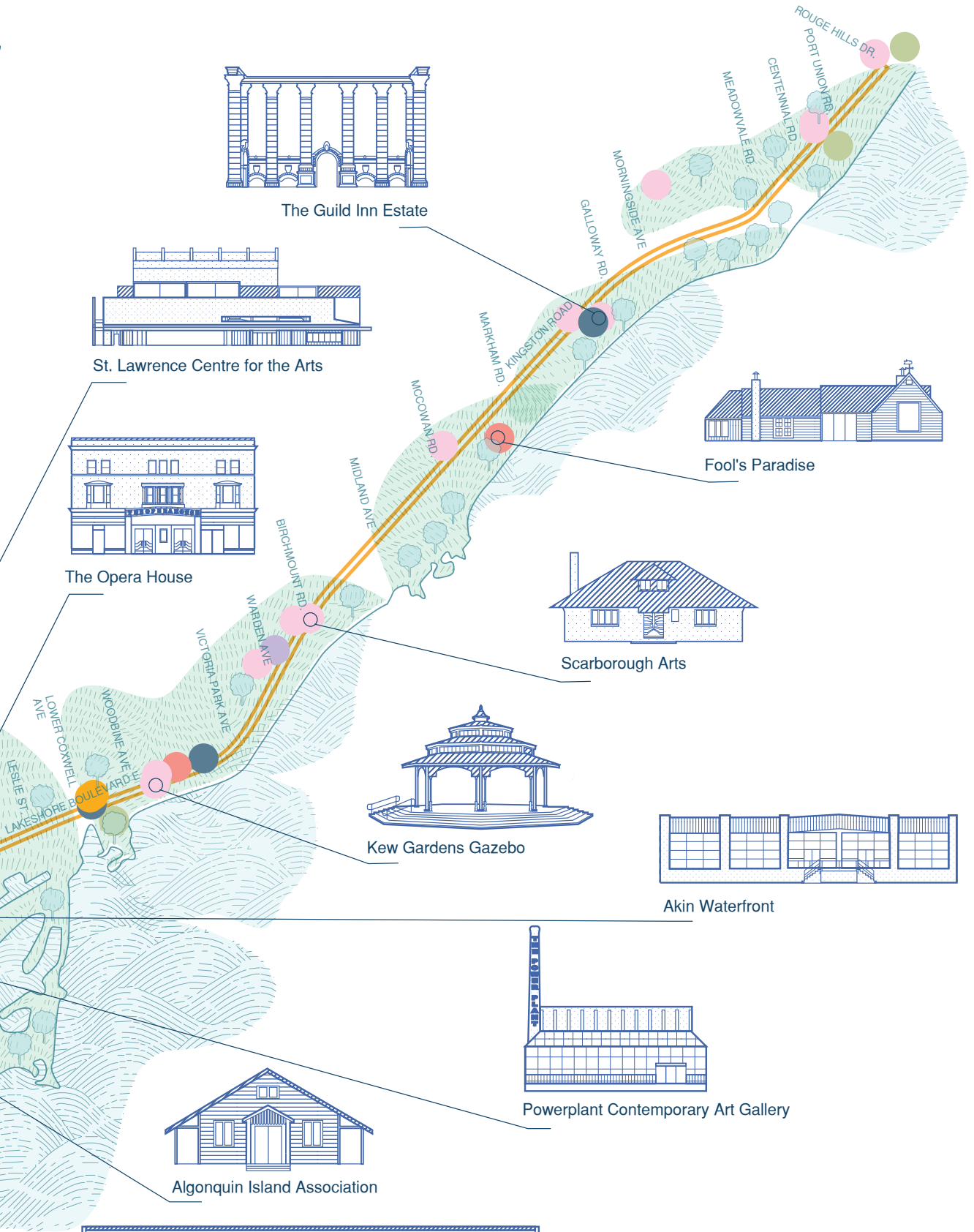
Powerplant Contemporary Art Gallery



Algonquin Island Association



Gibraltar Point Centre for the Arts



Waterfront Toronto

HOW IT WORKS

In November 2001, the three levels of government established Waterfront Toronto to oversee all aspects of the planning and development of Toronto's central waterfront, between Jameson Avenue in the west to the Portlands in the east.

CONTRIBUTING TO A DISTRICT PLAN

While its scope is limited to the city's central waterfront, Waterfront Toronto's pivotal role in shaping the physical and economic landscape of the waterfront renders its involvement integral to the success of the proposed Waterfront Cultural District Plan. Working with Waterfront Toronto will ensure that a waterfront cultural corridor is aligned with broader redevelopment efforts and cultural initiatives.

Community Land Trusts

HOW THEY WORK

Community Land Trusts are established to secure the affordability of housing and community spaces by collectively purchasing land and structures and holding them in community trust.

CONTRIBUTING TO A DISTRICT PLAN

Toronto is witnessing the emergence of many land trusts throughout the city, geared toward preserving economic and cultural diversity for specific neighbourhoods and communities. Establishing a land trust specifically for artist live-work spaces would be critical in maintaining accessible cultural infrastructure that would otherwise become unaffordable for artists and culture workers.

OPPOSITE RIGHT:

Aerial of Toronto's central waterfront

BELOW RIGHT:

"The Peace Maker's Canoe" by Jay Haven's, exhibited as part of Waterfront Toronto's Temporary Floating Public Art program





Recommended

Tools & Policy



There are many tools and policies currently existing in Toronto and other Canadian cities that are well-suited to support cultural spaces specifically. A Waterfront Cultural District is an ideal conduit through which to implement them in a unified way and provide the most effective support for arts and culture spaces.



Cultural Spaces Grant Funds

BELOW RIGHT:

Projections on the Bathurst Quay Silos by Dave Colaengelo and Patricio Davila in 2015 demonstrate the potential for re-using existing infrastructure as spaces for artists to work and exhibit

Demonstrated in successful Cultural Infrastructure Plans in other major Canadian cities such as Vancouver⁸, Cultural Spaces Grant Funds are an effective tool for supporting the health and growth of cultural locations. Grants can support cultural facilities and artist residences to carry out space planning, research, and building improvements and upgrades including accessibility infrastructure and acquiring (purchasing), renovating, or expanding cultural spaces. They can also provide the resources to facilitate knowledge sharing between cultural organizations, practitioners, and artists.

Recently, The City of Toronto funded ArtHubs, an organization created to manage Artscape's venues when it entered receivership. While this investment was an emergency infusion of funds, it demonstrates the City's commitment to supporting cultural hubs. Funding a broad range of cultural spaces by harmonizing an array of policies and tools and should be formalized under a permanent municipal program.



District-Specific Inclusionary Zoning

The City of Toronto has adopted an inclusionary zoning policy that requires new residential developments to include affordable housing units. Applying inclusionary zoning to Toronto's Waterfront Cultural Corridor would promote cultural vitality. Here's how:

DISTRICT-SPECIFIC MARKET ANALYSIS

The City of Toronto is advancing Market Analysis studies for specific districts, including Little Jamaica and Mount Dennis. The Waterfront is an ideal candidate for its own market analysis.

SET-ASIDE REQUIREMENT

Mandates that a certain percentage of residential units in new developments within the Waterfront Cultural District be affordable housing specifically for artists. This will create socioeconomic diversity in the community and provide housing options for artists, cultural workers, and residents with varying income levels.

PARTNERSHIPS WITH CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS:

Collaborate with cultural institutions and organizations to identify opportunities for incorporating affordable housing into cultural developments. This can include leveraging available land or airspace above cultural facilities for affordable housing units.

FINANCIAL INCENTIVES:

Offer financial incentives or density bonuses to developers who exceed the minimum requirements for affordable housing provision.

Property Tax Subsidies

Property tax subsidies are another effective tool for supporting cultural spaces in cities. The City of Toronto currently provides tax subsidies for properties housing cultural facilities¹⁰. Widening the scope of tax subsidy programs would stimulate cultural activities and reduce barriers to establishing and maintaining arts spaces. This would build on the City of Toronto's "creative co-location" tax subclass for some culture hubs and creative spaces.

Community Benefits

Like other Canadian cities⁹, Toronto administers a Community Benefits Charge on developments and redevelopments to help fund adjacent facilities that support the existence of healthy, mix-use communities. Levies are collected to fund a variety of infrastructure including affordable housing, public art, and parkland. This framework would be an ideal way to ensure funding for the maintenance and creation of cultural spaces in areas undergoing change.

Using Vacant Storefronts

Meanwhile leasing – temporarily using vacant storefronts as artist studios and exhibit spaces is an opportunity to quickly and cheaply provide more working space for artists along Toronto’s waterfront. According to the Waterfront BIA, 30% of storefronts along the eastern waterfront are vacant. By partnering with BIAs, LASOs, Waterfront Toronto, and other cultural organizations while leveraging funding from the City, Toronto could repurpose empty commercial spaces along its waterfront into vibrant hubs of artistic creation and exhibition. This initiative would not only provide emerging artists with much-needed studio space but also activate underutilized areas, fostering cultural engagement and vibrancy toward revitalizing the waterfront.

Collaborating with stakeholders such as property owners, cultural organizations, and the public, Toronto could implement a project similar to Montreal’s “Créer des ponts” (Building bridges), addressing both the need for affordable studio space and the challenge of vacant storefronts.

BELOW, RIGHT:

Meanwhile leasing created space for artist studios and exhibition spaces in Montreal, as part of the “Créer des ponts” program



Next steps

Toward a Waterfront Cultural Corridor



The Waterfront Cultural Corridor is an ambitious, multi-generational plan. Like all big plans, it requires a first step!



The following section outlines immediate implementation measures that will create a series of “quick wins”, essential to kickstarting the initiative and creating momentum.

QUICK WINS

Coalition Building

Toronto’s artists and creators are as diverse as the disciplines they work in. It’s therefore essential that a Cultural Corridor reflects their equally wide range of needs, perspectives, and practices. Building an active coalition of cultural individuals from across the city that informs, shapes, and champions Toronto’s Waterfront Cultural Corridor from the ground up will ensure a broad and enduring framework for generations to come. Our coalition includes public, private, not-for-profit, industry, and independent members spanning generations and practices.

Culture Plan 2024

The City of Toronto is preparing a new Culture Plan, to be released in Fall 2024. Working with City staff and Monumental - the consultant writing the plan - to include a Waterfront Cultural Corridor within the Culture Plan will direct the City to implement policies and programs that will support an arts district on Toronto’s waterfront.



LEFT:

Audiences take in water-based work as part of an Art Spin bike tour on Toronto Island in 2016

QUICK WINS

Placemaking and Wayfinding

Developing and implementing a placemaking and wayfinding strategy will create a cohesive identity and foster a distinct sense of place while promoting and uniting disparate districts along Toronto's 38km stretch of waterfront. This initiative will be funded by grants, and building on the marketing and communications budgets of our partner organizations.

The following steps outline the implementation process:

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND COLLABORATION

Engage Art=Waterfront's key stakeholders (including artists, cultural organizations, councillors, City staff local businesses, and community members). Solicit input and feedback to ensure that the name and overall branding strategy reflects a district-wide identity while honouring the unique character of Toronto's waterfront communities.

LOGO DESIGN

Collaborate with local artists and designers to create a logo that embodies the character of a city-wide Waterfront Cultural Corridor that can be used in wayfinding signage, promotional materials, and online.

WAYFINDING SYSTEM

Develop a comprehensive wayfinding system to be employed along the entire waterfront corridor from Marie Curtis Park in Etobicoke to the Rouge River in Scarborough. A wayfinding system will establish the Waterfront Cultural Corridor as a cohesive district, and will help guide visitors and residents through the corridor. The signage and maps will highlight key cultural organizations and encourage visitors to explore more.

WEBSITE

Create a dedicated website for the Waterfront Cultural Corridor to serve as a hub for information, events, and resources related to the district. The website will include interactive maps, event calendars, organization profiles, and artist promo.



RIGHT:

Creating a distinct name, logo, and wayfinding system is the first step to creating a coherent Waterfront Cultural Corridor



Opportunities

The Art=Waterfront team has assessed existing facilities along Toronto's waterfront to determine specific projects that could jumpstart the Art=Waterfront initiative.

Exhibition Place



Exhibition Place is a 192-acre site adjacent to downtown Toronto. For a century and a half, the primary use of the grounds has been to host the 18-day Canadian National Exhibition each August. While some buildings located on the Exhibition site are inhabited by year-round tenants (Medieval Times, Queen Elizabeth Theatre), a significant number of them are under-used for the remainder of the year. This presents a unique opportunity for the development of permanent and meanwhile facilities for arts and culture organizations, artist housing, and performance, studio, and exhibition spaces.



Exhibition Place is also situated directly south of Western Liberty Village, an arts and design business district. With future investment in pedestrian rights of way bridging the Gardiner Expressway and GO Railway, there is great potential to connect new arts and cultural spaces at Exhibition Place with the existing cultural infrastructure to the north.



Gibraltar Point Centre for the Arts



The Gibraltar Point Centre for the Arts (GPCA) on Toronto Island hosts local and international artists through residencies and studio rentals. Formerly managed by Artscape, which went into receivership in late 2023, the GPCA presents a unique opportunity for renewal as the centrepiece of a Waterfront Cultural Corridor, offering an opportunity to expand spaces for artist to live and work, and updated facilities, transforming it into a modern, sustainable, and accessible arts hub.

Bathurst Quay Silos



The Canada Malting heritage silos and the adjacent buildings in Bathurst Quay represent a nexus within any proposed Waterfront Cultural Corridor. The site will facilitate the collaboration of multiple cultural organizations (e.g. OCAD, Canada Ireland Foundation, The Corleck) and serves as an anchor for cultural activities on the waterfront. The site is currently undergoing rehabilitation to allow for outdoor cultural programming. With future investment, the silos could house a variety of indoor cultural facilities.

Conclusion

Toronto needs a Waterfront Cultural Corridor



As Toronto's cultural spaces are at risk, now is the time to create a discrete and effective plan to safeguard spaces for artists to live, work, and exhibit.

It is paramount that the development of a District that spans the length of Toronto is collaborative. For the district to best serve the diverse group of neighbourhoods, communities, and practitioners that live along the city's waterfront, it is essential to design it based on their needs.

Drawing on the expertise, knowledge, and lived experience of the broadest coalition possible—including artists, city-builders, and policy experts—will inform the creation of a robust and enduring Waterfront Cultural District.



Notes and References

1 ["Toronto artists are being 'run out of town' by soaring rents. Should the city step in to help?"](#) Toronto Star. October 10, 2022.

2 ["Toronto's running out of affordable rehearsal space. It's putting the city's rich arts scene at risk"](#) Toronto Star. January 10, 2023.

3 ["Toronto's arts organizations are in decline. Here's a brief overview of the struggling arts scene"](#) Toronto Star, March 14, 2024.

4 [Cultural Location Index](#), Martin Prosperity Institute, OCADU, 2010

5 Waterfront Toronto and the Waterfront BIA's joint Artist-in-Residence Program

6 Ice Breakers and the the Temporary Floating Public Art program

7 Lassonde Art Trail and Port Lands Public Art Master Plan

8 [Making Space for Arts and Culture: Vancouver Cultural Infrastructure Plan](#). September 2019.

9 [Section 37 Community Benefits Charge](#). City of Toronto.

10 [Creative Co-Location Facilities Property Tax Subclass Designation](#). City of Toronto.

Thanks to our contributors

This document was written and designed by the Art=Waterfront Coordinating Team:
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