Rivers as urban landscapes: renaissance of the waterfront

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Abstract The Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail, currently stretching 350 kilometres along the shore of Lake Ontario, Canada, links 26 communities, 184 natural areas, 161 parks and promenades, 84 marinas and yacht clubs, hundreds of historic places, fairs, museums, art galleries and festivals. The Waterfront Trail is a catalyst for a new attitude and way of thinking towards the Lake Ontario waterfront and its watersheds – one that integrates ecological health, economic vitality and a sense of community.

Since it was launched in 1995, the Trail has accompanied the protection of the most valued elements of the waterfront, and the transformation of under-utilized and environmentally degraded lands to vibrant places with businesses and jobs, parks and recreational facilities, green spaces, natural habitats and cultural venues and attractions. It is through the Trail that people have been mobilized to improve the waterfront as they have rediscovered the shoreline and understood the interconnections, both natural and cultural, that are so vital to its health and vitality.

The Waterfront Regeneration Trust is the not-for-profit charitable organization that has been leading this large-scale greenway initiative over the past 10 years. While much has been accomplished, there remains much to do to enhance and expand the greenway. This presentation will focus on the lessons we have learned over the past decade in our involvement with more than 100 projects and what those lessons mean for the next decade of waterfront regeneration.

Keywords Lake Ontario; regeneration; waterfront

Introduction

Around the world, and through the ages, people have been fascinated by places where land touches water – where culture meets nature. Protecting and restoring those elements of the waterfront that we value – ecological health, a sense of community, economic vitality – is part of the challenge before us.

Originally established in 1992 under provincial legislation to implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront, the Waterfront Regeneration Trust is now an independent, non-profit charitable organization that brings together people, ideas and resources for regeneration of waterfronts and their associated urban areas.

The Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail and Greenway is the Trust’s signature project. The Trail now extends some 350 kilometres along the shore of Lake Ontario, one of the five Great Lakes. The Trail represents an important step towards bringing the vision of a regenerated waterfront closer to reality.

The Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail and Greenway as a catalyst

The Waterfront Trail is a catalyst for a new attitude and way of thinking about the Lake Ontario waterfront – one that integrates ecological health, economic vitality and a sense of community. Since it was launched in 1995, the Trail has accompanied the protection of the most valued elements of the waterfront, and the transformation of under-utilized and environmentally degraded lands to vibrant places with businesses and jobs, parks and recreational facilities, green spaces, natural habitats and cultural venues and attractions. It is through the Trail that people have been mobilized to improve the waterfront as they have...
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The Trail links as many as 184 natural areas, 161 parks and promenades, 84 marinas and yacht clubs, hundreds of historic places, fairs, museums, art galleries and festivals. Use of the Trail is as diverse as the 26 cities, towns and villages that the Trail passes through. Trail users tell us that they enjoy cycling, walking, in-line skating, jogging, birding and/or exploring the vast natural and cultural heritage of the Lake Ontario waterfront.

**Our Waterfront Trail is growing**

The original vision for the Lake Ontario waterfront was to build a trail from Burlington to Trenton with links into the valley lands and other trail networks. The popularity and benefits of the Trail were soon recognized in other places around the Lake, encouraging communities in the Niagara Peninsula as well as the Belleville, Prince Edward County and Kingston areas to join in creating a regional loop around Lake Ontario with connections along the Niagara River and access to the Seaway Trail in Western New York.

Much has been accomplished, but there is more to do. For example, significant gaps exist in the Trail in Niagara Peninsula, in Toronto, and Hope Township, and further implementation is beginning to link the eastern leg of the Trail from Trenton to Kingston. When complete, the Trail will span 700 kilometres along the entire Canadian shore of Lake Ontario.

**A decade of regeneration**

In early 2000 the Waterfront Trust launched an initiative to “take stock” of the Waterfront Trail and Greenway after some 10 years of work at the local level. We wanted to document the remarkable progress that is being achieved at the local level, and the lessons learned from more than 100 completed projects. In addition, we wanted to suggest an agenda for the next decade of regeneration that would build on the achievements and maintain the momentum.

The resulting publication, *A Decade of Regeneration* does just that. It is about our special relationship with Lake Ontario as understood by the people who live, work and visit its shore. The stories and interpretations contained in this book remind us that the waterfront of today is a product of our heritage – a heritage of buildings and culture, ideas and tradition, and the interactions between people and nature. It focuses on changes in attitude and action that are shaping our waterfront and highlights excellence in waterfront regeneration that is being achieved in many communities. It also looks to the next decade and calls us to an agenda of continued innovation, partnership and dedication.

**Lessons from the field**

As part of the research carried out for the *Decade of Regeneration*, the Trust’s waterfront partners in some 30 municipalities provided information on over 100 projects completed along Lake Ontario since 1992. Many of the projects illustrate excellence in restoration, design and leadership. The experience points to 9 lessons for success in waterfront regeneration:

- Make the waterfront a community priority
- Look beyond your boundaries
- Set the stage with good planning
- Use milestone projects to build momentum
- Design with heritage in mind
- Add value with connections
- Make it happen with creative partnerships
• Secure strategic public investment
• Attract private resources

**Make the waterfront a community priority**

Once a vision for the waterfront is established, regeneration becomes a priority not just for local residents and businesses but also on a community-wide scale. The energy and commitment of people can be unleashed and the resources found to start the work. It’s not always easy to describe what others don’t yet see, but we have all seen the importance of a sustained, meaningful waterfront vision.

**Look beyond your boundaries**

Communities around the Lake have benefited from what they call the domino effect. Through the Lake Ontario Waterfront Network and the International Brownfield Exchange, they have been able to come together to share information and experience to draw out the best practices and apply them in ways that make sense for their local conditions. The idea that we are part of something bigger than our own agenda has helped many of us over the hurdles.

It is also clear that international borders are less important to those who want to exchange information, services and goods and to visit and work in other places. This reality means that our waterfront has become a place of international interest and significance. That’s a vital economic reality and also a huge opportunity for us to showcase our communities, to attract new investment, and to continue to learn from others engaged in regeneration.

**Good planning sets the stage**

The interim report of the Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront, *Watershed*, popularized the ecosystem approach to planning. Ten years later we know a lot about how to engage in it. We know that planning processes must be transparent; they must provide meaningful opportunities for the involvement of people, and they must demand the best in design and performance standards for all new development. Plans must ensure that waterfronts are reconnected to the urban fabric and that the quality of the public realm is upheld and sustained. This is what makes great waterfronts.

**Milestone projects build momentum**

Waterfronts are places of particular meaning, because it’s here that nature meets culture and where a community has its “front door”. Big plans are important, but so are bold moves. Many waterfront communities can now point to one or two key projects that got the ball rolling and created the impetus to do more.

Sometimes that project is a large consolidation of land, sometimes it’s a project of great architectural beauty, and sometimes it’s a bold new policy. All of them have made a measurable difference.

**Design with heritage in mind**

Many individuals and whole communities have felt disconnected from their waterfront – physically, mentally and ecologically. But that is changing. We cannot adequately shape the rapid pace of change if we do not understand and celebrate our heritage. This is one of the most important lessons of the last decade – and it presents huge opportunities for the next decade of regeneration.
Add value with connections
At the start of the decade our objective was to see the Lake Ontario Trail become the backbone of a network of trails in the bioregion – that goal is well underway. The value of the trail is increasing tremendously by connections to it through local neighbourhoods and within the watersheds of the bioregion. The Oakville Heritage Trail, the Great Circle Route and the Lower Don Trail are examples of this emerging web of trails. In addition to links to the Trans Canada Trail, there is an opportunity to make a continuous trail right around Lake Ontario.

Make it happen with creative partnerships
The Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail has proven to be an important symbol of a new attitude to the waterfront – a catalyst for regeneration and a project that ties all the others together. Regeneration connects people and places. It requires cooperation and collaboration to reach a common objective.

The Toronto Music Garden has set a new standard for design quality and innovative partnerships that deliver results. With the City maintaining ownership, Jim Fleck led a private donation campaign that raised over $1.3M for the design and construction of this wonderful urban park. The Trust’s regeneration fund held the money in trust, providing official tax receipts to donors.

Secure strategic public investment and attract private resources
Experience over the past decade shows that a shared vision, innovative leadership, and strong, strategic planning attract private sector investment. This is especially important in those waterfront areas that are experiencing changing land use and market conditions. What we see is that public sector investment in infrastructure and parks can provide the right conditions and increase confidence to tip the scale in favour of waterfront redevelopment. In addition, a new generation of corporate leaders are setting a new standard for wise stewardship and redevelopment in the global business community.

In Burlington, about 100 km west of Toronto, increased accessibility to the shoreline provided by the Waterfront Trail in combination with a major park restoration have resulted in a boom in restaurants and other businesses in the downtown waterfront area. The number of restaurants alone jumped from fifteen in the early 1990s to forty by 2000. Many of the restaurants now open at 7 am to cater to the growing numbers of early morning trail users.

Where do we go from here? The next decade of regeneration
Clearly, the progress of the past decade provides optimism for the next one, and a rich mix of ideas, information and experience. It also highlights where we need to focus effort to ensure a healthy, sustainable future.

The next decade provides us with the opportunity to really shape change to ensure the environmental, economic and cultural vitality of the bioregion. Sustainable development is really about Smart Growth – balancing economic, ecological and community objectives to ensure the vitality of our society and meaningful choices for our children’s children. It’s really about a process of transformation – transformation of people’s minds and their hearts – to a new way of thinking and behaving.

Our vision for the Lake Ontario Greenway is a call to action over a 50 year timeframe. With our local partners, we have created about 350 km of trail and we want to improve and expand it to over 600 km over the next 5 years. Completing the Trail and continuing to implement new greenway projects will build on the investments of the last decade and optimize their value. We can see the potential benefits emerging now – tourism, recreational
amenities, local job creation, cultural heritage protection and environmental regeneration. At the same time, the challenges are clear: the population of the Greater Toronto Area is expected to rise from 5 million today to over 6.7 million by 2021. Land use changes will continue to affect the waterfront through conversion of former industrial lands and the development of new housing. These inevitable changes provide opportunities for revitalization – they also pose challenges in meeting the housing, transportation and recreation needs of the growing population without destroying the natural resources and heritage values of the waterfront and its watersheds.

Our experience with efforts to improve water quality and natural habitats on the waterfront and throughout the watersheds tells us that while much has been accomplished, much remains to be done, from restoring surface water quality in the Toronto Harbour as well as in the eastern waterfront communities in Quinte and Port Hope, to the protection of the Oak Ridges Moraine. The initiatives of so many local groups now engaged in this work must be better supported and enhanced if we are to ensure the integrity of the bioregion.

The redevelopment of derelict landscapes, often referred to as brownfields, is a priority for many communities focused on the post-industrial waterfront. Clear, equitable policies are needed, as well as streamlined approval processes, innovation in financing, and municipal leadership. Much remains to be done in the arena of brownfield redevelopment. Derelict, post-industrial waterfront properties offer great promise as the alternative for urban sprawl. We must give more priority to addressing the real obstacles to reinvestment in these sites.

As we embark on the first decade of the 21st century, we know that the public has a strong desire to see the work of waterfront regeneration continue. But it’s not business as usual. We have to continue to develop new approaches, new methods and tools, and even more effective working relationships.

Our call to action for the next decade revolves around 5 areas where we need to put our collective effort:

• Share the vision with a new generation
• Complete and enhance the Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail and Greenway
• Expand watershed stewardship
• Develop and apply new tools
• Develop innovative new partnerships

Conclusion
Regeneration is about community engagement and commitment. Regeneration is also about partnership and leadership. Over the past 10 years a new generation of leadership has emerged on the Lake Ontario Waterfront. It is a new type of leadership – one that draws out the best in people to translate dreams into reality and to build the necessary awareness, understanding and participation by all citizens to help build sustainable, vibrant waterfront communities.

A simple word like “partnership” is not as simple a word as it might sound. We can no longer do things alone. We must bring people together to achieve meaningful, lasting results. Partnerships are the way that we bring people, ideas and resources together in an ecosystem approach for sound planning, decision-making and sound financing. Working partnerships create a new kind of accountability. Those of us who have the opportunity to look for solutions, to move forward in the areas of environmental protection, economic development and social benefit, have an obligation to one another and to ourselves. We are in some ways the stepping stones to the city of the new century. Accountability starts with each of us – it is not up to someone or something else.

Charles Sauriol is a well known Canadian naturalist, pioneer and conservationist who...
dedicated his life to the conservation of the Don River Valley, one of the most important urban greenways in the urban core of Toronto. He wrote this verse and I leave it with you as a reminder of the common goal shared by all those concerned about waterfront regeneration and the quality of life in communities in every part of the world:

Isn’t it strange that princes and kings  
And clowns who caper in sawdust rings  
And simple folk with you and me  
Are builders of eternity.  
To each is given a bag of tools  
A shapeless mass and a book of rules  
And each before his life has flown  
Must be a stumbling block or a stepping stone.