

Waterfront on a roll with classy WaveDeck



CHRISTOPHER HUME

It's time to take another look at the waterfront. Just last week, the city unveiled the latest example of lakeside revitalization, the brand new WaveDeck immediately west of the foot of Simcoe St.

Technically speaking, this wooden structure, which rises and falls like an exquisite frozen wave, is a means of getting from one side of the Simcoe St. slip to the other. In fact, that's the least of its functions. Its real purpose is to be beautiful, and if not beautiful, elegant, engaging, entertaining, cool and ever so slightly loopy, qualities that have long been conspicuous in their absence on our poor long-exploited waterfront.

Of course, a single wavedeck does not a complete revitalization project make. It's important to keep this piece in the context of Waterfront Toronto's big task, the remaking of the bottom end of the city from east to west.

Already one WaveDeck has opened; another, the third, will be unveiled later this summer. By the time all is done, there will be at least five.

More dramatic still will be the closing of two of Queens Quay's four lanes and the reinvention of the street into a tree-lined pedestrian walkway. That proposal will go before city council for final approval in July and is expected to pass readily. Construction could begin next summer.

"It's unbelievable," enthuses Rotterdam-based landscape architect Adriaan Geuze, whose firm, West 8, won an international design competition several years ago with Toronto's DTAH.

"I'm totally happy with it. From one point of view it seems so familiar. But it also inspires the child's mind within you. It took a very long time to figure out how to design it and build it. You're invited to come and play, but we didn't want to make it a playground.

"We wanted a serious moment of

'Wow' and an identity for the waterfront. We had the idea of making it an amphitheatre-like space, a space that would attract children and adults."

But even as things are in this area — the infamous towers of Harbour Point's three condo towers across the road — the WaveDeck will not be ignored.

Quite simply, there's nothing like it in these parts.

"It's a message to pay attention," says Waterfront Toronto's vice-president of development, Chris Glaisek. "The redevelopment process feels very slow, but don't forget this project didn't exist until 2006."

Toronto's former chief planner, the plain-spoken Paul Bedford, was also on hand for the unveiling.

"This is the realization of a 30-year dream," he said. "It's spectacular. It opens up the waterfront. I'm very, very happy. I'm smiling from ear to ear."

So was everyone else on hand.

"It's unique to Toronto," Bedford

The easy cynicism of earlier years no longer applies

continued. "It's not a copy of any other waterfront."

But, he warned, "the most important thing is to get on with the closing of Queens Quay and the planting of trees."

Bedford knows whereof he speaks. The neighbours are onside, as is city council; delay could lead to changes of heart and failures of will. Narrowing Queens Quay and transforming it into a grand waterfront boulevard could be the kind of move that transforms the whole city, not just one part of it.

The easy cynicism of earlier years no longer applies. The possibilities of waterfront revitalization will now be obvious to even the least imaginative among us. It is exactly this kind of design excellence and boldness that will bring the waterfront back to life.

If this is a sign, the change that this city fears so desperately could be the best thing that ever happened to it.

chume@thestar.ca