

Creative SPACE

Vision quest: Ron Taylor is in charge of turning the Seawall plan into a reality.

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The Seawall will transform empty sheds on the waterfront into new districts for artists—and the tourists who follow them

BY SUE CARTER FLINN

It's the first steamy Saturday afternoon in July on the Halifax waterfront. The boardwalk is filled with locals anxious to shed their winter skin and tourists eager to take in the sight of the *Bluenose II* and the bagpipers. A group of American tourists tests out the words to "O Canada" and fails miserably, but their enthusiasm is endearing, especially considering the long hot walk they had from their cruise ship docked at Piers 20 and 21.

Tracing back the tourists' steps to their cruise ship is a revelation. Their first impression of the city includes the Halifax Port Authority's asphalt parking lot, which on a blistery day like this one is a football-field-length conduit to the summer's heat and tour-bus fumes. Soon, however, this will all change, with the Port Authority's plans

to transform this uninspiring area into the city's first arts district.

There is an ambitious 10-year development plan in place for the Seawall, which extends the length of the empty container sheds at Piers 20 to 24, along with the Cruise Pavilion, the Immigration Annex building located on the other side of the parking lot, and a gateway connected to the Halifax Harbourwalk. By 2015, when the development is done, both tourists and locals will enjoy culturally vibrant work areas, restaurants, one-of-a-kind shops, artist studios, galleries, and other related businesses.

The plan for the federal government-owned land includes transforming the pier's underused cargo sheds into two distinct areas: a visitors' district, which will comfortably accommodate the tourist and cruise traffic, estimated to double in the next 10

years, and an arts district, conceptualized as a creative cluster of arts- and media-related businesses. Imagine: You'll be able to enjoy a coffee and the waterfront view while sitting on a beautifully designed park bench, ready for an afternoon of exploring new artist studios and galleries.

Ron Taylor is in charge of turning this idyllic vision into a reality. As the development executive for the redevelopment of the Seawall with the Halifax Port Authority and the senior vice-president of Toronto-based real estate firm O&Y Enterprise, he's no stranger to these types of projects. Those who have travelled along Toronto's bustling waterfront may have encountered one of them: Queen's Quay Terminal, an airy mixed-use shopping complex home to many local designers and, most importantly, no chain stores.

"The vision is creating communities that



Follow the leader: The bears in Artport are just the beginning of Taylor's vision.



are self-contained and integrated enough so that they don't put burdens on public transit and other demands," says Taylor. He envisions a place where cost-effective, modular, rental space will attract creative businesses and people, somewhere those with an entrepreneurial spirit will receive marketing and business-planning support. "The catalyst is to stimulate the economy through jobs," he says. "Culture is a significant contributor to the economy, but we don't exploit our cultural resources to the maximum."

Taylor's focus also includes incorporating sustainable-development measures into the project that will protect and enhance the environment. To ensure minimum harm is done to the environment, the buildings will be installed with energy-efficient heating and electrical systems and a seawater cooling system; plus all will have rooftop gardens.

Last year Stephen Dempsey, the president and CEO of the Greater Halifax Partnership, commissioned a report on the city's talent, creativity, technology, and diversity based on an index developed by *Creative Class* economist guru Richard Florida. The result? "It always comes back to people," says Dempsey. "And that's the environmental context that a project like the Seawall becomes relevant. There is now recognition that creative industries are good things—not that they were thought of as bad things, but there was a perception that they were needy. The reality is that if we didn't

have those types of institutions in our community or those kinds of people, we wouldn't have the success we've had. We wouldn't have the ability to bring businesses into our community. The creative industries and the people are an integral part of creating a more prosperous society."

Skeptics beware: There are several real-life examples where this theory already has been proven. Granville Island in Vancouver used to sink with rundown tin factories; now its bustling markets, galleries, and restaurants have become one of the city's most popular tourist and local attractions. 401 Richmond, an old brick factory building at, as the name implies, 401 Richmond St. West in downtown Toronto, is another excellent example. Purchased in 1994 by the Zeidler family (father Eb consulted on the Halifax Seawall project) for \$1.5 million when it was scheduled for demolition, it's now a hub of successful galleries, artist spaces, film-festival offices, and high-tech businesses, plus rooftop gardens, a café, and a daycare centre.

Eb's daughter Margie Zeidler, who is the president of 401, says the building's success was in part because they offered creative

tenants long-term leases at reasonable rates. "If we had just filled up the building with lawyers and accountants," she says, "it would have become like any other building and it wouldn't have the draw for eclectic creative-sector and social-innovation types." She lists War Child Canada and World Literacy of Canada amongst its many firms, dance studios, and architectural companies.

(Homegrown talent Daniel MacIvor's theatre-and-film production company, da da kamera, also calls 401 home.)

Zeidler recognizes that this type of development is not for everyone—in fact, she posts this "warning" on the building's website: "There were some times that people would come in and we knew that it wasn't going to work because they

would start to complain that the floors creak, the windows are drafty—I don't know if this would be suitable for our clients. Couldn't you do something to make it more acceptable? We would gently say it's probably best you find something else."

With the Seawall redevelopment, Taylor will face another challenge: how to accommodate the needs of both the local community and tourists. "A couple of the projects

"Where local people go, tourists love to go, but where tourists go, local people stay away in throngs"