

## Liberty Village The Makeover of Toronto's King and Dufferin Area

by Thorben Wieditz

*Drawn from "Planning Liberty Village: The Makeover of Toronto's King and Dufferin Area," a paper submitted to York University's Faculty of Environmental Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Environmental Studies*

### 1. Early history of the area: Forts, railways, and prisons

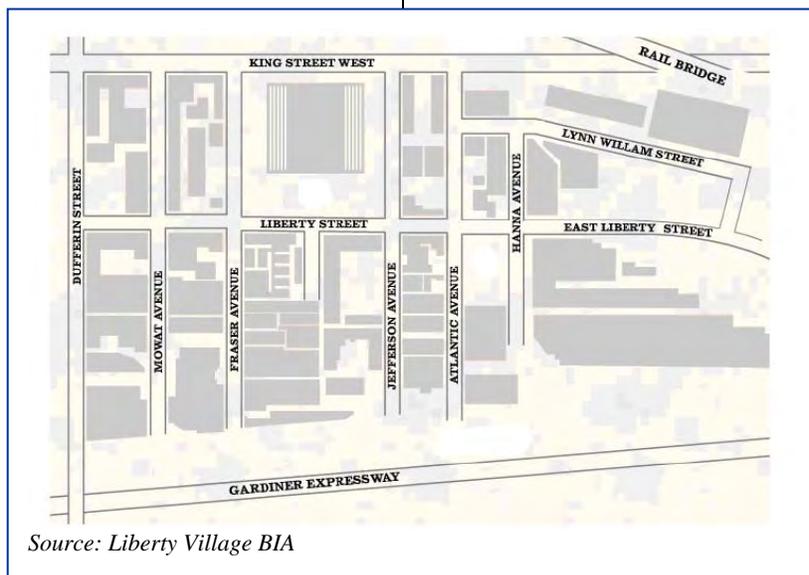
The area now popularly known as Liberty Village is located just southeast of Toronto's South Parkdale neighbourhood, about a 20-minute walk west of Toronto's central business district. The area is bordered by King Street West to the north, Dufferin Street to the east, Strachan Avenue to the west and the Gardiner Expressway to the south. However, it is disconnected from the surrounding urban fabric by railway lines to the south and north.

This area was the site of one of the oldest European settlements in the Toronto area. Colonization began with the arrival of the French in the 1600s and their establishment of fur trading routes in the Great Lakes region. Between 1750 and 1751, the French established

Fort Rouillé, also known as Fort Toronto, about three miles east of the Humber at the mouth of Garrison Creek, only to torch it in 1759 in order to prevent it from being used by approaching British troops. In 1787, the British "purchased" much of today's greater Toronto area from the Mississaugas and founded the Town of York (1793) under John Graves Simcoe, the first lieutenant-governor of the province of Upper Canada.

A military reserve – the Garrison Common – covering more than 1,000 acres along the shore of Lake Ontario between the townsite and the Humber River was set aside for military purposes, and Fort York was built in its centre. The Garrison Common

stretched from what is now Bathurst to Dufferin Street and from Lake Ontario to Queen Street West.



Source: Liberty Village BIA



The town of York was laid out on a ten-block grid to the east, bounded by George Street, Berkeley Street, Palace Street (now Front Street), and Duke Street (now part of Adelaide Street). Lot Street (now Queen Street) was surveyed as the base line from which to start Upper Canada's township-concession system which stretched north, east, and west on a grid with concession lines every 1.25 miles, and five farm lots of 200 acres between each line.

As early as 1797, the Town of York began expanding westward into the military reserve. In the 1830s, land in the Garrison Common was opened for residential development that extended west to Bathurst Street. In 1834, when the Town of York became the City of Toronto, the municipality's west boundary extended to the northeast corner of what is today Bloor Street West and Dufferin Street.

The old Garrison Common land became home to several institutions, including the Provincial Lunatic Asylum and Trinity College on Queen Street West. Plans to

develop the remaining lands for residential purposes changed in the 1850s when the Toronto, Grey and Bruce Railway and the Great Western Railway extended their tracks across Garrison Common. The railways cut this part of the city off from the rest of the growing city.

In the early 1870s, the provincial government created the Central Prison for Men, a 20-acre facility built by prisoners which operated until 1915 on lands directly south of the Grand Trunk Railway line (south of King Street West) and west of Strachan Avenue. Nearby, just northwest of the prison, on the site of today's Lamport Stadium, the Andrew Mercer Reformatory for Women opened in 1878 for women convicted of such crimes as "sexual precociousness," vagrancy, or "incorrigibility." Both the Mercer Reformatory and the Central Prison faced onto Liberty Street, so it was the first street women or men would set foot on after serving their sentences in the correctional facilities.

## 2. A bustling industrial district

With the completion of the King Street Rail Overpass in the late 1800s, much of the Garrison Common and particularly the area between the Central Prison and Dufferin Street developed into an industrial district where companies could take advantage of the proximity of railway tracks.

Two of the largest enterprises were Inglis and Massey-Harris. Inglis, a manufacturer of boilers, heavy machinery, and later electrical appliances, began operations here in 1884, and later expanded onto the former

Central Prison lands. Directly north, the Massey-Harris (later Massey-Ferguson) Company built an industrial complex to produce agricultural implements in 1891.

Other large industries established in the area at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were the Ontario Wind Engine and Pump Co., Toronto Carpet Manufacturing Company, and the St. David's Wine Company.

Following the closure of the Central Prison in 1915, all of

its buildings were demolished, with the exception of the prison chapel and remnants of the paint shop. Throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and well into the 1920s, industrial operations flourished in the area, capitalizing on the area's excellent railway access and many spur lines and Parkdale's substantial labour market. These companies included Canadian General Electric Co. Ltd., Canada Metal Co. Ltd., Simmons Ltd. (bedding), Hinde and Dauch Paper Co. Ltd., the Brunswick-Balke-Collender Co. (manufacturer of billiard tables and bowling alleys), and Irwin Toys (a distribution company).

During the First and Second World Wars, many of the factories turned to the production of armaments, weapons, and bombs. Much of the soil pollution in the area dates from these two wartime periods.

After the Second World War, industries began to move to the suburbs and the area hollowed out. The To-



Some of the 4,000 women war workers lined up for their last pay in 1918. Employment in the area peaked during the World Wars.  
Source: *City of Toronto Archives.*

ronto Carpet Manufacturing plant on Liberty Street shut down in 1990. The Inglis plant (owned by the U.S company Whirlpool since 1985) was among the last remaining large-scale employers in the King and Dufferin area and shut down its operations in 1991.

The Inglis and Massey-Harris factories (with exception of the former Massey-Harris Office Building at 945 King Street West) were demolished, but many large industrial buildings remained. Declining industrial activity was accompanied by the depreciation of property values as well as landlord and municipal neglect.

### 3. *An artists' community*

The discovery of the King and Dufferin area by Toronto's artist and marginal community began in the 1970s. The abandoned factories and warehouse buildings were in poor shape, but they offered large, inexpensive spaces that could be used as studio space.

John Englar, who lived there between 1984 and 1989, notes that the area was a rather rough place to be and that in the early days, artists colonized mainly two or three buildings:

It used to be a scary area. Buildings were empty. When I walked down the street at night, there was nobody, absolutely nobody. Rent was fairly cheap, but you had to put in your own bathroom and kitchen. There was nothing in there. I divided my space up and a buddy of mine helped me out installing everything... Everything down there happened in three buildings [53 Fraser, 9 Hanna, and the Carpet Factory]. Most of the people living there were craftsmen and artists.

One of these buildings, known as 9 Hanna, was a former wartime factory and later a Loblaws warehouse. Adrian Blackwell, artist and former local resident, lived there twice, first in the 1980s and again in early 2000, says:

Although it was pretty underutilized when I lived there in 1988, it was much more populated then than it was later. There was quite a mix of people. People who couldn't afford to have their own shops just worked out their spaces. ... Because they couldn't use large areas in the center of the building, it was kind of the periphery of the building that always had units. [Those units] were only about one room deep, usually 25 foot deep from the window...there was really just this kind of crust around the outside of the building.

The area was attractive for artists because the rents were very low. Low rents allow artists to spend more time on their art and less time earning money to make ends meet.

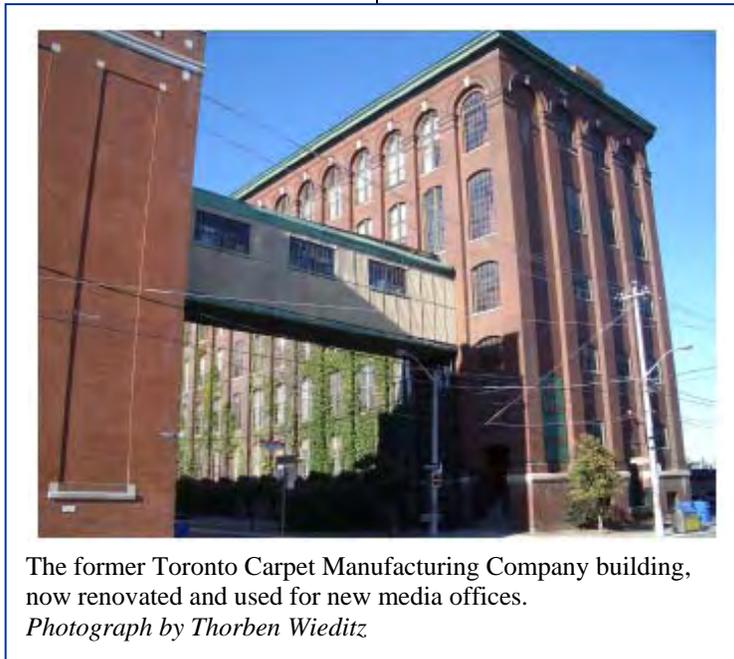
The warehouse space provided excellent studio space for artists, although the living spaces were rudimentary. The artists also liked the distinctiveness and unconventionality of the area.

Gregory Green, film maker and local resident, elaborates on what it was that made the area so special for artists and the culturally and economically marginal who, in his

words, could find their "communities and their living spaces in their own terms" in the King and Dufferin area:

It was a beautiful area, there were actually meadows [former Inglis lands] you could walk through... You could wander through and see the old factories; you could climb into the old factories. It was beautiful. There was something very special about it. It lends a certain magic to a city to have abandoned spaces and you know those were natural magnets for artists and people who wanted to find their communities and their living spaces in their own terms that is the kind of people the neighbourhood used to attract.

Although the area went through a lengthy period of disinvestment, it was nonetheless the subject of real es-



The former Toronto Carpet Manufacturing Company building, now renovated and used for new media offices.  
*Photograph by Thorben Wieditz*

tate speculation during much of this time. Toronto business owners bought up properties for little money, knowing that centrally located real estate in a growing city like Toronto would eventually be in demand.

#### 4. The transition begins

With the abandonment of the area by industries in the 1960s, it was almost forgotten by many Torontonians. This changed during the early and mid-1990s when the area started to attract more affluent in-movers.

During much of the 1990s, this attraction was facilitated by local artist organizations, such as the Parkdale Village Arts Collective (PVAC) and Toronto's Artscape organization, as well as by local organizations devoted to economic development, such as the Parkdale Business Improvement Association (BIA) as well as by the City of Toronto's economic development division.

Local artists became formed collectives, organized exhibitions, put together studio tours, and founded festivals. The area housed, for example, several of Toronto's yearly Third Rail Festivals – art exhibitions that allowed Toronto's arts community to visit artists' loft studios. Events such as these promoted the area beyond its borders, attracted the attention of potential second-wave gentrifiers and property entrepreneurs, and led to the "rediscovery" of the area.

A collaboration between Artscape and TEDCO created 45 affordable live/work spaces for artists at 60 Atlantic and further stimulated investment in the area. Local property owners, real estate developers, speculators and the City of Toronto started to take more interest in the area. In addition to the stock of heritage buildings, the area supplied incoming companies (mostly start-up companies employing not more than five to six people) with affordable office space in an otherwise tight downtown office rental market.

The new in-movers were financially more solvent and more mainstream than the existing local community. These businesses included computer and business services, photographers and graphic designers, sound

engineers, marketers, programmers, management consultants, advertising agencies, interior designers as well as planners and architects. During the mid- to late 1990s, the King and Dufferin area emerged into a hot-spot for Toronto's new media industry and IT industry.

#### 5. Municipal government involvement

Municipal deregulation of land uses in the King Street West area in 1994 contributed to the attraction of the area for developers and real estate speculators. The King and Dufferin area was chosen by then-Mayor Barbara Hall in 1994 as the background for a news conference to introduce and outline her new economic policies

that aim at the "recycling of abandoned warehouses for new uses" through the deregulation of municipal zoning bylaws. This intervention in the local property market by the City of Toronto augmented property values and promoted a real estate boom in the downtown area.

Many small businesses and low-income tenants were evicted to allow property owners to renovate their buildings. The deregulation of zoning bylaws had increased the pressure to redevelop

industrial lands and put planners under constant pressure to allow the conversion of old industrial buildings for residential or office use. The resulting shortage of industrial and commercial space in Toronto's inner-city meant that property owners in the King and Dufferin area controlled a scarce resource in Toronto's real estate market.

In addition, the government's decision to demonopolize local telecommunications services in 1999 increased pressure to allow the conversion of the area, as local real estate entrepreneurs were now able to offer fast Internet connections through local service providers as an additional benefit to their tenants. This encouraged local property owners and developers to market Liberty Village to new media businesses. This feature attracted further IT and new-media companies to locate in Liberty Village, where giants such as Adobe (in the Carpet Factory) or Sony BMG had already taken space.



A popular lunch spot in Liberty Village.  
 Photograph by Thorben Wieditz

By this time, local entrepreneurs wanted a “brand-name” under which the district could be marketed and they started to call the area Liberty Village. This was a new name. In 1994, the area had been described by the *Toronto Star* as “Toronto’s west-end warehouse district,” and in 1995, the *Financial Post* called it “the Dufferin-King corridor.” The first time the area was described with reference to Liberty Street was in 1996, when the *Toronto Star* called it the “the Liberty warehouse district.” It was not until 1999, that the name “Liberty Village” began to appear in the media.

In the late 1990s, provincial funding cutbacks and downloading of responsibilities to the municipal level left the city without the necessary financial means to maintain public housing stock or to prevent cutbacks to social services and funding for Toronto’s public transit system. In response, the City of Toronto sought opportunities to increase its tax base and market the city to potential employers and businesses, in particular through public-private partnerships and economic development efforts.

Toronto’s Economic Development Division helped business leaders and property owners to form the Liberty Village Business Association (LVBA) in 1999. With the authority and legitimacy of a local business association, Liberty Village’s property owners were able to pursue further revitalization efforts in this area by participating in the Economic Development Division’s Employment Revitalization program. This program enabled Liberty Village’s property owners to tap into the City’s Economic Development Capital budget, which provides 100 per cent funding for specific infrastructure and streetscape improvements.

## 6. Business development of the area

The Liberty Village Business Association, the City of Toronto Economic Development Division, and the Parkdale/ Liberty Economic Development Committee

retained a consulting firm to carry out a capital design program to identify infrastructure and streetscape improvements needed for the revitalization of Liberty Village. The Capital Improvement Plan was projected to cost \$6 million.

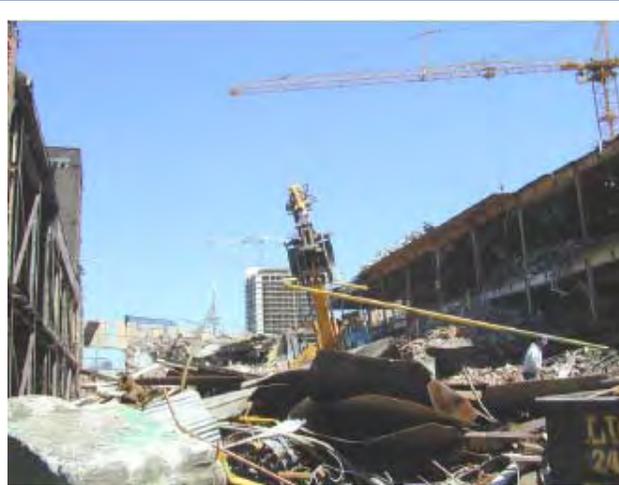
In April 2001, the Liberty Village New Media Center was founded jointly by the City of Toronto, SMART Toronto, and York Heritage Properties Inc. to enhance Toronto’s ability to foster growth in the new media and

information technology cluster. It is a partnership between the private sector, not-for-profit organizations, and the senior level of government funded through Ontario’s Ministry of Energy, Science and Technology’s Interactive New Media Fund.

Another step towards the construction of a new economy and IT industry cluster in this neighbourhood can be seen in the formation of the Liberty Village Business Improvement Area (LVBIA) in August 2001. This Business Improvement Area is unusual, as it represents

Canada’s first BIA without a typical main street commercial strip. It consists solely of local property owners. While traditional BIAs consist of retail businesses with a mutual interest in increasing the volume of their business, the mutual interest holding together Canada’s first non-retail BIA’s is the increase of their property value through initiatives that increase the demand for their space.

Other than this feature, the LVBIA works in the same way as other BIAs. The organization is financed through a special levy on municipal business taxes in Liberty Village. The levy is collected by the municipality, but administered by the BIA. The BIA is part of the municipal economic development initiative to improve the area, promote festivals and special events, and improve building facades through matching grant programs.



The Irwin Toy warehouse is being remade into a place to “live, work and play.” Looking west through the partly demolished building.

*Photograph: Thorben Wieditz*

Local business representatives from Liberty Village approached the Economic Development Division to ask for help establishing the Canadian Technology Walk of Fame. This is an initiative of several businesses in Liberty Village that have formed a non-profit corporation called GigaThon Community Inc. to develop and maintain a sense of community in the Canadian technology sector. The non-profit corporation puts on a yearly gala in the Carpet Factory to promote the new media industry – the Canadian New Media Awards. The event brings together new media industry leaders from across Canada. The GigaThon project is another example of how the area is promoting itself and raising the awareness of the new media sector in Liberty Village.

### **7. Large-scale residential development**

Residents of 9 Hanna were evicted in 2000. The building was stripped to its bare bones and redone as a potential IT building, a web-hosting centre, wired with copper to protect it from power surges.

Developers are also building on the former Inglis lands to create King Liberty, a master-planned community for 7,000 to 10,000 residents. In 2000, the remaining unused tracts of the Inglis lands were rezoned from industrial to residential and mixed-use by the City of Toronto to allow redevelopment.

Another developer is building two 23-storey condo towers as well as a 24-storey condo loft tower. The old Irwin Toy warehouse (former Hinde and Dauche paper manufacturers Inc.) is being converted into residential condo lofts and live-work spaces. The factory building is being transformed into 215 condo loft units.



The last of the major projects currently transforming the area is the former Inglis factory itself. A building once used to build Bren guns in wartime and washing machines in peacetime is being converted into a retail and commercial indoor mall.

The area's makeover is supported by newspaper articles that promote the area as an "artsy loft district," a "bohemian enclave," and a "neighbourhood to live, work and play" for people who want to be close to the entertainment district and to the gentrifying Queen Street West area. With the influx of large-scale developers, it is likely that the new developments will obliterate any trace of the "artsy" and "bohemian" residents who once populated the area.

### **8. Conclusion**

The gentrification of the King and Dufferin area can be described as municipally managed. Toronto's economic development corporation, in combination with Toronto Artscape, started to attract investment and industries to the area during Toronto's real estate slump of the early 1990s to prepare the area for future rounds of gentrification. Real estate developers started to buy up properties in the King and Dufferin area and initiated the remake of this old-industrial district into a thriving IT and new media cluster, protected from residential intrusion by large-scale development projects through the City's employment area program.

Since then, the area has developed from a distinctive and diverse artists' community developed on the margin of Toronto's mainstream culture and without the help of capital or government, into an increasingly homogenized space that has been made safe, clean, and attractive for capital investment and new residents.

**Thorben Wieditz** studied urban planning at the University of Dortmund, Germany, before he came to Toronto's York University on an EU scholarship in 2002. Thorben received the Mark Nawrot Award in 2006 for his research on the gentrification of Toronto's King and Dufferin area, which he undertook in partial fulfillment of his Master of Environmental Studies degree. [twieditz@rogers.com](mailto:twieditz@rogers.com).

#### **Related Websites**

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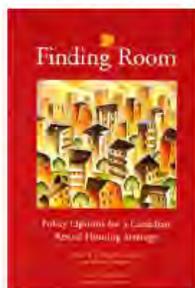
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