

Case Study:
The Distillery District, Toronto, Ontario
Aestheticized Nostalgia as
Cultural Consumption Accelerator

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Right up there with the CN Tower, the Royal Ontario Museum and Ripley's Aquarium, Toronto, Ontario's "very hip" Distillery District is identified by several tourism websites as being among the city's top 10 tourist destinations, and as an "industrial neighbourhood with a modern, contemporary twist" (Osojnik, 2023). In the early 19th century, Gooderham and Worts served as a proud symbol of the ambition and progress of the growing industrial city and its emerging business elite. When the industrial alcohol production ended and the distillery closed down in 1990, the 5-hectare site located adjacent to the east downtown immediately became the locale for a new redevelopment approach, one that fused industrial heritage with the arts, akin to the culture-led redevelopment strategies that continue to be actively pursued in post-industrial cities across the global North.

The rebranded Distillery District was opened in 2003, as a City of Toronto arts, culture and economic precinct. Although the site's owners' Cityscape (and subsequently DREAM Inc.), promote the arts, create a festival-like atmosphere, and focus on independent and artisanal retailers over large chains, at its core, the Distillery District is a real estate development. Today high rise residential buildings are increasingly dwarfing the heritage campus and the subsidized 20-year leases for artist tenants (an original condition of City approval and funding) have recently not been renewed. As it has done since its founding in 1832, the Distillery District continues to shape the city's identity and development patterns and its recent transformation has played a significant role in defining the political-economy of adaptive reuse in the city of Toronto.

Origins

In 1832, William Gooderham's first batch of whisky was produced at his new distillery constructed at the mouth of Toronto's Don River by Gooderham and his business partner James Worts (City of Toronto, n.d.). The distillery largely thrived for almost 160 years. By the mid-late 19th century, Gooderham and Worts was among the largest and most modern distilleries in the world. Its extensive facilities of over 40 Victorian buildings included a private wharf, grain elevators, and a cooperage for barrel making and were capable of producing over two million gallons of whisky per year (City of Toronto, n.d.).

But by 1990 the owners of the time, Allied Vintners, were facing growing global competition and financial constraints associated with modernizing production facilities.

In response, they decided to shut down the plant (Mathews, 2010).

Yet the story of Gooderham and Worts was far from over. In 2001, the new owners, Cityscape Holdings turned their attention to redeveloping the property under its new branding as the "Distillery District" in ways that would

both celebrate its historical importance which includes the largest collection of Victorian industrial buildings in North America, while also ensuring its long-term economic viability (Mathews, 2010). The Distillery District has been embraced as part of the City of Toronto's cultural strategy as an 'arts, culture and economic precinct', its redevelopment made possible in large part due to a public-private partnership in which the City for its part cleared the path for redevelopment through rezoning from industrial to mixed use, approved the construction of three new condominium towers and provided the necessary heritage easements. The City also provided other inducements in the form of Section 37 funding which is marked for projects of community benefit. While the City had hoped the Section 37 funding would unlock affordable housing, they conceded to artists studios as serving up community benefits, although it is as debatable as to whether the provision of Section 37 funding for artist studios can be interpreted as amenities and as marketing tools that help draw the appropriate consumer demographic rather than providing any benefits to less affluent members of the community" (Kohn, 2010, p. 364).

The closure and eventual reopening in 2003 of this nationally-designated heritage site as an upscale leisure destination, in many respects resembles other industrial heritage adaptive use projects in post-industrial cities. The site's transformation illustrates many of the forces that have reconfigured cities and reconstructed place identity over the past several decades: commodification, the city as theme park and spectacle, gentrification and globalization (Kohn, 2010; Mathews, 2010; Zukin, 1991). The remaking of urban spaces using consumptive strategies for middle and upper class tastes at the expense of redistribution also disadvantages use of lands for affordable housing and low-rent uses (Rothenberg & Lang, 2017b; Smith, 1979, 1996). In this, the Distillery District is no exception.

Aesthetic Dimensions in Adaptive Reuse

Since its closure, the Distillery District has functioned as a liminal market space, a zone that “stands betwixt and between social institutions, the world of commerce and that of religion, and between work days and feasts”

(Zukin, 1991, p. 28). During the 1990s, this liminality was marked by the use of the site as a major venue for film production as the site's owners sought a revenue stream to maintain the site while the broader redevelopment plans, approvals and financing were being assembled. Geographer Vanessa Mathews identifies this interim period between the site's industrial and cultural production as a placeholder in which film imbued the site with the possibility for new imaginaries. The Distillery offered the potential to be a stand-in for other landscapes representing different periods of industrialism and post-industrialism (Mathews, 2010). However, Mathews encourages us to think about the role of film more critically in the context of urban redevelopment. “The role of film... has broader implications for social policy. Film practice at the Distillery played and continues to play a role in naturalizing redevelopment, smoothing capital flows, and attracting a base of high-end consumers (Mathews, 2010, p. 186).

The Distillery District is conceptually and physically located between past and present and is actively in the process of becoming, yet it functions as a site of transaction over

transition. In creative cities, value is produced through aesthetic experience.

Reclaimed industrial sites are recoded, made to produce new affects and social relations, invested of new meanings and often drained of old ones. Their new purposes require users to learn new habits of apprehension and aesthetic values, as ‘eyesores’ are recast as works of art, sites of high culture consumption or picturesque landscapes” (Rothenberg & Lang, 2017b, p. 1).

The Distillery District’s owners have embraced the site’s raw industrial aesthetics as its value proposition and arts and culture as critical to the brand. The owners have even created a comprehensive website Distillery District Heritage profiling the site’s history and its personalities, including some workers, over time. Entire buildings, not simply facades, have been retained. Patinas are left rough. Cobblestone streets function as arteries connecting the buildings. Industrial artifacts and machinery of distillery production are left in situ supported by interpretive panels. “In short, the developers of the Distillery District commodify heritage as visual spectacle

(signage, built form, equipment) to appeal to middle-class consumers without disturbing the primary function of the site as a space of consumption.” (Mathews & Picton, 2014, p. 344).

By placing high value on aesthetics that accentuate the raw character of the space and favouring serious art and local retail (over large-scale chains) the Distillery District conveys a sense of a place apart from the neoliberal city (Kohn, 2010). Yet Kohn also questions whether these strategies serve to depoliticize nostalgia and the social and economic consequences of deindustrialization by creating an environment of a past that did not really exist, a context in which nostalgia is characterized as a “placebo that allows one to accept the status quo uncritically and inhibits deeper social criticism” (Kohn, 2010, p. 365). In this imaginary world workers are not alienated by the division of labor, and market relations foster social relations rather than destroying them (Kohn, 2010, pp. 366–367). The emphasis on small scale retailers strikes a further discord as Gooderham and Worts grew in no small part due to the consolidation of smaller scale distillers (Kohn, 2010; Mathews & Picton, 2014). To the question of who the Distillery District is for, Kohn answers:

The Distillery District is not a place that is frequented by members of the working class and is not designed to highlight working class history or cater to working class tastes. The expensive restaurants, bars, galleries, and theatres appeal to the demographic that has benefited most from deindustrialization and globalization.

(Kohn, 2010, p. 367).

Rapid Growth and Cultural Consumption

In December 2021, 70 artists received notice from the Urbanscape that their leases would not be renewed as the site owners sought to make way for a french language school. While the 20-year leases were intended to expire in 2022, most of the artists hoped they would be renewed (Taylor, 2021). Despite, or perhaps because of the Distillery promoting itself as being “widely regarded as Canada’s premier arts, culture and entertainment destination. A place brimming with creativity and creative people, that can inspire dreams, and a place that can help them come true” (Cityscape, n.d.) the displaced artists felt deep betrayal with the news.

Thirty plus years ago when Gooderham and Worts closed operations, the site seemed well off the beaten path, a legacy and relic of a bygone industrial era. Today, the city has grown up and around the Distillery District, no doubt thanks in part to the magnetic attraction that has become the site itself. Immediately south, the 300-hectare Portlands are undergoing massive redevelopment with major infrastructure investment in flood protection soon to be enabling large-scale residential development amid a 25 hectare park and new mouth of the Don River. To the north, the new Ontario Line subway which will connect the city from the south-west to the north-east is under construction with a Corktown Station scheduled to be open in 2031. To the east, former contaminated brownfields now the Canary Landing redevelopment, largely catalyzed by the 2015 Pan Am Games, are developing at a rapid rate. A 32-story condo is currently under construction at the Distillery’s south end and a 31-story Hilton hotel was recently approved to the site’s north. These are among the last places of developable lands in the District. By 2041, the City projects an additional 500,000 people will live in the downtown core. The city is building higher and higher and is in the midst of a condo boom. Amid this growth,

the value of heritage sites will also grow as they become increasingly more scarce relative to new development and as public demand for affordable and accessible amenities expands in tandem with growth. Undoubtedly, the Distillery District will continue to be popular destinations for tourists and visitors alike. But if and how the Distillery, developers and the City address affordability in these plans, whether community arts organizations will continue to find a home there and if the site retains its focus on only serving a middle and upper class clientele will continue to serve as important questions about exclusion, displacement and gentrification that results in the transformation of industrial heritage sites.

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