

Finally, waterfront waves We won't learn the winner till Friday. Meantime, people are starting to talk

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Ah the waterfront, the waterfront. Never have so many felt so little about so much.

Or so some say.

But if the results of a Star e-poll are any indication, the waterfront has finally emerged as a major issue in the city. Since the poll went online two weeks ago, more than 5,000 readers have responded, which puts it right up there as one of the paper's most popular web polls ever.

Of course, this is Toronto, Canada, a city and a country badly enough run that many residents seem to have given up on their future. The most they hope for is that things just stay the same.

If only.

Against all odds, however, the \$20 million international waterfront design competition has become a public event. True, \$20 million isn't going to buy us a new waterfront, but if nothing else, the five finalists have given us reason to dream.

Their submissions, which have been on display around the city for the last two weeks, comprise a catalogue of ideas - good, bad and ugly - of what could be done along the central waterfront between Bathurst and Parliament Sts. Judging from the crowds that showed up daily at BCE Place, where architectural models were on exhibit as well as drawings, this competition has succeeded in generating some genuine excitement.

God knows that sense of engagement will take some getting used to. Torontonians have been slow on the uptake, but while they were yawning with indifference, work has started on Don River Park, the West Donlands neighbourhood, HtO, the urban beach park, Union Station subway retrofit (yes, that's an official waterfront project), the York and John Quay water's-edge promenades and more.

That brings us to the current competition; if it has garnered the most attention of all those organized by the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corp., that's because it's the most comprehensive. Indeed, there's a strong argument to be made that it should have happened three or four years ago, when the revitalization process was still young and our cynicism less entrenched.

But better late than never. The Central Waterfront Innovative Design Competition, as it's known officially, asked participants to explore, among other things, the boulevard along Queens Quay, its various slips, street lighting, promenade and street furniture. Some took the competition brief at its word; others, the most interesting, went well beyond.

The most compelling entry of the bunch, West 8, is also the most popular with readers, with 31 per cent support. Headed by Rotterdam landscape architect Adriaan Geuze, the proposal envisions the waterfront as a series of villages joined by streetcars that run along a Queens Quay cut down from four lanes to two. But Geuze also suggests the Gardiner Expressway be dismantled and a new "interceptor tunnel" be dug underground to trap and clean sewage before it enters the lake. The slips would be bridged with beautiful wooden structures to create a succession of intimate spaces. He would also plant thousands of trees to establish Toronto's "green foot."

By contrast, the scheme from Foster & Partners, the U.K.'s leading architectural firm, offers a much more striking approach. It received 20 per cent approval from readers. Foster's team proposes a number of piers be extended into the lake, three of which would climax in a large teardrop-shaped building standing eight storeys tall. Little wonder the plan has been dubbed "Dubai lite." On the other hand, Foster would also like to see the land around the Gardiner raised to the level of the expressway, and the street grid extended from downtown to the waterfront.

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Architect Stephen Best of Foster & Partners rightly calls the waterfront "a wasteland the size of Central Park right in the heart of the city." But he also notes the enormous potential of revitalization. It is, he argues, the kind of problem cities would love to have.

Readers responded most enthusiastically to Foster's pointed structures. They would be an undoubted waterfront highlight, though unrelated to anything around them. Then again, perhaps that's their charm.

Far and away the strangest entry comes from Wasah, a U.S.-based team that includes Stan Allen, Sarah Whiting and Ron Witte of Princeton. Their submission, titled "Loops and Lilies," gained 9 per cent approval. It consists of a series of "overhead arbours" and "cultural buoys" located at the slipheads. These buoys are glass pavilions that could serve as small museums, restaurants, concert halls, whatever ... But as one reader put it, there's something slightly odd about the scheme, it's as if it were designed during an acid flashback.

One of the strongest entries comes from a group that calls itself PORT. It received 28 per cent support, second only to West 8. Led by Norwegian architect Craig Dykers, it would also cut Queens Quay in half and turn the southern strip into a tree-studded pedestrian walkway. The most dramatic gesture is a row of 100-metre tall "weather masts" that rise from the water, swaying in the wind. The team would also extend a pier into the lake from the foot of Yonge St., and relocate the ferry dock there. This is an extremely thoughtful proposal that demonstrates a thorough understanding of Toronto's waterfront.

Finally, there's the submission from Tod Williams and Billy Tsien of New York and Martinez Lapena-Torres of Barcelona. It envisions a new island attached to the mainland by two foot bridges, at Simcoe and York Sts. It would also reduce Queens Quay to two lanes and add new ferry terminals at Simcoe and Jarvis Sts. Large canopies would be erected at five of the slips, each programmed differently, each a hub of activity. It drew 9 per cent approval.

It's important to remember that the proposals were prepared quickly and only taken to a certain level of detail. In other words, the jury must pick a winner based on approach rather than specifics. Still, each team has revealed enough of itself for that to be a relatively straightforward exercise. The announcement will be made next Friday. For once, it seems Torontonians will be paying attention when the results are released next week. So will the rest of the world. With its lineup of leading architects, landscape architects and designers from across Europe and the U.S., the competition has put the waterfront on the international map. In the cities where these participants live, and in any number of international architectural websites, the work of the TWRC is suddenly of interest.

It helps, perhaps, that non-Torontonians are unfamiliar with how this community, national and municipal, hates to make a decision. But there are people everywhere now who can't wait to see what happens here.

Given how slowly the wheels of government move in Canada, what's all the more remarkable is that construction of the winning submission is due to start this fall.

The city - and the world - will be watching.

Credit: Toronto Star

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