

Trusting the science ? and architects

by BROCK WEIR

When I first started writing this column, I thought it would simply be a space to express my views on local, national, international issues ? and if I can make you think, smile or chuckle along the way, so much the better.

But, over the years, I've also found that writing in this space can be somewhat fraught with danger. That is, completely inadvertently, I've found that sometimes my words have tempted fate.

One week, for instance, I made the case for actor and Second World War veteran Conrad Bain (Maude, Diff'rent Strokes) to get a star/maple leaf on Canada's Walk of Fame, only for the Alberta-born thespian to shuffle off this mortal coil within days of publication in January 2013.

Eleven months earlier, I waxed lyrical about the contributions Queen Elizabeth II had made to Canada and the Commonwealth just in time for her Diamond Jubilee, or the 60th anniversary of her accession to the throne, marvelling that over those many decades, she held true to the vows she made on her 21st birthday that her life ?whether it be long or short would be devoted to service.? She held fast to that commitment so many years ago and had fulfilled it day in and day out without feeling the need to renew that vow, I wrote.

Quite literally the day after we went to press, the late monarch did just that.

?In this special year, as I dedicate myself anew to your service, I hope we will all be reminded of the power of togetherness and the convening strength of family, friendship, and good neighbourliness, examples of which I have been fortunate to see throughout my reign and which my family and I look forward to seeing in many forms as we travel throughout the United Kingdom and the wider Commonwealth,? she wrote, rendering a good chunk of my column moot.

The so-called ?fickle finger of fate? has been kinder to me as of late ? but all good things come to an end? as it did with last week's column.

Last week's piece, ?Investing in ? and respecting ? our collective heritage?, looked at the willingness of the public, and the leaders we elect, to, as the title suggested, respect our collective heritage and pony up the resources to ensure they survive for generations to come.

To recap, the column compared the deliberate neglect of 24 Sussex Drive, the official residence of our Head of Government, neglect which has rendered the landmark all but uninhabitable, to the millions of dollars being pumped in to restore and preserve the Parliamentary Precinct in the Nation's Capital, and the similar investment recently made by the Provincial Government to restore the centrepiece of Queen's Park.

My conclusion was, ?Now, both of these projects come with hefty price tags, but the need has been clear for years and the bottom line has grown with each passing interval of inaction. While some naysayers will always balk at the cost, apparently happy to see them crumble, these buildings belong to us, have storied histories, and indeed, represent very important elements of our parliamentary democracy.

?In a society where so many things are sadly built to be disposable, our landmarks, particularly those that continue to or have the potential to serve us well, deserve better ? and to be seen through a more objective and less political lens.?

No sooner had last week's ink dried the Ontario Government stuck a knife into the Ontario Science Centre as we know it.

While the Ontario Science Centre might not be seen as a landmark or heritage asset synonymous with our democracy, the facility, originally envisioned as the Centennial Centre of Science and Technology, was intended by the Provincial government of the day to be a demonstration of our place in the world, our innovations, and an ever-evolving signpost to where we are collectively going.

'It's a place to experience the excitement of science: as our knowledge of the world changes, the centre will change. It will provide an opportunity to watch the development of our technology, to study, and to understand science and to feel the imaginative power that gives us an understanding of the world in which we live and to whose future we contribute,' said Lister Sinclair, in a quote shared in a profile of the Centre titled, 'Please touch everything' by Jamie Bradburn for TVO.

'Rising architect Raymond Moriyama was commissioned to design the centre. 'The centre must be a place for everyone - not cater to 12 specialists and ignore 12,000,' he wrote in his personal notes in October 1964. 'It must be FUN. It must arouse curiosity. It must be a place of wonder. It must have unmeasurable qualities of comfort and joy, of discovery with others. It must fuse the visitor with ideas through active participation. It must be an emotional experience with intellectual satisfaction.' Promotional material from 1966 promised that the project would serve as 'an investment in Canada's present and future in a world of accelerating change' in which 'the ultimate concern will be the welfare of Man himself and his progress towards a better life.'

The present Science Centre has ticked all of those boxes for generations of Ontarians from all parts of the province who flocked to the uptown Toronto site, and I wager that those visiting for the first time will never forget that inaugural, interactive experience, not to mention the journey down multiple escalators to different portions of the Centre, which was cleverly designed to fit into its challenging site on a natural ravine.

Heck, the Province must have recognized this as well as they picked the Ontario Science Centre to be the northern subway terminus for the upcoming Ontario Line - but now, the northbound journey will be a trip to nowhere.

Promoting its decision to move the facility to a re-developed Ontario Place, the Province said, 'The new Ontario Science Centre will be integrated with an underground public parking facility designed for the future with electric bus and vehicle chargers. Moving the Ontario Science Centre also creates a generational housing opportunity at the future site of a terminus station of the new Ontario Line with additional planned community infrastructure. The province will work with the City of Toronto on realizing this new opportunity and hopes to bring more affordable and attainable housing to the neighbourhood.'

Given the topography of the Science Centre's current site, I am somewhat skeptical of affordable or attainable housing being achievable in a steep ravine. Nor do I feel that bulldozing a purpose-built facility that has become a great example of brutalist architecture, to help justify the Province's controversial vision for Ontario Place, is the best use of public dollars.

Like 24 Sussex, like Parliament Hill, like the Ontario Legislature, the Ontario Science Centre, as it stands, is not much different. It was built as public infrastructure designed to stand the test of time and, as mentioned above, change along with the world.

It hasn't outlived its usefulness and shouldn't be sacrificed for a political win.