

TEXT BY LOUISE THOMASSIN

Much excitement has been stirring in Ottawa around the sale of a privately owned 37-acre site on Chaudière Island and the nearby Quebec shoreline. This unique piece of real estate is in close proximity to the downtown core and within sight of Parliament Hill. The area played a key role in the development of Canada and was an important site before European contact in North America.

The magnificence and potential of the falls was apparent to settlers, and, in 1800, the first families of European ancestry capitalized on the falls' natural power and began to develop Chaudière Island with mills. In 1900, a fire destroyed the mills and flattened much of the city. After the devastation, the mills were rebuilt, and a shanty town of simple wooden homes sprang up around them. To the chagrin of politicians on Parliament Hill, Chaudière Island and Lebreton Flats, an area south of the island on the shores of Ontario where many of the lumbermen lived, became increasingly unsightly—a stark contrast to the picturesque landscape and neo-Gothic federal architecture of parliament. The government began to take steps to improve the capital, hiring a series of landscape architects, planners, and architects to provide guidance on the direction of Ottawa's future development.

Montreal landscape architect Frederick Todd, who had worked with Frederick Law Olmsted, was the first to be brought on board, in 1903. He was retained by the Ottawa Improvement Commission, an earlier version of the National Capital Commission, during a period strongly influenced by the Parks Movement. He argued that Ottawa should have two priorities for its long-term design objective: to keep its natural gems in a beautiful condition; and to encourage industrial growth and prosperity, without sacrificing one for the other. Todd believed that the planning should not be restricted to Ottawa but should include Hull. Since Chaudière Island straddled the border between Ontario and Quebec, he proposed that it be reclaimed from industry and dedicated as parkland to act as a connector between the two provinces.



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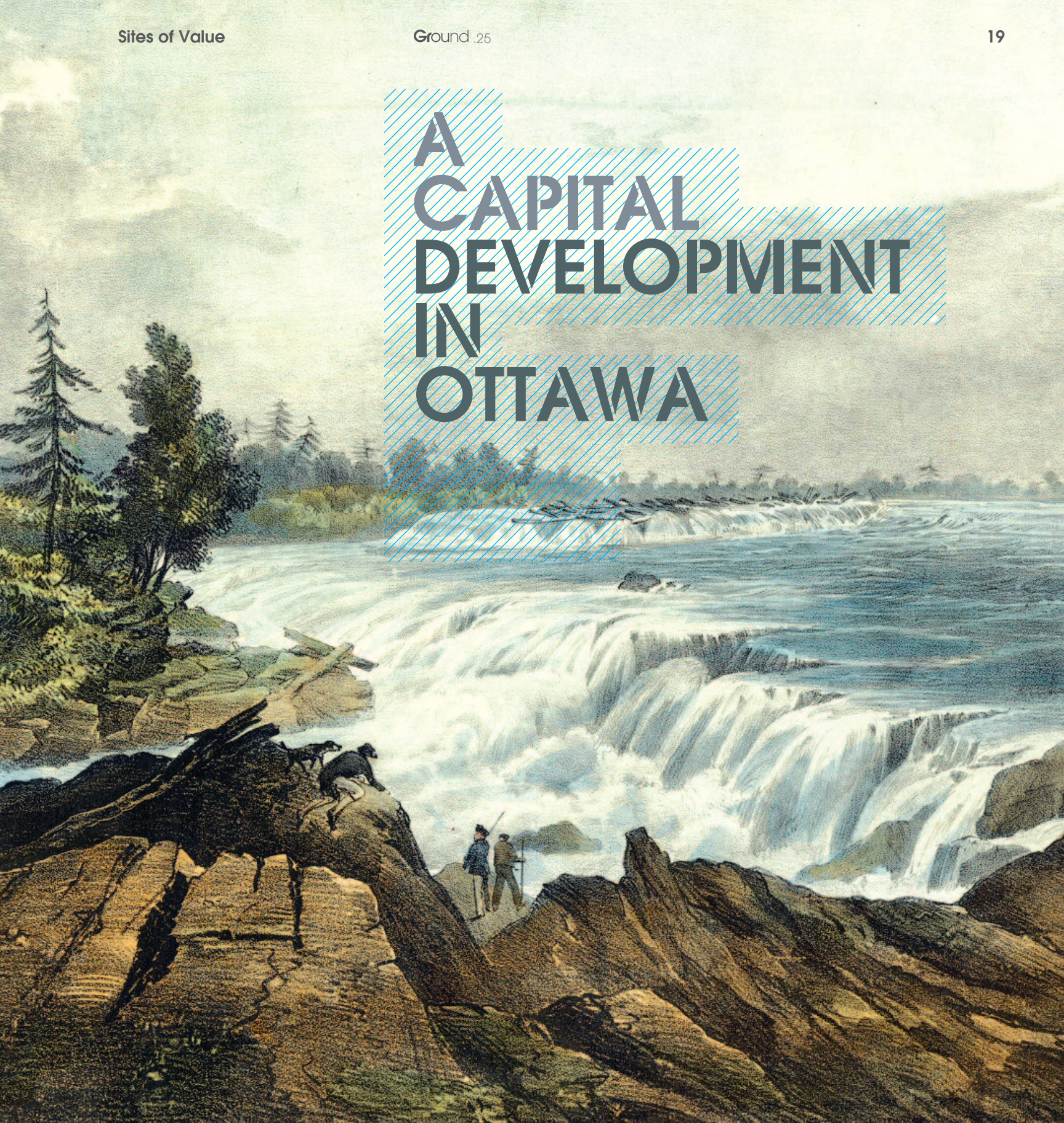
01/ Lithograph by C. Ingrey of Chaudière Falls prior to the erection of the bridges, circa 1826

IMAGE/ Library and Archives Canada

02/ Watercolour of Chaudière Falls, circa 1839

IMAGE/ Library and Archives Canada

A CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT IN OTTAWA





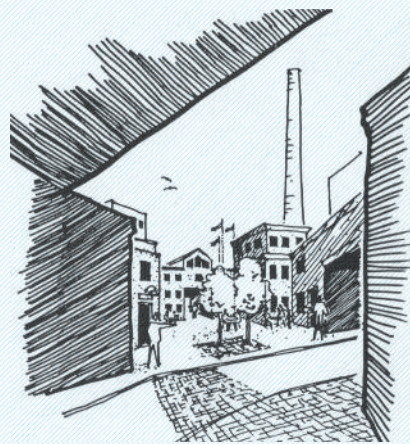
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The City of Ottawa shelved Todd's report, ignored his vision, and instead chose economic development over natural beauty. A hydroelectric dam was built in 1908 and put into operation in 1910 with the aim of controlling and standardizing the water level and distributing the waterpower.

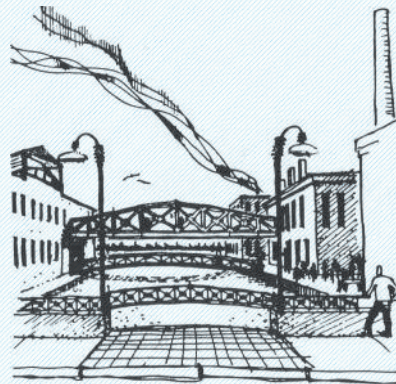
Other reports on the development of Ottawa followed, but it wasn't until 1950 that a plan was devised that would affect Chaudière Island and its surrounding region. The Gréber plan, the single most influential planning instrument that directed the growth of Ottawa and Gatineau, had a solution for both Chaudière Island and the Lebreton Flats: clear the slums and industries and install a ceremonial parkway along the Ottawa River for Canadians to view through the windows of their motorcars.

The newly formed National Capital Commission (NCC) approved the plan, but made some subtle changes. The industries on Chaudière could stay, but the slums would be replaced, not by parkland, but by a government complex of office buildings and parking lots. In 1962, the residents of the area were given a year to vacate their homes, and soon thereafter the mills closed. The 60s and 70s became a lost era for Chaudière Island and Lebreton Flats, with both sites remaining dormant, as the NCC lost control of federal planning initiatives to private developers.

In 1990, Ottawa-based architect and urbanist Mark Thompson Brandt developed a master plan for the National Capital



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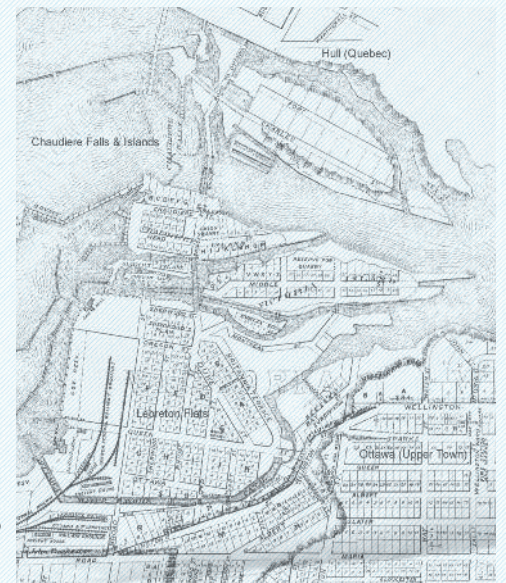


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Commission (NCC) for the district that included Chaudière Island, along with Victoria, Amelia, and Albert Islands. The plan was based on the evolution of the site and its cultural landscape. He states, "The cultural landscape of the Chaudière Island is really a waterscape. The site is all about the historic Ottawa River and the falls. The revitalization plan is about bringing people back to the water." The master plan's main connector through the site is called the "Walk of Waters," which navigates pedestrians through the entire district.

During that same period and into the 21st century, others presented a different vision for Chaudière Island. Elder (Dr.) William Commanda, founder of the Circles of All Nations, advocated for the removal of the dam in order to free Chaudière Falls and return it to its former magnificence. His vision included replanting the island with native trees and creating an educational eco-park expressive of the site's past and future. This would serve as a national symbol of reconciliation with nature, both of land and water, according to Commanda.

Romola Vasantha Thumbadoo, the Coordinator for the Circle of All Nations in Ottawa, worked alongside William Commanda and has supported his work, including his vision of the Chaudière Island and falls, for more than a decade. "William Commanda's vision is one of inclusivity—for the sharing of the ancient meeting place of his ancestors with others," she says. "The Chaudière has been under the grip of industry over the past two centuries; the Commanda legacy calls for public space, not privatization. We cannot afford to slip into the old ways of thinking; it is time to build a relationship with the land, inclusive of all peoples." She and William Commanda support the idea of commemorating the site's recent industrial history, but believe the rest of the space should be returned to its natural state and planted with native species for the public to enjoy. "We live in the capital city of a great country and should make a point of prioritizing our natural environment to positively influence others to do the same, particularly in these times of climate change and global environmental crises," she says. "The area



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07

is important for its incomparable natural and geological history, its spiritual importance to First Peoples, and its contemporary historical relevance, and it should be preserved to be shared not only with Canadians, but the world.”

In 2007, the NCC published a report by DTAH, which called for Chaudière Island to be multi-purpose (identifying it as an ideal cyclist route connection, and a place for connecting the waterways with boat access) and for the island to be part of the Lebreton Flats character area. The open greenspace on the eastern tip of the island was identified as a place where no buildings should be built, in order to preserve and enhance the iconic view of the parliament buildings.

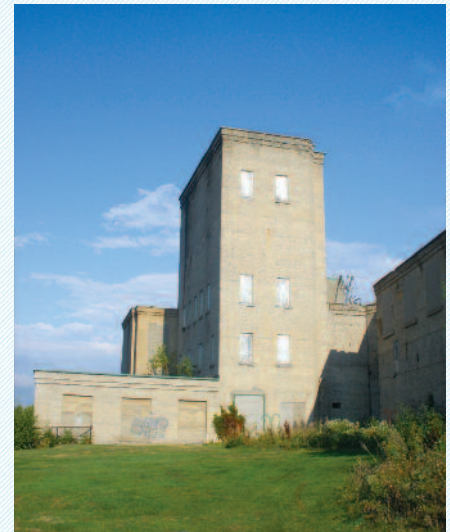
Chaudière Island has continued to hum with the sound of industry, most recently under Domtar, a Montreal-based paper manufacturer that, in 1998, purchased the mills, buildings, and timber slide from E.B. Eddy. Local newspapers report that Domtar is looking to sell the property; with the NCC stepping away from a proposal to purchase the lands (a proposal nixed by the federal government), Domtar is looking to private developers.

In 2013, Windmill Development Group, a real-estate development company based in Ottawa and known for its green practices, signed a letter of intent with Domtar. The sale agreement commits Windmill to purchasing the property, with the only remaining condition being rezoning it for mixed-use development. Windmill intends to present its planning applications to the city of Ottawa and Ville de Gatineau in the spring of 2014. The plans include establishment of waterfront restaurants, cafés, and

public parks; setting up public gathering places that provide views of the river; building a mix of low-rise, high-rise, and affordable housing; redeveloping some of the heritage buildings; and creating various historical installations honouring the area’s logging and industrial history.

The plan is an ambitious one and will require a high level of coordination going forward between the NCC, Ville de Gatineau, and the City of Ottawa. Not only will zoning, industrial contamination issues, and First Nations considerations need to be resolved, but a general set of regulations will also need to be created to merge the by-laws of the two cities and Federal Region. Mark Brandt, who has been retained by Windmill, states that “it is the first time the two cities have worked together at this scale, and the proposed development is arguably the most significant and complex one happening in Canada today.”

The new deal has sparked interest in the cultural significance of the Chaudière Falls. According to John Zvonar, OALA, past-president of the Alliance for Historic Landscape Preservation who has long been involved in national historic sites across Canada and abroad, “Redevelopment of the land should be preceded by a values exercise to determine what has heritage value and thus should be protected moving forward.” Zvonar suggests using contemporary layers with the past as a point of departure. He proposes potential uses similar to those on Granville Island in Vancouver, such as shuttle boats connecting the island to points of interest on the mainland and the maintenance of some industrial operations while integrating shops, restaurants, and perhaps a new Science and Technology Museum to replace the one on St-Laurent Boulevard.



08

Another Ottawa landscape architect, Jim Lennox, OALA, principal of James. B. Lennox and Associates, stresses the importance of existing studies. “As a starting point, I would reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses of past reports and plans prepared for the island and the surrounding areas, and not let good ideas of the past pass us by.” Lennox further states, “It would also be worthwhile to examine some of the original drawings and prints of the Chaudière Falls to see what could be done to revert at least part of the falls back to their natural grandeur. Incorporating locks or an eel fishway into the falls would also be a real accomplishment.”

With the buzz of renewed hope and optimism, what is clear about the Chaudière site is that it is a complex cultural landscape connecting Canada’s three founding peoples: the First Nations, the French, and the English.

BIO/ LOUISE THOMASSIN IS A LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURAL INTERN AT LASHLEY + ASSOCIATES IN OTTAWA.

- 03/ Timber slide designed to circumvent Chaudière Falls
- IMAGE/ Library and Archives Canada
- 04-05/ Revitalization concept, 1990s, by MTBA
- IMAGES/ Mark Thompson Brandt Architect & Associates Inc.
- 06/ Map of Chaudière Island and surrounding area, circa 1879
- IMAGE/ Library and Archives Canada; edits by Wes Cross
- 07/ Aerial view of Chaudière Island
- IMAGE/ Shanta Rohse; edits by Louise Thomassin
- 08/ Booth Board Mill, built 1912; closed since 1980 and derelict
- IMAGE/ URBSite