

The Dilemma at Guild Park: Public Destination / Private Facility

By John P. Mason, President, Friends of Guild Park

The Background: During 2022, tens of thousands of visitors who came to Guild Park & Gardens set major milestones at the increasingly-popular 88-acre public site in the heart of Guildwood Village.

- In July, the City of Toronto’s Arts in the Parks program attracted one of its largest-ever outdoor audiences in Toronto. More than 500 people (photo, right) came to the park’s Greek Theatre to enjoy a hands-on evening workshop and concert by Nagata Shachu, the Japanese Taiko drummers.



- From May through September, Guild Park’s natural and art-related attractions continued to draw Torontonians from across the city, thanks to the guided walking tours organized by Doors Open Toronto (photo, right), Heritage Toronto and volunteers from Friends of Guild Park. About half of the people participating were first-time visitors to the site.



- Over the summer, Guild Festival Theatre (GFT) hosted its biggest season of performances at Guild Park with three productions centred at the Greek Theatre. In addition, one of GFT’s stage plays from last year – its imaginative adaptation of *Alice In Wonderland* – won two 2022 Dora Awards, (above, left) which are the “Oscars” for the top stage productions in Toronto.



- Earlier this spring, the official opening of the City of Toronto’s Clark Centre for the Arts (above, right) brought the return of art exhibits and professional artists to Guild Park. This came exactly 90 years after the historic arts community, The Guild of All Arts, was founded on the property. Appropriately, the new Clark Centre is named after philanthropists Rosa and Spencer Clark, who owned and operated the Guild property for nearly half a century. The newly-redesigned centre is already offering public art programs and classes, with much more to come.

These and other events – including the ever-popular Guild Alive With Culture Arts Festival (image, right) - show how art and nature at Guild Park combine to create a viable, alternative cultural destination to complement the established arts scene in the City’s congested core.



What a difference since 2011.

That year, the National Trust for Canada designated the park’s Guild Inn one of the country’s 10 most endangered historic places. The Trust called it a classic case of “demolition by neglect” by the government agencies in charge (image, right).



One of the catalysts for Guild Park’s transformation was the City of Toronto’s decision to find a private partner willing to restore and modernize the then-crumbling Guild Inn. In 2013, after many frustrating delays, the City selected Dynamic Hospitality & Entertainment to operate the facility as a privately-run, multi-use complex. It was named Guild Inn Estate to recognize the site’s long legacy of public hospitality.



The dilemma: A series of outstanding issues at Guild Park centres around the uncertainty about public access to Guild Inn Estate. Based on the City’s past announcements, the facility was meant to be a community asset.

This year, it became clear that it’s *verboten* for regular park visitors to set foot inside what used to be one of Toronto’s most popular hotels and dining rooms (images above, Guild Inn Estate logo and Private Property sign at Guild Inn).

The actual operating agreements between the City and Guild Inn Estate are complex. The provisions have altered many times over the past 10 years. Terms get renegotiated. The paperwork outlining the changes often remain buried for years.

Some fundamentals are clear. The private developer originally agreed to invest about \$15 million to restore the old Guild Inn and expand it into a functioning facility for visitors.

In return, various departments of the City of Toronto provided Guild Inn Estate with a 40-year sub-lease, after which the entire facility becomes a City of Toronto asset.

During those four decades, the private operator agreed to manage the facility in two ways:

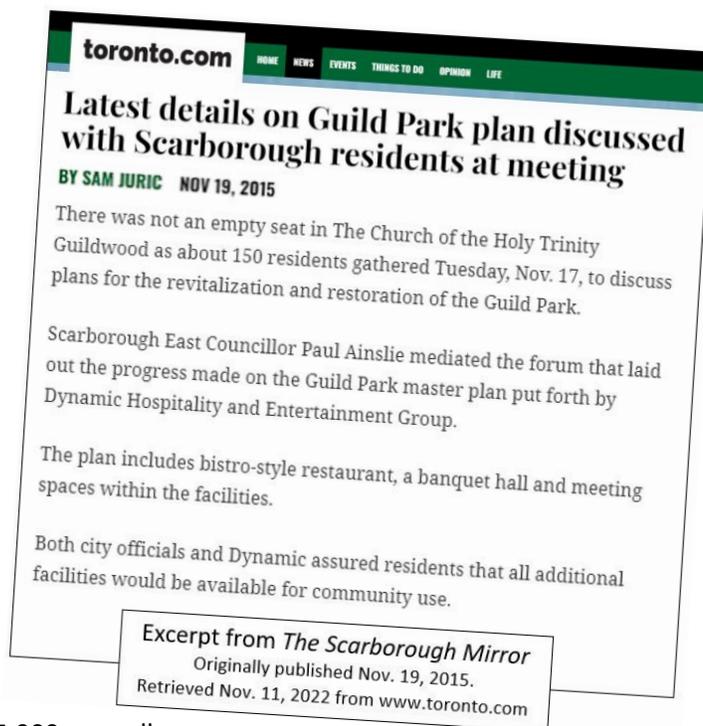
1. As a commercial facility, catering to private events, such as weddings, business meetings and other functions;
2. As a public facility, benefiting both the City of Toronto and the broader community. City officials based many of these provisions on work done by volunteers from the GVCA and the Guild Renaissance Group going back to the 1980s.

Some of the first detailed descriptions of Guild Inn Estate's operations were unveiled at a public meeting held Nov. 17, 2015 at Guildwood's Holy Trinity Church. That's when officials from the City and the Guild Inn Estate told the standing-room-only audience that the facility would be restored to include:

- A restaurant,
- Designated meeting space available for community use, rented at rates set by the City's parks department, plus
- Many pieces from the Clarks' art collection, which the City now owns, for display on a permanent and rotating basis.

After these comments, as reported in the media (see image, right), public expectations ran high while construction continued for the next two years.

Agreement documents recently made available by municipal officials confirm how serious city officials were for Guild Inn Estate to serve the public. In 2015, Toronto City Council granted the private operator special tax-favoured status, worth about \$225,000 annually.



This ongoing tax benefit came by designating most of Guild Inn Estate as a Municipal Capital Facility. Such special status is designed to cover a private operator's costs to provide public/community services. At Guild Inn Estate, this tax exemption was intended for:

- The licensed restaurant, including seasonal public use of the original Inn's patio;
- Public access to the displays of public art; and
- The community meeting space rented through Toronto's parks department at the City's prescribed community rates.

The City's original documents include a curious provision that applies if Guild Inn Estate no longer qualifies as a Municipal Capital Facility and loses its municipal tax-exemption benefits. In that case, the City's parks department would be "required to pay the full amount of property taxes" on behalf of Guild Inn Estate.

The amount paid would come from the park department's annual operating budget. The actual value would be based on the original 2015 tax exemption of \$225,000/year, adjusted for subsequent tax increases.

Despite these tax exemptions and the public's expectations, in 2022 no public visitors to Guild Park, nor any local community groups were able to:

- Order a meal, or even buy a coffee at the on-site restaurant,
- See the public art mounted inside Guild Inn Estate,
- Rent meeting space at the City's community rates.

Illustrating the dilemma between public and private use of Guild Inn Estate are the many metal signs now posted outside the facility.

The beautifully-restored building within Guild Park may be the only designated Municipal Capital Facility in Ontario that qualifies for tax exemptions as a community resource and, at the same time, carries warning signs that state: "Private Property – No Public Access"

Other problems continue to emerge in the tug-of-war between public use at Guild Park and how Guild Inn Estate's private clients use the site. These include:

- Access. The provisions to share access of the Guild Inn patio between Guild Park visitors and Guild Inn Estate guests ended in 2021.

That's when, due to Covid, City officials okayed installing three tents over the patio for the exclusive use of private guests. This decision also degraded the historic vista of the restored façade of original 1914 building. Previously, that view was protected by a City of Toronto bylaw.

- Noise. The private parties renting this outdoor patio use amplified music that often disrupts the quiet enjoyment of the rest of Guild Park. Also affected by this unrestricted noise are live performances at the nearby Greek Theatre.

The private events were apparently exempt from the City's noise bylaws. This may change after volunteers filed a noise complaint this summer because sound levels from a Guild Inn Estate event exceeded 100 decibels (the usual limit in the City is 55 decibels).



The original Guild Inn's restored façade and south patio, top, is no longer accessible to the public. City officials approved installing seasonal tents (middle) to create new private event space. These obscure the building (bottom) and prevent public access to the former restaurant facility.

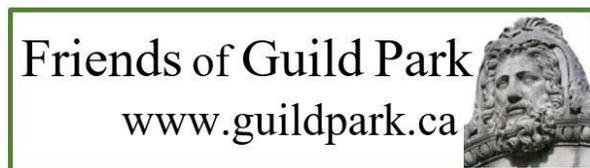
- Permits. Private guests at certain Guild Inn Estate functions have a mistaken impression that they're allowed unrestricted access to all Guild Park features, including the landmark Greek Theatre, without first obtaining required approvals from the City. Numerous times this summer, the cast and crew of Guild Festival Theatre, which uses the stage with City approval, had to deal with belligerent private guests who lacked permits, yet demanded going on stage for photos. These people disrupted rehearsals and threatened to disrupt performances, even damage theatrical equipment.

What's the solution to this dilemma? How do all Guild Park visitors, as well as Guildwood Village residents, gain access to the benefits of the restored Guild Inn – a facility that City of Toronto taxpayers continue to subsidize?

A major challenge is recognizing that the operating agreement covering Guild Inn Estate operations is between a private company and the City of Toronto. Under the various agreements, there's no formal opportunity for public representatives to provide input on how this important asset gets run and what services it provides during the 40-year sub-lease, which continues to 2067.

That doesn't mean the community has no voice. A first step is for Guild Park supporters and anyone unhappy with current conditions at Guild Inn Estate to register their concerns in two ways:

1. By contacting the City's 24-hour information hotline 3-1-1 and file a specific complaint about access to the facility, public services at Guild Park, noise or anything that detracts from enjoying Guild Park. The City of Toronto is now monitoring aspects of Guild Inn Estate operations. Your comments and concerns let city officials know their attention is required at Guild Park.
2. Provide copies of your comments/ suggestions to Friends of Guild Park, either by email at friends@guildpark.ca or by posting on-line at www.facebook.com/guildpark.



The more public input from people like you, the more additional “ammunition” that volunteers can use to keep raising these unresolved issues with Guild Park's decision-makers.

Informed comments from Guild Park supporters also helps hold public officials accountable in two ways:

- To maintain Guild Park's historic legacy as a place where Art meets Nature
- To fulfill Guild Park's potential as a destination that serves the community, city residents and the thousands of park visitors who come from all across the world.