

NEIGHBOURHOOD



With sweeping glass walls surrounded by a shallow pond, Discovery Landing's transparent design accentuates its accessibility.

Fluid,

By Deborah Birkett
Photography by Jon Evans
and Daniel Banko

dynamic

Discovery Landing,
Burlington's new
destination

Strongly minimalist in design, with sweeping glass walls affording wonderful views of the lake, Burlington's Discovery Landing invites visitors to discover its charms and fully experience the enduring relationship between the people of this city and the water.

The new Discovery Landing is a two-tier, 14,200-square-foot facility that includes the Observatory, the 10,000-square-foot Rotary Centennial Pond, the Bite Café, and Spencer's at the Waterfront, an exciting new restaurant. Located in Spencer Smith Park, it's another key piece of the ambitious \$17.4 million redevelopment of our waterfront.

Rachel Milan, waterfront supervisor for the City of Burlington, explains that "the three main themes of the Landing are weather, water, and the ecosystem." The Observatory offers a wonderful spot from which to watch the lake, the weather,

and people, as well as an educational and contemplative experience. Other special outdoor features include a sleek waterfall and retaining wall, meant to evoke aspects of the Niagara Escarpment. To the immediate east of Discovery Landing is the recently opened Dofasco Waterjet Plaza, and a short walk to the west is Beachway Park.

The Observatory is lined with large colourful information panels and plastic "interpretive sails" which invite visitors to discover more about Lake Ontario. An innovative, 80-foot timeline of Burlington's waterfront is rendered translucently on the Observatory windows. Each component is positioned so that as you read it, you're looking in the exact direction of the monument or event it describes.

One of the more fascinating displays in the Observatory is a seven-foot tornado machine, designed to be triggered when someone walks near it. Discovery Landing plans to bring in other special displays over time.

The Landing is full of subtle cues and ideas, and takes a minimalist approach to both design and atmosphere. Central to this is the deliberate lack of signage around the Landing. Instead, Milan wants her staff, the Waterfront Ambassadors, to be "walking signage" for the facility. "That is the role of the Ambassadors: they engage," she says. "We [also] want Burlingtonians to be ambassadors. We want them to be proud of this destination."

She emphasizes how this differs from other city facilities. "You walk in, and you're engaged by someone, not just greeted." Ambassadors are posted in key spots around the Landing, but not in an obvious way. The lobby's information desk purposely lacks a chair, encouraging staff to circulate and speak with visitors.

Milan is training her staff to treat visitors as if they're at a hotel or resort, not a municipal hockey rink or



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swimming pool. To her, this means the facility also has to have much higher standards for cleanliness and service, and she attends constantly to these matters to ensure expectations are exceeded.

Something that has pleased all parties involved with Discovery Landing is the broader-than-expected demographic the facility has attracted. Milan describes a strong cross-section of visitors, including runners, walkers, young families, seniors, business people and couples.

“I wanted it to have excellent architecture and to be reflective of the fact that it was a special time for the city of Burlington,” says Mayor Rob MacIsaac. “And I think we’ve succeeded. I think 50 years from now, people will look at that and say, ‘That’s a pretty neat building. It must have been a great time for the city when they built that.’ ”

The primarily glass facility, designed by Toronto firm Baird Sampson Neuert, offers a considerable feeling of transparency, extending toward the lake like the prow of a ship. Milan’s idea is to have that architectural transparency mirrored organizationally. “No one can hide here,” she says. Staff should be visible and available, and visitors should be able to experience the facility as fluidly as possible. The goal: minimize obstructions,

maximize public access. To that end, for example, you don’t have to buy something from the Bite Café in order to use the nearby seating.

Discovery Landing has lots of programming for all ages planned, from stargazing and weather watching to ballroom dancing and lantern making. As Burlington’s only year-round facility, Milan and her staff are excited about winter programming. The Rotary Centennial Pond becomes a skating rink in winter, and the retractable roof above the pondside seating becomes a wind screen to protect skaters from biting winds off the lake.

The reception to the facility has been so positive that Milan has been unexpectedly swamped with requests for private rentals of the Observatory. Public use is the priority, but Discovery Landing is developing a rental policy. Since the Observatory’s hours are more limited than the other spaces, those wishing to use the facility outside of regular hours might potentially be accommodated.

It’s Milan’s hope that everyone will come and experience the Landing. “Anyone can come down here and I can guarantee they will learn something. You will discover something about your waterfront. Discovery is the basis of everything we do.” | **IB**



Spencer's at the Waterfront *Dining on the edge*

More than 50 restaurant operators bid to provide food services at Discovery Landing, but it was Aaron Ciancone and his team from the respected Ancaster Old Mill who won the contract. Open since early June, Spencer's at the Waterfront has quickly become Burlington's hottest dining destination. With 250 seats indoors and out, an enviable lakefront location and a top-notch culinary team, Spencer's offers an experience that is comfortable and elegant in equal measure.

The multi-talented Ciancone also acted as project manager for the construction of Spencer's, collaborating with architects Baird Sampson Neuert and interior design firm Cricket Design to achieve Spencer's fluid connection to the look and feel of Discovery Landing. Decorated in appealing earth tones and featuring custom light fixtures and very comfortable seating, the restaurant has the feel of an elegant yacht.

Ciancone knew he needed an exceptional chef with great management skills to run Spencer's. He found it in the "impeccable résumé" of British import Chris Haworth, who apprenticed under superstar chef Marco Pierre White.

Haworth's philosophy is to focus on local and seasonal food, "the best available produce." Spencer's makes

a point of buying directly from local farmers. "This year we've even gone as far as to have our own farm in Copetown," he says. "We hired three acres [for Spencer's and The Old Mill]. That's where we're headed. We want to do more and more of this."

The cuisine is contemporary Canadian, with plenty of Haworth's European influence. "It's sort of a crossover: the food is very classy but very accessible and very homey. The menu goes from a \$10 pizza to a \$60 entrée for two people. So there's a wide range. Everyone can afford it," says Haworth.

"I didn't want to do what everyone else does in Burlington. So we're doing something totally different, totally unique, and I think Burlington really needs it." Haworth looks forward to changing the menu with the seasons and, come winter, using the wood oven more often and featuring lots of braises.

The Spencer's team also runs The Bite Café on the lower level of Discovery Landing. Describing it as "fun, friendly, fresh," Ciancone says The Bite is a spot where visitors can experience good quality food with a lower price point and quicker service.

"We want Burlington to be a food destination, so people won't have to drive into Toronto to get a real dining experience," says Ciancone. "It's right here in their own backyard." | IB

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