

**A LETTER** / *Citysites* columnist John Bentley Mays declines an invitation from former Toronto mayor John Sewell to go to the barricades on behalf of Fort York.

*Mays argues that the much-beleaguered historic site will survive no matter what, and that there are far more pressing concerns on the city's agenda*

## The fort will endure, it's the city we have to worry about

John Sewell  
c/o The Friends of Fort York  
Toronto, Ontario

**D**EAR John: I am writing, first, to thank you for your invitation to appear as a speaker, along with Pierre Berton and architect Catherine Nasmith, at the Sept. 22 City Hall protest against development of derelict land lying beneath and south of the Gardiner Expressway, between Bathurst Street and Strachan Avenue; and also to decline this kind request.

My second reason for writing is to explain why I cannot, in good conscience, take part in what promises to be an event I should otherwise like to attend — a happily high-kicking show of public temper, the likes of which we've rarely seen in this town since the invigorating days of Stop Spadina.

If I understand matters correctly, and I believe I do, the issue is less the continuing existence than the honour of Fort York, Toronto's famous Georgian fortification and the first enduring foothold of the British Empire here — hallowed ground indeed for the public-spirited, historically minded men and women you represent.

The fort, in your view and that of the Friends, has suffered quite enough contempt from reckless industrial and commercial development all round, and from its kilometre-wide separation by landfill from the great lake that once lapped the earthen base of its palisades. The scheme you and your comrades are rising to oppose is, I agree, yet another instance of such contempt. Approved in late July by Toronto City Council, it gives the green light to Molson Breweries and the Weston family, owners of the strip of desolate property, to go forward with plans to raise yet another wall of high residential towers between downtown and the lakeshore. Though not an explicit part of the strategy approved by Council, a huge grocery store, to be constructed under the elevated ramp of the Gardiner (of all places), is also in the developers' dreams.

Thus will the "forlorn little monu-



**Fort York: This heroic survivor of countless urban indignities will not likely be defeated by a few condos and a super store.**

(RICHARD RHODES/The Globe and Mail)

ment huddling in the shadow of the Gardiner Expressway" — the words come from *Globe* columnist John Barber, who's on your side — get the ultimate insult Glitz City can give it: concealment behind condos, and a bunker-like Loblaw's for a next-door neighbour.

As you know from reading my *Citysites* articles, I do get grouchy about the pseudo-historical pageantry and touristy carry-on sponsored by the Toronto Historical Board at Fort York. But, for the site and its historical significance, I have nothing but respect. Certainly no "forlorn monument" to me, Fort York is an heroic survivor of Toron-

to's west-side downtown development, a treasury of 19th-century timber-and-brick military architecture of a sort that vanished from the centres of most North American cities generations ago.

The barracks did not save the little civilian town of York from marauding Americans during the War of 1812 — thus flunking its first and last serious military test. But one cannot escape the feeling that the very ground, the architectural fabric of Fort York is something indomitable. The fort *will* survive. That fact more than any other is why I cannot summon up the passion necessary to rally troops of preservationists to

stop the construction of a supermarket and yet more condo towers in the fort's vicinity.

In what possible way could these indignities exceed those already visited on the fort's environs? Garrison Creek, the once-beautiful waterway which gave Fort York a strategically defensible, excellent source of fresh water, was allowed to become a pestilential open sewer by mid-Victorian times, and had been buried in a brick tunnel before the last century was out.

Railway tracks, and soot-belching rolling stock, ran alongside the Fort long ago; the huge advertising billboards and the six-lane expressway

elevated 18 metres above the fort's margin are later defamations. But was any of that worse than the building of a slaughterhouse practically on top of the fort just weeks after the city's triumphant acquisition of the site for parkland in 1903? Or the pork packer's demolition of half a rampart, with the unintended effect of uncovering soldiers' bones, which were then carted off with other rubble?

As a distinguished former mayor of Toronto, and an urban activist all your days, John, you hardly need be reminded that even our first, tough Metro chairman, Fred (Big Daddy) Gardiner, was forced to scrap his

plan to ram his huge lakeshore expressway straight through the place. In the end, it was the highway that moved, not the fort; and in that tale, among others, we have yet another parable of just how successfully this fragile composition of lawns, low ramparts and old buildings has resisted the massive force of urban industrialization, and remained a place to learn from.

If I cannot lend a rousing cheer to your campaign to stop Molson's and the Westons from building stores and highrises on the south side of Fort York, it is because I believe Toronto could stand much less urban idealism nowadays, and a great deal more stoicism about city process and pragmatism about economic development.

The citizens of a metropolis recovering from a killing recession would do well to shelve fabulously expensive, utopian proposals for demolishing the Gardiner, re-greening the waterfront and so forth. There are more pressing matters on the agenda than the dignity of rugged Fort York. In my view, the proper study of anyone who cares about the social fabric and cultural future of this town should be a search for smart keys to unlock Toronto's immense productive powers, and ways to encourage domestic and foreign developers, builders and other capitalists to do *here* what they do *best*: invest, create new wealth, enrich the public coffers by expanding the tax-base, make jobs in construction, services and the businesses of consumption.

Right now, John, the desperation of my unemployed working-class neighbours, the idleness of so many skilled labourers on my street, the loss of jobs in the financial industries, the shut-down of shop after shop on corners and strip-malls across Metro — such matters lie somewhat heavier on my mind nowadays than a potential slighting of Fort York. Anyway, I am sure the Fort, having survived so much worse, will survive Molson's and the Weston family. I am not so sure about the long-term prospects of the great city you and I cherish.

Sincerely yours,  
John Bentley Mays