Welcome to Toronto, AWCI delegates.

As a construction professional or an interested tourist, Canada’s largest city has as much to offer as any city in the world. New Yorker magazine a couple of years ago called Toronto “the next world-class city” and whether it is on the verge or already arrived is a minor point of debate.

For lovers of culture and the arts, Toronto is home to the National Ballet of Canada and the world-renowned Toronto symphony orchestra. Not far from the AWCI convention site is Roy Thompson Hall, a state-of-the-art concert hall featuring unique architectural concept and acclaimed acoustics. The Royal Alexandria Theatre, O’Keefe Centre and St. Lawrence Centre offer top broadway musicals, professional theatre and all-star entertainers.

For the gourmet, Toronto offers a cornucopia of fine dining in virtually every ethnic tradition. Visit Chinatown for first-class Cantonese and Szechuan specialties. Nouvelle Cuisine, Greek, Indian, Italian, Japanese...there are four-star establishments to cater to every preference.

Shopping in Toronto is limited only to the imagination. Visitors enjoy the huge Easton Centre mall in the heart of downtown, or the Yorkville boutique area north of Bloor Street. Bloor Street itself is home to Creed’s and many other fine retailers, and ranks near the top of the world’s most exclusive retail areas. Yonge Street is the city’s main drag and if you can’t find what you’re looking for in one of its shops, then it probably doesn’t exist.

Toronto is also an avid sports town. Still waiting for the Blue Jays to win its first World Series, the city is also home of the Maple Leafs—one of the original six NHL hockey teams with a history as colorful and successful as almost any in the league. The Toronto Blizzards compete in the professional soccer circuit, and the Argonauts are the city’s CFL football team.

Toronto The Good

In contrast to the world-class image which the city seems determined to present to others, there still exists a flavour of what locals know as the “Toronto The Good” ambience which has always existed.

In Toronto The Good, you still can’t shop in most areas of the city on Sundays and the debate about it rages on year after year without resolution. In Toronto The Good the bars close at 1:00 a.m., have limited hours and restrictions on Sundays, and to buy beer or liquor you have to go to special government-licensed outlets.

Although the city is slowly shedding this lingering image of conservatism, and even parochialism at times, the elements which persist are those which seem most attractive to many visitors from the United States and abroad. Cleanliness and safety are the two most often cited attributes about which visitors to Toronto consistently comment.

Toronto prides itself on being a “people city; a city where the local community group can go to city hall and win and where ethnic diversity is encouraged and supported.

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Hopefully, the Toronto of50 years in the future will still be clean, safe and friendly, but with world-class status comes some endemic consequences which both challenge and
confound urban planners worldwide. Urban sprawl, traffic congestion, pollution, public transportation demands, infrastructure maintenance, and other problems of the large city are all becoming part of day-to-day life in Toronto.

Six-Year Boom Continues

Toronto has seen record growth levels year-over-year since 1984 and there doesn’t seem to be any slowing down in sight. A walking tour of almost any part of the city will reveal not only significant commercial/industrial i-e-development, but also a wealth of architectural diversity both new and old.

The AWCI convention is being held in the world-class Metro Toronto Convention Centre, with its unique seamless sloped-glazing facade. Within a one minute walk is the 1,800-foot high CN Tower, the world’s tallest building with a revolving restaurant on the top and an “outdoor” elevator ride to get there.

Two minutes west of the convention centre is Toronto’s current pride and joy, the SkyDome. It has the world’s first-retractable solid roof and is unrivalled by in sports facility in the world today in terms of technology, scope and attractions.

Dominating the Toronto skyline are the towering headquarters of Canada’s five major banks. Developed from the early 1960s through to as recently as 1988, the bank buildings are each distinctive in their own way and can lay claim to unique architectural or construction technique.

First came the white First Canadian Place monolith built by the Bank of Montreal. Commerce Court then went to three white granite towers, and the shiny black Toronto-Dominion bank complex now boasts four rectangular anchor buildings.

The Royal Bank went to gold for distinction, not as tall a building, but dazzling in appearance and design. It has real gold in its curtainwall glazing. The last bank on the scene was the Bank of Nova Scotia, and they went with a red granite tower, higher and more
slender than the others, to make their statement.

The insurance companies have also made an architectural statement on the Toronto skyline, from the art deco stylings of the relatively new Standard Life Building to the shimmering glass Sun Life twin towers which occupy opposite sides of a major intersection in the financial district. Crown Life combines the new and old in an uptown development which has gradually covered the four corners of a major intersection.

Just a short walk south and east of the convention centre is the Toronto Harbourfront area on Lake Ontario’s waterfront. Here you can see the award-winning Queen’s Quay Terminal, an old warehouse converted to an upscale retail building topped with luxury condominiums.

**Maintaining Architectural Tradition**

Toronto’s architectural statement is not all fashioned around the new office towers and other buildings changing the skyline each year. Toronto also retains a strong sense of tradition; architecture showcasing the influence of British and rural tradition.

This sense of the city’s history is preserved in buildings like Queen’s Park—the home of the provincial government. The tradition of grandiose space, the use of granite and natural stone and other distinctive trends of the past are highlights in the old City Hall building which is about 80 years old, the grand old Royal York Hotel which was Toronto’s tallest building when it was built in 1927, and the cathedral-like proportions of Union Station built long ago when railways were the lifeblood of Canada.

The historical legacy of Toronto is also being preserved through a boom in commercial restoration and renovation projects. Century old buildings in the main core are being sandblasted and tuckpointed to their original splendour, many protected by heritage designation bylaws.

On the secondary streets like Jarvis and Sherbourne to the east, many old homes, some from the mid-1800’s, are undergoing transition to trendy, expensive offices, again often retaining their historical character right down to replication of original building materials.

**Million-Dollar Homes**

New residential construction is almost non-existent in the city, as a result of skyrocketing land values which make the cost of building homes other than expensive condominiums prohibitive.

In the Metropolitan Toronto suburbs, where land values again have pushed the average new home over the $250,000 mark, the trend is to smaller homes on smaller lots (30-35 foot frontage is now common).

But first-time buyers and non-affluent families are now commuting from as far as Peterborough, about an hour-and-a-half drive to the east, and Kitchener, the same distance west, in order to find a home they can afford.

If you can’t see many new homes being built in the city, there is no shortage of unique residential areas where huge old homes grace tree-lined enclaves almost oblivious to the big city around them. Tour old Rosedale uptown or Forest Hill in the northeast end for elegant three- and-four-story homes worth millions in many cases. In these areas, the million-dollar renovation project has become a reality.

So once again, welcome AWCI delegates. Welcome to the newest world-class city where you can do or see anything any other city has to offer, and more. Enjoy!