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Halifax Explosion's ground zero destroyed, view from memorial blocked by shipyard's expansion nearly a century after tragedy

NP DEAN JOBB, SPECIAL TO NATIONAL POST | June 17, 2014 | Last Updated: Jan 24 11:27 PM ET
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Joel Zemel, author of a recent book on the Halifax Explosion, compares a photo of wreckage taken shortly after the 1917 disaster to the same waterfront location today, now infilled to accommodate new Irving Shipbuilding facilities. Dean Jobb

HALIFAX — Almost a century after the Halifax Explosion flattened much of the city's north end and killed nearly 2,000 people, a shipyard expansion has obliterated the blast's ground zero and will soon block the view from the main memorial to victims of the disaster.

Constructing the massive ship where Irving Shipbuilding Inc. will assemble Canada's next generation of warships and patrol vessels

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required dredging and infilling at Pier 6, where the munitions ship *Mont Blanc* blew up in 1917 — work that was completed with no public outcry.

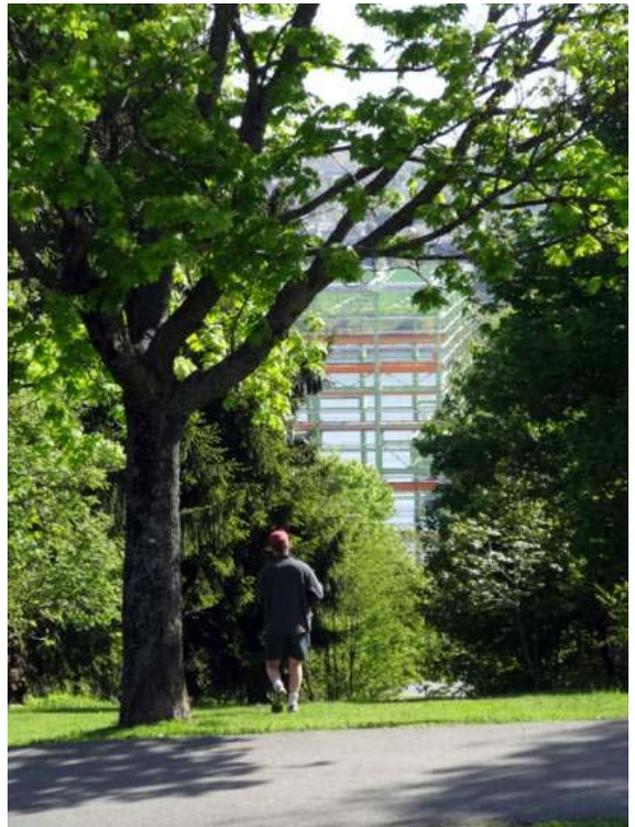
And now this victory of progress over heritage seems to have taken city officials, explosion historians and victims' descendants by surprise on another front.

The shed not only covers the site, it will make it impossible to see the harbour from a hilltop memorial in Fort Needham Park, which houses bells salvaged from a local church and where a ceremony is held each Dec. 6 to remember those killed and the 9,000 injured, many of them blinded or maimed for life.

Author Janet Kitz, whose bestselling book *Shattered City* helped revive interest in the explosion not long after the memorial was completed in 1985, was shocked to discover the view will be lost, especially as the city gears up to mark the explosion's 100th anniversary in 2017.

"It was intended that, from the memorial, you could see the site of the explosion," she said, before heading to the park to see for herself. "It's an extremely important view."

A plaque at the memorial instructs visitors to look down to the harbour through a gap in the surrounding trees, to see the spot where the explosion occurred. The shipyard shed's framework now fills the gap, and once wall panels are installed only the side of the building will be visible.



Irving Shipbuilding's massive fabrication shed blocks the view of Halifax Harbour from a monument to victims of the 1917 explosion. Dean Jobb

Patrick Murphy, a former city councillor who lost family members in the explosion, says as many as 200 people attend the anniversary ceremonies, including children from the neighbourhood who learn about the explosion — the largest man-made blast before the atomic era — in school.

"It's very disappointing and disheartening," he said of losing the waterfront view. "We tend to forget the things that are important to this city."

A spokesperson for Irving Shipbuilding, which won a \$25-billion federal contract to build a new fleet of frigates and Arctic patrol ships that promises to create thousands of jobs, says locating the new facilities adjacent to its existing shipyard, which has been in operation for 125 years, made sense. The East Coast base of its major customer, the Royal Canadian Navy, is next door, Deborah Page noted.



Halifax on Dec. 6, 1917 after a massive explosion in the harbour.

National Archives of Canada

A sewage outfall fouled the Pier 6 explosion site for decades, she said, and a naval historian worked with the company to identify items uncovered during dredging, including an anchor, an 18th-century cannon and unexploded shells and shell casing that post-date the explosion.

Irving plans to restore and display some of the artifacts at its new facilities. The company, Ms. Page added, is willing to work with the city to update the plaque at Needham Park — the one that touts the disappearing view — “so that it reflects the new reality of a busy, modern and professional working shipyard.”

Halifax Mayor Mike Savage says the city had no power to reject or alter Irving’s expansion plans — all zoning and other approvals were in order — and he welcomes the jobs and spinoffs once ship construction begins next year.

“We have probably never had a project in the city where so many people are going to work,” he said.



Irving Shipbuilding's massive fabrication shed, where Canada's new fleet of frigates and Arctic patrol vessels will be built, blocks the view of Halifax Harbour from a monument to victims of the 1917 explosion that killed almost 2,000. Dean Jobb

He was not aware that the new building blocks the view from the explosion memorial. “This isn’t an indication that we don’t respect the heritage” of the explosion, he added, noting that just last week city council struck a committee to plan centennial events.

“More than looking at the site of where it happened, is honouring the memory of what happened, making sure we take appropriate measures to continue to recognize what a devastating event this was but also the resilience of the city.”

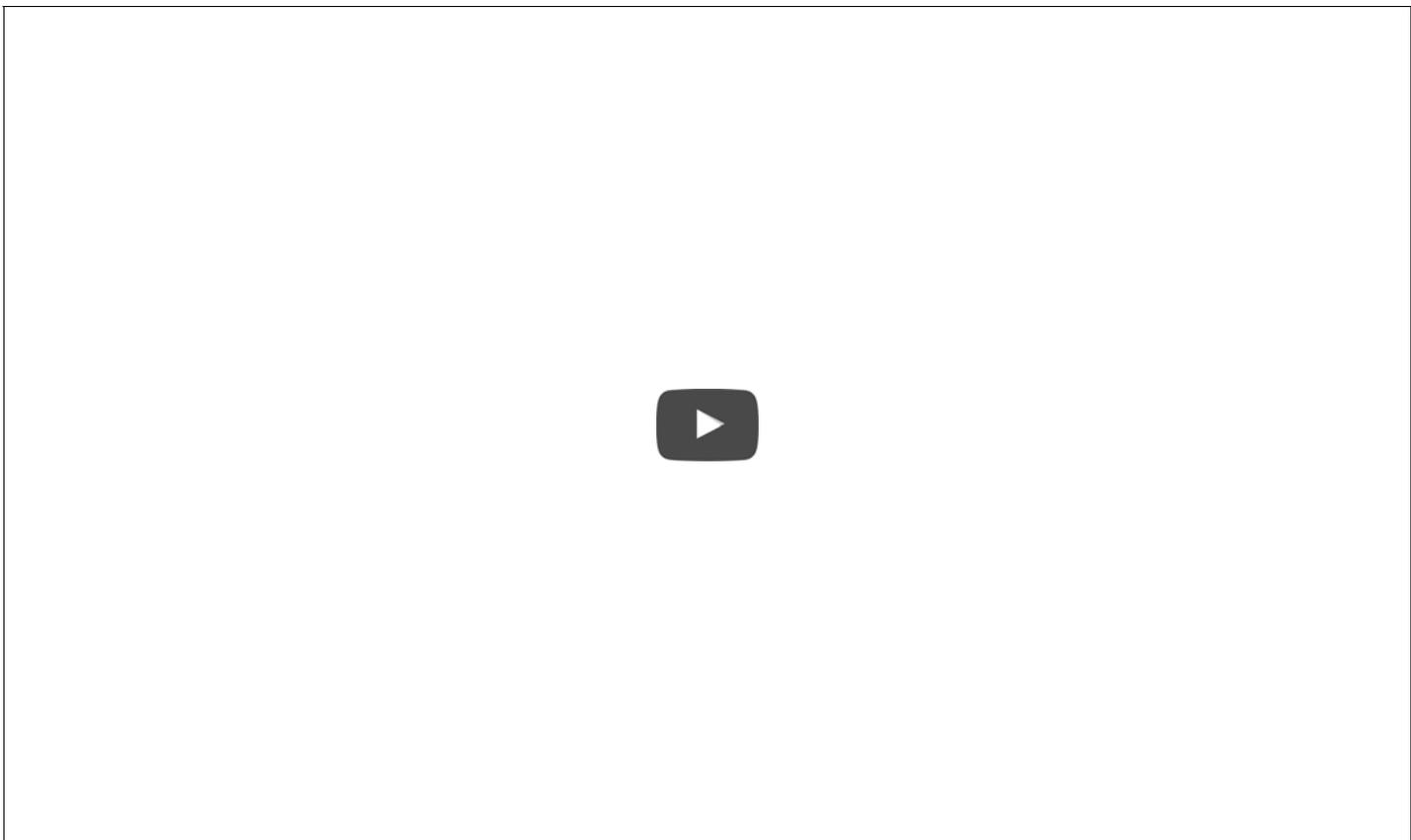
Joel Zemel, author of *Scapegoat*, a recent book that recreates the explosion and its aftermath, thinks Halifax missed a glorious opportunity to preserve the blast site, in the same way New York City has honoured victims of the 9/11 terror attacks with a newly opened museum and public space.

“In New York, they didn’t leave a hole in the ground where the Twin Towers went down,” he said this week as he surveyed the shed’s

towering framework. "They're putting up something to recognize that the area was the area of a terrible disaster. Well, we are not doing anything like that."

Mr. Zemel says he complained to former Nova Scotia premier Darrell Dexter and provincial museum officials more than a year ago about the loss of the Pier 6 site, to no avail.

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