

Here, it still casts a long shadow

The city's definitive icon may be losing its place on top, but many locals are still just as proud of it

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On April 2, 1975, when an ironworker with a cast-iron stomach fastened the antenna atop the CN Tower and waved to thousands of onlookers on the streets below, an eight-year-old Larry Fisher was in southern Manitoba transfixed by the drama unfolding 553 metres in the sky live on his parents' television.

"I remember the helicopter and the wires and the guy up there waving," Mr. Fisher, now 40 and a superintendent at a Saskatchewan diamond mine, recalled on a recent visit to the tower with his wife and children. "My mother was really impressed. She just couldn't believe it."

He still takes pride in that epochal yet fleeting event. But it is a pride tempered by time and scores of stunning human achievements since - including the construction of the Burj Dubai, a new tower that is poised to knock the CN Tower from its lofty perch in the record books as the tallest free-standing structure on Earth.

Asked if he felt any sense of loss over the climbing cranes in the United Arab Emirates, Mr. Fisher shook his head. "Not really," he said. "Wayne Gretzky beat Gordie Howe's record. It was bound to happen."

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While the CN Tower remains the city's and country's most recognizable landmark, the imminent end of its reign has provoked in Torontonians both a nostalgia for the heady days of the 1970s - when an optimistic nation coalesced around a string of awe-inspiring accomplishments - and a decidedly ho-hum take on the end of an era.

Even the ironworker whose wave and setting off of a smoke bomb from atop the tower 32 years ago solidified his place in Canadian history greeted the thought of the tower's losing its distinction with a shrug.

"A sense of loss? Absolutely not," said Paul Mitchell, now 62 and president of the Ontario Erectors Association, who fondly recalled the euphoria of his moment in a telephone interview. "After 30-some-odd years, it begs the question: what took them so long?"

Many people had similar reactions, suggesting that the astonishing length of time that the record stood has cushioned its fall in the collective consciousness.

"We got nothing to be ashamed of. The old tower's held up pretty good," said Brian Hewson, 38, whose mobile Bozo's Roadhouse burger joint on Front Street relies heavily on hungry tourists leaving the tower. "Besides, I don't think too many people from Buffalo are going to head to Dubai any time soon."

That the same thing could have been said about Kuala Lumpur a decade ago did nothing to assuage the bruised egos of Chicagoans when their city's Sears Tower was topped as the world's tallest building by the corncob peaks of the Petronas Towers in that Malaysian capital.

(A "building" is in the eye of the beholder. While the CN Tower boasts of being the world's tallest building, it is not recognized as such by the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat, the international body that decides such things and defines a building as a structure designed for residential or commercial purposes. The CN Tower was built to house communications equipment.)

The designation so incensed citizens of Chicago that the city lobbied the Council on Tall Buildings to change its definition in a way that would wrest the record from the Petronas Towers, whose spires, and not actual floors, put it over the edge.

When that failed, the city resorted to a shameless display of self-promotion by affixing an antenna atop the Sears Tower that reached higher than the spires of Petronas. It failed to convince the council.

"I'm pleased to hear that the city of Toronto is taking it so well," said Antony Wood, executive director of the council, who visited the CN Tower for the first time two weeks ago. "I wish it was not such a big deal in other places, but unfortunately it is."

Discussions with Torontonians reveal beaming national pride in what was achieved when the grey and red smoke billowed from atop the CN Tower. Yet they also indicate no yearning to recreate that feeling or for a multibillion-dollar project to avenge the beloved tower.

For Deirdre Athaide, 27, a Toronto resident and solutions manager at IBM Canada who has never known her city without the tower, its elegant sloping façade cries "home." As such, she prefers it just the way it is.

"I don't think it's worth spending tax dollars on building taller or altering it in any way," Ms. Athaide said recently from the tower lookout 346 metres in the sky. "It's definitely a source of pride for me."

James Huctwith, 40, an artist, developed what he called "a nerdish crush" on the CN Tower as a boy growing up in a farming community 110 kilometres southwest of the city. He tattooed a bird's-eye view image of the tower's foundation on his right shoulder as a tribute to "the totem and portal to my adult life."

"When it went up, there was this sense that we were a socially, architecturally, educationally progressive and futuristic society, and I wanted to live in a place where people built such things," he said. "I feel nostalgic and a touch romantically melancholy, but not particularly sad [about the record]. It was inevitable."

Exactly when the title will fall to the Burj Dubai is unknown, although developers of the mixed-use office, hotel and residential tower say it is a matter of days.

Officials at the CN Tower declined to comment for this story, but have acknowledged that its days as the record-holder are numbered. A previously released statement suggests that they are preparing for the unavoidable, positioning the tower as "much more than just a tall building," a "must-see," and "a special place to create memories."

"It's almost a relief in a way," said Christopher Needles, 26, a graduate student who recalled feeling a special connection to the tower as a child because they shared the same initials. "It's no longer a game. The building can come into its own once it's lost the record."

If history is any guide, it is unlikely that the loss will send the two million visitors the CN Tower draws each year scurrying for the sand-swept United Arab Emirates.

Roughly six million people visit the Eiffel Tower annually, despite the fact that its 41-year reign as the tallest structure in the world ended in 1930 with the completion of the Chrysler Building in New York. The Empire State Building, which bested its crosstown neighbour a year later, attracts more than 3.5 million people a year.

"It won't be too bad - you'll see," said Barbara Altazin, a 19-year-old student from France who capped a summer in Ontario with a visit to the CN Tower this week. "There is only one CN Tower. They can build higher and taller and bigger, but no one can have your

tower."

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