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New plaza takes Whistler entertainment and tourism game to new level

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The 2010 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games forever ensconced Whistler, B.C.'s place on the world stage. Now, a major legacy from that global event has set a new stage for Whistler to take its tourism and entertainment game to a new level.

Situated in the heart of Whistler Village, the Whistler Olympic Plaza was the focal point of more than 100 victory ceremonies during the 2010 Games, as well as the venue for the Paralympic Winter Games Closing Ceremony. The site has since been transformed into a \$13.67-million outdoor gathering place with 360-degree mountain views, an expansive lawn, gorgeous log playhouse for kids, performance spaces and

public art.

Maureen Douglas, the former Vancouver 2010 Organizing Committee director of community relations, is among the local residents excited to see the event space reborn.

Beyond honouring Whistler's founding visionaries, who wisely set aside the land for community use back in the 1980s, Douglas says the site pays fitting homage to the 2010 Games spirit.

"I am so grateful to have been there on the second day of the Games, when the first medals were handed out on this site. It was so fabulous to see the athletes on stage and feel the energy and be surrounded by friends, neighbours and colleagues – people from our community who had been working together on this for eight years. The joy and achievement for everyone – from the athletes to the volunteers – I will never forget it."

Since then, Douglas and other Whistler residents have watched the site come to life as a stunning new event venue and public space.

Until now, concert and event organizers have had to rely on temporary stages set up in various village locations. The new permanent facility takes Whistler's entertainment capabilities to a new level, says Whistler Mayor Ken Melamed.

The plaza includes a permanent, 600-square-metre performance pavilion that offers weather protection, flexible rigging points, enhanced acoustics, dressing rooms, a high-tech fibre optic backbone and other appointments.

"This is an opportunity for Whistler to try things that we haven't done before – to potentially produce Shakespeare, or host ongoing symphony or dance performances – things that are tough to do in makeshift venues. It's also a chance to engage higher profile artists who require certain infrastructure," says Douglas, whose company, Mobilize, is working with the Resort Municipality of Whistler on its production of the Whistler Presents Concert Series this summer.

Melamed says visitors and residents alike can expect access to entertainment not seen here before, including an ongoing lineup of free and ticketed events.

This July, hip-hop artist K'NAAN drew more than 4,000 revellers to the pavilion, including families with children who danced under the stars, says Melamed.

August kicks off a six-week lineup of events, including the plaza's official opening celebrations on August 27. Shortly after, the inaugural Jazz On The Mountain At Whistler festival will add new tempo to the Labour Day long weekend.

From the alpenglow of its Whistler and Blackcomb Mountain backdrop to its public art, the site itself is breathtaking and worthy of a visit.

Various art installations recognize the 2010 Games' athletes, medal winners, volunteers, government and partner organizations. A memorial to Georgian Luger Nodar Kumaritashvili, who died tragically during the Games, adds a further poignant dimension.

Melamed says on certain rare occasions the Olympic/Paralympic cauldron will be lit. For now, she says at virtually all waking hours people can be seen proudly posing for photographs by the Olympic rings and Paralympic agitos.

Douglas agrees. "I have never walked by the site – day or night – without seeing someone getting their photo taken inside the Olympic rings. They are part of the legacy, culture and history that is here to share," she says.

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