

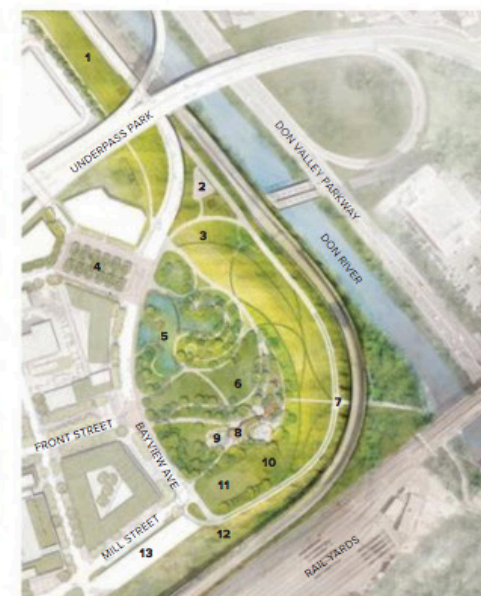
CANADIAN ARCHITECT





PARKS AND REGENERATION

A DOWNTOWN TORONTO GREEN SPACE REVAMPS A BROWNFIELD INTO A VIBRANT PUBLIC PLACE THAT GIVES BACK TO THE ENVIRONMENT.



SITE PLAN

- 1 PRAIRIE
- 2 DOG RUN
- 3 LOWLAND
- 4 RIVER SQUARE
- 5 URBAN MARSH
- 6 MULTI-USE
- 7 BALA UNDERPASS
- 8 PAVILION
- 9 WATER PLAY
- 10 SLEDDING
- 11 RECREATION
- 12 LOWLAND PRAIRIE
- 13 COMMUNITY CENTRE

0 100m

PROJECT Corktown Common Park and Pavilion, West Don Lands, Toronto, Ontario

DESIGNERS Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, Inc. Landscape Architects (park) and Maryann Thompson Architects, Inc. (pavilion)

TEXT Jon Scott Blanthorn

PHOTOS Nicola Betts, unless otherwise noted

Toronto's waterfront has been a place of contention for residents and politicians for many decades. In 1971, when Toronto celebrated the opening of Eb Zeidler, FRAIC's futuristic Ontario Place, there was hope that the banks of Lake Ontario would usher in a new wave of development for public enjoyment. Yet few of the discussed plans came to fruition. And while subsequent builds around Queens Quay serviced the downtown core, other than the Waterfront Trail for cyclists there was no singular vision to unite the communities that stretched the full length of the Greater Toronto Area for almost 30 years. Private developers eventually began fragmenting the waterfront with large-scale condominiums.

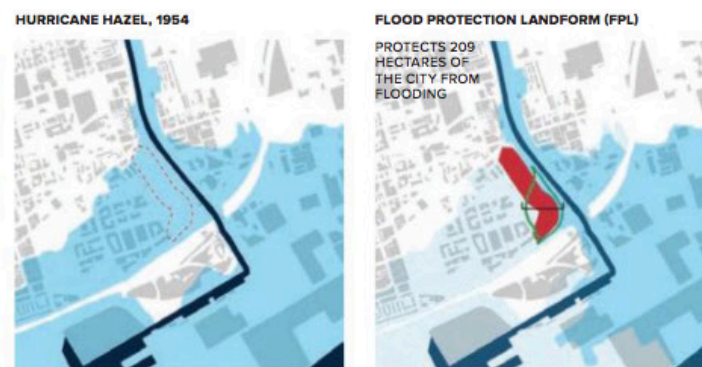
A tangible promise of change came in 2000, when the federal, provincial and municipal governments each committed \$500 million to renew one of Canada's largest designated waterfront areas. Together, they established Waterfront Toronto to bring together the varied areas along the lakefront with an environmental, economic and social development plan. The now fully functional Corktown Common park in the West Don Lands not only helps realize this promise, but also sets a standard for how thoughtful design can rejuvenate seemingly unusable space, while bringing together surrounding communities.

Waterfront Toronto commissioned New York-based landscape architecture firm Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates (MVVA) to turn 7.3 hectares of land into the neighbourhood park. However, MVVA was also charged with a broader mandate. As associate principal Emily Mueller De Celis says, they were asked to set "a regenerative ecology in motion by establishing a new benchmark for ecological diversity in Toronto

LEFT Corktown Common borders the Canary District, a mixed-use development that initially housed athletes during the 2015 Pan Am/ParaPan Am Games. The park incorporates a raised landform that protects the eastern part of downtown (including the Canary District) from flooding.



For MVVA, the design was informed by both the location's history and its current conditions. "This site has a storied environmental



The adjacent Canary District is rapidly growing to include 6,000 new condo units, so the park also needed to be a place where the community could socialize. At the height of the park, the pavilion stands as a central focal point. With this structure, Maryann Thompson Architects created an architectural feature marked by several pitched roof segments made of Canadian red cedar. "The design of the pavilion is meant to orient you to the top of the hill and sky," says partner Maryann Thompson. "Because you approach from below, you really notice the underside of the roof—so





COURTESY OF WATERFRONT TORONTO

ABOVE LEFT The park includes a variety of areas, including a wetland that is frequented by waterfowl and migrating birds. **ABOVE RIGHT** Native flora was chosen for use throughout the park, which weaves together natural habitats and recreational zones.

it was important to make this beautiful and evocative.” The segments purposefully allow light to come through, heightening the sense of the sky above. To support the roof, the architects created compound columns tied together by metal rope—“like bundles of sticks that you can see the light between,” says Thompson.

The park and pavilion are designed to function year-round. Across the site, the planting palette celebrates all four seasons. Trees such as birch, larch, cottonwood and oak flourish and change throughout the spring to fall months, while pine, holly and red cedar add colour and life in the winter. The topographical plan also transforms in the cold months: green hills and sloped pathways can be used in the snowy season for sledding, and a flat-surface play area doubles as a skating rink.

For its part, the pavilion includes a fireplace for roasting marshmallows in the winter, and concrete tables that can be used throughout the year for communal meals. Translucent, moveable walls can be closed to provide protection from wind and pelting snow. Power for the pavilion comes from solar panels, mounted on the south face of the fireplace, where they are likely to stay free from ice.

Less noticeable, but perhaps most relevant to the project’s transformational aspirations, is the way it manages water. “The entire site is a gigantic water treatment plant,” says Thompson. The clay fill comprising the flood protection landform and supporting the built elements made it impossible to use site water to re-charge groundwater supplies. This presented MVVA with the opportunity to devise an innovative system unique to Corktown Common.

In summer, the splash pad consumes some 570,000 litres of water each week. Instead of being wasted, it is UV-filtered and combined with a park-wide underground drainage system that collects storm water. The treated water is discharged into the marsh, which functions as a tertiary

treatment system, and used for park-wide irrigation. The folded pavilion roofs are part of the system, capturing and directing rain through a grate into a storage reservoir. “Each drop consumed in play or produced by rain is redirected [from the] landscape construction into a living natural system,” says Mueller De Celis.

Visiting Corktown Common now, it is difficult to imagine it hasn’t been part of the community for years—if not decades. The natural habitat has grown to provide areas of tranquility, cut off from the surrounding city. The playground and parks are well used, not just by the local community, but also by those who travel to the site as a destination to meet friends, walk their dogs and hang out with their families. It’s a space that has benefitted from the close collaboration between a government body with a clear vision and experienced design experts with innovative solutions. Since opening to the public, Corktown Common has been widely praised as a model for future builds. Its success suggests the potential for other unused public spaces in the city to be regenerated into environmentally and aesthetically pleasing areas. In this sense, transformation from the industrialized to the natural could occur literally anywhere in the urban sphere.

Jon Scott Blanthorn is an architecture writer and critic based in Toronto.

CLIENT WATERFRONT TORONTO | **DESIGN TEAM PARK**—MICHAEL VAN VALKENBURGH, LAURA SOLANO, EMILY MUELLER DE CELIS, NEIL BUZINSKI. **PAVILION**—MARYANN THOMPSON, HOPE STRODE, MARTHA FOSS, EVAN MATHIESEN, BILL PEVEAR. | **STRUCTURAL PARK**—ARUP TORONTO; **PAVILION**—RICHMOND SO ENGINEERS | **MECHANICAL/ELECTRICAL** ARUP TORONTO | **CONTRACTOR** EASTERN CONSTRUCTION COMPANY (CONSTRUCTION MANAGER) WITH BUTTCON CONTRACTORS (BUILDING CONTRACTOR) AND ALDRSHOT LANDSCAPE COMPANY (LANDSCAPE CONTRACTOR) | **AREA PARK**—6.5 HECTARES; **PAVILION**—225 M² | **BUDGET PARK**—\$14.1 M; **PAVILION**—\$1.45 M | **COMPLETION** JULY 2012