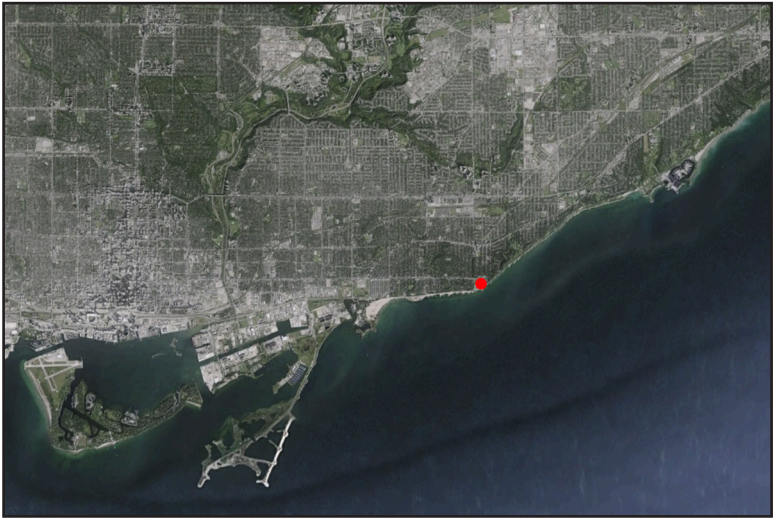


Site Overview

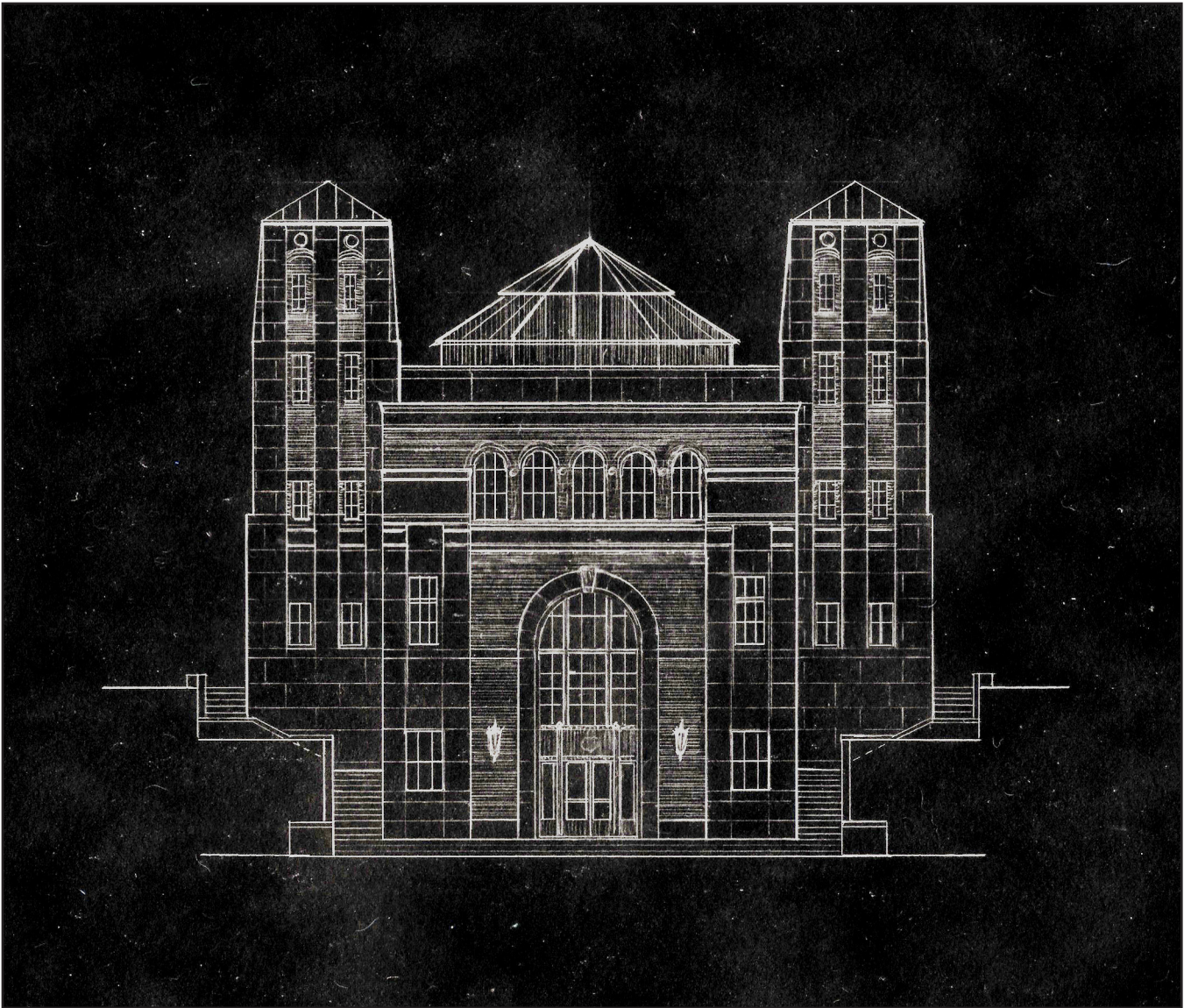
In Toronto’s eastern end, along the shoreline of Lake Ontario, there is a portion of land that is a geographical intermediary between the sandy beaches to the west and the rugged Scarborough escarpment to the east. On this site is the R.C. Harris Water Treatment Plant, commonly known as the Toronto Waterworks. It is Toronto’s largest water filtration facility and its expansive grounds are a valuable public space.

The site is named after Richard Caldwell Harris, the commissioner of public works from 1912 until his death in 1945. He, along with his fellow public works officials, first conceived the facility in 1920. It was constructed in two stages, the first from 1937 to 1941, and the second from 1954 to 1958. Relatively unknown architect Thomas Pomphrey designed the buildings. He worked side-by-side with civil engineering firms Gore and Storrie and H.G. Acres Limited who designed the filtration systems and the landscaped grounds.

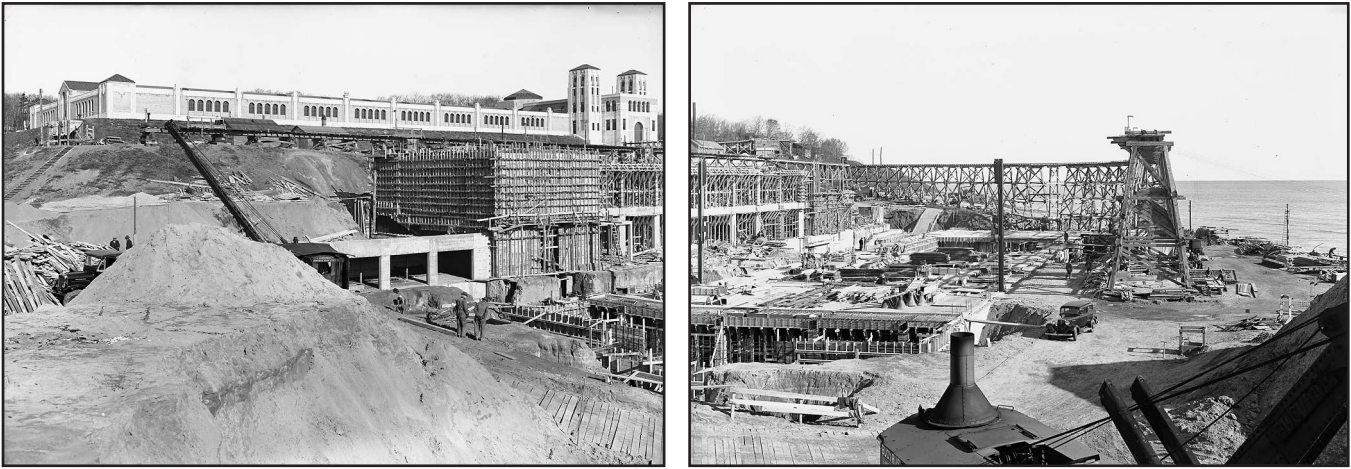
The primary function of this facility is to provide clean drinking water for the citizens of Toronto. The design went beyond this function to provide citizens with a commodious public space and iconic pieces of architecture. The three buildings sit on a terraced landscape looking over Lake Ontario. The facility is nicknamed “the Palace of Purification” because of its elegant design. The expansive grounds have consistently remained open to the public who use the space for a wide variety of activities. The site offers fantastic views of the architecture, Lake Ontario, the Scarborough escarpment, and the downtown Toronto skyline. Page 2 outlines the physical composition of the site and Page 3 presents how the public utilize the space.



Site Location



Hand drawn south elevation of Filtration Building



Under Construction during the late 1930s



Summer photo of the public beach and the pumping building



Summer photo of the pumping building, the service building, and surrounding landscaped public space



Summer photo of the filtration building and the sloped grounds used by people for various outdoor activities.

Sources: Toronto Archives, Google Images, Personal Drawings

Physical Composition

The Toronto Waterworks combines the existing natural environment and the designed built environment to create a beautiful and practical public space.

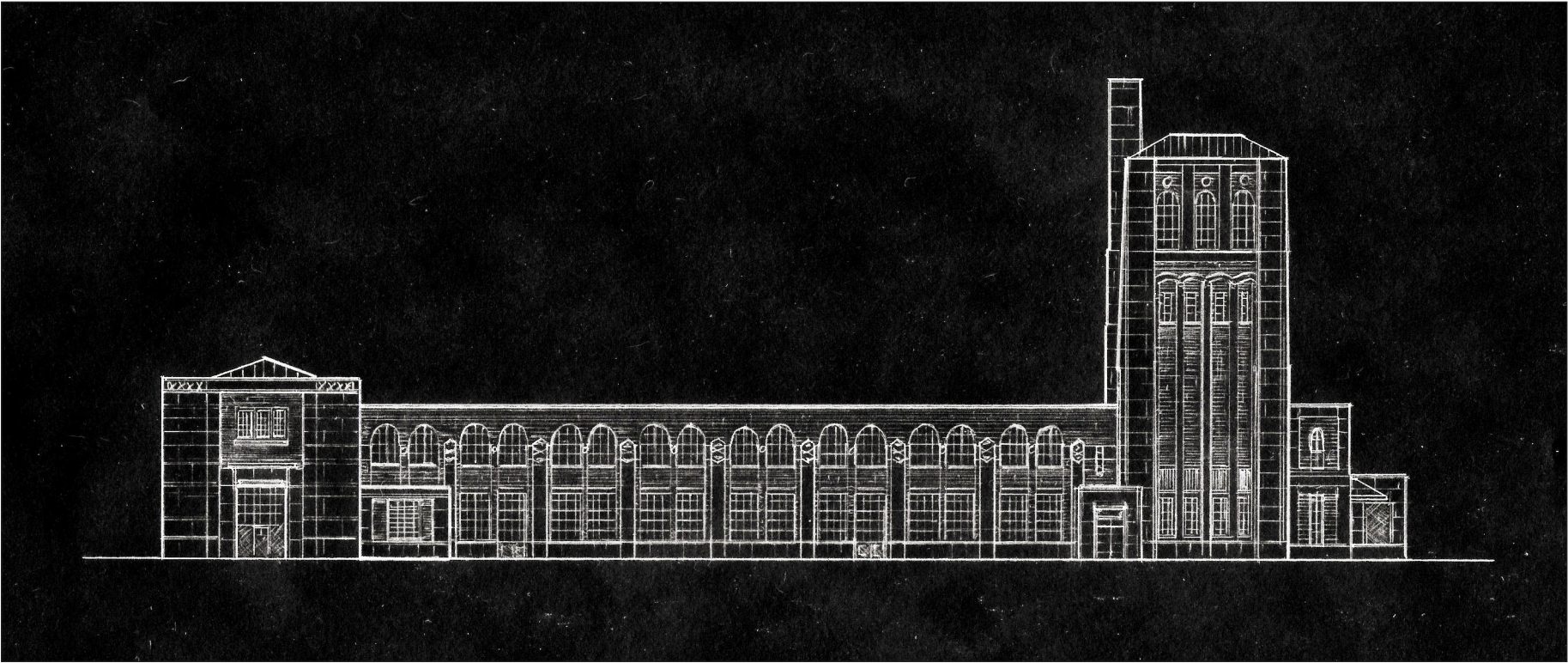
Water, land, and sky are the three major aspects of the natural environment that impose their aura on the site. The site is located along the shores of Lake Ontario. The lake is dynamic. It can be as flat as glass on the calmest days and on the windiest days the waves can be 15 feet high and crash along the shoreline. The temperature of the lake changes from being comfortable to swim in during the summer to being partially frozen in the winter. The colour of the open water changes from shades of grey to shades of blue depending on the sky. The site offers big views of the sky, which can be a variety colour and texture. Being on the edge of the city, the site offers a good view of the stars as it is less impeded by light pollution compared to the surrounding urban area. The site also offers good views of the sunrise and sunset, which alter the mood of the site. The natural landscape that makes up and surrounds the site is both rugged and soft. The ruggedness comes from the varying sloping terrain and closeness to the Scarborough escarpment. The softness comes from the textures of the sandy beaches, manicured grass, and other foliage. People are drawn to the site because of the ability to be closer to these aspects of the natural environment. This is especially the case for people living in an urban environment.

Before construction, the site was home to Victoria Park, a public park situated on the natural topography of the land. Construction required massive earthmoving because of the need to allow for submerged filtration tanks and to have large flat portions of land for building footprints. The result is a man-made terraced landscape. The landscape is primarily covered with manicured grass, concrete driveways, footpaths, and staircases. The public uses this landscape for a wide variety of activities (see page 3). The site contains three buildings for water treatment processes; the filtration building, the service building, and the pumping building. These buildings combine aspects of art-deco and beaux-art architectural styles and are well proportioned with each other and to the surrounding environment. Their building material palette is limited to light grey concrete, soft yellowish brick, and dark green window frames, and dark grey glass. These materials fit with the colours and textures of the surrounding natural environment. The building elevations elegantly designed, frame the landscape, and to add to the aesthetic of the site. The architectural designs of the buildings are an attraction in themselves and draw in visitors from afar.

Thus the Toronto Waterworks utilizes the designed built environment and the existing natural environment to attract people to its open grounds.



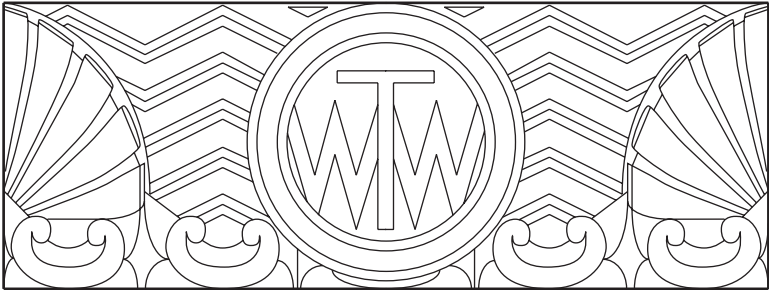
Material Palette



Hand drawn south elevation of Service Building



Winter photo of grounds, pumping building, and big sky



Digital drawing of the Toronto Waterworks logo which is carved into the masonry of the filtration building



Winter photo of the sloping grounds and vast views of lake and sky

Public Space

This graphic shows the grounds of the Toronto Waterworks in plan view from an extracted Google Earth image. The icons and descriptions show how the space is utilized by the public for a variety of activities.

People use the expansive grounds to go for walks alone or in groups. The land, the architecture, and the nice views of the lake and sky offer a way to “escape” from daily life.

People use the space for exercise and fitness routines either alone or in groups. The most common are cardio workouts and bodyweight fitness.

Cyclists often use the concrete driveway either when passing through as part of a longer journey or go up and down a number of times as part of hill training.

The sites architecture and views of the lake is a popular place for tourists and local photographers. It is especially popular for modeling and wedding photography.

The site is a meeting place for long-boarders. The concrete driveway is good slope and has challenging turns. They use the top of the hill as a hang-out place.

During the winter, the slopped landscape is a popular place for children and the families to go tobogganing. Jumps are often made out of mounds of snow.

The concrete driveway and parking lot is used as a meeting point for auto enthusiasts who convene to talk and take photos of their vehicles in a picturesque setting

Some people use the space for yoga and meditation. There are also martial arts groups who use portions of the fields for holding classes and practicing.

The open fields are a popular place to light off fireworks during holidays. The site is also an excellent viewpoint for the city organized fireworks over Lake Ontario.

The water near the beach and by the retaining wall is a popular place for people to practice scuba diving. They prepare and put on their equipment on the beach.



The flat open fields are used by people to play sports like football and soccer. Participants hang out and talk when not playing.



The grounds are a popular place for residents to walk their dogs. The open fields give space for owners and their dogs to play fetch while being far away from traffic.



Artists use the space to paint and sketch aspects of the natural and built environment. There are also on occasion art installations on site.



The site is a workplace for some. Those who work in the filtration plant and those the city contracts to maintain the grounds.



Benches located at strategic viewpoints offer people a place to relax and enjoy their surroundings. People either sit by themselves or with a group.



Groups or individuals use the space to smoke marijuana as the grounds are away from the streets. They can view the nature and architecture with an altered mindset.



In the summer, on occasion there are people who use the public beach for small campfires and partying. This often includes teenagers drinking underage.



The shoreline of the site is often used for swimming on the hot summer days. People read, talk, or nap when relaxing by the water.



The beach is used as a launch point for water sports such as surfing, windsurfing, jet skiing, and kayaking. The space on the beach is used for relaxing when not on the water.

Additional Cultural Impact:

The Toronto Waterworks were a setting in Michael Ondaatje’s book “In the Skin of a Lion.” The site has also been as a location in film being depicted as a prison, asylum, brewery, and in one case the home of an evil genetic engineering corporation.