

Canadian Brownfields Case Study

Corktown Common



Figure 1: An aerial image of the complete Corktown Common project at full build out

PROJECT SUMMARY

Corktown Common, previously referred to as Don River Park, is a 7.3-hectare public park located at 155 Bayview Avenue in Toronto, Ontario. This addition to the city's public realm opened to the public in 2013¹. As the largest greenspace in the emerging West Don Lands community, Corktown Common is, in many ways, the focal point of the neighbourhood. The park attracts a range of users due to the diverse array of landscapes and recreational infrastructure. Grasslands, open fields, meadows, and marshes are interspersed with amenities including a splash pad, a firepit, a playground and a multipurpose field². A covered pavilion offers users respite in adverse weather conditions. The former brownfields site is multi-purpose in nature; not only does it provide critical green infrastructure, but it also serves as a flood protection landform, which has allowed for the development of surrounding communities³.

Site Characteristics & History

The Corktown Common site is located on the eastern edge of downtown Toronto. Its southern and eastern boundaries (the Don Yards and the Don River, respectively) represent harder, less permeable edges, though some permeability exists via a single pedestrian tunnel below the rails. Bayview Avenue curves along the northern and western frontages of the park; this extension of Bayview includes bicycle lanes and provides multiple pedestrian crossings. These elements connect the park to the wider neighbourhood. A

linear portion of the park runs north of the main space, along Bayview Avenue before terminating at the Queen Street bridge. Connections to other public realm spaces, namely Lawren Harris Square and Underpass Park, exist along Bayview Avenue.

Corktown Common exists within the urban fabric of the West Don Lands, which has a rich history. An initial investment in the area circa 1886 resulted in the straightening of the previously meandering Don River. This canalization led to the 'unlocking' of multiple

QUICK FACTS

Location

Toronto, Ontario

Project type

Public Realm Improvement / Flood Protection Landform

Site size

7.2 hectares

Land uses

Open space, recreation

Keywords/special features

Waterfront Toronto, West Don Lands, Park, Flood Protection

Website

<https://bit.ly/3sjF5JZ>

Project address

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Case studies were prepared as a course assignment by students enrolled in PL8312/PLE845: Brownfields & Sustainable Development, School of Urban and Regional Planning, Ryerson University (Winter 2021). Information for the case studies was obtained from online sources, available reports, and, in some cases, site visits and direct communication with stakeholders.

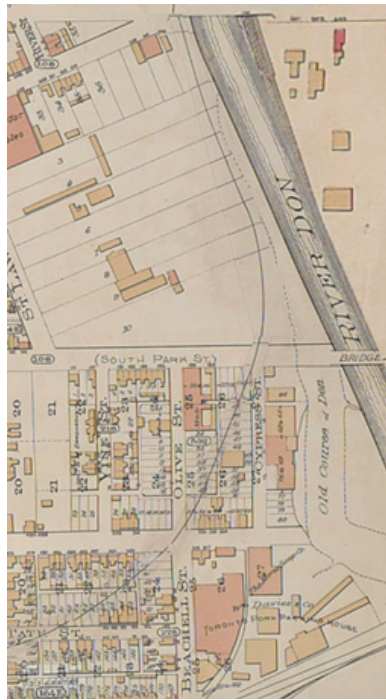
If you are aware of any errors or updates to the case studies, please contact chris.desousa@ryerson.ca

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lands for industrial use and the expansion of rails along the banks of Lake Ontario⁴. The W. Davies & Co. Pork Packing House, a pork processing facility was established on the lands in 1879. This was, at one point, the largest pork packer in Canada. This facility existed on the lands until a merger in 1927 precipitated the reorganization of the company and subsequent closure and demolition of several building⁵.

Less is written about the site in question from the abandonment to its eventual expropriation by the provincial government in the late 1980s when the City of Toronto made plans to build a new affordable community on this site. With provincial funding, six to seven thousand residential units were to be built, of which 60 percent were to be affordable. This concept, spanning the wider West Don Lands, named Ataratiri, failed to materialize due in part to the recessionary crisis of the 1990s. At the time, the complexities and costs associated with the environmental cleanup and necessary flood protection were cited as the reasons for the provincial retreat⁶. The lands were put on the market in 1996⁷. When plans to establish a racing and lottery facility emerged, community groups led by the Corktown Residents and Business Association formed the West Don Lands Committee (WDLC)⁸. The WDLC worked to engage with multiple stakeholders through the late 1990s and early 2000s. These events generated momentum for a mixed-used neighbourhood, but understood the barriers posed by environmental contamination and flood risks. As Toronto began bidding for the 2008 Olympics, the land was removed from the market as it was identified as a potential site of interest⁹. The Waterfront Task Force was created to this respect. Despite Toronto's unsuccessful Olympic bid, this task force was retooled into what is now Waterfront Toronto; a collaboration between municipal, provincial, and federal governments towards rehabilitating Toronto's waterfront. At this point, flood protection and



Source: City of Toronto

Figure 2: 1889 Goad Insurance Plan of the City of Toronto of the Corktown Common Area, the W. Davies & Co. Pork Packing House complex at the bottom right of the image.



Source: City of Toronto

Figure 3: 1992 aerial photograph of the Corktown Common area.

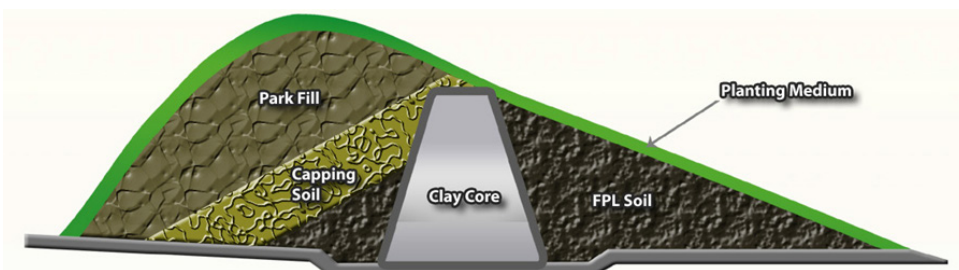
environmental cleanup of the region became a main priority for Waterfront Toronto¹⁰.

Cleanup

A Class Environmental Assessment was prepared on behalf of the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA), this generated a list of mitigation strategies for the West Don Lands. The Flood Protection Landform (FPL) was selected as the preferred alternative by the Class EA¹¹. The FPL was conceived in such a way as to remove 210 hectares of downtown land from the Don River floodplain, effectively allowing for their development and intensification¹². Although this work examines the park principally, it is important to consider how it has existed in relation to surrounding spaces; without the installation of this piece of infrastructure, development in the West Don Lands and beyond

would not be feasible

Work on the FPL began in 2007¹³. Canadian Consulting Engineer reports that the province chose to undertake a risk assessment remediation, instead of a more traditional dig and dump based remediation¹⁴. This process allowed for in-situ treatment of soils, leading to the diversion of more than 1 million tonnes of soil from disposal sites. This same report states that: "Other remediation measures include the installation of vapour barriers beneath structures, and hard and soft capping" were used¹⁵. These two technologies represent physical barriers preventing potential contaminants left on the site, from entering the soil, groundwater, or air. Once remediation was complete the installation of the FPL was possible. This 775 m long and 4-meter-high structure crosses the site



Source: Waterfront Toronto

Figure 4: Cross-section of the Flood Protection Landform

and creates a hard barrier in the event of a regulatory flood. At its core is a 1.5-meter deep clay core of varying heights, which itself is armoured to prevent erosion¹⁵. It is this clay core that prevents water from penetrating into the city-facing 'dry side' of the park. The core is topped with various layers of soil, with different compositions and functions based on their positionality in relation to water flows. A final planting medium caps the structure, allowing for vegetation to be added to the site. In total, approximately 400,000 cubic meters of clean soil, obtained from various construction sites throughout the Greater Toronto Area were used to construct the FPL¹⁶.

Planning and Redevelopment

Work for Corktown Common was done in conjunction with multiple other projects, and their associated studies. The Class EA for the West Don Lands, ran in conjunction with the precinct planning for two adjacent communities, the East Bayfront and the West Don Lands (occurring from 2003 to 2004). These works were preceded by the establishment of Toronto's Central Waterfront Secondary Plan, in 2002, and a previous study examining the future of the Port Lands, 'Unlocking Toronto's Port Lands', in 1999. These studies included provisions for community engagement and allowed for interested stakeholders to participate actively in the work being undertaken as part of the wider Waterfront Toronto mandate. When planning for flood

protection and Corktown Common, the TRCA engaged with community members through three Public Information Centres (PICs) in January, April and September of 2004. The PICs allowed for TRCA and consultants to inform community members on the progress being made as part of this study. Each session included display boards, presentations, and opportunities for questions. The consultation programming also provided for the creation of a Community Liaison Committee (CLC), composed of 19 members of the public acting as representatives for various groups of stakeholders. The CLC met on 5 occasions, from November 2003 through November 2004 and provided feedback on the structure for the PICs¹⁷.

Financing

Construction for this project was jointly funded by the provincial and federal governments. Total costs for the park and pavilion project were \$26,589,352. This included \$18,004,326 in federal funds and \$8,585,026 in provincial funds¹⁸.

Buildings

The design of the park includes a single building; the park pavilion includes indoor restrooms and office uses as well as covered outdoor uses such as a kitchenette¹⁹. Corktown Common's design capitalizes on the unique topography generated by the FPL below grade. Along the crest of the FPL, Corktown Common is separated into two sections, each with distinct landscaping and features. The 'wet side' faces the river and the lake; this side would flood in

the event of a major storm. This 'urban prairie' features various grass species; plantings selected as they will not compromise the integrity of the FPL. The city-facing 'dry side' includes a range of installations that promote active use. These include a sledding hill, a splash pad, a playground, multi-purpose lawns and trails. Woodland vegetation and an expansive marshland are featured in the park's 'dry side'²⁰. The design of the park as a whole seeks to reconnect the space with its native ecological heritage; native species are featured throughout the landscaping. The marshland is a tribute to the marshlands that once lined the banks of Lake Ontario and the Don River and provide diverse habitats for wildlife. Lastly, the marsh serves as a water reservoir for irrigation needs of the greenspace, reducing the inputs needed for maintenance²¹.

Lessons Learned

Challenges for this site may include maintenance of the landscaping over time. Given the investment that this greenspace represents, and the diversity of biomes and native species that were used, the City will need to carefully monitor greenspace represents, and the diversity of biomes and native species that were used, the City will need to carefully monitor pests and/or invasive species in the park.



Source: Canadian Architect

Figure 5: Multi-Use Trails



Source: Waterfront Toronto

Figure 6: Conceptual Map of Corktown Common

The benefits of the Corktown Common project are wide and have been touched upon in this report. The Flood Protection Landform, as a piece of infrastructure, has served to remove 210 hectares of downtown real estate from the Don River floodplain. This, in turn, has allowed for the development of the West Don Lands and the East Bayfront neighborhoods. Upon full build-out, these precincts will contribute 12,000 units to Toronto's housing stock^{11, 12}. Not only will these units serve to increase the stock of apartments in central Toronto, the associated property taxes could also be expected to contribute to the City of Toronto's budgetary needs.

The landscaped park sitting atop the FPL is also expected to be beneficial for these burgeoning communities. The various dynamic installations in Corktown Common will provide for diverse uses for citizens of all age groups and abilities year-round. Additionally, the design of Corktown Common has generated connections between itself and other greenspaces and public realm installations including the Martin Goodman Trail, the Lower Don River Trail, Lawren Harris Square and Underpass Park. This serves to create a destination for both local residents and those residing in other neighbourhoods within the City of Toronto.

With regards to planning for this community as it continues to grow in the next few years, the City should invest in the public realm in ways that complement Corktown Common and other existing elements. Space should be set aside to ensure that intensification will not come at the cost of a robust public realm. Lastly, this project sets a precedent in terms of resilience planning and design excellence that should be honored as the City and Waterfront Toronto continue to improve our relationship with our waterfront. For example, as the Don Mouth Naturalization and Portlands Flood Protection Project moves forward, the city and other involved stakeholders should lean on the work done here and the lessons learned throughout this project.

Endnotes

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