

Location: Toronto, Canada
Streetlife products: Solid Serif Benches, Solid Crosswise Benches, Solid Curved Benches,
Solid Crosswise Top Seats
Delivery: 2021
Landscape Architect: PMA Landscape Architects Ltd.

Modern revitalization of St James Park embraces a Victorian spirit in the heart of Toronto

Situated next to St James Cathedral in downtown Toronto, the revitalization of St James Park is a modern update to a well-loved park that also takes visitors back in time to when Toronto was an emerging city. One of the park's most striking features is the beautiful garden, based on a Victorian design, that surrounds a classically styled fountain. With new benches installed around the fountain and a diverse range of options for seating and relaxation dotted throughout the winding landscape, St James Park offers a social and contemplative place in the City.

The original site of the park was gifted by The Garden Club of Toronto to the City of Toronto in 1980. Together with Landplan Collaborative Ltd, the next two years were spent researching classic Victorian Gardens, known for their ornamental impact and elaborate patterns, displays, and colours, to develop the design of garden beds for the park.

In 2019-20, the park was expanded to the east as part of the St James Park Revitalization, a project undertaken by the City of Toronto with PMA as Landscape Architects. Following a year of construction, the park reopened with features such as an award-winning playground by Earthscape, an expanded central plaza, and an open-air pavilion by RAW, which was inspired by the Gothic Revival architecture of St. James Cathedral. Pathways were widened, and new perimeter fencing, matching the park's original iron fencing, was provided by the Toronto Historical Board (now Heritage Toronto) and the University of Toronto.

PMA explains that though the layout of St James Park is relatively simple in that it is a large square park with paths leading from each corner into a central plaza, it was essential to the designers to carve out unique spaces within the park, each with a different character, whether it be for socializing, a quick place to stop and rest, to sit alone quietly, or be in the heart of the 'action' of the park.

"With so many distinct uses happening within the park all at once, it was also important to us to create a legible hierarchy of spaces that would appeal to the various ways we hoped and anticipated people would use the park. Streetlife's Solid collection appealed to us as there are so many different selections within the product line that would help reinforce the flexibility of the park for so many different activities," says Dylan Cassidy, Project Landscape Architect at PMA.

At each of the four corner entries to the park, there is a small entry plaza with angular seating walls inviting people into the park. Each seat wall is clad with a Solid Crosswise top seat to provide warmth and varied materiality, adding character and much-needed seating at the transition between the sidewalk and the park.

Moving along the pathways into the park, PMA selected Solid 8 benches with backs to provide rest areas along each of the long paths. Each bench is oriented to offer views of the open lawn areas and the rest of the park — great for a quick rest or lingering and people-watching.

In both the playground area and the central plaza with timber shade pavilion and community stage, the landscape architects selected long, double-sided benches: the Solid Serif bench, perfect for gathering, social seating for groups of friends, families with children, and for viewing performances on stage.

Lastly, as part of the park improvements, PMA was tasked with revitalizing a small formal garden tucked away under the leafy canopy of mature trees along King Street. At the centre of the garden is a cherished Victorian-inspired fountain with a small circular gathering space and eight curving Solid Crosswise benches arranged in a concentric circle looking inward toward the fountain. *“By allowing people to gather in a quiet space to embrace the cooling effect of the fountain and the shade of the mature trees, the designers were able to create a totally unique space within an otherwise bustling downtown park,”* says Cassidy.

While the park has been diversified and modernized, elements found in the pre-existing Victorian garden design remain. These elements include footpaths around the geometric-shaped garden beds that feature fragrant roses and Victorian-style planting alongside urns, ornamental statues, and the central fountain.

Even having its Facebook account, the park reopened to great success and popularity, further cementing its place as one of the most loved outdoor public spaces in Old Town Toronto.

