

Location: Ottawa, Canada
Streetlife products: Drifter Linear Structures, Drifter Benches
Delivery: 2025
Landscape Architect: Susan Fisher - National Capital Commission (Commission de la capitale nationale)

Westboro Beachfront: Site-Sensitive Design sets a new benchmark for waterfront development in Canada

The National Capital Commission’s redevelopment of Westboro Beachfront presents a compelling model of integrated landscape architecture, heritage preservation, and sustainable urban design. Located on the Ottawa River within a 9-kilometre linear park corridor, the \$21 million project reimagines a long-cherished public beach as a contemporary civic space grounded in cultural and ecological context.

Led by NCC architect Marie Poirier and NCC landscape architect Susan Fisher, the design evolved through public and stakeholder consultation. The result is a site-sensitive intervention that balances new construction with the preservation and adaptation of existing assets. As the team explains, “the project preserved the existing site features that were already cherished by the public, while simultaneously transforming the landscape to meet contemporary needs.” The project rehabilitates three modernist towers by local architect James Strutt that opened in 1967—transforming them into accessible, day-lit spaces, including gender-neutral washrooms, a café and lifeguard office. The earth-sheltered pavilion has a public roof garden that flows seamlessly into the landscape. A newly constructed, four-season restaurant, designed to operate at carbon-zero, complements this heritage work with year-round functionality.

Public realm improvements extend across the waterfront, where a former parking lot was removed to create expanded greenspace, river-view nodes, and a thematic children’s play area inspired by the site’s logging history. Notably, removing a 65-car parking lot enabled a large open space adjacent to the river to host new amenities, significantly strengthening the site’s ecological and social performance. Ecological remediation efforts included the removal of invasive species and the protection of tree root systems to maximize tree preservation; and importantly, the project uncovered site assets that were buried under soil or blocked by invasive plants, including the stone foundations of Skead’s Mill and 500-million-year-old stromatolite fossils. These newly-exposed gems are now interpreted in situ through a coordinated signage strategy that enhances public understanding of the site’s layered history.

Central to the site’s spatial and material language is the strategic use of Streetlife furnishings. In particular, the Drifter benches and structures play an important role in bridging landscape, history, and public use. The use of square timber profiles directly references the squared logs that once floated downriver to milling – an intentional gesture that, as the design team notes, evokes the site’s history while serving contemporary and programmatic needs.

Positioned prominently on the main terrace, the Drifter Structure has become a social focal point, where timbers of various lengths and heights provide multiple usage possibilities, encouraging sitting, lounging, and informal play in a highly animated public setting.

From a specification standpoint, Streetlife benches were selected over custom-designed alternatives not only for their cost-effectiveness and thematic alignment but also for their sustainability profile. While the NCC had initially planned custom benches using salvaged logs, the selected solution ensured that “the use of lumber that would otherwise be wasted was also a consideration,” reinforcing circular material principles. Moreover, their “long lifespan with limited maintenance met sustainability goals,” contributing to the project’s broader carbon and lifecycle objectives.

Perhaps most compelling is how the redevelopment integrates new and rehabilitated features into the mature riverfront landscape. The team emphasizes that these interventions “respect and build on the existing site assets, integrating seamlessly into the mature landscape.” By preserving nearly all existing trees, the site opened with what designers describe as a “mature, green look that blends elegantly with the surrounding riverfront landscape,” offering immediate shade, comfort, and continuity.

The Westboro Beachfront redevelopment demonstrates how urban infrastructure, when approached through a lens of cultural narrative, environmental stewardship, and material clarity, can result in a deeply engaging and resilient public landscape. Through deliberate design choices—from macro-level planning to the detailing of a single bench—the project sets a new benchmark for waterfront development in Canada.

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