



Historic first responders

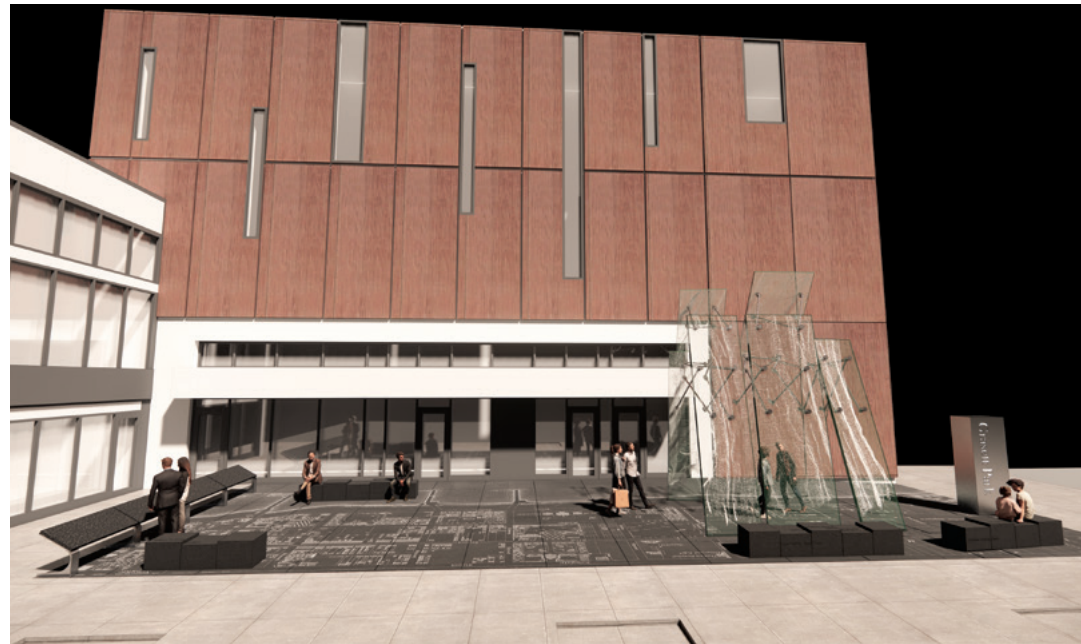
A new park commemorates those who died helping the victims of a 19th-century epidemic

by Jamie Bradburn

When the Ireland Park Foundation began planning Dr. George Robert Grasett Park to honour the medical professionals who sacrificed their lives to treat the victims of the 1847 typhus epidemic, it would have been hard to imagine just how relevant their project would be to the present. “It’s extraordinary that the park will open in the latter stages of a pandemic or shortly thereafter,” observes Robert Kearns, founder and chair of the foundation.

From that time to the present, medical professionals have provided the frontline defence against outbreaks of illness, ranging from typhus to COVID-19. Often putting their own health at risk, doctors, nurses, and other healthcare workers try to bring comfort, hope, and treatment to those facing life-threatening illnesses.

The park will be one of the city’s most compact, occupying a narrow plaza (only 80 feet long and 20 feet wide) in front of the Artscape Sandbox at the southeast corner of Adelaide and Widmer Streets. It honours one aspect of a larger crisis commemorated at Ireland Park, at the foot of the hulking Canada Malting Silos on Toronto’s waterfront. The typhus epidemic grew out of one of the Victorian era’s worst tragedies, the Great Famine, also known as the Irish Potato Famine. When blight caused Ireland’s potato harvests to fail repeatedly during the mid-1840s, mass starvation led to a million deaths and the emigration of two million people. At the peak of the exodus in

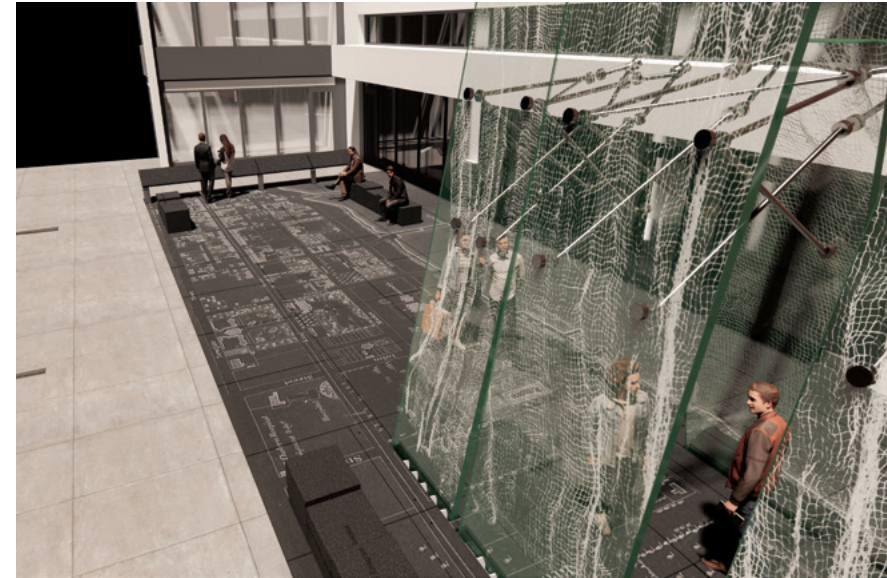


1847, nearly 110,000 Irish journeyed to British North America aboard crowded, dirty ships — the perfect environment for lice to spread typhus to already weakened passengers.

Though all incoming passengers were inspected for typhus at the Grosse Île quarantine station near Quebec City, many who passed their medical examination were still incubating the illness, resulting in more outbreaks as ships sailed westward. When symptoms emerged, they were awful: delirium, dysentery, rashes, and enlargement of the internal organs. The infection generally lasted for two weeks, killing 50–75% of those afflicted.

Dr. George Grasett was hired to be the facility’s chief attending surgeon. An Anglican whose brother was the rector of St. James Cathedral, Grasett was a well-connected member of the community who was involved in programs to help the destitute, such as the House of Industry. His concerns for the welfare of others crossed sectarian lines, at a time when the idea of Protestants tending to the needs of Catholics like the Irish migrants was not appreciated by everyone. “He knowingly put himself at risk to treat an incurable, infectious disease in the hope of saving lives,” Kearns observes.

When the first waves of migrants arrived in Toronto in May 1847, emergency sheds were erected at Rees’s Wharf (located near the present-day site of the Metro Toronto Convention Centre) to process the migrants. As more people arrived, the city’s healthcare resources were strained. On June 17, after several other possible sites were considered, Toronto General Hospital was redesignated as an emigrant hospital. At that time the hospital was located at the northwest corner of King and John Streets, which is now the TIFF Bell Lightbox site. The property, known as the Hospital Reserve, took up the entire block including the site of Grasett Park, and had been used for patient care since 1829. As more typhus victims were sent there, a series of emergency fever sheds were built on the grounds.



On July 16, less than a month after taking up the position, Grasett died from typhus. At least ten other doctors, nurses, and orderlies who worked at the hospital, including Grasett’s successor Dr. Joseph Hamilton, would also fall. The city’s first Roman Catholic bishop, Michael Power, who regularly visited patients, also died in the line of duty. Overall, in a city whose population was just under 20,000, 38,650 emigrants were processed over the course of 1847, of whom 1,124 died of typhus.

While Ireland Park’s focus is on the overall victims of the famine, Grasett Park focuses on the medical professionals and support staff who gave their lives on its site. Depending on the course of COVID-19, it is hoped that the park will officially launch in July 2021 to coincide with the anniversary of Grasett’s death on July 16.

Once the park is open, the first thing you may notice is a series of tall glass panels leaning into each other and embedded with printed patterns resembling cheesecloth, which was used as mosquito netting for the fever sheds. Kearns imagines that anyone walking by at night will, thanks to

the park’s illumination, “see these panels of cheesecloth billowing in the breeze,” symbolizing the healing process.

The park will be surfaced with granite etched with the *Topographical Plan of the City and Liberties of Toronto*, a map published by James Cane in 1842. This image will help visitors visualize what the city looked like during the epidemic, and where people recovered or perished. A series of benches will be inlaid with the names of those who died tending to the sick.

As we celebrate the heroic efforts of healthcare workers during the COVID-19 crisis, Kearns feels that the courage of those who performed similar actions nearly 175 years ago should be remembered, especially in a city that welcomed subsequent waves of migration from around the world. “To volunteer like these men and women did, and disappear into that summer of 1847 and be completely lost to memory — I think we’re duty-bound to restore them to memory and to celebrate what they did. They should never be overlooked or forgotten.”

renderings courtesy Denegri Bessai Studio



2150 Lake Shore Blvd W (former Christie Cookies Site) Toronto, Ontario

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