

WELLNESS BY DESIGN

Treatment centres bring people together in nature to heal in comfort. **Christopher Hume, GT3**



GTA GREATER TORONTO AREA

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West Park reconnects patients to nature



Christopher Hume

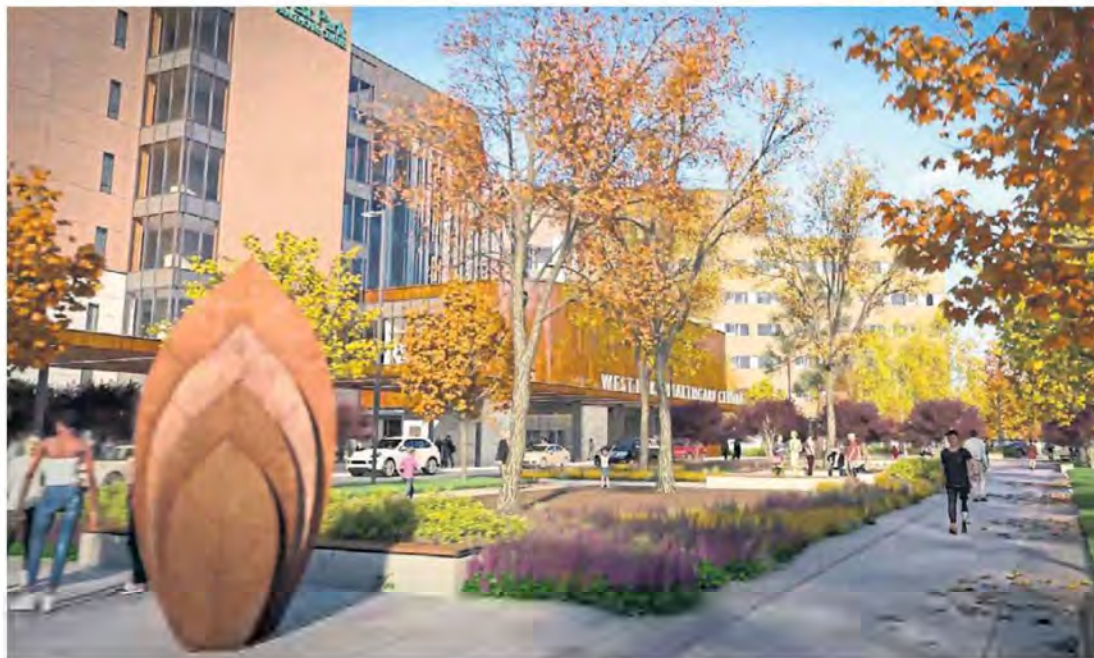
OPINION

The architecture of wellness has never been in better shape. From the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health on Queen St. to Bridgepoint Active Healthcare at Broadview and Gerrard Sts., 21st-century medical design has started to put people before process and allow patients their humanity. This may not sound revolutionary, or even new, but conventional thinking has long emphasized the institution over the individual.

Now comes West Park Healthcare Centre at Jane St. and Eglinton Ave. W., overlooking the Humber River. Founded in 1904 as a tuberculosis sanitarium, it will take its first step into the modern age at a groundbreaking ceremony this week ahead of its latest incarnation, a patient-focused rehabilitation hub. What makes the centre different is the role its park-like campus plays in helping people heal.

"This is a place for patients with traumatic injury to get better through the great outdoors," West Park vice-president Shelley Ditty explains. "We use all our 27 acres for wellness. Now we want to reimagine our land and use it better. Nature is calming, but it also has the potential to be a very active part of recovery. It helps patients get their life back."

When work is finally completed in 2024, the grounds of West Park will be divided into a



ARTIST RENDERING

Redevelopment of the West Park Healthcare Centre will redefine how natural surroundings can help enhance rehabilitation by putting patients' well-being and humanity before processes.

series of smaller spaces, all different yet accessible.

"There's a lot of evidence about the therapeutic outcomes of landscape," architectural planning consultant Ben Embir says. "One of the evidence-based ideas was to create a variety of fragmented spaces. This is a shift from the idea of the big central lawn, which engages people more as spectators than users."

Embir says those spaces include therapeutic trails, shady areas, four-season "rooms" and 28 gardens — all barrier free, fully connected and open to the public. Indeed, the public — including dog walkers — will also play a part in the recovery process. Their job is to keep patients aware of the larger community and help eliminate that feeling of being cut off from the world that has historically been so much a part of the hospital experience.

The architectural brain behind the massive project, Ed Applebaum of Montgomery Sisam Architects, has been working with West Park since 2005. For him, the task was to redesign and open up a facility site originally intended for isolation. "This is a place of

healing," he says. "We created a new building that will allow us new parkland. The challenge was to figure out how to connect the building to nature."

Today, West Park comprises a number of structures, some constructed as recently as the 1970s and '80s. The fact they will be demolished indicates just how recently and dramatically attitudes to health-care design have changed. The new imperatives are connection and transparency. Rooms, 80 per cent of them single occupancy and all with their own bathroom, allow patients to maintain their dignity. Each room also has a window with views of the campus. That may sound a frill, but research shows that access to greenery — visual as well as physical — makes people heal faster. Even hanging an image of nature on a hospital wall has positive effects. Abstract imagery doesn't. The colour of those walls also contributes to the recovery process as do lighting and materials.

The lesson learned at West Park is that factors traditionally rejected as unscientific, even frivolous, actually matter because they improve outcomes.

And that, let's not forget, is what this is all about. The most dramatic result could well be a series of enormous terraces that will extend from all six floors of West Park's new building. Each one will have a large planter and overlook the campus. They will be gathering places for patients and their families, therapeutic exercises and exchange and, of course, healing.

"All of our design thinking is about the interaction between nature and recovery," says Ditty. "We want to bring the outdoors inside and the inside outdoors. Expectations have changed. Transparency is a requirement."

West Park patients stay for days, weeks and sometimes years. In other words, it is their home. And so it must provide all the qualities associated with home — comfort, familiarity, safety and a sense of domesticity and belonging. That's a lot to ask of a medical institution, but change is underway. A world that has sought to separate people, one from another, now hopes to bring them back together. Finally, the future looks healthy.

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