

Ontario Places

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Walking around downtown Toronto neighbourhoods one is constantly surprised by the modernist schools that stand in contrast to the residential fabric of the city.

These schools are a result of the boom of students in the Toronto Board of Education during the 1950s and early 1960s. The federal government, faced with increasing enrollment of new Canadians relocating to Toronto, covered up to 75% of the total cost of building, while the Province funded the rest. The schools which resulted were a dramatic break with the beige brick institutions of the past.

At the centre of this revolutionary school design storm was **Frederick C. Etherington**, Chief Architect for the Toronto Board of Education.

Etherington was employed by the Board for 42 years. He became Chief Architect in 1951 and retired in 1965. He had apprenticed with **Sproatt & Rolph Architects**, and **David R. Franklin Architect** after receiving his education from the Ontario College of Art. A studious man, Etherington completed his accreditation as an architect under the RAIC syllabus programme. In addition, he completed several Business Administration courses in order to handle the \$31 million budget for the new schools building programme¹ an enormous sum of money at that time.

"Etherington was one of the finest persons I ever met, sensitive to design, architecture and people," recalls Irving Boigon

Etherington's team included **Gordon Frittenburg**, Deputy Chief Architect; **Peter Pennington**, the principal design architect; **Harry Facey** Chief Engineer; **Bernie Gibbs**, Chief Draftsman and **Harvey Self**, Comptroller of Buildings and Plant.

Etherington selected the projects which remained in-house and those that were to be completed by external consultants. Usually the projects with more interesting programmes, more complex technical requirements and requiring community input were handled in-house. He awarded the other commissions to leading architectural

firms in the city. He encouraged simple and effective designs with integrated structural solutions. Most importantly, he supported final designs without compromise in the face of the board bureaucracy. "Etherington was one of the finest persons I ever met, sensitive to design, architecture and people,"² recalls **Irving Boigon**, one of the talented young architects Etherington passed commissions to. Boigon completed five schools for the Board during Etherington's tenure. A fresh approach characterized all the schools of the period, especially those developed by the Board's staff under Etherington's direction.

Williamson Road Junior & Senior School, completed in 1961 consisted of a new addition to an existing 1914 structure. The design integrated a reinforced concrete frame and folded plate roof using precast concrete floors slabs. The elegant pool design included side walls splayed at a 30 degree angle with floor to ceiling glass panels in between. Above the two-storey pool, was a two-storey gymnasium. Other unusual vertical spaces included a two-storey staff room with an upper level retreat and a street facade which consisted of a steel latticed girder with glazing infill. The pupils' lunch room featured a stair down to an exterior grassed court. These touches give the school architectural poetry and a programmatic resonance lacking in most institutional settings.



Frederick C. Etherington, Chief Architect, Toronto Board of Education at work

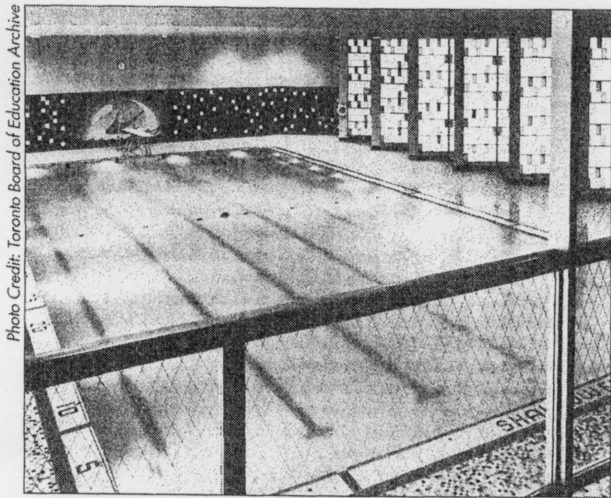


Photo Credit: Toronto Board of Education Archive

Williamson Road Junior and Senior School, Toronto Board of Education Building Division, Frederick C. Etherington, Chief Architect

Lansdowne Senior School, completed in 1961 was "Toronto's first circular school"³ It is even more exuberant. The design resolved tight site conditions by having an 9-sided structure housing classrooms and a rectangular wing housing an underground parking with the gymnasium above. The "ordinary elements of the school were made extraordinary"⁴ by design architect **Peter Pennington** who worked on all the schools and brought

the most advanced architectural concepts to bear in their conception. The exterior buttress-like piers were designed as support lifts to hoist up the concrete roof and easily accommodate additional floors. During the excavation a large gabbro boulder which had been deposited over 12,000 years ago by a glacier was uncovered and used as a landscaping feature. The sculptural and colourful chimney stack became a neighbourhood landmark.

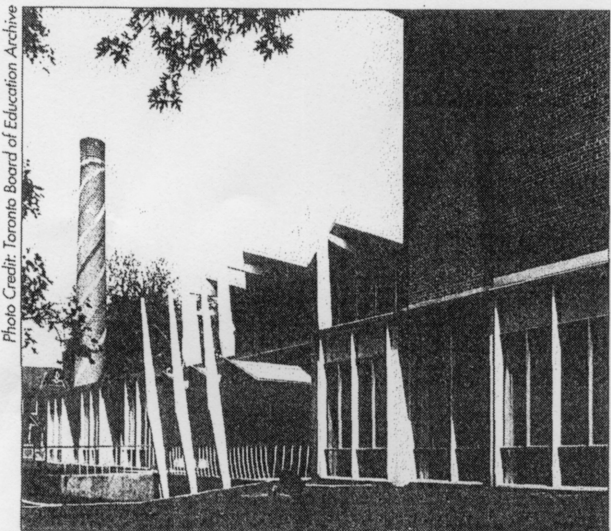


Photo Credit: Toronto Board of Education Archive

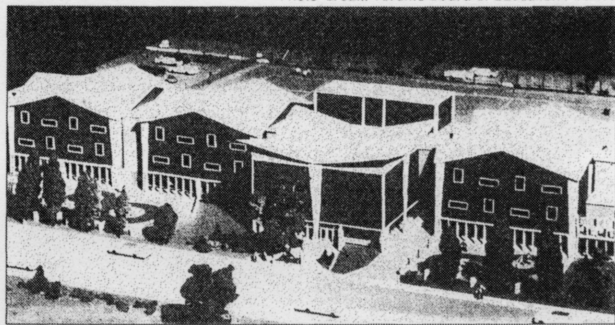
Lansdowne Senior Public School, Toronto Board of Education Building Division, Frederck C. Etherington, Chief Architect, Peter Pennington Design Architect

Davisville Junior and Metro Toronto School for the Deaf, combined a junior school, a day nursery and a school for the deaf. Of all the projects headed by Etherington and designed by Pennington, this is the most unique. The school is constructed with a reinforced concrete frame that is expressed on the exterior. The three classroom pods have winged hyperbolic paraboloid roofs and small windows punctuating the walls like painted squares on a colour field canvas. The central piece housing the main entry, the offices, the general purpose rooms and cafeteria, has an inverted roof design.

exemplify the experimentation, vitality and solid achievement of the public sector

Etherington, a consummate administrator completed all these projects on budget and on time. His greatest talent was successfully convincing the Board to produce schools of quality. It is a credit to this "staff architect" that his great vision of supporting a new bold school design resulted in the special Ontario Places that have benefitted Toronto's children.

Photo Credit: Toronto Board of Education Archive



Davisville Public School and Metro Toronto School for the Deaf, Toronto Board of Education Building Division, Frederick C. Etherington, Chief Architect, Peter Pennington Design Architect

A pavilion separates the two pods housing the school for the deaf from the west pod housing the junior school and the day nursery component with its enchanting roof garden playground. The outstanding colours were selected by Irving Boigon whom Etherington brought in for consultation.

The projects carried out by Etherington's team bear witness to the excellence of school design that characterized our province. Parkway Vocational School, Huron Street, Indian Road Crescent, etc., are an expression of that high level of educational and architectural culture. They

- 1 Interview with Mrs. Florence Etherington by L. Ferrara & M. Contreras, November 5, 1993.
- 2 Interview with Irving Boigon, by L. Ferrara, November 1993.
- 3 *Globe & Mail*, March 31 1961
- 4 "A Gay School for Children", *Canadian Art*, by P. Pennington, May-June 1962.