



More than pipes, pumps and groundwater

BY KARL KESSLER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER LEE

We design a building to accommodate and shelter a particular aspect of our lives. To perform a specific function. To be a house, factory, office block, school. To let us do what we need to do.

And even a small building is big enough that it also makes a ready billboard. To pose a statement, suggestion, question, declaration. To let us whisper, speak, shout out what we want to say; something that is likely to persist for generations. This is, in fact, also part of its function.

At the Middleton Water Pumping Station in Cambridge, the original 1891 pumphouse – still in operation – speaks of

more than pipes, pumps and groundwater.

Anchoring the façade is the suggestion of a scaled-back Norman-Romanesque style tower, perfectly semicircular with a conical roof. The pumphouse walls are yellow brick on a stone foundation: not unusual, but the simple decorative brick cornice running beneath the eaves echoes a Romanesque corbel table. The narrow windows on stone sills are topped with semi-elliptical arches. The roof is steeply pitched. For this modest building, the sum of all these parts is a visual impression of fortification.

In the late 1800s, a safe, reliable water supply was identified as essential for disease control and fire suppression, and through legislation in the 1880s municipal waterworks were established in towns and cities across Canada. The public face of this

transformation was infrastructure whose architecture looked reassuringly stately and sturdy.

The driving force behind the design of many of these early water systems was civil engineer Willis Chipman (1855-1929). The overall plan at Middleton was his, and the pumphouse has been attributed to him as well, as have others in Ontario. In Chipman's era, in addition to creating construction plans, it was common enough for engineers or builders to express esthetic creativity. Here, that meant adding a touch of fancy to an otherwise utilitarian building.

The Middleton site is operated today by the Region of Waterloo.

Karl Kessler is co-ordinator of Doors Open Waterloo Region. 

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