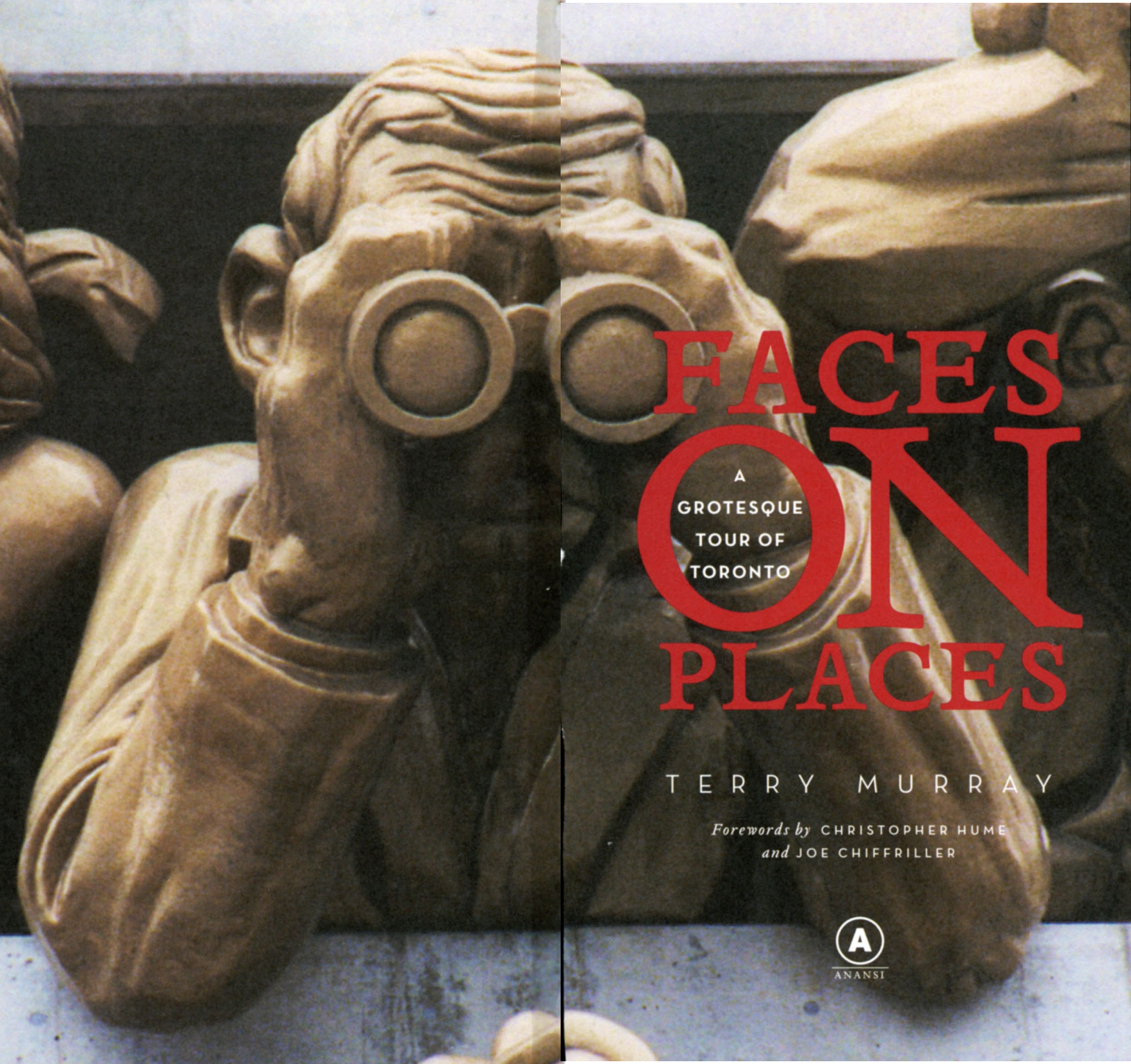

# FACES ON PLACES

## A GROTESQUE TOUR OF TORONTO

TERRY MURRAY

*Forewords by* CHRISTOPHER HUME *and* JOE CHIFFRILLER

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Published in 2006 by
House of Anansi Press Inc.
110 Spadina Avenue, Suite 801
Toronto, ON, M5V 2K4
Tel. 416-363-4343
Fax 416-363-1017
www.anansi.ca

Distributed in Canada by
HarperCollins Canada Ltd.
1995 Markham Road
Scarborough, ON, M1B 5M8
Toll free tel. 1-800-387-0117

Pages 209–210 constitute a continuation of this copyright page.

10 09 08 07 06 1 2 3 4 5

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Murray, Terry, 1954–
Faces on places : a grotesque tour of Toronto / Terry Murray.

Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-88784-741-2

1. Stone carving — Ontario — Toronto.
2. Decoration and ornament — Ontario — Toronto. I. Title.

NA3513.T6M87 2006 729'.5 C2005-907429-9

Cover and text design: Ingrid Paulson
Front-cover photograph: Queen's Park
Pages ii–iii photograph: Rogers Centre
Pages vi–vii photograph: U of T Admissions Office
Page 181 photograph: Lillian H. Smith Library

Canada Council for the Arts | Conseil des Arts du Canada

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CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

*We acknowledge for their financial support of our publishing program the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP).*

Printed and bound in Canada



*To Kathy Margittai,*
*who helped me find*
*what I thought I had lost*

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GARGOYLES

THEORIES ABOUND as to why Western architecture has been ornamented with figures — whether they be gods or mortals, celestial beings or rude humans, the Devil himself or souls trapped in stone on their way to hell, recognizable animals or bizarre hybrids. One school of thought is that traditionally they were used by the Church to instruct the illiterate masses or terrify them into compliance with the Ten Commandments. Another suggests that the figures were believed to keep away evil spirits and protect a building's occupants.

In some cases, carvings were functional. In fact, the late British architect and mechanical engineer J. E. Gordon claimed that they actually kept the walls upright. In his 1978 book *Structures: Or, Why Things Don't Fall Down*, he explained that "in a building with any pretension to sophistication, there is most likely to be at least one oblique force arising from the sideways thrust of the roof members, from archways or vaultings or from various other forms of construction."





That oblique force then displaces the "thrust line"— which should run neatly down the middle of the wall and keep it vertical — into a potentially destabilizing, curved path. The logic is counterintuitive, but adding weight to the top restores a wall's stability by bringing "an erring thrust line back, more or less, to where it ought to be," Professor Gordon explained.

"If it is that sort of building and you can afford it, a line of statues will always help. This is the structural justification for the pinnacles and statuary on Gothic churches and cathedrals."

There is another, more immediately apparent function of some sculpture on buildings: the drainage provided by gargoyles that stretch out from buildings and overhang streets and squares. Strictly speaking, a gargoyle is stone-covered plumbing with a face — a fantastic open-mouthed creature that carries water away from buildings, protecting the building's walls and foundations from erosion.

A colourful description of gargoyles and their function appeared in the *Toronto Daily Star* in 1932, in the midst of the controversy over the fate of the creatures on Old City Hall (which is discussed below). A cartoon shows a "Professor Chickwick" standing before a blackboard on which he has drawn a perching gargoyle emitting a torrent of rainwater.

The professor explained, "If you walked along the streets, say during the reign of Queen Elizabeth [I], you would notice the gargoyles pointing from

the roofs all around you. They were as common as the signs which hung over every door. If it were a rainy day you had a very unpleasant walk, for the signs swung and rattled, flinging the drops around, while the water poured from the gargoyles in a hundred different streams upon your head.





**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: CHUM-City Building; Timothy Eaton Memorial Church, with gargoyle at rest and in action; North Toronto house boasts two working gargoyles.**

"Numbering shops and houses of course did away with the swinging signs. Drain pipes caused the gargoyles to disappear."

But gargoyles did not completely disappear. Three striking sets of examples in Toronto can be found on the CHUM-City Building, a residence in North Toronto, and Timothy Eaton Memorial Church.

It is difficult to photograph gargoyles in action. They are generally found near the tops of buildings,

meaning that the photographer has to shoot upward, risking getting his or her equipment soaked — or, at a minimum, getting raindrops on the lens, possibly distorting or obscuring the picture.

A safer and dryer alternative is to shoot *evidence* of the gargoyle's work. Melting snow pours through a gargoyle just as rain does, and if the cycle of thawing and freezing is just right, the freeze will turn the dripping snowmelt into an icicle. (This is a favour nature provides the photographer only; as will be explained shortly, freeze-thaw cycles are the enemies of stone.)

TOP: Canon Theatre
BOTTOM: Jarvis Street Baptist Church

Other stone creatures look like gargoyles but do not have pipes or conduits through their mouths. Instead, they have channels in their backs to conduct water over their heads and away from the buildings.

There are still other creatures that look like gargoyles but have no visible means of drainage. These too can be called "gargoyles," according to Walter Arnold, an American stone carver whose gargoyles appear on Washington National Cathedral in the U.S. capital and Tribune Tower in Chicago.

"There is the technical, pure usage and the accepted everyday use," he said in an interview. "Purists are very rare. In the pure sense, even an unornamented scupper which extends out of the wall is a gargoyle, and any carved creature which is not a drain spout is a grotesque.

"However, language changes with common usage, so I feel it is acceptable to use the term 'gargoyle' in the generic sense."

But just why there are gargoyles on these largely early-twentieth-century buildings is not clear. Most church histories focus on the congregation; when they deal with architecture at all, it is usually to do with the interior.

OPPOSITE: Jarvis Street Baptist Church
ABOVE: Claridge Apartments

But how can four gargoyle-like figures flanking the main doors of Jarvis Street Baptist Church be ignored? And the church that used to be known as St. Timothy and All Eatons? The late R. H. Hubbard, an art historian and long-time chief curator at the National Gallery of Canada, described it as "somewhat more interesting outside than in."

The gargoyles on the North Toronto house can be explained, at least in part, by the fact that the builder and first resident was a stone merchant.

Although there is no explanation given for the inclusion of the "generic" spoutless gargoyles on the four corners of Old City Hall, their history is well documented. They are Toronto's newest, placed on the tower in 2003.

In fact, they were *re*placed. A dozen gargoyles sprang from the building when it opened in 1899 as Toronto's third city hall — from the corners of the clock tower, as well as lower down on the building, from the centre part of the north façade and from the turrets flanking both side entrances.

The clock-tower gargoyles weighed an estimated 900 kilograms each, and cantilevered out about three metres from the 103.6-metre tower. But by 1921, the gargoyles' unique posture (projecting horizontally instead of bending closer to the building) and the erosive forces of high winds and freeze-thaw cycles started to take their toll.

On the afternoon of Tuesday, March 8, a gargoyle's jaw dropped — literally — from the northeast corner of the clock tower. It fell more than thirty metres, crashed through the Old City Hall roof and narrowly missed killing James Marshall, a draftsman in the works department drafting room.

"It was noticed lately that some of the New Brunswick sandstone of which these odd ornaments are made was crumbling," according to a front-page story in the *Toronto Daily Star* the next day, "but that part of one should loosen and fall through the roof was hardly anticipated."

The immediate reaction of city architect G. F. W. Price was to propose removing the gargoyles. Not surprisingly, E. J. Lennox, Old City Hall's architect, disagreed. "'There's no need of removing them,' declared Mr. Lennox to *The Star* to-day, and he spoke with quite evident feeling," said a story a few days later.





An Old City Hall gargoyle — but the record is not clear about whether this one was destined for the clock tower. The record is similarly unclear about whether master stonemason Arthur Tennison is on the left or seated in front of the gargoyle.

CREDIT: CITY OF TORONTO ARCHIVES, FONDS 1268, ITEM 214

"'No decent architect would do such a thing as to remove them all. It will spoil the general appearance of the city hall,'" he added, suggesting another piece of gargoyle might not fall for another hundred years.

However, a subsequent story said information had been leaked to the paper that two other jaws had fallen "some time ago." More fragments were to break away and eighteen years were to pass before anything definitive was done. It was not until 1939 that the gargoyles were finally removed.

The entire Old City Hall was threatened with demolition when the fourth and current city hall opened across the street in 1965 and planning began for the Eaton Centre. However, a group of



New gargoyles on Old City Hall

concerned citizens, known as the Friends of Old City Hall, convinced the city to preserve the earlier building. (It was declared a National Historical Site by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada in 1989.)

With that battle won, talk turned, by the early 1970s, to replacing the missing gargoyles. According to the glacial pace at which civic decisions are often made, it would be nearly twenty years before







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that project began. In 1991, the Ventin Group, an architectural firm with a strong heritage bent, began a twelve-year, $35-million renovation of Old City Hall, culminating in the return of the gargoyles.

The Ventin architects were not actually able to resurrect the old gargoyles, which had been chipped off the tower. No fragments survived and there were no drawings or detailed photos of the originals.

"We've learned from other gargoyles on the building what their style would have been," said Peter Berton, the partner in charge of the renovation. "Our gargoyles follow the silhouette of the originals, but we didn't have intricate details, so we didn't make replicas.

"We like to work from the information we have. When you can replicate a detail, you should. When you can't replicate a detail, you should avoid conjecture."

(The *Star*'s 1921 front-page report of the first falling gargoyle was accompanied by a photo, already more than twenty years old, that was said to be one of the tower gargoyles before it was hoisted into place. The City of Toronto Archives now holds the photo, and its notes say the gargoyle was *not* from the tower.)

It is believed that the four original gargoyles were all different, but the new models are all identical. They have the look of stone but in fact are made of lightweight bronze. Their creation was a joint effort by the Ventin Group and the classically trained stone carvers at Traditional Cut Stone Ltd. Joseph Por, the Ventin contract administrator, sent an archival picture of the tower with the gargoyles to the carvers, who produced a sketch of the new gargoyle.

"The sketch showed the gargoyle with a closed wing, instead of being open for flight as in the photo," Por said of the design the Ventin architects approved. "And on the tower, there are remnants of where the gargoyle claws were attached to the stone. They show that the (original) gargoyle had a narrower stance."

Each full-size, 136-kilogram gargoyle was then produced and erected through the additional work of MST Bronze Limited Art Foundry, Heather and Little Limited, and Clifford Masonry Limited, all of Toronto. The new gargoyles earned the Ventin Group an honourable mention in Toronto's 2005 Architecture and Urban Design Awards.

"These flamboyant Victorian Romanesque details, replacing originals that once adorned the clock tower of E. J. Lennox's Old City Hall, recall a time and architectural taste very different from our own," the jury said, "hence their value as reminders of the mental worlds through which Toronto has passed in its journey to the present, and as gracious enrichments of the historical layering the jury believes to be crucially important in urban life."







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