

The New City Hall Administration Building: A Good Neighbour in Downtown Cambridge

“Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.” Leonardo da Vinci

Architecture might be the most public of art forms. Unlike a painter whose art might be seen by a few visitors to a gallery, an architect’s work cannot be hidden. His or her creation must stand alone for all to see.

When a new building goes up, people immediately see it and talk about it. They study and criticize, offering opinions as to the structure’s aesthetic value. The work of an architect, more than any other artist, becomes part of the public’s consciousness.

As a result, an architect must create works that find a balance between originality and giving the people what they want.

The new City Hall Administrative Building in Cambridge serves both needs.

Created by the world-renown Toronto architects Diamond and Schmitt, the new building offers several design innovations. At the same time, it fits in with the heritage of the city’s downtown area.

“I think from the beginning we thought of the heritage aspects,” says Gary McCluskie, lead architect on the project.



“The chance to work with existing heritage buildings was one of the great potentials of (this) project.”

McCluskie says from the start, the new building was designed to blend in with its historic neighbours. Project designers needed to keep the height of the project down to avoid blocking views of these historic structures. The roof had to be in line with buildings like Old City Hall and the Farmers Market. That meant the new structure could be no larger than four stories.

Designers played with horizontal, rather than vertical lines, to augment and link the new structure with the old. The result is a complementary design that, rather than drawing the viewer’s eye away from heritage buildings, acts as a “punctuation point.”

The new building features a unique step design: three stories on the south side and four stories on the north. The west end of the north elevation also steps down.

“The fundamental aspect of the new building is this step design,” says McCluskie.

Another fundamental aspect is that the new building is open and light, maintaining clear sightlines with the downtown area.

“The real strengths of the new building from the inside are the tremendous views of Old City Hall and Farmers’ Market and the Firehall,” says McCluskie.

These sightlines offer workers and visitors to the new building “rewarding views” of what McCluskie calls a “town of towers.”

Another major design feature of the new building is its four-storey atrium. It provides wide open space for public events. Large multi-purpose doors can be opened to allow activities to move inside while covered arcades and canapés protect against harsh weather.

These aspects make the new building useful and functional for civic events.

“It’s a community-use building and a good tie-in with outside functions,” says McCluskie.



Most people are likely aware of the new building’s unique environmental features. The building’s bio-wall, green roof, solar windows, energy-saving lights and rainwater recycling aspects put it on the leading edge of sustainable design.

Sustainable design features are a trademark of Diamond and Schmitt. McCluskie’s team has come up with similar award-winning designs such as the new building at the University of Guelph-Humber. The company also has a track-record developing municipal buildings within a heritage context such as

the new City Hall in Jerusalem.

These seemingly contradictory challenges drew McCluskie to the Cambridge project. That and creating a “quieter” piece of architecture that adds to - rather than subtracts from - the city’s historic downtown.

“I think that is the main virtue of this building; it’s designed to be a good neighbour,” says Rick Haldenby, Director of the University of Waterloo’s School of Architecture. “It uses the timeless form of the atrium and links public spaces inside the building with civic spaces outside.”

“We knew the identity of the new building wasn’t a problem,” adds McCluskie. “We didn’t have to create a landmark, because a landmark quality already existed.”

He adds that “to be working on a project that has leading edge technology in a heritage context is very exciting.”