

A nice place to pay taxes - and hang out

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The ancient Athenians called it the agora. A meeting place. A civic space, where people would gather to discuss the comings and goings of life, surrounded by government buildings and mercantile shops.

Before this year, if you walked any of the streets along the Grand River in downtown Cambridge, you'd have found the small and scenic Southern Ontario city got most of it right. Victorian-era shops and restaurants with limestone facades dot the downtown core. An old, former city hall stands stoically near a historical fire hall with aging red brick. And churches and schools, some converted from old factories that wouldn't look out of place in a sunnier Dickens' London, line the streets along the river.

But city hall? It was tucked away in a dull grey building, away from the city's core, after several municipalities formed the City of Cambridge in 1973.

And the civic square, the central location where the city would hold events? It didn't really exist.



Doug Craig, Mayor of Cambridge, Ont.

“We were renting for 35 years, and it became very evident we needed to do something on a more permanent basis,” says Doug Craig, the city's mayor.

On a recent morning, Mr. Craig sits in the fruits – perhaps “shrubby” is more accurate – of the city's labour: a \$30-million, 85,000-square-foot building that opened in June after about two years of construction.

In August, the building received a gold certification in the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program from the Canada Green Building Council. It incorporates a variety of energy-saving methods, from collecting rain water in a 10,000-litre cistern and using it to flush toilets, to taking advantage of natural light with enormous windows.

“At a time when people are environmentally conscious, I think we've answered the bell on that one,” Mr. Craig says. “This is going to be the finest, most eco-friendly, energy-efficient municipal hall in Canada, so we've set the example of what can be done with buildings.”

The new city hall may be the largest capital project in the city's history, but officials estimate the city will cut its energy costs about 42 per cent relative to a typical building this size. That translates to roughly \$160,000 a year, or \$1.6-million over 10 years, in savings.

But there's more to it than that, says Don Smith, the city's chief administrative officer and committee chairman for the project.

“It gives a signal to people in the investment community ... that the city is serious and wanting to revitalize its core area,” he says.

“There are a couple hundred people in this building that buy goods and services downtown [and] support the market, and so it has some very practical and immediate economic spinoffs.

“And of course,” Mr. Smith adds, “it brings people into the core. Other people come down here to do business and they get the opportunity to see what a beautiful downtown we have.”



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The new city hall on Dickson Street links the old city hall, the farmer's market, the old fire station, a seniors' centre and an arts centre via a series of pathways. It sits tucked behind the new agora in Cambridge: a civic square that the mayor says will be used for city festivities and ceremonies.

When you walk into building, you immediately notice – and hear – its atrium centrepiece: a 110-metre wall of tropical plants with a trickling waterfall. The building has more than 3,000 plants in offices, the foyer and rooftop, which builders say cleanses the air of pollutants and re-circulates clean air throughout it.

“As you walk out of here,” Mr. Craig says with a laugh, “the toxins will have left your body.”

Other Canadian municipalities with aging infrastructure may want to take note of what Cambridge has done – in particular, how the city melded historical buildings with a modern one.

“With the advice of our architects, what we were interested in doing was not trying to duplicate a heritage building,” Mr. Smith says. “It was important that there be some contrast between the old and the new.”

Rick Haldenby was one of those architects. He's director of the University of Waterloo's School of Architecture, which is situated on the Grand River in Cambridge, in a building that once housed a silk mill.

“I'm a tremendous believer in preserving architectural heritage and re-using historic buildings,” he says. “... I'm also a believer in the principle that it's important that heritage buildings, especially great, high-quality heritage buildings, contribute to the contemporary life of the city.”

Contemporary architecture, Prof. Haldenby says, should co-exist and mutually reinforce historical heritage. And a municipal building shouldn't be a stolid expanse of concrete; it should create civic pride among citizens.

“We were really careful to try to make a building that wasn't a big display of pyrotechnics itself,” he says. “It was a building that was careful about where it sat and careful about its deference to its historical neighbours