

Building to heal a community

Health centre a turning point for Queen/Bathurst

Cities don't just house communities, they create them. Some cities manage this well, others poorly.

Toronto manages better than most and, if the new Central Toronto Community Health Centre is any indication, it's managing better still.

Designed by the venerable architectural firm of Markson Borooah Hodgson, the recently opened complex represents a huge turning point for an area that has seen healthier days.

Located at 168 Bathurst St., just south of Queen, the three-storey building is the strongest sign yet that this is a neighbourhood in recovery.

Area is regaining a sense of urbanity and community

Typically, walk-in clinics, needle exchanges, psychiatric support groups and so on can be counted on to bring out the absolute worst in Torontonians, who want the problems dealt with — but as far from their backyard as possible.

Well, this is one backyard that has moved a big step closer to regaining a sense of urbanity and community as a direct result of the health centre.

"I don't believe in grandness," says architect Jerome Markson, who did the design work with partner Matthew Delean. "But it had to have some dignity."

The usual design criteria for such facilities doesn't extend much beyond the need to avoid outright shabbiness and stay on budget. Utility is measured in strictly economic terms; the cheaper the better.

But that's only half the story. Perhaps the most important lesson of the health centre is that it proves quality is affordable — indeed, that, in the long run, quality is much, much cheaper.

"The more people we see here, the more money we can save the health-care system later on," explains centre executive director Walter Weary.

"We deal with psychiatric survivors — the homeless, addicts, people who feel they have the greatest barriers to health care.

"If we can keep them healthy, we can save ourselves oodles of money farther down the line. The building makes that easier."

The health centre accomplishes this as much by what it is as what it isn't. After all, there are many ways in which architecture can be used to express contempt, whether intended or not.

It would have been easy to throw up a box and feel that the poor, the addicted and the marginalized had got what they deserved. But a health centre is



HEALTHIER NEIGHBOURHOOD: Bright, airy and inviting main entrance to remarkable new Central Toronto Community Health Centre sets the tone for a facility that represents a huge turning point for the Bathurst/Queen neighbourhood, an area that has seen healthier days.

Architecture

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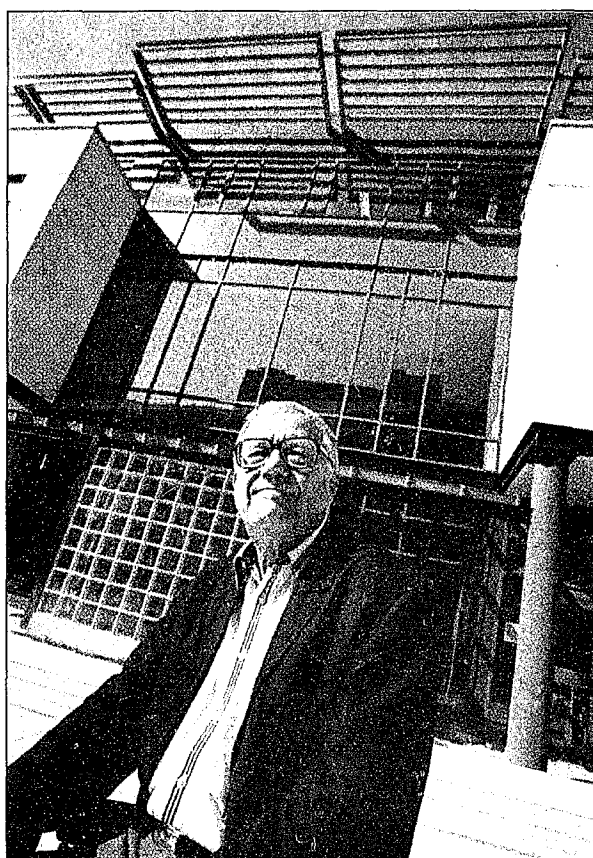
also a community centre. If it can make visitors feel better, that's a good start.

Markson's design does that at many levels. To passersby, it is remarkable for purely aesthetic reasons. Colourful yet sophisticated, bold yet respectful, it reaches out to the sidewalk and the city beyond. Glass-block walls and acres of windows create a feeling of transparency and openness.

On the south side along Richmond St. W., where there's space between the building and the pavement, benches and trees are in place, making the centre an obvious gathering place, not just for patients.

The way the bulk of the structure is broken up into discreet elements adds immediate visual appeal. Complexity, in this case, is a virtue, especially welcome in an area where things were either built ugly or allowed to deteriorate into ugliness.

Supported on a series of four earth-coloured columns, the centre rises to a rooftop patio that overlooks the street and the neighbourhood. This alone makes it one of a tiny handful of buildings at Queen and Bathurst that acknowledge their human purpose. Even the restaurants nearby seem more like bunkers than anything else.



JEROME MARKSON: "People are afraid to go into places like a health centre," says architect. "That's why we tried so hard to make it friendly and inviting."

"People are afraid to go into places like a health centre," Markson notes. "That's why we tried so hard to make it friendly and inviting."

That goes for the interior, too, where there's a distinct air of decency and delight.

an artwork. Though totally unexpected, it's a small but significant gesture of affirmation.

Entering through the main door, visitors move into a large open space connected both to the sidewalk and the second floor, where the actual clinics are located. Normally, they'd be at street level, but the idea here was to clear as much of the ground floor as possible for public functions — thus the meeting rooms and communal kitchen.

Above, where doctors and dentists treat their patients, the waiting area uses natural materials and is flooded with natural light — a stark contrast to what we are accustomed to.

A mural by Rebecca Baird animates a space where one normally would expect nothing more than old magazines and government-issue posters warning against the dangers of smoking and unprotected sex.

Not surprisingly, the advent of the new facility has led to an increase in the number and types of activities that can now happen in the neighbourhood. A good example is the perinatal group that sprung up recently.

"It's been so hard getting space in the community," says Weary.

"At any given moment, there's a whole pile of stuff going on here. Above all, this building is extremely functional. Jerry and Matthew captured the values of the organization, while trying to make it as little like an institution as they could."

For Markson, the project marked a return to a building type he pioneered more than 30 years ago as a young architect fresh out of school.

"It was in the early '60s," Markson recalls, "when we did the first community health centre in Canada, the Sault Ste. Marie District Health Centre.

"There was no such thing in Canada at the time; there was no prototype. But we did what we could and ended up winning a Massey Medal."

An architect who creates cities while designing buildings

Several years later, Markson designed a health centre in St. Catharines and then a private clinic in Oshawa.

Those experiences clearly helped him understand the particular needs of a health-care facility.

On the other hand, the qualities that allow the building to address more than its specific purpose can be acquired only through decades of urban practice.

Markson's quiet mastery makes him one of the rare architects who creates cities while designing buildings. Too often, the truth is exactly opposite.

Like so many of the people who live in the area, the Queen/Bathurst neighbourhood has been relegated to the sidelines and isolated by barriers — economic, social and racial.

The health centre is the first sign in many years that at last things are changing positively.

The wounds aren't fully healed yet, but the bleeding has stopped.

Mountie myth got its due, down south

As perplexing as the success of the bland Mountie-out-of-ice-water series *Due South* may be to this observer — who finds *Dudley Do-Right* a darned sight funnier — the fact that it is so successful compels us once again to consider one of the truly peculiar idiosyncrasies of Anglo-Canuck culture.

And that's our genuinely weird — yet starkly revealing — attitude toward cops.

Think it over. Ever since 1874, when Sir John A. Macdonald dispatched a few hundred raw and untrained recruits to clean up some nasty whiskey-trading business in the remote Cypress Hills of Alberta, English Canada's most indelible national symbol has been the unstoppable peacekeeper in the scarlet tunic known globally as the Mountie.

Yet while the seeds of the popular image of the federal police force were planted domestically by the canny public relations decision to send a reporter and illustrator along for the so-called "Great March" — in reality something of a full-bore fiasco — it was outside the country that Mountie mythology really took root and mutated.

Virtually from the inglorious git-go, America fell in love with the North West Mounted Police. It's true. The Mountie stereotype as we now know it — dogged, dutiful, dull... but with a really cool uniform — was largely an American invention.

Indeed, not even that business about "always getting their man" was

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home-brewed. It was first coined by a 19th-century Montana newspaperman, who originally used "fetch" instead of "get."

Founded at a time when the American public's fascination with the fictional Wild West was colliding with the grotesque real-life horrors of the Plains Indian Wars — the Vietnam of their day — the North West Mounted Police offered an irresistible mythological alternative: enforcers of peaceful yet firm justice, friend of settler and native alike, relentless in the pursuit of right. (Not to mention those boss scarlet tunics.)

Within a couple of years of the PR coup of the Great March, the Mountie myth industry was off and galloping. At first it was dime novels and serialized fiction that kept American and British audiences enthralled. Then, in the early part of the 20th century, it was movies.

Awed by wilderness locations and still steeped in post-Victorian romanticism, early movie audiences pretty well went Mountie-mad. As Pierre Berton pointed out in his 1975 book,



GREAT MARCH: Seeds of Mountie image were planted domestically in 1874 when a reporter and illustrator joined the raw recruits sent to Alberta to clean up some nasty whiskey-trading business.

Hollywood's Canada, by the year 1923 — even before the advent of sound would permit movie Mounties to sing — Hollywood had already cranked out 211 outrageously fanciful movies about the NWMP.

Indeed, so plentiful were the Mountie movies, and so annoying were they to the real force, that Commissioner Cortlandt Starnes wired the following policy of complete non-co-operation to MGM in 1926:

"MOUNTED POLICE WOULD APPRECIATE BEING LEFT ALONE BY

MOVIES. HAVE NO INTENTION OF ASSISTING."

Like countless other Canadian bureaucrats since, Starnes eventually gave way to Hollywood pressure and learned to fetch what he was told. There's a lesson here: Though the Mounties get their man, Hollywood gets its way.

Yet, strangely, as the image of the Mountie evolved into the unstoppable Energizer Bunny of Anglo-Canadian mythology, English-Canadians themselves demonstrated scant interest in

getting in on the deal.

And it's not just our valiant men in scarlet. In stark contrast to America's cop-obsessed culture, the whole police genre has been pretty well absent from our entertainment.

Case in point: While a handful of Canadian cop shows — from 1959's *RCMP* to the *Sidestreet* series of the mid-'70s — have focused on police work, I can think of no Canadian movies that have. That's right, none. And when one finally seemed to, David Wellington's *I Love A Man In Uniform* in 1993, it was about a guy — an actor, in fact — who only *thinks* he's a cop.

I long ago accepted that understanding English-Canadian culture requires a healthy capacity for paradox, and this is clearly a case in point.

While off-screen Canadian police history seems to be steeped in headlines screaming bungle, miscarriage and fiasco — Riel, Sitting Bull, Gouzenko, Truscott, Marshall, Morin, Milgaard, Bernardo, Jane Doe — the myth of the noble Mountie, as seen in the persistent but dull *Due South*, proves as stubbornly intact as ever.

Small wonder that, after decades of struggling with the myth, no one now embraces it more fervently than the Mounties, who even hired the Disney company to police their own merchandising.

After all, when a good image is all you've got, you've still got a lot.

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