



## COMMUNITY SPIRIT

In Toronto's Trinity Bellwoods Park, a 1950s brick building has been transformed into a warm and inviting community centre. Oleson Worland and Levitt Goodman Architects made purposeful use of a tight budget to reinvent the centre in way that reflects a changing neighbourhood's collective values.

BY BETH KAPUSTA



Opposite page and left: A glazed addition along the west edge of the Trinity Community Recreation Centre opens up what was once a closed-off facade, bringing light into basement-level and first-floor rooms. The main entrance has been relocated to this side of the building, so that it now faces residences across from the park, rather than commercial Queen Street. Below: The western addition floods the formerly viewless pool area with natural light. A new toddler pool runs along the glazed edge.

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There are times when we get so excited about globalization that we lose sight of the power of the local, and it takes a project like the Trinity Community Recreation Centre to pull us back down to earth. Through both the process and the result, the community has been drawn together, reinforcing its collective values and the self-evident truth that Toronto is a city of neighbourhoods.

Oddly enough, the project began in the chaotic wake of the forced amalgamation of the City of Toronto with its satellite suburbs. After years of promising a renovation to the Trinity community recreation centre, the City finally got the project on the rails, assigning it to a staff architect in 1993. The community group, rife with architects who live in the area, lobbied for opening the job up to a competition, arguing that in this way the city could maximize its investment. According to Susan Lewin,

an architect who spearheaded the group's early work, "We wanted a good building, not a boilerplate community centre."

The City agreed to open up the process to external architects and for the first time granted a community group a say in the selection of the architect. The City seemed to have a preconception that the area was still Parkdale west, a district that is home to many of Toronto's more disenfranchised residents. In terms of demographics, property values and community activism, however, it is in fact more like Annex south, a much more stable and affluent community. The persistent internal urban pressure of gentrification has turned an area once dominated by the dispiriting presence of 999 Queen West, a psychiatric hospital that de-institutionalized many of its patients decades ago, into a healthy, up-market urban neighbourhood with a diverse mix of inhabitants,

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from working-class immigrants to designerly types. Since the conversion of the nearby Massey Ferguson industrial lands to a housing development, the centre of residential gravity has shifted southward. Trinity Bellwoods park is no longer the southern edge of a viable neighbourhood; it is now the centre of one.

Of the short-listed design teams, the winner was the one assembled by the firms Oleson Worland Architect and Levitt Goodman Architects. David Oleson was partner-in-charge on the acclaimed North Toronto Memorial Community Centre in Forest Hill, and Dean Goodman had experience on grittier urban projects, including the nearby Strachan House homeless shelter and The Meeting Place community drop-in centre. The two architectural firms approached the Trinity project by forming a team that worked on the project from start to finish.

The renovation involved a series of incisions and perforations to open up and rationalize the rather drab 1950s buff brick building. (In fact, prior to renovation it was often used as a film set to represent 'dire institutions'.) Its pool was a lightless box, and the gym sported the rather unusual feature of an overhead running track with square corners.

According to the community centre's co-ordinator, MaryAnn Di Biagio, the facility went "from having cages on all the windows to a high-profile community centre that's warm and inviting, and lofty." The big move was the addition of a glazed porch facing west to Crawford Street to effectively reface the park building. (The building's original main entrance had faced south towards a series of properties the City had at one time hoped to expropriate.) It seems appropriate, however, that the building turn its attention to the community, and not to the city. The new open face provides previously introverted rooms with a view. The basement-level daycare and library rooms now adjoin a bright 'greenhouse' space. As well, a new toddler pool that appends the existing pool serves to open the view to the outside. Additional openings from the pool overlook the adjacent exterior play area, a huge bonus for parents with multiple charges, and a means of meshing pavilion with park.

Internally, the once-hermetic box is now peppered with openings that allow views from one area to another, and the warren-like circulation has been substantially improved. The main cut through the building takes the form of an airy public area that makes a clear connection from Crawford Street to the park and creates a controlled entry point to counteract the perceptions of danger and lack of control that had previously plagued the building. Judicious excavations at the park side bring light to basement rooms – and Lewin notes that they also seem to deter people from peeing on the building.

Although the \$4.5 million renovation budget was nowhere near as lavish as that of the North Toronto Memorial Community Centre in Forest Hill (which weighed in at \$18-million for a new building nine years ago), this facility adds a couple of state-of-the-art features, including a sleek, tiled, family

change pavilion right on the pool deck. Some of the materials are reminiscent of the North Toronto centre, including glulam beams and the large expanses of glass off public areas. "The necessity is also the decoration," says Goodman. A spare but complementary public art program by Warren Quigley involves mosaic tile laid in friezes and medallions. Some of the tile installations have objects embedded in them – there are toys, for instance, in the children's-area frieze – and others in this successfully integrated program allude to the multicultural character of the neighbourhood by evoking traditional decorative patterns from various parts of the world.

For the most part, the architects have made purposeful use of a tight budget – and happily Trinity's accomplishments are not an isolated example of effective design that reflects neighbourhood values. The architectural mass within a radius

of a couple of blocks is quietly growing impressive, from the Candy Factory converted lofts to the south (by Quadrangle Architects) and Lobko Tregobov Architects' now well-established Artscape artists' co-op, to A.J. Diamond, Donald Schmitt and Company's upcoming renovation of the nearby McCormick Community Centre and Teeple Architects' renovation of Givins

Shaw Public School. Even more upscale Toronto neighbourhoods rarely demonstrate such a consistent will to use architecture to embody a coherent community spirit. **A**  
*The Trinity Community Recreation Centre is located at 155 Crawford Street in Toronto.*

Above: While the most significant changes to the existing building were made along its west edge, this view shows the new secondary entrance on the park-facing east facade. It is directly opposite the main (west) entrance, and a public concourse links the two points of entry. Right: An element in Warren Quigley's tile-based art installation for the community centre. Several of the works were inspired by traditional decorative patterns from various parts of the world. This medallion's design is based on aboriginal motifs from the American Southwest.

