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Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre at University of British Columbia

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Nestled in a bowl-shaped landscape with its spectacular copper roof visible to pedestrians from a distance, the University of British Columbia's new Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre (IRSC) is a unique addition to a campus renowned for its bold architecture and sustainable building elements.

As part of a re-design of UBC's Library Garden, the two-storey, 6,670-square-foot IRSC is attached to the old Sedgewick Library and serves as a point of access for Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada records for former residential school students, their families and communities, and the public. The centre also provides information for UBC students who have little information about Indigenous people or their role in shaping Canada.

The \$5.5-million project was first announced by UBC president Stephen Toope in September of 2013; scoping and background work began in the summer of 2015, with an assessment of the history of Library Garden and the values held around the space. From that work, a detailed design brief was created to guide both projects, and FormLine Architecture as well as landscape consultants were retained in the fall after a competitive bid process.

Dave Poettcker, development manager for UBC Properties Trust, says, "This was our first collaboration with FormLine, and it was vital to make this a facility that would embrace all indigenous people even though UBC sits on the unceded traditional lands of the Musqueam."

Alfred Waugh, owner/principal of FormLine Architecture (which works predominantly on First Nations projects), explains his philosophical approach to the IRSC design: "Survivors describe residential schools as fortresses with small windows, very confining. Therefore, we found it

appropriate to locate public access to the records in the basement of the Sedgewick Library, and by contrast we designed the IRSC itself to be light and airy, and to blur the lines between interior and exterior.”

Working closely with PFS Studio, Waugh designed a building with extensive wood features and structures that integrated into the revitalization of the landscape precinct surrounding the old Sedgewick Library, which is essentially bowl shaped. The lower level at the bottom of the bowl was designed to house a digital exhibit space that will also be used for teaching and interaction with guests. The upper level pavilion, which would be visible from many other UBC vantage points thanks to extensive glazing, was designed for meeting rooms, research and administrative staff.

A focus on natural materials, which would fulfill UBC’s mandate for sustainability as well as be thematically appropriate for the IRSC, included exposed wood and charred wood cedar siding (based on an old Japanese technique) sourced from Merritt, B.C. Cross laminated timber (CLT) walls would dominate the interior, along with a woven wood feature wall on the lower level. “The strength of the charred cedar imparts a message to residential school survivors that the scorched past will make us stronger over time,” says Waugh.

Given the low level of the roof in relation to the topography of the rest of the campus, Waugh made this a showcase feature consisting of a copper clad folded plane of CLT supported CLT panels and glulam columns. “Initially a green roof was considered, but that would have disappeared into the surrounding landscape, which would symbolize hiding the history of the past. Copper was used by the Salish people as the Chief’s copper and signifies dignity, and was deemed the more appropriate material,” says Waugh.

Poettcker says, “We have several mass timber buildings on campus but none with a low slope, metal clad, mass timber roof. Getting the details right was a challenge.”

To which Mike Mariotto, partner at Bush, Bohlman & Partners, adds, “Incorporated into the design were roof valleys for a trough that runs along the length of the roof to collect rainwater that spills down between the front of the building’s two vertical support columns into a water feature. The roof was a spectacular design, and we supported its large projections with structural steel beams hidden above the CLT roof deck.” To handle the continuous water flow, the waterfall between the two columns would be made of structural silicone glazing.

The design was completed in May of 2016, and in the fall of that year **Bird Construction** crews broke ground. Bird project manager Craig Shirra noted that the centre’s location, between the library and a learning centre as well as adjacent to the garden, required an access road through the garden to be built, plus Bird had to co-ordinate with the University to schedule work so as to minimally impact campus activity.

While site conditions were good, tying into the existing library posed a few challenges. “Initially we thought we could use a large retaining wall that had been built decades ago, but it turned out that its foundation had been built too shallow for the required depth of the lower floor of the facility, so it was demolished and rebuilt,” says Mariotto.

But as anyone who was in Metro Vancouver later that year can attest, the biggest challenge facing construction was the unusually severe winter of 2016. “The rain and snow was relentless, and it complicated waterproofing,” says Poettcker, adding that a rare week of clear skies in December enabled Bird to complete the task in a timely fashion.

One task facing Paul Luhman, project manager for AES Engineering Ltd., was to create lighting systems that would have no unsightly conduits in what was an open ceiling. “All the wiring had to be grouted into the wood channels and filled over,” he says. “Fire alarms and other security devices had to be discreetly located, and extensive testing was required to ensure their optimum audibility.”

AES’s work was simplified somewhat by the fact that the existing library was undergoing an upgrade to its distribution unit. “So when they had their power down to upgrade, we put in our breakers and tied into their electrical room,” says Luhman.

The centre’s polished concrete floor was scheduled to be poured during a particularly cold week, and in order to accomplish this, Bird created a heated enclosure to ensure the concrete would pour and cure properly. However, despite the sub-zero temperatures and complications due to snow removal equipment working overtime in other locations, Bird estimated that the weather set back the project by only a week or so — time that was made up as construction continued into April of 2017.

As of June, the IRSC was occupied, and interactive exhibits were being installed. “It’s a beautiful building and we’re already getting enthusiastic feedback from user groups and students,” says Poettcker. “FormLine and Bird, as well as all the trades that pulled together to bring this project to life, should be proud of their accomplishment.”

LOCATION

1985 Learner’s Walk, UBC, Vancouver, B.C.

OWNER/DEVELOPER

UBC Properties Trust

ARCHITECT

FormLine Architecture

GENERAL CONTRACTOR

Bird Construction

STRUCTURAL CONSULTANT

Bush, Bohlman & Partners LLP

MECHANICAL CONSULTANT

Smith + Andersen

ELECTRICAL CONSULTANT

AES Engineering Ltd.

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

PFS Studio

TOTAL SIZE

6,670 square feet

TOTAL COST

\$5.5 million
