

GESTURES TOWARDS RECONCILIATION



Matt Durnan

Centennial College believes it is raising the bar on thoughtful design of higher education buildings with its recently-opened expansion of the old A-Block building that is the country's first ever LEED Gold, zero carbon, mass timber higher education building at the school's Progress Campus in Scarborough.

The college's new "A-Building", located off Progress Avenue, opened on September 21; a more than 130,000-square-foot, six-storey expansion to the existing A-Block building that will accommodate administrative offices, collaborative meeting areas and study spaces, food services, and classroom space for the school of engineering technology and applied science.

Design of the building was achieved through a Design Build competition won by **EllisDon, DIALOG and Smoke Architecture**, with the school making it known from the outset that the building's design was to expressly demonstrate Centennial's commitment to Truth and Reconciliation, and to reflect Indigenous values and

principles.

Some of the walls of the original 15,000-square-foot building, known as "A-Block"—which accommodated mainly classrooms—were demolished to connect the expansion with the existing building. The classroom and learning areas of the old A-Block also underwent significant renovation to better tie them into the new building.

Central to the design of the new A-Building that will also serve as the main entry point to the college is the incorporation of a series of Indigenous details designed to make the building more than just a place

a learning, but a space that manifests Indigenous traditions and values in its design, construction and sustainability performance.

Drawing on principles of the Anishinaabe roundhouse and sweat lodges, the new A-Building includes an Indigenous commons. Indigenous artwork adorns wood paddle-shaped panels in the building's "Wisdom Hall"—an open double-height study space—while the building's exterior cladding draws inspiration from the ribbing of a wigwam.

All of the elements

incorporated into the new building are the product of a collaborative effort from a team that included EllisDon Construction, Colliers Project Leaders, DIALOG, and Smoke Architecture.

"The college issued a book of poetry to all of the proponent teams, which was very unique and it was a book of poems from **Chief R. Stacey LaForme** that asked for the designs from

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Photo of Centennial College's new "A-Building" on its Progress campus off of Progress Avenue in Scarborough. The college celebrated the grand opening of the building on September 21, which is the first LEED gold, zero carbon mass timber higher education building in Canada. The six-storey, 130,000-square-foot building's design was informed by a book of poetry by Chief R. Stacey LaForme. A team consisting of Ellis Don Construction, DIALOG, Smoke Architecture won the College's design build competition to create the building, which the College views as a gesture towards Truth and Reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. The exterior cladding of the building is inspired by the ribbing pattern of a wigwam.

ARCHITECTS: DIALOG, SMOKE ARCHITECTURE
SOURCE: JAMES BRITAIN FOR DIALOG

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each of our teams to manifest the book of poetry,” DIALOG partner **Chen Cohen** told *NRU*.

“It’s a very unique stipulation as you can imagine, and it’s an entirely unusual exercise to have such aspirational views from a client asking for something to articulate architecture and form in a way that is not only Indigenous-inspired, but to manifest poetry is kind of an unheard of call.”

That call came from the school’s former and longest-serving president, **Ann Buller**, who informed proponents that the project was to represent Centennial’s commitment to truth and reconciliation, while also embracing current industry trends for sustainability and net-zero campuses and incorporating sustainable building materials like mass timber.

“The president [Buller] made it very clear [in 2018] that this wasn’t just any project, this isn’t just any building, and that this project must represent the college’s commitment to truth and reconciliation,” Colliers Project Leaders national higher education sector lead **Robert Balicsak** told *NRU*.

“She made a very emotional plea that this must embrace

and exude that, and the building needs to be able to teach it without even having to take a course in it. These were very large and aspirational desires and it’s not something that we have seen a lot of. We’ve seen acknowledgement of Indigenous principles, we’ve seen Indigenous art within facilities but we haven’t seen a building which would be welcoming to all and make all

feel comfortable, and that was a very inspiring vision.”

That notion of creating a space that was welcoming was critical to the vision of the project, as the former A-Block building served as a main entry point into the school, although that was not the original intent when the building was first constructed.

“The original A Building was seen as the main entrance to the college, but it didn’t feel like it. The college had built a library a few years ago, so the library all of a sudden kind of became the main entrance, even though that’s not where student registration and

everything else is,” Balicsak said.

“You still had to walk through the entire campus [to get to the student registration building] and this building wasn’t too active. We understood [A-Building] to represent the gateway to the campus. We wanted people to be drawn into the facility, to feel welcome and that was the drive. It wasn’t putting the student services right in there, it wasn’t about dropping off tuition payments there. It was more about ‘Come in, feel welcome’ and to embrace what education can be.”

In addition to the commitment to creating a welcoming space that prioritizes Indigenous teachings, the new building has also achieved a zero carbon certification, thanks in large part to the installation of an all-electric hot water heating and HVAC system and a solar photovoltaic panel array on the roof.

Mass timber construction was also one of Centennial College’s design requirements for the new building, a requirement that served to address both the sustainability

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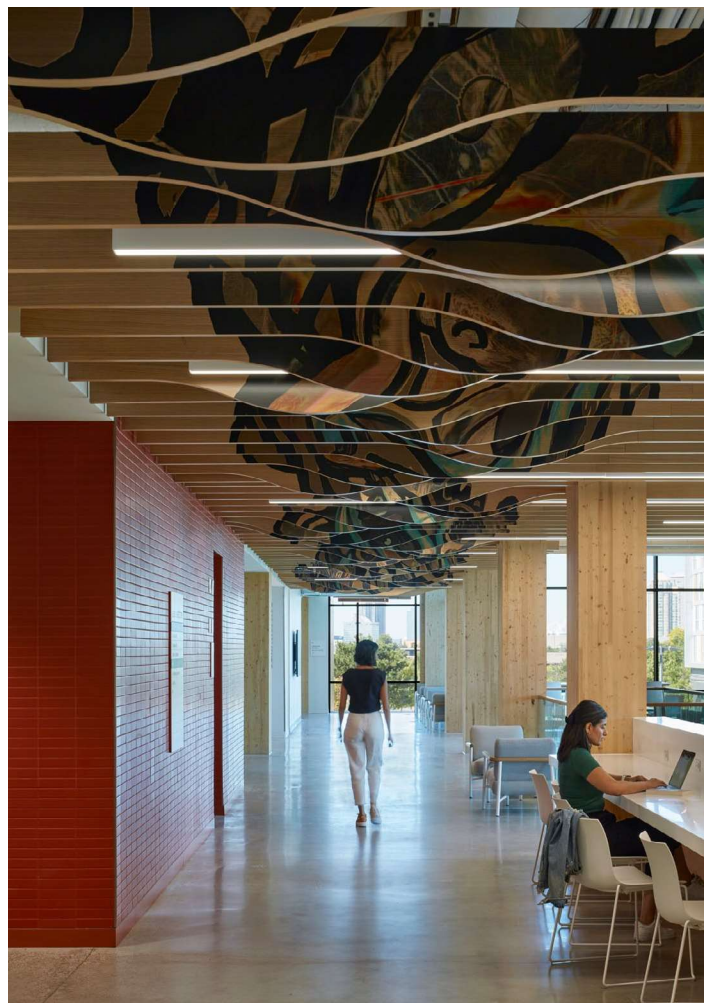


Photo of the interior of “Wisdom Hall” in Centennial College’s new “A-Building” at its Progress campus in Scarborough. The building features a mass timber frame with Indigenous-inspired elements throughout, including ceiling architecture inspired by wooden paddles, adorned with Indigenous artwork.

ARCHITECTS: DIALOG, SMOKE ARCHITECTURE
SOURCE: JAMES BRITTAIN FOR DIALOG

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aspect and the commitment to supporting Indigenous ways desired by the school president.

“I absolutely think that beyond mass timber being a requirement of the design competition, it reinforced not only a lot of the Indigenous principles of connection to natural materials,” said Cohen.

“It creates an incredible feeling within the building that you are not within a traditional concrete learning space. It has a sense of being connected to nature. Whether it’s part of Indigenous principles or just biophilic design that all humans connect to natural ideas, it absolutely met that requirement and reinforced it.”

Design elements throughout the building were implemented in a very thoughtful manner, with elements like the Indigenous commons carefully located at the centre or “heart” of the building, creating the opportunity for learning to occur outside of the classroom but inside of the school.

“The Indigenous commons is based on the principles of a roundhouse; even if you’re an individual that may not have knowledge or background of Indigenous practices, you will learn about them,” Cohen said.

“The intent is that you’ll walk into that space and

wonder why it’s shaped like a circle, wonder why there is a wood-burning stove in the corner of it. You’ll inherently learn about concepts of Indigenous culture even if you’re not familiar with them.”

Photo of the Indigenous commons, located in the heart of Centennial College’s new A-Building at its Progress campus in Scarborough. The design of this area was inspired by a traditional Anishinaabe roundhouse and features mass timber framing and a wood burning stove. The building also includes new classrooms, offices, food service space and study spaces. Thirteen of the new rooms within the building are equipped with special exhaust fans that make it possible for smudging to occur.

ARCHITECTS: DIALOG, SMOKE ARCHITECTURE
SOURCE: JAMES BRITAIN FOR DIALOG

The completed building stands as a point of pride for Balicsak, who explained that in many ways this project is a game-changer, from its beginnings as a design build project to the ambitious vision set out by the school to have a book of poetry serve as the inspiration for the building’s design.

“This sets a new baseline, we’ve raised the bar on every building within the college and we’ve raised the bar for other colleges, who at the end of the day, are all competing against each other for the same students,” Balicsak said.

“Moving forward, this is the minimum of what a college is going to want to do, and now we have to expand off that, we’ve set the tone, we’ve raised the bar.” 🌸

