



Once more with feeling

At first glance, the recent addition to the W. Ross Macdonald School for the Blind looks much like any other primary school – brick rectangles with stretches of glazing and ample wooden doors. But venture beyond the institutional wire fencing and an uncommon mosaic of materials unfolds.

Toronto architect Bruce Stratton was initially hired to retrofit the elementary school, one of several buildings on the Brantford, Ontario, campus that has been educating visually impaired youth since 1872. But after careful observation of the students, Stratton proposed a new building that would better meet their needs. “It’s incredible to see how tactile these children are,” says Stratton. “Audio and tactile senses obviously take on much greater importance when sight is limited or non-existent.” Creating a strategically touch-sensitive environment became his underlying objective.

Instead of standard-issue red brick, purple-hued iron-spot brick juxtaposes with weathered steel and zinc siding. As most of the students are sensitive to glare, precast concrete walls and poured concrete panels are angled around windows to limit direct sunlight. The textured exterior sets the tone for the interior of the 2,800-square-metre wing, where a balance between oversimplicity and complexity was achieved on two levels: circulation and detail.

The single-spine plan features extra-wide corridors and oversized doors with four classrooms on either side. Tactile markers orient the children at every stop along their daily route. Porcelain tiles on hallway floors segue into maple flooring at key junctions; classroom floors are clad with Marmoleum. Conventional concrete walls are softened with cherry millwork and classroom windows are sandblasted for privacy and light control. Organic curvilinear shapes, bull-nosed corners and a continuous trail rail protect against sharp edges while providing guidance. “It’s a building you discover slowly,” explains Stratton. “An adventure rather than a one liner.”

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The design of a new elementary school for blind kids takes into consideration their unique needs: materials used vary in type and texture to ease orientation, reduce glare and prevent injury.