



PHOTOS: STEPHANE GROLEAU

Mount Dennis Branch – Toronto Public Library

by Martha Uniacke Breen

In the sunny reading area at the front of Toronto's new Mount Dennis Library, a young man lounges in an upholstered armchair by the front window. He's completely at home with his feet up, belongings stashed neatly beside him and his eyes focused on an open laptop. "People 'design' their own reading spaces here," says Ewa Piatkowski, library services manager at Toronto Public Library (TPL).

It wasn't always like this. The Mount Dennis branch used to be a rather forbidding square brick box. Built in 1951 and renovated and expanded in 1984, it hadn't been touched in over 30 years. Limited public budgets only allow for individual branch renovations every three decades or so, explains Anne Bailey, director of branch libraries for TPL, so they were determined to get this one right.

The neighbourhood is home to a large population of recently arrived immigrants and busy working parents, along with light industrial businesses. It's not exactly notable for its esthetics. However, as residential development in the city moves northwest, it has been slowly undergoing a renaissance. Revitalizing Mount Dennis could accomplish a great deal besides just letting in some light and air; the neighbourhood library could play a key role as a community resource.

TPL selected G. Bruce Stratton Architects to mastermind the physical redesign. "The existing library had a deteriorating pitched metal roof along with an aging timber trellis post system, [and] there was no entrance off the street," recalls Mirko Zupanic. "Patrons

had to walk down a long corridor on the north side of the building to enter in the middle of the library. They could then go to the lower level by an exit stair to the children's area and a community room. The glazing of the exterior windows were tinted to the extent that one could not see in from the exterior.

"We proposed demolishing the old roof and increasing the height of the library to match the height of the commercial neighbours to the south. Generous amounts of glazing were introduced as a means of visually connecting the library to the street. Clerestory windows replaced the skylights to help distribute natural light down through the new central stair to the lower level."

From the street, the new facade has a subtly Modernist look. Aqua-tinted Pilkington glass and an overhang of rich russet weathered steel above the entrance reference the industrial buildings in the area. Inside, the whole main floor is bright and clean, and the various departments are clearly laid out.

Part of what makes the library so friendly is its emphasis on humanity in materials. The floors are the original concrete with patches of terrazzo uncovered during the renovation that have been brightened and polished up. Weathered steel reappears throughout the main floor, and crowns one of the most exciting serendipities of the renovation: a fireplace. An electric insert that patrons can operate with a remote and a weathered steel overmantel make it a central attraction of the reading area here.

Technically, there were a number of puzzles in upgrading the structure,

according to Themis Tzovolos of Steelcore Construction Ltd., the general contractor on the project. "The building did not stand out at all from the surrounding buildings, and I missed it the first time I visited the site," he says.

"We added a small addition to the front, redid the entire front facade, gutted the interior completely for all new finishes and ceilings, and cut the centre of the main floor open for the new glass and concrete staircase as well as one for a new exit at the rear of the building. There were extensive structural upgrades to the building as well, which required an engineered shoring system for the new steel columns and beams," adds Tzovolos.

Jeffrey Yee is with Halsall Associates, the structural consultants on the project. Yee explains that due to the height of the structure, additional support was required. "Where the new cladding was higher than the existing roof, and [there were] added snow piling loads, we added steel joists between existing joists to handle the additional load," he explains. The staircase opening was a little more complex. "For the openings to the basement, there was quite a lot of shoring installed to temporarily support the structure, while the new columns and footings were added to provide this open space."

Just past the fireplace is another inspired touch that began as a solution to an esthetic problem. The high, broad windows at the side look across a narrow alley out on to the distinctly unpoetic cinderblock wall of the building next door. The designers erected an attractive wood fence in front of the

cinderblock, installed concrete pavers, wooden benches and planters in the former alley, and a glass door at the sidewalk entrance, and a secluded reading garden was born. "It's extremely popular in the summer," says Bailey.

But perhaps the greatest improvement in the whole library is the new staircase, the library's overture to the children's area and meeting rooms below. Formerly, Bailey explains, the convoluted side-corridor access meant you'd have to be pretty determined to get down there to use it; some people didn't even know it was there. Now, a high clerestory window acts like a natural spotlight over the broad, open stairs, rimmed in glass banister rails whimsically printed with vertical rows of letters.

"The street is enhanced by the library; with all its windows, especially at night, it acts like a beacon, drawing people in," says Bailey. n

LOCATION

1123 Weston Road, Toronto, Ontario

OWNER/DEVELOPER

Toronto Public Library

ARCHITECT

G. Bruce Stratton Architects

GENERAL CONTRACTOR

Steelcore Construction Ltd.

STRUCTURAL CONSULTANT

Halsall Associates

MECHANICAL/ELECTRICAL CONSULTANTS

MCW Consultants Ltd.

TOTAL AREA

11,000 square foot

TOTAL COST

\$2.75 million (approx)