

A photograph of a modern building with a large, frosted glass wall. In the foreground, there is a colorful glass screen made of vertical panels in shades of red, yellow, and blue. The screen is supported by dark brown metal posts. The ground in the foreground is paved with colorful geometric patterns in red, yellow, and blue. The sky is clear and blue. The building's facade is a mix of dark brown metal and light-colored panels.

For students with limited eyesight, frosted glass lessens glare, and bright colors enliven the space and give it visual depth. A bar of colored glass acts as a rich screen mediating views to the outside.

School design for the blind: learning to see without sight

**G. BRUCE STRATTON ARCHITECTS DESIGNS FOR ALL SENSORY EXPERIENCES
AT THE W. ROSS MACDONALD SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND IN BRANTFORD, ONTARIO**

Large, black handrails help guide students through hallways, while many wooden alcoves provide space for rest.



By Rhys Phillips

Architecture is largely considered a visual medium. How then does one best approach architecture for users who are primarily without sight? This was the essential question Toronto architect Bruce Stratton, of G. Bruce Stratton Architects, tackled recently in designing a primary school addition for the campus of the W. Ross Macdonald School for the Blind in Brantford, Ontario.

His response was to pay close attention to the functional specifics—particularly as they related to touch, sound, and physical orientation—required to ease the complex living and learning challenges faced by the 32 blind, deaf/blind, and visually challenged students attending grades 1 through 6. At the same time, Stratton considered his objective for the \$8 million, 30,000-square-foot facility as “not only accommodating pragmatic needs, but also serving intangible spiritual and sensory purposes.” Stratton shares with Finnish architect and critic Juhani Pallasmaa the belief that architecture requires broader sensory depth than just the visual. In his essay “The Eyes of the Skin” (1996), Pallasmaa touted the “tacit wisdom of the body,” in which vision must share architecture with touch, hearing, and smell. How a door handle greets the hand is more important than how it meets the eye. It is a position that emphatically resonates at the school, where students characteristically have a heightened sense of hearing, touch, and smell.

Furthermore, visual excellence was required of the design, in part because there are 40,

Rhys Phillips is the architecture critic for the Ottawa Citizen.