

Daycare combines natural light and a warm materials palette



DAVE LEBLANC >
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The Stationview YMCA Child Care in St. Thomas, Ont. Design by CGS Architects, Hamilton was designed with the needs of its end users, the community's children - in front and centre. The use of jaunty cutouts on one side of the building allow light-circles to dance across the windows.

TOM ARBAN/TOM ARBAN

“There’s a theory in design that everything should be scaled to the user,” says architect Bill Curran of CGS Architects in Hamilton.

The users, in this case, can be heard down the hall; naptime is over and little shrieks of joy begin to bounce off the walls.

“So, for children, there should be low rooms so they feel more comfortable,” he continues, “but we thought this might be a little more inspiring – the high, lofty spaces that they might never have access to.”

He’s right. Not everyone can live in an architect-designed space. A space teeming with raw timber posts and thick beams has walls made of an intriguing system of wood panels (the construction of which Mr. Curran compares to the de Havilland Mosquito combat aircraft), bristles with big play spaces, spacious bathrooms, and oodles of natural light ... and even sports a porch swing out front. But it’s all here in St. Thomas, Ont., at Stationview YMCA Child Care, built and paid for by the city.

“Before we moved in I thought: ‘How are we going to fill this space, how are we going to use this?’” says YMCA regional manager Lisa Wilson. “But once you get in, and you live with it [and] see the children move through it and work their day through it, it’s been really great.”

And while the breezy and playful architecture is mostly what makes this building great – and more on that in a moment – Mr. Curran says it wouldn’t exist without the selfless vision of now-retired St. Thomas city manager Wendell Graves: “He comes off as that disarming, country

Look around St. Thomas, and it's clear Mr. Graves has shaken things up. In June, 2021, this space reported on Mr. Graves's and Mr. Curran's transformation of a "dust bowl" parking lot into 28 affordable housing units and home for the Railway City's social services department, and the Transit Building into 16 "micro-apartments" for residents transitioning from living on the street.



Daycare centre in St. Thomas, Ont. | TOM ARBAN/TOM ARBAN

And, again, what had been a parking lot at the corner of St. Catharine and Curtis streets – (“They gave up some of their parking, but, you know, parking is plentiful here,” quips Mr. Curran) – is now the child care centre, big enough for 88 little ones ages six and under. Across the street is a new parkette, and a stone’s throw away is the Brutalist library by Brook, Carruthers and Shaw, which opened in 1974. As Mr. Curran points out, this has led to a domino effect, as even privately owned buildings in the area have been spruced up; one even built what has become a popular restaurant patio.

“This wasteland, just off of downtown, all of a sudden it’s a vital, safe, civic precinct,” says the affable architect. It’s a master class in city building, and it wouldn’t hurt other municipalities to come and take a look.

Of course, a tour of the new child care centre by CGS – formerly known as Their + Curran Architects – is also a lesson on how to take a TV dinner budget yet provide a gourmet meal of a building. (Which reminds this writer of celebrity chef Susur Lee and his son, Jet Bent-Lee, and their TikTok TV dinner project).

Open the door, and one is struck not only by the natural light pouring in via big windows and clerestories, but also by the warm materials palette. The aforementioned cross-laminated timber posts, beams and wood wall system of course (provided by local factory Element5), but even inexpensive VCT flooring in tans, golds, creams and warm greys all mixed up to provide visual interest. Or, overhead, Mr. Curran’s choice of inexpensive yet luxurious-looking, artichoke-shaped light fixtures and, on the walls, sconces made from onion-skin-thick slices of wood.

Noting the generous staff room and how windows provide employees with multiple views in order to keep eyes on their charges, the children’s playrooms are what will impress visitors the most. High ceilings, views to city hall via child-height windows with built-in benches, and sunlight that washes the wooden walls and ceiling to paint the entire room in golden hues. Acoustic panels along the upper portion of one wall ensure the din doesn’t get overwhelming.

“Not your average child care area,” Mr. Curran says with a smile. “That’s one of the benefits of CLT panels: you get a wood interior. Three quarters of the walls are wood ... as opposed to painted drywall and ACT [acoustic ceiling tile] ceilings.”

Not to mention how quickly drywall can get dirty and dinged up, I say.

“And, also, [drywall is] lifeless,” finishes Mr. Curran.

On the exterior, simple yet inexpensive changes in colour and texture animate the building façade, and the use of jaunty cut-outs allow light-circles to dance across the windows. And because it’s a public building, it’s designed to take a beating; to ensure it’ll look as good in 25 years as it does today, cladding is of robust, corrugated metal and tough, factory-coated wood.

Even the porch swing punches above its class: “It’s anchored with hooks onto a piece of steel to keep it from being vandalized,” says Mr. Curran, “but it also says ‘welcome’ and it’s kid-height.”

From porch swing to the sculpted outdoor playground out back, this is a city project that punches far above what it should. Architecturally dynamic and fun to look at, it champions the user experience while bringing much-needed life to this city on the rise ... something kids of all ages can smile about.

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