SKETCH

OCAD University at 135 years
A glimpse into our past, present and future
OCAD UNIVERSITY'S PHYSICAL EVOLUTION
FROM A SMALL BUILDING ON KING STREET WEST TO THE ICONIC SHARP CENTRE FOR DESIGN

By Christopher Hume

...a tiny handful of buildings have the power to change a city, or at least the way it is perceived. In Toronto, the Sharp Centre for Design at OCAD University is one of them. Designed by award-winning British architect Will Alsop, this unique structure is known around the world. Since it opened in 2004, pictures of this remarkable facility have circulated widely. In the process, they have raised awareness of the school and created a new image of Toronto as a city willing to be bold, take risks and think outside the grid—if not the box.

Sitting on a series of 12 brightly coloured steel "zips" 11 storeys (25 meters) above street level, the Sharp Centre redefined OCAD U and with it, art school architecture. Though controversial at the time, Alsop's "flying tabletops," as it's known locally, has quickly become a Toronto icon. Not everyone loves it, but no one denies it has had a tremendously positive influence on the city and has helped bring a cosmopolitan conservative community into the 21st century.

Of course, the Sharp Centre is just one of a number of architectural episodes that comprise the history of the school. Indeed, OCAD U's story is one that mirrors not just changing attitudes to the city, but also to art and art education.

When the institution was founded in 1876, as the Ontario School of Art, it was housed in a building at 14 King Street West that has long since disappeared. Needless to say, back then the city was a much smaller place and residents' ability to get around was limited. In other words, things had to be close or they were incommensible.

By 1882, the faculty had become part of the Department of Education and moved to the Normal School complex, now incorporated by Ryerson University. It too was situated well within the heart of the city, an indication both of the city's inherent understanding of the importance of art and also of art education.

After that, the school seems to have changed locations and names every few years. It spent time (1886 to 1890) at the corner of Queen and Yonge Streets, before going back to King Street West where it shared premises with the Art Museum of Toronto at the Princess Theatre from 1890 to 1910. At this point, it was known as the Central Ontario School of Art and Industrial Design.

When the theatre was torn down to make way for the expanding street grid, the school had to search for a new home once again. But it was also during this period that the Provincial Legislature passed the "Act Incorporating the Ontario College of Art." Queens Park voted for OCA to receive an annual grant of $3,000 in addition to giving the college a free room back at the Normal School that it had vacated almost 20 years earlier.

Nor until the 1920s did the institution construct its own building. Situated at the north end of Grange Park, the new premises were designed in the same Georgian style as the original Grange, which dates from 1817. When it opened on September 30, 1921, it was the first purpose-built art school in Canada.

In appearance it is testament to the pioneering role played by George Reid, who had been appointed principal of OCA in 1920. A Farm boy born in Wingham, Ontario, in 1860, he himself had been a student at the Ontario School of Art before travelling to Philadelphia and then Paris to study painting. A tireless champion of the visual arts, Reid was a pivotal figure in the history of Toronto. Best known for his murals (Old City Hall, Jarvis Collegiate and others), as well as great paintings such as The Forenoon of the Mongon (1893), Reid was a tireless activist who helped to lay the foundations of Toronto’s cultural infrastructure.

His struggle to have the visual arts accepted as part of the provincial education system kept him busy for decades. As he wrote in the OCA Student Manual in 1927, “Art education has been begging for a long time for its proper place in the scheme of Education as a whole, and is only now coming into its own.”

Interestingly, Reid argued that OCA should be affiliated with the University of Toronto so students could graduate with a degree. That dream wouldn’t be realized until decades later when OCAD (Ontario College of Art & Design) became OCAD University.

“There is hope,” Reid wrote in that same manual, “that through making Art a subject for matriculation and eventually by creating a degree of Bachelor of Fine Arts in the University that higher Art Education in Ontario may receive full recognition and go freely on its way with the development of the aesthetic side of our life.”
For an idea of how different Toronto was a century ago and what Reid was up against, consider that in 1921 the college had all of 330 students and a staff of 13 teachers, three assistants, a principal and vice-principal. The school’s fund-raising consisted of an annual stipend of $400 from the Department of Education and about $300 from the city. In 1910, OCAD’s entire budget added up to a grand total of $3,377.

When Reid departed in 1929, he was succeeded by R.E.H. MacDonald, best known as one of Canada’s finest painters and a member of the Group of Seven. Under him, in 1933, came Fred Hannah, also a painter. Hannah occupied the position until 1952, by which time the college was set to enter another period of growth. It was operating summer courses in Port Hope, Ontario, and had taken over William Houston Public School in downtown Toronto in what is now York University’s Glendon College. Located at Lawrence and Bayview Avenues, it was a bit further afield.

Finally, on January 27, 1957, OCAD opened its new consolidated campus at 100 McCaul Street, where it remains to this day. The building unveiled back then was a well-intentioned exercise in modernism. Restricted rather than exuberant, the complex consisted of a set of glass-and-brick boxes that faced onto the street. Though it may have seemed the last word in architecture at the time, it has since become one of those seminal heritage structures too old enough to be considered historical. That will happen in time, no question. Even now, the building speaks of a sense of extraordinary optimism in Toronto. Planning for Viljo Revell’s New City Hall had begun as bad for Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s Toronto-Dominion Centre, two projects that helped bring the city into the modern age.

Though more modest in scope and budget, 100 McCaul McKee’s efforts changed things that were satisfying not just in architecture but the arts in general. The new school looked to the future, not as in the case with the 1927 Grange addition—to the past. In Toronto, the mid-1950s and early 1960s was the era of Painters Eleven, a pioneering group of abstract artists—many graduates of OCAD—who introduced non-figurative painting to the city. By the time British architect Will Alsop was selected to design the Sharp Centre in 2000, the McCaul premises were showing their age. OCAD was starting to look like a rustic, high school, a bit rundown and verging on shabby. When the federal/provincial infrastructure funding program SuperBuild was launched in the 1990s, many cultural and educational organisations recognized it for what it was—a chance to get their hands on some desperately needed cash.

Alsop, who by his own admission was barely aware of Toronto, heard about the project from a Canadian colleague. Despite the fact that his bid submission didn’t include a design, he made the shortlist and travelled hurriedly to the city. “I was back in London by Monday”, Alsop recalls, “and they called me on Tuesday and said we’d like you to do it. I had made it clear in the interview that I didn’t know what I was going to do. I wanted the design to be an inclusive process. I wanted to include everyone in the conversation.”

Some architects might be keener of such openness, but not Alsop. Indeed, his willingness to engage with students, staff and neighbours was almost as crucial as the building he produced. “Through these conversations,” he says, “it emerged that no one wanted a building on the south parking lot. I tended to agree with them. So I asked the question: ‘Where do you put the building?’ The idea of pouring the building on legs emerged from talking to people—including the neighbours. The truth is that I did not know I was going to do that. But it solved a huge number of problems. And despite what people might think, we got the building permit in just 12 days.”

For one thing, Alsop’s scheme meant that the building did not have to be closed down for two or three years while construction took place. Once the steel skeleton had been constructed—a job that took place during summer holidays and attracted large crowds—the rest of the work was relatively straightforward.

Another major advantage of Alsop’s approach was that it allowed for the creation of an open space beneath the “tabletop” connecting Grange Park on the west with McCaul on the east. That plan made a lot of sense. The impulse to fuse these various components into a single multi-functional urban entity is appropriate in a city that has only recently started to value itself as a city. As Alsop pointed out when he won the competition, the public realm on McCaul needed attention; what better way to provide that than by “dragging” the park through in the sidewalk. “Apart from the legs, it’s a very simple form,” he explains. “You don’t have to carve it up into strange shapes to make it interesting, or make something people enjoy.”

Through the initial reaction was mixed—architects, especially, disapproved of the Sharp Centre—it has become one of those buildings that define Toronto. Given that it’s an art school, a place to experiment and take risks, Alsop’s over-the-top architecture sets just the right tone. It’s okay to be different and look beyond the conventional.

From OCAD U’s point of view, the building ups the mix of beauty and practicality that lies at the heart of creative excellence. You don’t have to be an art student, or even a Torontonian, to appreciate that.

Christopher Hume is the architecture critic and urban affairs columnist for the Toronto Star. Since the 1980s, he has won a National Newspaper Award and been nominated five times. He has been recognized by the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada and the Ontario Association of Architects. His book, Winter James’ “Toronto Weave,” won a Toronto Heritage Award in 2000.