

DESIGN

QUARTERLY

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The purpose of Design Quarterly is to reflect and represent
practitioners and professionals in the architectural, interior design
and design resource communities throughout British Columbia
and Alberta.

IDIBC AWARDS OF EXCELLENCE
ARCHITECT GENE DUB | KITCHEN & BATH

A SENSE OF PLACE

BEST OF SHOW XTHUM, Kwantlen Polytechnic University – Public Architecture + Communication Design
BY CHERYL MAH | PHOTOS NIC LEHOUX



Located at Kwantlen Polytechnic University's Surrey campus, the goal of this new Aboriginal Gathering Place was to create a warm and inviting environment tailored to Aboriginal students for gathering, celebrating, storytelling, studying and relaxing.

Working with local representatives of Kwantlen, Semiahmoo, Tsawwassen and Katzie Nations, Public Architecture + Communication Design transformed a small classroom into a flexible multipurpose space that successfully fosters a sense of place and identity for Aboriginal students on campus.

"Historically there have been recruitment and retention challenges with First Nations students so this was a strategic initiative on the part of the provincial government and the university. There are other ones being built at other universities," says Brian Wakelin, a principal at the firm.

In the search for solutions to the constraints of the small space, the design team found inspiration and a design concept revolving around the use of a basket like weave pattern for wall-scapes and ceiling elements. It's used effectively to conceal the original room while referencing native tradition, delivering much more than the long-house originally envisioned by the client group.

Public Architecture + Communication Design transformed a small classroom into a flexible multipurpose space that successfully fosters a sense of place and identity for Aboriginal students on campus.

The 25 ft x 30 ft classroom is in a concrete block building with a standard t-bar ceiling with no ceiling height and no ability to excavate down, recalls Wakelin, so it became a "logical idea that we would obscure any references to the conventional restraints of the room."

"The building is so wonderfully banal that it's a perfect foil to this tiny jewel," he adds.

The woven cedar ceiling-scape not only helps to define the various zones but undulates around the room, creating highs and lows to add drama in the space.

The woodwork uses small dimension lumber and was fabricated off site. The use of a contemporary construction and fabrication methodology to create the cedar wood elements is a fitting expression of First Nations culture and contemporary architecture. It also resonates with the modern post-secondary institution setting.

Using a digitally driven "building without drawings approach," a succession of computer-numerically-controlled (CNC) produced prototypes were eventually used to create the intricate weave form that defines the space.

"We took our computer files and gave them directly to a wood fabricator who translated all of the files into plywood templates — each one was numbered and quite specifically located within the room," explains Wakelin.

Once brought onto the site, templates were laid directly on the floor and carefully mapped out prior to installation. The inner cedar lathe was hand applied on site which allowed for coordination with mechanical and electrical services.

"The lath is vertical in orientation when it comes down the skylight and it's meant to allude to rain, landscape and water — all which resonate with the four nations," says Wakelin.

A new skylight and exterior entry was incorporated into the room to evoke connections to the sky and forest.

"The room is at the end of a long double loaded corridor so we broke through the end of the corridor with a little new vestibule to build a connection to an existing stand of trees beyond," says Wakelin, adding the skylight draws natural daylight down into the space.

In addition, a wall connecting the classroom to the corridor was removed in order to create connectivity to the campus as a whole.

Location: Surrey, B.C.
Design Team: Brian Wakelin, John Wall, Matty Scolozzi, Chris Forrest, David Zeibin
Square footage: 1,000



Other renovations included lighting and window upgrades, new finishes and furnishings.

Because fire is important to the First Nations group for social, historical and cultural reasons, a fireplace acts as the key anchor for the modest space. The multipurpose room includes computer stations, digital projection for group activities, tables for studying or feasts and a simple kitchen. Soft seating allows for students to have informal discussions as well as for elders to continue the strong oral tradition of storytelling.

Completed in October 2009 and officially opened in May 2010, Xthum (meaning basket and drum) has been well received by the client group and the students. The design team was able to execute smart space planning to overcome a desired program far too big for the space.

"We love projects like that — paring it back to what's essential and what's the absolute minimum programmatically that will do the most," says Wakelin. "We found a scheme where it did really get pared back to the absolute minimum but when you look at it, it doesn't look it at all."

Although the design team anticipated challenges with the innovative ceiling/wall design, it was executed as planned.

"As it turned out, it was the conventional building construction details that for whatever reason went slightly sideways or had its peculiarities," says Wakelin with a laugh.

The innovative project has earned the firm several awards to date, the most recent being awarded Best in Show and a gold award at this year's IDIBC Award of Excellence. Not bad for the firm's first commission.

"We feel really lucky and were very surprised at winning, especially for Best in Show," says Wakelin.



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