



forms & functions

Art wins the lottery

Since it was established in 1943, the Art Gallery of Windsor has been housed in a Victorian home, a converted brewery and, most recently, a shopping mall. This February the AGW moved into its first purpose-built home, inaugurating its new space with a blockbuster exhibit of Impressionist masterworks from the National Gallery of Canada. But it was not just paintings by Monet, van Gogh and Renoir that made a splash when the new AGW opened its doors. The building itself turns heads, boldly announcing that this too-often marginalized repository for regional, national and international art has finally come into its own. Overlooking the glimmering waters of the Detroit River, the AGW's new light-filled, three-storey stone-clad structure provides a stark contrast to its old windowless mall space (which, incidentally, wasn't nearly as bad as it sounds).

Over the past few years, it has been the AGW's real estate decisions, rather than its actual real estate, that have been the talk of the town. While the AGW was boxed into the shopping mall, the gallery leased its old home, the converted brewery, to the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Commission for use as a temporary casino. This arrangement was viewed as outrageous by some, savvy by others. Revenue from the casino's five-year lease left the gallery with a healthy endowment, and on top of that the lottery commission contributed \$20 million to the \$24 million cost of the new building. "They were able to develop a complex building quickly because they used an innovative financial planning model," observes Stephen Petri of the Toronto architecture firm Reich + Petch, which designed the gallery in joint venture with Moffat Kinoshita, also of Toronto.



AGW's new building contains a restaurant, multi-purpose performance space and other amenities to make the gallery, in director Nataley Nagy's words, "visitor friendly." But on opening weekend, there was an overarching sense that such amenities overshadowed the facility's raison d'être. While the entrance possesses a gorgeous balance – natural light flooding into the open area from all three floors is mellowed by dark cherrywood accents and a fossilized limestone floor – the upstairs galleries feel off kilter. Exhibit space dominates the west side of the building, while the east side is reserved for storage and meeting rooms. Wide hallways, which run through the splinter-like spine that bisects the building, separate the two uses, and the unfortunate result is that visitors find themselves caught between the contemplative enjoyment of art and the frantic business of it. The dichotomy is even more pronounced on the ground floor, where a windowless gallery, tucked behind a performance area and closed doors, stands largely unnoticed.

It is likely some of these inequities will be remedied as the AGW's curators explore their newfound flexibility. They must also find ways to draw visitors into the sharply pointed glass bays, which offer magnificent views but are separated from the upper-floor galleries by heavy doors. This will take some seriously creative curating, but the result could render these protrusions as striking a feature from the inside as they are from the street.

KRISTIN PALM

Top left: Windsor's new art gallery lights up downtown with its distinctive three-storey glass lantern. Top right: The building's bifurcating spine terminates at the south end in lean, pointed bays. Corridors running through the spine separate the galleries from storage and meeting rooms. Bottom: A staircase linking the second and third floors threads through a glazed bay.



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