



Gallery takes a bow

1

The board of the new Art Gallery of Windsor knew that to make the project a success, it needed to be more than just a bold new space; it had to pay its own way, and it had to be fun.

By **Martha Uniacke Breen** Photography by Kerun Ip and Peter Sellar/KLIK

With its breezy, double-prow-shaped core framing views of the Detroit River on one side and the city skyline on the other, the Art Gallery of Windsor resembles nothing so much as a giant ship docked alongside the historical port of call that is its home. The gallery board knew that to make the enterprise a success, it needed to be more than just a bold new space for the display and preservation of art; it also had to make art fun, and, of course, pay its own way. They turned to Toronto museum specialists Reich + Petch Inc.

According to Reich + Petch's co-ordinator on the project, Stephen Petri, instilling an entertainment component in the design of museums and galleries is nothing new. In fact, he says, "People have to be willing to look at their institutions with an air of progressiveness, or they become fossilized." But making the design striking was one thing; making it comfortable for users, and satisfying a number of practical considerations from environmental stability to wayfinding, was equally important.

Incorporated in the late 1980s, Reich +

Petch began to gravitate over time towards a specialty in gallery projects; by the early 1990s, it opened a British office, Reich + Petch International, to handle a growing body of overseas work. Today, the company has projects in Asia, the U.K. and the Middle East, and is currently at work on a giant new gallery, the Behring Family Hall of Mammals, at Washington D.C.'s Smithsonian Institution.

Petri himself is uniquely suited to his firm's specialty. A University of Waterloo graduate, he spent time at several Toronto and international

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architecture firms before joining the Royal Ontario Museum, where he worked his way up to chief designer. His ROM projects included the Corelli Gallery and the revamped Egypt Gallery, which brought him to the attention of Reich + Petch, who partnered in that project. When the architects landed the Hong Kong Heritage Museum project in 1997, it was only natural to ask Petri aboard.

For many years, Windsor's art gallery had been housed in a historic former brewery, close to its present site on the shore of the Detroit River. The gallery oversight committee originally hired the firm to engineer an extensive reno-

entrepreneurial model with the financing of the gallery," explains Petri. "Instead of relying on public money or loans, they leased out part of the original gallery building to a casino and used those revenues to pay for the new gallery project. It's very bold, very unusual for a cultural institution to do something like that; they were very broad in their thinking throughout the project."

The site provided a natural inspiration for the building's shape. On the north face is a small greensward, with a grove of trees crowned by a massive ancient oak, overlooking the Detroit River. On the opposite side is a long view of the city skyline. Though the building is

landings, so that visitors must cross each floor in turn to get to the stairs for the next level. Both of these ends, which are architectural works of art in themselves, are notable for their soaring, open volumes of space (on one side, a 25 foot height is used for large scale sculptural exhibits that are clearly visible from outside), and of their large-scale vistas. Observes Petri, "On Canada Day, when they set the fireworks off over the river, those 'ends' are the hottest ticket in town to watch from."

The design had to be visually consistent to help keep visitors oriented as they moved through the building; yet it had to provide a wide assortment of spaces to suit curators' tastes, and to meet the physical needs of sometimes very fragile works of art. The gradual transition of the spine's glazing – clear at the two ends, to sandblasted glass and finally opaque white walls towards the centre – satisfies both requirements, protecting the art from direct sunlight while maintaining the sense of openness. Movable panels, slots and slices of window allow the curators to further add and

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vation to the brewery building, which was picturesquely historic. However, it soon became abundantly clear that a brand new building, with state-of-the-art environmental control systems, especially critical in a place that houses precious works of art, and a striking, crowd-pleasing design would be the more practical option.

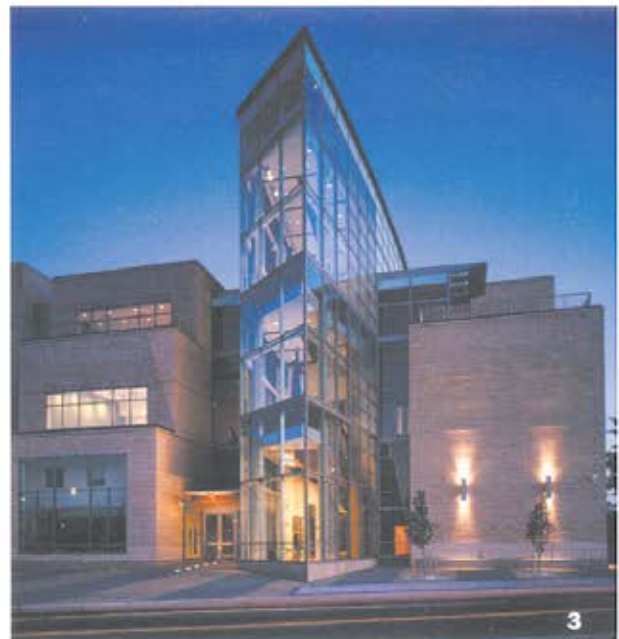
Practicality, incidentally, played a strong role in the realization of the gallery right from the start – nowhere more than with the financing. "They followed an innovative,

roughly squarish in shape, its central figure is a three-storey spine, a central galley running straight through the building that divides it more or less in two: public areas such as the top-floor terrace and soaring, glazed sculpture court on the river side, and office and administration functions on the more enclosed city side.

The spine rises through all three floors, helping both with orientation and also to pull visitors through. The spine tapers into all-glass stairways on each end, which feature alternate

1. On the river side, the Art Gallery's soaring glazed staircase/entry hall is great for close encounters with sculpture.

2-3. The city and river views of the building, respectively, through which the glazed spine sails like a giant ship. Photos by Kerun Ip.




subtract light from different areas as needed.

The second floor is the main gallery space and, considering its neutral, unobtrusive design, the amount of hidden engineering in it is remarkable. "We wanted a very explicit, white gallery with very literal details here," explains Petri. "Through ceiling treatments, wide wall openings, and moveable elements, curators can use the entire space for one large show or break it up into two smaller ones."

One of the more subtle, and interesting, details the architects had to puzzle out was how to make the long, curved walls of the central spine suitable for the hanging of art. The sheer length of the curved walls allows all but the largest canvases to lie more or less flat, says Petri, though their shape is clearly evident if you sight along them. Actually, everyday details like light switches, outlets, and thermostats were much more difficult to place, he laughs, saying

ruefully, "Believe it or not, it's actually very difficult to make a completely blank wall."

The success of the gallery goes beyond its intrinsic worth as a centre for the preservation and display of the city's increasingly important art collection, Petri explains. It also plays a role in the revitalization of Windsor's downtown waterfront, a major ongoing initiative currently underway in the city. In that sense, the entertainment factor played a small but pivotal role.

"Because of its nature, so much of the building had to be simple and plain, but the public really wants a space that's expressive and beautiful," Petri says. "So we made the most of the ends of the spine, put in strong aggressive lines, to contrast with the plainness of the galleries and the overall shape. You might say we did a bit of architectural 'guerrilla warfare'." 

Consultants:

Architects: Reich + Petch Architects, Moffat Kinoshita Architects (joint venture)

Lighting Design: Suzanne Powadiuk Design

Suppliers:

Architectural Masonry: Artisan Masonry Inc.

Architectural Metals: Formnuovo Inc.

Carpeting: C.J. Duguid Flooring Ltd.

Custom Faux Finish: Scott Gregory

Custom Lighting: Nelson & Garrett Inc.

Custom Millwork: Provincial Store Fixtures Ltd.

Door Hardware: Upper Canada Specialty Hardware Ltd.

Doors: Southwest Doors and Hardware

Flooring: Colauti Brothers Marble Tile & Carpet Ltd.

Glass: Ferguson Glass

Stone Flooring: Stone Tile International Inc.

4. The streetside stairway opens to rafters 25 feet overhead. Photo by Kerun Ip.

5. Openings and moving panels make the galleries adaptable for individual installations. Photo by Peter Sellar.

6. A long view of the main lobby clearly shows the curved walls of the central spine, which helps visitors orient themselves as they stroll through the galleries. Photo by Kerun Ip.





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