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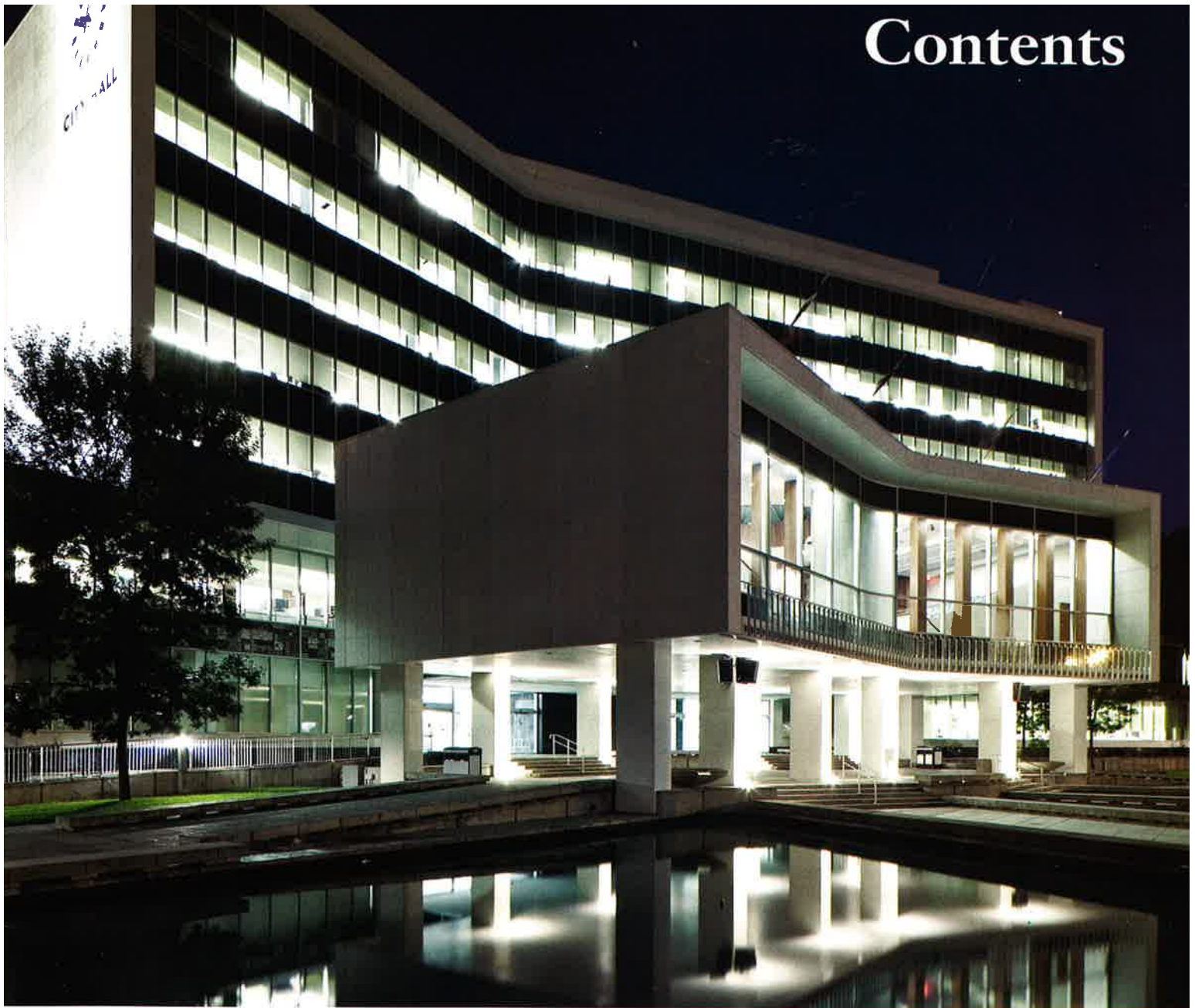
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Above: Northeast view of Hamilton City Hall. Photo by Jesse Colin Jackson.

Cover: Vaughan Civic Centre clock tower. Photo by Maris Mezulis.



Inside the Past

To commemorate the War of 1812 bicentennial, Reich+Petch Architects helped the St. Lawrence Parks Commission and others enhance the on-site immersive experiences of their historic monuments and forts.

By Tyler Davie

Working on a museum experience at a historical site means working with what is there, even if the landscape has changed significantly. Features of the land or buildings may not be as they were for the period examined, or even exist anymore. And when the period of history being examined is the War of 1812 in Ontario, the relative lack of prominence can be a challenge. Yet the obscurity also offers opportunities for designers to have a blank slate in the visitor's mind to tell a story.

To commemorate the bicentennial of the War of 1812, Toronto-based Reich + Petch Architects were selected to design exhibits at Fort Malden in Amherstberg, Fort George in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Old Fort Erie, Fort York in Toronto, and Upper Canada Village in Morrisburg as part of site refurbishments sponsored by the governments of Ontario and Canada. Reich + Petch also designed the new visitors' centre at Upper Canada Village, exhibits at Fort Henry's new visitors' centre in Kingston, and exhibits at the Laura Secord homestead in Queenston Heights.

Fort Malden

In the early stages of the war, Fort Malden was a key site with a shipyard from which the British and their First Nations allies attacked Detroit, but little of the original fort remains today. The story of the fort is in many ways the story of Amherstberg, as the site of the fort changed purposes – from military to a mental institution to a mill to a residential zone – to meet the town's needs over time.

"We worked with Parks Canada's site manager, interpretation manager, curator and collections person to think through the stories they wanted to tell, tracing from the War of 1812 up to the present day, and talk about the change seen in the town of Amherstberg," says project co-ordinator and principal Pauline Dolovich. "Right now when you're in Amherstburg most of it looks like a city park because most of the buildings from the fort are not there."

The exhibits Reich + Petch developed are located in the site's interpretive centre in a laundry building of the former mental institution and opened last summer. Each room measures between 250 and 300 square feet and feels like a gallery, says principal Whit Petch. On the ground level is the story of the war, centred around the rock on which Shawnee chief Tecumseh gave a speech rallying First Nations to fight with the British against the Americans, with an audio track of the speech in English and Shawnee. As visitors walk through the building, they walk through the history of the town, ending with a view of what it is today through windows closed since the 1970s.

The thorough collection of artifacts from the era of the war down to the present day gave Reich + Petch plenty of firearms, uniforms, and written correspondence with which to tell a story. "Malden is lucky because it's one of the sites that have had a collections person throughout its history," says Dolovich. "They actually had a good collection, well catalogued, and each object is understood, which is unique to a lot of sites."

Sometimes curatorial expertise can be a challenge because the sheer number of artifacts they have could overwhelm a visitor if they were all displayed, says Petch. And with Malden, the physical space and budget forced Parks Canada and Reich + Petch to sharpen their focus. "We made some decisions early on about who was coming here and how they would use the building and that affected how we would lay out the rooms," says Dolovich. "We brought their children's space down to the main level and emphasized it because it's a core audience for them."

In-house staff that could perform maintenance, such as installing new floors, and students researching the Parks Canada's library and the Royal Ontario Museum's archives for high-quality images needed for displays freed up more of the budget for exhibits, says Dolovich.

The challenge for the students was finding the right images to use at the required quality, Petch says, because the budget would not have covered original illustrations. The images and material used in exhibits at Fort Malden were strongly influenced by existing rooms and spaces.



Previous page and above: The new visitor centre in Upper Canada Village pays homage to traditional local barn structures with their cedar-shingle gable roofs by including wood siding and 25-ft. vaulted exposed timber ceilings (Photos by Shai Gil Photography).

Upper Canada Village

Reich + Petch were freed from this restriction at Upper Canada Village where they were architects and exhibit designers for the Discovery Centre in association with NORR Limited, which opened last year. “We did a master plan for the exhibits before we did the building so we had a good idea for what the exhibits were going to be about and the spaces that would be required,” says Petch.

The Discovery Centre features touch-screens and interactive videos that explain the battle at Crysler’s Farm and how it affected the development of the surrounding area, including the village preserved from the 1860s. The building acts as an entrance to the village and a small train ride that moves visitors around the battlefield (at least a recreation of it, as the actual battlefield was submerged when the St. Lawrence Seaway was built).

Here Reich + Petch built houses and encampments, and even built a display of firing cannons with the added sound effects of the balls hitting the earth and water. “You can’t interpret the site as such but they’ve got a number of monuments on the edge of the river which we did interpretation for describing the importance of the St. Lawrence River in the war,” says Petch.

He says Reich + Petch and interpretive planners Blue Sky, who wrote the stories for all of the firm’s 1812 projects, took more initiative in picking the artifacts for stories because St. Lawrence Parks Commission had less curatorial resources than Parks Canada. This gave the firm more of an opportunity to shape the exhibits and consequently the building.

Fort York

The same opportunity did not exist at Fort York, where the visitor centre’s architecture had already been decided by the time Reich + Petch began designing exhibits for it. “It’s a complicated building, a building that’s doing a lot for the community,” says Dolovich, co-ordinator of the still-in-development project. “For the site, it’s a key piece of a strategy that kind of works outside of the walls and within the walls.”

Dolovich says the City of Toronto wanted to use the centre to show how Toronto and Canada are affected today by the fighting

at the fort and the war, including the role of First Nations.

The entrance to the building is situated at the original waterfront of the city. Visitors are greeted with a graphic of a 1,000-lb. shell gun and led into a lobby with a boat model, Douglas Coupland’s toy soldiers sculpture, and a model of a dredger used to shape the waterfront. From there, visitors will see exhibits and the vault, an environmentally controlled space where objects can be displayed that would have been damaged in the process before.

The last steps before entering the fort commons are taken up a 100-ft. ramp, designed by the building architects as an area for a multimedia experience. It is here where the six hours of battle at Fort York will be illustrated. “From the start when the British sight the American ships arriving, there’s fighting at the water’s edge, out to fighting in the forest, where there was the big explosion where a lot of Americans were killed when they blew up the grand magazine on the embankment,” says Dolovich.

Re-enactments and other footage are also an important component of the exhibits for Fort George, Old Fort Erie, and Fort Henry. Fort George features a video cube that describes events around the fort during the war, and opens this summer.

At Old Fort Erie, part of a recently-shot PBS documentary will play at the visitor centre. The audience will then embark on a tour back and forth through the siege wall that tells the story of the fighting from the perspectives of the British invaders and American occupiers in the bloodiest battles of the war.

Reich + Petch’s work at Fort Henry is in the visitor centre, set to open this spring and, like York and Old Fort Erie, introduces the postwar fort, which is almost completely intact.

The level of control in telling a story changes by how much control the firm has in building design, and what material is available already. The relative good condition of Fort Henry and Fort York allowed Reich + Petch the opportunity to introduce visitors to inhabitable pieces of history, so the emphasis of the work could be more directly focused on storytelling. Fort Malden’s collection provided ample material to choose from to describe the experience of living in Amherstberg through changing times.

At Upper Canada Village’s visitor centre and surrounding grounds, Reich + Petch were able to shape the physical experience of the space itself, to clearly illustrate what went on. With the War of 1812’s relative lack of historic prominence, effective storytelling is even more important to engage visitors and meet the expectations of communities wanting to share the importance of what remains from that time to their lives today. **Building**



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