



# Colourful history

## BOLD, INNOVATIVE DESIGN SALUTES QUILTING, TECHNOLOGY, HERITAGE

By Barbara Aggerholm

Photography • Ian Willms

**YOUR FIRST GLIMPSE** of Waterloo Region's new history museum hits you like a lightning bolt out of a grey sky.

As you motor along Kitchener's fast-moving Homer Watson Boulevard, with its mix of businesses, industries and apartment buildings, your eyes are snagged by a wall of vivid, multi-coloured glass panels.

This is a building that makes you pay attention to history.

More than 500 glass panels — a quilt-like pattern of blues, yellows, reds, greens, browns and white among them — are only part of the new museum's exterior, but they were creating a buzz among residents long before May's official opening.

After all, the wall is the most public view of the \$26-million Waterloo Region Museum, located at the intersection of Homer Watson Boulevard and Huron Road.

The 47,000-square-foot museum is the gateway to Doon Heritage Village, the region's 1914 living history village depicting life in a rural Waterloo County village before the First World War.

It will showcase some of the region's 43,000 artifacts, one of the largest community museum collections in Ontario, including a bell tower from a Kitchener tannery, button-making equipment and a 1989 burgundy Toyota Corolla, one of the first cars off the assembly line at the Toyota plant in Cambridge.

The new building — with its two levels of exhibit space, 115-seat theatre, three meeting rooms, lobby, catering kitchen and assembly area — opened this month at the same time as Doon Heritage Village, which was closed during the museum's construction.

The museum's exhibits will not be ready until next year.

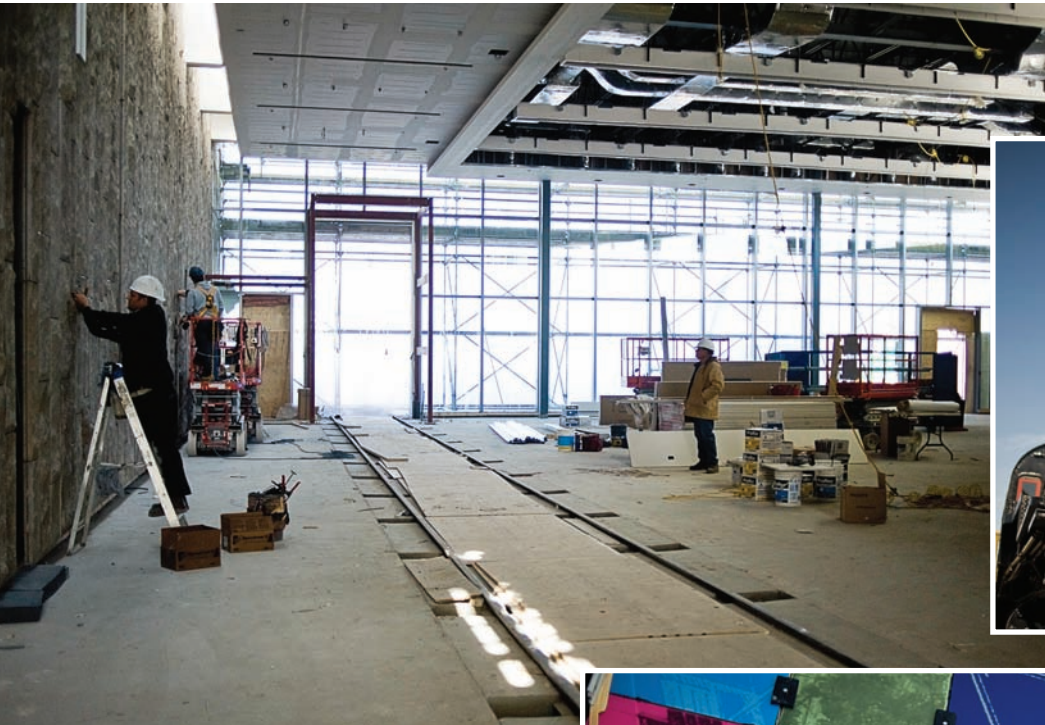
While the multi-coloured façade makes a statement from the busy roadway, the other end of the museum is tranquil.

The rear façade is more muted, featuring wood, stone and floor-to-ceiling windows, giving visitors in the large main lobby, with its magnificent limestone wall, a view of the peaceful historic village.

"The other side is a wonderful step back through history," says project architect Brian Rudy of Moriyama & Teshima Architects in Toronto. The view gives a feeling of ►

The 16 colours of the glass panels in the exterior wall of the new Waterloo Region Museum have been arranged, using computer code, to spell out a quote from Sir Wilfrid Laurier about immigration.





**Above photo:** Earlier this spring, workers use limestone from a quarry near Owen Sound to build a wall in the main lobby where community gatherings, weddings and other functions will be held. When the room is complete, the locomotive (upper right) will appear as though it is following the tracks through the glass.

**Right photo:** Just inside the main entrance of the museum is a map of Waterloo Region in coloured glass.



► serenity, he says.

“We really love that feeling and we didn’t want to destroy it. . . .With the lobby glass, it draws the village into the museum.

“I hope it (the museum) feels modern on the whole, but in the village side it has a respect” for the historic buildings and materials there.

So many features of the building, designed by Moriyama & Teshima Architects in association with The Walter Fedy Partnership in Kitchener, speak to the region’s rich history.

The museum is built on the spot where two historic transportation routes met: the old Huron Road built in the 1830s to bring settlers into the region, and the branch rail line that connected Galt to Elmira, passing through Berlin. Glass flooring shows the crossroad where the road meets the rail line.

That rail line actually runs through the museum, right to the large glass windows looking out at Doon Heritage Village. The windows frame an imposing 1911 Canadian Pacific Railway steam locomotive sitting outside on its original tracks, though the

train looks like it will crash through the building at any minute.

The museum is an iconic building that suits this region, says Tom Reitz, manager/curator of Waterloo Region Museum, who is “exhilarated” with its architecture. “I think the building shows excitement and boldness,” he says.

“I think the building is quite striking,” agrees project historian Kenneth McLaughlin. “It represents the Region of Waterloo in a memorable architectural statement.”

And that’s not easy, given the region is made up of three cities, four municipalities, rural and urban landscapes, industry and technology.

The new museum is not a monument, and that fits with Waterloo Region whose buildings traditionally blend with the landscape,

McLaughlin says.

“We do not have a tradition of monumental buildings that say, ‘Come and look at me,’ ” McLaughlin says. “They say, ‘Look at the surroundings and the land.’ ”

That’s the effect Rudy was looking for. He didn’t want it dominating its surroundings as though it “had landed like a spaceship in this wonderful village.”

But the museum hasn’t been without some controversy. Not everyone was thrilled, for example, when they saw the colourful exterior glass panels for the first time.

Some people thought the colours were too bold for a quilt or a museum devoted to history.

“People who are regular visitors to the village have only seen one side of the building, the bright colours, and they were



concerned about its impact on historical buildings,” Reitz says. They were thinking of the village’s period in history when colours were more muted.

But history isn’t just about the distant past, says Reitz, whose own relatives came to Waterloo Township from Pennsylvania in the 1820s. History is also recent.

“We’re dealing with all parts of history and all time. It’s not just about pioneers. . . . History is anything that happened an hour ago.”

The coloured glass panels allude to the region’s history of quilt-making. Architects pored over many of the 130 quilts in the region’s collection before making a decision.

When so many museums are dominated by men’s contributions, it’s significant that quilting, a woman-centred tradition that speaks of community, is at the forefront of this museum, McLaughlin says.

But there’s more behind the glass panel design than meets the eye. The design also alludes to the region’s burgeoning tech-



Manager/curator Tom Reitz



Architect Brian Rudy -file photo

nological expertise, Reitz says.

In a nod to technology, the coloured glass panels have been arranged, using computer code, so they quote Sir Wilfrid Laurier when he was prime minister on Sept. 1, 1905.

The 16 colours of the glass façade have been translated into hexi-decimal computer code so that combinations of colours represent the 26 letters in the English alphabet.

Similarly, a display of multi-coloured glass panels inside and just outside the museum doors are positioned so they spell out the names of the seven area municipalities.

“There’s a couple of hidden messages like

that in the building,” Rudy says.

“We know that we want to tie the building to the modern-day stage of the region,” Rudy says. “A large part is about technology and RIM (Research In Motion) and Open Text.”

For the less computer literate among us, here are the words of Laurier when he was acknowledging the heritage of immigrants coming to Western Canada. (They’ll be written in plain English inside the museum.) “We do not want, that any individuals should forget the land of their origin or their ancestors. Let them look to the past, but let them also look to the future; let them look to the land of their ancestors, but let them look also to the land of their children,” Laurier said.

The coded phrase is a little like a detail of the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa, for which Moriyama & Teshima Architects won the Governor General’s Medal for Architecture in 2008. Small windows on the sides of the war museum’s central copper roof spell “Lest we forget” in Morse code. ►



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The Waterloo Region Museum is close to Rudy's heart.

Rudy was born and raised in the local Mennonite community. His ancestor, Joseph Schoerg, was one of the first two Mennonite pioneers to settle in what is now Waterloo Region in 1800. His grandmother grew up in the farmhouse built by Schoerg's son at the site of the present-day Pioneer Tower in Kitchener. His mother, a life-long quilter, lives in Kitchener.

Rudy, who was part of the team that designed the Canadian War Museum, received his architecture degree from University of Waterloo.

"I would say it's probably for me the most meaningful project of my career," says Rudy, who lives in Toronto.

Rudy's challenge was to create a building that was "iconic," giving it a significant feature or "architectural signature."

The exterior glass panels, with its rainbow of colours, won the day, rather than a tower or other feature.

"There was a huge study we did for several months of colour, a lot based on quilts from the collection, some based on colours of the site at different times of the year," Rudy says.

Rudy is looking forward to seeing visitors' impressions of the museum once they step inside the door.

"I think the crossroad will be the most powerful moment when people come in," he says. As they come in, they'll see the pond, reminiscent of Grand River and other bodies of water in the region. The pond, also used for storm-water collection and a source of grey water for toilets, is one of the "silver standard" features of the museum's energy and environmental design.

Once they're inside, visitors will head up a slight ramp where they'll see the historic crossroad, which symbolizes a time when the region was "bridging its pioneer past with its modern present," says the architect's project statement.

"I hope when they hit the crossroad, there

will be a shift in orientation to the village, and a surprise moment," Rudy says.

They'll have a choice: either continue along the rail line toward the village and the frozen-in-time steam engine; or head toward the exhibits which illustrate history as distant as the flora and fauna that grew here before First Nations settlements, and as recent as the BlackBerry.

"The notion of choice is profound because that's what history is, a series of choices or paths," Rudy says.

Rudy hopes you like the museum, but he also knows that there will be some critics. "That's normal for any modern building, especially one that's built on a sacred place" like Doon Heritage Village, he says.

For Reitz's part, he's looking forward to showing you Waterloo Region Museum, inside and out.

"When we get you inside the building and you see the layers of meaning and the quality of space and the incredible views out to the village and from the village in, I think we'll sell you on the quality of the building."



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