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Making a difference through design

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In an age obsessed with celebrity architects, it's worth remembering that the best aren't always the most famous.

The designers of the new Bloorview Kids Rehab, Montgomery Sisam and Stantec of Toronto, are hardly household names, but together they have produced one of the finest examples of contemporary architecture in this city. The $101 million facility, on Kilgour Rd. east of Bayview Ave., north of Eglinton Ave., is a deeply moving reminder of the sheer power of design to make the world a better place.

That may sound hopelessly maudlin, but the fact is that with Bloorview, the architects involved, especially design principal Terry Montgomery and project architect Chris Klemt, have created something truly remarkable, namely a building that meets all its functional requirements and much, much, more. The message — and it can be read in every detail — is that the disabled lead real lives and belong in the real world.

Attitudes were quite different in 1962 when the first Bloorview, then the Ontario Crippled Children's Centre, was built. The old building was set apart, cut off from its surroundings. This was the end of the line, a place from which there was no escape.

By contrast, the new Bloorview is filled with art and light and fully integrated into the neighbourhood. The big architectural move is a striking zinc-clad roof that slopes dramatically from two storeys at the front to six at the back. Sections are cut away to create a series of terraces.

"The building had to be low on Kilgour," Montgomery explains, "to accommodate the wishes of the neighbours. But we wanted to design something with its own identity. The culture of Bloorview is very consultative; we spoke to kids, parents, staff and former clients. They taught us a huge amount."

According to Joan Ferguson, Bloorview's vice-president of programs and services: "The focus now is on clients and their families. People who come here should feel they have possibilities. This is about a child's right to participate in society. We want to change attitudes and rebuild lives."

Wandering through the hallways of Bloorview, one can't help but be impressed by the attention to material quality and the human scale of the building. Though the architects didn't have unlimited funds, they managed to avoid that mean institutional feel historically associated with such places. Working with interior designer Anne Carlyle, Montgomery and his team created spaces that are comfortable and the opposite of oppressive.

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Terry Montgomery, architect

One of the subtexts of the architecture is a clear desire to blur the distinctions between inside and out. For example, the zinc tiles that make the exterior so distinctive are also used on some interior walls. Despite the expense, wood has also been used indoors to add warmth to spaces that could otherwise have been deadly.

Because the building sits beside a ravine that still has trees and greenery, there's a strong sense that it's also connected to nature. Research has shown that patients who have visual and/or physical access to nature recover faster. On this basis, Bloorview, which handles 7,000 outpatients and 300 inpatients annually, will work wonders. Windows and glass walls are located strategically to create vistas that enhance the feeling that Bloorview is part of something much larger.

Indeed, the place is so attractive it will allow for what Ferguson calls "reverse integration." That means, for instance, that local kids from Leaside are welcome to swim in Bloorview's pool and play in its well-appointed gym.

Though staff and patients started moving in on Monday, the building won't be fully occupied until August. But even now, it's obvious this facility has set a new standard but simply because it was designed with users in mind. As a result, these users, whether they're children or adults, staff or volunteers, don't have to leave the world behind when they arrive at Bloorview.

"The old place was depressing," admits longtime volunteer Marny Loach. "This is so bright and airy. It's wonderful. We love it."

For Montgomery, who has been involved with Bloorview for a decade, the experience has been a memorable one.

"I don't know what I'll do when it's over," he says sounding both happy and sad. "I think we managed to flip the paradigm."