

Greenwood School has a lesson to teach



Christopher Hume

An instant landmark for an instant school — that's what was asked of Terry Montgomery and that's what he delivered.

The Toronto architect was hired three years ago to design the just-founded Greenwood College School. Located on the southeast corner of Mt. Pleasant Rd. and Davisville Ave., the new facility turned out to be one of the most attractive buildings in the neighbourhood.

Dedicated to notions of experiential learning, community service and outdoor education, Greenwood is not a typical private school. On the other hand, neither is it radical; indeed, it's based on very traditional ideas that schools play a part in the character-forming process.

For Montgomery, a partner in Montgomery Sisam Architects, the task was to take these disparate impulses and marry them into a coherent whole. In addition to everything else, it had to function as a place for kids (Grades 7 to 12), which meant it had to be able to withstand the nasty habits of teenagers.

And because the co-founders, the Latimer family, run Camp Kilcoo in Haliburton, the basic aesthetic of Greenwood was based on the idea of the lodge. As corny as this may sound, Montgomery managed to turn it into something remarkably fresh and, even more amazing, something quite urban.

The most obvious reference to the lodge is the use of Warton limestone both inside and out. Grey and beautifully patterned, it appears indoors as flooring and in sections of the exterior as a cladding.

The stone also adds an element of elegance to a building constructed on a limited budget.

It's worth noting that Greenwood provides further evidence that architectural excellence isn't necessarily determined by budget; in other words, it shows that it's entirely possible to produce buildings of exceptional quality without spending enormous sums of money.

In fact, that's the architect's job, though many seem reluctant to accept it.

Entering the school from Mt. Pleasant, one walks into a large, open area which, like so many rooms in the school, does double or triple duty. In this case, that means it's a cafeteria,

assembly hall and general gathering space. Off to one side, a smaller area serves as a student lounge. Organized around a large fireplace, it's defined largely by furniture, with a series of couches arranged around the hearth.

And like most of the rooms at Greenwood, the lounge has a wall almost entirely given over to windows. As well as letting in sunlight, windows are an effective way of connecting this most urban of institutions to its context.

This corner, which has been changed completely since the condo craze swept through the area starting in the late '80s, now has a nicely European scale. The residential slabs across Mt. Pleasant are medium-height developments built out to the sidewalk. Though the surrounding neighbourhood is mostly small, two-storey houses, the taller buildings along the main street feel appropriate.

Against this backdrop, Greenwood fits right in, even providing a buffer between Mt. Pleasant and the area behind.

Interestingly, Mt. Pleasant does a strange split just south of Davisville on the east side. For a block, a short one-way lane, separated from the main street by a substantial grassy island, runs north past Greenwood. Though entirely coincidental, it means there's a drop-off point for students and a natural barrier between the school and the flow of traffic on Mt. Pleasant.

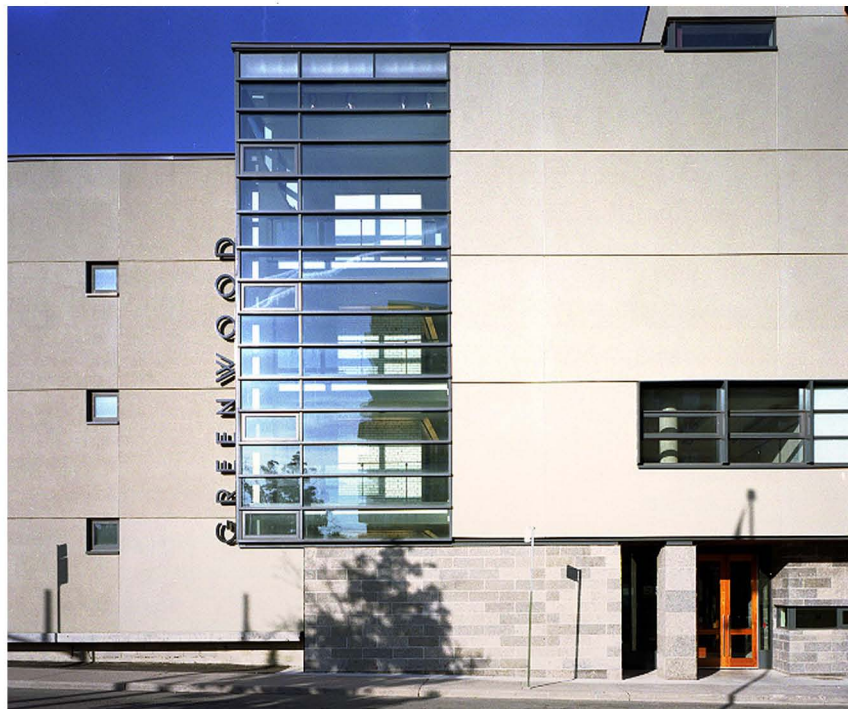
Anyone who knows the area will remember that, before Greenwood, the corner was the site of early modernist box made of those white-enamelled bricks that were so popular in the 1950s. They can still be seen inside; the older building was stripped back to its bones and then incorporated into the school.

"Our role was to create a sense of place," says Montgomery. "It's such an urban location. The streets are right outside so it's not behind gates or anything."

The brilliance of the project lies in the exquisite sense of balance it brings to a neighbourhood that's both a part of the city and off the beaten track. Density is appropriate but only on the main streets. Once quiet thoroughfares such as Balliol, Merton and Davisville streets are built up, they become major arteries and lose their appeal.

Mt. Pleasant, by contrast, can handle the extra activity. Greenwood School goes the extra distance by not appearing corporate; it may not look like a conventional school, but neither does it resemble an office building.

In other words, it's urban without being downtown, just the right thing for North Toronto, where many residents still think they live in a small town.



STEVEN EVANS

With the changing intersection of Mt. Pleasant Rd. and Davisville Ave. as a backdrop, Greenwood College School fits right in, even providing a buffer between busy Mt. Pleasant and the area behind.