

New school perfectly on point



Christopher Hume

Sometimes it's hard not to love this city. Wednesday was one of those times.

The occasion was the official opening of the National Ballet School on Jarvis St.

Normally, the appearance of a specialized facility such as this would be of little interest beyond the immediate community. But in this case, the sheer architectural excellence of the project, its profound sense of urbanity and rigorous institutional intelligence serve as a model to Toronto and the world.

Rest assured, the \$100-million complex will draw visitors from around the globe. It is a splendid example of how good architecture can meet the needs of both a professional school and the larger city. Designed by Goldsmith, Borgal and Co. and Kwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg, this is one of those rare schemes that works on multiple levels.

As a school, it gives staff and students an additional 100,000 square feet of studios, classrooms, offices and gathering space. As an element of the cityscape, it is a jewel that will help revitalize part of the downtown that needs fresh life. It also incorporates new construction with historic renovations, knitting past and present into a seamless whole. Finally, it combines institutional buildings and residential development; two condo towers and a row of townhouses occupy the bottom half of the site effortlessly.

In fact, what was unveiled yesterday was only the first of several phases; two years of work remain. But this is the main gesture. The dominant feature is a six-storey glass tower that contains a series of studios, one stacked atop the other. Open to the street, they will become the face of the school, an impromptu show for passersby. A smaller glass box sits to the south, connected to a larger glazed slab that join the disparate elements of the complex.

Two rebuilt 19th-century structures also form part of the compound, the original 1898 Havergal Ladies' College, long-time home to the CBC, and the



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The new building will provide impromptu shows for passersby, knitting it more intimately into its community, while the complex as a whole integrates itself wonderfully with its surroundings.

1856 residence of Sir Oliver Mowat.

The result is that the school has become a presence in a way it never was before. Where the school turned its back on its surroundings, now it embraces the city. With this building, the institution takes its proper position in Toronto; finally, it has architecture it deserves.

Inside, the theme is one of transparency, domesticity and shared spaces. Huge swaths of glass are used throughout to provide light and visual connection. On every side, there are views, large and small. The visitor feels a sense of intimacy and openness, a remarkable mix, particularly in an institutional setting.

Because the site is so tight, the architects had to go up as well as out; the play between vertical and horizontal enlivens the campus, creating large flexible



spaces such as the Town Square, the practical, social and ceremonial heart of the complex. The upper floors culminate in balconies that overlook the square and bring a theatre-like quality to the room.

The architects also had to

share the site with a condo development, the unusually elegant Radio City designed by architectsAlliance. The two teams worked things out brilliantly and their projects function beautifully as a single entity.

This is precisely where many

schemes in Toronto fall flat; they fail to take context into account and insist they are the only building on the block.

What makes NBS/Radio City so important is that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Everyone, from residents

of Radio City to the students at the school, wins.

"It's a fantastic project," gushed architect Philip Goldsmith, who has been on the job fully 12 years. "Now's the time to say it; great architecture takes great clients."

As much as anyone, that client was National Ballet School chief administrator Robert Sirman, whose efforts were recognized when the city agreed to name the laneway that bisects the site from east to west after him.

"When I came here 15 years ago, the school was in difficult straits," Sirman said. "We had an operating deficit of \$1 million annually. It struck me that we had to turn around and take our rightful place in the city."

Though that has happened, money continues to be an issue. A further \$18 million is needed to finish the task.

But for now, it's enough to bask in the glow of a project where everything went right. Wandering around the facilities earlier this week, local councillor Kyle Rae had tears in his eyes.

"It's so beautiful," he whispered, "so beautiful. It's a triumph."

Indeed it is.