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LOCATION
371 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario

OWNER/DEVELOPER
University of Toronto Schools (UTS)

ARCHITECT
Diamond Schmitt Architects

HERITAGE ARCHITECT
ERA Architects

CONSTRUCTION MANAGER
Eastern Construction Company

STRUCTURAL CONSULTANT
RJC Engineers

MECHANICAL/ELECTRICAL CONSULTANT
Smith + Andersen

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT
Terraplani Landscape Architects

TOTAL SIZE
120,000 square feet

TOTAL COST
\$58 million

SCHOOLS ADDITION & RENOVATION – UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO SCHOOLS

by ROBIN BRUNET

When the University of Toronto Schools (UTS) received a long-planned affiliate status with the University of Toronto in 2015, this opened the floodgates for a comprehensive renovation and expansion of its three-storey school building, which had been designed by Darling and Pearson architects in 1910.

Diamond Schmitt was tasked with restoring the heritage central and east wings of the building, converting many spaces and creating new amenities, along with a new wing that would include a 700-seat auditorium.

But as far as Rosemary Evans, UTS's principal is concerned, the underlying story of the renewal and expansion project is of a noteworthy architect coming home. "Don Schmitt was a UTS alumnus: Class of 1970," she says. "He was passionate about our school, and over many years he had done numerous iterations of what an upgraded school building could be. When we received affiliation status, the renewal finally got underway."

Evans isn't being hyperbolic when she credits Schmitt for being the ideal architect for the job. "For example, the footprint we were granted for the expansion changed in size, but because Don knew the campus inside out he was able to adjust his ideas without losing what he was trying to achieve."

Diana Saragosa, associate at Diamond Schmitt, says, "This was a fairly complex project that successfully knits together the historic and new program elements, prioritizing



clear circulation and creating gathering spaces." With Schmitt and team working closely with Evans and other stakeholders, it was mutually agreed that the 1910 building's layout had to be opened up to accommodate modern learning needs. Connectivity was a priority, as was bringing much more natural light into the structure.

The architects turned a sub-standard gymnasium into a black box theatre, and a 25-yard swimming pool in the basement was converted into music classrooms. Visual arts studios with large north-facing windows, new science labs, a media lab, multi-purpose room, and classroom clusters completed the transformation of the heritage wings.

To maximize the university's park space, a new eight-metre high gymnasium and athletic centre were located below the park with steel beams over 24-metres long supporting the outdoor space above. The new auditorium's walls were comprised of large steel trusses, allowing the structure

to be lifted above grade and cantilevered over a row of columns, creating a sheltered outdoor seating area and a glazed learning commons overlooking a park space. "Within the auditorium a curved upstand truss supports the cantilevered balcony, maximizing audience sightlines," says Saragosa.

A skylit atrium space at the centre of the plan links the heritage wing and addition with a corridor loop on each floor and vertically connects all six levels of the school with stairs and amphitheatre stepped seating. The atrium was designed as a place of gathering and a crossroads for the school community.

As complex as the project was, Saragosa points out that in many cases the best solutions proved to be the simplest. "For example, concrete turned out to be an important material not just for structural integrity but also for esthetics, as evidenced by polished concrete floors and exposed foundation work," she says. "We also used white brick in a minimalist



fashion to complement the heritage building red brick facade."

Eastern Construction Company broke ground on the project in 2019 after students were relocated to other parts of the campus, and as with any renovation, surprises occurred. "We came across a fully enclosed hidden room in the basement that had long been forgotten," says Evans.

Also, the terracotta surrounding the heritage windows of the 1910 building necessitated additional structural support. Another surprise followed during the excavation for the gymnasium, when the foundations of homes from the 1800s were uncovered.

UTS's renovation and addition is expected to be fully completed by January, and Evans speaks on behalf of colleagues when she says, "We like to say that we have built an extraordinary past, and now thanks to Don Schmitt and his team plus the many trades working on site, we're truly building the future of UTS." **A**