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GALLERY DESIGN & DEVELOPMENT

New Royal Alberta Museum Project

The 2011 competition for a design-builder generated high international interest, including submissions from two Pritzker Architecture Prize-winning architects. In the end, the project was awarded to a local team, Ledor Design Build, which comprises the builder, Ledor, and the architectural firm, DIALOG. Housed on the grounds of a former Canada Post distribution centre, the design envisioned by DIALOG architect Donna Clare and museum specialist Michael Lundholm, of Lundholm Architectural Associates, takes perfect advantage of the downtown site. The overarching design concept is an interwoven narrative between nature and man. The rectilinear forms of the Museum's layout follow and express the traditions of early survey grids that originally defined the site, where the English grid and French river lot systems met. The main entrance is strategically placed to signal the presence of the Museum as an active partner in the downtown Arts District.

On occasion, architects offer up designs that forever constrain institutions by forcing them into preconceived sculptural solutions that defy practicality. Not so for the Royal Alberta Museum (RAM), whose design sets the bar high for functionality and navigability. On the public side, the building invites visitors in, leading them intuitively through the main lobby and beyond, where gallery destinations are revealed. Each gallery experience begins and ends at a grand central lobby that serves as the building's hub. The design team consciously restricted the visitor spaces to just two levels, reflecting studies showing that galleries located on higher floors tend to be visited less frequently. The public spaces, including the lobby, assembly spaces, café and lunchrooms, will be multifunctional, offering the ability to open and close areas as needed. This adaptability is critical as the Museum and its programs grow and mature in their new home.

Often given short shrift, the work areas of the Museum will be expansive and customized to need. They have been specifically ordered and arranged to coincide with the function of use, whether that be accessioning new collections, receiving the next feature exhibition or processing specimens in one of the research laboratories. The building layout is designed and sequenced to work with, not against, staff.

Community Engagement

While architectural reveals tend to get the most attention in a project like this, those of us who work in museums know that the real story is on the inside. At their most basic level, museums tell stories, and our goal is to relate stories that matter. Some stories will be inspiring, uplifting, amazing; others will be hard, challenging, demanding. All will be thought-provoking and provide new perspectives.

We have asked our visitors what elicits the strongest responses, and they have told us loud and clear that it is our objects that inspire endless fascination. To ensure the centrality of collections in the visitor experience, story displays will be object focused, told around a key message and directed to a defined target audience. We will use a range of interpretive methods to deliver our key messages, including text, film, digital interactives, and audio-explained dioramas and inter-actives. Our approach is multidimensional: we are keen to employ various storytelling methods to deliver engaging narratives for each display, to convey not only facts but complexity, character and emotion.