



Corner Glass

An Addition to This 19th-Century School Provides Expanded Facilities for English as a Second Language and Adult Literacy Programs, as Well as College and University Entrance Courses.

Project Winnipeg Adult Education Centre, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Architect Penner Prins Architectural Collaborative

Mechanical/Electrical/Lighting MCW/AGE

Exterior Lighting Gabriel Design

Text Peter Sampson

Photos Gerry Kopelow

Winnipeg is known for its heritage architecture, where remarkable examples of early 20th-century buildings adorn the city's core. As a newcomer, I have been told by colleagues that when the honeymoon is over, I'll be more upset by what's gone missing than I am impressed by what's still standing—a sentiment confirmed by Winnipeg's own urban troubadours The Weakerthans, who paint an image of the city with lyrics such as "buildings gone missing like teeth." True as this might be, as far as heritage buildings go, I am impressed by the promise of a refreshing sense of city building that is forward-looking while respectful of its past. Red River College's sustainable downtown campus (see CA, January 2004) combines new technology within a heritage shell; Mountain Equipment Co-op is reconstructed from warehouses once occupying the site; the construction of the Manitoba Hydro Tower which promises to be the largest sustainable office complex on the continent. These all present, in their own way, a view toward conservation that is compelling. A recent addition to this city-building effort is the rigorously minimalist concrete-and-glass extension to the Winnipeg Adult Education Centre (WAEC), once known as the Isbister School, a designated heritage building.

Completed in 2004, the addition to the WAEC on Vaughan Street was designed by the Penner Prins Architectural Collaborative, a partnership of two small Winnipeg firms. Against the more inward-looking original Queen Anne style building, the addition provides adults returning to school with a light, open and inviting learning space. A winner at the Prairie Design Awards, the new wing presents a graceful and outward-looking orientation down one of the city's grand boulevards—presently home to defining Winnipeg moments such as the legislature building's historic Golden Boy and underused parking lots. As the boulevard falters towards greatness, the Penner Prins addition brings to it new life and promise, asserting the street's potential.

Isbister School was originally built as a neighbourhood school in 1898. Soon after completion, massive economic growth and subsequent city building surrounded the facility. And as the residential streets were redeveloped, the school was left standing awkwardly with its back to Memorial Boulevard¹ throughout the 20th century. The school was developed into an adult facility in the late '60s; within a decade the building could not meet growing enrolment. The usual trailers showed up to house extra classrooms, and the grounds degenerated into surface parking lots and chain-link fences. While it is hard to believe that such a condition could go unchecked on

such a prominent site for the next 20 years, it was always the intention of the school division to improve the facilities.

After many studies, Penner Prins were retained in 1998 to examine building options. Work on the heritage structure was to be kept to a minimum, and their efforts were largely focused on the addition. Though they were initially encouraged to explore additions to the south, the architects suggested that the proper orientation of the addition should extend the centre hallway of the four-square schoolhouse towards the back of the building, culminating in a secondary entrance at Memorial Boulevard. This was a successful move, not just for the life of the city's grand via, but for WAEC occupants as well. The hallway breaks out of the old schoolhouse along a full-height curtain wall. Washed with light, pale orange flooring against a dark masonry trombe wall casts warmth against the green canopy of a small garden below. The main-floor level, set to match the height of the existing main floor, is raised so that one is above ground when stepping out into the glass corridor. An intentional deployment of the curtain-wall frame below floor and above ceiling levels creates minimal visual barriers to the exterior, save for one horizontal member located at guardrail height which reduces the need for additional architectural components against the glass wall.

While the entry sequence into the addition from the school is nothing short of magnificent, the story becomes complete when traversing the hallway at the upper floor. At the top of the three-storey glass stairway, the view down Memorial Boulevard is intense and promising. Evident are some of the city's finest contributions to Canadian architecture: the country's largest provincial legislature building, Number Ten Architectural Group/Gustavo da Roza's iconic 1971 Winnipeg Art Gallery, the city's iconic Hudson's Bay Department store, and a host of other 20th-century buildings--a handful of them gems built in Manitoba's own Tyndall stone. The revitalization of WEAC is a bold effort to create a constructive dialogue not just between the old school and its contemporary addition, but between the site and the city, establishing a dialogue that celebrates contrast, diversity, and the appreciation of one's surroundings.

"I think we were looking for this moment," Penner told me as we stood looking out over the city, to which Prins added, "though we had no way of knowing we'd get it right until it was built." But the effort and the implication of the gesture toward the city are clear. I came away thinking that, perhaps as architects, if we knit places together to make civic moments somehow interdependent, it becomes harder and harder to remove them from the fabric. Perhaps this kind of complex integration is the ultimate goal of heritage, where conservation follows as an integral part of successful new city building.

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1 Colony Street is the actual name of the one-block extension of Memorial Boulevard upon which WEAC sits. For clarity's sake, Colony Street is referred to here as Memorial Boulevard.

Client Winnipeg School Division

Architect Team David Penner, Richard R. Prins, Todd White, Travis Cooke

Structural Wolfrom Engineering

Mechanical/Electrical/Lighting MCW/AGE

Exterior Lighting Gabriel Design

Area 2,322 M²

Budget \$2.5 M

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