

INDIGENOUS LEARNING CENTRE – WESTERN UNIVERSITY

by ROBIN BRUNET



Seeking extensive input from stakeholders has become common among architects for virtually any project, but the people behind the development of Western University's new Indigenous Learning Centre (ILC) took the practice to new levels in order to create a touchstone for Indigenous students' groups and programming.

Wanda Dalla Costa, founder of the Tawaw Architecture Collective and Canada's first Indigenous woman to practice architecture, explains, "We used our Indigenous Place Keeping Framework [IPKF] to ensure the project was citizen-led, place-based, and had a reciprocal value for the home community."

The result is an area on campus that embodies a distinctive circular structure with three levels of indoor space, including a ground/main floor open concept for gathering, a second level mezzanine area, and a lower-level accommodating teaching/learning spaces and offices (the location also allows for a relocation of the University's Indigenous Food and Medicine Garden and an outdoor classroom with ceremonial space).

Scott Robinson, principal at architects Tillmann Ruth Robinson, says, "I had met Wanda back in 2018 and jumped at the chance to have her on our team and collaborate with her. Due to her unique approach to seeking stakeholder input, I learned a great deal about the process of Indigenous engagement."

Dalla Costa says her process aims to "decolonize design" and consisted of five steps that lasted from October to December of 2018 and was led by



Candace Brunette-Debassige, special advisor to the University's provost (Indigenous Initiatives). The first step determined the aspirations of stakeholders and how they could be achieved. "Then we undertook place-based research by really digging into resources for forgotten or overlooked cultural context, in order to increase our awareness of the client."

After that came the most crucial step: the community-led teaching phase in which stakeholders expressed their worldview and protocols. "Among many other things, we learned that Western University was all about imparting knowledge connected to the land," Dalla Costa says.

The final stages included conducting a visual preferences survey in which it was determined if a traditional or modern approach to the design was warranted (Western stakeholders preferred a contemporary structure).

The University announced in July of 2019 that the distinctive circular library at the John. G. Althouse Faculty of Education Building would be repurposed as the keystone to the ILC. "It was an elegant concrete form built in 1966, with a robust structure but not a lot of natural light, so we added new openings and replaced the old skylight to increase transparency," Robinson says.

S.E.M. Construction also excavated the lower level to the basement to create a terrace that steps up onto grade. Construction was aided somewhat by the fact that ground broke in August of 2021, when the campus was still mostly devoid of people due to COVID. S.E.M. also built new offices, kitchens, and bathrooms, and presided over the installation of a high-efficiency heating and cooling system as well as LED lighting.

Arguably the most remarkable design aspect of ILC is a ceremonial

LOCATION

1137 Western Road, London, Ontario

OWNER/DEVELOPER

Western University

ARCHITECTS

architects Tillmann Ruth Robinson (prime consultant) / Tawaw Architecture Collective

GENERAL CONTRACTOR

S.E.M. Construction

STRUCTURAL CONSULTANT

VanBoxmeer & Stranges Engineering Ltd.

MECHANICAL/ELECTRICAL CONSULTANT

Chorley + Bisset Ltd.

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

Arthur Lierman Landscape Architecture

TOTAL SIZE

13,400 square feet

TOTAL COST

Undisclosed



harbour that is a modern interpretation of a turtle's shell (after the Indigenous name of North America, Turtle Island). Eventscape Inc. created the elaborate steel frame in its Toronto fabrication shop, disassembled it, and shipped it to Timmerman Timberworks Inc., which created the glulam cladding. "Everything was disassembled again and shipped to the site, where it was put together again very quickly," Robinson says.

As the project neared completion in October of 2022, Robinson said of Western University, "Our relationship with them goes back more than three decades, and with their director of capital projects, Fred Janzen, they gave this project tremendous support."

For her part, Dalla Costa emphasizes that the steps taken to gather enough input to influence design decisions "makes the difference between creating something that is acceptable and something meaningful and authentic. The process also gives architects a better chance to avoid an undue amount of design changes, because the input from stakeholders is so extensive." **A**