

The whole city is dug up. A light rail train will run from the south end of Kitchener to the top of Waterloo, Kitchener's northern neighbour. But, for now, there are vacant streets—sand underfoot, roadways sunken below the sidewalk like empty riverbeds. Excavators and bulldozers in their customary mustard yellow crowd inside the fences. And a few blocks up on Queen Street North, a bright yellow lantern shines on the edge of a downtown slowly coming back to life.

This is Kitchener's Central Library, reopened in 2014 after a major renovation and expansion by Toronto-based LGA Architectural Partners in association with Phillip H. Carter. The project broke ground in 2010 after two feasibility studies, which determined, based partly on community consultation, that the existing structure should be integrated into the expansion. Designed by renowned local architect Carl Rieder and built in 1962, the original building represents an ambitious era in Kitchener's history, which saw the extension of Highway 401 to the region and the construction of much modern architecture. Echoing these grand plans of half a century ago, the contemporary renewal of the library is both a part of downtown Kitchener's current transformation and an embodiment of what a library in the twenty-first century can be.

This does not mean discarding the old for the new—the architects have taken care in working with, and not against, the original building. Rieder's exterior motif was a series of two-storey arches in white precast concrete, framing walls of ashlar rubble stone. Facing Queen Street, the renovation has pushed out a glass wall beyond the original façade. This glazed box is the lantern that signals the library's presence after dark, offering a panorama of activity in the well-used double-height reading lounge and an illuminated view of Rieder's design.

The \$49-million project included a 25,000-sq. ft addition for a total 106,000 sq. ft of new and renovated space. Funded through the City of Kitchener's Economic Development Investment Fund, the project was recently awarded LEED Gold, which all municipal facilities are required to achieve. This mainstreaming of sustainability targets moves energy efficiency to the forefront, and the Central Library wears it on its sleeve (or envelope, if you prefer). Much of the new elevations alternate transparent, gel-filled (translucent), and opaque panels—balancing light, visibility, and insulation—that bring to mind an arrangement of books on a bookshelf. At night, the panels light up, animating the building when the library is closed.

By day, a light-filled atrium topped with clerestory windows welcomes visitors as they enter. Above is "Flux" by Toronto artists Moss & Lam: 20,000 silk-screened pages in lines of various lengths, forming an undulating canopy ranging from white through assorted tints of red, the result of thickening layers of text in different languages. This dramatic central concourse connects users to the multimedia collections and computer/media labs, the children's area, and the fiction collection. While much attention has been paid to the integration of digital technologies into libraries, the books remain, quietly buttressing the snazzy 3D printer and the 85 public-access computers.

The reading lounge, also off the central hub, has been enhanced in area and openness. A coffee counter serves treats while people sit in armchairs and at street-facing laptop bars. A faceted ceiling sprinkled with pot lights and subtly twinkling LED dots is a contemporary twist on the original illuminated grid ceiling. The most striking feature of the lounge is a mural by local painter Jack Bechtel entitled "Enlightenment," commissioned at the time of the original construction.

The children's area features delightful touches such as a mural on the glass wall of an activity room, and nook-like cubbies for kids to hide out and read. Staff animate the space by guiding games and crafts,

while parents enjoy time with their children by sharing a book. This area is in the rear addition and sits on a new, 412-space underground parking structure designed by Walter Fedy and operated by the City of Kitchener. Pending the completion of the LRT, Kitchener is still a city dependent on cars, but at least here, parking is tucked out of sight, prioritizing pedestrians and outdoor space.

The garage will serve the library and several other institutions making up the Civic District, such as Centre in the Square, an arts complex completed by Rieder in 1980 and part of his vision for a cohesive district anchored by iconic architecture. The renovation of the Central Library gestures boldly toward a new civic participation that can inform the area's evolution. Defined neither by bureaucracy nor commercialism, the library is a true "third place" between work and home, a concept cited by the architects as relevant to this project.ⁱ The third place, as defined by Ray Oldenburg in *The Great Good Place*, is crucial for civic engagement, democracy, and establishing feelings of a sense of place.

The second floor of the Central Library continues this sense of community through study and meeting spaces surrounding the non-fiction collection. Both the original building and the expansion create connections between spaces and users: one can watch from the second-floor balcony as a board game event takes place in the lounge below, or get a sense of the exam crunch by the number of students hunched over laptops in the glass-walled study rooms. The juncture between new and old is most dramatic on the second floor as the addition steps back to offer views of two bays of the original rubble stone façade. Nearby, a local history room rubs shoulders with a teen area where young people play video games. The less-visible basement floor completes the building program with meeting rooms and an art gallery, as well as a renovated 200-seat theatre where celebrated Canadian architect Douglas Cardinal gave a talk in April 2015. Another key component is the staff and administration area, which takes up roughly one-third of the upper two floors—the building hosts the headquarters for the KPL system of five libraries.

The success of the Central Library can be found in its details and formal gestures, but most importantly in what the design has enabled the community to achieve. Kitchener has suffered its share of built heritage losses, including the demolition of its 1924 city hall for the construction of a shopping mall that today is dilapidated and underused. Rieder's 1962 library had itself been a replacement for a Carnegie Library built in 1904, when Kitchener was still known as Berlin. While change in the built environment is inevitable, the approach to the Central Library taken by the client, architects, and community—adding to and enhancing rather than clearing the slate—greatly enriches the sense of place generated by its mix of uses and approachable atmosphere. The Central Library is a library of its time, complete with e-books, wi-fi and self-checkouts, but it is firmly rooted in the heritage of its place. Like the arrival of the LRT, which invokes the long-forgotten streetcar tracks that once criss-crossed the downtown, the library pauses to consider what came before and integrates the past into the future.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Professor Rick Haldenby of the University of Waterloo for assistance with research for this text.

ⁱ Alex Bozickovic, "How libraries are getting bright, loud and friendly," *The Globe and Mail*, June 12, 2015, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/home-and-garden/architecture/kitcheners-new-watering-hole-city-library-undergoes-46-million-renovation/article24923476/>.