

The School of Population and Public Health (SPPH) - UBC

BY JERRY EBERTS

The School of Population and Public Health (SPPH) at the University of British Columbia focuses on the discussion, creation and application of initiatives to protect and improve the health and well-being of people and communities, at home and around the world. It is fitting that this new school should have a good home.

"The elements of the school were distributed in different locations," says Dr. Martin Schechter, director of SPPH. "Part of it was in the Library Processing Building and part was in the Mather Centre Building on the fringe of the campus. UBC wanted to convert the James Mather Building to housing, so the decision was made to redesign the Library Processing Building to become the new SPPH Building."

Discussions began in early 2008 to combine the locations, including finding a new space for the work done at the Library Processing Building. "This required a paradigm shift in thinking," says David English, development manager for UBC Properties Trust. "As part of the team, the architects came up with a brilliant solution."

That solution included the creation of a new entrance to the building and corner plaza to make the SPPH Building a focus for the campus's East Mall. "It's a big concrete building," says Schechter. "The plan was to blow out one side and put in new, big windows and create a new entrance. The basement also needed a lot of work to create classrooms. Because of the low ceilings, we wanted to dig down, but engineering and code issues kept us from doing that."

Erik Mak, an associate with MCW Consultants Ltd., agrees the basement space was challenge. As electrical consultant for the team, Mak was tasked with upgrading the aging library building to modern standards for lighting and power supply. "Lighting was a challenge," says Mark. "We had high-end fixtures to coordinate, with projectors and other equipment. We had to reroute wiring for specific lighting needs. Plus it was a fast-track project; we only had about eight months to do the job."

Mak's colleague at MCW, Henry Leung, was a mechanical consultant for the team.

Virginia Anthony, senior administrator at SPPH, was a member of the building committee and liaison between the designers and the school. She says the process worked well and it was a "pleasant surprise" that the project took less than a year to complete. "I was impressed with Kasian Architecture Interior Design and Planning Ltd.," says Anthony. "They made sure that our requests for open spaces and a stairwell were taken into consideration. They were always amenable and all our wishes were taken into account. Not everything was in our control, but it all worked out in the end."

With the existing glazing on the ground floor removed and full-height glazing installed, the new entry was properly defined and the interior flooded with natural light.

As well, a new canopy was installed over the new entry point and can be used as an outdoor classroom. A 30-foot 'community table,' made with blown-down logs from Vancouver Island, is located under the canopy.

Scott Webster, principal with Axis Engineering Ltd., describes the outdoor canopy as a fun party of the redesign. "The work was deceptively tricky," says Webster. "The layout of the building columns is at asymmetric angles and we had to consider the heavy gravity load from now buildup. Other than that, it was fairly straightforward process, though not a normal sort of job for our company."

Carol Jones, a principal with Kasian, says there were a few challenges. "The building is now in what was the Library Processing depot and was really a concrete bunker built in the late 1970s," says Jones. "One challenge was that it had few windows and quite low ceilings on the bottom floor. Making a silk purse out of a sow's ear was our challenge. The second challenge was timing. We started work in late September 2009 and the building had to reopen in one year."

"Partway through, the school decided it wanted the outside done as well, though we were originally asked just for the interior design," says Erica Wickes, senior interior designer and project manager for Kasian. "We recommended a single entry point and blew them out of the water with our proposal. But it was just an idea. We then had to incorporate these further changes into the original budget."

“It was important to the school to have a connection to the rest of the campus,” says Jones. “We wanted an entry that welcomed people and passerby to the building. We also had to connect the landscape around the building to the master plan for the campus and consider how the exterior walkways connected with the infrastructure.”

Christopher Phillips, a principal with Phillips Farevaag Smallemberg, was landscape architect for the project. “As a strategy to improve UBC’s public realm, the entrance renovation for the SPPH took an anonymous building and reoriented its primary entry towards East Mall, giving the building a presence, public outdoor social space and an address along this primary campus pedestrian route,” he says. “The outdoor space takes advantage of the southwest aspect of the site by providing an elevated outdoor gathering space for socializing, studying and group classes, while multiple paths address desired lines through the site and connect to the surrounding walkways and streets.”

Phillips also helped design the system for utilizing rainwater. “The new canopy offered the opportunity to collect and reveal storm water by way of a rain chain and water channel running the length of the terrace,” he says. “The water is collected from the canopy via a decorative rock channel. A water runnel allows for infiltration and natural lawn irrigation prior to entering the campus system.”

Joe Ross, president of Donovan Management Ltd. and general contractor for the project, says this was an excellent team with which to work. “We’ve been doing renovations for a long time,” says Ross, “and we’ve done bigger jobs than this. But this one went extremely well.”

The design team paid tribute to the work of Dr. John Snow, father of epidemiology. His name is embossed in the concrete water wall located close to the entrance and along the trough where rainwater flows. “That was a pleasant surprise for the people at the school,” says Wickes.