

Designing Dreams

Local architect leaves master touch on Edmonton

Edmonton-based architect Barry Johns is at an exciting career juncture.

For starters, a recently released lush monograph chronicling his career — the plainly titled *Barry Johns Architects* (part of Tuns Press's Documents in Canadian Architecture series) — just won an Allied Arts Magazine international book publishing award for graphic design.

An impressive accomplishment, and deserved given the book's comprehensive yet succinct survey of John's architectural projects, work that has left an impressive intellectual and esthetic fingerprint on the designed face of Edmonton. Projects discussed include: Grant MacEwan College downtown campus, La Cite Francophone and the Advanced Technology Centre.

In the case of the Grant MacEwan campus — a project Johns



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and partners worked on as a team which included three separate architectural firms — few architects can lay claim to working on as vast a project in the heart of an already developed urban space.

Johns was also the cover feature of the July issue of *Canadian Architect Magazine* for his ambitious Two Rivers Gallery in Prince George, B.C. This building, nearly a decade in the making, is typical of this 53-year-old's architectural practice in its sensitive incorporation of community and client feedback (what the magazine describes as "learned populism") and responsiveness to the immediate environment.



Clockwise from top, a view of the curving glulam columns on the Two Rivers Gallery's east facade in Prince George, B.C., looking south; the gallery interior; the gallery viewed from the upper level.

But that's only Johns' professional history. Now the eloquent architect is focusing on whole other projects — these being undertaken once again under his own name given that he's stepped away (amicably) from his former firm Stantec Architecture, a group he still actively collaborates with. (In 1981, three years after arriving in Edmonton, Johns founded Barry Johns Ar-

chitects, a firm he merged with WSAG Architects and Laird Polson Architects to become Stantec Architecture, part of Stantec, an international built environment consulting firm.)

"I'm looking for more compelling opportunities for the future and think that pure architecture is going to be the next stage of my career," Johns says over a quiet lunch at Louisiana



Barry Johns outside La Cite, the community centre he designed for francophones in Edmonton.

Purchase in the Oliver neighbourhood.

"I'm looking for more complex buildings, more sophisticated buildings — realizing that I can't be all things to all people," continues the design practitioner famous for deeply symbolic work he describes as "purposefully eclectic."

Case in point: Johns is especially pleased with his collaborative efforts on two recent projects; one is a partnership with a sports architect on the world's largest indoor soccer centre being built in Calgary.

The other is the brand new, seven-storey Information and Communications Technology Building for the University of Calgary.

For Johns, the first project is just a foreshadow of the complicated multi-disciplinary collaborations that will become increasingly commonplace in his profession, while the second project is the beginning of a major focus on sustainability and green architecture which Johns believes will dominate the next 20 years of building design.

Of course, neither of these new

trends is completely new to Johns, given that collaboration is at the heart of his profession practice, especially the incorporation of his client's voice into his finished built structure.

Take the two very different community centres that Johns designed for francophones in Edmonton (La Cite) and Calgary (Centre Communautaire), buildings reflecting contrasting desires of groups who may share common ethnicity but have two very different histories.

Calgary wanted a building that reflected its close connections to Quebec, while an older Edmonton community (which had struggled 50 years to build its centre) wanted to bridge a Francophone historical context that included Europe and historic franco-Alberta as well as Quebec.

The result of a long community discourse was "a metric version of Grant MacEwan," imbued with sophisticated visual symbolism, referencing everything from "prairie farmhouse verandahs to memories of classical buildings."