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JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2019

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TRUE NORTH

BY REBECCA LO

Embracing both tradition and modernity, Toronto has a slew of new boutique hotels and one-off restaurants while sympathetically reusing former industrial spaces. *Perspective* delves a little deeper into Canada's biggest city

Nobu, by Studio Munge, is a mix of residence, hotel space and restaurant

Photo: Evan Dion

Toronto, or ‘Torono’ as its inhabitants would have it, is North America’s best-kept secret. It offers all the benefits of a large metropolis – a thriving business environment with plenty of multinationals, a highly respected film festival, museums built by world-class architects – all in the context of a city built around close-knit local communities with Canada’s natural beauty on the doorstep. For decades, it has been the preferred location for American film and television shoots ranging from *X-Men* to the Emmy-winning series *The Handmaid’s Tale*, based on the 1985 novel by Toronto native Margaret Atwood. Canada’s recent legalisation of cannabis for recreational use makes it just one of two countries to do so (the other being Uruguay). And with 8 million living in the Greater Toronto Area, the bill further enhances the city’s status as a great place both to work and play.

Scratch beneath the surface, and its inherently conservative nature comes through, despite the city’s left-leaning persona. The apparent polarity of Toronto as a forward-looking nexus attracting clever millennials, and Toronto as the staunchly British ‘Hogtown’ bent on preserving its colonial legacy are not at odds with each other. Indeed, the relationship between well-established residents and new arrivals, including refugees (some of whom were welcomed personally by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau with open arms and winter coats) has resulted in multi-ethnicity, evident in many facets.

Opened in September last year after a three-year renovation by Toronto-based architects Alliance, the Tower Automotive Building has begun its new life as MOCA – the Museum of Contemporary Art. With input by heritage consultants ERA Architects, MOCA occupies the lower five storeys and a total 5,100sqm (55,000sqf), while the top five storeys are leased. The architects went for an approach of minimal intervention to the original



MOCA opened in 2018 in the Tower Automotive Building



MOCA’s exterior reflects what’s to be found within

Photos: Ben Rahn A-Frame



Wall art: the Kiln’s original graffiti is regarded as an integral part of the building

Photos: Ben Rahn A-Frame

1919 structure, allowing key features such as its interior mushroom-shaped concrete columns to dominate the lofty exhibition halls.

Slated to fully open by the middle of this year, the Kiln redevelopment by LGA Architectural Partners at Evergreen Brickworks will transform the 1957 tunnel kiln and brick-drying building, abandoned in 1984, into a flexible community event, gallery and environmental centre. One of the elements LGA sought to preserve was the colourful graffiti in the interior. The firm had to bring the building up to date, not only for year-round usage, but also for the annual floods that plague the Don Valley where the brickworks is situated. More ambitiously, LGA set out to obtain carbon neutrality, hoping the Kiln will be a model for advancing sustainable cities.

The firm opted to maintain the open planning, allowing the facility to host up to 2,000 people. “Many people who have visited the site ask me what we have done – they cannot see anything different,” says Drew Adams, an LGA associate and the project’s lead architect. “To me, that is the biggest compliment. We could not add any insulation to the exterior as it’s a heritage structure, nor to the interior due to preservation of the graffiti. In the end, it made more sense to heat the floors, giving people a feeling of room-temperature warmth.” One open side was outfitted with high-performance retractable glazing to enclose the space, while raised flooring was installed to allow potential flood waters a chance to course through alongside radiant heating. “As the space had to be flexible for any type of large event year-round, we installed gender-neutral washrooms –



The University of Toronto's Daniels Building is a restoration, by NADAAA, of an 1875 college



A basilica-like atmosphere was the intention for Sud Forno on Temperance Street

the first in Canada – to allow for functions that skew towards more women or more men,” Adams notes.

A more dramatic adaptive reuse project is for the Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Design at the University of Toronto. Dubbed the Daniels Building in honour of its benefactor, alumnus and local developer John H Daniels, the design by NADAAA is a sensitive restoration of the 1875 neo-gothic former Knox College plus a brand-new wing. Where the old meets the new is where the Daniels Building is most exciting. Original gothic detailing such as ornamental arched windows lend the library a cloister-like hush, while volumes and masses are cleverly manipulated to create a progression of spaces that open up to double or triple heights, with something intriguing revealed around every corner.

“There are currently four key landscape thresholds into the site: a plaza to the east, a fabrication court to the north, a walkway to the west and a terrace cafe to the south,” says Nader Tehrani, founder of NADAAA. “I think there are

some key civic spaces that are simply extraordinary: the third-floor studio, the auditorium, the Fablab. As episodes, each of these contributes to the larger narrative of Toronto, because they operate as public spaces for the city.”

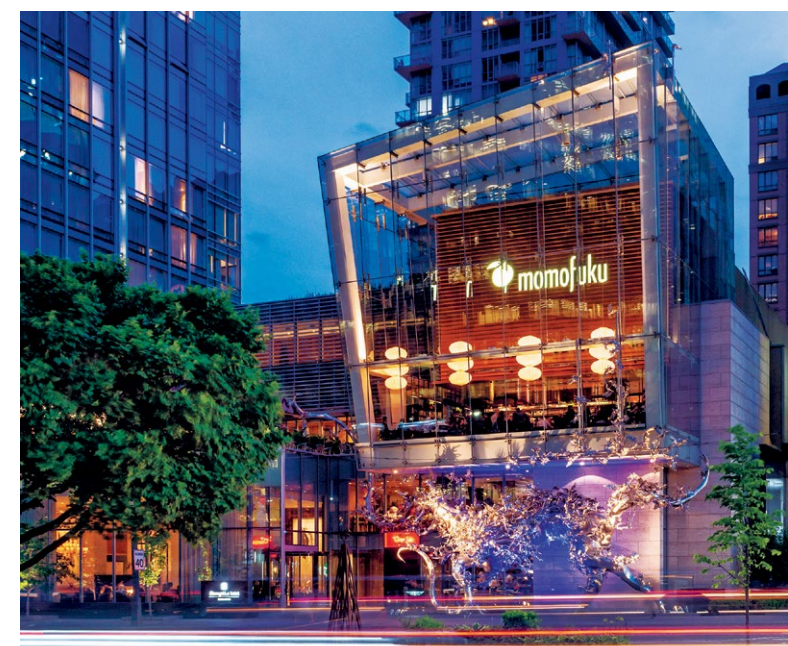
On the hospitality front is Giannone Petricone Associates with its two-storey Sud Forno on Temperance Street, designed for restaurateur Cosimo Mammoliti – the architectural firm has worked with him in Toronto as well as Los Angeles since the late 1990s. They intentionally wanted to highlight the heritage building’s architecture with rough and smooth surfaces, creating an unfinished basilica-like atmosphere on the ground floor with mosaic floor tiles and pendants peeking through a light well from the floor above. “Toronto has become a magnet for young Canadians,” says Ralph Giannone. “They have transformed the city in the past 10 years. At the same time, their parents have become empty nesters and are entertaining more outside the home. All this means more dining competition.

Photo: John Horner

Photos: Above: Yonge & Temperance courtesy Kriss Communications. Below: Bob Gundu

With an increase in density, we get luxury of scale. For us, the effort it takes to design 1,000sqf compared to 9,000sqf is not that much more.”

Close by, restaurateur David Chang’s Momofuku in the glass cube adjacent to the Shangri-La hotel got a new third-floor update, Kojin, in June. Courtesy of long-time partner DesignAgency, Kojin pays homage to open-flame cooking, and features contemporary Japanese aesthetics with a state-of-the-art ventilation system to extract the burning charcoal and wood fumes. The kanji character for ‘fire’ in red neon is a nod to the cuisine’s Asian twist. “We did Momofuku at Shangri-La five years ago,” notes Anwar Mekhayech, co-founder at DesignAgency. “We have designed all of David’s restaurants so far. Kojin is dark and moody with a lot of walnut and ox blood-coloured banquette upholstery. The hardest part was the extraction revamp, since we had to renovate it for Argentine *asado* cooking over open flame in an enclosed space.”



Momofuku: smokin’ on the third floor



Interiors in 50 Scollard are by Studio Munge, while the building is by Foster + Partners



St. Regis Toronto, an act classier than Trump

The former Trump Hotel reopened in November as St. Regis Toronto, and DesignAgency gave it a less blingy look by updating its lobby, ground-floor bar and upscale 31st storey restaurant Louix Louis. It follows the firm's 2017 adaptive reuse of lurid strip bar Jilly's into the boutique Broadview Hotel. "All the international hotel brands have finally arrived," notes Mekhayech. "I believe that the greatest spaces with the best narratives will be in Toronto's new hotels."

Case in point is Nobu, a mix of residence, hotel space and restaurant by Teeple Architects that broke ground this past summer. The celebrity chef's Japanese heritage will be interpreted by Studio Munge, which is also responsible for the residences at 50 Scollard in a Foster + Partners-designed

building and boutique hotel Bisha that opened towards the end of 2017 for local entertainment mogul Charles Khabouth. "Toronto is too young of a city with too many global influences to have a distinct design aesthetic," says Alessandro Munge. "It lacks the unity of many European capitals, but that allows us to be creatively free of traditions, more inclusive of various cultures and exploratory with our less defined identity. As Toronto grows and attracts more cosmopolitan residents and international developers, no doubt budgets will increase. Larger investments mean more aggressive visions and ultimately, more innovative projects. If the city comes on board and allows for groundbreaking architecture to rise while we push the boundaries of design, our future is bright." ■