

Award

MAYHEW INC. Charting The Way Forward

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LOCATION
Kent Drive, London, Ontario

OWNER/DEVELOPER
Western University

ARCHITECT
architects Tillmann Ruth Robinson

GENERAL CONTRACTOR
Tonda Construction Ltd.

STRUCTURAL CONSULTANT
Hastings & Aziz Ltd.

MECHANICAL/ELECTRICAL CONSULTANT
Chorley & Bisset Ltd.

TOTAL SIZE
117,534 square feet

TOTAL COST
\$34 million

University College Modernization – Western University

by ROBIN BRUNET

Constructed in 1922, University College with its iconic tower has dominated the hill overlooking London, Ontario's Western University campus, inspiring incoming generations of students, staff, and faculty to set their sights high.

But as with so many popular buildings, intense usage over the generations tended to outstrip the pace of maintenance (despite two additions constructed to the western and northern portions of the facility in the 1960s) and by the new millennium the interior infrastructure was no longer able to match the majestic exterior.

So, just as subtly as time had taken its toll on University College, a team consisting of Tonda Construction Ltd. and a host of talented sub trades working from a plan by architects Tillmann Ruth Robinson undertook a \$34-million renovation in 2016 that would prepare it to provide a 21st-century academic experience – and fully realize the design vision of the original architects.

And as is typical with renovation projects, the builders soon discovered they had their work cut out for them. "University College was constructed in a robust fashion to begin with, but when we started renovating we found ourselves drilling into interior and exterior walls that turned out to be 15-inch thick concrete," says Tonda project manager Paul Walkom.

But the effort was well worth it, especially from the perspective of the



Arts & Humanities faculty, for whom University College was originally developed and who would return to the facility once the renovations were complete. "We have a real commitment to creating student space, which was lacking in the former configuration, and we want to upgrade all of the services in the building to bring it into the 21st-century and, generally, to allow for a lot more light, to open it up, and make it far more accessible," Michael Milde, dean of Arts & Humanities, told the press in 2017.

The renovation consisted of upgrading critical elements such as plumbing, wiring, heating, ventilation, and windows. Classrooms would be outfitted with modern technology, and student and community spaces would

be given attractive new settings and improved connectivity.

Architects Tillmann Ruth Robinson benefitted from already having a strong relationship with Western University: its previous projects on the campus included the restoration of the Physics and Astronomy Building as well as design of the Saugeen-Maitland residence and the new FIMS and Nursing Building.

Construction-wise, the biggest component of the renovation was the creation of a commons, which was achieved by the removal of floor space in the central part of the building. "This would enable people on the fourth floor," says Tom Tillmann, principal of architects Tillman Ruth Robinson. "We



also determined that bringing natural light into this large space would be achieved by restoring nearby large arched windows that had been covered over for fire code reasons. The vertical integration of the floors animates the common spaces with natural light."

Another substantial undertaking was the creation of an atrium looking out onto the picturesque Beryl Ivey Garden. However, when asked what sticks in his mind as the most laborious aspect of the project, Tillmann unhesitatingly replies, "Cleaning up or replacing all the windows. At least 50 percent of them were obscured by ivy, to the degree that in some places the ivy had grown inside University College and caused mould – as well as substantial heat loss. We also wound up removing seven trees at the front of the building that had been planted in the 1940s and were preventing daylight from penetrating the interior."

Great care was taken to preserve the interior historical elements, for example, Conron Hall, initially designed as a grand convocation hall complete with towering stained glass windows, remained untouched save for an upgrade to its audio-visual systems. The original 1922 terrazzo floors were preserved throughout and matched in areas where the floor needed replacement. A time capsule placed in the building's stone brick in 1922 was left undisturbed.

As for the most memorable aspect of the project, Tillmann cites the restoration of light fixtures contained in two

bunkers near the main entrance symmetrically focused at the tower. "This would illuminate the tower at night, something I haven't personally seen since the 1960s," he says.

Paul Walkom from Tonda says of construction, which began in the summer of 2016: "We dealt with the usual site constraints you would encounter on any campus, but the main challenge for us was outfitting the historic interior for digital technology, which is why we spent so much time drilling into concrete – and finding out how thick the walls were. While we had

access to the original drawings, they consisted of only 30 or so pages, so detail about what was behind the walls and under the floors was limited."

However, Walkom echoes the sentiments of Tillmann when he says, "We'd worked extensively with Western in the past and we couldn't have asked for better communication or a more productive working relationship throughout the project."

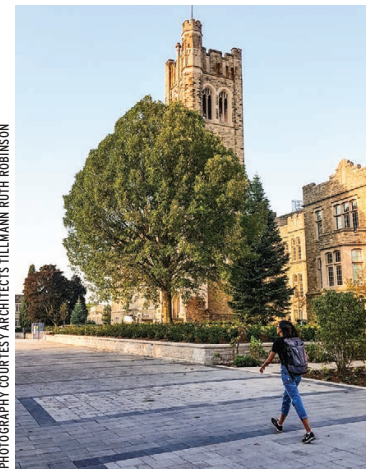
Innovation was evident throughout the design and construction process. Because drop ceilings couldn't be incorporated into the historic

structure, mechanical specialists Chorley & Bisset Ltd. located the HVAC system and other mechanical components in two new roof penthouses, constructed to match the limestone facings of University College.

As of September a paved driveway fronting University College was being replaced by pedestrian-only stone pavers and garden areas with seating and low level lighting, a revamped stone entry with widened stairs was being constructed, landscaping was ongoing, and the lighting system that would illuminate the tower was being fine-tuned.

Tillmann concludes, "I'm delighted by the outcome. This was a great chance to revitalize a wonderful part of the university, and special credit should go to Michael Milde for his persistence in getting this project off the ground."

Milde summarized the importance of the project by telling local media: "The sense of bringing everything up to current standards shows that arts and humanities is not, somehow, mired in the past, but we're keeping abreast with contemporary developments. It's a reminder that arts and humanities is at the heart of the University, that the things we do are central to the University's mission and, indeed, to maintaining a civilized society." **A**



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY ARCHITECTS TILLMANN RUTH ROBINSON



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Congratulations to Western University on their University College Modernization. We are proud to be part of the team!

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