

## Room for all faiths

by LISA ROCHON

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**An ethereal new space at the University of Toronto invites people of all beliefs to worship under the same onyx sky, LISA ROCHON reports**

Our eyes never rest. Our minds are rarely still. Could any of this come as a surprise? The world is ablaze with images intended to seduce and appall.

With every drive down a billboard-plastered street, with every flick through the channels on the television, more violence is done to our senses. Amid the madness, given our whacked-out state of mind, the architecture of serenity and reflection can take us by surprise, like a full body assault on our mission in life.

I visited the Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Toronto and couldn't get it out of my mind. This is not what I had expected. It's a second-floor redesign of an existing building. The budget is tiny. But several days after my first visit I went back to be stunned all over again by the clarity of the architecture and the grace of the multifaith idea. There may be wars of religion all around, but here is a place where Sikhs and Muslims and Buddhists and Christians can worship in the same space. This is a place where the historic particularities of religious architecture -- the ornate dome, the golden temple, the rose window -- have been distilled down to pure geometries and material essences: a room large enough to suggest a void or something vast; a ceiling and an eastern-facing wall covered in a glorious skin of pale white onyx; a kitchen and dining room for any worship group to break bread, and a meditation room with a wall of living plants meant to cleanse the air and, with any luck, the human spirit.

The design by Moriyama & Teshima Architects proves that architecture can inspire civility and understanding between people, no matter their faith.



Religion may often divide but the centre gathers and affirms. Within the main worshipping room, there is poetry in the details and reason in the simple square of the room, the former allowed to exist but not overwhelm the latter. Possibly, it's the simple cohabitation of passion and things cerebral that makes for a beautiful room. A matrix of onyx supported in a frame of steel floats within a recessed ceiling. It moves from earthy veins of colour to become nearly celestial white by the time the ceiling hits the eastern wall. Laminated to glass in order to allow for enough structural stiffness, the onyx is made extra translucent because it is lit from behind by fluorescents. The swirls of the onyx resemble a map of the Earth, suggesting a topography big enough to hold all religions. Such is the ethereal quality of the space -- a room that hints at nature and the desire to accommodate the world's many faiths.

Though it may not be immediately obvious, there is an intense numerology to the way that the panels of onyx have been organized along the ceiling into threes and fours. In Buddhism, there are three pillars to represent the life forces. In Christianity, there is the holy trinity. In the Sikh religion, there are four stages of spiritual evolution. In Hinduism, there are four cardinal points. In Islam, prayer beads are organized into multiples of threes.

The architects considered other materials such as Japanese paper, cast glass or white Corian before devoting themselves to the onyx, says project architect Carol Phillips, who worked closely on the project with the principal in charge, Jason Moriyama. Luminosity is what the architects wanted and what they found with a block of onyx from Iran that looked like crystallized sugar. "The idea of framing light and having a mysterious source of light was always part of the design," says Phillips. "The onyx reminded us all of a sky or a landscape."

Here is what architects -- and clients -- will do to achieve what they want: The supplier of the onyx could not guarantee enough of the ghostly onyx to cover the area required, so, rather than compromise, the decision was made to extend deadlines for construction contracts by two months. The right amount, in the ideal palette, was eventually discovered at a quarry in Italy.

Once the onyx was found, the architects set about creating an uninterrupted gesture with it. Within the eastern wall are four tall doors discreetly carved from the onyx, each one opening onto individual wood-lined cupboards. Different religious groups have applied to adopt a cupboard to store their religious icons to be used and highlighted during ceremonies.

For the Sikhs, it might be a sacred text. For the Buddhists, a scroll. For the Hindus, there will likely be murti, sculptures of the various Gods they worship such as Shiva. Some groups worship with burning incense. The First Nations might use sweet grass as part of a cleansing ritual. Working with mechanical engineers, the architects ensured the room is negatively pressurized -- the air is constantly changing -- so that the smell of burning incense or grasses can be extracted in an efficient, discreet manner.

Before getting to the mechanicals, the contractor had to completely rework the entire space. Originally named the Koffler Institute of Pharmacy Management, the building was constructed 15 years ago on Spadina Avenue and designed in a post-modern style of architecture with some strident geometries in the interior. Moriyama & Teshima Architects was commissioned to redesign the existing three-storey building -- the budget was so tight that the architects and client decided to leave the ground floor alone and concentrate available funds on the second floor which measures only 600 square metres. The second-floor worship hall replaces two lecture halls which were stepped and diagonally divided. Besides being entirely reoriented into a square room, a mass of cabling and conduits had to be removed.

In the search for materials, Moriyama & Teshima restricted the interior vocabulary to: onyx; white Venetian plaster; edge-cut Eramosa limestone from Owen Sound; a recycled wood product used for the floors and a massive pivoting door, as well as an African hardwood known for its vertical linear grain called Sapele. Wood shelving is provided for shoes at two entrances to the worship room. The decision was made to create a new space dedicated to the Muslim practice of washing of the hands and feet before worship. Located down the hall and away from the public toilets, the ablution rooms for men and women feature a clean minimalism and single faucets with water that runs at only one mild temperature.

For its intent and dedication to the cause of inter-faith discourse and critical thinking -- for pursuing an idea that began more than 10 years ago -- the University of Toronto deserves full kudos. The project was facilitated by Nouman Ashraf, the U of T's anti-racism officer, and Susan Addario, director of student affairs. In Quebec, universities such as McGill and Concordia that receive public funding have been restricted from providing support for religious practice. There have been student protests. Some of us may recall media images of Muslim students praying outside in the snow.

As one of Canada's largest developers, the University of Toronto regularly spends millions on the construction of new buildings: the \$70-million Leslie L. Dan Pharmacy Building by Sir Norman Foster; the \$34-million Communication, Culture and Technology building by Saucier + Perrotte in Mississauga. At \$1.4-million, the construction budget for the Multi-Faith Centre is, by comparison, peanuts.

But, the idea could reverberate far and wide.

"The idea of the centre is to engage students in a creative dialogue around inter-faith, and how it works not only on a personal level but in their community," says Addario. "It also aims to provide strategies for living peacefully in a religiously diverse community."

There will be yoga classes, Buddhist circles of meditation and public dialogue.

One of the recent lectures in the worship hall was presented by women representing the Islamic, Jewish or Catholic faiths who spoke on the subject of modesty and modernity as it related to the sacred texts of their respective religion.

Though students enrolling at the University of Toronto are not asked for their religious affiliation, it is understood that about 75 per cent of students at the undergraduate level come from the GTA and about half of those speak a language other than English at home. As well, there are roughly 30 groups at the U of T representing world religions, including three groups of Buddhists, five groups of Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Pagans and Christians. When the Multi- Faith Centre opens officially on March 25, visitors can expect performances by the University of Toronto gospel choir, a Buddhist drumming group and Hindu-inspired Balinese music.

The varying sounds will surely rise up and resonate under the centre's big onyx sky.