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Acton Ostry Architects: Boldly Reinventing British Columbia



Russell Acton



Mark Ostry

Russell Acton and Mark Ostry both fell in love with architecture as teenagers. In the 1980s, they met while working as intern architects at different firms. They realized they shared a powerful dream—to start their own architectural practice.

Now twenty years after Acton Ostry Architects Inc. was founded, their colleagues still marvel at their synergy. “Our staff has always told us it’s kind of scary how similar we are regarding design and have tested us over the years by asking each of us individually what our response would be to a particular design option—we always pick the same one,” says Acton. “Without fail.”

A SHARED ARCHITECTURAL DREAM

Acton completed a diploma of Building Technology at The British Columbia Institute of Technology and graduated from Carleton University with a Bachelor of Architecture with Distinction. He got his start working with Peter Cardew, whom he says gave him “a great introduction into detailing and expressing architecture in a straightforward, double-duty way in which everything had to have a reason for being there.” Ostry worked for Tony Robins after receiving his Bachelor of Science from the University of British Columbia and his Bachelor of Architecture and Environmental Design degrees from Dalhousie University (formerly Technical University of Nova Scotia), “One of the hallmarks of Tony’s practice was that he allowed us to learn the practice of architecture in a studio-style environment with reviews of our work.” Later, Ostry was an early proponent of artist live/work studios in Vancouver—a new building type that combined residential and industrial uses in underutilized heritage warehouse buildings. Together, Acton and Ostry bring architectural and artistic sensibilities—as well as great passion—to their firm. “Ultimately, part of the inspiration of wanting to be an architect was that we had a chance, in some small way, to make the world a better place, whether it is for community or residential projects... That’s why public institutional and multi-family housing projects form the core of our practice,” Ostry explains.

Using a West Coast Modernist approach, Acton Ostry Architects focus on new high-density urban projects, as well as the rehabilitation, renovation, and re-use of existing buildings. Their work includes community and recreation centers, places of worship, schools, university buildings, and mixed-use multi-family residences. Acton describes their controlled approach, “Over the years we’ve tried to keep our expression spare and refined and strive to make our projects strong, elemental and expressive in a simple, straightforward way.”

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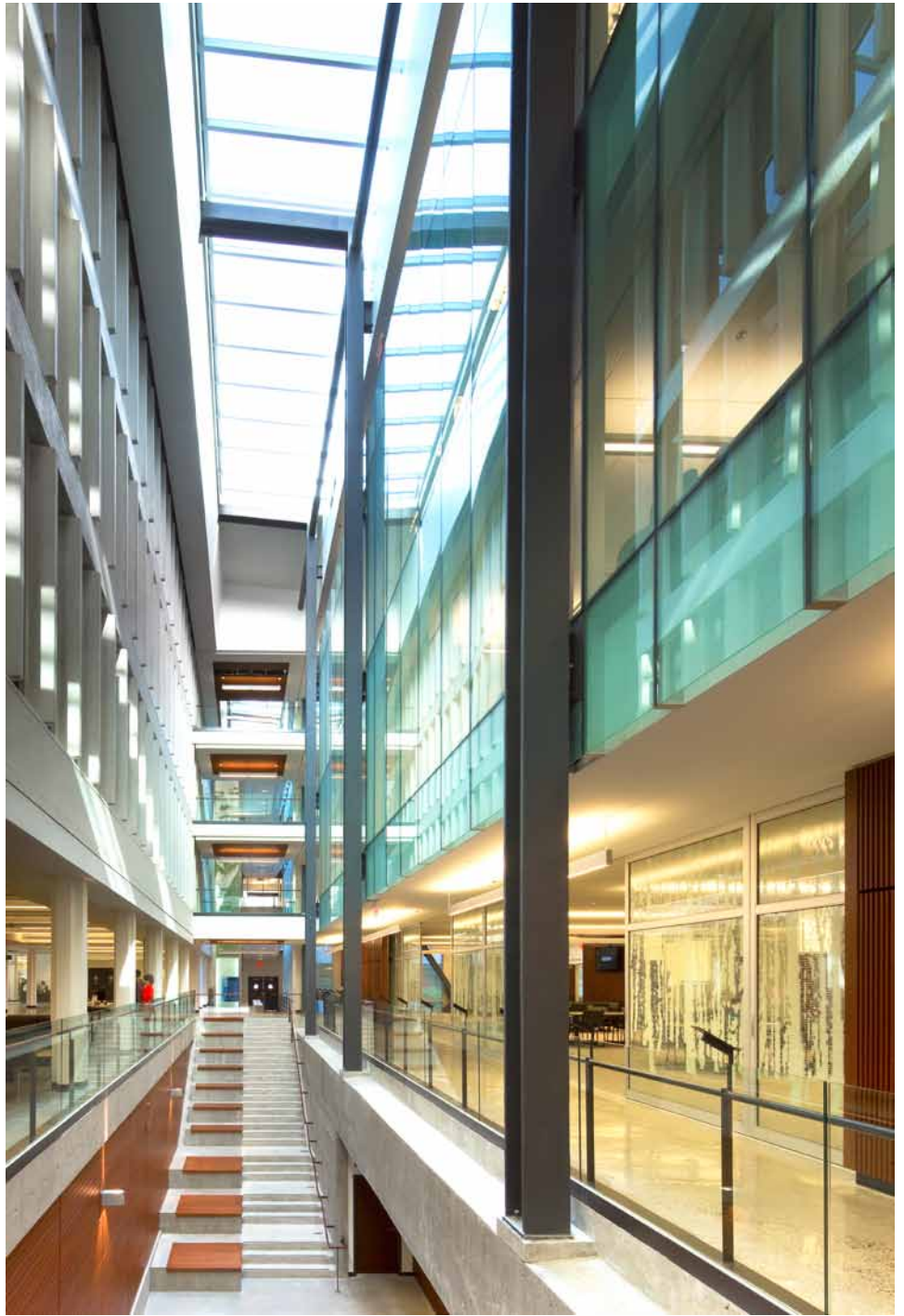
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The five-story expansion of the business school includes a light-filled atrium hub.



Ostry adds, “Architects and designers are problem solvers and that’s what we do—we look for solutions to questions and problems. We’re really trying to focus on the expression of ideas. . .and then carrying those through in a restrained, controlled manner so that the architectural idea is legible and can be read.”

Based in Vancouver, Canada, the 30-person firm has built an excellent reputation over the years with their clean, powerful designs. Amongst many others, Acton Ostry Architects has received eight Lieutenant Governor Awards, four Canadian Architect Awards of Excellence, five Canadian and American Wood Council Awards, and the prestigious Ron Thom Award. The list continues to grow. In 2010, the SAB Canadian Green Building Award program recognized Acton Ostry Architects for their work on the Sauder School of Business and the Water Street Revitalization project. It marked the first time in the history of the program that one firm won two awards in a single year.



A WORLD-RENOWNED BUSINESS SCHOOL TURNS HEADS AGAIN

The Sauder School of Business’ original 1960s Modernist concrete building had served its purpose but did little to serve the burgeoning reputation of a premier international business school at the University of British Columbia’s Point Grey Campus. Beginning in 2007, Acton Ostry Architects designed a three-phase expansion and renewal completed in January 2012 that finally reflects the world-class education it houses. Drawing on feedback from the

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school faculty's fact-finding trip through the continent's top schools, the firm designed a state-of-the-art, \$85 million CAD facility with a 30,000-square-meter renovation and 5,100-square-meter addition—which if certified, would be anticipated to achieve a LEED Gold standard. To date, the project has been awarded a 2011 Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia Award in Architecture, a 2010 *Canadian Interiors* Best of Canada Design Award, a 2010 Sustainable Architecture and Building (SAB) Canadian Green Building Award, and a 2010 Vancouver Regional Construction Association Award of Excellence for the builder, Scott Construction Ltd.

Acton and Ostry worked closely with the business school dean, Dan Muzyka, known as “Dean Dan” to students and faculty alike, to convey the pivotal idea of how essential transparency is to the business world. Acton Ostry Architects wrapped the existing building with glass for a cost-effective, dramatic update, aligning the new structural module with the original for a harmonious transition between old and new. Light and color now fill the once darkened space. Stunning glazed windows in shades of greens and blues meet sleek steel and glass to create a “corporate cool” effect. Within the main building, a new concourse lounge, conference and breakout rooms, a business career center,



As Acton says, “the new colored, glazed façade expresses the idea of a barcode, which is business-pattern language.”

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“Vectorworks is non-denominational. The way we work, it is a simple process to bring in consultants’ data and share our own, no matter what software our consultants use. This has gotten even better with the ability to pull in PDFs at scale and use them as drafting underlays.”

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the Robert H. Lee Graduate School, and a café provide ample space for the exchange of knowledge. The five-story expansion includes a light-filled atrium hub that connects classrooms, lecture theaters, breakout rooms, social areas, and an undergraduate center. The results are stunning. “The Sauder School of Business transformation is a brilliantly unified response to a highly complex and demanding program,” concludes Architectural Curator and Critic Adele Weder in the November 2010 issue of *Canadian Architect*.

Public spaces were key to the vision, Muzyka explains: “The contemporary business school is less about teaching and more about learning.” It focuses on students and faculty sharing information, not on a teacher-dominated style. Acton explains: “At its root, I think that business, particularly in an academic environment, is all about the importance of relationship building between different parties and people. It is my hope and belief that, through their education, students will go out and use business in a way that will contribute to making the world a better place.”

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"The aesthetic quality of our drawings is of utmost importance. Vectorworks has allowed us to achieve consistently beautiful drawings through its detailed control and instant visualization of line work. Customization of tool sets and standards provides a common language throughout drawing sets and, at its core, Vectorworks reliably produces drawings that are crisp—without the mechanical harshness that is inherent in the output of other CAD systems."

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Large-scale images of the donors overlook the atrium where the students gather.



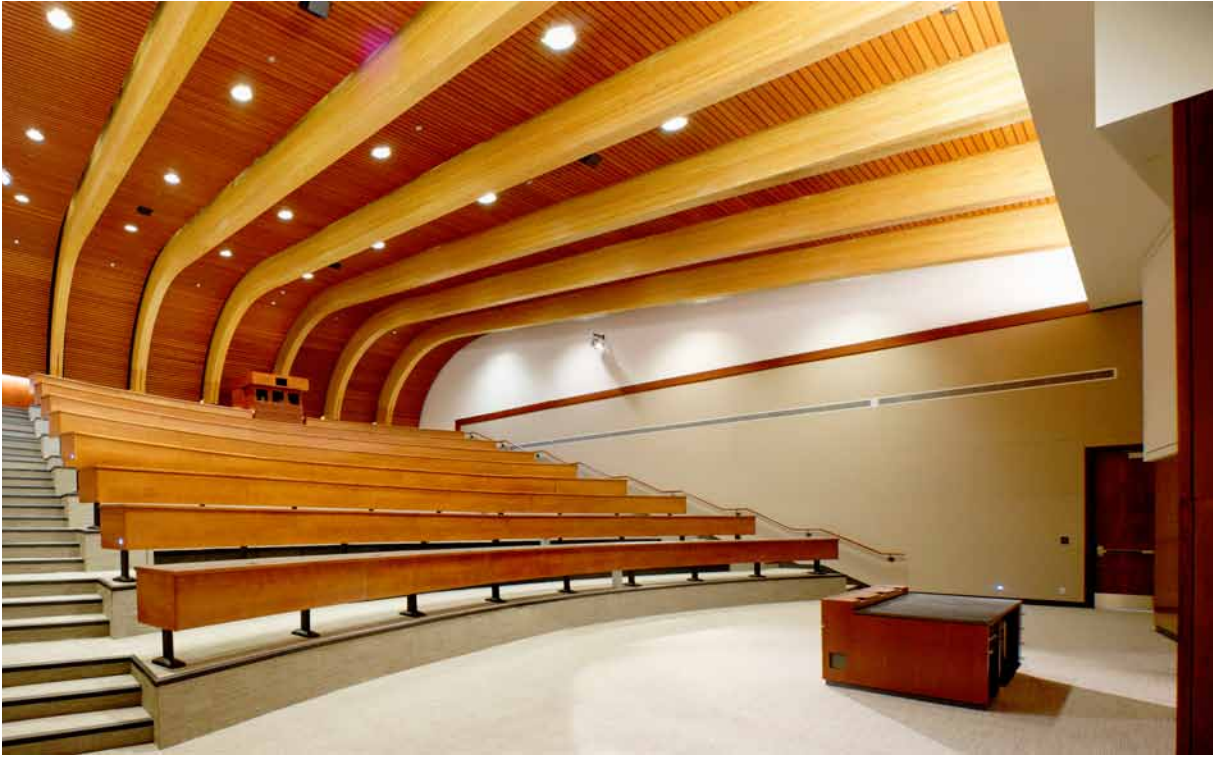
Ostry recalls that the original building was a "rabbit warren...where people had to go—a place to get in and get out of as fast as possible. Now it's a place people want to go. It's a huge difference and it's so supportive of people interacting and meeting and communicating and exchanging ideas."

BIG IDEAS FUEL BIG THINKERS

The school itself is a subtle representation of commerce. Acton says, "The new colored, glazed façade expresses the idea of a barcode, which is business-pattern language. The interior has striking three-by-four meter backlit images printed on glass of global stock exchanges from countries with which the school has developed special relationships over the years. The firm also designed a donor recognition program using international currency symbols as glazed pixelated dots on glass walls to create large-scale images of donors. Those that have made significant contributions to the academic development of the school since it began are recognized on a Builders

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The lobed-roof form at the Leadership Centre creates a stunning backdrop.

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Wall in the atrium. These leaders of industry, academic achievers, and financial benefactors inspire the students and create "a rich and varied experience," says Acton. To honor the school's namesake, the late Dr. William L. Sauder, who endowed the school with \$20 million in 2003 (at that time the largest single private donation made in the history of Canadian business schools), Acton Ostry Architects created a towering four-story portrait that overlooks the atrium where the students circulate and gather every day.

Acton and Ostry selected Vectorworks® Architect software as their design tool of choice. Acton recounts, "It's very important to us that design drawings and working drawings read clearly with a strong graphic presence because they embody and communicate the architectural concept.

We've been complimented many times on the clarity of our drawings and the completeness of the packages and that's due in part to the use of Vectorworks. The aesthetic quality of our drawings is of utmost importance. Vectorworks has allowed us to achieve consistently beautiful drawings through its detailed control and instant visualization of line work. Customization of tool sets and standards provides a common language throughout drawing sets and, at its core, Vectorworks reliably produces drawings that are crisp—without the mechanical harshness that is inherent in the output of other CAD systems."

Acton and Ostry praise the linking features that make it easy to update and maintain designs, and a flexibility that facilitates change and customization. "It's compatible with other programs, and we like that it can be supplemented with graphics to clearly show an idea so that everyone can understand it," notes Acton. Ostry says, "Architects are creative and sometimes want to do things a little outside of the box or to communicate things that just aren't standardized or conventional—and Vectorworks allows us the flexibility and freedom to make architectural drawings the way we want them to be."

With a strong reputation for fresh, beautiful designs, Acton Ostry Architects' clear vision continues to pave the way for innovative and sustainable design.

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