

A blend of old and new

The Robert Lee YMCA will open on May 3 after undergoing a \$67-million renovation

BY KIM PEMBERTON, VANCOUVER SUN APRIL 24, 2010



Signi Solmundson, along with her sons Magnus, 2, and Hudson, 6 months, enjoy the rooftop garden at the Robert Lee YMCA.

Photograph by: Ian Lindsay, PNG, Vancouver Sun

The Robert Lee YMCA's tag line is "Bringing People Together" and, while its programming, staff and volunteers are central to that goal, there's another main player in the community team building quest -- the building itself.

The new YMCA is an example of how the power of architecture can transform everyday life.

It's easy to envision how this open, bright facility will bring people together when it opens May 3, after being closed for more than three years. During that time a \$67-million renovation was completed that successfully blends old and new.

The facade of the well recognized brick structure, built in 1940 on Burrard Street in downtown Vancouver, remains intact. But walk through the doors and it's a totally different experience from the old YMCA, where you went through a dark rabbit warren of staircases and corridors to reach the light-deprived fitness centre, gym and pool.

Today, light pours into the new Robert Lee YMCA, from its 70-foot-high glass walls in the atrium that separates the old building from the new. In fact, there are very places in the 92,000 square-foot facility that don't get natural light.

It's an inviting space that welcomes the community to come inside and enjoy the facility itself along with its extensive programs and services.

And while getting fit is still one of the main reasons people will join, the new Robert Lee YMCA also has set a new priority to cater to the needs of today's families living in the downtown area.

The Y's president and CEO, Bill Stewart said they are hoping the new facility and emphasis on children and families will help boost membership over the coming years to as much as 10,000. When the Y closed for renovations, its membership hovered around 1,700, down significantly from a high of 6,000 in the 1970s, he said.

"It [membership] dropped because people's interests changed, other fitness centres were opening up and partly because people moved out of the core of the city," said Stewart, during a recent tour of the facilities.

The exodus of families to the suburbs, which occurred during the 1970s and 1980s, appears to have ended, with more and more young families returning to the city's downtown core.

The Robert Lee YMCA will be a "beacon" for their return, Stewart predicted.

The renovations were made possible after an extensive fundraising campaign that brought million-dollar donations from both individuals and corporations.

One of the donors was the new YMCA's namesake, Robert Lee, one of Vancouver's top real estate developers, who has been a member for 50 years, dating back to his grade school years when he took swimming lessons there.

Lee, now 76, who co-founded the Wall Financial Corp. and the Prospero Group, has the kind of finances that allow him access to some of the upper echelons of private fitness clubs in the city. Although he does belong to a number of them, like the Shaughnessy Golf and Country Club, the Hollyburn Country Club and the Vancouver Club, he prefers to work out at the YMCA.

"You're just like the average guy there," he said.

"It's a great facility ... I've met a lot of friends there. There's no pretensions. Just work out and chat."

One of the big changes at the new Y was getting rid of the hostel-like 113-bed residence in favour of putting in a licensed daycare facility.

When the YMCA reopens, there will be 69 new full-time child care spots available downtown.

Residences would have meant a facility that "was quite different" and less space and programming dedicated to children and families.

Stewart said that while "regrettably, we aren't right now able to do it" he wouldn't rule it out residences in the future.

He noted that the YMCA changes as the community's needs change.

"There have been many evolutions of the YMCA. In the 1940s, when it was first built, it was one of the only places with a pool and gym. At that point in its history it was all about getting fit.

"Now times have changed and, while getting fit is still a priority, the YMCA is also about connecting people. We have 2,000 entrances a day in Surrey [at the YMCA] with people coming to take a course, have a community meeting. I don't see this Y being any different," he said.

General manager Simon Adams said one of the main strategic decisions taken by the board was to dedicate 25 per cent of the building to children and families.

The top two floors of the six-storey building will house the child care facilities.

The sixth floor is for the fulltime daycare, where staff will care for infants to five year olds. While the fifth floor has a part-time preschool and outdoor play area that can be accessed by the public when the preschool isn't using it, the fulltime daycare's rooftop play area is not accessible to the public.

The 6,000-square-foot outdoor playground has a castle theme, which is in keeping with the turrets on churches nearby -the First Baptist Church is next door, with St. Andrews-Wesley United across the street from First Baptist.

"We've incorporated into the design many aspects that meet the needs of today's families," said Adams.

"In designing the facility we had to think: 'What does a modern YMCA look like in an urban environment?' The YMCA has a 125-year history in Vancouver, with a 70-year history working from this location. One of the changing needs we have downtown is it's a growing population and there are more families downtown. Children are growing up in 600 square feet and they need a place to go to build relationships with other kids, and parents need a place to connect with other parents."

Adams, who also lives downtown in a small apartment, said what he's noticed in his own building is parents having to use every space available to them to accommodate all the toys and bikes that children acquire. To help ease this problem, the Robert Lee YMCA will have a toy and book lending library so parents can easily rotate items of interest to their children without having to worry about long-term storage.

Another family-friendly move was dedicating stroller parking in the daycare's lobby and having art

frames that allow for the easy removal of changing children's art along the walls.

Demand to secure one of the full-time daycare spots is high, with a waiting list of 300 names already.

Signi Solmundson and her husband, who live and work within five minutes of the new Y, hope their two children, Magnus, 2, and Hudson, six months, will be able to attend the daycare when Solmundson finishes her maternity leave in September.

"I love the rooftop playground. It's the best feature. It's nice to know we'd have access to a safe, child-friendly playground in downtown Vancouver," she said.

But even if they don't get a daycare spot immediately, Solmundson said they are planning to get a family membership because of the "range of amenities from the pool, to the gym, to the workout spaces."

"It offers everything for families to use it together," she said, while taking one of the YMCA tours available before the official opening.

Adams said many people dropping by for a tour expect it will take only 10 minutes, but it's been a challenge to show everything off in such a brief time because "the building is full of all these surprises."

Like the fifth floor, with its huge lounge, fireplace, kitchen and eating area which, he believes, can serve as the downtown's "living room." The room also has dividers that would allow more than one group to make use of the space at a given time. There are also community meeting rooms, an adult education centre, centre for reflection, computer lab and cafe in the building.

Spacious facilities

With 50 to 60 per cent of users expected to live in the downtown core, many of them in small condos where space is tight, it was important to create an inviting room large enough for them to kick back and relax, said Adams.

And since fitness is one of the key purposes of the YMCA, the highlights of the centre are the one-of-a-kind gymnasium with specialized flooring to help prevent joint injuries, a 10,000 square-foot fitness room and three fitness studios for activities such as spin cycling and yoga. There are also two squash or racquetball courts. But one of the big draws will likely be the 25-yard indoor pool, a feat of modern technology with a movable floor to help provide access to young swimmers and people with disabilities. The pool also has a UV filtering system worth \$800,000.

Being as "green" as possible was another goal for the Robert Lee YMCA. Twenty per cent of the original building was recycled and the new space was designed to maximize natural light. Some of the other green features include energy-efficient glazed windows, a heat recovery system for the pool and expanded bike storage to encourage sustainable transportation methods for staff and members.

Robert Lee said what he likes about the new YMCA is how it caters to everyone in the community, from the very young to the very old. He expects his own family, which includes two sons and eight grandchildren between the ages of three and 20, will get memberships.

When asked to be a lead donor on the project, Lee consulted with his sons who encouraged him to "go for it" which he did with a \$2-million investment in the Y's future. He noted the YMCA doesn't get government funding so it's vital that private citizens help support the recreational/ social facility.

Another of its first investors was longtime employee Noell Caryll, who bequeathed the greater part of his estate to the YMCA for its future expansion. That gift of \$273,275 at the time of his death in 1983 was invested and grew in the intervening years to \$1.337 million.

Corporate donors also stepped up to assist with the project.

Landmark building

Concert Properties partnered with the YMCA of Greater Vancouver. The company not only built the Robert Lee YMCA, but in an intricate deal was allowed to build a 42-storey condominium tower at the west end of the property, called Patina. Another corporate donor was Coast Capital Savings, which helped fund the Early Childhood and Family Development Centres on the fifth and sixth floors.

The final result is architecture the city can be proud of -- that will continue to be a landmark building in the city. The architects behind it include Stantec Architecture and Endall and Elliot Architects, who discovered the old building had undergone six previous renovations over the years -- which contributed to its former chopped-up layout.

"The genius of the architectural design is the blending of old and new," Adams, the general manager, said.

"Stantec did an amazing job of anchoring the heritage building into the facility and not allowing it to become a secondary area of the building. The glass holds the two areas together," he said, of the glass walls in the atrium. "The building is a representation of what the Robert Lee YMCA offers -- a fresh start for people to come together."

Stantec lead architect Doug Hamming said while it would have been easier and cheaper to simply knock down the old YMCA and build from scratch it was important to keep part of the heritage building because it has such a strong presence in the city.

"Although our history is only 200 years old it's important we have some sense of preservation as we move new buildings into the city," said Hamming, adding "it was a logistical challenge."

"If you look at an old photo of the Y you would see it was largely closed to the outside street. There were lots of blank walls with no connection. Today there is a connection to the community. If you are standing on the pool deck, along one side, you are standing literally close to the street ... this really

feels like this is your place in your neighbourhood."

kpemberton@vancouversun.com

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