

Glendon College and the 21st-century campus: Christopher Hume

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As long as you don't mention tuition fees, university campuses everywhere are starting to lighten up.

Glass-filled pavilions are replacing Gothic arches carved in stone and red-brick Romanesque towers. From solidity to invisibility, opacity to transparency, the new architecture of higher education reveals all.

A sort of reversal is unfolding; architects who once designed structures that embodied the (sometimes uncomfortable) nobility of scholarship now devote themselves to setting a stage on which students direct their own learning in their own way.

The most recent example, and one of the best, is Renée Daoust's Centre of Excellence at Glendon College. In her first Toronto project, the highly regarded Montreal architect happily turns the structures of academia inside out. The cloister has been replaced by openness.

There's nothing new about glass cubes — Toronto is awash in see-through towers — but Daoust's is one of special elegance. Sitting just inside the main entrance to the campus at Lawrence and Bayview, the centre is the first thing visitors and students see. For that reason, transparency also serves as a kind of welcoming gesture, a way of demystifying the institution and revealing it, symbolically at least, to the rest of the world.

Almost nothing is allowed to interrupt the clean lines of this perfect form. You get the feeling that in a perfect world — one without gravity or weather — the glazed exteriors here would carry on forever, oblivious to all externalities.

Indoors — or at least, on the other side of these glass walls — the centre seems pure and pristine, like sculpture displayed in a glass case. It's minimalist, but relaxed, not dogmatic. The fact the building sits amidst the leafy spaces of this garden campus gives it the feel of a green house.

Of all Toronto's campuses, Glendon comes closest to resembling a country club. It began life in the 1920s as the E.R. Wood estate. During its brief heyday 70 or 80 years ago, Bayview was popular with wealthy businessmen who worked downtown but preferred life in the country. Back then, Bayview made that possible.

That's all changed today; the farmers' fields that once lined the street have long since disappeared. Most of the estates — Cheddington, Armadale, Sunnybrook — have been developed and disfigured beyond recognition. By contrast, Glendon Hall, though substantially altered, retains much of its innate Italianate charm.

The school, which opened in 1961, feels very 1950s. Rooted in its time, it represents a contemporary response to the idea of the small liberal-arts college more than to the site itself. Though the placement of the buildings reflects the layout of the estate, the architecture doesn't rise above the mid-century earnestness reserved for institutional projects such as this. The best that can be said is that it looks a country club more popular for its grounds than its architecture.

On the other hand, those grounds are lovely, leafy and green. Daoust was obviously fully aware of its appeal when she designed the centre. It sits, like some latter-day Philip Johnson Glass House, an instance of utter simplicity. As it recedes into the landscape, it becomes a part of it.

That's the good news; the bad news is that the grounds around the centre remain unfinished. Because the landscape plays such a big role in the experience of the centre, the empty flower beds are painful to behold.

That will change in time. Until then, of course, it's what's inside that matters most for students. Though there are dramatic splashes of colour, rooms are uninterrupted white. One space flows into the next, imperceptibly, and even the stairwells, enclosed in exquisite glass boxes, are gathering places.

"It's all teaching space," explains Glendon principal Kenneth McRoberts. "Students learn from each other; there's much more room here for interaction."

That means islands of couches and plenty of seating areas. It also means the centre is focused entirely on students, not a professor's office to be seen. The emphasis on students is consistent with changes happening in other universities, including York, of which Glendon is part. No longer do academic buildings set out to present some idealized notion of education; they just want to make sure everyone's comfortable.

Given that the campus was designed to accommodate 1,000 students and now has 3,000; there was a desperate need for space. That became possible when the province designated Glendon the Centre of Excellence of French-language and Bilingual Postsecondary Education in Ontario. The designation came with \$20 million, almost enough to cover construction costs.

This disembodiment or dematerialization of architecture, dreamed of for millennia, has only recently become technically feasible. Little wonder we're still so fascinated by what's now possible. Projects such as Daoust's underline how deeply we are affected by the physical environment in which we live and work. And, it also reminds us, look good, feel good.



Renée Daoust's Centre of Excellence at Glendon College turns the structures of academia inside out.

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