

# THE COLLABORATIVE DESIGN MANIFESTO

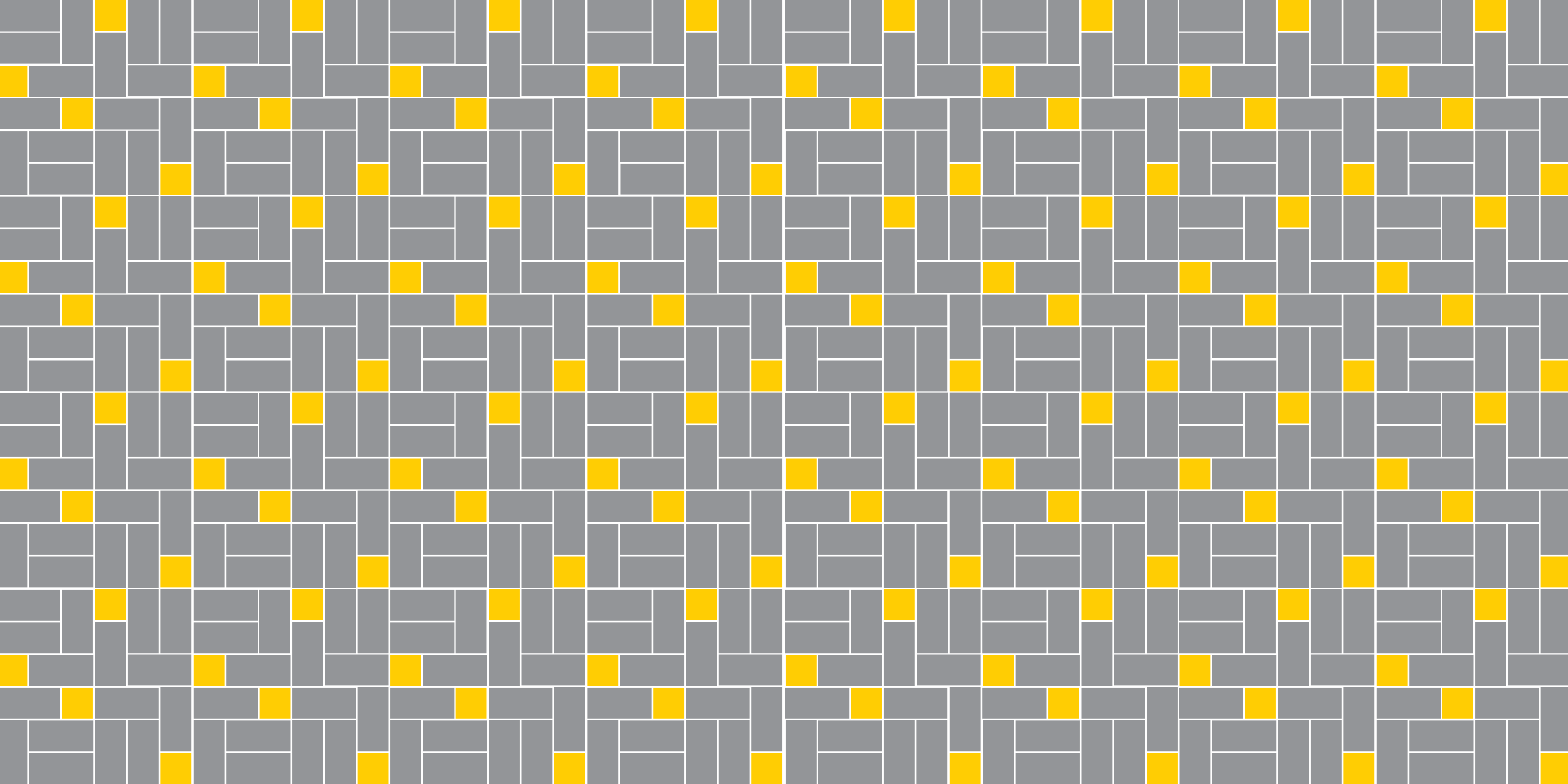
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# INTRODUCTION

*col·lab·o·rate /ke'labe,rāt/ v. to work jointly on an activity,  
esp. to produce or create something (OED)*

**THERE IS MUCH TALK OF COLLABORATION  
THESE DAYS, WHETHER AMONG INDIVIDUALS,  
BUSINESSES, OR GOVERNMENTS.**

Scanning the 'about us' web pages of companies providing some kind of service, we are sure to read how well they work with customers and consult stakeholders, with lots of the 'in' words like 'interactive,' 'inclusive' and 'integrated.' Professional firms are particularly fond of this kind of language, including architectural practices like ours.

But do we really mean it? As designers it's easy for us to take the client's involvement for granted. We can forget how prone we are to the influence of 'style' over our thinking, which is more pervasive now in our digitally connected age than ever before. Sometimes this makes us overlook practical client requirements which don't fit our 'vision' of the ideal design.

Certainly the question of style is as important to architects as it is to any other design profession, and for many is the highest measure of achievement in these applied arts. Just how significant this is can come as a bit of a surprise to some clients. As designers, we need to help our clients appreciate the importance of style - the sense of coherence of design - as something inherently valuable over the life of their project, irrespective of whether this receives any formal recognition through awards or publications.

With this book, we want to share our approach to design as this has evolved over 20 years of practicing architecture. Its foundation is simply a respect for our clients' ability to decide for themselves what is best for them. Our role is to give them the confidence to do this by asking questions, by challenging us, and by being part of each of the key steps that go into creating their buildings.

This book is written both for clients — the people who hire designers — as well as for the designers themselves. For clients who have realized they need professional help with the design of an important project like a building, we want them to realize this is an opportunity to create something that is uniquely suited to their needs, representative of their aspirations, and a chance to engage the people who matter to them in the process. It can be one of the most exciting and rewarding experiences they may ever have.



**FOR DESIGNERS, WE WANT TO REMIND THEM  
WHOSE PROJECT IT IS THAT THEY ARE HELPING  
TO CREATE: THE CLIENT'S.**

This seems so obvious, but while designers refer to what we are working on as 'our' projects and we retain the copyright to our designs, it is easy for us to forget who will be living with them. From our experience, we are convinced that truly collaborating with motivated, engaged clients is liberating and thrilling. It leads to ideas that would never have been discovered otherwise. It makes for great design — as defined by the client.



*Begin with the end in mind.  
~ Stephen Covey*

# STARTING WITH THE **BIG PICTURE**

**SO WHERE TO BEGIN? CLIENTS WHO ARE ABOUT  
TO EMBARK ON THE DESIGN OF A BIG PROJECT  
ARE NATURALLY ANXIOUS ABOUT WHAT THEY MAY  
BE GETTING THEMSELVES INTO.**

Often their first inclination is to look at what other people with similar projects have done. While this seems like an obvious step, and familiarizing yourself with relevant design precedents is important at some point, we strongly discourage our clients from doing this too soon, before they understand what their own objectives really are. The problem with looking at other people's projects is that you fill your imagination with their ideas, good and bad. Your mind will tend to become bounded by what you have been told works for someone else.

**On virtually every project we do, we start by asking this question:**

*Take a few moments to imagine yourself sitting in your new environment... what will you want to say about the design itself, as well as the experience of creating it?*

Whether we ask this to an individual client or a group of people on a committee, the responses are usually very insightful, not only for us but also for our clients. This kind of question looks ahead and asks people to imagine what completing a successful project means to them, in terms of how they want to feel about it at a very personal level.

We try to ask this question at the conclusion of our first meeting with a new client, normally before we have been engaged or are still competing for the commission. Occasionally we find that a client is unwilling to answer, or does so in a very evasive way. That's a clue that for some reason they are not comfortable being open about their true motivations. We've realized that this means our process will not be a good fit for them and their project. As difficult as it may be, especially on large important projects, we have learned that it is best for both us and this client to decline the opportunity. We have also realized that doing this means that our resources, both physical and intellectual, are freed up to be applied to those projects where we can make the biggest contribution.

The second step we take comes after we have been engaged, and the client has shared with us what success on the project means to them.

**In preparation for our first working session together we ask them to complete a brief questionnaire consisting of the following questions:**

- 1** *What concerns do you have about this project?*
- 2** *What opportunities does this project represent for you and your organization?*
- 3** *What personal strengths do you have to contribute to this project?*

It does seem strange to most people to begin a creative design process by asking about concerns, but everyone has them and we find it works best to get them out in the open right away. These include clients' normal worries about time and money, but also their qualms about specific aspects of what they are contemplating, or the process for accomplishing it.

Once we get these issues 'out into the daylight' so to speak, we move on to discuss the opportunities: the reasons why we are doing the project in the first place. Sometimes clients think these are obvious or that we understand them intuitively somehow. We find it is essential for everyone to express 'the point' of the project to one another to make sure we have not assumed something that turns out to be unimportant, or missed something very important.



#### A PLAYFUL WELCOME

The playroom and library at the Thames Valley Children's Centre gives patients and parents alike the chance to relax and play in a comfortable and welcoming environment.

**LOOKING TOWARDS A BRIGHT FUTURE**

Janet Miller (left), Jennifer Savel and John LaPorta stand in the children's playroom and library at the Thames Valley Children's Centre.



The last question is the most difficult for people to talk about, because we are all hesitant to 'sing our own praises' for fear of seeming pompous. We explain that working together means we need to understand what clients are comfortable dealing with, and therefore where we do and don't need to provide special assistance.

All of this can seem like a lot of talk and no action at the beginning of a project. However, these conversations do not take that much time and are the essence of establishing the frank and open relationship with clients that a truly collaborative process needs to rely on, especially once things really do get busy.

**FEATURE PROJECT:** Thames Valley Children's Centre

The addition and alterations to Thames Valley Children's Centre began with the development of a reorganization and expansion plan that re-conceptualized the organization of the facility, as well as the delivery of services to the Centre's clients. From this Functional Programming phase, Conceptual Plans were developed for the expansion, including the addition of a third floor to the existing two-story facility. Program spaces include open and private office spaces, a video-conferencing suite, multi-purpose/meeting rooms and treatment spaces.

*The act of hiring a professional is,  
by very definition, an act of faith.  
~ David Maister*

# INVOLVING THE KEY PEOPLE

SO WHO GETS INVOLVED? A QUESTION WE ARE  
COMMONLY ASKED IS WHAT NUMBER OF PEOPLE MAKES  
THE IDEAL COMMITTEE FOR A BUILDING PROJECT.

*Our answer is that it is the smallest number of people  
who adequately represent the interests of the project.*

Sometimes this is only one or two people if they are the owners of a private organization and thoroughly understand how it works. More commonly, the committee of people who work directly with us on large complex projects include the six to eight key people in an organization who are responsible for decision making and who are prepared to devote a significant amount of time to the design process.

In the case of creating a team of people who will work directly together with us, we find that the 'more the merrier' is definitely not the best approach: we have better ways to engage the wider organization than to have a huge group of people attending design meetings. Think of this like any other team, and don't put yourself in a situation with too many players on the ice!

We do insist on involving the most senior people in an organization. For most of the projects we are involved with, the stakes are so high that the decision makers need to be at the table. The process needs to build momentum and many of the best ideas emerge because our clients understand the issue as well as how their organizations could be adapted to take advantage of it. Particularly in the early stages of design when big questions like project size and location are being explored, the people involved need to have discretion to select among options and make recommendations, even if these need formal endorsement or approval.

We do explain and emphasize this at the outset, which means a significant commitment of time by the people in senior leadership. It is important to respect the fact that these individuals also have other responsibilities which take precedence over their involvement with our design process. This means that we have to make our time with them very focused on the key issues at that point in the project, and keep track of the other details that will become important later on.

**BRINGING EXPERIENCE TO THE TABLE**

Working closely with Steve Crawford, McCormick Home was designed to provide a beautiful, contemporary environment for seniors and their families.

**FEATURE PROJECT:**  
McCormick Home

McCormick Home in London, Ontario accommodates 160 long term care residents as well as providing extensive space for 60 participants in an Alzheimer's day program. Designed in association with Montgomery Sisam, the building embraces a contemporary architectural aesthetic with dramatic brick forms accented by natural wood at entrance canopies and large expanses of glazing.

The day program features a separate access, generous activity rooms, and a large garden space to offer a wide range of experience to participants and their families.

*So what about everybody else?*

Our philosophy is that the people who work in an organization are the best 'experts' in what they do. Of course they can benefit from innovative ideas from outside, but we find that their input is invaluable in making sure the design actually works. We remind our clients that they are going to hear the opinions of the users about the design of their building, sooner or later.

Many clients worry that by approaching too many people in their organization for input, they risk creating a 'wish list' of unrealistic expectations. Although this is possible, we find that most people are reasonable, and realize that there are time and budget constraints which have to be considered if the project is going to happen at all. We find that most people simply want to have a chance to have input. Often these are simple requests, and sometimes great suggestions, which can easily be incorporated into the design if we find out about them soon enough.

*I have not failed. I've just found  
10,000 ways that won't work.  
~ Thomas Edison*

## EXPLORING THE POSSIBILITIES

As designers, we like to consider ourselves the most capable of coming up with ideas that best suit the particular parameters of a project once these are identified. Some think that this means that a design problem once defined is virtually solved. In other words, there is only one best answer. But according to who?

*We think that design is a process of exploring virtually limitless possibilities.*

The best evidence of this is a formal design competition where each team of designers is given exactly the same definition of the problem. The resulting designs are as varied as the individual participants. The 'best' one is up to the client to choose, even though each design team would say theirs is the best.

**The human imagination is a wonderful thing and has the capability of looking at the same situation in many different ways.**

We love the adventure of taking some basic design parameters for a building, usually in the form of coloured cutouts representing the various space requirements all at the same scale, and seeing how many possible combinations we can come up with together with the client's design team. We call this our Puzzle Piece Charrette™. It normally starts with the configurations, which are the most obvious, then we encourage everyone to come up with other ways of assembling the pieces, like a puzzle with many 'right' ways of putting it together. It's even worthwhile exploring crazy ideas because these often uncover an opportunity no one would have thought about otherwise.



Unlike a design competition where the client has to select among a number of fixed alternatives, this process enables us to combine the best features of one idea with those of others, as the client gradually, almost magically, sees the design emerge. We have also found that the process builds consensus around the general direction which seems to be the most appropriate to everyone involved. The final design has a sense of it naturally fitting the parameters because it has literally evolved from them.

Something to be aware of as designers is that our powers of visualization are much stronger than most other people's, simply because we are exercising these skills every day. It is easy for us to assume that clients can see into our rough sketches and schematic diagrams the same full-blown design that we do. Therefore, it is essential to take advantage of the powerful visualization tools that technology makes available to us these days. This helps people live with the design in a virtual sense before they have to do so in the real sense.



#### OPENING DOORS

The Village of Winston Park was designed to resemble small town Ontario. Located along 'Main Street' the facility boasts shops, a post office, pubs, and beauty salons. This atmosphere has created a vibrant spirit of community with the residents.

**BUILDING A COMMUNITY**

Ron Schlegel is the visionary founder of Schlegel Villages, and the inspiration behind their unique communities for seniors that emphasize social engagement.



There is a downside to the way our human mind works, and our ability to always see other possibilities every time we look at something. The risk is that this becomes a never-ending process of constant tinkering. At some point we need to be prepared to commit to moving forward with a final design which will then become a reality. This means it will never be perfect, and the client will share the designer's curse of always being aware of the flaws.

Ultimately, we find the involvement of the client and the key people in their organization to be tremendously rewarding for us and for them. For us, we are more confident that they understand what they are getting in the design. For them, they have a sense of having made tangible contributions to something that will serve the needs of their organization and represent who they are to the wider community.

**FEATURE PROJECT:** The Village of Winston Park

The Village of Winston Park in Kitchener, Ontario is a continuum of care community for seniors providing long term care, retirement accommodation, and independent apartments designed to function like a small town on a site which is integrated into its surrounding neighbourhood.

# EXPLAINING THE ISSUES & MAKING RECOMMENDATIONS

*If one cannot state a matter clearly enough  
so that even an intelligent twelve-year-old  
can understand it, one should remain within  
the cloistered walls of the university and  
laboratory until one gets a better  
grasp of one's subject matter.  
~ Margaret Mead*

**IT IS INEVITABLE THAT AS DESIGNERS WE PUT A  
LOT OF OURSELVES, OUR ENERGY AND IDEAS INTO  
ANY PARTICULAR DESIGN.**

There's no avoiding the fact that creating something is a very personal activity, which makes it easy to fall in love with a design into which we have invested a lot of time and effort. The risk of this situation, however, is that it tends to make us take criticism too personally and lose our ability to look at our work objectively.

We have realized that, if we are truly committed to enabling the client to decide for themselves what is best for their project, we need to make a conscious effort to suspend our own self-interest in it. There have been many occasions when we felt we had nailed a design with a particularly elegant solution, only to find that the client did not see it that way once we walk them through our rationale. Ouch. We realize, of course, that it's best the client realized they didn't like something when it's still on the drawing board, rather than realizing this after it gets built. Still, it is difficult, and it is the true test of whether we are really committed to putting the client in charge.

In some sense our role is that of leaders of an expedition. We map out the alternative routes, explain their advantages, and make a frank recommendation if there is one that seems obviously preferable to us. Then it's up to the client. Usually they will accept our recommendations, because these have hopefully been based on our accurate interpretation of what they are looking for. Occasionally, however, our clients decide that they want to take one of the other directions offered.

As a profession, architecture has unfortunately developed a reputation as a field for prima donnas who are prone to fits if someone disagrees with their opinion, especially on an aesthetic issue. Perhaps other design professionals can acquire the same affliction, but architects seem to exhibit the most acute cases. A designer with this attitude has quite a few techniques that can be deployed to prevent the unsuspecting client from raising concerns. These amount to a series of trump cards such as public safety, building regulations, or technical difficulties, which can be played to override objections from clients. While each of these issues is important, rarely does it mean there is only one design which addresses them, but it can be presented that way. When all rational arguments fail, the biggest trump card of all is the 'ugly' insinuation. Nobody wants their building perceived to be 'ugly', and architects can imply they have a unique insight into what is and isn't 'cool'. The client can feel that ignoring this advice risks an embarrassing final product.

#### LEADERS IN COLLABORATION

Marty Graf stands in front of The Livingston Centre, built to bring the community together.



**STRONGER TOGETHER**

Each of the agencies preserves its own culture, staff and funding; a part of a greater whole working together to build a healthy community.

Time for a confession: we've been just as guilty of these sins as the other members of our profession. While our motivation may have been a noble pursuit of design in its purest sense, we've realized that using sophisticated technical or aesthetic arguments just to get our own way is unethical, and unfair. It shows a lack of respect for the client's intelligence. Instead, we need to recognize that part of our role as designers is to demonstrate our understanding of these complex issues by explaining them in a clear and concise fashion that respects the client's ability to appreciate the rationale behind our design.

**FEATURE PROJECT:** Livingston Centre

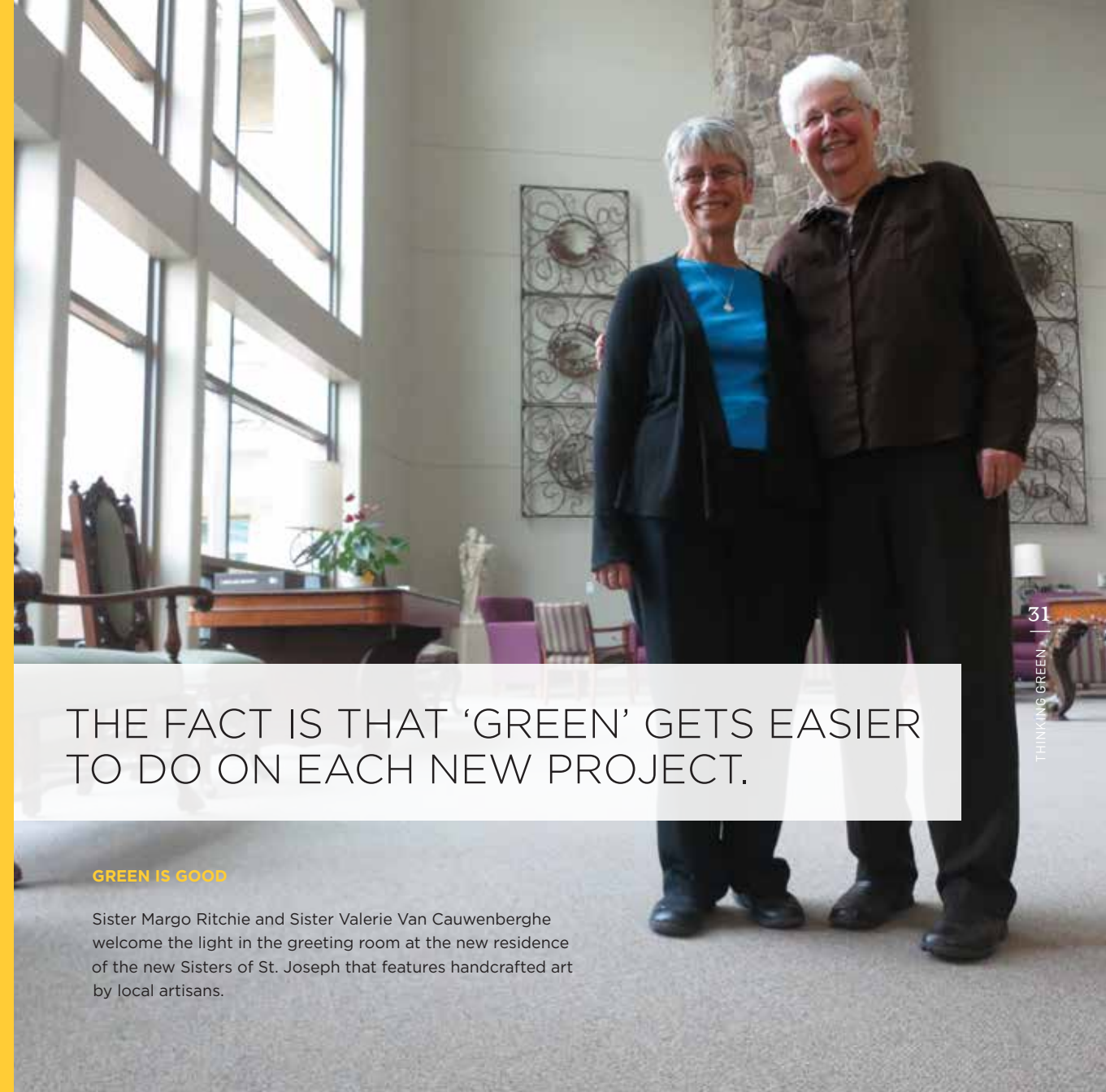
A fully-integrated, multi-organizational building known as The Livingston Centre currently houses over 15 agencies under one roof. The building is a holistic approach to service delivery that meets both the Tri-County community's vision of easily accessible services, and government mandates for cost-effective linkages in health, education, training, and employment.



*Sustainable development is a term that offers an accommodation of opposing forces — suggesting that responsible stewardship of nature and continuing gains in human material well-being are compatible.*  
~ Bob Gibson

## THINKING GREEN

We like to blame the Sisters of St. Joseph of London for making us think about the environmental impacts of our designs. Ever since we worked with them and began to understand their deep and spiritual commitment to conserving the earth's resources while also improving human society, we can't seem to avoid looking at every project we do from the same point of view. Of course, not every client is prepared to commit to making their building as green as the Sisters did, but most of the clients we work with are realizing that this is becoming a more and more important issue in our society.



THE FACT IS THAT 'GREEN' GETS EASIER TO DO ON EACH NEW PROJECT.

### GREEN IS GOOD

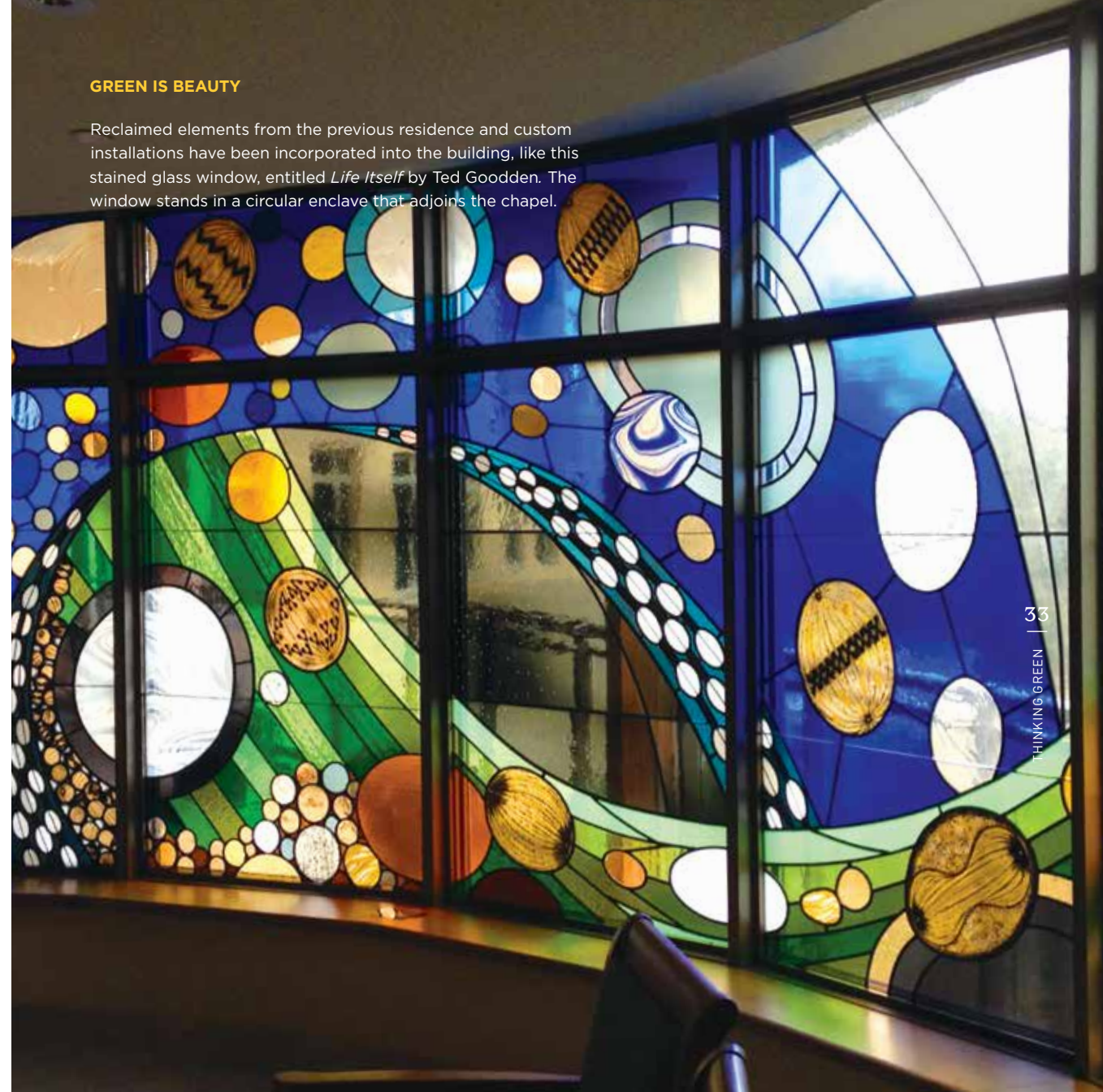
Sister Margo Ritchie and Sister Valerie Van Cauwenberghe welcome the light in the greeting room at the new residence of the new Sisters of St. Joseph that features handcrafted art by local artisans.

Some practitioners of green building design have taken this on as a kind of moral crusade, and tend to make clients feel guilty about not doing everything that might be recommended. In our case, we try to find out how important this question is to each client, and identify the best opportunities for making their particular project greener. The fact is that this gets easier to do on each new project, because virtually every industry has started to consider how its products impact the environment.

CONSUMERS HAVE ALSO BECOME MORE SOPHISTICATED AS PAST EXAMPLES OF 'GREENWASHING' HAVE BEEN EXPOSED AS PURE NONSENSE.

### GREEN IS BEAUTY

Reclaimed elements from the previous residence and custom installations have been incorporated into the building, like this stained glass window, entitled *Life Itself* by Ted Goodden. The window stands in a circular enclave that adjoins the chapel.

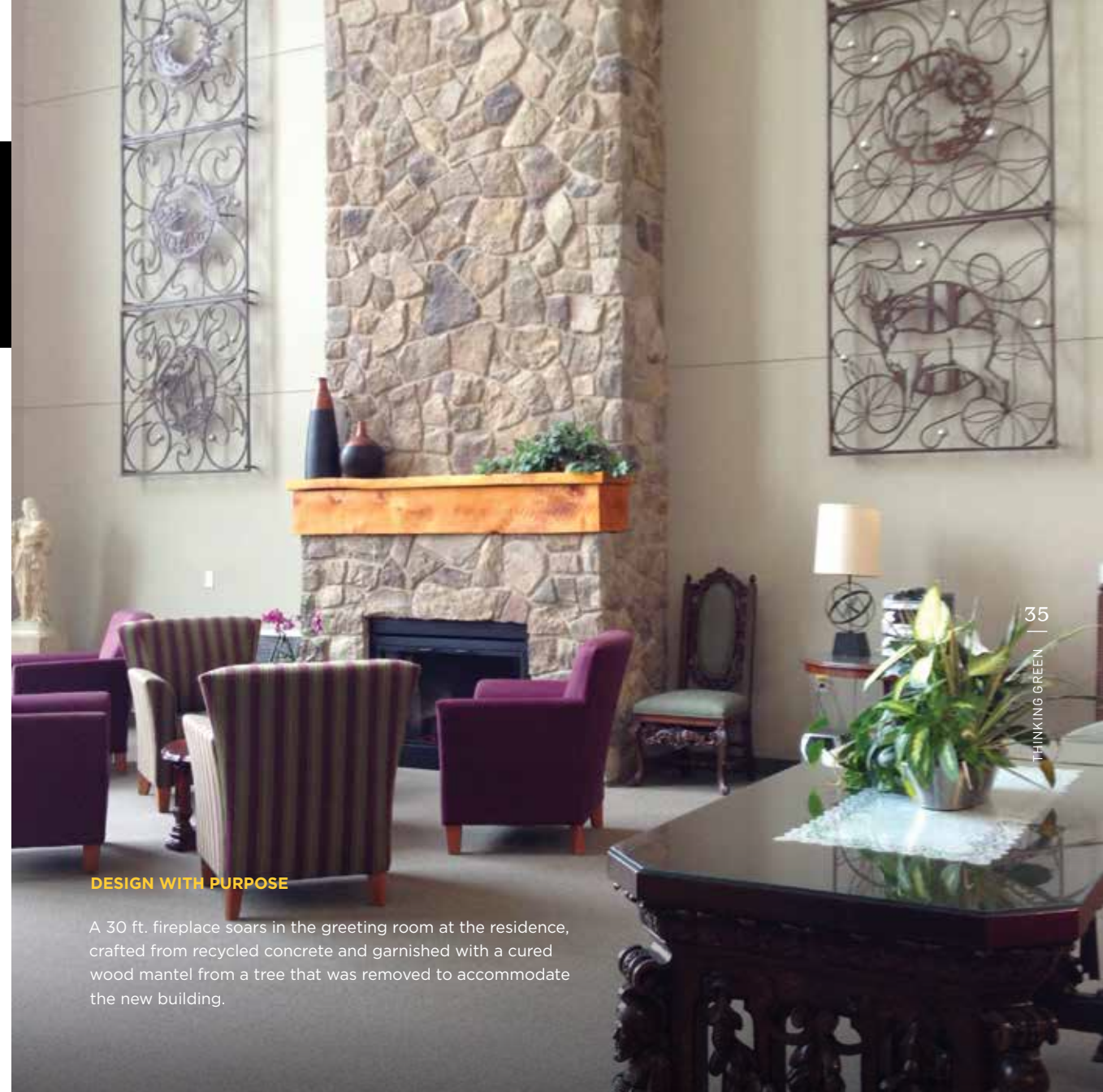


# GREEN IS THE NEW BLACK.

By that we mean that things green have become very fashionable, and designers like to adorn their creations with the latest features whether or not they make any sense for that particular project or client. Take green roofs for instance. Most architects consider these essential to any green building design, and not having one on their project is like having a cake with no icing. The question that needs to be asked is:

## WHAT ARE THE OVERALL BENEFITS OF A PRODUCT OR SYSTEM THROUGHOUT ITS LIFE CYCLE, COMPARED TO OTHER ALTERNATIVES?

This means making a frank assessment of the costs of a particular measure versus its long term performance and comparing this to other ways of accomplishing the same thing. This information about product 'life cycle impacts' is out there. There is no excuse for not tracking it down if you are really interested in finding the lowest impact option for your project. Only on this basis can designers help their clients to strategically invest their resources where they will make the biggest difference over the life of their projects.



### DESIGN WITH PURPOSE

A 30 ft. fireplace soars in the greeting room at the residence, crafted from recycled concrete and garnished with a cured wood mantel from a tree that was removed to accommodate the new building.



**FEATURE PROJECT:** Sisters of St. Joseph New Residence

The new residence for the Sisters of St. Joseph is sited on approximately 5.5 acres of land overlooking the Thames River in London, Ontario. As the first facility in the London region to achieve Gold Certification under the Canada Green Building Council's LEED® standard, the facility was designed to incorporate the latest principles of sustainable design and energy efficiency, and was used as part of an education program to inspire similar efforts in the community.

The major elements of the program include accommodation of the Sisters in 100 suites including a 24-bed nursing care area, meeting and office space for their work and outreach, as well as a chapel and therapeutic pool.

We eat our own cooking. If we are going to promote the idea of doing things in a more environmentally responsible way to our clients, we feel that we need to apply the same thinking to what we do in our own firm. Because we know it is easy to convince ourselves that we are doing the right thing, we work with Zerofootprint.org to track the annual impact of our activities, everything from the power we use and distances we travel to the materials we buy and the waste we generate. This allows us to compare the environmental impact of our firm in terms of energy and carbon dioxide on a per-person and per-square-foot basis with other similar organizations, and work at reducing these. Five years ago we started on average with other offices, and now our impacts are among the lowest in North America, with more progress still possible.

You will notice that we talk about our work in this field as green building design, and tend to avoid referring to what we do as 'sustainable design' the way many other firms do. This is simply because we have learned that making a project sustainable in the fullest sense of the word goes far beyond the criteria of contemporary green building rating systems. For us, sustainable design means that the building not only achieves its environmental objectives, but has also been responsible with its financial resources, while ultimately supporting the individual and social activities of the people who use it. Green building initiatives can make a difference in reducing the energy and resource impacts of our buildings, but whether these projects contribute to the overall well-being of society and the environment in which it exists is a much bigger question.

*A structure must exhibit the three qualities  
of firmness, commodity, and delight.  
~ Marcus Vitruvius Pollio*

## FOLLOWING THROUGH ON THE DETAILS

**REGARDLESS OF HOW MUCH EXPERIENCE A CLIENT  
MAY HAVE, OR INTERNAL EXPERTISE THERE IS WITHIN  
THEIR ORGANIZATION, WHEN IT COMES TO THE  
TECHNICAL DETAILS AND APPROVAL PROCESSES  
WE SEE OUR ROLE AS THAT OF EDUCATORS.**

We consider it part of our commitment to clients to explain the rationale behind various technical options, and insist that our consultants do the same. Everyone has their professional biases and systems which they prefer, but we should be able to describe why we have reached these conclusions and be willing to objectively compare them to other possibilities.

In every field, the pace of technological change makes it difficult to keep up. One attitude to this is resignation and a retreat to what is familiar and comfortable, criticizing any new initiatives as ‘fads’. This kind of complacency is dangerous, because the world will move on, with or without you. The benefits of technology are too numerous to count. While we get frustrated when something doesn’t work, and we sometimes dream of going back to a world before cell phones and email, the future will be governed by those who are able to apply technology in creative and effective ways.

*Access to digital technology and the internet has benefitted  
the architectural profession more than most.*

The ability to quickly and accurately create drawings and three-dimensional models has saved huge amounts of time, not to mention cardboard, X-Acto blades, and band-aids. We are entering a new phase of creating digital versions of our designs using ‘building information modelling’ software where instead of drawing lines and shapes we assemble components which the computer recognizes as representing real materials. This brings the digital model to life and allows us to see whether things fit together, calculate its cost, and place it on its site to see how much energy it consumes. So far our capability to do this has been limited by the power of the available computer hardware and the awkwardness of the early software interfaces, but both of these are likely to change as quickly as any other technology does.

Every profession complains about the increasing regulation they face in their work. There is no doubt that we are dealing with more rules and convoluted approvals than ever before. It seems that the mentality of many politicians and bureaucrats is that if some regulation is good, more must be better. It remains to be seen whether this bureaucratization of society is sustainable, but in the meantime we need to deal with it.

Our strategy in dealing with regulations and approvals is to remember these are all matters of interpretation by human beings. No piece of English or any other language can be so precisely crafted as to eliminate any subjectivity about its meaning, even on the most technical of issues. We try to understand the purpose of the rule, whether this is stated or only inferred, and explain this to our clients. Often an arbitrary-sounding regulation will make more sense once it is put into the context of its overall purpose, such as improving safety or conserving energy. Sometimes it's simply a matter of providing complete information in the appropriate form. Occasionally, when regulatory control extends into more subjective areas such as urban design, the lack of any coherent rationale becomes readily apparent and the rules really are arbitrary. Whether arbitrary or reasonable, our approach is to accept them as a creative challenge, even if it means working a little harder to figure out how to accomplish the goals of the project under these conditions.

#### TECHNICALLY STUNNING

Clean lines, natural light and vast open space dominate the design of the Stoney Creek Community Centre.



### DESIGN THAT WORKS OUT

Tim Wellhauser led the project team who collaborated to bring the space to life and now enjoys the YMCA at the Stoney Creek Community Centre as a member.



Another strategy for working in our rules-orientated society is to realize that it usually comes down to a few individuals who have a significant influence on what gets approved and what doesn't. Sometimes these officials are concealed behind layers of procedure, but more often than not we find them to be approachable people with a genuine interest in making things better. Too often the role of someone in an approvals position is to review complex design information under great time pressure from us, our clients, or the construction team biting at the bit to get going. Not a fun job.

What we try to do is approach these individuals early in the process to discuss the client's goals, particularly if we are proposing something a little out of the ordinary. We find that the people in authority we meet with are often glad to make a positive contribution to a project when there is still time to incorporate their suggestions. They can be extremely helpful in finding an appropriate interpretation of their regulations that will fit best with our design, even if it has to be adapted a little to work. It's amazing how showing a little genuine appreciation for the people involved goes a long way in getting through the approvals process successfully.



### FEATURE PROJECT: Stoney Creek Community Centre YMCA & Library

Designed in association with Perkins+Will Canada, the new community centre and library facility is the result of a partnership between the City of London, the YMCA of Southwestern Ontario and the London Public Library. Within the 80,000 square foot envelope, the centre provides two pool tanks, a fitness centre with five multi-purpose rooms, a walking track, two competitive size gymnasias and a branch library. Achieving **LEED® Gold Certification**, the building is designed to incorporate as many of the principles of sustainable design and energy efficiency as could be proven to have a reasonable capital and operating cost return period.

*The most important thing in communication  
is hearing what isn't said.  
~ Peter Drucker*

## KEEPING IN TOUCH

Maintaining good communications is a theme that seems to run through every aspect of what we do. We see ourselves in a unique position at the nexus of the numerous individuals and organizations involved in the design process. We take the initiative in making sure everyone knows what they need to about what's happening, especially as the project moves into construction and more and more people start to climb aboard. We also make it everyone's responsibility to speak up if there is something they need and don't have. Mind reading is not part of our normal services.

**HERE, TECHNOLOGY IS ALSO VERY HELPFUL. THERE ARE  
NUMEROUS TOOLS AVAILABLE TO ENSURE CLIENTS AND  
THE CONSULTING TEAM HAVE THE LATEST VERSION OF  
THE DESIGN AND ACCESS TO CURRENT INFORMATION.  
INTERACTIVE MEETING TECHNOLOGIES ENABLE US TO  
WORK TOGETHER AND TO BE LOOKING AT THE SAME  
THING EVEN IF WE ARE NOT IN THE SAME ROOM.**

We rely on the one-page summary. No matter how complex the topic, whether a multimillion dollar project budget or a multi-year sequence of coordinated design activities, we try to distill it down to fit on a single 8.5 x 11 inch piece of paper. There may be lots of backup material, but we find it's critical to separate the important details from the more important essentials. Otherwise, even for the most experienced clients, the real issues get lost in minutiae, and we can lose track of them.

Another important communication tool is the Design Synopsis. Like the one-page summary, it distills the critical information about a project into a document which the client receives once we feel that the process has reached a point where it is time to make it a reality. Essentially this tells the story of the design and includes the final versions of the illustrations we have used along the way to reach this point. While the design process is never really finished, if it is going to turn into an actual building there needs to be a point at which the major elements of scope, organization, and appearance need to be fixed. We find that the Design Synopsis is as valuable to our own team as it is to the client, because it provides a concise reference within which the details can be filled in. Not only does this document describe what has been decided about the components of the project, it also lists the issues which remain outstanding, because there are always some.

Most people who get involved for the first time with construction of large buildings find it a little disturbing that these tend to consist of millions of dollars' worth of components all installed by the lowest bidder, with a one-year warranty. Yikes. An important and difficult part of what we need to communicate to clients is that construction is an imperfect science. Except for the most rudimentary of structures, the set of documents which represent the design of a building is not the same as the building itself.

Again, technology is helping to improve the accuracy of design documents. While claims from proponents of the latest applications fall well short of the current reality, progress is inevitable. Some day we will see buildings rise up as if they were on an automated assembly line, going directly from digital reality to physical reality. In the meantime, however, we need to rely on exporting our three dimensional dreams onto two dimensional paper that ordinary people can interpret properly.

In a sense we look at the construction team, the group of trades and management who will make the design into a reality, to be a kind of client, even though they have not engaged us directly. To the extent that we can make it easier for them to do a good job for the client, the more likely it is that they will build something that we can all be proud of. The few bad experiences we have had make us appreciate the dedication of the majority of people we deal with in the construction industry. Most people are capable of putting quality into their work, and we have found it important to recognize this when we see it, as opposed to always citing the deficiencies.



#### BRINGING IT HOME

Vaulted ceilings and natural light flood the living and dining spaces of Highview. Residents enjoy freshly prepared meals, beautifully manicured gardens, bringing them all the comforts of home.

**FEATURE PROJECT:** Highview Residences

This specially designed environment accommodates 24 persons with Alzheimer's Disease or related dementia. The building consists of two linked 'cottages'. Designed in collaboration with Uriel Cohen of the University of Wisconsin, a leader in the field of dementia design, the model of care is based on normalizing the environment, to not only look like an ordinary home but also to function like one.

For instance, meals are all prepared in the kitchen of each cottage. Residents are encouraged to participate to the degree of their ability. Families are likewise encouraged to be as involved in the day-to-day lives of the residents as possible.

**A FAMILY AFFAIR**

Ross and Cathy Chapin continue to honour and uphold the reason for which Highview was created: to care for people with disease and related dementia; to be their home.

The process of helping our clients develop the design of their projects and then bringing these to a reality often takes a couple of years to complete. For large projects involving complex approvals, it can take four or five years. Some projects start design then have to wait months or years for financing or zoning conditions to be met. Throughout this time, we have worked directly together with the client and key individuals within their organizations to create a sense of rapport as fellow team members and co-designers. It has always seemed strange to us for this relationship to end when the building is finished. We love to drop in and find out how the design is actually working, and how it is helping their organization accomplish its objectives.

This means we make a conscious effort to stay in contact with our clients for years after their projects are completed. Thankfully, most clients are glad to see us and openly share how things are going. Of course, this is simpler for clients with whom we continue to do other projects, but we still like to drop in to visit their earlier buildings to see how the designs have held up over time.

Sometimes this means we find out about a problem that has cropped up, or are asked for information about a particular part of the building. We consider these situations an opportunity to differentiate ourselves. We feel that the time involved in providing a little extra help or information is the best investment in promoting our services that we could ever make. So much of our new work comes from referrals that it makes a big difference when a new client contacts someone we have worked with in the past, and hears how we have kept in touch. Besides, we simply enjoy doing it.

# CONCLUSION & SUMMARY

We hope this review of our approach to what we do has been insightful for both clients and other designers like us. Every firm has its own way of doing things, whether this is explicitly identified or implicitly revealed in their behavior. Whether what we say about being committed to collaborating with our clients is really true can be pretty obvious. It comes down to having genuine respect that the client is the one whose opinions matter most. This means that as designers, we need to give our clients confidence to get involved in the process and to encourage them to influence its outcome. After all, it may be our design, but they are the ones who will be living with it.

STAYING TRUE TO OUR COMMITMENT TO ONE-PAGE SUMMARIES, THE FOLLOWING LIST IS A DISTILLATION OF THE PRINCIPLES WE HAVE BEEN TRYING TO DESCRIBE. YOU CAN BE THE JUDGE OF HOW WELL WE HAVE DONE.

For more information about us and our process (including an introductory animation) visit us at: [cornerstonearchitecture.ca](http://cornerstonearchitecture.ca)

## STARTING WITH THE BIG PICTURE

- *We start by asking about how our clients want to feel when the project is completed.*
- *We explore what our clients' biggest concerns, opportunities, and strengths are, in their own words.*

## INVOLVING THE KEY PEOPLE

- *We insist on directly involving the leaders of the client's organization in the process of creating their building, and respect the commitment of time and energy this involves.*
- *We also insist on getting direct input from the people who will be using the building when it's finished, including the communities it serves.*

## EXPLORING THE POSSIBILITIES

- *We engage our clients in thinking of as many design solutions as possible, and make this fun.*
- *We help visualize the possibilities as they are taking shape, and make this exciting.*

### EXPLAINING THE ISSUES AND MAKING RECOMMENDATIONS

- *We summarize the issues and frankly express our opinion of what approach makes the most sense.*
- *We respect our clients' ability to decide what is in their own best interest, once they understand the issue, even if it's not what we have recommended.*

### THINKING ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT

- *We measure the environmental impacts of our work and find practical and proven measures to mitigate these.*
- *We apply a sustainability inspired approach to our own practice.*

### FOLLOWING THROUGH ON THE DETAILS

- *We demystify technical complexities.*
- *We personalize bureaucratic approval processes.*

### KEEPING IN TOUCH

- *We respect the role of the construction team and help them build a project everyone can be proud of.*
- *After the project is completed, we stay in touch over the life of the building.*



### CORNERSTONE PRINCIPALS

Alison Hannay and Richard Hammond are actively involved in each of the firm's projects and inspire a collaborative approach by everyone on their team.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It has been a challenge selecting a few clients and projects to highlight out of the many wonderful relationships we have had over almost 25 years of practice. We would like to express our appreciation to those who have agreed to participate, not only for their good nature in having pictures taken and sharing their experiences, but also for being such an important influence on what we do.

IF YOU HAVE ENJOYED READING THIS MATERIAL AND HAVE FOUND IT HELPFUL IN APPROACHING YOUR OWN BUILDING DESIGN PROJECTS, WE WOULD ENCOURAGE YOU TO CONSIDER SUPPORTING ONE OF THESE ORGANIZATIONS IN WHATEVER WAY YOU CONSIDER APPROPRIATE.

## ■ **Thames Valley Children's Centre**

Find out about the centre's unique range of programs for children with disabilities and make a donation here: [www.tvcc.on.ca](http://www.tvcc.on.ca)

## ■ **McCormick Home**

Support the WCA's Alzheimer's Outreach Service to help individuals and families better cope with the onset of dementia here: [www.alzheimeroutreach.org](http://www.alzheimeroutreach.org)

## ■ **Schlegel Villages**

Contribute to the Schlegel-UW Research Institute for Aging and their work to bring into practice innovative and effective programs for seniors' physical and mental health here: [www.the-ria.ca](http://www.the-ria.ca)

## ■ **Tillsonburg Community Services Initiatives**

See the wide range of programs and services which support individuals and families in need across the region here: [www.thelivingstoncentre.com](http://www.thelivingstoncentre.com)

## ■ **The Sisters of St. Joseph**

Help contribute to the Sisters' most recent initiative accommodating St. Joseph's Hospice of London into their building here: [www.sjhospicelondon.com](http://www.sjhospicelondon.com)

## ■ **The City of London**

Discover how much goes on inside the Stoney Creek Community Centre YMCA & Library and get involved with their programs here: [www.ymcawo.ca/stoney-creek](http://www.ymcawo.ca/stoney-creek)

## ■ **Highview Residences**

Join Highview in actively supporting the amazing work of the Alzheimer Society of London and Middlesex here: [www.alzheimerlondon.ca](http://www.alzheimerlondon.ca)

