

# Making Spaces for Art

## A Case Study: McMichael Canadian Art Collection



**“If we can achieve this with a log and field stone building, on a ridge, in the middle of one hundred acres, anyone can.” - Victoria Dickenson**

Victoria Dickenson, the CEO of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, is referring to the gallery’s LEED® Silver Certified status. The McMichael occupies a special spot in the midst of one hundred acres of picturesque conservation land. And what it has done with its one hundred acres is just as wonderful and inspirational as the landscapes that first inspired Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven.

In 1954, what would become the McMichael Canadian Art Collection was a private fieldstone and log home. It became a provincial asset in 1965 and since then has expanded to a Category A museum, occupying 85,000 square feet on five levels. The McMichael is primarily known for collecting Canadian art by some of Canada’s best-known and most beloved artists such as Tom Thomson, the Group of Seven, First Nations, Métis and Inuit, among others. The McMichael welcomes 100,000 visitors annually to the thirteen exhibition galleries.

Situated on one hundred acres of watershed and forest, it was appropriate for the gallery to reflect the ideals of the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority that manages the surroundings. It made sense for the “outside to reflect the inside,” says Dickenson. To that end, the McMichael gallery became LEED® Silver Certified in 2010.

When discussing what motivated the McMichael to become certified, Dickenson states that museums often become leaders in many fields such as architecture or operations, and that environmentalism should be no different. The McMichael saw it as a real opportunity to set an example and a high standard for other facilities across the country.

Climate control, though expensive, is pivotal to the preservation of the nearly 6,000 works in the McMichael’s permanent collection. The gallery is set to 45 percent humidity and 21 degrees Celsius year round. Reducing long-term energy costs was another motivating factor for the gallery.

It was the operational staff who took much of the initiative in the gallery becoming LEED® Certified. The changes were incremental and took place over a number of years, with the input and assistance of Enermodal Engineering, Canada’s largest consulting firm in creating green buildings. The four main areas of concern became water management, cleaning products, indoor air quality, and a solar energy project for the roof.

On the interior, improving water efficiency was a matter of changing plumbing fixtures. In total the McMichael was able to reduce water usage by 30 percent. Cleaning products used by custodial staff were replaced with greener solutions such as vinegar and water. Dickenson laughed when she recalled how she would often come home from work smelling of vinegar.

Because the gallery is not on a public transit route, it encourages visitors to make environmentally conscious decisions by offering bike paths throughout the grounds and preferential parking for green automobiles and carpooling.

To improve electrical efficiency, motion sensor and light harvesting high efficiency lights were installed in the offices and a solar capture area was installed in 2009 on the southeast corner of their cedar shake roof. Future considerations also include replacing the roof.

In the process of becoming LEED® Certified, the McMichael also became the first gallery in North America to use LED lighting, a much talked about issue in the gallery world. Fortunately, Dickenson said that they “have not gained energy efficiency at the cost of aesthetic quality.” The installation was so successful that the McMichael became an example to other galleries while reducing its lighting costs by 60 percent. Because LEDs do not give off heat, the gallery has also reduced its cooling costs.

These changes and innovations, although staff driven, also required education and collaboration. Without the staff on board, the project may not have been as successful as it was. There was an education process that ran the gamut from “think before you print” to changing the entire way staff thought about an office and running a facility. These initiatives and changes turned into a whole new set of policies and procedures for the gallery. Dickenson maintains that because of the gallery’s physical location, the staff are already very cognizant of environmental issues and the transition was not traumatic. Environmentalism has now become a part of the culture of the gallery.

The McMichael has been ahead of the pack in this area, as the first gallery in the country to achieve LEED® status in 2010. It faced more challenges perhaps than a new building would have, in that most of its adaptations required retrofitting; but the gallery persevered and the effort has paid off.

Maintaining this silver status involves tracking energy consumption and product purchases including the type of paper and ink used for business, managing waste/compost/recycling, as well as developing new policies to encompass more of the gallery’s various operations and improving upon existing ones. It may be a challenge sometimes, but the staff at the McMichael are committed. They know it is the “right thing to do.”

While the McMichael is home to paintings depicting some of Canada’s most beloved landscapes and remains dedicated to their preservation, it has also committed to preserving the world outside the gallery doors and beyond its one hundred acres.

### **What We Learned**

1. Any building can be retrofitted to become LEED® Certified. The McMichael accomplished it in a log and stone 1950’s building.
2. It is a great learning experience, which carries through to all aspects, towards a more environmental way of thinking.
3. It requires an ongoing institutional commitment in terms of annual allocation of funds and continuing vigilance.
4. It is challenging work and can be time consuming, both preparing for the certification, and as an ongoing process.