

Making Spaces for Art

A Case Study: Waterloo Region Museum



"It is the ambition of the Society to acquire at an early date, a substantial fireproof county building in which to preserve permanently all such records and general objects of historic interest". W.H. Breithaupt, November, 1912

In 1912, disaster had to be on peoples' minds. After all, the unthinkable had happened when the unsinkable hit an iceberg in April that year. One can only imagine that William Henry Breithaupt had preservation and disaster avoidance on his mind when he dreamt of a fireproof county building in November.

The Waterloo Historical Society held its inaugural meeting in November of 1912. One of their goals was to amass and preserve a collection that represented the history of Waterloo County and to some day have a fireproof building for its preservation. With that goal in mind, the group formed what would become a long lasting partnership with the Berlin, now Kitchener Public Library.

The home of the Waterloo Historical Society was indeed the place many seek refuge from disaster. Certainly fireproof, the society made its home in the basement of the library. In 1960, all that had to change however. The Kitchener Public Library was moving to a new main library. And while the partnership with the library continues to this day (the Historical Society's archival collection is still managed and preserved at the Library), the Society donated its artifact collection to the newly opened Doon Pioneer Village on the outskirts of Kitchener.

In 1983, the Region of Waterloo took over the management of Doon Pioneer Village and its property. The priority for the Region was to reinvigorate the village and embark upon creating a regional history museum; all while acting as good stewards of the collection of objects they were given.

Through the 1980s and 1990s, improvements were made in the village as historic buildings were restored. The construction of a regional history museum remained a more elusive undertaking. In the late-1980s, the Region made a four million dollar commitment toward construction of a new museum but an economic downturn put the project on hold.

With its artifact collection still in jeopardy, the now newly named Doon Heritage Crossroads began to investigate how best to care for and store its collection of more than 40,000 objects. Staff hired an architect and scoped out 19th century factories and warehouses in downtown Kitchener, contemplating constructing a building within a building. For many reasons, including the practicality of the size of some of the pieces in the collection and therefore accessibility issues of placing museum storage in an urban core, to the cost of the infrastructure, the concept was not feasible.



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The Region then took a different approach, to purchase an existing modern warehouse. Real estate agents showed the Region many buildings and such a warehouse was found. The space had environmental controls, essential to store the artifact collection, but it was not large enough. Undaunted, the Region then set out in search of a parcel of land on which to construct their own purpose-built storage facility. A suitable lot was found in a new industrial park near the village. The Region put an option to buy on the parcel of land, but did not immediately commit to its purchase.

Once again to no avail, when the time came for the Region to exercise the option to purchase the land, their budget could not accommodate the project. In the face of so many foiled opportunities, Tom Reitz, the museum's Manager/Curator along with the staff, remained optimistic: "At the time it seemed like we had nothing, but in fact we did – we had lots! We had four years of good data and research." By exploring so many options, the Region had even more clarity about what was necessary for success and to move the project forward.

By 1994, a new Canada-Ontario infrastructure program was put in place with one-third funding from each of the federal, provincial and municipal governments. The Region of Waterloo developed a list of ten projects for which to seek funding. A storage facility for the museum was the last project on that prioritized list.

Miraculously, it all came together. The project was funded. In the northwest corner of Doon Heritage Crossroads' property, the 32, 000 square feet Waterloo Region Curatorial Centre was constructed at a cost of \$3.8 million. To meet funding program requirements, design and construction took place quickly and was only possible because of the four years of planning and failed attempts to secure storage space. The Centre opened in the fall of 1995.

The building is far more functional than sexy. Reitz says, "everyone wants the public face, the marble lobby" at their museum. The Waterloo Regional Curatorial Centre is not that space. The Waterloo Region Curatorial Centre is a warehouse, albeit a very nice warehouse. It is all "behind the scenes space" – artifact storage vaults, conservation labs, change rooms for costumed staff who work in the village, and offices. It did however "become a beacon of hope to other museums that don't have their collections taken care of properly." It was and is a functional space to house a large collection with the care and maintenance that artifacts require, and that public ownership and stewardship demands. But there still was no public face for the collection, other than what was on exhibit in the sixty-acre living history village.

Moving forward once again, Regional Council included the idea of building a regional museum in its strategic plan in the early 2000s. Galvanized, the Region began developing plans and making many strategic decisions. The collection was analyzed for its strengths and weaknesses; the collection was fully catalogued and photographs of more than half the collection were taken; and a feasibility study for a new museum was contracted.

Consultants looked at locations for the public face of the collection. Where should a new museum be located? Their recommendation was the new museum should be built on the same lands as the Curatorial Centre and the living history village. Council decided to go ahead with the project, committing themselves to the entire capital cost of \$26 million but with a hope and expectation that a portion of the capital cost would come from senior levels of government and fund raising.



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What they learned, very quickly, is that there is no money available at the provincial level for building museums. The Region applied for funding at the federal level from Cultural Spaces Canada. The federal government made a significant contribution of \$2 million. Donations by local families, companies and foundations amounted to another \$600,000, while the Region of Waterloo came through with the rest – an amazing \$23.4 million. It was an investment in their community's quality of life, and collective memory, which is unparalleled in Canada.

This is when the fun began; having spent years learning how to house a collection, spending time in workshops about building museums and building capacity and knowledge for many years, both Regional Council and staff decided it was time to innovate, to create. There was a national competition to hire an architect, but not just any architect. This architect would have to have a whole team of experts on board including exhibit designers, a historian, a retail consultant, a landscape consultant, a LEED® consultant, and all the necessary mechanical, electrical and lighting consultants required when building a new facility. The insistence that the architects partner with exhibit designers met with some opposition from prospective applicants, but the museum knew they would get a better, integrated product if the building and its exhibits were designed in tandem.

Applications were received from across the country. Council established a twelve-person steering committee made up fifty percent by Regional Council and the other fifty percent by community members. The architectural consortiums were short listed to four. For two days the steering committee conducted interviews. And the decision was unanimous to hire Moriyama + Teshima from Toronto working in partnership with The Walter Fedy Partnership from Kitchener.

In January 2008 still committed to a very unique process, and as museum design began, the Region rented a bus. The winning team was taken on a driving tour of the region. They visited places that reflect defining moments in the history of the region, architectural masterpieces in their own right, urban and rural community landscapes – all that define this sense of place. Reitz maintains that you can see intimations of this tour, in the actual physical building today.

A hallmark of the process was community consultation, including focus groups, interviews, surveys and community meetings. This consultation influenced decisions on everything, from the building itself, to exhibit themes and content, and visitor services such as washrooms. Reitz says that more time was spent thinking and talking about the washrooms, than just about any other space in the museum. For most visitors, the washrooms are their first encounter with the museum – so there are exhibits here too.

The scope of transformation, growth and change that went into becoming the Waterloo Region Museum, from its predecessors Doon Pioneer Village and then Doon Heritage Crossroads, is tremendous. They grew from a staff of eleven, to twenty-four. They went from an operational budget of \$1.5 million to \$6 million.

But the wisdom learned through the years waiting for this building, continued to inform the process. Right away they hired an organizational development consultant to help define what the new organizational structure and job descriptions looked and functioned like. Other consultants worked with staff through change and stress management workshops. Everyone involved worked hard to make sure that everyone was part of the conversation about this transformation.



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Doon Heritage Crossroads also did not escape attention. It was renamed yet a third time – now known as Doon Heritage Village. During construction of the museum building, the Region made sure to reinvigorate the village. Two historic buildings were restored; one building was taken down, as well as landscaping, painting and re-roofing.

Offices in the Waterloo Region Curatorial Centre also got a facelift while the museum was under construction, including new paint, carpet and furniture; all to make sure that no one felt left out of the transformation that was swirling around them. The Curatorial Centre also expanded, with a \$1 million addition to house an exhibit fabrication workshop and design studio, to support exhibits in the new museum.

The Waterloo Region Museum opened May 2010 and officially opened its doors, with its exhibit galleries completed, in November 2011; nearly a century after its first mention on public record. Proudly the Waterloo Region Museum is a LEED® Silver facility and the largest community museum in Ontario. The main gallery features the story of Waterloo Region, from 12,000 years ago through today and the museum's temporary gallery hosts local and travelling exhibits. As envisioned, the building has become a community centre and the focus for many public and private events. W.H. Breithaupt would surely be impressed.