



Creative Spaces Case Study Series

Idea Exchange: The Old Post Office



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Idea Exchange: The Old Post Office

Interviewees

Helen Kelley, CEO

Jaime Griffis, Director, Programming & Promotion

Cathy Kiedrowski, Director, Public Services

Mission and Vision

Mission Statement:

Idea Exchange supports and inspires our community in the exploration of reading, arts, innovation and learning.

Vision Statement:

We will create an environment of curiosity and discovery through the exploration of the arts and new technologies. This will foster creativity, spark innovation, develop human capital, and support lifelong learning.

Historical Background

At the end of October 1881, the Government of Canada appointed architect Thomas Fuller to the job of chief architect in the Department of Public Works. Along with the original Parliament of Canada building, Fuller was responsible for the design and construction of many public buildings, including 80 Post Office buildings nationwide. Fuller designed these Post Offices as landmarks, and as such, wanted to help foster a federal architectural image or a “dominion” image that was instantly recognizable to ordinary citizens. Unfortunately, many of the Fuller Post Offices were demolished in the 20th century.

The Old Post Office building has been used in a multitude of ways since 1885. It was used as a post office for 51 years. Then during the '60s and '70s, its use fluctuated between housing municipal offices. It lay vacant and hosted a theater company, art gallery and small stores. In the 1980s, it first saw a restaurant space. In 1982 the building was designated an Ontario Heritage site and in June of 1983 it was added to the National Historic Sites and Monuments directory through Parks Canada. In the late 1980s, it also saw a shift to various night clubs and pubs opening and closing throughout the years. In 2007, the Fiddler’s Green pub closed and the building sat vacant until 2013 when the City of Cambridge purchased it for the Old Post Office Project.

Project Summary

Opening its doors in July 2018 as a digital library, the Old Post Office was repurposed by the City of Cambridge into a modern community library and resource centre. While respecting the buildings historic

designation, the project featured heritage restoration and adaptive re-use to blend the old with the new, and create a multi-use community space with panoramic views of the city and the Grand River. The site is Canada's first "bookless" library and Idea Exchange's newest location which features creative studios, a discovery centre, makerspace and heritage reading room café – all designed to best serve their users and community.

The "What"

What is Idea Exchange's Operational Model?

All Idea Exchange buildings are owned by the City of Cambridge. While they are municipal facilities, they are all operated by the Cambridge Public Library Board. As Idea Exchange is Cambridge Public Libraries and Art Galleries' business name, the Library Board is effectively carrying on business as Idea Exchange.

What was Built?

In 2012, the City of Cambridge purchased the Old Post Office with intentions to preserve the heritage site and transform the building into Idea Exchange's newest location. The project included restorations, renovations, and additions that doubled the existing space by adding 9,000 square feet to the historic structure. The vision for the space was inspired by the rise of makerspaces and digital literacy programs in public libraries. They envisioned multiple spaces for creative minds to gather and learn through play. Referred to as the 'digital library', the building is intended to inspire creativity and skills development through community access to cutting edge technologies.

The building is comprised of four floors, with their own designated function. The lower level features a videowall with audio/visual recording suites, laptop lending service and gaming areas as well as musical instruments available for recording and performance. The ground floor features the Riverview Room and a Café managed by their partner Monigram Coffee Roasters. This floor serves as the main gathering space, and can be used as a reading room or public presentation area. The third level is a children's Discovery Centre, a single large bright room equipped with smart tables, robot building kits, and built-in feature walls with Lego, Lite Brite and magnets. Finally, the fourth level contains a classroom/meeting room and an adult-oriented studio space with a laser cutting machine, 3D printers, soldering stations, vinyl cutters, irons, sewing machines, as well as wood and metal workshop tools. This equipment is also available in extended hours to facilitate public creation for older age groups.

What was the project timeline?

The building was purchased by the City of Cambridge in 2013. A heritage consultant was engaged in 2013 to do an assessment of existing condition, as well as to do "Conservation Master Plan" (2014). The heritage consultant also prepared "Heritage Impact Assessment" (2015). The design stage of the

project took place in 2014 and construction of the Old Post Office project started in November 2015. On July 6, 2018, the community was invited to celebrate the opening of the Old Post Office with a family/community party in the evening. The facility opened to the public on Saturday, July 7th, 2018

What partners were involved in the project?

The City of Cambridge owns the building and the contract for the project. As the facility is managed by Idea Exchange, they were the client on the design of the space. Monigram Coffee Roasters were engaged as tenants and project partners by Idea Exchange once they established the plan to include a coffee shop in the facility.

The “Why”

Why did the City and Idea Exchange take on this capital project?

The decision to create the digital library was driven by community need. At Queen Square, Idea Exchange's main location, the Children’s Department underwent a renovation, but they still found themselves overwhelmed with program attendance from kids and families. As program attendance was increasing, the City of Cambridge had also projected a population surge of 23%, going from 135,000 in 2019 to 176,000 by the year 2030. Leveraging their programming success with the expected population growth, Idea Exchange was able to make a case for expansion in downtown Cambridge as the City of Cambridge was looking at purchasing the Post Office building.

While the city would own the building, Idea Exchange would be responsible for programming the space. It was intended that the new digital library would not compete with their facility at Queen Square. They would maintain the facility and continue with programming, but they would offer complimentary programming that focussed on digital literacy and maker culture for the community at the new location.

The “Who”

Who led the project?

Helen Kelley, CEO of Idea Exchange, was the project lead. As project manager, she sat in on construction meetings and was able to make decisions in the moment, moving the project along. She also took photos of the renovation project, keeping the board and staff informed throughout the process.

The City of Cambridge appointed Slobodanka Lekic, Manager of Building Design and Construction for the City as their project lead. With her previous experience as an architect, high attention to detail and ability to offer creative and cost-effective solutions to issues, she was well suited for the position.

The project also had a steering committee led by the City that met monthly throughout construction. The Restoration of the Post Office Committee included the following members:

- Hardy Bromberg, Deputy City Manager, Community Development, Chair
- Mayor Doug Craig, City of Cambridge
- Nicholas Ermeta, Councillor, City of Cambridge
- Jan Liggett, Councillor, City of Cambridge
- Pam Wolf, Councillor, City of Cambridge
- Helen Kelly, CEO, Idea Exchange
- Gary Price, Chair, Cambridge Public Library Board
- David Pinnington, Board Member, Cambridge Public Library Board
- John Oldfield, Chair, MHAC
- Steven Fairweather, Deputy City Manager/Chief Financial Officer, City of Cambridge
- Brad Paddock, Community at Large

Who were the project partners?

Outside of the municipality, the other project partner was Monigram Coffee Roasters. They are a local independent coffee shop with similar values to Idea Exchange. Through their main location, they support local artists and musicians serving as a gathering place for the community.

They were brought on through an RFP process after deciding a coffee shop would be a more viable option than a restaurant. Monigram Coffee were viewed as stakeholders in the project, as the café is ultimately their space and they have a vested interest in the success of the digital library. They pay rent to Idea Exchange, and manage their space within the facility as per the lease agreement.

Who was contracted for this project?

The contracted project team selected by the City of Cambridge included:

Architect: Tyler Sharp, RDH Architects, Toronto

Heritage Architect: Kelly Gilbride, Heritage Architect from Stephens, Burgess Architects, Toronto. On the project team to ensure the restoration was completed in reference to original design, colours, sourcing of heritage glass, restoration of windows, slate roof replacement, repointing, cleaning and dutchman repairs of the entire stonework.

General Contractor: Collaborative Structures Limited (CSL), led by Drew Fletcher

Heritage Contractor: Henry Forget, Rooftile Management

Consultants: Christie Digital, Digital projection technology and John Coniglio, digital lighting specialist at Westbury National

As per Purchasing Procurement Policy the City of Cambridge awarded Request for Proposals based on a ranking system. Evaluations were done based on following criteria: fixed fee cost, experience of firm, experience and qualifications of key team members, quality of approach, methodology and project timing and demonstration of design capability.

Who opposed the project?

The main opposition to this project was the overall cost, and the effect it would have on the municipality's budget. In previous years, the City of Cambridge had run zero deficit budgets. However, over the last few years, they have been running on a deficit. The project was debenture financed by the City; both corporations and governments frequently issue debentures to raise capital or funds. The public opposition to cost was addressed through communication and advocating for the benefits that this project would offer the community. A video was made early on in the project, articulating the vision of the space. It also featured community champions and individuals from the maker community demonstrating their support for the project.

The “How”

How did the project go from concept to construction?

Support from the municipality and Idea Exchange's Library Board was instrumental in moving this project from concept to construction. The City of Cambridge's municipal staff and former mayor had a vested interest in preserving the local heritage building within the community. As such, the City wanted to restore the Old Post Office and have it available for public use.

At the same time, Idea Exchange was facing a surge in program attendance. In order to address their capacity issues, they suggested expansion of their main space at Queen Square, or renovating the Old Post Office to their Board. In the end, the Library Board chose the option to save that heritage building and turn it into what was proposed as the digital library. Idea Exchange's previous CEO imagined the original vision for the space, and passed the project on to the organization's current CEO.

How was a construction plan formed?

As the City of Cambridge held the contract, they acted as the main liaison with the general contractor. They established a construction schedule and plan of action for the project.

Considering design plans would be informed by the programming that would take place in the facility, staff from Idea Exchange were heavily involved in the planning phase. They went to every meeting through the construction process and looked at every submittal and shop drawing. This enabled them to have input at the front end of the project, and ensure the building's design would reflect its intended use.

Throughout the project, there were construction meetings every two weeks. Morning meetings were held for two or three hours with the general contractor, the architect, the City and Idea Exchange. If the meetings involved the kitchen and cafe, a representative from their project partner Monigram Coffee would also be in attendance. In the afternoon following, meetings involving heritage construction would take place. The heritage architect would be present, and there would be a site visit where the team would go through the building.

How was heritage considered in the project plan?

Using the following standards and guidelines, ERA Architects created a Heritage Conservation Master Plan for the project:

- Parks Canada - Standards and guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places
- Ontario Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Sport's - Eight guiding principles for the Conservation of Historic Properties
- City of Cambridge - Heritage Master Plan
- City of Cambridge - Official Plan

The project design included conservation, restoration and preservation of the building's heritage features. Stevens Burgess Architects Ltd prepared a Cultural Heritage Impact Assessment, which was peer reviewed by ERA Architects Inc. The Municipal Heritage Advisory Committee (MHAC) approved the Cultural Heritage Impact Assessment and Conservation Master Plan.

How were day-to-day operations and organizational capacity impacted?

Undergoing this capital project was a major feat for the Idea Exchange team. On top of maintaining their programming initiatives in other facilities, there were construction projects in other locations happening simultaneously. Staff also had to plan for the opening of the facility. They had to determine an operating model, staffing, programming and promotions. All staff members were taking on more work, and working longer hours. Kelly was able to manage operations by creating achievable lists and phases for the project. Specific tasks were outlined in chronological order to ensure that staff were not overwhelmed with all the project tasks. Once all action items in a particular phase were accomplished, they would move on to the next.

How were contingencies managed?

When the project first went out to tender all of the construction companies overbid on the project. The lowest was about 25% over budget. This meant the City had to re-evaluate their plan and determine what should be reduced in their design. Some of the pieces that were taken out included the mezzanine on the Discovery Center floor, the skylight in the makerspace and the size of the outdoor terrace. This

would enable them to update the space after learning what users may be missing, and use new additions as an engagement opportunity to draw in the public.

As they did not announce an opening date to the public, the re-tendering of the project did not affect the project timeline. While the public was made aware of major milestones, when the project would be completed was left relatively vague. The public was still engaged through the construction process through tours given to the media and press releases for milestones such as funding announcements and construction updates.

How was accessibility included in the project?

Accessibility was a key consideration and addressed throughout the project. Before construction began, the designs were approved by the City of Cambridge's Accessibility and Diversity Services Committee. Based on their input we added two additional washrooms. Once the building was open, representatives from the Cambridge Accessibility Advisory Committee came through to confirm all improvements were done.

The City of Cambridge referenced the City of Cambridge's Facility Accessibility Design Standards (FADS) when renovating the Old Post Office and other Idea Exchange locations. This document outlines citywide standards that build a universally designed and accessible community for residents, visitors and employees.

How was energy efficiency and the environment incorporated?

The newly renovated facility was designed according to LEED Gold standards. The building also features a green roof and panoramic windows on all levels to utilize natural light. The building also includes light harvesting and features heat recovery with its BAS system. The City removed contaminated soil from the site, provided bicycle storage, electrical vehicles charges, used regional materials, materials with recycled content, low emitting materials, adhesives & sealants, green furniture. Facilities staff clean with green cleaning products and processes.

How was the project funded?

The project was funded through public funding as well as donations. The approved total cost of the project was \$15.3 million and was mostly funded by the municipality. Through funding from Canadian Heritage's Canada 150 granting program and Parks Canada, \$1.6 million was secured for heritage restoration.

The first major donations for this project included \$50,000 from the Toyota Foundation, which enabled the purchase of a laser cutter and outfitting the third-floor classroom for the training of new

technologies, and \$120,000 behest that was donated to the organization by Thomas Taylor, a previous Cambridge resident that had frequented the public library. To honour his career as a musician, these funds were spent outfitting the lower level with technology that was focused on music and youth. Project partner Monigram Coffee also held a fundraiser, in which individual roof tiles were sold for \$20 each. This raised \$6,600 dollars that was used towards the Children's Discovery Centre technology and materials.

The “Ongoing”

How were finances projected for the new facility?

Idea Exchange has numerous locations throughout the community, and this information was used to project the cost of operations.

In terms of a business plan for the space, the Digital Library was integrated into Idea Exchange’s larger plan. While each municipal department is able to create their own business plan, they must support the City of Cambridge's strategic plan.

Does the space provide any additional revenues?

The new space provides two additional revenue sources. Idea Exchange collects rent from tenant Monigram Coffee, and rental fees for events in the third-floor glass classroom/meeting space.

While the majority of programs at Idea Exchange are free, they are able to cover costs of the materials in the makerspace by charging for materials. For instance, users would be charged the cost of the filaments used in the 3-D printer or for the piece of wood used in the laser cutter. While these costs do not result in a profit, they enable Idea Exchange to offset the costs of purchasing the materials.

How was staffing determined?

Drawing insight from their other spaces, Idea Exchange knew that they would need to staff every floor, since they each have different and distinct purposes. For this facility they hired two full time positions: one in the makerspace, and one in the creative studios. Inclusive of part-time staff and janitorial support, a total of fourteen individuals were hired.

How will the facility be maintained?

Idea Exchange is included in the capital budget process within the City of Cambridge. Projects and upgrades over \$50,000 are addressed by the City, and projects under \$50,000 are their responsibility. Idea Exchange has a facilities budget for each of their locations and a list of items to address over time.

What lessons were learned in the first year?

In terms of building, Idea Exchange learned the value of keeping their furniture budget separate from their building contract to retain control. By also including specifications in the RFP such as the use of local materials and hardware, a project team can ensure their priorities are established and made clear to the contractors.

From the operating and programming side, they learned that they could not operate the floors on different schedules as originally planned. Despite their different target audiences and uses, Idea Exchange learned that visitors wanted to be able to access all four levels floors in one visit. This meant that they had to revisit the staffing model and hire an additional person to bring the whole building onto the same schedule. The branch has a single budget for all programming materials for all floors.

Case Study Summary

Through this capital project, the City of Cambridge and Idea Exchange successfully reignited a historical landmark and created Canada's first "bookless" library dedicated to digital literacy and makerspaces. Built as a place for creative minds to gather and learn, to tinker, to code, to play, fabricate, sketch and build, the facility was inspired by the rise of makerspaces and digital literacy programs in public libraries. It now offers residents free access to spaces for learning and creativity, and a central hub for meeting and socializing. By providing cutting edge technologies and resources, it inspires learning and creativity, while providing accessible spaces that meet the needs of the evolving community.

Resources

The following resources below have been provided as additional information for readers.

Websites:

- [Idea Exchange: Old Post Office](#)
- [City of Cambridge: About the Old Post Office](#)

ArtsBuild Ontario Webinar:

- **Alternative Creative Spaces and Adaptive Reuse Projects**
[Watch the Recording](#)
[Download the Transcription](#)

Documents:

- [RDH Architects: Schematic Design Presentation](#) <https://www.cambridge.ca/en/learn-about/resources/Cambridge-Public-Meeting-July-10-Opt.pdf>
- [Cultural Heritage Impact Assessment for Old Galt Post Office IDEA Exchange and Restaurant Project](#) <https://www.cambridge.ca/en/learn-about/resources/Compiled-HIA.pdf>

Videos:

- [Restoration of the Post Office Concept Video](#)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DiM_CG11gHw&feature=emb_title
- [Like nothing you've ever imagined...](#)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HBCtNsr1i1Y&feature=emb_title

News Releases:

- [Cambridge Moves Forward with Expanded Plans for the Old Post Office, December 18, 2013](#)
<https://www.cambridge.ca/en/learn-about/resources/2013-12-18-Old-Post-Office-Project-Update.pdf>
- [RDH Architects Selected as Architectural Firm, March 24, 2014](#)
<https://www.cambridge.ca/en/learn-about/resources/2014-03-24-RDH-Architects-Selected-as-Architectural-Firm-for-the-Old-Post-Office.pdf>
- [Architects Propose Glassed Additions with Panoramic Views of City at Restoration of the Post Office Public Meeting, July 11, 2014](#) <https://www.cambridge.ca/en/learn-about/resources/2014-07-11-Architects-Propose-Glassed-Additions-with-Panoramic-Views-of-City.pdf>