

Armoury recognized with Global Design Award

Its past as a base for the Queen's York Rangers is never far from the eye of anyone who walks through the doors of the Aurora Armoury on Larmont Street.

The building, originally constructed in 1874 and now, after extensive renovations, home to Niagara College's Canadian Food & Wine Institute, is steeped in history, from the exposed beams of its ceiling to murals of its heritage on many of its walls.

This effort to preserve the past while embracing the possibilities of the future was recently recognized by the LIV Hospitality Design Awards in the Architectural Design Event Space Category, a celebration of quality architectural ventures and interior design diversity that shape hospitality worldwide.

"I am proud for our community that the Aurora Armoury Canadian Food & Wine Institute has won this global award," said Mayor Tom Mrakas in a statement. "The decision made by Council in 2014 to purchase the Armoury, I believe, was visionary in that it put the emphasis on partnership, innovation and community spirit. I commend all those involved in making this project such a successful part of the fabric of our region."

Transforming the Armoury from a drill shed into both a kitchen and centre for culinary learning, as well as an event space, was carried out by the Toronto architectural firm of Gow Hastings. Jim Burkitt, Design Director for the firm, says it was an "exciting" process to bring prominence to a building that was "an inaccessible backdrop for Town Park."

"We think of this project as a community hub with culinary as its core," he said. "While outdoor food venues are common, it is unique to have an interactive, culinary facility with a state-of-the-art kitchen on display in a public park - operated by a top-notch chef and open to the community for dining, snacking and coursework."

The LIV Hospitality Award singled out the Armoury renovations for its interactive demonstration kitchen and the merging of the indoor and outdoor dining experience.

For CFWI dean Craig Youdale, the recognition means a lot to this newest chapter for Niagara College.

"When you put a lot of work and effort into something, a lot of thought into it, when it gets recognized by a group for its quality and design, it is exciting and is a testament to the work that went into [the partnership]," Mr. Youdale tells The Auroran. "It is nice to be recognized and to know that people can see [the effort]. For it being such a new project for the Town, this also gives us a bit of a boost for people to recognize the space and maybe even a reason to come down and check it out."

What sets the facility apart, he says, is the setting and location. People love being connected to Town Park and in historic core, he says "a setting that is underscored by the patio that faces onto Town Park."

"It is always fantastic, especially when there are kids in the park and on Saturdays when the Farmers' Market is operating," he says. "It is such a fantastic setting and that really strikes people when they come and see it. We have had a lot of great feedback on how we've been able to maintain the historical integrity of the building. People are very happy to see we've made it modern and interesting and innovative. But, at the same time, I think the architects have done a great job of recognizing the history so when people step inside the building, when they look up and see the original roof and the original timber frame, I think people really like that too, that we didn't dismiss the history of the space."

From the outset, all partners wanted to make sure that the project resulted in a space that was flexible and accessible to everyone.

While the CFWI focuses on culinary education, with, as the name suggests, an emphasis on food and wine, it has become a hub for weddings, conferences, and as the Town continues with its redevelopment of Town Square (formerly Library Square), also as a

home for Aurora Cultural Centre programming.

'We wanted it to be something that people could take ownership in, that it is not just for a few people, but we wanted it to be flexible enough that people could use it for all kinds of reasons,' says Mr. Youdale, 'including people coming for brunch on the weekend. We have a sweet sixteen coming up this weekend for a small family group. Royal Bank is having a retirement party there next weekend. There is a whole variety of ways that people can use the space and that is why we're excited about the design because it is starting to show that it can be used for just about anything.'

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