NATURE / NURTURE

The new Bridgepoint Active Healthcare facility in Toronto is all about using the outdoors as a therapeutic tool. Can more trees really help long-term patients get well? By Daniel Baird / Photography by Tom Arban, Sam Javanrouh and Mari Mezulis

The 10-storey hospital is nestled among residential neighbourhoods, the Don River, and some of the city’s largest parks, including Riverdale.
SKY GARDEN
The hospital was conceived as a large-scale "urban porch", with various places to congregate with nature. Most of downtown Toronto can be seen from the garden rooftop, where a glass wall keeps out the wind without blocking the view.

TURNING OFF BROADVIEW AVENUE in Toronto and onto the newly minted Jack Layton Way, one might well encounter a clutch of prison guards escorting inmates out of the Don Jail, the detention centre that has occupied a corner of prime real estate on the city's east side since before Confederation. Despite spectacular views overlooking the nearby parks, the heavily policed lot is not exactly an auspicious way to enter the ambulatory care unit of Bridgepoint Active Healthcare's new hospital. Completed in April, the 10-storey facility for patients with complex chronic diseases is designed to be quite the opposite of a jail. Its driving force is to dissolve barriers between hospital walls and outside world, which many long-term care patients rarely see.

While a portion of the Don Jail remains in operation (the last inmates are expected to be transferred elsewhere by the end of the year), the original jailhouse, with its stone curved Fisher Time glowing down from above, has been meticulously renovated and turned into Bridgepoint's administrative offices. As glass-enclosed bridge is the only sign that the neighbouring buildings are part of a larger plan, the result of an unusual collaboration between two of Toronto's biggest firms: KRMG Architects (working with Stantec), and Diamond Schmitt Architects (working with IESB).

The new hospital's envelope consists of horizontal glass slatwork punctuated by hundreds of vertical windows that seem to float on the surface, with the building otherwise faced in a subdued grey zinc. The ambulance bay at the south entrance is a sweeping concrete awning, with a ceiling of warm ipe. A matching bird ceiling continues past the entrance and...
THE CONNECTION
The administrative offices are now housed next door on the Don Jail, which was built in 1945. Diamond Schmitt’s interior renovations maintain many of the jail’s unique features.

Patient Care
There are 404 beds and 324 patient rooms, and each room has a vertical protruding window framed in wood, to inspire patients to stand up and look out. The hydrotherapy pool overlooks greenery, and the nursing stations feel bright, casual and open.

Offices
The Don Jail’s half-moon rotunda is the historical building’s most striking feature, with its elevated, wrought iron walkways, skylight and partial glass floor. While the administration offices for Bridgpoint’s 90 to 100 staff now occupy the adjacent space, the refunds and other areas within the building are rented out as event venues or movie locations.
ceiling windows for even larger views. You can see these protruding windows on the building envelope, with one featured in each of the 524 patient rooms. They are an expression of just how focused the hospital's design is on the people who use it.

Once a patient becomes mobile, he or she can wander down any one of the ample corridors to the nurse's stations (each painted in pastel tones), or to one of the lounges at the ends of the building. Clad in clear or frosted glass, the lounges to the north look out to a 21-metre-wide labyrinth adapted from the medieval Chartres Cathedral near Paris. “We put the labyrinth there because people find driving their wheelchairs or walking along it soothing,” Colucci says, “and so do the patients looking at it from above.”

Two of the centre’s most spectacular features are a glass-sided hydrotherapy pool, with full-height windows facing out onto greenery, and an accessible rooftop with transparent barriers that block the wind. Lined with saplings, tall grasses and low-lying shrubs, the outdoor court allows patients to relax or visit with friends and family in the sun and fresh air, with panoramic views that extend all the way to Lake Ontario.

Ambitious architects such as Bruce Kuwabara, Michael Mokash and Gregory Colucci spend a great deal of time anticipating, and imagining, the impact of their designs on those who use it, yet it is often unclear how well they succeed. Enter research scientist Celeste Alvaro, employed by Bridgepoint to study the new facility’s impact on patients' health. “My role is to evaluate how that design is leading to well-being,” says Alvaro, who holds degrees in both architecture and social psychology. By using qualitative surveys, interviews and focus groups, she and her team will concentrate on specific areas - the gardens and the corridors, for instance. The study began several months before patients were moved from the former hospital, and when the report is completed next year it will be the largest evaluation of a building in Canada using comparable before and after data.

While significant architecture features cannot be changed in response to Alvaro’s study, others - such as furniture, colours and space usage - can. The new Bridgepoint basically serves as an experimental laboratory at the intersection of design and healthcare.