The Don Jail (1864) was the largest building project to date in Toronto. Designed in the Renaissance Revival style, it is notable for its grand scale, heavily rusticated stone masonry and dramatic use of chiaroscuro.

A conservation-adaptive reuse project preserves the building’s heritage while providing administrative offices for the new Bridgepoint Active Healthcare. The building is integrated within a renewed hospital campus that opened in 2013.

The original exterior was retained and a balance was sought between new and heritage fabric in the interior. Clear material distinctions are made between new and old, and the marks of history (ghosting, remnant materials) remain. The public has access for the first time to this infamous jail, site of Canada’s last executions by hanging in 1962.

A major challenge lay in transforming an inflexible floor plan designed for isolation and separation into an open, welcoming and functional space. Fully 90 percent of the cells were dismantled by hand, replaced with a new structural system. A row of prison cells is preserved and elsewhere the order of these monk-like cells now frame corridor office windows. The gallows were untouched. Stone and wood floors were maintained and refinished. Ironwork resplendent with symbolism including serpents and gryphons were repaired and left exposed. The buff-brick, limestone and sandstone exterior was thoroughly repaired, restoring features such as a sculpture of Father Time over the heavy wooden doors of the main entrance.

The resulting architecture gives public life to an important chapter of Toronto’s history. The soaring rotunda that once housed a guard’s surveillance is bathed in natural light beneath a restored Victorian skylight and lantern and is now a distinctive event space. Interpretative text displays throughout make connections between the hospital, rehabilitation, penal reform and the community.