
The Library, the City, and Infinite Possibilities: Ryerson University's Student Learning Centre Project

Madeleine Lefebvre

Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada



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Abstract

Ryerson is a dynamic university in the heart of Toronto, the largest and most diverse city in Canada. In the last decade the university has undergone rapid expansion from a 9000 student polytechnic to a comprehensive university of almost 30,000 students, offering programs at all levels.

The three goals of the University's 2008 Master Plan are: urban intensification; people first (pedestrianization of the urban environment); and a commitment to design excellence. At the Master Plan announcement Sheldon Levy, Ryerson President, said "With energetic partnerships and great ideas, our aim is to move Ryerson and Toronto forward together". Numerous inventive partnerships have been formed since then.

The first new building since the Master Plan was the Ryerson Image Centre (RIC), which houses a large image bank of twentieth century photo-journalism from the Black Star Agency. Next, The Mattamy Athletic Centre (MAC) rose from Maple Leaf Gardens, an iconic 1930s building famous for ice hockey, Elvis, and the Beatles. In partnership with a national grocery chain the MAC houses new student athletic facilities, an ice arena, and a huge supermarket.

Third is the Student Learning Centre (SLC), to be built on Yonge Street, the major spine of Toronto. The current Library is a 1970s brutalist book warehouse. This building is completely inadequate in size, functionality and ambience for our users. The new SLC, designed by Snøhetta (Oslo) and Zeidler (Toronto) satisfies the three tenets of the Master plan. It will provide a window and gateway to Ryerson. The transparent building will focus on student learning support, individual study and collaborative space. There will be no bookstacks. The two library buildings will be organically connected. Retail stores will occupy the street face at ground level and below, to revitalize the street. Completion is planned for 2015.

This paper describes the philosophy, the landscape, the planning, the design, the collaborations, and the challenges of this exciting project.



Credit: Snøhetta and Zeidler

Introduction: Ryerson's Master Plan

Ryerson is a dynamic university in the heart of Toronto, the largest and most diverse city in Canada. In the last decade Ryerson has undergone rapid expansion from a 9000 student polytechnic to a comprehensive university of almost 30,000 students, offering programs at all levels.

The University's President, Sheldon Levy, has boldly pursued his vision of Ryerson as a city-builder: "with energetic partnerships and great ideas, our aim is to move Ryerson and Toronto forward together," he stated in an address to the Canadian Club of Toronto in 2006 (Levy, 2006). In 2008 he released Ryerson's Master Plan (www.ryerson.ca/about/masterplan/) with three basic tenets: urban intensification; people first: pedestrianization of the urban environment; and a commitment to design excellence.

The Master Plan was immediately put into action, and has received much attention from the media. In a 2010 *Toronto Life* article Marcus Gee wrote:

"Levy's master plan for Ryerson envisions a dense urban campus with soaring glass towers, stylish street furniture, eco-friendly green roofs and cyclists and pedestrians traversing a busy campus... He is talking with city hall about transforming Gould Street, Ryerson's central avenue, into a car-free pedestrian mall lined with café tables and shaded by trees."

“Levy believes that what is good for Ryerson is good for Toronto. The reverse is also true. ‘The higher the quality of the city around us’, he says, ‘the higher the quality of the university.’” (Gee, 2010)

Opportunities were seized wherever they arose. The University owned a multi-storey parkade opposite the Library. Ryerson was able to sell the ‘air rights’ above the parkade to the developers of a large movie theatre complex on Yonge-Dundas Square (dubbed ‘the Times Square of Toronto’), so that the parkade is now integrated into that complex. In return, Ryerson negotiated the use of the movie theatres as lecture halls up until 1pm each day. This has addressed the problem of housing large classes, and the comfortable theatres have extra features such as tablet armchairs and a retractable lecture podium to ensure they work well as lecture theatres. The complex also has restaurants and a fast food court, which students frequent between classes, and even use as an informal study hall.

The first major Ryerson building project under the Master Plan was the Ryerson Image Centre (RIC) (www.ryerson.ca/ric). It was a complete renovation and expansion of the existing Image Arts building, which was itself a converted brewery. The building now contains the School of Image Arts along with a state of the art gallery and research centre. Their large image bank includes a collection of twentieth century photo-journalism from New York’s Black Star Agency.

Next, Maple Leaf Gardens, an iconic 1930s building famous for hosting professional ice hockey, and such performers as Elvis Presley and the Beatles, was reborn as the Mattamy Athletic Centre (MAC) (<http://www.mattamyathleticcentre.ca/>). In partnership with a national grocery chain the MAC houses new student athletic facilities, an ice arena and basketball courts, alongside a huge supermarket, while retaining the original Art Deco Maple Leaf Gardens shell.

The Context

Ryerson University occupies a relatively small site in the heart of Toronto. It is no ivory tower: for many years it sat almost unmarked behind a series of retail and other buildings on Yonge Street, the north-south spine of Toronto. There are no strong delineations of the campus perimeter – it is “sewn into the urban fabric” (Dykers, 2013). In line with the Master Plan, land was acquired right on Yonge Street to build a Student Learning Centre, which was seen as a window into Ryerson and a gateway to the campus. In 2008 the University secured a CAN\$45 million grant from the Ontario government to support the project.

The Yonge Street block between Gould and Gerrard streets where the Student Learning Centre is being constructed is not the most salubrious. Nearby are The Zanzibar Tavern and a number of small fast food and other retail outlets with a high turnover. For over forty years, part of the site was home to an iconic record store, Sam the Record Man, which has engendered a great deal of nostalgia among its many patrons. Part of that nostalgia was for the enormous spinning neon discs on the store’s frontage, which were a Toronto landmark.

The need for the Student Learning Centre was expressed both in the Master Plan and the 2008-2013 Academic Plan (<http://www.ryerson.ca/senate/academicplan.pdf>). The current Library building, a brutalist concrete tower, was built in 1974 for a student population of 8,500, when architects and chief librarians were more concerned about amassing, storing and protecting book collections than providing an inviting, comfortable and congenial study facility. At the busiest times in the academic calendar the Library receives over 11,000 visits per day. Our surveys point to the great dissatisfaction of our users with our physical space. Hence we had a strong desire to overcome the limits to learning imposed by an outdated and overcrowded library.

In the last third of the 20th century, when the quality of libraries was measured by the size of their physical collections, Ryerson's was very small as its programs were largely technical and textbook based. In 1993 university status was granted, and in 2000 graduate programs were added. Prescient decisions were made to focus on a digital strategy as extra funds flowed in, rather than to build retrospective physical collections. It was clear when contemplating a new building that our digital strategy would guide the planning. There will be no books in the new building, but it connects on two floors with the existing Library where the stacks are located. We focused instead on congenial study space, technology infrastructure (access to digital resources), and collaborative services. The design principles we have embraced are visual impact; comfort; sensory stimulation; versatility and ubiquitous technology.

Bob Jackson, the Library's Head of Facilities and Projects, and I are fully engaged in the Student Learning Centre project. We tell our community that the building will provide students with an outstanding environment in which to study and collaborate. It is intended to spark interaction, inspiration, innovation and discovery. It will be welcoming, accessible, comfortable, and ready to adapt to new technologies, developments and services. It will feature bright, open, technologically rich, barrier-free spaces for individual and collaborative study. It will include a variety of learning environments, digital support and academic services which promote student learning success, fostering a culture of collaboration and creativity.

The Project

Two architectural firms were chosen to partner on the project: Snøhetta, of Oslo and New York, and Zeidler Partnership of Toronto. Zeidler designed Ryerson's Ted Rogers School of Management, and is comfortable with planning a dual purpose building that stacks academic departments above retail stores at street level and below. Snøhetta was responsible for the 'new' Biblioteca Alexandrina, and recently completed the Hunt Library at the University of North Carolina.

The Student Learning Centre is now under construction. It has an area of 14,443 square metres (155,464 square feet) in total, with 1,486 Square metres (16,000 square feet) of retail space at ground level and below. The site is bordered by Yonge Street on the west, Gould Street on the south, O'Keefe Lane on the east, and a retail building on the north. The building is planned for

LEED Silver certification, and will have a 50% green roof. With a budget of CAN\$112 million, it has a projected opening date of January 2015.

Snøhetta took their inspiration from the agora and stoa of ancient Greece, a space for students to interact and explore their creative potential. Many of our professional programs engender a ‘tribal’ response from their students: they want to spend their out of class time in the building where their classes, professors and fellow students are. With the inviting spaces of the Student Learning Centre we hope to lure students from their home buildings and into this neutral space so that “productive collisions” - to use an architect’s phrase - may ensue. Recognizing that the majority of our students are commuters we aim to become a “sticky campus” – one where students don’t just attend classes and leave, but engage in the life of the University (Madden-Dent, 2007).

Snøhetta’s focus on nature, landscape, social experience and wellbeing can be seen throughout this project. There is a large exterior presence relating to the streetscape, and an emphasis has been placed on informal gathering space. The interior is divided into a series of thematic zones linked to nature. The floors are named the valley (1), the bridge (2), the bluff (3), the garden (4), the sun (5), the beach (6), the forest (7), and the sky (8). The furniture and finishes reflect these themes.

The new building is connected to the current Library on two floors by a wide glass wedge with a roof garden. Public access between the two buildings will be restricted to the second floor. Moving from the Student Learning Centre the users will find themselves entering the existing library through The Ronald D. Besse Information and Learning Commons.

The original design had a concrete overhang over the retail façade, which led to concerns about creating a skateboarder’s delight. This has since been changed to a green roof, so that those inside the building in the valley and the bridge will have their street view tempered by greenery.

Retail is an essential requirement of any new building in the downtown core, and the Student Learning Centre is no exception. In an interview with *The Ryersonian*, President Levy said: “When you occupy ground level... (It) should be for the city of Toronto, to keep the streets vibrant and alive and not institutionalized” (Connor, 2013). Behind the façade at street level on Yonge Street retail will occupy the mezzanine and lower ground level. A consultant is currently working on potential occupants for this space. In an area with considerable retail density (several shopping malls are within two blocks) the challenge is to occupy the space with a unique and inviting retail presence.

The exterior of the SLC is a vital piece in defining its nature and relationship to the street. The building is sheathed in a glass curtain wall overlaid with a frit pattern, bringing an abundance of dappled light into all areas of the building. As the light changes during the day, so will the vista of those inside the building.

Also planned within the functional program of the building is The Digital Media Zone (www.digitalmediazone.ryerson.ca), which is a defining element of Ryerson University today, and a major factor in growing its reputation. Originally in one space, it now has several locations within the movie theatre complex at Yonge-Dundas Square to which I referred earlier. An incubator for student entrepreneurial projects, it brings students from all disciplines together to develop viable digital companies in a supportive environment. The DMZ is a good fit with the Library, since we have already collaborated in several ways. In the node planned within the Student Learning Centre we hope to see the development of Library-related entrepreneurial projects. We are already proud of HitSend (www.hitsend.ca), a successful DMZ-born company co-founded by one of Ryerson's librarians, Graham McCarthy, in partnership with Brennan McEachran, who was a business student at the time.

This DMZ node is planned for the third floor bluff with a vista over the dramatic entrance and the street. It will share the bluff with the Digital Media Experience. This concept rose out of a desire to create a technology centre where students could learn how to use multimedia for their assignments. With the rise of smart phones, YouTube etc., digital images are very much part of every student's life. Within this centre we shall offer editing suites and other technology, run by student tutors trained to assist and teach their peers. One only has to visit an Apple store to see how popular this concept is.

The Library has collaborated with elements of student success services for some years. Previously dispersed student learning support services have been brought together into one unit, with a strong presence in our existing Library Commons (Writing Centre, peer tutoring centre, director's office). Also in the Library building is a Math Assistance Centre. All these services will move to the fourth (the garden) floor of the new building with a strong emphasis on accessibility.

Serendipitous Collaborations

In such a creative environment as Ryerson, simple ideas can sometimes gather momentum in unexpected ways. For example, I discovered by chance that the City of Toronto Reference Library is exactly one mile north of the Student Learning Centre. Given that the stretch of Yonge Street between the two libraries is quite run down in some places, I decided to highlight how many libraries and cultural institutions exist within that mile. That idea led to RULArch, a collaboration between the Library and the Department of Architectural Science, under the leadership of Assistant Professor Vincent Hui. The Library developed a mobile app, DataM.O.B (www.news.library.ryerson.ca/datamob) which is populated by architectural students, with additional data solicited from users. DataM.O.B provides context-driven information such as history, architectural design, statistics, photographs, etc. Hui is now collaborating with other architecture schools in Canada and the USA to develop the concept in their cities.

Librarian Bob Jackson has a personal interest in Toronto's history. He has done considerable research through the City archives to develop a fascinating picture of the past occupants of the Student Learning Centre site. His findings reveal echoes of the past in our vision for the Student Learning Centre. Out of discussions with Jackson, Sociology Professor Paul Moore developed a course on the social context of Yonge Street focusing on the site; the students' website is <http://ryersononyonge.wordpress.com/about/>.

Ryerson University is known for its programs in the creative industries, Image Arts being one of them. Jackson discovered the Yonge and Gould corner had been the site of the Toronto Camera Club from 1906 to the middle of the century. In the 1880s it was the home of archaeologist David Boyle's bookshop, a Toronto landmark of the time. As part of its 'green' approach, Ryerson encourages the use of bicycles and has accommodated cyclists with secure lockups. Jackson found that a popular bicycle shop operated here in the early 1900s. Around the same time the Metropolitan School of Art was holding classes in the Bank building that for most of the 20th century was situated on that corner. A business school and correspondence classes also operated in that location at this time. Ryerson currently has the largest undergraduate business school in Canada, and a very large continuing education program, of which online learning plays a major part.

Perhaps one of the most interesting echoes Jackson found was from The People's Café, opened in 1904. The Café had reading and recreation rooms, a billiards room, large facilities for meetings of societies, and food services: a congenial environment for reading, relaxing and playing, not that far removed from a modern student commons.

Music and entertainment had a strong presence on the site over the years. Fifty years before Sam the Record Man opened in 1961 there was a sheet music store, Chappell's. A & A Records was two doors further up the block, with Steele's Tavern sandwiched in between. The Tavern saw many famous names in the 1960s: indeed a near riot broke out during a visit by film stars Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton.

The Challenges

When a new university building is planned, in many cases it is sited within a discrete campus, where existing vacant land under the university's ownership is identified for development. Ryerson's Student Learning Centre project, however, has faced significant challenges because of its location in the heart of downtown, on land that had to be acquired for the building. It is being built on a compact site with a relatively small footprint. The project required amendments to three City of Toronto by-laws to the current zoning for the site. These amendments covered height restrictions, angular plane restrictions, and density of the building area. Further, the City required that a minimum of 60% of the Yonge Street frontage had to be reserved for retail space.

The application process for re-zoning required lengthy and complex preparation by the architects. Included in the application were architectural concept drawings which delineated the

areas subject to re-zoning, as well as numerous detailed reports on such topics as wind and shadow studies, traffic studies, and flight path studies. (The site is near several hospitals which have helicopter landing pads).

A lengthy review process by the City's Planning Department ensued, involving technical consultation as well as community reviews. In addition to zoning issues, the project required Site Plan approval from the City — another lengthy process. In addition to all the studies previously mentioned, this element required a review by all major utilities, the fire department, the transportation department and the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC). These processes took almost a year to be approved.

As stated earlier, Ryerson is largely a commuter campus. It has very few student residences, and parking is very limited. Thus most of the community travels by public transit. The site is one block north of a very busy subway station, Dundas. Discussions were held with the TTC to explore a possible underground connection to the Dundas platform from the Student Learning Centre. The cost proved to be prohibitive at this stage in the project, but the finished building will have a roughed-in access point in the basement in case of future platform extension.

Other issues that had to be addressed on the site plan documents were: emergency routes; landscaping; utilities; traffic; loading/unloading facilities; garbage storage; use of the laneway between the SLC and the existing Library building; pedestrian walkways; underground links; snow removal; storm water management and sewers.

Another requirement was an encroachment agreement with the City regarding the bridge over O'Keefe Lane, which connects the old and the new buildings, as the laneway is city property. The question of traffic flow to the loading dock was crucial given the very tight space and high pedestrian traffic area. Ryerson students had lobbied for some years to turn Gould Street (bordering the south side of the Student Learning Centre) into a pedestrian only area. They have been partly successful. The half block of Gould Street between O'Keefe and Yonge still has traffic access, and is heavily used by service trucks using the loading areas on O'Keefe Lane to the north and the south of Gould.

Construction schedules have also been affected by difficult winter weather. The large construction crane can't be operated when there are high winds, and snow or heavy rain have caused some delays.

Another major challenge has been the legacy of the Sam the Record Man spinning discs. When Ryerson bought the land, a community group successfully petitioned the City to designate the Sam's sign a heritage site, with a requirement to remount the signs when the building is completed. The thousands of neon bulbs (many of which were slowly disintegrating) were carefully dismantled by hand and put in specialized storage during the lengthy demolition process. Discussions are still underway regarding the future of the sign. Meanwhile Ryerson has

created a website to commemorate Sam the Record Man (<http://news.library.ryerson.ca/musiconyonge/>).

From the beginning of the project we have expressed the need to address the safety and security of users, staff and equipment in the building. The Student Learning Centre is in a very busy location which a reported 16 million pedestrians pass through every year. It will be a key entry point to the campus, and thus likely to have a high drop-in rate of information seekers and even tourists. Since the Student Learning Centre and the connected Library will be the closest point to the Dundas subway station, it will likely become a main thoroughfare to the rest of the campus, particularly in bad weather. It remains to be seen what effect this will have on our Besse Commons, the entry point of the existing Library. Early in the project we considered 24/7 access, but have since decided against that.

The Toronto Reference Library has been a good source of information as they have experienced numerous issues relating to street life, as have many large urban libraries. The Reference Library has a very visible physical security presence at the main entrance. Ryerson has decided that the Student Learning Centre will have a more subtle approach. It remains to be seen after the building opens whether the visibility of Security personnel will have to be increased.

Every large city has numerous hoardings surrounding building projects. They tend to be unattractive and inconvenient for pedestrians. Ryerson chose to install Urban Umbrella (www.urbanumbrella.com), which creates a more artistic and pleasing protection from construction.

The Way Ahead

The Student Learning Centre won Canadian Architect Magazine's 2011 Award of Excellence in Design. Although there have been some detractors, for the most part the new building is garnering praise. There are already signs that the architectural beauty of the building will provide a spark for positive redevelopment – city building – along the block. A group of investors has purchased several buildings further up the street, and we look forward to seeing incremental change taking place.

I have described the collaborations which are underway at time of writing, but in this fast moving, creative and entrepreneurial environment, anything is possible. I believe in building relationships, not just a building. As we move closer to the opening of our Student Learning Centre for the 21st century, we shall continue to attract and entertain new and creative collaborations that we haven't even thought of yet. Infinite possibilities indeed.

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