



COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY/ RIDDELL KURCZABA ARCHITECTURE ENGINEERING INTERIOR DESIGN LTD.



PHOTO: MULTIVISTA

Hotel Alma – University of Calgary

by Kim Wooder

It is a unique model on the Canadian student housing landscape. The University of Calgary's Hotel Alma is both a hotel and student residence, an innovative combination that those involved believe will be examined by universities the world over. U of C director of residence, food and conference facilities Joel Lynn describes the idea as one borne of necessity. "The challenge the university was facing was twofold," explains Lynn. "Firstly, residences normally lose money or barely break even. They are expensive to build and expensive to maintain." Secondly, the university was spending well over a million dollars a year putting up guests at area hotels. The solution is Hotel Alma, a seven-storey building in the heart of the Calgary campus that includes 125 student bed spaces on floors two, three and four, 85 hotel rooms on floors five and six, and 15 hotel suites on the seventh floor.

Associate vice-president of facilities development Steve Dantzer says the building's location was key. "We wanted the building to be front and centre in campus life and we accomplished that. This new building really is the interface between the academic precinct and the residence precinct and is on a main pedestrian path."

Dominion Construction Inc. project manager Neville Doyle concurs that the building is well situated but difficult from a construction point of view. "The fact that it is placed relatively tightly to a number of other buildings with ongoing programs created noise and vibration issues in the early stages," Doyle explains.

Soil conditions were not ideal; gravel had to be trucked in and dynamic

piles were used to create the foundation. Vibration monitors were set up. "When you have a million-dollar organ in the Performing Arts building on one side," says Doyle, "and a pool not far away, you don't want to shake the neighbourhood. Getting off the ground is always tricky and this project was no exception."

Things were about to get even more interesting. "In the course of construction," Dantzer explains, "we decided to increase the size of the building and number of beds, which required the addition of another floor."

The initial design the work of Toronto's Baird Sampson Neuert Architects Inc. BSN's Barry Sampson understood the budgetary constraints driving the decision but was disappointed that it came at the cost of a central atrium. "The atrium was part of the natural ventilation system," says Sampson, "and a key component of our initial design."

BSN partnered the project with Calgary firm Riddell Kurczaba Architecture Engineering Interior Design Ltd. and the local firm implemented the design alterations made necessary by the added floor. Riddell Kurczaba project lead Nancy Maerz says her company's goal was simply "to deliver a project that met the needs of the practical changes while honouring Sampson's original design as much as possible."

Doyle remembers the day they received word of the addition. "We were working on level one or two, and were told that another floor was to be added to accommodate more student housing." Timelines were adjusted and the necessary retrofitting done to accommodate the added weight. Lynn points

to residence waitlists in making the case for one more floor. "It was a decision made by the Provost based on information that the construction boom was going to continue forcing up costs and, given that we needed more residence space on campus, it made sense to add more rooms."

The team's focus turned to the question of how to provide superior living and work space for students while giving hotel guests the quality experience they expect and, at the same time, encourage interaction between the two. The main floor provides a common area by way of a Corner Store stacked with snacks and university apparel and Bistro Alma, a high-end café open all day serving everything from breakfast to post-dinner cocktails.

The building's unique Y shape consists of a double loaded corridor on the main portion with single loaded corridors on each of the wings. Called 'split and splice' by Sampson, the design concept includes two overlapping thin buildings that split apart where they meet the octagonal dining centre built in the late 60s. The dining centre is spliced into the lobby at the centre of the Y by means of a glazed bridge. The visual thinness of the building is emphasized by a tilt in the southern half that, along with horizontal bands of integral sun shades, will reduce cooling loads.

The hotel's exterior final touches were provided by O2 Planning+Design Inc. Landscape architect Matt Williams says he wanted to mimic the buildings sleek and simple esthetic by making very subtle gestures. A large island in the front of the building was turned into a giant planter. Potentillas,

LOCATION

169 University Gate Northwest
Calgary, Alberta

OWNER

University of Calgary

ARCHITECT

Baird Sampson Neuert Inc.
Riddell Kurczaba Architecture
Engineering Interior Design Ltd.

CONSTRUCTION MANAGER

Dominion Construction Company Inc.

STRUCTURAL CONSULTANT

MMP Engineering

MECHANICAL/ ELECTRICAL CONSULTANT

Stantec

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

O2 Planning + Design Inc.

INTERIOR DESIGN

Riddell Kurczaba Architecture
Engineering Interior Design Ltd.

TOTAL AREA

101,350 square feet

TOTAL COST

\$57.1 million

with their small yellow flowers, and grasses with a blue hue complement the building's interior.

Williams also managed to save a few trees along the way. "There were some Burr Oaks that had to be transplanted or would be lost due to the construction of another building. We were able to save the trees and find a new home for them."

Inside and out, Hotel Alma has been a project of struggle, surprises and, in the end, success. Lynn says reaction to the final product has been a collective wow: "their eyes get big, their jaws drop, as students and visitors alike express their delight at the university raising the standards of residence life while at the same time providing four-star service at a three-star hotel." ■