



COURTESY RDHA

LEGACY FIRM

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THIS YEAR, TORONTO FIRM RDHA CELEBRATES ITS CENTENARY. WHAT DOES IT TAKE FOR A FIRM TO ENDURE FOR SEVERAL GENERATIONS?

In the history of Canadian architecture, there are few firms that can claim the deep roots of RDH Architects, which turns 100 this year.

Founded by Ferdie Marani, the firm experienced its heyday in the mid-1940s through to the 1960s, when the practice designed the new Toronto courthouse and the Bank of Canada headquarters in Ottawa (with Arthur Erickson), along with a huge volume of other buildings.

Throughout that time, says current partner Tyler Sharp, the firm built up a portfolio of “very conservative, modernist buildings that still have this element of classicism.” “Those guys knew their materials,” adds partner Bob Goyeche, noting how the dense Georgian marble used for the Royal Bank Building in Toronto is well-suited to a cold climate.

The firm had its share of ups and downs. It landed one of its first major commissions—the North American Life Assurance Company headquarters on King Street—in the otherwise bleak year of 1932. During the Second World War, all three partners left to join war-related agencies. In 1963, at the height of the firm’s prosperity, two partners died suddenly, within six weeks of one another.

By the 1980s, the firm was still a well-respected practice. Then came the recession

of 1990. “Every level of government and the private sector essentially stopped building for three years,” recalls Goyeche. While there was no money for payroll, former staff came in anyway, “because they couldn’t get work, and wanted to help [partners] Rob [Boyko] and Glenn [Hadley] keep the door open.”

As the economy recovered, Goyeche returned to become a partner in the firm. Boyko and Goyeche aggressively built the business, stepping up their game by associating with Brian MacKay-Lyons Architect and becoming the architect of record for a series of prominent projects, including the Academic Resource Centre at the University of Toronto Scarborough and the Canadian Embassy in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Evolving the firm’s own design capabilities was also on their mind, and, on the recommendation of Talbot Sweetapple, they connected with Dalhousie alumni Tyler Sharp and Geoff Miller. Goyeche notes that he and Boyko were both on board with giving the design reins of the firm to younger architects. “If it’s a firm that you want to go on, you have to decide that,” he says. “You have to be open to change, and to handing over power.”

Both proved to be stellar choices: Sharp’s first project was the Bloor Gladstone library

and Miller’s was the Newmarket Operations Centre, both of which won Governor General’s Awards. They became partners in 2012.

Working for a legacy firm has advantages that go beyond inheriting a portfolio. “The DNA of the firm includes a sense that architects are highly regarded professionals, and that was passed down through the partners,” says Goyeche. “You inherit an intergenerational confidence that you can detail a certain building, or handle whatever issues arise from a client or a builder, because you’re backed by a wealth of experience.”

Sharp and Miller take pride in the work culture of RDHA, where there is an atmosphere of collegiality and mutual respect. “Compared to many people who reach a partner level in an established hierarchical practice, we didn’t have to fight up through the ranks, so we were never inculcated in that tooth-and-nail culture,” says Miller.

Instead, they saw partners who maintained a calm attitude at all times. The firm is adamant about paying overtime and creating high-quality work on a 40-hour work week. They’re determined to carry those ways of working forward to the next generation.

In these regards, RDHA still has an old-fashioned attitude—in the best of senses. ▲