



The curving stairwell is one of the most distinctive features in the design of the new Markham Stouffville Hospital. Natural light and a view from any window allow people to see what's going on outside. This stairwell now houses the spiral sculpture referred to on page 21.

Design lets nature help to heal

By Jim Beatty
Staff reporter

When you first see the Markham Stouffville Hospital you might think it's a shopping plaza or a fancy hotel - and that's exactly what its designers want you to think.

Say goodbye to the dull concrete high-rise hospitals whose only color is the big blue "H" at the top. The trend now is low-rise, color and imagination.

And who better to design a hospital than the architectural firm which has helped design about 22 hospitals across the province - probably more than any other company.

Many older hospitals around Toronto look more like jails than the places where lives begin. The architects at Mathers and Haldenby believed something had to change.

When designing the red-brown brick building with the jagged corners and green roof, the architects wanted to take the institutional fell out of the hospital.

"We didn't want to regurgitate the old plans," says company managing partner Andrew Mathers. "We try always to keep abreast of hospital design."

Besides hospitals, the Toronto firm designed the Milliken Mills Community Centre and has worked jointly on the design of Roy Thomson Hall and the new Metro Police headquarters as well as prestigious office buildings.

Mathers and Haldenby decided to design a hospital that wouldn't look like a prison but would somehow fit in with the delicate historic flavor of Markham.

"It has a roof line rather than the usual flat institutional roofs," says Mathers, of the two-storey structure.

While the shape of a building's roof sounds dull, it's an integral part when creating character. It also helps blend the building with the nearby residential area, he says.

The other major consideration when designing the jagged roof was that future additions and new wings will blend in with the existing building.

New wings, which likely won't be built for a decade, can be added in small - unnoticeable - portions horizontally. The current 244 bed hospital could easily be expanded to 400 beds.

While the outside of the 330,000 square foot building is unique in hospital design, few, if any, hospitals can match the inside.

The first thing one notices - and the most commented on - is the use of natural light. Almost every hallway, patient room and office has a window, or easy access to one.

"When you walk into the hospital you're comfortable but you still feel outside," says Project Director Vas Georgiou.

The spacious open lobby area with windows, skylights, and the use of brick on the inside "really doesn't give you the impression you're at a hospital at all," he says.

The low cut windows are another important part of the design, says Mathers. Not only do they help to de-institutionalize the hospital but they provide psychological relief for both staff and patients.

"They keep staff and patients in contact with nature," he says. "It's human nature to want to be aware of what's outside. People really object to being cut off from the outside. If you've got unhappy staff you've got unhappy patients."

In the same vein, the hospital has been built around several landscaped courtyards which will be furnished and opened for patients, staff and visitors. The areas will serve to relax people, says Georgiou.

The design of the hospital places departments that work together close together. The emergency department, diagnostic imaging, laboratory and surgical suite are linked by common corridors.

"The important departments are located together," says Georgiou. "It's much quicker for patients and important to efficiency and patient care."

"It's really very easy to find your way around," said one nurse, who had been at the hospital for two days. "After a couple of hours it's simple."

It is believed fewer noises, interruptions or worries are placed on the patients and nursing staff when the rooms are separated from the busy hospital operations.

The inside colors teal and taupe - were also carefully chosen. "They had to be restful, but not boring," says Mathers. "We try to make imaginative use of colors."

Imagination was one consideration but money saving was another. Maintenance will be easy as crews will now only have to stock the hospital's two colors.

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