

Canada Innovates: Cultural Spaces

Questionnaire

Iredale Group

Do you believe that your work reflects a distinctly regional character? Can you expand on how your building designs, and use of building materials characterize a unique “west coast” aesthetic?

Iredale Group Architecture is a small west-coast practice with offices in Victoria and Vancouver. Although these cities are now more than 100 years old, our west coast society remains by and large a culture of newcomers - people who have come from other parts of the world seeking a better life and many of whom have had to leave behind much of what was familiar and comforting.

“Architecture” here, we feel, is all about recreating a sense of identity and delight in this relatively new land. We take as our inspiration the same things that inspired the First Nations : the dramatic coast-line with its snow-capped mountain tops and mysterious inlets, the mist and winds which waft from the pacific ocean, the fabulous sea and bird life as well as the majestic old-growth forests with their soft dappled light.

The shape of BC’s ragged coastline provides the inspiration for our designs. We seek to create forms that echo the rhythm and curve of the coastal landscape and that celebrate its mystery, scale and grandeur. We build with a blend of intricately-detailed local stone, brick and wood and set our structures within landscape designs that embrace nature. We create glazed and open interior spaces that celebrate the moody yet inspiring coastal light. In every possible way, we aim to bring the outside into each room, so that those who inhabit the space can delight in the forms of nature and the passage of the seasons beyond its walls.

Much of your best work employs wood as a structural and finishing material - what do you feel is your unique approach in utilizing this specific material?

BC’s salmon-fertilized coastal forests, which grow so much higher than the arboreal forests of Central and Atlantic Canada, have given rise to an inspired local architecture of heavy timber. Our work has adapted traditional methods of cutting, milling and joinery to the demands of the curved and irregular forms that we have created to mirror the westcoast landscape. Computers have proven invaluable in this work by allowing us to quickly model complex geometry. We have been able to extend the possibilities of timber framing and wood paneling by using robotic milling devices to speed the calculation and cutting of compound connections and irregular panel shapes. These materials, finished to a high degree of perfection by precision cutting, have found their way into the structure and finish of our projects.

What do you feel your approach is that successfully culminates in a distinctive and unique architectural form that remains in a balanced dialogue with the surrounding natural environment?

Buildings have always marked the point of contact between fragile human consciousness and the cosmos. The megaliths of Easter Island and the Lintel Beams of Stonehenge both echo what early people saw as the eternal actions of the seasons and the starscape.

Even though our work is done on a smaller and far more transient scale, we feel the same urgency as our ancestors did to site projects so that they “touch” the lay-lines of the landscape and starscape. Finding the right point of entry, determining the appropriate forecourt size and position as well as the principal structural axes and the best paths of approach and departure - all are essential elements in creating structures that link human beings to their surroundings. We seek to make the lines of each roof and wall, each sculptural massing of architectural form within its landscaped setting, mirror the shape and rhythm of creation.

How do you treat public space in a cultural space project – what typifies your approach?

Whether it’s a Theatre, Public Market, Conference Center, Art Gallery or Museum, all public buildings serve as crossroads: they are places to meet and get to know one’s fellow human being. In a time before automobiles the world was rich in pedestrian places where people met and formed community – one has only to think of the agoras and temples of the ancient world. Today, sadly cocooned within our cars and media rooms, we rely more than ever on markets and cultural spaces to draw us together. Iredale Group sees these “extra spaces” as essential parts of the design of a museum, theatre, shop or gallery. Their primary function is to foster what Jane Jacob’s called “the chance social encounters that form the small change from which civic life is built”. Vancouver’s Granville Market and Victoria’s Bastion Square are wonderful examples of these places. Shops, galleries, coffee shops opening off common, public space allow for many different kinds of activities to bring people together: they are places to linger and chat during an otherwise busy day, places which encourage face to face encounters between members of the community. Though public buildings always have an official, overt function - a service they provide and for which they were built -their unofficial role is perhaps even more vital in the life of our communities: they are places to gather, convene and connect with one another.

Describe what makes for a successful cultural space project from your perspective.

Cultural spaces are the “living rooms” of civic life best placed at the crossroads of a town. In an ideal world cities would have the foresight and money to set aside valuable real estate at busy commercial intersections for galleries, theatres and museums. On most of our projects we haven’t had this luxury, and we’ve had to mix and match to create an exciting cultural venue. At the Kay Meek Center in West Vancouver, for example, we combined a community art gallery with two theatre spaces (a 500 seat main theatre and a 200 seat studio theatre) to get enough activity to make an interesting cultural space. At the Squamish Adventure centre we also combined a variety of activities – an outdoor sports museum exhibit, civic offices, a tourist information centre, coffee shop, gift shop, and tour staging area - in order to create energy and excitement. Multi-use is always the way to go, and (at least in Western Canada) cars have to be

integrated into the mix (with parking, ideally split up into several small lots) to attract a far-flung, mostly suburban audience.