

Site Lines

M Sean Stanwick profiles a new recreation centre designed by Julian Jacobs Architects for Ellesmere in Canada.

'The crisis of modernism in North America,' says Toronto architect Julian Jacobs, 'is the common perception that it is cold, sterile and dehumanising.' While it is indeed unfortunate that it has become synonymous with the ubiquitous glass box, lost in this gross oversimplification is perhaps its greatest achievement – the development of a symbiotic relationship between form, structure and aesthetics. Convinced that Modernism and humanism are not mutually exclusive paradigms, Jacob's new Ellesmere Community Recreation Centre offers itself as an unapologetic pedagogue in the study of tectonics.

From the outset, the pragmatics of the project yielded few design clues. The programme for the 20,000-square-foot facility was minimal: a Gymnasium, a multi-purpose Community Room, and service spaces including a small lounge and café. With little in the way of context – save a thoroughfare, a rail line and a pair of big-box retail outlets – the 6-acre suburban site offered few references from which to draw.

The solution – which is intentionally straightforward – groups the programmatic functions into three typological masses, each with its own distinctive yet complimentary style. A gently curving arcade serves as an organisational datum for two voluminous pavilions and a linear bank of rooms. 'Keeping the layout as utilitarian as possible,' comments Jacobs, 'meant we weren't hindered by complicated formal arrangements and spatial relationships ... Of course functionality was always a top priority; I am not interested in designing something that challenges conventions if it doesn't operate at the most basic levels.'

But the apparent simplicity of the parti belies the depth of the larger architectural aspirations. Throughout the project, Jacobs employed three main design strategies. The first was a metaphorical reference for the architectural expression; the second was lightness and harmony; and the third, a clear celebration of the structural systems.

Loosely based on the myth of Orpheus, Euridice and their children, an architectural interplay between the pavilions was established. Using gender as a basis for expression, the square, big-boned male figure of the Gymnasium is balanced by the smaller, curvaceous female form of the Community Room. Completing the family unit is the line of children, the smaller bank of service rooms, delineated by an energetic serrated facade at the rear.

In a deliberate move, the material palette was kept sparse. Using only two brick colours, each pavilion is wrapped in a pattern designed to express their individual identities while maintaining a balanced composition. The Gymnasium, clad in cream brick with ochre string coursing, reduces its overall bulk, while the Community Room reverses this pattern to compliment its mate. As a subtle witticism, a cornice of corrugated metal – a material usually reserved for decking – crowns the male figure.

To emphasise the building's engagement of, and extension into the landscape, a delicate ribbon of horizontal glazing wraps around the full perimeter of each pavilion. Providing a titillating view of the activities inside, the effect is nothing short of breathtaking. As the luminescent glow emanates from beneath Orpheus and Euridice, they appear to float, almost kite-like, above the lawn.

The most salient feature, however, is the building's structural bravura. Seduced by the tension created when systems are pushed to within inches of their failure limits, Jacobs articulated each pavilion with innovative structural devices. In the Gymnasium, a modified Vierendel box-frame truss denotes strength and masculinity. The Community Room, spanned by a unique system of undulating steel sections, resembles the rolling swells of the ocean. Says Jacobs, 'the effect is like being inside the belly of a whale'.

At their most basic level, the brick coursing, glazed reveals and structural devices work to create a visually pleasing composition. For all their aesthetic value though, they serve a far more important function in illustrating Jacobs's calculated approach to building assembly. With one glance, the formal and spatial mechanisms are readily understood. We cannot easily mistake the brick facade as anything other than skin, nor can we overlook the fact that it is literally hung off the structural members.

And therein lies the beauty of this project. The progeny of a tabula rasa methodology, it speaks with an architectural clarity, and serves as a much-needed antidote to the miasma of postmodern nostalgic pastiche. While it may be a humble candidate to lay challenge to the naysayers of Modernism, the building, says Jacobs 'really just wants to be understood and loved by the community'.³

