

The Bata Shoe Museum

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE BATA SHOE MUSEUM



His commission was to design 'a small gem of a museum'. Raymond Moriyama, of Moriyama & Teshima Architects, has done just that.

It took more than 15 years to find the right site for the Bata shoe collection's permanent home. But in the end, the ideal location was acquired: the busy corner of Bloor and St. George Streets in downtown Toronto. The Museum is within easy walking distance of the St. George subway station, the Royal Ontario Museum, the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Arts and the University of Toronto - an important consideration as the museum is intended to serve serious researchers as well as the general public.

Architect Raymond Moriyama challenged himself to create an enduring building which would express the excitement he felt when he first saw the collection, and inspire that feeling in others. The idea of the museum as a kind of container took shape early on. Says Mr. Moriyama, "When I first viewed the collection, I was impressed by the array of shoe boxes that protected the shoes from light, moisture and dust and played an important role in the collection."

Complicating this vision, however, were functional requirements such as the site's existing zoning by-laws, building regulations and its restricted size. The initial strategy was to adopt the maximum allowable height (13.4 metres) as the major horizontal discipline plane and roofline. North along Bloor Street and east along St. George Street the edges of this plane extend from property line to property line. Similarly, to the south its edges coincide with the rear setback line. To the west it comes within inches of the neighbouring building.

Guided by these parameters, Mr. Moriyama was able to maximize the buildable volume. In one of the most impressive exterior views of the building, the roof plane suggests a lid resting on an open box, protecting its contents within, a metaphor which is most obvious when viewed from the street below. The 'lid's' copper-clad soffit and fascia align with the parapet of the building's neighbour. As the copper oxidizes over time, the lid effect will become more pronounced and the visual link reinforced.

The building's north and east walls, which frame the exhibition areas, are canted inward at street level by 83.5 degrees. The effect of this is two-fold: it creates a feeling of spaciousness and provides a place for street performers, artists, musicians and other public activities.

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The walls are clad in a limestone which is denser than granite and has a warm tone, a soft sheen and a fine texture similar to raw leather – the base material of the shoe industry. The hand-picked stone from Lyons, France, is at once sympathetic to the buff-coloured building across the street and responsive to the changing light conditions. On sunny days, the reflection from the windows of the neighbouring building animates the stone walls and copper ‘lid,’ while the late afternoon sunlight streams down Bloor Street, transforming the stone from a warm golden glow to a range of mauve-magenta tones.

In addition to the inviting displays of natural and artificial light which continuously sweep the limestone, the museum’s main entrance on Bloor Street is difficult to ignore. A transparent glass wedge, it virtually explodes through the building’s limestone walls and bursts onto the sidewalk. It allows passersby an enticing glimpse right through the building, from the lobby and gift shop to the central circulation space with its cantilevered staircase of steel and glass and huge window of faceted glass set into the south wall.

Inside the three-storey building, the required elements – public facilities and exhibition, conservation and research areas – are organized in a simple, straightforward manner. The circulation core, dominated by a 42-foot-high glass window designed by Lutz Haufschild, is centrally located. East of it lie the exhibition galleries. To the west are the gift shop, multipurpose rooms, special exhibition areas and administrative areas. Two below-grade levels provide space for an additional gallery, shoe research and storage.

The exhibition galleries were designed as neutral containers in order that the museum staff and exhibition designers could freely express their ideas and concepts. The task was to provide maximum flexibility in addition to strict environmental controls and an absence of natural light (restrictions made necessary by the age and delicacy of the objects on display).

One of the many special spaces designed to enrich the museum experience is the enclosed courtyard along the south side of the building. Accessed from the multipurpose room on the main level, it provides a dramatic backdrop for receptions and other events. Throughout the museum, windows have been carefully positioned to provide visitors with neatly framed views.

Mr. Moriyama’s fascination with the museum’s subject is clearly reflected in his frequent references to the shoemaker’s craft. Leather is used for signage, wayfinding and the coat-check and reception desks. The oversized windows in the central circulation core display images of workshops and tools. Dora DePedery-Hunt created cast bronze medallions depicting shoes from the collection which appear on the handrails and balustrades of the central staircase.

Says Mr. Moriyama, “Architecture is never the creation of the architect alone. This building could not have been realized without Mrs. Bata’s continuous care and understanding in developing both the concept and the numerous details. Her vision of the museum, her love of architecture, her energy, drive and insights were all instrumental in its shaping. The museum’s architecture should be seen as a celebration not only of shoes but also of the wonderful vision which has brought them into the public eye.”