



# WOMEN AND FAMILIES CENTRE EXPANSION – UNION GOSPEL MISSION

by ROBIN BRUNET

The Union Gospel Mission's new UGM Women and Families Centre in Vancouver is noteworthy on several fronts, one being that it is the UGM's largest expansion project in more than 80 years.

More importantly, the seven-storey mixed-use project provides a host of services under one roof: community outreach, afterschool care and meeting rooms; and a total of 63 housing units (27 sleeping units for women in stabilization and recovery, 18 for individual women, and nine for mothers with infants, as well as 36 supportive housing units. Two daycares are located on the seventh floor, one with 12 spaces for infants and toddlers and another for 16 older kids. The design plan also includes a courtyard on the main level, decks on the second and seventh floors, and a drop-in centre.

Nadia Tchoumi, manager, media relations and communications for UGM, says, "The new facility replaces our old women and families facilities and fills a void in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, where it has been estimated that women make up 25 percent of the homeless population. It was important during the early stages of the project that we create a warm, welcoming, and safe environment for the women and children living here."

Tchoumi adds, "By 2018, fundraising for the \$35.5-million project had begun in earnest, with planning and research around evidence-based programming having begun years before. The original building at 601 E Hastings was designed by Orbis Architecture Inc.; we worked with NSDA Architects for the new facility."

Brian Dust, principal at NSDA Architects, says, "The building also had to be efficient and convenient for staff to facilitate their programs, so to achieve all these goals we worked closely with Bill Mollard, Dan Russell, Tara MacDonald, Rev. Candice Harper, and Rudy Loewen, UGM owner's representative."

The form of the UGM Women and Families Centre emerged from a desire to develop a strong urban street definition at the Cordova and Princess thoroughfares. The "L" shape results in a large south facing communal courtyard along the lane. Internally, the mandate was to design a straightforward, efficient layout with clear circulation.

Dust located the outdoor amenity areas to have a southern exposure on the ground level for the drop-in centre. The palette of materials for

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**LOCATION**  
616 East Cordova Street, Vancouver, B.C.

**OWNER/DEVELOPER**  
Union Gospel Mission / BC Housing

**ARCHITECT**  
NSDA Architects

**CONSTRUCTION MANAGER**  
Darwin Construction Ltd.

**STRUCTURAL CONSULTANT**  
Kor Structural

**MECHANICAL CONSULTANT**  
TD Systems

**ELECTRICAL CONSULTANT**  
AES Engineering

**CIVIL ENGINEERING**  
Binnie

**TOTAL SIZE**  
77,000 square feet

**TOTAL COST**  
\$35.5 million

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RENDERING COURTESY NSDA ARCHITECTS



the building exterior included brick masonry, coloured panel, and glazing in aluminum frames. "Although undeniably modern in expression, the building form and materials allude to and reflect elements of the historical architecture of the Downtown Eastside," says Dust.

Princess Avenue has a three-metre wide interpretive children's walk with

a mural, benches, decorative paving and boulevard trees.

When asked to cite the most challenging aspects of the design process, Dust replies, "We worked within the existing zoning, as UGM did not want to rezone the site. Fitting their program with the height restriction into seven floors was challenging. It was also crucial that we meet BC Housing's Step

Code 3 energy efficiency standards."

With Darwin Construction providing preconstruction management services, ground broke on the stipulated sum project in May of 2019. Rudy Loewen, principal at Palcor Management, notes that site constraints posed a challenge for his colleagues and Darwin Construction work crews. "The parkade took up the full site, and we had to deal with bus lines as well as high voltage lines less than six feet from one face of the building," he says. "Cranes became the primary way to move materials, up and over the lines. Also, just-in-time materials deliveries were necessary, even for the formworks."

Loewen credits NSDA for providing help throughout construction, and Dust remarks, "We appreciate the contribution UGM makes to our community and that inspires us to do whatever we can to make the construction process go smoother. Rick Aubin, our senior technologist, and I spend a lot of time on site working collaboratively with Darwin's team: Rod Gabel, Meghan Foran, Reg Morel and Gross. We were also fortunate to work with Sheila McLaughlin, senior development manager at Terra Housing, as her expertise was invaluable."

One of the most uplifting aspects of the project was that it stoked philanthropic sentiment: M&L Painting Ltd., which handles everything from commercial to industrial and special projects, donated its services to the new facility. "We're painting the interior: walls, doors, frames, steel work, and so forth," says M&L owner Mark DuMerton. "We're also providing epoxy coatings in specific areas, since we're a full service coatings and fire-proofing company."

DuMerton says that donating his resources was "a no brainer. I first became a Union Gospel Mission volunteer in the 1990s, and we love what they do: they're making a difference in the Downtown Eastside, and this new facility in particular will be a tremendous asset for women and mothers in the community."

The UGM Women and Families Centre is scheduled to open in October, and Tchoumi says thanks to the architects and builders working at the top of their game, all of Union Gospel Mission's criteria for a new facility have been fulfilled. "This will be an invaluable asset to our organization," she says. "It's really a remarkable centre, and better still it feels like home." ■



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Vancouver, BC

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