



COURTESY FERRARI WESTWOOD ARCHITECTS

Martha's House

by Jane Harris

Martha's House in Lethbridge, Alberta is not just an apartment block for seniors. "This is very much a community," says Kevin Cowan, CEO of St. Michael's Health Care Centre and St. Michael's Housing Association, which manages Martha's House.

While this is a user-pay facility, Martha's House operates on a not-for-profit basis. Residents pay for their apartment either through a life-lease program or a traditional rental arrangement. But the goal of the board is to have 10 per cent of the residences subsidized.

Named in honour of St. Martha and the order of nuns who founded St. Michael's Hospital 76 years ago, the pioneer Sisters of St. Martha would be pleased to know that their commitment to hospitality and community are carried on both in the design of Martha's House and in the services residents receive.

The commitment to community was evident even in the initial stages of the project. Cowan credits board chair Josef Prozniak as the guiding force in the creation of Martha's House. "If it wasn't for Joe, the building would not exist. He's a visionary and he's also a doer," says Cowan.

Cowan, Prozniak and other board members did extensive research to ensure their project would create a community second to none, both from an architectural and service prospective. They toured facilities throughout Alberta and British Columbia looking for a design that would work for their clients and the surrounding area.

"We were very much sold on the X concept — shortened hallways and common services," says Cowan. But area neighbours had to be consulted.

The architects, who also toured some facilities, joined St. Michael's Housing Association in this extensive input-seeking process. "My partner, Dan Westwood and I had quite a challenge with the neighbourhood, incorporating the look, height, appearance of the building into this old established neighbourhood," says Art Ferrari, of Ferrari Westwood Architects.

"We let them know what we were planning in three public meetings at which we shared the options and listened to the neighbours' preferences," he says.

What they did not want was an imposing concrete structure in the midst of their green and flowering community.

"We settled on a three-storey structure and something that looked quite residential," says Ferrari. The solution was an X-shaped design. "The end of the X closest to the street is the thing that you see immediately. It almost looks like a large family home," says Ferrari.

"It required extensive use of transfer beams, lots of heavy-duty lumber, to make the X shape and step the project back from the curb," says Darren Boras of Ward Brothers Construction Ltd., general contractors for the project.

Keeping the building a step back from the street and integrating the design into the area was the most challenging aspect for his construction team. "One of the main challenges was the desire not to encroach on the neighbourhood," he says.

The design allows the majority of the building to be back off the street, making Martha's House more hospitable to residents and neighbours alike. It effectively blends an 118-unit

apartment complex into one of the city's oldest and most prestigious locations.

Extensive rose gardens, poppy gardens (which pay tribute to veterans) and walkways at the Health Care Centre are being extended across the property to Martha's House. In addition, mature trees have been added to the grounds to complement those along the boulevards on both sides of the property.

Martha's House also has two exquisite rooftop patios. The tile on the patios appears to be rusty brick, but is actually a durable rubberized product made from recycled tires and is tough enough for a wheelchair.

Stone and stucco feature prominently on the exterior of the building, as it does on the residences on 13th Street, and a water fountain greets visitors at the front entrance.

"We wanted it to be a little distinctive as well, as this is a prestigious neighbourhood. So we tried to create an atmosphere of that sort of quiet, small hotel look like you would find in a boutique hotel. It's independent living, the people there are capable of caring for themselves," says Ferrari.

Huge windows along the length of the circular 96-seat dining area and lounge allow natural lighting and a view of the picturesque neighbourhood. Outside the dining room's glass doors, is a large patio with tables and chairs.

"Lethbridge is windy. But the patio faces south and has the building wrapped around it. It's sheltered," says Elda Barva, administrator, Martha's House.

A private dining room was constructed to fit a 12-foot formal dining table for residents who want to host family gatherings.

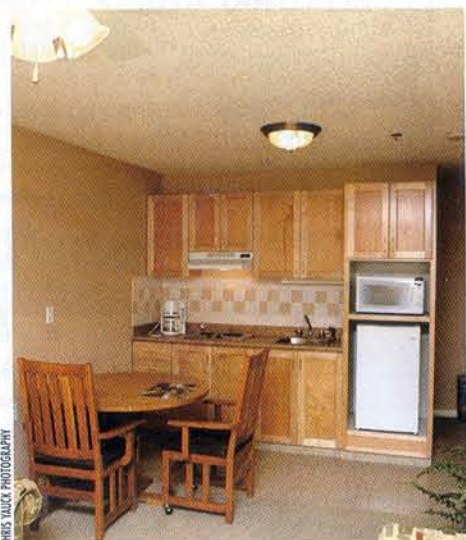
A faith-based element of the project is evident in both the design of the common area and its exquisite artwork. An etched glass of St. Martha created by local artist Mary Mehlen was fitted beside the small administrative centre. A few steps away, in the quiet semi-circular chapel, a hand-carved 36-inch Italian statue of the risen Christ becomes the focal point for quiet meditation. Sliding doors open onto the dining area for larger services and celebrations.

A time capsule with memorabilia from the Sister's of St. Martha, a Knights of Columbus medallion and information about Pope Benedict is tucked in the wall directly in front of the administrative centre.

The social component of the facility was important to the designers as well as the architects. In addition to a fireplace lounge, Martha's House has its own pub complete with shuffleboard, a hairdressing salon, library with computer and Internet access, and an exercise room that includes safety posters, weights, a low-speed treadmill with handlebars and a recumbent bike.

The second and third levels feature common areas where residents can gather or eat their continental breakfast. Free laundry rooms were built on each floor for the resident's convenience.

White wooden hand railings and set-back apartment entrances accent the taupe hallways. Brass numbers and handles appear at each entrance, and the doorway and moulding are designed to appear like a traditional entrance for a single-family dwelling. "You're walking into somebody's home," says Cowan.



HIGHLIGHTS

Location
9TH AVENUE AND 13 STREET SOUTH
LETHBRIDGE, ALBERTA

Owner/Developer
ST. MICHAEL'S HOUSING

Architect
FERRARI WESTWOOD ARCHITECTS

General Contractor
WARD BROS. CONSTRUCTION LTD.

Structural/Mechanical/Electrical Consultant
MPE ENGINEERING LTD.

Total Area
96,205 SQUARE FEET

Total Construction Cost
\$13 MILLION



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WE WANTED IT TO BE A LITTLE DISTINCTIVE AS WELL, AS THIS IS A PRESTIGIOUS NEIGHBOURHOOD. SO WE TRIED TO CREATE AN ATMOSPHERE OF THAT SORT OF QUIET, SMALL HOTEL LOOK LIKE YOU WOULD FIND IN A BOUTIQUE HOTEL. IT'S INDEPENDENT LIVING, THE PEOPLE THERE ARE CAPABLE OF CARING FOR THEMSELVES.

Each 550-foot apartment has a walk-in storage room and bedrooms feature lighted walk-in closets. Large, low windows allow fresh air and a clear view of the outside gardens and street even at sitting level. "Windows were too small and too high in many of the facilities we visited," says Cowan.

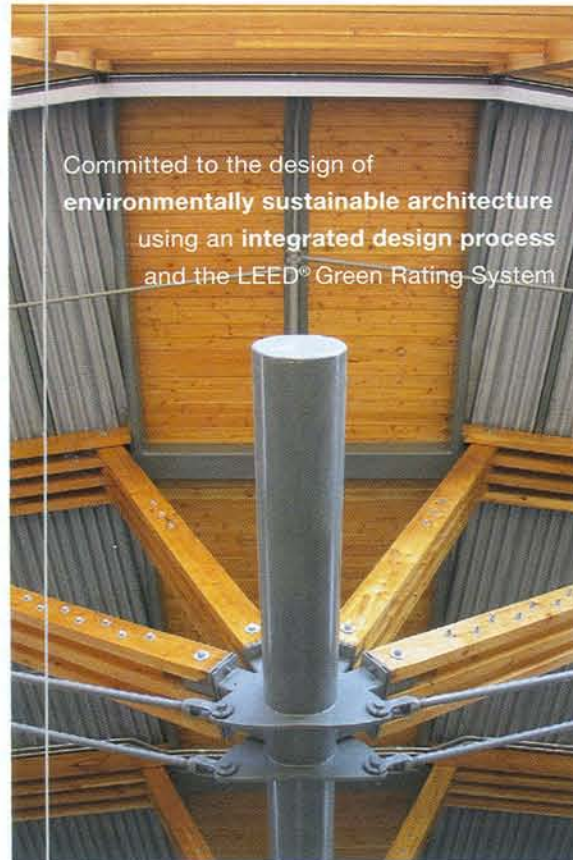
In-suite kitchenettes feature two-burner, countertop stoves and an apartment-size refrigerator as well as space for a microwave. The ceramic tile backsplash combines white and earth tones. Cupboards, walls and carpets come in a choice of light, medium or dark wood tones. "We picked three different wood looks and three different

paint schemes and we mixed the schemes," says Ferrari.

Bathrooms feature dual flush toilets and large walk-in showers. Medicine cabinets provide storage and are set at heights that make reaching or step-stools unnecessary.

The majority of apartments are one-bedroom units, but Martha's House also has 18 two-bedroom units. The two-bedroom units feature leaded-glass French doors on the second bedroom, giving residents the option of using the extra space for a music room or den.

"It's like living on a cruise ship," says Barva. "That's what we're aiming for." ■



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