

RE bank birth brand build

Taylor_Smyth Architects turn the dated and worn office of the Auto Workers Community Credit Union into an elegant landmark in Oshawa.

By Peter Sobchak
Photos by Ben Rahn/A-Frame Inc.

Let's be honest: these days when you see these two phrases in the same sentence – auto workers, credit – you immediately think sinking ship. And you can't be blamed, since the fortunes – or lack thereof – of former automotive giants General Motors and Chrysler have dominated the news for the past few months. But the tide change in that industry didn't happen overnight, and many of those within the fold saw a need to start altering the way they attract business.

The Auto Workers Community Credit Union (AWCCU) were like that, and although the timing of a total revamping of their headquarters in Oshawa, Ont. may seem a little suspicious given the aggressive reinventions being undertaken by GM and Chrysler, in reality the AWCCU began to investigate an image overhaul as far back as 1998. Faced with an aging membership and long-standing uncertainties of the local automobile industry, the Board of Directors concluded that a fresh image was required to catch the attention of new members in the wider Durham Region and to welcome them as part of the co-operative family.

Toronto-based Taylor_Smyth Architects was selected to revitalize

the original 19,000-sq.-ft. building, constructed in 1965 and now appearing woefully passé and uninviting. "Our design was intended to not only update the structure, be also be a contrast to the current trend of depersonalizing the banking experience," says partner-in-charge Michael Taylor. To achieve this, starting in 2006 they gutted the interior and substantially re-configured and re-clad the exterior.

To improve awareness of the credit union, much of the design team's efforts were spent on increasing the building's presence facing oncoming traffic on a busy one way street, primarily through the use of bold signage elements such as the low concrete wall that projects from the base and evokes the gesture of an arm reaching out to customers. This motion of embracement is amplified by the new street façade that slides out from the mass of the



Previous page & right: Originally mostly solid, the elevation facing oncoming traffic is now a luminous composition of channel glass and clear glazing that embodies the openness of the AWCCU to the larger community.



building as a perforated aluminum plane. More than just a backdrop for their logo, this assertive new skin serves as the brightest symbol of the co-operative's forward-looking goals.

Impressions of greeting and community are punctuated by moments of what Taylor call "drama and wow," particularly in the extensive use of transparent and translucent glazing and emphasized in the all-glass west façade. This recurring motif of clearness and openness comes to life at night when the building becomes a glowing lantern of windows and channel glass and the perforated metal sign gets lit from both the front and behind.

Inside the banking hall during the day, those warm feelings are continued through the extensive palette of rift cut oak in a language that reinforces the overall sense of quality and thoughtfulness.

"The biggest challenge of the project was phasing construction to allow uninterrupted service to members," says Taylor. Tellers

were relocated three times within the building during construction, since "the costs of temporary relocation off-site were determined to be more detrimental to members' perception than the disruption from a series of moves within the building, as well as being more expensive."

Although not out of the woods yet, their new headquarters has left AWCCU feeling energized. "The new building has changed staff attitudes and made them proud of our company, and not feel shy about telling people in the community where they work," says David Bobnar, marketing manager at AWCCU. "We have had a number of new members join specifically because they have seen the new building and it attracted them to come in." In these delicate times, and especially in relation to anything connected to the automotive industry, getting positive customer feedback can be like a shot in the arm. **B**



Above right: One of the most striking elements is the discovery, as one moves along the street façade, of the void framing a view of the sky between the body of the building and the perforated metal sign. Left: Staff is now all on one floor in an open, visually accessible environment, at the centre of which sits an elliptical composition bisected by an oak screen, containing the reception desk on one side and a waiting/reference area on the other.

Architect: Taylor_Smyth Architects
Mechanical & Electrical Engineers: Enso Systems Inc.
Code Consultant: Hine Reichard Tomlin
General Contractor: H.M. Brooks Limited