

Campus plans revealed

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By Adam Gardiner

It's a sparkling, modern concept, one officials say is the biggest step to date in making a permanent University of Waterloo (UW) digital media campus in Stratford a reality.

Plans were unveiled Tuesday morning for the campus's first building, a 42,000 square-foot, three-storey structure aiming to be as visually and emotionally appealing to the community, as it is influential.



A cutaway of the building's east-west view reveals the many rooms inside, plus a digital wall capable of displaying images and patterns. Photo courtesy of the University of Waterloo

“What we wanted was a really active building where there’s lots of people, lots of things going on, lots of movement here and there,” said UW dean of arts Ken Coates at the unveiling, held in the campus’s temporary Wellington St. home. “We’re really, really pleased with what we received from the architect.”

Several points of interest will define the building's exterior, most notably the front façade: made mostly of glass, it will allow people on St. Patrick St. S to literally see through the building's main corridors to light coming in from the other side.

That was done, said Coates, to make the campus as open and inviting as possible to the community.

"The whole idea is this is a place you want folks to come into," he said. "I've been to several independent locations around and they don't work if they're closed off."

The eye will also be drawn to a large graphic design planned for the building's left side incorporating elements of the digital media field; and a "digital wall" just right of the building's midsection that can be programmed to display different images or patterns.

Inside will be the kind of classrooms and meeting rooms expected of an academic and conference centre. The first floor will also feature a "faculty touchdown office" – a sort of open-concept reception room for the faculty, executives and many other kinds of people expected to visit the campus.

A large amount of space will also be devoted to "collaboration rooms" and "project rooms" – two opposite concepts Coates says is essential to the work students will be doing.

The collaboration rooms, he said, will be "very informal open space" full of white boards and computer screens where faculty and students can meet, conceptualize and show off work to visitors.

The project rooms, on the other hand, will be the secure workrooms where students and faculty will spend months at a time – or longer – developing their ideas.

"When we've gone to other places that use this kind of model, it's just amazing," Coates said. "I mean, the students move in...it's a likeable, self-contained space."



An overhead view of the site, with St. Patrick St. at the top and Cooper St. to the left. Photo courtesy of the University of Waterloo

The building was designed by Toronto-based ZAS Architects and will be built by Concord-based Bondfield Construction.

“They’re a good company [and] they’ve worked with the university a lot,” said Coates of Bondfield. He couldn’t confirm, but imagined there would be opportunities for local companies to be involved in the campus’s construction. Naming opportunities would also likely be available for campus rooms, he said.

LEED certification in energy efficiency won’t be pursued because of its cost, but Mayor Dan Mathieson, who co-hosted the plan unveiling, said the building would be built to the equivalent of a silver rating with features such as efficient lighting and low-flow toilets.

About 400–500 graduate students will initially use the building and eventually, undergraduate students will study there as campus programs grow, Coates said.

But it's plans to offer professional training in digital media year-round where he really sees the campus' less obvious - but equally important - potential, calling it "the sleeping tiger in all of this.

"...This [digital media] field is changing so rapidly that if you went on a training program two years ago, you'd have to start almost completely over again to sort of figure out where things are going now," he said. "We want this to be a place that all across North America people see as...the place you come to get that specialized training."

Included in the building's design is a link to the campus's next phase, for which plans are already in development. That phase will be funded by private sector support for the first phase, plus operational revenue, once it opens.

"I just want to assure taxpayers that there's not another request coming," said Mathieson, alluding to the \$10 million the City provided to support the first phase.

Construction will begin this summer and the building is expected to open by late summer 2012 in time for the start of that year's academic fall term.

With the building's design announced, Coates said he hopes the campus plans will become even more concrete in the minds of Stratford residents.

"We can show them all the things that we're doing, people will get excited about it [and] we're getting excited about it."