

Despite the problems of the credit crunch, a new breed of boutique architectural firms are prospering in the southeast of Canada.

Steve Hill

The Toronto architectural scene currently appears to be in robust health, with practices of all sizes remaining busy despite fears of an economic downturn. Meanwhile, a clutch of bespoke firms has emerged producing innovative and stylish work that is earning critical praise.

These companies are relatively small operations but pack a big punch, as can be seen by their impact on the skyline of one of the world's great multi-cultural, cities through the emergence of a new aesthetic and language of materials.

Giannone Petricone Associates Inc. Architects, the life and work partnership of Ralph Giannone and Pina Petricone, was launched just over a decade ago and made its first big impression when Ralph designed a new location for his favourite restaurant, Bar Italia.

The company has since become well-known for a series of small restaurants and retail spaces, including acclaimed work at Il Fornello, the Italian restaurant chain's newest location on Church Street, but it is equally at home with a large-scale development such as the refurbishment of the historic Don Mills Centre.

One of its most recent schemes was to design office interiors for Wildeboer Dellelce on Toronto's Bay Street, with Giannone declaring his desire to challenge notions of how a law firm should look and feel.

"We selected materials associated with the profession such as oak, leather, marble, felt and brass, and then defamiliarised them through a process of reinterpretation and representation," he says.

The end result, he adds, became "the architectural equivalent of a custom - tailored suit – loved not only for its precise fit and comfort, but also because it is confidently and informally accessorized with a boldly coloured tie."

The renovation of a single-storey, 1960s academic building, meanwhile, posed a completely different challenge. Petricone's starting point at The Centre for Ethics at the University of Toronto's Trinity College was to create 'an essay on the values and focus of the centre itself'.



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"Avoiding icons and symbolism of any given religion, culture or race, we focused our attention to an unusual palette of materials with varying degrees of softness, reflectivity, absorption and transparency to signify the examination of cultural, religious and social divides," Giannone says.

A text wall inscribed with the word 'justice' translated into 12 languages addresses the question of what it means to live an ethical life, and underscores the importance of texts to the centre's work.

Also flourishing are Michael Taylor and Robert Smyth, who linked forces to establish Taylor Smyth Architects which currently boasts a team of 18 professionals.

The company stated mandate is to approach each of its projects individually without any preconceptions with its work 'inspired by certain fundamental elements to which we believe all people respond: natural light, texture and colour, natural materials and the symbiotic relationship between space and architecture'.

There is also 'a sense of openness allowing access to views and connection to nature ... balanced by a sense of sheltered enclosure' to ensure that 'every project can offer a unique and memorable experience'.

Whenever possible, designs employ a rich palette of local, natural materials including limestone, oak, copper and zinc. The

firm is best known for its residential projects, with Sunset Cabin and Bishop Street Residence summarizing its modern aesthetic.

The one-room cabin, on the edge of a lake around 90 minutes north of the city, is a fully insulated glass box encased on three sides by cedar slats. It is a private retreat from a nearby main cottage, but sits neatly into its surroundings thanks to a green roof planted with sedums and herbs.

And the interior is a triumph of minimalist comfort, featuring a bed with built-in drawers, a wall of storage cabinets and wood-burning stove.

In contrast, Bishop Street Residence, in the Yorkville area of Toronto, was transformed from the home of a graphic design firm to a desirable bachelor's residence. Glass is the signature material throughout, allowing light to filter through ceilings, floors, walls and doors, while the interior has been designed to showcase the owner's extensive collection of 20th century furniture and lighting.

"The house might seem to some as a wealthy man's plaything, but it serves as a valuable model for new home design," Taylor says. "It demonstrates how a house's interior can be divided into spaces far more imaginative and useful than they have generally been and it demonstrates how a house can be an adventure."

A more recent arrival on the scene is Cindy Rendely, the principal of Cindy Rendely Architecture, who as a young student was apparently heading into the world of dentistry before taking a right turn into the field of metal artistry, and the design of jewellery, small products and tableware. However, frustrated at the small scale of this work, Rendely decided instead to study architecture and, at the age of 32, signed up for a five-year programme at the University of Toronto.

She then found her feet at two local firms before establishing her own company, which has quickly made waves in the Toronto area.

Rendely is currently busy on a long list of projects, including two cottages and a house that she is designing from top to bottom, including furnishings and details such as door knobs and letter boxes.

She is also continuing to draw on her jewellery and design background with the development of Objex, a new product line that will feature vases, candlestick holders, tablemats and trays. Rendely also collaborates with artisans and design professionals who share her interest in the craft of building. But the project that has really brought her to the forefront is Ravine Residence, a

three-level family home in the North York area of central Toronto that is dominated inside and out by one material.

Eramosa, a limestone sourced from northern Ontario, has been used for cladding, flooring, furniture and counter tops after being cut and treated in different ways to produce differing effects.

Rendely says the project perfectly sums up her approach to materials and textures. "The end result was beyond my expectation ... and it has put us on the radar."

Agathom, meanwhile, is another husband-and-wife partnership just starting to make its mark. Adam Thom and Katja Aga Sachse Thom met as students at Sci-ARC in Los Angeles, where both were sculptors of some repute.

Their practice is one of the newest in Toronto with both principals drawing deeply on their previous interests and family backgrounds.

If the name Thom sounds familiar that's because Adam is the son of Vancouver native Ron Thom, one of Canada's best-known architects whose work is still revered 22 years after his death.

Katja has a similarly impressive lineage as she is from a family of famed Danish weavers, and has designed many patterns herself as well as collaborating with designers such as Verner Paton.

The combination of these talents means that Agathom has a unique outlook and style which is not afraid to make the most of raw materials. "Our background means that we design in a far more sculptural way than many other architects. We try to make spaces that are what I call 'giving spaces'," Adam says.

And a little can go a very long way. "We try to convince our clients that we can do a lot with very small spaces through designs that bring in natural light from often unexpected areas, to bring in the magic," he adds.

Recent projects include their first house in the Toronto suburbs and Molly's Cabin, a beautiful wooden-framed building on an island in Georgian Bay in northern Ontario, while current commissions include several cottages in Ontario.

"Toronto's time has yet to come as far as architecture is concerned ... there is room for new firms to push the boundaries a bit more." Adams adds.