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## Regent Park's splashy new aquatic centre: Hume

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The Regent Park Aquatic Centre is far more than just a pool; it's a beautiful modern facility designed to be enjoyed.

MACLENNAN JAUNKALNS MILLER ARCHITECTS



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Urban Issues, Architecture

If God is in the details, the best place to look for Her right now might be the new [Regent Park Aquatic Centre](#).

In any part of town, this facility would stand out; but on Dundas St. E. in the middle of a failed postwar social housing community, it looks spectacular. Indeed, it would be hard to find a more convincing piece of contemporary architecture in the city or beyond.

Designed by [MacLennan Jaunkalns Miller Architects](#) (MJMA) of Toronto, this is one of those rare projects where everything comes together without fatal compromise, civic misgivings or any obvious damage inflicted by value engineers. Exquisitely detailed yet boldly gestural, this is a recreational amenity taken to a whole new level. Though supremely practical, it's also a powerful statement about the beauty of utility.

The centre, which opened quietly last weekend, represents the latest installment in the revitalization of [Regent Park](#), itself a rare instance of urban enlightenment in a city that all too easily forgets it's a city. Though the remake has years to go before it sleeps, already things are changed beyond recognition.

The original housing, boxy and undifferentiated, is being replaced by glass-and-steel buildings, low- to high-rise, that address human needs rather than some imagined set of priorities. And by mixing market-priced units with subsidized apartments, Regent Park's ghetto-like aura has finally started to lift.

MJMA's contribution will go a long way to making that happen. Set back from the sidewalk on the north side of Dundas, east of Parliament St., it is an elegant two-storey structure that alternates between black and white, transparent and opaque, hard and soft.

From the street, the centre presents a sleek facade of glass, wood and blackened zinc. Through the glazed exteriors we see two large pools and the various features that make the place less an athletic facility than a neighbourhood recreation centre. Until now that has meant concrete-block boxes designed to be cheaply constructed and easily maintained. They have about them the air of places intended to be used more than enjoyed.

Not Regent Park; while there's no hint of luxury here, there is an impressive attention to detail. These smaller points enable the project to embrace users and engage them in an experience that anticipates their every need. A good example is a wall of hairdryers, arranged Grand Salon-style, to accommodate both short and tall.

Then there are the "universal" change rooms. They're filled with cubicles available to men and women and everyone else. The reality isn't nearly as daring as it may sound, but in a time of paralytic political correctness, these non-segregated facilities represent a welcome loosening of the social fears that have constrained Toronto for decades.

The centre's two pools — one for laps, the other play — can be glimpsed through glass walls. On the west side, they connect to a park now under construction. In fact, these walls can be opened to allow direct access from outside. In a risk-obsessed jurisdiction such as Toronto, that's something of a minor miracle. So are the slide, Tarzan rope, bubblers, hot tub, and so on. Even the water is warm.

Because of these measures and others, Regent Park is a seamlessly integrated element of the public realm. MJMA partner David Miller calls the centre “a pavilion in a park” and he's right. Older pools — think of Sunnyside — were hidden behind large castle-like walls. Newer ones were set off by chain-link fencing.

Regent Park may be the first such facility to treat users as adults; it provides them with opportunities and access that earlier versions wouldn't have dared. If this project is any indication; Toronto must be growing up.

Architecturally speaking, the highlight is the massive cedar-panelled roof structure that cuts through the building from end to end. It reads as a single piece, curved like an upturned boat, full of warmth to soften the hard surfaces of glass, tile and concrete.

“People's perceptions of what a pool can be are changing,” explains project architect Troy Wright. “This is the culmination of a lot of things.”

Miller calls it the “next generation” of aquatic facilities: “It has all the things we like to do. It's light, bright and open. It has a lot to do with the park.”

That park won't be ready until the fall of 2013, but already it's clear how it will embrace the centre on three of its four sides.

Mostly though, MJMA has produced an outstanding piece of architecture that reminds us the city is about more than acceptable mediocrity and rigid adherence to arbitrary regulations and unfounded assumptions. The modest \$14.7 million budget notwithstanding, the firm has managed to balance the big moves and the finer touches to create a thing of remarkable power. The cantilevered walls, dramatic roof (green on top) and the counterintuitive geometry create an impression of dynamism, solidity and openness.

“It's quite a joy,” says pool supervisor Gary Sanger, who credits local councillor Pam McConnell with keeping the project alive and even making it better than initially planned. “People love it. The architects listened to what we said. We're very pleased.”