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The Vancouver Art Gallery

Vancouver, Canada

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The Site

Larwill Park, the site of the new Vancouver Art Gallery, is one of the last unbuilt city blocks on Vancouver's Downtown Peninsula. The new site is situated seven blocks east of the current Gallery's home on West Georgia Street. Surrounded by public institutions and part of a vibrant and flourishing neighborhood, it is a key location that connects the west and the east of the peninsula linking Yaletown and Central Downtown to Gastown and Chinatown.

The Architecture

The proposal for the new Vancouver Art Gallery is a sculptural, symmetrical, upright building. From an urban standpoint it is a classical type: a recognizable public building along a prominent boulevard. The building has both a low and a high component, addressing the human scale and street life, while also offering public visibility within the vertically dominated Downtown Peninsula.

The low building densifies and activates the public realm around the Vancouver Art Gallery by providing a continuous yet permeable street front; the courtyard is accessible through all three surrounding street facades. It also responds to the topography along West Georgia: the roofline follows the slope of the street, resulting in a building that is consistently low from one corner of the block to the next. In scale and materiality, it echoes the low wooden structures of early Vancouver, including those that framed Larwill Park until their demolition in the 1950s.

The courtyard space surrounded by the low building is open to the public and features generously landscaped garden beds providing opportunities for seating, meeting people and engaging with nature. The perimeter building houses a bar, café, shop and restaurant, alongside a community project space, daycare centre and artist-in-residence ateliers. The diverse programming of spaces serves to activate both the street and the courtyard, making it part of the daily fabric of the city. It can also accommodate a variety of artistic practices and experiences, from art installations and performances to concerts and evening cinema programs.

The tall building is an upright symmetrical figure, sculpted to express its inner life and to respond to the local climate. The building rests on four cores, rising 40 feet above the courtyard. The arrangement of the upper volumes allows the sun to reach the courtyard level by minimizing the mass at the bottom and maximizing it in the middle. Generous setbacks and overhangs alternate to create both covered and open terrace spaces on various levels.

The vertical gallery tower adds a public dimension to the Vancouver skyline due to its varied programming. The large gallery suites, art education classrooms and day-to-day workspaces housed in the vertical stack activate the building from morning till evening. Most have a direct relationship with external terraces, allowing users to experience the building both inside and outside, to enjoy spectacular views and further take advantage of Vancouver's climate through covered open spaces.

A variety of art spaces are distributed throughout the museum, differing in height, scale and proportion. This variety responds to many facets of the Gallery: the need for difference and specificity to display the multifaceted permanent collection, the wide range of anticipated temporary exhibitions,

and the accommodation of the many forms of current and future artistic practice. All gallery levels provide natural light and views out towards the city and the landscape beyond.

Wood and copper both hold significant cultural value in the material history of British Columbia. Owing to its abundance and versatility, wood has been the material of choice for architecture and construction in the Vancouver region, from the traditional longhouses of the Coast Salish people to early 20th Century city growth. The new Vancouver Art Gallery will use wood as both cladding and structure for the low building, while the tower façade will be articulated in a copper toned metal. The referencing of copper in the design of the façade is the result of a dialogue with local artists, and stems from the fact that objects made of copper, often elaborately embossed, bent, and colored, carry a powerful message amongst many First Nations peoples of British Columbia.

The copper façade protects the wooden surfaces beneath; it lends the Gallery a visually unique and distinctive character in direct contrast to its dense urban environment, dominated mainly by glass-clad towers distinctly of the 20th Century. It has a veil-like quality; a texture and lightness which – like traditionally woven textiles – changes its appearance depending on the vantage point of the observer and the time of day, creating a dynamic visual experience. The weaving concept has been developed in collaboration with local indigenous artists. Horizontal bands of perforated copper are intertwined with a series of shaped vertical elements, akin to the weft and warp found in the weaving of natural fibers. Where needed, the woven and perforated metal skin offers views out and daylight in, while in other areas it acts as a protective membrane over the opaque structural wall behind.

From the street looking up at the structure both wood and copper are equally present. In the vertical, the new Vancouver Art Gallery engages with the tall city surroundings. At street level the modest, almost domestic scale enhances the character of openness and visibility for everyone.

Herzog & de Meuron, 2021