

The Mendel Art Gallery, which officially opened in October 1964, was a generous gift to the city of Saskatoon from local businessman and philanthropist Fred Mendel. Today, it stands as a prominent cultural landmark and a significant example of modernist architecture in Saskatchewan and Canada.

Understanding the relationship between art and architecture, Mr. Mendel ensured that a national architectural competition for the design of the gallery was conducted. The competition was won by the Winnipeg firm of Blankstein, Coop, Gillmor and Hanna (now known as numberTEN architectural group), which ensured that the gallery would be a state-of-the-art, purpose built facility. The Mendel Art Gallery was designed to offer an aesthetic and supportive environment for the engaged appreciation of art, and throughout its forty-five year history it has delivered a unique experience for visitors that integrally links the visual arts to the architecture of the building and its specific geographic location. Indeed, the "Mendel Experience" is not simply an experience of the artworks housed in the gallery, but a combined architecture, museum, and site experience, which includes the added enjoyment of the Conservatory. Further, it is the unique historic modernist design of the building and the specific cultural history of the building's function as a public art gallery, the events and activities that have taken place there over time, that would most assuredly qualify the Mendel Art Gallery for official provincial and national heritage designation.

In 2004, on the occasion of the Mendel Art Gallery's 40th Anniversary and based on a facility development plan by Toronto's Lundholm Associates Architects, Saskatoon's Kindrachuk Agrey Architecture was hired to design renovations and a major expansion to the building that would sensitively integrate with and enhance the original modernist architecture of the building. Doug Gillmor and Alan Hanna, two of the architects responsible for the original 1964 design, were present at the unveiling of Kindrachuk Agrey's architectural design, and have expressed their full support of the expansion's design premise. Kindrachuk Agrey Architecture communicated the following in a public presentation: "The Mendel Art Gallery is a nationally recognized cultural and social cornerstone of Saskatoon's community. Located along the South Saskatchewan River, the Mendel forms an integral part of the river edge which provides distinct visual imagery for our city. The significance of the site and the public gallery institution that resides there make this project of prime significance to the city of Saskatoon. We will work to resolve the building program requirements into a form expressive of the Mendel that will provide a 'sense of place', engage the public, and respect the given building. We will work to achieve a result beyond the expected, a solution for today and into tomorrow, facilitating the Mendel to continue as a nationally recognized gallery with a significant local cultural presence."

Fast forward to 2009, to the terrible shock to Mendel supporters that the renovations and

expansion of the Mendel Art Gallery were not only being aborted, but that the building was to be abandoned as an art gallery, along with Fred Mendel's important cultural legacy. City officials and the Mendel board made this short-sighted decision in secrecy and without public consultation. Only weeks before, they were endorsing the architectural plans developed by Kindrachuk Agrey Architecture, plans that cost the city over \$1 million and the federal government over \$400,000 for Phase #1. On top of that, the Province of New Brunswick had agreed to provide \$4.1 million to the project through its Building Communities Program and the City of Saskatoon had pledged \$4.5 million.

The Mendel Art Gallery's "Expanding the Vision" Facility Renovation and Expansion Project was called "a bold and ambitious dream in the making that would herald a new and exciting chapter in the history of Saskatoon's premier cultural institution." It not only addressed the critical need for a significant scope of renovations and additional space to enable the Mendel to continue to fulfill its mandate for the next forty years, it represented the bequest of one generation to another. This important project, which is estimated to cost \$21 million – much less than half of the estimated \$55 million for a new art gallery at River Landing, has been described as "transforming the facility so that it would be equipped to perform the core functions of an art museum at its optimum level, and provide improved services and expanded opportunities for the Gallery's many visitors and Saskatchewan's outstanding artists", and further, as "reconfirming the vision of the Gallery's founder, Fred Mendel, and the core values that have made the Mendel one of Saskatoon's and Saskatchewan's enduring legacies."

Plans for the renovated and expanded Mendel Art Gallery included the Joni Mitchell Café, and restoration of the late Ken Lochhead's studio, designed by Saskatchewan's most renowned modern architect Clifford Wiens, as an artist-in-residence studio on the Mendel site, among several other exciting features.

There is no justification for abandoning the visionary plans for the renovation and expansion of the Mendel Art Gallery. The tremendous public outcry in 2005 made it perfectly clear to city officials that the idea of abandoning the Mendel for a new art gallery at River Landing was a bad idea. In 2009, it is still a bad idea. Based on the facts, as provided by the city of Saskatoon's own documents, renovating and expanding the existing building is the more progressive, intelligent, and ethical direction to follow.

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