



# CANADIAN MENNONITE UNIVERSITY: STUDY OF THE MARPECK COMMONS

Learning Commons and How Technology is Changing  
Contemporary Library Architecture & Design

## WHAT ARE LEARNING COMMONS?

Also known as Scholars Commons, these learning spaces are innovative models created to share space for information technology, meetings, studying, and collaboration.

They have become increasingly popular in public, research, and school libraries with the disciplines of Architecture, Interior Design, and furnishing playing a particularly important role in their use and arrangements.



*Atrium to 2nd Floor*



*Folio Cafe / Atrium Space*

## HOW DID IT ALL START?

During the technological revolution of the 1980s and 1990s, this new model of the Information Commons (IC) form of service delivery became established and went beyond the access and retrieval function of traditional reference service to support the full range of activities of information literacy, helping students access, manage, integrate, evaluate and create information and knowledge.

### Components of Information Literacy

**Access** - knowing about and knowing how to collect and/or retrieve information.

**Manage** - applying an existing organizational or classification scheme.

**Integrate** - interpreting and representing information, which involves summarizing, comparing and contrasting.

**Evaluate** - making judgments about the quality, relevance, usefulness or efficiency of information.

**Create** - generating information by adapting, applying, designing, inventing or authoring information.

## THE DESIGN OF IDEAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

The Learning Commons liberates the exploration of ideas and concepts, encouraging inquiry, imagination, discovery and creativity through the connection of learners to information, to each other and to communities around the world.

Versatility, adaptability, flexibility are at the heart of the design of a Learning Commons in order to meet the demand of the evolving needs of its users and the resources it accommodates.

Development of interiors needs to be in a manner where spaces can be easily reconfigured to support a wide array of learning activities that facilitate understanding and discovery. Considerations need to be made towards physical access, comfort, and safety to be inclusive of differing needs.



*Library Space, North Public Seating*

## THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

A properly developed design would take into account various factors such as: lighting, noise reduction, power capacity, quiet spaces, and sharing spaces.

Moreover, while printed books play an essential role in supporting intellectual growth, digital technologies offer additional pathways to learning and content acquisition. Instead of a resource solely for access, libraries now require a space that promotes a construction of learning from a variety of sources.

The continual evolution of digital technologies and, more importantly, the ways in which these tools are being used to access, select, manipulate and produce scholarship has caused many librarians to rethink their roles, facilities and organizational structures.

Instead of supplanting, technology will enhance the traditional facade of an archaic archival prototype of a learning space. Thus, learning commons bring together the best of the physical and digital worlds to create a learning hub.

## HOW WE MEET THESE STANDARDS

A new learning commons for the **Canadian Mennonite University**. The **Marpeck Commons, Library and Bridge** features a variety of student gathering spaces, including study, seminar and social areas. A coffee bar and bookstore encourage interaction and the facility is anchored with today's version of a library. The new complex connects the south edge of what will become a feature quadrangle of the campus with expansive views across to the CMU heritage building.

As the campus is bisected by a major road, a new bridge was built to unite both sides of the campus in a manner that permits safe, easy, barrier free access to all facilities, effectively eliminating the busy roadway below and creating a campus gateway.

A multi-media learning environment responsive to emerging technology, the Library and Learning Commons form a focal point for all aspects of student life, where intellectual, social and spiritual renewal are uniquely experienced.

In the planning and siting of the Library and Learning Commons for CMU, a master planning exercise was decisive in determining the appropriate location for such a core facility. CMU's former library had been challenged with inadequate space from its inception.

Located on a campus divided by a busy four-lane thoroughfare, opportunity arose to address an even greater challenge. The design team facilitated several workshops with numerous stakeholders from the University (administration, professors, staff and students) to best determine a long-term campus vision and create a functional program that met current needs while anticipating future growth.

In addition, respecting the heritage status of the former Manitoba School for the Deaf (on the northside) required adherence to strict guidelines related to the preservation of the historic building, including maintaining viewsheds from the Grant and Shaftesbury intersection.

Unifying a campus made up of disparate heritage buildings and contemporary structures bisected by a major thoroughfare required a truly collaborative effort of design and engineering. In response, the project evolved into a new central library facility complete with a pedestrian bridge – a design solution informed by the proximity to all campus amenities while addressing student needs.

The entire project serves to physically connect structures, students and staff, linking them to their history and the wider community, as they continuously circulate through old and new, past and present, knowledge and discovery

## LEARNING COMMONS AND THEIR ROLE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Learning Commons have been equated to a laboratory for creating knowledge and staffed with librarians that serve as facilitators of learning. The theory of an integrative curriculum that educates the whole person is realised here: the mind, body, and spirit. A fundamental principal of a Learning Commons in a Higher Education setting is equipping students with what they need to succeed and learn. Allowing them to interact with peers, and work in their own way gives them the tools they will need for future education and the skills they will need going forward in life.

Research over the past few decades on academic innovation has revealed spaces that focus on human-centred design and encourage learner participation will become increasingly important in transitioning to a commons model that emphasises the academic community of learners and the range of services they require.

A challenge faced by post-secondary designers is that the idea of the commons is a moving entity that continually incorporates new advances in technologies and pedagogies based on who its serving. This complex issue of finding a balance between spaces for social and academic activities is designated to architect and interior designers. Some core questions designers ask when consolidating a project are:

1. What collaborative services are being delivered, in the commons?
2. Is the commons intended to produce an isolated change in library use and effectiveness or to be the driver of a transformational change initiative across campus?
3. Can the commons best serve its users through a unified integrated service desk or through a cluster of specialized service desks?
4. Does the history of IT and library management on your campus present special challenges or oppurtunities for co-location and collaborative service delivery?
5. Does your commons address the needs of both social and individual learners? Are busy open enviroments sufficiently augmented by accomodation for group process learning and quiet study?



*View of Circulation Desk*

## LEARNING COMMONS AND LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

The Canadian Mennonite University was simultaneously enlarged and divided by four lanes of traffic on Grant Avenue upon quiring the historic Provincial Normal School.

The need for a student centre, the long walk between buildings in Winnipeg's unforgiving climate and the hazard of crossing a busy thoroughfare provided the impetus to realize a sixteen year old vision of a new campus at its geographic centre, complete with a pedestrian bridge. The design delivers a contextual response that is respectful to its historic neighbor, preserving precious views of the landmark structure.

The CMU campus is well served by an extensive network of recreational walking and cycling paths in convenient proximity to buildings on both sides of Grant Avenue. From these paths, visitors are beckoned to the commons. Fullfiling its mandate as a venue for CMU to engage its neighbors and the broader community, the commons has already become a popular venue for community events, town hall meetings and private functions.

The design of the newest campus addition is informed by its oldest companion; panels of timeless Tyndall stone masonry owe their scale and proportions to the same elemnts of their Collegiate Gothic neighbor. An array of aliminum mullions animate transparent facades with a playful rythym that recalls a relaxed, informal approach to student life in the electronic age.

## RESOURCES

- <https://www.cmu.ca/library/>
- <https://www.mcw.com/Projects/Details?f=p&title=CMU-Marpeck-Commons>
- <https://www.dds.ca/en/programs-and-learning/library-learning-commons.aspx>



Architecture  
Landscape  
Interior Design

**ft3** is a Winnipeg based architecture, landscape architecture and interior design firm celebrating its 47th anniversary in 2022. The company was founded in 1975 as Friesen Tokar Architects by partners Rudy Friesen and Brian Tokar.

The firm specializes in health and wellness, multi-unit housing, and corporate office projects, and has a sizeable portfolio of senior's housing and personal care homes. The latter includes Fisher River (2007); Salem Home, Winkler, Mb; Oxford House (2008); Rosetown, Sk (2010); Bigger, Sk (2010). These homes are designed around a progressive model that incorporates small households and collective 'downtown' spaces, a concept coined Chez Nous by partner emeritus Rudy Friesen.

Other notable projects include the RCMP Student Dormitory (Regina, 2012), a competition winning scheme for a complex of the three bold, neo-modernist structures, each to accommodate 224 cadets and designed to exceed LEED Silver. Similar goals of environmental efficiency were involved in the plans for the Concord Hall Student Residence (Canadian Mennonite University, 2005) the Osborne Village Rapid Transit Station (2012); the Stonewall Heritage Arts Centre (Stonewall, Manitoba, 2011), which contains an interpretive centre, exhibition space and dance and art classrooms; and Winkler Centennial Library (Winkler, Manitoba, 2006). The firm's downtown office, located on Waterfront Drive, is housed in the eco-friendly six-storey condominium block The Strand (2007).

**ft3** has worked on projects similar to the Marpeck Commons, namely the Neil John Maclean Health Sciences Library at the University of Manitoba's Bannatyne Campus, and also the Winkler Centennial Library and the Salvation Army William and Catherine Both Library.