

DURABLE DESIGN

MASONRY IN ONTARIO

In a province whose history can be mapped in the masonry of its structures, architectural firms like **The Ventin Group Ltd.** and **NORR Limited** are maintaining a legacy more durable than time

By Zach Baliva

Stone masonry is a well-established and deeply rooted Ontario tradition. Many of the province's downtown districts boast historic limestone structures that talented artisans built over the years. Courthouses and other government buildings often feature fine details in brick, block, stone, and concrete. Today, the time-tested method is still alive in Ontario, where architects and engineers are working with masonry contractors to produce stunning new buildings and preserve immaculate historic structures. Two architecture firms—The Ventin Group (+VG Architects) and NORR Limited—have incorporated stunning masonry into recent designs. The Ontario Masonry Contractors' Association celebrated a project by each company with a 2010 Ontario Masonry Design Award.

Diversity in Design

Paul Sapounzi is a partner in the Brantford-based +VG Architects. The 40-year-old firm came to life by creating rural schools across Ontario and then developed skills in healthcare, commercial, leisure, residential, and heritage restoration. "We believe the project manager should carry a project from design to completion so nothing is compartmentalized," Sapounzi explains. Many of +VG Architects' significant restorations, including Queen's Park (a Romanesque marvel) and Toronto's Old City Hall (circa 1899), showcase complex masonry components. Masons matched original grey and brown stone from the Credit River Valley and New Brunswick for some of the project's many phases.



Project Focus

Huron Heights Secondary School

+VG Architects received an honourable mention at the 2010 Ontario Masonry Design Awards for its work on the Huron Heights Secondary School for the Waterloo Region District School Board. The 1,200-student school on the outskirts of Kitchener plays a vital role in the community, which is experiencing an increase in development. "It's challenging to overcome modest funding in Ontario schools, so we decided to focus money on public spaces," says +VG Architects partner Paul Sapounzi. The Huron Heights lobby, for example, is multiuse and connected with the cafeteria. Around that space, the architects created a pod design that connects a cluster of four rooms around a single-resource space. Expansive glass provides good visibility so that teachers can assist each other and students know what is happening. The unique masonry at Huron Heights was driven by durability. "Schools are heavily used and undergo many changes. Only masonry can stand the abuse," Sapounzi says. In lieu of painted blocks, +VG Architects specified exposed brick. The material doesn't just form the exterior; it continues right on inside the school. "We created an indoor-outdoor connection with our use of brick and masonry," Sapounzi says. "It combines perfectly with the glass so students have a comfortable learning environment."



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—PAUL SAPOUNZI, PARTNER IN CHARGE, THE VENTIN GROUP

Currently, +VG Architects and its client PCL Constructors are involved in an arts-and-entertainment centre in Milton and converting the old Don Jail into facilities for Bridgepoint Health. Renowned architect William Thomas designed Don Jail, once the largest in North America, in the mid-1800s. +VG Architects is serving as the heritage architect for a total renovation and addition. The team will restore a rotunda, skylight, walkway, gargoyles, cells, and gallows.

Sapounzi and his colleagues specialize in institutional, public, and cultural facilities—buildings that often feature specialized masonry. “Masonry can play a big role in heritage projects because we are tasked with finding replacement stone,” Sapounzi says.

Masonry is deeply embedded in Ontario’s history, giving the province a distinct architectural identity. Most of Ontario’s old libraries, courthouses, and theatres were built with locally sourced stone that +VG Architects tries to replicate exactly. “Ontario has a great heritage of clay, brick, and limestone elegantly detailed in combination with great woodwork,” Sapounzi says. “Stone masons in Canada at the turn of the century built well-crafted structures. We’ve tried to complement the architectural pillars of Ontario, so masonry has been the answer.”

Masonry, however, is only as good as the infrastructure behind it. Tight envelopes combined with the durable materials used in masonry create buildings that will stand the test of time. “We have standards for masonry strength, and veneer must fit with existing colours and materials, but focus on a building envelope is supreme in all projects,” Sapounzi remarks. “Weakness in the envelope will transpire to masonry failure.”

A Prestigious Outcome

This commitment to the details and quality design may sound extensive, but it yields solid results for the firm. +VG Architects’ University of Guelph Student Residence received an honourable mention at the 2010 Ontario Masonry Design Awards for its “creative use of masonry in building design and construction.” The university



owned a decaying 1970s apartment building in the middle of an open field and asked +VG Architects to develop a series of townhomes on the 22-acre site. Sapounzi created several public squares with green gathering spaces. “Every entrance to every quad takes visitors underneath a bridge,” he explains. “We designed columns and a colonnade so people walk protected from the elements.” A combination of stone, brick, and limestone helps the townhomes match the existing campus. +VG Architects specified stucco in early proposals but opted for more durable and appropriate masonry instead.

Clever design techniques let the contemporary residences blend with an older campus without feeling dated. “We create a good distinction between old and new,” Sapounzi says. “We put a contemporary spin on traditional architecture to set up a dialogue that works.” Instead of windows within the masonry wall, for example, the architects pulled windows out to form boxes. Smooth, clean lines were formed with poured-concrete columns to bring about a modern aesthetic.

Above: For the University of Guelph Student Residence renovation, +VG Architects created a series of gate-houses that open up on public squares.