

Historic Don Jail, Refitted for a New Purpose



MARIO MADAU/+VG THE VENTIN GROUP ARCHITECTS

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Paul Sapounzi grew up in Toronto's Riverdale neighbourhood just down the street from the old Don Jail, a brooding pre-Confederation correctional facility that he always found quite frightening. And for good reason: "My father used to tell me that if I didn't behave, I would end up at the Don Jail."

Mr. Sapounzi did, in fact, land in the Don Jail, but not in the way his father imagined. A partner with **+VG Architects** of Cambridge, Ont., Mr. Sapounzi is working to transform the historic Renaissance Revival-style structure into Bridgepoint Health's new administrative headquarters. When it opens in April it will, for the first time in its 148-year history, be a positive and light-filled space that welcomes educators, students, history buffs, community members and curiosity seekers alike.

Designed as a reform prison by William Thomas and opened in 1864, the Don Jail was dubbed the "Palace for Prisoners" because of its progressive ideas for the physical and mental



Scaffolding recently came down at the Don Jail, revealing the restoration of the 148-year-old building in Toronto. It is being repurposed as administrative offices for the new glass-exterior Bridgepoint hospital, left, and will reopen next spring.



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wellness of inmates and its improved living conditions. Over time, overcrowding and other factors earned the jail a reputation as a hellhole of misery and despair until it was eventually shuttered in 1977.

“In Toronto, the Don Jail is the equivalent of Alcatraz,” says Gary Miedema, chief historian and associate director of Heritage Toronto. “I’ve always been fascinated by a photograph taken after it was closed showing dignitaries taking a whack at the jail with a sledgehammer. It was a place of fear and perhaps cruelty in the popular imagination, and I think its closure was considered a victory for humanity.”

The historic, 84,000-square-foot structure will be renamed the Bridgepoint Administration Centre and will provide office space for about 100 hospital administrators including president and chief executive officer Marian Walsh. The adaptive reuse project is just one part of a comprehensive \$1.2-billion site redevelopment plan by Bridgepoint and the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-term Care that also features the construction of a 680,000-square-foot, 472-bed facility for the treatment of complex chronic diseases.

Two existing buildings on the site – the old Bridgepoint Hospital and the jail’s 1958-built east-wing addition, now called the Toronto Jail and which is still in operation – will be demolished during the second half of 2013 to make way for new roadways, parks and landscaped areas.

Exterior scaffolding recently came down on the Don Jail revealing the painstaking removal of almost 150 years worth of grime from the buff-brick, limestone and sandstone structure. A bit of a patina was purposely left, explains Mr. Sapounzi, whose firm has extensive experience rehabilitating old Ontario jails

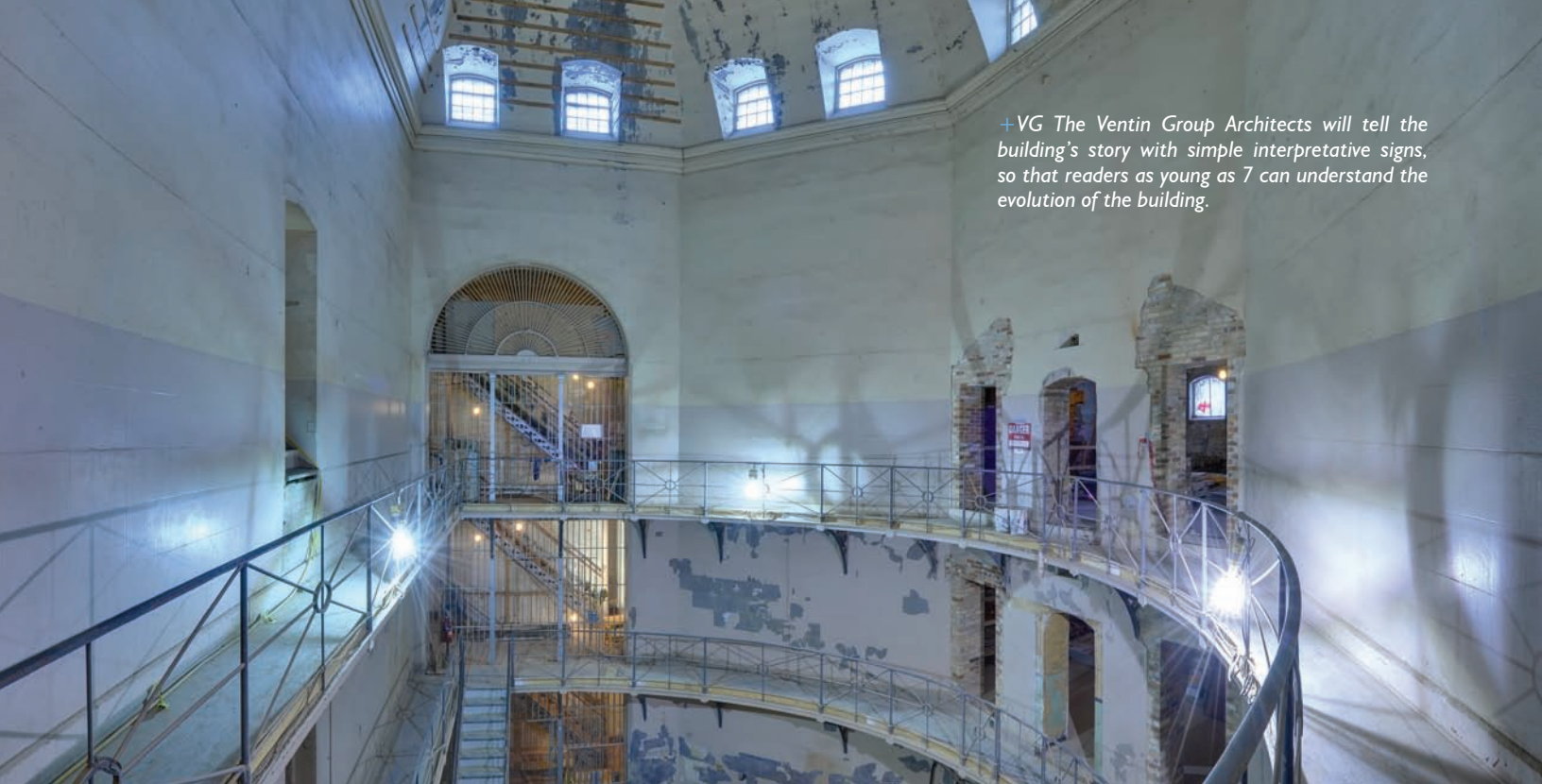
including the Waterloo County Gaol in Kitchener. “The scars and stuff that was on the brick is part of the cumulative history of the place.”

Visitors coming through the south entrance will pass under the watchful eye of Father Time, a figure carved into the keystone, and through to the centre block’s spectacular half-octagonal rotunda featuring clerestory windows, original iron railings and balconies supported by fearsome griffin and serpent cast-iron brackets. The main level’s original glass flooring is being restored to allow light to stream down to the lower level where, during regular business hours, visitors will learn what daily life was like for inmates including access to six representative prison cells where it wasn’t uncommon for two or three inmates to share a 0.9-metre by 2.4-metre space.

Only on special occasions, such as Toronto’s annual Doors Open, will the public be allowed to view additional features such as the punishment and death row cells, and the former gallows tower where, in 1962, Ronald Turpin and Arthur Lucas were the last people to be executed in Canada. There remains on the interior walls only a ghostly outline of the timber framing. The space is being preserved as is and will remain behind closed doors most of the time, Mr. Sapounzi says. “We’ll freeze it in time.”

About 20 per cent of the former jail’s heritage interior has been preserved, and the rest of the brickwork cleared out to make way for modern office space, says Greg Colucci, principal of Toronto-based Diamond Schmitt Architects, which is the joint architect of record on the Bridgepoint project along with HDR Inc. of Omaha, Neb.

“From an aesthetic standpoint, we made a deliberate attempt to differentiate the elements of historic value from the new and



+VG The Ventin Group Architects will tell the building's story with simple interpretative signs, so that readers as young as 7 can understand the evolution of the building.

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contemporary,” Mr. Colucci explains. For example, where some of the jail cell openings are being preserved, a simple piece of frameless glazing will allow natural daylight to reach adjacent office spaces.

As for whether any bad karma might still cling to the place despite its reincarnation, Ms. Walsh points out that the jail has shared the site with community health-care facilities for most of its history and that Bridgepoint is on a mission to transform Canada’s approach to complex care and rehabilitation. “We’re not restoring a jail, we’re adapting and reusing an architectural landmark and an important piece of Toronto’s public infrastructure,” Ms. Walsh says.

Mr. Sapounzi agrees that honouring the past is the right way to reconnect the site with the neighbouring community. “From a very small boy until the time we started this project, walking into that rotunda is something I never could have imagined,” Mr. Sapounzi says. “We’re going to teach the public what this place meant, and create a level of honour that it’s really never had.”

Long, colourful history

- In 1856, the City of Toronto paid the Scadding estate £10,000 for 119 acres of land to build a jail, an industrial farm and a House of Refuge.
- Thirty-one men were hanged at the jail, either publicly within the east exercise yard or in the gallows tower, says a +VG Architects heritage interpretive plan. In 2007, 15 skeletons were found buried underneath the yard.
- The Boyd Gang was among the jail’s notorious inmates.
- Female prisoners were sometimes incarcerated with their children.
- A representative number of bars on the building’s exterior windows are being preserved.

+VG The Ventin Group Architects is a full-service architectural firm offering new design, expansions and heritage restorations for cultural, educational, municipal, justice, healthcare, residential and recreational facilities. Our staff of 50+ operates in five offices in Ontario, in Brantford, Kitchener, Toronto and Belleville. See www.plusvg.com for more information.

For more details on the entire **Bridgepoint Health Team**, visit their website: <http://www.bridgepointhealth.ca/projectpartners>

Team;

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- PCL Construction
- HDR Architecture
- Diamond & Schmitt Architects
- +VG The Ventin Group Architects
- Hallsall & Associates
- Smith and Anderson
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On the lowest level, six jail cells have been retained to give the public a sense of former living conditions in the jail. A couple times a year the public will be allowed to view the punishment and death row cells, and the former gallows tower located on the second floor of the east block.