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Transformative
design



TCA | Their + Curran Architects is a full-service design firm based in Hamilton, Ontario. Since starting in 2005, they have developed a diverse portfolio of projects spanning a wide range of industry sectors. Despite the varying sizes and typologies of their projects, however, the firm has always approached each building with similar objectives. According to William J.E. Curran, TCA's founder and principal, they consistently strive to deliver buildings that are "decidedly contemporary yet respectful of context and history," that are "thoughtful and engaging," and that "transcend the ordinary."







The firm also has two constant principles, no matter what they are working on, according to Bill: “a highly collaborative design approach,” and “a recognition that buildings and sites themselves collaborate in the making of places.”

“We aim to create architecture that is expressive and participatory, architecture that responds to the human needs of habitation; and that draws on alliances with context, landscape, the arts, and the rhythms of human activity,” Bill says. “The results are thoughtful and engaging buildings that create memorable and meaningful places.”

Over the years, the consistency

of TCA’s approach has led to a great deal of industry attention and acclaim – over the past 17 years, the firm and their projects have been featured in numerous industry publications, and their work has netted them well over 30 awards and prizes in a diverse array of categories.

The firm’s approach has also led to consistent growth, and has helped them to attract and retain a versatile and accomplished team of architects. In recognition of their years of excellence, two of those team members – Stevan Gacesa and Kyle Slote – were recently promoted from senior associates to principals. The firm will soon rebrand to CGS | Curran Gacesa Slote Architects

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to reflect that change.

Stevan and Kyle both joined TCA in 2007; just two years after Bill “reluctantly” started the firm originally.

“To be honest, I didn’t think I wanted the headaches of starting and running my own business,” he admits. “But I had no choice – my old firm was going bankrupt, and there was work to be done. I ended up taking over some of those projects and having work on hand right away.”

Despite his initial reservations, Bill and TCA achieved rapid success. Their first project was a successful church addition for St Luke’s. Then they picked up some work with a local college and university. Then they did some affordable housing work.

“We were fortunate with the way it unfolded,” Bill recalls. “We got to do a lot of different things, one after the other. That just carried on. One project led to another, the firm kept growing, and now here we are.”

Back in 2007, Stevan remembers

being attracted to TCA by the quality of the work they were already doing. He grew up in nearby Burlington and was relocating back to the area at the time. He was looking for a job that wouldn’t require commuting to Toronto, and “I don’t remember finding any other firms in town that were doing anything interesting,” he recalls. “I was fortunate that TCA was looking at the time.”

Kyle, meanwhile, grew up right in the suburbs of Hamilton. While later doing his master’s thesis at university, he decided



to focus on the city's downtown, and he "fell in love."

"It was a really transformative time for the city," he says. "A lot of revitalization was happening. I just fell in love with that movement and what was happening here. A lot of exciting stuff was going on. When I graduated, I knew I absolutely wanted to work in this city that I cared so deeply about. I wanted to be a part of this transformation."

That desire drew Kyle to TCA, which he saw as contributing to

Hamilton's revitalization. What kept him there, he says, is the social impact he's seen their projects have:

"A lot of our projects really make a difference, and that's really motivating to me," he says. "When I feel like I'm improving someone's quality of life through the architecture I'm doing, that's when I feel like I'm doing my best work."

That feeling is shared throughout the office, he adds. He believes everyone at TCA believes in what he calls "the

power of design."

"Design can have a transformative effect," Kyle says. "It's not just some sort of added fluff to a project. Good design can actually be a powerful and transformative tool."

Throughout their history, TCA has applied the tool of 'good design' to a variety of project types. Their portfolio includes education facilities, public buildings, housing, interiors, cultural facilities, commercial and mixed-use buildings, and



healthcare projects. They have worked across Canada, the United States, and the Caribbean, but their focus has always been their home, i.e. Hamilton and the surrounding area.

According to Bill, clients within that region choose TCA because of their reputation for quality:

“The people that choose us are the people who share our values,” he says. “They understand the value of quality architecture.”

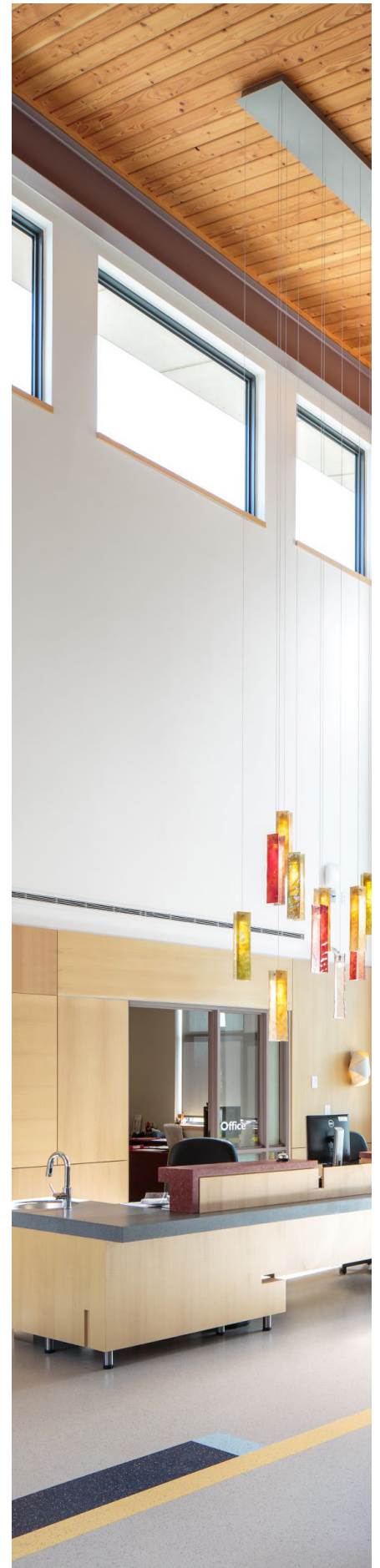
“We believe that we contribute a higher level of quality than other firms might,” he adds. “The clients that seek us out are looking for that added value. They believe, as we believe, that better architecture can have a better impact on people’s lives.” Also, according to Kyle and Stevan, clients are also drawn to TCA by their ability to problem-solve:

“Our clients also tend to be seeking creative solutions to challenging problems,” Kyle says. “We’re good at solving problems that other firms can’t or don’t want to. I can actually think of quite a few cases where the client started with somebody else, but they ran into a problem, and we ended up taking it across the finish line.”

“We’re not widget-makers,” Stevan adds. “We’re not just technicians banging out drawings. We really take a lot of pride in bringing a lot of brainpower to our architecture. We like to put a fair bit of thought into what we do. I think that’s usually why clients seek us out.”

Bill also partly credits TCA’s ability to solve their client’s problems to the fact that, in addition to their architectural practice, they are also small-scale developers. He believes that undertaking site and building developments projects has given them a deeper understanding of project financial performance realities and “what actually works.”

“We all recognized early on that to solve the problems our clients have, we have to have a deep understanding of they think and what they need,” he explains. “So we gained a really deep understanding of the business of development. We learned about the big picture when it comes to approvals, to marketing, et cetera. We now bring all that to the table too.”





Making an impact

As a recent example of TCA's commitment to architectural excellence – and as an example of their ability to overcome challenges – Kyle points to the firm's award-winning work on the Gasworks Cultural Centre.

That project involved the revitalization and expansion of a non-profit community arts space within an 1850 heritage structure. The addition more than doubled the size of the available space, providing "much needed support spaces," such as a new two-storey lobby,

a large second floor multi-purpose classroom space, practice and teaching spaces for music lessons, and service spaces such as washrooms, a coatroom, and a green room, loading dock, and side stage.

The new space was built to serve multiple purposes – it's also used as a church and rental event space, for instance – but the anchor tenant is the Hamilton Music Collective. The addition was built around their 'An Instrument for Every Child' program, which is "dedicated



nourishing youth self-esteem through the musical arts.” Helping with that mission was particularly rewarding to the team at TCA.

“That’s a project that I think exemplifies what we’re about,” Kyle says. “To start with, it had an incredibly complicated approvals process. The zoning was really complicated. It was a lot to navigate. There were a lot of technical challenges we had to solve – and we were able to solve them and get this project built.”

“But not only was it challenging, it also had this incredible social

aspect,” he continues. “The anchor tenant runs this fantastic program with a mandate of providing free music education to inner city kids. We were able to tailor many of the specifics to their needs. It was thrilling to be a part of that.”

“That building is going to be transforming lives for decades and decades, and that’s an incredible thing,” Bill adds. “The main thrust of the project is to educate children about music and expose them to art. That’s a hugely transformative thing they’re doing there.”

The client on that project

was John and Ellie Voortman Charitable Foundation. According to Kyle, that was an example of one of those jobs he referred to before, where they started with another firm, hit a dead end, and then sought out TCA.

“They reached out to us based on our reputation around town,” Kyle recalls. “They said ‘Hey, we haven’t been able to get this where it needs to be, can you take a look at it?’ And we were able to run with it and make the project work.”

The response to the finished product has been rapturous –



the project has been featured in numerous publications and news programs, and has also won several industry awards, as previously mentioned. At the 2021 Hamilton Urban Design and Architecture Awards, for example, it won an 'Award of Merit.' At the 2021 HMHC Heritage Recognition Awards, it also won the category for 'Adaptive Reuse of a Heritage Property.'

"We're very proud of that recognition, and we're very proud of that project," Bill says. "It's a fabulous building. We're excited to see it open up and

host a lot more events."

Recently, TCA has also gotten excited about their work with Haldimand County. They worked with them on the Haldimand County Library + Heritage Centre and the Haldimand County Central Administration Building - two large-scale and dynamic public projects that reflect what Bill calls "the ambition of the county."

"That country is transforming," he says. "For a long time, it has been a rural agriculture kind-of county, it's been something of

a backwater. But now, because of the proximity to the GTA, it's booming. It's evolving, it's becoming more urbanized, more sophisticated."

The Library + Heritage Centre is located in the heart of Cayuga, a small town on the Grand River that's basically central to the county. The project brings together a local library branch with a museum and genealogy centre. Bill describes the building as a "vibrant focal point for the community that will enrich the lives of users." He calls it "an illustration of architecture crafted to serve



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and inspire its community” – and while it’s “simple, very economical, and very efficient,” he says it still has “bold architectural ambitions looking forward to the future.”

For Kyle, what made it special was the combination of library and museum. He praises the county for having the idea to co-locate the two facilities in one building, and he says the challenge of combining them was very rewarding.

“A library in and of itself is a super-interesting building type that we love to work on,” he says, “but adding that heritage museum component charged the whole building that much more. We were able to program it and create a layout such that these two different elements would fit together under one roof. People could brush up against the museum element when they were there to visit the library and vice versa.”

“That was exciting,” he adds. “There were some fun nice opportunities to do some interesting things. We really embraced that.”

Then there was the Haldimand County Central Administration Building – a 43,000-square-foot, three-story building that functions as the ‘town hall’ for

the county.

Bill describes that project as “sensitively scaled and massed to ensure the contextual fit in a small town with adjacent single family dwellings.” He calls the building itself “simple and economical, reflecting the small town ethos of cost restraint.”

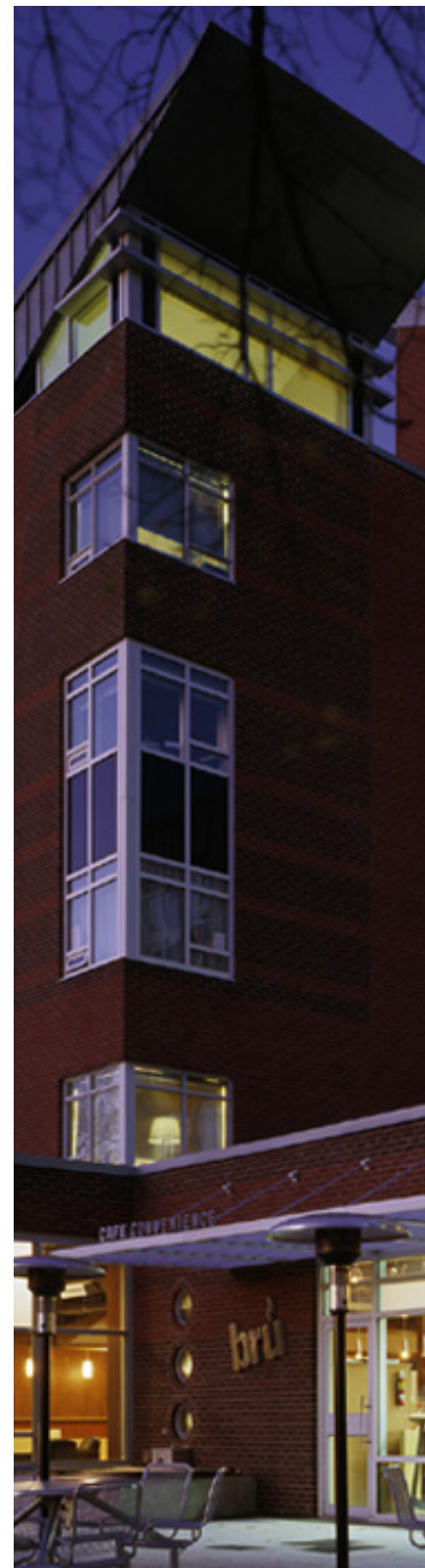
“However, attention to detail and design quality elevate the building: careful planning to break down the scale inside and out, selective use of rich, natural materials at high-profile locations and strategic use of a broad colour palette to add warmth all work to avoid the usual banal character of government offices.”

Taken together, both those projects have a “big psychological impact on the community,” Bill believes.

“Having that admin building there, and having that shiny new library-museum downtown, makes an impact,” he says. “Their downtown has been stagnant for a while, and these are great symbols of revitalization.”

“Things are changing in the county,” he adds. “I think these buildings reflect the ambitions of the people that are running the county. They wanted to

illustrate the new values of the county and the new spirit they’ve got going. That’s been a pretty exciting thing to be a part of.”



Doing what they do

Moving forward, TCA's vision is to continue down the trajectory they are on – they want to continue working with clients who share their values and care about quality, and they want to continue doing the kind of interesting and challenging work they have become known for.

"We're happy doing what we do," Kyle says. "We like that we have a deep enough portfolio to win public work, and we hope to continue to do that, and we like that we have repeat clients who trust us and want to work with us on an ongoing basis."

"I think that thread of social impact is one that will continue to follow our work as we go," he adds. "It inspires us to know that our projects will make a difference in someone's life. We want to keep making that difference."

"And we want to keep doing work that reflects the revitalization of Hamilton and other communities," he continues. "When we see the ability of a new project to really energize a community, to uplift them economically, culturally, socially – that's energizing. Those are the kinds of projects





that excite us and we want to do more of.”

On the topic of ‘uplifting’ people, TCA also wants to pursue more work in the affordable housing sector. They have done several of those projects over the years and they’ve seen how much of a “catalyzing effect” they can have on communities, provided they are properly designed and built. They want to see that happen more.

“Affordable housing is not normally what you’d use to spur urban development,” Bill says. “Normally, affordable

houses are just cheap boxes. But we like to elevate it beyond that. We like to remember that it’s people’s homes. It’s a matter of basic dignity. People want to live in a house that they’re proud of and not in a project. Those are the kind of affordable houses we want to design. We want to design houses where people are proud to live.”

Lastly, as previously mentioned, TCA will soon rebrand to CGS | Curran Gacesa Slote Architects. That’s in recognition of Stevan and Kyle’s elevation to principals, and also in recognition of their longstanding roles on the firm’s

leadership team.

“It’s a natural evolution,” Bill says. “These guys have a huge part of the firm and the work we do for a long time now. It’s the natural next step for them to become owners. If anything, it’s long overdue.”



For more on TCA, their team, their design philosophy, and their past projects – including more on the Gasworks Cultural Centre, the Haldimand County Library, and the Haldimand County Central Administration Building – visit [https:// tcarch.ca/](https://tcarch.ca/) or <https://cgsarch.ca/>

