

CANADIAN MENNONITE UNIVERSITY

IDEA INCUBATOR TAKES ROOT

The Canadian Mennonite University has a lofty goal for their new Centre for Resilience — when the \$1.7-million addition to the school opens next spring, they're hoping the ideas it spurs help change the world.

The centre, which fills 6,500 square-feet of space on the fourth floor of CMU's north campus building on Shaftesbury Boulevard, will be an academic hub for partnering organizations to work with each other and students to develop policy, design, and enterprise innovations in the hopes of creating a more resilient economy that improves social equity and environmental protection.

In short, says the centre's director James Magnus-Johnston, the university hopes to provide a space for social entrepreneurs including non-profits and local businesses to mingle with the school's brightest young minds to work on ways of creating a more sustainable future.

"In a nutshell it's a co-working space for social entrepreneurs," explains Magnus-Johnston, who also teaches social entrepreneurship and political studies at CMU. "In practice it will be a co-working lab for folks who are working at trying to solve social and ecological challenges.

"Sometimes I refer to the centre as a lab because it's a place where we can play with ideas — some will fail and some will succeed — but we'll always be attempting to build resilience in the process."

The centre will look more like an office than a classroom, says Magnus-Johnston, and will have space for a revolving base of between 25 to 30 social entrepreneurs to take up residency while they work with students on real-world projects.

And those students will come from any and all of the school's classes and disciplines.

"We need folks who are broadminded enough to identify the kinds of problems that need to be worked on and to be able to think them through in a really rigorous way," says Magnus-Johnston.

The centre's interface model is based on the school's long-standing practicum program, explains Jonathan Dueck, CMU's Vice-President Academic and Academic Dean, and will at times see whole classes working on projects, sometimes groups of students, and at other times just individual students.

"It's based on the residents having an interest in students being involved and the students and faculties meeting those interests," says Dueck, who is also an associate professor of ethnomusicology at the school. "It's a very social model for connecting the two groups."

With an open concept, the centre will have living walls with greenery growing indoors and lots of natural light, and there will also be a variety of work spaces that include sit/stand desks and soft seating areas.

It's an environment designed from the ground up to help incubate ideas, says Magnus-Johnston.

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"We tried to foster a range of different interaction styles, for instance in the kitchen we're looking at particular kinds of booths that keep the sound to a minimum but which enable private, focused meetings to take place as well," he says. "We wanted to make it private enough that it's not super exposed for the folks who are working in there, but then also open enough that it fosters some kind of meaningful interaction between everyone taking up residence there."

As well as the indoor space offered in the university's campus, the Centre for Resilience will also utilize an acre of land on CMU's grounds where greenhouses and a compost facility are planned, as well as space for any large projects students and social entrepreneurs come up with.

"Having the space on the grounds is a real plus because you can actually do things outside, you can test things, or you can build installations that the public can interact with," explains Dueck. "So if you wanted to try new housing that is more sustainable, for instance, you can actually build something out there and have people come in and try it out."

With construction of the Centre for Resilience nearing completion Magnus-Johnston is hard at work creating partnerships in the community, and social entrepreneurs from both the business and non-profit sectors interested in taking up residency can connect with him at jmagnus-johnston@cmu.ca.

"Let's go for coffee, let's have a chat about it and see if there's a good fit for these students," he says.

Prospective students can find more information about the centre and CMU's courses at cmu.ca. ■



Renderings of Canadian Mennonite University's Centre for Resilience. Courtesy Ager Little Architects

