

Success Allows Shawn J. Lawrence Architect Inc. to Grow and Expand Into New Types of Design Work



DANIEL SMITH – The Ottawa Construction News Special Feature

Retirement residence or five star hotel?

The question may ring funny at first, but the confusion would be entirely real if you were standing in a retirement building designed by Shawn Lawrence.

Looking up into the two-floor grand lobby's ceiling. Glancing around at the lobby's luxury fittings; the baby grand in the corner, aglow in the flickering flame of a large stone fireplace. The richly-carpeted dining room, with equally rich aromas. Let your eyes fall down to the marbled tile leading to an ornate spiral staircase decked with carved mahogany railings...and you could be forgiven for mistaking this place for new addition to the Four Seasons chain.

But in Lawrence's esteem, this is a new type of retirement residence in the Ottawa area, one that caters to those who require a certain level of care, but still want to live in luxury.

"We've done a lot of these buildings and, over time, they have become more and more luxurious," says Lawrence. "Now everyone has a nice suite, a private dining room, plenty of amenities like spas, wellness centres and a grand lobby. The goal now is to make the retirement home seem like a luxury hotel."

And the small-but-efficient 6 person firm of SJL Architect is more than happy to have clients who cater to this niche. "We have clients who are articulate, who have a vision and who want to be proud of what these buildings look like in the end. We are happy to be dealing with clients who have the same vision and passion that we do."

Lawrence began his practice 17 years ago and he started out in the institutional space, parlaying a relationship he had built while interning into a string of school board contracts right out of the gate.

This type of work kept the firm busy for the first 5 years, but then about 12 years ago a friend referred him to Rejean Lemay, who was planning a retirement project.

"We ended up doing our first retirement home with him, and we ended up with a great working relationship that lead us into many more projects," says Lawrence.

"Plus once you do one or two of these and they are successful, other people find out about it and they want you to do the same thing for them."

Lawrence's working relationship with Lemay has indeed weathered the years; in fact, the most recent SJL project to open its doors in Ottawa is the Windsor Park Manor Retirement facility on Hunt Club near the Airport Parkway, a Lemay building.

Windsor Park Manor Opened Doors Dec 6th

Although they faced challenges of inclement weather and permit delays, the Windsor Park construction team lead by Prescott Russell Construction and Project Management was able to complete the project without a hitch. They celebrated their Grand Opening on Dec. 6th and Mayor Larry O'Brien was on hand to cut the ribbon.

The 25 million dollar retirement home boasts a fairly large footprint at 120,000 square feet, and it definitely makes use of every inch of the lot it sits on, the facade sitting a mere 50 feet from the curb. But despite its size, as Lawrence points out, it was nonetheless designed with the neighbourhood in mind.

"I think we managed to give it a fairly residential feel. We kept it low at 2 stories with a sloped roof so it would be aesthetically similar to the area," says Lawrence. "It's more or less designed to look like a very large home."

Lawrence notes as well that City policies actively encourage architects to pursue certain density levels within urban areas like this one, a goal the 150-unit building certainly achieves.

Prescott Russell founder and president Jacques Châtelain says the project would never have been a success without having such a great team, from the architect (SJL) all the way down the line. "We were lucky to have very good trades and consultants on this project," he says.

Valleystream A Great Success Story

Before Windsor Park, Shawn Lawrence's most recent retirement home project was another development called Valley Stream off Baseline Rd in the West End, which was built by Taplen Construction and opened in August

of 2009.

Lawrence says the 132,000 square foot, 25-million-dollar project is a great success story because the owners have filled most of the units in less than a year. "That's an amazing sales story," he says. "These are not condos, they are rental retirement units, so to fill that many that quickly, that's a great story."

Like Windsor Park, Valley Stream is built to have luxury appeal, with high-end fittings and furnishings and over a dozen different amenities like an on-site bistro cafe and movie screening room.

"Essentially it's like you have come full circle," jokes Taplen's Michael Assal. "When you were young you went off to college and had everything there for you in your dorm, now as you get older you get to have the same experience [at Valley Stream]... only with room service and better food!"

On a more serious note, Assal says he thinks that the high quality materials called for in Lawrence's design and implemented by his team played a great role in the facility's success so far. "The quality of these finishings is always important and we were all responsible for that," he says.

Retrofitting for Success

But of course, developers do not always have the luxury of building on open sites - sometimes plans call to reuse existing structures, and that can be more difficult.

"Certainly it is easier to go out in a field and build something than to take over an existing building," says Lawrence. "Sometimes you don't have as-built drawings and the old permits don't match what's out there, but you're basing your own designs on them... You just have to do a whole lot more review on site with these projects."

But despite the challenges of retrofit design, SJL has not shied away from this type of work. In the past year, they have seen the completion of two conversion retirement home developments, The Duke of Devonshire on Carling Avenue and The Lord Landsdowne in Old Ottawa South, both developed for Dymon Healthcare.

"I would call both of these 'adaptive reuse' projects,"

SJ Lawrence

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says Lawrence. "We took buildings that were doing something completely different and turned them into something that was in demand. Both have been very successful."

In the case of the 100,000 square foot Duke of Devonshire, the old building had been filled with medical offices - dentists, doctors and the like. Lawrence's design called for the addition of another floor and of course the conversion of existing space into a total of 104 retirement units and amenity space.

Lawrence says the main challenges of this retrofit were in modifying the envelope, and bringing the building up to code. Because the original design was commercial rather than residential, all the windows were completely sealed so the entire exterior had to be stripped down completely. The code updates were necessary because under the latest building code, new seismic requirements have to be met when adding floors to existing buildings.

The 127-unit, 125,000 square foot Lord Landsdowne replaced what was once a nursing home. Because the usage was a little closer to residential than the Carling retrofit was, this project was not as challenging to convert. "But we still had some headroom restrictions and other problems, as with any reuse building," says Lawrence.

Derek Noble is Senior Project Manager with Dymon Capital, which developed the two retrofits. He agrees that the projects had

their challenges, but says that they are pleased with the results.

"These were both extremely difficult retrofits," says Noble. "We were taking, in the case of Landsdowne, an existing nursing home, a run-of-the-mill building, and turning it into a world class retirement facility. Similarly with the Duke of Devonshire, we had an old medical office transformed into a showcase property for the city of Ottawa. Shawn (Lawrence) is a very creative person and a pleasure to work with from a client services perspective."

Making The Jump Into Residential Condos and Custom Homes

With all their success in designing winning retirement homes in Ottawa, it was only a matter of time before the SJL firm's talents were sought out for other residential applications. Most recently, Lawrence is designing 2 medium-large condominium buildings on Innes road in Orleans to be built by Gallivan Developments Inc.

"Shawn is a great designer. I like a contemporary flair and he does this well so it's a good fit," says owner Tom Gallivan. "He is also very approachable. A lot of architects are very competent but not approachable. Shawn is both and that's a great benefit of working with him."

Lawrence is also starting work on another project with Gallivan in the west end that will be comprised of residential units in trendy Westboro.

To further cement his firm's growing reputation as a truly general practice, Lawrence has also done some custom home design in his own neighbourhood of Rideau

Forest, Manotick and along the St. Lawrence river.

"We did our own home in Rideau Forest about 8 or 9 years ago," says Lawrence. "And because of that project, we have met a good group of friends and neighbours who more or less want to stay in the neighbourhood but want to build something new."

Lawrence says he enjoys the personal side of custom home design. "It's a completely different level of involvement when you do someone's home than when it's a commercial project. It's usually one of the most important things they're ever going to build and it's very personal. We bring in interior design consultants to make sure every detail is right."

In addition to all their expansion into

the residential sector, Lawrence still does commercial work as well, such as the four 100,000 square foot climate-controlled self-storage units they recently completed for Dymon or the two car dealership projects they recently finished for 417 Nissan and Marcel Belanger Auto.

Lawrence says he is pleased at how much the firm has continued to grow in recent years and he hopes to continue to expand the breadth and volume of his business in years to come.

"It's the same with any practice," he says. "When things go well, eventually you can be a little more selective with your work. That has started to happen for us and we're really happy about that."

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