



Left to right, Bindya Lad, Oliver Dang and Heather Dubbeldam of Dubbeldam Design Architects. Their exhibit, full of moving pieces, explores how clients interact with architects' plans. DUBBELDAM

Compromise and collaboration in design

Simple, conceptual and fun, Harbourfront exhibit reveals close relationship between client and architect



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"I've never been up here," says the older, well-dressed woman to her friend as they walk into the gallery.

Entering the exhibit, hesitantly, they're greeted by architect Heather Dubbeldam, who suggests that they slide or push a wall... or two: "You can make different room configurations," she tells them.

"I see," says the woman. "So what is this type of architecture called?" asks the well-dressed woman's friend.

After an explanation that it's conceptual, the ladies are sliding, pushing and pulling a little and, mostly, smiling. A few minutes later, a young mother and her two charges wander in. The little boys don't need to be told anything, since directly on the walls are the instructions "slide," "push," and "pull," which they do with gusto and peals of laughter. In a newly created enclosure, one of the little boys is directed to hear music and starts dancing. When the two boys stumble upon the big, orange cubes, they can barely contain themselves.

Part of a new show, Building Partners, at Harbourfront Centre's second floor architecture gallery, the Dubbeldam Design Architects exhibit is fittingly titled *pull push slide pivot lift tilt turn*. And while it's certainly a lot of fun, it's also a hands-on way to convey to gallery-goers that while "the architect provides the framework," a building is not complete until the "client manipulates elements," explains Ms. Dubbeldam.

Building Partners asks, simply, "What is the relationship between architect and client?" "Is a building a compromise or collaboration?" and "Can the client/architect relationship lead to a better building?" And the Dubbeldam team — which included Bindya Lad, Oliver Dang and Jacob LeBailey — decided the answers might be found by engaging the senses of touch, sight, sound and even smell. Closing off a corridor and turning it into a room, or making a big room very small with the pivot of a wall shows that space, or lack of it, affects one's experience. Sound-proofing in some areas and music in another also affects perception, as does quality of light: one wall, when pushed to the side, turns half of a light panel off. Another wall is painted charcoal grey on one side and white on the other so that, when pivoted, light is either reflected or absorbed. Some walls have windows that line up with shapes or mirrors on the walls... or with people's faces as they move through the exhibit.

The soft orange cubes littering the space can be configured into



beds, benches or columns. No matter what visitors create, the hope is that as they play, they'll leave with an understanding that decisions made with an architect have real-life implications that result in how a space, such as their own home, will be experienced.

"We do a lot of very serious work all the time, and it's nice to do something that's the counterpoint to that," says Ms. Dubbeldam. "Our normal projects last two to three years — this was, like, three weeks: come up with an idea, pare it down, make it simple."

Also deceptively simple is the Moriヤマ & Teshima Architects exhibit a few feet away. Here, a pathway of smooth river rocks invites gallery-goers inside. If they intend to walk across the rocks, further enticement is offered by what lies at the end of the journey: a gorgeous backlit panel of milky white onyx.

Inside the exhibit, called *Architecture of Light: Transcending Difference*, visitors are treated to audio, video and photographs of the firm's 2007 Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Toronto. "Our client was not only the university," they write, "but every faith group represented on campus, asking us to overcome a challenging design paradox: to create a uniquely versatile 'faith-neutral' venue with a design aesthetic that is universally perceived as a sanctuary and retreat for all, and where everyone would feel equally welcome and equally valued."

By distilling all faiths down to one element — that of light — and recreating it at the Spadina Ave. Building via dozens and dozens of backlit onyx panels, Moriヤマ & Teshima provides a successful meditation space for all students; at the Harbourfront gallery, a crunchy walk across loose stones and a rather quiet audio-visual presentation shows the Ontario's space enough, perhaps, to meditate on the architect-client relationship.

Rounding out the show are Ian MacDonald exhibit called *Architecture's In-site*, which explores the "current issue of the Ontario Association of Architects' magazine, *Perspectives*, features a cover story on "Architecture and the Non-Visual Senses" and encouraging us to manipulate, listen and even smell. Building Partners reminds us that when we hire an architect, we get to participate in the creation of that document.

Building Partners at Harbourfront Centre's architecture gallery runs until Jan. 2, 2011. Admission is free.

Images from the show *Building Partners* at Harbourfront Centre. Clockwise from bottom left:

Image of a residential project in Caledon, from an exhibit by architect Ian MacDonald. IAN MACDONALD

Moriヤマ & Teshima's Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Toronto, featured in the exhibit *Architecture of Light: Transcending Difference*. TOM ARBAN

Dubbeldam Design Architects' pull push slide pivot lift tilt turn. DUBBELDAM DESIGN ARCHITECTS

A backlit onyx panel from *Architecture of Light*. MARLEE CHOO