The Bata shoe factory, 10 kilometres north of Trenton, Ont., has been reborn as a residential building. QUADRANGLE AND DUBBELDAM ARCHITECTURE + DESIGN

A polished update for a former shoe factory

Architectural firms complete respectful retrofit of modernist Bata building

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Modernism, that disciplined and unornamented early-20th century movement of architecture, graphic design and furniture, prided itself on two things: honesty and a limited palette.

Honesty allowed people to see the underlying structure expressed on a building or a chair; no hiding of chair legs under fabric skirts and no decorative stone covering I-beams. And a limited palette meant that one could easily blur a building's boundaries between inside and out and create consistency from room to room; with furniture, a designer could achieve a sculptural look – think of a bright red Eero Saarinen Womb Chair – or, in graphic design, create a bold, striking advertisement using a just few primary colours and a limited amount of text.

These ideals were embodied into every brick, window and concrete column at the Bata shoe factory 10 kilometres north of Trenton, Ont., at Batawa. Indeed, it was modelled on the hometown factory in Zlin, Czechoslovakia, and others the company had built around the world (in 1938, the company "employed 42,000 people in Czechoslovakia and a further 23,000 abroad," according to Bata literature).

When this location was selected in 1939, Thomas J. Bata, at the age of 24, and 164 Czechs arrived, plans in hand, and built the factory and the surrounding village: "They always built the factories a little bit outside the city, near water; a river was important because they had tanneries," says Bata Development Corp.'s Bengt Gunnarsson, who has been involved with the Bata family in various roles for the past half-century.

Supplying shoes to postwar Canada, that humming, bustling factory would become a backdrop for Mr. Bata's young Swiss bride, Sonja, when she arrived in 1946. As a young woman, Sonja Wettstein had dreamt of becoming an architect, but a case of tuberculosis put a halt to her studies. So, it was only logical that, some 60 years later, with the factory now shuttered, Mrs. Bata – philanthropist, officer of the Order of Canada and widow – would ensure it was reborn as a residential building.

And Mrs. Bata, who died in February, 2018, at 91, would oversee all aspects of that rebirth, even down to window hinges and balcony handrails.

"It's the, you know, concrete, wood, steel, really, that's the intent, that simple modernist palette," says architect Dev Mehta, senior associate at Quadrangle.

"We spent a great deal of time with Mrs. Bata on the proportions of the windows, the materiality. It was probably a year and a half of detailed design meetings. I recall my first meeting with Mrs. Bata – we hadn't worked out the program of the spaces yet – we were talking about the detail of the window handle and the hinges," Mr. Mehta says with a laugh.

The interior was designed with a simple, modernist pallette, under the guidance of Thomas J. Bata's widow, Sonja, whose dreams of becoming an architect earlier in life were dashed by a case of tuberculosis.
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Mr. Bata and 164 Czechs arrived in 1939 to build the factory. The company 'employed 42,000 people in Czechoslovakia and a further 23,000 abroad' at the time, according to company literature
BATA DEVELOPMENT CORP.

Heather Dubbeldam of Dubbeldam Architecture + Design, who joined the project approximately 18 months after Quadrangle, says that although the design process with Mrs. Bata could be "gruelling," having a "client who cares about that level of detail [and] the human scale," brought out the best in everyone.

Ms. Dubbeldam smiles when she remembers Mrs. Bata holding each of the 3-D printed handrail mockups, critically, until the Goldilocks moment, or when the team laid out different wood-veneered, phenolic resin panels (for exterior cladding) on the front lawn so Mrs. Bata could choose the "correct" one in sunlight.

The reason for all the fuss is because the factory's original walls and windows – pretty much everything in between the sturdy concrete columns – had to be demolished to allow the building to be retrofitted to 21st-century standards. And energy performance was a big deal to Mrs. Bata, Ms. Dubbeldam says: "She described the history of all those factory towns, that sustainability – even back in the 20s and 30s – was at the forefront of all they did: utilizing natural ventilation, using passive systems before anyone was talking about it … they never had air conditioning back then."

So, for this residential rebirth, the team chose to drill 63 wells, each 600 feet deep, so the building could be fully heated and cooled by a geothermal system. Much of the original asphalt parking was removed, and a bioswale introduced to manage storm water. And since geothermal doesn't require HVAC as bulky as conventional systems, interiors could be opened up as well.

And boy, do they open! A walk though a number of suites (all are rentals) on an early fall day rewards the eye with 13-foot ceilings, massive (and modernist) windows, creamy white walls and light wood cabinetry and floors, which all combine to give a sense of well-being and healthiness (early modernists often touted the new architecture as having health benefits). Ms. Dubbeldam says Mrs. Bata "wanted to do ultra, ultramodern, light suites," but only a portion of them look this way because focus groups suggested many folks prefer dark wood floors and cabinetry.

Balconies, too, are of note, since they sit between the building's original columns so as not to interrupt the grid-like face that was so important to the Bata matriarch; this, Mr. Mehta says, "was another really, really tedious exercise … they're cantilevered steel members that tie back inside the building: very, very technically complicated, but it looks really simple and elegant."

Public space, such as the terrazzo-floored lobby and second floor (which has already hosted a few wedding receptions, Mr. Gunnarsson says), and the rooftop, are also simple and elegant. The rooftop, in particular, is noteworthy for its three pavilions – two mechanical and one public – that connect by a long, Miesian roof. While roof patios can be windy and impersonal, this one is quite the opposite, which, again, is just what Mrs. Bata wanted. Ahead of her time, Mrs. Bata also ensured the building be fully wired for high-speed Internet, since she knew, pre-COVID, that the future would see many working from home.

"She wanted to make a statement, a legacy with this building," Mr. Gunnarsson says.

"I think Mrs. Bata would have been very pleased if she had been able to see it finished," Ms. Dubbeldam says.

"Oh yeah, oh yeah," Mr. Gunnarsson says.

The Bata shoe factory conversion won a 2020 Green Building Award. The jury called it a "respectful adaptation of an important part of an important part of Ontario's industrial heritage" and noted that it has "very good energy performance."