

Estonian Centre Architect Profile Part 2

Alar Kongats talks about what matters most

For Alar Kongats, leading the design process for the Estonian Centre Project on Madison Avenue in downtown Toronto is very close to his heart.

“You can’t help but feel a very personal connection,” Alar said. “I want to make sure it comes out really well.”

Alar, who is Estonian-Canadian, grew up in the Hamilton area. He said there was always a very strong design aesthetic in the family home.

“We had modern Scandinavian furniture in our home,” he recalls. “It was very different from other peoples’ homes at the time.”

“It was a small house, but my parents really took pride in clean, simple details that were well executed. It was very important to them.”

Alar also remembers visiting a favorite aunt in New York City where he was further influenced. One of his favorite places to visit was Paley Park - a “pocket park” located in midtown Manhattan. It’s an example of a perfect urban oasis that provides a place for quiet contemplation in a bustling city. It provided some inspiration for the Estonian Centre design.

These early experiences helped shape Alar’s approach to his work. A modern, clean design that uses space wisely and incorporates natural, sustainable materials figures prominently.

There will be interesting green space at the new centre – a public outdoor space that can be enjoyed by the community and passers-by and a green roof for private events.

“Estonians really celebrate nature and appreciate access to the outdoors,” Alar said. “Incorporating these uses will also open up choices for how the centre functions and make it attractive to potential people who want to rent the space.”



The landscape firm North Design Office, headed by Alissa (Puhm) North and her husband Peter, has been retained to develop the design for the outdoor spaces.

An Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture at the University of Toronto, Alissa teaches graduate design studio, visual communication, and history, theory criticism courses. She graduated with Honours from the Bachelor of Landscape Architecture Program at the University of Toronto, and received the Master in Landscape Architecture degree with Distinction from Harvard's Graduate School of Design in 2003 where she was awarded the Jacob Weidenman Prize.

Function is extremely important when determining just how a building should be designed and constructed.

“We never really talk about how beautiful a building is.” Alar said. “What’s most important is how it functions.”

“Architecture is like writing - you have to know how to edit. It’s important to be your own good editor.”

“I like things stripped down and using minimal materials that are durable.”

The use of recycled materials whenever possible is also important.

For example, when Kongats Architects designed the King City Public Library, they reused some beautiful Douglas fir beams that were on the original site in the construction of the building.

Similarly, when they designed the Athletic and Wellness Centre at Centennial College, the design team noticed that the old gymnasium floor had wooden floors that could be reused. These were stripped down and refinished and became the walls of the new centre.

Alar is the recipient of three Governor General’s architecture awards and numerous Ontario Association of Architects (AAO) awards.

The Governor General’s architecture awards were won for these projects: the Centennial College Student Centre (2002), the Terrence Donnelly Health Sciences Centre (2012) and the Centennial College Athletic and Wellness Centre (2014.)

Alar says that sustainability is a very big issue right now in Estonian design and that there are some excellent young architects at work in Estonia who are developing international connections and reputations.

“They are designing in a very sophisticated and controlled way,” he said. “There is simplicity in the use of materials that is wonderful to see.”

“It’s important for a building to last over time.”

Alar’s intention is to help ensure that the proposed Estonian Centre will be a warm and vibrant home now and for future generations of the Estonian-Canadian community.