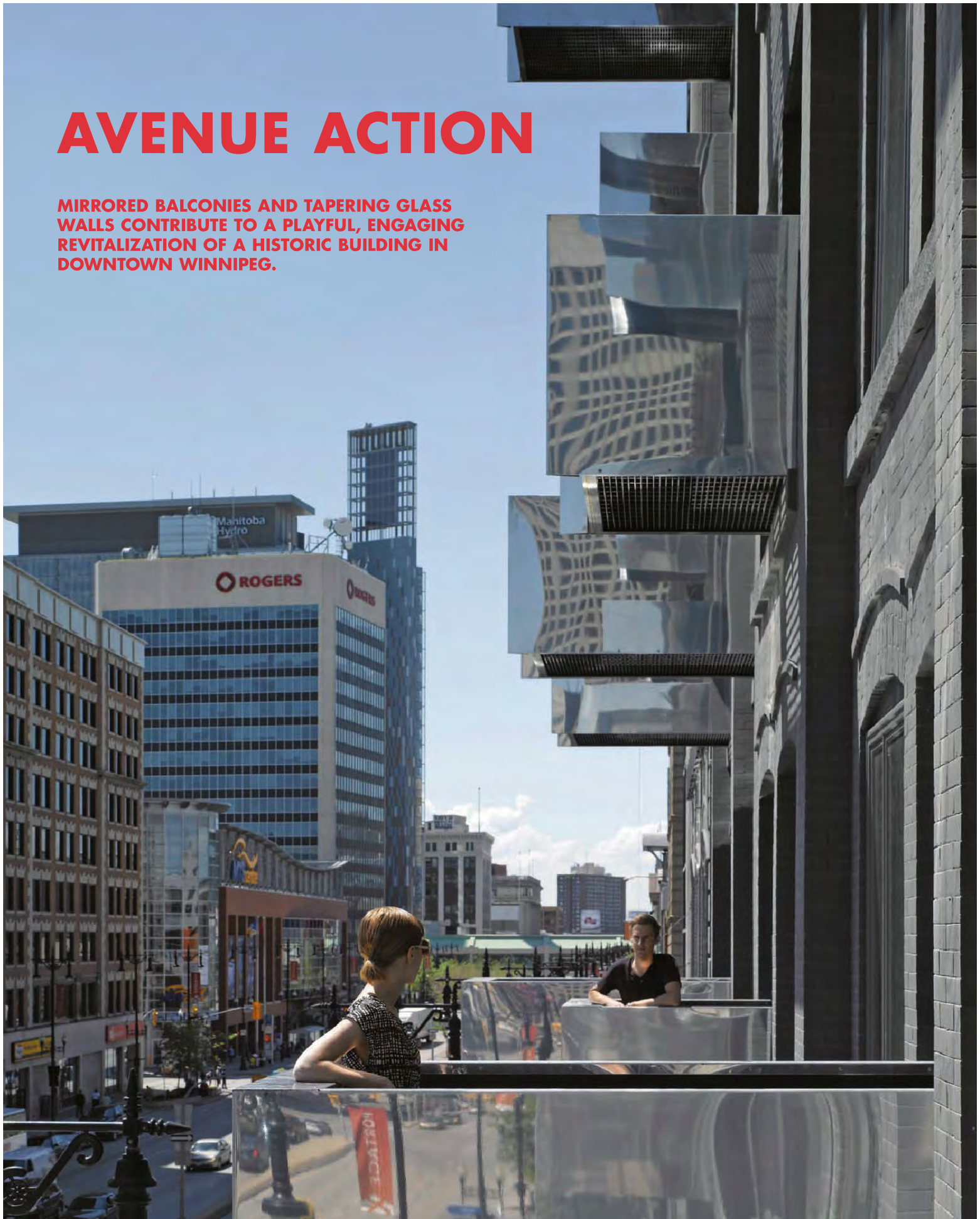


AVENUE ACTION

MIRRORED BALCONIES AND TAPERING GLASS WALLS CONTRIBUTE TO A PLAYFUL, ENGAGING REVITALIZATION OF A HISTORIC BUILDING IN DOWNTOWN WINNIPEG.



PROJECTS THE AVENUE ON PORTAGE AND MANITOBA START, WINNIPEG, MANITOBA
ARCHITECTS 5468796 ARCHITECTURE
TEXT LISA LANDRUM
PHOTOS JAMES BRITAIN

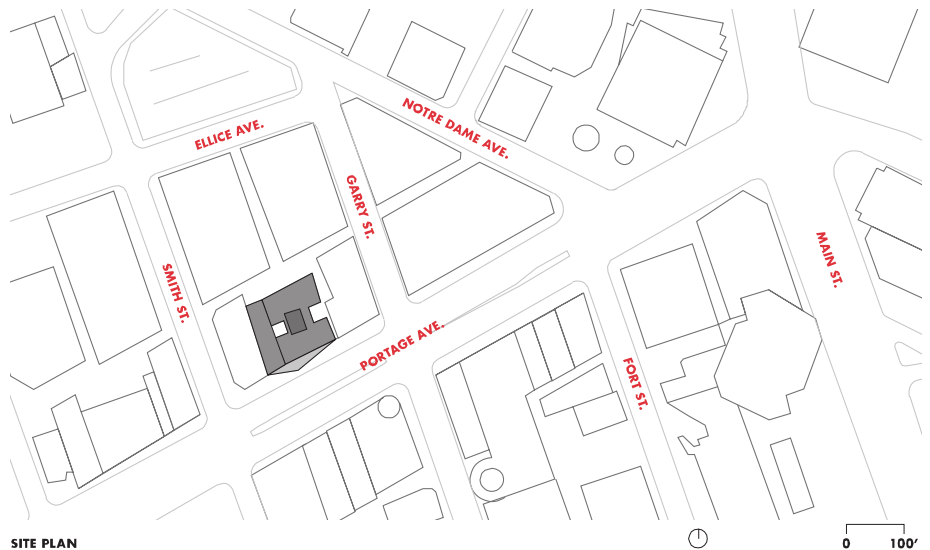
Before Portage Avenue became famous for forming, together with Main Street, the coldest, windiest intersection in all of Canada, it was celebrated for hosting Winnipeg’s warmest receptions and most heated public events. Nearly every parade, procession and protest in the city’s history—including royal visits, the 1919 General Strike, and the 2011 return of the Jets—has trodden on or across Portage Avenue, originally a muddy trading trail extending west to Portage la Prairie and beyond.

The Avenue Building, recently redesigned by Winnipeg’s award-winning 5468796 Architecture, participates in the animated history and potential of the legendary street it fronts. With its array of reflective balconies projecting over Portage Avenue like box seats in an urban theatre, this revitalized building performs as both avid spectator and engaging actor upon the Prairie’s primary promenade.

Originally built in 1904 for a mix of small businesses eager to join the commercial boom along Portage, the Avenue Building flourished in the early 20th century. But by the 1990s it had fallen into disuse and disrepair. By 2000 it was completely vacant and at risk of demolition. Then, in 2010, local developers Mark and Rick Hofer courageously opted, with city and provincial support, to rehabilitate the neglected structure into much-needed downtown housing. If that was the Hofers’ first praiseworthy decision, their second was equally laudable: enlisting 5468796, the firm named for its incorporation number.

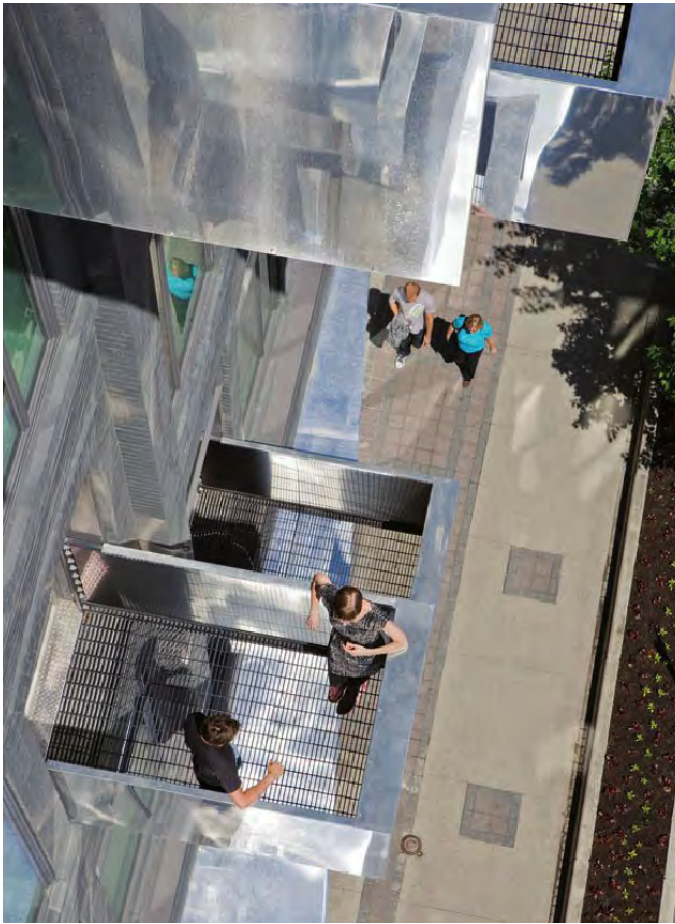
Following a successful collaboration in converting a nearby warehouse into 43 loft apartments (the Edge on Princess, which earned a 2010 Preservation Award), the Hofer brothers commissioned project architect Colin Neufeld, together with fellow principals Johanna Hurme and Sasa Radulovic, to tackle the century-old Avenue Building. Their task, as Hurme put it, was to invent “a new act for the old body.” This new act entailed everything from bold programmatic and structural interventions to cunning material and spatial transformations.

The architects were initially asked to accommodate 75 residential units, 40 underground



OPPOSITE BALCONIES JUT OUT FROM THE BUILDING AT DIFFERENT DEPTHS, CREATING A DYNAMIC FAÇADE AND ENCOURAGING SOCIAL INTERACTION. **TOP RIGHT** THE PROJECT MERGED THE AVENUE BUILDING WITH THE ADJACENT HAMPLE BUILDING, THE LATTER OF WHICH GAINED A THREE-STOREY ADDITION.

SITE PLAN



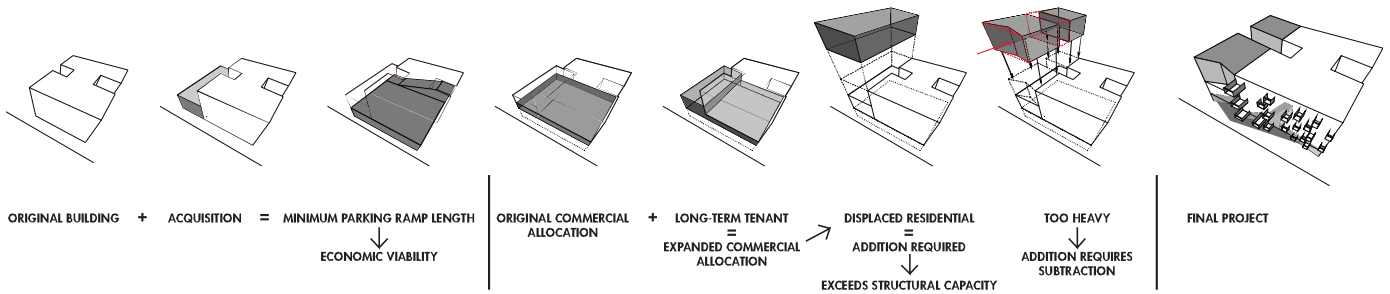
ABOVE LEFT DARING, OPEN METAL GRATES LEND A SENSE OF ADVENTURE TO THE BALCONY FLOORS. **ABOVE RIGHT** THE ENTRANCE CANOPY SHIFTS FROM STAINLESS STEEL TO MATTE BLACK AS IT CUTS BACK TOWARDS THE BUILDING.

parking stalls, and grade-level commercial space in the existing historic shell. The envelope included both the Avenue Building and the neighbouring Hample Building, named for Adolphe G. Hample, a prominent butcher and hide dealer. Though built just two years apart, the adjacent structures differed in construction: cast iron and heavy timber on stone foundations for the 88-foot-wide six-storey Avenue Building, and reinforced concrete (a new technology at the time) for the 44-foot-wide three-storey Hample. Reconciling these constructional differences, however, was ultimately less of a feat than what was to follow.

Well into construction, the not-for-profit tenant Manitoba Start signed on with a program requiring more space than the grade level provided. Adding area by reducing the number of residential units was out of the question, since city and provincial funding were contingent on 75 units.

For the agile designers, this spatial challenge became an opportunity. In short order, they proposed a three-floor addition atop the Hample, allowing Manitoba Start to fill the existing three-storey building while accommodating the requisite units in the new construction above. Once again, an obstacle gave rise to a creative response when it was determined that the hundred-year-old reinforced concrete could not support the added load. Neufeld and his team ingeniously floated an independent steel structure above the Hample with columns piercing through the existing building to bear on new poured-in-place piles reaching deep beneath the original footings.

Structural moves are only part of this building's full performance. Acts of public engagement and expression are performed by key mediating elements of the façade. Every new architectural element facing Portage—the

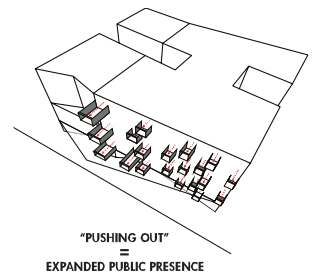
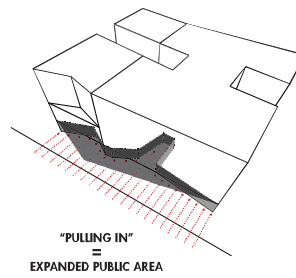




ABOVE ON THE SIDES OF EACH BALCONY, POLISHED ALUMINUM PANELS REFLECT THE EBB AND FLOW OF CITY LIFE ON PORTAGE AVENUE.

floating addition, the projecting balconies and the receding entries—shares in a material vocabulary of glass and mirrored-finish aluminum. They also share in interactive engagement, accomplished through a series of pushing and pulling moves, which, as 5468796 explain, “soften the boundary between the public streetscape and the private interiors.” For instance, the addition atop the Hample is articulated with glass walls folding back from the line of the façade, drawing residents out onto slender triangular porches. Receding walls of glass also define the street-level entries, inviting pedestrians into a tapered portico. The angular canopy amplifies the depth of the portico both by extending beyond the colonnade and by transitioning from mirrored aluminum to matte black as it slices back into the residential core. All these new glass and metal elements—at once receding and projecting, inviting in and drawing out—perform dynamically against the more static brick façade, itself largely unaltered.

Unaltered, that is, save for a heavy coat of grey paint. Strict preservationists may cringe at the homogenizing effect this paint has on the historic masonry. The original cut-stone sills, brick arches, pilasters, quoining, foliate surrounds and decorative spandrels, with their diamond motifs and herringbone patterns, are all effectively flattened by the industrial grey. This paint dematerializes the brickwork and dulls the crisp shadows of its ornamental features by diminishing the depth of detailed relief. To be fair, by the 1970s the Hample’s earth-toned brick had already been painted a ghastly salmon; and, to their credit, 5468796 dissuaded the owners from their initial urge to clad over the brick completely. But



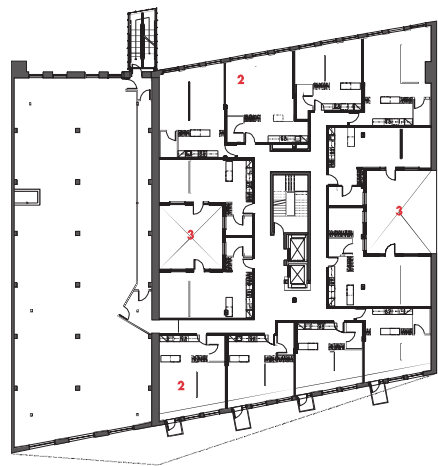
brushing on breathable grey paint was no mere compromise. Rather, Neufeld insists, this action was a choice intended to transform the two historic façades into a more unified neutral backdrop: a visually recessive surface against which the assertive balconies and colourful street life could claim centre stage.

Zealous Modernists may applaud this neutralizing paint job as a decisive turn away from traditional ornament. But make no mistake: ornament here is not abolished, but reinterpreted. Though the paint mutes the ornamental brickwork, it defers to other kinds of ornament revealed in material finishes.

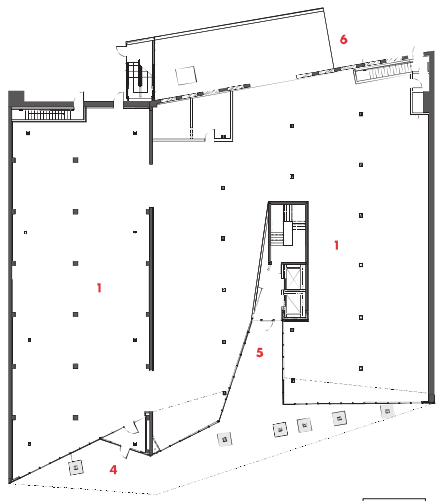
In particular, the highly polished aluminum recalls the reflective



LEVELS 5 AND 6

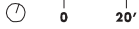


LEVELS 2 AND 3



LEVEL 1

- 1 COMMERCIAL
- 2 RESIDENTIAL
- 3 LIGHT WELL
- 4 COMMERCIAL ENTRANCE
- 5 RESIDENTIAL ENTRANCE
- 6 PARKING GARAGE ENTRANCE



finish of the columns in Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion and Tugendhat House. The Avenue Building's balconies are also effective by their overall distribution. By cantilevering them at distances from five to nine feet, and alternating their position from floor to floor, the designers have transformed the perception of the façade's regular pattern into a whimsical loose array. But seeing these balconies as funky sculptural elements, as a kind of Donald Judd display, would be an oversimplification. These balconies perform not just formally and aesthetically but socially and situationally, contributing to the experience of living in a dynamic community. Residents benefit, for example, from direct experience with the urban outdoors and with one another, via the surprising social opportunities these gregarious platforms provide. Moreover, in spite of their minimal form and detailing, these balconies have wonderfully excessive effects for passersby. This is not simply because their sheen is eye-catching but because, like the works of artist Anish Kapoor, they capture and reflect a surplus of movement and light from their milieu. These balconies do not simply attract, but redirect and disperse attention: gesturing to prosaic movements in the streetscape below, to ephemeral phenomena in the sky above and, laterally, to more distant horizons. Wrapped with mirrored aluminum on their east and west sides, the balconies shine with morning and late-day sun. Open industrial grating serves as their street-facing side and floor, causing the balconies to begin to disappear when viewed frontally. This allows the building to play a more deferential role alongside the grand diva of Portage: the

1917 Paris Building, with its bodacious ensemble of Neoclassical and Art Nouveau motifs.

The building's most notable interiors are those for Manitoba Start, a government-supported agency providing new Canadians with employment, language and settlement services. Serving up to 400 clients daily, Manitoba Start required a mix of administrative, educational and social settings with varying degrees of privacy and openness. The architects responded with a playful distribution of rooms, echoing the plans of Sou Fujimoto's Children's Centre (2006) and Aldo van Eyck's Municipal Orphanage (1956). Like Fujimoto and van Eyck, 5468796 sought a city-like balance between private spaces and socially integrative opportunities. Interconnectivity is also recognized in hexagonal motifs etched onto glass and cut into birch plywood and painted MDF partitions. Shifting back and forth, these porous panels finesse interrelationships among the spaces. Alternatively masking, veiling and framing, the partitions softly divide, blend and join the buzz of activity.

According to Neufeld, the hexagonal geometry—explicit in the partition patterns and implicit in the plan—was part of a design strategy to reconcile the non-orthogonal footprints of the two buildings and the non-aligning column grids of their distinct structures. For Neufeld, the 30-, 60- and 120-degree angles also reflect the oblique angle at which Portage meets Main, two blocks east. But the hexagonal configurations evoke much more: the patterns of *mashrabiya*s—the lattice-like wooden screens adorning windows and balconies in Islamic architecture; the mosaic-like quality of a world map; and the image of a beehive, a metaphor of



OPPOSITE OVERLAPPING HONEYCOMB PANELS FORM A POROUS PRIVACY SCREEN IN THE MANITOBA START TENANT SPACE. **ABOVE** THE HONEYCOMB MOTIF WEAVES THROUGH THE PARTITIONS. **RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM** A MEETING ROOM WITH ETCHED GLASS WALLS; THE DEEP GROUND-FLOOR ENTRANCE PULLS RESIDENTS AND VISITORS INTO THE BUILDING.

organic cooperation invoked by exemplary Modern architects. In short, these layered hexagonal gestures mimic the social infrastructure that Manitoba Start and 5468796 Architecture aim to provide.

Are there missed opportunities in the Avenue Building? Or, acts yet to be performed? Certainly. For instance, one hopes that the owners will not only invest in long-term maintenance of the parapets and rear masonry—work that appears to have been deferred—but also cultivate an ecologically active habitat in the building’s generous light wells. But the more significant acts to come are those the Avenue has always participated in: those parades, processions and protests, together with a variety of prosaic affairs, which have for so long brought life to the city’s core. As many Winnipeggers know, the downtown core has not lived up to its potential for much of the last century. Thus, having pleaded for proper attention for years, the Avenue Building, in its revitalized state, now stands poised to act again with confidence as a knowing witness and leading actor, agitating for further vital change. **CA**



THE AVENUE ON PORTAGE

CLIENTS MARK AND RICK HOFER
ARCHITECT TEAM SHARON ACKERMAN, MARIA AMAGASU, MANDY AIDCORN, KEN BORTON, JORDY CRADDOCK, MICHELLE HEATH, AYNLEE HURDAL, JOHANNINA HURME, JAYNE MILES, COLIN NEUFELD, ZACH PAULS, SASA RADULOVIC, SHANNON WIEBE
STRUCTURAL LAVERGNE DRAWARD & ASSOCIATES INC.
MECHANICAL G.D. STASYNEC & ASSOCIATES LTD
ELECTRICAL NOVA 3 ENGINEERING LTD
INTERIORS 5468796 ARCHITECTURE
CONTRACTOR HOFER CONSTRUCTION
AREA 95,500 FT²
BUDGET \$10.8 M
COMPLETION 2012

MANITOBA START

CLIENT MANITOBA START
ARCHITECT TEAM SHARON ACKERMAN, MANDY AIDCORN, KEN BORTON, JORDY CRADDOCK, MICHELLE HEATH, AYNLEE HURDAL, JOHANNINA HURME, JAYNE MILES, COLIN NEUFELD, ZACH PAULS, SASA RADULOVIC, SHANNON WIEBE
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INTERIORS 5468796 ARCHITECTURE
CONTRACTOR HOFER CONSTRUCTION
AREA 22,500 FT²
BUDGET \$1.7 M
COMPLETION 2012

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