



David MacWilliam, dean of Emily Carr University's Faculty of Visual Art and Material Practice, looks at mock-ups for the students' What Colour Are You project. RAFAL GERSZAK FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

VISUAL ARTS

Restoring dignity, one piece of art at a time

A student project comes to an Eastside mission – with a little help from one of Vancouver's biggest collectors

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The dining hall at the Union Gospel Mission's Downtown Eastside is a model of efficiency. With its cafeteria set-up, family-style seating and huge food-storage area, it's a vast improvement over the cheek-by-jowl communal-table arrangement that preceded the new \$29-million building, which opened last April. But it's fairly obvious that the immense room, with its big, blank, mustard-and-grey walls, could use a little something. Like some art.

"I think it would be nice to have something to look at, to just kind of brighten the room and make a real nice atmosphere," says Randy Spark, UGM's kitchen manager, who oversees hundreds of hot meals that are served each day. More than half his staff members have been through UGM's recovery program.

When you talk to the people who operate the mission, you hear the word "dignity" a lot. This is a prime concern: restoring dignity to difficult lives. There is dignity, the mission believes, in having a comfortable – and beautiful – space in which to eat, catch up with friends, or just pause from the hardships of the day.

"We often see people living up to the space they are in," offers UGM's Keela Keeping. "If it's dirty and chaotic, people are less likely to care for their surroundings, including other people in it. ... It is my feeling that art in

the dining room will help remove any lingering feelings of an institutional setting and subtly make it more home-like and inviting."

Across town on breezy, picturesque Granville Island, a group of students is working on it. They've enrolled in a course at Emily Carr University of Art + Design designed specifically this semester to realize the UGM project. Forget final exams: This course will wrap up in April with the real-world test of large-scale art installation in the mission's dining room (with professional help).

"This interaction that the guests at UGM are going to be having with our pieces that we create is huge," says student Lindsay Block-Glass. "It will change the space completely."

The idea was sparked on a Monday night last summer when Richard Deacon, a long-time UGM donor and volunteer, was working a shift in the kitchen. "I was looking at the walls in this gorgeous building and thought, boy, they're just missing something," says Deacon (who happens to work for The Globe and Mail). "There are all these beautiful orange-coloured chairs, and the walls are yellow, but there's zero art. I don't have a ton of money, but we have some pieces of art in our home, and they inspire me. And I just thought ... that people who use this facility deserved to have the same kind of visual stimulation, if you will, and the chance to enhance their lives like anyone else."

The mission believes in the

power of art and runs several art-related programs, but it certainly has no budget to be buying it. So the following weekend, Deacon called up Bob Rennie, a local real-estate marketing machine and prolific art collector or who has opened an exhibition space, the Rennie Collection at Wing Sang. Would Rennie (also a UGM supporter) consider getting involved? By Monday morning, Rennie was firing off e-mails with ideas.

"This is our community," says Wendy Chang, director of the Rennie Collection, which is located a few blocks from the mission. "Everyone was gung-ho right away."

What wasn't clear was whether lending art from the collection would work. With a mandate to focus on identity, social injustice and appropriation, the Rennie Collection work can be challenging and political, and UGM was looking for something more pleasant and inspirational (although not religious, despite the mission's Christian basis). Anything that could upset UGM's users in any way, that could provoke unpleasant memories, would not be appropriate.

Rennie sits on the board at Emily Carr, and it didn't take long for the idea of having students create work for the space to form. The university was also enthusiastic.

"I thought a course that is project-based would be a great opportunity for the students," says Yunhee Min, who teaches the Vicinity of Painting course. "It's the first time for a lot of people – including myself –

teaching a class that is actually going to realize a work on-site."

Min has divided the class into four teams, each taking on a different area of the 2,917 square-foot dining hall. This week they presented their ideas to the UGM and Rennie Collection honchos for the first time, in a school studio.

The proposals include a 50-colour, 320-tile piece created with input from UGM's users, who will choose a colour "that prompts positive memories" and also suggest a word – such as "hope" or "faith" – to go on the tile (or the word may be extracted from interviews the team will conduct with the clients).

"We want to create something positive and beautiful and hopeful for the space," says Block-Glass, presenting her group's piece *We are All Colours*.

"I'm really impressed," says Chang after watching the presentations. "Each group has taken a very interesting approach."

But with real-life applications come real-life considerations. Neither of the two women presenting a proposal for a ceiling mobile has built a mobile before – would the non-concrete ceilings be able to support it? Carey Fouks, the Rennie collection's director, art services, suggests a change in direction. "If you do paper lanterns, then you don't have an issue," he says.

Another group's proposal for a "vertical garden" installation for one large wall is an aesthetically pleasing assemblage of pieces created from different materials, all in varying shades of green.

But Fouks zeroes in on the pieces created with egg-crate foam: not very durable, he says. Worse, the material might evoke unpleasant feelings. "The foam is maybe not a happy thing for these people," says Fouks, pointing out that many of UGM's clients may have spent uncomfortable nights on a foam mattress.

A fourth group, proposing installations for the pillars, suggests using historic train-hopper symbols, used historically to communicate information about important matters such as whether a place had work to offer, or a dog, or would serve a meal. One symbol, indicating good food, seems a particularly good fit for the project: I8.

The discussions in the classroom range beyond the art and its creation, extending to the space and the users.

"School's not always something that we can apply, to be honest, to real life," says Block-Glass. "So to have something that is impactful as well as being educational for us and make a difference is really exciting and inspiring."

Back at the mission, Spark, who is about to serve up a lunch of sausage patties, rice, mashed potatoes and veggies, is looking forward to seeing something on those big empty walls.

"I think it's going to be awesome," says Spark, who's been kitchen manager for nine years. "I don't know what exactly the pictures are that they're going to do or anything, but I have full confidence that they're gonna be great."