

# *ALL TOGETHER NOW*

**DX23 Vancouver: Exploring Integrated Design**



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## INTRO

The Design Expedition (DX) was developed to engage, explore, and discuss design ideas among a diverse cross-section of GBBN employees. Launched in 2015, our first DX went to Philadelphia, where tours of architecturally significant buildings helped inform our Guiding Principles and crystallize our vision for the firm. The same spirit infused subsequent Design Expeditions to Toronto, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and London, where we considered how to integrate research, technology, transformative vision, and our design tenets into our process.

In 2020, we were packing our bags for Chicago to explore wellness. We halted our plans when the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the globe, plunging the world into an unprecedented crisis.

DX's three-year travel hiatus validated several long-held beliefs: pushing back from desk and screen is essential; the tangents and rabbit holes of face-to-face conversation and collaboration are indispensable; experiencing architecture and design in-person is invigorating and elicits surprising reactions; connecting to nature can feel like a luxury (but shouldn't).

With renewed anticipation and excitement, our 2023 DX cohort headed to Vancouver to explore integrated design.



**“DX gave me a better understanding of GBBN’s culture. It was a chance to nerd out; to make community and sharing part of the process.” —Meredith**



**“Integrated design begins with integrated thinking—how do we make space in our heads and incorporate this thinking into our process?” —Adam**

## WHY INTEGRATED DESIGN?

Our multidisciplinary practices brings together expertise in architecture, interiors, computational design & digital fabrication, sustainability, resilience & well-being, environmental graphic design, and research. Bringing them together early in a project can positively impact built environments and the people who use them.

As an intercoastal city, Vancouver offers interesting examples of different disciplines can align in projects. How does Vancouver connect to its natural surroundings and its indigenous history and community? How do building codes impact the pedestrian experience among its many residential towers? How are mass timber building systems having an impact? How are spaces responding to the human scale? How or (how not) does Vancouver’s built environment foster a sense of welcome and inclusivity?



“DX is an opportunity to geek out with others about buildings and use those conversations to push our own work.” —Nick

## THE DX23 TEAM

Aaron Anderson  
Chris Bartell  
Brooke Behnfeldt  
Meredith Benz  
Alyssa Brandt  
Chad Burke  
Ivan Cheung  
Josh Duddey  
Adam Fosnaugh  
Chris Guignon  
Amanda Markovic  
Stephen Mrdjenovich  
Mel Ngami  
Matt Plecity  
Liz Schmidt  
Nick Sillies  
Mandy Woltjer  
Christopher Yost  
Tyler Zembrodt



“Small group preparation set the stage for deeper conversations and connections.” —Alyssa

## PREPARE

Before every DX, we take time to investigate the projects we’re going to tour. These early explorations help build relationships before the trip begins and often set travelers up to have their minds changed (or minds blown) comparing how a project looks on screen to how it feels in real life.

DX23 participants broke into small groups prior to departure to study assigned projects. After landing in Vancouver and settling in, the small groups dined together to share first impressions of the city and finalize their presentations for the following days.

DX is always more than just touring projects. Ample time for the whole DX team to gather and reflect is built into each expedition so we can learn from each other and consider architecture from different points of view.



## EXPLORE

There's something about exploring an unfamiliar city that heightens the senses; that makes the mundane feel noteworthy. These can be simple moments, like steps in public squares, or larger ones, such as Vancouver's bike infrastructure or the streetscape itself.

High-rise towers in Vancouver are set back on their podiums, which helps make them feel less "looming" and allows opportunities for urban landscaping we don't typically see in our home cities. The strategy also creates breathing room, and views to the surrounding mountains, a reminder of the city's connection to its environment.

Exploring the city on foot helped us understand the pedestrian experience: What's working well? What gets obscured by the glittering green glass of residential high-rises or overshadowed by views of snowcapped mountains in the distance? What moments took us by surprise, sparked questions, or incited delight?



**"The city invites respite by offering the ability to sit and experience people walking by you." —Mel**



## ITINERARY

### SUNDAY (4/30)

**AM:** Depart home cities for Vancouver, British Columbia.  
**PM:** Dinner with DX small groups.

### MONDAY (5/1)

**AM:** Fast + Epp tour and deep dive conversation into integrated design.  
**PM:** Guided tour of Ronald McDonald House BC & Yukon. Group dinner at Salmon N' Bannock, Vancouver's only indigenous restaurant.

### TUESDAY (5/2)

**AM:** Group reflection on the previous day and small group project presentations.  
**PM:** Small group self-guided walking tours of Vancouver Convention Center (LMN Architects) and other buildings including: The Alberni (Kengo Kuma), Robson Square (Arthur Erickson), Blood Alley Square (Henriquez + Partners), Vancouver Public Library (Safdie Architects), and Vancouver House (Bjarke Ingels Group). Dinner in small groups throughout Vancouver's Yaletown neighborhood.

### WEDNESDAY (5/3)

**AM:** Group reflection on the previous day, small group project presentations and discussion, and design charrette.  
**PM:** Tour and self-guided exploration at the University of British Columbia, including: Tallwood House at Brock Commons (Acton Ostry Architects & Hermann Kaufmann Architekten with Fast + Epp), AMS Student Nest (B+H Architects and DIALOG), Robert H. Lee Alumni Center (HCMA), Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences (Saucier + Perrotte), and Orchard Commons (Perkins + Will). Dinner in small groups...and karaoke!

### THURSDAY (5/4)

**AM:** Group exploration of Vancouver's Shipyards District, including: 1 Lonsdale Avenue (John Hemsworth Architecture) and The Polygon Gallery (Patkau Architects with Fast+Epp).  
**PM:** Chartered bus to Whistler, British Columbia with spontaneous stop at Shannon Falls Park. Docent guided tour of Audain Art Museum (Patkau Architects) in Whistler. Group dinner at The Raven Room in Whistler.

### FRIDAY (5/5)

Depart Vancouver for home cities.



**"This DX flowed from one small group to another seamlessly. People made space for each other. The result was rich conversation—the kind we want to infuse into our work" —Brooke**





**“The Fast + Epp building is just a box, but incorporated mass timber, and the warmth and smell of wood. You don’t need geometric somersaults when you work with the constraints of a material and let it shine.” —Stephen**



## FAST + EPP

Perhaps it’s unsurprising that internationally recognized structural engineering firm Fast + Epp used wood prominently in the design of their headquarters. One of the top five structural engineers doing mass timber in North America and Europe, their headquarters used wood in varied ways, including hybrid mass timber construction (a combination of wood and other materials like concrete and steel). Cross Laminated Timber was used extensively for floor plates, stairwells and elevator cores. Their projects include INTRO Cleveland, the tallest mass timber building in the United States, and Tallwood House on the campus of the University of British Columbia, the tallest mass timber hybrid building in the world. Fast + Epp’s headquarters also uses innovative Tectonus devices that act as shock absorbers, a feature that can allow a quick return to occupancy after an earthquake.

Beyond letting us explore their building, our Fast + Epp hosts—Tobias Fast, Ian Boyle, and Jamie Pobre Sullivan—shared insights about their projects and process. They graciously provided meeting space for us so we could settle in as a group and initiate conversations that would continue all week.



**SURPRISE!** The Concept Lab at Fast + Epp continues their legacy of innovation with dedicated research, testing, and development space that helps them advance structural design. DXers loved exploring the lab and appreciated how it puts making on display and celebrates continued learning and discovery.





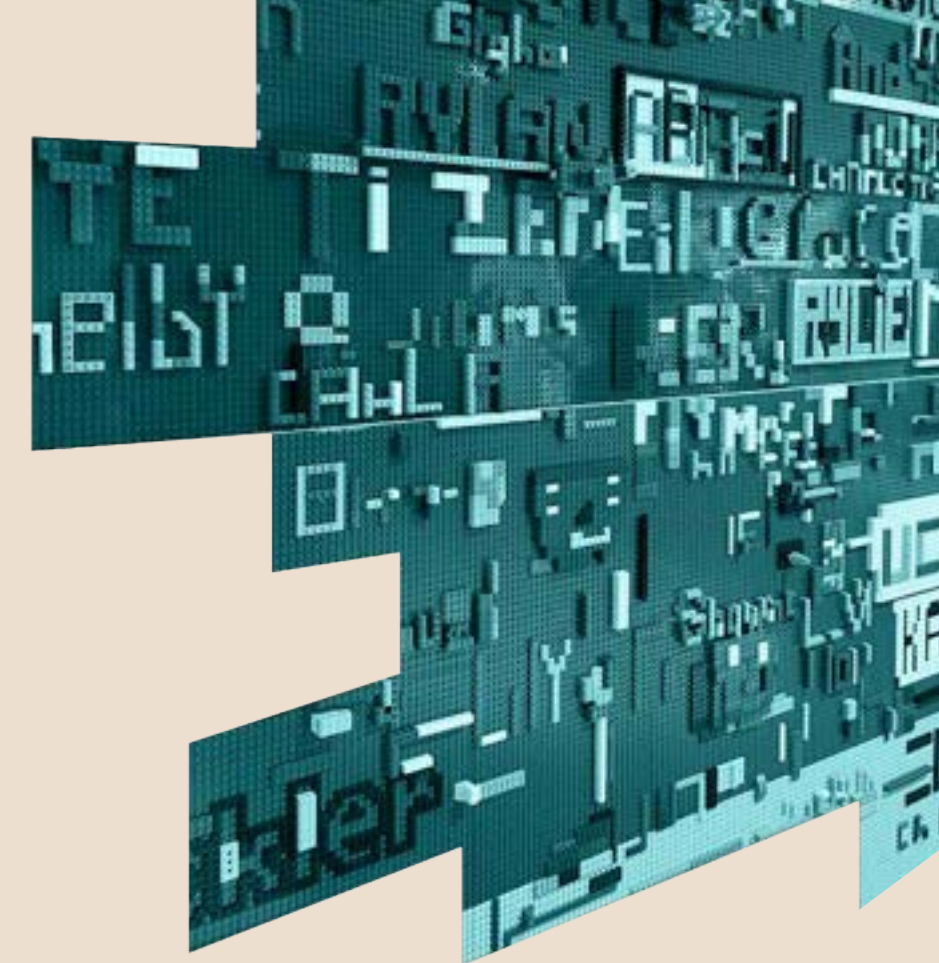
“Functional, simple moves, like operable windows, build wellness. Start with one and build a new norm over time.” —Mandy



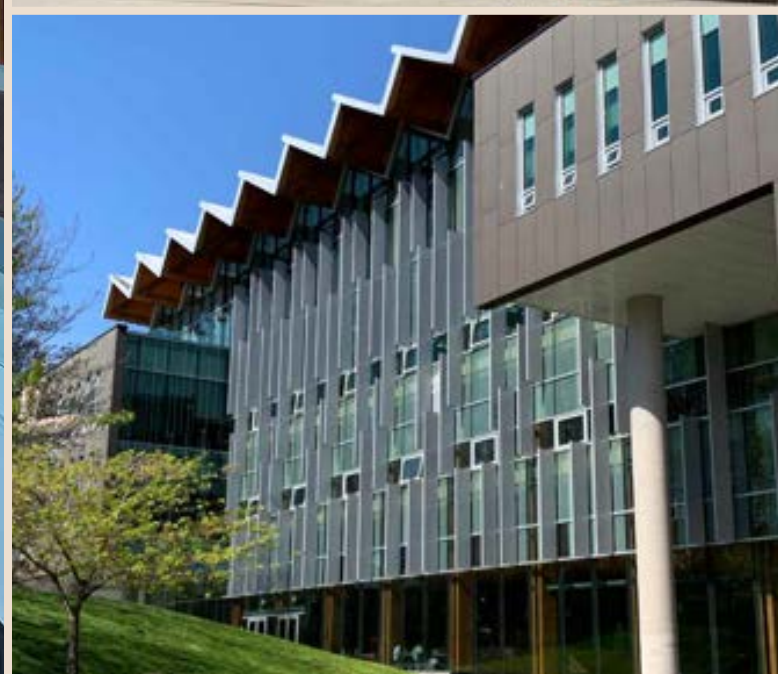
## RONALD MCDONALD HOUSE BRITISH COLUMBIA & YUKON

With an alpine mountain vibe that fits its context, Ronald McDonald House BC & Yukon, designed by Michael Green Architects (MGA) and completed in 2014, expanded their capacity from 12 families to 73, while preserving the nurturing feeling present in the original house.

As part of the design process, MGA principal Michael Green wrote and illustrated *Alpenglow*, a children’s picture book that metaphorically describes the mission of Ronald McDonald House Charities and the thinking behind the house’s design—which provides layers of space to help families find support and community. Four residence buildings with private rooms are connected by communal living, kitchen, and outdoor spaces where kids can play and families can connect.



**SURPRISE!** Play is fun: Chronic illness can disconnect us from the joy of physical movement, discovery, and fresh air. Designed for children (but not childish), this RMH integrates many ways to play—climbing and sliding, biking, Lego building on walls, making music, digging in the dirt, or just walking through a kid-sized door—within a sophisticated environment.



## UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Of all the buildings we crawled around on the University of British Columbia (UBC) campus, two had us primed with curiosity: Tallwood House designed by Acton Ostry Architects, a 17-story residence hall and the tallest hybrid mass timber building in the world; and The AMS Student Nest, a LEED Platinum student union designed by B+H Architects and DIALOG, with significant input from the students themselves.

One of the great delights of DX is the ability to walk through projects at one's own pace, explore specific details and moments, or absorb a project holistically from a particular vantage point. Up close and in-person, we were able to step beyond the "money shots" and see the connections, the details, and the material transitions. Visiting architecture in person also leaves room for serendipity and surprise which, at UBC, came in the form of the Robert H. Lee Alumni Center.

### **SURPRISE!**

The Robert H. Lee Alumni Center, designed by HCMA, was a sleeper hit of DX23. DXers raved about the restraint of the alumni center, its materials (like blackened steel), its elegant central stair, nice cut outs, and excellent detailing. The Alumni Center reinforced the idea that a simple and elegant small building can be just as successful as a grand one.

**"A big budget doesn't guarantee success. When resources are used holistically and thoughtfully, the results can be stellar." —Josh**



**"I didn't expect the landscape to impact the environment as much as it did." —Amanda**



## SHANNON FALLS PARK

En route to visit the Audain Art Museum in Whistler, our bus driver suggested a spontaneous stop at Shannon Falls Park, which has a spectacular waterfall rising over 1,000 feet, making it the third highest falls in British Columbia. Hiking to the overlook resulted in a healthy misting; cold streams invited dipping of hands and feet. In a region filled with breathtaking views, this was an opportunity to do more than look at nature from afar, it allowed an interaction that, increasingly for many people, feels like a rare luxury.





“Vancouver reinforced for me the need to always ask ‘who is this for?’ and question if a design move is for the good of users, resources, or the community?” —Aaron

## AUDAIN ART MUSEUM

A big budget may not guarantee success, but when resources, client vision, site, and architectural expression align, the results can be stellar. Patkau Architects considered the site’s floodplain location and the region’s average 40 feet of annual accumulated snowfall to design this gem of a museum, which houses Canadian builder and philanthropist Michael Audain’s collection of work from British Columbian and Indigenous artists, as well as temporary exhibits from around the world.

Questions on our minds before we visited were: How well does the building honor the collection of Indigenous art it was created to house? Was input from Indigenous communities or artists solicited?

A sentiment expressed on our DX17 trip to Los Angeles took on a new relevancy as we toured the Audain: “You can tell an awful lot about what people think about you by the spaces they design for you.” Michael Audain has been candid about the sweetheart deal he got from the city of Whistler for the building site. Does the final project appropriately and authentically celebrate the work within? It is a question we continue to explore.



**SURPRISE!** Looks can be deceiving. At first glance, online images suggest a building nestled into a remote evergreen forest, but the Audain Art Museum sits along a well-trafficked road adjacent to bustling Whistler Village, a popular tourist destination and ski resort. The museum’s high-quality materials, beautifully detailed design, daylight, and framed, wooded views contribute to a rich in-person experience that isn’t fully captured through images.



## THE CHARRETTE

Conversation is a huge part of every DX. In Vancouver, we gathered after breakfast for meetings to preview the day's agenda and hear presentations about the buildings we'd see. We also participated in a group design charrette, using a confidential client and project. One-part urban design, one-part architecture, and influenced by the urbanism we were experiencing, the energy of exploration drove the fruitfulness of the charrette.

As we worked through the charrette, we could feel the trip rubbing off on us. We each brought integrated thinking—our unique lenses of planning, architecture, interiors, story, sustainability, landscape, plus what we were experiencing—into a short, intense, collaborative, and fun exploration of design challenges within the charrette. We found this exercise begged the question: Does being in an unfamiliar environment allow us to stay on the bubble of possibility longer? Does being in our daily realities tether us too quickly to familiar obstacles and challenges?



**“What made our DX charrette successful was people found ways to communicate. It set a high bar for how a DX charrette can go.” —Matt**



**“Every DX should experiment with a design process.” —Ivan**

## TAKEAWAYS

At GBBN, we enjoy a challenge when the solution isn't clear at first. We believe the first or easiest answer isn't always the right one. We know our designs are richer—more efficient, memorable, and functional—when we view our clients' design challenges through multidisciplinary lenses. Our clients' design challenges are always evolving in their complexity. Our ability to help them must continually evolve as well. The Design Expedition to Vancouver highlighted the need to use our lenses as early as possible so we can help our clients use their physical assets to do more than they ever dreamed possible.

In 2019, the Design Expedition to London explored uncommon partnerships and how these varied alliances and lenses could enrich our work. This led to us growing our practice by adding in-house experts in computational design & digital fabrication, sustainability & resilience, and research. It also led us to advance our expertise in environmental graphic design. Our 2024 Design Expedition to Vancouver not only validated this approach but inspired us to continue to find new ways to leverage our multidisciplinary expertise. From internal Design Blitz charrettes to renovations, adaptive reuse, and new building projects at all scales, our approach to integrated design drives innovation, collaboration, and design excellence.



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