



A distinctive character on the UW campus

BY KARL KESSLER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREJ IVANOV

Wedding cake. Sugar cube. Flash cube. Any doubt that its various nicknames are affectionate is set aside by the countless photos of the University of Waterloo Dana Porter Library in all seasons, in every sort of light, shared on everything from postcards to Instagram during the past half-century.

Envisioned as the Library for the Humanities and Social Sciences, or Arts Library, it was built between 1964 and 1970, and designed by Toronto's Shore and Moffat and Partners, architects of other 1960s Waterloo campus buildings.

"Because of its relationship to the campus centre group, this building can afford to be of a distinctive architectural character," stated the 1962 building committee brief

to the architects. Doris Lewis, university librarian, was committee chair.

Along with the 1960s Arts Lecture Hall and Modern Languages buildings, Dana Porter defines the edge of a plaza. It's on high ground, visible from long distances; a focal point.

Its plan is square. The sunken first floor, in a moat to permit daylight, is a rough-faced masonry plinth supporting the entrance level above, a recessed arcade of concrete elliptical arches with windows between. Like draw-bridges, two sets of steps cross the moat.

The third floor, a platform, extends beyond the second. The fourth is recessed. Above that, an ascetic, almost-cube of precast concrete appears to float. Hundreds of windows – small, incised slots – perforate the façade.

It's impressive, not perfect. "Inviting" is

not a word that springs to mind. Inside, there are no sweeping, open areas typical of big libraries. Its spaces are filled nearly to capacity.

But it's stunning, year-round. Gleaming like a salt crystal by day, at night it's a lantern, light spilling out all over its surface. Inside, it buzzes, filled with students sitting at carrels by the perimeter windows, working hard.

It's not the only mid-20th century library that could be mistaken for a fortress. But the gesture is understandable – powerful. If it looks a bit like a locked safe, what is its treasure? Contemplation. Study. Creativity. If it's somewhat of a blank canvas, it's an invitation to dream something new.

Karl Kessler is co-ordinator of Doors Open Waterloo Region. 

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