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DIAMOND SCHMITT DESIGNS MASS TIMBER MARPOLE COMMUNITY CENTRE AS A ‘CIVIC LIVING ROOM’ IN VANCOUVER PARK

*Thoughtful civic architecture that supports social connection and
sustainability within a growing neighbourhood.*



Vancouver, BC, Canada May 6, 2026 – The new Marpole Community Centre, designed by Diamond Schmitt for the City of Vancouver and the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation, sets a new benchmark for low-carbon civic infrastructure in Canada. Realized with an exposed mass timber structure and targeting Passive House and LEED Gold certification, the project reimagines the role of the community centre as both environmental infrastructure and social anchor within the rapidly intensifying Marpole neighbourhood.

Replacing the city's oldest community centre, the new building expands the program area of the existing community centre, bringing together recreation, childcare, and community programming within a highly efficient, all-electric building. Conceived as a “civic living room within a park,” the project extends beyond its footprint—integrating indoor and outdoor gathering spaces to support everyday use and informal gatherings like community events and performances—strengthening the centre’s role as a social and cultural hub for Marpole’s diverse and multi-generational community.

“Our vision for the Marpole Community Center was to create an inclusive and welcoming high-performance facility that embodied the City’s ambitious sustainability and accessibility targets while also supporting the community’s goals for how they wanted to use the building and grow their programming,” says Architect Caroline Inglis.

Positioned on the southwest edge of Oak Park, the building strengthens the relationship between civic space and landscape while minimizing disruption to existing green space. This siting allowed the original facility to remain operational throughout construction and establishes a clear civic presence at the intersection of Oak Street and Park Drive while maintaining a scale that respects the surrounding residential neighbourhood.

The architectural approach centers on openness, permeability, and connection to the park setting. A low, horizontal massing is articulated by three gently curving roof forms that organize the program volumes, echoing the natural character of the landscape. This strategy reduces the perceived scale of the building and establishes a welcoming, legible identity within the greenspace.

Program spaces are organized within two primary volumes connected by a central circulation spine that acts as both lobby and social condenser and runs the length of the building. Active recreation and fitness spaces, including the gymnasium, are located along the north elevation, directly connecting to outdoor sports courts and playing fields. This orientation reduces solar heat gain while lowering cooling demand. Along the south façade, community-oriented spaces—including a kitchen, and multipurpose rooms—are arranged to maximize daylight and visibility to the public realm. A childcare facility occupies the second level, providing a secure and independent environment while remaining integrated with the broader community centre.

Transparency and visual connection are fundamental to the building’s civic role. Interior glazing and open circulation reveal the diversity of programs within, encouraging interaction among visitors and reinforcing the centre’s role as a shared civic space. A transparent stair and elevator tower—conceived as a lantern—signals the building’s presence at the park edge. Rising to align with

the surrounding mature tree canopy—which has been maintained through careful siting and design—the illuminated tower reveals the vertical timber structure within and establishes a recognizable presence both day and night as a beacon within the park, guiding people to the building’s core.

To the north, basketball courts connect directly to the gymnasium and youth multipurpose room, extending activity outdoors. On the southside, an ethnobotanical garden grounds the landscape in its cultural context. A welcome circle to the west side and a teaching circle to the east side create opportunities for community events and gatherings to spill beyond the building’s footprint. An oversized shingled cladding system inspired by cedar shingles helps modulate the building’s scale and reinforce its connection to place.

As part of B.C.’s Mass Timber Demonstration Program, a defining feature of the building is the exposed mass timber structure which shapes the interior character of the facility while significantly reducing embodied carbon. Enabled through an alternate building code approach, the extensive use of mass timber contributes to the building’s overall 41% embodied carbon reduction while creating a warm, tactile, and human-scale environment that reflects the natural context of Oak Park.

From the outset, community members were engaged in the design process to ensure that the new centre responds directly to community needs. Collaboration with Sky Spirit Consulting, Indigenous design partners informed the integration of Coast Salish people’s perspectives throughout the building’s public spaces. This collective process has helped shape a series of spatial and artistic interventions by Musqueam artists that embed cultural meaning within the site, extending programming into the landscape and activating the building on all four sides—creating moments where landscape, architecture, and art intersect.

Sustainability is embedded into the project’s design, with the Centre targeting Passive House certification through a highly insulated, airtight envelope, and heat-recovery ventilation that significantly reduce operational energy demand. An all-electric system supports the City of Vancouver’s climate goals, operational emissions while maintaining high levels of occupant comfort. These systems are complemented by passive design strategies—including orientation,

shading, and daylight optimization—which further enhance performance and reduce reliance on mechanical systems.

Accessibility was also a key priority. Targeting Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certification (Gold), the facility is organized to provide intuitive, equitable access for all users. A continuous, gently sloped approach ensures that all visitors access the building through the same shared path, reinforcing dignity and inclusion as core principles of the civic experience.

As the Marpole neighbourhood continues to grow and evolve, the new community centre establishes a contemporary civic landmark within Oak Park—one that brings recreation, culture, and care within a resilient, low-carbon framework. In doing so, it offers a model for how future civic buildings can support both environmental performance and the social life of the city.

About Diamond Schmitt

Diamond Schmitt is a global architecture firm that designs transformative, purpose-driven, and highly sustainable buildings across sectors. Delivering innovative architecture that empowers people, communities, and organizations to harness change for the greater public good, Diamond Schmitt employs a collaborative process to create bold designs renowned for their exceptional performance and meticulous craftsmanship. With offices in Vancouver, Toronto, and New York, the firm has designed unique recreation and community spaces—including the Cor Van Raay YMCA in Lethbridge, Daniels Spectrum in Toronto, Marlene Meyerson JCC in Manhattan, and the Oakville Trafalgar Community Centre—all known for their civic-focused versatility of space, amenities, and striking design. Current projects include Cameron Community Centre and Library in Burnaby, the redevelopment of Parkinson Recreation Centre in Kelowna, and Wabash Community Centre in Toronto.

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