



The play of shade and light, rather than design, gives complexity to the building.



Photo: Meredith Ebbin



Ted Wood

# ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

*Architectural clichés are absent from XL House, but the new \$115 million building has captured the essence of Bermudian architecture.*

PHOTOS: ROLAND SKINNER

## COMMERCIAL WINNER

XL House, Bermudiana Road, Hamilton

Owner: XL Capital Ltd., Michael P. Esposito Jr., chairman, Brian O'Hara, president and chief executive officer

Architect: Ted Wood

Architectural technologists: David Thompson, Scott Armstrong and Kevin Power



XL's front entrance on Bermudiana Road

Undoubtedly the most dramatic change in the City of Hamilton so far has been the transformation of Pitts Bay Road. And of course XL House, the global headquarters of reinsurer XL Capital Ltd., has been very much part of that transformation, its crisp white lines rising from the ashes of the old Bermudiana Hotel. Since its official opening in May 2001—ground was broken on May 1997—it has already become a familiar sight, a pleasing city landmark. Perhaps that's because as one of our judges, Andrew Trimmingham, puts it: "At the end of the day it's very simple and that is the essence of Bermudian architecture."

Ted Wood, director and project architect of Entasis Architecture, and his team, job captain David Thompson, assistant job captain Scott Armstrong, and head technician, Kevin Power, worked intensively over five years to design and oversee the construction of the building, built at a cost of \$115 million. But from the start Wood had a vision of a white building with palm trees surrounding it. "It's a strong Bermuda island image," he says. "I wanted to let the play of shade and light, rather than the design, give complexity to the building. I think the theme of traditional Bermudian architecture is the play of

solids, windows and verandahs. And I wanted to pick up on that only in a more abstract way. We used roof decks, in fact, but they do give the effect of verandahs." What he was very conscious of not doing, however, was including Bermudian architectural clichés such as eyebrows or buttery towers.

"During the conceptual stage," he says, "we made the decision to position XL's front entrance on the Bermudiana Road so another aim was to transform the road into a prestigious address." The project included widening the sidewalk so now the Bermudiana Road, lined with trees, is more boulevard than street and infinitely more pleasurable for pedestrians. The entrance itself is recessed, the focus being on the concrete pergola, with one palm tree each side of it.

"We had to make the building sit well on the site, to make sure it was the right fit for the edge of town. Good landscaping was a key priority because we wanted the effect of a large office building with a garden."

Naturally, he was always in collaboration with XL executives, particularly with CEO Brian O'Hara, Brian Wolford and Bruce Connell, but from very early on, he worked closely with interior designer Joan Murdoch.

"We both concentrated on corporate needs. We needed to figure out what spaces they needed so we could tailor make them to suit. Working together gave us the opportunity to get it right. It was important for the building to have a logical structure so it could be understood from inside to outside as well as from outside to in. We wanted to give it a simple geometry so that people seeing it would have a strong image. The counterpoint to that was we had to make absolutely certain we got the proportions exactly right; the column and window spacing had to be exact."

Simple though XL House looks, it in no way resembles a square box. Large projections break down the space. Nor does it look as it consists of two separate buildings, which in fact technically is the case—Tower One is on the southern end of the Pitts Bay site and Tower Two on the Gorham Road end. At the start of the project the second building was a possibility but with XL Capital's acquisition of Mid Ocean Re in 1998, it had to become a reality. Tower Two is taller than Tower One so it comes under different fire regulations so is deemed a separate entity.

Says Wood: "I really take pride we



Water flows over three bronze whales' tails in the fountain.

achieved the goal of having a seamless flow from the first building to the second. At the time the challenge was hair-raising. And now they're a complex rather than two individual buildings although they could be used separately if the future demands it."

Constructing XL House involved building a structural steel frame and encasing it in concrete with thermal insulating material, plus fibreglass reinforcing and a plastic stucco finish. Marble buttresses and bases give a look of quality, while the highly polished railings and trim add sparkle and modernity. The glass used for the windows was a major issue. "We had time to do the research," he says, "and so I visited glass factories throughout Canada and the U.S. We put a lot of effort into choosing glass that would

not retain heat or be light reflective. Blue tinted, it's extremely thick paved glass and of very good quality. It's also hurricane enhanced, which means there's no need for shutters or boards should a hurricane occur.

A huge amount of attention was paid to landscaping and outdoor design with the result that hundreds of trees have been planted on the property. On the Pitts Bay side of the building XL shares with ACE, there is a nature walkway planted with agapanthus, lantana and other plants. But the focal point of the patio area is the striking black granite water fountain where water flows over three bronze whales' tails. Since whales reflect Bermuda's maritime heritage as well as strength, they're an apt image for the company. A smaller granite waterfall is

also at the front entrance.

Invisible, but to XL's staff invaluable, is the two-storey underground car park which, he says was built three or four feet above sea level. "It took us about a year to build. Completely wheelchair accessible, it can take up to 250 cars and offers a lot of storage."

All in all a huge project, given XL is one of the largest buildings to be constructed in Bermuda since the early 70s. "At times, we were working a 60 to 70-hour week because of course we had to give it priority," he says. "So I really want to thank my partners for persevering through the traumas and pressure." ■