



Toronto (Sept. 27, 2017) — In 2015, WE Charity celebrated its 20th anniversary and purchased a historic building in downtown Toronto — the soon-to-be home of its new Global Learning Centre and headquarters.

But Karin Karak’s story starts back in 2013.

With her 20 years experience as an Interior Designer, Karak collaborated with a contractor and broker to develop a rendering to envision a refreshed look for the iconic turquoise “Marty Millionaire” building, on the corner of Queen and Parliament. The budget and rendering that was developed, while she was employed at another design firm, helped sell the building to a developer, who later sold the building to the WE Charity in 2015.

Launching her own design firm, k2 designworks inc., in August 2015, Karak was quickly engaged to bring her design aesthetic and expertise to WE Charity.

“At that time — it was intuition almost — I remember thinking, this was an important building,” Karak says. She remembers telling a colleague in 2013, “You have to think big picture and the potential opportunity at hand; something great’s going to happen with this building.”

Four years later, the WE Global Learning Centre opens its doors today, with former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in attendance. A complete interior redesign of 45,000 square feet of offices and meeting spaces leverages cutting-edge technology and collaborative working areas to attract a young workforce, engaging them in WE’s mission and movement of youth empowerment.

“Being a boutique Interior Design firm, we are fully involved and committed to our clients,” Karak says. “We dedicate ourselves to ensuring their visions and business objectives are turned into a functional space that is on-brand and aesthetically authentic.”

As an added twist, Karak says part of the reason WE chose her to design the interior space was, in fact, due to her activities outside of work: she’s led a couple humanitarian missions to Armenia, and just recently returned from a ME to WE trip to Kenya with her family this month.

“I understand WE’s mission and what it means to give back to the community,” she says. “It’s something that’s close to my heart. This project became a labour of love.”

“As the centrepiece of WE Charity's international operations, the WE Global Learning Centre needed to speak to our vision and tell our story — where we've come from, the work we are doing, and where we're going,” says Marc Kielburger, co-founder of the WE movement.



“Karin and her team designed the ideal space for the WE global family: it's a place where we can share our story and vision, can all connect, collaborate and engage with each other — and also with our local, national and international communities — while always feeling united in the same mission.”

THE DESIGN STORY

WE's Global Learning Centre consolidated WE's previous, separate real estate properties into its new, more cohesive campus — with 339 Queen Street East at the centre of its operations.

“WE's vision was to have this facility support teachers and youth around the world, from local to remote communities, in a building that would encourage a new culture, a new synergy in the way they work,” Karak says. “We met with the WE team to review their current operations, and strategize how to create a more integrated and unified working environment.”

Collaborative spaces cater to a youthful, high-energy employee demographic that thrives on engaging, with occasional nooks for privacy. Connectivity was also crucial — staff can access Skype, video conferencing and use smart boards to instantly connect with internal and global teams.

Cutting-edge technology throughout the centre includes custom monitors streaming original content, a donor wall with touch-screen navigation to browse its global benefactors, an incubation hub that will support young entrepreneurs, Skype pods for global classroom outreach, a 200-person theatre that can divide into two digital classrooms, a multimedia control room, and a recording studio with a live feed that allows the charity to record, edit a post online video within hours.

At the same time, WE's identity was the crux of every design decision — from WE's five pillars, strategic imperatives and mission statement, to their origin story of the young brothers, Craig and Marc Kielburger, creating one of the world's largest organizations serving youth. WE gave Karak's team creative freedom to develop their branding story.

“The branding program tells a story of the WE brand from the minute you walk into the Global Learning Centre — every wall, every corner, every stairwell adds to the narrative,” Karak says.

“They entrusted us to bring their vision and messaging into reality.”

The project's priorities included using environmentally conscious materials, wherever possible, as well as a commitment to barrier-free accessibility for all visitors and employees. Karak's team sourced natural, calming and earth-inspired materials, finishes and palettes — staying “grounded to nature” for the interior's aesthetic.



Workstations by the windows and glass fronts for all enclosed rooms allow natural light to flood into the core of the office space, even reaching the stairwells. Most light fixtures provide direct and indirect lighting — reflecting above onto wood joists and the ceiling, creating a softer glow.

The carpet features subtle, serene waves, and a frosted, dissipated film on glass walls is reminiscent of clouds, while providing both seated privacy and a sense of openness. The brick finishes complement the original architecture of the brick and beam heritage building. And there is a potential, in the future, for developing a rooftop garden.

“We came up with an architectural scheme that was very relaxing, holistic and neutral,” Karak says. “We wanted to showcase WE’s branding. We wanted their work to stand out, and feel dynamic and energizing for the staff.”

“Karin and her team were a perfect fit for WE Charity,” says Marc Kielburger says. “We wanted to work with her because she understood our vision and we trusted her to craft our narrative in the space. In the two years we have worked on this project, she listened and she delivered — again and again. She brought the WE brand to life.”

HERITAGE AND REVITALIZATION

339 Queen Street East has been designated a heritage building and — just like her previous intuition — Karak says it’s certain to be a landmark that transforms the local Corktown community and businesses.

Sometimes a marquee structure to anchor a corner — and its accompanying young, bright, charity-minded staff — can be, as the saying goes, the rising tide that lifts all boats.

“Already the community has responded,” she says. “Some places are renovating — the cafes and restaurants — to accommodate the influx of people. It’s interesting to see how it will benefit local businesses.”

In a city filling with glass towers, the preservation and rejuvenation of a heritage structure is a victory for Toronto’s history. At the same time, filling that heritage building with hundreds of young staff working in cutting-edge facilities is a victory for Toronto’s future.

“It was always very important to the client and the project team to maintain the heritage aspects of the building,” Karak says. “I am proud to be part of WE’s Global Learning Centre’s vision, values and contribution to the community.”



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More images can be found at k2designworks.ca/portfolio/

High-res images available upon request.