

SITUATION:

A major Canadian gas and oil company approached Smith LaRock Architecture for design of their central control building. They wanted a state-of-the-art, durable, and functional building for the intended control mission.

Moreover, they wanted the building designed to address the issue of operator turnover, and to be something the company and its operators would be proud of for many years to come. It also had to afford the protection inherent in a blast-resistant structure.

With the increase in oil prices, and a major influx of oil companies tapping into the huge oil reserves in Alberta's tar sands, top control operators are in high demand and have their choice of employers.

Case in point: during the design, a second gas and oil company approached SLA to design a control facility for their new extraction process at a similar, nearby site. The competitor indicated that they knew SLA was working on the control center project and indicated they wanted a design "light years beyond" the facility SLA was designing for the first company.

The predatory environment created a unique challenge in the specialized architectural design of these spaces, to meet the functional, philosophical, commercial, and emotional needs of the persons tasked with enduring a lifestyle so far from home. These are not typical challenges.

APPROACH:

Despite such hurdles, SLA was tasked to perform the design while maintaining a firm respect for ultimate costs in a local climate of minimal labor availability, rampant escalation of labor and material costs, and weather-impacted schedules.

SLA began rethinking the design, material and labor needs for the project. Mirroring the project's sense of urgency, construction of necessary structures was completed along a critical path. New design techniques were developed to reduce on-site construction time and labor requirements, while keeping the mission-critical environmental goals in place.

The focus on operator retention warranted a design emphasis on encouraging and achieving user vigilance, both in the control room proper and throughout the building. A desire to feel a connection between the building, its staff, the culture, and the site was derived from the interviewing users and key project stakeholders. This created a shared vision to tie the facility together physically and philosophically.

The sterile and cold feeling of the building was reduced through strategic placement of visual design elements, the use of natural materials in deliberate locations, and creating a comforting layout. To offset the dark and lonely climate, stone, textiles and wood were juxtaposed against the corporate look of stainless steel and glass.

RESULT:

The rich textures of concrete and stone, rough-hewn wood, and stained concrete provided the durability needed, while imparting a stress-free feel to the building. One constructor remarked that he "didn't know why, but everyone who comes in here feels relaxed." Goal surpassed.

The facility recently came online after the massive construction effort, and SLA anticipates positive response from a post-occupancy evaluation.

