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# **Deconstruction over Demolition: Manasc Isaac Architects a case study**

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## **Abstract**

This photographic documentary examines everyday activism through the lens of sustainable construction. There are many misconceptions about the construction industry and its impact on the environment. Focusing on the Edmonton-based architectural firm Manasc Isaac, this project aims to define sustainable development and explore the procedures practiced in this specific industry by using photography to bring awareness to forward-thinking architectural processes.

## **Overview**

Everyday activism is a topic that encompasses a variety of sustainable processes and behaviours like turning off lights in a room that is not in use or turning off water taps while brushing teeth, but also challenging large-scale projects. This sentiment has been embraced by Manasc Isaac, an Edmonton, Alberta based architectural firm with a focus on sustainable design. The company has won a plethora of honours for both its design style and sustainable practices. In addition to being recognized for designing Alberta's first C-2000 green building, Manasc Isaac also designed Alberta's first LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified building and Edmonton's

first Silver LEED (“Our Work,” Company Profile), certified, having achieved between 50 and 59 points out of a possible 110 across seven different categories, with energy savings of 35-50% over non-certified buildings (LEED Green Building Rating System 2009 Explained, Enermodal). As Martina Keitsch (2012) notes, “Besides ecological advantages, architecture and design can work as a catalyst for the advancement of social sustainability and social inclusion.” (p. 142). In its efforts to achieve integrated engineering and deliver architecture that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, the company focuses on five key areas—sustainable site development, water efficiency, energy efficiency, material selection, and indoor environmental quality. This environmentally-friendly mandate drew the attention of Dana Dusterhoft and Jonathon Schell, students in MacEwan University’s Documentary Photography class, part of the Design Studies program.

### **Conception**

In late January of 2014, Dusterhoft and Schell were charged with producing a photographic essay around the role of sustainability in everyday actions. The photographers come from two very different backgrounds. Environmental conscientiousness has always been a significant part of Schell’s life, whose father is an active member of the Green Party. On the other hand, Dusterhoft, who hails from oil rich Drayton Valley, Alberta, was not exposed to environmental issues until she arrived in Edmonton in 2011 for her first year at MacEwan University. Initial ideas for the project circled around conventional imagery and institutions associated with the environment, such as natural settings protected by Parks Canada (Dusterhoft and Schell, personal communication, June 2, 2014). However, prompted by the prolific construction activity in downtown Edmonton, the two researchers saw the opportunity to focus their photographic skills on the atypical topic of sustainable architecture. Online research led them to the website of Manasc Isaac architects and ultimately to architectural technologist Garth Crump, who lead the photographers through their shoot and explained key concepts as well as the value of Manasc Isaac technologies.

### **Execution**

Qualitative research was conducted throughout the semester in forms of interviews and photographic documentation of Manasc Isaac projects across the city, with the majority of photography taking place during March of 2014. Working with Mr. Crump, the photographers shot both finished projects and sites still under development, including the Manasc Isaac offices, the downtown loft of company co-founder Vivian

Manasc, and client buildings ABSA (Alberta Boilers Safety Association) and the south side, Edmonton Research Park, location of the Servus Credit Union. Each location ultimately showcased a different aspect of Manasc Isaac operations and vision. After building a library of photographs, the two researchers selected several that they considered to reflect most accurately their research, then arranged them into the final layout based on location.

The document begins with a cover slide image of the downtown PCL offices project. Reflecting on sustainable architecture and construction practices is conveyed through the images of building cranes mirrored in the glass exterior, a material commonly used in the firm's designs. Nature is represented through the blue sky and willowy clouds that provide contrast for the image.

The first set of photographs come from the heart of Manasc Isaac operations at their Edmonton offices, where the selected images reflect the values of the company by capturing the bright openness of the workplace, relaxed atmosphere and sense of fun, as well as highlighting the sustainable practices put into use. Though the first image of the Manasc Office photoset appears to be just a bright blue couch and ottoman, it is exemplary of the comfortable, open attitude of the architectural firm, and just one example of the unique approach, with relaxing spaces, creative spaces, and gathering spaces throughout. The remainder of the Manasc Office photoset continues to document this corporate ideology. The large overview of the office, so open Schell had to shoot it with a Sigma 18-35 wide-angle lens, showcases how the company has deconstructed interior walls to allow natural light to access from both sides, as well as subtly displaying the remarkable 100% recycled and recyclable carpet, with its dark colour shot through with gradients of green and gray (Schell, personal communication, June 2, 2014). The final image of an employee's adorable Yorkshire terrier atop a pile of blueprints is perfectly symbolic of the company's willingness to prioritize comfort and health to create a fun and inviting workplace.

The second group of photographs focuses on the private penthouse of Manasc Isaac cofounder and Senior Principal Architect Vivian Manasc ("Vivian Manasc," Contact). Her personal penthouse, sitting atop a building her company redesigned, was a small wonderland of technological innovation; even in the middle of a blizzard, the interior temperature of the repurposed utility room was so well regulated by insulation and waste heat that the photographers did not notice that windows had been left open (personal communication, June 2, 2014). For Dusterhoft, the visit to Manasc's penthouse offered an opportunity to again use the power of photography to dispel the

stereotype of reused material as “old and trashy” (personal communication, June 2, 2014). By capturing the paradoxically modern trendiness of a retro furniture aesthetic that is the result of repurposing timeworn furnishings, Dusterhoft highlights Manasc’s personal commitment to the environment. Schell’s contributions to this set again focus on technology being put to use. While the far distance shot establishes the scale of both Vivian Manasc’s penthouse and the building her team helped redesign, closer images in his angular style showcase solar panelling attached to the side of the penthouse, soaking up rays even in the middle of a mid-march snowstorm (personal communication, June 2, 2014).

Manasc Isaac’s environmental technology takes the forefront in the Alberta Boilers Safety Association Building photoset, with the ABSA employee break room at the front of the images. The room’s tall ceilings and exposed lumber are not solely aesthetic considerations—the wood is locally sourced, while the dark furniture and recycled carpeting provides contrast (personal communication, June 2, 2014). However, it is the high-tech flooring featured in the second image of the set that is impressive. The vent system is a modular zone control heating and cooling system with electrical capability that is almost entirely in-floor, with access gained simply by lifting the floor panel (Schell, personal communication, July 16, 2014). Normally, extension cords or renovations would be required to accommodate alterations in layout. With this specialized flooring, there is dramatically reduced waste in the event of repairs or reorganization. The entire HVAC (Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning) system operates on this principle, allowing for the running of extra vents and reprogramming of the system as needed during extremely cold winters or exceedingly hot summers. Finally, the sloped sides of the exterior not only give the audience a perspective on the exterior, but also highlight how simple design elements, in this case the slope of the walls and roof, are effective in mitigating weather variations. The sloped design reduces the amount of sunlight taken from directly above during longer summer days, but captures more during short winter days, thereby reducing cooling costs during the summer and heating costs during the winter.

All these divergent ideas culminate in the final set of photos from the Servus Credit Union, a building that represents Manasc Isaac’s design aesthetic and sustainable practices, as well as is uniquely suited to the photographers’ individual styles. While other locations show how Manasc Isaac reused materials and furnishings whenever possible, in the case of Servus Credit Union’s Edmonton Corporate Centre, the entire building was repurposed (personal communication, June 2, 2014). It is truly exemplary of the company’s dedication to *deconstruction over demolition*. Manasc Isaac cut out the congested

interior, while windows and skylights allow natural sunlight in throughout the day. Although customer privacy and sensitive information issues proscribed shooting in certain areas of the bank, the photoset remains exemplary of what Manasc Isaac seeks to achieve. The opening image of the Servus set conveys all these ideas in one clean image; an open interior where there was once a crowded core of concrete and cubicles, accentuated with angular contours and bright natural light. The building is also Silver LEED In addition to documenting this environmental achievement, the photographers focused on the specialized exterior siding tile system. The tiles can be removed and replaced individually, eliminating costly waste in the event of damage, and can be reused on other projects in the unlikely event of a building tear down. Additionally, green panels beneath the windows capture the designers' aesthetics and environmental conscientiousness, while the bright blue sky accentuated with clouds once again serves as a negative space for the entire structure (personal communication, June 2, 2014).

While the photographs represent the architectural side, for added depth and colour, the pair relied on a green and teal set of pastel colours to reflect the environmental nature of the project. The squirrel is meant not just as a representation of their professor's analogy about collecting information and photos like nuts in a squirrel's cheeks, but also to represent the environment in a way that mirrors the fun the photographers discovered about the company itself.

### **Construction and Conservation**

The connection between people and their places is an enormously important one that may go unconsidered when contemplating sustainable practices and everyday activism. However, many people spend large portions of their lives indoors, and how their environments affect them and the world they live in is a key consideration. How we build is just as important as what we build. Architecture and construction practices literally determine how a society grows, making sustainability throughout the process a critical factor in shaping the future. For Manasc Isaac, that future is one of net-zero communities. Not content with constructing one or two green buildings here and there, the architectural firm envisions entire communities that rely on exceptional energy conservation and onsite renewables to meet all of their heating, cooling, and electricity needs. Until then, though, they remain an example of how sustainable practices can be found in industries not usually associated with the environmental protection movement. Documentary photography offers a visual means of cataloguing the characteristics of sustainable architectural practices, green technologies, and showcasing how even large scale projects can be positively impacted by acts of everyday activism.

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