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Form Fitting

Frank Prosperi-Porta's decades-long career with RJC was built on a fascination of all things structural and suits him well

BY SHELLEY WILLIAMSON | PHOTOGRAPHY BY EUGENE UHUAD

FRANK PROSPERI-PORTA'S ROMANCE WITH THE WILD

West and shaping Alberta's landscape at Read Jones Christoffersen (RJC) is long and storied, as is his trajectory at the engineering firm. He has, in fact, spent his entire career there, helping craft the skylines of Canadian cities from Toronto to Vancouver.

Now RJC's managing principal for the structural engineering team in the Edmonton office, Prosperi-Porta began his career after graduating from UBC with a Bachelor of Applied Science in structural engineering. He recalls his eagerness to roll up his sleeves and begin work out of the Vancouver office in 1974, where he would cut his teeth for five years before heading east for Toronto.

The choice to become an engineer with a focus on civil and structural engineering was a no-brainer, he says. "I had no affinity for electricity, no interest in pipes and water, so my preference was civil [engineering]. In my mind, it was all about buildings; the other stuff didn't interest me at all."

In Toronto, he got a glimpse at what would be his future: designing and overseeing the construction of buildings that would ultimately carve out the Alberta landscape. Manulife Place, which he helped work on from Toronto before taking a job in the Edmonton office, would be the first of many such projects that have helped define Prosperi-Porta's decades-long career.

The up-and-coming engineer, who was born in Italy but immigrated as a child with his mother to Powell River, BC, was met with an uncertain landscape when he first arrived in Alberta to the brunt of the National Energy Program in 1982. Never one to back down from a challenge, he stayed when many others in his field would leave the province for greener pastures due to a lack of available work. "There was no point in graduating engineering if you wanted to live and work in Alberta. I stayed because at the end of the day I was given every opportunity to stay," he explains.

The Alberta Urban Hospitals Joint Venture gave Prosperi-Porta his first taste of a large-scale project, and an opportunity to work with two other firms, including Calgary's Simpson Lester Goodrich, to build the Grey Nuns Hospital in Edmonton and the Peter Lougheed Centre in Calgary, each with 500 acute care beds. "It was a good-sized project and my role was essentially to make sure each of the three firms did what they'd agreed to in

their scope of work. My job at the end of the day was to make sure RJC didn't do more than their share of work," says Prosperi-Porta.

Through the 1990s, he saw his share of work with RJC in Edmonton and beyond, including the million-square-foot shopping centre, Mill Woods Town Centre, and a design-build for administrative and fabrication structures atop the Hibernia Oil Platform in the North Atlantic Ocean, an admitted career highlight for Prosperi-Porta. RJC Offices in four cities collaborated on the latter project, which he characterizes as "very exciting, with fast execution of the work. It was very challenging, with a lot of pressure on the team."

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Now a principal at RJC, Prosperi-Porta oversees about half of the Edmonton office's 55 full-time staff, with a management style he characterizes as hands-on. "If you are away from it, you lose your skills. So I resolved I would not step away from the engineering side because I enjoyed that much more than the management side. I've continued to this day to be very hands-on in the design side, while at the same time doing the management work I am responsible as principal."

Prosperi-Porta's promotion of consulting engineering remains strong, even outside of the office. Now in his second year as the Consulting Engineers of Alberta Edmonton Buildings Committee Chair, he believes a consultant best serves the community when selected by skills and accomplishments, and promoting this mindset, along with attracting new blood into engineering with "exciting projects" are among his goals with the CEA.

As for his own career, his thoughts come from a place of gratitude, having been given that first chance at RJC as a young engineer some 44 years ago, and scores of opportunities since to climb the ladder. "For me it's been a very positive opportunity, from the time I joined Read Jones Christoffersen. I can't thank the firm enough for what I have been able to do for all these years," says Prosperi-Porta. "Today, I can't imagine having done anything else." ■