



Left to right: The Chan Centre for the Performing Arts, which opened in 1997, added a futuristic feel to the UBC campus. Laura Lee Shavelich photo. One Wall Centre's two-tone glazed exterior created controversy before it was completed in 2001. Tourism B.C. photo. Aberdeen Centre's bright colours and transparency set it apart from other malls when it opened in 2004. Danielle Hays/Tourism B.C. photo.

Brave new architecture

A UBC professor's new guidebook offers a revealing look at some of the most significant contemporary buildings across the region

BY CHARLIE SMITH

The acting director of UBC's school of architecture, Chris Macdonald, measures his words carefully. Ask him about the quality of contemporary building design in Vancouver, and the tall, blondish academic pauses for nearly half a minute before responding. And even then, his answer is somewhat oblique.

"One of the things that's difficult for many contemporary architects is Vancouver had a moment of inventive brilliance after the [Second World] war, and in particular through the persona of Arthur Erickson," Macdonald responds during an interview at the *Georgia Straight* office. "So there was this frisson, of a sort, of unprecedented brilliance in architectural design that happened."

Macdonald explains that Erickson's most celebrated projects, including the MacMillan Bloedel Building (1075 West Georgia Street) and the Simon Fraser University campus on Burnaby Mountain, were built in a different era. In the 1960s, strong-willed clients of Erickson's, such as timber baron H.R. MacMillan and former SFU chancellor Gordon Shrum, could focus on a design effort without facing interference from government panels demanding changes to the design to suit their tastes.

"This city's history...had these emphatic moments of real accomplishment that could be measured against anything that was happening anywhere in the world, and certainly in North America," Macdonald says.

Compared with these successes, he suggests, the post-Expo period of Vancouver architecture has been "more pedestrian" on a building-by-building basis. He cites high land costs as one factor, which forces developers, homeowners, and institutions to take fewer design risks. However, he points out that the urban landscape citywide has "much more substance and intrigue" than it had during the 1970s, when small towers were being built in the West End. "There are these moments of brilliance," he concedes, noting that architects tend to push the envelope through structure.

Macdonald has captured many of these "moments of brilliance" in *A Guidebook to Contemporary Architecture in Vancouver* (Douglas & McIntyre, \$24.95), a new pocket-size book dedicated to the memory of Erickson, who died just over a year ago. With the assistance of writer Adele Weder and several architects, Macdonald narrowed the selection to 58 buildings and precincts. Each is presented with a capsule description accompanied by lush photography. The book, which will be officially launched on Tuesday (June 8) at Emily Carr University's Charles H. Scott Gallery, provides an overview of the most significant architecture built across the region between Expo 86 and the 2010 Olympics.

"All of the people who were involved advocated for different projects," Macdonald says. The team

chose not to include single-family homes and initially focused on buildings that have either won major awards or been in peer-reviewed architectural journals.

Weder and architect Matthew Soules, who teaches at the UBC school of architecture, contributed essays to the book, and Macdonald says that architect Veronica Gillies acted as the project manager. In an interview in a Davie Street coffee shop, the youthful-looking Soules becomes animated when the discussion turns to the overall importance of architecture.

"We literally live in it, work in it, sleep in it," he says. "We move among it. It's everywhere and it has a profound impact on our lives, on all of our lives." In his essay, Soules describes Vancouver as a "supermodel of utopian urbanism" that promotes "fitness, leisure, and comfort as the ultimate barometers of city life". This, he adds, is in sync with the natural setting. He also writes that the extensive use of glass in Vancouver's contemporary architecture facilitates views of the natural environment. Meanwhile, wood components, which are prominently on display in buildings across the region, hint at sustainability.

Unlike Macdonald, who is extraordinarily cautious, the Vancouver-born, Harvard-educated Soules is uninhibited when commenting on specific projects. He barely hesitates before accusing Vanoc of failing to embrace architecture as a "core ingredient" in the 2010 Games, calling it "a missed opportunity". He claims that this is most evident at the Richmond Olympic Oval, a product of Cannon Design Architecture. While he acknowledges being inspired by the oval's roof, which was created from wood harvested from mountain-pine-beetle-infested forests, he describes the building's exterior as "clumsy and unrefined".

"It's a crude shed, and it has these gimmicky kind of materials to kind of gussy it up," Soules says. "It's an attempt to conceal its blandness, but it's only made worse because the tricks are so obvious. So I think it's a shame."

On the other hand, the new Vancouver Convention Centre West, designed by Seattle-based LMN Architects with local firms Musson Cattell Mackey Partnership and DA Architects + Planners, draws a more favourable response. He describes the public space and the interior as "quite successful". He also admires how the building conveys a message about sustainability with a "quite radical" green roof and an artificial reef below the water. His only criticism is its overall shape. "I actually think the geometry—the sculptural form and shape—is a little stunted," he says.

He sees a sharp contrast between this building and the first convention centre to the east, Canada Place, which was built in advance of Expo 86. At that time, Vancouver was trying to make a statement that it was a "world city in the tradition of other established world cities" with its five sails, which Soules characterizes as "expressive formalism" derived from the Sydney Opera House. With the new convention centre, he adds, Vancouver no longer wants to convey to the world that it's

concerned about "formal, monumental gestures". "They are two icons," Soules says of the two convention centres, "and I think they say a lot about how the city has shifted."

For his part, Macdonald says that walking into the convention-centre precinct is like entering a different, more upscale city, and that the public plaza is a "space of spectacle" that could only be filled by something as grand as the Olympics. When asked what he thinks of the convention centre itself, he replies with a smile: "What's the nice way of putting it? In architecture, sometimes there is a fine line between generosity and extravagance. I would say the convention centre straddles that line."

In researching the book, Macdonald took several trips to the suburbs, and the book features such buildings as the West Vancouver Aquatic Centre and Har-El Synagogue in West Vancouver, the North Vancouver City Library, and the John M.S. Lecky UBC Boathouse and Richmond City Hall in Richmond. "There's a certain kind of urbanity that's being constructed there [Richmond] that is very different from Vancouver, and is pretty interesting," he states.

ONE OF MACDONALD'S favourite buildings, UBC's new Beaty Biodiversity Museum, was completed too late to be included in the book. Designed by Vancouver's Patkau Architects, the understated, glass-enclosed structure features an enormous blue-whale skeleton visible to passersby. It's adjacent to the Aquatic Ecosystems Research Laboratory, also by Patkau, which includes suspended skeletons of whales and porpoises in its three-storey atrium.

"The whale facing the main mall is a way in which the inner life of the university is given a kind of expressive presence in the public realm," Macdonald says. "It's a really smart building in lots of ways."

Meanwhile, Soules cites two lesser-known projects in the book that really excite him. One is the Woods Columbaria, designed by Pechet and Robb Art and Architecture, at West Vancouver's Capilano View Cemetery. He describes the resting place for urns carrying the ashes of the dead as a "sacred location" and a "hidden jewel" of concrete and stone walls within a grove of trees. "It's like this magical kind of informal setting," he says.

In addition, Soules praises Sun 1 (3101 Prince Edward Street), a multifamily project built over three single-family lots in 2006. Designed by Battersby-Howatt, Hancock Bruckner, and Eng + Wright, Sun 1 added density, but in a way that promoted a sense of community with a narrow pedestrian walkway that manages to protect residents' privacy.

Soules notes that most new buildings in the region belong to one of two extremes: clusters of tall towers in the downtown and Burnaby or vast tracts of single-family homes in the Fraser Valley. He says that towers isolate people in what can be considered a "vertical suburb", whereas single-family homes isolate people geographically. "We were interested in how the middle ground could enhance community dynamism in ways that these other buildings don't," Soules says.

He emphasizes that the Woods Columbaria and Sun 1 met the basic requirements for inclusion in *A Guidebook to Contemporary Architecture in Vancouver*: they had a clear concept, and they were well-built. However, he also points out that Macdonald

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and his team didn't always list the "best" buildings. Rather, they wanted to create a record of the "most important" contemporary architecture, which is why some controversial choices were included.

One example is the Scotiabank Dance Centre (677 Davie Street), which retained the neoclassical face of an old bank for a contemporary building. "It's referred to as façadism in a derogatory way," Soules says, noting that the dance centre was featured in the book as an important example of this form.

Also highlighted is one of the city's more unusual examples of post-modernism, the 17-storey Eugenia tower (1919 Beach Avenue), completed in 1987 and best known for the tree sprouting at the top of its building-length column of windows. Soules calls it a reaction to the modernist towers of the West End, which rejected ornamentation in favour of clean, simple geometry. He points out that people sometimes have a hard time relating to those older, more spartan structures because they don't communicate anything meaningful to the public.

The architect of the Eugenia, Richard Henriquez, turned this concept on its ear. The cylindrical entrance is intended to resemble a tree trunk. The height of the building matches the height of the trees near Stanley Park before they were cut down. And, Soules explains, the shapes of concrete blocks near the building resemble a logged forest.

"This is a strong and powerful example of a larger architectural movement that was covering the globe," Soules says.

ONE FAN OF the book is Michael Heeney, executive director of Bing Thom Architects. Several Bing Thom projects are featured, including the Chan Centre for the Performing Arts at UBC, the Sunset Community Centre (6810 Main Street), Aberdeen Centre (4151 Hazelbridge Way, Richmond), and Surrey Central City (13450 102 Avenue, Surrey). In a phone interview with the *Straight*, he sounds pleased that Macdonald ventured into the suburbs to highlight several projects on the North Shore and in Richmond, as well as the Gilmore and Brentwood Town Centre SkyTrain stations in Burnaby.

"I think it's wonderful that it [the *Guidebook*] has been published," Heeney says. "There are a lot of really good architects in this town, and it's nice to see this recognized."

Heeney mentions that the future of the Vancouver Art Gallery crossed his mind a couple of times as he read the book. He says that the VAG could address its need for more space by expanding an underground area of the gallery to 400,000 square feet. This area, which is currently used for storing art not on display, is below the lawn on the Georgia Street side of the building. It's commonly called the "plaza".

In an interview with the *Straight* earlier this year at the VAG office, director Kathleen Bartels and two board members, Michael Audain and David Aisenstadt (who was on the phone), said a recent feasibility study had proved that there wasn't sufficient space in the existing building to properly highlight the gallery's collection. Audain also stated that VAG officials were concerned that heritage advocates would raise serious objections to any plan to tinker with the building or with the Arthur Erickson-designed courthouse across Robson Street. "Going under this plaza would be very expensive," Audain emphasized. "That's where our vaults are."

The VAG has its sights set on a city-owned parking lot at 150 Dunsmuir Street, directly across from the Sandman Hotel. Bartels estimated that a new gallery built on this site would be 320,000 square feet, about double the size of the current gallery. Aisenstadt said that the board wants a "spectacular" building that will serve the city and the province for many years into the future. The architectural selection process would begin as soon as the VAG has control of the site.



International media praised the Richmond Olympic Oval during the 2010 Games, but architect Matthew Soules says it's "clumsy and unrefined." Tourism B.C. photo.

"That entire footprint will allow us to create something that will become not just a fantastic art museum, but a gathering place and a real cultural centre for our city," Aisenstadt declared.

Later in the interview, he added that the goal is to create a "truly green" art gallery. "I think that resonates really well with what B.C. and Vancouver are trying to do generally in the world right now," he noted.

While the future of the VAG is not something that Macdonald cares to discuss, Soules reacts negatively to suggestions from some, including Concord Pacific president Terry Hui and commenters on local blogs, that Vancouver needs an "iconic" building to house a new art gallery. Soules points out that the term *iconic* implies that the most important consideration is the building's appearance, whereas the look should flow, he says, from its use and how it's integrated into the built environment.

"If you psychoanalyze the comments, there is a belief, you know, that great architecture is about visual appearances and is superficial," Soules states. This, he suggests, breeds a counterproductive mistrust of architecture.

ONE PERSON WHO has paid a great deal of attention to Vancouver's built form is Gordon Price, director of SFU's city program and a former NPA city councillor. He maintains that urban landscape is more significant in some ways than the design of individual buildings. As he speaks to the *Straight* on the phone during a walk through the Downtown Eastside, Price says the city's decision not to eliminate alleys in the latter part of the 20th century has had a profound impact. That's because the existence of these alleys restricts the footprint of local high-rise buildings, giving Vancouver a look formed by tall, narrow towers.

Retaining the alleys also got rid of the need for curb cuts—those indentations in sidewalks that create room for service vehicles—at the front of buildings. This has left more space for greenery along boulevards. "You really end up with a nicely detailed city where nothing is so overwhelming that it is alienating," Price says.

As far as architecture goes, he declares somewhat dismissively that

"We reach a very high level of mediocrity," before quickly adding that there are also outstanding buildings in Vancouver. He feels that some areas, notably Coal Harbour, have an excess of green glass, and that the city as a whole has a narrow colour palette in its buildings, which he contrasts with those of Brisbane, Australia, where he recently travelled.

Price credits the Urban Design Panel, which offers advice to the development permit board and council, for elevating the quality of the city's architecture. Macdonald, on the other hand, sounds less sanguine on this topic, noting that Vancouver's built environment is highly regulated. "I guess one can point to the city that has been constructed as a measure of the success of the design panel," he says, "but one might ask the question: what's the excess that we're afraid of in our lust for regulation?"

Macdonald states that the Vancouver planning department conducts case-by-case negotiations with developers regarding individual buildings on a scale unlike that of any other city in Canada. While this can bog projects down in bureaucracy, he says that there are benefits, notably some impressively designed community amenities. They include the Contemporary Art Gallery (555 Nelson Street), the Bill Reid Gallery (639 Hornby Street), and the Roundhouse Community Arts and Recreation Centre (181 Roundhouse Mews). In the case of the Woodward's project (100 West Cordova Street), numerous parties came together to create space for the W2 Community Media Arts Society and bring SFU's School for the Contemporary Arts to the site.

Macdonald says the jury is still out on whether the citizens will embrace the public space at Woodward's. But he also believes that no other city in North America, with the possible exception of Montreal, has demonstrated as strong a commitment to including community benefits in private-sector developments. "That's been kind of enshrined in the planning process where the commercial buildings are given extra density," he notes, "and these public projects come on the back of that." ♦