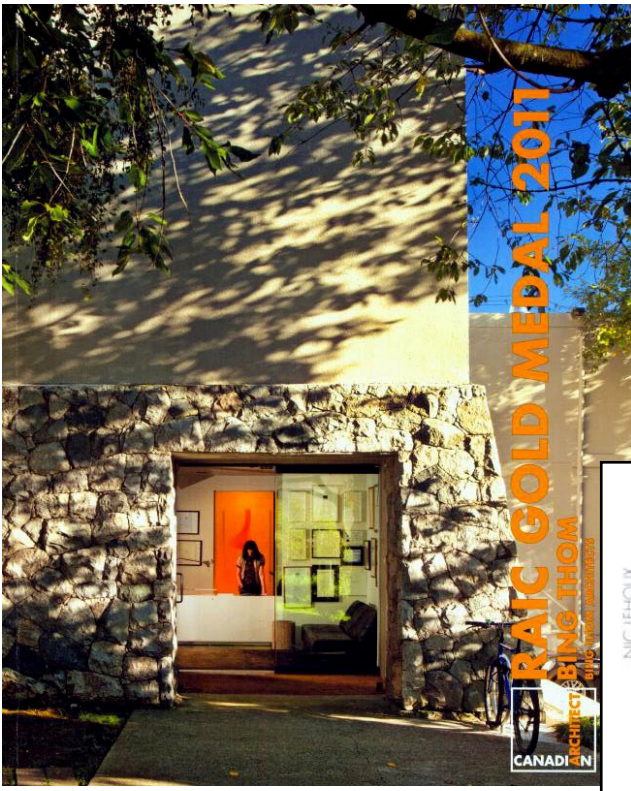


RAIC GOLD MEDAL 2011 CANADIAN ARCHITECT BING THOM



FOREWORD



ABOVE BING THOM'S VISIONARY ABILITY IS IN EVIDENCE AT ABERDEEN CENTRE—A DEVELOPMENT THAT SEEKS TO PROVIDE SUBURBAN RICHMOND, BC WITH A MORE COSMOPOLITAN SENSIBILITY.

The RAIC Gold Medal is considered to be the greatest recognition of an individual's contribution to the architectural profession in Canada. The Gold Medal has been in existence since 1930, yet it has not been awarded every year. Rather exceptionally, the RAIC Gold Medal has been awarded every year since 2005. And, when reviewing the history of this prestigious award, not every medallist has been an architect. Jean Drapeau, the former mayor of Montreal who oversaw his city's glorious hosting of Expo 67—not to mention his additional achievement of displacing thousands of lower-income Montrealers while destroying scores of priceless heritage buildings through his urban renewal campaign—received an RAIC Gold Medal in 1967. Jane Jacobs, arguably one of the most important urban thinkers of the 20th century, received a Gold Medal in 1981. Her book, *The Death and Life of American Cities*, is celebrating the 50th anniversary of its first publication in 1961. Other Gold Medal winners may have been architects, but have had little or nothing to do with the practice of architecture in Canada. These include British architects Serge Chermayeff (1973) and Ralph Erskine (1982). With few exceptions, past recipients of the RAIC Gold Medal share one thing in common: effective leadership. As the 2011 recipient of the RAIC Gold Medal, Vancouver-based Bing Thom demonstrates remarkable leadership by consistently exerting his influence on architectural education, promoting collaboration amongst craftsmen and consultants, and ushering in new methods of community engagement.

Having a broad cultural perspective has certainly helped him. Like his mentor Arthur Erickson, a formidable traveller who drew inspiration from the Middle East and Japan, Thom is similarly well-travelled, having been exposed to innumerable cultures and communities around the

world. This has certainly helped him with not only achieving a greater depth and clarity in his architecture, but in expressing a remarkable degree of cultural sensitivity. The fact that Thom is a philosophically minded Asian-Canadian with a global soul has enriched his world view while providing him with the relaxed confidence necessary to connect with tradesmen and consultants possessing disparate skill sets and opinions, along with the ability to engage in meaningful dialogue with clients on an international level.

This world view has certainly benefited Thom in Greater Vancouver, a region that has been dramatically altered over the past three decades. Former BC Premier Mike Harcourt once remarked that the centre of Vancouver appears to be inexorably shifting to municipalities like Surrey. Although this comment might elicit sneers and guffaws, the reality is that businesses and young professionals are increasingly finding themselves working and living in places like Surrey or Richmond—cities adjacent to Vancouver where Thom is actively working to improve the health, beauty and sustainability of these environments. It may have seemed ridiculous when Erickson once declared that Vancouver could approach 10 million people but today, we can see how Erickson's prediction may indeed become a reality. It takes leaders like Thom with the foresight to begin planning for this eventuality.

Thom represents one of the last true generalists, even though he is the first to declare that there are many new and emerging approaches to being a generalist architect. As younger generations are discovering for themselves how to leverage their own strengths and beliefs at a time when the profession appears to be offering fewer and not more opportunities for future architects, there is much inspiration that can be drawn from the contributions of Bing Thom.

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RAIC GOLD MEDAL 2011 CANADIAN ARCHITECT BING THOM

INTERVIEW

THE NEW GENERALIST



2011 RAIC GOLD MEDALLIST BING THOM DISCUSSES THE NECESSITY OF REINFORCING THE VALUES OF THE ARCHITECT AND THE IMPORTANCE OF REMAINING TRUE TO A SOLID FOUNDATION OF CRAFT, INNOVATION, AND ESTABLISHING GOOD WORKING RELATIONSHIPS.

INTERVIEWER IAN CHODIKOFF

The RAIC Gold Medal is largely about leadership and what you can give back to the profession and the community. What are your thoughts about this responsibility?

I think we are living in very chaotic times, but the present and future can still offer opportunities for architects as there is a tremendous rejuggling of priorities of what we as architects can do.

From an international perspective, the whole Eurocentric focus that we've had in North America is now going to be much broader. You can see what's happening in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) countries, as well as in the Middle East. This will initiate a serious reconsideration of our responsibilities as architects. So much of our focus as a profession has lost sight of the fact that we actually have a monopoly to practice, when you consider the power of the provincial regulating bodies. The fact that our monopoly to practice comes with certain obligations—I don't think that we as architects take

these obligations seriously enough. We've forgotten that our client is really society, not the person that pays us. Architecture has to put itself on a higher plane or we'll simply work ourselves out of a job.

When considering issues like complex stakeholder objectives in the public realm, and what various levels of government can expect architects to deliver, the concept of what constitutes a client has changed. What can you expect a client to demand from us?

We often accuse doctors of prescribing poison. Architects can sometimes prescribe poison too, especially in the way we shape our physical environment. I think that we are not accountable enough. For example, we lack accountability with the level of greenwashing going on in the work that we do. Architecture is like a kind of clothing. You have an obligation to ensure that the person is wearing suitable clothing designed for them. Using this analogy, you can also educate the person to ensure that the clothes they have are worn in a proper way. Because of the confusion and chaos that exists in our world, so much of our so-

OPPOSITE TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: THE GRACIOUS FORMS OF THE ABERDEEN CENTRE IN RICHMOND, BC; BING THOM'S LANDMARK ARENA STAGE IN WASHINGTON, DC HAS PROVIDED MANY NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR HIS FIRM.

ciety is being balkanized in a defensive way. Therefore, we have a strong obligation to break down these barriers because the only hope for society is to maintain a constant dialogue. Architecture is a physical manifestation of that dialogue, either in the way we plan, express or site a building, or in the way we use materials to construct it.