



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

