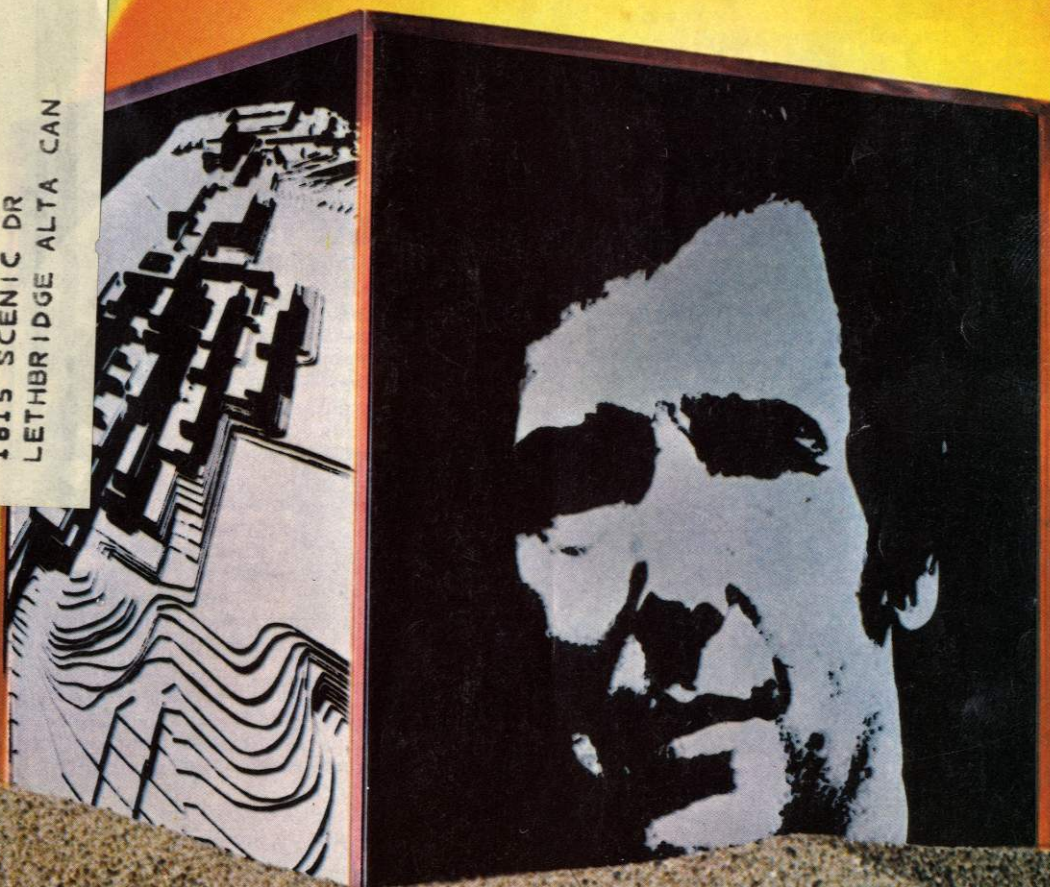


# TIME

## Canada's Master Architect

SE 72 CMS XX615R93C08 13 93  
MR R F COMSTOCK  
1615 SCENIC DR  
LETHBRIDGE ALTA CAN



Arthur  
Erickson



# Erickson: The Architect as Superstar

ONE of the central beliefs of Vancouver Architect Arthur Erickson is that Canadians—or, for that matter, North Americans—do not know how to enjoy their cities. “Our whole tradition,” he told a Vancouver audience, “has been one of resistance to the city and instead, idealization of the country and small town.” Determined to alleviate the urban malaise, Erickson has from time to time put forward a variety of cures, ranging from encouragement of local pubs to placing a limit of nine stories on all new buildings. His main prescription, however, calls for a whole new set of attitudes toward urban living. As he puts it: “Primarily, we must think of our cities as places to live in and enjoy rather than places to work in and get out of.”

Whether Canadians are ready to heed the call to celebrate city life is hard to say. They have already made one step in that direction by celebrating Erickson's own buildings. More abundantly than any Canadian architect before him, he has been showered with acclaim and awards: he has won every major professional prize in Canada, as well as such garlands for public service as the \$15,000 Molson Prize and, last June, the \$50,000 Royal Bank award. At 47, he enjoys a degree of public recognition all the more unusual in that the architectural profession increasingly tends toward anonymity and group effort. In an age of team design, Erickson epitomizes the idea of the

individual creator, the architect as superstar.

It is easy to see why. Since 1954, Erickson has created a bold body of work which, while in no way being mannered, is unmistakably his own. He first came to attention with a series of West Coast houses so ideally suited to the gray-lit landscape of B.C. that they have started a tradition of their own. In fact, says Thomas Howarth, dean of the faculty of architecture at the University of Toronto, Erickson has “established a distinctive regional style of modern domestic architecture, the Canadian equivalent of the Bay region style of San Francisco.” He has also established himself as an exposition designer of great flair. His mirrored Canadian pavilion at Osaka's Expo '70 was teasing, witty and friendly—and won near-unanimous acclaim as the most successful pavilion at the fair.

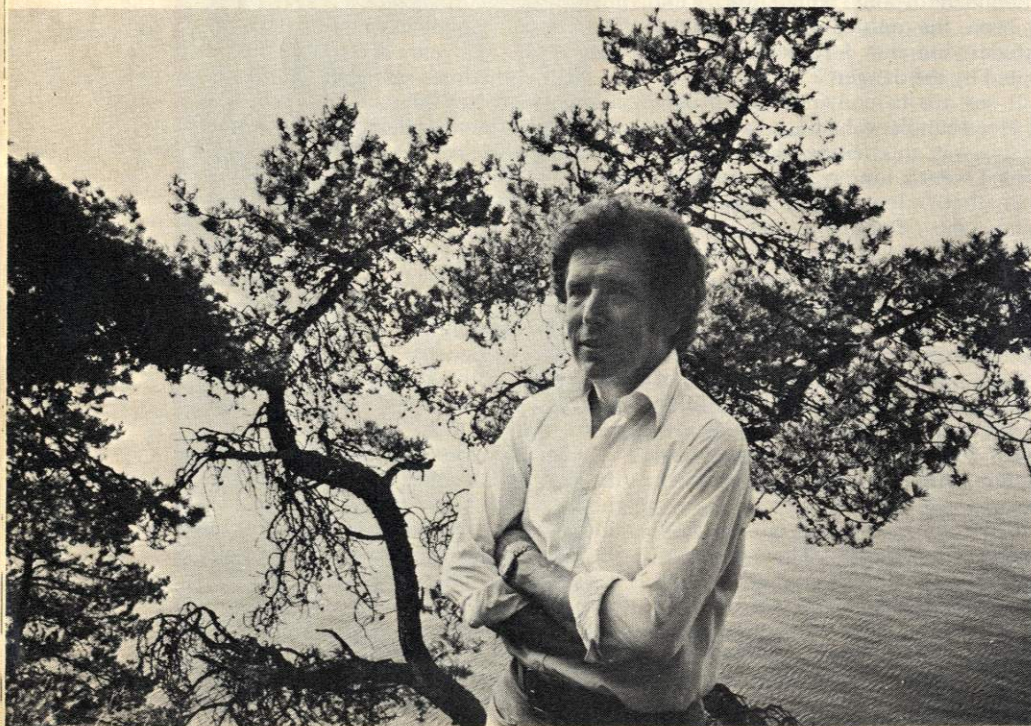
**Galvanic Milestone.** The design which has given Erickson international stature is his master plan for Vancouver's Simon Fraser University. Conceived in two months and executed in two years, it was an extraordinarily ambitious undertaking. When the campus was opened in 1965, Simon Fraser had a galvanic effect both on the public and the architectural profession. Says Robert Gretton, managing editor of *The Canadian Architect*: “Before Simon Fraser, our architectural monuments were buildings such as Place Ville Marie, for which the big American

talent was brought in. But along came Simon Fraser, a large university built on a mountaintop by a group of Canadian architects, supervised by a Canadian architect. It was truly one of the turning points in Canadian architecture, reinforced, of course, by Moshe Safdie's Habitat for Expo 67.”

Few who drive up Vancouver's Burnaby Mountain and then climb the ascending levels of Simon Fraser's public spaces fail to be stirred one way or another. The university lies easily and naturally along the spine of the mountaintop, and the visitor who walks through it experiences a series of exciting and constantly changing vistas. The design has some memorable external spaces. One is the space-frame-covered mall that acts as a natural center of the university; another is the topmost academic quad, a dramatic square with views over the plains of the Fraser River, Indian Arm and the coastal mountains. Ada Louise Huxtable, the normally acerbic architecture critic of the *New York Times*, remembers visiting the university on a spring day, seeing students lounging on the steps, clustering along the walls and playing music. “It was very peaceful and informal,” she says. “Simon Fraser works perfectly as an environment and a monumental piece of architecture.”

Peter Blake, the U.S. architect and critic, found S.F.U. “a fantastic structure, spacious and not in the least claustrophobic.” Another admirer of the university is Sir Paul Reilly, director of the British Council of Industrial Design. Erickson, he thinks, “is really one of the great figures in modern architecture, although he may not yet have international recognition. If his work was multiplied, the world would be richer—and you cannot say that about many other architects.”

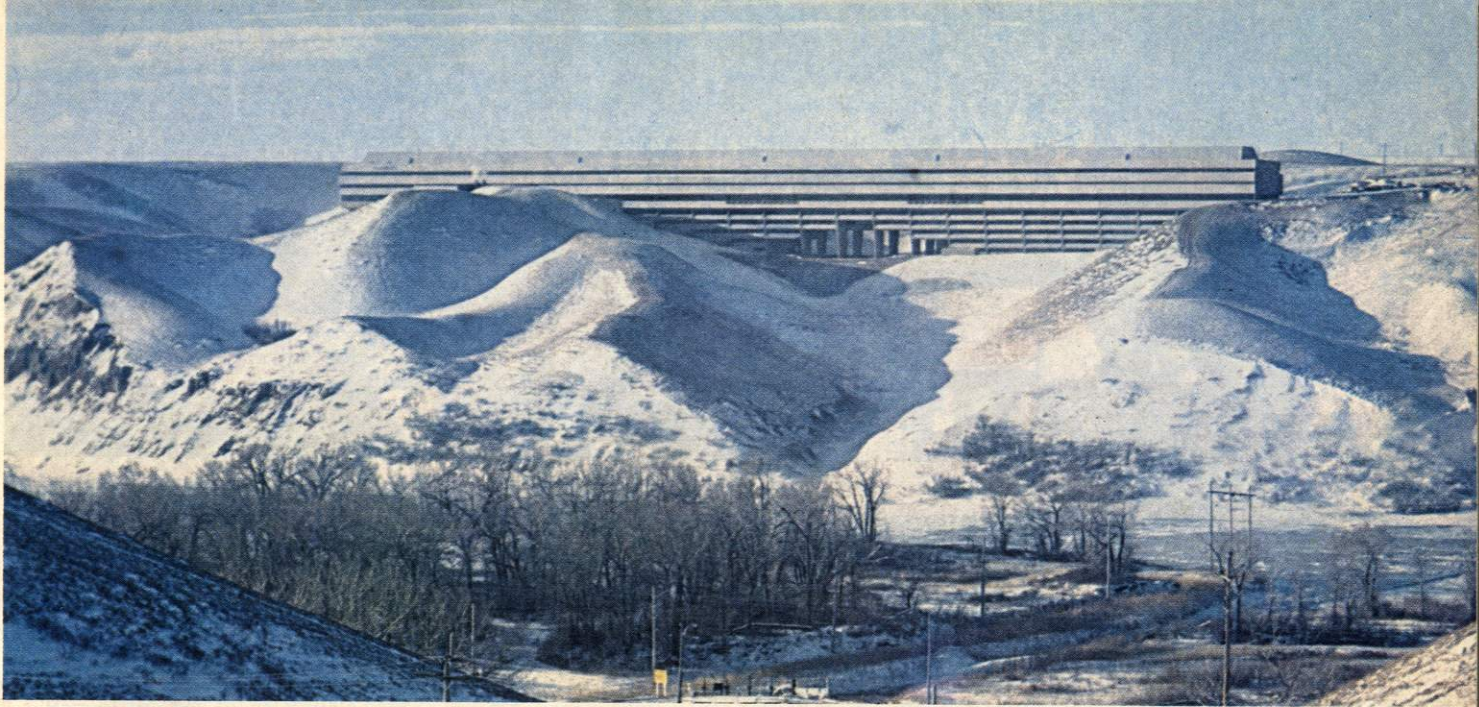
If Simon Fraser has, until now, drawn more praise than any other Erickson design, it has also come under more pointed attack, usually from other architects. One local designer complains of “a total grandness that makes the individual feel insignificant. This, it seems to me, is what the kids are fighting at universities.” Douglas Shadbolt, director of Carleton University's school of architecture, has similar reservations. An admirer of Erickson's superb sense of siting and composition, he nonetheless finds that Simon Fraser “has a level of monumentality that bothers me.” Shadbolt judges the campus “conceptually a brilliant extravaganza,” but also considers it the result of the star system of architecture in which “one man imposes his value system on others. I wish Arthur would do some things that have more to do with people.”



ARTHUR ERICKSON RELAXING ON A SITE OVERLOOKING HOWE SOUND  
Establishing a distinct, regional style in housing.

GEORGE JAMES





THE UNIVERSITY OF LETHBRIDGE'S CAMPUS IN THE COULEES SEEN FROM ACROSS THE OLDMAN RIVER

As it happens, several of the current projects by Erickson's firm, Erickson-Massey, do indeed involve people—sometimes controversially so. In December, for example, Erickson met with the press to describe a project that calls for the demolition of Vancouver's 82-year-old downtown Christ Church Cathedral. The cathedral occupies an inner-city property which no longer sustains a viable congregation. The idea is to replace the downtown church with a development that ingeniously unites God and mammon. The church, in the early Christian manner, would literally go underground; its walls would be made from the stone of the old cathedral, its altar illuminated from above ground by a giant, five-story-high prism suspended by three glass rods. Tiered and landscaped "people places" would be created on the church roof, and from one corner of the lot would rise a slender, 18-story office tower sheathed in mirrored glass.

**Lost Era.** By this method, the church would be able to escape its present financial straits and at the same time revitalize its ministry. In addition, says the cathedral's Dean Herbert O'Driscoll, the city would be improved. "The present site is limited," he says. "It's a setting for a building. But the new site would be a setting for people. It's got so many items of interest as human place." That argument carries little weight with antiquarians who claim that Vancouver can ill afford to lose one of its few landmarks from an era when the city had only 12,000 inhabitants. The issue could well be decided this month when the congregation, now down to 1,000 members, meets to vote on the scheme. In the meantime, there has been practically no opposition to Erickson's actual execution of the project. "If anyone was good enough to do this thing, it was Erickson," says the Dean.



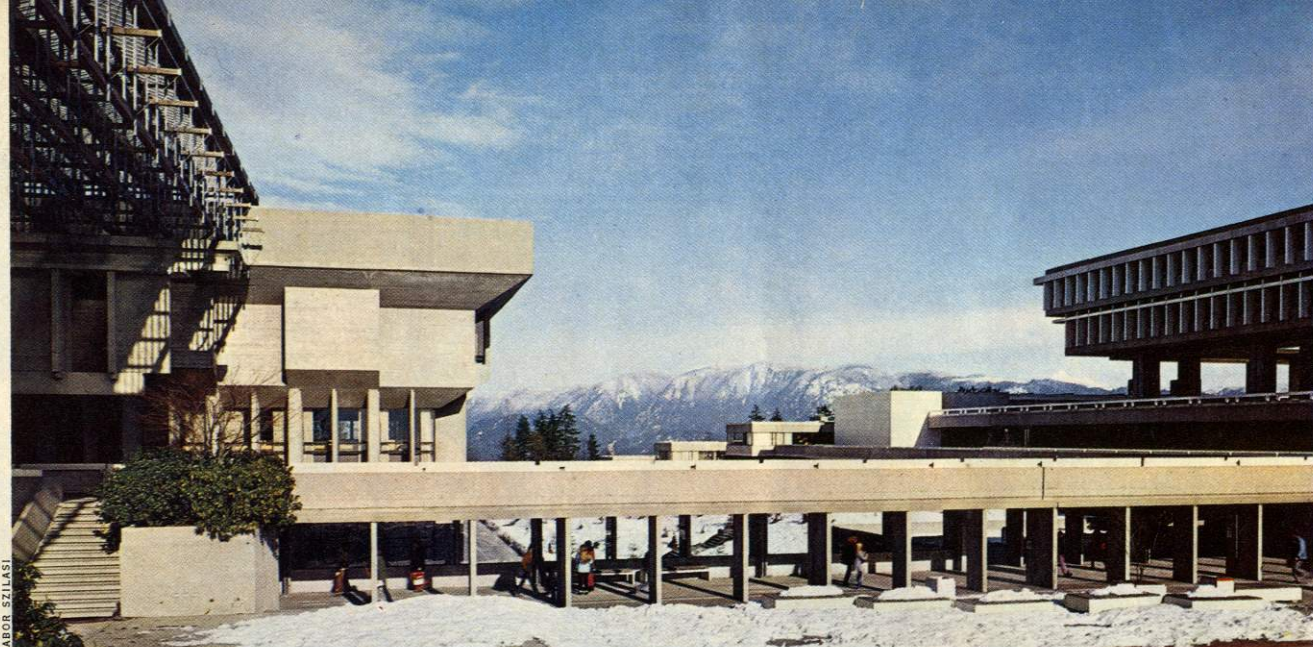
INTERIOR OF LETHBRIDGE'S CONCOURSE LEVEL SHOWING TIERED TEACHING AREA



BOILER ROOM EXHAUST STACKS

PHOTOGRAPHS FOR TIME BY GABOR SZILASI





WALKWAY AT SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY LINKING THE COVERED MALL



EXTERIOR OF ACADEMIC QUAD

The opposition agrees. Parks Commissioner George Puil, a conservationist, says, "I'm disappointed they chose Erickson, because if anybody could design something I can enjoy, it's him."

Less controversial is the architect's first major non-exhibition building project in Eastern Canada. His assignment was to build a large extension to the mausoleum-like Bank of Canada building in Ottawa that would harmonize both with the bank and with the surrounding Canadian Gothic of Parliament Hill. His solution: an elegant, self-effacing glass building which will enclose a tree-filled courtyard.

**Ship Ahoy.** Of all Erickson's new designs, none so fully sums up the architect's approach as Alberta's \$12 million University of Lethbridge, which was opened for its first 1,260 students last September and now awaits the final touches of landscaping and furnishing. Lethbridge is both a continuation and

a refinement of the thinking that produced Simon Fraser. Like the Vancouver university, it is a tour de force of form, scale and siting. A single 912-ft. concrete slab, it inevitably summons up the image of an ocean liner riding the humpy coulees that flow down from the prairie to Lethbridge's Oldman River. Seen from across the river, the college nestles discreetly below the horizon. Up close, it becomes a massive piece of minimal sculpture. Even the building's freestanding metal boiler stacks have a monumental quality about them—so much so that they seem to demand a plaque and the artist's name.

Like Simon Fraser, the new university is a megastructure designed to create constant interreaction between its occupants. Nowhere is this more evident than on the main concourse level, an open zone that combines a library, student union, cafeteria, sand-blasted stair wells and tiered, carpeted teaching and lounging areas. Says University President W. E. Beckel: "It's incredibly convenient for sleeping, eating and intellectual activity. But it wasn't designed for Consciousness III people. It was designed for people who want to explore intellectually."

Some students have reacted negatively to the building, especially to the endless white corridors of some of the upper floors. ("I hope they ask us to paint them," says Erickson.) Perhaps the most telling reaction to Lethbridge appeared last fall in an editorial in the student newspaper. The piece began by calling Erickson's conception "the ultimate in ivory towers, the final white room." But it concluded: "Life can be pumped into this building . . . and it can be done without dynamite and fire. This is not a call for mindless scribbling or heartless defacement . . . Probably the outstanding characteristic of Erickson's architecture is its admittance of human potential and possibility, its need for fulfillment. The choice is ours."

It is one of the ironies of Arthur Erickson's life that the creator of such great forms has never got around to designing for himself. A bachelor, he lives in a humdrum, middle-class neighborhood in a former garage and lean-to that he bought 15 years ago for \$11,000. The house is not so modest as it sounds. For one thing, it faces an exquisite, enclosed garden that gives Erickson a privacy that baffles and enrages neighbors raised on stucco and open lawns. Giuseppe Mazziariol, a Venetian architectural teacher and critic, describes the "piccolissima casa" as one of "elegance and refinement. It is made of nothing. There are no extraordinary things inside, only colors and materials, but it is a place where a man feels hugely rich and cultivated." Erickson himself says: "I would love to do a house for myself. It would be something very simple, very rudimentary. But I'm one of those people who never has money." Asked once why he was not rich, Erickson was prompted to check out the earnings of the top U.S. architects. He came to the conclusion that "it's the second level of architects who make all the money. Principles seem to get in the way."

One advantage of Erickson's house is that its garden is ideal for parties. An Erickson soirée is never wholly predictable. Guests may arrive to find a Caribbean steel band or a garden full of fireflies imported from Eastern Canada. On one occasion, he threw a party for members of London's Royal Ballet after they had performed *Swan Lake*. The dancers were greeted by two angry black swans which Erickson happened to have borrowed to fend off marauding raccoons. More often than not the guests themselves are the attraction, for the range of Erickson's friendships extends from the William Buckleys to the Pierre Trudeaus.

Outwardly, Erickson is a gregarious man, much sought after by hostesses. He skis enthusiastically, dances excel-



lently and enjoys telling self-deprecating stories. Always impeccably dressed in suits tailored in Rome, he rarely appears to be even faintly ruffled. "Arthur is never abrupt, curt or intemperate, and he resists pressure charmingly," says Alvin Balkind, a friend and neighbor who runs the University of British Columbia's art gallery. When Erickson is angered, says Balkind, "it's a gentle rage, as though he were shaking his head with despair that someone could be so stupid."

Such occasions are rare, for Erickson is essentially a reserved and private person. He is a Gemini with a life-style built on motion and elusiveness. "There is always the secret Arthur," says Architectural Historian Abraham Rogatnick, another friend and neighbor. "Something always remains closed, and that to me is an aspect of his artistic personality. Intimately, he is unreachable, and I think this reserve is reflected in his work."

Part of the key to Erickson's character lies in a life that Rogatnick aptly calls an Arthurian legend. Erickson's father, Oscar Erickson, was a professional soldier, a major in the 78th Battalion, the Winnipeg Grenadiers, who lost both his legs in the Battle of Amiens during World War I. He returned to marry the girl who had waited for him, Myrtle Chatterson. Arthur was born on June 14, 1924, and was followed four years later by his brother, Don. With extraordinary determination, Oscar Erickson worked first in Winnipeg and then Vancouver as a manufacturer's agent. "He refused to be considered a cripple in any way, he could do everything that anyone else could do," Arthur recalls. Rogatnick, who has known Arthur for years, thinks that the example of the father had a deep effect on the two boys.

"They used to carry him from place to place, and perhaps his suffering without complaint ironed off their rough edges. Erickson's father was unquestionably one of those noble men, and Arthur's inherited a good deal of that."

**Precocious Murals.** Arthur also inherited from his father a passion for painting. At 13, an ardent child-ichthyologist with a tank of tropical fish, he decided to turn his bedroom into a giant, underwater mural. From that, he went on to cover brother Don's bedroom walls with a jungle scene, complete with a black panther and a family of monkeys. It was a tactical error. Don and his friends enraged Arthur when they ruined the mural, not to mention the plaster, by shooting at the wild animals with BB guns. The relationship is now more harmonious. Don has become a successful Vancouver film writer and the pair plan to team up to do a television series on the nature of cities.

Erickson's adolescent absorption in painting extended beyond murals. At 16, he exhibited in a show at the Vancouver Art Gallery, winning two honorable mentions. He was even more excited when he met Lawren Harris, a recent arrival in Vancouver and the most interesting member of the Group of Seven. "I'll never forget the day he came to see my paintings," recalls Erickson. "He was a marvelous man with a great shock of white hair and the most beautiful eyes. I took him to see a basement I had painted, and he didn't say very much at all. I was a little disappointed because I thought I was really wild." Two months later, Arthur received a card from Harris inviting him to participate in a show of non-objective American painting. Says Erickson: "I was overwhelmed."

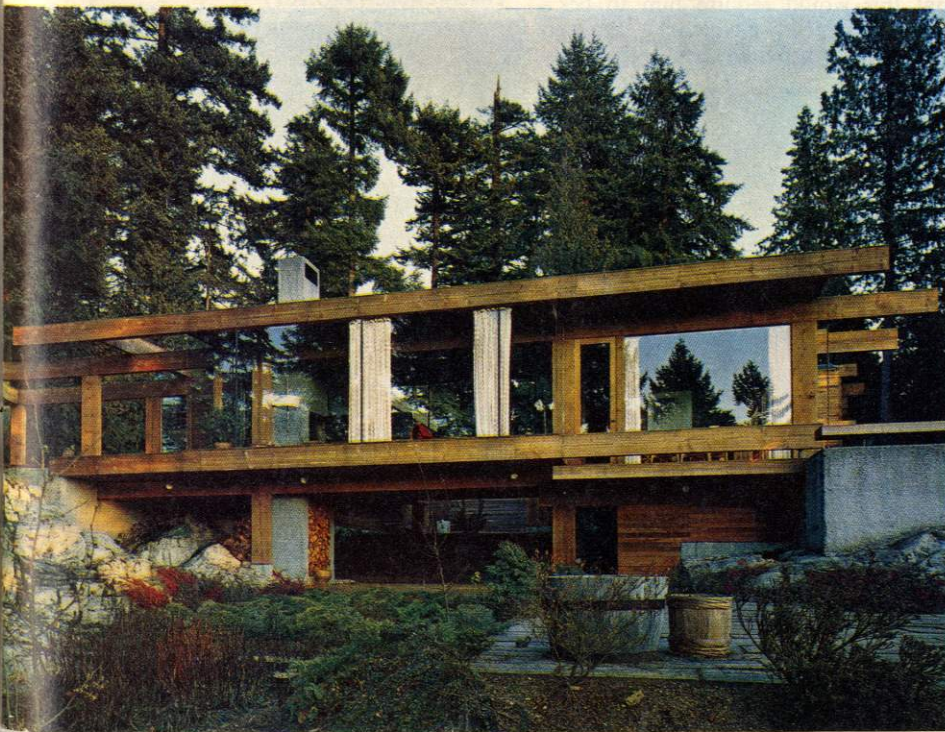
From then on, Lawren Harris and

his wife Bess became a major influence on the young Erickson. Every Saturday night they would hold open house, an event attended by artists of all kinds, including such distinguished refugees from wartime Europe as Sir John Barbirolli, then guest conductor of the Vancouver Symphony. The soirées had a set pattern: the guests would arrive, talk, then sit in the dark and listen to Harris' elaborate phonograph. It was, says Erickson, "a marvelous exposure to some very interesting conversations which had to occur precisely before the lights were turned out or after they were turned on."

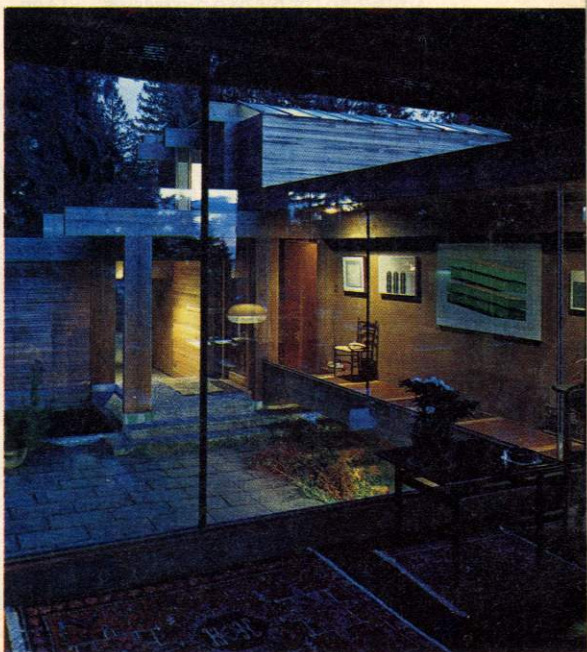
**Army Linguist.** Inevitably, the war impinged on this small, cultivated world. In 1943, Erickson volunteered for an Army Japanese language school in Vancouver. From the start it was apparent he was no soldier. As a cadet at high school, Arthur had lagged because, as he complained at the time, "I can't click my heels fast enough." But he proved himself an adept linguist. George Swinton, a fellow student in the Japanese course and now an art professor at the University of Manitoba, remembers that "his learning ability was astounding. He had an amazing visual memory." After a year, the pair were among ten Canadians chosen for special service. "We were given commissions," Erickson recalls. "We didn't know where we were going or who we were going with. No one could have been more incompetent. It would have been absolute disaster if we had encountered active combat."

Fortunately, Erickson's military experiences turned out to be distinctly Waugh-like. The Canadians were sent out to join the British in India. The low point of their tour was a month-long survival course in the jungle near Bombay during the monsoon. "All we

EXTERIOR OF SECOND GORDON SMITH HOUSE



INTERIOR SHOWING COURTYARD



GABOR SZILASI





MacMILLAN BLOEDEL BUILDING

did was make bamboo furniture and try to keep our Japanese dictionaries from going moldy," says Erickson. The group was pulled out after Swinton, the senior officer, mistook a large cobra for a harmless snake. Taught that any snake over 6 ft. is not dangerous, Swinton merely stamped his foot at the reptile, expecting it to slink away. Instead, the cobra uncoiled, opened its hood and hypnotized its prey. Swinton fainted—and luckily the snake left him unharmed. Next day, the unnerved Swinton informed the British that his group was wasting its time in the jungle. The British reply was to promote the Canadians—making Erickson a captain—and send them to live in a luxurious mansion outside Calcutta.

The house had been maintained by an Indian for his two mistresses and contained, apart from some erotic murals, a small group of Japanese prisoners of

war. It was the Canadians' job to gain as much as they could from the Japanese, who had agreed to cooperate. Captors and captives shared the same quarters and what began as a military interrogation ended as an extended discussion of religion and philosophy. The seminar-like atmosphere doubtless had much to do with the presence of such men as Trevor Leggett. A judo black belt who is now a leading British expert on Eastern religion, Leggett encouraged the Canadians to meditate and do yoga exercises every morning. Says Erickson: "It was an enchanting sort of experience, living in a strange house with the Japanese captives, walking out occasionally to the Indian villages in the area and befriending the Indians." But the idyl soon ended and the Canadians were sent off to the invasion of Malaya.

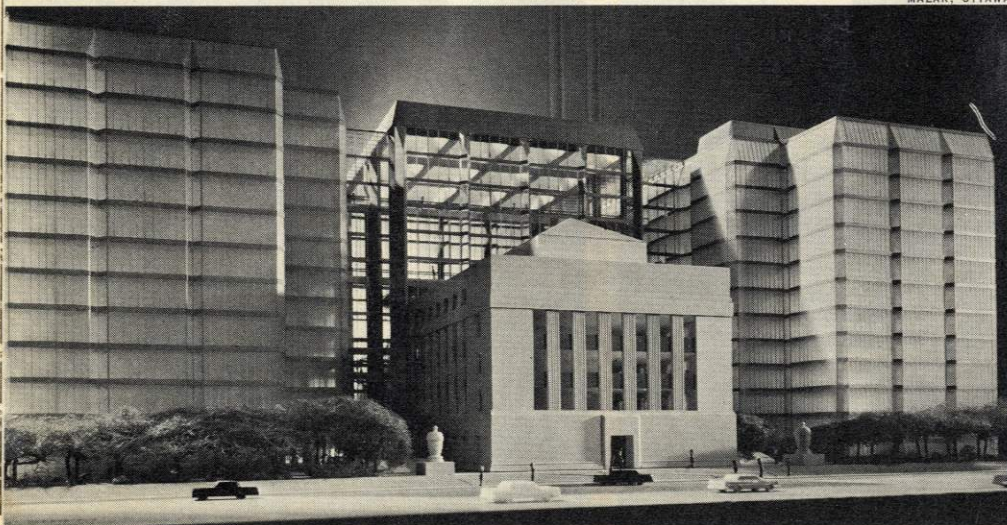
**Hunting Tigers.** Peace was announced while they were en route. Instead of going through with his original, almost suicidal mission of dropping behind enemy lines to broadcast propaganda, Erickson wound up as the program director of a radio station in Kuala Lumpur. His job was to supervise broadcasts in eight Asian languages—though not, the Army being the Army, in Japanese. Erickson stayed in Malaya for a year, entertaining himself every Thursday by attempting to hunt boar and tiger. His return to Canada was characteristically indirect: he traveled via Rangoon, Calcutta, Darjeeling and Colombo, finally sailing for home on a military transport that carried six men and 400 servicewomen. Says a friend: "There always has been a kind of method about Arthur's madness."

Back in postwar Canada, Arthur faced up to the problem of a career. He had once thought of architecture, but had been discouraged when the U.S. Architect, Richard Neutra, told him that this would require him to be a sound engineer, "which I realized wasn't my particular bag." In 1946,

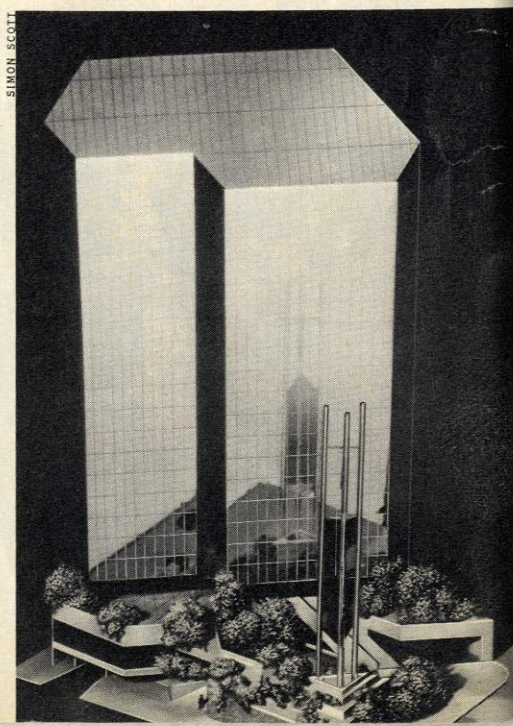
while he was preparing for the External Affairs exams, Erickson came across an article in *FORTUNE* on Taliesin West, the famous retreat of the visionary Frank Lloyd Wright. "When I saw it, I said 'if someone can do that as an architect, I'm going to be an architect.'" Accepted at McGill in Montreal, Erickson found himself surrounded mostly by fellow veterans. "We really took our courses into our own hands," he says. "We taught one another." Classmate Douglas Shadbolt remembers that Erickson's contact with Lawren Harris and his extensive traveling stood him in good stead. Says he: "Even in those days Arthur had a pretty damned refined sense of design—in fact it was way ahead of his technical skills. He was the class philosopher." He was also its star student, winning the Lieutenant Governor's bronze medal and a \$1,500 traveling scholarship.

It was this last award that dissuaded Erickson from going to sit at the feet of the magisterial Wright. "I'm glad that I didn't go," he says. "I think that anyone who participated in that particular life really took a long, long time to recover from it, because it was so unreal. It was beautiful—too beautiful." Instead Erickson took a slow boat carrying dynamite and sulfuric acid to Egypt, the first leg of a conscious, sequential pilgrimage around the architecture of the West. Living with the same kind of austerity that characterized the early travels of Pierre Trudeau, sleeping out in the desert or in the sleaziest of hotels, Erickson went through Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Greece, Italy, France, Spain, England and Scandinavia. In lieu of a diary, he wrote his mother literally hundreds of letters, sometimes including such details as the precise measurements of some of the best-known monuments. The letters, says brother

#### CHRIST CHURCH PROJECT



MAQUETTE OF OTTAWA'S NEW BANK OF CANADA EXTENSION  
*How to harmonize with a mausoleum.*





Don, were "a fastidious, careful study of the history of architecture." Says Arthur: "It was a marvelous experience. The whole of my life changed."

So, too, did many of Erickson's preconceptions about architecture. Traveling for nearly three years, seeing the history of building in sequence, he discovered "where the great breakthroughs occurred, what extraordinary steps they were and how timid we are by comparison. Not in terms of technology, but in terms of ideas and conviction." For Erickson, the greatest revelation was the importance of light, and how it affected the form and architecture from region to region. He saw how the brilliant light of North Africa demands the simplest forms—the pyramid and the dome—and only the slightest modulation of surface. The white light of the North, on the other hand, makes the silhouette more important. In Italy, he marveled at how the beautifully balanced light resulted in the extraordinary grace of Italian architecture. In Greece, he reveled in the subtlety with which the ancient Greeks sited their buildings.

**Difficult Reentry.** The Arthur Erickson who returned in 1953 had changed not only mentally but physically. "I had lived in Italy very much as an Italian," he said. "I don't think I drank water in two years, and when I got back, my hair, which had been blond, was black, and my skin was oily." Hired by the firm of McCarter Nairne, Erickson outraged his employers by walking round with a loaf of unwrapped bread under his arm. Within less than two years, he proudly claims, he was fired from every major office in Vancouver. During that period he met Geoffrey Massey, the tall, patrician-looking son of Actor Raymond, and nephew of the late Vincent Massey. The pair shared a house and worked together to design a house in West Vancouver for Ruth Killam, niece of Financier Izaak Walton Killam. Erickson was enamored with the site, Massey with the client. During construction, Massey proposed to Ruth and the couple have lived in the house ever since.

The houses that Erickson went on to build have an almost infinite variety. They include rich men's cliffhangers, town-house units, and houses that have run as cheap as \$17,000. If they have one thing in common it is Erickson's understanding of light and site. "You couldn't overestimate his skill at siting a house," says Painter Gordon Smith, who is now on his second Erickson house. "We thought we knew this lot, yet we didn't realize that there was a gully going through it." In fact the house, which is built around a courtyard, spans the gully and fits snugly into the contours of the land.

Some of the devices Erickson uses amount almost to trademarks: the use of chains as rainpipes, the subtly placed reflecting pool and the characteristic



PREPARING TO GO OVERSEAS, 1945

*Military years that were more Waugh-like than warlike.*



WITH BROTHER DON, AT AGE 15

Japanese-style mound. In several of his houses, too, he has used skylights to bring southern light onto northern walls, giving a beautiful, diffused effect. A pioneer in the use of plastics for this, he occasionally had troubles with leaky roofs—a fault that is lightly dismissed by his friend, U.S. Architect Philip Johnson. "All roofs leak in the beginning," says Johnson. "Frank Lloyd Wright had to put 19 buckets around one of his houses." For Erickson, the house above all has been a great training ground. Says he: "It teaches one how to use materials, how to bring services together, how to work with scale and how to make people happy."

In the '50s and early '60s, Erickson taught design, first at the University of Oregon, then at UBC. When he formed a formal partnership with Massey in 1963, he tended to choose his associates from among former students "because they're well brainwashed." At the moment, all but one of his five associates are former students. This team, together with Geoffrey Massey, who concentrates on the business and technical side, is essential to any project's success. "The makeup of the group is as critical as the vision by Arthur," says Bruno Freschi, a former associate. "Arthur has been able to get a good group of people together. He has mastered the teacher role and that's very significant." Erickson's approach to a design is almost mystical. He begins as if it were the first thing he had ever done, delaying decisions until the pressures build up. "You cannot speed up your rate of absorption and concentration, because most of the creation takes place in the subconscious," he says. "Suddenly things are right. Only afterward do you really realize how right they were."

This Zen-like approach was doubtless intensified by a visit to Japan in 1961. For five months, Erickson traveled across the country, immersing himself in its culture and staying for a time in Zen temples in Kyoto and Nara. From that, he acquired at least some understanding of a people whose perceptions of life are significantly different from those of the West. Certainly the experience gave him insights for the Osaka pavilion. The building's sky-reflecting mirrored exterior was a subtle trick on a people whose normal habit is to look at the ground rather than the sky. Its internal courtyard struck a responsive chord among millions of Japanese. "The design arrangement for the interior evoked the finest effect of traditional Japanese landscape gardening," says Sakutaro Okahashi, vice president of a firm that collaborated on the project. The result, he added, "was almost pure Zen."

Many of his fellow architects wonder what direction Erickson's career will take. There are some who think—and fear—that he will increasingly tend to accept only large corporate commissions. His first such project was in 1965, when he designed Vancouver's MacMillan Bloedel building, an office tower with a solid, Doric façade and an extremely humane interior. For his part, Erickson refuses to be forced into any such pattern. "I'm not interested in repeating things," he says. "I'd become bored. The real fascination of architecture lies in the subject, in redefining the purpose of a building. If I can't push a building a little further forward than I have, then I'm not interested in doing it." Which would seem to suggest that it will be some time before Erickson stops producing buildings that both challenge and delight their users.