A Community of Learning

I believed that above all a University should express universality of knowledge, that fragmentation into faculties and departments, each isolated in its own world, contradicted its purpose. Knowledge is connecting; higher education held to be more than the sum of its parts. The intellect develops from the process of interchange. I wanted to express at Simon Fraser University a new ideal based on the ancient models. The new university should be a community of learning.

The design of Simon Fraser University marked the beginning of what was a long and distinguished career for Arthur Erickson, one of Canada’s most renowned architects.

An Urban Complex

One of the major drawbacks of the university was its distance from the city. To overcome this, though not requested in the master plan, we advocated providing for a large built-in residential population and proposed to locate a new town Centre on the very edge of the campus.¹ When this plan was rejected, our master plan opened the possibility of five thousand to ten thousand students living in as a necessary step to lessen the university’s rarified isolation. Unlike mediaeval Arabic and many European universities tucked in the fertilizing currents of city life, the ordinary university allows escapism to flourish within its almost industrial precincts. Simon Fraser is purposely an urban complex. At Simon Fraser, students and teachers daily encounter the whole community. This intensity of involvement is the basis of culture.

Fast Facts

1. In 1993, Simon Fraser University adopted an Official Community Plan to build a complete residential community on the mountain top. UniverCity will have 10,000 people once it is fully built out.
2. Burnaby Mountain Elev. 370 m (1,200 ft.)

Additional Resources

Stouck, David (2013), Arthur Erickson An Architect’s Life
Erickson, Arthur (1963): The Principle Intentions of the Design
PLANNING CONCEPTS

- Axial arrangement of spine along mountain ridge
- Facilities concentration
- Terraced massing in response to lateral topography
- Weather protected pedestrian network
- Hierarchy of built form and architectural expression
- Gagliardi way approach sequence
- West and east anchors
- Forest edge relationship
Space for Contemplation

We began with an academic quadrangle in the tradition of Oxford and Cambridge. Within it, a “Philosopher’s walk” bordered a quiet green central space. To one side were the science laboratories, on the other the humanities, connected by an underground concourse with the lecture theatres off it. Standing in a ring above were smaller seminar rooms and more intimate teaching areas. Because professors should be among their students, their offices were distributed throughout. In keeping with the sense of contemplative quiet, the quadrangle must be a perfect square with no variation in its facade, like the Plaza Mayor of Salamanca, sufficiently monotonous that only the sky above, the outlook underneath and the garden within would command attention.

Massive Columns lift the top two floors of the Quad above a landscaped courtyard. The repetition of sun louvers over the entire façade echoes the use of vertical elements in the Mall and the library and gives the entire central campus an almost classical feel. The courtyard is tranquil and serene in contrast to the bustle the mall. The Quad’s classicism inspired the comment, by Bruno Freschi, that SFU would “Make an elegant ruin.”
The Social Crossroads

The second major space, the social crossroads of the university, was inevitably outside the library, with all the common facilities grouped around it: theatres, art galleries, communication Centre, bookshop, pubs and cafeterias, lounges and student government offices. In this central mall, students and teachers would at one time or another run into everyone at the university. Such a space needed an umbrella, a huge glass one to let the light in but to keep off the interminable Northwest Coast rain.
Elevated Walkways

The walkway structure eventually became the spine of the university. Linking all buildings, the central mall became a high level pedestrian bridge, a hanging garden between the academic quadrangle at the top of one rise and the residential section at the top of the other rise, a distance of some thousand feet.

Implicit in the quadrangle-mall unit was a one-building concept that meant expansion would always occur at the periphery; growth by accretion. The university would spread down the mountain in the same low, land-hugging terraced form dictated by the central core.

Simon Fraser University

Noted Canadian architects Arthur Erickson and Geoffrey Massey designed the original Burnaby Mountain campus to foster interdisciplinary contact between students and researchers. That same openness and desire to innovate inform SFU’s vision today, to be Canada’s most community-engaged research university.

Consistently ranked among Canada’s top comprehensive universities and named to the Times Higher Education list of 100 world universities under 50, SFU is also the first Canadian member of the National Collegiate Athletic Association.
CAMPUS RENEWAL PROGRAM

Student learning spaces
Informal study social spaces
Outdoor gathering spaces
Fountains, pools, landscapes
Science teaching labs
Research space

WALK PRESENT
Development Plan envisages a future 2.73M S.F. to be added to current 4.56M S.F. continuing to grow through accretion at the periphery, new space terracing down the slope.

There could be 10,000 residents in UniverCity residential community east of the University.