

The Changing University in the Neo-Conservative Era

JANET COLLINS, VANCOUVER

Campus planning decisions made at the University of British Columbia over the last few years form a good example of the consequences of recent fundamental changes in the concept of a university. Simply put, the neo-conservative construct is more about opportunism than meeting academic requirements and objectives.

UBC has gained almost 50 buildings since 1986. The result is a physical transformation comparable to the building boom the campus experienced after the Second World War. Funding for most of these recent additions was garnered by way of the World of Opportunity Campaign (WOC), the university's first major fund-raising campaign in nearly 30 years. Said to be the largest campaign of its kind in Canadian history, the effort began in 1989 with a private sector goal of \$66 million; by campaign's end in 1993, more than \$250 million had been raised.¹ UBC President David Strangway, under whose tenure the campaign was conducted, must be commended for accomplishing such a feat, especially at a time when so many other Canadian institutions are in a state of decline due to lack of funding. But that doesn't mean that all is well at the Point Grey campus.

An examination of some of the more recently completed construction projects may provide a clue to the future direction of UBC and the role the WOC has played in it. In a sense, the physical fracturing of the campus is analogous to the effects of the increasing contestation currently taking place at UBC.

In theory, there should be nothing but great architecture at UBC. There are no municipal zoning or design guidelines to compromise an architect's ideal solution. No government in any of the usual senses of the word. No nearby residents to complain about density.

"When you think of the opportunity to create incredible buildings, there it is," says one UBC architecture graduate who returned to work at the university during the boom and who requested anonymity. "That's a pretty nice canvas to begin with. There is no zoning per se. That's the incredible opportunity at UBC."

And yet, despite the presence of perhaps more award-winning buildings on the UBC campus than any other similar institution in Canada, the whole is somehow less than the sum of its parts. UBC is not known as a showcase for great architecture — not even with an

abundance of great architecture at hand. It is, rather, a mostly incoherent catalogue of 20th-century building styles. UBC's real value might be as a handy laboratory for the architecture and city-planning graduates its architecture school turns out: all around them are examples of well-designed buildings poorly sited.²

Many of the structures fall into two popular building types: the "Status Building" and the "Product." The Status Building is about prestige. While it is true that the government of British Columbia was the single largest donor to the WOC, many recent UBC buildings bear the name of their other principal benefactor — as do buildings or rooms at other universities. Nevertheless, the sheer proliferation of this type of structure at UBC over the last few years should give one cause to ponder their necessity. It can be argued that the principal purpose of these buildings is to serve as oversized billboards for the individual or group putting up the most money (not unlike the current trend of naming major entertainment facilities after their major corporate sponsor, *à la* Vancouver's GM Place or Ford Centre for the Performing Arts). Others would suggest that such blatant advertising is a small enough price to pay for a building that the university could not otherwise afford to build. The question is, however, does the university need such a building at all? These structures generally fail to meet any pressing academic requirement.

The C.K. Choi Building (Centre for Asian Research) underscores this point (**Figure 1**). There is no denying the wonders of the Choi Building (Matsuzaki Wright Architects, 1996). Arguably one of the most sustainable structures ever built in this country, its clean lines and quality detailing reflect the environmentally friendly nature of the building. Visitors may be captivated by the natural ventilation and composting toilets, but they are as likely to wonder at the lack of tenants.

When the university embarked on the WOC, the administration asked the various departments and faculties to list projects they would like the anticipated funding to finance. The Department of Arts noted that the Centre for Asian Research was scattered in myriad facilities throughout the campus, and felt it would be beneficial for all concerned if the various groups could be brought together under one roof.³ A

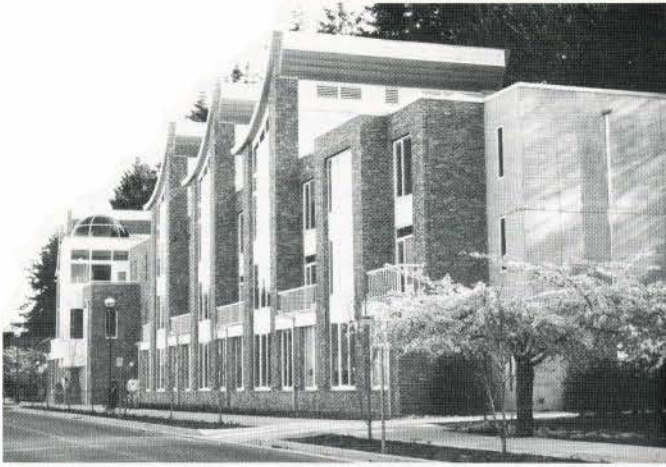


Figure 1. C.K. Choi Building (Centre for Asian Research), University of British Columbia, Matsuzaki Wright Architects, 1996. (J. Collins, 1997)

brand-new \$4.5 million building was the result,⁴ with major funding from C.K. Choi, Anthony Choi, David Choi, Stella Kwong, and Diane Sung.⁵ Substantial completion was achieved in February 1996, but the official opening did not take place until late in the fall of that year. Even then, only half of the space was occupied — and one of the tenants in this Asian research centre was the *Journal for Canadian Studies*. “It’s a matter of the programming not reflecting the real needs of the department involved,” explained David Grigg, UBC’s manager of urban planning and infrastructure.⁶ “It’s not unlike the situation with the School of Social Work, where they also found they didn’t need as much space as they thought.” Which raises questions about the true level of faculty involvement in “Status” projects, as well as the amount of control exerted by the principal donors. (Grigg denies rumours that suggest some patrons threatened to withdraw funding if they didn’t get the building and site that they wanted.)

Similar concerns pertain to another project, the Sing Tao School of Journalism (A.J. Diamond, Donald Schmitt and Co., 1997), which is named for the influential Asian newspaper. It forms part of the new Centre for Creative Arts and Journalism that was recently built across the street from the C.K. Choi Building. The idea of building a journalism school appears to be at odds with a trend experienced by other Canadian university campuses, where journalism programs are being threatened. For example, at the University of Western Ontario the master’s program has been joined with the School of Library and Information Sciences, a move, it is hoped, that will ensure the survival of both programs. Meanwhile, Simon Fraser University has a thriving publishing program. Does Vancouver really need — and can it support — two major journalism-focused programs? Or is the Sing Tao School of Journalism yet another glorified billboard? More questions arise when it is discovered that a journalism school was not even part of the faculty’s pre-WOC “wish list.”⁷

There are other serious problems associated with Status Buildings. For example, some buildings, such as the 1997 Chan Centre for the Performing Arts (Figure 2), prove that having donors with enough cash to have a building named after themselves does not necessarily produce a building that will pay for itself. “There were shortfalls,” Grigg admits. “Most occurred because of inflation or program/scope of work changed once construction commenced. The government’s matching funds helped, but we also had to use infrastructure money to help make up the shortfall. That is probably the case with most buildings.”

The Chan Centre (Bing Thom Architects, Inc., 1997) has been the target of much debate for other reasons, as well. The \$25-million⁸ entertainment complex consisting of a concert hall, studio theatre, and cinema is named for its principal financial supporter, The Chan Family Foundation, which contributed \$10 million to its construction. Michael Noon, director of the Chan Centre, has said that the UBC School of Music had been looking to replace its old auditorium. The Chan Centre meets that need, and provides space to host ceremonial events at the university. Noon also said it

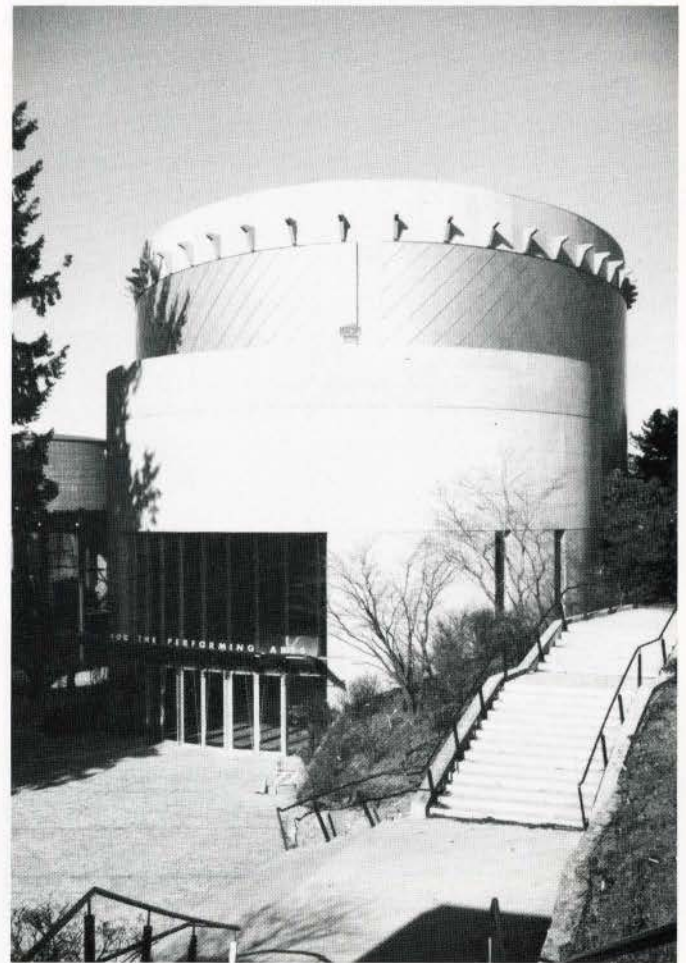


Figure 2. The Chan Centre for the Performing Arts, University of British Columbia, Bing Thom Architects, Inc., 1997. (J. Collins, 1997)

fills a need in Vancouver itself, since the city lacked a mid-range (1,400-seat) state-of-the-art hall. "Mainly it comes down to size: there are large halls such as the Queen Elizabeth Theatre and the Orpheum and then there are smaller spaces such as the Vancouver Playhouse. Vancouver had nothing to offer, however, in the mid-range and the Chan Shun fills this gap."⁹ It is an interesting comment in light of Vancouver's struggle to attract enough patrons to its other theatres to support both a symphony orchestra and an opera company orchestra. The question must also be asked: If the university finds itself in a situation where the theatre or music department wants to use the facility at the same time as a community-based interest (i.e., paying customer), which will be given priority?

The Chan Centre, like many of the products of the recent building boom, is built on a site that had, for good reason, remained undeveloped until now. The sheer bulk of the zinc-covered drum of the Chan's exterior has, as a result, been the target of much condemnation. Dubbed "the nuclear reactor" or "Chan-oby!" by UBC students, faculty, and local architecture critics, attempts to soften its impact through the planting of several trees between the building and the road are little consolation to tenants of the neighbouring Buchanan Building who, because of the Chan, can no longer take in views through an opening in a forest that overlooks Howe Sound.

The greatest threat to campus cohesion may, however, be the profit-generating "Product Buildings." Over the last few years these monuments to commercialism have increased their presence at UBC. And if the proposed Greater Vancouver Regional District/UBC Official Community Plan is any indication, commodification of the UBC campus will continue for some time to come. (A less-obvious indicator came by way of a product endorsement in 1996, when Coke was named the official drink of UBC.)

The proposed expansion of the existing commercial centre along University Boulevard is one of the more obvious pockets



Figure 3. The University Plaza commercial centre along University Boulevard, University of British Columbia. (J. Collins, 1997)

of Product activity. Set to quadruple in size, it already boasts a plethora of fast-food outlets — including McDonald's — as well as a bank, dry cleaner, and other amenities (Figure 3). Located on the edge of the campus, it is a visitor's first introduction to UBC, should they arrive via West 10th Avenue. Can the campus realistically support all of these businesses? Some say they are having trouble now, especially when classes are not in session. Expansion in this area will also threaten the view of the University of British Columbia War Memorial Gymnasium (Sharp & Thompson, Berwick, Pratt, 1951), the 1952 Massey Awards silver medalist.¹⁰

Across campus is another proposal of interest, the addition of a hotel facility to the financially troubled Faculty Club. Some \$7 million is already said to have been raised to fund this effort. This move would seriously compromise views of yet another Massey Award medalist, the Thea Koerner House/Graduate Student Centre (Thompson, Berwick, Pratt, 1960).

More interesting still is the high-density Hampton Place residential development. Located on the southern edge of the campus, the development boasts an uninspiring variety of housing types including high-rise apartments, courtyard townhouses, and low-rise condominiums (Figure 4). It is unfortunate that the lessons of sustainability learned from the C.K. Choi Building and the design innovations of some of the more recent campus structures were not developed here. But parking, not architectural design, is the real issue at Hampton Place. Most parking, including visitor spaces, is underground and therefore very limited. The nearest bus stop is at the entrance to Hampton Place, two to three blocks from most residences. In addition, the development has no community services, thus putting additional pressure on already-strained campus facilities. So, why build Hampton Place at all? Could it have something to do with the \$450 million potential land endowment (if all land sold/leased at market value) tied up in the 250 acres of residential land UBC owns on campus? It is estimated that



Figure 4. Hampton Place residential development, University of British Columbia, 1996. (J. Collins, 1997)

Hampton Place has already generated \$75 million.¹¹

The result of this strange mixture of disparate projects scattered about the Point Grey campus speaks more to development for development's sake than of construction to fulfil pedagogical need. So why is it happening? Like many growing cities, development at UBC seems to be getting ahead of proper planning. "The planning was not in place first because the 'hustlers' that were out raising money didn't know about planning," says Grigg.¹² But then, planning never has been the campus's strong suit. In 1910, when it was first constructed, UBC covered a mere 100 hectares. Over the years, the site has grown to 480 hectares. The expansion came in the absence of the kind of land-use guidelines that are routine in cities, with the result being "the sprawl that has become UBC's worst planning liability. The campuses of both the University of Toronto and Montreal's McGill University would together fit quite nicely into about half of UBC's."¹³

The original planning motif was a pair of academic quadrangles, one for arts, the other for sciences, rendered in a simplified collegiate Gothic by George Sharp, the design partner of what became the architecture powerhouse of Vancouver for 75 years, Sharp & Thompson. UBC was the firm's first big competition win, and their entry had a Beaux-Arts look to it. The three north-south malls survive from that 1910 layout, and the main campus still clusters at the crown of Point Grey.

In theory, the appointment of a single firm of architects to oversee the development of the campus should have made UBC more coherent than it has turned out to be. The problem was that as the firm evolved from a small office into the more corporate, multi-disciplinary outfit that became known as Thompson Berwick Pratt & Partners, it became more and more difficult to impose a house style on the diverse talents who joined it as it grew.¹⁴

Campus planners also came and went over the years, and as they did, other firms were invited to add their designs to the UBC canvas, further fragmenting what little unifying factors remained. The postwar boom made clear the necessity for some long-term planning. New plans for the campus were commissioned in 1959 — the first plan in nearly 50 years — and in 1968, 1982, and 1993, when Toronto's Roger du Toit was asked to take a fresh look at a campus that, in large measure, resembled one vast asphalt-paved construction project.

The dates of these plans show that nobody thought about bringing some order to the campus until a building boom had already taken hold. Their recommendations usually consisted of pointing out the mistakes hardened in reinforced concrete since the last plan was adopted. And the first casualty of a boom is often the plan.

As UBC sat in splendid isolation from the city, much of what went wrong there was of almost purely academic interest. Now, however, campus growth has increased the strains

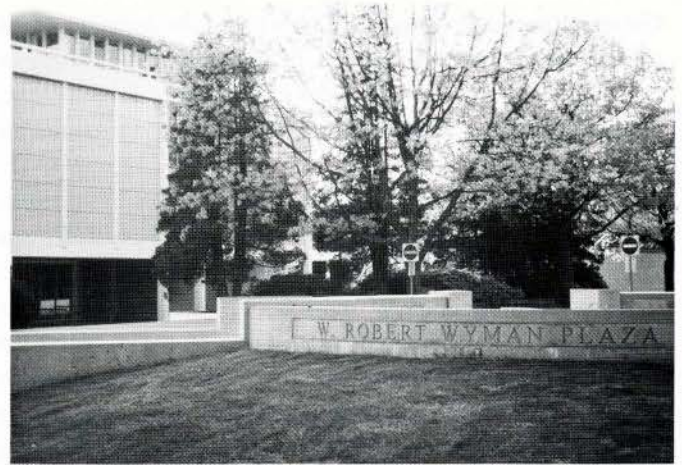


Figure 5. W. Robert Wyman Plaza (1996) with the Lasserre Building in the background, University of British Columbia. (J. Collins, 1997)

Figure 6. W. Robert Wyman Plaza, donors monument. (J. Collins, 1997)

imposed on such elements of the municipal infrastructure as sewers and roads. UBC is now the biggest commuter destination on the Lower Mainland, after the downtown peninsula.

In return for the support it needs from the larger community UBC is being asked to join it. The price of admission to the

Greater Vancouver Regional District was the creation of an official community plan, which UBC has done. One feature of this plan is the insertion of nodes of residential development, along with retail and service businesses, at various points on campus.

There is one construction at UBC that is not intended to relate to anything around it. The point of the W. Robert Wyman Plaza, set on the Main Mall (at the very doorstep of the Lasserre Building, home of the school of architecture), is to stand alone and command attention (Figures 5, 6). Also known as the Donors Plaza, this structure is a monument to money, a celebration of everything that has gone wrong during the past several years at UBC, everything higher education used to warn us about: the final triumph of commerce over wisdom.¹⁵

There is no denying the fact that universities cost money. Until now, the various levels of government have underwritten most of those costs, but mounting debts are forcing them to tighten their purse-strings. As a result, universities are having to look elsewhere for funding, and the natural place to look is the time-honoured alternative of corporate and private donations. But such funding is not without costs, including advertising for the company or brass-plated glorification of the individual, and buildings that aren't really needed to provide students with a good education. Some people insist this could spell the end of the university. But is the concept of the university as we know it doomed to die in any case?

Underlying all of this is a change in public attitude toward all universities. Failed expectations, deficit problems, and pessimism regarding the latest technology are just some of the issues being raised. In short, the public is questioning whether it is getting good value for its money. As a result, administrations are being forced to rethink the way in which universities are being operated and funded. The issue is especially pressing for UBC, given that the Ministry of Education withheld \$2 million in funding for UBC "because the university did not meet the ministry's targeted enrolment increase" last year.¹⁶ Thus, the university is faced with both the need to obtain alternative funding, and to find innovative ways of attracting future students.

Over the last few years, in an attempt to help rectify the situation, UBC set itself up as a designated centre of research excellence. This provides a more marketable incentive for external (i.e., non-governmental) funding sources. But that solution is double-edged, in that there is now even greater need to keep up funding in order to maintain the centre of excellence designation. As a result, goal/product-oriented projects that facilitate more manageable (and more attractive) fundraising efforts than, say, maintaining the sewer lines, have become the norm. This has caused a subsequent shift in academic focus from the humanities and pure sciences to applied sciences. As one professor anonymously noted, "It's

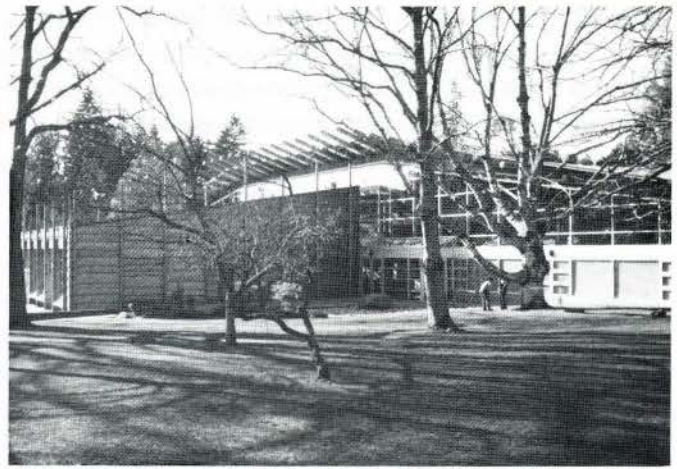


Figure 7. First Nations House of Learning, University of British Columbia, Larry McFarland Architects, 1994. (J. Collins, 1997)

no longer about the distribution of knowledge so much as the packaging of it."

Like other universities, UBC is feeling the pressure of various interest groups forcing the emergence of gender and post-colonial discourse. Despite continuing gender-issue problems surrounding the Political Sciences department, UBC is trying to demonstrate it is sensitive to the issues of our time. Once again, development on the campus is an indication of how some of these issues are being addressed. For example, a great deal of money and effort is being spent on making the sprawling campus more accessible. In addition, the First Nations House of Learning (Figure 7) serves as a icon of the environment in which the university today finds itself — there could be no finer expression of the political guilt complex. But is it enough to simply want to correct the wrongs of the past and the immediate needs of the present?

Freda Pagani, UBC's former associate director of project development, campus planning, and development, notes that there is an increasing trend toward non-traditional post-secondary education.¹⁷ Distance education and part-time studies are also becoming increasingly popular. She says the future may therefore lie in "on-line" education. If that is so, what is UBC going to do with all that land? Vancouver land costs are among the highest in Canada. Shouldn't the university be able to sell some of it off to finance other educational opportunities that might better serve the community than the current campus could possibly do, even with extensive renovations? If so, what happens to the UBC campus as we know it?

It is clear that the contestation of the campus space is at the root of the problem. The government, tax-payer, community, benefactor, faculty, staff, and students all have their own interests in the plans for the UBC campus. The question remains as to whether or not the university can satisfy all their needs and still survive.

Endnotes

- 1 Development Office, University of British Columbia, *Report on Philanthropy* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1993), n.p.
- 2 Sean Rossiter, "Picture Imperfect: UBC has gained almost 50 buildings since 1986, but has it lost its sense of community?" *The Georgia Straight*, 17-24 April 1997, 16.
- 3 Telephone interview with David Grigg, UBC's manager of urban planning and infrastructure, 23 April 1997.
- 4 Janet Collins, "C.K. Choi," *AWARD Magazine*, April 1996, 22.
- 5 Public Affairs Office, UBC. WOC report.
- 6 Grigg interview.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Tanya Schaap, "The Chan Centre for the Performing Arts," *AWARD Magazine*, February 1997, 45.
- 9 Schaap, 45.
- 10 Ward Stendahl and Lynn Sully, *Constructing Careers: Profiles of Five Early Women Architects in British Columbia* (Vancouver: Women in Architecture Exhibits Committee, c/o Architectural Institute of British Columbia, 1996).
- 11 Public meeting on the Official Community Plan, 9 April 1997.
- 12 Grigg interview.
- 13 Rossiter, 18.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*, 18-19.
- 16 "Enrolment Increase on Hold Says Senate." *UBC Reports* (UBC Public Affairs Office), 1 May 1997, 1.
- 17 In conversation with Freda Pagani, then associate director of project development, campus planning, and development, 21 February 1997.