

EDITORIAL

The group of buildings that has emerged over the last long generation towards the northern edge of the University of British Columbia campus is among the most intriguing collections of contemporary architecture in Canada. One of the first buildings of note was the Faculty Club (now the University Centre) designed by Fred Lasserre, then the head of the School of Architecture, and opened in 1959. In the 1970s the Museum of Anthropology, Arthur Erickson's brilliant blend of modernism and the Haida longhouse, was a centennial contribution from Ottawa. Recent financial campaigns have led to such buildings as the Belkin Gallery (Figure 1), the Choi Building, and the Chan Centre for the Performing Arts (Figure 2). Visitors are drawn to the north end of the campus for the spectacular view up Howe Sound, but a more intimate treasure there, well worth an extended walk, is architectural.

If there is a focus of these buildings, it is the space just off the north end of the main mall between the former Faculty Club and the Belkin Gallery, in the middle of which is a dominating sign (Figure 3). In such spaces other societies put statues of the three graces, obelisks purloined from Egypt, fountains or reflecting ponds, plazas for pigeons and strollers. Not us. We put up a parking sign.

Why have we put up such a prominent sign, which on the face of it would seem, at very least, to be atrocious publicity for the university? We doubt it can be sloughed off as mismanagement, the product of a crass or overburdened administration. The sign seems to be accepted. The university community have not arisen in affronted dudgeon. The larger public, those who reach UBC, seem oblivious. Perhaps the sign is virtually invisible, a commonplace. Perhaps only the architects squirm.

Anyway, there the sign sits in precious symbolic space and amid considerable architectural splendour. This journal, which purports to interpret British Columbia, should have something to say about it.

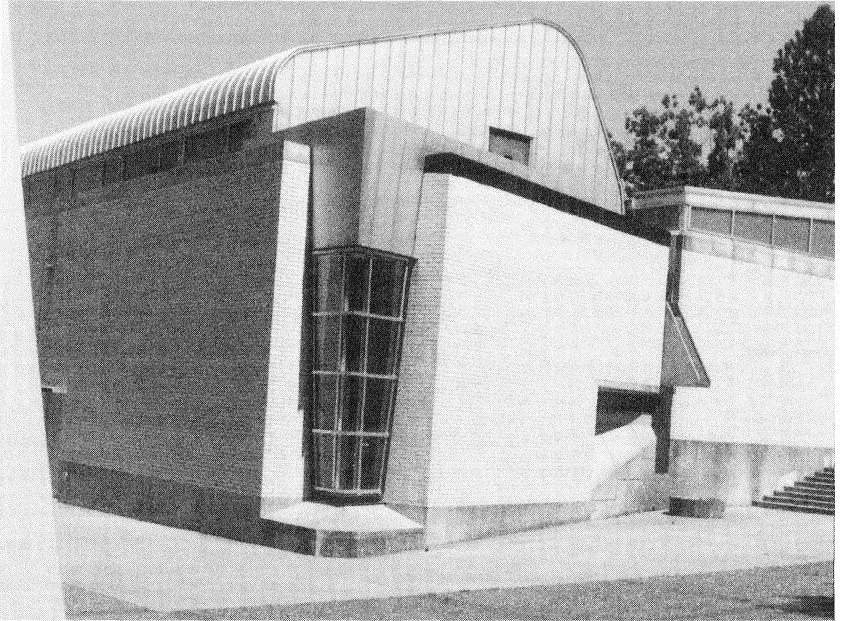


Figure 1: The Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery (architect: Peter Cardew) 1995. Rear view.

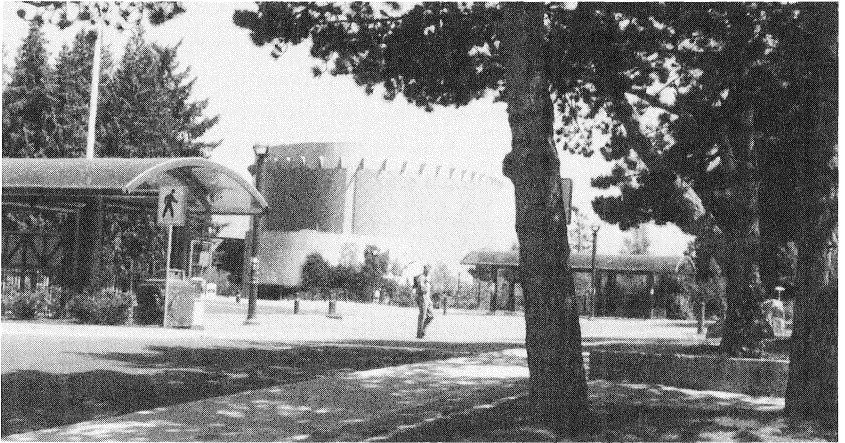


Figure 2: Chan Centre for the Performing Arts (architect: Bing Thom) 1997. Viewed from across the mall.

The best we can do, for now, is to offer these tentative thoughts. Perhaps people have only so much momentum for protest and have given their energies to matters they judge more portentous. Perhaps, on the other hand, the commercial, corporate landscape at the end of the 20th century is now so familiar that it is acceptable, indeed

welcome, almost everywhere. Could it be that the sign is comfortable whereas the buildings, some of which employ experimental architectural vocabularies, are somehow odd and dislocating? Or is it that we don't quite know what to put in a public space? Perhaps we have no aesthetic consensus to fall back on. Fine architects can create fine individual buildings, but the spaces between those buildings may depend on a public aesthetic that simply is not there. Around a corner at the south end of the Choi Building, for example, is a Confucian rock garden (Figure 4), but perhaps Confucian virtues belong where they are, with the Institute of Asian Research, not with the campus as a whole. Around the opposite corner, a well-equipped Native man signals the entrance to the Museum of Anthropology (Figure 5). He,

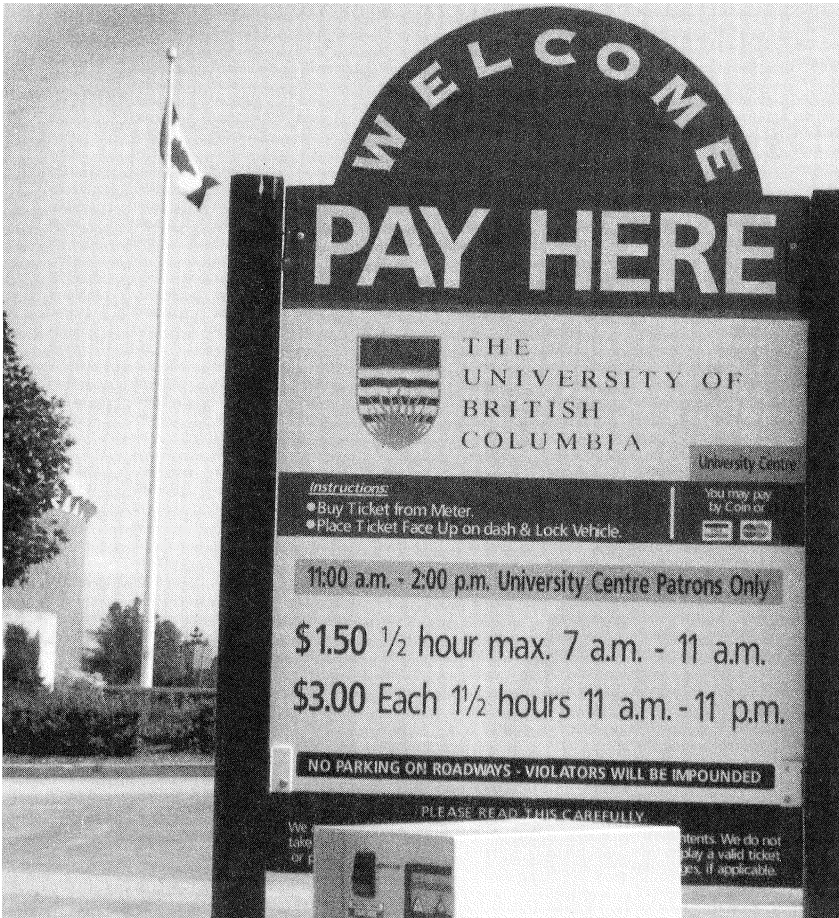


Figure 3: Sign in front of the University Centre.

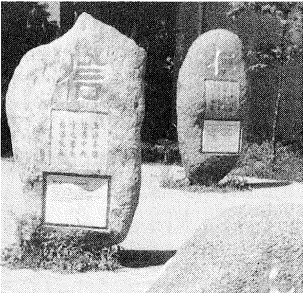


Figure 4: Rock Garden to commemorate "the virtuous achievements of Confucius."

too, may belong in his more specialized location. Closer at hand, but tucked behind a hedge, is a fountain composed of four anorexic modern graces (Figure 6). They might seem closer to predominant British Columbian culture than Confucian virtues or Nuu-chah-nulth welcoming figures, but we doubt there would be much consensus even about them. Their bodies may be too angular, their heads too small. Is, then, that sign the product of the combined dislocations of modernity and of an immigrant society?

None of this seems very convincing. Essentially, we are baffled and report the sign as a cultural artefact of obvious importance awaiting a comprehensive analysis.

The editors

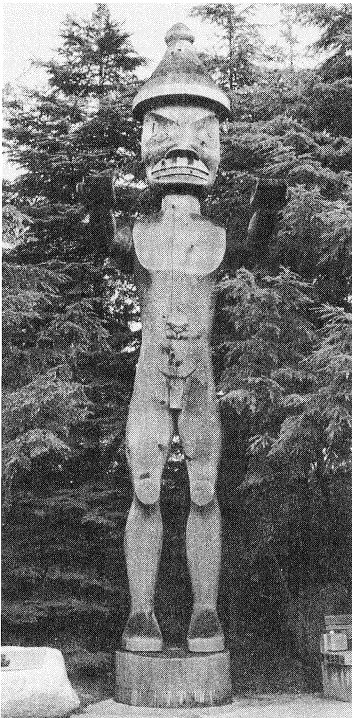


Figure 5: Joe David, Welcoming Figure. Collection of the MOA.

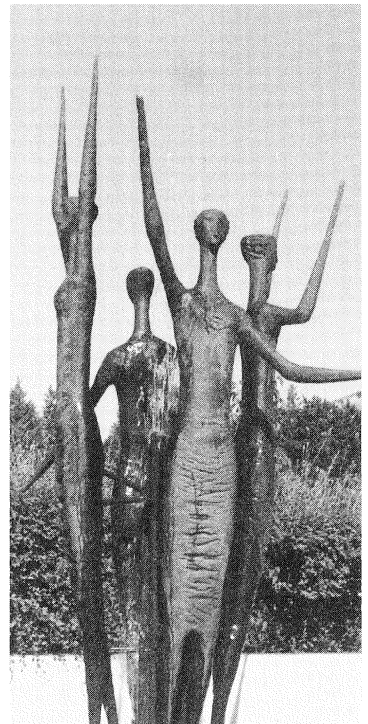


Figure 6: Jack Harman, Transcendence, 1961.