

Erickson exhibition reveals the architect's design process

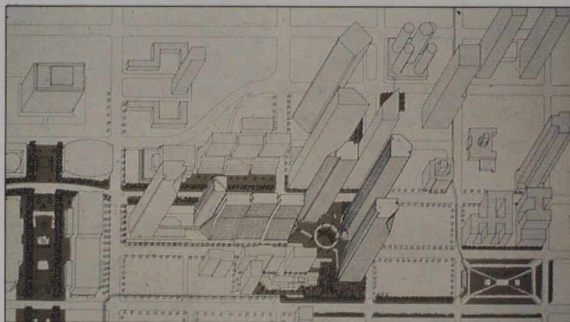
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Museum of Anthropology,
University of British
Columbia



Japanese landscaping, his design received the President's Award of Excellence from the American Society of Landscape Architects. (see front cover photo).

Erickson's increasing awareness that 'architecture is no more than a reflection of the concept of the culture behind it', contributed to his ability to win major commissions from the late 1970s in the Middle East, Far East, Britain and the United States.



California Plaza,
Los Angeles

The California Plaza commission, awarded Erickson in 1980 but still being refined, heralds a fifth phase in Erickson's career, anchored in the United States. (He is currently developing the design of the Canadian Chancery, Washington, D.C.). The huge scale of the Los Angeles complex and diversity of its facilities manifest a new mastery of the monumental which yet promises to retain his sensitivity to landscaping.

The relation of nature to architecture has been one of several fundamental preoccupations, conceptual and formal, that unite the phases of Erickson's career. His interest in site, light and materials is well known. Less appreciated, since little of the correspondence from his travels has been published, is Erickson's fascination with cultural tradition.

'I am always thrilled by the great buildings of the past' Erickson remarked in 1978, adding no less significantly, 'though there is no direct influence. The Parthenon of Athens, of course, Katsura and Ise in Japan, the Imperial buildings of Peking, Machu Pichu in Peru, the works of Hadrian, the great Islamic buildings like the mud brick and tile architecture of Iran or the early mosques of Egypt, the last Moorish work of Spain, the great Romanesque buildings through Europe. Each has taught me something save for the Gothic buildings, which have impressed me but never given me anything; the Renaissance — Brunelleschi, Palladio, Borromini, which I have admired and the gardens, the great command of landscape and cityscape of the baroque period. But then everything has some fascination.

One can never see enough nor begin to understand sufficiently.'

The all-embracing compass of that statement, and shunning of copyism, explain the liberal eclecticism of Erickson's work. Notwithstanding his caveat, even Gothic motifs can be traced in his buildings.

Hi-tech style developed

Erickson's eclecticism has always encompassed contemporary architectural developments. The glamour of the new glass technology appealed to Erickson, as it is less intrusive and provides greater light and more efficient internal climate control. The renewed formal geometry that it spawned in design has also affected him, and the mixture of hard-edged mass and mechanistic detailing of the 'hi-tech' style has entered his domestic vocabulary.

The inventive rather than imitative nature of Erickson's references to the evolving pattern of current international design is typified by the tremendous variations existing between his Napp Pharmaceutical Laboratory at Cambridge, England, and Norman Foster's Sainsbury Centre of the Visual Arts, University of East Anglia, Norwich, England (1974 — 1978).

Though he has kept up a lively competition with his peers, Erickson has continued to be inspired by the 'founding fathers' of modernism.

The urbane adaptation of ancient and modern sources is a component of the creative polarities contained within Erickson's design. Throughout each phase of his development, it is possible to discover not merely historical and current allusions, but also regional and international aspirations, romantic (picturesque) and rationalist or intimate and monumental qualities, artistic and pragmatic ideals.

In a 1978 interview he averred that, 'My work method is crudely described as "by the seat of the pants". However, the one important aspect of it is to bring out the unconscious rather than conscious responses to a subject. This becomes sometimes confusing and disturbing to those working around me since it means postponing decisions and pursuing explorations for as long as possible without making any emotional, intellectual or sensible commitment.'

The fact that the final decisions are also governed by material specifications and respect for the values of the client explains why Erickson has been sought out both by wealthy patrons and by commercial developers, governments and institutions.

Taken from the critical biography by Rhodri W Liscombe in the exhibition catalogue. ❖

