

ARTHUR ERICKSON

Money, Media and Canadian Architecture

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Arthur Erickson came of age as “Canada’s Master Architect” in a particularly auspicious time for the development of modern architecture in the country, during the years leading up to its centennial celebrations, in 1967.¹ One of the first prominent Canadian architects to be born and educated in his native country (he earned his B.A. in Architecture from Montreal’s McGill University in 1950), he honed a career that saw his status in Canada and abroad rise, fall, and—to a certain extent—rise again toward the end of his life. Erickson was born in Vancouver in 1924 and died in the same city eighty-five years later, building his career in the 1950s and ‘60s, an era that coincided with the rise of jet travel and the media industry. New media such as film, radio, and television dovetailed with an exponential growth in traditional media like print and photography. His coming of age in what Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan described the “global village” would prove to have a profound effect on the organizational model and design process that came to define Erickson’s professional practice and image, characterized by extensive travel, international networking, and the management of multiple offices.² Erickson was featured regularly in the Canadian (and international) popular and professional press and even posed for an Air Canada Aeroplan advertisement, published by *The Globe and Mail’s Report on Business* magazine in February 1987.

Throughout his career Erickson strategically cultivated relationships with both the

architectural press and mainstream media to boost his exposure and status, and ultimately to increase the ability of his practice to win prestigious commissions. In this way he crafted a public persona as one of Canada’s most vocal and visible advocates for modern yet timeless civic and commercial architecture and urban design during the key decades in which the nation’s major cities were expanding and transforming. Erickson received the most prestigious recognitions bestowed upon Canadian citizens: in 1973 he was appointed as an Officer of the Order of Canada and in 1981 he was appointed a Companion of the Order of Canada, which recognizes “outstanding achievement and merit of the highest degree, especially in service to Canada or to humanity at large.” In 2007 Erickson was one of four architects to have a building—in his case, the University of Lethbridge main hall, completed in 1971—featured on stamps issued by Canada Post to mark the centennial celebrations of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada. To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the University of British Columbia’s Museum of Anthropology (1949–99), a new stamp was issued with Erickson’s new building, completed in 1976, featured alongside Bill Reid’s *The Raven and the First Men*.

Through his example, Erickson transformed the identity of the architect in Canada from a technocrat to a public intellectual whose concern for the arts and culture were part and parcel of a new *modus operandi*. Erickson’s professional ambition to elevate the level of practice and discourse both inside and outside his native country—he was the first Canadian architect to establish three permanent offices in Vancouver, Toronto, and Los Angeles—enabled him to generate considerable income while taking part of a jet-set lifestyle that eventually also came under scrutiny with a humiliating declaration of bankruptcy in 1992.³

As Erickson’s finances waxed and waned, so too did his role in the media, in which he was at times portrayed as famous and at others as infamous. This changing relationship with the architectural press and mainstream media does not fully explain, however, why Erickson’s important contribution to modern architecture and urban design has largely failed to register outside of Canada, even though influential critics and architects such as Ada Louise Huxtable, Philip Johnson, and Phyllis Lambert have championed his work.⁴ Although a number of high-profile American journals—including *Life*, the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* featured and discussed Erickson’s contribution, it was in Canada, especially in his native British Columbia,

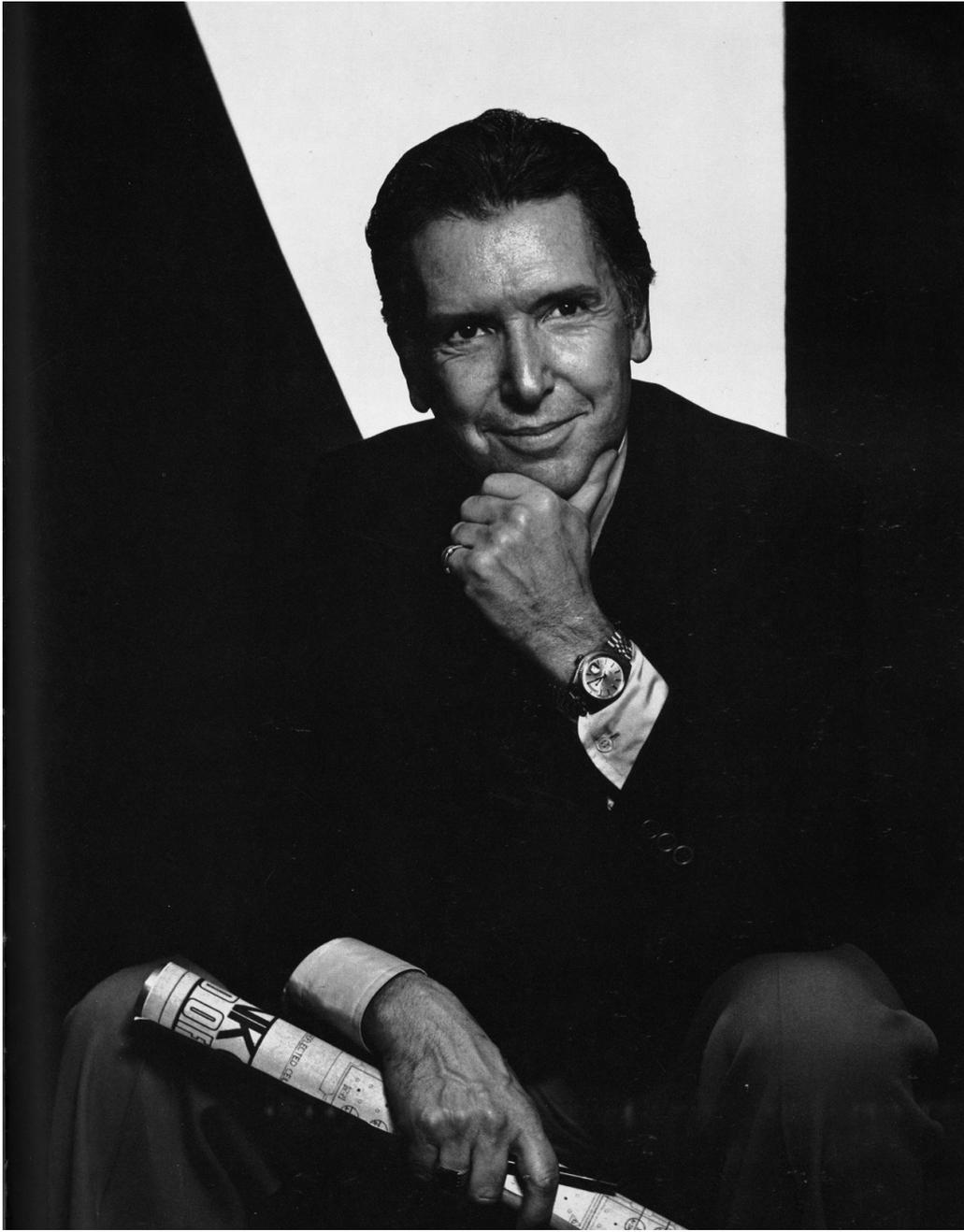


Previous spread Fig. 6. Arthur Erickson on viewing platform in his Vancouver house.
Above Air Canada, Advertisement.

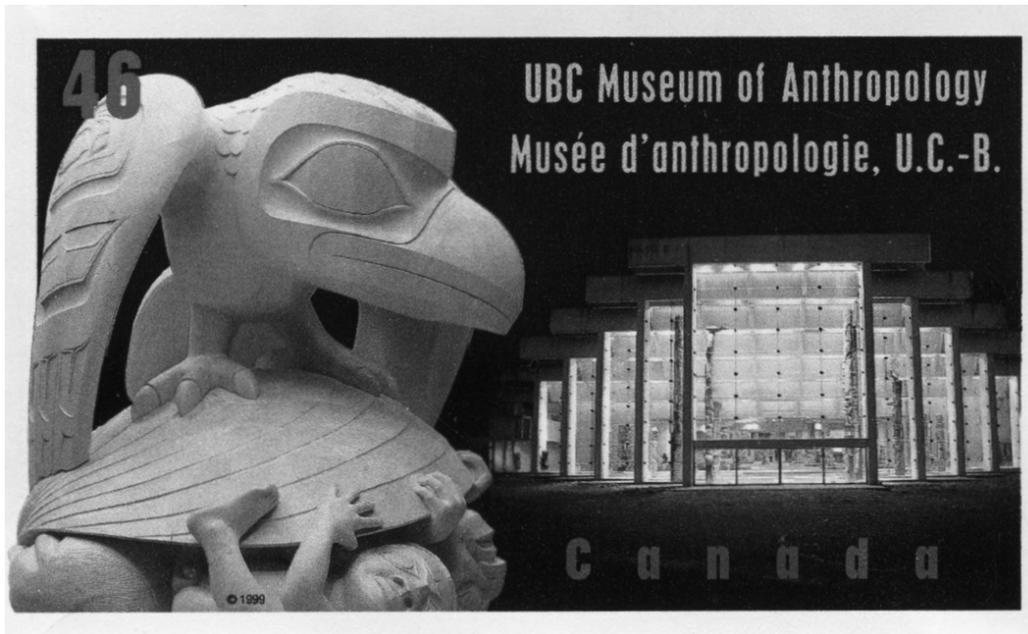
Cover: "Arthur Erickson—Canada's Master Architect," *Time*, (Canadian edition), February 14, 1972.



Arthur Erickson, University of Lethbridge (University Hall, 1971); Stamps to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada (1907–2007).



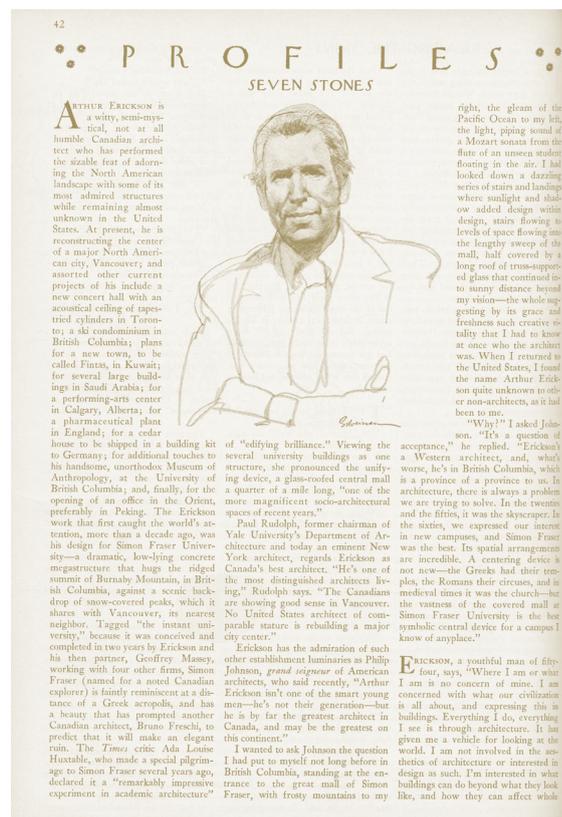
Arthur Erickson, in *Karsh Canadians* (1978), by Yousuf Karsh.



Arthur Erickson, UBC Museum of Anthropology (1976) and Bill Reid, *The Raven and the First Men* (1980). Stamp to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the UBC MOA (1949-1999).

that he achieved his greatest following. There the visibility of his most outstanding work—such as Robson Square, Simon Fraser University, and the Museum of Anthropology—has assured that his legacy would remain intact.

To be sure, Erickson's relationship to media and money was a complex one that changed over time. He identified with the



Edith Iglauer, "Seven Stones," (Profiles) *The New Yorker*, June 4, 1979.

image of architect-artist more than that of architect-entrepreneur. This likely underlies his preference for managers rather than partners in his various offices. Maintaining ultimate control over the creative process seems to have mattered more to Erickson than empowering partners. He shared little with John C. Parkin and John B. Parkin, whose "collaborative and corporatist" approach, modeled upon Albert Kahn's firm in Detroit, transformed the Toronto-based Parkin practice into Canada's largest during the 1960s and '70s.⁵

Many twentieth-century architects have seen their careers fluctuate negatively in response to strained financial circumstances outside of their control or critical responses from laypeople and professionals to their newly completed buildings. Not unlike his self-elected mentor, Frank Lloyd Wright, to

whom he attributed his decision to study architecture, Erickson projected an image of a worldly, elegant, and at times controversial architect, especially in the popular media. Yet the controversy with Erickson, especially during the 1980s in the years leading up to his bankruptcy, and the perception that he was wealthy came about not because of his fame but because of his highly visible extravagance, coupled with his office's dwindling finances and the resulting frustrations of staff, suppliers, and other stakeholders. Amid a whirlwind of innuendo, the soft-spoken, elegantly dressed Erickson continued to practice. He lived in a former garage on a double lot in Vancouver's west side (Point Grey), which he had skillfully transformed into a modest-sized house with a mesmerizing garden. Perhaps to offset the growing perception of his out-of-control spending, and more poignantly as a self-reminder about his modest middle-class upbringing, he often mentioned his home's humble origins in media interviews.

Erickson's high media profile came at a relatively early age for a profession whose members typically require many years to gain renown. He was only forty-eight when he made the February 14, 1972, cover of the Canadian edition of *Time*, alongside an image of Simon Fraser University and a heading describing him as both "Superstar" and "Canada's Master Architect." [Fig. 1] Erickson has also been the subject of several documentaries, sponsored by both publicly funded and private Canadian broadcasters, a breadth of coverage conferred on no other architect in Canada.⁶ A Hollywood turn of events led Erickson to serve as the real-life model for the protagonist of the film *Intersection* (1994), in which an architect named Vincent Eastman (played by Richard Gere) designs a Museum of Anthropology (Erickson's real-life design).

Erickson gradually became Canada's main public commentator in both domestic and international media. This media coverage, coupled with his alliance with Pierre Trudeau (Canada's prime minister at the time) fueled Erickson's ability to acquire commissions. In fact, his "Man in the Community" and "Man and His Health" pavilions, designed for Expo 67 in Montreal, his award-winning Canadian Pavilion for Osaka World's Fair of 1970, and the controversial Canadian Chancery in Washington (1986–89) were all governmental commissions received while Trudeau was in power. In 1972, the same year Erickson appeared on the cover of *Time*, Prime Minister Trudeau emerged as an advocate for Canadian architecture and urban design

when he introduced a special issue of *Progressive Architecture* dedicated to his country:

I believe you will find that Canadian architecture has an unpretentious quality and reflects the diversity of its people and its climate. As our cities grow, we shall demand of our architects a sensitive interpretation of society's needs as well as the eloquent architectural statement. The day of the individual building in isolation is over; our concerns are in building communities that offer enrichment and increased choice to their citizens. More and more our friends in the United States of America are discovering that although we share a continent we differ in many ways.⁷

Erickson's professional practice expanded rapidly as it shifted from predominantly site-specific houses in the Pacific Northwest to large-scale public buildings such as university campuses and governmental offices. He understood the importance of strategic alliances between governmental leaders and individuals in the private sector, as well as of effective communication with the general public. The gentle demeanor Erickson displayed in public interviews belied his fierce professional drive and determination. A window into his charming yet combative personality can be seen in a portrait taken by Armenian-Canadian photographer Yousuf Karsh (1908–2002), published in the *Karsh Canadians* collection in 1978. Tellingly Erickson was the only architect to be featured. The photography session took place in Karsh's Ottawa studio, in the neo-Gothic Château Laurier hotel, near Parliament Hill, the country's seat of government. In the photograph, an image of wealth is projected through Erickson's impeccably tailored suit, conspicuously placed Rolex watch, and other carefully selected elements. He props up his head with one hand and holds a roll of Bank of Canada drawings in the other. At the time of the portrait Erickson was engaged in the design of the bank's new headquarters in Ottawa, on a prestigious site between Sparks and Wellington Streets. The architectural drawings consciously emphasize his status as an architect. By comparison, Karsh's 1958 photograph of Frank Lloyd Wright displays neither conspicuous status symbols nor elements that allude to his identity as an architect.

More than vanity or narcissism, Erickson's desire to appear impeccably dressed and in control of his image was part of a self-conscious plan to increase his stature in order to advocate for high-quality architecture in the public realm. The Bank of Canada commission was highly significant for his professional image and career strategy as his practice continued to grow and to accommodate large-scale civic buildings and sites.

More importantly, he understood that bankers held a lot of power and responsibility for the built environment. He believed they could invest money in transformative projects to improve cities and the lives of ordinary citizens. In his address to the Institute of Canadian Bankers in 1972, Erickson asserts the following:

I have come to plead, also, for the comprehensive approach as the most urgent issue facing us today. We can no longer afford the short term and limited view of things because of the broad impact of the consequences of our decisions. You, as bankers, cannot afford to be concerned with only the economic aspects of projects that you finance. There may be serious implications on the natural environment, on the urban environment, on human culture, which at some future time may even be considered crimes against mankind. ... As lending institutions, you have enormous power over development in this and other countries, and with that, an enormous responsibility.

Erickson's three-block reflective glass curtain walls and copper-clad scheme for the bank headquarters resists the object-building model and pushes the boundaries of contextually sensitive design.⁸ The final scheme conveys not only innovation but also sensitive integration of the existing modern classical building, realized in 1938 by the Toronto firm Marani, Lawson & Morris. Erickson designed two light-filled atriums to flank the existing building and animated them on the ground-floor level with an interior landscape that recalls the 1968 Ford Foundation Headquarters, by Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo. The Bank of Canada is located in a historic neighborhood near the Gothic Revival Houses of Parliament and Sparks Street (Canada's first pedestrian mall, evocative of Victor Gruen's Kalamazoo Mall). Erickson deployed a sloped façade that abstractly recalls the profile of the copper-clad mansard roofs of the Parliament and surrounding buildings. Despite the building's critical acclaim, Erickson did not receive any more commissions in the nation's capital.

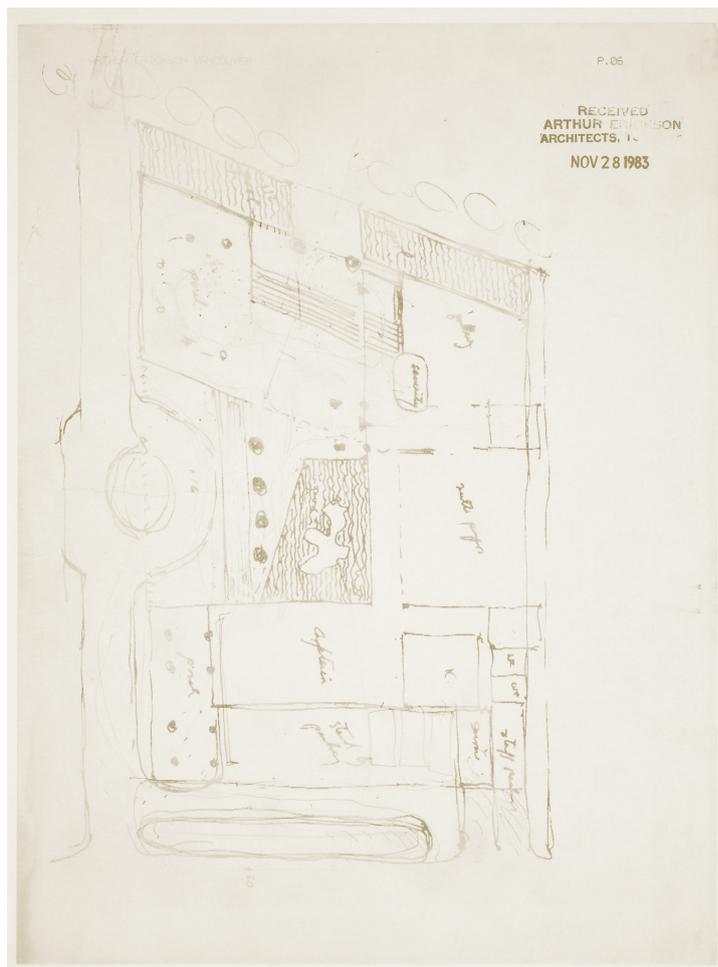
The American capital was a different matter. In the early 1980s, when the Canadian government decided to commission a new chancery for Washington, Erickson's national and international prominence was at its peak, stoked by his constant media presence. Prime Minister Trudeau overruled the chancery selection committee, which had chosen another architectural firm for the project, and gave the commission to Erickson. By the mid-1980s Erickson directed offices in Vancouver, Toronto, and Los Angeles. In 1986 he was awarded an FAIA Gold

Medal; he was the first (and so far only) Canadian architect to be so honored.

The Arthur Erickson Archive at the Canadian Centre for Architecture contains materials ranging from preliminary sketches to models and presentation drawings.⁹ These artifacts speak to Erickson's continued embrace of innovative new technologies to facilitate his increasingly complicated professional practice. Among the most unusual of the documents is a sequence of seven faxes that was sent with Erickson's sketches of the various floor levels of the Chancery. His Toronto office oversaw the project, so Erickson probably executed the seven sketches on the five-hour flight from Toronto to Vancouver. Since the heading reads "Arthur Erickson Vancouver," it seems that upon arrival he asked his office assistant to fax the sketches to the Toronto office; the faxes are stamped: "Received—Arthur Erickson Architects, Toronto, November 28, 1983."

Erickson always traveled with a pad of 8 ½" × 11" vellum paper. These original sketches of the different floor levels of the Chancery, beginning with the underground level and ending with the top floor, hosting the ambassador's offices, were most likely drawn over a site plan and photocopied before being faxed. What makes these faxes of scholarly interest is what they reveal about Erickson's global professional practice. As Erickson began traveling regularly between his three offices, employing a fax machine on a regular basis became increasingly necessary for staff-to-staff communication. In 1981 Erickson discussed his peripatetic lifestyle and the importance air travel played in his creative process in a convocation address given at the University of Lethbridge, on the campus he and Geoffrey Massey had designed a decade earlier:

Though I am an architect by profession, I am a wanderer by circumstance. Since weekly I pass through a time zone change of a minimum of three hours and have been doing so for many years, my constitution makes none of the usual demands for regular intake of food or hours of sleep. Divested of such routines it seems to slip into the time slot of each destination with ease. Moreover, in the five hours of transcontinental travel which I undergo three or four times each week, I float in marvelous detachment from the electronic earth systems that extend our range of sensory experience and communication to the world's remotest corners. For those hours, cut off from all



Arthur Erickson Associates, Fax, November 28, 1983.

such worldly involvement such as the telephone, I return to myself again, and on the one-by-two-foot table in front of me, allow myself to dream. I return to a state of almost original bliss.

Erickson's candid and somewhat nostalgic account of the distraction-free hours he spent at the "one-by-two-foot table" reveals how opportunity for design thinking was increasingly undermined by his competing responsibilities. Reading between the lines of Erickson's convocation address, one might question whether he could meet the challenges of managing and financing his three offices while maintaining a level of engagement and a standard of excellence that had distinguished his earlier production.

Upon its completion in 1989, the Chancery in Washington received mixed reviews in both Canadian and American media. For example, Paul Goldberger's review in the *New York Times*, on July 9, 1989, described the building as an "odd mix of the grandiose and the graceful, the pompous and the inviting, the awkward and the appropriate." Architectural critics such as Peter Blake and Canadian-based

Trevor Boddy countered with praise for Erickson's design. To be sure, the Canadian media coverage of Trudeau's decision to override the selection committee led his disgruntled colleagues to feel that Erickson's personal friendship with the prime minister had subverted the democratic process. Since he was such a familiar presence in the media, it was

hard for him to avoid the very public widespread dissatisfaction toward both the design quality and the process surrounding the chancery. The mass media he had harnessed strategically to advance his vision for high-quality design in Canada and abroad at the height of his career proved a double-edged sword for Erickson.

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1 Rhona Richman Kenneally and Johanne Sloan, eds., *Expo 67: Not Just a Souvenir* (Toronto-Buffalo-London: University of Toronto Press, 2010). See particularly Inderbir Singh Riar, "Montreal and the Megastructure, ca 1967," pp. 193-210.

2 For an overview of Erickson's life and work, see Nicholas Olsberg, "Canada's Greatest Architect," in ed. Rhodri Windsor Liscombe, *Architecture and the Canadian Fabric* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011), 429-45; see also my essay "Modern Architecture and Nature in the Houses of Arthur Erickson," in eds. Linda Fraser and Michelangelo Sabatino, *Arthur Erickson: Layered Landscapes: Drawings from the Canadian Architectural Archives* (Halifax: Dalhousie Architectural Press, 2013), 6-23.

3 For a detailed account of his bankruptcy, see "Bankrupt," in David Stouck, *Arthur Erickson: An Architect's Life* (Madeira Park, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, 2013), 341-65; Donna K. H. Walters, "The Collapse of an Architectural Pillar Jolts L.A. Real Estate: Arthur Erickson Associates' financially ailing Southland office was abruptly closed last month. Its renowned Canada-based principal admits that he is no numbers whiz," *Los Angeles Times* (July 15, 1991).

4 Phyllis Lambert, "Tribute to a Visionary Architect Ahead of his Time: Arthur Erickson, 1924-2009," *Architectural Review* 1349 (July 2009), 27-28.

5 See Michael J. McMordie, "John B. Parkin Associates and Albert Kahn Inc.: An Industrial View on Architecture," in eds. Linda Fraser, Michael McMordie, and Geoffrey Simmins, *John C. Parkin, Archives, and Photography: Reflections on the Practice and Presentation of Modern Architecture* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2013), 31-52.

6 Erickson was the subject of three

documentaries and countless other television interviews: Arthur Erickson, directed by Jack Long and produced by the National Film Board of Canada, 1981; *Arthur Erickson, Poète du Béton*, directed by Michèle Smolkin and produced by Radio-Canada Télévision Colombie-Britannique, 2003; *The Life and Times of Arthur Erickson*, written and directed by Gordon McLennan, 2003.

7 Pierre Trudeau, "A Message from the Prime Minister," *Progressive Architecture* (September 1972), 88-89.

8 Recently the integrity of the Bank of Canada building has been threatened by proposed "renovation" plans. See Maria Cook and Michelangelo Sabatino, "Destruction Looms for Arthur Erickson Designed Bank of Canada Atrium Garden," Cultural Landscape Foundation, January 7, 2014.

9 Additional Erickson archives are held by the Canadian Architectural Archives of the University of Calgary.