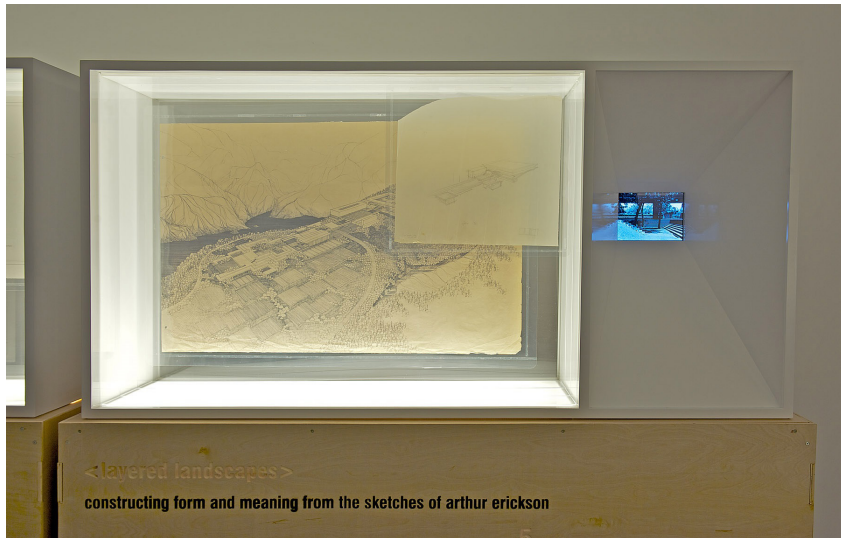


Layered Landscapes: Constructing Form and Meaning from the Sketches of Arthur Erickson. CANADIAN ARCHITECTURAL ARCHIVES, UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY. Mounted at the Nickel Galleries, Taylor Family Digital Library, University of Calgary. October 2013 to January 2014. Curated by LINDA FRASER and GEOFFREY SIMMINS.

Arthur Erickson (1924–2009) was perhaps Canada’s first “starchitect,” famous internationally for a unique architectural vision that integrated his modernist buildings comfortably within their natural surroundings. During a career lasting over fifty years, he designed iconic buildings in Canada and around the world, including the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, the campus of the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, the addition to the Bank of Canada building in Ottawa, and the Canadian Embassy in Washington, D.C. As part of the necessary and inevitable assessment of Erickson’s legacy after his death, the Canadian Architectural Archives at the University of Calgary mounted a small, tightly focused exhibit drawn from its holdings, featuring sketches by Erickson created during the first fifteen years of his architectural practice.

The exhibit comprised eight vitrines, each featuring drawings from a specific Erickson project from the period 1954 to 1969, ranging from simple line sketches to more elaborate concepts used by Erickson as part of his creative process. Bathed in a warm glow from below, the drawings were displayed vertically, sandwiched in overlapping layers between two panels of glass. As opposed to the more traditional method of framing individual sketches and hanging them on the wall, this unusual, unframed, and free-floating display format allowed viewers to see through the drawings from either side, inviting more detailed study and reflection on their interconnectedness. Six vitrines featured time-lapse video on a playback loop, showing aspects of the building as built, allowing the viewer to observe the play of light on the completed structure and place the visions of the drawings into their constructed reality. The vitrines were perched at a comfortable viewing height atop plywood stands, which doubled as the exhibit’s packing crates. Carved into the stands were the exhibit title, name of the building, its location, its construction date, and the number of the vitrine. While these carved labels were stylish, their relatively low placement on the boxes hindered the overall experience, making viewing of the labels difficult when examining the drawings up close, especially because the gallery was slightly darkened in order to produce a dramatic lighting effect on the drawings themselves. While not evident in the exhibit, archival citations for the drawings appeared in the accompanying exhibit catalogue.



Layered Landscapes: Constructing Form and Meaning from the Sketches of Arthur Erickson. Image NOV5935, courtesy of the University of Calgary (LCR Photo Services); photographed by Dave Brown.

The choice of the projects highlighted by the exhibit cleverly illustrated Erickson's development as an architect as well as his increasing skill and comfort with his abilities. The drawings for Stegeman House, built in West Vancouver in 1954, are beautifully executed but seem mannered and controlled. The fluidity, speed, and playfulness evident in the 1958 designs for his famous Filberg House in Comox, B.C., reach a crescendo with the feverish intensity of his sketch of the interior of the Canadian Pavilion at Expo '70 in Osaka, Japan. Part of this evolution may have resulted from the changing nature of the tools at Erickson's disposal, as pencils gave way to felt-tip pens – more effective for creating the required bold, decisive strokes on the page. Whether Erickson used pencil or pen, tracing paper or vellum, his skill as an artist and his vision as an architect shine through in each of his sketches. These works are essentially preliminary sketches and draft drawings long since superseded by more specific construction plans, but they resonate with the viewer as evidence of the initial spark of an idea and, in some cases, its evolution toward a signature Erickson creation.

Inevitably, a viewer versed in both archival theory and the nature of technological change will tend to reflect on the role of sketching and the use of technology in current architectural design. Most architectural students now learn to produce drawings primarily through computer-assisted design software; even outside the workplace, the most ephemeral idea would probably be captured on some form of electronic device, which is more likely to be at hand than a

pencil (or any writing instrument) and a medium upon which to draw. It is still possible that architectural students of the future will capture their inspirations with pencil and paper, but current and future generations, when compared with architects of Erickson's era, will not be drawing on a daily basis to the same degree. Mastery of such artistic skill requires continual practice and development that is now less likely to occur in work and personal environments dominated by computers. While electronic devices and their software bring new, previously impossible opportunities to architectural design, they do create homogeneity of practice since all architects are using similar tools that have similar strengths and weaknesses. It is possible to imagine that a creative vision could be hindered by the inherent limitations of software to capture a moment of inspiration. Given that electronic records preservation is still at an immature phase, the survival of digital files of architectural design, perhaps even of Erickson's later works, is also an open question.

The nature and quality of architectural archives, and perhaps the archives of all creative people, will evolve with technological change. Our understanding of how creative processes are captured, and what elements are considered artistic and creative, must evolve as well. It does seem unlikely that a drawing printed from an AutoCAD or other electronic file will evoke the same kind of response as an original pencil drawing on tracing paper by an architect of Erickson's stature. Despite this, exhibits of the archives of future generations of acclaimed architects may have to feature exactly that type of printed material, with sketches and drawings in a distinct minority, leading viewers to assess the skill and mastery of the architect of the future from a different perspective.

Layered Landscapes reflected on the creative process of an extraordinary architect and the preservation of the variety of records resulting from it. It evoked not only the connection between the conception and reality of a building and its site, but also the archival bonds among documents through its unique method of displaying the drawings. Although this exhibit was not intended to provide a basic overview or an in-depth study of the oeuvre of Arthur Erickson, the span and impact of his long career, hinted at in this small selection of drawings, argue strongly for the worthiness of either initiative in future exhibitions.

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