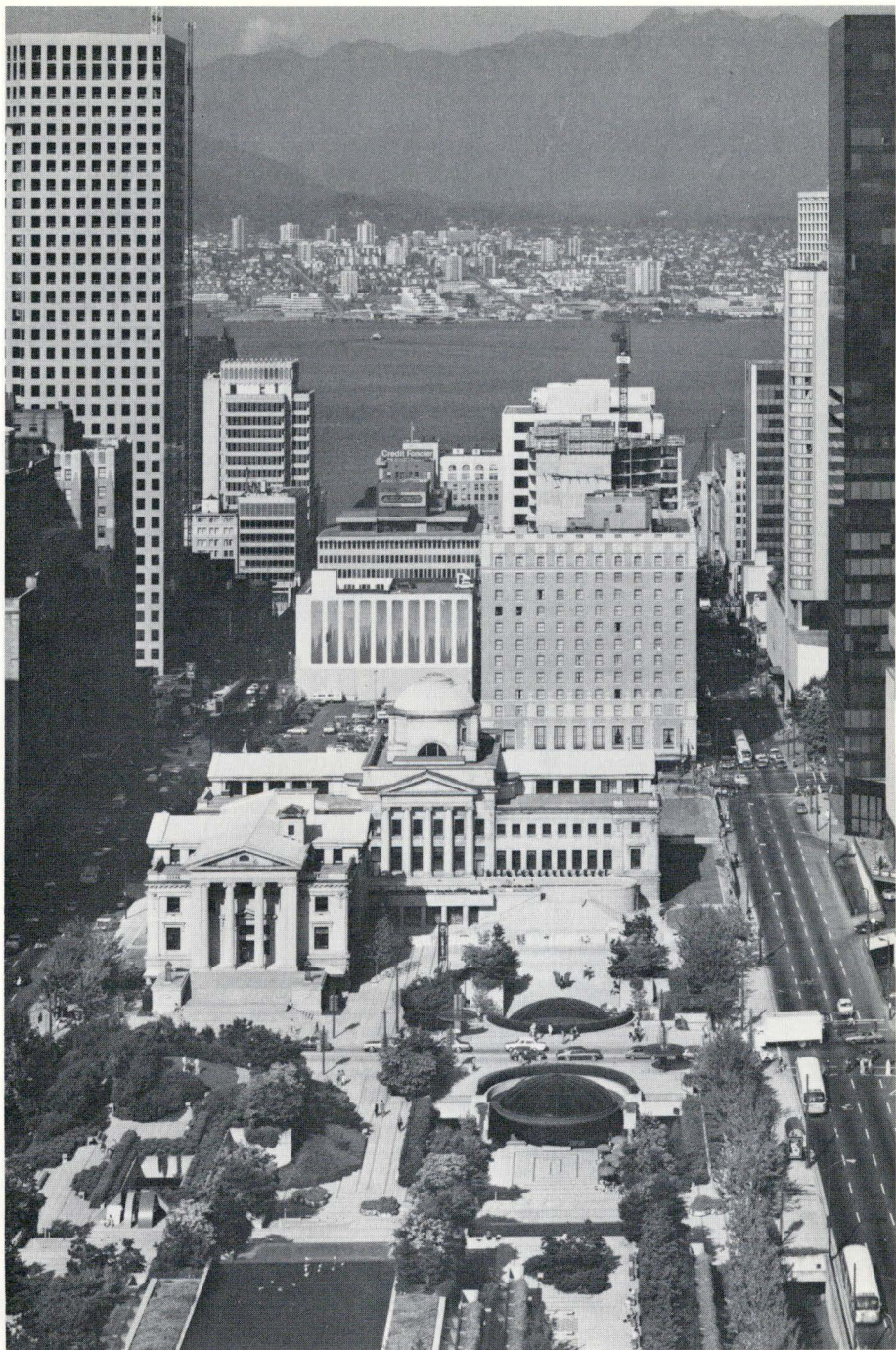


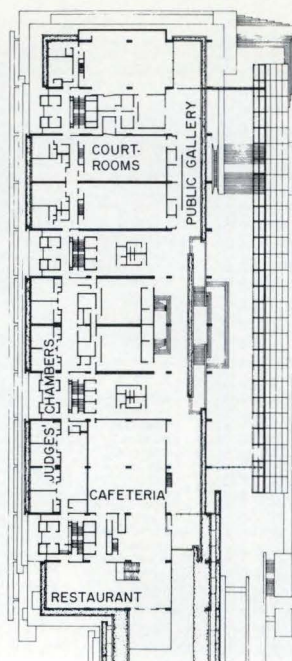
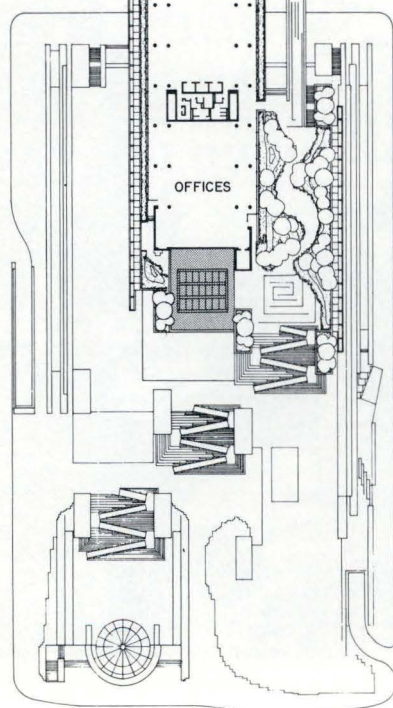
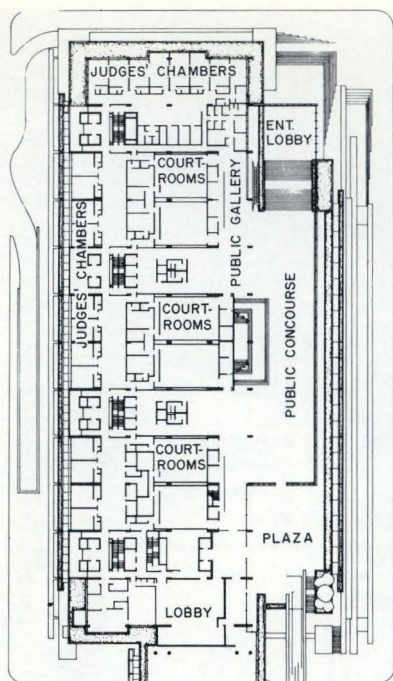
A WALK THROUGH ROBSON SQUARE

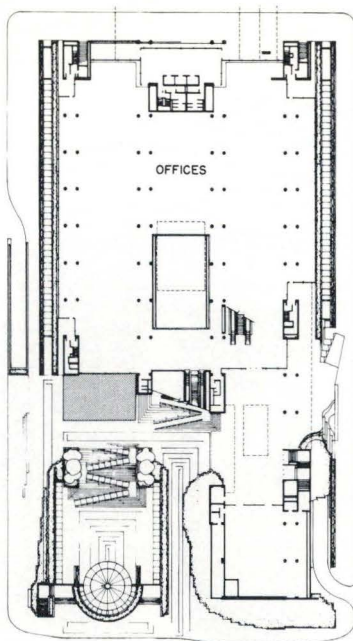
As the plans and the overview demonstrate, Robson Square contains three inter-related structures: the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Provincial Government Office Block and the Law Courts. These are integral to a multi-level plaza and garden through which two thoroughfares pass. Indeed, the Office Block is designed in such a way that it is itself a terraced open park. It is adjacent to or actually contains many of the facilities that are essential to Robson Square's overall function as a civic centre.

All the roofs of the office block have been landscaped, and most areas within it are accessible to the public, either above or below the level of the streets that transect the square. The public focus of this building-cum-plaza is the area surrounding Robson Street between Hornby and Howe, the area nearest the VAG. Close to the free public skating rink that is positioned under the two plexiglass domes situated below Robson Street is an international food mart that opens onto a plaza. Immediately adjacent to it within the portion of the office block that is constructed beneath Robson Street is a media centre that is equipped with a theatre, conference areas and exhibition spaces.

The government office block portion of the complex is set back 150 feet from Robson Street and gradually steps up to a maximum of three storeys at the Smithe Street end of the complex. There is a maximum of three storeys below street level, including service spaces. Within the structure there are open-plan offices accessed by street-like corridors. The interiors are landscaped in order to provide attractive office environments and to continue, inside, the park-like setting. The interior planning was designed by British Columbia Buildings Corporation (BCBC) on the principle of office landscaping.

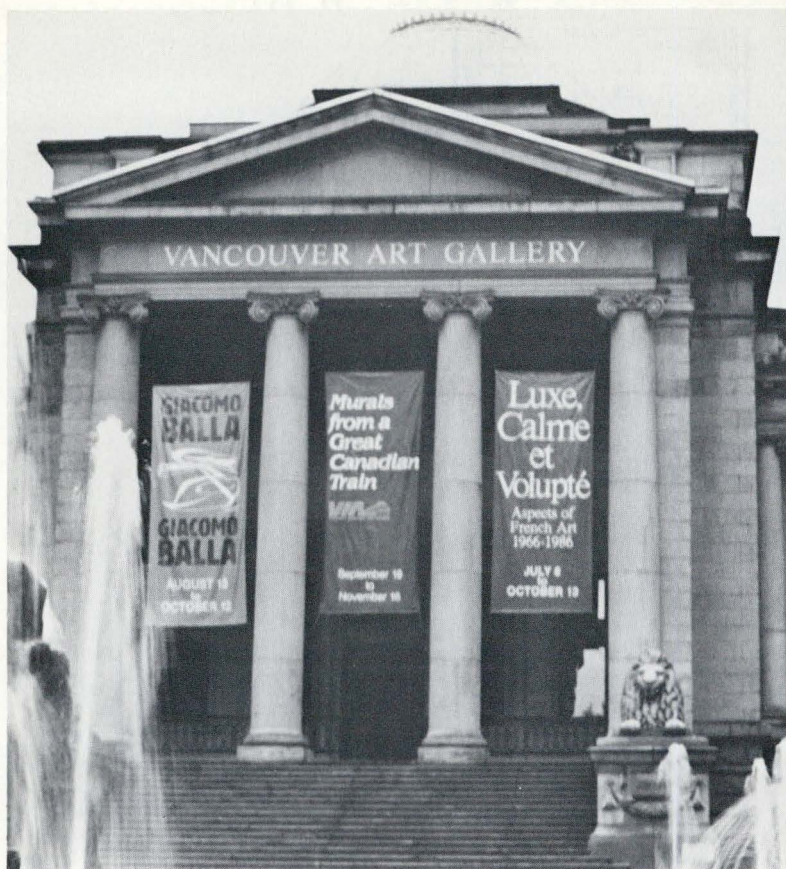






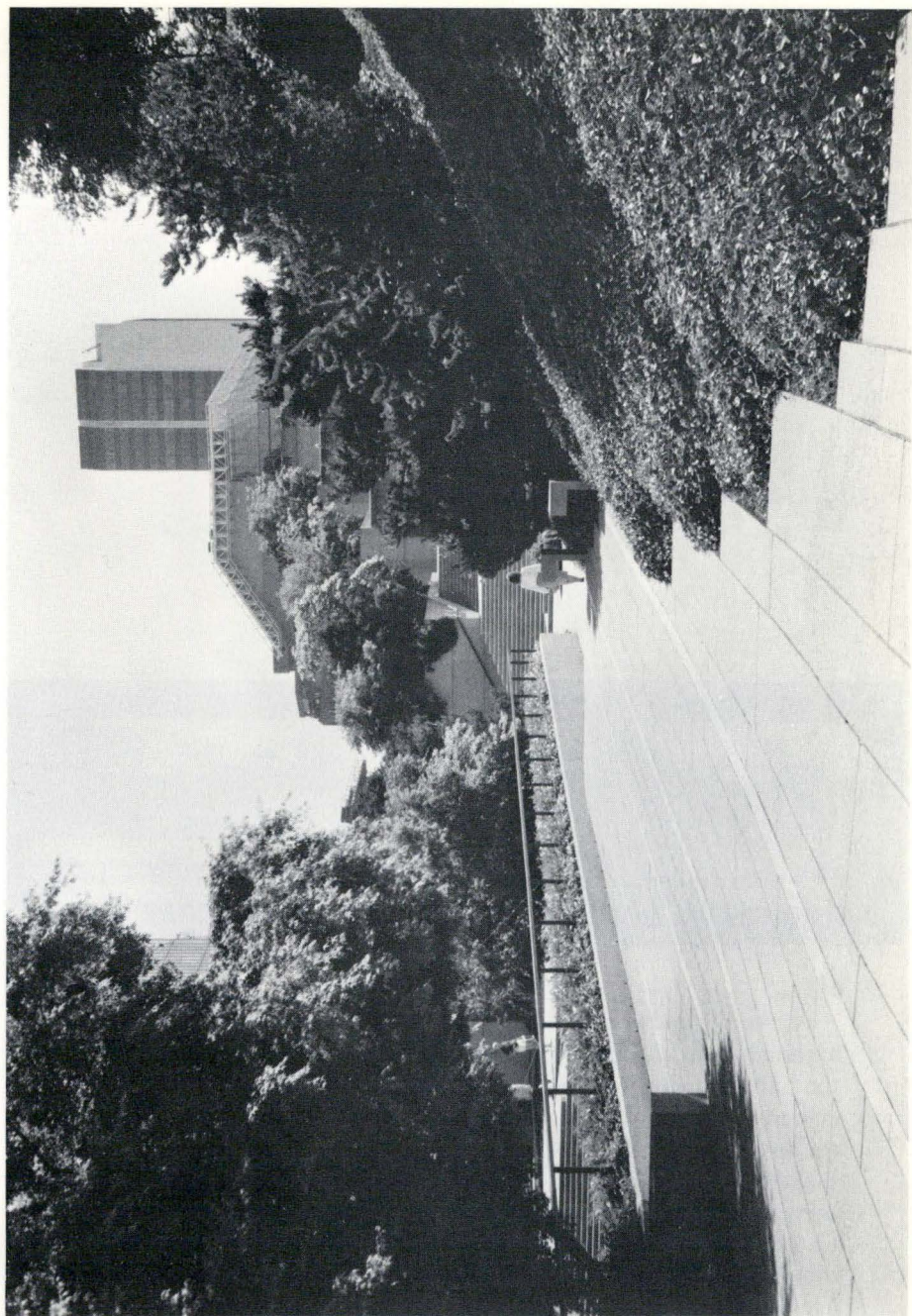
It is important to know that, as originally planned (and for a year or two after Robson Square opened), all but essential traffic was prohibited on Robson between Hornby and Howe. This allowed the square to function as the pedestrian precinct it was designed to be. And this closure made it easier to use the route that brought one most efficiently from the Hornby Street side of the Vancouver Art Gallery to the street-level causeway across Robson. That route is still accessible, even though Robson Street is now open to traffic, and it is the ideal one to pursue in order to perceive the way in which the Law Courts complex was to be experienced not only as a walk that would ultimately bring one via steps down to Nelson Street, but also as a civic amenity that would provide several services. On the whole site, there are many exhilarating routes to pursue.

* * *



The Vancouver Art Gallery's West Georgia Street facade is the logical beginning of the Hornby Street side progression through the Square. Although Rattenbury's structure (and its Hooper wing addition) have been converted into new gallery premises, the exteriors retain their Renaissance Classical appearances and, as such, evoke reminiscences of precedents as ancient as the Athenian Acropolis or as modern as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

As he walks along Hornby towards Robson Street, the spectator passes by one of the Gallery's two major entrances. When Robson Street is gained, he sees before him, just to the left of the intersection he must cross, an obvious path that invites him forward through the complex.

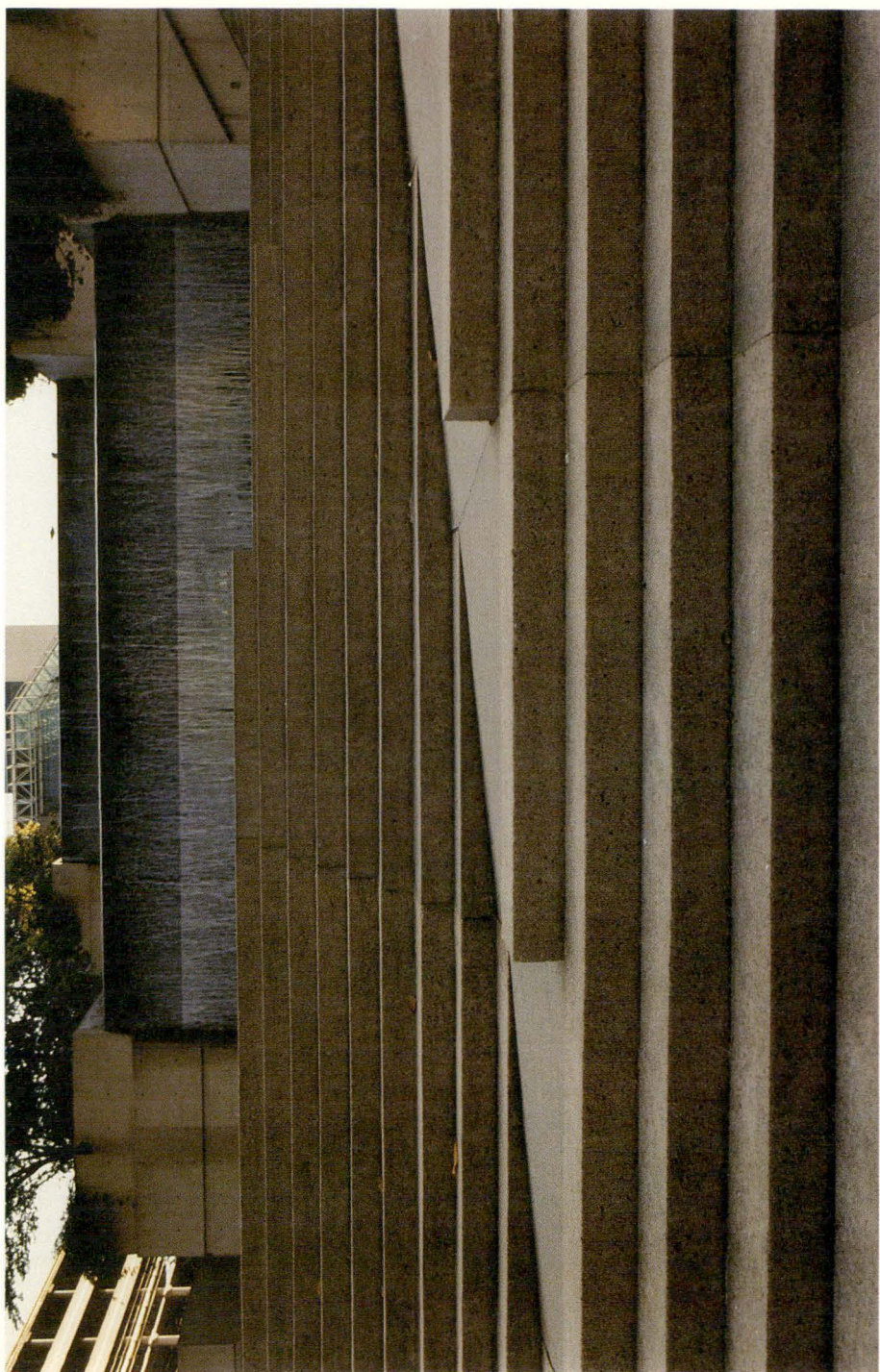




At the beginning of this path, a substantial part of the architecture is concealed from view by shrubbery. Some steps along the path, however, a view of the Courthouse surmounting an elaborate system of ramps and steps is presented. Further along still, the spectator has the impression that the Law Courts have shifted to the left and that they are about to disappear visually below the horizon of the stairs. Further, from this vantage point the upper waterfall also threatens to vanish behind the lower. The steps and ramps, which recall the plazas and temples of the Egyptians and Mayans, entice the walker forward to climb up to inspect the first cascade.







This close view of the first falls reveals to him that he is not simply looking at a pleasure-giving landscape feature, but also into the interior of an office building whose lower floors he has crossed up and over without being conscious of that fact. More steps and ramps soon lead him to the second torrent which, like the first, flows over windows of interior rooms. He pauses then to inspect the second reflecting pool. He can see that its glass bottom is the roof of a subsurface hall. When he mounts the steps to the right of this waterfall, the Law Courts will no longer be visible to him.

Soon, however, the pedestrian is located in a causeway similar to the first one he gained after crossing Robson Street. To his left, clearly visible, is the clerestory of an office block. He stands now on a bridge that will carry him over Smithe Street along the side of the Law Courts structure that is integrated with the government office block by virtue of an extended concrete beam positioned over a clerestory continuous with the first. The glass-roofed structure towards which he has been climbing is now fully visible. It is a contemporary Crystal Palace, a covered garden through which to walk. It is a foyer which gives him access to the courts in which he, as citizen of or visitor to this country, may sit as witness to trials in progress.





Within the foyer near the entrance he will discover Jack Harman's bronze figure of Themis. She is the climax to the walk he has experienced and is the graceful symbol of justice, the purpose of the Law Courts.

* * *

As originally planned, this glass-roofed foyer was to have been publicly accessible twenty-four hours a day as part of a pedestrian way that concluded at the Nelson Street boundary of the Square. Shortly after the complex was opened in 1980, the foyer was closed for security reasons when the courts were not in session. Therefore, this portion of a most important walkers' route through the entire length of the complex on the Hornby Street side cannot be used in the late afternoons, the evenings or on weekends as envisioned.

This closure, in tandem with the reopening of Robson Street to traffic between Hornby and Howe, has made it almost impossible for the casual visitor to grasp that this walk is the one that takes him along a conceptual spine of the Square. Further, the fact that the Law Courts' foyer is open only during regular business hours allows fewer people than was hoped to pass through this imposing space at leisure.

Relatively few people are aware that the lobby, which AEA calls the Great Hall, was conceived of as a space in which ceremonies and performances could take place after hours and on weekends. If considered in the right fashion, the Law Courts can be understood as a place for education and recreation, a parallel to the media centre within the Provincial Office Block.

* * *





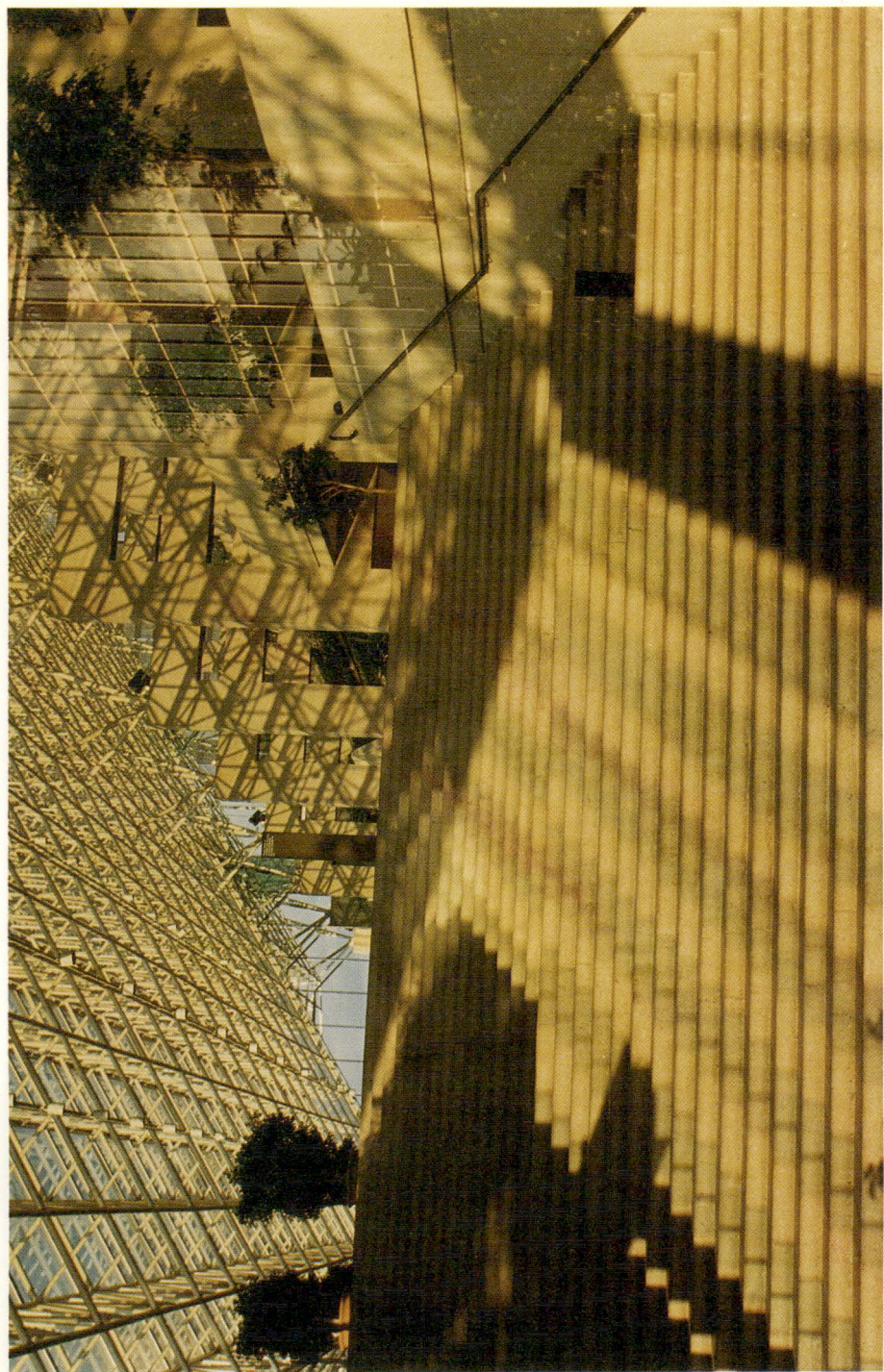
When Arthur Erickson Architects embarked on the Robson Square project, many people, despite the Vietnam War, despite nuclear threat, were still able, somehow, to take an optimistic view of human nature and of the institutions that symbolize North American and British democratic processes. Erickson, himself, at that time and still, has a desire to create monuments that will elevate the human spirit and put the citizen in touch with a carefully orchestrated urban site and, through landscaping, with nature. These are the lofty concerns which are materialized in Robson Square. But by the time the Law Courts opened in 1980, instances of terrorism in public places, at home or abroad, were escalating. It was becoming more difficult to imagine that such old-fashioned virtues as respect would prevent acts of major vandalism or the wanton destruction of public institutions. Hence it is sensible, but regrettable, that the Law Courts building is now more secure than it might have been.

* * *

The Great Hall, which was designed as a major civic space that invited public awareness and involvement in the process of justice, is complementary to the courts adjacent to it in this space. The main courtrooms are stacked in the four storey high interior of the glass roofed lobby. They are approachable via a system of ramps, steps and elevators. Plantings cascade from the balustrades. The courtrooms are warmed by wood and by strong single-colour carpets and upholstered seats.

The Law Courts building is organized into four major components: public space, courtrooms, judges' chambers, and administrative and support facilities. In all there are thirty-nine courtrooms provided with necessary special areas for jury and judge retirement and for witness interview. Sixty judges are accommodated within this edifice. There are libraries and a barristers' lounge. The administrative facility provides space for the court registry and the sheriff's department. There is provision, too, for court reporters, security control and detainees.

* * *





A visitor is welcome to inspect not only the many rooms and chambers within the Law Courts, but also most of the offices and recreational spaces within the Provincial Government Office Block. He should descend to the main floor of the office block and walk through that structure in the direction of Robson Street. He will discover a four storey high inner court covered by a glass roof over which water flows. This area is richly planted. Full grown trees shade those who sit at tables to talk, to read, or to watch the play of the shadows of foliage and water ripple over the concrete revetments. This is the interior space under the glass-bottomed reflecting pool of the highest waterfall on the site.

The visitor will then pass by open office spaces arranged on either side of the plant-lined avenues that lead him out onto the main plaza of Robson Square. There he might be tempted to eat at the international food mart. He might see a display in the media centre's court, a space designed as one complementary to the tree-filled court in the office area. Or he might walk underneath the dome of the rink, then under Robson Street itself in order to climb the stairs to the main entry of the Vancouver Art Gallery. If he had visited this gallery in September 1986, he would have discovered the Rotunda transformed by an installation work by France's Daniel Van Buren.

* * *



A visitor might encounter Robson Square to enjoy the culture offered by the Vancouver Art Gallery, to explore the city's central square, to enquire after travel information at the BC Tourism office, to obtain a business licence at the government offices, to deal with a legal problem, or to serve on a jury. The complex was designed, however, in the hope that people would come most often to the Square because of the recreation it provides, walk, to talk, to read a book, catch a snooze, get a tan, have a snack. It is a place to enjoy. It is also a place in which to learn. In addition to the programmes the VAG offers, there are art and business displays, conferences, films and dramatic productions booked into the Media Centre. A visitor may also wish to view trials in the Law Courts. Robson Square is also there, however, to be experienced and appreciated as a major work of architect and city planning.

While there are some technical and user criticisms of Robson Square because of the recreation it provides, to walk, to talk, to read a book, to catch a snooze, to get a tan, to have a snack. It is a place to enjoy. It is also a place in which to learn. In addition to the programmes the VAG offers, there are art and business displays, conferences, films and dramatic productions in the Media Centre. A visitor may also wish to view trials in the Law Courts. Robson Square is also there, however, to be experienced and appreciated as a major work of architecture and city planning.

* * *







To know that Arthur Erickson is well travelled and an admirer of the work of Frank Lloyd Wright is essential to an appreciation of his work. Erickson did not become an architect until he returned from the East, having served in the Canadian forces during World War II. After seeing the first publication of Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin West (Arizona), he decided to become an architect. Those familiar with that house will realize that its glass-roofed studio is arranged in a fashion that recalls the Law Courts' Great Hall. So intrigued was Erickson by Wright that he visited him at his other home, Taliesin East (Wisconsin). That home, the design of which inspired many houses and complexes Erickson would build in future, was a skilful interconnected array of architectural and landscape elements composed as an unfolding surprise.

Although he had a chance to study with Wright, Erickson was advised by the Director of McGill's School of Architecture not to accept the offer. He was encouraged instead to finish his academic studies so that he could win a travelling scholarship. Erickson stretched the scholarship money to cover a two and one-half year period of self-education in western architectural history, tracing its development from its Middle-Eastern beginnings to Greece and beyond, then forward to Western Europe and England, a fact that has allowed his buildings to be rich in allusion. The great monuments of the past and the work of Frank Lloyd Wright have provided Erickson with insight into methods of composing architectural and environmental features (found, augmented and planted) into imposing sites. This gift has been evident in most of his works on a small or large scale. It is particularly evident at Simon Fraser University which he designed in 1963.

Ten years after his scholarship trip, Erickson began a special study of the art and architecture of Japan which led to the writing of serious architectural philosophy and which contributed depth to several commissions executed in that country. Recent travels have taken him to South East Asia, Africa, China, South America, and the Middle East. Arthur Erickson Architects has now long been an international firm with offices in cities around the world.

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SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

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PROJECT CREDITS

ROBSON SQUARE (A THREE BLOCK PROJECT)

Vancouver, British Columbia, 1973-1983

Designer: Arthur Erickson Architects, Vancouver

Client: British Columbia Buildings Corporation

Project Chairman: Dr. Gordon Shrum

Architects: Arthur Erickson Architects

Planning Co-ordinators: Bing Thom, Rainer Fassler, Jim Wright

LAW COURTS: BLOCK 71

Principal Architect: Arthur Erickson

Project Architect: Rainer Fassler

Project Team: Nick Milkovich, Ron Beaton, Barry Simpson, Eva Matsuzaki, Roger Morris, Allen Cheng, Eddie Maifredi, Kirat Anand, Arthur Yesaki, Bob Bida, Tom Robertson, Shanti Ghose

PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT OFFICES: BLOCK 61

Principal Architect: Arthur Erickson

Project Architects: Junichi Hasmoto, Jim Wright

Project Team: Randolph Jefferson, Yasuo Murumatsu, Eva Matsuzaki, Jim Cheng, Arthur Yesaki, Bob Bida, Tom Robertson, Shanti Ghose

Urban Design: Alan Bell, Dennis Christianson

Landscape: Cornelia Hahn Oberlander, Raoul Robillard, Ken Morris, Robert Zinser

Structural: Bogue Babicki & Associates

Mechanical: Reid Crowther & Co.

Electrical: W. T. Haggert & Co.

Lighting: William Lam Associates Inc.

Acoustical/Audio Visual: Bolt Beranek and Newman Inc.

Life Support Systems: Rolf Jensen & Associates, Inc.

Glazing: Eugene O. Tofflemire Associates

VANCOUVER ART GALLERY: BLOCK 51

Client: City of Vancouver Civic Buildings Department

Principal Architect: Arthur Erickson

Associate-in-Charge: Eva Matsuzaki

Project Architect: Noel Best

Project Team: Konhee Ho, Tom Robertson, Barbara Shapiro, Arthur Yesaki, Sandy Trewin

Landscape: Cornelia Hahn Oberlander

Structural: Bogue Babicki & Associates

Mechanical: Mechanical Consultants Western Ltd.

Electrical: R. J. Wong & Associates

Lighting: Incorporated Consultants Ltd.

Project Management: J. D. Bibby Management Ltd.