

Architecture

Design By Rethink

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THERE are those who say there is an architecture of confrontation and that it has been built at Simon Fraser University. These observers of the revolutionary student scene claim that the design of this remarkably impressive experiment in academic architecture, 14 miles from Vancouver in British Columbia, has also focused student activism with incendiary precision.

Simon Fraser is a "megastructure"—a relatively new and controversial concept of building. The components of a megastructure are not treated as separate buildings, but as units of a total, single structure, like the cells of the body.

At Simon Fraser a central court, or mall, is the heart of its unified plan. It is also one of the more magnificent socio-architectural spaces of recent years—a natural magnet of student activity. Presto—protest.

"Support the consolidation of the Chinese proletarian dictatorship," counseled mimeographed yellow handbills during a recent visit. In the warm June sun, with a vista of snow-topped mountains, a group of student singers made music, not revolution, as their peers basked on the mall's amphitheater-like steps under a cloudless Canadian sky.

It is said that Vernon De Mars, of De Mars and Wells, has pulled off the same trick, architecturally, at Berkeley. His student center for the California university is believed to work so well in fulfilling its purpose of bringing people together that it has become a catalyst for the protest movement.

The Simon Fraser noon-time concert was a peaceful exercise in togetherness. The architects' plan was operating with a consciousness of people and purpose that has been rare in more doctrinaire modern buildings preoccupied with esthetics and monumentality.

Arthur Erickson of the Vancouver firm of Erickson, Massey, designers of Simon Fraser, speaks of this as "conceptual architecture."

Conceptual architecture means designing buildings not as conventional containers to be stuffed with specified activities, but by rethinking and replanning those activities and shaping a new building concept to fit. For a university, it means questioning the practice of repeating isolated boxes labeled arts, sciences, etc., scattered around a green.

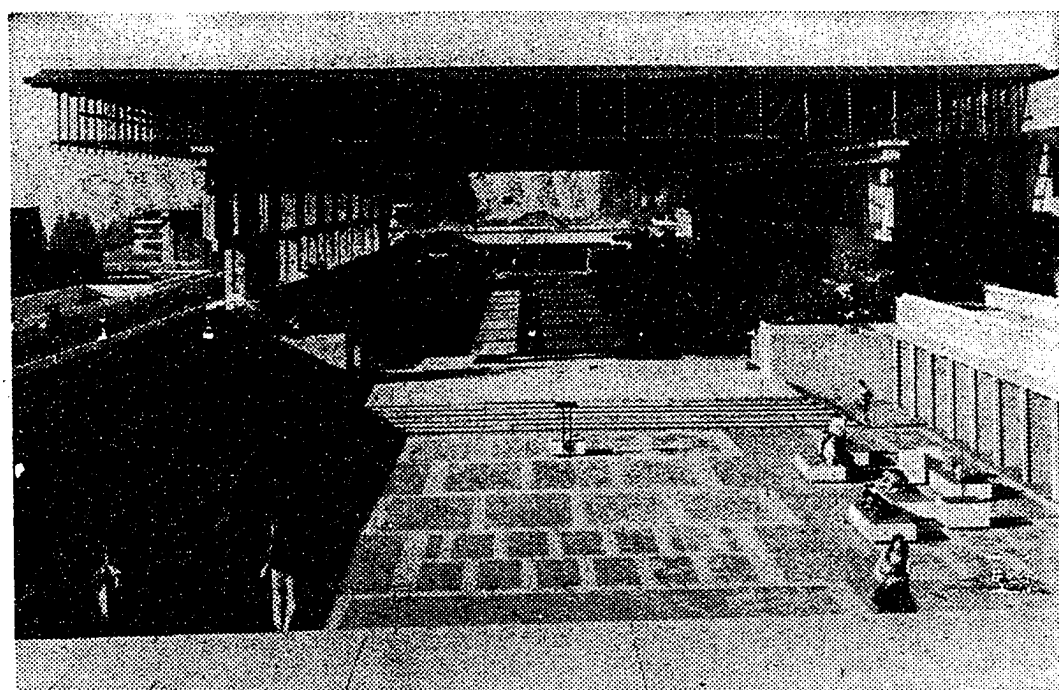
Today's interdisciplinary education, for today's world, doesn't fit into the old boxes anymore. There have been some pretty fancy boxes put up at some of the older universities, and the effect is often like cutting off the educational foot to fit into the fancy shoe.

A new university can start fresh, and the Canadians have shown the way. Scarborough College in Toronto, by John Andrews, was another notable early experiment along these radical lines. The idea has been demonstrated with edifying brilliance at Simon Fraser.

What has happened to the Simon Fraser concept since it was built, however, is an illustration of how sensitive architecture is to its uses and users, and how it can change and be changed by that interdependence.

Simon Fraser's plan was the result of a competition held by the Provincial Government of British Columbia in 1963, and that is significant, too. Some of the best ideas and buildings come out of competitions, rather than from established offices. Successful formulas have a way of turning into straitjackets in anything as fluid as the environment.

"The issue," Erickson, Massey stated, was "to redefine the university in contemporary terms, to make it meaningful to the community and natural to the place where it sits."



Central mall of megastructure for Simon Fraser University near Vancouver, B. C.
Is this the architecture of confrontation?

It sits on a ridge of Burnaby Mountain, in some of the handsomest country in the world, and the plan takes the form of a spine along that ridge. Tall, wild grass was meant to come up from the forest to the edge of the natural concrete "Acropolis," but it has been shorn and tamed by the administration like Samson's hair.

The focus of the linear plan is the superb, central mall, through which everyone passes and to which everything connects. It is campus, plaza and pedestrian thoroughfare. It joins a library and theater along its length, a gymnasium and academic quadrangle at either end. In turn, classroom wings radiate from the quadrangle. The spine is meant to continue with new units "plugged in" as needed.

The mall, convenient center of student disorders, is a marvelous space, roofed in part by a huge, glazed truss. It has dignity, scale, and visual and functional drama, and bears comparison with some of the great urban spaces of history.

The space flows, directed to different levels by steps, through enclosure and openness, suggesting action or repose, changing mood and scene with a dome, a fountain, the rise and fall of stairs, the transition from light to half light, the landscaping of the quad at the end of the paved mall. It moves, from the plaza to the

cloister, with great environmental skill. This is consummate urbanity on a mountaintop.

Except for the grouping of specialized structures such as science labs or athletic facilities, the old "school" boundaries are abolished. Students, faculty and disciplines are expected to mix. Knowledge, say the architects, is expanding and defying boundaries; so must the university.

This was the principle with which Simon Fraser started out—as a plan and as an educational institution. Two phases of its 15-year program for an eventual 18,000 students are complete. The first phase included the mall and provisions for 2,000 students. The second phase, for 2,500 students, received double that enrollment.

At that point, the Provincial Government ran short of funds. Lounges were converted into offices and a small slum of "temporary" trailers was added for more classrooms. The disfigurement is brutal. One thinks of Washington's World War I temples, still standing.

Administrative attitudes began to change as student activism increased. Politics and bureaucracy hardened. A progressive faculty, attracted by the exceptional promise of an experimental school, began to break up. To some, the experimental structure became a symbol of repressive authority. The stu-

dents alienated the government through protest.

The government and the administration alienated the students with sublime bits of *bêtise*, such as giving over a prime location, intended for a student center, to a gas station. There was plenty of student protest about that, including the rolling of gas tanks down the mountain, but to no avail.

The gas station went up—a cross between architectural travesty and planning blasphemy. The natural concrete of the mall fountain has been painted blitz swimming-pool blue. The administration didn't find the buildings "colorful" enough and substituted touches of fading garishness for the original dormitory design. Collaborating firms have turned interiors into a busy architects' samples display. The misunderstanding of esthetics and environment is appalling.

Still, the plan and the idea are strong and they survive indignities. A classroom wing is in construction now, held low, to preserve the mountain view.

And in Lethbridge, Alberta, the architects are building a new university that will carry Simon Fraser's revolutionary concept a stage further. It will span the contours of a coulee in the Canadian prairie and continue to expand the teaching-learning process. These are the new architectural and educational frontiers.