

Buchanan Courtyards
The University of British Columbia
1958-60



Top: Student Rally staged on
Front Entry Court (n.d.)

Middle: View of West Courtyard from
its southeast corner (1958)

Bottom: View of East Courtyard today





West Courtyard with East Courtyard under construction, 1960

Contents

Statement of Significance 3

Supplementary Photos 5

Interviews 8

Zoltan Kiss

Barry Downs

Cornelia Haan Oberlander

Statement of Significance

Buchanan Courtyards The University of British Columbia 1958-60

Description of the Historic Place

The Buchanan Courtyards consists of the Front Entry Court facing Main Mall, and two open-ended spaces bounded by five legs of the Buchanan Building complex. The complex is located at the north end of The University of British Columbia's Point Grey campus, between Main and East Malls.

Values

The Buchanan Courtyards are important examples of planning and design that signaled the University's participation in the Modernist transformation of North American college and university campuses in the 1950s and 60s. Their original designs and subsequent modifications are an important record of the evolving campus landscapes during those years.

The Front Entry Court and West Courtyard are important for their association with the firm Thompson Berwick & Pratt, descended from Sharp & Thompson, the firm who won the competition for the original planning and design of the campus; and specifically Roy Jessiman (Partner-in-charge) and Zoltan Kiss (project Architect) at TB&P, who represented the young generation carrying forward the firm's traditional role as the campus architects, and introduced the Modernist aesthetic to the UBC campus with their building and landscape design. These courts are important examples of the Modernist practice of making the landscape and building one indivisible designed realm.

Front Entry Court (1958)

The Front Entry Court is valued for being the public face of the Modernist Buchanan Building complex, adding a simple, sophisticated, modern public space onto the north end of the signature open space of the campus: Main Mall. The space is important aesthetically for its complete visual connection with the entrance lobby and main stairs to the floor and West Courtyard below. The court is also valued for its association with the student rallies of the 60s and early 70s, which utilized the court as a conveniently raised stage adjacent to the mall.

West Courtyard (1958)

The West Courtyard, bounded on three sides by the original three legs of the building complex, is valued as the campus' finest example of Modernist civic space, designed to culturally elevate and inspire the modern open and inclusive university society after the Second World War. With its sophisticated sparseness of detail and showcasing of sculpture, the courtyard is culturally valuable for the boost it gave to the Arts Faculty's presence at the university.

The sophisticated interweaving of outdoor space and building make West Courtyard It is an important regional example of dynamic site



Top: Front Entry Court, 196-
Bottom: West Courtyard, 1958

planning, formal rigour, and restrained detailing that are the hallmark of early Modernism (the so-called International Style). The choice of simple materials and faux white stone paving (road paint) are important examples of the local design community's adaptation of continental design trends to local restricted budgets and conditions.

The courtyard is also valued for its site-specific engagement with the wider natural landscape that is the hallmark of Vancouver Modernism: the courtyard was deliberately designed to embrace the mountain view that defines the north end of the campus, making the reflecting pool and lawn intermediary elements between the cultivated courtyard and the breathtaking coastal landscape in the distance.

The space is culturally and historically valuable as the setting for many student events, including the great Engineering sculpture spoof, reflecting the important role the space played in campus life in the years immediately following its construction.

The courtyard is also important as a record of the evolution of values and priorities on the campus: modifications were allowed to be made to the space such that it no longer has the distinguishing features of its sculpture, reflecting pool, and the view to the natural landscape beyond.

East Courtyard (1960)

The East Courtyard, constructed two years following the West Courtyard, is of value primarily for its derivative nature: like the second phase classroom and office blocks, the courtyard takes its aesthetic cues of orthogonal paving arrangements and materials palette from the first phase of work to the west.

This courtyard can be seen as aesthetically valuable as a contemporary descendent of the university cloister: a quiet internal space bounded by building, and designed to accommodate quiet seating or passage through on foot or bicycle.

It is culturally and symbolically important for its stock of memorial trees, lending the space a social intimacy, and a role of linking the present student body and faculty to important social history.



Top: View today from West towards East Courtyard

Bottom: West end of Block D

Character-defining elements

General

Form and scale

- Rectangular form and human-scaled, reflecting the building design and formed by the wings of the building
- Gridded design intimately related to the building grids
- Landscape design laid out in an asymmetrical grid
- Sense of enclosure balanced by a dynamic passages and openings through and under buildings to open space beyond
- Irregular entrances and exits between the courtyards and the campus and between the courtyards
- Covered spaces created by the building overhangs
- Framed connections below building overpasses between courtyards
- Connection or view from west courtyard to the conifer-planted lawn to the north

Materials and surfaces

- Low raised rectangular planting beds used to create discrete spaces
- Two coloured concrete surfaces in a grid of large squares with surrounding painted concrete banding
- Remaining sculpture

Plant material

- Tree planting as specimen or in small groupings
- Use of coniferous trees
- Restrained plant palette of low shrubs, trees and lawn

Use

- Continued use as a student and faculty gathering space

Front Entry Court (1958)

- Wall sculpture
- Simple concrete pavement
- Contrasting building surfaces: brick veneer/glass wall
- Asymmetrical flanking planter
- Two short flights of broad stairs as part of broad paved entry path
- Regular line of lighting standards leading to Main Mall
- Formal link of broad path with spacing of Main Mall boulevard trees
- Transparent entry door wall

West Courtyard (1958)

- Planning and physical remnants of reflecting pool
- Remains of view through open north end
- Wide passage through south end under Block B
- Generous areas covered by building
- Largely paved open space; paving with visual grid design, and some panels of brick
- Planting beds adjacent to office block
- Transparent wall between courtyard and entry foyer

East Courtyard (1960)

- Memorial trees aligned with hard landscaping grid
- Gridded paving, with brick panels, concrete panels, and borders
- Open to the south
- Predominance of soft landscaping



Buchanan Building Complex with Front Entry Court in foreground, 1962



Above: sculpture in West Courtyard ca 1960



Top to bottom: Three views of the West Courtyard, 1958

Supplementary Contemporary Photographs



Top: view north from north end of West Courtyard
Middle: East Courtyard looking south
Bottom: East Courtyard from northeast corner

Top to bottom: Second Phase building
West Courtyard from north end
West Courtyard from northwest corner
West Courtyard from southeast corner

Phone interview with Zoltan Kiss

- History of building design
 - TB&P doing most the work at UBC at the time with Roy Jessiman the partner-in-charge for the UBC projects
 - Buchanan Building Phase 1: Blocks A, B, and C
 - Buchanan Phase 1 designed without input of landscape architect; does not remember any design consultations with CHO. Landscape design entirely followed building design
 - Colour of glazed facing bricks to replicate UBC granite colour, for continuity yet in a contemporary idiom
 - Courtyard open to the north a deliberate decision to make connection of the civic space with the natural landscape
 - Buchanan Phase I was designed in the International Style, which at the time was relatively new to North America, but an idiom familiar to anyone living in Europe
 - The enameled metal panels were an innovation in this part of the world
 - There was no difficulty convincing the client to do a Modernist building; the client was a small group headed by the Arts dean.
 - TB&P not retained to do Phase II [this assertion differs from other information, and should be checked]
- **Zoltan Kiss**
 - Zoltan Kiss Project Architect, who also designed research buildings and many other buildings on campus
 - Emigrated from Hungary to Denmark 1945-1950, then to Vancouver, where he had a sponsor

Phone interview with Barry Downs

- TB&P
 - Roy Jessiman underrecognized for his role in the post-war design community of Vancouver
 - Modernism
 - Inspiration from what was happening south of the border, as epitomized by the work of Skidmore Owings & Merrill (International Style), which was derived from Mies van der Rohe's work, particularly his work in the United States
 - Buchanan Phase I exemplified the Style's formal, modular, anonymous qualities, but done with local practices that mimicked the appearance of Mies' work without the budget
 - Block B on stilts is a legacy of Gropius at Harvard
 - Very much a plan designed to a grid (Jessiman always designed on graph paper)
 - No recollection of discussion of landscape design



Sculpture in West Courtyard (1966)

Interview with Cornelia Haan Oberlander

- TB&P
 - CHO associated with the firm at the time of the designing of the first phase
 - Hard landscaping designed by the architects (Jessiman, Kiss)
 - Plant specimens signature of species in favour at the time, particularly the three *Robinia pseudoacacia* in the planter nearest the entry lobby and the birch (now gone) in the southeast corner
 - Discovery of the faux light stone finish (road paint)