

## GEOFFREY MASSEY

ARCHITECT, 96

PIONEER OF WEST COAST MODERNISM  
HELPED SHAPE VANCOUVER CULTURE

He partnered with Arthur Erickson to create a wide array of landmarks and masterpieces, including Simon Fraser University

ADELE WEDER

He was the son of a movie star, the nephew of the first Canadian-born governor-general and the descendent of farm-tool manufacturers who begat one of the richest and most powerful families in the nation. But Geoffrey Massey was his own man, and when it came time to establish his career, he chose architecture. By the time by Mr. Massey died in Vancouver this month at the age of 96, he had helped shape buildings and communities across the land.

Among architects, much of Mr. Massey's renown derives from his 15-year association with Arthur Erickson, which began in the mid-1950s. Their partnership produced an array of landmark houses, plus two large-scale masterpieces: the MacMillan Bloedel headquarters on Vancouver's West Georgia Street and Simon Fraser University on nearby Burnaby Mountain.

At Erickson/Massey Architects, their complementary talents and personalities made them a symbiotic team. Mr. Erickson focused on the conceptual design work, while Mr. Massey provided a broad urban outlook and administrative oversight. As their portfolio grew, they attracted emerging talents, including Bruno Freschi, Bo Helliwell and Nick Milkovich, all of whom later established notable practices of their own.

Mr. Erickson served as the main spokesman and front man for the firm, but Mr. Massey – tall, dark, handsome and taciturn – commanded attention just by entering a room. When Mr. Erickson was away on his frequent travels, Mr. Massey's reliable presence became the ballast that stabilized the firm. “Geoff and Arthur were a dynamic pair together, bringing in corporate and institutional work at that time,” Mr. Helliwell recalls. “Both of them had radio-announcer voices. Arthur had the social connections in Vancouver and Geoff through the Massey family had connections across the country.”

Mr. Massey's steady hand would turn out to be crucial when it came time to oversee their more complex projects through to construction. When the two men won the 1963 competition to plan and design a new university from scratch, they hadn't even established a firm or rented an office yet, and they had just two years to bring their conceptual scheme to fruition.

They succeeded, albeit with some inevitable glitches as the campus took shape. Their distinctive personae are recounted in biographer David Stouck's book *Arthur Erickson: An Architect's Life*.

When informed that one of the university's concrete slabs was too thin to bear the weight it was required to carry, “Geoff burned up the telephone lines, shouting at various contractors and suppliers to deal with the problem at once,” Mr. Stouck wrote. “Simultaneously, Arthur was on another line trying to track down a certain kind of gold-scaled koi for a reflecting pool.”

Geoffrey Massey was born on Oct. 29, 1924, in London, England, to Margery (née Fremantle) and Raymond Massey, a Canadian-born stage actor and the son of Massey-Harris Tractor Company owner Daniel Massey. He saw little of his mother after his parents divorced in 1929, but remained close to his father, following him to America when the elder Mr. Massey continued his career on Broadway.

Geoffrey Massey enlisted in 1942, when he was 17, and served for three years, but the Second World War ended before he could be deployed to Japan for combat duty.

He enrolled at Harvard, receiving a bachelor of arts degree and then a master's in architecture from the Graduate School of Design, when legendary Bauhaus co-founder Walter Gropius headed the department. The curriculum focused on high modernism when other architecture schools still taught neoclassicism.

“We felt like revolutionaries, at



Arthur Erickson, left, and Geoffrey Massey stand outside Simon Fraser University, on which they collaborated, in 1965. The pair's firm, Erickson/Massey Architects, attracted numerous emerging talents who would later form notable practices of their own. COURTESY OF THE ERICKSON FAMILY COLLECTION

the forefront of what was going on,” Mr. Massey recalled in a 2014 interview with this writer.

After graduating, Mr. Massey worked briefly in Montreal “at a fuddy-duddy old firm,” as he described it. When he was fired from that job, he relocated to Vancouver.

At Harvard, much of the academic and peer discussion had centred on new ways of designing urban environments, including Le Corbusier's entirely new city of Chandigarh in India. He hoped to find similar opportunities in fast-growing British Columbia.

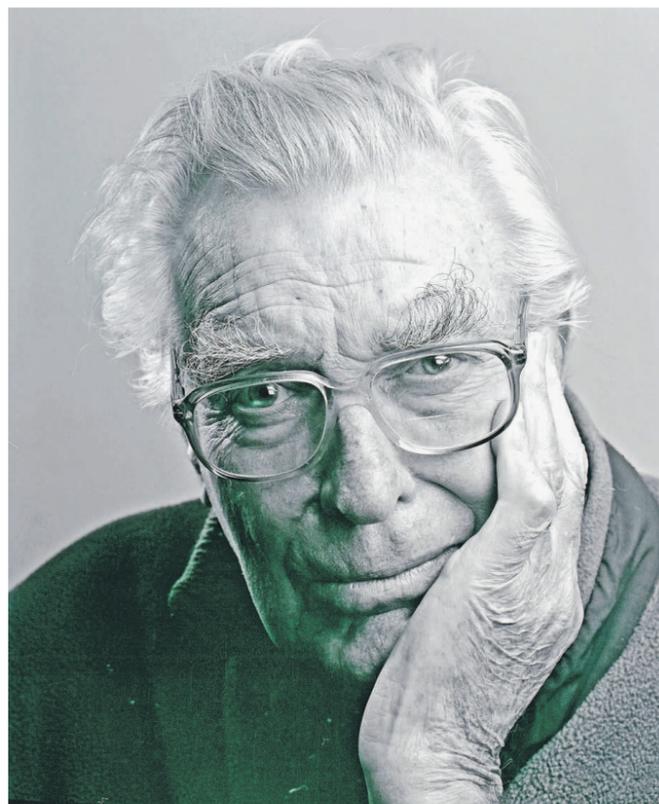
Mr. Massey joined Thompson, Berwick & Pratt Architects, which was designing a brand-new town named Kitimat to serve the workers of an aluminum smelting plant on the North Coast.

“This was going to be the new model city,” Mr. Massey recalled in a 2010 interview with this writer. “So I told Thompson Berwick Pratt: ‘I'd love to work on Kitimat.’ And they said: ‘Oh, by all means, you are welcome to work on Kitimat!’”

Once hired, however, Mr. Massey was dismayed when he saw drawings of its rigid urban template and monotonous house designs. He then realized that instead of Canada's Chandigarh, this would be Alcan's company town – economically driven and utterly banal. It was his first rude awakening to the limitations of his chosen profession.

Mr. Massey found his day job to be disappointingly dull, but his life was enlivened by living with Mr. Erickson and moonlighting together on their own architectural projects. One of their earliest clients was a young woman named Ruth Killam, herself the scion of an illustrious Canadian family. Mr. Erickson started the design of her modernist house, sited on a small peninsula jutting into Howe Sound, and then handed the project over to Mr. Massey. By the time Mr. Massey finished her house, their relationship turned personal, and in 1955, he married Ms. Killam. Mr. Massey became a devoted family man and they raised four children, enjoying an adventurous life together until her death in 2011.

In many ways, Mr. Massey exemplified what novelist Robertson Davies described as “Fifth Business”: the character in a drama who is neither the main protagonist nor the rival nor the villain nor the victim, but an important back-



Mr. Massey, shown in Vancouver in 2010, also played a key role in the creation of Massey College at the University of Toronto, persuading his uncle, philanthropist and founder Vincent Massey, to seek a groundbreaking contemporary design. ALEX WATERHOUSE-HAYWARD

room player who is crucial to moving the plot forward.

His behind-the-scenes influence extended to the other arts as well. In 1955, he invited his Harvard classmate Abraham Rogatnick to Vancouver, where he and Mr. Erickson introduced him and his partner, Alvin Balkind, to a select group of artists. Enraptured by the city and its tightly knit cultural community, Mr. Rogatnick and Mr. Balkind then moved to Vancouver and opened the New Design Gallery, the city's first modern art gallery.

Mr. Massey supported the fledgling institution and its artists – including B.C. Binning, Jack Shadbolt, Bill Reid and Toni Onley – in any way he could, investing money for its operation and buying art. The New Design Gallery turned out to be a catalyst of Vancouver's transformation from a sleepy resource town to a vibrant cultural centre. The gallery later moved from its original West Vancouver location to downtown Vancouver, sharing space with yet another cultural generator launched by Mr. Rogatnick with the help of Mr. Mas-

sey: the Arts Club, which later evolved into the city's renowned Arts Club Theatre.

Mr. Massey also played a key role in the creation of Massey College at the University of Toronto. His uncle Vincent Massey, who did philanthropic work with the Massey Foundation following his term as governor-general, originally wanted a Gothic Revival structure similar to the adjacent campus architecture. But Geoffrey and his cousin Hart, also an architect, persuaded the elder Mr. Massey to seek a groundbreaking contemporary design instead. On their advice, he invited four of the country's best young architects, including Vancouverite Ron Thom, to compete for the plum commission. With Geoffrey's support, Mr. Thom's scheme won, and upon its 1963 completion, Massey College became one of the most celebrated buildings in Canada.

Around the same time, Mr. Massey became one of the unofficial pioneers on a much larger project: the embryonic resort municipality of Whistler. His friend Garry Wat-

son, a Vancouver lawyer and fellow avid skier, persuaded him to take a close look at what was then a raw swathe of land at the base of a spectacular mountainscape. “There was nothing here but two logging camps and some summer cottages,” Mr. Watson recalls, “In effect, the whole town had to be planned.”

Mr. Watson joined forces with Mr. Massey and three other partners to form the Garibaldi Whistler Development Company. Along with a handful of other groups, they supported a rough community plan and a bid to host the 1968 Olympic Games. The quixotic Olympic bid failed, but it triggered the area's first serious construction activity and publicly branded Whistler as an up-and-coming ski mecca.

The Garibaldi Whistler group acquired a large tract of provincial Crown land, built Whistler's first condominium project, and laid out building sites for family chalets near the base of the first ski lift to Whistler mountain. In the ensuing years, Mr. Massey continued to help shape Whistler, working with other architects on cabins and private homes.

Mr. Massey had big ideas for the City of Vancouver as well. With Mr. Erickson, he co-produced Project 56 and Project 58, a series of late-1950s visions for high-rise densification, whose principles later informed the growth of Vancouver's West End. And in 1966, he worked with Mr. Erickson and Mr. Freschi to devise and propose a massive conceptual transformation of downtown Vancouver into a bustling core of glass-domed shopping zones and pedestrian streets.

“Architectural designs are not the critical problem at this time. Consideration of the pedestrian is the most important,” Mr. Massey argued in a public presentation.

Both the provincial and municipal governments rejected the \$500-million concept as too expensive. Still, the scheme prompted citizens and civic leaders to imagine new possibilities for densifying their city.

The Erickson/Massey dynamic grew strained over the years after Mr. Erickson's life partner, interior designer Francisco Kripacz, became more involved with their firm. Mr. Massey blamed the firm's dire financial straits on Mr. Kripacz's unfettered spending and the partnership dissolved in 1972.

After the breakup of Erickson/Massey, Mr. Massey entered municipal politics and was elected to Vancouver City Council in 1972, just as Art Phillips won the mayoral race on a progressive urban agenda. While on council, Mr. Massey supported the development of Granville Island, the halting of a planned inner-city freeway, and the conversion of a stretch of downtown Granville Street into a pedestrian mall. But he found it too difficult to implement his ideas properly, and he left politics at the end of his two-year term. “Municipal politics drove him crazy,” according to his son Raymond. “The amount of effort it took to accomplish even a no-brainer project was agonizing.”

Returning to architecture, Mr. Massey co-founded the Coal Harbour Architectural Group in 1978, spending much of his remaining career designing projects in Whistler and on Hernando Island. After retiring from architecture, Mr. Massey kept periodically involved with design advocacy projects, most recently as a founding director of the West Coast Modern League, an architectural advocacy group, whose quarterly meetings he hosted in his West Vancouver home.

His continued interest in architecture and urbanism continued to the final months of his life, echoing the credo he shared with a newspaper reporter back in 1971: “If you're dissatisfied and see no future in what you're doing, get the hell out before it's too late.”

He leaves his children, Raymond Massey, Vincent Massey, Nathaniel Massey and Eliza Massey Stanford; 10 grandchildren; and six great-grandchildren.

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