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Lethbridge University: The Spaceship-like Prairie School Comes of Age

13 February 2014 | By Hadani Ditmars

In the late 1960s, Arthur Erickson's heroic campus for the University of Lethbridge in Alberta emerged from the coulées of the Canadian prairie. Assailed by insensitive additions of intervening decades, a new masterplan promises renewal

There are still a few sacred moments left in Arthur Erickson's University of Lethbridge. One of them is the view from the city looking west. It reveals the bones of his original vision: University Hall, the perfectly sited singular building, with its long horizontal lines, rising organically from the landscape as pure sculptural form.

Sunk into the coulée, a kind of Prairie ravine, it was designed to be a natural extension of the horizon line, with unimpeded views from east to west. As Erickson himself wrote of the nine-storey building, in his 1969 development plan, it was 'built into the coulées rather than up, so that the building mass

remains low on the landscape'. Its uninterrupted roofline, he wrote, 'by its very flatness, contrasts with and enhances the richness of contour of the coulées'.



Despite the building's mass, the architect intended it to defer to the landscape

Today, it seems inconceivable that the renowned building might have been sited elsewhere, but at the time, there was considerable opposition to the coulée location. As the story goes, a 43-year-old Erickson, fresh from the triumph of his Simon Fraser University (designed with then-partner Geoffrey Massey), was asked by a local Liberal senator named Evangelos Christou, to build a new university in Alberta's third largest city, an hour from the Montana border. Christou, an orthodontist from a Greek immigrant family who was a patron of the arts and headed the board of governors charged with building the new university, shared Erickson's passion for the classical ideal of education and the concept of the 'integrated campus'. He also felt that Erickson was the architect who could best respond to the dramatic landscape of southern Alberta.

Erickson was summoned by telegraph in January of 1967, while he was in Paris, and asked to attend a screening of a film about SFU and to meet the board of governors. A helicopter flight was arranged with the local press, and when asked where he would locate the new university, Canada's late great Modernist simply pointed down to the coulée and said 'there'.



Aerial view revealing outlying urbanisation in stark contrast to the campus's immediate prairie setting

His decision was not a popular one with local residents of the then predominantly agricultural community, who could not understand why he wanted to build in the coulée – not a traditional construction site – when so much flatland was available. And it was the subject of much debate, between local businessmen who wanted a downtown location, and a smaller group who wanted it on a 'virgin' site where there would be room for growth. A local

farmer reportedly even took a few pot shots at the architect one day as he walked around the site.

This was, after all, Alberta in the late 1960s, still very much a Conservative stronghold and Erickson was a friend of newly elected Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau. It was also a time when ‘radical’ new ideas about education and society were at their zenith, and Erickson was one of their leading proponents.

As with SFU, his vision was for a new kind of university, liberated from the confines of bureaucracy and hierarchy, but expressed in a singular building that fused residential and pedagogical, recreational and academic. The 912-foot-long University Hall did not delineate between arts and sciences, and expressed the democratic spirit of the times by making faculty offices and student residences the same size.

In many ways, Lethbridge was a continuation of the ideas explored in SFU – with its main mall a gathering spot for students and faculty alike – and its classical inspiration. But as Erickson writes in his 1976 book, *The Architecture of Arthur Erickson*, the two universities were also inversions of each other. The light in Lethbridge, he noted, was clear and cast shadows, while at the West Coast SFU it was greyer, and more atmospheric. One was built on a mountaintop and the other in a valley. And in wintry Alberta, the open-plan outdoor mall was met by an interior ‘street’ – a sixth level concourse that spanned the building – where students could access the cafeteria, library and student centre, or break off into clusters of pods of tiered seating areas. Taking SFU’s legacy a step farther, Lethbridge was also characterised by a focus on smaller classrooms, and interchangeable cross-faculty learning spaces.



Arthur Erickson (left) directing a site tour



Erickson's Simon Fraser University, both a precedent to and an inversion of Lethbrige

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Compelling influences

Erickson's ideas were bold, but not entirely new. They were influenced by the concepts he'd encountered as a young traveller at the likes of Al Azhar University in Cairo – which in his description of intent, he called an 'educational marketplace' where 'students, merchants, and beggars ate or lay on the carpeted floors, listening, praying, reading or just sleeping'. And by the cloisters at Oxford and Cambridge, where 'in the rhythm of the day there was a complete fusion of instruction with worship, sport, dining and social mingling – everything to round off the whole man'. You can even see in his early

drawings of concentric structures hints of Caliph al-Mansur's round city – back when Baghdad was known as the city of peace, and a decade before his own project in Abu Nawas was foiled by the Iran/Iraq war.

Erickson went on to produce some of Canada's best buildings. But sadly, his pristine vision that embraced the prairie landscape, did not. The phantom twin to the still remaining original university building was never realised, nor were his plans for landscaping with native grasses or a series of reflecting pools nestled in the coulées. His concept of a commercially integrated 'university village' also met the same fate.

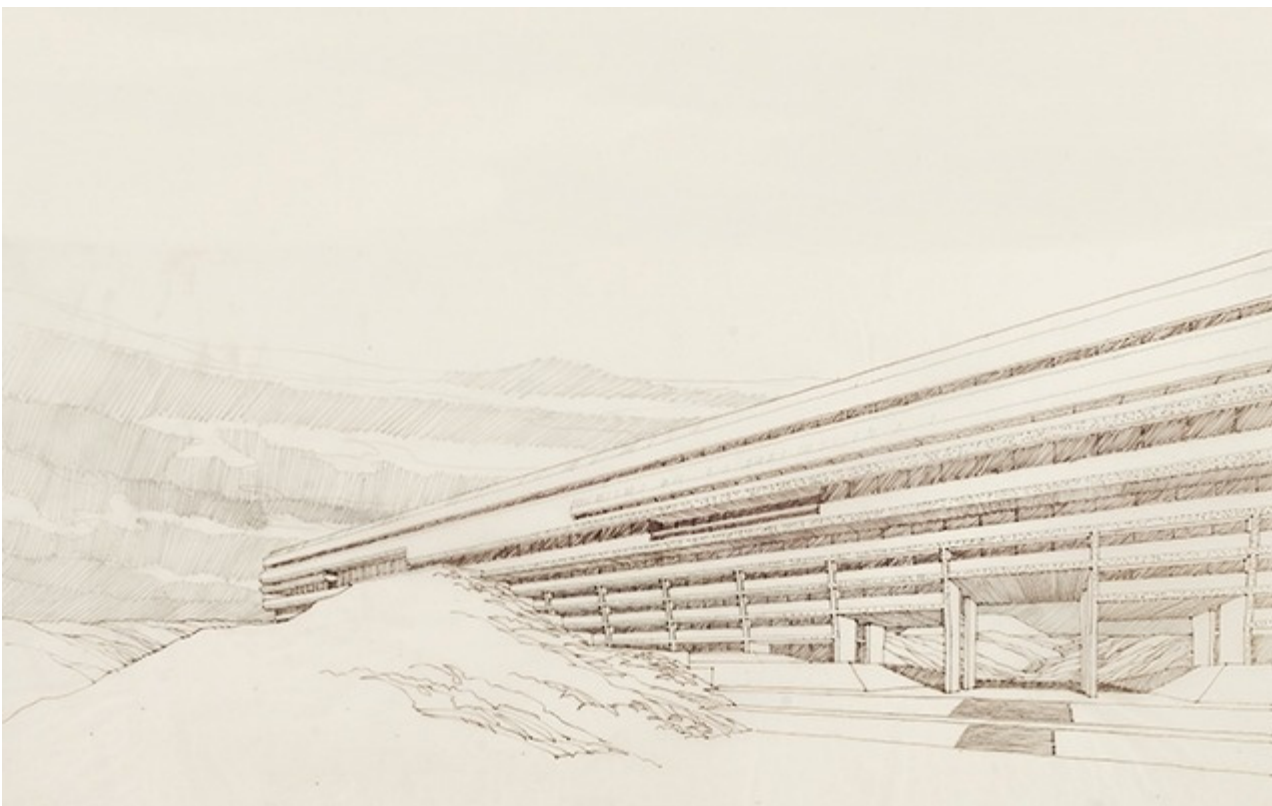


Site plan from October 1968

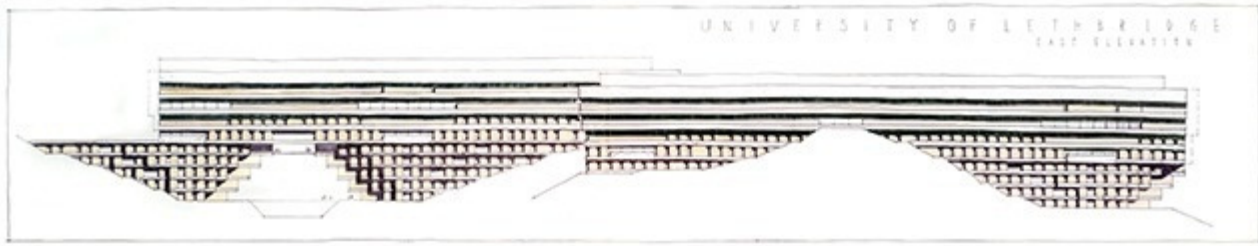
As the campus population grew, so did its need for new buildings. But Erickson was not commissioned to design them, and infrequently consulted. As a result, the campus today remains a hodgepodge of styles and eras, some less effective than others, in their attempt to keep the faith.

As a new masterplan (by Toronto-based Moriyama & Teshima Architects with locally-based Gibbs Gage Architects) unfolds, hoping to lend a sense of cohesion and completion to the campus some 45 years after its initial design in 1968, the University of Lethbridge offers a cautionary tale about the importance of respecting both site and original architectural vision.

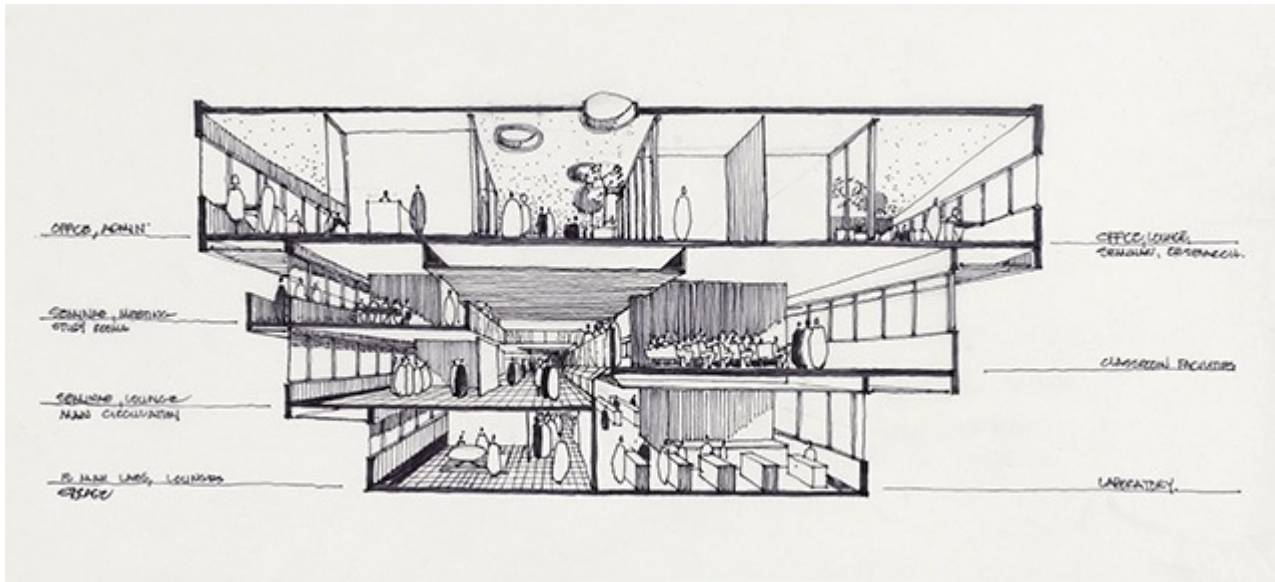
Four years after Erickson's passing, the University of Lethbridge remains both his greatest triumph and his greatest disappointment. Born of the revolutionary fervour of the era, Erickson's design – that reflected the streamlining of disciplines and functions and attempts to erase boundaries between faculty and students – was ultimately trumped by a '90s-era corporatism from which the campus has never fully recovered.



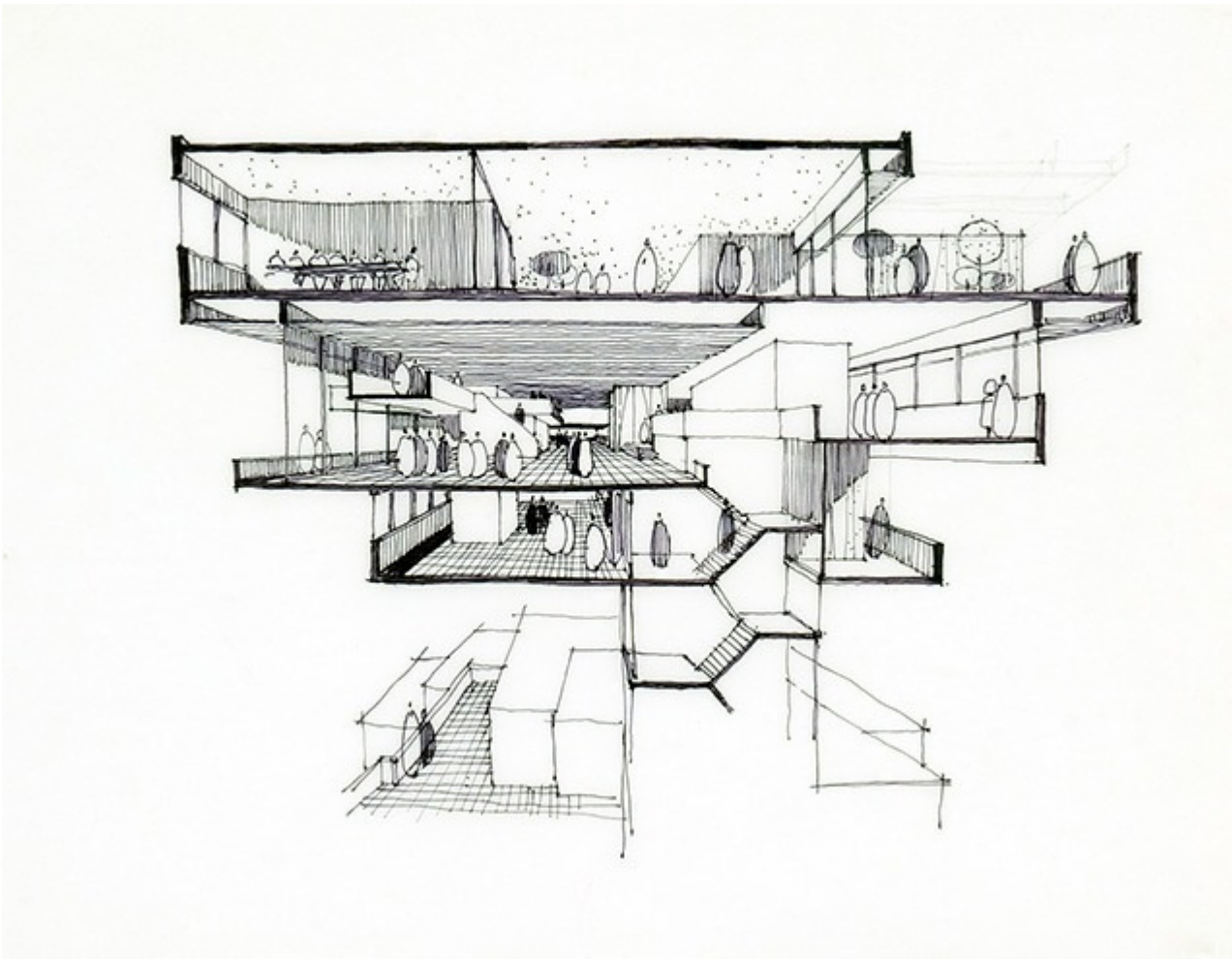
Exterior rendering: the archive contains a number of iterations of similar views, suggesting that the appearance of this monolithic megastructure in the landscape was doted upon



Megastructure meets landscape in one of the original elevation drawings



While the building expresses a certain relentlessness in its long elevations, the cross sections are modulated frequently to create different spatial arrangements. Here are the building's more functional spaces including offices, laboratories and classrooms



Campus circulation was envisaged taking place both on external and internal walkways

The fatal blow, most agree, was really the mid 1990s-designed library by Calgary's CPV Group Architects, that violated the principles of Erickson's own development plan, in particular his diktat that buildings must be built low to the ground. (He wrote of the prairie and its 'basic elements of earth and sky' that 'objects caught between these vast and simple elements appear trivial unless emerging intrinsically from one or the other or unless reflecting in generosity of size the prairie scale'. And 'Buildings must grow out of the ground clustered with other buildings or trees, but never sit blatantly on top of the ground. Forms must be simple and geometrically concise, as elaborate forms and fussy detail show as weakness. Just as the prairie landscape has been reduced to essentials, so must its buildings be as elemental.') Its pagoda-like literalism certainly falls into the fussy detail category and its scale is not right for the campus. But lest a lone library be unfairly demonised, it's safe to say there were danger signs well before that.

To really understand the architectural tragedy of Lethbridge, one needs to closely examine its origins. A hymn to the horizon – its genius lies in its revelation that the prairie is not flat but undulating. By creating a building composed of parallel horizontal lines, one that references a nearby aqueduct-like railway bridge that inspired Erickson, he exposed the contours of the land.

Erickson also tapped into the fact that the prairie is not a homogeneous entity but consists of different microclimates, warmed by variegating winds (in certain pockets of the coulée there are cacti and flowers). And in a way his creation of various ‘learning commons’ or areas of ‘micro-study’ away from traditional classrooms and lecture halls – well before the concept was adopted universally – was an architectural expression of this environmental reality.

Clearly integration with site was as seminal to Erickson’s vision for the university as was his concept of an integrated living/learning environment. But in many ways, his choice of site was also his undoing. The complications of building on a site where, as the university’s current associate director of planning and architecture Spencer Court notes, ‘water is the enemy’, resulted in cost overruns and delays in completion (augmented by the fact that this, like many baby boomer universities, needed to be built in a hurry). The university ended up suing Erickson and Massey for damages as shifts in the land meant some of the precast-concrete beams were poised precariously, although the architects won the legal case, citing the engineer’s report in their defence.

This, combined with Erickson’s dissolution of his partnership with Massey (seen by many as the most business-minded and pragmatic of the pair) conspired to create a reluctance on the part of the administration to further engage the architect. The result was that many new buildings, as Court puts it, ‘turned their back to the landscape’ and crept to the top of the coulée, ruining the line of vision. In the good old days, the university revealed itself like a surprise spaceship folded into the prairie: now the approach is marred by a variety of buildings inconsistent in scale, size and aesthetic.



A daunting view of the building as it stretches almost to infinity

‘People are very critical about how you engage a building after a long period of time,’ says Court somewhat diplomatically. ‘Are you an architectural taxidermist – and it just becomes a monument to nothing? Or is there an adaptive reuse thing you can do? How do you engage the same spaces in 2013 while respecting original design intent?’ Clearly Court – who walks a fine line between his respect for Erickson’s vision and more pragmatic considerations – has a challenge ahead. Can this university be saved? And can a new marriage between the practical and the pristine end happily?

'By creating a building composed of parallel horizontal lines, one that references a nearby aqueduct-like railway bridge that inspired Erickson, he exposed the contours of the land'

Lethbridge since Erickson

Since the new masterplan was only finished at the end of 2012, it's too soon to say. But a walk from the west down to the east proves instructive. Ugly early 1990s residences, seemingly devoid of any relationship to the 1969 development plan, greet your arrival – as does a large parking lot (Erickson's original vision was for a walkable campus where cars would be minimised or hidden). A forlorn early 1970s sculpture at the centre of a circular island looks as though it's missing a bit, echoing the sense of fragmentation throughout the campus. Everywhere is *Frankentecture* – some obviously original Erickson elements fused with newer structures – to varying effect.



The new masterplan by Toronto-based Moriyama & Teshima Architects with locally-based Gibbs Gage Architects fuses old and new elements in an attempt to impart some cohesion to the campus

An exception is the 2007 Barry Johns-designed Health and Wellness facility – fused onto the old physical education building – which respects Erickson’s aesthetic by burying the double-height gymnasium into the ground.

Installation art by Lebanese Canadian Jamelie Hassan punctuates the juncture between old and new with a contemporary grace.

The late 1980s Student Union Building with its mound-like form, is not bad. But Court is keenly aware that ‘one of best things early leadership did was to site University Hall where they did; the majesty of this campus lies in how that place is occupied’. Thus one of the new masterplan’s primary objectives is, ‘A University Hall that is not orphaned but fully integrated, re-purposed as an important architectural building on campus.’ Hopes are high that a new science building stretching westward from the north end of University Hall will help to achieve this.

This ties into the general goal of creating ‘a highly interconnected system of buildings and pedestrian networks to create an intimate and harmonised learning environment, integrating both academic and residential programmes. This creates a compact and efficient campus layout, facilitating the cross-pollination between disciplines and encouraging “learning anywhere and everywhere”.’ To this end, the sixth-level concourse ‘indoor street’ is being reinvigorated with new tiered seating areas, complete with original late 1960s orange, pink and yellow colour schemes (but minus the original shag carpets).





Designed to encourage casual study and social interaction, the long internal street of the sixth-floor concourse was conceived as an 'educational marketplace'

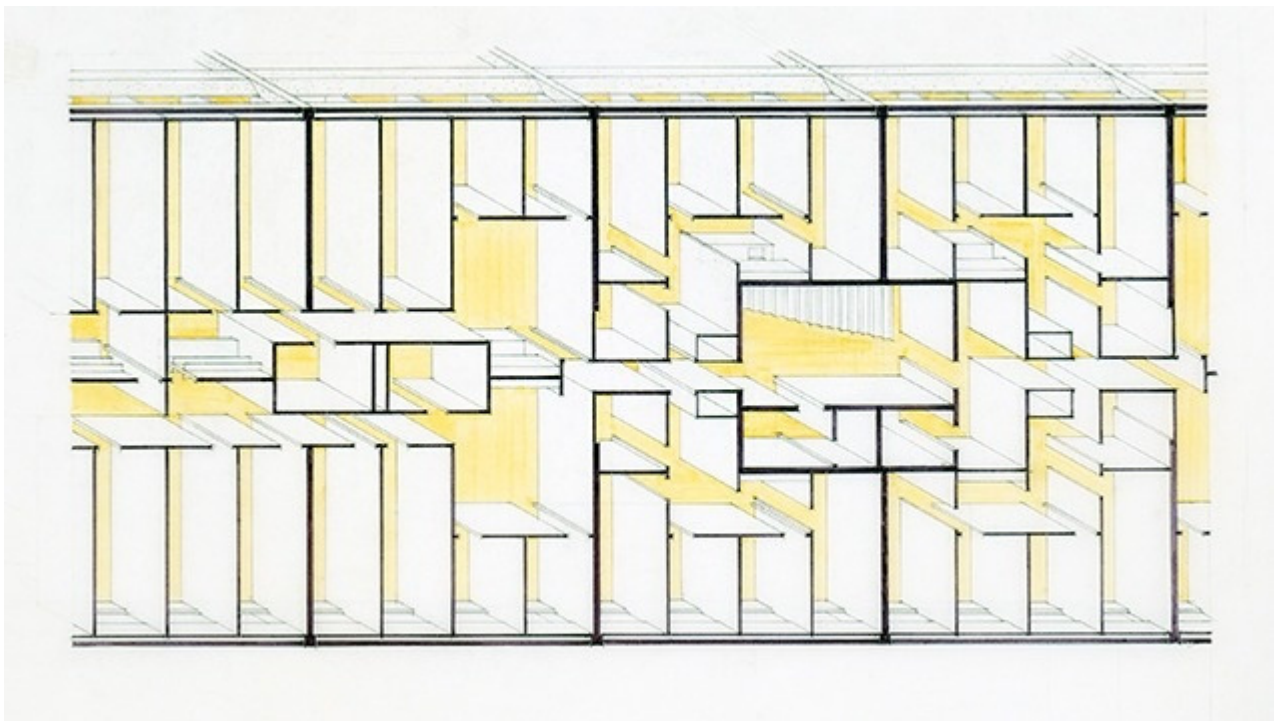
But good intentions aside, not to mention the limits of what can be accomplished with signage, landscaping and judicious culling of failed buildings and commissioning of new ones, it's hard to resist the gravitational pull of Erickson's University Hall. It still commands attention. Approaching it from the north end offers an architectural journey. A very Ericksonian moment happens as you descend the terraced stairwell; there is both a slow reveal of the building as well as a sense of being situated right in the landscape. University Hall tapers from the top floors, and employs a certain verticality to create intimacy. Residences on the bottom four floors feature windows that open, lending a human scale to the sometimes overwhelming monumentality.

The inner sanctum of the place is the 'breezeway', where concrete columns, softened by cedar soffits, offer a yonic threshold on the west, and a portal to

the prairies on the east, or what Court calls ‘a classical aperture to the coulées’. This place – one of Erickson’s ‘microclimates’ conceived as a spot where students could gather for informal learning – has consistently maintained its function since 1971. Students still gather here to draw, chat, do yoga, throw Frisbees, or simply contemplate the vast expanse of prairie to the east. Its grandeur is humanised by occasional graffiti, and in spite of remaining below grade and sediment issues, it remains the nexus of the university.

Literally cut out of the coulée, with repeatable precast and cast-in-situ concrete structures slid into place, it demonstrates the original intent. In spite of budget constraints, says Court, that made for often sparse interiors. ‘What the founders weren’t willing to sacrifice was the big bones of the project that say that “this form is the right response to the coulée”.’

Forty-five years later, the man charged with the task of reviving the Ericksonian spirit of this place, waxes poetic. ‘There is a classical feeling to a very modern execution,’ he observes. ‘The essence of this building is rooted in timeless truths.’



The concrete structure and cellular arrangement seen from above



Perspective of study-bedroom with an unusual split-level bed

