

# OAA Perspectives

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# Remember Ron Thom

## EDITORIAL

**“OAA PERSPECTIVES IS DOING SOMETHING it has never done before – devoting a whole feature to one architect. Our subject is Ron Thom (1923–1986), undoubtedly one of Canada’s greatest architects.”**

With this E-bulletin notice, marking the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ron Thom’s birth and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the opening of Massey College, we invited our readers and others to tell us what they remember about the architect and his buildings, and how these may have affected their lives.

Ron Thom was the sort of person about whom stories are told. Such stories have travelled widely, become embellished and perfected over time. Some of the stories have even passed into oral lore, due to the fact that they are surprising (often amusing), revealing, profoundly human and, above all, memorable. We heard many such stories during the preparation of this issue.

But, as we quickly concluded, the real Ron Thom stories are those that his buildings tell, because something of the architect is palpable in the architecture. The words that people used to describe Ron Thom’s qualities can equally be used to describe Massey College: acutely aware of context, sincere, down-to-earth, engaging, friendly, playful.

As architects, many of us hope to create a lasting marker for ourselves – some of us try for a “monument.” In St. Paul’s Cathedral, Christopher Wren famously accomplished this, with an epitaph (*Lector si monumentum requiris...*) thrown in for good measure. Like many famous buildings, St. Paul’s demands reverence, as a monument should.

But Ron Thom has accomplished something rarer: in Massey College, he has created not a commanding monument, but a place of comfort where the architect’s presence can be felt, and where a more personal connection can be made. John Fraser, journalist, lecturer and Master of Massey College, expresses this fact when he refers to himself as the “luckiest guy in Canada” for having had the privilege of living in Massey College for almost 20 years.

So next time you visit Massey College, stop by the pond in the courtyard and do as the small plaque suggests: Remember Ron Thom.

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Massey College  
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# Remember

*For their invaluable help in preparing this feature, we are especially grateful to architect Michael Miller; writer/curator Adele Weder; and John Fraser, Amela Marin and PJ MacDougall of Massey College.*

# Ron Thom

**I**t was Wednesday July 26, 1979, when I was awakened first thing in the morning by the phone ringing. I had just graduated with my Bachelor of Architecture from Carleton University, and I was taking my first summer off before looking for a job in the fall.

On the phone was Bob McIntyre of the Thom Partnership, asking if I could come in for an interview that afternoon. I had planned to put my portfolio together in August to be ready for my September job search, but hadn't finalized it yet. Ron Thom's office was at the top of my list for Toronto employers. The previous year I worked at a large production firm and was ready to quit architecture as a result, but, from what I heard of the Thom office, there might still be hope for my architectural career. I was therefore overwhelmed with the idea of getting my portfolio together in the next few hours and set to work.

That afternoon, I put on my best shirt and headed downtown for the interview. I was met by Bob McIntyre who took me into his office and called in Michael Miller, who also attended my interview. We talked, and I showed them my portfolio. They seemed quite impressed, and after a pleasant discussion I left.

The next morning, another call came. It was Bob, asking if I could come in for a three-week period, starting that day. I was completely taken aback as I had wanted to enjoy the summer prior to starting to look for a job, and the summer would be virtually over by the end of the contract. But I couldn't turn it down, so I asked if I could start on Monday instead. Bob agreed.

It was a week or two before I really got to meet Ron. He came to my desk and started talking with me, and we seemed to get along well. After a few weeks, I was assigned to work on a design for a new shopping centre in North York. This meant that Ron and I had to conduct a research tour of local centres, so we got in his car and off we went. That was the first time we'd had a chance to really talk and we had a nice evening. Ron had said to me that he was pleased with my contribution and I should really consider "becoming a part of the place", a very Ron Thom thing to say. Wow! Ron Thom asking me that! I was ecstatic and, while I stayed on contract for several months, I eventually became full-time staff. I realized later that "being a part of the place" was a term Ron used many times in later years. I ended up staying at the firm for not the original three weeks but 14 years, long after Ron passed away in 1986.

Ron was a very soft spoken and relatively shy man. He was carefully diplomatic about how he dealt with staff when he didn't agree with the direction they were going, and would often say things like, "I like the way this is going but perhaps I could suggest a teensy change," or "Couldn't we just make that a little more ...?" He was a master at blending his buildings into the landscape – even right down to the materials and textures he chose. He loved a colour that was a mossy green or what was known as "dull, dead grass." He would say things like, "Don't you think that brick is a little hot?" If you asked what he thought was more appropriate, he'd look outside and say, "See that tree [or rock or field] over there? That's the colour of nature" and then he would suggest a deep

ochre, buff, or warm gray. He wasn't really as comfortable designing in an urban environment as he was in a rural landscape for the reasons above, even though his undisputed masterpiece is Massey College. But the understated and inward-looking character of that work is emblematic of Ron's own personality. He spoke always in quiet tones, and those of us who were present at client meetings thought that he would deliberately and slowly lower his voice in order to make his clients listen harder.

He didn't mind some colour, in its place, but was generally all about camouflaging a building in its environment or, as he said often, "The building should make love to its site."

He told me once about meeting Richard Neutra in the 1950s, and how he had changed his approach. I found this odd because of the stark stylistic differences between Neutra's and Ron's work. I recently visited some of the Neutra and Schindler work in Los Angeles and it was only then that I got the parallels – and these buildings were quite striking in the early '50s. Even though Ron's houses didn't look like Neutra's, there were parallels in the interconnection between the rooms and, in turn, their relationship to the exterior.

He had no use for cold modernism and often scoffed at it. He couldn't bear some of the stuff produced by Mies or Meier; he felt that those buildings provided no connection to human beings, the natural environment, or the setting. He didn't place a lot of credence in the intellectual discussion of architecture, and often used the phrase "bullshit baffles brains." If you visit some of his houses, you can see that the designs often don't concern themselves with the kind of rigour and resolution that we architects place so much emphasis on today. Things often just happened in an organic way and Ron often resolved complicated intersecting materials in a simple and unstudied manner. My favourite one was in his own home on Meadowcliffe Drive in Toronto: a shelf was wider than the window in the adjacent wall,



A WATERCOLOUR RENDERING OF THE SHAW FESTIVAL THEATRE BY RON THOM. COURTESY MICHAEL MILLER



SKETCH OF SHAW FESTIVAL THEATRE  
BY RON THOM. **BELOW.** A RECOLLECTION  
PROVIDED BY NELLZY (A.K.A. R. JAMES  
NELLES) TORONTO JUNE, 2013

One crisp fall morning back in 1972, I witnessed Ron Thom of The Thom Partnership, Architects & Planners, 47 Colborne St. in Toronto, 'dash-off' this sketch within minutes. With agility, ease and flare Ron set the perspective from looking at the exterior elevations I had just finished for our Shaw Festival Theatre project at Niagara-On-The-Lake. "What do you think?" asked Ron. "I like it", I said. "It's perfect." This sketch was then given to Bob Montgomery, our resident artist, who worked his magic to create his fine pencil rendering. Bob's version was printed on white porcelain dinner plates which were sold as a promotion during the following summer for Shaw's Inaugural Season, June 12 to September 23 1973.

so he simply cut the shelf face back in a series of small steps to abut the wall, instead of the glass. He was totally comfortable in resolving design issues in this way and hated overthinking. Trained as a painter, his work was simply an expression of something intuitive, something that grew out of the setting, and that was completely informal.

I suppose that this is what I most learned from Ron: that buildings in natural landscapes shouldn't shout out at you, but that they should be inextricably intertwined with their surroundings; they should be informal; and they should grow from their sites. As I worked on a design of a lakeside home this morning, I found myself wondering how it would look from the lake, as

the client said he had come to me because he didn't want "obviousity". That is a word I'd not heard before, but an appropriate one to express the concept. I think Ron would have loved it. ■

*Peter Berton is Partner-in-Charge of the architectural firm The Ventin Group Ltd., in Toronto.*

