

ERIKSON'S TINY PERFECT TEMPLE

Arthur Erikson hid the best building he designed in Victoria. We found it.— 12

'YES ANGELA, BUT IS IT ART?'

UVic's Cunningham building: a very functional bunker

'Look, all I know is that Arthur Erikson designed these buildings and hid them in Victoria.'

By DON LUXTON

"BORING, Angela, very boring." Angela sighed, settling back in her rattan chair, and smiled. "Oh, I agree, I've seen enough of the Queen." She paused, reaching for a muffin. "Or are you on about architecture again?"

"Well Angela," I began, refusing more tea, "this city hasn't seen any exciting buildings go up since Sam Maclure kicked the bucket."

"I always prefer exciting people to the buildings they live in," she countered. "You architects are all alike; you're too busy finding your own work to appreciate other people's projects. I happen to know," she said coyly, "of two Arthur Erikson buildings in Victoria that I'm sure you've never even heard of."

"How could you think I'd miss the eyesore? It's the biggest thing in Vic West!"

"See, see, I told you," she cried, rising up and brandishing her muffin below my nose, "I wasn't talking about that one. You want to see them, or don't you believe me?"

I bit. Angela Chantry, not the sort of woman to let a second cup of tea stand in the way of proving a point, launched me into her '82 Subaru and swept up Foul Bay Road en route to the university. "This one's huge, but well-hidden," she announced. "Don't worry, I'll find it."

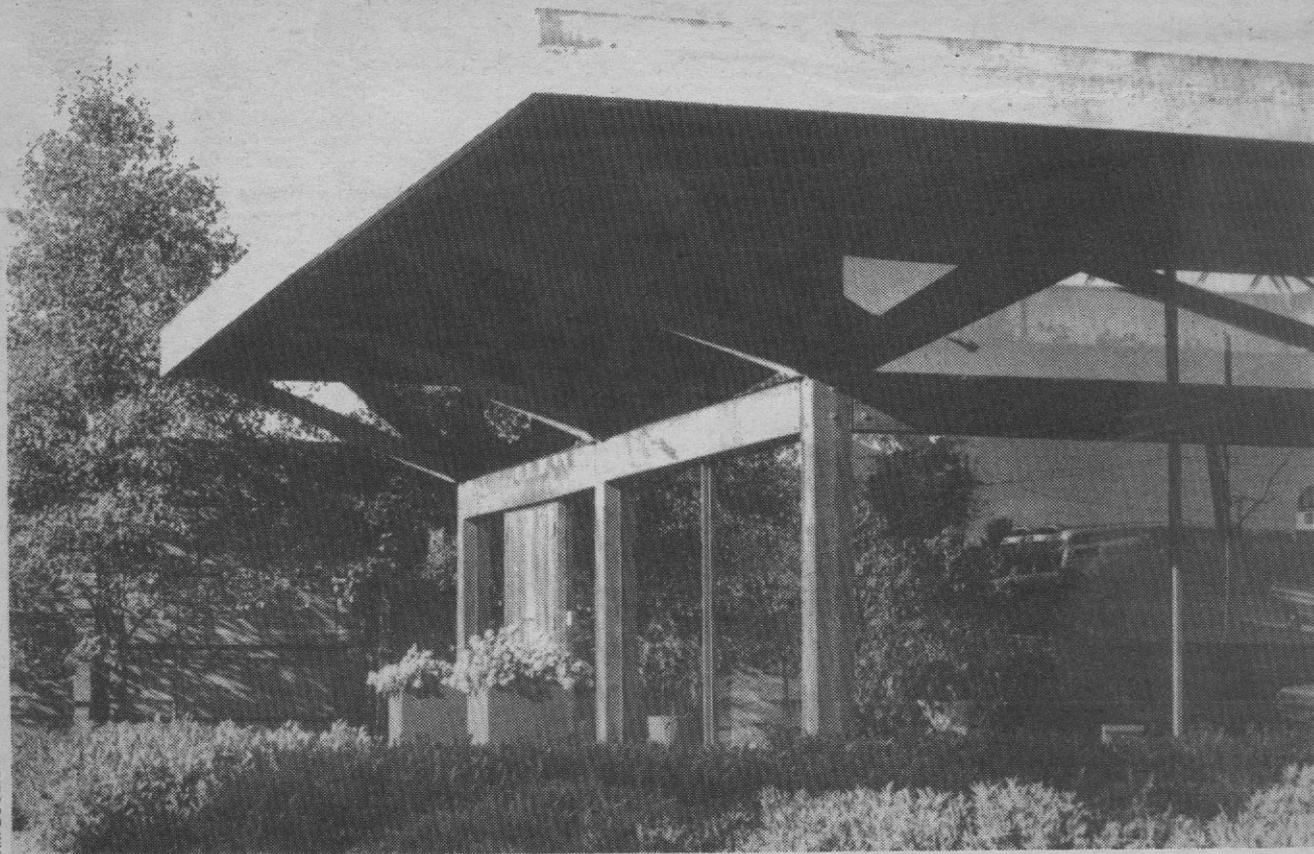
The building in question was indeed huge and well-hidden, and for some reason, backwards. We found ourselves entering by the service entrance, not realizing until later that the formal front door faces into the centre of the university. That's when I realized that we were in the Cunningham Building.

"There, what do you think?" Angela asked, staring up at the colour-coded service runs, a favourite '70s device.

"I hate it," I said, "It's ugly. I admit it's an Erikson, but it's so boxy and institutional. I could never imagine taking classes in here."

"Dino did," Angela announced as if that would excuse the bare concrete walls and gloomy colour scheme. "Let's get out of the basement and see what's upstairs."

The upper floors, unfortunately, looked exactly the same as the basement, and were reached by stairways that resembled in form, material, and detail an exceptionally functional



bunker. I was appalled. Angela led me out the front door to see what the outside looked like.

"Doesn't this remind you of the Vancouver courthouse?" she exclaimed with glee.

"Yes," I answered despondently, as I saw he had made all his mistakes here first. It looked like a huge block of concrete had been dropped from a considerable height, then left for the landscaper to rectify. "Typical Victoria, Angela," I added as I kicked the front door, "another mediocre building by a famous architect."

"You'll like the other one better," Angela promised, helping me limp back to the Subaru.

Heading down Douglas Street, she abruptly turned right at the Red Lion Inn. Just as Ardersier Road ended, she wheeled into the parking lot of Home Lumber. "Buying

The office building at Home Lumber: a tiny perfect temple to the gods of commerce

something for another craft project?" I jibed, but Angela ignored me as she jumped out of the car and began to wave her arms about. And there it was, finally, what I had given up expecting to see in Victoria, a great modern building.

This had to be one of Erikson's smallest commissions, a tiny office building for a lumber yard, but he had somehow made it into a tiny perfect temple to the gods of commerce, a monument in wood to the trees that have been cut to fuel our economy. I told Angela I liked it.

"I think it's so clever," she said, "How he made the columns look like trees. I think he really caught something there."

He had indeed been able to express in wood what he couldn't do in concrete. This building actually displayed symbolic meaning, and expressed its function very clearly, unlike the Cunningham, which looked like nothing except a jail for students. Here was something that was not only attractive, but spiritual. Angela was enraptured. I admitted defeat. I had fallen in love with a modern building in Victoria.

Returning quietly to her apartment, I was amazed by the thought that a gem like this could go undiscovered. Angela, bless her literary heart, put it all in perspective by flipping open her copy of Ezra Pound's *Cantos* to a quote about critics flinging pearls in mud and howling to find them unstained. Maybe, just maybe, Angela, there are a few more pearls out there.