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# 'To be happy, you must be wise'

By [Jade Colbert](#) on October 9, 2007

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You'll miss it if you stand too close to the brick wall, but view it from a distance—say, from Soldier's Tower—and you'll get a better view of why Ron Thom's design was chosen in the 1960s for the newly-founded Massey College. Viewed from there, Thom's abstracted buttress-like columns rise out of the planes of brick—something more akin to what you would expect of a place where Robertson Davies was the founding Master. More indicative, too, of what's inside.

That red brick bulwark was much criticized at a time of growing pressure for universities to be more, not less, open. Yet in 2000 when Canadian Architect summed the highlights of the country's twentieth-century architectural offerings, Massey made the list.

“Like a chapel within a medieval fortification,” wrote one reviewer. And that's the way U of T's smallest college likes it.

“It does have that slightly forbidding look, but it gives a strong feeling of protection,” says John Fraser, now in his 13th year as Master of Massey College. “I remember asking a grad student what she liked about Massey—I was trying to figure it out—and she talked about all the infighting in the English faculty: the competition for supervisors, for peoples' ideas, funds...and she said when she walks back into Massey, she gets the feeling of what she thought graduate school would be like.”

In other words, amongst the 130 Junior Fellows who are hand-picked from a range of graduate departments and professional faculties to create an interdisciplinary mix at the college, that protection is part of what makes them happy, and happiness is something that the school takes very seriously. The school's founder and namesake—Canada's first native-born Governor General, Vincent Massey—shared a vision with others in the university community on what a graduate residence should be.

“At the heart of what Robertson Davies, [U of T] president [Claude] Bissell, and Mr. Massey wanted to do was create a place that was harmonious, beautiful architecture, good food, good conditions for the students, and a chance for young people to rub elbows at a relatively equal level with great scholars, and that's what we do,” says Fraser. That the university now uses Massey's food services for important events speaks to the success of that vision. Fraser is the first to point out that outside the college, the food at the university is generally awful.

As for the architecture, Ron Thom's design, which included custom furnishings and details for the interior, is far different from the fortress seen from outside. One motif that runs throughout is that of the medieval monastery, which were the predecessors of Europe's first universities. Massey's Dining Hall, one of the rooms for which Thom's design is most celebrated, reworks the design of traditional church windows to form a modern, almost art-deco like grid. This same geometry is repeated in the perforated monoliths that extend into the sky, which from afar appear like the flying buttresses of a ruined church, giving the college a sense of history much longer than its 45 years.

While the college's architecture may cultivate a meditative quiet, it isn't cold. Throughout the dining

hall, common room, round room, and upper library, the interior has been finished in bronze, leather, and wood. The last of these, especially, gives a sense of warmth, but also intimates the influence of Thom's own west coast background.

Part of the role of Master of the college is to strike a balance between town and gown, once you get past the imposing Porter's Gate, the college is actually quite social, and endeavours to bring in the wider community. Through avenues such as the Massey Lectures, the Writer-in-Residence program, the Canadian Journalism Fellowships, and the Walter Gordon Forum on Public Affairs, Massey manages to keep a balance between meditation and warmth, the scholarly and the informal.

A mixture of scholarship and the bizarre, the riches to be found in the college's basement can astound. After the acquisition in 1963 of an 1870 New Improved Albion Press, the college has bought four other hand presses, original wood engravings, as well as a series of wood blocks used to print circus posters. Stepping into the Massey College Press, a major centre for scholarship on print culture, is like stepping into an entirely different age, when changing a page from 12-point to 16-point font could take days.

Turn a few corners and you will come to the small museum dedicated to Vincent Massey. Some of its contents were donated to the college, but a large portion of the collection amounts to objects bought by Robertson Davies at the Massey contents sale upon the founder's death, showing the bric-a-brac a 1950s Governor General collects over the years. In the words of the college's current master, "It's kooky, it's fun—it's not scholarship."

The basement houses the ecumenical St. Catherine's Chapel and its 18th-century Russian iconostasis. But then, the basement is also home to the college's annual golf tournament. According to Fraser, a lot of the school's eccentricity comes from its students.

"They're just focused. And that's often just so incredible in terms of the scholarship and the work they produce, but often leads to being pretty helpless on the other side, managing human relationships. So there's a lot of accumulated grief sometimes. One of the things that Massey's great for is social life, because it helps people doing such intense work," he said.

It's a sentiment echoed in the quote from George Santayana that runs around the inner perimeter of Ondaatje Hall: "Happiness is impossible, and even inconceivable, to a mind without scope and without pause, a mind driven by craving, pleasure or fear. To be happy, you must be reasonable, or you must be tamed. You must have taken the measure of your powers, tasted the fruits of your passion, and learned your place in the world and what things in it can really serve you. To be happy, you must be wise."

One incident from the 2006-07 school year serves as a final case in point. Last year's reception for the Polanyi Award—named after Professor John Polanyi, a founding fellow of the college and winner of the 1986 Nobel Gold Medal for Chemistry, which is now displayed in the private dining room—was marked by a cavalcade of black cars and police guard rolling down Devonshire Place to deliver the evening's special guests, King Carl XVI Gustaf and Queen Silvia of Sweden. They came to attend the reception. They stayed to act as judges in the college's pumpkin-carving contest. That's the kind of place Massey is.

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