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POST OCCUPANCY

A Tale of Two Colleges

Scarborough and Massey Colleges were built a half-century ago in Toronto, one a study in Brutalism, the other an exercise in Arts & Crafts. Witold Rybczynski revisits the two projects to see how they've aged.

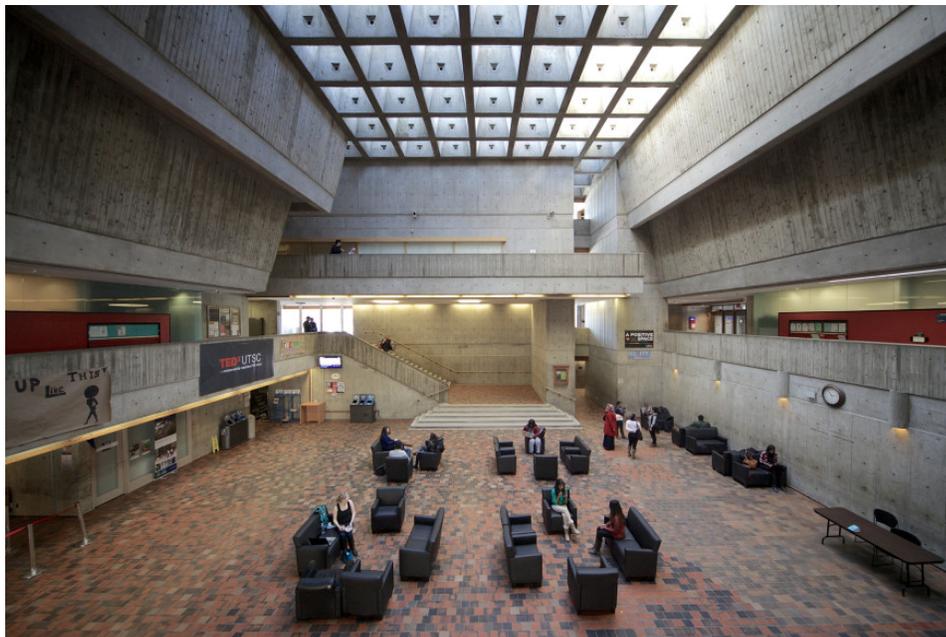
By [WITOLD RYBCZYNSKI](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Witold Rybczynski

Witold Rybczynski, Hon. FAIA, is an emeritus professor of architecture at the University of Pennsylvania. He has contributed to the *Atlantic*, *New Yorker*, *New York Review of Books*, and *The New York Times*. The recipient of the 2007 Vincent Scully Prize, he was honored in 2014 with the National Design Award for Design Mind from the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum.



Thomas Guignard

The Meeting Place at Scarborough College

Buildings don't only weather physically, they also weather architecturally. Ideas age as surely as materials; what once seemed exciting and adventurous can appear strained and shallow in hindsight. Conversely, some ideas—like wine—take time to mature.

I recently revisited [Scarborough College](#) and [Massey College](#). These two buildings were completed within a few years of each other, in the mid 1960s. While both were part of the University of Toronto, their design approaches were light-years apart; the first was a flagship project of what would become known as Brutalism, while the second was an exercise in Arts & Crafts, with more than a nod to Frank Lloyd Wright. When I saw them as an architecture student, the former struck me as exciting and original, and the latter as rather tame. Almost a half-century later, I was curious to see how these two projects have worn over the years, and to see if my initial impressions had changed.

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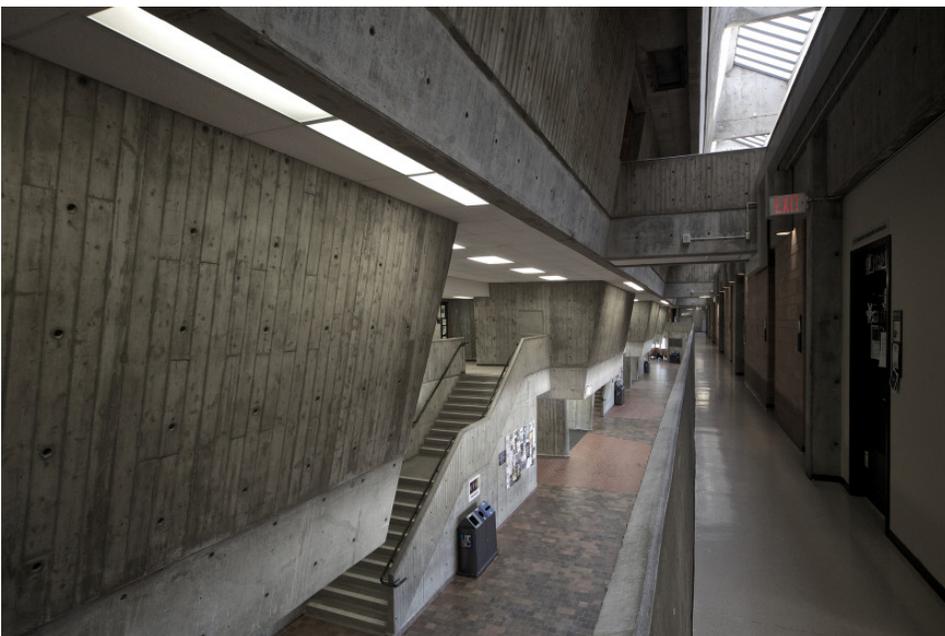
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Vik Pahwa
Scarborough

When Scarborough College (now known as the University of Toronto at Scarborough) opened in 1966, it was the first building of the university's new suburban commuter campus. An internal pedestrian "street" forms the spine of this 1,200-foot-long structure. Roughly at the center is a dramatic four-story space, overlooked by galleries and lit by a giant eggcrate skylight. It's called the Meeting Place. In my experience, college students tend to meet in classrooms, dining halls, and at social events, but an academic town square is nevertheless an attractive concept. The square, like the rest of the college, is all concrete; the eggcrate is concrete, the walls are concrete, the balustrades are concrete, even the wall sconces are concrete. This is not the warm, plastered concrete of Frank Lloyd Wright, or the silky smooth concrete of Tadao Ando, Hon. FAIA, just ordinary poured-in-place concrete, replete with air cavities, flaws, and pour marks. The concrete also shows the impression of its formwork, sometimes simply joint lines, sometimes a variety of vertical ribs, a technique pioneered by Le Corbusier in the Unité d'Habitation at Marseille and widely used by architects in the 1960s.



Thomas Guignard



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Scarborough's poured-in-place concrete shows the impressions of its formwork

Scarborough was designed by John Andrews. He got the job almost by accident. An Australian, he attended the [Harvard Graduate School of Design \(GSD\)](#), and while still a student he and three classmates entered the international competition for Toronto City Hall, and were one of the finalists. (I. M. Pei, FAIA, was another; the winner was a Finn, Viljo Revell.) This success led to a job offer from John B. Parkin, a leading Toronto practitioner. Andrews accepted and eventually opened his own office. Like many struggling young architects, he took a teaching job—at the University of Toronto. Andrews happened to be available when the university was exploring the feasibility of a satellite campus. The enterprising 30-year-old turned a master planning study into his first major commission.

The completion of Scarborough propelled Andrews into the limelight (two years later he was hand-picked by his old teacher, Josep Lluís Sert, to design the new GSD building). Scarborough was covered widely by the American and British architectural press. It's easy to see the appeal. This was an architect's architecture: spare, spatially inventive, determinedly functionalist, a frank expression of structure and construction. It was also self-consciously "new," a campus without the usual trappings of academe: no distinguishable departments—no arts building or chemistry building—no lawns, no formal entrance. This was clearly no ivory tower; the iconic vertical feature was not a spire or a belfry but the chimney of the heating plant.



Vik Pahwa

The prominent vertical feature at Scarborough is the chimney of the heating plant

Scarborough exhibits all the characteristics that Reyner Banham described in his seminal 1955 essay, "The New Brutalism": a powerful image that communicates the functions of the building; an approach to design that he called "je-m'en-foutisme," which roughly translates as "I don't give damn," or, "what-you-see-is-what-you-get"; underdesigned details; and the use of building materials "as found"—that is, in their raw state—which in practice usually meant exposed concrete. As I observed during my recent visit, concrete does not age gracefully: exterior surfaces are discolored and stained by rust streaks, corners are chipped, ugly patches abound. Retrofitted electrical conduits are surface-mounted on the solid concrete walls. Nor does concrete react well to human use. A brass handrail gets attractively burnished over time, wood become smoothly polished where it is handled, but the well-used concrete balustrades I saw merely acquired a greasy patina.

Scarborough is a very early example of the use of form-tie holes as a kind of architectural ornament.

"Ornament" may be too strong a word. My chief impression of this building was of a no-nonsense work of engineering, like a dam or a highway overpass: scaleless, implacable, mute. Well, not entirely mute. Andrews



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**A Tale of Two
Colleges**



did not splurge on materials or workmanship, but he was liberal when it came to space. Above the pedestrian street, the space rises the full height of the four-story building providing vertiginous, Piranesi-like views of overlapping balconies, galleries, and skylights. More than one contemporary reviewer compared the college to a Baroque stage set. In practice, Brutalism developed a strong romantic streak that was at odds with Banham's *je-m'en-foutisme*—just think of Paul Rudolph's concrete architecture or Boston City Hall. At Scarborough, the building zigs and zags picturesquely along a heavily wooded ridge, and the chiseled forms of the protruding lecture halls look like mouldering World War II bunkers, especially covered in ivy, as they are today.



Vik Pahwa

The science wing at Scarborough

Two wings extend from the Meeting Place. One houses the humanities, the other, the sciences—6,000 students under one roof. Scarborough is one of the first—and largest—built examples of a megastructure, wherein functions previously housed in separate buildings are combined in a single structure. In a 1966 *Architectural Forum* review, Oscar Newman called Scarborough “an important milestone in urban design in North America,” reflecting the common view that megastructures represented the future of urban planning. Indeed, he referred to the building as “a beginning rather than a culmination.”

In fact, it proved to be the latter. Andrews' building was phase one of a projected linear scheme designed to be twice as long, but phase two never materialized. Scarborough grew vigorously—there are now 10,000 students—yet the university turned its back on the megastructure concept, perhaps because it proved ill-adapted to change and much less flexible than its maker promised, more a straitjacket than a liberating tool. Or perhaps it was a search for academic identity that caused new departments such as computer science, business administration, and social sciences to be housed in their own freestanding buildings. Their architecture is resolutely modernist in a low-key Canadian way—but precision, transparency, and lightness, not *je-m'en-foutisme*, are the order of the day. The cladding is copper, glass, brick, and limestone—anything except concrete.



Vik Pahwa

Exterior of the science wing

Several prominent Brutalist buildings—unloved and underperforming—have succumbed to the wrecking ball in recent years. Although the concrete bunker looms over the Scarborough campus like some elephantine survivor of an alien civilization, the university appears committed to what it calls the Andrews Building. The name feels right. This monolith is, above all, a monument to an architect's idea. I can still admire Andrews' single-mindedness, and the consistency that he brought to his design, but his ideas have not worn well. He was focused intently on the future, but it turned out to be a future that was stillborn, which makes this iconoclastic building oddly quaint, the architectural equivalent of a Sixties psychedelic poster.



Bob Gundu

Massey College's quad and bell tower

Massey College was designed as a conscious attempt to create a small, close community of graduate students from different disciplines. The difference with Scarborough is not merely one of scale, however. Instead of advancing a new planning concept, Massey is modeled on an Oxbridge quadrangle; instead of

concrete it uses traditional materials; instead of industrialized construction it celebrates craft; instead of form-tie holes there is ornament. And instead of a smokestack it has an actual bell tower.

Massey College stands at a busy intersection on the downtown campus of the university. From the street, the brick exterior, which steps back and forth and is interrupted by vertical slots, appears intriguing rather than forbidding. The entrance is marked by the college's coat of arms carved in limestone. Beyond the porter's gate, a grassy quadrangle is enclosed on three sides by three floors of student rooms. The fourth side comprises a common room, a library, and the dining hall, whose tall, glazed volume is plainly visible.



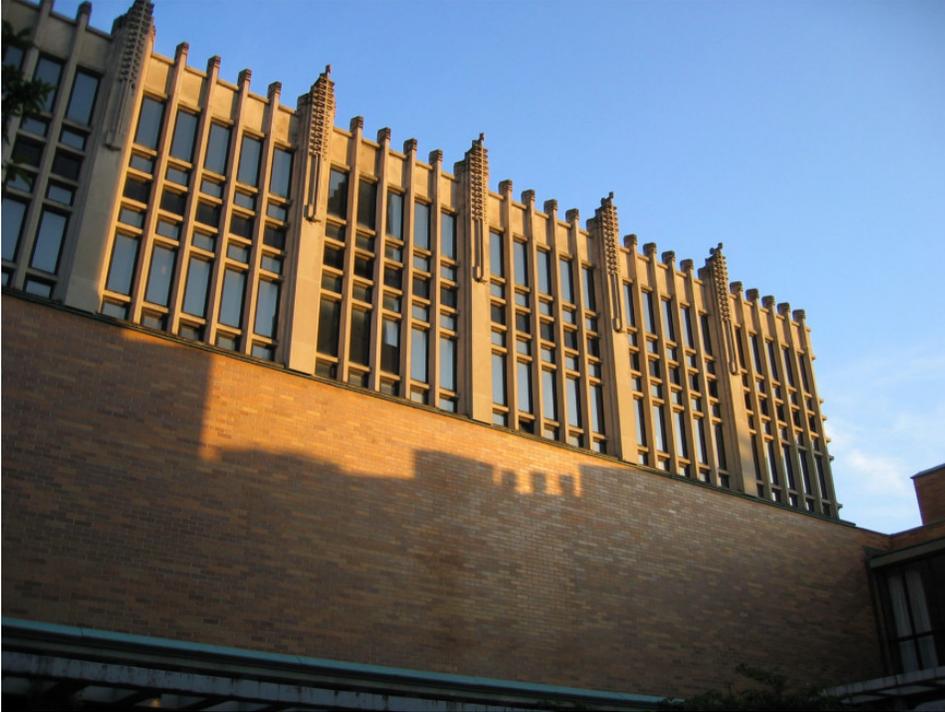
Bob Gundu

The entrance to Massey College

What is most striking, other than the Edenic atmosphere of the leafy quad, is the architecture. The vertical rhythms of the residential façades vaguely suggests Gothic, despite the modernist flat roofs and lack of medieval detail. The horizontal canopies and the geometric finials of the dining hall explicitly mimic Frank Lloyd Wright circa 1915—think Midway Gardens in Chicago and the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo. The bell tower, an abstract composition of overlapping planes, recalls the Wrightian Dutch modernist Willem Dudok. On the other hand, sculptural forms capping the limestone mullions resemble Haida Indian totems, and window spandrels are decorated with sun-burst motifs that reminds me of Marimekko fabric patterns. It is a puzzling mix.

Massey College opened the same year as Paul Rudolph's Yale Art and Architecture Building. In the early 1960s, modern architects were expected to use concrete and to design abstract forms that expressed a building's function, craft was frowned upon, and ornament was forbidden. The brick quad broke all these

unspoken rules. Perhaps that's why I couldn't find a single reference to the project in the American architectural press. The reception in Canada was mixed. One critic considered that the building set architecture back 50 years, referring to the resurrection of Wrightian motifs. The contrarian historian Peter Collins took a different view. He wrote in the RAIC Journal: "If one considers that Frank Lloyd Wright was one of the pioneers of modern architecture, and that he had already reached maturity by, say, 1903, then it is difficult to see why the forms he was using in 1913 should cease to be valid in certain circumstances today." I doubt that most architects at the time would have agreed.



Flickr elena_mch

Exterior of the Massey dining hall

The designer of this unorthodox building was Ron Thom. Born in British Columbia in 1923, he graduated from art school and joined a Vancouver architectural firm as an apprentice. His lack of a formal architectural education influenced his approach to design. Architecture schools did not encourage reproducing the past, even the recent past, but in his early houses, Thom drew directly on the work of Wright, as well as Southern California modernists such as Richard Neutra, Rudolph Schindler, and Harwell Hamilton Harris. He was not a historicist, but his willingness to appropriate elements from other architects flew in the face of the conventional architectural wisdom that condemned "copying" and privileged originality.

Thom's approach did appeal to his client. Vincent Massey (whose family owned the agricultural equipment giant, Massey Ferguson) had been a diplomat and the governor general of Canada. As a young man, he had conceived and financed Hart House, the university's Gothic Revival student center. Massey College was one of his last philanthropic projects. His son and nephew—both architects—had helped to organize a limited architectural competition. Massey, who had attended Balliol College at the University of Oxford, had a very definite idea of what he wanted; the final competition brief stipulated that the new building "should be in the form of a quadrangle—that it should be turned inwards, not outwards." The three other competitors (John B. Parkin, Arthur Erickson, and Carmen Corneil) did not follow this requirement. Thom did, and produced a private, fully enclosed court. Massey likely supported the neo-Gothic compositional approach and Thom's ornamental touches.



Bob Gundu

Massey College

At the time he designed Massey College, Thom was 35, a partner in the Vancouver firm of Thompson, Berwick & Pratt, and an experienced designer with more than 40 houses under his belt. According to my classmate Ralph Bergman, who worked for Thom in the 1970s, “Ron didn’t necessarily believe in the things we were taught in school—truth to materials, clarity of structure, and so on. He had in mind to create spaces and environments, so anything necessary to achieve this was okay with him—and he was very good at it.” This pragmatism is visible in Thom’s treatment of structure. Like Scarborough, Massey College is constructed of poured-in-place concrete, but the material is largely concealed. The dropped ceiling of the dining hall is wood and the columns are clad in limestone; the bearing walls in the residential section are clad in brick. The brick-clad structural walls are indistinguishable from the partitions and the non-load-bearing exterior walls

which are also brick. The heavy window mullions are limestone, whereas the similar-looking spandrels and finials are cast stone. In Thom's work, form and function lead separate lives.



Bob Gundu

The fireplace in the Massey common room

Massey College accommodates about 60 graduate students, as well as visiting scholars. The rooms, instead of being organized along a continuous corridor or around individual staircases, are grouped in five separate "houses," each with its own entrance. All the rooms look into the quad. The distinctly un-institutional atmosphere is heightened by the labyrinthine circulation (which, being one-sided, benefits from natural light), and the variety of room plans—most include a small bedroom as well as a study, and many have fireplaces. The 45-degree geometry of the fireplace in the common room recalls Wright, as do that room's ceiling coves and concealed lighting. The walls throughout the building, as in so many of Wright's houses, are brick, a warm ochre blend. The ironspot brick, dense and nonporous, is also used on the exterior where it has aged exceptionally well; after 50 years it looks as good as new.

The inscription on the bell in the college tower—the Bell of St. Catharine, patron saint of learning—is "I summon the living: I mourn the dead: I rouse the sluggards: I calm the turbulent." And in my case, "I toll for lunch." The dining hall of Massey College is both imposing and surprisingly intimate. It is a double-cube lit by high windows, an arrangement that recalls a medieval hall. Thom played down the resemblance—there are no hammer beams or stained glass—but he did include fabric-shrouded suspended light fixtures that resemble banners. He also designed the wooden tables and chairs, which remind me of the Arts & Crafts movement, as well as the decorative cast-iron grilles that cover the air vents. The massive brick fireplace is pure Prairie Style. A frieze below the windows carries a long quote from George Santayana rendered in medieval calligraphy. The quote ends: "To be happy you must be wise."



Bob Gundu

The Massey dining hall

Scarborough is emblematic of its time; Massey College, an outlier, is different. What seems to have guided Thom were not abstract ideas, but something more down-to-earth: the human experience of a place. *You come into the room and you see this. You turn, go up a few steps, and you touch that. A fire crackles in the corner.* Human experience endures. So does human memory. Thom alluded to the past—to several pasts—which provides his building with richness and a depth of meaning that can still be appreciated. He was no functionalist. "The architect in proposing a building makes a choice—an imaginative choice which outstrips the facts," he wrote in a 1962 *Canadian Architect* essay. "The creativity of architecture lies here; it imagines more than there is grounds for and creates relations which at bottom can never be verified."

He added, somewhat defensively: "An architect, no less than an artist, should be willing to fly in the face of what is established, and to create not what is acceptable but what will become accepted." Thom didn't need to be defensive; after a half-century, the masterful quad resoundingly bears him out.

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