



Arthur Erickson's Decades-Old Vision for Vancouver's Robson Square Is Finally Realized

The revised plazas, which encircle the Vancouver Art Gallery, streamline Robson Square as a continuous, pedestrianized public space with nods to local culture.

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When long-time [Arthur Erickson](https://www.arthurerickson.com/) (<https://www.arthurerickson.com/>) collaborator [Nick Milkovich](https://milkovicharchitects.com/) (<https://milkovicharchitects.com/>), first worked on Vancouver’s iconic Robson Square in the 1970s, he was in his 30s. “It was a wild ride,” recalls the now octogenarian architect of his experience on the project, which was imagined by Canada’s late great Modernist—who helped shape the city’s urban form—as a high-rise turned on its side. “We were exploring and experimenting.”

The three-block expanse encompassing new law courts, offices, and public space culminated in the [Vancouver Art Gallery \(VAG\)](https://www.vanartgallery.bc.ca/) (<https://www.vanartgallery.bc.ca/>), which was adapted from Francis Rattenbury’s 1911 Neoclassical courthouse in 1981. Now, some 40 years later, Erickson’s original vision of pedestrianizing the Robson Street entrance of the VAG and joining it to the larger complex has been realized.

“It feels good to finally complete Arthur’s vision,” says Milkovich, whose [firm](https://milkovicharchitects.com/vancouver-art-gallery-north-plaza/5dj0keb8dgf1eydu1a12cf9bpd620c) (<https://milkovicharchitects.com/vancouver-art-gallery-north-plaza/5dj0keb8dgf1eydu1a12cf9bpd620c>) worked on the project in collaboration with [HAPA](https://hapacobo.com/projects/800-robson/) (<https://hapacobo.com/projects/800-robson/>), “to provide a continuous pedestrianized public space in the middle of the city—something that’s been dreamed of since the ‘60s.”



The City of Vancouver–funded project began in Fall 2019 and comprised [work on the north and south sides of the VAG](https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/VAG-North-Plaza-Project-Background-2013-Oct-1.pdf) (<https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/VAG-North-Plaza-Project-Background-2013-Oct-1.pdf>). The North Plaza, newly renamed $\text{šx}^w\lambda\text{ənəq}$ Xwtl'e7énk Square, which roughly translates in local First Nations languages as “a cultural and ceremonial gathering place,” has symbolically shed its colonial skin by reframing the plaza space as an open space. (It had [previously](https://www.arthurerickson.com/government-buildings/law-courts-complex/1/caption) (<https://www.arthurerickson.com/government-buildings/law-courts-complex/1/caption>) been dominated by a colorful fountain installed to mark Canada’s centennial in 1967 and the merger of the British colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia.) The plaza continues to be used as a site for public gatherings and protests, but new seating and landscaping also encourage more casual urban lounging. Additionally, a sculptural bus stop at the plaza’s eastern side offers stylish shelter, and breaks down the scale of the massive, black glass office tower across the street, entering into a dialogue with trees planted along Hornby Street to the west.

The South Plaza, completed at the end of March, is a more intimate space than the larger one to the north and contains everything from small social gatherings to jazz festivals. “We took Arthur’s original idea of paving Robson Square and stretched it across Robson Street,” Milkovich explains. Its seamless integration was achieved by using concrete pavers with articulated granite patterns that blend with the complex’s original paving.



The public space's boundaries are defined by the domes in the sunken plazas on the northeast and southeast sides of Robson, the Cornelia Oberlander-designed landscape mound on the southwest, and the annex of the art gallery on the northeast (adjacent to the original Edwardian building.) "The paving tied it all together," says Milkovich.

In one of North America's most densely residential downtowns, the pandemic era need for increased outdoor space has made the fruition of Erickson's original vision even more timely. Indeed, as a new sound installation on the South Plaza called *Weekend Chime* (<https://covapp.vancouver.ca/PublicArtRegistry/ArtworkDetail.aspx?ArtworkId=865&FromArtworkSearch=False>) played the notes from the chorus of the 1981 hit song by Vancouver band Loverboy's *Working for the Weekend* at exactly 5 o'clock last Friday, to the delight of dozens of socially distanced citizens enjoying a break from the claustrophobia of the home office, there seemed to be an audible sigh of civic relief.

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