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## If These Walls Could Talk: A Site for Art, Architecture and Defence

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Bill Reid's *The Raven and the First Men* (1980; MOA Collection: Nb1.481) installed where a MK7 gun was once positioned during the Second World War. Photo by Goh Iromoto.

For over 40 years, the Museum of Anthropology has been located on the northwest corner of the UBC campus — perched on the cliffs of Point Grey, looking out into the Strait of Georgia. Thousands of UBC students and staff, locals and tourists visit MOA each year, and for most of us, it's hard to imagine the site without the museum. Yet the foundation of MOA's architecture was laid long before it was built in the mid-1970s, when this point was an important site for defence. Though that time has passed, a closer look at the museum and the surrounding grounds still reveals signs of this history.

The Musqueam people, whose unceded lands these remain, used this site for millennia as a lookout point. If enemies were spotted in the water, runners would be sent to alert other tribal members. With the advent of the First World War in 1914, the site — usurped in 1860 by the British as an admiralty reserve — was designated by the

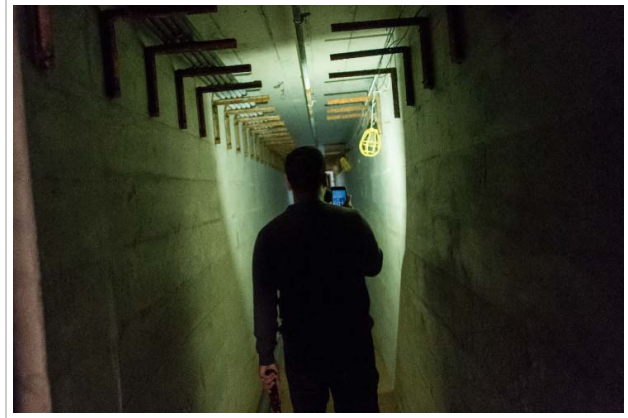
<https://www.ubc.ca/ubc-now/2018/if-these-walls-could-talk.html>

Canadian government as a “fortress area,” and two five-inch guns were installed. When the war ended in 1918, this improvised battery was dismantled.

Two decades later, war was declared against Nazi Germany. A more extensive army facility was built here to defend BC’s coastline from Japanese naval attack. Positioned in a 100-metre line along the hillside, three circular gun emplacements, with underground magazines and ammunition hoists, were built with reinforced concrete. MK7 guns were placed on top of the emplacements, and a subterranean tunnel system connected each of them.



Interior view of the underground magazine and ammunition hoist located below each gun emplacement. Photo by Paul Joseph.

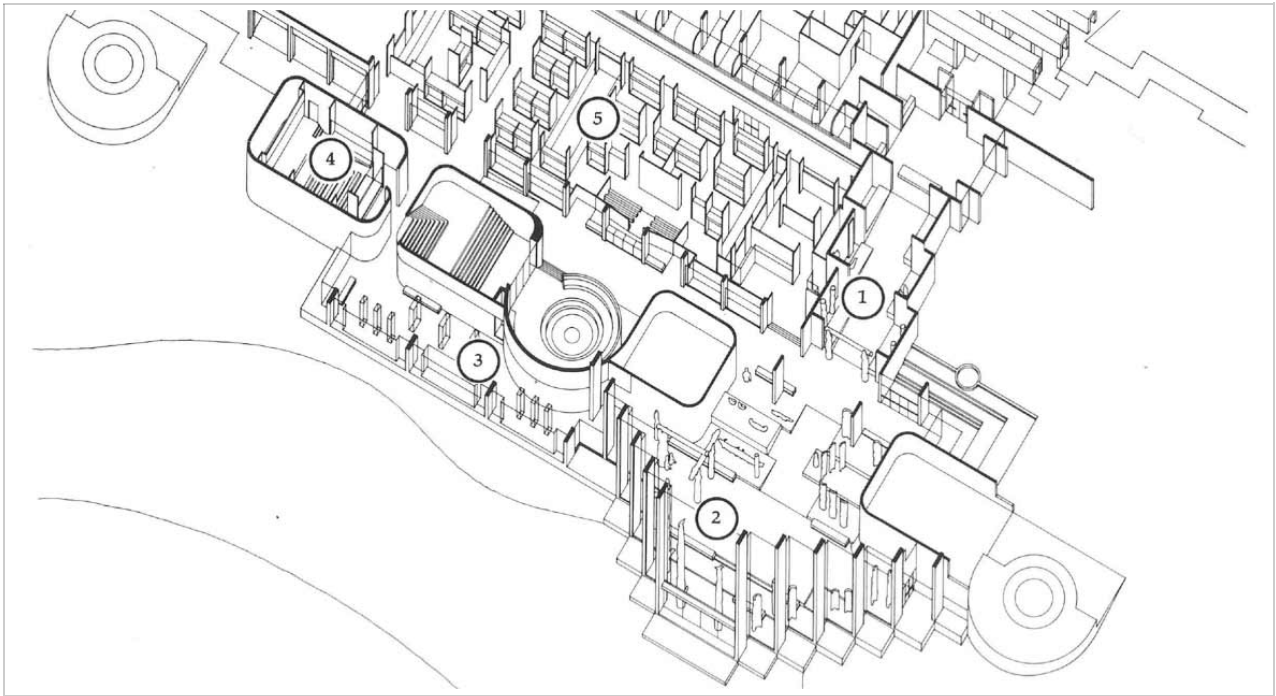


Exploring the tunnel system below the museum. Photo by Paul Joseph.

After the war, the facility was decommissioned. The point of land was not returned to the Musqueam but instead was taken over by the university and largely abandoned, save for a few trespassing students who hosted parties in the deserted tunnels.

It’s in this state that the site was designated for a further transformation. The world-renowned Canadian architect Arthur Erickson was selected in 1972 to design the new museum. According to architect Nick Milkovich, who worked for Erickson as a young graduate, “The way Arthur worked on all his projects was to walk in with an empty mind. No preconceptions. Just, ‘what’s there, what’s needed, and how do we address it?’ What was there was a sloping site and these three gun emplacements. So, let’s use them, play with them, see what we can do with them.”

Erickson built the museum on top of the emplacements and tunnels, incorporating them into the architecture. Today, visitors to the museum can see hints of the burster pads — the concrete domes built as protective outer layers around the emplacements — protruding at the bottom of the rounded walls inside MOA’s Great Hall. “We built a wall on top of the curvature of the burster pads. It was a little bit of a nod to the history, and it was functional. It was a way of showing what was once there,” explains Milkovich.



Isometric plan of MOA, circa 1976, showing the three circular gun emplacements — one on each side of the museum and one within it. Photo courtesy of Hopping, Kovach, Grinnell Design Consultants, Vancouver.

Erickson's decision, however, may have taken a different form if it wasn't for the research and passion of UBC professor emeritus of history, Peter Moogk, who helped to preserve the site's historical significance. On learning that Erickson's initial plan for the gun emplacements was to incorporate them as structural features in an Asian garden, Moogk felt it would be a disrespectful legacy for these relics of war. He launched a public relations campaign, writing letters to local papers to bring attention from a wider audience who might be sympathetic to preserving the gun emplacements as reminders of their role in military history.

There was also the matter of practicality. Whatever Erickson's initial intentions, it was simply too difficult and costly to remove the 15-metres-thick reinforced concrete. Erickson's creativity and resourcefulness brought an elegant solution.



Bill Reid's *The Raven and the First Men* is lowered through the skylight for installation on what was once gun emplacement number two. MOA Archives: William McLennan fonds, a043191. Photographer unknown, ca. 1980.

He would integrate one of the circular gun emplacements directly into the middle of the museum to serve as the site for Bill Reid's monumental work, *The Raven and the First Men* (1980). As Erickson recounted in 1999, "I suggested to Bill that he plan his work for the gun mount itself, and I would provide a round skylight over it, so that natural light would flood it — like the light of the forest."

Reflecting back, Moogk says, "I think it's rather ingenious the way Arthur Erickson decided — given that gun position number two was so solid and large — to incorporate it into the base for the Bill Reid sculpture."



Bill Reid's *The Raven and the First Men* (1980; MOA Collection: Nb1.481) installed where a MK7 gun was once positioned during the Second World War. Photo by Goh Iromoto.

Outside, on MOA's grounds — the same lands where the Musqueam people, and then soldiers of First and Second World Wars, once took their post — visitors can still see the exteriors of gun emplacements number one and three, flanking either side of the museum.

Arthur Erickson's architectural feat is all the more remarkable knowing that history has been built directly into its foundations. The site's buried past is hidden in plain view. On your next visit to MOA (<https://moa.ubc.ca/>), find the hints all around you.

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