

FAIRFIELD, Robert Calvin (1918 – 1994)

One of a post World War II generation of architects that sought a new approach to building and design, Robert Fairfield created many significant public buildings that helped shape southern Ontario to the modern ideal.

Robert Fairfield was born in St. Catharines, Ontario on July 31, 1918. Keenly observant of human nature and the world around him. Fairfield was blessed with a fertile imagination and a gift for drawing and writing. He channeled his energies in creative pursuits including what he termed “inventive drawing” sketches of ingenious machines. His elder brother, mindful of his sibling’s artistic talents, steered him away from engineering and into the realm of architecture at the University of Toronto.

In 1943, Fairfield graduated with honours and with the Toronto Architect’s Guild Gold Medal. He joined the Royal Navy and served in the Fleet Air Arm for the remainder of the war. Upon his return to Toronto in 1945, he co-established a practice that eventually evolved into Rounthwaite & Fairfield Architects. As a design partner, Fairfield was responsible for a number of schools, hospitals and senior citizen homes in Ontario.

The Festival Theatre in Stratford, Ontario, which won the firm the 1958 Massey Gold Medal, was Fairfield’s crowning achievement. The permanent theatre, preceded by a much-admired tent which Fairfield also designed, was significant in its elegant incorporation of the revolutionary thrust stage designed by Tanya Moiseiwitsch in collaboration with Tyrone Guthrie. The events leading to this commission were recorded in one of Fairfield’s legendary speeches presented at the 1984 Stratford Festival Annual Dinner of the board of governors and senate.

Fairfield entered into a new and prolific partnership with Macy Dubois in 1963. The firm received commissions for a number of buildings at several Ontario universities and won the Massey Silver Medal for the Central Technical School Art Centre in Toronto in 1964 and the Massey Medal for the Ceterg Office Building in Don Mills in 1967. The same year heralded Expo ’67 for which the firm designed pavilions for the Province of Ontario and the Brewers’ Association of Canada. Widespread recognition for Fairfield’s expertise in theatre design won him contracts for theatres in Alberta and the United States.

Despite the partnership’s success, Fairfield was uncomfortable with the economic social climate which, he felt, favoured the plans of developers and civil servants over the architect’s vision. A consummate wit and articulate writer, he was not known to shy away from a lively debate. His wry sense of humour concealed a concern for the desecration of the landscape by modern machinery and the loss of history through the demolition of buildings and the replacement of old road signs. He turned to the future represented by the next generation of architects, becoming a mentor to many young rising stars.

Fairfield retired from the partnership in 1975 but continued to work as a consultant on expansions to the Festival and Avon Theatres among other projects. He was the architectural contributor to *Early Stages: Theatre in Ontario, 1800-1914* published by University of Toronto Press in 1990. Time was more forthcoming to further his lifelong interest in wire sculpting, wood carving and landscape design until his death on August 30, 1994 at the age of 76.