

**Sisterhood of Temple Sholom,  
Women of Reform Judaism  
Vancouver, Canada**  
***Tour of the Landscape of the Museum of Anthropology by  
Dr. Corneila Oberlander on May 29, 2011***  
*By Violeta Moutal, VP, Programming*



**Group Tour: Grounds of the Museum of Anthropology, UBC**

The **Museum of Anthropology** offers a variety of guided tours for visitors seeking to experience its unique collection and facilities, led by trained guides, who learn facts and recite them confidently as they go. Yet, how often does one get to join a tour of the MoA landscape led by its own planner and designer, Order of Canada recipient **Cornelia Oberlander**?

Our May 29 visit was organized by the Sisterhood of Temple Sholom, Women of Reform Judaism. It brought together as many as 25 visitors, all of whom were treated to a one-of-a-kind tour around the museum's scenic perimeter, listening to Oberlander's commentary, filled with personal revelations, on the birth of one of Canada's most significant buildings.

MoA was designed by Canadian architect and urban planner **Arthur Erickson** (1924-2009), and opened its doors to the public in 1976. After appointing Oberlander as landscape architect and designer in 1971, Erickson followed her counsel to create a

traditional Northwest coast design, honouring the continuing spiritual power of aboriginal cultures, given that the museum was built on the traditional lands of the Musqueam people.

“It only took approximately 100 meetings to accomplish this goal,” Oberlander explained. “It was not an easy process, but, in retrospect, this building is my most rewarding and significant achievement.”

MoA has received numerous awards, including the Governor General Award for Architecture (1989), Canada’s top tourist attraction by the Canadian Tourism Commission (1983) and, in 2011, the museum was one of four buildings to receive the 2011 Prix du XXe Siècle award for enduring excellence in Canadian architecture from Architecture Canada-RAIC, the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada.

Oberlander’s design features indigenous plants – trees and grasses, a reflecting pool representing an imaginary coastal inlet, two outdoor Haida houses and 10 full-scale totem poles, all of which pay tribute to First Nations’ culture. The Discovery Path, dressed with indigenous trees and vegetation, intentionally separates the city from the forest, the noisy from the quiet and the mundane from the spiritual.

At the very heart of Oberlander’s design lies the conviction that we should build around nature, using whatever natural features a building site offers. All of her work reflects her love and respect for nature and the delicate balance between development and the environment, and is evidenced at MoA by her inclusion of natural water-drainage systems and other such features.

Oberlander is a long-standing member of Temple Shalom, and also a member of the sisterhood. She has lectured for the group in the past, given her expertise as a landscape architect and her philosophy, which is based on green designs and sustainable spaces. This philosophy comes as no surprise, as it stems from Oberlander’s strong Jewish faith, which considers protecting the environment a mitzvah.

Therein lies a commonality that draws indigenous cultures and Judaism together – the commandments given to protect the environment. These mitzvot instruct us to protect all of God’s creation, the totality of the physical world in which we live. They include *bal tashchit* (do not waste), *shiluach ha-ken* (chasing away the mother bird, so as to safeguard all species) and *shemittah* (the sabbatical year).

Oberlander’s current challenge is to come to terms with reduced maintenance budgets for MoA, as well as the planting of non-indigenous plants, which threaten the original vision and mission of the museum’s creators.

In Oberlander’s own words, “When you look up into the horizon, what lies before you is just one portion of what lies beyond you.”

As one of the visitors on her tour said, “Thank you, Cornelia. I will never look at this place in the same way again.”