



An artist's rendering of the proposed Robert Bateman Centre at Royal Roads University in Victoria.

OPINION

Bateman Centre the impetus for taking Royal Roads University off the grid

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Fortuitously, renowned artist and naturalist Robert Bateman's philosophy lines up almost perfectly with Royal Roads University's four pillars of interest.

Sustainability. Leadership. Entrepreneurialism. Conflict analysis and management that's focused on the belief that most of the world's conflicts – current and future – involve the environment, from water shortages to oil spills.

Bateman – a former high school geography and art teacher – has been a frequent speaker at Royal Roads.

He loves the mostly undeveloped 563-acre site and Hadley Castle, which was first home to coal and lumber baron James Dunsmuir, and later to a military college.

But Royal Roads also allows him to be in a community of fellow-travellers – not the least of whom is Peter Robinson, the chancellor, chairman of the university's board, head of the Suzuki Foundation, former CEO of Mountain Equipment Co-op and a former park ranger.

Four years ago, Bateman (who recently turned 80) and his wife, Birgit, donated \$11 million worth of artwork, archival material and money for what will become the Robert Bateman Centre, an art gallery/museum/conference space for art and environmental education.

"It's not a centre for studying Robert Bateman. I don't want



GLENN BAGLOY/PNG

Robert Bateman shares Royal Roads University's philosophy.

it to morph into an art school. ... Not everybody should be an artist, but everybody should be a naturalist," the artist said Wednesday. "I'm only part of the landscape."

It will be a "living building" with as small an environmental footprint as possible. It will be self-sufficient in water, but not in energy. Even with a solar-panelled roof, there's not enough sun to produce more than 20 per cent of the building's needs.

The architect is Richard Iredale, who beat out competition that included architectural superstar Frank Gehry, whose proposal Bateman says was essentially "give me a million dollars and I'll give you my plan."

Bateman wanted none of that. He doesn't have the final word, but Bateman clearly intends to be actively involved in the design. A strong-willed perfectionist, he was so involved with the construction of the Abbotsford secondary school that bears his name that Bateman placed rocks in the interior

waterfall fountain.

Fortunately for everyone, Bateman loves Iredale's design and describes Iredale as "a kindred spirit."

Part of what sold him on Iredale was how he answered Bateman's question that he put to all of the applicants (Gehry aside) when they were interviewed in the artist's Saltspring Island home.

Bateman asked how his art might inform their designs. Iredale took five minutes to describe all of the elements he'd liked when he'd walked from the front gate through the courtyard and then the front door.

The plan, which is still being tweaked, is to use all natural and mostly recycled materials. The timber, for example, will come from an old airplane hangar in Comox; the floors will be hardwood salvaged from South America.

But almost certainly, the construction will require taking down as many as 15 old-growth trees. There's a good chance that even this well-meaning and

environmentally aware group that sees trees are replanted and wetlands enhanced might be confronted by protesters.

If it does, well, Bateman is willing to take the flak because with self-sufficiency the goal for the building, the Bateman Centre became the impetus for a sustainability plan. That plan should result in the entire campus being off the electrical grid within the next decade, says Robinson.

In addition to the \$12 million for that building, Royal Roads is embarking on an ambitious, \$86.5-million plan that includes a \$60-million waste and energy recovery research centre.

When – and if – all three stages of that waste water and energy plant are completed, it will produce 15 times the energy the college needs and take a vast chunk of the city of Colwood off the grid as well (which seems only fair since Colwood's sewage and waste water will help fuel the plant.)

There's still a long way to go. Fundraising for the Bateman Centre is only about halfway to the \$11-million target. Then, there's finding money for the rest. But Robinson is confident that the money will come.

When it does, the university will not only teach about the environment and energy sustainability, it will lead by example.

It seems a fitting legacy for the teacher/artist/naturalist and a subtle commentary on how far British Columbia has come since coal was king and resource extractors rich enough to build castles in the wilderness.

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