

TechBC, the university in a mall.

Courtesy of Stantec Inc. and the Colborne Architectural Group.

# An Oral History of TechBC

## *Surrey Place Mall's Forgotten University*

By Holly Hendrigan

**O**n February 2nd, 1995, Premier Mike Harcourt announced the establishment of the new Technical University of British Columbia to be located in Surrey. By

July 1998, the final site decision was revealed: the Surrey community of Whalley, where a new development—Central City—would build out the down-market Surrey Place Mall, providing campus space and a tower. New faculty hires quickly developed an innovative curriculum which combined the disciplines of business, interactive art, and information technology, using online learning platforms whenever possible.

TechBC's first intake of students arrived in September 1999, years before the Central City development was complete. In the meantime,

TechBC's classes took place in mall storefronts, including a former Zellers location. This story of TechBC is told through the voices of its former students and other members of its community.<sup>1</sup>



"The Pool" open gathering place. Courtesy of Stantec Inc. and the Colborne Architectural Group.

## Choosing TechBC

Melanie Sia (student, Interactive Arts).

There weren't a lot of options for students to study something to do with computers but also something to do with arts. I had plans to become an animator or go into video game design or video game programming after high school, but at the time it wasn't a popular thing. Especially for girls. And when I heard it was in Surrey, I was like, "Oh my gosh! It's like right in the neighbourhood, or at least right in the Lower Mainland." I was absolutely thrilled.<sup>2</sup>



Melanie Sia (student, Interactive Arts).

## Going to school in Surrey



Oh gosh, I would say I would not walk there at night by myself, especially as a female. It was kind of sketchy. There were, gosh, how can I put this nicely? There were some questionable characters around the SkyTrain station, particularly at night. When you were driving down King George towards the school, you would see "ladies of the night." You would see people just standing there selling probably illegal substances.

Robin Johnson (student, Information Technology).

Jack Sam (student, Interactive Arts).



Coming in on the SkyTrain you saw lots of crack houses in terrible states of disrepair, garbage along sides of the streets of that and all the small ethnic stores that go with a poor neighborhood. Pawn shops along King George highway.<sup>4</sup>

At the time, Surrey was not a great place by reputation.<sup>3</sup>



## Early days in the Surrey Place Mall (1999-2002)

Tammy Mooney (student, Management and Technology).

Robin Johnson (student, Information Technology).



My husband used to tease me all the time and say, "Oh, you're going to school at the mall?"<sup>5</sup>

Surrey Central mall at the time was a dying mall. There were lots of empty spaces, particularly down in the TechBC area.



Melanie Sia (student, Interactive Arts).



I remember my mom just looked at me and she's like, "Inside the mall? Is it, like, a store?"

## TechBC campus—nicknamed “BetaSpace”

**Dianne Cyr** (*faculty, Management and Technology*).

The senior administrators at the University decided that they would make the campus look like an industry environment.<sup>6</sup>

**Jack Sam** (*student, Interactive Arts*).



In BetaSpace, you could still see the vinyl art from the electronics department from Zellers. It said “Nintendo” but it was painted over but if you looked carefully in the right light, you could still see the outline of the word.

**Robin Johnson** (*student, Information Technology*).



BetaSpace, beyond its origins as a converted Zellers store, really felt like a tech company circa 2001, with the crazy open plan and Herman Miller chairs and desks in most of the spaces. Classrooms built into the edges of it, with slightly cheaper Herman Miller chairs.

**Melanie Sia** (*student, Interactive Arts*).



When you entered the school, there was a big, wide open area, called the Pool. In the Pool was really funky furniture—unusual and unexpected furniture for a university. We’re talking fun colours—the carpets were different colours; the walls were painted different colours. It was not your traditional learning institution.

**Justin Liebrechts** (*student, Interactive Arts*).



I had no preconception of what university was like, except for maybe the movies. But this was totally different from the movies. Some of my friends went to UBC and I’d go there and it was a completely different vibe. I liked how small TechBC was. When we went to UBC there were so many people and you don’t know a lot of the people, but whenever I was at TechBC, I felt, “I’m going to know 90% of the people I’m seeing today.” Felt homey.<sup>7</sup>

**Adrian Chong** (*student, Interactive Arts*).



It was built in a way that was pretty conducive for us to learn—the campus was so open. We were there twenty-four hours a day. We would be there in the evening, sitting in bean bag chairs; we would watch a movie at night, while something was rendering. Those all night collaborative exercises helped people understand how to work in a team setting, how to work with different points of view, and how to create something better as a team than you could as an individual.<sup>8</sup>

## Open Concept

**Jack Sam** (*student, Interactive Arts*).



All the instructors sat in the middle of BetaSpace, so if you think of Zellers as a big rectangle, they sat right in the middle, in a bunch of cubicles. They didn’t have doors—you could walk up to them and talk to them. They were probably annoyed by the constant interruption but it gave me a lot of access.

## Community and Culture

**Mike Sollanych** (*student, Information Technology*).



There was also a kind of a pioneering spirit about the entire thing. That was the first place I had ever seen wireless networking.<sup>9</sup>

**Robin Johnson** (*student, Information Technology*).

On the student side, take the gamers-kids and the high performing nerds of high school, mix them together, add the creative elements that you would have run into in your art and drama classes of high school, and then a few on the fringe: business people with enough savvy to recognize that technology was going to become very important in the future and they shouldn't just go to business school.



**Melanie Sia** (*student, Interactive Arts*).



I guess I should mention the challenges of online courses at the time. There were many. The first one being dial-up internet. We didn't have high speed back then; I had dial-up for my first year before convincing my parents to pay more for faster internet... Another challenge was, my family had only two computers for a family of five. I had to share my computer with my siblings and we somehow split up the time on the computer equally. There was none of this: "Everyone has their own PC or phone or tablet."

When these interdisciplinary projects happened, all of a sudden we had to learn not only how to put this project together—we had to learn how to work with these people. And that sounds like a bad thing, but in the end, it was probably one of the most beneficial things that the school taught me.

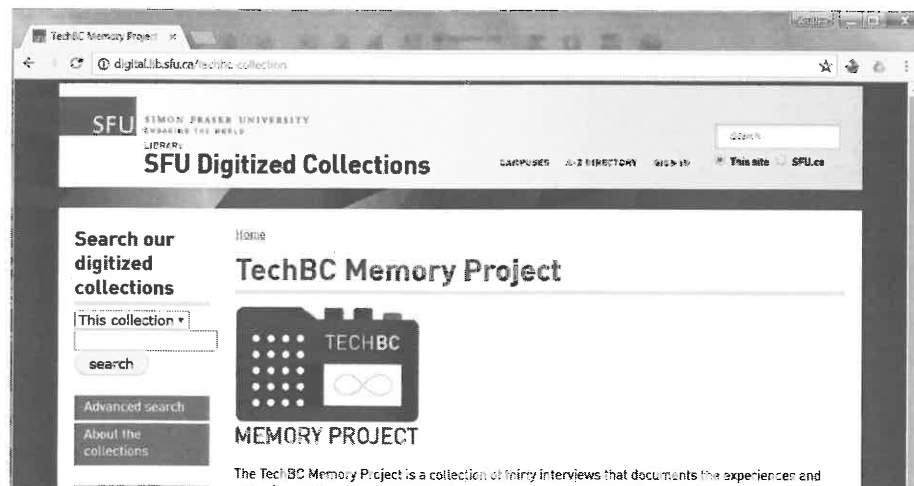
## Classes: Interdisciplinary, Online

**Tammy Mooney** (*student, Management and Technology*).

It was funny because you've got these IT geeks mixing with these graphic "artsy fartsies," hanging out together. Business students were crammed in the middle.



When the BC Liberals won the May 2001 election, however, they began voicing concerns about TechBC's high expenditure per student ratio, missed private fundraising targets, and the cost of the Central City development (then halfway through construction.) On February 7th, 2002, they announced that they were closing TechBC and its students and facility would be transferred to Simon Fraser University.



Explore the TechBC Memory Project on the SFU Library website.

## TechBC's period of uncertainty (late 2001/early 2002)

**Adrian Chong** (student, Interactive Arts).



But I feel like it was weeks, maybe—I don't know, it probably was months—but in my mind it's like this time compressed time where everybody was in this malaise and a lot of things didn't happen. Everything was in a bit of a holding pattern.

**Justin Liebrechts** (student, Interactive Arts).



I'm just out of high school, I didn't really have a good understanding of business and especially institutions and government. I think I was a bit naive: "Oh, you know! It'll be fine!"

**Jane Fee** (Associate Vice President):

We began to hear rumours that the government was going out with an RFI (a Request For Interest) to other institutions in the province to see if they were interested in acquiring something. We heard rumours it was us; we heard rumours it was the Open Learning Agency; we heard rumours it was the University of Northern British Columbia, which was relatively new at the time. There were all sorts of rumours. It was probably not until mid-November that we actually had clarification from the Ministry about what was going on. At that point, they did tell us that they were considering other options for TechBC.<sup>10</sup>

I remember sitting in the Pool, which was the lobby of Beta Space. A lot of people were bummed out not knowing. That was around the second module of the second term of our first year. A lot of people were like, "What's the point of this? Do we even continue caring about the courses?" .... And some of my friends did leave and they didn't come back.

**Justin Liebrechts** (student, Interactive Arts).



I liked saying "I go to TechBC": that was cool. I didn't know if I liked the idea of saying "Hi, I'm an SFU student"—that comes with a lot of preconceptions from people who already think they know about it.

## Closure announcement (February 2002)

**Jack Sam** (student, Interactive Arts).



A lot of friends were quite happy about it because SFU is a reputable institution...It didn't make me feel good; it could have been any school and it wouldn't have made me feel great. Instructors I liked were leaving, or they would have to go through interviews to be rehired.

**Mike Sollanych** (student, Information Technology).



When SFU stepped in to take over, that was seen as a "saviour" sort of thing. But at the same time, it seemed that it was going to be a stuffy culture coming in, that wasn't going to respect the innovation and change that was taking place down there. (Which may or may not have ended up being the case overall.) When I looked at the individual SFU courses, they weren't what I wanted to take. I said, "I don't want to do this. I don't want to go to SFU. I don't want to end up taking any classes up the hill. This doesn't appeal to me at all." So I just took a year off and then went to BCIT instead.

## Transition to SFU (late 2002-2006)

**Jack Sam** (student, *Interactive Arts*).



And, I think ultimately, there were benefits to it, but there was a lot of friction and clash throughout the years. We'd get all these emails, updates about SFU, virtually none of it was applicable to us. It was all about Burnaby and a smaller part of downtown and I'd just treat it all as spam. We were the poor cousin.

**Melanie Sia** (student, *Interactive Arts*).



After TechBC got absorbed into SFU, our spirits were a little dampened. We thought, "They're not going to respect the pre-existing culture that we have established in TechBC. They're going to want to change the IA program and make it, maybe an Applied Arts program instead." But fortunately none of those things really changed too much. I think the only thing that really did change was our lack of identity. People in my cohort all entered thinking "Oh yeah, we're TechBC students!" and then when it got absorbed into SFU, it's like, "Oh, okay, well I guess we're SFU students now. Woohoo, oh boy."

**Tammy Mooney** (student, *Management and Technology*).



I was so exhausted. The Business students moved to the Burnaby campus—we were taken away. And then I was told I had to do an extra semester, extra classes. They did do quite a good job of transitioning, the best they could for us. But here we were: this really tight group, used to doing all these interactive programs, having to adjust to a different philosophy.

Twelve years after the closure of TechBC, Holly Hendrigan began collecting oral histories from the former staff and students of TechBC. The result? The TechBC Memory Project, a digital collection of fully indexed, summarized, and transcribed interviews that are publicly available through the SFU Library website. This venture in digital humanities maintains the "orality" of the conversations by using an application that allows users to navigate to specific points in the

audio file. Browse the project at <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/techbc-collection> ■



Holly Hendrigan is the librarian for the Faculty of Applied Sciences at Simon Fraser University. She is the author of the article "Neoliberalism and institutionalism in the short life of TechBC" in *Historical Studies in Education* and has presented widely on the intersection of librarians and oral history. She lives in east Vancouver.

### Endnotes

1. These excerpts were lightly edited from transcripts of the TechBC Memory Project, SFU Digitized Collections, 2016, <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/techbc-collection>.
2. Melanie Sia, interview by Holly Hendrigan, December 3, 2014, TechBC Memory Project, Simon Fraser University, <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/islandora/object/techbc%3A86/transcript>.
3. Jack Sam, interview by Holly Hendrigan, November 24, 2014, TechBC Memory Project, Simon Fraser University, <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/islandora/object/techbc%3A74/transcript>.
4. Robin Johnson, interview by Holly Hendrigan, July 13, 2015, TechBC Memory Project, Simon Fraser University, <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/islandora/object/techbc%3A78/transcript>.
5. Tammy Mooney, interview by Holly Hendrigan, March 22, 2015, TechBC Memory Project, Simon Fraser University, <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/islandora/object/techbc%3A72/transcript>.
6. Dianne Cyr, interview by Holly Hendrigan, November 26, 2014, TechBC Memory Project, Simon Fraser University, <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/islandora/object/techbc%3A71/transcript>.
7. Justin Liebrechts, interview by Holly Hendrigan, April 1, 2015, TechBC Memory Project, Simon Fraser University, <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/islandora/object/techbc%3A85/transcript>.
8. Adrian Chong, interview by Holly Hendrigan, November 28, 2014, TechBC Memory Project, Simon Fraser University, <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/islandora/object/techbc%3A77/transcript>.
9. Mike Sollanych, interview by Holly Hendrigan, March 19, 2015, TechBC Memory Project, Simon Fraser University, <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/islandora/object/techbc%3A83/transcript>.
10. Jane Fee, interview by Holly Hendrigan, December 18, 2014, TechBC Memory Project, Simon Fraser University, <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/islandora/object/techbc%3A84/transcript>.

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