



Vancouver skyline circa 1966



Martin Knowles Photo / Media

OPEN VANCOUVER

mid-century modern

...for further reading on **modernist architecture** check out these books in our reading room:

Bergdoll, B and Christensen, P. **Home Delivery: Fabricating the Modern Dwelling**. New York: MoMA, 2008

Erickson, Arthur. **The Architecture of Arthur Erickson**. Montreal: Tundra Books, 1975

Gössel, Leuthäuser et al. **Architecture in the 20th Century**. Köln: Taschen, 2005

Hollingsworth, Fred. **Living Spaces: The Architecture of Fred Thornton Hollingsworth**. Italy: Blueprint, 2005

Liscombe, Rhodri W. **The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938 -1963**. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1997

Shadbolt, Douglas. **Ron Thom: The Shaping of an Architect**. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1995



Vancouver Heritage Foundation
402 - 510 West Hastings Street
Vancouver, BC V6B 1L8

tel 604.264.9642
fax 604.264.9643
mail@vancouverheritagefoundation.org

www.vancouverheritagefoundation.org

Mid-Century Modernism in Vancouver

...an aesthetic of *openness, efficiency,*
and *clear, purposeful design...*

In the mid 1920's, as the post-war economy improved, the new utopia began to take shape. Avant-garde, Modernist design moved from little-seen exhibitions or small-circulation magazines to a much wider audience.

Designers now had official positions as city architects or organizers of large international exhibitions. This gave them a stage on which to promote the 'New', and to do so in ways that proclaimed the unity and internationalism of the arts. The New Architecture, the New Dwelling, the New Photography, the New Typography were all terms used during the period.

Underpinning this movement towards the New was the idea of the 'New Spirit', one that reflected new social and economic relations, as well as new technology. This, so designers hoped, would seize the imagination of everyone and fundamentally transform the way people lived.

Between 1938 and 1963, Vancouver became a centre for the interpretation of Modernist architectural theory and practice. Being a small city in a superb setting with a temperate climate, Vancouver attracted young architects in search of a community open to new ideas. Many were influenced directly by the designers and institutions that initiated the modernist movement: Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Walter Gropius. Vancouver's movement towards an aesthetic of openness, efficiency, and clear, purposeful design serves as a reminder of the central tenet of Modernism - that intelligent design is a critical element in the achievement of vital social goals. Intelligent design is more relevant and necessary today than ever before.

Adapted from Liscombe, Rhodri W. **The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938 -1963** Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1997

1. Oberlander Residence

Architects: Peter Oberlander and Barry Downs, 1970
Landscape Architect: Cornelia Hahn Oberlander

On entering the property by foot, one passes through an arch in the high hemlock hedge and under the canopy of a pink dogwood tree. Exposed aggregate concrete pavers on a slight incline guide the visitor in a spaced rhythm over a gravel-filled moat to the entrance of the house. The Entry Garden is predominately an evergreen space with pots of seasonal flowers giving it colour. Four steps off the Entry Garden bring the visitor into an enclosed sunken space.

The house which is built on the edge of a deep, well-treed ravine has its major spaces oriented to the foliage of the ravine. The house is wood-framed throughout with plywood-box beams and piers, faced with flush cedar siding. The house rests on piers placed to accommodate structural and internal plan configurations. Long stepped horizontals are placed to relate to street and site levels.

The house is only 29 feet from the front property line, and a sense of enclosure is achieved by a berm planted with tall pines and a hemlock hedge. The house is inserted into the forest like a floating bridge thus the house does not interrupt the forest. Large windows allow for a visual relationship to the existing forest landscape. Originally used for trampolining and playing on a lawn by the children, today the small secluded garden accessed by a wooden ramp is not mowed, is full of moss, and has a paved sitting area. This is an example of a garden of the future.

As land becomes scarce, solutions must be found to allow the area fronting the street to become our garden rather than a high maintenance front lawn. Additionally, this garden does not connect into the storm sewer; drainage is on the site. These solutions, through thirty years old, point us towards the future.



residential tour 2009

Stuart Residence, photo by Stewart McCall/North Light Images



Photo: Nic Lehoux

2. The Courtyard Residence

Architects: Robert McKee, 1956, Nick Milkovich, 2007
Landscape Architect: Cornelia Hahn Oberlander

This mid-century modern house, sited on a ¾ acre property overlooking the ocean and mountains, was originally built in 1956 for Stanley Waroway. When the current owner purchased the house in 2002 it was largely untouched.

The original house was designed as a sixty foot square single storey plate centered by an open square glazed courtyard. The north wall, with sixty feet of floor to ceiling glazing, opened the house to the views and provided the main connection to the immediate site. Its structure was steel and douglas fir with cedar siding.

A 2007 renovation to the house focused on drainage improvement, electrical upgrades, insulation issues and creating additional space. The renovation provided new office studio space, new bedrooms, and a guest suite, with intention to preserve the scale and light qualities of the original building and increase the experience of the large site. The house was to also exhibit a growing modern art collection. The reconstruction left the north wall of glazing and the glass courtyard untouched.

The west and east wings of the house were extended to the south yard. A reflecting pool between the two wings, spilling out of the new landscape, became part of a strong axial composition connecting the living spaces, the inner courtyard, the swimming pool, and the ocean and mountains to the north.

The landscape collaboration between Landscape Architect, Cornelia Oberlander, and the owners resulted in a simple, elegant re-sculpting of the landscape. All fill was re-used on the site. Mature vegetation from the 50-year-old garden was re-used, one tree was removed and six trees were added. The original asphalt parking spaces and long horseshoe drive way were removed, recycled for highway construction and replaced with a shorter permeable surface driveway and carport. The roof was reinforced to hold a potential green roof and solar panels. Both the south water feature and the swimming pool use salt-water chlorination systems.



Martin Knowles Photo / Media

3. Fitterman Residence

Architect: Daniel Evan White, 1987
Landscape Architect: William Reed

The full-height wood pivoting front door set flush with matching side panels shields the discrete beauty of this waterfront house from busy Point Grey Road. Such a statement at the front door is characteristic of the residential work of Daniel Evan White. From the 1970's through recent years, White's work exemplified the late modernist period of residential architecture. This house shows many of the characteristics of his extensive body of work.

From the road, the house is a composition of planar massing and minimal detailing, all clad in tight joint cedar boards and revealing nothing of the spacious and light filled open interior. The northern view out over English Bay is viewed through expansive glass walls and structural glass handrails. The kitchen occupies a key spot in the open plan and interconnected living spaces. A dramatic custom fabricated steel spiral staircase, welded and spray-painted on-site, links the upper and lower levels, and is a central feature of the design. Skylights are integral features in the architecture, as is a rigorous palette of materials: granite, stainless steel, glass, and wood.

Built for the couple that still occupy the house, it has been meticulously maintained. The furnishings and interior design by Robert Ledingham, intended to seamlessly integrate with the architectural design, were custom designed for the house. The interior showcases the owner's important collection of west coast modern art.

Outside, the modernist design extends in the autocourt, entry courtyard and terraces designed by landscape architect William Reed who specified a restricted palette of clipped cedar hedges, mass planting of roses and Asian-influenced sculptural pines to echo the home's minimalist aesthetic.

The house has been featured in Western Living, and Canadian House and Home. Daniel Evan White studied architecture at UBC under Arthur Erickson, and has worked with Ian Davidson and Erickson Massey. Some of his notable commissions have been in collaboration with Robert Ledingham and William Reed.

Text by Robert Lemon



Photo courtesy of Patkau Architects

4. Point Grey Residence

Patkau Architects, 2000

This Point Grey Road house is located on a narrow waterfront property on the south shore of English Bay. Views from the site stretch across the bay to encompass the skyline of downtown Vancouver and beyond to the North Shore mountains. The house is organized with living spaces at grade and a music room below. A single bedroom, study, and lap pool are above grade. The pool, with terraces at each end, runs along the entire west side of the house.

Because the house is so narrow, spatial expansion is possible only outward over the water and upward. Generous ceiling heights enlarge spaces; a clerestory above the lap pool transmits daylight and dappled, reflected light deep into the central spaces, including the dining room, which rises from the ground level to the upper level of the house. The entrance is directly under the pool, midway along the side of the house. An almost magical aqueous light is transmitted to the entrance area through the water and glass bottom of the pool.

Like many cities on the West Coast, Vancouver is in an area of high seismic risk. A robust structure is required to resist the significant lateral forces that would result from the large mass of water in the pool in the event of an earthquake, thus the house is constructed almost entirely of reinforced concrete. A special dense mix utilizing white cement keeps the structure looking bright during frequent rainy weather. Inside this concrete shell, the house is insulated and clad with gypsum board. In areas where insulation is not required, the concrete structure is exposed. Muted materials and colors – white painted walls, pale concrete floors, precast stair treads, and bleached millwork – allow natural light, even the soft light of winter, to describe the interior.

Reprinted from: **Patkau Architects** New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., 2006



Photo courtesy of Robert Lemon

5. Barber Residence

Architects: Ross Lort, 1936, Robert Lemon, 1990
Landscape Architect: William Reed, 1990

The Art Moderne-style Horace G. and Elza Barber House is one of Vancouver's most distinctive and visible pieces of early modern architecture. Built at the end of the Art Deco period and foreshadowing the tenets of the Modern Movement, the house embodies many interesting design features. It owes a nod to the Art Moderne work of Rob Mallet-Stevens in France at the same time. Vancouver City Hall, another Art Moderne landmark, was built in the same year.

The exterior's board-formed concrete was poured around a skeleton of vertical steel columns - actual railroad rails - on a rigorous 4 foot wide grid. The scalloped wooden backing of the inner formwork was discovered during the rehabilitation and its curved shape expressed in refinishing one of the living room walls. Within this structural grid, the punched windows are grouped in bands to accentuate the cubic nature of the design. Most are the original single-glazed wood frame sash and glass. Subtle details in the concrete exterior included notched corners rounded balcony and canoly edges and a distinctive panel of chevron patterned concrete, now covered in aluminum leaf, above the front door.

The interiors were updated in 1990 by interior designer Robert M. Ledingham, leaving the living room in its original second floor position with its panoramic view and red-railed balcony. A palette of 1930's era materials - Avodire wood veneers, mirror, polished plaster, parchment, aluminum leaf, goat skin and lacquer - were selected for the interior and rendered in a contemporary manner. Most furnishings, including the living room sofa, library desk and dining table were custom designed for the house. Bedrooms were moved downstairs and the balance of the upper floor opened for an interconnected dining and kitchen area. Original light fixtures, door hardware and fireplace details were all retained. Glass artist Lutz Haufschild designed the trio of side yard windows.

In 1990, the Barber House was designated as a heritage building, and in 1991 received a City of Vancouver Heritage Award.

Text by Robert Lemon