

# mid-century modern

## residential tour 2012

### ... modernism in Vancouver

In post-war Vancouver, a small city literally "on the margin," the temperate climate, superb scenery, and irregular and sloping building lots stimulated experiment with the idiom of Modernist domestic architecture. The unique geographical setting of the city, and Vancouver's relatively distinctive socio-political character during its first phase of post-war expansion, made it an excellent place in which to examine the localization of diverse strands of "International Modernism". The renown of local progressive designs inspired the popular term "West Coast Style," an epithet that obscures its transatlantic sources.

Vancouver had no entrenched architectural, cultural, or even social establishment. It looked less to the east than southward to Seattle, Portland, and the San Francisco Bay region (the regular objective of field trips organized by the architectural faculty of UBC by the early 1960's). This independence was recognized by Frederic Lasserre, head of the new Department of Architecture at UBC in 1946. "BC is developing its own new architecture with the help of all new technical developments and ideas."

Modernist regionalism in Vancouver responded directly and imaginatively to the omnipresent landscape and weather: the dense, lush and majestic Northwest Coast forest fringing the constantly changing waters of the Strait of Georgia, the high rainfall, the remarkably luminous grey light – all encompassed by the sublime profile of the Coast Mountains. The implementation of Modernist thought and design was brought about by a relatively small if vigorous group of professionals and citizens that exerted a remarkably broad influence on local society from the mid 1940's through the 1950's.

By 1960 the cityscape was dominated by CBK Van Norman's pragmatically Rationalist Burrard Building (1952-7) and by Thompson Berwick Pratt's elegant BC Electric building (1957). The period between Vancouver's first, experimental Modernist houses of 1937-38 and the design competition for Simon Fraser University of 1962-63 witnessed the triumph of Modernism among institutional, corporate, and private patrons. Vancouver nurtured what the Vancouver Province in January 1953 called "a growing creative spirit (that yielded) a new Renaissance of building." The city attracted architects in search of something new – new experiences, and a new manner of living.

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

### About the VHF

[www.vancouverheritagefoundation.org](http://www.vancouverheritagefoundation.org)

The Vancouver Heritage Foundation is a registered charity committed to the conservation of Vancouver's heritage buildings. Creating new life for the city's older buildings is important in sustaining the culture, economy and environmental well-being of our city. When a historic building is demolished we lose the connection to our past, and we add tons of debris to our landfill. Through education, public awareness and granting activities, the VHF is helping to create a city that repairs and reuses its older buildings.



The BC Electric Building a year after completion in 1958

### Mid-century modernism

After WWII there was a building frenzy and the extreme of post-war building was the assembly-line style form of construction going on in California. In a single LA suburb, up to 100 houses were completed in a day. The results were dreary, uninspired houses repeated ad nauseum in boring rows without beginning or end.

At the same time plans by a young generation of architects, who saw architecture as a social responsibility and an essential element of modern, democratic urbanism, lay idle on drawing-boards. Their designs had less to do with the normative urban Utopias of the thirties than with comprehensible model solutions. Their inspiration was not Le Corbusier or Frank Lloyd Wright, but examples such as Mies van der Rohe's apartment house in the Stuttgart WeiBenhof Estate – steel-frame construction with flexible plans, the open apartment on a generous scale.

In 1945 John Enterza, publisher of *arts & architecture* magazine, set up the 'Case Study House Program' and commissioned eight design prototypes by promising architects meant to be advertised and made available to an interested public. After 3 years, six detached houses had been completed and viewed by 370,000 curious visitors.

The first steel-frame construction to be built within the Case Study Program was the house by designers Ray and Charles Eames in the Santa Monica Canyon. Using elements from the industrial sector for the construction was not in itself unusual, but to show them openly and thereby to achieve elegance was new.

Case Study architects Craig Ellwood, Pierre Koenig and Richard Neutra managed to find sponsors and commissions. Neutra in particular developed a new, much-imitated type in his villa designs with extensive glazing, striking sun reflectors and effectively-positioned mirror walls that produced subtle mixtures of interior and nature. Entrances were unassuming and often hidden, but once inside you looked across the interior to the glass walls on the opposite side and into the landscape. Anything fashionable was taboo since only in this way could real art be produced in architecture with a social conscience.

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



Martin Knowles Photo/Media

### 5. Pearson Residence

Architect: Robert McKee  
Owner/Builder B Bjornson  
Built: 1951

This is a rare Vancouver example of a butterfly roof house. Shaped like a butterfly's wings, a butterfly roof dips down in the middle and slopes upward at each end. The butterfly form stretches east to west and is not as exaggerated as it is in some American examples, nor is it very visible within the dense, mature garden. Standing in the lane the form is more easily visible.

The two sides of the butterfly form separate the main living area from the bedroom area. The two sides also delineate the sides of the hot water radiant heating system, with the bedrooms heated with coils in the ceiling and the living area heated with coils in the floor. This was expected to increase the heat circulation, however the current owners report this is not the case.

The home remains largely as it was originally built more than 60 years ago, with the exception of a small addition added in 1976 to the south of the carport. Like many houses of this era, the repair and maintenance needed to refinish the terrazzo floors, keep out the water and update the mechanical systems is beyond the capacity of the owners. Water ingress is a particular challenge and evidence of it can be seen especially in the office to the left of the entrance way.

#### About the Architect...

Robert McKee began his local practice in the late 1930s in the office of CBK Van Norman where the focus was on generating clean-lined interpretations of Cape Cod cottages. When he opened his own practice following WWII, McKee's designs mixed the Populuxe style of the 1950s and 1960s using bright colors, forms and textures to evoke a sense of luxury, with European Modernism's new construction methods and clean-lined designs focused on functionality. His projects included: Woroway Residence, UBC (1956); Ross House, Coquitlam (1950); SuperValu Store, 49th and Victoria Drive (1960) now Value Village; and Granville Chapel, 43rd and Granville Street (1950).

### The Vancouver Heritage Foundation

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## 1. McCulloch Residence

Architects: Chart & Pat McCulloch  
Built: 1979

Built in 1979 for their own family, the design team of Chart & Pat McCulloch designed this project as a modular four bedroom 4500 square foot home that wraps around the swimming pool. Typical of many homes of the era, the street view is horizontal cedar siding, garage door and a 'tucked away' front door giving the impression of the house turning its back to the public. Inside, the rooms focus on views to the garden and pool, fusing the relationship between the interior and the outdoors.

Few changes to the home have occurred over the last three decades despite there having been multiple owners. Each family has respected the original design of the house leaving in place the polished aggregate stone floors, the swimming pool, the blue-grey tint to the interior wood stain which so beautifully reflects the pool, the in-floor radiant heat, and most importantly, the original floor plan.

Alterations to the home have included a renovation to the master bathroom and the kitchen which was done by the McCullochs, and the transition of the original potting studio off the garage into an office. One interesting feature no longer present was the original glass pool roof designed to retract into the ceiling of the kitchen using a garage door opener. This has been replaced with a stationary glass roof. The mural on the wall of the pool is not original to the house, but has been carefully repainted in muted shades by the current owner.



## 2. Quaglio Residence

Architect: Min-Fong Yip  
Built: 1974

With only two owners, this 4,000+ sq. ft., split-level house remains largely intact. The current owners bought it six years ago and have made very few changes. A wall was removed between the dining room and the entrance hall, and some of the rosewood panelling in the living room was removed. The panelling remains on either side of the original fireplace. There was shag carpet throughout the main living areas and this has been replaced with African hardwood flooring. The original owners had updated the kitchen a decade ago and this renovation remains. The covered sunroom – greenhouse originally housed the first owners' orchid collection, however it now provides a private place to enjoy the sun.

The new owner has put her personal stamp on areas of the house such as the master bedroom which although still the original space, has been reworked to include a large bathroom and closet. The hot pink area rug in the living room is a piece of the original shag carpet that was removed from the bedroom. The party room, complete with a black vinyl padded and orange arborite bar remains completely intact and is used as a practice room for the family of dancers.

On the staircase and upstairs hall the original carpet and wallpaper remain, as do the original red plexiglass hanging lights in the staircase hall. The white metal spindles attached to a wood railing on the staircase are believed to be original.

On the exterior, the vertical channel siding remains as does the largely concrete back yard which gives the teenagers in the house a place to skateboard..



## 3. Ledingham/Wiens Residence

Architects: Sharp & Thompson, Berwick, Pratt  
Built: 1954

This 3,500 sq. ft. house has all the hallmarks of classic mid-century modern design including long low lines, wide overhands, an open plan with a central stone fireplace, hand-hewn heated slate floors, solid mahogany wall panels and full length glass revealing the park like setting including a koi pond framing the rear of the house. On top of this, the house is well cared for and furnished with many mid-century iconic designs making it a treat to tour. Architect Clifford Wiens designed a renovation in 2007.

Over the years the VHF has opened a number of homes designed by the renowned team of Sharp & Thompson, Berwick, Pratt. We often know from the building permits or the original owner which specific architect within the firm did the design. In the case of this house however, we know from the original building permit only that it was the firm of Sharp & Thompson, Berwick, Pratt.

About the architects...

In 1908 George Sharp came to Vancouver from England, and formed the architectural firm of Sharp & Thompson with Charles Joseph Thompson, who from 1906-08 was the chief architect for the CPR. In 1912 Sharp & Thompson won the competition to design the UBC Point Grey Campus and remained the university's official architects until the 1950s. The firm designed such major buildings as the B.C. Electric Building, and over the years played an important role in the development of the built environment in Greater Vancouver designing residential, commercial and institutional buildings. The company changed its name to Sharp & Thompson, Berwick, Pratt in 1945, when two new partners joined. When Sharp resigned in 1955 the name was changed again to Thompson, Berwick & Pratt. The firm was re-organized and re-named Hemingway Nelson Architects in 1990.



## 4. Works-Baker Residence

Architect: Ron Thom  
Built: 1951

The 2,216 sq. ft. four-split-level house is a signature Ron Thom post and beam design. It features the original grey brick fireplace with a raised hearth & brass trim, and cedar ceilings constructed with 3" tongue & groove cedar. The original shag carpet in the living areas has been replaced with ceramic tile. The dark stained wood window trim has been replaced with natural wood, while the original dark stain is retained on the exterior.

Constructed in 1951, the original house was 1½ storeys. It was expanded in 1981 using Thom, who was working in Toronto as the Thom Partnership, to design a family room where the entrance had been, create a new entrance and storage on the main floor, and to add a third level master bedroom suite which pops up above the original roof line. Window details and ceilings in the upstairs addition were matched to the original design. Modest changes to the kitchen in the 1990's saw the installation of new cabinets that matched Thom's design and the removal of upper cabinets between the kitchen and the living area.

The house continues to be loved and appreciated, but it is time to sell. As with many mid-20th century homes, the development potential of the lot exceeds the perceived value of this Ron Thom designed home, and despite all efforts, there is no certainty that the house will be retained once it is sold.

About the architect...

Known for larger projects completed as a partner with Thompson, Berwick, Pratt, Ron Thom designed more than 40 houses in Vancouver during the 1950's and 60's.

While at the Vancouver School of Art in the early 1940's, Thom was inspired by his teacher B.C. Binning's architectural design course. After a short stint as a graphic designer, Thom began an apprenticeship with architect Ned Pratt. Beginning with home designs for himself and for friends, by the mid-1950's Thom was designing large structures such as the BC Electric tower now converted into 'The Electra' condominiums at Burrard and Nelson. Thom finished his career in Toronto where he passed away in 1986.