VANCOUVER ARCHITECTURE IN 1960: THE CASE OF RON THOM

> "Yet it was the so-called Vancouver School, remote from those eastern centres of power, that first caught the country's eye as a distinctively Canadian modern style. In the 1950s a combination of opportunity, climate, and talent produced on the West Coast the fortunate circumstance for the emergence of a body of regional architecture of a consistently original character."

> "When, in 1961, Ron Thom moved from Vancouver to Toronto to carry out the winning scheme for Massey College, the three main centres of Canadian Modernism were cross-referenced."

> "The Vancouver environment was changing rapidly under the impact of the post-war building boom—seldom for the best. Among the many ugly office and commercial downtown developments, certain projects shone out as exceptions. One of these was the British Columbia Electric head office building, designed by Thompson Berwick Pratt and completed in 1957 .... it was an attempt to find an urban idiom for the West Coast that was regional as well as Modern. It was an early curtain-wall tower with a delicately articulated grid of metal that took account of the city's cloudy skies and moody climate."

These three short passages are taken from a volume entitled *Modern Canadian Architecture*. The first two are taken from the introduction to the book written by the editor, Leon Whiteson. The last, referring to the design of the B.C. Electric building, is from an essay "Modern Architecture on the West Coast" by the late Vancouver architect Ron Thom (1923-86).[1]

These excerpts offer a good starting point for a discussion of the history of the Modern Movement in Vancouver. Collectively, they propose and represent two important views. The first is that the ideas of the Modern Movement took hold and developed on the West Coast earlier and more vigorously than anywhere else in Canada. The second is that when they did so they produced an architecture that was both modern and strongly regional in character. It was, one might say, "an early and important regional variant" of international modernism.[2]

In the historiographical context of Canadian and Vancouver architecture one does not have to look very far to realize that this interpretation is not new. It has been around since at least the 1960s, and remains common today.[3] One could say it represents the main line, the approach that every historian or critic inevitably keeps in mind when considering the architecture of British Columbia. Still, despite the overall conventionality of the ideas contained in these passages, they raise several interesting points. The first is the idea, suggested by Whiteson, that by the early 1960s West Coast modernism, in the guise of Ron Thom's design for Massey College, had begun to merge with alternate strains of modernism developed in central Canada. The second is the fact that Thom himself, in writing about modern architecture on the West Coast, subscribed to the idea that West Coast architects during the 1950s were interested in finding what he called an idiom that "was regional as well as modern."[4]

By Kelly Crossman

Figure 1. D.H. Copp house, 4755 Belmont Street, Vancouver, B.C.; Ron Thom, architect (for Sharp & Thompson, Berwick, Pratt), 1950-51. (B. Shim/ H. Sutcliffe, 1995)

Following the line of thinking raised by these points and seeing where they lead (hence the title "Vancouver Architecture in 1960: The Case of Ron Thom") suggests considering two things: the first is the identification by Thom and others of Vancouver modernism as essentially or at least notably regionalist. Given Thom's autobiographical willingness to talk about Vancouver architecture in terms of "regionalism," as well as the continuing acceptance of this idea as a leitmotif in the understanding of the architecture of the West Coast, it is worth asking if historians should look at this idea a little more closely. The second point is the relationship of Vancouver modernism to that of the rest of Canada, round about 1960. Taking Whiteson's point, can a consideration of Massey College help us find new ways to think about the architecture not just of Vancouver and Thom, but of Canada in general?

If one investigates carefully the emergence of a "particularly West Coast approach" to house design in the immediate postwar era (as, for example, Sherry McKay has done), one is immediately struck by the fact that it was more or less born "full grown."[6] Put another way, it does not seem that Vancouver architects designed houses through the 1940s and 1950s, only to discover in the 1960s that they had somehow evolved a distinctive local architecture. On the contrary, it would seem that creating a distinctive local architecture fully grown was their intention. From the time B.C. Binning built his famous 1939 house—a house that is generally regarded as the beginning of Vancouver modernism—there was a great desire in British Columbia to build houses which would reflect their time and place.[7] One comes to the conclusion that an important reason a local brand of modernism appeared in Vancouver in the postwar period was that architects, and likely their clients, desired it. This was a self-conscious architecture, and I have no doubt young architects working in Vancouver at that time knew what they were doing, were excited by it, and watched each other's work closely.

To observe that the phenomenon of Vancouver regionalism in the 1950s was domestically based, and that the architects involved knew what they were trying to do (more or less), might seem to be stating the devastatingly obvious, but keeping these observations in mind does raise some rather interesting and complex questions: If the basic facts about Vancouver regionalism are straightforward, why did a similar development not occur elsewhere in the country? Did young architects in other parts of Canada think about things differently? Was the West Coast phenomenon simply, as Thom remarked, a combination of climate, geography, and talent? And why should the desire for a recognizably local architecture suddenly appear in Vancouver precisely with the importation of high modernism, a movement which is usually associated with the exact opposite, the effacement of the local? Even a moment's pause leads to the inevitable conclusion that there must be more to an understanding of Vancouver regionalism than describing its formal qualities, its use of materials, or its relation to site. Clearly, there is an intellectual story here which historians have not really begun to explore.

1 Leon Whiteson, *Modern Canadian Architecture* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1983), 12, 13, 23.

2 Harold Kalman, *A History of Canadian Architecture* (Don Mills, Ont.: Oxford University Press, 1994), 2:787.

3 See, for example, Andrew Gruft, "Vancouver Architecture: The Last Fifteen Years," in *Vancouver Art and Artists* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1983), 318-31; Barry Downs, "Landscape and the Western House," in William Bernstein and Ruth Cawker, comps., *Building with Words: Canadian Architects on Architecture* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1981), 40-41; and Kalman, 2:785-97.

4 Whiteson, 23. On Thom, see Douglas Shadbolt, *Ron Thom: The Shaping of an Architect* (Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1995).

5 Lee Morgan and Colin Naylor, eds., *Contemporary Architects,* 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: St. James Press, 1987), 907-09.

6 Sherry McKay, "Western Living, Western Homes," SSAC *Bulletin* 14, no. 3 (September 1989): 65-74.

7 This point is noted by McKay, p. 66; her reference is *Western Homes and Living* 1, no. 2 (October/ November 1950): 15.

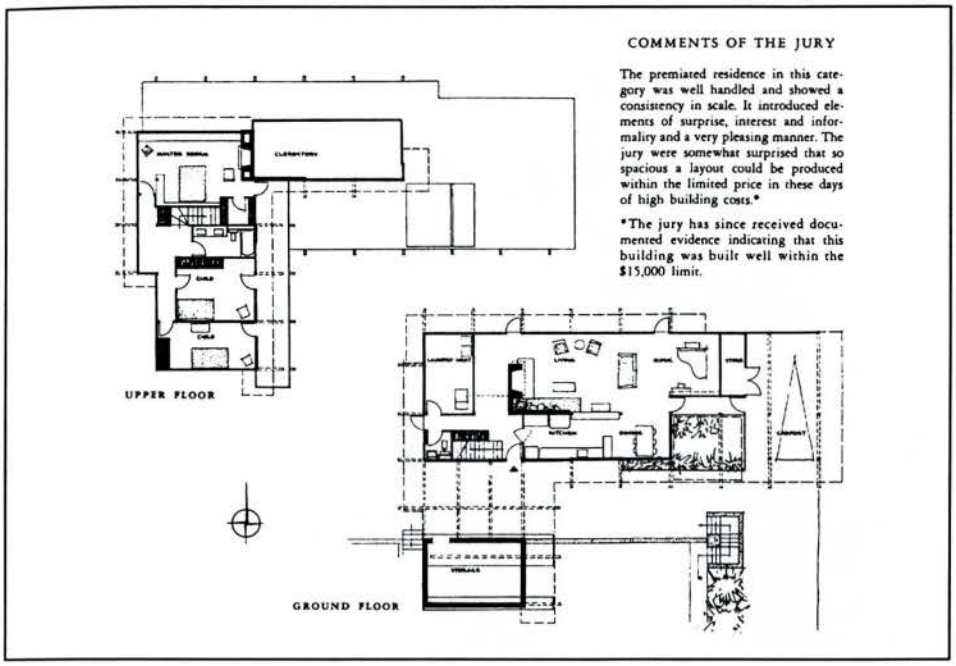

Figure 2. D.H. Copp house, Vancouver. Plans. (*Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada* 30, no. 1 [January 1953]: 12)

One area of investigation which might help illuminate this aspect of Vancouver's architectural history is to see to what extent the Vancouver experience can he related to developments elsewhere, across Canada and within the field of architecture as a whole. For example, if one takes a wider view of the idea of Vancouver "regionalism," a more historiographical view than that offered by Whiteson and by Thom himself, it quickly becomes clear that the idea of adapting modern architectural forms to fit local conditions was in the 1940s neither a new idea nor an unusual one. It was, in fact, a highly topical one, and by 1947 a mildly controversial one.

To put this point in concrete terms, it was in 1947 that Lewis Mumford, architectural critic for *The New Yorker,* attacked the dominance of functionalist and formalist design theory, calling it sterile and abstract. As an alternative, he championed the architecture of the American west coast, which he described as "that native and humane form of modernism which one might call the Bay Region Style, a free yet unobtrusive expression of the terrain, the climate and the way of life on the Coast."[8]

Over the next few years the idea gained considerable currency. Mumford clarified his position several times, and numerous luminaries such as Sigfried Giedion waded in to launch a counterattack.[9] From a distance, we can now see this episode over the idea of "regionalism" in at least three ways:

1. It was an early example of what was to come. In the words of Liane Lefaivre, modern architecture had begun to enter its period of crisis; no longer marginal but now dominant, it would increasingly come under attack.[10]
2. In the 1940s and 1950s the idea of "regionalism" was being reexamined. Particularly in the writing of Mumford, we can see this concept linked to the recognition of a well-developed North American-based architectural culture which had coexisted and been influenced by developing modernism for most of the century. As Mumford wrote, the Bay area style had taken root more than fifty years earlier in the work of Bernard Maybeck, and farther south in the work of the Greene brothers.[11] Working in California, these architects had produced an architecture which drew on many sources, the vernacular, Arts and Crafts ideology, the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, and the influence of Japan among them. This West Coast tradition had never entirely died out: it had produced a new vernacular in the California bungalow; modernist architects such as Richard Neutra were well aware of it; and in the 1930s, for example, William Wurster had experimented with an adaptive or localized "modernism" which was well publicized. In 1947, West Coast regionalism was like the proverbial overnight sensation who had just spent ten years trying to get a break. What was new was that a once marginalized, locally based manner of practice had now begun, rather unexpectedly, to act upon the larger tradition of international modernism.

8 Lewis Mumford, "The Sky Line," *The New Yorker,* 11 October 1947, 110.

9 A brief discussion of these events can be found in Joan Ockman and Edward Eigen, *Architecture Culture 1943-1968* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 107.

10 A discussion of the regional idea can be found in Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis, "The Grid and the Pathway: An Introduction to the Work of Dimitris and Suzana Antonakakis in the Context of Greek Architecture and Culture," in *Atelier 66, The Architecture of Dimitris and Suzana Antonakakis* (New York: Rizzoli, 1985), 24.

11 Mumford, 110.

Figure 3. Alexis Martin house, 1558 Rockland Avenue, Victoria, B.C.; Samuel Maclure, architect, 1904. (*The Craftsman* 13, no. 6 [March 1908])

3. The debate over regionalism in the 1940s and 1950s was yet another manifestation of a fundamental divide in architecture that has its origins at least as far back as the late 18th century, and which is still with us. For example, Mumford had written about the regional idea as early as the 1920s, and came to believe that, at root, it was not a question of form but of a reconciliation between opposing forces: that is, a reconciliation between the universal and the regional, the mechanical and the human, the cosmopolitan and the indigenous.[12]

Since this last idea is particularly complex, it deserves a few words of explanation. Many writers have traced the origins of the idea of the regional to the philosophy of romanticism, and in architectural terms to the romantic reaction to the Gothic. Goethe, for example, saw in Gothic architecture a realm of the indigenous and the local, which he contrasted to the abstract geometry which lay behind the classical. Closely related was the idea that architecture, like all the arts, should exist in an organic, symbiotic relationship with humans and their world. Of course, one cannot help but notice that these insights appear at the beginning of the 19th century, the very moment that this symbiotic relationship seemed to have vanished.[13]

In this larger sense, then, the regional can be seen as a longstanding device to obtain the organic—by which I do not mean a biomorphic or functionalist architecture but what we might call today an architecture of rootedness, an architecture of place.

While these different understandings of the concept of "regionalism" and its position within architectural culture might seem rather far apart, taken together they help us understand the road Vancouver architecture had taken by 1960. Incidentally, and at a more human level, they might also help us understand why, from the very beginning, these "West Coast" houses, like the Copp house (**figures 1, 2**), have had such a grip on the architectural imagination and why they, out of the great mass of building which has taken place in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia since 1950, have seemed and continue to seem particularly significant.

Could it be that they remind us that if the "regional" manner was indigenous to the American west coast, it was equally indigenous to British Columbia? As in California, the idea of developing a domestic British Columbia architecture by taking into account local materials, site, and lifestyle had already been explored at the turn of the century, notably by Samuel Maclure. Maclure's houses were described at the time as "unusually interesting examples of houses built of local materials and absolutely suited to their environment"[14] (**figure 3**). Subsequently, the so-called California bungalow was widely built in Vancouver, becoming a kind of vernacular. It is fair to see the movement of architectural ideas northward from the American west coast in the 1940s as simply more of the same, the continuation of a well-established cultural pattern.

12 Ockman and Eigen, 107.

13 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Von Deutscher Baukunst," reprinted in translation in Elizabeth G. Holt, ed., *A Documentary History of Art* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, 1966) 2:360-69. For commentary on this text, see Nikolaus Pevsner, *Architectural Review* 98 (1945): 151-54.

14 "Among the Craftsmen," *The Craftsman* 13, no. 6 (March 1908): 675.

To say this, though, is not to say that the houses of Maclure and Thom, for instance, are in any way similar in their particularities.

Even this extremely brief consideration of "regionalism" as a cultural idea gives some understanding of why Vancouver architecture was not only receptive to the regionalist brand of modernism, but why it was so able to generate it. It helps us understand the position of Vancouver architecture *vis-a-vis* that of California and the Pacific Northwest; it also helps us understand the relationship of Vancouver architecture to the Canadian context. For example, it can help us understand the significance of Thom's design for Massey College in a new way, both confirming and throwing new light on the notion introduced at the beginning of this paper that, with Massey College, "the three main centres of Canadian Modernism were cross-referenced."

The reason why an understanding of "regionalism" proves to be helpful both in understanding Massey College and, rather unexpectedly, Canadian architecture in general in 1960 is evident as soon the light of inquiry is turned away from Vancouver architectural history to that of Canada itself. This new vantage point reveals a trail which leads to one of the recurring and dominant themes of Canadian architectural history itself: nationalism and the desire for self-expression.

In our architectural culture, the regional idea has long had to do with local expression and the desire for an architecture which co-exists with society in an organic way. But history reveals that, in addition, "regional" forms, first Gothic and then the vernacular, to take two examples, were almost from the very beginning allied to the cultural sense of nation. During the 19th century this was true of Germany, France, and, most notably, Great Britain. The national, if not nationalistic, underpinnings of both the Gothic Revival and the Arts and Crafts movement in these countries are well known. In Canada we see this pattern followed very closely. For example, at the end of the 19th century, when Canadian architects became increasingly concerned with producing a "national architecture," they turned first to Gothic, or some derivative such as the Château Style, and then to the Québec vernacular. The residual effects of both these formal explorations can be seen in Toronto architect John Lyle's Runnymede Public Library of 1929, in Toronto, (**figure 4**).

By the 1930s, the desire for a recognizably "Canadian architecture" had become quite a powerful force, allied as it was to nationalist movements in literature and painting. The problem was form: from where could a Canadian architecture spring? For decades theorists had stated the obvious: from climate, from materials, from lifestyle. But by the 1930s Canadian architects seemed mired in an adaptation of vernacular forms or the use of Canadianized iconography, such as seen in the work of Lyle.[15] While some architects (such as Lyle, or a Montréal circle centred on the figures of Nobbs and Traquair) were content with these nationalistic explorations, for young architects—and probably for many older architects, too—none of the conventional responses of the day seemed particularly convincing. By the mid-1930s the only way forward seemed to be the emerging architecture of the Modern Movement. It is here that the larger meaning of that phenomenon we recognize as West Coast regionalism of the 1950s suddenly presented itself.

On the surface there would seem to be very little connection between the Canadian architectural world of the 1920s and '30s just described and that of the 1940s and '50s which produced the Copp house. But it is the first which seems to explain many of the motivations of the second. The reason is clear: the experiments of the inter-war years left many young architects suspicious of an overtly nationalistic architectural program, the long-term effects of which seemed to promise only provincialism. Instead, they opted for what seems now to be an unconditional acceptance of international modernism. It is this position which lies behind an editorial which appeared in *The Canadian Architect* in September 1957. Titled "Regionalism in Modern Architecture," it ended with the following paragraph:

> In the evolution of modern architecture in Canada there are two special potential pitfalls in the alley of regionalism. Internally, the boundary between regionalism and provincialism is very vague. Externally, the efforts of architects, in common with the worlds of business, politics and arts, to maintain a precious national identity as neighbours to Uncle Sam may easily lead to sun-screens of concrete maple leaves. Either one will produce only irrelevancies.[16]

Figure 4. Runnymede Public Library, Toronto; John Lyle architect, 1929. Detail of the south entrance, with Canadianized iconography in the form of totem poles. (K. Crossman, 1995)

15 Geoffrey Hunt, *John M. Lyle: Toward a Canadian Architecture* (Kingston, Ont.: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1982), 50-60.

16 "Regionalism in Modern Architecture," *The Canadian Architect* 2, no. 9 (September 1957): 82.

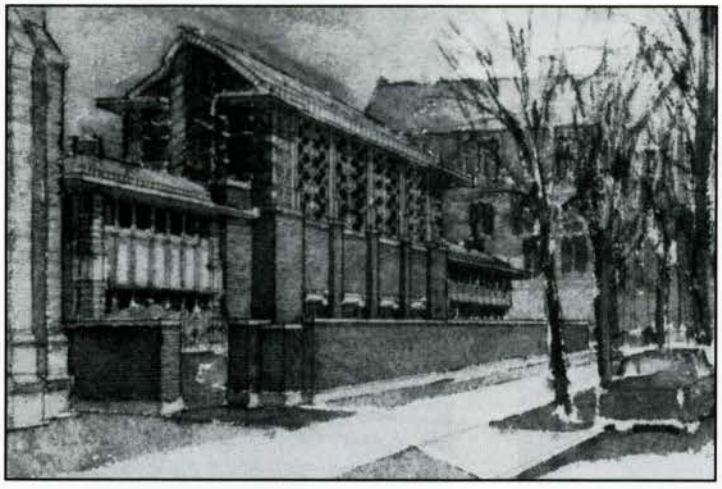

Figure 5 (left). Detail of a preliminary drawing for the Hoskin Avenue facade of Massey College, University of Toronto; Ron Thom, architect (for Thompson, Berwick & Pratt), 1960. (Massey College)

Figure 6. The Hoskin Avenue facade of Massey College, University of Toronto, as built in 1963. (K. Crossman, 1995)

But what then of Ron Thom and his colleagues? What of Vancouver regionalism? It is clear that in Vancouver, unlike much of the rest of the country, there existed for many reasons (some of which have been discussed here) an architectural culture that had begun self-consciously to transmute the 1920s and 1930s desire for an architecture indigenous or rooted to its place into the language of modernism. Like the writer in *The Canadian Architect*, a small group of Vancouver architects was also reacting against the work of a previous generation. We can hear this in Ron Thom's description of pre-1945 Vancouver, written almost forty years later, in 1983:

> Early settlers came directly to Vancouver, arriving by sea. In the field of domestic architecture, colonial, Cape Cod, and Tudor reigned for generations prior to the Great War. Areas of Vancouver such as Shaughnessy, developed in the 1920s and 1930s, were very much in the manner of nineteenth-century Britain.[17]

Thom continued by describing the coming of modernism with its various influences, including California, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Japan. The sub-text is clear: for Thom, and perhaps his colleagues too, the modernist vocabulary was a vocabulary of liberation, a liberation not just of the wall, as Wright would have it, but from the forms of a colonial past, and especially from the inability to express through architecture the place and culture in which they found themselves.

Quite apart from how one would—and, in the future, will—try to categorize the domestic work of Ron Thom, one can propose that what Thom (and with him that aspect of Vancouver architecture which he represents) was after was not so much a regional architecture as such but an indigenous architecture, an architecture of place.

It is with this that we reach, finally, 1960 and Massey College. Briefly, in 1961 Thom emerged as the winner of a limited competition for a residential college at the University of Toronto. The client was Vincent Massey. The story of the competition is a fascinating one, not least because Thom's competitors included Arthur Erickson, Carman Corneil, and John C. Parkin. What happened during the design process can be see by comparing Thom's preliminary sketches with the final design (**figures 5, 6**).[18]

The question which Massey College poses, and which in many ways is the raison d'être of this paper, is this: As completed, was Massey College in Toronto a work of Vancouver architecture? It is a tricky question, perhaps with no single answer. But what is significant is that it is a question one can legitimately pose at all. And the reason why one can do so, quite apart from the obvious one that Thom was a Vancouver architect, is because, in the end, Thom produced a design that in the realm of the cultural imagination exists precisely in the place that Vancouver architecture, the so-called "regional school," had been exploring for 15 years. What we see at Massey College is an architecture that is modern, but modern in a way qualified by the desire to express a particular sense of place and purpose. Returning to Lewis Mumford's oppositions, we might say it exists in an intellectual space much closer to the regional, the humane, and the indigenous than the universal, the mechanical, and the cosmopolitan.

17 Ron Thom, "Modern Architecture on the West Coast," in Whiteson, 22.

18 On Thom's intentions, see *The Canadian Architect* 8, no. 10 (October 1963): 48-62.

To describe Massey College in these terms might not seem surprising today, living as we do in an architectural world very different from that of thirty years ago. But Thom's design was unusual at that time, in a city and culture dominated by the high modernism of Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius. The regional theme was not so easily found in Toronto. It is to Thom's credit and a sign of the growing maturity of Vancouver architecture—an architecture which would soon produce non-domestic work of an original character recognized world-wide—that he was able to produce a design which today we see as neither faddish nor provincial, but rather as grounded, and convincing, and yet distinct from the mainstream.

ALMOST ALONE AMONG CRITICS, PETER COLLINS WROTE approvingly in 1963 that "at Massey College, magnificence, lightheartedness and drama have undoubtedly been created with a skill which borders on genius."[19] More than thirty years later, Massey College seems a building so connected to its time and place that it conveys a kind of truth—this was the world that produced Northrop Frye and Robertson Davies, and now it is passing into history. By 1960 Vancouver architecture was coming of age; regionalism had begun to give way to poetry.

19 Peter Collins, "An Appraisal: A Critique of Massey College, Toronto," *Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada* 40, no. 10 (October 1963): 40.

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